

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.

chapter two

I mean, of course, Henry de Warlencourt.

You might have read about him online by now, on that creepy Facebook page they set up for him, or seen his picture on the news. But back then he wasn't famous – or infamous – outside of his own circle. They say you shouldn't speak ill of the dead so I'll just say you would never have known by looking at him what a terrible person he was.

I have to really struggle, now, to remember him as I first saw him; to be fair to that first impression, and try to forget what I know now. He was, quite simply, the most gorgeous boy I'd ever seen. Tall for seventeen, all blond hair, blue eyes and tanned skin. When people were around Henry de Warlencourt they watched him all the time, even though they pretended they weren't. Even the Friars seemed to be in awe of Henry. He never got punished for anything – and that's not because he didn't do anything wrong; it's because he got away with it. He was like one of those really cool frying pans that everything slides off. He thought he was invincible. But he wasn't.

Henry de Warlencourt was as British as they come, despite his foreign-sounding name. Apparently some distant ancestor had fought in the Frankish army on the Crusades, and had settled in England afterwards, conveniently marrying some noblewoman who owned half of northern England. The de Warlencourts had been fabulously rich ever since. Their house, Longcross Hall, is a beautiful manor house in the Lake District. I know it better than I ever would have wanted to, because Longcross was the scene of the crime.

Because I was in the top set for all my subjects I saw Henry de Warlencourt a lot; him and his five closest friends. The six of them were known as the Medievals. Everyone knew the Medievals, because it was the Medievals – not the Friars – who really ran STAGS.

The Medievals were the unofficial prefects of the school. You'd see them walking in the quad in their immaculate uniforms, long black coats fluttering in the autumn breeze. The Medievals were allowed to wear any colour stockings they wanted under their Tudor coats, and they emphasised this privilege by choosing crazy patterns like leopard print, or tartan, or chessboard checks. But it wasn't just the stockings that marked them out; it was a particular kind of confidence they had about them. They lolled about like expensive cats. That confidence, that comfort in their surroundings, told you that their houses were probably not that different to STAGS; that they probably had grounds too, rather than gardens, and houses with wings, instead of neighbours. And antlers too, houses with lots of antlers on the walls.

The Medievals were all tall, beautiful and clever, as if they were especially bred for the job. They held court in the Paulinus quad – a beautiful square of perfectly manicured grass, surrounded by four walkways of elegant arched cloisters, at the heart of Paulinus house.

Henry de Warlencourt was always at the centre of the group, his blond head visible, as if he was that king at Versailles, whichever one it was, one of those millions of Louis. Henry was the sun, and the rest revolved around him. They would hang out there in all weathers, talking, reading and, after dark, secretly smoking. There was a sort of ancient stone well in the middle of the quad, and if you ever got close enough to look down it, you could see that about a foot down a circle of chicken wire had been fixed for safety, and the chicken wire was stuffed with cigarette butts. I once dropped a coin through the holes, to see how deep it was. I listened for ages, but couldn't hear the splash of the coin hitting the water. I assumed that the bottom of the well was so full of fag butts that they were cushioning the coin's fall. The Paulinus well was just like the Medievals themselves. It looked pretty, but in its depths it was gross.

If Henry was the Medievals' leader, Cookson was his second-in command. Cookson was actually called Henry Cookson, but he was always known by his second name, as there could only be one Henry in the group. Cookson was good-looking too, as they all were, but he still looked like a bad photocopy of Henry. He was slightly smaller, slightly chubbier and his hair was a dirtier blond. His features were blunter, his skin paler, his voice more braying. But the two were inseparable, as close as the brothers they resembled.

The third boy in the group was Piers. Piers was elegant, and dark, and he had a monobrow that made him look like he was constantly annoyed. Piers added little details to his uniform, like a pocket watch, and a tooled leather belt instead of the regulation slim tan, and handmade shoes from his London bootmaker. Piers had been Henry's friend since they'd been shipped off to the junior bit of STAGS – the prep school – at the age of eight.

