

# **YEAR ONE**





## DAWSON

I realize I'm staring at the arse of the guy in front of me roughly seven seconds before he does, but that's all the time I need for several thoughts to run through my mind.

First, I think *nice arse*.

Second, I mentally shout at myself for objectifying this guy based solely on his bum. After everything I've been through, I should know better than to reduce someone to their appearance. I should be more concerned about how intelligent he is, or whether he does stuff for charity, or how he treats animals . . . and all I'm thinking about is how good his jeans look. And they really do—

STOP IT, YOU PERV.

Third, I wonder if I can blame hormones, or would that be a cop out? Is this what happens once you start kissing people? One (slightly – OK, very – drunken) kiss and a bit of a fumble (over trousers) with Olly Pritchard, and the Pandora's Box of Perving is open for business, so now all I can think about is sex. Although Celestia Carey did say boys think about sex once every seven seconds. Wait, that can't be true. Every seven seconds? That's like, five hundred times an hour. No way. No one could think about sex that much. I'll google it later . . .

Fourth – is this really the time to be eyeing someone up? I'm not here to look at bums; I'm here to see my mum.

There. That killed it. The lid is back on the box.

Fifth – what if someone in the cafeteria hears my thoughts and knows I’m the kind of guy who stares at strangers’ arses and has to think about his mum to stop himself? What if someone is listening right now?

I look around as surreptitiously as I can to see if anyone is looking at me in disgust. No more than usual, ha ha.

Once again I find myself looking at the arse. I wonder if he’s . . .

The seven seconds are up, and all sex thoughts die a million deaths as the owner of the arse turns around and clocks me. He’s older than me. Much older – maybe twenty-five. I didn’t think he was that old from behind. His arse didn’t look like an old arse.

He looks at me, eyebrows raised, and my skin heats. I see the moment he dismisses me, and then I see *it* – the recognition – as if a light has switched on inside his mind, and he does a double take.

Shit.

‘Have we met?’ he asks. There is a string of spit between his teeth and it makes me feel sick. ‘Wait. Are you . . . ?’

I’m gone before I can hear how that question ends, bolting out of the queue and cutting between the tables. I trip over someone’s bag, and my shin smashes into a chair, but I don’t stop, ignoring the angry voices behind me and slamming through the doors into the corridor.

Outside is buzzing, and I weave through crowds of people – adults in suits, techs in Converse and shorts. Where is the bloody exit? I need to be outside. Weirdly, there’s a load of people my age around, all wide-eyed and staring, and I duck my head and try to move past them. Don’t look at me. Don’t see me.

I turn down the corridor towards the lifts, stopping abruptly

when I see how many people are waiting. Someone slams into the back of me, and I grunt.

‘Sorry,’ a girl says when I turn around.

‘No worries,’ I say. She has a blue stripe in her hair, like a weird punk skunk. Why just one stripe? It looks ridiculous.

‘Are you going to the induction?’

‘What?’ I can’t stop staring at the stripe. It’s *really* blue. I wonder if it was a dare. Or an accident.

‘The induction. Health and safety. It’s on the ninth floor.’ Skunk Girl sounds annoyed, so I stop staring at her hair and meet her eyes.

‘Erm. No. Sorry.’

‘Oh. It’s just . . . I thought I recognized you from the briefing earlier.’

‘Nope. Not me. I’m not being inducted.’ They’re interns, I realize. Work-experience kids. One of them will be assigned to Mum, and she’ll spend two weeks shouting at them because they’ll be on their phones all day and not get her coffee right. It happens every year. Someone gets put on Mum’s show, and she’ll get angry about it and phone me to rant about how it’s because she’s a woman, and a mother, and if she was Stewart McConnell she wouldn’t have to have an intern, she’d get a proper assistant. And then I’ll do my famous Angry Alicia Sharman impression in the *Dedman* green room and everyone will laugh.

Except I won’t. Because there isn’t a *Dedman* green room this year. Or ever again.

‘Dawson Sharman!’ the girl says, and I tune back in. ‘That’s why I recognize you!’

‘What?’

‘You’re Dawson Sharman. From *Dedman High*.’

Shit.

‘No,’ I say, too fast. ‘I get that all the time. I mean, I don’t see it, personally. But, you know . . .’ I smile as though I’m embarrassed. I mean, I *am* embarrassed. But not in the way I want her to think.

‘Right. Sorry. I just . . . Yeah. I suppose it would be a bit weird if you were him, just wandering around the UKB randomly.’

‘Yeah. Ha,’ I say. ‘No, I’m here for . . . I work here. As a runner.’

‘Oh. Right.’ She looks me up and down again. ‘Right,’ she says again. ‘So, do you know where the health and safety induction is?’

‘No. Sorry.’ I shrug.

The lift pings, and we both turn to it, joining the informal queue to get in as people pour out.

I spot Stewart at the same time he spots me.

Shi-i-i-t.

‘Dawson!’ he booms down the corridor, causing everyone within a five-mile radius to turn to me.

The girl behind me gasps, and I freeze.

‘What are you doing here? Your mum said you were going to a taster day at your new school.’

‘Erm . . .’

‘Must be weird, eh, at a school for norms after all this time. Still, it’ll be good to build some character. Think of it as method acting, that’s what I’d do. Just get through the year and maybe you can apply again. Have you thought about one of the Manchester acting schools? Not too far from here, and they might be less picky than a London school.’

‘OK, so . . .’

‘Anyway, I won’t keep you. Your mum was in her office, last I saw. She didn’t seem in a great mood though, so have a care.’

‘Sure.’

Stewart frowns, as if noticing for the first time that I'm not in a great mood either. 'Your drink is leaking.' He nods at my hand.

I look down and realize I'm still holding the carton of coconut water I was queuing for in the cafeteria. I've stolen it, and while he's been talking, I've been squeezing it, and it's leaking all over the floor. It's not a huge loss, I tell myself. I don't even like coconut water. Celestia says it tastes like spunk, but I wouldn't know. Neither would she, to be honest.

Stewart strides away, and I watch him go, wishing I had the power to kill people with my eyes. I take a small step away from the coconut-water puddle. I should find a bin—

'You lied.'

I spin around, startled; I'd forgotten Skunk Girl was there. It feels like every single person who'd been waiting for the lift has stayed, listening to Stewart, and staring at me. Some of them have their phones out. Probably snapchatting, instagramming. There will be photos all over the Internet of me, people tweeting each other the conversation, looking me up on IMDb and Wikipedia to find out what I'm doing next, a hint of why I'm here. Maybe an audition . . .

Yeah, no.

I, Dawson Sharman – former actor and BAFTA Rising Star-nominated child prodigy – am, at the grand old age of sixteen, a has-been. I am over. All my future holds now is the possibility of an appearance on some telly show where I'm stuck in a jungle, or a house, or on an island with a bunch of other Z-listers, and my only chance of a comeback is if I get off with one of them. My destiny lies in *Where Are They Now?* listicles. Ones with *Before and After* pictures. Dawson, aged fourteen, with his amazing bone structure, those piercing green eyes – versus Dawson today, blob fish after a fist fight. What happened to the face that launched a thousand *Dedman* fan edits and head-castings?

Dawson Sharman as Harry Potter. Dawson Sharman as Luvian Fen. Dawson Sharman as Rhys Gold. I used to spend a lot of time online. I know what they said about me.

I know what they say now too. Turns out people don't stop tagging you, even when they're calling you ugly.

I am part of the reason that website created the phrase 'Nevilled Down'.

Ten Actors Who Anti-Longbottomed and Actually Nevilled Down  
Number Eight: Dawson Sharman

Former star of *Dedman High*, the most popular children's show to come out of the UK since *Tracy Beaker*, Dawson Sharman was cast aged thirteen as Mason Wright, the bad boy son of the headmaster of a boarding school for troubled teens, who finds out on his thirteenth birthday that he's a vampire. For two years, Sharman dominated online polls for Hottest UK Teen Male, and was the focus of the #PrinceSharming Internet campaign, an online plea for him to attend a young fan's school prom as her date. Earlier this year, however, the show was cancelled at the beginning of its fourth season, with rumours abounding that the reason was a rapidly diminishing fan base due to what insiders termed Sharman's 'unfortunate brush with puberty'.

What they didn't add was that 'Sharman will probably never work again. Unless he can find theatre parts and then spend the rest of his life pretending it's his true calling, because it's more "authentic" and "there's nothing like performing to a live audience, with no second takes", and all the other stuff actors too ugly for television say.'

There was a huge backlash to the article because I was still



fifteen when it was published. They took it down in the end. But before they did, I read the comments, and a lot of people said it was ‘a shame about me’. And other less polite things.

It was good training for my first day at normal school, let me tell you. And let me also tell you, there is no way I am going back there. I lasted an hour. It was enough. There has to be something else I can do. Somewhere else I can go. I cannot spend the next two years being called ‘Count Fagula’ by feral kids who think culture is drinking half a litre of cider and then trying to finger someone called Chelsea ‘up the park’. I don’t even know if ‘up the park’ is a location, or slang for ‘vagina’.

Skunk Girl is still looking at me, and for a moment I want to tell her she looks stupid.

