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The Haunting of Tabitha Grey

Written by

Vanessa Curtis

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It's like the house is waiting.
Waiting for me to move in.

THE HAUNTING OF TABITHA GREY

Vanessa Curtis

EGMONT

EGMONT
We bring stories to life

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Whilst this book is based on real events, it is still very much a work of fiction and should be read as such.

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

To Dad, for giving me
a love of ghost stories

Prologue

When Dad first crunches the car up the semi-circular gravel drive outside Weston Manor I don't take much notice.

My head's tipped forwards on the seat and Mum's got a wad of tissues stuffed up my nostril and is telling me to keep still. Ben is crying next to me, impatient to get out of the car where he's been sitting stuck next to a pile of cases and boxes for a hot half-hour.

Nosebleeds.

I hate them.

Gran says that they're a sign of a 'sensitive soul' and that all the best people get nosebleeds

at my age. But that's not much comfort when you're swallowing salty blood that runs down the back of your throat and your mother is yelling at you not to move and your father is drumming his fingers on the car window with impatience, is it?

Nope.

Gran's not moving in with us, anyway. There was some talk of it, cos she's living on her own now and not very mobile, but Mum and Dad had one of their rare frosty conversations and Dad was heard to utter the words, 'If that lunatic is moving in, I'm moving out,' and since then it hasn't been mentioned again. Besides, she's only half an hour away from here by car.

Dad's switched the engine off now and as the blood finally dries up in my nose I become aware of how quiet it is.

'It's beautiful,' Mum says. She's gazing up at the house in front of us. 'Like a palace!'

I shoot her an astonished look when she says that. Even Ben stops fiddling about and stares at her.

'But it's not,' I say, 'like a palace. This is just a house.'

Mum and Dad exchange smiles.

'Only you,' says Dad, 'could call Weston Manor, "just a house". Take another look, Tabitha.'

I scowl at him using my real name and glare up at the house in front of us. Yeah, it's kind of smart, I suppose. It's probably more of a mansion than a house. Elegant, painted white with dark green shutters and great long glass windows running along a verandah on each side. There are smaller windows up on the top floor and a wing on each side of the house with a pointed gable on top.

'Emma says the servants lived in one of those wings,' says Mum, following my gaze.

Emma Houghton is the head of museums and galleries at Weston Borough Council. She's the one who has arranged for Dad to take the job of curator.

I glance at Mum where she's gathering her bags up in the front seat of the car.

She still looks like a dancer even though she's dressed in a fleece and combats. Her hair is tied back into a loose ponytail and wisps of her glossy brown hair hang around her face so that she resembles one of those old-fashioned women in paintings. She's thin – you can see her cheekbones trying to cut through her fair skin.

'What's that?' I say, pointing at a flight of white concrete steps in the middle of the grass. 'How can they be stairs? They don't go anywhere!'

Mum smiles. 'That was where the ladies of the manor would mount their horses,' she says.

'So that they didn't have to leap up from the ground and ruin their long dresses.'

I pull a face.

'Weird,' I say.

Dad is getting out of the car and stretching, even though we've only come a few miles.

'I think the first thing I'll do is find a kettle and make some tea,' he says, rubbing his eyes and blinking.

Mum nods in agreement.

'Come on,' she says. 'Your nose has stopped bleeding now. Get out of the car.'

She addresses her remark to me, but Ben's the one who needs to be told the most. He's now fiddling about with the electric button on the car window, lost in his own little world as usual.

I shove him with my foot until he shoots me a sullen look and slides out of the car on the other side.

Mum, Dad and Ben stand for a moment in front of the house, gazing up at the dark windows with shutters pulled across them. Dad has his arm draped over Mum's shoulders. Ben stands next to them, very small beside Dad's giant frame. All three of them have the same shiny dark-brown hair. I don't look like them. Mine, for some reason, is as yellow as corn. I've got Dad's skin, though. In summer my cheeks go strawberry red. Mum's the only one who tans.

