



Snow

Dinah sat up in bed for a long time that night, a stiff little figure in a white nightdress, hugging her knees. She knew that there was something wrong about the school, with its well-behaved children, all doing the right thing at the right moment, but she could not understand what it was. And she knew that she did not like the Headmaster at all. She could not understand why she kept saying how wonderful he was. She hated not understanding things.

In the end, she did what she always did when things baffled her. Slipping quietly out of bed, she pulled back the curtains so that the room was lit by moonlight from

outside. Then she went to stand in front of the mirror. Pale and prim, her reflection stared back at her, the eyes thoughtful and the mouth pursed up, considering. 'Well?' she murmured. 'What's wrong? Why is the school so peculiar?'

Gazing into her own eyes, she suddenly knew the answer. *Fear. It's because they're all afraid.*

She nodded briskly. Yes, that was the right answer. 'But what are they afraid of?'

The reflection stared back, unwinking, and she heard the reply in her head. *That's what you'll have to find out.*

'How?' But she hardly needed to ask. The answer to that one was obvious.

You'll have to be naughty, and see what happens to you.

Her hands, clasped on top of the dressing table, began to shake slightly, but the face that looked back at her out of the mirror was amused.

See? You're afraid yourself, and you don't know why.

Defiantly, she stuck her chin up and pulled a face into the mirror. 'I don't care if I am scared,' she said out loud. 'I want to know, and if that's the only way to find out, that's what I'll do.'

With a determined hand, she closed the curtains and climbed back into bed, feeling as though she had settled something. Curling up under the covers, she fell asleep trying to think of something bad she could do.

When the morning came, she was still considering. She did not expect Lloyd and Harvey to speak to her

after their quarrel the day before, and she came down to breakfast in a proud silence, not saying anything even to Mrs Hunter. But things were a bit different. Something had happened that she had not counted on.

It had finally snowed. Outside in the garden, a white, unbroken sheet stretched across the grass, gleaming in the crisp, clear light. And Harvey was so excited that he had forgotten about everything else. He wriggled delightedly in his chair.

'Oh, I *wish* we didn't have to go to school today. Don't you, Di?'

'Sky-blue sandwiches!' snorted Lloyd, his mouth full of porridge, 'd'you ever want to go to school?'

'No, but it's different today,' Harvey said earnestly. 'If we stayed at home, we could build a snowman and have a snowball fight and – oh, Mum, couldn't we?'

'Don't be silly, dear,' Mrs Hunter said placidly. 'There's no point in asking questions like that. Just make sure you wrap up warmly. You know the cold's bad for your chest.'

She hovered over them while they dressed, insisting on bundling Harvey up in extra scarves and gloves, until he looked like a little round parcel. And all the time he was hopping up and down, peering longingly out of the window at the snow. When she finally let them go, Harvey ran joyfully outside and kicked his boots about, scattering a fine dust of snow.

'Oh, it's beautiful! It's lovely! Don't you think it's gorgeous, Di?'

'Yes, I like snow,' she said dreamily. 'We used to have terrific snowball fights at the Children's Home. The sort where you pick sides and build up great stocks of snowballs before you start.'

'Oh, fantastic!' Harvey reached down for a handful of snow.

'Come on!' Lloyd said crossly. 'We'll be late for school.' Harvey's face drooped. Still deep in her own thoughts, Dinah said, 'We could always have a snowball fight in the playground. In morning playtime.'

She was so busy thinking of her own plans for the day that she did not notice how Harvey brightened and started to whistle. All she could think of was that she had found a good way to be naughty.

She was so busy thinking, in fact, that she walked into school and into her classroom in a daze. It was not until she was sitting in her desk that she realized that she had automatically moved into line and marched in with the others, as if she had been told what to do. But she did not remember anyone having told her.

Before she had time to work that one out, however, she had another surprise. Mr Venables, the class teacher, was giving out pieces of paper.

'This morning,' he said, as he moved round the room, 'I want you to write down everything you know about the solar system.'

As it happened, Dinah knew a great deal about the solar system. But she had no intention of writing it all down. That would be asking for trouble. She settled down to consider what she could safely say. But before

she had thought about it at all, she found herself writing, in strange, stiff little sentences.

'The planets of the solar system are Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. The sun is the star of the solar system.

The Earth is 0.137 light-hours from the sun. The magnitude of the sun is - 29.6.'

She stopped, with an effort, and stared at the last sentence she had written. *But I didn't know that*, she thought. She never remembered seeing that particular piece of information before. Yet there it was, confidently written down on her piece of paper, as though someone had slipped it into her head without her knowing.

