



# D.O.G.S.

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*To Inca,  
who was the very best of dogs*

Let him but look,  
And read,  
He may be saved by thy book.

*To Ben Jonson's Ghost*  
William Cavendish

# ACT ONE



## Scene i

So.

When someone's dead they're supposed to stay dead, right?

Well, that's what I thought. I certainly didn't think I was going to be seeing Henry de Warlencourt again. But it turned out I was wrong.

Everyone in the hospital keeps telling me that there's this thing called the 'Anniversary Effect'. It's when you start getting visions or flashbacks a year after a traumatic event. In my case, Justitium weekend a year ago at Longcross, and Henry's suicide. OK, death. Apparently the anniversary 'opens up the neurological floodgates'. Now, I know all about the Anniversary Effect. I watch *Stranger Things*. But *this* isn't *that*. I know what I saw.

There's lots of other stuff before we get to the exceptionally weird bit though. So I'm going to pick up the story exactly where I left off – Justitium of my last year at STAGS – because

it annoys the shit out of me when stories are supposed to be sequels and then it's like: THREE YEARS LATER. I mean, what the hell is *that*?

I'm going to tell you what happened in the second half of that autumn term – God, was it really only six weeks ago?? – right after the chapel service, right after we broke up for Justitium, right after I'd figured out that the Abbot was the Grand Master of the Order of the Stag, a freaky, people-hunting cult hell-bent on maintaining some archaic social order.

So.

Here goes:

As soon as I'd told Shafeen and Nel what I had to say, the three of us went straight to see the Abbot. We strode through the ancient quads of the school, all hyped up and ready for confrontation. We'd decided to challenge the Abbot with his crimes – a pretty crazy idea on reflection, since we now knew he was Murderer-in-Chief. *Were* we crazy? Probably, but still we hurried through those sunlit courts.

STAGS looked beautiful and deadly in the autumn light. There was nothing modern to be seen, and only the distant howl of an ambulance siren and a flash of blue streaking along the Alnwick road reminded us that there was even a Savage world out there at all. I shivered despite the sun. Ambulances and blue lights brought back that last night at Longcross: Henry falling backwards into space, the roar of the waterfall drowning the sound of his body breaking on the rocks below, his ruined form in a body bag being filed away neatly into the back of an ambulance. It was time for all this to end. But when we

entered the Abbot's study, the Abbot wasn't there. Friar Ridley was sitting behind the desk. Talk about the wind being taken out of our sails . . .

Friar Ridley was OK. He taught English and drama, and as they were two of my subjects I knew him a little bit, even though the term was only six weeks old. He was tall and had curling dark hair and green eyes. He looked a lot like that guy from *Batman v Superman*. Not Batman. Superman. Henry Cavill.

I wondered how the three of us looked to him – solemn Indian guy, perfect Barbie princess and me in the middle, all dark bob and bangs like some manga Joan of Arc. He nodded at the others but he knew me well enough to greet me by name. 'Greer,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

We all sat down, uninvited, in the chairs across from him. We sat in the exact same configuration as when we'd told the Abbot all about the Medievals last year. What chumps we'd been, to give the Abbot warning so he could cover up for his evil little minions, the Medievals, and ship them off to Oxbridge before we could act. I raised my chin. *We* were the Medievals now, we were at the top of the school, and we were going to get to the bottom of this, right *now*.

'I . . . We want to talk to the Abbot.'

I was ready to be asked why. I was ready to say because he's the head of an evil, child-killing cult. But Friar Ridley didn't ask me why. In fact, he said something quite different.

'Ah,' he said, looking down at his long fingers on the blotter. 'I'm afraid that won't be possible.'

'Why not?' asked Shafeen, all belligerent.



'Because he's on his way to Alnwick Cottage Hospital. He was taken ill after Justitium Mass.'

'What's wrong with him?' Nel didn't mess about.

'I know no more than that, I'm afraid. He collapsed.'

'So who's in charge?' I asked.

He flattened his gown over his broad chest. Friar Ridley, I could see, worked out. There was no getting away from it. He was fit. I don't just mean ripped, but handsome with it.

'Well, for the moment,' he said, 'I am.'

We all studied him. He was probably in his thirties, but despite his height he barely looked old enough to be a teacher, let alone an Abbot. Behind that desk, he *kind* of looked like he was on a 'Bring Your Son to Work' day, waiting for Daddy to get back.

