



JUNGLE GIRL

Mia

Karien van Ditzhuijzen

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*For my own jungle kids,
Tijm, Linde and Jasmijn –
and all those who like to see what fun
it is to get their feet dirty in nature*



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Chapter 1

#NOTBORING

Mia bangs the kitchen door open with her bum, turns, then freezes. Something hairy sits on the kitchen table. A scream forms inside Mia's belly but her throat is too tight for it to come out. When the creature turns around, it bares big teeth at Mia in a grin that makes her so scared she can't move. Then, it turns sideways and picks up a banana from the fruit bowl. Slowly, it peels the skin off the banana, one strip at a time. Sticking the fruit in its mouth, it smirks at Mia again. Huge canines pierce through the soft yellow flesh of the banana. It smacks its lips – that thing has no table manners. Defiantly, it stares into Mia's eyes until her heart thumps so violently in her throat that the scream finally escapes.

Dad comes running. "What's going on?"

"Monkey," Mia gasps. She points at the banana peel left on the table.

Dad looks puzzled. "What do you mean, a monkey? Inside?"

Behind the table the window is open. Mia's hands shake and when she rubs them together, she feels something and

remembers – her phone! She was filming the chaotic sight of their new house stacked with boxes to send to her BFF Alice. And it is still recording. “Wait, let me show you.”

Dad looks at Mia quizzically. Together they watch the video: boxes, her father from the back, unpacking, the doorframe ... and there he is, large and all teeth! He sits and stares at the camera like a movie star, so close he almost fills the screen. Peeling and eating the banana leisurely. Only when Mia screams does the monkey get up calmly. In the now shaky recording, he sways his behind at the camera until you see just the tip of his long tail disappearing through the window.

Dad laughs. “I’d never have believed that if you hadn’t filmed it! You caught it in the act, that looks like a professional video. Well done.”

Mia rubs the hair standing on her arms. She doesn’t correct Dad, doesn’t tell him the video was an accident. Dad looks at Mia’s frozen face. “Are you okay? I mean, he does look a little scary.”

Mia still feels the big lump of fear inside but her father does not need to know. She shrugs.

Dad picks up the fruit bowl. “I suppose we need to keep the fruits in the fridge.”

Mia walks back to her room. She breathes in and out slowly, counting to ten. And again. Only after 30 does she feel she can breathe normally again. Those teeth! What was her father thinking, moving to a place like this, surrounded by jungle? Surrounded by monkeys that just stroll into their house like that?

Back in her room, Mia’s phone buzzes – *Going for swim. U comin? XO A.*

Mia grunts. Dad said she can’t go anywhere until she unpacks the boxes in her new room. If they were still at their old condo, she would have been at the pool faster than she

could message Alice back. But this stupid place has no pool.

Mia sighs as she flops on the bed. There are boxes everywhere, clothes strewn over the floor. She picks up a swimsuit with her toe then kicks it under the bed. Enough to do but nothing she actually wants to. Her thumbs move over the screen fast – *Need to unpack.* Mia adds a sad face emoji and *Boring here! Miss U!*

There is no reply and Mia decides not to message Alice about the monkey. Before the move, she would have run over straight away. She tells Alice everything, things much less interesting – or scary – than a real life monkey in her kitchen. But now Alice is a bus ride away. Alice is close to school and all their friends. Mia is here in the jungle, alone with a monkey. The strange feeling in Mia’s stomach grows bigger, expands to her throat. It tastes bitter and she can only just manage to swallow it down.

Mia looks out of the window. The next house is hiding somewhere behind the trees, she can barely see it. Behind the garden, a wall of green erupts: the Nature Reserve. More boring! A pang cuts through her. Maybe more scary than boring? How many more of *those* would there be out there? She sighs.

Dad keeps saying Mia should tear herself away from her phone. *Go play outside ...* With who, those monkeys? In the condo, there was not only Alice but many other kids to play with. She rummages around her room, pretends to unpack without doing much. Then sinks down on her bed and takes out her phone again.

Mia stares at the phone. It makes her angry. She wanted one for years and now she has it. But she’d rather be close to her friends than have this, this ... thing. She groans. She wants to see her friends for real and the monkeys on a screen. Not the other way round. Maybe she is more like Dad than she likes to admit. Dad is old-school, he doesn’t like kids with phones.

He doesn't like social media. But when Mia cried, and yelled about how she would never be able to stay in touch with her friends after they moved, he gave in. "Only Whatsapp," he said. "You're not going on whatsitcalled, that Facebook thing."

Mia grins. As if. Only old people are on Facebook.

The phone arrived. Alice, who's had a phone for years, helped her set it up. "He didn't mention Insta, did he?"

Mia pushed away the thought that Dad had not mentioned it because he didn't even know it existed. "What if my dad finds out? He might take the phone away."

Alice laughed. "Your dad doesn't have Insta. How would he find out?"

It was easy for Alice to say that, her parents are fine with social media, actually, Alice's mum is on Instagram all the time herself. She often asks Alice to help her take a photo of a new outfit or hairstyle.

Mia gave in. "Let's use an alias, just to be safe. But what?"

Alice giggled. "You are moving to this crazy jungle house, right? What about junglegirl?"

"But I don't even like the jungle!" Mia exclaimed.

Alice pointed at Mia's huge pile of stuffed animals. "Animals live in the jungle. You can post photos of your animals."

And that's how @junglegirl started.

