RUNAWAYS

E.L. NORRY

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For Jenni S.

My muse, my friend, the younger sister I never had.

How our ugly baby has blossomed!

1

JULY

Nando's and Jax

'Why are we here?' I asked, squinting at Mum suspiciously as she rolled a chunky chip around in the peri-peri salt. 'Won the lottery, have we?'

Even though I was joking, a teeny-tiny part of me hoped when I asked that question – which I always did if we were having a Special Treat – that we *had* won the lottery. Like, can you even imagine?

Nanna and Grampy used to put scratchcards in my birthday and Christmas cards and honestly, the best part of opening those was the very real possibility that I might actually get a winning number and be able to change everyone's lives.

Anyway – course – Mum shook her head. 'Got enough points on the app to get this meal for free.' She waved her phone at me. But she knew what I meant.

'Don't play innocent with me, young lady,' I growled, like she used to do to me if she was cross.

She laughed and raised one pierced eyebrow. The small silver hoop jiggled. Wish I could raise only one eyebrow – I've tried but I can't do it. I *can* roll my tongue into this three-pronged petal shape though, but it made Mum cringe, like she did when she saw blood, bobble hats or balloons. All B things – isn't that funny?

Only a few things make me cringe: rubber gloves that are wet inside (*Ugh!* Super grim), hair clogging up the shower, and the stringy bits on bananas. Once, on the drive back from a garden centre, an extra-long stringy banana strip got stuck to my hand and even though I flapped my hand around, it wouldn't come off for ages, and when it eventually did, it stuck to the car window and Grampy got pretty mad.

'All right, all right, babes. Busted.' Mum groaned and put down her burger. She lowered her head and glanced around nervously.

The Hulk's hand suddenly plunged into my tummy. *I knew it!* That she'd brought me here for a reason. Nando's wasn't somewhere we usually came to. If we weren't celebrating good news, then obviously she'd brought me here so that I didn't Make a Fuss in public over something … *bad*.

'I need to tell you something.' Her voice was quiet.

The fluffy chips crumbled in my mouth and clagged together. I'd only been back living with Mum for three months; was it already going wrong?

'OK,' I said bravely, trying to smile. I did this a lot with Mum – smiled to cover up any worries; I didn't mind. These kinds of skills would make me a world-class performer one day. And sometimes, when I had no idea what to say, I quoted Nanna; she used to have all these wise sayings.

'Go on. *Better out than in*.'

I'm not sure if Mum noticed or even knew that I was quoting Nanna.

'Well,' she began, pushing spicy rice round her plate. 'You know that caravan holiday …'

I knew it. I knew by the way her voice danced up and down, full of questions even though she wasn't

asking any. I folded my arms and glared at her. I knew where this was going now. And even though there was a pause where she drifted off, unable to finish, eyes flickering around, a pause when I should have – could have – been kind, I ignored all that because the tight metal ball in my tummy was getting bigger and bigger and making it hard to breathe.

'What's happened this time?'

I sounded just like my teachers at school – the ones who you knew didn't enjoy being teachers any more.

A waitress bustled over. 'How is everything?' She smiled as she collected the numbered chicken sign off our table.

'Mmn, great,' Mum mumbled with her mouth full.

'Um … our coleslaw hasn't come yet?' I added politely.

'I'll see where it's got to,' the girl said, checking her electronic pad and tapping at it as she walked off.

Mum sighed. 'It's not my fault.' She looked away. 'Sometimes, babes, things are just … out of our control.'

My heart softened a bit then because I heard the

truth in Mum's voice. I knew all the ups and downs and ripples of her voice. *How* she said things was way more reliable than *what* she said because really, her words couldn't be trusted.

That might sound harsh, but my eleven years on this planet had proved it was true. Nanna used to say it was like I was the parent, and Mum was the child – as if we'd swapped places like in that film, *Freaky Friday*, except without the funny bits.