I want *her* to feel ugly too.

‘Can you blame me?’ I say finally.

She says nothing; in fact, none of them say anything. So I walk past them all and smash my finger into the ‘call’ button, even though it’s already lit. The doors open immediately, and I get into the lift.



## KAITLYN

The woman on the reception desk knew. I know she knew. She handed me my lanyard and made me sign a sheet, and then she said the thing that made me sure she knew: ‘Would you like someone to walk you to the first induction?’

Subtle, right? Most people wouldn’t even read any meaning into it. I wouldn’t have once. Not even six weeks ago. But now I notice these things.

I wonder how she knew. It’s probably written right there on the list of names. Kaitlyn Thomas, fifteen, work experience – *the blind one*.

Anyway, screw that. I looked right at her – yes I did; I looked *right at her* – and said, ‘No, thank you.’

And then I turned and walked away, all confident like, my head ever so slightly tilted, as if it’d help me see around the blurry spot in the centre of my vision. I’ve done it for years, way before diagnosis, way before the word ‘blind’, when I thought everyone saw the world like I did, before Stargardt disease and my mother sitting on my bed crying and everything going to shit.

I realize about halfway down the hall that I’m not actually sure where I’m meant to go, but I carry on confidently anyway until I turn a corner and stop. I lean against the wall and open the induction folder I got in the post last week. The induction

folder is jazzy, all exclamation marks and laminate shine, like the people who made it couldn't imagine anyone reading it who wasn't SO EXCITED about doing work experience at the UKB. The whole thing screams, YOU'RE SO LUCKY TO BE HERE! CONGRATULATIONS!

Please. Even if I wanted to work in TV or read the news or something, I wouldn't be cartwheeling across the car park to be here. This is work experience for fifteen-year-olds, for God's sake. I'll be making tea for two weeks and sitting in a boring meeting or two and maybe getting to gawk at a celebrity in a lift or something. Lucky, lucky me.

And I *don't* want to be here. I had my work-experience placement all worked out. I was going to help out at my Aunt Nina's hair and beauty salon. She owns the place, so I would have been able to learn stuff about running a business as well as cutting hair. I wanted to be a beautician then. That was my plan. And I was really excited about it all.

But now I'm losing my sight, and that means, apparently, I can't be a hairdresser or a beautician. That means my school cancelled that placement and moved me on to the UKB programme instead, without even asking me first. They acted like it was this great thing they'd done, like I'd be really pleased. Grateful, even. 'How many teens your age get this kind of opportunity, Kaitlyn?' they said.

Like I was too stupid to realize that they'd only done it to tick a box. Sending their only disabled student to a work-experience placement at the UKB is the kind of thing they can dine off for years. Never mind that I've never cared about anything like this, never wanted to be some kind of media high-flyer, that I've been in all the middle sets for years and feeling fine about it. I've never planned to go to university or whatever. I was just plodding along quite happily, practising

manicures and learning about eyelash tinting.

Anyway. So here I am. The blind one. The box-ticker. Even though I can see just about fine right now, and I don't need someone's arm or one of those white sticks or anything. Not yet anyway.

Last night, I put a blue stripe in my hair. It looks great. It's like an *electric* blue, and I did it myself, over the bathroom sink, using one of those Schwarzkopf dyes my best friend Avani gave me at Christmas, and it's the best thing I ever did. Mum almost fainted, but there was nothing she could do. It's my head, and my hair, and my life. And now *that's* what people will think of when they think of me; I'm the girl with the blue stripe in her hair.

I flip through my induction folder until I get to the YOUR FIRST DAY! page and scan the timetable. I'm meant to go to the ninth floor for some kind of health and safety induction. *Great*. Inspiring. Health and sodding safety. A horrible thought occurs to me: what if they try to incorporate my sight problems into this induction? What if they tell everyone I'm blind, and so everyone should make sure I don't walk into doors, or something? Oh God. Oh God. Everyone will look at me, like, *That's the girl who's here because she's blind – poor cow*.

Will I have to explain that I'm not blind, actually, and confuse them all? I'll say, 'Well, not yet,' and everything will be awkward because they won't really want to know, and I won't really want to tell them.

People hear 'blind', and they think of darkness. They close their eyes and think that's what it's like. You're meant to say 'visually impaired', really, because it's more accurate, but no one does, and most people don't have a reason to care why the difference matters.

I quite like 'visually impaired'. It's melodic. There's a question mark hanging over it that doesn't exist in the cut-off that is 'blind'.

If I ever have to introduce myself to someone and explain the whole Stargardt thing – and I know I’ll have to, one day – I’m going to say that. ‘I’m visually impaired,’ I’ll say. Or, ‘I have a visual impairment.’ Maybe one day I’ll be OK enough with this whole thing to say this without my voice breaking or shaking or doing any one of those things that betray me.

But not today. Please, not today.

I sigh, closing the folder and tucking it under my arm. I hazard a guess as to where the lifts are based on the number of suited men walking confidently in that direction. There’s a crowd gathering, waiting in front of three closed lift doors, and out of the side of my eye I’m looking for a space to stand in, and—

*Shit!* I’ve walked right into someone. Not even just a little nudge either. I’ve fully slammed into him.

‘Sorry,’ I say, oh so casually. Simple mistake. It’s not like I’m going blind, ha ha ha.

‘No worries,’ he says.

He looks familiar. Maybe he’s famous. Or a bit famous. He’s not good-looking enough to be actually famous. More likely he’s on the same placement as me, so I ask if he’s going to the induction, but he just looks confused.

‘Nope. Not me. I’m not being inducted,’ he says, and something about the way he says this drops the penny.

‘Dawson Sharman!’ I blurt out. He is famous! Sort of. *Was* famous. ‘That’s why I recognize you!’

Avani and I loved *Dedman High* back in the day. I used to have a poster of Dawson Sharman on my bedroom wall. And now here he is, standing in front of me! He’s pudgier than he was back then, of course. Everyone knows the Dawson-got-ugly story. But still. I can feel the old stirrings of fangirl within me.

But then he tells me that he’s not Dawson Sharman, that he

just looks like him, that he gets this all the time, and he looks embarrassed and awkward, and I instantly feel really bad. Of course I'm wrong. Imagine me thinking I can recognize someone – me, with my traitorous eyes. This poor guy, being mistaken for the he-got-ugly Dawson Sharman!

'Right,' I say, aiming for breezy. 'Sorry, I just . . .' Make a joke, Kaitlyn! 'Yeah. I suppose it would be a bit weird if you were him, just wandering around the UKB randomly.' Eh, that'll do.

Not-Dawson tells me that he works here as a runner, and he doesn't seem that bothered about the mistaken-identity thing, so I relax. I steal a head-to-foot glance over him – blurred, but good enough – and he really does look like Dawson Sharman. But then what do I know?

A lift pings, and I turn towards the noise, blinking as the people around us surge towards it. Sometimes I get wobbles with my sight; suddenly the whole world blurs. My stomach lurches – *this is what it will be like all the time one day* – and I'm just wondering whether I should go and sit down for a minute when I register that a man with TV-white teeth is coming towards me, beaming. No, not towards me, towards Not-Dawson.

'Dawson!' he booms.

Dawson! Not Not-Dawson. Dawson! I can't help myself – a melodramatic gasp escapes my lips. That sneaky liar!

The man with the teeth is saying words, but I'm too stunned to listen properly. I catch snippets like 'school for norms' (*norms!* Charming!) and 'method acting'. This guy probably loves the sound of his voice as much as he does his shiny white teeth, because he carries on talking even as Dawson just stands there looking mortified. He's trying to cover it with cool, but I can tell. He wants to sink through the floor right now.

No sympathy from me though. When Teeth Man strides

off, I turn to him. ‘You lied,’ I say.

Dawson looks at me, his expression a little dazed. I can feel from the energy around us that everyone’s looking at him, and I hear the telltale click from someone’s phone. Twitter is about to light up. *Good.*

‘Can you blame me?’ he asks.

I try to remind myself that he doesn’t know. Why should he? How could he possibly understand that the days when I can recognize someone’s face are numbered? That the warmth of recognition, that flash of comfort that comes with your mind going, ‘Yes, hello, I know you!’ is a gift? A gift he waved in front of me, then threw away.

I don’t say anything. I think about my aunt’s cosy, cheerful salon and how she’d promised me a box of nail-polish samples. The smell of wet, freshly snipped hair.

Dawson moves past me and presses the button for the lift in front of us. The doors open straight away and he walks in, keeping his back to me. I briefly consider slamming into him again, just because. I feel all ragedy – too ragedy to go to a health and safety induction and pretend like I give a damn about any of this placement bullshit.

Everything is going blurry again. Oh shit! Am I *crying*? I can’t bloody see anything.

‘Are you coming in, or what?’ Dawson says, but not unkindly.

His voice is like a lifebuoy thrown into the dark, so I grab it. I let it pull me out of the blur and into the lift.



## SASHA

I wake up with a jolt when one of the packages slides off the pile on my lap and into the footwell.

‘No dozing on the job,’ Dad says from the driver’s seat, giving me a wry smile.

