

# Prologue

**P**lenty of people think about murder. It's not as crazy as it sounds. We all reach a point in life where we sit down and think:

*'What if?'*

*'Could I?'*

*'Would I?'*

If you could take that one annoying person, tie a breeze block to his ankles and throw him overboard, how much rope would you actually need? Just in theory, of course. I'm not suggesting because you've thought about it and calculated the depth of your local lake that you've brought the rope... It is, as morbid as it sounds, just one of those things we take great pleasure in thinking about.

But what if one day you woke up and realised that it was all entirely possible? Maybe you dreamt it. Or maybe you've spent too much time staring at the bricks in the wall. But that ridiculous idea you had yesterday, the one you told yourself was a passing thought, today seems almost plausible. No, it's more than that. You've thought about this. *Really* thought about it. You are certain, more certain than anything else you've ever known. You could kill him. You could kill him, and nobody

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would ever know about it.

Then all that remains is one question:

Why *shouldn't* you do it?

# Chapter 1

## Cosmo

Doctor Jamari's office was no bigger than a broom closet. It was a small space with sterile white walls that smelt of hospitals with a cheap flat-packed desk overflowing with notes balanced on more notes. The bulk of desk space not being used by notes was occupied by a large, grey computer. On top of the inch-thick monitor frame, he balanced another stack of files, which made it hard to see over the other side of the desk. In fact, if this doctor had a surface, he found a bunch of things to cover it with. Pens, fruit, Post-it notes, you name it; he filled the gaps with it. The room was busy with clutter, but it was as if he had found the most boring things he could and grouped them all together. Even his Post-it notes were beige.

When they first told me I was going to see a shrink, this broom closet wasn't what I was expecting. I had always thought shrinks were all about personality, or tranquillity, or other words ending in *'lity'*, but this little room was just plain dull. In the movies, when they go to see the psych doctor, the patient gets a big comfy lounge to have a nap on, there are fancy rich wallpapers with some kind of swirling pattern on them, and the

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doctor sits in his own chair as a metallic ball contraption on his desk bangs away in the background.

Doctor Jamari's office wasn't anything like that. You would think with spending twelve hours a day listening to crazies, he might use a little more imagination with his room. At the very least, I expected him to have one cat-themed motivational poster, or wave music in the background. This wasn't what I'd imagined at all. His space looked like a doctor's office that was run by, well, someone my age; it was in desperate need of an angry mum to tell him to clean up.

As white coats go, Doctor Jamari's not that bad. He's not as creepy and old as the others I've had. In the last two years, I've had six white coats work my case. They've all been the same except Jamari. The old ones only wanted to sit me down and have what they would call a *down-to-earth talk*, which meant they wanted to spend the next forty-five minutes lecturing me. They would talk for hours about what happened, reading from the police reports, asking me stupid questions. They would harp on at me with cryptic questions instead of just saying what they wanted. I suppose the first difference I noticed about Jamari was that he looked at me. The others didn't look. They glanced at me with concerned frowns. They searched for defects. They wanted to see a problem. When Jamari looks, it's to see the person.

He has his faults like any other human; he's never on time, never uses enough deodorant and he's a big fan of sitting in silence, in order to, in his words, *contemplate the past, help me live in my present and succeed in my future*. That's a favourite mantra of his. He talks a lot like that.

That's the thing about Jamari, he's one tie dye wristband

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away from a hippy, and yet talking to him is the easiest thing I've done since being sent here. I'm not saying I can't feel what I say in his sessions, it's just when I talk to him, I don't have to concentrate on the words I use. The big words no longer enter into what I have to say. Maybe it's because Doctor Jamari doesn't talk to me like I'm one of the nutters. I know I am, and so does he, but at least when we're in his white box all the extra stuff gets left outside. The crazy stuff becomes like an extra part of me, and not all of me. It's almost like having a hobby. In my spare time I read, I go for long runs and occasionally I talk to my imaginary friend who happens to be a cartoon squirrel. At least when I talk about all those parts of me, I may feel nuts, but he doesn't give me that wide-eyed, *where the hell did this psycho come from* look and that's a rare thing in a mental hospital. That's why when he's late, like today, I don't mind the waiting.

