

FOXES

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CHAPTER 1

Last night I dreamed I went to Longcross again.

It seemed like I was watching myself, as if I were in a film, if that makes sense. There was a whole bunch of people on horses milling around in front of the grand entrance to Longcross Hall, all wearing their hunting stuff. And I was one of them. I was on this elegant grey horse, wearing boots and breeches and a midnight-black coat with a nipped-in waist and a black riding hat. I was holding the reins with one gloved hand, and in the other I held a little silver cup. I was drinking from it and smiling.

Shafeen and Nel were there with me too, both looking amazing in their riding gear; Shafeen, like all the gentlemen, wearing hunting red. Sorry: pink. The twins were there, immaculate on twin white – sorry: grey – horses, but when I looked for someone else, someone who also had blond cropped hair, he was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't see Ty either, and she definitely would've stood out in this company, as the only black person in the hunt.

We were all chatting and laughing, but there was an air of anticipation. The horses were shifting their hooves, the riders turning their heads with impatience. There was a bunch of hounds milling around, sniffing and yapping and weaving in between the horses' legs. We were all waiting for something. And it came.

There was the sound of a horn, clear and sweet as death, and we began to move off. We all trotted down the drive and then began to gallop across the open fields. Then I saw everything from above, like that helicopter shot of the hunt at the beginning of *The Remains of the Day*. The hounds, who had picked up a scent, streaked ahead in a white-and-tan arrowhead. Beyond them a flash of fire – a fox, running easily dark shadow of the trees of Longwood.

Once we followed it into the woods everything changed. This will sound weird, but the fox was now human, a figure dressed head to foot in red, a hood drawn over its head. It was running through the blackthorn of the undergrowth, the branches whipping at its face. I felt exhilaration and dread for the running figure. Jaws snapped behind it, and however fast it ran they nipped at its heels. It was no good. As we burst out into a clearing, the low sun in my eyes, the jaws closed on the red runner at last.

I crowded in with the rest of the hunt as the hounds tore at the red clothing. I watched in horror as the dogs ripped and wrenched, my whole body drenched in dread as riders jumped down to whip the hounds away and turn the motionless figure over. I was suddenly certain that when they did I would see my own face. But when the riders stood back, almost respectfully, the body was gone and there was just a fox, furry and forlorn, stretched dead on the winter grass. Then my point of view spiralled up and up, over the hills and far away, until the fox, that little smear of red, could no longer be seen.

You see? Even my dreams have camera moves. I didn't do that sit-bolt-upright-gasping-for-breath thing that they do in the movies though. I woke quite gradually, blinking myself into consciousness, and for a minute I didn't know where I was. It took me a good few seconds to click that I was in room K9 of Alwick Cottage Hospital, and I was totally alone – just me and my throbbing thumb.

Slowly, as things do after a vivid dream, everything came back to me, resolving like a darkroom photograph. Only a few days ago I'd been onstage at the De Warlencourt Playhouse, the school theatre at STAGS. I'd been glorying in the triumph of my production of Ben Jonson's lost play, *The Isle of Dogs*. I'd been playing the character of Poetaster, the narrator of the play and a thinly veiled version of Ben Jonson himself, when everything had gone very, very wrong. While speaking the epilogue with my head in a noose (part of the play, don't ask), something had gone wrong and I'd been hauled upwards until I was hanging by the neck.

And that was when things had got really weird.

I'd found myself in the middle of a circle of figures wearing red hooded gowns and stag antlers, led by the Old Abbot – who was, oh yes, supposed to be dead – putting me on trial for the murder of Henry de Warlencourt.

Naturally, when I came round in this very hospital bed, I thought I'd hallucinated the whole thing, especially as I'd then had a cosy bedside chat with none other than my own 'murder victim', Henry de Warlencourt himself. And TBH, I would still think that I had been hallucinating if it wasn't for one little detail. The sentence that had been visited upon me by the Dark Order of the Grand Stag: the brand on my thumb. The same brand that had been burned into Ben Jonson's flesh 400 years ago.

M for Manslayer.

I squinted at my phone. It was actually quite a reasonable hour – but of course it was the dead of winter, so it was just getting light outside. In the weak winter dawn I held up my thumb to the light. It felt strange, as if I was doing a thumbs-up, as if everything was OK. But everything was most definitely not OK. I could see the newly healed scar tissue of my brand, that pink, slightly stretched look that scars have, making a perfect capital 'M' in the pad of my thumb.

As soon as my nurse, Nurse Annie, had unwrapped my thumb the night before and seen the brand, she'd kicked Shafeen and Nel out of my hospital room and called in my doctor, Doctor Kyd. He'd questioned me for about a decade about self-harm, and hazing, and online cutting challenges, and all this horseshit until I'd finally convinced him that I hadn't done it and I wasn't a danger to myself. This wasn't an easy task when you consider that I couldn't actually tell him who had done it. In the end Doctor Kyd formed the opinion that I just needed to go home for Christmas to have some R & R, but still I could only get him to leave on the condition that I agreed to come back to see him at the beginning of the Trinity Term (January to you).

SO . . . By the time that was all over I was pretty tired but still nowhere near sleep, because then I was faced by the stone-cold realisation of what I couldn't tell the doctor: the only way that brand could have got onto my thumb was if it had been put there by the Dark Order of the Grand Stag. And that meant the whole trial in the De Warlencourt Playhouse at STAGS, far from being a figment of my oxygen-starved imagination, had actually happened In Real Life. And that realisation, let me tell you, was not exactly conducive to sleep. I must've slept eventually though, because I had the dream.

I lay there in the grey dawn trying to figure out what the hell it meant, but already it was starting to fade in that pesky way that dreams do. All I could remember, by the time Nurse Annie bustled in with a breakfast tray, was that it was about a fox.