

For my sister, Julie. I'm sorry I used to be a biter.



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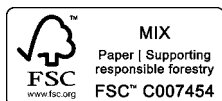
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JENNIFER KILLICK

PROJECT Z

ESCAPE ROOM



DREAD WOOD

FRIGHT
BITE

Farshore



PROJECT Z

CHAPTER ONE

A TRAGIC START

What. The. Heck. Is. That?’ Colette says, as the sound of a horn honking like a deranged goat makes everyone within a hundred-metre radius stare in the direction of the school car park. We’re standing outside Dread Wood High in the fading light, looking fresh in the clothes we just changed into, our uniforms squashed in our backpacks.

It’s 4 p.m. on a Thursday, so most of the

FRIGHT BITE

students have gone home, but there are still some hangers-on: the after-school club attenders and the detention slackers. I'd been feeling pleased that for once I wasn't one of the detention slackers, but the smugness is fading fast when I see what's driving up the path.

'Oh god.' Hallie looks up from her phone. 'Please tell me that isn't our ride.'

But as the school minibus pulls up to where we're waiting, it becomes clear that, tragically, it *is* our ride.

'Anyone for a road trip?' Mr C grins at us out of the open window. 'I even pimped our wheels - look!'

We turn to where he's pointing and see that he's stuck a hand-painted banner on the side of the bus, underneath the windows from which our faces will be fully visible when we're inside. It says: *HAVE A PENG BIRTHDAY!*

'I'm sorry I couldn't include your name on the banner, Colette, for safeguarding reasons,' Mr Canton says. 'But I wanted to make it special.'

A TRAGIC START

‘That’s honestly totally fine.’ Colette’s cheeks are bubblegum pink and she looks like she’d rather be anywhere than here. If one of the Latchitts’ trapdoor spiders was to burst out of the gravel and drag her underground, she’d probably thank it and welcome a doom less excruciating than a birthday trip in the school minibus.

‘Sir, when you said you’d got us a “sick vehicle”, I thought you meant a limo. Or a Humvee with blacked-out windows,’ Gus says.

Colette’s mum leans over from the passenger seat. ‘Well, he got you Betty, which I’m sure you’ll agree is even better. Come on, get in.’

‘Betty *is* an excellent name.’ Gus nods, patting the minibus like it’s a very good dog.

‘Come on, let’s get this over with,’ Naira sighs, pulling on the handle and sliding the door open, like she’s no stranger to using this method of transportation.

‘Sliding that door like a pro.’ I raise an eyebrow at her.

‘Not my first rodeo,’ she says, climbing on board and scooching along one of the rows of seats to the opposite end.

‘Dibs the back row,’ Hallie says, pushing past the rest of us and jumping inside. ‘I can’t believe you didn’t take it, Naira.’ She runs to the rear and drapes herself across three of the fake-leather-covered seats. ‘You had an open goal right there.’

‘A Year Seven kid vommed there a couple of weeks ago, on our way to a chess tournament,’ Naira says. ‘Just so you know.’

Hallie sausage rolls off the seat and on to the floor while the rest of us laugh. ‘Gross,’ she says, and takes the row behind Naira instead.

‘Don’t worry, it’s been thoroughly sanitised!’ Mr C smiles over his shoulder as Gus hops on and slides along the seats so he’s next to Naira.

‘There are eleven empty seats on this minibus, so why are you squishing up next to me?’ Naira says, although she doesn’t look too unhappy about it.

A TRAGIC START

‘Because it’s cold as a penguin’s toe, and despite your chilling appearance, you are officially the second-warmest member of Club Loser. I’ve tested everyone.’

‘Second warmest?’ Colette raises an eyebrow. ‘And also, tested how?’

‘Yes, Halster’s the warmest because of the burning rage inside her. But she just sat on the puke seat, so I’m not snuggling up to her,’ Gus says.

I give Hallie a comforting pat on the shoulder as I take the seat behind her. ‘Unlucky, Hal.’

‘Who’d have thought there’d be a plus side to sitting on the puke seat?’ Hallie grins.

‘Guys, it’s been sanitised!’ Mr C says again, his smile fading slightly.

‘And I’ve spent the past year carrying out a series of highly scientific experiments to find out which of you is the best Club Loser member to be close to during any given situation,’ Gus says.

‘Such as?’ I ask, smiling at Col as she takes

the seat next to me.

‘Too cold? Hallie or Naira,’ Gus says. ‘Too hot? Colette or Naira again - she is a master of controlling her body temperature. Lost, stressed or need a bit of quiet? Angelo every time.’

‘What about if you’re sad?’ Ms Huxley says.

‘If it’s a needing comfort kind of sad, then Col, ’cos she’s the best hugger.’ Gus nods like a wise mage.

‘Happy with that,’ Col smiles.

‘If it’s a brooding, brothers in arms kind of sad, then Angelo,’ Gus says.