I twisted my swivel chair. I held the edge of the desk, pivoted left and pitched back right. I swung back and forth, letting the room sway around me. The boredom of waiting was starting to get to me. I flopped back into the chair and watched the room as it twisted into a giant turbine with a swirl. From the corner of my eye, I saw the red blur of Bandit. He looked bored too, and that was never a good thing.

I guess when I say my imaginary friend is a cartoon squirrel, it doesn't sound like the kind of hallucination you should be worried about. What can be harmful about a fluffy, woodland squirrel? Sure, he's a malicious murderer with an innate homicidal nature, but that would never stop Bandit from arguing that he couldn't be cute whilst doing it. In his words, *because he's worth it*. Bandit was a strange thing to look at, and I mean other than

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the fact he's a cartoon squirrel. He has chiselled abs that make a steroid-popping body builder look like a bulimic ant. And unlike any red squirrel you've seen before in kids books or on morning TV, he dresses head to toe in full military kit. The amount of firepower he brings changes every visit; sometimes it's just the odd shotgun or machete, but I've known him to go full Rambo. Today was a one-to-one therapy session, which always seemed to bring out the Die hard version of Bandit. Squatting in the corner of the office, Bandit was wearing a green military cap, a sash of grenades, a shotgun on his back and a penknife strapped to his leg. He was ready for war.

Instead of entertaining himself by picking out the dirt from his claws with his pocket knife like he had been for the last twenty minutes, he had found a new way to occupy his time. He removed a grenade from his sash and was now doing bicep curls in the far corner of the room. At least he was being quiet, I guess. It could be worse – he could be throwing them.

Bandit is a lot of psycho to deal with, and for a time I let it scare me. It's hard to sleep when there's an oversized squirrel on the end of your bed flicking through a Hello magazine, stabbing out the heads of the celebrities. Somewhere in the madness of it all, I've gotten a little used to it, and the drugs help. I still have moments of panic in times like these when I watch him do his bicep curls. It doesn't take much for bicep curls to turn into juggling, or for juggling to turn into a hot potato, and I'd rather not blow up on a good day.

I looked over and checked in his direction. Bandit seemed content with his own company, so I let myself flop back into the chair again. As I relaxed, and pivoted myself to turn in my chair,

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a flustered and a rather ripe smelling Doctor Jamari opened the door and stumbled into the room. Dumping his man bag, he darted around me, positioning himself behind the desk.

'My goodness! What a day!' He slumped into his own chair. 'I'm sorry, Cosmo, have I kept you long?' He was a hot, sweaty mess.

'No,' I lied, letting the chair come to a natural stop. There was no point making him feel bad about it. Bandit rolled his eyes at me from the corner of the room.

'Now, let us see...' he murmured while rummaging through the largest stack of notes. He picked out the fattest file from the bottom, arched it open and let the paper thud onto his desk.

'Where were we? Yes, here we are,' he said to himself. Bandit climbed the table and looked over the doctor's shoulder.

Jamari scanned his notes, leaving us in silence as he struggled to read his own handwriting. He picked up the pen from his pocket, scribbled down the date in the margin and placed the pen back down on the table. He settled back into his seat.

'How are you doing today?'

I shrugged at him and Bandit.

'Not bad, I guess.'

'You know, the phrase *not bad* is just another way of saying *not good*.'

'I'm okay, it's just...'

Bandit had grown bored with the conversation already and had decided it was more fun to place his paw over Doctor Jamari's hand on the desk and pull out his penknife. With slow, purposeful stab marks, he began attacking the wood between his fingertips. I couldn't take my eyes off the chipped wood as

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Bandit gained momentum and edged closer to skin.

‘Bandit being a little overactive?’ Doctor Jamari asked.