Friar Ridley was one of the slew of new teachers who had been hired throughout the year since we'd had our face-off with the Abbot. As we'd demanded, they were supposedly non-posh, non-STAGS alumni. But knowing what we now knew about the Abbot, I was wary of all his new appointments. Friar Ridley sounded pretty well spoken to me. Maybe he was one of *them*. 'Friar Ridley,' I said, looking at him through narrowed eyes, 'where did you come from?'

He narrowed his eyes to match. 'How d'you mean?'

'I mean, where were you before STAGS?'

'My last school was Ampleforth in Yorkshire, where I was head of house, then head of English, then –' he smiled – 'head.'

Somewhere during that speech, I don't know why, I started to trust him. 'What about before that?'

'I could swear I'd already had my interview.' But he smiled

again. The smile was sort of lopsided. It was cute. 'Christ Church College, Oxford.'

That sounded alarm bells. Christ Church, I knew, was posh. And the reason I knew that was that it was the very college I'd applied to myself. More of that later. For now all I was thinking was that Ridley could be part of the whole STAGS set-up, radicalised at uni into the nostalgia posse, ready to murder us commoners just for fun. Warily, I asked, 'And before that?' I was trying to get to where he'd been to school, find out if he was part of the silver-spoon squad.

'Manchester Grammar School.'

'You're from *Manchester*?'

'Yes. Do I pass your test?'

*That's* why I'd begun to trust him. He'd said *last*, not *laaaast*. *Pass* not *paaass*. He was a northerner.

'Do you know Arkwright Road?'

'Know it? My aunty lived on that street. Near Asim's newsagent's on the corner.'

That did it. I'd bought sweets in Asim's shop my whole childhood. I was totally Team Ridley.

I looked at the other two. Shafeen and then Nel both gave me a small nod.

'We've got something to tell you. Something about the Abbot.'

He leaned forward, hands clasped on the tooled leather of the desk. You can be sure I had a good old look at those hands, every single finger, before I spoke. But we were good – no signet rings stamped with antlers, no big, flashy head-of-a-cult rubies.

'The Abbot –' I began. 'You're going to find this quite difficult

to believe . . .' – understatement of the year – 'but he's the head of a –'

Then, just like in the movies, the phone rang.

Typical of STAGS, if they had a phone it was going to be the oldest one they could find. This one was black with a rotary dial and a curly cord – it looked like it was straight out of some Ealing comedy of the 1940s. But there was nothing comedic about Friar Ridley's face as he listened to the muffled sounds of speech on the other end.

He said, 'I see. Thank you.'

He put the phone down very gently on its cradle. Then he looked at each of us in turn. Suddenly I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

'I'm afraid what you had to tell me may no longer be relevant,' he said. 'The Abbot is dead.'

## Scene ii

Apparently the Abbot had had a heart attack and was dead on arrival at Alnwick Cottage Hospital.

In my head, of course, I'd now murdered someone else. Had the Abbot known, as he'd looked out across the congregation of STAGS pupils during Justitium Mass, that one of them had guessed his secret? Had he seen it in my eyes, eyes red with the reflection of his ruby ring, that I'd rumbled him and it was all over? Had the shock killed him?

That very evening there was a Requiem Mass for the Abbot, and Shafeen, Nel and I found ourselves once more in the chapel, this time by candlelight. The chapel choir, who were this professional-standard choir cherry-picked from the decent singers at STAGS, sang this song/hymn/whatever as everyone filed in. It seemed to be about misery cos they kept singing '*Miserere*' over and over again. It was fricking beautiful. Even though I didn't give a crap about the Abbot, I felt the corners of my mouth twitching downwards. Suddenly the choir seemed to be singing about Henry.

Luckily, just as it seemed that tears were inevitable, Nel nudged me in the ribs. 'They knocked this thing together pretty

quick,' she muttered out of the corner of her mouth.

Shafeen, on the other side of me, shrugged. 'Well, if you have a school run by a Holy Order then it doesn't take long to put together a Requiem Mass.'

'Unholy Order more like,' I said uneasily.

It all seemed a bit too neat. There was Friar Ridley, in the Abbot's robes, standing at the lectern, telling us that Justitium weekend had been postponed for a few weeks and that we were all to stay in school, as a mark of respect for the Abbot. This was greeted with a chorus of groans from the kids who actually liked their parents and were looking forward to going home, but Ridley shut them down with a look. He no longer looked like he was someone's kid. He had some authority about him, standing exactly where the Abbot had stood earlier that day, the rogue sunbeam catching not a ruby ring this time, but Friar Ridley's green eyes. His voice rang out. He had game. He was the acting Abbot now.

