Mr Barlow

by ninetyfive

Summary

When Mark starts his very first teaching job at the local arts and music college, things don’t quite go as planned. He’s drowning in lesson plans, he suddenly has to teach a subject he’s not even qualified for and most of his colleagues still treat him as an inexperienced intern.

Only the handsome piano teacher Mr Barlow makes going to work in the morning remotely bearable, but it’s hard to get to know someone when you’re constantly surrounded by students, teachers and paperwork. Will Mark ever get a moment alone with him?

Mr Barlow: A story about trust, teaching, sex, school trips, exams (and what not to do with them) and Howard's dreadful timing.

Notes

I'm really proud of this story. I wrote it during a time when I was feeling a lot of frustration at my previous job, and working on this fic played a big part in finding my own place within teaching. A lot of the things that happen in this story come from a very real place.

That said, at the end of the day this is a very porny, angsty, fluffy piece of work that I believe has the most sex scenes I've ever written. Mark and Gary have a lot of fun in this fic. Enjoy.
LESSON ONE: THE NEW TEACHER

Several hands shoot in the air. Mark points at the student closest to him, a sun-kissed girl with her hair tied in a ponytail. According to the paper name card on her desk, her name is Naima.

Mark flashes her a warm smile. ‘Naima! Do I say that correctly?’

Naima nods a couple of times very quickly. She’s as excited about this activity as Mr Owen is.

‘Why don’t you come to the board and finish our story for us, Naima?’

Naima leaves her desk with such enthusiasm that she nearly knocks over her pencil case and bumps into a neighbouring table. One young student chuckles, then closes his mouth like a trap snapping shut when he sees Mr Owen shaking his head at him.

Once Naima has reached the board, she wastes no time getting to work. She writes on the whiteboard as though she has done it a million times.

Mark watches with bated breath as Naima adds a new sentence to the five other sentences that are already on the board. They’re all written by a different hand: five completely different but oddly related sentences, strung together by the students in an activity Mark likes to call “chain writing”. Looking at the collaborative story on the whiteboard now, the students of class M_SW1F have come up with a brilliant short story in mere minutes; which is just as well, because they’re all training to be songwriters.

Naima finishes her sentence with a flourish and hands back Mr Owen’s whiteboard marker. When she and Mr Owen take a step back to admire her and her classmates’ handiwork, a lot of students start snickering.

This time, Mark doesn’t tell them off for it.

Mark turns to a slightly older student on the second row: Emmanuel.

‘Emmanuel, could you please read the story aloud for us?’

Emmanuel isn’t keen. He crosses his arms. ‘I can’t read that!’

Mark gives the student a fair but pointed look.

‘Fine. But y’all nasty,’ Emmanuel says to his classmates. He reluctantly starts reading out loud the story his classmates came up with. It was created by six different people (including Mark, who’d scribbled the starter sentence on the board long before the lesson started), so it makes little sense.

‘I come to your door to see you again,’ begins Emmanuel, ‘but where you once stood was an old man instead. He’s a creep, so he took me in and showed me to his bedroom. I was very scared because there were creepy dolls everywhere! Suddenly, I fell in love with the old man anyway. We made very passionate love on the moon-lit staircase in his Victorian mansion. But the man turned out to be from Mars, so when I became pregnant we had very cute alien babies and we lived strangely ever after.’
When Emmanuel reluctantly finishes reading the story, Mark starts clapping. The students join him in somewhat amused applause.

‘I thought that was very good, guys. You should all be really proud of yourselves, you know. I mean that, Alex!’ Mark adds when a large boy with short hair starts snickering as if he thinks Mr Owen must be exaggerating, like when a pop star tells an audience they’re the best audience they’ve ever had.

Mark sits on his desk; his preferred spot when he’s discussing something important with the whole group. ‘Remember what I said about the importance of teamwork? The same is true for all your songs – you don’t always have to work alone! Try writing songs with your classmates every now and then. You could even use chain writing as a basis; keep swapping and adding lyrics, and you might come up with something you wouldn’t have thought of on your own. Maybe you should keep the story suitable for all ages next time, though,’ Mark adds somewhat blushingly.

‘Why? We’re all sixteen or over,’ says Natasha, one of the group’s older students.

‘I’m not.’ This comes from Ben.

Natasha shrugs. ‘Sucks to be you.’

Ben sticks out his tongue at Natasha. Mark decides to ignore it. Having done everything he set out to do on his five-page lesson plan, he looks at the clock in the corner of the classroom. It’s 9:25: five minutes away from the bell, if he remembers his timetable correctly.

‘Now, before we leave and go to our next lessons, could anyone remind me what we’ve done today?’ He scans the group of students, some of whom are trying very hard not to look Mr Owen in the eye because they don’t want to answer his question. His eyes land on one of the group’s younger students. ‘Latifa, maybe?’

Latifa puts a lock of hair behind her ear and anxiously starts flicking through her exercise book. She lands on a page where she scribbled a dozen alliterative sentences twenty minutes ago. ‘We discussed collaborative writing and . . . alliterations, was it?’

Mark beams at her. ‘Absolutely correct! Well remembered, Latifa. Today, we discussed collaborative writing and alliterations. Tomorrow, we’ll be writing a so-called button story, which is a story based on a button, so make sure you bring your pens and notebooks. And don’t forget, every exercise we do has to be handed in as part of your Creative Writing portfolio at the end of the school year, so please make sure you type everything up as soon as you can.’

Right on cue, the school bell rings. As the students collect their things and make their way to their next lesson, English, Mark breathes a sigh of relief.

He’s just survived his first ever lesson as an NQT! And what’s more, he seriously enjoyed it.

[LESSON TWO: MEETING THE OTHER TEACHERS]

Mark’s next lesson is more or less a repeat of the last one. Like the previous group, most of his students eat out of his hands. They love this new, unfamiliar teacher who doesn’t stop smiling and has a million different activities up his sleeve, like the fun alliterations game that involves quite a few flash cards.
Of course, the students can tell that Mr Owen has obviously only recently graduated. For the most part, he lacks the class management skills needed to teach a bunch of hormonal seventeen-year-olds.

When a blonde student refuses to put away his phone during a writing exercise, Mark doesn’t say anything. When a student can’t be bothered to come to the board to finish the chain story, Mark lets him. And when a student arrives ten minutes late, against school rules, Mark lets him in anyway because he has no idea what kind of rules the Music department has in place. It is obvious Mr Owen has joined the school in the worst ever time: April, the final term of the school year. With three terms having passed already, the brand new teacher has been thrown head-first in the middle of the school year with no knowledge about the school at all.

But while Mark obviously lacks authority, he has kindness in spades. He praises students even when they write something silly. He genuinely tries to engage everyone. Within thirty minutes, he knows most of the students’ names by heart. And by the end of the lesson, he has smiled at all of them.

By the time the bell rings at 10:30, heralding the beginning of the first break of the school day, Mark has two lessons as a qualified teacher under his belt. He’s absolutely starving, but he has no idea where the staff room is or if he’s even allowed to eat there. Apart from when he went to the head teacher’s office for his interview, Mark actually hasn’t seen that much of the building. He hasn’t even met any colleagues.

Based in the north of England, but open to students from all over, The Vocational College for Music and Arts, or VCMA, prepares teenagers and young adults for careers in the arts and music industries. The school’s main departments are, of course, Music and Arts, and both offer at least twenty different technical courses, from Songwriting to Electric Music and Animation to Illustration. Mark is a part of the Music department, where he’ll teach Creative Writing to a wide range of Composition and Songwriting students.

All in all, he’s going to work at The Vocational College for Music and Arts five days a week, seven lessons a day, saving his weekends for lesson planning and administrative work. Only two hours into his first day here, he absolutely can’t wait to see what his other groups will be like, like the second-year Composition students who are famed for their hard work.

But first: a break.

His heavy textbooks neatly packed in the rucksack on his back, Mark wrestles his way through the sea of people in the narrow C-wing, the most modern part of the U-shaped school. The rest of the building was originally a warehouse slap-bang in the middle of the city, repurposed after the local council decided it needed a place for vocational or career-based education. As a result, the school is an absolute maze, with long, brick-walled corridors zigzagging into dead ends and staircases leading to dark, stuffy basements and neglected photo studios. It is often said that even the longest-serving teachers haven’t seen every single corner in the building, adding to the popular myth that it is possible to get lost here and never be found again.

After the council claimed the warehouse, plans were made to transform its surroundings considerably. Previously a drab stain on the city, the area was turned into a lush, green space where students could sit, study, relax or eat. Over the years, the school grounds – surrounded by blocks of flats and a parking lot– have even expanded to include a Starbucks, an over-priced stationery store and a library. The school isn’t a university by any means, but it has tried very hard to look like one.

As for Mark, he’s already lost his way inside the school quite dramatically. He can’t see a sign for the staff room anywhere, and there’s no one he can ask, for he genuinely can’t tell whether someone
is a student or not. It's one of the few downsides of working in a college such as this: sometimes, students can be as old as thirty-five.

Mark has already accepted his fate of being lost forever when he feels a gentle tapping on his shoulder. When he turns around, he comes face-to-face with an unfairly tall lad with dark hair and a dozen tattoos snaking up his arms. Mark first assumes the guy must be some sort of fine arts student with a minor in Tattooing, but then he sees the ID card dangling from the stranger’s trousers. It’s the same ID card Mark has shoved into his backpack. This is a member of staff.

‘You’re the new Creative Writing teacher, right?’ The stranger holds out a tattooed hand, and Mark shakes it. ‘I saw you teach in 105-MC earlier. Not that I was trying to have a peek or anything. That’d be weird. I just happened to walk past on me way to the restroom. Anyway, I’m Rob.’

‘I’m lost,’ says Mark, without thinking. ‘I mean, I’m Mark. My name’s Mark Owen. But I’m lost also.’

‘Where you headed?’

‘The staff room . . .’ Mark says with some shame.

‘Which one?’

This unexpected choice stumps Mark. He feels his cheeks burning up at the fact that he obviously doesn’t have a clue how this building functions. ‘There’s more than one staff room?’

‘One to eat in and the other to work in, yeah. Not that you can’t work and eat at the same time, but the head teacher of the Music department gets really mad when people eat at their computers.’

Mark’s tummy rumbles at the mere mention of food. It doesn’t help that students keep walking past with their packed lunches; often, Mark simply forgets to eat because of how busy he is. ‘You wouldn’t mind showing me to the staff room to eat in, would you?’

Rob – Mr Williams to students – leads the way. He explains that he is not technically a teacher: he’s the supervisor in one of the school’s computer labs. In his own words, he’s the guy who makes sure students don’t break the labs’ very expensive Apple computers. Sometimes, he also gets put in charge of certain administrative tasks, like scanning and uploading students’ sick notes. He finds this very boring.

‘So you know a lot about technology, then?’ Mark asks.

‘Not at all, mate. I just sit on me arse all day and tell people off when they try to sneak ten buckets of KFC hot wings into me classroom. That’s not me exaggerating’ for effect, by the way. That actually happened. The lab smelled of chicken for days,’’ he adds with some regret, like the memory is particularly painful.

Rob goes on to explain that the computer lab job is a means to afford his current teacher training.

‘I wanna become a support teach for kids with dyslexia and other learning disabilities one day,’ Rob explains. They’ve headed into another, much older corridor; a part of the Arts department, judging by the paintings on the wall. ‘Me own teachers made me think I was a fucking idiot cos I couldn’t read and write properly, so I wanna make sure that stops happenin’ to students who are otherwise really good at what they do. You know what I mean? Imagine gettin’ amazing grades for your art and stuff and then havin’ to do the year all over again cos dyslexia made you fail a theory test.’

It’s not hard to imagine how terrible that would be. ‘Oh my,’ Mark sighs, shaking his head. ‘That’d
be awful, wouldn’t it?’

‘Crushing, mate. Crushing. So yeah, that’s me. Future support teach and all. Plus, it means I won’t have to deal with massive groups of kids each day. Cos I fucking hate dealing with people sometimes, you know? I honestly take me hat off for guys like you who don’t become fucking mental seeing a different group of kids every hour. When I’m a support teacher I’ll obviously still be involved with people’s education, but I won’t have to deal with big groups anymore. It’ll just be me in me own office and just the one student. It’ll be great.’

Mark makes an understanding noise with his mouth. He can see why Rob would want to be a support teacher. ‘Do you have any affinity with music and arts yourself?’

‘I write every now and then, but I haven’t had any time because I’m constantly workin’ on me flippin’ dissertation,’ Rob says. ‘Turn left here.’

They turn left. They’ve been walking for so long Mark’s beginning to feel quite famished. He’s pretty sure that they’ve been to this very spot already.

‘Are both staff rooms this far away?’ he asks, hoping it sounds like a genuine question rather than a judgment of Rob’s chosen route. He doesn’t want to come across as impatient or ungrateful on his first day here.

Thankfully, Rob seems to think the question is quite justified. ‘You’ve noticed how the period before the first break ends at 10:30? Most teachers tend to stop a little earlier depending on where they are just so they can get to the staff rooms on time.’

Mark gives out a light gasp that he tries to conceal with a cough. ‘Is that allowed?’

‘Not really, but Mr Barlow doesn’t mind so it’s okay.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘He’s, like, the unofficial deputy head teacher of the Music department. It doesn’t say so on his CV or anything, but basically he’s the guy everyone goes to when the real head teacher’s too useless to answer a fucking question. No offence.’

Mark only met the head teacher once, for his job interview, but he didn’t seem so bad. He feels like he ought to defend the man even though he doesn’t know him. ‘That’s a really weird way to talk about your head teacher.’

Rob scoffs. ‘You won’t be sayin’ that after you’ve worked with Mr Harrison for a week, trust me.’

Mark doesn’t get the chance to ask Rob what he means by that, for they’ve reached a wooden sign that reads “Staff room”. It’s pointing at a door covered in graffiti put on there by students, and Rob opens it.

Located in the school’s old A-wing, the staff room is absolutely massive; about the size of three large classrooms. In the middle of the room, there are several round tables surrounded by chairs that don the school’s symbolic colours. Nearly every single chair is occupied by a member of staff, young and old.

In the staff room’s right-hand corner, there’s a small kitchen unit with a sink, a dishwasher, a microwave and a fridge that smells of a sewer when you open it. Next to the fridge, a group of tired-looking teachers have congregated in front of the room’s only coffee machine.
The walls of the staff room have been decorated with cork memo boards and a dozen posters, ranging from A3-sized reminders about exam regulations to colourful flyers for the so-called summer prom, a big party to celebrate the end of the school year. At the far end of the staff room, a large, panoramic window overlooks the school grounds and its occupants, picnicking on the grass with their school bags at their feet. If you look closely, you can even make out the on-campus Starbucks café at the other side of the grass.

For Mark, who has only worked at a small, local secondary school so far, the sight is almost too much to take in. By the looks of it, the entire team consists of about sixty people in all – twice the amount of teachers, trainees and administrative workers at Mark’s previous work placement.

As a result, the staff room overwhelmingly buzzes with chatter and gossip. Every couple of seconds, the coffee machine loudly sputters and gurgles a nasty-looking liquid into a teacher’s coffee cup. In the background, music plays: a song written by one of the students from the music department by the sounds of it.

Mark finds it a little difficult to get his bearings. He gives Rob an anxious look.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it,’ Rob reassures him. ‘Or not. Some teachers don’t even bother comin’ in ’ere. Shall we?’

Rob gestures at two empty seats at one of the room’s smallest round tables. They sit. Mark politely but awkwardly introduces himself to the table’s other occupants – five stern-looking Drawing instructors who all look like cartoon villains – before getting his lunch box out of his bag. Upon opening his lunch box and seeing the sandwiches he made that morning, he finds that entering the staff room has completely made him lose his appetite. He closes the lunch box again and pushes it away from him.

‘How am I ever going to remember everyone’s names?’ he anxiously asks Rob, who has not brought any food at all.

‘Simple, mate. You don’t.’

The thought makes Mark feel rather nauseous. At his previous school, he knew the names of everyone: students, teachers and administrative staff alike. Now, learning the names of everyone seems like an impossible task, especially when he only has one term to do it in. In just four months, the school year ends.

‘But they’re my colleagues,’ Mark presses. (Does Mr Williams not care about anything?) ‘How can I work here if I don’t know everyone’s names?’

‘Just refer to everyone as “Professor” or “Mr” or “Mrs” dependin’ to who you’re talkin’ to and no-one gives a crap, mate. You’re only goin’ bother wanting to get to know the folks from the Music department, anyway. The teachers from the Art department all have their heads stuck up their bums.’

Mark glances at the villainous Drawing instructors at their table. ‘That’s an awful thing to say.’

‘It’s true, though. You’ll see.’

‘So you don’t know the names of everyone, then?’

Rob shrugs. ‘I know a few. Not everyone, but enough to not make a fool of meself.’

‘Such as?’
Rob scans the room for colleagues he knows the name of. Standing on her own at the panoramic window, he spots a tall girl who once told him she makes all her worksheets on her own. ‘See that girl over there? Long brown hair? New Kids on the Block T-shirt? That’s Ms Brooke. Teaches English. If you ever run out of fun activities, she’s the girl you need. She doesn’t work on Fridays. Everyone thinks it’s because she does charity work for disadvantaged children, but I personally think she secretly uses her long weekends to go to boy band concerts.’

Mark has spotted her. He nods and saves the information about her in the back of his mind. ‘Who else do you know?’

Rob looks around the staff room for more familiar faces. His eyes fall on a tall guy with unruly brown hair, grumpily jabbing his thumb on the digital display of the coffee machine. ‘Tall guy. Striped T-shirt? He’s currently having a row with the coffee machine.’

Mark nods. He had already spotted the guy when he walked in here. He must have had about three cups of coffee in as many minutes.

‘That’s Mr Donald. Top bloke. Teaches Dance. He’s really quiet during meetings and stuff, but he’s one of the best teachers we have. His class management is top-notch. Don’t go to him if you wanna hear praise about the students, though. If he thinks a student is shit then he’ll probably tell ‘em so. It’s a bit brutal, but it works.’

‘Mr Donald drinks a lot of coffee,’ Mark observes out loud. Mr Donald has finally managed to fill his cup with more coffee and downs the brown drink in one go. Mere seconds later, he turns to the coffee machine for another refill. ‘Is he all right?’

‘Mr Donald he has two young kids,’ Rob explains. ‘If he didn’t drink so much coffee he’d probably die of exhaustion.’

Rob does his best to name more members of staff, like Mr Hepburn, who teaches Percussion, and the extremely experienced Mr McDonald and Mr Stevens.

Because his computer lab is in the C-wing, where most Music classrooms are, Rob knows very few people from the Arts department. He ends up skipping an entire table with well-dressed individuals who teach Sewing part-time.

Mark’s curious eyes fall on another tall bloke, walking past them with a cup of hot water in his hands. He looks extremely peaceful, which is rather admirable because the staff room is not a peaceful place at all.

‘Who’s that?’ Mark asks curiously.

‘Mr. Orange. Another Dance teacher.’ Mark waits for more information to come, but the fact that Mr Orange teachers Dance is literally the only thing Rob or anyone else knows about him, like a legendary Pokémon. ‘Mr Orange likes to keep himself to himself, for some reason. Sometimes he even literally disappears. He’s a nice bloke, though. Very thoughtful, once you get to know him.’

Rob thinks he has now mentioned everyone he knows. A couple of teachers, mainly colleagues from the Music department, have kindly come over to Mark’s table to get to know him themselves.

Shamefully, Mark forgets all their names within a minute.

‘Out of all the members of staff, how many do you think are here?’

‘Most of them, I reckon,’ says Rob. ‘The head teacher isn’t ’ere. And the Animation teachers usually
eat in their classrooms because a student accidentally sat on a very expensive Claymation figure
during lunch last year.’

Mark vaguely remembers Rob mentioning an unofficial deputy head teacher on their way here.
‘What about that colleague you mentioned earlier? Mr Barlow or something? Is he here?’

Rob grins. ‘Don’t worry, you’ll know him when you see him.’

Right on cue, the door of the staff room opens and Mark’s heart does a summersault.

The person who’s just walked in is one of the most handsome men Mark’s ever seen. He’s a little
taller than Mark. He’s wearing all black; an expensive tailored jacket, black trousers and a black T-
shirt. His hair, styled in a perfect, messy quiff, is dark blonde with hints of a peroxide dye. A light
stubble contours his face. His eyes, from what Mark can see, are a dreamy mix between blue and
green. This man is quite obviously the most attractive person in the entire building.

But what Mark notices most of all is the ease with which the man walks into the staffroom. This is
someone who knows this school and its people inside-out. He oozes experience, evident in the way
he carries the worn-out songbooks in his hand as though they’re just there for show. It’s almost as if
the man is a celebrity, but that would be ridiculous, wouldn’t it?

Within the ten seconds that it took him to look at the stranger, Mark has turned bright red. He feels
himself burning up just looking at the guy, like he’s one of his young students experiencing a crush
for the very first time.

The feeling is overwhelmingly absurd. It’s obscene. He can’t get the hots for a guy he’s never even
spoken to; he doesn’t even know the guy!

But it’s already too late. Rob has waved at the man and asked him to come over.

‘Gary! Mr B! Come over here, mate.’

Gary does as he’s asked. He slowly makes his way through the crowd, then stops when he reaches
Rob’s table and sees whom his colleague is sat next to. His eyes take on an eager shine as he squints
to look at Mark properly.

‘Hang on, I’ve never seen you before.’

Mark’s positive that he’s blushing. He hopes it isn’t obvious. He manages to croak out a nervous
‘HELLOIMNEW’ before a burst of nervousness forces him to look at the floor.

‘You’re the new Creative Writing, teacher, aren’t you? I read about that in the online newspaper. I
didn’t think you’d be joining us today. I’m Gary Barlow, by the way. Piano teacher.’

Mark shakes Gary’s outstretched hand. It feels incredibly firm.

‘M-Mark Owen,’ Mark stutters. Rather than staring at the ground, his eyes accidentally travel all the
way from Gary’s eyes to his crotch, and he instantly wishes the ground would swallow him whole
and spit him out again in Hell. He’s pretty sure he must look and sound like a teenager.

Thankfully, Gary doesn’t seem to have noticed the look Mark gave him. He keeps talking, which
Mark quickly decides is even worse than staring at a stranger’s crotch because Gary Barlow has one
of those attractive voices that’d make even a phone book sound interesting.

‘Great subject, Creative Writing,’ says Gary. ‘You know what, I’ve been thinking about introducing
a few things from the CW curriculum into me own lessons lately. Maybe we could do a bit of
brainstormin’ over a cup of coffee sometime this term?’

Mark has no idea what Gary’s just said. He just heard a lot of really lush noises that were probably
meant to represent words. ‘I-d-don’t know a lot a-about the school yet, so t-t-that sounds like a g-great idea,’ he stutters nonsensically.

‘Brilliant! I’ll be in touch.’

With that, Gary walks away satisfied that he and Mr Owen will one day get together to discuss
“work”. Mark’s big, curious eyes follow the shape of Gary’s arse all the way to the coffee machine
until Rob pinches his arm and makes him tumble, head-first, back to Earth.

Rob speaks with the sort of honesty other people would usually reserve for best mates. ‘I know that
we’ve only just met and that I’m probably bein’ a prick by pointin’ this out, Mark, but I don’t think
I’ve ever seen anyone stare at someone so hard. Jesus. Do you need a moment alone?’

Mark blushing. He rubs his arm where Rob pinched him. ‘I wasn’t staring.’

‘You were, though. You were doin’ the most starin’ I’ve ever seen anyone do, ever. See! You’re
doing it again now!’

Mark guiltily looks away from the kitchen area, where Gary has just dunked a Starbucks tea bag into
what looks like a reusable Star Wars coffee cup. He’s talking to Mr Donald, who is on his fifth cup
of coffee of the morning and looks as tired as he did five minutes ago.

Mark anxiously tries to find something else to look at, like one of the “safe sex” posters on the wall
or the rainbow flag on the cork memo board, but they only make Mark glance at Mr Barlow again,
perfectly proving Rob’s point about doing a ridiculous amount of staring.

Defeated, Mark rubs his forehead and sighs. He meets Rob’s eyes, who is looking at him pointedly.
‘All right. You’re right. I can’t help it. Mr Barlow’s not terrible looking.’

Rob grins. He looks quite triumphant, as though he has secretly been plotting this exact sequence of
events for years. (But he couldn’t have, Mark thinks. Rob could never have known that blonde,
handsome, well-dressed men of average height are exactly his type.) ‘I could tell you what I know
about him, if you want.’

Mark looks into Gary’s direction again. He’s just removed the tea bag from his cup and tossed it into
a recycle bin. When Gary puts his cup to his mouth, Mark feels a stupid little twinge in his stomach
that he never wants to feel again.

He turns to Rob. He crosses his arms. ‘I don’t like gossiping about me colleagues.’

‘Who said anything about gossipin’? I’m just goin’ to conveniently share some information that you
may or may not find interesting.’

‘Why would I want to know anything about him?’ Mark counters stubbornly.

‘Because you’re goin’ to be workin’ with Mr Barlow quite intensely, for one. He is the unofficial
deputy head teacher, Mark, so it would help if you knew what kind of guy he is. I could do the same
for Mr Harrison. I mean, I could. The only thing you need to know about Mr Harrison is that he’s a
shit head teacher.’

Mark’s uninterested shrug of his shoulders belies the curiosity he feels inside. Truth be told, he
wouldn’t mind getting to know this Mr Barlow a little better. It wouldn’t automatically mean that he fancy him or something. How on Earth would that work, anyway? You can’t fancy someone within a minute of having met them.

‘All right. But I only wanna know things related to work. Nothing else.’

‘Only things related to work, got it.’ Rob readjusts his chair so that he and Mark are sitting closer together. He lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper while colleagues pass their table to get to the coffee machine. ‘Fact one: Mr Barlow isn’t just a piano teacher. He also provides singing lessons. Is that fact work-related enough? Just checkin’.

‘It is, Mr Williams. Thank you.’

‘Awesome. Fact two: as well as bein’ a much loved teacher, Mr Barlow also has a genuine recording career. As in, he’s a bit of a pop star when he’s not tellin’ students off for not doing their homework.’

Mark’s eyes go wide. He already knew that quite a few teachers at VCMA are professional artists as well as being teachers – such as the scary-looking Drawing instructors at their table, who have provided illustrations for various children’s books, but a pop star is something else. ‘Mr Barlow releases music? Seriously?’

Rob nods. ‘He tours as well. He’s got a brand new tour planned this summer, actually. It sold out within minutes. I think he’ll be busy touring during the entire summer holiday.’

‘Wow. So he’s popular, then?’ Mark’s eyes glance at Gary, who is still talking to an increasingly tired-looking Mr Donald. ‘As in, famous? Mr Barlow is famous?’

‘You could say that,’ Rob says secretively.

‘How famous?’ Mark’s never heard of Gary Barlow the recording and touring artist before.

‘You’ll have to ask him that. Though I suppose you could Google it too.’

No thanks, Mark thinks. He isn’t planning on Googling a colleague. (Though he does wonder how a teacher can afford the clothes Mr Barlow was wearing. They looked very expensive. His tour must have shifted a few hundred, Mark thinks naively.)

‘How does Mr Barlow combine being a recording artist with his teaching career?’

‘No-one knows. Literally, no-one knows,’ Rob adds when Mark frowns at that. ‘He’s always busy workin’ on lesson plans or teachin’ people how to play the piano or performin’ to a few thousand in a theatre, which also means that Mr Barlow hasn’t had time to date anyone lately. As in, he’s single.’

Mark feels heat rise up his cheeks. ‘I said facts related to work, Mr Williams, not his love life.’

‘You’re right. Fact Three. Mr Barlow also teaches meditation and yoga, so he’s probably very flexible.’

Mark groans.

‘What? I’m sure being flexible comes in useful when you’re a teacher and that. Fact Four: Mr Barlow’s kinda been staring at you too . . .’

Mark hazards another look at the kitchen area. He feels a little flutter in his chest when he catches Gary staring right at him with an incomprehensible look in his eyes.
Mark looks away instantly. He rubs the back of his head as though he can literally feel Gary’s eyes burning into it. ‘He’s probably just looking at someone else.’

‘Probably.’ Rob has more or less run out of facts for now, so he changes the subject. This is just as well, because he’s given Mark quite a lot to think about. ‘Hey, are you going to eat that sandwich in your lunchbox? I left mine at home.’

‘Help yourself.’

Still devoid of an appetite, Mark generously slides his lunchbox across the table. As Rob helps himself to one of his BLT sandwiches, Mark’s curious thoughts immediately bounce back to his handsome colleague. There’s no denying it: seeing Gary made him feel things he’s never felt before. He teaches Creative Writing for a living, and here he is, unable to describe fully what it felt like to have Gary’s hand touch his.

Just as Mark’s artistic mind is about to come up with a suitable metaphor for what he’s feeling inside, he hears his name being called. It’s Mr Harrison, the head teacher whom Rob hates. Mark vaguely recognises the man from his job interview a couple of weeks ago. He seems nice enough.

Mr Harrison approaches Mark’s table. He’s quite a short fellow, with a thinning head of hair. There’s a black pen stuck behind his ear. ‘Mr Owen? A word, please?’

‘Of course.’ Mark glances at Rob, who’s looking at Mr Harrison with suspicion in his eyes. ‘I don’t suppose we could continue our conversation later, Mr Williams? I wouldn’t mind more facts if you have any. You know, for educational reasons.’

Rob eagerly sits up. ‘Mate, I’d love to. Meet up at the computer lab during lunch? I’ll make a proper PowerPoint and everything.’

Mark glances at Mr Harrison, who is beginning to look quite impatient. ‘You’re going to make a PowerPoint about . . .’ He lowers his voice. ‘You know, the thing we just talked about?’

Rob nods enthusiastically. ‘I might even pop in a couple of pics.’

Mark doesn’t dare ask what kind of pictures Rob’s talking about. Somewhat flustered, Mark picks up his rucksack from the floor and follows Mr Harrison out of the staff room, leaving his lunch box on the table.

|LESSON THREE: AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE|

It takes Mark and Mr Harrison ten minutes to reach the head teacher’s office. The guidance counsellor’s office is on the left, and on the right there is the office for support teachers. Mark imagines that his new mate Mr Williams will one day be working there.

As Mark enters the head teacher’s office, the smell of dust and old books hits him instantly. He has to fight the urge to sneeze. Mr Harrison asks him to close the door behind him, and they shake hands. Mr Harrison is one of those people who sandwiches your hand between his palms.

Mark sits. It’s the same office Mark visited a couple of weeks ago, when he did his job interview and he had to discuss, in detail, how he would deal with an unruly group of students. Even then, he found himself thinking about how uninviting the office is. There are no ornaments. Mark sees no
photos of children or loved ones on Mr Harrison’s desk. Even the walls are stark: apart from a large, old photo of what must be the school’s first-ever teachers, the walls are white, with wallpaper peeling off the wall in the right-hand corner. The papers in front of Mr Harrison’s desk seem to feature only numbers and percentages.

‘I hope your first two lessons went well, Mark?’

Mark nods. In spite of his surroundings, he loses himself in an enthusiastic ramble about his first hours of being here. ‘It went very well, yes, Mr Harrison, Sir. The students were absolutely wonderful. I could even do one of me own activities. I wasn’t sure if they’d enjoy it at first, but most of them seemed to be really into it, you know. I’m really looking forward to spending more time with them and figuring out what kind of activities they like most. I’ve also met some of me colleagues, and they seem very nice. They were very welcoming.’

‘Well, I am glad to hear that,’ Mr Harrison says with no emotion at all. ‘Unfortunately, I am afraid I have some bad news. You see, news reached us this morning that we have lost our one and only Art History teacher. The rest of the team have not been informed yet, but the head of HR is buying flowers for family as we speak.’

‘Oh my.’ Mark struggles to find the right words. The news reaches him as though he actually knew the former Art History teacher. ‘I’m so sorry for your loss, Mr Harrison.’

‘Oh, she is not dead,’ Mr Harrison says with the same lack of inflection. He glances at a pile of exam envelopes in front of Mark, and he puts them into a drawer of his desk, as if they need hiding. ‘She has simply won the lottery. Thirteen million pounds, apparently. Sadly, her sudden departure has left quite a large gap in our timetables. We now need someone to teach eight hours of Art History.’

Wait. Mark blinks. He forgets all about the handsome piano teacher he met in the staff room.

Why is he here?

Mark tries to explain as politely as he can. ‘Mr Harrison, Sir, I teach Creative Writing, not Art History. I don’t know what this has to do with me.’

‘I must not have been clear.’ Mr Harrison starts speaking to Mark as though he is a child. ‘You are going to teach those lessons. Conveniently, you have eight free periods in your timetable. We have decided to fill those hours with Art History.’

Mark doesn’t know how he can point out that he knows nothing about Art History without coming across as rude. Mr Harrison has probably just confused him with someone else. ‘Mr Harrison, Sir – I trained to become a teacher of Creative Writing. I teach Creative Writing. I’m not qualified to teach Art History. It’s all on my CV.’

‘Whether you are qualified or not is not relevant,’ says Mr Harrison. ‘The most important thing is that we can still provide every lesson in our curriculum. Of course, you will be given all the necessary materials free of charge, and you will be compensated with a gift card for all your trouble. Sadly, we cannot afford to actually pay you for doing the lessons until at the end of the school year.’

Here, Mr Harrison hands Mark an A4-sized piece of paper. Mark reads it. It quite obviously features a planner of the next ten weeks, but it’s rather useless. For each week, the only thing that is specified is “Book A”.

‘You will, of course, be wondering what Book A is.’ Mr Harrison reaches down, opens another drawer of his desk and plonks a huge textbook in front of Mark’s hands. ‘This is book A.’
Mark feels sick inside. The book easily has a thousand pages.

He doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Just ten minutes ago Mark felt like the happiest teacher in the world, fired up by what he had done and what was still to come, but now all that excitement has left him. He feels utterly lost.

His hands shake as he flips open the book in front of him. The two pages he’s landed on feature at least twenty words he’s never heard of. The font is miniscule. There are pictures of paintings and statues on every single page; paintings he’s never seen before. By the looks of it, he’s meant to teach whatever he fancies. The planner in front of him is no help to him at all.

Mark tries to reason with his head teacher. This has to be a misunderstanding. ‘Mr Harrison, Sir . . . I realise how important Art History is to our students, but I can’t do this. I’m so sorry, but I can’t. I don’t even know where to start.’

‘Greek art, I believe. Does it not say so on the planner?’ Mark shakes his head. ‘That is unfortunate. Anyway, yes, I do believe our previous teacher got as far as chapter four. That is helpful, is it not? I have no doubt that you will be able to teach our students all about Greek art in time for their exam. Speaking of, I have not given you your new timetable yet.’

Mr Harrison fishes another document from his drawer. When Mark shakily accepts the timetable print-out and reads it, his head starts spinning. He drops the piece of paper on Mr Harrison’s desk as though it has severely burned his hands.

‘Mr Harrison – it says here that I have to teach Art History after the break, with a group named A_WD1E. I don’t know . . . I can’t . . .’ Mark looks at the textbook, so impossibly thick that it eclipses Mr Harrison’s coffee cup in height. ‘I haven’t had time to prepare. I can’t do this.’

But Mr Harrison has already made up his mind. He utters his next words with the emotional capability of a robot. ‘Mr Owen, you are here for a reason. You are a recent graduate. This should be child’s play for a young talented teacher such as yourself. Not to mention the fact that teaching a respected subject such as Art History is the perfect opportunity to hone your teaching skills.’

Then Mr Harrison’s eyes narrow. They become like slits, as thin as the black pen in his chest pocket. ‘Unless you have decided you are not suitable for technical education after all, Mr Owen? There is no shame in admitting that this school has not met your expectations. Teaching at an Art school is not for everyone.’

Mr Harrison sounds neither accusatory nor upset. In fact, Mark can hear no emotion at all, just facts: the simple, underlying fact that if he says no to this, he’ll probably lose his job before the day is done.

Mark takes a deep, shaky breath. He gingerly files his brand new timetable, the useless planner and the bible-sized textbook on top of each other and manages a weak smile. He has never had a proper job at a school before, so he has no idea whether being given a brand new subject that he knows nothing about is something that happens at schools all the time.

For the sake of his job, he assumes that it is.

‘You’re right, Sir. This is a wonderful opportunity. I should not have questioned it.’ Mark looks at the clock. There are five minutes of break-time left, and he has to use his remaining strength to make himself sound less worried than he feels. ‘I’ll use the rest of my break to prepare now, Mr Harrison, Sir.’

‘That is good news. I am glad we sorted that out. Thank you.’
It takes Mark a moment to realise that Mr Harrison’s robot-like “thank you” is his cue to leave. He clumsily gets up, again thanks Mr Harrison for the “wonderful” opportunity and leaves the office, barely able to carry the Art History book because it weighs as much as a bowling ball.

A minute later, Mark locks himself in the men’s restrooms and cries.

|LESSON FOUR: A CHALLENGING GROUP|

Group A_WD1E is one of the worst groups Mark’s ever had the misfortune to teach. The students are loud. They’re stubborn. They’re all boys. They’re training to be web designers. Almost every word they utter is an expletive. They’re young: the average age of the students is 16, much younger than the Songwriting students Mark saw that morning.

The age of the group shows. Every time Mark turns to his keyboard to head to the next slide on his PowerPoint presentation (Mark has yet to figure out that he can achieve the same thing by simply tapping his hand on the Smartboard), the students decide to throw paper planes at each other. They laugh at Mark for not fully understanding how the Smartboard works because they’re all autodidacts who learned about computers through trial and error at home. They keep saying negative things about Mark’s height and personality behind his back, knowing full well that Mr Owen can hear every single word.

And they most certainly aren’t interested in Mark’s first ever Art History lesson.

In spite of the obvious chaos in the classroom, Mark keeps reading aloud the information on the PowerPoint presentation that he found on the internet one minute before the lesson started. It’s about Greek Art, but he has absolutely no idea what he’s talking about and the contents of the presentation only cover half of the topics in the book. He feels like he’s reading aloud a passage from a foreign book in the middle of a war zone.

Every now and then Mark anxiously threatens to have a student expelled for throwing paper planes at him, but the threats don’t work. The students keep ignoring every word the inexperienced Mr Owens utters, and after just forty minutes of lesson time Mark miserably sits down at his desk, desperately looking for YouTube videos about Greek art.

The video he ends up showing fails to capture the group’s attention. They keep making a mess until the bell rings and there are more paper planes on the floor of than there are students.

Mark’s next couple of lessons, more Art History, are just as bad. They take place in the same classroom, so over the course of just a couple of hours the floor becomes a carpet of paper planes. Mark doesn’t say anything about it, and the students don’t stop. During one lesson, he simply ends up reading the chapter about Greek Art aloud, putting half of the group under a deep sleeping spell. Those who do stay awake continue to disobey him.

The disastrous Art History lessons put a serious damper on Mark’s mood. He completely skips lunch. He loses all sense of time and forgets that he was supposed to have a conversation with Rob about Mr Barlow.

He can’t even get himself to praise his students anymore. When the students from an otherwise lovely second-year Composition group show him their poems during a Creative Writing lesson, he
struggles to find something he likes about them. He doesn’t know what to say or do. All he keeps thinking about is the Art History textbook in his rucksack, so large and so heavy that he could probably kill himself with it.

Things take a turn for the worse when Mark fails to show a first-year group a PowerPoint presentation about famous uses of alliterations. They flat-out refuse to pay him any attention. Like group A_WD1E, they just sit there throwing paper planes at each other, not caring that Mr Owen is right there trying to teach them something.

In a blind panic, Mark rushes through his explanation, skips his beloved chain writing exercise, forgets to remind the students of their writing portfolios and anxiously announces the end of the lesson – thirty minutes before the bell rings.

The moment the last student has headed out of the door, Mark collapses into his desk chair. He feels relieved that the students are gone, but he feels terribly guilty that he ended the lesson thirty minutes early, a lifetime in teaching terms. If Mr Harrison ever finds out about this, he’ll be sacked for sure. He could lie that he stopped early to get to the staff room on time, but the staff room is literally three doors away.

He’s messed up. He’s going to lose his job.

A wave of fear rises up Mark’s body. He feels all of a sudden very alone even though there are over 1,600 people on the school premises, all potentially able to see him crying because every classroom has interior windows looking out at the corridors. There’s no privacy here.

He wants to disappear to the bathroom, but he finds it impossible. His body has become as heavy as a stone. Gravity is keeping him in place on his desk chair; his poor, unprofessional lesson plans laid out before him in a mess on the table.

His breaths are starting to come in quick, frantic pants. His mind keeps replaying the same images and sounds over and over again, sometimes in a completely different order or backwards. He again relives his dreadful conversation with Mr Harrison.

Then a terrible thought reaches him. He doesn’t want to be a teacher anymore.

In the space of just six hours, he’s gone from loving being a teacher to absolutely hating it. He hasn’t even had time to think about Gary, one of the sexiest men he’s ever seen. It all seems so insignificant now, finding someone attractive when he’s sat here having a panic attack.

**Lesson Five: Paper Planes**

Mark doesn’t know how long the bad feeling lasts. He takes another trembling breath, and slowly but surely the world comes back to him, starting with the explosion of planners and student handouts on his desk. When he then looks at the floor, he counts at least thirty paper planes, scattered across the entire length of the classroom. He’s spent four hours in here, and it shows.

The sight is a stark reminder that something’s wrong. Last year, Mark was the tidiest, most organised trainee there was, constantly reminding students to keep their desks clean and making sure that his own desk had all his lesson plans piled up in chronological or alphabetical order.

This classroom does not represent that at all. This is the classroom of a teacher out of his depth; a teacher who has so disastrously failed to be in control that even the stationery has tried sneaking out.
Not wanting to burden the cleaners with the mess he allowed to happen, Mark leaves his desk so he can pick up every single paper plane he can find. He gets up a bit too quickly, and his head starts spinning. He has to hold on to the edge of his desk until the dizziness stops, caused by the fact that he hasn’t eaten all day.

He proceeds to pick up paper planes regardless.

Most of the paper planes are empty, but one of them has been scribbled full with rhyming couplets about Mark’s dismal teaching skills. They’re quite malicious, but they do contain several alliterations like the ones Mark taught them today. He isn’t sure whether that’s a good thing or not.

There’s another paper plane perched on top of the smartboard, but Mark can’t reach, and he’s too tired to try. He just hopes he doesn’t get in trouble for leaving it there.

As well as paper planes, some students have left empty water bottles and food wrappers on the window sills. Another student has scribbled something quite offensive on his desk. Mark scrubs it off with the side of his palm and throws away the empty bottles in the trash bin, which by now has become quite full. Feeling somewhat calmer (but not better), Mark returns to his desk to have another look at his timetable. His next lesson – the final lesson of the day, starting at a quarter to four – is CW: Creative Writing. He’ll be teaching a third-year group by the looks of it. Mark planned a fun lesson based on free writing and modern rap music, but he’d rather go home and cry for the rest of the day. Out of all the potential things he was hoping would happen on his first ever day as an NQT, he never thought he’d be given a second subject he knows nothing about. He doesn’t even know if it’s allowed, legally. Probably not. But now he’s stuck with it anyway, and he has no idea how to proceed. Reading the chapter about Greek art alone will take him several hours.

Quite suddenly, Mark’s tummy rubbles; he hasn’t eaten since that morning. He considers crossing the corridor to go to the staff room to eat something, but then he remembers that he left his lunch box with Rob and that he hasn’t spoken a single colleague since eleven o’clock that morning. He hasn’t even seen any colleagues, as far as he knows. He’s just sat in this classroom all day, desperately trying to find useful worksheets about Greek art online and skipping lunch and his meeting with Rob as a result.

The thought fills Mark with immense loneliness that makes tears well up his eyes. How is it possible to teach at a school with over sixty members of staff and still feel this alone? It’s as if he’s the only teacher here, completely left to his own devices in a building he still doesn’t know his way around.

What’s worse, he has no idea how he’s going to pretend he’s okay at a quarter to four, when his final lesson of the day starts. No-one’s ever taught him how to get through a lesson when you’re feeling down. No-one’s ever taught him how to teach Creative Writing when your mind is swimming with a million worries about how you’re going to survive. You just welcome your students, turn on your Smartboard and pretend to be fine for sixty minutes.

But Mark isn’t fine. He feels terrible.

And it shows.

Mark starts when he hears a soft knocking on the door. He quickly rubs the tears from his eyes.

Then his heart drops; Mr Barlow is standing in the doorway.

He’s clearly seen Mark cry.

‘M-Mr Barlow,’ Mark stammers, his voice catching. His red eyes flick to a couple of paper planes
that he didn’t spot earlier, right underneath Gary’s nose. There are more paper planes that Mark missed hidden behind a couple of chairs, completing the picture that Mark’s previous lesson must have been a perfect disaster. ‘I – I didn’t see you there.’

Gary picks up one of the paper planes from the floor and gives it an impressed look. ‘I see that the students have made good use of our expensive stationery again. Good shape, this. I sometimes wonder if we shouldn’t just switch to teaching aerodynamics. Imagine that.’

Mark lets out a weak, relieved laugh. He feels another tear roll down his cheeks, and he rubs it off with the back of his hand. ‘I guess that’s a nice way of looking at it.’

‘Wanna talk about it, Mark?’

Mark almost forgets to nod because he’s too busy having an inner party at Mr Barlow remembering his name. The experienced teacher suggests a visit to the staff room, but Mark declines; the staff room is too crowded for him, and he doesn’t want his colleagues – mere strangers, still – to find out that he’s been crying over a sea of paper planes in his classroom. Mark makes up a white lie about preferring to stay in classroom 127-MA because he doesn’t feel like carrying all his stuff to the staff room, and Mr Barlow asks no further questions.

Mr Barlow half-closes the door behind him, giving him and Mark some privacy. He sidesteps the rogue paper planes on the floor and sits on the chair opposite Mark’s desk. It means that they’re separated by Mark’s massive desk, and Mark rather wishes they weren’t. He’d much prefer it if Mr Barlow were sitting next to him, where he could better see all the little lines and blemishes on Gary’s face, allowing Mark to decide that he doesn’t find him attractive after all.

Unfortunately for Mark, his colleague looks just as beautiful as he did that morning. There’s a certain shimmer in his eyes that wasn’t there earlier: a sort of unspoken intrigue that almost makes Mark think there’s a mutual romantic curiosity.

But there can’t be. Gary’s just showing interest in him as a colleague. Apart from the fact that Mark will probably feel a lot better once he’s talked to someone about his disastrous first day here, this means nothing. It’s not as if Gary felt the same spark Mark did that morning.

Still, it doesn’t stop Mark from feeling a fuzziness in his stomach whenever Gary looks at him.

Mark looks away and pretends to re-organise the papers on his desk. They’re print-outs of the PowerPoint that Mark nicked from the internet earlier, about Greek Art and other things he knows nothing about because he hasn’t been able to read the textbook yet. The groups he taught were so challenging that he hardly managed to get through the first three slides.

‘How bad was it?’ Gary asks. He sounds soft. Warm. He’s not going to judge.

Mark sighs. His voice sounds croaked, as if he’s just returned from a particularly bad night out. ‘Not great, Mr Barlow. Really, really not great.’

For lack of having something to distract himself with, Mark starts stacking up the papers he had already stacked up a minutes ago. Next, he adjusts his Art History and Creative Writing textbooks so that they perfectly line up with the edge of the table. It’s easier than looking Mr Barlow in the eye, what with him being so ridiculously handsome and Mark having just proved himself to be one of the world’s worst ever teachers.

But Gary doesn’t seem to mind.

‘Describe “not great.”’
‘Just – you know. Bad class management. Students not listening to you, that sort of thing.’ Mark
dares to look up. When he catches Gary’s eye, he sees his colleague looking back at him with a kind
of rare understanding in his eyes that makes Mark want to tell him everything. ‘And I’ve had that
before, obviously – you know, students not listening to me –, but this was different. It’s like they
didn’t even know I was there. They just kept throwing paper planes at each other until I didn’t know
what to do anymore and I let them go thirty minutes after I’d started. And it wasn’t just that one
lesson, it was nearly all of them. All day. I just couldn’t take it anymore.’

Mark looks at Gary for a sign that he disagrees with the way he handled, but Gary doesn’t seem to
care. He doesn’t judge.

‘You know what, Mark . . . I don’t think any teacher’s first day is ever any good. Especially not if
it’s at a school like this.’ Gary gives Mark another sympathetic smile, and Mark feels butterflies
having a party in his tummy. ‘On me first day here I had to lie down for about three hours
afterwards, I was so tired. And don’t even get me started on class management. You’d think you
never have to tell people off when you’re teaching them how to play the piano, but that’s not the case
at all. You’re gonna be dealing with class management whatever you teach. Just the other day I had
to send someone away for trying to hide chewing gum inside one of me keyboards.’

Mark laughs. ‘You’re right, that is bad.’

‘It is. It was. But it doesn’t matter, is what I’m saying. Cos this, mate?’ Gary waves a hand at the
paper planes on the floor. ‘This doesn’t matter. The students will have forgotten about it by
tomorrow.’

‘You really believe that?

‘I do. They will. Trust me. Teaching’s basically a sequence of snapshots. Pictures. Some of those
snapshots are good, but a lot aren’t. It doesn’t mean you’re a terrible teacher.’

‘It doesn’t help if you have no control over the sequence.’ Mark says it so softly that he might as well
be whispering.

‘What do you mean?’

Mark studies his colleague, this seemingly kind, understanding man who made Mark feel all sorts of
things inside when he first saw him. He has no way of knowing whether he can trust this stranger
with sensitive, personal information that could easily make its way round the school if the team is a
particularly gossipy bunch, and yet he trusts Mr Barlow completely.

Just to make sure, Mark looks at the door. It’s ajar. Faint sounds from the corridor slip through the slit
of the door, but no-one has walked past since the sixth period started, suggesting that he can say
anything without having to fear being heard.

‘It’s Mr Harrison,’ Mark admits. He hopes he isn’t overstepping by talking about the head teacher
behind his back. ‘He’s suddenly decided that I’m the perfect candidate to teach Art History, starting
today. It’s why me lessons went so badly – I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve never even had Art
History at school myself.’

‘Yeah, I did wonder why you had a copy of that massive textbook on your desk,’ Gary says, raising
an eyebrow at the bible-sized textbook in front of Mark. ‘Seemed a bit strange, for a Creative Writing
teacher . . . Have you told Mr Harrison this? About not knowing anything about Art History?’

‘I have, but he didn’t – well, he didn’t seem to care . . .’
‘Yeah, that sounds like Harrison, that.’

‘He’s done this before?’

‘Afraid so,’ Gary says with some resignation. ‘During me first year here, I was suddenly made a mentor of a first-year group, meaning I had to keep track of everything they did. Being a mentor isn’t necessarily that difficult, but it is when you’ve only been a teacher for three months. I didn’t have a clue what I was doing, and whenever I told Harrison I was struggling he would just shrug his shoulders. It wasn’t a big deal, apparently. But it was. Being a mentor kept me up at night – so much so that when a student was on the verge of being removed from the programme I neglected to inform her. I ended up telling her in an e-mail. Her parents weren’t very happy about that. Even now, I still feel guilty about that.’

‘So, Mr Harrison – he didn’t tell you how to be a mentor even though he knew you were inexperienced?’

‘Exactly.’

‘And that’s legal? Getting a teacher to teach a subject they know nothing about?’

Gary sits back and crosses his arms. In doing so, he exposes the muscles on his arms, faintly visible through the material of his black dress shirt. It’s only now that Mark notices Gary’s taken off the jacket he was wearing that morning.

‘I’m not sure about it being legal, but some schools do it anyway. Especially in further education, where a lot of teachers originally come from a non-teaching background. It’s a lot cheaper than hiring someone completely new, anyway. You were already on the payroll, so having you teach Art History wouldn’t cost the school any extra. I suppose the Art History lesson replace your free periods?’

Mark nods.

‘Yeah, I thought so. The school doesn’t have to bother paying someone new, and it keeps the students off the streets. Cos one free period for these kids – that’s enough to keep them from coming to school all day. It’s why I was made a mentor: the students literally didn’t have anyone they could turn to. I wasn’t a good mentor by any means, but at least they had someone to go to if they had questions. I’m not surprised at all that Mr Harrison asked you to take over.’

Mark’s gutted. He was hoping Gary would at least agree that the school’s decision is absolutely ridiculous – and perhaps even a little bit illegal. Schools aren’t meant to employ unqualified teachers, period. ‘So you think this is all right, then?’

‘Absolutely not, mate. It’s a disgrace, asking you to teach something like this. They could easily have asked one of those folks from the Art department to do it – I don’t think I’ve ever seen them do anything, those teachers. But I do understand the reasoning behind it. Once you’ve worked here for a couple of years you’ll realise there just are some things you can’t say no to. Better to just get on with it.’

Mark’s feelings have somewhat mellowed, but it doesn’t change the fact that he knows nothing about Art History. What’s more, he’ll still have to face his challenging groups week after week, regardless of whether he understands the reasoning behind Mr Harrison’s decision. The students aren’t miraculously going to treat him better just because the school has treated him poorly.

‘So what do I do?’ Mark asks. He knits his brow. ‘Not just with Art History, but with everything.'
How am I ever going to get through a lesson if I’m just going to end up having paper planes thrown at me? How do I teach a subject that’s full of facts and numbers when I was trained to get students to write?"

‘Simple,’ Gary says as though it’s obvious. ‘We all have different teaching styles. I’m really self-deprecating. When someone doesn’t listen or I play out of tune, I joke about it. That way, the students don’t have to. Mr Donald, one of the Dance instructors – he sends students away the moment they so much glance at their phones, he does. He’s amazing when it comes to class management. Mrs Brooke likes trivia and giving away prizes. Mrs Nas doesn’t explain anything. She just gives students a planner, sits down at her desk and lets the students get on with it. As for you, you teach Creative Writing, Mark. You were trained to get students to write. So get them to write.’

Mark has an epiphany. He hadn’t thought of it like that. The students could easily use their textbooks to write a poem or sonnet about Greek Art. Or even better, a magazine! They could write a magazine; the perfect marriage between facts and creativity.

Feeling himself becoming enthusiastic about the idea, Mark writes it down on a post-it, then pops it on the first page of his textbook. He gives the textbook an intrigued, eager look as though its previously unintelligible pages have magically transformed into something he finally understands.

This could actually work.

‘I might have an idea. It’ll take time, but – yes, I think I’ll do it.’ Mark feels relieved. The panic attack he experienced just ten minutes ago suddenly feels very far away. His words are suddenly energised with a newfound cheerfulness. ‘I don’t know if it’ll stop students from throwing paper planes at me, but it might work. Yes. I think it will.’

‘Mind sharing?’ Gary asks, to encourage Mark.

Mark blushes. He’s scared that if he says the idea out loud, he’ll realise how bad it is. ‘I wanna write a lesson plan and see if it works on paper first.’

‘Fair enough. Class management stands or falls at the way a lesson’s been planned, so if you think your idea could work, then you should do it.’ Then Gary seems to remember his place. He has so many colleagues coming to him for advice that he sometimes forget that he’s just a regular teacher too. With Mr Harrison genuinely being quite useless, he often feels like he has to step in for what the head teacher lacks. ‘Anyway, mate, you don’t have to do anything I just told you. You’ve just graduated! You should just do whatever you want to.’

Mark looks down. ‘I don’t feel like I’ve graduated. I don’t even feel qualified to teach . . .’

‘You will. Give it three or four years, but you will.’

‘That’s not very helpful.’

‘I know. Wait till I start getting out my concert analogies!’

Mark blinks. ‘Concert analogies?’

‘You sure you wanna hear this?’ Gary asks, challengingly.

‘I don’t know, but seeing that we’re already here . . .’

‘What I always tell new teachers: a lesson’s like a concert, really. Play a couple of energising songs at the beginning, get people fired up; calm things down a little, maybe have a good chat; then round
things up with all the big hits to make sure people still remember the gig when they go back to work on Monday. That’s literally what a good lesson should be like, that.’

Mark is sceptical. ‘I’m not sure if all of that applies.’

‘You’re right. If I brought a confetti cannon to school a lot of parents would probably complain,’ Gary concludes humorously.

Mark laughs. He finds himself having to suppress a very loud thought about how much he likes this handsome colleague with his limitless knowledge and enthusiasm.

They briefly look at each other, and sparks fly. Mark ends up staring at his desk again, which he’s already reorganised a million times for fear of looking at Gary too long. He’s stared at his desk so much that he has already memorised the pathetic messages that students have scratched into the wood.

‘I bet this isn’t what you had in mind when you got this job,’ Gary whispers. In doing so, he shifts the topic from class management to Mark’s teaching training, which is a lot easier to talk about because it’s something Mark finished quite successfully.

‘It’s not what I expected at all,’ Mark sighs. ‘I was so made up that I’d managed to get a job so soon after graduating.’

‘When did you graduate?’

Mark hardly dares say it. By the sounds of it, Gary’s been a teacher for much longer than he has. ‘A few months ago . . . The course itself only took about two years.’

‘What made you decide to do it?’

Now this is something Mark won’t have any trouble talking about. At last, Gary gets to see Mark for what he is; a creative music enthusiast who also happens to be a teacher, like him.

‘I used to be a songwriter before this. Meaning I wrote songs for other artists. It didn’t pay that well, but it allowed me to meet a lot of different people who all worked in music in some way or another. One day one of those people reached out to me and asked if I could plan and teach a Creative Writing lesson at a local sixth form, and when I went and did it I enjoyed it so much that I decided I wanted to become a teacher. I never really went to university because my training was entirely school-led, but I did manage to get my teaching qualification in the end, you know. What about you? Mr Williams told me you’re a recording artist as well as a teacher.’

Mark gulps. What a stupid slip-up! He was never meant to tell Gary that he and Rob had spoken about him!

‘I mean, Mr Williams may have mentioned it in passing,’ Mark backtracks, his cheeks pink.

‘What else did he say? Just out of interest.’ There’s a twinkle in Gary’s eyes.

‘Just that. You know, nothing very interesting.’ Mark’s cheeks turn a little pinker when he remembers that Rob mentioned Gary also teaching meditation and yoga, amongst other things. He tries to stop himself from thinking about it in too much detail by asking Gary a perfectly innocent question about his career. ‘Were you a recording artist or a teacher first?’

‘A bit of both. I was performing at working men’s pubs to pay for me teacher training, and during me fourth and final year I was discovered by this guy from a local talent agency. He’d heard me sing
and was interested in becoming me manager. That same year I graduated and picked up a job here, and not much later I released me debut album.’ Although Gary is obviously allowed to be proud of what he’s achieved, he doesn’t say it in a boastful way. ‘I’ve now got four albums under me belt and I’ve never even missed a single lesson, can you believe it?’

Mark looks at Gary in awe. All the students from the Music department probably adore Gary for managing a teaching career as well as releasing albums, and Mark doesn’t blame them, because he now does too.

‘Wouldn’t you rather be a singer full-time, though?’ Mark asks out of curiosity. He looks at the clock; there are still five minutes until the afternoon break. Out of the small, indoor windows that overlook the corridor, he can already see small groups of students leaving their classrooms and heading downstairs to get something to eat. Perhaps if he and Gary talk long enough, Mark will forget that he still has a difficult lesson ahead of him.

‘The problem with being a recording artist is, you spend a lot of it being indoors,’ Gary begins to explain. ‘Some days you won’t even see anyone, you’ll be so busy writing. That’s why I like performing live. You get to meet all these people from different backgrounds and countries who’ve come together just to see you. It’s the same with teaching. You get to meet people. You get to find out about their lives. Sometimes you see certain students more than their parents do. Sometimes you never see certain students at all. But it’s that social aspect that made me continue being a teacher. It’s the people.’

‘Even the people who throw paper planes at each other?’

‘Especially those.’

The bell rings. Perfectly on cue, there’s the sound of dozens of chairs scraping the floors above their heads. Within seconds, the corridor in the A-wing is filled with an ocean of students. It’s business as usual. In fifteen minutes, Mark has to face yet another group: M_SW3C, a third-year group in the middle of their final exams.

But for now, it’s time for something far more important.

‘Fancy a cup of tea, Mark?’

[LESSON SIX: A CHAT AT THE COFFEE MACHINE]

Even though it is only half past three, the staff room has thinned out considerably. Where there were dozens of teachers only that morning, there are now only five: Ms Brooke, the English teacher Rob mentioned, and three fellow colleagues from the Music department. At a table a little farther away, the mysterious Mr Orange is hunched over a notebook with a pen, his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth as he writes.

Mark’s lunch box is still in the same place where he last saw it, on one of the small round tables where he and Rob talked about Mr Barlow that morning. When Mark picks up his lunchbox to have a sandwich, he sees that Rob has left a pink post-it on top of it: FACT FIVE: HE HAS A YOUTUBE CHANNEL.

Blushing, Mark quickly shoves the post-it into the pocket of his jeans before Gary can see. He takes a small bite of one sandwich, then puts it back into his lunchbox, unfinished. He still isn’t feeling
particularly hungry, for it’s quite hard to feel hungry when you feel butterflies.

Meanwhile, Gary has already made his way to the coffee machine and gotten himself a cup of coffee. When he sees Mark sheepishly approaching, he hands him an empty paper cup and gestures vaguely at the machine’s digital display. By the looks of it, there aren’t that many options: just black coffee, coffee and sugar, coffee and milk, espresso, black tea, chocolate milk and hot water.

‘Have you used this machine before, Mark?’

Mark shakes his head. He spent most of his first break talking to Rob. And if he had decided to have a cup of coffee, he probably wouldn’t have been able to get past Mr Donald, the Dancing teacher with a caffeine addiction.

‘Is the tea any good?’

‘Not really.’ says Gary. ‘If you want a good cup of tea you’re probably better off heading to the Starbucks we have on campus. It’s why so many students are late in the morning – they’re all queuing up for caramel lattes at nine in the bloody morning. Their teas are good, though. Nice coffee, too. You just need to be prepared to wait in a queue. As for this thing over here, well . . . it’s got a life of its own, this one. I’ve already asked the finance department to order a new one, but they didn’t seem keen for some reason. Sometimes I wonder if I have to order one meself . . . Here, lemme show you.’

Mark cannot see why Gary would possibly need to show him how a coffee machine works (or how Gary could ever afford an expensive corporate coffee machine himself), but he stays anyway.

Gary presses the CAPPUCCINO button with his index finger. Nothing happens. He does it again. Still nothing. By now, Mark has made the awful discovery that Gary’s hands are quite nice to look at. Very nice indeed.

By now, Gary has pressed the CAPPUCCINO button five times. He tries to have black tea instead, to illustrate. That button doesn’t work either.

‘Mr Donald made using the coffee machine very easy this morning,’ Mark says. ‘Has he broken it?’

‘You just need to know which buttons to press. Like I said, life of its own. Been like that for weeks.’ Gary gestures at the empty cup he handed Mark earlier. ‘What are you having?’

‘Tea, I think.’

‘What kind?’

‘Green? I like green tea.’

‘We don’t have green tea.’

‘Oh.’ Mark squints at the digital display of the coffee machine. ‘I’ll have black, then.’

Gary goes through a million different buttons just to get a cup of tea. After what feels like a century, the coffee machine finally gurgles black tea into Mark’s paper cup.

‘There you go! See how easy that was? It won’t take you more than a minute each time,’ Gary says in jest.

Mark stares into his paper cup. The water isn’t even lukewarm, and the tea – well, it doesn’t look
black at all. More like a strange sort of brown. ‘Maybe I’ll just head to Starbucks next time.’

‘That’s probably for the best,’ says Gary, and he puts his own cup to his lips anyway and blows.

‘I heard a rat got stuck in there once.’ This comes from Mr Williams. Having entered the staff room without Mark noticing, he’s taken a seat on top of one of the large round tables in front of the coffee machine. ‘T’was really big as well, did you know? Apparently people were still drinking little bits of rat two weeks after it happened . . .’

Mark gives his own cup of tea an uncertain look. He feels bad about not drinking it after the effort Gary went through to get it, but he doesn’t really fancy drinking animal remains either. He casually puts his cup on the kitchen counter whilst Gary flicks away Rob’s story with a wave of his hand. ‘Don’t listen to him, Mark. It’s just something Mr Donald came up with so he could have the coffee machine to himself.’

Rob lowers his voice conspiratorially. ‘Did he, though? Or does the school just want you to think that?’

Gary rolls his eyes. ‘Not everything in here is a conspiracy theory, Rob.’

‘Like the rumours about the ghost haunting people in the dark room? A dark room for photography, obviously,’ Rob adds for Mark’s sake.

‘Obviously,’ Mark reiterates.

‘There’s no truth in that either,’ Gary says. ‘Just students accidentally knocking things over in the dark.’

‘I doubt that,’ Rob says sceptically. ‘I left your lunch box on one of the tables, by the way, Mark. Did you get it?’

Rob changes the topic so suddenly that Mark’s brain takes some time to go along with it. Apparently they’re not talking about rats and coffee machines and ghosts anymore. ‘I – I did, yes. Thank you, Mr Williams.’

‘Did you get the note as well?’

Mark nods nervously. His eyes flick at Gary, who has taken another sip of coffee, not caring about Rob’s tales. ‘I d-did get your note, yes.’

‘Will you be checking it out?’ Rob says, of course referring to Gary’s YouTube channel.

‘I – I don’t know yet,’ Mark stammers, hyperaware of Gary standing right next to him. He tries to change the subject too. ‘I’m s-sorry I didn’t meet you during lunch, by the way, Rob.’

‘That’s all right. Try again on Friday? I haven’t finished me PowerPoint yet, anyway,’ Rob says, meaning the “Gary Barlow’ PowerPoint that he was going to make. ‘And you really should have a look at that channel, Mark. For research.’

Mark has no idea how Rob can talk about Gary so openly when Gary’s right there. What if Gary finds out about Mark (potentially, maybe) liking him?

Still, Mark really is quite curious about Mr Barlow, and he wouldn’t mind getting to know him a little better without having to go through the awkwardness of actually being near the guy. Besides: learning about Mr Barlow will teach Mark things about the school too, which of course is much
more important.

‘Okay. Let’s try again on Friday,’ Mark tells Rob. ‘But keep your PowerPoint professional, please. I don’t want it to have any, you know –’ He searches for the right word. ‘Special effects.’

‘Like pictures?’

Mark feels himself go red, and he hopes Gary can’t read his mind. ‘No pictures. Please.’

Rob promises that his ‘very professional and educational PowerPoint presentation about a thing’ will contain no pictures and special effects at all. Rob then looks at the clock, realises that he was meant to catch his bus six minutes ago and bids his colleagues adieu.

He’s disappeared before Mark can thank him.

With Ms Brooke and the three colleagues from the Music department having left too, Gary and Mark are suddenly quite alone. It makes it harder to ignore the butterflies that Mark feels inside. He becomes quite genuinely scared that Gary somehow knows that he and Rob were talking about making a PowerPoint about him.

Thankfully, Gary doesn’t seem particularly interested in Rob’s PowerPoint. ‘Don’t worry about Rob’s story, by the way. The thing with the rat, I mean. That never happened.’

Mark shivers. ‘It’s enough to put me off, though, Mr Barlow. Especially with the coffee machine taking ages to get you a cup of tea. It’s like you’re deliberately telling me to spend my money at Starbucks!’

Then something hits Mark like an epiphany. That morning, when he watched Gary dipping a tea bag into his cup in the staff room – that was a Starbucks tea bag! Could this conversation be Gary’s sly way of telling him that he wants to get tea together? It can’t be.

It could be.

But it isn’t.

Mark’s obviously seeing things that aren’t there. Gary’s just being supportive and kind and all the other things he wishes his colleagues would be.

Or . . . could he perhaps use his knowledge that Gary likes Starbucks to his advantage? He could head to Starbucks each morning and try to spot Gary there. Or even better, he could bring Gary a cup of tea each morning and make him fall in love with him, one sip of hot tea down his throat at a time . . .

Mark was so distracted by thinking about Gary’s throat that he completely blocked out his new crush asking him something.

Gary has to repeat the question. ‘Which group do you have next?’

Mark feels a part of him die inside. He had completely forgotten that he still has to teach!

He quickly takes the print-out of his new timetable out of his bag. He hopes he doesn’t have to put himself through another Art History lesson.

He traces his finger to Monday, 15:45. It’s the final lesson of the day. ‘Says here I have group M_SW3C next. Creative Writing.’
Gary snorts. ‘Good luck with that.’

‘Why?’

‘M_SW3C is the group Mr Donald mentors. You know, the dancing instructor? Anyway, the group were all supposed to graduate last year, but they didn’t because they didn’t put in the work for their four core subjects. Some of them have actually been here longer than I have.’

Mark knits his brow. From what he can remember from the school’s website, all courses from the Music department should take students about three years. In year one, students take a variety of general arts and music subjects like Art History and Drawing; a way for teachers to determine whether the students have the talents to stay here. They’ll also have subjects related to their chosen area, such as Sound Design and Mark’s Creative Writing. Everyone can apply for a course, and most students will be accepted. Year two is generally seen as a period of time in which the students develop their own individuality as an artist. And in their third and final year, students will graduate by handing in a final portfolio as well as taking a series of difficult theory exams. They’ll also be doing an internship at a studio, design company or record label.

‘But the courses here only last three years,’ Mark says as much. ‘I looked it up before I started working here.’

Gary nods. ‘Exactly. These students – don’t get me wrong, mate, but they’re not the cleverest bunch. Mr Donald has always been quite honest about how much he hates this group.’

‘Oh. Oh, dear. So class management is going to be a struggle again, then, isn’t it?’ Mark’s feeling rather deflated.

‘It is if they actually show up . . .’

‘Why wouldn’t they?’

‘Like I said. This is a special bunch, this group. Most of these students finished their final Creative Writing portfolios last year already, or the year before that, and in the rare case they haven’t – well, they’ll probably be too busy with their other lessons to bother going to yours. They don’t even have to come – your subject’s just on the timetable because they’re technically still following the third-year curriculum. It’s an administrative thing.’

Mark’s head is swimming with information. He can’t wrap his head around the fact that an entire group would neglect to attend his lessons. ‘But it’s on the timetable. They have to come.’

‘Most of them don’t come to Ms Brooke’s English lessons either. They just show up for their exams, and that’s it, really. Ms Brooke doesn’t even know half of them. It’s frustrating because it makes the group a pain to get in touch with, but that’s not on you.’

Mark lets out an exasperated sigh. ‘This school is very strange. I don’t know if I even want to teach a small group.’

‘You’ll get used to it.’

Mark looks at the clock. It’s only five minutes until the final lesson of the day: his lesson with M_SW3C, the elusive collection of third-year Songwriting students. He knows that what Gary just told him is probably true, but even if only one student shows up then he’ll obviously need to be there. He can’t stay away.

‘I think I’ll go to the B-wing anyway,’ Mark says. ‘Just in case.’
‘Suit yourself,’ Gary shrugs. ‘But I bet you’ll be back here in five.’

Mark almost says something along the lines of ‘would you like me to be back in five?’, but he thinks better of it. They’re not in flirting territory yet. They’re not even in any territory. They’re just colleagues, which is a perfect explanation for why Gary’s eyes stare after Mark’s pert arse on his way out.

LESSON SEVEN: MR OWEN’S STUDENTS DON’T SHOW UP

Mark enters his classroom in the B-wing, one of the oldest parts of the school. He’s been put in a large arts and craft classroom that is primarily being used by students and professors from the Art Teacher courses.

It’s rather exhilarating to be in the craft classroom. Everywhere Mark looks, he sees crafted animals, paper cameras, painted seashells, handmade pop-up books, paper crowns, dream catchers, foam flowers, pinecone bird feeders, DIY rain sticks, straw tulips, spinner toys and bottles filled with glitters. The colourful pieces of art look like they were made by five-year-olds, but they were actually made by students, learning how to make paper crafts suitable for children.

Five minutes pass. Then ten. Then fifteen. There are no students to be seen, not even in the corridor. M_SW3C have stood him up. He’s come here for nothing. Gary was right.

The group not showing up is a bit of a relief because it means Mark doesn’t have to deal with another challenging group, but it’s also rather disappointing. Mark would quite like to have finished his day with another successful Creative Writing lesson. Now, he feels like he’s had two good lessons and four terrible ones. It’s not exactly a good start of his teaching career.

Still, at least he can go home now. He feels absolutely knackered. He has so little strength left in his body that it takes him fifteen minutes to get to the cloakroom on the ground floor, where he left his coat that morning. By the time he gets there, most students and colleagues have already left the building.

Rather coincidentally, Gary’s also there. He’s in the process of putting on his coat – a black summer trench coat, just as puzzlingly expensive as the clothes he’s wearing underneath – when Mark walks into the room breathing in the scent of Gary’s cologne. He gives Mark a handsome smile that turns Mark’s insides into jelly.

‘They didn’t show up, did they, your group?’ Gary says.

Mark shakes his head. ‘Not a soul.’

‘That’s probably for the better. You get to go home now! That’s good, isn’t it?’

Mark nods. He really does feel immensely tired.

‘I just hope tomorrow will be better,’ Mark sighs as he puts on his leather jacket and pops his arms through the straps of his immense rucksack. ‘Maybe I should read a book about class management tonight.’

‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you.’
‘Why not?’

‘You don’t want to go home and do more work, do you? Relax! Have fun. Pick up a novel if feel like doing some reading. But I would seriously suggest you don’t do anything for work tonight.’

‘I’d love to, but I still need to prepare my Art History lessons,’ Mark pouts. He can’t see himself being able to relax at all.

‘Suit yourself. I’m personally going to watch Star Trek Discovery tonight, me.’ Then Gary gets an idea. ‘Do you know what, though, if you think class management is going to be a serious issue for you, you could have one of your lessons recorded. It’s been proven to work for anyone, even more experienced teachers. You can ask Cecelia for a camera kit at the reception desk if you’re interested – she works at reception day and night and can help you with anything.’

‘Having one of my lessons recorded?’ Mark scrunches up his nose. ‘Oh, I hate the sound of that. I wouldn’t feel comfortable with being watched like that at all.’

‘Really? I love being watched . . .’ says Gary, and he gives Mark an infinitesimal wink that has Mark thinking about him for the rest of time.

[LESSON EIGHT: MS MITCHELL]

Mark doesn’t sleep that night. Or the night after. Or the one after that. His lessons are so all-consuming that he lies awake thinking about them at night, unable to get rid of the voices in his head.

At one point, he doesn’t even know what day it is anymore. He drags himself through one bad lesson after another until he finds himself sat at his dining table with no memory of how he got there. During most evenings, he can’t remember what he did at work other than that it must have been extremely difficult.

His magazine idea for his Art History lessons, whilst promising, takes some time to get off the ground. He’s constantly torn between planning his Creative Writing lessons and preparing himself for the groups he’s meant to teach about Greek Art, and most of the time Creative Writing ends up winning the battle. He already knows how to teach writing, after all. He’s trained for it. He knows how to get students to write a poem or a sonnet or a set of lyrics.

But it’s a lot more difficult to get students to write when they’re not listening to you.

For the rest of the week, class management remains Mark’s biggest challenge. It doesn’t get better. With some groups, like the extremely challenging A_WD1E that he also sees on Wednesdays, it actually gets worse. Way worse. They don’t stop throwing paper planes at each other, and at one point Mark gives up entirely. He lets them do whatever they want to, defeated by a bunch of web-designing sixteen-year-olds because they refuse to listen to him.

Apart from Mr Williams, Gary is one of the few good things about teaching at the art school. They don’t see each other often, but the thought of Gary alone is enough to keep Mark sane at work.

Mark’s crush on Gary gets a little worse when Mark randomly decides to go to the on-campus Starbucks before work on Friday. He has spotted Gary sauntering around with a chai latte from Starbucks quite a few times that week, and he secretly hopes that he’ll coincidentally bump into Gary when he heads there himself on that morning.

Sadly, Gary is nowhere to be seen. It’s an otherwise lovely morning, with the early morning sun
already warming the seats on the terrace, but while he waits in the queue for his cup of tea Mark can
only see students and intimidating-looking colleagues from the Art department. Gary must have
headed into the school already.

Just as Mark’s about to leave the coffee shop with a cup of tea and the croissant he ordered, he can
hear someone calling his name. It’s a somewhat older teacher from the Art department, not someone
Mark knows particularly well. Mark can’t remember what she teaches.

The older teacher waves at Mark from one of the window seats. Mark smiles at her amicably as he
approaches her.

‘You’re Mark, aren’t you? One of the new colleagues from the Music department? The name’s Ms
Mitchell.’

Mark shakes Mitchell’s outstretched hand. It’s not a very firm handshake, like shaking hands with an
eel.

‘Nice to meet you, Ms Mitchell. I teach Creative Writing. Oh, and Art History too, since last
Monday,’ Mark adds, still having to get used to his new job.

‘Nice to meet you. Must be quite hard, teaching two subjects while you’re still in uni.’

‘Oh, I’m – I’m not still in uni,’ Mark politely points out. He assumes Ms Mitchell must have
confused him with someone else.

But Ms Mitchell continues to give Mark a suspicious look over the rim of her pointed spectacles. It
makes her look quite menacing, which isn’t helped by the fact that her unruly grey hair gives her the
appearance as though she was electrocuted by a witch. As much as Mark likes to see the best in
people, it’s not a particularly pleasant face to look at, and it turns out she isn’t a particularly pleasant
person to speak to either.

‘Really? I could have sworn you were still a student,’ Ms Mitchell says, fixing Mark with the
expression of someone who has just swallowed a flying ant. ‘There’s no shame in admitting that
you’re an intern, you know.’

‘I know, but I’m not,’ Mark tries to explain. Having forgotten to put a cardboard sleeve around his
paper cup of tea, his left hand is beginning to feel quite hot and burned. He’s too polite to ask
whether he’s allowed to put it on Ms Mitchell’s table. ‘I graduated last month. I never even went to
uni, actually.’

This explanation should suffice, but Ms Mitchell seems quite put-off by the fact that Mark didn’t go
to university. ‘If you didn’t go to university, then how did you get your qualification?’

‘I did a school-led training course. I learned on the job. The school where I was working at the time
offered to train me.’

‘So you’re not really qualified, then.’ Ms Mitchell glares at Mark with squinty eyes.

‘Oh, b-but I am,’ Mark says with as much politeness as he can muster up. He doesn’t want to seem
rude, but this lady is insinuating that he isn’t a qualified teacher! ‘I got my degree not too long ago. I
know I’m only young, but I think I know what I’m doing. Most of the time, anyway.’

‘That’s not what A_WD1E told me yesterday.’

The sentence cuts through Mark like a knife. It feels like a personal attack, like someone has been
watching Mark’s lessons via a hidden camera. He’s pretty sure one of the first rules of teaching is that you don’t gossip about other teachers with your students.

‘Why would A_WD1E talk about my lesson with you?’

‘I’m their mentor. They come to me when they have complaints. Obviously, they’ve complained about you.’ Ms Mitchell pushes up her glasses and grabs her bag from the floor. She gets up and leaves her empty paper cup on her table, not caring that there’s a recycle bin right in front of her. ‘I can more or less abide Mr Harrison’s decision to hire a young teacher such as yourself, but I don’t like it when my students suffer as a result. Art History is an important subject. My group don’t know that yet, but it is. They have to pass your exam. Have you ever thought about this? Have you asked anyone about your brand new subject at all? Have you, Mark?’

Mark shakes his head. He has not.

‘Then you should have asked.’ Ms Mitchell tuts. ‘It is the first thing you should have done. Do my students have an exam or not? What is the exam about?

‘Do you not see the importance of this, Mr Owen? It is absolutely vital that my students pass. If they don’t, I’ll look bad. People like Mr Harrison will look at me and tell me I’ve been a bad mentor. So if my students complain about you again, I’ll make sure we have you removed. I don’t care if we have to hire someone else. I won’t have you make my students look bad.’

Ms Mitchell has said all of this with cut-throat emphasis. If Ms Mitchell were Mark’s teacher, he’d want to hide in the back of the classroom, not daring to look her in the eye because he’d be terrified of being turned into stone.

She has the same effect on Mark as a colleague. He looks down and fumbles with the paper bag in his hand. By now, his croissant has gone cold and stale. His left hand hurts from the heat of the paper cup against his skin.

He has never been reprimanded by a fellow teacher before. ‘I’m sorry, Ms Mitchell. I’ll work harder from now on. I’m sorry that your students complained about me.’

Mark’s expecting a grateful nod, but Ms Mitchell’s face remains stern. ‘When are you seeing them again?’

‘Next Tuesday, I – I think. No. Wait.’ Mark’s struggling to put the cogs of his brain into motion with Ms Mitchell looking at him like a witch threatening to turn him into a frog. ‘I’m seeing them on Monday. Yes, Monday.’

‘Are you sure about that?’

Mark’s eyes flicker with doubt. He hasn’t memorised his timetable yet. ‘Yes. Yes, Ms Mitchell. I’m seeing your students on Monday.’

‘Next Monday. Good. I do hope that my students won’t come to me with complaints again,’ Ms Mitchell says in a voice that could melt steel. ‘Have a nice day, Mr Owen.’

With that, Ms Mitchell leaves her empty cup on her table and leaves. By the time she’s left the building, Mark lets out the shaky breath he didn’t know he was holding. He leaves the building with his tail between his legs. He sits on an empty chair outside Starbucks to catch his breath and sighs in disappointment when he takes a sip of his tea. It’s gone cold.

Mark knew that teaching was going to be hard, but he never thought he’d be threatened like that. It’s not what he’s used to; if he made a mistake during his apprenticeship, his coach would be kind but
firm. His coach would tell him exactly what to work on, word for word, without threatening to have him removed from the training course.

So what Ms Mitchell threatening to have him fired? That’s terrifying. Utterly terrifying.

And yes, Mark knows the students were right to complain. His lessons have been bad. It’s true, he hasn’t bothered to find out whether the students have an exam or not. But it doesn’t change the fact A_WD1E is the worst group he’s ever taught and that he’s probably never going to get a group of future web designers interested in Art History.

So how is he going to get through this?

|LESSON NINE: TEN FACTS ABOUT TREE SLUGS|

The rest of his day is just as stressful as Mark feared. He doesn’t have any Art History lessons today, but he keeps thinking about Ms Mitchel, the frustrated mentor from the Art department. As a result, he starts questioning every single thing he does, from the way he opens his lessons to the collaborative writing activities he asks his students to do.

His students aren’t particularly challenging today (it’s Friday, and most of them are already thinking about the weekend), but it doesn’t stop a million questions from jumping up at him over and over and over again.

What if he’s just not any good at this? What if getting his teaching qualification was a big ruse and he’s not qualified after all? What if the reason the students are complaining about him is because they can tell that he doesn’t belong here?

After all, students can smell a newly-qualified teacher from a mile off. He knows that. They can break you down in just a single lesson. So what can he possibly do to make the future web designers from A_WD1E like his lessons after all?

Mark doesn’t know. He spends his entire lunch break Googling class management techniques, but nothing helps. Everyone else seems to know how to teach, but he doesn’t, and he’s too ashamed to ask.

Thankfully, distraction is provided in the shape of the ‘Gary Barlow’ PowerPoint that Mr Williams promised he would make.

Mark’s arranged to meet Rob in the computer lab, a large collaborative space with over two dozen computers set up in rows. In the middle of the room, there are large desks where students can work on assignments that don’t require computers. The windows in the lab are ceiling-high, providing a perfect view of the green school grounds for the brave students who dare to look away from their Apple computers. The room is well-lit; a stark contrast from the dark, dusty computer rooms at Mark’s training school.

If the malfunctioning coffee machine in the staff room was meant to make Mark believe that the school is seriously underfunded, then the computer lab tells a different story. It’s no wonder Rob works in the lab: sat at his desk, where he has two monitors placed next to each other, he looks like Professionalism itself.

Rob’s in the process of finishing an essay for his own studies when Mark walks in for his chat about
Gary. It’s already way past four, so most students have already left the lab. When Rob sees Mark approaching, he flashes a warm smile and gestures at the empty desk chair next to him.

‘How are you, mate?’

‘I’m all right.’ Mark sits. He adjusts the desk chair so that his feet can reach the ground. ‘A bit tired.’

‘Still enjoying yourself, though?’

Mark doesn’t really know the answer to that, and he hasn’t known Robbie Williams long enough to dare telling him how crap he feels. Every time a colleague asks him how he’s doing, he simply nods and hopes they don’t ask any more questions.

Thankfully, Robbie Williams is the type of colleague who can’t focus on one question long enough. He glances at a young lad, a little over sixteen years old, with skewed glasses on the tip of his red nose.

Mark remembers the boy from his Art History lessons; a studious young lad, he’s the only student who’s still working on his homework at one of the Apple computers. Mark hopes Rob isn’t going to show him a PowerPoint about Mr Barlow when there are still students around.

Rob’s thinking the same thing. ‘Hey, Nick, mate. It’s Friday. The lab closed five minutes ago. Go home and watch Netflix or something.’

‘But I haven’t finished texturing my walls yet,’ says Nick, with childish sulkiness that makes him sound younger than he actually is. When Mark squints at the young lad’s screen, he can see a perfect 3D rendering of a small cottage like the ones you might find in the British countryside. Half of its walls are still a cold grey; the other half has been digitally plastered with a brick texture Nick must either have made himself or found online. It looks like the project took a lot of work.

‘I don’t mind if Nick stays,’ Mark whispers. Nick’s usually one of the most behaved students in his Art History lessons.

Rob makes a quick assessment of Nick’s character. He’s fearfully bright, but he lacks some social skills. He spends most of his breaks and free periods working on his only friends, his 3D renderings of various original characters. He probably won’t care about two teachers gossiping about one of their colleagues.

‘Okay. Nick, you can stay.’

Nick continues working on his 3D cottage like the conversation never even happened, and Rob turns back to Mark. ‘Have you spoken to Mr Barlow since we last discussed my extremely useful and enlightening facts about him?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘Only on Monday, during the sixth period. We talked about class management.’ He doesn’t add the fact that Gary basically walked in on him crying over paper planes.

‘But you haven’t seen him since?’

‘Only in passing. I briefly saw him on my way to the B-wing yesterday.’ Mark remembers this very well, because Gary was wearing very tight trousers.

‘And your feelings, have they changed at all? You said on Monday that you thought he isn’t terrible looking, and you’ve specifically asked me to prepare more facts about him, so there must be
something nice brewing in your tummy, am I right?’

‘I still think he’s not terrible looking,’ Mark says. He hasn’t spoken to Gary enough to have made a proper assessment of his character.

‘On a scale from one to ten, how not terrible would you say he looks?’

‘Ten being . . .?’

‘Definitely not terrible looking. Hot. Attractive. Fit. Would be down to have sex with when both parties enthusiastically agree.’

Mark ignores the idea of having sex with Mr Barlow, which is something he has not been thinking about. At all. Sex is not something you have time to fantasise about when you’re constantly worrying about getting through a lesson without having a paper plane ending up in your eye. ‘A seven, I think.’ He pictures Gary inside his head. ‘Yes, a seven.’

‘You and I both know that’s factually incorrect, but whatever works for you, Mark.’

Rob logs back into his computer. Both monitors face away from the students; something he arranged so he can look at YouTube videos of cats playing the ukulele whenever he gets bored.

Once Rob has logged in, it takes him a couple of clicks to find what he was looking for: a PowerPoint presentation entitled “TEN FACTS ABOUT TREE SLUGS”. Its title slide bores the same name.

‘In case someone hacks my computer,’ Rob adds when he sees Mark raising his eyebrows at the title. ‘Are you ready for more facts about our dear colleague?’

Mark isn’t (for some reason, his heart rate has gone up quite a bit, and he feels a little light in the head as though he has not eaten all day), but he nods anyway. He hopes that whatever he’s about to find out won’t make him like Gary less. Or more. He’s not sure what he wants to get out of this. He doesn’t even really know why he’s agreed to meet up with Rob at all. The only thing Mark knows for sure is that he desperately wants to find out more about a man he didn’t even know existed until five days ago.

Rob presses F5 and moves to the first slide of his PowerPoint: “FACT SIX: MR BARLOW HAS RELEASED FOUR ALBUMS AND TEN SINGLES.”

Underneath the title, Rob has provided the covers of all four of Gary’s albums. Mark did specifically say he didn’t want any pictures in the PowerPoint, but thankfully the album covers are quite innocent, with the pictures more or less being four different front-facing headshots. They’re aesthetically pleasing, but nothing to get butterflies about.

‘As you already know, Mr Barlow’s a bit of an artist,’ Rob explains expertly. ‘He’s released four albums so far, and they’re quite good. Well, the second one isn’t so much. But fans still pretend they like it because they think it makes them sound hard-core.’

‘What is his music like?’

‘Just your usual “singer-songwriter” stuff. It’s the type of music mums love, if that helps. Haven’t you been to his YouTube channel yet?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘I can’t, Rob.’ Meaning, I won’t.
‘Why not?’

‘It’d be like stalking, wouldn’t it? I wouldn’t feel comfortable with something like that at all.’

‘So? Students watch his videos too.’

‘That’s different. *They* don’t fancy him. N-Not that *I* do,’ Mark adds, stuttering. ‘I’m just here cos I’m a bit curious.’

‘You’ll like the slide that I added this morning, then. Information about Gary’s exes!’

Mark clicks away the slide about Gary’s exes with the speed of light.

The next slide is much more innocent, but it’s nothing Mark didn’t know already: “FACT SEVEN: GARY HAS WORKED HERE FOR SEVEN YEARS.”

‘That means he’s very experienced,’ Rob adds matter-of-factly, with an emphasis on ‘experienced’ that has very little to do with teaching.

The next slide features several more facts, presented as short bullet points: “GARY HAS TWO DOGS; GARY HAS NO TATTOOS (IN CASE YOU’RE INTO THAT SORT OF THING MARK); GARY HATES HORSES BECAUSE HE WAS ONCE ATTACKED BY A HORSE DURING A SCHOOL TRIP (pictures available upon request); GARY IS A STAR WARS NERD; GARY MEDITATES ONCE A WEEK” and so on. It’s all very educational, but it hasn’t really helped Mark figure out his feelings. He is quite obviously physically attracted to Gary, and he found great comfort in talking to him about class management on Monday, but he has only known Gary for five days. That’s not enough time to develop a crush.

Then again . . . the way Mark’s heart keeps racing whenever he thinks about him – and the way he keeps thinking about Gary, period – maybe he just ought to admit that he likes Gary more than he should.

Mark can see in the right-hand corner of Rob’s screen that the PowerPoint presentation still has one slide. ‘What’s on the next slide?’

‘It’s a surprise. Meaning, I’m not going to show it to you until you’ve told me whether this has actually been helpful. I take it you wanted me to give you facts about Gary because you wanted to find out if you could fancy him?’

Mark rubs the back of his head. ‘I don’t know. I do feel like I know Gary better now, which is nice, but, you know, do I actually fancy him or do I just think he’s nice-looking? I don’t know. Maybe it’s too early to tell. It’s all a bit of a conflict inside me head at the moment. But I do think it’s nice that you took the effort to make this for me.’

‘No problem, mate. As for you wondering whether it’s too early to tell – that’s usually a sign that you know already. You know what I mean? You wouldn’t be feeling conflicted if you didn’t have these feelings for him already. And you did look like you wanted him to sit on your lap on Monday, anyway. Or the other way around.’

Mark turns bright red. ‘I did not!’

‘You did. It was very noticeable.’

Mark crosses his arms. He frowns, which is one of the few things in life Mark Owen isn’t very good at. It just makes him look like a cross puppy. ‘What do *you* care, anyway? You’ve only known me
for a week. I could be a terrible person with really bad breath and a terrible bedside manner.’

‘You don’t look like you are. And I care because Gary’s mate. Also –’

Rob presses a random button on his keyboard. Where there was previously a long list of bullet points, the words “YOU’RE HIS TYPE” appear in flashing rainbow letters, bouncing up and down the screen like hyperactive bunnies in a terribly cheap 90s screensaver. There’s also an animated gif of two hugging otters, which has no relation to the flashing message at all. Rob just thought it looked cute.

The bright message has made Mark turn even redder. ‘I said no special effects,’ he mumbles, baffled by both the PowerPoint and his own feelings.

‘Whatever. It gets the point across.’

Rob presses a random key. A black screen appears. ‘All I’m sayin’ is, I can tell that you’re into Gaz. He’s probably into you too. And I know that we’re not mates and that I’m not even a proper teacher and that I’m probably oversteppin’ by sayin’ all these things, but I’ve worked at this school for two years. I’ve been sat here, in this lab, for two years. That means I hear and see a lot of stuff other colleagues never would, like Brenda from M_SW3C hopelessly fancying Ms Nas or Mr Harrison doing really shady stuff with exams. I don’t want this to be one of those cases where you two clearly like each other but you can’t be arsed to do something about it. You know, especially with Gary clearly needing to get laid.’

Mark gasps. His eyes dart at Nick the Animation student, who’s still working on his 3D cottage. ‘You can’t say stuff like that when there are students around!’

‘I can. I just did. All I’m sayin’ is, talk to him. Get to know him. I swear to you, Mark, you won’t regret it.’

Mark lets out the breath he didn’t know he was holding. With all the things he’s heard (and felt, for his heart hasn’t stopped racing since Rob showed him his PowerPoint), he can’t deny it anymore. He fancies Mr Barlow. There might even be a chance Mr Barlow could fancy him back one day.

‘All right. You’re right. I think I may be willing to accept that I have a crush on Mr Barlow, but I don’t know how I’m ever going to get to know him with all the other things I have on my plate,’ Mark says. He has literally not fancied anyone for years, and he’s never fancied someone whilst so otherwise occupied with other things. ‘There’s so much I need to do that I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to talk to him much.’

‘You mean, like, lesson plans and stuff? You don’t have to prepare lessons all the time, mate. Unless . . . there’s something else going on?’ Rob adds when he sees Mark looking down guiltily. ‘You know you can tell me anything – I’m gonna forget about it in two minutes anyway.’

Mark sighs. He might as well tell Rob what’s bothering him. ‘One of my groups has complained to their mentor about my Art History lessons. She told me this morning that if my lessons haven’t improved by Monday, she’s going to have me, sacked.’

Rob gives Mark a confused look. ‘Art History? But I thought you taught CW.’

‘I do. But Mr Harrison decided on Monday that I have to teach Art History too. The original Art History teacher has left, you see.’

‘Fucking hell. Is that why you skipped lunch on Monday?’
Mark nods. ‘I spent that entire break trying to figure out what to do. There’s a special assignment that I’ve been working on – you know, this magazine about Greek Art – but it’s never gonna be finished on time. I don’t know what I can do that’ll stop the students from complaining again, especially with my class management being so terrible.’

‘You want my advice, mate? I mean, other than obviously throwing Mr Harrison down a pair of stairs for makin’ you put up with a subject you’ve never taught before?’ (Here, Mark gives a disapproving shake of his head.) ‘Ask Gary for help. Seriously.’

‘You’re just saying that because of what we were just talking about.’

‘No, I’m serious. You need to ask Gary for help. He’s got an entire bookcase worth of boring class management stuff at home. And he does classroom visits as well. You know, when teachers come and have a look at fellow teacher’s lessons and give ‘em feedback and stuff? He does that. He’s known for it.’ Rob heads to the school website on his computer. ‘When are you seein’ this difficult group again? The one that complained?’

‘Monday, third period . . .’

Rob heads to the school website on his computer. Within a couple of clicks, he’s found Gary’s timetable. Compared to Mark, whose timetable is stacked full with one lesson after another, Gary has quite a few free periods. Including on Monday. ‘What a coincidence. Gary has a free period that hour.’

That is all very well, but Mark isn’t sure whether he’d actually like having Gary visiting one of his lessons. At best he’d feel ridiculously nervous having Gary there, watching him with those intense green eyes of him, at worst – Mark doesn’t even want to think about it.

‘Mr Barlow probably has better things to do,’ Mark says. ‘I doubt he’ll wanna help me.’

‘You can ask him yourself.’

Rob utters a mock gasp of surprise when Gary Barlow himself walks into the computer lab holding something small. Mark can’t see what it is. The only thing he can see is that Gary is heading straight for him.

Mark suddenly wants to disappear. He’d rather be swallowed by the floor than having to go through that ridiculous plethora of emotions he feels whenever he looks at that man. He pretends to be looking for something in his rucksack on the floor as Gary hands Rob whatever he was holding.

‘Thanks for making me borrow that recorder, Bob. Really came in useful earlier.’

‘No problem, mate.’ Rob doesn’t seem surprised that Gary happens to be here at all, as if he orchestrated the entire thing. He opens a drawer in his desk and puts away the recorder Gary handed him. ‘Did the keyboard assessments go well, then?’

Gary makes a pained expression. ‘I’ve heard better. Harrison was right when he said this year’s Piano first-years aren’t as good as last year’s. I worry about their final assessments in June.’

‘So nothing worth listening to, then,’ Rob surmises. Mark has no idea what they’re talking about, but he’s too nervous to ask. He just stares.

‘There was nothing worth listening to at all,’ Gary sighs. ‘I used the recorder to make the students assess their own arrangements, but I wiped everything after. It’s going to be a tough few weeks if they don’t improve soon.’
'You think a lot of them aren’t going to make it to the second year?'

'Afraid not, mate.'

'Can’t you take them to that music expo you’re visiting in a couple of weeks? That might inspire them.'

Gary grins. His face lights up in a way that Mark hasn’t seen Gary’s face do before. ‘You know I love that expo, mate, but I don’t know if my students are going to be particularly interested in a two-hour talk about analog synths, Rob.’

‘But you are.’

‘Can’t wait, mate.’ Then Gary’s eyes fall on Mark, who’s obviously been staring.

Now that Rob has made Mark so very aware of the fact that he clearly fancies Gary, it’s as if the seed of infatuation has sped up its transformation and changed into a dangerous flower. Gary looks more beautiful, suddenly. His eyes are more piercing than before, drawing Mark in until he drowns, and there’s nothing Mark can do about it. The feeling in his tummy has been given a name, rendering it more hopelessly inevitable than before.

‘There was something you wanted to ask Gary, wasn’t there, Mark?’

Mark blinks, his train of thought derailed as Rob harshly nudges him with his elbow. ‘I – I don’t think there was, no.’

‘There was, though. Ask him about the thing.’

Gary is looking at him with such compelling curiosity that Mark doesn’t have a choice. ‘Erm. Yes. I was going to ask you about the thing.’

‘The thing,’ Rob reiterates in support.

‘What thing?’ Gary asks.

‘Well. Erm. Me and Mr W-Williams were talking earlier, and he told me that you do classroom visits.’ Mark starts fumbling with the sleeves of his dress shirt. He feels absolutely terrified about talking to Gary for some reason, and it shows. He starts stammering. His cheeks have gone pink. ‘I was wondering if you’d like to visit one of my lessons? I’d like to get some feedback about class management. I mean, if you’re free, of course. You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to.’

‘Is this about the group you mentioned earlier? With the paper planes?’

Mark barely manages to say the name of the group out loud. ‘A_WD1E, yes.’

‘When are you seeing them again?’

‘On Monday. Third p-period. I’d – I’d really appreciate it if you could help me. It’s . . . it’s quite important that this lesson goes well.’

‘I think I have a free period that hour, but I’m not sure, mate.’

‘I’ve already checked,’ Rob interrupts. ‘You’re free that period.’

‘Well, I guess in that case I have no choice but to say yes.’ Gary gives Mark a warm smile that turns Mark’s legs into custard. ‘And you don’t have to be so nervous about asking me, you know. I do
lesson visits all the time. I’d love to help you out.’

Mark blushes. His heart starts hammering inside his throat, literally forcing his next words out of him. ‘You’re the reason I’m nervous, actually,’ he says, apropos of nothing, and Rob has to cover up a laugh with a cough. Mark immediately regrets saying it.

*Why is he suddenly acting like a teenager?*

Mark tries to backtrack, poorly. ‘I mean, I’m nervous because – like I said, I don’t like being watched. I mean, I *do*. I mean, I don’t mind. I do mind when it’s on camera. But I don’t mind – I wouldn’t mind if you . . . I wouldn’t mind if you came and gave me a hand. With class management.’

Mark thinks he’s saved himself pretty well, but Rob’s still snickering, and Gary’s eyes have already flickered with something eager and dangerous.

The flicker is gone the moment Mark dares to look up again.

‘If I make you that nervous, I’ll just sit in the back of the classroom and try not to make you notice me,’ Gary says tenderly. ‘I get it, though. Most teachers find classroom visits difficult. They’re not my favourite thing in the world either, but sometimes the only way to improve is by asking someone else for feedback. I suppose you could ask the students too, but I don’t think they’re going to be that kind to you at the moment, I’m afraid, mate. Are there any particular issues you’d like me to help you with?’

‘Just class management in general. Whether I tell the students off when they do something silly, that sort of thing. I don’t need you to look at one thing in particular.’

Gary has taken his phone out of the pocket of his trousers. ‘Class management in general,’ he reiterates as he types those exact four words into an app on his phone. He’s also added the date and time of their meeting from what Mark can tell. ‘I take it you’ll want me to give you tips afterwards?’

‘Yes, please, Mr Barlow.’

‘Brilliant.’ Gary adds it to the note on his phone.

‘I wouldn’t mind some tips *now*, if you have any,’ Mark says. He feels rather silly asking colleagues for teaching tips when he graduated only a couple of weeks ago.

Gary’s tip is fittingly straightforward. ‘I’ve got just got the one, really. If you’re afraid the students are gonna throw paper planes at each other again, don’t give them paper.’

The tip seems so simple – so silly, really –, but it hits Mark like an epiphany. ‘That’s really, really helpful, Mr Barlow. Thank you,’ he says, actually bowing a little.

‘No problem, mate,’ Gary has saved his meeting with Mark into his phones. ‘Also – the timetables on the school website aren’t always that accurate. Mind giving me your phone number in case I can’t find you on Monday?’

Mark’s brain immediately malfunctions. He knows, logically, that Gary’s just asking for his number in case the classrooms end up being changed, but this seems extremely fortuitous. He’s only fancied Gary for a week, and he’s going to get his number already!

‘My p-phone number . . .’ Mark frantically searches his memory for his phone number, but he can’t remember suddenly. Apparently Gary has not only turned his legs into jelly, but also his mind. ‘I – I
can’t remember. I can’t remember my number.’

‘I’ll look it up!’

Rob turns to his computer and opens a file that has very basic information about the school’s teachers should there ever be an emergency. He reads aloud Mark’s number, which Mark tremulously confirms is correct, and Gary saves it to his address book.

‘Is there anything I need to know, Mark? Or something you need, perhaps? I’ve got quite a few books about class management at home.’

Just your number, please, Mark thinks, but he’s too scared to ask for Gary’s number in return. ‘No, I - I think that’s it. Monday morning, third period. A_WD1E.’

‘Amazing. I look forward to it . . .’

Gary wishes his colleagues a good evening and takes his leave. By the time he’s gone, Rob has already shaken his head in stunned disbelief a million times. Nick the Animation student is still working on his 3D cottage, not a care in the world.

‘I can’t believe you’ve only been ‘ere for five days and Gary Barlow’s already got your number. Do you think he’ll text you over the weekend? I think he’s going to text you over the weekend.’

Mark cringes. ‘Don’t say that! He’s just asked for my number because we’re colleagues and he wants to help me out with my class management problems.’

‘Of course. He’s just asked you for your number because he wants to discuss Bloom’s Taxonomy.’

Rob rolls his eyes. ‘But don’t tell me I didn’t tell you so when Gary ‘accidentally’ texts you a picture of himself in his yoga kit, Mark.’

‘I don’t think Mr Barlow would ever do something like that. He doesn’t look like the type.’

Rob just laughs.

[LESSON TEN: “KEYBOARDS MONTHLY”]

It’s Sunday morning. The floor of Mark’s tiny living room is filled with a disorganised ocean of papers, lesson plans, timetable print-outs, students’ poems, worksheets and textbooks. It’s the only place at home he can work, for his house is the size of a matchbox and his living room is too small to house a proper desk and a desktop computer. So far, he’s had to plan all his lessons this way, sat at his living room table that also doubles as a dining area in the evenings and mornings.

Mark’s flat is not ideal, but it’s home, and Mark probably wouldn’t be able to afford something better anyway. When you’re a teacher in a big city, you have no choice but to make do with a shoddy one-room flat with a rowdy pub as your next-door neighbours. He doesn’t even have room for a full-sized bed; he’d had to sleep in a squeaky single bed for the past year and a half. It’s not exactly a flat you’d want to take a potential lover to.

Mark might have been able to afford something a little better if only he’d received more royalties for
his songs, but he was never going to be a millionaire. Even if one of his songs did end up doing reasonably well for someone else, he’d be lucky if he even got a penny out of it. With iTunes and CD singles being a thing of the past, it has become almost impossible to be a songwriter and still have a decent disposable income.

So, while being a teacher is very tough, it has at least provided Mark with a decent income and a guaranteed job. When he was a songwriter full-time, he never quite knew when he would get his next pay check.

Regardless, being a songwriter never took him as much time as teaching did. Mark’s been planning lessons all weekend, and he’s not even halfway finished. He still has to plan his CW lessons because he spent all Saturday evening making stencils for his Greek Art project on his laptop, and he still has to mark the poems that his students e-mailed him over the weekend. He doesn’t have a printer at home, so he’ll have to go to work early tomorrow to print everything out on time.

Mark’s about to lift himself up from the floor to have a cup of filter coffee when his phone buzzes with a text alert. He assumes it’s one of his mates asking him whether he can meet up for drinks tonight, so by the time Mark has reached his phone on the other side of the living room table he’s already come up with a dozen excuses.

He’ll say he’s meeting someone else. Or that he’s tired. Or that there’s a work-related thing he has to attend. Or that someone from work is having a birthday party down the road.

There’s no way he’s going to tell his mates that he has to spend all evening cutting up stencils for his CW lessons.

But when Mark finally sees the text, he notices that he hasn’t been texted by a mate at all.

—Hey, Mark. It’s me – Gary Barlow. Just a question – what kind of activities were you planning on using for our classroom visit on Monday? I wanted to see if I could find anything that might help you in me books at home.

Mark reads the text again. And again.

He’s just been texted by Gary! He’s clearly just asking an innocent question about Mark’s lesson, but still! Gary’s texted him!

Mark saves Gary’s number to his phone immediately. He types a shaky reply.

—Morning Mr Barlow..... Have you had a good weekend? I wanna do my lesson in the computer lab this time. The students will be working on an online magazine about Greek Art!!

Mark reads the text through again. The bit where he asks Gary about his weekend seems a bit too keen. He gets rid of it. The text now reads as follows:

—I wanna do my lesson in the computer time this time. The students will be working on an online magazine about Greek Art!!

He doesn’t like the look of that either. It looks far too formal. He deletes everything. His nervous fingers slip. He accidentally ends up sending Gary this:

—I'm gogffij ghgh

Mark’s heart sinks. He starts to sweat. He tries to move his clumsy little fingers into a second text, but it’s already too late.
—Sorry, is this not Mark Owen’s number?

—Mark: No, it is!! I’m Mark. This is Mark’s number. I’m just clumsy, sorry!!

—Gary: Oh good! I was beginning to wonder if Rob had given me someone else’s number on purpose… Anyway, have you had time to think about what you’re gonna show me on Monday?

Breathe. Mark tries to type his next message more slowly.

—Mark: I’m taking the students to the computer lab tomorrow. The lesson plan is taking me quite a lot of time but I think it’s going to be good…

Send. Breathe.

—Gary: Sounds good, that – I love me some computer lessons… I really hope you haven’t been preparing your lesson all day though?

Mark blushes even though Gary obviously can’t see him.

—Mark: I have… Today and yesterday….. I haven’t had any time to prepare anything at work so I need to do everything at home…..

—Gary: So you haven’t done anything fun all weekend?

—Mark: Not really…..

—Gary: You should! Trust me – I know what it’s like when you’re new and you want everything to be absolutely perfect but even if you have a perfect lesson plan it’s never going to take off if you’re tired and stressed!

Mark can see what Gary means, but he can’t just stop working either. He still needs to prepare seven lessons.

—Mark: I don’t think I’ll have time to do anything fun, but I’m open for suggestions if you have any…..

—Gary: Go for a walk?

Mark looks out of his dirty living room windows. It’s dark outside, and it hasn’t stopped raining since the sound of raindrops pelting the windows woke him up that morning.

—Mark: It’s raining.

—Gary: Meditate?

—Mark: I have no idea how to do that.

—Gary: I personally love meditating me … It’s the best feeling in the world.

The best feeling in the world? Surely nothing is better than sex, Mark thinks. Or going to a Radiohead concert. Or holding a puppy. Or listening to the middle eight of Like A Prayer. But Mark can’t see how meditation can ever be that good.

—Mark: I think I’ll pass for now. Any other ideas?
—Gary: You could write a poem? You used to be a songwriter for a living didn’t you?

Mark laughs. He hasn’t written something creative purely for himself since he started teaching.

—Mark: I’ve just spent three hours sorting through the poems my students sent me over the weekend so I’d rather not write one myself at the moment…. It’s a good suggestion though!

—Gary: How about you do some reading? You don’t happen to have a Keyboards Monthly subscription, do you? They’ve recently done a great five-page spread about this year’s best MIDI controllers if you wanna do some light reading.

Mark has no idea whether Gary is being serious. Then again, with Gary having a reusable Star Wars coffee cup and talking openly about visiting music expos where they do two-hour talks about synthesisers, Gary does strike him as a bit of a nerd. He probably reads about MIDI controllers for fun.

—Mark: I don’t subscribe to Keyboards Monthly, no….. And I don’t know if I’m gonna have the attention span to read something at the moment anyway. I feel like I’m about to fall asleep just looking at my computer screen.

—Gary: You could try exercising if you need a quick energiser? Yoga is always great. Group exercise too if you have a gym in the neighbourhood.

—Mark: I’ve never tried exercise.

—Gary: I can help you with that…

Mark takes a sharp intake of breath. Maybe he’s just seeing things that aren’t there, but it seems quite strange that they’ve suddenly gone from texting about lesson plans to texting about yoga and exercise, of all things. After all, Rob did say that Gary might text him a pic of himself in his exercise kit.

Could this thread of messages be the start of something more intimate?

No, of course not.

Mark shakes his head. This means nothing. They’re just colleagues. Gary’s just being kind. He probably tells colleagues to exercise all the time. He does teach yoga, after all.

He sends Gary a quick, thoughtless reply.

—Mark: Thanks for the offer, but I think I’m gonna have to pass on the exercise too.

—Gary: Why?

—Mark: I’m not flexible enough…..

—Gary: I can help you with that too if you want x

‘Oh.’ Mark reads the text again. ‘Oh dear.’

There’s no misinterpreting this. This is flirting. Gary’s flirting with him! And he has no idea how to respond.

Seriously, he has no idea how to respond. Mark’s not unfamiliar to being flirted with, but this is . . .
different. It feels different. Fancying Gary Barlow is something Mark has no idea how to deal with.

—Mark: Are you trying to distract me from my very important work, Mr Barlow?

—Gary: Maybe – is it working yet?

—Mark: A little bit…

The next text is less flirtatious, but Mark is glad, for his heart has started beating in a way that he’s not sure is entirely healthy.

—Gary: I’m serious though Mark – there’s no shame in taking a break from work. You’re a teacher, not a robot! Your lesson plans can wait. If that means your lessons are a little less good next week, then so be it – your wellbeing is more important. Relax! Have fun! No-one’s going to check whether you’ve written a lesson plan anyway. I’m not!

Mark sighs. He looks at the mess in front of him: the sheets on his living room table; the cup-stains on his paperwork; the Art History textbook, marked with over a dozen sticky notes and paper tabs; his laptop, currently showing a simplified Wikipedia page about Greek Art because he’s never going to understand the subject otherwise. He’s been sat here for nearly two days, just writing and reading until his well of ideas ran completely dry.

Gary’s right: he needs to take a break. If he doesn’t, he’s going to head to work feeling absolutely exhausted and no more prepared than he did yesterday.

—Mark: You’re right, Mr Barlow. I might head out for a walk after all. The weather’s clearing anyway, and I don’t think I’m going to come up with more ideas sat here….. Maybe I’ll just call it a day and continue working on my lessons at work tomorrow.

—Gary: You should. Like I said – your lessons can wait.

—Mark: Okay. Then I think I’ll stop!!

—Gary: Good lad x

This time, Mark doesn’t try to ignore the sharp flutter that Gary’s last text makes him feel. After he’s closed his laptop, removed his things from his living room table and put on his coat and shoes, he spends the next half hour blissfully floating around his neighbourhood on a pink cloud, never once thinking about Mr Harrison or Ms Mitchell or the students who complained about him. There’s a light drizzle, but for him, head over heels in love, it might as well be a bright summer’s day.
PART TWO

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Gary helps Mark becoming a better teacher by visiting his lessons and offering to talk about class management over a cup of coffee at Starbucks, which feels an awful lot like a first date. But not everything Gary does is helpful: at one point Gary sends Mark a rather risky text, and it gets Mark in tremendous trouble with the head teacher . . .

Chapter Notes

"Lesson seventeen" features some very, very, very light smut. The next time Mark does something like it, it will be a lot dirtier.

"Lesson eighteen: Let's talk about love" includes an aromantic student character. I originally thought about cutting the "lesson" entirely, but it's pretty much the only way I'm ever going to slip aromanticism into a Take That fic, so the character stays.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

|LESSON ELEVEN: MR BARLOW COMES FOR A VISIT|

By the time Gary walks into classroom 105-MC for his anticipated classroom visit, Mark has already been there for over ten minutes. He wants to get everything right, from the way the students walk into the classroom to the way they’ll leave it again when they head to Mr Williams’ computer lab for the main part of the lesson. He’s only planning to spend about ten minutes in 105-MC, a classic classroom with rows of desks, but they are ten minutes that need to be absolutely perfect.

After Gary has asked how Mark’s day has been, he briefly acknowledges the worksheets on Mark’s desk. Today, Gary’s wearing a black leather jacket with a black dress shirt underneath, one of his more formal work outfits. ‘Are these the stencils you spent all weekend, on Mark? They look good. Very professional, actually. I’d have believed you if you told me you got these from one of me books at home.’

Mark’s heart swells. Out of all the amazing teachers he’s met at this school so far, Mr Barlow is the one he wants to impress most. You can just tell by the way he enters a room that he’s one of those rare, once-in-a-lifetime teachers who inspires and encourages nearly everyone. When you see Mr Barlow, you instantly want to be him; to become a successful artist, like him, or even a teacher at an art school.

The only problem is that Mark has the added disadvantage of wanting to cuddle Mr Barlow as well as becoming him. This makes things a tad confusing, and very frustrating; Mark hardly manages to
get out his words in the correct order whenever he talks to him.

Simultaneously, Mark has the increasing feeling that his first ever meeting with Gary a couple of days ago wasn’t their first meeting at all. It felt so comfortable, talking to the piano instructor, like their meeting in the staff room had been written in the stars for millennia; a moment he had been waiting for all his life – and yet Gary couldn’t make him feel more uncomfortable if he tried. He feels bloody nervous just being near the guy.

‘T-thank you, Mr Barlow,’ Mark stammers after Gary has praised the stencils he made for his lesson. He hopes his face doesn’t look like he just swallowed a lightbulb, for his cheeks feel awfully hot. ‘I hope the students will like them too.’

‘I hope you did something fun this weekend, though? The last thing you texted me on Sunday was that you were going for a walk. I was beginning to get worried that you were working too hard.’

Mark looks at his hands. He thinks about what Gary texted him yesterday, about teaching him yoga and how to be flexible. He has never tried yoga or exercise before, but that has doesn’t stop his imagination from working over-time.

He accidentally pictures Mr Barlow teaching him yoga. They’re in a deserted exercise room. He feels warmth rise up his body when he pictures Gary kneading his body into shape. His cheeks become red hot when he tries to imagine what it would be like to have Gary’s large hands on his body. He wants to know what it’d be like to have Gary telling him to bend over.

The sound of a student walking past cuts through Mark’s daydream like a needle puncturing a balloon. He feels very suddenly very awkward and guilty when he sees Gary looking at him with a bemused look on his face.

He must not have bad thoughts about Gary Barlow. Not here. Not ever.

Gary is here for a classroom visit, nothing more. Gary’s here to assess his teaching skills. Gary’s here to give him feedback. This is not magically going to lead to the two of them going on a date.

‘I did go on a walk, yes,’ Mark says in his most casual voice. ‘It was very relaxing.’

‘So you didn’t try exercisin’, then.’

Mark’s guilty eyes flick up to meet Gary’s. Could Gary have read his mind and seen the images his brain was projecting? No, of course not.

But still – it’s quite convenient that Gary brings it up again.

‘I thought you’d help me exercise, Mr Barlow?’

‘I did, didn’t I? I don’t know if I’d be your cup of tea, though, Mark. I’ve been told I can be quite strict . . .’

‘I’d have no problem with that.’

A certain look flickers across Gary’s face that Mark hasn’t seen in his green eyes before. He wishes he could describe it without sounding hopelessly in love, but he can’t, even as a writer of love songs. Every time he looks at Gary, he’s bowled over by how beautiful this man is and how badly Mark wants him.

Even the way Gary picks up his stencils is sexy.
‘To be honest, Mark, I think you’re probably getting enough exercise with these.’ Gary has a brief look at the worksheets Mark had Rob print that morning, a five-page collection of computer-based tasks about Greek Art. He’s stopped talking about their texts, which is just as well because Mark doesn’t know enough about yoga and exercise and being strict to make any flirtatious comments about it. ‘Are you going to do all of this in one lesson?’

‘Several lessons, not just the one. I’m hoping to spread out the tasks over the remaining weeks of the semester. And I’m not gonna do anything. The students are.’

‘Remind me what you’re doing?’

Mark explains that the students are to make an online magazine about Greek Art. Mark hopes that the task will lead to the group knowing enough about Greek Art by the time they’ll sit down to do the exam.

Mark hasn’t really bothered himself with the technical aspects of the exercise, but the students all have their own websites where they regularly have to upload their work, so they probably have more ideas about how to make an online magazine than he does. Besides, the students from A_WD1E are training to become web designers. They should get the hang of the exercise pretty quickly.

Gary tells Mark he really likes the idea. ‘Oh, I love a good magazine, me. It’s such a shame so many are going out of print, isn’t it? I shed a tear when NME announced it was going to go online-only. You can’t beat Keyboards Monthly, though,’ he adds with childlike awe that Mark’s decided looks really endearing on him. It’s nice to see a side of Gary that isn’t just the slick teacher that he’s gotten to know.

‘Well, you never know,’ Mark says. ‘Maybe the students will love the exercise so much they’ll wanna work on online magazines when they’re older!’

‘What are you going to do in terms of class management, though? Computer lessons are quite tricky.’

‘I’m going to send away the students who haven’t taken their textbooks with them,’ Mark says.

‘Even though the textbook weighs a ton and they might not have been able to afford it?’

Mark can see what Gary’s doing – testing if he can truly be a strict teacher; testing if he can stick to the goals he set out on his lesson plan –, but sending away students for not having the textbook with them is a huge part of his new mission. If he’s strict from the start, the students will know that he’s not there to be ridiculed.

‘The students all have lockers,’ Mark explains. ‘They can leave their textbooks in there. And I know the Art History textbook is really expensive and that a lot of students don’t have that sort of money, but it is April, you know. We’re four months away from the end of the school year. I know it’s cruel, but I can’t teach if people haven’t bothered to bring their books with them. And Ms Brooke does it too, so it’s okay,’ he adds sheepishly, as if he doesn’t want to take credit for the idea.

‘What about when you’re inside the computer lab?’ Gary asks. ‘The students could all be playing computer games when you’ve got your back to them, and I think Mr Williams has a free period at 10:30.’

‘I’ll just walk around a lot and make sure everyone’s hard at work.’

This seems to have answered all of Gary’s questions. He asks where Mark would like him to sit, and Mark gestures, vaguely, at a seat in the left-hand corner. Gary has barely had the time to sit and take out a notebook and pen when the bell rings.
Mark feels a nervous current running through him. He knows, logically, that group A_WD1E are just a bunch of stubborn sixteen-year-olds, but it doesn’t stop Mark from feeling ridiculously anxious. He’s absolutely dreading this lesson, and it’s not just because Mr Barlow is sat in the back of the classroom in his snug jeans and a leather jacket. He’s dreading everything this group might throw at him: the paper planes; the rumours; the snickering; the hateful comments behind his back that he can’t say anything about because it will make him look weak.

So now that he’s moments away from another lesson with the loud web designers, Mark isn’t afraid to admit that he’s nervous. He’s very nervous indeed, especially with Ms Mitchell breathing down his neck and this lesson being a massive experiment that he’s never tried before.

If this lesson goes wrong, it could very well lead to him being fired.

Mark knows he mustn’t show it, though. He has to be strict. He must never let his students know how important this lesson is to him because they’ll only take advantage of it.

Mark waits for his students at the door. When he sees the group approaching, he demonstratively crosses his arms and stands in the doorway so the students can’t walk in. He takes a deep breath, tries to ignore the charismatic smell of teenage sweat that suddenly fills up the air and puts on the most authoritative voice he can muster up.

‘Good morning, class. How many of you have brought their textbooks today?’

The words come out a little strangled, but it still works: nine confused hands move slowly into the air. Mark can see that they’re indeed all carrying their textbooks with them and allows them entry. ‘You can come in. As for the rest of you, I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.’

The nine students with textbooks walk into the classroom one by one. The remaining fifteen lads all start talking at the same time, forcing Mark to shush them. He nods at an older lad with green hair. ‘You can’t just send us away!’ the student with the green hair says. ‘We’ve paid for this!’

‘If you can pay your tuition fees then you can afford your Art History textbook too,’ Mark says. Afraid that the students will see his hands shaking, he has to put them behind his back. ‘I’m sorry, but it’s no use coming to the lessons if you haven’t got the proper resources.’

‘We never even use the book,’ says another lad, shorter than Mark but just as old as the student with the green hair. He has a serious case of teenage fungus growing on his face.

‘We do use the book. We’re going to use it today, and we’re also going to use it when we start preparing ourselves for the Greek Art exam in June.’

A murmur erupts from the fifteen students who are still stood in the corridor. They all give each other worried looks.

‘We have an exam for this?’ asks a third boy.

‘You didn’t tell us that!’ exclaims another.

‘We don’t have time to revise for another exam!’ says the boy with face fungus.

‘I did tell you,’ Mark says. ‘I told you last time remember? You know, when you were too busy throwing paper planes at each other?’

The remaining boys look at each other again. They’ve all gone a bit pale and quiet.
Mark almost feels bad for the students, but he mustn’t give in. He needs to stick to his guns and go through with his plans, or else he’ll never be taken seriously again.

‘I’m really sorry, lads, but I can’t let you in if you haven’t got your books with you. If you’re scared that missing this lesson will make you run behind on schedule, please read chapter four from your textbook and have a look at the e-mail that I’m going to send you later. Goodbye.’

Before the students can point out that they never check their school mailboxes, Mark has already closed the door and moved to his desk. When he catches Gary’s eye in the corner of the classroom, he sees Gary nodding at him approvingly.

Mark’s never felt prouder.

As Mark explains his plans for today’s lesson, the students all watch him in quiet awe. Who is this new and improved version of Mr Owen, the inexperienced teacher who let them get away with murder only last week, and why does he suddenly look so much more comfortable? It’s as if he’s a changed man.

Mark mainly directs his words at the group, but he can’t help but glance at Gary every now and then, watching him with such eerie familiarity that it turns Mark on. It shouldn’t, but it does. When you have Gary Barlow looking at you like this, you’ll always, inevitably wish you were alone with him.

There are still nine students in front of him, though, and they all have questions:

‘Will we be graded for the magazine?’

‘When you say magazine, you mean blog, right? I’ve never read a magazine in me life.’

‘Do I have to write something, Sir? I hate writing.’

‘May I go to the bathroom to blow my nose?’

‘Does the magazine need to be suitable for mobile devices?’

‘How many hotlinks do you need?’

‘Can I use my own fonts?’

‘Sir, I really need to blow my nose.’

‘What is Greek Art?’ etc.

Mark has no idea about hotlinks and mobile devices, so he tells his students just one thing and lets them figure out everything else by themselves. ‘You’re going to be web designers one day. I think you know more about this than I do.’

The praise works. The students all sit a little straighter, for Mr Owen is completely right: they do know a lot about web design. Writing and creating an online magazine should be a piece of cake.

A student raises his left hand. ‘So this project, then, it’s all exam prep? If we work on this magazine, we’ll have a bigger chance of passing the exam?’

‘Exactly!’ Mark beams at the student. ‘Your exam will be about Greek Art, so if everyone makes a really good magazine you might not even have to read the textbook. You can just use everyone’s magazines as your revision papers.’
The student makes an impressed face. Last week, he was the one who started the shower of paper planes. ‘Nice.’

Mark can’t help but blush at that. He glances at Gary, who gives him another approving nod. Clearly, Gary likes the idea too.

Now that he thinks about it, Mark hasn’t even introduced Gary properly. He quickly explains why Gary is here. ‘Before we head to the lab to work on our magazines, I’ve just realised I’ve been quite rude to one of my colleagues. You’ve probably noticed him already, but today we’re joined by Mr Barlow. Mr Barlow is here to –’

Mark’s stumped. He doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t want to admit that Gary’s here because of his poor class management.

Thankfully, Gary had prepared an excuse already. ‘I’m here cos I’d like to find out more about the Art department,’ he tells the students. ‘We were thinking about making the two departments work together a bit more starting next school year, and we can’t do that unless we know what our students are like.’

‘We’re probably not the best example,’ one of the students snorts.

‘Why’s that?’ Gary asks, unable to help himself.

‘We’re really loud,’ another student interjects.

‘Yeah,’ a third student agrees. ‘No-one knows what to do with us. Nothing works. Even our mentor says she hates us. We’re one of the worst first-year groups ever. Everyone says so.’

Gary looks at Mark with a soft but eager look in his eye. It’s full of promise and faith; complete faith that Mark’s experiment will work out because he took so much effort to design it. ‘Let’s hope Mr Owen’s magazine project does work, then.’

Mark moves the lesson to the computer lab. During the move, which involves several corridors and one staircase, the students lose some of the quietness they were practicing earlier. Being allowed to leave the classroom makes them a lot louder, with some students even starting to sing pop songs at the top of their longs.

Happy that the students are here at all, Mark lets them.

When they finally reach the computer lab, the students are like fish in water. They put their heavy Art History textbooks next to their keyboards and log in with the speed of light. Within minutes, most students are indeed working on the bare bones of their magazines in various Adobe programs, but some take more effort to get started. One boy has completely neglected to take his textbook with him and has started playing a rather violent-looking online shooter.

Mark isn’t sure what to do about it, and Mr Williams isn’t there to keep an eye on the group, so Mark sheepishly ends up asking the student if he could please stop playing the game. The student does as he’s asked. But once Mark has stammered a nervous thank-you and turned his back on the student, the online shooter flickers back to life.

Gary has spotted it, but he doesn’t say anything.

The rest of the lesson is less than a struggle than Mark’s previous lesson with this group, but it isn’t perfect. Being inside the computer lab has stripped him of some of the authority he held earlier. Here, there are a million distractions: social media; YouTube; Mr Donald, mistakenly walking into the lab
with a Flat White clutched in his right hand. As a result, most students have yet to get started on the project.

It also doesn’t help that Mr Barlow is obviously still watching everything. With him clearly having written two pages worth of feedback, Mark doesn’t feel that aroused having Gary here anymore. He just feels nervous. He desperately wants to impress Gary still, but he doesn’t know how. Looking at it now, his lesson has only half succeeded, with the students being relatively quiet but not really doing anything now that they’re inside the computer lab.

At least they’re not throwing paper planes anymore.

It’s nearly time. Mark once again reminds the students that they’ll be working on the project again next week, and the students take that as an early cue to log out and leave. Most students leave without so much of a goodbye. While the students seemed to have fun during the lesson, it’s obvious that they’ve yet to appreciate Mr Owen.

Gary snaps his notebook closed and puts his pen in the pocket of his leather jacket. He purposefully doesn’t give Mark any feedback yet. ‘Shall we reflect on your lesson at the end of the school day? Say, at four? I know you’re already free by then.’

‘Oh, I can’t at four,’ Mark says as the bell rings. He picks up his things from Rob’s desk and starts stuffing them into his oversized backpack. ‘I’m meeting Mr Harrison to have a look at the Art History exams. I think I’m meant to write the exam myself,’ he sighs.

‘Tomorrow, then? During the sixth period?’

‘Can’t. I don’t have any free periods anymore, remember?’ Mark chews the inside of his cheek. Getting feedback was really important to him – especially as it means he’ll get to spend even more time with Gary. ‘How about Wednesday?’

‘Good shout. I’ll be in the piano lab all day on Wednesday. Just come round whenever you want and I’ll make sure I’ve got me notes with me. My students usually don’t mind when other people visit.’

Mark looks at the clock. His next lesson is about to start, but now that Gary has mentioned that he’s written notes he’d rather not see his next group without knowing how well he did. ‘On a scale from one to ten, though, how bad was it?’

‘Oh, I can’t tell you that yet! I need to type everything out first.’

‘A tip, then. You must have a tip for me. I don’t know how else I’m going to get through my next lesson to be honest.’

‘Just one tip? That’s easy. Don’t look at me so much. Ignore me next time. I’m not there.’

Mark groans. He knew he shouldn’t have looked at Gary. ‘I know. I know. But it’s weird having someone there.’

‘You’re a teacher. You had nine students watching you just now. An extra person shouldn’t matter.’

‘It’s different with you.’

‘Why?’

Mark blushes. He can’t say that it’s weird having Gary there because of how badly he wishes his colleague would watch him under very different circumstances where there are no students and
they’re both naked. ‘It’s different because I know you’re there because I struggle with class management. I don’t want you to think I’m absolutely terrible! I could be out of a job before I even got started properly.’

‘You’re not terrible, Mark. Just a little rough around the edges, is all. It’s not the end of the world. You’ll see when I give you me feedback on Wednesday.’

‘You say that like you want to keep me in the dark on purpose,’ Mark sighs. He really would like to know how well he did, especially with Ms Mitchell now threatening to have him fired.

‘I wouldn’t call it that,’ Gary says. ‘More like upping the suspense.’

Mark rolls his eyes so hard that they almost fall out of his head. ‘Is this another one of your concert analogies, Mr Barlow?’

‘I guess you could say I know how to tease an audience, Mark. I wouldn’t mind teasing you either.’

The remark is so obviously flirty that Mark bursts out laughing.

‘Sorry, was that too cheesy?’

‘A little bit!’ Mark wishes he could say something equally suggestive, but Mr Harrison has already rushed into the computer lab like a particularly frightening whirlwind and reminded Mark that there’s a group waiting for him in the B-wing.

Mark spends so much time thinking about Gary that his next three lessons are absolutely abysmal.

**LESSON TWELVE: THE PIANO LAB**

It’s Wednesday, the day Mark arranged to talk about his lesson in Gary’s piano lab.

The piano lab is easily one of the most technologically advanced classrooms in the country, perhaps the world. There are twelve digital keyboards set up in rows of three. On top of every keyboard, there is a monitor like that of a modern desktop computer. Headsets are attached to the keyboards. In front of the classroom, a large black piano takes centre stage.

A small camera has been placed above the black piano to film the instructor’s every move, its live images duplicated on both the smartboard and students’ monitors so that they’ll know where to place their hands. And at the pristine black piano itself, there is Mr Barlow, playing a theme song from a 1970s science-fiction show to an audience of twelve captivated students.

Mark enters the piano lab in the middle of Gary’s demonstration. He stops in the doorway to give Gary a questioning look: *May I?*

Gary just smiles and nods at an empty chair in the back of the classroom without stopping to play. The students don’t even notice.

Mark sits on the chair that Gary indicated and watches.

The first thing Mark notices is how *different* this lesson is. Whereas Mark’s lessons are usually chaotic and chock-full of different types of activities, Gary’s lesson is possibly the quietest Mark has ever attended.
You could hear a pin drop. Every student, old and new, is paying attention to the live feed of Gary’s hands on the smartboard. They don’t say a word. There’s no phone or paper plane in sight. The only thing you can hear is the sound of Gary’s gorgeous piano play, slowly building towards something.

It’s stunning to behold. Mr Barlow’s surrounded by twelve students and one enamoured colleague, and yet he plays the piano as if he is alone. His eyes don’t leave his hands for a single second. He does not pay attention to the student on row three, quietly humming along to the arrangement so that she’ll remember it better. He doesn’t seem to feel Mark’s eyes burning into his skin, watching his expressions rather than the live feed of his hands.

Gary doesn’t notice any of it. He’s blissfully lost in his own world of melody and sound, which is what makes him such a good teacher really. If you can teach a group of teenagers how to play the piano and still enjoy it so thoroughly, so intimately, then you must be doing something right.

By sheer listening, Mark can tell that the theme song Gary is playing is about to end. The students do too. They all sit a little straighter. They’ve already dissected the song over a dozen times, so they know how it should end. They’ve already hummed it in their heads.

Gary’s fingers move into a loud, frantic crescendo. The song reaches its climax, and a second later he abruptly stops. The students erupt into enthusiastic applause.

Mark joins the students’ applause a little later, flustered by the nature of the ending. He’d heard it coming, and yet he couldn’t have predicted the way Gary played those final notes; with so much ease and familiarity because he knows every single arrangement by heart.

Mr Barlow turns off his smartboard. The live feed of his hands, provided to make students more familiar with the arrangement, turns to black. ‘What’d you think of that, then, eh? Do you reckon you can pull this off?’

‘Easily,’ a girl on the back row says. ‘Really, Sir, I wish you’d let us play easier stuff!’

‘Hang on, this is a very difficult arrangement, this! Don’t you make me look bad in front of me colleague now, Esra,’ Gary jests, with a nod at Mr Owen in the back of the lab. The students all turn their heads to look at him, and Mark’s cheeks turn pink at the attention. ‘Now, why don’t you guys try playing the theme song by yourselves while I talk to Mr Owen here? Remember, this is from a science-fiction show, this, so you should try playing it with urgency. Make it sound like that YouTube clip I showed you earlier.’

The students don’t need to be told twice. They all put on the comfortable headsets attached to their keyboards and start playing. The sheet music has already appeared on the monitors in front of them, like magic.

Gary gestures at an unoccupied desk in front of the classroom.

The way the chairs have been set up forces Mark to sit next to Gary at his desk. It’s all a bit awkward because they’ve never been this close before, but at least Mark won’t feel like he’s being lectured. Gary puts his notebook on his desk. He opens it on a page that he scribbled full with illegible comments about Mark’s teaching skills. Next to it, he lays out the stencils Mark handed out during his lesson. In the right-hand corner of Gary’s desk, Mark can see brochures about several music conferences, including one conference exclusively dedicated to songwriting. Next to that, there’s a thick, glossy magazine called *Keyboards Monthly*, the magazine Gary was referring to in one of his texts over the weekend. Gary’s obvious a bit of a music nerd.

‘I take it you’re okay with us discussing your lesson here?’ Gary asks. ‘If not we can also go to the
room next door.’

Mark looks at the twelve students in front of them. They all look extremely occupied.

‘It’s okay,’ Mark says, stopping for a second because he’s surprised at how not nervous he sounds. ‘I like it here. It’s a lot calmer than most parts of the school.’

‘You should have seen the previous piano lab. It was a right mess.’

‘Oh? In what way?’

‘We didn’t have any headsets and just two keyboards, so students would be fighting each other trying to play,’ Gary explains. ‘It made the course lose quite a lot of credibility, actually. Four years ago we only had seven students enrolling in the first years of the Piano courses because rumour had spread that our facilities were terrible.’

Mark looks around him. Everything looks extremely expensive, like it was endorsed by a company like Apple. ‘It must have cost quite a lot of money to build this.’

Something mysterious flickers across Gary’s features. ‘We had a few benefactors.’

‘Benefactors?’

‘You know, people with deep pockets who were interested in giving the school a make-over.’

Gary’s eyes try to signal something to Mark, but Mark doesn’t see it because he’s too busy staring at everything else. ‘I did ask them if they could build the Starship Enterprise on the school grounds, but the board of directors wasn’t keen.’

‘And yet you still have a malfunctioning coffee machine. I mean, we,’ Mark corrects himself, still needing to get used to the fact that he works here too and that he’s obviously a part of the teaching staff. ‘We still have a malfunctioning coffee machine.’

‘To be fair, our students are a lot more important than Mr Donald needing to get a cup of coffee every morning.’

‘I suppose that’s true.’ Mark looks at Gary’s notebook. Apart from the date of the lesson, it’s quite hard to decipher what he wrote down. There’s even a doodle of what looks like Mark’s classroom arrangement, with tiny squares representing chairs and desks.

Gary sees Mark looking. ‘Let’s move on to what you came here for, eh? How about you tell me what you thought of your lesson first, and then we go from there?’

Mark nods. It’s quite difficult to recall what Mark thought of his lesson what with it being two days ago, but he did think it went a lot better than his first lesson with the group. He just wishes that they’d been more productive; by the end of the lesson, the most any of the students had done was opening Adobe Dreamweaver.

Mark says, ‘I enjoyed the lesson a lot, but I felt like the students weren’t very productive. They were quiet, which was nice, and they weren’t throwing paper planes anymore, but they didn’t do very much, looking at it now. I wish I’d handled that differently. I also wish sending away the students without books hadn’t taken so much time,’ he adds reflectively. ‘I don’t think my lesson really started until ten minutes after the bell.’

Gary nods as he taps his notebook where he wrote down that exact piece of feedback. ‘Agreed. Next time, don’t lose yourself in a discussion with students. You make the rules, so they should follow
them, end of story. If they don’t like it, you can send them to Mr Harrison’s office.’

That piece of feedback seems fair. Mark nods as he copies it into his own notebook. ‘What else did you think?’

‘It was a good lesson, for the most part. Well thought-out, well explained – but I do think you’re right about the students not doing much. Ironically, you lost them when you took them to the computer lab, which kind of beats the purpose. When you see them next, talk to students when they’re not doing the work. Tell them about what will happen if they don’t finish the project. Because it’s great that the students weren’t throwing paper planes anymore. That’s brilliant. But they still need to do something. Next time, make sure you monitor them more closely.’

Mark has copied Gary’s tips in his own notebook.

‘What else did you think? In terms of class management.’

Gary checks his notes. He taps his finger at a comment he made in the right-hand corner. ‘I thought your class management was quite good considering that said you’d had trouble with this group before. There is one thing I thought could have been better, though. There was a student on the front row who spent the entire lesson on his phone.’

Mark tries to recall who was sat in front of him in the classroom. He remembers a blonde guy. Tall. Phone stuck to his hand. ‘Kevin. I must not have seen it.’

‘Probably cos you were so busy looking at me,’ Gary says, tongue-in-cheek.

Mark blushes. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.’

‘Don’t worry about it. If you were assessing one of my lessons I probably wouldn’t be able to take me eyes off of you either . . .’

Gary says it so provocatively that Mark has to look around to make sure the comment wasn’t overheard by a student. Blissfully, the students’ eyes are all still pointed at their keyboards, expensive headphones covering their ears.

They haven’t heard a thing.

But Mark has. He lowers his voice, just in case. ‘Why does that sound like you want me to assess one of your lessons?’

‘You seemed pretty into it when you were watching me play earlier.’

Mark lets out a knowing laugh. ‘So you noticed.’

Gary’s about to say something even more provocative, but then the words freeze in his mouth. A female student with a very bright head of hair has walked up to his desk to ask him a question.

‘Sir, I accidentally pressed a button on the keyboard and now I can’t get it to turn back on again,’ the student says. Her gentle face is framed by blue curls. ‘Could you help? Taylor’s already tried, but he couldn’t turn it back on either.’

‘I’m just going to finish me chat with Mr Owen here, and then I’ll be right with you, Anna. Don’t worry,’ Gary says in his most soothing voice. He turns to Mark as the student heads back to her keyboard on the fifth row. Apparently Anna needing his help has concluded their conversation, for Gary has already started to put away his notes. ‘Anyway, I really hope this has been helpful, Mark.’
Mark tries not to look as gutted as he feels. He’d rather stay here for a little longer, but he also knows that Gary is in the middle of what looks like a very important lesson. He doesn’t want to keep him. ‘Oh, it has been helpful, Mr Barlow, thank you.’

‘I could always visit another lesson. Maybe in two weeks’ time?’ Gary takes his phone out of his pocket and checks his online diary. ‘Say, Monday the 7th?’

Mark doesn’t really fancy Monday the 7th. ‘I’m meant to hand in me first draft of this term’s Art History exam that day. Mr Harrison’s had me write an exam all by myself . . . How about next week? I don’t mind there just being a couple of days between your visits.’

Gary shakes his head at the diary on his phone. ‘I can’t next week. On Tuesday I teach extra-curricular meditation classes, and a couple of days later I’m visiting a music expo in London.’ His face transforms into something quite childlike and gleeful. ‘I’m going to see a guy talk about synths for two hours.’

Mark can obviously see that Gary is smiling, but he’s not sure whether listening to a guy talk about synths for two hours is something people would do willingly. ‘I take it you’re . . . excited about this talk? You’re looking forward to it?’

‘Are you kidding? I can’t wait, mate. This man’s made a fortune in the music industry, he has. He knows everything there is to know about synths, it’s this guy. And don’t even get me started on the expo itself, Mark. It’s like heaven for musicians, this expo. It has fuck all to do with teaching, but it’s so good. I even got a goodie bag last year.’

Something about hearing Gary talk about something he loves so enthusiastically makes Mark like him even more. Mr Barlow always comes across as rather knowledgeable and professional, but he clearly has a geeky side that he isn’t afraid to share with people.

‘If you’re too busy because of your expo, then I won’t mind your visit being on the 7th after all,’ Mark says, not wanting to burden Gary with more work. ‘Unless you have a full schedule that week? I know how busy you are.’ As well as spending his weekends going to geeky music expos, Mark has recently learned that Gary is also involved with the organisation of the annual summer prom.

‘I’m sure I can still squeeze you in that week,’ Gary nods without having to look at his schedule. ‘Monday the 7th it is, then,’ Mark confirms. He writes down the date in his diary and wishes his heart wouldn’t beat so fast at the idea of having Gary watching him again.

‘Same period as last time?’

‘Third period, yes.’ Mark has a quick look at the lesson plan he stapled to his notebook. ‘I have a free period, so I think I might head to the staff room to work on a lesson plan now, actually’

‘You could e-mail your lesson outline to me if you want me to have a look at it.’

