

JENNIFER KILLICK



CRATER LAKE

DON'T, EVER, FALL ASLEEP

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by Jennifer Killick



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Geek, Robot, Overlord

‘Anyone want to Geek, Robot, Overlord for the last cookie?’ I say, as the coach takes a sharp right on to a country lane.

‘But if you win, you’ll give it to Katja.’ Big Mak looks round from the seat in front. ‘If Kat wins, she’ll give it to you; if I win, Chets will whinge at me until I give it to him...’

‘And anyway, Chetan’s already eaten it.’ Katja peeps at us over the top of her seat. ‘Haven’t you, Chets?’

‘Why do you assume I’ve eaten it?’ says Chets.

I look at him and laugh. ‘You’ve got the crumbs of guilt around your mouth, mate.’

I pretend not to notice as Chetan makes out he’s cleaning off the bits of cookie while actually pushing them into his mouth.

‘Of course Chubby Chets ate the last cookie,’ Trent shouts from the back seat. He always ruins everything. ‘Geek, Robot, Overlord. Best of three,’

he says to his mates. ‘Loser has to share a room with Fangs and probably won’t make it through the night. Who wants to play?’

Everyone on the back seat laughs like Trent is the funniest guy in the world. I’ve known him since Reception and I can tell you, legit, he isn’t. And not just because most of his dumb jokes are about me. He just all round sucks.

‘If anyone gets to share a room with Lance, it should be me,’ Chets pipes up, totally missing the point. ‘I’m his best friend.’

‘Chubby and Fangy share a room, Chubby gobbles up Fangy’s tomb.’ Trent falls over the back of the seat in front, laughing at his own joke-slash-poem. I like to give respect where it’s earned but, let’s face it, not that clever or funny.

‘Wow – Trent made a rhyme,’ I say, rolling my eyes at his smug face. ‘Say what you want about me, but leave Chetan out of it.’

‘That’s OK, Lance – I can take a joke.’ Chets is kneeling on his seat, facing the back of the coach. Everything about him is neat and sensible, and he has eyes like balls of chocolate – all gooey and sincere.

‘Yeah, chill out, Lance,’ Trent says, and they go

back to playing Geek, Robot, Overlord, which is the Montmorency Year Six version of Rock, Paper, Scissors. Trent claims he made it up during a wet break back in October, but it was actually me, Chets, Big Mak and Katja's creation. It's been used for making every important decision ever since.

'Overlord enslaves Geek, I win again,' Trent shouts.

Trent almost always plays Overlord, so he's easy to beat. But his mates either haven't realised or don't want to make him mad, so they keep pulling out the Geek. All of them are so predictable.

'Good one, Trent,' Chets calls and turns and sits down again.

'Why do you do that, Chets?'

'Do what?'

'Suck up to Trent. He's not your friend and he never will be. I don't understand why you would even want him to be.'

'Mum says he's a wonderful boy. And as we're both going to Bing Academy, it makes sense for us to stick together.'

'There will be hundreds of people at Bing. You don't need him.'

‘Hopefully you’ll go up the waiting list really fast, and then you can come to Bing with me.’ Chetan smiles at me.

‘Mate, it’s a long list. It might take ages to get in.’ That’s what I say to Chets, but inside I know I’m never getting in. I didn’t take the entrance test and I’m not on the waiting list. I can’t tell Chets that, though.

‘And when you arrive, you’ll have Trent and me to show you around.’

The clouds are extra fluffy in Chets’ world.

‘Year Six – I want everyone to quieten down and face the front.’

Miss Hoche, the assistant head, stands up at the front of the coach, trying not to fall as it bumps up the country road. I always think saying her name sounds like you’re trying to cough up something nasty, which works because it’s how she makes me feel.

‘I’m now going to provide you with some information,’ she says, pronouncing the long words especially slowly and clearly for those of us who are too dumb to understand people speaking at normal speed – aka me, or so she thinks.

‘This information is of the greatest importance

for ensuring you have a safe and productive trip. Some of you...' (she looks at me) '...should be paying particular attention to the information about the rules.'

Damn, if she says 'information' one more time...

'There will be stickers presented to the children who demonstrate exemplary behaviour.' She beams at Trent, Adrienne and Chets. 'And punishments for those who let the rest of the class down by being disruptive.' I'll give you one guess who she looks at when she says that.

She opens a leaflet and starts to read. 'Crater Lake is a new and innovative activity centre, designed with the needs and safety of your children in mind to provide an unforgettable learning experience.' She looks up. 'We're actually the first school to be trying out this centre, so we're extremely fortunate.'

'My mum is a parent governor,' Trent says, loud enough so I will hear, 'and she told me we're stuck going to Crater Lake because some people's scummy parents refused to pay for the good activity centres.' More laughing from the jerks at the back.

‘The centre was built deep in rural Sussex, in a crater thought to have been formed when a meteor hit the earth’s surface hundreds of years ago,’ Hoche continues.

‘A meteor from space, Miss?’ someone asks.

‘Yes, of course. Where else would a meteor come from?’

‘A meaty rowing boat,’ Big Mak whispers from the seat in front of me and we crack up.

