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GLITTER BOY

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To my beautiful son,
with love, faith and hope.

CHAPTER 1

It's Monday and the first day of term when it happens.

The rumours and whispers about Mr Hamilton have been swirling around ever since we found out he was going to be our new teacher.

And of course, it has to be Paul who asks the question.

I don't like Paul. At all. He races and shoves and barrels around the playground, and he always seems to have a little gaggle of kids and a trusty sidekick following him around. Apart from being good at football, I can't think why anyone would like him. Maybe just being good at football is enough to get by? It might be because he's bigger, taller and broader than all the other boys. We learnt about the Stone Age in Year 3 with Miss Davies, and I have a theory that

Paul is still in the "caveman" phase of his evolution: someone who beats his chest, drags his knuckles and grunts a lot… Apparently he wears deodorant already (Lynx Africa, I heard). His skin is fair and his hair is always slick and gelled. Plus, he's always got the latest, trendiest shoes and clothes, and goes on constantly about how rich his mum and dad are.

It's foul.

He's foul.

Slick and gelled is the complete opposite of my hair, by the way, but I don't mind that *at all*. As if I'd restrain my lovely, wild hair!

Certainly not today! Today my hair is looking *extra* fabulous, and I am raring to go. It's been brilliant – absolutely wonderful – to not have seen Paul *once* over the summer holidays. And as annoying as it is to see him again, I'm super excited about having Mr Hamilton as our teacher.

Last year we had Miss Wilson, who seemed to spend a lot of her time barking and yelling at us all. Especially me.

Speak up, James!

Will you sit up, young man!

Stop daydreaming!

Miss Wilson was vicious! Her hair was always

tied back so tightly from her pale face that I often wondered if *this* was why she never smiled: she literally couldn't!

She used to ask me maths questions like she was firing a machine gun at me. My mind would go totally blank and I'd stutter back an answer – for some reason I always went with "seventy-three", in the unrealistic hope that it might be correct. (It actually was the right answer once, much to everyone's surprise.)

At the beginning of Year 5, there was this problem-solving task she made us do which made no sense *at all*. We had a series of addition calculations and every number linked to a letter of the alphabet. It was basically like cracking a code with maths, which sounds cool, but it was all to answer a question:

How did the candle feel when it was blown out?

And once you did all the calculations and worked them out, the answers spelled out the word "DELIGHTED".

Get it?

Well, I did not. At all. Why would a candle feel delighted if it had been blown out? Surely it would feel

sad or lonely or, maybe, *here's an idea, Miss Wilson*, maybe it didn't feel anything because it was BLOWN OUT!

I did in fact get the right calculations – no, seriously – but rubbed them all out because the answer made no sense! Miss Wilson made me spend all of break and half of lunch doing all the calculations again, but I still got the same answer, which I kept thinking must be wrong.

"I … I … don't understand…" I finally muttered.

Obviously, now I'm in Year 6, I get the joke. Hilarious.

But I spent the rest of the year with Miss Wilson speaking to me very, very slowly, through gritted teeth. At parents' evening Dad asked Miss Wilson why I was struggling with maths and she explained what had happened very, very slowly to him too.

"Seems to me that James didn't understand a joke, Miss Wilson," said Dad with a raised eyebrow. "I'd be very happy to work with him on, say, riddles or wordplay, his witty repartee, but I hardly think his progression in mathematics should be impeded by one trivial misunderstanding."

It always makes me want to laugh so hard when Dad speaks like this, with all these fancy words,

because he doesn't LOOK like he would. He's a big white guy with short, cropped hair, and he's a manly man – GGRRRR! He's also got a tattoo of Mum's name on his arm, which is a bit embarrassing now because … well, they're not together any more. I once asked him if I could have a Mariah Carey tattoo and he said absolutely not, under no circumstances, EVEN when I'm eighteen.

We'll see about that!

So, excuse the tangent, there was Dad staring down Miss Wilson with his raised eyebrow, and me sat in the middle like I was at a tennis match, but instead of hitting balls, they were serving words.

