

# GHOSTS OF WINTER

*by*

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## TIMELINE: WINTER MANOR AND ITS INHABITANTS

1746—Lord William Fitzsimmons Winter inherits an old Tudor manor house from his father, has it demolished and rebuilt in Palladian style.

1751—The new Winter Manor is complete. Lord William invites his friends to visit in June.

c.1780—Lord William dies with no children. Winter passes to his cousins, the Richmond family.

1848—Though his father still lives, Edward Richmond moves into Winter, with his wife Kitty and his children, Francis and Catherine, then aged nine and five.

1862—In autumn Maeve Greville comes to tea at Winter and meets Catherine for the first time.

1863—Maeve returns to Winter in spring, as Francis Richmond's fiancée.

c.1865—Catherine Richmond drowns in the river in Winter's park.

c. 1893—Francis Richmond inherits Winter from his father. He does not marry and has no children.

c. 1900—Francis Richmond dies, Winter passes to his distant cousins.

1917—The legitimate male heir to Winter, Wilfred, is killed in World War I.

1925—Simon, master of Winter, dies with no living children. Winter passes to his sister, Mary.

1926—Mary, mistress of Winter, dies and her daughter, Evadne Burns, inherits the house.

1927—Evadne Burns has a liaison with John Potter, the neighbouring farmer, and falls pregnant. That summer Evadne invites her school friends to Winter for a reunion. Later in the year, John Potter marries May Shipley, the housemaid. Their daughter, Maggie Potter, will eventually inherit her father's farm.

1928—Evadne gives birth to a baby girl she names Edith, Edie for short.

1930—As a result of the global economic meltdown, Evadne is forced to abandon Winter for a smaller house and find work.

1940—Winter is requisitioned as a place for wounded soldiers to recuperate during World War II.

1945—Winter is given back to Evadne, in terrible condition. She cannot afford to renovate it, but refuses to sell.

1965—Evadne Burns dies, and Edie inherits Winter but cannot live there.

c. 2010—Edie dies and leaves Winter to Ros, then aged 30.

## CHAPTER ONE

In the rear-view mirror, the road was empty for now, wide and black beneath the bright mid-afternoon sky. Peering ahead, I saw darker skies, threatening rain. I hoped fervently it wasn't an omen. A sign came into focus, telling me the city of Durham was only another fifty miles north. Only another sixty miles to go until I discovered just what sort of a predicament I'd thrown myself into this time. Starting a new life just after my thirtieth birthday, every familiar part of my life hundreds of miles behind me, wasn't an adventure I'd ever expected or craved. Yet here I was, driving into the uncertainty.

*Winter Manor.* I let the words drift through my head in the way they had done so many times over the last weeks. They were familiar now, but remained as unsettling as they had been from the beginning. A manor house? Not only a manor house, but a manor house located two hundred miles away from everything familiar to me. *My* manor house.

Considering it too deeply made it ludicrous. More ridiculous still, I now had all of my worldly possessions packed into my battered silver Ford Fiesta and was heading for the wilds of County Durham—a region I'd never considered, let alone visited—to move in to said newly acquired manor house. Apart from what I hoped were reliable assurances the house had water and electricity, and a wealth of preliminary structural reports I'd tried to wade through, I knew very little about my new home. I'd not even known it existed a month ago.

A few days after my thirtieth birthday in mid-November, a belated and half-hearted birthday card from my sister had arrived in the morning post through the door of my compact London flat. With it came an intriguing, intimidating letter, summoning me to the offices of a lawyer I'd never heard of. That letter tormented me with curiosity for days. It was all very well informing me I'd been left something in the last will and testament of Miss Edith Burns, and I had to make an appointment to learn the size of the bequest.

What I'd really wanted to know was: who on earth was Miss Edith Burns?

I smiled to myself now as I remembered the kindly lady who lived across the street from my family home in our pretty Hertfordshire village, the house my mother, sister, and I had lived in until I was nearly eleven. Always known to me as Auntie Edie, though she was no relation at all, she had been my surrogate mother, an indulgent grandmother, and an amusing playmate for me in my childhood. My own mother, too busy in her work as a beautician or with indulging my sister—who was five years younger than me and far prettier—had never seemed to have the time for me I'd craved. I'd turned to Auntie Edie instead. I remembered with huge fondness and gratitude her constant supply of lollipops, the horrific lime-green pullover she'd once knitted for me, and the shiny fifty-pence piece she gave to me every birthday.

