



## THE BEGINNING

**I**t was a very fine day, until something tried to eat him.

It was a black dog-like creature, but it was not like any dog he had ever seen. It had teeth as long as his arm, and claws that could tear apart an oak tree.

It says, therefore, a great deal in Christopher Forrester's favour that he refused – with speed and cunning and courage – to be eaten.



## THE BEGINNING, ELSEWHERE

**I**t was a very fine day, until somebody tried to kill her.

Mal had returned home from her journey, flying back from the forest with arms outstretched and coat flapping, buffeted by the wind.

Mal Arvorian could fly only when the wind blew. The weather that day was perfect – a westerly breeze that smelt of the sea – and she was sky-spinning, twisting in the cold air. Her flying coat was thick, and too big for her, and she wore it with the sleeves rolled up four times. When the wind was up – it didn't need to be strong, but some wind was necessary – she could catch at the corners and open it, like wings, and feel the breeze lift her off her feet.

That day she had flown over treetops, her shoes brushing the tips of their branches, and swooped low, causing a herd of unicorns to scatter.

In the kitchen, her Great-Aunt Leonor had grumbled at her cold hands, and given her a cup of hot cordial, when there was a knock on the door.

It was the murderer.



## ARRIVAL

The day before the attack, Christopher sat on a bench outside the ferry terminal, waiting for his grandfather. He had travelled alone from his flat in North London to Scotland, and he was cramp-legged and ravenously hungry.

A squirrel leaped on to the bench, and watched him. Slowly it edged closer, quivering, until its whiskers were touching his knee. It was joined by another, and then another, until there were seven of them, clustering around his feet.

A woman waiting at the taxi rank turned to stare. 'How's he doing that then?' she said to the man next to her.

One squirrel darted to crouch on the toe of Christopher's shoe. Christopher laughed, and the squirrel ran up his shin bone to his knee. 'All right there?' he said to the squirrel. 'Nice day.'

'Feeding them, no doubt,' the man said, then called over to

Christopher: 'You shouldn't feed wild animals! It's bad for their guts.'

'I know,' said Christopher, and he smiled half a smile. 'I'm not.'

It was a joke among his friends that wherever he went, animals sought out Christopher. Cats on the street came to wind figure-of-eights around his ankles; dogs leaped up at him in the park. Football games had been interrupted when a small chorus of yowling foxes tried to get near him; there had been a day when insistent pigeons dive-bombed him during a school trip, and swimming in the outdoor ponds in Hampstead was almost impossible. The lifeguard had ordered him out of the water, because the sudden arrival of a phalanx of swans was making the smaller children scream.

Christopher had smiled, whistled at the swans, and led them out of the pond and into some nearby bushes. One young swan had tried to fly on to his shoulder, scratching at his skin with clawed, webbed feet. He had the marks for months afterwards. He didn't mind the scars: he knew that the attention and love of animals were no gentle thing. It often involved a certain amount of blood.

'Something in his smell,' his father would say stiffly. But Christopher didn't, as far as he could tell, smell significantly different from other boys his age. He washed, though not unduly.

As a small child, it had been the great delight of his life. As he grew older, it still gave him tremendous joy, but he

learned to hide it – because his father hated it. The animals drove him into an inexplicable anxiety. ‘Get away!’ he would say, and he would chase off the cats, the birds, the occasional mouse or rat on the underground. Christopher and his father never went to the countryside now, because there was always an outside chance that hares would chase him across fields, and swallows would want to nest in his hair.

It hadn’t always been that way. Before his mother’s death, he remembered his father differently. Animals had come to his mother too. He had a photograph of the three of them in Richmond Park, surrounded by deer, his father laughing with a baby Christopher on his shoulders. But she had died, nine years ago, and his father had contracted, as if a weight had settled on him and concertinaed him downwards and inwards. Everything in the house had felt smaller – diminished and less brave – after that.

So Christopher secretly opened his windows at night to let the birds in. He wore a long wool navy overcoat, and occasionally let sparrows investigate the patch pockets. He made detours to greet crows if he saw them, and allowed them to stalk on clawed feet up his arm and on to his shoulder. His friends were wary – ‘They’ll peck your eyes out!’ – but he only smiled and shook his head.

‘Nah.’ His voice around animals became softer, lighter. ‘They won’t,’ he said – and they didn’t. His face around them took on the look of a drawn bow: ready, waiting.

The crows brought him silver buttons and paper

clips, and coins which he dug holes in and strung on to a shoelace and wore round his neck. Some of the seniors at school jeered at him for the necklace, but it didn't stop him wearing it. It was a way of saying his allegiance was to wild and living things.

And so he grew older and taller – they were a tall family, with gangling legs and finely made hands – and he waited.

What he was waiting for, Christopher couldn't have explained: he only hoped, in a way that burned in his lungs and stomach, that there was something more than that which he had so far seen. The animals felt like a promise.

(He was right. It was an astonishment that would change his life forever.)