'The Abbot is Dead,' Shafeen said drily. 'Long Live the Abbot.' It was pretty much what he'd said when Henry had . . . died, and Cookson had taken over.

'Don't you like him?' I said, surprised. 'I do.'

He gave me a considered look. 'Yes,' he said. 'I could see that. Maybe that's why I don't.'

I decided to ignore Shafeen's snippiness. I actually thought it was cute. Although we were together – *really* together – in private, in public he wouldn't ever show how into me he was. To be fair, this was something we'd sort of agreed so as not to make Chanel feel like a third wheel, but that didn't mean I didn't like a bit of affirmation now and again. Don't tell the

BuzzFeed feminists, but I quite liked that he was a bit jealous. As one of the friars started droning through a Bible reading, I said, low-voiced, 'Now what?'

'Now nothing,' said Shafeen. 'It's the end of the line.'

'Are you sure?' I said. I nodded to a few rows in front, where the de Warlencourt twins sat, almost exactly where they'd sat earlier in the day.

'What have they done? They're not automatically guilty by association.'

'They smiled at me funny this morning.'

'Ooh, they *smiled*? Quick, call the Feds.'

'They invited Ty to Longcross.' I nodded to the new girl, her neat black cornrows next to those sleek blond heads.

'But they won't be going now. Justitium's cancelled. So she's safe.' He turned to the next hymn, snapping the pages of the hymnbook pointedly between his fingers.

After the service we had a bit of time before Commons (dinner to you). We gathered round the Paulinus well in the darkening light. This was a habit that, oddly, we'd adopted from our predecessors. I'm not sure why, we just kind of started doing it in a weird Medieval continuity, leaning on the stone wall looking into the depths of the well, or out into the night. I gazed into the shaft now and could swear I saw the Medievals' cigarette butts still stuck in the wire mesh halfway down. Had one of them been thrown from Henry's lips? 'So that's it?' I spoke down the well, my voice echoing back to me. 'We just drop it?'

'Greer,' said Shafeen, putting his arm round me in a rare Public Display of Affection, 'we have one year left at STAGS.'

He threw his other arm out in this big theatrical gesture, which took in all the silhouetted buildings. 'This is our school, and we're stuck with it. If we were going to leave, we should have done it a year ago after the Henry thing. It's too late to go anywhere else now, and besides, it has an academic record second to none. We have to take the good bits of the school and use them to our advantage. We have to trust that now Henry has gone and the Abbot has gone, all that other stuff is over.'

'Do you really believe that?' asked Nel.

'I have to,' he said simply. 'Because the alternative is that you and me and Greer spend our last year here obsessing over this, playing Sherlock Holmes and trying to reveal the machinations of a centuries-old cult – and if we do that we are going to mess up our exams.'

I straightened up and gazed moodily ahead at the massive hulking shadow of Honorius, the house that Henry was in when he was at STAGS. 'Maybe this is one of those times when your best friend dies and then you get all A-stars.'

Nel said, 'It was a year ago, and I don't think Henry would qualify as anybody's best friend.'

Shafeen gave me a funny look. 'Or would he? Anyway, I can't rely on that. I don't know about you, but I want to get my Prohibitiones. I need three As, Greer. I've got to concentrate on that.'

Prohibitiones were the final exams at STAGS. They were pretty much identical to A levels, but of course, being STAGS, no one called them A levels (except for me); it had to be something ancient and Latin. You took three or four Prohibitiones in the second year of sixth form, i.e. this year for us. Shafeen was

right. Shit was getting real. He wanted to read medicine at university and he needed the grades. Nel, in contrast to (or perhaps because of) her dad's hi-tech world, had found a love of history and classics. I knew I wanted to be a director, but I'd agreed with my dad that I'd get a degree first, so I was going for drama. We all needed to work hard.

Determinedly, I moved my eyes away from the blond heads in front of me and looked instead at the stag window above the new Abbot's head. STAGS was my school and it was the only one I had.

Shafeen was right.

It was time to get my head back in the game.



## Scene iii

It's funny to think, looking back now, that none of what happened *would* have happened if only I'd liked Shakespeare.

