

TRISHA ASHLEY

A Winter's Tale

Prologue: The Dream

Mother, what did you foretell, when you held my hand so tightly and wept, then said that the future could not be altered and I must go to the manor of Wynter's End in your stead?

From the journal of Alys Bezzard, 1580

No house as ancient as Winter's End was ever entirely silent: even at eight years old, Sophy Winter knew that. Crouched on the floor of the gallery, she felt like Jonah sitting in the belly of the whale, surrounded by creaks and sighing, feeling, rather than hearing, the heavy heartbeat of a distant long-case clock and the sharply flatulent rattling of the water pipes.

She peered through the wooden banisters, down into the depths of the stone-flagged Great Hall where her grand - father's King Charles spaniels lay in a tangled, snoring, comatose heap on a rag rug before the log fire. Nothing stirred in the darker shadows beyond. Satisfied, she ran to the end of the gallery and climbed onto a curved stair rail that seemed to have been designed for little fingers to grip; then, clinging on for dear life, she slid with an exhilarating, rushing *swoosh!* of cold air, right to the bottom. Slowing down was always tricky. Fetching up with a thump against a newel post bearing a carved cherub's head, she lost her grip and would have fallen off, had she not been caught and rather roughly set on her feet. In the ensuing silence, a moth-eaten stag's head dropped off the wall and landed with a clatter, glassy eyes vacantly staring at the intricately plastered ceiling. Sophy looked up and her impish, round-cheeked face, framed in dark curls, not unlike the carved cherub's behind her, became instantly serious. Grandfather didn't like her to use the front stairs, let alone slide down the banisters. In fact, Grandfather didn't seem to *like* her at all, and it was somehow Mummy's fault – and where *was* Mummy? If Sophy hadn't been sitting on the gallery floor watching for her for so long, she wouldn't have been tempted to slide down the banisters in the first place.

Grandfather stared back at her, ferocious bushy brows drawn together over a formidable nose and an arrested expression in his eyes. 'A Pharamond, that's who *your* father was,' he said slowly, 'from over Middlemoss way. Why didn't I see that before? But which one . . . ?'

Nervously Sophy began slowly to back away, ready to make a run for the safety of the kitchen wing. 'Hebe!' he shouted suddenly, making Sophy jump and all the spaniels start awake and rush over, yapping. 'What are you bellowing for? You sound like a cross between the Last Trump and a cow in labour,' Great-Aunt Hebe snapped, appearing suddenly round the carved screen. Her fine, pale, red-gold hair stood out around her head in a flossy halo and she brandished a large wooden spoon that

dripped a glutinous splat onto the flagged floor. One of the spaniels licked it tentatively: you never knew quite what Hebe was cooking up.

Sophy gave a little nervous giggle – Grandfather *was* loud enough to wake the dead slumbering in the graveyard, and since that was her least favourite of Aunt Hebe’s biblical bedtime stories she found the idea slightly worrying . . .

‘Aunt Hebe,’ she said urgently, running to her and grabbing a handful of slightly tacky cotton apron, ‘the dead people won’t climb out and walk round the graveyard in their bones, will they?’

‘No, they’ll all wait for the end of the world,’ Hebe said.

‘It was just a figure of speech.’

She looked over her head at her brother. ‘What’s up?’

‘The child was sliding down the banisters again.’ ‘Well, she *is* a child. You did it, I did it, Ottie did it . . . we all did it! Now, let me get back to my stillroom. Come on, Sophy, you can give me a hand.’

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘Take a look at her and tell me which family round here has black, curly hair? I don’t know why I didn’t realise it before: she’s a Pharamond.’ ‘What, from the Mosses?’ Hebe held Sophy away and stared at her. ‘What nonsense! There’s been the occasional dark-haired Winters ever since Alys Blezzard married into the family in the sixteenth century – and anyway, all the Pharamonds *I’ve* ever met have had dark blue eyes, not hazel, and narrow, aquiline noses. If anything, Sophy’s nose turns up.’

‘She’s got the look,’ he insisted.

‘I don’t think so – and does it matter anyway?’ ‘Of course it bloody matters! They’re all mad as hatters in Middlemoss!’

‘Sophy isn’t mad.’

‘Oh, no? What about her imaginary playmate?’ Aunt Hebe shrugged. ‘Lots of children have invisible friends.’

‘Alys isn’t *always* invisible,’ Sophy said in a small voice, but Grandfather didn’t seem to hear her.

‘I’m sure I’m right,’ he said, ‘and why wouldn’t Susan say who the father was, unless he was a married man? God knows where she’s been the last few days, but if she doesn’t mend her ways, she’ll find herself out on her ear.’ At this inopportune moment Susan Winter slid in through the great oak door, setting down a colourful carpetbag on the floor; tall, fair, slender and pretty in a long, floaty dress with little bells that chimed softly as she moved, smelling of sandalwood and patchouli. Like a fairy, Sophy always thought, not a dark little hobgoblin like herself. ‘So you’re back, then? Where have you been?’ Grandfather demanded, switching that fierce gaze to a new victim. ‘And, more to the point, *who* have you been with? Another married man?’

Susan, who had been smiling vaguely at the group, her blue eyes unfocused, flinched and took a step backwards. ‘W-what do you mean? Some friends took me to the Reading Festival to see Genesis, that’s all, Daddy!’ ‘Friends! I know the riffraff you call friends! Layabouts and hippie scum! I’m telling you, Susan, I won’t tolerate any more of your loose behaviour, so if you want me to house you and your bas—’ ‘*Not* in front of the child!’ protested Hebe, and Sophy was suddenly snatched off her feet and

carried away through the baize-lined door to the kitchen wing. It slammed behind them, cutting off the escalating sound of shouting and weeping.

‘What’s Mummy done now?’ Sophy asked, as she was set back down again. ‘Is it my fault, for making Grandfather angry? Aunt Hebe, what has Mummy—’ ‘Quickly!’ Aunt Hebe said, flapping her apron and shooing her through the kitchen past Mrs Lark, like a reluctant hen into the coop.

The cook, who was single-mindedly pounding steaks with a sort of knobbly wooden mallet, looked up long enough to remark, ‘Bile pills, that’s what *he’ll* be needing, before the night’s out,’ before resuming her assault. ‘Deadly nightshade, more like,’ muttered Aunt Hebe. ‘Come on, Sophy, into the stillroom – I’ve got rose conserve on the stove, and I don’t want it spoiled. And you should know by now that your grandfather is all bark and no bite.’ Although Aunt Hebe was tall and rangy and not at all cosy, she always smelled of roses, which was safe and somehow comforting, unlike Mummy’s patchouli, which made Sophy feel excited but vaguely unsettled, much like Mummy herself did.

And after Mummy took her away late that night, leaving behind Winter’s End, Aunt Hebe, the little dogs, and everything loved and familiar, she always did find the scent of roses a comfort in an alien world, long after she had forgotten the reason why.