‘You’d do that?’

‘Of course! We could even discuss your lesson via text, if you want?’

Mark blushes. ‘I don’t think I’d get much work done if we did, to be honest.’

‘Because my texts are so distracting?’
‘That’s one word for it,’ Mark laughs, remembering how Gary’s texts made him feel.

‘In all seriousness, though, Mark – I hope you didn’t mind? Cos I wouldn’t mind texting you more often, but I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable either.’ Gary says this very slowly and carefully, as though he has gone over these exact words in his head many times. He’s blushing furiously all the way down to his neck. ‘I know we’ve only known each other for a couple of days and I’m already talking about helping you get flexible . . . If I were your head teacher that would probably get me in trouble.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind at all!’ Mark’s quick to point out. He would love it if Gary kept texting him, and he tells him as much. ‘But your texts do make it quite hard to concentrate sometimes.’

‘In a good way?’

‘In a good way. I liked it when you started telling me how to relax. That was nice.’

‘You mean me suggesting that you try exercising?’ Gary asks.

‘I did, yes. That suggestion was good, you know,’ Mark says, meaning, It really turned me on when you told me that you’d help me get flexible because I couldn’t get the image of you doing something very bendy and sexual to my legs out of my head. Mark telepathically tries to tell Gary this by blinking his eyes several times, but it just ends up looking like he has something in his eye.

‘Well, I’m glad that you found my texts useful, anyway,’ Gary says. He genuinely looks a bit relieved that Mark doesn’t feel uncomfortable with the flirtatious nature of their texts. ‘Maybe next time I’ll send you something less distracting, though. You said you were going to read a book about class management a couple of days ago – how about I compile a list of all the books I have at home? I’ve been meaning to sort through them, anyway. If there’s one you like the sound of I can give it to you.’

Mark has indeed been meaning to read a book about class management for a couple of days, so a list of what’s available would be more than welcome – especially as it would stop him from having very strange thoughts involving Gary and a yoga mat. ‘I’d really appreciate that, Mr Barlow. Thank you.’

‘No worries. Are you sure you’re gonna be fine with the feedback I gave you, though? I know it isn’t much.’

‘Oh, no, it’s more than enough! I think you should go to your student now, anyway,’ Mark says with a bemused nod at the student who couldn’t turn her keyboard back on. She has now started slapping the keyboard with the back of her textbook.

Gary lets out an exaggerated sigh. ‘Students, eh? Can’t leave them alone for more than ten minutes . . .’

Gary finally gets up to help the student with her keyboard, but not before giving Mark the sort of wink that makes you burn up and feel dizzy inside.

Mark has a feeling their texts are going to be about a lot more than just class management.

|LESSON THIRTEEN: MR OWEN MESSES|
The next couple of weeks happen like a whirlwind. Mark’s feelings for Gary don’t change, but his understanding of class management does. He hands out more warnings. He no longer sits idly by when a student refuses to listen to him. Having now known his students for over a month, he’s slowly beginning to understand what makes each group tick – even A_WD1E, the most challenging group in the school. Their mentor has finally dropped her threats of having Mark fired, but she still thinks Mark is an intern.

As the days become longer, new posters advertising the upcoming summer prom have been put up all over the school. With Gary being the one organising the event, Mark wonders if he should volunteer to help out that night.

Sadly, interactions between Mark and Gary are rare. They text each other innocent texts about lesson plans every now and then, but that’s about it. There are days they don’t even speak to each other at all. Gary is so busy with having three million different jobs that he spends most of his days locked up in his piano lab.

Similarly, Mark doesn’t have much time either. When you have to come up with twelve different lessons, free time is scarce. How his colleagues manage to find time to eat their lunch in the staff room, he has no idea.

Regardless, Mark perseveres. He enjoys his job more than he did four weeks ago. He’s even getting to know more colleagues, like the mysterious Mr Orange or the ever-tired Mr Donald who accidentally bumped into Mark last week and spilled coffee all over Mark’s shirt.

After Mark had needlessly apologised to Mr Donald for his expensive Flat White ending up on his shirt, they had quite a long chat about Mr Donald’s children and what it is about him that makes him so good at class management.

Mr Donald simply shrugged, took a sip of what remained of his Flat White and said, ‘I have two kids under the age of three. I’m absolutely pooped physically and mentally. I haven’t slept for three years. So if my students behave more childishly than my kids, then they can fuck off to Harrison’s office.’

Mark thought he understood class management a lot better after that.

But while Mark is slowly getting better at class management, the simple fact remains that teaching is a bloody tough job. For teaching isn’t just standing in front of a bunch of teenagers and telling them to shut up; it also involves staff meetings; school trips; parent evenings; bad coffee; working late; and worst of all, supervising exams, the most boring thing in the world.

Mark has never supervised an exam before, so when Mr Harrison one day asks him if he could please supervise an Art Theory resit in classroom 107_AC, he’s hesitant.

Mark worriedly tells Mr Harrison that he doesn’t know the rules. How many students should he expect? Are they allowed to use dictionaries? Should they sit separately, with a desk between each student? What if there aren’t enough tables? Are the students allowed to leave the classroom once they’re finished? What about toilet breaks? Is there going to be an attendance list?

As ever, Mr Harrison doesn’t tell him anything. He waves his hands at Mark as if he’s shooing away an annoying wasp. ‘We don’t have time for that now, Mr Owen.’

Mr Harrison then pushes a thick, brown envelope with all the exam papers into Mark’s hands and
reminds Mark to make a note of the students who haven’t shown up.

It’s the only tip Mr Harrison gives him, and the exam takes place in fifteen minutes.

Mark anxiously hurries to the classroom where the exam is to take place.

It’s a mess. There are empty packets of crisps and coke cans on the floor. A student has drawn an obscene picture of a pair of boobs on the whiteboard that Mark has to spend two minutes scrubbing off.

What’s worse, the classroom is not suitable for an exam at all. The room is tiny. It stinks. Separating the desks, where possible, takes Mark ages. Some desk don’t even have chairs. He has to sort out all the exam papers himself.

Not knowing whether or not the students are meant to write their answers on the exam papers in the envelope, Mark locks the door and sprints to the staff room to get a pile of scrap paper.

He gets desperately lost. By the time Mark returns to the classroom, the resitters are already stood in front of the locked door, trying to take a peek at the exam papers on the table through the window in the door.

When Mark sees the students, he feels relieved. It’s a group of five third-year Animation majors; hardly the most challenging students in the world. They don’t even get angry at Mr Owen for being five minutes late.

Mark tells the students to follow him inside. They all sit in separate corners without being asked.

Once Mark has given the students a short lecture about how they shouldn’t cheat and all that, he hands out the papers Mr Harrison has given him. Apart from one student, who says a quick prayer before opening her exam papers, the students immediately get to work. They ask no questions. One student has already filled in three easy questions about the colour wheel.

Pleased, Mark sits.

He waits.

And waits.

And waits.

The student in the left-hand corner is breathing incredibly loudly.

Two minutes have passed. Mark’s already beginning to feel quite bored.

Inspired by Mr Barlow’s piano lesson, he tries to write a song to pass the time. He gets stuck after the first line and aims his crumpled-up piece of paper at the trash bin. He misses.

He waits.

He opens his Art History book on page 569, where there’s a short summary about the Greek Art chapter. He has to put the book away when it almost puts him to sleep.

A student raises his hand and tells Mark he hasn’t brought a pen with him. They’ve been working on the exam for over ten minutes.

The first student has finished the exam. Fifteen minutes have passed.
When Mark looks up at the clock, he can feel every single second ticking away in his bones, counting down so slowly that Mark’s beginning to feel that time has actually slowed down and he’s moving backwards in history.

The sun has begun to shine for the first time that week, and under any other circumstance Mark might have gone outside to sit in the grass on the school grounds. Unfortunately, there are still four students remaining.

Mark decides to stretch his legs. He has walked half the length of the classroom when he realises that his shoes make a noise and that walking around might be too distracting for the remaining students. He sits down again.

Mark’s eyes are beginning to droop when suddenly his own phone buzzes. He left it on his desk so he could keep track of time, but he hasn’t touched it since he handed out the exam papers. With him having literally nothing to do and the students being otherwise occupied with their questions about cubes and monochromatic scales, Mark quickly checks his phone to see who texted him.

It’s Gary.

Mark looks up. The students are still at work. He feels a bit naughty reading his texts in the middle of an exam, but he does it anyway.

When he clicks Gary’s message, he sees that Gary’s texted him a long string of pictures of books about class management, including titles such as Getting the Buggers to Behave, Meditation in the Classroom and Classroom Behaviour. Mark doesn’t recognise any of them, but the book about using meditation sounds interesting.

Some of the pictures also feature accidental selfies of Gary’s dogs. In one photo, the title of a book is entirely obscured by a black furry head looking distractedly into the camera. Gary must have sent it to Mark because he found it funny.

—Gary: How’s this for a boring text? Found all of these in my study when I was taking a break from organising the summer prom last night… I don’t think my dogs like them very much mind!

Mark moves his fingers into a quick reply, with fevered glances at the students to make sure they’re not helping each other cheat.

—Mark: Jeez….. How many books do you have!??!

—Gary: You don’t wanna know mate.

A second later, Gary texts Mark another picture from when he was sorting through his books last night. It’s a picture of him sat on the floor of what must be his study at home, surrounded by a plethora books and two dogs – and in it, he’s wearing a very flattering sleeveless shirt.

Mark feels a hungry prickle in his tummy. He swallows. It’s such an ordinary picture, and yet Gary must have sent it knowing fully how little he’s wearing in it. The pic is not about the books or the bookcases or the dogs or the tiny Star Wars figurine on one of the shelves in the background, but Gary’s arms, so strong and tan that Mark wants them wrapped around him.

He can’t help but type a somewhat hungry reply.

—Mark: Wow x

—Gary: I know! I can’t even remember buying half of these.
Mark: I wasn’t talking about the books…..

Mark knows his text is provocative as hell, but he sends it anyway, his heart hammering like mad. He shakily stares at his phone while he waits for Gary to reply, and as a result he doesn’t hear Mr Harrison storming into the classroom like a whirlwind.

The door slams shut behind Mr Harrison’s back, and it gives everyone such a start that Mark leaps up from his chair and a student drops his pen on the floor and it rolls underneath a radiator. Mark quickly slips his phone into his pocket, but it’s already too late.

Mr Harrison has seen him texting through the window in the door.

The students have all stopped working on their exams to look at Mr Harrison looking at Mark with daggers in his eyes. Clearly shocked, the student who said a prayer before she opened her exam papers has put both her hands in front of her mouth.

‘Mr Owen, a word?’

Shame seeps into Mark’s veins and floods his entire body. He utters a stammered reminder that the students still have forty minutes to finish the exam, and everyone gets back to work looking a little rattled.

Feeling quite mortified himself, Mark awkwardly follows Mr Harrison to the back of the classroom, where they can still observe the students without the risking being overheard.

Mark opens his mouth to say something, but Mr Harrison holds up his hand. ‘I take it the reason you decided to check your phone in the middle of an exam is because you are not familiar with our exam regulations, Mr Owen?’ Even when Mr Harrison is whispering, his words seem to be punctuated with anger.

‘It was only a – a text, Mr Harrison.’ Even though Mark obviously knows what he did was wrong, he feels the childish need to defend himself. After his run-in with Ms Mitchell in the coffee shop a couple of weeks ago, he constantly feels like he has to prove himself in every single thing he does. ‘I don’t think I was looking at my phone f-for more than a minute . . .’

‘Perhaps, but even a minute of inattentiveness can cause serious issues. When we supervise exams, we must be vigilant at all times, Mr Owen. If I had not walked past the door and spotted you looking at your phone, a student could have swapped their answers with a classmate. An incident like that would seriously harm your future as well as the students’. Is that something you want to have on your conscience?’

Mr Harrison holds his gaze, and Mark feels warmth spreading up to his neck as he shakes his head. He can feel his phone buzzing in his pocket, but every desire to check it has left him.

He’s been careless.

A student has finished his exam, so Mark doesn’t get the chance to answer Mr Harrison’s question about harming the students’ futures. Shaking, Mark asks the head teacher whether he may please continue his supervision thank you very much and goes over to the student’s desk to collect his papers.

By the time Mark’s put the exam papers back in the brown envelope he was given, Mr Harrison has already stomped out of the classroom with a trail of dust in his wake.

Mark never gets the chance to apologise, and Gary’s latest text remains on the lock screen on his
Whilst Mark can see that he obviously made a massive error, the fact that Mr Harrison’s scolding came so quickly after Gary’s provocative text only makes Mark feel worse. He hates that he had to go from feeling warm and fuzzy and horny inside to being lectured by his boss. He feels even worse than he did when Ms Mitchell threatened to have him fired.

After all the students have finished their exams and Mark has handed the brown envelope to an administrative worker, he decides to take a walk on the school grounds to clear his head. The weather is nice; warm enough to go out without his jacket on.

The school grounds are the size of two football fields. Behind him, there’s the school, looking tall and imposing and like a mix of old and new; obviously a former warehouse. In front of him, there’s the school library, one of the many parts of campus Mark hasn’t visited yet. Further afield, he sees everyone’s favourite coffee shop cloaked in the shade of several apple trees. The trees have all been covered in yarn – a creative project undertaken by first-years from the Dressmaking course.

The grass looks inviting, but Mark sticks to the path. His footsteps crunch loudly on the gravel as he walks past a group of important-looking colleagues from the Art department sat at a picnic table. He waves at them amicably, but they don’t wave back. He can tell by the way they’re covering their mouths with their hands that they’re gossiping about someone. By the looks of it, they’re probably talking about him.

Mark quickens his pace. Eventually, he retraces his steps back to the school entrance. He sits on the steps in front of the entrance and checks his phone. There’s still an unread message from Gary from forty minutes ago, but he feels rather weird checking it.

He puts his phone back into his pocket.

Seconds later, it buzzes again. Curiosity gets the better of him. It’s a brand new message from Rob, whom he swapped numbers with a couple of weeks ago. He ignores Gary’s unread message and checks Rob’s instead.

—**Rob: FACT ABOUT MR HARRISON: HE CARES MORE ABOUT EXAMS THAN HIMSELF. ALSO – NICE SHIRT XX**

Mark first looks at his shirt, then behind him. On top of the chairs, basking in the comfortable April sun, he sees Mr Williams looking back at him with his phone in his hands. He gestures at the empty place next to him.

‘May I, Mr Owen?’

Mark nods, and Rob plonks himself down on the steps. Like Mark, he’s opted to leave his jacket inside because the weather is so good. ‘How are you, mate?’

‘I’m all right,’ Mark lies.

‘You’re all right,’ Rob reiterates sceptically.

‘Yes,’ Mark insists.

‘Even though Mr Harrison just stormed into your classroom in the middle of an exam and gave everyone a heart attack?’
A feeling of shame rolls towards Mark on a poisonous fog. ‘So you heard.’

‘Yeah. Sorry, mate.’

Mark pulls up his knees and hugs them closer to his chest. He doesn’t like the idea of his colleagues talking about him behind his back. With his lessons being less than perfect, he doubts they have anything good to say about him. ‘I should have known people would find out about it. I’m pretty sure the colleagues from the Art department were talking about me when I walked past them earlier.’

Rob look at the picnic table Mark is indicating. The sounds of their stifled laughter reaches Robbie’s ears. ‘You mean those guys? They gossip about everyone. They were probably just saying how nice your shirt is. Which it is, by the way.’

Mark rolls his eyes. ‘How did you find out?’

‘I overheard two students talking about it ten minutes ago. They seemed to be on your side, if that helps. And anyway, teachers check their phones during exams all the time. It’s not really allowed, but what else are you supposed to do? Pick your nose? Read a book!? Harrison could at least have waited till after the exam to tell you off. I bet he didn’t even tell you what the exam rules are in the first place.’

Mark can see what Rob is trying to do, but it doesn’t work. ‘I feel awful. I’ve never broken a rule before. What if Mr Harrison is going to fire me over this?’

Rob pats Mark’s hand. It’s only then that Mark realises he’s been clenching his fists as though he would quite like to punch himself. He unclenches his fists, but he doesn’t feel better.

‘Mr Harrison has never fired anyone. He doesn’t have the balls for it.’

‘There’s a first time for everything.’ Mark lets out a regretful sigh. He’s so furious at himself for messing up that it has rendered him rather speechless, and he has to stare at the school grounds to put his thoughts back together.

Rob says, ‘Trust me, mate. Texting someone in the middle of an exam is not something that gets teachers fired. You’d need to fuck up really badly if you wanted the school to let you go, like helping the students pass their exams or something.’

But Mark is still thinking about what he could have done differently. He stares at a couple of green leaves being picked up off the steps by a gentle breeze as he goes through a mental list of things he shouldn’t have done. ‘I should never have kept my phone in my pocket. If I’d just turned off me phone and put it in my locker, I would never have seen Mr Barlow’s message and this would never have happened. And how stupid was I for not asking about the exam rules? I should have asked someone, shouldn’t I? I should have asked someone for help instead of thinking I could supervise an exam on me own.’

Rob cocks an eyebrow. ‘Wait – were texting Gary when Mr Harrison walked in? That changes everything. Did he send you anything juicy?’

‘Just some pictures of books about class management,’ Mark mumbles.

‘Sexy.’

Mark blushes. ‘He also sent me a picture of himself in a – well, a vest. You know, with – with arms. Nice arms. Arms that were naked. I’m pretty sure he sent it to me on purpose.’
‘And you – liked this picture? It got you hot and bothered?’

Mark gives a curt nod.

‘You know you could see Gary in a vest more often if you bothered to check out his YouTube channel,’ Rob says. He searches Mark’s face for any guilty signs that he has, indeed, checked out Gary’s videos, but he sees nothing. ‘You haven’t, have you?’

‘I can’t, Rob,’ Mark says. ‘It’d be like if I Googled someone. If I Googled you! I can’t do it.’

‘You might see something you like, though.’

‘I know. That’s what I’m worried about! Cos I can still decide that I don’t like Mr Barlow after all, you know. I can still look at him and go, Oof, I don’t know if I really wanna be with you. But once I check out his music, then – well, I’ll be doomed, won’t I? I won’t be able to change me feelings anymore.’

‘And you think that is a bad thing?’

‘Of course! I don’t know if I want my feelings to become real yet. Especially if it gets in the way of my job and I become a worse teacher as a result.’

‘Hasn’t it already become real, though, mate? I mean, he did text you a pic of himself in a vest.’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’ Mark looks up at the trees above him for inspiration. He wishes he knew what to do. ‘I can tell that Mr Barlow obviously likes me and that he knows I like him back, but it’s really complicated cos I’ve never fancied someone from work before. I don’t know how we’re ever going to get closer without getting in trouble. What if we do something and we get caught? I’d never want that to happen.’

But there’s more, Mark thinks. He felt it when he first laid eyes on Gary: this strange, indescribable feeling that their first meeting wasn’t their first meeting at all, like it was destined that they’d meet. Like it was written in the stars.

‘You know what’s also weird?’ Mark whispers as three students walk up the stairs to the entrance, ‘I can’t shake this feeling I’ve met Mr Barlow before, except I can’t remember when.’

‘But that’s not possible,’ Rob says. He has to flick away a fat fly buzzing above his head.

‘I know.’ Mark makes a face. ‘But the feeling’s there.’

‘Maybe you feel it cos you’re made for each other. A lot of couples feel like that.’ Rob shrugs. ‘And as for what you were saying earlier – you’ve been in a relationship before, right? The fact that Gary’s a colleague doesn’t change anything.’

Mark gives Rob an uncharacteristically annoyed look. ‘Of course I’ve been in a relationship before. It’s just I’m scared that if we do end up dating it’s gonna get us in trouble because, you know, we’re both teachers and I’d be terrified of a student finding out about us.’

‘Does that mean you’re not going to do anything about your feelings, Mark? Cos I still think Gary needs to get laid with how much time he’s spending trying to organise that fucking summer prom.’

Blood rushes to Mark’s face. If there’s anything Mark has learned while working here, it’s that Rob always makes jokes at the most inappropriate time. ‘I was talking about something very serious here, you know!’
Rob’s mouth twitches up at the corners. ‘You’re right. Sorry. Please go on.’

Mark crosses his arms in mock annoyance. He demonstratively turns his back to Rob. ‘Whatever. I’m not gonna bother anymore now.’

‘No, please continue talking about how you’re definitely never going to get it on with Mr Barlow because you’re scared of a spotty sixteen-year-old virgin from the Art department finding out,’ Rob says, taking the mickey. He can’t see Mark’s smiling with his back turned to him, but he can practically feel it beaming off of him.

Mark stops pretending to be upset. He turns around again. ‘I didn’t say I’d never do anything with Mr Barlow. I’m just gonna take things a bit slower than usual.’ He tries to push back his hair, but it just ends up flopping back over his eyes. ‘I wanna think things through before we start cuddling in a classroom. Just in case people find out and I get fired.’

‘Does that mean you’ve texted Gary back, then?’

‘I texted something simple. Just, you know – “wow”. He thought I was talking about the books. But I wasn’t. I was talking about his arms.’

‘Has he texted anything since?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘I haven’t checked. I mean, I know he’s texted, but I haven’t read it.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. It just seemed inappropriate after what had happened during the Art Theory exam.’

‘You’re not supervising anymore, though. Harrison isn’t going to tell you off for checking your phone sat in the school grounds. And even if he does – who cares, Mark? Students get away with being on their phones all the time. You know what I mean? If he has such a big problem with phones he should ban them altogether.’

Mark wouldn’t agree that students checking their phones is the same as a teacher doing so, but there is some logic in what Rob’s saying. Mr Harrison isn’t around. He isn’t going to accost Mark for daring to look at his phone now.

Mark picks up his phone, hesitates, then hands it to Rob. ‘You check.’

‘What if he’s sent you a nude!?’

Rob literally screeches the word “nude”, and Mark starts flapping his arms in a panicked attempt to shush him when a couple of students walk down the steps. Red in the face, Mark quickly snatches back his phone and checks Gary’s message with his back turned.

It’s not a nude, but it’s still rather flirtatious. It refers to Mark’s previous text, about how he wasn’t talking about Gary’s books when he replied with a single horny “wow”.

—Gary: My offer from 3 weeks ago still stands – if you wanna see me like this in the flesh you should join one of my group exercises on Tuesday. I can’t promise I won’t be hard on you though x

‘He’s basically saying he’s down to fuck,’ Rob helpfully explains after Mark has shown him the text anyway.

‘He’s not, Rob,’ Mark says insistently.
‘He is, though. You’ll see.’

Mark wouldn’t mind seeing a sleeveless Gary more often, but he also genuinely doesn’t have any
time to make a complete tool of himself in a group of very flexible individuals. He tells Gary as much.

—Mark: Sounds nice Mr B, but I haven’t got any time I’m afraid….. I think I’d rather focus on next week’s lesson visit for now if you don’t mind x

Mark is grinning when he hits send.

They wait for a reply. Minutes pass. Rob has already lost focus and become interested in something else: a group of Illustration first-years, dispersed across the school grounds to make sketches of various bushes and trees. Their teacher, a tall, slender figure known only as “Victor”, is barking orders at all of them: Draw this, do that, don’t draw that.

Victor once got very offended when Rob neglected to go an important meeting about a potential collaboration between the Art department and the school’s computer labs, and ever since Rob has been avoiding Victor like the plague. He wishes people would understand when he tells them meetings make him uncomfortable.

After a couple of minutes sat on the staircase waiting, Mark’s phone buzzes with a reply. It’s short but sweet.

—Gary: Is it just me or are YOU the one doing the teasing now ? x

Mark laughs out loud at that. When Rob stops looking at the Illustration students to read the message, Mark turns red and puts away his phone. ‘I think that’s enough texting for now, Mr Williams.’

‘Spoil-sport.’

In his office on the first floor, Mr Harrison has written an official complaint about Mr Owen.

|LESSON FOURTEEN: MR BARLOW PAYS ANOTHER VISIT|

Mark doesn’t tell Gary that his texts got him in trouble with Mr Harrison. They keep texting each other relatively innocent things about class management and projects and staff meetings, and a week later it is time for Gary’s second classroom visit.

Compared to the last lesson Gary visited, Mark has clearly thought about how he’s going to be in charge. His class management has come leaps and bounds, and it shows: it’s a good lesson, much better than the first lesson Gary visited.

At the start of the lesson, Mark sternly sends away two students who failed to take their textbooks with them. This time, he doesn’t bother arguing with them. And when a student tries to catch a virtual Pokémon on his desk, Mark tells them off immediately.

Clearly, Gary thinks Mark is doing a good job too. Whenever Mark looks over at Gary in the back of the classroom, he can see his colleague nodding at him. At one point, Gary even dares to squeeze
Mark’s hand to show him how proud he is. It happens when Mark walks past Gary’s table to hand out his stencils, and Mark instantly wishes the touch had lasted longer and that it had been somewhere else, like underneath a table somewhere or hidden away in a supplies cupboard where no-one can see them. He wants him and Gary to get to a point where they can touch each other all the time, every day, everywhere.

But they’re not at that point yet. Right now, they’re just getting to know each other. All Mark can do is smile and thank Gary for helping him out today.

A minute after he’s handed out his new stencils, Mark leads the students to the computer lab like he has done every week, like a shepherd being followed by his flock of sheep. The group was quite disruptive last time Mark took them to the other side of the school, but this time the students don’t say a single word. They don’t even check their phones. Something about Mr Owen’s new approach must have struck a chord in them.

By now, Mark feels so comfortable about having Gary around that he doesn’t feel that nervous anymore. He does still feel a little warm and fuzzy about being watched so closely, but that has more to do with the way Gary looks at him than Mark’s class management skills.

Once everyone has reached the computer lab, only two students need reminding that they’re here to do things for school. The rest start working on their projects almost instantly, with some students even having worked on their projects throughout the weekend because they genuinely like the exercise. It’s as if the disastrous lesson that Mark spent having to avoid paper planes never even happened.

Of course, the lesson isn’t without its flaws. When a student starts eating a sandwich above his keyboard, Mark lets him get away with it even though he knows Mr Williams would never allow it. And when Mark allows a student to go to the toilet, the student never returns again.

Regardless, the majority of Mr Barlow’s notes about the lesson is positive.

Feeling lenient because most students did a tremendous job, Mark announces the end of the lesson five minutes early. A couple of students stick around for a while longer to show Mark and Gary their magazines, and Gary enthusiastically makes a note of everything he sees. Mark spends such a long time praising everyone’s work that he’s already missed the start of his next lesson.

Misters Barlow and Owen should have been at their classrooms in the A-wing five minutes ago, so the lads have no choice but to arrange their next meeting on the way there. They try desperately to be quick, but it’s nearly impossible, for every person inside the school had conspired to come out at the same time. It’s like trying to return to the front row at a concert after you’ve paid a visit to the toilet.

‘Shall we discuss your lesson over a cup of coffee at Starbucks at four?’ Gary asks, having to speak up over the noise in the corridor. He speeds up to match Mark’s quick footsteps, hoping that he won’t lose Mark in the throng.

‘I’d like that, Mr Barlow, thank you,’ says Mark. His ears have definitely heard Gary’s comment about having coffee at Starbucks like they’re going on a proper date, but the only thing he can think about is how he’s going to make it to his classroom on time. ‘Do you have any tips you could share with me already? I have quite a difficult group next.’

Gary just about manages to avoid a group of students running the other way. He tries to stick to Mark like a bur, but it’s difficult when there are so many people around and he can hardly keep up. ‘Just do what you just did and you’ll be fine, mate.’
Mark flushes. ‘Really? You thought I did well? I’m surprised you did, to be honest. I mean, I know I did well cos I really enjoyed myself and I know the students did too, but I know I must have done some things wrong too. There were two students who weren’t really doing anything, and I found it quite hard to get them to like the task, you know. I think they’re the only ones who haven’t taken to the project, and I’m scared they’ll convince the others that the magazine isn’t important after all.’

They pass a group of colleagues in the crowd, and Mark gives them a polite hello before continuing his very long ramble about what he thought about his own lesson. ‘Cos that’s one of the things I’m still struggling with, you know – telling my students why they should do something, cos I don’t think they’ll feel more motivated to do the project if I tell them it’ll help them with their exam revision. Students don’t really seem to care about exam revision. I don’t suppose you have any ideas about that, Mr Barlow?’ He stops in his tracks. He looks around him. ‘Mr Barlow?’

It’s only now that Mark realises that Gary hasn’t been walking next to him for quite some time. They must have gotten separated in the corridor, with Mark looking as if he was talking to himself like a madman.

Regardless, Mark smiles as he finally reaches his classroom. He nervously but cheerfully acknowledges his students at the door, apologises for being tardy and enters.

He may not know what feedback Gary will give him later, but he knows one thing. His lesson went okay, and maybe he’s not such a terrible teacher after all.

|LESSON FIFTEEN: THE QUESTION GAME, PART ONE|

While Mark is fast becoming a better teacher, his love for his students does mean that he’ll often spend several minutes just chatting to them when he should otherwise be teaching, like when he gets side-tracked by an inquiring student on his way to a classroom. Every now and then, he forgets where a classroom is altogether and ends up walking around the place like a headless chicken.

All of the above means that Mr Owen is late quite often. Over the past week alone, he’s arrived late over seven times. It’s a character trait that Mr Harrison has often reminded him needs fixing as soon as possible, but his students don’t really mind. Mr Owen being late is as normal as Mr Donald walking into the dance studio with a Starbucks coffee cup, Mr Orange answering a simple question as if he is Socrates himself or Ms Williams typing his e-mails in capital letters. It’s all part of Mr Owen’s lessons along with his creativity, positivity, praise and a surplus of smiles that will make even the most challenging students want to sit down and give him a chance.

Mr Owen’s lessons still aren’t perfect, but you’ll always be seen and acknowledged, whether you’re a shy Animation student or a loud Web Designer. When all is said and done, that is the most important part of teaching you can ever master.

Unfortunately, Mark also ends up being late for his very serious lesson assessment with Gary. When he finally enters the Starbucks on campus, it’s already twenty past four. He’s twenty minutes late.

Mark ran all the way across the school grounds, so he enters the coffee house looking a little dishevelled. He quickly checks his reflection in the window, blows a stubborn strand of hair off his forehead, straightens his waistcoat and searches the shop for Gary. He spots his colleague sitting next to a window, talking to an art student who pays for her school fees by working as a barista part-time.
When she sees Mr Owen approaching, she quickly gives Gary’s table another polish with a piece of cloth and disappears behind the bar.

Mark stops at Gary’s table. His brain completely malfunctions when he sees Gary looking up at him, and his brain completely short-circuits. As a result, his first words to Gary are all jumbled up.

‘Hellomisterbarlowhowareyoudoingimsorryimlate!’

Mark turns absolutely scarlet. It’s only then that he notices how hard his heart is beating, like a rabbit running. He was so focussed on Gary’s classroom visit and getting feedback that he neglected to think about how bloody attractive he finds this man.

Gary’s mouth twitches up at the corners. He looks like he is blushing too, but it’s probably just the light. ‘Are you all right, Mark?’

Mark nods a couple of times very quickly. He does his hardest to block out the smell of Gary’s cologne and focusses on what he’s here for: his lesson feedback.

‘Sorry. Hi. I’m here for my lesson feedback?’

Gary gestures at the empty seat next to him. ‘You might want to sit down first.’

‘Oh. It was that bad, was it?’

‘It wasn’t. But I’d prefer it if you stopped hovering in front of me table, mate.’

Mark plops himself down with the speed of light. He nearly knocks over Gary’s table in the process. He again apologises for his tardiness, takes a deep breath and demonstratively opens his backpack to grab a pen and notebook. He’s feeling like a nervous teenager!

He focusses once more. Ask him about your lesson, he tells himself. Ask him what he thought.

‘So . . . what did you think?’

Gary looks at Mark blankly. ‘Sorry, what did I think of what?’

‘My lesson. You must have quite a lot of feedback if you wanted to discuss it in here.’

‘Oh! Your lesson!’ Gary sounds as though Mark’s lesson had already slipped his mind. ‘It was good. I have nothing to add to it, really.’

‘But if it was good, then why are we here?’

Gary waves a casual hand at their surroundings. ‘Isn’t that obvious?’

Mark looks around him, but all he can see is lots of teachers and students casually enjoying their coffee. ‘Not really, no.’

‘I asked you here because I wanted an excuse to get you coffee, mate,’ Gary says insistently. His ears are turning pink. ‘That’s why I’m here. I wanted to do something casual!’ he adds, as if it needed further explaining that Gary’s lesson visit was a ruse to get Mark alone in a coffee shop.

However, Mark can still only think about his lesson with A_WD1E and whether it was good or not. ‘So, my lesson . . .’

‘It was good. I enjoyed it. I made notes. They were mostly positive.’ Gary sounds like he’s going
through bullet points on a very boring list. ‘But I’d rather talk about you, Mark! I’m here to get to know you!’

Mark lets out a nervous laugh. Is Gary trying to turn this into a date? He didn’t prepare for this! He’s not even wearing his best waistcoat! (In comparison, Gary’s wearing a tailored jacket with a Star Wars t-shirt underneath. It looks very good on him.)

‘I don’t know what I can tell you about me that I haven’t told you already, to be honest,’ Mark says. ‘You already know how I got here and what I did before.’

‘I meant the real you. The Mark Owen who doesn’t teach. I asked you here because I wanted to get to know you.’ Gary’s mouth curls into a smile. ‘But I suppose we can also talk about how your lesson related to John Hattie’s theories about visual learning if that makes you feel better . . .’

Mark laughs. ‘No, you’re right. Talking about each other is much better.’

‘I thought as much.’ Gary jerks his head at the bar, where a short queue of tired-looking Art students has gathered to order coffee and donuts. ‘Shall I get us some coffee, then?’

Mark presses his tummy where he feels butterflies having a party. He’s probably better off drinking tea. ‘Tea for me, please, Mr Barlow. Earl Grey, if they have any. Medium. Wait. Lemme just check if I’ve got any money on me.’

Mark shoves his hand into his pocket and comes away with about three quid worth of coins. He holds up his hand to give them to Gary, but Gary just looks at him an amused look on his face.

‘You didn’t think I’d let you pay for your own tea, did you? It’s my treat,’ Gary says.

‘But it’s Starbucks. It’s expensive,’ Mark says, with a look on his face as if to say, We’re teachers. We’re broke.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Gary with the air of someone who isn’t particularly worried about his money. ‘You said you wanted tea? I’m gonna get you tea.’

‘At least put me money in the tip jar,’ Mark insists. He nods at the Art student behind the bar. ‘For her school fees.’

‘Be right back.’

Mark stares after the shape of Gary’s arse as he heads to the bar. He feels less nervous now that he’s here, but just as fuzzy and warm and bouncy inside. How on Earth did they go from talking about lesson feedback to doing this, having coffee on what positively feels like their first ever date?

He doesn’t even know what he could tell Gary once he gets back. His private life isn’t that interesting compared to Gary’s, and all the hobbies he has are work-related. He wishes he’d had time to prepare for this. What if talking about himself will only make Gary like him less?

Then again – they have been flirting. They’re obviously attracted to each other. Gary made that quite clear when he asked Mark whether he was okay with texting him about things aren’t work-related. Talking about something casual could be a good thing, and it might not even be that difficult. It could lead to proper dates. Maybe even more than that. He just needs to stay calm, is all.

The polite, courteous thing would be to look out of the window and pretend to be very interested in the after-school activity on the school grounds, but Mark can’t help but watch Gary as he orders their drinks. From up here, Gary looks like the picture-perfect image of Mark’s ideal man: strong; tanned,
slim but fit, with strong arms that look perfect for hugging and other things; a nice arse; a good sense fashion; and a personality that makes everyone want to work with him.

Even from afar, Mark can tell that Gary Barlow is a very nice man. He puts Mark’s coins into the tip jar like he promised. He smiles when he hands the barista his ten-pound note. He thanks her when she gives him his change and doesn’t neglect to tell her how good he thought her art project was.

It’s quite obvious from the barista’s chuffed reaction that Mr Barlow is a respected teacher, and yet he is not feared. He is not the subject of ridicule. He is not hated like Mr Harrison, who cannot be bothered to respond to the simplest questions because he does not know the answers to them. Unlike Mr Harrison, Gary would never ask inexperienced teachers to teach a subject they’ve never heard of. He’d never get angry at them. He’d sit down with the teachers who have never supervised an exam before and tell them the rules. He’d take his time.

And judging by the way Gary looks over his shoulder to see Mark gawking back at him, he’s probably a tremendous lover. And why wouldn’t he be? He writes love songs, after all.

At least, Mark thinks he does. He still hasn’t bothered to check out Gary’s music or social media pages. He knows absolutely nothing about Gary Barlow’s recording career, and it’s probably for the better, for it would give him the shock of his life.

A couple of minutes later, Gary returns to their table with their drinks. A thick trail of foam has made its way down Gary’s reusable Star Wars coffee cup, and Mark becomes suddenly very interested in the ceiling so he can avoid looking at Gary scooping up the foam with his finger and licking it off.

Gary sits. He searches his pockets and throws a small pile of paper sugar sachets on the table. ‘I forgot to ask if you take your tea with sugar, so I got you a bit of everything.’

‘Cheers.’ Mark tears open a sachet of white sugar and pours its contents into his cup. He stirs with a thin wooden stick. ‘What are you having?’

‘Cappuccino. Don’t tell anyone, though. I’m usually more into healthy smoothies, me.’

Mark knows now is probably the time to ask Gary something about exercise or his health or other things vaguely related to smoothies, but he doesn’t know how. A part of him still feels like they ought to talk about this morning’s computer lesson and not each other’s private lives – especially with so many students around.

‘So when you said you wanted to talk about me instead of my lesson . . .’ Mark absently stares into his cup as he stirs. ‘You meant that, didn’t you? You didn’t think there was anything wrong with my lesson? There isn’t anything you think I should have done differently?’

‘Nothing at all. Well, apart from that one lad going to the toilet and disappearing all of a sudden. But I’d much rather talk about you, Mark. I know I should probably have told you that earlier, but I was scared that you wouldn’t show up!’

Mark pushes the hair from his forehead. He wishes he’d combed his hair before coming here – he must look like a right mess. ‘As if you’d ever get stood up by anyone.’

‘You’d be surprised! I get stood up all the time. It’s what happens when you only have one foot in the music industry. Record labels will arrange a meeting with you and cancel last-minute cos they don’t think you’re invested enough. Which I am, obviously. But being a teacher part-time puts a lot of people off.’

Mark turns up his nose. ‘People like that aren’t worth your time.’
‘I know. But you are.’

Mark’s ears turn pink at Gary’s compliment. ‘Oh, I – I don’t know about that, Mr Barlow. I’m not that interesting. Like I said, there isn’t much I can say about meself that I haven’t told you already. I’m a very boring person.’

‘Then let’s take turns asking each other questions. It’s something Ms Brooke does with her first-years,’ Gary explains when Mark gives him a confused look. ‘It’s called the “question game”. She pairs students up during her first lesson of the school year and tells them to ask each other questions in turns. There’s one catch, though: you have to take turns, and fibbing is not allowed. You don’t have to write all of that down, by the way,’ he adds when Mark starts making a note of the exercise in his notebook.

‘Right. Sorry.’ Mark reluctantly puts away his notebook and takes a large sip of tea to steady his nerves. This really is beginning to feel like a first date.

‘I’ll start with something simple,’ Gary says. ‘Where do you live?’

Mark tells Gary where he lives. He adds, ‘It’s about thirty minutes away from here. I take the bus every morning.’

‘All right. Now it’s your turn.’

Mark struggles to come up with a question, so he copies Gary’s. ‘Where do you live?’

‘I live in the city centre.’

‘Is it nice?’

‘Hey, that’s cheating, that is. We take turns, remember? I’m next. What are your hobbies?’

Mark profusely apologises for forgetting the rules of the question game and starts counting his hobbies on his fingers. ‘I like songwriting. Photography, also. I like reading. And walking; I love going on walks. And listening to music, obviously. I paint too. Well, I try to paint. I made a painting of red roses recently and everyone told me they looked like lollipops . . . But I like writing the most.’ He repeats the question he was meant to ask earlier. ‘Is your house nice?’

‘It’s all right,’ Gary answer vaguely. ‘What kind of music do you like?’

‘All sorts. Pop, rock, indie, soul, I like a bit of everything. I’ve been listening to CHVRCHES and Florence + The Machine a lot lately. Alice Merton too – her album is quite good. What about you?’

‘I’m the same, really. I like anything I can play along to. Sometimes I’ll spend an entire day listening to movie soundtracks. What’s the best group you teach?’

Mark doesn’t even need to think about it. ‘M_SW1F. They’re nice. What’s yours?’

‘Probably the same as yours. A couple of them chose Piano as their extracurricular activity. Really bright kids, they are.’ Gary takes a couple of sips of cappuccino to give himself some time to come up with another question. ‘What’s your favourite holiday destination?’

‘Oof, I don’t know. I’ve never been outside of the UK, to be honest. I like London, though.’ Mark feels like he’s finally getting in the groove of this question game. He has a million things he’d still like to ask Gary, like what it’s like to meditate. ‘When did you first start meditating?’
‘A couple of years ago. I was feeling a little anxious and Mr Orange told me he always meditates after a difficult lesson, so I thought I’d give it a shot. I haven’t stopped since. Would you ever consider picking it up yourself, Mark?’

‘Maybe if I were feeling nervous about something. I’d need someone to teach me, though.’ Mark can’t come up with a decent follow-up question, so he asks, ‘Do you travel much? You must have seen quite a bit of the UK on your tours.’

‘I suppose I have. The UK isn’t that much fun seen from the back of a car, though. Speaking of, have you always lived here?’

‘No, I grew up in Oldham. You?’

‘I’ve always lived here, yeah. I pretty much know everything there is to know about this city. Is Oldham where you began songwriting?’

‘It is, yeah. I was eighteen, I think. Eighteen or nineteen. I got into it quite late.’ Even though Mark obviously likes songwriting, he doesn’t really feel like talking about it because of its similarities to what he teaches at work. He asks Gary something completely unrelated. ‘What did you think of the latest Star Wars movie?’

Gary starts grinning from ear to ear, which Mark quickly decides is the cutest thing in the world, ever. ‘I absolutely loved it, mate. I think I must have gone about five times.’ He pauses as he thinks of his next question. ‘Do you have any pets?’

‘My landlord doesn’t allow pets, unfortunately. I’d love to have a cat or a dog, though.’ Mark already knows that Gary has two dogs, so asking him if he has pets would be a waste of time. He looks around the coffee house for inspiration and sees a poster of the upcoming summer prom plastered on the walls behind the bar. He knows that Gary has been spending quite a lot of time getting a line-up together. ‘How are you getting on with the organisation of the summer prom?’

‘It’s a lot trickier than I thought it would be, but the line-up’s looking good so far. I’ve booked acts that I think the school can be really proud of.’

‘Wow! That must be nice.’

‘It is! Next question. Are you single?’

The question disarms Mark completely. He turns bright red and forgets the rules of the question game completely. ‘Do you always ask such personal questions?’

‘Stick to the rules, Mark. My question first. And no fibbing.’

Mark has to look away for a second. He bites his lip; shakes his head. He might as well tell the truth now that he’s here. ‘Yes, I’m single. Are you, Mr Barlow?’

‘I am. Are you ever going to call me by my first name?’

Mark laughs. He takes a big sip of tea, then puts down his cup down again when he notices that his hands are shaking. ‘Maybe under the right circumstances. What’s the biggest venue you’ve ever performed at?’

‘The Symphony Hall in Birmingham, I believe.’ Gary can tell that Mark is trying to steer the conversation away from relationships, but he doesn’t miss a beat. ‘What do you mean, under the right circumstances?’
‘I call most of my colleagues by their last names,’ Mark mumbles. He runs his fingers nervously across the grain of the coffee table. ‘I guess if we were mates, I might start calling you Gary.’

Gary’s eyes crinkle at the corners. ‘Mates or – more than that?’

Mark starts blushing furiously all the way down his neck. He shoots an anxious look over his shoulder. What if someone is eavesdropping and all the students and teachers will soon be talking about how two male teachers have been flirting at the local coffee shop? Gossip travels quickly as schools.

‘It’s my turn to ask a question now, I think, Mr Barlow,’ Mark bristles.

‘Shame. I really liked my question!’

Mark has to take another sip of tea to steady his nerves. He asks the first question he can come up with. ‘Would you really not rather be a singer full-time?’

Gary studies Mark’s flushed face. He leans forwards on the table. ‘You say that as if you’d rather be a singer full-time.’

‘I asked you first.’ Mark sounds wounded. He didn’t expect to be asked his question in return. It’s a question that he has often asked himself, for of course he’d rather be a singer than having to drag himself to school every morning.

But it’s Mark who’s asking.

‘I meant what I said when you first asked me,’ Gary says. ‘I love being a songwriter, but I also love being a teacher. Not desperately trying to juggle both – that actually sounds like a nightmare, that does. I’d hate “only” being a songwriter just as much as I’d hate only being a teacher.’

‘Isn’t it really difficult, though? Having two jobs? You literally work harder than anyone I know.’

‘It is difficult, but it’s far better for me mental health,’ Gary explains with surprising honesty. ‘I get really depressed when I don’t have anything to do. Having two jobs stops me mind from going places I don’t want it to.’

‘You get depressed when you have nothing to do? Sorry, I know I’m not sticking to the rules,’ Mark adds when he remembers that they were meant to ask each other questions in turns.

‘Don’t worry about it. And I do, yeah. It first happened to me during me first year of teacher training. It was late July and me lessons obviously wouldn’t start again until September, and I got really depressed for some reason. Me daily routine was a mess and I wasn’t doing any performances at the time, so I stopped going to social events. At one point I stopped seeing people altogether. I’d lock meself up in my room and stay up till four in the morning doing absolutely nothing.

‘It’s only then that I realised how badly I needed something to be doing something. That’s why I’m going on tour during the summer holidays this year – if I don’t, I’ll just sit at home wishing the new school year would start. By the looks of it, I’ll be away all summer.’

Mark doesn’t know what to say. He feels quite privileged that Gary has told him what obviously is a very private story, but he’s also never heard of a teacher who gets depressed during the summer holidays. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever met a teacher who doesn’t enjoy the summer holidays.’

‘Oh, don’t get me wrong. I don’t hate the summer, necessarily. It’s just that I’d rather be at work. I could be sat on the most beautiful beach in the world, and I’d still be working on something
on me laptop.’

‘And yet you keep telling *me* that I shouldn’t work on lesson plans over the weekend,’ Mark says, referring to the first few texts the boys sent each other, about relaxing and taking things slow.

‘That’s different. You’re a newbie! You shouldn’t be spending three hours on a single lesson plan.’

‘How long do *you* spend on one, then?’

‘I don’t.’

Mark’s eyes become as wide as saucers. ‘You don’t write lesson plans?’

Gary shakes his head.

‘Then how do you prepare?’ Mark sounds a little flabbergasted, for he’d never go into a lesson unprepared. ‘How will you know what to do? I don’t understand.’

Gary taps his temple with his index finger. ‘It’s all in here. Sometimes I’ll decide what I want the students to play on the spot. Sometimes I won’t even ask them to play anything! But it’s all about keeping the students on their toes, my lessons.

‘Cos they all wanna be proper artists, these kids. They all wanna be the best artists and pianists in the world. And while that obviously involves being able to come up with your own arrangements, it also involves being able to play whatever an important guy from a record label asks you to play. At school, *I’m* that guy. And let’s be honest, Mark, do you ever look at your lesson plans after you’ve written them? Cos I don’t think you do.’

Mark has never thought about it like that before. He did write a four-page lesson plan for the lesson that Gary visited, but he hardly used it. Gary didn’t even ask for it, and Mark didn’t think to show him. ‘You’re right, I don’t ever look at my lesson plans. I *should*, but I don’t.’

‘My tip? Jot down what you wanna do, but stick to key words. You don’t have to describe every single minute of your lesson.’

In spite of Gary’s earlier comment about Mark not having to write everything he says down, Mark has grabbed his notebook and jotted down Gary’s tips anyway. He’s still a newly qualified teacher, after all; that means there’s always an opportunity to learn something new.

After Mark has underlined Gary’s tips with a flourish and closed his notebook, he catches Gary looking at him with an amused look on his face.

It makes Mark feel a bit unsure of himself. He checks himself out in the reflection of a window. ‘Is there something on me face? You’re looking at me a bit funny . . .’

‘It’s just cute to see you make notes, is all.’

Mark can’t help but laugh at that. ‘*Cute*, Mr Barlow?’

‘I meant nice,’ Gary corrects himself, stammering somewhat. ‘It’s nice. It’s refreshing to have someone who wants to get better at their job. It’s a lot better than the folks from the Art department always complaining how much they hate being here. They act like someone *forced* them to become a teacher.’

Mark thinks he knows which teachers he’s talking about. He hates talking negatively about
colleagues, but his first impressions of the Art department haven’t been good at all. ‘I hate it when colleagues do that.’

‘And yet you look as if you wouldn’t mind being a singer full-time either.’

‘You’re right. I wouldn’t mind being a singer full-time,’ Mark admits. The coffee house is already beginning to empty considerably, and he relaxes. With so few people around, he won’t mind talking about something personal like his songwriting career. ‘It was my dream once, you know. Becoming a singer. Getting my songs out there on my own. But no matter which record label I contacted, no-one was interested in me. A handful of people bought and recorded my songs, but they all ended up being track 11 or 12 or an album. There was no way one of my songs was ever going to be someone’s first single.’

Even though it must be a painful memory, Mark manages to smile. ‘I was being paid enough royalties for my songs to get by, but I knew that it would stop one day. People would find out that I’m not such a good writer after all. So I stopped. For a while I even stopped songwriting altogether. I’m still not any good at writing, though. I’m just good at getting my students to write something.’

‘Oh, I’m sure that’s not true, Mark.’ There’s no need to lower their voices, but the nature of Mark’s confession has prompted Gary to whisper anyway. ‘I bet your songs are beautiful.’

‘They’re not. They’re crap. Yours are probably a lot better.’

Gary groans. ‘Oh, I don’t know about that, mate. My second album seems to be universally hated. I think about twelve people must have bought it, and they were all students and colleagues . . . Thirteen if you count me mum.’

Mark chuckles weakly. Rob did tell him something along those lines. ‘I guess we both have things in our careers that we wish we’d have done differently.’

‘It’s not too late to get back into songwriting if you’re not happy with the way your career has gone. It’s more than possible to release songs and be a successful teacher at the same time.’

Mark shrugs. ‘I think I’m all right for now. I like being a teacher. It’s difficult, but it’s nice. I enjoy it. It pays better than my songs, anyway.’

‘Which part do you enjoy most?’

Mark looks around him. There is something he likes everywhere he looks: the mysterious but warm Mr Orange casually chatting to a student at the bar; the students’ artworks on the walls; the shy Animation student who has come alive as a barista; the sound of a graduate’s debut album playing in the background; two students from a first-year Songwriting class working on one of Mark’s exercises at a window seat; and of course the school itself, looking imposing and yet inviting across the grounds. They are all wonderful things that make being a teacher worthwhile, and yet the only thing he can see is Gary.

So far, all of Mark’s best and most memorable adventures at the school have involved the man in front of him, from being consoled after his terrible first day to watching him play the piano and texting him. Gary has been there for him the entire time.

Tonight is anything but a date, but Mark desperately wishes it was. If it was, he might be able to utter his next words with more conviction.

‘I don’t know which part I enjoy most, but I’m really glad that I met you, Mr Barlow,’ Mark says, his face lighting up as though he has just swallowed a lightbulb. ‘I’m really grateful that you’ve been so
kind in helping me improve and figuring out what to do with my difficult groups and offering to assess my lessons for me. And I suppose – I suppose I’m really grateful for our texts too. Yeah.’

‘Even when my texts got you in trouble with Harrison?’

Gary utters his words very carefully so as not to maim Mark with them, but Mark still feels himself flare up with guilt. While he doesn’t necessarily regret texting Gary, he does regret doing it during an exam. If he does something like it again, he might not get away with it again. He could get fired.

‘How did you find out?’

‘Victor told me,’ Gary says. ‘You know, the Drawing instructor? He’s the one who wrote the exam in the first place. He seemed quite unhappy about the whole thing.’

Mark sighs. ‘I wish I hadn’t accepted that exam envelope without asking Mr Harrison what I was supposed to do. Not taking the time to read up about the exam regulations was stupid of me.’

‘Nonsense. Mr Harrison should have told you. It’s what he gets paid for.’ Gary opens his mouth as if he wants to say more about their head teacher, then thinks better of it and takes a sip of coffee. ‘It’s no more silly than me texting you during a work day, anyway. I should have been more careful.’

‘It was my own fault for not turning my phone off in the first place,’ Mark insists. ‘You’re not to blame. I am.’

‘So you don’t think we should stop texting, then?’

Mark hadn’t even considered that. ‘Of course not. Well, unless I’m supervising an exam. Then I probably won’t reply. But I would very much like to keep texting you. I mean, depending on what you were thinking of sending me. I didn’t think your list of this year’s best new smoothie flavours was very interesting. Sorry.’

‘Good thing I still have a few ideas up me sleeve then, Mr Owen. Big ideas.’

Mark chuckles. ‘You’re not going to send me another PDF file of Keyboards Weekly, are you?’

‘Nope. You might wanna check your phone in private next time I text you, though. Just saying.’

Mark unconsciously licks his lips. He wishes he could say something suggestive in return, but he can’t. Not here. ‘This question game hasn’t really gone so well, has it, Mr Barlow?’ And they’re right back at the start of their conversation, Gary’s flirtatious comment quite forgotten.

‘No really, no. I enjoyed it, though! I got to know you a little better, which is nice, and the coffee was good.’ Gary looks at the watch on his wrist, an expensive one. ‘Mind you, we probably ought to have gone out for dinner with how late it’s gotten . . .’

Mark turns his head to look up at the clock on the wall. It’s nearly six o’clock. He’s usually home by now. If he still wants to have some relaxing alone-time before heading to bed, he ought to catch his bus like yesterday.

Mark tells Gary as much, and they start making preparations to leave. Gary throws away their paper cups while Mark quickly polishes their table with a tissue so the barista doesn’t have to.

Then Gary says, as though he’s rehearsed it in his head many times over, ‘I could take you home, if you want, Mark? It’s probably quicker by car, and I don’t mind the detour. You’d save the bus fare for another cup of tea, too.’
Mark quietly considers it. It’s true that going home by car would save him about twenty minutes, but he doesn’t really fancy the idea of being stuck in an enclosed space with someone he fancies. Besides, Gary seeing Mark’s tiny flat with his single bed might put Gary off him. Taking the bus is the better option.

‘Maybe next time. But thank you for offering, Mr Barlow.’

Gary doesn’t seem hurt by this. He gracefully puts on his coat, which looks just as expensive as when Mark last saw it. ‘I see you’re still not calling me Gary, then.’

‘Like I said. Maybe next time,’ Mark says with a multi-million-pound smile and a twinkle in his eyes that would suggest there’s definitely going to be a next time. But where or when, he does not know.

They head outside. Wisps of white cloud still cling to the sky as the sun sinks slowly behind the blocks of flats in the background. It’s already evening, but the lights are still on in a dozen classrooms, providing lessons for people who are learning English as a second language. Mark hopes he’ll never have to visit the school at night.

They walk side by side on the gravel path. Eventually, they reach a T-junction. One path leads straight to the school’s private parking lot; the other meanders lazily to the school gate and Mark’s bus stop. They obviously have to say goodbye, but Mark skilfully puts it off by asking Gary if he knows what this week’s staff meeting is about. Gary jokes that the meeting is probably going to consist of Mr Harrison going on about student numbers for two hours, and it earns him one of those gorgeous Mark Owen smiles that makes you go weak in the knees.

They separate after that. As Mark makes his way across the school grounds, alone, he tells himself that he shouldn’t look over his shoulder to look at Gary again. It’ll only make him look hopelessly in love.

Mark has nearly reached the school gates when he looks over his shoulder anyway. Sure enough, Gary’s looking over his shoulder too.

And he’s smiling.

|LESSON SIXTEEN: MR BARLOW COMES TO THE RESCUE|

People always ask Gary how he manages to work on so many projects at the same time without getting a burnout. Aren’t you tired? Wouldn’t you rather take a break? Isn’t there someone else who can organise the summer prom for you? Do you really have to go on tour this summer? Don’t you have a private life? etc.

Gary knows that these questions are all justified – he is tired, and he doesn’t have a private life unless you count the days he spends in between lessons –, but wouldn’t have it any other way. The moment he stops working and sits down to read a book somewhere – that’s the moment the demons in his head take over. His monsters. The unnamed creature underneath his bed, ready to strike whenever his feet stand still on the carpet. He needs to work, or else he’ll feel depression looming over him like a dark raincloud. He knows that goes against everything he’s been telling Mark, but Mark is new. Mark doesn’t know better.
Compared to Gary, Mark doesn’t look like he’s been depressed before. Mark is beautiful. He’s bright. He’s kind. He’s ambitious and earnest to the point of torturing himself when things go wrong – unlike many of the other teachers he knows, who gave up on being a good teacher the moment they were given a permanent contract. Far too many teachers are like that lately, Gary thinks: teachers who forget they’re teachers the moment they go on holiday. But for him – and Mark, it seems – teaching is as much a part of him as his songs are. His students matter as much as the records on his walls do. If you don’t give your all when it comes to your students, then there’s no point being teacher. Being a teacher is not something you half-arse.

Gary knows that makes him sound like a hypocrite. He’s half a teacher, half a songwriter. People will always accuse him of half-arsing things. He knows how much trouble he has to go through to make every single aspect of his two jobs the best they can be.

The only problem is that Gary’s split attention now has another thing to compete with: Mark. Gary’s been perfectly capable of keeping his work and his love life separate in the past, but he’s been a mess for weeks to be fair. He keeps texting Mark when he should otherwise be working on the setlist for his tour. He keeps thinking about Mark in the middle of his lessons. He even worries about how he’s going to stay in touch with Mark over the summer, for he’s not likely to be able to text him regularly when he’s off singing his songs abroad.

He hasn’t even been able to think about his tour all that much. Every time he does, Gary’s train of thought leads him to Mark instead, wondering how it’s possible for someone to be so bloody adorable and sexy at the same time. Gary feels Mark in every single thing that he does.

So whenever people ask Gary how he manages to juggle a dozen projects at the same time, the answer is always Mark – cheerful, polite, beautiful, bright Mark Owen, with those gorgeous blue eyes that still look up at the school like it’s both the scariest and most wonderful place he’s ever been in. Gary would love to show Mark around one day, but he still has about twenty essays to get through.

Gary’s so engrossed in reading one such essay in his otherwise empty piano lab that he almost jumps out of his skin when a student pops up at his desk. When he looks up, he sees that the student is holding another essay for him to read.

‘My essay about my favourite pianist, Sir,’ the student stammers. Her name is Ivy, and she has very blue hair. ‘I know I’m a week late, but I was wondering if you could still read it? You don’t have to mark it if you don’t want to. I just wanted to know what you thought. If you have time, Sir. You don’t have to do it. I know eleven pages is probably a lot.’

‘Good grief.’ Gary takes off his reading glasses so he can pinch the bridge of his nose and have a second to perfect his reaction. He decides to go for “Teacher pretending to be vexed”, which he learned from Howard. ‘I’m going to be sat here till the end of the summer if everyone keeps handing in their essays late. I might have to cancel me tour now!’

The student makes a little choking sound as if she’s forgotten to breathe. She clutches her essay to her chest. ‘Oh, no. I’m so sorry, Sir. I don’t want to ruin your summer! I – I’ll just throw this away if you don’t have the time to read it . . .’

‘I’m only joking, Ivy. I’d love to read your essay. It doesn’t matter. I didn’t have anything to do this weekend, anyway. I’ll just be marking essays all day, me,’ Mr Barlow says, obviously pretending to be very upset and bitter. ‘What a great life I live, eh?’

There is a few seconds’ delay as Ivy’s brain tries to catch up with what is happening. ‘You’ll still mark my essay, Sir? Even though it is a week late?’
Mr Barlow nods importantly. Ivy actually bows at him when he does.

‘OH, THANK YOU, SIR! THANK YOU! I WON’T EVER HAND IN SOMETHING LATE EVER AGAIN!’

Ivy looks like she might collapse to the floor with relief. She tremulously leaves her essay on Gary’s desk and darts out of the empty classroom before her teacher can change his mind.

No more overdue essays arrive, and Gary spends the rest of his day marking the ones on the pile on his desk. With most essays being a nonsensical waterfall of words about the students’ favourite pianists, it takes him thirty minutes to get through each one. Ivy barely passes.

When Gary gets out of his chair to have a quick stretch, he realises he’s been sat in his empty piano lab for the past six hours. It’s so late in the day that the only sound is the low hum of distant traffic and students walking past.

Only a handful of lessons are still in process. Gary’s lessons were all cancelled because his third-years are away on a school trip, so he could spend his free time marking essays and trying to finalise the line-up for the summer prom. Two acts still haven’t called him back, and right now he only has one act booked for the night, a female singer he once met on tour. He might ask Mr Donald to DJ as a last resort, but he knows what Howard is like at night. He might fall asleep at his mixing desk.

Gary’s about to slip back into his seat when his phone buzzes in his pocket. He grins like an idiot when he sees that Mark’s texted him. They’ve been texting more and more lately.

His smile falters when he reads the text.

—Mark: Are you still at school? I’m in trouble. My final lesson of the day has spiralled out of control. Bad class management. Need help. Everyone else has already gone home. Please!! Room 115-MA.

Gary doesn’t even have to think about it. He texts Mark that he’s on his way and hurries out of the room, careful to lock the door behind him.

Classroom 115-MA is some way away, but Gary knows a shortcut. He takes a right turn, scoots past Mr Orange perched on a window sill with his nose buried in a battered copy of *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* and enters an empty corridor where most lessons from the Art department take place.

The distinction between the two departments is obvious. Whereas the classrooms of the Music department smell of little more than Mark’s cologne, the smell of wood instantly hits Gary’s nose as he walks past a wood workshop. Then he walks past a group of students painting in the corridor, and he smells paint. The sound of an electric wood saw follows him until he reaches the next corridor, making it hard to come up with an excuse for intervening Mark’s lesson that the students will believe.

He could say that he needs to talk to Mr Owen privately. Or that there’s been some sort of emergency. But whatever he says, the students must never find out that he was asked to come round because Mr Owen couldn’t deal with them.

After five minutes of taking shortcuts, Gary finally arrives at 115-MA, a large theory classroom that also has four desktop computers set up in the back of the room. Because the classroom is on street-level, at the very back of the school, hidden away in a corner, you always have to compete with the sound of cars and ambulances driving past. There are several threes outside the classroom’s windows, so it’s always dark. During the winter months, it’s as if teaching in the basement. And if
something bad ever happens, you’ll be hard pressed to find a colleague to help you out.

Gary peers through the rectangular window in the door to see Mark standing in front of the whiteboard with his hands in his hair. From what Gary can see, his lesson has become utter pandemonium. Students are jumping up and down their desks. Paper planes shoot through the air. A student has drawn a bad depiction of Mr Owen on the whiteboard. Six students are fighting over the four desktop computers in the back. The window is open, and a student is hanging out of it as if he is about to jump.

It looks like every teacher’s worst nightmare, and it feels like being trapped in a room full of people who hate you.

Mark doesn’t know what to do. He’s desperate to leave the classroom and run as fast as his legs will carry him, but he can’t. He just can’t. His colleagues will say that he’s weak and that he can’t handle these awful students, grinning at each other like naughty Cheshire cats because they got what they wanted.

Mark should have sent them away from the moment the trouble started. He should have warned them. Confiscated their phones, even. Acted when his students stopped listening to them. But he should never have let them get away with taking control of his classroom like this.

He feels like a failure. He wants the ground to swallow him whole when two students start pointing their fingers at him like he’s an idiot. He feels sorry for the girls in front of him, looking at him with big, scared eyes because they want to be anywhere but here.

Then there’s a knock on the door, and Mr Barlow comes rushing into the classroom like a bullet train.

The students stop in their tracks as though someone’s pressed pause on time itself. They all listen as Mr Barlow approaches their flustered Creative Writing teacher and starts talking in an important whisper loud enough for the students to hear.

‘Sorry to bother you, Mr Owen, but have you got an iPhone charger? Me phone’s dead and I’m expecting a really important phone call from Dua Lipa about the summer prom.’ Even when he’s whispering, Gary manages to emphasise the words Dua Lipa and summer prom. The female students on the first row give each other curious glances.

Mark’s very relieved to see Gary, but he has no idea what Gary is talking about, and he doesn’t have an iPhone.

‘I – I don’t h-have an iPhone charger, I’m afraid, Mr Barlow.’ Mark doesn’t know what else to say, because he’s still trying to recover from his lesson going terribly.

‘But your students might have one,’ Gary stresses meaningfully.

Mark exchanges a doubtful glance with the students, who have gone suspiciously still and quiet since Mr Barlow arrived. ‘Does anyone have an iPhone charger for Mr Barlow? He’s expecting a phone call from – Dua Lipa, was it?’

Gary nods importantly. ‘Dua Lipa, yes,’ he says very loudly on purpose.

Seventeen hands shoot up at the mention of the pop star. The boy who had previously been trying to jump out of the window slumps back into his seat and conjures up an iPhone charger like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. ‘I’VE GOT ONE!’
Other voices try to drown out the student at the window. ‘I’ve got a charger too!’

‘I’ve got two!’ comes a female voice.

‘I’ve loved Dua Lipa since 2015!’

‘You can keep my charger forever!’

It’s only now that Mark is beginning to see what Gary is trying to do. It’s an incredibly well-disguised attempt to save Mark’s backside, and with Mr Barlow obviously being a relatively successful recording artist (note that Mark still hasn’t bothered to Google exactly *how* successful he is), he probably isn’t lying about Dua Lipa having his number. It’s ingenious.

Gary points at one of the biggest boys of the bunch, a student named Tim. ‘Tim, isn’t it? You’ve got a charger you can borrow?’

Tim nods. The other students groan in envy. ‘Brand new, Sir.’ He hands Mr Barlow his charger.

‘Does that mean I’ll get to meet Dua Lipa if she decides to perform at the summer prom?’

There’s a trace of uncertainty in Gary’s eye. He glances at Mark, who has used the intervention to sink into his chair and down an entire bottle of water. He looks a little shaken, but his students don’t seem to notice because they’re too busy thinking about Dua Lipa.

‘I don’t know yet,’ Gary says slowly. ‘If it turns out you haven’t been behaving at school, then I don’t think Ms Lipa will wanna meet you, to be honest, Tim. The same goes for all of you, really. Ms Lipa only wants to perform for the best crowds, she does. She might decide not to want to have you at the summer prom at all.’

The colour disappears from Tim’s face. The other students all share worried looks. They know that if they don’t behave, they might not be able to see the UK’s hottest female pop star performing for free at their summer prom.

Gary has effectively just bribed the students to be on their best behaviour.

‘Anyway, Mr Owen here probably had better things planned than me going on about the summer prom. Why don’t I tell Ms Lipa that you’re all amazing students and that you’d love to meet her, eh? What’d you think about that, Mr Owen? D’you reckon your students deserve it? You know them better than I do.’

A warm glow spreads inside of Mark when Gary gives him the tiniest of winks. He tries to paste a serious expression on his face. ‘I don’t know yet, Mr Barlow. Why don’t I tell you at the end of the lesson? We still need to get started on the chapter about elegies.’

‘Elegies, eh? You could write an elegy for the physical music format, you could.’

‘Or you could write an elegy about someone dear to you,’ Mark tells the group more seriously. Now that the students have calmed down, he finds it a lot easier to explain his exercise without stumbling over his own words. He gets up from his chair and points at the definition of an elegy that he wrote on his whiteboard. ‘Elegies are poems for someone or something that has passed away or is no longer around.’

Tim nods seriously. He obviously wants to look very serious indeed in front of the respected Mr Barlow. ‘Like my dog, Sir? We had to put her down last month and everyone in my family was very sad.’
‘Or my cat,’ a Chinese student named Hazel sniffs in the front of the classroom. ‘She got run over by a car.’

The group all share stories about pets they once lost. Mark shares a similar story about the precious lizard that he had when he was younger. ‘You could write about the loss of your pets, yes. It doesn’t necessarily have to write about a person. If you want, you can also write about an object that you once had and then lost.’

‘Like your virginity,’ Gary whispers into Mark’s ears suddenly, the words tingling pleasantly on Mark’s skin and making Mark snort.

‘Let’s keep our elegies serious, Mr Barlow,’ Mark whispers back. ‘We don’t want an elegy to make us laugh.’

Mark knows that he shouldn’t be feeling warm and fuzzy inside when he’s surrounded by a bunch of spotty kids who were making his life hell only a couple of minutes ago, but Mark finds that he is smiling. He feels so much better now that Mr Barlow is here, saving his backside with a little white lie. He doesn’t know if his students will continue to be just as serious once Gary leaves, but he does know he’ll be prepared if they’re not. He can do this.

‘Anyway,’ Mark continues in his normal voice so that even the students in the back row can hear him, ‘I thought you had to phone a certain Dua Lipa, Mr Barlow?’

‘I did, didn’t I? She might be wondering why I’m not answering her calls by now!’

‘We don’t want that,’ Mark says seriously. The students all nod in agreement.

‘You’re right, we don’t.’ Gary lowers his voice again so that only Mark can hear him. ‘Will you be all right without me being here, though? I have a free period, so I can stay.’

Mark’s flattered, but he’s fairly confident that he’ll be able to manage the group on his own from now on. He nods and gives Gary’s hand a quick, thankful squeeze. ‘I’ll be all right. Thank you, Mr Barlow,’ he says quietly and with sincerity, and Mr Barlow leaves the room with his borrowed iPhone charger.

The rest of the lesson, the students are quieter than they’ve ever been.

|LESSON SEVENTEEN: AN INTERESTING JOURNEY HOME|

It’s half past five. Mark’s on the bus back home. He’s absolutely knackered from seven hours of teaching, and he watches sleepily from the window how the city rushes past him in a blur. Next to him, an older lady is flicking through the latest issue of RadioTimes. A text reaches Mark’s phone when the bus takes a sharp right turn into a street lined with shops.

—Gary: How did the rest of your lesson in 115-MA go? I hoped my intervention helped somewhat?

Mark smiles. He sits up in his seat a little straighter to text a long, wordy reply.

—Mark: It went amazingly!! They all worked really hard and handed in their poems like I asked. Some even came up to me afterwards to apologise for their behaviour. They said they’d had a
random pop quiz the lesson before and they were all really spooked about it because they hadn’t had
time to prepare!! [Poop emoji] I was the guy they decided to get angry at, not the teacher who set the
pop quiz!! But I understand now. [Here, Mark includes an emoji a relieved face.]

—Gary: So it’s not such a difficult group after all then?

—Mark: Not at all. Just a difficult day.

—Gary: Got anything nice planned tonight? Something to make your day a little better?

—Mark: Is this the point when you tell me to try meditation?? [This time, Mark add an emoji with a
tongue sticking out of its mouth to indicate that he is joking.]

—Gary: I was going to recommend you watch Star Trek Discovery, actually! It’s a cracker of an
episode this week’s is.

Mark rolls his eyes at his phone. Nerd.

Then the bus turns left into an empty lane, and a second text reaches him.

—Gary: But for those of us who *aren’t* interested in Star Trek – shame if you’re not mate – I
might have something better to keep you distracted tonight …

Mark frowns at his phone. Something better? What does Gary mean by that?

A short while later, Mark’s phone buzzes with another message. It’s not a text, but a picture.

A shirtless pic.

The picture gives Mark such a start that he accidentally drops his phone on the floor and it ends up
sliding underneath the empty seat in front of him. He can’t reach, so he has to get up, squeeze past
the older lady sat next to him, apologise to her (profusely), crouch down in front of the seat where his
phone ended up and avert his eyes when he sees the pile of dirt he’s reaching into.

By the time he finally manages to get a hold of his phone, the sleeves of his jacket are stained with a
layer of dust. He doesn’t want to know the last time the bus was cleaned.

Thankfully, Mark’s phone wasn’t damaged in the fall. He grabs his rucksack from the seat where he
was just sat and flops into an empty seat in the front of the bus – away from onlookers, just in case
there are colleagues or students around – and takes a deep breath before looking at the picture again.

It really is very shirtless.

The photo was obviously taken some time ago (it features Gary on a beach somewhere, presumably
in the UK because teachers can’t afford proper beach holidays), but still. Gary looks good. So good.
He’s tanned. There is hair in all the right places. He’s obviously in perfect physical shape; not skinny
or anything – just perfect. Gary looks perfect. The bulge in his swimming shorts isn’t bad either.

Mark has been staring at the picture for several minutes when he realises with a pang that he should
probably text something back. He’s not the type to ever send pics of himself, but a reply won’t hurt.

—Mark: Nice beach. What did you expect me to do with this pic exactly? x

Clueless but flirtatious. Perfect.
—Gary: As if you don’t know.

—Mark: I really really don’t. Please share your thoughts with the rest of the class Mr Barlow x

—Gary: Let’s just say I didn’t send this pic just so you could stare at it.

Mark grins. It’s not hard to figure out what Gary means by that, but he’s going to pretend he has no idea.

—Mark: I really don’t know what you’re talking about Mr Barlow. Maybe we could talk about it after class next week? I wouldn’t mind having a couple of private lessons with you xx [Winking face emoji]

Mark’s so engrossed in writing his own reply that he doesn’t notice that the bus has just arrived at his stop. He quickly cranes himself out of his seat, throws his rucksack on his back, thanks the driver for his service and hops out of the bus looking a little bit flustered.

When Mark finally gets home, the first thing he does is have a wank in the shower. He knows it’s wrong, but he can’t help it. Seeing Gary without a shirt on has made him bloody horny.

As Mark steps into the shower and the hot water hits his skin, he forces his mind’s eye to bring back every detail in Gary’s picture he can still remember seeing in the picture: Gary’s strong arms; his hands; his chest; the light trail of hair running into his shorts; the bulge in his swimming shorts.

As he starts rubbing himself slowly up and down, he imagines feeling Gary’s tanned chest against his own body. He imagines Gary’s arms lifting him onto the flat surface of a table. No, a piano. No – the sandy surface of the beach in the picture. He imagines Gary spreading his legs and doing oh so unspeakable things to him as the water crashes onto the beach. He pictures Gary coming inside of him just as he flicks his wrist one last time and the water instantly washes his guilt into the drain.

Ten minutes later, Mark collapses onto his bed feeling like he’s floating. He falls asleep immediately.

[LESSON EIGHTEEN: LET’S TALK ABOUT LOVE]

Mark probably thinks Gary is brave after sending that pic of himself, but Gary doesn’t feel brave at all. He’s terrified. It took him half an hour to build up the courage to text Mark just now. The words didn’t come easily. Flirting with Mark made his heart beat so fast that he thought it was going to explode.

Even ten minutes after Mark’s last text, Gary’s still shaking because of what he sent and how careless he was. His Instagram account is full of similar pics of him doing yoga with his shirt off or meditating in a sleeveless top, but this is different. This is pretty desperate, let’s be honest. This is him saying, This is what I’ve got on offer. Take it or leave it. And judging by the way Mark responded, Mark wouldn’t mind taking him.

Gary’s still reeling from their shameless string of texts, so he decides to look for a calming yoga and meditation playlist on Spotify. He closes his eyes and proceeds to meditate on his five-star sofa. He initially has trouble thinking about anything other than Mark’s response, but then he calms down. It
It takes him ten minutes for his thoughts to clear and his body to stop shaking.

Not much later, the guilt of the things he texted Mark fades.

_This is okay_, he thinks to himself. _Flirting and sending dirty pics is what adults do._

Even adults with 600,000 followers on Instagram.

Gary’s yoga and meditation playlist suddenly stops playing, and he finds his concentration fading. His thoughts drift back to Mark. He allows his mind to come up with the strangely comforting image of waking up with Mark every morning. He’d love to have that sort of life with Mark; the type where they’d live together and they’d make love all day, if that’s what Mark wants. They’d be able to travel to school together every day.

Is he getting ahead of himself there? Perhaps. He’s yet to ask Mark out, after all, and it’s not like they’ve spent an awful lot of time together. And yet, Gary feels strangely like their getting to know each other has been written in the stars for months – like they were destined to meet even before they first laid eyes on each other in the staff room. He just wishes he could remember where that feeling comes from.

Hopefully, when the days become longer and hotter, and everyone’s too worried about grades to care, they’ll finally have an opportunity to find out more about each other.

* 

The end of the month May is nearing. Rain taps relentlessly on the classroom windows. Outside, students hurry across the school grounds with umbrellas and large textbooks covering their heads.

By now, timetables for next month’s exam week have already been put up online. Students who spent all school year doing nothing are suddenly faced with the fact that there are only a couple of weeks left until the school year ends. And inside of classroom 105-MC, two students from M_SW1F are voluntarily helping Mr Owen clean up the mess after his frantic writing task. It’s the first group Mark ever saw, and by far his favourite.

The exercise was very fun, but cleaning up afterwards is a chore. Naima, a polite sun-kissed student with a fondness for poetry, has spent the past ten minutes trying to pick up sequins, feathers, glitter, pieces of carton and stickers from the floor. Mark asked the students to decorate their poems with as many embellishments as they liked, but most of the glitter ended up underneath Mark’s shoes.

‘Mr Owen?’ asks Mimi, Naima’s pretty best friend. She has blonde curls and is always dressed in expensive-looking clothes from popular fashion brands. She’s just helped Mr Owen clean the whiteboard and is now crouching down by the teacher’s desk to pick up a piece of carton from the floor.

‘Yes, Mimi?’

‘Do you know anything about the summer prom? All the third-years are talking about it and saying that it’s going to be amazing, but no-one wants to tell us what it is.’ Mimi gets up and tosses bits of useless carton in the trash bin. While Mark’s trousers have got dust on them from picking up sequins, Mimi’s expensive outfit still looks meticulous. ‘Is it like a big concert for everyone from the school?’

‘Oh, I don’t know about it being a concert,’ Mark replies. He’s in the middle of re-organising a pile of coloured paper on his desk. ‘There will be music, though, and a couple of DJs and a famous singer and lots of food and drink if that’s something you like. Mr Barlow is organising it, but I think
he wants to keep everything a secret. I know a lot of older students are already worrying about who they’re gonna ask out that night. That’s nice, isn’t it?’

Naima’s face crumples. ‘If I’m supposed to take a date to the prom then I won’t bother coming.’

Mark stops separating his red pieces of paper from the blue ones. *Have I said something wrong? ‘Why not, Naima?*

Naima shrugs as she gets up a bit too quickly and pours a handful of broken sequins into the trash bin. Some of the sequins get stuck to her hand, and she ends up having to wipe her hands on her trousers to get rid of them. She looks a little vexed. ‘I’d rather go alone. It’s what Destiny’s Child said, right? Independent Women and all that? That’s what I’m gonna be. An independent woman, not going to prom.’

Mimi nods at her friend with an expression of understanding. ‘Naima isn’t very interested in dates,’ she tells Mr Owen knowledgably.

‘Exactly. I don’t understand the point of them,’ Naima says. She tucks a lock of her brown hair behind her ear. ‘Like, since when are dates more important than other people? Why do people stop caring about their friends and family once they’ve found a boyfriend or girlfriend? I don’t get it.’

‘God, tell me about it,’ Mimi huffs. She turns to Mr Owen. ‘Remember Billie, the girl who switched to Animation last month? She stopped wanting to meet up with us the moment that third-year chick became interested in her.’

Naima shakes her head. ‘I know. It’s ridiculous, isn’t it? I’d rather go out with me mates.’

‘Or both, Naima. It *is* possible to do both. Just cos you’re seeing some guy or girl doesn’t mean you have to stop seeing your friends.’

Naima shrugs. ‘*Eh.* I’d rather just see me mates.’

Whilst he’s flattered that Naima and Mimi have obviously involved him in a conversation about what they personally think about relationships, Mark can’t help but think about Gary in this. He’d *love* to go on a date with him. Several dates.

‘Dates *can* be nice, though, Naima,’ Mark says as much. ‘A lot of people love having a special someone they can kiss and cuddle with.’

‘That’s the thing, though, Sir,’ Naima says, ‘why just cuddle one person? Why not cuddle everyone? I hate this idea that I’m supposed to stick to just the one person.’

Mark’s not sure where the conversation is heading. He stops sorting out his papers and sits on the edge of his desk, the place where he always sits when he’s about to explain something important. Naima and Mimi are both eighteen, but he doesn’t want to say something that will upset them. ‘So you want to have a relationship with more than just one person, Naima?’

Mimi cracks up. Naima makes a face as though she’s tasted something foul. ‘Are you kidding, Sir? I don’t want a relationship at all! Ever. Not even if you paid me.’

‘Naima always skips the love scenes on Netflix,’ Mimi explains for Mr Owen’s benefit. ‘And she hates kissing. Last time a guy tried to kiss her, she ran off. As in, she ran a mile, Sir. I’ve never seen a girl move so fast. It was like watching the Olympics.’

Naima nods a few times to confirm Mimi’s story. ‘Kissing. Again, what’s the point? I don’t want to
touch something where your food has been.’

Mark laughs out loud. Although he loves being kissed himself, he thinks he’s beginning to understand what Naima is trying to say. ‘Now I get it. You’re just not into things like that.’

‘Not even if you paid me,’ Naima reiterates.

‘Well, I think that’s more than all right, you know,’ Mr Owen says understandingly. ‘A lot of people consciously choose to stay single, and a lot of them are very happy, aren’t they? It means you’ll have the stereo all for yourself!’

Naima beams at Mr Owen. ‘Exactly! I don’t want some partner person deciding what I listen to in the morning. What if I hook up with someone and they don’t like St Vincent?’

‘Oof, that would be terrible, wouldn’t it?’

‘I know! So staying single sounds perfect.’

‘And as for the summer prom,’ Mark adds, ‘I don’t think anyone will stop you if you wanna go alone, you know. You might even get a trend going.’

‘Maybe!’ Naima nods, warming to the idea of going to prom after all. ‘Everyone will be saying how cool and independent I am.’

‘What about you, though, Sir?’ Mimi asks. Having finished cleaning the whiteboard, she plops into a chair next to the window. Her clothes still look perfect. ‘Are teachers allowed to take dates with them to prom?’

Mark blushes. He thinks about the shirtless pic Gary sent him the other day. ‘I don’t know, to be honest. I don’t really know that much about the prom other than what I told you. I might help out, though!’

A brilliant idea pops into Mimi’s head, and she grips the edge of her desk tightly. ‘You should ask Ms Brooke, Sir! You’d look very cute together.’

Naima looks pointedly at her. ‘Ms Brooke? Seriously, Mi? You know she only cares about boy bands’

‘I think I’ll just volunteer to help out and worry about who I’m going to dance with later,’ Mark stammers, keen to drop the subject before he says something a teacher shouldn’t say.

He gets up from his desk and tells the girls they should finish cleaning the classroom together before the bell rings. Keen to get into their favourite teacher’s good books, the girls obediently help out, with Naima and Mr Owen doing a lot more work than Mimi. By now, the girls have already found something else to talk about.

Mark politely smiles and hums whenever the girls try to involve him in a conversation about tonight’s episode of Britain’s Got Talent, but his mind is elsewhere. He can’t help but feel an excited flutter in his chest whenever he thinks about the summer prom. With the end of the school year fast approaching, the prom could be the perfect opportunity to get to know Gary better. They could sneak into a hidden room in the venue somewhere and “cuddle”, as Naima put it.

But first, one of them has to take their relationship to the next level – further than texts and shirtless pics and curious looks across classrooms.
Question is, who will it be?

Chapter End Notes

I'm not entirely sure when I'll post chapter 3 as I'll be quite busy seeing some boy band over the next two weeks.

That said, the next chapter features the boys sneaking off twice and Howard nearly breaking his neck in the school's concert hall.
PART THREE

Chapter Summary

In this (slightly shorter) chapter, Mark and Gary spend nearly an entire staff meeting flirting with each other. They take it further by sneaking off to a quiet little spot together, but they quickly find out that you’re never really alone when you’re a teacher.

Featuring a lot of fluff and some expository scenes about Rob (and Howard, to a lesser extent).

Chapter Notes

In this story, Rob deals with a serious case of social anxiety that I’ve based on things I went through last year. In a real school, his anxiety would be reason enough to get Rob fired as teachers are generally expected by bosses and principals to be social butterflies who have no problems, ever. Thankfully, no-one will get fired in this fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

|LESSON NINETEEN: MORE FACTS ABOUT TREE SLUGS|

Every Thursday, the teachers have a staff meeting. Last week, the teachers from the Music department spent over an hour discussing a single students’ exam results. You can see why Gary and Mark don’t have private lives.

Today the staff meeting involves both faculties, and everyone has gathered in the Arts & Crafts classroom in the B-wing to listen to what the head teachers have to say. Mrs Stohl, the posh and enigmatic head teacher of the Art department, has already gathered all of her colleagues while Mr Harrison is still looking for his.

‘The meeting is starting in five minutes,’ Mr Harrison grunts as much. He looks enviously at the gathered teachers from the Music department. ‘Why aren’t Misters Williams and Pomeroy here yet?’

‘I haven’t seen Bernie and Milton for a while either,’ remarks Mr Hepburn, one of the Music department’s much-loved Percussion teachers. ‘Are we sure everyone knows we had a meeting today?’

‘An e-mail about the meeting was sent out last night, so I would imagine so,’ Mr Harrison sighs. ‘They must not have thought the meeting was important.’

Mark nervously raises his hand. Ever since he made the mistake of checking his phone in the middle of an exam, he has been avoiding his head teacher like the plague. ‘Mr Harrison, Sir?’
Mr Harrison lets out a deep sigh; to him, dealing with Mr Owen is on part with trying to deal with an annoying insect. ‘Yes, Mr Owen?'

Gary is away on official singer-songwriter business in London, so Mark would feel a lot better if Rob were here. He’d probably have more luck finding his friend than his colleagues. ‘I was just wondering if I could have your permission to look for Mr Williams in the computer lab, Sir. I don’t think he checked his e-mail last night.’

There are agreeing murmurs from other teachers from the Music department. It’s the first time Mark feels like he’s said something productive during a meeting.

‘I’ll go looking for Bernie and Milton too if that’s all right, Harrison,’ says Mr Hepburn. ‘They don’t check their e-mails either.’

Mr Harrison sighs. Next to him, Mrs Stohl, his fellow head teacher, is looking quite smug. ‘All right. We will postpone the meeting by half an hour. But I want everyone back here at two. I will personally write down the names of the colleagues who missed the meeting here.’

Mark politely excuses himself and takes the long way to the computer lab so he can check his phone. There are no new messages, and Gary hasn’t texted anything since he sent over that picture of him shirtless on the beach. He’s probably being a tease.

After a brisk walk through the empty corridors in the C-wing, Mark reaches the computer lab. He knows he doesn’t need to knock as the lab is an open space that people can walk in and out of whenever they please, but he knocks on a vacant table to announce his arrival anyway.

Apart from Rob, only three people are using the lab. One of them is Nick, the quiet Animation student who was working on a rendering of a 3D cottage a couple of weeks ago. Nick is concentrating so hard that he hardly notices Mark stopping to look at his monitor, which shows a 3D rendering of a castle, beautifully textured with white bricks and ivy.

‘Nice castle, Nick,’ Mark says. ‘I wish I lived there.’

‘You really don’t, Sir,’ Nick says without looking up from his screen. He’s in the middle of adding a weather effect to the castle’s exterior, a large green field, spread over the 3D world like a picnic blanket. ‘It’s surrounded by carnivorous goblins.’

‘Not so different from my flat, then,’ Mark sighs. He lets Nick get on with his castle and turns to Mr Williams. In an attempt to look busier than he actually is, his colleague is typing frantically on his keyboard. ‘Mr Harrison was asking for you, Mr Williams. He needs you to come to the joint staff meeting.’

Rob groans without looking away from his monitor. ‘Tell him I’m busy.’

‘Mr Harrison said it’s important. He did send you an e-mail . . .’

Rob continues typing like Mark isn’t even there.

‘Mr Williams. Please. Mr Harrison might get very mad at you if you don’t come.’

Rob chews the inside of his cheek as he considers whether he should tell Mark his real reasons for wanting to stay here. He studies the students in the computer lab (a bunch of first-year Animation students who all wear T-shirts of Gravity Falls and Pokémon; not the most gossipy lot) and pats his hand on the empty chair next to him. ‘C’mere, Mark.’
Mark does as he’s told and sits.

‘Three facts about Mr Williams,’ Rob begins to say in an apparently random combination of sentences that doesn’t seem remotely relevant to what he and Mark were talking about previously. ‘One: he binge-watched seven episodes of Love Island last night. Seven episodes, Mark. I thought I’d go blind by the end of it.

‘Two: Mr Williams is a bit dyslexic, so reading e-mails takes him a very long time. Especially when a certain head teacher mails him, because he always writes in very wordy paragraphs that makes me eyes water. There’s a reason I write everything in capital letters.

‘Three . . .’ Here, Rob swallows. He looks down for a second, as if ashamed by what he’s about to say. ‘I absolutely loathe staff meetings, Mark. I absolutely hate them.’

Mark doesn’t know what to respond to first, the fact that Rob watches cheap reality TV or the fact that Rob hates staff meetings for some reason. ‘Is the fact that you watched Love Island relevant?’

‘Probably not. No. Although it did make me think about what Mr Barlow told me the other day. He said he’d texted you a certain picture?’

Mark feels himself flushing. ‘You said you hated staff meetings, Mr Williams?’

‘Right. Staff meetings.’ Rob looks as though he’d already forgotten why Mark came here. He does this a lot – haphazardly flicking from one subject to the next in an apparently random order. Mark thinks it’s because Rob sees so many people one day that the ghosts of their conversations get stuck in his head and he doesn’t have enough room to fit them all in.

But when Rob looks Mark in the eye, he doesn’t look scatter-brained at all. ‘Can I trust you to keep a secret, Mark?’

Mark nods very seriously.

‘Well – I’ve got a bit of an issue,’ Rob says. ‘Truth is, I don’t just hate staff meetings. They actually fucking scare me, Mark.’

Mark raises his eyebrows. ‘Staff meetings scare you? Why?’

‘They just do. I feel uncomfortable when there are more than thirty people in a room. Good thing there’s room for only about twenty-nine students in ‘ere.’

Rob talks about his apparent discomfort with the familiarity one might use to describe a friend.

However, Mark doesn’t really get it. Finding it difficult to be in a room with a lot of people is completely at odds with what Rob does for a living. ‘But you’re sat in the computer lab all day. I’ve seen you in the staff room. Why are staff meetings different?’

‘They just are. Donavan told me there’d be a meeting with both faculties and me head was like, “Nope! Not going.” And I did try, Mark. I did go to the Arts & Crafts classroom to see if I’d change me mind about stuff, but then I saw everyone and it’s like someone tried a knot into me stomach. You know what I mean? So I just left and helped Nick ‘ere with his homework.’

Now that Mark thinks about it, this isn’t the first meeting Rob has missed. He was also absent during last week’s meeting, and when Mr Stevens asked Rob if he could join him and some colleagues for drinks after work, Rob turned a bit green.
‘Does Mr Harrison that meetings and things like that scare you?’

‘He does, sort of. I was forced to tell him about it when I missed the graduation ceremony last year. I couldn’t even drag myself out of the house that night. Again, knots in me stomach.’

Rob tells Mark what happened. Last year, when Rob was about to leave his apartment, about to attend the third-years’ graduation ceremony at the school’s concert hall, he found himself unable to go. Physically unable. His breath started coming in short pants and his heart was beating like mad. Whenever he’d try to move to the door, his legs would fail to cooperate and his mind would start naming every single reason why being in a room full of students, teachers and parents would be an absolutely terrible idea.

_They’ll judge you_, one voice in Rob’s head said. _You’ll say something silly_, another voice said. _You’ll feel uncomfortable. You won’t be able to go home until everyone has received their diplomas._

Ever since, Rob’s been very careful to avoid similar social events – especially staff meetings that involve both faculties because he’d be in a room with over sixty people.

Throughout Rob’s story, Mark has nodded and squeezed Rob’s hand. He understands now; being in big groups scares Rob, and that’s fine. ‘Was Mr Harrison understanding when you didn’t show up at the ceremony last year?’

Rob’s face expresses his answer without saying the words. His eyes stare sadly at a project he’s been working on, another PowerPoint entitled “MORE FACTS ABOUT TREE SLUGS”. It’s obvious that he’d much rather stay here than go to the staff meeting.

‘I see that you’ve been working on another PowerPoint,’ Mark says in an obvious attempt to change the topic. ‘Anything special?’

‘It is if you like tree slugs.’

‘When you say tree slugs – you mean Mr Barlow, right?’

Rob nods. He seems a little more relaxed now that he’s told Mark about his big secret. ‘I’ve been workin’ on it to get me mind off my dissertation. I have five brand new facts that will absolutely blow your mind, Mark.’

Mark remembers that Rob took up the job in the computer lab so he could afford his training to become a support teacher; a perfect position for Rob, as it’ll allow him to deal with students one-on-one. ‘When you say dissertation – you mean the one about dyslexia, right?’

‘Yeah, mate. I’m in the final term of me training course, and me dissertation is due really soon.’

‘Is it any good? Your dissertation.’

‘I hope so.’ Rob sighs. ‘I briefly thought about writing the dissertation with the letters and words all jumbled up to get the full “dyslexia” effect, but me coach didn’t seem very keen.’

‘That’s probably for the better.’

‘Yeah.’

Mark’s eyes flick at Rob’s PowerPoint. He can only see the first slide, but there are five other slides by the looks of it. ‘I hope your new facts aren’t about Gary’s exes, by the way.’
‘Nope. They’re good, though.’

‘Anything you could share already?’

‘Eh. Maybe. Probably not. I still need to finish me Venn diagram about your shared interests. Speaking of, do you read *Keyboards Weekly*, Mark?’

Mark groans at the mere mention of Gary’s favourite magazine. ‘Mr Barlow keeps trying to make me read that. I don’t know how I can tell him that I’m not interested in reading a ten-page feature about how to clean a keyboard. I feel awful.’

‘So *Keyboards Weekly* isn’t something that’ll overlap in the diagram, then.’

‘No.’

Rob types it into a Word file. So far, Gary and Mark’s shared likes only include “songwriting”, “music”, “dogs”, “tea” and “cassettes”.

‘It’s still a work in progress,’ Rob explains when he sees Mark looking.

‘You can add Mr Harrison to the list of shared dislikes. Or rather – make that “Unreasonable head teachers”. I don’t want to name him personally. I don’t think he’s that bad, actually,’ Mark adds, not wanting to speak ill of his colleagues no matter how bad they are. ‘But I wish he didn’t make me feel so terrible.’

‘The guy’s like fucking Voldemort,’ Rob says. Then another memory of Mr Harrison’s terribleness hits him, and he goes off on a bit of a rant. ‘You know what was even worse about me missing the graduation ceremony? It was the way Harrison responded. Cos I was already feeling fucking guilty that I couldn’t make it, but then Harrison came up to me afterwards and he was like, “You can’t miss the graduation ceremony! It’ll make the students and parents think we don’t care about them! It’ll stop new students from enrolling and then we’ll no longer get funds from the government and we’ll have to shut down the school and everyone will end up on the streets!”’

‘I was like, *jeez*. Of course I fucking *care* about the students, I just don’t feel comfortable being in a crowded room. With one hundred people. *Ugh.*’

Mark gives Rob’s arm a squeeze. While he has personally always loved being around people, he can see why other people might find it scary.

‘You shouldn’t have to go to meetings if they make you feel uncomfortable,’ Mark says, and he flashes one of those comforting smiles that’ll make you feel better no matter what. ‘I’ll tell Mr Harrison that you were very busy helping Nick with his project.’

‘Thank you, Mark.’ Rob doesn’t know how to say how much this means to him, but he doesn’t have to. Mark can see it in his eyes. ‘When did you say the meeting was startin’? You should probably leave now if you don’t want Harrison to get mad at you again.’

Mark looks at the clock. ‘*Oops.*’

Mark leaps out of his chair and makes a dash for the door. He’s already halfway out of the lab when comes running after him and stops him in his track.

‘Before I forget, Mark – you know that picture Gary sent you? Of him on the beach?’

Mark gives a nervous nod. He glances at the clock on the wall. Five minutes to the meeting.
‘Please don’t think it’s something Gary does on a daily basis. Cos it’s not. The fact that he’d send you something like that – it means that he’s serious about you. Very serious, Mark. Like, ‘I’m two texts away from askin’ you out’ serious. But also . . .’

Rob rubs his nose. He looks over his shoulder at the hard-working Animation students and lowers his voice. ‘He’s got, like, an Instagram account worth of this stuff. I’m not saying that to discredit what Gary did cos I’m sure that it must have felt fucking amazing to receive that shirtless pic in your inbox, but he’s got an Instagram account worth of this stuff. You know what I mean? There’s a goldmine of pics waiting for you on the internet. You know, in case Gary ever has to go on a business trip and you get “bored” or something. We all do it. I’ve done it! But not with pics of Gary. That’d be weird.’

What Rob is suggesting is so ridiculous (and true) that Mark lets out a shriek of a laugh. He starts to leave before he can accidentally admit that Gary’s shirtless pic led to quite an embarrassing moment in his shower a couple of weeks ago. ‘Thank you, Mr Williams, but I have my standards.’

‘His Insta has got videos too if that’s something that gets you off?’

Mark stops in his tracks to stick up two fingers at Rob, but not without having the biggest ever grin on his face. When you have a friend like Rob, it’s not so bad fancying a colleague after all.

|LESSON TWENTY: STUDENT NUMBERS|

The meeting that Rob skipped ended up being the most boring staff meeting of all time. Mark can’t even remember what happened in it other than that Mr Donald fell asleep in the middle of a long discussion about student numbers and Mark had to probe him awake by sticking a pencil in his ear. Mr Harrison got very angry about that.

The next meeting takes place a week later. By now, Mark and Gary have gotten into the habit of texting each other daily, but they still haven’t done any of the real things grown-ups do, like kissing or touching or asking each other out on a date.

This changes today.

This week, the staff meeting is meant only for the Music department. This still involves twenty-nine members of staff, but apparently twenty-nine is a magic number, for Rob has finally decided to show up again. Either that or Mr Harrison has given him another lecture about the importance of staff meetings. Judging by the half-hearted smile on his face when Mark gives him a supportive thumbs-up, it’s probably the latter.

Mr Stevens enters the classroom a bit later than planned, and finally the Music faculty is complete. They’ve gathered in a large theory classroom, with the tables having been arranged in a sort of U-shape in the middle of the room. In the middle of the U is Mr Harrison, looking extra important in his comfortable desk chair. Everyone else has been forced to sit on the chairs meant for the students: a black multipurpose stack chair with a frame made of chrome.

The meeting hasn’t even started yet, and Mark is already beginning to feel serious pain in his lower back. He tries to sit more comfortably by straightening his back, but doing so only makes the ache spread to his shoulders. The student chairs are terribly uncomfortable.

Apparently, Mark’s discomfort shows. Mr Harrison is just about to close the door and begin the meeting when Mark’s phone buzzes noisily on his desk. He checks it before the head teacher can tell him off for it.
—**Gary:** You know what I always love about these meetings? The collective groan when everyone gets up from their chairs when the meeting is over. It’s like whoever designed these chairs *wants* our students to get a hernia...

Mark grins at his phone, then looks up to catch Gary’s eye. He’s sat next to Ms Devlin and Mr Orange at the other side of the “U”, dressed in one of his more comfortable black T-shirts. Ever since he texted Mark his shirtless pic, Gary’s gone from wearing tight black suits to wearing more revealing T-shirts that show off his arms. Mark can’t say he minds very much, for he likes Gary even better now that he knows what’s underneath.

—**Mark:** I have no idea how our students manage to sit on these chairs all day. I’ve only been here for ten minutes and my back’s already in pain.....

—**Gary:** I know. And people still wonder why our students never bother to show up!

Mark wants to add something along the lines of *I feel so bad for them*, but Mr Harrison has suddenly turned off the lights in the classroom. Behind him, a Smartboard displays what looks like a very lengthy PowerPoint presentation about every head teacher’s favourite subject: student numbers and what to do about the fact that fewer young people are choosing a career in music than ever before. Keen to make a good impression, Mark puts away his phone and puts on his best “I’m listening, you should try it” face.

It’s a fucking boring meeting, sadly. The PowerPoint presentation contains fifty-one slides. Each slide contains over four paragraphs of words in a font completely unsuitable for people with dyslexia and bad eyesight, and after just five minutes Rob decides to work on his dissertation on his laptop.

To make matters worse, Mr Harrison mentions so many numbers that everything else he says becomes a meaningless mess of statistics. Apparently, the future of the music faculty is bleak. First-year student numbers for the Music department have gone down from 261 to 198, which could lead to teachers being forced to work elsewhere as there won’t be enough students to teach.

Mark knows he ought to find this news absolutely terrible, but it’s hard to feel worried about the future of the school when you’ve only worked there for less than two months.

His chin resting on his hand, Mark’s fast beginning to doze off. His eyes have already drooped closed when his phone buzzes in his pocket and he jerks awake five minutes later. Mr Harrison has now proceeded to illustrate the declining student numbers with a series of graphs.

Mark wipes the sleep from his eyes and checks his phone.

—**Gary:** Having a nice nap?

Mark blushes.

—**Mark:** Can you blame me? I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many numbers.

—**Gary:** It’s like this every year. The number of prospective students comes in and the big heads start panicking that we won’t have enough students to keep teachers employed. Then July comes around and we suddenly have a spike in the number of kids signing up. We usually end up with about 260 first-years each year.

—**Mark:** So we don’t have anything to worry about?

—**Gary:** Exactly. [Smiling face emoji.] How’s your back by the way? You looked like you could use
Mark chuckles just as Mr Harrison is about to answer a colleague’s question about how the music faculty is supposed to attract more students. The head teacher gives Mark a pointed look and crosses his arms. ‘Do you have any ideas you’d like to share with the group, Mr Owen? You don’t look particularly vexed by our predicament.’

Mark’s glad the lights in the classroom are still off, for he has turned as red as a tomato. Suddenly everyone is looking at him.

Frankly, Mark has no idea about numbers or how to attract new students. His previous school never had to deal with that, so he has to look around the classroom to stall for time and find inspiration somewhere, anywhere. As ever, his eyes land on Gary. He thinks about Gary’s concerts and the summer prom he’s been organising.

‘Maybe we could . . . organise a free concert? With . . . school . . . alumni?’

Mr Harrison’s face shows no emotion. ‘Explain, Mr Owen.’

Mark bullshits his answer. He draws out every word, hoping desperately that he’ll suddenly be struck by inspiration. ‘Well, you know. A concert. A free concert where . . . previous students will perform and . . . sort of show everyone how much they’ve learned.’ He’s getting in the groove now. He keeps talking. ‘That way, prospective students will get a good idea of what they’ll be doing if they do decide to study here. Maybe it could take place during one of the open days.’

Judging by Mr Harrison’s sour expression and the agreeing murmurs in the room, Mark’s idea is not so bad after all. He begrudgingly writes down the idea with the black pen from the pocket of his shirt and moves on to another question, about how to keep students here once they have enrolled.

Mark breathes a sigh of relief. At the same time, he receives another text.

—Gary: [Clapping emoji]

—Mark: Shut up x

—Gary: You were thinking about *me* giving you that massage just now, weren’t you?

Mark bites his lip to stop himself from laughing out loud again. He doesn’t understand how someone who likes Star Wars and synthesisers can be this flirty. One moment he’ll be talking about a geeky music conference dedicated entirely to ABBA, the next he’ll pushing you up against a wall to kiss you. Probably. Mark hasn’t had time to think about it. Much.

Truth be told, Mark hasn’t stopped thinking about kissing Gary since he took the bus home a couple of days ago. Every single text Gary sent him that night was tailored to perfection: Gary promising he’d send Mark something distracting and following it up with that gorgeous shirtless pic; and then that delicious, naughty “Let’s just say I didn’t send this pic just so you could stare at it.” Mark’s been looking at that shirtless picture every day since, wondering how Gary might react if he sent him a similar pic of himself.

Mark won’t ever send Gary a nude, of course, not even if someone bought him a brand new flat and offered him a record deal and he’d never have to work another day in his life, but he can’t help but wonder. If he sent a pic of himself shirtless, would Gary touch himself too? Would Gary send him a second picture in which he wears even less?

Perhaps if they were finally alone together, he’d no longer have to stare at pics on his phone to see
what Gary looks like naked.

—Mark: Are you offering me a massage, Mr Barlow?

—Gary: Maybe. I *have* been told I am quite good at them.

—Mark: In that case I’ve got a few other sore places I wouldn’t mind you getting your hands on…..

Mark can see Gary’s phone light up at the other side of the room. Gary reads the text and smiles so widely that the colleague next to him gives him a judgmental look. Meanwhile, Mark can feel his stomach doing several backflips like his insides have turned into a circus performer.

Sadly, Gary takes his fair time to reply, for he’s genuinely interested in what Mr Harrison has to say next. He’s stopped discussing student numbers and has moved on to something a lot more interesting: school excursions.

‘I know next school year is still far away, but we do need to start thinking about next year’s induction week for the Composition and Songwriting students,’ Mr Harrison says in his trademark robot voice. ‘Mr Brooke, you’re in charge of organising the first-years’ school excursion. I take it this has been going well?’

‘Very well, yes,’ Ms Brooke says. Today, she’s wearing a Boyzone T-shirt. ‘We’re still torn between Berlin and Amsterdam, but we’ve written preliminary programs for both. We just need to figure out costs. When it comes to transportation, Amsterdam seems to be the cheaper option.’

An older teacher scoffs. ‘You want to take our Composition and Songwriting students to Amsterdam? Good luck dragging them away from coffee shops.’

Ms Brooke rolls her eyes so hard that they almost fall out of her skull. ‘Amsterdam isn’t just coffee shops and mushrooms, Steve.’

‘Well, I won’t be going, that’s for sure.’

‘Fine. But if anyone would like to join our first-years on a trip to Europe – we’re still looking for volunteers. Howard’s already agreed to join us.’

‘Only because I’ll finally be able to get some bleedin’ rest,’ Howard scoffs. Yesterday, Mr Donald was so tired that he spent five minutes trying to open the door of his classroom with his debit card.

‘And we’re very thankful, Howard,’ Ms Brooke says, the sarcasm practically oozing off of her. ‘I can’t wait to see you roam the streets of Amsterdam without a Starbucks coffee cup glued to your hand.’

Apparently that closes the subject. Next on the agenda is the summer prom, which Mr Harrison kindly asks Mr Barlow to talk about. Gary clearly read the agenda before the meeting, because he still hasn’t texted Mark back.

‘It’s going really well so far,’ Gary tells his colleagues. ‘We’re looking at venues now. There’s a venue that’s willing to give us a discount if we host our graduation ceremony there too.’

Mark’s eyes unconsciously flick up at Rob. He can’t see the screen of Rob’s laptop from here, but he probably isn’t making notes of the meeting.

‘And the line-up? You said you were trying to book . . .’ Mr Harrison holds up a piece of paper. ‘Dwah Lee-PAH?’
'Dua Lipa, yes. We're working on it.'

'And if this band does not show up?'

'She will.'

Mr Harrison doesn’t seem so sure, but he doesn’t know enough about Dua Lipa to ask more questions. He moves on to the next item on the agenda: the implementation of a brand new student registration system. This involves yet another PowerPoint, and after only two slides Mark can feel his eyes getting heavier.

Just on time, Gary sends his long-awaited reply.

—**Gary:** I could have a look at one of those sore places of yours now if you wanna?

Mark grins, but not without giving Gary a doubtful look.

—**Mark:** Now? [Here, Mark adds two puzzled-looking emojis.]

—**Gary:** Yes, now.

—**Mark:** What about Mr Harrison?

—**Gary:** We’ll sneak out.

Mark experiences a mix of fear and excitement. He feels like he’s just regressed into his teenage self and he’s about to skip a day of school.

—**Mark:** Does that mean we’ll finally be having that private lesson I was talking about a couple of weeks ago, Mr Barlow?

—**Gary:** You still don’t know what to do with that shirtless pic I sent you then?

—**Mark:** I don’t, sorry. [Emoji of an angelic-looking face] Will you be teaching me today Mr Barlow?

—**Gary:** Only if you’ve been a good boy x

Mark snorts a bit too loudly at that, and Mr Harrison ends up having to pause his very important and serious presentation to give him another pointed look. Mark postpones his reply until Mr Harrison has turned his back to him.

—**Mark:** I really need to work on my “texting in public” skills. [Here, Mark inserts an emoji of a distressed-looking turd]

—**Gary:** You do yea xx

Mark smiles at Gary from across the room.

—**Mark:** Anyway. Private lesson. Sneaking off. Will I need to bring any textbooks?

—**Gary:** I imagine we’ll mostly be using our hands, so no.

*Goodness,* Mark thinks. That escalated quickly.
—Mark: HOW will we leave, though? I can’t see Mr Harrison allowing us to just walk off.....

—Gary: Allow me to show you.

Right in the middle of Mr Harrison’s demonstration of brand new student registration software, Gary gets up and leaves the classroom. Just like that. Mark receives a text mere seconds later.

—Gary: Meet me at the concert hall in five.

Mark reads the text over and over. Meet me at the concert hall? What are they going to do? Listen to music? Talk? Kiss? Organise a concert?

Have sex?

Maybe they’re going to have sex. Maybe not. Gary doesn’t really strike Mark as a “sex on the first date” sort of guy (Mr Barlow may be flirtatious, but he’s not a slag), and Mark can’t imagine a concert hall being a very suitable place to have sex in.

Then again, this isn’t a date, technically. That means the regular rules of dates don’t apply and that it probably doesn’t matter where they’re going shag as long as it’s not Mark’s dreadful single bed that will probably collapse the moment Mark tries to get on top.

Problem is – where is the concert hall?

[LESSON TWENTY-ONE: SKIVING OFF]

Mark’s departure from classroom 105-MC is less sleek than Gary’s. He doesn’t dare leaving in the middle of Mr Harrison’s presentation, so he keeps his hand in the air until the head teacher notices him and he has to stammer something about desperately needing the toilet and if he could please leave thank you very much so sorry to disturb you God bless you all.

When Mr Harrison finally grants Mark his leave, his legs have become so wobbly that he nearly walks into Ms Devlin’s table. Mortified, Mark utters a million more apologies and darts out of the door feeling like an absolute idiot. So much for subtlety.

Mark’s next challenge is finding the concert hall. The school is so large that he still doesn’t know his way around it. He can more or less find his classrooms, both staff rooms, the library, the local Starbucks and the computer lab, but he still manages to get lost every week. Sometimes he wonders if the reason why certain students never show up to his lessons is because they got swallowed up by the corridors along the way.

As ever, Mark arrives at his destination late. It’s taken him over ten minutes to get from the staff meeting to a large set of doors marked “CONCERT HALL”. He enters, and he gasps.

The concert hall is massive. It resembles a real music venue. Red velvet seats are lined up in rows on a floor that gradually slopes upwards. In front of that, there are two small standing areas separated by low metal barriers. Two more tiers of seats loom impressively above Mark’s head, providing the perfect view of the big stage behind him.

On the stage itself, there is every instrument any band might need: a keyboard, an acoustic guitar and a drum set. There’s also a microphone and a mixing desk. It reminds Mark vaguely of the O2 Apollo in Manchester, except this is probably even bigger.
The house lights are on, so Mark spots Gary easily. He’s sat in one of the seats on the floor, grinning at Mark like an idiot. Mark sinks into the red seat next to him and breathes a sigh of relief when he finds that the chair is a lot more comfortable than the ones he sat on during the meeting.

‘You seem to be making a habit of arriving late everywhere,’ Gary jibes.

‘I know.’ Mark grimaces. He feels a little nervous about being here, but he tries not to let it show. ‘I got lost. Again.’

‘Did Harrison not show you around on your first day?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘I think he might have been too busy making PowerPoint presentations . . .’

Gary laughs out loud. ‘I wonder what they’re talking about now. More things that’ll make our lives miserable, probably. Like a new grading system or something. You know, giving out a 1 instead of a 10 if a student has everything correct, that sort of thing. I think they do that in Germany.’

‘That sounds terrible.’

‘Christ, it does, doesn’t it?’ Gary shakes his head in disbelief. ‘I’ve had to sit through a lot of meetings, but that was absolutely terrible, that was. Worst thing I’ve had to do all week.’

Mark gives Gary a meaningful look. ‘Good thing we’re here, then. Alone. Together.’

‘I think this is probably the first time we’ve ever been alone together,’ Gary notes. ‘No students, no colleagues, no head teachers telling us what to do . . . We’re free to do whatever we want, we are.’

Mark takes that to mean “free to do whatever we want to each other”, and he can’t help but be drawn to Gary’s lips.

This suddenly feels like a Moment. The moment.

The thought of potentially being mere seconds away from kissing Gary makes Mark feel butterflies. He feels his own temperature rise when he thinks about what it’d be like to feel Gary’s stubble against his skin.

Mark can just tell that this moment is he’s been waiting for. Obviously, Gary does too. He’s smiling. Grinning.

Gary’s thinking it too. We’re about to kiss.

Mark wants to lean in right now. No-one would know. It’d be their little secret, shared with no-one. Not even Rob.

Unfortunately, Gary has already levered himself out of his chair and made his way to the big stage before Mark can so much tilt his chin and close his eyes. Bloody tease.

‘I just have to show you this keyboard,’ Gary says with the same enthusiasm he uses for Star Wars and Keyboards Monthly. He was smiling at Mark because of a keyboard. Obviously. ‘We had it imported from Japan and it’s just brilliant, Mark. Absolutely brilliant.’

Mark has to fight the urge to roll his eyes, but he follows Gary to the stage anyway.

It’s obvious that Gary has stood on a stage of this size before, and it leads Mark to wonder what kind of music he writes. He’s always assumed that Gary writes the sort of songs that you have to listen to sitting down, but he could be completely wrong. Maybe Gary’s discography is full of up-tempo bops
that involve a lot of dancing.

Gary could be into heavy metal for all he knows, for Mark still hasn’t bothered to check out his crush’s music. He can more or less justify staring at the pictures Gary sends him via text, but actually checking out Gary’s life’s work? On YouTube? Where there may be fan videos of Gary singing sex songs?

No thanks.

As Mark struggles to imagine what kind of music his crush makes, Gary takes a seat on the little black bench in front of the Japanese keyboard. The bench is big enough to provide room for two adults, but Mark decides to stay on his feet in case he feels the stupid urge to kiss Gary again.

Mark curiously watches as Gary puts his hands on the keys in front of him, fingers splayed. He starts playing a soft tune that Mark doesn’t recognise. ‘Rob’s told me you’ve never heard one of me songs before, so I thought I’d bring you here and play you one myself.’ He gives Mark an uncertain look over his shoulder. ‘Would that be okay with you?’

It’s as though Gary has read Mark’s mind. Having Gary play him one of his songs would be a lot less creepy than looking them up on the Internet, and it’d be helluva lot more entertaining than listening to Mr Harrison worrying about declining student numbers.

‘I’d really like that, Mr Barlow. Thank you.’

‘Do be warned, though, I’m an average pianist at best.’

Mark laughs, then closes his mouth when he can tell that Gary is being serious. ‘You really think of yourself that way?’

‘I do, yeah. I’m an average pianist, but I’m pretty good at getting other people to play the piano. You might not even like the song I’m about to play you!’

Mark didn’t know that someone like Gary could question his own abilities. Apparently being a handsome, geeky, relatively successful singer-songwriter doesn’t make you immune to self-doubt. He actually likes Gary even more that way. He loves that Gary is insecure, like him.

‘I hope this isn’t how you talk to your audiences,’ Mark smiles.

‘Oh, it is. They know what they’re in for when they buy tickets to see me, my fans; self-deprecation and a long setlist of average pop songs.’

‘You should put that on a poster.’

Gary looks as though he’s seriously considering it. ‘That’s not bad, actually. Mind you, it might put some casual audiences off.’

‘Not me!’ Mark says this very enthusiastically, but he doesn’t actually know what Gary’s about to play him. ‘I mean, I don’t think it will. What genre did you say your music was?’

‘Pop.’

‘Do you mean pop like Dua Lipa or pop like CHVRCHES’s second album?’

Gary scratches the back of his head. He’s never thought about his music like that. ‘More like Coldplay if they ever released a pure-pop album on Mother’s Day. I make the sort of music they play
during the finale of *Celebrity Masterchef*, basically.’

Mark’s eyes go wide. ‘They play your music on TV?’

Gary has gone very pink at the ears for some reason. ‘Forget I said that. No, seriously, forget I said that. Wait till I run out of original songs and I start churning out TV tunes! You’ll regret that you ever agreed to come with me.’

‘Let’s hope for both our sakes that you sweep me off me feet before you get the chance, then,’ Mark says, hoping that Gary remembers that he mainly came here for a massage. ‘Just play me whatever you feel comfortable playing.’

The description of Gary’s own music has not turned Mark off at all, and he finds the courage to sit next to Gary after all. The bench feels satisfyingly solid and real. Their legs accidentally touch in the process, and Mark has to snap his legs closed when his knee brushes Gary’s.

Gary flashes Mark one of those infuriating geeky smiles. ‘Feeling comfortable, Mark?’

Mark nods hard. He experiences a harsh wave of anxiety when he notices that he can literally feel the heat radiating off Gary’s black jeans, and he suddenly wishes they were back on the red velvet seats on the floor. There, he felt like he was only an intake of breath away from tilting his head and kissing Gary on the mouth.

But now? Sat at a piano? With Gary’s fingers easing into a pop tune on the piano? In a deserted concert hall with Gary’s leg literally an inch away from touching his? *When he’s actually supposed to be in a meeting and Mr Harrison might fire him if he catches them in the act?*

It’s easily the most nervous he’s ever felt. His heart starts running at a million miles an hour. He can’t focus on the ballad Gary is playing. He feels himself becoming increasingly fidgety.

Scattered thoughts about Gary are being slowly replaced by worries about work. He has a sudden, petrifying fear of being fired. He can’t stop thinking about how close he came to kissing Gary earlier and how he might never come that close again because his body has turned into solid stone.

At the same time, he wishes he were back in the meeting. He’s scared of being reprimanded by Mr Harrison for not doing his job. For not participating, like Rob.

It’s a ridiculous mix of feelings. Mark has previously had to battle challenging students, insensitive colleagues, incompetent head teachers and one disastrous, potentially career-threatening exam, and yet nothing could have prepared him for the utter *fear* he’s feeling right now.

Apparently, it shows.

‘You’ve gone kinda quiet, mate. You don’t like the song?’

Mark hasn’t heard a single note, so he has no idea that Gary just played him his debut single that went to number one seven years ago. Any self-respecting songwriter would have recognised the song from the first note, but not Mark. Mark is so oblivious to how ridiculously successful Gary Barlow is that it’s almost endearing.

‘I – I haven’t really been listening. Sorry.’

Gary stops playing. He doesn’t look hurt – just curious. ‘Why?’

Mark blushes. He fidgets with his hands. ‘I’m just a little worried, I guess. I can’t stop thinking about
what will happen if someone finds us here, especially after all the mistakes I've already made. You know, with my Art History lessons and the exam that I sort of messed up . . . And, well, I suppose I find it really hard to concentrate when you're this close to me and you're playing the piano like we're not about to be caught sneaking off. I'm sorry. I do want to know what your music sounds like.’

‘Imagine what my fans on the first row feel like,’ Gary says in jest.

‘I can’t imagine they’ll be as nervous as me!’

Gary beams like a child at Christmas. ‘So I make you nervous.’

Mark can’t help but return Gary’s smile. There’s something about that smile that is both unnerving and reassuringly familiar. It reminds him of one of their first ever meetings, when Mark asked Gary if he could please visit one of his lessons and Mark accidentally let it slip that he was nervous about Gary helping him out. He brushed it off by saying that he was merely nervous about having someone assessing his lesson, but the nervousness never really went away.

Most of the time, Mark feels utterly at ease being next to Gary. But sometimes, on days like this, when they’re alone together and there are no students around, he feels like being near him will make his heart explode.

‘You’re right. I do make me nervous, yes. Very nervous. Not always, but – but often. Very often. You’ve made me feel nervous since the day we first met.’

Then Mark thinks about something he told Rob a couple of weeks ago; about how meeting Gary for the first time didn’t really feel like a first meeting at all – like they’d already met way before that, except Mark can’t for the life of him remember when or where. ‘When we first met, did you also feel like it wasn’t our first meeting at all?’

Gary nods. ‘I did, yeah. I did think it was strange, that.’

‘Why do you think that was? It’s not as if we’d met before I got me job here – I would have remembered.’

Gary shrugs. ‘Maybe it’s just cos we click so well together. Being with you feels like I’ve known you forever.’

Mark blushes. ‘I think if that was the case I wouldn’t feel so nervous being with you. You know, especially with . . . you know. With what I thought we’d be doing in here. Together.’

‘What did you think we’d be doing?’

Gary obviously knows what Mark came here for, but he’s a bit of a tease and likes to pretend he doesn’t know anything. He knows that Mark’s here because he wants to talk about the texts they’ve been sending each other. He knows that Mark wants to kiss and maybe even do more, if they both want it. Mark wants to have the sort of kiss that he fantasised about when he had a wank in the shower. He wants Gary’s hands to replace his own. He wants to see Gary’s naked body for real.

‘I don’t think I can say that out loud, Mr Barlow.’

‘I don’t see why not. We are alone, after all.’

Mark bites his lip. He doesn’t know how to tell Gary that he would much rather have a long make-out session than listen to Gary playing his songs on the piano.
‘Out with it, Mr Owen. What did you have in mind? I promise I won’t tell anyone.’

Mark nervously tries to push the hair from his forehead, but it only ends up flopping back over his eyes. If he wants this moment to lead into something a bit more intimate than just staring at each other and worrying about Mr Harrison walking in on them, he has to tell Gary before they have to get back to the meeting. ‘Well. You know. I was wondering if maybe we could – you know . . .’

‘If we could what, Mark?’ Gary’s fishing for it now. He’s teasing Mark. Tell me what you want. Say it out loud.

‘You know.’ Mark turns bright red. Since when has he become so infatuated and nervous? He’s an adult. He’s had relationships before. He’s had sex before. Why is telling Gary that he wants to have a proper snog so bloody difficult? ‘I was just wondering if – what with us being here and our texts being really amazing and your feeling comfortable enough to send me certain pictures of yourself and us potentially never being able to be alone together again because the end of the school year is almost here and we’re constantly busy, I was wondering if we could . . well, kiss?’

It’s such a ridiculous word now that Mark has said it out loud. Kiss. Kissing. Kissed. If he says it again, it might not even sound real anymore. That happens sometimes – when you say a word so many times that it loses its value and you’re sat wondering whether you’ve just made up a completely new word.

By now, Mark has fantasised about kissing Gary so often that he doesn’t even know if it’ll ever happen at all. Maybe he wasted a million 11:11 wishes on something that has no chance of ever happening, like his debut album or his first-ever number one single that will inevitably be about the way Gary Barlow kisses him next.

It happens before Mark can process it. One moment, he’s blabbing, as Mark Owen does, about how they don’t have to kiss if Gary doesn’t want to and that they could also just sit here and talk and stare at each other; the next, Gary places his hands on both sides of Mark’s face and steals the words right from his mouth.

Just like that.

Mark’s eyes flutter closed the moment Gary’s lips touch his own. He lets out a deep, dreamy sigh when he feels Gary’s stubble against his skin. He parts his lips enough to allow Gary to kiss him better. His hands leave his own knees and blindly search Gary’s right thigh for a quick, chaste squeeze. His heart is hammering so fast that he’s pretty sure people all over the school can hear it.

It’s a really nice kiss. It doesn’t feel forced. Every finger and body part moves exactly where and when it needs to, like a beautiful performance of one of Gary’s famous love songs on a hot summer night.

In the back of his mind, Gary’s already thinking about the song he’s going to write about the moan that leaves Mark’s lips when he kisses his ear.

The moan is so loud even for Mark’s standards that it completely throws the inexperienced teacher off balance. He breaks off the kiss and starts uttering a million apologies about being too loud and what if someone heard them and walked in on them and it got them both fired? He’s turned bright red, like a tomato.

Gary can’t help but laugh a little. He loves that their kiss has rendered Mark a chattering, nervous mess. ‘You do realise I enjoyed your reaction, don’t you, Mark? I love a loud guy . . .’
‘I know. I know.’ Mark makes an embarrassed face as though he would quite like to punch himself for breaking off the kiss so suddenly – especially when Gary was in the middle of kissing his ear! ‘Me too. I enjoyed that kiss so much. Very, very much. But I don’t want someone to find out that we’re – you know.’ He waves a vague hand at himself and at Gary, indicating togetherness.

‘You don’t want people to find out that we’re an item.’

‘Yes. Well, not yet, anyway.’

‘Why not?’

‘I just don’t feel comfortable people knowing that sort of thing about me. Cos if our colleagues find out about it, then our students will find out too. That’s how schools work, isn’t it? People gossip about everything. And if our students find out, then even more people will know we’ve snogged. Maybe even your fans! I don’t know what your fans are like, but I don’t think they’d enjoy it if they found out you were snogging one of your colleagues . . .’

Mark touches his lips where Gary kissed him, and his fear of getting caught briefly disappears, like a star flickering out. If he concentrates, he can still feel his lips tingling. The ghost of Gary’s hands cupping his chin still lingers on his skin, reminding him of how perfect the kiss was.

‘It was a good snog, though,’ Mark adds, as if it needed saying.

‘Good enough to try again?’

Mark lets out a giddy, nervous laugh that makes Gary laugh too. He doesn’t know how long they’ve been away from the meeting, but he’s certain they must have missed more than twenty minutes. Mr Harrison has probably sent someone to look for them by now.

‘It’s almost like you want to get caught, Mr Barlow. I’d hate to be one of your fans.’

Gary raises his eyebrows. ‘So you’re still not calling me Gary. That’s interesting, that.’

‘I prefer Mr Barlow,’ Mark blushes. ‘I like it. We are still colleagues, after all.’

‘Colleagues who’ve just kissed, though! Also – most of me fans are a bit older. They’re not going to chase me down the streets with pitchforks if they find out I’ve been snogging a colleague.’

‘So you do want to get caught.’

‘Maybe I do!’

‘You’re terrible.’ Mark’s shaking his head, but he’s smiling. ‘I hope our next kiss takes place somewhere a lot nicer where no one will be able to walk in on us.’

‘You say that like you wanna go back to the meeting already. Do you? You did say you wanted to give me a massage earlier . . .’

‘I don’t. Wanna leave, I mean. I don’t wanna leave. It’s just – I don’t wanna get caught. You know?’ Mark blushes. ‘I think it’d a lot better if we were snogged somewhere else next time. Cos I do want there to be a next time, obviously. I want there to be a next time very much.’

Although the idea of kissing Mark in public turns Gary on tremendously, he can see Mark’s point. However, there aren’t an awful lot of places where teachers can go to have a quick snog. The concert hall is by far the best place for it, and all the other potential places he knows are just
Gary gets an idea. He demonstratively gets up from the keyboard and walks up to the side of the stage. He pulls away a long red curtain and exposes a brick wall with a large light switch on it that you have to pull down. ‘I know you just said you’d rather go somewhere else, Mark, but it’s a lot more difficult to get caught snogging when the house lights are off . . .’

Gary gets a five-second glance of Mark’s mouth spreading into a toothy grin before he cloaks the concert hall in darkness.

[LESSON TWENTY-TWO: MR DONALD TAKES A TUMBLE]

The staff meeting has just entered its third hour. After the exciting discussions about student numbers, school excursions, summer proms and new student registration programs, Mr Harrison has moved on to something slightly . . . less exciting: next year’s timetables. This involves a lot of moving back and forth of lessons in a complicated computer program, and all teachers need to be present at the meeting to double-check that they’ve been given the correct amount of groups and lessons.

By now, Mark and Gary have been away for over twenty minutes. If they don’t check their prospective timetables today, there’s a chance that Mark will have to teach even more courses that he’s not qualified for.

The boys’ absence has not gone over Mr Harrison’s head. He addresses the remaining teachers, who have all entered various states of hibernation. ‘Does anyone know where Misters Owen and Barlow have gone? We need everyone to have a look at their preliminary timetables for next year.’

‘Mark said he was going to the toilet, didn’t he?’ This comes from a very bored Mr Stevens, who has been at the VCMA since the school’s very first semester and therefore knows it’s no use having a look at next year’s timetables already.

‘He probably just got lost, knowing him,’ Rob adds in a bored voice. He has not been paying attention to the meeting at all; on his laptop screen, there’s the first page of his dissertation about dyslexia that he has to hand in for his teacher training.

‘And I suppose Mr Barlow got lost too, then?’ Mr Harrison looks unamused. ‘Mr Barlow has been here for seven years. He should know by now how important our meetings are. That includes all of them,’ he adds with a pointed look at Rob that could melt steel.

Rob pretends not to have noticed and continues to work on his dissertation. He feels a small shiver when Mr Harrison then tuts, but he brushes it away. Right now, he cares more about finishing his dissertation than getting Mr Harrison to like him. Once he’s a support teacher, he won’t have to deal with the guy anymore anyway. He’ll be so busy visiting lessons and talking to students one-on-one that he’ll only see Harrison in passing in the corridors.

When no-one responds to his comment about the importance of all staff meetings, Mr Harrison demonstratively closes his notebook and sits back in his chair with his arms folded. He smiles at the teachers in front of him. A wide, patronising smile. ‘If not everyone is here, we might as well postpone the meeting to tomorrow evening.’
The teachers exchange worried looks.

‘I’ll go and get ‘em.’ Howard, the ever-tired Dance instructor, levers himself out of his chair and stretches. He pushes his red baseball cap back on his head and gives the chair an angry look. ‘I was beginning to get a bloody hernia sat on those chairs, anyway.’

Howard doesn’t wait for Mr Harrison to thank him and leaves.

The school is too big to search completely, so Howard limits his search to the toilets, the staff rooms, the computer lab and the coffee machine in the C-wing., where he ends up getting himself a cup of coffee because he might as well.

However, he can’t find his colleagues anywhere. They’ve probably sneaked out of the building and gone home, and who can blame them?

If Howard had his way, he’d go home too. He’d kiss his wife, hug his kids, have a nap, order Chinese, watch telly all night with the missus next to him and fall asleep reading his eldest son a bedtime story. He knows it’s boring, pedestrian, whatever, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. He loves coming home to his family after a long day of teaching.

He doesn’t even mind having to change nappies in the middle of the night. He pretends he does, but he doesn’t. Because his kids – they mean everything to Howard, his kids. They’re so pure, innocent, wonderful and alive, so alive, and Howard hopes they’ll never turn into the tired robots Howard sees dragging themselves into school every day.

Sometimes he wonders if that’s what makes him such a good teacher. Not that he thinks of himself that way, but it’s what he’s been told. His students like him – even the ones who walk initially walk in having no interest in school whatsoever. In the course of just sixty minutes, Mr Donald gets his students to approach his lessons in the same way his kids look up at the world: bright-eyed, full of wonder, and so alive.

Howard is about to give up his search when he notices that the back door of the concert hall is ajar. The door is usually closed, and for some reason someone’s decided to turn the house lights off. Strange.

Curiosity beckons Howard inside. It’s pitch black inside the concert hall apart from the green EXIT signs above the doors, so he finds it difficult to get his bearings. He doesn’t even know why he’s here, really. Why would anyone willingly sit in a concert hall in the dark? Mark and Gary have probably headed back to the meeting already. It’s no use being here.

Howard makes a movement towards the door he came in. His eyes still haven’t gotten used to the dark, so he doesn’t notice the blue bucket in front of him. He accidentally steps into it, loses his footing and sends the contents of the bucket clattering down the sloping floor of the standing area while the world goes topsy-turvy.

SLAM!

The next thing he knows, Howard’s lying on the floor next to a mop and a pair of cleaning gloves. His baseball cap is no longer covering his head.

Then Howard starts hearing voices, and for a second he thinks that he’s gone and died.

‘What was that?’ whispers one voice. Male.

The voice is immediately shushed by another voice, also male. Howard hasn’t died, but it turns out
he is not alone after all.

‘What do you think that was, though?’ says the first voice.

‘Probably nothing. I hope.’

Silence.

‘I don’t have a good feeling about this,’ comes the first voice. He sounds anxious. Scared. ‘What if it’s Mr Harrison? What if he tripped up in the dark? I’m going to turn the lights back on.’

‘Wait. Let me.’

There’s the sound of shuffling feet. Five seconds later, the house lights turn on and the full scope of Howard’s accident is illuminated. The entire standing section is littered with cleaning supplies, and in the middle of it is Mr Donald, resembling like an upturned beetle.

‘Jeez, Howard!’

It’s Gary, with Mark not close behind. They hurry to where Howard has tripped and help him get up from the floor. Mark even takes the effort of brushing the dirt off Howard’s shirt and hands him his baseball cap.

‘Mr Donald, are you okay?’

‘I think so.’ Howard places his hand where he landed on his arse and cricks his neck. He doesn’t seem to have injured anything, but he did create quite a mess: everywhere he looks, he sees pairs of yellow gloves and bottles of cleaning liquid. ‘We better clean that up.’

The three of them work together to pick up all the cleaning supplies from the floor and put them back in the blue bucket that Howard stepped into. It was probably left here by one of the concierges, a scatter-brained woman who’s counting down the days to her retirement.

It’s only when Howard tucks the blue bucket underneath a red velvet chair that he can have a good look at his colleagues. Gary’s face looks suspiciously red, and Mark’s hair is all sticky-uppy and messy, like he’s just rolled out of bed and not bothered to look for a comb. Strange.

Howard eyes his colleagues with suspicion as he puts his cap back on. ‘What were you two doing sat ‘ere in the dark?’

Mark and Gary share a worried look.

‘Writing,’ says Mark.

‘Discussing the summer prom,’ says Gary, at the very same time.

‘Right.’

‘I mean, we were writing about the summer prom, we were,’ Gary says. He has gone the same shade as the red velvet seats in the concert hall. Next to him, Mark’s nodding so much that he has begun to resemble one of those bubbleheads that you always see in the backs of cars.

It’s only then that Mark notices that the first two buttons of his shirt are undone. He awkwardly starts buttoning his shirt back up, but it’s already too late. Howard has already put the pieces of the puzzle into place and figured them out.
Mark and Gary have been kissing.

Howard can see Mark thinking it. *Does Howard know? Has he figured it out?*

Yes. Yes, he has. But Howard isn’t going to mention it. Not with these two. Not at a school of all places.

‘Well, work on the summer prom with the lights on next time,’ Howard says. He can see Mark breathing a sigh of relief. ‘I know this prom is important, Gaz, but I nearly broke me bloody neck just now! My wife would kill me if I died and left her widowed with two kids. It takes two adults just to get a child to eat a single piece of broccoli.’

‘I know. I’m sorry, Howard,’ Gary says, looking just as relieved as Mark. ‘We just thought we’d feel more inspired with the lights off.’

‘Much more inspired,’ Mark reiterates. He gives Gary the sort of look that makes Howard want to get out of here before he can accidentally witness the two of them kissing.

(Not to mention the fact that it’s rather painful to watch two grown adults being such crap liars. They could do with a lesson or two from the colleagues from the Musicals & Theatre course.)

‘I’m glad that you’ve been working on the summer prom, but I don’t think Harrison’s very happy. He says he wants you back in the meeting so you can have at next year’s timetables.’

Mark looks at Gary, then at Howard. ‘Mr Harrison wants to look at the new timetables already? But it’s not even the end of the school year yet.’

‘I know. I don’t think he realises how fucking busy we are. He seemed pretty peeved about you two sneaking off, though, so I’d prepare for a long lecture if I was you.’

Mark blanches. He lets out a deep, shaky sigh, and Gary gives him the sort of smile that is usually reserved for lovers, not colleagues.

(They really *are* making this quite obvious, Howard thinks.)

‘Harrison probably won’t mind that we were gone if we tell him we were working on the summer prom,’ he tells Mark. Then he turns to Howard. ‘Which we were, obviously. We were working on the summer prom. We were nearly finished preparing a – a thing, actually.’

‘A thing,’ Mark reiterates, still nodding.

Howard waits for them to tell him what kind of “thing” they were working on, but his colleagues don’t bother to elaborate, or maybe they just aren’t able to. The lads continue to look at each other like Howard isn’t even in the room. Even if the school started falling apart all around them, they would still only have eyes for each other.

Howard just hopes they’ll be careful, these two. Rumours spread quickly at a school, and if someone else had walked in on them “working on the summer prom” in a dark concert hall they’d definitely be out of a job – or worse.

It’s no surprise, then, that when the three teachers return to the staff meeting to look at their preliminary timetables, Howard lies his arse off to Mr Harrison.

‘Where did you find Mistres Barlow and Owen?’ Mr Harrison asks before Howard can even sit down.
'In the concert hall,’ Howard tells him.

‘What were they doing?’

‘Working on the summer prom together.’

‘What was Mr Owen’s role in this?’ Mr Harrison presses.

‘He was making notes,’ Howard lies, and Mr Harrison shrugs as if to say that’s fair enough. They spend the rest of the meeting discussing next year’s timetables.

Of course Howard knows that lying to your colleagues is often a sign of a dysfunctional team, but he doesn’t think he’s ever seen Gary look at someone the way he looked at Mark earlier. If that means he has to lie to his head teacher in order to keep their relationship a secret, then so be it.

[LESSON TWENTY-THREE: RAIN CHECK]

Once the meeting has finished and the teachers have all had a look at their preliminary timetables, Mark and Gary meet up in the staff room to discuss what happened in the concert hall. Only the kind Mr Hepburn is there, so they can talk freely. Everyone else has already gone home, including Howard. Thanks to him, the boys didn’t get in trouble for missing most of the meeting.

‘About what we did today . . .’ Sat at one of the round tables in the middle of the room, Gary looks over his shoulder to see Mr Hepburn engrossed in a magazine about the world’s best drummers. He probably isn’t interested in what the two of them are talking about, but Gary lowers his voice anyway. ‘I really, really enjoyed that.’

‘Me too.’ Mark flashes Gary a wide, toothy smile, and they both giggle like infatuated schoolchildren.

‘So you have no regrets about sneaking out and potentially losing our jobs?’

‘No regrets.’ Mark says this very certainly, but there is one thing he does regret: not paying attention to Gary playing him his song. Gary went through the trouble of playing him a song he’d never heard before, and Mark completely ruined it by becoming so nervous that his soul nearly went to a different planet.

He tells Gary as much. ‘I should say, though, I sort of feel bad that I wasn’t paying attention when you were playing me your song earlier. Cos I do care about your music, you know – it’s just that I felt really nervous when we were in the concert hall together. Really, really nervous. You decided to play me something because you know I haven’t listened to your music yet, and I ruined it by completely zoning out. I’m sorry about that. I’m also sorry if it seems like I’m not interested in your music in general. I am – it’s just that I feel really weird about checking you out online.’

‘No, I get it. Rob told me as much.’

‘He did?’

‘Yeah. I get it. If it were me, I probably wouldn’t wanna look me up either.’

Mark lets out the breath he didn’t know he was holding. ‘Oh, good. Good. I’m really – I’m really made up about that, actually. I was a bit worried that you thought I wasn’t interested in you as an
‘You’ll feel like a stalker if you look me up, right? Well, it’s probably for the better,’ Gary shrugs indifferently. ‘My debut video is fucking terrible. I don’t think you’d ever wanna kiss me again if you checked that one out. I still have no how a serious record label ever green-lit that mess.’

‘What was the song about, though?’ Mark’s eyes flick at Mr Hepburn. He whispers his next words. ‘You know, the one you played me before we . . . kissed?’

Gary smiles. His fingers drum rhythmically on the surface of the table as though he’s already thinking about the song he’s going to write about Mark’s mouth. ‘It’s about love. Every kind of love. Your first love, your true love, the ones that don’t go so well and every kind of relationship in between. It’s a really saccharine love song, basically.’

‘Did you ever release it?’

‘It was my debut single, actually. Like I said – decent song, crap video.’

‘How did it do?’

‘You’ll have to look that up online, I’m afraid.’

Mark doesn’t know what that means. ‘So it did . . . badly?’

Gary shrugs as if to say, What do I know? His eyes are twinkling, but he isn’t smiling, and Mark’s too polite to push him further.

Mark again thinks about how great their first kiss was: the texts leading up to it, the promises of a massage, finding Gary in the concert hall and then the kiss itself, as good as though it had been taken from an album filled with love songs.

They did forget one thing, though: the massage. Mr Donald walked into the concert hall before Gary could put his hands on him.

‘Speaking of love songs, you never quite managed to give me that massage, did you, Mr Barlow? All we did was kiss . . .’

Gary hums. ‘That’s right, that. It’s a shame that Howard walked in on us before I could get me hands on you, isn’t it? You’d almost think we should meet up again and finish what we started . . .’

It’s so obvious what Gary is talking about: sex. It’s what all their flirtatious texts, the kissing and Gary’s shirtless pic have been leading up to. Just snogging in a concert hall was never going to be enough.

There’s just one problem. Gary has about a million different jobs, and Mark has almost no private life. How are they ever going to find time to get to know each other, let alone make love?

‘I hate to point this out, Mr Barlow, but I don’t think we have time to go on a date . . . I won’t, anyway. Remember when we tried finding a date for your lesson visit? It only took us ten minutes . . .’

‘I didn’t mean a date, necessarily. I know we don’t have time to go and have dinner somewhere,’ Gary says. ‘We could also meet up at yours for an hour or two too. You know, something casual and low-key before you have to get back to writing a million lesson plans. You live just half an hour from here, right?’
Mark goes pale. He thinks of his loud neighbours, his single bed, the mould on his kitchen walls. He
doesn’t want his first time with Gary to be there! His bed is so small that he doesn’t even have
enough room to roll over.

‘I’m renovating.’ The lie leaves Mark’s mouth before he can take it back. ‘My flat – I’m busy
painting the walls. It’s going to take a very long time. Maybe we could meet up at yours? It’s a lot
closer to the school, so we could go there straight after work and maybe hang out together?’

Gary goes slightly pale too. ‘I – I don’t think that’s going to be possible, that. You see, Mark, I’m
renovating too.’

‘Oh?’

