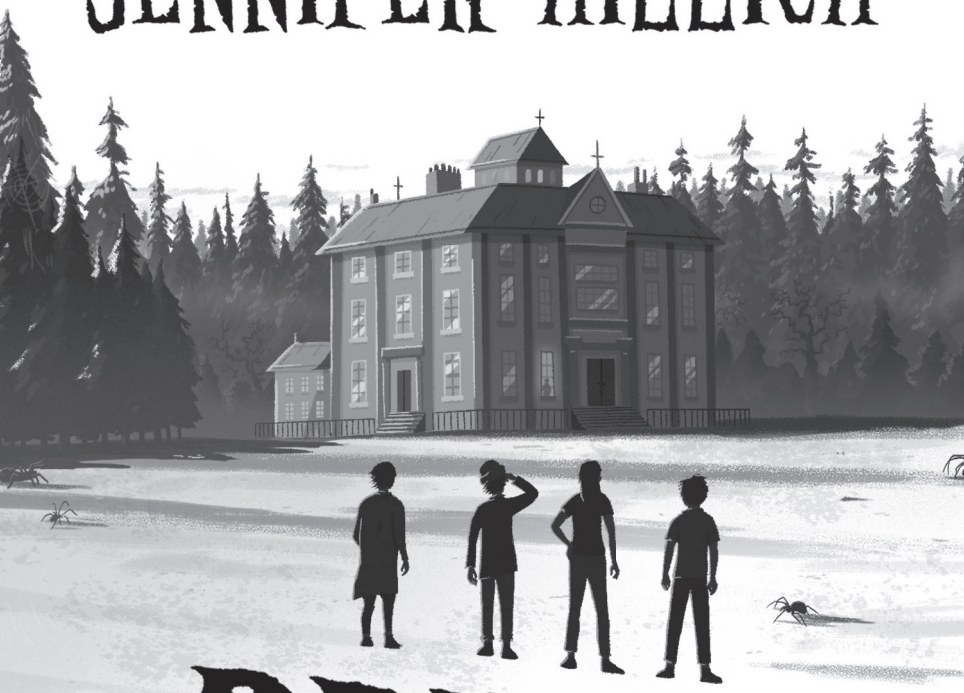
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DREAD WOOD



Farshore

CHAPTER ONE

CLUB LOSER

There aren't many worse things than being in school, but being in school on a Saturday is one of them. Water drips off the trees that loom like ancient sentinels over the path to the locked gates, and circle the grounds all the way to the Dread Wood that backs on to the school. I wonder how many weekend detentions they've watched over. How many groups of hacked-off kids scuffing up the gravel lane, wishing they were somewhere else. An icy droplet falls from a low oak branch, rolls down my neck and under the

collar of my sweatshirt, but I see the others – three of them – waiting up ahead, so I make sure I don't flinch. When I reach the gates I keep my head down so I won't make eye contact.

'I'd honestly rather be dead than here right now,' Hallie says. I know it's her without looking up because it's the kind of stupid thing she'd say.

'Really?' someone snorts. It's Gus, the crazy kid who seems to live his life by a different set of rules to everyone else. I have no idea what they are – he's as unpredictable as a dog in a field of squirrels. Like walking chaos. 'This is a seriously grim way to spend a Saturday, but I'm not sure it's as bad as death.'

'Of course it isn't,' the other girl snaps. Naira. Uptight, overachiever, one hundred per cent perfect, on the surface. Spends a lot of her time using her brilliance to make other people feel worthless. 'And, let me make it clear right now that none of you are to talk to

me for the duration of this consequence. I don't want anything to do with any of you losers.'

Gus laughs.

'If we're losers, Naira,' Hallie says, 'then welcome to the club.'

'Club Loser!' Gus whoops, jumping up and grabbing a tree branch, sending a shower of water drops over everyone else. He swings there for a few seconds, as Naira shrieks and Hallie swears, both of them swiping at the droplets like they're being stung by wasps.