I'd felt terrible in the lawyer's office when I'd been informed that Miss Edith Burns was Auntie Edie. I hadn't forgotten her kindnesses, but I'd not had cause to think of her in many years. The honour that she'd left something to me in her will was momentarily eclipsed by my sadness on realising she had passed away. Eternally a sprightly sixty-something year old in my recollection, I was shocked to learn she had been over eighty when cancer had claimed her. Auntie Edie had been a retired nurse when I knew her. I imagined the bequest would be the adult equivalent of that birthday fifty-pence piece, and I told the lawyer as much.

The lawyer had smiled mysteriously at that point. She informed me Auntie Edie had been born in a small country house, Winter Manor, in County Durham. The property had been in her family for

most of the twentieth century but had fallen into disrepair since it was last inhabited in the 1940s. Auntie Edie, having no children, had remembered the little curly-haired child I'd been and left the place to me. I'd also been left most of her money, the result of her lifetime of saving, which was no small sum. The only condition in place required me to oversee the renovation of Winter Manor, returning it to its former glory.

I'd stared open-mouthed and questioned the lawyer's sincerity. But once she handed me the official documents, I began to believe this strange twist in my fortunes was genuine. Before I'd had a chance to think about it, I'd found myself asking, "Is the house habitable?" I almost hoped she would say *no* before the idea truly took shape in my mind.

"I believe it is, if you're prepared to virtually camp to start with," she replied. "It has electricity and water connected, that much I know. There's some paperwork, including a full report on what needs to be done and some contact numbers of professionals Edie had already spoken to about taking it on. I think the information's a few years out of date now, but I don't suppose much has changed in that time."

"I could go and live there?" The words had fallen out of my mouth, despite the very reasonable protests my brain tried to interject.

"If you wanted to."

It was that simple, apparently. At her words, all logical objections took a step backwards, and there was a quickening in my veins that felt something like optimism. I'd looked at the piece of paper in my hands, ignoring the way it trembled with my fingers, and confirmed again this was not a fiction I had dreamed up, it really did inform me Winter Manor was mine. Two hundred miles from everything that still hurt. A place in the middle of nowhere, where my only responsibility would be to a woman I'd loved as a child, and a house full of history. Someone else's history. For the first time in months I'd seen a path in front of me. Exactly what I had been searching for.

Only now, driving ever closer, the nervous tension was taking hold of me again. What if I failed Auntie Edie? What if I couldn't

deal with such a practical project? What if this didn't work out, in the same way as everything else in my life lately? I attempted to ignore the doubts. I only knew, for some unshakeable reason, I had to try this. I didn't have a lot of other options after all.

I sighed and reached out to turn on the radio, hoping to occupy my mind with some talk or music. The haunting electronic notes of "True" by Spandau Ballet filled the car. I turned it off quickly in disgust. That song had way too many memories attached to it, and there were some places I didn't want my mind to go today. Bittersweet recollection of my early years with Francesca was one of those places. It had been one of the many songs that meant something to us whenever we heard it. For nine years. Now Francesca was gone, and nine years of my life, of loving, of compromise, of sharing my dreams with her, felt wasted.

Tears threatened to blur my vision. I wiped them away quickly and focused again on the road in front of me. I pressed the accelerator to overtake a slow-moving truck and opened the window to let the cold air blow over my face. The roar of the wind, as I drove faster still, obscured everything else. I pushed the accelerator harder. I had no choice now, my decision was made. I'd just have to hope fate was kinder to me than she had been so far in my life. The perfect isolation of Winter Manor beckoned. Right now, it was all I craved.



I drew close to my destination at just before three in the afternoon, as the first signs of winter twilight were turning the December sky from pale grey to smoky blue. Following the directions given by the toneless voice of my satellite navigation system, I turned onto a small country lane, edged with hedgerows barren of leaves. I was soon aware of a low stone-built wall running along the side of the road behind the undergrowth to my right. The navigation system, into which I'd programmed the exact GPS coordinates of Winter Manor, instructed me to turn right in one hundred yards. "What the hell are you talking about?" I muttered in return. All I could see were hedges and that low wall. I slowed

the car to a crawl as the display counted down the yards. I stopped with a few yards to go and wound my window down. Then I saw the entrance to my new home.

Two stone pillars rose from the tangle of brambles at their base to form ornate and pointed guardians of a pair of wrought iron gates which hung between them. The rusted, swirling metalwork of the gates had once been painted black, but the paint was flaking and faded. Both pillars and gates were intricately laced with ivy, some of it dark, living green, some of it brown and lifeless but still holding the structure in a death grip.

