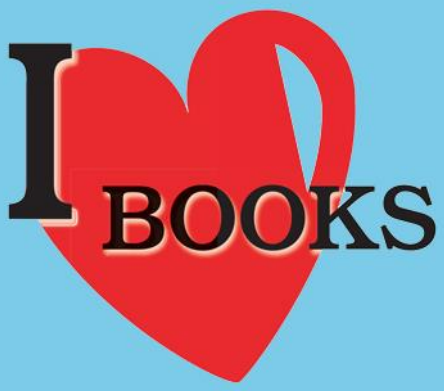

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Opening extract from

The Awakening of Sunshine Girl

Written by

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Published by

Macmillan Children's Books an imprint of Pan Macmillan

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First published in the US 2016 by Weinstein Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group

First published in the UK 2016 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-0185-5

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Book design by Jane Raese
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Someone Else Is Watching

I sensed it the instant she passed her test.

The feeling began in my center: a small, tight twist, as though someone had taken hold of my guts and pulled tight. Unbidden, an image of what she might look like today blossomed behind my eyes: sixteen years old. Her father's eyes. Her mother's . . . I don't know. All I can remember now are her eyes.

I don't want to remember anything more. I don't want to think about whom she might look like, sound like, act like. I've been setting aside such curiosities for years now. They have no place in my life. They'll only interfere with what must be done. And it must be done. It should have been done sixteen years ago, but he took her before I could. I've had years now to gather my strength.

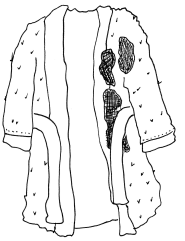
Sixteen years to plan it.

Sixteen years to envision it.

Sixteen years to steel myself for the task that's fallen at my feet.

I'm ready to eliminate her. I just have to find her first.

CHAPTER ONE
Haunted



Sixth-period biology isn't where most people expect to see a ghost, but I'm not like most people. After making a note about the genetic similarities of rhesus monkeys to humans, I look up to see an old lady standing in the corner of our classroom who clearly doesn't belong there. She's short and at least ninety years old. Or maybe, I should say, she *was* at least ninety. She's wearing a pink terrycloth robe with embroidered flowers along the neckline. Her eyes are intense, small and sunken into her skull. She doesn't blink as she stares at me, and it sends shivers along my spine. Quickly I glance around the room to reassure myself I'm the only one who sees this. No one is reacting like we have a sudden, oddly dressed guest lecturer, so I know she's a ghost. I'm the only one who can see her, and she needs my help.

I'm new to this luiseach thing, so I try not to be too hard on myself when my first instinct is to ask for a hall pass and run out of the room. Instead, I casually reach toward the woman,

trying not to draw too much attention to myself. I need her to come closer if I'm going to help her move on.

Mr. Packer moves his lecture from monkey to pig genetics, and I know I should be taking another note, but I can't. I extend my arm a little further and focus on the woman. It works, and she begins to move toward me. She passes through three of my classmates, and they have no idea, although I do notice one of them shudders and looks around for the source of the cool breeze. He wouldn't believe me if I told him.

As the woman gets within a few feet of me, I stretch my arm out even farther, hoping I can touch her and help her move on without anyone noticing. The woman's jaw begins to chatter with excitement as she nears. Her mouth opens just enough to let out a sickening dark liquid that pours down her robe. Suddenly I know how she died: she was lying alone in her bed, too weak to sit up, when she began coughing. She coughed until she choked. Her name was Elizabeth, and it wasn't the most peaceful death in the world, but at least it wasn't the most violent either. Now I need to help her move on.

Her eyes remain locked with mine, and I wonder whether she sees me or is looking straight through me. I've never seen anything like this before, and suddenly I want to scream. I just want to make it all go away, for her and for me. I stand, and my chair lets out a groan as it slides against the floor. I reach out and touch her shoulder, closing my eyes as a sense of peace washes over me. Just as quickly as she appeared, Elizabeth dissolves into a bright ball of light. Within seconds the last particles of light fade into the air.

"Can I help you, Sunshine?" Mr. Packer asks, as if there wasn't just an oozing ghost in his classroom. I open my eyes

and suddenly realize how ridiculous I looked standing in the middle of the room, my arm stretched out in front of me, my eyes closed.