‘Not for you, maybe,’ I say. ‘I’m just the passenger.’

‘Assistant courier,’ he corrects, like it actually matters.

Neither of us wants to be doing this, but me and Dad aren’t the type of people who get what we want. Dad’s the type of person who gets made redundant and can’t seem to find another job, and I’m the type whose applications for fancy work placements get as far as someone’s inbox and no further.

Still, I’d rather be working with my dad for the week than at the local council, where there’s a kind of buy-one-get-ten-free deal on students from my school. One of the ten being Billy Goodart.

I should not have touched his penis.

Another package almost slides off as I wipe the memory off my hands on to my jeans.

‘Seriously though, Sash, you need to keep a hold of them,’ Dad says.

Dad’s been freelancing as a courier driver for a few months now – he says it’s better than signing on, that at least he’s working for himself and gets to choose the jobs that suit him so



he can be around for me . . . not that I need it at fifteen. But Dad's a proud man, and I think it's been good for him to feel like he's working, even if it isn't a job he likes. Or one that pays well.

Three hours in, and I know for sure that this isn't the career for me:

1. *Early mornings*: I've been up since sparrow fart, and (as we've just established) I'm not allowed to nap.
2. *Other couriers*: They'd run you over if they thought it'd get them an extra delivery slot. Seriously. The sub depot this morning was carnage.
3. *Delivering things*: You have to talk to strangers, even if it is just to say 'Name?', 'Sign here,' and 'You have to press hard – the screen's a bit rubbish.' I'd thought Dad would let me off, this being my first morning, but he's all about maximum efficiency and minimum tolerance for my 'confidence issues'.
4. *Magic FM*: It's like being trapped in wedding playlist.

Although I guess that last one isn't compulsory. It's just Dad's terrible taste in music.

Dad said something about a round he's picked up because another driver just had a baby, and I gaze out of the window at a landscape of tiny roundabouts and tall buildings. It's not until Dad pulls up into a parking bay by a curved bank of windows that it clicks.

'Is this MediaCity?' I say.

'Did the giant letters "UKB" give it away?' Dad calls back, already half out the car.

I have to wait for him to come round and take the packages off my knee so I can get out, and I stand while he sorts through the ones in the back of the car, muttering to himself and stacking

things on my arms like I'm a human forklift.

I've always been strong – one of the better things about being a big girl. Dad's stature; Mum's colouring. I've seen pictures on Facebook, photos scanned in from when she was my age, me in miniature. A hint of something more permanent than a tan, brown eyes, strong black brows, waves of dark hair. I'd fit right into the Albanian side of the family if I ever met them. Which will never happen. Mum did a bunk when I was little – since then it's phone calls at Christmas and a birthday card that never arrives on time. If I didn't friend her on Facebook I'd know nothing about her life at all.

'You listening?' Dad says.

Obviously not. I'd been on the lookout for famous celebrity types. My friend Michela's always talking about seeing famous people when she goes clubbing with her cousin – claimed she pulled a *UKBabies* presenter once, but everyone ripped it out of her for that, and two weeks later, Michela upgraded to giving someone from *Hollyoaks* a blowjob.

Didn't have the heart to tell her they don't film that in Manchester.

'It would be a lot quicker if you were able to take this lot over to that building there, while I offload the others.' Dad's questions always turn out as statements.

'Do I need the machine thingy?' I say, entirely unprepared for a solo delivery of this magnitude.

'None of the ones I've given you require a signature. You'll be fine.' Dad pats the top of my arm and gives it a bit of a squeeze. 'Get this done quickly and we might get to eat lunch somewhere nice – like Subway.'

Sometimes my dad has a problem detecting irony. Or sarcasm. Or, you know, reality. 'Subway' and 'nice' don't even belong in the same sentence. But he's already over the other

side of the courtyard – because why would he wait for a response when he knows I’m going to do whatever he tells me?

It’s slow progress round to the back. Any time I try anything more than a cautious shuffle, the pile in my arms starts to slide gently to the side, but eventually I make it through the doors and all the way to the security desk. I have to rotate a bit so I can see the person sitting there.

‘Hi!’ I say.

The man behind the desk doesn’t look up, just carries on playing Candy Crush on his phone. ‘Hi.’

‘I, er . . .’

In that moment my arm cramps, and the whole pile slides off. The man lifts his phone up a bit as a box falls from the desk on to his lap.

Now he looks up. The git. Or ‘Phil’ as it says on the lanyard round his neck.

‘You need to put those in the pigeonholes.’ Phil points just over my shoulder to what looks like an infinite wall of tiny little boxes with writing under each one.

‘I . . . What? Really?’ Is he winding me up? ‘Isn’t that *your* job?’

A thin slice of a grin appears on his face as he says, ‘Not today.’

I do not like ‘Phil’.

Finding the right pigeonholes is a nightmare because the writing’s so tiny, and I realize after I’ve offloaded five packages that I’ve been putting them in the wrong place because the recipients’ names are at the *top* of each slot, not the bottom. Not everything fits properly, and sometimes there’s already something in there that I need to take out and re-stack . . .

This is taking forever, and I can feel the minutes racing past,

imagining Dad standing by the car and wondering where I've got to.

So much for a Subway lunch.

One package left: 'A. Sharman'.

I hurry back along the pigeonholes, scanning the names: K. R. Shapiro . . . C. Siren (. . . imagine: Sasha *Siren*. So much better than Sasha entirely-forgettable-*Harris*.)

There's no Sharman, A. or otherwise, and I'm starting to get sweaty and panicky, my breath coming in a little faster. Dad made a really big deal about how important speed is, and he's not someone who exaggerates.

'Er, excuse me?' I say, but Phil pretends not to hear me, so I storm back to the stupid desk and thump the parcel down on top of it, hoping that whatever A. Sharman ordered isn't fragile. 'Hey! Hi? Help! I can't find a hole for this.'

You can see a 'witty' retort cross his mind the way a cloud scuds across the moon, but then he thinks better of baiting someone who looks like they might cry.

I have a bit of a thing about letting people down – especially my dad.

'Hang on.' He reads the name off the label and taps in '*Sharman*' one-fingered on to the system like he's still in Candy Crush mode, then. 'Doesn't have a pigeonhole because they don't work in this building.'

I take a moment to breathe. I'm not going to cry; that would be ridiculous. I'll just sweat lots instead. Much better.

'Could you take . . . ?' I start, but Phil's already shaking his head – not unkindly.

'I'm sorry, love – I've got to stay here.'

He tells me to head back to the main entrance and they'll sort me out at reception. As I run back the way I came, I message Dad about the delay.

*Be quick!!!* comes his reply.

Those three exclamation marks are a bit worrying – Dad thinks anything more extravagant than a full stop is the work of the devil – so I put on a bit of a spurt across to the main reception. There’s a glut of people trying to get in, and I hurry on past, yelling, ‘Special delivery!’ like that’s actually a reason people use to jump a queue.

Turns out blind panic can override confidence issues. Who knew?

The girl on the desk doesn’t look so impressed, but when I say, ‘I need to get this to A. Sharman,’ her eyes widen and she does a little gasp.

‘Give it to the receptionist on the ninth floor!’ The words come out as a panicked squeak as I hurry on past. I’m thinking that whoever this A. Sharman is, I’m glad I don’t actually have to hand the package over to them personally. I look down at the label again as I slide carefully around the edge of the crowd of people waiting to get in the lift and I see the words: ‘*Signature required*’.

Caught in a moment of indecision, I turn back to look at the entrance, wondering whether I should run back and get the machine from Dad and risk taking even longer, or . . .

Or what?

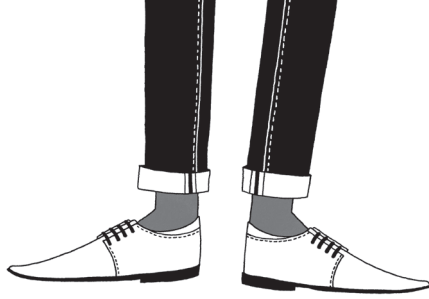
Maybe I could just video someone signing for the package and use that as evidence? Is that how this works? Why is this happening to me on my first day as assistant courier during my dad’s important new round delivering to someone whose name had the same effect on that receptionist as ‘Voldemort’ has on Ron Weasley?

Crap. The lift’s open and everyone’s piling in, and I’m getting jostled out of the way. As I try and squash in, I get a horrible flashback of that time I got stuck halfway down the wiggly slide

in the local soft-play centre and loads of smaller kids piled in after me and started crying.

‘You’re blocking the doors, love!’ someone yells, and I give up. Whoever this A. Sharman is, they’re not worth triggering my claustrophobia for.

I step away from the doors as another lift *dings* open and people surge around me. Clutching the parcel, I walk into it, quickly followed by a couple of others, and breathe.



## HUGO

God, the North is ghastly.

There should be some kind of *law* that prevents anyone from encountering it with a raging hangover. I look out the window of my first-class carriage and can't help but wrinkle my nose as we blast past a giant collection of industrial chimneys. I mean, *chimneys*? Do they still have COAL up here or something? I have no idea how my mother stands to be up here five days a week. Although if it came down to a choice between Manchester and having to share a bed with my father, I can see why she'd choose Manchester.