‘Brand new floor.’ Gary starts fidgeting in his chair. ‘I haven’t been able to sleep in me bedroom for
days. It’s not going to be finished until this summer.’

‘Oh. So then when do we . . .’

‘I don’t know.’ Gary furrows his brow. ‘Are you sure you don’t have any time to meet up? Let me
check me phone to see if I’ve got a day off somewhere.’

Gary gets out his phone and swipes through his online diary. It’s almost completely filled up with
tour rehearsals, exam prep, piano assessments, recording sessions and yoga lessons, but he has about
two hours left on Saturday – enough time to give Mark that massage he was promised. ‘I’m free this
weekend, by the looks of it. Maybe we could have lunch?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘I’m seeing my mates over the weekend. It’s the first time I’ve seen them for
weeks . . . How about next Thursday, after school? We don’t have a staff meeting that day.’

‘Can’t, I’m afraid. I have a meeting at the record label straight after work.’

‘And the weekend after?’

‘Tour rehearsals.’

‘All weekend?’

‘A lot of effort is being put in my tour, Mark! I’m gonna be away for several weeks, I’ll have you
know . . .’ Here, Gary neglects to tell Mark that his tour will actually take up the entirety of the
summer holidays and that he probably won’t be able to see Mark at all. ‘You don’t happen to be free
tonight, do you? Please tell me you’re not gonna write more lesson plans.’

Mark hides his face in shame. ‘Sorry.’

‘You work too hard.’

‘Says the guy with three jobs!’ Mark says this a bit too loudly, and Mr Hepburn briefly looks up
from his magazine before continuing to read his article.

Gary just shrugs as though his bazillion jobs have never bothered him. ‘At least I don’t spend all
weekend writing lesson plans I’m never going to use. I keep telling you you don’t have to do all of
that, Mark.’

Mark looks away guiltily, and they have an awkward moment of not knowing what to say. They
always knew it was going to be difficult to go on dates what with Gary always being away on
Being with Mark and texting him is fun, but kissing him earlier nearly took Gary’s breath away. He wants to have that feeling again and again until things inevitably lead to more and he finds himself dropping onto his knees to kiss Mark’s cock in an archive room.

‘I know we’ve had this discussion already, but we could just mess around here,’ Gary suggests quasi-seriously.

‘No way. I’m not doing that again. Mr Donald could have seriously injured himself! He could have died!’

‘He didn’t, though. And let’s be honest, Mark, you bloody loved it. I could tell by the way you moaned when I kissed your ear then . . .’

Mark turns red and defensively crosses his arms. ‘I still think we should have been more careful. I wouldn’t mind if we stuck to texting each other until we figure out how we’re ever going to be alone together without getting ourselves in trouble,’ he says, meaning, you’re going to send me more shirtless pics while I swear never to make a naked selfie of myself, ever.

‘So no more sneaking off to the concert hall, then?’

‘No.’ Mark’s eyes fall on a fire escape plan on one of the walls in the staff room, and an idea hits him like an epiphany. He feels his reluctance to kiss Gary in a public place wavering already. ‘Though I suppose . . .’

‘Suppose . . . what?’ Gary’s loving the sound of this already.

‘Well, I suppose – if we were more careful and we didn’t sneak out during meetings anymore . . . I suppose we could try finding somewhere more secure, like a – a photography dark room or a classroom that no-one has the key to.’ Mark has turned bright red, and Gary has to fight the urge to tell him how bloody adorable he is. How someone manages to be both so cute and fit Gary has no idea. ‘Do we have a place like that at school? You know, a place no-one knows about? Surely we have a place like that somewhere. As in, a place that isn’t really that public.’

Gary’s mouth spreads into a wide grin. ‘So you would like to mess around here.’

‘Only if we do it in a place that no-one knows about. Somewhere . . . comfortable,’ Mark adds, thinking about his squeaky single bed.

‘I believe Rob’s got a map of the entire building on his computer. We could ask him to have a look at it?’

‘Good idea.’ Then Mark thinks about how Rob might react if he tells him he’s snogged Gary. ‘Do you think we should tell him we’ve kissed, though? He’s pretty invested in us getting together, but I know how excited he gets . . .’

‘Very excited. He was already talking about us getting married when I told him I’d sent you that pic of meself.’

Mark and Gary agree not to tell Rob. After all, Rob’s a bit scatter-brained at the best of times, and he might get so thrilled about Mark and Gary having kissed that he decides to tell everyone. Not that the boys feel particularly ashamed about what they’ve got going on, but it’d be better if it stays a secret, for now. They will get to know each other, privately and slowly, whether that involves proper dates or not.
They just need to figure out how they’re ever going to get to know each other when they’re always surrounded by students.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter/part finally sees things becoming a little bit smuttier. It also features the "Gary finds out Mark has a tattoo" bit that I promised a while back but have unfortunately had to put in the next chapter because this one (chapter three) would have been a bit heavy otherwise.
PART FOUR

Chapter Summary

In this M-rated chapter, Mark and Gary take their relationship to the next level by canoodling in an archive room. The experience leads them to a spontaneous decision that will shape the rest of the summer and the school year that follows.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

[LESSON TWENTY-FOUR: MARK SUPERVISES ANOTHER EXAM]

It turns out that being a couple is very difficult when you work at the same school together. Every time Mark so much tries to touch Gary’s hand in the staff room, someone will walk into the room and ask them for a favour, like if Gary could please fill in the attendance list for yesterday’s third period on his computer. It’s as if no-one wants to have them a moment alone.

Even Mr Harrison has started conspiring against them. Right when Gary is about to ask Mark if he would like to have a cup of coffee at the Starbucks on campus, the head teacher stalks into the room and asks Mark to supervise an important English exam. Originally Ms Brooke was supposed to do it, but she’s fallen ill with the flu and has spent the past two days in bed. It’s only the second exam Mark has supervised, but Mr Harrison is a difficult man to say no to.

Mark gives Gary an apologetic look, and ten minutes later he’s sat in a stuffy theory classroom, watching twenty-nine students from a third-year Dancing and Choreography group in deadly silence. They’re taking a writing exam for Ms Brooke’s English class (the formal “writing a cover letter” type of writing, not the creative writing Mark teaches), so it involves a lot of scrap paper. It’s one of the final English exams of the school year, and it’s very important; the students from M_DC3A won’t be able to get their diploma if they don’t pass. It’s absolutely vital that Mark’s supervision goes well.

Remembering how badly his first attempt at supervising an exam went, Mark meticulously orders every piece of exam paper he receives. He even goes through the trouble of double-checking that every student from the Dancing and Choreography group has filled in everything. He puts a blue tick next to the present students on his attendance sheet. Only one student is absent.

In case the students use their own pens to cheat on the exam, Mark has given them all pens with the school logo on it; pens with blue ink. He took a book with him to pass the time, but he hasn’t opened it since he got here. He needs to watch everyone like a hawk, like that one student suddenly dropping her pen or another student coughing twice in a row. They are probably not attempts at cheating, but they could be. At this school, you never know.

Just in case, Mark left his phone in his locker in the staff room.

By the time the exam ends and the final student hands in their mock cover letter, Mark feels
confident that he’s done a good job this time. He can be proud of himself that Mr Harrison didn’t storm into his classroom to tell him off for something. The room was so quiet that everyone you could hear a pin drop.

The exam has gone well.

Mark’s feeling of success follows him around for the rest of the day. He doesn’t have any class management issues for the remainder of the afternoon. Not a single student makes a nasty comment about Mr Owen behind his back, and the feels like a proper teacher when the first writing dossiers for his Creative Writing lessons start appearing in his letterbox in the staff room.

The sun is shining, and the summer holidays have never seemed closer.

It’s a good day, but it gets even better.

When Mark sinks into Rob’s desk chair that afternoon so he can keep an eye on his students during his Art History lesson in the computer lab, he doesn’t have to do anything. Everyone is hard at work. He doesn’t see a single paper plane. Apart from when he has to remind a student that they’re not allowed to drink in the computer lab, things are going suspiciously well.

Things have been like this for a couple of weeks now. The last time Mark struggled with class management was when Gary had to come and save him with a lie about Dua Lipa. Apart from that, his lessons have been pretty solid – even the tricky Art History ones that he initially had trouble planning. It hasn’t been easy, but going to work has certainly become more bearable now that he has a handsome boyfriend to look after him.

He’s even had time to write music again. Teaching Creative Writing had, ironically, made Mark feel rather bored with his favourite hobby, but ever since he and Gary snogged in the concert hall he’s written over a dozen love songs. Most of them aren’t very good, but there are a few that he thinks show promise. Perhaps if he and Gary ever have time to meet up outside of work, he’ll show Gary the lyrics and ask him what he thinks.

Everyone in the computer lab is hard at work finishing their magazines about Greek Art, so Mark can easily jot down a few more lyrics in his notebook without having to worry about his students.

When he can’t remember how to spell a certain word for a lyric about love, he looks it up on his phone and sees that Gary texted him ten minutes ago. It appears to be just another string of boring pictures of books about creative writing, class management and what to do when you’re a class mentor . . . followed by a pic of Gary doing yoga without his shirt on.

Mark has to click the photo away when a student walks past his desk to get to the printer. When the student has his back to him, Mark texts a quick, flirtatious reply on his phone.

—Mark: Looking good Mr B..... Will I be seeing that in the flesh one day? [Here, Mark has added an emoji of an angel with a halo.]

—Gary: LOL I hope so! If only our boss would stop stealing you from me! I hope your supervision went better than last time?

—Mark: Mr H didn’t come running into the classroom this time so I think I did all right..... [Emoji of two hands pressed together in prayer]

Mark’s so engrossed in writing his reply that he almost doesn’t notice Rob sinking into the desk chair next to him. He puts away his phone to see Rob smiling at him proudly. ‘I see you’ve gotten over
Mark crumples up his nose and laughs. ‘My group are being really good today, so I thought to myself, I might as well check me messages. It’s not as if they’ll notice, anyway,’ he whispers conspiratorially. ‘It’s almost scary how hard they’re working today.’

Rob sees what Mark means. There are dozens of computers in front of them, all occupied by Mark’s students, but not a single monitor is currently displaying YouTube, Netflix, Instagram or a violent online shooter. The student all genuinely seem to be working hard, and the only sound in the room is that of the printer. And at the back of the lab, Nick the quiet Animation student is busy working on what looks like a 3D rendering of a city. He was working on a 3D rendering of a cottage only a month ago.

‘Were you texting Gary?’ Rob whispers when Mark is least expecting it.

Mark turns a bit red. ‘Maybe. Maybe not.’

Rob raises his eyebrows at that. ‘So you were texting Gary.’

Rob rolls his desk chair closer, and Mark wishes one of his students would ask him a question about the online magazine so that he won’t have to talk to Rob about Gary.

He doesn’t want Rob to find out that they’ve been snogging; if he does, the entire school will find out!

‘Did he text you anything interesting?’ Rob asks, meaning, Did he send you nudes that I should know about because I’m such a good mate of both of you?

‘Just boring stuff,’ Mark says with as much indifference as he can. ‘You know, lists of books about class management and creative writing. Whether I’ve read the latest Keyboards Monthly, that sort of thing.’ (The latter is actually true, but Gary did follow up his boring text about an article about piano cleaning supplies with a rather juicy sext involving keyboards, so Mark didn’t have any complaints.)

Rob is trying to read Mark’s face like a book, but his mate isn’t giving anything away.

Similarly, Gary didn’t say anything when Rob probed him about his love life either. If they’ve done something, Mark and Gary are doing a very good job keeping it secret.

‘So you and Gary haven’t done any cute couples stuff? Like when you and Gaz went MIA during a meeting a while back? Or when Gary asked me for a map of the school for some “unknown” reason yesterday? You’d almost think you two were tryin’ to sneak off somewhere . . .’

Mark goes so red that a couple of students actually ask him if he’s all right. He casually waves his hand in the air and mutters something about how he’s going down with a cold and that he may have a fever.

Sometimes he hates how attentive his students are.

‘We haven’t had time to do anything,’ Mark whispers at Rob. ‘We’re both very busy. When we missed half of that meeting earlier we were just working on the summer prom together. And Gary needed the map of the school for reasons. Work reasons. He – he wants to see if he can organise the summer prom at school next year.’

Mark hates lying to his mate, but he’d rather keep his relationship a secret in case Rob accidentally gets too excited and the entire school finds out about it.
Rob must have sensed as much, because he stops asking Mark further questions, for now. He scans the Apple monitors in front of him and makes an impressed face. Apart from Nick’s computer, which is currently displaying a complicated-looking 3D computer graphics program called Autodesk Maya, they all show pages of the online magazine Mark asked them to make.

‘I think this is the quietest I’ve ever seen this group. Have you given them money or something?’

Mark laughs. ‘It’s scary, isn’t it? I can’t believe that I was so worried about these lessons at the beginning of term. I still don’t know a thing about Greek Art, to be honest, and I don’t think I ever will unless someone gives me a crash course about it, but this project really seems to have taken off, hasn’t it? I don’t have to do anything but steer the students in the right direction and remind them of the deadline every now and then. Sometimes I don’t have to remind them at all. It’s amazing. And as for this group, it’s like they’ve changed completely.’

‘Or you have. You’ve improved loads!’

Mark gives a modest shake of his head. ‘Oh, I don’t think so. I still feel as new and inexperienced as I did when I first got here. I’m just relieved I finally know the rules of exams now!’

Rob cocks one eyebrow. ‘Harrison didn’t ask you to supervise another one, did he?’

Mark wrinkles his nose. At the same time, a young student named Colin pumps his fist in the air when he finally finishes the last page of his magazine. Mere seconds later, he starts watching videos of some teenage vlogger on YouTube.

‘Have you finished your magazine, Colin?’ Mark asks the boy from his desk chair.

Colin turns around in his chair with a pleased expression on his face. ‘Of course, Sir.’

‘Have you remembered to add a webpage with all the sources you’ve used?’

Colin groans. Clearly not. He clicks away the video and gets back to work.

‘Anyway, yeah, Mr Harrison did ask me to supervise an exam again today,’ Mark whispers. ‘I think it went well. Mr Harrison didn’t get mad at me afterwards, anyway. I felt really pleased with myself afterwards!’

‘You should, Markie. Mr Harrison would probably have a proper fit if it turned out a student had cheated and stuff. You know how angry he gets when things don’t go his way. It’s like he breathes exam results. It does me head in.’

The way Rob talks about the exam makes Mark’s body go cold. He suddenly has this weird premonition that he made a mistake during his exam supervision after all.

But why? He ordered every exam paper meticulously. He made sure the students couldn’t cheat. He didn’t check his phone or look away for a single second. He handed out pens. He was clear, strict and calm when he told the students about the exam rules, and the only time he let his guard down was when he complimented a student for coming to school in a Madonna T-shirt.

And yet he feels strange. Anxious. Something inside of him is telling him that this won’t be the last he’ll hear of M_DC3A’s English exam.

‘How are you and Ms Mitchell gettin’ on, by the way?’

Mark blinks. ‘Sorry, what?’
‘Ms Mitchell. The teacher who was trying to have you “removed” cos she didn’t like that her group had complained about you. Does she still think you’re a crap teacher?’

Mark shakes his head. Ever since he started doing his digital Art History lessons, Ms Mitchell hasn’t threatened Mark once. She does still call him a trainee, however, and she likes to mention Mark’s failed first attempt at supervising exam as often as she can.

Apparently texting during an Art Theory exam is the Worst Thing Ever.

‘She hasn’t mentioned wanting to get me fired for a while, but I don’t think she likes me very much,’ Mark tells Rob indifferently. He doesn’t particularly like Ms Mitchell, but he doesn’t want to speak ill of her either.

Rob, however, doesn’t seem to care about hurting people’s feelings at all.

‘Fuck her, mate.’ Rob utters the swear word a little too loudly, and a couple of students look up from their computers. He leans over across his desk conspiratorially. ‘Don’t get me wrong, Mark, but the teachers from the Art department? I don’t like them. You make one mistake, and then you’re out. Just like that! What’s up with that?’

‘I’m sure not all the members of the Art department are like that,’ Mark points out diplomatically. Sure, his first impressions of the Art department haven’t been that good, but he refuses to believe its teachers are all the same. ‘The Art department is probably just as nice as ours. Maybe even nicer!’

‘It isn’t, though,’ Rob counters. ‘Why do you think the previous Art History teacher left?’

Mark recalls Mr Harrison telling him that the previous Art History quit her job because she’d won the lottery. ‘Didn’t she win several millions?’

Rob snorts. ‘That’s what people want you to think. She actually got fired because she was accused of exam fraud. Like, helping students cheat and stuff. We were never even told the full story. We were told she was leaving one day, and the next day we were supposed to forget about it. We weren’t even allowed to talk about it outside of work. The student who’d taken part in the exam all had to do the exam again, and they had to pay for it as well. It was a fucking mess.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yeah.’

Mark hopes he won’t be accused of exam fraud because he texted during an exam a couple of weeks ago. ‘Do you think the previous Art History teacher really helped her students pass the exam?’

‘All I know is that she’d made a mock exam based on the real exam and that a lot of people got very angry about that, Mr Harrison especially. I personally don’t think making a mock exam is a reason to get someone fired, but I guess that’s just teachin’ for you. It’s like everyone around us expects us to be these perfect human beings. You know what I mean? I’ve got issues! Howard’s got issues! But just because we’re teachers and “role models” we’re meant to cover everything up and pretend we’ve got everything under control.’

Clearly, this is something that Rob has had on his mind for a while. He goes off on a tangent. ‘Do you have everything under control, Mark? Cos I fucking don’t. I don’t even know if I’m going to become a support teacher now! I’m terrified, Mark, absolutely terrified.’

Rob has said all this with such sadness and anger that Mark feels quite shocked. Something must have happened. ‘I take it your dissertation isn’t going well.’
‘Not really. Ironically, I think spelling is going to be an issue.’

‘When is it due?’

‘Soon. Way too soon. I’ve had sleepless nights, Mark. Sleepless nights. Not to mention the fact that Voldemort gave me a lecture about missing that joint staff meeting a couple of weeks ago.’

‘You don’t really think of Mr Harrison like that, do you?’ Mark says sternly. ‘I know that he’s a bad person for giving you lectures about missing meetings, but he’s not that bad.’

‘He is, though,’ Rob maintains. ‘He’s been awful from the moment I met him. Even my job interview with him was bloody stressful. Did your job interview not make you feel terrible, mate?’

Mark tries to recall his job interview with Mr Harrison. It didn’t take place that long ago, but his memory of the afternoon is a bit foggy. He only remembers Mr Harrison asking him some very difficult questions, Mark thinking he’d messed up the interview and locking himself into a restroom afterwards and . . . a stranger cheering him up?

It obviously must not have gone that well, for he’d completely blocked out the memory of his job interview until three seconds ago. He can’t for the life of him who cheered him up after the interview either.

‘You’re right, Mr Harrison wasn’t very nice to me during me interview either,’ Mark says.

‘See?’ Rob makes a face as if to say, I told you so. ‘What kind of head teacher does that? I cried after me interview, Mark. I cried. It almost made me not accept the job when I was offered it. I wish I hadn’t, now. But I needed the money.’

‘I think I cried after me interview too. Weird. I’d forgotten it till now . . .’ Mark shrugs, then flicks the memory of his job interview from his mind. His job interview does not matter now, for he got the job in the end. ‘Anyway, you know that if you needed someone to have a look at your dissertation, I could do it for you, right?’

Rob doesn’t talk about his training much, but he does know that Rob one day wants to support and train students who have learning disabilities. With Rob having a bit of anxiety when it comes to dealing with large groups (and sometimes people in general), helping students individually would be the perfect job for him. As far as Mark knows, Rob’s dissertation is the final stage of finishing his training.

‘I’m not the best at spelling either,’ Mark says, ‘but I’m pretty good at checking other people’s writing if you want.’

‘Nah.’ Rob shrugs. ‘Thanks for the offer, mate, but I think you’ve got better things to do. Like . . . kissing Gary, maybe?’

This change of subject is so unexpected and cheeky that it nearly makes Mark fall off his desk chair. He replies with a curt ‘We haven’t been kissing.’

‘No?’

‘Definitely not.’

Rob utters a half-hearted Hmm, but he can tell that Something’s Up. He and Gary have definitely been snogging, for Mark’s face has just turned as red as a tomato.
He isn’t going to say anything, though. Like Howard, Rob is pretty good at keeping secrets, and he
doesn’t want to spread rumours about his colleagues by accident.

Instead, Rob smoothly changes the subject. He and Mark talk leisurely about the upcoming summer
prom while somewhere in the building, in an office with black curtains, someone is making plans to
do something terrible with an exam . . .

[LESSON TWENTY-FIVE: DOLPHINS AND
DISAPPOINTMENT]

A week has passed since Mark supervised his second exam, the formal writing exam that Ms Brooke
was supposed to supervise. The days have become longer and hotter. Students now go to school in
their short T-shirts and flowy dresses. Teachers struggle to keep their heads cool in the building’s old
and stuffy classrooms. Students skip less important lessons to revise for exams. Mark’s groups have
become so small that hasn’t had an issue with class management for days. His students have
sporadically been handing in writing dossiers and online magazines left and right. Potential graduates
are already thinking about which entry-level jobs they want to apply for. Easels are dotted around the
school grounds as Art students attempt to make last-minute paintings that will go nicely with the rest
of their portfolios.

With more and more exams taking place, and Gary still having to put the final touches on both the
organisation of the summer prom and his upcoming summer tour around the UK, it has become even
more difficult to meet up. Mark and Gary still haven’t been on a proper date, and they haven’t even
kissed that much. On most days, they are both so busy with their jobs, assessments, exams, writing
dossiers and extracurricular activities that they can hardly see each other. Yesterday, when Mark had
to grade his students’ online magazines all day, he couldn’t even respond to Gary’s texts.

It’s a really difficult way to have a relationship, but it hasn’t stopped Mark from fancying Gary’s
socks off. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, as they say, and the less he sees Gary, the more he
wants him – sexually and romantically, and all the stages in between.

Having Gary’s increasingly more intimate photos to look at makes up for not being able to see each
other, but it’s hard to not want more, like having sex. Kissing. Cuddling. Giving each other head and
seeing Gary’s face when he comes on the sheets of his bed. Or waking up together after their perfect
first time, with rose petals still dotted around Gary’s waterbed from the long, passionate night before.

In reality, they’ll probably have to make do with a quick shag in a stuffy classroom.

Gary has somewhat different plans. It’s Thursday, and it’s one of those “four weeks until the end of
the school year” days when every teacher seems to be running around the school like a headless
chicken.

Mr Donald has had to assess thirty choreographies in the past four hours. Mr Orange’s nose is no
longer stuck in a book about meditation and peaceful warriors, but essays handed in by his students.
Even Rob, who is generally quite relaxed and nice to be around, has been staring at his computer
monitor stricken with fear and worry for the past three hours because his dissertation about how to
help art students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities is due tomorrow.

There is usually a staff meeting on Thursday evening, but today Mr Harrison has decided to cancel it.
The lessons ended at 1PM today, and every member of staff has been hard at work to finish the piles of work they still need to get through. With both staff rooms being completely packed and the classrooms being too hot and stuffy to mark exams in, this is almost impossible.

In other words, this is not a time to have fun. These next four weeks, everyone needs to be at their absolute best – teachers, administrative workers and students alike. It is vital that everything goes well, even small things. So when Gary suddenly walks into the staff room on Friday and asks Mr Owen if he could please help him look for a file in the archive room, Mark takes this very seriously indeed.

‘I didn’t know we had an archive room,’ Mark tells Gary on their way to the archive room itself, which is in the basement of the A-wing and therefore takes about fifteen minutes to get to. ‘Which file are we looking for? Is it important? Do you need it for your assessments with your first years? I hope your students are doing well. I like the students from the Piano course, don’t you?’

The questions rain down on Gary with no signs of letting up. He had hardly considered any of these things, but he’s not able to tell Mark why he’s really taking him to the archive room. There are students and teachers everywhere, and he doesn’t want them to find out that he wants to have sex with his boyfriend.

He’s going to have to lie.

‘I JUST NEED TO HAVE A LOOK AT SOME OLD GRADES, IS ALL,’ Gary announces deliberately loudly as they walk past Ms Nas and Mr Orange in the B-wing. They’re engaged in what looks like a very serious conversation about one of Ms Nas’s mentor students. ‘IT’S FOR MR DONALD. I NEED TO KNOW WHAT HIS STUDENTS SCORED FOR THEIR PIANO ASSESSMENTS LAST YEAR.’

‘So you want to compare scores, is that it?’

Gary nods. He continues to talk quite loudly when they pass a group of students taking very artistic photos of the school’s interior architecture. Anyone would think that Mark has gone deaf. ‘YES. WE’RE GOING TO THE ARCHIVE ROOM TO COMPARE GRADES. THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO.’

‘Okay! I’m sure I can help with that.’

They reach the door of the archive room, an old door that looks rather weathered and damaged.

It’s as if time stood still in this part of the school. The floors creak. The walls are laid with bricks. There are no students’ artworks, just a couple of posters of previous summer proms peeling off the walls like old wallpaper. The windows in the corridor are small and filthy. If you look out of them, the only thing you can see is the brick wall of the block of flats that was built right outside the school ten years ago. This must have been the part of the school that was once a warehouse.

Gary casts a suspicious look over his shoulder, then opens the door. He cautiously steps one foot into the archive room, pauses at the floor’s first complaint, once more looks over his shoulder to make sure no-one has seen or heard him, then tiptoes into complete darkness whilst gesturing at Mark to follow him inside.

Gary has to reach out in the dark to find the light switch. Once the two lightbulbs on the ceiling have flickered on, Mark can see that the archive room is obviously ancient but massive. There are old file cabinets reaching all the way up to the ceiling. Every cabinet contains five large drawers, all filled with over a dozen folders that contain every single students’ details.
By the looks of it, every drawer has been meticulously named: A_WD3A, M_CO1F, and so on. Mark can see drawers dating all the way back to the 90s. There are no windows, so the archive room smells vaguely of an old attic.

Mark looks at Gary inquiringly. With everything being labelled, finding the file Gary was talking about earlier shouldn’t be too difficult. ‘Remind me which file you needed help finding, Mr Barlow? It looks like whoever’s in charge of this room has done a really good job to get everything organised.’

Gary snorts. ‘You didn’t really think I took you here to look for a file, did you?’

Mark gestures at the room as if to say, Well duh. ‘What else is an archive room for?’

Gary gives Mark a Look. Isn’t it obvious? ‘I don’t know about you, mate, but I was thinking we could use the room to get away from everyone . . .’

Mark’s still not getting it. ‘Why would we wanna do that?’

‘You know, so we can actually have a proper cuddle for a change? But we can go looking for files too, mate. That sounds great, that.’

At first, Mark thinks Gary must be joking. What does looking for files have to do with cuddling? Doesn’t Gary want to compare these grades? Doesn’t he want to do a good job? There’s only four weeks left until the end of the school year, after all.

Then the penny drops. Mark’s mouth transforms into a big, understanding O. ‘You’re here because you want to kiss in private,’ he realises at last.

‘I do, yeah. I thought that was pretty obvious when I winked at you when I told you I needed you to come with me.’

Mark rolls his eyes. ‘You could have just told me you wanted to snog, Mr Barlow. You know how serious I get about work! I was ready to open every single one of these drawers until I found what you were looking for.’

‘I know. But I didn’t want to say it out loud in front of everyone. Besides, maybe I wanna do more than just kissing, Mark.’ Gary’s eyes flicker with something dangerous then. ‘I do still owe you that massage . . .’

Mark’s remembers. When they went to the concert hall to snog, Gary said he would give him a massage. Unfortunately they never managed to do it, because Mr Donald suddenly decided to trip up in the dark.

His eyes flick at the door of the archive room. Kissing in here does sound tempting (and there are more than enough places to let things escalate, like the edge of the table in the corner or the wooden floor that’s just about spacious enough for a quick shag if their breaths and touches inevitably quicken), but he doesn’t want to get caught either.

Then again – it’s been so long since that first kiss. Too long. How can it be that the school year has less than four weeks left and they’ve only kissed once or twice? Mark’s been so busy grading his students’ online magazines that he’s hardly had time for anything else.

On the other hand, there is the potential of getting caught. Again. He doesn’t want that. Ever.

‘I do like the idea of you giving me a massage, Mr Barlow, but how will I know for sure that
someone isn’t about to walk in on us? I don’t want to be responsible for someone tripping over again.’

It’s a fair question, and one that Gary immediately knows an answer to. ‘Simple. We lock the door and make sure we don’t get caught.’

Gary heads back to the door, turns the handle and locks it. Next, he shoves a large carton box filled with files in front of the door so that no-one will be able to open the door from the outside unless they have a key and super strength. As far as Gary knows, the only other person who has the key to the archive room is Mr Harrison.

And he doesn’t have super strength.

‘Is this good enough for you, Mr Owen?’

Mark doesn’t say his answer out loud, but Gary can read it in his nervous blue eyes.

Yes. Yes, it is.

‘You want me to give you that massage I promised then, Mark?’

Mark nods. Is this really happening? ‘Yes, please, Mr Barlow.’

Gary gestures at Mark to turn around for his massage. Before Mark can find the opportunity to tell Gary that his left shoulder genuinely feels a bit sore because of the school’s terrible desk chairs, Gary has already placed his hands on his shoulders and started to squeeze.

The gentleness of Gary’s hands takes Mark’s by surprise. He lets out a soft laugh that he desperately hopes won’t travel outside of the room’s four walls.

‘You like it so far, Mark?’

Mark hums. Yes. ‘A little to the left, please, Mr Barlow . . . That’s it . . .’

Gary starts off gently, then adds more pressure when he sees Mark visibly relaxing. He kneads and moulds Mark’s shoulders in such a way that Mark can feel the tension leaving his body one touch at a time.

‘This feel good?’

Mark nods. Every touch and squeeze seems to reverberate in the rest of his body. Where he previously felt the dull pain from sitting on the school’s chairs for too long, he now feels the tingle of Gary’s touch making its way down to his crotch.

Mark can’t help himself. The massage is so good that he moans when Gary squeezes a sensitive part of his left shoulder. He leans himself back against Gary’s frame, wordlessly telling him to keep going. To come closer.

Gary keeps kneading. He presses his body against Mark’s thin frame as if they’re about to make love standing up, and Mark becomes quickly convinced that they might melt together when he feels Gary’s crotch rubbing up against his arse. He’s suddenly trembling like a leaf. This position . . . it’s everything he’s wanted ever since he fell in love with Gary.

‘You look red.’ This comes from Gary. He breathes the words into Mark’s ear before kissing him there. Then the back of his head. His neck, where his hair is wet from sweat.
All the while, Mark’s world feels only one touch or kiss away from spinning off its axis. He has to place one hand on one of the cabinets next to him, terrified that if he doesn’t have something to hold on he’ll tremble and fall.

By now, Gary’s hands have slipped off his shoulders and crept down the part of his arms where he’s rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. His fingers have left goosebumps on Mark’s exposed arms. ‘Why don’t we get this thing off you, eh?’

Gary kisses his ear then, that same little spot where Mark was oh so sensitive earlier, and Mark says something so obscene that Gary doesn’t have to ask again. He reaches out for the front of Mark’s shirt from behind and starts unbuttoning it.

Gary makes light work of Mark’s buttons. He pops the first one with ease. Then the second. Then the third, exposing Mark’s hairless chest.

Mark feels the touch of every fingertip leave a tingle on his chest. Some touches are less soft, making Mark feel a horny pulsing in his groin.

After just five buttons, the front of Mark’s body is completely exposed. It should make him feel utterly vulnerable, but he doesn’t; Gary places his hands on his flat stomach, and he feels safer than ever, like Gary’s hands are the anchor keeping him grounded.

Gary knows that they only have mere minutes before someone will pay the archive room a visit, so his hands don’t remain on Mark’s stomach for long. They start searching Mark’s naked chest without looking. What are Mark’s most sensitive spots? Where is he softest? What is the piece of skin that will make him oh so hard if he’s touched there?

It’s a thrill to find out. Not being able to see Mark’s chest makes him all the more curious. He touches Mark’s belly and his chest and his collarbone and every other part of Mark’s body that he can’t see, making Mark feel even hotter than before. He even touches Mark’s nipples; clearly a sensitive spot, for Mark responds by rolling back his arse against Gary’s groin. With his shirt still clinging to his skin and Gary’s crotch pressed tightly against his arse, it’s as though he’s stepped into a sauna with his clothes on.

It shows: Mark looks hot and sweaty even from behind. The hair on his neck is wet. A trail of sweat runs down from the back of his neck into his dress shirt. Even being touched makes him moan. Mark’s clearly a loud guy.

‘How are you feeling now, Mark?’

The words sound so airy and warm inside of Mark’s ear that he can hardly make sense of them. His head is swimming in an ocean of dizzying thoughts about Gary and how desperately he wishes Gary would pull his trousers and boxers down and fuck him senseless. Right here, against one of the file cabinets, with the top half of their clothes still on.

He wouldn’t even mind if they lasted only a minute.

Mark wishes he could tell Gary all of that, but he can’t. He’s terrified that if he opens his mouth his heart will tumble out of it.

‘You still with us, mate?’

Mark swallows. He leans into Gary’s tight embrace. He wishes he could see Gary’s face, no doubt looking just as red and flushed as his own. His shirt clings uncomfortably to the small of his back. ‘I feel – I feel hot. So hot, Gary.’
Gary. Mark just called him Gary. No more Mr Barlow, just Gary. Gary.

Hearing it makes Gary’s chest bloom with love. Love – and arousal.

‘We can do something about that.’

Gary helps Mark ease out of his shirt from behind. It takes a long time; Mark’s rolled-up sleeves get stuck above his elbows, and he feels so nervous that it feels like the first time someone’s ever undressed him.

There’s the sound of the floorboard outside the door creaking as someone walks past their hiding place, but Gary doesn’t seem to care. The only thing he has eyes and ears for is Mark’s naked back finally appearing in front of him when Mark’s shirt lands in a blue, patterned mess on the floor. There’s a small scar underneath Mark’s shoulder blade, but other than that he’s perfect. Perfect – and his, for just today.

‘Christ, you’re so gorgeous, Mark.’

Gary runs a curious finger down Mark’s spine, and the response is instantaneous. He can see the hairs on the back of Mark’s neck stand on end. He kisses Mark there. Then lower. Lower still. He kisses Mark all the way down his spine until his mouth reaches the hem of Mark’s trousers and he’s sat on his knees on the floor. His trousers will probably have stains on them when he gets up again.

His head facing Mark’s arse, Gary can’t help but spank Mark, hard. Mark responds with a loud expletive that doesn’t make him sound like a teacher anymore.

‘Oh, fucking hell – jeez, Gary, that’s good.’

Mark’s reaction makes Gary laugh a smug sort of laugh. ‘Christ, Mark. Watch your language, will you? People will think you’re not suitable for the job with such a dirty mouth . . .’

Gary’s eyes are shining. He’d love to make Mark moan even louder and harder, preferably by giving him head right here. Someone would only have to open the door with the key, push past the box of files on the floor and see Mark’s cock disappearing into his warm mouth.

He knows that Mark isn’t particularly turned on by the idea of getting caught, but Mark isn’t a famous singer-songwriter. If Gary ever got caught with his pants down, he’d not only be losing his jobs (plural), but also his fans. The press would drop their support for him as quickly as a stone. He might never get a record deal again. And he knows that ought to scare him, but it doesn’t.

It only makes him want Mark more.

‘Turn around for me, Mr Owen.’ Gary utters it like an order, and Mark does as he’s told. He turns around on the spot as slowly as he dares. ‘That’s it, lad. That’s it . . . Eh, what do we have here . . .?’

Mark’s never told Gary this, but he has a tattoo of a dolphin. It’s placed on his hipbone, right above the hem of his trousers – right where he loves to be touched most. Out of all the places on his body, his dolphin tattoo is the place where Mark is most sensitive.

It’s also the sexiest tattoo Gary has seen by far.

Gary’s first instinct is to kiss it. He places a tentative kiss on the top of the tattoo, where the back of the dolphin is arched in a thin black line of ink, then keeps going when Mark moans. Again. Mark’s proper loud even when he’s not supposed to make a sound. He keeps kissing Mark there until the
skin around the tattoo is red and Mark has gone hard inside his trousers.

Gary’s mouth waters just looking at it.

‘Perfect.’

Gary fondles Mark through the fabric of his trousers, and Mark responds with an expletive. Looking up, he can see that Mark is biting his lip. He’s loving this, Gary can tell.

‘I bet you’d love me to give you head, eh?’ Gary says. ‘You want me to do that to you, Marko? You want me to make you come?’

Mark nods. ‘Y-yeah. Please.’

Gary grins and starts pulling down Mark’s zipper. He does it so slowly that Mark thinks time must have stopped and he has to suck in his breath.

The teeth of the zipper disconnect without a sound. Even the rest of the world seems to have stopped making a noise. There is no longer the sound of colleagues walking past. The floor stops creaking where Mark’s shoes touch it.

The only thing that still matters in the world is Gary pulling down Mark’s zipper so low that he can see that Mark’s wearing white Calvin Kleins. He kisses the shape of Mark’s long, hard cock through the fabric of his underpants, and Mark can’t help but let out a sad little whimper.

‘Oh my God, Gaz. Oh God, this is so good . . .’

Throughout his kisses, Gary keeps looking up at his boyfriend with a glimmer in his eyes that Mark hasn’t seen for a while. It’s the same look that Mark imagined Gary having in his eyes whenever they fuck in his daydreams. It’s the same look that Mark has fantasised about over and over again.

But in his daydreams, they weren’t about to make love in an archive room.

There’s a sudden knock on the door.

Mark lets out a yelp as he accidentally bangs his elbow against the file cabinet next to him. A sharp pain shoots through his arm and makes his hand go numb. He struggles to zip up his trousers and put his shirt back on when there’s another knock on the door.

Gary has to scamper back on his feet looking as pale as though he has seen a ghost.

‘H-hang on!’ Gary shouts at the person behind the door. Please don’t be Mr Harrison, he thinks. Please don’t open the door.

‘Hello? Is that you, Gary?’ It’s Ms Brooke by the sounds of it. She’s trying to turn the handle of the locked door from the outside.

‘One s-second!’ Gary quickly brushes the evidence of dust off his trousers. He glances over his shoulder to see a red-faced Mark putting his dress shirt on the wrong way round. He frantically helps Mark look presentable, hands him a random file from the archive room to cover up his erection and opens the door to a curious-looking Ms Brooke wearing a Westlife hoodie.

Ms Brooke looks at Mr Barlow, then at Mr Owen. They’ve both gone incredibly red, and Mr Owen seems to be hiding the front of his trousers with a file for some reason. What’s more, Mr Owen has buttoned up his shirt asymmetrically, with one end of the shirt being longer than the other. ‘Are . . .
‘O-Of course,’ Gary lies without missing a beat. He looks at Mark, who has gone fire truck red. ‘We were just looking for a file, weren’t we, Mark?’

Mark nods. He’s still trembling, but not because of the things Gary was doing to him earlier. ‘We were, yes. Gary – Mr Barlow – he needs a file of a – a third-year group.’

‘Which one?’

Mark names the first group he can think of. ‘Um. M_SW3B?’

‘I was looking for that one too!’ Ms Brooke’s face lights up with genuine recognition. She nods at the file in Mark’s hands. ‘Is that it? Have you found it?’

Mark goes quite pale. He looks the file he was given to cover up his quite obvious erection. His hands are shaking, and he has to hold on to the file with all the force he can manage. ‘Erm. We’re still looking for it. Cos, you see, looking for something in here – it’s – it’s quite hard, you know.’

Gary lets out an accidental snort that he ends up having to cover up with a cough, and Ms Brooke’s eyes narrow into the same suspicious squint that Mr Donald used on them a couple of weeks ago.

If Ms Brooke didn’t suspect Misters Owen and Barlow of suspicious behaviour before, she certainly does so now. It’s obvious: Mr Owen’s red face, Mr Barlow suddenly needing a file of a group he doesn’t even teach and Mr Owen not having moved an inch since she walked in here. She thinks about how awake Mr Donald looked when he brought Mark and Gary back to the meeting a couple of weeks ago, and she becomes suddenly convinced that the two of them have Something going on.

However, it’s hard to bring up your suspicions when Gary’s fake cough has escalated into a very genuine wheezing fit.

Mark doesn’t dare giving Gary a pat on the back in case he looks too affectionate doing it, and Ms Brooke doesn’t like touching people, period, so they have to wait for Gary’s wheezing fit to pass naturally.

This takes a long time. Gary’s face becomes increasingly redder as he heaves and coughs. Mark repeatedly asks him whether he’s all right, which Gary can only respond to with a huff and a grunt.

In the meantime, Ms Brooke has decided she’s going to act like she has no suspicions at all. Once Gary has finally stopped coughing, she gives her two colleagues an airy smile and pretends to be none the wiser.

‘You know what, I don’t need that file right now. Once you’re done with it, could you leave it on my desk in the staff room? Thanks for supervising my English exam earlier, by the way,’ she tells Mark, who flinches at the sudden attention. ‘My students’ diplomas depended on it, so I’m glad it went well.’

‘Of cOURSE!’ Mark’s words sound strange and slurred. Nervous. ‘We’d love to hand you the file later. Right, Mr Barlow?’

Gary coughs once more, painfully. He has stopped wheezing, but he still sounds hoarse. ‘Right. We just need to do . . . things. With the file.’

‘Yes. Comparing grades. We need to compare grades,’ Mark adds, thinking he must create a more compelling lie. He’s had to do quite a lot of lying lately, and he finds that colleagues will generally
believe anything that has to do with grades and examination. The school year is almost over, after all.

‘Just make sure you keep the documents in the envelopes in alphabetical order. You know how angry Harrison gets about things like that.’ Ms Brooke absently scratches her cheek as she glances at the files on the table in the archive room. She opens her mouth as though there is something else she would like to share, then thinks better of it. She flashes her colleagues a doubtful smile, wishes them good luck and leaves the archive room.

The moment the door closes and falls into the lock behind her, Mark lets out the breath he didn’t know he was holding.

‘Oh my God, Gary. That was absolutely awful. What if you hadn’t locked the door? She could have walked in on you giving me head!’

‘I know. That was close.’ Gary mimes a relieved wipe of his forehead. He looks too casual for Mark’s liking.

‘It was awful, Gary.’ Mark puts away the file he’d been holding. He’s not hard anymore, and he’s glad, for he doesn’t think he ever wants to cuddle in here ever again. ‘I don’t see how we’re ever going to become a proper couple now, you know. It’s like we’re always busy and surrounded by people.’

Mark stops talking long enough to take a short breath, then continues. ‘And even if we weren’t so busy, what about your tour? How are we ever going to meet up this summer when you don’t have any days off and I can’t afford to see you?’

Mark has uttered all of this with the speed of light. It’s obvious that these are thoughts that have been on his mind for some time. Gary personally thinks he can see the positives of their quick cuddle just now, but Mark must have found their run-in with Ms Brooke rather vexing.

Gary’s used to having to hide away in the dark corners of recording studios and concert venues, but not Mark. Mark doesn’t know what it’s like to always have to kiss in secret because Mark doesn’t know how famous Gary Barlow really is.

‘I know. I’m sorry, Mark. I should have thought this through. I didn’t.’

‘It’s not that. It’s . . .’ Mark looks up at the ceiling as though he’s asking some invisible deity why this stuff always happens to them. ‘It’s us. This. Constantly having to hide but not being able to do anything. I hate it. I hate that I won’t be able to see you this summer and that I don’t know if we’re still going to be together when the new school year starts.’

Gary told Mark when his tour takes place the other day. It starts on the first day of the summer holidays, right on the tail of the summer prom, and it ends on the Sunday before the new school year. In other words, the boys will not be seeing each other for the entirety of the summer holidays, which might as well be a lifetime.

The only thing they’ll have is each other’s texts and photos, and what good will that do? There’s no way they’re going to sustain texting each other for six weeks, especially not with Gary having to spend each night in different bed in a different city because he’ll be busy being a successful performing artist.

The worry shows on Mark’s face. Where there was previously a smile, there is now an uncharacteristic frown that Gary wishes he could kiss away.

‘Tell me what’s on your mind, Mark.’
Mark sighs. I’m worried that us not seeing each other enough will make us not be in love anymore. We haven’t even made love or been on a date yet, and now I’m supposed to wait for you to come back to me all summer long. What if we grow apart? What if you come back from your tour and you don’t like me anymore? What if our relationship is always going to involve us hiding from our colleagues? Cos don’t get me wrong, Gary, this has been wonderful, you know . . . kissing you and having you touch me – and getting to know each other . . . But what if we’re never going to do more than that? What then?’

‘I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.’

‘How?’

‘I’ll send you lots of pictures of me on tour. We could video chat!’

‘You know that’s not what I mean.’ Mark gives a shake of his head, saying, you’ve not been listening to me. ‘I want you properly, Gary. Not just pics. I want to be with you and make love to you and be in a relationship with you. The problem is that it’s a bit difficult being in a relationship when you have about thirty different jobs.’

Mark says this quite sarcastically, but he does mean it. It’s impossible to have some sort of relationship with someone when they’re always busy.

‘I guess you could always volunteer for the summer prom,’ Gary suggests quasi-seriously.

Mark snorts disbelievingly. ‘And do what?’

‘Well, think about it. I’m the one organising the event, aren’t I? That means I’ve seen the venue. I know which acts perform where and when. I can easily secure a room somewhere so we can get away from the party for a couple of minutes.’

‘A couple of minutes,’ Mark reiterates sceptically. He doesn’t look at all convinced.

‘I don’t mind if it’s quick.’

‘I do.’ Outside the door, Mark can hear the floor creaking as people walk past. He holds his breath and waits until the strangers are out of earshot before he speaks again. ‘If we do meet up at the summer prom, we’ll still have to be secretive. We’ll still run the risk of getting caught. Can’t we just go to your place?’

Mark has asked Gary this a million times already, and Gary’s answer has always been the same. ‘I’m still refurbishing. You can’t rush a parquet floor, Mark!’

‘A hotel, then,’ Mark suggests.

‘Too expensive.’

Mark sighs. It’s impossible to go on a date with this man. ‘If I do agree to volunteer for the summer prom so we can snog for five minutes, will you actually have the time for it?’

‘Of course! I’m the organiser of the event. I can do whatever I want. I just need to remember that I have to head to the airport for my UK tour that same morning.’

Mark rolls his eyes, but in a loving sort of way. ‘Of course you do. Remind me where you’re headed?’
‘Glasgow. I think. Anyway, the summer prom is in only four weeks, so you won’t have to wait for long . . .’

In spite of Mark’s annoyance at not being able to date Gary properly, he gladly returns the kiss he’s being offered.

‘Actually, Gary . . .’ Mark breaks off the kiss and gives Gary a shy smile. ‘Now that I think about it, I did think about volunteering for the summer prom to get you alone. But only briefly. I wasn’t seriously going to do it. Naima and Mimi from that first-year Songwriting group made me think about it.’

Gary’s smiles widely. ‘See! So it isn’t such a bad idea after all. Shall I put you in charge of drinks?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Tickets, then! You’ll be in charge of checking everyone’s tickets at the door.’

Mark thinks about it. Checking students’ tickets doesn’t sound so bad. ‘All right, then. I’ll check tickets at the door. But if we haven’t spoken to each other by the time Dua Lipa shows up, I’m never helping you out again, all right?’ And he gives Gary the biggest ever smile.

‘I knew you’d come round to it in the end. I bet students will love having you there!’

They’ve taken a seat on the old table in the archive room. Once you shove the files to one side, it’s not such a bad place to sit as long as you remember not to move too much. The table would probably collapse if Mark and Gary tried having sex on it.

‘Are there many students coming?’

‘Students were able to buy tickets over the past few weeks. We sold over five hundred.’

Mark’s eyes go wide. ‘Wow.’

‘I know. It’s mostly third-years that have bought tickets, but we’ve got a few first- and second-years coming too. I’m hoping the new posters in the corridors help.’

Mark has seen the posters Gary is talking about. It features quite a large collage of the acts that are performing, like Dua Lipa, Mr Donald and a special guest. Ms Nas and Mrs Stohl spent all Thursday afternoon putting them up.

‘Apart from me, who else is volunteering?’

‘Howard, cos he’s DJing. Jason is going to keep an eye on students. We’re also working together with the students from a security training course from a vocational school in the area. There are a few others, but I’d have to look at me spreadsheet.’

‘And the venue?’

‘An old industrial building. Lots of hidden rooms everywhere.’ Gary studies Mark’s face. ‘Sound good?’

‘Sounds good.’

They share a quick kiss on the mouth. Whilst Mark is genuinely glad that he has the prom to look forward to, there’s still the pressing issue of Gary’s summer tour. Mark will literally not be able to see Gary for six weeks. ‘Now that we’ve agreed to meet up at the prom, what about the summer
holidays? I’ll still have to wait for you all summer long, and if you have to head to the airport on the 
morning the prom then I don’t see how we’ll be able to have more than a quick snog.’

‘That sounds a bit like you’re desperate for me, Mr Owen.’

Mark rolls his eyes in the way only Mark Owen can, with a mix of love and childishness. ‘You’re not 
seeing my point. How can we ever be boyfriends if we can’t see each other for weeks? How are we even 
going to become a proper item? It’s not like I can book a flight to come and meet you in, I don’t know, 
Amsterdam or something.’

Amsterdam was the first city that came to Mark’s mind, but Gary’s eyes lit up with an epiphany. ‘That’s it! Amsterdam! We should volunteer for the school trip to Amsterdam!’

Mark blinks. ‘Sorry, what?’

Gary sits straight. He’s visibly excited. ‘Last time I went on a school excursion with the Composition 
and Songwriting students, we’d have the nights off. We’d be falling over ourselves trying to keep 
students entertained all day, but the nights were ours to fill in. We could do anything we wanted. 
Some teachers went to see a concert. Howard went to bed after he’d had tea. But you know what was 
really great about the trip? We had twin rooms. As in, two-person bedrooms. The student were 
all staying in cheap hostels with the girls in one dorm and the boys in the other, but the teachers had 
rooms to themselves. Four teachers, two rooms. Meaning that if we volunteered . . .’

Gary has been talking so quickly that Mark strains to make sense of everything. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I’m saying we could finally share a room, Mark.’

Then the penny drops. ‘We could share a room! We’d finally be alone together!’ Mark practically 
glowes at Gary. He’s never been to Europe before. ‘You really think that there’ll be twin rooms for 
the volunteering teachers?’

‘Positive, mate. We could ask Ms Brooke now?’

* 

The lads find Miss Brooke in the staff room. It’s so crowded that there are hardly any seats left, but Gary spots two empty chairs next to Mr Orange, who’s busy marking essays, his tongue sticking out 
of his mouth. Gary asks if him if he could please borrow the chairs and pops them next to Ms 
Brooke.

He and Mark sit. ‘Liiiiiz?’

Ms Brooke looks up from the pile of paper in front of her. ‘Yes, Gary?’

‘You don’t happen to still need volunteers for the excursion team, do you? The excursion for the 
Composition and Songwriting students, that is.’

‘I . . . do, actually.’ Ms Brooke puts down the pen she was using to mark her students’ writing 
exams. By the looks of the pile of papers in front of her, she still has about twenty exams to go. 
‘Why’d you ask?’

Gary glances at Mark, who gives him an encouraging nod. ‘Me and Mark were just wondering what we’d have to do if we volunteered is, all.’

Ms Brooke squints at him sceptically. ‘I thought you’ve been on one of these things before. Didn’t
you came along when we went to London a couple of years ago? You know, when you took us on a tour through the Royal Albert Hall? You’re the one who organised it.’

‘Oh, I’m just asking for Mark, I am. Cos you’ve never been on an excursion before, have you, Mark?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘I haven’t, no. I’m willing to learn, though.’ Very willing, he thinks, with a glance at Gary.

‘There isn’t much to it,’ Ms Brooke explains with a shrug. She must have given this explanation a million times already. ‘You’ll mainly be there to keep an eye on the kids and make sure they work on the exercise book me and Howard wrote. Most of it is just, you know, take a pic of this, write a song for that, blah, blah, but we do want the excursion to be fairly educational. They’ll be graded for the exercises when we get back to the UK.’

‘So we’ll just be helping them do the exercises?’ Mark asks.

‘Pretty much. Some of the questions are about the city itself, though, so it’d help if you read a book about Amsterdam beforehand. You don’t have to, though. I don’t think the exercises get much more difficult than finding a specific artwork in the city centre or looking up the name of a Dutch singer-songwriter. We’re not asking the impossible.’ Ms Brooke looks at Mark, then at Gary. ‘I take it you’re interested in coming along, then?’

‘We are, yeah.’ Gary takes a deep breath. This is it. Within now and three seconds, he’ll need to come up with a believable reason for asking Liz whether there will be twin rooms. He bullshits his way out of it. ‘The problem is, Liz – I’m a really light sleeper, I am. I’m worried that if I came along I wouldn’t be able to sleep cos of the students making a racket next to me!’

‘Oh, God, please don’t bring that idea into the world,’ Ms Brooke groans. ‘You’re not going to be sharing a dorm with the students. God, no. Especially with those kids’ hormones going haywire? Ugh. No, thanks. We’ll be travelling with about four members of staff, so I’m going to book two twin suites in a hostel I stayed at last year. The students get the dorm rooms on the first floor. Unless the students start partying outside your door, you should be able to sleep just fine.

‘You will have to intervene if the students do end up having a party, though. We don’t want to be banned from going to Amsterdam forever. A big part of being on the excursion team is making sure the students are on their best behaviour, basically,’ Ms Brooke tells Mark in particular, who has actually gone and started making notes of all the things his colleague has been saying in his notebook. He’s underlined the word “twin suite” with enough force to make a sound.

‘When you say twin suites . . .’ Mark tries his best not to look as excited as he feels. Amsterdam could be the perfect opportunity to get Gary alone. ‘You mean two teachers will be sharing a room, right?’

‘That is the whole point of twin suites, yes.’ Mark must not go on holiday an awful lot, Ms Brooke thinks.

‘And there will be an ensuite bathroom?’ Gary asks.

Ms Brooke squints again. She doesn’t know why, but there’s something very suspicious about Mark and Gary today. ‘You two are very particular about where you’ll be staying. Have you had really bad experiences at youth hostels or something?’

‘Now that you mention it, I have actually . . .’ And Gary starts talking about that one time he stayed
at a hostel during the release of his second single and fans would bang on all the hostel’s doors trying to find him. None of the hostel’s customers slept much that night, and he and his team were disallowed from ever staying at the hostel again.

‘Banging on people’s doors isn’t something I can’t see our first-years doing, so you’ll probably be all right. And there will be ensuite bathrooms, yes,’ Ms Brooke explains. ‘We’re not expecting the teachers to use the communal bathrooms.’

Mark and Gary share a look. ‘That sounds all right, then, doesn’t it?’ Mark says.

‘It does, actually,’ says Gary. He can imagine it already: him and Mark, shagging in their twin suites all night. However: ‘What about breakfast, though, Liz? I can’t live without a good English breakfast, me.’

Ms Brooke makes a face. ‘Dutch people generally don’t eat beans and sausages for breakfast, so you’ll have to do with a continental breakfast, I’m afraid. I hope there will be gluten-free alternatives or else I’m gonna have a stomach ache all week. Anyway, lemme just get this in writing.’

Ms Brooke takes a piece of paper out of her shoulder bag. It’s some sort of form by the looks of it, with the words “COMPOSITION AND SONGWRITING – SCHOOL EXCURSION 2018-2019” written on it in big, fat letters. Mark can see Howard’s name on it already. ‘What do you think, then? Are you guys up for it? The excursion takes place in the first week of the school year, so right after your tour, I believe, Gary.’

‘I’d love to,’ Gary says.

‘So would I.’ Mark nods so hard that it hurts his neck.

‘Great! I’ll add your names to the form now.’

That settles it. Mark and Gary are going to Amsterdam together. It’ll be a lot of hard work, but at night they’ll be free to do whatever they want to each other. It’ll be perfect.

‘By the way, did you manage to find that file you were looking for earlier?’ Ms Brooke nods at her pile of exams in front of her. ‘I need it to compare grades.’

Mark and Gary had already gotten up from their chairs. They give each other nervous looks. They’d completely forgotten that Ms Brooke had asked them to hand them the file of M_SW3B, the third-year Songwriting group.

‘We – we couldn’t find it,’ Gary lies. He’s turned quite red, and he holds himself stiffly when Ms Brooke gives him a doubtful look.

‘The file was lost,’ Mark nods, looking just as flushed. ‘I’m sorry, Ms Brooke, Miss.’

Ms Brooke hums. She was pretty sure she’d spotted the file on the table in the archive room right before she left, but it hardly matters. She smiles vaguely and tries not to laugh when her colleagues almost fall over each other trying to run out of the staff room.

Silly boys.
From the next chapter, this fic finally starts earning its “explicit” rating.
PART FIVE

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the end of the school year is almost near. Gary has big plans to get Mark alone during the summer prom, but his plans are spoiled when there’s a sudden change in the itinerary of his tour, which starts tomorrow. What if he doesn’t get to see Mark again until after the summer?

Meanwhile, Rob hears news about the dissertation he handed in.

Chapter Notes

"LESSON TWENTY-NINE: THE PROM" features some smut. Angsty smut. Who knew being in a relationship with a semi-successful singer-songwriter-teacher could be so frustrating?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[LESSON TWENTY-SIX: FINALS WEEK]

Before everyone knows it, there are only two weeks of the school year left. One day, new students are still struggling to find their way on campus – the next, students suddenly find themselves having to sit three exams in one day.

Because of all these exams and assessments, Gary has spent all Monday and Tuesday listening to recordings of his students’ piano skills. Rob still doesn’t know whether he’s passed his dissertation about dyslexia. Mr Donald looks more awake than ever as he and Mr Orange assess and grade over a dozen original choreographies, designed by the third-year students from the Dancing & Choreography course. On Wednesday, Ms Brooke finalises the itinerary of next year’s school excursion to Amsterdam in the computer lab.

She accidentally forgets to book two twin suites for her colleagues.

On Thursday, a shy student tiptoes into the staff room and anxiously hands Mr Owen his writing dossier. If the student followed Mark’s clear instructions, his dossier should contain at least one original sonnet, one collaboration poem, one elegy, one haiku, three riddles and two songs. The student handed in his dossier a week after the due date, but Mark has already had to read and mark so many different dossiers that another one won’t make a difference. He accepts the students’ dossier without a single complaint and gets to marking it immediately.

The student gets a B+. Apart from one dossier that had clearly copied everything from Every Kind of Poem You Will Ever Need at School, Mark’s students have all passed Creative Writing. When it comes to the subject he graduated in four months ago, Mark has nothing to fear.
Things are different when it comes to Art History. Mark’s had to write and supervise the exam himself, so when he finally gains the courage to have a look at how his students did, he can’t help but feel a little nervous. If his students performed too well, Mr Harrison could say that the exam was too easy. If the students all did badly, people could argue that Mark’s a shit teacher and that his magazine project about Greek Art was a failed experiment. Bad grades would imply that the project failed.

Mark carefully opens the brown envelope that has the exam papers in it. He put the papers in there himself, so everything should be in alphabetical order.

The first exam Mark takes out of the envelope was handed in by Abdul, a talkative student who is very social, but not very good when it comes to studying. Mark takes his hand-written rubric that has all the answers on it and starts going through Abdul’s papers with red ink.

Abdul’s handwriting is a chore to get through, but he has the first three answers correct. He did less well on questions four and five.

Mark adds a red tick to every question Abdul has correct, sometimes even writing a smiley next to an answer that he thought was particularly clever. By the time he reaches the final question, Mark has jotted down twenty-four ticks in all, which amounts to a respectable B.

The next student, Alex, does less well. He’s skipped an entire page and ends up scoring a C. Mark already knows that Alex probably won’t stay at school; he is much more interested in accountancy than music or art. Why he ever applied for a course here, Mark has no idea. It’s probably just a case of Alex choosing something simply because he felt like he had to.

The rest of the grades are similarly mixed, but Mark can tell that his magazine project has genuinely helped. Leon, the oldest student in the group, made a very interesting online magazine about Greek art techniques, and as a result, Leon completely nails the question about how sculptures were made in Ancient Greece. It’s obvious proof that writing about things makes you remember them better.

The next two exam papers, handed in by Chen and Stanley, score perfect A’s. Stanley’s even added a little footnote about how much he loved Mr Owen’s lessons this term.

Mark feels like a much better teacher after that.

When Mark finally finishes grading all exam papers from A_WD1E, the clock has already struck four. The results aren’t perfect, but he’ll take what he can get. The exam was doable but not too difficult, and he’s proven that he’s not a terrible teacher. He’s also shown that his magazine project is worth doing again.

What more could you want?

(Apart from, you know, finally getting your boyfriend alone.)

(Not that Mark’s priority this week is getting Mr Barlow alone. Oh no. His priority, by far, is marking his exams. But it helps that he has the summer prom to look forward to . . .)

Mr Barlow’s pianos assessments are usually the most nerve-racking moments of term. They consist of two parts: one, playing an existing arrangement to perfection; two, an original composition. It’s easy to judge a student’s piano skills when they have to play a famous TV theme tune or a pop song, but it’s much more difficult to judge a person’s original work. It’s hard to stay objective, so Gary always tries to judge a composition based on the execution of the task, like if you were to judge a
painting on its application of paint. Whether or not he actually likes the original composition does not come into it.

But today, Gary’s had to sit through quite a few original compositions he genuinely hated.

There was the girl playing something that sounded like a tune from a horror movie; the guy who pretended that his flat notes were all part of the act; and the girl who’d misunderstood the task completely and played the same three chords for ten minutes in a row. Gary all gave them passing grades in the end, but he seriously questioned their taste levels. Some people just aren’t made to become composers.

By the time Gary welcomes the twenty-third exam taker of the day into his classroom, he can tell that his attention span is beginning to fade.

He knows he has to focus, but he’d much rather be with Mark and talk about what they’re going to do at the summer prom and where. He’s had another look at the floorplan of the party venue, and he reckons they could meet up outside, near the water, where no-one can come and see them. They’d be able to look out across the canals, but no-one would be able to look at them.

As Gary grabs his pen and starts filling out the rubric he made to judge his students’ original songs, he wonders what Mark is doing right now. Supervising an exam, perhaps. Or marking his tests, feeling no doubt as bored of the school year as Gary does. That’s what always happens in July; once the classrooms begin to feel hot and stuffy and the weather forecasters on the news begin to warn people about a potential heatwave in the north of England, you don’t really want to at school anymore.

He just wishes the summer prom were here. It’s taking place next week, after all the final exams have taken place and the teachers have spent several hours discussing their students’ futures until there is nothing left to talk about. Most colleagues will probably feel exhausted.

It looks so close, the prom, but it isn’t, for Gary. There are still a million things he needs to do before he can allow himself to feel genuinely excited, like filling in all his bloody grades in the online student registration system or phoning the guys from SJM Concerts about the promo of his summer tour. Not to mention the fact that the stage for the prom still needs to be built and that one of his acts has called in sick at the last minute. He’s now trying to book a solo member of some boy band, but he has only a couple of days to do it in. If he can’t book an artist soon, the students will have to make do with yet another DJ.

Of course, Gary’s worries begin to fade whenever he thinks about Mark and what’ll be like to kiss him again. The longer he and Mark are apart, the more desperate he gets. He wants Mark now. He wants to make love to Mark today and take him home after, forever, but he can’t. Not when they’re always busy and Gary’s still pretending he’s refurbishing his floors.

He never even meant to lie to Mark about that. He always meant to tell Mark what his situation is like from the very beginning, but then he found out Mark knew absolutely nothing about his career and that he hadn’t even heard any of his songs, and Gary decided to go along with it. He decided to lie.

And it’s not that Gary feels particularly proud of that, but it’s a hundred times easier to be with someone when they don’t know how big you are. Previous lovers only wanted to be with Gary because it gave them bragging rights, but not Mark.

Mark likes Gary for what he is: a busy, geeky, thoughtful teacher who just so happens to have a tiny, tiny record deal.
LESSON TWENTY-SEVEN: MARK CAN’T KEEP A SECRET

There are now officially only three days until the end of the school year. Teachers stay up till late to mark last-minute resits. Staff meetings take place every day, discussing students’ results in aggravating detail. Concierges spend hours cleaning the classrooms in preparation for the school’s imminent hibernation. The only people who still visit the school are teachers; most students have already gone on holiday. Those who passed their exams already know they’ll be able to return to school once the summer ends. Those who failed will have to wait for the teachers to decide their faiths in one of their many staff meetings.

Mark’s engaged in one such meeting with several colleagues from the Music department when Rob enters the staff room brandishing an unopened envelope. He looks pale, and his usually gelled-up hair stands out at odd angles.

‘Is everything all right, Rob? You look like you’ve been run over.’ This comes from Howard, who’s just spent ten minutes arguing that a boy from M_SW1F ought to be transferred to another school because he’s obviously more interested in becoming a professional footballer. He wishes Gary were here to back him up, but Gary’s at Starbucks. Mr Harrison asked him to meet him to discuss brand new plans for his piano lab, and he thought he might persuade Gary better by offering him lots of tea.

Rob lets out a miserable sigh that makes everyone in the staff room share a worried look. ‘I don’t know about everything being all right, How, but you’re right about me feeling like I’ve been run over.’

Mr Orange, the Dance instructor whom Mark has only ever seen with his nose buried in a copy of The Way of the Peaceful Warrior, removes his bag from the vacant chair next to him. ‘Take a seat, Rob. Mike, grab him a glass of water if you will, mate.’

Rob stumbles into the chair with the flexibility and joie de vivre of a one-hundred-year-old man with arthritis. He’s still clutching his envelope to his chest; the same white envelope he’s been holding, anxiously, ever since he received it in the post that morning.

‘What’s in the envelope?’ Mark asks.

‘It’s the results of me dissertation,’ Rob replies miserably. He shakily accepts the glass of water Mike offers him and down its contents in one quick gulp. ‘It says in here whether I’ve passed or not.’

‘Is that the dissertation about support for dyslexic students within vocational education? I’ve been curious about that for a while,’ Mr Orange remarks. There’s an intrigued twinkle in his eyes, and it’s only now that Mark notices how handsome Mr Orange is, which does not seem to have gone unnoticed; the moment the handsome dancing instructor started speaking to Rob, Rob went from being pale to turning bright red, like a tomato. ‘You always seemed to be glued to your laptop studying for your teacher training. I hope you’ll get the result you want.’

‘So do I, Jay, but I’m too scared to open it! I’m fucking terrified.’ Rob places the envelope flat on the table in front of him. He’s looking at the thing like it’s a wild animal that’s about to bite him.

Rob’s spent the past school year with his nose buried in books about learning disabilities. It’s all resulted in his dissertation, a 10,000-word mess that he’s pretty sure contains over a million spelling...
errors. If he gets a passing grade for what he wrote (in this case, a B or above), he’ll finally be able to leave the computer lab and become one of the school’s official support teachers. It would mean that students that are on the verge of having to quit school because they had trouble reading or understanding an exam will be able to get the help they need. It would mean that he’s finally able to make a difference, like Mark and Gary and Howard and all the other teachers he looks up to.

If Rob has failed, however, he’ll have to write his dissertation all over again. It would take him another two months just to come up with a new subject – more than enough time for Rob to lose interest in becoming a support teacher altogether. If he doesn’t become a support teacher now, he might as well quit.

‘I could open it for you, if you want,’ Howard offers before putting his cup of coffee to his lips.

‘No thanks, How, but I don’t want you gettin’ coffee all over me letter, thank you very much.’

It’s only then that Rob sees all the papers spread out across the table: a sheet with pictures of students’ faces on it; several sheets with exam and test results; Mark’s notebook, scribbled full with brief comments about what he thinks of each student; a spreadsheet with the students’ attendance records, and yet more complicated-looking papers with numbers and percentages on them. Rob was so busy worrying about the contents of his envelope that it had slipped his mind that his colleagues still have quite a lot of meetings to get through.

He’s obviously poked his nose into something that doesn’t involve him. He takes his envelope and starts to get up. He isn’t technically a teacher, after all. ‘Anyway. I think I’ll just go and open the envelope on me own somewhere. I shouldn’t even be here, anyway. You’ve probably got more important stuff goin’ on.’

‘Don’t be silly, Rob,’ Mark says. ‘We’ll open it together.’

‘You’ll have our complete support,’ Mr Orange agrees. He winks, which almost makes Rob drop his envelope.

‘I think we need Gary if we wanna discuss these kids’ test results, anyway,’ Howard adds. Another sip of coffee.

Rob looks at the envelope, then at Mr Orange, who was sitting closest to him. ‘Jay? Will you do the honours?’

‘Gladly, Rob.’

Rob sits down again and slips the envelope into Mr Orange’s hands. He and Mr Orange briefly share a private look, and for a second that’s all Rob can think about.

Then Mr Orange starts slowly opening the envelope, and Rob feels his tummy feeling flipped like a pancake. To create more suspense, all the gathered teachers start drumming their hands on the table as their colleague takes out the letter containing Rob’s results. It looks quite pompous and official.

Mr Orange reads the letter twice, but his face doesn’t give anything away.

‘I’ve failed, haven’t I?’ Rob’s face looks more worried than Mark has ever seen it. ‘I bet it was all the spelling mistakes.’

Mr Orange doesn’t let Rob wait for long. He waits for his colleagues to stop drumming, clears his throat and reads the letter aloud. ‘Dear Mr Robert Peter Williams, we would hereby like to inform you that you have scored a sufficient mark for your dissertation named “Improving the treatment of
dyslexia and dyscalculia in vocational education programs” and that you have therefore completed your teacher training. You are henceforth qualified to help, assist and coach students of all ages with the challenges that come with dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia. Our sincerest compliments.”

Rob can’t believe his ears. He’s passed his exams! He’s finally allowed to call himself a support teacher!

‘Flippin’ hell.’ Rob accepts the letter with shaking hands as his colleagues erupt into warm applause. Mark, his new best friend, has immediately gotten up from his chair to give him a big hug.

‘That’s amazing, Rob. I’m so proud of you.’ And he gives Rob a big smooch on his cheek.

Other colleagues have gotten up to personally congratulate Rob too. Rob’s gone a bit pink at all the attention, but it’s Mr Orange’s hug that makes him blush most of all. ‘Cheers, lads. I r-really appreciate it.’

Rob looks at the letter in his shaking hands. Every word Mr Orange read aloud is true: he’s passed his dissertation, he’s allowed to call himself a support teacher and he’s finally finished his teacher training. Next year, he’ll be working at the Vocational School of Music and Art as one of the Music department’s support teachers, helping students with dyslexia and dyscalculia, but also other learning disabilities.

This is fucking ace.

By the time everyone has finished congratulating Rob privately, ten minutes have passed. Judging by the list that Mark was looking at earlier, they still have to discuss over a dozen students with unsatisfactory test results. One grade could be the difference between a student enrolling into year two or having to register for a course elsewhere.

‘Here’s an idea, lads, how about I get everyone coffee?’ Rob smiles broadly. ‘It’ll be my treat cos I passed me exams and stuff. You might get through the meeting quicker!’

‘You shouldn’t have to pay for your own treat!’ Mark gets out his wallet and takes out a ten-pound note. ‘Do you reckon ten pounds is enough? I know Starbucks can be really expensive.’

Rob shakes his head. ‘Oh, I can’t, Mark. You worked hard for that money! Let me pay.’ And he fishes a wrinkled fiver from the pocket of his jeans.

‘You could always ask Gary to chip in,’ Mr Stevens jibes, and a couple of colleagues burst out laughing, like it’s some sort of inside joke.

Mark laughs uncertainly. He asks Mr Stevens to explain what’s so funny, but Howard painfully jabs his foot into Mr Steven’s ankle before he can say.

‘Get me a Flat White,’ Howard grunts as he digs his hands into his pockets and gets out a ten-pound note to match Mark’s. He shoves it into Mark’s hands. ‘Large, please.’

‘Jeez, How, a large Flat White?’ Rob’s eyes have gone almost as large as his face.

‘Yes, Rob, a large Flat White. You try having to change nappies all night and staying awake at work.’

Mark looks at all the money he’s holding, then at Mr Donald and Mr Stevens. There’s something really fishy going on, Mark thinks. Why would Gary chipping in for a drink from Starbucks be funny? Gary’s been to Starbucks before. Gary’s been to Starbucks with him, where they drank tea
and cappuccino and Mark had to avoid looking at Gary as he licked the foam off his hands. Gary had even offered to pay.

So why did his colleagues laugh?

Mark never gets the chance to ask. The fact that he’s the one holding the money apparently means that he’s also in charge of going to Starbucks. His colleagues start barking orders at him like he’s some sort of waiter at a restaurant.

‘Get me a muffin, please, mate,’ says Mr Hepburn.

‘A chicken sandwich, thanks. Gluten-free if they have any,’ says Ms Brooke. ‘I get a stomach ache if I so much look at bread.’

‘Another Flat White for me,’ says Mrs Lumberg.

Mark’s so flustered by everyone giving him requests that he’s already forgotten what Howard wanted. ‘Why am I supposed to get everything?’

Howard laughs. ‘You said it yourself, Mark – Rob shouldn’t be the one getting his own treats, should he?’

‘Besides,’ he adds in a whisper so only Mark can hear, ‘Gary and Mr Harrison went to Starbucks earlier. You can tell ‘em to get back ‘ere if you see ‘em.’ He smiles at Mark then, warmly and secretly, and Mark suddenly realises that Howard knows about his relationship with Gary.

It’s so obvious, now that Mark thinks about it. Howard has been looking at him funny ever since that day he and Gary snuck off to the concert hall together, like he’s constantly on the verge of saying something and then swallowing it at the last minute. Not to mention the fact that, only yesterday, Howard casually left the staff room when he could tell that he and Gary wanted to have a moment alone.

Having colleagues finding out about them was the last thing Mark wanted, but for some reason he doesn’t feel that worried about Howard knowing. He and Gary sneaked off to the concert hall weeks ago, and he still hasn’t heard any comments about their relationship behind his back. If Howard does know, he has kept their relationship completely secret.

Mark promises Howard that he’ll buy him the biggest Flat White he can get his hands on.

The first thing Mark does when he walks into Starbucks is checking whether he sees Gary anywhere. A lot of teachers from the Art department have claimed a table somewhere to mark exams or read overdue essays, but he doesn’t see Gary anywhere. If he did indeed come here to talk business with Mr Harrison, they must have left ages ago. Gary could be on his way back to the school now, not knowing that Mark and Rob are here looking for him.

Mark focuses his attention on the food display next to the bar. There are over a dozen different baked goods to choose from: lemon cakes; muffins; donuts with chocolate glazing; tiny cake pops that look like a delicious cross between a cupcake and a lollipop; tasty gluten-free chicken sandwiches that drip cheese when you toast them; tomato and mozzarella panini; butter croissants; cinnamon buns; blueberry scones; cheese bagels; oat cookies; classic coffee cakes and chocolate brownies. Mark and Gary didn’t eat anything when they were here last, so Mark’s mouth is watering just looking at everything.
Unfortunately, there isn’t much Mark can do but stare; it turns out that twenty-five pounds doesn’t get you very far at Starbucks. Howard’s Flat White alone costs about five pounds, and the cakes, muffins, sandwiches and cinnamon buns that everyone wanted him to get are so bloody expensive that Mark ends up buying a handful of cake pops instead. It’s not much, but they look rather tasty.

Rob’s waiting for Mark outside. Everyone insisted that Rob shouldn’t be the one getting the treats, but he likes being with Mark and he needed the fresh air, anyway. Waiting for Jason to open his envelope has given him a proper headache. Not to mention the fact that Jason hugging him made him feel all floaty inside. It’s best not to think about it.

The door opens, and out comes Mark. Rob eyes what he’s holding. He’s holding a single cup of coffee in his right hand and a paper bag in his left. The bag looks far too small for all the food his colleagues requested ten minutes ago. ‘Have they shrunk the sandwiches, or . . . ?’

‘I didn’t have enough money.’ Mark holds up the cup in his right hand. It has “Owen” scribbled on it in fat black marker, with a small doodle of a flower underneath. All the baristas are students from the Art department, and they always take time to decorate the paper cups no matter how busy it is. ‘Howard’s coffee took up the entire budget. I had to buy cake pops instead.’

Rob shrugs. ‘Works for me, mate.’

They make their way back to the school. The sun is out, so the boys take the long way round. It’s so hot outside that they were able to leave their summer jackets in the staff room.

Mark’s clearly enjoying their walk. He walks the gravel path up to the school nearly every day, but there’s something quite special about seeing the school set so perfectly against the blue sky. Almost all the students have already gone on holiday, so the school grounds have become a quiet oasis.

Of course, the school year isn’t over yet. It’s only when you leave the gravel path and enter the building that you realise that over a hundred exams still need marking. Teachers don’t leave the building until six o’clock on most work days. Files and exams pile up on the tables in the staff room. Administrative workers stay at school all day so they can fill in the results of the third years’ internships. Some teachers are already making preparations for next school year.

Unfortunately, there are over a dozen students whose futures still need to be decided. The students’ results are neither good nor bad: they’re split evenly between having the talent for entering the Music industry and having no talent at all. Mr Harrison would argue that they all deserve a second chance because it would mean higher student numbers and more money for everyone involved, but sometimes students simply get bad grades because they’re in the wrong place.

Mark thought that about himself, for a while. He thought that his struggles with class management and Art History must mean that he wasn’t made to be a teacher. He doesn’t even know if he’d still be here if he hadn’t met Gary and Rob. Without them, his first experience as an NQT would unquestioningly have ended in disaster.

Without Rob, Mark would never have survived anything.

Mark nudges Rob’s arm with his elbow. He gives him a proud, loving look – the sort of look only Mark Owen can give you. ‘So how do you feel now that you can officially call yourself a support teacher?’

‘Fucking amazing, to be honest.’ Rob smiles at Mark, and it looks like sunshine. ‘I didn’t realize how much I wanted this till that letter arrived this morning. This is going to change me life so much, Mark. Cos me job in the computer lab was great, mate, don’t get me wrong, but this is such a big
deal. You know what I mean? This is going to be so good.’

‘I can imagine!’ Mark spots a small bump in the gravel path and steps over it. He’s holding Howard’s cup of coffee like his life depends on it. ‘It must be wonderful to become a support teacher next year. Do you know what your tasks will be yet?’

Rob grins. He’s loving the prospect of getting to be a support teacher, and it shows; he looks genuinely happy, happier than Mark has ever seen him. ‘I’m gonna be doing all sorts, Mark. I’ll be doin’ lesson visits and one-on-one chats, and I might even visit students at their work placements if they’ll have me. I’ll even have me own office! Well, along with two others, anyway. But I’m pretty sure my name will be added to the plate on the door. And I’ll never have to deal with staff meetings again, ever.’

Mark tries to recall where Rob will be working. The support teacher’s office is next to Mr Harrison’s office. He first saw the office when Mr Harrison told him he’d be teaching Art History.

That first day seems like so long ago now. He can’t even remember what his first day at VCMA was like other than that he didn’t sleep that evening. His mind kept him up all night, replaying different fragments of conversations that he’d heard that day. His inner voice had become a spinning wheel of restless thoughts about class management, Greek Art, exams, rowdy students and writing portfolios. He hardly slept for a week.

It’s a miracle he even got through that first week, now that Mark thinks about it. It must have been the thought of seeing Gary again that kept getting out of bed each day.

Now, though, Mark gets out of bed each day because he genuinely wants to. He loves teaching now, more than anything in the world, and he can’t see himself doing anything else. Looking at Rob grinning and smiling quietly to himself, he figures it must be the same for him. Once Rob takes on the mantle of support teacher, his life at the school will be completely different.

‘Mr Harrison must be pretty happy that we’ll have another support teacher at school,’ Mark says. ‘You could be the difference between a student staying and leaving.’

‘I know. That’s what we do it for, right? You know, students actually staying and stuff. You don’t want a student to get kicked off just cos they’ve got dyslexia. It’s what happened to me – the only reason I did so badly at school is cos no-one knew how to deal with the fact that words looked all funny when I tried to them. I don’t think I even knew I had dyslexia till I was older. But I do now, and now I can prevent students from leaving school early like I did.

‘Students shouldn’t stop bein’ an artist just cos they have difficulty readin’ a textbook. I think it’s going to be really good. And like I said – no staff meetings and people moaning that I’m not being “social” enough. I had enough of that crap when Mr Harrison got angry with me when I didn’t go to that graduation ceremony.’

*And when I nearly had an anxiety attack during the open day last year,* Rob thinks. But he isn’t going to tell Mark that, because telling him would involve talking about the person who helped him get through the attack.

‘I can’t wait to move into me office,’ he says instead.

Mark can’t help but feel warm and proud inside. There’s a contagious enthusiasm in Rob’s voice whenever he talks about becoming a support teacher. It’s a complete 180-degree change from the last time they spoke about it. Back then, a couple of weeks ago, Rob went off on a tangent about how teachers always have to present this flawless image of themselves, like they’re robots that cannot ever
malfunction in case they get disposed of.

Mark guesses that is partly true (after all, is Mark himself not trying to make himself look “better” and more perfect by pretending he hasn’t been snogging Mr Barlow?), but there’s no shame in admitting your flaws either. It’s okay that Rob struggles with big groups and staff meetings and that he’d much rather help students one-on-one. It’s okay that Mark still doesn’t know an awful lot about Greek art. It’s just how you deal with it that matters – and as far as Mark is concerned, Rob has dealt with his issues admirably.

‘You know I’m really proud of you, right?’ Mark tells Rob as they walk up the stairs to the school entrance. He’s still clutching Howard’s coffee cup and his bag of treats like they’re the Queen’s private jewels. ‘Really, really proud.’

‘Cheers, Mark. I’m proud of you too, you know!’ Rob’s mouth curls at the corners. ‘Especially with you and Gary finally bein’ an item now . . .’

‘Aw. Thanks, Rob. That means a lot.’

‘So you two are an item, then?’

Mark stops in his tracks. ‘Huh?’

‘You just said you and Gary were an item.’

Mark turns very quickly bright red. Mortified at his own stupid response, he completely panics and rushes off.

Literally.

Mark ignores Rob’s shouts and speed-walks into the school as quickly as his short legs will carry him, not caring if he drops his bag of cake pops or if the coffee sloshes out of Howard’s paper cup.

He even doesn’t apologise when he almost runs into Mrs Stohl by accident. He just runs.

‘Mark! Come back ‘ere, mate! Mark!’

Mark ignores Rob completely. He doesn’t want to look him in the eye ever again. He never wants to talk to anyone again, ever. He wants the ground to swallow him whole and spit him up in a place where people don’t know him.

This was never supposed to happen. Rob wasn’t supposed to find out about them!

This is a disaster! Now two people know!

‘Come back, Mark!’

Mark makes a sudden right-handed turn into an empty corridor, but Rob’s a lot quicker. He corners Mark in front of the men’s toilets and glares at him accusatorially.

‘I knew you two had been snogging.’

Mark tenses and clutches his bag of cake pops to his chest. ‘You have it all wrong. We – we haven’t been doing anything.’

‘Then why did you say you’re an item?’
‘We’re not.’

‘You just said you were!’

‘I was joking. It was a joke.’

Rob’s eyes narrow. He looks at Mark as though he’s weighing him up and down. ‘A joke.’

‘Y-yes.’ Mark’s actually trembling. He knows that Howard knows about them too, but this is different. This is Robert Williams, the guy who has no filter and changes the subject every three minutes. If he knows, everyone in the world will know.

‘Mark. Mate.’ Rob’s eyes soften. ‘I’ve worked at this school for ages. I’ve had to sit through students lyin’ to me face for the past three years. I can tell that you’re not being entirely honest. Sorry, mate.’

There’s nothing else for Mark to say. He’s been caught red-handed. And you know what?

He doesn’t even mind. Keeping a secret fucking sucks.

‘Fine.’ Mark rolls his eyes and casts one quick look down both ends of the corridor before pulling Rob into the men’s restrooms. He deposits his Starbucks bag and coffee cup on one of the basin countertops and checks whether the stalls are empty.

When he’s sure that no one’s around, Mark takes a deep breath, clears his throat and says, quite loudly and quickly, as though he has been waiting to say these very words for his entire life and can’t be bothered to pause for breath, ‘Gary’s been my boyfriend for weeks.’

‘What?’

‘Gary’s been my boyfriend for weeks,’ Mark reiterates heavily. He knows he’s not supposed to drink Howard’s coffee, but he takes a gulp anyway. He coughs as the coffee goes down the wrong way and tries again. ‘We’re together. We’ve been snogging. A lot.’

Rob isn’t sure whether he should feel thrilled or not. He’s been praying for Mark and Gary to get together for months, but Mark looks weirdly upset. ‘If you two have finally been snogging, then why do you say that like someone’s died?’

‘Because I don’t want people to find out about it. And, well, it’s been a bit difficult.’

‘Difficult how?’

Mark doesn’t know how he can say this without sounding like he’s desperate for Gary’s cock.

He looks around him for some sort of inspiration or clue, but it doesn’t really help: everywhere he looks, students have vandalised the walls with lewd messages about sex or love. The door of one stall is completely covered in drawings of every subject possible: cartoon characters and famous faces, but also phallic symbols and a pair of rather large boobs. Another bathroom stall is entirely covered in strings of toilet paper, and Mark suddenly wishes he’d pulled Rob into a classroom instead.

What’s more, something about the restrooms makes Mark feel . . . nostalgic? Nostalgic. It’s a strange feeling to have in a restroom, but for a fleeting second Mark has this weird feeling he’s been in this very restroom before, under very different circumstances; perhaps when he did his job interview.

Yes, Mark thinks suddenly to himself, I came here after my job interview. It hadn’t gone very well,
the interview, and he’d locked himself into one of the stalls to have a bit of a cry.

The memory is pretty sketchy, and Mark vaguely remembers someone comforting him after he’d admitted the job interview had gone terribly. He can’t really remember. It doesn’t matter, anyway; he got the job in the end.

‘Mark.’ Rob has to wave his hand in front of Mark’s face. ‘We were talking about why your relationship with Gary has been so difficult?’

Mark blushes. ‘Well. Let’s just say we haven’t seen much, you know . . .’


‘You know.’ Mark makes a vague gesture in the air, meaning “sex”.

‘Cooking? Bowling. Flossing!’

Mark rolls his eyes. ‘Not that. I mean that we haven’t seen much . . . action, I guess. Being with Gary has been nice so far – really, really nice –, but we haven’t been able to . . . you know. Make love. Which is fine, cos obviously not everything is about sex and some people don’t even care about that sort of thing at all, which is fine also – but I just wanna make love to him, you know? I don’t wanna keep waiting to find out what it’s like.’

Rob lets out a low whistle between his lips, meaning, oh dear. ‘So what have you done?’

Mark tells Rob about their very first kiss in the concert hall. He skips the bit about getting intimate in the archive room, but he does tell Rob about how hard it’s been to go on a date because of Gary’s twenty-seven jobs and the fact that they both seem to be renovating parts of their apartment at the same time. He also tells Rob that they’ve volunteered for the first-year school excursion to Amsterdam just so they can finally be alone together.

The juicier Mark’s stories become, the more Rob starts glowing with pride. At first, Mark thought that Rob knowing about his relationship would be the worst thing in the world, but he actually feels like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders; when he catches his own reflection in one of the mirrors in the restroom, he can see himself smiling wider and bigger than ever.

He should have told Rob ages ago.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier,’ Mark says when he finishes his story about his first ever kiss with Gary. He absently traces his finger along the rim of Howard’s coffee cup. ‘I guess I was afraid that if I told you, you’d tell someone else . . .’

‘I don’t blame you, mate. This is so excitin’ that I wish I could tell everyone! But I won’t. I’ll never tell anyone, ever.’ And Rob pretends to be zipping his mouth shut.

Mark smiles. A warm, comforting feeling has begun to bloom in his eyes. ‘Cheers, mate.’

Rob just points at his closed mouth.

‘I think Mr Donald knows about us too, you know.’ Even though there is no-one around to hear them, Mark still lowers his voice into a whisper. ‘Did I mention he nearly walked in on us snogging? That was scary.’

Rob acts out unzipping his mouth again. ‘Has Howard not told anyone?’
‘I don’t think so.’

‘No, I can’t really imagine that he would. He’s a cool bloke, Howard. One question, though, completely unrelated – now that I know that you and Gary are officially an item, does that mean I get to see the nudes Gary has sent you?’

‘No.’ Mark’s answer is curt but polite.

‘Not even a peek?’

‘No.’

Rob shrugs his shoulders, meaning, *fair enough.* ‘What’s next for you, though? You and Gaz, I mean? Cos I’m fucking thrilled for you, mate, but it sounds to me like you won’t be havin’ a proper moment together till Gaz gets back from his tour.’

‘We’ve had *some* fun,’ Mark whispers with great satisfaction, and he tells Rob about his adventure in the archive room anyway. By the time he gets to the part when Gary kissed his tattoo, he is blushing furiously. ‘Unfortunately, Ms Brooke knocked on the door before we could take things further. I think I spent about two minutes trying to put my shirt back on . . .’

‘Did Liz – Ms Brooke – find out that you and Gary were . . . canoodling?’

‘I don’t think so. Maybe. I don’t know. Keeping our relationship a secret has been harder than I thought. Every time we try to sneak into a room to snog, someone else walks in.’

‘I bet it was worth it, though. Gettin’ it on at school like that? That’s fucking amazing.’

‘It was all right,’ Mark says, and he gives Rob a cheesy grin.

Kissing Gary was more than all right.

After Mark has finished telling Rob everything he and Gary have done so far, they slowly make their way back to the corridor.

There are hardly any people around. The only sound is that of an ambulance rushing past on the street outside the school. Only two students are still at school, sat in the canteen as they prepare themselves for a last-minute resit.

One of the concierges, a kind man in a red uniform, is busy removing old posters and reminders from the corkboards on the walls. Every remaining soul at the Vocational College of Music and Art seems to have locked themselves inside a room somewhere, discussing students’ futures as blue skies beckon them outside.

‘What about the summer holidays, though?’ Rob asks Mark as they head up a flight of stairs. ‘Are you and Gaz going to meet up at all?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘We can’t. There’s no time. Gary’s going on tour, remember? And I obviously can’t join him.’

‘So you’re seriously just going to wait till the end of the summer to see him again?’

‘We’re going to meet up at the summer prom this Friday. I’ve agreed to volunteer so that we can – you know, meet up somewhere at the venue and kiss, hopefully. It’ll be like a goodbye present for him. It’ll be good.’
Mark has said this very brightly, but Rob can sense some tension in him. He’s been friends with Mark long enough to know when something’s bothering him. ‘You don’t sound like you think it’ll be good.’

‘I do. I do think it’ll be good. But I guess I’m a little worried too.’

‘Worried that not seein’ Gaz for so long will make you grow apart?’

Mark nods. ‘Six weeks is a lifetime.’

‘It is, mate. It is.’ Rob pats Mark amicably on the back. ‘I guess it’s not too late to do some online research about how to take the best nudes.’

The suggestion is so preposterous that Mark nearly trips over his own two feet. ‘I am not going to send Gary naked pictures of myself.’

‘Why not? It’ll stop you two from losing interest in each other.’

‘Still not doing it.’ And Mark gives Rob a jovial jab with his elbow, feeling much better than he did before.

**LESSON TWENTY-EIGHT: CAKE POPS**

Gary’s just spent the greater part of an afternoon talking to Mr Harrison. He would much rather have attended the meeting about his students’ test results, but you can’t say no to your head teacher, and he was dying for a cup of coffee anyway.

As it turns out, Mr Harrison wants to build another extension to the piano lab. It’ll have twice the amount of keyboards the lab has now, and a brand new studio where students can go to sing and record. Harrison hopes that the new additions to the lab will lead to more student applications, which will mean higher student numbers for the Music faculty and more money for everyone involved.

Gary wasn’t particularly impressed by the idea. He could tell that Harrison was trying to coax him into liking it by taking him to Starbucks and buying him coffee, but his piano lab is perfect as it is. Students aren’t going to apply for a Composition and Songwriting course just because a school has more keyboards than the music school down the road. Students don’t give a crap about that. You get students to apply by offering them interesting courses. You keep students at school by offering digital projects like Mr Owen’s. You keep students coming to your lessons by employing teachers like Mr Donald. You keep students from going off the rails by having support teachers.

It’s true that the current piano lab is easily the most technologically advanced classroom in the country. However, classrooms mean fuck all if you don’t offer engaging lessons, and there are much more important things that the school should spend money on, like getting more comfortable student chairs or renovating classroom 115-MA, where it’s always dark and hot.

Mr Harrison had seemed quite affronted by all of Gary’s comments. In fact, he was so upset that when he took an angry bite of his Starbucks muffin, an unexpected raisin went down his throat the wrong way and he had a bad coughing fit.

When the coughing fit finally passed, Mr Harrison angrily got up from his chair and hissed that it was time to head back to the staff room.

Ten minutes later, Gary and Mr Harrison finally join the meeting about M_SW1F’s test results. Their
colleagues are in the middle of a long debate about a student called Mateusz Anderson. They always
discuss students in alphabetical order, so they clearly haven’t missed much.

Mr Harrison hasn’t mentioned his plans for the piano lab since they left the coffee shop.

Gary looks at the gathered colleagues. They’re all sat at one of the biggest tables in the staff room.
He spots Mr Stevens, Ms Lumley, Mr Donald and a few others, but he doesn’t see Mark, who has
this group too. ‘Isn’t Mr Owen supposed to be here?’

‘He’s gone to get some food with Rob,’ a tired-looking Howard says. ‘They wanted to celebrate Rob
passing his dissertation. Mark’s only known this group for three months, anyway.’

Gary’s eyes light up. ‘Rob passed his dissertation? That’s amazing.’

But Mr Harrison doesn’t seem to care. He gives Howard a withering look as he sinks into the empty
chair next to Gary. ‘Three months is still enough to form an opinion about a student. Mr Owen
should not be skipping meetings.’

Howard must have spent all night changing nappies, because he looks positively vexed at Harrison’s
comment. ‘Maybe Mark just felt like getting some fresh air after marking bloody Art History exams
all week. You know, the subject you was stupid enough to give him, Harrison? I bet you haven’t
even praised him for doing a fucking good job.’

The staff room goes absolutely quiet. There had previously been a tangible air of warmth and
joviality, but the staff room suddenly doesn’t feel so warm anymore. The weight of Howard’s words
fills the air like a smothering cloak.

Gary shuffles uncomfortably in his chair, unable to say something positive about Mark in case people
think it’s suspicious.

‘You cannot possibly expect me to praise someone for what they are being paid for, Mr Donald,’ Mr
Harrison replies, cold as ice.

‘You’re our head teacher,’ Howard goes on. It’s the most words he’s spoken all day; usually, he
likes to stay quiet during staff meetings. ‘Telling us that we’re doing all right is your job.’

‘I agree,’ Mr Orange chimes in. ‘Mr Owen has done a remarkable job considering the
circumstances.’

Gary looks at Howard with surprise and gratitude. It should be him telling Mr Harrison that Mark
ought to be praised, not Howard.

So why is Howard suddenly being so protective over someone he’s hardly worked with?

‘If you have complaints about my performance as a head teacher, you can make a note about this in
the annual staff satisfaction survey. Now, shall we discuss Mateusz Anderson? I believe there are
good reasons to keep him here.’

With that, Howard’s comments are brushed aside completely. The rest of the team have no choice
but to pretend like Howard’s outburst never even happened as they painstakingly discuss Mateusz
Anderson’s results.

Gary pretends to be very interested in the spreadsheet that Harrison hands him, but he can’t stop
thinking about what just happened. There have been more moments like this recently; colleagues
standing up to Harrison and telling him what they think of him. The teachers no longer seem to trust
him, and who can blame them? If all a head teacher cares about is numbers, the people around him are bound to feel like they are just that – a number.

Yet more numbers present themselves in the shape of Mateusz Anderson’s attendance percentages. They are not good. It is clear that Mateusz, a moody lad who spends more time at the local athletics club than at school, ought to be transferred to a sports college rather than wasting his time trying to write songs.

Of course, Mr Harrison thinks that Mateusz would be better off staying at VCMA because he once got a good grade for English. For Harrison, keeping students here and receiving their school fees is much more important than keeping students here who actually like music and arts.

Howard is about to tell Harrison as much when Rob and Mark walk into the staff room brandishing a coffee cup and a paper bag. He completely forgets what he was about to say. Coffee always comes first.

‘Coffee, at last!’

‘Finally, food,’ echoes Ms Brooke, who was already beginning to doze off. ‘I hope you got the gluten-free sandwich I asked for, Mark?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘We didn’t have enough money for that, but we –’ He suddenly catches sight of Gary, and the words stop in his throat for a second. Gary has gone extremely red at seeing him. ‘We’ve, um, we’ve got cake pops if you’re interested, Ms Brooke?’

‘Is it chocolate?’

‘Chocolate and red velvet, yes. We’ve got some plain cake pops as well.’

‘Oh, well,’ says Ms Brooke resignedly. ‘I guess the chocolate will make up for the stomach ache I’ll have after.’

Mark smiles like Father Christmas as he hands everyone a different cake pop, while Howard gets the cup of coffee, of course. Everyone proceeds to eat their cake pops in blissful silence, happy to have been given another break from grades and attendance records.

Meanwhile, health-conscious Mr Barlow hasn’t taken a single bite. He looks at the cake pop in his hands as though it might explode. ‘What is this?’

‘It’s a cake pop, like Mark said,’ Rob explains with his mouth full as he flings himself into a chair. ‘It’s not really a cupcake, but it’s not really a lollipop either. It’s a mix of both, basically, except it doesn’t really taste like either of them.’

‘They’re really nice, Gaz,’ Mark adds, and when he’s sure no-one is watching, he wraps his lips around his chocolate cake pop like he’s sucking on a lollipop.

He and Gary share a brief, private look before Mark bites off the top with a soft, satisfied mm.

‘Delicious,’ Mark purrs, and he gives his boyfriend the sort of wink that makes you go weak in the knees.

It’s going to be a long six weeks.

Everyone in the staff room seems pretty happy with their cake pops, but Mr Harrison looks peeved. He stares judgmentally at his colleagues, eating and laughing as if they’re children. ‘Now that
everyone has received their *treats*, can we please go back to work?” He pushes away the cake pop Mark has given him, feeling like he’s far too superior to eat it. ‘Or need I remind you that we still need to discuss ten students’ test results?’

Everyone awkwardly finishes their cake pops and continues to discuss Mateusz Anderson’s future at VCMA. Gary does his hardest to give Mr Harrison compelling arguments as to why Mateusz is obviously in the wrong place, but he can’t help but be distracted by Mark, still sucking his lollipop like they’re not surrounded by a team of colleagues.

They’re frankly been shit at keeping their relationship completely secret, now what he thinks about it. The reason Howard stood up to Mark earlier was undoubtedly so that Gary didn’t have to. Meaning, *Howard knows.*

Rob probably knows about them too, judging by the way he keeps nudging Mark’s arm whenever Gary looks at him. That’s now two people who know about their relationship – two more than Gary would have wanted.

Meeting up at the summer prom on Friday isn’t going to be without its dangers either. They could easily get caught snogging, or worse, and not everyone is going to be as kind as lenient as Rob or Howard. Some people will do anything to get a colleague fired for doing something as simple as kissing someone.

The alternative, however, is far worse. Gary doesn’t want to go on tour not knowing what Mark tastes like. He doesn’t want to leave the country without having told Mark how much he genuinely, deeply loves him.

That love song he played Mark in the concert hall a couple of weeks ago wasn’t just Gary showing off – it was him saying, *this song is you and me. It’s us, forever. It’s the butterflies I felt when I first saw you and the terrible things I imagine doing to you whenever I think about the touch of your lips on mine.*

To Gary, Mark is everything. He is the reason he gets out of bed in the morning. He is all of Gary’s best memories, compiled into one big playlist of wonderful moments, good and bad. He is the reason why he keeps telling his students to practice writing a love song, whether it’s a song to a lover or a friend or something else they love, like the smell of rain or fireworks at the end of a concert. Mark is the sun and the moon and the sort of song you play on a sultry summer evening.

Question is, what will happen to them once the summer ends?

**[LESSON TWENTY-NINE: THE PROM]**

A glitter ball paints glitters all over the dancefloor. Waiters in sharp suits offer canapés and drinks to the guests. A song is playing: an original pop song by one of the graduates from the Music department, booming out of the speakers as the first visitors arrive on the red carpet.

A students’ award-winning art installation has turned the ceiling of the party hall into a colourful foliage made of mesh and fabric. Underneath, students and teachers dance their worries away. Other artworks feature at the prom too, like the handmade dresses designed by students from the Dressmaking course or the gigantic wood statues that have been put up in front of the door, looking quite like the gatekeepers of a magical world.

Outside, girls in gorgeous outfits step out of white limousines looking like superstars. Lights flash as students take photos of their friends in their best party outfits. Some students haven’t bothered to
dress up at all, like the Animation students in their Super Mario T-shirts. One student has shown up in a Pikachu onesie.

Naima and Mimi, the lovely students from the Songwriting course, stop to take selfies of themselves on the red carpet, their dates quite forgotten. Inside, the dancefloor erupts into cheers as a DJ takes to the stage. Those who don’t feel like dancing have all claimed a spot at one of the round cocktail tables with glasses of wine or sparkling juice in their hands. Students who aren’t yet of drinking age have been marked with a blue wristband by the volunteering teachers.

The party venue is an old soap warehouse, and some of its windows overlook the canals outside. Long red curtains have been put up to keep out the light, but every now and then a student disappears behind the curtain to admire the view of the water, sparkling with the faraway city lights.

It’s simply an amazing venue, this. It has: a dancefloor big enough to house a stage and a mixing desk; a spacious room suitable for dinner parties and high teas, where over a dozen round tables have already been laid with candles and cutlery for a future visit; a balcony overlooking the canal; a large kitchen where cooking classes are often held; a conference room for meetings; an escape room; another dancefloor; and over a dozen other rooms where soap used to be made and stored, now vacant.

The only accessible room for the guests of the Vocational College of Music and Art is the big dancefloor on the ground floor, but Gary has spent enough time staring at the floorplan of the venue to know every single nook and cranny. He knows quite a lot of spaces where you can be alone with someone, but even more spaces where he could potentially run into a problem.

He has mentally prepared himself for over a dozen potential issues. There might not be enough cocktail tables. Clever students without tickets could easily skip the queue. Problems may arise when more than one limousine arrives at the front door and guests try to get out. Not to mention that tiny stage, barely big enough to do a dance routine.

What if it’s not good enough? What if the VIPs complain about the size of their dressing rooms and leave without having performed a single song?

All of those things could go wrong. Gary knows that. He’s organised over a dozen parties so far, from royal birthday parties to staff excursions with colleagues, and a lot of them went really, really well.

Some didn’t go so well. With over a thousand students being involved, the chance of something terrible happening is bigger than ever.

But so far, the prom has been absolutely wonderful. Gary spent so much time worrying about everything that he hadn’t really considered how beautiful the prom might be.

From where he’s standing, quietly enjoying a glass of wine at one of the cocktail tables during a welcome break from being the official Summer Prom Party Manager, the prom seems to be a success. Students are genuinely enjoying themselves. New friendships are being made over glasses of alcohol-free beer. Nick, the quiet Animation student who might one day work for Pixar, has opened up on the dancefloor. Older teachers embarrass themselves with their bad dancing – apart from Mr Orange, who is still a better dancer than everyone. Mr Donald has been spotted drinking something other than coffee for once. And backstage, an ex-member of a famous boyband is preparing himself for his surprise performance.

Nothing seems to have gone wrong yet. The food arrived on time, the venue looks beautiful, the music is good and all the teachers who volunteered a couple of weeks ago have all shown up – even
Rob, who doesn’t do well in big crowds but volunteered anyway.

From up here, Gary can just about make out the back of Rob’s head as he checks students’ tickets at the door. Next to him, there’s Mark, putting blue paper wristbands around the wrists of underage students who aren’t allowed to have alcohol.

Gary has been so busy that hasn’t been able to speak to Mark personally yet, but he can tell that he looks good. So good. He’s wearing a white T-shirt with a black waistcoat on top; a relatively simple outfit, but something that Mark manages to look absolutely amazing in. His trousers are meticulously tailored, with a white stripe running down the sides. His hair is a bit shorter than it was a couple of days ago. His arse looks even more perfect and pert than ever.

Staring at Mark from afar now, Gary wishes they were alone already. He doesn’t even care if their evening will be romantic or not. He just wants the line of students at the door to disappear so he can steal Mark away from his duties and fuck him senseless in a deserted room.

It’s the only thing he’s been able to think about for the past three days.

Unfortunately, Gary is still the prom’s organiser and official spokesperson – meaning that whenever there’s an issue, he’s the person people will flock to. He’s literally only had three minutes to himself when someone taps him on the shoulder.

‘Mr Barlow, a word?’ It’s the manager of one of the acts Gary booked, a twenty-five-year-old singer called Duygu Love. He has a headset on, and he looks like he’s been running. His forehead is covered in sweat. ‘There’s been a problem.’

‘What kind of problem?’

‘The “my artist has been sick in a trash bin” kind.’

Gary’s eyes flick at Mark. His boyfriend has disappeared behind a big group of underage students begging him not to give them wristbands, to no avail.

Fuck, how Gary wishes he were alone with Mark now. ‘How bad is it?’

‘Bad, Mr Barlow. Very bad.’

Gary ignores his desires and follows Duygu Love’s manager. They make a beeline past the back of the crowd until they reach a locked door. The manager impatiently jabs his thumb into the keypad on the door, and the door unlocks with a soft click.

They enter. Gary makes sure to lock the door behind him. They have to walk through the dark, deserted corridors of the former warehouse for five more minutes until they finally reach the venue’s dressing rooms on their left.

Once he steps inside, Gary can immediately tell that he has a big problem on his hands. The singer, Duygu Love – a VCMA alumnus who sings in both Turkish and English – has just thrown up into one of the trash cans. Her usually tanned complexion now looks a bit green.

‘She’s been like this for ten minutes now,’ the manager explains as he kneels on the floor next to Duygu and pats her on the back. She throws up for a second time. ‘I think it’s the fish she had last night. She insisted that she had poke bowl with salmon, but it must not have agreed with her.’

In times like these, Gary’s quick on his feet. He changes the running order of the performing acts, phones and books a different female artist who still owes him a favour and tells Duygu Love to go
home. Twenty minutes later, Duygu’s replacement singer walks into the party venue via the stage door.

Party saved.

Duygu getting suddenly sick is the only “real” problem Gary stumbles into all night. Apart from some issues with the sound system when the replacement singer arrives on stage, being in charge of the prom has been the easiest thing he’s had to do all week. Compared to having to decide whether a student with dissatisfactory test results gets to continue their studies, managing a party is a piece of cake.

Here, at VCMA’s annual summer prom, you can dance, sing or socialise as much as you like. You can celebrate having passed your difficult piano assessments or let loose after having marked tests all weeks.

You can even do nothing at all. Some students just watch and take photographs as treasured classmates let loose on the dancefloor. Others feel more at ease watching the special guests on the first row. But whatever you’ve come to the summer prom for, no-one can possibly feel as excited as Mr Barlow, the prom’s organiser. Even as he or orders the chefs in the kitchen to make more canapés, his mind is fast beginning to focus only on what he’s going to do to Mark and where.

Mark is all Gary can think about, for good and for bad. Mark is everything this prom revolves around.

Feeling a bit bad that they haven’t been able to speak yet, Gary decides to text Mark as he heads to the back entrance of the venue, where one of the DJs he booked has just arrived in a big black van. He knows how important it is for artists to feel seen, so he wants to welcome every act personally – especially as he has a bit of a reputation to keep up. Not every guest will know the DJs or the singers he’s booked, but everybody knows him.

—Gary: I’m so sorry we haven’t been able to speak yet. There’s been a couple of issues with our line-up I’m afraid!

There. Short but sweet.

Gary has been walking through the deserted corridors of the party venue for several minutes when his phone buzzes with a reply. The glow of his smartphone is the only light there is; apart from the faint strips of light trickling in through the dirty warehouse windows, the corridors are as dark as if it were midnight.

—Mark: Don’t worry about it. I know how important this prom is to you. I’ve been checking you out from afar anyway x

Ha. So Gary isn’t the only one who’s been staring.

—Gary: What’d you think of me new party look then?

—Mark: [Here, Mark has added two emojis of a white face with a single finger and thumb resting on its chin, suggesting something like thoughtfulness.] I’m not sure yet Mr Barlow….. It’s a bit smart innit? You look so stiff with that jacket and waistcoat and your shirt all buttoned up.

Gary looks down at what he’s wearing. It’s a tailored black suit, with a matching waistcoat and white shirt. It’s not unlike the sort of outfit he might wear if he were performing at something like the Royal Variety performance or The X Factor; something smart, sensible and, well, a bit uptight. He’s worn
less clothes in the pics he’s been texted Mark.

—Gary: Are you saying you’d like me more without me clothes on?

—Mark: It’s as if you’ve read my thoughts!! [Here, Mark has added a string of more than ten emojis, including a winking face with its tongue sticking out and an aubergine that has very little to do with the actual fruit.]

Gary smirks when he sees the text.

—Gary: I’m afraid it’s a tight suit this one – I might need your help later if you want me to get out of it!

—Mark: You know I wouldn’t mind giving you a hand x

Gary’s so engrossed in texting his reply that he doesn’t pay attention to where he’s going and he bumps into someone, hard.

The collision sends Gary flying backwards, and he lands flat on his arse.

‘Jeez—!’

The fall hurts like hell. In fact, it hurts so much that Gary’s first thought is that this is probably the universe getting payback for making Howard trip up in the dark a month ago. He deserved it, really.

His second thought is that he definitely won’t be able to make love to Mark sitting down. Not that he was going to do that. But still. He’ll have to be careful with things involving his arse.

The person Gary has bumped into kindly proffers his hand and helps him get up from the floor. Once Gary is back on his own two feet, he can see that he has bumped into James, the guy in charge of tonight’s security.

He also happens to be Gary’s private bodyguard.

‘You all right, Sir?’

Gary touches the part of his bum where he fell. It does hurt quite a lot, but he doesn’t seem to have injured anything. If he had, he would not be able to sit at the piano without being in serious pain. It’d make his tour very awkward; over five numbers involve him playing the piano. ‘Just a bit sore, is all.’

‘You’ll be feeling that for a couple of hours, I’m afraid, Sir.’ James hands Gary his phone, which fell on the ground during the fall. It’s hard to tell in the dark, but the phone doesn’t look damaged. ‘I take it you’ve seen the text, Sir?’

‘Which text?’

‘The one from BA, Sir. Tomorrow’s flight to Glasgow has been cancelled.’

It’s not particularly cold inside the corridor, but Gary suddenly feels cold all over. Glasgow is where he’ll be playing the first gig of his tour. It’s the concert that matters most. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘Your 8:30 flight to Glasgow has been cancelled, Sir. We will now be taking a much earlier flight.’

Gary doesn’t want to ask this, but he has to. His body trembles as he speaks. He presses his hand to
his stomach; a mix of anxiety and worry has curled into a big ball in his tummy ‘How much earlier?’

‘We’ll be expected at the airport in an hour, Sir.’

‘No.’ Gary barely manages to utter the word. He feels light in the head. ‘I – I can’t.’

‘We have to.’ James’s face is fatherly but stern – the way James always looks at Gary whenever he’s telling him bad news, like one of his singles flopping or a show being cancelled because of stupid logistics. Gary has seen that face a million times, but today it hurts him most. Today wasn’t meant to go wrong. ‘It’s our only option. If we don’t fly tonight, we might have to cancel tomorrow’s show altogether.’

It’s like the rug has been pulled underneath Gary’s feet. He feels the ball in his stomach twisting together tighter as he pictures the look of disappointment on Mark’s face.

His mind even goes so far as imagining him and Mark breaking up because he couldn’t keep a simple promise.

This was supposed to be their night. They were supposed to go to a secret room somewhere. They were supposed to make love. Not next week or after the summer holidays, but tonight.

Gary knows it’s ridiculous to plan out something so deceivingly simple as fucking your boyfriend, but it’s his only choice. If they don’t do it tonight, they never will. He’s sure of it. They’ll grow apart not knowing how good they could have been. They’ll go back to work in September not even caring about each other, all because of Gary’s stupid decision to go on tour right after the end of the school year.

‘Can we really not fly tomorrow? James, I’m begging you here.’

‘We can’t. I’m sorry, Gary.’ James is using Gary’s first name now. That always makes it worse. It means that James knows how much Gary cares about this and that he has no way to make it better, like a parent who doesn’t know how to console their child. ‘I have already arranged for your things to be brought to the airport. There will be a car waiting for you at the stage door in an hour. I wish there was more I could do.’

Gary’s lost for words. He feels utterly deflated. He wants to beg James to reconsider and book him another flight, tomorrow at twelve perhaps, but he also knows that he has no choice whatsoever.

His tour is starting in less than twenty-four hours. He’ll have to be in Glasgow at noon at the latest. If he doesn’t arrive at the venue on time, he won’t be able to do his dress rehearsals, and if he doesn’t rehearse he might as well cancel.

He’s never done a gig without having several hours to prepare before.

And even though he loves Mark, there’s only one Gary Barlow. In Glasgow, there will be nearly 1700 people waiting for him at the venue, some of whom have been queuing since yesterday, their little tents making the street look like a small campsite. That’s a lot of potentially disappointed fans if he doesn’t arrive in Glasgow on time.

‘What about the rest of the prom?’ Gary doesn’t sound like a teacher or entertainer anymore. His voice is as light and frail as a whisper, whereas James’s is clear and strong.

‘Ms Brooke will be taking over the organisation. Considering that you two have worked together before, I asked for her help specifically.’
Gary nods a couple of times as though the information needs longer to sink in. Ms Brooke has never been in charge of the summer prom before, but she’s done a pretty good job organising excursions in the past. Out of all the people here, she’s by far the best person for the job.

He tries to think if there’s anything else that needs to be dealt with immediately. ‘What about the DJ? The one who just arrived at the stage door? I was supposed to meet him.’

‘I’ll take care of it.’

‘And the – the food? We were beginning to run out of canapés.’

James just smiles. ‘That’s not something you have to worry about right now, Sir. I just need you to relax. We don’t want you arriving in Glasgow feeling anxious.’

Something about James’s comment makes Gary snort. How the fuck is he supposed to relax if his entire night has just been ruined? ‘You know what, James, I don’t know if I can now. I haven’t even had time to pack me bloody suitcase . . .’

‘I believe Mr Owen has just finished handing out wristbands at the door, Sir. I’m sure he’d be willing to help you take your mind off things.’

Gary’s eyes go as wide as saucers. The only thing he can utter is a flabbergasted, ‘Sorry, what?’

‘Mr Owen, Sir. I was saying that he might be willing to help you relax.’

Gary and James have never directly talked about Mark before, but it’s obvious that James is talking about sex. With Mark. He doesn’t even need to say it; the suggestion is obvious in his eyes.

‘You knew, James? About me and Mark?’

‘You did talk about Mr Owen throughout our ride here, Sir. You’ve made it rather obvious.’

Gary doesn’t know what to say. He counts all the people who know about his relationship with Mark and comes up with a total of three: Rob, Howard and James. There’s potentially Ms Brooke too. Keeping things a secret has been much more difficult than he thought.

‘If it helps, Sir, I think you and Mr Owen make quite a handsome couple,’ adds James, with another fatherly smile.

Mark doesn’t know this, but James has been Gary’s bodyguard ever since Gary hit it big with his first number one single – meaning that they’ve known each other for over seven years. Throughout those seven years, James has always been the person to pick Gary up from school after parents’ evenings and drop Gary off at concert venues like a protective father. He knows everything there is to know about Gary. If James thinks that he and Mark look good together, it must obviously be true.

‘Does Mr Owen know, Sir? About your career?’

‘Only the basics.’

‘And you think that is wise, Sir?’

Gary rubs the back of his head. ‘I thought it was, but I’m not so sure anymore, to be honest, James. I’m forcing Mark to wait for me all summer long, but he doesn’t even know where I’m really headed. Cos it’s a fucking long tour, this. I have no idea how Mark is going to respond when I get back to the UK for me final show of the tour and he accidentally finds out how big I actually am.’
There’s the faraway sound of the crowd cheering at the end of a song. Another limousine drives past the windows to drop off latecomers at the red carpet. Girls can be heard cheering as their friends arrive outside. Another song starts, and there’s yet more applause.

People are obviously having the times of their lives, dancing and singing, and drinking and socialising, but Gary doesn’t feel good at all. As well as having to deal with the consequences of his flight being delayed, he’s actually beginning to wonder whether he’s been a good boyfriend to Mark.

Not only is Gary simply incapable of meeting up with Mark over the summer holidays, he’s also been lying to him about his career. He’s been pretending that his tour is a relatively small one, with concerts taking place in the UK and some parts of Western Europe. But what Mark doesn’t know, is that Gary is also headed to the other side of the world because he’s got four number one singles and 30 million monthly listeners on Spotify.

You can’t really tell someone you’re actually a multi-millionaire at a school party.

‘I’ve been lying to Mark the entire time, James. He thinks I’m this local act, he does!’

‘Does Mr Owen not listen to popular music?’

‘Not to mine, apparently . . .’

‘You want my advice, Sir? Tell him. Perhaps not tonight, but after the summer, certainly. It will sound better coming from you. But I don’t think you should assume that the world is ending just because you won’t be able to be with Mark until midnight. I’m sure he’ll understand.

Gary nods. James is right; his world – and his relationship with Mark – may not be ending after all. He just needs to be truthful; as long as he tells Mark the reason why he has to leave early, Mark might not mind. ‘So you don’t think Mark will mind that I have to leave early?’

‘I don’t think he will, Sir. He’s a good person. But do tell him about your career, please.’

Gary finds himself smiling back at James. ‘I will. Thank you, James.’

‘My pleasure, Sir.’ James looks at the expensive watch on his wrist. ‘Your cab will arrive in an hour. You better make most of the time you’ve still got.’

Gary can see what James is hinting at, but shouldn’t he be keeping an eye on the party? He knows James just said Ms Brooke will be taking over, but . . .

‘When you say “make the most of the time I’ve still got”, James . . . what exactly are you talking about?’

‘I am saying that you should look for Mr Owen.’

‘And . . . neglect me duties?’

‘And neglect your duties, yes, Sir. Again – Ms Brooke is in charge now. Not you.’

‘Are you sure that’s okay, though?’ Gary not really used to being able to do whatever he wants; there’s always a manager or someone like Mr Harrison pulling his strings. ‘I don’t wanna open the newspaper tomorrow and find out that the school received over a hundred complaints about the party I organised . . .’

‘Ms Brooke and I will handle it. Go and be with Mr Owen.’
‘And me suitcase? What about me laptop? You know I need me laptop on tour . . .’

‘It’s being taken care of. There will be a car waiting for you at the main entrance in about an hour. Go, Mr Barlow. Now. Don’t look back.’ James is too gentlemanly to say it out loud, but he’s basically telling Gary to fuck off.

Gary doesn’t have to be told twice. He flashes James a grateful smile and leaves. He retraces his steps through the dark maze of corridors. He opens a door and has to blink against the bright light of the dancefloor.

He pushes through the crowd and makes a beeline for the entrance, where Mark was handing out wristbands, then thinks better of it. He first heads to the cloakroom to get rid of his jacket and waistcoat. He doesn’t want Mark to see him with his suit on. He wants to look perfectly fuckable; with just his white dress shirt on, you can see every muscle Gary has. He just needs to remember to pick up his jacket and waistcoat afterwards.

When Gary heads to the entrance of the venue, he discovers with a pang that Mark isn’t there. He doesn’t spot Rob either. He’s pretty sure he saw the two of them checking tickets and handing out wristbands half an hour ago.

Gary approaches the guy currently in charge of tickets, a young lad who studies Hospitality at one of VCMA’s sister schools. According to the name tag on his chest, he’s called Rick. ‘Sorry, have you seen Mr Owen?’

‘Sorry, who?’

‘Mr Owen. He was here about an hour ago.’

Rick continues to check guests’ tickets as he tried to recall Mr Owen at the same time. The device in his hands goes blep when he scans a female student’s ticket and asks her to have her bag checked by one of his fellow students from the Hospitality course.

After what feels like an age, Rick finally asks Gary what Mr Owen looks like.

‘White guy. Brown hair. About this short.’ And Gary holds up his hand to indicate Mark’s height.

Rick scrunches up his nose. ‘Don’t know him.’ He turns to the guy in charge of checking guests’ bags. He’s very slow, and he doesn’t look particularly bright. ‘Hey Marve, d’you know someone called Mr Owen?’

‘What’s he look like?’ Marve asks as he looks through a girl’s handbag with the speed of a tortoise.


Marve scratches the patch of facial hair on his chin. Gary reminds him of a sloth. ‘Was he the guy in charge of wristbands earlier?’

‘Yes!’ Gary almost sighs the word.

Marve thinks about it hard. You can almost see the cogs turning in his head. Almost a minute passes until he remembers. ‘Mr Owen, right? Short guy? Brown hair?’

‘Yes.’ Gary’s pretty sure he can feel the hands of time ticking in his bones.

Marve jabs a thumb at the dancefloor. ‘He said he wanted to see Dua Lipa.’
‘Thank God.’

Gary speed-walks back onto the dancefloor. According to his watch, Dua Lipa is arriving in less than ten minutes. He needs to find Mark before the crowd thickens and he loses Mark in the throng.

Gary doesn’t spot Mark until a colleague points him out to him. He’s stood at the back of the crowd next to Cecelia, the school’s receptionist. His eyes as large as saucers as he tries to take in everything that is happening in front of him: the ex-boybander on stage, singing his heart out; the young crowd shouting every word; the glitter ball, painting lights on the guests’ faces; the works of art dangling from the ceiling. He’s easily the most beautiful person in the room, and Gary has to stop in his tracks to look at him.

There’s something in the way that Mark looks at the world that Gary finds utterly captivating. It’s like he sees things that aren’t there, hidden beautifully within the folds of the universe. It’s what makes him such a good teacher: where others might see nothing more than a rowdy student, Mark sees potential. When Mr Owen looks at you, he sees everything, from the good to the bad to all the bits in between.

But when he looks at Gary, Mark’s mind goes absolutely blank in the best way.

‘Are you guys ready for one more song?’ The boybander has just finished his second-to-last song. As the lights on stage change from green to blue, Mark looks over his shoulder to see Gary beckoning him over with a wave of his hand. Gary’s already taken off his jacket and waistcoat, and he looks better than ever. Sexy. Ready.

Gary probably isn’t about to ask him about the latest issue of Keyboards Monthly.

Mark turns to the female colleague next to him. It’s Cecelia, the kind receptionist at school. He lost Rob in the crowd earlier, and he ended up talking to the receptionist about boybands. Cecelia doesn’t like boybands. ‘Do you mind if I have a chat with Mr Barlow, Cecelia?’

‘Go ahead, love. I don’t like that female artist that’s coming up anyway.’ Clearly, Cecelia doesn’t like Dua Lipa either.

Mark excuses himself and joins Gary at a cocktail table. With Dua Lipa being due to perform any minute now, nearly all the cocktail tables have been deserted in favour of the dancefloor.

Gary gives Mark an obvious once-over. Jesus, he looks good. His outfit is so simple – just a waistcoat and a white t-shirt –, but it’s perfect. Absolutely perfect.

But Gary doesn’t want to tell Mark that. He wants to tease him. Push his buttons. He wants to get a little naughty tonight. Dominant. ‘You know what, Mark, when I asked if you wanted to volunteer I was hoping you’d be checking people’s tickets all night, not fawning over some guy on stage . . . ’

Mark grins. Clearly they’ve skipped the stage of asking each other how they’re doing. ‘Are you jealous, Mr Barlow?’

‘Not jealous. Just disappointed you’re not doing what you were supposed to be doing . . . ’ Gary’s only playing, of course. He wants to see how far he can go with Mark with just the simplest suggestion.

His approach is working. Mark understands this game, and he can play it just as well. ‘You’re not my boss, Mr Barlow. I don’t have to do what you tell me to, you know.’
Gary meets Mark’s challenging gaze. It’s saying, *flirt with me. Try me.*

Gary’s going to. ‘Shame, Mark. I’m usually used to people doing what I tell them to.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Mark sounds deliberately sceptical. *Prove it.*

‘Yeah, Mark. There aren’t many students who disobey me when I tell them what to do.’

‘I’m not a student, though, am I?’ Mark leans forward on the cocktail table. He’s whispering even though he doesn’t have to; the sound coming from the stage is enough to drown out his words. His heart is beating in his throat, but his voice is clear. He’s prepared for this. ‘I’m sure there are some things you can do to get me to behave.’

Gary looks down at Mark’s lips. He’s leaning so close that he can see the sparkles of the glitter ball bouncing up and down Mark’s mouth.

He knows that they’ve hardly talked tonight, but all that cute foreplay can wait. They’ve had weeks and *months* of not being able to do more than asking each other how they’re doing.

‘I can think of a few things to get you in line, Mr Owen.’

‘Oh yeah? And what’s that?’

The lights on the dancefloor suddenly go off, and Gary leans forward for a quick, messy snog. He manages to slip his tongue into Mark’s mouth before the lights go on again and Dua Lipa appears on the stage behind them.

The cheer of the crowd is so loud that no-one hears good, professional, *perfect* Mr Barlow telling Mark that he wants to fuck him.

Their fingers entwine, and Mark and Gary slip away unseen, into darkness. Even Rob doesn’t spot them; he’s too busy dancing with Mr Orange.

Gary approaches a door that can only be unlocked by entering a code into a keypad. Only Gary knows the code, and he enters it quickly, impatiently.

Before Mark knows it, he’s inside a long corridor, walking hand-in-hand in the dark. The noise of a famous Dua Lipa song fades the moment Gary closes the door behind him. The only sound is that of their footsteps, echoing through the empty corridors of the former soap warehouse.

‘Where are we going?’ Mark sounds as impatient as Gary feels.

‘Somewhere private.’

‘How long will it take?’

Gary doesn’t say because he doesn’t know. He keeps walking. His steps become faster and faster as Mark struggles to keep up.

It feels like they’ve been walking for over a century when Mark’s patience finally runs dry and he pulls Gary closer.

They share a desperate kiss in the dark. Mark’s grabby hands trail all the way up to Gary’s neck. He’s trying to unbutton Gary’s shirt. It’s difficult in the dark.
His hands are shaking. He can’t concentrate with Gary’s tongue tasting of red wine inside his mouth, reminding him of all the fucks he’s had whilst he was drunk.

He accidentally tears the top button of Gary’s shirt and he hears the button falling on the floor and spiralling like a spinning top until it comes to a standstill. He feels light in the head when his fingers touch Gary’s chest.

Mark can feel Gary chuckling then. ‘Let’s get you comfortable, eh, Mark?’

Mark doesn’t protest when Gary lifts him unto the flat surface of a table or cabinet or whatever and spreads his legs with his hands. He doesn’t even know where he is. A corridor, somewhere? Sat on a table? Fuck knows.

The only thing he knows is that it’s dark and hot and that he feels Gary’s fingers all over his body. Every kiss feels like a butterfly on his skin, tingling him and making him want more and more until he explodes. The scent of Gary’s cologne is so dizzying that Mark almost sees stars. In the background, there’s the sound of a door creaking open.

Mark’s still trying to unbutton the rest of Gary’s shirt when suddenly there’s a shift in the air and Gary stops kissing him. Not because there are other places Gary would rather kiss, but because he doesn’t want to.

Suddenly and drastically, Gary has changed his mind.

‘Mark.’

Gary’s voice has changed. He’s pressed his forehead against Mark’s, eyes shut tight. He’s grabbed Mark’s wrists, telling him, stop. Don’t do this.

The sudden change in Gary’s behaviour scares Mark. ‘Gary? What’s wrong?’ He remembers the taste of wine on his tongue. ‘Are – are you drunk? Cos if you are, then –’

‘It’s not that. I’m not drunk. I’ve only had a couple of sips of wine.’

‘Then what?’

Mark feels the hair on his forehead moving as Gary breathes out a deep sigh. Not just a sigh, but a heave that he’s had to carry up all the way from his toes to his throat.

‘I should probably tell you something. Something important.’

It sounds like saying that took Gary a lot of effort. Mark wishes he could see Gary’s eyes, but it’s so dark inside the corridor that the only thing he can make out is what he feels: Gary’s hands clutching his wrists; his breath, ragged and hot on Mark’s skin. He has no idea what’s made Gary stop kissing him.

‘Tell me what?’

‘It’s my flight.’ Gary wishes he didn’t have to tell Mark this. He wishes he could just flip Mark around on this table or whatever it is and fuck him. He wishes he could take Mark home with him and wake up together in the morning. He wishes his life wasn’t this confusing, unfocussed mess that he has no control over.

But he has to tell him. Has to. If he doesn’t, his life will be built on a bed of lies, growing larger and larger until there’s no going back from it. ‘The flight I was supposed to take tomorrow morning has
been cancelled. I’m now flying tonight. If I don’t get to the airport before the prom ends, I’ll miss the first gig of me summer tour.’

It’s like the air has left Mark’s lungs. He doesn’t know what to say.

‘I’m so sorry, Mark. I should have told you sooner.’

‘How long do we have?’ Mark’s voice sound clipped with something unfamiliar and strange. Worry. Suddenly, he hates that Gary decided to drag him along to some dark corridor; here, every piece of bad news feels ten times more terrible. He can’t even see Gary’s face.

‘We’ve only got an hour,’ Gary says. ‘Even less, by now. Half an hour, at most. I know you wanted more than that.’

Mark says nothing. The dancefloor is so far away that the only thing Mark can hear is the sound of Gary’s breaths, shaky and laboured as he tries to suck the air back into his lungs.

It’s true, Mark wanted more than this. Half an hour would not cover all the things he wants to do to Gary. He wants to feel the heat rise up his chest as Gary takes off his trousers. He wants to know how big Gary is. He wants to feel that fragile threshold between pain and pleasure as Gary puts his prick inside of him.

Half an hour would be enough for a quick shag, but a quick shag is not what Mark wants. He wants to be Gary’s priority, not the quickie in the back of a party venue.

Mark actually feels himself getting anxious as he thinks about it. This was supposed to be their night. They were supposed to make love all night, not for just thirty minutes. They’ve been together for several months, and what have they done apart from kissing in a concert hall? Absolutely nothing. They’ve done nothing. And he gets that Gary’s tour is important, and he knows that sex isn’t really that big of a deal, and that he ought to wait if that’s what Gary wants, and he will, but that doesn’t stop him from feeling utterly terrified that this is what their relationship is going to be like forever.

It’s not the lack of sex that worries him, but the fact that they always seem to be waiting for something.

‘Is this what it’s always going to be like?’ Mark breathes a shaky sigh. He sounds more anxious than worried. ‘I don’t wanna sound like I’m clingy or something, but I just want more, you know. I don’t wanna move in with you one day and not know when I’m gonna see you again.’

Mark’s pretty sure they’ve had this conversation already. Mark posed a similar question after Ms Brooke had almost walked in on them snogging in the archive room.

‘I know. I’m sorry,’ Gary sighs. ‘I wish I could make it up to you, but I don’t know how. If I don’t hop on that flight tonight, I’m gonna have to cancel an entire show. That’s not something that I wanna do, Mark. I can’t.’

‘And I’m not asking you to. I know how important your shows are to you.’ Gary can’t see Mark’s face in the dark, but he can tell that Mark is smiling. He isn’t angry, just scared. So scared of losing everything they’ve been building towards since they met. ‘I don’t wanna sound like I’m desperate for your cock, Gaz, and obviously I don’t wanna push you into having sex with me if you’re not ready or if we don’t have enough time, but I really wish I knew when I’m gonna make love to you. I get that there are more important things in life and that our relationship doesn’t just revolve around sex and stuff, but I do wanna do it eventually.’

‘We could still make love now it now if you want?’
Mark shakes his head. His hands touch the edges of the thing Gary has lifted him on top of, and it’s only now that he realises it must be a large crate; a leftover from when the warehouse was still being used to produce and transport merchandise. It’s terribly squeaky, and it’s not very comfortable.

‘There’s not enough time. It needs to be real, Gaz.’

‘Then at least let me give you something to remember me by.’ Gary takes Mark’s hands in his and kisses them. ‘Allow me to prove how good I can be to you.’ And he kisses Mark’s hands again and again until it makes the hairs on the back of Mark’s neck stand on end.

‘Here, Gaz?’ Mark sounds unsure.

‘Somewhere else.’

‘But we won’t have sex,’ Mark insists, meaning, I don’t want to. Not now.

‘I’ll only give you head. We’ll save the rest for later. You can think of it as a goodbye present.’

Mark laughs. ‘I’m not the one who’s leaving, Mr Barlow.’

‘Still. It’ll be good. If you want.’

Mark hesitates. He thinks about all the times he and Gary could have made love already: in Mark’s single-bed at home; at Gary’s mysterious apartment; in the back of a car after a hot date. All of those moments were stolen from Mark because of how impossibly busy they’ve been. He’ll never get those opportunities back, but it’s still possible to have one sweet, quick Moment now, involving nothing more but Gary’s hands and mouth as he tries to make up for what they’ve missed.

‘Okay.’

‘Okay?’

Mark finds Gary’s lips in the dark and kisses him. Okay.

They leave. Mark allows Gary to lead him deeper into the shadows. They walk slowly, but their hearts are racing. The clock keeps ticking in the back of their heads. The car that will bring Gary to the airport is already on its way to the party venue along with Gary’s things.

Mark’s heart skips a beat as Gary takes a sharp left turn and walks towards a room where the lights are on. It has a warm, inviting glow, but lights mean people.

Gary pokes his head around the doorway and scans the room. He sees no-one. He pulls Mark into the room by the hand and gives him another warm, questioning look. ‘You really want this, Mark?’

‘Y-yeah. Yeah, I do.’

‘C’mere, then.’

Mark catches a quick flash of series of tables and a chandelier before Gary leans forward and kisses him on the mouth.

The kiss becomes bloody desperate before Mark can even close his eyes. It feels so good that he tumbles backwards into something. He reaches blindly into the space behind him and finds the edge of something hard and wood-like. He hears glasses being shattered as Gary lifts him onto a table with ease.

*Gary must really like lifting me on top of things,* Mark thinks to himself. He’s not complaining.
It’s only then that Mark can see where he is: a huge room with dinner tables everywhere. A dining room.

The space reminds Mark of a dining room from a palace or maybe the Titanic. There’s a large chandelier on the ceiling, illuminating the room in a sort of old-fashioned yellow glow. All the tables have been laid with identical white tablecloths and shiny silver cutlery. The entire floor is covered with a soft carpet; red in colour. Each table has exactly eight chairs. Mark tries counting the tables, but stops short when Gary starts unzipping his trousers.

In one gentle movement, Gary has taken off Mark’s trousers and exposed his red Calvin Klein boxers. He’d much rather have Mark naked, but there isn’t any time and Mark’s made it quite clear that he doesn’t want to have sex. All he’s getting to see of Mark’s chest is the flash of skin between the buttons of his shirt.

Gary goes on his knees on the dining room floor then, and everything stops. Time slows down as Gary starts kissing the shape of Mark’s cock inside his boxers. Mark feels himself tremble when Gary licks and kisses the inside of his right thigh, a sensitive spot.

‘D’you know what, Mark, it’s probably a good thing I’m taking an earlier flight . . .’

‘Why’s that?’ Mark sounds nervous as fuck. He can’t stop staring as Gary kisses him everywhere but where he wants it most: his cock.

‘Cos I’d probably shag you all week and miss me entire tour if I wasn’t . . .’ Gary’s eyes meet Mark’s. There’s none of that worry that they held earlier; right now, Gary is every bit the desperate lover, not the pop star who’s about to hop on a plane to an audience in Glasgow. ‘Now let’s see what we’ve got here, eh?’

Gary slips the tips of his fingers inside Mark’s boxers and pulls them down. Mark’s long, hard cock bounces up then, and Gary stops to look at it. It’s long and pink and just perfect, really. Gary licks it all the way up.

Mark clenches the edge of the dining table so hard that his knuckles go white. He’s shaking like a leaf, and the moan he lets out when Gary simply kisses the tip of his cock is slightly embarrassing. ‘I g-guess you’ll have to hurry up if you don’t want to miss your f-first gig after all,’ he stammers.

‘Don’t worry about that, Mr Owen. I’ll have made you come before me cab can get here. Christ, you’re big . . .’

What Gary does next is so good that Mark’s eyes flutter closed and the last thing he sees is the chandelier suspended from the ceiling, sparkling so brightly that it makes him see stars.

He forgets that he ever felt anxious about tonight.

Gary’s good. Really, really good. The hairs on the back of Mark’s neck stand on end when he feels his cock slipping into Gary’s hot, wet mouth. Gary’s lips tighten around the tip of his cock is slightly embarrassing. ‘I g-guess you’ll have to hurry up if you don’t want to miss your f-first gig after all,’ he stammers.

Then Gary starts using his tongue, and things become even better. Mark feels something dark and fuzzy building inside his tummy as he feels Gary’s tongue licking the pre-cum off the tip of his cock, forcing him to open his eyes and look down after all.

What Mark sees is possibly the riskiest thing he’s ever witnessed. He sees his own cock disappearing into Gary’s mouth. He sees Gary’s face, hot and sweaty. He sees Gary’s cheeks, bright red. His lips
are swollen and wet. Messy. A thin trail of saliva and pre-cum trickles down Gary’s chin that he has to wipe off with the back of his hand.

If someone were to walk into the dining room now, they’d most definitely get fired. Not just because they’re two teachers, but because Gary’s in the middle of it. He’s supposed to be keeping an eye on the party and being in charge, and yet here he is, sat on the floor of a pristine dining room with his mouth wrapped around Mr Owen’s cock.

It’s not something Mark is usually into, getting caught. He likes his sex to be sweet and safe. He hates the idea of someone walking into him like this, with his legs spread wide and his mouth wide open as he mutters a million things a proper teacher shouldn’t be saying, like “Oh fuck” and “That’s it right there.” There was a time when he didn’t even know teachers had sex.

As a child, and even as a teenager, Mark assumed that teachers were mechanical human beings that wound down once the school closed. They didn’t have feelings. They didn’t do romance or sex. And even when a teacher got pregnant, he assumed it must have been caused by witchcraft. Teachers don’t have sex.

And yet here Mark is, a teacher; getting desperately turned-on by the idea that he’s one minute away from having his relationship with Gary exposed.

Mark wants to moan so loudly that someone will hear him and walk in on them. He wants it harder. Deeper. He wants to forget that he’s about to spend six weeks without his favourite person in the world.

Mark digs his fingers into Gary’s short blonde hair and pulls him closer. He feels a muffled moan against his exposed skin when his cock hits the back of Gary’s throat, nearly choking him.

Gary stops want he’s doing to catch his breath. He wipes his chin, then slowly kisses Mark’s cock all the way down.

Then there’s the sound of a zipper being pulled down. Gary’s. He digs his hand into the front of his trousers and starts jerking himself off in time with his kisses. It doesn’t take long before he’s hard and he has to take his cock out of his trousers. There’s already a stain on the inside of his boxers.

He’ll probably last a couple of minutes.

‘Slag.’ Mark’s word is barely a whisper. He knows that they’re alone, and that the idea of getting caught is a massive turn-on, but he’s not risking it. Any word might reach the ears of someone dangerous, like Mr Harrison or a student who has wandered off with a lover. Every word he says has to be as soft as the kisses Gary gives him. ‘You sure you wanna get caught with your cock out like that?’

Gary snorts. ‘You’re calling me a slag? Have you heard yourself, mate?’

Mark smiles down at Gary. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Not at all. I love it when you’re loud . . .’ And Gary gives Mark’s hard prick such a sweet kiss that Mark comes softly and spontaneously against Gary’s mouth.

It’s so unexpected that Mark barely makes a sound; just a soft, aroused ‘oh’ as Gary licks the hot cum off his lips and takes Mark’s prick into his mouth again.

It’s such an innocent gesture, a kiss, and yet it’s what does it for Mark. What he loves most is not
Gary sucking his balls or the sensation of his cock hitting the back of Gary’s throat, but a kiss – so loving and real that all the troubles from the past few weeks are instantly forgiven. They have issues like any other couple, but they fade in comparison to the warmth Mark feels when Gary comes up to kiss him.

They share a wet, sticky kiss on the dining table, and the world disappears. The chandeliers fade from view. They don’t hear the wine glass shattering on the floor when Gary pulls Mark closer or the floorboard creaking on the first floor above.

They don’t say a single word. All they can do is stare at each other, half in a daze, as Mark starts wanking Gary off with his right hand so he can reach his orgasm too. All they need is the unspoken words in their wide, terrified eyes, conveying all the things they want to say but can’t.

After all, tonight is too early for “I love you”. You don’t tell someone you love them before your boyfriend goes on tour. You don’t say “I love you” in the middle of a messy blowjob in a deserted dining room in a party venue. You say it after you’ve made sweet, slow love on a squeaky single bed somewhere.

But then Mark flicks his wrist just right, making Gary come in quick spurts inside his fist, hot cum trickling down his fingers, and weirdly enough “I love you” is the first thing that comes to their minds.

They grin at each other. A proper, silly “Can you believe we just did this?” sort of grin.

Mark’s smile is the widest. He looks down at their naked lower bodies. They look like a mess, all naked and wet and bright red in the places where they were touched last. ‘We should probably get dressed, shouldn’t we?’

Gary lets his face fall in a deliberately comical way. ‘Hang on, Mark – I was hoping we could stay here. . .’

Mark gives Gary a stern but fair Look, and they help each other get dressed. Mark helps zip up Gary’s stained trousers as Gary kisses him twice on the forehead. Mark wipes his hands on a napkin that he conveniently finds next to one of the plates on the dining table.

They take it slow. They’re saying, stay. Don’t go. We’ve got all the time in the world.

Of course, they haven’t got any time at all. By the time they’ve tucked themselves back in, Gary’s cab has already arrived. There’s an unspoken anxiety in Gary’s eyes when he glances at his watch and he sees that he only has about seven minutes left.

He gives Mark another smile – sadder, this time. It’s the smile of someone who’s about to say goodbye to the person he loves most in the world even though he’s just had the time of his life.