I've seen a fair bit of Shakespeare – admittedly on film. I've seen a trio of Hamlets – Kenneth Branagh (weird), Mel Gibson (weirder) and Laurence Olivier (weirdest). I've done the obligatory GCSE play (*Macbeth* in my case). But I could never get on with it. I don't know if it was the language, or the unfunniest comic characters in the universe (step forward, Porter in *Macbeth*. And you, Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*.)

The whole point of this Shakespeare rant is that I had to direct a play for my drama Probitio. See what I always said about STAGS being different? In what other school would you be allowed to direct a play in a replica Jacobean theatre as part of your exam? Luckily for me, most of the drama folks were hell-bent on acting. No one was about to challenge me for the director gig, even though it was the director who was given the choice of what play we did. The problem was that the play couldn't be modern. The chosen text had to be old school, to fit the Renaissance theatre.

The Sunday morning after the Abbot's Requiem Mass I had

a meeting to discuss the play I'd chosen. The problem was, I still had less than no clue. I had researched and read, but still not found anything that floated my boat.

As I walked through the grounds to my drama meeting, working out what I was going to say, it was a late-October day, cold, with the sun shining and the leaves turning all shades of flame. STAGS really was an amazing place. Shafeen was right: if we were going to leave, we should have done it a year ago. Maybe with Henry gone, and the Abbot gone, this most vicious of cycles could be ended, and we, the new Medievals, could make it a good place. Buildings couldn't be bad in themselves, could they? Bricks and mortar couldn't be made from murder.

I walked from my room at Lightfoot, all Tudor splendour and diamond windows, across Bede's Piece iced with frosty grass, avoiding the hideous sporty types rushing about with lacrosse sticks, to the long, low medieval buildings of the library. I swished through the lovely quad to the English Schools, where I was due at 10 a.m. to discuss the practical element of my drama *Probitio*. I wasn't sure who'd be taking the meeting now, probably some BTEC friar who'd been parachuted in to replace Friar Ridley now that he was Abbot Ridley. But when I knocked on the ancient studded oak door of the English Schools and went in, it was Abbot Ridley himself who was perching on one of the desks, tapping his foot with a metre ruler. He looked completely different again to his chapel self, the strong leader who'd taken the reins of the school without missing a beat. He looked younger again. More approachable. Funner. He laughed at me.

‘Why that face?’

I was surprised into honesty. ‘You always turn up in places I don’t expect.’ I felt I could speak to him like a peer, not like the Abbot he now was.

He indicated a chair and I sat in it.

‘I’ve been your English and drama teacher for six weeks now. I don’t know you *very* well yet, Greer, but you don’t strike me as someone who is slow on the uptake.’

‘Yeah, I know, but . . .’

‘But what?’

‘I thought, with you being the new Abbot and all, you’d have, well . . . bigger fish to fry.’

‘Ah. I am merely an Interregnum Abbot, made so because I have experience of headship, as we discussed. So it’s true, I do have some extra . . .’ he searched for a word, ‘administrative duties. But I assure you, none of those take precedence over the paramount importance of seeing my class through their English and drama Probationes. So –’ he banged the ruler smartly on the floor, making me jump a little – ‘until graduation, you may consider yourself, if you don’t mind me borrowing your phrase, the biggest fish in my fryer at this time. “Call me Ishmael.”’

I caught the reference. ‘*Moby -Dick*,’ I said.

He looked pleased. ‘You’ve read it?’

I could’ve easily bullshitted, but then *he* could’ve easily caught me out by asking me my favourite part. ‘Seen the movie,’ I admitted. ‘Gregory Peck.’

‘Ah yes. Well, speaking of dramatic representations, let’s talk about your drama Probatio. Have you decided which play you’ll be directing for the performance element?’

He was talking like a teacher again, but I still thought it was worth chancing my arm. 'I don't suppose it could be a *film*, could it?'

'It couldn't. The syllabus specifies a play written before 1660.'

I mentally rolled my eyes. Typical STAGS.

'How about Shakespeare? That would be the obvious choice.'

'Exactly.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'It's the obvious choice. And – don't take off for Mars, but – I *hate* Shakespeare.'

He smiled his half-smile. 'Then I recommend you take yourself off to the library and do some research. He wasn't the only Renaissance dramatist. Look at Nashe, Dekker, Jonson, Marlowe. There might be something more to your taste.'