The three girls were pretty similar in appearance, all blonde-haired and blue-eyed. We'd been studying Homer in Greek that term and they reminded me of the Sirens: beautiful mermaids who looked gorgeous but would actually lure sailors to their deaths. Their names were Esme, Charlotte and Lara. They were all pretty, and slim, and they managed to make the strange ecclesiastical uniform look like something from the catwalks of Milan. Charlotte was some distant cousin of Henry's, Esme was minor royalty, and Lara, seemingly as British as the rest of them, was from a Russian family with an Oligarch-level fortune. They all had that hair that lifts at the hairline and falls over one eye, and they constantly flicked it from one side to the other as they talked. My hair (bobbed, black, heavy fringe) doesn't behave like that, but all the other girls at STAGS (including, tragically, my roommate Jesus) tried to copy their style. To begin with I made the mistake of mixing the Medieval girls up, dismissing them as all the same. If Dad was here to play our film game we'd be saying *Heathers* or *Mean Girls*, but those movies don't really do justice to the evil that lived behind the white smiles. They weren't dumb blondes, those girls, they were highly

intelligent; you underestimated them at your peril, and that's exactly what I did.

All of the Medievals were incredibly rich – Henry's family had been coming here for centuries, and the school theatre was even called the De Warlencourt Playhouse. Lara's family, it was rumoured, paid for the pool. This made them behave as if they owned the place; because they kind of did.

There were only ever six Medievals, three boys and three girls from Six Two – the second year of sixth form. But beyond this hard core there were a whole bunch of hangers-on who idolised them, and did exactly what they wanted in the hope that in Six Two they would become Medievals themselves. Every year, six Medievals leave and a new pack is forged, so there are plenty of wannabes hanging around. Jesus is definitely one – she would die to be a Medieval.

All of the Medievals were OK individually; I was in a lot of their classes and they could be quite human. But when they were in a pack, like hounds, that's when you wanted to be invisible, like Aidan's stag. They mostly left me alone; occasionally the three girls would mimic my accent and snigger behind their hands once I'd walked past them in the quad. I'd feel like there was a cold stone of unhappiness lodged just below my ribs, and the feeling wouldn't subside until I'd gotten out of their eyeline. But I had it easy. Some people seemed to be in their crosshairs all the time. People like Shafeen.

The Medievals called Shafeen the Punjabi Playboy. He was tall and quiet, with a handsome, serious face and unreadable dark eyes. The nickname they had given him was wilfully

inaccurate. For one thing, he was not from the Punjab at all. For another, he was painfully shy around girls, quite the opposite of a playboy. But that, of course, was what they found so funny. From the Medievals' perspective, if a nickname sounded good, and it made them laugh, it stuck. Shafeen was one of the only people who talked to me; we'd chosen the same subjects for A level, and we were in the top set, so we talked about our classes a bit. You could say he was the nearest thing I had to a friend that first term, but as he was in Honorius and I was in Lightfoot, he wasn't much comfort. I didn't know much about Shafeen at the beginning – of course, I know him now. (Guilt is quite a bond, I've discovered, and since Shafeen is a murderer too, we now have a very particular connection.) People said Shafeen was some sort of prince back in India, so you might have thought the Medievals would welcome him into their group. But they teased him mercilessly, and, as I found out later, their dislike of Shafeen came from some old quarrel that took place at STAGS about a million years ago, between Shafeen's father and Henry's. Shafeen too had been at STAGS since he was eight. He'd been all the way through the prep bit and the main school to the sixth form, as his parents were in India. But although Shafeen knew all the rules, and even spoke like the Medievals did, he somehow managed to be an outsider too.

I've asked myself many times why Shafeen accepted The Invitation when he knew what the Medievals thought about him. He can't *not* have known what they thought about him; they made it so public. Even in lessons Shafeen wasn't safe.

I heard one exchange in history that made me a bit scared for him.

We were in the Bede library, seated at our single desks in rows, with the weak autumn sun streaming through the stained-glass windows and brightening our black coats with multicoloured patches. We were studying the Crusades, a tussle between the Christians and the Muslims over the city of Jerusalem that started in 1095, when STAGS, unbelievably, was already four centuries old.

