

DREAD WOOD

TERROR
TOWER

***For Sarah Levison - lover of horror, and
co-founder of Club Loser. Thank you for
going on this adventure with me.***



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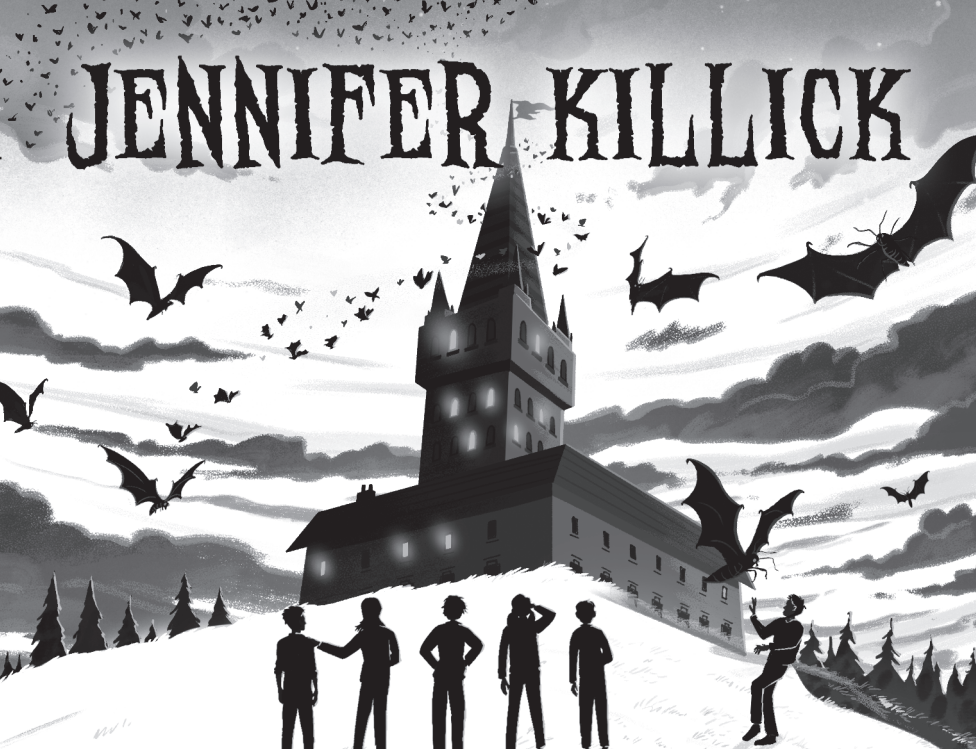
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JENNIFER KILLICK



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CHAPTER ONE

INTO THE DREAD WOOD

Not gonna lie - this is the most fun I've had in months,' Gus says, jumping up to see if he can reach a leaf-heavy branch on an oak tree. He makes it, just with the tips of his fingers, sending the branch swinging gently and a shower of nature debris falling down on our heads. 'Feels like I'm living again.'

It's early summer and the kind of weather where it feels like the sun is giving everything and everyone a recharge. I can feel the warmth soaking into my skin like medicine. See my

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forearms turning brown below my rolled-up shirtsleeves. And even though the past six months have been rough - being stuck in parent prison while the police look for the Latchitts - and fail to find them of course - there's something about today that's giving me a new burst of hope. I look up at the ancient trees around us and inhale the green of the Dread Wood. 'Smells like freedom,' I grin.

'You know what it also smells like, Angelo?' Gus says. 'It smells like money. Cold hard cash filling our pockets.'

We fist-bump that, cos who doesn't want to have pockets filled with money?

'Who'd have thought that Dread Wood High going meat-free for a month would turn out to be a good thing?' I say. 'All those hungry students, trying to survive on beans and lettuce, desperate for a chicken nugget, or a bacon roll . . .'

'Remember when Hume announced it?' Gus says.

'Felt like a strange and cruel punishment,' I say.

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‘It felt personal, goddamn it.’ Gus kicks a fallen stick, sending it sailing deeper into the woods. ‘Like he did it just to twist the shank. Everyone knows I can’t live without a chicken burger.’

‘And that sausage rolls alone get us through double biology with Ms Mahoney,’ I say.