I let the water roll down my face, enjoying the thought that it's been on an epic journey, falling from the clouds high above, then trickling through the tree, and finally landing on me. I look up at Gus.

'We should make a badge, guys,' he shouts. 'I'll use my best pens to draw a logo. And we simply *must* have a motto.' He puts on a fake posh voice for the last part.

'Have some respect for the tree, lame-brain,'

Hallie says. ‘It’s like a million years old. If you break that branch, I’ll break your arm.’ Hallie uses her anger for both good and evil – it seems to me she has a ton of it stored up and she loudly puts it on display. There are unauthorised pin badges on her sweatshirt declaring her pride in being vegetarian, an LGBTQ+ ally, and a welcomer of refugees.

‘It’s just a dirty lump of wood and dry leaves,’ says Naira, glaring upwards while smoothing her hair back.

‘I know we’re not friends, but describing me like that is hurtful, Naira.’ Gus drops from the branch, and I let out a snort of laughter, even though I hadn’t planned to.

‘So he is listening,’ Hallie says, hands on her hips like she’s just won a game.

Gus’s eyes open wide and he clutches Hallie’s arm. ‘Wait. Do trees have ears?’

‘She meant Loner Boy over there.’ Naira tilts her head in my direction. ‘Table-flipper.’

‘Yeah, all right, tray-launcher,’ I say. ‘I seem

to remember it was you who started the whole thing.' I regret speaking as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Just like I regret lasting less than three months in Year 7 before getting involved in a situation that the rest of the school now refers to as 'The Dread Wood Riot'. Riot is an exaggeration, but I can see how it led to all of us being here, in detention, on a Saturday. Anyway, let the rest of them think what they want, and don't get involved. I just have to get through the next four hours.

The sound of someone whistling makes me turn back to the gates. The school groundskeeper is walking slowly towards us, keys dangling.

'Finally,' Naira says. 'Let us in, will you, so we can get this over with?'

'Someone's in a hurry.' He smiles as he chooses a key from the bunch and puts it into the lock.

'She knows she's here for the same reason as the rest of us, right?' Gus whispers to Hallie,

loud enough so we can all hear.

'Not sure,' Hallie says. 'You can never tell with Naira. I don't think anyone really knows her.'

'Is her name even Naira?' Gus whispers as we start to crunch up the drive. Naira is speeding ahead, Gus a few metres behind her, talking to himself, with Hallie trailing, eyes glued to the phone in her hand. I keep to the back, still in half a mind to turn and run. I notice a beetle on my sleeve that must have fallen with the rainwater from the tree. I let it crawl on to my finger, then carefully transfer it back to the trunk of the nearest oak. As it stops to take in its surroundings, I hear the school gates clank shut behind me, and the click as the groundskeeper locks us in. The moment for escape has gone.

'You're to sign in at student services,' the groundsman calls. 'Mr Canton will meet you there. Good luck.' He starts whistling again – sharp and clear. It's a familiar tune that I can't

quite place and I can't be bothered to wonder about. None of us turn around and thank him.

Dread Wood High is a weird place – a mix of old and new, historical and modern, in the way it looks and the way it feels. The main reception and offices are in the old mansion, a grand building that would be nice to look at if it wasn't a school. Imagine horses pulling carriages, ladies in bonnets, and gentlemen in high boots and frilly shirts, and you'll get the picture. It has a conservatory and ornamental gardens out the back, but only sixth formers and teachers are allowed in there. Nothing makes me want to see a place more than being told I'm not allowed, but when I sneaked on to the science-block roof once, I got a good look. There are bushes cut into ball shapes, a pond with a fountain, and a load of smug Year 12s, who didn't notice me laughing at them. I'm not bothered about going in there now. It's the kind of place where, if it was in a movie, there would either be a wedding or a murder. You'd

think they would have used a place like this for something nice, but I guess whoever owned it was some kind of charity do-gooder because instead they decided to turn it into a school for the local estate kids.

