

New York Times Bestselling Author of
How to Sell a Haunted House

GRADY HENDRIX



Witchcraft for Wayward Girls

A NOVEL

Fiction by Grady Hendrix

Horrorstör

My Best Friend's Exorcism

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How to Sell a Haunted House

Nonfiction by Grady Hendrix

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Witchcraft
for
Wayward
Girls

GRADY
HENDRIX

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

Amanda,
You look at life
Through the eyes of a child,
And I don't know where you got them,
And it's making me very uncomfortable.
Please, stop.

"The average unwed mother is a young moron who as a child had inadequate home training, due to the ignorance, poverty, and alcoholism of her parents."

—*MENTAL HYGIENE MAGAZINE*, 1927

"You can't call your soul your own once you've had a baby without a marriage certificate."

—*LADIES' HOME JOURNAL*, 1947

"When she renounces her child for its own good, the unwed mother has learned a lot. She has learned an important human value. She has learned to pay the price of her misdemeanor."

—*THE TELEGRAM*, 1956

"Behind the national statistics testifying to the proliferating number of adolescents giving birth, a perplexing question remains unanswered: Why do teenagers permit themselves to become pregnant?"

—*EBONY*, 1980

"You shouldn't have a baby when you're not married. You just have to stop it."

—*PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON*, 1994

"Needy girls who imagine that having a baby will fill the void in their lives are usually in for a rude shock."

—*TIME*, 2005

Sit. Listen. I need you to understand what they did to us when we were girls. That's the important thing you have to remember. We were unsocialized girls, fast girls, loose girls, emotionally immature girls, girls who grew up too fast. Rose wasn't even eighteen, Holly had just turned fourteen, I was fifteen. Whatever you wanted to call us, we were children.

I still feel like I'm going to get in trouble if I say their real names. I've kept this secret for so long I don't know how to tell it. But someone needs to know what happened to us down there.

You see, we'd been taught that the devil was the worst thing in the world, but we were too young to understand that there were worse things than the devil. We were too young to understand that their job was to convince us that the most natural thing in the world was evil, and the most evil thing in the world was natural.

We were girls. That's what they called us in their articles and their speeches and their files: bad girls, neurotic girls, needy girls, wayward girls, selfish girls, girls with Electra complexes, girls trying to fill a void, girls who needed attention, girls with pasts, girls from broken homes, girls who needed discipline, girls desperate to fit in, girls in trouble, girls who couldn't say no.

But for girls like us, down there at the Home, the devil turned out to be our only friend.

- *May 1970* -

26 WEEKS

Chapter 1

She didn't think things could get any worse, then she saw the sign. *Welcome to Florida*, it read. *The Sunshine State*.

She knew she shouldn't ask. She knew she stood in a puddle of gasoline and every word was a lit match falling from her lips. She knew her dad hated her. But that sign made her throat squeeze shut so tight she couldn't breathe, and her bloated stomach pressed on her lungs so hard she couldn't get enough air, and she'd suffocate if she didn't say something.

"Dad," she said. "Why're we in Florida?"

His hands tightened around the steering wheel until it creaked, but he kept his eyes on the road.

"Huntsville's the opposite way," she said, trying to stay calm.

They'd been driving for hours and in all that time he hadn't looked at her once. He'd shown up at Aunt Peggy's that morning so angry his hands shook as he snatched her clothes and stuffed them in her suitcase and slammed it shut. One of her bra straps stuck out the side, but she didn't think it was smart to say anything.

It isn't too smart for a girl to be smart, her mom had always said.

So she just made herself very, very small. For hours and hours she made herself so incredibly small. But they didn't know anyone in Florida. They didn't have any relatives in Florida. This was kidnapping unless he told her where they were going. He had to tell her where they were going. So she resorted to the one thing she knew could reach him.

"I saw the trailer for that *Planet of the Apes* sequel," she said because he loved science fiction. "It's about nuclear war. I bet they got the rockets all wrong."

"Goddammit, Neva!" he exploded. "Do you understand what you've done? You have ruined your mother's health, God knows what you've done to your brother and sister, and now you've ruined your aunt Peggy's good name. I don't even know who you are anymore. It'd have been better if you'd never been born!"

"Where are you taking me?" she bawled, terrified.

"I'm taking you wherever I want!" he bawled back.