He got up from the desk, his robes falling to his feet, rippling like a superhero cloak. I did find myself wondering what he would look like out of his Abbot robes. Not *naked*, before you go thinking that. That would be creepy. Just in normal clothes.

I got up too, as the interview was clearly over. 'OK. I'll have a look.'

'And Greer –'

'Yes?'

'I wouldn't waste much time choosing. Term's marching on. The practical element represents two-thirds of your overall drama mark. You'll have to perform your play at Christmas. That's a little over six weeks.'

\* \* \*

I spent a long, butt-numbingly boring afternoon in the Scriptorium, the most ancient bit of the library. Most of the time I spent watching patterns of stained-glass-refracted light crawling across endless tomes of Shakespeare, Dekker, Beaumont and Fletcher, Marlowe and Webster. The only good thing to be said about the afternoon was that I didn't once think about the Medievals or the Order of the Stag. Friar Ridley had really scared the bejeezus out of me about how little time I had, and there's nothing like losing your bejeezus to really make you focus. Finally I checked out *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, a huge brick of a thing, and went to Commons. I plonked myself down between Shafeen and Nel on one of the long refectory benches.

'Any luck?' asked Shafeen through a mouthful of cottage pie.

'No,' I said. 'They're all so stupefyingly *boring*. I mean, I could do yet another horrible school production of *Macbeth*, or *Hamlet*, I guess, but . . .'

'But what?' asked Nel, who was peeling a tangerine in one long, satisfying curl, aided by her perfect acrylic nails.

'They've all been done to *death*. I mean, can you imagine someone saying, "To be or not to be", or "Is this a dagger that I see before me?" as if you're hearing it for the first time?'

'Then do something new,' said Shafeen, ever practical.

'This is STAGS. Has to be a play, has to be from before 1660.'

'Ah.'

Shafeen (history and triple science) had no further advice, and even Nel (who was actually doing drama too, along with history and classics) had no clue.

This *sucked*.

## Scene iv

Nel and I walked back to Lightfoot in the dark and we said goodnight at the top of the stairs.

As Medievals we each had our own suite of rooms – no more sharing – and mine was a lovely big one with a study in the eaves of the house. Usually I would hang in the evenings with Nel or Shafeen or both in the Medieval Common Room, or in one of our rooms, or even, if it wasn't too cold, by the Paulinus well. But tonight I needed to get this play decision made, so I sat at my desk in a pool of lamplight, poring over the Shakespeare I'd brought from the library.

I got that familiar prickling feeling that I often got when I was alone, that Henry-behind-the-curtains feeling, as if I was being observed. However hard I tried to banish him, Henry hung around in my memory, impossible to forget. I didn't know if I felt guilt or a lingering sorrow, or whether I just plain missed him – all feelings far too complicated to share with anyone else. Particularly Shafeen. I couldn't tell Shafeen. Things were going so well, and I really, *really* liked him, way too much to present him with the fact that he was sort of sharing me with a ghost.

Henry hadn't been forgotten online either. Even though tech was still officially forbidden at STAGS (*Festina Lente*, right?), I would charge up my phone and check occasionally. His cult was growing. Those Oxbridge dining clubs still ate by waterfalls at moonlight in their black ties; fan pages grew in number on Instagram and Twitter. The presence of Henry's face and name in all my timelines made me stay away from my phone and embrace the Medieval life even more. But he still intruded, hanging about in the shadows. And tonight this made it hard to concentrate, and the tiny text, the stupid names and the improbable plots swam before my eyes. I threw the Shakespeare across the desk and sat back in my chair, shoulders aching, pushing my hands into my hair. It was then that I heard the sound.

It's funny how sounds can take you right back, like a time machine that can whisk you away to your past. That whispering, paperknife sound of something being pushed under a door transported me back a year, to The Invitation. A simple piece of card, which had set in motion the train of events that had led to the weekend of twisted huntin' shootin' fishin' and, ultimately, to Henry's death. For a moment, the dread turned me to stone and I physically couldn't turn round, but then I told myself not to be stupid. I should get up and go to the door, and there would be nothing there.

I got up and went to the door.

There *was* something there.

Not a single envelope this time, but a bunch of yellowing pages, covered in black scrawl, shoved under my door.

I picked up the pages and read, with difficulty, what was

on the front. It was old-fashioned script like you see written with a quill in films like *Anonymous*. It said:

The Isle of Dogs  
A Tragedy  
Acted in the Year 1597  
By Pembroke's Men  
With the Allowance of the Master of Revels  
The Author Ben Jonson

I turned the page and read: *Act One, scene i.*

It was a *play*.