I dragged my eyes away from Bandit’s chaos in action and looked the doctor in the face.

‘Yep,’ I managed, without looking back down at Bandit.

He nodded at me in reply.

‘Do you want me to prescribe you something stronger for the time being? We can always lower it back down again later on.’

As he waited for my reply, Jamari turned to face his computer, switched it on and brought up a blank prescription. The sharp twist knocked Bandit off balance and with the least amount of grace possible, he tipped off the table, landing on his arse.

‘No, thank you,’ I said, battling an inner smirk.

Bandit went back to the corner of the room to nurse his bruised backside and injured pride.

‘I think it’ll be ok.’

The doctor hesitated before closing the screen.

‘If it gets too much, you know you can ask for help, right?’

‘Sure,’ I nodded back as he clicked the cross at the corner of the screen.

I tried not to watch Bandit from the corner of my eye, but I could still hear him swearing and muttering under his breath. I wanted to enjoy his bruised ego for longer, but the doctor had decided it was time to start the session now the niceties were out of the way.

‘We covered a lot in our last session...’ He relaxed into his chair. ‘I know as doctors we tend to overuse the word ‘progress’ but I like to think we have made steps that can help you on your



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journey, Cosmo.’ He sounded as hopeful and as spiritually in sync as normal.

‘I guess so,’ I replied. It was a forced answer, but that’s what I’ve found doctors want. A reply or answer to everything, even if you don’t have one.

‘Have you taken any time to give it some thought? Or did it leave you with any questions or feelings you want to talk about?’

I checked on Bandit. He was still sulking in the corner, swearing at Doctor Jamari.

‘*Why’s he still here?*’ Although Bandit was busy, I whispered my question to the doctor. The last thing I wanted was another outburst from Bandit. I knew what Jamari’s answer would be before he said anything.

*There is no answer.*

‘That’s what these sessions are for. I’m here to help you figure that out.’

His words were all too familiar, but I suppose once you’ve heard them once a week for six months, they begin to sound normal.

I fell back into the chair with a defeated flop and sighed to myself. My fluffy companion would define my life for everyday I lived and then maybe more. Two years of drugs and therapy were two years he remained unscathed. Bandit was a curse, and he remained as vivid as the day he came into my life. Just because he wasn’t real, didn’t mean it didn’t feel like he was. His fur felt real, his voice was as loud as mine, and his touch was warm; he was as real as I was, or anyone was. I looked down at him. *He’s never going.* I didn’t have to be a shrink to know that. Bandit gave me the finger for staring at him for too long.

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‘Cosmo?’ Doctor Jamari pulled me back.

‘Everything happens in its own time.’ His voice was as calm as always. ‘Bandit will go when your mind is ready to let him go. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but it’s the truth. There are no magic potions or shortcuts. But it’s important you know, Cosmo, until that time comes, I’m not going anywhere either.’

I could tell he meant it. He was, after all, Mr Nice Guy. I looked at his face, those dark brown eyes. I doubted that man could lie to anyone. Over the last two years it was a promise I’d heard a lot, and it’s something I’ve never seen happen. Doctor Jamari might think he means it, but so did my parents. It didn’t take them long to change their minds. They thought it was better to mourn for the child they’d lost than live with the monster I had become. One day he’ll look at me the same, because what I’ve done will always outweigh who I want to be. I couldn’t find the words to tell him he was wrong, and I didn’t know how to tell him I wished he was right. So, I nodded and flashed him a half smile. He smiled back. He resettled himself in his chair and went to take a sip from his dirty coffee cup before making a face at the grim contents and placing it back down on the desk.

Bandit moved past his sore pride and sulking and turned his attention back to doing bicep curls, grunting with each rep. His red fur blushed with determination. At least one of us had settled.

‘Okay.’ He leant back in his chair, ‘Now... We need to discuss the request you made last week.’

I put my sulk on hold.

