



NINE  
STUDENTS.

THREE  
BLOOD SPORTS.

ONE DEADLY  
WEEKEND.

# S.T.A.G.S.

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1

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*To Conrad and Ruby, who are Medieval  
and Savage in the right places*



‘Trace the deer to its lair’

*Master of Game* – Edward of Norwich, 1373







S.T.A.G.S.

(I)



## chapter one

I think I might be a murderer.

Although, as I didn't mean to kill, I suppose it was manslaughter, so technically I would be a 'manslaughterer', although I don't think that's a word. When I got my scholarship to STAGS, my old headmistress told me, 'You'll be the cleverest student in that school, Greer MacDonald.' I might be, I might not. But I'm clever enough to know that manslaughterer is not a word.

I should make it clear here, before you lose all sympathy for me, that I didn't kill with my own hands. There were a few of us. I helped to *cause* a death, but not alone. I'm a murderer in the way that foxhunters are murderers – they are each responsible for the fox's death, even though they hunt in a pack. No one ever knows which dog tore the fox apart, but all the dogs, and all those riders in their smart red coats, are part of it.

I just gave myself away. Did you spot it? Those coats – the coats that posh people wear out foxhunting – they are pink, not red; hunting pink. And the dogs are not dogs, they are hounds.

Every time I open my mouth I give myself away; Greer MacDonald, the Girl Who Doesn't Fit In. It's my northern

accent, you see. I was born and raised in Manchester and went to Bewley Park Comprehensive School until this summer. In both those places I fitted in just fine. When I won my scholarship to STAGS I stopped fitting in.

I ought to tell you a bit about STAGS, because I now realise how connected the school is to the murder. STAGS stands for St Aidan the Great School and it is *literally* the oldest school in England. Not a single building in my comprehensive school, Bewley Park, was built before 1980. The earliest bit of STAGS, the chapel, was built back in 683, and it is covered in frescoes. *Frescoes*. Bewley Park was covered in graffiti.

STAGS was founded in the seventh century by the man himself: St Aidan the Great, I mean. Before the Church decided he was Great, he was just a plain old monk, and wandered around northern England telling anyone who would listen about Christianity. Then, presumably so he could stop wandering, he founded a school, where he told his pupils all about Christianity instead. You might assume that he'd been made a saint for all that telling people about Christianity, but apparently that's not how it works. In order to become a saint, you have to perform a miracle. Aidan's miracle was that he saved a stag from the hunt by turning him invisible. So the stag became Aidan's emblem, and the school's too. When I got my letter calling me for interview, the stag's antlers were the first thing I noticed, right at the top of the letter, like two little jagged black tears in the paper.

The first time I saw St Aidan the Great School was when I went for my interview. It was one of those sunny midwinter days, all glittering frosty fields and long, low shadows. Dad drove

me through the gates and up this long driveway through lush green grounds in his ten-year-old Mini Cooper. At the end of the drive we got out and just stared and stared. We'd seen some pretty amazing scenery on the long trip from Manchester to Northumberland, but this was the best of all. It was a beautiful, vast medieval manor house, with a sort of moat and a little bridge to the entrance. It didn't look at all like the headquarters of a disturbing cult, which is what it actually is. The only clue, if I'd been looking for it, might have been the pair of antlers over the great door.

'*Another Country*,' I said shakily.

Dad didn't nod, or murmur, 'You can say that again.' He said, '*If*.'

My dad is a wildlife cameraman, and he loves films of all kinds, not just the nature documentaries that he mostly works on. We watch loads of films together, from obscure subtitled films to the stupidest brand-new blockbusters. I'm even named after Greer Garson, a film star from the black-and-white days. When Dad's travelling, or on night shoots, I watch films on my own, just to make up for the thirty-year head start he has on me. We have this game that we play; when something we see reminds us of a film, we say it out loud, and the other person has to name another film on the same theme. Now we were doing films featuring private schools. 'And,' he said, '*Zéro de Conduite*.'

'*Oh là là*' I said, 'a *French* film. The gloves are off.' I thought hard. '*Harry Potter*, films one to eight,' I said, a bit shakily. 'That's eight points.'

Dad could obviously hear the nerves in my voice. He knows

so many films he could have beaten me easily, but he must have decided that today wasn't the day. 'All right,' he said, giving me his lopsided grin. 'You win.' He looked up at the grand entrance, and the antlers over the door. 'Let's get this over with.'

And we did. I had the interview, I did the exam, I got in. And eight months later, at the beginning of autumn term, I was walking through the entrance of the school, under the antlers, as a sixth-form student.

I was soon to learn that antlers are, appropriately, a big thing at STAGS. Antlers bristle from every wall. There is also a stag on the school emblem, with the words '*Festina Lente*' embroidered underneath. (No, I didn't know either; it's Latin and it means 'Make Haste Slowly'.) In the chapel those frescoes that I mentioned show scenes from the 'miraculous' stag hunt, when St Aidan turned the stag invisible. There is also a really old stained-glass window in the chapel, of him holding one finger up in front of the face of a nervous-looking stag, as if he is trying to shush it. I've stared at those frescoes and that window a lot, because we have to go to chapel every morning, which is pretty boring.

