

CHAPTER ONE

The first thing that hit me was the smell – damp and bitter. It was the smell of a place long shut up, of mice, bird-droppings, and rot.

‘Welcome to Wicker House,’ Dad said, and flicked a switch. Nothing happened, and he groaned.

‘Probably been disconnected. I’ll go and investigate. Here, have this,’ he pushed the torch at me, ‘I’ll get another one from the car.’

I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering as I swung the torch’s thin beam around the shadowy, cobwebbed rafters. The air in the house was even colder than the night outside.

‘Go on,’ Dad called from the car. ‘Don’t wait for me; go and explore. Why don’t you check out your bedroom – I thought you’d like the one at the top of the stairs. It’s got a lovely view.’

I didn't want to explore. I wanted to go home – except where was home? Not London. Not any more.

Dust motes swirled, silver in the torchlight, as I pushed open a door to my right and peered into the darkness beyond. The narrow circle of the torch's beam glittered back at me from a broken window, then traced slowly across the damp-splotched plaster. I guessed this had once been a living room, though it seemed strange to use the word 'living' about a place so dead and unloved.

Something moved in the dark hole of the fireplace. Images of mice, rats, huge spiders ran through my head – but when I got up the courage to shine the torch I saw only a rustle of ashes as whatever it was fled into the shadows. I thought of my best friend, Lauren, who went bleach-pale at even the idea of a mouse. She'd have been standing on a chair by now, probably screaming. The idea of Lauren's reaction to this place made me feel better, and I reached into my pocket for my phone and started a text.

Hi Lauren, we've arrived in Winter. The welcome party consists of half a dozen rats and—

I broke off. There was no signal. Well, I'd known this place would be isolated, Dad had called that 'part of its charm'. But even so . . . Maybe I could get a signal upstairs.

The stairs creaked and protested every step, until I reached a landing, with a corridor stretching into darkness,

lined with doors. The closest was ajar – and I put my hand on it and pushed.

For a minute I was dazzled by the moonlight flooding in. Then, as my eyes adjusted, I took in the high, vaulted ceiling, the stone window seat, and smelled the faint scent of the sea drifting through the open window.

Through the casement I could see the forest stretching out, mile after mile, and beyond a thumbnail moon cast a wavering silver path across the night-black sea. It was heart-breakingly lovely and, in that fleeting instant, I caught a glimmer of what had brought Dad to this place.

I stood, completely still, listening to the far off sound of the waves. Then a harsh, inhuman cry ripped through the room, and a dark shape detached from the shadows. I ducked, a flurry of black wings beat the air above my head, and I caught a glimpse of an obsidian beak and a cold, black eye as the creature hunched for a second on the sill. Then it spread its wings and was gone, into the night.

My heart was thudding ridiculously, and suddenly I didn't want to be exploring this house alone in the dark. I wanted Dad, and warmth, and light. Almost as if on cue, there was a popping sound, a blinding flash, and the light-bulb in the corridor blazed out. I screwed up my eyes, dazzled by the harsh brightness

after straining into the darkness.

‘Hey-hey!’ Dad’s shout echoed up the stairs. ‘Turns out the leccy wasn’t off – it was just a fuse. Come on down and I’ll give you the grand tour.’

He was waiting in the hall, his face shining with excitement. I tried to rearrange my expression into something approximating his, but it clearly didn’t work, because he put an arm around me.

‘Sorry it’s a bit of a nightmare, sweetie. The place hasn’t been occupied for years and I should have realized they’d have turned everything off. Not the best homecoming, I must admit.’

Homecoming. The word had a horribly hollow sound. Yup, this place was home now. I’d better get used to it.

‘Come on.’ Dad gave me a squeeze. ‘Let me give you the guided tour.’

As Dad took me round, I tried to find positive things to say. It was pretty hard. Everything was falling apart, even the plugs and light switches were all ancient Bakelite and looked like they’d explode if you touched them.

‘Just look at those beams,’ he exclaimed in the living room. ‘Knocks our old Georgian house into a cocked hat, eh? See those marks?’ He pointed above our heads to scratches cut deeply into the corded black wood. They looked like slashes: deep, almost savage cuts that

formed a series of Vs and Ws. ‘Witch marks, according to my book. Set there to protect the house from evil spirits and stuff.’ But I didn’t have time to look properly at the scarred wood, because Dad was hurrying me on to his next exhibit.

‘And how’s that for a fireplace? You could roast an ox in there! That’s an old bread oven, I think.’ He tapped a little wooden door in the inglenook beside the fire, blackened and warped with heat. ‘I’ll have to see about getting it open one of these days. But anyway, enough of me rattling on. What do you think? Isn’t it great?’

