Praise for the

series!

'A funny, sweet and touching "big school" book, ideal for 9+ fans of Jacqueline Wilson.'
Guardian

'This funny and touching coming-of-age story will reflect the experiences of many youngsters making the transition to secondary school or experiencing changes in the family.'
BookTrust

'Williamson's empathy for young people shines through . . . As good as Jacqueline Wilson at her best.'
The Bookseller

'Heartfelt and funny, this is a story about staying true to yourself, no matter what – and about real friendship.'
Sinead O'Hart, author of *The Time Tider*

'This warm, true-to-life story will hit the spot with so many readers!'
Karen McCombie, author of *Catching Falling Stars*

'A fresh, funny story filled with feelings around the highs and lows and ins and outs of friendship.'
Jake Hope, *Youth Libraries Group*

'A delight! It's warm and engaging, and perfectly pitched. We are all Lola and we all know a Cleo!'
Abie Longstaff, author

'A warm, funny and bittersweet story of growing up and growing apart . . . just loved it.'
Tamsin Winter, author

'Williamson shows a rich insight into the emotional life of a Year 6–7 child . . . I can't wait to get this into my school library.'
Jenny Jones, librarian, Clifton College

'A perfect read to show how tricky that timeless, gut-wrenching experience of changing friendships can feel.'
Ros Roberts, author

'It made me laugh and cringe in equal measures . . . I absolutely loved it. A perfect transitional read!'
Jo Clarke, author of *The Travelling School Mysteries* series

'Another perfectly observed and pitched story of Year 7 life, funny, warm and true.'
Lovereading

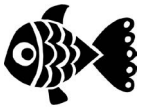
'Funny, relatable, tender and sometimes painfully honest . . . Entertainment and reassurance in one perfectly created book.'
Lancashire Evening Post

'Daniel Littleton navigates challenges at home and Henry Bigg Academy in this relatable early secondary school story. Children aged 9–12 will connect with Daniel's journey of self-discovery.'
School Reading List

Lisa Williamson

Scaredy Cat

illustrated by
Jess Bradley



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For Woody
LW

For Moogs. Eat your sea greens.
JB

Chapter One

I woke up just in time to see Mum place my morning mug of warm chocolate milk on my bedside table.

'Morning, Ajay!' she trilled, leaning across me to open my curtains.

'Morning, Mum,' I said, sitting up and rubbing sleep out of my eyes.

'Your porridge will be ready in five minutes. What would you like on it today? Bananas or blueberries? Or both?'

'Both, please,' I replied, taking a sip of my milk.

'Coming right up,' Mum said, kissing me on the top of my head before breezing out of the bedroom.

I climbed out of bed, pulled on my dressing gown over my pyjamas, before venturing onto the landing.

At the exact same time, my big sister Mira opened her bedroom door. She was wearing her avocado print Oodie and a massive scowl.

'Please don't talk to me,' she said, holding up a hand in front of my face.

'OK,' I replied cheerfully.

I've lived with Mira long enough to know that she is *not* a morning person.

Her eyes fell on my mug of milk.

'I can't believe Mum still makes that for you every morning,' she said, wrinkling her nose. 'What are you? Five?'

'You're never too old for chocolate milk,' I replied, taking a big gulp and giving myself a chocolatey moustache.

Mira narrowed her eyes.

'How come you're in such a good mood?' she asked suspiciously. 'You *do* know it's Monday, don't you?'

'Of course. Mondays are awesome.'

'Ugh, you are *so* weird, Ajay.'

Statistically, I suppose I am. Last term, we did a project in maths on collecting and presenting data. We all had to come up with a question to ask the class, then present everyone's answers in three different ways (a bar chart, a pie chart and a pictogram). My question was 'What is your favourite board game?' (FYI Monopoly was the most popular answer with eighteen per cent of the vote.) A girl called Etta asked, 'What is your favourite day of the week?'. The clear winner was Saturday with fifty-three per cent. I was the only person in the entire class to go for Monday.