"Um. No. I'm fine," I answer, quickly sitting down as half the class laughs out loud. Before Mr. Packer can resume his lecture—and before my face can reach peak redness—the bell rings. I grab my things and rush out of the classroom. Why do luiseach have to come into their powers at sixteen? It's hard enough being sixteen without having to deal with all of *this* at the same time. I run out into the parking lot and sigh with relief when I see Nolan's lanky body leaning against the car, waiting for me.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, unaware of what just happened in bio.

It's the first day back after winter break, and around us our classmates chatter about their Christmas presents and tropical vacations, about the trees they trimmed and the candles they lit, about the movies they saw and how late they slept. Their voices fill the air around us, and, still thinking about the woman I just helped move on, I can't decide whether or not I'm glad I'm so different from them.

"Nervous," I finally answer Nolan, brushing my long, curly brown hair away from my face with my fingers and securing it with an elastic band. I don't want anything obstructing the view for what I'm about to do.

"Don't be nervous," Nolan says as we walk across the parking lot. "You're a natural. You've done it once already, right?"

"Yeah, but that was just a practice run. And I wasn't alone then."

"Do you want me to come with you?" he offers.

"No," I say, digging in my bag for the car keys. "I have to do it by myself." Part of me does want Nolan to come with me,

though. He could grab the steering wheel if I suddenly have to help a spirit move on. But I don't tell him that. I have to learn to be a luiseach *and* a functioning normal person at the same time. I unlock the door and toss my purple patch-covered backpack onto the backseat, then lean against our silver sedan beside Nolan. "I can do this. I can drive all the way to the hospital alone."

Mom cringed when she handed me the keys this morning. I've had my license for months; I passed the test before we moved here from Austin, Texas, in August. But I haven't been doing much driving. Before we moved, with my shiny new license burning a hole in my pocket, I thought I'd be begging Mom for time behind the wheel in our new hometown. But nothing's been anything like I thought it would be since we moved here.

Mom works long hours, and I'm kind of trapped in the house when she's not there. She finally offered to let me take the car to get myself to and from school—it's a long walk, and January in Ridgemont, Washington, is flippin' cold—but I had to promise to pick her up from the hospital whenever she needs a ride home. I'm happy to do it. I mean, it's only fair, right? But the ride to the hospital isn't exactly a nice straight line from point A to point B. I have to get on the freeway, and then I have to drive on the twisty road around the mountain that towers above our town. You'd think they'd have made the road to the hospital easier—I mean, ambulances have to get there at top speeds, right?

The truth is, it's not really the twisty roads that have me worried; it's the fact that my mentor/father, whose name I now know is Aidan, keeps sending lost spirits my way to remind me he's waiting to talk to me. I wrap my arms around myself.

"Another spirit?" Nolan asks, lowering his voice to a whisper.

I nod, unable to speak because my teeth are chattering. I can't see the spirit yet, but I know it's near. Luckily, with Nolan standing close, I'm not *too* cold because being near him keeps me a little bit warmer. Still, I pull the too-long sleeves of my navy blue cardigan over my wrists because apparently when spirits touch me, my temperature plummets and my heart races. Which has happened *way* too many times in the forty-eight hours since I met Aidan. Well, *met* might be a bit of an overstatement. *Met* implies we shook hands, exchanged pleasantries, that kind of thing.

"You can't avoid him forever, Sunshine," Nolan says, leaning on the car beside me. He's wearing a bluish-gray hooded sweatshirt with a scarf, gloves, and a rather silly-looking bright yellow snowcap with a red ball on the top. I'm still not entirely used to seeing him without his grandfather's leather jacket. I'm not sure he even owns another coat. But on New Year's Eve he gave me the jacket he loves so much and insisted I keep it even after all the craziness happened. It's hanging in my closet at home now, still not entirely dry. "You should talk to him."

"That would be a lot easier if I had the slightest idea of what I wanted to say to him."

