



HOLLY WEBB

FROST






Stripes



Chapter ONE



"Wait for me!"

But they didn't. They never did wait. Cassie kept on calling, just in case. It wasn't even as though she was the youngest of the kids from their flats but William always called her his "baby sister", so everyone thought she was the babyish one. She watched the rest of the children disappear over the patch of wild ground, kicking a ball back and forth between them.

"Didn't want to play football anyway," she muttered to no one, as their shouts died away. It was almost true. She didn't much like football, but she would have played if they'd let her, because she didn't want to be on her own.

Cassie slumped down on an old tyre that someone had dumped among the

patches of foxgloves and picked a pink spotted flower from one of the tall stems. She slipped the tiny bell over her finger and stroked it. It was soft, almost sticky, but very smooth. "You wouldn't fit a fox," she whispered. "Not even a little one."

She only just saw it – the faintest twitch out of the corner of her eye. A movement in the tall plants. Something was there, watching her. It was probably a cat, but then there were sometimes stray dogs around too… Cassie swallowed, wondering if she should shout for William. He was supposed to be looking after her – Mum always reminded him when they went to play outside. If she yelled, he'd have to come, wouldn't he?

"I can see you," she said, trying not to let her voice squeak. "I know you're there!"

She glared fiercely at the foxgloves and saw them shiver a little. A dark nose appeared between the flowers and then a sandy-whitish muzzle.

Cassie stopped worrying about a fierce stray dog and leaned slowly forward, holding her breath. There was a fox in her foxgloves!

The fox stared back, just as surprised and curious as she was, Cassie thought. Its ears were huge and they twitched as it peered inquisitively at Cassie.

She knew that there were foxes on the waste ground, of course she did. Mum and everyone else at the school gates complained about them. They said there was always fox poo in the playground, and that foxes got in the litter bins and spread mess everywhere. They shrieked

and squealed in the night too, like little ghosts. Mum talked about the foxes as if they were nasty, dirty things. Cassie had seen them occasionally as they walked back from the bus stop in the dark – a fox might skulk past into the shadows, faded to grey by the lamplight. London was full of them, her dad said, even though they were meant to be countryside animals.

This fox was beautiful. It was small, but not skinny and greyish-red like the ones she'd seen before. Its fur was really red – a rich, orangey red-brown that glowed against the leaves. It edged a little closer to Cassie, pushing its way through the tall foxgloves, and she saw that it had neat dark socks and a white front and chin like a cat.

The fox gazed at Cassie with maple-syrup eyes and then stared hopefully at

Cassie's bulging pocket. Cassie glanced down too, then looked back at the fox, frowning. "Biscuits?" she whispered. "I don't think foxes eat biscuits."

Then again, she thought, they were a sort of dog, weren't they? Her cousin Riley's dog ate everything. He'd snatched a biscuit right out of Cassie's hand once, and he'd definitely eat these. Mum had given her the end of a packet of ginger biscuits for a snack, her favourite. Cassie pulled one out of the wrapper and saw the fox's ears swivel eagerly as it tracked the rustling sound.

"You do want one, don't you?" Cassie stifled a laugh – she didn't want to scare the fox away. "OK. One for you, one for me?" She reached forward and put the biscuit down on the worn path through the grass.



The fox looked at it, and then at Cassie, and then it darted over, snapping at the biscuit and tossing it up into the air. It caught the treat neatly in its jaws, then whisked away, tail held proudly high.

Cassie watched that tail, tipped in white, until it disappeared among a tangle of bramble bushes.



After that, Cassie stopped asking to join in when William and the others went off to play football. She spent the summer holidays watching the foxes. There was a whole litter of them, she discovered, with a den somewhere deep in the bushes. Four cubs and their mum and dad – though Cassie hardly ever saw the adult foxes since they were much shyer than their babies.

They were her secret. Cassie kept expecting William or one of the others to notice the cubs – to tell their own story about feeding a little fox cheese and onion

crisps – but they never did. Perhaps they just weren't looking, Cassie thought, or else they were too loud when they went rushing by.

The little fox with the white tail tip brought the other three cubs to see Cassie but they were never quite as brave as she was. Cassie had decided that her fox was a girl. She didn't really know for sure but she wanted her to be. She was fed up with William teasing her and her baby brother Lucas making Mum so tired all the time. She wanted another girl around. In her head, she called the fox cub Frost, because her white tail looked like the frost patterns on the leaves on the coldest morning, an icing-sugar sparkle.

The other cubs only peered through the foxgloves at Cassie, whiskers twitching.

They never came to beg for snacks like their sister but they were so funny. The four of them were like puppies, she thought. Or toddlers. Always rolling around on top of each other and snatching each other's toys. One of the cubs only had to find a particularly exciting twig for the rest of them to decide it was definitely theirs and start a full-on wrestling match.

Cassie never went near their den. She wasn't sure she'd be able to, anyway, because she had a feeling it was right in the middle of a fierce clump of brambles. But if she threaded her way through the weeds and sat looking at the scrubby stretch of dry grass by the bramble patch, the fox cubs were happy enough to pretend she wasn't there.



They seemed to get bigger so quickly and they changed so much. The first time Cassie had seen the little fox with the white tail tip, she was still darkish brown and fluffy along her back and her tail – her baby coat. But a week later Frost's coat was all red and Cassie was sure she'd grown. Her ears looked sharper and her nose was definitely more pointy.