When I didn’t respond he put his hand on my shoulder and turned me to look at him, begging me with his eyes to like it, be happy, share his enthusiasm.

‘I like all the fireplaces,’ I said evasively.

‘Well you’ll like them even more when winter comes, unless I can get the central heating in pretty pronto. But is that all you’ve got to say?’

‘It’s a lot of work, Dad. How are we going to afford it?’ Even as I said it, I suddenly realized that I’d never really said those words before. I’d never had to. We hadn’t been rich, but Dad had always earned enough for what we needed.

Dad shrugged. ‘We got the place pretty cheap, considering. And I’ll do most of the work myself, which’ll

cut down costs.'

'Oh God!' I said involuntarily in a horrified voice. Then I caught Dad's eye and began to laugh. Dad can barely change a light-bulb, let alone conduct major house renovations. He looked offended for a minute but then began to laugh too.

'I'll get someone in to do the gas and electrics, at least, I promise you that.' He put his arm around me. 'I have a really good feeling about this place, Anna. I know it's been a jolt for you, I do, but I honestly think we can make something of our lives here. I can do a bit of writing, grow veg – maybe I could even do B&B if money gets tight. This place just needs a little TLC to make it fantastic.'

A *little* TLC? I thought about the filth and the rats, and all the work we were going to have to do to make this place even liveable, let alone nice. And then I looked at Dad, and I thought of him back in London, sitting up night after night, his face grey with worry as he tried to make the sums add up, tried to find a way out for both of us.

'I think,' I said. Then I stopped.

'Yes?'

'I think . . . if anyone can do it, you can, Dad.' I put my torch down on the mantelpiece and hugged him fiercely. Then I noticed something.

‘Hey.’ I coughed to clear my throat. ‘Look.’

I brushed away the dust that covered the fire surround, and shone my torch closer. Beneath the grime were twining vines and leaves, but that wasn’t what I’d noticed. In the centre was a carved stone shield, bearing an ornate W.

‘W for Winterson.’

‘Look at that!’ Dad said delightedly. ‘Though it’s W for Winter more likely, or maybe Wicker House. But it’s a nice omen. Now come on,’ he dropped a kiss on the top of my head, ‘let’s go and do battle with that Aga, see if we can’t get you some tea.’

Monday was the first day of the summer term, but you wouldn’t have known it from the greyish light that trickled under the curtains. I lay in bed with the cover to my chin and listened to the wind in the trees. My body felt strange; every muscle was taut with nerves and my veins seemed full of some strange tingling liquid, as if my blood had been drained and replaced with carbonated water. It was terrifying starting a new school after ten years in the same comfortable surroundings. There had been only forty girls in the Lower Sixth of my old school – in comparison Winter High was massive. And scary. And co-ed.

Just to add to the stress, there was no uniform in the

sixth form. Which meant I had to think about what to wear to school for the first time in my life.

Dragging myself out of bed, I opened the door to my Ikea wardrobe, which still looked strange and out of place in this huge, vaulted room. At the sight of myself in the mirror inside, I groaned. I've never forgiven Dad for bequeathing his hair to me: wild, dark and unruly, and ready to run riot at the slightest opportunity. I suppose the rest, the pale skin and blue-grey eyes, must have come from my mother. I wouldn't know, but that certainly wasn't Dad's DNA looking back at me from the mirror.

I grabbed a comb and began trying to tame my curls into something that wouldn't get people pointing and laughing on my first day. My best hope for Winter High was not being noticed; I wasn't planning on making any life-long friends; if I could just get through the next two years, get my A-levels, and get out, that would be good enough for me. But fitting in would be nice, and crazy-girl hair wasn't going to help with that.

I was only halfway done when Dad yelled, 'Breakfast!' up the stairs.

'Coming,' I shouted.

A leaden lump formed in my stomach.

* * *

It was two miles to town and Dad insisted on driving me. The car was parked in the middle of the clearing in front of the house, under a vast, spreading beech, and as we picked our way across the long grass, the dew wet the hem of my jeans. Far across the forest you could see the silhouette of some tumbledown ruin, high on the cliffs above the sea.

‘That’s Winter Castle,’ Dad said, following my gaze. ‘It’s a ruin now, of course, but you can just make out the towers.’ They were stark and black against the blue of the sea. ‘And that lane’ll be your walk to school.’ He pointed to a cleft in the dense forest and a black tarmac road that snaked off into the distance over the cliffs.

‘I still can’t believe we can see the sea,’ I said.

