



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.

TWO

Jelly



“Right, everyone, I need your attention for the register!” Ms Morley calls over our heads brightly. She’s lit by a beam of spring sunlight and I have to squint to see her.

I don’t have Ms Morley for any classes, but she always seems nice. She’s an English teacher and runs the school newspaper. In the freshness of the first couple of weeks at Colliery Road, Mikala and I went to a lunchtime editorial meeting. But then Mikala said it was too much like lessons and there were more fun ways of spending your time.

“Jelly Griffin?”

Ms Morley’s repeating my name. She has a slight frown on her face, like she might be misreading it.

“Oh yeah, that’s me. I’m here,” I stumble. Students around me laugh.

Blood rushes to my cheeks. I don’t know why I didn’t

just use my full name when we registered here. *Angelica* might not feel like who I am, but should I have outgrown *Jelly* by now?

I hear Mikala's voice in my head that first day in September. *Jelly is for six-year-olds. Can't you try to be a bit less cringe?*

She'd also said that my hair clips and flowery coat made me look like a toddler. Even though I knew full well Mikala had the exact same clips at home. We'd bought them together at the start of the summer holidays.

I lost the clips pretty quickly anyway. And the coat. I got Mum to get me a simple black jacket instead.

"Mikala Harrison." Ms Morley is repeating Mikala's name now.

I lift my head to look around. I wasn't sure what I should do when I see her. Should I go over? Would Mikala want that, or expect it? She'd be with Tori or Abby, who seem to be her current favourites. But both those girls are standing in the centre of everything without Mikala in sight.

Ms Morley reads the next name on her list. "And Reuben Harrison? They're related, I think? Perhaps they're still on their way."

She purses her lips and looks over to Everett, who's talking disdainfully to a boy and his mum who've just arrived. The mum's all flustered and apologising loudly about their bus being late. I feel sorry for the boy. His belongings are

bulging out of three separate carrier bags and he's looking pretty mortified at the attention. A mop of blond hair falls around his face.

"Mr Everett, we've not heard anything from the Harrison family? Mikala and Reuben?" Ms Morley calls.

Everett frowns. "Oh yes, those were the names I was given earlier by the office. They're absentees, both of them. That dreadful norovirus." He sighs heavily. "Which we have to hope is not about to get on the bus with us!"

I watch the boy's mum grip his shoulders more tightly.

"Ah, Mikala! Nooooo!" Tori shouts loudly, and some of the girls around her join in.

"No way. I can't believe she's going to miss it."

"My Mikala girl. Nooooo!"

Their disappointment competes with an equally loud burst of fake spewing noises, which earn a glare from both Ms Morley and Everett.

But my heart is rising like a bird.

Like something caged has just been set free.

THREE

Bird



The bird soared.

The day was warm and blue – the warmest, bluest day in ages – and she was on the hunt. Pickings had been slim lately. Water had covered over too much land, and prey had been scarce. Maybe today there would be a vole or two, or a small stricken rabbit she could tear apart and devour, bones and all.

There had been a couple of dead lambs, but those had been popular among the birds and foxes of the valley, and the carcasses hadn't lasted. Even on the concrete lanes, where the metal boxes hurtled through the peaks and cloughs of the land, there had been fewer deaths. Fewer bodies to pick over.

That was just how it was: days of plenty, and days of nothing, and rarely anything in between. The bird was used to it.

Today the rain had stopped, and every part of her – the far reaches of her black-tipped wings, the black talons curled under her yellow feet – told her this was a day of plenty.

She needed to concentrate. Over the silver, water-laden world, she watched with sharp amber eyes.

Her forked tail twisted and turned, keeping her exactly where she wanted to be in the moving air. Sometimes, she'd catch an updraft that lifted her to the top of everything.

Then she'd dive – down, coursing lower into the depths of the valley. Down over the blue water of the reservoir.

Usually the fish in the reservoir were too quick, too deep. The water too vast.

But today, for the first time in ages, she'd seen fisher people in the morning light. And sometimes they left pickings.

Fish who'd been caught by the hook but escaped it, or for strange reasons unknown to her taken off the hook and thrown back. Yet not soon enough, so death had still touched them, and there they'd be on the surface, waiting. And she was good at spotting shiny things.

She would lift them clean from the water and give the shimmering, scaly creatures one last flight.

Water versus air. Sometimes it seemed her whole life had been that way.

FOUR

Jelly



The instant the driver opens the coach doors, there's a frantic rush for seats. I'm last, apart from Lincoln, the boy who just arrived, but he makes a triumphant dash for the remaining seat at the back. I stand dazed and frozen, the air around me already hot with bodies and deodorant.

"Can you not find a seat, Jelly?" Ms Morley asks. Her own bag is on one of the front seats with a PE teacher, Ms Green. I have a sudden awful feeling that I'll be put next to Everett, who's still outside watching the driver load the last few suitcases and grumbling about oversized luggage and flimsy carrier bags. Ms Morley's eyes scour the bus.

"There should be enough seats, especially with two students missing. Oh, look! There we go, next to Harriet. Can you please make room, Harriet?"

I look midway down the bus where a girl from my form

sits. She's playing Uno with two other girls across the aisle. Harriet catches my eye and smiles. "Sure," she says, pulling her coat and bag from the seat next to her to make room.

I murmur my gratitude and find my way past her. My cheeks are flushed. I'm embarrassed to have to be assigned a coach partner, but glad too to have a seat by the window. Dad would be pleased.

Everett blunders on board. "This is a final warning to sever your electronic devices from your person. Punishments for infringements after this point will be non-negotiable."

