

## Chapter One

Yes, I got kicked out of school on purpose. No, I did not want to be sent to Witch Point. I thought I'd be sent home, but Dad can't get out of his work in America, so I have to stay with his sister Mae. I'm not speaking to him. I don't think he's speaking to me. I've never been to Mae's house before, because Dad has never let me, and I don't want to go there now. Witch Point is legendary for all the wrong reasons. I wanted to get away from all the weird things that were happening to me and have ended up in the weirdest place in the world.

It's not so bad to look at. The sky is the brightest blue and the fields are a warm, happy yellow. A heatwave in Wales. That's how weird things have got. Extra strange because it was raining and not hot at all where I got on the train and it's only a couple of hours away. I can't wait to go travelling like my dad does. Today I would go to Alaska and cover myself with snow. Closing my eyes against the blistering glare I remember that the world is a very big place and one day I'm going to see lots of it. I force myself off the train. The carriages judder and hiss, then pull away towards freedom. Standing back, I am fried like an egg by the sun.

I find a spot in the shade and try to think calm thoughts. I'm so thirsty, my mouth tastes disgusting: like chewing a dirty sock. There's a noise just above my head and, squinting up, I see an owl staring down at me from the top of the Witch Point station sign. It spins its head around 360 degrees. It should be asleep in the day. Here we go again.

Birds follow me; I don't know why. They just do. When I look up again, it's been joined by a jackdaw and a crow. *No. Go away. Leave me alone. I'm not going to be weird here. I'm going to be Normal.* I look again and they have vanished. Good.

I worry a lot as I wait. Perhaps Mae has forgotten about me? Or she doesn't want me to stay with her after all? I pace the platform to drum the thoughts out with my feet. She wouldn't leave me here, would she? I check my phone for messages. The small of my back is sticky from effort, so I stop to watch a buzzard as it loops the distant field and warn it away with my finger when it changes direction towards me.

Maybe Mae is worried that people will think I'm peculiar. She needn't worry. I'm not going to admit to anyone all the weird things that happen around me. I'm not going to tell anyone that some people have called me a...

"Wilde!" Mae's silver sequinned flip-flops make it hard for her to run. She flump-trip-flumps towards me, stubs her toe and swears. "I'm late. I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't matter, Mae." It matters.

"The car. It's the heat. She's temperamental. It's so good to see you. My goodness, you've grown." She grabs me in a hopping hug which lasts too long. Releases me. Hugs me again. Half releases me so that we are standing too close together. Awkward. We carry the awkwardness with us as we walk to the car. "Why are you wearing all black? You must be boiling."

"I like black, that's all."

"Where is Mrs Lee?"

"I told her to go." A lie. Mrs Lee was snoring like a cow when I scarpered. I left her a note so she wouldn't worry. I had to haul myself through a window and shin down a tree. It's not easy to break out of a boarding school, though I'm getting better at it. Some of my plait still hangs on a branch as a final goodbye. When you have to leave, do it quickly. Not escorted out under a shame cloud and definitely not accompanied by a disapproving adult on a three-hour train trip filled with tea and tuts.

"She needed to go because you were late – she had to get back to teach Latin. Et cetera." My lie fizzes and stings. Lies always hurt. I'm not good at school. I don't fit in. Things always go wrong and I have to cause trouble and leave. "You have a twig in your hair. Shall we go home?" Home. Mae clambers in through the passenger side and scoots across to the driver's. "I could do with a bit more ventilation."

She is a silver-lining finder, that's for sure. Flapping at her face with one hand, she unwinds her window with the other. "Come on, Vera. You can do this, old girl," she tells the car, patting the steering wheel. "This heat is intolerable. I feel like a tomato." I could tell her that she doesn't look like one, but I've lied enough already. "Vera is a little terror to get going but once she's started, she's a dream." The car hacks into life. Chill-out music plays over the engine, pan pipes and chimes.

As we get going, the wind blasts in through the windows like a hairdryer stuck fast on hot. "I'm so glad you are here. I mean, I'm not, obviously, because you should have done well at that last school. It took a long time for your dad to find someone who'd take you. But I am as well. You know?" Mae looks different from when she used to visit during the holidays. Older. I think of the thing she told me about my mum that I keep hidden way, deep down inside. I swallow it deeper. My stomach churns. I should have eaten something. Too nervous. I take in a long burning breath, unstick my legs from the seats, blow out slowly.

Long gardens, garages, a trampoline on its side, an abandoned trike and a kid using a dustbin lid as a shield against the sun. According to legend, Witch Point is cursed. Everyone tries to leave and if they escape, they hardly ever come back. This is where my mum and dad grew up. This is where I lived till I was two. I don't want to stay in a place where they talk about witches. I don't want to think about curses. I stare out of the window, concentrate on what's outside, to stop the pain inside.