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Opening extract from

The Haunting of Sunshine Girl

Written by

Paige McKenzie and Alyssa B. Sheinmel

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THE HAUNTING OF SUNSHINE GIRL

PAIGE MCKENZIE

WITH ALYSSA SHEINMEL

STORY BY NICK HAGEN & ALYSSA SHEINMEL

BASED ON THE WEB SERIES CREATED BY NICK HAGEN

MACMILLAN

SEVENTEEN CANDLES

She turned sixteen today.

I watched it happen. Katherine, the woman who adopted her, baked her a cake: carrot cake, a burnt sort of orange color with white frosting smothered over the top of it. A girl named Ashley came over to her house with candles, which they lit despite the sweltering Texas heat. Then they sang—Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you. Our kind don't celebrate birthdays. Except, of course, for when one of us turns sixteen. Just as she did today.

At precisely the time of her birth—7:12 p.m., Central Standard Time, August 14—I sensed the change in the girl named Sunshine. I felt it the instant the spirit touched her. Katherine had just set the cake down on the table in front of her: sixteen—no, seventeen . . . why seventeen?—candles. Sunshine grinned and pursed her lips, preparing to extinguish the flames. But then an instant of hesitation, the smile disappearing from her eyes.

Of course, she hadn't a clue what she was feeling or why she was feeling it. The moment the spirit touched her, her temperature dropped from 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit to 92.3; her heart rate jumped from 80 beats per minute to 110. She pressed her palm to her forehead like a mother checking for a fever. Perhaps she thought she was coming down with something: a cold, the flu—whatever it is that people suffer from. I recognized

the culprit immediately: a twenty-nine-year-old male who'd perished in a car accident less than a mile away several weeks earlier, the blood on his wounds still fresh, the glass from the windshield still embedded in his face. Later, I would help him move on myself: his wounds will heal, his skin will be smooth. But for now I keep my focus on Sunshine.

I counted the seconds until her heart rate returned to normal: eleven. Impressive.

She took a deep breath and blew out her candles. Katherine and Ashley applauded. Sunshine stood up from the table and curtsied elaborately, garnering more applause. Her smile was back, planted firmly on her face, her bright green eyes sparkling. Almost as though she never felt anything at all.

My last student's temperature took twenty-four hours to rebound. But Sunshine's was back to normal by the time her mother cut the cake.

Of course, this was just a passing spirit. Soon she'd have to contend with so much more.

CHAPTER ONE
DEFENDING CREEPY

"Mom, the house is creepy." We're only halfway up the gravel driveway to our new home, and I can already tell. Even the driveway is creepy: long and narrow, with tall bushes on either side so I can't see our neighbors' front yards.

"I prefer creeptastic," Mom answers with a smile. I don't smile back. "Oh come on," she groans. "I don't even get a sympathy laugh?"

"Not this time," I say, shaking my head.

Mom rented the house off of Craigslist. She didn't have time to be picky, not once she got offered the job as the head nurse of the new neonatal unit at Ridgemont Hospital. She barely had time to ask her only daughter how she felt about being uprooted from the town she'd lived in her whole life to the northwest corner of the country, where it rains more often than not. Of course, I said I'd support her no matter what. It was a great opportunity for her, and I didn't want to be the reason she didn't take it. I'm just not sure that moving from Texas to Washington State is all that great an opportunity for *me*.

Mom parks the car and eyes the house through the windshield. Two stories high, a front porch with an ancient-looking porch swing that looks like it couldn't support a baby's weight. In the pictures online the house looked white, but in real life it's gray, except for the front door, which

someone decided to paint bright red. Maybe they thought the contrast would look cheerful or something.

"You can't tell a house is creepy from the outside," Mom adds hopefully.

"Yes, I can."

"How?"

"The same way I can tell that those jeans you bought before we left Austin will end up hanging in my closet instead of yours. I'm very, very intuitive."

Mom laughs. Our little white dog, Oscar, whines from the backseat, begging to be let out so he can explore his new home. As soon as Mom unlatches her seat belt and opens the door, he bounds outside. I stay in the car a second longer, breathing in the wet air blowing in.

It's not just the house. Ever since we crossed the state line the world has been gray, shrouded in fog so thick that Mom had to turn the headlights on even though it was the middle of the day. I didn't picture our new life in Washington as quite so colorless. To be honest, I didn't picture it much at all. Instead, I kind of pretended the move wasn't happening, even as our house back in Austin filled with boxes, even when my best friend, Ashley, came over to help us pack. It wasn't until we were actually on the road that I really *believed* we were moving.