Chapter One: There Must Be an Angel

Despite my fears I found Wynter’s End most delightfully situated above a river, with terraces of sweet-scented knots. Sir Ralph was greatly pleased to see mee – but not so the mistress. Mary Wynter is Sir Ralph’s second wife and I perceived from the moment she set eyes on mee that she was mine extreame enemy, though I know not why unless she hateth every woman of less years than herself.

From the journal of Alys Blezzard, 1580

No matter how many times I dreamed of the terrible day that culminated in my mother taking me away from Winter’s End for ever, I still woke up with my face wet with tears and a sense of anguish – *and* guilt.

Was the final argument that precipitated our flight *my* fault for provoking Grandfather once too often? I had been a mischievous child, always getting into trouble. My mind groped desperately after the disappearing echoes of once-familiar voices, the last lingering fragrance of Gallica roses . . . but as always they slipped away, leaving me with only the fragmented memories of my early childhood to take out and examine, one by one, like faded treasures. Since my grandfather’s brief visit earlier this year everything had been stirred up again and old wounds had reopened. But surely it shouldn’t still hurt so much. It was so long ago, that settled time before my mother and I, cast out of Eden, had moved around the country from squat to travellers’ van to commune. Eventually, like random jetsam, we’d washed up at a remote little Scottish commune, where we’d run out of road. And then later my poor feckless mother had *literally* run out of road . . . but as Marlowe said, that was in another country: and besides, the wench is dead.

Dead and gone.

It was still dark and I reached for the bedside lamp, only to find that it wasn't there. Then, with a sickening jolt under the ribcage, I remembered that it was already packed away – and why.

I had to pad across the cold, bare floorboards to switch on the ceiling light before climbing back into bed. The white candlewick coverlet, with its raised diamond pattern and central flower motifs, suddenly reminded me of the intricately moulded plaster ceilings of Winter's End. Strange that I hadn't thought of that before, but perhaps, subconsciously, that had been why I bought it.

Yet I barely ever allowed myself to think of Winter's End – not with my conscious mind, anyway – for that was the past, with the door forever shut, and the present had to be dealt with.

And what a present! That day I would be moving out of the tied cottage where Lucy and I had lived for over twenty years, because my elderly employer recently suffered a bad fall and the consequence was that my job had come to an abrupt end.

At first I thought everything would work out fine, especially when Lady Betty's nephew arrived to look after things until she recovered enough to come home. Conor was a chubby, balding man who always reminded me of an amiable frog, though unfortunately he turned out to be a complete toad.

On previous visits to Blackwells he had seemed fond of Lady Betty and otherwise entirely harmless (apart from a slight tendency to invade my personal space and squeeze my arm with his plump white fingers, while telling me how grateful he was to me for looking after his aunt). That opinion lasted right up to the point where he got power of attorney and had poor Lady Betty, confused but weakly protesting, whipped straight from the hospital to an expensive retirement home. Personally, I don't see that keeping fourteen cats, and telling visitors to your stately ruin that you are the reincarnation of Ramses the First, is anything *like* enough reason to be declared incompetent to manage your affairs. She'd managed them perfectly well for years, with a little assistance from her faithful staff, and she *never* wore the headdress and robe in public.

I think Conor's betrayal was a much greater shock to her than the fall, which I told him straight the day I found out about it – and then he had the gall to come round to the cottage that very evening, well tanked up, to try to exercise some kind of medieval droit de seigneur, insinuating that keeping my home and my job depended entirely on how 'friendly' I was.

I had an instinctive knee-jerk reaction and droited his seigneur until his eyes watered. Pity Lady Betty hadn't been able to do the same, once he had charmed and weaselled the 'temporary' power of attorney out of her and showed his true colours.

The upshot was that Conor gave me immediate notice and put my cottage and other assets up for sale – and of course without a job I couldn't get a mortgage to buy it myself. In any case, I couldn't match the price the people buying it as a weekend cottage were prepared to pay. Let's face it, I couldn't even raise the deposit.

When my husband, Rory, did his vanishing trick and left me holding the baby over twenty years ago, I took the job of Lady Betty's general factotum and moved to a remote little Northumbrian village with Lucy, mainly because it offered a cottage as well as a small salary. There weren't many applicants, or I don't suppose I would have got the job at my age and with a small child, despite having had lots of relevant

experience working for the mistress of a small Scottish castle ever since I left school. But the minute we arrived at the village I knew it was *meant* to be, because I recognised the place. My mad mother and I (and her man of the moment) had once set up home in our vans in a lay-by just outside it, and for several days no one had tried to move us on. That was exceptional, since normally we seemed to be as welcome as a bad smell. So you see, serendipity brought us here, and Lady Betty loved children and was quite happy for me to fit my work around Lucy's needs. But my pay wasn't huge, so I'd staggered from one financial crisis to another over the years, with never quite enough money to make ends meet, juggling bills and later helping Lucy out at university when her student loan and part-time job weren't quite enough. If only the interest wasn't so high on that small loan I took out . . . and if only I hadn't had to increase it further still to cover nearly two thousand pounds of vet's bills for poor Daisy! And all in vain, though of course I had had to *try* because she was Lucy's dog too, and we both loved her. And if only I hadn't economised the month before she got ill by letting her pet insurance lapse, it would have been perfectly all right.

If only . . .

Why did everything have to go pear-shaped at once? My life was like a volcano: it lay dormant for long enough to let me think it was acquiescent, and then suddenly tossed out hot rocks.

My mother would have said, 'Accept your karma and go with the flow, darling,' but just look where doing that got her. She flowed over the Atlantic, over California and down a rather steep canyon. And then, since she still had her old passport, they returned her to Winter's End for burial: a toss of the dice and right down the snake to where you started out, though perhaps not in quite the same pristine condition.

But it was not in my nature to be miserable for long, and soon fingers of silvery sunlight began to gleam around the edges of the black cloud of despondency. I knew something good was coming, even if not precisely what, because I have a touch of the second sight from my witch ancestor, Alys Blezzard.

And after all, there were hours yet before I had to hand over the keys of Spiggs Cottage to strangers and always, *always* in the past something had happened to avert calamity at the last minute . . . though perhaps calamity had never been on such a grand, overwhelming scale before. I mean, I'd put down roots here at last, shallow and tentative though they might be, and it was the only home Lucy had ever known. I'd been so determined that Lucy would have the secure and settled upbringing I hadn't had myself once Mum had torn me away from Winter's End. I sat up, hugging my knees. It wasn't too late to save the cottage – the contract wouldn't be exchanged until later that morning. There was still time for the cavalry to come riding over the hill to rescue me, bugles blowing and flags flying, just as they always had.

