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The Hive

Written by Gill Hornby

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THE HIVE

Gill Hornby



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

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For Robert

Una apis, nulla apis
One bee is no bee

(proverb)

AUTUMN TERM

The First Day of Term

8.45 A.M. DROP-OFF

There was Bea, standing over the other side, in the shade of the big beech tree. Rachel, clearly waiting in the wrong place as usual, moved to go and join her and then stopped short. Uh-oh. She could read the signs even from that distance: taut, watchful, smiling … Bea was building up to one of her Big Announcements. The playground was so noisy and frenzied – it always was the busiest morning of the school year – that a normal person might have to shout, bellow even, to attract everyone's attention. But not Bea. She would never raise her voice around school, especially after the bell had rung. Anyway, there was no need. She just picked her moment, cleared her long hair from each side of her face as if parting the curtains on a stage, gave a little cough and began: 'Welcome back, welcome back. Hope your summer was amazing.' And at once the chaotic back-to-school clatter dropped to a placid, steady hum.

The groups that were scattered about, catching up after the long break, all stopped and turned around. Those who were standing alone, anxious about the first day in a new class, forgot their nerves and stared. 'Now then, everyone. Listen up. Please.' Bea held up her enormous bunch of keys, gave them a sharp rattle and smiled some more. 'I have been asked …' she paused, 'by the *new head* …' the words ruffled through the gathering crowd, 'to pick a team.' She

was on tiptoes, but there really was no need. Beatrice Stuart was the tallest of them all by far.

Rachel, sinking back against the sun-trap wall of the pre-fab classroom, looked on and smiled. Here we go again, she thought. New year, new project. What was Bea going to rope her in for now? She watched as the keenos swarmed to the tree and clustered round. Their display of communal enthusiasm left her with little choice but to stay put, right there, keep her distance. She could sit this one out, surely. She was bound to hear all about it from Bea later. She would wait here. They would be walking out together in a minute. They always did.

The tarmac in the playground needed restoration and was already tacky from the unusual morning heat. Rachel had to keep peeling up the sole of her shoe to stop it sticking. While August had been dank and dark, the summer had bounced back buzzing and full of beans for the start of the new school year. It was funny, she thought, how the seasons seemed to take the holidays off, too. The last few Christmases had been warm and wet. Only in the Easter term had winter eventually shown up, buried them all and shut the school completely. And now here they all were, after a month of fleeces and cagoules and more *Simpsons* than was good for them, back for the autumn and sweltering. Perhaps it wasn't just schools that came alive according to the academic calendar: it was a pattern to suit the whole of the natural world.

Rachel tried to tune in to Bea's little rally without actually moving, but she could only hear snippets. There was something about the *fabulous* new headmaster. And the latest *savage* cuts. And, guess what, some fund-raising. Of course. Yet more fund-raising. She shifted her weight on to the other hip and tuned out again.

She watched idly as a tractor measured out lines on a field beyond the games pitch, gazed up at an aeroplane drawing a perfect curve in a sky the colour of Quink. Christ, it was hot. What was she doing wearing jeans? This weather was doing nothing to help her general feeling of listlessness. Unlike, apparently, the rest of nature, Rachel had no back-to-school bounce. She was buzzless.

Bean-free. She'd had to drag herself up the hill to get here this morning – Sisyphus and his wretched rock rolled into one. But still, after a holiday like that one, even Rachel was, if not quite glad, definitely relieved to be back.

She always did like this school, and even from the murky puddle at the bottom of her own little well of misery she could see that today it looked pretty much like paradise. St Ambrose Church Primary teetered on a hill, clinging to the edge of its market town, enjoying the view of the luscious green belt while it could, before the inevitable retail park came along to ruin it. Rachel loved its mock-ecclesiastical architecture, its arched front door and sloping roof – so resonant of the splendid nineteenth-century social values that had brought it into existence. She could lose herself for hours in the different shapes thrown above the playground by the puzzled branches of the old beech tree, under which the children played in the day and their parents were assembling now.

