

THE SECRETS OF
THE LAKE

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For Eileen.
I wish you were here to see this.

CHAPTER 1

A DISAPPOINTINGLY NORMAL LIFE

Life wasn't fair. That was the lesson that Anna Smith had learnt growing up. It was difficult at the best of times, and downright awful at the worst. Being an only child, she never had a sibling to call her best friend or whom she could share a room with. And, being the daughter of a rather terrible mother, Anna was constantly subject to verbal abuse when anything went slightly wrong. No matter what it was, where it happened, or if she was even there when it did: it was always *her* fault.

Regardless of this, though, Anna tried her absolute best to get everything she could from every opportunity she was afforded. Being in her second year at Bloomsridge Secondary School, Anna always made sure to try her hardest in her classes. Her hard work paid off as well. She was the top student in every class she thought mattered, meaning P.E. was excluded.

She was a natural genius, or so it seemed to many. Truthfully, though, Anna was simply a bookworm. Whenever she could, she had her face buried in a book. Fiction or nonfiction: it didn't matter. Both, in her eyes, had their own distinct advantages. The former was full of fantastical adventures featuring heroes and heroines, who saved the day in the nick of time; who represented all that was good in the battle between light and dark. They allowed her to live a better life vicariously, in worlds of wonder. The latter, scientific journals and the likes, expanded her mind with new knowledge. They were equally as exciting and engaging to her, just in their own unique ways. No matter what was going on in her life, if she ever began to feel down or upset, Anna knew she could always sit on her bed, reach across to the nearby messy excuse for a bookshelf, or the piles beside it, and grab a book to start reading.

It was a good thing that Anna had this form of escaping as she needed it right now. Below her, she could hear the daily bout of yelling starting and a lot of awful, hateful words being thrown around. Words that she knew she ought not to repeat.

But, as she listened, Anna simply opened up the book in her hands and began reading. She tried her best to let the images and characters

whisk her away to their fantastical world, but the argument was simply too loud to be ignored. It was at times like these that Anna then resorted to her earphones. They were mostly exposed wire now, with soft rubber buds at the end, and they looked incredibly dangerous to use. But they worked and that's all that mattered to her. She slipped them into her ears and pressed play on a playlist containing her favourite film soundtracks—something she often did when reading. The gentle orchestral music, accompanied by her imagination's rendition of the events on the page before her, slowly drowned out the arguing and helped Anna float off into another, better place.

Downstairs, Jane Smith, Anna's mother, and her boyfriend, Patrick 'Paddy' Neal, were hurling abuse at one another. Both had drunk one too many, a few hours too early, and were now escalating what should've been a minor disagreement about the volume of the television into a full-blown screaming contest. 'I told you that I'd be watching it, so I don't get your problem with me watching it!' Paddy yelled, being equally as emotional with his body language as he was with his words. 'It's not your stupid football that I have a problem with,' Jane screamed back. 'It's the fact you have it on one hundred when I'm trying to listen to my own music!'

‘You’re on the other side of the house! Why should it matter what I have mine on?!’ Paddy continued to yell, despite being only a few feet away from Jane.

‘Screw you!’ Jane screeched with the might of her entire lungs. ‘It’s my house, turn it the f...’ Anna turned up her music to drown out their voices. She wasn’t too bothered by the arguing anymore. She was used to it. It was more of an inconvenience than a real problem in her mind. The real problem would come later, when both of them turned their drunken anger towards her. As she briefly thought about the nightmare to come, Anna took a deep breath. Her whole body tensed up as she tried to regain some sense of calm, and push the negative thoughts from her mind. She exhaled slowly in an effort to calm herself. She’d deal with that problem if, or when, it arrived. Right now, she was enjoying the thrilling adventures in her book, and no one could take that away from her.

The deafening arguments continued all throughout the weekend, as Jane and Paddy continued to drink enough to quench the thirst of a village. Naturally, Anna spent as much time as she could hiding away from the hateful adults that were lingering downstairs. In her room, Anna would spend hours reading, to no one’s surprise. But, when her hands needed a rest from

flicking pages, and her eyes a rest from flowing over the words written on them, Anna would hesitantly stand up from her bed, trying to minimise the creaking the old thing would do, and move to her windowsill.