I don't do that any more. I promise I'll leave him. I didn't mean it. I can stop whenever I want, it's not a big deal. I made a mistake. I won't let you down again. I'll come back for you. I'll change.

Mum believed those things when she said them. I believed her for years and years too, but then Nanna pointed out how *actions speak louder than words* and I realised she was right. Mum's voicemails and messages full of Exciting Plans and Promises for the Future never seemed to happen in Real Life and it was up to me to make sure she stayed on the Straight and Narrow.

I took a massive bite of my juicy extra-spicy chicken burger – my tongue flickering and eyes watering – and waited for her explanation.

'… So, our money's gone, and we can't get the deposit back,' she finished, just as the waitress slid a pot of coleslaw across our table.

Our holiday! A week at a caravan park near the sea, on the Isle of Wight, with crazy golf, a pool, go-karts and horse riding, was the only thing keeping the nerves about secondary school away. I was due to start in two weeks and I was *not* looking forward to it.

'We got scammed, basically.'

'How did the scam work?' I asked. If I understood it then maybe we could avoid the same thing happening again.

Mum huffed. 'I don't know. Facebook tried to find out who was behind the fake page but … the caravan site doesn't exist. The website has been taken down now. The forums reckon they just used photos from other real caravan sites.'

She waved her fork around in the air and it clattered to the floor. 'It could be worse.'

Her voice was muffled as she bent down to retrieve it. 'We'll survive!'

She was right – we would. We always did. When I was born, I arrived in a rush, six weeks early, and was

teeny-tiny. Grampy used to call me his *little survivor*.

I dipped the edge of a serviette in my water glass, took the dirty fork off Mum and wiped it clean, sighing.

I'd been *so* bored all summer. I'd only been in Year 6 at this school for a few months, but I'd made friends – Sukhi and Nia. They were abroad now though and neither of them were coming to Ashramite High. And I'd done *everything* I could think of to entertain myself. *Everything!* I'd read my favourite book, *How They Survived*, over and over; I'd made collages from old magazines; I'd learned ten new songs (all from musicals); and I'd watched so much TV that I worried my eyes actually *would* go square, like Nanna warned me.

'You could have told me this at home.' I swiped peri-peri sauce off my chin. 'I wouldn't have freaked out.'

Mum pulled a 'That's not all' face and the rest of my breath hissed out.

'What? What is it?' I shivered, goose pimples breaking out over my arms.

'I'm … I'm meeting Jax later.'

Jax was Mum's best friend but not a *good* friend, as Nanna would say. Hearing that name was worse

than a cancelled caravan holiday, and *that's saying something*. Jax took Mum off backpacking round South-East Asia before they'd even brought me home from the hospital.

'Didn't she move?' I said.

Mum opened her mouth and then closed it again, trying to work out what to tell me and how. She lifted her glass and the ice cubes inside rattled.

'She did. To Manchester.'

'Why is she back in London then?'

The last time I saw Jax was over a year ago. Mum and I were visiting Nanna in hospital, but Nanna got so distressed when Jax turned up that the nurses had to make her leave. There had been lots of shouting and swearing and tears.

Mum tipped her head to one side, weighing up how much to tell me. 'It didn't work out … with her new boyfriend.'

It never did, but I didn't say anything. I stared at the salt crusted around the top of the shaker. Sometimes the quieter I was, the more Mum told me. She wasn't a fan of silence and filled it whenever she could – she always had to have the TV or music on.

'I know that Nanna blamed Jax for me getting in with the wrong crowd at college, and … everything that happened after, but it wasn't all Jax's fault.' Mum gazed at her glass and wiped away the condensation. 'It takes two to tango.' She sounded sad as she echoed one of Nanna's favourite phrases.

When I moved back in with Mum, she said I could ask her anything and that she'd tell me the truth, but that I might not like the answer. I'd always wanted to know more about Jax.