I was filled with a sudden glow of unfounded optimism. Getting up, I sprayed on a liberal, fortifying blast of Penhaligon's Elisabethan Rose perfume (the only extravagance in my life, unless you counted Lucy), pulled on a red jumper and jeans that clung to my abundant curves, and ruthlessly dragged a hairbrush through wildly curling dark hair.

Then I went to make coffee and await the arrival of the postman. The last post . . .

No, I wouldn't think like that! The postman would bring *good* news – a reprieve. Maybe I'd won the lottery (despite never buying a ticket) or the Pools. Or perhaps Conor had metamorphosed overnight from a cockroach into a human being and,

repentant, he would refuse to sell the cottage and instead beg me to stay there rent free for ever (no droit de seigneur included).

My best friend, Anya, who believes our guardian angels watch over us twenty-four seven, would say that she heard the hushing whisper of mine's wings as she (or should that be *it?*) rushed to the rescue.

I only hoped my very own Personal Celestial Being wouldn't collide on the doorstep with the cavalry or there would be feathers everywhere.

Chapter Two: Distant Connections

I applied all the cures and simples my mother taught me so well, and young Thomas Wynter's suffering is much alleviated, though it is clear to me that he will not make old bones.

From the journal of Alys Blezzard, 1580

I'd been so *positive* I could hear those hoofbeats and the *swoosh!* of angel's wings coming to the rescue – but either I was mistaken or they took a wrong turn, for Spiggs Cottage was lost to me.

I couldn't understand it . . . and even several days later, I still couldn't quite believe it. My life had gone full circle so that I'd have to start all over again, twenty years older but still with no money, qualifications or assets other than a vintage Volkswagen camper van with about twice the world's circumference on the clock, inherited, by rather permanent default, from my mother.

Lucy and I had always used it to travel about with friends in the holidays, but it began to look as though I would have to live in it again permanently, until someone in the village came to the rescue with the offer of a big static caravan for the winter.

Though grateful for any temporary roof over my head, there was nothing quite so freezing as a caravan out of season. The cold pierced from all directions, like living in an ice cube. I wouldn't have been surprised to find a shivering polar bear at the door asking to be let out. But at least it was a roof over my head until the site reopened in March, and it was far larger than either the van or the cottage. This was just as well, since the materials for the little round silk and satin crazy-patchwork cushions I made and sold mail order took up quite a bit of space. My cushions, each feather-stitched patch embroidered and embellished, were *very* upmarket. Luckily the buyers couldn't see the raggle-taggle gypsy making them, or the charity shops and jumble sales where I bought the old clothes to cut up for pieces!

I blew on my frozen fingers and read over the letter I had written, breaking the news that we were homeless to Lucy, so very far away teaching English in Japan.

Darling Lucy,

My job at Blackwalls has finished rather suddenly. Poor Lady Betty was making a good recovery from her fall, but her nephew got power of attorney and took charge of things, with disastrous results. Do you remember Conor? You said when you met him once that he was a slimy little creep, and you were quite right – he has put Lady Betty into a home and now seems to be selling up the whole estate.

In fact, he's sold our cottage already, but though it was sad to leave it I am ready to have a change of scene and a new job. Meanwhile, Dana – you remember her from the Pleasurefields camping site? – is letting me live in one of her static caravans rent free, which is very kind of her. I'm making a special cushion as a thank-you. Don't worry, I packed up everything in your room very carefully, and the contents of the cottage are stored in the next-door caravan. I can stay until they open up again in March, but I don't suppose I will be here very long. There are one or two nice-looking jobs advertised

in The Lady magazine, with accommodation included, so I've written off with my totally impressive CV. You can't say I haven't had a lifetime's experience of looking after ancestral piles, even if I've only ever really been a glorified cleaner-cum-tour guide. I'll let you know when I hear anything and hope to have a lovely new home for you to come back to when you return.

Love, Mum xxx

Who was I fooling? Lucy would be on the phone to me two minutes after she got the letter . . . which was why, I suppose, I was taking the cowardly way out and posting her the news.

I hoped, by the time she got hold of me, to have a new job and a new life lined up somewhere else. The applications lay on the table, ready to post except for stamps – and then I suddenly remembered it was the post office's half-day and the clock was hurtling towards twelve. Leaping up, I dragged on my jacket and flung open the door – then teetered perilously on the brink, gazing down into a pair of eyes of a truly celestial blue, but even colder than the caravan. Missing my footing entirely, I fell down the two metal steps into the surprised arms of an angry angel. Maybe Anya was right after all, I thought, as he fielded me neatly – except that angels are presumably asexual, while this one was undoubtedly male, even if his short, ruffled hair was of corniest gold. He smelled heavenly too, *and* expensive. I think it was the same aftershave that Conor used, at about a million pounds a molecule, but it smelled *so* much better on my visitor.

He set me back on my feet, stared down at me in a puzzled sort of way, then said, 'I'm looking for Sophy Winter – I was told she was staying here.'

'She is – you've found her.'

'*You're* Sophy Winter?'

'Well, I was last time I checked in the mirror,' I said tartly. 'But you can't be! You don't look like—' he began, then broke off to give me a comprehensive once-over, checking off my minus points on some mental list: dark hair – check; hazel eyes – check; unfashionably generous hourglass figure – check; supermarket jeans and jumble-sale jumper – check. Number of Winter attributes scored: nil.

'Right . . .' he said doubtfully, 'then you must have been expecting me. I'm your cousin, Jack – Jack Lewis.' 'But I haven't got any cousins,' I protested. I certainly didn't recall any . . . and surely even my mother would have mentioned them if I had.

'I'm a very *distant* cousin and since I didn't go to live at Winter's End until shortly after you and your mother had left, you wouldn't remember me. But I'm sure you've heard of me?'

'No I haven't,' I began – and then the full import of what he had just said sank in, shaking me to the core. I exclaimed incredulously, 'What do you mean, *you* lived at Winter's End?' I'd always imagined Winter's End and Grandfather and the twin aunts and the little dogs and *everything* just going on for ever, like a scene securely enclosed in a snowglobe. Even if I could never get back into that closed world again, at least I had been able to take it out and give it a shake occasionally . . . But now it seemed that this stranger had almost immediately taken my place there! He misread my amazement as suspicious disbelief and flushed crossly. 'If you must know, my mother was your grandfather's cousin and we lived in New Zealand. She died when I was five, and when my father remarried I was sent back home.'

‘Oh,’ I said uncertainly, because despite his hair not having the true red-gold Winter tint he *did* have a look of my mother, now I came to consider it – or how she would have looked in a rage, if she’d ever had one. While ‘feckless’ and ‘stoned’ would have been the two words that summed my mother up best, she was good-natured to the point where it was a serious handicap in life. ‘But why are you here? And why did you think I would be expecting you?’ I must have sounded as genuinely bewildered as I felt for the anger in his eyes slowly thawed and was replaced by something like speculation. ‘You mean you don’t know anything about me? And you haven’t heard the news yet?’ ‘No! And what news?’