As she sat in the warm glow of the afternoon sun, Anna smiled slightly. A rare sight when she was at home. She got comfortable in her new position and let out a hushed sigh. The noise downstairs had disappeared. The two adults had passed out, finally. Now, in this brief moment of peace, Anna was able to speak to her best friend: her only friend. In front of her sat a well-cared for, lively snake plant, which she'd aptly named Kaa, after a character in one of her favourite novels.

'Hey, Kaa,' she whispered, trying to make sure the silence in the house continued. The plant gave no response, but Anna smiled wider regardless. 'I know, I know. I'll bring some water tomorrow,' said Anna, dismissing her stoic outer shell and showing her true, soft colours. 'I've been a bit busy today,' she confessed, 'I've been hiding away up here...' She quickly fell silent, joining the rest of the house in an eerie void of noise. It was difficult, even talking to Kaa, for Anna to address the situation at home, but her plant brought her some much needed comfort. Even without speaking a single word. 'Thanks, Kaa,'

she murmured. ‘Yeah, I needed to hear that. I’ll be alright though. It’ll all be alright in the end, right?’ she asked herself. The answer wasn’t as clear as she’d have liked it to be, but, in her heart, Anna was certain things would eventually take a turn for the better. She continued to talk to Kaa for close to an hour, when her name suddenly echoed around the house. Jane was back to her feet and beckoning her daughter. Trouble was no doubt on its way, but Anna held her head high as it approached. *I can do this*, she thought to herself. *I can do this.*

Soon enough, the weekend was over and Anna was thrust into the outside world to go back to school.

It wasn’t terrible. In fact, Anna enjoyed school, when she was left to do her work by herself. She enjoyed learning new things everyday. She did not enjoy the teasing she got from her fellow Year 8 students, though. Anna was by no means an ugly child. But, standing beside her classmates, her tattered and worn uniform made her look scruffy and unkempt. Her untameable blonde hair made her seem crazy. And her pale complexion earned her the nickname of Anna the Friendly Ghost. It was a not-so-clever nickname inspired by Caspar the Friendly Ghost; but she expected nothing less from the people she was stuck with five days a week. Most of them,

she thought, would struggle to read the Hungry Caterpillar, let alone come up with a clever, insulting nickname for her. Still, their persistence in attacking her for every minor thing hurt her. It was a constant reminder that nothing she did was good enough.

Anna made her days at school slightly more bearable halfway through her first year there. Back then, she was much more sensitive to the teasing and bullying, and wanted a place where she could run away to and hide. It was at this point that Anna stumbled across the loveliest spot; a hidden place of tranquility: a safe haven from the torrent of tormenting and bullying that bombarded her on a daily basis. A secluded, overgrown area, tucked away behind the southern-most building on campus. That was her spot, and it was perfect. No one knew of it. She even began to doubt that the caretakers did as time went by, due to nature's slow reclaiming of the spot. The walls, the bench, and everything else got greener over the year. At lunch, Anna would disappear to her spot. She would sit on the mossy bench, take out her lunch, and eat in peace. The trees around her, that had been left to grow unchecked, would keep her out of the harsh sunlight or, more often, keep her sheltered from the pouring rain. It was wonderful. And, on days like today, it was even better.

The first half of Anna's day leading up to her arrival at her spot was incredibly uneventful, which she loved. Her classes had not been rowdy, as they often were. Her teachers had not made her stand up and do any public speaking—a usual favourite of her English teacher. And, most importantly, she hadn't been in any classes with the girl she hated most: Rachel Moores.

She was the opposite of Anna. Her hair was raven-black and straighter than Anna thought ever possible. Her skin was an unnatural orange-tone, which seemed to be the case for most girls in Rachel's friend group Anna had noticed. And she was the most popular, most extroverted girl in the entire year. Almost everyone saw Anna's dislike for Rachel as jealousy, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. In fact, on any occasion when she thought about it, Anna couldn't think of anyone she'd be less jealous of. The truth was that Rachel had been bullying Anna for as long as she could remember. From telling her first, and only, crush about her secret feelings to the previously mentioned Caspar-inspired name-calling. Rachel seemed to have it out for Anna, and she had no idea why. It didn't matter a great deal either, as Anna was used to it by now. She could almost completely tune out Rachel's voice whenever she heard it. It

was a great skill she had taught herself. Yet, when she needed it most, it seemed to fail her.

