

# The Winter People: A Suspense Thriller

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The New York Times bestselling author of *The Invited* will shock you with a simmering psychological thriller about ghostly secrets, dark choices, and the unbreakable bond between mothers and daughters.

West Hall, Vermont, has always been a town of strange disappearances and old legends. The most mysterious is that of Sara Harrison Shea, who, in 1908, was found dead in the field behind her house just months after the tragic death of her daughter.

Now, in present day, nineteen-year-old Ruthie lives in Sara's farmhouse with her mother, Alice, and her younger sister. Alice has always insisted that they live off the grid, a decision that has weighty consequences when Ruthie wakes up one morning to find that Alice has vanished. In her search for clues, she is startled to find a copy of Sara Harrison Shea's diary hidden beneath the floorboards of her mother's bedroom. As Ruthie gets sucked into the historical mystery, she discovers that she's not the only person looking for someone that they've lost. But she may be the only one who can stop history from repeating itself.

A Boston Globe Best Book of the Year

Jennifer McMahon is the author of six novels, including the New York Times bestsellers *Island of Lost Girls* and *Promise Not to Tell*. She graduated from Goddard College and studied poetry in the MFA Writing Program at Vermont College. She currently lives with her partner and daughter in Montpelier, Vermont. Excerpted from the Hardcover Edition

Visitors from the Other Side

The Secret Diary of Sara Harrison Shea

January 29, 1908

The first time I saw a sleeper, I was nine years old.

It was the spring before Papa sent Auntie away--before we lost my brother, Jacob. My sister, Constance, had married the fall before and moved to Graniteville.

I was up exploring in the woods, near the Devil's Hand, where Papa had forbidden us to play. The trees were leafing out, making a lush green canopy overhead. The sun had warmed the soil, giving the damp woods a rich, loamy smell. Here and there beneath the beech, sugar maple, and birch trees were spring flowers: trilliums, trout lilies, and my favorite, jack-in-the-pulpit, a funny little flower with a secret: if you lift the striped hood, you'll find the preacher underneath. Auntie had shown me this, and taught me that you could dig up the tubers and cook them like turnips. I had just found one and was pulling back the hood, looking for the tiny figure underneath, when I heard footsteps, slow and steady, moving my way. Heavy feet dragging through the dry leaves, stumbling on roots. I wanted to run, but froze with panic, having squatted down low behind a rock just as a

figure moved into the clearing.

I recognized her at once--Hester Jameson.

She'd died two weeks before from typhoid fever. I had attended her funeral with Papa and Jacob, seen her laid to rest in the cemetery behind the church up by Cranberry Meadow. Everyone from school was there, all in Sunday best.

Hester's father, Erwin, ran Jameson's Tack and Feed Shop. He wore a black coat with frayed sleeves, and his nose was red and running. Beside him stood his wife, Cora Jameson, a heavysset woman who had a seamstress shop in town. Mrs. Jameson sobbed into a lace handkerchief, her whole body heaving and trembling.

I had been to funerals before, but never for someone my own age. Usually it was the very old or the very young. I couldn't take my eyes off the casket, just the right size for a girl like me. I stared at the plain wooden box until I grew dizzy, wondering what it might feel like to be laid out inside. Papa must have noticed, because he took my hand and gave it a squeeze, pulled me a little closer to him.

Reverend Ayers, a young man then, said Hester was with the angels. Our old preacher, Reverend Phelps, was stooped over, half deaf, and none of what he said made any sense--it was all frightening metaphors about sin and salvation. But when Reverend Ayers with his sparkling blue eyes spoke, it felt as if he said each word right to me.

"I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

For the first time, I understood the word of God, because Reverend Ayers spoke it. His voice, all the girls said, could soothe the Devil himself.

A red-winged blackbird cried out conk-a-reee from a nearby hazel bush. He puffed up his red shoulders and sang over and over, as loud as he could, his call almost hypnotic; even Reverend Ayers paused to look.

Mrs. Jameson dropped to her knees, keening. Mr. Jameson tried to pull her up, but did not have the strength.

I stood right beside Papa, clutching his hand, as dirt was shoveled down on the coffin of poor Hester Jameson. Hester had a crooked front tooth, but a beautifully delicate face. She had been the best in our class at arithmetic. Once, for my birthday, she gave me a note with a flower pressed inside. A violet it was, dried out and perfectly preserved. May your day be as special as you are, she'd written in perfect cursive. I tucked it into my Bible, where it stayed for years, until it either disintegrated or fell out, I cannot recall.

Now, two weeks after her very own funeral, Hester's sleeper caught sight of me there in the woods, crouching behind the rock. I shall never forget the look in her eyes--the frightened

half-recognition of someone waking from a horrible dream.

I had heard about sleepers; there was even a game we played in the schoolyard in which one child would be laid out dead in a circle of violets and forget-me-nots. Then someone would lean down and whisper magic words in the dead girl's ear, and she would rise and chase all the other children. The first one she caught would be the next to die.