‘That William Winter is dead, for a start,’ he said bluntly. ‘Grandfather’s *dead*?’ Things seemed to blur dizzily around me and I sank down onto the top step of the caravan. ‘Dead for months. And while I, as the last male descendant of the Winters, get the title, I don’t suppose you will be surprised to learn that he left Winter’s End and everything else to *you*.’

My vision cleared and I looked up to see that he was eyeing me narrowly.

‘W-Winter’s End? *Me*? You’re mad or . . . or there’s some mistake!’ I stammered. ‘He’s only seen me once since we left, and he didn’t seem to like me any more than than he did when I was a little girl!’

‘*Once*?’ It must have been obvious that I was telling the truth, for his expression slowly altered to a rueful smile of singular and quite dazzling charm, exuding such warmth that, despite my state of numb shock, I found myself returning it. ‘Sorry, I seem to have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. I’ve made all the wrong assumptions! What on earth must you think of me? Look, let’s start again, shall we?’ He took my hands and pulled me to my feet. ‘Sophy, I’m *delighted* to meet you at last!’

Then, enfolding me in his arms, he kissed me on each cheek before taking my hands again and stepping back to look at me with what appeared to be genuine admiration. But do not think I was entirely inactive during this embrace – no, I was actively inert and acquiescent. I hadn’t had my hands on such a gorgeous man within living memory, even one with a dodgy temper who had just told me things I didn’t want to hear – *and* some I couldn’t believe. *You* try dating in a small village, while juggling a low-paid and exhausting job and turning your hobby into a little business on the side, all under the critical and jealous eyes of your daughter. None of my potential suitors had made it past first base. If I actually managed to find a babysitter and got out of the house with a man, you could bet your bottom dollar Lucy would be running a high fever or throwing out interesting symptoms before I reached the end of the street. And I hadn’t had much more luck since she went off to university. All the men in my age bracket seemed to be looking for skinny young blondes. That, or they had a serious impediment they forgot to mention, like a wife. So now, enfolded in softest cashmere and anaesthetised by Amouage Gold Pour Homme, if I had any conscious thought at all it was along the lines of, Yes! Bring it on! Ten minutes later we were sitting in my icebox of a caravan drinking coffee and talking like old friends. ‘So you see,’ Jack was explaining, ‘we didn’t even know old William had found you until the will was read. He’d tried and failed to discover where you and your mother were in the past, of course. Then when your mother . . .’ he searched for a tactful phrase, ‘when your mother was brought home, he tried again to trace you – but on the wrong side of the Atlantic, since we assumed you would have been in America with her. After that we thought he’d given up, until we discovered he’d secretly left you

Winter's End and,' he shrugged and smiled charmingly, 'we thought *you* must have finally got in touch with *him* and managed to persuade him into leaving you everything.'

'No, he traced me through an advert for cushions I put in a magazine, and a few months ago he simply turned up out of the blue. And although it was lovely to know he'd never stopped trying to find me, I don't know why he bothered, because he spent most of the time lecturing me about where I'd gone wrong in life and which decisions I could have made better. He'd hired a private eye to dig into my past, so he even knew things I'd forgotten. He didn't look much different from how I remembered him, either . . . except he seemed frailer and his hair was white, of course.' I looked back at my early memories of him: a tall figure with the Winter pale red-gold hair, bright blue eyes and the beard of a biblical prophet. (The only one of those attributes I don't regret not inheriting is the beard.) 'So that's the only time you saw him?' Jack asked, accepting another refill but declining anything to eat. I'd laid out before him everything I had in the way of refreshments – two cherry-topped coconut pyramids and a carob-covered rice cake – but going by his expression, I don't think he recognised them as food.

I took the rice cake myself, the pyramids, crumbly and sticky, being a bit hard to eat neatly in company. 'Yes, he just turned up one afternoon on my one day off – but of course the private eye would have told him when I'd be in. Lucy was home and she is *so* defensive that she and Grandfather spent most of the time trying to score points off each other.' I shuddered. 'They actually seemed to enjoy it, but I hate arguments and fights. He didn't suggest we visit Winter's End, either – he said it was too late and would just stir things up.'

At the time that had hurt and I had wondered why he had gone to the trouble of finding us at all, but then he had added that he wasn't in the best of health and had just wanted to assure himself that we were all right. Which we were, of course – totally penniless, but all right.

'Who's Lucy?' Jack asked.

'My daughter. She's twenty-two, and out in Japan teaching English for a year . . . at least, I hope it's only a year, because I miss her terribly.' I cupped my hands around my own mug and stared down into it. 'But you did say that Grandfather left me Winter's End, didn't you? I didn't imagine that? Only I'm sure you *can't* be right because – I mean – why on earth would he? It's too incredible to be true! And in any case, surely I would have been told about it by now if he had?'

'You haven't, because the solicitor had strict instructions from my uncle to wait until the estate was settled before contacting you – or telling the family where you were. He knew there would be a fuss because, you see, I was brought up expecting to take on Winter's End as the next *legitimate* heir . . . even if you turned up again, which of course you didn't. But it wasn't entailed on the next male descendant, so he was free to leave the estate to who he liked.' 'So, why did he do it?' I asked, ignoring this slur on my birth.

'My uncle and I didn't see eye to eye about some things:

he just couldn't understand modern business methods, for a start. And he'd been draining the money that should have gone to keep the house in good repair into his garden restoration schemes instead, but when I remonstrated with him, he flew right off the handle.'

‘So when the will was read you naturally assumed I’d schemed to get him to leave Winter’s End to me?’ ‘Yes – sorry about that! But you can understand how I felt, can’t you? The old man must have been senile to do such a thing – I love the place and I’d grown up believing it would one day be mine, that’s what made me so unreasonably angry. As soon as I managed to find out where you lived I thought I’d come up here and make you an offer for Winter’s End, but temper got the better of me!’

‘Make me an offer?’ I’d started to be convinced I was in some strange dream and would wake up again any minute. ‘You mean, you want me to *sell* Winter’s End to you?’ ‘Yes, just that. I could challenge the will because William was clearly unhinged when he wrote it – but this way seems more civilised.’ He leaned forward and took my hand in his, looking down into my eyes in a way that made the caravan seem suddenly very much warmer. ‘Listen, Sophy, it’s the only practical thing you *can* do, because I’m afraid you’ve inherited a total white elephant and all the liabilities that go with it. Winter’s End is falling down and has been for years, because of all the income being diverted into the garden restoration. He even took out a bank loan against the house to fund the final stages. It’s got wet rot, dry rot, woodworm . . . you name it, and it’s got it. And there aren’t even any major assets you could sell off. There was one decent painting, a Stubbs, but William arranged for it to go to the nation in lieu of death duties.’ Despite the mesmerising effect his nearness and those devastating blue eyes were having on me, it occurred to me that Grandfather seemed to have had it all worked out – not the actions of a senile man.