‘As the crow flies we’re not far,’ Dad said. ‘It just feels further going through the wood. Anyway, better get going. You don’t want to be late on your first day. If we’ve got time I’ll drive you past the fishing port – you’ll like Winter village. I’ve always thought it was a pretty little place.’

He turned the key in the ignition and a clump of rooks detached themselves from the beech, startled by the noise. They wheeled around in alarm as Dad manoeuvred his way into the lane, and then followed us into the green shadows of the wood, swooping in our wake along the

leafy, curving tunnel, until we burst out into the stark sunlight of the cliff road.

Dad drove steadily down past the castle and through the outskirts of Winter, and we followed the tide of kids sweeping up the narrow high street until we came to a sprawling building that looked more like a Victorian prison than a school.

Winter High. It was huge. Winter was a small town but the school took in all the kids from outlying villages; there were five tutor groups in the Lower Sixth alone. I gulped – then realized that Dad was waiting for a reply to some remark he'd made.

'Sorry, Dad, what did you say?'

'I said, anything special you'd like for supper, to celebrate your survival?'

I shook my head. Food was the last thing on my mind.

'Anything's fine. Well, OK. I'd better . . .'

He nodded and kissed me on the cheek, and I slid out of the car with my heart beating in my throat. As I stood, fingering the strap of my bag, my mobile beeped. It was a text from Lauren.

Hi sweets. don't worry they'll love you. if they don't tell em there's a crew of Notting Hill beyatches gonna make their lives hell. Good luck miss you L xxx

The reminder of home and all my friends brought a

sudden prickle to the back of my eyes but I blinked furiously. Starting at my new school with tears in my eyes would *not* be a good way to go.

I scrubbed at my cheeks, straightened my back, and walked through the carved front door.

CHAPTER TWO

My footsteps echoed as I entered the hallway. I was gazing up at a mahogany board headed *In honour of those former pupils of Winter Grammar School, who gave their lives in the Great War 1914–18*, when a grumpy voice rang out.

‘Hey you!’

I stiffened and looked round. A red-faced man in overalls was waving a mop at me. I pointed to myself and he nodded.

‘Yes, you, Missy. No students in the main door!’

‘Sorry,’ I said, annoyed to find my voice was shaking a bit. ‘I didn’t know – I’m new.’

‘Well you’ll know for next time, young lady,’ he said with obscure triumph.

‘I’ll take over from here, Mr Wilkes,’ said a voice.

I jumped and turned.

Behind me was a small, elderly man wearing a tweed

jacket with leather elbow patches and a neat pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. He held out a hand. ‘Anna Winterson, I presume? What a very appropriate name.’

‘Yes, pleased to meet you, Mr . . .’ I stopped in confusion.

‘Brereton,’ he completed. ‘I shall be taking you for History. Usually it’s the headmaster who welcomes new students to the school, but unfortunately he’s unwell today. He has asked me to act as his deputy and welcome you to Winter, my dear Anna. I’m sure you’ll be a great addition to our ranks. Mid A-Levels is not the easiest time to move schools, I realize, but I think you’ll feel at home in Winter very soon.’

‘Thank you,’ I muttered.

‘We are a friendly place, by and large, although a little old-fashioned I do admit. But we pride ourselves on keeping to some of the *old traditions*. And you may find our interests coincide with yours more than you realize.’ He gave me a slightly sideways look, that seemed to indicate there was more to his words than face value. I had a sudden, horrible premonition that he was going to try to persuade me into some dire extra-curricular activity – dressing up as Tudors perhaps, with dodgy nylon costumes, and re-enacting battles with tin-foil swords.

‘Um, I’m quite busy,’ I said warily. ‘I’m not sure I’ll have much time for extra-curricular stuff at first, at least until I’ve caught up.’

He smiled, as if I’d missed the point of a joke, but only said, ‘Of course. Now, we have ten minutes before first period, so I’ll give you a whistle-stop tour of the school to orientate you. Mr Henderson is very keen on punctuality, but I think there’s just enough time.’

‘You’re late,’ said Mr Henderson without looking up as I sidled in to a classful of staring eyes.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said, slightly out of breath. Mr Brereton’s brisk pace had left me wondering if I’d remembered to put deodorant on that morning. Altogether a *brilliant* start to my new school career. ‘I’m new. Mr Brereton was just showing me around.’

‘Oh.’ He looked up and assessed me. ‘Anna Winterson?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, sit down. We sit alphabetically in my classes.’

I tried not to show my surprise. It looked like Mr Brereton hadn’t been exaggerating when he said Winter High was old-fashioned. My old school was pretty traditional, but alphabetical order? What were we, ten?