Okay, maybe that's not entirely true. There are about a million things I want to say to him. Well, a million things I want to *ask* him: Why did you abandon me? How could you endanger my mother? Who is my birth mother? Where have you been all these years? Why haven't you come forward until now? What made you think this was the right way to introduce yourself: *Hi, I stood by silently while your mother almost died so I could test you while you figured out you weren't the person you thought you'd been your entire life—that, in fact, you weren't technically a* person *at all?*

But when he showed up in my driveway on New Year's Day, I found myself completely tongue-tied. When he held out his hand and told me his name, explained who he was—my birth father, as if his milky-green cat eyes identical to mine didn't do the talking for him—I could barely even control my muscles enough to make my own hand shake his. I opened my mouth, but the only sounds I could manage were pathetic little mumbles of *Whydidyou howcouldyou whendidyou* before I finally realized it was all too much. I shook my head and ran inside, leaving Nolan all alone on the porch with him.

The guy may have been my birth father, but he was also the person who put my mom—my adopted mom, but my *real* mom nonetheless—in danger so he could test my newly activated supernatural skills. I'd believed that when I finally saw him I'd give him—as Mom would say—a piece of my mind. But instead, my mind went totally, miserably, shockingly blank.

"He told me he needed to talk to you," Nolan says for what's probably the twelfth time.

"I know," I answer. "But I'm not ready to talk to him yet."

"I understand that." Nolan nods slowly. "And I get where you're coming from. But you're going to have to talk to him eventually, so why not get it over with?"

Finally I spot the spirit that's been making my teeth chatter. It's a man in his midtwenties. Immediately I know his name was Ryan Palmer. His face is pale blue, his lips purple, and his eyes are blood shot. He drowned, and it looks like a terrible way to go. I step to the side of Nolan to reach the man and touch him on the shoulder. I close my eyes and help him move on. It feels as natural as breathing. I can't tell if helping this amount of spirits is normal or if Aidan really is sending every single local spirit

in my direction. It feels like he thinks I need a reminder that he's waiting. Like there's even the slimmest, smallest chance I might forget he's here.

That he's my mentor.

That he's my father.

That I'm a member of a race of magical-mystical-guardian-angel-types for the entire human species.

Those aren't exactly the kind of details a girl could just forget willy-nilly. However much she might want to.

"Can we please, please change the subject?" I beg, squeezing the car keys in my hand so hard it hurts. Part of me just wants to go. To hop in the car and drive off before the next spirit is drawn to me. I mean, it may feel good to help the dead find peace, but it can also be quite frightening when someone didn't die so peacefully and they suddenly appear. Luckily I haven't had to help any murder victims yet.

"All right," Nolan acquiesces, leaning against the car beside me. "What do you think of our new visual arts teacher?"

If I could playfully shove him like half the girls across the parking lot are doing with their boyfriends, I would. Not that Nolan is my boyfriend. He's not exactly *not* my boyfriend either. I mean, he's my boy and he's my friend and he's really cute (even with that ridiculous hat) and I'd love it if he *could* be my boyfriend, but we can't touch each other because every time he gets too close, I get queasy and not in the weak-in-the-knees, good kind of way. Feeling ill every time the boy you like touches you has never been the opening setup to a great romance.

"That's not really changing the subject," I joke, smiling just a little bit. Our new visual arts teacher, Mrs. Johnson, is nothing at all like our old one. Victoria Wilde wasn't even a teacher at

all, it turned out. Aidan planted her at Ridgemont High just so she and I could find each other. But now she's gone, and I don't know where.

"I should get going," I say finally, pushing myself off of the car. "I can't put this off much longer."

"My thoughts exactly," Nolan answers, but we both know he's not talking about driving.

"Plus, if I have to look at that silly hat any longer, I might have a seizure or something." I grin, glad that I managed to make a joke. Nolan smiles, impervious to my teasing.

I settle into the driver's seat, checking my mirrors and adjusting my seat even though I already did all of that before I drove to school this morning. I push my sleeves back up over my wrists so my hands are free to grip the steering wheel. The door still open, Nolan leans down to say good-bye.

Looking through my windshield, I see other girls kissing their boyfriends before they drive away. Maybe I'll have to add that to my list of questions for Aidan, if I can just get my vocal chords to work in his presence next time I see him: Why can't I kiss the boy I like so much?