And of course she liked the people. OK: most of the people. St Ambrose, after all, was famous for its people. It was known throughout the county for its one-big-happy-family schtick. They all looked out for one another at St Ambrose; prided themselves on it. Well, some of them did. And Rachel had always, instinctively, made a point of having as little to do with that lot, thank you very much, as was politely possible. Still keeping her distance, she watched them all over there, one-big-happy-family-ing round Bea, raising their hands to volunteer for something or other, jittery with excitement. Rachel shook her head: frankly, she despaired sometimes, she really did. But, at the same time, she did think Bea was amazing; it was impressive, really, to give people some thankless task of joy-quenching tedium and make them feel truly thankful. To see her surrounded by women – outlining plans, issuing commands, thinking big, rearranging a few mountains – was to see a creature in its element. It was just who she was. Rachel could only look on, with love and enormous admiration. Really, she and Bea might as well belong to different species. But it didn't matter: they

had been great friends – best friends, really – since the day they met, when the girls first joined Reception five years ago.

The soundtrack of the first day of term – the chanted good-mornings, the little chairs being scraped in to low tables, plastic trays thumping back against classroom walls – drifted out of the open windows. And suddenly the corner of Rachel's eye was caught by someone she had never seen before – tall, dark, a study in elegance from her clean, swinging bob to her pretty ballerina pumps. And, Well, well, well, she thought to herself as she turned to get a better look. Well, well, well. That was a rare and wonderful sight: an actual exciting-looking newbie. In her long and wearying experience of that playground, the September intake was so strikingly similar to the previous term's leavers as to be virtually indistinguishable – as if she had sat in the dark through to the end of the credits and the same boring old movie just started playing all over again. Could it be that this year might turn out to be different? The same story but remade, with a fresh new cast?

The newbie approached the crowd around Bea and hovered on its edge, circling. She seemed to debate whether to join in, weigh up the pros and cons, before drifting off through the gate and towards the car park. While Rachel wished she would hang around, just for a minute so they could meet, she also had to applaud the wisdom of getting the hell out without being nobbled. But even as she did so, some grudging admission that she really should be doing her bit was born within her and grew until, like a nagging small child, it was pulling and pushing her somewhere she didn't want to be. There was nothing for it but to give in. Rachel sighed and dragged herself over to the tree to be given a minor, lowly, inconsequential task – some small token of belonging.

'Aw, that's *amazing*. Thanks, lovely,' Bea was saying to the unlovely Clover, who was always hanging around on the edge of things, like a black cloud at a picnic. 'And I've got Colette, Jasmine and Sharon on board. All old hands.'

How did Bea do that – know who everyone was? Rachel had

seen them every day since for ever, but she still found it hard to tell that lot apart. Well, that wasn't quite true: since Colette's marriage broke up last year and she released her inner teenager, Rachel did now know Colette. It was hard to shut out the gossip, however much you wanted to, and the gossip seemed to suggest that every single bloke within quite a significant radius also now knew Colette. But Jasmine and Sharon – she defied anyone to know who was who there. They could swap lives and no man or child would necessarily notice. And even if they did, would they bother to mention it? Those two exercised together, shopped together, thought – even spoke – as one. Rachel didn't know if they had holidayed together too, but she did know they'd had too much sun – they looked like a little helping of snack-box raisins.

That was always the striking thing about the first day of term – the children had all gone trotting into class trimmed and polished and shiny, but the mothers looked about as groomed as Robinson Crusoe. Rachel couldn't quite recognise half of them. Give them all a few weeks, and their turn at the hairdresser or the spa, and the situation would be reversed: the kids would be a mess and the adults reborn. Apart from Heather, of course. Heather didn't really do polish, or trimming, or grooming. She had been the same reliable recognisable figure, in the same reliable clothes, for the past five years. Right then she was on tiptoe – she did need to be – and using her left hand to push her right up yet higher, waving it frenetically. And as she did so her specs were slipping dangerously far down her nose.

'All right, er . . . Heather, isn't it? Perhaps you can . . . ' Bea looked stumped, then inspired. 'I know! You can be secretary to the committee! We'll give it a go anyway. No promises, mind. But let's see how you get on.'