Mark can tell. He’s been with Gary long enough to be able to decipher his lover’s little idiosyncrasies; the “tells” in his expressions that give his thoughts away. ‘How long have we got?’

‘A couple of minutes, at most.’ Gary joins Mark on the edge of the dining table. The wood creaks at the pressure of having two grown adults sat on it, but the table remains in perfect balance. The tablecloth underneath their bums has become quite creased by now. ‘I’m not leaving till I’m sure you’re fine with me going.’

Mark just smiles and leans his head on Gary’s shoulder. His head fits perfectly there, like Gary’s shoulder was made just for this moment.
‘You . . . are okay with me going, though, aren’t you, Mark?’

The question hadn’t even been on Mark’s mind. It’s true that he felt worried about Gary, but that was before he and Gary came here. He’d happily stay in the dining room for the rest of time, just breathing in Gary’s scent and reliving his memories of Gary making him come over and over again until the lights of the chandeliers go out. ‘Of course I’m okay with it.’

‘So you’re not angry with me?’

‘I’m not.’ Mark lifts up his head. ‘I’m actually proud, you know.’

‘Proud?’

‘Of you. I think it’s amazing how professional you are. You must care about your fans a lot.’

‘I have to be! They’re half of my shows, my fans are. My concerts mean fuck all without an audience. I’d prefer it if you were part of it, though.’ Gary sighs. ‘I could still try to arrange something if you want me to.’

Mark’s answer is curt and resolute. ‘Don’t be silly. What if you spot me in the audience and forget what you were about to sing? I don’t wanna be responsible for that! You just wait till you get back, Mr Barlow. It’ll be the best day ever. I promise.’ And he kisses his boyfriend on the cheek.

Right on cue, Gary’s mobile phone chimes with a text alert. It’s a short text from James, saying that his cab has arrived and that his suitcases have already been taken to the airport.

It’s such a simple text, and yet it fills Gary with dread. He doesn’t want to go. Not now, with the ghost of Mark’s hands still on his cock. He’d much rather continue kissing Mark, right here, with the chandeliers smiling down on them and the world passing by slowly.

Mark looks at the phone in Gary’s hands. ‘It’s your cab, isn’t it?’

Gary nods. He stares at his phone as if willing the text to go away, but it doesn’t. The message remains on his screen like some sort of stain he can’t wipe off.

He’s beginning to regret his decision to begin his tour after the last day of the school year more and more. ‘I’m sorry, Mark.’

‘Don’t be.’ Mark gives Gary an understanding smile. If he still had any worries about the two of them being apart for over a month, then his doubts have completely disappeared.

Or maybe he’s just gotten better at hiding them. ‘I had the best time tonight, you know. Besides, not everyone can say that their boyfriend is about to go on tour through the UK! That’s nice, innit? And we’ll still be going on that school excursion when you get back.’

Gary doesn’t bother pointing out that he’ll be visiting lots more territories than just the UK and that getting in touch with Mark will be harder than ever. He sends James a quick reply and mumbles something about how he wishes his tour was starting next week, not tomorrow. Mark just gives him another kiss and reminds him that his fans are waiting for him in Scotland.

They leave once Gary’s finished writing his reply to James, whom Gary doesn’t say is his private security guard.

They made a rather big mess of the table, but Gary tells Mark not to worry about it as the dining room is hardly ever used. Mark puts the glasses back into place anyway and tries to make the creased
tablecloth look as neat as he can. Bless him.

They walk out of the dining room hand-in-hand. In the dark corridors where the boys kissed, they can still be lovers. In the hallway that leads to the dancefloor, it is still possible to kiss each other. They can still say whatever they want to each other; the music will drown out every word. But once they open a big set of heavy doors of the backstage area and step onto the dancefloor, they have to let go of each other. Surrounded by spotlights and students, it’s no longer safe to give each other a kiss. It’s no longer a good idea to look at each other lovingly.

So when Gary heads to the cloakroom to pick up his jacket, they have to pretend that they’re just colleagues. As Gary walks the red velvet steps to the exit and sinks into the car that was waiting for him at the entrance, Misters Owen and Barlow have to say goodbye without ceremony. Mark can merely wave and smile, worriedly, as the door of the cab closes and the car drives off like their kisses never even happened.

Mark can just about make out the shape of Gary waving at him before the cab disappears into darkness and the anxiety that he felt previously smothers him all over again.

It’s going to be a long six weeks.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, Mark finally finds out about the secret Gary has been keeping from him.
PART SIX

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, which takes place during the summer holidays, our two lovebirds have not seen each other for two weeks! Life is truly terrible. The only thing Mark has to get him through the summer is a video that Gary texts him one night: a video that shouldn’t get Mark hot and bothered, but does. The video leads to Mark looking Gary up on the internet, and he gets the shock of his life . . .

Meanwhile, Rob has made another PowerPoint presentation.

Chapter Notes

This chapter features Mark having a wank. With toys.

Also, I’m sorry that this update took so long. I’ve genuinely not known what day it is for several weeks, and time tends to slip away from me without noticing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

|LESSON THIRTY: WHEN POP STARS GO ON TOUR|

The roar of the crowd is so good that it makes the hairs on the back of Gary’s neck stand on end. He acknowledges the crowd with a brief wave, then takes a seat at his expensive black piano.

Over the next three songs, Gary plays his heart out. He can only see the first five rows, but he can tell that the crowd are enjoying themselves; unlike his students, who will often stare back at him with empty, glazed-over eyes from the back of the classroom. This is a crowd who are here to be entertained.

It’s obvious that the audience has been to a Gary Barlow show before. They sing along to every word. They know exactly when to clap their hands and wave their hands in the air. They even dance along to the choreography of his most recent number one hit, a song about enjoying life to the fullest. A lot of his songs are about that.

By the time Gary gets down to the fifth song of the night, half an hour has passed. It’s the slow segment of the slow, this. He performs a medley of five ballads: the type of love song that his debut album is full of.

At the one-hour mark, Gary asks for the house lights to be turned on, illuminating every single face inside the London Palladium, one of the most stunning venues he’s ever played. (It’s also the
steepest; he went up to the upper stalls this morning, just to see what the view was like, and he felt like he’d climbed a mountain, the stalls are so steep.) In the crowd, he sees older women and their friends, but also young girls and their boyfriends; children; celebrities; straight men; and even some students from the Vocational College of Music and Art. He doesn’t have to tell people off for looking at their phones. There are no men like Mr Harrison, reminding him of exams and budget cuts and student numbers.

It’s just a completely different world, being on stage. At school, Gary sees over a hundred students per day, and most of them don’t give a shit about him. There are plenty of students who like him, but there are just as many who loathe having to be taught how to play the piano by a pop star; a sell-out. And he can deal with that, to be honest. Just because he has sold over a million records doesn’t mean he’s immune to students not liking him.

On tour, though, everybody loves him. The crowd are clearly enjoying themselves. People sing. They dance in the aisles. They wave their banners in the air, hoping for some sort of connection that Gary wishes he could have with his students. Even the guys who were dragged along with their wives and girlfriends seem to smile and sing along to the words when he performs one of his biggest hits.

Tonight is only the twelfth gig of the tour, but it feels like the thousandth, in a good way. If this is what the rest of his tour is going to be like, it’ll be the best tour he’s ever done.

Things are less good during the quiet moments; the little intervals in between songs when he disappears backstage to change his clothes or drink some water.

He successfully manages to block Mark from his thoughts when he’s on stage, but it’s when he’s not performing that his loneliness hits him most. It’s everywhere; it’s there in the back of his car; it’s there when he crawls into an unfamiliar bed in a five-star hotel; it’s even there when he’s being interviewed for radio at eight in the morning.

He hasn’t seen Mark for over two weeks, and it hurts. Gary thinks of Mark whenever he goes to bed at night. He thinks of Mark when he steps into the shower in the morning and he touches himself. He thinks of Mark whenever a colleague from VCMA randomly texts him and he remembers with a pang what he had to leave behind two weeks ago.

Sometimes, it’s like the summer prom never even happened. What Gary did at school before the summer holidays feels like something out of a storybook; a life completely separate from what he’s doing at the London Palladium right now.

Gary knows, deep inside, that he is a teacher, and that he teaches students how to play the piano, and that he has over sixty different colleagues who are all involved with education too, but if someone told him that he won’t be returning to VCMA after the summer he’d probably believe them.

On a regular school day, Gary has to do everything himself. He drives himself to school; he copies his worksheets himself (and phones the IT department when the copying machine has run out of paper again); he plans his lesson himself; he needs to deal with challenging students all by himself and he needs to decide, alone, whether or not he ought to remove a student for Facetiming during a lesson. There’s no-one who can do or decide those things for him. It’s all him.

Sometimes, teaching can feel pretty lonely.

On tour, you are not lonely, and you don’t have to do anything. Everything is done for him. He doesn’t even have to think about taking off his clothes: his stylist helps him take off his jacket and shirt in between songs, and someone else helps him put on another. It’s not very romantic, and it’s
not very flattering. When you’re on tour, someone’s always bound to see you with your top off.

Point is, he never has to think about anything.

After the encore of his London show, Gary is ushered towards the stage door in a simple hoodie and a pair of jogging trousers. He doesn’t know how his fans have managed to get outside so quickly, but once he steps out of the stage door, he can see over forty or fifty eager faces, waiting for him with photos and CDs they want signing. They must have skipped the encore and headed straight here.

The attention is flattering, but it’s also annoying. If he wants to get to the car, he’ll literally have to go through a gaggle of girls like a bulldozer. Lots of girls. (And some men.) The only thing he can see is the shape of James’s large body in front of him, creating a makeshift path to the car like he’s bloody Moses trying to cross the Red Sea.

The distance between the stage door and the cab is just a couple of feet, but it feels like miles. Every couple of steps, someone decides to shove something into his face: a CD; an old photo; a letter; a chocolate bar; even a piece of broccoli. He accepts a couple of letters with a fleeting smile, but he has to decline the demands for selfies. He pretends not to have seen the piece of broccoli.

Two more steps until he reaches the car. In front of him, to his right, he catches a glimpse of Liberty’s, a famous department store on the other side of the road.

Cars drive by slowly to see what the commotion is all about. The flash of a camera blinds him as he steps into the car. He can’t tell whether it’s a paparazzo or a fan with a particularly good camera.

James closes the door, and Gary puts on his seatbelt. He has to close his eyes to block out the noise of fingers tapping the tinted windows of the car; all fans, trying to get him to open the window and accept more gifts. No thanks.

The car drives off not much later, and Gary can breathe for the first time since he left the venue. It’s fun, being an artist, but stage doors are tricky. He’d love to stay and talk to everyone, but he can’t. He has to get back to the hotel and crawl into his five-star bed before his insomnia catches up with him.

It’s a miracle, really, that all his fans have the dignity not to bother him at school. It’s a bit of an unwritten rule in Gary Barlow fandom: it’s okay if you bother him at the stage door, but you shan’t ever visit him at the Vocational College of Music and Art unless you happen to be a student or parent. Gary keeps those two worlds separate, and therefore fans should do too.

Slowly, the car drives away from the theatre and enters the busy roads of London. James has to take the long way round to the hotel because there are roadworks near Oxford Circus, but Gary doesn’t really mind because it means he gets to check his phone. He’s got quite a few texts: messages from celebrity fans saying that they loved tonight, but also a text from Ms Brooke about the school excursion. Gary ignores it.

There aren’t any texts from Mark. They’ve been texting each other sporadically since the tour began two weeks ago, and it’s put a bit of a pause on their relationship. It’s not like Gary can check his phone in the middle of a show, and his schedule has been so full with visits to TV studios and record labels that he hasn’t had any time to call.

He glances at the digital clock on his smartphone screen. 10:40. He wonders whether Mark’s asleep by now. He texts him regardless.
—Gary: How are you?

Gary checks the text before sending it. Now that he thinks about it, “How are you” doesn’t really cover how he’s feeling right now. He deletes the text, and writes then sends this instead:

—Gary: I miss you.

That’s better.

As he waits for Mark to reply, Gary catches his own reflection in the car window. He doesn’t look tired, but he never does after a gig, unless it’s one of those boring cooperate ones. There’s a glow on his cheeks and he looks pretty good in the hoodie that his assistant helped him put on. There’s a sadness in his eyes, though. An absence. Loneliness. He desperately wants to see Mark again – so desperately that even “I miss you” doesn’t cover it. He doesn’t just miss Mark; his heart is aching without having him here.

Mark texts Gary back a couple of minutes later. He’s already been in the car for ten minutes by now; his hotel is still a five-minute drive away. It’s one of those fancy five-star hotels that, on the outside, looks just like an ordinary house in Kensington. It doesn’t even have the word “hotel” written somewhere.

—Mark: Same here. This summer’s been quite difficult without you to be honest Mr Barlow.....

—Gary: You’ve not enjoyed it then?

—Mark: Not much. Parts of it.

—Gary: Didn’t you say you were going to meet up with Rob today though ? That must have been good. He probably talked so much you didn’t have time to think about me. [Here, Gary adds a winking face emoji to take the edge off.]

—Mark: You’re right!! Me and Rob did meet up for drinks earlier. It was really nice actually. We had fun.

Gary smiles. So Mark’s summer hasn’t been entirely awful. He moves his fingers into a quick question about what he and Rob got up to exactly, but Mark’s a lot quicker. He sends Gary a second text, a bit sadder than the previous one:

—Mark: I wish I could’ve spent the day with you too though.....

—Gary: Tell me about it. :-( Don’t get me wrong – my band are great, but after a while it gets a bit boring to be around the same people all day ! It’s a lonely job sometimes, this...

Mark does not reply for a while, giving Gary time to think about how his own summer has been so far. As much as he’s enjoyed being on tour, he’d trade it for one day with his boyfriend in a heartbeat. Being away from Mark feels like having your heart shattered in two, regardless of how many performances he does to put it back together. He still wishes he could have taken Mark with him. Maybe he should have.

Clearly, Mark feels the same way. His text comes so suddenly that it makes Gary’s heart skip a beat.

—Mark: I really really really wish I could see you again.

Gary feels his blood run cold just looking at the text. Mark’s text is obviously a sad one, and Gary
doesn’t blame him. He feels sad too. Sometimes he can barely even get out of bed in the morning.

If only he knew how to reply. On one hand, Gary doesn’t really feel like dwelling on the fact that they haven’t been together for a fortnight. He didn’t text Mark just to have a contest about who’s feeling the most miserable. And to be frank, missing Mark is a complicated emotion that he only has time for during the quiet moments in between songs. There’s still only one Mark, but a thousand fans that he has to satisfy every night. He cannot afford to be sad.

So if he doesn’t want to reply back that he feels the same and that he’s sad too, what else could he text? Something distracting perhaps? Something . . . flirtatious? You can’t really have a thoughtful conversation about how much you miss each other via text, but you can make each other feel a bit better.

So, instead of dwelling on Mark’s obvious sadness, Gary sends him a daring, suggestive text. “Which part of me?” he texts, meaning, which part of me do you want to see most? He can think of a few places on Mark’s body he’d like to see again.

—Gary: Which part of me?

—Mark: I don’t know what you mean…..

—Gary: Sure you do. Tell me what you’d want to see if we were together again. Something that would cheer you up – get you hot.

Gary’s not sure if he’s being clear enough, so he sends a second text that makes his heart race inside his chest. His hands are shaking once he hits SEND. He tries to tell himself what he’s doing is for the greater good and that everything he’ll do next is just to cheer Mark up.

—Gary: I can provide pics if you want ?

—Mark: Like the pictures you sent me when we started dating?

—Gary: Sure. I could also send you something a bit more *private* though... Anything to make you feel better.

Gary bites his lower lip when he reads back what he’s just texted. He’s just being a tease, of course. He would never send Mark a photo like that, and Mark isn’t the type to ask, thank God.

It’s still a fucking hot text, though. Risky, even. He’s offered and sent Mark pictures of himself before, but this is different. This is him offering a photo of something far, far worse; the type of photo that would ruin him and his career if it ever got into the wrong hands.

Predictably, mercifully, Mark declines. Gary actually breathes a sigh of relief when his text arrives.

—Mark: No nudes.

—Gary: You sure ?

The amount of time it takes for Mark’s reply to arrive is pretty telling. Three minutes, according to the clock on Gary’s phone. Mark must at least have considered it.

—Mark: I’m sure. [Here, Mark has included an emoji of a white face with a halo floating above its head, an angel. Mark obviously isn’t sad anymore.]

Gary thinks about what he could send Mark instead. He could take a picture of his face right now,
but the light inside the car is pretty crap and he doesn’t want to put Mark off.

He flicks through the photo gallery on his phone. There are a lot of recent selfies. Gary looks pretty good in them, but he wants to send Mark more. He wants to find a pic that is right on the boundary of being perfectly innocent and perfectly titillating, like that pic of himself on the beach that he sent Mark a couple of months ago. No nudes.

After a couple of minutes, Gary lands on a video that one of his assistants put on his Instagram account a couple of days ago. It features him exercising. As in, getting on the floor and doing push-ups. The video drew quite a lot of naughty comments from excited fans, which was flattering. Gary didn’t even realise a video of him exercising would get people hot and bothered.

As for Mark – he doesn’t know if Mark’s into that sort of thing. The video does look good, though, and he’s wearing clothes. It’s not even particularly sexual.

But it could be.

He ends up sending Mark the video after all. He waits for ten minutes. Then fifteen. He doesn’t receive a reply until he’s already inside his hotel room.

Innocently, Gary assumes Mark must have gone to bed.

|LESSON THIRTY-ONE: TEA, TEXTS AND TEARS|

Twelve hours before Gary is due to perform at the London Palladium, Mark is getting himself ready for a day out with Rob. They’ve arranged to meet at a Starbucks in the city centre, but Mark is dreading it. He knows it’s awful of him, but he’d much rather stay in bed. All day.

Ever since he saw Gary last, at the prom, Mark’s been feeling increasingly anxious and depressed. There’s a sense of immense sadness in his chest whenever he thinks about the last time they spoke. Getting out of bed is a struggle. He doesn’t do much; now that he no longer has to spend all day working on lesson plans, he finds it hard to kill time. (And most of his hobbies, like writing, sadly require complete concentration.) He spends most of his days in bed, staring at the wooden partition that separates his bedroom from his tiny living room.

It’s so embarrassing. He really thought he could do this. He thought that being apart from Gary for six weeks would be a breeze and that every day would fly by like a minute. He thought that he wouldn’t ever feel sad. How could he, when he still has the school excursion to Amsterdam to look forward to and his last meeting with Gary was so naughty and wonderful?

So far, though, every single day of the summer holidays has felt like a lifetime. Mark has tried texting and calling, of course, but it’s been bloody difficult to get a reply. Gary takes ages to get back to him, and most of the time Gary’s messages consist of no more than a curt, disinterested “yea”. If Gary doesn’t have time to check his phone, then Mark doesn’t want to waste his time trying.

At least, that’s what the anxious, worried part of Mark’s brain is telling him. The real Mark, the infatuated teacher who loves Gary more than anything, is happily counting down the days till they meet again. He can’t help but smile whenever he thinks about what their first kiss was like. He takes pride in telling his mates about his brand new lover, turning red every time he tells them about how
they met (but never mentioning Gary by name). Still as infatuated as ever, Mark smiles brightly at everyone he meets, wishing that they, too, will meet the loves of their lives one day (if that’s what they want). He doesn’t have it in him to be mad at Gary, so he isn’t, and he won’t. Gary’s just doing his job, after all.

However, being in love with Gary is still very hard. So hard. Mark feels his heart sink into his shoes whenever his phone rings and it turns out to be someone else. He sees remnants of Gary in his own reflection. Nightmares about losing Gary in Amsterdam haunt him every night: nightmares in which he loses track of Gary in the dark corridors of their shabby youth hostel. Every day, he walks the fragile threshold between happiness and depression.

So, most days, Mark feels absolutely crap inside. He wants to enjoy his summer holidays and have fun, but he can’t, because his lover isn’t here. Gary won’t be here with him for another four weeks. All he has to look forward to is his meeting with Rob.

Unfortunately, Rob wasn’t very clear about where he wanted to meet up. He texted something vague about meeting up at the “Starbucks in front of the theatre in the city centre on Monday” (in all-caps, with many spelling mistakes), but the city has a lot of theatres and even more coffee shops. With Rob refusing to reply to any follow-up questions, Mark had no choice but to go into town early and try to find the shop himself. Hopefully.

After a pretty long journey from his house to the city centre, the bus drops Mark off on a long street lined with hairdressers, coffee shops and department stores. If you keep walking and turn left at one point, towards a science museum, you’ll eventually stumble upon the five-star hotel where Gary stayed just last week. Mark doesn’t know that, of course. Mark doesn’t know anything.

Having no idea where Rob has arranged to meet up, Mark gets out his phone to see if he can look up the Starbucks in Google Maps. He ignores the painful stab he feels in his chest when he sees that Gary still hasn’t texted him and inserts the name of the department store he’s standing in front of, using it as a landmark.

According to the map that his smartphone conjures up, there’s a Starbucks near a large public square, just a two-minute walk away. There seems to be a theatre nearby too. This could be it.

Mark carefully crosses the road towards a French café and enters a street lined with stores aimed mainly at fashionable men, stopping for a moment to ogle a shop display filled with expensive watches. He takes a left turn and enters the square he saw on the map on his phone. It’s a large, open space where public events sometimes take place during summer.

In the middle of the square, there’s a large, imposing statue of some historic figure Mark doesn’t recognise. There are shops, too, and office workers and shop assistants are enjoying their packed lunches on the concrete benches in front of the square’s many clothing stores. A considerable line has formed outside of a McDonalds. The sun is shining. The sky is a bright, vibrant blue, befitting the summer holidays. Couples walk across the square hand-in-hand, reminding Mark of the good times he had with Gary.

Mark thought seeing couples might make him feel worse, but he actually feels better being here. It’s good being outside. Everywhere he looks, he catches glimpses of happy faces, young and old. He feels calm when he breathes in the fresh, familiar scent of a summer’s day.

For a moment, the gentleness of the summer air actually makes him believe things are going to be okay after all. All he needs to do is get through the next four weeks. He can do that. It’ll be easy. All he needs to do is remember to breathe. Once he and Gary are in Amsterdam, together, no bad things will happen. The trip will be full of positivity and sex, and nothing else.
Mark stops underneath the shade of a tree. According to the map on his phone, there’s a Starbucks just ahead. He walks into the street his phone is indicating. Sure enough, he spots a small Starbucks café with a slick, modern interior on his left – and a theatre on his right. This has to be the Starbucks Rob was talking about!

He enters. It’s a pretty small shop compared to the one they have on campus, but it’s a lot more modern. There’s a big, oval table in the middle of the shop. Small tables and seats are lined up next to the concrete wall like a train. A sleek staircase zigzags up towards the first floor. Large windows overlook the theatre on the other side of the street. Two employees are busy cleaning the empty cups and saucers from the round tables whilst an experienced barista makes a perfect cappuccino behind the bar.

Mark doesn’t spot Rob.

He texts Rob that he has arrived, then sits at the only remaining table on the ground floor. It’s next to the restrooms, and the scent of toilet cleaner punctures the air.

A couple of minutes pass. He orders a slice of lemon cake and a cup of Earl Grey. The scent of toilet cleaner doesn’t fade, but Mark’s too polite to try to find an empty table elsewhere.

Waiting for Rob makes Mark’s mind go back to its default position: Gary. He wonders what his boyfriend’s doing right now. Rehearsing for one of his shows, probably. He never did ask Gary where’s he’s heading. Gary could be in Belfast right now for all he knows.

As a matter of fact, Mark doesn’t know anything about Gary’s tour. He never asked, and Gary never told him. It’s not something that particularly bothered Mark before, but now that he thinks about it, it is quite strange that he knows so little about Gary’s recording career. Why did he never think to ask? They’re in a relationship, aren’t they? Gary should have told Mark about this.

A slap on the back stops Mark’s thoughts from going to different, darker places. He looks up from his lemon cake – still untouched, for Mark’s lost his appetite – and sees his best mate grinning down at him. They embrace like brothers, and Mark inwardly tells himself to stop worrying so much. He puts on a warm smile and hopes that Rob didn’t see him sighing into his cup of tea when he arrived.

Rob sits on the black, wooden stool at the other side of the table. He’s wearing a flowery bomber jacket. He looks good. Healthy. ‘How are you mate?’

‘Good.’ Mark says this very believingly, but it’s a bit of a lie. Mark does feel better now he’s had a bit of fresh air and a walk, but he was up till two in the morning thinking about Gary.

He doesn’t tell Rob that, though. ‘How’re you?’

Rob spends the next ten minutes happily talking about himself (not because Rob likes talking about himself so much, but because he’s one of those people who gets excited about the small things in life, and feels like sharing this), and Mark is more than happy to listen.

As ever, Rob hops from one subject to the next. One moment he’s talking about how he went back to campus yesterday to have a look at his new office; the next, he’s talking about a show that he binge-watched on Netflix two days ago. He also tells Mark that he’s been thinking about adopting a dog and that he hasn’t eaten since he had breakfast that morning.

‘Are you not going to eat that?’ Rob points at Mark’s untouched lemon tart.

‘I’m not hungry,’ Mark says.
‘Then why did you order it?’

‘I thought I was hungry, but I wasn’t.’

Rob frowns at that. A questioning frown. ‘Is everything okay? You do look . . . ten per cent less happy than usual.’

Mark sighs. He doesn’t know how to tell Rob that, apart from today, this summer has been one of his worst. You’d think that being away from work for a couple of weeks would make him feel good, or at least more energised, but he doesn’t feel good at all.

‘I don’t wanna talk about it,’ Mark says petulantly, like a student who doesn’t feel like explaining why they’ve been misbehaving.

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t want to ruin our first day together since the end of the school year,’ Mark says. He thinks he sounds kind and selfless, but he just sounds tired. ‘I enjoyed listening to you talking about what you’ve been up to.’

‘That doesn’t mean we can’t have a serious conversation too, though.’

Mark runs his finger along the rim of his white ceramic cup. He genuinely doesn’t feel like talking about Gary. After all, he met up with Rob to get away from his sadness and have a good day out. He doesn’t want to burden Rob by talking about something negative, especially not when he was feeling a lot better when he was soaking up the summer sun in the city centre just now.

But that was then. This is now. Even being with his best mate and drinking a cup of tea hasn’t stopped the sadness from trickling back into his body.

Being able to tell as much, Rob gives Mark a warm, coaxing smile. ‘Will it help if I say that I’m a really good listener, Mark? At least, I hope I am! Maybe I’m crap. But I’m going to be a support teacher soon, so I should probably get some practice.

‘By the way, did I ever tell you about the real reason why I wanna be a support teacher? Apart from wanting to make a difference and stuff? It’s cos I fucking hate people. Especially when they’re in a group. So talking to students one-on-one? It’s fucking paradise, mate. All I have to do is listen and nod and help people, all the time. And I get paid for it! I’ve even had enough money to buy some more vinyl. Vinyl, Mark.’

‘You weren’t listening very well when we had our staff meetings,’ Mark points out diplomatically.

‘That’s different. I automatically zone out whenever Mr Harrison is talking. So what’s the problem?’

With Rob looking at him so warmly, Mark actually feels a bit guilty not confiding in him. ‘I know it sounds silly, but I really, really miss Gaz, Rob.’

‘Have you not been in touch with him? Can I have your cake, by the way? I’m fucking starving . . .’

Mark moves his shoulders into a disinterested shrug, and Rob steals his lemon cake from him. ‘I’ve tried phoning, but it goes to voicemail every time and Gary’s not very good at replying to his texts all of a sudden. Before the summer we used to text every day.’

‘He’s probably just busy,’ Rob says with his mouth full.
'For two weeks, though?' The words slip out of Mark’s mouth before he can stop them. They sound painfully clingy and sad; an emotion Mark doesn’t often experience.

Mark usually doesn’t mind when lovers don’t text him back immediately. He doesn’t feel comfortable forcing his lovers to get in touch with him when they haven’t got the time. He doesn’t expect a lover to be with him every passing second. That’s not who he is. As a boyfriend, Mark is patient and kind. He likes his love-making to be slow and sweet. (Most of the time, anyway.) He would never assume that he’s the only person in his lover’s life, and he wouldn’t want to be.

But when it comes to Gary, he feels like his well of patience has run dry and he’s about to hit the bottom. All he wants is to have one day with Gary – just one –, but all he’s had so far is a night that was cut short.

‘Is it awful that I really wanna see Gary again?’ Mark sighs into his cup of tea. ‘I feel like I’m being so . . . I don’t know, clingy, I guess.’

‘Of course it isn’t awful. You’re his boyfriend. I’d be more worried if you didn’t miss him, to be honest. I swear he probably misses you just as much.’

Mark sighs. Again. In spite of Rob’s kind reassurances, he suddenly feels as bad as he did this morning, all deflated and empty and sad. ‘I wish he’d send me a pic or something. You know, something to let me know he’s okay.’

‘You could check out his Insta,’ Rob suggests.

Mark gives Rob a pointed look. ‘I’m not a stalker, Rob.’

‘I don’t think checking someone’s social media accounts is technically stalking if you’re in a relationship. I’m tellin’ you, mate, you should check out his Instagram account.’

There’s more Rob wants to add, like, Maybe if you check out Gary’s Instagram account you’ll finally understand why it’s taking Gary so long to reply, but he doesn’t. That discovery is Mark’s to make.

‘I don’t need to know what Gary posts online,’ Mark says decidedly, as if it were final.

‘Suit yourself, mate.’ And Rob shoves a large piece of lemon cake into his mouth.

‘Anyway, you said you’d been back to school,’ Mark says, meaning, can we change the subject now please and thank you? He doesn’t feel like talking about Gary anymore.

‘There wasn’t much to it,’ Rob says. ‘All I did was move into me new office. You know, claiming a computer and a desk and everything. I’ve even got a desk plant now, can you believe it? I didn’t even want a desk plant before I got this job. But other than that the school was pretty much deserted, obviously. I did run into you-know-who, though. He seemed pretty stressed out.’

‘You-know-who?’

‘Voldemort. Mr Harrison.’

Mark frowns. ‘Mr Harrison was there? Why?’

‘He was having a rant about exams in his office. Like, shouting and everything. The head teacher’s office is next to ours, so I could hear quite a bit of it. But he sounded fucking upset, mate. I’m pretty sure he’s one bad day away from having a burnout.’
‘That’s not a very nice thing to say about someone,’ Mark says, although he understands Rob’s sentiment. Mr Harrison is not a very pleasant man at the best of times. If this were a different kind of story, Mr Harrison would be the big villain the protagonists have to defeat at the end of a dramatic battle involving lightsabers. ‘Why do you think he would be worrying about exams now, though? It’s in the middle of the summer.’

‘I know. It’s weird, right?’ Rob lowers his voice into an important whisper. ‘Maybe one of the exam envelopes went missing.’

Mark cringes. ‘Oh, no, that’d be awful . . .’

‘I know! Imagine goin’ to the summer prom thinkin’ that you’ve finally graduated from school, only to find out that you have to do everything all over again! Speakin’ of, you never told me what you and Gary got up to that night . . .’

Rob changes the subject so unexpectedly that Mark turns bright red.

‘So you had a good time, then,’ Rob says. He gives Mark a coaxing look – the kind that involves fluttering your eyelashes and smiling sweetly. ‘I promise I won’t tell anyone?’

Mark bites his tongue. He would much rather talk about exams and Mr Harrison and the summer holidays. Talking about the amazing night he and Gary had will only make him feel sadder.

On the other hand, not talking about Gary will probably make him just as miserable, for he’s been keeping what happened on the night of the summer prom to himself for the past two weeks. He hasn’t told anyone. Not even his mates. He’s kept it secret ever since, terrified that if he says it out loud the midnight spell will be broken and the magic will fade.

He’s already feeling fucking miserable, anyway. Telling Rob what he and Gary did won’t hurt him.

‘We – we did have fun, yeah,’ Mark stammers. He’s blushing.

‘Care to share some details? Let’s start with something simple. Location.’

‘We – we went to the dining hall. The one at the party venue. There were a couple of tables.’

‘Tables! Good. On or against?’

Mark screws up his red face in careful thought. ‘A bit of both. I think.’

‘Awesome. So was it, like, a quick first time or one of those long passionate ones?’

‘Quick. Very quick.’

‘Safe, though?’

This question throws Mark off. The first thing that comes to his mind are the knives on the dining table he was sitting on. ‘Safe?’

‘Safe. Safe sex.’

‘Oh. We didn’t get that far. Like I said, it was really, really quick. Gary had to leave for the airport before we could – you know. And that’s fine, you know, cos I know how important this tour is for Gary and I wouldn’t want to force him into something anyway, but it did bother me. Not while we were kissing, but before. It really bothered me that Gary had to leave so suddenly. And it still bothers me a little now, I guess.’ Mark makes an apologetic face. ‘Is that bad?’
‘Not at all. I’d probably be frustrated too if me boyfriend suddenly had to leave cos he suddenly had to go to the airport. Not that I have a boyfriend,’ Rob adds, two pink spots appearing on his cheeks. ‘It’s okay if you’re frustrated.’

‘I wouldn’t call it that,’ Mark explains. ‘Frustration sounds like I’m angry at him. It’s more like – anxiety, I guess. The more we put it off, the scarier it gets. And I know it doesn’t have to be, cos it’s just sex, but it feels like such a fucking big deal now.’ Mark actually whispers the word “fucking” in case there’s a student around.

‘Isn’t that a good thing, though?’ Rob starts eating the leftovers of Mark’s lemon cake; tiny bits of crumb that anyone else would leave on the plate. ‘I actually envy you two for not rushing into things. Cos what you two are doing – I think that’s amazing. I’d love to have a proper bond with someone instead of not remembering someone’s name in the morning.’

Rob’s never talked about his love life before. ‘Do you not have a relationship, Rob?’

‘Not really. I just have lots of meaningless sex, me. You know, the kind that you regret afterwards because it was fucking rubbish. I’m okay with it, though. I’m not really in a hurry to settle down.’

Rob has said this all very indifferently, but deep down there’s someone he wouldn’t mind settling down with. He’s never going to do it, though, and he’s never going to mention it; the person he fancies is the opposite of him, clever and calm and serene. They’d never last.

The first time they got together was pretty rubbish, anyway. Rob had had an anxiety attack, and his crush helped him through it. That’s not really something you can base a relationship on.

‘I don’t know how me and Gary are ever going to settle down if he’s always so busy,’ Mark goes on, oblivious to the cogs turning and turning in Rob’s own mind. It may be true that taking things slow is good and enviable, but not being able to see your lover isn’t. In fact, he feels a gaping hole inside his heart where Gary used to be.

No matter how much Rob reassures him that not rushing into things is a good thing, he’s going to miss Gary until he gets back from tour. He doesn’t even know whether or not Gary misses him back. How could he, when Gary’s constantly on the road and he has his performances to distract him? He probably hasn’t thought of him all day.

Mark becomes suddenly so gloomy and depressed that he can’t shake off the darkness anymore. He spends the rest of the day worrying like mad. Even when he and Rob head to the cinema to watch a brand new superhero flick together, he can’t stop worrying. The anxious thoughts in his head become so dark and loud that he doesn’t enjoy the movie. He keeps asking himself the same questions: Where is Gary now? Does Gary think about him often? Does he ever feel alone when he wakes up in a strange bed in the morning?

Would Gary ever have another lover at the side?

The questions haunt Mark until he suddenly finds himself standing at one of the bus stops on a street lined with shops with no recollection of how he got there. Rob is still there, happily chatting away about what he thought of the movie they watched, oblivious to the fact that Mark feels like he’s going down with a terrible cold.

Mark’s tummy aches. He feels light all over. He genuinely can’t remember walking to the bus stop, let alone the movie they went to. The sun is shining and people walk around the city in their T-shirts and shorts, but Mark wishes he could wrap himself in a million blankets and disappear. He doesn’t even listen to Rob. He just wants his bus to get here and go home.
The bus arrives after what feels like a century. As he gets on his bus back home and promises Rob he’ll call, the taut ball of anxiety that Mark felt in his tummy that morning is still there, becoming tighter and tighter. His smile at Rob is a half-hearted one, and he forgets to wave when the bus drives away from the bus stop. Rob watches the bus drive away with a worried look on his face.

It makes Mark feel terribly guilty. He ought to be happy, not sad! He shouldn’t be sat here, feeling sorry for himself on a bus when he just had a really good day out.

Except – he didn’t have a good day out. He spent most of their morning in Starbucks sighing into his teacup. He wasn’t able to echo Rob’s enthusiasm for the movie. He even snapped at Rob at one point, saying that he didn’t want to talk about how he was feeling. He didn’t even ask Rob what his new office is like.

Mark can feel himself shaking in his seat. He doesn’t know what’s happening. He’s never felt this way before. He’s never felt so impossibly sad that his body has decided to go along with it.

He tries to count to ten in his head. He feels marginally calmer, but the guilt is still there. He acted like a terrible friend today, all because of how smothered he is in darkness.

He’s not sure if an apology is really necessary, but he sends Rob one anyway.

——Mark: I know we spoke just two seconds ago but I really wanted to apologise for being a miserable sod today..... especially at the cinema..... and Starbucks..... I really wanted to enjoy our time together but I kept thinking about Gaz and wishing he were here!! [Here, Mark adds a string of sad emojis.]

Rob replies within seconds.

——Rob: ARE YOU SAYING YOU WOULD HAVE PREFERRED TO SEE THE MOVIE WITH GARY INSTEAD?

Mark feels heat rise up his cheeks. He moves his fingers into a quick, panicked reply.

——Mark: No!! I mean that I kept thinking about Gaz because I miss him!! I’m not saying that I wish you were Gaz. That would be weird.....

——Rob: I KNOW ... I WAS ONLY TAKING THE MICKEY MATE ... I KNOW HOW MUCH GAZ MEANS TO YOU ... I COULD TELL THAT YOU WERE FEELING DOWN BUT I DIDN’T TAKE IT PERSONALLY ... I’M PLEASED AND THANKFUL THAT YOU MADE THE EFFORT TO MEET UP WITH ME IN THE FIRST PLACE ... I KNOW HOW DIFFICULT THAT CAN BE WHEN YOU’RE DOWN ...

——Mark: Oh good!! [Cue an emoji of two drops of sweat and a relieved-looking face. In real life, Mark lets out the breath he didn’t know he was holding. Rob is such a good friend.]

——Mark: I don’t suppose we can meet up again same time next week? I promise I’ll be less miserable.....

——Rob: SURE ... SAME TIME NEXT WEEK SOUNDS GOOD ... BY THE WAY,, I MEANT IT WHEN I SAID I KNOW HOW MUCH GAZ MEANS TO YOU ... YOU PROBABLY DON’T REALISE IT YET BUT YOU TWO ARE SO SPECIAL ... SO PLEASE DON’T BE MAD WITH GAZ FOR NOT REPLYING AS MUCH AS YOU’D LIKE ... OR MAD AT YOURSELF FOR FEELING DOWN EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE ... JUST BE PATIENT AND YOU’LL GET OUT OF THIS STRONGER THAN EVER X
It’s so silly, but Rob’s last text makes Mark well up. He tries to take deep breaths to stop the sadness from coming back and stifling him, but it’s already too late. The sadness takes over completely. The tight ball of anxiety that he felt in his tummy transforms into a genuine stomach ache. He has to press his hands where it hurts. Terrified of people on the bus seeing him like this, he directs his teary gaze outwards, out of the window.

He misses Gary so, so much. He misses Gary’s voice. He misses Gary’s smile and the way his face lights up whenever he talks about keyboards or Star Wars. He misses the calmness that he feels whenever he looks at Gary. He misses having Gary as the anchor that keeps him afloat at work. He misses being able to look forward to seeing Gary in the staff room, but also the kisses. He wishes he could kiss Gary again. He wishes he had the promise of sweet sex to look forward to, and the warm aftermath in the morning.

He misses Gary so much that it hurts.

**[LESSON THIRTY-TWO: MR OWEN WATCHES A VIDEO]**

Mark spends the rest of his evening in a sad daze; the kind that makes you listen to melancholic music with the curtains drawn. He tries to eat, but he’s lost his appetite. The last thing he ate was a handful of popcorn at the cinema, a mix of salt and sweet. He can’t even remember what the movie was about, he was so busy thinking about Gary.

At a quarter to eleven, Mark tiredly changes into his nightwear, a comfortable white T-shirt and pyjama trousers with a novelty print. His bedroom is separated from his living room with just a wooden partition, so the walk from his living room to his bed takes just seconds. He enters his bed with hardly any energy left inside of him.

Even though Mark knows checking his phone after dark will only make his anxiety come back, he does it anyway. He crawls into bed, flips open the leather case of his phone and notices with a pang that Gary has texted him.

He sits up straight in bed. He turns on the lamp on his bedside cabinet and reads.

—**Gary:** I miss you.

Mark’s worries fade like snow dissolving in the sun. When his phone automatically times out and he catches his own reflection in his smartphone screen, he can see that he’s grinning from ear to ear. The sadness that he felt this morning suddenly feels very far away. Rob was right!

Mark types up his reply a couple of minutes later, adding an emoji of a broken heart to sum up how he’s feeling. It’s slightly hyperbolic, but it’s not as if there’s a single, all-encompassing emoji for “missing your boyfriend”.

—**Mark:** Same here. This summer’s been quite difficult without you to be honest Mr Barlow.....

—**Gary:** You’ve not enjoyed it then?

—**Mark:** Not much. Parts of it.

—**Gary:** Didn’t you say you were going to meet up with Rob today though? That must have been
good. He probably talked so much you didn’t have time to think about me!

—Mark: You’re right!! Me and Rob did meet up for drinks earlier. It was really nice actually. We had fun.

Mark re-reads the text he just sent and realises that it’s not entirely true. That is, it was nice to see Rob again, but he did also think about Gary loads. More than he should have, really. Throughout the day, Mark’s mood was precariously balanced between happy and miserable. At Starbucks, he spent several minutes just staring into his ceramic teacup. On their way to the bus stop, he barely paid attention to what Rob was saying.

Telling Gary that things were “nice” doesn’t quite sum up how he was really feeling.

He sends Gary another text.

—Mark: I wish I could’ve spent the day with you too though…..

—Gary: Tell me about it. :-( Don’t get me wrong – my band are great, but after a while it gets a bit boring being around the same people all day! It’s a lonely job sometimes, this…

Mark doesn’t know why, he can actually feel himself welling up when he reads that. He pictures Gary on tour, surrounded by a hundred fans but never really connecting with anyone. It must be so difficult to wake up in a different bed every morning, alone.

The sadness becomes so overwhelmingly bad that Mark has to hide his face in his hands. He closes his eyes and tries to take deep breaths to slow down his heartbeat. He focuses on his breathing until he feels that invisible, taut ball of sadness in his tummy disappear.

When he opens his eyes, the tears have gone – but he still misses Gaz. Desperately. He texts him as much; one simple text that doesn’t even touch the surface of how miserable he really is.

—Mark: I really really really wish I could see you again.

He adds a smiley of a sad face, and he instantly regrets sending the text. He miserably lets himself sink into his pillow and leaves his phone on the edge of his bed somewhere, out of reach so that he doesn’t have to see Gary’s inevitable reply.

What the fuck does he think he’s doing, telling Gary that he wants to see Gaz again? He knows it’s impossible. Gary’s on tour. Gary doesn’t have time for that sort of thing.

Mark has counted all the little spots of paint on the ceiling when he feels his phone buzz next to his leg. He reluctantly sits up and checks his phone, half-expecting his screen to feature a text from Gary saying that he needs to get over himself.

—Gary: Which part of me?

Mark frowns. Which part of me? What does Gary mean by that? Was he not being clear when he wrote that he wants to see Gaz again?

—Mark: I don’t know what you mean…..

—Gary: Sure you do. Tell me what you’d want to see if we were together again. Something that would cheer you up – get you hot.

Then, seconds later:
—Gary: I can provide pics if you want?

Mark feels himself go hot in the face. Gary’s talking about sending him pics. Good pics, like the one that featured Gary right in the middle of his living room, wearing a sleeveless shirt. Or that photo on the beach, with the summer sun spilling out on Gary’s shirtless chest.

He feels aroused just thinking about it.

—Mark: Like the pictures you sent me when we started dating?

—Gary: Sure. I could also send you something a bit more *private* though… Anything to make you feel better.

Mark swallows as he reads the text again. He’s pretty sure Gary’s just offered to send him something a lot more than “just” a picture of him on a beach.

Frankly, he doesn’t know how to feel about that. He supposes he wouldn’t mind seeing Gary’s body again. It has been two weeks after their little moment in the dining hall, and Gary has sent him little else apart from the occasional text about how he’s doing. Mark kind of deserves it after the rough summer he’s had.

However, what Gary’s offering is also extremely precarious. He’d never ask Gary to send him a pic like that, not even if they’d been away from each other for two years instead of just two weeks.

Also – they’re teachers. Teachers don’t do this sort of thing.

—Mark: No nudes.

—Gary: You sure?

Mark thinks about it, again. He reminisces about what he and Gary got up to on the night of the summer prom: holding hands in the dark; kissing on a pristine dinner table; feeling his cock disappearing into Gary’s mouth; his orgasm being triggered by just the simplest, softest kiss on his prick; the comedown after; and then having to watch Gary drive away without him.

He so wishes he could have taken a snapshot of that night. If he had, he would replay it over and over again. If he had, he might still be able to picture the look on Gary’s face right before he came. He’d still be able to feel Gary’s cock in his hand, big and pulsing as he pumped his fist up and down. He’d be able to kiss Gary again.

So when Mark reads Gary’s text for the third time, he does genuinely consider asking Gary to send him something risky. Something just to get him off. But he won’t. He doesn’t. He sends Gary a short message with an emoji of an angel added at the end, cute and innocent like him.

—Mark: I’m sure.

Unconsciously, Mark has moved his right hand to the hem of trousers, inches away from slipping inside and touching himself there. He’s not quite as innocent as the emoji he’s chosen, and neither is Gaz. Gary knows precisely what he’s doing.

Two minutes later, Gary sends Mark a video. Not another text or risky photo, but a video. It’s about seven minutes long.

Curious, Mark waits for the video to load. The internet on his phone is rather poor (sometimes Mark even has to use the WiFi from the pub next door), so the opening seconds of the video looks rather
blurred. Mark can hardly make out what the video is supposed to be of. A room in black and white, with a sort of mat in the middle.

What is Gary trying to tell him with this?

Mark’s about to send Gary a string of question marks when the video suddenly switches to a much higher quality. Someone enters the room. Gary, wearing a black sleeveless top and jogging trousers. He starts exercising on the floor; proper push-ups that make his muscles stand out in his shirt, and other complicated-looking exercises that would make Mark collapse on the floor after just three seconds.

There’s no sound, but Mark’s brain is perfectly capable of filling in the gaps. Gary wasn’t loud when he came, but he wasn’t quiet either. He can hear Gary’s little sighs in his head every time he lifts himself up from the floor.

It’s not even a particularly sexual video, but something about it turns Mark on: Gary’s chest, hugged tight by his shirt; the sweat on his arms; the way he pushes himself up from the floor like it’s nothing; the concentrated look in his eyes that reminds Mark of when Gary saw him half-naked for the first time.

Mark slowly slips his right hand inside the front of his pyjama trousers. He turns off the lights. He lets out a soft, stifled moan when he wraps his hands around his cock. It takes him five long strokes before he realises what he’s doing.

A rush of guilt washes over him. He stops.

He can’t do this. He can’t watch a video of Gary and touch himself at the same time! It’s wrong. There are probably laws about this.

Then the video focuses on Gary’s face, all screwed up in concentration. It doesn’t look unlike the way Gary looked at him before they kissed in the concert hall: tongue licking his lips; green eyes flashing with something dark and dangerous.

Mark continues what he’s doing even though it makes him feel like the most terrible person on planet Earth. He slowly pumps himself up and down as he watches the video at the same time, too scared to increase his pace in case he’ll go to hell if he does.

The video skips to another room, a different scene. In it, Gary is filmed lifting dumbbells; small, black weights that don’t look heavy but clearly are.

Gary looks fucking hot doing it. It makes the muscles in his arms stand out in a way that makes Marks want to be fucked senseless. No wonder Gary was able to lift him up so easily when they eloped to the dining hall two weeks ago.

Mark tilts back his head when he suddenly touches a sensitive spot. He swears. He bites his lip. He tries to drown out the increasing feeling of guilt; the pesky voices in his head that are telling him what he’s doing is bad.

The voice in his head that wants him to have an orgasm is much louder, though. He keeps touching himself. First slowly, then quicker. Quicker still.

The video goes out of focus as he fantasises about Gary walking into his room and fucking him till he’s sore. He wants Gary to flip him over and push him into his bedsheets, hard. He wants his crappy single bed to collapse underneath the combined pressure of their bodies as Gary pulls his hair and calls him a slut.
The friction of his fist around his cock isn’t enough. He slows down. He’s feeling hot. He takes off his white T-shirt and throws it on the floor.

He rolls over and reaches out for his bedside cabinet. He opens a drawer, rummages inside its contents and comes away with a bottle of lube and a toy; the sort of thing he might take with him to Amsterdam next month.

The video has paused at the halfway mark, but Mark doesn’t need to watch it anymore. He’s already horny as fuck. He’s hard. Pre-cum stains his hands and sheets, and yet he wants more. So much more.

By now, he’s pretty sure he’s going to hell.

Mark awkwardly wriggles out of his pyjama bottoms and boxers. He pushes the sheets off his body and spreads his legs. He’d probably whisper an apologetic prayer at the air if he wasn’t feeling so fucking horny.

He squeezes a large amount of lube on his hands and spreads it all over his toy, a simple blue dildo. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

It’s been a while since he had something inside of him, and he has to get used to the feeling again. It’s both painful and nice when he pushes his toy inside and imagines Gary fucking him. In the fantasy in his mind’s eye, Gary’s wearing the same black shirt in the video, covered in sweat.

Once he’s gotten reacquainted to the size and shape of his toy, Mark starts moving it in and out slowly. He curls his toes and arches his back when he hits a nice little spot next to his prostate.

He utters Gary’s name underneath his breath, too afraid that if he says it out loud he’ll go to hell for wanking to a video of his boyfriend. He doesn’t bother covering his moans. He knows he’s loud. He doesn’t care. The walls are thin. So be it.

His bed creaks underneath the pressure of his own writhing body. He closes his eyes and pretends that it’s Gary’s warm, pulsing cock that’s fucking him, not a dildo.

He pushes his toy inside as deep as he can manage it.

Mark’s so close to the edge that he’s beginning to tremble. His toy keeps touching a sensitive spot inside. He can feel a wave of pleasure making its way from his tummy to his chest, dizzying him and making his entire body go light, like it’s completely made of feathers.

He no longer feels guilty or bad, just hot. He’s taken his shirt off, and yet he’s sweating like mad. A trail of sweat makes its way down his chest when he jerks up his body like a slag and *moans*.

He wonders if Gary ever touches himself like this.

He wonders if Gary has ever met someone on tour. A fan. A groupie. He knows Gary isn’t innocent – he must have shagged a fan at one point.

The thought shouldn’t turn Mark on, but it does. His hands start trembling so much that he has to stop using his toy. He continues to pleasure himself with just his fist.

He grabs his phone with his free hand and unlocks it. He watches certain fragments of the video over and over until his hips jerk up and he ejaculates all over his stomach, his teeth digging into his lip to stop himself from screaming Gary’s name.
When he looks down, he can see that his entire body is flushed a beautiful, guilty red. There’s a thick streak of cum on his tummy, and he bit his lip so hard that he can taste blood. His right ear has actually started buzzing in the process, the orgasm was so good.

The video on his phone has awkwardly paused on a shot of Gary pulling a weird face mid-push-up, and a loud laugh ripples out of Mark’s mouth; the silly, giddy sort. It perfectly sums up their relationship: it’s strange, silly, awkward, difficult, and yet fucking hot. What he just did was fucking hot.

The high of the orgasm doesn’t fade. Mark feels utterly elated. He’s floating. He doesn’t bother to clean the cum off his tummy as he lets himself fall, comfortably, into his pillow. He just grins at the ceiling like an infatuated teenage boy, giddy and happy on love.

That orgasm was something else. And that video – wow. He can’t wait to see Gary doing that in the flesh one day.

For a dangerous fraction of a second, Mark thinks about sending Gary a picture of his tummy. Imagine that – a blurry photo of his red, flushed, sweaty stomach, covered in a thick trail of cum. Even his tattoo hasn’t been spared. It would look fucking outrageous.

Then Mark shakes his head at the idea. He’d never do something like that, and he probably wouldn’t want Gary sending him something like that either. He’s always found the idea of sending someone a pic of your private parts pretty weird.

Still. He just masturbated to a video of Gary exercising. That’s pretty weird too.

Mark quickly cleans himself up with a box of tissues, then puts his pyjamas back on and pulls the sheets back up. He turns on the lamp next to his bed and tries to formulate an appropriate reply to Gary’s text, the video.

His brain freezes. He doesn’t really know how to tell Gary that he just wanked himself off watching a video of him, so he settles on a sheepish “thank you”.

—Mark: Thank you for sharing, Mr Barlow.

—Gary: Did you enjoy it?

—Mark: Very much. [Cue a “winking face” emoji and a peace sign, because, well, it’s not a Mark Owen text exchange if it doesn’t feature a peace sign somewhere.]

—Gary: You know all you need to do is check out me Instagram if you wanna see more...

Mark laughs. Gary’s beginning to sound like Rob.

—Mark: Thanks, but I’ve already had my fill tonight.... [Here, Mark daringly adds a single emoji of an aubergine.]

—Gary: That sounds like you’ve been a bit naughty Mr Owen – have you?

Mark replies with an emoji of a devil. And another aubergine in case the first one wasn’t obvious enough. There aren’t a lot of discreet ways you can tell your boyfriend that you’ve just had a wank.

Thankfully, Gary seems to get it.

—Gary: Oh wow – I hope you’re not having too much fun without me now! You won’t believe how
boring being on tour is – it’s a dreadful job this.

Mark laughs out loud. As if touring the UK with your own setlist of pop songs would ever be boring! If Mark ever got as far as releasing an album of his own, he’d tour all over the country too, starting with Manchester because that’s where he first discovered his interest in music.

It seems so long ago now. A young lad, Mark had been to see a concert at the Apollo, one of his favourite concert venues. The first thing he thought to himself when the concert ended was how much he’d related to the songs he heard. There was something about the songs that made him feel like the singer had somehow tapped into his subconscious and written songs just about him, Mark Owen.

He spent the rest of the night thinking about it. He hardly slept, and the next morning he signed up for a music class at his local community centre. He got good at writing quite quickly. A year later, he found himself attending so-called writing camps to write songs for some of the most famous names in the music business. Some of those songs were good enough to make the debut albums of wannabe pop stars, and he spent the next several years providing songs for over a hundred artists.

He never quite became famous himself, but he did manage to earn enough money to get by. It was a good job, and he was having a good life.

Eventually, the royalties stopped rolling in and he had no choice but to change careers and move house. Now, the only thing he’s still got going for him is a crap one-room flat and a hundred Creative Writing dossiers stacked up in his living room. Gary is one of the lucky ones.

—Mark: Don’t be silly, Mr Barlow. I bet touring is amazing x

—Gary: A bit lonely though ! I actually found the tour quite difficult to be honest – I can’t imagine how people in long-distance relationships cope !

Mark sits up straight. Is Gary saying that he’s been feeling depressed too?

He can hardly believe it. There must not be many chances to feel down when you’re constantly on the road, performing to hundreds of fans all around the UK. If Mark went on tour, he’d be over the bloody moon. He can’t imagine that he’d ever feel sad.

Then again, it must not be easy, being apart from your loved ones. Mark has only been on holiday once or twice (to the Isle of Man), and he remembers feeling quite lonely, sometimes. Even in the age of camera phones and Facetime, you can still miss people. If Mark misses Gary sat on his bed in his tiny flat, he can’t imagine how Gary must be feeling at the other side of the country.

—Mark: You too huh? [Sad face emoji]

—Gary: Oh yea. I’m struggling *now* actually ! All I have to do is leave the stage and I’m reminded of how long it’s been since we last saw each other …

Mark doesn’t bother telling Gary that he’s actually kept count of the exact amount of days they’ve been apart. Seventeen, last time he counted.

In a couple of follow-up texts, Gary and Mark talk about the tour. It’s mostly been great; Gary’s met wonderful people, seen great places and performed in some of the most amazing venues in the country. It’s probably been his best tour ever. However, the days off are hard. So hard. Getting through his concerts is easy, but it’s the moments between concerts that get to him. That’s when the loneliness hits him most. It’s why Gary tends to fill his days with private gigs, recording sessions,
meet and greets, and promo; that way, he won’t feel the pain of missing Mark as much.

Because it does hurt, missing Mark. It hurts much more than Gary thought it would.

—Mark: I know what you mean. I thought being apart from you would get a little easier over time, but it’s only gotten harder for some reason!! [Quite literally, Mark thinks. But he’s not going to tell Gary that.] I feel like this is something only couples who’ve been together for many years go through.....

—Gary: Tell me about it. At least you’ve got me videos to get you through it eh ?

Mark feels butterflies thinking about the video again, and for only the dozenth time that evening, he wishes he could see Gary properly.

Somewhere in the country, in a three-star hotel perhaps, Gary is seeing the texts he’s written. Maybe he’s smiling. Maybe he’s in a late-night meeting at a record label somewhere, unable to laugh. Maybe he’s in bed too, touching himself to the thought of the pictures Mark will never send him.

But somewhere, Gary is as real as the bed Mark is sitting on. He’s as real as the train that rushes past his window and as real as Mark’s own skin, blushing bright red still. He’s had lovers before, and yet Gary feels like the realest, warmest one of all.

—Mark: Don’t flatter yourself, Mr Barlow. You’re not the only person getting me through this awful summer xx

—Gary: Rob keeping you busy then ?

—Mark: Yes! He seemed very excited about his new office this morning.....

—Gary: Did he tell you about his desk plant?

—Mark: He did actually!!

—Gary: Bless him. He actually sent me pics of his new office earlier, can you believe it ? I’m so chuffed for him, though – he really deserves this Rob does. I can’t think of anyone else who’d actually be *excited* heading into school during the summer hols...

The mention of school makes Mark think about what Rob told him that morning, about Mr Harrison ranting to someone about exams in his office.

He wonders if it’s something he should bring up. He doesn’t want to ruin their conversation by mentioning their not-too-kind head teacher, but something about Mr Harrison being at school seems... “off”, somehow.

—Mark: Speaking of..... Rob told me that Mr Harrison was having a rant about an exam when he was at school yesterday. Apparently he was shouting to someone on his phone! What do you think that was about? [Thinking face emoji]

—Gary: That’s strange... Harrison doesn’t usually go to school during the summer. He usually goes on holiday he does... Did you hear what kind of exam he was talking about ?

—Mark: Unfortunately not..... All I know is that Mr Harrison seemed very upset!

—Gary: Harrison gets annoyed about everything, so it’s probably nothing. What happens to exams
Mark can see what Gary is talking about, but he can’t help but feel irrationally worried. Ever since he got caught texting during an exam, exams have been a massive source of stress for him. Did Rob not tell him that the school’s former Art History teacher was fired because she’d been caught helping a student with their exams? Not to mention the fact that exams going missing at another technical college in the city centre was a hot topic in the news just a couple of days ago. It could happen to anyone.

Even him.

—Mark: I know. I just hate the idea of Mr Harrison getting angry at someone. Especially over exams. I still have nightmares from when he walked into me texting you that one time!! What if someone committed exam fraud or something?

—Gary: If something serious *did* happen then we’ll probably never find out about it – cases of exam fraud are usually kept secret as it might attract bad press for the school – but I doubt it’s something as serious as that.

Another text reaches Mark seconds later.

—Gary: What are you even doing thinking about work in the middle of August though? Shouldn’t you be thinking about your loving boyfriend?

Mark laughs out loud. He’s had no trouble thinking about Gary at all. In fact, he’s thought about little else. He hasn’t even had time to think about work, until now – his brain has been pretty much all about Gary, Gary, Gary.

Not to mention the fact that they still have that school excursion to Amsterdam coming up! During the day they’ll be sauntering comfortably through the city streets, reminding first-years to do their exercises; after dark, they’ll be making love on an unfamiliar hotel bed in their private bedroom, all night long. He ought to think about that, not exams!

—Mark: You’re right!! I shouldn’t worry. [Cue an emoji of two fingers making a peace sign.] And don’t worry Mr B…… I’ve been thinking about you loads……

—Gary: Good boy. ;-) I hope you don’t mind if I go to bed now though? I’ve got quite an early start tomorrow and I don’t wanna do a gig with bags under my eyes!

—Mark: Of course not!! Your work is very important Mr Barlow.

Gary doesn’t reply to that, but Mark didn’t think he would. It’s almost one in the morning; way past Mark’s usual bedtime, and probably Gary’s too. He doesn’t know what being a pop star is like, but he imagines Gary Barlow isn’t the kind of pop star who stays up all night.

Now that the high of his orgasm is fast beginning to fade, Mark’s beginning to feel quite tired too. Tonight was fun, but he doesn’t want to feel like a wreck when he wakes up in the morning. Starting tomorrow, he wants to work on improving his summer and actually enjoying it.

Yawning, Mark turns off the lamp next to his bed. He pulls up his sheets and carefully puts away his phone, right on the edge of his bedside table, but not without having one last look at the video, just for good luck.
Mark’s summer vastly improves after his late-night chat with Gary. He goes out more. He meets up with Rob more often, and he enjoys it every time. The songs he writes are good and uplifting, not merely sad. He doesn’t worry about school and doesn’t think about the exam Mr Harrison was apparently so worried about. He wakes up at eight every morning and goes to bed at eleven: perfectly reasonable times compared to a couple of days ago. He even eats better, cooking food himself instead of heading to the chip shop down the road. Things are good.

As Mark’s mood improves, the summer does too. Tourist fall over themselves trying to buy souvenirs in one of the city’s only tourist shops. Weather forecasters warn for the hottest summer on record. People flock to the beach in droves. Mark develops a bit of a tan. His hair is getting a little bit longer and unrulier, and he hasn’t bothered to shave for a couple of days. It suits him; even Rob’s said that he looks sexier with a bit of stubble. Ever since, Mark’s been considering whether or not he should keep the stubble when he gets back to work next months.

Texts from Gary have become more sporadic, but Mark can live with it now. He’s happy. He feels good. He’s even spent an afternoon writing lesson plans in his living room – not because he has to, but because he actually wanted to.

Mark’s new enjoyment of the summer holidays has made him more creative than usual. He’s already thinking about making a Kahoot quiz about stylistic devices. He’s marked the bits of his textbooks that he wants to spend more time on next year. This morning, he made multi-coloured flash cards with the names of famous poets and their respective works on them. The morning before that, he read Every Kind of Poem You Will Ever Need at School for a third time, putting post-its on the pages of every poem he wants his students to read next year. He’s even made a series of PowerPoints.

So far, Mark’s managed to write over a dozen lesson plans. It doesn’t even feel like work. He loves it really, and he can easily spend several hours writing up activities without being distracted.

That is, that was before he discovered Instagram.

It all starts when Mark’s browsing the internet for relevant pictures to use in his PowerPoint. He’s at home, sat on his living room floor because it’s more comfortable than his sofa. His eyes land on a link to someone’s Instagram page, and he instantly hears Rob in his ear, telling him to check out Gary online.

“I don’t think checking out someone’s social media accounts is technically stalking if you’re in a relationship”, Rob had said knowledgably. And a couple of months earlier, Rob had casually hinted that Gary has an Instagram account that is worth checking out “in case Gary ever has to go on a business trip to and you get bored or something.”

Mark had just laughed out loud at that.

Now it’s August, and Mark still hasn’t checked out Gary online. He’s never wanted to, and he’s never felt the need to. Gary’s online presence is something that he wants to have absolutely nothing to do with. It’s as bad as reading someone’s secret diary – something that he’d never do, ever.

And yet. Mark thinks about the video Gary sent him. It was sexy without being overtly sexual. It turned Mark on. He felt a rush of familiarity when he saw Gary entering the frame. He felt guilty when he looked down at his tummy and saw that the video had made him come.

At the time, that video was more than enough. He didn’t need anything else, not even when Gary
reminded him that he had more videos like it on his Instagram account. The experience of watching
Gary exercise was all he’d needed that night.

But now that he thinks about it, he’s not sure if just that video is going to be enough. Mark wants
more now; more than just a video of Gary exercising. He wants photos. He wants to see snapshots of
the life that is keeping Gary from him, intentionally or not.

He wants to check out Gary’s Instagram.

Mark takes a deep breath, then types “Gary Barlow Instagram” in the search bar in his internet
browser. He’s typed it so quickly that he’s accidentally misspelled it “gary barlwo instrgam”. The
first result the internet conjures up is a link to what must obviously be Gary’s official Instagram page.

Heart hammering inside his throat, Mark clicks the first link.

And closes his laptop shut immediately.

‘I can’t do this.’

Mark gets up from the floor. He paces around his living room table, anxious and vexed. He twists
and turns his hands together nervously. Every now and then, he glances at the laptop as though it’s a
bomb that’s about to go off. He even goes so far as heading into his kitchen to make a cup of tea,
hoping he’ll simply be able to wash down his urge to stalk Gary online.

He feels absolutely torn. He should not be looking at Gary’s Instagram page. It’s wrong! It’s what
lovers do when they suspect their boyfriend or girlfriend of being a cheat. It’s what people do when
they have no faith in their lovers.

What is he expecting to find, anyway? It’s not as if Gary will have posted subliminal messages to
him online. It’s not as if there will be more black and white exercise videos like the one that gave
Mark a hard-on. Gary Barlow’s Instagram will most likely be a black-and-white collage of boring
pictures of pianos and the occasional plug for Keyboards Monthly.

And yet . . .

Mark steps back into his living room, teacup in hand. (Mark’s house is so small that getting from the
living room to his kitchen takes literally just one step.) He looks at his laptop again. He hesitates. He
doesn’t want to be this curious about Gary’s pop star life, but he is. He’s curious as hell.

Besides, it’s not as if Gary will find out about it. He’ll just have a quick peek before his tea goes
cold.

Mark heads back to his living room and sits on the floor in front of his living room table. He takes a
deep breath, mutters a “sorry” to some invisible deity in the air and flips his laptop back open.

He’s never been to Instagram before. For a website that his students talk about daily, it’s pretty basic,
with square pictures placed next to each other in rows of three. There’s a short description of Gary’s
various jobs at the top of his profile page: “Singer / songwriter / musician”, with a link to his official
website. His profile photo is a black and white one, taken on stage. Seeing it fills Mark with fondness
and warmth.

Then he sees something that he shouldn’t have.

His eyes flick to Gary’s follower count. His heart skips a beat. He has to do a double take.
The page says that Gary has 600,000 followers.

Six hundred thousand. Surely that’s wrong? It must be.

Mark scrolls down. The sight of Gary’s follower count has made him break out in a cold sweat.

He sees a lot of photos of crowds. Huge crowds. There’s the London Palladium in one photo; the Birmingham Symphony Hall in the other. And in the middle of all the crowd shots, Mark can see screenshots of newspaper reviews. The Manchester Evening Standard has apparently given Gary’s concert five stars. The Guardian has granted him four.

Four stars from The Guardian. Just how big is this tour?

Mark’s face has gone bright red in shame, but he keeps going. Gary’s posted a lot of pictures, ranging from pics of his two dogs to selfies with famous presenters from Radio Two. Then he spots a photo of the O2 Apollo in Manchester, one of his favourite ever concert venues, and he forgets to breathe. It’s sold out. Completely packed from the front of the floor to the very back. Gary has actually gone and sold out the Apollo.

But it isn’t the picture of the O2 Apollo that does it. It’s the photo next to that: a black and white photo of Gary with a long list of tour dates superimposed on top.

And they’re all outside of the UK.


Gary Barlow, a teacher at the Vocational College of Music, Mark’s boyfriend, is famous. Properly famous.

Mark tries to takes a sip of tea, but he’s trembling so much that some of the tea ends up on his T-shirt. He doesn’t bother cleaning himself up as he continues scrolling down Gary’s Instagram page, eyes wide. His heart is beating fast, like a rabbit running.

He sees more pictures of concert venues. Edinburgh. Aberdeen. Glasgow, where Gary started his tour. In every picture, the venue is completely sold out. There isn’t a single empty chair to be seen, and every face in the crowd is smiling.

Gary himself looks good. In all the pictures, he’s wearing an outfit that Mark’s never seen before: a modern red jacket with a black t-shirt and black trousers underneath. A red stripe runs down the side of his trousers to make him look a bit taller. His hair is more gelled up than usual, and Mark’s pretty sure he can see a spot of make-up on his boyfriend’s face; just enough to get rid of the faint lines next to his eyes.

By the looks of it, Gary’s concerts involve a lot of moving and dancing. He didn’t even know Gary could dance.

In other pics, Gary’s sat behind the piano with some middle-aged woman cradled in his lap. A fan, presumably. (Hopefully?) Behind him, there’s a ten-piece band; unfamiliar, happy faces who have spent more time with Gary than Mark has all summer.

Most lovers would feel a stab of jealousy seeing these pictures. They’d wish they were the fans sat in Gary’s lap, or the musicians sharing their Friday nights with Gaz.

But the main emotion Mark is feeling? It isn’t jealously. It isn’t anger. It’s confusion. He can see that
he’s obviously looking at pictures of his boyfriend, but that’s where the familiarity stops. Gary never talked about this. He’s never mentioned ten-piece bands, sold-out concert venues and ticker tape raining down the sky like glittering rain. The image Gary painted of his recording career was small. It made Mark think of local pubs and pint-sized theatres, not a bloody theatre in Australia!

By now, Mark’s guilt has completely disappeared. He keeps scrolling. He recognises none of the pictures he sees, which is a relief; Gary must have shared his more intimate photos only with Mark.

As he scrolls further back in time, the pictures of Gary on stage or meeting famous Radio Two presenters become less frequent. Having obviously reached the point in Gary’s timeline when he wasn’t yet on tour, most of the pictures feature Gary doing quite ordinary things, like cooking or walking his dog or doing Yoga in a sleeveless top.

One photo features Gary’s slim, shirtless figure in a gym somewhere, and Mark has to stop and stare at it. He tries not to feel smug when he reads several comments saying how “hot” Gary looks, with some posters even going as far as asking him to marry them. His fans must not realise that their favourite artist has been snogging one of his fellow teachers.

Then again, Gary’s posts don’t mention the school much. The only post remotely related to the Vocational College of Music and Art is one photo taken during the preparation of the summer prom. Apart from that, it’s as if Gary’s “real” job doesn’t actually exist. For his fans, the fact that Gary Barlow is a teacher is as unfamiliar as something from an alternative universe. Knowing Gary, it’s probably intentional.

Mark keeps scrolling. Although he obviously enjoys looking at the pictures to a certain degree, he still doesn’t understand how Gary managed to get so many followers, never mind sell out venues in Europe and Australia. Australia!

Half a million followers is huge. Even if you counted up all the students Gary has taught over the course of seven years, you still don’t reach that many people. Gary must be extremely successful. More successful than Mark ever thought he was.

And he never knew.

Mark closes his laptop with a soft thud. His tea has gone cold, and thirty minutes have passed. His mind is filled with half a million questions – confused ones, mostly.

He doesn’t feel particularly angry that Gary has kept his fame secret. There must be a pretty good reason, like the press finding out about their relationship or his fans abandoning him.

He can’t say he gets it, though. He’d be incredibly proud of Gary if he turned out to be this massively popular recording artist. That’s what boyfriends do. He’d support Gary through thick and thin, even if he wasn’t a pop star at all.

So why does it feel like Gary doesn’t trust him with this?

*

The next day, Mark texts Rob with just two requests: to meet him at the Starbucks in the city centre and prepare another PowerPoint about Gary’s recording career that suddenly turns out to be a lot more successful than Mark thought it was.

That same afternoon, Rob walks into the popular coffee shop with his laptop in his hands, ready to tell Mark all he knows about Gary Barlow, the pop star.
Rob looks even better than Mark last saw him. He’s tanned. He looks rested. He’s replaced the flowery bomber jacket that he wore last time with a simple black jacket that has polka dots all over. He smiles when Mark hands him a cup of caramel latte that he ordered five minutes ago.

‘Thanks for coming so quickly, Rob. I really needed someone to help me wrap me head around this.’

‘No problem, mate. I’m not sure how I’d react if me boyfriend turned out to be a massive pop star.’ As ever, Rob wastes no time getting to the point. He must have known about Gary being famous forever. Typical. ‘How did you find out?’

Mark blushes. ‘Please don’t judge me when I tell you.’

‘I won’t.’

‘I – well, I may have checked out Gary’s Instagram,’ Mark says, his cheeks burning with shame. He takes a sip of tea.

‘You were bound to give in to the temptation eventually.’ Rob shrugs Mark’s admission away with a flick of his hand, meaning, We’ve all done it. ‘What gave it away?’

‘The tour dates. And, well, his picture with the Queen. Plus the half a million followers. I wish I could meet the Queen.’

Rob studies Mark’s face as he says all this. Whilst Mark has grown some stubble on his face and an unruly head of hair to match, he doesn’t look at all angry. There’s a healthy glow on his face, and he’s smiling as much as ever. Compared to last week, Mark looks properly happy. Composed. Weirdly composed.

‘You know, mate, you seem very calm for someone who’s just found out their boyfriend sells out theatres in literally the entire world,’ Rob says. ‘I thought you’d be angry or something.’

‘I’m not angry,’ Mark says. Still composed. ‘I’m just confused. I keep wondering why he would keep this from me, you know. Having a successful career is not really something to be ashamed of.’

‘It’s not.’

‘I know. So why didn’t anyone tell me?’ Mark gives Rob a pointed look – the kind of look a puppy might give to an irritating sibling. ‘Especially you, Rob. You could have warned me about this!’

Rob lets out an exasperated sigh. ‘I tried, Mark! Didn’t I tell you to check out his YouTube page and stuff? But you kept insisting that you wanted didn’t want to “stalk your boyfriend on the internet”, so I just dropped it.

‘It would’ve come better from Gary, anyway,’ Rob shrugs. ‘The only reason other people didn’t tell you was cos everyone assumed you knew already. You don’t go around telling people that the Queen is the Queen. People just know.’

‘I did ask you, though,’ Mark counters. ‘Specifically. I asked you how famous Gary is and all you said is that I had to ask him that.’

‘But you didn’t! You literally didn’t.’

‘Yeah, cos I thought he was just a local artist! I didn’t know people listen to his music on the other side of the world.’ Mark sighs. ‘I worked as a professional songwriter for over three years. How come I didn’t recognise Gaz when we met?’
‘Probably cos you were too busy starin’ at his cock, mate.’

Mark’s look at Rob could melt steel. Even though he is generally not capable of being angry, he does look as if a student has just called one of his activities “stupid”.

‘Are you sure you’re not angry, Mark? Cos you look, well, angry.’

‘I’m not angry.’

‘Are you sure, though? Cos I don’t want you throwin’ tea all over me laptop.’ And Rob pulls his laptop away from Mark and towards the edge of their coffee table.

‘Oh, drop it, Rob,’ Mark says, mock-annoyed. ‘I can’t even get angry when a student is Facetiming in the middle of one of my lessons! As I said, I’m just confused. Very confused. I’ve been in love with Gary for five months, and yet I never noticed that he’s a pop star. That’s why I texted you. I was never ready to look into Gary’s music before, but I am now. I feel like I’ve been living underneath a rock for these past seven years!’

Even after everything he found out yesterday, Mark still doesn’t blame Gary for not telling him about the extent of his celebrity. There must be a pretty good reason why Gary decided to keep this part of his life from him. He doesn’t blame Rob for not saying anything either. At the end of the day, he’s just a bystander. Just a friend.

If anything, Mark’s actually angry at himself. He worked in the music industry for several years. He’s written songs for over a dozen albums. He knows how hard the music business can be and what it takes to become famous. He thought he knew everyone in the industry, from the nervous teaboys to the arrogant managers.

But out of everyone in the music industry, Mark didn’t know Gary Barlow. At all. That’s why he asked Rob to bring his PowerPoint; perhaps if he listens to the songs he’s so obviously missed out on, Mark will better understand what has made Gary so famous. He’ll ask Gary about his fame privately when they meet again; right now, he just wants to listen to his music. That’s all.

‘Sorry – I know that we’re having a very adult conversation here, but did you just say you don’t tell students off for Facetiming?’ As ever, Rob is only paying attention to the little things.

‘I know. I’m working on it.’

‘Facetiming, though.’

‘I know!’ Mark rolls his eyes. ‘But I’d never get angry at Gaz, is what I’m saying. This is just something the two of us need to talk about after the summer. I don’t even particularly care that he didn’t tell me.’

Rob gives Mark a sceptical look. ‘No?’

‘No. I think your PowerPoint might help me understand his reasons, though.’ And Mark makes a demonstrative face at Rob’s laptop, telling him to get a move on. He didn’t come here just so Rob could make fun of his class management.

Rob gets the hint. He pulls his chair closer to Mark’s, pushes their ceramic mugs out of the way and clicks on a file on his dashboard, a PowerPoint presentation. Rob presses F5 and the title “MORE FACTS ABOUT TREE SLUGS – NUMBER ONES EDITION” appears on the screen. Mark guesses the “number ones” refers to the number one singles Gary has.
The first slide features the pictures of all of Gary’s studio albums. Mark has seen this slide already, but this time the albums have their respective chart positions added underneath: #5, #39, #1 and another #1. The #31 looks so out of place that Mark has to do a double take.

‘Album number two didn’t do so well, did it?’ Mark whispers. He knows that Gary’s other three albums performed amazingly, but he can’t stop staring at that #31, sticking out like a sore thumb. ‘What about the singles from that album?’

‘One step ahead of you, mate.’

Rob presses the space bar, and a list of Gary’s singles and respective chart positions appears. It’s an impressive list. There are four number one singles, and even a song that sold two times platinum. Only two songs didn’t do quite as well: they barely scraped the bottom of the top forty and sold peanuts compared to Gary’s other singles. None of the song titles ring a bell.

‘I feel really bad saying this, but I don’t recognise any of these songs.’ Mark squints at the title of Gary’s debut single in the hopes that it’ll conjure up some tucked-away memory. The only thing he can think of is a poem with the same title – a sonnet that one of his students wrote in April. It must not have been related. ‘It feels like there’s a blank space in my head where Gary’s songs are supposed to be.’

‘Maybe you’ll recognise the songs when you listen to ‘em?’ Rob plugs a pair of white earphones into his laptop and hands Mark one of the buds. He pushes the other one into his left ear and heads to YouTube.

‘Wait.’ Mark closes Rob’s laptop before Rob can type the name of Gary’s debut single in the search bar. He scans the coffee shop. A quiet Thursday afternoon, the only other people here are sat at the oval table next to the bar, quietly reading their copies of a free local paper over a cup of coffee. ‘The video we’re about to watch is safe for work, right? I don’t wanna watch something that isn’t, you know, suitable for all ages.’

‘All of Gary’s videos are pretty pedestrian, mate. I wouldn’t worry about it unless watching Gary pushing a piano through a street in Brooklyn is something that gets you off.’

Mark gives his mate a stern but fair look and demonstratively opens up Rob’s laptop. ‘Let’s just get this over with.’

Rob does as he’s told. He types in the name of Gary’s debut single on YouTube, clicks PLAY on the first result and sits back as he lets Mark listen to his first ever Gary Barlow song. It’s a black and white video, clearly filmed some years before HD music videos became the industry standard. It starts with a shot of Gary in bed, wearing a white sleeveless shirt that doesn’t look unlike the clothes Gary wore in his workout video. He obviously looks good: seven or eight years younger, but as sexy as ever. Mark can see why his fans fell in love with him.

In the next shot, Gary’s standing on the balcony of his flat, flashing the audience a tantalizing piece of flesh as he runs his hands underneath his sleeveless shirt. In the corner of eyes, Rob can see Mark turning bright red.

They watch “pop star” Gary leaving his flat. He’s changed into a well-fitted black dress shirt. There’s another gratuitous shot of him drinking water from a tap. Mark tries not to think about what he saw Gary’s mouth doing to him three weeks ago.

The next scene features Gary in a pub. He’s wistfully looking at people in love; couples, basically. He keeps watching these people until he gets some sort of epiphany and he hails a cab. Next, he’s sat
in a big dance hall. There’s an audition process going on. It has to do with couples. Every kind of couple: boys and girls, girls and girls, boys and boys. Gary watches the couples as they talk to him, inaudibly, about their relationships. Some couples are seen hugging and kissing – even the same-sex ones.

Watching the video makes Mark reflect on his own relationship with Gary. He thinks about all the moments they’ve shared thus far, from when they first met to when Gary gave him head so expertly. He wonders who Gary wrote the song about.

The song itself is slow. Mark’s never heard it before. It must have passed him by completely, like one of those “memes” that his students keep showing him on their smartphones and he has to nod and pretend he understands them. Gary Barlow’s entire recording career is a complete mystery to him.

Similarly, Mark’s never heard the song that Rob plays for him next either. It’s more up-tempo. Its video takes place entirely on an exotic island, with Gary walking along the beach like he owns it, his chest bare and tanned. Mark can’t help but blush, terribly, when he sees Gary getting on his knees on the beach as he sings his heart out.

‘You said the videos were safe for work,’ Mark mumbles with a sidelong glance at Rob.

‘It is!’ Rob says. Right on cue, there’s a shot of Gary running his hands across his bare chest. ‘Okay, maybe apart from that bit. At least I haven’t shown you that one video of Gary eatin’ a chocolate bar.’

‘The video of Gary doing what?’

‘Never mind! The song is good, innit?’

Mark nods. He likes this song more than the first one Rob played him. It’s obviously a love song, but it’s incredibly euphoric. The production is immaculate. There are synths and a backing choir. The video is effortlessly sexy without taking things too far.

By the time the video finishes, Mark has actually broken out in a bit of a sweat. ‘I really enjoyed that,’ he mumbles, too afraid to say it out loud.

Rob makes a face that says I told you so. ‘Did it ring a bell?’

Mark shakes his head. He looks at the title of the song: Pray. It is undoubtedly a gorgeous song, but it has given him no sense of familiarity at all. He’s beginning to feel like Gary’s songs are all far-removed cousins and uncles that he fails to recognise at a family reunion. ‘It went to number one, you said?’

‘In several countries, yeah.’

‘I’ve never heard it before, sorry.’

‘And the other one? Forever Love?’

‘Nothing,’ Mark says, and Rob shakes his head at him as though he’s just admitted he’s never heard of The Beatles. ‘Don’t look at me like that, Rob! It’s not my fault that I’ve never heard any of these songs. Maybe he didn’t do enough promo or something.’

‘I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t judge you for not recognising two of the biggest pop songs of the past ten years.’
Mark doesn’t know what to say. He always thought he was pretty up to date with pop music (even going so far as making weekly playlists on Spotify and meticulously re-organising his small record collection every month), but he genuinely does not recognise any of Gary’s songs. His name didn’t even ring a bell when they first met. Mark just assumed Gary was an ordinary teacher, nothing more.

He wonders how their first meeting would have fared if Mark had known about Gary Barlow, the pop star. Mark’s never really met any celebrities – the singers he wrote with during his songwriting years were pretty much on the bottom rung of the ladder of the music industry –, but he thinks he’d be pretty flustered. Not that his first meeting with Gary went particularly well (he was stammering like mad, and he kept looking at Gary’s crotch), but at least he wasn’t saying embarrassing stuff like “I love your work” or “I am your biggest fan.”

Maybe that’s why Gary hasn’t told him.

‘Do you think there’s a reason Gary didn’t tell me?’ Mark thinks out loud.

‘Maybe. Why, do you think you’ve figured it out?’

Mark moves his head in a small nod. Although he feels none the wiser in terms of Gary’s music, he does think he’s beginning to unravel the mystery of why Gary never told him. It can’t be easy to put your faith in people when you’re famous: people must constantly bother you for things you can’t give them, like money or songs. Didn’t Gary once skip a staff meeting because Mr Harrison wanted to talk him into building an extension to the piano lab? Gary is probably the guy who’d wind up paying for it.

Not to mention the price Gary has to pay for love. Every day, celebrities get photographed holding hands with their loved ones. If word ever got out that Gary has a boyfriend – a teacher, no less –, the press would have a fucking field day trying to publish the first picture of the two of them snogging. The fact that Mark genuinely didn’t know how famous he is must have meant everything to Gaz: Mark would never boast about being in a relationship with Gary Barlow because he has no idea how famous he is.

‘You once tried showing me a PowerPoint with, you know, Gary’s . . . his – his exes.’ Mark feels awful just saying the word out loud. He takes a sip of tea to flush the curse down his throat. ‘Without telling me their names, were any of them . . . famous?’

‘Pretty much all of them.’

‘So I’m the first guy who’s . . .’

‘Ordinary, yeah. Well, apart from that one girl Gary dated when he was nineteen. But she didn’t like Gary’s dogs so that didn’t last long.’

The fog of confusion begins to lift from Mark’s mind. He thinks he understands now. Gary didn’t “neglect” to explain how big he is because was being a crap boyfriend, but because he was trying to protect himself. And Mark. To students and colleagues, Gary Barlow must be an idol; an inspiration to all, but to Mark, Gary is just the guy who wears Star Wars boxers. His Gary isn’t a celebrity at all.

‘I didn’t understand Gary’s reasoning before, but I think I get it now,’ Mark says. ‘I don’t know what Gary’s exes were like, but if I was the first guy who didn’t start dating him just because he’s famous, then – then I guess that makes us special, in a way. Not that I’d ever take advantage of someone because they’re successful, but it must have been a – a breath of fresh air, me not knowing.

‘Maybe it’s better this way, actually,’ Mark adds in hindsight. ‘I do wanna talk to Gary about why he
kept this from me, obviously, but I’m not in a hurry. It can wait. It’s not that important, is it?’

‘So you don’t wanna find out how much money he has in his bank account, then?’

Mark laughs. ‘One step at a time, Mr Williams.’

They return their attention to YouTube. Up next are the videos of the songs that barely scratched the top forty. The songs are decent, but Mark wouldn’t want to listen to the album they hailed from. They remind Mark of the poems his students tend to hand in when they’re suffering from writer’s block: unimaginative pieces of work that could have been written by anyone.

‘I’m very confused by these songs,’ Mark tells Rob as much. Presently, the laptop screen is showing Gary in the back of a car, singing something about love. ‘The lyrics are very different, aren’t they? It sounds like they were written by someone else.’

‘That’s because they were.’

‘What?’

Rob pauses the video. He returns to his PowerPoint and taps his screen where he’s typed the songwriting credits of all of Gary’s singles. Ironically, the two singles that didn’t do so well on the charts were written by seven different people.

‘Gary’s first album did so well that his record label started puttin’ pressure on him to write a second,’ Rob explains. ‘They were basically saying that if he didn’t churn out another album within a month, they’d drop him. I’m not even sayin’ that for effect. They were goin’ to drop him. The pressure became so bad that Gary got serious writer’s block and the label decided to write the album for him. When the singles off the album flopped, the record label dropped him and pretended they didn’t have anything to do with it. People called him a one-hit wonder.

‘Obviously, things are different in the music industry now. It’s all EPs and mixtapes these days, innit? No-one ever puts an album out anymore. But Gaz did then, and it bombed.’

Mark’s eyes have gone as wide as saucers. No wonder Gary has been so tight-lipped about his career. ‘They dropped him? That’s awful.’

‘I know.’

Mark doesn’t even know what to say. Being dropped from a record label can be seriously traumatic. ‘How – how did he cope?’

‘Quite badly, to be fair. I mean, we’re talkin’ about bein’ at the top of the charts one day and not knowin’ how you’re goin’ to pay your bills the next. Most artists don’t survive that. Most artists don’t even come back after they’ve been dropped. The only reason he coped is because he happened to be a teacher at the same time. I think he taught forty lessons a week that year just so he wouldn’t have to think about it.’

‘Oh my.’ Mark looks at the statistics on Rob’s laptop. The two albums that Gary released a couple of years later did phenomenally well: both were number one. ‘If his second album did so terribly, then how come his other two were number ones?’

‘He got lucky.’

Mark wants to say that there’s no such thing about “luck” in the music industry, but then he thinks about how hard he had to work when he worked as a songwriter full-time. He must have written and
submitted several hundreds of songs, but none of them ever made it to an A-lister’s album. He only ever managed to reach artists who were independent; the sort of act who don’t even have a thousand plays on Spotify. He always thought the style of his songs must have had something to do with it, but perhaps it was just a case of the odds not being in his favour.

‘How come you know so much about music, anyway?’ Mark asks. He can’t remember Rob having experience in the music industry.

‘I’m just naturally very knowledgeable,’ Rob shrugs. ‘Also, I lurk music forums in me spare time. That’s how I got the job at VCMA, actually! An advert for the school’s open day popped up on the forum one day and I thought, maybe I can apply for a job there. So I did. I’m a member of loads of forums. I’ve recently joined one about UFOs. It’s very interesting.’

Mark has to stifle a laugh. ‘You spend your free time writing about UFOs on the internet?’

‘Of course.’ Then Rob seems to remember what they were talking about, and he goes back on track. ‘Anyway, as for Gaz being a massive superstar and all that – Gary’s never taken any of this for granted. He knows how unique his situation is. There aren’t many artists who can go from bein’ a massive flop to releasing two number one albums in a row. I think that’s why he stayed at school. It keeps him grounded, teachin’. It’s probably why he likes you.

‘Now, I’m fucking starvin’.’ Rob reaches into the pocket of his trousers and comes away with a wrinkled five-pound note. ‘I’m goin’ to get a croissant. Do you want anything? I’ll get you a donut.’

Mark is left to ruminate about Gary’s celebrity on his own whilst Rob heads to the bar to get more coffee and pastry. When he returns, Mark has already started watching the video of Gary’s first song after he’d been dropped from his record label: the aptly named Patience, a gorgeous ballad about asking a loved one to wait for you.

‘Please tell me that you’ve at least heard of Patience,’ Rob says after he’s handed Mark his tea and donut, a chocolate one.

‘I have not.’ Mark takes the earbud out of his right ear. ‘It’s good, though! I like the melody.’

‘I don’t know how you managed to work as a songwriter for three years, Mark. People have written essays about this song!’

Mark just rolls his eyes.

They watch the rest of Gary’s videos whilst they eat. With every video Mark watches, more and more layers of Gary’s character are being laid bare. In one video, he sees Gary the musician, playing the piano in a concert hall; in another, he sees a sexy, well-dressed Gary on top of a rooftop, staring wistfully at the city beneath. One video even features the familiar corridors of the Vocational College of Music and Art.

Whilst it’s nice to see Gary again, none of his videos really feature the guy that Mark has fallen in love with. He sees a dozen different interpretations of Gary the pop star, but the real Gary – the teacher, the boyfriend, the geek – is something that these four-minute pieces of visual art never show. The videos never even show Gary with a love interest; it’s always him, alone somewhere, playing the piano or lip-syncing to an unfamiliar beat. Love is something that Gary sings about but never shows. Mark wonders if that choice is intentional.

Gary’s most recent single, These Days, is another up-tempo bop about how life ought to be enjoyed at its fullest. It is very good. When the song ends, Mark finds himself blinking at a black screen. He
has officially watched all of Gary’s music videos.

‘Your opinion, Mr Owen?’

‘I like it!’ Mark hands back Rob’s earbuds. ‘His music is not really what I’d usually listen to, but it’s good. It’s nice. I can see why he’s popular. I’ve genuinely never heard of any of these songs, though. I guess you were right about me living underneath a rock. I feel like I’ve missed out on so much . . .’

Rob makes a gesture as if to say, Don’t worry about it. ‘Now, shall I make a Spotify playlist with his best album tracks? I’ll put them in chronological order. Or would you prefer ascending order of quality? Whatever. I’ll put them in alphabetical order.’

Mark starts grinning as he watches Rob open Spotify and whip up a playlist with Gary’s best “deep cuts” – starting with a song called Lie To Me. Looking at the various songs being dragged into a playlist, Mark doesn’t know why he ever felt vexed. Gary being famous is not a big deal, because he’s still the same person Mark fell in love with six months ago. They’ll talk it over during the school excursion and laugh about how out-of-touch Mark is, and they’ll have the best ever time walking past the Amsterdam canals together.

At least, that’s what Mark hopes. What actually happens during the school excursion is a completely different thing.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is another relatively smutty one. And when I say smutty, I mean “Jesus, lads, get a room”. Like, there are just some things you don’t do on a bus. In public. Shame on you, Mr Barlow.

Sadly, I don’t know when the next update will be. I’ve landed a job interview at, ironically, an art school, and I want to focus on that next week.
PART SEVEN

Chapter Summary

We’ve made it through the summer! In this chapter, which features more smut, Rob overhears Mr Harrison saying something very suspicious about an exam.

Meanwhile, on their trip to Amsterdam, Mark attempts to speak Dutch. He also finds out that Gary gets really turned on by doing naughty things to him in public.

Chapter Notes

This chapter features some PDA. Please don’t try this at home, because it will probably get you fired.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

|LESSON THIRTY-FOUR: WHEN THE PLOT THICKENS|

Even though the new school year doesn’t start until the first Monday of September, a week after the induction for first-years has taken place, there’s already a pile of student dossiers waiting for Rob on his desk.

When he flicks through the dossiers that morning, Rob recognises quite a few names from when was working in the computer lab. There’s Nick, the Animation student who wants to work on his writing skills, and Mimi, a student whose dyscalculia made it difficult for her to sequence events on her Music History exam last year. Starting next month, Rob will be meeting all the students in his dossiers one-on-one, without the pressures of having to speak up in a big group. It’ll be perfect. He might not even have to go to staff meetings anymore.

It’s quite different, being a support teacher. Unlike the traditional teachers like Howard and Mark, who won’t be starting their lessons until the first-years’ induction week is over, Rob has already been back at school for over two days. Being a support teacher involves a lot of administrative work like compiling dossiers and pulling up digitalised lists of grades, and this needs to be done before the school year kicks off. That way, all the students who have signed up for support will get the help they need from day one, starting in September.

It does mean that Rob’s sat in a stuffy office whilst his colleagues are still on holiday, but he hates long holidays so he doesn’t really mind. Besides, it’s not as if he’s entirely alone; the other support teachers – two middle-aged ladies with identical haircuts – are already there too, minding their own business and only talking to him when strictly necessary. (Perfect.)

After three hours of reading student dossiers that morning, Rob tells the ladies in his office that he
needs to stretch his legs. (Often, Rob will head to the canals that are just outside the school grounds, hidden behind a forest of towering apartment buildings. It’s one of the quietest spots in the entire city.)

Because his two fellow support teachers are nice, but he’s still the same old Rob. Sometimes he just needs a moment alone. There aren’t many people who understand that: there’s Mark, and Gary, and . . .

Rob feels hot inside just hearing the third name in his head. He flicks away the name with the back of his hand. He doesn’t have time to fancy people now that the school year is about to kick off.

Instead of going outside, Rob decides to have a walk around the school itself. Unsurprisingly, the building is quite empty this morning. Old, yellowed posters of the previous summer prom still adorn the walls. The faint smell of dust clings to the air, making Rob sneeze every now and then. Artworks that were made by last year’s graduates have been left in the corridors, unclaimed. Inside the archive room where old exams are kept, there’s a hive of activity; three construction workers are busy renovating the room in time for the new school year.

Rob walks into a corridor on his left, heading straight towards the computer lab. Walking past the lab makes Rob feel a pang of guilt; he realizes that he never really loved the job. All he ever did was telling students off for playing violent online shooters like Counter-Strike. At least now that he’s a support teacher, he’ll finally be able to make a difference.

The summer hibernation becomes even more obvious when Rob enters the B-wing, the part of the school that used to be a warehouse. With its dark corridors and creepy staircases spiralling down into the basement, where the prints workhouse and photography darkrooms are, the B-wing reminds Rob of those old horror movies you have to watch between your fingers. For a brief second, he becomes genuinely afraid that the ghost of a deceased student will jump out of the shadows and kill him.

He keeps close to the walls, where the windows paint thin strips of light on the floors. Out of the windows, he can see the school grounds. Usually crowded with students and teachers, the only souls he can see on the grounds are a bunch of pigeons fighting over a breadcrumb. The local Starbucks is so deserted that it might as well close for the rest of the summer.

Even though walking through a deserted school is obviously terrifying (he’d hate being asked to attend the triannual parents’ evening and going to school at night, when the artworks left by the Fine Art students in the corridors look like monsters in the dark), a part of him also enjoys the solitude. Once the school year kicks off, there will be no more quiet corridors to roam leisurely. It’s why Rob became a support teacher; that way, he can still contribute to a student’s progress without having to deal with a dozen people at a time. So whilst there’s something very scary about walking through a former warehouse, alone, it’s also strangely enjoyable.

Rob has been away from the support teachers’ office for over fifteen minutes. He needs to head back to his colleagues. He’s thinking about taking a short-cut when a loud voice makes him start.

He turns around, heart in throat. He doesn’t see anyone, not even a ghost. He must’ve imagined it. There are no people anywhere in this part of the school.

Then he spots the door of the Arts & Crafts classroom. It’s ajar. If he holds his breath and listens very carefully, he can just about make out Mr Harrison’s familiar robot-like voice, talking as if he’s on the phone with someone. He almost sounds angry, for a guy who feels no emotion. Frustrated. Why would Mr Harrison go into the Arts & Crafts classroom to have a phone call when he literally has an office all by himself?
Strange.

Curious, Rob decides to eavesdrop. He edges towards the door of the Arts & Crafts classroom and listens. He can only make out half of what Harrison is saying, but it’s obvious that he’s angry.

Every now and then, Rob picks up snippets of the conversation; something having to do with exam papers and a student called Owen. It seems odd that Mr Harrison would be talking about exam papers at the start of a brand new school year, for there haven’t been any exams yet, and the ones that took place before the summer have been marked already. Unless a student needed to do a re-sit, there’s no point wasting your time worrying about exams.

Then Rob remembers something. Mr Harrison was talking to someone about exams three or four weeks ago too, when Rob had gone to school to have a look at his new office. Harrison was talking so loudly that Rob could hear his phone call from the support teacher’s office, shouting things that sounded quite problematic.

Is the phone call he’s having now about the same topic?

‘Yes, I am aware that we did not spot the similarities when the English exam was first issued,’ says Mr Harrison. Rob can hear him clearly now, and he creeps even closer to the door of the classroom. ‘Yes. Yes, Sir. Yes, of course. We will look into it. No, I do not know. Yes, I realise that two students handing in identical exam papers is a very serious issue.’ Pause. Sigh. ‘Do I think a teacher may have been involved? I do, yes. I think the teacher in question may have done this deliberately, in fact.’

Rob has to cover his mouth to suppress a gasp. Two students have cheated on their English exams and a teacher may be involved!

He wants to know everything.

Rob tries to lean in closer, but he doesn’t spot the broken piece of floorboard as he does so. He missteps and loses his footing. His body automatically looks for the next best thing to steady himself with. He ends up placing his hand on the door of the classroom, pushing it in.

The door gives a loud, complaining creak, and he suddenly finds himself on the threshold to the Arts & Crafts classroom – face to face with Mr Harrison himself!

Anger flashes across Mr Harrison’s face. He ends his phone call with without a word. He sounds angry. Properly angry.

‘Explain yourself, Mr Williams.’

Rob doesn’t even flinch. This is where his years of working in the computer lab finally comes in handy. He’s caught enough students trying to get away with murder to know what it takes to come up with a bullshit excuse.

Besides, he already knows what Mr Harrison is like when he gets angry. After what happened at the open day last year, his head teacher no longer scares him.

‘I was just admiring the artwork on the door, Sir.’ Rob nods to the door of the classroom, painted in a bright palette of different colours. It’s been like that for ages, but Rob’s looking the door up and down as though he’s never seen it before. ‘So pretty. Seriously. Wow. I hope I didn’t walk in on an important phone call, by the way?’

Mr Harrison manages an ugly smile. ‘I’m just checking in on my family, Mr Williams.’
Rob squints at him. He’s pretty sure that Harrison was talking to someone very important and official – meaning that Harrison is lying through his teeth.

He’s never been all that impressed by Mr Harrison, but this is just strange. This issue – which very likely involves exam fraud – has clearly been going on for several weeks. Should the other teachers not be informed about it?

Rob really wants to ask Harrison about it. Unfortunately, doing so would mean admitting that he was eavesdropping, and this might lose him his job. He doesn’t want to be fired now that he’s finally been made a support teacher! He has no choice but to look the other way, for now. He’ll figure out what’s going on in his own time.

‘Well, in that case, I’m sorry for disturbing, Mr Harrison. I hope your family are all right.’ Rob doesn’t even bother trying to sound sincere.

‘Thank you, Mr Williams,’ says Mr Harrison, with a similar lack of inflexion. He touches his pocket where he put his smartphone and glances at the clock in the corner of the classroom, a colourful grandfather clock made by students from the teacher training course.

Looking at Mr Harrison now, Rob notices that he’s the only thing in the classroom that is lacking colour. His face is grey. His jacket is grey. His trousers are grey. The pen in the pocket of his jacket is black, not blue. Even his shoes are a dull colour. In comparison, the Arts & Crafts classroom is crammed with bits of colourful fabric, old paint tubes, pink and lavender pompoms, and rainbow-shaped mobiles dangling from the walls. Sometimes Rob seriously wonders if Harrison is even qualified to teach at an art school.

‘Now, Mr Williams, should you not be in your office?’ Another glance at the clock. It’s obvious that Harrison wants Rob to go. ‘You must be so busy now that you have become one of our support teachers. Dare I say, it is the perfect new job for you – you did say you struggled with large groups last year . . . Or need I remind you what happened at the open day?’

Rob sets his jaw. Mr Harrison’s ugly, impatient face makes him want to be deliberately challenging and stubborn. Mr Harrison is keeping a very serious secret, and Rob is going to get to the bottom of it even if it’s the last thing he does. ‘You’re right, Mr Harrison. I’ve got loads of dossiers on me desk that I still need to go through. It’d be a shame if something happened to them, right? You know what I mean? Someone could just walk in there and copy them . . .’

Mr Harrison’s eyes flash with something dangerous. His neck flushes red. ‘Are you going to stand there all day, Mr Williams?’

‘No, I think I’m done. Have a good day, Sir.’

By the time Rob sits down at his desk in his office, his mind is overflowing with conspiracy theories. What does it mean, two students handed in identical exam papers? Did they do it deliberately? Did someone help them do it? Did one of the teachers slip them the answers in order to boost the grades of their students? And why is Mr Harrison being so secretive about it?

Oh, this is so exciting! He has to tell Mark and Gary about this.

Rob reaches for his phone on his desk, but then he realises that Mark and Gary are probably too busy texting each other to care about exam gossip. Besides, the excursion to Amsterdam takes place next week. In the grand scheme of things, some student committing exam fraud doesn’t really matter as long as the excursion still goes ahead and Mark and Gary will see each other again.
Rob doesn’t bother texting in the end. He’ll tell the boys what he overheard when they get back from Amsterdam. It probably doesn’t even matter, anyway.

LESSON THIRTY-FIVE: BACK TO SCHOOL … FOR GOOD?!

It’s Monday. It’s early. Fucking early. The morning is warm. Nervous university students all around the country wake up for their last ever morning in the houses they grew up in. A rainstorm has been predicted.

At home, Mark is getting himself ready for his trip to Amsterdam. He’s so nervous that he’s reorganising his luggage for the sixth time that week. He’s brought: his passport; several sets of underwear; extra shoes; an umbrella; a camera; a toiletry bag; a jumper; reading material; his wallet; his phone; seven t-shirts; his travel documents; a set of worksheets that the students have to fill in this week, provided by Ms Brooke; a travel guide of Amsterdam, including a list of Dutch phrases that he wants to try; a reusable bag; his iPad; and, hidden somewhere underneath a pile of extra socks, a pack of condoms in all the colours of the rainbow. Next to that, Mark has tucked away a sex toy.

He feels light in the head just thinking about it. He’s waited six weeks to see Gary again, and now it’s finally happening!

He wishes he could fast-forward to their reunion already. Mark has already thought about their reunion a million times – a million different scenarios, one for each night. In one scenario, Gary will surprise Mark in a quiet corridor in the B-wing of the school and hug him from behind; his mouth on Mark’s neck. In another, Mark will spot Gary across a sea of faces in the staff room and smile at him like an idiot. Scenario three: they’ll lock eyes during Gary’s speech in the concert hall. Scenario one hundred: Gary will text Mark on his way to school, asking him to meet him in a classroom before the first-years arrive. They might even have sex.

Mark’s so excited about their reunion that he leaves his house at half past six, positively bouncing with infatuated energy. He’s nervous too, of course (he’s never been on a school trip before and he has no idea what the first-years will be like), but he’s also happy. Fucking happy. There’s nothing in the world that could ever ruin how good he feels.

Mark is one of the first people to arrive at the on the school’s parking lot. They’re going to Amsterdam by coach, one of those large buses that have TVs and even a toilet in them.

The coach has arrived in the parking lot already. The driver, an experienced chauffeur, shoots Mark a quizzical look when he sees his luggage: two suitcases and a large black rucksack slung haphazardly across his right shoulder. The driver looks old enough to be in his sixties; he has no hair, and a tanned, leather-like face.

‘I thought we were headin’ to Amsterdam, son?’

‘I’ve never helped out on a school trip before,’ Mark says, as if that explains anything, and he helps the driver lift his suitcases into the luggage compartment underneath the coach. He keeps his large rucksack on; it contains another box of condoms in case Gary wants to get naughty already.

As of yet, the luggage compartment is quite empty apart from two small rucksacks; Howard and Ms Brooke’s, by the looks of it. His colleagues aren’t in the parking lot, so they must be in the staff room already, possibly joined by Gary.
Mark feels butterflies just thinking about it.

‘Your first school trip, eh?’ The bus driver closes the large lid of the luggage compartment. It shuts with a loud *thud*. ‘No offence, mate, but I thought you was a student when I saw you just now.’

‘Oh.’ Mark scratches his clean-shaven chin. He didn’t want to give Gary the shock of his life by showing up with a beard, so he shaved off the facial hair he grew over the summer. ‘I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not.’

‘Not if you want those students to take you seriously. ’t might get some of the new young ladies to fancy you, though, if you know what I mean.’ The coach driver gives Mark a half-arsed attempt at a wink, the sort when both of your eyes close and you look like you’re squinting up against the sun. ‘Anyway, I don’t wanna boast, son, but this is my *sixtieth*. Try to beat *that*.’

‘Your sixtieth school trip?’ Mark shakes his head in disbelief. ‘What’s that like?’

‘Like a fucking headache. Especially with this lot.’ The driver jerks his head into the direction of the school, looking as imposing and impressive as ever.

New students were asked to wait in front of the school before the induction ceremony kicks off, so there are already small clusters of nervous-looking first-years forming on the front steps.

Mark thinks the students look nice, but the bus driver doesn’t seem to agree. ‘I don’t know how you cope, son, being surrounded by these pompous arty-farty types. It’s not like it amounts to much, anyway, art or music. What’s a piece of paper from an art school worth these days? Not much, I bet. Now a university degree, that’s something I’d like my kids to get.’

Mark frowns. Even though he’s only worked at the school for a couple of months, the bus driver’s comment bothers him tremendously. What is this stranger doing, saying that what these students are doing doesn’t mean anything?

Sure, studying a subject like Songwriting or Fine Art is a massive risk these days. With the ever-changing demands of the modern world, the easiest, safest choice would be to just get A Proper Job. Mark’s struggles as a songwriter prove that pursuing a career in the arts isn’t always guaranteed to make you rich. Only people like Gary have managed to do it, and he just got lucky. They don’t teach workshops about good luck and four-leaf clovers at school. Sometimes, the students who spent three years studying Songwriting end up teaching poetry at a middle school instead of writing songs for pop stars at Universal Music. That’s just life.

However, Mark does believe that his students are *worth* something. All of them, even the rowdy ones. Just because these kids study art or music at a local vocational college doesn’t mean they’ve automatically failed as human beings. You don’t need a coveted university degree or a list of amazing grades to become a functioning individual in society.

‘Well, I think our students are *worth* something,’ Mark says as politely as he can. ‘This school – it’s important to them. It’s important to me.’

‘It’s not really like going to university, though, is it?’

‘Did you learn how to drive a bus by going to university, Sir?’

The bus driver’s mouth closes like a trap snapping shut. Mark flashes him a sweetly polite smile, wishes him a good day, waves, and makes a beeline for the school via the gravel path. He’s going to stay the hell away from that guy today.
Mark doesn’t get annoyed often, but that guy really knew how to push his buttons. He’s had to deal with people like that a lot this summer; people who think that what the students do at VCMA is worthless because it’s not as good as getting your A-levels or going to university. Or worse, people who think that being a teacher at an art school is worthless because being a teacher is the worst job in the world, apparently. How can being a teacher be awful when he’s got such lovely colleagues and students to share it with?

Mark decides that he isn’t going to let the bus driver’s words bother him. He excitedly makes his way back up the stairs to the school. A couple of nervous first-years are already hovering in front of the entrance next to their suitcases and parents, and Mark greets them with a polite “How are you?”, which quickly turns into Mark talking to everyone for over fifteen minutes because he’s a talkative mess, bless him.

Inside, the school is still quite empty apart from a couple of new students who are admiring the artworks in the corridors, travel bags in hand. Only the first-years are expected today; the rest of the students won’t return to school until next week, when the lessons start. (Mark’s received his timetable already; it looks quite terrible.) There will be a speech about the school in the concert hall followed by a musical performance by VCMA alumni, and then they’re off to Amsterdam. With the journey taking over nine hours, the coach is expected to arrive at the youth hostel near Waterloo Square late in the evening.

When Mark enters the staff room to eat in, it’s as if the summer holidays are wiped from his memory. Over half of the teachers are there already, boasting to one another about their holidays with cups of coffee in their hands. Some teachers have started working on their lesson plans laptops in time for next week’s kick-off. Mr Orange is texting someone with a goofy smile on his face, which is . . . odd. (Everyone has told Mark that Mr Orange does not have a phone.) One or two colleagues look so stressed that Mark thinks they must have been here since the end of last school year.

Gary is nowhere to be seen. He’s probably making the final preparations for his speech.

Mark makes the effort to greet everyone he sees, starting with Mr Hepburn (who looks even cuddlier than usual) until he reaches Ms Brooke and Howard, who will be travelling to Amsterdam too. They’ve claimed a table in the corner of the staff room to go over today’s itinerary on Ms Brooke’s laptop. In front of Howard, there are three different maps of Amsterdam, with important tourist places circled in thick black ink. Places that Ms Brooke wants the students to avoid have been marked with big red crosses, like the famous Red Light district or certain naughty museums.

‘Good morning, guys.’ Mark politely smiles at his colleagues before sinking into a chair. He puts his heavy rucksack on the table and rests his arms on it, using it as a sort of cushion. ‘Today’s a good day for a school excursion, isn’t it? The weather’s so good this morning.’

‘Couldn’t be better,’ Ms Brooke agrees, though she sounds exhausted, like she’s been running all morning and all the oxygen has been knocked out of her lungs. She must have been up all night worrying about the excursion. ‘Apparently we’re going to have rain later today, though.’

‘Are we? Oh dear. I can’t remember if I packed an umbrella . . .’

‘You probably have, judging by your backpack.’ Howard’s eyeing Mark’s rucksack, which is so big that it almost takes up the entire table. ‘You could fit two students inside that thing.’

‘This – well, you see, this isn’t my only bag, you know.’ Mark recalls with some shame that the bus driver pointed out his luggage too. He hugs his rucksack closer to his chest. ‘I may have brought two suitcases with me as well . . .’
‘Suitcases?’ Howard laughs out loud. ‘Where did you think we was going? Timbuktu?’

Mark goes red. ‘I didn’t know, all right? I’ve never been on one of these things before.’

‘You’ll wish you hadn’t by the end of the week,’ Howard jokes.

Ms Brooke gives Howard a cautionary slap on the arm. ‘Don’t say that.’

‘I’m kidding. I love Amsterdam. I can’t wait to buy some tulips,’ Howard says, pronouncing the word as though he quite means something else. Mark thinks he can see a spark in his eyes, though he supposes it could also be eye gunk. ‘Anyway, what do you think of the new students, then?’

‘I met some of them this morning,’ Mark says. ‘They seemed very nice.’

‘They do, don’t they?’ Ms Brooke agrees. ‘New students usually seem to dread our excursions, but the ones I saw looked really excited this morning. I think it’s going to be a good one. That said, I’m a little worried about a kid named . . . Seb, I think it was – one of the Songwriting students. He didn’t seem at all excited when I spoke to him this morning. I hope he behaves – I don’t feel like having to be a babysitter this week.’

After they’ve discussed the new students, their conversation enters the familiar realm of the summer holiday and how they spent it. Howard spent most of the summer changing nappies; Ms Brooke went to Sziget Festival in Budapest, Hungary, to see one of her favourite bands, and Mark mumbles something about how he’s mainly been working on his music. He doesn’t say that he also spent an entire evening masturbating to a video of Gary Barlow exercising.

‘I bet you were happy to get away from everyone after the first term you had,’ Ms Brooke says.

‘Not really,’ Mark shrugs. ‘I worked on lesson plans also. And I tried to learn some Dutch sentences. Hoo iz it?’ he says proudly.

‘What?’

‘That means “How are you?”’ Mark explains expertly. ‘I can also say Good’un aah-vund. That means “Good evening”. I think. I may have to write some of them down. Don’t you speak German, How? That’s a bit like Dutch, isn’t it?’

‘Not really. I’ve forgotten most of it now, anyway,’ Howard says. ‘I could probably order a beer in broken Dutch, but that’s about it. I can’t believe you’d work on lesson plans out of your own free will, by the way, Mark. I thought only Gary liked doing things for school during the summer.’

‘Speaking of Gary, where is he?’ Ms Brooke looks around her whilst Mark becomes suddenly quite red. Howard cocks a suspicious eyebrow at him, and Mark unpleasantly remembers that Howard once almost walked into him and Gary snogging. ‘He should be here by now – he’s supposed to give a speech at the opening!’

‘He’s probably in the concert hall already,’ says Howard. He shoots a meaningful glance at Mark. ‘Why don’t you go and have a look, Mark?’

‘What? Why me?’

‘You’re closest to the door,’ Howard shrugs, and that’s final. ‘Also, leave your bag here. You look like you’re going backpacking in the bloody Alps.’

Mark sticks out his tongue at Howard, but his eyes are smiling. Mark loves Howard really.
Underneath all that sleepless “new dad” grumpiness, there’s a guy who genuinely loves his closest colleagues – even when it turns out they’ve been sleeping together. Or rather, trying to. There hasn’t been much in the way of lovemaking. But the point is, Howard still hasn’t told anyone about what he saw Mark and Gary doing in the concert hall two months ago. That means he’s one of the good guys, and it’s good to see him again.

Mark makes a beeline for the door. It’s surprisingly difficult to get there; over the past ten minutes, more and more teachers have joined. He has to push through the crowd like he’s trying to get to the toilet in a busy concert venue, muttering ‘sorry’ and ‘excuse me’ as he goes.

His colleagues let him pass without any complaints. Mark even stops to talk to a few, like the ever-calm Mr Orange, who is still smiling and texting at the same time; and Mr Stevens, who has worked here ever since the school began.

By merely stopping to ask how they’re doing, Mark can tell that everyone is really happy to be here. They look rested. Healthy.

Everyone but Mr Harrison.

It happens too quickly for Mark to give it any significance, but he catches Mr Harrison looking at him from the other side of the staff room. He can literally see Mr Harrison’s eyes flashing with anger. Deep, proper anger; the same kind that Mark saw in his head teacher’s eyes when he was caught texting.

A second later, Mr Harrison turns his head, and the anger is gone. Just like that. Mark must have imagined it.

Mark finds the concert hall quite easily this time. He reaches the big double doors – fitted with an A4 piece of paper that says “REHEARSALS IN PROGRESS” – and slips through it without bothering to ask if he’s actually allowed to be there.

The concert hall still manages to take Mark’s breath away. It’s as big as Mark remembers it being. The seats on the floor have not moved, and Mark can still spot the bucket of cleaning supplies that Howard stepped into a couple of months ago.

Everything else is different. The walls of the concert hall have been decorated with blown-up replicas of graduates’ paintings. There’s an expensive-looking LED screen on stage, showing changing images from last year’s various school activities: the Fine Art excursion to Brussels; the summer prom; the Halloween ball; a photo of Rob at the open day; the graduation ceremony that Mark didn’t attend. In front of the screen, there is a four-piece band: one guitarist, one drummer, one bassist and a singer with more tattoos than hair. Old enough to be VCMA alumni, they’re in the middle of tuning their instruments.

Mark catches the eye of the guitarist, a slim lad with very long hair. ‘The induction program doesn’t start until eight thirty, mate,’ the guitarist says. ‘Why don’t you go outside and see if you can find some of your new classmates?’

‘Oh, I’m – I’m not a new student,’ Mark explains. He shoves his hand into his pocket and shows the guitarist the key card that he uses to open classrooms. ‘I’m a teacher. I’m looking for Mr Barlow?’

The guitarist squints. ‘Who’s asking?’

‘Mr Owen. Mark. Mark Owen. I’m a teacher,’ he reiterates sheepishly.

A hint of familiarity flashes across the guitarist’s face. He jerks his thumb at the space behind the
massive LED screen. ‘Your mate’s backstage.’

Mark beams at him. ‘Thanks!’

He heads into the direction the guitarist was indicating. Two large curtains separate the stage from the darkness behind it. The ceiling is high here. Only one lamp illuminates Mark’s path to the backstage area, a large space cluttered with wires, rubbish, old props and instruments that look like they haven’t been used for years. There’s a clothes rack. There are ropes, so many ropes. A rolled-up piece of cloth, painted in green, is stacked up against a wall. Above the stage, Mark can see an elevated platform where the chief electrician is currently repairing a broken light. During a performance, this space will be absolutely packed with artists trying not to fall over each other.

Mark’s about to give the electrician above him a wave when a pair of hands covers his eyes and the lights go out. The air is knocked out of his lungs.

‘Guess who, Mark?’

Mark breathes out again. He’d recognise that voice anywhere. ‘Good morning, Mr Barlow.’

Gary drops his hands. They land on the small of Mark’s back when Mark turns around and pulls him into a tight embrace; the first hug they’ve shared for weeks.

The hug is perfect. It’s everything. Here, you have Mark’s arms, wrapped around Gary’s neck; and there, Gary’s hands, fingering the material of Mark’s t-shirt as his stubble scratches Mark’s cheek.

It’s the warmest Mark has felt for weeks. He doesn’t want to let go. He kisses Gary’s left cheek. He wraps his arms around Gary’s body tighter, closer. He feels Gary’s hands slipping down, past the small of his back and the hem of his T-shirt. They squeeze Mark’s arse with just enough pressure to make him feel like he’s being claimed.

Mark laughs into Gary’s ear. A naughty, horny laugh. ‘I can tell that you’ve missed me, Mr Barlow.’

‘You have no idea.’

They separate to look at each other for the first time since the summer prom. Gary looks as good as ever. Tanned. He’s started growing his hair out; the blond quiff that he sported when he and Mark first met has entirely disappeared. He’s wearing a white dress shirt, a mix of casual and formal. He’s grinning; a proper grin that makes his entire face light up.

It’s really good to see Gary again. This is his boyfriend, alive and breathing and real. So real. He’s not just a picture on his phone anymore; no longer the ghost of a dozen frantic strokes up and down in a dining hall. Gary’s actually here.

Right in front of him.

They hug again. This time, Mark dares kissing Gary on the mouth. It feels like the first time, and his legs go a bit wobbly. His head starts spinning, reminding him of the fact that Gary will be putting his body through much worse tonight.

The chief electrician keeps unscrewing lightbulbs above their heads as though nothing is happening. Sometimes, pop star money can buy you everything.

As the boys head back to the staff room, Mark literally cannot stop talking. He keeps asking Gary
questions about his tour, one after another: Where have you been? Were your fans loud? Did you miss me? Did you get to perform in any theatres I know? Were there guest performances? He asks the questions with such genuine enthusiasm that he almost tricks himself into thinking he doesn’t know the answers already.

Of course, Mark does know. He knows the answer to every single question he asks: Gary visited the entire world; his fans were amazing; he performed in the London Palladium; and yes, there were guest performances. Mark knows every single detail, from the attendance records to the number of songs he played in Europe compared to the UK (far fewer, for some reason), but now is not the right time to tell him that. Gary doesn’t need to know that Mark spent an afternoon watching his music videos. He doesn’t need to know that his boyfriend knows exactly how famous he is.

Why? Because it doesn’t matter. Really, it doesn’t. In Mark’s eyes, Gary is still the teacher he snogged in an archive room two months ago, and he’s missed him tremendously.

Similarly, Gary’s adventures on tour mean nothing compared to what it feels to be reunited with Mark. Absolutely nothing.

Don’t get this wrong – Gary’s tour was amazing. Really, really amazing. Probably his best ever, in fact. He went to places he never thought he’d be playing seven years ago. He met singers he loved when he grew up. But this? Seeing that look on Mark’s face right before they embraced? Sharing his stories with Mark, lapping up every word? Not having to miss his boyfriend anymore now that they’ve reunited? That is better than anything. It’s better than fame. It’s better than travelling to the other side of the world to perform to thousands.

Because when he’s with Mark, Gary’s just an ordinary guy. Just a teacher. A lover. A friend. A Star Wars enthusiast who missed Mark like hell when he was on tour. He’s not the guy whose pictures are all over the internet – he’s just Mark Owen’s boyfriend, simple as that. If he had his way, he’d be ordinary forever, never admitting that he’s actually a big fucking pop star.

But he can’t do that. James was right; he has to tell Mark one day. And he will. Just not today; not when Mark is looking at him so lovingly and he feels like his heart is about to burst out of his chest when Mark gives his left hand the gentlest of squeezes right before they walk into the staff room that morning. When you’ve seen Mark Owen looking at you – really, really looking at you –, even the magic of ticker tape fades in comparison.

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The introduction program starts at 8:30 sharp, so Mark and Gary don’t have much time to get re-acquainted. One by one, this year’s new students and their proud parents walk into the concert hall to the music of The Musicians, a band made up of VCMA alumni. After their interesting cover of a Beatles song (Howard thought it sounded a “bit shit”, but Mark and Gary were bopping in their seats on the first row), it’s time for a speech.

Gary takes to the stage to thunderous applause from the first-years from the Music faculty. No wonder, because Gary’s a world-famous pop star. His songs could one day become part of the school curriculum if they aren’t already.

Gary’s speech is short but inspirational. He tells students the same version of the story he told Mark when they first met: he started out as a young, ambitious pub performer, and got lucky when he was discovered by someone from a big record company. By working hard and never missing a day of school ever (‘That’s not quite true,’ Howard scoffs), he made it to where he is now, being able to perform in beautiful theatres and still maintaining his career as a teacher at the same time. He never mentions fame or his number one singles. If you didn’t know Gary’s true success story, you’d think
he’s merely a local celebrity, not a pop star.

Every now and then, when Gary is at the risk of forgetting his words or stumbling over a sentence, he looks at Mark sitting on the front row. It makes his tummy do a summersault every time, seeing Mark again. He hopes that Mark knows how terribly he missed him.

After Gary’s inspirational speech, it’s time for the two head teachers of the Art and Music departments to go and ruin it all. Mrs Stohl keeps her speech relatively short, but Mr Harrison predictably spends the next two minutes boring everyone to death with facts about student numbers, his favourite subject in the world. He also reminds students that they should never cheat on an exam ever, and that if they did they were to be expelled from school forevermore. The first-years don’t have to take any exams until the second term of the school year, so all the teachers on the first row share confused looks. Why would Mr Harrison mention exams already? It’s very strange.

By the time Mr Harrison’s speech has entered its tenth minute, Howard has fallen asleep in his chair. He’s clutching a large Flat White from Starbucks in his right hand. Instead of having his name on it, the paper cup sports the words “I’m tired” in thick black marker.

On the first row, Mr Orange can be seen smiling encouragingly at Rob, who seems a bit anxious about being in the concert hall. The only thing that is making him feel remotely comfortable is the words Mr Orange whispers in his ear, making Rob laugh. He also seems to be blushing, but maybe that’s just the light.

Mr Harrison’s speech is forgotten when The Musicians play their second song of the morning, a cover of an inspirational Coldplay song. Throughout the performance, the large LED screen on the stage shows memories of the previous school year, from selfies taken by students to footage that was shot by expensive cameras during the summer prom. (No shots of Mark and Gary sneaking off, thankfully.) The montage is incredibly empowering; by the end of the song, most of the first-years are smiling at one another. They’re now confident that coming here was the right choice and that they’ve found a brand new place to call their “home”.

After the performance by The Musicians, the program moves on to a more exhausting part of the day: getting everyone on the right bus in the parking lot. Since Mark left his suitcases with the moody bus driver that morning, four more busses have joined. One is taking the Composition and Songwriting students to Amsterdam; another is headed to Berlin; another to London; another coach is driving all the way to Barcelona; and the final coach is headed to Rome with the students of the Fine Art course.

‘I thought ours was the only excursion,’ Mark tells Gary as they take their places in front of the coach to Amsterdam in the parking lot. They’re both carrying big placards that read “COMPOSTION AND SONGWRITING” and “AMSTERDAM, HOLLAND”. The temperature has gone down a bit, and they’ve had to put their jackets on. Gary’s is a red jacket with leopard print. (Mark recognises it from Gary’s tour pictures on Instagram, but he isn’t going to tell Gary that.) ‘Where does the school get all the money from? We can’t even afford a new coffee machine.’

Gary shrugs. ‘Why do you think Mr Harrison cares so much about student numbers? Have you signed the petition, by the way? Howard and Rob have made an online petition to get the school board to buy a new coffee machine. It’d be cheaper than going to Starbucks all the time.’

Mark shakes his head. He holds up his placard with “AMSTERDAM, HOLLAND” higher when he sees two students walking past, but they don’t seem to be interested. ‘I don’t like the idea of complaining about a coffee machine. If I had to complain to someone about something, I’d rather complain about my new timetable. But I won’t.’
‘Is it bad, then?’

‘It’s not great, to be honest.’ Mark cringes when the wooden stick that’s attached to his placard starts digging into his hand. ‘I won’t have to teach Art History anymore, though. Ms Stohl told me they’ve hired a new teacher for the subject – someone who’s actually gone to school for it! I hope she does a better job than I did.’

‘You didn’t do too badly,’ Gary reassures him.

‘Still. I never want to see an Art History textbook ever again. Look, more students are arriving.’

Mark and Gary help the students get on the right coach. A couple of students have forgotten which course they signed up for and need specialist assistance from Mr Harrison, who has printed a piece of paper with the names of all the new students and their respective groups on it. Some kids look like they’re having second thoughts about the school already.

Gary touches Mark’s elbow and nods to a young lad with dark skin, no older than seventeen, hovering cluelessly between the bus to Amsterdam and the one to Rome. He’s wearing a bright purple bomber jacket and a rucksack on his back. His black hair has streaks of blue dye in it. He looks a bit vexed.

Mark makes a movement to start towards the lad, but Gary stops him in his tracks. ‘Hang on,’ he says, grinning. ‘I wanna see how much you still remember about our students.’

Mark can feel himself flushing at Gary’s challenging tone. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Simple. I want you to guess if the lad’s with us –’ Here, Gary points a finger at his own placard, ‘Or with the guys from Fine Art.’ And he points his finger at the bus to Rome, where a very long queue of female students has formed.

‘Oh. I don’t wanna do that!’

‘Why? Do you think you won’t get it right?’ Gary flashes Mark an infuriating smirk.

Seeing Gary smirk at him like that makes Mark flush with familiarity. He thought that being reunited with Gary would be bloody awkward, but it’s like they’ve never even been apart.

Has it really been six weeks since they last saw each other? He can hardly believe it. Gary’s teasing hasn’t aged a day.

‘I just don’t feel like speculating about where our students come from,’ Mark says. More students come up to them to ask which coach they’re supposed to be on, including a female student who looks old enough to have given birth to one of the younger students. ‘I don’t wanna gossip about them. It’s wrong!’

‘It’s not gossiping,’ Gary says. ‘Or did you think the new students aren’t talking about us too?’ He nods at a gaggle of girls in front of the bus marked “Berlin”, talking to each other with their hands covering their mouths. Every now and then, they’ll glance in the direction of the coach to Amsterdam and laugh hysterically.

‘They’re probably making fun of your jacket,’ Mark says in jest.

Gary looks down at his jacket, a perfectly tailored red jacket with a leopard print. ‘Don’t start making fun of me clothes, now, Mark – this is the latest fashion trend, this is! One of the teachers from the Dressmaking course told me so herself.’
Gary clearly loves the jacket, but even fashion-conscious Mark wouldn’t want to be found dead in it. There are just some things you can’t wear as a teacher, like ripped jeans, tracksuits and leopard print. (That said, Mark owns plenty of questionable outfits himself, like that see-through shirt that shows off his chest. But he’d never wear it to work, is the point.)

Mark looks at the equally interestingly-dressed student in the purple jacket, still hovering between two coaches. He changes his mind about Gary’s challenge. ‘What do I get if I guess correctly?’

‘There are a few things I have in mind.’

Mark can’t help but feel a little nervous when Gary winks at him then. ‘Like . . . ?’

‘Oh. You know.’ Gary moves his mouth to Mark’s ear and whispers something so naughty that they both turn red.

Mark slaps Gary’s arm with the back of his hand. ‘You can’t say things like that when there are students around, Gaz!’

Mark says this very seriously, but his eyes are smiling. He loves this naughty side of Gaz; the part of the pop star that’s just begging to get caught. It’s like he doesn’t give a shit that he’s famous. ‘Please keep your disgusting thoughts to yourself.’

‘I’m just saying. It’s going to be a long drive, this, Mark. I wouldn’t blame you if you got bored.’

‘Never!’ Mark catches Gary’s challenging expression then, and he feels a warm wave of bubbly giddiness making its way from his toes to his tummy.

God, it’s good to see Gary again. It’s like the summer prom left a piece of his heart missing and he’s only just reclaimed it now that Gary’s standing next to him. He’s looking forward to this trip so much that he could burst.

‘Anyway.’ Gary nods to the student with the purple jacket and half-blue hair, still undecided as to which coach he’s supposed to go on. ‘What’d you think, then? Fine Art or Composition and Songwriting?’

Mark steps aside to let a student get on the coach to Amsterdam. ‘What happens if I don’t get it right?’

‘Nothing. You’ll get a prize if you win, and if you don’t win I’ll probably still give it to you.’

The prize – whispered into Mark’s ear so softly that he can still feel where the words brushed his skin, tingling him – is a handjob, just as real as the one Gary gave him before the summer started.

Today. During their trip to Amsterdam.

Mark isn’t sure whether he’s supposed to laugh or feel aroused. Probably both.

‘You seem very keen on doing things to me in public, you know,’ Mark points out. ‘Are there more kinks I should know about?’

Gary just grins. ‘Fine Art or Composition and Songwriting, Mark?’

Mark looks at the student in the purple jacket. He hates making any kinds of assumptions about people, but at first glance the lad seems to be a Fine Art student. There’s an artistic blue streak in his curly black hair, and he has a ring in his nose. A lot of Fine Art students are a fan of body art.
However, the student’s clothes are immaculate. His jacket is obviously brand new. His white sneakers look like they cost more than the average school fees.

Mark hasn’t seen the itinerary for the trip to Rome, but he knows there will be a lot of painting going on. If Mark was a Fine Art student, he wouldn’t want his expensive shoes to get paint on them. Not to mention the fact that the student’s rucksack is not big enough to have any art supplies in it; most Fine Art students carry notebooks and pencils into the coach. It’s obvious that this lad is one of theirs: a Songwriting and Composition student.

‘Composition and Songwriting,’ Mark says decidedly.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Very sure.’

‘Let’s go and check.’

Mark and Gary approach the lad in the purple jacket. He looks incredibly fidgety.

‘You all right, mate?’

The lad looks at Mark’s placard that reads “AMSTERDAM”. Then he looks at the coach to Rome. He awkwardly scratches the back of his head. ‘I – I can’t really remember which course I signed up for.’

That seems to happen a lot today. Mark gives the lad a reassuring smile. ‘Have you got your letter from school with you? The one you received two weeks ago? It says in the letter which group you’re in. My names Mr Owen, by the way. I teach Creative Writing. This here is my boyf– er, Mr Barlow.’ Mark flushes.

‘I’m Henry.’ The lad takes off his rucksack. He puts it on the ground and searches through its contents until he’s found what he’s looking for: the letter he received from school after making it through the department’s relatively simple application process. He hands it to Mark, who scans the letter for the boy’s group.

Mark grins when his eyes land on a familiar code in the letter. ‘You’re with us, Henry. Group M_SW1C, Songwriting.’

‘Oh! All right.’ Henry seems genuinely surprised that he’s in a Songwriting group. ‘Not what I was expecting, but cool.’

Gary raises a quizzical eyebrow at him. ‘Could you really not remember which course you signed up for, Henry?’

Henry shakes his head. ‘I didn’t even know I had! Me mam signed me up, you see? She said, if you don’t apply for a course before we go on holiday I’m gonna do it for you. She knows I make music on my laptop so she must’ve seen this course and thought, “perfect. That’s Henry sorted.” I’ve never actually sat down to write a song, though. I do everything on my laptop.’

‘That’s the beauty of our school,’ Mark says comfortingly. ‘It doesn’t matter if you’ve never written a song or never played the piano or don’t know anything about music. You learn everything here. Even the really basic things. What made you think you’d been signed up for Fine Art, though?’

‘Dunno. I paint every now and then. It’s, like, a hobby of mine. I’d be happy with either of the two courses, to be honest. I’m not that bothered.’
‘Well, if it turns out you’d rather do Fine Art after all, you can always switch courses,’ Mark says. ‘I know that sounds complicated, but it isn’t. Your first year is all about figuring out what kind of stuff you like. It’s what this trip to Amsterdam is all about. We’ll be doing lots of things like visiting concert halls and conservatories, but we’ll have time to look at art too. There’s something for everyone. So if you decide that you’d rather make art after all, that’s fine.’

Gary proudly stands back and listens as Mark tells Henry what his first year is going to be like. It’s a massive transformation from the Mark he got to know in April, when he still struggled with class management and he had no idea what exams and staff meetings were like. The Mark from six months ago would never have been able to tell Henry about all the things Songwriting students learn in year one.

At the end of their conversation, a big grin has appeared on Henry’s face. ‘So I’m actually going to learn how to write a song from scratch? Wow. Cool.’

‘Exactly! So don’t worry if you’ve never written a song before. And thank your mum for signing you up,’ Mark concludes with a flourish. ‘You’ll probably wanna get on the coach, though – we’re leaving in about ten minutes!’

Henry responds with an enthusiastic ‘Okay!’ and heads blindly towards the bus marked “Berlin”.

‘Wrong bus, Henry.’

‘Right. Sorry.’ And Henry makes an awkward beeline for the coach to Amsterdam.

Mark and Gary watch Henry until he sits down at a window seat. He gives his teachers a nervous wave from the window. ‘Do you think he’ll be all right, Gaz?’

‘Positive,’ Gary says. ‘We get students like him all the time. It happens. Cos these kids are bloody young, they are – sixteen or seventeen, some of them. I don’t blame them for not knowing how they’re going to spend the rest of their lives yet. You got it right, by the way.’ Gary jerks his head at the bus. ‘Saying that Henry is one of ours. That’s a good skill to have, that.’

Mark makes an uncertain expression with his face, meaning, I’m not so sure about that. Then he remembers what Gary promised him, about being given a prize if he guessed correctly. He feels a hot flush just thinking about it; it’s been ages since he felt someone else’s hands on him. ‘What about my prize, though, Mr Barlow? You said you’d do something very nice to me if I guessed correctly . . .’

Gary’s about to say when three older students get out of the coach to Amsterdam to smoke a cigarette. He steps out of the way to let the students pass. He waits until the students are out of earshot, then says, in a whisper, ‘Not now. Later.’

‘At the hostel?’ Mark gives Gary his best bedroom eyes. ‘Tonight?’

Gary’s mouth twitches at the corners. ‘Much earlier than that, Mark. Much earlier.’

|LESSON THIRTY-SIX: NOT QUITE A TOUR BUS|

Getting a bunch of nervous, uncertain, fidgety first-year students on a bus is easy.

Keeping them entertained is a lot more difficult.
For the first hour, all the students watch, spellbound, as the familiar English streets slip away from them from the windows. Some students are coaxed into sleep by the sea-like motions of the coach. Others try to get to know their brand new classmates. Mr Donald even manages to take a nap. All is good.

It’s when the journey enters its second hour that Mark begins to realise just how terrible being on a school trip is.

A student on the first row has gotten sick and thrown up in the aisle. A smell of vomit and teenage sweat punctures the air. There is no air-conditioning. Most students have already eaten their packed lunches. They groan every time the coach drives past a fast food restaurant. The teachers have been strategically seated in different rows to keep an eye on things, meaning that the only thing keeping Mark company is the empty seat next to him. He’s feeling terribly bored.

Everyone else on edge. Some boys are beginning to get increasingly frustrated with the lack of air-conditioning. One girl is only now realizing that she’s actually meant to be on the coach to Rome. The coach gets stuck in a traffic jam. Mark almost has a coughing fit when a boy in the row in front of him decides to spray his entire body with Lynx deodorant. He has to put his headphones on when the girls behind him start playing a very imaginative version of “shag, marry, kill”. (Featuring Mr Barlow as one of the celebrities. Gross.)

Ms Brooke lets out a fearful gasp when she realises that one of the museums the students were meant to visit on Wednesday has closed for renovation. On the front row, Gary has been cornered by three teenage fangirls, asking him if he’s ever met The Vamps and if he could please share their phone numbers. Howard is suffering from serious motion sickness. The only adult who looks relatively pleased with his life’s choices is the bus driver, but then again he’s done this before. Sixty times, in fact.

It gets worse on the ferry to Europe, one of those massive ships with cabins, restaurants and on-board entertainment. Howard’s never been on one before. The first ten minutes are okay, but then he begins to feel seriously uneasy. He breaks out into a cold sweat when he tries to escort a gaggle of girls to the front deck, where you can see a blue blanket of water as far as the eye can see. He sees a pale student vomiting into a trash bin, and he follows suit a second later. He has to spend the rest of the journey on the ferry with his head propped between his legs. He drinks no more coffee.

By the time the ferry reaches the mainland of Europe, everyone’s looking a bit pale. Mark’s hair looks like it was caught in a hurricane. He’s pretty sure he saw the feather of a gull fluttering out of his hair when he headed back to the coach earlier.

The journey continues on the road. It’s getting dark outside. The lights in the coach are off. In one of the front rows, Howard has fallen into a deep sleep against the seat in front of him. He looks like a zombie.

Mark’s in the second to last row, many rows removed from Gary. On his left, there’s the window, framing the dull European motorways; on his right, there’s an empty seat. The two seats on the opposite side of the aisle are also empty apart from a bunch of “Amsterdam” exercise books Ms Brooke had printed before the trip.

He feels quite lonely being sat here, alone. Apart from when he smiled to Gary on the main deck, he hasn’t been able to talk to Gary at all since the coach departed from the VCMA parking lot. It’s as if he and Gary are on separate coaches to different cities.

Tired, Mark closes his eyes. He can still feel the main deck of the ferry underneath his feet. He can still feel the buoyant movements the ferry made as it sliced through the water.
It’s like he’s reliving the entire journey all over again. Jagged fragments from today flash before him, from meeting Henry for the first time to seeing Howard getting sick on the main deck of the boat. Whenever he tries to picture Gary hugging him from behind in the backstage area of the concert hall, the concert hall, it gets upstaged by another image of seagulls or someone looking miserable on the coach.

The seats in the coach are quite hard, and he hasn’t taken a pillow with him, so it’s impossible to get comfortable. The only thing he has to make himself feel comfy is the blanket wrapped around his shoulders; the driver has finally put on the air-conditioning, and it has turned the coach into a freezer.

After what feels like an age, Mark can finally feel his body drifting off into a restless sleep. He dreams of endless oceans stretching out before him. He dreams of exams too; fraudulent exams that he played a part in.

He dreams that he’s invigilating a writing exam and that he accidentally checks his phone right when Mr Harrison passes his window. He can hear the floor of the classroom beginning to crack underneath him when his head teacher opens the door.

He’s about to be fired, he just knows it. He’s never going to see Gary again.

Then his desk chair gives way and the floor of the classroom cracks open into a big bottomless pit. He falls off his chair, taking a bundle of exam papers with him. He falls and falls and falls. He hears voices in the dark. Mr Harrison’s.

‘An incident like that could seriously harm your future as well as the students’. Is that something you want to have on your conscience?’

He keeps falling. He sees nothing. He winces when he feels his skin being sliced open; papercuts from exam papers.

He can tell that he’s about to hit the ground. He braces himself for impact.

He opens his eyes with a start.

‘Morning, Mark.’

Mark rubs his head where he leant against the window. Gary’s slipped into the empty seat next to him, looking enviously rested and awake.

‘What time it is?’ Mark sounds hoarse.

‘Ten-ish.’ Gary fixes Mark with a worried stare. ‘You okay, by the way? You looked like you were having a nightmare.’

‘I did.’ Mark feels cold, so he pulls his blanket tighter around his shoulders and rubs his arms up and down. ‘I dreamed that Mr Harrison fired me.’

‘Wanna talk about it?’

‘It was just a dream. I doubt it means anything. You look rested, by the way,’ Mark adds.

‘I’m used to sleeping in cars when I’m on tour. I fell asleep the moment the coach left. I’ve been awake for about an hour, though. Ms Brooke woke me to tell me we won’t be able to visit one of the museums in the exercise book because it’s being renovated. I think she was tearing her hair out over her itinerary last time I checked.’
‘Speaking of, where are we?’ Mark rubs his eyes and looks out of the window. The only thing he can make out is a motorway with trees and lights on either side. They could be anywhere. ‘Is this Belgium?’

‘Not quite. The south of Holland, I think.’

‘Is that where Amsterdam is?’

‘No.’

Mark sighs. This is his first ever school excursion so he doesn’t want to moan, but this journey has not been enjoyable at all. ‘I don’t wanna sound awful, but I feel like I’ve been on this bus for three years.’

‘This is always the hardest part, the bus journey,’ Gary explains. ‘It’ll be better on the way back, trust me. Anyway, there is one positive about thing about tonight.’