Our new house is on a dead-end street backed up against an enormous, fog-drenched field. Each of the houses we passed before we turned into our driveway was about two sizes too small for the size of its yard; I guess these are the kind of neighbors who want nothing to do with one another. There wasn't a single kid playing in his front yard,

not a single dad getting ready to barbeque tonight's dinner. The street is littered with pine needles from the towering Douglas firs that block out any semblance of daylight. An ugly, rusted, chain-link fence wraps around our new yard.

Judging from the little I've seen so far, I'm pretty sure the whole flippin' town of Ridgemont, Washington, is creepy. I mean, what could be creepier than a place at the foot of a mountain, where the sky is gray even in the dog days of summer? And if it seems like I'm overusing the word creepy, it's not because I don't have access to a thesaurus like everyone else with a smart-phone; it's because there is simply no other word that will do.

I shake myself like Oscar does after his bath. It's not like me to be so negative, and I'm determined to snap out of it. I take a deep breath and open the car door. The house is probably adorable on the inside. Mom wouldn't have rented a place that didn't have some redeeming qualities. I reach into the backseat and grab the crate that holds our cat, Lex Luthor. Then I take out my phone and hold it up, taking a picture of me, Lex, and the house in the background, and I text it to Ashley. We promised each other we wouldn't grow apart, even with me living up here in Washington and her back in Texas. I mean, we've been best friends since second grade. If our friendship could survive the middle school cliquey-ness it faced a few years ago, I'm pretty sure it can survive a few thousand miles.

My Chuck Taylors crunch over the gravel driveway as I make my way to the front door. Mom and Oscar are already inside. It might be August, but that doesn't stop Ridgemont from being cold, colder than Austin is at Christmastime,

and unfortunately I'm still wearing the ripped-up denim shorts I put on before we left our motel in Boise, Idaho, this morning. The brightly colored mustang on Mom's old high school T-shirt—my favorite shirt these days—looks out of place in the fog, the opposite of camouflage.

I hover in the doorway. "Mom!" I shout. No answer. Just the squeak of the screen door on its hinges while I hold it open, then the whistle of a gust of wind from behind me like it's trying to push me inside.

"Mom!" I repeat. Finally I shout her full name: "Katherine Marie Griffith!" She hates when I call her by her first name, though she claims it has nothing to do with the fact that I'm adopted. We've never made a big deal about it—never had some big talk where my mother, like, revealed the news to me. The truth is, I don't remember a time when I didn't know. There are moments when I wonder who my birth parents are and why they gave me up, but even Mom doesn't know those details. She was a pediatric nurse at the hospital in Austin where I was found—left swaddled in the emergency room: no parents, no paperwork, no nothing—and once she got her hands on me, she says, she knew she was never going to let me go. We were meant for each other, she'd say, simple as that.

Mom and I giggle when strangers comment on how much we look alike, because we don't. We just *act* alike—sometimes too much alike. But unlike me, Mom is a redhead with light skin, almost-gray eyes, pale skin, and freckles. I have long brown hair that's usually trapped somewhere in between wavy and frizzy. And my eyes are green, not gray like Mom's. Ashley says they look like cat's eyes. You know

how some people's eyes change color depending on the light or what they're wearing? Not mine. They're always the same milky, light kind of green. And even in the dark my pupils never get big. I've literally never seen anyone with eyes that look like mine. They're so unusual that I'm pretty sure anyone whose eyes matched mine would probably be related to me. Like for real related, by blood.

Anyway, adopted or not, I'm closer to my mom than any other sixteen-year-old I've ever met. Or, at least, I'm pretty sure we're closer than any of the mother-daughter combos I saw walking around the mall in Austin. If they weren't fighting, they were barely talking. Ashley used to pick her phone up and pretend to be deep in conversation every time her mother walked into the room rather than answer when her mom asked about her day. I mean, how many sixteen-year-olds do you know who could spend three days straight locked up in a car with their mother driving across the country? Though I've only been sixteen for a week now.

From somewhere inside the house comes the sound of a toilet flushing. "Where did you think I was, Sunshine?" Mom asks, returning to the front door.

"My name never sounded that ironic in Texas," I mumble, shivering as I step over the threshold. The door slams shut behind me and I jump.

"It's just the wind, sweetie." Mom's got a twinkle in her eye like she's trying not to laugh at me.

"I think it's actually colder inside the house than it is outside." I don't think I've ever felt a cold like this before, not even when I was nine years old and Mom took me skiing in Colorado, where the temperature was literally

below freezing. *This* cold is something else entirely. It's snaking underneath my clothes and covering my skin in goose bumps. It feels kind of like when you have a fever and you're shivering despite the fact that your temperature is rising and you're bundled up under layers of covers in bed. The kind of cold that's damp, as though the whole house needs to be run through the dryer. It's . . . all right, fine, I'll admit it: it's *creepy*. I say it out loud and Mom laughs.

