

ONE

On the day we arrived, I thought I saved her life.

Dad drove slowly into Marwood Forest, home of Leisure World, Europe's biggest sports holiday complex, and—in my opinion—most colossal pit of hellfire.

"We just need to get away, Daniel," he said. "It's only for a week."

"A week," I said, shaking my head.

"It's not so long," he said. "We need some proper time together."

Time. It was all my family—or what was left of it—ever talked about. *In time, things'll get easier. We just need to put some time between ourselves and what happened.* Time apart. Time together. Time away from school.

"Besides," Dad said, smoothing his tracksuit top, "it's somewhere we can get healthy."

"I am healthy. There's nothing wrong with me," I said. I was a little sensitive about my weight.

Dad did that thing where he puts his head back and then rubs his hand down the stubble on his neck. It was like he was strangling himself. He hadn't always done it. It was a new thing, like his obsession with growing vegetables, and crying. We pulled into the biggest car park I had ever seen. Metal and glass sparkled in the weak sunlight.

"I know there's nothing wrong with you, kiddo," Dad said. "It's me."

We got out of the car and started unloading our bags. Motor vehicles had to be left outside the complex; the brochure said that we would be transferred to our cabin in an "electric carriage." I could see one of them waiting by the Welcome Hut. It was an oversize golf buggy.

"I just think we need to get out in the fresh air. There's no air in our house," Dad said.

"There's no TV in our house," I said, and then wished I hadn't. It was true that Dad hadn't replaced the TV, but I was the one who'd destroyed it.

We began walking toward the electric carriage. Dad gripped his sports bag so tight that the blood drained out of his fingers, making the sprouting hairs look darker. He'd gone quiet, which was never a good sign.

"Dad?" I said.

"There'll be a TV where we're staying. I got us a Comfort Plus cabin. It's not quite as swish as the Executive, but, as you know, money is tight. Anyway, you won't need telly because there's every kind of sport you can think of, right here."

"I can think of about three," I said. "And I hate all of them."

We arrived at the cart, and Dad gave the driver our cabin number and luggage, then turned back to me. “Maybe this week you’ll find the sport you’re really into,” he said. “The one you’re really good at.”

I shook my head slowly.

“Well,” Dad said. “There’s a TV.”

In the carriage, I rode up front with the driver—an old man with a gray beard—while Dad sat in the back with the bags. He tried to make light of the autumn wind blasting in through the open sides. “Welcome to the great outdoors!” he shouted, taking in a deep satisfied breath. I could see a Starbucks in the distance.

Leisure World was nature with a perimeter fence: a sports complex with shops and restaurants, set in the middle of the woods. Everybody stayed in wooden cabins or wooden houses or tall terraces, depending on how rich they were, and families bicycled past in tracksuits. There was so much nylon, and so much wood, that one match could have caused a fire you could see from space. There was a huge dome in the distance, a heated “tropical paradise” swimming center with a wave machine and palm trees and rapids. I’d seen it in the brochure; it was Leisure World’s centerpiece.

I never would have admitted it to Dad, but I felt a thrill of anticipation as we left the all-weather playing fields and tennis courts behind and drove deeper into the forest. The shadows of the tall, planted pines darkened the inside of the cart, and I thought I heard a long, low hum. You could forget—

if you tried — about the plastic nonsense of Leisure World, and concentrate on the dark heart of the woods. You knew that when the light fell, the creatures would wake. You knew that in a thousand years, when every single one of these happy vacationing families was dead and buried, nature would take this place over again. Ivy would cover the little cabins, and the thick roots of trees would burst through the floors. Eventually the water in the Tropical Dome would turn green, and fish would reclaim the Jacuzzi. There'd be screaming birds in the palm trees, and foxes looting the store cupboards, trotting through the restaurants.

"Daniel!" shouted Dad. "You haven't seen the plant food, have you?"

He had his head down and was rummaging around in our bags, looking for nutrition for his beloved tomato plant. I didn't answer because a girl had stepped out into the middle of the road. She was wearing a red hoodie over a swimsuit. Her hair was bedraggled and wet. I looked at the old man driving the cart and waited for him to slow down. He didn't, and the girl didn't move.

"Aren't you going to . . . ?" I said to the driver.

"What?" the driver said.

We were five meters away when I grabbed the wheel and dragged it to the left. We missed the girl by centimeters, but we crashed through a wooden barrier, and the carriage flipped onto its side. My world tumbled, and I smacked my head against the dashboard. When the carriage came to a rest, I was on my back, looking up at a giant oak. The driver had landed

on top of me, and he was less than happy. "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" he said.