I whipped open the door and looked frantically up and down the oak-panelled passageway. Of course there was no one to be seen. I closed the door behind me and, for some reason, locked it. I stood for a moment with my back against the hard oak, heart pounding. I was suddenly sure, surer than anything I'd known in my life, that the play was from Henry. I walked slowly back to my desk, clutching the pages, and by the time I'd got there I'd given myself a good talking-to. There was no mystery here. The play wasn't from a ghost. There was only one person who could have given it to me, and that was Abbot Ridley. He was my drama teacher, my mentor for the drama Probitio, and the one who had been hounding me about choosing a play.

He'd obviously rooted out this copy from somewhere, thought it might be a bit pervy to actually come *into* my



room, but, mindful of the shortness of time, decided to push it under my door tonight and give me a head start. And, since he'd gone to all that trouble, I thought I might as well read it.

It didn't take me very long – as it turned out, it was only one act, not an entire play. But it was fantastic. It drew me in immediately, because it was narrated by this sardonic poet character called Poetaster, who I was pretty sure was the playwright Ben Jonson himself, so you were seeing the whole thing through his eyes. The play was about a queen, called Queen Cynthia, who lived alone in this magnificent Longcross-esque palace on the Thames called the Palace of Placentia. She was rich, brainy and beautiful. She was also entitled and sometimes cruel, but endlessly charming. She had everything she wanted, and was bored out of her skull. She reminded me of Henry.

The play opened when the queen had, for the first time in her life, found something that she couldn't have. She had fallen in love with a penniless noble, the Earl of Greenwich, and decided that, after many years of ruling alone, she wanted to marry. But her chief courtiers, a father and a son called Lupo and Volpone, insisted that she couldn't marry him – if she was going to take a husband, it had to be this foreign king called the King of El Dorado. Queen Cynthia raged furiously against them like a caged animal trapped by duty. The whole thing was explosive – the two father-son courtiers simultaneously working for her and against her, and the earl sweet-talking her into making him her king. It set up this terrific power struggle at court, as well as this queen struggling with her duty versus her heart, and her love of her independent power

versus her giving it up to a man if she married. The language was all Elizabethan (obvs) but somehow accessible. It was much, much darker than Shakespeare. The character of the queen was dynamite – such a strong, flawed heroine. I knew I had to direct *this* play. If anything was going to make me forget the events of the last year and concentrate on my work, it was *The Isle of Dogs*.

Without knowing why, I slept with the pages under my pillow. They crackled and whispered to me every time I turned.

## Scene v

Despite being knackered from my late-night reading, I was up before the alarm and ready to go.

I had drama first thing, so I swerved the Refectory, just grabbing a banana, and went to class super-early, clutching *The Isle of Dogs* so hard that the buttons of my black Tudor coat bit into my chest. It was like I'd written the damned thing.

Our drama class was timetabled to be in the theatre that day, so I made my way across Bede's Piece, the low mist still clinging to the grass, the school buildings rising over the playing fields like a mirage. The De Warlencourt Playhouse (seriously, there was no getting away from that family) was built in the 1960s, way back when Shafeen's dad was at STAGS, but since it was an exact replica of a Jacobean theatre, even down to the thatched roof, it totally fitted with the rest of the school. If you've ever seen the film *Shakespeare in Love*, it looked just like the Globe Theatre in that, except for when you went inside: it wasn't open to the air but was enclosed, and entirely lit (with classic STAGS attention to traditional detail) by candlelight. It was pretty weird walking in there, through the timbered doors underneath the de Warlencourts'

commemorative plaque, out of the bleak winter sunshine, into the candlelit dark.

For a moment I couldn't see a thing, but after a bit I could make out Abbot Ridley in the middle of the stage, lighting the candles around the proscenium with a taper. The flames flowered under his hand like he was some wizard from *Fantastic Beasts* or something.

I was suddenly shy, something I usually am not. I walked down the auditorium, between the wooden benches. 'Thanks for the play,' I said, by way of a hello.

He spun round in his superhero manner, robes flying. 'Oh, you found one?' he said. The theatre played tricks with his voice, projecting it out over my head. 'What did you go for? *Wives of Windsor* or *Gentlemen of Verona*?'

I held out the pages. 'Neither.'