'Nanna said that Jax and her brothers got you into trouble with the drugs and getting kicked out of college … but you never told me what happened.'

'I had a big crush on one of Jax's older brothers, and I just really wanted to impress him. That's how it started.' Mum picked up a serviette and tore little strips off it as she talked.

'Leaving school after having a baby was such a shock. Mum was more upset than she let on. She thought a sixth form college might be a more grown-up environment, but it wasn't. I felt more isolated, if anything. It's no excuse but everyone was doing the same … I just got caught. I shouldn't have gone along with the crowd.'

'Nanna said you were top of the class. Her and Grampy said you could have gone to university.'

'Well, I didn't, did I?' Mum barked.

I hadn't meant it like that. I hadn't meant to make Mum feel bad.

She dragged her hand slowly up and down across her face. 'Sorry. I'm just … well, I would've liked that too, I think. But … having you at sixteen, I knew nothing! It's great now of course – everyone thinks we're sisters – but at the time, I was scared stiff. I didn't want to be a mum, and when college didn't work out … heading off back-packing with Jax seemed the best option.'

I can't imagine leaving a teeny-tiny baby in a hospital to go dancing on beaches in Thailand instead, but Nanna said that Mum didn't know her own mind back then.

'Mum and Dad offered to look after you – they'd always wanted more than one child – so I went. Anyway. Your nanna's not around now and … Jax *knows* that I'm clean and how hard I've worked to get you back. Nothing will mess that up, OK?'

She looked at me with her soft brown eyes and I nodded.

'Jax has changed too. Really. I said she can stay, until she gets sorted.'

'*Stay?*' That was different to 'meeting up with'. 'With us?'

Mum and me had a one-bedroom flat above a chicken shop next to Stockwell tube station. The living room was big and had a room divider, so it doubled up as my bedroom, but it'd be totally cramped with three people.

'You can share with me. It'll be a cosy sleepover vibe!'

Mum's smile was wide and hopeful, but when I tried to return it my top lip stuck to my teeth. Sharing *wouldn't* be cosy. Her room just about fitted a double bed and a small chest of drawers. She snored and sometimes called out in her sleep. She also got up at 6 a.m. for her cleaning job in Canary Wharf.

'We can make a new bedtime routine. Snuggle and watch *Gilmore Girls*. I loved that when I was your age.'

She was trying to Make the Best out of a Bad Situation, but I didn't want to watch *Gilmore Girls*. And sometimes Mum *said* she'd snuggle, and we'd watch something but then I'd catch her scrolling.

Anyway, I already had a brilliant bedtime routine. I read *How They Survived* for fifteen minutes before writing down any worries or things I had to do for the next day. Bee, the foster-mum I'd stayed with for a while when Mum was getting clean, taught me that, and it really helped settle my brain.

'Babes, don't give me the silent treatment! Jax has done a lot for me over the years, and she hasn't got anyone else right now. She needs me.'

I needed her too.

I wasn't giving Mum the *silent treatment*; I was just thinking. But sometimes she didn't get that.

I stared at the string of lettuce stuck between her bottom teeth – it made me feel ill, and so did the idea of Jax being under our roof. Wherever Jax went, disaster soon followed.

'I'll check if we can take the rest of this home,' I said, pointing to our plates.

'Good idea,' Mum replied. 'What would I do without you, eh?'

What Mum said about us being like sisters? I've never told her that all I've ever really wanted is a mum.

2

JAMIE

Nando's and Dad

'Clarks?' I said.

Not *another* shop!

'It'll only take ten minutes, darling, and then we'll have lunch,' Mum said, weaving in and out of the crowds on the high street like a pro, wielding her sunglasses as if they were a weapon.

Ten minutes? No way. Whenever Mum said stuff would only take 'ten minutes', it always took much longer. We'd already wasted all morning getting me measured for a stupid itchy blazer so stiff that it pinched my armpits. Not the 'amazing bonding time' she'd promised. More like torture, and on a boiling-hot

day too. 'Bonding' would be taking me to Brighton beach or Laser Quest or using the pool at her posh new members only club.