I rest my head against the cool glass and close my eyes for a second. I only got, like, a MINUTE'S SLEEP last night, and my body is caning me for it. But the moment I drift off, my phone goes.

Saskia: *I had a really good time last night x*

My nose wrinkles again, and I tap out a reply. I'd had higher hopes for this one.

*I had a good night too, but that's all it was. Because I don't date girls who have no self-respect.*

I smile and screenshot it to send to David. But I don't actually send it to Saskia; I'm not a MONSTER. I'll just not reply. She'll get the hint.

They always do.

David and I share sordid details as the train wobbles its way up towards the shit part of the country. He pulled Octavia last night, lucky bastard. Though according to him, she's got bad breath, so maybe I'm not so jealous after all. Anyway, Saskia was the big win. So of course I got her. God, I hope she's not all CLINGY next week at school. You would think pretty girls wouldn't be. And, at first, they pretend they're not. They know they're hot; they know you have to work for it. So you play the game, and you get there. But then – KABAM! – Psycho Central. Acting like the whole thing meant something.

We're just pulling out of some hellhole called 'Crewe' when my mother calls to check the train is on time.

'Yes, Mother, it's moving on the track and everything. That's what trains do.'

'You really can't be late; it will make me look bad.'

'Calm down, dear. I won't be late.'

'Good. The car will pick you up from the station.'

'See you then.'

She hangs up without saying goodbye, and I sigh and throw my head back. Why does she NEVER trust me to just function? I get that she's pissed off I didn't travel up last night and stay at her flat so we could bond or whatever, but there was no way I was missing David's party. Not when I'm doomed to a week of social oblivion, up here in the middle of nowhere. Oh well, think of the CV . . . think of the CV. Gotta tick the boxes and all that. Life is a game a game a game, and – man – am I good at playing it.

I make the car wait for me while I pick up some coconut water at the station. The driver looks pissed off, but I'm afraid he will have to deal. My head is thumping and, if I'm going to kick ass at the UKB, I need to be fully hydrated and at my charming best. He mumbles something under his breath as I



slide into the back of the black Merc.

‘What was that, mate?’

He mumbles again. Followed by, ‘Nothing.’

‘Yeah, it better be fucking nothing.’

Honestly – these people! We roar off through this dingy city, and I don’t feel guilty. Not for being late. Not for swearing at the guy. I don’t owe my dad a lot, but he did teach me one of the most important lessons in my life: *Some people are better than other people.*

That’s not me being a jerk, or him being a Nazi. Nope. Sorry. It’s just simple economics. *Law of the vital few.* Eighty per cent of any work done, any money made, anything decent contributed to this world, is done by twenty per cent of people. The rest are just coasters. I am in that twenty per cent, and I’m sick and tired of the other eighty chucking rocks at my family just because they’re jealous. Hell, I don’t have TIME to throw rocks. I’m too busy CONTRIBUTING.

We ride in awkward silence. Well, awkward on his end. I’m too busy using the mirrored window to sort out my suit. First impressions count, and all. I’m hungover as sin, but I can’t look it. I check the collar, and I’m glad I went through the arse of getting it made. I look at least nineteen, I reckon. And even with eye bags the size of a porn star’s penis, the fabric makes me look amazing.

We roll up to MediaCity, and I do tip the guy – so he can’t get all arsey now, can he? He pulls out my wheelee suitcase, I say thanks, slam the door shut, and make my way up to the main entrance. I notice a few heads turn as I walk up to reception. There are girls my age EVERYWHERE, and I try to return the smiles of the fit ones. I reach the front desk and lean over, waiting for the receptionist. Her attention is taken up by this sweaty wobbling mess of a girl getting in a fluster about some

stupid package. The receptionist catches my eye, and I grin conspiratorially. Then the girl waddles off, and I lean over.

‘Sorry about that,’ the receptionist says. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m Margot Delaney’s son,’ I tell her. Enjoying the moment her face changes. When the recognition kicks in. ‘I’m here to do work experience for a week.’

She sits up in her seat, flicks back her hair, suddenly acting totally competent. ‘Yes, of course! Wow, I didn’t know she had a son.’

‘She does, and it’s me.’

The girl laughs too hard, and I immediately don’t like her very much. She puts up a finger, asking me to wait, then punches some numbers into her phone. ‘Hi, is that Mrs Delaney’s office? I’ve got her son down here . . .’ She looks up at me, realizing her mistake.

‘Hugo,’ I provide.

‘Hugo. Yes. Brilliant. OK. Thank you. I’ll send him up . . . Right, Hugo. Let’s get you signed in, then you can go on up. She’s on the top floor. Though of course you know that already.’ She laughs like a horse. ‘Um, well, anyway. You won’t be up there for long. Your mum’s assistant said you’ll have to do some compulsory health and safety training.’

I raise my eyebrows in disgust.

‘Totally non-optional, I’m afraid.’ She smiles sympathetically. ‘As you can see, it’s a busy week for us. Work-experience week. We have students from all around the country. They need to know what to do in a fire.’

There’s no way I’m going to health and safety training. I have better things to do with my time than listening to some self-important milk monitor point out bleeding obvious things like, ‘*When there’s a fire, leave the building.*’ But I take my lanyard from her and pull it over my neck. The colour matches my suit perfectly.

‘Where do I go?’

‘Oh, the lifts are right over there. Through the lobby.’ She points with her biro.

I thank her and can feel her excitement buzzing behind me as I walk away, smirking. I bet that will be her gossip for the day. ‘*Did you know her SON is here this week? Yes, yes. Hang on, isn’t she married to . . . ?*’

There’s a cluster of people clogging up the entrance to the lifts, including the sweaty girl with the package, and I try my best to push past them. Ugh, everyone here is just so *predictable!* It’s like playing Diversity Bingo, and it’s a struggle not to roll my eyes. I’m so sick of everyone telling me how freakin’ privileged I am all the time when it’s quite obviously the opposite these days. Dad always used to wind Mum up by saying you’d have to be a black one-armed lesbian to get a job in television – and now it’s probably even harder than that. Even though I’ve been editor of my school paper for two years now, even though I’m top in all my classes, even though I’ve flogged myself half to death, everyone will look at me and go, ‘*Oh well, he’s her son, OF COURSE he got a work placement at the UKB.*’ But when the chips are down, when it comes to actually applying for jobs, I bet you I lose out now to some box-ticking gender-fluid Scientologist who has to crawl everywhere on their hands and knees – even if I have better experience. But, nooooooo, *I’m* the privileged one.

*Dooph.* I smash into some girl who isn’t looking where she’s going. Oh God, what if she’s blind? That would just be the icing on the fucking cake, wouldn’t it? But something jogs me out of my bad mood. A flurry of phones being raised above people’s heads, the clicking noise of about a dozen cameras going off. I look over the sea of heads to work out what’s causing the fuss.

No. Freakin’. Way.

This is amazing. This is too good. I whip out my phone and use my height to get a good shot. Then I'm sending it to everyone on my contacts book.

*GUESS WHO'S DOING WORK EXPERIENCE WITH HELLFACE???*

My phone buzzes instantly.

*No way!*

*Aww bless him. He looks even worse now than he did in that feature last year.*

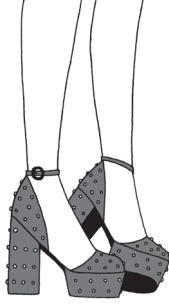
*Ask for his autograph!*

I laugh and tuck my phone back into my pocket. He looks pissed off by the attention. But I'm sorry, mate, that's just what happens when you go on television. It's not my fault your face did that to you.

It's getting way too busy by the lifts now. What's taking them so long? Some girl is pushed right into me, and it gives me a stirring. Especially as she's forced to stand so close. I give her the once-over. She's a bit sweaty and stressed-looking, but she's a solid eight, even in her obviously cheap-as-shit outfit. She thinks she's a five. A brilliant combination. Much better than girls who think they're an eight but are only a four.

I forgot how horny I get when I'm hungover. Maybe I can work out where this girl goes to lunch? Make some moves? A week would be long enough to lay the appropriate groundwork, I reckon. Maybe health and safety isn't such a bad idea after all. We may have to do partner work . . . role play. And I could pretend to rescue her from a burning photocopier or something . . .

I tell my trousers to calm the hell down, at least until I've figured this girl out. Dawson Sharman pushes past us to jab at the lift button, and as the doors open I follow her in, turning to smile at her as they close.



## VELVET

‘Velvet?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s an . . . interesting name.’

I know exactly what that pause means. I’ve been on the receiving end of them all morning. All my life, if we’re being really accurate.

It means that if I was a posh girl with shiny hair and a double-barrelled surname to go with it, Velvet would be a charming and unusual first name. But I’m not, so I get *The Look*: almost a sneer, but not quite, because *that* would be rude.