‘Who can tell me about the Battle of Hattin?’ asked Friar Skelton, our round and cheerful history professor. ‘Mr de Warlencourt, one of your family was actually there, wasn’t he?’

Henry smiled; the Medievals always took the trouble to be charming to the Friars. ‘Yes, he was, Friar. Conrad de Warlencourt.’

Friar Skelton tossed a piece of chalk in one hand. ‘Perhaps you could give us the family perspective.’

‘Certainly,’ said Henry. He sat a little straighter in his chair and I couldn’t help thinking that in the black Tudor coat, with the sun striking his blond hair, he looked a bit like a young Crusader himself. (‘Henry V,’ said Dad in my head, ‘*or maybe* Kingdom of Heaven.’) ‘The forces of Guy of Lusignan met the Sultan Saladin’s forces at Hattin. The Christian army was already starving, and dying of thirst. Desperate for water, they were lured to Lake Tiberius, where they found their way blocked by the sultan’s army. It was a trap.’

I could see, looking at the shuttered expression on his face, that it hurt him. Crazy, Henry de Warlencourt still minded what had happened to his ancestor all those years ago.



Friar Skelton hadn't seen it. 'Then what?' he asked cheerily, chalk poised in mid-air.

'They made a mess of us, Friar. The Crusader army was completely destroyed. The defeat led directly to the Third Crusade. The sultan took the True Cross and the city of Jerusalem too.'

I registered that 'us'. Henry really was taking this personally. 'The survivors were captured, but Saladin didn't want to be burdened with prisoners. His men begged to be allowed to kill the Christians. They were lining up to do it. With their sleeves already rolled up.' He jabbed his pen viciously on his writing pad. 'They only let my ancestor go on condition that he told Richard the Lionheart what had happened. And he did. It was a war crime, an atrocity.' His voice rang out around the old library.

Shafeen, sitting just beyond Henry, made a tiny sound. He shook his head and smiled ever so slightly. I was well placed to see it, because I was sitting just behind them all.

Henry shot him a look, his eyes suddenly very blue. But Friar Skelton beamed; he loved a debate. 'Got something to add, Mr Jadeja?'

Shafeen looked up. He cleared his throat. 'Yes, Hattin was an atrocity. But there were atrocities on *both* sides. The "Lionheart", as you call him, murdered three thousand Muslim prisoners at Acre in cold blood. *That* wasn't even in battle. *They* were unarmed, and tied up.'

'Good point,' said Friar Skelton, pointing his chalk at Shafeen. 'More of the events at Acre later. But for now –' he knocked on the blackboard, his gold signet ring making a sharp metallic sound – 'we must return to Hattin. I would like you





to write a short essay about, and form some understanding of, how the topography of the area contributed to the Crusaders' rout. And please watch your punctuation, or I will be obliged to remind you, once again, that the sentence "Hannibal waged war, with elephants" does not convey the same meaning as the sentence "Hannibal waged war with elephants." He wrote both examples on the blackboard (there were no whiteboards at STAGS), making a huge deal of chalking in the comma. 'The former means that elephants were his war machines. The latter means that a great Carthaginian general was fighting a bunch of big-eared mastodons.' Normally we might have laughed – we all liked Friar Skelton – but today the atmosphere was too strained.

Friar Skelton turned away to rub his sentences off the board and replace them with a drawing of the horns of Hattin. Cookson saw his opportunity and leaned forward in his chair towards Shafeen. 'I suppose one of your ancestors was at Hattin too, eh, Punjabi?' he said out of the side of his mouth. 'On the camel-jockey side?'

Now, I knew nothing about Shafeen's religion, if he even had one, but what Cookson had done was to look at the colour of Shafeen's skin and place him firmly with Saladin and the 'infidels'. The message was clear: the Christian white boys against the Muslim brown.

Shafeen did not look at Cookson. He was doodling a black Crusader cross on his pad of lined paper, filling it in so firmly that his knuckles paled. I thought, irrelevantly, how long his eyelashes were in the stained-glass sunlight. He said, quite clearly, 'Perhaps you should pay as much attention in geography

as you do in history. The Punjab is nowhere near Jerusalem. Neither is Rajasthan, which is where I'm *actually from*.'