‘You mean, Jay and Luke?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And as your doctor, I have to admit; I have

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some concerns about you doing this. I don't know if we're ready to take that step yet.' He tried to give me another reassuring look. It was that *please don't bite the messenger* look that postmen give to Staffordshire bull terriers. I couldn't stomach watching another doctor telling me no, more so because I could see he was trying to be nice about it. I turned my face towards my feet. Mr Nice Guy was supposed to be different.

'They've never let me go. I don't know why I hoped for different.' I shook my head at my reflection from the shiny floor tiles. 'You're the one who keeps telling me I need to work through my past,' I said, getting more upset than I wanted to. 'How can I do that if nobody lets me talk to them?' He gave me a slow, thoughtful nod and clenched his lips together.

'Have you thought about what you'd say if you could?' he asked.

'Well, yeah. Sometimes that's all I can think about.'

Doctor Jamari nodded again as he knotted his hands together and relaxed them in his lap.

'What's that like?' he asked.

'I don't know,' I said, avoiding both his stare and the grunting face of Bandit in the corner.

'Yes, you do,' he replied before waiting for my answer.

'Sometimes, when I think of them, we're just hanging out like we used to, before all this happened. It feels like being home.'

'And after all those times you meet them in your thoughts, what is it you say to them, or want to say?'

'I would say I miss them. I guess I want them to know that I haven't forgotten them, and that I think about them every day.'

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I swallowed down the anger and sadness that settled with the lump in my throat. ‘They can’t be in my life anymore. I know that. But it doesn’t stop me wishing they were, you know. They were the only friends I ever had.’

He paused long enough for me to settle myself again and scribbled something down.

‘And in these thoughts, what do they say back?’ he asked.

‘Fuck all!’ Bandit yelled from across the office before giggling himself into a stupor.

I shot a look to Bandit, hoping he’d shut the hell up, but he didn’t.

‘Over here, Cosmo. Try to stay with me if you can,’ Jamari interrupted.

‘It changes every time. Sometimes it’s like I’m talking, but they can’t hear me. Other times I talk, but no words come out. I want a chance. That’s all I’m asking for. I want to do something that’s real.’ Doctor Jamari nodded back at me.

‘There’s over two months before the memorial service, let me think on it.’ Wide-eyed and alert, I looked at him square in his eyes. Bandit dropped his grenade and leapt onto the table between us. He wasn’t attacking, and he wasn’t being a pain. By the way he eyeballed us, he was as shocked as I was. He held his red-faced cheeks with his paws, and his jaw slapped open.

‘I’m not saying yes, understand? But I will consider it as long as you do me a favour.’

‘What?’ I said with growing hesitation.

‘I want you to spend some time contemplating the idea of this visit. What it means for you as well as them and then I would like to hear you talk about it in Group.’

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‘Can’t I just talk about it with you?’

‘You can talk about anything you want with me, but you already know that. I think it’ll be good for you to open up to somebody new,’ he said. ‘One day when you’re out of here, you’ll be living in a world full of strangers, but today you are here. Today you have people around who you can depend on if you let them. You need to take from therapy what you can, while you can. It may be the only time you can open up to a group of people that won’t look at you differently for it.’

‘What if I don’t do it?’

‘You have two months. Think about it. If you want this opportunity, you need to try.’

‘Okay.’

Bandit threw himself backwards off the table, laughing. He hit the tiles with a thud so loud he had to stop and catch his breath before he choked on his laughter. He wriggled around in fits, rolling belly up, farted loudly then continued to flop around, giggling. It seemed he had as much faith in me as I did.

# Chapter 2

## Harley

*Group* is the most tedious activity you can make a bunch of teenagers do. There are three different support groups (or torture) you can get forced into, on top of education and therapy. You have Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Group, or CBT, which is the one where you sit around picking apart a problem you all share into smaller chunks. Say you're in the Polars' Group for CBT; they would base it on a subject, like how you feel when somebody writes negative comments on your Facebook wall. Then you all talk about your thoughts, feelings and physical aspects of that issue. As a group, you all try to figure out what small changes you can make to fix it. The aim is to show you you're not the only crazy that feels that way. What they forget is not everyone thinks the same way. That's the thing about irrational thoughts, they don't tend to make sense. They put us in these boxes labelled crazy and expect us all to be the same. But the number of crazy teens in the world is the same as children that are born. CBT forgets that a lot of the time.

