

## Rebecca

She could have been anyone.

She could have been any girl who arrived in Winterfold that summer.

That sounds strange, doesn't it?

It sounds strange to my ears, anyway. Summer in Winterfold. How can there ever be any other season here but winter, with a name like that? But whatever the time of year, Winterfold has a cold embrace, and like the snows of winter, it does not let you go easily.

Once upon a time there was a whole town here, not just a handful of houses. A town with twelve churches and thousands of people, dozens of streets, and a busy harbour.

And then the sea ate it.

Storm by storm, year by year, the cliffs collapsed into the advancing sea, taking the town with it, house by house and street by street, until all that was left was a triangle of three streets, a dozen houses, an inn, a church. Well, most of it . . .

And then, that summer, she arrived. And actually I'm lying.

She couldn't have been anyone, because the moment I

saw her beautiful face I knew I loved her, and I knew she  
would love me too.

I knew.



— Saturday 17th July —

Rebecca slides out of her father's car and the first thing she notices is the smell.

She sniffs the air, and without knowing it, she tries to break it all down. She gets some of it. She gets the hot salty air of the seaside, the tar of the fishing boats hauled up on the beach just out of sight over the ridge, the marram grass of the marshes inland, the hot engine oil because her father has flogged the old car all the way from Greenwich to this God-forgotten place.

She pulls back a long curl of hair blown into her face by the stiff breeze from the shore. Her father pops the boot on the car and grabs both of her bags at once.

The tiny cottage, idiotically named The Mansion, is disappointing; dark, with low ceilings.

Her father drops the bags on a shabby rug, kicks the door shut behind him with the heel of his boot.

'Well,' he says, but Rebecca already doesn't want to hear. She knows what's coming next. 'Your home for the next six weeks. Welcome.'

He's trying to sound carefree, and opens his arms as if

he thinks she'll run into them.

She doesn't. Slowly his arms fall back to his sides.

'Your room's at the top of the stairs. Here, I'll show you.'

'I'll find it,' Rebecca says, taking her bags. She turns her back on him, though even as she does so she hates herself.

Her room is a little better than downstairs. She drops her stuff and goes to the window, pulling her backpack off as she does and throwing it on the bed.

There is the sea.

Just beyond the ridge that slopes up to the right to become the cliffs, there's the beach, and the sea, and it burns brightly blue this afternoon, a diamond sea sparkling in the hot sun.

She turns to her backpack on the bed, knowing she has lost.

For a moment she wonders what exactly it is that she's lost, and decides it's a few different things, though what she feels most is that she's lost the battle to stop hurting herself.

The bag had been between her feet all the way from Greenwich, and yes, they'd had the radio on loud to hide the fact that neither of them was speaking, but even so, she would have heard it.

So she knows that Adam hasn't rung, and she knows

there's no point looking, but unable to stop herself she unzips the front pocket, and pulls out her phone.

She stares at the blank screen. Nothing. Nothing. No texts. No missed calls.

For a second she tells herself there's probably been no reception since halfway through the journey, but she has a couple of bars.

So she knows that he's not interested. She tells herself to be strong, but that lasts for five short heartbeats, and then she pushes redial.

When he answers he sounds surprised to hear her.

'Becky?'

She hasn't thought what she's going to say, so it comes out, blunt and raw.

'You said you'd call.'

'I did.'

'No you didn't. You said you'd call. Three days ago.'

'I will,' he lies, barely trying to sound as though he means it.

'You won't, because I left today,' Rebecca stabs, 'So you won't be coming round now. You . . .'

'Becky, listen . . . You don't need to . . . Look, I've got to go.'

Then there's laughter at the other end of the phone. Several voices. His mates. A girl's high-pitched laughter rises over the babble.

Rebecca holds the phone away from her head as if

it's burning her. Slowly, she moves her thumb over the keys and ends the call. She drops the phone on the bed and stares at it for a long minute, then goes downstairs, fingering the silver crucifix Adam gave her for her birthday. It wasn't a religious thing. More a Goth thing.

Until then, she'd always worn a silver heart pendant. It had been given to her by her dad, years ago, when Mum had died. He'd told Rebecca it was so she'd always remember he was there for her, that he loved her, even when they weren't together. But when Adam gave her the crucifix, she'd taken off the heart pendant, and not worn it since.

Maybe her dad had noticed. Neither of them had said anything about it. She tried not to feel bad about it; she wasn't Daddy's little girl any more, it was stupid to cling to that kind of stuff anyway.

Her father comes out of the kitchen.

'Nice room, isn't it?'

She opens the front door.

'I'm going out,' she says.

'I'll do something quick. For seven. Don't be too long.'

But she's already gone, into the hot late afternoon, and she's so preoccupied that she's unaware of the various eyes that are appraising her.

The new girl.

She blinks in the blazing sun, and looks to her left and right. She turns left, and passes the pub. Briefly she notices the sign. The Angel. It's beautiful, handmade, maybe years old, but someone has freshly repainted it. A beautiful stylised angel, handsome, with blond curling hair and glowing white robes, a golden halo and a golden sword. He stares into the blue-sky corner of the sign, as if staring up to God. His face is serene, and yet full of yearning too.

The inn marks the end of the street, and here the road turns back inland, up past the ruins of the priory, so she takes the track down to the beach, but has only taken a few steps when she sees a footpath leading into the darkness of the woods on the cliff.

The beach is full of happy laughing people, sunshine and sea, and joy. All these things feel dead to her. She considers the path up into the darkness, where she can take her pain away from all the brightness, and hide it.

That's the way she chooses.