Cautiously, she leaned sideways, to glance at the paper on the desk next to her. The boy beside her had just written, 'The magnitude of the sun is - 29.6.'

Although the classroom was warm, she found herself shivering. Everyone in the room was scribbling busily, and she was suddenly sure that they had all just written, 'The magnitude of the sun is - 29.6.' Thirty little robots, all obediently writing down the same things, things that had been put into their heads for them. The only person who was not writing was Lloyd. He was chewing the end of his pencil, as if he did not know very much about the solar system. Dinah let herself feel a little quiver of mean pleasure that he was in trouble. Then she started to write again, and the information went on pouring out. Most of it she knew, but every now and again came a little bit she did not.

And as she wrote, she pursed her lips together deter-

minedly. Things were getting queerer and queerer. And she would find out why. She *would*.

At playtime, she put on her hat and coat and marched out into the playground, ready to carry out her plan. Without speaking to anyone, she knelt down and began to make a heap of snowballs, intending to throw them when she had a pile of ten.

But she had reckoned without Harvey. When she was only halfway through, he came bounding across to her, past all the groups of children chanting tables and dates.

'Oh Di! You remembered!'

'What?' She looked up, vaguely.

'You remembered. We really *are* going to have a snowball fight!'

Suddenly she realized what she had done. 'No. Harvey! I didn't mean you.'

'Don't be a spoilsport.' He bent down and picked up two of the snowballs she had made.

Almost at once, Lloyd was there. He came bounding across the playground at top speed. 'Hi! What are you doing?'

'We're going to have a snowball fight,' Harvey said cheerfully. 'It's Di's idea.'

'Don't be an idiot.' Lloyd knocked the snowballs out of his hands. 'Let her get into trouble if she wants to, but don't you get mixed up with it.'

'That's right,' Dinah said. She did not realize how odd it sounded until she saw Lloyd staring at her. She stared back defiantly, and while the two of them were distracted,

Harvey stooped down and picked up two more snowballs. 'I think you're both rotten!' he shouted. 'And I will have a snowball fight. The snow might be all gone, by tomorrow.'

His yell sounded eerily loud among the mutters in the playground. As he drew his right arm back to throw, Lloyd shouted warningly, 'H! No!' And from the other side of the playground came the sound of Ian's voice, calling, 'Watch out, you lot!'

But it was too late. As total silence fell over the playground, the two snowballs flew from Harvey's gloved hands and spattered messily, one on Lloyd's coat and one on Dinah's.

'Lloyd and Harvey Hunter! Dinah Glass! Come here!' bellowed a voice from the steps.

Ranged on the steps, the prefects were staring at them, a row of six stern faces. Slowly, Lloyd, Harvey and Dinah walked to the foot of the steps and stood looking up.

'Wait there!' Rose said curtly. 'We'll deal with you when the others have gone inside.'

CHAPTER 7



The Punishment

As Rose began to call out orders, the neat rows of children formed and filed into the building. Lloyd, Harvey and Dinah stood awkwardly, not looking at each other, until the whole playground was empty and they were alone, gazing up at the prefects, who stood like a row of iron statues.

Jeff stared down at them and chanted, 'It is forbidden to waste time by playing in the playground.'

'It is forbidden,' Rose went on, 'to make a mess of your school uniform.'

'You must be punished,' Sarah said.

'In a suitable manner,' finished off Simon, smiling slightly.

Drawing together, the prefects whispered for a moment and then Rose turned to them again. 'Go inside,' she rapped out. 'Take off your hats and coats and gloves. Then come back here.'

As they walked towards the cloakroom, Dinah whispered to Lloyd, 'What will happen? What will they do?' 'I don't know,' he said sourly. 'But whatever it is, it'll be all your fault. I wish you'd never come.'

'No, it's my fault,' Harvey said in a miserable voice. 'I threw the snowballs. And whatever they do, it'll be terrible.'

When they came out of the door again, four of the prefects had gone. Rose was standing looking out over the playground, with a pleased smile on her face, and Jeff was by her side, holding three long-handled brooms.

'Now,' he said in a silky voice, 'you're very lucky. We've decided to be kind to you.'

Lloyd and Harvey looked uneasily at each other.

'Yes.' Rose's smile broadened. 'Because you're so fond of playing with the snow, we're going to let you have some more of it.'