Mark gives Gary a sceptical look. ‘And what’s that, then?’

‘Just listen for a sec.’

Mark listens. Apart from Mr Donald’s snores sounding like he’s singlehandedly trying to saw down a tree, everything is quiet. Everyone – even Ms Brooke – has been lulled to sleep.

‘I can’t hear anything,’ Mark says as much.

‘Exactly. Everyone’s asleep, they are . . .’

Mark can’t help but detect a suggestive little tilt at the end of that sentence: a hidden, naughty tone that has previously led to things like Mark being snogged in an archive room and getting head in a dining hall. He doesn’t know whether he ought to feel excited or scared. ‘What are you suggesting, Mr Barlow?’

‘I’m just saying. If you still wanna collect your prize from this morning, I wouldn’t wait long, Mark . . .’

As if to illustrate, Gary kisses Mark in the dark; a soft, chaste kiss on the neck that draws a scandalously loud moan from Mark’s lips.

Mark’s hand shoots in front of his mouth. His eyes glance at the two seats on the opposite end of the aisle; still vacant, still covered with Ms Brooke’s precious exercise books. Behind them, the students who were previously engaged in a loud game of “shag, marry, kill” have gone silent. In the row in front, two boys have dozed off. Mark knows this, because he hasn’t heard them laughing for the past two hours.

He waits until ten seconds have passed before he removes his hand from his mouth again. He can’t hear anything to suggest that somebody heard him. He doesn’t hear hushed voices or someone laughing. No-one has heard him. Everyone’s still asleep.

Please let everyone still be asleep.

Gary continues to stare at Mark with a shit-eating grin on his face. ‘Is that a “yes” to collecting your prize, then?’

Gary speaks his words far too loudly for Mark’s liking. Mark shushes him like a child. ‘What? No!
Oh my God, of course not, Gaz – we’re in public! We’re surrounded by children!’

‘Most of our students are eighteen or over, Mark. It’s not as if they’re angels themselves.’

‘That doesn’t mean you can just – you can’t! It’s awful!’

Mark tries to say all of this with utmost confidence, but truth be told he doesn’t feel confident at all. He’s torn. The way Gary’s looking him up and down kind of makes him want this after all. Him. Gary. He wants Gary to mess around with him before they get to the hostel.

In other words, he wants to mess around now. He doesn’t want to have to wait anymore. It’s been ages since he last had someone touching him like that.

Gary can see the uncertainty flickering in Mark’s eyes. ‘You sure, mate? Cos you kinda look like you want this after all . . .’

Mark inhales sharply when Gary makes a movement as though he wants to touch Mark’s thigh. He stops to give Mark a warm, reassuring smile. ‘D’you mind?’

Even though he’s nervous as fuck, Mark finds himself shaking his head after all. No, I don’t mind. Go ahead.

He feels his tummy doing a funny summersault when he sees Gary’s hand making its way up his thigh in the dark, knowing that if he said no, Gary would stop teasing him immediately. He wouldn’t pressure Mark into anything, and Mark wouldn’t feel guilty. He loves Gary for that.

But what he also loves is the sight of Gary’s hand on his thigh, so big. So capable. So good.

Six weeks is a long time to go without being touched by anyone.

‘O-okay.’ Mark wants to say more, but he’s terrified that if he does his heart will fall out of his mouth, it’s beating so fast. He feels a wave of nausea rising up his chest, making him think he’s back on the ferry and that he’s about to fall into the ocean. He tries to sound confident, but he just sounds scared. ‘I – I want this. You. Your hands on me. Yeah.’

‘I need you to sound a bit surer than that.’

‘I’m sure,’ Mark says. He manages to sound less nervous this time. He wants this. He tells Gary as much; smiles at him; even makes a show of placing his hand on Gary’s. ‘I promise. I’m sure. But if we get caught, Gaz –’

‘We won’t. Trust me.’ Gary’s words are soft and warm. Just like him.

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I’ve done this before.’

Time stops. Mark tenses. Gary reaches for the blanket wrapped around his shoulders and pulls it off of him. He feels cold and then hot when Gary drapes the blanket over his legs to cover his crotch and legs.

He’s too scared to look down. Every sound is amplified by the silence, from his shaky breaths in and out to the soft rustling of the wool draped on top of his lap.

In the front row, Howard is still snoring.
It’s dark. There are hardly any lights apart from the streetlights that move quickly past their window, creating a continuous display of light on Mark’s face. They don’t dare speak. All Mark can hear is the staccato of terrified thoughts in his head when he sees Gary’s hand disappearing underneath the blanket and heading towards his zipper.

The bus is so quiet that Mark can hear every tooth of his zipper disconnecting. He starts when a student on the first row suddenly bursts out laughing.

They’re not the only ones awake after all.

Gary keeps going regardless. Mark has to bite his lip when Gary tugs down his boxers and jeans, freeing his half-hard cock. He can feel the zipper of his jeans rubbing uncomfortably against his naked skin, and he has to wriggle out of them. His jeans drop down to his ankles on the floor.

It’s a good thing that he brought a blanket that’s as big as a bedsheets. No-one will know a thing.

Mark’s too nervous to look Gary in the eye. He feels simultaneously scared and aroused when Gary starts touching his prick underneath his blanket. He’s gentle. He’s slow. Gary takes it one stroke at a time, watching Mark as his face becomes redder and redder.

‘Like it, Mark?’

Mark just nods. It’s obvious that he’s trying hard not to moan or make a sound, but he’s not very good at it. Gary remembers this from when he first gave Mark head in the dining hall six weeks ago. Mark’s loud. Proper loud. Even the fact that they’re in public doesn’t stop him from moaning softly every now and then. Mark can be a fucking screamer if you touch him right.

By now, Gary’s strokes up and down have become so fucking good that Mark’s started shaking. He’s beginning to enjoy it now: his eyes are shut, mouth partly open, head tilted back against the window. He looks good. So good. Like a work of art.

It makes Gary want to kiss him. He kisses Mark, hard.

Mark’s mouth returns the kiss with such need that Gary has to stop touching him to take it all in: the smell of Mark’s shampoo; the taste of food on the tip of Mark’s tongue; the hands clutching his shirt as though Mark is trying to stop himself from tearing it off of him. For a split second it’s as if they’re back in in the dining hall again, finding out just how fucking good they are together. The prom was such a good memory that Mark still thinks about it daily.

Tonight is even better. Mark allows Gary to kiss his ear. He moans a bit too loudly when he feels Gary’s teeth digging into his earlobe, forgetting that they’re on board of a packed bus full of students. He’s waited almost two months to see Gary again, and now he’s here, being jerked off in a way that makes him want to cry out loud.

But he can’t. He has to bite his tongue and swallow the words he wants to say, because more and more people are waking up all around them.

Mark can hear two older students having a whispered conversation not far off.

In the row behind them, another student has been jerked awake by a bump in the road.

Howard has stopped snoring.

Ms Brooke can be heard having a frantic conversation with the bus driver, talking about the location of the hostel.
Only one person would have to get up and look down at the blanket covering Mark’s legs and see what Gary is doing with his hands, and their lives would be over. They’d never recover from this. Not even Mr Barlow, the beloved popstar with almost a dozen top ten hits.

Gary keeps touching and kissing Mark regardless. He can feel the coach slowing beneath him. They’ve left the highway. They’ve entered a road with houses on either side; Amsterdam, judging by a sign on the road. They’re there. They’re here.

The bus is close, but so is Mark. Gary can tell by the way Mark’s looking at him with that fucked, faraway look in his eyes; concentration set on his face; mouth half-open. He gives Mark a peck on the cheek: a soft one, just barely touching his skin. His hands are covered in wet, sticky pre-cum.

‘G-Gaz . . .’

Mark’s trembling like mad. He looks down at the blanket covering his legs. He can see the blanket moving up and down in the dark like a living, breathing thing every time Gary pumps him up and down. He wishes he could see what his cock looked like right now.

The handjob is so good that Mark can’t even remember what he wanted to say. He looks up at Gary with a mix of fear and arousal in his eyes. He can hear more snippets of conversation; more people who could potentially see him with his cock out.

The thought makes panic rise up his chest. At the same time, he jerks up his hips; feels a prickle of something nice and sweet when Gary squeezes and touches him right.

‘Oh God.’ He can’t stop the words from coming out. They come before Mark can bite his tongue. ‘Oh my God.’

In the heat of the moment, terrified of crying out loud, Mark pulls Gary closer by his collar of his jacket and kisses him on the mouth one last time. He savours the moment. He breathes a string of swear words against Gary’s lips and comes in hot spurts against the inside of his blanket, hard.

He doesn’t moan. He’s too afraid to.

The orgasm knocks Mark out completely. He feels light in the head. For a dangerous second, he genuinely can’t remember where he is. The only thing he’s fully aware of is the warm pleasure pulsing its way up and down his body and Gary wiping his cock clean with his blanket.

Fuck. Mark realises with a shock that he’ll probably have to ditch the blanket. He feels a wet patch on his shirt that he didn’t notice before. Gary’s hands are sticky as fuck. At one point Mark bit his lip so much that he drew blood.

It’s a disgusting, terrible wake-up call, but a good one too. It reminds him of when Gary gave him head in the dining hall, but better. Much better – and much more dangerous too.

‘Wow, Gaz.’ Mark can’t remember what day it is anymore. Sunday? Monday? Monday.

Gary grins. A smug, knowing grin. ‘Was that good or what?’

‘Yes. So good, Gaz. So good.’

After Gary has helped Mark clean himself up and tucked Mark’s dirty blanket underneath the seats in front of them, they spend the rest of the journey having a conversation about how their summers have been. Mark tells Gary almost everything: about how difficult he found the holiday and that he longed for Gary to touch him like that ever since the start of the summer. He even admits how hot the
video of Gary exercising was.

He doesn’t, however, tell Gary about the evening he spent on Instagram. He doesn’t tell Gary that he’s listened to every single album of his and that his favourite song is *Forever Love*. He’d rather tell Gary all that when they’re in their room at the hostel together and they’ve made love all night and they wake up in each other’s arms in the morning. After they’ve done *all* that – and eaten breakfast in bed together – Mark will finally tell Gary that he knows how famous he is. But not now.

Right now, the only thing Mark wants to do is revel in what he and Gary just did together. He’s never done something like it before. He’s never had to and never wanted to. Kissing and touching in public always felt like something that other people did, not him. He always felt too scared. Too reserved. Too afraid of getting caught. There’s always a risk of getting caught.

Gary is different. Gary’s kisses are full of colour. They feel safe and warm even when they’re surrounded by people. They coax Mark into doing dangerous things he’s never done before – not because he’s being forced to, but because he deeply wants to. Gary makes him feel things he doesn’t yet understand, and yet Gary’s touches have a warm, comforting familiarity to them, like coming home after a long day at work.

Gary feels like *home*. Even in a packed coach. All the way to Amsterdam.

‘I’m really glad we’re on this his journey together,’ Mark tells Gary. From the window, he can see that the houses on the streets become increasingly older and slimmer and smaller. He’s even beginning to catch glittering glimpses of Dutch canals, as perfect as a picture on a postcard. They look far more beautiful than the canals in England. ‘I don’t know if I would have coped if I had to spend another week alone. I missed you so, so much, Gaz. So much.’

‘I know. I’ve missed you too.’ Gary gives Mark a quick kiss on his temple: a gentle kiss compared to the ones they shared ten minutes ago, but a kiss nonetheless. It encapsulates everything Gary wants to say to Mark but *can’t*, not now that more students are waking up.

Even pop stars aren’t immune to the consequences of missing someone. ‘Don’t get me wrong – my tour was bloody good, Mark. So good. I don’t think I’ve ever had such a good reception before. But making you come just now . . . that’s made me feel more alive than anything, that has. I can’t wait to do that again tonight.’

Gary can’t quite see Mark smiling in the dark, but he doesn’t have to. He can feel the smile *radiating* off of him.

Mark leans his head on Gary’s shoulder and comfortably watches as the coach drives past strange old streets with their slim canal houses. He must’ve dozed off at some point, because when he opens his eyes again the bus has just stopped in front of what is obviously their hostel. He can lift his head from Gary’s shoulder right before the bus driver switches the lights inside the coach back on.

A collective groan ripples through the coach as Ms Brooke’s voice booms through the coach, ordering everyone to get out and gather their luggage. She must have been waiting to get hold of the bus driver’s microphone for ages. The time for sleeping is over.

As everyone makes their way to the exit closest to them, Mark carefully studies the faces of the students on the back row. Their faces don’t seem to betray any hint of them knowing what Gary did to him. In fact, they all have black sleeping mask resting on the tops of their heads. There’s no way they could have seen Gary jerking him off. *Thank God.*

The ground feels comfortably solid when Mark leaves the bus. The air smells different here. Cleaner.
In front of the coach, there’s the hostel, a black 17th-century house that looks worryingly slim. It has five floors and tiny rectangular windows that look like they haven’t been cleaned since the Golden Age. The words “Youth Hostel” – preceded by some unpronounceable Dutch word or street name – are lit up in yellow neon letters above the door. Over a dozen cycles have been parked in metal bicycle stands next to the front door. They’re all hire bikes.

The buildings next to the hostel are completely different: some are taller; some are smaller; some have flat, horizontal roofs whilst others are a bit curved. Even the colours are all different: the houses on the street range from deep red to black to navy blue. A restaurant right next to the hostel looks like it can’t have been built more than fifty years ago.

Behind the coach, there’s a canal, much wider than the narrow ones Mark spotted from the bus before he fell asleep. He counts at least four bridges, lit up like it’s already Christmas. It’s beautiful.

On the canal itself, there are canal boats in all the colours of the rainbow, reminding Mark vaguely of the narrow boats he sometimes sees on the UK waterways, now empty because business has closed. There’s even a boat that sells pannenkoeken during the day: flat, wafer-thin pancakes that people like to eat with iced sugar. It feels like Mark’s on holiday.

“You can tell we’re in Europe,” Howard says flatly.


Howard nods his head at something in the distance. He looks tired; his eyes are blurry. ‘See that? The steering wheel’s on the wrong side.’

Mark looks at the thing Howard’s indicated. ‘That’s a scooter, Howard.’

‘Is it? Hm.’

One by one, everyone heads to the other side of the bus to collect their things from the luggage compartment. With his two suitcases and his dirty blanket clutched awkwardly underneath his arms, Mark looks more prepared for a trip up the Alps than a trip to Amsterdam.

The reception area of the hostel is so small that all the students have to stay outside with Howard while the other teachers handle their check-in. A dark room that probably used to be a hallway or reception area of some kind in the 17th century, the reception area consists of no more than a shabby-looking desk with an old nineties computer monitor. The only source of light is a ceiling lamp that keeps flickering on and off. The windows are so dirty that they hardly let out any light from the streetlights outside the hostel. It’s not very inviting.

Ms Brooke’s in charge of checking in. She’s clearly done this before. ‘Good evening. We’d like to ch—’

There’s a loud crash followed by a terrified-sounding ‘oh my God.’ It’s Mark. The reception area is so small that he’s managed to knock over a plant pot with his massive rucksack.

He helplessly looks at the receptionist, a young lady with her black hair pulled back in a bun, staring at Mark with daggers in her eyes. She has a nameplate on her chest, which reads Happy to help. The receptionist does not look at all happy to help today, and Mark does that thing when he tries to overcompensate for being a massive disaster by turning up his politeness to eleven.

‘I’m so sorry, Ms Receptionist, Madam. Er – wait.’ Mark fishes a piece of crumpled paper out of the pocket of his jeans and folds it open. It contains useful Dutch sentences and their English

The receptionist blinks. ‘What?’

‘I think he’s trying to talk Dutch.’ Ms Brooke looks as though she’d rather pretend she doesn’t know Mark. Howard and Gary both shake their heads at Mark, equally embarrassed. ‘Anyway, I wanted to check in? I made the reservation under the name of Ms Brooke. We’re checking in with twenty-seven students and four members of staff from the Vocational School of Music and Art.’

The receptionist disinterestedly types in Ms Brooke’s details in the ancient computer in front of her. ‘Ms Brooke, you say? I can see now your reservation. You will stay in Rooms 4, 23 and 34. Rooms 23 and 34 are big rooms for much students. Girls and boys apart. The other is a room for the teachers.’

The receptionist’s English isn’t perfect, but it’s not difficult to understand what she just said.

She’s saying that the teachers will be sharing a room.

Mark looks at Ms Brooke, then at the receptionist. He gets an empty, hollow feeling in the pit of his tummy. ‘I – I don’t mean to sound awful, but weren’t the teachers supposed to get . . . two . . . rooms? As in, separate rooms?’ He again looks at the paper in his hands. ‘Er. Hoo iz it?’ he says again, in terrible Dutch, because it’s the only thing he can say.

Ms Brooke ignores Mark while he sheepishly turns his crumpled piece of paper over for more useless Dutch phrases. ‘I booked four rooms in total: two for the students and two for the teachers. There must have been a mistake. I did go over the reservation twice.’

‘There are no rooms left,’ the receptionist says. Everything she says is preceded by a deep sigh. She must hate her job terribly. ‘The teachers have to share room 4. You will get your money back. You can with your refund buy a nice souvenir at the Rijksmuseum.’

Gary’s shoulders slump. Mark’s gone a bit pale. The only reason they volunteered for this trip was so Mark and Gary would be able to share a room. Together. With just the two of them. But now, they’ll be sharing a room. With their colleagues.

Ms Brooke gives the boys an apologetic look. ‘I’m sorry, boys. I know you didn’t want to share a room with me and Howard.’

That makes Mark feel even worse. He didn’t want to have a separate room because he doesn’t like his colleagues – he wants to have a separate room because he wants to be with Gary! ‘It’s not that, Liz,’ he stammers self-consciously. ‘It’s just, well – we . . .’

‘It’s because of me,’ Gary adds, coming to Mark’s rescue. He’s gone a bit pink in the cheeks. ‘I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to sleep with others around me. I’m a very light sleeper, I am.’

‘Exactly.’ Mark nods a couple of times very fast. He gives Ms Brooke a nervous smile even though he feels like he’s about to pass out. ‘I’m sure you’re very good company, you know.’

Ms Brooke laughs self-consciously. ‘I hope so! I’m glad I brought my regular pyjamas now . . .’ She turns to the receptionist while Mark and Gary share worried looks behind her back. Howard quietly sips a cup of coffee that seems to have appeared out of nowhere. ‘Are there other things we should know about? About check-out or . . .?’

The receptionist starts listing important things they should know about the hotel like she’s a robot that’s about to power down. She’s still punctuating each sentence with a sigh. ‘Check-out is on ten
o’clock on Friday. Dinner is served in the dining room on about six o’clock every day. You may not smoke in the rooms. Make please not too much noise because we have neighbours that complain a lot.’

‘What about breakfast?’ Gary chimes in. He always gets a bit anxious when he doesn’t know what he’s going to eat two days in advance, and he knows that Ms Brooke doesn’t eat gluten.

‘There is in the morning breakfast. You can eat sandwiches and cereal. If you do not like sandwiches and cereal then you may bring your own food. There is also a chicken restaurant next to the hotel, but it is very expensive.’

Gary’s almost afraid to ask his next question. ‘And the, er, bathrooms?’

‘The teacher room has an ensuite bathroom. Your pupils have to share the showers on the third floor.’

‘Oh, thank God,’ Mark whispers.

They receive their key cards; one card for each room. When Ms Brooke asks if they could please receive more cards, the receptionist makes an all-encompassing gesture at the reception area as if to say, *Have you seen this place?*

‘We do not have enough money to make more cards. You will have to share. Also, please tell your students to be careful with the furniture. It is very old. If a piece of furniture breaks and falls on your head, please do not sue us.’

‘Why would a piece of furniture fall on our heads?’ Gary asks.

‘You will see,’ the receptionist warns ominously. Howard almost chokes on his coffee.

With the check-in sorted, Mark becomes the sole protector of the key card for the teachers’ room. He puts it in his wallet next to his debit card.

Ms Brooke leads the female students to the girls’ dorm on the third floor whilst Howard takes the boys on the floor below. Mark and Gary get the questionable privilege of checking out the room they’ll be sharing with their colleagues.

Room 4 is on the ground floor, but getting there involves walking through several pitch-black corridors. Here, the carpet is worn. The wallpaper peels in places and there is a faint smell of damp and something else – weed and chicken. It reminds Mark of wet cabbage and skunk litter. It’s nauseating.

They’ve reached a T-junction on the ground floor. Mark almost falls over when Gary suddenly stops to read a dimly-lit sign on the wall. With Gary distracted, he hazards the question he’s been wanting to ask ever since they reached the hostel. ‘Gaz?’

‘Yes, Mark?’

‘Could we – could have a chat when we get to our room? Just the two of us?’

‘What do you mean by chat, exactly?’ Mark can’t see Gary’s face, but he can tell hear there’s a suggestive tilt at the end of that sentence.

‘I meant a chat. An actual conversation.’
‘Oh.’ Gary sounds disappointed. He must have thought Mark was talking about sex. ‘What do you wanna talk about?’

‘Just . . . stuff,’ Mark says vaguely. He doesn’t yet want to admit that he knows about Gary’s worldwide success and that he spent an entire afternoon listening to his music and that he thinks it’s a bloody tragedy that Reach Out wasn’t a proper single because it’s a fucking tune. That sort of stuff. ‘I’ll tell you when we get to our room.’

‘If we get to our room,’ Gary adds. He steps aside so that Mark can have a look at the sign on the wall too. On the metal sign, there are directions to every room apart from their own. Room 4 doesn’t seem to exist. ‘Any ideas?’

‘Maybe Room 4 is on the first floor?’ Mark glances at both ends of the corridor. It’s so dark that all he sees is a blanket of darkness stretching out before him. He can just about make out the door closest to them: a brown door without a number on it. It must be a cupboard or some kind, not a guestroom. ‘Let’s keep looking.’

They head left, walking past Rooms 3, 5 and 6 until they reach a dead end. They head back into the direction where they came from and walk straight ahead. Another dead end.

Mark suspiciously eyes the door without the number on it. He takes his key card out of his wallet. ‘Do you think . . . ?’

‘We could try.’

Mark swipes the lock on the door with his card. After incorrectly swiping the lock with the wrong side of the key card three times, the door audibly unlocks. It opens to the most miserable room Mark has ever seen.

Room 4 is painfully bare. The floor is filthy. There are two bunk beds. There’s a wardrobe fitted with dusty shelves and three broken clothes hangers. There are no chairs and tables. A window overlooking the street outside the hostel has been locked shut. The curtain in front of the window smells of cigarettes. The room was built and decorated so long ago that it doesn’t even have any sockets to charge your electronic devices. Gary has to flick several fruit flies away from his face.

But it gets worse. The ensuite bathroom consists of no more than a dirty shower, a toilet, a wooden wardrobe and a simple basin. A suspicious brown handprint has been planted on of the tiles in the shower. A giant cockroach is trying to crawl out of the basin. The tiles on the floor feel sticky. The room smells vaguely of weed – probably because there’s a tiny bag of weed sticking out of the waste bin behind the door.

‘Charming,’ Gary says sarcastically, and he closes the bathroom door as quickly as he can.

The bunk bed at the right-hand side of the room gives a loud, complaining creak when Mark sits on its edge. Gary doesn’t dare sit next to him in case the whole thing collapses, so he decides to take a seat on one of Mark’s man-sized suitcases.

Mark looks as gutted as a child who didn’t get anything for Christmas.

‘This is not what I was expecting,’ Mark mumbles as much. He didn’t feel dirty after having Gary jerk him off in the coach, but he does now. The only thing he likes about the room is the painting on the wall, of a grand ship sailing a stormy sea. Everything else is not nearly as warm and inviting as he thought it would be when he got out of the coach fifteen minutes ago.

‘If it’s any consolation, there’s aircon?’ Gary gets up from his makeshift chair and steps towards the
small white box on the wall that controls the air conditioning. A second after he’s pressed a big green button, the air conditioning starts whirring so loudly that Mark has to put his hands over his ears and Gary has to turn the thing off again. ‘Never mind. We’ll just sweat to death.’

Mark fumbles with his shirtsleeves, not daring to his fingers touch his sheets in case they’re as dirty as they look.

He has no idea what to do. When his lessons don’t go as planned, he can fall back on what he learned during his teacher training. He can start up an impromptu online quiz or ask the students to take turns writing lines of a poem. Teaching’s easy. He was trained for it.

He wasn’t trained for a school trip. He didn’t even prepare for this one, not really. All he cared about were the plans he had with Gaz: making love on their double bed; taking a shower together; telling Gary that he knows about his secret; letting Gary take him from behind on the floor. He can’t do any of those things now.

Gary’s still trying to make the most of it. ‘So what did wanna talk about, then?’ He casually leans against the bunk bed opposite Mark’s, and the whole thing gives a loud, complaining crrrrrrkk, like a branch snapping in half.

Mark’s eyes go as wide as dinner plates. ‘That doesn’t sound good.’

‘No, it doesn’t.’ Gary steps away from the bunk bed on the left and motions at Mark to get up for a second. He gives the bunk bed that Mark has claimed a firm push with both hands. It doesn’t groan and creak quite as much. ‘I guess I’ll be sleeping above you tonight,’ he says, and he tosses his rucksack on the bed before briefly checking the small ladder next to the bed. It looks firm enough. ‘Anyway. You said you wanted to talk.’

‘Oh. It – it doesn’t matter.’ Mark tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. ‘We’ll talk about it later.’

‘You sure? You made it sound pretty important.’

‘It’s not. It can wait.’ Mark looks at the bed opposite them, and a lump forms his throat. He knows it sounds awful, but he really wishes he and Gary were on this trip alone. ‘So what do we do now that we can’t spend the night together?’

Gary shakes his head, lost for an answer. ‘I wish I knew.’

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will make you wish Howard had better timing.
PART EIGHT

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, which will make you wish Howard would stop having such dreadful timing, a student nearly ruins a very expensive Van Gogh painting.

Meanwhile, Mark and Gary have an argument.

Chapter Notes

This chapter features some rough smut, dirty talk and Gary being quite dominant (and slightly unreasonable).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

LESSON THIRTY-SEVEN: THE POTATO EATERS

The first night in Amsterdam, Mark hardly sleeps. As well as being plagued by more nightmares about exams, there’s a bump in his mattress. He spends over half an hour wondering whether it’s a body part someone left there after a brutal murder.

Also: it’s hot. The air conditioner doesn’t work. The blankets smell of a coffee shop. Every time someone in the hotel opens a door, Mark can feel the room trembling. His pillow is hard. A mosquito is buzzing annoyingly above his face, and he feels his left cheek itching where the insect bit him.

The mosquito isn’t the only thing that is keeping Mark up. Howard’s snores sound like someone’s trying to mow down all the trees in the Amazon forest. The showerhead in the bathroom is dripping. He can hear the hushed conversations from the room next-door leading into sex, making Mark stick his fingers into his ear. Every time Gary so much lifts a finger in the bed above him, he can hear every single fibre of the bunk bed creaking. It makes him genuinely petrified that the bunk bed is about to collapse on top of him.

The next morning – Tuesday – is worse. Even though there’s only four of them in the room (Mark, Gary, Howard and Ms Brooke), there’s a queue for the bathroom. Mark gets to shower last, and there’s hardly any hot water left. He barely manages to wash his hair.

Breakfast at the youth hostel in Amsterdam is a similarly shabby affair. There are no scrambled eggs, sausages or beans. Mark can’t even see any hot porridge or bacon. The only food guests can choose from are slices of white bread, burnt toast, more white bread, tasteless crackers, beschuitjes, salami-and-ham sandwiches and bran cornflakes. There’s also an average selection of spreads: Nutella, peanut butter, cheese, salami, jam, and chocolate sprinkles.
The Composition and Songwriting students are currently at that age where their idea of a perfect breakfast is having a can of energy drink with a bag of crisps at nine in the morning, so most of them opt for toast and chocolate sprinkles.

Meanwhile, Mark and Gary stare miserably at their own choice of breakfast: bran flakes and a flimsy salami-and-ham sandwich. Mark would never look a gifted horse in the mouth (today’s breakfast is free of charge), but the bread looks quite old: it has moulded in places and the ham is thin and see-through. It doesn’t look appetizing at all.

‘Just throw it away if you don’t wanna eat it, mate,’ Gary says as he stuffs his mouth with a spoonful of tasteless bran flakes. For the last minute and a half, he’s been watching Mark pedantically cut off bits of his salami-and-ham sandwich.

Mark gives Gary a disagreeing look. ‘I’ve got to eat it now, haven’t I? Someone at the hostel took time making this. I can’t just throw it away.’ We’re not all rich like you, he thinks miserably.

Having cut off all the moulded bits of his sandwich, Mark has ended up with an edible sandwich the size of a post-it. He eats it bit by bit. He’s still hungry by the time he finishes. But when he gets up to get another salami-and-ham sandwich to dissect, he finds that the hostel staff have already cleared the breakfast buffet. The only thing he’s eaten is his stamp-sized sandwich and his bowl of bran flakes.

It puts him in a bit of a mood.

Usually the happiest person in the world, Mark’s clearly A Bit Fed Up with everything when he and Gary head back to Room 4 to brush their teeth. He’s hungry, horny and tired: the worst possible mix of emotions a man could possibly have. This is a teacher who’s on the edge of losing it, like a puppy having a breakdown when its favourite plush toy gets stolen.

Gary bringing it up doesn’t really help. He softly closes the door of Room 4 behind him. ‘You all right, Mark? You seem a bit put-out this morning.’

‘I’m all right,’ Mark lies as he heads into the bathroom. He makes a show of opening the bathroom cupboard as enthusiastically as he can, but in doing so he accidentally opens the cabinet too forcefully. He ends up tearing the wooden door right off its hinges like he’s the bloody Hulk.

‘Jesus, Mark.’

Mark stares at the loose door in his hands as though he’s just murdered a kitten. Two rusted metal hinges have ended up on the floor. ‘Oh my God, Gaz – what have I done?’

‘Just leave it,’ Gary says. There’s a hint of impatience in his voice. He’s not used to hotels crumbling in front of him like this. ‘We’ll ask housekeeping to take care of it later.’

‘What? Don’t say that, Gaz. I can’t just leave it!’ Mark bends down to pick up the metal hinges from the floor and tries putting the door back in place. In doing so, he accidentally puts too much pressure on the cabinet. The entire thing succumbs to gravity. The whole cupboard comes down with a loud crash! like a small tree falling down. He can narrowly avoid a piece of wood slicing his leg. Where he just stood, there’s a mess of broken pieces of wood and Ms Brooke’s bottles of skin products. There’s a spotless white silhouette on the wall where the cupboard used to be.

Mark stares at the remains of the cupboard with eyes as large as dinner plates. He can feel his tummy twisting into a knot. Along with breakfast being quite terrible and not being able to sleep and his sheets smelling of weed, he’s beginning to wonder if the cupboard falling down is a case of bad
karma. He shares a worried look with Gary. ‘Why do I feel like this is the universe punishing for what we did last night?’

Gary scoffs. ‘Mark. Don’t be ridic—’

There’s a deafening CRASH. When Mark and Gary run back into their room, they can see that someone’s just shot a football into their window.

Gary can pull away the curtain just in time to see two young kids in football kits hopping on their bicycles, laughing like little maniacs as they make their exit towards a bridge in the distance. If Howard were here, he’d have jumped out of the window and chased them on foot.

Gary assesses the damage. The football has cut a large hole in the window. Dangerous pieces of glass cover the floor and Howard’s bed. A pleasant breeze draws goose pimples on Gary’s skin.

‘Well then,’ Gary says drily, ‘I guess that solves the issue with the aircon. Now I understand what the receptionist meant when she said we had to be careful about furniture falling on our heads.’

Mark doesn’t appreciate Gary’s attempt to make light of the situation. He fixes Gary with a stare that says I told you so and heads to the reception desk to fetch a broom and dustpan.

So much for their romantic getaway.

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After Mark has cleaned up the mess in Room 4, he, Gary, Howard, Ms Brooke and all the students of the Composition and Songwriting course head out on their first ever adventure together. Today, they have planned a visit to one of Amsterdam’s most famous museums: the Van Gogh museum. On their way there, the students are supposed to fill out several exercises from the “Amsterdam” exercise book that Ms Brooke was in charge of making.

Even Mark’s miserable mood cannot spoil the beauty of the city that morning. He can feel himself brightening the moment he steps out into the sun. In broad daylight, Amsterdam looks like a work of art. There isn’t a cloud in the sky. Green trees line the canals. People zip by on their bicycles. Some bikes even have flowers and cuddly toys attached them: a personal touch to make the bikes stand out in the oceans of bikes spread out across the city. Mark thinks it’s lovely.

It’s not only the bikes that are unique. Every single house in the city looks completely different from the ones next to it. Some of the canal houses are slim, high and deep, with small steps of stairs leading up to the front door, but there are bigger houses too – former mansions, previously owned by rich tradesmen. They look a lot more expensive than Mark’s cheap one-room flat back in England.

He counts ten different types of houses on one street alone, from a big mansion built from brown brick to a tall, imposing house that is painted black, like their hostel. The tops of the houses are different too, with some gables being triangular whilst others are more elaborate and neck-shaped. One mansion on the corner of a street even has a gable shaped like the steps of a staircase.

‘Some of the houses are so narrow,’ a female student with long jet black hair says at one point. ‘What if you’ve bought a new telly?’

‘It’s why the houses have hooks,’ Ms Brooke explains. She stops to point at a hook fixed to the top of one of the buildings. ‘See that, Meera? People use them to hoist furniture through the windows. Isn’t that clever?’

Meera doesn’t look convinced. ‘Why didn’t they just build bigger houses?’
‘Most of these houses were built several centuries ago, at the height of the Golden Age,’ Ms Brooke explains. She knows this because she studied three different books about Amsterdam until two in the morning last night. She’s the leader of the pack today, telling students to hurry up if they stop to take a photo of something. At the moment they’re merely headed to a tram stop, but she’s treating it like they’re an army on their way to an important diplomatic mission. ‘Because of how popular Amsterdam was back then, it made sense for the government to cram as many houses as they could into the city streets. That way, many more houses could be built. People didn’t only live there; these buildings were used as warehouses and offices too. People used to store their wares in those buildings.‘

Mark never knew all that stuff. He looks at the houses with renewed interest. Even as they head into a more crowded, commercial part of the city, the idiosyncratic architecture of the many different canal houses stays the same. There are very few modern buildings here, and no flats like the one Mark lives in. If you squint and use your imagination, you can get a pretty good idea of what the city must have been like in the 17th century.

The delegation from the Vocational College of Music and Art has been walking for over ten minutes when they reach the tram stop to their next destination. The fresh air and the walk has done Mark well: he’s feeling a lot better than he did that morning. He does still feel immensely knackered, and his back hurts like hell (not to mention the fact that he’s genuinely fucking horny because *fuck me* does Gary look good when he’s not wearing one of his “serious teacher” outfits), but at least he’s smiling again. This trip could be a good one yet. He just needs to stay away from the hostel. And cupboards. And windows.

Whilst the group wait for the tram to take them to Museumplein (Museum Square; literally a square filled with art museums), Howard tells the students to take out their “Amsterdam” exercise books. They have to do exercise 1: writing a verse inspired by the city. For illustration, the teachers have added the lyrics to Coldplay’s *Amsterdam* on the next page, a song that the band allegedly wrote while they were here. It has nothing to do with the city itself, but Mark thought it was a nice addition. A later exercise asks the students to interpret the song’s lyrics.

By the time the tram arrives (a white-and-blue tram that looks terribly narrow), most students have finished their verses already. Only Henry, the blue-haired student who couldn’t remember which course his mum had signed him up for, has yet to get started. Mark helps him brainstorm ideas in the back of the tram once they’ve touched in with their anonymous travel cards like you would with a London Oyster Card.

‘You could write a song about anything, you know,’ Mark says, with an all-encompassing gesture at their surroundings. ‘You could write about all the different houses, but you could write about how you feel too. If *I* had to write a verse, I’d probably write about how tired I am.’

‘Is that allowed?’ Henry has clearly never written a real song before. ‘I thought all songs had to be about love and stuff.’

‘Not all songs have to be about relationships if that’s not something you want to write about,’ Mark explains, remembering some of the songs he’s written professionally. ‘Songs can be about friendship and life too. Or cities. The whole point of this exercise is that you sort of take what you see on the city streets and let it inspire you. Or you could not let it inspire you at all! It’s up to you.’

This piece of advice has clearly worked, for Henry finally puts pen to paper and starts scribbling away like mad. His handwriting is hard to read, but he seems to be writing something about the blue seat he’s sat on.
It’s only when Mark looks up from Henry’s exercise book that he notices where they are. The tram has entered a street lined with tourist shops and international fashion stores. He sees tourists everywhere. The street is slim, with perhaps no more than ten metres between both sides of the pavement, and yet people cross the tracks like they don’t have a care in the world. The tram is moving so slowly that cyclists can easily overtake it. There are no cars; just cyclists, pedestrians and trams. And lots of tourists.

The tram stops so many times that it’s hard to tell when you’re supposed to get off. Every couple of minutes, a male voiceover reminds people to touch in and out with their travel cards. Ms Brooke purchased thirty anonymous cards at a service point that morning, loaded with enough money to last them a week. Having the travel card in his wallet makes Mark feel like he’s a proper tourist.

After fifteen minutes, Henry finally finishes his verse. At the same time, the white-and-blue tram reaches its destination: Museumplein, a large, green lawn with museums and galleries as far as the eye can see. There’s the Stedelijk Museum, shaped like some sort of upturned bathtub; the Van Gogh museum, with an even longer queue than the average Gary Barlow concert; the Moco “Banksy” museum; and the gorgeous, imposing Rijksmuseum, home to the world-famous The Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch – or The Night Watch, as it’s more commonly known. There’s also a concert hall, where the students will be heading for a guided tour later in the week. In front of the Rijksmuseum, tourists are taking selfies with a set of giant letters that spell out “I Amsterdam”, with “I” and “am” painted red. In a couple of months, the sculpture will be removed because some politicians thought it was ridiculous that people would rather take photos of a bunch of letters than take photos of the museum behind it.

The Composition and Songwriting students are allowed to roam around the square for a bit whilst Ms Brooke heads off to buy tickets for the Van Gogh museum. The queue at the Van Gogh museum is so long that it will take Ms Brooke an estimated fifteen minutes to get to the ticket office, allowing Mark and Gary to have a moment alone on the edge of a pond in front of the Rijksmuseum. Quietly, they watch their students talking selfies with every imposing building they can lay their eyes on.

After a couple of minutes of this, Gary asks Mark what he thinks of the excursion so far.

‘I really like it,’ Mark replies, and he means it. He feels much happier than he did that morning, when he felt tired and frustrated. ‘Well, apart from when we’re at the hostel. I actually saw a rat when I went to get a dustbin earlier. It was so big that I thought it was going to eat me.’

‘At least the students don’t seem to mind,’ Gary points out. ‘I think they like the hostel more than we do!’

‘I guess that’s the most important thing.’ Mark lowers his voice even though there’s no way any of their students will be able to hear him; they’re all too busy with their phones. ‘I still wish we could have shared a room, though. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this horny . . .’

Gary laughs out loud. ‘Same here, mate. Same here. It’s a good thing today’s been so good or else I would’ve felt bloody frustrated about the lack of sex, to be honest.’

‘We might still get a moment alone,’ Mark adds, ever the hopeful. ‘We could take a shower together.’

‘Not likely, I’m afraid. Our colleagues might notice if we disappear into the bathroom together.’

‘You’re right.’ Mark makes a face. ‘We probably shouldn’t do that.’

‘The shower probably wouldn’t survive, anyway. A tile nearly fell on me foot while I was washing
‘It has been good so far, though, hasn’t it?’ Mark asks, because there have been moments when he felt like it was anything but.

‘It has. We haven’t lost anyone so far, anyway. That’s usually a good sign.’

‘And the students seem to like the exercises,’ Mark adds in hindsight.

‘They do, don’t they?’ Gary looks over his shoulder to see their students still taking selfies of the large “I Amsterdam” sign in front of the Rijksmuseum, completely ignoring the building behind it. ‘I think this might actually become one of our school’s best trips, this . . .’

Unfortunately, Gary spoke too soon. Way too soon.

When the students move into the Van Gogh museum for their next adventure, the atmosphere changes completely. The new Composition and Songwriting students do not like museums, apparently. They do not enjoy looking at works of art. Van Gogh’s importance as a Dutch Post-Impressionistic artist is of no interest to them. They fail to be inspired by the painter’s exquisite colour palettes.

As for the exercises they’re supposed to do, only a couple of students actually bother writing fake album tracklists inspired by *The Potato Eaters*. Most of the students don’t even bother leaving the comforts of the souvenir shop. As is often the case with school trips, the only people enjoying the tasks and exercises from the “Amsterdam” exercise book are the ones who wrote them, i.e. the teachers.

The trip to the museum reaches its nadir when a student, eighteen-year-old Seb, flat-out refuses to open his exercise book. He doesn’t want to do the exercises. He thinks they’re boring, and he doesn’t feel afraid to tell his teachers as much.

In the heat of the moment, Gary decides to give Seb a big telling off in the middle of the gallery, surrounded by tourists. He tells Seb that if he doesn’t do the exercises, it can work against him at the end of term. The teachers could decide that Seb isn’t suitable for a career in music after all.

The threats mean nothing to Seb. It only angers him more. He calls Gary a bad word and demonstratively tosses his exercise book over his shoulder, missing a painting called *The Potato Eaters* by a hair.

*The Potato Eaters* is considered to be one of Van Gogh's masterpieces.

After this, everything goes downhill very quickly.

A lady who’d spent the past ten minutes staring at the painting almost faints. Outraged visitors demand Seb to be removed from the building. Clueless tourists think the student’s outburst is an act of performance art. Mark fails to keep the rest of the students in check, and he uselessly watches on as Seb parades through the gallery, shouting every known swear word against anyone will listen. Unbeknownst to him, two students are filming the entire thing.

Then a large security guard shows up. He lifts Seb up by the collar of his jacket, violently pulls him back up the escalator to the ground floor and throws him out of the building like a sack of potatoes. By the time Seb has gotten up from the ground, four male students have joined him in an act of defiance.

To make matters worse, the whole thing was caught on camera by a student with a particularly
expensive smartphone and a fast internet connection. Three minutes later, Gary gets an anxious phone call from Mr Harrison, asking him why there is a video on Instagram of a VCMA student being kicked out the Van Gogh museum.

The video has already gone viral. Someone’s even published an article about it on the website of a particularly pleasant British tabloid newspaper, titled “Gary Barlow fails to control students as 18-year-old student damages priceless painting.” Thankfully, Gary’s team back in England bribed the writer into deleting the article before it could gain any traction.

But the viral video is still up, and they clearly show a student from VCMA nearly ruining a priceless painting.

Naturally, many people are very upset about the whole thing. While Ms Brooke tries to find Seb on the ground floor, three very important-looking people in suits have appeared: the museum curators. Mark has taken it upon himself to apologise on Seb’s behalf and promise that his students are usually very well behaved and that something like this will never happen again thank you very much so sorry for the trouble God bless you, but the curators aren’t convinced. In spite of Mark’s best intentions, all British schools are henceforth banned from ever visiting the museum again.

The delegation from England is asked to leave the building after that. Howard, who’d been drinking coffee at the museum’s café the entire time, doesn’t learn what happened until he gets a panicked text from Mark. He emerges from the museum sheepishly carrying a souvenir tote bag that he bought for his wife.

The incident with Seb and The Potato Eaters puts a dampener on the rest of the day. Sadly, Gary is forced to make things even worse by giving the students a ten-minute speech about discipline, respect the dangers of social media. When a pop star starts giving you a long lecture about social media, i.e. the one thing you know much more about than most adults, he stops being a pop star and starts being just a boring, uptight teacher.

The students aren’t the only ones who have been affected by the events at the Van Gogh Museum. Just like that morning, Mark’s feeling anxious and worried. He can’t stop thinking about how angry the people from the museum were. Every time they walk past a poster about a brand new exhibition at Van Gogh museum, his heart skips a beat. He never wants to visit a museum with his students ever again.

As for the students themselves, they’ve regressed back into their teenage, stubborn selves. They’ve stopped making small talk. They groan when Ms Brooke announces that they’re expected at a Dutch university in twenty-three minutes. They half-arse the exercises in their “Amsterdam” exercise book. They don’t bother to touch in with their travel cards when they catch the tram to the Conservatory.

The students aren’t aware of this, but they have unconsciously formed a front between themselves and the teachers. When one of their own is being threatened with removal from school during what is supposed to be a nice trip to a foreign country, the teachers by definition become the enemies, the party-poopers. From now on, the teachers will find it difficult to get their students in line.

But it gets worse.

At half past two, the teachers stop in front of the Conservatory of Amsterdam, a modern-looking university dedicated to masters degree courses in music. When Mark looks over his shoulder, he notices with a pang that five students have completely disappeared. Seb is amongst them.

The students’ disappearance causes a bit of a panic. The lads don’t pick up their phones. Their fellow schoolmates stubbornly shrug their shoulders when Gary asks them if they know anything. Mark’s
so tired that he struggles to remember the missing students’ names. Mark always knows everyone’s names.

Seb is already facing expulsion from school after almost damaging a priceless painting by accident, so they have to find him. If they don’t, Seb will be removed from the course almost certainly. With student numbers being at an all-time low, expelling a student before the school year has even begun is never a good look. Mr Harrison would have a field day if he found out the Music department will be missing out on a student’s school fees.

After a brief emergency meeting between just the teachers, it’s decided that Howard and Gary go ahead with their planned visit to the conservatory whilst Ms Brooke goes looking for the missing students in the neighbourhood. They last saw the lads when they got out of the tram in front of Amsterdam central station, and the walk between there and the university only takes about ten minutes. They can’t have gotten far.

Mark draws the short straw that afternoon. Because he is by far the nicest teacher in the group, he’s has been given the unfortunate task of heading back to the Van Gogh museum in the hopes of sorting out the mess caused by their students. By the time he gets there, his mood has hit rock bottom. He barely manages to drag himself across the green lawn of Museum Square, which seems much larger than it did this morning. When he tries to explain to the security guard in front of Van Gogh Museum why he is there, the guard merely shrugs and gestures vaguely at the long queue at the ticket office. Mark’s too polite to object.

Howard and Gary don’t fare much better. Their visit to the conservatory is similarly exhausting. The university – a large, modern university right next to the water in a much newer part of the city, with no canal houses or quaint little shops – was kind enough to allow the students from VCMA entry to an English seminar about music theory. However, most kids end up falling asleep in it. One English student spends the entire seminar playing with the foldable tables in the lecture hall. Another first-year student has to be removed from the lecture room when he accidentally spills his drink all over a Dutch girl’s laptop. A group of older Dutch students spend more time gawking at Gary than paying attention to their seminar, causing the lecturer to feel a bit awkward. Howard may have drawn a dick on the back of someone’s chair.

More apologies ensue. The English delegation ends up leaving the building much earlier than scheduled. If Ms Brooke were here, she’d have a minor panic attack about her colleagues not sticking to her itinerary.

Knowing this, Howard and Gary have an emergency meeting outside the building whilst their students disinterestedly check their phones. One or two students have wandered off to take photos of a green building shaped like a ship in the distance, the country’s most famous science museum.

‘What do we do? We’re all out of activities for today,’ Gary whispers.

Howard looks at the direction they came in: a long quay lined with hotels and restaurants that look like they were built quite recently. On the other side, there’s a big stretch of water, much bigger than the small, shallow canals they saw on their way to the city’s museum district. There’s also a Chinese restaurant (on the water), several modern-looking cafés and a large electronics store that sells anything from fridges to expensive K-pop CDs.

Further down the quay, there’s a Starbucks. For lack of a better idea, Howard and Gary allow the students to get themselves some coffee as long as they don’t wander off and stick together.

‘I don’t know why you keep bothering to volunteer for these things, Doug,’ Gary says after he and Howard have ordered their drinks and taken a seat on a terrace that overlooks the water. On their left,
there’s the street that took them to the conservatory. If they were to head right, they’d eventually stumble into the city’s central station. ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m bloody exhausted.’

Howard looks surprised. ‘Are you? I slept so well last night that I could have passed for comatose.’

‘That’s just cos you haven’t slept for two years.’

‘True. It was a really good sleep, though. Shame that the rest of the hostel is a piece of crap. You could’ve bashed someone’s head in with those slices of bread I had this morning.’

Gary groans at the memory. ‘Christ, it was terrible, wasn’t it, breakfast? What am I supposed to eat when I can’t enjoy me daily cinnamon oatmeal in the morning? I can’t be seen eating sandwiches with chocolate sprinkles every day.’

‘Not being able to eat a proper breakfast isn’t really the worst of our problems, though, is it?’

‘I wish it was! I hope the students are enjoying themselves, at least. If we can’t get them to enjoy a school trip, how are we supposed to get them to enjoy our lessons at school? It’s so important that we get this right.’

Howard scoffs. He chugs down half a cup of Flat White in one go. ‘We’re not really doing a good job, though, are we?’

‘No, we’re not.’ Gary remembers with an unpleasant jolt what they have planned for tomorrow: a long treasure hunt through the centre of Amsterdam that involves finding and taking photos of famous tourist attractions. It took quite a lot of planning from Mark and Ms Brooke, who collaborated on writing the exercises. ‘Christ – what if the students don’t like the treasure hunt tomorrow? They could all decide to head back to the hostel at ten in the morning.’

‘I think that’s bloody unlikely with all the rats walking round the place, Gaz.’

Gary shudders. ‘That’s it, I’m sleeping outside tonight . . .’

[LESSON THIRTY-EIGHT: HUTSPOT]

After a well-deserved drink at Starbucks, Gary, Howard and the remaining students go back to the hostel. With dinner not being served for at least another hour, Howard and Gary allow the students to do whatever they want as long as it doesn’t involve running off or getting themselves into trouble. Most students decide to spend their free time staring at their phones in their dorms.

Not much later, Howard and Gary find Mark in the empty dining room of the hostel, the room where breakfast and dinner are served. Upon first sight, Mark looks a bit moody. Having just spent an hour in the queue at the Van Gogh museum, and then another hour talking to the chief curator of the collection, he’s more or less managed to lift the ban placed on all British schools. However, it’s come at a cost: the school has to pay a considerable fee for almost damaging The Potato Eaters and giving several visitors a massive fright.

As ever, Mark doesn’t think he’s done a particularly good job.

‘I really wish I could have done more,’ Mark says after he’s told Howard and Gary about his second visit to the museum. His chin on his hand, he looks immensely tired.

‘You did what you could, mate.’ Gary gives Mark a pat on the back. ‘Did you manage to learn
more about the video that went viral? You said you were going to ask Rob for help.’

‘I did,’ Mary says. ‘I asked him to check social media for me and he said it’s quietened down since this morning. I don’t think it’s viral anymore. People have moved on to a video of a politician falling over at an event, apparently. I don’t understand why people would watch videos like that, do you? It seems so awful. I also tried phoning Mr Harrison to ask him for advice and if he could please go easy on the student who filmed it, but he hasn’t gotten back to me yet. He must be busy.’

Gary frowns. When the video of Seb being removed from the museum went viral that morning, Mr Harrison phoned him within minutes. Even the school governor phoned him: Mrs Kennedy-Cairns, the former voice teacher who keeps the school running behind the scenes. She seemed quite worried about the whole thing.

So when Mark says that Mr Harrison didn’t return his call, this seems incredibly strange. Why would Mr Harrison not want to talk to Mark about his second visit to the museum? It’s almost as if Harrison was ignoring Mark deliberately.

Howard doesn’t think of it that way. He says, ‘He probably didn’t reply because he’s busy worrying about us potentially having one student less than we did last year. You know how worried he gets about student fees. You did all right on your own, Mark. You should be proud.’

Mark tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. Today’s events have taken a complete toll on him. The spark that he had in his eyes at the start of the trip has disappeared. A light has gone out.

Gary gives Mark’s a soft squeeze. ‘You okay, mate?’

Mark moves his head into a nod. He doesn’t want to admit how tired he is. Doing so would be foolish and ungrateful. He’s in a foreign country, after all. He ought to be taking in the Amsterdam sights, not complaining how much he’d like to skip dinner and go to bed. He doesn’t want to worry about broken bathroom cupboards and windows and bad breakfasts when he’s supposed to be having the time of his life. ‘I’m just worried about the students that have gone missing,’ he says. ‘I don’t want them to get in trouble.’

Henry, the student with the blue hair, as well as two female classmates have just entered the dining hall. Howard has to lower his voice so that they won’t be able to hear what he’s saying. ‘They’re still not back? Seb and his mates?’

‘Only Kenny, Seb’s mate,’ Mark says, matching Howard’s whisper. ‘I bumped into him on my way here. He said he was sorry for walking off, but he didn’t know where the others were.’

‘And you believed him?’

‘It’s what he said,’ Mark shrugs. ‘I don’t like assuming that students always lie to me when I ask them something.’

‘They do, though,’ Howard says. Ever the optimist. ‘Students lie. Constantly. I hope you told him off for wandering off like that?’

Here, Mark feels himself flushing with shame. ‘I didn’t really know what to do, so I just made him a cup of tea and asked him to do the exercises that he’s missed. I know I should have been sterner.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Gary says gently. ‘You did what you could.’

‘He made Kenny a cup of tea, Gaz!’ Howard disagrees fiercely. ‘You don’t make students who’ve misbehaved tea. Come on.’
Howard wants to say more, but then he sees Mark pouting and retreating back into his shell, and he thinks better of it. He’s beginning to think of Mark as a mate, and he doesn’t want to upset him necessarily. ‘Anyway. I suppose Mark’s approach isn’t that terrible. We probably shouldn’t start throwing students into the river Amstel until we’ve received their school fees, anyway. I’m sorry, Mark. Gary’s right – you did what you could. Today’s been fucking weird anyway. I doubt I would have fared better.’

Mark smiles weakly. He can sort of see that he did an okay job dealing with Kenny and getting the Van Gogh museum to lift the ban, but he still feels like crap. He wishes he and Gary could go back to their bedroom so they might make love, but that’s never going to happen now. Not when he still has to share a room with Howard and Liz and the bump in his bed keeps him up at night.

He’s never going to say any of those things out loud, though. He’s not the complaining type, and he doesn’t want his students to see him sulking and moping. He wants his students to get know him as the approachable teacher he knows he can be — not the moody, tired teacher he has been since this morning. At the end of the day, his number one priority is making sure that his students have the best ever time, no questions asked. That includes pretending like he’s having a great time too.

It’s just that he wishes he could remember what it felt like to have Gary jerk him off last night. So much has happened that last night’s journey might as well have taken place a decade ago; a lifetime. He’s never felt so lost and disoriented before. If someone told him that today’s Sunday instead of Tuesday, or November instead of September, he’d believe them. Most of the time he genuinely no longer remembers what year it is.

Things get worse at teatime. There aren’t enough plates for all the guests. The dining hall is cold. The four students that went missing magically reappear right when everyone’s about to plate up their food. The lads are clearly all quite stoned, and Ms Brooke has to give them a stern talking-to in the reception area. Mark is beginning to get a serious headache. One student keeps asking Howard if he can be excused from the hall to blow his nose.

Things settle down when the missing students sit down to eat their food. Unsurprisingly, the food is nothing to write home about. The only food on offer is hutspot: a dish of mashed potatoes, onions and carrots. Mark read in a book once that hutspot is meant to be served hot, but the hostel’s version is cold. Ice cold, in fact, like it was just taken out of the freezer. Mark only eats the dish because he doesn’t want to disrespect the hostel staff.

Halfway through dinner, fresh food appears on the buffet table. Instead of more hutspot, the hostel kitchen has prepared for them garlic bread and bitterballen, tiny meat-based snacks that are round in shape. Almost everyone runs off to the buffet to claim several slices of bread and bitterballen like it’s the last thing they’ll ever eat.

Gary gets the tray of bread closest to the kitchen. (No bitterballen, sadly.) He puts the tray in the middle of their table and waits until everyone has finished their hutspot before digging in.

He enthusiastically reaches out for a particularly buttered-up slice, then stops when something slimy suddenly catches his eye. His mouth falls open.

‘Lads,’ he says, meaning Mark and Howard, for Ms Brooke has taken a seat next to the four students that went missing to stop them from starting a food fight, ‘are you seeing this?’

Mark’s face loses all its colour when he sees what Gary is seeing. It’s big, slimy and very alive, and it definitely doesn’t belong on a piece of bread.

‘That’s a slug,’ Howard says matter-of-factly.
The slug in question is in the middle of crawling over a particularly juicy piece of bread, and Mark can actually feel himself go light in the head. ‘Oh my God.’

He’ll feel immensely ashamed about this later, but seeing the slimy creature on the bread is the straw that breaks the camel’s back. Mark loses his appetite. He doesn’t even bother picking up the slug and helping it out like he usually would with an animal, big or small. (One time, a bee had drunkenly flown into his classroom and collapsed in the middle of his desk, and Mark had tried saving the bee by giving it a moist tissue to drink from. His students had found this very strange, and Mark spent the next ten minutes rambling about how bees are terribly important.)

All he can think about is that he has to leave. Now.

Mark flashes Gary a faltering smile, wipes his mouth, politely excuses himself and walks out of the dining room without another word. He has to hold his breath when he walks past the stoned students that went missing earlier and almost trips over his own two feet when he walks into the labyrinthine corridors to his room, forgetting for a moment that the lights in this part of the hostel aren’t on.

He feels claustrophobic. He is forced to take deep breaths. He is overcome with a sensation that he’s never felt before. Homesickness. He can’t remember where his room is. He wonders if this is what Rob feels like when he gets into a room full of people he doesn’t know.

When Mark finally reaches his room ten minutes later, he finds it in almost the same state as he left it that morning. The shards of glass that he helped house-keeping get rid of that morning are gone, but the window is still broken. There’s a cold breeze running across his arms. Little traces of the bathroom cupboard that he broke by accident can still be found on the floor along. He can see a dead cockroach underneath Howard’s bed. He immediately regrets it when he takes off his shoes and sees that the soles of his white socks have suddenly turned quite dark.

Whilst the beds have obviously been made by housekeeping, the sheets are the same: Mark recognises the dark stain on his pillowcase that he tried desperately not to stare at last night. A new problem seems to be the lights in the bathroom, nervously flickering on and off so quickly that Mark has to close the bathroom door to stop himself from going quite mad.

The moment Mark sits on the edge of his squeaking, creaking, smelly bed, he feels the last smattering of energy leaving his body. He has to take deep breaths to stop himself from shaking. He hides his face in his hands, moments away from crying. He doesn’t allow the tears to come in case a student knocks on the door. He feels desperately alone.

He can’t explain what happened just now. Discovering the slug shouldn’t even have been that bad – the creature looked rather happy crawling over a piece of bread, and ordinarily he would have helped the slug make its way back to nature and given it a name and adopted it maybe – but Mark had to take just one look at the slug and he lost it completely.

He doesn’t even know the proper word for it. It could have been a panic attack for all he knows. The last time something like it happened was when he had to teach Art History for the first time and Gary found him crying in an empty classroom. It’s the same feeling: helpless and sad. So very sad.

He felt fleetingly happy this morning when he had a moment alone with Gary at Museum Square, but things haven’t been the same ever since Seb almost damaged The Potato Eaters. He can’t even feel his legs anymore.

Lost in thought, Mark starts when there’s a sudden knock on the door. He’s the only one with a key card, and the door has fallen into the lock. He hollers a hoarse ‘I’m coming’ and cranes himself up from the bed.
When Mark opens the door, he comes face to face with Gary: his lover, his boyfriend, his rock, looking at him with such a soft expression on his face that he melts.

He doesn’t have to say anything. Once the door closes, Gary pulls him into a tight embrace and kisses his cheek; whispers something in his ear about everything going to be all right.

After everything that has happened, Mark finds that hard to believe.

‘I’m so tired, Gaz,’ Mark whispers, his face hidden in the nook of Gary’s neck. He’s shaking. His cheeks are burning with shame. ‘I wish I could go home.’

Gary gives Mark a reassuring kiss on the forehead. ‘I know.’ He rubs the small of Mark’s back. He kisses him again. ‘I know.’

They move to the edge of Mark’s bed, careful not to let it squeak underneath their combined weight. Gary gently smiles at Mark, prompting him to speak.

The words leave Mark’s mouth like he’s been waiting to say them all day. ‘I know I shouldn’t say this because it’s ungrateful of me, and I don’t want you to think I’m not enjoying being with you, but I’m really beginning to regret volunteering for this trip. I wish I was enjoying it more because Amsterdam is wonderful and you’re here and you gave me such a good handjob yesterday, but I haven’t stopped feeling crap ever since I woke up this morning. It’s been getting worse, too. I feel like it’s snowballed into this unpleasant feeling that I’m not used to, because when I looked at that slug on the bread all I wanted to do was go home.

‘I sort of just wanna and crawl into bed instead of having to deal with all these problems that I don’t know how to deal with. And I know that sounds unprofessional of me because I know I’m here as a teacher and I’m supposed to deal with those things, but I don’t know how to prevent students from getting bored or running off or not bothering with the exercises.’

Mark’s shoulders slump. He lets out a deep sigh. ‘I’ve never felt anything like it. It’s worse than when Mr Harrison got mad at me for texting you in the middle of an exam last year.’

‘Not your finest moment, that,’ Gary reminds him with a smile.

‘Can you blame me? You’d sent me a picture of yourself in a vest.’

‘Definitely my finest moment. Along with sending you that vid of me exercising, anyway . . .’

Mark can feel himself blushing. What were they talking about again? ‘Yes. Anyway. I feel very terrible and I want to go to bed. If this was a holiday I’d ask for my money back,’ Mark adds, even though he’s never asked for a refund for anything. Even if a waiter were to present him with a completely different dish to what he ordered at a restaurant, he still wouldn’t complain about it.

‘You’re just homesick,’ Gary explains. ‘It’s not the end of the world. I felt fucking homesick when I was on tour too.’

Mark looks up at that. He didn’t know pop stars could get homesick. ‘How did you cope?’

‘Badly. Texting you helped, though. It’s the same now – being able to share it with someone always helps.’

‘That’s the thing.’ Mark averts his eyes to the floor. Every single tile is cracked, and there’s a big, suspicious stain next to his foot. ‘I’m not sure if being together has helped at all, Gaz. Things were going so well until last night. I genuinely feel like we brought this upon ourselves because of what
we did on the bus.’

‘Like that curse you mentioned earlier?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t think it works that way,’ Gary says measuredly. ‘School trips go wrong because they’re school trips. Cos these kids have probably never been abroad, they haven’t. Amsterdam is the first foreign city they’ve ever been to. I don’t blame them for not wanting to do the exercises or being deliberately challenging.

‘And as for what happened to the painting, that’s not on us, that isn’t. It didn’t happen because we’ve put some kind of curse on us. That doesn’t mean we’re not supposed to tell the students off for their behaviour, but it’s just what kids their age do, really. It’s not a big deal. I’d be more worried about what they do when we finally welcome them to our classrooms.’

‘What about what’s been happening at the hostel, though? With the cupboard and the slug and the room almost falling apart?’ Right on cue, a painting of a Dutch seascape falls off the wall. Mark gives Gary a look as if to say I told you so. ‘See? Cursed.’

Gary wriggles his eyebrows. As ever, he tries to make light of the situation. ‘I think you’re just saying we’re cursed because you don’t wanna admit how much you like messing around in public, Mark . . .’

Mark blushes and rolls his eyes. He tries to come up with another piece of evidence that shows that they’re definitely cursed and that what they did last night placed a terrible jinx on them and that they shouldn’t do something intimate ever again, but he falls short. He can feel himself smiling, and his mood lifting.

Maybe Gary is right; maybe this is just the way school excursions are meant to be. Not all students will enjoy doing exercises or visiting museums or being told to stick to their teachers at all times. As prospective songwriters (the most stubborn type of artist there is), Mark should probably be more worried if the students always do exactly as they’re told.

‘Okay, maybe you’re right,’ Mark acquiesces. He’s already feeling a bit better. ‘Maybe we’re not cursed. But I still think this is a really, really terrible school excursion. And you know I don’t say things like that lightly, Gaz. I hate how much I hate this trip.’

‘I know. This is probably the first time I’ve ever seen you so fed up with something – you haven’t even sent in a formal complaint about the coffee machine in the staff room! Everybody else has.’

‘Broken coffee machines aren’t really the same thing as having to sleep in a room that is literally falling apart, Gaz. I value my sleep, you know.’ Especially when I don’t get to spend it with you, Mark thinks.

‘So do I. But there’s not much we can do about it, I’m afraid. We just need to get through it. Together. Cos you know that if something goes wrong, you just have to shout, mate. Even if you needed help with that slug earlier.’

Mark gives a helpless chuckle as he remembers the slimy animal. ‘Oh dear. That slug must have been absolutely made up that he found such a big piece of bread. I hope someone hasn’t killed the slug while I was gone – that’d be awful.’ He shoots a torn glance at the door of their bedroom. ‘Do you think I should check? Maybe I should check.’

‘Don’t worry, I told Howard to put the slug outside.’
Mark brightens. ‘Oh. Good. That’s nice. I hope he’s happy. The slug, I mean. I hope he’s happy. I wonder if slugs experience happiness.’

Gary snorts at Mark’s nonsensical questions. The colour has returned to Mark’s cheeks, and he’s smiling again. ‘I guess you’re feeling a little better now?’

‘Much better. Yes. The slug wasn’t really a big deal, was it? I mean, in the grand scale of things. At least nothing seems to be wrong with Amsterdam itself.’

‘My thoughts exactly. Trust me, mate – you’ll be laughing about this in a couple of weeks, you will. You’ll look at The Potato Thinkers one day and think, “You know what, maybe Seb should have damaged it.” Cos it’s a fucking terrible painting.’

Mark laughs. He’s still feeling a bit shaky, but talking to Gary has lifted a massive weight off his shoulders. Whenever he talks to Gaz, he feels the same spark when they first met; that same warm glow that makes him feel safe and warm and loved wherever he is, even in this tiny bedroom in a dirty hostel in a corner of Amsterdam at the other side of the Channel.

‘I’m so happy I get to share this journey with you, Gary,’ Mark whispers. ‘So, so happy. I love you, you know.’

Oh.

Mark inhales sharply. He just told Gary he loves him for the first time!

A million questions flood Mark’s brain at once. What if Gary doesn’t love him back? What if he’s said it too soon? What if he’s completely ruined the rest of their trip? What if they really are cursed and saying those three words will only make it worse?

But Gary feels the same way. He returns Mark’s nervous smile in a way that makes Mark go gooey and weak all over. ‘I love you too, Mr Owen.’ And he kisses Mark so softly and gently that he can actually feel the breath leaving Mark’s lips.

The rest isn’t quite as gentle.

It’s like a light has been switched on. Mark feels a rush of hot, frantic happiness when Gary pulls him closer and kisses him deeper. All his inhibition leaves him. He can just about manage to mutter a consenting ‘yes’ when Gary asks him if he wants to fuck.

He wraps his arms around Gary’s strong body and allows himself to be pushed into his squeaky, dirty, itchy mattress, narrowly avoiding the bump that kept him up last night.

He forgets about the slug.

He forgets about the painting and the missing students and breakfast and their room falling apart. He forgets about everything but the memory of what it feels like to be fucked.

Gary’s on top. He’s pining Mark down with his thick thighs. He can tell that Mark likes it like that. He kisses Mark where he likes it best. His hands are everywhere: in Mark’s hair; touching his neck; searching the hot, sweaty skin underneath Mark’s shirt.

Mark doesn’t even complain when he spreads his legs open wide.

Then Gary touches a sensitive spot on Mark’s chest, and Mark accidentally lets out a loud expletive. Gary presses two fingers to his lips. ‘Not a word,’ he purrs, and he actually slips his fingers into
Mark’s mouth; deep enough to make Mark gag if he wanted to. He desperately wants to. ‘Got that, Mr Owen?’

Mark moves his head into a nervous nod, and Gary removes his fingers from his mouth. He unceremoniously wipes them on Mark’s shirt.

‘Good lad.’

Mark’s bloody loving Gary pining him down and kissing him and pushing his fingers into his mouth like this, but he still shoots a nervous glance at the door, unable to remember whether they’ve locked it or not. Not even a million kisses will ever stop him from being genuinely terrified of getting caught by someone. ‘Gaz. The door . . .’

‘Don’t worry about that. You’re the only one with the key card, remember?’ Gary straightens then. He starts taking off his shirt as slowly as he can. He pulls his shirt over his head and throws it on the floor, exposing the body he knows Mark’s been desperate to see.

Mark has turned bright red in the process. He’s staring at Gary’s body so hard that his eyes are at risk of falling out of their sockets. He takes a deep, rather wobbly breath. ‘Jesus, Gaz.’

‘You like it, Mark?’

‘Yes. So much. Wow.’

‘You know you’re allowed to do whatever you want to me, right?’ To illustrate, Gary grabs Mark’s hands and places them flat on his chest, prompting him to touch him there. ‘Anything.’

Mark’s eyes are flashing. ‘Anything, Gaz?’

‘Anything.’

Mark takes a deep breath and relaxes. He nervously runs his hands up and down Gary’s chest, stopping at his flat tummy before moving his hands up again.

Gary’s utterly beautiful. He looks even better than in the video Gary sent him. He looks real now. He’s made up of flesh and blood, not of a mismatch of fantasies that Mark tried to string together during Gary’s absence last summer. Gary’s actually here, with him, in one room, allowing him to be touched in any way Mark wishes.

It takes Mark an incredible amount of courage to say the words Gary’s needs him to say. ‘Fuck me, Gaz.’ Mark can’t speak louder. The stopper in his voice is too tight. ‘Please. I don’t wanna wait anymore.’

Gary grins. A satisfied grin. ‘How d’you want it?’

Mark glances at the door again, and he feels a frisson of nerves under his skin. He hopes Howard and Ms Brooke will stick around for dinner long enough so they can make love to each other properly – not that quick, rushed stuff they’ve been doing lately. ‘Take it slow. Very slow.’

Gary smiles all the way to his eyes. ‘My pleasure, Mr Owen.’

The last thing Mark sees before he closes his eyes is Gary dipping down to kiss him. Hard. It’s not slow. It’s messy. Quick. They touch each other everywhere. Loud music is playing in the room next door. Mark whimpers and moans softly whenever Gary touches him. The smell of Gary’s cologne drifts all around him. He has to cover his own mouth with his hand when a series of kisses on his ear
almost makes him cry out.

He wants more. He struggles to take off his shirt lying down, and Gary has to do it for him. He can’t feel his legs anymore when he feels Gary’s very naked upper body pressing him down. The bed squeaks. He becomes hyper-aware of the bump in his mattress. He can feel every part of Gary’s hard, hairy body rubbing up against him.

Gary’s bloody good at this. He kisses Mark everywhere, from his neck to his chest to his nipple to the tattoo on his tummy; that same tacky dolphin tattoo that was covered in cum when Mark jerked himself off four weeks ago. He even kisses Mark’s armpits, which Mark shouldn’t find arousing but does.

He’s already hard when Gary’s mouth finally reaches the hem of his trousers.

Gary starts pulling down his zipper then, and a jolt of anxiety makes Mark sit upright. He looks over his shoulder again. The door is firmly shut. The curtains are drawn, but there’s still that massive crack in the window.

If someone heard them . . . he doesn’t even want to think about it. This is a bit different from getting a handjob in a quiet coach on the way to Amsterdam. This is bloody awful. They’re literally one knock away from losing their jobs.

Gary clearly doesn’t give a shit. He helps ease Mark out of his tight trousers without a care in the world. It lands somewhere on the floor. ‘So good so far, Mark?’

Mark’s bloody nervous (it’s been a long time since he had sex – a really, really, really long time), but he still nods. He can do nothing but watch as Gary kisses the inside of his left thigh. He has to hold back a gasp when Gary kisses the outline of his cock in his Calvin Klein boxers. It’s the same way Gary kissed him there in the dining hall at the party venue six weeks ago. Mark loves that Gary can still remember how fucking hard that made him.

The next bit is new.

‘Flip over for me, Mr Owen.’ It comes so suddenly that it catches Mark off guard.

‘Sorry?’

‘You heard me, Mark.’ Gary sounds dominant. Horny. Mark’s never heard him speak like that before. This is no longer Gary Barlow the perfect, popular, precious pop star, but Gary the lover, turning Mark into his willing, shaking, desperate slut. ‘Flip over for me.’

Mark feels courage blooming into his chest like a flower. He gives Gary the fiercest look he can manage. ‘Make me.’

Gary flips Mark over onto his stomach with ease. (So much for Mark trying to be insubordinate.) He drapes his chest over Mark’s back like a warm blanket, pushing him into the mattress. The bed starts squeaking and creaking underneath the pressure of him rubbing his crotch against Mark’s clothed arse. He hopes the bed doesn’t collapse before they can get to the fun bit.

‘You want me to fuck you like this, Mark?’

‘Y-yes. Please.’ Mark’s moaning a bit louder now. He’s not afraid to get caught anymore. Good. ‘Please fuck me like this.’

Gary starts kissing the back of Mark’s neck. He places soft kisses all the way down his spine.
It’s obvious that Mark hasn’t been kissed like this for a while. Gary likes it like that.

Then Gary reaches the hem of Mark’s Calvin Klein boxers, and the kissing stops.

Mark’s so lost in thought that he doesn’t feel Gary’s hand coming. He cries out when Gary pulls down his boxers and spanks his arse, hard. So hard. He curses loudly.

The music from the room next door has stopped.

Gary throws a piece of fabric at Mark’s face. It’s his own shirt, dirty and sweaty. ‘Put that in your mouth,’ he orders.

‘Why?’ Mark can hazard a guess, but it’s nice to hear it coming from Gaz.

‘Cos I don’t want you waking up the entire hostel with those slutty moans of yours. Now get that arse up for me. That’s it . . .’

Mark puts Gary’s shirt into his mouth and digs his face into his mattress. He braces himself for another hard spanking, but what Gary does next is much softer. It’s so gentle that Mark has to clasp his sheets until his knuckles turn white.

Gary starts eating his arse. It’s been a while since Mark felt anything like it: Gary’s tongue playing with his tight arsehole; hands splayed wide on his cheeks; saliva dripping down his thighs; velvet kisses being placed all over the curve of his arse.

Mark is finding it more and more difficult not to moan out loud.

Then Gary starts adding his fingers. First just his index finger, then another. He pushes his fingers in and out of Mark’s hole so. fucking. slowly that Mark has to take over the tempo. He starts fucking himself on Gary’s fingers, grinding his arse like a fucking slut whilst biting down on Gary’s shirt so hard that it’s absolutely *drenched* in saliva.

He gasps for breath when Gary’s shirt falls out of his mouth. He can’t keep the words in anymore. He doesn’t bother to stifle his moans as Gary keeps fucking him with his fingers. ‘Oh my *God, Gaz,*’ he cries, ‘that’s it . . .’

That’s when Howard knocks on the door.
doesn’t want to upset their feelings. If Mark Owen walked off right in the middle of dinner, something very serious must have happened.

And it probably doesn’t have to do with the slimy slug that he found on his bread.

Howard helped the slug in question reunite with nature fifteen minutes ago. Howard is actually considering checking whether it’s doing all right (the slug can’t have gone far, after all) when a loud clang like the sound of a pot falling on the floor makes him look up. At the other side of the dining hall, the five students that ran off earlier have become seriously rowdy. One of them has even gone as far as flinging a spoonful of hutspot into another student’s face, and Ms Brooke is struggling to get them to behave.

She shoots Howard a worried look from across her table. Howard can see her mouthing something that sounds like ‘Get ready’. Get ready for what? Is she going to start a food fight?

Then he gets it. She’s saying ‘Get Gary’. She’s telling him to fetch Gary, who excused himself from the table when Mark walked off earlier. They haven’t been back for over fifteen minutes.

Ms Brooke has never been amazing at class management (she prefers to keep students behaved by throwing a dozen different collaborative activities at them and following a tight lesson plan), and Howard would only threaten to push the students into the canal. As for Mark, he’d just turn red when confronted by misbehaving students and mumble something about world peace and Buddhism, followed by a long monologue about how much he hates conflict. Gary is by far the best person for the job.

Howard can’t imagine Mark being the type of guy to storm out of a building when he’s upset, so his first instinct is to check their room, Room 4. Like Mark before him, he forgets where his room is and walks into the wrong direction, ending up in a dark, labyrinthine series of corridors where the wallpaper is peeling off the wall and the carpet is worn. He can hardly see anything.

He’s been navigating the ground floor for what feels like a century when a sound he doesn’t recognise makes his skin prickle. He stops in his tracks as he tries to make sense of the sound. It sounds like someone is wailing. Crying. It could be a student.

‘You all right, mate?’ he asks the dark corridor, his voice catching.

No response. A prickle of fear settles into Howard’s tummy when the sound repeats itself, much louder this time. It doesn’t sound like a wail anymore. It sounds distressed. Like someone dying.

Howard’s imagination runs wild. Perhaps it’s because he’s in a pitch black corridor, but he becomes absolutely convinced that the sound belongs to a ghost. He suddenly pictures the tortured spirit of a 17th-century tradesman, reliving the moment he got stabbed in his own warehouse, now seeking revenge on every single person that dares step inside his house.

The thought scares Howard tremendously. He shivers in the dark, not knowing where to go next. A single broken lamp is flickering in the corridor. He feels something brush his cheek. The smell of rotten eggs fills his nose.

Could it be the smell of a body?

Then a dark shadow shoots past his right leg, and he lets out an unmanly yelp. He almost stumbles over the worn carpet on the floor.

Howard has to lean his hand on the wall to steady himself when he hears another, second scream. He
thinks it’s his own cry echoing through the empty corridors, but then he realises his own voice is much deeper.

This voice isn’t. This voice is high-pitched.

It sounds terrifying.

It sounds like someone is being murdered.

Howard’s never believed in ghosts (the only creature he believes in is Father Christmas, but only for the benefit of his kids; children are much easier to bribe into going to bed when you tell them there are presents waiting for them when they wake up), but he is now absolutely convinced that this place is haunted.

It would certainly explain why the cupboard in their bathroom fell off the wall that morning. Or why there was a massive hole in their bedroom window the last time he checked. It’s all the work of a demon. A ghost. A shapeless spirit who was hung from the hook underneath the house’s triangular gable.

And he doesn’t like it one bit.

Howard urges his body to move. He increases his pace, almost speed-walking towards a numberless door in the corridor. At last, Room 4!

A thin strip of light warms the worn carpet from under the door of his room. He knocks once and shoots a nervous glance down both ends of the corridor. Whomever that shadow belonged to, he hopes Gary and Mark will open the door before they can come back to kill him, or worse.

The door doesn’t open. He briefly checks whether he’s knocked on the right one. He has; he can see Room 5 on the other side. Room 4 is the only room on the ground floor without a number plate on the door.

He knocks again. This time, he can hear the sound of something creaking inside the room. Muffled voices. Someone going ‘oof’ after a loud thud. Gary, raising his voice. The sound of footsteps and then a door shutting, hard.

It sounds a bit suspicious.

‘Everything all right in there?’ Howard tries to turn the handle, but the door of Room 4 remains shut. His heart rate increases when the flickering lamp in the corridor on the ground floor briefly illuminates the shadow of something large and scary scurrying past. He desperately hopes it’s just a large rat.

At last. The door unlocks. Howard forgets his fear of being brutally murdered by a ghost when the door opens to reveal a very flustered-looking Gary. His hair looks messy and his cheeks are flushed red. His shirt is dirty. His shoes are off. The zipper of his trousers is half-undone.

This is not the immaculate pop star Howard saw at dinner fifteen minutes ago.

Seeing Gary like this throws Howard completely off guard. He looks past the shape of Gary’s body in the doorway, half-expecting Mark to sit cross-legged on his bed, but he can’t see Mark anywhere. Whatever happened to Mark running off in the middle of dinner?

‘Wasn’t Mark supposed to be with you?’ Howard asks. ‘I thought you’d gone after him.’
‘He’s in the bathroom. He just needed to grab some clothes from the closet.’ Gary steps out of the way to let Howard pass. Howard follows his nervous gaze towards Mark’s bed. ‘Did you, er, need something? I was kinda in the middle of something here.’

Howard squints at the closed bathroom door. He can hear the sound of rustling fabric as though Mark is getting dressed. Why would Mark get dressed after dinner? Howard can’t remember Mark spilling hutspot all over his shirt. ‘Is Mark all right in there?’

‘He’s just had an allergic reaction, is all.’ Gary sounds impatient. Rushed. He’s obviously lying; Howard can tell by the way he’s scratching his right ear.

‘You said he was grabbing some clothes from the closet earlier.’

‘Er. Yes. He had an allergic reaction, and then he had to grab some clothes from the closet.’

‘Allergic reaction to what?’

‘The . . . hutspot.’ Gary shoots a nervous glance at the door when he hears Mark sniffing and blowing his nose.

Most people who have allergic reactions to food get serious stomach aches, Howard thinks – not a runny nose. Could he be the person Howard heard crying when he was in the corridor? If so, why isn’t Gary bothering to check in on him? Isn’t Gary supposed to be Mark’s supportive boyfriend?

And why do the sheets on Mark’s bed look so bloody creased?

‘Are you sure it’s just an allergic reaction, Gary?’

Gary crosses his arms. There’s something very strange about him right now. Howard would almost say he looks scared. Anxious.

The Gary he knows is never anxious.

‘It’ll be over in a couple of minutes,’ Gary says dismissively. Another anxious look at the door; another touch of his ear. ‘He’ll probably feel better by the time we get back for dessert. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.’ He rubs his ear again. Changes the subject. Averts his eyes. ‘D’you know what, the hostel does really good pancakes, they do. You should probably head back to the dining hall if you don’t wanna miss out, mate.’

Howard ignores Gary’s obvious attempts to make him leave. ‘Actually, that’s the reason I’m here. I needed your help with something.’

‘Needed me help with what?’ Gary looks at the bathroom door again. He sounds like he’s in a hurry.

‘It’s the students that went missing earlier. They was trying to start a good fight last time I checked. It’d be fucking hilarious if they wasn’t trying to get themselves expelled . . .’

Gary’s face darkens. At the Music department, expelling a student for bad behaviour is the absolute last resort. With student numbers still being worryingly low, they need all the students they can possibly get – even if it means keeping on students who are loud and disruptive. Mr Harrison would have a field day if they had to expel four students before the school year has even begun.

Gary makes a disapproving noise with his tongue. ‘We can’t let that happen. How is Liz dealing with it?’
‘You know what she’s like when it comes to class management. She’s probably trying to get them to write a formal letter to the owner of the hostel.’ Howard stops talking so he can listen to Mark in the bathroom. There’s the sound like that of someone tearing toilet paper from a metallic paper dispenser. More sniffing. ‘Shouldn’t we check in on him?’

‘It’ll pass,’ Gary says, his voice catching. (Suspicious, Howard thinks.) He clears his throat. ‘Anyway, I reckon that if this was a normal school day and Ms Brooke was teaching those four kids English, we’d have to suspend them for not following a teacher’s instructions. It’s in the school rules.’

‘Exactly. But how do you suspend someone on a school trip? We can’t just—’

At that moment, there’s a loud crash like something metallic hitting the floor. The metallic paper dispenser.

Howard doesn’t wait for Gary to get into action. He makes his way for the bathroom in three big strides and opens the door without bothering to knock.

Howard has to hold back a gasp. In the middle of the room, he sees a red-eyed Mark Owen, staring at a broken toilet paper dispenser in front of his feet. His hair is messy. His shirt is on the wrong way round and his trousers look creased. He’s clutching a big string of toilet paper. His cheeks are streaked with tears.

This doesn’t look like the image of someone who’s just had an allergic reaction.

Mark looks at Howard, then at the toilet dispenser. His cheeks flush. His tongue feels thick. ‘I – I didn’t mean to – it just – it just fell off the wall. I – I didn’t do anything . . .’

‘That’s okay. We can fix it. Right, Gaz?’ Howard looks at Gary for moral support, but the colour has drained from Gary’s skin.

It’s as if Gary has seen a ghost. Howard has never seen him like this before. Something must have happened. Something bad. Something that is still in progress.

Something that has Mark in the middle of it.

‘Gaz? What’s going on ‘ere?’ Howard looks at Mark, who’s very busy staring at his feet like he’s never seen them before. ‘Mark? Care to tell me what’s going on here?’

‘I-It’s nothing.’ Mark visibly shivers. He wipes his nose with the string of toilet paper in his hands, then shoves it into the pocket of his trousers. He looks like a deer in headlights. ‘I – I just need some air.’

Mark can’t breathe. His ears are beginning to buzz. Howard and Gary blur in front of him. He has to mumble an apology when asks Howard to get out of the way. He can’t feel his legs anymore.

He can just about make out Gary offering to go with him. ‘Mark? Where are you going, mate? Let me go with you. Please.’

Mark’s reply to Gary is curt. He refuses Gary offering his hand. He shakes his head. Says sorry again. ‘I need to be alone right now, Gaz.’

Mark leaves. By the time Howard has the bright idea to go after him, Mark has already disappeared into the shadows of the ground floor corridors. He’s even taken the effort of closing the door of their room behind him.
Mark is still a polite man even when he’s upset.

Seeing their bunk beds from the bathroom makes Howard see Room 4 in an entirely different light. His eyes take in the crumpled sheets on the bed; the pillow on the floor; Gary’s messy hair as though he’s just woken up. He thinks about Mark’s shirt being on the wrong way round. He sees a pair of Calvin Klein boxers underneath the bed.

That’s when the penny drops. It wasn’t a ghost that he heard on his way to their room earlier.

It was Mark. Being fucked by Gary.

Howard curses loudly to himself. He puts his hand to his mouth. ‘Shit, Gaz. I interrupted you guys fucking, didn’t I?’

There it is. The truth is out. Howard has officially admitted that he knows that his colleagues are an item.

The only thing Gary can do is move his head into a small nod. He’s been frozen on the spot ever since he saw Mark standing over that toilet dispenser with the tears running down his cheeks.

His stomach twists with guilt just thinking about it.

‘Shit, Gaz.’ Howard lets out a low whistle. ‘Why didn’t you put up a sign? I would’ve slipped condoms underneath the door and left you to it . . .’

‘I didn’t know we were going to do something, did I?’ Gary sounds hollow. Sad. He runs his hand through his hair. ‘I completely panicked when I heard you knocking on the door just now. I practically shoved Mark into the bathroom and asked him to get dressed while I lied me arse off to you . . .’

‘And now he’s upset with you.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I don’t blame him. That’s pretty rude of you, mate.’

Gary groans. He feels so dizzy suddenly that he has to sit on the edge of Mark’s bed. He closes his eyes and counts until ten before he speaks again.

Howard sinks into the empty space next to him. ‘You’re not mad at me, are you?’

‘I’m not. You’re right – I should have let you know. It’s not your fault. It’s mine.’ Gary hides his face in his hands. He shakes his head. ‘I don’t know what to do anymore, How. I feel like I’m getting this relationship all wrong. Mark even thinks we’re cursed, he does.’

Howard didn’t see that coming. ‘Are you?’

‘I don’t know. I think Mark’s angry with me that we’ve never really had a moment alone together. We always have to sneak off somewhere and hope that someone doesn’t walk in on us.’

Howard clicks his tongue. ‘Like me when I walked into you in the concert hall.’

‘Exactly. That was our first kiss, that was,’ Gary says, blushing.

‘Right. Shitty timing. Sorry.’
‘We didn’t mind. It was good, that kiss. But we haven’t really been able to do much since. It’s why Mark’s been so moody today – he thought we’d be sharing a room together. He was hoping we’d finally... you know.’

Howard thinks he knows what Gary’s talking about. ‘You haven’t had sex yet.’

‘Exactly. We were hoping that we’d finally get the chance on this trip. But now Mark’s forced to share a room with you and Liz in a hostel that’s literally falling apart all around us, and we haven’t been able to do anything. I know that’s not what he wanted to get from this trip at all. And now I’ve literally pushed Mark away by telling him to hide in the bathroom.’ Gary heaves a deep sigh.

‘So Mark’s just sexually frustrated,’ Howard says matter-of-factly. ‘It’s not the end of the world.’

Gary chews on the inside of his cheek. ‘I’m afraid it’s a bit more than that, Howard. I’ve – I’ve never told him how big I am.’

‘Five inches is nothing to be ashamed of,’ Howard jests without missing a beat.

‘I meant in terms of my career. He doesn’t know how famous I am. I’m afraid that if he finds out by himself he’ll never forgive me for keeping that part of my life secret.’

‘Then go after him and tell him.’

Gary’s eyes meet Howard’s. He thinks of all the things that have gone wrong on this trip: the broken bathroom cupboard, the window, The Potato Eaters, the five disruptive students, the frame that fell off the wall, the toilet dispenser. Maybe they are cursed.

‘What if it’s already too late?’

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Mark wasn’t happy when Howard knocked on the door. He felt even unhappier when Gary pulled his fingers out of him and told him to hide in the bathroom, shutting the door into his face without another word. He didn’t even say sorry.

As Mark tearfully got dressed, alone, listening to Gary lying his arse off to Howard, Mark realised that Gary told him to hide because he’s Gary’s secret. He and Gary are something shameful that needs to be hidden. They’re something that will only ever happen in the dark.

Why? Because Gary is famous. Because he has fans who will stop buying his records the moment they find out he likes fingering guys in a hotel room. Mark understands that now. He’ll always be waiting; always having to hide the marks Gary placed on his skin.

It’s why he ran off just now. Being in the bathroom felt like being in his private prison.

The hostel is pretty crowded, but remarkably Mark finds a spot that is completely deserted. It’s some sort of parlour, used in the Golden Age to entertain guests and potential business partners.

Just like the rest of the hostel, everything here looks old. The floor is wonky, and it creaks underfoot. The only light in the room comes from a broken chandelier on the ceiling. There’s dust everywhere. The furniture is made up of proper antiques, made around the same time the house was built. Mark has a feeling he’s the first visitor the room has seen for months.

There’s a small selection of magazines and second-hand travel guides about The Netherlands on a small tea table in the centre of the room. Mark picks up a book about Rotterdam and starts flicking
through it on an old sofa. He finds it hard to concentrate. He has to read the same sentence over and over again.

He keeps turning the pages, looking for something to distract him because he doesn’t want to remember how ashamed he felt being shoved into a bathroom. He carefully studies every page in his travel guide, not taking in a single word.

Then he sees Gary entering the sofa and all the shame comes flooding back.

Gary gestures at the empty space on the sofa. ‘May I?’

Mark doesn’t stop staring at his book. He doesn’t even speak. Mark always speaks.

Gary tries to strike up a conversation anyway. ‘So about what we did just now . . .’ He reckons it’s best to stay positive. He gives Mark the warmest smile he can manage; pretends that everything is all right even when it’s not. ‘I really enjoyed that.’

‘So did I before you told me to get dressed in the bathroom,’ Mark says without looking up from what he’s reading.

‘What?’

‘Please don’t ask me to repeat myself, Gaz.’ There’s an edge to Mark’s voice. Gary’s never heard it before. Mark’s voice is usually warm and kind. Soft. Patient. But not today.

‘I’m just trying to have a conversation here, Mark,’ Gary bristles. Hearing Mark speak to him like this feels like a personal attack. ‘There’s no need to get moody.’

‘And I’m just trying to make love to my boyfriend of six months.’ Mark meets Gary’s eye. The words come before he can stop them. He can feel himself charge up with negative, angry energy – the kind he’s never felt before, not even during a particularly difficult lesson. ‘You know, Gaz, I really do love you, and I enjoyed what we were doing too, but I’m tired of having to sneak off every time I want to be intimate with you. I hate that we’ve yet to have a moment alone together.’

Gary laughs. A mocking laugh. ‘That’s not true. What about our first kiss? What about the summer prom?’

‘The summer prom was cut short because you had to go to Glasgow,’ Mark bristles. ‘Or have you already forgotten that we had this exact same conversation that night? Everything we’ve done since the summer prom has revolved around us hiding in the dark and praying that someone won’t walk in on us. Things were supposed to be different now. You were supposed to be different.’

‘What do you mean, “hiding in the dark”? I thought you’d enjoyed what I did to you in the coach.’

‘I did, but I’m also getting a little sick of the fact that everything we do together involves us nearly getting caught.’ Mark’s eyes are flashing. He has no idea where these feelings have come from; they’ve bubbled up to the surface without him knowing, like when you shake a bottle of coke too much and the stuff comes bursting out of the bottle when you open it. ‘I just want to have one moment with you when I don’t have to worry that I’m going to lose my job for loving you.’

Gary scoffs. Frankly, he thinks Mark’s being ridiculous. He forgets that he came here to patch things up with Mark, not make them worse. ‘You’re just exaggerating because you’re tired.’

‘You’re right. I am tired. I’m tired of you shoving me into a bathroom with me clothes off because you didn’t want Howard to find out we were in the middle of making love.’
Now Gary’s the one sounding impatient. ‘Would you rather have had him walk in on us?’

‘You know that’s not what’s not what I’m trying to say.’ Mark’s voice cracks. There are tears in his eyes. Why doesn’t Gary get it? ‘I’m saying that I’m tired of having to live our lives in the shadows. I don’t want to have a relationship with you and never know when I’m going to see you again.’

Gary lets out a mocking laugh. He thought Mark was over this shit by now. ‘What do you mean, never know when you’re going to see me again? We’ve gone over this. I’m back now. I won’t be touring the UK again for at least another year.’

‘You mean you won’t be touring the entire world for at least another year. I found out, you know. About your success. I know how famous you really are.’

Gary’s heart stops. Mark was never supposed to find out about that. It was supposed to come from him. He was supposed to tell him today. ‘Mark. I can explain.’

‘I think it’s too late for that now.’ Mark swallows. He wasn’t angry with Gary before, but he is now. He doesn’t want to be someone’s cursed secret anymore.

‘What do you mean, it’s too late for that now?’ Gary’s heart is beating like a rabbit running. He doesn’t like where this is going. ‘What are you saying?’

Mark looks away. He studies the worn carpet on the floor. He considers his next words slowly. ‘I’m saying that if you think the fact that you’re a famous popstar isn’t worth sharing with me, then – then maybe it’s a good thing that Howard walked in on us.’

Mark uses the conversation’s pause to think about when he first met Gary. Strangely, it didn’t feel like a first meeting at all. It felt like he’d met Gary before that moment, in a different life, maybe; or during a time when they’d simply walked past each other on the street, not knowing each other’s names. Sometimes he genuinely believes he and Gary were written for each other in the stars. Tonight, he feels like their star is about to burn out.

Mark sniffs. Gary has blurred in front of him. ‘When I first met you I felt like it was meant to be, you know, like I’d already met you a million times because I felt so comfortable around you, but – but now I’m beginning to wonder we were ever comfortable at all, Gaz. I’m seriously beginning to wonder why I bother. I don’t know if I want to have a relationship with someone if it involves keeping so many secrets.’

That last sentence knocks the air right out of Gary’s lungs. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. He kept his fame secret because he thought it was the best thing for their relationship. He kept it secret because it was easy.

He never once considered that not saying the truth would one day backfire like this.

‘Mark.’ Gary pushes out Mark’s name with all every fibre in his body. He feels something heavy and painful settling in his stomach like a stone. He doesn’t want to say this out loud, but he has to. He needs to. ‘Are you breaking up with me?’

Mark just smiles. A sad smile. A heartbroken one. ‘I’m not sure if we were ever together in the first place, Mr Barlow.’

Chapter End Notes
I'm going to TRY to post the next chapter before the end of the month, but I can't promise anything as life is pretty busy at the moment. Please be patient!
PART NINE

Chapter Summary

Following a good piece of advice by Howard, Gary tries to patch up his relationship with Mark by taking him to a five-star hotel in Amsterdam. (Because money can buy you anything, right?)

Meanwhile, Mark thinks the most logical way to make up with someone after an argument is tying them to your bed.

Chapter Notes

This chapter features proper E-rated smut and Mark being the biggest tease in the history of teasing. Also, toys. And ties.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[LESSON FORTY: THE SILENT TREATMENT]

Mark thinks that being angry with someone involves not talking to them. He thinks that being angry is the same thing as ignoring your feelings and pretending they aren’t there.

In other words, Mark deals with his anger for Gary like a child. He stops talking to his boyfriend for the rest of the day. And the day after that. It’s the only way he can stop himself from blurting out how very ashamed he feels.

Gary asking him to get dressed and hide in the bathroom hurt him more than Mark can say. He wasn’t being hyperbolic when he said that he felt like he was Gary’s disgusting little secret, shoved away into a bathroom so that his colleagues wouldn’t know he was there. If Mark had any say in this at all, their relationship wouldn’t even be a secret. He’d tell everyone he knows he’s in love with Gary.

Even his students.

However, Mark also knows that dating Gary in public would be impossible. If he told people that he’s dating Gary Barlow, the pop star, Gary would never hear the end of it. He might even lose his record deal. Mark gets that. It’s why he didn’t feel upset when he first saw Gary’s Instagram and found out how big he is. If Gary wants to keep their relationship a secret for the sake of his career, then that’s fine. He’s not even that angry about that. He never was.

It’s just that Mark would feel a lot better about being someone’s secret if it actually involved making love to them. Privately. Without having to be afraid that he’s going to be shoved into a dirty
bathroom when they’re at risk of getting caught.

So when Gary tries to strike up a conversation with Mark at breakfast that Wednesday morning, he doesn’t speak. He passes him the bread in an uncharacteristically passive-aggressive manner, smiles as he would at a stranger and continues eating his bran flakes without another word. He doesn’t even look at Gaz. In Mark’s tired, confused, childish mind, his boyfriend lost the right to talk to him the moment he stopped fucking him.

Gary’s way of dealing with their first-ever row is equally childish. He tries to coax Mark into talking to him by offering him gifts: a cup of coffee here, a souvenir from a Dutch museum there. With Gary probably having a fair amount of money because he’s had several number one singles and sell-out tours all over the world, Mark annoyingly feels like he’s being bribed.

As for the rest of the excursion, it’s a bloody shambles. Howard spills coffee all over himself on his way to the tram stop. A dozen exercise books go missing. A student has a belated allergic reaction to the bread served at breakfast and throws up in the tram. Ms Brooke nearly trips and falls over a loose cobblestone on Dam Square. A group of British tourists recognise Gary in a tourist shop and nearly fall over themselves trying to get a selfie with him, which makes Mark roll his eyes.

But it gets worse. The treasure hunt that Mark and Ms Brooke spent three weeks organising is in danger of being ruined when it starts raining. Eventually, the weather becomes so bad that the treasure hunt is postponed to Thursday, tomorrow.

For a lack of a better idea, the teachers decide to take the students to a restaurant that serves pancakes and pie. Not far away from the restaurant is the Begijnhof, a large courtyard that consists of 17th and 18th-century houses centred around a luscious field of grass, slap bang in the middle of the city’s busiest shopping district. The courtyard is beautiful; everywhere you look there’s green grass and trees in full bloom. It’s so quiet that you could hear a pin drop.

The courtyard still looks inviting in the rain. Whilst his colleagues check out the menu card outside the restaurant door, Mark joins his students in taking as many pictures of the courtyard as he can. Like the rest of the city, all the houses are different: some are slim whilst others are a bit bigger. Each house has a small front garden filled with bushes and flowers. Over the course of just two minutes, one student has posted ten different pictures of the courtyard on her private Instagram account.

Mark doesn’t blame her. He thinks the courtyard is wonderful too. It looks like a secret garden: one of those hidden places you’d otherwise never know about unless you happened to stumble into them.

If he didn’t feel so terribly upset with his boyfriend still, the Begijnhof would be the sort of place he’d love to take Gary to, alone. They’d sit on one of the benches and kiss all night, not caring if someone saw them. He bets Amsterdam has a lot of places where you can be with someone in private.

Mark has no choice but to go back to the restaurant when he feels his energy fading. His tummy is rumbling.

He wishes someone had told him how exhausting being angry is. He’d much rather spend the rest of the day fantasising about taking Gary to the courtyard after dark.

He won’t, though. He refuses to daydream about romance when there’s still a part of him that’s angry about how Gary treated him last night. He’s not even sure he should call it “anger”, for he reckons being genuinely angry at someone is more like when Mr Donald threatens to kick out a student for not paying attention. What Mark’s feeling is more like disappointment. Guilt. Shame. A lot of shame; so much so that when Howard tries to talk to him at the restaurant near the courtyard,
Mark turns bright red.

He’s really ashamed that Howard had to see him run off like that yesterday. What is he even supposed to say to him? “I’m sorry that I ran off after you’d almost walked in on me and Gary shagging.” “I’m sorry that it looks like I’m angry at you for what you did because I’m not.” “I’m sorry that I’m ruining this entire trip by being moodier than I’ve ever been and that I didn’t say anything when you said hi to me this morning.” Seeing Howard constantly reminds him of how much he hates being Gary’s secret.

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It’s lunchtime at the restaurant near the courtyard. Gary’s just finished telling Howard about the row he had with Mark and that they haven’t talked to each other since.

Mark’s even gone as far as sitting at a table at the other side of the restaurant. It’s all a bit dramatic.

‘Just show him you care about him,’ Howard says as he cuts a slice into the pancake he ordered, a thin one with bacon. ‘That always works.’

‘I know. That’s the problem. I have been showing him I care. Constantly.’

Gary reaches out for the can of icing sugar on their table. They’re sharing a square table next to a window that overlooks the courtyard. Thanks to the arching windows and the modern lights fixed to the brick walls, the restaurant is a sleek, inviting space, providing shelter from the rain.

Wooden beams run across the ceiling. The smell of traditional Dutch pancakes fills the air. The room buzzes with chatter. White chairs stand out against the brown tiles on the floor. Wet umbrellas are lined up next to the door. Helped by the poor Dutch weather, most tables in the restaurant have been taken.

Although Gary would normally avoid sweet food like the plague, he has ordered American-style fluffy vegan pancakes with banana, syrup and chocolate. As someone who usually feels terrible when he so much adds honey to his oatmeal, it’s by far the unhealthiest thing Gary’s eaten in the past six years.

‘I’ve tried everything to get Mark to talk to me,’ Gary says. He puts the can of icing sugar on the table a bit too hard, and a big puff of smoke bursts out of the opening like ashes spurting out of a volcano. ‘I’ve tried getting him coffee, buying him souvenirs, offering to take him shopping – I’ve even sent him a pic of me with me top off. These are desperate times, How.’

Howard raises an eyebrow as he watches Gary shoving a big piece of pancake into his mouth like he hasn’t eaten for years. ‘You all right there, Gary? You’re attacking that pancake like you didn’t have any breakfast this morning.’

‘I’m just hungry.’

‘Mate. You’re not hungry – you’re comfort-eating.’

Gary reaches out for the iced sugar pot for the third time. ‘Okay. You’re right. I’m comfort-eating because Mark threatened to break up with me last night, and because I have no idea how to stop someone being angry about not getting any sex.’

‘You . . . do realise that Mark isn’t just mad at you cos of the lack of sex, don’t you?’ Howard reminds Gary with an edge. With the restaurant buzzing with conversation, and the rain still pouring down outside, he can tell Gary this without having to be afraid that someone can hear him. ‘I’m sure
he’s fucking horny, Gaz, but he didn’t run off cos I almost walked into you two fucking.’

‘Of course I know that, How.’ Gary hazards a look at the other side of the restaurant to see Mark talking to two students from the Songwriting course. He isn’t smiling as much as usual and his eyes look red, like he’s recently been crying. To Gary, the reason for Mark’s tears is obvious. Mark told him as much yesterday: ‘He’s mad with me because I told him to hide in the bathroom.’

Howard lets out a loud laugh. A dirty, mocking laugh. ‘Jesus, Gaz. Are you really that blind? You’re ever blinder than Rob when Jay told him th—’ Howard seems to compose himself then. Gary does not need to know about Rob and Jason. ‘If you really think Mark is upset cos you told him to hide in the bathroom then you obviously wasn’t paying attention to him yesterday.’

Frozen, Gary holds his fork in mid-air. Some banana slices fall off his fork and land into a thick puddle of syrup on his plate. ‘What do you mean? Of course I was paying attention yesterday. You weren’t even there!’

‘I didn’t need to hear you two rowing last night to know what Mark is really upset about.’

Gary’s voice cracks. He sounds hurt. Really, really hurt. ‘I’d love you to tell me, mate, cos I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.’

Howard doesn’t know what to say. He wishes he could be warm and supportive and tell Gary that everything is going to be okay and that Mark will stop ignoring him eventually, but he doesn’t know how he can be supportive when Gary is missing the point completely. It’s been staring him in the face ever since he had that row with Mark last night.

Maybe it’s been staring him in the face ever since he and Mark first met.

There’s no easy way to say this. Howard has to be blunt. If Gary were a student who was failing to understand why he keeps getting bad grades for his classes, he’d be just as forthright. Sometimes presenting someone with the truth is the only way to get them to change. ‘I’m sorry, Gaz, but you must be fucking thick if you can’t see that Mark’s upset with you cos you can’t be arsed to settle down with him.’

Howard’s blunt comment hits Gary like a stone. ‘T-That’s not true,’ he stammers. He has to put down his fork; his hands have started shaking. ‘Of – of course I wanna settle down with him.’

A feeling of anxiety and fear rolls towards Gary on a poisonous fog. Does he want to settle down with Mark? He’s suddenly not so sure. After all, he’s not only lied to Mark about his pop star career, but he’s also lied about his penthouse. They’ve never even been on a proper date, and he can count the number of kisses they’ve shared on just one hand. Gary could easily see himself asking Mark to marry him one day, and yet it feels like their relationship has been stuck in motion for the past few months.

How is he ever supposed to build a proper life with Mark if he’s kept so many secrets from him?

It’s as though Howard has read his mind. He starts naming all the ways Gary has been a terrible lover, not caring if he’s being blunt or not. ‘If you really wanna settle down with Mark, then when was the last time you took him home? When was the last time you shared your music with him? You think that you kept your fame secret because you wanted to protect your relationship, but you just did it cos you’re fucking scared, Gaz. You’re scared that being with someone will stop you from being a popstar.’

Gary swallows as he pushes away his plate of pancakes. He’s lost his appetite.
Truth be told, he’s never thought of it like this before. He always thought that keeping his fame secret was the right thing to do for their relationship, but it was always about him: his career, his life – not Mark’s. He never stopped to think about what he was taking away from Mark by forcing him to live out their relationship in the shadows.

At the end of the day, the only thing Gary could think of was himself.

‘I’m right, aren’t I?’ Howard’s words are warm. Soft. Understanding.

‘Yeah.’ Gary sounds hoarse. ‘You’ve hit the nail on the head there, How. I am scared. I’m fucking terrified. Absolutely terrified.’

‘Why?’

‘If I had to guess, it probably has to do with the fact that I’ve never had a relationship like this before. I’ve always dated celebrities and people who were in the public eye like me. Or worse, fans. And now this amazing, gorgeous guy has entered me life and I keep pushing him away cos I’m scared of what’ll happen if people find out I’m dating a fellow teacher,’ Gary says, whispering his last words when someone walks past their table. ‘Can you imagine the headlines in The Sun? They’ll have a fucking field day. Ofsted might even get involved.’

‘It’s not just that, though, is it?’ Howard says, lowering his voice too. ‘You’ve been a solo act your entire adult life. It’s okay to admit you don’t really know how to spend your life with someone.’

Gary can feel himself tearing up at that. He has to blink several times to stop himself from crying in the middle of a packed restaurant. He really hopes Mark isn’t looking at him.

‘You’re having an allergic reaction, Gaz?’

Gary snorts, and a tear escapes down his cheek. He quickly wipes it away with the back of his hand before one of the students can see. ‘When did you become so wise, eh, Howard?’

‘When you started being so thick.’

‘Cheers, lad.’

‘I mean it, though. You’re an idiot if you think you can get away with not telling Mark how much you really care about him. I mean, look at you two. You clearly love each other. You’re probably going to get married one day. But you do need to actually tell him you care, Gaz.’

‘How do I do that, though?’ Gary sniffs. He rubs his eyes and blows his nose into his napkin. ‘I feel like I’ve tried everything.’

‘Not everything,’ Howard says.

‘What’d you mean?’

‘Simple. Answer yourself this. When did Mark first become moody? And I don’t just mean when he got moody about finding a slug on his bread, but earlier than that.’

Gary thinks about it. Mark’s mood went downhill when they saw their room and Mark accidentally broke the cupboard in their bathroom. ‘It started when we got to our room. He wasn’t happy then, Mark wasn’t.’

‘That’s what I thought. Mark doesn’t like our room. What does that tell you?’
'That he doesn’t like bunk beds? I don’t know what you’re trying to say here.'

'I’m saying that you should take Mark to a different room, Gaz.'

Gary scoffs. ‘I can’t, How. The hostel is all booked up, remember? The receptionist told us as much when we checked in on Monday.’

‘That’s true, but I wasn’t talking about the youth hostel.’

Gary lets out a disapproving tut. ‘I can’t just book a room in a different hotel, How. Not while we’re supposed to take care of thirty kids who can’t even afford bloody lunch. It’d be outrageous!’

For illustration, Gary nods at the students at the table next to them. Low on funds, they’ve only been able to order a single flat pancake that they’ve been sharing for the past ten minutes. Similarly, a lot of students have put off buying souvenirs because they simply haven’t got the money for it. It’s a miracle they’ve even been able to afford their textbooks.

‘The students won’t be paying for it, though, will they?’ Howard reminds Gary. ‘You will. You can afford a room in literally any five-star hotel in the world.’

‘What if one of them finds out, though? We’re talking about literally sneaking off here.’

Howard shrugs. ‘It’s none of their business what we do after the lights are out. As long as it’s not illegal and it doesn’t get the school into trouble, who cares? It’s not as if you’ll be going to the Red Light District.’

Gary thinks about what Howard is suggesting. Howard’s telling him to elope with Mark. Tonight. To a different hotel. A five-star one; one that doesn’t fall apart at the touch. A place where Mark and Gary can finally be alone. Together. It seems almost too good to be true, and that’s because it probably is.

‘It’s too risky,’ Gary says, and that is that.

‘So is not doing anything while Mark’s still upset with you.’

‘I know, but I can’t just bribe Mark into loving me. That would make me no different from the people who only tried to have sex with me cos of how famous I am.’

‘I wouldn’t call it bribing. More like being clever with your money.’

‘So bribing, basically.’

‘Yeah.’

Gary again looks at Mark: his gorgeous boyfriend, deserving of so much more than what he’s been given. Money will never buy you love, but it might be able to buy them the one opportunity they need to reconnect. It would buy them a spacious room in a five-star hotel. A bouncy waterbed. Red curtains. A Jacuzzi, big enough for the both of them. Soft pillows. Breakfast in bed. A moment alone. At last. They could have had all of that and more from the moment they fell in love.

Gary just never bothered.

‘Okay.’ Gary punctures the word with a sigh.

‘Okay what?’
‘I’m going to do it. I’m going to book a hotel. Tonight. But not a word of this to Mark, all right? It’ll sound better coming from me.’

Howard doesn’t bother hiding his smugness. He knew this would happen. ‘Have you got any hotels in mind?’

‘There’s this brilliant five-star hotel I stayed at three years ago, but I can’t remember what it’s called now. Something to do with tulips, I think.’ Gary gets out his phone. He types in a random description of the hotel he went to in the search bar on Google. The first result is a large hotel next to the river Amstel. It has five stars. The pillars in front of the main entrance look vaguely familiar. ‘I just hope Mark’s willing to come with me – I’ll be sat on me king-sized bed on me own if he’s not.’

‘You could just . . . not tell him,’ Howard suggests. ‘Wait till everyone’s gone to bed, then tell him to meet you outside for some crap reason like, I don’t know, stargazing or something. You could even say a student’s gone missing.’

‘Or I could just be honest and tell Mark I’ve booked a room in a five-star hotel because I’m bloody desperate to get him back.’

‘That works too.’

Gary puts away his phone for the time being. He’ll book the room later, when he’s not surrounded by students. ‘What did you mean earlier, by the way?’ he says, remembering something Howard had mentioned a couple of minutes ago. ‘You said Jay had told Rob something? I didn’t even know the two of them were working together.’

Howard waves a casual hand in the air. ‘Never mind that. I’d be more worried about what Mark’s got planned for you if you do get him to come with you.’

Gary looks up at that. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I’m just saying. Mark looks like someone who’s pretty good at holding a grudge.’

Gary laughs out loud. ‘Mark? Holding a grudge? Don’t make me laugh, How. Mark’s so nice that he once tried to perform CPR on a bumblebee. I’m sure a simple apology at the hotel will suffice. I just need to get him there, is all.’

Howard doesn’t seem so sure, but he isn’t going to tell Gary that.

|LESSON FORTY-ONE: MARK AND GARY ELOPE|

The rest of the day is pretty decent, as far as school excursions go. The weather finally clears up and the students can begin their treasure hunt after all. It involves taking selfies at famous landmarks and answering questions about them in their exercise books.

The treasure hunt is quite fun, but it doesn’t stop Mark from feeling absolutely exhausted. He’s so tired that he goes to bed at nine. He doesn’t even bother telling the others where he’s going. He doesn’t smile at his students during dinner. He doesn’t look at Gary on his way out of the dining hall. He just heads to his room, changes into his pyjamas, crawls into bed and hopes sleep comes to him quickly and painlessly.
He dreams of Gary, of course. In the dream, Gary is warm. Not just in character, but his body too. His kisses are so warm that Mark melts. His touches are sweet. It almost feels like the two of them are already married.

By the time dream-Mark and dream-Gary head to their room to make love, Gary’s heating up. He’s nervous. His touches are careful but quick. He’s kind. So kind. He’s exactly what Mark needs him to be in that moment and more. It’s what he wishes Gary would be forever: not just a pop star, but a lover. A friend.

Then the dream stops.

Mark opens his eyes to a curtain of darkness. The only thing he can see is the underside of Gary’s bed and the strip of light from a big hole in the curtains. All is quiet apart from the sound of Howard’s snores. It must be late; he can see Ms Brooke sleeping at the other side of the room. His blanket has half ended up on the floor, and he has to pull it back over his body. It’s cold. The hole in the window hasn’t been fixed. There’s still a bump in his mattress.

He closes his eyes again. He tries to go back to sleep.

It’s impossible. He becomes acutely aware of the fact that he hasn’t spoken to Gary for twenty-four hours. That’s more than a day. And why? Because he’s angry. Because he’s sad. Because he’s never had a love like this before. Gary’s the best lover he’s ever had and yet he’s the worst.

Sleep comes to Mark difficultly. His ears unintentionally focus on the sound of Howard snoring at the other side of the room. He can’t relax. All he keeps thinking about is Gary.

Mark has just rolled over on his right side when a loud thud next to his bed makes him start. He sits upright in bed, almost knocking his head against the underside of Gary’s bed in the process. The next thing he hears is footsteps. The sound of someone breathing. Something being picked up from the floor.

Mark grabs his pillow and holds it in front of him like a shield. ‘W-Who’s there?’

‘It’s only me.’

_Gaz._ Mark would recognise that voice anywhere.

Mark ignores the flutter in his tummy and waits for his eyes to get used to the dark. Gary’s wearing a smart shirt and tie by the looks of it: the sort of outfit he’d wear to a formal event. He looks good. So good. He also seems to be carrying something. A large bag. It’s hard to make out.

‘Why do you look like you’re going to a parents’ evening?’ Mark whispers. It’s the first full sentence he’s spoken to Gary since last night. ‘And why are you holding your bag?’

‘Not mine. Yours.’ Gary hands Mark his rucksack. It’s so heavy that Mark’s bed creaks underneath the added weight. ‘We’re leaving.’

‘What? Why?’ Mark’s heart rate increases. A feeling of worry and fear blooms in his chest. He wraps his arms around the familiar shape of his rucksack for comfort. ‘Has something happened? Is it the students that went missing yesterday? They haven’t run off, have they?’

Gary doesn’t speak. It’s hard to see his expression in the dark, and his silence is frustrating.

‘Gaz. What’s going on?’
Gary starts. ‘Oh. Sorry. I’m – I’m just a little thrown that you’re talking to me again, to be honest. I didn’t think you would.’

‘Well. I can’t keep ignoring you, can I? You are standing next to my bed, you know. You could be a ghost for all I know.’

‘I’m not. I mean, I don’t think I am.’ Gary pinches his cheek to make sure. ‘Nope, definitely not a ghost.’

Mark has to fight back a smile. He experiences something very similar to homesickness, except he isn’t missing his house or England or the simplicity of waking up in his own squeaky bed. He’s missing Gaz. ‘If you’re not a ghost haunting my room, why are you awake?’

Gary’s glad it’s dark, for he’s just started blushing. ‘Because I . . . well, I may or may not have booked a room. At a hotel. A room in a hotel that I wanna take you to.’

Perhaps it’s just the lack of sleep getting to him, but Mark has no idea what Gary said just now. Booked a room? At a hotel? What? ‘Aren’t we at a hotel right now, Gaz?’

‘No. Yes. I meant that I’ve booked a different room. At a five-star hotel. For just the two of us. That’s why I’m dressed like I’m going to a parents’ evening, cos I – cos it’s a five-star hotel.’ Pause. Gary runs a nervous hand through his hair. In the background, Howard is snoring quietly. A police siren sounds in the distance. ‘If you wanna come, that is. You don’t have to. But basically, I’m saying that I wanna take you to a place where we can be alone and talk for a bit. Alone.’

‘What, now?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What time is it?’

Gary shrugs. ‘Twelve, I think.’

Mark’s eyes become as wide as saucers. He looks positively mortified. ‘You booked a five-star hotel at midnight? The Music department can’t even afford a new coffee machine!’

Gary turns an even deeper shade of red. ‘I booked it this afternoon, mate.’

‘No!’ says Mark, aghast.

‘Howard suggested it, if that makes it better.’

‘What on Earth do you wanna do at a hotel in midnight?’ Mark looks genuinely shocked.

‘Nothing. I just wanna take you to a place that doesn’t fall apart whenever I try to look at you. That’s it. If you decide you’re still angry with me afterwards, then that’s on me. But I just want you to hear me out for a second.’

‘What if someone finds out?’ Mark sounds uncertain. Torn. ‘I’d rather not get caught sneaking out of our hostel in the middle of the night.’

‘We won’t. The students are all in their dorms. I’ve checked.’

‘What about the return trip, though?’

‘I’ve asked Howard to cover for us. If we’re not back by morning he’ll tell the students we went
ahead to buy our tickets for the Anne Frank house.’

Mark feels something flutter in his stomach. He tries very hard not to look at the way Gary’s white shirt is hugging his chest. ‘You say that like we’ll be spending the night.’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. All I want is a chat.’

‘A chat,’ Mark reiterates.

‘Yeah, mate. Or were you really going to wait till the end of the excursion to talk to me again?’

‘I – I don’t know. Maybe.’ Mark averts his face. Now that he thinks about it, ignoring Gary all day was far from his finest moment. It feels so childish, looking back. ‘I’ve never been this angry with someone before. I have no idea how to deal with it.’

‘Then come with me. Allow me to make it up to you.’

Mark bites his lip. He’d love to say that he doesn’t want to speak to Gary ever again and that he’s done being in a relationship with him, but none of that is true. He’s missed Gary so badly that he agrees almost instantly.

‘Okay.’ Mark says the word again. He tries to convince himself that this is the right thing to do even though he knows it’s bloody wrong. If Mr Harrison ever finds out about this, he’ll definitely get fired. ‘Can you give me a minute to get dressed? I’ll meet you outside if that’s okay.’

‘Does this mean we’re cool, Mark?’

Silence. Mark gets out of bed, quietly opens the bathroom door and tiptoes over to the wardrobe in the bathroom to get some fresh clothes. He thinks about what he wants to wear, then opts for a simple t-shirt and jeans and a white pair of underpants, nothing fancy.

Gary watches Mark grabbing his clothes from the wardrobe. ‘Mark? Are we all right, you and me?’

Mark hesitates. He can’t possibly give Gary that answer now; not when he has no idea what he’s just agreed to. Part of him wants to be hopeful that running away with Gary will fix every problem they’ve ever had, but he can’t predict the future. His reasons for being moody have always been about much more than just his squeaky bed and the bump in his mattress.

‘Ask me again later, okay?’ Mark soundlessly closes the bathroom door so he can get dressed, alone.

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It’s not until Mark changes into a fresh T-shirt and jeans he starts doubting himself.

Should he really be doing this? Yes, he’d very much like to hear what Gary has to say, but they’re still on a school trip. They’re teachers. If just one of their students spotted them sneaking out, they’d be in a world of pain. Another mistake would likely get Mark fired.

But whilst Mark is genuinely afraid of being fired, he’s also quite desperate for a decent night’s sleep. If going to a five-star hotel means that he’ll finally get to sleep without having to worry about potentially waking up with a terrible backache, he’s more than willing to take the risk.

Especially if it leads to sex. Because he’s fucking horny, Mark is. So horny. He was doing a pretty good job not thinking about Gary in that way when he wasn’t talking to him, but having Gary Barlow standing next to your bed in a tight shirt and tie is pretty difficult to ignore.
He wants that man. On him. In him. He wants Gary to spoon him in a five-star bed after an hour-long make-out session. He wants Gary to look at him like he’s the only person in the world. He wants Gary to ask him to move in with him. He wants an apology in the shape of a messy blowjob. He wants to get married, one day. Apparently being angry with your boyfriend makes you very sexually frustrated.

Before they do anything like that, though, Mark needs Gary to explain himself. At length. Because he still has no idea what Gary was playing at when he pushed him into a bathroom last night. He still doesn’t understand why Gary doesn’t want to take their relationship public.

Frankly, Mark can’t wrap his head around it. Being with someone is supposed to be good. It’s warm and safe and comfortable, and it shouldn’t ever be hidden in the dark. So before Mark ever allows Gary to kiss him again, he wants to hear the truth. The complete, utter truth. All of it.

Even the parts of Gary’s career that he would rather keep secret. Especially those.

Mark meets Gary on the pavement outside the hostel ten minutes later. The neon letters above the entrance shine brightly in the dark. In the distance, Mark can see the same illuminated bridges that he saw when he first got out of the coach, looking like Christmas in the middle of summer. A lone cyclist makes his way to the other side of the street. All the lights in the hostel are off. A cab has just arrived, one of those expensive ones with dark windows.

When the driver gets out of the car, Mark’s heart does a little summersault. The driver is immaculately dressed, almost posh-looking. Gary obviously didn’t book a ride with Uber.

The driver shakes hands with Gary. ‘Good evening, Mr Barlow. Mr Barlow’s friend,’ he adds when he sees Mark. Mark turns red at the attention of someone so gentlemanly and smart-looking. ‘I hope I’m not too late?’

‘You’re perfectly on time, thank you.’ Gary looks at Mark, who’s been staring at the cab like it’s a UFO that’s just fallen from the heavens. ‘You okay with this, Mark? It’ll be much quicker than taking the tram, and I didn’t really feel like walking.’

Mark doesn’t want to ask this, but someone has to. ‘Who’s paying for it?’

‘I am. I’m a rich pop star, remember?’

Mark lets out a hollow, helpless laugh. ‘You never said you were rich!’

‘Didn’t I? Well, I am. I’m a very rich pop star who’s been a bloody terrible boyfriend.’

‘I wouldn’t say “terrible”,’ Mark whispers. He thinks of the right word. He wonders what Howard or Rob would say if they were here. They’d probably say something funny. ‘More like . . . rusty, I guess.’

‘What? I’m not rusty!’ Gary lowers his voice. Conveniently, the cabbie has just turned his face, pretending to be very interested in the neon sign above the hostel entrance. ‘I wasn’t rusty last night, I wasn’t . . .’

Mark remembers. Before Howard nearly walked in on them almost-but-not-quite fucking and things went a bit Wrong, Gary was wonderful. He was warm. He was kind. He was naughty and sweet and everything Mark had ever wished for in a partner. Just because Howard knocked on the door doesn’t mean it wasn’t one of the best moments he’s had on this trip so far.

‘Okay,’ Mark admits. ‘You weren’t completely awful.’
'Does that mean you enjoyed it, then? Before I asked you to hide in the bathroom, that is,' Gary adds solemnly.

Mark looks away. He bites his lip for a second. ‘All right, yes. I enjoyed it.’

‘Did you . . . enjoy the shirtless pic I sent you this morning too?’

‘You mean the pic you sent me to get my attention?’

‘That’s the one.’

Mark thinks about it. In an attempt to get his attention, Gary had sent him a picture of him, shirtless, in a dressing room. As if Mark was ever going to fall for that. ‘It wasn’t bad,’ he says. ‘Not as good as the video you sent me during the summer.’

‘You mean the one of me exercising? You never did tell me what you thought of it.’

Mark laughs. ‘I thought the aubergine emoji I sent you afterwards was pretty obvious.’

‘So it . . . turned you on? I turned you on?’

‘You still do, you know.’

They smile at each other then. It’s one of those silly “sparks fly” moments that only people in films and books seem to experience. It means that all is well. They’re getting somewhere here.

There is *one* thing that Mark still doesn’t get, though.

‘When you say “rich”, Gaz . . .’

Mark chews on the inside of his cheek. He looks at the cabbie, who is dressed as though he works for The Queen. He considers all the times he saw Gary wearing an expensive coat or shirt, wondering how a teacher could ever afford something like it. He thinks of Gary’s piano lab, the most technologically advanced classroom in the entire country.

He knows that – in England, at least – it’s incredibly rude to ask someone how much they earn, but the time for secrets is over. ‘*How* rich, exactly?’

Gary rubs the back of his head. ‘In all honesty? Rich enough to never have to teach again.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yeah. But where’s the fun in that, eh? Can you imagine me sat at home doing nothing? I’d just get bored and read me favourite issue of *Keyboards Monthly* over and over again. Or worse, I’d spend all day scouring the internet for rare *Star Wars* action figures. No, give me challenging kids and exams all day, me.’

Mark snorts. ‘You’re a very strange man, Mr Barlow.’

They get into the cab together. Mark spends most of the journey staring out of the window, taking in as many sights as he can.

The canals all bask in a warm orange glow. Tourists still walk the streets without a care in the world. In a narrow lane that seems endless, Mark spots at least a dozen cafés that are still open. Boats glitter on the water. A drunk man has just left a restaurant. Different houses of all shapes and sizes flash by so quickly that Mark has already lost count of them.
In the corner of his eye, Mark can see Gary smiling at him and reaching out for his thigh. Mark lets him. He closes his eyes when he feels Gary’s hand touching his leg and squeezing him there. A million memories flash before him: memories of kissing Gary for the first time; being undressed by Gaz in an archive room; their adventure during the summer prom; almost being fucked by Gary last night.

Mark smiles. A nervous smile. He doesn’t know what to say. Gary has to say the words for him. ‘Beautiful, isn’t it, Mark?’

Mark places his hand on top of Gary’s and squeezes it. He knows that Gary isn’t just talking about the city. ‘Yeah. Yeah, it is.’

After about ten minutes, the car stops in a street lined with trees. There’s a parking lot to their left and the faint glitter of water in front of them. When Mark squeezes past Gary to look through the window on his right, his heart skips a beat.

They’ve stopped in front of a hotel. A proper hotel. It’s massive. It’s as big as at least ten canal houses. There are Grecian pillars in front of the entrance. A Dutch flag is aflutter in the air alongside the flag of Amsterdam, a red and black flag with three Xs on it. A stern doorman is standing guard in front of the door. At the other side of the hotel, there’s the river Amstel, as gorgeous as ever. This is obviously a building that has always been a hotel; not a former warehouse or merchant’s office, but an actual hotel, made to last.

Mark hesitates when Gary makes a movement to get out of the car. He looks down at what he’s wearing: a T-shirt and jeans and his leather jacket that he accidentally poured coffee on a couple of days ago. He doesn’t look suitable for a five-star hotel at all. ‘What if they won’t let me in?’

‘Of course they’ll let you in – you’re with me.’

Gary’s words are meant to be comforting, but Mark doesn’t feel comforted at all. He feels anxious suddenly. Torn. ‘Gaz. What if we get caught doing this?’

‘We won’t. As I said before we left – I’ve asked Howard to cover for us in the morning. If we end up staying the night together, he’ll tell the students we went ahead to buy tickets for the Anne Frank House and that we’ll meet everyone there. And if someone does find out about it, I imagine Harrison will give us a big lecture back at home and then forget it ever happened. He’s all bark but no bite, that man.’

Mark bites his lip. Harrison may never fire the man who has enough money to buy the entire school, but Mark isn’t Gary. ‘What if you’ve already had a lecture from Mr Harrison before, though?’

‘You mean because of that time you answered one of me texts while you were invigilating an exam? That was ages ago.’

Mark fumbles with the sleeves of his leather jacket. ‘That wasn’t the only time he lectured me.’

Mark’s never told Gary this, but A_WD1E wasn’t the only group he struggled with during his first term. There was a Songwriting group that he found so hard to manage that he used to let them go early. Very. Early. He’d feel so flustered and helpless that he’d allow the students to leave his classroom half an hour before the bell rang. Sometimes he wouldn’t even bother teaching the group at all.

He told himself that he was being kind.

Mark’s scheme was supposed to be a secret between him and the group, but then one of the kids
started talking. One of the more serious students felt so frustrated about Mr Owen obviously not feeling like teaching that she told her mentor about it – who then told Mr Harrison, the department’s head teacher.

Predictably, Mr Harrison wasn’t very happy with Mr Owen’s behaviour. He said that letting students go early went against school rules and that it might even endanger the reputation of the school itself. If Ofsted ever found out that students weren’t getting full sixty-minute lessons, everyone could get into an awful lot of trouble. Not to mention the fact that not bothering to teach a group at all is no way to deal with class management.

In the end, Mark got off with a stern warning. He privately hoped that all had been forgotten, but that was before Mr Harrison started ignoring his texts about the incident at the Van Gogh museum. He’s beginning to feel like the head teacher is ignoring him deliberately.

‘What if Mr Harrison hates me?’ Mark says as much. ‘What if he fires me because I’m not at the youth hostel like I should be?’

‘Harrison doesn’t hate you. You just got unlucky. Just because you did something bad doesn’t make you a bad teacher. You shouldn’t have gotten into trouble for letting those kids go early in the first place. You’re not the only person who does it, believe me.’

‘No?’

‘Of course not. I promise you, Mark, there’s no way Mr Harrison will ever find out that we’re here.’ Gary pauses. He looks at Mark for a long time. ‘Unless you’d . . . rather go back to the hostel after all?’

Mark looks at the imposing hotel outside of the car window. He still thinks that someone from the school is in waiting for him in the bushes somewhere.

‘If it helps, they have really comfortable beds, this hotel,’ Gary says to coax Mark into coming anyway.

‘You’ve been here before?’

‘A couple of years ago, when I was in Amsterdam for a gig. The staff is great. Also, the minibar is the size of a small bedroom. You’ll never wanna leave, there’s so much food.’

That gets Mark’s attention. His tummy rumbles. ‘Food? For free?’

‘Oh yeah. There isn’t just food, though – there’ll be a towel with your name on it. And they have Jacuzzis. In the room itself.’

Mark gasps. ‘I’ve never used a Jacuzzi before,’ he says longingly.

‘They’re amazing. And guess what – there’ll be no people knocking on the doors to disturb us. It’ll be just us, Mark. We can do whatever we wanna do. Even if all we do is talk.’

Gary’s actually done it. He has won Mark over.

‘Okay,’ Mark says. ‘I’ll stay at the hotel with you. But don’t assume we’ll be doing anything worth disturbing, Mr Barlow. I could still decide I am very mad with you,’ he says even though he’d love to do something worth disturbing.

He just hopes that he isn’t about to lose his job in the process.
Mark doesn’t realise quite how rich Gary is until he enters the five-star hotel next to the river Amstel. The lobby – ten times the size of the lobby at the youth hostel – gleams with white stucco and stone. An inner balcony overlooks the reception desk. The floor is made of marble. A glittering chandelier is suspended from the ceiling.

Beyond a set of soaring Greek arches, there’s a double staircase that looks like the sort of staircase a princess might ascend on her way to meet her prince at the ball. The floor is so shiny that Mark can almost see himself reflected in it. He self-consciously runs his hand through his messy bed-hair when he spots two immaculately-dressed businessmen sat on a comfortable black sofa, no doubt discussing important business matters. All the members of staff wear fancy uniforms and have genuine smiles on their faces.

It’s not hard to see why the hotel has five stars. Everything about the lobby oozes luxury, from the decorative white pilasters and bespoke lights to the expensive Persian carpet in front of the double staircase, no doubt a great deal more expensive than the worn carpet in the youth hostel. The lobby even smells good, of lavender. It weirdly reminds Mark of home, except he’s never been here before and his flat would fit inside the lobby three times. There was always something about the youth hostel that made him feel like the building was trying to spit him out.

With Gary being the rich popstar, he’s the one who handles check-in. The receptionist, a young lady with brown skin and long black hair all the way down her back, recognises Gary immediately. She looks much happier than the bored receptionist at the youth hostel. ‘Mr Barlow! It’s so good to see you again. I trust that your journey was comfortable?’

‘It was,’ Gary says. ‘Thank you for offering to pick us up.’

‘No problem, Sir,’ the young receptionist beams. She looks very happy for someone who has to work at a reception desk at nearly one in the morning, but then again she works at a five-star hotel. She’s no doubt being paid accordingly. ‘I hear that you will be staying with us for one night, Sir?’

‘That’s correct, that.’ Gary looks in Mark’s direction then, who has spent the past couple of minutes staring up at the ceiling of the lobby like it’s a star-filled night sky. ‘I . . . do hope you know that I’ll be needing a double room as opposed to a single room this time? My management usually handles these things, and I stayed on me own last time. I wasn’t sure if I’d done the booking correctly,’ Gary says uncertainly. ‘I probably shouldn’t have done the booking on me phone.’

‘I’m sure everything is in order, Sir. Let me have a look at your reservation to make sure.’

The receptionist soon confirms that the booking is all in order: they’ll be staying at a double room until eight in the morning, breakfast included, and if they need anything else they can just ask a member of staff or call reception. The receptionist doesn’t seem that surprised that Mr Barlow has decided to check in at one in the morning.

‘Unfortunately,’ the receptionist then adds, ‘there has been a sudden issue with one of the lights in your room. We’ve already sent an electrician to take care of it. Your room should be ready in about ten to fifteen minutes. Would that be all right with you, Sirs? I can always see if we have another
'We don’t mind waiting.’ Gary smiles at Mark at that, and his hand reaches out and grabs Mark’s hand for the first time in days. It’s also the first time he’s ever held Mark’s hand in front of anyone else, ever, and it feels strangely good. Solid. ‘You don’t happen to have a place where we could talk in private, do you?’

‘You could take a seat over there,’ the receptionist says. She points a finger at the empty Chesterfield sofa where two businessmen were previously discussing important business matters. ‘Feel free to make use of the coffee machine in the lobby while you wait. I will ask a member of staff to take you to your room once the electrical issue has been taken care of.’

They take a seat on the sofa the receptionist was indicating. They don’t talk for a bit. When you’ve spent nearly an entire day not talking to each other, it can be quite hard to get back into it.

‘So – er – I just wanted to take this opportunity to say sorry,’ Mark begins to say. He looks quite solemn. Serious. ‘I shouldn’t have treated you the way I did.’

Gary lets out a nervous, mocking laugh. Mark’s sorry? What about? Gary’s the one who pushed him into a bathroom and lied about his career, not him! ‘What on Earth for? You’ve done nothing wrong, mate.’

‘Except I didn’t talk to you for a day, did I?’ Mark nervously runs his hands over the edge of the sofa, a Chesterfield loveseat. It’s covered in black fabric with an expensive-looking silver floral print.

They probably don’t have this sort of sofa at the youth hostel, Mark thinks. There were a lot of things the hostel lacked, like love and warmth and the sound of Gary’s voice when Mark decided not to talk to him for a day. He really regrets ignoring him even now.

‘I shouldn’t have acted like a child,’ Mark goes on. ‘Cos we’re teachers, aren’t we? We’re supposed to show our students how to talk to each other like proper adults, not ignoring each other because of something silly we’ve done. I should have heard you out last night instead of letting my anger get the better of me. I’m sorry.’

Gary laughs. Trust Mark to take the blame. ‘You shouldn’t be the one apologising, Mark. That’s my job. I deserved you not talking to me. I asked you to hide in the bathroom, for Christ’s sake.’

‘I’m actually still a bit angry about that,’ Mark points out.

‘Exactly. Not to mention the fact that I lied to you about me career for half a year. What kind of boyfriend does that? I literally pushed you away just so I didn’t have to worry about how I was ever gonna settle down with you.’

That bit is new. Mark sits straighter on the Chesterfield sofa. ‘You didn’t tell me you’re famous . . . because you’re scared of settling down with me?’

‘Terrified, lad. Cos I’ve never been in a long-term relationship before, I haven’t. It was always just fellow artists and celebrities, that sort of people. Then you come around and I suddenly find meself wondering if I wouldn’t just rather be with you instead of going on tour.’

‘I’d never ask you to do that.’

‘I know. But the thing is, I could have done, and that scared the shit out of me. It wasn’t just that, though. Before you, all the people who dated me only did so cos they needed something from me. Songs, contacts, record deals – you name it. You were the first guy who wanted me for me. I’d never
had that before. *That’s* why I didn’t tell you.’

Mark nods in understanding. He figured as much when he and Rob sat down to watch Gary’s music videos at Starbucks last summer. ‘You liked me better not knowing.’

‘I did until last night made me think otherwise.’ Gary sighs. ‘I should never have decided that you were better off not knowing about that part of my life. I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry, Mark.’

Mark squeezes Gary’s knee. He smiles sympathetically. ‘You know, I genuinely did feel angry with you for a while, but I don’t want to be angry anymore. Being angry with someone is so tiring, isn’t it? If you say that you didn’t tell me you were famous because you were scared, then I understand that. I wasn’t even really that angry when I found out last summer.’

‘When *did* you find out?’

Mark blushes. ‘I got a bit too curious about your Instagram account. I . . . may have spent the next day watching all your videos with Rob.’

Gary grins. Perhaps it’s just Mark touching his knee, but where there was previously a tight ball of dread in his tummy, there are now butterflies. ‘You watched all of my videos? What did you think?’

‘I really liked them.’

‘Which one did you like best?’

‘Pray,’ Mark admits with some shame. He tries to ignore Gary looking annoyingly smug at that. ‘Anyway, as I said – I wasn’t angry when I found out how famous you were. I was actually going to talk to you about it, but then I saw our room at the hostel and all those weird things started happening like the paintings falling off the walls, and I didn’t feel like talking anymore. I didn’t even enjoy the trip anymore. *That’s* what made me upset, not *you*. Not entirely, anyway. Some of the things you did weren’t so nice, but I’m fine with that. We all do silly things when we’re scared.

‘I do need you to promise me not to keep secrets anymore, though. I don’t wanna be that couple that always has to snog in the dark. And I’m fine with you going on tour as long as you come home to me afterwards. I think that’s quite fair considering that we’ve been together for half a year.’

Gary can’t believe his ears. Have they just made up? They’ve just made up!

‘Mark, you have no idea how happy hearing all of this makes me,’ Gary says. He’s beaming. ‘I’m so glad you’re not upset with me anymore. And I’d *love* to come home to you. *Love* to.’

‘Then let’s figure out how we’re going to make that happen. Okay?’ Mark tilts his head to the left and gives Gary a chaste kiss on the cheek; a kiss soft enough to make Gary wish he was deserving of much more.

As Mark gives him a second kiss, a bit closer to his mouth, Gary thinks about how silly their falling-out was. He always thinks his students are a bit childish for fighting over simple things like who’s going to be in charge of a group project, but it turns out teachers are pretty good at having meaningless fights too.

‘M-Mark?’

‘Yes, Gary?’

Gary hazards the same question he tried to ask Mark right before they left. ‘Does this mean we’re . . .
cool, Mark?’

‘Yes,’ Mark replies. Simple as that.

‘So you’re not angry at me for not telling you how famous I am anymore?’

‘No.’

‘And the . . . bathroom thing?’

‘Oh. I’m not quite over that yet,’ Mark says. His eyes are twinkling. Bedroom eyes. ‘I’m still really angry about that, you know. You’ll see.’

Gary’s about to ask what Mark means by that when a member of staff tells them their room is ready. They’re to stay in room 312: a suite on the third floor with a view of the river. There’s a lift on their right-hand side ready to take them upstairs.

Gary glances at Mark when the member of staff hands them their key cards. The main reason he booked a room is so they could talk about last night’s argument, which they just did. At length. He wouldn’t blame Mark if he wanted to head back to the hostel after all. ‘What do you think, Mark? Do you still wanna stay here? I know we only came here so we could talk in private.’

‘Of course I wanna stay! You can’t just book a hotel and then decide not to use it, Mr Barlow. That’d be awful.’

‘What about being afraid of getting caught?’

Mark looks at the key card in his hands. He’s still afraid, deathly afraid, but to be fair he’s also been desperate to kiss Gary since he saw him standing next to his bed in a shirt and tie. Now that they’ve both apologised, there’s only one thing he still wants to do – one very important, terrifying, careless thing that they’ve never really been able to do because there was always someone about to walk in on them.

‘I think I’m willing to take the risk, Mr Barlow. Now, shall we? I’m very excited to see the bed, aren’t you?’

|LESSON FORTY-THREE: DO NOT DISTURB|

It’s fair to say that Gary Barlow has three lives: the pop star, the teacher and the lover. He’s had amazing and wonderful days in all three, but bad days too. Those bad days have made him the person he is now, walking towards his room on the third floor of a five-star hotel.

The worst day of Gary’s pop star life was when his record label dropped him after the failure of his second album. That’s easy. As a teacher, the worst day he ever had was less life-changing than that, but still as difficult. It was a week before Christmas. He was a tutor like Howard then, and he’d organised a Christmas brunch for his first-ever tutor group, the challenging M_SW1B. He’d arranged for them to stay in a large classroom on the last day before the Christmas holidays, and there was going to be lots of food and a quiz about Christmas number 1s. He’d even gone as far as decorating the classroom with garlands and lights that morning.
Only six students out of twenty showed up. Half of them spent the entire afternoon complaining about the food. They didn’t like the Christmas quiz. They kept moaning that other first-year groups were doing “more fun” things like going ice-skating and eating a two-course dinner at a proper restaurant. Most students cheated on the quiz. When the quiz was over and all the food had been eaten and the prizes were given out to the ungrateful winners, all of the students left the classroom without bothering to help Gary clean up. They didn’t even wish him a happy Christmas.

