

The  
Other  
Overs

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Chicken  
House

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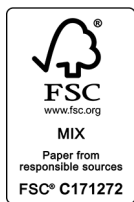
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*For Caroline*

*Let me tell you what it's like to be haunted.*

*You don't remember the first time you realized it wasn't normal: living with ghosts in your house. But the ghosts are more a part of your life than any of your friends. Than anyone at all. They are a constant, chilling presence.*

*You see them everywhere you turn. They are in the peeling wallpaper, in the stained floor, in the scratches on the doors. They are in the ceilings laced with cobwebs. They are woven into the very threads of your existence. And every so often, they tug on its strings, and threaten to pull it apart.*

*Your house is not a home. It is tall, and dark, and imposing. Even on the sunniest days, its shadow spreads further than it should. Everybody knows your house is haunted. They have seen the crumbling walls and the decaying window frames. They can imagine ghosts making themselves at home inside.*

*People shrink from it. And, in the dead of night, you shrink from it too.*



## CHAPTER ONE

**N**umber seventeen Yew Tree Lane was a tall and rickety house with grey wood panelling that was beginning to sag and rot. The roof was unusually pointy, formed of two sloping apexes, and the walls appeared as if they were being swallowed by the sprawling mass of ivy that covered them.

The inhabitants of Holden refused to go near it. There had once been neighbours, but the houses next door both sat empty now. The postman threw the post over the gate, which had fallen from its frame and sunk into the ground. The locals quickened their steps as they passed by the end of the drive. Even the trees that lined the property's perimeter seemed fearful. They strained against their roots, their long limbs stretching away from the house's walls.

Sal had lived there since he was born. When he was a

boy, his mother had told him not to leave his room at night. The house wasn't safe, she said, once the sun had gone down. In the bright light of day, he and his sister – Asha – played at slaying ghosts. In their imaginations the ghosts cowered before them. They could be beaten away with wooden spoons and old umbrellas.

At nearly seventeen years old, Sal knew the things that haunted them couldn't always be defeated. He had learnt to keep his head down, to live in their shadow. If he tried hard enough to be ordinary then maybe, one day, he would be.

It was a Sunday morning, the 4th of October, one month into the new school year. The first of the autumn leaves were beginning to fall from the trees and, down by the farm, the pumpkins were starting to swell in the patch. The corn in the field across the lane had reached shoulder height, and soon nobody would be able to see over its swaying, golden stems. But Sal would remember the day as *the day the doorbell rang*.

He was huddled on the end of the sofa when it happened, scooping cereal from the box straight into his mouth and staring at the old television screen as it cycled through endless reruns of old cartoons, screen flickering and buzzing with static sounds. At the peal of the doorbell he paused, hand halfway to his mouth, and turned to frown through the front windows. There was no sign of a car on the lane outside. There wasn't even a delivery van, driven by one of those rare drivers who hadn't yet heard the house was haunted and was still willing to climb over

the broken gate and trek the fifty metres up the drive. Sal stood up and approached the windows, attempting to peer through the ivy that covered them. The porch, and whoever was standing on it, was shielded from view.

He remained frozen in place. The doorbell rang again. And then again.

Sal made a half-hearted attempt at brushing the cereal crumbs from his hoodie. The floorboards in the hall creaked beneath his bare feet as he padded towards the front door. He looked through the stained-glass window in its centre and was met with the sight of a strangely fuzzy silhouette. Glancing behind him, he checked the hallway was empty before he unlocked the latches and opened the door.

Early morning sunshine poured through the ivy that hung over the porch. Dappled light seeped into the house, fingers reaching for the gloom in its corners.

The boy on the doorstep was around Sal's own age. But the similarities ended there. He was one of the strangest-looking boys Sal had ever seen, wrapped in a thick furry coat so large it dwarfed his slender frame. The rust-coloured fur contrasted dramatically with his fair skin and large pale grey eyes. He was peering out at Sal from beneath a knitted hat, complete with ear flaps and long plaited tassels. Standing before him, in his old hoodie and jogging bottoms, Sal felt seriously underdressed.

The boy's face broke into an ear-splitting smile. 'You must be Salem.'

Sal briefly considered correcting his pronunciation. It

was pronounced Sah-lim. The boy on the doorstep was calling him Say-lem, like the black cat in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. And he seemed to be getting a kick out of it. Which was annoying.

‘It’s Sal,’ Sal said instead. He had always hated his name, chosen by his Egyptian father. He was yet to meet anyone who pronounced it right and, even when they did, it didn’t suit him.

The boy beamed at him. He was clutching a casserole dish in his hands and he held it out to Sal with the air of someone laying down a sacrifice at an altar.