"Is that your new favorite word?" she asks.

"No," I say softly. I can't remember ever having said it much before. But then I never felt like this before.

"No one has lived in the house in months. It's just been empty too long. Once we get all of our stuff in here, it'll feel more homey. It'll be *great*, I promise."

But our stuff—the moving truck full of our furniture and my books and knickknacks and clothes—won't get here until tomorrow. I guess the movers who were driving it from Texas weren't in as much of a hurry to get here as we were. Mom and I ascend the creaky staircase and briefly explore the second floor—two bedrooms and one bathroom with a malfunctioning lock on the door ("I'll ask the landlord to fix it," Mom promises)—but it's hard to imagine how our stuff will look in our rooms when most of our belongings are still a hundred miles away. I go into the room that will be mine and shudder at the bright pink wallpaper and carpet. I am not a pink kind of girl. I decide that I will put my bed in the corner to the right of the door and my desk beside the window across from it. I walk to the narrow window and look out, but the branches of a pine tree in our backyard almost entirely block my view of the street. Even if the sun

were shining, I doubt much light would get in. Mom's room faces the front yard, but branches mostly block her windows too.

We blow up our queen-size air mattress on the hardwood floor of the living room and spread blankets over it so the cat doesn't accidentally pop it with his claws when he climbs all over it, which of course he immediately does. We drive into town for pizza, the sound of pine needles hitting our roof in the car chorusing right along with the sound of raindrops. Main Street is mostly empty, nothing like the crowds in downtown Austin.

"It's quaint," Mom says hopefully, pointing out the charming nonchain pharmacy and diner, and I nod, forcing myself to smile. On our way home, the pizza cooling in the backseat, we drive past the hospital, and Mom pulls into the parking lot. She hasn't been here since they flew her in for a job interview a couple of months ago. The hospital is at least half the size of the one where she worked back in Austin. She unclicks her seat belt but doesn't move to get out of the car, so neither do I.

"Guess they don't have as many sick people in Ridgemont as they did back home," I say, gesturing at the nearly empty parking lot.

"It's a small town," Mom shrugs, but she looks wary. She's going to have a lot more responsibility in her new job than she did in Texas, and even though she hasn't said so, I know she's nervous.

"Don't worry. You're going to knock their socks off."

Mom looks at me and smiles. "That's my Sunshine." She reaches across the car to squeeze my shoulder then puts

her seat belt back on and restarts the engine. She's turning the car around when the sound of sirens fills the air. An ambulance comes barreling into the parking lot, speeding toward the emergency entrance.

I guess there are sick people in Ridgemont after all.

We eat our pizza in our pajamas, sitting on the air mattress like we're having a slumber party.

"This pizza is better than anything they have in Austin," Mom says as we argue over the last piece.

"Who knew?" I say, ripping the remaining crust from her hands and giggling. "Ridgemont, Washington, pizza capital of the USA."

"See? I knew you'd like it here."

"I like the *pizza*. That's not the same thing as liking the *place*."

"Maybe loving the pizza is just a hop, skip, and jump away from loving the place," Mom counters hopefully. I sigh. The truth is, we've barely been here three hours, and it's really too soon to have an opinion one way or the other.

"Smells funny in here," I say, wrinkling my nose.

"It smells like pizza in here," Mom says, gesturing to the crust-filled box between us.

I shake my head. It smells like something else, a musty, moldy sort of smell, like someone left the air conditioning on too long. Not that you need AC here.

"Anyway, once we have all our stuff moved in, this house is going to smell like us," Mom promises, but I'm not so sure the damp mildew smell will go away so easily.

We read before bed. Mom's tackling the latest thriller to grace the best-seller list—she's a sucker for those kinds of books, even though I make fun of her for it—and I'm reading *Pride and Prejudice* for what has to be the fifteenth time. It's impossible to feel homesick with the familiar weight of the book in my hands. I like all the words no one uses anymore: *flutter* and *perturbation* and *enquiries*. Sometimes I find myself talking like one of the Bennett sisters. Super dorky, I know.

"Do you think maybe I was Jane Austen in a former life?" I ask sleepily when we finally turn off the lights. It must be after midnight. Oscar has weaseled his way in between us on the bed, but I don't mind because even though he takes up half the square footage of the mattress, I'm a lot warmer with him curled up beside me.

"Of course not," Mom says. She doesn't believe in things like past lives. She believes in logic and medicine, things that can be proven with organic chemistry.

"Okay, but I mean if you *did* believe in that kind of thing—"

"Which I don't—"

"Okay, but if you *did*—"

"If I did, *then* would I also believe that you'd been Jane Austen in a former life?"

"Exactly."

"Nope."