‘But *you* still want Winter’s End?’ I asked him curiously. ‘Yes, it’s my family home, after all, where I was brought up . . . I love it. And I’m a property developer, a very successful one, so I know what needs to be done and I can afford to do it.’

‘I understand. I was just starting to feel the same way about my cottage, even though it didn’t belong to me.’

He looked seriously at me, his eyes frank and earnest:

‘Please let me buy it back, Sophy! I’ll even pay well over the market value – how about that? It can’t mean anything to you, can it, since you left it when you were a small child? And I don’t suppose you could afford the upkeep, anyway.’ I said slowly, ‘No, I – no, how *can* it mean anything to me? I was eight when I last saw it.’

‘*Liar!*’ said a voice in my head – Alys’s voice, tenuous and far away, as if speaking down a very bad telephone line, but instantly familiar to me even after all these years.

Alys, are you back again?

But if she was, she was now silent. Maybe my subconscious had simply ascribed her voice to my innermost thoughts? For of course I did long for Winter’s End – but the Winter’s End of my childhood, before Jack took my place and everything changed – and there was no way back to that. ‘You could come and visit whenever you liked anyway,’ he offered, with another one of those glorious smiles. ‘We’re family, aren’t we? And now I’ve found you, I’ve no intention of letting you get away again!’

I sighed and shook my head. ‘You know, it’s *so* ironic! I was waiting for an angel to come to the rescue – but now it’s too late. Only a week ago I’d have jumped at the chance without a second thought, because I could have bought my cottage and not had to move out.’

He looked puzzled, so I explained what had happened, and then he suggested I could still make the new owners of the cottage an offer they couldn't refuse. 'I could, but they are rich City types who've bought it for a holiday home and I don't think they would be likely to sell it even at more than its value. They're busy ripping out every original feature and tossing the cottage's entrails into a skip, so all the things I loved about it have already gone. If there is one thing my early life has taught me, it's that when everything changes, you move on – and you can never go back and expect things to be the same.' Not even at Winter's End, except in my dreams . . . 'But you could buy somewhere new?' he suggested. 'I expect you've got friends here?'

'Not really. I know a lot of people but I've only got one *real* friend, from way back, and she tends to move around a lot.'

In fact, she moved around permanently; but Anya, with her dreadlocked red hair and her home made from an old ambulance, was probably a world away from the sort of people my cousin Jack knew.

'Well, now you've got me,' he said, giving my hand another squeeze and then letting it go. 'Whatever you decide, we'll always be friends as well as distant cousins, I hope. But I know, when you have thought it over, you'll realise that the right thing to do is to sell Winter's End to me, to keep it in the family.'

'I expect so, but – well, none of this seems real at all yet. I need time to think – and hear the news officially from a solicitor, too, before it sinks in properly and I start to believe it!'

'You will. Hobbs is the family solicitor, though he is semi-retired, and he said he was going to call in and see you personally on his way up to Scotland. I expect he's hard on my heels. Oh, by the way,' he added casually, 'I promised Aunt Hebe that I'd ask you if you had the book, and if you have, take it back with me.'

'The . . . *book*?' I stared at him blankly while the clanging of alarm bells sounded in my head. 'Do you mean that Victorian children's book of gruesome stories from the Bible that Aunt Hebe used to read to me? I did take that away with me – still got it, in fact, though I didn't inflict it on Lucy. It used to give me nightmares, but I was horribly fascinated by it!'

'No, she meant Alys Blezzard's household book, a little, really ancient notebook of recipes. It's a priceless bit of family history, and it's been missing since your mother ran off. They just sort of assumed she took it with her.' I shook my head. 'No, sorry. Mum told me all about Alys – she liked the idea that she was descended from a family notorious for witchcraft – but she never mentioned any book.' 'Are you *sure* it wasn't among her things?' he pressed me. 'It's quite an heirloom, so Hebe's always been upset that it's missing.'

'She didn't leave a lot of possessions behind when she went to America, so I'd have noticed something like that.' 'And she wouldn't have taken it with her?' 'No, I'm sure she didn't. I helped her decide what to take and did the packing. We had to buy a suitcase especially, because we didn't think her old carpetbag would stand up to aeroplane baggage handlers.'

'Then Aunt Hebe *will* be disappointed!' He stood and pulled out a slim gold case from his pocket. 'Look, I'll have to be off now, but here's my card – ring me when you've seen Hobbs and had a think about my offer. Selling Winter's End is the only

sensible option, you know . . . and remember, whatever *anyone* says, I love the place and only want the best for it.'

'OK,' I said, slightly puzzled, and he put his arm around me and gave me a squeeze. He seemed a very hands-on kind of person, when he wasn't miffed. But I understood how he felt about Winter's End because I, too, had loved my little cottage.

'And at least you have inherited something I, a mere female, can't – the title,' I pointed out. 'Sir Jack!' 'Very true. And of course there *is* a long family tradition of intermarriage in the family, especially when a girl is the heiress . . . much like now, I suppose,' he said, with a teasing smile. 'Keeps the title and the property together.' 'I – yes, I suppose it does,' I agreed, slightly taken aback. 'Oh, Sir Jack, this is so sudden!' he said in a mock-modest falsetto, and I laughed.

'But seriously, Sophy, I don't intend letting you go out of my life five minutes after I've found you, whatever you decide,' he said, and kissed me again before he left, this time in a less than cousinly way. But that's OK – he *is* something less than a cousin, after all.

After he'd gone everything seemed a bit leached of colour and lifeless, including me. I drank about a gallon of Rescue Remedy, then went out to the VW and fetched a wooden box from the ingenious special hiding place that one of my mother's friends had made for it (and her stash) long ago. It was rectangular, quite deep and surprisingly heavy, and when I opened the lid the delicious aroma of ancient books wafted out. I should know that smell, I've dusted libraries full of them in my time. Anyway, I adore books. That's where I acquired most of my education. The scent of old leather bindings promised escape into another, comforting world, much as the scent of roses once reassured me that Winter's End still existed just as I left it. Carefully I lifted out *A Little Child's Warning: A Treasury of Bible Stories* with its faded gilt edges and the cover depiction of a small child praying, eyes cast up to heaven, but my icy hands fumbled and almost dropped the book. A positive cascade of pressed roses fell out, with the papery whispering of old ghosts.

Chapter Three: Diamond Cut

They have given me a chamber in the solar to be near Thomas. I spend much time there – or in the stillroom, which is sadly neglected, Lady Wynter having no interest in those arts in which it should be her pride to be accomplished. I walk in the gardens when I can spare the time and pick herbs. The plants I need that grow wild in the woods and pastures are harder to obtain and some must be picked by the light of the moon . . . To slip out here unseen is difficult.