I was named after a girl from this old film, *National Velvet*. In short, it’s about a girl called Velvet who wins a horse in a raffle and enters the Grand National – it’s terrible. Growing up in the mouldy basement of a condemned old hotel in Bridlington, my mum spent her sad childhood wishing she had a horse. So, she saddled me – so to speak, ha ha – with a stupid name that gets you semi-sneered at when you turn up for work experience and have to get your passport photocopied by some bitch wearing basic black trousers that probably cost more than your entire flat and everything in it. Spoiler alert: my mum never won a horse, or anything else, in a raffle.

I hand my passport over to the receptionist to take a copy, which is the law, apparently. I really, really hope they don’t do

any further checks and find out about that caution I got last summer. It wasn't my fault; it was my cousin Chelsea who bought the vodka and made me carry it in my bag. It wasn't even that much fun; Chelsea got drunk and puked on my sandals, so I had to wash my feet in the sea. She snogged Jamie King (*after* she'd been sick – it was vile) and she'd gone off with him down behind the arcade when the police turned up, so I was the only one who got in trouble and had to ring my mum to say I had been taken down to the station.

It's funny – when I think of home, I know it doesn't really *sound* that great. If I close my eyes, I can imagine I'm eating chips on the seafront with Chelsea, boys shouting stuff at us, the sound of fruit machines, and that rank smell of rotten seaweed you never quite get used to. Yeah, I know it doesn't really sound that great at all.

But I want to go home. I don't fit in here. This isn't just a 'face your fears and do it anyway', 'challenge yourself and your dreams will eventually come true' stupid, shitty *X Factor* sort of a thing. This is an 'I know I don't belong here and I never, ever will – and I'm not even sure I want to' sort of a thing. This is a total identity crisis.

I look all wrong, for a start. I bought a smart blazer and shiny nude high heels from Primark especially to wear today. Because that's the sort of thing people wear to work, right? I was feeling pretty fierce about my executive costume realness.

Until I got here. All the other girls I've seen so far are wearing normal stuff. A lot of brogues and cute outfits, satchels swinging, eyeliner perfect. They haven't come in fancy dress as a middle-aged receptionist from a Travelodge or something. I look like a total idiot. The irony is, if I'd have come in my normal clothes, that might at least have won me a bit of respect. It would be a bit like the judges calling my play 'gritty' and 'edgy' and being all

pleased with themselves for giving me the award, even though it was just about me and my friends doing normal stuff.

The jacket's really sweaty, and the shoes are rubbing my feet. I can't even take the jacket off because all I've got on underneath is a tatty old vest that has a stain under the right boob and shows my bra. I did not think this through. I think I may have only put deodorant on one armpit when I was half asleep this morning, but I can't be totally sure. These people might be looking at me like I'm scum, but I'm not exactly going to start sniffing my own armpit in public.

I can't help thinking: my mum's bloody useless. All these other girls probably have mums who can tell them this sort of stuff, so they know what to do and what they're supposed to wear. I know it's not Mum's fault; she's even more clueless than I am, so I shouldn't blame her.

In fact, I kind of wish she was here right now. She'd make me a cup of tea with three sugars, and tell me to hold my head up and remember I'm from a long line of staunch women. My mum, it is fair to say, has had tougher things to deal with than an office full of swishy-haired private school girls called Sophie and Francesca looking at her a bit funny.

Still, my mum never put herself out there to have to deal with this sort of thing. Easy for her to talk big from the sofa. It's like complaining, 'But I was going to *say* that!' when someone's already told you the right answer – everyone knows it doesn't count.

The thing is, it's struck me today – if I'm going to be somewhere like *this*, it would be easier if I was completely different from my family. If I was the intellectual type who was desperate to get away from my ordinary life in a flat by the seaside. But I'm not. I'm just like them, and mostly I'm glad I am.

I like hanging out with Chelsea and spending hours doing nothing more taxing than painting our nails and bitching about our friends. I like giggling over the *Daily Mail* sidebar of shame with my mum and watching *Love Island*. I genuinely care about the love lives of Z-list celebrities.

I just happen to be really good at writing. I wrote a play that won this award last year. I didn't even want to enter, but my English teacher Ms Parsons took it and ran with it. I think she was trying to *inspire* me or something, which is so deluded it's actually kind of cute. I should probably paint her as some amazing saintly character who came along to my shit school and changed my life, and I suppose she kind of is, but she's also pretty annoying.

Anyway, it was her that got me to apply to do this work-experience thing, and I didn't think I'd even get in, but now it all seems to have spiralled out of control. I mean, I'm *at the UKB*. British broadcasting giant, household name, et cetera. Not only that, but I'm in Manchester by myself. It felt so strange staying in the Premier Inn last night, which Ms Parsons had organized for me through some funding programme thing, and getting the bus in rush hour with the other commuters this morning like a real adult human. It just made me feel like an imposter.

It's like, I know this is a good opportunity. I know I should be grateful. But I kind of hate that.

'Don't go getting all up yourself,' Chelsea's always saying, helpfully. I hate it that she thinks she needs to, that everyone might start thinking I'm different – sometimes I feel like I don't fit in *anywhere*.

I gave in to Ms Parsons' nagging, so I'm here. But there's a big part of me that wishes I was just the beach with my friends like everyone else, helping out in my nan's hotel, and hoping



that Griffin Collins might try and snog me again. Just normal stuff.

Instead I'm . . . here.

'Well, *Velvet*, here's your security pass and handbook. Now you need to go to the health and safety induction. Ninth floor.'

'OK. Thanks. Where are the . . . ?'

She's already walked off, so I guess I'll have to figure out where the stairs are for myself. My left shoe is totally crippling me, sweat and possibly blood squishing damply with every step. I should've broken them in at home first.

The reception area is getting busier. It was practically deserted when I got here stupidly early this morning because I was worried about messing up the bus times and being late. No wonder I feel so crap; I'm knackered already.

I catch sight of my own reflection in a glass door and instantly wish I hadn't. I look like I'm in bad fancy dress as a greasy-haired teenage version of Theresa May. Theresa Maybe-not.

Sod this. I can't be the only person here who doesn't have a clue. At least I can be safe in the knowledge that I could probably take any of them in a fight, if it came to it. Hopefully it won't, but it's always good to have a Plan B.

'Scuse me?'

I picked out a girl who looked about my age and equally lost, but I quickly realize this was a mistake.

'Yes?' She looks up twitchily, as though she genuinely believes I'm going to stab her or something.

'Are you going to this induction thing? Do you know which way it is?'

'Yes. I mean . . . Are you? No, I'm not sure . . . Sorry.'

Well, I'll just go die under a sheet of burning plastic then, shall I? I can't figure out if she's just shy or what, but the way she turns her back on me has got to be unnecessary.

Actually, it kind of strengthens my resolve. *I am from a line of staunch women.* I may look crap and feel totally out of place, but I'm here because I deserve to be, and these people are no better than me. For a second, I even kind of half believe it.

I don't bother asking anyone else for advice on where the hell I'm supposed to be going. I just walk like I know. This place is huge, but I'm sure I'll figure it out.

At the end of the corridor, I spot a group of people who look like they know what they're doing, so I kind of casually tag along at the back. I feel shifty, like I'm stalking them or something; they probably think I'm going to try and rob them for their phones.

I follow them to a bank of lifts, keeping my head down. I'm not really a fan of confined spaces – I prefer to be able to run away whenever I need to. Number one rule in life: always have an escape route planned. Still, I guess this is my best option right now.

I simultaneously try to disappear and hope that someone might talk to me, as we all awkwardly stand there. I half smile at the girl next to me, who's clutching a parcel and looking panicked, then remember that my bitchy resting face means my idea of a half-smile is most people's idea of a death stare. Too late.

I swear it's taking the piss, how long it takes the lift to turn up. I could have walked it by now, even in these evil shoes from hell. If I knew where the stairs were.

The longer I stand there, the weirder I start to feel. I'm not sure if it's the shoes, plus the no breakfast and being on the second day of my period (which is always a total horror show), but I start to feel a bit dizzy and sick. I can feel epic levels of sweat trickling down my back, even grossing *me* out – no wonder nobody else wants to talk to me. I wipe my forehead

with one hand, and don't even care as I transfer the resulting mess of sweat and foundation on to the side of my skirt.

I'm going to pass out . . .

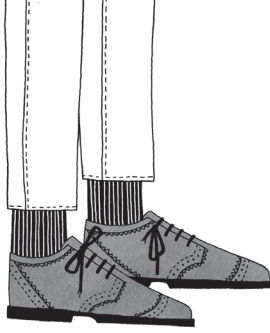
'Are you all right?'

It's a deep male voice – very posh and weirdly sexy. I try to pull myself together, but all I can see are the buttons of his shirt right up in my face. I think I manage to say I'm fine, just so he'll leave me alone and not look at me, but he's standing so close to me it's suffocating.

Luckily, I don't think he's paying much attention to me. The mass of faces around me are swimming; conversations are buzzing over my head. For a second, I swear I see a kid that looks like Dawson Sharman talking to some girl with a blue stripe in her hair, but I really must be hallucinating. I have got to get out of here.

I hear a *ding*, which brings me back to reality. Instead of running away, I go against every instinct and let the crowd hustle me along with them towards the lift.