Nan always says, "When you see your father raise that eyebrow, DO NOT APPROACH!"

But Miss Wilson wasn't in the slightest bit bothered by my dad's comment. She simply raised her eyebrow too (DO NOT APPROACH!) and, very quietly, very nonchalantly, whispered, "Thank you so much for your feedback, Mr Turner. As a trained and qualified teacher, I'm more than capable of assessing a child's understanding of any given topic. If you have any more" – she paused – "*opinions*, then do pass them on to Mrs Garcia."

And that was the end of that. I spent the rest of

the year dreading anything to do with maths. *It was bleak, dahhling*, as Mariah would say!

So it's nice to have a new teacher. Mr Hamilton is maybe forty years old or maybe even forty-five, but very trendy and cool. He even has a nose piercing! I feel like a nose piercing would really suit me, but I have a feeling Dad would say no to that too. And Mr Hamilton wears nail varnish sometimes, which is so glamorous! When I was really young, like six, I used to make false nails out of Blu Tack and dance around the house pointing at things. But Mum and Dad said little boys shouldn't do that to their nails, so I had to stop.

Today Mr Hamilton is wearing a deep blue shimmering shade of nail varnish and this seems to have *infuriated* Paul, by the look of disgust on his face. In fact, everything about Mr Hamilton seems to annoy Paul.

But I'm not going to let Paul bother me again this year because I already love Mr Hamilton and I *love* our new classroom. Mr Hamilton's room is quiet and calm. The display boards are all backed with hessian and everything's very simple inside, very pastel, *très chic*. It feels relaxing and grown up, like Mr Hamilton takes us seriously. (Chuck a few Mariah Carey posters up and it would be perfect!)

It hasn't all been great, though. When my dad first found out Mr Hamilton was going to be teaching me, he went into Mrs Garcia's office to "have a talk", while I waited outside. I couldn't really hear what they were saying – and believe you me, I tried – but Dad came out looking furious. He did a lot of what I call *adult tutting* that evening.

I never did find out what it was all about, but I think I now have an idea.

Because the question Paul asks Mr Hamilton is: "Mr Hamilton, do you have a wife?"

You know in old Western films when everything goes really silent and some tumbleweed rolls by? It's a bit like that.

Eventually, Mr Hamilton takes a deep breath and says, "No, I don't have a wife. I have a boyfriend – well, fiancé – called Sam. We're getting married in six weeks!"

I glance around the classroom, something strange fizzing in my stomach. Some kids look embarrassed, and some kids are whispering and giggling. Most kids don't seem to care, though, and a few are even smiling. That makes me feel … hopeful? Excited?

I'm not sure why.

But Paul's making "yuck" faces to anyone who will watch.

He's a complete cretin.

It's Harriet who breaks the silence, as usual. Her hand flies up. "How old is Sam?"

"He's forty-nine," Mr Hamilton replies, smiling a little.

"Oh, so quite old, then," says Ameera matter-of-factly.

"And what does he look like?" Harriet continues.

"Well, he has silvery-grey hair, and he's VERY tall … and…"

"And…?" Harriet says, looking at him expectantly, smiling.

"And … I think that's quite enough of that, thank you!" Mr Hamilton says, laughing. "We really need to get down to some learning!"

We all groan, which makes Mr Hamilton laugh more.

Mr Hamilton tells us that once a week we will be reading and writing poetry *for fun*. No tests, no assessments, and no marking! He says that poems are like songs that touch us deep inside and that he would like to learn more about us through our poetry: our lives, our passions, our fears and our dreams.

I scrunch up my toes in excitement and wriggle in my chair with happiness.

OK, I know that poetry isn't everyone's cup of tea, but poetry is *my thing*. Even Miss Wilson had to begrudgingly admit last year that my poems (when we did get a chance to write some) were actually quite good. I don't know what it is, but whenever I feel happy, or sad, or angry I find myself writing poems, even if it's just in my head.

Nan saves the ones I write down, saying I will be world-famous one day. In fact, it was Nan who suggested turning my poems into songs.

"You never know, James," she had said with a gleam in her eye, "maybe one day your Mariah Carey will be singing words you came up with!"