Mindfulness Group is the Zen-like treatment. It's all about finding your centre and focusing your energy to a calmer state.

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What they mean is we're going to get you all together and force you to try different things to make you look as stupid as you feel. So far this year I've meditated, which I slept through. I've tried Tai Chi, which makes you look like an old guy faking Kung Fu in slow motion. Yoga, which turns the room into a fart factory if you bend too far. And last of all, exercise, because we all know how running on a treadmill puts life into perspective.

CBT and Mindfulness are the least painful group activities, especially if you can get behind the hot girl in yoga. The worst of the worst is Small Group. They make it sound as if it's the Holy Grail for teenagers. It's a therapy where you, as the name suggests, sit in a small group circle, and just talk. It goes on and on, but you cannot look like you're bored. You have to fake some kind of interest. The best I've ever come up with is a glazed over, frozen-screen-type facial expression. It's a combination of *I couldn't care less about your problems* and *my ask me and I'll kill you stare*. It's a personal favourite. It works well in circle-type situations like these. Nobody wants to ask the angry guy what he's thinking about. They keep telling me that this Small Group nonsense is optional, but yet again, here I am every other bloody day sat in a circle surrounded by idiots.

Today's selection of sacrificial lambs comprised of myself, Kelly (a polar), Kabe (a fairy), Isla-Rose (a colourful mix of polar and fairy), Tia (the up-chucker), and Rayden.

We were sat in a circle made up of plastic chairs spread arms distance apart, arranged boy/girl, boy/girl with two staff nurses either end of the circle. The staff call it a support circle. I refer to it as *the gateway to the inner circle of hell*. I'm sure they have books upon books sitting in some library that say all this is good

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for me, but I somehow doubt that. Nobody needs to know how stealing jeans from Bluewater makes Kelly feel better. It is by far the longest hour of my life. One I will never get back.

Today seems to be poor Kelly's day for slaughter in the Small Group circle. She's been in and out of confinement over the last week for stealing other patients' belongings. She is what we call a polar, short for bipolar. One day she is Miss Popular, happy and normal, and the next she can't get out of bed. If mood swings were a complication to depression or polars, Kelly's swings would be closer to Ripsaw at Alton towers. Her parents dumped her here a month ago, on their way to a New York business trip and haven't been back since. Polars bore me because they seem to consist entirely of tears, but Kelly I feel sorry for on days like these. It was her birthday last week; she's just turned fourteen. Us hard-core crazies, we don't get a choice in it, nor do our families. Her parents put her in here like it was day care. She only has us, and that's a sorry state to be left in. That would make any normal kid sad, let alone a polar.

She twitched away in her seat as she mumbled on about feeling like left luggage, and how silly she feels for it. The others were half paying attention like I was, trying not to get sucked into it. As much as we were all on Kelly's side, it still felt awkward having to hear it all in between sobs.

Six is the highest number of people you're allowed to have in Small Group. Any more and it falls apart. Wellspring will tell you it is for listening and sharing purposes, but in all honesty, it's more likely a control issue. Too many crazies in one place isn't a party, it becomes a riot. Wellspring Hospital for Children isn't huge, but the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Unit



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here is one of the biggest in the country. Our ward is top-notch, according to the NHS. We have a secure twenty-bed inpatient ward, a courtyard to stare at the half-dead koi, a TV room that gets three channels and a full nursing team of dummies that look like they want to be there less than the patients.

‘How do you feel about that, Harley?’ asked the fat dummy at the other end.