'We could've just ordered online!'

'Jamie, that would not do. Your feet are growing at a rate of knots. Please, do stop whining – we shan't be much longer.'

Whining? I wasn't whining. But this was Saturday. I could've been playing FC 25 or reading *Naruto*, or … anything but this, dodging a granny walking two skinny bald dogs in matching tartan coats. They looked like fat rats. I bet the first thing they'd do, if they ever broke free, would be to chew each other's coats off, or even each other's faces. The thought made me laugh.

'Lovely to see you finally smiling,' Mum said, linking her arm through mine. She tugged me close, so that I didn't end up tripping into the road. 'Tell me what you've most enjoyed this summer, so far?'

She claimed she liked me being honest, but sometimes, if I was, she went all weird. Once, when I said how we never did stuff together any more, she got teary. So now I wasn't sure what to say, but I was annoyed at being dragged out, so I said the truth.

'Nothing much.'

She laughed though it sounded more like a yelp. 'You're saying that Disneyland wasn't a highlight?'

'It wasn't as fun as I thought it would be.'

'Seriously?' She took her arm out of mine. 'It wasn't as fun as you thought?' Her voice was tight.

It *hadn't* been fun. Florida had been a dream for me and my dad, and without him, it was just … depressing. Everywhere I looked, I'd imagine his reaction, messing around and telling corny jokes. Garrett – Mum's new boyfriend – just whined about the heat and the noise and called me 'buddy'. Mum ended up working and didn't come on *one* roller coaster. Hardly the holiday of a lifetime.

'Honestly, there's no pleasing you.' Mum sighed, pushing open the door to Clarks. 'Sorry that I had to work, but there you go.'

Mum worked weekends, holidays, evenings. I understood that managing hedges and moving people's money around was very important, but she never worked this much when Dad was around. She'd been promoted two years ago, and everything was about extra training and trips abroad and five-course

dinners and Zoom and Teams and Skype … glued to her phone and laptop. 'Money doesn't grow on trees,' she'd repeat on a loop. Except … it did though, didn't it? Or it used to. Now it's made out of some odd plastic stuff, and I don't know where the heck that grows.

She ripped a *Next Customer* ticket off the appointment stand. 'One day you'll understand.'

Yeah, yeah. One day I'd get everything – I couldn't wait for the day when everything grown-ups said suddenly made sense. As if.

'Are we nearly done?' I muttered when the shop assistant disappeared into the back to look for my size. '*Mum!*'

She didn't look up from texting.

Florida was the only time in three years that Mum had taken time off during my summer holidays. She went on about how being independent was a 'vital life skill', so for my Year 4 and 5 Easter *and* summer holidays, she'd sent me on swimming and basketball camps; it would've been way better to be at home, but I didn't get a choice. I asked why I couldn't go and stay with Dad, but she said an oil rig wasn't a suitable

holiday destination for a child. But she had never properly explained why me and Dad couldn't WhatsApp or Skype, and although I didn't ask questions about that when I was younger, this summer I'd thought about nothing else.

I hated my life. If only I was eight again. Eight was cool. Not a care in the world. Or nine. Nine was all right too. My near encyclopedic knowledge of dinosaurs had always impressed *somebody*. And Dad still lived with us.

'Here we are.' The shop assistant brought black shoes out of a box and presented them to us as if they weren't exactly the same as the five other pairs I'd just tried on. Jeez, how was it possible to have so many styles all as boring as each other?

'Try those,' Mum said. 'You can manage laces, can't you, darling? I don't think Velcro is on the St Neots approved uniform list.'