The house reminds me of a giant white square that's been plonked down in the middle of an enormous green park. It's very quiet. No signs of life; no smoke coming out of the chimneys; no cars or vans or coaches pulling up next to us. The arched gateway leading from the side of the house into the back gardens is padlocked shut. That's because the house isn't open to the

public on Sundays, or so Mum has told us way too many times.

Mum and Dad and Ben are still staring up at the house. They look like they are frozen solid, but when I get out of the car Mum turns towards me, smiles and holds out her hand.

Then she turns back to gaze up at the manor like she's in some weird trance or something.

'We're going to be so happy here,' she says. 'I just know it. This is what we all need – a fresh start.'

Dad squeezes her hand when she says this and pulls her closer.

I look up at the dark, unblinking eyes of the house and I get the weirdest feeling.

It's not a good feeling.

It's the feeling of being pulled into something dark by a hand I can't see and not

being able to stop it happening even if I want to.

It's like the house is waiting.

Waiting for me to move in.

Chapter One

Dad's new job title is 'Keeper of Weston Manor'.

He used to have another job nearby until the council decided that they couldn't afford to pay him any longer because they needed our flat for offices and storage space.

Dad was worried he'd have to sign on to the dole, but Emma Houghton called him one night and said that after twenty years of having no live-in Keeper, the council had decided that Weston Manor needed one again and that she was keen for somebody with the right experience to take over even though she

couldn't offer him as much pay as he got in his last position.

So I guess you could say that this job came up in the nick of time, or else we'd be homeless.

We don't have a house anywhere else.

We used to have a flat in London near to the Royal Ballet when Mum danced there every night. After she retired, there was a long period when she had no work and Dad hadn't yet found his Keeper job and was working as an art historian at a big London museum and it didn't pay enough for us to stay in our beautiful Georgian flat so we sold up and moved in with Gran for a few months until Dad managed to get work.

Mum was a really famous ballet dancer until she got to thirty-eight and decided to retire so that she could devote more time to Ben and me. She never talks about it much, but

sometimes I wonder if she wishes she had carried on longer. The time at home didn't exactly work out as she'd planned it.

This new place, Weston Manor, looks kind of OK.

Yeah. I reckon things are going to be better here.

We walk through the grand front door to the manor and Dad flicks switches and lights up the enormous entrance hall.

'It's gorgeous!' says Mum, gazing around with her eyes wide.

'Yeah, yeah,' I mutter. I'm tired and lugging a heavy suitcase. 'Where's our flat?'

Mum and Dad laugh when I say this, but Dad leads us down a long corridor on the ground floor, past two very large grand rooms to a brown front door with a gold doorbell and a plate with our surname on it.

'Here we are,' he says. 'Home sweet home.' He staggers in holding a box in one hand and jangling his keys in the other.

Mum puts her bags down. She unpacks the kettle from the top of the box and heads into a pleasant, blue-tiled kitchen with a view of the front drive to Weston. She drifts around our new flat in the wing of Weston Manor, inspecting the bedrooms.

'Do you fancy this one, Tabs?' she says, opening the door to a square, light-filled room on the second floor. It looks out over the croquet lawn at the back of the house. 'I think it used to be a servant's bedroom. Not a bad size, is it?'

I shrug.

'OK,' I say. But my heart lifts. The room is really pretty. And it's going to be all mine. I help Mum carry boxes and suitcases up into my new room and then she goes downstairs

to choose her and Dad's room and I bounce on the bed a few times and look around my new room.

There's a small white fireplace just by the window and wooden floorboards that have been stripped back and varnished, covered by a thick Indian carpet, with a single bed in the middle of it. The ceiling is bare and white and there's no furniture other than one ancient-looking oak chest of drawers.

I turn the handle of a door and find myself in a tiny adjoining bathroom. There's a deep white bath with enormous gold taps and a toilet with a wooden seat with a chain pull hanging over it. The sash window over the loo has the same view as from the bedroom.