The rest of the school was added bit by bit as they took on more kids, so every building is in its own different style. None of it matches or connects. Even more random is that when the school was a rich person's manor they kept animals on the land, and the school kept them on. I mean, obviously the original animals died a long time ago, but they still keep pigs and chickens for 'student well-being'. The pig yard is my favourite place in the school.

Student services is downstairs in the main classroom block – a concrete place that looks like a prison or hospital from the outside. Not much difference, really, as I want to be there as much as I'd want to be in either of those places. When we arrive, Mr Canton is waiting. We were told to wear our PE kits and trainers

for ‘outdoor activities’ – no further explanation given – and Mr Canton is dressed in a painfully neat, matching tracksuit, T-shirt and middle-aged trainers that he clearly thinks are cool, but are not. He has a baseball cap and clipboard in his hand.

‘Good morning, Mr Canton.’ Naira smiles. Putting on the perfection again. ‘I’m so sorry you had to give up your Saturday morning to oversee our totally justified Back On Track session.’

‘Morning, guys! Great day for it,’ he bounces as he talks.

‘Are we going out on your yacht?’ Gus asks, in a posh voice to copy Mr Canton’s. ‘Or perhaps a spot of lacrosse?’

I bite my lip so I don’t laugh. I am not here to get pally with anyone, even though Gus is proving to be entertaining. School is a place I come to as little as I can get away with. It’s pointless, just a waste of time when I could be earning money to help my family. And no one

else at Dread Wood High can understand that. I've tried having friends in the past, and it just ends in a mess, so there's no way I'm going to waste my time buddying up with this lot.

'L-O-L!' Mr Canton smiles, and we all visibly cringe. Even Naira's fake smile cracks. 'By the end of today's session, I'm sure you'll all be right back on track and heading towards greatness.' He puts his hand up to shield his eyes like he's looking off into the distance.

'Or we'll be considering throwing ourselves on the track,' Hallie says.

'Come on, Hallie. Let's see that positive mental attitude. I know it's in there somewhere.' He ticks off our names on his clipboard list.

'What's with the Victorian register?' Gus says. 'Are you sending us to clean the chimneys? Are we doing role play? Oh, should I get changed?'

'Excellent questions, Mister Gustav,' Mr Canton chuckles. 'And as much as I'd like to

train you up to be a gang of raggedy pickpockets, I'm afraid that's not on the agenda for today. We're having some technical difficulties, hence the return to paper and pen.'

Did he just say hence?

'You just said hence,' Hallie groans.

'Personally, I'm grateful for the opportunity to realign my vision and values, sir,' says Naira.

'That's the spirit.' He grins. 'And how about you, Angelo?' He turns to me. 'Are you ready to start turning things around? Hashtag "get things Back On Track"?'

Mr Canton is actually all right, but he clearly needs help.

'Sir,' I say. 'No one hashtags any more.'

'What? I thought it was all the rage on the socials.'

'No, Mr C,' Hallie says. 'Just no.'

'Right then,' he says. 'Onwards!' And he marches out of student services like this is his best day ever. We follow him past the main block and over to the tennis courts. A pale sun

dips in and out of scurrying clouds, sending shafts of weak sunshine across the flat grey expanse. He opens the PE locker – which is basically a big shed next to the courts – and pulls out some black bags and litter pickers.

'Bags inside the locker, please,' he gestures for us to put our stuff inside. 'They'll be safe in here. Plus . . .' he straps a pouch that matches his tracksuit around his waist and unzips it, 'I'll take your phones.'

We all groan.

'Mr C, my phone does not want to be anywhere near your bumbag.' Hallie looks at the pouch in disgust. 'Seriously, I'd rather set it on fire.'

'They'll be safe in here,' he grins. 'I promise to protect them with my life.'

'I don't have a phone,' Gus says. 'I'm off grid right now.'

'Hand it over, Gustav,' Mr Canton says. 'And make sure you turn them off. I don't want any startling vibrations going off in my man pouch.'