There's a distinct element of enjoyment behind his hard stare. *This*, I realise, is why he's here – the chance to wield further power over us.

Then the coach engine growls to life, and the indicators flash, ready to join the busy main road.

"Sorry about Mikala," Harriet says, turning to me. "Aren't you two best friends or something?"

I shrug, unsure how to answer, but Harriet's already moving on. "Do you know Juno and Sanchita?" she asks, indicating the girls across the aisle and waving her stack of Uno cards at the same time. "We can deal again if you want to play?"

It's nice of her, but I swear there's obligation in her smile. The three of them had been happy without me.

"I'm all right. I get travel sick," I lie. "But thank you."

“Suit yourself,” Harriet says breezily, turning back to her friends and shuffling a fraction further into the aisle.

The coach crawls through the morning traffic. It seems to hit every set of lights on red. I watch our town thin out and get replaced with outlet stores and warehouses. Then green and yellow fields, separated by stray bits of woodland. Wind turbines and electricity pylons stretch out above everything, all alien-like.

Sometimes on car journeys I make up stories in my head, or with Dad, about how the turbines descended from space, or are lookout posts in some weird apocalyptic future. Today they just blur into each other.

The strength of relief that Mikala isn't here almost makes me dizzy.

I'm still reeling from my birthday sleepover a few weeks ago. It's like a dream now. A nightmare. Three of the four girls I invited pulling out one by one on the day of my celebration, while Mum and I were out buying pizzas and crisps. The ping of my phone in the supermarket as each message came in: Jade, Tori, Pia. Until it was just Mikala left.

As Mum and I backtracked round the chilled section returning surplus pizzas, she tried to convince me not to take it personally. There must be a bug going round, it was that time of year, and I still had the most important friend of all coming, didn't I? Mikala and I could still have

a lovely time, the two of us, like we always did.

But Mikala was the worst of all. She'd bailed too. She just didn't bother coming up with an excuse.

I waited for over an hour. I didn't even dare message. I suppose I knew the truth by then and didn't want it confirmed.

It was Mum, in the end, who called Mikala's dad and got an embarrassed apology. He was really sorry, it must have slipped Mikala's mind. It wasn't like her, but starting a new school was intense.

The real reason for them pulling out was obvious later that evening when I saw the photos on my phone. A massive group of Year Sevens at the ice rink. They'd all found a better option.

Then that Monday, Mikala had the gall to ask how my birthday had been.

My skin prickles, remembering. I try to push it all out of my head. *She isn't worth it, she isn't worth it.*

The words match the rhythm of the coach engine.

The landscape is greener now. Fields rising either side of the road, like wings. The trees are mostly still bare after the winter, but I see buds on some of them and imagine the bright new leaves squashed up inside.

She isn't even here, she isn't even here.

Maybe Mum and Dad were right and this could be a chance to make new friends. People more like me.

Though who even *am* I, without Mikala? It feels like I haven't had the chance to figure that out.

Harriet and the others are about to redeal for another game. I make myself lean over. "I actually feel OK, if there's still room for another player?"

FIVE

Jelly



There are loud whoops of excitement as we all pour off the bus into the campsite. My heart lifts when I see the cabins we'll be staying in, dotted among the trees. The roofs are green and mossy and shine like emeralds.

"They're like hobbit homes, sir!"

"It's like we'll be staying in tree houses!"

"Awww, they're so cute!"

Everett gathers the boys to go to the second of two 'villages', while Ms Morley sets about assigning cabins for the girls in the first. I'm relieved there's no picking of groups. I get put with the same girls as the coach – Harriet, Juno and Sanchita.

It was fun playing Uno with them. I just can't shake the feeling that I'm third wheeling. Or fourth wheeling, which should even things out, but people are never as predictable as that.

Inside our cabin are two sets of metal bunk beds. Each person gets a shelf and a small cubbyhole for their belongings. Our suitcases have to be left at the ends of the beds or stowed away underneath.

Harriet and Juno immediately throw themselves down on the beds by the big window, where all the light spills in. The window by the opposite bunk has another cabin butted up against it.

“Guys!” Sanchita protests, then turns to me. “I guess we get the dark side. Do you want top or bottom, Jelly?”

I shrug.

“I’ll have the bottom then. I like to spread out,” Sanchita says with a grin, already sorting her things into neat little piles.

I climb the wooden ladder to my bed, pulling my bag up after me.

There’s a shelf mounted on the wall where I set out the couple of books I brought, and a torch, in case I read after lights out or need to get up for the loo. I want to get my unicorn pillow too, out from the bottom of my bag, but I can’t see if the others have brought anything like that.

It’s only been a few months since our Year Six residential, when loads of us brought toys from home, but everything has changed since then. There are so many people I don’t know at all. And we’re in secondary now, which apparently comes with its own set of rules.

The others are bringing out supplies of sweets and chocolate, laughing and stashing them under their beds so the teachers won't find them. We were warned in advance about cabin inspections.

"Shall we have a midnight feast tonight?" Juno asks.

"Ummm, yes!" Harriet replies, before looking over at me. "Did you bring anything, Jelly?"

My stomach turns over. "I didn't think... I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, I've got loads!" Harriet says casually, launching herself off her bed. The entire cabin seems to lurch to the side.

"Whoa! Steady!" Sanchita cries from beneath me. "It's like we're on a ship!"

"Ahoy, there!" Juno screeches.

The three of them collapse into a fit of giggles. I join in uncertainly, but then we all stop anyway, because somewhere outside a bell is ringing.