



TIGERS.

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HOT
KEY
BOOKS



PART I
Trust in Me



1

It was seven o'clock of a very cold evening when I set out for my meeting with the Abbot.

I snuck out of the front door of Lightfoot House into the shock of the January cold. I crossed the Garden Quad, then went down the Hundred Steps – slippery with frost – past Honorius House and Oswald House, past the illuminated windows of the library and into the gothic dark of the chapel. All the way the letter fluttered in my hand in the bitter breeze. As if there hadn't been enough drama, what with the fire at Longcross Hall and the death of its lord, Rollo de Warlencourt, the letter which I now clutched had told me that there was *another* secret society, *besides* the Order of the Stag. The letter had shockingly revealed that rebels against the Establishment had been watching the Order since the time of the Gunpowder Plot, tracking them for centuries. Rebels known as the FOXES. Their leader – their own Grand Master – known as Reynard, had written to recruit me. And I was pretty sure I was going to meet one of his agents right now.

The meeting was to be at seven o'clock in the chapel

because everyone else would be in the Refectory at Commons – the evening meal. I didn't tell anyone I was going to meet Abbot Ridley. Not Shafeen, even though he was my boyfriend. Not Nel, even though she was my best friend. And not Ty, the outsider who'd become an insider; the one who knew much more about this than any of us. Apart from maybe Abbot Nathaniel Ridley, headmaster of STAGS and all-round nice guy, who, I was convinced, was up to his handsome neck in it. It was the Abbot, after all, who had directed me to check my post. He'd known the letter was coming.

He was there before me, in the front pew, sitting poker straight, with the cowl of his habit drawn right up. From the angle of his head, he seemed to be looking up at the window, the one that showed St Aidan and the white stag. The chapel was dark, lit only by the pinprick light of candles, but moonlight flooded through the window, its silver hue unchanged by the white flanks of the stag.

As I walked down the aisle – I'm not going to lie – I had the strongest feeling that there would be someone else beneath that hood. It hadn't occurred to me until that very moment that I might be in danger. But as I slid into the pew beside the cowed figure, it raised a pale hand and lowered the hood to reveal the ruffled curls of the Abbot.

I knew just what to say, don't you worry. There was no wondering where to start. I waved the letter under his nose. 'OK,' I said. 'I did what you asked. I checked the post. *Now* show me.'

He didn't waste time asking me what I meant. It was truth

time and we both knew it. The gaslighting days were over. He turned over his long left hand, the fingers splayed, and showed me the pad of his thumb. There, in the moonlight, I could see the smooth scar tissue in the shape of a perfect little M. I looked at it for a moment. Without hesitation, I pressed my own branded thumb to his.

He didn't draw away but returned the pressure. We looked at each other and smiled a grim smile. Our dynamic had changed forever. The brand gave us an undoubted bond. I knew we couldn't be the only people in the world who'd been tried by the Dark Order of the Grand Stag, but right now that's how it felt: just us two Manslayers, sitting together in a pool of moonlight in the STAGS chapel. We were no longer headteacher and pupil. I spoke to him now as an equal.

'So – you're one of the FOXES?'

He said nothing.

'First rule of the Fox Club, eh?' I said. 'You don't talk about it?'

'Something like that.'

'And I take it that you being here at STAGS isn't an accident?'

'No. The school was identified as, shall we say, the epicentre of the problem. This was clearly where the "prey" for the death hunts were being sourced.'

That was one way of putting it, I thought. All those poor kids who had thought they were being invited to a lovely country-house weekend, being pursued through the green fields of England. 'Then,' he continued, 'when Gideon Villiers had to "disappear", I was fed in.'

He'd lost me. 'Sorry, who?'

‘The Old Abbot. Gideon Villiers.’

‘Ah.’ I’d never known his full name. In the game book of 1969, when all the old friars and Shafeen’s dad had been Rollo’s guests at Longcross, he’d been written in the book only as the Grand Master. That, of course, reminded me that the Grand Master of the DOGS had an opposite number in the FOXES. The mysterious sender of the letter I now held. A thought occurred. ‘Are *you* Reynard?’