From the journal of Alys Blezzard, 1580

'Anya!' I said, when I finally managed to reach her. 'My guardian angel is a golden Lucifer – diabolically handsome and slightly sulphurous round the edges. He's hot – and I think I'm in love!'

'How do you know?' she said, sounding as if she was standing in a metal oil drum (which she might have been – you never know with Anya).

'That I'm in love?'

‘No, that your guardian angel is a Lucifer.’ ‘Oh – because he visited me yesterday,’ I said. ‘He’s sort of a cousin – a very distant cousin.’ Then I told her all about my grandfather’s death, my inheritance – and Jack’s offer. ‘And he was furious when he first turned up, because he thought I’d somehow managed to brainwash Grandfather into leaving Winter’s End to me. Once he realised I hadn’t he was really, really nice.’

‘I bet he was,’ she said, sounding unconvinced. ‘But after all you’ve told me about your childhood at Winter’s End and how you feel about the place, I can’t understand why you don’t sound delirious with pleasure.’ ‘Well, for one thing I’m still stunned and wondering why on earth Grandfather did it; and for another, it isn’t the Winter’s End I remember, because it’s clear that Jack took my place soon after I left,’ I said slowly. ‘Apparently the house is really run down and there is a big outstanding bank loan against it too, which Grandfather took out to pay for his garden restoration.’

‘What were you expecting, a Shangri-La that always stayed the same?’

‘It *did* always stay the same, in my imagination – and part of me thinks it’s better left like that, and I should never try to go back there.’

‘Well, they always say, be careful what you wish for,’ Anya said breezily, ‘but actually, I always thought the only reason you started working in stately homes was because you were trying to recreate a bit of what you once had – and just think how useful all that experience will be now! Doesn’t the thought of doing such a major clean-up get your juices flowing?’ She knows me only too well.

‘I wish *my* angels would conjure something up like that, Sophy. I’m getting a bit tired of wandering around now,’ she confessed to my surprise, because she has been on the road since she was eighteen and left the commune. We did this sort of role-reversal thing. When I arrived at the commune I was tired of moving about and just wanted to settle down, while she was fed up with the whole thing and attracted to the kind of life I’d had with Mum. ‘I think when Guy gets a job I might settle somewhere near him,’ she added thoughtfully. ‘He’s got lots of interviews.’ ‘I’m not surprised; he got a first-class degree.’ Guy is Anya’s son, a year younger than Lucy, and was always bright – and very determined. When he was eleven he insisted on staying with his grandmother in Scotland during the school terms and got grade A *everything*. ‘How is Lucy doing?’ Anya asked.

‘She seems fine, but I wish she wasn’t so far away. And some man keeps pestering her, which I find worrying. She says he seems fascinated by her being so tall and blonde. There have been a couple of cases of British women being stalked and even murdered in Japan.’

‘But Lucy is very sensible, Sophy. I’m sure she wouldn’t put herself at risk.’

‘Perhaps not, but if I *did* sell Winter’s End to Jack, she could come home and I would be able to pay off her student loan and buy a cottage somewhere. Then maybe we could start up a business together and—’ ‘Don’t you do anything hasty,’ she warned me, ‘especially with this relative of yours. He doesn’t sound like any kind of angel to me, but he *does* sound the kind of clever, tricky, devious man you always seem to go for.’ ‘I don’t know what you mean by “always”. I can count on one hand the number of men I’ve been out with since Rory left me,’ I said with dignity and some modesty, leaving one or two of my brief encounters with absolute no-hopers out of the reckoning. ‘And I can’t imagine what I’ve said to make you think that about Jack! He’s a really genuine, lovely person – and what’s more, he’s *family*. Anyway, I can’t do anything at all until the solicitor turns up. I’m still trying to take it all in, but I’m

worried that Grandfather might have changed his will on impulse after arguing with Jack about spending too much on the garden, and then died before he could change it back. It *does* seem unfair that he should leave the house to me. Anya—’ There was a plaintive bleeping. ‘Blow – my phone’s almost dead,’ she said, and was cut off.

My belated rescue turned out to be a very belt-and-braces affair, for next day the cavalry, in the sober and suited form of the family solicitor, turned up too.

You see, I knew good things were on the way. My second sight was just a bit dodgy about *when*.

Mr Hobbs said he had already written to tell me he was coming to see me today ‘on a matter to my advantage’, but of course I haven’t had the heart to go back to Spiggs Cottage and collect my mail since I left. The new owners are probably putting it straight into the skip, anyway. Any more strange men visiting my caravan and, as far as the village is concerned, I might as well hang a red lamp over the door, even if this one looked so old and desiccated that strong winds could have blown him away. I’ve learned the hard way that a divorced woman is always seen as a sexual predator, after everyone else’s menfolk (which is why, I suppose, I haven’t made many friends here and hardly ever get asked to dinner parties).

But I invited Mr Hobbs in, and he was surprised to find I already knew of the legacy, until I told him about Jack’s visit and his offer to buy Winter’s End. Then, over tea and rather overdone rock cakes (the caravan stove is a bit temperamental), I asked him if he knew exactly *why* my grandfather hadn’t left the estate to Jack. ‘After all, he was the obvious heir, wasn’t he, even if they had had one or two disagreements? It does seem unfair.’ ‘He had his reasons,’ he said cagily. I suppose it was only natural that he should side with my grandfather – they were of an age and had probably been friends. ‘Jack is the only son of his cousin Louisa, now deceased, and was born in New Zealand. When his father remarried he was sent back here to school, about a year after you and your mother left . . . and of course he spent the holidays at Winter’s End and looked on it as his home. He is divorced with no children – another disappointment to your grandfather – and has a house in London. You know he is a property developer?’ ‘He did mention that. Presumably a successful one, if he could afford to buy me out?’

‘Yes indeed: one cannot say that he hasn’t risen by his own endeavours. His father purchased a small house for him to live in when he was at Oxford, and then later he renovated it and sold it at a profit and bought two more on the proceeds . . . and so it went on. I suppose his enterprise is quite remarkable. *Nowadays* he specialises in buying large period properties cheaply and converting them into extremely upmarket and expensive apartments,’ he added meaningfully. I stared at him. ‘But surely you don’t think he would do that to Winter’s End? He said he loved the place and wanted to restore it to its former glory – and he seemed so sincere.’ ‘I am sure he did: his sincerity must be one of his greatest business assets,’ Mr Hobbs said drily. ‘And of course he *has* restored the houses he has purchased, which might otherwise have fallen into irreversible decay. They were all, like Winter’s End, within an easy commuting distance of thriving major cities.’

‘Oh,’ I said, digesting this. ‘But in the case of Winter’s End, that could be just a coincidence?’

‘Of course, that may be so. However, in his eagerness to persuade you to sell your inheritance, he may have been perhaps a little *selective* in the information he imparted

to you. For instance, did he touch upon the various responsibilities that come with the legacy?’

