

Chapter ONE



“Wait for me!”

But they didn't. They never did wait. Cassie kept on calling, just in case. It wasn't even as though she was the youngest of the kids from their flats but William always called her his “baby sister”, so everyone thought she was the babyish one. She watched the rest of the children disappear over the patch of wild ground, kicking a ball back and forth between them.

“Didn't want to play football anyway,” she muttered to no one, as their shouts died away. It was almost true. She didn't much like football, but she would have played if they'd let her, because she didn't want to be on her own.

Cassie slumped down on an old tyre that someone had dumped among the

patches of foxgloves and picked a pink spotted flower from one of the tall stems. She slipped the tiny bell over her finger and stroked it. It was soft, almost sticky, but very smooth. “You wouldn't fit a fox,” she whispered. “Not even a little one.”

She only just saw it – the faintest twitch out of the corner of her eye. A movement in the tall plants. Something was there, watching her. It was probably a cat, but then there were sometimes stray dogs around too... Cassie swallowed, wondering if she should shout for William. He was supposed to be looking after her – Mum always reminded him when they went to play outside. If she yelled, he'd have to come, wouldn't he?

“I can see you,” she said, trying not to let her voice squeak. “I know you're there!”

She glared fiercely at the foxgloves and saw them shiver a little. A dark nose appeared between the flowers and then a sandy-whitish muzzle.

Cassie stopped worrying about a fierce stray dog and leaned slowly forward, holding her breath. There was a fox in her foxgloves!

The fox stared back, just as surprised and curious as she was, Cassie thought. Its ears were huge and they twitched as it peered inquisitively at Cassie.

She knew that there were foxes on the waste ground, of course she did. Mum and everyone else at the school gates complained about them. They said there was always fox poo in the playground, and that foxes got in the litter bins and spread mess everywhere. They shrieked

and squealed in the night too, like little ghosts. Mum talked about the foxes as if they were nasty, dirty things. Cassie had seen them occasionally as they walked back from the bus stop in the dark – a fox might skulk past into the shadows, faded to grey by the lamplight. London was full of them, her dad said, even though they were meant to be countryside animals.

This fox was beautiful. It was small, but not skinny and greyish-red like the ones she'd seen before. Its fur was really red – a rich, orangey red-brown that glowed against the leaves. It edged a little closer to Cassie, pushing its way through the tall foxgloves, and she saw that it had neat dark socks and a white front and chin like a cat.

The fox gazed at Cassie with maple-syrup eyes and then stared hopefully at

Cassie's bulging pocket. Cassie glanced down too, then looked back at the fox, frowning. "Biscuits?" she whispered. "I don't think foxes eat biscuits."

Then again, she thought, they were a sort of dog, weren't they? Her cousin Riley's dog ate everything. He'd snatched a biscuit right out of Cassie's hand once, and he'd definitely eat these. Mum had given her the end of a packet of ginger biscuits for a snack, her favourite. Cassie pulled one out of the wrapper and saw the fox's ears swivel eagerly as it tracked the rustling sound.

"You do want one, don't you?" Cassie stifled a laugh – she didn't want to scare the fox away. "OK. One for you, one for me?" She reached forward and put the biscuit down on the worn path through the grass.



The fox looked at it, and then at Cassie, and then it darted over, snapping at the biscuit and tossing it up into the air. It caught the treat neatly in its jaws, then whisked away, tail held proudly high.

Cassie watched that tail, tipped in white, until it disappeared among a tangle of bramble bushes.



After that, Cassie stopped asking to join in when William and the others went off to play football. She spent the summer holidays watching the foxes. There was a whole litter of them, she discovered, with a den somewhere deep in the bushes. Four cubs and their mum and dad – though Cassie hardly ever saw the adult foxes since they were much shyer than their babies.

They were her secret. Cassie kept expecting William or one of the others to notice the cubs – to tell their own story about feeding a little fox cheese and onion

crisps – but they never did. Perhaps they just weren't looking, Cassie thought, or else they were too loud when they went rushing by.

The little fox with the white tail tip brought the other three cubs to see Cassie but they were never quite as brave as she was. Cassie had decided that her fox was a girl. She didn't really know for sure but she wanted her to be. She was fed up with William teasing her and her baby brother Lucas making Mum so tired all the time. She wanted another girl around. In her head, she called the fox cub Frost, because her white tail looked like the frost patterns on the leaves on the coldest morning, an icing-sugar sparkle.

The other cubs only peered through the foxgloves at Cassie, whiskers twitching.

They never came to beg for snacks like their sister but they were so funny. The four of them were like puppies, she thought. Or toddlers. Always rolling around on top of each other and snatching each other's toys. One of the cubs only had to find a particularly exciting twig for the rest of them to decide it was definitely theirs and start a full-on wrestling match.

Cassie never went near their den. She wasn't sure she'd be able to, anyway, because she had a feeling it was right in the middle of a fierce clump of brambles. But if she threaded her way through the weeds and sat looking at the scrubby stretch of dry grass by the bramble patch, the fox cubs were happy enough to pretend she wasn't there.



They seemed to get bigger so quickly and they changed so much. The first time Cassie had seen the little fox with the white tail tip, she was still darkish brown and fluffy along her back and her tail – her baby coat. But a week later Frost's coat was all red and Cassie was sure she'd grown. Her ears looked sharper and her nose was definitely more pointy.