No. I will not ask him that. That's way too personal for a person I barely know, even if he is my birth father. Anyway, I don't even know whether Nolan *wants* me to kiss him. He's never tried to kiss me. But, then again, the past few months since we met haven't exactly been romantic; in fact, they've been terrifying. A high creepiness factor doesn't really lend itself to lingering stares and heaving bosoms and long walks in the rain across the moors.

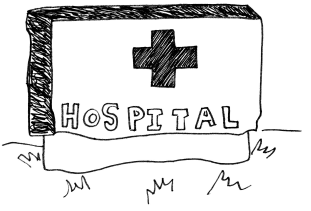
Get a grip, Sunshine. You're a luiseach, not the main character in a Brontë novel.

"Good luck!" Nolan shouts, shutting the door for me.

Right, it's time to drive. As I shift the car into drive and pull out of the parking lot, Nolan's tousled sandy hair is visible in my rearview mirror. He must have taken off his hat, and I can't help but smile. It doesn't occur to me that this might be the last time I smile for a very long time.

CHAPTER TWO

Emergency



These aren't nice, pretty, baby flurries. They're big, fat, wet snowflakes, so heavy that the windshield wipers can barely move across the glass in front of me. The already intimidating drive from Ridgemont High to Mom's hospital has turned downright treacherous. I inch along at a snail's pace, which gives me plenty of time to think about the fact that the drive isn't the only reason I'm not looking forward to picking Mom up. I mean, I'm definitely looking forward to the picking-her-up part; it's the *hospital* part I'm not so crazy about.

I never used to be queasy about hospitals. Mom was—is—a neonatal nurse, and when I was a baby, I was a regular at the hospital's day care back in Austin. Later, when Mom's schedule was crazy and she couldn't find a sitter for me after school, sometimes I'd hang out at the nurse's station, quietly doing my homework. I got used to the sound of sirens and crying babies and even doctors and nurses shouting for aid.

But everything's different now. The last time I was at this hospital I helped a spirit move on. In fact, it was my very first time helping a spirit move on. But that's not what's making me drive even slower than the slowest of cars on the road in front of me; it's the fact that the last time I was at this hospital was also the day they told me Victoria was dead. Hearing those words was like a punch to the gut, like I'd never catch my breath again.

My thoughts are drowned out by the sound of sirens screaming. Ambulance after ambulance comes careening out of the hospital parking lot, and I'm barely able to pull into a spot before it starts.

It's just one spirit at first. A young man who died seconds ago, a victim of a multiple-car pile-up on the freeway I just left behind. His name is Matt, and he's sitting in the passenger seat beside me, his piercing blue eyes unwavering as he stares at me. He died from some sort of major trauma to his torso. I try not to let my gaze drift down to his midsection. I know seeing his wounds will be terrifying, so instead, I stare back into his eyes, which are filled with sadness. His was the car that started it. His bald tires skidded over a slick patch, drifting across the median and into oncoming traffic. I can feel the tremendous guilt saturating his spirit; he won't know peace until he moves on.

But before I can help him, I feel something else. Another spirit. A woman this time, Kimberly, who's only a few years older than I am. She's standing beside the driver's side door waiting for me. Her injuries don't look as traumatic as Matt's, but blood is dripping from her ear. A head injury killed her, mostly hidden by her hair.

Two spirits this close to me, this quickly, is overwhelming. Even though heat is blasting from the vents behind the steering

wheel, it's suddenly so cold in here that I can see my own breath coming out in hyper little pants because my heart is pounding, beating faster than it ever has before.

Another spirit is near. I gasp at what I see and look away as quickly as I can. His wounds are horrific. No one told me I'd see spirits in such graphic detail. But then again, I've been avoiding my mentor, the one person who can tell me things like that. Before I have time to process what's happening, another spirit is here, waiting for my help. I can't see Matt anymore, the man whose bald tires caused this tragedy. I want desperately to help him move on, but I can't find him. I can only feel the overwhelming cold from all of them at once. I sink into the gray upholstery of my seat as though someone has placed an enormous weight around my neck, pressing me down, down, down.

I've never known cold like this before. I should have zipped my jacket before I got in the car, should have put on the multicolored crocheted hat and gloves that are sitting uselessly in my backpack in the backseat. I should have put on boots with thick socks instead of my sneakers when I got dressed this morning. I should have borrowed Nolan's ridiculous hat.