Mia opens @junglegirl. This morning she has taken a selfie in the pile of plush animals on her bed, the only thing she has unpacked, and posted it – *Drowning in my own mess, help!* #moving #newhouse #junglegirl #toomanyanimals.

Opening Instagram, Mia sees there is only one *like* so far on that photo. And it isn't Alice's. How depressing. She sinks in the toys again and scrolls through her feed to see if there is anything new, then stops dead. That's their pool. Correction, that *was* their pool, it is no longer hers. It is Alice, yesterday, with a girl Mia doesn't know – #newfriends #newBFF.

The big blob of heavy darkness inside Mia expands further and two tears well up in the corner of her eyes. She has only just moved away and Alice has already made a new BFF! She wants to throw the phone against the wall, smash it into a thousand pieces. #BFF. How could she? And now Alice is at the pool again. With *her*?

Mia's thumb hovers over the little heart button, thinking there should be one with a big fat skull. A *hate* button. She doesn't tap on the heart, but doesn't break the phone either. She buries it between the toy animals.

Lying on top of the toys, Mia pulls out a reddish brown furry one. Bonno. Her favourite. His fur is worn at the edges, him being the only one she sleeps with. Not that she'd admit that online. She is 12 already. Cradling Bonno, she gets up again and peers through the window at the depressing green. Why did they have to move right at the start of the long school holiday? And worse, why did Auntie Yanti, their helper, have to go back home to Indonesia to look after her sick sister just at this time? Because of that, Mia has to unpack all her own boxes, tidy her own stuff. Because of that, Mia's dad has arranged to work from the house so he can watch her himself during the school break. But unlike Yanti, Dad never has time to play. Yanti would help her bake cakes and then clear up the kitchen. Yanti would let her do painting and then clean up all the colours she spilled. Yanti would play badminton with her in the garden. And with Yanti, they would not have to order food all the time, or eat Dad's bad attempts at making meals. Now, she has no friends, no helper. Just a dad buried in his study and a bunch of crazy monkeys.

Ugh. Mia stares at the trees, willing them to become a playground, a pool, but that just reminds her of Alice again. Alice with her #newBFF, and Mia isn't sure whether to scream

or cry. *I hate green*, she thinks. *I hate having to live here, too far away from Alice to be her best friend.*

Mia digs the phone back up. She scrolls through her own posts and slowly a smile emerges on her face. These photos are cool. They are all of her stuffed animals, but they aren't just photos, they are artsy creative fun pictures that Mia edited herself. Otter with sunglasses on a lilo in the pool with an icy blue filter. Penguin nested in the freezer drawer between ice cream tubs and frozen peas, an ice lolly at his beak. Mia knitted a scarf for Penguin herself for that one – it is her favourite photo. The knitting took a long time. The last photo she did before they moved was two googly eyes peering from a slit in a cardboard box – *#help #boxedin #whereamIgoing?*

All the little hearts showing up red, all the likes and comments, make her feel a little better. Then she thinks of something. Maybe she can use this very shitty monkey morning to her advantage. Quickly, she edits the monkey video and posts it – *Look what I ran into on my first day at my adventurous new house! Living animals don't sit still but didn't I do an amazing job? #notboring #newneighbours #realjungle girl #brave*. She stares at the word brave, feeling the exact opposite when she thinks of the monkey, but then shakes the feeling off. The video is cool, who cares how it was made? Let's see which post proves more popular, this or Alice's stupid pool friend.

She cuddles Bonno close, then tries to refresh the feed on her phone. It blocks. Argh. The Wi-Fi is not yet connected and her dad managed to find the only place in Singapore that has rubbish mobile network. Just then, Dad sticks his head around the door of Mia's bedroom.

"Are you still here? Go outside, explore, whatever. I don't want you hiding inside all day. We didn't move to a house with a garden like this for you to hover in this airless cave."

Dad walks over to the window, opens it wide and snaps off the air-conditioning. "It's so fresh and shady around here with those big trees, no need to waste energy on cooling."

Mia feels her heartbeat go up just thinking about all the monkeys that could come in through that open window, but she says nothing. Dad walks over to Mia and holds out his hand: "And now hand me that phone!"

Mia does so grumpily, then turns more boxes upside down until she finds her flip-flops. It rained earlier today, so there is mud everywhere. No way she will dirty her brand new sneakers. Or go out with bare feet. There could be bacteria and stuff in that mud. Or worse.

As she walks out towards the street, Mia stops in her tracks before she reaches the gate. A whole family of them sits on top of the fence and the concrete poles supporting the gate. Like furry statues, the monkeys sit on guard. Panic grabs Mia's insides like a clenched fist. Great. She can't even leave this garden now. She is locked inside, alone, forever.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When she lived in Borneo as a child, Karien developed a strong love for the jungle and those who live there. After wandering the world, she landed back in Asia in 2012 and gave up her career developing ice cream recipes to become a writer. She joined a Singapore charity that supports migrant workers, and the women she met there inspired her first novel, *A Yellow House*.

Karien's favourite workplace is the garden of her jungle house – which looks suspiciously like that of Mia's – which explains why so many critters crawl onto the pages of her books. She started writing *JungleGirl Mia* for her own children, who love reading as much as playing in the mud.

She is currently staying in the Netherlands, where she is plotting ways to get back to Asia soon.

You can find out more about Karien and her books on her website: www.bedu-mama.com

You can also share your wildlife photos with Karien on Instagram @junglegirlmia