Gary felt very alone after that. He hadn’t released his debut album then. Mr Barlow was still this geeky piano instructor working part-time as a pub singer. Teaching was tremendously difficult at the time, and his students not appreciating the effort he went through to organise something fun for Christmas made him wonder if his students even liked him.

Things are different now. He’s respected. His students like him. Even if he wasn’t a pop star, he’d still be pretty pleased with his salary. He works hard to get what he wants. Looking back, forcing his students to sit through a quiz about Christmas number 1s from the 1990s was one of the worst decisions he made that year.

Nowadays, he organises an annual Christmas bingo. There are even talks to host an annual Christmas song contest.

One of the worst days of Gary’s private life – the lover’s – was when he thought Mark had broken up with him. It was the first time since his first year as a teacher that he felt truly alone. Because it can be terribly lonely, teaching. You’re spend all day stood in front of large groups, and yet you’re always alone. It’s you versus them. Marking exams is something you do solo.

Talking to Mark in the lobby of the riverside hotel made Gary realise something he didn’t know before. It’s something Howard hinted at this morning. He’s not alone anymore. He’s got Mark. He no longer has to be a solo act. He won’t have to go to work on his own anymore. He’ll always have someone waiting for him when he gets home, and one day he might even ask Mark to marry him. He didn’t have all of that when he went on tour last summer.

Realising all of this has been a weight off his shoulders. Walking into his hotel room with his boyfriend by his side, he’s easily the happiest he’s ever been.

It also helps that their room is one of the most beautiful hotel rooms in Amsterdam.

The room is big. Really big: about twice the size of Mark’s apartment. A navy blue patterned wallpaper matches the sheets and pillows on the king-size bed. Ceiling-high amber curtains frame the windows, turning the view of the river Amstel into a work of living art. The bed, perfectly positioned in the middle of a square lavender carpet in the centre of the room, is much bigger than Mark’s bed back at home.

An antique writing desk in front of the bed makes Mark think of 17th-century tradesmen, importantly writing their manifestos on yellow papyrus scrolls. Above the desk, there’s a painting of a bouquet of flowers, not unlike the paintings Mark saw in the Van Gogh museum yesterday.

A set of steps leads to an ensuite bathroom with a bath, shower and a sleek marble basin with gold taps and an amber mirror. In another room, Mark finds a white Jacuzzi, just like Gary said.

Everything in the room looks reassuringly solid and clean. When Mark runs his finger along the edge of a glass cabinet, he finds no dust at all. He doesn’t have to open the medicine cupboard in the bathroom to know that it won’t fall off the wall like its wooden equivalent back in their two-star hostel.
Compared to the tiny, dusty, smelly room the lads left behind in the two-star youth hostel, this is 
heaven. From the curtain-framed window, Mark can see the river Amstel and all its canal houses on 
the other side, lit beautifully in the dark. He spends a good few minutes staring at the stars in the 
cloudless night sky, wondering what he’d wish for if he saw a falling star. By the looks of it, he has 
all the things he desires already.

‘Are all five-star hotels like this?’ Mark asks his boyfriend, who has joined him at the window with a 
look on his face that screams relief. In the back of Gary’s mind, there was always going to be a 
possibility that Mark was going to hate the room.

‘Most of them are, yeah,’ says Gary.

‘Do you often stay at five-star hotels when you’re on the road?’

‘Most of the time.’

‘Do you ever get used to it?’

‘Never. It’s always a privilege, walking into these rooms. Mind you, this room has probably got the 
comfiest bed I’ve ever seen . . .’ Gary finds Mark’s hand and rubs Mark’s fingers as gently as he can 
manage. ‘What do you think, Mark?’

Mark hesitates. He looks at the bed – the biggest, most daunting bed he’s ever seen; big enough to 
make his heart skip several beats just thinking about what making love on it might be like – and he 
lets go of Gary’s hand. ‘Do you mind if I take a shower? I didn’t get to take a shower at the hostel 
today.’

That wasn’t the response Gary was expecting, but it’s not like he can force Mark into sleeping with 
him. ‘Sure, Marko. Take your time.’

Mark heads into the bathroom with little ceremony. For a lack of something to do, Gary takes his 
phone out of the pocket of his jeans. He has a couple of texts from his manager (something about 
when Gary is planning to record a new album, which is the last thing on Gary’s mind) and a text 
from Howard wishing him good luck. It was sent forty minutes ago, so Howard must have woken 
right after he and Mark left. He’s always been supportive of their relationship – even when he was 
still pretending not to know anything.

Other than that, it’s been pretty quiet. Judging by the lack of calls from Ms Brooke and Mr Harrison, 
no one has seen them sneaking off together. Their secret is safe. Unless a student happens to be 
standing in front of the hotel when they leave in the morning, no-one will ever know they were here. 
Even his hard-core fans won’t find out.

It’s funny, really, that none of his fans know that he’s in Amsterdam at all. (Apart from a couple of 
British tourists who asked him for a selfie in a tourist shop, Gary hasn’t really been “spotted” by 
anyone. He supposes it’s because a popstar doesn’t really stand out when surrounded by students.) 
Gary has always been pretty lucky in that the quality of his music has never warranted much interest 
in his private life or what he does as a teacher, but he still has to be extremely careful with what he 
does or says in public, even down to his choice of partner. Just one negative article about who he 
loves, and the reputation of the school could be seriously harmed. It’s why he’s always been wary of 
who he takes home with him.

It hasn’t stopped him from having fun, though. He’s had a lot of fun. He’s not ashamed to admit that. 
If Mark ever asks a question about that, he’ll be honest. Yes, he’s slept with fans. Did he actually 
enjoy sleeping with them? Fuck knows. Gary’s never quite managed to get rid of the anxiety of the
fan in question being a parent or a member of the school council. They never were, but they could have been.

He doesn’t have that fear with Mark. Mark feels safe. Warm. Gentle. Mark is the only person who’s made him seriously consider never going on tour again. Mark’s the only person that’s ever made him think of marriage, only half a year into their relationship.

But Mark isn’t just that. Mark is kind and a little unpredictable. He’s got the sweetest smile in the world. He’s patient. He’s creative. He’s the kind of teacher who almost makes you miss your next lesson because he’s just spent ten minutes asking you how you’re doing in the school corridors. Gary loves him for that. Mark Owen is always worth the wait.

Especially when you’ve just spent the past ten minutes waiting for him to get out of the shower.

It’s a fucking long wait, to be honest. Gary can still hear the sound of the water splashing. Occasionally, he thinks he can hear Mark singing and the sound like that of a bottle of shampoo falling on the tiled floor. What is Mark even doing in there? If they do decide to move in together one day, they’re going to have to have a pretty long conversation about who showers first in the morning.

Bored, Gary heads to the minibar in the far end of the room. Most minibars he’s seen over the years are relatively small, but this one is basically a larder with handleless chrome doors and many shelves and compartments. It even has a counter with a retractable velvet chair for sitting on.

Inside the minibar, Gary finds wine, beer, champagne, tea, snacks, an espresso machine and a small selection of glasses, cups and saucers. It’s like a miniature version of a walk-in closet, except this has alcohol in it instead of clothes. It’s also completely free of charge.

Gary starts pouring himself red wine in an expensive crystal glass. He is about to raise his glass to his lips when, out of the blue, two arms snake around his waist. A kiss tickles his ear. A warm, shaky exhale makes the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

Mark.

It’s only now that Gary notices that the splashing and all the singing from the bathroom has stopped. The fresh scent of strawberry shower gel hits drifts into his nose, and he closes his eyes. He leans back into Mark’s tight embrace, breathing deeply to take note of the smell of his scents – sandalwood and bergamot, with just a hint of strawberry shampoo. He smells so clean that it almost seems like a waste to get him dirty again.

‘You’re not trying to get me drunk, are you, Mr Barlow?’

Gary shivers even though he’s not cold. Mark’s words feel like little pockets of air bursting on his skin. He has to put his glass of wine back on the counter in the larder-like minibar when he notices that he’s shaking. He’s getting the impression that Mark’s going to be in charge tonight, not him.

‘Would you like me to get you drunk, Mark?’

‘Not if you still want me to remember what we do tonight . . .’

Mark’s hands reach out for the zipper of Gary’s trousers then, and Gary gasps in surprise. In an almost dominant way, Mark asks him for permission to touch him. Gary says yes. He lets it all happen. Mark’s fingers pull down the zipper, and suddenly Gary has a hand inside the front of his boxers. He tilts back his head when Mark wraps his hand around his not-yet-hard cock and begins to touch him there.

Gary hasn’t yet seen what Mark looks like at this stage. He probably looks all wet and naked and flushed, with little drops of water chasing each other down the curve of his stomach. There’ll be a
towel around his waist. Messy hair. A hard cock because Mark spent the past ten minutes playing with himself in the shower.

The thought alone is enough to make Gary’s head spin. He has to lean his hands on the counter in the minibar when Mark reaches deeper inside his boxers. The pressure on his cock increases. He can still feel Mark’s mouth on the back of his neck, kissing him there. Mark’s other hand has found its way into the front of Gary’s shirt, running his hand up and down his chest. He wants to find every sensitive little spot he can get his hands on.

‘You s-see pretty needy right now, Mark,’ Gary says. His mouth has gone very dry. He’s not used to feeling someone else’s hard prick pressed up against the curve of his arse. That’s what he does. ‘You h-haven’t got something special planned, h-have you?’

Mark relishes Gary sounding this nervous. The groan Gary lets out when Mark kisses his ear is slightly embarrassing. ‘Why don’t you turn around and find out, Mr Barlow?’

Gary does. What he sees is exactly like the painting he had in his mind: Mark, half-naked; wet hair sticking to his face; pink lips; blue eyes looking up at him longingly; a towel tucked round his waist, so impossibly low that Gary can see the dolphin tattoo that he so loves to kiss. It’s gorgeous. Fucking gorgeous.

And tonight, it’s all his.

Gary places his hands firmly on Mark’s sides and pulls him much closer. The bulge in his trousers touches the towel around Mark’s waist. He can count all the lines of Mark’s dolphin tattoo; so bright and inviting and wrong that Gary can’t help but touch it again with his fingertips. He’s gotten as far as dragging his index finger across the outline of the tattoo when Mark stands on tiptoes and raises his face to his, their mouths inches apart.

‘You like seeing me like this, don’t you, Mr Barlow?’

They’re stood so closely together that Gary can actually feel Mark’s mouth saying the words on his skin. He moves forward to close the gap, but Mark deliberately tilts his chin at the last moment. Gary’s intended kiss ends up on Mark’s cheek.

Instantly, there’s a shift in energy. Gary wasn’t wrong when he thought Mark was going to be in control tonight.

‘You’re not getting my kiss until you deserve it,’ Mark says, his eyelashes aflutter, a smug smile on his face. He leans forward again. He moves his mouth so close to Gary’s ear that it tingles. ‘I want you to apologise to me first.’

It’s quite hard to concentrate when you have Mark Owen whispering into your ear, and frankly Gary doesn’t know what to say. He’s already apologised so many times that he’s beginning to feel like a broken record, and yet he can tell by the way Mark dips his teeth into his neck next that he’s being quite serious. This is no longer the Mark Owen who was afraid of getting caught just twenty minutes ago – this is the Mark Owen who is annoyingly good at being a demanding little shit. ‘I’m s-sorry, Mark.’

‘Sorry for what?’

‘I’m s-sorry for being a b-bad boyfriend.’

‘And?’ Mark flutters his eyelashes.
‘I really, really want you to kiss me.’

Mark loves being in control like this. *Loves* it. He could even decide not to kiss Gary at all. He could head back into the shower and make Gary wait for him for another hour. Or two. In the back of his mind, where all the angry thoughts go that he doesn’t quite know what to do with, making Gary wait is exactly what he deserves after what he did last night.

He won’t, though. Mark didn’t survive his worst ever summer just to tell Gary he doesn’t really want to have sex with him.

He deliberately gives it a second’s thought (a second that feels like a bloody century to Gaz, he’s so horny), then kisses his boyfriend so. fucking. softly. that it instantly leads to more.

Gary pulls Mark closer. He moans when Mark sucks his tongue into his mouth. There’s the sound of smattering glass. He’s accidentally knocked over his glass of wine with his hand. His trousers feel tight. He’s lost his tie. Mark’s managed to loosen it from his neck and take it off of him. He doesn’t know where it is now. He doesn’t care.

The kiss is so otherworldly that Gary has to break it off to catch his breath. He has to restrain himself from immediately kissing Mark again. His speech has become embarrassingly monosyllabic.

‘Mark. Bed. Now,’ he hisses. Then he adds, just in case, because he *has* to, because the last thing he wants is getting this wrong again, ‘Please.’

Mark smiles and takes his boyfriend by the hand to the bed. He makes light work of Gary’s clothes. They end up on the floor next to the bed. His own towel falls off his hips in one swift motion. They’re now quite nude apart from Gary’s *Star Wars* socks and his tie around Mark’s neck. So that’s where that went.

Being stripped off all clothes slows down time. They stare at each other’s naked bodies in front of the bed as though they’ve never seen each other like this before. Because it still knocks the air out of Gary’s lungs, seeing Mark without his clothes on. Everything seems to be perfectly proportioned. He’s skinny and a little tanned and his stomach is deliciously flat, perfect for kissing. His cock is the perfect size: a bit longer than Gary’s. His eyes are the kindest, warmest eyes Gary has ever seen.

Mark’s so beautiful that Gary can’t find the words he wants to say. Instead, he gives his boyfriend a sweet kiss and takes hold of his hands, saying, *Let’s take it slow tonight. Let’s enjoy each other while it lasts. Slowly. Gently.*

He hopes that Mark feels the same way, but it turns out Mark has slightly different plans. For when you’ve spent the past six months not being able to fuck your lover at all, constantly being told to hide, to be nice, having to make do with quick handjobs in the back of a coach, your patience quickly runs dry.

Mark’s eyes flash with something dangerous. He pushes Gary then, and Gary collides with the bed. Mark’s on top. Gary doesn’t know how that’s happened. He has Mark’s legs keeping him in place on both sides of his waist, pinning him down with surprising strength. He pathetically moans when Mark dips down to kiss him and their cocks touch.

He pushes up his body. He uses his hands to explore the small of Mark’s back. He closes his eyes and laps up every kiss Mark gives him. Cos he’s good, Mark is. Fucking good. He’s remembered all the things Gary loves about making love, from the kisses on his neck to the scandalous little moans Mark makes next to his ears. It’s almost as if they’re continuing the moment when they had to press
pause last night, reversed, down to the way Mark’s touching him.

Except last time, Gary didn’t have a tie wrapped around his wrists.

It happens before Gary can protest. One moment he’s rubbing Mark’s back, the next his hands are being pinned down above his head. He gasps. He feels the soft material of his tie suddenly tightening around his wrists and chaining him to the metal frame of the bed.

Mark’s gone and tied him up. Nude.

‘You kinky bastard.’

Mark straightens to admire his handiwork. He’s sat on Gary’s chest, legs on either side of his boyfriend’s body, Gary’s hard cock inches away from his arse.

‘You like having me on top, Gaz?’ Gary nods. Speechless. ‘You want me to fuck you like this?’

To demonstrate, Mark reaches over his shoulder and starts stroking Gary’s cock against the soft curve of his arse. He’s come as far as seven strokes up and down when Gary begs him to stop.

‘Please, Mark.’ Gary looks bright red. He’s close already. So close. ‘I don’t want to yet,’ he says, meaning, I don’t want to come yet. Not now. Not here.

Mark can’t help but laugh at that, to be honest. He knew from the moment Gary told him that he’d booked a room in a five-star hotel that they were going to do things his way. That is, the slow way. Really, really slow.

‘Who said we were going to do anything, Mr Barlow? Maybe I’m gonna keep you tied up to the bed all night . . .’

Mark unceremoniously gets up from Gary’s chest without another word. Slowly, he makes his way to his rucksack that he left next to the writing desk.

Gary wishes he could reach out for Mark, but he can’t. Every time he tries to move his hands, he accidentally ends up wrapping his tie tighter around his wrists. His abandoned prick stands out like a sore thumb. He has to bite his lip as he’s forced to watch Mark bending over to open his rucksack on the floor.

Gary doesn’t know if Mark’s always been this slutty or if this is just his way of getting payback, but there’s nothing he can do about it. Being tied up has put Gary in a position he’s never been in before. Mark’s in control now. He’s the one calling the shots. There will be no more hiding tonight.

In his bag, Mark finds a dildo. Not just any dildo, but a fucking big one – easily bigger than Gary’s dick. In his right hand, Mark seems to be holding a small bottle of lube that definitely wasn’t there before.

Gary lets out a nervous sort of laugh when he sees the dildo, a shapeless pink one. ‘Were you carrying that the entire time? What if you were searched at the Van Gogh museum yesterday?’

‘Let’s not think about that, Mr Barlow,’ Mark says. He slowly makes his way to the writing desk in front of the bed. He looks so fucking sexy that Gary has to bite his lip to stop himself from saying something embarrassing. It’s a good thing he’s all tied up.

Mark sits on the edge of the writing desk then, one foot perched on the desk itself whilst the other dangles several inches from the marble floor. It’s not the most flattering position in the world – it’s
quite pornographic really –, but it makes Gary turn bright red so he’s obviously doing something right.

Mark keeps talking as he starts unscrewing the top off his bottle of lube. At first Gary thinks he’s doing it just to fill the silence, but he quickly realises Mark’s doing dirty talk.

‘Remember that video you sent me last summer, Gaz? Of you exercising in that gym? I didn’t just watch it, you know. I touched myself at the same time, too. I thought it was quite wrong of me at first, but you wouldn’t believe how hard I came afterwards. It was so good, Gaz. I wish you could have seen me doing it.’

Gary swallows. Trying to picture sweet Mark Owen wanking off is like trying to imagine an angel telling a lie, and yet Mark’s sat right in front of him, holding a toy that looks absolutely ridiculous, it’s so big.

‘S-so you thought you’d show me in real life? I-is that what you’re doing?’ Gary’s eyes are as large as dinner plates as he watches Mark squirting lube all over his hands and toy. He’s never seen someone masturbating in front of him before. He has to bite his lip when Mark starts preparing himself with his fingers – just three movements in and out before he decides he’s ready.

‘I’m afraid that’s not quite correct, Mr Barlow.’ Mark grins. He slowly pushes the toy inside of him without ever losing eye contact. It’s like watching porn, down to the way Mark bites on his lip and spreads his skinny legs. He knows exactly how good he looks doing this. ‘I’m not doing this just to get you off, you know. I’m doing this cos I want you to know what it’s like to wait for you . . .’

The next couple of minutes are complete torture. Gary has to watch, tied-up, what his boyfriend is like when he’s fucking himself. It’s obscene.

And loud, apparently. So loud. Clearly Mark thinks that being in a hotel room the size of an apartment means that no-one can hear him, because he’s incredibly loud. He isn’t even putting it on for show. This is genuinely the sound that Mark makes when he’s being penetrated. Gary should probably be even a little surprised that Mark turns out to be a screaming kinky bastard, but he’s not. Every teacher loves a crowd.

‘Good so far, Gaz?’

Gary nods. ‘Yes. So good, Mark. Christ.’

Knowing that he’s got Gary’s full attention, Mark pushes his toy deeper. He uses his left hand to jerk himself off at the same time. He looks like he’s practised his expressions in the mirror, his face looks so bloody pretty.

‘Are you ever going to let me fuck that arse of yours, Mark?’

Mark grins. He moves his toy in and out deliberately slowly. ‘Have a little patience, Gaz. We don’t have to get out of here till eight in the morning, remember?’

Gary lets out a sound of frustration. He’s left with no other choice. He’s going to have to beg for it. ‘Would it help if I begged for it, Mark? I feel like I’m about to explode, me prick’s so bloody hard.’

Mark laughs out loud, one of those infectious laughs. ‘I think that’s easily the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me.’

‘Do you know what, Mark – I don’t care about romance anymore,’ Gary sighs. ‘I just wanna make love to you before I die of old age, lad. Jesus.’
The words haven’t so much left Gary’s mouth when the penny drops. He finally understands what Mark is trying to do here. It’s what Mark said a couple of minutes ago: *I’m doing this cos I want you to know what it’s like to wait for you.*

This is what Mark must have felt like all this time: having to wait constantly. Never knowing when or where the next kiss is going to be. Being lied to. Having to wait for the summer holidays to pass.

It must have been torture.

Gary’s expression becomes more solemn. ‘This is what it feels like to be in a relationship with me, isn’t it, Mark?’

‘It doesn’t feel like this all the time,’ Mark says slowly, carefully, ‘but it does sometimes. Being your boyfriend involves a lot of waiting and never really knowing what’s going to happen.

‘But it’s good also. I would never have survived my first term if it wasn’t for you, and whenever I’m having a bad day at work all I have to do is come and see you and I’ll feel better again.’ Mark smiles then. A shy smile. ‘I really do love you, you know.’

‘I love you too. So much, Mark. I could, er, show you, if you want?’ Gary tries to get up from the bed then, remembering too late that he’s still tied to the bed. His hands hurt like hell when he accidentally wraps his tie even tighter around his wrists. His tie isn’t as soft as it looks. ‘Jeez, this tie’s tight.’

Worry flashes across Mark’s face. ‘Oh dear – I hope I haven’t tied you up too enthusiastically now. It doesn’t hurt, does it?’

‘Er – yes?’ Gary lies. Anything to stop himself from being tied up. ‘It hurts like you wouldn’t believe, lad. I think me hands might fall off, it’s so tight,’ he adds unbelievably. ‘I might never be able to play the piano again now.’

Mark’s eyes narrow. There’s no way he’s going to fall for that. ‘Nice try, Mr Barlow, but the tie stays until I say so.’

Gary swallows as he watches Mark putting away his toy and hopping off the writing desk. His heart skips a beat when he thinks Mark is about to join him on their king-sized bed, but of course Mark has to make a beeline for his rucksack instead. Typical Mark. He wasn’t lying when he said he doesn’t like it quick.

The next bit is particularly slow too. Mark takes his time to rummage through his rucksack, which is easily the size of Mouth Everest.

After a long minute of sort of pretending he can’t find what he’s looking for, an item in Mark’s hand catches the light from the lamp on the writing desk. Gary inhales sharply when he realises what it is. It’s a condom. This must be the hundredth or thousandth time he’s ever seen one, and yet seeing Mark Owen holding a condom makes him feel as nervous as if he’s about to lose his virginity again.

Mark being a tease doesn’t help. He opens the packet so slowly that it’s as if time has stopped. He makes his way towards the bed like a predator making its way toward its prey. The mattress dips underneath his weight in slow-motion. The grin he gives Gary is slowed down to the tiniest microsecond.

It’s only when Mark starts rolling the condom down Gary’s erect cock that time speeds up again. Gary’s stomach swoops and plunges with anxiety. He’s never felt this nervous about someone
‘You okay there, Gaz? You look a bit pale.’

Gary tries to swallow down his fears. He wishes he could reach out for Mark’s hand and squeeze it, but he can’t. He’s still tied up to the bed. He can’t do a single thing. He can’t even touch Mark, which only makes what they’re about to do unbearably more tense.

‘Sorry. It’s b-been a while,’ Gary says, though that’s not entirely true. He had sex shortly before he met Mark, with a fan, but it’s the first time in a long time that having sex with someone felt this special and scary. He hopes Mark knows that.

‘You’re still up for it, though, right?’

Gary nods. ‘Yeah. I-I’m just nervous.’

‘Wanna talk about it?’

‘I don’t really know what there is to say other than that I’m shitting meself here, Mark. I can’t remember the last time I felt this nervous about anything. It’s like it’s me first time all over again.’

‘I bet you weren’t tied to the bed then,’ Mark says.

‘No.’

‘But you . . . like being tied to the bed?’ Mark asks, just in case.

‘Yes. Jesus, yes. But I’m still nervous. I’m nervous because it’s you, Mark. I feel like me heart is about to burst out of me chest.’

‘Good thing you’re in good hands then, Mr Barlow.’ Mark kisses Gary’s latex-covered prick then, and the moan that Gary lets out is so sexy that he does it again. He squirts more lube onto his hands and his arse and divides the rest on Gary’s cock. ‘Ready, Gaz?’

‘Y-Yeah. I’m ready.’

‘Good.’ Mark doesn’t bother making a show of it this time, though he probably could if he felt like it. He gets into the same position he was in before: his legs on either side of Gary’s body; his arse settled right above Gary’s cock. All he has to do is guide Gary’s prick towards his entrance and push himself down, and the fun begins.

Mark swear the moment he feels Gary’s prick pushing inside of him. It hurts. He thought he’d prepared himself pretty well earlier, but Gary’s a bit thicker than Mark thought and it takes him a few moments to get used to his unfamiliar shape.

Pretty quickly, Mark finds the right rhythm. He’s quick but good. He has to stop himself from crying out loud in pleasure when he starts rolling his hips a little faster. His own cock bounces up against his flat tummy with each move he makes. His hands grasp the sheets so tightly that his knuckles have turned white. Every now and then, he lets Gary’s cock deliberately slip out of his hole just so he can push himself down again.

It’s the sexiest thing Gary’s ever seen. He’s so fixated on seeing his cock disappearing into Mark’s body that he becomes a bit useless and he lets Mark do all the work.

Mark doesn’t mind. He likes it like this. His face is a perfect, pornographic mix of pain and pleasure:
mouth open wide, eyes rolling back in his head in bliss. Even though his messy hair sticks to his forehead and there’s sweat literally rolling down his chest, he still looks angelic.

‘Oh my God, you’re so big, Gaz. Do you like having me on top? I bet you’re dying to get your dirty little hands on me, aren’t you? I bet you can’t wait to touch me.’

Okay, maybe not so angelic. Mark talks a lot during sex, apparently. He literally has not stopped talking for the last minute, and it takes Gary a minute to realise that Mark’s just asked him a question instead of simply narrating every little thing they’re doing.

‘Y-Yes? Y-Yes please,’ Gary stammers, meaning, yes, I want to get my hands on you. Only being able to watch as Mark effectively uses his prick as a dildo, he’s beginning to feel quite horny and frustrated. Not that Gary has anything special planned for when Mark finally does untie him – he rather likes having Mark on top, to be honest, and he can’t see himself lasting for much longer anyway – but he desperately wants to touch and hold that man. ‘Yes, I want to get me hands on you. Please untie me, Mark.’

Mark bends over so that his chest touches Gary’s and their mouths are inches apart. Underneath him, he can feel Gary all of a sudden taking over the tempo and moving gently up and down inside him. It feels so ridiculously heavenly that Mark can’t help but give in to Gary’s wishes.

‘Oh all right then. You’ve waited long enough, anyway.’ Mark smiles down at Gaz. He kisses him gently on the mouth whilst Gary’s cock rubs a sweet little spot inside. With the curtains closed and no strange sounds or smells coming from the other rooms on the third floor, it’s quite as if he’s stumbled into a wonderful world where it’s just the two of them – just one and the same person, moving in unison.

He starts loosening the tie around Gary’s wrists in earnest. His fingers are so quick and nimble that Gary becomes genuinely convinced that Mark has tied someone to a bed before. It wouldn’t surprise him.

The second Mark has loosened the tie and it lands on the mattress next to Gary’s head, there’s a shift in energy. Gary uses his now-free arms to pull Mark in a tight embrace, and they hold on to each other so lovingly that it doesn’t matter that they’ve stopped rolling their hips. They lock lips for a long, romantic kiss. By the time they stop to catch their breaths, Mark has managed to pull the bedsheets over their bodies.

There’s something about sharing a bed with Mark that makes Gary well up. They could have done this so much sooner if Gary had taken Mark home with him. He could have shared a bed with Mark every day, not just on a school trip.

‘I’m so sorry we didn’t get to do this sooner,’ Gary says. He’s rubbing his arms up and down Mark’s body, looking for the right thing to say but not quite finding it. Even though he’s already apologised for keeping his popstar life secret a hundred times and more, he still feels guilty about it. ‘I should have been honest to you. I’m sorry.’

Mark places his fingers on Gary’s lips. ‘It’s in the past now, okay? Let’s just make the most of what we have.’

‘But how can you even trust me after what I did? I lied to you, Mark.’

‘I know. Lying is bad. Really, really bad. But sometimes people do silly things to protect themselves, and what you did was only so you could protect us. You didn’t want me to know you were famous because you were scared of losing me. I understand that, and I don’t blame you, all right? I still
wanna settle down with you one day, and I still wanna make you come.’

Gary scoffs. ‘You won’t have to wait long for that.’

‘Then let’s come. Together. All right?’

Gary nods a couple of times very quickly. ‘All right. Yeah.’

Mark dips down for another kiss, and something in the atmosphere changes. The kiss they share is harder this time; messier. Gary moans when he feels Mark’s wet cock rubbing against his tummy. He tastes blood where Mark’s teeth have nipped into his lip.

He wants more. His hands blindly follow the curve of Mark’s arse underneath the blankets. He squeezes, then uses his hands to spread Mark’s arsecheeks and pushes his prick deeper inside.

It doesn’t take long before Gary picks up the pace and Mark starts moaning into his ear. It’s not just Mark doing the moving now; it’s both of them, Mark rolling his hips; Gary pushing in and out balls-deep as quickly as he can manage without losing his breath.

It’s been a while since Gary felt anything like it. Gary loves the feeling of having Mark wrapped tightly around his shaft. He feels so hot that the sweat is dripping down his temple.

As for Mark, he’s absolutely soaked in sweat. The sight of it alone is enough to drive Gary to the edge. He has to slow down his movements. He can already feel that familiar prickle making its way from his prick to the rest of his body.

He’s close. So very close. His entire body starts trembling like a leaf.

Their eyes lock, and Mark knows. ‘Come for me, Mr Barlow.’

All it takes is just one more push, and Gary ejaculates into his condom with a violent shudder. After a quick rub in Gary’s fist, Mark follows suit all over their stomachs. They’ve made a right mess of themselves to be honest, but Gary doesn’t care. He contently pulls Mark closer and showers his head in a dozen kisses.

‘Christ, that was amazing, that was,’ Gary laughs. He feels like he’s floating. ‘God, I love you so much, Mark.’

‘I love you too,’ Mark says, and they kiss. Already, Mark hopes he’ll get to spend the night with Gary, every night, for the rest of his life.

They might even get married one day, Mark thinks deliriously. He’d propose to Gary with an original song and get on one knee for him in the concert hall, where they first kissed.

He’s probably getting ahead of himself here.

‘I wasn’t too rough, though, was I?’ Mark asks instead. ‘With me tying you up to the bed?’

‘Nope. I loved it. You too, I hope?’

‘Of course.’ Mark smiles smugly against Gary’s chest, using it as a pillow. Somewhere in-between coming and resting his head on Gary’s chest, Gary has thrown his used condom in the bin next to the bed. It feels weird not having Gary inside of him anymore, but he’s rather fond of cuddling too. ‘I loved all of it, you know. All of it. Especially tying you up.’

In true Mark Owen-style, Mark breathlessly starts listing all the things he loved most about fucking
Gaz, from the tie to the kisses and the way Gary’s touching him now, with his hands rubbing his shoulder.

Mark spends about ten minutes going on and on and on about it until he hears a gentle snoring noise next to him. Gary. He’s actually gone and fallen asleep in the middle of Mark’s monologue, the soft sod.

Gary looks so peaceful that Mark doesn’t bother waking him. He turns off the lights in the hotel room using the switch next to the bed and kisses Gary softly on the forehead. He says, ‘Good night, Mr Barlow,’ and he’s blessed with the best sleep he’s had in years.

Chapter End Notes

If you think this fic is over now that the lads have finally made love . . . it is not.
PART TEN

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, which is the calm before the storm, Gary finally makes Mark a promise that will change the shape of their relationship forever.

Meanwhile, Howard fears something is wrong with the students.

Chapter Notes

This chapter features gratuitous rough sex that adds absolutely nothing to the plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LESSON FORTY-FOUR: THE AFTERMATH

It’s the morning after. Birds are chirping. A small parting between the curtains allows a strip of light to fall, perfectly, on Mark’s gorgeous, sleeping face. Dizzy, barely just woken up, Gary kisses Mark there, waiting for the breath to leave Mark’s lips as he sleeps. He’s holding Mark tightly in his arms, feeling every rise and fall of his chest; feeling the warmth as it radiates off his skin. His boyfriend is easily the softest thing he’s ever held.

Memories of the previous night keep coming back to him in waves: arriving at the hotel and seeing Mark’s face light up; Mark’s laughter sparking off the golden walls in the reception downstairs; Mark wanking him off from behind at the window; seeing Mark in just a towel; making love all evening. Maybe he’s become a bit biased because he loves Mark so dearly, but last night was easily the best shag he’s ever had, hands down. He still can’t quite believe how well Mark’s body fitted around him, like they’d been made for each other somehow, somewhere.

It still blows his mind sometimes, how wonderful being with Mark is. Being with Mark is that feeling you get right before you get on a rollercoaster. Being with Mark is when lights go off right before a concert: that sort of bubbly anticipation mixed with the scary, exciting understanding that you have no idea what’s about to happen even though the artist you’re seeing feels like family. Gary loves that about Mark. He feels like family, and yet he couldn’t feel more unfamiliar, in a good way.

Looking at him now, sleeping so peacefully in his arms, Gary truly believes in his heart that Mark is The One for him. Not just because Mark is a tremendous fuck, but because Gary can feel it in every part of his body, inside and out, charging him up and making him giddy with happiness. Sometimes you just know.

Slowly, Mark wakes. Seeing expensive furniture everywhere, forgetting for a second that he spent the night in a five-star hotel and not at the youth hostel, he looks for a moment a little disoriented.
Then he sees Gary next to him, and his mouth spreads into a smile that could light up the entire world. ‘Morning, Mr Barlow.’

‘Morning, Mr Owen.’ Gary dips down to give Mark a soft kiss on the lips, and he feels dizzy all over again. Underneath the covers, he quickly finds all the right places on Mark’s naked body that he loved so much last night. He can feel Mark chuckling against his lips when he squeezes his soft, pert arse with both hands, feeling every inch of his warm skin.

‘You seem very keen this morning, Mr Barlow.’

‘Can you blame me? Just look at you. Jesus.’ Gary removes his hands from underneath the covers so he can push the hair from Mark’s forehead. It’s been growing longer since the summer, nearly reaching his shoulders. He looks beautiful. ‘I’m so grateful I get to spend this time with you, Mark, you’ve no idea.’

‘Same here, Gaz. I can’t remember the last time I slept so well.’

‘You didn’t have any nightmares, then?’ Gary remembers Mark tossing and turning quite a lot at the youth hostel and in the coach, dreaming about plagiarism and exams.

‘I only dreamt about you, Mr Barlow. So no. No bad dreams. Just good ones.’

Mark lifts his chin, and Gary meets his mouth just in time. They kiss passionately – their hands everywhere; their fingers still discovering places they haven’t yet touched, like the sensitive little spot underneath Mark’s shoulder blades – until there’s the sound like that of something vibrating.

Gary cocks one eyebrow. ‘It’s a bit early for toys.’

Mark snorts. ‘That’s not me – it’s your phone, look.’

Gary looks at the bedside table to his right. Mark’s right: his phone is vibrating. It turns out it’s just his alarm clock, heralding the arrival of a brand new morning. Gary deactivates his alarm clock and turns off his phone, for now.

‘It’s seven. If we want to get back to the hostel on time –’ Gary doesn’t have to finish his sentence. He can see the smile on Mark’s face fading for a second, and his heart plunges. He wishes they could stay here forever, just cuddling and kissing and making love whenever they feel like it. ‘I’m sorry, Mark.’

‘It’s not your fault. I don’t mind. I know we can’t stay here forever.’ Mark smiles in spite of himself. He knew their moment together wouldn’t last forever. He’s glad, for it means he’ll have another morning like today’s to look forward to. ‘I’m so grateful you took me here, you know. This room – it’s so special. I’m going to miss it so much.’

As though wanting to hold on to the image of their five-star hotel forever, Mark looks around the room with that childlike wonder that makes Mark Owen so special. He always does this: he looks at the world as though he can see a colour that no other human can see. If he could, he’d burn the exact shapes and colours of the room into his retina so that he’d be able to come back to last night’s memory forever.

As far as Mark’s concerned, last night was the best night he’s ever had.

‘We had fun, though, didn’t we?’ he says as much, as if needing Gary’s confirmation. His eyes have something distant and dreamy about them.
‘Yeah,’ Gary says, his voice clipped with emotion. ‘Yeah, we did.’

Mark gets out of bed then. As he does so, he flashes Gary a perfect shot of his bare arse as he opens the curtains and windows, seemingly not caring that he’s stark naked. He breathes in the fresh smell of the oak trees that lingers in the air and stares out of the window as a boat makes it way slowly across one of the city’s many canals.

It makes him feel quite worldly, being stood here. Amsterdam ought not to feel so different from England, but it does. Here, everything is green and pocket-sized and old, whereas the buildings back home seem so very heavy and new and ugly. In England, Mark has to hide parts of who he really is, but in Amsterdam, he can be himself, with pride. He doesn’t ever want to leave.

As such, Mark continues to look out of the window for several minutes, just taking everything in. He thinks his view is the best view a window could provide, but Gary reckons what he’s seeing is much better: Mark’s back and arse, covered in a dozen tiny marks he can’t even remember leaving there.

It’s strange, but as he looks as Mark looking out of the window, so very naked, so very beautiful, Gary’s never been more certain that Mark is the man he wants to spend the rest of his life with. He genuinely feels like yesterday’s argument is the worst thing that will ever happen to them. Now that they’ve survived that, and thrived, he’s convinced that their future will only have good things happening to them. They might even be able to move in together.

But the future is a long way off, and right now a five-star bedroom – and Mark giving him a challenging look as he saunters into the bathroom, naked – is all he needs.

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Howard wakes up at around the same time as Gary and Mark that morning: seven o’clock. By the time the first student comes down to have breakfast, he and Ms Brooke have already been in the dining hall of the youth hostel for over half an hour. Just three minutes ago, Howard received a text from Gary saying that he and Mark are probably going to be late:

—Gary: Our cab from the hotel is stuck in traffic … If a student asks us where we are, could you please make something up? I don’t want them to know what we’ve really been up to!

Howard rolls his eyes and texts a quick reply. Although he’d rather not spend the morning with just Ms Brooke (Ms Brooke is one of those annoying people who talks only about boybands), he did promise Gary that he would cover for them if they didn’t make it back to the youth hostel on time. Obviously, Gary deciding to take Mark to a five-star hotel has worked: Howard hasn’t seen his colleagues since he spoke to Gary yesterday. They must have done a lot more than just making up.

Naturally, this means that Howard will have to lie to his students about the boys’ whereabouts. For lack of a better excuse, he decides that he’s going to lie that Misters Barlow and Owen went ahead to buy tickets for the Anne Frank house and that they should be back before nine. They’re going to pay a visit to the Anne Frank house later today anyway, and the queue is always about three blocks long, so it’s the perfect lie.

However. It quickly turns out that the students don’t really care where their teachers are. As the morning progresses and more and more sleepy-looking students drag themselves into the dining hall to have breakfast, not a single one of them has asked Mr Donald where his colleagues are. In a complete 180-degree change from yesterday morning, when the students were happily conversing about art, Van Gogh, shops and Amsterdam, the students all seem to be glued to their smartphone screens.
From where he’s sat, sharing a table with Ms Brooke, Howard can count at least five students plating up their breakfasts with one hand while they text or tweet with the other. Apart from the occasional chuckle as if the students are all watching the same funny video, the students are deadly silent.

It’s really weird. It’s like looking into the future of an apocalyptic world where people are born with their phones glued to their hands.

Howard is used to seeing kids being quite unable to put down their smartphones, even during his lessons, but this is breakfast. On a school trip, after a particularly long day. They should be talking about the day ahead instead of silently eating their pieces of toast with their phones stuck to their left hand.

Something’s up.

‘Don’t you think it’s really weird that the students are all glued to their phones, Liz?’

Ms Brooke looks up from her brochure about Negen Straatjes: nine shopping streets full of quaint little shops relatively close to the Anne Frank house. She’s quite fond of window shopping, and the nine streets are perfect for it.

‘They’re teenagers. You know we’re never going to win the battle against mobile phones, Mr Donald.’ Mr Brooke raises one eyebrow. ‘You’ve not turned into Mr Orange, have you?

Howard chuckles. Mr Orange is an odd one: a serene teacher who’s always so chilled out that he might as well be floating, he is one of the few teachers who refuses to use technology during his lessons. He won’t allow students into his lessons unless they can prove that they’ve left their phones in their lockers, and he cares deeply about student mental health. He also seems to smile fondly whenever he sees Mr Williams for some reason. ‘No. I know. I just think it’s strange that the students haven’t said a thing all morning given all that’s happened.’

‘Maybe it’s an art experiment,’ Ms Brooke shrugs, and she continues reading her brochure.

Howard still thinks it’s odd. He gets up and approaches a table of six slightly older students who’ve been staring at their phones all morning. One student hasn’t even touched her breakfast yet.

‘What’s going on ‘ere?’ Mr Donald asks with a strict edge, and the students all shove their phones into their pockets. One student even stuffs his mouth with burned toast so he won’t be able to say anything.

The student who has yet to eat a single bite of toast, Ruby, gives Howard a sickly sweet smile. The teachers have already singled Ruby out as “one to watch”: she’s a terribly good writer, but she tends to talk about other students behind their backs. ‘Good morning, Mr Donald. You look very handsome today.’

‘Morning, Mr Donald,’ echoes the rest of the group. They’re all looking at Mr Donald like innocent puppies.

‘I like your shirt, Sir,’ adds a young boy.

‘So do I,’ says another.

Howard looks down at what he’s wearing: a T-shirt with cars on it, one of those cheap shirts you can get for three quid at Primark. The shirt still a stain of baby food on it.

The compliment gives Howard pause, because getting complimented by his students is not what
Howard’s used to. The students are never this nice to him in the morning, and he’s too strict to be on the receiving end of much kindness in general. ‘What were you guys doing on your phones just now?’

‘Nothing,’ Ruby replies sweetly. ‘You know, texting and stuff.’

‘Texting and stuff,’ Howard reiterates.

‘Yes, Sir. Texting.’

Another girl adds, ‘We made a WhatsApp with just the six of us. We’ll be able to share homework and stuff like that when the lessons start next week.’

The boy who complimented Howard on his choice of shirt nods a couple of times very quickly. ‘We’ve already shared our timetables with everyone.’

Howard doubts that, but it’s not as if he can ask for the students’ phones and check, and they’re on a school trip so the usual “no phones” rule doesn’t really apply anyway. He crosses his arms. ‘I want less texting and more eating breakfast, okay? I don’t want you guys moaning that you’re bloody starving when we go to the Anne Frank house. And finish your exercises,’ he tells no-one in particular.

Howard returns to his seat. The moment he sits down in his chair, the students he addressed have all gotten out their phones again, whispering conspiratorially to one another. It gives Howard a queasy feeling because the students were all acting the same way when a video of a student being kicked out of the Van Gogh museum went viral earlier.

Could another damaging video have made its way online? And if so, what is it of?

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After Mark got out of bed and opened the curtains that morning, he and Gary made slow love in the shower and spent the rest of the cab ride back to the hostel positively glued to each other’s faces. Conveniently the cab got stuck behind a tram that had broken down, so they managed to do quite a lot of kissing.

When the cab finally stops a safe distance away from the youth hostel to avoid the students from seeing them walking in together, the cabbie has to utter a loud ‘aherm’ to stop the teachers from sucking off each other’s faces like they’re two horny octopuses. They sheepishly get out of the car and traverse the remaining metres to the hostel on foot.

Gary glances at his watch as they cross the road to the hostel, which somehow manages to look even shabbier than it did last night. One of the letters from the neon sign has fallen down, and someone’s decided to dump their rubbish bags in front of the entrance. Compared to the five-star hotel that the lads went to last night, the youth hostel is an actual dump.

Thankfully, they only have to spend two more nights there: in a couple of days, the students and teachers from VCMA will be heading back to England. After that, it will be business as usual when the lessons kick off officially. Mark already can’t wait to get back to teaching.

‘According to Howard’s text, the students went to the dining room to have breakfast ten minutes ago,’ Gary says as they start towards the hostel entrance. ‘If we walk into the dining room now, no-one will know we were gone last night.’

‘What did Mr Donald say we were up to?’ asks Mark.
‘Getting tickets for the Anne Frank house, I believe. If they ask, we’ll just tell the students we didn’t manage to get any and that we’ll have to queue up again later.’

Mark frowns. ‘I don’t like that we have to lie to the students. It doesn’t feel right.’

‘Would you rather have the students finding out that we stayed up all night shagging?’

‘Hm. I guess not.’

They head inside. They briefly acknowledge the bored receptionist, who is in the middle of playing Solitaire on her outdated desk computer, and they make their way towards the dining room. They can already smell the burnt toast. The sound of students talking fills the air.

Gary’s about to enter the dining room when Mark grabs him by the hand and pulls him into a dark hallway. A second later, one of their students walks straight past their hiding place and heads out of the front door to smoke a cigarette.

Gary gives Mark a puzzled look. ‘Mark. Why are we hiding?’

‘You’re still wearing yesterday’s clothes,’ Mark says under his breath.

Gary looks down at what he’s wearing: a smart shirt and tie. It’s the sort of outfit he might wear to a formal event. He and Mark were so busy snogging and making love this morning that he forgot to change into something a bit more comfortable.

‘You look like you’re going to a parents’ evening,’ Mark points out.

‘So? I look good. These clothes.’

‘They’re also the clothes I jerked you off in last night,’ Mark adds a little sheepishly. He has to bite his lip when he remembers wanking Gary off from behind. ‘Normally I’d find that attractive, you know, but given where we’re going . . .’

‘I should probably get changed,’ Gary says.

‘Yeah, Gaz.’

They agree to head back to their room so Gary can get changed into something a bit more suitable for the day ahead. Miraculously, they reach their room without being spotted by a student. Their secret is safe, for now.

Upon entering their room and closing the door behind him, Mark utters a small sound of disillusionment. Not only is Room 4 terribly ugly now that Mark has seen what a proper five-star hotel looks like, but it would appear that the room has managed to become even worse overnight. The curtain has fallen off the ceiling, and wallpaper has started peeling off the walls in places. The curtain, which was already damaged anyway, now lies in a big lumpy mess on the floor. There’s still a vague smell of weed protruding the air, and the bump in Mark’s mattress seems to have grown a second head. Room 4 continues to be the worst place in all of Amsterdam.

‘I’m so happy you booked us that hotel last night, Gaz,’ Mark sighs.

‘Don’t get used to it,’ Gary says. ‘It nearly blew me entire tour budget, that room. I might have to perform in people’s living rooms next time.’

With Mark already wearing different clothes than he did last night (a fluffy red jumper and tight
black jeans), he sheepishly looks on as Gary starts taking off his clothes. Mark still needs to get used to being allowed to see Gary like this.

It rather turns Mark on, seeing Gary getting undressed, with those large hands carefully undoing every single button he has. It makes Mark want to make love to Gary again even though they already made love this morning and last night. They could easily do it here, on the bed or even in the bathroom; just have a quick shag before they have breakfast.

Mark’s usually not the type to have a quickie (when you shag Mark Owen, you need to be prepared to spend several hours doing it), but when your boyfriend looks as good as Gary Barlow, he might just be persuaded otherwise.

Mark is roused from his fantasy when Gary tosses his own shirt and tie into Mark’s arms. ‘Are you going to stand there staring at me getting changed all morning or what?’

Mark flushes. He looks Gary’s shirtless body up and down. Gary looks bloody good: strong and tanned and covered in a dozen bite marks that Mark can’t remember leaving there. They’ve made love so often and so passionately that all the sex has kind of blurred into one amazing memory, but Mark can still remember how it felt to have Gary’s naked chest pressing him into a mattress. He can still remember the swear word that left Gary’s mouth when he came into Mark’s mouth in the shower this morning. He can still vaguely remember thinking that Gary’s the type of guy he wouldn’t mind getting married to.

He knows they literally just had sex, but he reckons they might as well make the most of the time they have. The students don’t know where they are anyway, and Howard and Liz are still at breakfast. There’s no way they’ll get caught this time.

And judging by the way Gary’s looking at him looking at him, Gary wants it too.

‘You know I’d prefer it if you didn’t get changed at all, Gaz,’ Mark says as much.

Gary’s mouth curls into a sly grin. ‘Oh yeah? And why’s that, then?’

Mark carelessly drops Gary’s tie and shirt on the bed. He approaches Gary with all the confidence the past morning and night has given him and stands on tiptoe, their mouths inches removed from each other. He knows how much it turns Gary on when he takes control. ‘Cos it’d save me a lot of time if you wanna fuck me again, Mr Barlow.’

Gary swallows. Mark lifts up his chin to kiss him, and Gary hungrily meets his mouth whilst Mark’s hands make his way to his back, pulling him closer. The only thing separating their skins is Mark’s bloody jumper scratching his chest like a bloody itch.

They have to separate when a car rushes past their window, reminding them that there’s no longer a curtain to stop a student from potentially standing outside their window and watching them kiss. After all the time they spend trying to keep their relationship secret, Mark isn’t about to be caught shagging in a two-star hostel.

‘Bathroom. Now,’ Mark purrs, and he takes his boyfriend by the hand into the bathroom. He unlocks the door with his right hand as he makes quick work of Gary’s zipper with his left.

Gary’s trousers end up around his ankles within seconds. He’s now quite naked apart from his socks and boxers, and it makes him feel good; sexy. He swallows when he sees Mark glancing at his boxers, Star Wars ones. ‘I thought you no longer wanted to fuck in ’ere after Howard nearly walked in on us yesterday, Mark?’
Mark sinks on his knees on the floor then, his bright blue eyes sparkling with desire as he pulls down Gary’s boxers with the tips of his fingers. He doesn’t bother taking it slow. He takes Gary’s still-soft cock into his hand and kisses it softly on the tip.

‘I guess I don’t care about getting caught anymore, Mr Barlow. I mean, I do,’ Mark adds, losing himself in his own words for a minute because Mark is a blabber-mouth even during sex. ‘I don’t ever wanna get caught because that would be awful. Obviously. But I don’t think anyone’s going to catch us in here, do ya?’

Mark starts pumping his hand up and down Gary’s prick until he’s hard. Knowing they only have five or ten more minutes until they really ought to get down to have breakfast, his pace is faster than Gary is used to.

Gary likes it like that. ‘Faster,’ he moans, which only leads to Mark slowing down because he’s a bloody tease. Their first-ever morning together becomes a long, twisted game of push and pull. Every time Mark can tell that Gary’s close to ejaculating inside his fist, he slows down or stops entirely.

It reminds Gary of the way Mark fucked him last night, teasing him whilst he was tied-up to the bed, begging for Mark’s touch until he couldn’t cope anymore.

Frankly, Gary has no more time for teasing.

‘I’ve had more than enough of this.’ Gary slaps Mark’s hand away and drags him by the arm up from the floor. Once Mark’s gotten unsteadily on his feet, Gary wastes no time flipping their positions. He pushes Mark against the bathroom wall hard, his head facing the tiles.

Mark has to press his hands against the wall to steady himself. He can feel Gary pushing his naked chest against his own back. It turns Mark on; he rubs his still-clothed arse hungrily up and down Gary’s cock, and Gary utters an expletive Mark’s never heard him say before.

‘I’m gonna put an end to your teasing, lad,’ Gary purrs. Whilst his hand is already making a movement to pull down Mark’s trousers, he still has the state of mind to ask Mark whether he actually wants this. ‘How about I show you how it’s really done, eh? Fuck you nice and quick? How about that?’

Mark’s left cheek collides with the cold surface of the dirty bathroom tiles when Gary forcefully kisses him and bites his ear, a sensitive spot. Just the thought of being fucked up against the wall turns him on, and his words escape him for a second. He can barely utter a shaky ‘O-okay’ as he continues writhing his needy arse up and down Gary’s cock.

‘What was that, Mark?’ Gary says, even though he’s heard Mark perfectly.

‘Fuck me quick, Gaz. P-please.’

Gary kisses Mark’s right cheek softly then, and Mark almost melts. ‘Good lad.’

Gary pulls down Mark’s trousers and boxers in one go. Mark’s jumper stays on: Gary likes it like that, and Mark tends to take ages getting undressed anyway.

‘You don’t happen to have a condom on you somewhere, do you, Mark?’

Mark points a shaky finger at a small cupboard in the left-hand corner of the bathroom, one of the few pieces of furniture that isn’t broken in some way. ‘Check me toiletry bag. There should be one in there.’
'I want you to keep staring at that nice wall while I get us a condom, all right? Gary kisses the back of Mark’s head then. Mark smells pleasantly of expensive hotel shampoo and cologne, and it almost makes him dizzy. ‘No peeking.’

Mark nods. He has now been staring at the same tile for so long that he could draw its cracks and blemishes from memory. ‘All r-right.’

‘All right who?’

‘All right, Mr Barlow.’

‘Good.’ Gary spanks Mark’s arse then, and he heads to the cupboard to dig through Mark’s toiletry bag. He returns with a condom and a tiny bottle of lube, and Gary rolls the condom down his prick while taking a second to look at Mark leaning against the tiled wall; his jumper rising up his back, arse out like a fucking slut.

Mark hazards a look over his shoulder, and he’s rewarded with another hard spanking from Gaz.

‘What did I say about no peeking, Mark?’

‘S-sorry, Mr Barlow,’ Mark says, unable to keep the arousal from his voice. He keeps his eyes trained on the same tile he’s been looking at for the past few minutes. He has to bite his lip when he hears the sound of Gary unscrewing the tiny bottle of lube and slathering his prick in the stuff.

The next sound is one of his own. Gary pushes one lube-covered finger inside his arse, and he whimpers pathetically against the wall. The next thing he knows, Gary is fucking him with two fingers, pushing in and out until Mark finds himself begging for his cock.

Gary isn’t being so quick after all.

‘Please, Gaz . . .’ Mark moans, for Gary has just added a third finger. ‘You s-said you’d fuck me q-quick . . .’

Gary grins. He has come even closer; his chest is now inches removed from the jumper on Mark’s back. He breathes every word on the back of Mark’s head. ‘You still want it, then? You still want me to fuck your slutty little arse, Mark?’

‘Yes. Please. Make it quick. Please, Gaz.’

‘As you wish.’

If last night was the boys’ passionate first time in a five-star room made just for that, first times, then this morning is the kind of shag that suits their surroundings to a tee. It’s dirty. It’s wrong. It’s hard. Gary replaces his fingers with his thick cock without so much of a warning, and the moan Mark lets out is so fucking obscene that Gary has to cover his mouth with his hand.

Gary’s thrusts are unbearably quick and painful. Mark’s prick rubs uncomfortably against the tiled wall whenever Gary isn’t touching him there, and he’s left a disgusting stain of pre-cum on the walls. Gary swears so often and so strongly that he sounds nothing like a teacher. He spanks Mark hard. His thrusts are equally rough, making Mark writhe and moan in half-pain, half-pleasure.

Embarrassingly, they both come within minutes.

Gary ejaculates into his condom whilst Mark comes messily inside Gary’s fist, some of his cum ending up on the wall. It’s a bloody good orgasm, one of those quick ones that make your heartbeat
race like mad, and it nearly knocks all the air out of Mark’s lungs. The world goes a bit topsy-turvy, and the next thing Mark knows he’s trembling like a leaf against the wall.

Gary tenderly kisses Mark’s ear. ‘You okay there, Marko?’

‘Yeah. Whew. I just need to catch me breath for a second.’

Gary starts placing gentle kisses on the back of Mark’s head, his strong arms curled around Mark’s waist to stop him from shaking. ‘Was I that good, then?’ He sounds smug.

Mark chuckles. He lets out a soft whimper when he feels Gary softening inside of him. The tile in front of him that he’s been staring at for ages has gone a bit blurry. ‘You were better than just good, Mr Barlow.’

Mark turns on his heel to kiss Gary then, and they embrace and kiss until the high of the orgasm fades and Mark stops trembling.

They spend a good five minutes having a cuddle until Gary’s tummy gives a hungry growl and they have to separate, laughing hysterically. Mark’s tummy follows suit a second later. They haven’t eaten anything since the slug incident, and Gary’s actually beginning to feel quite hungry.

‘Do you mind if we go down to the dining room?’ Gary asks. ‘I know we’ve just shagged and everything, but I could do with a cold piece of toast . . .’

Mark rubs his tummy. ‘So do I. We’ll probably wanna clean this place up first, though. Hand me a towel, will ya?’

They clean themselves up, then give the bathroom a quick scrub. Conveniently, the bathroom has a small closet for keeping clothes in (the one in the main bedroom is broken and mouldy), and they quickly put together two new outfits. Gary’s wearing tight trousers and a Star Wars tee, and it’s honestly nearly as sexy as seeing him naked. Mark’s opted for a different jumper, a green one.

Having both changed into something clean, Mark makes a movement to unlock the door so they can finally have breakfast.

The lock won’t give.

‘That’s weird,’ Mark says as he tries to fiddle with the door, ‘the door seems to be stuck. I can’t open it, can you?’

Gary reaches for the lock. Mark’s right: the door seems to be stuck. When he pushes his upper body against the door, the doorframe gives a complaining creak as though the bathroom itself is about to collapse on top of them.

They’re stuck.

‘We’re stuck,’ Gary says as much.

‘Oh dear,’ Mark whispers. He shoots Gary a worried look. ‘What do we do now? I haven’t got me phone with me, do you?’

Gary shakes his head. This wasn’t how he was hoping their post-sex cuddles would go.

He looks around the bathroom. His eyes fall on a translucent window in the top right corner of the room. It’s big enough for a slender guy like Mark to squeeze through.
No way, Gaz,’ Mark says before Gary can open his mouth. He crosses his arms defiantly. ‘I’m not going to climb through the window.’

‘I wasn’t going to say that.’

‘You were thinking about it, though. I can see it on your face.’

Gary sizes Mark up with his eyes, then looks at the window. ‘It’s the only choice we have, mate. If Ms Brooke or a student catches us in here before we make it back to the dining room, they’ll definitely know something’s up.’

Mark sighs. Gary’s right, one of them will have to climb through the window. It’s their only way of getting to the dining hall on time. Mark would only have to climb through the translucent window, get back into the hostel without attracting attention to himself, get to Room 4 and open the bathroom door from the other side to save Gary.

Easy.

‘All right. Fine,’ Mark sighs, and he rolls up the sleeves of his jumper.

Directly underneath the window is an unused washing machine. Mark climbs unsteadily on top of the washing machine and reaches for the window. The window is locked with a small latch, and he opens it easily.

He looks over his shoulder at a worried-looking Gary. ‘If I break me neck while climbing out of this window, I’m going to haunt you forever, Mr Barlow.’

|LESSON FORTY-FIVE: MOBILE PHONES|

After what feels like an age, Gary hears a knocking on the bathroom door. He hesitantly steps forward and puts his ear to the door. He needs to be careful; it could be a student, and he doesn’t feel like explaining what led him to be locked in a bathroom. ‘Who’s there?’

‘It’s me, Mark. I brought the lady from the reception with us. She’s brought keys.’

Gary breathes a sigh of relief. ‘Thank God. Be quick, will you? I’m bloody starvin’.’

‘Be patient, Sir.’ This comes from the ever-bored receptionist. Mark found her playing Pinball on her desktop computer. ‘The door does not open by itself. I have more than twenty keys so this could take a time.’ Even though he can’t see her, Gary’s pretty sure the receptionist just rolled her eyes.

Over the next five minutes, Gary has to wait patiently as the receptionist tries opening the door from the other side with every key she can find. She’s never bothered marking her keys. She might not even have the right key with her all.

Gary says nothing as he waits. The only thing he can hear is the clanging of keys and Mark’s voice, uttering a sound of disappointment every time a key won’t fit the lock. Clearly, Mark’s nervous: he has struck up a long and rambly conservation with the receptionist, who hardly responds.

‘Have you worked here for long? It must be so nice, working at a hostel. I’ve thought about working at a hotel myself, but I don’t think I’d be any good at it, you know. I once worked at a shop where they sold men’s clothes and I kept being told off for talking too much. Thankfully you can’t really get told off for talking too much when you’re a teacher. Unless you’re supervising an exam, which is
when you shouldn’t talk at all really. How many keys have you tried now? This is the final one? Oh dear, I do hope it works.’ By now, Gary has stopped listening to Mark’s rambling and tuned it out, which causes him to miss this next bit: ‘Actually, if you do manage to unlock the door, Ms Receptionist, could you wait a second? There’s something I need to do first . . .’

Finally, the door unlocks with a loud click. Gary makes a movement to push down the handle and open the door, but the handle still won’t budge. It’s like someone on the other side of the door has put their hand on the handle, stopping him from pushing it down.

‘Mark? You still there, mate?’ He tries the handle again, but he can’t push it down for the life of him. ‘Why won’t you let me open the door?’

‘Your colleague does not want you to see him,’ the receptionist says in her monotone voice. ‘He rolled through garbage.’

Gary lets out an uncertain laugh. ‘Sorry, what?’

Mark’s the next to speak. He sounds nervous and vexed, which is quite strange given that the receptionist has just found the right key. ‘Promise me you won’t laugh, Gaz.’

‘Why would I laugh? Mark, what’s going on?’

‘Please, Gaz,’ Mark insists. ‘I’ll break up with you if you make fun of me.’

This is obviously quite a dangerous threat, and Gary has no choice but to promise Mark that he won’t laugh and that he won’t make fun of him even though he has no idea what Mark’s talking about. Gary would never laugh at Mark; he’s the most beautiful person he knows!

Satisfied with Gary’s answer, Mark finally lets go of the handle. The door opens outward into the bedroom, revealing the receptionist (still bored), and Mark . . . looking like he has been rolling through garbage.

It’s quite a sight. Mark’s hair looks like a bird’s nest. There are stains all over his jumper. Pieces of carton and paper have gotten stuck to his sleeves. There’s a wet patch on his right thigh. The smell of mayo and chicken fills the air, and two fat flies seem to be circling above Mark’s head. The smell is so bad that the receptionist has to pinch her nose with her thumb and index finger.

Gary feels a fit of laughter rippling up his body at the sight of Mark looking like he has been rolling through the trash.

‘Let me guess, there was a trash container underneath our window?’

Mark blows a feather from his hair and sighs. ‘There was a trash container underneath our window.’

‘The container is not from us,’ the receptionist explains as she puts her bundle of keys back into her pocket. She has to flick away one of the flies that is circling above Mark’s head. ‘It’s from the neighbours. They have a chicken restaurant.’

Gary makes a face at Mark’s jumper. ‘I can tell.’

The receptionist then gets a message on her walkie-talkie, saying that a young guest has decided to throw food all over a table. She’s about to leave the room when Gary stops her in her tracks. He hands her a tip befitting a millionaire popstar. ‘To, thank you for helping me get out of the bathroom. If you could, er, just not tell anyone what you’ve seen, that’d be great.’

The receptionist looks quite flustered. ‘T-thank you, Sir. I will not say it to anyone.’ She leaves
Room 4 looking happier than she has all week.

Once the receptionist has left, Mark quickly changes into a less smelly outfit – another jumper. In spite of Gary promising that he would not make fun of Mark falling head-first into a trash container, he can’t quite stop himself from making trash-related puns. Eventually Mark can see the humour in it too, and they laugh all the way to the dining room, still basking in the wonderful afterglow of morning sex, their worries from the previous days already long forgotten.

Then they spot the mobile phones.

Walking into the dining room, the first thing Mark notices is that the room is deathly quiet. Every single student is sat at a table with their faces glued to their smartphone screens, their food untouched. It’s fucking weird. It’s like they’ve stumbled into an episode of *Black Mirror* in which students across the world have turned into emotionless robots dependent on technology. It’s bloody uncomfortable to look at, and it’s about to get even worse.

One student looks up from her phone and spots Mark and Gary standing in the doorway of the dining hall, and she starts laughing.

Then another student joins in. And another.

Laughter spreads through the dining room like wildfire, and suddenly almost all the students from the Vocational College of Music and Art are laughing hysterically and even pointing their fingers at Mr Owen. Only one table isn’t joining in: a table with four young girls, the youngest students the school has. They all look deeply uncomfortable.

Mark shares an equally uncomfortable look with Gary. ‘Do I still have chicken in me hair?’

Right on cue, Howard shows up clutching his phone. His face is pale, and he looks more tired than the boys have ever seen him. Ms Brooke is standing behind him with a worried look on her face. ‘We need to talk.’

‘No need, Mr Donald.’ This comes from Seb, the student who got kicked out of the Van Gogh museum for misbehaviour. He’s sat at the table closest to Mark, and he’s wearing a wicked expression. ‘It’d be so much easier if you just showed ‘em.’

Seb gets up from his chair then and hands Mr Owen his phone. Seb taps the screen, and a video starts playing.

‘Don’t watch that,’ Howard warns, but it’s already too late. Mark has already realised what the video is of.

The video was taken seconds after Seb nearly threw his workbook at *The Potato Eaters*. However, instead of having Seb as its protagonist, the video entirely focuses on Mr Owen, trying and failing to keep his students in check in the aftermath of Seb’s misbehaviour.

And it doesn’t look good.

The video is a seven-minute display of student pandemonium. Students laugh and point as Seb gets picked up by a security guard. They leisurely sit back and watch, refusing to do the exercises they were given. Mr Owen walks up to several rowdy the students to tell them they ought to get back to work, but they refuse to do as they’re told. They laugh at Mr Owen like he’s an idiot, and an unfortunate close-up shows the Creative Writing teacher turning bright red. One student even does an unflattering imitation of Mr Owen behind his back.
In the end, the video shows Mark sitting himself down on a bench and watching, helplessly, how more and more students refuse to do the work. He has a frustrated look on his face; a look of utter helplessness. He even puts his hands in his hair.

The video makes the students look terrible, but Mark looks worse. He comes across as inexperienced. *Young*. This is what Mark must have looked like when he struggled with A_WD1E, the Web Design group who threw paper planes at him during his first week as a Newly Qualified Teacher.

Back in the dining room in the shabby youth hostel, Mark has to blink away tears. Looking up from Seb’s smartphone, he can tell that everyone in the dining hall is watching him. The students must all have seen the video too.

They now all know how bad he is. You don’t have a second chance to make a good first impression, and he’s absolutely blown it.

Mark turns to Seb, who’s grinning at him like a wicked Cheshire cat. Mark isn’t unused to students misbehaving in his lessons, but this feels uncomfortably like a personal attack.

‘W-why would you show me this?’ Mark stammers, unable to keep the emotion from his voice. ‘Why would you do this?’

Seb grins ‘Because it’s fun. And because you’re not gonna expel me anyway. I know what schools like this are like,’ he adds with an important edge. Everyone else admires Seb as though he’s their hero. ‘You’re always gonna find a way to keep me at school. Everyone knows that all you lot care about is my money. It’s true, isn’t it? All schools care about is cash. Everyone’s heard the rumours about your head tea—’

‘Right, that’s enough of that.’ Howard snatches Seb’s phone from Mark’s hand and tosses it into a student’s cold bowl of porridge, which elicits a collective gasp from everyone. A small smile appears on Henry’s face.

‘If I see just one of you watching or sharing that video again,’ Mr Donald tells the group with a look in his eyes that could cut steel, ‘I’m going to get you all expelled. We don’t take videos of people without their permission, period. If just one of you shares the video anyway, I’m going to leak the videos you sent in for your application. Everyone’s. Is that clear?’

The dining hall has gone completely silent. Everyone knows that the videos the students sent in as part of their application are very embarrassing indeed.

‘Is that clear?’ Howard reiterates, and the students all mumble something along the lines of ‘yes, Mr Donald’ and ‘yes, Sir’.

Even Seb seems impressed by Mr Donald’s lecture, for Mr Donald only ever speaks when he absolutely has to. He mumbles an apology and says he’ll delete the video immediately.

Seb’s apology seems to be heartfelt, but to Mark his words are meaningless. He mutters that he needs to get some fresh air, and he half-runs, half-walks out of the dining hall. He doesn’t stop until he stumbles out of the front door of the hostel.

Mark finds a bench near the edge of the water and sits with his face hidden in his hands. The sun is shining, and there’s a cloudless sky above the canals, but all of it passes him by. He doesn’t bother
looking up to see an orange cat curling up in the shadow of a blue hire bike. He doesn’t bother taking artistic photographs of the canal houses at the other side of the water, beautifully framed by verdant trees. All he sees is the video, played over and over again in his mind’s eye.

He can’t even remember the moment in the video happening. He’d removed it from his memory. If Mr Harrison saw the video he’d be fired for sure. He genuinely can’t think of a worse thing happening to a teacher than having all his weaknesses framed in a seven-minute video.

Mark hates the idea of his students thinking of him as weak, because he genuinely thinks he’s improved since he met Gaz. He was out of his depth when he first started teaching, but he isn’t out of his depth anymore. He’s all right now. He knows what he’s doing. His lessons are good. His materials are engaging and innovative.

So the teacher in the video that Mark just watched? Mark’s ashamed of him. He hates that guy. It’s not the type of teacher Mark is. As a teacher, Mr Owen is kind and creative and spontaneous and the best when it comes to explaining things. But now, every single student from the Composition and Songwriting course will believe he’s a crap teacher before they’ve even had their first lesson with him.

It’s the worst possible way to start the school year.

Mark removes his hands from his face when he hears the bench creaking underneath someone else’s weight. Looking up, he can see that Gary has taken a seat next to him. Howard’s there too, stood next to the bench with his arms crossed and a worried look on his face. ‘You okay, mate?’

Mark nods. He rubs his eyes, and his fingers come away with tears. He doesn’t dare open his mouth in case all his emotions come flooding out of him.

‘We told the students to delete the video from their phones,’ Gary says quietly. ‘I don’t think they understood how damaging it was. They thought it was just another bloody joke like the video of Seb getting thrown out of the Van Gogh museum. Ms Brooke is going to put all of them on rapport.’

‘You – you don’t have to do that,’ Mark sniffs. When a student has been put on a rapport, it means they’ll be given a written warning saying that another incident or low attendance could lead to their expulsion. As much as the video hurt Mark, he doesn’t want it to get a student in trouble. ‘A lecture should be enough, shouldn’t it? You don’t have to put them on rapport for my sake.’

‘If we don’t warn them now, they’ll be getting away with much worse in the future.’ Gary grabs Mark’s hand and squeezes it. ‘They left us with no other choice.’

‘If we don’t warn them now, they’ll be getting away with much worse in the future.’ Gary grabs Mark’s hand and squeezes it. ‘They left us with no other choice.’

‘It shouldn’t have happened in the first place,’ Howard grumbles, kicking his foot against the bench in frustration. ‘The students must have been watching that video all morning. I’m so sorry, Mark. I should have spotted it earlier.’

Mark sniffs. ‘It’s okay. I – I suppose you can’t really stop the students from seeing a video we didn’t know was taken.’ He stares at the houses at the other side of the canal, a faraway look in his eyes. ‘I just wish they didn’t put me through watching it. It made me feel awful.’

‘If it’s any consolation, mate, I thought you looked rather handsome.’ Gary kisses Mark on the cheek then, and Howard goes a bit pink in the face.

‘I think this is my cue to go back in,’ Howard mumbles, looking over his shoulder at the hostel. From this angle, he can see straight into their room, for the curtains are no longer there to shield their room from spying eyes. ‘Did you guys know there was a restaurant next to the hostel? We could try that
tonight – I’ve had enough of the hostel’s food.’

‘I think Mark already had a look at the menu this morning,’ Gary says. His right hand is rubbing circles on the small of Mark’s back. ‘You weren’t that impressed, were you?’

Mark shakes his head, and Howard shrugs. ‘Guess we’ll be having more bread with slugs tonight. Anyway, I’m gonna make everyone write lines. Wish me luck.’

It’s not until Howard has headed back to the hostel that Mark feels like he can talk about what happened. Overcome with emotion, he has to rub away tears that have rolled down his cheeks.

‘I feel so awful. I was hoping this trip would be a little better now that we’ve finally made love, but it’s still the same as yesterday. This entire trip – it’s been so exhausting. Why would the students show me that? Why watch it?’ Mark sighs then, and more tears roll down his cheeks. He doesn’t bother wiping them off. ‘I don’t want the students to come into me lessons next week and assume I’m a crap teacher, Gaz. I don’t want them to think I’m bad at my job before the school year has even started.’

‘Then prove them wrong,’ Gary whispers, wiping the tears from Mark’s cheeks and smiling at him gently. ‘Every lesson is a new start. You just need to show them how good you are. Cos you’re a good teacher, Mark. You’re one of the best.’

Mark chuckles weakly. ‘Are you saying that just cos you wanna get inside me pants again, Mr Barlow? We only shagged half an hour ago . . .’

Gary grins. ‘Is it working, though?’

‘A little.’

They kiss each other on the mouth; a brief, chaste kiss that’s over as quickly as it started. For there are still students around, and getting caught snogging is the last thing Mark needs.

Mark stares at the calm water in the canal, and he feels something inside himself calming too. He follows a swan floating, leisurely, on the water until it disappears underneath a bridge, wondering where it has come from and where it will go. He smells the scent of trees; a welcome respite after the smell of weed and chicken that has followed him around today. He hears nothing: just birds chirping up in the trees and Gary breathing softly next to him. They may be sat in front of their terrible two-star hostel, but for a moment it’s as if he’s somewhere else entirely.

‘Why do you think the students did it?’ Mark asks matter-of-factly. It’s not an emotional question; this is just Mark wanting to get to the bottom of why their students did what they did. It’s how teachers talk about their students all the time, like they’re little puzzles that need solving. ‘What is there to gain from this?’

‘In me own experience, students are hardly ever out to hurt their teachers,’ Gary explains. ‘Cos that doesn’t win them anything, that doesn’t. They’re far more likely to do things to help themselves.’

‘“Help themselves?”’

‘You know, becoming more popular. That’s what the video was about, I reckon. One of the cooler students like Seb’s mates must have filmed and shared it, and then told the other kids that they wouldn’t be “cool” if they didn’t watch it. That’s what it all boils down to in the end.’

“But Seb and his mates aren’t cool,” Mark points out. A gentle breeze makes the hairs on his arms stand on end, and he pulls down the sleeves of his jumper so they cover his hands. ‘I wouldn’t want
to be a part of that group.’

‘That’s not how students think,’ Gary explains. ‘When they see Seb, they see someone who stood up to the teachers. That makes him interesting. And when you’re on a school excursion with a bunch of kids you don’t know, you tend to flock to the kids who stand out.’

‘But they shared a video of me. That’s not cool.’

‘I know. And I reckon most students know it isn’t. But as I said, it isn’t about you. It’s all about survival, this.’

Mark sighs. ‘I wish I knew as much about students as you did.’

‘I’m only talking from experience. Something similar happened to someone I know.’

‘A teacher?’

Gary nods. ‘One student thought their lessons were terrible, so she decided to write a letter to the head of the school, saying the teacher had to be fired. And when I say “the head of the school”, I mean the school governors. As in, Mrs Kennedy-Cairns. The student asked one of the most popular kids in the group to sign the letter, and pretty much everyone in the group followed suit without really knowing what they were doing. They thought they were being a part of something, but they were just being cruel.’

Mark’s looking at Gary with his mouth hanging open. ‘What happened to the teacher?’

‘You’re looking at him.’

‘No!’ Mark says, aghast.

‘True story. Mind you, I was working nights at the time, so the complaints were probably justified. I must have fallen asleep during nearly every lesson at the time. My point is . . . students are not intentionally cruel. It’s just the kids trying each other out. You’ll get through this.’

Mark smiles for the first time since he saw the video of himself, and he feels a weight being lifted off his shoulders. Gary’s right, he will get through this. Next week, the school year will kick off officially. He’ll be given a brand new start. He’ll prove how good he is.

Mark looks over his shoulder to make sure there aren’t any students around, then rests his head comfortably on Gary’s shoulder. ‘I’m so glad you’re here, Gaz.’

‘So am I, Mark.’

They watch the calm waters in the canal together, quietly and comfortably, in the hopes that things can’t possibly get worse than this.

|LESSON FORTY-SIX: THE QUESTION GAME, PART TWO|

The afternoon following the video incident is weirdly smooth considering what happened before it. Several students come up to Mr Owen to apologise for their behaviour. Even the weather is good: the sun is shining, and there isn’t a cloud in sight.
Overall, it’s a good day. Following their sobering visit to the Anne Frank house, the students are let loose in the Negen Straatjes, nine shopping streets with quaint little shops you can’t find anywhere else. During the evening, the students enjoy a genuinely nice home-baked pizza at the hostel, free of mobile phones. Over the past twelve hours, the students and their teachers have finally grown to like and respect each other.

The next day, the penultimate day of the excursion to Amsterdam, Mark has completely forgotten about yesterday’s events. So many students have come up to him to apologise that he doesn’t feel like such a crap teacher anymore. In fact, he feels like a rather decent teacher. Two hard-working students have complimented Mr Owen on the exercises he provided for the excursion workbook, and he couldn’t feel prouder. If only Mr Harrison could see him.

With today being the second to last day of the excursion, the students have been allowed to spend the day as they please. Most of the students have decided to pay a visit to the Amsterdam Dungeon. As for the teachers, Mr Donald’s decided to go shopping for his wife. She’s an artist who can occasionally be persuaded to give a workshop to the students from the Art department, and Howard wants to buy her a cute set of ink pens he saw in a shop window yesterday. Ms Brooke has been given the unfortunate task of babysitting the school’s more challenging students, which means she won’t be going anywhere. As for Gary and Mark, they’re still in the hostel’s dining room, trying to decide what they want to do.

‘I suppose we could always stay in our room and make love,’ Gary whispers as he watches Mark drawing a route on a massive map of Amsterdam with a pink highlighter. ‘That’d be nice.’

‘In your dreams, Mr Barlow,’ Mark bristles. His eyes don’t leave the map for a single second. He’s currently in the middle of highlighting the street called Rokin, a major shopping street in the centre of Amsterdam. It has recently been given a bit of a make-over, and there’s a big book store where the lads could have a cheap cup of tea. ‘I’m not going to spend me last day stuck in ‘ere, you know.’

‘Why not? We’ve already seen most of the city anyway . . .’

Mark looks up from his map then, which he’s spread out over the dining room’s biggest table. Apart from an elderly couple who stays on the third floor, they’re the only ones there.

‘I’m not staying here,’ he reiterates, and he circles another popular attraction he wants to visit. So far, he’s circled seven places: Rokin, Rembrandtplein, the flower market, the botanical gardens near ARTIS zoo, the zoo itself, Vondelpark and Hermitage Amsterdam, an art gallery. The attractions are all so far removed from each other that it would take them two or three days to visit all of them.

Having just circled Vondelpark, Mark looks fondly at his map. His highlighted route looks like painting child painted on his map with yellow ink. He points his finger at the zoo. ‘Let’s start at the zoo. We could spend two hours there and then have a look at the botanical gardens. After that, we can walk through Vondelpark – we haven’t been there yet, have we? Oh look, there’s a church. That looks pretty.’ And he draws an eighth circle around the church.

Gary just rolls his eyes. It’s obvious that Mark has never been abroad before. ‘We don’t have time to visit all that – it took you three hours to cover one floor of Madame Tussauds a couple of days ago! If you wanna see celebrities you can just look at me, mate.’

‘You don’t have a wax statue at Madame Tussauds, though, do ya?’ Mark quips, and Gary’s mouth shuts like a trap snapping closed.

In the end, Mark has to concede that visiting Rokin, Rembrandtplein, ARTIS Zoo, Vondelpark, some church and Hermitage Amsterdam in one day is probably a bit too ambitious. Using the help of
the receptionist, who has melted considerably since Gary gave her a millionaire tip yesterday, they agree on a route that covers mainly Amsterdam’s most famous shopping streets.

Taking a tram up north, they start at Amsterdam Central station and make their way down Rokin and Dam Square, where tourists have their pictures taken with living statues. They walk past Madame Tussauds and take a left turn into one of Amsterdam’s busiest shopping streets – a street so popular that they actually bump into several students. Not much later, they reach the first thing on Mark’s original wish list: the Flower Market, a street filled with a dozen flower stalls, as colourful as the paintings at the Van Gogh museum.

Mark takes photos of literally everything he sees: he takes photos of the trees, the shops, the houses with their unique zigzag roofs, the blue and white trams going past, a cat perched on a branch of a tree and several photos of Gary’s arse that he isn’t going to share with anyone but himself.

Even though today is the penultimate day of the trip, Mark is filled from top to bottom with happiness. He loves walking the streets with Gary like this, stopping every couple of seconds to take photos and kiss each other quickly on the lips. Amsterdam is so busy that they can get away with kissing in public, and the city isn’t exactly famed for their huge Gary Barlow fan base, so he and Gary can easily roam the streets without being stopped for a selfie.

Although the lads are technically still at work, today feels amazingly like they are on a date.

‘I’ve just realised something, you know,’ Mark says as he stops to take a photo of a statue of Rembrandt at a square of the same name, Rembrandtplein. ‘I’ve just realised we’ve never really been on a date together. Apart from today, anyway.’

‘That’s not true,’ Gary says, ‘we’ve been on loads of dates. We went on one just a couple of days ago!’

‘The visit to the expensive hotel doesn’t count,’ Mark says. Snap! He takes another photo of the statue, a close-up of Rembrandt’s face this time. ‘I mean a proper date. You know, when you plan it a couple of days in advance and you have enough time to decide what you’re going to wear. I feel like I’ve never worn something nice when I’m with you.’

They sit on a concrete bench in front of to the statue. Here, they have a gorgeous view of the square’s surrounding cafés and restaurants, and the tourists that flock to them. ‘What about the summer prom?’ Gary offers. ‘We decided on that ages in advance.’

‘We were both working, though,’ Mark points out. Snap! He’s taken a pic of Gary looking handsome in the sunshine. Another one for the family photobook. ‘It doesn’t really count as a date when there are students everywhere. I did enjoy it, though.’

Gary chuckles fondly. ‘Remember when we sneaked off to that massive dining hall that night?’

Mark blushes. Gary gave him head that night: one of the best blowjobs he’s ever had, hands down. ‘I loved that place. It was so romantic, wasn’t it? I thought it was the most beautiful room I’d ever seen.’

‘But it wasn’t really a date,’ Gary says.

‘No.’

‘You went to Glasgow that night, didn’t you?’ Mark recalls.

‘I did, yeah. I still wish I hadn’t – I had quite a lot of plans involving you and one of the tables in the
dining hall that night.’

Mark laughs. They both rack their brains trying to recall a meeting or evening that would count as a date.

Meanwhile, more tourists arrive to take photos of the bronze statues behind them, a small depiction of *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt, with some bronze men holding spears and others brandishing shields. A woman briefly stops in front of the bronze statues when she sees Gary sitting on the bench. She hesitates as if she’s about to grab her phone and ask for a selfie, then thinks better of it. She shakes her head and laughs to herself. A popstar like Gary Barlow couldn’t possibly be in Amsterdam.

At the other side of the square, five men dressed in chicken costumes pass them by—a stag do, presumably. An airplane flies overhead, and in the background, people laugh at a joke spoken in a different language.

Gary marvels at the beauty of it all. Even though they’re slap bang in the middle of Rembrandt Square, it’s as if it’s just him and Mark; just two satellites, circling each other in outer space whilst the Earth keeps turning.

He wonders when he first felt that sort of connection with Mark. He supposes he first felt it when they went on that coffee date after work. It was late in the afternoon then, and they’d met up at the Starbucks on campus to discuss one of Mark’s lessons. Or rather, that was the idea: it was really just an excuse to get Mark alone. Surely that would count as a date?

‘What about that time you and me got coffee at Starbucks?’

Mark smiles. He remembers. ‘You mean when you pretended you wanted to discuss my lesson with me? You never really told me what you thought, did ya?’

‘I did – I said it was good.’

‘Only after you’d asked me whether I was single, though.’

‘God, I did, didn’t I? We took turns asking each other personal questions that day. The question game. I got quite some good answers out of you.’

‘I didn’t do so well, though, did I? I kept forgetting the rules because I couldn’t stop looking at you.’

Mark into the distance as he recalls their wonderful afternoon at Starbucks. He remembers it well: dubbed the “question game”, a tool Ms Brooke often uses in her lessons, the boys took turns asking each other questions like do you have any pets and what’s your favourite album, that sort of stuff. Mark didn’t really stick to the rules, and Gary kept flirting with him.

It was also the first time Mark openly admitted that Gary was by far the best thing about school—saying that he was glad he met him and that he was grateful for their texts. ‘I don’t know which part of the school I enjoy most,’ Mark had said, ‘but I’m really glad that I met you, Mr Barlow. I’m really grateful that you’ve been so kind in helping me improve and figuring out what to do with my difficult groups and offering to assess my lessons for me. And I suppose – I suppose I’m really grateful for our texts too.’

It was that evening that Mark realised he was in love with Gaz, and not many days later he received quite a risky picture from him.

‘I wonder what we’d ask each other if we tried the game again today,’ Mark thinks out loud.
‘We could do it now,’ Gary suggests. He moves his mouth to Mark’s ear so he can whisper the rest. ‘Cos I’m warning you now, Mark – there’s still loads of things you don’t know about me.’

Mark chuckles when he feels Gary pecking his ear. The last time he discovered something new about Gary, he found out that Gary was a popstar who’d been keeping his career secret “for the sake of their relationship.”

‘You’re not talking about your career, I hope, Gaz.’

‘I was more talking about kinky sex stuff,’ Gary says, moving his eyebrows up and down in what is supposed to be a suggestive fashion.

Mark rolls his eyes. ‘Let me guess – you wanna have sex on a piano? Cos there’s no way I’m doing that, Mr Barlow. It’s not hygienic. You know I’m still reeling from when we had to clean the bathroom at the hostel.’

Gary blushes. He casts a conspiratorial look over his shoulder. ‘I was more thinking “sexy Princess Leia”, I was, mate.’

Mark makes a face that is half disgust, half . . . arousal? It’s hard to describe, for Mark’s face is usually so pretty. ‘When you say Princess Leia, Gaz . . . Do you mean you or . . .’ He points an uncertain finger at himself.

‘I mean you, mate.’ Heat has crept up underneath Gary’s shirt, and he looks desperately around him in search for a distraction. He wishes he hadn’t mentioned dressing up now; just thinking about it makes him hot!

Thankfully, Gary quickly spots a Starbucks café at the other side of the road, a pretty big one. ‘How about we recreate our first date in there, eh? Christ, it’s hot all of a sudden . . .’

Mark just grins. What a nerd, he thinks, and he kisses Gary sweetly on the lips.

Again, he experiences the weird, unfamiliar need to do more with Gary. Not just kissing and having sex and maybe moving in together, but getting married. Mark can’t get the thought out of his head. Would they ever do such a thing? Perhaps. Perhaps not. He’s probably getting ahead of himself here. After all, he’s yet to visit Gary’s apartment. Hopefully, his first visit isn’t too far away.

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In an attempt to recreate their very first date, which wasn’t really a first date at all because Mark went there in the assumption that they’d be talking about teaching, the boys head to the Starbucks café at the other side of the square. Just like last time, Gary orders a strong cappuccino whilst Mark opts for a medium Earl Grey – with Mark insisting that they leave some coins in the tip jar, of course.

One of the baristas recognises Gary the pop star, and she excitedly asks him for his autograph. Mark rolls his eyes at that, and a flustered Gary tells the barista that he has no idea who “this Gary Barlow” is.

Even though he and Mark have obviously made up about the whole “not telling your long-term boyfriend that you’re famous” thing, Mark much prefers Gary when he’s a teacher, and a lover – not a pop star. Seeing people staring at Gary and asking him for selfies does his head in. He doesn’t know how he’ll cope with Gary’s celebrity if they ever move in together.

Thankfully no-one else at the Starbucks at Rembrandtplein seems to recognise him. Even if they do, they have the courtesy not to bother Gary for an autograph. Most of Gary’s fans respect the fact that
their favourite pop star is also a teacher, and a human being.

‘I can still remember what you were wearing when we went to Starbucks for the first time, you know,’ Mark says after Gary has handed him his cup of tea and sat down in front of him, at the other side of the table. Compared to the Starbucks on campus, this one is absolutely massive, with an artistic ceiling made of both wood and concrete, and a long bar and stretched-out wooden tables for people to work at. ‘You were wearing a tailored jacket and a Star Wars T-shirt and I thought you looked so handsome, more handsome than anyone I’ve ever seen. I felt so underdressed. I kept thinking, Why didn’t I put on me best waistcoat?’

‘That’s funny, cos I clearly remember thinking you looked handsome too.’

Mark blushes, and they reminisce about their sort-of-first-date-but-not-really as a world of coffee, tea and tourists keeps spinning around them. At the bar, six Swedish students are stood in front of the bar, unable to decide what they’d like to drink. To the boys’ right, a straight couple is smooching in a way that would make most people look away in disgust. Behind them, a group of young tourists are pored over a map of Amsterdam like Mark was this morning. There’s the sound of cutlery falling on the floor as a barista walking past drops her tray. Predictably, Mark gets up to help her because, well, he’s Mark Owen. He even helps her carry the tray all the way to the kitchen, the helpful sod.

Whilst the coffee house is nothing more than just your average Starbucks, Gary thinks it’s easily the best place he’s been on this trip so far. (Apart from the five-star hotel where they made love, anyway.) It’s absolutely packed with people, and yet it feels intimate: intimate enough for Gary to kick off his shoes and rub his foot slowly against Mark’s ankle once Mark has returned from helping the barista.

Mark clears his throat. ‘So about that question game . . .’ He distractedly runs his finger across the rim of his white teacup. It’s hard to concentrate when Gary’s touching him in a way he didn’t even know he liked. ‘Remind me of the rules again?’

‘Simple. We take turns asking each other questions. And no fibbing.’

‘Even when it’s embarrassing Star Wars stuff?’

‘I’ve nothing to hide,’ Gary shrugs.

‘Apart from when you decided to lie to me about your pop star career,’ Mark points out sweetly.

‘Are you going to hold that against me for the rest of my life, Mark?’

‘Only when I need something to bargain with, I suppose.’ There’s a long pause, and Mark blinks a couple of times. ‘Wait, have we started already? Did yours count as question? I’m lost.’

Gary snorts. ‘Let’s start now, mate. You begin, and then we’ll go from there.’

‘Okay.’ Mark looks up at the ceiling for inspiration. It’s a mix of wood and concrete, very artistic-looking. ‘What’s the first record you ever bought?’

Gary lets out a nervous breath. He was half-expecting Mark to ask him something a bit sexier. ‘What happened to asking each other kinky sex stuff? We’ve been together for ages – we can skip the boring stuff.’

‘I know. I’m getting there. I like a good build-up.’

‘I’ve noticed.’
Mark smiles, and he hooks his ankle with Gary’s. ‘Answer, please, Mr Barlow. Don’t keep the teacher waiting.’

‘Adam and the Ants, I believe. Or D.I.S.C.O. by Ottawan.’ It’s Gary’s turn to ask a question now. He might as well stick to the theme. ‘What’s a song that you wish you’d written, but haven’t?’

‘Like a Prayer. You know, by Madonna,’ Mark adds even though it’s pretty self-explanatory because everyone knows Like a Prayer. ‘I used to dream of watching her in concert one day, but her shows are very expensive and I probably wouldn’t be able to find someone to go with anyway. I’ve never been to a concert alone, have you? Her shows are so big, though – there’s so much going on, isn’t there? I believe every show should be like that, with a dozen costume changes and lots of dancing . . .’

Mark gets so lost in rambling about concerts and Madonna that he neglects to ask Gary a follow-up question. Instead, he sort of stares into the distance, fantasising about ticker tape and glitter and cone bras. If he were in charge of Gary’s live shows, they’d be the biggest concerts in the world.

Gary has to wave a hand in front of Mark’s face to get him back to Earth. ‘Mark. You’re kinda forgetting the rules of the game already.’

‘Am I?’

‘Yeah, mate. It’s your turn to ask a question now, remember?’

‘Right. Okay.’ Mark scratches the back of his head. Staying on topic, he asks, ‘What are your shows like?’

Gary takes a sip of his cappuccino. ‘Intimate. Small. They’re a blast to play, though. There usually aren’t that many people sat down during me shows.’ He jiggles his eyebrows. ‘Why, would you like to come and see one?’

‘Depends. Would you let me come backstage, Mr Barlow?’

‘Dunno, Mark.’ Gary’s eyes are gleaming. ‘I think security would probably hear you, to be honest, you’re always so loud . . .’

Mark laughs out loud. ‘You know I can’t help it.’

‘Really? And here I thought you were just loud because it turned you on, Mark . . .’

Mark has to take a calming sip of tea when he feels Gary’s foot sliding up his leg. It takes him several sips of tea to remember the question he wanted to ask. He hopes it sounds like a statement rather than a question. ‘Anyway. You’re – you’re saying you’d let me join you on tour, right?’

‘Of course. If you want to.’

Mark’s mouth spreads into a massive grin; the nicest smile Gary has ever seen on anyone. ‘Really? Oh Gaz, I’d love to.’

‘Then that’s what we do. Next tour, I’m taking you with me.’ Gary kisses Mark on the mouth then, right in the middle of a Starbucks in Amsterdam, with tourists and strangers all around them, and the rest of the world disappears. Gary proceeds to move his foot to a place where no foot should go, ever, and Mark has to break off their kiss laughing.

‘You really love doing bad things to me in public, don’t ya, Gaz?’
‘What can I say? I am a pop star, Mark.’ And Gary removes his foot and puts his shoe back on because there are some things you just shouldn’t do when drinking coffee at Starbucks. ‘Pretty sure it was my turn to ask a question, though.’

‘Ask away.’

Gary finishes his cappuccino while he considers his next question. He supposes he could ask something a bit kinkier, but like Mark, he enjoys a good build-up. He settles on something a bit simpler. ‘What has been your favourite moment of this trip so far?’

Mark thinks about it. There’s been loads: making love at the hotel, roaming the city streets together, Gary wanking him off in the bus . . . but also Amsterdam in general, of course. He’s loved it all. Well, apart from having to sleep in a dirty hostel. And finding a slug on his piece of bread. And rowing with Gary. And one of their students getting thrown out of the Van Gogh Museum. And, you know, having a video taken of him. But other than that it was good – especially this moment right here, just being sat talking to each other over a cup of coffee.

‘I really love the moment we’re having right now,’ Mark says, and he reaches for Gary’s hand across the table. ‘No students, no colleagues – just us. That’s why we signed up in the first place, wasn’t it?

Their fingers interlace on the table, and for a moment Mark loses himself in Gary’s thumb rubbing the back of his hand. He knows about all the things Gary’s hands are capable of, and yet simply holding them is the best thing of all.

‘What about you?’ Mark asks. ‘What has been your favourite moment?’

‘I’m the same. I love moments like this where it’s just the two of us doing nothing.’ Then Gary wiggles his eyebrows. ‘I can’t pretend like I didn’t absolutely love sleeping with you, though. I can’t get over how good you are . . .’

Mark blushes and gives Gary his best bedroom eyes, which is . . . actually just how he looks at people most of the time. ‘You’re not bad either, Mr Barlow.’

‘I bet there’s loads we still haven’t done, though.’ Gary bites his lip. He wishes he’d get away with giving Mark much more than just a snog, but the coffee house has filled considerably, and there’s always a chance of students being around. ‘We do still have a whole day in Amsterdam ahead of us. We could do anything we want.’

‘Are you saying you wanna make love now, Mr Barlow?’

‘Maybe. Are you?’

Mark’s eyes flick down at his own hand in Gary’s, and he’s overcome with sudden shyness. ‘I’m actually not wearing any pants, you know,’ he whispers, and Gary leans forward on the table; tell me more. He’s always loved the idea of guys going commando.

Then Mark has to go and ruin it all. ‘I mean, the main reason I’m not wearing any pants is because I forgot to bring an extra pair. I actually sort of thought we’d be going home today. I wanted to buy a pair of boxers at a souvenir shop earlier, but all I could find was boxers with pictures of cannabis on them . . . But anyway, I’m not wearing any pants, is my point. I thought you’d like to know.’

‘You’re a mess, you are,’ Gary laughs. ‘Bloody gorgeous, though.’

‘Thank you, Mr Barlow.’
‘That said, we’ve kinda steered off course again – we’ve asked each other ten questions at best. It’s turning into our first date, this.’

Mark makes a face. ‘You’re right. We’re not really sticking to the rules, are we?’

Gary jerks his head at the bar, where a long queue of tourists has formed. ‘Try again after a refill?’

Gary gets them more coffee and tea and even two chocolate donuts, and they try again. Sticking to the rules this time, they take turns asking each other questions, just like they did on their “sort of” first date six months ago. Some questions are innocent and sweet, but others are dirtier:

‘What was your first time like?’ this comes from Mark.

‘Bloody short,’ Gary replies without bothering to elaborate. His next question is work-related. ‘If you had to pick one colleague to work on a project with, who would it be?’

‘Mr Williams. Oh, don’t give me that look, Gaz – at least I can concentrate when I work with Rob! And he was very kind when I first told him I fancied you, you know. He even made a PowerPoint with lots of useful information about you cos he thought it would help me get closer to you, and I think he’s going to do a very job being a support teacher. Anyway, I better ask you a question, shall I? Let’s see – are you going to be a mentor next school year?’

‘Christ, I hope not. I’m not made out to be a mentor, I’m not . . . How did your job interview for the Creative Writing job go?’

This question stumps Mark. He can’t really remember his job interview for his current position apart from that it went quite terribly. He vaguely recalls storming into a restroom to have a bit of a cry, but other than that, it’s a bit of a blur. ‘I don’t know. I think I cried in the bathroom afterwards. It’s a miracle I even got this job – all I remember is Mr Harrison being quite strict and me feeling terrible about everything.’

Even though Mark’s talking about something that Gary obviously wasn’t there for, Gary feels strangely like he knows this story already. He’s pretty sure Mark’s never told him about his job interview before, though, and if rumour spread that a teacher’s job interview had gone terribly, everyone at school would know about it. Weird.

Unfortunately, Gary doesn’t get the chance to ask further: Mark has already asked a question of his own. ‘What’s your favourite song to perform?’

‘Cry,’ Gary says after a second’s thought. ‘You should Google that. Who’s your favourite student from the new cohort? Apart from Seb.’

‘I really like the quiet girls – Florence and Saundra. They complimented me on the exercises I made for the workbook earlier. Let’s see – what else could I ask? Oh, I know – would you ever consider becoming a head teacher?’

‘Probably not. I don’t know.’ Gary has a thoughtful look on his face. ‘A lot of people have told me that I’d be good at it, but I don’t know how I’d manage being a head teacher while also trying to manage me pop star career. I think it’d be good, though. It’d be something a bit different. What are your feelings about marriage?’

Mark blushes. That’s one question he wasn’t expecting. ‘Er. I don’t know. I think – if it’s with the right person . . . but it’s so expensive, isn’t it? A lot of organisation comes into it. I don’t know how I’d feel about it.’
Gary’s unexpected question about marriage has made Mark’s stomach swoop and plunge to the floor. Truth be told, he wouldn’t mind getting married. At all. He’d love it, and he’s often imagined him and Gary being a married couple. But on the other hand, they haven’t even moved in together yet. Thinking about marriage would be like thinking about what he’s going to teach in March next year: it’s just a bit too far away, and a bit too unrealistic.

‘If you could change one thing about the school, what would it be?’ he asks in return.

Gary snorts. ‘Where would you like me to begin? I’d fit every classroom with aircon, for one. Feels like a bloody sauna during summer – and still Mr Harrison won’t allow students to bring water to class. It’s bloody ridiculous.’

‘You say that like you don’t like Mr Harrison very much,’ Mark says carefully. Similarly, Rob hasn’t had much positive to say about the Music department’s head teacher either.

‘Does anyone?’ Gary shivers even though he is not cold. ‘Just thinking about Harrison does me head in – I can’t think of any questions now!’

‘You could ask me about my favourite music,’ Mark offers.

‘We’ll be sat here all day if I do, mate,’ Gary laughs, and Mark makes a face as though that’s a fair comment. Then a cheeky grin spreads across Gary’s face, for he’s just thought of the perfect kinky question. ‘What was your first time like?’

Mark didn’t think he would be asked his own question in return. He blushes and takes a big sip of tea to steady the nervousness he feels all of a sudden. ‘It was nice. I was young, though, so I probably didn’t enjoy it as much as I should have done. We broke up two days later because she kept telling everyone I had a small willy.’

‘She should have gone to Specsavers.’

Mark makes the mistake of taking another sip of tea whilst Gary says this, and the drink comes out through his nose in an aborted laugh. The rest of his tea ends up down his throat the wrong way. He has a big coughing fit whilst tea drips unflatteringly down his face, and several members of staff approach their table to ask Mark if he’s all right.

‘Is he all right?’ one barista says.

‘Is he chocking in his donut? I know how to do the Heimlich,’ offers another helpful member of staff.

In the end, a red-faced Mark flicks away the worried members of staff with a wave of his hand, rasping that he’s okay thank you very much God bless thank you for your concern.

It takes Mark three minutes to catch his breath. ‘Oof. I thought I was about to die there,’ he tells Gary, who was watching the display with more amusement than worry on his face.

‘We wouldn’t want that,’ Gary says, a grin appearing in the corners of his mouth.

‘No.’ Mark takes a deep breath. ‘Phew. Where were we? It was my turn to ask something, I believe.’

‘It was.’

Mark thinks about it. They’re probably better off talking about innocent things – for now. He’ll ask Gary something kinky once he’s finished his tea. ‘Would you ever consider letting me help you with
your tours? I have a lot of ideas, you know. I’ve always loved the idea of designing a concert. It could be like Madonna’s, except with maybe elephants and a circus.’

‘As long as I’d still have me piano and a mic stand, sure,’ Gary says, though he’s sceptical about how having an elephant at a pop show would work out. ‘You’re not teaching Art History again next year, are you?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘The Art department hired a new teacher for the subject, thankfully. I like Creative Writing much more. Are you ever going to release a fifth album? I know you’ve already released four.’

‘My record label have told me they want me to release a fifth album this year, but I haven’t really had time to get into the studio lately. You said she earlier – you’ve been with both men and women?’

Mark finishes what remains of his tea. ‘Yeah. It took me ages to realise there was a word for it, though. Looking back I probably had crushes on loads of guys when I was younger.’

Mark thinks of what he wants to ask Gary now that it’s his turn. There’s a question that he’s been wanting to ask Gary for a while, but it’s a bit personal and he doesn’t want to offend Gaz. Then again, Gary did say he wanted to use the question game as an opportunity to find out new things about each other – and Gary’s pop star career is still very much one big question mark.

He’s going to ask The Question. The one question he’s always wanted to ask. The question he shouldn’t ask.

‘Have you ever slept with a fan, Mr Barlow?’

‘Yeah, I have.’ Gary doesn’t even blink.

‘And you enjoyed it?’

‘Pretty sure you’re forgetting the rules again, Mark,’ Gary retorts, but he answers anyway. ‘We both consented to it – of course I enjoyed it.’

This only fills Mark with a dozen more questions. He knows that this is a part of Gary’s career he should know nothing about, and yet he desperately wants to fill in the blanks because God knows it turns him on. ‘So your fans, they’d . . . go up to your dressing room?’

‘Sometimes. Most fans I’d meet at the hotel afterwards. And it’s not like I’d be eyeing up the bar trying to find the most attractive person in the room . . . it’d just happen naturally. Most nights I’d have sex with someone. But not anymore.’

Mark swallows. There’s another question he wants to ask, but its answer might hurt him because he’s never been able to experience it himself. ‘Did you ever take your fans home with you afterwards?’

Gary’s eyes flick down guiltily. There aren’t many things he regrets, but he does regret not taking Mark home with him when he had the chance. Protecting Mark from his pop star life did them more harm than good.

‘I’m guessing that’s a yes,’ Mark says flatly.

‘I’m so sorry, Mark. I shouldn’t have kept that life from you.’

‘It’s not like I’m innocent,’ Mark sighs. ‘I lied to you that I was renovating so you wouldn’t have to
see the state of me apartment. It’s so small that I don’t think we’ll even get to have sex.’

‘Good thing I live in a house with seven rooms then,’ Gary says, which thankfully earns him a big, hearty laugh from Mark. ‘I’m telling you, the second we get back to England I’m taking you home with me. I’m never going to keep anything from you ever again.’

Gary squeezes Mark’s hand then, and Mark can tell that he means it. ‘Is that a promise, Mr Barlow?’

‘Promise.’

‘You’ll even show me your Star Wars memorabilia?’ Mark asks.

‘Yes. All of it. We’ll do it next week. No, hang on – we’ll do it tomorrow evening. The evening we get back to England. We’ll grab our bags from the coach and go.’

Mark starts beaming. He’s always wanted to visit Gary’s house, but he never thought they’d be doing it tomorrow, when they return to England. ‘And we’ll stay at your house all night?’

‘All weekend. I promise. Tomorrow, I’m taking you home with me, Mark.’

It’s a date. They agree to go to Gary’s house tomorrow evening, the evening the coach arrives at the school’s parking lot to drop off the students; the last remaining minutes of their school excursion.

They’ll help the students reunite with their parents on the parking lot, pick up their own bags from the luggage compartment and take a cab to Gary’s house. Then, they’ll make love all day and all night until the start of the new school year on Monday. Mark won’t have any time to prepare his lessons over the weekend, but he won’t have a care in the world.

At least, that’s what he thinks now. In reality, he won’t visit Gary’s apartment at all. He’ll spend the weekend and all of next week with tears in his eyes because he can no longer see his boyfriend.

Tomorrow, when he returns to England, Mark’s world will be flipped upside down.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is slightly shorter than usual ones. It also features a bit of a plot twist, which you’ll probably see coming from a mile off.
PART ELEVEN

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Mark gets the shock of his life when he, Gary, Howard, Ms Brooke and the first-year students finally return to England.

We also discover more about Mark’s disastrous job interview several months ago.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LESSON FORTY-SEVEN: COMING HOME

8:30 PM.

Gary glances at his watch. It’s 8:30. He was supposed to meet Mark at the school parking lot half an hour ago, but he hasn’t seen Mark since they unloaded their bags from the luggage compartment inside the coach.

By now, it’s gone dark. It’s a chill evening in the north of England. It’s at least five degrees colder than it was in Amsterdam, and cloudier too. Every student has gone home. The coach that took the students from the shabby youth hostel in Amsterdam to the parking lot of the Vocational College of Music and Art has left by now.

The journey was short: Gary fell asleep within seconds and didn’t wake up again until the coach stopped in front of the familiar shapes of the school – a former warehouse. The excursion is over.

Next step? Taking Mark home with him.

Despite yesterday being the last night of the trip, the lads made love again last night. All it took was a grubby bathroom stall at a bar on Leidseplein, a busy square in Amsterdam, renowned for its nightlife. The music in the bar was so loud that it drowned out the moans Mark uttered when he came hotly into Gary’s fist, and they snuck out of the restroom as quickly as they entered it.

They managed to get back to the youth hostel right before Howard and Ms Brooke went to bed.

For Mark, last night was fun. It felt good to be able to let loose before lessons start on Monday. After all, teaching is an all-consuming job that leaves little to no time for going out, even when you have a pub as your next-door neighbours back in England. Once the school year kicks off properly, the boys’ lives will be so taken over by homework, lesson plans, meetings and e-mails that they won’t
even have time to watch Netflix. So when Gary offered the idea of going to a bar, Mark said yes immediately. Yesterday, Mark could just be Mark; not Mr Owen, the teacher who’s terrified of putting a foot wrong in case it costs him his job.

But yesterday’s night out in Amsterdam has now turned into a brand new evening in England, and Mark’s nowhere to be seen.

It worries Gary. He sits on a large cubed bollard on the school’s empty parking lot and texts Mark again. Mark hasn’t replied for the past hour or so, so Gary’s screen is just a lonely string of his own messages.

—Gary: Where are you mate ? I last saw you heading into school with Mr Harrison – he’s not bored you to death has he ?

—Gary: You’ve not forgotten about our meeting I hope ? I was going to take you home tonight…

—Gary: Getting worried now mate xx

Gary reads his first text again and thinks. After they’d unloaded their bags from the coach and talked to the parents who had come to pick up their kids, Harrison suddenly showed up and said he waited to speak to Mark in his office. Gary doesn’t know the exact details because he was talking to a student’s parents at the time, but Mark must have felt like he couldn’t decline the conversation. Two seconds later, Gary saw Mark following Harrison into the school with his massive rucksack on his back.

It looked a bit like the rucksack was carrying Mark rather than the other way around.

Mark and Harrison are as bad as each other when it comes to going on for hours without really talking about something, so Gary isn’t surprised Mark is running a little late. However, half an hour is pushing it. Surely they’re not still in conversation? And what would the conversation be about, anyway? Mark’s just come back from a week-long trip to Amsterdam. There isn’t anything to talk about.

Gary looks over his shoulder so he can see the school, as large and imposing as Gary remembers it being. At night, the school provides lessons for people who speak English as a foreign language. This means the lights are still on in the halls and some of the classrooms, represented as tiny squares of light. The window in Mr Harrison’s office is easily recognisable: it’s the only office with curtains as opposed to blinds. Black curtains.

Rob often jokes that Mr Harrison’s office has black curtains is because he’s a vampire. Sometimes, it’s as if Rob genuinely believes Mr Harrison is a terrible villain and his personal arch-enemy. Gary knows that Mr Harrison’s approach to education is often questionable, and often based on money, but he’s not as bad as Rob claims he is.

At least, that’s what Gary hopes. With Mark having been gone for ages now, it’s not difficult to wonder whether something bad has happened. The curtains in Mr Harrison’s office are open but the lights are off, so it’s obviously not being used.

What is taking Mark so long?

Gary decides he’s going to have a look inside. Mark could genuinely have forgotten his meeting with Gary. Mark goes tend to be rather forgetful, and if Harrison bored him to death with statistics and student numbers he could easily have gone home without remembering to meet Gary in the parking lot.
And that’s fine, Gary thinks to himself. They’ll just reschedule. Mark will probably want to work on his lesson plans anyway, knowing him.

Gary’s going to ask around, just in case. He crosses the yard in front of the school and walks up the stairs to the main entrance. Judging by the smell of grass that still lingers in the evening air, the grass has been freshly mowed: just in time for the start of lessons on Monday.

Stepping inside of the school’s main hall, Gary’s immediately greeted by an amicable wave from Cecelia, the receptionist. She’s the first face students and teachers see each morning. She’s in the middle of ordering a bunch of papers. They’re blank sick notes by the looks of it, enough to last the Music department a month.

‘What are you still doing here, love?’ asks Cecelia. A plump middle-aged woman with short hair and round glasses, she is easily one of the nicest women in the building. She knows almost everything about everyone, which is quite impressive given that she sees up to a thousand people every day. She also loves almost everyone – and loves complaining about those she does not. ‘I thought the coach left ages ago – you should be at home! The school is such a boring place in the evening.’

‘I’m looking for Mr Owen,’ Gary explains. ‘We were supposed to meet up at the parking lot half an hour ago to go over our timetables, but he never showed up. You haven’t seen him, have you?’

Cecelia makes a face. ‘Mr Owen left the school twenty minutes ago, love. He was in an awful hurry – he even dropped his phone.’

Cecelia reaches for a drawer underneath her desk and takes out an outdated Samsung Smartphone – Mark’s.

Seeing the phone makes Gary feel a knot of anxiety. As scatter-brained as he is, it’s not like Mark to leave his phone lying around. Not to mention the fact that the two of them text constantly.

‘Strange that Mark hasn’t come back to get it,’ Gary thinks out loud. ‘You sure he was in a hurry, Ce?’

‘Positive, love,’ says Cecelia. ‘He looked a bit upset as well, the poor lad. I even asked Mr Harrison about it afterwards – I asked him, do you know why Mr Owen’s just ran past my desk looking like someone’s dog got run over, but he just shook his head and left, can you believe it?’ Cecelia gives Gary a conspiratorial look over the rim of her glasses. ‘Don’t tell him I said this, love, but I don’t like him.’

‘Who, Mr Owen?’

‘Oh no, don’t be silly,’ Cecelia says, aghast. ‘I mean that Mr Harrison. Mr Owen’s an absolute angel; he always asks me how I’m doing in the morning. He once spent so much time long talking to me that I think he missed the start of his lesson, bless him.

‘Not Mr Harrison, though – I don’t know why he’s a head teacher, to be honest with you, Gary. I bet he said something to poor Mr Owen to upset him. No wonder he ran off like that.’

Gary suddenly feels cold all over. The knot of anxiety tightens in his tummy. Cecelia has a point: Mark’s meeting with Harrison must have been pretty upsetting if it made Mark run past the reception desk without so much acknowledging Cecelia and dropping his phone in the process.

What was their conversation about? And why couldn’t it wait till Monday, the official start of lessons? Something is up.
Gary gestures at Mark’s phone that Cecelia left on her desk. ‘Could I have that, Cecelia? Me and Mark work together quite closely – I might as well give it to him in person. I could visit him over the weekend.’

‘You’ll have to fill in a couple of forms if you wanna do that, I’m afraid, love,’ Cecelia warns. She rolls her eyes infinitesimally. Filling out forms is her least favourite part of her job, and sadly schools seem to care desperately about having forms of everything. ‘You know how much people care about forms these days – I had to fill out a form just for borrowing a roll of toilet paper the other day! It’s absolute madness.’

Cecelia lets out a frustrated sigh as she takes out a form titled “ARTICLE 3.11: TAKING RETURNED ITEMS FROM THE ‘RETURNED ITEMS’ CABINET, HENCEFORTH CALLED ‘LOST AND FOUND’”. It’s three pages long. ‘Just sign your name at the bottom, love – I’ll fill out the rest.’

‘Cheers, Ce.’ Gary flattens the form on Cecelia’s desk. He shakes his head as he looks at Mark’s phone again. ‘I have to say, I don’t have a good feeling about this, Mark leaving his phone here.’

‘Neither do I, love,’ Cecelia sighs as she takes back the papers Gary signed. ‘Do you know what might have upset him? He’s usually so cheerful.’

Gary shakes his head. Mark was in a pretty good mood when they got out of the coach, helping the driver empty the luggage compartment and talking to as many parents as he could. He also seemed genuinely excited about finally being able to visit Gary’s apartment. ‘I haven’t a clue, I’m afraid, Ce.’

‘Do you know what, love, I think you should visit him, just in case,’ Cecelia says as she begins filling out the first page of Article 3.11. She does this very slowly and reluctantly. ‘Beginning the school year in a bad mood isn’t good for anyone. You should have a good chat with him – that’ll cheer him up.’

I would if I actually knew where Mark lives, Gary thinks to himself, the thought popping up like a bad memory. It hadn’t occurred to him that he’s never been to visit Mark’s apartment before. Mark had always claimed that his house was being renovated, which was a lie Mark made up because he’s ashamed of where he lives.

How is Gary ever going to find out what happened to Mark if he doesn’t even know his address?

***

7:30 PM.

The coach from Amsterdam arrives at a parking lot filled with parents, friends and guardians. For a couple of seconds, Mark genuinely scans the parking lot for the faces of his own parents until he remembers that he’s a grown man who lives on his own.

Then he sees Gary snoring away gently on his right, and he smiles. Gary is pretty much family now.

Mark has bittersweet feelings when he gets out of the coach, his feet hitting the solid ground of the school’s parking lot where he’s been so many times. He’s happy that he’s back in England, but being home also means that his adventure with Gary is over.

That is, the Amsterdam part of their adventure is over. Their next adventure – finally visiting Gary’s house – is just around the corner.

‘Are we still up for tonight, Mr Barlow?’ Mark asks, just in case Gary’s forgotten. They’re stood
outside the coach, waiting for the driver to open the luggage compartment. Behind them, a small group of impatient students have gathered, all keen to grab their bags and reunite with their parents.

Gary gives Mark a sly smile. ‘You mean you still wanna sit together and discuss the trip together? You know how much I enjoy working with you, Mr Owen.’

Mark grins, and they help the driver unload all the bags from the coach. With Mark being small enough to fit into the luggage compartment without hitting his head on the ceiling, he’s put himself in charge of taking out the bags and handing them to the coach driver. The driver then hands the bag to Gary, who then gives them to their respective owners.

Within five minutes, nearly all of the bags have been handed out. All the first-year students have now either reunited with their parents who were waiting for them in the parking lot or headed home on their own.

‘Now, whose bag is this?’ Mark spots a luxurious-looking paper bag filled with pink tissue, tucked away in a dark corner. Mark grabs it, clambers out of the luggage compartment as gracefully as he can – “gracefully” meaning “hitting his head on the ceiling in the process” – and holds up the paper bag. He holds it up as though it might be explosive, for it has just occurred to him the bag is from an expensive Dutch lingerie shop. ‘Is this yours, Mr Barlow?’

Before Gary can answer, a very flustered Mr Donald jumps out from behind the coach, snatches the bag out of Mark’s hand and clutches it tightly to his chest. His face is red. ‘I’ll replace all your whiteboard markers with permanent ones if you tell anyone about this,’ he warns both of them, and he sprints off with a trail of dust in his wake.

The students haven’t seen him since.

Mark rubs the back of his head. ‘That was weird. Do you think he bought those for his wife, Gaz?’

‘Probably,’ Gary laughs, and he and Mark help the driver close the massive door of the luggage compartment. Behind them, the parking lot has filled up with yet more parents. Every student who isn’t otherwise travelling home alone has now reunited with their parents or guardians, no doubt reliving the wonderful things they did on the trip – and skipping all the bad stuff like a classmate being thrown out of the Van Gogh museum.

Likewise, Mark finds himself thinking about the trip too, and how he wishes he had someone waiting for him in the parking lot. ‘It must be so nice to have someone to come home to,’ he sighs wistfully, his words deliberately aimed at Gary; meaning, *I wish I could come home to you every day.*

‘You have me now,’ Gary whispers, and he gives Mark a quick blink—or-you’ll-miss-it kiss on the cheek. Everyone in the parking lot blinked, so everyone missed it. ‘From now on, you’ll be allowed to come visit me whenever you want, night or day. What we had in the five-star hotel, I want that every day. Starting today.’

Mark smiles. He feels butterflies; funny really, because he’s been in love with Gary for over half a year. It seems like his feelings for Gary are only about to get stronger. ‘Sounds good, Mr Barlow. Now, shall we have a chat with all those parents over there? I’d love to get to know them, wouldn’t you?’

As ever, the exciting potential of talking to parents turns Mark into a bit of a blabber-mouth, talking at a million miles an hour as they cross the parking lot. ‘Do you think that is Henry’s mum over there? She’s got the same blue streak in her hair, look. I’ve never talked to a student’s parents before,
did you know? This is my first time, actually. I hope it goes well. I mean, not that I’m worried. There’s no reason to be worried, is there? Parents are just people, and I’m very good at talking to people. You know.

Gary just grins.

They make their way to the ocean of people in the parking lot whilst the coach departs slowly behind them. As ever, Mark quickly loses himself in his own kindness. Still carrying his massive rucksack on his back, filled with mementoes from the trip, he talks to pretty much every adult he can find, retelling positive moments he’s remembered for each student because that’s just the kind of teacher he is.

The parents take to Mr Owen immediately. Who is this attentive teacher who has noticed even the usually-ignored quiet kids? They all love him within minutes.

Meanwhile, Gary has just been accosted by the mother of a younger student. She’s a fan of his music, and she wants to ask Gary for a selfie. Her child looks as though he would rather die than having to deal with his mother being a fangirl, because everyone knows you shouldn’t bother Gary Barlow for selfies when he’s busy working as a teacher.

Controversially, Mr Donald has just slipped away from the crowd. While he loves teaching, he doesn’t really like being in big crowds because it makes him feel a bit awkward and shy. He loathes most parents, and if he could he’d skip every single parents’ evening.

Besides, Mr Harrison isn’t here to lecture him for not sticking around to talk to everyone.

That is, Mr Harrison is here. He is very much present in the parking lot.

He just isn’t paying attention to Howard slipping into his car.

Mark has just spoken to a pair of grandparents when he feels someone tapping on his shoulder. He turns around and feels a weird, unexplainable dread settling in his stomach.

It’s Mr Harrison.

Mark’s mood worsens, instantly. He tries to smile, but it’s hard to smile when your head teacher is looking at you with eyes like a snake’s.

‘Mark Owen.’ It’s all Mr Harrison says. It’s a greeting devoid of emotion. Mark feels like he ought to make up Mr Harrison’s monosyllabic greeting by doing a ridiculous amount of talking.

‘Good evening, Mr Harrison, Sir – it’s a nice day today, isn’t it? Have you spoken to any of the students yet? They’ve had a wonderful trip, you know. It must have been so nice for them, travelling to a foreign country for maybe the first time. I could show you some photos, if you want?’

Mark reaches for his pocket so he can show Mr Harrison the photos he took on his phone, but the head teacher simply responds by holding up his hand.

‘I am afraid I do not have time for pleasantries today, Mr Owen.’ Mr Harrison’s voice sounds as flat as ever. They’re standing in the light of a streetlamp – it’s nearly dark – and it’s making the head teacher’s face look more intimidating than ever, like when you shine a flashlight underneath your face to make yourself look like a ghost. ‘I was rather hoping you would join me in my office when you are done chatting, Mr Owen. There are things that need discussing.’

Mark gives a nervous laugh. ‘C-Could it wait, Mr Harrison, Sir? I – I was hoping to talk to more of
our students’ p-parents . . .’

‘It cannot,’ Mr Harrison retorts. He crosses his arms. ‘Or need I remind you that you are technically still at work? It would do you well to do as you are told, Mr Owen. Even though the lessons start on Monday, the timetables can still be changed in favour of a Creative Writer teacher with more experience.’

Mark finds that he is trembling, and not because of the heavy souvenirs in his backpack. He has no choice but to do as he’s told. Again. ‘Allow me tell Mr B-Barlow I’m going to be late, at least, Sir. We – we were going to reflect o-on the trip after everyone had left.’

Mr Harrison does not move a muscle. The only thing he says is this: ‘I am not being factitious when I say that teachers cannot be easily replaced, Mr Owen. After all, you replaced Ms Turnbull, did you not? Remember? Ms Turnbull, the Art History teacher? I believe we have not heard of her since. The same could happen to you.’

Mark’s brain briefly registers the sentence “The same could happen to you” as a thinly-veiled threat. He quickly tells himself he’s being silly. Head teachers don’t threaten other teachers.

‘Does that means I’m allowed to go, Mr Harrison, Sir?’

Mr Harrison makes a face that looks like an unimpressed prune. Mark isn’t sure whether that means he’s allowed to walk up to Gary and tell him that he’s going to be late, but for the sake of his relationship with Gary he assumes that he is.

Head teachers don’t threaten other teachers.

Mark politely excuses himself and pushes himself through the thinning crowd of students and parents. This involves quite a lot of apologising, for he’s still carrying his massive rucksack, and he manages to bump it into quite a lot of people.

When he looks to his right, he can see that Mr Harrison is still standing in exactly the same place as Mark left him, an indecipherable look in his eyes; a black pen popping out of the chest pocket of his jacket.

The black pen is the only remotely human thing about that man, Mark thinks miserably to himself. He is by far the worst thing about the school. Nearly every bad thing that has happened to Mark at work had to do with him: having to teach Art History; being reprimanded for not supervising an exam properly; the sleepless nights . . . They were all because of Mr Harrison.

Mark isn’t the type of person to hate people, but what he thinks of Mr Harrison comes pretty close.

Mark eventually finds his boyfriend talking to a student and her parents, Mr and Mrs Bunzl. Mark quickly introduces himself to Mr and Mrs Bunzl and turns to Gary.

‘Mr Barlow. Hello. You know how you said you wanted us to talk about the trip tonight? We may have to postpone that for a couple of minutes. Mr Harrison asked me if I wanted to talk to him, you see, and, well, I don’t want to leave him hanging.’ Then Mark turns to the parents, who have been listening in. For the parents’ understanding, he adds, ‘Mr Harrison’s the Music department’s head teacher, you know.’

‘Oh yes,’ says Mr Bunzl. He turns to his wife. ‘We talked to him on the open day, didn’t we? Very nice man.’

Gary has to fight the urge to scoff at that. ‘Did he say what he wanted to talk to you about, Mr
Mark shakes his head. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing. Probably something having to do with student numbers.’ He tries to put on a brave face, but he finds that he does not feel brave at all. He wishes he could reach out and squeeze Gary’s hand for comfort. ‘Shall we meet back here at eight? I’m sure me and Mr Harrison will be done talking by then.’

‘Sounds good to me.’ Gary checks his watch. It’s 7:40. ‘I’ll be here for a while, anyway –Mrs Bunzl wanted to discuss exams, didn’t you, Mrs Bunzl?’

‘We did, yes, Mr Barlow,’ says Mrs Bunzl, her eyes glinting because she’s obviously another secret Mr Barlow fan. ‘We’re ever so curious about what exams our daughter is going to have to take this year.’

‘You’ve heard it, Mr Owen – I’m not going anywhere,’ Gary says, and he winks.

‘Then I’ll meet you back here in about half an hour,’ Mark says. He again shakes Mr and Mrs Bunzl’s hands. ‘Nice to meet you, Mr and Mrs Bunzl. Have a safe journey home.’

Mark flashes Gary an uncertain smile and heads back to Mr Harrison, who’s still waiting for him in the exact same spot; arms crossed, eyes as narrow as slits. A black pen is popping out of the pocket of his suit jacket.

Muttering quietly to himself as he pushes through the crowd, Mark’s absolutely convinced that he’s about to be told something terrible.

|LESSON FORTY-EIGHT: THE BEGINNING|

5:15 PM, SEVEN MONTHS AGO

‘Tell me about yourself, Mr Owen.’

‘Well, I’m M-Mark, and I b-became a qualified teacher a couple of weeks ago. I trained on the job, and now I suppose I’m here.’

‘And during your traineeship, you taught Creative Writing?’

Mark picks up the cup of coffee in front of him. He instantly regrets it. His hands shake so badly that the coffee – tasteless brown drab – almost tips over the edge of the coffee cup like a wave. He puts the cup back down and clasps his hands together on the interviewer’s desk to stop them from shaking. ‘I taught Creative Writing, yes. I w-was a songwriter before this, you see, a-and I’ve always sort of been interested in getting other people to write. It’s w-why I became a teacher, you know.’

The interviewer – one of the school’s head teachers – picks up a page from Mark’s CV. Mark’s really only had three jobs so far, so the CV is pretty sparse. It consists of: a summer job at a clothing store; a boring position as a clerk at a local bank and his more recent songwriting career, which has barely kept his head above water. His teaching position at his previous school was just an internship.

The interviewer speaks without looking up from Mark’s CV. ‘If I were to hire you, Mr Owen, what would you bring to the job other than your experience in the music industry? You have only been a qualified teacher for a couple of weeks, so if someone came into my office with ten years of
experience I would feel much more compelled to hire them. What makes you special, Mr Owen?’ The interviewer adds an emphasis on special, and he sits back in his chair with a look in his eyes that makes an involuntary shiver run up and down Mark’s spine.

He always thought job interviewers were supposed to make you feel more comfortable.

For lack of an answer, Mark looks around the room for inspiration. This quickly turns out to be useless, for the head teacher’s office is as bland as they come. There are no flowers. No photos of loved ones adorn the walls, and there are no signs that the head teacher has any love for music or art. The only things in the office that could be accused of having any personality at all are the exam envelopes on the desk in front of him.

Next to the exam envelopes, Mark spots a pile of forms. They’re forms third-year students have filled in by the looks of it, requesting a resit. When the interviewer sees Mark looking at the pile, he casually slips them into a drawer.

Everything else in the room is pretty dull. As a result, Mark finds no inspiration apart from what he already knows about himself: the fact that he’s kind and creative and a hard worker, filled with a dozen ideas that he frankly has no idea what to do with. He knows that he can be a good teacher if he sets his mind to it. He just needs to find the right school, which this one might just be.

Mark sent out over twenty application letters, but the Vocational College of Music and Art is the only one that replied. The school is only a thirty-minute drive by bus away, and it seems to be in quite a nice area. It does extremely well on exam tables, and many students at the school have gone on to become successful artists and performers. Mark knows schools are much more than alumni and exam results, but he’d love to be a part of a school that obviously knows what it’s doing. His creativity would fit perfectly here.

‘I’m very creative,’ Mark begins to say. He’s not that used to speaking positively about himself, and his own compliment tastes foreign on his tongue. ‘I have a lot of lesson ideas that I wanna try out, and –’

The interviewer holds up his hand, indicating stop. ‘This is an art school. Everyone here is creative. Try again.’

Mark’s stumped. He doesn’t know what to say about himself apart from what he’s already written on his CV. ‘As y-you can see on my CV, Mr Harrison, Sir, I’ve worked as a songwriter for a c-couple of years. That means I can tell students what it’s like to –’

‘We already have teachers who have worked as songwriters,’ Mr Harrison, the interviewer, points out. He’s beginning to sound quite bored – or maybe that’s just how he sounds all the time. ‘We do not need another teacher telling students what it is like to work in the music industry. If you cannot offer something special, you do not belong here.’

Mark is beginning to feel quite panicked. He doesn’t know what makes him special. He hasn’t been a teacher for long enough, and he’s so unused to highlighting his own qualities that he frankly has no idea what he’s good at. He’s an all-right teacher. He’s an all right songwriter. His songs aren’t even that good really; they’re just all right songs that paid the bills for a couple of weeks.

If Mark were to ask his mates to describe him, they’d say that he is a terrible worrier and that he’s kind and warm. The latter is a trait that he values tremendously; there are plenty of people in the world who need kindness in their lives, and even more people who are not kind at all. In an alternative universe, he’d make an excellent Hufflepuff.
‘I – I guess what makes me special is that I’m kind and polite – and always willing to make time for my students. I’ll help them out no m-matter what. That’s i-important, isn’t it?’

The head teacher is shaking his head. ‘Kindness and teaching do not go well together, Mr Owen. This is not a kindergarten. Try again.’

Mark never quite finishes his coffee, and he never quite manages to name something that makes him “special”.

Five minutes later, he leaves the head teacher’s office feeling utterly miserable.

There’s no way Mr Harrison will give him the job.

Mark feels the disappointment so strongly that he’s overcome with emotion. He aimlessly walks through the labyrinthine corridors of the school with no idea where he’s supposed to go, increasingly feeling like he’s about to break down and cry. He’s alone; the interview took place at the end of the school day, and there’s no-one around. He mutters nonsensically to himself as he tries to find the exit, his vision blurring.

He finds a restroom instead.

Mark darts into the restroom and locks himself inside an empty stall. He closes the lid of the toilet and sits. The door of the stall he chose has been completely covered up in drawings of cartoon characters and nude women, but he hardly notices them. He sits with his face hidden in his hands and cries.

He’s never had an interview for a teaching position before, but that was absolutely terrible. Terrible. Why couldn’t he just tell Mr Harrison what makes him special? He wishes he’d told Mr Harrison about that time he asked his students to write a rap; or that time he helped a student pass his exams by spending extra time with her. That’s what makes him special.

Or, at least, that’s what he used to think. He doesn’t know what makes him special anymore. He doesn’t even know if he’s a good teacher, really. If this job interview is anything to go by, his following interviews will be absolute torture.

Of course, that’s assuming he’ll even find any suitable teaching positions at all. Creative Writing is a pretty niche subject, and there aren’t that many schools that offer it.

He’s in trouble.

Assuming he’s alone, Mark cries openly and loudly over his own incompetence. He cries and he cries until a soft sound like someone tapping their finger on the vandalised door of his stall makes him start. He looks down, and he sees a pair of perfectly polished shoes peeping underneath the underside of his stall.

‘You all right there, mate?’

Heat creeps up underneath Mark’s collar. He could kick himself; he’s not alone after all. Someone is standing outside his stall!

Mark sniffs and rubs the tears off his cheeks even though the other guy obviously can’t see what he looks like. ‘I-It’s just a cold,’ he lies. He sniffs again. ‘It’s n-nothing.’

‘Doesn’t sound like nothing to me, mate,’ the stranger at the other side of the stall says. He sounds kind. Northern. Older. Based on his shoes – the only part of the stranger Mark can see – the guy
must be pretty well off; the shoes look terribly expensive. ‘Wanna talk about it?’

Mark sniffs so loudly that he sounds like a trumpeting elephant. ‘T-Thank you, but no, n-not really . . . I just wanna be alone for a second.’ He tears off a string of toilet paper and loudly blows his nose with it. ‘I’ll be fine on me own, t-thanks . . .’

In spite of Mark’s desire to be alone, the polished shoes standing outside his door refuse to leave. ‘Would you like me to get someone from student counselling instead? I know a guy who’s really good when it comes to this stuff.’

Mark has to rub his nose when he feels a trail of snot trickling down his face. It’s bloody annoying how unflattering crying is; it’s like your body deliberately tries to make you feel even more miserable than you already do. ‘I-I’m not a student.’

The polished black shoes shuffle uncomfortably outside Mark’s stall. ‘If you’re not a student, then why are you sat there crying?’ Pause. ‘You’re not a colleague of mine, are you? You don’t sound like one of the teachers I know.’

Great, Mark thinks miserably to himself, I’ve been caught crying by one of the teachers. Now I’m definitely not going to get the job.

‘I’m not a teacher,’ Mark whispers. ‘I mean, I am . . . but – but not here.’ He blows his nose again, and he’s glad there’s a stall separating him and the stranger, for he’s pretty sure he must look like a snotty mess. ‘I never will be.’

‘What do you mean, you never will be?’

Mark’s eyes flick up at the door that’s separating him and the stranger. It’s covered in all sorts of lewd drawings that no-one ever bothered scrubbing off, and for a second he wishes the door was transparent so he could see what the stranger looks like. If he had to guess, he’d say the stranger at the other side of the door has short brown hair. He’s probably tall, too. Tall and handsome.

He sounds handsome, anyway. Handsome and kind. Warm. If this guy managed to get a teaching position here, he must have that special something that Mr Harrison is looking for: great lesson plans maybe, or twenty-year experience.

It makes Mark trust the guy unconditionally.

‘I came here to do a job interview,’ Mark admits, ‘but it was awful. I didn’t even know how to answer any of the questions. It made me feel terrible, like – like I’m the worst teacher in the world. I hope I’m not – I didn’t spend two years trying to become a teacher just to be told I’m crap at it . . .’

Mark sighs so heavily that it makes his entire body shake. ‘I don’t know what to do anymore. If I don’t get a job as a teacher here then I won’t be able to work anywhere.’

‘You’re not terrible,’ the stranger says. ‘You wouldn’t have been invited to a job interview if you were.’

Mark feels a spark of hope in his chest. No-one’s ever told him he’s not a terrible teacher before. Despite obviously graduating and doing a decent job at his internship, he’s never really been told he’s actually any good at teaching. ‘You r-really think so?’

‘I do, mate. Stop being so hard on yourself.’ Pause. ‘Who did you say you had your interview with?’

‘I don’t know if I can say that.’
‘Was it Mrs Stohl?’

‘It was an older guy.’

‘Mr Harrison, then.’

Mark mumbles a sound of affirmation, and the stranger chuckles as if Mr Harrison being a terrible interviewer does not surprise him. ‘D’you know what, I’ll put in a good word for you. I’m having a meeting with Harrison today anyway, so I might as well mention you casually.’

Mark has to blow his nose again when another trail of snot decides to make its way down his face. ‘Why w-would you do that? You don’t even know me. I could be a terrible teacher for all you know.’

‘You’re sat here crying cos your job interview went badly. That obviously means you care, which is good enough for me.’ There’s a long pause as the stranger seems to be considering something. ‘Unless you’d rather I didn’t, mate? I can imagine your interview with Mr Harrison wasn’t a good first impression of the school. If you wanna apply for a job elsewhere, I can understand.’

Mark doesn’t know what to say. He’s pretty sure putting in a good word for a job candidate you don’t even know goes against about a million school rules, and yet this stranger is offering to talk about him to Mr Harrison, the head teacher. Are all teachers at art schools this kind? Or has Mark just been lucky?

Frankly, he could use all the help he needs. If he doesn’t get this job, he’ll have to start applying for jobs at schools that are over an hour away by car – and Mark doesn’t have a car.

‘You’d really put in a good word for me?’

‘I would, mate. Yeah. Like I said – you care. That’s good enough for me. There are plenty of teachers who don’t.’

Mark wishes he could come out and shake the stranger’s hand, but he’d have to wash his hands first, and he probably looks like a mess. The only thing he can do is thank the stranger, profusely. ‘Thank you so much. You have no idea how much this means to me.’

‘No problem, mate. What did you say your name was?’

Even though this is a fairly straightforward question, Mark doesn’t know how to answer it. Shame washes over his body like a wave. Does he really want this stranger to know his name? After he’s just been caught crying? In a restroom? He can’t think of anything more shameful. ‘Er. I don’t really – I don’t really know . . .’

‘You don’t know your name, mate?’

‘I do. It’s just – I don’t know you, and . . .’

‘You’re ashamed because of your bad job interview, is that it?’

Mark blushes some more. ‘Yeah. You know, what if I get the job after all and everyone will find out how badly my job interview went? I don’t want students to know that about me. The only thing I’ve ever wanted was for students to think I’m a good teacher. It’s my dream, actually. I wanna become one of those teachers who’s – who’s respected, you know. But not one of those really strict teachers. I don’t think I’d be like that.’
Mark catches himself mid-monologue. Why is he talking so much? He doesn’t even know this guy. ‘Anyway. I don’t want anyone to find out about my interview, is all.’

‘Then tell me your last name only. I promise I won’t tell anyone what happened. I’ll just put in a good word for you and forget this ever happened, okay?’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise, mate.’

Mark swallows. What is it about this stranger that makes him put so much faith in him? ‘The name’s Owen. Yeah. Owen.’

‘Owen. Right. I can’t promise if me talking to Mr Harrison will actually help, all right, but you never know, eh? Harrison likes me, he does – he’ll listen to me, I reckon. It’d help if I knew what you looked like, though,’ the stranger adds awkwardly. ‘After you’ve left the stall, obviously.’

Mark finds that his cheeks have turned into an even deeper shade of red. He desperately does not want the stranger to see him. What if this guy is actually very handsome and his first impression of Mark is him looking all snotty and red-eyed?

‘I . . . I’d rather not show me face at the moment,’ Mark stammers. ‘Not b-because I don’t want you to see it, but I – I look like a mess and I don’t want you to think that’s how I’d look like when I teach. Cos it isn’t. I’m wearing me best waistcoat, actually. But me face is one big bubble of snot. You know, because I’ve been crying. You were right when I said I didn’t have a cold. I don’t.’

Gary chuckles, and Mark’s heart does the weirdest flutter. ‘All right then, Mr Owen. I’ll tell Mr Harrison that he needs to consider hiring a guy with a good waistcoat.’

Mark chuckles too. His heart feels lighter already. ‘Thank you, Mister . . .’

‘Barlow. Mr Barlow. If you’re lucky you might get to work with me.’

**|LESSON FORTY-NINE: THE END|

8:00 PM, TODAY

It’s not until Mark takes off his heavy rucksack and sits in the chair opposite Mr Harrison that he remembers the day of his job interview. The job interview had been so disastrous that he had completely blocked it out.

Until now, he’d genuinely forgotten that the guy he met in the restrooms afterwards was Gary. His Gary. Gary Barlow, the guy he loves most in the world. The guy he wants to move in with. The guy he wants to marry, one day.

Mark felt an indescribable connection with Gary from the moment they met in the staff room in April, and now he understands why. He’s known Gary since day one.

Gaz must have put in a good word for him after his disastrous job interview. He changed Mark’s life before Mark even knew they were going to get together.

Gary saved him.

But as Mr Harrison stares at him many months later, Mark quickly realises that he isn’t going to be
saved tonight. He’s on his own this time, and things are about to get a lot worse than his job interview. Mark knows that already. He doesn’t know why, but he can feel it in the air.

Mr Harrison smiles at Mark like a lion snarling at a wounded animal, and Mark braces himself for impact.

*This is it*, he thinks. Mr Harrison is about to tell him what a crap teacher he is.

‘Tell me about your trip to Amsterdam, Mr Owen.’

This catches Mark off guard. He was half-expecting Mr Harrison to say something terrible like, “Mr Owen, I have decided that you are without question the worst teacher in the world. Please take your bags and leave.”

Being asked about the trip puts Mark at ease. He relaxes and lets out a deep breath.

Mr Harrison is just curious, is all. This is a regular conversation about how the trip has been, nothing more.

‘Do you mean in general, Mr Harrison, Sir?’

Mr Harrison clasps his hands on his desk. ‘Just your thoughts, please.’

Mark thinks about it. If he had to summarise the trip to Amsterdam, he’d say that it was both the most beautiful and stressful time he’s ever had. He’d say that Gary Barlow is by far the best shag he’s ever had, hands down.

But Mark can’t say all that, and it’s not like Harrison cares about matters of the heart. The only thing Mr Harrison cares about is numbers and statistics: things you can measure, but not *feel*.

Frankly, Mark has no idea about numbers and statistics. To Mark, whether a school trip has been successful depends on the feeling it’s given him.

‘I thought the trip was wonderful, you know,’ Mark begins to say. ‘The students were obviously enjoying themselves, and I thought Amsterdam was so beautiful. We got round to doing all the things we set out to do on the itinerary Ms Brooke made for us, and so many students came up to me afterwards to tell me they’d enjoyed the trip. I could tell that they loved it.’

Mark stops to see whether what he’s just said has impressed Mr Harrison in any way, but the head teacher’s face remains unchanged, like a mask.

It makes Mark feel rather uncomfortable and nervous. Has he not said the right things? Should he show him some of the photos he made after all? Maybe Mr Harrison wants him to say more about the places they’ve visited.

As ever, Mark’s increasing nervousness causes him to blabber, at length. There must be *something* he can say that will impress his head teacher. ‘We went to many places, you know. We went to Madame Tussauds, with all the amazing wax figures, and we spent many hours exploring the city streets. I think a lot of students thought all the walking was very tiring, but I kind of enjoyed it. It’s very good for you, walking. Especially when it’s in a city like Amsterdam, because the city has so many wonderful parks and green spaces. Obviously we didn’t just walk, though – we used public transport as well. The students were quite excited to get on a foreign tram for the first time, although we all thought they were quite slow compared to the ones here . . . Oh, and we also visited the Anne Frank house a couple of days ago, which is just such a sobering experience, isn’t it? We sort of talked about it afterwards, as a group, and everyone was very glad we went. But we also went to the
local conservatory and visited many interesting museums. It was a good trip overall, I thought.’