Just because I'm getting in, doesn't mean I'm staying, I tell myself. I still feel like doing a runner. As the lift doors close, a weird thought comes into my head out of nowhere: stay or go . . . ? I ask the universe to give me a sign.



## JOE

‘You all right, Mum?’ I ask.

My mum, dressed in her morning uniform of dusky-pink quilted dressing gown and matching slippers, swivels her head in my direction.

‘Oh, Joe, I can’t get the thingamajig to work,’ she says, motioning at the microwave in front of her. She jabs at the buttons as if to demonstrate, her eyes watery with frustration.

‘You need to press “power” first, like I showed you the other day,’ I say gently. ‘Then you just set the time and press “start”.’

I show her. As the microwave whirrs into action, she gets me to repeat my instructions, scribbling them down on a Post-it note. She peels it from the block and sticks it to the microwave door.

There are Post-its all over our house, stuck to doors and window frames and electrical appliances, each of them filled with Mum’s old-fashioned loopy handwriting.

At fifty-nine, my mum and dad are older than everyone else’s parents at school by miles. My big brother, Craig, was twenty-one when I was born and already engaged to Faye. Mum and Dad tried to have another baby for years and had given up hope when they got pregnant with me at forty-three.

‘What are you doing up so early?’ Mum asks, peering through the glass at her revolving bowl of porridge.

‘School trip, remember?’ I say, sticking a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. ‘The coach leaves at eight.’

Mum looks blank.

‘To the UKB,’ I prompt.

Her face lights up at the sound of those magical letters.

UKB.

United Kingdom Broadcasting – one of the most respected television broadcasters in the entire world.

‘Of course,’ she says, consulting the calendar on the fridge. ‘How exciting!’

‘I know.’

‘Do you think you’ll see anyone famous?’

‘I’m not sure. Maybe.’

To be honest though, it’s not the prospect of gawping at celebrities that excites me. My plans are much grander than that.

From the back seat of the bus, Tyler Matheson and his mates are leading everyone in a chant of ‘Everywhere We Go!’ They’re on at least their fifteenth round, their curiously proud yells of coming from ‘mighty, mighty Skiddington’ showing little sign of dying out any time soon.

If I didn’t value my life so highly, I’d ask Tyler to specify exactly what makes Skiddington so ‘mighty’ in the first place? Skiddington’s single claim to fame is as home to Champion Biscuits (‘The Nation’s Favourite’), its mammoth concrete factory employing over a third of the town’s residents. Both my dad and Craig work there on the production line. Mum used to as well until she was made redundant last year. Apart from that though, my hometown is entirely unremarkable in every way.

The singing is getting louder. I’ve forgotten my headphones, so the best I can do is ball up some tissues and shove them in my

ears. I take out my phone and send a text to my best friend, Ivy.  
*Kill me now.*

When St Thomas Moore School went into special measures last year, Ivy's mum pulled her out and started home-schooling her. When I asked Mum if I could be home-schooled too, she looked at me like I'd just grown an extra head.

'Don't be daft,' she said. 'What on earth could I teach you? I didn't even pass my eleven-plus.'

I still see Ivy after school and at weekends, but it's not the same. Without her, the school days feel painfully long, the minutes and seconds stretching out like pizza dough.

Tyler and his idiot mates are still singing when we pull into the UKB car park an hour and a half later.

*Shut up and show some respect*, I want to hiss at them as I reluctantly remove the tissue paper from my ears. *You're at the UKB, for goodness sake – a national institution, not a football match.* I'd be wasting my breath though. People like Tyler don't listen to people like me, i.e. 'swots'. In Tyler's world 'ambition' is a dirty word.

We pile out of the coach and follow Miss Harley towards the entrance in a messy line. I wish we had a smarter school uniform: a blazer perhaps; a tie at the very least. As it is, in our cheap polyester trousers and navy sweatshirts, the school's emblem emblazoned across our chests like a warning, we're the very opposite of smart. I try to make up for it by wearing nice shoes and carrying my things in a polished vintage leather satchel I got on eBay, but the overall effect is still far from ideal.

In front of me, Tallulah Roberts and Marzina Khan are going on about how excited they are to see the *Strictly Come Dancing* ballroom.

'Wrong television broadcaster,' I say.

They turn around, identical frowns on their faces.

‘What did you say?’ Tallulah growls.

I clear my throat. ‘Wrong broadcaster,’ I repeat. ‘And anyway, *Strictly* is recorded in London . . .’

‘You’re joking?’ Marzina says.

She looks like she might cry.

‘No. Sorry.’

‘Then why exactly are we even here?’ Tallulah demands. ‘I only signed up for this cos I thought I was going to meet Pasha.’

I wince as they spread the word down the line.

When we finally get inside, the foyer is buzzing with people our age. We’re the only ones in uniform though. *And* the only ones behaving like a herd of escaped zoo animals. Miss Harley shoos us into a corner and ambitiously tells us to ‘wait sensibly’.

‘Miss Harley from St Thomas Moore School,’ she announces apologetically to the sleek-looking receptionist. ‘We’re here for a studio tour.’

The receptionist glances over at us with unimpressed eyes and picks up her phone.

I take a large sidestep away from my classmates and allow myself to take in the surroundings. The foyer is bright and airy, full of hope and possibility, sunlight pouring in through the glass. Just the sight of the massive UKB logo above the reception desk sends a shiver of excitement up my spine.

When I was little, I never wanted to be a footballer or astronaut or vet, or any of the other things kids usually come up with when asked what they want to be when they grow up. No, since I was about six years old, I’ve wanted to work in television. Not as an actor, or a presenter, or anything like that – but behind the scenes, as a producer . . . the one at the very top making everything happen. It sounds a bit dramatic perhaps, but television is probably the only thing in my life (apart from Ivy) that keeps me sane. It’s also pretty much the only thing I

have in common with the rest of my family. We may have no idea how to talk about emotional stuff, but we can spend hours debating who made the best Doctor (Me: David Tennant; Dad: Jon Pertwee; Mum: Tom Baker), or quoting lines from *Alan Partridge* at each other, or reminiscing about the first series of *Sherlock*. Our family life revolves around the programmes circled with red biro in our weekly copy of the *Radio Times*; television the glue that keeps us together. Which is precisely why I want to be the one who makes it one day.

A man wearing a UKB lanyard and a wide grin strides across the foyer towards us. He introduces himself as Toby, our guide for the day, and distributes ID badges for us all to wear.

‘It’s not usually this busy,’ he explains to Miss Harley as I attach my badge to my trouser pocket. ‘But we’ve got our work-experience programme starting today.’

My head snaps up.

*Work experience?*

I throw my hand in the air.

‘What is it, Joseph?’ Miss Harley asks, sighing slightly.

‘Yeah, what is it, *Josephine?*’ Tyler mimics in a high voice. Cue sniggers from my imbecilic classmates.

‘Did you say work experience?’ I ask Toby, trying to ignore them.

‘That’s right,’ he says, motioning at the growing crowd behind us. ‘Today’s their induction. Don’t worry though. It won’t interfere with the tour; they’ll be tucked away on the ninth floor all morning.’

I feel like I’ve been punched in the stomach.

At the beginning of the year, I asked about the possibility of doing my work-experience week at the UKB, and Mrs Kirk, the careers adviser, pretty much laughed in my face.

‘Whatever next?’ she’d said, chortling away as she shuffled



bits of paper. ‘Work experience at Disneyland?’

I ended up spending my week wearing a hairnet at Champion Biscuits, alongside half my year group.

I should have known not to trust Mrs Kirk. She’s the one who ignores me every time I say I want to work in television, banging on about the management training scheme at Champion instead (‘Bright boy like you – you could make it all the way to supervisor!’).

I look over my shoulder at the work-experience kids. They’re all talking and laughing and wearing nice normal clothes – the sort of clothes I wear when I’m not sporting flammable trousers and the sweatshirt of shame. I want to be one of them so badly, my entire body aches.

Tallulah has her hand up.

‘Yes?’ Toby says.

‘Is it true the *Strictly* ballroom is in London?’ Tallulah asks, throwing me an accusing look.

‘I’m afraid so,’ Toby replies, the pained smile on his face suggesting this isn’t the first time he’s been asked the question. ‘We make lots of exciting television programmes here though . . .’

He goes on to name half a dozen amazing shows. Not that this impresses Tallulah.

She doesn’t even bother to hide her disgust, folding her arms and screwing up her face like she’s just smelt something rotten.

Which is great. Because now Toby will assume we’re all complete idiots who know nothing about television and tailor the tour accordingly.

‘Any more questions before we kick off?’ he asks with over-the-top brightness.

There aren’t.

‘In that case, if you’d all like to come with me. There’s rather

a lot of you, so we're going to take the stairs . . .'

He sets off.

I take another glance behind me at the work-experience lot. As far as I can tell, there's no distinction between the ID badges they're wearing and the one I've been given.

*Interesting.*

My classmates troop off after Toby, hollering and squealing and shoving.

I don't follow them.

The second everyone has disappeared through a set of double doors, I turn in the opposite direction and walk briskly towards the sign marked 'Toilets'.