I think I may have even played this game once with Hester Jameson.

I had heard whispers, rumors of sleepers called back from the land of the dead by grieving husbands and wives, but was certain they only existed in the stories old women liked to tell each other while they folded laundry or stitched stockings--something to pass the time, and to make any eavesdropping children hurry home before dark.

I had been sure, up until then, that God in his infinite wisdom would not have allowed such an abomination.

Hester and I were not ten feet apart. Her blue dress was filthy and torn, her corn-silk hair in tangles. She gave off the musty smell of damp earth, but there was something else behind it, an acrid, greasy, burnt odor, similar to what you smell when you blow out a tallow candle.

Our eyes met, and I yearned to speak, to say her name, but could only manage a strangled-sounding Hss.

Hester ran off into the woods like a startled rabbit. I stayed frozen, clinging pathetically to my rock like a bit of lichen.

From down the path leading to the Devil's Hand came another figure, running, calling Hester's name.

It was her mother, Cora Jameson.

She stopped when she saw me, face flushed and frantic. She was breathing hard and had scratches on her face and arms, pieces of dry leaves and twigs tangled in her hair.

"Tell no one," she said.

"But why?" I asked, stepping out from behind the rock.

She looked right at me--through me, almost, as if I were a pane of dirty window glass. "Someday, Sara," she said, "maybe you'll love someone enough to understand."

Then she ran off into the woods, following her daughter.

I told Auntie about it later.

"Is it really possible?" I asked. "To bring someone back like that?"

We were down by the river, picking fiddleheads, filling Auntie's basket with the curled fern tops, as we did each spring. Then we'd bring them home and make a creamy soup stuffed full of wild greens and herbs that Auntie had gathered along the way. We were also there to check the traps--Auntie had caught a beaver just two days before and was hoping for another. Beaver pelts were a rarity and brought a high price. They were once nearly as common as squirrels', Auntie said, but trappers had taken all except a handful.

Buckshot was with us, nosing the ground, ears attentive to every little sound. I never knew if he was all wolf, or only part. Auntie had found him as a pup, when he'd fallen into one of her pit traps after being all shot up by someone. She'd carried him home, pulled the buckshot pellets out of him, stitched him up, and nursed him back to health. He'd been by her side ever since.

"He was lucky you found him," I said after hearing the story.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Auntie told me. "He and I were meant for one another."

I never saw such devotion in a dog--or any animal, for that matter. His wounds had healed, but the buckshot left him blind in his right eye, which was milky white. His ghost eye. Auntie called it.

"He came so close to death, he's got one eye back there still," she explained. I loved Buckshot, but I hated that milky-white moon that seemed to see everything and nothing all at once.

Auntie was not related to me by blood, but she cared for me, raised me after my own mother died giving birth to me. I had no memory of my mother--the only proofs of her existence were my parents' wedding photograph, the quilt she'd sewn that I slept under every night, and the stories my older brother and sister told.

My brother claimed I had my mother's laugh. My sister said that my mother had been the best dancer in the county, that she was the envy of all the other girls.

Auntie's people came from up north, in Quebec. Her father had been a trapper; her mother, an Indian woman. Auntie carried a hunting knife, and wore a long deerskin coat decorated with bright beads and porcupine quills. She spoke French, and sang songs in a language I never did recognize. She wore a ring carved from yellowed bone on her right pointer finger.

"What does it say?" I asked once, touching the strange letters and symbols on its surface.

"That life is a circle," she answered.

People in town were frightened of Auntie, but their fear did not keep them away from her

door. They followed the well-worn path to her cabin in the woods out behind the Devil's Hand, carrying coins, honey, whiskey--whatever they had to trade for her remedies. Auntie had drops for colic, tea for fever, even a little blue bottle that she swore contained a potion so powerful that with one drop the object of your heart's desire would be yours. I knew better than to doubt her.

There were other things I knew about Auntie, too. I'd seen her sneak out of Papa's bedroom in the early morning, heard the sounds that came from behind his locked door when she visited him there.

I also knew better than to cross her. She had a fiery temper and little patience with people who did not see things her way. If people refused to pay her for her services, she'd call on them, sprinkle their homes with black powder pulled from one of her leather pouches, and speak a strange incantation. Terrible things would befall those families from then on: sicknesses, fires, crop losses, even death.

I tossed a handful of dark-green fiddleheads into the basket.

"Tell me, Auntie, please," I begged, "can the dead come back?"

Auntie looked at me a long time, head cocked to the side, her small, dark eyes fixed on mine.

"Yes," she told me at last. "There is a way. Few know of it, but those who do, pass it down to their children. Because you are the closest I will ever come to a child of my own, the secret will go to you. I will write it all down, everything I know about sleepers. I will fold up the papers, put them in an envelope, and seal it with wax. You will hide it away, and one day, when you are ready, you will open it up."

"How will I know I am ready?" I asked.