Jeff held out the brooms. 'You will each take one of these, and you will sweep all the snow from the playground into a heap. Then,' he looked at Rose, with a grin, 'you will make the whole heap into a pile of snowballs.'

For a second, Harvey looked perplexed, but Lloyd burst out, 'Aren't you going to let us put on our coats and things?'

Rose went on smiling. 'Certainly not.'

'But you can't do that! Harvey's got a weak chest. He could be ill. He -'

'Silence!'

'Suppose we say no?' asked Dinah, in a stiff voice. Rose and Jeff looked at her as if she had said something unbelievably stupid. Together, they chanted, 'The prefects are the voice of the Headmaster. They must be obeyed.'

Then Jeff thrust the brooms at them. 'Get sweeping!'

Resigned, Lloyd and Harvey trailed off down the steps, dragging their brooms after them. Dinah lingered rebelliously for a second or two, then joined them at the far end of the playground.

'Let's do it as quickly as we can,' she said. 'Perhaps that'll keep us warm.'

'Huh!' Lloyd snorted. 'Don't know why you're so cheerful. None of this would have happened if you hadn't started talking about snowball fights.'

He banged his broom crossly into the snow and began to sweep, pushing it into a great white mound in front of him.

For the first ten minutes or so, it was not too bad. The exercise kept them fairly warm. But then the wind started to blow, scattering the snow as they swept it and freezing their fingers.

'I'm so cold,' Harvey said plaintively. 'And we're only halfway across. We'll never get it all swept.'

'Don't give up yet,' Lloyd said grimly. 'This is the easy part. Just you wait until we start on the snowballs.'

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Dinah shuddered at the thought, as the wind whipped through her thin school shirt. Then she found that she could not stop shivering. Her whole body was shaking, and her teeth were clattering together uncontrollably. She put down her broom for a moment to clap her arms round herself, for a bit of warmth.

Instantly, from the building behind them, came an irate rapping. Turning, she saw Rose gesturing furiously at her through the window. She picked up her broom again and began to sweep harder, trying to ignore the shaking.

At last the snow was piled into a single heap, almost as tall as Harvey. The three of them laid their brooms down at one side and stared at it.

'I don't think I can do it,' Harvey said woefully. 'My hands are *hurting*.'

Lloyd watched him anxiously. His face had a bluish tinge and he was starting to breathe wheezily.

'Why don't you stop?' Dinah said. 'Tell them you won't do it. I don't suppose the Headmaster would really be angry. He must see —' Then her teeth rattled together so hard that she could not go on speaking.

Lloyd and Harvey said nothing. Just looked at her as though she were completely idiotic and bent down to start making snowballs.

'Oh, all right,' she said crossly. 'Be like that. I bet I can make snowballs faster than you.'

As soon as she touched the snow, she knew that it was going to be a nightmare. Her hands were already painfully cold, but at least they had been dry up to now. The snow

made them wet, and the cold wind, whipping across, stung them so that they felt almost as if they were burning. Anxiously, she wondered how long it would take before she got frostbite and her fingers started to turn black and drop off.

It would not have been quite so bad if Lloyd and Harvey had been sympathetic, but neither of them spoke to her. Lloyd was making snowballs in a frenzy, trying to get through the huge heap as quickly as possible. If he looked at her at all, it was only to pull a disgusted face. And Harvey had started to cry. Without stopping work, he was sobbing with pain, his face growing red and raw now as the wind scoured the tears from his round cheeks.

I can't, murmured a voice in Dinah's head. *I can't, I can't, I can't*. But all the time, mechanically, she went on making snowballs, until it seemed that she would never stop, as if she would go on until the end of the world, stooping, seizing a handful of snow, squashing it together in her agonized hands and dropping it on to the pile.

They seemed to have been there for about a hundred years when Lloyd said suddenly, 'Two or three more each and we've finished.' Glancing sideways at his watch, Dinah saw that it was not yet twelve o'clock. Gritting her teeth, she scrunched together the last couple of handfuls of snow and flung them triumphantly on top of the pile.

'That's it. We've finished! Let's go inside and get warm.'

'Not yet,' Lloyd said bitterly. 'Look. They're coming to inspect us.'

Sure enough, the prefects, all six of them, were trooping down the steps from the school, marching in perfect time. They walked across the playground and stood in a half-circle round Lloyd, Harvey and Dinah.

'Not a very tidy heap of snowballs,' Rose said grudgingly. She looked sideways at Jeff, and his spotty face suddenly creased into a leering smile.