Everyone looked in my direction, except Kelly, who was sobbing into her chunky, red-knit jumper. *Oh no, they’ve moved on.*

‘Erm... Great.’ It was the best I could do. It was a fifty-fifty shot in the dark. Whatever she had said, I have two choices: make something up and hope I get lucky or ask her to repeat herself. Getting a twenty-minute lecture on respecting others is not what I need to make this afternoon worse. I give a fake smile back at her, scratch my head and wait for her to say something in return. The right answer is normally emotion-based in this kind of scenario. Maybe I should have gone with the, *I know it feels rough right now, but you’ll get through it* speech. She was crying, after all.

Why won’t the ground eat you up when you want it to?

‘Well, that’s good to hear,’ she said.

Phew, I think, as I take a deep breath. I had pulled it off.

I leant back, relaxed a little, and waited for the dummy to move on to her next victim, but she didn’t.

‘We’re ready to hear what you have to share when you are, Mr Layton.’

My heart skipped a beat when I realised what I had agreed to. As it turns out, Kelly was cried out, and the dummy had

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tagged me in.

What the hell do I say now? The rest of the crazies seem keen to hear me talk, except for one or two. I've talked once before because I wanted to see if you could scare the smile off a dummy's face. It turns out, the more scared they get, the more stretched and rigid it becomes. The smile creeps up the side of the face until the corners hold up their eyelids. They left me alone after that. In fact, this was the first time since they'd tried it. So, I guess there's only one thing to do – make it bigger and bolder.

'Why don't you try starting with something small? Maybe something that's had an effect on you today. It doesn't need to be anything in particular. It could be something good or something you've enjoyed. Or you could talk about the day in general.'

The fat dummy and her backup had both put their pens down and were already leaning in, enjoying watching me squirm. Kelly had swallowed some of her sobbing and was staring at me with bright red eyes from the other side of the group. In fact, only two of the group didn't care to see me in pain. Kabe was only ever in Group in a physical sense and not mentally, a skill all us crazies wished we had. Today he had left his chair and was wandering in the fringes of the circle on all fours, humming a tune similar to the national anthem under his breath. His kind of crazy you left alone. Even the dummies let him be. He was the crazy even the crazies worried about. And then there was Rayden. He was part of the Wellspring household before me. I'm not sure how long he's been here. He doesn't like to talk about it. He doesn't like to talk, period. Instead of watching me, he continued to pick at his nails, chewing and biting on his thumb.

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'Mr Layton?' she repeated.

'What?' I snapped. She gave me a horrified look. I was done for.

'*We're waiting,*' she scolded. Her red lipstick smile clenched before smoothing back out to a forced, *oh so happy to be here* smile.

'If you want to know what bothers me, look around. Your whole establishment's way of thinking keeps us all nuts. All those stupid things you do day in and day out, like it's nothing at all. That's what bothers me.'

'Would you care to give us an example?' she pushed, knowing where this would end up. Me, strapped to a bed, doped up to my eyeballs, yelling at the ceiling. I think she'd like all of us to be that way. She'd see it as controllable, and this dummy wanted nothing but order.

'Bananas,' I said.

'Bananas?' she looked as puzzled as the rest of the group.

'It's the only fruit you serve at breakfast. I've been here one year, two months and six days. And you still only serve bananas with breakfast. Do you know how infuriating that is to someone like me?'

'Erm... No. No, I don't.' She looked around lost and confused for a second. Anyone would think she was trying to talk to sane people. 'Why don't you try to explain to us why it makes you feel that way?'

She seemed amused by my admission of anger and forced back a snigger under her smile at the same time. She has no idea who she is talking to. I could never work out whether they didn't read a patient's file, or if they thought it was just funnier

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to hear the patients say it themselves. I was being set up to be her lunchtime jibe. I knew it. If that was the case, I would scare her straight. If she wants a story to tell, it's better if it's a horror, it's not so funny then.