‘Anna...?’ Rachel’s voice startled the timid girl, who had her face buried in a book and her sandwich stuffed in her mouth, in the most unflattering way possible. Anna’s eyes widened as she looked up in horror. She suddenly felt her cheeks get very warm and she swallowed the chunk of sandwich she had in her mouth as quickly as possible. ‘Rachel!’ Anna choked on her food. Her opposite didn’t even respond with words. She just sniggered and turned. ‘Millie! Sophie!’ Rachel called out. ‘Come look who I found hiding!’ Anna’s face got even warmer somehow as she quickly forced her sprawled out setup back into her school bag. Rachel snapped her head back around to Anna and smiled cruelly. ‘Oh, sorry, were you going somewhere?’ she teased. ‘Sit back down and wait for the others to get here, so they can see what a sad little tramp you are.’ Rachel’s words were spoken with more spite, and hurt Anna worse, than they ever had before. But one word hurt more than any. It rang in her ears as she sat, frozen in place, on the bench, looking at Rachel, almost in disbelief at what she’d just said. *Tramp*. Anna replayed the word in her mind. Her eyes began to well up with tears as she quickly zipped up her bag, continuing her escape from the situation. She tried to hide how much it hurt

her, but she couldn't as she felt Rachel's oppressive glare on her. 'Move.' Anna's voice shook as she got up and pushed past Rachel.

'Where you going?' Rachel called out with a slight giggle afterwards. Anna ignored her and barged between Millie and Sophie on her way back to the main school hall. The trio of girls finally came together as Anna disappeared, laughing at her misfortune.

As she wandered alone through the school halls, Anna fought back the tears. School, as awful as it could be, was her escape from Jane and Paddy. She could usually deal with the bullying that Rachel and her friends threw her way. It was a nice break compared to the real struggle she faced at home. But she'd never been called anything like a tramp before. Any insult thrown her way was usually about her personality, her keen attitude to learning and love for books, more than her looks; there was the odd exception, such as the Caspar-inspired tease, but they never came across as truly malicious. They were never so mean-spirited and intentionally wicked. Anna knew her appearance wasn't the best, but she tried to do all she could. Unlike Rachel, Millie, Sophie, Emma, Natalie, and whoever else gave her looks of disdain as she passed them in the halls, Anna didn't have the money to afford a whole drawer worth of makeup or a new uniform

every year. Anna didn't have her mum's help getting ready in the morning. She honestly tried her best with what she had, and what she could do by herself—and she knew it wasn't anything special—but she tried. She used to think that meant something; but, as she wandered through the corridors with her head down and eyes streaming tears, Anna realised that her classmates were just biding their time before insulting yet another part of her. There was no unspoken respect towards her for trying her best to keep up with everyone else. They just hated her. It was, in her mind, as black and white as that.

Anna crashed through the door into the bathroom and locked herself into one of the stalls. She never went to the bathroom in school, as they were disgusting, and filled with crude graffiti, but right now she didn't care. She needed somewhere quiet and solitary. Somewhere she could cry freely and not be judged, and this was all she could find. Her tears were silent as they ran down her cheeks and off her chin. Anna let out the occasional snuffle as she cried, but, having learnt from her home life, was able to mostly stay silent.

The rest of the day was just as awful as lunch had been. Her eyes were red and slightly puffy from crying throughout lunch, and she was teased about that by the usual suspects relent-

lessly throughout Chemistry. It was a miserable hour, and Anna couldn't wait for her final lesson of the day. It was one of her favourites, and it allowed her a moment of peace. She wasn't forced to endure Rachel's bullying in Art. It was one of the few subjects where they weren't together. There, she could sit quietly and simply let herself fall into her work. Whilst she wasn't naturally inclined to the subject, like she was with Maths, Science or English, Anna loved Art just as equally. Especially on days like this, when she was feeling utterly miserable. It gave her a way to express herself. Even if that was just a worksheet with six different spheres on it for her to shade in different styles. Art was a chance for her to switch off and just let her feelings flow. That's why she loved it, despite not being at the top of her class.

