

DREAD WOOD  
DEADLY  
DEEP



*For my lovely friend, Sarah Hill. Thank you for everything.*



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JENNIFER KILLICK

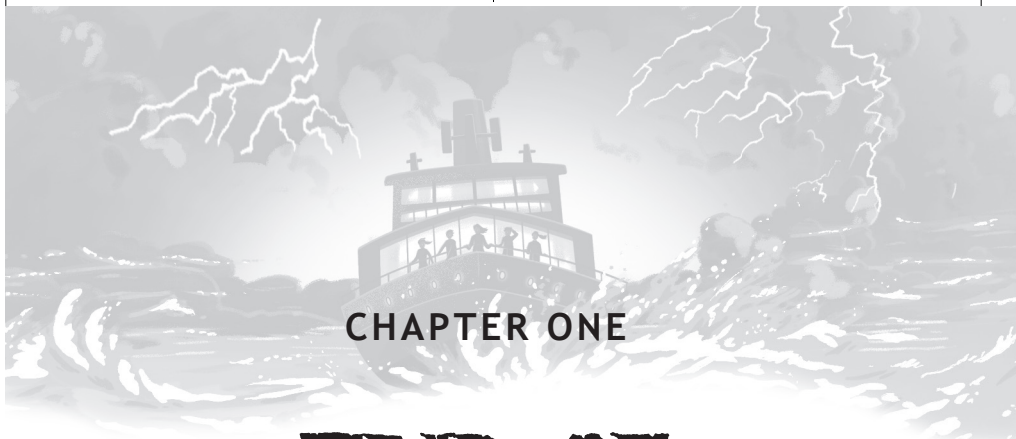


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## CHAPTER ONE

# TRIP OF DREAMS

**T**his is SO going to end badly. One hundred per cent, we're doomed.' Hallie stops at the bottom of the ramp, drops her backpack on the floor, and stink-eyes the scene in front of us. It's the first week of September, and we're starting Year 8 with the school trip of my dreams – five days in the South of France studying the Mediterranean coastline and wildlife. It's day three of the trip and we're getting on a boat to Corsica for the



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next stage of our research. I've never been out of the UK before, so for me this is mind-blowingly amazing, even if Hallie's not feeling it. The late summer sky is a perfect blue, dotted with ice-cream scoops of fluffy vanilla cloud. The sun is just starting its descent into evening, and its rays are making the ocean glitter gently like the waves are crested with diamonds. The ship we're boarding is spotless white steel, chrome and glass, rising out of the sea in a way that I can only describe as majestic. It gleams luxuriously, the sunlight glinting off its hull like it's winking at us. My best friends are next to me. Hallie, Gus, Naira and Colette, all tanned and freckled from the long summer days. We're in shorts and T-shirts and trailing wheelie cases. It's about as perfect as a view could be.

'Literally a freaking disaster waiting to happen,' Hallie sighs.

'I mean, sure,' Gus says, parking his wheelie case next to Hal's backpack and looking up at

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the ship. ‘It wouldn’t have been my first choice of seafaring vehicle. But I’m not getting the same aura of bleakness that you are, Halster.’

‘What would have been your first choice?’ Colette pulls up next to Gus while the rest of the Dread Wood High students continue on to the ship.

‘Pirate ship, obviously,’ Gus says. ‘Wooden decks dotted with random barrels, a sniper’s nest full of guns and grog, rowdy singing, and the kind of camaraderie that only exists between crewmates who’ve gazed deep into the butthole of death and lived to tell the tale. You with me, Angelo?’

‘I know our vibe is more Coke Zero and artisan crisps than beer and maggoty biscuits,’ I say. ‘But I definitely feel like we’ve gazed into the butthole of death together.’

‘I don’t see why it has to be a butthole.’ Naira sighs. ‘There are so many other holes you could have used for your weird little fantasy.’

‘Because buttholes have a bit of glamour and

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mystery about them, Nai-Nai. Except yours, of course, because we all know you keep that stick up there.’

I snort out a laugh at the same time Colette does, as Naira thumps Gus in the arm and Hallie manages a half-smile while still glaring at the ship. The rest of the group: twenty-five other Year 8s, with Mr Canton, Mrs Sydney and, to Colette’s absolute horror, her mum – Ms Huxley – have disappeared from view into the ship.

I feel more relaxed than I ever remember being. The past year has been rough, facing off against Mr and Mrs Latchitt and their evil experiments three times and somehow scraping through. We destroyed their giant spiders last November; put an end to their brain-biting parasitic worms in March; and turned their vampire birds against them in July. We’ve dealt with everything they’ve thrown at us and come out stronger and happier. And now they’re locked up back in England, awaiting trial for their crimes, and we’re here in France on the



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trip of a lifetime.

There were thirty places for Dread Wood High students on the school trip, which combines the usual geography and history stuff they do every year on the southern French coastline, with the launch of some amazing new wildlife research technology in the Mediterranean Sea.