I go back into my room and finish unpacking. I've packed all my make-up and brushes and moisturisers in a little leather bag that Gemma lent me. Gemma's my best mate at school and

she looks a lot like a young Cat Deeley which is a bit sick-making. I arrange all the little brushes and compacts and bottles on the oak chest of drawers and then I lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling for a while.

It feels OK, this room. Mum said that the entire wing is much newer than the rest of the house. Before that the servants had to work and sleep in the basement kitchens in the main house, although a couple of the senior maids had bedrooms upstairs near the family and sometimes the junior housemaids had tiny attic rooms right up in the roof.

'Poor things must have been sweltering in summer,' Mum says.

She's always worrying about people, even people who've been dead for decades. Mum's soft hearted. Not like Dad. He's a bit more fiery and opinionated. That's why he makes a good Keeper. He's strict and brilliant at

sticking to routines. If Mum was Keeper she'd drift through houses forgetting to lock doors and windows and probably not even notice if an army of burglars marched up the stairs and started helping themselves to the silver.

'Let me help you pack that,' she'd say, offering them boxes and cups of tea.

Ben's airy-fairy, like Mum. He cries all the time and mopes about, not saying much and looking pale.

I'm more like Dad – quick-tempered and impatient.

And different.

I'm not much like the girls in my class at school. Gemma and I have a laugh but even she thinks I'm a bit weird sometimes. There are reasons for that, I guess. But Gem's all right about it. She's a true friend.

I flick the switch on my laptop and sink into retail heaven.

*

There's a gentle knock on our door just as Mum's toasting up a big plateful of cheese muffins, drenching them in butter because she's decided to have a day off her diet.

'Oh,' I hear Dad say. 'It's good of you to come round so soon.'

He comes into the lounge, stepping over boxes and crates and followed by a huge hulk of a man who has to stoop to avoid bashing his head on the light.

'This is Sid,' says Dad. 'He's head of security here. If you ever see anybody acting suspiciously around the manor, you contact Sid. OK?'

As though I'm planning on spending loads of time snooping around the manor looking for weirdos or something . . .

'Yes,' I say to keep Dad quiet because he's got his manic expression on.

Mum sighs and holds out her hand to Sid.

'Excuse my husband,' she says. 'We're all a bit tired from the move today. What he really should be doing is offering you a drink. Tea? Coffee? And could you manage a muffin?'

Sid's face lights up at the sight of Mum's tea tray and he settles down on the end of the sofa. Ben gives him a look of alarm but then decides he's a friendly sort and stays huddled up on the other end of it with his eyes fixed upon a piece of Lego.

'Don't mind if I do, pet,' Sid says. 'I reckon the old house can look after itself for ten minutes.'

He's smiling at me, so I half-smile back even though what he's saying seems a bit stupid. I mean – how can a house look after itself?

I like Sid's face though. It's round and open and he doesn't have much hair left, only a dark shadow of what was once probably hair even

darker than Mum's. He's got one pierced ear with a gold stud in.

Mum passes him a cup of tea and two muffins and he sinks his teeth into the soft bread with a sigh of pleasure.

'I can see I'm going to like you lot living here,' he says. 'It can get a bit – monotonous, this security-guard lark. Nice to have a new family to breathe life into this old house.'

Sid accepts a third muffin from Mum, wolfs it down in about three seconds and drains the bottom of his teacup with a big slurp.

'Right – no rest for the wicked!' he says. 'Which probably explains a lot about this house!'

He laughs a bit at this and then realises we're all staring at him, trying to work out what he means.

'I'm just having a little joke,' he says. 'You'll get used to me. And the house. It's a bit of an

acquired taste but it's a beautiful place to live.'

He gets up, blocking all the light from the window with his huge frame and ducks out of the door with a wink and a wave.

After we've washed up and started to put some of our plates and cups away, Ben goes into his new room to play and Mum says that she needs a lie-down. She's got 'depression' and although it isn't so bad any more, she still has to have loads of rests and be careful not to get over-tired, so Dad locks the door of the flat behind us and we walk back down the long corridor that takes us into the heart of the house and we begin a tour of Weston Manor.