After the little pick-me-up at the end of her day, Anna left the school gates feeling better than she had done an hour or two ago. She wasn't smiling or happy, but she wasn't crying either, so that was an improvement. The walk home that Anna did every day was another highlight in her mind. She could enjoy some time to herself, with her favourite music playing, and take in the odd bit of scenery she came across, such as a well-kept park or field. There wasn't much, as she did live on the outskirts of Manchester, but it was enough to bring a small smile to her face.

However, today, her smile slowly vanished as the music in her ears was drowned out by a set of familiar laughs. Rachel had decided to walk a different way home today, apparently. ‘Anna!’ Rachel wrapped her arms around Anna’s shoulder as she said her name with a smile. ‘I’m glad I caught you.’ The other laughs got closer and Anna recognised them as belonging to Millie and Sophie, Rachel’s slightly larger and much taller sidekicks.

‘What?’ Anna asked bitterly, the smile completely gone from her face now.

‘I just wanted to see you again after our little meeting at lunch.’ Rachel’s mouth curled into a smile. ‘I wanted to show my friends what I was talking about earlier.’ Rachel tried to hide her laugh as she looked back at her friends.

‘Just leave me alone, please,’ Anna sighed.

‘Aww, did you hear that girls?’ Rachel suddenly stepped into Anna’s path: stopping her. ‘The little tramp wants to be left alone. Probably so she can go back to that little pig sty she calls home and be with that alcoholic mess she calls her mummy.’ Anna had to try her best not to cry at these mocking remarks. They hurt more than she’d expected them to. Anna had built a tolerance over the past few years, ever since Rachel entered her life, to comments made about her mum. She knew that she wasn’t in a good place, and that she

wasn't a great person, so whatever anyone said about her had little effect nowadays. But for some reason, these ones hurt. Anna likened it to rubbing salt in a wound. Throughout the day, she'd already endured Rachel's wicked words, and her defences were simply beaten and broken. It was clear that Anna couldn't take anymore.

But, as she stared at the skinny Oompa-Loompa in front of her, through her tears, Anna's pain became anger. She wanted to lash out so badly. She wanted to show Rachel that she wasn't someone to be messed with but... but she couldn't. Rachel was already larger than her, and also had two goons to back her up. She'd lose any fight she started. She also couldn't retaliate with words because—Anna almost chuckled—Rachel would be too stupid to understand any insult she threw her way. Even the simplest ones. So, that left her in the position she was in. Once again, Anna simply had to endure it. 'Aww, she's gonna cry again!' Rachel laughed. 'You really are pathetic, aren't you?' Rachel chuckled. 'Just like your mum.' Anna's lips quivered. Rage built up inside her. Her fist clenched. She wanted to ignore everything she'd just thought. She wanted to hit Rachel. She wanted to do it so badly.

Then another voice stole Anna's attention. 'Just like that dead dad of hers too!' chimed in Millie from behind.

‘Don’t you dare say anything about my dad!’ Anna turned and screamed. She hadn’t known him. He’d died before she was even one. But this didn’t stop Anna from caring about him. And it certainly didn’t mean she’d let someone call him pathetic. So, with all the might in her body, Anna shoved Millie to the ground. The other girls went silent and stared at Anna in shock. Millie stared at Anna, in utter disbelief at what had happened. Then a smile curled on her face and she looked at her friends. ‘Ooo, someone’s getting a bit annoyed,’ giggled Rachel as she took a step back. There was no need, though. Anna was spent. She’d put everything into that—and she felt sure it’d deter the girls from messing with her again—but it did nothing. They just had something new to tease her about.

She hung her head as the grey clouds above joined her in openly weeping. With the rain coming down heavier by the second, Rachel and her friends set off down the path again, leaving Anna to cry by herself. It wasn’t fair, Anna thought as she looked at her feet. It was always her. No one else seemed to have it this bad. So, what was different about her that made life treat her this way? Why did everything awful happen to her? She didn’t know.