And I feel stupidly pleased.

‘Why can’t I be your brother in arms?’ Hallie huffs. ‘That’s so sexist.’

‘Nothing to do with gender, Hal. You just can’t sit and brood like Angelo can. You get bored after, like, thirty seconds and go on your phone.’

‘Any other categories?’ Naira says.

Gus nods. ‘I’m glad you asked, Nai-Nai. There

A TRAGIC START

are many categories and sub-categories . . . for example there are thirty-two different scenarios under the zombie apocalypse heading.'

It's mad how well we've got to know each other since our fateful Saturday detention, back in the early days of Year 7 at Dread Wood High. When I arrived at school that day to see Naira, Gus and Hallie at the gates, all I wanted was to get through the detention with as little chat as possible. We had nothing in common. No reason to be friends. But being attacked by the Latchitts and their genetically mutated giant spiders forced us together, and that's when I realised they were the kind of people I'd trust with my life. No matter how different we are, we have the things that matter in common. And when Colette joined the group, it made Club Loser complete.

'Let's hear them, Gus,' I say. The way Gus's mind works is fascinating. It's like he sees the world as scenes from the craziest movies

blended with real life. With added blood and sparkles.

‘Shall we discuss them on the way?’ Mr C says, starting the engine.

‘Dare I ask where we’re going for my surprise birthday trip that has started with the Dread Wood High minibus, complete with custom banner?’ Colette says.

This is a question we all want to know the answer to.

‘Only the most exciting hang-out in Finches Heath!’ Ms Huxley says, as the tyres start rolling forward on the crunchy gravel.

‘And whose definition of “best” are we using here?’ Colette says. ‘Because Mr C’s version of best is . . .’

‘The wetlands centre.’ Mr C nods without taking his eyes off the road.

‘Oh god, it’s not the wetlands centre, is it?’ Naira says. ‘It’s too cold to be dealing with nature, and these trainers are new.’

‘Fear not,’ Mr C says. ‘The venue we have

A TRAGIC START

chosen for this thirteenth birthday extravaganza is . . . drum roll, please . . .’ Ms Huxley bangs her hands on the dash, and the rest of us brace ourselves. ‘The place where all the cool kids go - the Neon Perch!’

Col’s mum turns around to see our reactions.

‘Hold on,’ Hallie says. ‘That actually *is* the place where all the cool kids go. Are you pranking us?’

‘Please don’t be pranking us.’ Gus is jiggling in his seat. ‘For the love of all that is great and good in this world - wireless headsets, grilled halloumi, unlimited Wi-Fi, brand-new sickles - please don’t be pranking us.’

‘Are we actually?’ Colette says. ‘You’re taking us to Neon Perch?’

‘You know, I don’t think they want to go, Faye,’ Mr C says, grinning at us in the mirror. ‘Shall we head for the wetlands centre instead?’

‘Don’t you dare!’ Colette says.

‘It was Teddy’s idea,’ Ms Huxley says, looking at Mr C with heart eyes. ‘The sad news is that

FRIGHT BITE

we can't hang out with you - Mr Hume has called a meeting at school, so we'll be dropping you off and then picking you up later.'

'Well, this evening has taken a surprising turn for the better,' Hallie says.

'Meeting?' Naira asks. 'Since when?'

'Don't worry, Naira, it's not compulsory for students,' Mr C says. 'It's to discuss the ongoing renovations of the school. You know, since the incident a year ago . . .'

'When we blew up the basement to destroy some genetically mutated spiders that wanted to eat us?' I ask, trying to hold in a grin because it was an epic moment.

'Yes, exactly,' Mr C says. 'As you know there was some superficial damage that needed repairing, which turned up some other structural issues to the mansion, and Mr Hume has decided to take the opportunity to carry out some additional building work.'

'Why didn't we know about this?' Naira says. I'm not sure if she's suspicious or she has some

A TRAGIC START

weird school meeting FOMO.

‘It was only announced today,’ Ms Huxley says. ‘Your mum’s going, don’t worry.’

‘How do you know Naira’s mum’s going?’ Colette says.

Ms Huxley holds up her mobile, which is pinging with notifications. ‘We made a WhatsApp group.’

‘You did what?’ Colette says.

‘It’s great,’ Mr C says. ‘There’s both of us, obvs, plus Naira’s mum, Hallie’s mum, the mother and father of Mister Gustav, and of course Angelo’s parents.’

‘Oh god,’ I say. ‘Why?’

‘So we can keep in touch if anything comes up,’ Ms Huxley says.

‘You mean, like being stuck on a sinking ship?’ Hallie asks.

‘Being chased by psychos in clown masks,’ Colette says.

‘Cannibal octopuses . . .’ I say.

‘Vampire birds . . .’ Naira sighs.

‘Or if one of us runs out of artisan crisps?’
Gus nods. ‘Good thinking.’

