

New York Times Bestselling Author of
THE FINAL GIRL SUPPORT GROUP

GRADY HENDRIX



HOW TO SELL A HAUNTED HOUSE

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HOW TO SELL A
HAUNTED
HOUSE





Grady
Hendrix

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Amanda,
You are with me everywhere,
I see you where I go,
As if you surround me always,
Even though
I know
Exactly where I buried you.

HOW TO SELL A HAUNTED HOUSE



Chapter I

Louise thought it might not go well, so she told her parents she was pregnant over the phone, from three thousand miles away, in San Francisco. It wasn't that she had a single doubt about her decision. When those two parallel pink lines had ghosted into view, all her panic dissolved and she heard a clear, certain voice inside her head say:

I'm a mother now.

But even in the twenty-first century it was hard to predict how a pair of Southern parents would react to the news that their thirty-four-year-old unmarried daughter was pregnant. Louise spent all day rehearsing different scripts that would ease them into it, but the minute her mom answered and her dad picked up the kitchen extension, her mind went blank and she blurted out:

"I'm pregnant."

She braced herself for the barrage of questions.

Are you sure? Does Ian know? Are you going to keep it? Have you thought about moving back to Charleston? Are you certain this is the best thing? Do you have any idea how hard this will be alone? How are you going to manage?

In the long silence, she prepared her answers: *Yes, not yet, of course, God no, no but I'm doing it anyway, yes, I'll manage.*

Over the phone she heard someone inhale through what sounded like a mouthful of water and realized her mom was crying.

"Oh, Louise," her mother said in a thick voice, and Louise prepared herself for the worst. "I'm so happy. You're going to be the mother I wasn't."

Her dad only had one question: her exact street address.

“I don’t want any confusion with the cab driver when we land.”

“Dad,” Louise said, “you don’t have to come right now.”

“Of course we do,” he said. “You’re our Louise.”

She waited for them on the sidewalk, her heart pounding every time a car turned the corner, until finally a dark blue Nissan slowed to a stop in front of her building and her dad helped her mom out of the back seat, and she couldn’t wait—she threw herself into her mom’s arms like she was a little kid again.

They took her crib shopping and stroller shopping and told Louise she was crazy to even consider a cloth diaper service, and discussed feeding techniques and vaccinations and a million decisions Louise would have to make, and bought snot suckers and diapers and onesies, and receiving blankets and changing pads and wipes, and rash cream and burp cloths and rattles and night-lights, and Louise would’ve thought they’d bought way too much if her mother hadn’t said, “You’ve hardly bought anything at all.”

She couldn’t even blame them for having a hard time with the whole Ian issue.

“Married or not, we have to meet his family,” her mom said. “We’re going to be co-grandparents.”

“I haven’t told him yet,” Louise said. “I’m barely eleven weeks.”

“Well, you’re not getting any less pregnant,” her mom pointed out.

“There are tangible financial benefits to marriage,” her dad added. “You’re sure you don’t want to reconsider?”

Louise did not want to reconsider.

Ian could be funny, he was smart, and he made an obscenely high income curating rare vinyl for rich people in the Bay Area who yearned for their childhoods. He’d put together a complete collection of original pressing Beatles LPs for the fourth-largest shareholder at Facebook and found the bootleg of a Grateful Dead concert where a Twitter board member had proposed to his first wife. Louise couldn’t believe how much they paid him for this.

On the other hand, when she suggested they should take a break he’d taken that as his cue to go down on one knee in the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and propose. He’d been so upset when she said no that she’d finally had pity sex with him, which was how she came to be in her current condition.

When Ian had proposed, he'd been wearing his vintage Nirvana *In Utero* T-shirt with a hole in the collar that had cost him four hundred dollars. He spent thousands every year on sneakers, which he insisted on calling "kicks." He checked his phone when she talked about her day, made fun of her when she mixed up the Rolling Stones and The Who, and said, "Are you sure?" whenever she ordered dessert.

"Dad," Louise said. "Ian's not ready to be a parent."

"Who is?" her mom asked.

But Louise knew Ian *really* wasn't ready.

Every family visit lasts three days too long, and by the end of the week Louise was counting the hours until she could be alone in her apartment again. The day before her parents' flight home, she holed up in her bedroom "doing email" while her mom took off her earrings to take a nap and her dad left to find a copy of the *Financial Times*. If they could do this until lunch, then go on a walk around the Presidio, then dinner, Louise figured everything would be fine.

