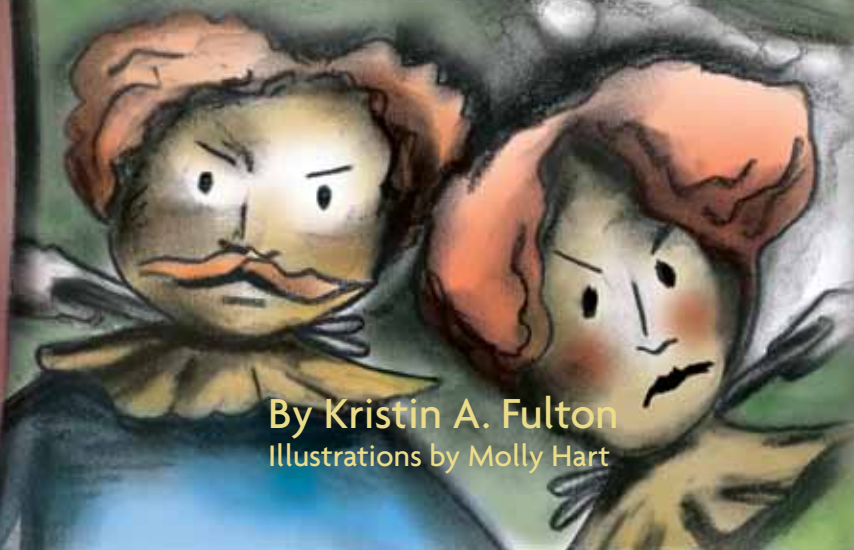


THE Haunting



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CHAPTER ONE

The Orphanage at Oak Hill

I, Chance Jameson, became an orphan when my parents, both lion tamers for the circus, were attacked, killed, and eaten by a pride of African lions they were tracking for capture. Neither of my folks had living relatives and I was too young to join the circus, so at the tender age of eighteen months, I became a ward at the Oak Hill Orphanage. I've lived at the orphanage ever since, and I can say honestly that it has been a great place to grow up. Not every orphanage can claim to have orphans who actually like living there, but Oak Hill is different because of Miss Elizabeth May, the orphanage director. She went out of her way to make everyone feel at home and loved and safe. Needless to say, we cried enough to fill a small fish pond when she died.

I'd describe the orphanage, but an actual picture is worth a thousand words, so I've included a sketch. Here it is:



Oak Hill Orphanage

As you can see, Oak Hill is humongous. What you can't tell from the picture is that it is in the middle of nowhere. The orphanage is ten miles from the nearest town and is surrounded by rolling hills and grassy pastures filled with black and white milk cows. You can't see the playground or picnic area in back of the house, or the huge barn where we shoot hoops on rainy days, and where Mr. Whibley tried to work us to the bone.

The orphanage was not always an orphanage. Hawthorne Hastings, filthy rich from his sugar cane plantations and rum factories, built the mansion in the early 1800s. He spared no cost and was often present as the mansion was being constructed. Miss May said that it took four years before it was completely finished. Being the history buff that she was, Miss May told some great stories about the mansion, but it wasn't until she was a ghost that I learned about the secret passages that crisscross through the house. They sure came in handy in what I've dubbed "Operation Orphanage Rescue."

At 8:00 in the morning on the day that Miss May died, the Whibley twins, who in a few short hours were to transform our happy world into a nightmare, paid their first visit to the orphanage. Everyone was in the dining hall eating breakfast when Miss May came in with two strangers. I noticed immediately that she was flushed and mad looking, like a mother bird whose nest was raided. It struck me as highly unusual; Miss May was always cheerful and unfailingly calm. The man at her side mumbled something to her, and she rang a little bell to get our attention. "Children, I'd like you to say hello to Mr. Stanford Whibley and his twin sister, Miss Ida Whibley. They are distant cousins of Emily Hastings, who left her huge fortune to provide funds for this orphanage, and they are members of the board that oversees Oak Hill."