‘I . . . no, *what* responsibilities?’

‘Apart from your grandfather charging you to complete a garden restoration scheme that has, in my opinion – and I have to say in all fairness, Jack’s – nearly brought the house to ruin, the livelihoods of several people working for the Winter’s End estate depends on your decision. You might also want to consider that Winter’s End has been your Great-Aunt Hebe’s home for all her life, though she does, of course, have some means of her own, as does her twin sister, Otilie, who resides for part of the year in the coach house.’ I felt responsibility settle round my shoulders like a lead cape. ‘But I know nothing about managing an estate! How could I possibly take it on?’

‘But you *do* have relevant experience in looking after old properties, Ms Winter. Sir William thought you were just what Winter’s End needed.’

‘He did? But I’ve no experience of running one, only doing the donkey work and passing on orders to the other staff. And do call me Sophy – I have a feeling we are likely to see a lot of each other.’

His face broke into a smile like a rather jolly tortoise. ‘Or one of my sons – I am semi-retired, you know, though I like to keep my brain active by retaining one or two clients. But to get back to business, Sophy, Winter’s End is not a large house, although the gardens are extensive and take quite some keeping up, especially the yew maze and all the box hedges and topiary. Do you remember the spiral maze?’ I nodded. ‘At the front of the house.’ I felt a sudden pang for the small, mischievous Sophy who used to run through it with Grandfather’s pack of miniature spaniels chasing after her, yapping madly – and who would then usually have to go back and rescue one or two of them who had got lost among the labyrinthine turns. ‘It was quite low, wasn’t it? Most tall adults would be able to see over the top of the hedges.’

‘That’s right, and all those curves and rounded edges take a good deal of clipping. Then there is a considerable area of woodland on the opposite side of the valley to the house and one tenanted farm. Are you interested in gardening at all?’

‘I had enough of mulching and digging in all weathers when I lived in the Scottish commune to cure me of wanting to be a hands-on gardener, but I do love the frivolity of gardens made just to *look* at.’

‘Quite,’ he said. ‘And Sir William told me that you have considerable expertise in caring for old houses and their contents from your previous employment, do you not?’ ‘Oh, yes, I left school at sixteen and my first job was in a Scottish castle. The Mistress saw to it that I learned the correct way to clean it and all the valuable things it contained.’

‘The Mistress?’

‘That’s how she liked to be addressed by her staff,’ I explained, ‘which I was, until I ran off and married her cousin Rory. Then after I had Lucy I got the job here at Blackwalls with Lady Betty, keeping everything clean and in good repair, passing on her orders to the other staff, taking guided tours around the house on open days, being her PA . . . you name it, I did it. Lady Betty didn’t pay me a lot, but she was very kind to me and Lucy, and I was fond of her.’

I touched the little gold, enamel and crystal bee brooch I wore. ‘She gave me this as a keepsake when I visited her in the hospital, because she said she had a premonition she wasn’t going to see Blackwalls again. And she was quite right, because once she signed the power of attorney, her nephew had her moved to an upmarket old people’s home and she just lost the will to live. The last time I visited her she didn’t really recognise me.’

I fished a tissue out of the box and blew my nose, while Mr Hobbs looked away tactfully.

‘After he had been up here to see you, your grandfather said, and I quote his very words, “It seems to me the women of the family have always run things behind the scenes here at Winter’s End, so one might as well take over as head of the family and have done with it.” He thought you would make a better job of it than Jack ever would, especially with Lucy to help you. Yes . . .’ he added thoughtfully, ‘he was particularly taken with your daughter.’

‘He *was*? But they quarrelled the whole time he was here!’ ‘He said she had the typical Winter temperament, allied with an almost masculine sense of business.’ ‘Well, I suppose he meant that as a compliment,’ I conceded. ‘She *is* very bossy and argumentative, though it’s called assertiveness these days, and she did business studies and English at university.’

‘Those would be considerable assets in running the estate. Sir William also said that, although so unlike your mother in character, in appearance Lucy reminded him very much of how Susan had been at the same age.’ ‘Yes, she’s tall, slender and has that lovely red-gold hair – nothing like me. I don’t look like a Winter at all. Even Jack, who is only a cousin several times removed, looks more like a Winter than I do!’

‘Oh, there are the occasional darker Winters,’ he assured me. ‘Sir William told me that he was deeply sorry that he had not seen you grow up, but I believe he *would* have discovered your whereabouts much earlier had your mother not changed her name to all intents and purposes, to –’ he looked down at his papers – ‘Sukie Starchild.’ ‘I know. Dreadful, isn’t it? She wanted to call me Skye, but I stuck to Sophy. I did have to use the surname Starchild on the few occasions when we stayed somewhere long enough for me to go to school, though, so Grandfather couldn’t find us. She *said* she was afraid I would be taken away from her, but I often wondered if there was something else making her so paranoid about it.’

‘There was,’ Mr Hobbs said. ‘Sir William did tell Susan that he would cut off her allowance and have her declared an unfit mother if she didn’t change her ways, but those were merely empty threats that he had no intention of carrying out, for he often said things in temper that he afterwards regretted.’

‘But my mother obviously believed he meant them that time?’

‘That is so, but when she left she also took with her a diamond necklace that was not actually hers to dispose of – a family heirloom, in fact. He circulated its description, so he would have been notified if it came up for sale, but when it didn’t he assumed it had been broken up and the stones recut.’

‘I *wondered* how she bought the van in the first place!’ I exclaimed. ‘And she did have some very dodgy friends when I was very small and we were living in squats in London.’ ‘Sir William assumed she would return when the money ran out, so by the time he realised she wasn’t going to, and began to try to trace you both, you had

vanished.’ ‘She was terrified of him finding her, and I suppose that explains why – but she never could stand anger and loud voices; she was such a gentle person.’

‘He never quite gave up hope that you would both be found, Sophy – and then, of course, he discovered that your mother had died in an accident. You know that her body was repatriated, and is buried in the family plot in the Sticklepond graveyard?’

I nodded. ‘Though I didn’t find out until much later what had happened.’

‘Your grandfather assumed you had been in America with her, so that is where he searched again for you, without result.’

‘No, I was fourteen by then, and I’d had enough of travelling. I didn’t like my mother’s new boyfriend much, either, so I didn’t want to go to California with them. We’d been living in a commune in Scotland and my best friend’s mother offered to look after me if I stayed, so I did until I got a live-in job at the castle, when I was sixteen.’ ‘And stayed lost until someone pointed out the unusual name “Sophy Winter” in a magazine advert,’ Mr Hobbs said, ‘when, on making enquiries, Sir William discovered that you were indeed his granddaughter.’