She smiled, showing her small teeth, pointed like a fox's and stained brown from tobacco. "You will know."

I am writing these words in secret, hidden under covers. Martin and Lucius believe I am sleeping. I hear them downstairs, drinking coffee and discussing my prognosis. (Not good, I'm afraid.)

I have been going back in my mind, thinking over how all of this began, piecing things together the way one might sew a quilt. But, oh, what a hideous and twisted quilt mine would be!

"Gertie," I hear Martin say above the clink of a spoon stirring coffee in his favorite tin mug. I imagine the furrow of his brow, the deep worry lines there; how sad his face must be after he spoke her name.

I hold my breath and listen hard.

"Sometimes a tragedy breaks a person," Lucius says. "Sometimes they will never be whole again."

If I close my eyes even now, I can still see my Gertie's face, feel her sugary breath on my cheek. I can so vividly recall our last morning together, hear her saying, "If snow melts down to water, does it still remember being snow?"

Martin

January 12, 1908

"Wake up, Martin." A soft whisper, a flutter against his cheek. "It's time."

Martin opened his eyes, leaving the dream of a woman with long dark hair. She'd been telling him something. Something important, something he was not supposed to forget.

He turned over in bed. He was alone, Sara's side of the bed cold. He sat up, listening carefully. Voices, soft giggles across the hall, from behind Gertie's bedroom door.

Had Sara spent the whole night in with Gertie again? Surely it couldn't be good for the girl, to smother her like that. Sometimes he worried that Sara's attachment to Gertie simply wasn't . . . healthy. Just last week, Sara had kept Gertie home from school for three straight days, and for those three days Sara doted on her--plaiting her hair, making her a new dress, baking her cookies, playing hide-and-seek. Sara's niece, Amelia, offered to take Gertie for the weekend, and Sara had made excuses--she gets homesick so easily, she's so frail--but Martin understood that it was Sara who could not bear to be without Gertie. Sara never seemed whole unless Gertie was by her side.

He pushed the worried thoughts away. Better to focus on the problems he understood and could do something about.

The house was cold, the fire out.

He peeled back the covers, threw his legs over the side of the bed, and pulled on his pants. His bad foot hung there like a hoof till he shoved it into the special boot fashioned for him by the cobbler in Montpelier. The soles were worn through, and he'd stuffed the bottoms of both boots with dry grass and cattail fluff, all layered over scraps of leather, in a futile attempt to keep the dampness out. There was no money for new custom-made boots now.

Blight had ruined most of last fall's potato crop, and they relied on the money they got from selling the potatoes to the starch factory to get through the winter. It was only January, and the root cellar was nearly bare: a few spongy potatoes and carrots, some Hubbard squash, half a dozen jars of string beans and tomatoes Sara had put up last summer, a little salt pork from the hog they'd butchered in November (they'd traded most

of the meat for dry goods at the general store). Martin would have to get a deer soon if they were going to have enough to eat. Sara had a talent for stretching what little food they had, for making milk gravy and biscuits with a bit of salt pork into a meal, but she couldn't create something from nothing.

#### Other Books

Katie Winter FBI Suspense Thriller Bundle: Protect Me (#8) and Remember Me (#9), A bundle of books #8 (PROTECT ME) and #9 (REMEMBER ME) in Molly Black's Katie Winter FBI Suspense Thriller series! This bundle offers books eight and nine in one convenient file, with over 100,000 words of reading. "Molly Black has written a taut thriller that will keep you on the edge of your seat... I absolutely loved this book and can't wait to read the next book in the series!" –Reader review for Girl One: Murder FBI Special Agent Katie Winter is no stranger to frigid winters, isolation, and dangerous cases. With her sterling record of hunting down serial killers, she is a fast-rising star in the BAU, and when a woman is discovered in the middle of a frozen lake, Katie is the natural choice to partner with Canadian law enforcement to track the killer across the brutal and unforgiving landscape. Yet Katie's past haunts her, demanding her attention and dragging her down into a well of secrets. In PROTECT ME (Book #8), when a string of bodies are discovered high up in the branches of trees near the Canadian border, FBI Special Agent Katie Winter is called in to hunt down the killer responsible for the bizarre crime. What can his signature mean? And where will he strike again? In REMEMBER ME (Book #9), when a body is found gruesomely impaled on a tree in a frozen landscape, FBI Special Agent Katie Winter must team up with her partner to enter this killer's mind. But the case leads her down a rabbit hole deeper—and more dangerous—than she ever could have expected. A complex psychological crime thriller full of twists and turns and packed with heart-pounding suspense, the KATIE WINTER mystery series will make you fall in love with a brilliant new female protagonist and keep you turning pages late into the night. Books #10 and #11 in the series—CATCH ME and WATCH ME—are now also available.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . Luckily, police were distrusted in this town at this time, after the accidental shooting and killing in winter . A lot of people in the community were closing ranks against them and that worked in his favor. He was so close to achieving ..."