‘Madeleine, move up, please. Anna, take Madeleine’s place.’

A tall, slim girl at the back of the class looked suddenly furious.

‘Oh but Mr Henderson I’d just got all my—’

‘Does Winterson come before Woburn or not, Madeleine? Unless you care to change your name I suggest you move up a place.’

‘Yes, Mr Henderson.’ She stood up, banging her books together with unnecessary force, and stamped along to the next desk, leaving a place free. I sat down, feeling my cheeks flame scarlet, and wished the floor could swallow me up. The force of her glare on my left side was like a blast furnace.

‘Turn to page one eighty in the blue book please everyone.’

There was a universal rustling and I sighed inwardly and raised my hand again. Mr Henderson was writing on the board and didn’t turn around.

‘I will get you a book for the next lesson, Anna. In the meantime please share with Seth.’

The boy sitting next to me pushed his book across and smiled. ‘Hi, Seth Waters,’ he whispered under cover of the sound of Mr Henderson’s chalk.

‘I’m Anna,’ I whispered back.

He put out his hand, and I shook it quietly. It was dry and strong and very warm, and I was horribly conscious

of my own sticky palm, sweaty with trotting after Mr Brereton. There were callouses on his palm and fingers, and oil deeply grained around the short square nails. I wondered what he did that left his hands so rough.

‘I hope you’re good at differentiation, Anna. Because I’m beginning to think I should have taken Applied and Statistics after all.’

Actually I *was* good at differentiation, and I’d also already studied the kind of equation Mr Henderson was outlining on the board. Which was a good thing because I was completely unable to concentrate.

Seth Waters was possibly the most beautiful boy I’d ever seen. To say he had curly dark hair, dark eyes and tanned skin was all true, but still completely missed the point – he had an indefinable something that made me completely unable to tear my eyes away. I couldn’t stop looking at him sideways as I sat there, pretending to read page one eighty, but in fact watching the muscles of his forearms moving under his tanned skin as he wrote, the string of beads round his throat, the movement of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

As I looked down at my book I saw there were actual goosebumps on the skin of my arm and I bit my lip, hard, to bring myself back to reality. This was pathetic! Lesson one, and already I was having hot flushes and palpitations.

What next, was I going to swoon in English or something? It wasn't like I'd never met a boy before, for heaven's sake. OK, I hadn't had classes with them on a daily basis, but I knew *plenty* of boys. London wasn't exactly short of the male sex. But I had to admit, I'd never, never met someone like Seth Waters. Surely, though, there couldn't be many more like him in the school? If there were I was going to be in serious trouble with my exams, that was for sure.

It looked like I wouldn't be the only one. Maybe Seth was right, and he should have taken Applied and Statistics, because he certainly didn't act too enthralled by Pure. He day-dreamed through most of the lesson, staring out of the window at the sea sparkling in the distance. At the end of the lesson he scooped up his books and gave me a devastating smile that crinkled the tanned skin of his cheeks.

'Nice to meet you, Hannah.'

Hannah. Great. I'd clearly made quite an impression.

The next period was Classics and we were free to choose our places. I was early this time, but still hovered nervously by the door, not wanting a repeat of the hostility with Madeleine if I somehow chose the wrong place. In the end a pink-cheeked girl in a clashing red jumper took pity on me.

‘Hi there, you’re Anna aren’t you? I saw you in Maths. Come and sit with me and Liz.’

‘I’d love to, thanks.’ I sat down gratefully at her table and said, ‘Sorry, I saw you too but I didn’t get your name?’

‘I’m June. And this is my friend, Liz.’ I nodded at Liz and she smiled shyly, hiding her face behind a curtain of blonde hair.

‘Thanks for letting me share your table; I was worried about picking the wrong place.’

‘Oh, what – after the business with Madeleine?’ June laughed as she got out her books. She was sharper than she looked. ‘Don’t worry about it, Anna. Madeleine’s just one of the thousand and one members of the Seth Waters fan club. Yawn.’

‘Oh, I know,’ Liz said. ‘It’s so boring. It’s like he and Caroline are king and queen of the school.’

‘Caroline’s his girlfriend,’ June put in. ‘Thank God we don’t have a prom here or we’d have to put up with them being crowned and all that crap. Although whether Mr Harkaway would allow that, I don’t know. Seth’s not exactly flavour of the month with authority . . .’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. June rolled her eyes.

‘Oh, you know, the usual. Drinks, smokes, got a tattoo against the rules. He was suspended a year or two back for getting into a fight and smacking some guy’s head into a

wall, but it didn't seem to do any good. Comes from a broken home, dontcha know. Anyway his reputation doesn't seem to put any of the airheads off. I expect every school has their official babe-magnet. Was it like that at your last school, Anna?