'Because the banana shares fifty percent of the same DNA sequences as a human. It's the living part in everyone's genetic makeup.' The dummy wrinkled up her nose in confusion. 'The strangest part in realising that we, in some way are related to the banana is that we as a species consume more than one and a half billion bananas worldwide every year. Five million are eaten in the United Kingdom alone. That's an average of a hundred bananas per year, per person. Unless, of course, you live in this place and then the average is a lot higher.'

'I don't see the connection you're trying to make, Harley,' said the supporting dummy.

'Well, the reason my parents dumped me here in the first place was because they caught me eating... well, let's just say I broke into my father's funeral home and chewed on something I shouldn't have.' The room went silent. Even Kabe had stopped crawling to paw at his head with both hands. It made the room feel still. 'What I don't get is why eating a banana isn't considered cannibalism, but when you're caught nibbling on a dead man's toe, it is?' I waited for a response from the dummies, but they both sat there sharing a gaping wide-eyed look.

The fat one leading the session looked at me in panic, her smile now almost touching her eyelids out of nervousness. She opened her lips to say something, but hesitated and closed them again.

'One is clearly more alive than the other. I mean, how can

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you compare the level of life in a decomposing forty-year-old man to a fruit that has barely touched the ground before it's packaged and on the breakfast table?'

'That's... very interesting,' she said. 'But I think that's enough for today, Harley.' She butted in, more so out of fear than the sanity of the group, I'd imagine. But I wasn't about to stop now I had her full attention.

'Did you know there's a university in America that is looking into the life of fruit after it's picked because it's said that the cells don't instantly die, instead the fruit still responds to external stimuli, changing colour and ripening because of the effect of sunlight? The banana doesn't taste better because it's dying; it gets better because it's living. The same can't be said of humans, trust me.'

'Harley, that's enough now,' she said in attempt to shut me up again.

'I'm merely saying in comparison I've eaten far more of my own DNA in bananas than I have in humans. And this system we have that frowns on me for being different, doesn't actually know the significance of either one of them.' Rayden laughed, I think it was supposed to be one of those quiet laughs you keep to yourself under your breath, but with the silence in the room, it boomed off the walls, making the dummies nervous. The group hummed with excitement.

'Enough!' She yelled over the calamity and bustle from the excited audience. 'I think that might be enough group talk for today.' Aggravated, she stomped away leaving the other dummy to guide us putting the chairs away. This one must be on the top ten of Group outbursts. It was better than the time Kabe

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stole the dummy's clipboard and made them chase him around the hall for ten minutes to get it back. But nowhere near as good as the time a polar took a chunk from a doctor. All he did was ask her to try to have a more positive outlook on her current situation and *chomp*. At least the dummy brigade was off my back for a while. It might give me another month of peace before I have to make up something else again.

3 a.m.

I could feel like myself after lights out. The night was a welcome reprieve at Wellspring. It was the only time they stepped back and left you alone. You were locked in, but it locked them out for eight hours, too. I've spent most of my nights awake staring at the ceiling, just because I can. They may lock me in my room and cut out the light, but it doesn't mean I have to sleep. That was my choice. One they can't take away from me. My watch ticks on my nightstand. Its rhythmic tick is the only sound I can hear. It's the sound I drift off to when the night starts to feel long.

I spend the darkest part of the night thinking about the last time I went on a family holiday. I was never part of one of those rich families that went away every year. But once every four or five years, we'd get packed up and taken somewhere new. We last went four years ago. They swooped us up in the middle of the night and put us on a plane, followed by another smaller one that took us straight across Africa. It was the biggest adventure I had ever been a part of. We journeyed through Kenya for a week on this big game safari. I had only seen animals in zoos and documentaries before, and the idea of being in the wild was

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new to twelve-year-old me.