Louise's body had other plans. She felt hungry now. She needed hard-boiled eggs now. She had to get up and go to the kitchen now. So she crept into the living room in her socks, trying not to wake her mom because she couldn't handle another conversation about why she wouldn't let her hair grow out, or why she should move back to Charleston, or why she should start drawing again.

Her mom lay asleep on the couch, on one side, a yellow blanket pulled up to her waist. The late-morning light brought out her skeleton, the tiny lines around her mouth, her thinning hair, her slack cheeks. For the first time in her life, Louise knew what her mother would look like dead.

"I love you," her mom said without opening her eyes.

Louise froze.

"I know," she said after a moment.

"No," her mom said, "you don't."

Louise waited for her to add something, but her mom's breathing deepened, got regular, and turned into a snore.

Louise continued into the kitchen. Had she overheard half of a dream conversation? Or did her mom mean Louise didn't know she loved her? Or how much she loved her? Or she wouldn't understand how much her mom loved her until she had a daughter of her own?

She worried at it while she ate her hard-boiled egg. Was her mom talking about her living in San Francisco? Did she think Louise had moved this far away to put distance between them? Louise had moved here for school, then stayed for work, although when you grew up with all your friends telling you how cool your mom was and even your exes asked about her when you bumped into them, you needed some distance if you wanted to live your own life, and sometimes even three thousand miles didn't feel like enough to Louise. She wondered if her mom somehow knew.

Then there was her brother. Mark's name had only come up twice on this visit and Louise knew it ate at her mom that the two of them didn't have a "natural" relationship, but, to be honest, she didn't want a relationship with her brother, natural or otherwise. In San Francisco, she could pretend she was an only child.

Louise knew she was a typical oldest sibling, a cookie-cutter first child. She'd read the articles and scanned the listicles, and every single trait applied to her: reliable, structured, responsible, hardworking. She'd even seen it classified as a disorder—Oldest Sibling Syndrome—and that made her wonder what Mark's disorder was. Terminal Assholism, most likely.

When people asked why she didn't speak to her brother, Louise told them the story of Christmas 2016, when her mom spent all day cooking but Mark insisted they meet him for dinner at P. F. Chang's, where he showed up late, drunk, tried to order the entire menu, then passed out at the table.

"Why do you let him act like that?" Louise had asked.

"Try to be more understanding of your brother," her mom had said.

Louise understood her brother plenty. She won awards. Mark struggled through high school. She got a master's in design. Mark dropped out of college his freshman year. She built products that people used every day, including part of the user interface for the latest iteration of the iPhone. He was on a mission to get fired from every bar in Charleston. He only lived twenty minutes away from their parents but refused to lift a finger to help out.

No matter what he did, her parents lavished Mark with praise. He rented a new apartment and they acted like he brought down the Berlin Wall. He bought a truck for five hundred dollars and got it running again and he may as well have landed on the moon. When Louise won the Industrial Designers Society of America Graduate Student Merit Award she gave the trophy to her parents to thank them. They put it in the closet.

“Your brother is going to be hurt we have that out for you and nothing for him,” her mom had said.

Louise knew that her not speaking to Mark was the eternal elephant in the room, the invisible ghost at the table, the phantom strain on every interaction with her parents, especially with her mom, who hated what she called “unpleasantness.” Her mom was always “up,” she was always “on,” and while Louise didn’t see anything wrong with being happy, her mom’s enforced happiness seemed pathological. She avoided hard conversations about painful subjects. She had a Christian puppet ministry and acted like she was always onstage. The few times she lost it as a mother she’d snap, “You’re embarrassing me!” as if being embarrassed was the worst possible thing that could happen to someone.

Maybe that’s why she was so certain about her decision to have this baby. Becoming a mother would allow her and her mom to share something just between them. It would bring them closer together. She suspected all the things that annoyed her about her mom were exactly the things that would make her an incredible grandmother.

As Louise brushed eggshell off the counter, she thought that shared motherhood might form a bridge between them, and gradually the walls Louise had needed to protect herself would come down. It wouldn’t happen overnight, but that was okay. They’d have a lifetime to adjust to each other’s new roles—a daughter becoming a mother, a mother becoming a grandmother. They would have years.

As it turned out, she got five.

DENIAL