'But you must have enjoyed yourselves,' he said softly. 'Since you're so *fond* of snow. Do you think they've had enough snow yet, Rose?'

She leered back at him. 'Surely not. Not when they like it so much.'

Without warning, the line of prefects surged forwards, in unison, their hands outstretched. Lloyd, Harvey and Dinah were each seized by two prefects who spun them round and knocked them forwards, face down in the snow.

As Dinah's face crashed down into the hard, balled snow, her first feeling was one of despair. Snow slammed up her nose, into her eyes and all down her front, soaking her clothes. It seemed like the last straw, and she nearly burst into tears. But by the time she stood up, she was furious. Furious and incredulous. Leaping to her feet, she began to yell at the prefects.

'That's too much! You can't do that! I shall go and tell the Headmaster. He'll punish you. You've got no right to treat us like that.'

Very softly, Jeff started to laugh and Rose, shaking

with merriment, pointed a finger towards the school, where the window of the Headmaster's office faced them.

At the window was a pale face, its eyes hidden behind dark glasses. It stared out over the playground, apparently without expression.

'So he knows, does he?' Dinah said quietly. Her mouth set stubbornly. 'Well, I'm not scared of him, even if the rest of you are. I shall go and tell him just what I think of him for letting something like this happen to a boy as little as Harvey.'

Her feet sounding loud on the cleared tarmac, she stamped across the playground and into the school, carried along by the force of her cold rage. Without stopping to consider what she was doing, she marched up to the door of the Headmaster's office and hammered on it with both fists.

Nothing happened.

Crossly, she caught at the handle and rattled it, but the door was locked, and so heavy that it hardly moved.

'I know you're in there!' she shouted. 'I saw you at the window. And I think it's disgusting. Fancy letting the prefects bully a little boy like Harvey. It might make him *ill*. You're inhuman.'

She paused. No sound came from behind the door and, for a second, she felt completely helpless. Then, at last, her brain began to work. She smiled triumphantly, and went on speaking in a quieter voice.

'Anyway, you won't get away with this. Even Headmasters aren't allowed to do things like that. When we

get home, we'll all tell Mr and Mrs Hunter, and there'll be a scandal. You'll be prosecuted.'

There was still no sound, but she did not care now that she had worked out what to do next. Her fingers were starting to hurt as the warmth of the building reached them, so, with a final thump on the door, she began to run down the corridor, towards the cloakrooms. If only she could wash them in warm water, she would feel better. And if there was something hot for lunch, even Harvey might be all right.

She was making so much noise, that she did not hear the office door open behind her. She did not look over her shoulder and see the pale face which stared after her. If she had, she would have been puzzled. Because the face was smiling.

'So, Miss Clever Glass,' murmured the Headmaster, 'you have a soft spot for Harvey Hunter, have you? You're ready to protect him? Well, that might come in very useful. Yes, indeed. I must think about that.' His smile broadened. 'After this afternoon's Assembly.' And as he turned away, he laughed, softly and evilly.

Lloyd burst in through the back door of the kitchen, a hundred yards ahead of Harvey and Dinah. 'Mum! Mum! Where are you?'

Mrs Hunter emerged from the hall. 'Goodness me, what a fuss. The end of the world at least, I should think. Whatever is the matter?'

'It's what happened at school today.' Lloyd slumped down into a chair. 'It was simply terrible.'

Mrs Hunter suddenly stopped looking sympathetic. 'Now, Lloyd, I hope this isn't going to be another one of your silly stories. You know what trouble we've had in the past, with your lies.'

'It's different this time,' Lloyd said triumphantly. 'Dinah will tell you that it's true. And you'll believe her, won't you?' He turned round and waved a hand at Harvey and Dinah, who were coming through the door.

'Well, Dinah certainly looks calmer than you do,' Mrs Hunter said.

'But she knows too,' Lloyd yelled. 'She'll tell you.'

'Don't shout, dear.'

'Oh, why don't you *ask* her?'

'Yes,' said Harvey excitedly. 'Ask Dinah what happened at school today.'

'You'll believe *her*,' Lloyd said bitterly.

Dinah was frowning, looking at the three of them in bewilderment.

'Well, dear?' Mrs Hunter said gently. 'Tell me. What happened at school today?'

In a perfectly calm, even voice. Dinah said. 'At school this morning. Harvey made snowballs and we all had a snowball fight. It was super. The Headmaster made sure we all dressed up warmly in our hats and coats and gloves. And he gave us drinks of hot blackcurrant when we came inside.'

'*What?*' Lloyd stared at her.

