



AND NOW WE RUN



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LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

ONE Jelly



Watching Dad lift my suitcase into the yellow coach, my whole body seems to solidify. My feet have actual lead in them and my stomach's weighed down with bricks. So much for the butterflies Mum said would be normal.

Dad walks through the school gates and I make myself follow. I can feel him stiffening, bracing himself for the goodbye, just like Mum did earlier, before she left for her shift at the hospital.

"You'll be fine, Jelly," she'd said through gritted teeth, as she hugged my rigid form in the hallway. "The week will fly by."

I couldn't meet her eyes. Or forgive the lie.

The worst thing is, when I first heard about this trip, it seemed like one of the best bits of coming to Colliery Road. Last summer term, when we came up from primary for the

taster day, Mikala and I pored over photos and testimonies from the previous year's residential. A week's outward bound in West Yorkshire – canoeing, caving, abseiling, zip-lining. Sleeping in wooden cabins underneath the trees.

“We’re going to have the best time, Jel,” Mikala had said. She’d reached for my hand and squeezed it. Mikala, my BFF, my ride or die. How could things have changed so fast?

“Year Sevens, if you could make your farewells as expeditious as possible,” Mr Everett shouts over everyone’s heads. “I need you out of your parents’ arms and lined up on the tarmac. Adults, please, *please* do not leave without both making sure your child’s luggage is in the coach and ensuring that you’ve handed over any medication they need for the week.”

He manages to sound both loud and weary at the same time. I groan inwardly. Why is Everett coming? He’s made it pretty clear he despises our year.

“Where’s that nice Ms Paing, from the meeting?” Dad asks.

I shrug. Answering in words is a step too far. I’m worried my voice will break.

“Ms Paing’s sick,” a woman next to us offers, overhearing. “That horrible norovirus. They drafted in the assistant head. Looks like he’ll be fun.” She makes a sympathetic grimace. Her kid’s already flocked to the main part of the

playground where loose groups are assembling.

“Are you and Mikala going to be bus partners then?” Dad asks, turning back to me. “I’ve not seen her yet.”

I shrug. It’s hardly likely.

Yet it’s not as if I’ve got anyone else, and I’m not exactly out of her grip. Mikala’s like the sun – you don’t get out of her orbit that easily.

“Anyway,” Dad goes on with faux brightness. “You’ve got a book, haven’t you? Try to get a window seat. Once you leave Doncaster, it’ll be green all the way. I envy you, Jelly, a week out in the wilds of West Yorkshire. I bet you won’t give your mum or me a moment’s thought.”

I stare back reproachfully. Last night I tried every plea and argument I could think of for why I should pull out of the trip – why it’s too much for me, how I barely know anyone yet at Colliery Road, and a Year Seven residential is the worst idea ever.

Neither Mum nor Dad would budge. “You can’t dodge life experiences, Jel. Even if this feels like a bad patch now, with you and Mikala, this could be exactly what you need. A chance to make new friends.”

What is it with parents? Why can’t they just be on your side?

Everett’s glaring at Dad now. We’re among the last to say our goodbyes.

Dad leans over and clasps my shoulders. His voice isn’t

quite steady. “Right, Jel. I better be going before that man blows his top, yeah?”

“Dad!” I manage – a final plea.

“Deep breaths. You can do it, Jel. I know you can. You’ve got this.”

I rub my sleeve over my eyes furiously, fighting the urge to run away.

Dad pulls a new pack of tissues from his pocket. “Almost forgot. It’s still cold season, isn’t it? Watery eyes are part of the deal.” He winks.

There’s no changing course now. Dad’s about to disappear, and there’s no way I can cause a scene with half my year watching.

So it’s me who trudges slowly away. I don’t even look back to wave.