"What were *you* doing?" I said. "You nearly ran that girl over."

"What girl?" he shouted. I climbed out from under the driver and stood, looking out onto the road. There was nobody there but Dad, shaking his head and nursing his tomato plant.

TWO

“What was that about, Daniel?” asked Dad as we walked the rest of the way to our cabin.

“The bloke was about to run over a girl,” I said.

“He reckons there wasn’t anyone there,” Dad said.

“Who are you going to believe?”

“Well, given your recent track record —”

“What? Oh, thanks.”

“Look, lad, that’s just the sort of behavior I was hoping you might avoid on this holiday. You could’ve killed the old bloke, pulling the car off the road like that. You could’ve killed all of us.”

“It was a *golf buggy*. Nobody dies in a golf-buggy crash.”

I thought back to the girl on the road. Faint wisps of steam had risen from her shoulders. I’d had hallucinations before. It was all part of the behavior Dad was hoping I would avoid. But he had his behaviors, too, since Mum left. They mainly revolved around the Star and Sailor Pub, where he would play the *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* video game, drink nine

pints of bitter ale, and then come home with a broken nose and hot sauce down his shirt. Cutting loose, he called it.

We arrived outside our Comfort Plus cabin. It was small and dark, overhung by a sprawling cedar. There was one big window and one small one. It looked like someone had punched our cabin in the face.

As we were taking the bags inside, two women in tennis gear cycled onto the drive of the cabin next to ours. They were a bit younger than Dad, both with the same springy curls and broad smiles. Sisters. Dad was carefully lifting the cherry-tomato plant from the ground. I was a bit embarrassed that he'd brought it in the first place, so to see him publicly talking to the plant as though it were a baby was mortifying.

"Welcome to Leisure World," one of the women said to me grandly. She was being sarcastic.

"You know you can never leave," the other one said. "This is Chrissy and I'm Tash."

Chrissy was shorter and had a little gray in her hair. The younger one, Tash, wore more tightly fitting clothes and an expensive-looking bracelet.

"I'm Daniel," I said. I looked at Dad, but I really didn't know what to say, because he was fondling the tomatoes like the pearls of a priceless necklace.

"I'm Rick," he said without looking up. He'd only been calling himself Rick for about a month, and it still made me wince. He used to be Richard.

"Hello," Tash said. "Have you been here before?"

"Nope," Dad said.

"It's our first time, too. We've come here to get in shape." She said it with a smile, and it seemed blatantly obvious to me that she was fishing for a compliment, because they were both thin as rakes. I waited for Dad to say so.

"Right," he said.

"What brings you to Leisure World, then?" asked Tash.

Dad held the plant pot above his head and studied the base. "We just needed to get away from things," he said. "At home."

"Oh," said Chrissy. "I see."

I felt the atmosphere become awkward.

"It's for the tomatoes, really," I said. "They haven't had a holiday in ages."

Both women laughed loudly, and Chrissy put her hand on my arm. "Bless you," she said. "Listen, if you need anything or you fancy a game of doubles, do come over and give us a knock."

"Thanks," I said, because Dad wasn't saying anything. "Do you know anywhere good for food?" I asked.

The sisters looked at each other. "There's all the usual places, of course, but actually I like the Pancake House down by the beach," said Chrissy.

"It's not really a beach, Chrissy," said Tash, laughing.

"OK," said Chrissy. "There's a restaurant called the Pancake House on the bit of imported sand near the man-made lake. Or you could just come to our house to eat. We're doing an autumn barbecue."

Tash pointed to the tomato plant. "You guys could bring the salad."

"The Pancake House sounds fine," Dad said, taking the plant inside. I followed him in.

"Bye," they said.

"Bye," I replied.

Dad had started growing vegetables soon after Mum left, but the tomato plant was his pride and joy. It was the first plant he bought after she'd gone and was too precious to leave at home. "The taste of the Mediterranean," he always said. This from a man who could only afford to take his holidays in Nottinghamshire.

He put the tomatoes by the kitchen window and placed a couple of shaving mirrors around the plant, to reflect the sun. Then he took out a baby bottle full of rainwater that he'd collected at home and began to squirt the ripe, full fruit. "You give love and attention to a plant like this," he said, not for the first time, "and it gives you everything it's got in return."