Here, Mr Harrison’s mask shows the first signs of a crack. His voice sounds sharper than it ever has. ‘Your visits to the museums of Amsterdam were interesting, you say?’

‘Er. Yes?’ Mark looks at Mr Harrison uncertainly. ‘What does his head teacher want him to say? The trip went well, didn’t it? ‘We all thought the visits to the museums were very interesting, Sir. The students learned a lot, and we all th—’

The head teacher laughs out loud, freezing the words in Mark’s mouth. It’s a mocking laugh; the sort that makes your blood run cold. ‘You think your visit to the Van Gogh Museum was interesting, Mr Owen? If I recall correctly, that visit was rife with errors. Or have you not seen the video that a student took of you?’

‘Oh.’ The air leaves Mark like a balloon being punctured. He feels an uncomfortable knot being tied in his stomach.

_Harrison didn’t ask me to meet him because he wanted to talk about the trip, Mark realises miserably._

_He’s here to tell me off._

***Given your inexperience, I can understand students might not listen to you. After all, museums are uninteresting places. I do not blame our students for deciding that they would rather vandalise expensive paintings than listening to their teachers. If you have never been on a school excursion before, keeping students behaved can be a monumental task. I do not blame you for how you handled the situation at the Van Gogh Museum.

‘Unfortunately, this is not the first time you have made errors, Mr Owen’

A foreign mix of feelings blooms in Mark’s chest: mainly anger and frustration, for he no longer believes himself to be “inexperienced”, but also fear.

No, not just fear — _terror_. Absolute terror.

The way Mr Harrison is looking at him with those dark, unreadable eyes; dressed all in black as though he’s attending someone’s funeral . . .

Mark doesn’t have a good feeling about this.

‘Quite frankly, Mr Owen, the video of you at the Van Gogh Museum is only the tip of the iceberg. In fact, I fail to name any positive things you have done since you arrived here.

‘You have been struggling with class management since your first term – so much so that you let certain groups leave your lessons thirty minutes early. Obviously, this goes against all school rules. When I confronted you about this, you claimed you were merely being kind. I say that you were desperate.

‘Then I catch you texting in the middle of an exam. Exams are the most important part of a student’s school life. They must not be tinkered with, ever. The fact that you were texting tells me that you do not take exams serious at all.’

‘I do,’ Mark stammers. ‘It’s just – I didn’t _know_. No-one had told me how you’re supposed to invigilate’
'I am aware, Mr Owen. You only got away with it because my colleagues had not instructed you properly. You should be thankful that I was not harsher on you.

'That said, I wish I had been harsher on you. I should never have allowed you to get away with it. In fact, I am not sure if I should have employed you at all. You seem terribly inexperienced still, and if word ever spread that this school has mistakenly employed a poor teacher, children might not want to enrol anymore. You see the dilemma that puts me in, yes?'

Mark can barely move his head into a nod, for his body has turned into stone. He wants to tell Mr Harrison that he isn’t a poor teacher and that he’s no longer inexperienced and that what happened at the Van Gogh museum wasn’t really his fault and that he’s sorry for texting Gary during that one exam, but he can’t. Mr Harrison’s accusations have rendered him speechless.

But it gets worse. Harrison says, ‘A couple of weeks ago, I might have been persuaded to let you get away with your poor behaviour. I would have asked you to attend a course about class management, or told you to read more books. However, I fear that you have made things rather difficult for yourself. Have a look at this.’

Here, Mr Harrison opens the exam envelope in front of him. He takes out three documents: an exam attendance sheet and two exams papers, handed in by two different students. They’re formal letters by the looks of it.

Mr Harrison hands Mark the attendance sheet. Mark barely manages to look at it; there’s a wet filmy sheet over his eyes that he has to blink away, and everything has gone a bit blurry.

‘Tell me what you see, Mr Owen.’

Mark tries his hardest. His heart does an unpleasant little jump when he notices that he’s the one who signed the exam attendance sheet – meaning that he supervised the exam. Mark has only ever invigilated twice: the infamous exam when he made the mistake of texting Gary; and another one, an English writing exam. This attendance list Mr Harrison handed him is from the second (English writing) exam, the one that he thought went all right. Was he wrong?

‘Mr Owen?’ Mr Harrison is getting impatient now. He drums his fingers on the edge of his desk. ‘I thought I told you to have a look at the list in your hands?’

Mark swallows. He tries to keep calm even though he has started shaking. ‘It’s the attendance list of an exam I supervised a couple of months ago. Group M_DC3A, a Dancing and Choreography group. It’s a–an English exam. Ms Brooke was supposed to supervise the exam, but then she got ill, and I was sort of asked to take over.’ He gives his head teacher an uncertain look. ‘I – I thought it went well.’

‘Hmm. Have a look at this.’ Mr Harrison hands Mark two papers from the envelope. ‘Two students handed this in during the exam you invigilated. Again, tell me what you can see.’

Mark tries to hold one exam paper in each hand, but he’s shaking so much that he has to put the papers flat on Mr Harrison’s desk. Once more, his eyes have filled with tears. Mr Harrison is watching him like a hawk, and Mark can’t shake the feeling that something terrible is about to happen to him.

‘The s–students had to write letters,’ Mark says bravely. His nose has gone runny, and he has to wipe his nose with the back of his hand. ‘They’re formal letters – letters you write to a company or – or when you’re applying for a job. One of these was made by Timo. I – I remember him, because he was wearing a Madonna shirt that day. The other student, Samuel . . .’
Mark looks at the name on the right-hand corner of the exam papers. It says: Samuel . . . something. He can’t quite make it out. ‘I don’t remember him.’

‘Have a look at the assignment,’ Mr Harrison presses. He sounds even more impatient now, on the verge of explosive, so Mark does as he’s told even though he’s shaking and on the verge of tears.

The letters are identical.

Mark’s hand shoots towards his mouth. The two letters are the same. Exactly the same. They use the same sentence structure, the same syntax, the same salutation – even the tiny details laid out in the letter are the same, with both Timo and Samuel telling the recipient that they can be reached via a phone number that ends in 56. Only the handwriting is different: Timo has written his letter in large blue letters; Samuel’s used loopy handwriting in black ink.

Mark looks up, and a tear rolls down his cheek. ‘I – I had nothing to do with this, Sir.’

‘But you invigilated the exam,’ says Mr Harrison. ‘Therefore, you had something to do with it.’

Mark opens his mouth to say something, but Mr Harrison holds up his hand, silencing him.

‘I cannot stress how unfortunate it is that this has come to light, Mr Owen. If we had been more fortuitous, we might actually have gotten away with it, for the exam took place several months ago and we tend to forget about exams the moment we have marked them.

‘Alas, we were paid an unannounced visit by Ofsted last summer, and when they said they wanted to have a look at a random exam envelope, this is the one we gave them. It was purely incidental, you see. We do not have any control over what Ofsted asks of us.

‘Unfortunately, it would now appear that we accidentally gave them an exam envelope that contained two identical exam papers. You can imagine that the people from Ofsted were very shocked about this; so shocked, Mr Owen, that they will be paying us several more visits to ascertain whether the school is fit to set exams at all. They might even decide that the school has to close entirely.

‘Not to mention the small fact that this discovery renders the entire exam void, meaning that all the students have to sit the exam again – all because you failed to pay attention, Mr Owen. I cannot imagine they will be very happy with that, for students have to pay a small fee for every exam they retake. It is a terrible inconvenience.’

Mr Harrison narrows his eyes. He gives Mark the sort of look that makes your blood run cold. ‘Unless you helped the students cheat, Mr Owen?’

‘No,’ Mark splutters, his face now streaked with tears, ‘I – I’d never do something like that. Never, Sir. Please believe me.’

Mark feels like his world has gone upside-down. An hour ago he was still talking to his lover, looking forward to the weekend and all the love-making that was to come, and now he’s being accused of helping two students cheat on an exam that took place nearly half a year ago.

He thought the exam had gone well. He’d arrived on time. He’d handed out pens to everyone. He’d diligently put a small tick next to every student’s name on the attendance sheet. He didn’t check his phone and he certainly didn’t do anything he wasn’t supposed to do.

The exam had gone well.
And yet Mr Harrison is telling him otherwise.

‘Regardless of whether or not you were involved, I am afraid this situation has forced me to make a rather painful decision,’ Mr Harrison says. He seems to be oblivious to Mark’s current mental state, for he’s completely ignored Mark letting out a loud sob and covering his hand with his mouth. He just keeps talking, like a robot from the future that’s been programmed to tell bad news to employers. ‘Either I save myself the effort of looking for a new Creative Writing teacher or I protect the reputation – and rating – of the school by letting you go. Neither is a very enviable choice, but under the circumstances, I find that upholding the status of our institution is much more important.’

Mr Harrison squints. ‘You must already understand what this means, Mr Owen.’

Mark shakes his head. His face has becomes a waterfall of tears. ‘Please, Mr Harrison.’

Mark already knows what Mr Harrison is about to say, but he doesn’t want to hear it. Ever. He wants to stay here, at VCMA, with Gary and Rob and Howard and Mr Hepburn and Mr Orange and Mr Stevens, forever. The thought of someone accusing him of cheating . . . it’s easily the worst thing that has ever happened to him.

‘I beg of you, Mr Harrison – please don’t do this. I – hic – had nothing to do with it.’

As if to make matters worse, Mark has started hiccupping. He currently looks like the world’s saddest man: eyes red, face streaked with tears, his entire body shaking uncontrollably in his chair. Have you ever seen a puppy crying? That’s what Mark Owen looks like right now.

A decent head teacher would try to make Mark feel more at ease, but Mr Harrison is not a decent head teacher. He’s just a man that’s out for blood. Blood, and money.

He brings the bad news with a voice devoid of emotion.

‘Mr Owen, things do not look good for you. All the evidence points at you being the one who helped Samuel and Timo cheat on their exam. It is the only explanation.

‘Of course, I cannot prove this entirely. It will be up to Ofsted to find out whether or not you are the one behind the forged exam papers. I personally believe you are, based on your previous incompetence. I may be wrong. I rarely am.

‘Regardless of the truth, I have no choice but to suspend your contract with us for the time being. There will be a formal investigation looking into the forged exam papers, and all the students from M_DC3A will have to sit the exam again. While the investigation takes place, you are not allowed to go to work, starting tomorrow. You are not allowed to contact anyone from school. If your colleagues ask you why you are not at work, you will lie that you are sick. Is that clear, Mr Owen?’

Mr Harrison’s words have hit Mark like a bolt of lightning. His scrambled brain desperately tries to make sense of what is happening. Formal investigation . . . plagiarism . . . sit the exam again . . . not allowed to contact anyone from school . . . suspending your contract.

His contract has been suspended, which means . . .

He’s effectively just been fired. There’s no way Mr Harrison will reverse this.

This is it. It’s over.

‘Mr Harrison,’ Mark begins to plead, but it comes out as a whisper. No other words come, and Mr Harrison isn’t polite enough to wait for Mark to finish.
‘Mr Owen, do you promise to keep your suspension secret?’ It’s as if Mr Harrison can’t even see that Mark has just broken down in front of him. The only thing he cares about is the status of his precious school, not the emotions of the people who work there. ‘It is absolutely vital that no-one finds out about this. We would not want your colleagues to think of you negatively, would we?’

‘What if they hear about the investigation and they automatically assume that you did help the students pass their exams deliberately? They would never speak to you again. No, we have to keep this a secret. Do you understand, Mr Owen?’

Mark nods even though he knows inside his heart that he had nothing to do with this.

He wants to say ‘no’. He wants to run away and tell the entire world what has happened to him, but he can’t. He’s not allowed. Within just twenty minutes, Mr Harrison has turned his entire life upside down and inside-out.

Mark can’t remember much afterwards. He vaguely remembers picking up his heavy rucksack from the floor and giving Mr Harrison a pathetic handshake, but that’s about it. The rest is a blur. He can’t even remember his phone falling from his pocket when he ran past Cecelia’s desk, his face hidden inside his hands.

He arrives home half an hour later, and the first thing he does is have a big cry on his sofa.

He’s been fired. Mr Harrison didn’t use those words, but Mark knows that having his contract suspended is pretty much the same thing. He’s about to lose his job, all because he didn’t pay attention during an exam.

Because he’s Mark Owen, the worst, most miserable teacher in the world.

And he can’t share it with anyone.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is so weird to me, because several weeks after I’d come up with it, I was told I had to quit my job too! But for social anxiety reasons, not you’re-being-accused-of-helping-students-pass-their-exams reasons. Life sucks.

Naturally, the next couple of chapters will deal with Mark losing his job and the consequences thereof, with a LOT of domestic stuff thrown in. Gary and Mark practically start living together. (But not OFFICIALLY, because Gary is too scared to ask Mark THAT.) We’ll also see the other lads a bit more as they all try to work together to help Mark out. Basically we’ve reached the part of the story where things become one big soap opera. There might even be a school heist at one point. (And Howard will still be drinking a lot of coffee.)
PART TWELVE

Chapter Summary

In this chapter (which is easily the most domestic chapter this story has seen so far), Gary visits Mark’s apartment for the very first time. His heart breaks in two when he sees the desperate state Mark is in.

Meanwhile, Rob seems to be hiding a secret.

Chapter Notes

I’m really sorry I took so long to update this. I’ve been struggling a lot with depression and feeling very tired lately, and sadly working on fics is one of those hobbies I can only do when I’m 100% concentrated and happy. I seem to be on the mend again, but it still took me much more energy working on my fic than usual. Hopefully I’ll be better soon.

Anyway, this chapter is a mix of angst and domestic fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LESSON FIFTY: MR OWEN GOES MISSING

‘I thought Mr Barlow was supposed to be nice.’

‘I know, right? He’s not at all like my mum said he’d be. Does he want us to have no social lives? It’s our first week and he’s already given us loads of homework.’

‘Maybe all the teachers are like that?’ The first student, female, points out.

‘Mr Hepburn didn’t give us any homework this morning, Kitty,’ her male classmate points out.

‘Yeah, but he’s Mr Hepburn. He’s nice. All the second and third years say so. Apparently, he’s really quick to give out distinction grades, which is why everyone chooses Percussion as their extracurricular.’ Kitty pauses. Her face loses all its colour. ‘Oh, crap. Mr Barlow’s just looked into our direction. Quick, Clem, put away your phone. Quick.’

A frustrated-looking Mr Barlow stops in front of the two students’ keyboards and holds out his hand. He looks at the students over the rim of his reading glasses, which makes him look like a scary librarian. ‘Give that here.’

The student who was holding the phone, Clem, holds up two empty hands. He’s cleverly slipped his phone underneath his seat, out of sight. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sir.’
‘Yeah, you do. Either you hand me your phone or I’m having you both removed from the piano lab for the rest of the year. Your choice.’

Kitty lets out a scared shriek.

‘You can’t do that,’ says Clem, his chin tilted at an angle, nose in the air, to make himself look taller and more imposing. He wants to be stubborn and brave, as most students do, but it’s hard to feel stubborn and brave when the country’s most famous teacher is looking at you like you’re a pesky little insect. ‘We’re f-first years! We p-pay money to attend these l-lessons!’

‘Your mum does,’ Kitty whispers.

Clem turns red. ‘Still. You can’t do it, Sir! Y-you can’t just send us away! I – I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do when a teacher kicks me out!’

‘Yeah, you do,’ mumbles Kitty. ‘You’ll have to go to Mr Harrison’s office.’

Clem gulps.

‘If you don’t want me to send you to Mr Harrison’s office, then why did you spend most of me lesson sat talking to each other instead of playing the keyboard like you’re supposed to?’ Mr Barlow gestures at Kitty and Clem’s classmates, dispersed throughout the piano lab. They’re all playing the keyboard with their headphones on. The monitors in front of them show different pages of the same music sheets.

‘If you’d rather talk, you might as well leave. I’ve plenty of students coming through me classroom. One or two fewer faces won’t make a difference. You certainly won’t make a difference if you keep acting like you’re still in bloody middle school. Also, me name’s on the door.’ Mr Barlow adds in that annoying “I’m a teacher and therefore I know better than you” voice. ‘I make the rules here.’

Clem reckons Mr Barlow has a point there. He reluctantly gives up his phone.

‘Now, I want you to put your headphones on and try out the song I played you earlier.’ Now that the confrontation is over, Mr Barlow no longer has to use his “stern” voice. He sounds tired. He looks ten years older than he did during their trip to Amsterdam. ‘If I so much hear you breathing, you’ll be out on your ear, got it?’

‘Got it,’ Clem and Kitty stammer at the same time.

Mr Barlow makes a gesture with two fingers pointed at the students as if to say “I’ll be watching you”, and he heads back to his desk. He slumps into his chair like a sack of potatoes. A scary sack of potatoes, but still. A sack of potatoes.

‘Jeez, that was scary.’ Kitty’s body gives an involuntary shiver. Mr Barlow is much stricter than she thought he’d be. ‘Do you think Mister woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?’

‘He’s a teacher,’ Clem hisses as he puts his headphones on. ‘Teachers don’t sleep.’

The rest of the day goes like this. Every time Mr Barlow so much spots a student doing anything other than playing the keyboard, he threatens to throw them out of class. On several occasions, he actually follows up on his threats and tells a student that they’re never allowed to come back to his lessons, ever.

It gets worse, though. When a shy first-year student dares to ask him if they’re ever going to play a game of Kahoot, Gary positively explodes. “YOU’RE IN THE MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY
ADVANCED CLASSROOM IN THE COUNTRY AND YOU WANT TO PLAY KAHOOT?
GET OUT. OUT, NOW! Jesus.” It nearly reduces the student to tears.

Given that today is only the first day of the school year, the first impression that Mr Barlow has given his students is that he’s the sternest, most intimidating teacher there is. One third-year student has even said that Mr Barlow has become worse than Mr Donald, which is saying something: Mr Donald is the strictest teacher in the world.

As a rule, Gary doesn’t like being strict. He does have his stern moments, yes, but he’s not one of those teachers who kicks out students left and right. Usually, misbehaving students get away with a warning. Removing a student from class only gives you paperwork.

But not today. Today, Gary is so tired and frustrated and worried that even a student playing in the wrong key makes him angry. Why? Because he hasn’t seen his boyfriend all day, and no-one seems to know where he is.

It’s all quite worrying. Most days, Mark arrives at school late, running past Cecelia’s service desk in the morning and stumbling into his classroom looking like he’s just run a marathon (and mumbling to himself). Most of his students have become used to it by now, and not even Mr Harrison has reprimanded him for it.

Of course, marks the official start of the new school year. Today is when all the lessons begin. If you have any things about your teaching style that need changing, today is the best day to start. Perhaps Mark has simply changed his ways and decided to buy himself a new alarm clock.

However. Buying a new alarm clock and changing his ways would mean that Mark would have been at school early today, and Gary didn’t see Mark in the staff room before lessons kicked off. He also didn’t see Mark during the first period. Or the second. Or during the first break. What is going on?

When Gary decided to ask Mr Harrison about Mark’s whereabouts, he got a very vague answer in response. According to Mr Harrison, Mark is recovering from a mystery illness at home. This seemed quite strange to Gary, because Mark seemed fine two days ago when they returned from their trip to Amsterdam.

That is, Mark seemed fine physically. Gary still hasn’t figured out why Mark lost his mobile phone in the school corridors on the evening of their return to England. Or why Cecelia the receptionist saw Mark running out of the school after a meeting with Mr Harrison that same evening, visibly upset. He looked a bit upset as well, the poor lad, Cecelia had said. I even asked Mr Harrison about it afterwards – I asked him, do you know why Mr Owen’s just ran past my desk looking like someone’s dog got run over, but he just shook his head and left, can you believe it? I bet he said something to poor Mr Owen to upset him. No wonder he ran off like that.

Could Mark’s disappearance be related?

It gets worse, though. You see, other than Mr Harrison, Gary has no way of getting in touch with Mark. Mark, of course, lost his mobile phone after his mystery meeting with Mr Harrison two days ago, and he hasn’t been back to get it. Currently, the phone is in Gary’s possession, which makes phoning Mark impossible because he doesn’t have a landline. He also hasn’t been responding to any of Gary’s e-mails.

But also – and this makes things really difficult –, Gary doesn’t actually know Mark’s home address. They’ve been together for six, seven months, and Gary genuinely has no clue where Mark lives.
Mark tended to shy away from talking about his apartment because of how tiny it is, and this is the result. It’s impossible to get a hold of him. Like Mark never even existed.

Weirdly, Gary can’t find any information about Mark at school either. Rob used to have a file on his computer that contains basic information about all the school’s teachers in case of an emergency, but when Gary asks Rob to look for the file, the file has disappeared. All the other files on Rob’s desk computer seem fine.

The phone book is of no help either: there are no updated copies available anywhere. Even an online search on Rob’s computer yields no result: the only “Mark Owen” Rob can find has released a book about the army. Definitely not their Mark. They can’t even find Mark’s songs in online song databases.

Quite frankly, Gary’s at a complete loss. He really wants to pay Mark a visit and return his phone and see how he’s doing, but he can’t, and Mr Harrison flat-out refuses to help.

‘I cannot give out Mr Owen’s home address,’ Mr Harrison told Gary on Tuesday. Already two days into the new school year, things were starting to feel quite serious. ‘It is against our country’s current privacy laws, and I cannot break the law.’

‘But it’s an emergency,’ Gary pressed. ‘I just want to know how he’s doing.’

‘Mr Owen is fine,’ Mr Harrison responded coldly. ‘He called me this morning. He is sick. An allergic reaction, I believe.’

This didn’t help soothe Gary’s worries at all. Mark hasn’t been sick since they first met. Even if he was sick, he’d probably still show up for work. What use is being in a relationship when you don’t even bloody know where your boyfriend lives?

Of course, it’s no use blaming Mark for not being able to get in touch. Mark’s always been pretty secretive about his apartment, just as Gary has always been secretive about his. Like Mark, he used to lie that his house was being renovated just so he didn’t have to tell Mark that he was famous. It seems so stupid now, looking back. Their egos have made things more complicated than they should be.

It goes without saying that knowing where Mark is has put Gary in a terrible mood. He has already given out massive piles of homework. He even set a difficult mock exam this morning. Several students sent him angry e-mails about it, but Gary deleted all of them. The only thing he can think of is Mark. What if Cecelia the receptionist was right, and Mark’s conversation with Mr Harrison upset him for some reason? And if so, what on Earth was their conversation about?

Sadly, there’s no-one who can tell him, because no-one knows. According to one teacher from the Music department, Mark has left his job to become a fashion model in America. Howard thinks Mark may be suffering from food poisoning. (Gary almost believes this, because the food at the youth hostel in Amsterdam wasn’t very good.) According to Ms Stohl, the head teacher of the Art department, Mark’s disappearance is all part of an art experiment. Some teachers genuinely believe Mark must still be in Amsterdam. No-one knows what’s truly going on. Only Ms Brooke looks as if she knows something, but whenever she’s about to open her mouth and say, Mr Harrison shoots her an angry look.

Then Rob shows up on Wednesday afternoon with a note in his hand, and everything changes. Rob slips it into Gary’s fingers when no-one is watching. ‘Don’t ask me where I got this,’ he says as though he would quite like Gary to ask him where he got it. ‘Quick, look at it before Harrison can find out.’
Gary open the note, then immediately folds it closed again when he sees Mr Harrison walking past to get a cup of coffee in the staff room.

The note contains Mark’s address.

‘Where did you get this?’ Gary whispers. He looks around the staff room. There are still many people around. For some reason, the fact that Rob managed to find Mark’s address seems like something they have to keep secret. ‘I couldn’t find a trace of Mark anywhere.’

‘I hacked into Mr Harrison’s computer,’ Rob whispers conspiratorially. ‘That is, I persuaded a third-year Web Design student to do it.’

‘Rob!’ Gary says, aghast.

‘It only cost me ten quid and a Caramel Macchiato,’ Rob shrugs. ‘I’m surprised he didn’t charge more, to be fair. He should have; he found Mark’s address within minutes. We also found some very weird financial transactions. Does a Mrs Turnbull mean anything to you?’

Gary shakes his head.

‘Well. Never mind, then. Think about this, though, Gaz – don’t you think it’s weird that hacking into Mr Harrison’s computer was the only way I could find Mark’s address? I couldn’t even find the file that I used to give you Mark’s phone number last year. It’s like someone made Mark disappear on purpose.’

Gary can see Rob looking conspiratorially at Mr Harrison getting a cup of coffee, and he rolls his eyes. It’s so like Rob to think that Mr Harrison made Mark disappear like he’s some sort of government secret. (Rob joined a forum about UFOs over the summer, and for a couple of weeks he became seriously convinced that the school was hiding extra-terrestrials in the school basement.)

‘Rob. This isn’t like one of your conspiracy theories,’ Gary says as much. ‘It’s just inconvenient that I never asked for Mark’s address and that he never brought it up. It’s what happens when you’re not honest with each other from the start. We both fucked up. This is the result.’

Rob deliberately says nothing. He thinks back to what he overheard Mr Harrison saying on the phone a couple of weeks ago. He’s pretty sure he already knows what happened to Mark, but he’s not going to mention it.

‘Just promise him you’ll visit, okay? Today. Please, Gaz.’

‘I will,’ Gary promises. He carefully puts the piece of paper inside the case of his smartphone. ‘I promise.’

Rob squeezes Gary’s left shoulder, then says he has to head back to his office. There’s a student with dyslexia waiting for him, and they’re going to have a look at her Art History homework together.

As Gary watches Rob walk out of the staff room, he wonders if he might have a point after all. Is there more behind Mark’s sudden disappearance? Is there some sort of conspiracy going on that someone is trying to keep secret?

There’s only one way to find out. He’ll have to visit Mark at home; the home Mark never talks about, the one Mark claims is tiny.

How bad can it be?
That afternoon, Gary lets his students go a little early so he can visit Mark at home. He doesn’t bother to say goodbye to his colleagues this time: he stuffs his laptop and coursebooks into his expensive black rucksack and leaves without another word. Gary usually likes to stick around after work, but not today; not when there are people at work deliberately trying to keep Mark’s life a secret. Why has Mark disappeared, and does it have anything to do with the upsetting conversation he had with Mr Harrison a couple of days ago? He must find out.

Gary finds Mark’s house in a pretty shabby part of the city, a thirty-minute drive away from the school. He parks his car in a nearby car park and makes the rest of the journey to Mark’s flat on foot.

It’s not a great neighbourhood. Litter covers the streets, and every building looks more dilapidated than the last. Most shop premises are empty. Apart from a 24-hour supermarket and a tiny chip shop, the only place remotely breathing some life into the street is a pub. The pub seems to be aware that it’s the street’s only place of interest, because the music it is playing can be heard from a block away.

The street is a pocket of noise and danger. The pavement is broken up in places, and very often a car will speed by with the speed of light, making Gary jump.

Gary knows that Mark was never that successful as a songwriter and that he obviously doesn’t earn that much more as a teacher, but this neighbourhood is the worst. It’s dreadful. There isn’t even any green: just boring greys and browns, and no colour anywhere. If Gary lived here, he wouldn’t want to take his lovers home either.

It still doesn’t explain why Mr Harrison refused to give him Mark’s home address, though. He understands why Mark personally wouldn’t want people to know that he lives in a place like this, but Mr Harrison not giving out his address for the sake of “privacy” . . . something about that gives Gary a prickly feeling. Harrison has shared plenty of colleagues’ home addresses – most recently when a teacher from the Music department ended up in hospital because she’d accidentally swallowed the nib of a whiteboard marker. Mr Harrison had e-mailed her address to everyone, and within a day she received over a dozen cards from colleagues wishing her well.

So why is this different? What makes Mark’s “mystery illness” so serious that no-one’s allowed to talk about it? Is he even sick at all?

Gary’s going to find out. He crosses the road to Mark’s apartment. He lives in a grey, drab block of flats next to the pub that Gary could hear from a mile off. It has six floors, and Mark lives on the top floor. He has a balcony by the looks of it, though there doesn’t seem to be anything on it.

There’s just one way to get to the top floor: through the flat’s communal area, where the stairs and lifts are. But without a key, the automatic doors to the communal area won’t open. Gary’s going to have to ring Mark’s bell and hope someone’s at home.

Now that he thinks about it, he should probably have announced his arrival.

Gary searches for Mark’s name on the doorbell panel outside the block of flats and presses the button next to it. He waits. He presses again. There’s no answer.

Worry rises up Gary’s body like a fever. He tells himself that this doesn’t mean anything. Maybe Mark’s just asleep. He’s probably fallen asleep on his sofa, covered in a dozen layers of clothes and
blankets.

But what if there’s more going on?

Gary presses the bell again. No answer.

Desperate now, he waves his hands in front of the automatic doors that lead to the flat’s communal area. They won’t open. The only way to Mark’s apartment is through those doors and up the stairs, and he doesn’t have any other way to contact Mark apart from ringing his bell. How on Earth is he going to find out what’s going on with him?

Gary’s about to press Mark’s doorbell again when a woman walks out of the lift carrying two trash bins. She momentarily disappears into an area that Gary can’t see from the outside (the designated bin area, presumably), then reappears a minute later without trash bins. She takes her phone out of her pocket and makes her way towards the exit. Her eyes are glued to the screen as she texts someone.

This could be Gary’s way in.

Gary pretends to be studying the doorbell panel and waits for the woman to walk out. The doors slide open automatically. He waits, then slips through the automatic doors while the woman turns away from him.

Gary’s right on time; two seconds later, the automatic doors squeeze shut behind him with a loud click. He’s made it.

Now he just needs to hope that Mark’s at home.

Keen to avoid walking into other residents in case they find him suspicious (or worse, recognise him as being Gary Barlow, the pop star), Gary takes the stairs to the top floor. He reaches the sixth floor within a couple of minutes and finds himself in a minimalistic hallway with three doors, one door for each flat. He spots a nameplate with “M. Owen” glued to the door to his right, and his heart does an unpleasant little summersault like he’s just missed a step going down a staircase.

He feels feverish all over. Should he really have come here? What if Mark genuinely is sick, and Mr Harrison is just protecting Gary from catching it? Or worse, what if Mark’s reasons for skipping work have to do with him?

Was it something Gary said when they returned to England?

Gary hesitates. He doesn’t want to make Mark feel uncomfortable by paying him a surprise visit. Mark’s always been pretty secretive about where he lives, and now he understands why. This place is a dump.

But the alternative would be going home and not knowing what’s going on with his boyfriend, and Gary doesn’t want that. If Mark really is poorly, then he wants to be there for him. And if something else is going on . . . something darker, like Rob hinted at earlier . . . then this is the only place Gary wants to be.

Gary knocks on Mark’s door twice. ‘Mark? You there, mate? It’s me, Gaz.’

Still no response.

He knocks again. This time, Gary thinks he can hear movement at the other side of the door.
‘Y-yes, Gaz?’

Gary lets out a sigh of relief. He’d recognise that voice anywhere. Mark is at home, at least. And alive.

‘I’m here to bring back your phone,’ Gary says. He removes his left arm from the strap of his rucksack and pulls his bag towards him so that it’s leaning on his hip. Using his right hand, he zips open the front pocket of his rucksack and takes out Mark’s phone. ‘You left it at school on Saturday. Harrison said you were poorly, so I wanted to see how you were doing.’

Gary anxiously rubs his thumb across the screen of Mark’s phone as he waits for his boyfriend to reply. He accidentally turns on the screen in the process, displaying Mark’s lock screen. It’s a picture of the two of them, taking a selfie with a Yoda impersonator on Dam Square in Amsterdam.

Seeing it fills Gary with immense sadness. ‘Why don’t you open the door so I can see you, eh?’

Gary thinks he can hear Mark letting out a deep sigh at the other side of the door. He sounds . . . different. Sad. Like he’s got a throat full of frogs. ‘I – I can’t, Gaz.’

The obvious change in Mark’s voice gives Gary pause. Why does Mark sound so different? Is it his mystery illness? Was Cecelia right when she said Mark looked upset when he ran past her desk on Saturday?

‘Why not, mate? Your illness, is it contagious? Is that why you’re not at work?’

‘I-it’s not that,’ Mark stammers. He sounds out of breath. ‘I – I wanna see you too, but . . . I’m afraid that . . . I don’t want to . . . Mr Harrison . . .’

Gary is beginning to feel really nervous now. He tries to press down the handle of Mark’s door even though he obviously knows it’s locked. If only they lived together! ‘Mark. Mate. Let me in. Please. You’re scaring me.’

There’s a long pause. Gary daren’t breathe.

‘Mark? Are you okay?’

Mark doesn’t say. Weirdly, he then decides to bring up something completely unrelated, as though he’s momentarily been taken over by Rob, who always jumps from one subject to the next. ‘R-remember when we first met, Gaz?’

Gary lets out a nervous chuckle. What does this have to do with anything? Of course he remembers their first meeting: they were in the staff room, and Gary thought Mark was the fittest guy he’d ever seen. ‘Yeah. It was your first day. We met in the staff room.’

‘We met before that,’ Mark stammers. He sounds on the verge of tears now. ‘We met in the restrooms a month earlier. I’d just done me job interview with Mr Harrison and – and it’d gone so terribly that I went to have a cry in the toilet. You came to my rescue that day. You talked to me then, like you’re talking to me now. You made me feel so much better.’

Gary’s mouth falls open as the memory rushes through his brain. ‘That was you, Mark?’

‘Y-yeah. That was me.’ Mark laughs then. A hollow laugh. ‘I – I guess you’re always coming to my rescue even though you don’t really know it.’

‘I don’t know what I’m rescuing you from now, though,’ Gary says. ‘No-one will tell me what’s
going on with you.’

‘Not even Mr Harrison?’

‘Especially not Mr Harrison. He keeps telling me that you’re going down with this mystery illness. He wouldn’t even give me your address. Everyone’s bloody worried about you, mate. Especially me.’

Silence. ‘If I let you in . . . will you stay, Gaz?’

‘Of course.’ Gary attempts a weak smile. He presses his fingertips against the grain of the door, wishing he could reach out through the door and embrace him. ‘I’ll stay, Mark. I promise.’

‘O-okay.’ Mark sniffs again. Gary thinks he can hear the rustle of fabric against fabric, like Mark wiping his face on the sleeves of his shirt. Is he crying? Or is he just going down with a cold? ‘One s-second, Gaz.’

There’s the sound of several locks being unlocked one by one.

The handle of the door moves down.

The door creaks open, and the world as Gary knows it comes crumbling down all around him.

Gary’s heart leaps to his throat. Mark looks bad. His hair is messy. His eyes are red as though he’s been crying all day. He’s wearing pyjamas, but not in a way that makes him look sexy; it makes him look dishevelled and dirty.

His face – usually so cheerful, so beautiful, always so filled with colour –, now resembles a mask. He looks tired. Sad.

Mark Owen looks sad.

‘Mark . . .’ Gary doesn’t know what to say. Mark isn’t tired or sick at all. Something broke him.

And Gary has no idea what. Or who. All he knows is that Mark suddenly pulls him into a big, messy hug and starts sobbing uncontrollably against his chest in the middle of the hallway.

Gary has barely managed to return the hug when his boyfriend goes limp inside his arms, like a toy winding down. ‘Mark? Mark, mate, are you still with us?’

Mark’s fainted.

Gary’s response is instantaneous. Mark fainting becomes a problem he needs to solve, like one of the singers he invited to the summer prom becoming sick, or a student bursting out in tears in the middle of a lesson.

He lifts Mark up easily, kicks the front door closed with the back of his foot and takes his unconscious boyfriend into his flat. He finds Mark’s bedroom easily: it’s right next to the hallway, separated from the living room with a wooden partition.

The apartment is barely the size of a classroom.

Mark’s bedroom is so small that Gary has some trouble manoeuvring his way towards the bed. He ends up laying Mark on the bed less gently than he would have liked, but Mark doesn’t seem to notice: he’s still out cold. Gary gently tucks a big pillow behind Mark’s head and pulls his duvet up to his chest.
Placing his palm on Mark’s forehead, Mark doesn’t seem to have a fever. He seems perfectly fine, really – but Gary knows there’s something very serious going on.

‘What happened here, Mark?’ Gary whispers to himself as he removes a lock of hair from Mark’s forehead. ‘What is Harrison hiding?’

Briefly, Mark wakes. He meets Gary’s gaze with red, tired eyes. ‘Will you stay?’ he asks again.

‘Yes. Yes, of course. I’ll stay.’

Just like that, Mark’s eyes flutter closed again. Gary actually checks whether he’s still breathing. He is, thank God. Mark’s just fainted. But why, Gary does not know.

With Mark out cold, and nothing else to do, Gary busies himself with cleaning Mark’s flat. It looks like an absolute mess: boxes of takeout meals cover the kitchen sink, and Gary finds dirty clothes nearly everywhere he goes. With Mark being the type of guy who meticulously orders lesson plans in chronological order and folds up his clothes after sex, it’s obvious that something strange has happened. Mark would never let his flat turn into a pigsty unless he felt very sad indeed.

Even if you ignore the mess, Mark’s flat is really not that great. The sink needs to be unplugged. A silverfish scurries away into a crack in the wall when Gary goes to the toilet. A small of garbage and car fumes punctures the air when Gary tries to open a window. There’s a massive racket coming from the pub next door. Mould covers the walls in the bathroom. The apartment has a view on the train tracks parallel to the road, and the house trembles every time a train rushes past.

The apartment is also very unpractical. The only table in the house is the living room table, which Gary guesses must also double as a dining table in the mornings and evenings. It doesn’t quite line up with the sofa, and Gary has to sit on the floor when he decides to do some work on his laptop.

Using the Wi-Fi from the pub next door, which doesn’t seem to be password protected, Gary sends Rob a quick update about Mark via e-mail.

To: Rob [r.williams@vcma.music.co.uk]
From: Gary [g.barlow@vcma.music.co.uk]

I’m at Mark’s right now – he went out cold the moment he saw me. I’m used to fans fainting when they meet me but this is something else! I’m bloody worried about him – Harrison said Mark was sick but I think you were right earlier, there’s more going on...

Gary

Rob doesn’t reply immediately, so the next thing Gary does is Google some recipes. He spotted some spaghetti and courgette in Mark’s fridge, and he wants to make Mark dinner for when he wakes up. It’s almost teatime, after all. He briefly considers popping into the supermarket next door to buy a quick microwave meal, but he doesn’t want to leave Mark alone and he might not be able to get back in.

Spaghetti with courgette it is.

Gary starts to prep his spaghetti with courgette at half five. He’s just been to check on Mark again, and he’s still asleep. He mumbles in his sleep every now and then, tossing and turning as though
Seeing Mark like that fills Gary with sadness. The last (and only) time Gary shared a bed with Mark, Mark slept peacefully throughout the night, his breathing soothing Gary into a dreamless sleep. His body had felt warm and soft; so soft, like a pillow. Gary woke up the next morning with Mark’s body pressed tightly against his own, his half-long hair tickling his nose, his pert little arse rubbing up against Gary’s crotch (not unintentionally). After they’d gotten out of bed and kissed, they made love again in the shower. It was by far one of the best mornings Gary had ever had.

It seems so long ago now. Barely a week has passed since that first morning together, but it seems like a lifetime. He wishes he could still remember the words Mark spoke to him as they made love for the first time, but he can’t. Even the image of their hotel room has become a blur, turned fuzzy and black-and-white by the subsequent bad memories of not knowing what’s going on with Mark.

What if this is something they’ll never survive?

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Gary cooks regularly, so a meal of spaghetti with courgette is something he could easily cook up in his sleep. He prepares the meal quickly using the utensils from Mark’s tiny kitchen. (Even the kitchen in the staff room at school is bigger, which is saying much.)

He’s about to divide the spaghetti into two separate bowls when he hears the sound of footsteps. He turns around and sees Mark leaning against the wooden partition that divides his bedroom from his living room.

He still looks bloody miserable.

‘I – I made spaghetti,’ Gary says when he sees Mark looking at the bowl in his hands. It’s only now that he realises how weird it must be, Gary cooking tea in a kitchen he’s never been before. ‘I hope you like courgette? I couldn’t find anything else in your kitchen, and I didn’t want to leave you on your own to pop down to the supermarket.’

Mark sniffs. He rubs his red eyes with the sleeves of his pyjama top. ‘Thank you, Gaz.’

Gary waits for Mark to ask him how his day has been like he always does; or maybe start a long monologue about the weather or spaghetti or the reason why he’s so poorly, but no other words come. Mark sits himself down on the space between his sofa and the dining room table and miserably stares out of the window. He doesn’t say another word. He doesn’t even offer to help Gary out. He just . . . sits there, like an empty shell of himself.

Rob wasn’t wrong when he said there was something fishy going on. Mark is definitely not sick.

Gary hands Mark his bowl of spaghetti. He puts two glasses of water on the table, sits on the opposite side of the table and mumbles ‘bon appétit’. They eat in silence.

Mark does not drink. In fact, he hardly eats, picking through the dish with his fork like a fussy eater. The only sound is that of cars rushing past and the pub next door playing an Ed Sheeran song. The train tracks are so close to Mark’s apartment that the glasses in the dining room jingle and tremble every time a train rushes past.

Half-way through tea, Gary remembers that he still has Mark’s phone. He searches for it in the pocket of his jeans and puts it down gently on the dining room table.

‘Cecelia found this lying on the floor at school on Saturday. She allowed me to take it with me. It

haunted.
made it really difficult to get in touch with you, you not having your phone . . .’

Mark puts down his fork to give his phone a quick once-over, then slips it into the pocket of his pyjama trousers. ‘Thank you,’ he mumbles, and he continues eating his pasta without another word.

Gary’s used to Mark talking his ears off, so he finds the silence extremely worrying. Whatever happened to the Mark Owen who always has a room-brightening smile on his face? Where is the Mark he fell in love with?

There has to be more behind this.

‘Cecelia said you looked pretty upset after you left Mr Harrison’s office on Saturday. It must have been a pretty serious conversation.’ Gary pauses to study Mark’s face, but it doesn’t give anything away. Mark’s usually so expressive face has become expressionless.

There’s something else too, though – there, hidden deep inside Mark’s eyes: a sadness that Gary has only ever seen once, when they had their row at the youth hostel. Mark didn’t talk to Gary then either, but that was because he was angry with him, and there’s not really anything to be angry about now. Gary’s pretty sure he didn’t do anything silly when they last met, and if they were having a lover’s tiff he would probably know about it.

‘What’s going on, Mark? Losing your phone . . . it’s not like you, that isn’t. Everyone’s saying that you’re going down with something, but you don’t look ill.’ Gary doesn’t know how to say this gently. ‘You look like someone’s died.’

Gary’s unintentionally blunt remark makes Mark’s eyes fill with tears. He has to rub his eyes with the sleeve of his pyjama top to make the tears go away.

‘It’s n-nothing,’ Mark stammers. He sniffs and looks away when he sees Gary giving him a worried look. ‘I – I don’t wanna talk about it.’ And Mark stuffs his mouth with a big helping of spaghetti and courgette so that he literally won’t be able to talk about it.

‘Mark . . .’ Gary finds himself a little lost for words. He’s not used to having to cheer Mark up; Mark is cheerfulness himself. The last time he saw Mark cry was when they had their first big fight in Amsterdam, and it took them nearly a day (and a very expensive hotel room) to get over that. ‘You know you can tell me everything, right? I’m your boyfriend. We can talk about this. Cos I’m getting a bit annoyed with not knowing what the hell is going on, mate. Even Mr Harrison refuses to tell me.’

This last remark has clearly rubbed Mark up the wrong way, for he suddenly comes over all irritated. He puts down his fork, cleans his mouth with a napkin and pushes his half-finished bowl of pasta away from him. ‘I’m going back to bed,’ he says with as much stubbornness he can manage, and he pushes himself up from the floor with a bit of a wobble.

Gary’s eyes flicker with fear and indecision. He doesn’t know what to do. Should he go after Mark? Should he push him to talk about what’s happened to him?

He never gets to decide. A minute later, Mark disappears slowly behind the wooden partition that separates his bedroom from the living room and enters his bed with the energy of a sloth. He doesn’t even bother pulling his duvet over his body.

Gary watches it all happen as though petrified. It’s not until he hears Mark snoring only a minute later that his body can move again.

Watching Mark getting up just now . . . his food hardly touched . . . such a sad look in his eyes . . .
the last time he saw Mark look at him like that was when they fought in Amsterdam, and they’re not fighting now. So why is Mark being so irritable?

Coming here has completely scrambled Gary’s brain. Why won’t Mark tell him what is wrong with him, and why does Gary feel increasingly like Mr Harrison was lying to him when he said Mark was “ill”? Was Rob right when he said someone made Mark disappear on purpose? Is there a deeper conspiracy going on?

He’s not going to figure anything out while Mark’s asleep. With Mark out cold, again, Gary has no choice but to finish his tea by himself and do the dishes afterwards.

He doesn’t want to leave Mark alone, so he decides to get some work done on his laptop in the living room. He still has to look at the assignments he made his first-year students do as homework, which the students were supposed to send him via e-mail.

Within just a couple of minutes, Gary has come across three students who have all sent him the exact same exercise. They thought they’d get away with the plagiarism by changing the colour of the font and changing a few details here and there, but Gary isn’t stupid. If the first-year students didn’t think he was strict already, he’s now going to have to give them a lecture about how they shouldn’t copy other people’s homework. Brilliant.

By now, Rob has e-mailed him back too.

**From:** Rob

**To:** Gary

HIYA GAZ,

I’M GLAD YOU MANAGED TO FIND MARK’S APARTMENT IN THE END … I STILL THINK IT’S FUCKING WEIRD THAT LITERALLY NO ONE AT SCHOOL COULD FIND MARK’S ADDRESS FOR YOU … THAT IS,, APART FROM ME … BUT I’M JUST NATURALLY VERY CLEVER …

MR H HASN’T FOUND OUT ABOUT ME AND THAT STUDENT HACKING HIS COMPUTER BY THE WAY … ALTHOUGH HE HAS BEEN LOOKING EXTREMELY FED-UP TODAY … MORE SO THAN USUAL ANYWAY … I WONDER WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU HELD A MIRROR IN FRONT OF HIS FACE … I BET HE WOULDN’T HAVE A REFLECTION …

AS FOR MARK,, I’M NOT SURPRISED HE IS POORLY TO BE HONEST … KEEP AN EYE ON HIM FOR ME,, STAY IF YOU CAN …

WE’RE ALL REALLY WORRIED ABOUT HIM,, HOWARD ESPECIALLY … HE WON’T SAY THIS OUT LOUD BUT I THINK HE’S REALLY GROWN TO LIKE MARK OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS … HOWARD HASN’T HAD COFFEE ALL DAY BY THE WAY … I THINK YOUR SCHOOL TRIP TO AMSTERDAM HAS DONE HIM WELL …

ANYWAY … I’M GOING TO DO SOME CLEVER INVESTIGATING RE: MR H TOMORROW … I OVERHEARD HIM SAYING SOMETHING A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO THAT I THINK MAY BE RELATED TO MARK SUDDENLY “GETTING SICK” … I’LL LET YOU KNOW IF I FIND OUT …

ROB
It’s hard to make sense of Rob’s e-mail. What does he mean by “clever investigating”, and what did Mr Harrison talk about a couple of weeks ago that may be related to Mark disappearing? Rob’s e-mail only raises more questions.

That said, Gary does keep an eye on Mark like Rob asked him to.

He decides to check in on Mark every half hour. He’s still fast asleep, snoring gently but tossing and turning in his sleep. Slowly the clock strikes ten, and Gary has to figure out for himself whether or not he should stay here.

Convinced that Mark would do the same for him, Gary decides to stay. He’s not leaving until he’s figured out what’s going on, even if it means he has to miss a day of work tomorrow. When your boyfriend looks as though he’d rather sleep forever, work suddenly becomes a lot less important.

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Gary doesn’t feel entirely comfortable sharing Mark’s bed without Mark’s consent, so he decides to sleep on the sofa that night. He’s using a plaid to cover himself up. There’s a soft cushion from the sofa propped up underneath his head. The sofa is pretty small, but it’s comfortable, and soon Gary dozes off into a sleep riddled with nightmares.

In his dream, he and Mark are driving through the streets of Amsterdam. They are no longer in a coach or a cab, but in a car they must have hired in Amsterdam. Mark’s driving; Gary is sat next to him, taking photos of their surroundings with Mark’s phone. They seem to be having a pretty good time. Every now and then, they share a loving look before Gary returns to taking pictures. Most of his photos turn out blurred.

In the back of the car, there are a dozen shopping bags: clothes, mostly, but also useless crap Mark bought at local stationery stores, like pens and notebooks. He’s even bought a brand new binder for all his lesson plans.

Then the unimaginable happens: there’s a sound like a thunderclap, loud and scary, and Mark loses control of the car. It happens so fast that he doesn’t have time to react. The uncontrollable car speeds towards a canal, and it’s as if time comes unstuck.

The tyres of the car leave solid ground in slow-motion. Gary feels his stomach being flipped like a pancake. Sheer terror shoots through him when the car dips down at an angle. A strip of water heads towards him.

Then the car hits the water, and time speeds up again.

The car fills with water immediately. In a complete burst of panic, Gary tries opening the doors as the car sinks deeper down into the canal. The door won’t give; the pressure of the water is too strong. Gary bangs his hands desperately against the door until the water reaches his nose and he swallows in water.

He can’t breathe. More panic rises up his chest like bile. When he dares to look over at Mark, he finds his own fear mirrored on his lover’s face. The contents from their shopping bags float all around them: expensive black pens and pieces of paper, now no more than wet debris.
Mark’s face is the last thing Gary sees before he wakes up panting.

Gary’s scrambled brain momentarily forgets that he spent the night at Mark’s, so it takes him a second to get his bearings. The first thing he sees is the ceiling of Mark’s living room, then the table where they ate. The sound of a train rushing past is reassuringly loud and real. Outside, he can make out a sound like glass bottles being thrown into a container. It must be one of the members of staff from the pub next door, cleaning up for the night. Slowly, he begins to remember the events of the past few hours: visiting Mark and feeling him faint in his arms, and then falling asleep here, on the sofa.

The dream had felt so real that he’s genuinely grateful to still be alive.

Gary gets up to check in on Mark, just in case Mark had the same dream he had. He breathes a small sigh of relief when he sees that Mark is still in bed, snoring softly, and heads back to the sofa.

He’s never had a dream like it. Gary doesn’t dream much, period, and when he does his dreams are usually about performing and writing brand new songs. The last time he had a nightmare was several months ago, and it had nothing to do with Mark or death or cars.

What if the dream was his consciousness, trying to tell him something? Did he dream of being in an accident because there is something in his life that he has no control of? Is he about to die or lose something?

And what is Mark’s role in this? He was the one behind the wheel, after all. Could Mark be the one who’s lost control of something in the real world? And if so, what has happened?

If only Mark would tell him. It’s not like Mark to suffer in silence. Mark often talks so much that it does his head in. (Sometimes, Mark will even strike up a random conversation during sex. As in, Mark’ll be talking about the weather while Gary’s fingering him.) Today, though, Mark has hardly spoken at all. Why? Is Mark simply not able to talk about what is going on with him? Or is someone else stopping him from doing so? It’s all terribly confusing.

Slowly but surely, Gary drifts off again. This time, no nightmares plague him until he dreams of Mark waking up in the middle of the night.

Or is he still awake?

Gary’s still awake. Gary sits up, then rubs the sleep from his eyes. Mark’s standing next to the partition that separates the living room from the bedroom. It’s still dark. A quick glance at the clock in the kitchen confirms that it’s four in the morning; the music from the pub next door has stopped, and there are no more trains rushing past.

It’s hard to make out in the dark, but Mark looks tense. His fists are clenched at his sides, and his shoulders look stiff. His face is pale, and his eyes are red and tired as though he’s been crying. A blanket covers his shaking shoulders.

‘Is everything all right, mate?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘I had a nightmare. It was awful.’

Gary can relate. ‘What was it about?’

‘I was falling. I couldn’t stop falling. It was endless. And when I hit the ground, there was nothing. No pain, nothing. It was just black.’ Mark shivers. It’s not cold inside his apartment (quite the opposite; Mark always has trouble getting the warmth in his apartment out), but he still feels like he’s
feeling. He pulls his blanket tighter around himself. ‘It was so scary, Gaz.’

‘I had a nightmare too,’ Gary admits. ‘I drowned. It wasn’t nice.’

It’s only then that Mark seems to realize that Gary is sat on his sofa with a plaid blanket covering his legs. ‘Hang on . . . you didn’t sleep on me sofa, did ya? You should have woken me up. I would’ve – I would’ve let you sleep in me bed.’

Gary blushes. ‘I didn’t know if you wanted me to sleep in your bed after you didn’t finish your tea last night. We probably wouldn’t fit, anyway, the two of us,’ he adds, which earns him a soft chuckle from Mark. ‘I can see why you never invited me here – I’d get a bloody hernia trying to make love to you!’

Mark laughs again, and it’s in that moment that he feels a flicker of something. Something good. Not happiness, because Mark doesn’t feel happy in the slightest, but . . . gratitude. Relief. There aren’t enough words in the English vocabulary to tell Gary how grateful he is that he stayed.

It’s also the first time someone has spent the night at his place, ever, for Mark has never taken a lover to his apartment. He always felt too ashamed of it; especially considering that he used to be a songwriter, and that everyone always thinks songwriters must be terribly rich.

Mark has to admit that Gary doesn’t look at all out of place on his sofa. It looks good. It feels good.

Mark still feels bloody terrible, but at least he no longer has to suffer alone.

‘Mind if I join you?’ Mark tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. It’s been growing longer since the summer. It’s nearly shoulder-length now. Gary’s been meaning to say how sexy it makes him look, but now is probably not the right time. ‘I don’t really wanna be alone in me bed right now.’

‘It’s your sofa, mate.’ Gary pats his hand on the space next to him. He makes some space on the sofa, and Mark gratefully lies down next to him. It’s a tight fit; Mark ends up being squished against his boyfriend so that he won’t fall off. But it’s comfortable, and warm, and safe, and eventually he rests his head on Gary’s chest.

‘Comfy, Mark?’

Mark nods. Gary thinks he can feel the relief wash off him like a wave. ‘Y-yeah. Yeah, I am. Comfy. Yeah.’

Gary pulls up his borrowed plaid along with the blanket that Mark took from his bed. He carefully wraps his arms around Mark’s shaking frame and pulls him closer like a large teddy bear.

Mark responds by letting out a shaky exhale against Gary’s skin; the type you’ve been holding for hours.

‘Will you ever tell me what’s going on with you?’ Gary doesn’t know why he’s whispering. They are all alone, and yet he’s too afraid to talk out loud. Mark’s body feels so fragile and cold that he might as well be a house of cards, apt to fall apart if you so much breathe. ‘You have everyone worrying like mad about you at work.’

Mark shakes his head. ‘I can’t say. Not now.’

This does not reassure Gary in the slightest. ‘Then at least tell me that someone didn’t hurt you, mate.’ He feels Mark turning away from him in the dark, his eyes leaking tears on Gary’s shirt. ‘Tell me that, at least.’
‘No-one hurt me.’ Mark sniffs. ‘It’s – it’s complicated.’

Gary kisses the top of Mark’s head. And again when he hears Mark letting out a soft sob.
‘Complicated how?’

Mark doesn’t say. He just sighs and closes his eyes. The lonely siren of a passing police car echoes through the night air. It’s the only sound still coming from outside. The road outside Mark’s house has emptied, and the pub next door has closed. Somewhere very far away, Gary hears several chimes of a clock.

Mere moments later, Gary can hear Mark beginning to snore.

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Gary wakes with Mark wrapped in his arms. He feels happy, at first, but then he remembers what he came here for. The memories of the past few hours engulf him like the water in his nightmares.

The last time he and Mark slept together was so wonderful, and last night was not. Last night, Gary hardly slept. He kept being woken up by Mark stirring in his sleep. Sometimes, Mark spoke in his sleep, saying incomprehensible things about exams and lesson plans. It made falling back asleep quite difficult; Gary didn’t fall asleep again till six, by which time the cars and the trains had come back. He hasn’t slept this badly since their first night in the youth hostel in Amsterdam.

Not to mention the fact that Gary’s back hurts like hell. Apparently sofas are not good places to sleep on. He stretches, and in doing so he accidentally wakes Mark up.

Mark utters a tired groan of frustration. ‘What time is it?’ he asks, his words a little slurred from sleep deprivation.

It’s hard to tell; the sun is shining through the blinds in Mark’s living room, so he supposes it’s early in the morning?

Gary lifts his head so he can see the clock in Mark’s kitchen. ‘It’s just turned seven.’

Mark groans. He pulls up his plaid blanket, wraps his arms around Gary’s frame and closes his eyes. ‘Good night,’ he sighs, and he dozes off again.

Gary tries to wake Mark up again, but his boyfriend is out cold. Again. It’s very nice having Mark embracing you and half-lying on top, but Gary’s usually awake by now and making breakfast. His tummy rumbles at the mere thought of food. The trip to Amsterdam messed up his body clock pretty badly; he needs to get out of bed now, or else he’ll never get used to having to wake up early again.

Mark dozing off again does tell Gary something, though. If Mark had been planning to head back to work today (it is an ordinary Thursday; the fourth day of the school year), he would probably have jumped off the sofa and gotten all his lesson plans together. But Mark fell back asleep without another care in the world, and Gary hasn’t seen any lesson plans. Meaning, Mark has already decided he isn’t going back to work today either.

Why, though? Mark’s not ill – Gary would’ve noticed if he was. So what could possibly be keeping Mark at home?

Whatever the answer may be, Gary isn’t likely to find it on an empty stomach.

Careful not to wake Mark up, Gary tries to squeeze out of Mark’s embrace by lifting up Mark’s arms one by one. Sleep-deprived Mark isn’t having any of it. He pulls Gary into an even tighter hug in his
sleep, trapping his boyfriend on the sofa.

Gary’s beginning to feel really hungry now.

‘Mark. Mate.’ Gary gently nudges Mark awake, and he’s rewarded with a sleepy little moan. The poor lad can barely keep his eyes open. ‘I’d really like to have breakfast now, if you don’t mind.’

‘I’m all out of food,’ Mark mumbles sleepily, and he dozes off again! Even though it’s already light! No wonder Mark always arrives late for work.

This is turning out to be quite an awkward morning, though Gary supposes it’s a welcome distraction from having to worry about what the hell is going on. Gary will worry about that once he’s had breakfast.

It takes Gary ten minutes to finally free himself from Mark’s grasp. He gently puts the blanket and plaid back in place over Mark’s sleeping form and tiptoes to the kitchen, which is only a couple of metres away. The flat is so small that the only thing really separating the kitchen from the living room is Mark’s sofa. Other than that, the entire apartment might as well be one big space. Gary wonders if the flat used to be a studio before Mark moved in.

Once Gary gets to the kitchen, he only feels hungrier. Mark wasn’t wrong when he said he’s all out of food. Upon checking Mark’s fridge and cupboards, Gary can’t really find any food you’d usually have in the morning, like porridge or scrambled eggs on toast.

What has Mark even been doing these past three days? Apart from last night’s spaghetti, which Mark didn’t finish, has he even eaten at all? If not, then Mr Harrison’s comment about Mark being sick suddenly makes a lot more sense. It might even be true. Most people don’t eat when they’re sick, after all.

However, Mark doesn’t look sick. He looks more sad than sick, which is much worse. You can easily make someone feel a bit healthier and less sick by making them food and giving them a pill and some grapes, but when someone’s sad . . . when someone’s sad, sometimes cheering them up is an impossible task.

Just like that, Gary’s gone back to worrying about Mark. He may have to pop down to the local Tesco’s after all, but he doesn’t want to leave Mark on his own. Are there any places in the neighbourhood that deliver breakfast at home? He doesn’t suppose the pub next-door does breakfast. Based on the lack of pop songs playing outside Mark’s window, the pub is still closed.

Then he remembers Rob’s e-mail from last night. He tiptoes back to the living room to re-read the e-mail on his laptop.

P.S. I PASS MARK’S HOUSE ON MY WAY TO A “COURSE” ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION TOMORROW MORNING ... LET ME KNOW IF YOU NEED ME TO COME ROUND OR SOMETHING ... I’M HAPPY TO HELP ...

That’s it! He’ll phone Rob and ask him to come round and bring them some food. That way, they won’t starve – and Gary will be able to keep an eye on Mark like he promised he would.

Looking at Mark now, asleep on his sofa, his chest moving reassuringly up and down as he breathes . . . he looks much calmer than he did last night. That’s reassuring, at least. But Gary knows that looks can be deceiving, and Mark’s “issue” – his reason for not going to work – won’t have
disappeared overnight. It’ll still be there, like the tiny scar underneath Mark’s shoulder blade, hidden beneath a dozen layers of pretence.

Gary just hopes he isn’t too late to help Mark heal.

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Rob arrives at Mark’s flat with three paper bags from a popular British coffeehouse chain just fifteen minutes later. He is accompanied by the smell of several delicious cheese and ham toasties, the kind where the cheese melts in your mouth. Gary’s tummy rumbles just thinking about it.

‘I wasn’t sure what kind of breakfast you guys eat, so I got you a bit of everything,’ Rob says as he starts emptying his bags on Mark’s kitchen counter. He looks like a merchant at a food market, putting out his tasty wares for everyone to see. ‘I also got you a raspberry smoothie, Gaz. It was fucking expensive, though. Five quid for just some pressed raspberries!’

‘I promise I’ll pay you back later,’ Gary says as he takes the raspberry smoothie Rob has bought for him. He looks over to the sofa and sees that Mark’s just woken up and sat straight on his sofa. His hair is messy but not in a sexy way, and his eyes look red. He must have been crying in his sleep again.

Poor sod, Gary thinks.

Rob has noticed the red eyes too, but Rob’s way of dealing with sad people is by talking quickly about different and totally unrelated subjects until he’ll hit on one that makes Mark laugh.

‘Good morning, Mark. Do you like porridge? I got you porridge. And three toasties, though I ate one of them on me way here cos I got really hungry. So I suppose there’s only two toasties now. Can you believe that they’re having me go to a course about special education at eight in the morning? Eight in the morning, Mark. I thought I’d no longer have to go to courses now that I’m an official support teacher and stuff, but You-Know-Who insisted. He said, “If you don’t go to this course about special education I’ll have you kicked out of your office.” Knob. I’m thinking about adopting a dog, did I mention? Might as well, now that I’m gonna be earning a bit more money. D’you want a brownie, Mark?’

Mark laughs at the theatrical way Rob has offered him the brownie. It’s the first time Gary has seen Mark smile for ages, though it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

‘Maybe later. Thanks for coming, Rob. You too, Gaz. This means a lot.’

Gary smiles at Mark. ‘No worries, mate.’ He looks at all the food on Mark’s kitchen counter. It looks as though Rob has actually gone and robbed the coffeehouse, there’s so much stuff. ‘Anything you particularly fancy? Rob says the toasties are quite good.’

‘They are!’ Rob agrees. ‘Better than the ones they serve at the canteen at school, anyway.’

Mark lifts up his head so he can look at what’s on the kitchen counter. He’s still got his blanket covering his shoulders. ‘I’ll have the toastie then, I think. And the brownie, if that’s all right.’

Gary hands Mark the toastie and brownie on a plate that he found in one of the kitchen cupboards. He tickles Mark’s ear, a sensitive spot, and he’s rewarded with a small smile that’s not quite as good as the real thing. (But it’s a smile regardless.) ‘You eat as much as you want while I let Rob here out, all right? There’s tea on the kitchen counter if you want some.’

Mark’s face falls. ‘Rob has to go already?’
'Like I said, I have to attend a course at eight,' Rob explains as he starts stuffing the paper bags from the coffeehouse into Mark’s trash bin in the kitchen. ‘I’m sure it’ll be very interesting.’

Mark laughs when Rob exaggeratedly rolls his eyes. ‘At least try to pay attention. You could make another PowerPoint, you know.’

‘I just might,’ Rob says, and he heads to the sofa to give Mark a big kiss on the cheek. The kiss makes Mark turn quite pink, and for a second he actually looks a bit flustered.

Gary can’t say he blames him.

With Rob’s course about special education starting at eight, Rob has only a couple of minutes left to stay, at best. He and Gary talk in the hallway while Mark eats his breakfast on his sofa.

‘So. Have you figured out what’s going on yet? Harrison told me Mark was “ill” yesterday.’ Rob pronounces the word “ill” with his fingers making inverted commas in the air.

‘I think it’s more than that,’ Gary whispers. ‘You should have seen him yesterday. I’ve never seen him look so depressed. I didn’t even know Mark could feel this low.’

‘What do you think it is?’

Gary glances over his shoulder to see Mark eating his toastie in rabbit-sized bites. ‘If I had to guess, it’s something to do with the chat he had with Harrison after we returned from Amsterdam. We’d just taken all our bags from the luggage compartment in the coach when Mark suddenly came up to me to say Mr Harrison wanted to speak to him. We were going to meet up in the parking lot to go to my place and, well, you know, but Mark never showed. When I then went into the school to check things out, Cecelia said she’d seen Mark running out of the school looking upset. It’s bloody weird, this.’

Rob crosses his arms. ‘So you think Harrison is somehow involved, then.’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t wanna jump to conclusions.’ Gary remembers the e-mail Rob wrote him a couple of days ago. ‘In one of your e-mails, you said that you’d overheard Harrison saying something that you thought might have been related. What did you mean?’

Rob makes a face. ‘I can’t say.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t want you to tell me I was wrong afterwards! It’s just a hunch. We won’t know for sure until Mark tells us what’s going on with him himself.’

Rob can tell that Gary doesn’t like this answer, because Gary’s right eyebrow has just reached his hairline.

Maybe he should tell him.

‘I don’t know for sure, all right,’ Rob says, his voice a conspiratorial whisper, ‘but I think the reason Mark disappeared from work is because of an exam, Gaz. I overheard Mr Harrison talking to someone very important over the phone a couple of weeks ago, and he was talking about two students handing in identical exam papers. At the time I thought he was talking about a student called Owen, but I think he was talking about Mark.’

Rob has said all this with the speed of light, so it takes a while for the words to reach Gary’s grey
matter. ‘You think Mark hasn’t been to work . . . because of two students handing in identical exam papers?’

‘It would make sense if he’s the one who supervised the exam.’

‘Oh, Jesus.’ Gary puts his hand to his mouth. He utters a few expletives.

‘I don’t know if that’s what really happened,’ Rob whispers. ‘But it fits. I’m sorry.’

Now that Gary thinks about it, Mark has always seemed weirdly worried about exams. A couple of months ago, when Gary had just done his show at the London Palladium, he randomly texted Gary about academic dishonesty and what might happen if a colleague was caught doing it. Not to mention the fact that Mark was once caught texting in the middle of an exam.

It must have really spooked him, Mr Harrison barging into his classroom like that. Ever since, Mark has been terribly worried, always taking extra precautions whenever he’s asked to invigilate. If something terrible did happen while he was invigilating, it would explain why he hasn’t been at work for three days.

‘Rob . . . I think you’re right.’

‘We don’t know that yet,’ Rob’s quick to point out. He doesn’t bother reminding Gary what happened the last time a teacher was involved with academic dishonesty. Ironically, Mark’s the one who replaced her. ‘We just need to hope that I’m completely wrong, all right? I could be wrong! Just ask Mark what’s happened, and maybe it turns out that he’s been offered a job as a model after all.’

Gary laughs weakly. Mark being offered a contract at a model agency is just one of the rumours that’s been doing the rounds. ‘If only, eh?’

The boys reach that awkward moment in a conversation when you don’t really know what to say or do to possibly make things better.

Rob glances at his watch. It’s ten to. ‘If I don’t leave now the people who run the course will come for me with pitchforks, I’m afraid. If there’s anything you need, just call me, all right? I’m only about a ten-minute drive away from me home, anyway.’

‘Thanks, mate.’

Rob pats a supportive hand on Gary’s tense shoulder, then leaves.

He’s about to head to the door when he turns round again. ‘Can I ask just you something, Gaz?’

‘Er. Sure?’

‘When did you know? You and Mark, I mean? When did you know he was The One?’

That’s a bit of an unexpected question after the discussion they just had. ‘I guess I just did.’

‘Was it, like, a feeling or – or a tummy ache or . . . ?’

Gary frowns. ‘Why are you asking me this?’

Rob flushes. ‘No reason.’

Gary rubs the back of his head. He’s never really thought about it. ‘It wasn’t really an epiphany or something like that, if that’s what you mean, mate. I just knew. Sometimes that’s all it takes.’
gives Rob an amused, questioning look. ‘Why – do you fancy someone, Rob?’

‘No,’ Rob replies, but it comes out as a squeak. He jabs a shaking thumb at the door. ‘Anyway. I better be off now. Good luck and all that.’

With that, Rob almost falls over himself trying to get out of the door. Gary can vaguely make out Rob running down the stairs. If he hurried to Mark’s living room window now, he might still be able to see Rob nearly walking into a streetlamp.

Instead, Gary stands frozen in the hallway for a couple of minutes. He doesn’t know what he ought to worry about more: the fact that Rob fancies someone – or the fact that Mark may be in some serious trouble.

He knows that Rob is a sucker for conspiracy theories and that most of the things he says are complete nonsense, but his theory about Mark somehow getting involved with plagiarism feels worryingly genuine. He can’t think of a single other reason why Mark would have missed three days of work.

Could Rob be right?

[LESSON FIFTY-TWO: THE TRUTH COMES OUT]

‘D’you mind if I have your toastie, Gaz?’

‘Go ahead – I was going to have some porridge, anyway,’ Gary says from the kitchen counter. He carefully stirs the porridge Rob bought at the coffeehouse while Mark gets up to claim a second toastie, another ham and cheese one. It’s gone a bit soggy and cold, but Mark eats it gratefully.

He looks better than yesterday, Mark does: still tired and a bit shaken, but he does look a little happier. His eyes are no longer red, and he often smiles. There’s some colour back in his cheeks. Having breakfast must have done him well.

The boys eat the rest of their breakfast sat on the floor in Mark’s living room. Radio Two is playing in the background. Right now, the radio is playing a pop song that was released only a couple of months ago.

‘I like this one,’ Mark says in between bites. He’s no longer eating in rabbit-sized bites. ‘It sounds like a country song. I like country, don’t you? I’d love to write a country song one day. I could wear a cowboy hat. I wonder if I’d look good in one.’

Mark seems to find comfort in commentating on every song Radio Two plays them, and Gary lets him.

‘This bit is good, the middle eight. It’s nice.’

‘I think I used to work with one of the guys who did the production for this song. He was nice. And talented, obviously.’

‘Didn’t one of our students write this one? I love the melody.’

‘The lyrics are so good. They’re sort of melancholic, aren’t they?’ and so on.
At some point, the radio station starts playing a recent chart-topping hit by a female pop star. Mark’s face lights up just hearing it. ‘Oh, I love this one. I always sing it in the bath.’

Mark’s own mention of taking a bath makes him smell his right armpit when Gary isn’t looking. He scrunches up his nose; he’s been wearing the same clothes for the past three days, and, well, you can tell. Even Mark Owen sweats sometimes. ‘Speaking of, I should probably take a bath now. And wash me clothes. I think brushing me teeth was the only daily routine I bothered doing this week.’

Gary finishes his last spoonful of porridge. ‘I could do it for you, if you want? Run a bath, I mean.’

‘You’d do that?’ Mark glances at the clock in his kitchen. ‘It’s half eight – you should be at work by now . . .’

‘I called in sick,’ Gary shrugs. ‘I’m not leaving till –’

Gary wants to say, *Till I know what’s wrong with you*, but he doesn’t want to push Mark into talking about it. He settles on, ‘Till I know you’re better. I think the students will be happy to have a day without me, anyway. I think they hate me now!’

Mark arranges his face into a frown. He’s never heard of a student who hates Mr Barlow. ‘How so?’

‘I’ve been really strict with them. Too strict, for my doing. I thought I was turning into Howard yesterday.’

‘Isn’t that what they say, though? “Don’t smile until Christmas” and all that?’ Mark’s referring to an old adage often given to new teachers: if you want your students to listen to you, you shouldn’t ever be nice to them until after the Christmas holidays.

Mark’s always thought the idea was a bit ridiculous.

‘Would you ever do that?’ Gary asks, although he thinks he knows the answer already.

‘I’d rather just be myself. That’s the best approach to teaching, isn’t it? Just being yourself. If only I could go back to work . . .’

Mark doesn’t explain what he means by that. He averts his face to dab his eyes with the sleeves of his pyjama top, and Gary suddenly knows, for certain, that Rob’s theory is right. Mark hasn’t been at work for the past three days because he’s sick or because he doesn’t want to – he hasn’t been because he can’t.

Gary places his hand on Mark’s shoulder and squeezes it. ‘How about I run you that bath, eh?’

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Like the rest of the house, Mark's bathroom is tiny. There’s just a basin, a toilet, a washing machine and a poorly maintained bath/shower combination. There’s mould on the walls, and some of the tiles on the walls are cracked.

The Mark Owen that Gary knows is meticulously tidy (Mark once admitted he had spent an entire hour cleaning a classroom after a creative writing activity involving sequins), so he must hate having a bathroom like this. He probably doesn’t have enough money to do anything about it.

Selfishly, Gary wonders if Mark might prefer living somewhere else. As in, at Gary’s penthouse. Gary’s penthouse is easily big enough for two people (and then some), and it doesn’t have mould on the walls or cars driving by at midnight. It also doesn’t have a pub as neighbours. It’s comfortable
and warm, and perfect for someone like Mark, who deserves the world.

Problem is, Gary doesn’t know how to ask Mark to move in with him. They’ve talked about settling down, sort of, but this was when they were in the middle of having of having sex, and, well, things have changed. There’s a very large possibility that Mark has lost his job, and obviously that’s going to be Mark’s priority. Mark might not even be able to get his job back at all, and there aren’t many schools in the city that offer Creative Writing courses. If Mark loses his position at VCMA, there’s a large possibility he’ll have to look for a job at the other side of the country.

So how are they ever going to settle down? Should they even move in together at all? Gary is still a popstar, after all, and being a popstar involves a lot of travelling and going on tour and being in places he doesn’t necessarily want to be in. He’s never really thought about how he’s going to combine that with having a long-term boyfriend.

Gary pushes away the issue of settling down, for now. There’s no use thinking about the future if he still doesn’t know what happened in Mark’s past.

He tries to ignore the state the bathroom is in. He plugs the drain and turns on the tap, and the bath starts filling with water. He checks the temperature, then adds some aromatic bath oils from a bottle in Mark’s medicine cupboard. It smells achingly familiar.

While the bath slowly fills up, Gary finds some fresh towels hanging from a rack and places them on the washing machine. He turns off the tap when the bath has filled two-thirds and mentally checks whether he has done everything. Bath? Check. Towels? Check. He wants Mark to feel relaxed and looked-after, so he wants this to be the best bath Mark’s ever had. (Even though it’ll never compare to the shower he and Mark had in the five-star hotel in Amsterdam. It involved much soap and rubbing things up and down.)

Gary still feels like he’s forgotten something. Something rather important that he can’t put his finger on. Maybe he should add more bath oils?

He’s going to add more bath oils.

Gary has added so much bath oil that the bathroom has filled with the pleasant but pungent aroma of sandalwood. It smells pleasantly of Mark, and Gary feels a strange twinge of something; something very similar to homesickness, except Gary is exactly where he wants to be.

He really wishes he could do this all day, every day. Not necessarily running Mark a bath, or cheering him up after three days of being locked up at home, but all the tiny things that make a relationship worthwhile. Having breakfast together. Going to work together. Having a fight over the remote control. Walking their dogs, together. Cooking. Showering. Watering the plants. Seeing Mark in a cute pair of pyjamas in the morning. Gary wants that more than anything.

He might even want it more than his pop star career. Because he loves performing, he really goes, but he still regrets not taking Mark with him on tour. He still regrets not telling Mark about that part of his life earlier.

Maybe “just” being a teacher is more than enough?

‘I hope you haven’t used the entire bottle of bath oils, Gaz.’

Gary leaves his thoughts and turns to see Mark standing in the doorway. There’s an alert expression on Mark’s face. He almost looks . . . flirtatious? There’s that certain spark in his eyes that always leads to trouble.
‘You could still join me, you know,’ Mark says, and Gary laughs out loud; a mocking laugh.

Truth be told, Gary does consider it briefly. Taking a bath with Mark isn’t something he’d mind doing (seeing Mark with soap all over his body? Christ, yes), but he doesn’t really want to get intimate after he spent the past twelve hours worrying about Mark like mad. He’d rather make love to Mark again when they’re both feeling a little happier – and the bath isn’t big enough for two people, anyway.

‘I’ll be in the living room if you need me,’ Gary says, smiling, and he ruffles Mark’s hair on the way out. He can just about make out Mark affectionately calling him a “spoilsport” before the door closes behind him.

Gary smiles to himself. He doesn’t know when the change in Mark started happening, but he’s pretty sure Mark has finally returned to his former self – the man who talks a lot and always has a twinkle in his eye.

Now he just needs to figure out what on Earth happened to him.

***

Gary’s in the middle of washing the dishes when he hears the door of the bathroom opening. A small strip of Mark’s face appears through the crack in the door just as Gary puts down his tea towel.

‘Gary? Could you fetch me some clothes from the wardrobe, please?’ Mark sounds a little ashamed. ‘I don’t really wanna walk around in me pyjamas anymore.’

Gary inwardly curses himself. He knew he’d forgotten something– he didn’t bother getting Mark a fresh pair of clothes!

‘One second.’ Gary heads to the wardrobe, which happens to be next to Mark’s bed. The wardrobe is easily the biggest piece of furniture in the flat.

Gary opens it, and he stops to look at all the clothes on offer: fluffy jumpers, dress shirts in over a dozen different colours, blouses that one might mistake for curtains, tight trousers, several pairs of shoes, four different waistcoats and a couple of denim jackets. There’s also a blouse that’s very see-through, and very outrageous. Mark may not have an awful lot of money, but he certainly likes spending it on clothes.

Finally, Gary settles on a comfortable jumper and jeans, nothing too fancy.

Gary heads back to the door of the bathroom with the pile of clothes in his hands. He knocks just in case Mark hasn’t got any clothes on, and he feels his heart skipping a beat when Mark opens the door a little further, revealing himself and the bathroom behind him.

Mark’s only wearing a towel. That is, of course he is – he’s just had a shower –, but seeing it still knocks Gary backwards. He’s obviously seen Mark’s body before, so it shouldn’t really come as a surprise that Mark looks bloody good half-naked, but he looks bloody good half-naked. And that towel? Mark’s tucked it around his hips, barely hanging on. It is a really good sight.

Mark flushes at Gary’s obvious once-over. He’ll probably never get used to someone like Gary looking at him like that, and he hopes he never will. ‘Did . . . you get me some clothes, Gaz?’

Gary shakes himself awake and unceremonially shoves the pile of clothes into Mark’s hands. He averts his gaze to the ceiling. ‘I – I got you that jumper you like.’
His boyfriend looks at the pile. It seems to consist of only a jumper and a pair of jeans. ‘And my underwear? I do need my underwear, Gaz. I know how much it turns you on, but I can’t go commando all the time.’

Now Gary’s the one to flush. ‘Right. Underwear.’ He casts a helpless look in the general direction of Mark’s bedroom. ‘Er . . .’

‘Second drawer in the closet next to the window,’ Mark clarifies, and he watches a flustered Gary nearly stumbling into his sofa to get him a pair of pants.

Gary returns to the bathroom carrying at least seven pairs of underpants. It turned out Mark has a drawer full of them, and he didn’t want to make Mark feel uncomfortable by handpicking a particularly revealing pair.

Mark grabs a pair of black Calvin Klein boxers from the selection Gary picked for him. He stretches the material between his two hands. ‘You wanna help me get changed into these, Gaz? They’re very tight, you know.’

Gary blushes. He stares at the boxers, then at the towel around Mark’s waist. He accidentally pictures helping Mark changing into his boxers.

The fantasy immediately gets blocked out by the memory of feeling Mark faint in his arms last night.

‘Maybe when you’re better,’ Gary says.

‘I am better,’ Mark pouts. ‘I’ve just taken a shower, haven’t I?’

‘But I still don’t know what’s wrong with you,’ Gary whispers. ‘Mark . . . why are you here? You should be at work, driving your students up the bloody wall.’

‘I know.’ Mark presses the pile of clothes closer to his body, the soft texture of his red jumper comfortable and soft against his skin. The flirtatious fire he had in his eyes just seconds ago has been doused once more. ‘I have been meaning to tell you, but every time I do – every time I do, the words won’t come. I’m sorry, Gaz.’

Gary kisses Mark softly on the forehead. ‘You just get dressed, all right? We can talk later, if you want.’

Gary lets out a deep sigh once Mark has pulled the door closed, though he doesn’t know if it’s out of relief or disappointment or fear. Seeing Mark with a towel around his waist was a welcome surprise, but he’s not sure how he feels about Mark not being able to talk about what happened to him. At least he seems a little happier now.

Gary puts the unpicked underpants back in Mark’s drawer and sends Rob a quick update from the sofa in the living room.

From: Gary

To: Rob

Hi Rob,

Thanks again for the food – it seems to have cheered Mark up a little. He seems more like his usual self now, though he’s also just said that he doesn’t know how to tell me what happened. There are
moments when he looks happy and cheerful again – and then there are moments when it’s like watching the light going off inside of him. I’m at a loss, frankly.

The more I think about it, the more I think you may be right about Mark’s disappearance having to do with work – but he still hasn’t talked about it because he doesn’t know how to put it into words. I wonder if I should bring it up?

Gaz x

Rob’s reply comes mere minutes later, which tells Gary that he probably isn’t paying any attention to the course he’s attending.

From: Rob
To: Gary

I’D WAIT FOR MARK TO TALK ABOUT IT HIMSELF… NO USE PUTTING PRESSURE ON HIM… I’M HAPPY MY VISIT HELPED BY THE WAY… LET ME KNOW HOW YOU TO GET ON...

P.S. I’M SAT HERE LISTENING TO A BLOKE TRYING TO TEACH ME STUFF I’VE KNOWN FOR AGES… I’M ONLY HERE FOR THE FREE FOOD TO BE HONEST...

Gary laughs. Trust Rob to care only about food.

Gary’s nearly finished writing his reply when Mark leaves the bathroom wearing the clothes Gary picked out for him. He looks much better than before.

Mark briefly disappears into his bedroom to put away his pyjamas. A moment later, he pops his head from behind the partition that separates his bedroom from the living room.

‘Did you make my bed this morning, Gaz?’

‘I did. And I did some cleaning as well.’

‘Did you really?’ Mark makes an impressed face, then disappears behind the partition once more. A moment later, he returns to the living room wearing yet another layer: he’s put on a fashionable woollen poncho over his already quite-warm jumper.

‘Was my jumper not enough, mate?’ Gary jests.

Mark sinks into the sofa, smiling. ‘You know I like wearing many layers, Gaz.’

‘Why? If you’re cold you can just put the heating on.’

Mark rolls his eyes, and he kisses Gary gently on the lips. It’s the first proper kiss they’ve shared for days. They spend the following five minutes in silence, with Mark wordlessly adjusting the cushions on the sofa as he builds up the courage to tell Gary what’s going on with him.

He doesn’t really know how to explain it, to be honest. Telling Gary that he’s been fired from his favourite ever job in the world will only make him feel worse. Since being fired, he’s often wondered if he might feel better if Gary kissed his neck and the sensitive little spot where his tattoo
is, but he knows what Gary’s like. Gary would never take advantage of how sad he’s been.

The only thing Gary can do is smile at him, warmly and encouragingly, as Mark finally finds the courage he needs to share his secret. He begins to talk slowly, taking time to think through every syllable he says in case it makes him cry.

‘I know you’ve been wondering why I haven’t been at work. Well, the reason is . . .’

Mark finds himself stuck already. He accidentally pictures Mr Harrison’s frustrated face staring back at him in his office, telling him to keep quiet about the plagiarism: What if your colleagues hear about the investigation and they automatically assume you helped the students pass their exams deliberately? They would never speak to you again. No, we have to keep this a secret.

Is Mark doing the right thing, telling Gary about what happened? Is it even legal? Gary took so much effort taking care of him and making him feel better, but what if he jeopardises Gary’s own position at school by telling him about the investigation?

‘Mark.’ Gary’s voice cuts through the argument Mark is having in his own head. ‘You can tell me. Whatever it is – you can tell me.’

Mark nods. It’s a brave nod; the type you force your heavy head to make when you need to be strong, but feel weak.

If Gary hadn’t been here for him, making sure he’s all right and making him feel warm at night, he would never have talked to anyone about his situation, ever. He would have stayed in his apartment forever, and eventually people would have forgotten about him.

But he has to tell someone. Even though Mr Harrison ordered him not to. Gary deserves the truth.

Slowly but surely, Mark tells Gary everything: about Mr Harrison taking him to his office; being reprimanded for the video at the Van Gogh Museum; and Ofsted discovering that two students had handed in identical letters during an exam Mark invigilated. As well as pointing out that Mr Harrison pretty much thinks that Mark deliberately helped the students cheat, he mentions the formal investigation, the students from M_DC3A being forced to sit the exam again and his contract being suspended. In other words, being fired.

After his conversation with Mr Harrison, Mark ran all the way from his office to the bus stop. He can’t remember losing his phone; it must have slipped out of his pocket as he ran. He didn’t notice he had lost his phone until he was already inside his flat.

He wouldn’t have been allowed to contact anyone anyway.

At the end of his story, Mark’s become quite tearful. Gary’s even had to head to the toilet to get him a long string of toilet paper to dry his eyes with.

‘I felt so bad after me chat with Mr Harrison that I locked myself up in here. I hadn’t even eaten till you made me that pasta.’ A trail of snot has made its way down Mark’s nose, and he has to blow his nose. It sounds like an elephant trumpeting. ‘But you already knew, didn’t you? I could tell, this morning. I could tell that you knew.’

‘I knew parts of it,’ Gary explains. ‘Rob had overheard Harrison talking about a fraudulent exam a couple of weeks ago, and he figured you must have had something to do with it. He’s already thinking about how we’re going to help you out.’

‘Do you think Mr Harrison was right, then? About . . . you know. Me being involved. Helping the
students cheat.’

Gary tries wiping a lock of hair from Mark’s forehead, but it only ends up flopping right back. His hair really *is* getting quite long.

‘I don’t think you helped those two students cheat intentionally, if that’s what you mean. And I don’t think you weren’t paying any attention, either. This is not like that time when you got caught texting *me* a couple of months ago. There’s more to it, this exam.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘It’s the way Harrison reacted when I asked you how you were. He refused to give me your address – said he couldn’t give it to me. I think he’s hiding something.’

Mark lets out an uncertain laugh. *I think he’s hiding something* sounds like something Rob might say after he’s spent all day lurking forums about UFOs and conspiracy theories. ‘Don’t tell me you think Mr Harrison’s trying to set me up.’

‘There are head teachers who have gotten away with worse.’

‘Gaz!’ Mark cries, aghast. ‘Don’t be awful.’

‘It would fit, though. Mr Harrison’s been behaving weirdly ever since last school year. In fact, he’s been behaving weirdly since he hired you.’

Mark considers this. ‘Do you *really* think it’s a set-up? Mr Harrison – you think he’s doing this on purpose?’

‘I’m not saying it’s *not* a set-up,’ Gary says. ‘Wouldn’t you have noticed two students copying each other’s letters? Besides, don’t you think it’s bloody weird that Harrison thinks you *helped* the students hand in two identical letters? You love rules. You’d never intentionally do something that goes against your moral code. I don’t understand why Harrison can’t see this. And he’s been telling everyone different stories about where you’ve been! Something is off, I’m telling you.’

Mark thinks about what Gary is telling him. He did think it was weird something had gone wrong while he was supervising, because in his head it had gone so *well*. He didn’t spot anything strange. He’d handed out pens, and he meticulously wrote down the names of all the present students on his attendance sheet. But the two students who were involved, Timo and Samuel . . . something about those two names doesn’t add up.

Could Gary’s fear be justified? Is he being set up? And if so, why?

‘What do we *do*, Gaz?’

Gary shakes his head. He doesn’t know. It had all seemed quite logical, visiting Mark and taking care of him, but he never stopped to think about what might come next. When he first stepped foot inside Mark’s apartment, he still thought Mark was going down with a mystery illness.

‘I don’t know yet,’ Gary says, which makes Mark’s heart shrink and falter in his chest. ‘But I’ll figure it out. Me and Rob – we’ll think of something to get you reinstated. Starting tomorrow. I promise.’

Mark sighs. Tomorrow is Friday: the fifth day of work Mark has missed. He doesn’t even want to think about the mess he’ll have to clean up if he does get reinstated one day, which seems unlikely. Missing five days is as bad as missing an entire term. There’ll be so much to catch up on: hundreds
of e-mails, writing dossiers, exercises and poems that need to be marked, and of course the fact that
he hasn’t seen any students since he returned from Amsterdam. Will the students miss him? Or will
they be wondering he hasn’t shown up because of what happened at the Van Gogh museum?

‘That reminds me – how have my students responded to . . . you know. My disappearance,’ Mark
says, failing to suppress a gulp of nervousness.

‘I don’t think they know the reason why you left,’ Gary says. ‘Mimi and Naima, though – the
students from the Songwriting course –, they both came up to me and Howard yesterday to ask me if
you were all right. I obviously didn’t know what had happened then, so I told them you were ill.’

‘Oh, bless them,’ Mark says, a fond look in his eyes. ‘They’re lovely, aren’t they, Mimi and
Naima?’

‘They are. Mimi seemed genuinely upset when we told her you were ill, actually. She said your
lessons have been taken over by Mr Gavin, now that I think of it.’

‘Mr Gavin who teaches Creative Direction? Are you sure?’

‘Hang on, let me check.’ Gary flips open his laptop on Mark’s dining room table and visits the
school website. He clicks a link for the online timetables, scrolls down a long list of names and finds
Mark’s at the bottom, before Mr Williams. He clicks.

Mark’s timetable is still there, but all of his Creative Writing lessons have been digitally crossed out.
In red capital letters, it says that his lessons have been taken over by Mr Gavin, an experienced
teacher who specialises in creative direction and event management. Gary was right.

Mark swallows. Seeing his name crossed out and replaced by someone else isn’t very promising.
‘Do you think this is significant? Mr Gavin taking over my lessons?’

‘Probably not,’ Gary says. ‘But these timetables are public. That means the students will have seen
them. They’ll know by now that they were supposed to get Creative Writing from you, not Mr
Gavin. And as far as I know, Mr Gavin doesn’t specialise in writing. If you’re gone for much longer,
the students might start asking awkward questions, which means . . .’

‘We need to sort this out quickly,’ Mark sighs. He doesn’t know much about Mr Gavin, but the fact
that his lessons are being taken over by someone who’s originally from the Art department doesn’t
give him much comfort. Will Mr Gavin have explained the syllabus? Has he already covered
alliterations and haikus? Have the students already started working on their writing dossiers? Does he
know that Naima doesn’t feel comfortable writing poems about relationships, and that Mimi has
dyslexia?

Just thinking about it gives him anxiety. ‘I really wanna get back to work, Gaz.’

‘I know.’

Gary squeezes Mark’s hand, slightly lost for words. It’s true, he doesn’t know what he can do to
make Mr Harrison reverse Mark’s suspension, and he’s not sure if getting to the bottom of the matter
is something that they should be doing at all. They might discover some things that will change the
school forever.

‘I suppose there’s one good thing about me not having a job anymore,’ Mark says. As ever, he tries
to be hopeful even though he feels dreadful inside. ‘I could finally try gardening.’

This is such a wholesome remark to make after their serious conversation that Gary laughs out loud.
'I hate to break this to you, Mark, but you don’t have a garden.'

‘I have a balcony, though.’ Mark dreamily stares at his balcony. He pictures a balcony filled with fresh shades of green and plenty of places for cute critters to go to, and he forgets about not having a job to return to, for now. ‘Yes – I’ll try gardening. Which flowers do you think would go well with the rest of the house? I might buy one of those insect hotels.’

Gary doesn’t have it in him to point out that Mark’s balcony is the size of a stamp.

It’s good to see Mark smiling and making the best of a bad time, though. There’s hope, still. Gary doesn’t know where that hope is coming from, but it’s there; fluttering through the air like a piece of ticker tape at one of Gary’s concerts, about to be caught.

He just hopes Harrison doesn’t snatch it from his hands before he can catch it.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is basically a fic within a fic.
PART THIRTEEN

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Rob and Gary find out more about the exam Mark supervised. They get some unexpected help from their colleagues.

We also learn more about Rob’s blossoming relationship with Mr Orange.

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder because it’s been so long since the last chapter: previously in this fic, Mark lost his job because his head teacher thought he had helped students cheat on an exam. Gary came to visit his apartment, and along with Rob he helped Mark get better. Gary and Rob both think Mark is being set up by someone – but by whom? [thinking person stroking his chin emoji]

Anyway, as well as dealing with Mark losing his job, this chapter is basically a mini-Willorange fic. That's right - we're getting another pairing! I thought very long and hard about whether or not I had to include it, but I *had* to, because I basically wrote this chapter on the back of a really bad period of anxiety. The majority of this chapter is actually about that: anxiety. I'm actually quite proud of the Willorange parts in this chapter.

Don’t worry if you're wondering where the Barlowen smut has gone: the next chapters will feature Mark and Gary getting it on as per usual. They just can’t get enough of each other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[LESSON FIFTY-THREE: COMING UP WITH A PLAN]

Yesterday, Gary spent all day at Mark’s. Gary had deliberately called in sick to take care of Mark, and it turned out to be quite a good day really. They cuddled and kissed a lot and by the time they went to bed together in Mark’s tiny single bed, Mark was feeling a lot better than he had all week.

Today is the day after, Friday; nearly one week after Mark heard the news about his suspension. This means that Mark has been stuck at home, unable to go to work, for five whole days. Nasty rumours are beginning to spread. Some colleagues think that Mark caught a nasty virus in Amsterdam. Others think that Mark must have been approached by a record label. Two teachers genuinely believe Mark got stranded in Spain over the summer. Where that rumour came from, Gary has no idea; Amsterdam is the only foreign city Mark has ever been to.
As for the students Mark was supposed to teach, they’ve all become quite restless and rowdy. Their lessons have been taken over by Mr Gavin, who originally teaches Creative Direction and Event Management. Mr Gavin is extremely intelligent, but also quite useless when it comes to Creative Writing. It is yet another reason why Mark absolutely needs to get reinstated. But how, Gary isn’t sure. He doesn’t even know who to trust anyone.

Because of this, Gary has decided that he’s only going to confide in Rob. He doesn’t want anyone else to know what Mark is going through. If Robbie Williams can’t come up with a plan to get Mark his job back, then no-one can.

The two of them have arranged to meet on a bench outside the school entrance on Friday: Gary’s first day back after he spent all Thursday at Mark’s. Gary told Rob that their meeting had to be “discreet”, so Rob’s decided to show up at their agreed meeting place with a pair of sunglasses on his face. He must have thought they were spies or secret agents, meeting up in secret to discuss a top-secret mission like James Bond.

‘Mr Barlow.’ Rob greets Gary with a mysterious air. He waits for a couple of students to pass their meeting place. ‘The nights were always warm with you.’

Gary blinks. ‘What?’

Rob lifts up his sunglasses. ‘The nights were always warm with you; it’s our secret code? Did you not get my e-mail? I sent it to you this morning. You said we had to be discreet!’

‘We don’t need secret codes if we know each other already, mate.’ Gary laughs. This is so Rob. ‘Sit down, will you? You’re making me nervous.’

Rob sits. He takes off his sunglasses. It’s quite cloudy really, and there’s no point wearing any sunglasses if they’re only going to attract more attention. ‘Has Mark told you what’s going on with him?’

Gary nods. ‘He told me yesterday. You were right when you said it had something to do with an exam.’

‘Fuck.’

‘Yeah.’

‘What happened?’

Gary waits for Mrs Stohl, the head teacher of the Art Department, to pass their meeting place. Even though the school day has already finished, there are still quite a lot of people on the school grounds. There are the tired teachers making their way down to the local coffeehouse via the gravel path; Photography students taking photos of the trees for a special art project; Mr Donald nearly walking into a lamppost because he was too busy sipping his coffee; and some yards away, the school’s handyman, mowing the grass.

There are probably far better places to meet, like the school library or the staff room, but it’s far quieter out here than inside the school itself, where there are colleagues everywhere. Here, they can talk freely about Mark’s predicament without anyone finding out about it.

At least, that’s the idea.

‘Mark supervised an exam a couple of months ago,’ Gary explains in an important whisper. ‘An English exam – formal writing. Turns out that two students handed in identical letters. Ofsted found
out about it, and now Mr Harrison believes Mark had something to do with it. As a result, he’s been suspended. As in, fired. He’s basically been fired, Mark has.’

Rob swallows. This is worse than he thought it would be. ‘What happens now?’

‘There’s going to be a formal investigation to find out what happened.’

Rob laughs out loud. A mocking laugh. ‘And let me guess – Mark isn’t allowed to talk to anyone while this “investigation” takes place? What a load of crap. This investigation is never going to happen, and you know it. Remember what happened to the former Art History teacher, Ms Turnbull? The one who was accused of helping students cheat the system or whatever? She never returned! We never saw her again – none of us did. I swear to you, Gaz, someone made her disappear, and the same is going to happen to Mark if we don’t help him out soon.’

Rob often likes to be dramatic, but this time Gary finds himself agreeing with him. ‘What do you suggest we do?’

‘Simple, mate. We have to prove Mark’s innocence. We have to show Ofsted or whatever that Mark didn’t have anything to do with this and that he’s the best teacher in the world, ever. Basically, we need to start our own investigation.’

Gary runs his finger along the brown grain of the bench as he considers this. He agrees that they should clear Mark’s name, but what if it turns out that Mark had something to do with the fraud after all?

He hates himself for thinking it, but there’s a small chance that Mr Harrison’s suspicions are correct. Mark is the kindest teacher there is, and sometimes he’s got his head so far up the clouds that he stops paying attention.

What if the two fraudsters, Timo and Samuel, simply took advantage of that?

‘What if Harrison is right, though?’ Gary hates that he has to say this, but someone’s got to. If Rob wants to start an investigation, they have to look at the issue from every single angle. ‘What if Mark just wasn’t paying any attention? He got caught texting me a couple of months ago. This might be the same thing.’

Rob presses his lips together. He hadn’t thought of that. ‘Even if that’s the case, there must be something we can do to help. There’s got to be some clever loophole we haven’t thought of. Personally I think Mark’s being set up by someone. Seriously. I think he’s being set up.’

Gary sighs. ‘Yeah, me too.’

‘I may be able to help,’ a third voice says. Male.

Rob and Gary both turn their heads, and their hearts stop for two very different reasons. Gary goes pale. Rob goes pink, then pale, then pink again.

It’s Mr Orange. He’s wearing a tailored black jacket with a grey jumper underneath, and he’s standing right behind their bench. In his right hand, he’s carrying an old copy of *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* which he must have read over a dozen times.

He must have heard everything Gary and Rob were saying.

‘I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,’ says Jason, ‘but I heard what you were saying about Mr Owen – Mark – being suspended, and I think I may have seen something important. It could help you build a case
to get him reinstated.’

Rob and Gary share a worried look. They should obviously have chosen a more discreet place to discuss Mark’s suspension, for Jason has just overheard all of it!

‘What do you reckon, Rob?’ Gary puts his hand in front of his mouth and whispers into Rob’s ear. ‘Should we trust him?’

Rob looks in Jason’s direction. There’s something about Jason Orange that gives him the impression that he’s always floating from the ground like a serene cloud, and yet he can be grounded when he has to be. He’s one of those teachers who would never judge a student for anything.

Rob knows all this, because he and Jason have been spending quite a lot of time together lately. He can’t tell Gary as much, though. Doing so would be admitting that he fancies Jason more than he’s ever fancied anyone.

‘Let’s hear what Jay has to say,’ Rob says noncommittally.

‘You sure?’ Gary raises one eyebrow. He looks over his shoulder to see Jason staring at a tree, two hands clasped behind his back. ‘You came up with a code word. I thought we both wanted to keep this to ourselves?’

‘I know. But I trust him, all right?’

Rob’s face has turned quite red, and something about this makes Gary’s skin prickle.

The way Rob is looking at their colleague, with those big green eyes of his . . .

Something is up. Gary can’t quite put his finger on it. But if Rob says that Jason can be trusted, then it must obviously be true.

Gary pats his hand on the empty spot next to him, and Jason sits down like a feather touching down on the ground. All of Jason’s gestures and moves are like that, as though he’s some sort of oiled machine that will never wind down.

Jason tells his colleagues what he saw. Two days ago, he went into the archive room on the first floor to have a look an old “Philosophy of Dance” exam, just minding his own business, when Mr Harrison suddenly walked in. It was dark, and Jason was stood behind a rather large file cabinet, so Mr Harrison didn’t see him.

‘I didn’t mean to watch what Mr Harrison was doing, but I thought he was behaving so oddly that I couldn’t help but stay hidden,’ Jason explains. According to him, Mr Harrison took out an old exam, looked at the attendance list and scribbled something on it with a black pen. He then slid the attendance list back into the envelope and put the envelope back where he found it. He quickly slipped out of the archive room – looking rather guilty, Jason thought – and Jason never saw him again.

‘I had a look at the envelope afterwards,’ Jason says. ‘It wasn’t the exam you described, Rob, but I did think it was strange that Mr Harrison was clearly adding some text or words to an attendance list of an exam that took place over a year ago. I couldn’t figure out what he’d added, unfortunately. But it’s odd, right?’

Rob’s face has gone red with excitement. (Or maybe he’s just gone red because of Jason being so close to him, Gary thinks. It’s hard to tell.) ‘Are you sayin’ what I think you’re sayin’, Jay? You think Harrison was tamperin’ with the exam?’
‘I can’t say for sure,’ says Jason. He seems to have forgotten Gary is there. He directs most of his words at Rob, who is looking at him like a puppy. ‘There is probably a logical explanation why someone might want to look at an old exam and then go over it with a black pen. Perhaps he was simply adding a date or a signature. But it does make you think, right? If you want to prove Mark’s innocence, as you said, Rob, I think you’ll need to start with the exam itself.’

Rob’s breath catches artfully. ‘You’re right – we need to get our hands on the exam Mark supervised! If there’s one way to prove Mark’s innocence, it’s that.’

‘Indeed,’ says Jason. And he smiles.

‘I don’t think it’s going to be as simple as that,’ Gary adds. ‘There’s going to be an investigation into the exam Mark invigilated, so we might not find it in the archive room.’

Rob feels a chill run up his arms. ‘You think Harrison might be keeping the exam papers somewhere else?’

‘We’ll have to check out the archive room to make sure. Today, if we can help it.’ Gary turns to Jason, who . . . actually still isn’t looking at him. He only has eyes for Rob. ‘I don’t suppose you’ll, er, wanna join us, Jay? We could use your help combing through the archives.’

‘I’m meeting someone, I’m afraid. But if I think of something else, I’ll let you know immediately. This is a really serious thing that has happened to Mark. If you need my help with anything, just shout. I consider Mark to be one of my friends. I hope he knows that.’

‘I’m sure he does, Jay, thank you,’ Gary says. He smiles. He’s sure Jason’s resourcefulness will come in handy.

Jason gets up from the bench then, and for a second Gary actually thinks he can feel the wind the whooshing and blowing, like Jason Orange is one with Nature itself. ‘Are you still up for our date, Rob? I texted you the details earlier.’

Rob turns bright red. He shares a guilty look with Gary, whose eyebrows have just jumped off his forehead. ‘I’ll reply after I’ve been to the archive room, okay?’

Gary’s mouth falls open, but no words come out.

‘I look forward to it,’ says Jason, smiling, and he walks away with the air of a charismatic prince, his tailored black jacket flapping behind him in the wind. Even the Songwriting student Naima, who is quite immune to attractive people, stops to look at him on her way out.

‘You,’ Gary says once Jason is out of earshot, ‘have some explaining to do.’

‘I have to do nothing of the sort,’ Rob says, and he puts his sunglasses back on and crosses his arms.

‘He obviously fancies you, Jay does. He was talking about texting! I didn’t even know Jason had a phone. What have you two been up to?’

‘I’m not telling.’

‘Please, Rob.’

Rob pretends to be zipping his mouth shut.

‘I’ll give you some money?’ Gary offers. ‘Five quid? Ten quid. How’s that sound?’
Rob lets out a loud, mocking laugh. Several first-year students stop to look at him as though he has
gone quite mad. ‘Ten quid, mate? Ten quid? I always knew you were stingy.’

‘I’ll buy you dinner, then. I’ll get you a boxset of one of your favourite reality TV shows. Brand
new. Just tell me which one.’

Rob lifts up his chin, nose in the air. ‘Nothing you say will ever make me change me mind.’

Gary considers this. He knows that Rob’s feelings for Jay aren’t important right now. His priority
ought to be getting to the archive room to see whether Mark’s writing exam is still there, and then
have a good look at it. They might be able to solve the mystery of Mark’s suspension before the day
is over.

On the other hand, the fact that Rob might be in love is the first good news Gary has heard in days.
He has to know more. Going to the archive room can wait.

‘I’ll tell you about me first time with Mark?’ Gary offers.

That has got Rob’s attention. ‘Go on.’

‘I’ll tell you everything,’ Gary promises. Heat rises up to his cheeks. What has he just done? ‘But
first you’ve gotta tell me about you and Jason.’

‘And you’ll spare no detail?’

Gary swallows. He’s never told anyone about his first time with Mark. After all, it involved toys and
being tied to a bed. ‘I won’t if you don’t.’

‘What about the exam Mark invigilated, though?’ Rob says. ‘Didn’t you say we better go check out
the archive room today?’

Gary’s eyes flick at the clock outside the school library, which is just at the other side of the school
grounds. The library was built especially for the school, and therefore it looks nothing like the former
warehouse.

The exterior of the library is a rather shapeless square, but on the inside, it looks like a library out of
Harry Potter. There are books and tables and cabinets everywhere, creating quiet little spaces to hide
into. Because of this, the library makes quite a good place for students to sneak off if they want to
have a moment alone with someone.

The clock on the library says it’s a quarter past four: not the best time to go sneaking around the
archive room in search of an exam that was tampered with. And that’s assuming it’s even in the
archives at all.

‘It’s probably best if we don’t visit the archive room till most people have left the building, I reckon,’
Gary whispers. ‘Harrison usually leaves at five on Fridays – we’ll wait till we see him leaving the
building and then sneak into the archive room without him knowing. I don’t really feel like having to
explain why we’re looking for an exam we had nothing to do with. He doesn’t know I’m in a
relationship with Mark, remember, so he’ll think I know as much about Mark’s disappearance as
everyone else does.’

‘See, that’s another thing I hate about Harrison,’ Rob says, jumping to another subject as though he
has already forgotten about the previous one. ‘What self-respecting head teacher leaves at five? Five
in the afternoon, Gaz! I’m stuck at school till six on most days. Why does Harrison think he can
leave early? I wish you could be the Music department’s head teacher.’
‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Gary scoffs. ‘I’d make an awful head teacher. I’d never have time for anything!’


‘Yes. You and Jay. Tell me everything.’

‘And if I do – you’ll tell me about when you and Mark canoodled?’

Gary cringes. He wishes Rob wouldn’t put it like that. ‘Yes, mate.’

‘All right.’ Rob takes a deep, gathering-up-courage sort of breath, and it’s only then that Gary notices how . . . different Rob looks. He looks happier. Healthier.

Of course, it’s no surprise that Rob’s happier. He no longer has to work in the computer lab, where he wasted most of his time picking his nose and telling students off for watching vlogs on YouTube, and he’s finally passed his dissertation. He seems to be doing a pretty good job being a support teacher, too: just the other day, Rob told Gary that he’d had a really meaningful conversation with a student who wanted to go to university to study architecture but had trouble telling numbers apart. Her conversation with Mr Williams had left her feeling a lot more confident. He’s not too bad at this support teacher lark!

There’s something else. Rob looks . . . calmer, these days. Collected. Whole. There’s a spark in his eyes that Gary has rarely seen in him. It’s obvious that his “relationship” with Jason has had a positive effect on Rob, and Gary’s glad, for he’s always thought that Rob deserved love more than anymore. Rob’s constantly helping other people when it comes to their love lives, but Rob never seems to be falling in love himself. (That is, Gary assumes it must be love. Jason talked about going on a date with Rob, which must mean they are dating, which must mean . . . oh, they must be in a relationship! This is so exciting!)

If only Rob had told him earlier! Knowing that one of his best mates is crushing on someone would have been a welcome distraction from worrying about his own boyfriend.

‘I’ll tell you everything,’ Rob goes on, ‘but I don’t want you to tell anyone. Not a soul, all right? If you do, I’ll have to kill you. I know many different medieval torture techniques, Gaz, and I’m not afraid to use them.’

Gary has no idea whether Rob is being entirely serious. It’s hard to tell with Rob sometimes. He just nods, twice, and Rob’s story begins.

[LESSON FIFTY-FOUR: MR ORANGE]

It’s a beautiful Saturday in April. The sun is shining. Birds are chirping. In the city centre, terraces are filled with people sipping iced teas and Frappuccinos. The sun is bright. There isn’t a cloud in the sky. It’s a beautiful Saturday in April, easily the hottest day of the year so far . . . and Rob’s sat at work.

Today was supposed to be his day off – he was going to spend all weekend binge-watching the latest series of Britain’s Got Talent–, but then Voldemort walked up to him in the computer lab yesterday and told him he had to help out at the annual open day. As in, the open day that takes place on Saturday, the hottest April day on record.

Naturally, Mr Harrison spent the next ten minutes explaining what an open day is exactly (even
though Rob has worked in education for three years and already knows this). Basically, an open day is an opportunity for prospective parents and students to visit the school and find out more about it. The open day is an extremely important moment on the school’s calendar, and teachers don’t get paid for being there. As if having a low salary isn’t already bad enough, sometimes being a teacher involves doing a lot of work for no money at all.

Rob would have loved to have been out in the sun instead of doing a lot of unpaid work, but sadly Mr Harrison is a difficult man to say no to. Rob has already missed several “social” events due to his anxiety (last year, Rob didn’t go to the graduation ceremony, and more recently he didn’t bother dragging himself to the annual staff day out because he’d been up all night worrying about it), and the head teacher pretty much said that if Rob missed another social outing, he’d be suspended. As in, fired. Mr Harrison never uses the words “fired” or “sacked” because firing someone involves an awful lot of paperwork.

This is how Rob has suddenly found himself in the staff room on a Saturday. It’s ten minutes before the school opens its doors for its open day visitors, and Rob is nervously staring out of the window. The school grounds are filled with people slowly making their way to the entrance. It’s like that one scene in *The Lion King*, except slower. The prospective students are the antelopes, and Rob is Simba, feeling increasingly like he’s about to be smothered by a bunch of strangers even though he’s safe inside the staff room.

But even the staff room stops feeling safe after a while.

There’s a loud whistle and the scraping of chairs against the floor, and everyone turns to listen to Mr Harrison’s annual pep talk. The pep talk is Mr Harrison’s way of getting his colleagues enthused about their own school before the open day kicks off officially.

Or rather, that’s the idea. This is Mr Harrison we’re talking about. Listening to Mr Harrison giving a pep talk is like listening to a robot who’s trying to sell you a brand new heart.

Rob keeps his back turned to the rest of the staff room, head facing the window, a stream of visitors walking up the gravel path to the school. Looking out of the window is the only way he can stop himself from losing control. Because that’s what always happens, no matter where he is. Whenever he’s about to be faced with a large group, there will always be a moment when his anxiety kicks in. As long as he stares out of the window, he can imagine that he is merely watching a movie that he’s not a part of.

Unfortunately, it’s impossible to tune out Mr Harrison’s voice. It sounds like bees have nestled into his ears.

‘In less than ten minutes, we will open our doors to hundreds of prospective students,’ Mr Harrison says, sounding more like a politician than a head teacher. ‘On average, only twenty per cent of young people who visit our open day today end up enrolling. This is not enough. We need more applications than last year. If we do not improve our numbers, we may have to cancel certain courses altogether. Therefore, we have to be at our absolute best today. All of us. Even you, Mr Williams.’

Rob starts. He turns away from the window and sees all his colleagues staring back at him with judgmental looks on their faces – especially the teachers from the Art department, who have always judged him. There’s something about the Art department that Rob absolutely hates: the pretentiousness, but also the fact that they seem to think they are automatically better than everyone else because they teach the “true arts”.

He’s always thought Mr Harrison would have made an excellent head teacher for the Art department.
‘Care to explain why you are not paying attention to me, Mr Williams?’

Rob flushes. Looking at the members of staff in the staff room, he notices with an unpleasant jolt that none of his mates are here. He has no allies to stick up for him. Gary is in London to have a look at the stage for his world tour, Howard is at home to take care of his kids, and his new best friend, Mark Owen, the guy who started teaching here only a week ago, isn’t here either. (New teachers are never asked to help out at open days in case they accidentally say things that aren’t true.) Rob’s got no one he can count on: everyone’s looking at him like he’s a rowdy student ruining the lesson for everyone else.

Only Jason Orange, the mysterious but handsome Choreography teacher, is looking at him with kindness. Jason’s head moves into a miniscule nod towards the window, and just like that, an excuse pops into Rob’s brain.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Harrison. I was trying to count how many visitors I could see walking into the school just now.’

‘And? What seems to be the verdict?’

‘I don’t know. You made me lose count.’

Several colleagues laugh at that, and Mr Harrison’s eyes flash with something dangerous. ‘Try to pay more attention from now on, Mr Williams. There are people on the ground floor to keep track of the number of visitors we get today.’

Attempting to count people isn’t something a member of staff has ever been suspended for, so Rob gets away with a warning. Mr Harrison continues his speech, and Rob breathes a sigh of relief. His head teacher always seems to have it out for him.

Rob still doesn’t understand why Mr Harrison is his “boss” at all, to be honest. Rob’s computer lab provides a learning space for students from the Art department as well as the Music one, and yet he’s been made an honourable member of the Music department, which makes Mr Harrison his head teacher.

He wishes Mrs Stohl was his head teacher instead. She may be strict, and her hair looks like a bird’s nest, but at least she’s still human. Even Gary would make a pretty good head teacher, but he’s got about a million jobs already so it probably wouldn’t work.

The rest of Mr Harrison’s speech is as dry and uninspired as the man himself. His voice is terribly monotonous, and it sounds to Rob like a bee buzzing in his ear or someone sawing a piece of wood with a chainsaw. Combined with the fact that the staff room is very hot, and very full, Rob is fast beginning to feel quite anxious again. His little white lie about trying to count the people outside may have saved him from his head teacher, but it can’t stop the bad thoughts from flooding in.

There’s a loud cheer coming from the school grounds, and Rob begins to feel on edge again. Hypersensitive. He looks out of the window once more. A bad idea, for more people have entered the school grounds than before: hundreds of prospective students, all about to walk into the building.

Rob’s used to the school being crowded, but this is different. The crowd outside feels foreign. Strange. Rob’s not used to it, seeing the school filling with faces he doesn’t know.

It’s like there’s a big protective bubble around him, and everything the bubble touches becomes scarier and more intimidating than it actually is. Soon the bubble starts expanding, and the bubble touches the window, and then his prickly colleagues, and then Mr Harrison, who is looking at him
with such disdain.

Every single one of those things makes Rob’s bubble more and more fragile. Soon, the bubble will burst. And once that happens, so will Rob.

‘—get out there and promote our school. Good luck!’

Rob only just catches the end of Mr Harrison’s speech. There’s the scraping of chairs against the laminate floor, and the hubbub of teachers wishing each other good luck. Soon, everyone has headed to their respective stations.

Today, there will be workshops, demonstrations, performances, video installations and over a dozen mini-lessons to get prospective students interested in the school. The corridors have been set up with small market stalls where visitors can find brochures and VCMA tote bags to take home with them. The computer lab has been turned into a place where prospective students can register for courses early.

This is where Rob comes in. He’s to keep an eye on the lab and help out where he can, telling students how to sign up for their desired courses. But looking out of the window again now, where he can see so many people, so many fucking strangers, he’d much rather go home.

It’s funny how anxiety always chooses the worst possible moment to arrive. Rob never feels anxious walking around the school corridors in the morning or being sat at his desk in his computer lab, but this . . . this feels like an insurmountable hill to him. The mere idea of leaving the staff room and finding himself inside a crowd full of strangers fills him with dread.

Soon all of Rob’s colleagues have left. Only Rob is left, staring breathlessly out of the window, his hands shaking.

The only other person still there is Mr Harrison.

‘Have you forgotten where you are needed, Mr Williams?’

Rob turns away from the window, but he doesn’t dare look his Mr Harrison in the eye. The protective bubble around his body is set to burst, like when you try to blow up a balloon and it snaps.

‘I—I’ll leave in a second,’ Rob stammers. He can hear dozens of footsteps walking up the stairs next to the staff room, and he very much does not want to leave in a minute. ‘I – I just need to grab a cup of coffee.’

Rob heads to the coffee machine to do just that. The coffee machine is still as stubborn as ever, and Rob has to press about ten different buttons before the machine finally does as it’s told. He’s shaking.

The coffee machine has just squirted brown drab into his ceramic cup when Mr Harrison’s voice cuts into him like a knife.

‘You are not having another anxiety attack, are you, Mr Williams? They are such ridiculous, inconvenient things.’ Mr Harrison’s face has turned into a deep puce. Underneath it, he looks smug. Mocking. ‘I would hate for you to miss yet another event because of some silly infliction you made up.’

Burst goes Rob’s bubble. He accidentally drops the ceramic cup he was holding, and it smashes into pieces on the floor, coffee splashing everywhere, the words “silly infliction you made up” ringing in his ears.
When Rob finally faces Mr Harrison, his eyes have filled with tears. He’s trembling all over. ‘I did not make my anxiety up, Sir.’

‘I seriously doubt that, Mr Williams. You did not miss the graduation ceremony last year because you were struggling with some fabricated mental illness – you were merely too lazy to show up at work. You can imagine how disappointed our school’s support teachers were when I told them about it. They thought you showed so much promise, Robbie.’

Rob’ feels light in the head suddenly, and he has to steady himself on the kitchen counter behind him. His shoes are covered in coffee. The smell of coffee beans and milk drifts all around him.

It’s true, Rob had missed the graduation ceremony, but it wasn’t because he was lazy. It was because he’d felt too scared to leave his fucking house. ‘I told you that in confidence. The thing with the graduation ceremony – that was supposed to stay between us. You promised me, Harrison.’

‘You also promised me that you would never bother this school with your issues again, and yet here you are, shaking like a leaf.’ Mr Harrison looks at Rob with contempt. ‘You need to stop this, Mr Williams. There are teachers at school with real issues. I would rather spend my time on them. Now clean up your mess and get over yourself.’ And Mr Harrison stomps out of the staff room like a rhinoceros, slamming the door shut behind him.

Their exchange leaves Rob feeling even more shaken than he already was. He tries to take deep breaths to steady himself, but he doesn’t feel steady at all. If anything, having Mr Harrison lecturing him has only made his anxiety worse, and his senses more heightened.

Beyond the door of the staff room, he can make out the sound of dozens of strangers making their way into the building. He hears upbeat music being played at the entrance: pop songs written by school alumni. If he looks out of the window, he sees even more people, still queuing up in front of the school entrance.

It’s too much to bear. Mr Harrison has made his bubble burst, and now everything has become too much: too loud, too busy, too crowded.

He has no idea what to do with himself. He tries making another cup of coffee in a paper cup, then changes his mind. He sits on a chair, then gets up again. He squats on the floor to get rid of the mess he left there, cutting his finger as his hand grazes a piece of broken ceramic.

He decides not to bother cleaning the floor at all. He makes a movement for the exit, only to change his mind again. The guilt and fear that Mr Harrison’s words have planted inside of him are beckoning him to the computer lab, where he’s supposed to be, and yet he cannot get himself to leave the staff room for the life of him.

This is what happened last time, Rob thinks. The guilt, the fear, the feeling of being locked up inside your own mind, not able to move. This is what anxiety feels like, for Rob. It’s a prison. The staff room has become Rob’s prison, and the more people he hears out in the school corridors, the more trapped he feels. He can’t escape this, not ever.

Rob sits himself down in one of the chairs in the staff room, hands in his hair. He knows that he absolutely has to go to the computer lab if he doesn’t want to get fired, but he can’t do it. He can’t. Mr Harrison’s asking too much of him.

Not knowing what else to do, Rob cries into his shirt, silently and miserably, all alone, until he feels a hand grazing his left shoulder. He lifts up his heavy head, and he has to blink several times to make sense of the blurry silhouette in front of him.
It’s Mr Orange, the dancing instructor.

Jason.

Jason smiles at him then, and the floodgates open once more. Rob cries so loudly that he doesn’t even hear Jason asking him if he would like a glass of water. He just keeps crying, like a child. The world around him becomes one big blur.

A moment later, Jason sits on the chair next to him – one of those uncomfortable classroom chairs – and hands him a mug. It’s a ceramic Spice Girls mug.

Rob laughs weakly when he sees the mug. He accepts it with shaking hands, his cheeks streaked with tears. He hopes desperately that he won’t drop this one either. ‘T-thanks, Jay,’ he says, and he drinks the water in big gulps whilst Jason quietly watches him from the red chair next to him.

In that moment, Rob’s anxious mind still takes the effort to size Jason up. He looks clean-shaven and alert, and he’s wearing a long jacket with a printed T-shirt underneath. He looks good. Handsome.

These are all the things Rob can see. Apart from that, he doesn’t know much about Mr Orange. He teaches Dance – and Philosophy, during certain terms – and he spends most of his time with his nose buried in a book. He glides through the school corridors like an ice skater, his feet sometimes barely touching the ground because his mind is always floating.

Gracious and tall, Jason looks like everyone’s perfect idea of a professional dancer. Which makes sense, because Jason used to work as a professional dancer on the telly, dancing in the background of pop star performances and sometimes choreographing performances himself. That much Rob knows.

But other than that, Jason keeps himself to himself. Mr Orange knows when his presence is requested, but he also knows when to stay away. He does not busy himself with the more complicated sides of teaching, like annual strikes or student numbers. He shows up on time every morning, does his job and goes home again at five.

He’s also one of the few teachers who’s managed to keep his career perfectly separated from his private life. Mr Orange does not plan lessons at home. He does not mark exams in his living room. He does not even check his e-mail. (Rumour has it that Jason does not have a computer at all and that he still uses a fax machine. Of course, this is complete nonsense.) But once Mr Orange arrives at work in the morning, he switches into one of the calmest and fairest teachers the school has, always thinking about what to say to his students instead of rushing through everything.

Where other teachers might see only one solution to a problem, Jason sees the different sides of a coin. He never judges a student until he feels like he knows enough. During the annual meetings about students’ exam results, Jason will always be the one person trying to figure out why a student has not passed their exams rather than criticising them for it. Other teachers will often scoff at this, saying that students ought to get good grades regardless of their issues, but not Jason. Jason cares.

Jason has also never removed or kicked out a student for misbehaviour. Because it’s a delicate thing, removing a student from your lesson, and whether or not you do it depends entirely on what kind of teacher you are. Some inexperienced teachers have never removed a student at all because they are too afraid to do it. Some teachers spend all day removing students from their lessons – teachers who do so because they are too lazy to consider why a student might be misbehaving. Incidentally, these are also the kinds of teachers who believe students misbehave simply because they loathe it when adults are in charge.
But students hardly ever loathe teachers. Students misbehave because they worry about their sick parents. Students misbehave because they don’t know where they’re going to sleep tonight. Students misbehave because they are so clever and good that they already know everything there is to know about music theory.

And Jason knows that. He knows that students misbehave because of a culmination of little reasons that have nothing to do with school. The reason why he has never kicked out a student isn’t because he’s inexperienced and afraid (like many interns), or because he does not have the inert capability to be strict (like Mr Owen), but because he doesn’t want to, and because he does not have to. Mr Orange respects his students, and therefore his students will respect him in return. No student has ever become a better person by being removed from class.

Of course, Rob doesn’t know all this. The only thing he knows about Jason is that he teaches dance and that he likes books, apparently. He’s also quite handsome, which Rob never really noticed before.

There’s something about him, Jay. There’s something about him that’s naturally a bit flirty, but also thoughtful and calm and clever. So clever. He’s one of those teachers who just oozes professionalism, but not in that stuck-up, “chin in the air” way Mr Harrison tries to run the Music department. Jason is a good teacher because he cares deeply about being a good person, no matter who he’s with.

‘You all right, Rob?’ Jason smiles at Rob. He’s just finished his cup of water, and he has a bit more colour in his cheeks. ‘You looked a bit poorly earlier, if you don’t mind my saying.’

Rob blurts out, “Poorly” is the understatement of the year, Jay. I was so anxious that I felt like me heart was going to explode just now. It was terrible.’

Rob bites his tongue. Why couldn’t he just keep his stupid mouth shut? Jason isn’t supposed to know that he has anxiety!

Rob tries to backtrack, poorly. He uselessly pretends that, actually, he’s feeling fine and that he has never suffered from anxiety, ever. ‘Not that I suffer from anxiety or anything. Like, what have I got to be anxious about? I’m not even a real teacher! I brush off anxiety like it’s nothing.’

Jason gives Rob a sympathetic look. Quietly, and with no judgment, he says, ‘So you suffer from anxiety.’

Rob swallows. In that single moment, he has to decide whether or not he wants to admit the truth and say, “yes, I suffer from anxiety” or deny it altogether. Most of his colleagues have responded so poorly to his not showing up at social events that it seems much easier to just pretend like nothing’s wrong with him. After all, introversion and anxiety do not mix well with a job in education. That’s what he’s been told and that’s what he’ll always believe, deep down.

But for some reason, Jason doesn’t seem like such a bad guy to confide in.

‘My anxiety has been an absolute pain in the ass today. An absolute pain, Jay. I thought I’d be fine helping out today, but then I saw all those people outside and me brain went, “Yeah, nope. Not doing that.” I know it’s weird, though, obviously. What kind of wannabe support teacher am I? I’m gonna be absolute crap.’

‘Who made you believe that?’

‘Voldemort— Mr Harrison.’ The name leaves Rob’s mouth like a curse, and he tells Jason about the
graduation ceremony and being lectured just now. ‘He thinks I’m making it all up, but I can’t help that I get fucking scared when I’m asked to deal with big groups. I’m not a popstar like Gary or a social butterfly like half of the teachers in the Music department. I get scared. A lot. And I don’t choose to get scared, it just happens and then I panic and I’m sat here having an anxiety attack like a fucking prick.’

It turns out that Jason is a tremendous listener, and Rob slowly feels himself calming down. He tries not to think about the crowd of strangers roaming the school and instead focuses on the shapes Jason’s mouth makes whenever he says something sympathetic.

Suddenly, Rob finds comfort in the smell of Jason’s cologne. He finds comfort in the way he speaks. He loves the look of his lips, so soft and pink.

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‘Is this when you fell in love with him, then?’ Gary asks Rob on the wooden bench in front of the school, many months later, a week after the new school year has started

‘Don’t interrupt, Gaz,’ Rob bristles. ‘I’m just gettin’ started.’

‘Was it, though?’

Rob shrugs noncommittally. ‘I suppose. I don’t know. But I was suddenly noticing things I hadn’t noticed about Jay before. Did you know that he always sticks out his tongue when he’s concentrating? He did that a lot, that day. A lot, Gaz. It was like I was finally looking at Jay properly.’

‘And you liked what you saw?’ Gary wriggles his eyebrows suggestively. He loves that he can finally ask someone else awkward questions about their boyfriends. It’s usually Gary having to answer awkward questions about Mark!

‘Jason is a very handsome man, Gaz,’ Rob points out. ‘So yes, obviously I liked what I saw. But I’d also just had an anxiety attack, and sometimes me brain makes me do very stupid stuff when I’ve just had an anxiety attack.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean it was only going to get worse. There I was, sat in the staff room, talking to this very handsome guy about me feelings and stuff, and me brain decided to fuck it all up. Again.’

Rob’s eyes fill with tears. Even though Rob and Jay have become very close since that day in the staff room, he’ll always regret how the rest of their conversation went. In fact, he doesn’t even want to talk about it.

‘Did I mention I was going to get a dog, Gaz?’ Rob asks Gary apropos of nothing. ‘I’ve gone and adopted a dog. I might call it Toast Dog, cos when I was eating a toastie from Costa the other day, the dog went and stole it. It kind of rolls down the tongue, doesn’t it? “C’mere, Toast Dog.” “Sit, Toast Dog.” I like that better than Hugo or something.’

‘One of my dogs is called Hugo,’ Gary points out, mock-offended.

‘Really? I knew that. I think.’

Gary rolls his eyes. ‘You were in the middle of telling me about your relationship with Jason, mate?’
Reluctantly (because he’s about to get to the point where his story begins to go downhill), Rob continues to tell Gary what happened on the open day. By now, Rob has been stuck in the staff room for over fifteen minutes, with Jason doing a lot of nodding and smiling as he tells his new favourite colleague all about his anxiety.

‘What do you think caused the attack?’ Jason asks Rob at one point. ‘I know you said you find it difficult to deal with large groups, but perhaps there is more going on? I remember you looking a bit pale when Mr Harrison singled you out during his speech.’

‘Yeah, being lectured like that didn’t really help either,’ Rob sighs. He gets angry just thinking about it. ‘I was already feeling pretty crap about being in a stuffy room and watching the crowd outside, but then Harrison singled me out and me anxiety sort of snowballed.’

‘Perhaps Mr Harrison telling you to pay more attention triggered something inside of you,’ Jason offers carefully. He talks slowly, thinking through every single syllable before he utters it out loud. It’s how he talks to his students: analysing everything to prevent saying something upsetting. ‘Anxiety often starts during childhood. During your formative years, perhaps you had a figure of authority like Mr Harrison that you had an issue with? They could very well be the root of your anxiety, Rob.’

This rubs Rob up the wrong way. He scoffs, and his new-found affection for Mr Orange completely disappears. Something inside of Rob has snapped, like an elastic band. ‘Are you seriously trying to psycho-analyse me, Jay?’

Jason lets out an uncertain laugh. ‘No, of course not.’

‘Yes, you are!’ Rob protests, his face burning. People always like to make fun of his anxiety. To his ears, Jason trying to get to the root of his problem is just as bad as Mr Harrison saying his anxiety is all made-up. ‘What the hell makes you think you can ask me that? Just because you studied psychology or whatever doesn’t mean I’m some puzzle you can solve.’

Things really go downhill after that.

Rob lets out a frustrated expletive, and he gets up from his seat. He needs to get out. Now.

He gets as far as the table at the other side of the staff room when, of course, Rob remembers why he stayed behind in the staff room in the first place: the open day and all the intimidating things it involves. He’d only have to open the door, and he’d feel scared all over again.

He looks at Jason then, and he makes up his mind. Some things are even worse than anxiety.

Rob opens the door and pushes his way through the crowd, leaving behind one prison and entering yet another.

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Fast-forward to September, several months after the open day.

‘So let me just get this straight, all right,’ Gary says as Rob pauses his story for dramatic effect. A large bag of popcorn has somehow made its way into Gary’s hands, and he pours a handful of popcorn into his mouth. ‘You had an anxiety attack because you struggled being at the open day, and Jason shows up and tries to help you and you push him away? That’s just poor, that.’
‘I know.’ Rob lets out a deep sigh. A cold breeze runs over his exposed skin, and he rubs his arms. You can tell that it’s September; you can still walk around without a jacket on, but every now and then the weather surprises you with a cold breeze or a little bit of rain. ‘I just felt terrible being in that room with Jay, Gaz. Absolutely terrible.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. That’s the thing with anxiety. It makes everything bloody scary and intimidating, even potentially good things. Me brain decided to turn Jay helping me out into something terrible.’ Rob gives a little shake of his head. ‘Looking back, I know now that Jay was only trying to help and stuff, but that thing he said about me childhood – it caught me completely off guard.’

Gary eats another helping of popcorn. ‘Did you go to the computer lab in the end? I bet Jay ran after you.’

‘He did.’ Rob stares into the distance, where the gravel path meets the pavement outside the school fence. ‘But I didn’t go to the computer lab.’

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We head back to April. Instead of going to the computer lab, Rob leaves the building entirely. He had hoped his escape would be far more dramatic, but the corridors are filled with prospective students stopping to look at the various market stalls, so he basically has to shuffle his way out of the school like a tortoise. It only makes his anxiety worse.

(Incidentally, Rob went through something similar only a couple of weeks ago: he was in the city centre to buy a plant for his flat, and he was halfway down the high street when it started raining cats and dogs. Torrential rain, in fact, like something from a rainforest. It was terrible. He thought he’d take shelter in the nearby shopping centre, but then he got there and he saw how busy it was and he had a massive panic attack in front of JD Sports. It was all very embarrassing.)

Five minutes later, Rob finds himself stood outside the school with no recollection of how he got there. He’s panting, and his heart is racing very quickly. His palms and armpits are sweaty even though he hasn’t really been doing any running. But the visitors keep coming, and he has to get out.

Rob decides to leave the school grounds altogether. If Mr Harrison fires him for it, then so be it. He isn’t ever going to pass his dissertation, anyway.

Not a lot of people know this, but there’s a canal close to the school, tucked away between the new high-rise buildings that have been popping up everywhere. Rob goes there every time he needs some time to think. It’s not quite like the canals of Venice or Amsterdam or even Birmingham, but it’s like an oasis to him.

The canal runs in one straight line from the city centre to the residential area where new flats are being built. If you were to follow the canal entirely, you would eventually reach a river. (But only if you walked for several days.) It’s a very calming place. Along the water, there are some dilapidated bridges and ugly brown buildings that probably used to be warehouses, but it’s honestly the quietest place Rob can think of.

Here, there’s only the water, calm as a river; birds chirping; the occasional jogger running past, and, if you listen very carefully and concentrate very well, complete silence. The canal is hidden in the middle of the city, and yet there are no city sounds. It’s perfect for someone like Rob who sometimes gets overwhelmed by the hustle of the school. The only sound he can hear that he would remotely describe as “noise” is the sound of another block of flats being built at the other side of the water.
He’s pretty sure the tower behind it is the place where Gary lives. Lucky bastard.

Rob sits himself down on a bench next to the water. He’s quite alone: apart from a jogger running off into the distance, he’s the only one here.

Slowly, Rob begins to calm down. He comes here sometimes, when he’s feeling down and anxious. In other words, he comes here quite often. Frankly, he doesn’t know how else to deal with his anxiety. Recognising an anxiety attack is pretty easy, but actually figuring out what to do whilst he’s having one . . . that’s hard.

Most of the time, walking away from the source of his anxiety seems to help. Unfortunately, it’s the actually getting up and leaving that he finds rather difficult. Sometimes, Rob simply lets the anxiety wash over him because it’s easier than actually doing something about it. It’s funny how the human brain works in those moments: you know that your body is putting you through something terrible and that you should do the opposite of what your brain is telling you, and yet you do nothing.

If you look at it like that, today’s anxiety attack was only about a 7/10 on the scale of terribleness. Rob panicked, yes, and he cried very much, but he got out of the building in the end, didn’t he? He’d made it. He’d done something about it.

Then again, Rob thinks miserably, the way he treated Jason wasn’t so nice. He knows Jason was only trying to help, but when you suffer from anxiety the nuances in people’s intentions are pretty hard to spot. Rob was going to explode no matter what Jason said.

Rob feels like shit just thinking about it. He lets out a loud expletive that gets carried away by the wind. Why did he have to push Jason away like that? And right after Rob had realised how handsome Jay is, too!

He’s made a right twat of himself.

Just like that, staring into the water, protected inside a pocket of silence, Rob’s anxiety has been replaced by . . . shame, he guesses. Regret, maybe? He’s not sure what it is. But it’s making his face go all hot, and his heart all jumpy, and he’d much rather feel anxious.

You see, Rob’s never really fancied a guy before. That is, he has (he fancied Gary for a day, when Gary had shown up to work in a sleeveless top; and when he’d gotten a bit drunk during an unprecedented staff day out, he had accidentally flirted with Howard), but it has never felt like this. Looking at Jason in the staff room just now, it was like he had died and he saw his life flashing before him. Except instead of dying, he’d come to life and he saw an entire future with Jason played out inside his head like a movie.

Is this what fancying someone feels like, then? It feels so strange compared to what people sing about in love songs. Not to mention inconvenient! Who the fuck falls in love with someone right after an anxiety attack? It’s fucking stupid. He’s stupid. (Rob, not Jason. Jason is the opposite of stupid. Jason is warm and kind, and so very beautiful.)

His new feelings drive Rob nuts. He hates all of them: potentially fancying Jason, and the anger he feels towards Mr Harrison, but also the constant fear that he feels in his bones, trapping his soul inside.

How is he ever supposed to become a support teacher if he can’t even be in a room with more than thirty people?

It’s hopeless. Everything’s hopeless. He might as well delete his dissertation from his laptop
computer, cancel his study (and get some of his money back) and tell Mr Harrison that he no longer wants to be a support teacher. He’ll have to make do with a stupid job in the stupid computer lab for the rest of his life, telling students off for watching Netflix every single day of his life. It won’t be a good life, but at least he won’t be making a fool of himself anymore.

What was he doing, thinking he could become a support teacher? People with anxiety don’t become teachers. They don’t become anything – they just rot away in their houses, too afraid to leave because the outside world bloody scares them. Becoming a support teacher may allow him to change careers and earn a bit more money, but the world won’t change. The world will still be hopelessly out of touch with how he feels inside. He might as well not bother.

At least the canals aren’t so scary. They’re peaceful and quiet, and a feast for the eye. Here, Rob can see a heron perched on the edge of the towpath, watching the fish that live inside the water; there, in the distance, Rob can see a mallard making its way towards its mate on the water. The only thing he can hear is a blackbird chirping and, occasionally, the sound of the progress being made on one of the expensive high-rise apartment blocks at the other side of the canal.

Right when Rob starts to think the worst of his anxiety has rolled over him, Rob can see someone making his way towards him on the towpath. At first, Rob thinks it must be a jogger. Or an office worker, trying to get away from the noise of the city.

Then Rob squints, and Rob goes hot all over.

It’s Mr Orange.

Jason has made his way to Rob’s bench before Rob can make a run for it. He gestures at the empty space on the bench and smiles. Rob begrudgingly notices that Jason looks graceful and handsome even when he’s pointing at something. ‘May I?’

‘It’s a free country,’ Rob shrugs, and Jay sits next to him, a considerable distance away. His heart rate has gone up considerably since seeing Jay walking down the towpath, and he’s sweating.

In fact, for a second Rob genuinely thinks he’s having another anxiety attack. Anxiety attacks always happen at the worst possible time, after all. However, there’s nothing to be anxious about, and he doesn’t have that weird imprisoning “flight or fight” sensation that he always feels when he’s having an anxiety attack.

Resentfully, Rob realises that his heart rate has gone up because of Jason. Jason’s taken his jacket off (he’s now wearing just a jumper, framing his long slender chest that looks perfect for placing your hands on), and the wind has whipped his half-long hair into a slight state of disarray. Of course, he still looks perfect.

Rob says nothing.

‘I’ll go back to school in a minute if you don’t feel comfortable with my being here,’ Jason says, mistaking Rob’s silence for resentment. ‘I wouldn’t blame you if you’d rather not speak to me at all after what I said to you. Just tell me you want me to go, and I’ll go. I won’t hold it against you.’

Annoyingly, this is the only thing Jason says. He proceeds to stare at the canal the way Rob was earlier, just taking in the small things like a bee buzzing past his feet; or the way the heron at the edge of the towpath is moving its long legs. It must have seen a fish, for it keeps staring at the water.

Looking at Jason looking at their surroundings, Rob can feel the clarity returning to his mind. He takes a deep breath. He, too, concentrates on what he can see in front of him: the heron, and the
water beyond. Occasionally a jogger passes by, but the heron doesn’t move a muscle. It keeps staring at the water; face alert, beak pointed towards the surface at an angle, its wings tucked behind its body. Its pose reminds Rob of Gary when he has to invigilate an exam – chin up in the air, arms tucked behind his back – and he chuckles softly.

Jason looks at him then, and Rob can feel his ears and cheeks burning. Blushing feels as much like an invasion of his body as an anxiety attack, and Rob’s first instinct is to fight it off. Anything that makes his body feel uncomfortable automatically becomes an enemy.

‘If you’re here to apologise to me, don’t bother,’ he bristles. He crosses his arms and looks away, concentrating his gaze on a bridge that connects one side of the canal with the other. If you were to follow the bridge, you’d eventually reach the tower where Gary lives.

He can still feel Jason’s eyes digging a hole into him.

‘I’m sorry if what I said hurt you,’ Jason goes on. He sounds gentle and soft. ‘You were right earlier – I shouldn’t have tried digging into your anxiety. It happened quite automatically, to be honest with you. You see, doing a lot of digging, trying to find out why someone behaves a certain way – that’s what I do with my students.

‘When a student doesn’t pass an exam, I always try to get to the root of the problem; try to find out if there may have been other reasons that played a part, like issues at home or other distractions that the student struggled with. I always feel uncomfortable when other teachers only look at a student’s results rather than looking at the bigger picture. I find that looking at the bigger picture always gives you a reason to give a student the benefit of the doubt. I like getting to the root of problems, as it were.’ Jason smiles uncertainly. He sounds as though he’s really thought about what he’s saying. ‘I’m afraid that I realised too late that you’re not a student.’

Rob deliberately doesn’t say anything, but he’s heard Jason’s words loud and clear. He just needs to think about what he’s going to do with them.

A part of Rob quite likes the idea of accepting Jay’s apology and moving on, but it’s much easier to be stoic. It’s what he’s been doing this entire time. Whenever someone asks him why he didn’t join everyone on their staff day out a couple of weeks ago, he’ll lie that he doesn’t like his fellow teachers. He’ll shrug his shoulders and say, “I couldn’t be arsed”.

Of course, the real reason he didn’t go is because he couldn’t drag himself out of bed that day. It’s a lot easier to tell someone that he just wasn’t that interested.

The more Jay talks to him, though, the more Rob wishes he could open up to him. There’s a certain logic to the way Jason talks about feelings that he really likes. Maybe turning your feelings into a puzzle you can solve actually isn’t so bad.