For a long time, I merely sat in my car and stared at the imposing sight. I knew I was in the right place but could barely comprehend the idea of simply opening the gate and going inside. Not only did I feel I would be intruding on what was really somebody else's property, but I would also somehow be going against the natural order of things. Decay had well and truly set in here, nature was claiming the manmade for herself. Auntie Edie, the last living being with any real claim over this place, had died. What right did I really have to push open that gate, rip the ivy out of the way, and force my way inside? Me versus Mother Nature was a contest unlikely to go my way.

I opened the car door and climbed out. As I felt the ground under my feet I noticed that beneath the weeds of what looked like part of the roadside verge was actually the gravel of a driveway. I approached the gates tentatively and peered between the ornate metalwork and tendrils of ivy. I could see nothing beyond a shadowy avenue of beech trees, which must have once been graceful. With their winter branches bare and after decades of neglect, the trees seemed rather to be guarding the driveway to the house, forbidding figures likely to come to life and tear at my skin and hair, monsters from a horrific fairy story.

I smiled at my runaway imagination and refocused on the driveway beyond the gates. Though it was overgrown, it would still be passable in my car. The view from where I stood offered no clue as to what the house itself looked like, and my curiosity to see it was increasing with every moment. Seeing the state of the gates, I felt

a growing trepidation I would find the property in worse condition than I had been led to believe it was in, and I was anxious to reassure myself. The monster trees would not put me off, however hard they tried.

I pushed the gate and was dismayed to find it didn't budge. I tore at the ivy snaking around the latch and discovered no lock, only a rusted old chain, broken many years ago. I ran my eyes to the base of the gates and discovered the problem at once: there was a bolt, dropped down and stuck in the ground. I bent and tried to force it up. It creaked, but resisted me. I straightened, and brushing the rust from my hands, went to my car and retrieved a can of WD-40 from a box on the back seat. I'd bought it, along with some initial supplies, because some vague memory of my father's garage workshop, from the occasional weekends I spent with him after my parents' divorce, had told me it was a magical fix-all substance. Had to be worth a try. I shook the can and squirted some of the light oil onto the stubborn bolt. While it trickled through the rusty lock, I stowed the can in the car. I returned to the gate and tried again. I pulled with both hands this time. Just as I thought I'd failed in my attempt, the bolt slid free of the ground and both gates shuddered and groaned.

Disproportionately elated by my first practical success at Winter Manor, I pushed the gates. The ivy strained against me, still trying to bar my entry. I took a deep breath and pushed harder. The sound of stems and leaves tearing and releasing their hold gave me unexpected satisfaction. The gates scraped along the ground, and the hinges sounded ready to give up, but still, they opened. It was the first thing I'd achieved in months.

I returned to my car, started the engine, and turned into the driveway, easing the car slowly through the weeds covering the uneven ground. Clearly my actions confused the navigation system because moments later the computerised woman piped up in an insistent tone, "Where possible, make a U-turn." I frowned at her negative attitude. "Where possible, make a U-turn." I reached over and pressed the *off* button. "No," I said to my so easily silenced companion, "I'm going straight ahead this time." I was driving into the unknown, but at least I was going forward.



My newfound optimism lasted for longer than it had been in the habit of surviving during the last few months. It made it all the way to the end of the half mile of overgrown driveway. Less than ten minutes. For much of the distance, all I could see were the forbidding trees on either side of me. In some places they had merged overhead to form a canopy of branches, shutting out most of what remained of the daylight. The natural archway had a certain gloomy charm to it, I reflected, peering upwards. It would be pretty in summer, with the dappled sunshine streaming through.

The driveway veered sharply to the left at the end of the avenue of trees. The vista before me opened up into rolling parkland. Winter Manor Park was 150 acres, I knew from the paperwork I'd studied. It had been much larger when the house was first built in the mid-eighteenth century, but many acres had been sold off as farmland during the nineteenth century. That was one factor I was very glad about, since even 150 acres of landscaped pastures and wooded areas seemed like a small country to me, who had lived in a city most of my life.

I drove over a slight rise in the ground, and suddenly an apparition arose before my eyes, surprising me with its proximity. The walls were of pale grey stone, broken by a regular pattern over two storeys of dark windows staring emptily back at me. I swallowed hard and stopped the car, fumbling for the door handle and climbing out quickly for a better view. The building demanded that I look at it properly, not peer at it through the windscreen. I stared up at it wide-eyed. The front façade of the house was ornamented by four very straight formal columns, at the top of which there rested a triangular pediment. To either side, the house pushed forward slightly, creating the symmetrical impression that there were two wings. The pyramid-shaped roof was tiled in dark slates and broken by small, regular dormer windows. At the apex of the roof was a somewhat incongruous domed clock tower, its curves at odds with the straight classical lines of the rest of the building.