"What's happening, Dad?" she asked, and she couldn't help it, she was so scared. "Why are we in Florida?"

He shifted from side to side in his seat, adjusted his hands on the wheel, then addressed the windshield like it really needed to understand this was for its own good.

"We found a place for you to stay," he explained to the windshield. "With other girls in your condition. After you're better, I'll come get you and we can put all this behind us."

The full horror of it hit her.

"You're sending me to a Home?" she asked.

Headlines from confession magazines streaked through her brain: *Disgraced Debutante Left to Rot in House of Shame! Good Girls Say No—Bad Girls Go Here! They Gave Away Their Own Flesh and Blood!* During rehearsals for *Arsenic and Old Lace* Margaret Roach had told them about the Homes. They were run by nuns who beat the girls, made them work in industrial laundries, and sold their babies, and Margaret Roach was a Catholic so she would know. The Homes were for poor girls, trashy girls, fast girls. They were for sluts.

"Daddy, you can't do this," she begged, because he had to understand, he had to turn the car around, there had to be another way. "Please, please, please, take me home, or to Granny Craven's, or talk to Aunt Peggy again. I promise I'll stay in the bedroom and I

won't make a sound and I'll vacuum and wash dishes and I'll do whatever she says, but you can't take me to a Home. They aren't for people like us. They're for Catholics!"

He turned to face her, briefly, and in that moment she saw how much he hated her.

"You've ruined everything," he said, cold and flat. A simple statement of fact.

He was right. She had ruined everything. Her mom had always told her she was going to ruin her grades by spending too much time on dramatics, she was going to ruin her eyes by reading in the dark, ruin her reputation by riding in a car with boys, ruin her figure by eating two desserts, and every time she did it anyway and nothing bad ever happened, but now she'd finally done it. Now she'd finally done something so bad nothing would ever be the same again. Now she'd finally ruined her life.

She was being sent to a Home.

She wasn't one of those wilting violets who cried at every loud noise but she couldn't help it, her body did whatever it wanted these days, and now she leaned her head against the hot window and wept—big, ugly, racking sobs.

Her dad clicked on the radio.

"...Brother, you are not prepared for Hell. You thought life was one big sinning party and there'd be no price to pay and now you're burning in the pit and finding out how wrong you were. Look up and ask for help, but what kind of help can there be in Hell..."

Florida was Hell. Back in Alabama they had hills and trees and lakes, but Florida was an endless flat tabletop with no escape from the sun. It beat down on the highway, cooked the roof of the station wagon, sent sweat slicking down her bulging stomach, trickling into her rubber girdles, pooling underneath her butt.

Her dad fiddled with the radio and a comforting ballpark voice cut through the static:

“...sets up, and here’s the pitch. It’s a fastball on the outside corner, and it’s a ball. Ty walked him. That is the first walk he’s given up and...”

She stopped crying somewhere around Tallahassee. Pretty soon after that, her dad pulled over at a Burger King and left her in the car. Sitting for so long had made her feet swell and her kidneys bruise, but she couldn’t make herself get out and walk around. Whenever they stopped at a rest area people saw her protruding stomach and at first they smiled, but then they saw the bare ring finger on her left hand and looked away or shook their heads or stared back at her over their shoulders, like she was an animal in the zoo.

Wasn’t that what they’d all said about Donna Havermeyer last year? All she’d done was gain a lot of weight and skip graduation and suddenly all the girls were talking about how she’d gotten pregnant by an officer up at the Arsenal, and then Racee Tucker said what did you expect, her whole family’s nothing but Arkansas trash, and she’d laughed, too, and now here she was. She bet that was what all those people at the rest stops thought: *Look at that Alabama trash.*

Her dad got back in and handed her a single skinny cheeseburger from the bag. He pulled out a Whopper for himself. She used to eat a single cheeseburger when they went to Sno Wite’s because she was an actress and cared about her figure, but she didn’t have a figure anymore. Now she wore her mom’s old deck shoes because they were the only ones that fit her swollen feet, and her mom’s old plaid maternity dress, and she had two chins and they were both covered in pimples, and her bust had popped a button on her dress yesterday. She tried to make the cheeseburger last a ladylike amount of time, but it was gone in three bites.

* * *

They drove through Florida for hours, and there was still more Florida to go. They passed a yellow painted billboard for Gatorland (*SEE All Kinds of Animals*), then one for the Fountain of Youth (*Beautiful Ladies Will Give You a Drink of This Famous Water!*), then more alligators (*SEE—Tons of Gators!*). Above them, buzzards circled in the merciless blue sky.