Harvey looked appalled. '*Dinah!*'

Mrs Hunter smiled comfortably. 'It all sounds very nice.'

'But you don't understand!' Lloyd exploded. 'It's not true. It wasn't like that at all. We -'

'Be quiet!' All at once, Mrs Hunter was very angry. 'It's always the same, Lloyd. You and Harvey come back from school with silly, unbelievable stories and whenever I ask any of the other children I find it's all lies. I'm *not* going to make a fool of myself by complaining again. I don't think it's funny, even if you do.'

'It's not *meant* to be funny!' Lloyd glared at Dinah. 'She knows that. She's a filthy, foul traitor! *She's* the one who's telling lies, and -'

'That's enough!' Mrs Hunter banged her hand on the table. 'I don't blame Dinah for not wanting to join in with your silly games. You've been unpleasant to her ever since she came, I won't have it. This is her home now, as well as yours, and you'll just have to get used to it.'

'But -'

'Not another word!'

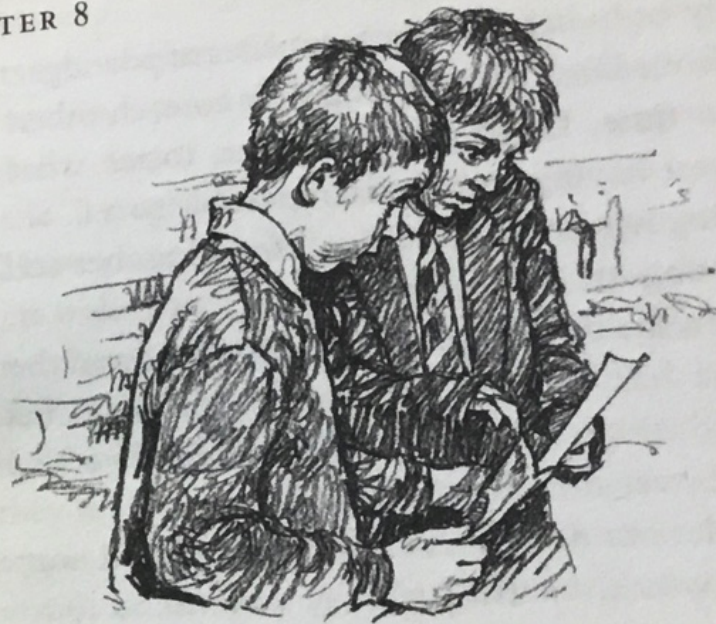
'It doesn't matter, L,' Harvey said miserably. 'We ought to have known it would be like this. It's always like this. Two hundred people to say we're lying, whatever we say. We can't do anything about it.'

'We can refuse to speak to traitors,' Lloyd said hotly. 'Come on, H. Let's go to the playroom. There's a bad smell in this kitchen.'

He stamped out. Harvey stood in the doorway for a moment, looking at Dinah.

'How *could* you?' he said reproachfully. 'When you know what it was like?'

CHAPTER 8



Prefects' Meeting

'We won't speak to her,' Lloyd said. 'Not ever again. Understand, H?' He pulled on his sock with such ferocity that his big toe came through the end. With a shout of rage, he flung the sock into the wastepaper basket and took a clean one out of the drawer.

'But how can we not?' Harvey said miserably. 'She doesn't know anyone except us. If *we* don't talk to her -'

'Black bananas! Think I care about that? After the way she's treated us? You're too soft, H, that's what's wrong with you. Well, just watch it. If I catch you speaking to her, I won't look after you any more. And I'll tell the

others not to look after you, either. Then you'll be in trouble.' Ramming his shoes on, Lloyd stamped off downstairs and a moment later an unhappy Harvey followed him.

They sat hunched over their plates of porridge, turned away from Dinah and talking only to each other. From time to time, Lloyd glanced at her, to see what effect they were having, but it was impossible to tell. She went on eating her breakfast without speaking, her cold, pale face gazing off into the distance.

When the time came to leave, she followed them out into the hall and left the house with them, but they marched along the road ten yards ahead of her, not looking over their shoulders.

'Just let her *dare* try to catch us up!' Lloyd muttered.

'She won't do that,' Harvey said. 'She's too proud. She -'

'Oh shut up! I don't want you going on about her all day. She's not here. She doesn't exist. Understand?'

Lloyd strode faster up the road and swept into the playground, his eyes searching about. 'We must find Ian and Mandy and Ingrid and warn them about her. Tell them not to talk to her either. Then she'll only have the goody-goodies and she won't get much fun out of them.'