I manage to focus on my fingers, still gripping the wheel, and I'm not surprised when I see they're turning blue at the knuckles. I try to catch my breath, but it's run away without me. I can't keep my eyes open; I've been deprived of oxygen for too long, and I'm about to pass out. Mustering whatever strength I have left, I press down on the horn as hard as I can, like I think I can scare the spirits away.

Mom opens the door on the passenger side, and my overworked heart leaps. "Didn't want to run out in the snow to pick up your poor old mom so you just honked the horn?" she

says with a smile that fades away the instant she sees the state I'm in.

"Sunshine!" she shouts, reaching across the car and putting her warm fingers on my neck. When she feels my pulse, she pulls back for a second in shock. But then she goes right into nurse-mode. She unclicks my seatbelt and pulls me across the car and onto my back on the snowy ground. She starts performing CPR and somehow manages to get the attention of the EMTs across the lot at the same time. The next thing I know, I'm on a gurney being wheeled into the hospital, my mother squeezing one of those airbags I've only ever seen on television, trying to breathe air back into my lungs.

If I could talk, I'd tell her it's no use. The doctors can't help me; they're not qualified to treat this kind of thing. Thanks to Nolan's research, I know that a luiseach like me can't be killed by a dark spirit, but I find myself wondering whether an onslaught of light spirits can kill me. I'm panting so hard that my lungs ache. The doctors and nurses are shouting around me as I'm wheeled into the ER and hooked up to their tubes and machines.

"We need to stabilize her heart!"

"We need to raise her body temperature!"

"We need to figure out why the heck an otherwise healthy sixteen-year-old girl just got wheeled into the ER with hypothermia and cardiac arrhythmia."

Okay, maybe they didn't shout that last one. But it's not difficult to guess it's what they're all thinking.

In all the chaos, as I drift in and out of consciousness, I can feel the warmth coming from my mother's touch. Her hand on my arm is a tiny source of heat keeping me connected to the world of the living, a small flame in the darkness. Suddenly I

have a better understanding of what it must be like for the spirits who find me after they pass.

And then, it all stops. Not the flurry of physicians around me but the pounding in my chest, the freezing of my extremities. The sound of the heart monitor they'd hooked me up to shifts from a screeching wail into a steady beep. The warming blankets they'd packed around me feel too hot; in a snap I go from shivering to sweating.

The weight on my shoulders lifts. The spirits have vanished. My tunnel vision fades, and everything is bright again. Mom slips out of nurse-mode and back into mom-mode. She shoves the machines aside and leans down over me, wrapping me up in a tight hug.

"Mom," I gasp. "I just started breathing again. I don't think smothering me is the best idea." I expect her to laugh at my joke, but instead she goes on hugging me, her cheek pressed against mine. I can feel that her face is wet with tears.

"I'm okay," I say, and she finally releases me. She turns to face the doctors surrounding my bed, each of them looking more baffled than the last.

"What happened to my daughter?"

"We don't know, Kat," someone answers. I look at his ID tag and see his name is Dr. Steele. The same last name as Lucy from *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen. Apparently with my vital signs back to normal—I think—I'm back to relating my life to the stories of my favorite writer. At least some things never change.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Mom stands, looking confused. "There has to be an explanation for an episode of this magnitude."

I close my eyes. There's an explanation all right, just not one my mother—or pretty much anyone—would believe. Like most people—like me, before the past four months—Mom believes in science and reason, not magic and mystery. I couldn't convince her our house was haunted even after a demon had taken possession of her body. Especially after the demon possessed her.

"We'd like to admit her for observation," Dr. Steele offers finally. "You can stay with her overnight."

"Of course I'm going to stay with her," Mom snaps, and I actually feel kind of sorry for Dr. Steele. It's not his fault he doesn't know what's wrong with me. Not his fault he'll never be able to answer my mother's questions to her satisfaction. Not his fault that from now on she's probably going to be haunted by the idea that he's a terrible doctor.

"I'm okay, Mom," I say again, and she turns from the doctor to face me, fresh tears brimming in her eyes.

It's clear she doesn't believe me. I'm not sure I do either.