A curtain of static ate the baseball game, then a jolly grandfather said:

"...demonstrations on a number of the nation's college campuses, most of the protests related to the U.S. involvement in Cambodia..."

The radio chewed static, then:

"...is one for eleven at the plate this year, his batting average is point one nine zero one. Here's the shoe strike delivery, it's on the outside corner, it's a fastball, and that's..."

She'd tried everything to fix this. She'd searched for Humphreys 11 but couldn't find it anywhere. She'd bought a bottle of castor oil and drunk the whole thing, but it only gave her the runs. She'd jumped off her dad's worktable in the basement over and over until her legs gave out, lifted the dictionary above her head until her arms cramped; she'd even drunk turpentine, but she barely managed a capful before throwing up. She'd closed her eyes when she crossed the street and prayed she'd get hit by a car until she realized they'd probably do an autopsy and everyone would find out.

No matter what she did her stomach kept growing like it wanted everyone to see how stupid she was. They all kept finding ways to make her feel stupid. That second night at Aunt Peggy's after dinner, they'd told her she could ask anything, and she'd asked how they covered up the scar where they took out the baby, and her uncle Albert had busted a gut laughing and said it came out the same way it went in.

"But," Neva said, because it had to be more scientific than that, "it can't fit!"

Then her aunt Peggy had said *Enough of that kind of talk* and excused her from the table.

No one would tell her anything. They'd shown films in school about emotional maturity, and fire safety, and getting along with others, but no one had ever shown them a film about having a baby.

Another burst of static stabbed her in the bladder, and she realized she had to go to the bathroom again. No, no, no, no, no. She couldn't ask her dad to pull over now, not when he'd finally stopped yelling at her. She clenched everything inside herself as hard as she could.

"...Guardsmen moved in after the students smashed windows and set fires on the campus and the surrounding..."

Up north, soldiers were shooting students, and kids were smashing up their schools. The Weathermen were blowing up buildings in New York City, and her dad thought he was going to lose his job because Apollo 13 had blown up in space. Out in California, freaks were murdering people in their houses and shooting them in their cars. Everything was spinning out of control. Even her body was revolting.

"...Look out, Tonto! It's the Lawn Ranger! The Lawn Ranger, here to save you from yellow lawns, wilting bushes, and dead flowerbeds..."

The sound of the Lawn Ranger's automatic sprinkler system sprayed from the speakers. Her bladder throbbed.

"Dad?" she tried.

He ignored her. A wave of static.

"...lift up your eyes and beg for water, just a drop, just a trickle on your parched lips, and know that in Heaven there is a fountain..."

She'd taken him to the fountain on Valentine's Day.

She'd gone with Guy to the drugstore to get a Clark bar. He always needed sugar when he studied, and on the walk back she

insisted they go through the park and made him sit near the fountain.

"What's with all this sappy stuff?" He smiled.

Then he kissed her. Her bosom had been getting bigger and she knew he liked that, so she leaned into him and they necked for a minute, and then he said:

"Dad gave me the car tonight."

It should have been perfect. This was the first time she was actually going steady with a boy on Valentine's Day, even though he didn't hold her hand at school or give her his varsity letter or sit with her at lunch, but she knew that was because he was seventeen and she was fifteen and he didn't want to get razzed.

Last year it had been perfect, and when the world got scary at the end of the summer Guy told her he'd always keep her safe. Always. She watched him play football, and they went to see 2001 at the drive-in where they mostly necked, and at the Splashdown Whoop Up in Courthouse Square he took her hand, and it felt like a bubble named Always protected them, and so she told him, right there by the fountain.

She knew he'd be scared at first but she also knew that when he got over his surprise he'd squeeze her hand and say What are we going to do, Nev? or maybe Do you think we're too young to get married? or maybe put his arm around her and tell her they'd get through it together. Instead, he pulled away from her and stared into the fountain.

Her dad stared straight ahead at the road. The station wagon jolted over roadkill and lightning forked through her bladder. The sound of a waterfall filled the car:

"...tropical Hawaiian vacations, hear the waterfalls, see the sun going down over the waves, dive into one of our three swimming pools..."

Finally, Guy turned to her and his eyes were full of tears and he said, "How could you do this to me?"