‘I prefer Salem,’ the boy told him. ‘It’s a beautiful name.’

He blinked owlishly at Sal, who stood in silence, arms folded, unsure how to react to this boy who dressed like a woodland animal and spoke like a grandmother. The boy squeezed past him into the house and, when Sal still did not accept the proffered casserole dish, set it carefully down on the hallway table. He smiled again.

‘That will need refrigerating.’

Sal frowned down at the dish. It reminded him of when his dad had died, five years before. Their neighbours had overcome their fear of the house for long enough to bring them cards and flowers. The fridge had been packed with dishes that didn’t belong to them, full of food that they couldn’t bring themselves to eat.

Sal cleared his throat. ‘Who *are* you?’

‘Oh.’ The boy looked surprised, as if it hadn’t occurred to him that Sal might actually want to know who he was. He held out a hand for him to shake. ‘Hi, I’m Pax.’



Pax's enjoyment of Sal's own name suddenly made a little more sense.

Sal accepted his hand reluctantly. Pax's skin was cold against his own. Sal let go as quickly as could possibly be deemed polite, and instantly regretted having taken his hand at all when Pax took it as an invitation to meander down the hall, looking around with interest. He ran a finger along the twisted wood of the banisters, peered at the dusty chandelier overhead and examined the faded pattern of the wallpaper.

'I thought it would be spookier,' he announced.

Sal couldn't understand why he was disappointed. Their house could have been pictured under the dictionary definition of *spooky*. It had been standing for over a century, and was beginning to fall apart at the seams. It hadn't been decorated since the 1920s. The ceilings were high and the windows were narrow. There were cobwebs in the corners and the floorboards creaked even when nobody was standing on them.

At the other end of the hall, Pax was leaning in to peer at the family photographs that lined the wall. The pictures were faded and dusty in their tarnished frames – long-forgotten snapshots that Sal, Asha and their mum passed by every day without ever really noticing. Sal and Asha as children, opening Christmas presents, their faces bright and smiling. Their mother, with her arms wrapped around them at the beach, her pale skin a stark contrast to their own, nearly glowing in the sun. His father, aged thirty-four, dark eyes staring impressively out of the frame.

It was the last photo taken before he had died.

‘Have you met the other inhabitants?’ Pax asked.

‘Well, yeah,’ Sal said, frowning. ‘They’re my family.’

‘Oh, no.’ Pax chuckled. He turned back around to face him and lowered his voice conspiratorially. ‘No. I meant . . . *you know* . . . the *other* ones.’

Sal didn’t answer. He knew perfectly well that Pax was talking about ghosts. But when he didn’t have anything he wanted to say, he liked to conserve energy and not say anything at all. He had been well into his teenage years before it occurred to him that he was unusual in that regard, and that most of the world shied away from prolonged periods of silence.

His silence did not seem to bother this boy, but that was probably because he was so busy filling it.

‘We just moved to the village,’ Pax said. ‘Me and Mum. I’ve been dying to find out more about the haunted house, of course. Mum said it was probably nonsense and she wanted to bring the casserole, but I said I’d do it. I helped make it.’

He turned back to Sal and watched him expectantly.

‘Um . . .’ Sal folded his arms across his chest. ‘Thanks?’

‘It’s no trouble.’ Pax shook his head. ‘I wanted to meet you anyway, before I start school. I’ve heard all about you.’

Sal thought that was unlikely. There wasn’t a soul in the entire village who knew *all about him*. Apart from maybe Asha, and she didn’t make a habit of talking to strangers. Especially strangers as strange as this one.

‘OK . . .’ He took a step towards the boy in the hope of

herding him back towards the front door.

Pax stood his ground. He pulled off his hat and a tumble of light-blond curls cascaded down to skim his jawline. 'I don't have any friends yet.'

'Right.' Sal sidestepped him and opened the door. Not having any friends wasn't something you just admitted to. He half wondered why Pax was starting a new school a month into the autumn term, but didn't want to encourage conversation by asking. 'Well . . . thanks for the casserole.'

Pax twisted his hat between his hands. 'You can bring the dish back any time.'

Sal nodded, already dreading doing so. He opened the door wider, and the wind swept in, scattering autumn leaves across the doormat.

'We're in the cottage by the church,' Pax said. He pointed past the gargoyles that framed the porch, and down the driveway towards the lane. 'I'm sure my mum would love to meet you.'

'OK.'

'Well.' Pax crammed his hat back on to his head, finally taking the hint and stepping over the threshold. He patted one of the gargoyles appreciatively on the head. 'I'll look out for you at school. Mrs Helliwell at number twenty-one said you'd be in my year.'