I was amazed. I had never heard Shafeen speak so many words at once, and with such confidence and command. He didn't sound afraid of them at all.

Friar Skelton turned back to the class and Cookson subsided into his seat. He'd just been owned, and I could see he didn't like it. 'Little shit,' he hissed, under his breath.

'Not little,' murmured Piers. 'He's a long, brown shit.'

'Like the ones you do after a vindaloo,' agreed Cookson. 'Long and brown and smelling of curry.'

Piers sniggered. 'We'll settle him.'

Cookson rocked back on his chair and stretched extravagantly. 'Not long now,' he agreed.

There was such venom in their voices that I felt sorry for Shafeen. I tried to smile at him, but he didn't catch my eye, staring instead, unseeing, at Friar Skelton's chalk stickman rendering of long-dead Crusaders. I knew Shafeen had heard every word. I glanced at Henry. Blond head bent, he was painstakingly copying the diagram onto his pad. As ever, Henry had not taken part in any name-calling; he had done nothing but look at Shafeen, but his attack-dogs had sprung to his defence. Back then I still thought Henry the best of them, before I realised he was the worst.

chapter three

The Medievals were not straightforward racists; nothing so simple.

I suppose you'd have to say that they were pretty even-handed really, in that they were quite happy to make fun of anything that didn't fit. Their other major target, besides Shafeen, was 'Carphone Chanel'.

Like me, Chanel was new to STAGS that autumn term. I tried to make friends with her then, but she was too afraid of getting things wrong to make friends with the likes of me. She was too weak to ally herself to another outsider. Of course we are friends now: Nel, Shafeen and me, we three murderers. (I wonder what the collective name for murderers is. It can't be a 'murder', since the crows took that one. Maybe a 'conspiracy'.

Nel has French-polished nails; ten perfect half-moons of white. She has caramel-coloured hair extensions and a perfect coffee-coloured tan. But underneath all the varnish she's really nice. Her father dropped her off in a gold Rolls-Royce on her first day, and I found out later she was more bothered by that than I was by my dad's ancient Mini. You see, we haven't got

money. But what I've learned from Nel is that when you're at STAGS there's only one thing worse than no money, and that's the wrong kind of money. 'My mum called me Chanel because she thought it had class,' she told me once in her carefully trained voice, betraying no trace of her Cheshire origins. 'She's got no idea.'

I knew what she meant by that. Class; it wasn't on the syllabus at STAGS, because there was no need. It was something everyone else seemed to know, bred into their bones over hundreds of years. Where to go on holiday. What wellies to wear. How to tip your soup plate (not bowl) at dinner. None of this meant having things that were brand new. That was Chanel's problem – she was brand new. Your shirt could have a frayed collar and buttons missing, as long as it came from the right maker in a little shop in London's St James's. Chanel could buy the same shirt, brand new, and still get it wrong. The Medievals called her a 'try-hard'. But that didn't stop her trying.

Chanel's father had made his money from his phone empire. He had nothing whatsoever to do with the Carphone Warehouse, but this didn't matter to the Medievals any more than it mattered to them that the Punjabi Playboy wasn't from the Punjab. They liked a bit of alliteration and Carphone went well with Chanel so it stuck, even though about two days into her time at STAGS Chanel began to call herself Nel. In actual fact Chanel's father had developed a phone called the Saros 7S – sort of half-tablet, half-phone – and the whole world had bought one. Chanel possibly had more money than the Medievals, and had a palatial house in Cheshire with a pool and a cinema room, but because of where the money came from

she was even more of an outsider. Because one of the major differences between STAGS and The Rest Of The World was that at STAGS there were no mobile phones.