As well as being boring, chapel is freezing cold. It's the only time I am glad to be wearing the STAGS uniform. The uniform consists of a long black Tudor coat of thick felt, all the way down to your knees, with gilt buttons down the front. At the neck we wear a white clerical tie, and at the waist a slim deer-leather belt which has to be knotted in a particular way. Under the coat we wear bright red stockings, the colour

of arterial blood. It is pretty dumb as outfits go, but at least it keeps you warm on the borders of Northumberland.

STAGS, as you might imagine, is pretty religious. Me and my dad are not religious at all, but we kind of left that fact off the application form. In fact, we may have given the distinct impression that we were churchgoers. That was back when I actually *wanted* to go to the school. Dad was going to be mostly abroad for two years, making a wildlife documentary for the BBC, and if I hadn't come to STAGS I would have had to go to live with my Auntie Karen, and *believe* me, I didn't want to do that. My headmistress at Bewley thought I had the brains to get a scholarship to STAGS and it turned out she was right. I also happen to have a photographic memory, which didn't hurt either. I can't tell you how useful it was when I was sitting that entrance exam. But if I'd known what was going to happen that autumn half-term, I wouldn't have been such a try-hard. I would have gone to my Auntie Karen's without a word.

Apart from the incessant chapel-going there are loads of other differences between STAGS and a normal school. For one thing, they call autumn term 'Michaelmas', spring term 'Hilary' and summer term 'Trinity'. For another, the teachers are called Friars, not 'Miss' or 'Sir'. So our form master, Mr Whiteread, is Friar Whiteread; and, even stranger, our housemistress (Miss Petrie) is Friar Petrie. The headmaster, a really friendly Santa Claus-looking bloke who I met at interview, is called the Abbot. If that wasn't odd enough, the Friars wear a weird gown like a monk's habit over their suits, with knotted ropes at the waist. A lot of the Friars are ex-pupils and keep going on about when they were at STAGS in their day (which, by the



sounds of it, was *exactly* the same – STAGS is so antiquated I'd be surprised if a single thing had changed). The Friars are practically antiques themselves – I'd have to guess they're all in their sixties. There's no doubt that this gives them loads of teaching experience, but I've also got a sneaking suspicion that oldies were employed so that no one would ever, *ever* fancy any of them. There's absolutely no danger of any of those teacher–pupil relationships you read about online.

The sports are strange at STAGS as well; we don't play ordinary games like netball and hockey and football but things like fives and real tennis, in Tudor wooden courts out beyond the playing fields. Those playing fields, known as Bede's Piece, are immense, but are not used for anything standard like athletics, only for sports like rugby ('rugger') and lacrosse. STAGS has its own theatre, but it doesn't have any fancy lighting or sets; it's a faithful Jacobean replica playhouse lit by candles. *Candles*. Instead of German and French we study Latin and Greek. The food too is different from normal school food, in that it is really nice. Actually it's amazing – it's the sort you would get in a really good restaurant, not at all like the slop we used to get at Bewley Park. Meals are served by women from the local village, who seem perfectly nice but are rewarded with the nickname 'dinnerbags'. But the major difference between STAGS and a normal school is, as you might have guessed, that it costs an absolute fortune. The STAGS parents pay the fees willingly, and it didn't take me long to figure out what they are paying for. They are not paying for their little darlings to benefit from the Jacobean theatre, or the Olympic-sized swimming pool, or for the incredible,

knock-your-eyes-out beauty of the place. What they are paying for is for their children to be different too.

For the first thousand years or so there were just four houses at STAGS: Honorius, Bede, Oswald and Paulinus. Then a few decades ago they started to admit girls, so they founded a new girls' house called Lightfoot. I was told in my admissions letter that the Lightfoot dormitories were in one of the more 'modern' buildings, and I arrived expecting lots of pine and glass and central heating. It turned out that the Lightfoot building was built in 1550, and was all diamond-paned windows and crazy spiral chimneys. At STAGS 1550 was evidently considered 'modern'.

My room was on the third floor at the end of a panelled Tudor passageway. Through an immense oak door, the room itself was modern. It had chipboard furniture, office-blue carpets and a girl already in it. The habit of thinking in films was a hard one to break. If my first encounter with my roommate was in a film script, it would look like this:

**GREER** (smiling): I'm Greer. What's your name?

*Greer's roommate looks her up and down in a snotty way.*

**ROOMMATE** (rolling her eyes): *Jesus.*

After that first encounter I always called her 'Jesus' to myself, because it made me smile, and there was little enough for me to smile about at STAGS. I found out later that her name was actually Becca. She was a horse-mad girl, who had pictures of

her ponies on her wall like I had pictures of my dad. Maybe she missed them as much as I missed him. I didn't see how. That's pretty much it for dialogue in this part of the story. There will be lots later, but the sad truth was no one talked to me much in that first half-term. Teachers asked me questions in lessons; the dinnerbags would say things like, 'Chips or mash, hinny?' (Their accents would make me homesick.) And Shafeen, this kid in my learning set, would occasionally murmur things at me like, 'The thermal stability of the nitrates follows the same trend as that of the carbonates.'

Despite sharing a room with me, Jesus did not talk to me until it was nearly half-term, and that was only because I got The Invitation. I now think that if I'd had more friends – or *any* friends – in that first half-term, I never would have accepted The Invitation. Maybe I accepted it because I was lonely. Or maybe, if I'm being honest, I accepted it because it came from the best-looking boy in the school.