Ida & Stanford Whibley

We dutifully called out hello to the two people standing next to Miss May. They weren't identical twins; in fact, the only features the Whibleys shared were their mean, beady eyes and the same shade of reddish-brown hair styled in an odd helmet of tight curls. Stanford Whibley, a short man with a barrel chest and big, hammy arms, glared at us as we finished our pancakes. He wore a checkered coat and his trousers were held up by suspenders stretched tightly over a belly as round as a jumbo beach ball. His small eyes were shadowed by black circles, giving him an ominous appearance, and a thick, curling mustache covered his upper lip and drooped down either side of a lumpy jaw.

Ida Whibley stood on the opposite side of Miss May. She was at least six feet tall and as thin and bony as Stanford was round. Her eyes were set close together and her eyelids were hooded like a lizard's. Her nose didn't help her looks; it was long and came to a sharp point at the end. An equally long chin jutted under thin lips that pressed together in a grim line. She reminded me of a cartoon witch from a comic book.

Mr. Whibley cleared his throat to speak. "Hello, girls and boys." He waggled his fingers at us in a fake-friendly wave. "My sister and I are the newly appointed heads of the Oak Hill Orphanage Foundation and we are here to investigate the operation at Oak Hill."

Miss Whibley lifted her upper lip in what I guess was a smile but looked more like a snarl. She put on a pair of wire rimmed spectacles and peered sharply around the room as she spoke. "You children may see Mr. Whibley and me poking around and observing you orphans in your daily routine. Just carry on with your usual business, as if we aren't here."

I could see from my seat at the front of the dining hall the worry in Miss May's eyes and I was surprised, because Miss May was the most positive, look-on-the-bright-side person ever, and I wondered what was wrong. I found out that plenty was wrong right before Miss May passed out of this life later that afternoon.

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CHAPTER TWO

A Ghost is Born

As far as deaths go, Miss May's wasn't bloody or particularly painful. She died instantly, and she died doing something that she loved, which was picking cherries in the Oak Hill orchard. Because it was noon, when most people are out of their offices, Miss May decided to postpone her phone calls to the Oak Hill Board members until early afternoon. She considered going to the cafeteria after all, but she wasn't hungry in the least; in fact

her stomach still felt upset from the disturbing meeting with the dreadful Whibley twins. Miss May isn't one to sit around and do nothing, and she remembered that she had promised Hattie, our cook, to pick a quart of cherries for a cherry pie. I know all this because her ghost told me so.

I was the one who found her lying on the ground face up at the bottom of the ladder. She was partially hidden by the tall grass, and I almost walked right past without seeing her, but I saw something out of the corner of my eye, and I turned back to investigate. It was Miss May's foot sticking into the path. Finding a dead person might seem scary, but actually, it wasn't that bad because she looked fine except that her neck was at an unusual angle. At first I thought she was napping. She looked comfortable, stretched out on the lawn with her arms at her sides and her head resting on a loaf-shaped rock that looked a lot like a pillow. I called her name, but she didn't respond, so I bent down to wake her. I shook her shoulder gently, but her body was limp and unresponsive. At that point, I realized that she was dead.

I'm a little ashamed to admit it, but I started to cry. I'm not much of a tear shedder because I don't think it is particularly manly, but there I was, looking at the dead body of my favorite grownup and crying to bust a gut. I was about to run back to the orphanage to get Mr. Ivy when Miss May, as transparent as a dragonfly wing but fully formed with arms, legs, and the same curly white hair, stepped out of her dead body. "What on earth!" she exclaimed, staring at the shell of herself lying under the tree. "Get up old girl!" The transparent Miss May nudged the body with her foot. "Come on, now! Don't be a nincompoop!" She waited for a reaction from her dead body, and when there wasn't one, she looked up and noticed me. "Oh, hello there, C.J.!"

I was so startled that I practically jumped out of my skin. "Hi, Miss May," I squeaked.

"Please stop crying, or you'll upset me," she said.

"But you're dead." I replied. "I'm supposed to cry for cripes sake!"

"Well, through some strange fluke of fate, you're talking to me even though I'm dead, so there's no reason to cry."

I could see her reasoning, so I said okay, and wiped the leftover tears from my eyes with the edge of my sleeve.

"Can you believe what's happened?" she said, pointing to her body on the ground.

"Truthfully, no. I can hardly believe that I'm seeing you at all, because up until now, I never believed in ghosts!"

"I agree, C.J. I've always been a skeptic about the spirit world. I guess this proves us both wrong, because I am definitely a ghost."