'Not exactly. My last school was single sex.'

'Oh how awful!' Liz looked comically horrified. 'Poor you!' Then she blushed, as if fearing she'd been too critical. 'Though it must be nice too, probably makes life a lot simpler.'

'Yeah, there'd be a lot less bitching around if it weren't for people like Seth,' June added.

'He seemed OK when I sat next to him,' I said. Annoyingly unable to remember a person's name, granted, but not bitchy, I had to give him that.

'It's not him,' June said. 'It's the effect he has on the female half of the population. Plus Caroline's a total bitch. Sorry, I really hate that word but she is. She's always been a prize PITA and since last year, when she started going out with Seth, she's been unbearable. You'd think he'd conferred divine powers on her. If it's not snide comments about virgins, it's bitching about who's trying to steal him off her, and if it's not that, it's how amaaaaaaaazing he is in bed.'

She rattled on to her Classics homework without

expecting an answer, and I was glad. There didn't seem a whole lot I could say to that.

By the end of the morning I was totally exhausted, but also slightly relieved. I was well up with lessons, or so it seemed, so I guessed the hefty school fees Dad had been shelling out for hadn't been a total waste. I'd made it through so far without disgracing myself academically or, if you discounted my run-in with Madeleine, socially.

I was dithering by the door of the canteen, trying to decide whether to buy a sandwich in town and save myself the mortification of sitting alone for an hour, when I heard Liz's voice from behind me.

'Hey, Anna, would you like to sit with us?'

I nodded gratefully. She and June swept me along to their table in the cafeteria and introduced me to their friends, who all seemed sweet. I answered lots of questions about London, like 'Isn't it majorly, like, dangerous?' and 'Isn't there a massive drugs problem?' They all seemed quite disappointed to find out that I'd never been mugged, that I didn't go to a hellish inner-city comprehensive, and that anorexia had been a bigger problem at my school than drugs.

Only one faux pas spoiled the break, towards the end of lunch. Liz asked if I liked horses. I said an emphatic no,

and then noticed the copy of *Horse and Hound* sticking out of one of her friends' bags. Oops. Closer questioning revealed that they were all ex-members of the Pony Club and at least three of them owned horses. One of them, a big-boned, solid girl called Prue, had hers stabled up near our house.

'Oooh, you live at the Witch's House?' Prue said when I mentioned it. 'We used to be, like, so scared of that place when we were little! I'd never let Mum drop me off at the main road by the stables after dark; she always had to go right up the track so I didn't have to walk past the gate.'

'The Witch's House, is that what you call it?' I asked.

'I know it's really called the Wicker House, but no one ever calls it that. It's always known as the Witch's House, like the wood is always known as Witch's Wood.'

'My mum says it should rightly be the Witch's House anyway,' Liz said. 'She said wicker is just a corruption of wicce, which is the Anglo-Saxon word for witch.'

'I told my dad that when he asked me why I wouldn't walk home alone through the wood.' June spoke with her mouth full of sandwich. 'And he says it's rubbish. He says it's called Wicker Wood because of the reed beds down by the river.'

'Whatever.' Prue waved a dismissive hand. 'It's bloody

spooky after dark, is all I'm saying. I don't envy you your walk home, Anna.'

'Oh don't worry,' I said. 'I'm not superstitious.'

History, after lunch, was fine, but fourth period English I was late again. The room was tucked away above the Chemistry lab and hard to find. I turned up just as the lesson was about to start and looked desperately around for a free seat. There was only one, next to a serious-looking girl with long dark hair and angular glasses, bent over a copy of *Macbeth*.

'Excuse me,' I said, 'do you mind if I sit here?'

'If you must,' she said, in a voice that plainly meant 'Please don't'.

I looked around but the class was full so I was forced to sit down anyway. I laid my books out, looking at her out of the corner of my eye. She was wearing a skinny grey cardigan with fraying sleeves, and as she read her fingers picked restlessly at the loose threads.

What could I say? Something about *Macbeth*? Or would that be too swotty?

'Um,' I tried, but she ignored my gaze, and I was still trying to think of an opening for conversation when the class started.

* * *

At last the bell rang for the end of the day, and I gathered up my books with a feeling of profound relief that I'd survived the first day. The girl began packing up her bag, her long black hair shielding her face.

'It was nice to meet you,' I said lamely. 'What's your name? Mine's Anna by the way.'

'I know,' she said, and shoving her copy of *Macbeth* roughly in her bag, she walked off without a backward glance.