Now, if Nan were a true fan, or "Lamb", as Mariah's fans are called, she would know that Mariah is a very talented songwriter who writes her own songs. BUT Mariah might want to write a song *with* me! I could be her next songwriting partner, like Jermaine Dupri or Walter Afanasieff!

I mean: *can you even imagine?!* We belong together, Mimi!

To help us get a feeling of what Friday's poetry lessons will be like, we spend the whole of our English

lesson reading poems, and Mr Hamilton asks us to use one of them as a structure to introduce ourselves to him.

I write:

I Am

I am beans on toast
I am microwavable dinners and silence
I am takeaways and unspoken questions
I have a dad who tries his best

I am I don't really know you
I am why did you leave us?
I am where are you now, and do you still care?
I have a mum who left

I am laughter, singing and dancing
I am cuddling on the sofa
I am safe when I am with you
I have a nan who means everything to me

I am Forever and Honey and Underneath the Stars
I am singing my heart out
I am One Sweet Day and Hero
I have music that makes me feel seen

OK, so the Mariah Carey references might be a bit obscure, I think – especially for an eleven-year-old kid. But she *is* a global superstar, and I feel like it's my mission to make sure everyone loves her as much as I do. Mr Hamilton did ask to get to know us, didn't he?

My love of Mariah cannot and will not be denied!

So, I leave him these little clues, like a trail of breadcrumbs in a fairy tale. As a test, I suppose.

At break, Harriet, Ameera and I try to come up with a new dance routine. I don't mean to brag, but last year we made up the best dances *ever*.

Seriously, they were the stuff of legend.

You should have seen our dance to Mariah's "Fantasy"! It was a "Five, six, seven, eight, strut, strut, dip, dip, clap, clap, shake, shake, woogah way, HEY" type of moment. We even did shows for the little kids and midday assistants, and I loved the cheering and laughter and fun. One time, one of the midday assistants, Mrs Cooke, joined in with us and it was SO funny.

So, this year, all our dances have to be even bigger and better, more extravagant! Harriet is insisting she can do a backflip because over the summer she went to one gymnastics class, but *I'm* imagining getting

loads of kids involved in the dance and taking over the *whole* playground!

Or we could rehearse a performance for the Christmas disco and strut our funky stuff on the dance floor?

We spend break time bickering over the best way to start the dance and then, all too soon, it's back inside for maths.

I groan. *Please, no candle jokes.*

Dad says I need to try harder at maths after last year. But he also wants me to try harder at science and PE too. I'm actually not that bad at PE, I just don't like playing football at school any more. And I'm not sure why PE is so important to Dad. He once tried one of those apps that's meant to get you to run five kilometres in a month, and he gave up after three days, but there you go!

I really do try and concentrate during maths because I want to make a good impression. And Mr Hamilton explains things in quite a logical way, so I'm starting to feel better. Maybe I could be really good at maths? Maybe I'm actually a *maths genius* in disguise who just needed the right guidance to shine?

Or maybe not, because towards the end of the lesson, my mind begins to drift to Mr Hamilton's

wedding. I wonder what colour suit he'll wear and if there'll be cake? *Cake is very important at a wedding*, Nan says. She says people only really go to weddings to eat cake and have a nose at what everyone's wearing.

But what *I* love the most about weddings is the dancing. Some of the other boys bomb around playing catch or hiding under tables, but I *love* to shimmy and shake on the dance floor until I'm hot and sweaty and feeling a bit delirious.

When I go to Nan's house she always has music playing, and in the summer she opens the windows so a cool breeze drifts in. We push the sofas to the end of the living room and dance.

But it's our little secret because we would never do it in front of Dad. He's not really a dancer anyway. "Two left feet," he says, with an uncomfortable shrug.

There was one wedding we went to – Auntie Kathy and Weird Bruce's – where Dad and Mum actually got up and danced, which was *so* cringe … but it made me happy to see them smiling.

That was a long time ago, before everything changed. Now it's just me and Dad.

And he doesn't smile that much any more.