"Why not?" I scoff, feigning offense.

I can feel Mom shrug on her side of the bed like the answer is really obvious. "Statistics. Mathematically the chances are infinitesimal."

"You're applying statistics to my hypothetical past life?"

"Numbers don't lie, Sunshine State." Mom calls me that sometimes, even though we've never even been to Florida, the actual Sunshine State. I'm pretty sure Washington is as far as you can get from Florida without actually leaving the contiguous United States. But Mom's always said that as long as she's with me, she's in a state of perpetual sunshine. She says she felt that way from the instant she picked me up when I was a just a newborn baby. That's why she named me Sunshine in the first place.

"Good night, sweetie," she says into the darkness.

"Good night."

The sound wakes me up. I'm not sure what time it is when I hear it. Hear *them*. Footsteps. Coming from the floor above us. I wasn't sleeping all that soundly anyway. Usually when I fall asleep after reading *Pride and Prejudice* I dream about Mr. Darcy, but tonight I was having really weird dreams. I saw a little girl crying in the corner of a bathroom, but no matter what I said or did, her tears kept flowing. I tried to put my arms around her, but she was always out of reach, even when I was right beside her.

"What the freak?" I whisper, rolling over and reaching for Oscar. Dogs' hearing is supposed to be really good, so if he doesn't hear anything, then this is definitely just my imagination, right? But Oscar isn't on the bed anymore, and it's pitch dark in here, so I can't see where he is. He can't be that far away, though, because I can smell the wet-dog-smell of his fur, which hasn't fully dried since we got here. Suddenly the footsteps stop.

"Mom," I whisper, gently shaking her shoulder. "Mom, did you hear that?"

"Hmmm?" she answers, her voice thick with sleep. She was really tired after having driven so far. I should let her sleep. But then the footsteps start again.

Oh gosh, maybe this house doesn't feel creepy because it's been empty for months. Maybe it feels creepy because a crazed murderer has been squatting on the floor above us, waiting for some unsuspecting family to move in so he could strangle them in their sleep. My heart is pounding and I take deep breaths, trying to slow it. But it just gets faster.

The footsteps don't actually sound like a crazed murderer's, though. They sound light, kind of playful—kind of like a child is skipping through the rooms above us.

"Mom," I repeat, more urgently this time. Maybe there really is a kid up there. Maybe he or she got lost or ran away from home.

"What is it?" Mom asks sleepily.

"Do you hear that?" I ask.

"Hear what?"

"Those footsteps."

"All I hear is your voice keeping me awake," she says, but I can tell she's smiling. "It's probably just the cat," she adds, rolling over and putting her arms around me. "Go back to sleep. I promise this place won't seem so creepy in the morning." She emphasizes the word *creepy* like it's some kind of joke.

"It's not funny," I protest, but Mom's breathing has resumed its steady rhythm—she's already fallen back to

sleep. “It’s not funny,” I repeat, whispering the words into the darkness.

The last thing I expect is an answer, but almost immediately after I speak, I hear it, clearly and softly as though someone is whispering in my ear. Not footsteps this time but a child’s laugh: a giggle, light and clear as crystal, traveling through the darkness.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself to think about anything else: Elizabeth Bennett and Fitzwilliam Darcy, Jane and Mr. Bingley, even Lydia and Mr. Wickham. I try to picture them dancing at the Netherfield ball (even though I know Mr. Wickham wasn’t actually there that night), but instead, all I can see is the little girl from my dream, her dark dress tattered with age, playing hopscotch on the floor above me. And again I hear laughter. A child’s laugh has never sounded quite so scary.

Before I know what I’m doing, I crawl out of bed and head for the stairs. If there’s a little girl up there, she’s probably just as frightened as I am, right? Though she didn’t sound frightened. I mean, she was laughing.

I place my foot on the bottom step and look up. There’s nothing but darkness above me. Oscar appears at my side, leaning his warm body against my leg. “Good boy.” My voice comes out breathless, as though I’ve been running.

I put my foot on the second step and it creaks. Then there’s nothing but quiet—no laughter, no footsteps, no skipping. My heart is pounding, but I take a deep breath and it slows to a steady beat.

“Maybe it’s over,” I say. Oscar pants in agreement. Other than our breathing, the house is silent. “Let’s go back to

bed," I sigh finally, turning around.

Oscar curls up beside me on the air mattress, and I run my fingers up and down his warm fur. I expect to lie awake, staring at the ceiling, for hours. Instead, my eyelids grow heavy, my breathing slows until it keeps time with Mom's.

But I swear, just as I'm drifting out of consciousness, in that place where you're more asleep than awake anymore, I hear something else. A phrase uttered in a child's voice, no more than a whisper:

Night-night.