He saw the other three in a corner and marched across to them, followed by Harvey. But before he could say anything, silence fell over the playground and everyone turned to look at the prefects.

There seemed to be something odd about them today. They were smirking at each other and hunting round

the playground with their eyes, as if they were looking for somebody. Suddenly Ian poked Lloyd in the ribs.

'Hey,' he mouthed soundlessly, 'why are they all looking at Harvey?' It was true. Six pairs of eyes had fixed on Harvey's chubby figure and six smiles had grown wider. Harvey started to shake. Mandy reached out and gripped his hand comfortingly. 'Don't worry,' she mouthed. 'It might not be as bad as you think.'

But Harvey was already worried. As the prefects rapped out their orders and the children started to move into lines, he caught at Lloyd's sleeve. 'Don't leave me alone, L.'

'OK.' Lloyd patted his shoulder. 'We'll stick together.'

As they moved across the playground, he avoided his usual place and went to stand in Harvey's line instead, immediately behind him. He saw Dinah glance quickly across at him, but he ignored her.

'Lead - in!' Jeff shouted.

As the lines began to move, Lloyd put a steadying hand on Harvey's arm and the two of them walked together up the steps. When they were nearly at the top, Rose stuck out a hand, blocking Harvey's way.

'Harvey Hunter,' she intoned, 'you are summoned to appear before the Prefects' Council at ten o'clock.'

'Why?' Harvey said plaintively. 'I haven't done anything.'

'That's right,' Lloyd blustered. 'Leave him alone.'

Rose gave him an icy stare. 'You are in the wrong line, Lloyd Hunter.'

'That's because I'm sticking by Harvey. I don't know

what you're plotting, but I'm coming too.' He saw Rose open her mouth to protest and he said quickly, 'Even in the courts, people are allowed to have lawyers to speak for them.'

Rather to his surprise, Rose shrugged. 'Please yourself. You can be Harvey's lawyer. It won't do any good. Ten o'clock.'

For an hour, Lloyd sat in his classroom, chewing the end of his pencil. All around him, people were scribbling industriously, writing facts about the British Constitution. Lloyd did not know the facts – as usual – but this morning he did not even care. All he could think of was the minute hand on the clock on the wall. It seemed to be racing round towards ten o'clock at twice its normal speed.

At five to ten, he stuck his hand up.

'Yes?' barked Mr Venables, looking startled. People hardly ever put their hands up. It was not encouraged.

'Please, sir, I've got to go to the Prefects' Council.'

Mr Venables frowned. 'I was not informed. This is most disorderly.'

'I've got to go,' Lloyd insisted. Without even waiting for an answer, he bounded out of his seat and made for the door. He could see Dinah watching him and he almost pulled a face at her. Then he remembered. No communication.

Outside the door of the prefects' room, Harvey was standing shivering. 'Oh, what do you think is going on? What are they going to do to me now?'

'Dunno. We'll have to go in and find out.' Lloyd slapped him encouragingly on the back. 'Cheer up. At

least the snow's melted. They can't make us do that again, anyway.'

Boldly he hammered on the door and heard Jeff's voice say, 'Come in.'

The prefects were sitting in a line behind a long table, their faces grave and their uniforms immaculate. Each of them had a pen clipped neatly into the top blazer pocket, at precisely the same angle, and their hands were folded on the table in front of them in a straight row. Six doubled fists.

'Sit down,' said Rose, pointing at two chairs, drawn up on the other side of the table.

'What's this all about?' Lloyd muttered. 'What's going on?'

'Sit down!' Rose said again, more curtly. 'And don't speak unless we ask you questions.'

Lloyd and Harvey took the two chairs and sat facing the row of accusing eyes. Slowly, Jeff reached out for a grey folder which lay on the table. A neat label on the front said *Harvey Hunter*. Opening it, he pulled out a piece of paper.

'Harvey Hunter,' he began, 'we have called you before us, on the instructions of the Headmaster, to deal with your disobedient and disorderly behaviour this week. He has been most displeased with you.'

Rose nodded. 'You are a disruptive influence in the school.'

'That's nonsense,' Lloyd burst out. 'He's never influenced anybody.'

'Please be quiet,' said Jeff, 'and listen to the charges.'

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'Please, sir, I've got to go to the Prefects' Council.'

Mr Venables frowned. 'I was not informed. This is most disorderly.'

