



THE
NIGHT
ANIMALS



PART ONE



THE FOX





!

Night is at its deepest, darkest centre when she comes.

I'm dreaming about being stranded on a wild island when I slowly notice the paws on my chest like two solid nothings. They feel the way ice does when you hold it in your hand – like something so cold, it's just numb.

And then I open my eyes and I see her.

She has the same strange opal glow I remember them all having, but I can still make out the rust red of her coat and hungry yellow of her eyes. The glow from my nightlight is watery, but gleams off the claws pressed

into my pyjama top and the tip of her nose as she sniffs me. Her black-tip ears are pointed back towards my bedroom door, listening.

Maybe I should be afraid, but I'm not. I've seen others like her before, although not for a while and never this close. They were sometimes just a rainbow haze in the sky when I was feeling lost, or a splash of colour under the surface of the swimming pool I was afraid to dive into.

But this one is here – sitting on my chest, in my bedroom, in my house, in the dead of night.

A fox. A *ghost* fox.

My heart flutters like a trapped bird.

The ghost fox is staring at me, hardly moving at all. And I'm frozen too, even though the empty pressure from her paws feels strange on my chest.

My whole house is silent as stone. There's no light under my bedroom door, which means Mum has turned everything off and gone to bed. My window is closed, so I can't hear the cars in the distance, or the wind sneaking into the shadows between tree branches. It feels like the whole world now belongs only to the ghost fox and me.

I've always wanted to see a ghost animal up close. The closest I ever got was when Dad left for India and

the tiger stripes on his suitcase roared into a giant cat that sat with me and made me feel stronger. But Dad couldn't see when I pointed her out and Mum's never been able to catch any of the others either. It made me wonder if they were just something I made up.

This fox is definitely here though. As here as if she were alive. And if I didn't remember seeing ghosts before with this shimmering colour behind them, I'd maybe think that she was a living wild fox, come to scavenge the meat off my bones in the night.

'Did you come to eat me?' I whisper, just in case.

Her ears tilt forward towards my voice and she slides off my chest, so the pressure lifts. I sit up and put my glasses on, looking at her properly with her bushy tail tucked across her paws. She's still, but her outline sort of flickers with colours that collide and disappear so quickly, it's like I dreamed them.

'I'm Nora,' I whisper.

The fox tilts her head slightly, but she doesn't say her own name, because even though she's a ghost, she's still just a fox.

I feel like she's asking me a question anyway though. Something still and urgent and quietly loud that I can't hold on to.

‘It must be lonely, being a ghost,’ I say.

Suddenly, she leaps up, her cold-nothing paws landing on my chest again and making my heart squeeze. And I close my eyes and push through the feeling it gives me, because, yes – this is what it feels like to be alone. Cold and empty, and I already know it.

I clench my hands into fists. ‘I’m strong, I’m strong, I’m strong,’ I mutter, over and over again.

The pressure lifts and my caged-bird breath takes flight. But when I open my eyes, I’m just looking at an empty space where I think maybe a fox once sat.