Briefly, in the deepening half-light of evening, I was convinced I was at the wrong country house. I almost hoped I was. I'd expected

a graceful ruin, but my first impression was one of quiet grandeur, imposing self-control, and a towering dignity that quite frightened me. Then I looked a little closer. I saw the panes in many of the dark windows were cracked and even missing entirely in places. Green moss crept up the walls, showing dark against the pale grey stone. The wide steps which led to what I assumed was the main entrance, between the columns, were littered with brown autumn leaves, and all over the large gravelled turning circle in front of the house there were clumps of tall grasses, trailing brambles, and other unidentifiable specimens of foliage.

In the trees behind me something rustled, and I jumped, suddenly aware I had been holding my breath. I felt dwarfed by the scale of the house, of the task I had taken on. I leaned against the car and gazed at the dilapidated glory of the building in front of me. Disquietingly, I sensed Winter Manor staring back, wondering who on earth I was to come here in my little silver car and disturb its dignified repose.

I grew conscious of the silence. The leafless trees did not even rustle in the strong breeze blowing my hair into my face. Another faint crunching reached me from somewhere in the undergrowth and then...nothing at all. I could hear no traffic or sirens, no voices or music blaring. I could see no signs of human habitation anywhere nearby. I couldn't even hear the overhead noise of an aeroplane. Winter Manor was a secluded oasis of oblivion. That consideration did not frighten me. It was exactly what I wanted.

I ducked back into the car and fished around in the glovebox for the set of keys the lawyer had given me. Small and insignificant in my hand, it was hard to believe they could possibly be able to give me entrance to this place. Marvelling at the chance to leave my car unlocked for five minutes, I strode purposefully towards the steps. As I climbed, to my right I noticed the statue of a woman who looked as though she would have been at home in ancient Greece, gracefully posed on a pedestal. Her waist was draped tastefully with a carved cloth, but her stone breasts were magnificently exposed to the elements. One of her arms had eroded and crumbled, but her expression, framed by stone ringlets, was still perfectly wistful, as

she seemed to look past me to the other side of the steps. I turned and followed her eye-line, only to find she was staring at an empty space. I glanced downwards to see an empty pedestal, the small broken piece of stone a lingering suggestion of where her chiselled lover had once stood, gazing back at her. I looked back to the blank eyes of the woman. Her expression was so sad, staring longingly after something that had simply crumbled away to nothing.

“I know how you feel, love,” I told her with a small smile. She didn’t react. “Pleased to meet you anyway.” I turned back towards the wooden doors at the top of the stairs. They were varnished mahogany, the varnish peeling and flaking away from the wood. The brass handles were tarnished. A large keyhole was located just below the handle, and a more modern hasp lock, with a very impressive padlock, added extra security. I felt my new statuesque friend had turned to watch me incredulously as I selected the biggest key from the three I had in my hand and inserted it into the hole below the handle. For some reason, I was surprised when it fitted perfectly. I turned it with remarkable ease and heard the lock click. I unfastened the padlock with fumbling fingers, my trepidation growing as I considered the significance of crossing the threshold for the first time.

Both locks dealt with, I pushed the door. It swung open with an entirely predictable creaking of its old hinges. I took a slow step inside like a child entering a haunted house in an old Hollywood movie.

I found myself in a large hallway. The only natural light came from the narrow windows on either side of the front door, and shadows enveloped me as I glanced around this hall of vague and mysterious shapes. They stretched endlessly upwards to the high ceiling and back, beyond a very grand staircase, into recesses I couldn’t make out. Inwardly, I cursed myself for not setting out earlier and arriving when it was lighter. The expanse of undiscovered gloom in front of me was not reassuring.

I remembered the information I had been given. Connected to the National Grid since the 1920s, Winter Manor still had a working electricity supply, but it was turned off at the mains. The fuse box

was in a small anteroom to the right of the entrance. I turned in that direction and saw a doorway, slightly ajar.

My footsteps echoed on what was apparently a marble floor as I walked towards the door. A cobweb brushed my forehead as I went through. I shuddered. I'd brought a feather duster with me in anticipation of just such considerations, and it was my plan for tomorrow to rid the liveable rooms of all signs of arachnid inhabitation. I peered into the small, dusty room and located the fuse box on the wall. Opening the cover, I assumed the big switch must be the master switch I'd been told would restore power to the house. I moved it from the *off* position to the *on* position. Nothing happened. I was first relieved not to see sparks and then disappointed. I glanced around for a light switch and flicked it. Still nothing.