He came closer, squinting a bit in the low light. 'What's that?'

'You tell me.'

'I don't understand.'

'Didn't you give this to me? Didn't you push it under my door?'

'Under your door?' He frowned. 'In Lightfoot? No. No, of course not. I assure you, I wouldn't even know where your room is.'

He seemed shocked by the suggestion and I saw then how mistaken I'd been – he was quite freaked by the implication that he'd been wandering around the girls' house after dark. He blew out the taper in his hand, as if to extinguish the very thought. He was obviously convinced that I was one of those bunny-boiling schoolgirls who get a crush on the hot teacher, like in *Wild Things*.

I wanted to reassure him that I wasn't about to go all #MeToo on him, but there was no earthly way of saying that without sounding mental. So I just said, 'It's a play called *The Isle of Dogs*.'

Then a weird thing happened. He started to *laugh*. 'Very good, Greer,' he said. 'You got me. But seriously, what have you chosen? I'd like to get everyone's production schedules done today so we can book rehearsal time in here. Between you and me, the music department can be very greedy with this space.'

I wasn't sure why he wouldn't believe me. 'I've chosen this. *The Isle of Dogs* – by Ben Jonson, it says.'

I climbed onto the stage and held the pages out to him. The Abbot looked at them for a moment and then took them in the manner of someone wary of a practical joke. He read the title page and went suddenly still. He actually sat down on the edge of the stage so that he could read in the candlelight. I sat beside him, but not too close. He lay each page down as he'd finished it on the stage behind him, as tenderly as if they were made of butterflies' wings. I waited nervously, as if I *had* actually written it myself. Had he got to *that* line yet? Had he got to the bit where this happened, or that happened?

I distracted myself by looking round at the De Warlencourt Playhouse. It must've cost the family a bomb, and I wondered then why theatre was so important to them that they'd put up the money. It was basically an oak structure built inside the circular brick shell. We were sitting on a thrust stage with a musicians' gallery behind us and an ornately painted ceiling above, with this kind of heavenly sky painted on it, clouds and stars and a sun and a moon – day and night at the same time. There were two horseshoe galleries, so the audience would be

quite close to the actors, and I felt for the first time a shiver of nerves. The candles were not just ordinary ones like you'd buy in a supermarket, but made of beeswax, which gave off a funny olde-worlde smell. They were mounted in sconces, and in six high candelabra that could be winched up and down. (The theatre was basically a massive firetrap.) Sitting there, next to the Abbot in his dark monastic habit, watching him leaf through a handwritten manuscript, with the Christmassy candle smell in my nose, I could've been transported back in time.

When the Abbot looked up, the air of being constantly wry and amused had gone and he looked deadly serious. 'Where did you get this?'

'Like I said. Someone put it under my door last night. After Commons. What's up?'

He gathered the pages together again as he carefully formed his reply. 'This play doesn't exist.' It was almost a whisper and his voice sounded around the theatre spookily.

'How do you mean? It's right there.' I pointed foolishly, now thinking it was *me* who was on the business end of a practical joke.

'I mean, it *did* exist. But there was no surviving copy.'

'Explain.'

'The play was written in 1597, at the end of Elizabeth I's reign. It was performed, then quickly suppressed.'

'What does "supressed" mean? They closed the play?'

'Closed the play, closed the theatre it was performed in, closed all the other theatres too, and burned all the copies.'

I whistled, and the sound was amplified in the auditorium. 'Jeeesus. That sounds like overkill. *Why?*'

'Blasphemy. Sedition. Treason. Demonic practices. Black magic. The full house of Elizabethan sins.'

Wow. 'But it's pretty tame so far. I mean, I think it's really good, but it's not *offensive*.'

'No. Act One does seem pretty blameless. Perhaps the dangerous bits are in the later acts, and that's why only this fragment survives.'

Huh. 'So what happened to Ben Jonson?'

'The queen had him thrown in jail.'

'So that was the end of Ben.'

'Not at all. He was released, and fell out of favour – but the queen was quite an old lady by that time. When she died, Jonson became rather a favourite of Elizabeth's successor, James. He ended up as court poet.'

'Posh boy then?' I decided, my lip curling.

'Hardly. He was the son of a bricklayer, and had become a bricklayer himself. He was once described as having a trowel in one pocket and a book in the other.' He looked at me sideways, a smile in his voice. 'He wasn't a fan of Shakespeare either – thought he was overrated.'