I duck into the men's and remove my sweatshirt, balling it up and shoving it in my satchel. My white shirt and black trousers look a bit 'waiter', but there's nothing much I can do about that. I fold up the sleeves of my shirt in the effort to look a bit more casual and grip on to the edge of the sink.

'What are you doing, Joe?' I ask my reflection.

I don't have a decent reply. All I know is that I've got to at least try to get myself on this work-experience programme. Even if it means gatecrashing. Even if it means totally embarrassing myself. Even if they suss me out straight away and chuck me out on my ear and Miss Harley goes mad. Even if I have no game plan beyond getting myself to the ninth floor. It's not like I've got anything to lose – quite the opposite, in fact.

Still, my body is trembling all over, and my forehead is shimmering with sweat. I soak up the moisture with a scratchy green paper towel and take a deep breath.

*If you're going to be a hotshot producer some day, you're going to need to have proper balls. Might as well grow a pair now.*

I exhale, give my reflection a determined nod, and leave the

toilets. Without breaking rhythm, I stride towards the lift, where the doors are starting to close. Before I can change my mind, I squeeze through the narrowing gap just in time, smiling what I hope resembles an enigmatic smile at the five other people who are already inside.

*You got this, Joe. You got this.*



So here we have them: the swot, the fraud, the dutiful daughter, the child star, the fangirl and the asshole. The six of them assembled in an awkward circle, trying not to stand too close to one another in the small lift, and failing. Dawson, in particular, is trying not to stand too close to Kaitlyn in case she takes it as an invitation to ask him what he's been doing since *Dedman High* – but she's still pissed off that he lied to her, so won't even look at him.

Opposite them is Velvet, who is trying to rub away the creamy smudge of foundation from her skirt so she looks less of a disaster, while Joe undoes the top button of his shirt so he looks less like a waiter. Sasha doesn't care what she looks like, but she does care about letting her father down, and she clutches the package so carefully, she may as well be holding a newborn baby. Finally, there's Hugo, back straight, shoulders back, a smug smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth as he sizes up the three girls: the other two aren't bad – solid sevens, even the fat one – but his initial instinct was right. He takes a step closer to Velvet.

They aren't alone for long. The lift stops on the first floor, and a woman with hair the colour of Irn-Bru gets in. She's holding a purple coffee cup, and Velvet can't help but gaze longingly at it. It's been hours since she had breakfast, and it's all she can do not to lean down and lick away the puff of froth that has escaped through the hole in the plastic lid. The woman looks straight at her, as if she knows, and Velvet stiffens.

'Don't judge.' The woman presses the button for the second floor. 'I know it's only one floor, but I can't face the stairs,' she adds with a smile, nodding at Velvet's feet. 'You get it, right? You're

in heels as well.’ She stops to take a sip of coffee, then licks her lips. ‘Are yours new too?’

Velvet nods and the woman chuckles gently.

‘Why do we do it to ourselves, eh?’

Dawson hears her laugh and his chest tightens. What did she say? He didn’t hear – too concerned with keeping a safe distance from Hugo, who’s just taken his phone out of his coat pocket. Dawson’s been like that since he got in the lift, his gaze darting furiously from face to face, sure that each of them is staring at him. Was she laughing at him? The woman with the orange hair. Was she laughing at him?

*You know who that is, right?*

Cue: gushing laughter.

When the lift doors open on the second floor, Dawson can’t look at her, terrified that she’ll turn back and wink at him. He listens to her heels clack as she strides out into the brightly lit corridor. Glad she’s gone.

One less person to worry about.

There’s a moment of movement as they shuffle away from each other and back into an awkward circle. It’s funny how these things work out, isn’t it? There they all were, distracted by their own petty problems, blissfully unaware of what was about to happen. A minute or two either way, and their paths would never have crossed. Later, Joe will ask himself why he did it, why he did something so unlike him, so reckless. If Toby hadn’t mentioned the work-experience programme, Joe would have gone on the studio tour and been nowhere near that lift. And if Hugo had not made the cab driver wait outside Salford train station while he got that bottle of coconut water, he would have been on time and in his mother’s office by then.

Speaking of coconut water, if Dawson hadn’t been caught peeping, he probably would have still been in the queue at the

canteen, not in the lift. That's something Velvet will wonder about as well – what would have happened if she'd told Ms Parsons to shove it and stayed in Bridlington with Chelsea. Or if Kaitlyn had done her work experience in her Aunt Nina's salon, like she'd wanted to. And what if Sasha's father had delivered that package instead of her? Would he have known what to do?

Probably.

We'll never know, will we? But what we *do* know is this: for whatever reason, the six of them ended up in the same lift at the same time. Call it destiny or fate or good old dumb luck, but there they are.

Just as the doors are about to close on the second floor, a man in a navy blue tracksuit appears, pushing a trolley with a pile of cardboard boxes on it. He must have run for the lift, Dawson thinks, noting his flushed cheeks and the pearls of sweat that have suddenly bubbled up across his forehead. 'Thanks,' he mutters, and sucks in a shallow breath that doesn't seem to help at all as the six of them shuffle apart again to let him in, Velvet and Hugo on one side, and Joe, Dawson, Kaitlyn and Sasha on the other.

Dawson must be staring, because the man turns to look at him, the pale skin between his heavy eyebrows creasing so deeply it sends a bead of sweat rolling between them and down his nose. Dawson is definitely staring now, holding his breath as he watches the glassy drop reach the tip of his nose. It's about to fall when the man catches it, wiping it, and then the rest of his forehead, with his sleeve. He's still panting short, shallow breaths that make his Adam's apple bounce up and down in his throat. He hasn't pressed a floor, Dawson realizes, his own brow pinching. They can't *all* be going to the ninth, surely? His gaze wanders away from the lift buttons and back to the man to find that he's staring at him – staring right at him – and Dawson holds his breath again as he waits for it, for the flicker of recognition.

There it is.

When Dawson summons the courage to look him in the eye, the man looks away, his cheeks even redder. They always do, always try not to stare. Either that or they laugh and whip out their phone to take a photo, like he's a funny piece of graffiti smeared on the side of a bus shelter. He probably thinks he's being polite, but Dawson sees his face soften before he looks away, and that hurts more than the laughter.

The pity.

Kaitlyn pities him. Especially because he lied to her. She's thinking how pathetic it is that he'd rather she thought he was a random runner than who he actually is. But she's not looking at him, rather straight ahead, staring at the charity fundraising poster Velvet and Hugo are standing in front of, hoping that the text will come back into focus. Hugo doesn't give enough of a shit to pity Dawson. He's scrolling through his camera roll from the night before, the corners of his mouth lifting for a moment as he looks at one of Saskia, then deletes it.

When Sasha checks her phone, Dawson thinks that's about him as well, but she's just wondering how Hugo has reception in the lift when she doesn't. Dawson doesn't know that though, or that the only reason Sasha keeps checking her phone is because she's waiting for a *Where are you?!!!!* text from her father, with four exclamation points this time.

Five more floors, thinks Sasha, as she watches the digital panel above the doors change from three to four. If the lift doesn't stop again, she'll be there in less than a minute, maybe back at her father's car in five . . . if A. Sharman doesn't muck her around, that is. Joe, on the other hand, doesn't want the lift to stop. Tyler Matheson and his mates will have done a good job of distracting Miss Harley, but she must have noticed that he's gone by now. She probably did a head count before they went in the studio and has

told Toby to sound the alarm. So he wills the lift to slow its ascent, sure that when the doors open on the ninth floor, a red light will be flashing and someone will be calling his name on a tannoy, like he's a lost child in a shopping centre.

Like Sasha, Hugo is desperate to get out of the lift. Actually, he's desperate for the panting, sweaty man with the trolley to get out of the lift. He looks like he's about to chunder, and Hugo is wearing his suede Tom Fords. Sasha isn't concerned about her shoes, but she is concerned that the man with the trolley is ready to keel over.

'You OK?' she asks softly, her gaze falling to his hands.

His knuckles are milk white from holding on so tightly to the trolley that she has to resist the urge to clench her own fists. He tries to smile and fails, but at least manages a nod, clearly incapable of much more. But before Sasha can ask if he's sure, his eyelids stutter shut, and that's it. The trolley slips from his grip and he slumps forward, striking them like a bowling ball that scatters the six of them like pins. There's a series of gasps as cardboard boxes tumble off one by one, landing on the floor in a succession of dull thuds as they each jump back to avoid them.

In the confusion, Hugo drops his phone and Sasha drops the package for A. Sharman, watching in horror as it ends up under the grubby rubber wheels of the trolley. She goes to reach for it, but Joe is in the way as he lunges forward to grab the man's arm. He's too heavy though, bringing Joe down with him as he folds to the floor with a final, desperate gasp.

Then everything is quiet as they each look down at the man, Joe tangled up on top of him, his legs splayed and his arse in the air. Velvet can see the label on the sole of Joe's shoes, can see how he tried to peel it off and couldn't, leaving a scrap of white on the black rubber. Later, she'll wonder why she noticed that and not the man passed out on the floor of the lift . . . but right now, all



she can see is that sticker and the outline of Joe's phone in the back pocket of his trousers. The others see the man. He's on his side, his limbs jutting out at odd angles like a marionette that's had its strings cut. That's exactly what it was like, Dawson thinks: one moment the man was standing in the middle of them, holding the trolley; then he was crumpling to the floor, like someone had cut his strings. It's not like it is on television, he thinks: there was no cry; no melodramatic swooning; no out-of-shot mattress to land on. He just fell.