I don't mean the school banned phones; it didn't. The lower years used them as much as they were allowed, which was weekends and evenings. But in Six One and Six Two it became a weird point of honour to be phone-free. The Medievals were a six-person social-media backlash. YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram were looked down on as 'Savage'. Selfies were Savage. Twitter was Savage. Facebook was Savage. Video games were Savage. For the Medievals, the tech revolution had sent evolution into reverse. They went round ostentatiously reading books. (Books were Medieval. Kindles were Savage.) The Internet was acceptable only in the library and computer room, to be used for research, not social media. (I heard that one of the Six One boys had been expelled for sneaking into the library at night and looking at porn. Poor thing; I guess he was desperate.) Very occasionally the Medievals would watch TV in the Six Two TV room, but when I passed they were always watching *University Challenge*, competing with each other to get the most answers.

You'd think the kids would rebel, but they didn't. Everyone was fine with the phone-free universe, and that was because the Medievals embraced it. Such was the power of their personalities, of their little cult. Everyone wanted to be like the Medievals. Even I, in the face of such social pressure, put my phone in a drawer and let it run out of charge. I had no wish to stand out more than I already did. With no contact

with my old friends I was even more isolated. I spoke to my dad at weekends, on the landline that all my floor in Lightfoot had to share, but there was always a queue of Jesus and her friends, waiting and tutting, so I could never tell him half of what I wanted to say. Plus Dad was so excited about his documentary, and filming caves full of batshit in Chile, that I couldn't tell him how unhappy I was. If I had, he would have come home. He loves me, you see.

Apart from my dad, films were what I missed the most. I'd told myself that, even if I hated STAGS, I could just do the lessons and then shut myself away at night watching films on my phone. But I couldn't even do that; that is, I could've done, but in some weird way I wanted to comply – I didn't want anyone to think I was Savage.

Of course, I knew in my heart that the phones thing was a massive pose, as was the whole 'Medievals' cult. But for Henry and his cronies it was just another way of demonstrating that they ruled the school, that they could bend everything to their will. They could have imposed anything they wanted – like having to hop on one leg on Wednesdays – and everyone would have followed them. But what was clever about the phone thing is that it went with the whole ethos of the school, the virtue of being different. Maybe that's why the Friars kissed their arses so much. Instead of spending hours on screens, kids were reading, playing sport and doing drama and music and choir and stuff. Plus everyone wrote loads, using actual pens and paper. Texts were Savage; letters and notes were Medieval. At STAGS, handwritten notes flew around like autumn leaves, written in fountain pen with real ink, from

folded notes on family-crested notepaper to creamy white invitations as thick as bathroom tiles. And that's how this all began, with The Invitation.

It was nearly half-term when the envelope came. Of course, being STAGS, they didn't call it half-term, but Justitium. Jesus and I were in our room, getting ready for bed. And now we come to about the only time my roommate ever voluntarily talked to me. She was there when The Invitation slid silently under the door. I didn't even notice, but she pounced on it excitedly, as if she had been waiting for it. I was brushing my hair at the time, and in the mirror I saw her read the front and droop. 'It's for you,' she said, as if she couldn't quite believe it. She reluctantly handed it over.

It was completely square, a kind of thick ivory envelope folded over on four sides, and sealed – I kid you not – with a blob of wax, the red of our school stockings. On the wax was impressed a little pair of antlers. *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*, I thought.

Jesus hovered. I broke the seal, just like I'd seen in the movies. Inside was a thick square card. There were just three words on it, right in the middle of the creamy card, embossed in black ink. The letters were slightly shiny and raised to the touch.

huntin' shootin' fishin'

I looked up. 'What does it mean?'

'Turn it over,' Jesus urged.

I did. On the back, in neat italics, was printed:

*You are invited to spend Justitium
at Longcross Hall, Cumberland.*

Coaches departing STAGS at 5 p.m. Friday.

RSVP

I turned the card over. 'RSVP to who?' I said. 'There's no name on it.'

'That's because everybody knows who sends them,' Jesus said, with just a hint of her former scorn. 'It's from Henry.'

There was, as I've said, only one Henry at STAGS. The black embossed type jiggled in front of my eyes. I should have known. Huntin' shootin' fishin'. It sounded like some sort of joke; the 'g' was missing from all three words. But the Medievals didn't make mistakes; if they made errors – the Punjab, the Carphone Warehouse – they were deliberate. Henry had written the blood sports like that for a reason, exactly as he said them. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Longcross is his house. You lucky beast,' she said. 'You've got the chance to be a Medieval.'