‘Not that anything else bad is going to happen,’ Mr C says.

‘But it also means we can meet up for drinks and nibbles.’ Ms Huxley smiles.

‘Please don’t say “drinks and nibbles”, Mum,’
Colette says. ‘It’s awful.’

‘Not as bad as “picky bits”,’ I put in. I’m imagining what our parents are all saying in the group chat and then wishing I hadn’t. ‘That is the absolute worst.’

‘This whole situation is a disaster,’ Hallie groans.

‘Shall we focus on tonight’s festivities instead?’ Mr C says, taking the main road that leads out of Finches Heath to the Neon Perch and freedom.

‘Yes, let’s,’ Col’s mum says. ‘Prepare to bask in the greatness of my parenting when I tell you what we have in store for you all, on this most special of days for my baby girl . . .’

A TRAGIC START

‘Please stop, Mum,’ Colette says.

‘We’ve booked a few different activities . . .’
Ms Huxley carries on, and I’m worrying about how I’m gonna pay because I only have, like, eight pounds on me, and that won’t cover much at the Neon Perch except a Coke and a game of pool.

‘Which we have prepaid of course,’ Mr C says, like he’s been reading my mind. I’m so relieved. ‘And we’ll give you a food and drink kitty.’

‘A what now?’ Gus says.

‘A kitty. For noms and spends.’ Mr C grins at us through the rear-view.

‘Oh Jesus,’ Hallie says, burying her face in her hands. ‘Kill me now.’

‘But then you won’t get to enjoy the kitty,’ Mr C says.

‘First things first.’ Naira raises her voice to be heard above the groaning. ‘Please explain what a kitty is. It’s clearly old-person language and we don’t understand.’

‘You know . . . a kitty,’ Ms Huxley says. ‘When

you get a pot of money together that you spend jointly.’

‘Or, in this case, a jazzy bumbag,’ Mr C says.

‘Ooh, dibs I’m wearing the bumbag,’ Gus says, like any of us were going to fight him for the opportunity. Gus loves any chance to dress up.

‘So we get a bumbag of money to spend at the Neon Perch?’ Naira says. ‘And . . . this is hard to say . . . the money is for “noms and spends”?’

‘Noms and spends!’ Mr C says. ‘Food, drinks, games, souvenirs, whatever your heart desires. The Neon Perch is your oyster.’

‘I think we have a new winner for the worst thing Mr C has ever said,’ Hallie says. ‘*Noms* is just indescribably horrible.’

‘How much money is in this kitty?’ Colette asks, which is a good question, because we all eat a LOT.

‘Quite a bit,’ Ms Huxley says. ‘So take good care of it.’

A TRAGIC START

‘Nice!’ Gus puts his hand up to high-five Ms Huxley.

‘Yeah, thanks,’ I say. ‘That’s so generous.’

‘And we’ve prepaid for Battle Karts . . .’

‘Yesss!’ we all say. The go-karts are awesome.

‘. . . Galactic Golf . . .’

‘Excellent,’ Naira says, ‘cos she knows she’ll destroy all of us at mini golf.

‘. . . Songbird Karaoke . . .’

Gus does a little scream of happiness, and Colette’s face lights up.

‘. . . and - drum roll, please,’ Ms Huxley says, and we all hammer our hands on the seats in front. ‘The brand-new, immersive, zombie escape room experience: Project Z.’

‘I think I’m gonna cry,’ Gus says. ‘This is like all my dreams come true.’

‘Mum and Mr C, I take back every bad thing I’ve ever thought about you.’ Colette is beaming now. ‘You’re the best. This is perfect.’

‘Yeah, thanks so much,’ I say, like a person who hardly knows any words, because I don’t

know what else to say. My parents could never afford this. On the rare occasion that we visit the Perch, me and Raph get to choose one activity each and we bring snacks from home. Don't get me wrong, I'm massively grateful to my parents for it - they work extra shifts and miss out on stuff for themselves so they can take us. Our family trips to the Perch are my favourite days. But being able to spend a whole evening there with my friends and not having to worry about paying for it is a real gift.

'Mr C, and - might I be so bold as to address you as the future Mrs C . . .?' Gus says. Ms Huxley goes red in the cheeks.

'You may NOT,' Colette says. 'Way too soon.'

'And why should Colette's mum change her name anyway?' Hallie says.

'Shush, you're ruining a beautiful moment,' Gus says. 'What I'm trying to say, is that you two are freaking awesome and I thank you from the bottom of my stoma bag.'

I start laughing. 'Cos it's funny, and 'cos I

A TRAGIC START

have the best feeling of excitement fizzing inside me. After all the fear and dread we've experienced in the last year, it's like dancing in the water sprinklers on the school field on a boiling-hot day.

Colette squeezes my arm and smiles at me. 'Tonight is going to be perfect.'

And I totally believe it.