I used the remaining daylight to bring my things into the entrance hallway. Then, wrapped in my sleeping bag on the creaking camp bed, I turned on my torch and flicked through the information Auntie Edie had collected before she died and found the name and number of an electrician she had wanted to employ. I called him on my mobile phone and thanked him profusely when he agreed to come and look at the faulty electrics before midday tomorrow. He sounded surprised when I told him that I was living in Winter Manor. He probably thought I was a lunatic.

That taken care of, there wasn't a lot else I could do. Itching though I was to explore the rest of my new residence, as night fell the prospect of wandering through the rooms with only my fading torch became less and less appealing. There would be time for that in the morning, in daylight. The house had been here for over two centuries, it wasn't going to change overnight. My stomach growled, drawing my attention to more immediate needs. I found the packet of egg mayonnaise sandwiches I'd bought from a service station on the motorway, settled myself on the low camping bed, and devoured them.

I crumpled the wrapper and tossed it onto the floor near the camping bed. Unable to face tackling the camping stove to heat water tonight, I contented myself with the lukewarm bottle of Cherry Coke I'd been drinking earlier. Then, still fully dressed in

the loose linen trousers and thick Nepalese knitted pullover I'd been wearing all day, I wrapped my sleeping bag around me and curled up on the folding bed in the corner of the dark hallway. The small halo of torchlight faded, flickered, and went out entirely.

I stared into the thick darkness. What would Francesca think of me now? The part of me that missed her wanted to pick up my phone and send her a text, at the very least. But somehow, even though the end of our relationship and our new status as awkward and distant friends was mostly of my own doing, I'd still not come to terms with it. Part of my heart could not help but want her, the comfort of her arms, the simply soothing presence of her company. It wasn't enough for a life together, but still, I mourned the only relationship I'd known.

I turned my thoughts away from Francesca and thought instead of my little sister, Jeanne. I hadn't told her about either my inheritance or my decision to take up residence in the dilapidated stately home. I'd sent a characterless change of address card which wouldn't arrive until tomorrow. Now, in the darkness, I pondered why I'd not told her more.

We'd never been close, Jeanne and I. The five year difference in our ages was less to blame than that we were total and complete opposites. As a gloomy, deep-thinking teenager, keen on trying out rudimentary philosophies and experimenting with my own spirituality, I'd considered her superficial and really rather silly. Obsessed by ballet and boy bands, blessed with a carefree nature and a pretty face, Jeanne represented everything I had never been able to embrace as a teenager. As she and my mother had giggled together over boys and shared make-up tips, I'd felt excluded from their girly conspiracy and retreated into a world where I sought magic and comfort of my own, with crystal healing, meditation, and yoga. I bought my clothes from ethnic and alternative shops partly out of a desire to set myself apart from my peers, while Jeanne wouldn't wear a garment unless all of her friends were wearing the same brand.

Though now that we were adults, such differences had become insignificant, our relationship was as distant as ever. Jeanne and I

lived in different worlds. She dealt with life so smoothly, and had a knack of making me feel incompetent in comparison. Even with a five-year-old daughter and an out-of-work husband, she always seemed bright and cheerful. And though I knew she suffered just as much grief and bitter anger over the all-too-recent death of our mother as I did, she still managed to remain basically optimistic and find enough time to nag me about the way she thought I should be living. She'd never questioned her own path through life and saw no reason why I should question my own, growing quite frustrated with me when I wouldn't listen. Her lack of understanding and constant, unavoidable advice had driven me further away from her than ever. We'd barely spoken on the phone in months and certainly hadn't visited each other. I didn't have to tell her about Winter Manor yet. I doubted she'd be interested anyway.

I closed my eyes. The house creaked and groaned around me, as though it was adjusting to my presence and not wholly happy with it just yet. I hoped it would get used to me soon. Against my expectations and alone in the middle of a county I knew nothing of, in a centuries-old house of which I had suddenly become guardian and sole resident, on a camping bed and with no electricity, I found I was comfortable. I could relax. The electrician's surprise told me that though my inheritance of the house was expected by the people Auntie Edie had dealt with, my decision to live here and arrival today had not been widely broadcast. Nobody knew where I was. It was calming to be hidden and anonymous, with only myself to think about. No responsibility, no pain. No expectations. Just me, alone in the darkness. Winter Manor was, so far, everything I'd hoped it would be.