He had driven all the way in Havaianas with socks underneath, and now that he'd taken off the flip-flops, there was a groove in his socks by his big toe that made his feet look like hooves.

"They seemed nice," I said.

"Who?" he said.

"Those women. The neighbors."

"Lesbians," he said.

"Dad, they were sisters!"

He shrugged. "And by the way," he said, "there's no need to be making public wisecracks about the tomato plant, thank

you very much. There's such a thing as family loyalty, you know, although I don't suppose . . ."

He trailed off, and I knew it was because he was about to say something about Mum or even about me. I wished he would. Anything was better than that fake smile. The smile said: "It wasn't your fault, lad." Which, of course, meant that it was.

I looked around the cabin — a lot of fake wood, a few stiff sofas with enough jazzy designs to hide the stains — while Dad got the rest of the stuff from the car. I figured the TV was hidden in one of the cabinets. Leisure World guaranteed a soundproof sleep (everybody likes nature, but you don't want it to wake you up), and so when Dad closed the door, the airtight seal made a sucking noise, and I felt my eyes pop out by a centimeter.

"Right," he said, looking at his watch. "We'll go and get our bikes, pop into the Tropical Dome for a quick dip, and then see if we can't find this Pancake House, eh? Brilliant."

THREE

So, you didn't drive at Leisure World, but you didn't walk either. You biked. If you were a little boy, you rode a BMX. If you were a full-grown man, you got a mountain bike. People of my size had to ride a "Shopper," which is a woman's bike — white and pink, with no crossbar and a basket on the front. To be honest, I had almost given up on looking anything other than an idiot. "Can't I have a BMX?" I asked.

"That's a kid's bike," Dad said.

"Health and safety," said the bike man.

"He needs all the health and safety he can get, this one," Dad said to the bike man. "He's a danger to himself and others."

That was a quote from the incident report the school had sent. The bike man appraised me with a new respect.

We took the bikes and rode away like husband and wife.

Some part of the Dome was always in view, and now, as we rode, we saw the trees peeling back to reveal it. It loomed huge above us. The shell of the Dome was made from giant hexagons

of reinforced plastic, and you could see inside. We stopped our bikes and watched kids deliriously throwing themselves down the water slide into the “rapids”—a stretch of moving water. I’d been out of school for the last two weeks, but it was mid-term break now, so there were lots of other kids about. It was weird to be around people my own age again. Men moved along the rapids in a long line like a supermarket queue; they seemed serious and purposeful as the current carried them along. I looked at their faces and — of course — I looked at their bodies. Real palm trees hung over the fake rocks by the edge of the water. You could hear the dull sound of screams from inside.

“I’m hungry,” I said.

“Surely not,” Dad said. “It’s only six. Let’s get in there and work up a proper appetite. It looks great.”

“I don’t really feel like swimming.”

“You don’t have to swim. Look. There’s loungers.” Dad pointed to an area of wooden decking, where a group of boys in swimming shorts were talking to two girls in bikinis. The girls were drinking milk shakes through straws and trying not to laugh.

“You could just sunbathe,” Dad said.

“I can’t *sunbathe*,” I said. “Because the sun is *outside*.”

“It’s a constant summertime temperature in there.”

“It’s warm enough out here,” I said, although it was pretty cold.

“Is this how it’s going to be, Daniel? For the whole holiday?”

I looked away.

"Most kids would give their right arm to be here. God, it's not like I'm asking you to take your shirt off."

"Dad, Jesus," I said. There were other families cycling by.

"Even if you did, nobody would look at you," Dad said.

He stopped talking then. I stared down at the T-shirt stretching across my soft body. Thinking back, he probably meant it in a nice way. He was probably trying to say that people are too busy getting on with their lives to tease a kid with a bit of extra weight. But there were two problems with what he said: first, I knew from experience that he was wrong. People *do* look. They *do* notice. Second, what kind of a state was I in, where the best thing I could hope for was that people wouldn't look at me?

"I'm going back to the cabin," I said.

I turned the bike around and began to walk away, but I could feel the full weight of his sadness behind me. Even though it was *me* who should have been upset, I knew that something like this could set him off. He might cry for a week or — even worse — drink.

So, I turned back.

He had his head in his hands. His feet were rooted to the floor, and the bike leaned between his legs. "Dad," I said.

"Yes."

"Can we just go to the pancake place? Maybe I'll feel like swimming tomorrow."

I waited for a moment. Eventually he took his hands away from his face. There was that smile again. Sadder than anything I'd ever seen.

"Course we can, Daniel."

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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