What a life, huh? A dad who didn't live with us any more, a mum who worked constantly and the worst Saturday ever … although this is nothing compared to the main reason my life is trash. The main reason? The holidays finish soon, and I start a

new school. Not just secondary school – I'm cool with that (I'm one of the oldest in my year) – but a new school where I won't know *anybody* … where I *sleep there* and only come home in the holidays? A school with small classes and exclusive whatevers. A boarding school which sounded … boring.

Mum's lost it. She's convinced herself this is the only way to stop me becoming a master criminal. There's no *actual* evidence I'm turning into a master criminal, by the way. OK, so me and Anwar *did* crash a shopping trolley into our neighbour's fence (breaking it), and we got caught selling multipacks of chewing gum at school … but the way Mum reacted? You'd think I'd committed murder.

When she first mentioned boarding school, I'd nearly ripped the brochure out of her hand. 'Is this a punishment?'

She'd rolled her eyes and sighed. 'Stop being so dramatic!' she said. 'It's not a punishment – it's an absolute privilege. You have no clue how lucky you are.'

Lucky? Whatever. I wouldn't call it that. L*ucky* would be me going into Year 7 with Risinu, Dev and

Anwar – not being sent off to the middle of nowhere with no girls in sight! How was *that* normal? It wasn't, was it?

I slipped off my trainers, again, and wriggled my feet into the stiff leather. 'They're fine,' I grunted.

'At least walk around,' Mum demanded.

I paraded up and down the shop floor, dragging my feet. When I glimpsed myself in the mirror, I drew my shoulders back. Did I walk hunched over, as Garrett said? I liked being the tallest guy in my class: an advantage in basketball – though not an advantage when complete strangers believed I was two or three years older than I was and expected me to behave older too. That was annoying.

'They'll do,' Mum said, satisfied.

I followed her to the till. 'There's a treat for you after this,' she said.

She better not be talking about buying more school stuff cos nothing would fix this disaster of a day.

After she'd paid, she cradled my cheek and smiled. 'Darling, it might not seem like it now, but I promise you, this new school will be for the best.'

Best for who? Did all parents learn the same script?

* * *

Back on the busy high street, I couldn't believe it when instead of walking past Nando's, Mum opened the door.

'In you go then.'

Families were everywhere, and it was noisy with laughter and talking. *Mmn*: chicken. Nando's was me and Dad's favourite place to eat. We used to go every Saturday for lunch when Mum went to the office. I hadn't been in ages cos Garrett didn't approve of 'fast food', although I'd explained Nando's was hardly McDonald's.

'What's with all the paintings?' Mum glanced around. 'It's rather … garish, isn't it? Like a carnival vomited!'

The first time me and Dad went to Nando's was soon after I'd got into manga and anime. He'd explained that the restaurant showed original art from Southern Africa and supported artists too.

'I like it.' Dad did as well. 'Think they have Nando's in Dubai?'

Mum frowned. 'Dubai?'

'Where Dad works. I wonder if he gets to visit one.'

'Oh.' Mum pushed her sunglasses up on top of her head. 'I've no idea. Do they serve salads here?'

Who came to Nando's for a salad?

'Probably,' I replied. 'The menu's really big.'

Mum sniffed. 'That is *not* a positive sign. Sit at that table over by the window and I'll go and order.'

A few minutes later, Mum put a Pepsi down in front of me. Ever since she'd got with Garrett she'd been weird about me having Haribos and fizzy drinks, so this *was* a treat.

'Peace offering for having to go shoe shopping on such a beautiful day.'

I guzzled my drink, the freezing fizz and sweetness hitting different after not having one for ages. I opened my mouth to say thank you, and let out a massive burp.

'Jamie!'

Anwar would've given that a solid ten.

'Sorry. You asked for extra hot sauce on mine, yeah?' I asked.

'Of course,' she replied. 'I'm not a fool.' She grinned.

Perhaps today wasn't complete trash.

Mum stirred sugar into her coffee. 'Michelle's fortieth is coming up. She's invited us all on a three-day cruise. Last minute.'