We got driven around in jeeps during the day, spotting animals, taking photos, doing all the normal tourist things. At night, we slept in these luxury tent structures erected in the middle of nowhere. We were miles from anywhere. There were no great gaggles of people, no motorways, nothing except us and the stars. It was the only place I had ever laid my head and thought *I'm alone here*. It was the most peaceful feeling I've ever had. The thought that this place didn't belong to man was soothing to the soul. It was free. I could feel the curvature of the plain under my mattress. I could sense the danger of animals roaming nearby, and when I looked up, I could see every star in the sky. Not the ones you see through a telescope or the ones you think you see from your garden. These were the ones you can only see when the rest of the world goes dark. It was as if these perfect stars grew out of blackness to shine down on the world below, and that night I was part of that. Staring at the block white ceiling, I tried to hold on to that feeling. I tried to let that feeling of space work down my body until I could feel the freedom in my fingertips and the night sky above my head. It didn't stay with me long. The trouble with living in a mental hospital is that after any period of silence, someone will always do something disturbing to balance it out. The scream did just that. It was a horror movie shrill. The high-pitched scream, first desperate and hurt, woke the night. You would think screaming into the night was commonplace behind these walls, but that wasn't true. You heard crying from patients, people muttering through the walls, sometimes someone would say a prayer, but never a scream like this. It wasn't the sound of someone terrified

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after a nightmare. It was like the sound from inside the terror itself. One of us, behind one of these walls, was hurting. This was not a scream out of insanity, this noise had something more than fear behind it. It was the sound of a person whose soul and heart was tormented by more than the normal pains of life. This was the sound of a lost cause finding its way onto our ward. And what started with a desperate cry turned into a mournful wail.

‘NO!’ she cried over and over again. ‘I won’t let you have him. He’s mine,’ the voice begged, pleaded into the night. To whom and for what, I couldn’t piece together. But this wasn’t a place for logical thoughts and the night can play tricks on unrested minds.

‘You can’t take him from me. Take me in his place, but let the boy live.’ The words were desperate and fraught with pain. ‘Please....’ she sobbed ‘... don’t let the boy be dead.’

Within moments of the cries starting, the sound of locks turning and rushed footsteps on the long corridor began. A barrage of dummies and white coats flew past my room. I could hear the squeaky wheel from the gurney being pushed past. This sounds bad. The gurney stopped three doors down from my room, and the familiar sounds of opening doors and straps being prepared followed. I could hear the plastic tear of syringes being readied and the pop of vials of drugs being opened. A doctor called out for more Midazolam. The haunted yells turned to mournful whines. And as the door closed behind them and the beeps locked it, I waited at the window in my door to get a glimpse of the soul that was suffering tonight. I stood alone in the dark thinking to myself I knew exactly who it was. And as the gurney slowed past my room, I saw the drugged, frail body



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of Isla-Rose being pushed away.

She was a thin girl, with a long natural wave to her dark hair, but as I looked at her now, it made her seem even more pale and skinny, more a bag of bones than a girl. There was a simple beauty to her face with soft eyes, pastel pink life in her cheeks and chapped lips. Isla-Rose was a born and bred didikai. Once a polar asked her what that was, and she replied, 'It means I'm a Romano Rai, my home can be any home as long as it's under the sky.'

Few round here knew what a real gypsy was until they met Isla. It always made perfect sense to me. She has a face you could only imagine being outside, with the wind blowing her hair into her eyes as she watched over horses. She was comatose by the time they wheeled her past me, but even then, with drool on her lips and tears in her eyes, she looked too wild to be tamed. As the wheels squeaked in the distance and Isla-Rose was rolled away, I could still hear her sobs on the echo of the long corridor she left behind her. The dark of the night was full of terrors for us all. Some monsters can't be hidden under beds or in our heads. In the dark I wondered what horror had found her. I thought of that pained voice and listened to it as it bounced between my ears inside my head. *Don't let the boy be dead*, she had said. As mad as we all are, I didn't doubt the sincerity of her words. Nobody begs in the night out of madness. What they crave is mercy. And begging for mercy can make madmen of us all. I closed my eyes, thinking of Isla. I lay her down in my dream next to me, under the open Kenyan sky, so we could both pretend to be safe and free, and watched the rest of the night pass us by.