'I've got to go,' Lloyd insisted. Without even waiting for an answer, he bounded out of his seat and made for the door. He could see Dinah watching him and he almost pulled a face at her. Then he remembered. No communication.

Outside the door of the prefects' room, Harvey was standing shivering. 'Oh, what do you think is going on? What are they going to do to me now?'

'Dunno. We'll have to go in and find out.' Lloyd slapped him encouragingly on the back. 'Cheer up. At

least the snow's melted. They can't make us do that again, anyway.'

Boldly he hammered on the door and heard Jeff's voice say, 'Come in.'

The prefects were sitting in a line behind a long table, their faces grave and their uniforms immaculate. Each of them had a pen clipped neatly into the top blazer pocket, at precisely the same angle, and their hands were folded on the table in front of them in a straight row. Six doubled fists.

'Sit down,' said Rose, pointing at two chairs, drawn up on the other side of the table.

'What's this all about?' Lloyd muttered. 'What's going on?'

'Sit down!' Rose said again, more curtly. 'And don't speak unless we ask you questions.'

Lloyd and Harvey took the two chairs and sat facing the row of accusing eyes. Slowly, Jeff reached out for a grey folder which lay on the table. A neat label on the front said *Harvey Hunter*. Opening it, he pulled out a piece of paper.

'Harvey Hunter,' he began, 'we have called you before us, on the instructions of the Headmaster, to deal with your disobedient and disorderly behaviour this week. He has been most displeased with you.'

Rose nodded. 'You are a disruptive influence in the school.'

'That's nonsense,' Lloyd burst out. 'He's never influenced anybody.'

'Please be quiet,' said Jeff, 'and listen to the charges.'

He looked down at the piece of paper. 'You are accused of three things. First, on Monday, you came into school before you were called in by us, although you know it's against the rules to come in early. Have you anything to say?'

'I was going to do the registers,' Harvey faltered. 'The Headmaster told me to.'

Jeff shook his head and ran a finger down the paper. 'Clearly rubbish. My information is that Sharon Mandeville did the registers on Monday.'

'It was a mistake,' Lloyd said quietly. 'The Headmaster changed his mind.'

'The Headmaster never changes his mind,' Rose said crushingly. 'Indecision is disorder.'

'Second,' Jeff went on relentlessly, 'later the same day, in the afternoon, you left your classroom, telling Rose that you wanted to go to the toilet. Instead, you went up to the Hall, to spy on the Assembly – which you are not permitted to attend.'

Harvey gasped and turned to look at Lloyd, but this time Lloyd could only shrug.

'Third,' Jeff said, 'yesterday, in the playground, you threw two snowballs, although you knew that playing anywhere on school premises is most strictly forbidden.'

'But that's not fair!' Lloyd shouted. 'He's already been punished for that.'

'The prefects took such action as they saw fit,' Rose said crushingly, 'but the matter has not yet been dealt with by the Headmaster. We are now acting under his instructions.'

'I don't believe you,' Lloyd said. 'If the Headmaster wants to deal with Harvey, why doesn't he see him himself?'

But even as he spoke the words, he knew they were stupid. Simultaneously, the figures round the table chanted, 'The prefects are the voice of the Headmaster. They must be obeyed.'

'Well,' said Lloyd desperately, 'if you're the voice of the Headmaster, then when you punished Harvey yesterday, that *was* a punishment from the Headmaster. And it *isn't* fair to give him another one.'

Harvey twisted his hands together wretchedly. 'Oh, L, what's the use? This isn't really like a court. They're not going to let me off whatever you say. Why don't we just shut up and hear what they're going to do to me?'

Rose gave a patronizing smile. 'I'm glad to see that one of you has some sense. Especially since the Headmaster has decided to be merciful.'

'He has?' Harvey looked disbelieving.

Rose nodded. 'He will give you a chance to redeem yourself.' She reached into the file and drew out a long white envelope with Harvey's name written on the front. 'He has set you a paper of sums to do. If you get them all right, your offences will be forgotten. This time. But if you get any of them wrong, the Headmaster will deal with you himself. Most severely.'

Harvey gulped. 'Is that all? Can I go?'

Jeff nodded. 'Go straight back to your classrooms and get on with your work. The sums are not to be done until you get home.' He smiled sarcastically. 'You never

know. If you do them well enough, you might land up on Eddy Hair's Great School Quiz.'

Lloyd snorted. 'I can just see *us* being the Headmaster's blue-eyed boys.'

Ignoring Jeff's frown, he made for the door. As soon as he and Harvey were safely outside, he exploded.