'A cruise!' I said. 'Is Garrett coming?'

'Oh, sorry – I didn't mean *you*.' Mum laughed. 'I meant us girls.'

I'd never been on a cruise, but I'd seen *Titanic* so didn't think I'd be missing out on much.

The waitress brought over our food. I lifted the Double Thigh Burger to my lips and took a huge mouthful … *Mmn*. I'd really missed this.

'I know we've only *just* moved into Garrett's, darling, but you'll be fine without me for a few days, won't you?' Mum picked up the balsamic salad dressing and tilted it back and forth.

All the swear words I knew flew into my brain and the moist chicken dried to ash in my mouth. She had to be kidding.

'Don't pull that face. No one else can put you up.'

'Where's Dev going?'

'His grandmother's.'

'Can't I stay at Anwar's?'

Mum sniffed. 'You know how I feel about your and Anwar's … friendship.'

'But his sister's moved in with her boyfriend, so they'll have space.'

'Darling, I'm not sure you're good for each other. You … egg each other on.'

I leaned back in my chair, lifting the two front legs off the ground; Mum hated it when I did that.

'That's not fair!'

All I'd heard for the past few months was 'You shouldn't be so easily influenced' and 'Stop trying so desperately to fit in – you'll find friends who like you for *you*'. She never understood – that's just what a squad was! You became like them, and they became like you …

Besides, *she* could talk. Ever since she'd met Garrett at that stupid New Year's Eve party *she'd* been the one to change her laugh and straighten her hair. I bet he suggested boarding school; claimed his military academy had been the 'making of him'. I didn't need 'making', thanks very much – I'd already been made.

By *my* dad. Bet Garrett was trying to get me out of the way so that he had Mum to himself.

'Regardless, the matter isn't up for discussion, Jamie. I don't know Anwar's father at all. His mother's not around, is she?'

'She's dead.'

'Oh. Oh yes. I remember you saying. Well. Staying with Anwar isn't an option so …' She trailed off and sipped her coffee.

Although my dad wasn't dead, having only one parent was something me and Anwar had in common. We didn't talk about it, but it was there, in the background – like, we *could* have talked about it, if we'd wanted, you know? He'd joined in Year 5 and got sent to exclusion in the first week for hitting this kid who'd teased somebody about their home-made Mother's Day card. None of us knew at the time that Anwar's mum had died just a few months before.

'Yeah, but you could meet Anwar's dad though. He's cool.'

'What does he do?'

Do? 'Um … works with cars, I think.'

'I see.' Mum nibbled a slice of halloumi. 'You and Garrett will be fine.'

Unlikely. Every time it was the two of us, he went on about his three sons, or himself – what they'd achieved, what cars they drove, awards they'd won. Stuff that made my brain melt. He never once asked me about anything that I liked – not that I'd have told him if he had.

Garrett was fifteen years older than Mum. He treated her as if she were fragile – made of glass – as if she'd break; she used to go on about 'being equal', but she must have liked it cos she'd been extra smiley since they'd met. I didn't like having him around though. Calling me 'buddy' was annoying enough but when he said manga wasn't 'real art' … I could've punched him.

We'd moved in with him so quick too! I'd heard Mum on the phone to Michelle saying she wasn't 'getting any younger', and that I needed positive male role models at such a 'crucial time' in my life. So when we got back from Florida, we'd moved into his four-bedroom town house in Archway. Living in North London felt like a huge betrayal, not only to Dad but

to South London itself. Like Anwar said, it was way different this side of the river.

Mum propped her chin on top of her folded hands. 'With only the two of you, I want to know that you'll be on your best behaviour, all right?'

'Can I have a refill?'

'No, one Pepsi is plenty. J, I need to hear it.'

'All right,' I muttered – good mood now gone. 'I'll behave.'

'I'm not talking *good*. I'm talking about … respect. Perhaps you could make more effort?'