‘I can understand if you want me to leave,’ Jason goes on. ‘I’ll go back to work, and we can pretend we never had this conversation. I can even cover for you, if you want. Mr Harrison doesn’t have to find out that you were gone. But I don’t want to leave. You know what I mean?’ Jason smiles then, and Rob’s insides turn into goo. ‘I don’t think I’d feel comfortable leaving you here on your own.’

Rob feels so hot inside that he’s started sweating. ‘I’m not a baby, Jay.’

‘I know. But I also know what it’s like to feel scared, and overwhelmed, and I don’t want you to think that you have to battle these emotions on your own because Mr Harrison doesn’t acknowledge you or your feelings. You’re not alone, Rob. I want you to know that there are people out here who are willing to help you work things out.’
‘That’s the problem,’ Rob says, exasperated at both his feelings and the conversation Jay is trying to have with him. The heron at the edge of the water has lost interest in the fish it was after; it retracts its neck, and it suddenly looks much less impressive. ‘I don’t have anything to “work out”. I had a pretty good childhood. I had nothing very traumatic happen to me, unless you count that one time I accidentally fell into a fountain and cut me head open. I can still walk past a fountain and not have an anxiety attack.’

Rob’s let his guard down. Now that he’s started talking about his anxiety, he finds that he can no longer stop. The words just keep coming. ‘You asked me if me anxiety was caused by something that happened in me childhood, or if I used to have someone like Mr Harrison ordering me about, but I didn’t. I’ve been anxious me entire life, Jay. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t feel uncomfortable being surrounded by people. It’s just the way I am. No reason. That’s why your comment bothered me so much. It bothered me because I know there isn’t a reason, and I’m never going to find one.’

Rob sighs then. Jason has blurred in front of him, and he has to wipe the tears from his eyes. ‘Sometimes I feel like I’m the only person who struggles with this crap.’

‘You’re not,’ Jason says.

Rob scoffs. It sounds more like a cough, for Rob’s anxiety attack has depleted his entire body of energy. He already knows that he’s going to feel like absolute shit in the morning. Anxiety attack have the tendency to linger in your body like a hangover. He’s pretty sure Jason doesn’t have an explanation about that.

‘How come you know so much about this shit, anyway, Jay? I know you studied psychology and stuff, but you’re always so fucking calm that you’re basically floating. It does me head in. Doesn’t it bother you that you never seem to be bothered about anything? Cos it bothers me, Jay. Also,’ Rob adds as a footnote, because he’s on a roll now (and it’s much easier to pretend he dislikes someone), ‘I’m sick of finding your nuts and linseeds in every single cupboard in the staff room. When I was looking for some crackers the other day, the only thing I could find is healthy crap with your name all over it.’

Jay’s mouth twitches into a smile. ‘I didn’t realise my nuts bothered you so much, Rob.’

Rob doesn’t know what to say to that, so he just averts his face and hopes he doesn’t look as hot as he feels. He doesn’t speak, and their conversation settles into a strangely comfortable silence. Rob’s tummy feels as though hundreds of tiny butterflies are coming out of their chrysalis inside it.

Meanwhile, Jason quietly thanks his lucky stars that Rob hasn’t asked him to go yet.

‘You’re right, I don’t know what it’s like to be anxious,’ Jason says. He’s talking quietly, in that same “thinking things through” way that Rob has come to expect from him. ‘I may have dabbled in psychology, but that doesn’t make me an expert. I can’t imagine that living with anxiety day-to-day is something that you’d want to advertise. But I do know what it’s like to have to detach yourself from work every now and again.

‘Because I love teaching, me, but I don’t particularly enjoy it when other people try to get involved. Open days like today tend to make me feel like a circus performer – like I’m this other version of myself that always has to impress and be the best ever teacher. You know what I mean? Because as teachers, as educators, we constantly have to sell this perfect image of ourselves, both to students and parents, but to our colleagues too. We can’t ever fail. That’s why I don’t check my e-mail at home. I don’t want to compromise my mental health for the sake of my co-workers. Not that I don’t care about my colleagues, but I care more about my mental health.'
‘So when you say that you find things like open days overwhelming, I do get that, Rob. I can relate more than you can imagine. I’m sorry if the things I asked you in the staff room made you feel like I didn’t care about your feelings. I do. I care about them tremendously.’

Every intention of Rob to be stoic and “whatever” leaves him. He can’t think of the last time someone has understood his feelings. He always gets to hear, “Get over yourself” or “You’re just making things up”. Apart from Gary and Howard, and the new Creative Writing teacher, most of his colleagues think Rob is a joke: a scared, expendable member of staff who refuses to join staff meetings.

He’s also pretty sure Jason’s the only guy he’s ever heard say the words “mental health”.

Even though the sun is shining, Rob has started shaking. This entire conversation feels like the start of something beautiful and healing and wonderful. ‘Are you serious, Jay? You understand what I’m going through?’

‘I do. Like I said, Rob, I can’t pretend that I experience anxiety like you do, but I do understand it. You’re not the only person who gets scared. I get shit scared all the time. But it hasn’t stopped me from being good at my job. And as far as I know, your anxiety hasn’t stopped you from being good at yours either.’

Rob sniffs. Jason’s words instil new confidence in him, and he pushes up his chest and tilts up his chin. ‘You’re right. I’m amazing at my job,’ he says, shaking but proud.

‘I was hoping you’d say that.’ Jason squeezes Rob’s shoulder then, with a soft, lingering touch, and afterwards Rob will swear that he felt an electrical current running from Jay’s hand to his chest, kick-starting his heart.

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‘I don’t know what got into me, but I suddenly asked Jay for his number,’ Rob tells Gary on their comfortable wooden bench in front of the school, almost five months later. The end of the school day nearing, the library across the school grounds is now basking in a warm orange glow, the sky reflected in its glass ceiling. ‘I knew it was stupid of me, but it just sort of slipped out. I didn’t even really think he’d give me his number after the stuff he’d said about shutting off after work.’

Gary raises his eyebrows. This is genuinely the first time he’s ever heard of Jason having a phone. ‘But he did? Give you his number, I mean?’

‘He did. He gave me his number, and I think he must have felt the same connection I had cos he suddenly started flirting with me.’ A red blush has crept up Rob’s neck. There’s a faraway look in his eyes as though Jason himself is standing right in front of him. ‘Can you believe it, Gaz? Jason Orange was flirting with me. It felt so natural. One second we were talking about serious issues like our mental health, and one second later Jay smiled at me in a certain way and I went hot all over. I can’t remember the last time I felt that way with someone.’

‘I’m like that with Mark,’ Gary nods. ‘We have a lot of fun together, but we can be serious too. It’s a good sign, this! So what happened afterwards?’

Rob bites his lip. ‘I . . . didn’t call.’

‘What?’

‘I didn’t call. We went back to school and did our thing at the open day, and then several weeks pass and I still haven’t texted him. Not even once, Gaz. I just felt so scared.’
‘Why? What were you scared of?’

Rob shakes his head; he doesn’t quite know.

‘I’m not—’ Rob stops his sentence as quickly as he started it when he thinks he can see Mr Harrison leaving the building. Thankfully, it turns out to be just a student with a similar build. According to the clock face on the school library, there are still a couple of minutes left until the end of Mr Harrison’s work day. Meaning, there’s still enough time for Rob to finish his story – even though he’s not particularly proud of it.

‘I’m not used to being in love,’ Rob explains. ‘Which I was, at the time. In love. And I still am. Obviously. I’m in love with Jay. More than I’ve ever been in love with anyone. Before him, I only ever had casual sex with people. Women. I never even particularly enjoyed it; I just did it cos I felt like I had to. You know what I mean? I did it more for the high at the end. I never really got that emotional about the women I slept with. Sometimes wonder if I even wanted it at all. Sex, I mean.

‘But with Jay, things were different. Not the sex stuff, but all the other things. I felt like he was really seeing me. For the first time ever, I felt like someone was seeing me for who I really was. In a different way than you, anyway,’ Rob adds for Gary’s benefit. Out of all his colleagues, Gary has always supported him the most. ‘I know you were there for me when I was feeling down and stuff, but I don’t fancy you. Though I suppose there was that one time when you wore a vest to work and I thought I fancied you,’ Rob adds in hindsight. A crinkle has appeared on the top of his nose. ‘But I didn’t, for the record.’

‘Weird,’ Gary says. ‘But flattering.’

‘Thanks. So when I started fancying Jay, it felt absolutely amazing. Seriously. I felt like I was floating. But at the same time, I also felt like I couldn’t go through with it. I kept staring at me phone and thinking, “What if he doesn’t fancy me back?” That thought kept running through me mind. It wasn’t until the summer prom that I realised how wrong I was.’

‘What happened?’

Rob blushes. ‘We danced.’

Gary lets out a theatrical gasp. ‘How come you get to dance at the summer prom and me and Mark have to sneak off? That’s not fair, that isn’t! But c’mon, tell me what happened.’

‘One step at a time, Gaz,’ Rob says, mock annoyed. ‘I haven’t even told you about the rest of the open day yet.’

‘Did you kiss?’

‘No.’

‘You might as well skip that part, then. Go on, get on with it.’

‘I will not,’ Rob says stubbornly, and he continues his story at his own pace, picking it up right where he ended.

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After his chat with Jay at the canal (the heron did not catch any fish), Rob goes back to help out at the open day in the end. He has no more anxiety attacks, and Mr Harrison doesn’t give him another lecture. Rob suspects Mr Harrison hadn’t even noticed him leaving the building.
For the rest of the open day, Rob helps prospective students register for their chosen courses online, while Jason and Howard give a crash course about breakdance in the concert hall. A lot of the students that Rob helped register for their prospective courses have genuinely ended up enrolling. One of them has even entered Rob’s support program.

At one point during the open day, Rob receives a text from Jason, asking him how he’s doing. It’s a very long text, with all the capital letters and commas in the right places.

Looking at the text gives Rob a tremendous jolt in his chest. He feels warm inside, and happy too. He can’t remember the last time an attractive individual texted him. And sure, it’s just a simple text asking him how he’s doing, but there’s another meaning hidden between the lines – just there.

Rob knows this, because Jay had winked at him when he promised he’d text, and Rob had gone very red in the process. There’s something brewing in the air, he can tell – something wonderful and romantic, like his new mate Mark’s feelings for Gaz. Meeting Jay in the staff room this morning was the start of something special, he just knows it.

He doesn’t text back, though. It’s bad enough that he has to deal with his stupid brain seeing monsters everywhere, but being in love? When your body does all this annoying crap like sweating and skipping heartbeats? That’s even worse. How is he ever supposed to feel in control of his own life when he has stupid chemicals dictating his every move?

No, he’d rather not text Jay at all. He won’t have any time to date someone with the due date of his dissertation coming up, anyway. He’ll just ignore the text and forget Jay ever made him feel anything.

Two months later, in June, Rob still hasn’t phoned or texted Jay. He also finally hands in his dissertation about how to deal with learning difficulties in art schools. It counts 9,856 words (including the annotations), which is the most Rob has ever written about anything.

He receives an envelope with his result not much later, and he’s too scared to open it. Surrounded by colleagues in the staff room, Rob eventually asks Jason to open the envelope for him. The result is a positive one, and everyone starts hugging him and patting him on the back.

It’s Jason’s hug that means the most to him. Rob suddenly finds himself caught about by the shoulders, pulled forward and squeezed against a very comfy chest covered in just a T-shirt. His nose fills with a pleasant clean smell, of aftershave and soap. His body blushes with shock when Jay kisses him on the cheek. ‘I’m so proud of you, Rob,’ he says, and Rob almost swoons.

Then more people come up to congratulate him, and for a second Rob feels as though all his birthdays and Christmases have come all at once.

Just like that, Rob’s gone back to fancying Jay and having all those unpleasant feelings that turn his body inside-out.

Even his fear of finding out the result of his dissertation felt more comfortable than this. Why would human biology decide to make fancying someone this uncomfortable? It makes no sense.

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‘Why do you keep insisting fancying someone is this terrible thing?’ Gary says three months later. They’re still sat on their bench; still waiting for Mr Harrison to leave the building. ‘I love being in love. It’s the best feeling in the world.’

Rob scoffs. ‘You write love songs. Loving love is a part of your job description. But there are those
of us who hate it, Gaz. Some people who don’t even fancy people at all! But I do, and I loathe it.’

‘Really? Then why did you enjoy Jay hugging you so much?’

Rob flushes. He wishes Mr Harrison would leave his office so that they can head back to school and sneak into the archive room to look for the exam Mark supervised. Unfortunately, he still hasn’t seen Harrison leaving the building, and Gary seems quite keen on hearing the rest of his story.

‘Anyway, never mind what happened in the staff room,’ Gary says. He already knows what happened after Rob had found out he had passed his dissertation: Gary had shown up after a meeting with Mr Harrison, and not much later Mark arrived with some food from Starbucks. ‘Why don’t you skip to the summer prom? You already know what me and Mark did. What about you?’

‘We didn’t do anything naughty, if that’s what you think. Not everyone wants to give someone head at a school party, Gaz.’ (Gary turns bright red. He never told Rob that!) ‘Also, my story would be going a lot quicker if you’d stop interrupting me. Seriously. We’ve been here for fucking ages.’

‘Sorry. I’m just too excited!’ Gary says. He means it; he’s genuinely excited. He loves it when other people are in love. ‘I can’t remember the last time you fancied someone. D’you know, I’m great at weddings. If you ever need someone to—’

‘Don’t,’ Rob says as fiercely as he dares. ‘I don’t want you to talk to me about weddings when you haven’t even bothered asking your own boyfriend to move in with you yet. You’ve been together for most of the year, Gaz. Why do you two still not live together?’

Gary makes a face. ‘That’s a fair point, that. You’re right – one step at a time. So what happened at the summer prom?’

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In June, the summer prom arrives. Gary, of course, is in charge of the organisation. Meanwhile, Rob and Mark have volunteered to check students’ tickets at the door and hand out a million different wristbands. Occasionally they also have to search a student’s handbag for health and safety reasons. The ‘worst’ thing they find inside a student’s bag is a massive two-litre bottle of Pepsi cola.

Weirdly, volunteering for the prom hasn’t disagreed with Rob’s anxiety at all. He hates open days and meetings and stuff like that, but the prom feels comfortably like going to a concert. Rob loves gigs, so working at the prom feels familiar and safe.

It also helps that Harrison isn’t here to tell him that he’s doing a shit job. Unsurprisingly, Mr Harrison has always believed the annual summer prom is a massive waste of money and resources. That man never has any fun.

‘Maybe you should wear one of these wristbands, Mark,’ Rob jokes an hour and a half after the doors of the venue have opened. The queues at the door have thinned out considerably. There haven’t been any new arrivals for ages. ‘You’ll probably be asked for your ID if you try to order some booze at the bar.’

‘Very funny, Rob,’ Mark says. He rolls his eyes. ‘I won’t be drinking tonight, though.’

Rob doesn’t have to ask Mark why. He already knows that Mark and Gary have plans to sneak out and “canoodle”. It’s why Rob volunteered: he wants to be there for Mark during the moments when Gary’s too busy being a party planner.

Supporting Mark isn’t the only reason Rob volunteered, though. The other reason – Jason Orange –
is currently having the best ever time on the dancefloor, moving his body with that flawless grace that made Rob fall in love with him. The more time passes, the more Rob wants to see him.

He should probably also take the opportunity to apologise for not replying to Jay’s texts.

Rob nudges Mark’s arm conspiratorially. In the background, there’s a loud cheer as a brand new act takes to the stage: a former member of a boyband. ‘No-one’s shown up for ages. Why don’t we check out the dancefloor? I think Dua Lipa’s supposed to come on soon.’

Mark nervously looks around him. No-one said anything about being allowed to leave their posts. ‘What if someone suddenly shows up without a ticket and sneaks into the venue because we weren’t paying any attention?’

Rob nods at two students from one of VCMA’s sister schools, Rick and Marve. They study Hospitality, and they’ve spent the past hour miserably standing outside of the entrance, doing absolutely nothing. Rob doesn’t know what studying Hospitality means exactly, but they probably weren’t expecting that. ‘We could ask those kids to cover for us. They study Hospitality, don’t they? They’re more qualified at this than we are.’

Mark chews the inside of his cheek as he mulls this over. The only reason he volunteered for the prom is so he could spend some quality time with Gary, but he still doesn’t feel comfortable neglecting his duties. ‘I don’t know, Rob. Gary said in his e-mail that we’re supposed to stay on our post for two more hours.’

‘You mean the mail Gary sent to all our colleagues? As in, the e-mail in which he casually forgot to point out that he had plans to shag you after the Dua Lipa performance? I don’t think people will notice if we leave, Mark.’

‘Fine.’ Two pink spots have appeared on Mark’s cheeks. ‘But only for a couple of minutes, Rob. I don’t want to be responsible if something goes wrong. Again,’ he adds miserably, thinking about the first time he had to invigilate an exam.

Rob and Mark arrange for the two Hospitality students to take over their duties, and they head to the dancefloor.

The change in atmosphere is palpable. At the entrance of the venue, activity had lulled apart from the occasional limousine dropping off latecomers on the red carpet. The only thing Rob has done for the past half hour is putting a red wristband around a student’s skinny arm.

Things are different on the dancefloor. Here, people dance. They drink, if they’re old enough. They have fun. Students cheer and whoop whenever one song ends and the other begins. Rob wasn’t wrong when he thought volunteering at the prom reminded him of going to a concert.

It’s so busy on the dancefloor that Rob quickly loses Mark in the crowd. He no longer sees any familiar faces. All he sees are the faces of students he doesn’t recognise. It makes him sweat. His heart rate increases considerably. It’s a sign that he’s about to get an anxiety attack.

The last thing he needs is an anxiety attack. Where is Mark? Where is Gary, the guy who’s in charge of organising this very party? He doesn’t recognise anyone, not even any students.

Luckily, fate intervenes at just the right time. The sea of people parts as though on cue, and Rob’s keen eyes land on the most handsome man in the room: Jason Orange, the guy he’s never texted even though he fancies him desperately.

Rob feels better already. They lock eyes across the dancefloor, and Jay comes over to where Rob’s
standing. There’s a flirtatious glint in Jay’s eyes. He must not care that he’s surrounded by students
and colleagues. (Then again, Rob thinks, Jay’s the kind of teacher who can spend two hours reading
*The Road Less Travelled* in the busy corridors of the school without being noticed by anyone. The
rest of the world seems to pass Jay by like a cloud rolling through the sky.)

‘You’re a sight for sore eyes,’ Jason says, which makes Rob blush. Rob suddenly wishes he’d put on
something else. Compared to Jay, who is wearing a tailored black jacket, he must look like a sack of
potatoes. ‘I was beginning to wonder if you’d ever show up. I’m glad you did, Rob.’

‘I was at the door,’ Rob explains. The music is so loud that he has to shout. The boys retreat to a spot
further back on the dancefloor, where the music is a little less deafening. Here, wallflowers retreat to
take a breather or talk to their equally shy crushes. ‘I volunteered to help out, you see. Checking bags
and handing out wristbands and all that. But I’m here now.’

There’s more Rob wants to say, but he doesn’t want to tell Jay at the top of his lungs. He hesitates,
than moves forward and tilts his head so that he can whisper in Jason’s ear. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t text.’

Jason smiles. He manages to look even more beautiful than usual in the lights on the dancefloor,
different colours flickering all over his face. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ he says, tilting his chin so that his
mouth lines up with Rob’s ear. It makes Rob’s skin prickle all over. ‘You shouldn’t feel pressured to
text me back if you’re not up for it. I much prefer talking to you face-to-face, anyway.’

Rob’s heart does a little flutter at that. This is what he likes about Jay: he’s such a *gentleman*. Jay
knows that Rob needs more time to figure out his feelings, and therefore he’s given Rob all the time
in the world, leading to this very second on this very hour on this very day.

This is why, when Rob looks into Jay’s eyes next, he knows that the decision he’s about to make is
the right one, and the one he’s always wanted to make. He knows, because he’s spent the past three
months thinking about it.

‘I know I’ve been terrible at texting and that, but –’ Right on cue, the act on stage – a former
boybander – breaks out into a slow song. It’s perfect timing. ‘D’you wanna dance, Jay?’

Jason’s face breaks out into one big smile that reaches his eyes. ‘I thought you’d never ask.’

They slow dance: Jay’s hands gripping Rob’s hips; Rob’s arms wrapped around Jay’s neck for dear
life. They’re so close that their chests touch. Rob can feel stubble rubbing against his cheek as he
hides his face in the nook of Jay’s neck. It’s more like a hug than a dance. They hardly move, but to
Rob it feels as though the world is spinning out of control.

It’s only when he feels Jay’s hands rubbing the small of his back that the world slows down again.

‘I’m so glad you’re here, Jay,’ Rob whispers. Jay must not have heard over the din of the music. Jay
just smiles and kisses him, saying nothing.

They stand like that, just swaying and holding each other, for the remainder of the song. Not a single
student seems to notice, and they wouldn’t care about two teachers dancing together anyway. What
teachers do in their free time is of no interest to them. Unless you’re a teacher yourself, teachers will
always be an inexplicable alien species.

After the boys have danced, several more weeks pass with Rob being too afraid to text Jay back. An
entire summer goes by without the boys speaking to each other. Then the start of the new school year
arrives, and Jay finally receives that precious first text on his phone.
‘It was the Sunday before the new school year,’ Rob explains. His story has nearly ended, but there’s one part he still needs to tell. ‘I was at home, and – I don’t know what triggered it, but I suddenly started sweating like mad. I kept thinking about the new school year and wanting to throw up. In my confusion, I finally texted Jay and asked him if he could come round.’ Rob blushes. ‘He did, Gaz. Jay came round.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing. We just talked and kissed and hugged, and he spent the night at mine, and . . . Gaz, we just kissed. That’s all we ever do. We kiss and we talk, and it’s amazing.’

‘So you don’t – you’ve never . . .’ Gary makes a gesture that vaguely refers to two men having sex.

‘No, Gaz.’

‘And you’re both okay with this?’

‘Honestly, yes. Cos I like men, obviously, but I’m also a bit freaked out by . . . you know. It’s just not my thing. I love what me and Jay have together. He makes me feel so earthed, Gaz.’

Gary smiles. He feels warm inside just thinking about Rob finally being in love. ‘I’m so glad Jay makes you feel that way, Rob. Love looks good on you. You look happy.’

‘I feel happy. I feel happier than I ever have, Gaz. I felt so crap a couple of months ago, and now two amazing things have come around at once. I’m a support teacher, and I have a loving boyfriend. It’s amazing. Oh – it’s five o’clock, look!’

There’s the chiming of a clock, heralding the arrival of five o’clock. Right on cue, Rob and Gary can see Mr Harrison leaving the building. This is their cue. Now that Mr Harrison is gone, they can search the archive room without the risk of being seen.

‘It’s time,’ Gary says seriously. He has already gotten up from the wooden bench and wiped the dirt off his trousers. ‘We can search the archive room all afternoon if we need to – the school doesn’t close till eight, anyway.’

‘What about you telling me about your first time with Mark?’ Rob pouts. ‘You did promise, Gaz.’

Gary flushes. He pretends to look in the general direction of the archive room. ‘I’ll tell you while we look for the exam Mark supervised. I’ve a feeling we might not find it in the archive room at all . . .’

|LESSON FIFTY-FIVE: GARY RETURNS TO THE ARCHIVE ROOM|

Rob and Gary have both agreed that the best way to prove Mark’s innocence is by starting their own investigation into the exam he supervised. Perhaps their suspicions are right, and someone is trying to set Mark up. But first they have to actually find the exam, and this is turning out to be as easy as finding a needle in a haystack.

The archive room has been refurbished completely. Previously a dark, dusty space in the basement of the A-wing (and perfect for snogging in), it is now light, and open. The old file cabinets have been replaced by tall white ones that reach up to the ceiling. There are no windows, so the archive room used to smell vaguely of an old attic. Now, the smell of fresh paint fills the air. The table that Mark
and Gary sat on after they’d nearly been caught snogging by Ms Brooke has disappeared.

‘I see they’ve redecorated.’ Gary scrunches up his nose. He’s so distracted by the archive room no longer being *his* archive room that he forgets to close the door behind him. He can no longer see the spot on the floor when he went on his knees for Mark, and he dearly misses the smell of dust. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘Neither do I,’ says Rob. He points a finger at one of the white file cabinets. ‘Look, the drawers haven’t even been marked.’

Rob’s right; none of the drawers have been marked. Upon first glance, all the files and dossiers seem to have been thrown into the drawers of the white file cabinets haphazardly. *Like someone did it on purpose,* Rob thinks. He isn’t going to tell Gary that.

‘Remind me what we’re looking for, Gaz?’

‘An English exam made by M_DC3A last year,’ Gary says. He runs his hand across the top of one of the file cabinets, expecting his fingers to come away with layers of dust. The room is spotless. When he went on his knees for Mark in this very room at the beginning of their relationship, his trousers came away with dust when he got up from the floor. ‘The exam should be in an envelope, one of those big brown ones. God knows how long it’ll take us to find it – this place is a bloody mess.’

They start looking anyway. To keep things fun, Gary tells Rob about his first time with Mark, just as he promised. He does skip the bit when Mark tied him to a bed and played with himself, but other than that he stays true to the story, even describing what the room at the five-star hotel looked like. Rob loves it all. He gasps and sighs in all the right places.

Meanwhile, the boys must have come across over a hundred student dossiers and exams by now. Some of them even date back to the early 00s, but they can’t find the exam Mark supervised anywhere. The exam is the reason why Mark’s been suspended, and finding it – and discovering what’s wrong with it – may be the only way to reverse Mr Harrison’s decision.

So why can’t they find it?

‘I still think it’s seriously fishy, what happened to Mark,’ Rob says as he compares three brown exam envelopes in his hand. They’re all English exams, but they’re way too old to be the one Mark invigilated. He puts them back where he found them. ‘If two students wrote and handed in two identical letters while Mark was invigilating, wouldn’t he have noticed? Cos I did a lot of cheating when I was at school, Gaz, and if I wanted to literally copy someone else’s formal letter I would have had to sit on their fucking lap. I swear to you, Mark would have noticed.’

Gary opens a drawer filled entirely with old school rapports from 2015. He closes it again. ‘What I don’t understand – why suspend Mark at all? He doesn’t even teach English. The only reason he had to supervise that exam was because Ms Brooke couldn’t. He wouldn’t gain anything by helping students get better grades for a subject he isn’t even involved in.’

‘Ms Brooke would,’ Rob points out, because someone has to. ‘She teaches English, right? Maybe she’s trying to set Mark up.’

Rob mentioning Ms Brooke reminds Gary of when the boyband-loving English teacher almost caught him and Mark snogging in here many months ago. Thinking about it makes nostalgia pick away at him. Things seemed so much simpler then. The only thing they had to worry about was how they were ever going to be in a relationship without their colleagues finding out. The thing that was
most on Gary’s mind was how he was going to tell Mark that he’s a popstar.

Now, Mark and Gary have to deal with something as serious as academic dishonesty, and Mark potentially losing his job as a result. If only he could go back in time and tell Mark not to invigilate the English exam at all, but he doesn’t have a time machine. The only thing he can do is prove Mark’s innocence.

When he thinks about it, he’s pretty sure that Ms Brooke didn’t have anything to do with it either.

‘I doubt Ms Brooke had anything to do with it,’ Gary thinks out loud. ‘If she really wanted to help her students cheat, she would have invigilated the exam herself, I think. Also, I’m pretty sure Ms Brooke has been meaning to tell me about the exam since Mark disappeared.’ I think Harrison isn’t letting her.

‘You think she’s not allowed to talk about it?’

Gary nods. He vaguely remembers Ms Brooke trying to talk to Gary about something in the staff room, then changing her mind because Harrison was looking at her. ‘Positive. She knows something – we just don’t know what. I think we can rule her out on the basis that Harrison doesn’t want her to tell us. Besides, Ms Brooke loves rules, she does. She swears by them. She’d never risk her job for the sake of her students’ results. And neither would Mark. Being suspended is the worst thing that has ever ha—’

The words freeze in Gary’s mouth when he’s interrupted by the sound of a door squeaking open. He and Rob turn around simultaneously, and the world ends.

Standing in the doorway, they see Howard; wearing his coat, a large bag slung across his shoulder. There’s confusion written all over his face.

‘I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to . . . The door was open, and I thought . . .’ Howard looks at Rob, and then at Gary. ‘Is it true, Gary? Has Mark been suspended?’

‘How long have you been standing there?’ Rob fails to suppress a gulp of nervousness as he says that. He hadn’t really counted on Howard catching them getting up to potentially illegal things in the archive room.

‘The door was open. I thought you was a bunch of kids or something,’ Howard fixes Gary with a demanding stare. ‘You should really close the door if you wanna do things in private, guys, c’mon. So what happened? And don’t try to bullshit your way out of it. I heard everything.’

Gary quickly tries to assess the situation. Howard has previously kept his relationship with Mark secret (and saved his arse multiple times since), so it’s quite likely that he’d keep another thing secret. With Mark not being able to do anything to reverse his suspension himself, they’re going to need all the help they can get.

He turns to Rob. ‘We might as well tell him,’ he says under his breath.

‘I don’t know, Gaz. That now makes four people who know about what happened,’ Rob whispers. ‘Perhaps five, if we count Ms Brooke. Didn’t want Mr Harrison want Mark to keep his suspension secret?’

‘Since when do you care about what Harrison thinks?’

Rob makes a face as though that’s a fair point. ‘You’re right. I don’t.’
‘You do realise I can hear what you two are saying?’ Howard interjects.

Gary seems to make up his mind then. He looks at Rob for final confirmation. He takes a deep breath and tells Howard everything he knows. ‘Mark’s been suspended because two kids handed in identical letters during an exam he invigilated a couple of months ago. Harrison thinks Mark helped them cheat, so there’s going to be a formal investigation to figure out what happened.’

‘Like *that’s* ever going to happen,’ Rob interjects.

‘Exactly. We both think there’s never going to be an investigation. Unless there’s a miracle, Mark will probably never be allowed back.’

‘Where is Mark now?’ Howard asks, a solemn look on his face.

‘He’s been at home for the past week. He’s not taken the news well. We were hoping the exam envelope would help us shed some light on the whole thing.’

‘We want to prove Mark’s innocence,’ Rob adds. ‘We think he’s being set up.’

‘In that case, you’re wasting your time ‘ere,’ Howard says. Gary can tell by the way Howard’s holding himself that he’s trying not to show how angry the news has made him. His hands are shaking, and his eyes have something furious about them. ‘Which exam did you say you’re looking for?’

‘M_DC3A’s English exam from last year,’ says Gary. ‘Formal writing.’

‘Yeah, you’re not gonna find that ‘ere. I saw it in Harrison’s office this morning when I met ‘im to talk about my timetable. It’s on his desk. Big brown envelope.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive. It’s on his desk.’

Gary’s shoulders slump. Everyone knows that the head teachers’ offices are usually closed and that ordinary teachers can’t get into them unless you happen to have Mr Harrison’s or Mrs Stohl’s key cards. Even if you had a meeting with him, like Howard did this morning, there’s no way you’d be able to have a look at an exam on Mr Harrison’s desk without the man himself noticing.

‘What do we do?’ says Rob. His voice has gone very quiet and scared. ‘We’ve both agreed that we need the exam itself to prove that Mark didn’t have anything to do with the fraud. Do we have to nick the envelope from Harrison’s desk?’

‘We can’t do that,’ Gary says. ‘His office is always closed. You’d need his key card to get into it. Either the door is locked, or Harrison is inside his office, stuck to his seat like glue. He’d notice if you nicked something from him, especially if he keeps the envelope on his desk like Howard said.’

‘We could force him to leave,’ Howard suggests. He has taken his coat off, using the door handle as a makeshift clothes peg. He’s put his heavy bag next to him on the floor, an alert look on his face. ‘There has to be something that would get Harrison out of his office.’

‘Even if there is, it’s no use,’ Gary says, thinking about the lock on Mr Harrison’s door. A couple of years ago, all the locks on the doors in the school were changed into digital locks after a couple of students had accidentally entered the Animation classroom and squished several very expensive Claymation figures. Instead of opening a door with a traditional key, you now open the door with a key card, like at a hotel. ‘The door of his office automatically locks when you shut it. It’s like our
classrooms – they lock automatically. A student can only enter a classroom unless there’s someone already inside it, or if they happen to have a key card, which they obviously don’t. It’s the same with Harrison’s office. If we wanted to nick the English exam, Harrison would have to be in his office already, and there’s no way he’d walk out of the office while we’re there. He doesn’t allow teachers to be in his office unattended. That’s why the door is always closed.’

‘I still think he’s a vampire,’ Rob mumbles.

‘You’re right about his door always being closed,’ Howard says, ignoring Rob’s jibe. ‘When I had a meeting with Harrison this morning, I had to knock on the door first. I was stood there for about five minutes until he finally let me in.

‘I reckon there’s one thing we could try, though,’ Howard adds, thinking on his feet. ‘What if we tricked Harrison out of his office on a day his door isn’t closed? Remember last term’s parents’ evening? He spent the entire evening sat in his office, but the door was open. It isn’t, usually. He did it so that parents of students could come round and ask him all the useless shit their kids’ mentors couldn’t be arsed to tell ‘em. I remember, cos whenever a parent asked me a difficult question I’d send them over to Harrison’s. If we found a way to make Harrison leave his office, we could sneak in and nick the exam envelope without him noticing.’

‘The door would still automatically lock if he closed it behind him, though,’ Gary points out.

‘Then we need to make sure he doesn’t close it.’

‘This all sounds very complicated,’ Rob says diplomatically. He’s feeling torn. ‘Why don’t we just smash the door in with a hammer? I’ve got a hammer at home. I could bring it? I’m sure Harrison wouldn’t notice. Well, apart from the massive hole in the door, anyway.’

‘We can’t,’ Gary says. He’s beginning to sound like a broken record. ‘If Mark’s really being set up, then we need to be careful about this. We need to gather evidence first, then smash Mr Harrison’s door in.’

Howard frowns. ‘You really think he’s being set up, Gary?’

‘Mark would never help students cheat. He may be the kindest person in the world, but he would never do something that would go against school rules. And if the students did cheat, he would’ve noticed.’ Gary takes a deep, wobbly breath. ‘Something is up, How. We just need to come up with a better plan. Nicking the exam papers from Harrison during the parents’ evening – it’s a bloody risk.’

‘It’s the only plan we have,’ Howard whispers. He turns to Rob. ‘What do you reckon, Rob? You said you thought the plan was too complicated.’

Rob chews the inside of his cheek. He still thinks Howard’s plan is terribly complicated, but Howard’s right, it’s the only idea they have. The only way they can prove Mark’s innocence is by tricking Mr Harrison out of his office and sneaking inside it before the door can lock automatically. They’ll then nick the exam and see what’s wrong with it.

Rob sighs. It feels like he’s accidentally walked into one of those lengthy mystery novels he sometimes sees his students reading. ‘I do still think it’s too complicated, but I also think you’re right – it’s the only plan we have. We’ll have to trick Harrison into leaving his office and hope we can nick the exam envelope that way. How are we actually gonna do it, though?’

‘The parents’ evening is next Tuesday,’ Gary points out. ‘We still have some time to figure something out. Mark might have some ideas – he’s good at creative stuff.’
Apparently that sorts it. Next Tuesday, they’re going to sneak into Mr Harrison’s office and steal the exam Mark invigilated.

No-one bothers mentioning that they’ll definitely get fired if they get caught.

‘I’ll try to think of something too,’ Howard says. ‘I’ve been made a mentor of another third-year group who are all eighteen or over, so I’ve a feeling only about two parents will show up on Tuesday. I’ll be finished quickly. Whatever we end up doing, I’ll help.’

‘I’ll help too,’ says Rob, as bravely as he can. ‘What will you and Mark do in the meantime, Gaz? He may be able to come up with some ideas, but he’s not allowed to come here. Mr Harrison will throw him out. He might even fire him again!’

Gary feels a large butterfly trying out its wings in his tummy. He looks at the brand new archive room, with its brand new cabinets and linoleum floor and nearly painted walls, and he desperately wishes the room still looked like it did five months ago, when the floor still left trails of dust on his knees, and he discovered the dolphin on Mark’s skin.

‘I think I’m gonna do what I should’ve done ages ago,’ he says. ‘I’m gonna ask Mark to come home with me.’

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is one big collection of domestic fluff (and some smut that involves ice cubes if I recall correctly).
PART FOURTEEN

Chapter Summary

After putting it off for hours, Gary finally asks Mark if he wants to spend a couple of days at his penthouse in the city centre.

Once there, Mark suddenly realises what went wrong during the exam he invigilated.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this update took so long. I’m finally back at work (after a seven-month break), and my body and soul need to get used to it again.

This chapter contains some smut of both the “mature” and “explicit” variety, but also some cute domestic stuff. Also, ice cubes.

LESSON FIFTY-SIX: AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

It’s Friday evening. Mark has spent nearly a week at home, unable to go to work because he’s been suspended from his job. Why? Because two students cheated during an exam he invigilated, and Mr Harrison thinks he must have had something to do with it. Mr Harrison told Mark an investigation into the alleged plagiarism would soon take place, but he hasn’t heard anything. Mark doesn’t think he ever will.

Mark enviously watched Gary go to work this morning after they’d spent the night together in his flat at the edge of the city centre. Gary promised he’d come back tonight (Gary has been the best ever boyfriend, taking care of Mark and making him dinner and running him baths and even staying with him at night), but the clock has already struck six, and Gary still hasn’t returned. It must have been a pretty intense day at work.

Restless and bored, Mark decides to look for job vacancies on his laptop computer. He knows that Gary told him that he’d find a way to get him reinstated, but nearly a week has passed since he was fired, and nothing has changed. Mark has always been a worrier, so he’s convinced he’s never going to get his job back at all. He might as well start looking for a different now.

Using the Wi-Fi from the pub next door, Mark types “creative writing” in the search bar of a recruitment website for educators. Creative Writing is quite a niche subject, so he’s not at all surprised when his search only conjures up three vacancies, starting next term. (In comparison, typing in “English” would get you 38 results.)

On the recruitment website for educators, one of the Creative Writing jobs involves a part-time job at
a primary school. The average age of students at VCMA is 18, so this would be quite a difference. Mark doesn’t really fancy it. The second vacancy, at a school for journalism, is in London, which is too far away. He’s never even been to London.

The third and final vacancy looks quite good, at first glance. The requirements are pretty straightforward: you have to be a qualified teacher (check), you have to be a team player (check), you have to be willing to assess and mark exams (this is a bit of a sensitive subject, but Mark might be able to talk his way out of it when asked about it during an interview), you obviously have to enjoy working with students aged 16 and above (double check), and you need evidence that you are continuing to follow courses relevant to the job (Mark supposes he can check this one as well). The perks of the job are also surprisingly good, for a job in teaching: all required transport costs will be covered by the employer. If Mark can never return to VCMA, this job could be a pretty good alternative. Perhaps it would even be better.

Then Mark sees that the school is in Shanghai. As in, Shanghai on the other side of the world. Never mind.

Disappointed, Mark closes his laptop. He lets out a deep sigh. People always say that it’s pretty easy finding a new job when you work in education, but they clearly don’t know what it’s like to teach Creative Writing. Schools need new English teachers all the time. Schools are always looking for Maths teachers. Even Geography teachers are in pretty high demand. But Creative Writing? Hardly any schools teach Creative Writing. Finding a suitable new job is going to be like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

He supposes he could get back to the job he had before this, but he doubts he’d have any success. When he was still working as a songwriter, he could barely afford the rent. Whether or not his songs would be picked up by record labels depended purely on luck. At least when he was still working at VCMA, he knew what he’d earn each month and what he’d have to do to get it. Returning to his job as a songwriter isn’t an option, as much as that pains him.

The only thing Mark can hope for is that he gets reinstated after all, but he isn’t feeling hopeful. Even if someone did prove his innocence, there’s still the fact that he made many other mistakes when he worked at VCMA, like struggling with class management or being filmed at the Van Gogh Museum, helplessly looking on as a student nearly ruined a priceless painting.

He still feels heat rising up his cheeks whenever he thinks about what happened in Amsterdam. There are times when he thinks he’s a pretty good teacher, but then he remembers that video and he feels like he’s an intern all over again. He’ll probably feel like an intern until he retires.

Right as Mark is about to sink into another dark mood, his doorbell rings. His heart lifts; it must be Gary!

A quick peek through his spy glass confirms that it’s indeed Gary who rang the doorbell. He’s brought food with him, based on the brown paper bags in his hands.

‘I wasn’t sure if you’d already eaten, so I thought I’d get you some food. Just in case, eh?’ Gary smiles as he empties the contents of three paper bags on Mark’s kitchen counter. They’re filled with cardboard hot boxes: chicken satay, but also sweet potato falafel with rice. There’s enough food for four people. ‘I hope you’re hungry – I know I am.’

Mark feels like he’s floating on gratitude. He kisses Gary lightly on the cheek. His hand touches the small of Gary’s back at the same time, making them both blush. It’s been a while since they touched; Mark’s flat is so small that there’s always a piece of furniture getting in the way. ‘Thank you, Gaz.’
They eat their take-out in Mark’s living room, as ever. Sadly, Mark’s house is too small to have a proper dining table. Every now and then, Gary opens his mouth as though he wants to say something important, only to close it again.

Only Howard and Rob know this, but Gary wants to ask Mark if he’d like to spend the next couple of days at his penthouse. He doesn’t really like the idea of Mark spending his unemployment in his one-room apartment, where you can barely turn around without knocking over a lamp. He’d much rather keep an eye on Mark in the comforts of his own house, where there’s air-conditioning and two dogs and a large water bed.

It’s also terribly unpractical, staying at Mark’s. Mark may not have a job anymore, but Gary does. Gary’s penthouse is only ten minutes away from the school on foot, but Mark’s flat takes a thirty-minute car ride to get there. If something important happens at school, Gary wants to be able to get there quickly.

Unfortunately, Gary has no idea how to pop the Question. Every time he tries, it feels like his heart is about to give out. It should be pretty simple, asking someone to come over, but to Gary it feels like he’s about to ask Mark to marry him. He frankly doesn’t know how to do it.

Instead, Gary chickens out and tells Mark how his day has been.

Today was pretty unremarkable. One of Gary’s groups, a first-year songwriting group, suddenly gained five brand new students who had been allowed to enrol late, therefore missing the school excursion and the first four days of lessons. Mr Harrison had neglected to tell the teachers that they were going to get new students this late into the first term, and everyone was a bit fed up with him. In another group, two first-years had suddenly decided they were going to quit school altogether. Gary would be lying if he said he wasn’t used to it.

Some good things happened too. A third-year Composition & Songwriting student released her very first single today, and the song made it onto several very popular playlists on Spotify. Also, the lady who was previously just a school governor, Mrs Kennedy-Cairns, has been made the school’s first female executive head teacher. This basically means she runs the school. Even Mr Harrison isn’t as important as her.

Another highlight of the day was meeting the new vocal teacher Mr Astley, who has a tendency of randomly breaking into song whenever he walks into a room. And during the fifth period, a brand new coffee machine arrived: one of those high-tech ones that make every kind of coffee you can think of. Rob broke it within the hour.

‘I met Rob after me final lesson today,’ Gary says. He shoves a spoonful of rice into his mouth. The rice is still boiling hot, and Gary has to flap his hand in front of his mouth like a fan. ‘We talked about you,’ he says with his mouth full.

‘You told him about my suspension?’ Mark asks. Mr Harrison specifically told him to keep quiet about it.

‘He’d already figured out about your suspension by himself, Rob had. We’ve both agreed that we want to prove your innocence, so we went to the archive room to see if we could find the exam you supervised two hours ago. It wasn’t there.’

‘If it wasn’t there, then where is it?’

‘It’s in Harrison’s office. Howard told us. He wants to help.’
Mark was about to eat a spoonful of rice. He drops his spoon into his cardboard box. ‘Wait – *Howard* knows what happened too? *Our* Howard?’

‘He overheard us talking about you in the archive room today, so we had no choice but to tell him,’ Gary explains when he sees Mark shaking his head in a disapproving manner. He doesn’t seem very pleased that Howard’s gotten involved, which makes no sense. Mark *loves* Howard. ‘I thought you’d be happy that I’m asking people for help.’

‘Mr Harrison asked me not to tell anyone,’ Mark says. He has a frustrated but worried expression on his face. ‘Now Rob and Howard both know. What if that puts their jobs in danger too? There’s a reason the investigation is being kept secret, Gaz.’

‘As long as they don’t tell anyone else, I don’t see how it’ll do them any harm.’ Gary fills his spoon with another helping of rice. This time, he makes sure to blow his spoon before shoving it inside his mouth. ‘We can’t get through this alone, Mark. We need as much help as we can get.’

‘I suppose.’ Mark scrunches up his nose. He doesn’t like what Gary’s saying, but he doesn’t want to be rude, so he lets his boyfriend finish his story. In the background, a train rushes past his block of flats, making everything inside the living room rattle. ‘What about Ms Brooke? She’s the one who was supposed to invigilate the exam in the first place – have you talked to her too?’

‘I think she knows what happened given it’s *her* exam, but I’ve a feeling Mr Harrison isn’t allowing her to talk about it. So even if she wanted to help out, she can’t.’

Mark hums. ‘You said the exam papers weren’t in the archive room earlier. Where are they now?’

‘Howard told us the exam you invigilated is in Mr Harrison’s office. He saw it lying on his desk when he went over to Harrison’s to talk about his timetable this morning.’ Gary pauses then. Given that Mark isn’t entirely pleased about Rob and Howard being involved, he’s a bit worried about how Mark will take this next bit. ‘We think we might be able to figure out what happened if we start our own investigation into the exam. As in, an investigation away from Harrison and Ofsted. Mark — we want to nick the exam papers from Harrison’s office so we can have a look at them ourselves.’

Mark’s right in the middle of taking a big gulp of Pepsi Cola when Gary says that. He swallows hard, sending fizzy bubbles up his nose. ‘You want to do what?’

‘We all reckon there’s something fishy about the way you’ve been suspended,’ Gary explains. ‘Finding the exam is the only way to find out what *really* happened.’

‘You can’t just walk into someone else’s office and *steal* something!’ Mark sounds positively mortified. ‘Gary, this is awful! You could get fired! You’ll be breaking about a million school rules! I’m sorry, Gaz, but if you have to lower yourself like that I’d rather not be reinstated at all. What do you even think you’ll find?’

Gary hadn’t thought of that. He stares into the half-eaten cardboard hot box on the dining room table, lost for an answer. ‘I don’t know. Proof that someone tinkered with it, maybe. Something like that.’

‘Even if someone *is* trying to set me up – which probably isn’t what happened, because it sounds absolutely ridiculous, Gary –, do you really think you’ll find evidence of that in the exam envelope? All you’re going to find is two identical letters that *I* missed.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘I do. You’re going to find two identical letters, and it won’t prove anything.’ Mark lets out an exasperated sigh. ‘Besides, what if you get caught and you get suspended too? Have you thought of
that? Mr Harrison is your boss, Gaz.’

‘He doesn’t own the school, though.’

Mark makes a face. ‘I still don’t like it. Sorry, Gaz, but I don’t. You shouldn’t have to risk everything just for me.’

Gary reaches for Mark’s hand across the dining room table. Despite his reservations about Gary’s plans, Mark lets his fingers slip into Gary’s without hesitation. ‘You’re me boyfriend, Mark. I love you. You know I’d do anything for you. Even if it’s potentially illegal.’

Mark rolls his eyes. ‘You’re just saying that cos you wanna get inside me trousers.’

Gary pretends to be offended. ‘That’s just offensive, that is, Mark. What do you take me for? I’m a gentleman, I am. I’d never say nice things about you just cos I wanna sleep with you. Never!’ And he demonstratively shakes his head as though Mark’s remark is the most terrible assumption anyone’s ever made about him.

‘To be fair,’ Mark says softly, ‘I don’t think we’ll ever do anything involving me trousers here – my flat is too small. We’d probably injure ourselves.’

This makes Gary want to risk the question he’s been meaning to ask Mark forever: do you want to spend the weekend at mine and make love until Monday morning?

Gary’s about to open his mouth to ask Mark as much, but then Mark interrupts him with a question of his own.

‘I still think it’s a massive risk, stealing the exam papers from Mr Harrison,’ Mark points out. ‘How would you even do it? His office is always locked, you know. How are you ever going to get inside it without his key card?’

Gary groans. Will Mark ever stop interrupting him? He’ll never be able to ask Mark if he wants to come home with him! ‘We’re gonna try nicking the exam envelope during the parents’ evening,’ he explains, as though it’s the most normal thing in the world. ‘The door of his office will be open then.’

‘So Harrison will be able to see you nicking one of his papers. That sounds like a brilliant idea,’ Mark says sarcastically. He’s lost his appetite; he closes the lid of his cardboard hot box and pushes it away from him.

‘Why are you being so negative?’

‘I’m not. I’m worried, Gaz. Someone’s got to be.’ Mark pauses so he can think through his next words. He can make out the sound of a clock chiming seven times in the distance. The road underneath his window has become quieter, and fewer and fewer trains have rushed past. The day is slowly coming to a halt. Mark feels like his life has been put on “pause” ever since he found out he’d been suspended. ‘I know that you’ve got about three million other jobs and that you think the new executive head teacher will fight your corner and that you’ll still have a good life if you ever decide to stop teaching, but we’re not all as lucky as you. I’m worried sick about not having a job. I still have to pay the rent, Gaz. I still have bills that need paying. If I don’t have a job, I won’t be able to do that anymore. I’ll be in a terrible amount of trouble.’

‘But you’ll have me,’ Gary whispers.

‘Yes, but what if I didn’t? What if you risk everything you have by breaking the law for some stupid exam envelope? I know that you think that being a pop star makes you immune, but what if you’re
not, Gaz? You could get dropped from your record label if they find out you stole something from an employer.’

Gary scoffs. Why does it feel like they’re having a row? ‘Now you’re just overreacting, Mark. No-one’s going to drop me if I happen to get caught nicking some papers from a desk in a school. Me label isn’t going to drop me, ever. I’m too successful! My job as a teacher has nothing to do with me job as a recording artist.’

Now Mark’s the one to scoff. If there’s one thing he dislikes about Gary, it’s the fact that he seems to think he’s invincible. All pop stars have this nonchalant aura to them as if they’re bulletproof, when in actual fact they’re just humans that can get hurt too. ‘Gaz. Look — I’m happy that you’re willing to help me get my job back. I really am. I’m so grateful to have you in my life and that you wanna support me no matter what. Your support is part of the reason I fell in love with you. When my first day at work had gone so terribly and everyone was throwing paper planes at me, you were the first one to ask me how I was doing.’

‘But?’

‘But I think you’re an idiot if you think that breaking the law is going to get me job back, and you’re an even bigger idiot if you think that your two jobs aren’t connected. Because they are, you know. You don’t stop being a teacher when you’re on stage. You don’t stop being a pop star when you’re teaching. If anything, your pop star life makes your teaching position much more important. You’re an inspiration to so many students, Gaz. If they found out you’d be willing to go against your head teacher, they perhaps might not like you as much.

‘But I also know how stubborn you are, so I won’t stop you from doing what you feel is right. If you and Rob genuinely think sneaking into Mr Harrison’s office is going to help me, then that’s your decision, not mine. Like I said — I’m grateful to have you in my life. I love that you want to help me out.’ Here, Mark smiles. It tells Gary that they’re not really rowing. ‘But I do sort of think you’re being very dangerous and impulsive. You’re not invincible, Gaz. Please remember that.’

Here, Mark gets up to throw away his unfinished hot box in the kitchen. In a tiny act of defiance, he doesn’t bother picking up Gary’s trash.

Mark’s not angry with Gary in the slightest (if he was, he’d simply not speak to him, which is what he always does when he doesn’t know what to do with his feelings), but he does feel immensely concerned.

That said, it is Gary’s choice. Gary has always been a bit stubborn, and there’s no way he’s going to change his mind. Especially not if Rob’s gotten involved.

‘When did you say you were gonna do it?’ Mark asks from the kitchen, more out of politeness than genuine interest. He still thinks it’s a crap idea.

‘Next Tuesday. Parents’ evening.’ Gary gets up to throw away his own empty hot box. They continue having their conversation in the kitchen. ‘Jason said the key may lie in the attendance list. Maybe if we look at it, we can prove that something fishy is going on. He wants to help too. Him, Howard, Rob, me . . . we all want to help out, Mark. We all care about you.’

Jason saying that they should look at the attendance list is the first logical thing Gary has said all evening. Mark did think there was something strange about the names of the two students who cheated, but he can’t quite put his finger on it. The answer escapes him.

‘If you can, try to find out more about one of the kids who cheated: Samuel. Something’s not right
with him. You know, if you don’t get *caught* and everything,’ Mark adds, his eyes nearly rolling out of his skull.

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence.’

‘I don’t see how I can have any faith in you if you’re about to do something awful.’

Mark is joking, but it doesn’t make Gary feel any better. He’s kind of beginning to doubt his decision now. Is nicking the exam papers really the best thing they can do? Is there not a better, safer way to prove Mark’s innocence?

Unfortunately, Gary can’t think of any. He just wants Mark to get his job back so they can finally move on to the next step of their lives together. (This next step being moving in together, and maybe getting married one day.)

‘I might know, er, one thing to make you have more faith in me,’ Gary says sheepishly.

Mark fixes Gary with a challenging look. He puts his hands on his hips, arms akimbo. He looks deeply unimpressed. ‘And what’s that, Mr Barlow?’

Gary flushes. The lamps in the kitchen highlight Mark’s naked arms (he’s wearing a vest today, one of those white sleeveless shirts that make him look even skinnier and sexier than he already is), and Gary almost forgets what he wanted to say.

Almost, but not quite.

This is it. Now’s the time to ask Mark to come home with him. ‘Well, Mark, speaking of you having more faith in me, I was wondering if . . .’

Right when Gary is about to ask Mark if he wants to come over to his penthouse, the doorbell rings. Mark’s eyes dart between Gary and the flat’s only hallway, where his front door is. ‘Did you order more food, Gaz?’

Gary shakes his head. ‘Why would I? We’ve got enough food to feed an entire family.’

Mark finds the ringing of his doorbell rather confusing. He never has any visitors in the evening (apart from Gary, everyone’s too afraid to visit his neighbourhood after dark), and he can’t remember ordering anything. He also remembers Gary telling him that no-one at work seemed to be able to find his home address without resorting to illegal business on Mr Harrison’s computer.

‘If you didn’t order any food, then who’s standing outside me door?’

A peek through Mark’s spyglass only raises more questions. There appears to be some guy standing outside his door. At least, Mark . . . assumes it’s a guy? It’s rather difficult to make out, because the stranger is holding a massive yellow and purple bouquet.

‘A bouquet for Mr Owen?’ the deliverer says. Mark has opened his door at a crack.

‘I didn’t order any.’

‘That’s cos the flowers are for you, mate,’ the stranger says.

‘But I didn’t order any,’ Mark insists. Trusting no-one, Gary is keeping watch behind him in the hallway.

‘No, mate – the flowers are for *you*.’
The deliverer takes the yellow gift tag out of the massive bouquet and hands it to Mark, forcing Mark to open his front door fully. A look of recognition passes over the deliverer’s face when he sees Gary Barlow the Pop Star standing in the hallway. Mark’s too busy reading the gift tag to notice.

It reads, simply: We’re thinking of you – Gary, Howard, Jason, Rob.

‘It’s from me colleagues!’ Mark cries. A warm, pleasant feeling blooms in his chest. He looks at the card, then at the flowers. They’re a mixed arrangement of purple irises and Peruvian lily. It’s the most beautiful and biggest bouquet Mark’s ever seen.

He holds out his hands, and the deliverer hands him the bouquet. He carefully presses his nose into one of the flowers, a lily. It smells of spring and blue skies.

Five minutes later, the bouquet has been given a vase and a centre spot on Mark’s living room table. The bouquet is so big that it nearly takes up the entire room.

Mark has already shown Gary the gift tag three times. He has not stopped smiling since he realised the flowers were for him. ‘This is so thoughtful, isn’t it? I’ve never had flowers before. But you knew, didn’t you, Gaz? This is what you meant when you said you would make me have faith in you again. You were talking about these flowers! They’re so beautiful. I don’t even know what those purple ones are. I’m going to look it up later. Do you think I’ve given them the right vase? I hope so. They’re so pretty, Gaz.’

Truth be told, Gary is as surprised about the flowers as Mark is. Rob must have ordered them without anyone knowing. It almost seems unfair to take credit for it.

Then again, this is easily the happiest Gary has seen Mark for days. It wouldn’t be fair to break the spell his boyfriend is under. ‘You’re right, this is what I was talking about,’ Gary lies. ‘This bouquet, it was all my idea, it was. Has it, er, restored your faith in me?’

‘Oh yes, Mr Barlow. Very much.’

Mark rewards Gary with the sort of kiss that Gary doesn’t think he’s entirely deserving of.

Gary reckons he’d be pretty foolish to complain.

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Although Mark previously had his doubts about his friends’ plans to nick an exam envelope, the flowers and the gift card appear to have put his mind at ease. Whilst he still thinks their plans are bloody dangerous, and frankly outrageous, he can’t ignore the fuzzy feeling he gets whenever he looks at the bouquet. He has friends! Four of them! He always knew he could depend on Gary and Rob, but the fact that Jason and Howard are also trying to help him feels really comforting too.

‘I wish I was closer to Jason, you know,’ Mark tells Gary at one point during the evening. They’re watching telly from Mark’s tiny sofa in the living room. A movie is on, and Mark is resting his head on Gary’s shoulder. ‘I don’t know him that well, do you? I’m happy he wants to support me, though. He’s so clever and calm. He seems like the type of guy who’d know what to do, doesn’t he?’

Gary agrees. ‘He’s the one who told us to go to the archive room and have a look at the exam in the first place. I think he has a point; I reckon all of our answers lie in the attendance list. Mind you, I don’t think you’ll be able to get any closer to him right now – he’ll be too busy snogging Rob, I reckon.’

Mark laughs out loud. His eyes don’t leave the telly for a single second. ‘Very funny, Gaz.’
‘I’m serious – Jay and Rob, they’re an item now.’

Mark looks away from the movie, a superhero flick from 2012 that is about forty minutes too long. He fixes Gary with a confused look. ‘Are you serious?’

‘I am. Rob’s in love with Jay. They’ve been dating for ages. Rob told me the entire story yesterday.’

On the telly, a superhero has just saved a child from a burning building. The superhero flies to the other side of the street and delivers the child carefully into the arms of her parents. It’s a very emotional scene; possibly the highlight of the movie. However, Mark only has eyes for Gary’s lips, telling him that Mr Orange and Mr Williams are an item. ‘I swear to you Gaz, you keep saying weird things today. Nicking exams, Rob’s dating Mr Orange . . . next thing I know you’ll be saying you wanna move in together or something.’

Gary turns pink first, then pale, then pink again. ‘M-move in together? B-but you’ve never even b-been to me house!’

‘Exactly. So you can see how ridiculous this sounds.’

Gary’s heart starts beating like mad. He has actually started sweating, he feels so hot. Has Mark figured out what he wants to ask him? No, of course not. Mark can’t read his mind.

He breathes out. At the same time, a commercial break has started on the telly. Now is not the right time to talk about moving in together.

‘Why don’t you think Jay and Rob could be an item?’ he asks instead.

Mark makes a face. ‘I know Rob. He doesn’t like guys like that. I don’t think he’d enjoy – you know. He’s not into it. With women, yes. But with men, no.’

‘That doesn’t mean he can’t be in a relationship with them, Mark. I’m telling you – they’re an item. They’re texting and everything. Also, they were practically joined at the hip during the induction day, if you can remember.’

Mark utters a small sound of enlightenment. Now that Gary mentions it, Rob and Jason were together on the induction day a lot. Jason kept whispering things into Rob’s ear during Mr Harrison’s speech, and Rob kept laughing and smiling.

‘You’re right, they did spend a lot of time together that day, didn’t he? I did think it was odd that Rob kept blushing.’ Mark smiles to himself. He never thought he’d ever see the day Mr Williams would go steady with someone. But now that he thinks about it, he couldn’t imagine a better companion for Rob. ‘They make a very handsome couple, don’t they? Rob must be so happy. See, I believe you now.’

‘Told you. They’re an item. Just like us.’

‘How long did you say they’ve been in love?’

‘A couple of months, I think. Since the open day last school year.’

Mark remembers not being invited for the open day because he’d just started working there. ‘Was that in April? That’s when we met too.’

Gary smiles. ‘You’re right. Something must have been in the water that month. We’ll all be celebrating our anniversaries in April next year.’
'I’d like that.’ Mark has a dreamy look in his eyes. ‘I wonder where we’ll be together, eight months from now.’

This seems to be the perfect moment to ask Mark if he wants to come round to his penthouse (again), but Gary has already wasted so many good opportunities that he chickens out. Again. Asking someone to spend a couple of days at “your place” should be pretty easy, but he’s now put it off so many times that it has become a near-impossible task. Students are like that sometimes: they’ll put off doing a simple assignment for weeks, only to realise after the deadline that it’s actually quite easy.

Of course, they don’t have to go to Gary’s penthouse. Despite its faults, Mark’s flat is cosy and warm. Everywhere Gary goes, he finds Mark’s smell, lingering in the air, reminding him of all the times he smelled Mark all over his clothes. Reminders of Mark’s life can be found in every corner: here, Gary sees notebooks filled with old lyrics; there, Gary finds folders filled with creative lesson activities, all ordered meticulously. Photos cover the walls in the living room: photos of friends and family Gary has never met, but also a selfie with Rob, and a picture of Gary looking like a tourist on Dam Square in Amsterdam. The blanket on Mark’s sofa reminds Gary of when he and Mark slept together a couple of nights ago, tears streaming down Mark’s face.

It’s all so “Mark” that it hurts, and yet Gary can see parts of Mark’s flat where he has left his stamp, too. He can still see the spot where he stubbed his toe against Mark’s table this morning. He would still be able to recognise the bowls he used for his pasta with courgette a couple of days ago.

Everywhere Gary looks, there are tiny fragments of their relationship. This should be more than enough, and yet it’s not. Gary wishes he could have Mark’s smell filling the air in his own home – the one Mark’s never been to. Gary wishes for nothing else.

Mark may be unemployed, but that doesn’t mean he should live out the rest of the month wilting away in here. Gary would feel a lot more comfortable knowing that Mark can spend the rest of the week inside his penthouse, where he can visit his roof garden and play with his dogs to his heart’s delight. His boyfriend deserves much better than this.

Gary doesn’t dare ask the question again until much later in the evening, when it’s already bedtime. The movie that was on telly has just finished. Mark has changed into a pair of comfy pyjamas, soft silk ones. Gary prefers to sleep half-naked, so he’s only wearing a pair of boxers.

‘Marko, mate?’

‘Yes, Gaz?’

Gary watches as Mark gets into bed, his pyjama top rising up his tummy as he does so, exposing the dolphin tattoo that Gary hasn’t seen for ages. He’s forced to empty his brain of quite nasty thoughts about dolphin tattoos when Mark pats his hand on the empty space on the bed and turns off the lights.

Now is not the right time to think about that.

‘I – er, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.’

Mark doesn’t really seem to be listening. He scoots over to the edge of his bed so Gary can lie next to him. The bed is a single bed, remember, made for just one person, so it takes them several minutes to get comfortable. In the end, Gary ends up half-pulling Mark on top of him like a very large, warm teddy bear. Mark contently rests his head on Gary’s chest, where he can feel it rise and fall as Gary breathes.
‘Mark? Did you hear what I said just now?’

Mark yawns. He sounds very tired all of a sudden. ‘Can it wait till tomorrow? I’m so tired, aren’t you? I haven’t even done anything – I just spent all day in ‘ere. I even looked for a new job, you know. But all I could find was a job vacancy in Shanghai. I don’t think many schools teach Creative Teaching. I should probably have thought about that before I did me teacher training. Oh well.’

‘That’s what I wanted to ask you about. Kind of.’ Gary’s heart skips a beat when he feels Mark’s arms tightening around his chest. Mark starts placing soft butterfly kisses on his skin; the kind of kisses that usually lead to absolutely nothing (but feel like fireworks regardless). He has trouble focusing on what he wanted to say.

‘Let’s just sleep,’ Mark says drowsily. His eyes are already closed, but he’s still kissing.

‘But it’s important,’ Gary insists. Mark says nothing. ‘I – I w-wanted to ask if you’d like to spend the next couple of days at – at my place.’

The kisses stop. The only sound in the bedroom is that of a ticking clock on the wall, and a car breaking the speed limit on the road outside. Then Mark lets out a deep breath against Gary’s naked skin, and Gary becomes suddenly afraid that Mark’s dozed off.

‘Mark, mate? You still with us?’

‘Yeah, sorry.’ Mark croaks. It’s dark, and it’s hard to make out his face. Gary can’t tell how he’s feeling. The only thing he has to go on is that Mark’s no longer holding him. ‘It just comes as a surprise. You asking me this – I didn’t think it’d ever happen, you know. I know we talked about it in Amsterdam, but . . . what with me losing me job . . . I wasn’t expecting it.’ More silence. ‘Let me put the light back on so I can see you.’

Mark sits up straight in bed and turns on his bedside lamp. They both have to blink against the bright light.

When Gary’s eyes are finally used to the brightness, he sees Mark looking back at him with an expression in his eyes that he doesn’t recognise. He straightens too; this is the sort of conversation you can’t really have lying down.

Mark speaks first. ‘Why now, Gaz?’

‘Because I want to keep an eye on you. Because I want you to meet me dogs. Because I want to make love to you and not have to worry about the bed collapsing on top of us. Does there have to be a reason?’

It’s only now that Gary realises that he should have thought this through. He should have rehearsed his question instead of randomly asking Mark if he wants to come round. If he had, he might have been able to express himself better.

Truth be told, Gary doesn’t have a true reason why he wants Mark to move in with him. All he knows is that he’s wanted Mark to come round forever. Long before Mark got fired, in fact.

Gary goes on, ‘We had plans to go home together after we’d returned to England, didn’t we? The only reason we didn’t do it was because Harrison had to ruin everything. If he hadn’t fired you, we might be in me flat now, snogging.’

Mark remembers. Gary’s right – they did have plans to go to Gary’s after the coach had returned to England. Unfortunately, Mr Harrison had other plans for them.
It seems so long ago now, the school trip to Amsterdam, and the life-changing conversation that followed it. Time works strangely, sometimes. There are months when time almost seems to have stopped, and then you have these weird periods when time speeds up again and a million things happen all at once and you come out of it not knowing what day it is.

This is what Mark has felt like ever since he got fired. He has no idea what day it is, and time has moved so fast that it’s almost as if Amsterdam never even happened.

Would visiting Gary’s penthouse make time go back to normal again?

‘I know I should have taken you home much earlier in our relationships,’ Gary goes on. ‘I still regret a lot of the things I did when we first got together. I wanna make that up to you now, Mark. It’ll be just for a couple of days – until the parents’ evening. Or for longer, if you want to. But I don’t want you to spend the next week withering away in here.’

Mark considers this carefully. ‘Do you have a garden?’

‘Technically, yes.’

‘Will I be allowed to do some gardening while you’re at work?’

‘Of course.’

‘Do you have bees? Every garden needs bees.’

‘I – no. But I suppose I could get some?’ (Gary has no idea how one might get some bees.)

Mark pretends to be in very deep thought, his hand holding his chin. It looks quite adorable. Then he smiles, and the rest of the room brightens with him. ‘Oh, all right, Mr Barlow. I suppose I wouldn’t mind staying over at your place as long as you’ve got bees.’

‘Oh, Jesus. Thank you, Mark.’

The bed gives a complaining squeak, and Gary pulls Mark into a very tight embrace, squishing his boyfriend against his naked chest. Gary utters a million thank-yous into his ear. Mark can feel the heat coming off his skin, making Mark feel warm in return. He must have been meaning to ask this question for ages.

Frankly, Mark forgets what he wanted to say. Something about moving in together? It hardly matters. Gary’s smell has turned his brain into goo. He feels Gary’s soft, smooth skin underneath the tips of his fingers; Gary’s stubble grazing his skin.

All of a sudden, in spite of his squeaky single bed, he wishes he wasn’t wearing pyjamas. He wishes he wasn’t here, but at Gary’s, where they can make love all day. He wishes they could make love now, on Mark’s squeaky single bed. It’s been so long since he and Gary last made love that even the softest embrace goes straight to his cock, making him pulse and harden until even his baggy pyjama trousers feel too tight.

Finally getting to visit Gary’s mystery flat is one hell of a turn-on.

‘I suppose if we stayed at your place, we wouldn’t have to worry about . . .’ Mark trails off, lost for words. He sounds aroused. He feels aroused. He trails his fingers down Gary’s back, stopping at the hem of his black boxers. He hesitates, then slips his hands into the back of Gary’s underpants, squeezing and fondling him there until he feels so much heat coming off of Gary’s skin that he feels hot and a little dizzy himself. He thinks he can feel Gary’s lips touching his ear then.
Mark wants to say, *I suppose if we stayed at your place, we wouldn’t have to worry about my bed collapsing when we make love. Or, We wouldn’t have to worry about being apart again. Or, We wouldn’t have to hide anymore.* Something like that. It’s hard to find the right syllables and words when you’ve got Gary Barlow embracing you with so much closeness that you think you might melt.

Mark never quite finishes his sentence in the end. He doesn’t have to, because Gary seems to be thinking the exact same thing. He lifts up his chin, and Gary fills up the gap by kissing him on the mouth.

His eyes flicker closed. It’s the softest kiss he’s ever felt. The next thing he knows, Gary pushes him into his mattress. His bed creaks and complains as Gary slithers on top of him and pins him down with his thighs.

In a breathless whisper, Gary asks him if he wants to mess around. Mark says yes. Of course he does.

Mark can feel his pyjama trousers being pulled off of him, and his boxers going at the same time. He doesn’t bother turning off his bedside lamp as Gary kisses him. He wants to see *everything:* the sweat rolling down his own chest; the gap in the curtains, allowing the outside world to see everything; and Gary’s prick, hardening already. He doesn’t even close his eyes.

Gary pushes himself on top of him. Mark curls his arms around his back. His skin feels warm and smooth and achingly familiar.

They slowly roll back and forth, their hands all over the place; their bodies never losing contact. The bed creaks and squeaks at merely the softest roll of Gary’s hips.

For a moment, Mark becomes genuinely terrified that the bed will collapse. Then he feels Gary’s prick rubbing against his own, and the fear disappears. It’s all they do: just rolling their hips and feeling the friction against their cocks as their bodies move in unison.

It feels ridiculously good. Sometimes all you need is just a good rub.

Mark’s the first to come. He comes softly against Gary’s sweat-slicked stomach. Gary leaves a thick trail of cum on Mark’s tattoo. Thankfully, Mark had the bright idea to take off his pyjama top two minutes ago.

They collapse on the bed side-by-side. A glorious red blush has appeared on Mark’s cheeks, and Gary can’t help but kiss him there. ‘You’re so gorgeous, Mark. Jesus. I can’t wait to show you all the corners of me house . . .’ And he kisses Mark again.

Mark giggles for the first time in ages. Even though losing his job has made him feel like his world is over, what he just did with Gary was the best thing ever. ‘I can’t wait either. You will have to allow me to pack a suitcase, though.’

Gary snorts. He runs a finger across Mark’s tummy and chest, careful to avoid the mess he left there. ‘Why would you need a suitcase? I’ve got everything you could possibly want, mate. You name it, and I’ve got it. In fact, I reckon we could just go there tomorrow.’

‘What about my clothes, though? I can’t wear the same shirt three days in a row, Gaz.’

Gary raises his left eyebrow. ‘Who says you’ll be wearing clothes at all? Maybe we’ll shag all day . . .’ He kisses Mark lightly on the mouth. Mark wraps his arms around him once more.
Mark may not have a future at school anymore, but at least he’ll always, always have a future with Gary.

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After they’ve made love, Mark – wearing just his pyjamas – heads to his living room to send Rob a quick e-mail. His head is still buzzing with the news that his best mate is in a relationship now, and he wants nothing more than to talk about it. He wants to know everything! Rob has played such an important part in him and Gary getting together that he almost feels like he owes Rob a congratulation.

Mark can no longer access his school e-mail after Mr Harrison suspended him, so he sends Rob an e-mail via his private e-mail account that he hardly ever uses. He hopes it doesn’t end up in Rob’s junk folder.

To: Rob [r.williams@vcma.music.co.uk]
From: Mark [markowen@gmail.com]

Hi Rob,

How are you? A little bird (this bird being Gary – it’d be a bit weird if birds could talk wouldn’t it?? can you imagine???) told me that you and Jason are an item now. I was so happy when I found out!! I remember when we had a conversation about love a couple of months ago and you told me that you didn’t think you’d ever have a relationship so I’m super pleased for you!! Is Jay treating you well? I bet he’s the most supportive boyfriend ever. [Here, Mark adds a string of heart emojis in all the colours of the rainbow.]

I would love to hear more about what Jay is like and how you are feeling now that you’re in a relationship..... but only if you feel up for it of course!! I can imagine you wanna keep things private like me and Gaz.

Also..... I just wanted to say thank you again for being so kind lately. It means a lot!! I loved it when you brought me breakfast a couple of days ago and I feel very relieved knowing that you and Gary are trying to find a way to get me reinstated. Even if it never happens and I’ll be forever jobless, at least I’ll know that I had a couple of mates looking out for me. [Another string of heart emojis, this time with sparkles added at the top.]

Mark

P.S. Say hi to Jay for me x

Mark knows that Rob doesn’t read his e-mail very often, so he assumes that he won’t get an e-mail until tomorrow morning at the earliest. It is quite late, after all. However, Rob actually e-mails him back five minutes later, right when Mark was about to turn his laptop off.

As usual, Rob’s e-mail is lengthy and wordy, with all the letters capitalized because Rob can read his sentences better that way.

To: Mark
THANK YOU MATE,

I WAS MEANING TO TELL YOU IN PERSON BUT I COULDN’T FIND THE RIGHT WORDS... I KNOW THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS YOU ARE CURRENTLY STRUGGLING WITH SO I DIDN’T THINK NOW WAS THE RIGHT TIME TO TELL YOU... I’M GLAD GARY TOLD YOU THOUGH,, HE’S A GOOD FRIEND SO I DIDN’T MIND CONFIDING IN HIM...

YOU’RE RIGHT WHEN YOU SAY JAY IS THE MOST SUPPORTIVE BOYFRIEND... JAY HAS BEEN ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL TO ME SINCE WE FELL IN LOVE... WE ACTUALLY FELL IN LOVE QUITE A LONG TIME AGO... I BELIEVE YOU HAD ONLY WORKED AT THE SCHOOL FOR A WEEK... BUT IT FELT SO ALIEN TO ME THAT I NEVER TOLD ANYONE... FANCYING SOMEONE ISN’T SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS TO ME NATURALLY... I THOUGHT IT WOULD GO AWAY AFTER A WHILE,, BUT IT NEVER DID... MY FEELINGS FOR JAY STAYED AND I GENUINELY THINK I’M A BETTER PERSON FOR IT...

HE’S SO WARM,, MARK... HE IS GORGEOUS AND KIND... AND SO SMART... EASILY THE SMARTEST MAN I’VE EVER KNOWN... HE LOVES ME FOR ME... HE DOESN’T CARE THAT I SOMETIMES GET SCARED OR THAT I DON’T ALWAYS FEEL COMFORTABLE LEAVING THE HOUSE... HE ALWAYS MAKES ME BREAKFAST IN THE MORNING... ALTHOUGH I CAN’T FIND THE COURAGE TO TELL HIM THAT I DON’T LIKE HIS VEGAN PANCAKES...

THERE ARE MOMENTS WHEN I GET A LITTLE OVERWHELMED AND ME AND JAY DON’T SEE EACH OTHER “PRIVATELY” FOR A COUPLE OF DAYS... SOMETIMES I TAKE DAYS JUST TO TEXT HIM BACK... BUT HE DOESN’T MIND... HE WOULD NEVER FORCE ME TO DO ANYTHING... HE’D NEVER GET ANGRY AT ME FOR NOT TEXTING BACK... HE’S PATIENT AND KIND,, AND I LOVE HIM FOR THAT... BEING WITH HIM FEELS LIKE A COMFORTABLE JUMPER THAT I CAN PUT ON AND TAKE OFF AGAIN...

ALL THE DATES WE’VE HAD SO FAR TOOK PLACE AT MY PLACE OR HIS... WE NEVER REALLY GO ON “TRADITIONAL DATES” BECAUSE IT FEELS SO GOOD STAYING AT HOME AND BEING ALONE TOGETHER,, NO ONE BOTHERING US... ONE TIME WE DID GO TO THE CINEMA BUT JAY FELL ASLEEP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MOVIE... I THINK HE’S MORE OF A DOCUMENTARY TYPE OF GUY...

THAT SAID,, I WISH HE’D STOP LEAVING HIS SUPERFOOD ALL OVER THE PLACE... WHEN I WENT TO HAVE BREAKFAST THIS MORNING I FOUND A POT OF LINSEED IN ME KITCHEN CUPBOARD... I’M PRETTY SURE JAY LEFT IT THERE BY ACCIDENT...

TO BE HONEST I DIDN’T KNOW I COULD EVER LOVE MEN LIKE THIS... NOT THAT I’M NOT ATTRACTED TO MEN,, BECAUSE OBVIOUSLY I AM... BUT I’VE REALISED THAT I ONLY LOVE THEM ROMANTICALLY AS OPPOSED TO THE OTHER STUFF...

JAY IS EASILY THE MOST HANDSOME MAN I KNOW BUT I DON’T WANT TO SLEEP WITH HIM... AND THAT’S NOT BECAUSE I DON’T THINK HE IS BEAUTIFUL BECAUSE I DO... HE’S BEAUTIFUL INSIDE AND OUT...

BUT I DON’T FEEL THAT CERTAIN URGE WHEN I’M AROUND HIM... THERE ARE JUST SOME THINGS I DON’T FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH... AND THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS THAT I DO FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH THAT I’D MUCH RATHER BE DOING WITH HIM... I LOVE KISSING JAY AND CUDDLING HIM... AND WAKING UP WITH HIM IN THE MORNING... WE’VE BEEN DOING QUITE A LOT OF THAT... AND I SUPPOSE ONE
DAY WE MIGHT TOUCH EACH OTHER AND I’LL ENJOY IT… BUT RIGHT NOW I’M OKAY WITH JUST SNOGGING… AND JAY DOESN’T SEEM TO MIND… I WONDER IF HE’S MAYBE WIRED THE SAME WAY AS ME…

ANYWAY,, I’M SORRY I DIDN’T TELL YOU… I’M GLAD YOU KNOW NOW… I FEEL LIKE TELLING EVERYONE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD… ALTHOUGH I DO WORRY ABOUT HOW PEOPLE AT SCHOOL WILL TAKE IT… BUT I SUPPOSE THAT’S A WORRY FOR ANOTHER DAY…

I HOPE YOU’RE WELL…

ROB

P.S. DON’T WORRY ABOUT BEING “FOREVER JOBLESS”… I’M SURE WE’LL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT X

Mark smiles at his laptop as he reads that. He loves that Rob has found love. While he personally can’t imagine what it’s like to have a relationship that involves only snogging, he can relate to Rob saying he wishes he could tell “the entire world”. Mark has been wanting to tell everyone at work that he and Gary are in love ever since they met, but he can’t. Possibly not ever, because Gary is a pop star, and he is not. Thinking about that makes Mark sad, but also happy, because it means he and Gary will be able to live in their own little bubble for a while longer.

He also doesn’t really want to think about how his students might react if they find out he’s . . . you know. He may work at what is technically an art school, where there are many students with complicated feelings like his own, but he also knows what the real world is like. Not everyone he knows will accept him for the relationship he’s in. He won’t tell Rob that, though.

To: Rob
From: Mark

Hi Rob,

I am well, thank you. I’ve had a good night. A really good night. I’m still worried about everything that is going on, but I’m feeling a lot better than I did a couple of days ago. Sometimes I feel like I’m a part of a film or a story and I don’t know which turn the plot is going to take next!! [Distressed-looking turd emoji.] I just hope the next turn will be a good one, because I don’t think I can bear feeling uncertain about my future for any longer.

I feel a little happier knowing that you’re in love, though. It sounds like you and Jay are having a really good time together. He’s very handsome, isn’t he?? You’re such a good match. And I’m really pleased for you that being with Jay has allowed you to make certain discoveries about yourself. [Another string of heart emojis.] Not everyone falls in love in the same way and that’s okay!!

Just as Mark is about to write his next sentence, he feels a pair of hands grazing his shoulders. He turns around, and there he finds Gary, wearing just a dressing gown. It’s a pink dressing gown. Shockingly pink. Mark bought it many months ago and then never wore again. It looks a bit weird
seeing Gary wearing it, because Gary only ever wears pieces of clothing that are grey or black or somewhere in between.

‘You’re not gossiping about me, are you?’ asks Gary, smiling.

Mark grins. ‘Gossiping about Jay, actually! Rob’s just sent me this massive e-mail about the two of them. He sounds so happy. Happier than I think he’s ever been. Love really suits Rob, don’t you think? I’m pleased. I’m a bit confused at you wearing that dressing gown, though, Gaz. I could have sworn I threw it out a couple of weeks ago. Where on Earth did you find it?’

‘I found it in your wardrobe. I only put it on so you could take it off of me again, to be honest. Is it too much?’

‘It is a bit. Still – you look sexy, Gaz. I could tell Rob that in me e-mail – Gary’s wearing a dressing gown with nothing underneath.’

‘Rob might want pictures.’

‘I wouldn’t blame him.’

Gary chuckles. He looks at the e-mail on Mark’s laptop screen. He can see that it’s quite a long one. Knowing Mark, he’ll probably want to finish his e-mail before heading back to bed. Mark’s e-mails are a bit like the way he talks: a waterfall of words.

‘Don’t be too long, all right?’ Gary ruffles Mark’s long hair. ‘I’ll be warming up the bed while you finish up here.’

‘Cheers, Gaz.’

As Gary heads back to bed, Mark finishes his e-mail. He concludes by congratulating Rob once more, and thanking him for all the things he’s done for him lately.

Anyway….. Gary just came up to me to ask me when I’m going back to bed so I’m gonna have to go, I’m afraid!! I think he’s just as fond of cuddling as you are!! I know I already thanked you in me previous e-mail, but I just wanna thank you again for being such a good mate….. and being there for me when I needed it most.

You’re a good person, Rob. You deserve love more than anyone I know. [Here, Mark inserts about thirty emojis that have literally nothing to do with what he’s just written.] Let’s meet up again soon, all right?

Mark x

Rob replies a couple of seconds later. It consists of just three words, but it still makes Mark blush.

To: Mark
From: Rob

HAVE FUN MATE XX
As Mark closes his laptop shut, he has to conclude that he feels a hundred times better than he did a couple of days ago. He doesn’t know where his story will end up yet, but one thing he does know: things are moving up. If Rob can find love, then perhaps Mark can finally find the light at the end of the tunnel too.

LESSON FIFTY-SEVEN: A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW

Only a short walk from the school, a canal slices the city in half. Rob often goes there when he needs a moment alone. The canals are quiet and calm. It’s his own private oasis. Or rather, it used to be.

Over the last couple of years, Rob’s quiet oasis has seen a rise of new development, from fancy restaurants and offices to tall apartment blocks that seem to eat up the sky. Even on Saturday, the canals are filled with the images of progress, like workmen balancing on narrow scaffolding as they work, dust flying all around them. It’s still an oasis, but one that has seen change and many apartment blocks popping up like trees. Gary lives in one of those apartment blocks.

Saturday morning (a day after Gary asked Mark to come round), Mark and Gary are stood in front of the tall block of flats where Gary lives. Behind them, just a couple of metres away, the canal begins, slithering away from them like a snake. The block of flats in front of them is called Odyssey Tower, based on the massive gold plate on the front door. Mark thinks it’s a pretty silly thing to call a block of flats. Gary tells Mark there’s a similarly-named tower in Canada somewhere, but it’s nowhere near as beautiful.

It’s difficult to describe Odyssey Tower, because there’s so much of it. The tower is huge. And large. Mark has to crane his neck just to see the top of the building. There must be about thirty floors, but it’s hard to tell where one floor ends and the other begins: the entire thing is made of glass. Other similar-looking towers surround Odyssey Tower from almost all directions. On the very top, on the roof of the tower, Mark sees little patches of green: a roof garden.

Gary can see Mark looking at it. He points a finger in the general direction of the top floor. ‘See that red curtain? I live on the top two floors. The roof is mine as well – it’s where I have me garden.’

Mark’s mouth has opened into a big ‘O’. He must have driven past this tower a million times, not knowing that Gary lives here. In fact, he’s pretty sure you can see Odyssey Tower from the school parking lot.

‘I can’t that believe you live ten minutes away from work and that you never told me.’ Mark sounds more impressed than angry. ‘And you let me snog you in that dusty archive room, too! We could have just gone here and made love about six months sooner.’

Gary makes a small face as though he’s ashamed of himself. ‘I know. I swear to you, Mark, I don’t know what I was thinking. All I could think of was how afraid I was that you’d find out how big I was. Financially speaking.’

‘Well, I suppose it’s better this way,’ Mark says, still looking up. This is easily the biggest block of flats he’s ever seen. ‘Can you imagine how many lessons we’d have missed if we kept going to your house every day? You better let me use your wardrobe, though.’

Just as most five-star hotels have someone standing guard in front of the door, Odyssey Tower
comes with a porter. He offers to take Mark’s suitcases (all four of them; Mark’s taken enough clothes with him to last him a month, including a neat see-through blouse that he’s saving for Special Occasions), and together the three of them take the lift to the second-to-last floor. There are thirty floors in total.

The lift moves so quickly that Mark can feel his ears popping. It’s one of those lifts in which every wall is covered in a shiny gold surface. Music is playing in the background. The air smells vaguely of roses.

In contrast, the lift in Mark’s flat is always covered in graffiti, and it always smells of shit and piss. One time, one of his neighbours got stuck in the lift for over twelve hours. Stepping into Odyssey Tower has been like stepping into a magical world where everything is just that bit shinier.

In a different time, Mark might have resented someone for being so rich that they can afford to live in a flat with a porter and gold-plated lifts. Mark earned enough money as a teacher to get by, but if he’d been just that bit luckier with his songs and his writing, he might also be living in a place like this. Perhaps not on the top floor, but still in a tall tower that almost reaches the sky. The fact that Mark has to live in a crappy one-room flat while a lot of his colleagues and mates live in proper houses with gardens and big living rooms has always sort of bothered him.

The lift stops so quickly after they’ve stepped into it that Mark questions whether they’ve made it to the top floor at all. Then the doors open, and Gary and the porter step out of the lift. Mark has no choice but to follow them into a long hallway. At the end of it, there’s a single door. It doesn’t have a nameplate next to it, just a number. It all feels extremely similar to when Gary took Mark to the five-star hotel in Amsterdam, except this time they’re not guests. Gary actually lives here.

And one day, Mark thinks in a flash, I might too.

The thought hits Mark like a baseball bat, clobbering him around the head. He feels a little sick when he sees Gary pressing four numbers into a digital keypad on the door: 1404. The door unlocks with a soft click, and his intestines sink into his shoes. Is this the place where he’ll spend the rest of his life? Is this where he and Gary will grow old, perhaps even as a married couple, if that’s what Gary wants too?

Mark knows that he’s just here to get away from things while he’s still suspended (by now, it’s been exactly a week since he got fired, and Mr Harrison still hasn’t contacted him about the formal investigation into the exam), but it feels weirdly like he’s about to move in with Gaz. Forever. It’s what he’s always wanted, so why does it feel so scary?

Is this what being a grown-up feels like? Mark’s certainly never felt like an adult when he’s teaching – more like a kid playing dress-up. Even when he briefly worked as a songwriter, attending writing camps for people who were far more successful than him, he never felt like he was a grown-up. Everyone else in the room seemed to have a firm grasp on life, but not him. He always felt like he was several years behind on everyone else. Even the songs he wrote as a twenty-one-year-old felt like they’d been written by a fifteen-year-old. When someone asked him to write a love song, he wrote a song as if he’d never been in love himself. He was always just pretending to be a grown-up.

But now that Mark’s stood here, on the twenty-ninth floor of Odyssey Tower, his bags being carried by yet another grown-up, he feels as though he’s on the cusp of entering a brand new stage of his life. He’s finally become an adult, and it’s bloody scary. Really, really, really scary. He’s never lived with someone before. It was always just him, in his flat. He never even invited people over. The fact that he’s about to spend the next four days in Gary’s house, where Gary has his own sofa and his own television and his own soft carpet covering the floor, where everything smells of Gaz . . . it’s easily the scariest thing he’s ever done.
But first — dogs.

The three of them enter the flat, and the first thing Mark sees is two dogs appearing out of nowhere and Gary squatting down to hug them. They’re two gorgeous dogs: one big one (Cookie), and the other one much smaller, looking more like a cat than a dog (Hugo). The smaller dog is clearly trying to get his attention, but Mark is otherwise distracted by staring at Gary’s hallway.

The walls are covered in gold and platinum records. There must be dozens of them. Even the studios where Mark attended all of those writing camps didn’t have this many accolades hanging on the wall.

Gary can see Mark looking at them. He gets up from the floor and shares a meaningful look with the porter, who nods and carefully drops Mark’s bags on the floor. Mark doesn’t notice him leaving.

‘I’m beginning to see why you didn’t invite me over when we first met,’ Mark says. He runs his finger along the sides of a frame celebrating one of Gary’s earliest gold records. It’s the song with the video that made him all hot and bothered when Robbie showed it to him, Pray. ‘I think I would have had a heart attack coming in here.’

‘This is not even all of them – this is just the ones from the UK.’

‘Now you’re just showing off.’

‘It’s not all music-related, though. Look here.’ Gary shows Mark a frame on the other side of the hallway. It’s a simple frame, A3-sized. It contains a large greeting card, cut in half so you can see both the front and the inside panel where people usually sign their names. It’s a “thank-you” card by the looks of it, signed by over twenty students from a group Mark doesn’t know.

‘I got it from the group I mentored a couple of years ago. Remember how I told you that story about how Mr Harrison suddenly made me a mentor during me first year? I was terrible at it. I made a lot of mistakes that year. Some people even complained about me. But students can always tell when you’re being made to do something that is beyond your control.’ Gary looks at the card fondly. He can still remember all the students he taught that year, from shy, introverted Laura to Ali, who was so clever that he went to university straight after his first year. ‘They sympathised with me, which is why they gave me this card. I’d rather have this than a gold record. Speaking of . . .’

There’s an antique cabinet in Gary’s hallway. On top of it, there’s a silver mesh letter holder. Gary takes a red envelope out of it and hands it to Mark. ‘I was told to give you this a couple of days ago.’

Mark gives the envelope an uncertain look. Could it be a letter from Mr Harrison? Or worse, Ofsted, telling him he’s never allowed to teach again?

It’s neither. Opening the envelope, Mark can see that the envelope contains a greeting card like Gary’s. His lips curl into a big smile. His face gets a fond, faraway look about it.

It’s a “best wishes” card, signed by students from the students who formed M_SW1F last year, Mark’s favourite group. They must all be in their second year now.

Naima, one of the group’s cleverest students, a sun-kissed girl with no interest in relationships, has written a little message in the middle of the inside panel.
Dear Mr Owen,

Please accept this card from your favourite ever group (we’re called M_SW2D now, which everyone thinks is very confusing).

We don’t really know where you’ve gone (Mimi tells me you got stranded in a desert, but I think she’s just making it up because she doesn’t know the real reason either), but we really miss having you as our CW teacher!

Our substitute teacher Mr Gavin doesn’t know what to do with us, so he lets us watch YouTube videos of the closing ceremony of the 2012 Olympics every day. (Mimi says Mr Gavin organised the whole thing.) He also asked me to write a poem about love the other day and I felt like my head was about to explode. I told him I wasn’t going to do the exercise and as punishment he made me write a long essay about the Rugby World Cup opening ceremony that he had organised in 2015. Ugh.

Please come back and save us from our misery! (But please don’t set us too much coursework.)

Your favourite student,

Naima

Mark feels warm all over. He’s never received a gift from a student before. First flowers, and now this! He can’t believe it. The fact that people are so supportive, so kind... it’s actually made him a bit emotional. He has to wipe away a tear that has rolled down his cheek.

Gary kisses Mark softly on the forehead. Mark lets out a deep sigh. ‘You asked me a couple of days ago how your students reacted to your disappearance. This is it. People care for you, Mark. Your students, your colleagues – they all care. Don’t let your suspension make you forget that.’

‘I won’t.’ Mark sniffs and wipes his nose on the back of his hand. Just as he’s about to look at the card again, he feels Gary’s smaller dog, Hugo, tugging at the underside of his trousers with its teeth, beckoning Mark to come with him. It’s only now that Mark notices that the porter has left. His bags and suitcases eat up a considerable chunk of the hallway.

‘I think Hugo here wants to show you the rest of the house,’ Gary says, smiling fondly at Hugo. ‘Shall we? I’ve loads I wanna show you. You can leave your card in the mail stand, by the way.’

Mark gives a little shake of his head. He affectionately presses his card from his students against his chest, holding it like a suit of armour. When you’re a teacher, even the simplest indication that your students care about you as a person can make the difference between a bad school year and a good one. If Mark’s card is anything to go by, Mark’s school year may not be doomed after all.

Clutching the card tightly to his chest, Mark follows Gary into the labyrinth that is his penthouse. They pass many rooms: the kitchen, a bathroom, Gary’s bedroom (Mark briefly stops to look at the bed), a guestroom, a room for exercising and another guestroom.

Gary even has a studio. Walking past it, Mark feels a twinge of nostalgia inside his tummy. He wonders if Gary would let him use the studio to record and write new songs. Mark hasn’t really been doing any writing in an official capacity for ages, but he’d love to get back into it one day. He wouldn’t mind becoming a songwriter again.
The next room is the living room. Mark stops in his tracks when he first sees it. Spacious and light, it’s the most beautiful living room Mark’s ever seen, even more beautiful than the one in the five-star hotel in Amsterdam. It’s a perfect mix of old and new, with upcycled antiques sharing the same space as slick white furniture. It’s a house fit for royalty.

 Everywhere Mark looks, there are personal touches that make the house idiosyncratically “Gary”. There’s a black piano in the middle of the room. An old-fashioned Star Wars poster takes centre stage on one of the walls. A large cushion in the corner of the room is covered in dog hair. There are touches of green everywhere: plant pots and flowers, and two large fiddle leaf figs placed next to a spiral staircase that takes you to the thirtieth floor – the top floor of the tower. Mark didn’t even know apartments in blocks of flats could have staircases.

 But it isn’t the staircase that’s most impressive. Even the gorgeous black piano isn’t that special – not when you compare it to that view.

 From Gary’s windows, which are entirely panoramic and extremely tall, you can see the entire city, stretched out as far as the eye can see.

 The view takes Mark’s breath away. From here, Mark spots the Starbucks in the city centre where he and Rob often meet up, an imposing theatre in front of it; he sees the canal, slicing the city in half; the train tracks; the city’s largest shopping centre; two football stadiums; green parks dotted all around the city; birds soaring the skies; cars stuck in traffic; even his own home, a pathetic little building compared to Odyssey tower; and the school where he used to work, slap-bang in the middle of a carpet of green.

 Seeing the school like this fills Mark with immense longing. His previous job feels further away than ever. He presses the gift card from his students closer to his chest, then nearly drops it when he feels Gary’s arms slithering around his waist and hugging him from behind. He lets out a shaky breath.

 Gary says, ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

 Mark doesn’t know if that’s the word he’d use for it. The view is stunning, yes, but it also hurts. He can’t stop staring at the school, the former warehouse that was turned into a school only recently. He can see every single detail in miniature: the on-campus Starbucks, where he and Gary had their first date; the library with its massive clock-face stuck in the middle of the wall (Mark has never been there) and the school grounds themselves, providing a bright spark of green in a concrete jungle. From this angle, he can see that the roof of the school has a tiny garden on it. He didn’t even know that. The school is so large that there must be a dozen classrooms and corridors he’s never been before.

 He misses the school terribly. If he hadn’t been suspended, he would no doubt have spent his morning marking poems and answering e-mails. Being a teacher can be incredibly hard, and yet he misses it more than he’s ever missed anything.

 ‘I really miss going to work,’ he says as much. He can’t quite keep his voice from clipping. ‘I miss it so much, Gaz.’

 ‘I know.’ Gary kisses Mark on the back of his head. He tries to make light of the situation. ‘Mind you, look at the state of the parking lot – is that Howard’s car parked in two places? Bloody outrageous, that.’

 Mark laughs. There’s no way Gary can tell which car is which from up here, but he appreciates Gary’s attempt to cheer him up anyway. He leans back into Gary’s familiar embrace, and they stand there taking in all the city sights. Every now and then, Gary points out a certain building, like the
city’s biggest library, or a theatre where he once performed. They watch the city in front of them until Hugo, Gary’s smallest dog, gives a soft yap for attention. He’s appeared at Gary’s feet, looking up at him enquiringly.

‘I think Hugo here is hungry,’ says Gary. He leaves Mark’s side so he can bend down to give Hugo a good scratch behind the ears. He tells Mark, ‘Why don’t you check out the rest of the house while I get this little beggar something to eat, eh?’

Mark makes a face. He looks around the living room uncomfortably. He’s not sure if he wants to walk around here on his own; he’d only feel like an intruder. ‘I’d rather wait for you to show me around, if that’s all right, Gaz. I don’t want to intrude.’

Gary gives Mark a pointed look. ‘Mark. Mate. You’re my boyfriend. You’re my guest. You’re allowed to go anywhere you want. Mind you, maybe not everywhere,’ he adds as he lifts Hugo up from the floor. ‘You’ll wanna be careful opening the cabinet in the sitting room upstairs.’

Mark’s eyes automatically flick up at the ceiling. ‘What’s in the sitting room upstairs?’

Gary buries his face into Hugo’s fur. That way, Mark won’t be able to see the flush spreading all over his cheeks and nose. He’s already said too much.

‘Gary. What’s in the sitting room upstairs?’

‘It doesn’t matter. Forget I said anything.’

‘Gaz. You just said I’m allowed to go anywhere I want!’

‘The cabinet – it contains me lightsaber collection.’ Gary only turns redder.

‘Your what?’

‘Like I said. It’s me lightsaber collection. It’s a hobby. It got slightly out of hand. Please don’t touch them.’ Gary’s cheeks are so red that he must be burning up inside. You rarely get to see Gary Barlow looking positively embarrassed. ‘They’re very expensive and it took me years to collect them all. Actually, please don’t go anywhere near them. Just look at them from afar. As in, from the other side of the house. With the door closed.’

Mark can tell that Gary’s exaggerating slightly, but he can also sense a challenge here. A fun challenge. He’s never quite been able to push Gary’s buttons – not since he tied him to a bed in Amsterdam, anyway. Pretending that he’s potentially going to ruin Gary’s oh so priceless Star Wars collection would be the perfect way to get him all hot and bothered.

Mark didn’t come over just so he could stare at the view, after all.

‘You’re cute, Mr Barlow,’ Mark says. He kisses Gary lightly on the cheek. He leaves his greeting card from M_SW2D on a coffee table – filled with large coffee-table books about pop stars and designers – and demonstratively makes his way to the spiral staircase. He stops on the first step to give Gary a deliberately provocative look. ‘Where did you say your lightsabers were? Actually, never mind. I’ll find them meself.’

Mark sticks out his tongue at Gaz and smiles before sprinting up the spiral staircase like Usain Bolt himself.

Gary chases after him. He’s still holding Hugo, his dog. He wasn’t kidding when he said his lightsabers are very expensive, and while he’d never get mad at Mark if he accidentally broke
something, ever, he’s not risking it. He has to get to his collection before Mark can.

It also helps that chasing after Mark in his own house is one hell of a turn-on.

Unfortunately, Mark’s a lot quicker. He makes it to the top floor within seconds. He sprints into the first room he can see. He gets lucky; he enters a sitting room with a massive L-shaped sofa with soft fluffy cushions and a big telly in the middle. Here, the view of the city is different: still gorgeous, but dotted with grey train tracks and concrete blocks of flats. He can see a tower similar to Odyssey Towers. It’s so close that you could easily stare into other people’s bedrooms.

The room he’s in is basically yet another living room, which Mark thinks is a bit ridiculous. Having several living rooms must be a “rich pop star”

Mark spots Gary’s memorabilia cabinet immediately. As he thought, it’s filled with lightsabers and replicas of spaceships.

Mark’s about to reach out and open the cabinet when he’s suddenly whacked around the head by a cushion, hard.

‘Noooo!’ Gary cries theatrically. (Imagine an A-level drama student delivering their lines with a bit too much importance.)

The blow makes Mark stagger towards the sofa. He picks up the first cushion he can find. He whacks it into Gary’s side. ‘They don’t even look good!’ he exclaims, because it’s the first retort he can think of.

‘Take that back!’ Gary responds with the air of a bad actor from a soap opera.

The boys exchange blows until Gary lands a hard one on Mark’s chest and Mark stumbles, arse-first, on the carpeted floor. He utters a loud ‘oof.’ He can see Gary grinning at him victoriously.

But the fight isn’t over yet. The cushion Mark was holding lands on the floor next to him. He whacks it against Gary’s legs. Gary responds by whacking Mark against the head once more, messing up his long hair and blinding him.

Mark’s too busy trying to wipe the hair from his eyes to see his boyfriend’s next move coming. Gary pulls the cushion from Mark’s hand and throws it back on the sofa, effectively disarming him.

Mark’s on the verge of reaching out for another cushion when Gary lowers himself on top of him and pushes him to the floor. He pins Mark’s hands above his head.

‘What did I say about not touching me Star Wars collection, lad?’

Gary pierces Mark with such an intense stare that Mark’s heart almost stops. He quickly reminds himself that Gary’s just playing. This is just a game. He’s holding Mark’s wrists so carefully that Mark could easily escape his grip. He’s not really angry; he couldn’t be.

But that’s not really the point. The point is that Gary Barlow is pinning him down to the floor, looking so fucking fit that Mark can’t help but be deliberately challenging.

‘Are you always this bossy at home, Mr Barlow?’

‘Why? D’you like it?’

Mark bites his lip. He can play Gary’s game just as well. ‘I don’t know yet. Why don’t you order me
about some more so I can find out?’ he says rudely as he dares.

‘In that case, how about you kiss me, eh, Mr Owen? Kiss me like you mean it.’

‘And what if I don’t want to, Mr Barlow?’

‘Then I guess I’ll just have to make you.’

Gary kisses Mark, hard. He lets go of Mark’s wrist, but only so he can feel Mark’s desperate touch all over him. He’d pin Mark to the floor all night if he could.

Mark’s body wants more. He wants the pleasure of seeing Gary pull his shirt over his head. He wants to feel the heat of Gary’s skin radiating against his own. He wants to feel the burn of being fucked against the carpet. He wants Gary to spread his legs open wide and have his wicked way with him.

Mark tries to tell Gary as much. He keeps bucking up his hips, desperate for a closer connection. He moans deliberately loudly when Gary nips his teeth into his neck. He moves his own hands down the curve of Gary’s back, squeezing and kneading and touching him there.

Then he moves his hands lower, towards the hem of Gary’s shirt. He wants to feel the skin underneath.

Mark gets as far as slipping his free hands underneath the back of Gary’s shirt when there’s another yap, and he feels a weird sensation like his cheek being licked by sandpaper. Definitely not Gary’s tongue.

Hugo has made it to the sitting room.

Being licked by a dog is a bit of a turn-off. The lads stop what they’re doing. They don’t want to accidentally squish a tiny dog. They sit up straight in front of the sofa, and Hugo settles comfortably in Mark’s lap even though he has only known Mark for a little over fifteen minutes.

‘I think Hugo likes you,’ Gary says. He pets Hugo’s head, and the dog gives a pleasant yap. ‘I was only playing, by the way. If you wanna have a look at me collection, knock yourself out. The lightsaber – it doesn’t even work. The other replicas are all knock-offs. You’re free to look and touch anything you want to. You’re me partner now, so you’re allowed to do anything you want to in here.’

Mark raises his eyebrows. ‘Partner, Gaz?’

‘Well, you know. Boyfriend. Lover. It’s a good word, partner. I like it.’

Mark’s never been called anyone’s partner. He likes it. ‘I like it too. Partner. It has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?’

‘It does.’ And Gary kisses Mark on the cheek.

‘I can tell that you’re lying, by the way,’ Mark says sweetly. He had a pretty good look at the miniature spaceships before he got whacked around the head by a cushion, and it all looked very real, and very expensive. ‘You know, about your collection. I think that’s a very real lightsaber you’ve got there.’

Gary blushes. ‘It’s not. I swear. Who would spend a hundred pounds on something like that? Not me. Never. Me selfie with Mark Hamill isn’t even real. I had it made by a student from the Art
Mark doesn’t bother pointing out that he actually gets rather turned on when Gary’s being a *Star Wars* geek. ‘Whether or not it’s real – which I think it is, you know, cos I can see you blushing – I did sort of enjoy seeing you getting all bossy on me. Actually, I enjoyed it a lot. I like it when you get bossy. You’d make a good head teacher, you know.’

Gary laughs out loud. ‘What on Earth makes you have that idea?’

‘You know, just the way people behave around you. The way they look up when you walk into a room. They respect you. I think you’d make a better head teacher than anyone else. You’d certainly be a lot better than Mr Harrison.’

Gary’s cheeks have turned slightly pink at this unexpected praise. ‘You’re just saying that cos you fancy me.’

‘I’m not. I mean it, Gaz – I think you’d make a really amazing head teacher. Don’t tell me you’ve never considered it.’

Gary shrugs. The only head teachers the school has ever had are Mrs Stohl, from the Art department, and Mr Harrison and two now-retired teachers he’s never met before. As much as Mr Harrison drives him up the wall, it would be quite strange if someone else ran the school. ‘I can’t see myself ever doing it, to be honest. I think I’d be a bloody pain, being a pop star and trying to run an entire school at the same time. I don’t think I’d have a social life left! You’d have to say goodbye to date nights, Mark.’

Mark makes a face. ‘That sounds awful.’

‘Exactly. Besides, Mr Harrison would never quit his job, he wouldn’t. He loves being in charge too much. Unless . . .’ Gary leaves the rest of his sentence hanging in the air. He wants to say, *Unless we find out that Harrison had something to do with the plagiarism after all,* but he doesn’t want to say it out loud. He knows that Mark would give him a lecture about jinxes and bad luck. You see, Mark is a firm believer in bad luck and karma, and if he said out loud that he really wishes Mr Harrison would get fired himself, things might only get worse.

Deep down, Mark genuinely still believes that the reason so many bad things happened in Amsterdam was because of what he and Gary did to each other during the bus journey there. He still thinks he was destined to be suspended ever since he got caught texting in the middle of an exam. He thinks he deserved to be suspended just as much as he deserved the sleepless nights in Amsterdam. It was all bad karma.

That said, there’s also a part of Mark that wonders if what happened to the formal English exam had anything to do with karma at all. He *knows* there’s something about the exam that doesn’t make sense. If only he could figure out what.

On the contrary, Gary doesn’t believe in all that “bad karma” nonsense. Things just happen, period. Bad luck has nothing to do with it. After all, he’s had his fair share of bad shit happening to him when he was dropped from his record label many years ago. Gary survived when he lost his job, and therefore Mark will too. Eventually.

‘Well, let’s not worry about head teachers now,’ Gary says, flicking the topic away with his hand. ‘Why don’t I show you the rest of me house? We do still need to figure out where we’re going to put all those clothes of yours . . .’
Gary’s flat is so enormous that it takes him about five hours to show Mark round. They spend two of those hours trying to hang up Mark’s clothes in an empty spot in Gary’s walk-in-closet. The agreement was that Mark would spend only three days here, until the parents’ evening, but he has packed his bags as though he’ll be staying here all term.

By the time Mark has finally settled, evening has arrived. They eat dinner in the dining room. From there, they can watch the sun set on the city.

The view is so beautiful that Mark almost forgets to eat. He can’t recall ever seeing a sunset that was this magical and otherworldly, like watching the sun set on a foreign planet. If he lived here properly – not just as a guest, but as Gary’s partner – he’d wake up early every day just so he could see the sun rise again and again in the morning. Many things objectively make Gary’s flat better than his own, but the view is the best thing of all.

‘I always walk me dog around this time of the evening,’ Gary says as Mark curiously watches him putting their dinner plates into the dishwasher. (Mark’s never had a dishwasher before; the only dishwasher he’s ever known is the one in the staff room at work, which smells of rotten eggs and wet cabbage. Like the coffee machine, it hardly ever works.) ‘You could join me, if you want?’

Mark smiles at Hugo and Cookie, Gary’s dogs. They’re play-fighting in front of the kitchen counter. Hugo, in spite of its size, seems to be winning.

They’re two gorgeous dogs, and it must be very nice to walk them. However, Mark has different plans. He’s getting slightly horny, you see, and he can’t stop thinking about that one dress shirt he kept hidden in his black suitcase, the one he’s saving for special occasions. (“Special occasions” being sex.)

He still needs to thank Gaz for taking such good care of him, after all.

‘Is it okay if I stay here, Gaz?’ Mark bites his lip. He blurts out the first excuse he can come up with. ‘I’d like to have a look at your roof garden, if that’s okay.’

‘We could do that now, if you want.’

Mark smiles nervously. Gary’s not getting it. He doesn’t want to look at his roof garden at all. Mark wants a moment alone so he can slip into something a little sexier and surprise Gary when he gets back. The outfit he has planned (a see-through shirt that shows off his chest) kind of loses its effect when Gary sees him putting it on.

‘Actually, never mind. It’s too dark now, isn’t it? I’ll have a look at your roof garden tomorrow.’

‘Shall we go out then, then? You can walk Hugo, if you want.’ Gary heads into his living room then, forcing Mark to follow him like he’s just a bigger version of Hugo. He retrieves a dog leash from the top of a wooden cabinet and distractedly shoves it into Mark’s hands. ‘Just a warning – Hugo scares easily. Sometimes other dogs’ll mistake him for a cat and they’ll start chasing him. He’s a bit of a handful, really. Actually – I’ll walk Hugo. You take Cookie.’

It’s probably just because he’s excited about walking his dogs, but Gary clearly wasn’t listening when Mark said he wanted to stay here. Gary does that sometimes; sometimes he’ll get so excited about something that he forgets to listen. It’s terribly annoying.

Gary’s already put on his coat and eased the leash around Hugo’s tiny neck when Mark finally finds his voice again. He doesn’t want Gary to think that he doesn’t want to go out with him, but he has no
other choice. He has to stay here, or else he’ll never be able to change into the sleazy outfit he wants to surprise Gaz with. (But he obviously can’t tell Gary that, because it would obviously spoil everything.)

‘Gaz – I’m sorry, but I’m staying here,’ Mark says as resolutely as he dares.

Gary’s face falls just a little. ‘Why?’

Mark glances at Cookie and comes up with a poor white lie. ‘It’s Cookie. He – I don’t think he likes me.’

Gary looks at Cookie, who is currently in the process of rolling on his back. He looks adorable. ‘Don’t be ridiculous – Cookie likes everyone.’ He squints his eyes at Mark. He’s gone suspiciously pink in the face, and he keeps touching his long hair and trying to tuck it behind his ears. He’s clearly lying. ‘Mark. Is there something you’re not telling me?’

‘No,’ Mark says, failing to suppress a gulp of nervousness. Gary seems to be looking under his skin, making Mark feel a both a little freaked out and aroused. Does Gary know about his plans? Did Gary see his outrageous see-through dress shirt when they were unpacking his bags earlier?

Apparently not. Gary drops the subject. ‘I suppose it’s better this way. I wouldn’t really want you to see me scooping up Hugo’s poop now that I’ve finally persuaded you to move in with me. I mean, stay with me,’ he corrects himself, his stomach plunging.

Mark grins. ‘Did you just say move in with me?’

‘Nope. Never. I – I was just joking, I was. I obviously know you’re just here as a guest. Temporarily. I’d – I’d never dare ask you to move in with me at all. I mean . . .’

Gary is only making things worse. Mortified, he scoops up his dogs, holding them in his arms as if they are two lady purses, and hurries out of his flat without another word, the steam nearly coming out of his ears. It looks quite comical.

Once the door closes to behind him, Mark can’t help but giggle. Even if what Gary said was just a slip-up, it has made him feel all fuzzy and warm inside.

Thinking about officially moving in with Gary makes butterflies prickle underneath his skin. He’s even more determined to wear his best outfit now: his see-through shirt that shows off his chest, and those tight black trousers that make his arse look cute.

If he wears that, Gary will never want him to leave his house again.

[LESSON FIFTY-EIGHT: ICE CUBES AND EPIPHANIES]

When Gary comes home that evening (walking the dogs was very uneventful and boring, and it’s really not worth wasting any words on it), he can tell that a change has taken place. Something in the air has shifted, like when the weather surprises you with a rainstorm even though it was supposed to be a bright spring day.

Gary leaves his dogs in the living room and searches his flat for his boyfriend, his heart racing inside his throat. He knows he left Mark in his living room half an hour ago. That’s not why he’s nervous.
He’s nervous because he could tell Mark was planning something before he left, and the last time Mark had plans for him, he ended up being tied to a bed. Therefore, Gary feels both nervous and a little excited when he sees that the lights in the sitting room upstairs are on.

He enters, and his suspicions are confirmed. Mark was planning something.

‘Welcome back, Mr Barlow.’

Gary doesn’t answer, for there’s a lot to take in. Mark’s sat on his sofa (the one where they last had a pillow fight), comfortably drinking what looks like a strawberry cocktail through a paper straw. It looks slightly obscene.

Seeing Mark sucking on a paper straw is pretty distracting by itself, but then Gary sees what Mark is wearing, and he feels his skin prickle all over.

Mark’s wearing a see-through dress shirt, which means he might as well be naked. The shirt – which Gary supposes is black, except not really, because it’s see-through – shows every part of Mark’s chest that Gary knows intimately: his flat, skinny chest, and the blue tattoo that never seems to be spared during sex. Mark is half-naked, and yet he is not: the see-through fabric seems to be draped over Mark’s body just so Gary can take it off of him later.

‘Did you and your dogs have a nice time, Gaz? Here, have a drink.’

Gary sheepishly accepts the glass Mark offers him. It smells like a strawberry cocktail, except there isn’t any alcohol in it: just lots of sugar and three ice cubes. Ordinarily Gary would reject a drink as sweet as this, but he’s too distracted by everything else to care.

He sits himself down on his sofa a little heavily, not knowing how he should feel about Mark’s see-through shirt. It is easily the sexiest Mark has ever looked, but also the most ridiculous.

‘Where on Earth were you hiding that?’

‘In one of my suitcases. Come, tell me about your walk.’ Mark sucks the strawberry cocktail through his straw in a way that most people would call crude, and Gary has to remind himself that what he’s witnessing is not a part of some sort of weird dream. He did not die and go to heaven; he is very much alive, and this is very much happening. ‘Did Hugo and Cookie behave themselves?’

‘Er. Yes. They did, yeah. They were very – yes.’ Gary realises half-way through his sentence that he doesn’t really want to talk about his dogs. He’d much rather talk about what’s happening inside his sitting room. ‘I can’t believe you’re wearing that.’

Mark smiles smugly. ‘Do you like it? I put it on just for you, you know. I wanted to thank you for being so good to me.’

‘Do I like it? Mark, mate – you look amazing. Jesus. C’mere, will you?’ Gary makes a movement to kiss Mark on the lips, but Mark holds up his hand, meaning no.

Gary’s about to protest (politely) when Mark puts away both their strawberry cocktails (leaving them on the sitting room table) and starts unbuttoning his shirt.

As in, Gary’s shirt.

Gary squeezes his own thigh to make sure that he’s not dreaming. He’s very much awake. Mark’s in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt.
‘Let’s kiss later, Mr Barlow. I wanna get you naked first, if that’s all right . . .’

Gary watches, open-mouthed, as Mark slowly undoes every single button he has, starting with the one at the very top until he reaches the button at the bottom. Mark’s fingers graze Gary’s skin along the way. The shirt falls open within minutes, seconds; revealing the body within.

Mark seems to know exactly what he’s doing: he runs a hungry finger down Gary’s now-exposed chest, applying pressure in all the right places. He doesn’t bother helping Gary ease out of his shirt, and Gary’s too much of a horny wreck to do it himself.

The shirt stays on. Mark already has access to all the places he wants to touch anyway, running his fingers up and down Gary’s hairy chest as though he owns it. The dimmed lights in the sitting room make Gary’s chest look even more sculpted than ever, and Mark stops to kiss every single muscle he can see.

To be honest, Gary can’t tell who’s hornier, him or Mark. Judging from the big tent appearing in his trousers, it’s probably Mark. Just a little bit.

‘Have you been planning this all day, Mark?’ Gary almost sounds impressed.

‘Of course,’ Mark purrs. ‘Why do you think I stayed at home? I’ve been wanting to fuck you ever since I got here.’

Mark reaches out for one of the glasses on the sitting room table. Gary assumes Mark must be thirsty. He’s not. Mark slips his fingers inside the pink beverage and takes out a single ice cube.

A lot of questions flood Gary’s thoughts like a panic. What is Mark about to do? Is he going to eat it?

No, of course not.

Mark holds the ice cube between his index finger and thumb and places it softly against Gary’s neck, sending a cold wave through the skin he touches. He can see Gary biting his lip at that. He moves the ice cube lower. And lower. Past Gary’s neck. Right across his nipples, making them go hard.

The ice cube is cold – freezing – and yet Gary couldn’t feel hotter. His chest has flushed a warm, pinkish red. He tilts back his head and shuts his eyes, allowing the ice cube to paint goosebumps on every single body part he has.

He’s got his head so far up the clouds that he doesn’t notice Mark unzipping his trousers until it’s already too late.

Gary feels a sharp, cold stab of not-quite-pleasure, not-quite-pain hitting his skin down there. He opens his eyes. He has to suppress a low moan when he sees Mark running the ice cube down the shape of his erect cock. He sees a thin trail of water where the ice cube has been. He feels cold, then hot when Mark replaces the ice cube with his warm mouth, enveloping Gary’s prick with his lips.

It’s almost too much to bear. Gary is unable to keep quiet as he sees his cock disappearing into Mark’s familiar mouth. He moans loudly, just once, and Mark deliberately lets his cock slip out of his mouth.

Yet more coldness hits his skin. The ice cube. Mark is rubbing it up and down Gary’s hard prick, making Gary yearn for the warmth of his mouth.

It’s all incredibly infuriating and unfair, and yet Gary couldn’t wish for a better boyfriend. Mark
seems to know what he’s doing every time they make love. He’s memorised every single thing that turns Gary on.

If the people on the ground below knew what he and Mark were doing, the city would come to a standstill.

‘Jeez, Mark.’ Gary looks down to see Mark looking up at him with a smug expression on his face. The ice cube has disappeared; the only thing he can still feel against his skin is Mark’s lips, leaving soft butterfly kisses all over his pulsing prick. ‘You really know how to be a tease, don’t you?’

‘If you think I’m being a tease now, wait until I take me trousers off, Mr Barlow . . .’

It’s as though someone has pressed fast forward on time itself. Mark sits up again.

In a daze, Gary helps Mark take off his shirt, exposing the tanned body underneath.

A smug, self-satisfied laugh leaves Mark’s lips when Gary pulls his tight trousers off his legs. He’s gone commando.

Time pauses so that Gary can stare at Mark’s erect cock, as big and long as Gary remembers it being. One day, Gary wants to be fucked by that prick. Not today, not tomorrow, but one day. He feels dizzy just thinking about it.

Time speeds up again when Mark takes him by the hand to his bedroom. Mark hardly gets to observe the bedroom. Otherwise distracted by Gary kissing him so hard that he almost forgets to breathe, Mark doesn’t see the luxurious paintings on the wall, or the golden chandelier dangling above their heads. He fails to notice the swirling gold patterns on the pillows on the bed, or the way nearly every piece of furniture is a warm, gold colour; as beautiful as it is expensive. He doesn’t spot the piano, yet another one.

The only thing Mark is truly aware of is being pinned to the bed and Gary pushing himself on top of him with a condom already inside his hand. He feels like a century has passed since he pressed an ice cube against Gary’s skin, and yet he feels like no time has passed at all. Whenever he’s with Gary, it’s like time no longer exists.

‘You want this, Mark?’ Gary knows the answer already, but he has to ask. He always asks. He’ll be asking Mark for permission to fuck him until they’re old and married. Getting to make love to Mark Owen is a privilege he never wants to take for granted.

Mark wraps his arms around Gary’s neck, pulling him closer until they might as well be one person. He’s always loved this position best: Gary on top of him; their chests and bodies pressed together; Mark nearly sinking into the soft mattress. He loves it when Gary takes charge, which is probably why Mark would love it if Gary were a head teacher.

‘I want this,’ he hisses against Gary’s mouth. ‘Fuck me, Gaz.’

Gary slips into Mark’s tight arse only seconds after he’s pushed the condom down his prick. He’s not at all gentle this time; he’s quick and rough, and he knows exactly when to bite Mark’s earlobe, a sensitive spot.

Mark speaks almost constantly while Gary fucks him. It starts off with the dirty talk that Gary’s so used to hearing from him (saying things like “Fuck me right there, Gaz” and “Oh my God, you’re so good”, or “Deeper, Mr Barlow”, alternated by Mark’s familiar screaming), but then Mark starts talking about work. Right when Gary hits his prostate.
‘You know what I keep thinking about, Gaz?’ Mark has to suppress a whimper when Gary rolls his hips right, hitting that sensitive spot inside that always makes him roll his eyes into the back of his head. His chest has flushed bright red, and a trail of pre-cum is tricking down the flat of his tummy. He’s bloody close already, and yet he still manages to talk Gary’s ears off. ‘I keep thinking about the two students who cheated. There’s – oh Jesus, Gaz – there’s something wrong about those two, I can tell. Oh fuck. Harder. That’s it. Oh yes.’

Mark does not elaborate on what he means, or maybe he can’t. Gary pushes in and out, hard, and Mark seems to forget his train of thought. He wraps his arms around Gary’s neck once more, pulling his boyfriend – his partner – even closer. A stream of whorish moans leaves his lips when Gary slams his cock inside of him at such a ridiculous speed that Mark thinks he might faint.

Then Gary slows down again and kisses Mark on the forehead, and the train of thought that Mark pressed “pause” on earlier comes back to him like an epiphany.

All of a sudden, images of when he invigilated the English exam flash before him. In an instant, he sees the entire hour of Mark-supervising-exam being repeated in his mind’s eye. Even though he has Gary’s prick deep inside of him, he can still smell the strong blue ink as his students worked on their letters. He can still feel the smooth surface of the pens he handed out to his students. He can still picture every single face he saw in his classroom that hour.

Every single face but one, because one student was missing. He realises now. The truth of what happened hits him like a wrecking ball. He knows.

‘I think I know what happened now, Gaz,’ Mark begins enthusiastically. ‘One of the students who cheated – Samuel – he wasn’t there! He wasn’t even in the classroom. Oh fuck. Oh God, Gaz.’ (Here, Gary lets his prick slip out of Mark’s hole on purpose, forcing Mark to moan when he pushes it back in again.) ‘Oh Jesus. That’s it. Fuck me, Gaz. Oh God. Mmm. Yes. I do sort of think that’s what happened now. One of the students wasn’t there, I’m sure of it.’

Gary frowns at Mark. He knows that Mark tends to talk a lot during sex, but usually his monologues are reserved for dirty talk. This is . . . well, it’s a bit of a turn-off. ‘Are you going to keep talking while I fuck you, mate? I don’t really want to discuss work while I’ve got me cock inside of you.’

Mark smiles innocently. He runs his hands all the way down Gary’s arse, squeezing him there while he feels Gary rubbing a soft spot inside. They’ve rather made a mess of the bed: all of Gary’s pillows have landed on the floor, and his silk sheets have creases in them. ‘Do you like me better when I don’t talk, Mr Barlow?’

Not really, Gary thinks. ‘Yes,’ he says instead, because the thought of telling Mark what to do is one hell of a turn-on.

Mark smiles then. Another challenge. Perfect. ‘Why don’t you stick something inside me mouth if it bothers you so much?’

Gary grins. There’s no way he’s going to say no to that.

‘Chin up, Mr Owen.’ Gary moves up so that his crotch lines up with Mark’s face. Not forgetting that he’s still a gentleman, he places two fluffy pillows behind Mark’s head to make him more comfortable. He can’t quite stop himself from ruffling Mark’s long hair as he does that.

Then the fun part starts. Gary removes the condom off his prick in one quick motion. He pushes
himself inside Mark’s warm mouth without so much of a warning.

The gesture is so unexpectedly rough coming from Gary that it makes Mark moan in surprise. He can barely get used to the tempo. Gary is immediately rough and quick, fucking his mouth with quick movements in and out. His hands are tangled up inside Mark’s long hair.

Even though it’s a little rough, it’s as enjoyable for Mark as it is for Gary. Mark loves having Gary inside his mouth, tasting Gary’s cock as it pulses against his tongue. It’s such a turn-on. Already, Mark has grabbed his own cock inside his fist, rubbing it quickly up and down as he tastes Gary all over him.

Frankly, Gary’s taste is something Mark never wants to get used to. He never wants to get used to this, fucking Gary and being fucked by him until his entire body feels like it’s been made of jelly. Even in outrageous moments such as this when his main thought should be Gary’s prick fucking him, the only thing he can think about is how much he loves Gaz.

After only a couple of minutes of this, Gary’s movements become less steady, shaky almost. He screams out Mark’s name (and several expletives), and Mark’s mouth fills with cum.

Mark barely manages to swallow it all. Most of it ends up trickling out of his mouth, making him look outrageously dirty and sticky. Gary swears it’s the sexiest Mark has ever looked.

Gary dips down to kiss him on the mouth, and they share the dirtiest kiss in the history of kisses. He doesn’t give a shit that Mark’s sticky as fuck and that he can taste himself on his lover’s tongue. All he wants to do is kiss Mark before the pleasant tingle of their orgasm fades.

Of course, Mark has already relieved himself over his stomach. Gary can’t tell when that happened. Mark can be a massive Screamer, and yet there are moments when he can come quietly and softly against his own skin, pushed over the edge by just the simplest kiss. It’s another thing that makes being with Mark an adventure in itself.

One day, Gary hopes that Mark will move in with him permanently. That way, they can have wonderful adventures like this every day.

*They might even get married,* Gary thinks to himself. He’d pop the question in his rooftop garden – the entire place covered in candles and rose petals –, and of course Mark would say yes and they’d spend the rest of their lives as a married couple.

He knows that moment is still ages away, but you never know.

Mark doesn’t sound like such a bad guy to be married to.

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After a quick clean-up in the shower, the boys cuddle up to each other in bed. They’re quite naked; the silk sheets that Gary has pulled over their bodies is the only thing that’s protecting their dignities. Mark is used to the two of them barely fitting on his bed back at home, but there’s so much space on Gary’s cloud-like bed that he could easily spread all his arms and legs without having to fear rolling off the bed. The bed is easily as large as his own kitchen.

Regardless, Mark stays close to Gaz, wrapping his lover in his arms and taking in the pleasant scent of soap that still lingers in the air after their shower.

It’s still early: eight in the evening. Mark feels like he could easily doze off.
Gary’s lips touching his forehead stop Mark from doing just so. ‘I loved tonight,’ he says, softly and sweetly. He remembers the way Mark’s lips felt around him, and he smiles. Mark always gives the best blowjobs. ‘I really loved it.’

Mark smiles. He runs a lazy finger across Gary’s tummy, now covered in sheets. Mark always loves this bit best: being curled up underneath the covers, quite safe and warm. ‘Me too, Gaz. You’re always so good to me.’

‘What were you talking about earlier, though?’ It’s only now, thirty minutes later, that Gary remembers that Mark was in the middle of saying something earlier.

‘I keep thinking about the two students who cheated. There’s something wrong about those two, I can tell,’ Mark had said. And later (while Gary was hitting a very nice spot inside of him): ‘One of the students wasn’t there, I’m sure of it.’

Gary was so busy making love that he wasn’t really paying any attention to it.

Clearly, Mark has forgotten too. He makes a confused face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You kept talking about the exam while we were – you know. Something about one of the students not being in the room? You were being quite delirious, actually.’

Mark gasps dramatically. He remembers now. ‘Yes, of course! Gaz, the exam. Oh my God.’

Mark sits up straight then, forcing the sheets to slip off his body, exposing his red skin. There’s an alert, almost manic look in his eyes, not tired at all. All of a sudden, he knows exactly what happened while he was invigilating. ‘Let’s get dressed and I’ll show you what I mean.’

Gary makes a face at that. ‘Get dressed? But Mark, I was hoping we’d —’

Mark fixes Gary with an uncharacteristically angry stare, and two minutes later they get dressed in Gary’s bathroom.

After they’ve changed into their sleepwear (a simple white T-shirt and lounge trousers for Gary; cute blue pyjamas for Mark that cover up way too much skin for Gary’s liking), Gary follows Mark to the dining room downstairs, where Mark’s left his laptop. As per usual, Gary has no idea what’s going on or what Mark wants to show him.

Meanwhile, Mark looks positively bouncy and awake. Gary has a disappointing feeling it doesn’t have anything to do with the amazing sex they just had.

They turn on the lights and sit at the dining room table, where Mark left his laptop that morning. Once his laptop has finished loading, Mark shows Gary a Word file, counting just 232 words. It seems to be a series of notes about the exam he invigilated.

‘When did you do this?’ Gary asks.

‘Yesterday, while you were at work. I tried to write down what I could still remember about the exam I supervised. It’s been ages, so I’ve forgotten most of it. But I’ve always thought there was something odd about the two students who cheated, Timo and Samuel.’ Mark points a finger at the space in his Word file where he’s underlined the names of the two students. He’s put big question marks next to them. ‘I think I’ve figured it out now, Gaz – I think Samuel wasn’t there.’

Gary looks at Mark’s laptop screen with a sceptical look in his eyes. It says in Mark’s own notes that Mr Harrison showed him both students’ letters. They were identical, which is of course what got
Mark suspended. ‘If Samuel wasn’t there, then how did he copy Timo’s letter? And more importantly, how did his letter end up in the exam envelope?’

‘That bit I haven’t figured out yet. But I know I’m right, Gaz. I don’t forget a student’s face. If Samuel had been there, I would have known. I’d remember. I’ve even written down what Timo wore that day, see?’ Mark gestures at his screen. In his notes, he’s written that Timo was wearing a True Blue Madonna shirt when he took the exam. ‘I can even remember where Timo sat. In the back, next to a girl with pigtails. But Samuel wasn’t there.’

Something about what Mark is saying makes sense. It reminds Gary of what Rob said yesterday: ‘I did a lot of cheating when I was at school, Gaz, and if I wanted to literally copy someone else’s formal letter I would have had to sit on their fucking lap. I swear to you, Mark would have noticed.’

Could Rob have a point? Would it have been impossible for Samuel and Timo to cheat while Mark was in the room?

‘Let’s assume for a second you’re right,’ Gary says, a thoughtful look on his face. ‘Timo sits the exam. Samuel doesn’t. Samuel still ends up copying the letter Timo wrote. His letter still ends up in the exam envelope that Ofsted had a look at. How?’

‘Maybe Samuel had help,’ Mark offers.

‘By Timo?’

‘Maybe. Timo could have worked on two letters at the same time. He would’ve had to copy Samuel’s handwriting, but I suppose it’s possible.’ Mark sighs deeply. He hates that he’s being forced to think about his students so negatively. He doesn’t want to believe that people are capable of doing something so deceiving. He’d much rather see the best in people. ‘On the other hand, Timo wouldn’t have been able to slip a second letter into the exam envelope without me noticing, because I always make sure I double-check everything a student hands in. You know, checking if a student has filled in their first and last names and completed all the exercises and so on. I would have noticed if Timo handed in two letters. So it can’t have happened during the exam itself.’

‘What about after? Can you still remember what you did after the exam took place?’

Mark nods. In his Word file, he’s written a separate note about this. ‘After the exam finished, I handed in the envelope at the exams office. I remember, because when I entered, the lady at the exams office was playing a Florence and the Machine song. She then sealed the exam envelope and told me she would get it to Ms Brooke once she’d recovered from her illness.’

Gary furrows his brow. ‘So a student can’t have done it.’

‘Not unless they stole the envelope from the office before it made its way to Ms Brooke, no.’

‘Ms Brooke – she marked the exams?’

‘She did. I saw her notes all over the students’ letters when Mr Harrison showed them to me. I think Ofsted didn’t discover the plagiarism until Ms Brooke had already marked the exams.’

‘Bit weird that she didn’t discover the plagiarism herself. Ms Brooke, I mean.’

Mark stares at his laptop screen. He tries to think of all the times he’s had to mark exams himself. After a couple of hours, there always comes a moment when you lose focus. ‘It’s possible, I suppose. Marking exams isn’t very easy, Gaz.’
‘Two students handed in identical letters, though. There’s no way she wouldn’t have noticed,’ Gary points out, because someone has to. He hates accusing people too, but it does seem odd that Ms Brooke didn’t raise the alarm herself.

‘I suppose it’s possible she didn’t notice the plagiarism if she spent several days marking the exams,’ Mark thinks out loud. ‘You see, I put the letters into the exam envelope in alphabetical order. Samuel’s last name ends with a B, but Timo’s begins with a Y. If Ms Brooke marked the exams in alphabetical order, maybe she didn’t notice the plagiarism because of how much time had passed between marking Samuel’s letter and getting to Timo’s.’

Gary makes a sound of agreement. ‘That’s a good point, that. It also matches up with what Rob’s been saying. He told me that he overheard Mr Harrison talking about a fraudulent exam over the summer, so in August. That’s ages after the exam took place. Maybe Ms Brooke really didn’t notice, like you say.

‘But even if the plagiarism wasn’t noticed till August, it still doesn’t explain how Samuel’s exam ended up in the envelope. Either the students had help from an adult who had access to the envelope before Ms Brooke could mark it, or Timo and Samuel are being used as some sort of scapegoat, which could mean you’re being set up after all. I bet you these kids don’t even know about this.’

Mark nods seriously. He doesn’t want to point a finger at someone, but it’s getting more and more obvious that an adult – a member of staff – slipped Samuel’s letter into the exam envelope without anyone knowing. But if it wasn’t Mark – or Ms Brooke, who was ill on the day the exam took place – who did?

‘What do we do now?’ Mark asks, a serious look on his face.

‘We need to gather proof,’ Gary says. ‘Without proof, this is all just speculation, this. It’ll be your word against Mr Harrison’s. Or worse, the students’, if they’re involved after all. The only way we can prove anything—’

‘Is by getting our hands on the exam envelope itself. I know.’ Mark rubs his temples. He’s beginning to get a headache from all these theories and conspiracies. ‘I still don’t like it, Gaz. If this goes wrong, you could get fired too.’ He has a feeling he’s said this before.

‘I won’t,’ Gary says. ‘Me and Rob and the others – we’ll come up with a plan.’

‘You keep saying that, but I still don’t know what your plan actually is. Unless I pose as a student or you stage some sort of fight of Mr Harrison’s door, there’s no way he’ll leave his office.’

Mark was just being factitious, but Gary’s face has lit up with the second epiphany of the night. ‘Mark! That’s it! If we stage a fight outside Harrison’s door, he’ll have no choice but to leave his office! Howard and Rob could pretend that they’re having a row!’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘You’re the one who suggested it.’

‘It was a joke, Gaz. I was joking. I don’t understand why you keep insisting on doing things that are so awful and dangerous.’

Mark says this very seriously, but even as the words leave his mouth he can feel himself sort of doubting them. Is it that dangerous? If someone is truly setting him up – which his own theory kind of proves – then staging a little incident outside Harrison’s door doesn’t seem so awful.
It’s certainly less sinful than plagiarism.

Mark crosses his arms on the dining room table, a thoughtful look on his face. He doesn’t at all approve of the idea of his friends staging a row, but it is the first good idea they’ve come up with.

‘Do you really think this would work, Gaz?’

‘D’you know what, I think it might,’ says Gary. He notices then that Hugo has joined them in the dining room, looking at Gary with those big puppy eyes that always make Gary feel soft and fuzzy inside. Won over by Hugo’s cuteness, Gary seats the dog inside his lap and pets him gently.

Touching Hugo’s soft fur always makes Gary feel calm. Slowly, the fog lifts from his mind. ‘Yes, I think it’ll work. As long as everyone works together and does as they’re told, I can’t see this failing, to be honest.’

‘“Everyone” being –?’

‘Howard, Rob and Jay. They all said they wanna help you out.’

Mark has gone and typed this all up in a separate file on his laptop. He’s aptly named it “Getting My Job Back”. Making a plan of action might be the only contribution he can make, for he won’t be able to help out on Tuesday; Mr Harrison has banned him from visiting the school until Ofsted’s investigation takes place.

‘Let’s go over the plan again. At some point during the parents’ evening, you, Rob, Howard and Jason will be staging some sort of . . . fight, I suppose, to get Mr Harrison to leave his office. While Mr Harrison is too busy trying to stop the fight, one of you will, er, steal the exam I supervised.’ Mark makes a face at his laptop. ‘I don’t like the word “steal”. I’m going to turn it into “borrow”. Yes. That’s better. Anyway. You will borrow the exam I supervised. What next?’

‘Like Jay said yesterday, I think the key to what happened lies in the attendance list. If Samuel really wasn’t there, then that means you’re not to blame for the plagiarism. In other words, the next obvious step would be looking into the exam papers to see if we can find proof that your theory is correct.’

Mark sighs as he types all of this up. What they’re saying is absolutely ridiculous. It all sounds like the plot of some sort of B-movie about school conspiracies, except he’s not an actor, and he’s not inside a movie. This is all real. All of this is happening.

It seems so unfair. Why him? What did he do in a previous life that made the entire world conspire against him? If he hadn’t been fired, he would’ve been sat at home right now, writing lesson plans and replying to student e-mails. Yet he’s found himself here, preparing what feels like a heist, his future hanging by a thread.

Sometimes he wishes he hadn’t become a teacher after all. Wouldn’t life be much better if he’d kept working as a songwriter? He might even have been successful by now. He might have had his own gold records hanging on the wall, and a penthouse of his own. He didn’t miss being a songwriter when he still worked as a teacher, but now that he’s been suspended, he desperately wishes he still worked in the music industry.

Deep down, he wonders whether it’d be too late to return to his previous job. He’d work as an in-house songwriter for some indie record label, and every now and then he’d write songs for an up-and-coming pop star. He’d earn enough money to get by, and together he and Gary would be the best songwriting duo in history.

But on the other hand, Mark thinks to himself, he would never have met Gary if he hadn’t become a
teacher. Gary would have been no more than a pop star he’d never heard of.

Imagining a life without Gary is even worse than living his life unemployed.

‘I really wish this wasn’t happening,’ Mark sighs.

‘I know.’ Gary reaches out for Mark’s hand and squeezes it, as he has done so often these past few days. By now, Gary knows Mark’s hands almost as well as his own. ‘This’ll work. Our plan is absolutely fool-proof, I promise you.’

‘Apart from the fact that you might get caught and lose your job,’ Mark reminds Gary sweetly, because someone has to.

‘I never got caught doing bad things with you, so I think we’re allowed to feel a bit more positive.’

That makes Mark laugh. Gary’s got a point there – apart from when Howard nearly walked into them (twice), Gary seems to have made a habit of getting away with things that could have cost him his job. Perhaps this will all work out after all.

‘You’re right. I should be more positive, shouldn’t I?’ Mark says brightly, his mood much improved.

‘Do you think I should mail the other guys my files? Maybe they’ve got some ideas of their own. Yes, I think I’ll e-mail everyone. Should I e-mail them today or tomorrow? They might not be online right now, and I don’t wanna bother them.’

‘I’d leave it till tomorrow,’ Gary says. ‘There’s no need to do it now. We can go over the plan again tomorrow. It’s getting a bit late, anyway.’

‘Good point. I am a bit tired, now that you mention it.’ Mark glances at Gary then. For the first time since going to the dining room and going over their Big (But Potentially Disastrous) Plan, he finds himself reminiscing about the sex they had half an hour ago.

Needless to say, the sex was wonderful: Gary pinning him to the bed, feeling him deep inside, tasting Gary all over his tongue . . . it was the most wonderful moment, and yet Mark still wants more, somehow.

And let’s be honest, who can blame him? Even though they just had a serious conversation, Gary still looks bloody handsome. His jogging trousers are just tight enough, and his white T-shirt shows off the arms that Mark so loves feeling around him. He wouldn’t mind feeling those arms around him again, if only so he could forget about what’s waiting for them on Tuesday.

‘Actually, Gaz . . .’ Mark tucks his hair behind his ears. He flutters his eyelashes. ‘I think I’d like to go to bed now, if that’s all right.’

Gary glances at the clock on the wall. Right on cue (as if it can sense what Mark is about to say), Hugo leaps out of his lap. ‘It’s only nine, mate – I don’t sleep till eleven on most days, and that’s on weekdays. Are you sure you wanna go to bed already?’

‘Who said anything about sleeping, Mr Barlow?’ Mark says, and he kisses Gary sweetly on the mouth. He applies just enough pressure for Gary to gasp, needily, against his skin. Their conversation fades.

It’s easily their hundredth kiss, and yet it feels like their first kiss all over again. It always does. With each kiss they share, Gary finds himself transported to when he first kissed Mark on the mouth, in the concert hall at school, when their scared little fingers didn’t dare touch anything but their red velvet seats.
Over a year has passed since that first kiss, and they aren’t worried or scared anymore. Every worry Mark’s ever had, old and new, disappears into thin air as Gary pushes him into his mattress again mere seconds later, his shirt already unbuttoned. The only fear that remains in his head is the uncertainty of what will happen on Tuesday, the parents’ evening. Will his mates succeed? Will they find out what happened while Mark was invigilating? Will they get caught? What if Mark is wrong, and Samuel sat the exam after all?

Perhaps it does not matter. Perhaps it matters more than anything in the whole wide world. Either way, Mark does not have time to think about it. Gary has just kissed him, softly and carefully, on the inside of his right thigh, and slowly all his thoughts about exams and getting caught fade.

Tuesday, there’s the parents’ evening, when Mark’s future will be decided by his colleagues – his friends. Until then, every night will be date night, all night long.

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