'Of all the stupid, trumped-up, unfair charges –'

Harvey looked sideways at him, his eyes scared. 'But how did they *know*, L? About me going into school early and going to look at the Assembly? No one knew about both things. Only me and you.'

Lloyd stopped in the middle of the corridor. 'Yes,' he said softly. 'Exploding eggshells! There *was* someone else who knew. Dinah saw you go into school early. And you told her that you watched the Assembly.'

'But she wouldn't have told. Would she?'

Lloyd pulled a face. 'Of course she would. It's all her fault you're in trouble. Like yesterday. That was her fault too.' Then he saw Harvey start to look upset and he put an arm round his shoulders. 'Never mind. It could be worse. They've only given you sums to do. And you're quite good at sums.'

'I expect they're hard,' Harvey faltered.

'Let's have a look.'

Harvey ripped open the envelope and pulled out three sheets of paper folded together. He glanced at them briefly and then said, in a horrified voice, 'L, I'll never work out the answers. I can't even understand the questions.'

'Let me see.' Lloyd snatched the papers out of his hand. 'I can always help you.'

He began to read with scornful confidence, but a moment later he, too, was looking completely baffled.

'You see?' Harvey said. 'We can't. Oh, what am I going to *do*?'

Lloyd took the envelope and pushed the papers back into it. 'We'll let Mandy have a look. She's quite good at sums. And if that doesn't work, we'll show them to Mum when we get home. She'll help you if she can. And if she can't –' all at once he looked pleased '– she'll see they're much too difficult for you. Then even she will have to admit there's something peculiar going on.'

When they got home, Mrs Hunter was sitting in the kitchen having a cup of tea with Dinah. Lloyd walked straight past Dinah without even looking at her.

'Mum, we want to talk to you.'

'Well, of course.' Mrs Hunter smiled. 'Have a cup of tea?'

Lloyd flicked his fingers impatiently. 'No. We want to talk to you alone.'

At once, his mother stiffened. 'I've told you about that before. Dinah's a member of the family and you must treat her like one. If you've got anything to say, you can say it with her here.'

'But you don't understand –' Lloyd began sulkily.

'Please, L,' Harvey broke in, 'don't waste time. Let's just show her the sums.' He pulled the papers out of the envelope and threw them on the table.

'The Headmaster gave them to him,' Lloyd said, 'and they're terrible. You must help him.'

Mrs Hunter shook her head. 'Now, you know you mustn't cheat. If the Headmaster gave them to Harvey, he means him to do them by himself.'

'But Mum, I can't,' Harvey said pathetically. 'They're awful. You look.'

Mrs Hunter picked up the paper and scanned it. Then she gave a little laugh. 'It's no use. It doesn't mean anything to me. I don't understand any of this New Maths you all do.'

'It's not New Maths!' Harvey shouted. 'It's just incredibly difficult.'

'Now, now, dear,' Mrs Hunter said, a little sharply, 'calm down. Let me give you a cup of tea. Then you can go away quietly by yourself and look at it. I'm sure you'll find it's all right when you think about it. The Headmaster wouldn't be unreasonable.'

'That's what you think,' Lloyd said bitterly. 'He's a maniac.'

'Don't be silly,' Mrs Hunter said. 'I'm sure he's not a maniac. Is he, Dinah?'

With an expression of utter misery on her face, Dinah said, 'The Headmaster is a marvellous man, and this is the best school I've ever been to.'

'It's no good asking *her*!' Lloyd shouted. 'It's all her fault. She's the one who got Harvey into trouble.'

'Me?' Dinah said.

'Yes, you!' He glared at her, and she stared back, looking completely baffled.

'Oh, what's the use of quarrelling?' Harvey said desperately. 'What does it matter? All that matters is that I've

got these sums to do and *I can't do them*. And nobody can help me. It's going to be *awful*.' He snatched up the papers and ran out of the room, banging the door behind him.

'See what you've done?' Lloyd shouted at Dinah. 'Oh, I wish you'd never come!'

He ran after Harvey, banging the door again, and found him in the playroom, huddled in a chair. His shoulders were shaking and he was beginning to sob fiercely.

'Oh H, do stop it. That won't help.'

'Nothing will help,' said Harvey, in a totally wretched voice. 'I shan't be able to do the sums and tomorrow I'll have to go and see the Headmaster, and it will be frightful and – oh!' With a loud wail, he buried himself deep in the cushions.

At that moment, the playroom door opened again.

'Please may I see the sums?' said a stiff little voice from the doorway.