Cyberus, the tech company Colette's mum works for, has been developing new ROVs – remotely operated vehicles – which are basically like underwater drones. They have the most up-to-date LINAR and SONAR so they can be used for mapping out the ocean and observing aquatic life in a way that's never been possible before. Because of Ms Huxley's work on the project, Cyberus's outreach programme decided to partner with Dread Wood High and get the school involved. I love wildlife and want to travel the world one day so I can see as many species as possible in their natural habitats.

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So obviously I was desperate to come on the trip but I knew we could never afford it. Then Cyberus offered to pay for two places through a sponsorship scheme. Col made me apply, and even though I thought I had no chance, I won a place. Naira too. And Col got a place but has to deal with her mum being here, flirting with our head of year, Mr C. And as much as we all love Mr C – the GOAT of teachers – because he’s saved us in a heap of different ways many times, both from the Latchitts and from getting in even more trouble at school, nobody needs to see *that*.

‘What’s the hold-up, my bloods?’ Mr Canton jogs back down the ramp towards us. ‘The fair *Melusine* is departing in . . .’ he checks his watch, ‘T minus five minutes and you’re here loitering like teachers around the tin of Christmas chocs in the staffroom.’

‘Hallie’s scared,’ Gus says.

Hallie whacks him on the other arm. ‘Am not,’ she says. ‘I just don’t like boats.’

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‘May I ask why?’ Mr C says, and we all groan.

‘Don’t get her started again.’ Naira rolls her eyes. ‘It’s a long list.’

‘There’s a lot about the pointlessness of boats when there are planes,’ Colette says. ‘And how basic they are . . .’

‘They’ve barely changed since the olden days,’ Hallie says. ‘I mean, we have technology now, so why haven’t boats developed into something more advanced?’

‘Then there’s the bit about the insignificance of humans when faced with the unknown horrors of the ocean . . .’ Gus says.

‘There could be anything under there.’ Hallie points at the sea. ‘The underwater world doesn’t belong to us.’

‘And also the movie thing,’ I say.

‘Mr C, name one movie set on a boat that ends well,’ Hallie challenges. ‘Just one. I’ll wait.’

‘Well,’ Mr C says. ‘There’s . . .’ He takes his cap off and rubs his head. ‘There must be one.’

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It'll come to me.'

Hallie looks smug.

'Movies aren't real life, Hallie,' Naira sighs.

'But stories are based on truths,' Hallie says.

'There's a reason why movies set at sea always have killer storms, people losing their minds and murdering their crewmates, and exceptionally intelligent giant sharks.'

My body goes cold for a moment, thinking about what could happen if the Latchitts were still free and messing with shark DNA. If that was the case, I would not even be considering getting on this ship.

The *Melusine* blasts its horn, making me jump. Beside me the others jump too, and I wonder if they were thinking what I was thinking.

'While I'd love to chew the fat about this for a little longer, Hallie,' Mr C says, putting his cap back on. 'If we don't board now, I'm afraid we'll be left behind. Remember, we're lucky to have this opportunity to be a part of the

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Cyberus ROV launch, and it would be a shame to miss it. Also, I've just been told that our very own head, Mr Hume, has decided to join us for the journey . . .'

We all groan. Who wants their super-strict and slightly sussy head teacher with them on a school trip that's supposed to be fun? I haven't got over the way he acted on sports day when we were attacked by vampire birds. Him and the VIP guests looked on like we were a reality TV show and then left us to be fodder.

'Talk about a buzz-kill,' Gus says. 'We won't be able to do anything fun with him around.'

'Now, now, we must remember to be respectful to all staff members,' Mr Canton says. 'And you might discover a different side to Mr Hume away from the restraints of daily school life. He could, in fact, be a bag of LOLZ.'

We all look at him like he's lost his mind.

'He could be the king of bants,' Mr C tries again.

'Stop it, sir.' Hallie shakes her head. 'There

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is nothing good about Mr Hume-an Fun Sucker being on the trip.’

‘Except that you won’t be able to simp on Ms Huxley as much,’ I say.

Mr Canton goes bright red and pretends to look for something in his bumbag while the rest of us snigger. Except Colette – who has her head in her hands.

‘So what’s the verdict?’ Mr C zips up his bag and acts like nothing happened. ‘Are we setting sail for a night of adventure, breathing in the sea-salt breeze, basking in the glow of a Mediterranean sunset and getting a unique view of aquatic life that other people would sell their freshest kicks for?’

‘Please stop,’ Hallie says.

Mr C smiles. ‘Gladly. Shall we board the *Melusine*?’

‘Fine,’ Hallie huffs. ‘But when things go bad, I’m going to be saying “I told you so” relentlessly. Like, I will never stop saying it for my whole life. And if we all die at sea, ghost

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Hallie will repeat it on an endless loop to your ghosts for all eternity.’

‘That’s the spirit!’ Mr C grins around at us. ‘Get it? Spirit?’

Hallie groans, puts her backpack on, and stomps up the ramp. The rest of us follow.

I don’t know if it’s because of the conversation we just had, or out of habit caused by a year of near-death experiences, but I find myself scanning the ocean for any signs of trouble. The surface is calm. Beautiful. It’s hard to imagine anything bad happening here and now. But like Hallie said, there’s a whole world beneath the waves that we can’t see. Who knows what’s lurking in the depths . . .