Sal barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Mrs Helliwell lived down the lane in a small cottage with a large vegetable garden, which she shared with several very fat tabby cats. She liked to think she knew everything about

everyone and enjoyed sharing her knowledge with anyone who would listen. He wondered if Pax had delivered casseroles to everyone along the lane, gathering gossip along with thank-yous.

‘I’ll leave you my number,’ Pax continued. He rested a hand on the door to prevent Sal from closing it and began rummaging around in his pocket. ‘You might need it.’

He produced a tattered scrap of card from his pocket and handed it to Sal, beaming at him, as if he thought this might seal the deal on their new and very much non-existent friendship.

‘Great,’ Sal said, as the uncomfortable beginnings of guilt stirred in the pit of his stomach. Asha would have told him he was being mean. He caved and forced a smile. ‘So I’ll see you around.’

Pax finally stepped away from the porch, casting a reluctant glance over his shoulder as he did so. He gave Sal a little wave and Sal smiled tightly back at him, watching him retreat down the drive.

‘Salem?’ Pax called out, turning around once he had nearly reached the gate. He was a good twenty metres away and his voice was almost lost in the wind.

‘What?’

‘I could help you with the hauntings,’ Pax shouted, lifting his hands to his mouth in order to help him project his voice. ‘I’m good with ghosts.’

Sal closed the door behind him, and took extra care sliding shut the bolts. He looked down at the scrap of card in his hands. *Pax Delaney* was scrawled on it in a loopy

cursive. Beneath that there was a phone number, and beneath *that* was a roughly doodled ghost.

He stuffed it in the back pocket of his jogging bottoms and hid the casserole dish in the back of the fridge, where he didn't have to look at it.

The sun was setting when Asha got home from work that evening. Sal saw her coming and opened the front door. She was clutching half a dozen shopping bags and her breath was misting in the frosty air. She strode straight through to the kitchen, flung the bags on the countertop and untied her apron with the fervour of someone finally freeing themselves of their shackles.

Asha was barely a year older than Sal, but she considered herself infinitely wiser. Sal found this annoying but had to admit she had a point. Even as kids, she had always been the smart one. When Sal was just about old enough to read, Asha would spend days on end curled up with books and scrawling stories on notepaper. She had been moved ahead a school year as soon as she got to Holden High.

She had aced her exams in spring and been offered a place at King's College London to study English Lit. She hadn't told anyone, but Sal had found the letter neatly folded inside a prospectus in her desk drawer. The shiny booklet was so well thumbed that the paper had turned as soft as tissue and the corners turned up temptingly at the edges. There was a laughing girl on the cover, white with blonde hair, carrying a backpack and looking every inch the exact opposite of his sister. When Sal had asked her

about university, she'd told him she'd decided not to go.

Asha worked full-time at the local shop now instead. She hated everything about it, from the sickly green shade of the apron to the long hours spent stacking tins under fluorescent lights and watching the clock drag its hands towards home time.

Sal watched her pile food on to the kitchen counter: cheese strings and chocolate milk, pizzas and cookie dough, hot chilli sauce and cans upon cans of Diet Coke. When she opened the fridge, she paused, confronted with the sight of the floral casserole dish. She poked at it suspiciously. Their mum spent all her time working and when she did have a chance to cook, it usually ended up burnt.

'Why is there actual human food in here?'

'We had a visitor,' Sal said.

'What?' Asha looked panicked. 'Who? Why?'

'Some weird kid.' Sal helped himself to a cheese string. 'His family just moved in down the lane.'

Asha seemed to relax at that. She moved the dish to one side and began piling the shopping in around it. 'Haven't they heard we're haunted yet?'

'They heard,' Sal said. 'That's why he came.'

'Oh dear.'

Sal nodded. 'Yeah.'

She pulled the casserole dish from the fridge and they both stood and stared at it doubtfully. When Asha pulled back the clingfilm, the room was filled with the rich buttery scent of roasted squash and thyme. Sal's mouth started watering.

‘Well, put it in the oven,’ she said decisively. ‘I’m bored of pizza.’

They ate on the sofa, curled up under blankets and shovelling the hot home-cooked food into their mouths with enthusiasm. It was a cold evening, and Asha lit a fire in the grate, casting the room in a warm orange glow. The house, for once, felt almost like a normal home.

‘I’m glad you met this kid,’ Asha announced, once she had finished. She set her empty plate down next to her feet on the coffee table and stretched out her arms above her head, yawning like a contented kitten. ‘I like him.’

Sal snorted. ‘He’s really weird.’

Asha just smiled. ‘So are you.’