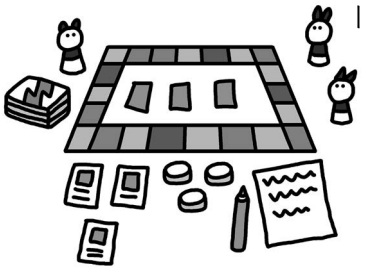
'Who on earth likes Mondays?' Etta said when I gave her my answer.

To be fair to Etta, liking Mondays is quite a recent thing for me, but the fact is, since starting Year Seven at Henry Bigg Academy, I've grown to not just like Mondays, but *love* them.

For starters, I have all my favourite lessons – art, science, computer science, history and geography.

Secondly, at lunchtime, I have the Board Room. The Board Room is Henry Bigg Academy's weekly board game club. I *love* board games. I'd

probably play them all day long if it was allowed. When I'm older, I want to be a professional board game designer. Mira claims this isn't a real job, but I've googled it, and it absolutely is. In fact, I've already designed three games of my own and I'm in the middle of developing my fourth.



The third and final reason I like Mondays is because Mum picks me up after school and takes me out for dinner. Mira has hockey practice and Dad doesn't get home until late, and Mum reckons it's not worth the bother of cooking a meal for just the two of us. It's great because she lets me pick the restaurant and doesn't insist that I order from the kids' menu the way Dad always does. Sometimes, if I don't have much homework to do, we might even swing by Game On afterwards. Game On is a board game cafe on the high street. It has every game you could possibly think of, plus it serves *the* best cake and milkshakes.

All in all, Mondays have a lot going for them,

and I was still in an excellent mood when Mum dropped me off outside the school gates just over an hour later.

'Have a lovely day, darling,' she said as I climbed out of the car. 'See you at three-fifteen.'

She blew me a kiss that I pretended not to notice (there was a group of Year Eight girls standing nearby).

I got my phone out and checked the time. There were fifteen whole minutes until the bell rang for registration, which meant plenty of time for a hot chocolate from the canteen (what can I say? I *really* like milky chocolate drinks).

I was making my way across the playground when a football flew past my face, missing my nose by a couple of centimetres at the most.

'Kick it back then!' a familiar voice shouted.

I looked to my left. Ollie Marsden and his mates were standing on the other side of the playground.

Ollie is loud and confident and good at sport – three things that make him really popular for some reason. He's not in my class, but everyone knows who he is, even Mira and she's in Year Nine.

'Hurry up then!' Ollie shouted. 'We haven't got all day.'

'Yeah, get a move on!' his friend Josh hollered.

I looked around, finally spotting the ball in the bushes behind me. My heart beating that bit faster, I went over to retrieve it.

Unlike Ollie, I'm rubbish at sports and always have been. I'm convinced it's because all the sporty genes got used up on Mira. She not only plays for the school hockey team, but also swims for the county *and* has a brown belt in kickboxing. This doesn't usually bother me because I'm good at plenty of other things, but in this particular moment, it would have been handy to trade in some of my brainy genes for a few sporty ones.

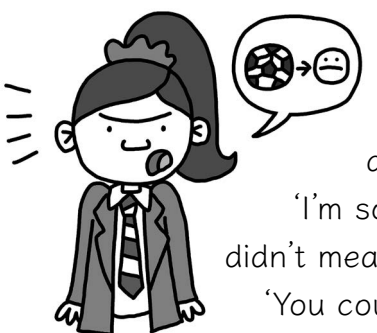
I positioned the ball on the ground in front of me. Ollie and his mates were roughly ten metres away. All I had to do was kick the ball in a straight line towards them. Surely even *I* could manage that?

'*Why are we waiting, we are suffocating!*' Ollie sang.

Within seconds, the others had joined in, and people were starting to look.

My cheeks growing hot, I took a few steps back, so I'd have a bit of a run-up. I did my best to block out the singing and booted the ball as hard as I possibly could. Only I must have used the wrong side of my foot or something because instead of going in a straight line, it curved wildly to the left, hitting Cleo Bayford right in the chest.