It's very dark in the entrance hall.

'It won't be like this during the week,' says Dad. 'Lights, heating and masses of visitors. You must keep out of the way, Tabs. Sid and his staff are very busy.'

'Erm, I won't be here during term time, Dad,' I say, but Dad is flicking switches and throwing all the shadowy chairs, tables and paintings into a sudden pool of golden light.

'Wow,' I say, despite meaning not to. I can't think how I didn't say that when I first came in. The entrance hall is enormous and kind of beautiful. There's a fireplace made of marble and four huge white marble pillars holding up the middle of the room. Masses of silver gleams out from dark oak cupboards and there are paintings hung right round the room.

'That's the lady who owned the house,' says Dad. He's pointing at a large painting of a woman dressed in a long, black Victorian dress and standing sideways so that I can see her severe profile and aristocratic nose. 'Lady Eleanor Thomas-Fulford.'

'Oh,' I say. I'm disappointed. I thought that the beautiful lady in a white ball gown who is

smiling out at me from an enormous oil painting by the fireplace might be the owner.

'That was one of her half-sisters, Lucinda,' says Dad, following my gaze. 'She was a twin. The other one was just as beautiful. Rose. You'll probably see some photographs of her as we go around the house.'

He ushers me into a doorway to the left of the entrance hall and clicks another switch.

'This was the original dining room,' says Dad. 'Before it moved into the new wing where we live.'

The room is very dim, even with the lights on. There are heavy oak panels on the walls and gothic chairs and tables to match.

I shiver. 'Bit dark,' I say.

Dad leads me through an adjoining door into a smaller room that is crammed to the hilt with plush chairs and small shining tables. There's a desk in the corner, covered with

faded black-and-white photographs of dogs and children. A clock ticks away to itself on the mantelpiece over the fireplace.

It's a cosy room but kind of stuffy.

Like it needs the windows opened wide and a rush of fresh air from the park to come in.

I wander over and stare at some of the photographs.

'This was Lady Eleanor's morning room,' says Dad. He's running his hand over the top of an elaborately embroidered chair seat when he says this.

'She must have been dog mad,' I say, because most of the photos feature the blurry features of long-dead pets.

I love dogs. I'm hoping to persuade Mum and Dad to let me have a puppy once we get settled in.

'Oh yes,' says Dad. 'You ain't seen nothing yet!'

He's enjoying this.

Dad loves old houses the way that other people love chocolate or clothes or train sets or whatever other things they might be obsessed by.

With Dad, it's 'The Past'. He's always going on about it. Sometimes, if I screw up my face and narrow my eyes, I can see Dad in an old-fashioned suit with a handlebar moustache instead of his goatee and with a pair of spectacles held to his piercing blue eyes.

'Come on, Tabs,' says Dad. We pass out of the morning room and back into the entrance hall but not before a tiny mirror in the doorway catches my eye.

'Why would there be a mirror there?' I say. 'Why isn't it inside the room?'

Dad comes back to take a look.

'Not sure,' he says. 'But I'm guessing that

the servants would check their appearance before going in to see to Lady Eleanor. She was very fussy about how they looked, from what I've heard.'

I nod. Kind of makes sense.

We pass in front of the grand staircase and I glance up as we go by. It's very brown. Brown banisters, brown patterned carpet and brown panelled walls that are covered in dark paintings of brown horses and dogs.

'Do you want to go up?' says Dad. 'There are loads of bedrooms up there and another floor in the attic.'

The weird thing is that I love grand staircases and always pretend that I'm some elegant lady coming down them in a ball gown.

But I don't want to go up this one.

I look up it a bit more and then my appetite kicks in like I haven't eaten for a year and it's all I can think of.

'Could we just do downstairs?' I say to Dad. 'I'm hungry.'