I sat on the bed heavily and squinted up at her.

'What are you talking about?'

Jesus was so excited that she forgot herself so far as to actually sit bedside me. 'Henry de Warlencourt always asks people from Six One to his house for the weekend at Michaelmas Justitium – hunting season. If you do well in the blood sports, and they like you as a person, then next year when you go into Six Two you could be a Medieval.'

Despite the novelty of actually having a conversation with my roommate, I was silent, processing it all.

'You are going, right?' prompted Jesus. 'Longcross is supposed to be amazing. The absolute lap of luxury.'

I had the power for once, and I just shrugged. I wasn't willing to share any confidences. If Jesus wanted to know about my stuff, she'd have to be a bit nicer to me. All the same, I did need information, so I thawed. 'Coaches?' I said aloud. Knowing the Medievals, I wondered if it meant *actual* coaches, with eight horses for each, snorting and pawing on the drive.

'Henry sends for the estate cars,' Jesus said. 'You get driven to Longcross by his gamekeepers.'

I looked from The Invitation to Jesus's jealous expression. If I'd been heading home at half-term, to see Dad, I would never have even thought of going to Longcross. But I wasn't. Dad would still be in South America, and I was due to go to my Aunty Karen's in Leeds. Now, I have nothing against my Aunty Karen, or indeed Leeds, but she has twin toddlers who are a total pain. That's why I didn't want to live with her and ended up coming to STAGS.

So, although I had never hunted, shot or fished, I seriously considered going.

I might have been academically smart, but I was monumentally stupid not to realise sooner what was going on. It's not as if I wasn't warned. I was, in very clear terms. The warning came from Gemma Delaney. Gemma Delaney was a girl who had got into STAGS three years ago, also from Bewley Park, my old school. She was always held up as a shining example to the

rest of us – she had her picture in the Bewley Park reception next to the sparsely filled cabinet of achievements (so different from the medieval atrium of STAGS, where you can hardly see the oak panels for silverware). Gemma came to talk in assembly at our school a year ago, to encourage us to try for a scholarship at STAGS, and I'd hardly recognised her. Gemma used to have dip-dyed hair with dark roots and straw ends, and a strong Manchester accent. In assembly that day she had long honey-blond hair, a spotless STAGS uniform and clipped vowels. I know now that she'd looked like a Medieval.

She looked very different now, outside the chapel at STAGS, clutching at my arm as we were all filing out of morning Mass. I turned to look at her. Her face was as pale as bone, her hair lank, her eyes haunted. 'Don't go,' she said. The 'o' of 'go' was flat; in her urgency, her northern accent had returned.

I knew exactly what she meant at once. She meant The Invitation. She meant don't go huntin' shootin' fishin'. I wondered how she knew. 'Why not?'

'Just *don't*,' she said, more forcefully than I'd ever heard anyone utter anything. She pushed past me, to be carried along with the crowd. I stood for a moment while students flowed around me, weighing up what she had said. But I hadn't really absorbed it. As she disappeared into the crowd the feeling of unease faded with her.

The truth was, after weeks of being ignored and belittled and excluded, I was flattered to be wanted, to be invited by the Medievals. The night before, I'd met Henry himself crossing the Great Hall in Honorius. He too had touched my arm, and spoken to me, actually spoken to me, for the first time ever.

‘You are coming this weekend, aren’t you?’ he’d said urgently.
‘It will be *such* a laugh.’ He pronounced it *larf*.

‘What kind of laugh?’ I said *laff*.

He smiled again, and my insides did a little flip. ‘You’ll see.’
He squeezed my arm and I looked down at his hand where it lay on my sleeve – long fingers, square nails, and a gold signet ring on the little finger. A signet ring with a design of two tiny antlers.

So as I stood that morning outside chapel, with the pupils all flowing around me, thinking about what Henry had said, and what Gemma had said, I wasn’t really deciding anything. In my mind I was already packing. It was like that moment when you flip a coin but you already know, before the coin comes down, what you’re going to do.