He smiled again. ‘That I can tell you. No.’

‘Then who is?’

He was silent.

I sighed. ‘All right, let’s try another one. Is Ty involved in this?’

‘Let’s just say that, when we discovered where her . . . interests lie, she was invited to join our number.’

‘So you’ve been in this together?’

‘You might say that.’ He tapped the letter where it lay in my hand. ‘And you? Have you thought about Reynard’s offer?’

‘I’ll answer you that if you answer me another. Did you murder Rollo de Warlencourt?’

He looked at me as if I’d asked a trick question.

‘He died in the fire at Longcross,’ he said slowly.

I shook my head, keeping my eyes on him all the time. ‘Nope. He was poisoned.’

‘What?’

I gauged his reaction carefully, but the shock on his face seemed genuine.

‘But you did kill someone, right? That’s why you have the brand.’

He shifted a little in the pew. 'Not deliberately. It was a long time ago, in a country far, far away.'

I appreciated the *Star Wars* reference – he did look pretty Jedi at that moment.

'Who was it?'

'That's another of the things I can't tell you. For your own protection.'

'Was he one of the Order of the Stag?'

'Yes.'

'Aren't you going to ask me the same question?'

'But I know who you killed,' he said. 'Henry de Warlencourt, formerly of this parish.'

Hearing Henry's name like that, and from the Abbot, was a shock. 'But he's alive.'

'I know that too.' He seemed to know an awful lot. 'Some people believe in reincarnation, you know.'

I was sceptical. 'Are any of those people in this chapel?'

He pointed. 'Him.' There was a crucifix over the altar, where a polished wooden Christ hung neatly, seeming politely not to notice that he was nailed hand and foot. 'He made a comeback after three days.'

'You're not, surely, comparing Henry de Warlencourt to Jesus Christ?' I said. 'Because I think even Henry would say that was a stretch.'

'I never met Henry. But no, from all I hear, it's not a comparison that I'd make.'

I *almost* sprang to Henry's defence. He had, after all, saved Ty from the fire at Longcross. But maybe if the Abbot didn't know about the poisoning, he didn't know about Henry and

Ty. Only Shafeen, Nel and I had seen him before he'd vanished into the ashes like in *Avengers: Infinity War*. If the Abbot could keep secrets, so could I.

'I merely meant,' he clarified, 'that many world religions believe in reincarnation. Hinduism in particular.'

'Now you sound like you teach religious studies,' I observed.

'Habit,' he said, and it was hard to tell if he was punning on his outfit or not.

I studied him. 'Do you really believe that Henry came back?'

'I think it more likely he never went away.'

There was something I suddenly had to know. 'The person you killed. He . . . she?'

'He.'

That was somehow better, but if you asked me, I wouldn't have been able to explain why. 'Did you *mean* for him to die?'

He seemed to give this some thought. 'If I were to think of a word for it, it would be that I was a Manslaughterer.'

I smiled to myself, remembering. 'I don't think that's a word.' Then another thought occurred. 'Are you even an English teacher?'

'I used to be.'

Before he'd joined the FOXES, presumably. 'Did you know that Esmé Stuart was a man?' I remembered when he'd muddled the gender of Ben Jonson's friend and patron. It was the first time I'd suspected that the shiny new Abbot might not be all that he seemed.

'Not at first. I did later.'

I *knew* I'd been right about that.

‘I suppose it was a kind of . . . shibboleth,’ he confessed.
‘And I failed the test.’

‘What’s a . . . shi-shi— *what* did you say?’

‘A shibboleth,’ he said. ‘A word, or a question, that’s a test.’
He nodded to the school bible, open on the lectern as it always was. ‘In the book of Judges, the residents of Gilead would challenge strangers to say the word shibboleth.’ He was doing that explaining teacher thing again. ‘The Ephraimites couldn’t say the word properly, so they were found out.’

‘Ah, OK,’ I said. ‘Like at the end of *The Great Escape*, when the German officer says *good luck* to the British prisoners and they say *thank you*, giving themselves away as English.’

‘If you like.’

‘What happened to them? The Eph-Eph—’

‘. . . Ephraimites . . .’