Just as I say this, the waft of eggs and bacon comes through from somewhere and my stomach growls with happy anticipation of Mum's dinner.

I move away back through the entrance hall and Dad shows me the grand dining room near the entrance to our flat with its odd bookcases full of white, Chinese porcelain lions and then the elegant drawing room – the largest room downstairs – with two grand fireplaces, a crystal chandelier hanging down in the middle and floor-to-ceiling green shutters. Dad flings these open to reveal the back grounds of the manor and a view of the tiny medieval parish church that sits just to the left of the house.

By the time we've gone down into the basement of the main house and looked at the old kitchens and the scullery and the butler's

pantry and the housemaid's parlour and the line of old bells, which still hang in the corridor waiting in vain for the lady of the manor to ring them and get the servants rushing upstairs, I'm tired out and starving.

It's been a long day of moving and packing and getting used to new things.

'You look like I feel,' says Dad as we head back down the long corridor on the ground floor that leads to the brown wooden door of our flat with 'Grey' on the gold plate just next to the bell.

I glance at my reflection in the glass of the long conservatory windows as we pass them and it seems Dad is right.

My fair hair's all lank and limp and my face is pale with dark rings under the eyes.

I look about ninety-three instead of fourteen.

Great.

And I'm supposed to be seeing Jake

tomorrow night. I've been going out with him for nearly six months and he's only like the hottest boy on the entire planet. He'd been pestering me to go out with him for ages before that and he's still really keen. Gemma says he's obsessed with me!

Mum doesn't like me going out on school nights but tough.

I'll tell Ben to keep Mum company while I'm out and while Dad's patrolling the manor and making sure everything has been prepared for the next day of visitors.

Not that Ben's much company. He's only five. And he doesn't have much confidence, unlike me. Dad says I've got too much.

Ben would burst into tears if he even saw his own shadow.

I burst through the door with my tongue practically hanging out from starvation.

'We're back! Let's have dinner!' I yell, but there's silence.

Dad pokes his head into the darkened bedroom he's going to share with Mum and I hear him murmuring in a low voice before he comes back out into the lounge again looking a bit worried.

'Mum's got one of her heads,' he says. 'So I'm going to pop to the parade over the road and see if I can get us a takeway, OK?'

I start to speak and then stop again. Maybe Mum started dinner and then her head got worse again and she had to lie down.

I go into the modern kitchen, which has been fitted by the council for our tenancy. The room is cold and the fridge is full of stuff but I can't see any bacon.

I peer in the bin but there's nothing in there, not even a bin liner.

Oh well.

Ben creeps out of his bedroom and puts his arms around my leg. He looks frightened, like he doesn't want to be here. We've had a lot of changes in our life over the last few years.

'Don't worry,' I say. 'It will be OK. This is a nice house. Everything will be fine. And Mum will get happier. You'll see.'

Ben looks up at me with his dark eyes and gives me the tiniest smile, so I let him explore my new bedroom. He sits on the bed and watches me try out new eyeshadows and we both try not to hear Mum moaning in pain through the wall. When Dad finally comes back I jump a mile at the sound of his key in the lock and then my heart leaps with relief at the smell of prawn crackers and black-bean noodles, and Mum comes out of her room and manages to eat with us and, although it's not quite like I imagined it being on the first night, it's kind of OK and we're together.

'So do you like Weston?' Dad says as we finish with a tub of vanilla ice cream from a late-night shop that Dad found next to the takeaway. His eyes are all lit up and eager as he waits for my reply.

'Yeah,' I say. 'Yeah. I think I'm going to enjoy it.'

There's a sharp laugh. Right in my ear.

I jump and shake my head like I'm trying to get a wasp off it.

It must have been Dad. He's good at projecting his voice, after all. He used to give talks at the museum and it still shows.

I'm tired, right? It's been a long day.

'I'm going to bed,' I say. 'Night.'

Ben's eyes follow me as I leave the room. I wonder if he'll come and get in my bed in the middle of the night?

He usually does.