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Closing her fingers carefully around the small box in her blazer pocket, Livy craned her neck to see through the jam of bodies all shoving forwards to climb on to the bus. She panicked as she saw the boy's black spiky hair disappear up the stairs to the upper deck. She had to get on this bus.

The driver looked straight ahead, uncaring. He pressed the button to close the doors. Livy pushed forwards.

She was on.

The doors closed behind her and the bus lurched. Livy reached into her rucksack for her travelcard. Once she had stuck it on the reader, she realized that she wouldn't be able to put it away without using both hands. She clamped it between her teeth because she didn't want to

let go of that box in her pocket. This was the present – a tiny blue glass heart – that she had promised her best friend Mahalia would be handed to the boy with the spiky hair – and a promise was a promise however difficult it was to keep.

On the upper deck, Livy swung her rucksack down, dropped her gym bag and sank on to the seat. She took her travelcard out of her mouth and slipped it into her blazer pocket. The boy was sitting with his friends at the back of the bus. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves – how was she going to do this? She looked out at the clouds for help. They looked as solid as whole cities suspended above her but only made her feel more light-headed. She would focus on letting this be a normal day, she decided. After all, what could be more normal than today?

She had got up when the alarm went off, as she had promised that she would: no stomach ache. She had managed a whole mouthful of breakfast and gone to school. OK, school had felt a bit weird after so long, but everyone was very kind and she had sat next to Megan in Maths and Ciara in Spanish. That had felt wrong because she had only ever sat next to Mahalia. But she had got through it and here she was, going home on the bus and the boy Mahalia was mad on was sitting somewhere behind her. Just like normal.

Her bare knees in her summer skirt rubbed up against

the seat in front of her. She wished she had worn trousers but hadn't been able to find them after so many weeks off school.

'Just a normal day,' she told herself. 'And tomorrow will be another normal day. And nothing much will happen. It will just be normal. Because normal is good. We like normal.'

The bus brakes screeched. She glanced over her shoulder. In the seats behind, the boys began a round of knuckle bumping, trading good-humoured insults in some form of Londonish that Livy couldn't understand. Jeering laughter broke out as the boy with black spiky hair pushed his way out of the group and sauntered up the aisle towards her.

Livy took a deep breath and took the box out of her pocket.

'Excuse me?' She leant forward.

The boy looked down at her, surprised. There was some wild whistling from his friends behind and Livy swallowed, her throat dry. Her mind was a blank: what was she meant to say? She thrust the tiny box wrapped in its sparkly paper at the boy's chest.

'A friend asked me to give you this,' she croaked awkwardly.

'Yeah? Who's your friend?'

'You spoke to her a few times on the bus,' Livy bumbled.

‘Is she pretty?’

Livy blushed. ‘She’s very pretty. Long brown hair and really big eyes.’

The bus stopped: Livy only had a few more seconds.

‘Mahalia,’ Livy blurted out. ‘My friend is called Mahalia.’

The boy took the package, held it to his ear and shook it. ‘Nah,’ he said. ‘I don’t know no one called Malia.’

Livy took in his blazer with torn pockets, trousers slung perilously low and his short, fat tie. His hair looked as if it had actually been glued into those strange stiff spikes. He gave her a brief shrug and headed off down the stairs.

Livy sat back in her seat. The emptiness of the day without Mahalia presented itself to her. And now this boy, who had been the focus of Mahalia’s thoughts and dreams for so long, said that he didn’t remember her. Couldn’t even get her name right.

‘Excuse me.’ A voice from over her shoulder.

She turned, surprised.

A slightly older boy, with curly brown hair and grey eyes, was smiling at her from the seat behind. She noticed he was wearing a pale grey blazer that did not belong to any of the local schools. On the pocket was a discreet crest of an embroidered tower. Temple College, Livy realized. The one by the river, the oldest school in London. That was where the rich children went to

school; rich and clever. So what was he doing on this bus?

‘Yeah?’ she said, feeling annoyed.

‘Is this yours?’ he said, waving something in her face – then flipping it open to look at the photograph inside. ‘Livy Burgess.’

‘Where’d you get that?’ Livy blurted out.

Her travelcard holder, covered in the faces of Korean pop idols that she and Mahalia adored, was in the boy’s hand.

‘On the floor. You dropped it.’

‘I couldn’t have!’

‘Why not?’ Those large grey eyes sparkled with humour and his mouth was turned up in an impish smile. ‘Don’t things end up on the floor when you drop them? Or do you have hidden talents?’

She swiped her hand at the card, and it dropped to the floor. They both looked down.

‘Gravity.’ The boy shrugged. ‘Amazing.’ He scooped up the travelcard, looking at the pictures on the cover. ‘Are these boys or girls?’

‘Boys!’ Livy snatched the travelcard out of his hand. ‘Clearly!’