"Should I be scared of you?" I asked. "Aren't ghosts supposed to be creepy?"

"I can assure you that I have the same personality I had when I was alive, and I can say proudly that I was never creepy."

"What exactly happened, Miss May? I mean, how did you, uh, die and so forth?"

"By a chain of events so innocent you wouldn't give it a second thought. I was savoring an extra large Queen Anne cherry when the tiniest of belly feathers from a baby bird in a nest at the top of the tree floated down at the very moment I inhaled. The feather flew into my nose and tickled madly, and I sneezed, which caused that luscious cherry to catch in my throat. I couldn't breathe."

"Bummer," I said.

“Use proper English, C.J.!”

“Okay,” I replied. “What a tragic accident.”

“I tried to perform the Heimlich maneuver on myself, to dislodge the cherry, and I lost my balance. The back of my head ended up striking that boulder.” She pointed to the large, rectangular rock that her head rested on. “Why, it looks exactly like a pillow, doesn’t it?”

“Wow, it sure does,” I said. “You actually look like you’re taking a nap.”

For some crazy reason, Miss May’s ghost burst into giggles and she couldn’t stop. She laughed until she cried, and I knew that she was having a wacky reaction to the whole situation, dying and everything, so I let her carry on for awhile. After a few minutes, just to calm her down, I said. “You know, it’s really not that funny, Miss May. I mean, you’re dead, which is terrible news for the orphanage.” Boy, did that succeed in sobering her up. She stopped giggling immediately and clapped both hands to her head.

“You’re right, C.J. In the shock of all this, I completely forgot about the Whipleigh twins! Oh, my! This is all too horrifying!”

She looked so worried that it just about broke my heart. “Don’t think about that right now,” I said. “Just try to calm down.”

Miss May and I were distracted by our conversation, so neither of us had seen the approach of Mr. O’Toole, the orphanage gardener. He was pushing a wheelbarrow full of leaves, and he’d apparently been watching me. “Who’re you talking to, Chance? You’ve been talking up a storm for a few minutes now, but there’s nobody else here, son.” Mr. O’Toole had a questioning look on his face, and in that moment, I realized that Miss May’s ghost

could not be seen by everybody.

“I was talking to, uh...myself, I guess,” I mumbled.

“Show him the body, C.J., and look sad. It will seem odd if you don’t,” said Miss May.

I took her cue and rubbed my eyes and sniffed. “There’s been an accident,” I announced, pointing to Miss May’s body. “Miss May must have fallen off the ladder.” The emotion of it all hit me and I got teary eyed again.

Mr. O’Toole took one look at Miss May and cried, “Lord, have mercy!” He immediately knelt down beside her, feeling carefully for a pulse in her neck, and putting his ear to her mouth to listen for her breath. Finally, he looked up at me sadly and shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s too late,” he said, which I already knew. He rose and wiped a tear away. “Come on, Chance. We’ll have to tell the others.” Mr. O’Toole put an arm around my shoulders to lead me away.

“Good-bye for now, C.J.” said Miss May’s ghost. “Be strong for the other kids, and tell them everything will work out for the best.”

“Okay, I will, Miss May,” I said automatically, and I gave her ghost the thumbs up sign. I realized my mistake when Mr. O’Toole looked at me funny.

“Are you all right, Chance?” he asked.

“I think so. Just a little light headed.”

“Naturally, son. It must have been a shock to find her this way.”

“You’re not kidding,” I said, thinking to myself that he didn’t know the half of it.

Mr. O’Toole and I went to tell the horrible news, and to summon the proper authorities. I didn’t see Miss May’s ghost

again until her funeral service in the orphanage chapel three days later. By that time, the orphanage was in the clutching, greedy hands of Stanford and Ida Whipley.

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THE Haunting

Other than being an orphan, Chance Jameson is just a normal kid when a freak accident leaves Oak Hill Orphanage in the hands of the greedy, ruthless Whipley twins.

Will Chance and friends succeed in saving the orphanage?

Find out how the orphans and a pair of ghosts plan a “good old-fashioned haunting” and win the battle for their well being.



**LET THE
FRIGHTFUL
FUN BEGIN!**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ISBN 978-0-9896146-1-0



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