It was near impossible to stop my eye-roll.

'Doing what?'

'At … *involving* him. Getting to know each other. He's not trying to replace your father. You should show him that YouTube channel you're obsessed with? Or perhaps … one of your computer games?'

'PlayStation?'

She was kidding, right? And I wasn't showing Garrett *Dude Perfect* either. No way. Dad would laugh his head off at the trick shots, but I could already hear Garrett tutting about health and safety.

'And if he mentions St Neots, tell him how excited you are.'

'But I'm not!'

Mum's cheek tensed, and a small muscle flexed, but she didn't raise her voice. 'You *should* be excited. It's a very exclusive, very expensive school.'

'Don't even know why you're bothering.' I rocked back and forth on my chair. 'Schools are free.'

'Some aren't.'

'It's stupid paying for something you don't have to.'

Mum closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. 'Sometimes you get what you pay for. And at this school, you'll have everything.'

I didn't need everything; I just needed my squad.

'If you *don't* pay for school, is it trash?'

'Not always, but … occasionally it can be.' She frowned. 'The smaller class sizes mean you'll get much more attention.'

Precisely what I didn't want. I slurped the last of my Pepsi and fished out an ice cube with my fingers and crunched it. 'That's not fair.'

'There's not much I can say to that. Life isn't fair but you know that, don't you?' She quirked an eyebrow.

I knew I was fighting a battle I couldn't win, but that didn't stop me trying.

'I won't know anybody.'

'E*verybody* will be new. You'll all be in the same boat.'

What a stupid expression: *in the same boat*. What did that even mean?

'No, we won't. You said that footballer's kid goes there, and somebody else from that reality TV thing.'

Mum's fork clattered against her salad bowl, spraying the *quin-noah* stuff Garrett had got her into and tomato chunks across the table.

'If Liz and I were on speaking terms then you could have gone to hers, but …' Mum gnawed her bottom lip. 'That isn't an option.'

Mum and Aunty Liz fell out when Mum met Garrett. But if she was leaving me with Garrett *and* I had to go to this stupid St Neots, then now was my chance to bring up seeing Dad. I hadn't mentioned him for weeks, although I thought about him constantly.

'How's your salad?' I asked, smiling.

'The dressing's too vinegary, but it's edible. How's your burger?'

I gave a thumbs-up. 'Want some?' I held it out, hot sauce dripping down the side.

Mum shook her head but took a chip off my plate.

I cleared my throat. 'Mum … You said that when I was older … I could visit Dad?'

Mum's fingers tightened around her fork and her knuckles paled. 'I've not had much time to think about your dad. I've been caught up in the move and sorting out your new school.'

She set her fork down and put her hand over mine. 'But I will give it some thought. I promise. When I'm back, we can discuss it properly. How does that sound?'

'I haven't seen him for nearly three whole years.' My voice squeaked at the end. I looked directly into her eyes, which she asked me to *please do* although it made my eyes itch. I had a trick though: I stared at the spot between people's eyebrows instead. It fooled everybody. 'Emails *aren't* the same … and letters take *ages*. I don't get why we can't WhatsApp?'

'I just …' Her voice cracked. 'You understand that his work makes it virtually impossible to visit. And now that we're not together, I wanted a fresh start.'

'You've got your fresh start with Garrett, but Dad's still my dad.' This was intense.

'I know,' Mum said. 'As I've said, we'll discuss it when I'm back. For now, just give Garrett a chance.'

A chance to do what?

'It's only a few days,' she said.

Yeah, for *her*.

She reached for my hand, but I put it under the table before she could touch it.

'Jame, I will miss you.'

'Sure,' I grumbled.

'Anyway. We'll have such a lovely weekend.' Mum took a toothpick out of her purse and poked in between her teeth. 'Garrett's planned a surprise!' Her eyes shone.

I stared at the stalk of rocket she'd dug out.