Livy turned back round, having given him what she hoped was a ‘superior’ look, and took care putting her travelcard back in her blazer pocket. She pressed her cheek against the cool window, letting the city flow

around her: sky like milk and the football stadium a cheap toy that had fallen out of a giant's cracker. Mahalia, she knew, would not have got into such a ridiculous conversation. She would have said just the thing to put the Temple College boy in his place.

She sensed him stand up behind her. 'My stop,' he said, as if she had asked him what he was doing. This was awkward: it was her stop too.

She saw him out of the corner of her eye. The neat blazer on top, football shorts, mud-splashed legs and filthy football boots below. He waved to her from the top of the stairs. Annoying! She waited until he had clattered down the steps and only then grabbed her rucksack and hooked her finger through the string of her gym bag.

But as Livy stepped down on to the pavement, she couldn't resist looking in both directions to see which way the boy had gone. She saw him move towards the park, a long, loping stride, his head to one side as if he were listening out for something. She hung back: she didn't want to look as if she were following him, because that was her way home too.

'Livy!'

Her mother, long black hair like trailing seaweed around her shoulders, was pushing her large old bike through the pedestrians in a determined fashion. Her eyes were made up with their sooty black eyeliner and her lips were dark red. She looked very different from

everyone else, as if she were a visitor from another country where it was normal for the inhabitants to dress in white fur coats and vintage crepe tea dresses.

‘You didn’t need to meet me off the bus, Mum!’ Livy said, glancing around to check that no one had seen. ‘I’m thirteen!’

‘Oh!’ Livy saw her mother’s beautiful eyes flicker as if she’d been found out. But she quickly came up with her excuse. ‘I wasn’t really coming to meet you.’ She leant forward to kiss Livy and take the gym bag out of her hands. She smelt of roses, but roses wrapped in fur. ‘I needed to do some shopping!’ She proudly pointed to her bike basket, which was piled high with packets of sugar and flour, a box of eggs and several tubs of ready-made icing.

‘I don’t need a cake, Mum,’ Livy muttered. ‘All I’ve done is go to school, remember? Like everyone else.’

Her mother didn’t say anything as she started to push her bike towards the park. But Livy was used to these pauses where questions hung in the air and instead of speaking, her mother tried to look for the answer in Livy’s face.

They walked up the side of the park; grand London terraces and stately plane trees surrounded the expanse of tired grass where dogs raced after sticks, barking recklessly. Ahead, Livy could see the boy in the pale grey blazer. Where was he going?

Her mother tried again. ‘It didn’t feel too odd being back at school?’

Livy shook her head. She had learnt over the summer that it was better just to smile an answer when the real answer was too big.

But her mother had also learnt something over the last few weeks and would often know that the smile was not truthful, so Livy took the precaution of turning away.

She saw the boy in the pale grey blazer, one sock lower on his long muddy legs, stop and talk to a man standing behind a book-laden camping table. Some sort of charity sale, Livy supposed. Her mother, watchful as ever, had followed Livy’s gaze.

‘Do you want to buy a book?’ she asked hopefully. ‘He’s got some very cheap paperbacks on his stall.’ She fished some coins out of her purse and handed them to Livy.

The man, thin and stooped, wore a heavy brown three-piece suit despite the golden autumn sunshine that dripped off the trees. He had pulled a narrow-brimmed tweed hat low over his forehead. Livy began to feel anxious. She didn’t want to approach the table – and the boy – and risk another conversation.

‘Hi! Ros!’ A woman with rainbow colours in her hair flung her hands up in delight.

‘Janie!’ Her mother leant forward to kiss her friend.

Livy, too, stopped walking, relieved her mother’s

attention was taken so that she could watch the boy. The man bent over the table, moved some books to find what he was looking for and handed a paperback over. The man must have said something that the boy found funny because Livy saw him throw his head back and laugh. She smiled too, couldn't help herself.

Oh! He was going. She saw the boy wave farewell and jog-trot across the grass towards the grand terrace of Georgian houses beyond. Her mother and her fast-speaking friend were slowly walking, now. Livy hung back so that she could see the boy bound up the broad stone steps of a house with a grey front door, put a key in the lock, kick open the door and slam it shut behind him.

Livy felt herself drawn to the rickety table. She smiled shyly at the man, who smiled back, his twinkling eyes magnified by a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. He was humming a little tune to himself and started to rearrange his piles of books. Livy wondered what book the boy had been given; the ones she could see were quite a mixture and not very interesting. There was a battered history of the Battle of Waterloo and a dog-eared French dictionary alongside a well-used thesaurus. They all looked grubby.

'Can't find what you're looking for, young lady?' The man's eyes were friendly behind the spectacles. His voice was quiet, the accent correct and precise.

Livy stepped back from the table and smiled apologetically.

‘Would you like me to suggest something? I’m selling them for a good cause.’ The man’s thin hand hovered over a large book. ‘What about this?’ He pointed at the grinning faces of last summer’s boy band.

Livy shook her head, embarrassed.