‘Or art with Miss Heeps,’ Gus groans. ‘Of all the butt-sucky things Hume has done, this one hurt the most. Or I thought so at first.’

‘Good thing we’re experienced in dealing with horror situations,’ I say. As we get further into the Dread Wood, the sounds of the school field - the ‘oof’ of a shoe against a football; the sudden shrieks of laughter from a group of kids all huddled watching something on one of their phones; the occasional yell of a teacher when they catch sight of a phone out or overhear an especially bad swear - they all fade away to nothing. Soon it’s just me, Gus and the rustling of the trees.

‘And we’re blessed with entrepreneurial skills,’ Gus says.

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‘And have contacts on the outside willing to work with us,’ I say.

‘Speaking of contacts, how far are we away from the rendezvous point?’

‘Gus, we’ve spent days in these woods - how can you still not know your way around?’

A lot has happened here since our first term at Dread Wood High: being hunted by genetically mutated giant spiders, stalked by the Latchitts during games of Flinch, falling in a pile of blood-drained animal carcasses . . . Everywhere I look, I see remembered images of the horrific things the Latchitts put us through in revenge for some bad choices we made when we first met Colette. But if they hadn’t, then me, Gus, Naira and Hallie would never have become mates and formed Club Loser, with Colette joining to make the perfect five. And today the Dread Wood is our friend.

‘Because woods are just trees,’ Gus says, pointing at a cluster of pine trees in front of us. ‘They literally all look the same to everyone except you.’

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Maybe because I've been reminiscing on past traumas, I jump when the crack of a snapping twig rings out behind us. I spin around to scan the trees. 'Is someone following us?'

'Angelo, chill out,' Gus says, not even bothering to stop. 'It was probably a bird.'

'Sounded heavier than that,' I say.

'A badger then,' Gus says, looking over his shoulder. 'Come on, or my cousin Bronya will want a bigger payment.'

'I mean, badgers are nocturnal,' I say, giving up on looking for monsters and jogging after him. 'But yeah, it was probably nothing. And don't worry, we're almost there. Did you get the order through to her OK?'

'Dude, our processes are slick as a snail's undercarriage,' Gus grins. 'Sent the order last night, got the thumbs-up confirmation. We just need to exchange goods and Bronya's fee, and then we can coin in our profits.'

We clear a few more trees and we're finally at the fence that splits the Dread Wood between school and public land. Bronya is waiting for us,

two bulging backpacks on the ground at her feet.

‘Baby Gus-Gus,’ she says, as we walk towards her. ‘How’s my favourite little cousin doing today?’

‘Bronya, I told you not to call me that in front of my friends,’ Gus says. ‘You’ll ruin my big G reputation.’ But he fist-bumps her through the links of the fence. ‘You got the stuff I asked for?’

‘Wing King and Bryan’s Bakes in this bag.’ She lifts one of the backpacks up and launches it over the fence like a professional shot-putter. I back up a few paces and catch it, trying not to squash the meaty treats inside. Bronya carefully packages the food items within two insulated bags and the backpack on top, so from the feel of it, you’d never know what’s inside. Our customers - the students of Dread Wood High who are missing their meat-based treats - like their orders toasty warm.

‘Banter Burger in here.’ She hurls the other bag and Gus one-handed catches it with a smug

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look on his face.

‘Good job, B,’ Gus says, passing her a rolled-up note. ‘Pleasure doing business with you as always.’

‘Snap me tonight if you want to order again,’ she nods, and turns to leave. ‘Oh, and Julia told me to say hi from her.’

‘Er, great,’ Gus says. His face is pinking up like he’s been dipped in bubblegum. ‘Yeah, I’ll Snap you.’

I try not to snigger as we put our backpacks on our shoulders.

‘Shut up, Angelo,’ Gus says. ‘You think I can’t hear your silent mockery?’

‘Sorry,’ I snort, not sorry. We walk back into the trees.

‘Don’t tell the girls at least,’ Gus says. ‘No man should be shipped with his cousin.’

And I splutter out a laugh, which catches in my throat suddenly when someone steps out of the bushes in front of us, blocking our path.