‘Yes, I reverted to my real name after my mother died. I always felt ridiculous as a Starchild – *so* old hippie. And I didn’t change my name when I married Lucy’s father, I just stayed a Winter. I was only married for five minutes anyway.’ Actually, that was a slight exaggeration: it was five weeks, just long enough for me to fall pregnant and for commitment-phobe Rory to get such cold feet that he went away to find himself. So far as I know, he’s still looking. ‘Yes, that did worry your grandfather a little – but at least you *had* got married.’

‘Unlike my mother?’

He ignored that, smoothing out the papers in front of him with a dry, wrinkled finger. ‘You have no contact with your former husband?’

‘No, none. He was a cousin of the owner of the castle I was working in, a diver working on the oilrigs – you know, six weeks on, six off. He was ten years older than me, but we fell in love and married in Gretna Green – very romantic – and then settled down in a rented cottage. Then he supposedly went off back to work and instead vanished.’ I had waited and waited for him, sure he would come back, until I finally realised that he’d taken everything he valued with him and never meant to return at all. With hindsight I could see that I had been the one in love with the idea of marriage and domesticity, the family I yearned for, and he had simply gone along with it in a moment of madness, or frustrated lust, or . . . something. ‘And that is the last you saw of him?’ Mr Hobbs prompted gently. ‘He never contacted you again?’

‘No, though I’m sure his family knew where he was. But they wouldn’t have anything to do with me, of course, because they were horrified when he married the help. I’ve heard that he has been working abroad ever since, and I divorced him eventually. There hasn’t been anyone serious in my life since then. I don’t need anyone really; I’ve usually got a dog.’

‘Quite,’ he said, though looking slightly perplexed. ‘That does, however, simplify matters. I would most earnestly advise you *not* to consider selling the property at this juncture, and certainly not without visiting it first. Indeed, they are all expecting you to take over the reins as soon as possible.’

‘*All?*’ I said, startled. ‘How many people are we actually talking about here?’

‘Well, your twin great-aunts – though of course they were provided for under the terms of your great-grandfather’s will. Otilie leases the coach house, which she converted into a studio with living accommodation soon after your mother left. You *do* remember her?’

‘Yes, though I saw much less of her than Aunt Hebe. She didn’t come to Winter’s End much when I lived there – isn’t she a sculptor?’

‘Indeed, a very well-known one. She made something of a misalliance in her brother’s eyes when she was in her forties by marrying his last head gardener, though I believe Sir William was more grieved at the thought of losing his right-hand man than at the marriage itself. But as it transpired he did not, since Rufus Greenwood was as passionate about restoring the Winter’s End gardens as he was himself. He stayed on and Otilie had the old coach house converted so she could divide her time between her husband at Winter’s End and her studio in Cornwall. Still does, though she is now widowed.’

‘So, who else is there? I remember a cook-housekeeper . . .’ ‘Yes, Mrs Lark and her husband, Jonah, are the only live-in staff now. There are three gardeners – four, if you include the head gardener . . .’ He ruffled the papers a little, seemed about to say something, and then thought better of it. ‘Ye-es. There is a daily cleaner . . . and Mr Yatton, the estate manager, who like myself is semi-retired, but he comes in most mornings to the office in the solar tower.’ ‘Four gardeners and only one cleaner? For a place that size?’ I exclaimed, amazed, because if there is one thing I do know about, it is the upkeep of old houses. ‘At first a cleaning firm was brought in occasionally, but I don’t think that has happened for three or four years now.’ ‘A specialist firm? One used to dealing with the contents of historic buildings?’ I asked hopefully. ‘No, a local agency called Dolly Mops. They are very thorough – my wife uses them.’

I winced, thinking of all the damage a well-meaning but untrained cleaner might have inflicted on the fabric and contents of Winter’s End.

‘Then, of course, there are the Friends,’ Mr Hobbs added.

‘The . . . friends?’

‘The Friends of Winter’s End, a local group of history enthusiasts, who volunteer to come in on the summer opening days to sell tickets, and look after those rooms open to the public – the Great Hall and gallery. The house and gardens are open two afternoons a week, from May to the end of August.’

‘I understand from Jack that the house is in very poor condition and there isn’t enough money to restore it. Is that so?’

‘While it is true that your grandfather diverted most of his income into renovating the gardens, he did not touch the capital, which is securely invested – though of course, no investments bring the returns they used to, and an old house like Winter’s End needs a considerable amount of keeping up. And unfortunately, he took out a bank loan when he started to restore the maze and the terraces, secured against the property, which is a drain on the estate.’

‘Jack mentioned that. How big a bank loan?’ I asked hesitantly.

I wasn’t sure I really wanted to know.

‘I believe there is still twenty thousand pounds outstanding.’

‘Good heavens!’

‘Yes, indeed – it is all *quite* a responsibility.’ The ‘r’ word again – and although I had pretty well run Blackwalls for Lady Betty, having the ultimate responsibility for my

own stately pile was still a scary prospect. On the other hand, the thought of having a whole neglected house to put right sort of appealed . . . OK, I admit it, it drew me like a magnet, especially if this time the house I would be working in would actually be *mine*! But I now had two rather differing views of my inheritance to compare – three, if you counted the letter from my grandfather that Mr Hobbs now handed to me, though actually it was more of a brief note scrawled in thin, spidery writing, urging me to complete the garden restoration project – his ‘Memorial to Posterity’ as he put it. It was abundantly clear that I needed to see Winter’s End for myself before deciding what to do, and the sooner the better: I would be upping sticks and decamping to rural west Lancashire as soon as I could get my act together. Besides, I was beginning to feel a strong, almost fearful tug of attraction, as though some connecting umbilical cord stretched almost to invisibility had suddenly twitched, reminding me of its existence.

Mr Hobbs must have drawn his own conclusions from the expression on my face, for he seemed to relax and, with a satisfied smile, said, ‘So, I may inform the family that you will be arriving shortly?’ He looked around at the cluttered caravan. ‘It would seem you do not have a home or employment to keep you here.’

‘Very true,’ I agreed. ‘No, there is nothing to keep me here – so I’ll go to Winter’s End and then make my own mind up what will be the best thing to do.’ ‘Spoken like a Winter,’ he said approvingly. ‘Yes, but Jack might not be pleased about it,’ I said, suddenly remembering my handsome cousin’s existence (be still my beating heart!). ‘He told me that he’d decided, before he met me, that if I wouldn’t sell Winter’s End back to him he would challenge the will. If he has a strong case, is there really any point in my going to Winter’s End?’ ‘Oh, that’s an empty threat, my dear,’ Mr Hobbs assured me. ‘Your grandfather was perfectly *compos mentis* when he made the will: only look at the way he left instructions for everything to be settled before you were informed of your inheritance, so you could step right in and pick up the reins. I am sure Jack has already taken legal advice and been told the same thing.’

He stood up and began to gather his papers back into his briefcase, declining my offer of more tea and rock cakes with every sign of polite revulsion. There’s no accounting for tastes.