

# 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 oversized 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 towards 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 carriage, and Dad gave the driver our cabin number and luggage, and 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 grey 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 how rich they were, and families cycled 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 centre with a wave machine and palm trees and rapids. I'd seen it in the brochure; it was Leisure World's centrepiece.

I never would have admitted it to Dad, but I felt a thrill of anticipation as we left the all-weather pitches and tennis courts behind and drove deeper into the forest. The shadows of the tall, planted pines darkened the inside of the carriage, 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 holiday 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, rummaging around inside 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 wore a red hooded top over a swimming costume. Her hair was bedraggled and wet. I looked at the old man driving the carriage 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 metres away when I grabbed the wheel and dragged it to the left. We missed the girl by centimetres, 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.