



# The Demon Headmaster

Gillian Cross

'Our last moments of freedom,' Lloyd said darkly. He glowered round at the battered walls of the playroom, at the motorbike posters peeling off the wallpaper and Harvey's model aeroplanes neatly ranged on top of the bookcase. 'She'll be sticking up pictures of flowers and ballet dancers when she comes, I bet.'

He mooched about gloomily, kicking at the furniture. 'Take care of her, Mum said. What does she expect us to do? Hold her hand and tell her bedtime stories?'

Harvey, curled in his chair, stolidly went on reading *The Aeromodeller*.

'H!' Lloyd banged him crossly on the shoulder. 'Why don't you say something?'

Harvey looked up and grinned. 'You've gone all red in the face.'

That only made Lloyd angrier. 'Red in the face? I should just think I have. Purple pancakes! Don't you realize how awful it'll be? Having a girl come to live here!'

'But you've known for ages,' Harvey said mildly. 'Mum's always wanted to have someone to foster.'

'I thought she meant a baby,' Lloyd spluttered. 'That would have been OK. Just a bit of screaming at night. But a girl! A horrible girl, as old as me! She'll never be out of our hair. We'll have to take her to *school* with us.'

'So?' Harvey shrugged. 'Might be a good thing. She might be on our side. Another Normal.'

Lloyd looked at him scornfully. 'Is it likely? I ask you. There's only five of us in the whole school. No, she'll be one of *them*. And what about the others? What will they say?'

'Have to wait and see, won't we?' Harvey picked up his magazine again. Enraged, Lloyd leaped across and knocked it out of his hands. 'Harvey Hunter, you're an *idiot*! Can't you see what it means? We'll have a little goody-goody about the place all the time, going on about how wonderful school is, and how marvellous the Headmaster is. I can't bear it. It'll be like having a spy in the house.'

For a moment, Harvey looked troubled. Then he brightened. 'Might not be as bad as that. If she watches us, we could watch her too.' A distant expression came over his face. 'You never know. We might actually be able to discover something. Find out what's going on.'

Lloyd stopped pacing the room and stared coldly at him. 'I've told you a hundred times,' he hissed, 'that's crazy. It'll just get us into trouble. We've worked out a good system for having a quiet life. I don't want anyone interfering with it.'

'But don't you ever *wonder*?' Harvey said dreamily. 'I do. In the afternoons. I sit and stare across at the Hall and wonder what the rest of them are doing, and why they're so—'

'Shut up!' Lloyd caught him by the shoulder and shook him hard. 'I've managed to keep you out of real trouble ever since you came to the school. And it's been a nightmare. Four years of watching and being careful. I won't have you mucking everything up now. You just have to behave yourself and—'

'OK, OK.' Scarlet in the face from the shaking, Harvey held up a hand to push Lloyd away. 'Keep your hair on. You don't want to be looking like a raging demon when she gets here.' Coolly he picked up his magazine and started to read again. Lloyd stared at him in disgust.

'Just wish I *did* look like a demon. That might frighten her away.' And he resumed his restless, furious pacing round the room.

'They're such a nice, *normal* family,' Miss Wilberforce said encouragingly, as the car jerked to a stop at the traffic lights. 'I'm sure you'll like living with them, Dinah. Lloyd and Harvey, the two boys, are very sensible and ordinary. It's a pity you couldn't meet them beforehand, but I'm sure you'll get on.'

'Yes, Miss Wilberforce,' Dinah said woodenly.

'Of course it's hard on you, having to change schools. I hope you won't find the work too difficult. You'll just have to put your back into it.'

'Yes, Miss Wilberforce.'

Miss Wilberforce sighed and looked round at her, taking one hand off the steering wheel. 'You don't seem very relaxed, dear. Are you, perhaps, just a teeny bit afraid? Mmm?'

'No, Miss Wilberforce.'

Miss Wilberforce sighed again. 'Hmm. Oh well, we're here now.' She steered the car in towards the kerb. 'Let's go in and meet them all.'

'Yes, Miss Wilberforce.' Dinah climbed out and stood stiffly on the pavement while Miss Wilberforce got her case out of the boot. Then the two of them marched up the front path of the Hunter's house and Miss Wilberforce rang the doorbell.

'Don't worry if you feel a bit strange at first,' she whispered. 'They'll do their best to make you at home.'

The door opened.

'Dinah, dear, how nice to see you again,' Mrs Hunter said. She held out her arms and gave Dinah a friendly hug and kiss. Dinah's body stayed quite stiff.

'Hello, Mrs Hunter. Hello, Mr Hunter,' she said, without expression.

'Come in and take your coat off. The boys are dying to meet you.'

'Oh,' said Dinah.

'I'm sure Dinah's looking forward to meeting them, too,' Miss Wilberforce put in quickly. 'But she's bound to be a bit shy, aren't you, dear?'

'No,' said Dinah.

Mr Hunter grinned at her. 'At least you know your own mind. Go into the living room. I'll call the boys.'

Dinah went in and sat on the edge of the sofa, with her knees pressed together. Her eyes flicked from side to side of the room. It was just what she had expected. Three piece suite. Television. A shelf of ornaments. A very ordinary room. She sighed softly. Then she sat up straighter as everyone else came in.

'Here they are,' Mrs Hunter said proudly. 'Lloyd's the big one, and Harvey's the little fat one.'

'Cheek!' Harvey protested amiably.

Dinah looked them up and down. Lloyd was taller than she was, with a mop of wild hair and a cocky look. Harvey was roly-poly and cheerful. There did not seem to be anything special about either of them. She held out a cold, rigid hand.

'Hello,' she said unenthusiastically.