'I'm starting to like him.'

'You should,' he said. 'You've got a lot in common. He got a scholarship to a very prestigious school in Westminster, and then went on to Cambridge. But he had to leave to make a living, and went into the theatre. At his death he was considered to be the greatest playwright of his time. Much better than Shakespeare.'

'Wow. Good for Ben.'

'Yes. But sadly he died penniless. He was buried standing up

in Westminster Abbey, because he could only afford a grave that was two feet square, not six feet long. Then he became less popular after the Restoration, and Shakespeare started to take over. And now, of course, barely anyone on the street would know who Ben Jonson was.'

'OK, but still, if he was such a genius in his day, shouldn't this be in a museum?' I looked at the pages in my grubby hand, and moved my fingers so I was holding the manuscript carefully by the edges.

'If it was given to you here, I presume it was in the Scriptorium. I imagine it must be from the school's manuscript collection, and therefore it belongs to STAGS. But I'm new here. Have you spoken to Friar Waterlow?'

Friar Waterlow was the librarian who worked in the oldest bit of the library, the literally medieval Scriptorium. 'Not yet. But . . .' My mind was whirling. 'How could the manuscript have got this far north, even? If Ben Jonson lived in London.'

Abbot Ridley thought for a moment. 'Good point. I do know that later in life Jonson went on a pilgrimage from London to Edinburgh and that he had a very dear friend in the North by the name of Esmé Stuart. He may have risked all to bring a copy north to give to her so that it would at least survive for posterity. He knew he could trust Esmé Stuart.'

I recoiled. The name Esme to me would always mean Esme Dawson, Medieval, Mean Girl and would-be murderess. 'Who was Esmé Stuart?'

'A powerful noblewoman. Jonson's patron and protector. He lived in her house in London and visited her home at Lennox Castle in Scotland. She sometimes summered at Alnwick Castle,



just down the road from here. Perhaps Jonson sought lodging here at STAGS on his way to visit her.'

'Huh.' I wasn't really interested in Esmé Stuart. I was still thinking of Queen Cynthia, the slimy father-son courtier team who were simultaneously working for her and against her, and the earl she loved but couldn't have. I had to ask the question. 'Could I direct *this*? I mean, if it belongs to the school, that's OK, right?'

'Of *course* you could direct it. You *should* direct it.'

'Even though there's only one act?'

'Well, that's a pity. But you still should present it as an extract.' He studied me for a moment. 'Greer, where are you up to in your university admissions? Remind me.'

'Oxford,' I said. 'I've got an offer. I just need to get the grades.' I grimaced.

He looked pleased. 'Then this is what I suggest: you perform it here. It's a wonderful discovery. Think of it, Greer. If you put this play on here, not only would it be an amazing coup – the first time those words have been spoken in four hundred years! – but if you are the first to direct the rediscovered *Isle of Dogs*, and you do as well as expected in your other Prohibitiones, then I don't see how Oxford could possibly turn you down to read English and drama.'

He had me there. The idea of making history began to take hold in my mind. Then the chapel clock struck nine and some of the other drama students started to filter in from breakfast and began to sit, dotting around the auditorium. Nel waved at me and motioned to a seat beside her. I nodded and slid off the stage, holding the pages like they were gold leaf. Which they kind of were.

Abbot Ridley spent the rest of drama briefing the others about the play. 'An exciting lost manuscript' at STAGS, which had recently been uncovered 'by our own Greer MacDonald'.

Nel turned to me, china-blue eyes very wide. Of course, the last she'd heard, I was floundering about trying to find a play to direct for the class, and the next thing, here was I, clutching a lost manuscript like Nic Cage in *National Treasure*.

The rest of the lesson was lots of chat about the rehearsal schedule, the performance date (last Friday of term, just before we broke up for Christmas). I wasn't exactly concentrating, because I was briefing Nel, low-voiced, about how Act One of the play had been pushed under my door the night before. Her eyes got wider and wider, and even in the gloom of the theatre you could see the whites of her eyes all the way around her irises.

Despite her obvious surprise, I had to ask the question. 'I don't suppose it was you, was it?'

'Me?'

'Yeah. I'd just left you – you could have gone to your room and picked up the manuscript to give me.'

She shook her head. 'No. If I'd had that up my sleeve, I'd have told you at Commons.' She smiled. 'Saved you from all that Shakespeare.'