Heather flushed with triumph. It was a shame, thought Rachel with genuine sympathy, that Heather did not meet triumph more often. All pink like that, she didn't look quite so tragic and mousey.

'Ah.' A note of something like mischief came into Bea's voice. 'Georgina. Joanna.'

Georgie – who, to be fair, was as kempt as the average castaway whatever the season – was trying to sneak past. Her hair was even wilder than usual after the long weeks of holiday, but Rachel still thought she looked quite lovely. However much she tried, Georgie could never quite hide her natural, classy, skinny good looks. Jo, stocky and strong, stood beside her like a minder.

'What' – Georgie sighed as she stopped and turned towards Bea – 'now?'

'The new headmaster is determined to somehow overcome the absolutely *appalling* attacks on the St Ambrose budget this year – it's a *scandal* what's happening, we are *so* lucky to have someone with his *wealth* of financial expertise – and he has asked, um, *me* to form a fund-raising committee. I just think it would be nice if you two joined in. For once.'

'Me? No. Sorry. Really. Love to. But couldn't possibly.' She picked up the toddler padding along beside her and held him up as her passport out. 'I've got Hamish . . . '

'Georgie, he's hardly a baby any more! And you do have more children in this school than any other family.' Bea smiled at the crowd as she spoke.

'But you don't want me. Really. I'd be useless.' She moved closer to Jo. 'We'd both be useless.'

'Yeah,' nodded Jo. 'Rubbish.'

'Well, thank you. It's great to have you on board.' Bea wrote down Georgie's name. 'And you, Jo.' Another little tick. 'Excellent.' They retreated, muttering, indignant.

Rachel was hardly going to raise her hand like everyone else. She was not a total loser. But she was preparing to attract Bea's attention and make a small, subtle yet ironic sign that she might help in some way vague and tangential, when someone else she had never seen before stepped to the front and addressed the whole crowd. Hello, what was this? Not another stand-out newbie? They were reaching levels of excitement here that were really quite unprecedented. Rachel chortled away to herself. She did hope St Ambrose was up to it . . .

'Oh, OK,' said the exotic stranger, who was as tall as Bea, as blonde

as Bea and actually – golly – as good-looking as Bea. 'Surrender! No excuse. Career break. *Extraordinary* feeling! Nothing for it. Do one's bit. Yikes! Here goes. *I* will come and help you all.'

Bea raised an eyebrow. Oh dear, thought Rachel. Bea didn't raise an eyebrow very often – risk of skin damage to the forehead – but when she did . . . blimey. It was on a par with an ordinary mortal, say, throwing a chair out of a window or driving a car into a lamp-post. Christ. The eyebrow. Rachel gave a low whistle.

'Sorry.' Bea's voice was as warm as her smile, but that eyebrow was still way up there. 'I don't think we've met . . . '

'I'm new. First day. Just *loving* it.' She swept her enormous sunglasses off her face and up into her long hair. 'You know that feeling: *done the right thing.* We're so pleased we chose St Ambrose. *Perfect.* Gad. The private sector! Escapees. *Never* again. I'm Deborah.' She stopped to dazzle the assembly with her teeth. 'Deborah Green. But everyone calls me Bubba.'

Woo and hoo, thought Rachel. We've got a right one here. That's it. I'm in after all. This is going to be a laugh. She raised her hand, just as Bea flicked back her hair and declared that her work there was done.

'Thanks, all.' Bea laced the strap of her enormous handbag into the crook of her elbow, shook her gigantic bunch of keys. 'I really do think this is going to be a very interesting year.' And she swept out of the school gates and off to her car.

Rachel stared after her. She had hardly had a clear thought in weeks, what with the murk, the well, the puddle, the depths etc., but at that moment, as she stared at the blonde-on-dark stripes on the crown of Bea's retreating hair, she had several. One after the other. Clear as day.

The first was: Huh. Weird. She didn't speak to me. And I haven't spoken to her for ages.

The second: Hey. Have I actually clapped eyes on her since Chris walked out?

And the third, very, very sharp this one: Hang on. Bloody hell. She didn't pick me.