‘. . . If they couldn’t say the word?’

He looked at me directly. ‘What happened to those prisoners in *The Great Escape*?’

‘They were put to death,’ I said soberly.

‘Then there’s your answer.’

‘Well then, you got off lightly,’ I said, trying to make a joke of it. ‘I didn’t do that to you.’

‘No, but you found me out.’

I fiddled with the carving of the pew in front of me. ‘And why didn’t you know the . . . shibboleth? Why didn’t you know Esmé Stuart was a man?’

‘Let’s just say I was insufficiently briefed.’

‘By whom?’

He was silent again.

‘All right. Let me change the subject. Blowing up Longcross, the full-on *Baader Meinhof Complex* thing. Was that a FOXES plan? Because I have to tell you, I’d have severe reservations about joining a group that had just tried to blow up me and my friends. You guys couldn’t have known we would get out in time. Even Ty, one of your own, would have been collateral damage. So you tell me, *Abbot Ridley* –’ I gave his title a biting emphasis – ‘*did* you plan to kill us all? Or did Bates the Bitter Butler go rogue?’

This made him squirm a bit. ‘I can’t say.’

‘Because you don’t know? Or because you won’t tell?’

‘I’m afraid,’ he said regretfully, ‘that I can’t even tell you that. All I can say is that you were never intended as targets.’

I stood up, frustrated. ‘This is useless.’

‘Where are you going?’ He sounded, for the first time since I’d known him, a bit panicked.

‘Lightfoot,’ I said over my shoulder as I strode down the aisle. Then I stopped. Sighed heavily. Turned back. ‘You know, this is not how I thought this would go.’ I slapped my hand down on one of the carved wooden terminals of the pews. ‘I thought this was going to be a truth fest. Cards on the table. If you want me to join your little rebel alliance then I’m going to need *all* the information. But you’re *still* keeping secrets. And if you won’t help me, I’ll go to someone else.’

‘What will you do?’ he said warily.

I regressed to primary school. ‘Tell.’

‘Tell who?’

‘The authorities,’ I said. ‘The governors.’

He got to his feet and met me halfway up the aisle, as if

we were going to get married or something. 'Listen . . . if I'm keeping things back, it's for a reason, I promise. If you "tell", as you call it, I would be fired. And you and your friends would be in *much* more danger than you are now.' He held out his hand to me in a pleading gesture and I saw again the thumb, and the M burned into it.

It was the brand that held me. We were on the same side – had to be. 'Are we in danger?'

'Not at the moment. I'm protecting you. But I have to be here to do it. We – the FOXES, that is – have to preserve this . . . equilibrium.'

That, at least, sounded plausible. 'So what do *we* do?'

'The hardest thing of all,' he said. 'Leave it alone. *Watch the wall.*'

'Watch the *wall*?'

'Don't you know your Rudyard Kipling?'

'Just *The Jungle Book* really.'

'Book or film?' he asked.

'Film,' I said shamefacedly. 'I told you it was truth time.'

He smiled for the first time. 'Well, when he wasn't writing *The Jungle Book* he wrote a poem called "A Smuggler's Song", about smugglers in the West Country. There's a line in it where a mother cautions her daughter to turn a blind eye to the smugglers' activities. She says: *Watch the wall, my darling, while the gentlemen go by.*'

'I guess you are an English teacher after all.' We stood there, in a standoff, now more like a scene from *The Gunfighter* than *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. 'So *now* what do we do?'

'You should probably revise for your exams.'

‘About *this*.’

There was that lopsided Harrison Ford smile again. ‘I’ll keep you posted.’

It was a weirdly archaic expression, which fitted with his habit and the surroundings and this whole batshit medieval set-up. The white stag and St Aidan still watched over us both from the stained-glass window.

‘Ironic, really,’ said the Abbot, following my gaze.

‘What is?’

‘St Aidan. His power was to protect his disciples from fire.’

I nodded at the saintly face as I turned to go. ‘Perhaps he did.’

I was nearly at the door when he called after me.

‘Greer. If it’s any consolation, I don’t think *you* are in any danger at all.’