‘Not your thing?’ The man nodded as if he agreed with her. ‘What about maps? A clever girl like you should know how to read maps: it’s such a bore getting lost . . . Or . . . wait a minute . . . I’ve got the one . . . if I can only find it . . . abra-ca-dabra!’ He pulled out a black book with the shape of a white seagull on the cover. ‘This is more your thing,’ he said. ‘I can see by your face that this book will get right under your skin. He’s very clever, this seagull.’ He tapped the book. ‘He learns all sorts of things as he flies through the sky.’

‘Oh, but—’

‘Consider it a gift,’ the man said, smiling. ‘This is the book for you, I just know it. And I’ll throw in this *Book of English Garden Birds*.’

‘Can I at least give you something?’ Livy held out the coins.

The man waved them away. ‘Payment enough that I have found you the right book,’ he said. ‘The right book at the right moment is medicine for the soul,’ he added with a look of concern.

Oh. Livy could feel her eyes prick, as if someone had blown smoke in her face. Did he know? But how could

he know? She had told no one about those strange, unsettling experiences she had endured since Mahalia had gone, not even her counsellor, who had asked too many questions about how Livy had felt in the weeks after it happened.

Her mother – face turned away – was still talking to her friend. Even though she was only standing a few feet away and Livy could have easily called out to her, Livy felt this was impossible. It seemed as if she was in a large glass bubble with this strange man and his books.

She stepped away from the table, clumsily stuffing the books into her rucksack. She wanted to go.

‘See you!’ She heard her mother’s voice as she said goodbye to her friend. She saw her mother turn, looking faintly startled as she saw her daughter and start to push her bike forwards.

‘Well, that was all *very* interesting,’ her mother said, then twittered on about somebody’s husband.

Livy tried very hard to listen, but she couldn’t resist looking over her shoulder, as if her head was attached to a very fine thread and it was being pulled round. The man raised his hat in an old-fashioned gesture of courtesy.

‘Did you find anything interesting?’ Livy’s mother asked.

Livy shook her head. ‘It’s mostly just old stuff,’ she muttered.

‘When I walked past earlier, he tried to give me a book about an old seagull! Said he would give it to me for the price of a smile. Are you all right, Livy? You look awfully pale, suddenly.’

‘Fine!’ Livy smiled and took a deep breath. The air was dull and heavy. That was good. Anything that made her feel more earthbound was good. She closed her eyes and willed herself to be as dull and heavy as the air rather than give in to the increasingly familiar feeling that her body was weightless and could spiral up into the sky like smoke.

When your best friend dies, she thought, everyone expects you to feel sad . . . and you do . . . but no one tells you that you might have other, more unsettling feelings that you can’t talk to anyone about.

‘You’re probably just tired after your first day back.’

Her mother was trying not to look concerned, but Livy could see that she was biting the inside of her lip, a sign that she was worried.

‘Just tired.’ Livy nodded.

They walked past the church, watched fraught and anxious mothers taking children into singing groups and art clubs. Twin boys in karate jackets threw their squat little bodies into ninja jumps and chops.

‘Remind me to pick up Tom, will you?’ Livy’s mother said, more to herself than Livy. ‘I arranged for him to go and play at Molly’s.’

‘So you could do your shopping?’ Livy asked.

Her mother laughed, dropping all pretence. 'So I could do my shopping.'

She leant her bike against the railings of their small, narrow house with the lipstick pink front door and navy blue window frames and got the key out of her bag.

'Mahalia's crush was on the bus,' Livy said.

Her mother turned to look at her. 'The one with the dreadful hair?'

Livy nodded, not trusting her voice.

Her mother shook her head. 'What did she see in him?' She smiled sadly. 'Mahalia was a funny, sweet girl. I know you miss her.'

Rather than get into that conversation, Livy said, 'Can I make the cake?'

Her mother looked a little surprised. 'It's been a while since you made a cake,' she said. 'Not since before Mahalia got ill. And Dad would love it.'

The door was open. Livy could see her little brother Tom's scooter, her old roller blades and a heap of coats on the newel post. It was just like her counsellor said: another normal day. Livy's mother pushed the bike up the two shallow steps, but instead of wheeling it straight into the house, she suddenly stopped on the doorstep and, speaking lightly – really, there was no emotion in her voice – said, 'Dad and I wanted to talk to you about something.' She pushed the bike into the hall and Livy stepped in behind her.

‘What about?’ Livy kept her voice neutral as she dropped her rucksack on the floor and kicked it under the hall table. But the skin on the back of her neck began to prickle.

Her mother didn’t say anything while she leant the bike up against the hall radiator. She took out the bags of sugar and flour from the basket and handed them to Livy.

‘You get on with the cake and I’ll go and get Tom,’ she said, smiling. ‘Dad will tell you when he gets home.’ She flashed a smile. ‘Really, it’ll all be fine! Nothing to worry about.’

But Livy knew that whenever adults said there was nothing to worry about, there usually was.