By the end of the summer, around the time Cassie's mum was muttering about getting new school shoes, the cubs looked almost like grown-up foxes. The white tip at the end of Frost's tail was an even brighter white, as though she'd dipped it in paint. She wasn't tame, exactly – she wouldn't come close enough to be stroked – but she was almost friendly. And she definitely liked Cassie's snacks.

“It'll be quieter for you when everyone's back at school,” Cassie murmured. She passed the fox cub a cube of cheese, and Frost sniffed at it suspiciously and then gulped it down. “But I'll come and see you after school instead.”

Actually, Cassie had noticed that the fox cubs were asleep for most of the day now anyway. They seemed to come out

in the early evening – after tea, when Cassie's mum was trying to get Lucas to go to sleep. Every so often she saw them in the daytime still, but in the evenings they came yipping and scuffling out of their secret den and played.

Once or twice, when she'd woken up early in the morning and gone to look out of the window of the flat, Cassie had seen the cubs sniffing eagerly through the bushes. They did ballet leaps, jumping to catch something – she wasn't sure what. Mice, maybe, or beetles? The book she'd got out of the library said that foxes even ate worms.

They definitely ate the late summer blackberries. Cassie had watched them do it, gently nipping the berries off the brambles with their teeth. The cubs tried

to stand on their hind paws to reach the fruit but they couldn't get all of them. Cassie had never liked blackberries much herself – too sour and too seedy – but she could reach higher than the foxes could. So after that, she picked them for the foxes, leaving little piles of blackberries balanced on dock leaves at the edge of the grass. They were never there the next time Cassie looked, and she knew the cubs had eaten them because their poo turned purple and once she accidentally trod in some. It took ages to get it off her trainer.

Even though she'd wiped away as much as she could, Mum still noticed when Cassie came in later. She said it stank and Cassie supposed that she was right, but somehow she didn't mind as much as Mum did. It just made her want

to laugh, thinking of the foxes nibbling blackberries so carefully. She wondered if they got purple juice down their white chins. They must have eaten an awful lot of blackberries for it to go right through them like that.

The blackberries on the bushes were all gone by the week that Cassie went back to school and Cassie wondered if Frost missed them. On Friday afternoon she ran ahead of William and her mum, who was pushing Lucas in his buggy. And instead of going along the path to the main doors of their flats, she darted round the back of the block to the waste ground. She'd saved the apple from her packed lunch and she left it by the bramble patch for the foxes. She wondered if Frost had ever seen one before.

“You shouldn’t feed them,” someone said snappishly as she raced back round the side of the building to see where Mum and William had got to.

Cassie pulled up short and saw Mrs Morris sitting on a bench outside the main doors. She looked out of breath and cross, and she was glaring at Cassie.

Mrs Morris lived in the flat next door and she was always complaining to Mum about Lucas crying. Mum said she didn’t mean to be horrible, and she was probably not feeling well or perhaps she was lonely. But Cassie had heard Mum muttering under her breath about Mrs Morris when she thought Cassie and William weren’t listening. Cassie’s dad wouldn’t go out into the hallway if Mrs Morris was there because he said she’d moan at him for at

least ten minutes if she saw him.

“Wh-what did you say?” Cassie stammered. How did Mrs Morris know she’d been feeding the foxes? Had she seen Cassie from her balcony?



“You’re just encouraging them! Nasty, dirty creatures. They make such a mess – they’ve ripped open those bin bags someone left by the wheelie bins again. There’s rubbish everywhere!”

“What’s the matter?” Cassie’s mum came hurrying up, shoving the pushchair in front of her so that it bumped over the paving slabs and Lucas whined. “Cassie, you shouldn’t run off like that. I didn’t know where you were. What’s going on?” she added sharply.

“Your little girl keeps feeding the foxes on that patch of waste ground.” Mrs Morris pulled herself up from the bench with an effort. “You should keep a better eye on her! She’ll probably catch something – those creatures are filthy.”

Cassie could see that her mum was

furious but she smiled at Mrs Morris, a thin smile that stretched round her teeth. “Thank you. I’ll talk to her. Cassie, William, upstairs now.” She marched away, with Cassie trailing after her to the lifts.

“Is that true?” she hissed at Cassie as the doors wheezed shut. “Have you been hanging about round there? You know I told you only to play on the swings and the slide!”

Cassie looked sideways at William and he glared at her. They hardly ever went to the little playground at the front of the block. It was full of baby stuff, more for toddlers like Lucas than for them. There was a patch of tarmac that was OK for football, it even had a goal marked out, but there were always older kids playing

on it. Everyone their age went round to the waste ground. But if Cassie told her mum that, she'd get William in trouble too. Her mum hated the way the waste ground was full of rubbish, she said it was dangerous. If Cassie said they all hung around there they'd never be allowed to play outside, not without an adult watching over them. She scowled at William and kicked gently at the side of the lift.

"Sometimes I go down there," she muttered. "Not all the time."

"She's usually with me and Sam and the others," William agreed, trying to look like a reliable big brother.

"Well, keep an eye on her! It's bad enough Mrs Morris having a go, let alone that she's actually right!" Her mum let out a sigh. "Don't go round there again,

Cassie," she added in a gentler voice. "It's not a good idea. Who knows what people have dumped there? And foxes are wild – what if one of them bit you?"

She never would, Cassie wanted to say, thinking of Frost's amber eyes and the delicate way the cub could nibble a biscuit from her fingers. But she didn't say it. Who would believe her anyway?