Miss Hoche glares at us.

‘The deepest part of the crater is home to Crater Lake itself, as the River Whist, which used to run past the site, took a detour many years ago and now feeds into the crater. The lake is the ideal arena for many of our daring water activities, such as swimming, canoeing and our epic game, “The Last Man Standing”.’

‘So sexist,’ Adrienne sighs. Adrienne is head girl, super-smart and looks kind of like an angry sparrow. You wouldn’t mess with her. If anyone in our class is going to win a game called Last Man Standing, I’d bet everything I own that it would be Adrienne.

‘Other outdoor activities include the climbing wall, obstacle course and the Leap of Faith.’

‘I don’t like the sound of that,’ Chets says.

‘Chets,’ I say, putting my hand on his arm for added reassurance. ‘They’re not going to let us do anything even slightly dangerous.’

‘That’s true,’ Katja nods. ‘There are laws.’

‘I heard you have to jump over a ravine filled with starving crocodiles,’ Big Mak says. Chets looks horrified.

‘The dormitories, chill-out zone...’ (the whole class rolls their eyes) ‘...dining hall and bathrooms are located in the main building, which is built on a rise in the crater.’ At this point I start to slip into a coma. Miss Hoche always says at least a hundred more things than are necessary.

‘Do I have your attention, Lance Sparshott?’ She’s suddenly standing right in front of my seat.

‘Yes, Miss.’

She leans in way too close to my face. I’m in the window seat, so Chets has to squash himself into the back of his seat to avoid any uncomfortable physical contact. Her breath smells like coffee and muddy dog.

‘You’re lucky to be on this trip. If there was any way I could prove what we both know you did at the beginning of the year, you would have been

excluded. If you take even the smallest step out of line, you'll be done, and there will be a black mark on your school record before you've even started at Latham High.'

She withdraws from mine and Chets' seating area, like a swamp monster oozing back into its pit, and starts walking towards the front of the coach again. Chets is frozen, burrowed so far into the padding of the seat that if his skin was some weird purple and blue triangular print, he'd be totally camouflaged.

'Bit too close for you?' I say.

'No words,' he mutters, without blinking.

Katja giggles, and Big Mak coughs to cover a snort of laughter.

'Something funny?' Miss Hoche spins round.

We all look at the floor.

'Stickers for everyone for excellent listening,' Miss Hoche says. 'Except Lance, Maksym and Katja.'

Yeah, no listening stickers for us – that punishment really burns.

'The rules of Crater Lake are as follows.' She nearly falls as she wobbles back to her seat where she left the leaflet. Katja and Big Mak are

desperately trying not to laugh. Chets is motionless. Probably still in shock.

‘Six children – either boys or girls, not both – to a room...’

(Please don’t say what I know you’re going to say, Hoche).

‘Except for Lance, who has to have his own room due to personal issues.’

Whispers and sniggers all around. I hate her.

‘Nobody is to enter a dormitory other than their own. You must remain in your rooms throughout the night. Mr Tomkins, Miss Rani and myself will be watching at all times.’ She pauses to stare around at all of us, just to remind us how good she is at watching.

‘Never wander the site alone,’ she continues. ‘You must always be accompanied by a member of staff.’

Sucking the fun right out of everything as usual.

‘You must follow any and all instructions given to you by a member of staff. This is for your own safety.’

Chets nods enthusiastically.

‘And of course – have fun! Your experience at Crater Lake is going to be one you’ll remember for the rest of your lives.’

She smiles – I think she’s waiting for us to clap or something. There’s an awkward moment of silence and then stuff gets crazy.

The coach lurches at the same time as the driver shouts and the brakes screech. We all fall forward, smacking our heads on the seats in front. Miss Hoche stacks it full force and rolls around on the floor. Bags, books and sandwiches fly through the air, landing in sticky piles. Atul’s unicorn pillow gets covered in mayonnaise. One of Jordan’s limited-edition WWE wrestling cards flies out of an open window and flutters away to freedom. ‘May the force be with you, John Cena,’ I call as it disappears into the trees. A slice of ham catches in Chets’ hair, which is especially bad cos he’s a vegetarian. It’s chaos.

The coach skids to a stop.

‘What happened?’ Hoche gasps at the driver.

‘There’s someone in the road.’

Of course, everyone rushes forward, trying to see out of the front window.

‘Everybody back to your seats!’ Hoche screams above the noise, and she and the other teachers form a human barricade at the front of the coach.

‘I’ll call an ambulance,’ the driver says, grabbing his mobile and stabbing at the buttons. (It’s one of those old-fashioned ones without a touch screen you hardly see anymore.) ‘Has anyone got a signal? I have no signal!’

The teachers all check their phones and shake their heads.

‘Why do we need an ambulance?’ Chets says. ‘Nobody seems hurt.’

‘I don’t think it’s for us,’ I say, angling my head as far out of the crack of open window as I can. ‘I think it’s for whoever’s outside.’

All I can see is the empty road, and nothing but trees for miles around. I press my face to the glass again, so hot it almost burns my skin, at the same time as a bloody hand thumps against the window from the other side.

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