I know Cleo from primary school. She's very pretty and very bossy, which also makes her *very* scary.



'Ajay Chatterjee!' she shrieked. 'What on *earth* do you think you're doing?'

'I'm so sorry!' I stammered. 'I didn't mean to!'

'You could have hit me in the face!' Cleo cried. '*My face!*'

'It was an accident, I swear!'

'Well, be a bit more careful next time!'

'Nice one, Ajay!' Ollie yelled.

I apologised to Cleo once more before scurrying off to the canteen, Ollie's hysterical laughter ringing in my ears.

Inside, I was happy to see my favourite dinner lady Sheila behind the counter.

'All right, Ajay?' she said. 'Same as usual?'

'Yes, please,' I replied.

Most of the dinner ladies at Henry Bigg Academy are a bit grumpy but Sheila is always really nice and gives me extra marshmallows.

I thanked her and moved to a quiet corner of the canteen to wait for my hot chocolate to cool down a bit.

I'd just taken my first sip when I heard my name.

I looked up. My best friends Ned and Gabby were making their way across the canteen towards me.

Back in September, when all my mates from primary school ended up going to a different secondary school, I was really worried I'd struggle to make new friends. Then, on my very first day at Henry Bigg Academy, I met Ned and Gabby and the three of us clicked straightaway. We have loads in common, and, best of all, they love board games almost as much as me.

'Hey, Ajay!' Gabby said. 'Good weekend?'

'Really good, thanks,' I replied. 'I spent most of it working on my new game.'

'Does it have a name yet?' Ned asked.

'No, I'm still thinking.'

'So, when can we play it?' Gabby wanted to know.

'Soon,' I promised (Ned and Gabby were going to be my official guinea pigs).

I asked them about their weekends.

'My brother was home from uni so I was with him mostly,' Gabby said.

Gabby has three big brothers. One of them is in the same class as Mira and another is in Year Thirteen. I've never met her oldest brother (the one at uni) but she talks about him all the time.

'And I got a new aglaonema,' Ned said proudly.

'What's an aglaonema?' I asked.

'It's a kind of plant.'

I should have known. Ned is absolutely nuts about plants. His bedroom is so crammed full of them, it looks more like a greenhouse.

In registration, our form tutor Miss Crouch took the register then sent us up to the main hall for a Year Seven assembly.

To my dismay, we wound up on the row behind Ollie and his mates.

'Watch out, here comes Lionel Messi,' he crowed as I shuffled past.

I did my best to ignore Ollie's dig, but my face still went bright red as he and his friends sniggered away.

'What was that all about?' Gabby whispered as we sat down.

'I'll tell you later,' I whispered back, hoping she'd forget.

I wanted to avoid having to relive my humiliation.

The head of Year Seven Mr Da Souza strode out onto the stage. As he recited the various sports fixtures that were coming up, I found myself drifting off, my thoughts inevitably turning to my board game. In it, players make their way around the board (a museum of ancient history) competing to build the most valuable collection. I'd spent the weekend printing and laminating the relic cards, and moulding playing pieces out of Fimo clay. If I got a wriggle on, I could have a prototype ready by the Easter holidays.

I was trying to decide on a title (*Museum Quest? Relic Hunters? Relic Chasers?)* when I noticed everyone around me had begun whispering all at once.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Merrywood!' Gabby said, her eyes shining.

'Merrywood?' I repeated, confused. 'What's Merrywood?'

But before Gabby had the chance to reply, Mr Da Souza was shushing everyone so he could continue speaking.

'Please be advised that places are limited,' he said. 'Your grown-ups have been sent an email with all the details, so if you are interested, you'll need to get them to complete the online form and pay the deposit as soon as possible in order to secure your spot.'

Cue more frantic whispering.

I still had no idea what Merrywood actually was, only that everyone seemed pretty excited about it.