Hugo shouldn't be this rattled, he knows. After all, he sees girls faint all the time (eating disorders and too much champagne aren't the best bedfellows, are they?), but he's never seen a man faint before. Pass out, yes. Plenty of times, in fact – usually in the back of a cab or on one of the sofas at Juju. But it's usually funny – an excuse to take photos or draw a dick on their cheek.

This isn't funny.

There's a flurry of gasped '*Is he OK?*'s as they each step forward. Except Hugo, who stays where he is, watching as Dawson helps Joe up and picks up the cardboard boxes and puts them back on the trolley to make room. Sasha's first instinct is to dial 999, but when she checks her phone and remembers that she has no signal, her heart begins beating so hard she has to press her lips together, sure that it's about to come up through her throat.

Kaitlyn is the first to speak. 'Everyone get out of the way.' Her voice sounds far steadier than she feels. 'Give him some room.' No one moves though, so she's forced to push Dawson out of the way. 'Press the alarm.' She gestures at Velvet, who just blinks at her.

Sasha reaches forward and presses the button, and as soon as she does, there's a violent screech and she has to reach for the handrail as the lights stutter on and off and the lift shudders to a halt.

‘What the fuck?’ Hugo grunts, echoing what the rest of them are thinking. ‘Why has it stopped?’

‘Are we on the ninth floor?’ Dawson looks at the doors, waiting for them to open.

When they don’t, Hugo straightens and turns to Sasha. ‘What did you press?’

Sasha looks at the console, then at Hugo, her heart in her throat. ‘The alarm!’

‘Why isn’t it ringing then?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Let me see,’ Hugo says, striding over to where she’s standing and shouldering her out of the way. He presses the alarm and, sure enough, they hear it ringing out in the lift shaft.

He presses it again to prove a point.

‘I pressed the alarm,’ Sasha insists, looking between Hugo and the other five faces suddenly staring at her. ‘I did. I pressed the alarm.’

Dawson licks his lips then points at the control panel. ‘You pressed the STOP button.’

‘No.’ Sasha turns to look at it and, yep, there it is: the STOP button right above the alarm.

‘You pressed the fucking STOP button!’ Hugo roars, taking a step towards her.

Sasha takes one back. ‘No.’

‘You fucking idiot!’

‘I didn’t. I pressed the alarm!’ Sasha roars back, the back of her neck burning.

‘Stop it!’ Joe says. ‘Just press it again, and let’s get going.’

Sasha looks confused. ‘The alarm?’

‘No!’ Hugo spits. ‘The STOP button, you idiot!’

‘Stop calling me an idiot!’

‘Well, you are an idiot!’

‘For fuck’s sake, you two!’ Velvet stands up, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. ‘This bloke needs help, and you’re bickering over who pressed what. Just press the STOP button again so we can get moving!’

Sasha obliges, but nothing happens.

‘Do it again,’ Hugo tells her.

She does, but the same thing happens.

Nothing.

‘It’s not moving,’ Joe says, looking between them. ‘Why isn’t it moving?’ Then he looks down at the man in the heap on the floor and all the colour flees from his face. ‘Does anyone know first aid?’ he asks quietly, but Kaitlyn is already on her knees beside him, carefully rolling the man over so that he’s on his back.

‘I did a course at the summer camp I was at last year,’ she explains, gesturing at Dawson to help her with his legs. He does, straightening them out so the man is laid out in the middle of the lift, his feet pointing towards the doors.

Sasha frowns, her fingers curling tightly around her phone. ‘Is he OK?’

‘Obviously not.’ Hugo sighs wearily, reaching down for his and assessing it for damage.

Sasha crosses her arms and tilts her head at him. ‘How is that helping?’

‘How is asking inane questions helping?’

‘At least I’m trying. What are you doing?’

Hugo holds up his phone. ‘I’m calling for help.’

‘What? On your magic phone that has reception in this lift when no one else’s does?’

Hugo’s smirk slips as he realizes she’s right, but before he can counter, Velvet stands between them.

‘Just shut up, will you?’

Yes, *shut up*, Kaitlyn almost says. She can't think with them talking, her thoughts jumping back and forth, like a bird hopping between the branches of a tree. The truth is, she didn't do a first-aid course at summer camp last year; she wrote a fic about Jem and Ace from *Dedman High* doing a first-aid course at summer camp last year, but in her panic, she can't remember a flaming thing.

*Think, Kaitlyn.*

'Dr ABC,' Velvet says, pointing at her. 'We had some bloke from the St John's Ambulance come into school a few years back. Dr ABC. I remember it because Mark Barton kept calling me Dr ASS.'

Hugo sniggers, but they ignore him.

Something in Kaitlyn's brain becomes unstuck. 'Danger. Response. Airway. Breathing. Circulation,' she recites, suddenly a little calmer.

Velvet nods, kneeling down opposite her, the man on his back between them. 'There's no danger. It's not like we're on a main road or something and about to be hit by a bus.'

Kaitlyn nods this time. 'Response.' She takes a deep breath and looks down at the man. 'Hello. My name is Kaitlyn,' she says as loudly and as clearly as her nerves allow. 'Are you OK? Can you hear me?'

Nothing.

'If you can hear me, open your eyes.'

Still nothing.

So she reaches for his hand. It's as clammy as soap. 'If you can hear me, squeeze my hand.'

Nothing.

She looks up at Velvet. 'What's his name?'

There's an ID card hanging from a yellow lanyard around his neck. She turns it over. 'Steven.'

‘Steven.’ Kaitlyn tries again, shaking his shoulders this time. ‘Steven, can you hear me?’

Nothing.

She shakes him a little harder this time. ‘Steven, can you hear me?’

Nothing.

Kaitlyn can feel the panic bubbling up inside her and tries to swallow it back. It feels like that time Danny Taylor shook up a can of Coke in the playground and opened it. She was nowhere near him, but she still jumped back as the plume of foam arced out of the red can, much to Danny’s delight. That’s what the panic feels like right now, like if she opened her mouth it would all rush out of her.

So she closes her eyes and takes another deep breath.

When she opens them again, Velvet is pinching the man’s earlobes.

‘Why are you rubbing his ears?’ Hugo asks before Kaitlyn can.

‘I’m checking if he’s responsive to pain,’ Velvet hisses.

‘Is he?’

Velvet looks up at him, her gaze narrowing. ‘Does it look like it?’

*Now who’s asking inane questions?* Sasha thinks, arching an eyebrow.

‘Airway . . .’ Velvet prompts.

Kaitlyn nods and reaches over, pressing her palm to the man’s forehead. It’s as clammy as his hand. That can’t be good, she thinks, putting two fingers under his chin and tilting his head back the way the woman did on that YouTube video she watched when she was researching her summer camp fic. She leans down and waits, trying to hear if he’s breathing, but she can’t hear a thing.

‘Everyone be quiet,’ Velvet snaps when she sees that Kaitlyn is struggling.

But no one is making a sound, the four of them huddled around her and Kaitlyn in stunned silence, the man in the middle of them.

‘Anything?’ Velvet asks.

Kaitlyn shakes her head.

This prompts a flurry of mutters and gasps that make Kaitlyn feel light-headed.

‘It’s too late,’ she says, taking her fingers away from the man’s throat.

Velvet stares at her. ‘What?’

‘He doesn’t have a pulse. He’s dead.’

‘He can’t be.’ Velvet kneels down next to him again. ‘Let me try.’

She presses two fingers to his throat and waits, but there’s nothing.

‘Try his wrist,’ Joe says, then resumes chewing his bottom lip.

She does, but she can’t feel anything.

‘Maybe we need to do mouth-to-mouth?’ Dawson suggests, but Velvet hushes him, her palm splayed on the man’s chest and her ear near to his mouth as she checks again to see if she can hear anything.

She obviously can’t, and Dawson fidgets with panic. It reminds him of a scene he did for *Dedman High* when the girl he was in love with was in a car crash and he had to bite her, thus saving her life and ending it all at once. At least that’s how he saw it, committing her to an eternity of drinking blood and avoiding sunlight. But the viewers loved it, and the scene won him a Teen Choice Award.

‘Do you know how to do mouth-to-mouth?’ he asks Velvet when she sits up again. She shakes her head, and he turns to Kaitlyn. ‘Do you?’

Kaitlyn shakes her head as well. ‘He’s gone.’

‘We have to try.’ He looks around the lift. ‘Does anyone know how to do mouth-to-mouth?’

'He's gone.' Kaitlyn says it more firmly this time.

'Gone where?'

'To Magaluf,' Hugo spits. 'Where the fuck do you think he's gone? He's dead!'

'But he was just here.' Dawson looks down at the man's body. 'He was *just* here.'

They look at one another, all except Hugo, who is staring at Velvet's hand on the man's chest, waiting for it to move. But it doesn't.

And then there were six.