Naira sighs and hands him her phone. Gus pulls his out of his pocket, switches it off and passes it over. I know there's no point arguing so I hand mine in too. Hallie clings to hers, looking like she's going to be sick.

'Hallie,' Mr Canton says. 'Come on.'

'This is an infringement of my human rights.'

'It's just a phone.'

'This is like a punishment from the Dark Ages – I'm sure there are laws against taking someone's phone at the weekend.'

'In case you've forgotten, you're here for a reason, Hallie. This is a Back On Track session – a consequence, not a punishment. Let's grab this opportunity to remind ourselves of our school values. TRACK: what does it stand for?'

We all look at him, eyes rolling.

'Angelo.' He turns to me. 'Let's start with you. The "T" in TRACK, what value does it correspond to?'

'Teamwork,' I say.

'And Gustav, give me the "R", please.'

Gus opens his mouth to speak.

'And let's not waste time going through all the negative "R" words you know – rubbish, ridiculous, ramshackle. I've heard them all before.'

'If those are the bad "R" words you've heard, sir, I really think I could blow your mind with some new vocab.' Gus grins.

'Just the value, please, Gus,' Mr Canton says.

Gus sighs. 'Respect.'

'And Hallie, what's the "A", please?'

Hallie smiles. 'Authoritarianism?'

Mr Canton smiles back. 'While I am very impressed by your vocabulary, Hallie, that was not the word I was looking for. Here's a clue – this word is particularly relevant to you.'

'Can I guess?' Gus raises his hand. 'A bunch of words come to mind.'

Hallie stink-eyes Gus and sighs. '"A" is for Attitude.'

'Excellent, I knew it was in there somewhere,'

says Mr Canton. ‘Definitely one for you to mull over, Hallie, while your phone is safe in my man pouch.’

He holds his hand out. Hallie huffs and swears, and finally hands over her phone.

‘The good news is that I think you all have plenty of value “C” – Curiosity – already, so let’s move to . . .’

‘“K” is for Kindness,’ Naira butts in.

‘Great enthusiasm there, Naira,’ says Mr C. ‘Lovely to see you keen as always, but what I want you to do is really think about that word, what it means, and how you put it into action.’

I’ve known Naira since primary. She’s the star pupil, perfect scores in everything, and works harder than anyone. This is the first time I’ve ever seen her get in trouble. But for all that perfection, she doesn’t seem happy. It’s been a long time since I saw a genuine smile on her face.

‘I’m kind,’ Naira says. She might as well have said ‘I’m purple’ or ‘I’m Batman’, and it would

have been as true. Everyone makes a face. ‘What? I am! I organise fundraising events, I help at the senior citizen coffee mornings, I did a flipping sponsored silence for orphaned elephants, for flip’s sake. Why would I do those things if I wasn’t kind?’

‘So you could get elected to the student council,’ Hallie says.

‘So you can write it on your university application,’ I add, seeing as she asked.

‘Because you love the smell of old people’s hair,’ says Gus. ‘Every time you lean over to give them a refill, you get to inhale that fossilised goodness.’

‘We’re not here to cast judgements, guys,’ Mr C says, giving us a look. ‘But what I’d like you to think about, Naira, is motivation. If you do something kind because it will benefit you in some way, is it really kindness?’

Naira opens her mouth, but can’t seem to find the words. As unlikely as it is, I swear she looks hurt.

‘About my phone,’ Hallie says, and the rest of us groan. ‘What if there’s an emergency?’

‘We’re in school for a few hours to see if we can get you guys working together and hashtag “Back On Track”. We’re going to be collecting litter, tending to the school animals, and hopefully having some first-class bantz . . .’

Another group groan.

‘. . . nothing even remotely bad is going to happen.’

And then a noise rings out – a desperate scream that splits the quiet of the empty grounds and fills the air around us. It’s like nothing I’ve ever heard before and a sound I know I’ll never unhear. It’s urgent fear and pain. And it’s coming from inside the grounds.