Then he got up and left.

After that, she was scared all the time—scared that Guy would tell his parents, scared her parents would find out, scared Hilda would figure it out, scared Deb *had* figured it out and that was why she wasn't talking to her.

Her heart stopped beating normally and just fluttered inside her chest. She couldn't eat but her body betrayed her and she found herself standing in front of the fridge in the middle of the night scooping up leftover meat loaf with her hands and cake icing with her fingers. She started throwing up every morning before school, hugging the toilet in absolute misery, a towel draped over her head so no one could hear.

Her stomach kept growing, even when she wore two girdles. She kept letting out the waist of her plaid skirt until she couldn't let it out any more, and then she used safety pins, and when those stopped working she found a big kilt pin. For Christmas she'd gotten a red plaid poncho and she wore it all the time. When people pointed out it was seventy degrees she told them she was reducing. Her face got hairy like Michael Landon in *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and she quit the school play because how could she go onstage like this? She started playing hooky, sneaking out and buying a ticket to the matinee where she'd sit through the same show over and over again, ducking into the restroom whenever the manager came down the aisles with his flashlight.

Of course they found out. She'd had to go to school for her biology presentation ("The Fossils of Alabama") and when she fainted in the ladies', Hilda took her to the infirmary, where the nurse examined her, then sent Hilda away, locked the door, and said, "Either you tell your parents or I will."

That night her dad had dinner at home for once. After, she waited until Chip and Midge were watching TV, then sat her parents down at the kitchen table and told them calmly what had happened and how she didn't think it meant anything had to change. They

could tell school she had mono. She could do her classwork from home. She wouldn't go outside. When she had the baby it could go straight to the orphanage.

They sent Chip and Midge to Granny Craven's that night, like they didn't want her contaminating them. Of course they called Guy's parents. Of course they all had a meeting to decide what should be done. Of course she wasn't allowed to attend.

She felt her grip slipping on her bladder. It was becoming life or death.

"Dad?" she asked, and her voice sounded too loud in the car. "Could we maybe pull over for a minute? At a gas station or something?"

He stared straight ahead, and she was too scared to repeat herself.

"...whatever goes to Hell, stays in Hell. It's permanent. It's over with. Judgment has been rendered. And let me tell you something, brother, there is no forgiveness in Hell, there are no second chances..."

They'd sent her to Aunt Peggy's in Montgomery. At first it was okay. She had to hide in the back room and not make a sound when people came over, and she couldn't call home, and the only thing to read was Uncle Arthur's magazines, but she could handle it. Then it felt like the days were getting longer, and she hadn't brought any books because it felt frivolous to pack books, and she sat in that bedroom on her lumpy sofa bed, staring at the wall, starting to come unwound.

Aunt Peggy wouldn't let her leave the house, not even to go to the library, so she'd snuck out to the drugstore for some paperbacks. She didn't have any money, but there was loads of room under her poncho. How was she supposed to know Aunt Peggy would search her room while she was taking a bath? Her mom always said she had the devil in her, and she knew she needed to do a better job

controlling her impulses, but Aunt Peggy could have just loaned her the money to pay for those books. She didn't have to call Dad.

She couldn't help it. Her body betrayed her.

"Daddy," she said, and it came out in a little kid's whine that she hated. "I really have to go to the bathroom or I'm going to have an accident."

Nothing happened, then he sped up. Up ahead was a gas station with a souvenir stand outside, and he pulled into their parking lot and shut off the engine. Immediately, the inside of the car started to bake. Outside, families on vacation in plaid shorts and Hawaiian shirts walked back and forth from the gas station to the souvenir shack to their cars.

She reached for the door handle and he grabbed her arm.

"Here."

He took a quick look to make sure no one was watching, then put his entire ring finger in his mouth, slicked it with spit, and worked his wedding ring over his knuckles. He handed it to her, warm and wet, and she slid it over her ring finger, then opened the door and hauled herself out of the car.

She walked to the gas station on swollen legs, the Florida sun baking the top of her head, the hot asphalt frying the bottoms of her feet. A woman in sunglasses smiled at her pregnant stomach. She held her left hand up near her belly so they could all see the ring on her finger, but she was fifteen years old and six months pregnant and she wasn't at all confused about what they actually thought. Her dad had laid it out pretty straight.

It would be better if she was dead.