

Chapter 1

I HATE THE Thousand Clowns Motel, and I haven't even got out of the car yet.

After driving all afternoon and half the night, Theresa's dad, Mr. Martinez, pulls into the parking lot, and the four of us climb out, exhausted and ready for sleep.

"We made these reservations three months ago," Mr. Martinez says to Theresa. "So, refresh my memory. Why are we staying here when there's a perfectly good Holiday Inn a half-mile back?"

My best friend and ghost-chasing partner pokes her thumb at her eleven-year-old brother, Joey, already off taking pictures of the spotlighted thirty-foot clown statue we drove past at the entrance.

"Oh, yeah. Duh." Mr. Martinez runs his fingers through his short dark hair and gives me an embarrassed smile. "Sorry, Kerry, but you know Joey."

I do know Joey. Two years younger than Theresa and me, his only obsession was insects when I first met him. But a few months back, he developed another interest. Clowns.

Theresa and I stay with the car and the luggage while Mr. Martinez checks in and Joey runs around blissfully snapping photos. Why, I don't get, since if a circus married a motel, this place is definitely what their kid would look like. Simply hideous. And the name is no joke. I count 146 clowns, and that's just what I can see from the parking lot. Who knows what the rooms look like? I'm not sure if it's the bone-white skin or all the creepy red grins, but, God, I hate this place, and the cold I'm coming down with certainly doesn't help matters. Oh, well. It's just for one night, and Joey's in heaven.

Five minutes later, Mr. Martinez returns holding two room keys. "You girls are in 214. I've arranged for wakeup calls at six a.m. sharp. It's almost eleven, so, no staying up late watching your ghost shows." He passes a key to Theresa. "Joey and I will be right below you, so stomp on the floor if anything happens."

"Thanks, Daddy. We'll be fine."

"Please don't turn on the TV," I beg Theresa. "I've got a cold coming on and I'm craving sleep."

We roll our suitcases across the lumpy blacktop, past a family of clownshaped hedges, and *bump, bump, bump* them up the oddest staircase I have ever seen. Standing on each of the steps are painted-metal clowns, their white-gloved hands raised to support the railing, another clown, just long and sausage like.

Avoiding all contact with the railing, I reach the top and wheel ahead of Theresa.

"I feel awful," I tell her, desperate to get to bed. "My head is all stuffy."

"I'm sorry," Theresa says. Seeing her glasses are smudged, she uses her Mickey Mouse tee shirt to clean them. "Maybe it's just allergies."

"Right. To clowns."

Blocked by luggage, she passes the room key to me, and I unlock the door. I turn on the lights, and then . . . I scream.

Dressed like a clown and holding a butcher knife, a crazed serial killer grins at me from the chair across the room. I turn to run and stumble over the luggage, landing on top of both suitcases.

Naturally, Theresa bursts out laughing. "It's just a big old doll," she tells me, still chuckling. "I saw one on a YouTube video. Watch." She steps closer and the clown's head thrashed from side to side. "See? Motion activated."

I run my finger along the edge of the knife. Plastic. "Super. I can't wait until two in the morning when I get up for a glass of water. I'll probably wet myself when that thing starts shaking."

Theresa offers to take out the batteries, which we do. But after a little begging, I also convince her to help me stuff Beetlejuice into the closet. Out of sight, but definitely not out of mind. We get ready for bed, and before turning out the lights, I slide open the closet door. Yup. He's still in there. Smiling.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I wake up with a jolt, unsure of where I am. Scratchy sheets and the subtle smell of thirty-year-old carpeting remind me that it's the Thousand Clowns Motel, me in one full-sized bed, Theresa in the other. The clock radio, one of the few things in the room that isn't clown-themed, tells me it's 2:58. Head still plugged and nose runny, I stuff a second pillow beneath my head and pluck a few Kleenex from the clown-covered tissue box on the nightstand. Lovely.

Nothing goes with a head cold like a clown overdose.

Feeling a chill, I locate my covers, which have worked their way down around my waist. As I pull them up to my chin, I look over at Theresa in the other bed, a dim lump since the only available light is leaking out from beneath the closed bathroom door.

Even though the accommodations could be nicer, The Thousand Clowns does have one redeeming feature. It's only a ten-minute drive to the Circus Kadnikov Winter Quarters. Here to research his next historical novel, Mr. Martinez has an appointment to interview the head animal tamer early tomorrow morning. With the excuse that they'd be getting two rooms anyway, Theresa talked her dad into letting me come along.

So, if I don't want to nod off in front of the tigers, I better get back to sleep. I peer over at the clock just as the numbers turn to three. Back in England where I grew up, some still refer to it as the witching hour. Since the thought's not exactly a sleep inducer, I push it aside and nod off thinking of warm sun and sandy beaches.

It isn't long before my eyes spring wide again. With goosebumps prickling my entire body, I reach for the blankets. This time they're all the way down at my ankles. Did I really kick them off, or is this some sort of prank? I look over at Theresa.

Still as a stone and breathing softly, she looks innocent enough. I give my nose another blow and tuck the blankets under me. Airways clear and securely bundled, I slowly drift off, only to be woken a few minutes later by a soft thunking sound.

I lift one eyelid. From what I can tell, Theresa hasn't moved. So, what made that sound? I sit up. The last time I saw my overnight bag, it was sitting on the clown's chair. But it's not there now. I lean forward.

Ugh. Just as I thought. The little suitcase has slipped off the chair, and my things have spilled all over the carpet. Too tired to get up, I leave the mess for the morning and roll over, securing my blankets beneath me in case Theresa really did pull them down. But as I start to nod off, I feel the empty side of the mattress lower behind me, as if someone just sat down.

Eyes still shut, I say, "So, it *was* you. What's next on your agenda, tickling? Please don't. You know I'm not feeling well."

"What are you talking about?"

Noticing the distance in Theresa's voice, my throat tightens. If she's still in her bed, then, who's sitting on mine? I gather my courage and roll over to find a roundish spot on the mattress is pushed down. In other words, a butt indent.

"No way!"

"What?" Theresa sits up. "What's going on?"

"There's nobody sitting on my bed!"

"Isn't that a good thing? Who did you expect would be sitting there?"

"You." I tug the covers up to my eyes. "I felt the mattress dip like someone sat beside me, and since you pulled down my blankets earlier, I thought . . ."

"I didn't sit on your bed, Kerry. And I sure as heck didn't pull down your covers."

"Then who did?" I look around and gasp. The clown doll is back in its chair, one baggy pant leg crossed over the other. Its wide toothy grin stands out in the near darkness.

"Theresa . . . ?" As always, anxiety brings on my asthma, and her name comes out a wheezy squeak as I point at the chair with my eyes. "Tell me you put that there."

“Put what where?” She brushes her curly bird’s nest hair from her eyes and follows my gaze. “Holy crabs! It’s back!” With no invitation, she leaps into my bed and huddles up against me.

“I’ll take that as a no,” I rasp, noting the room’s sudden temperature drop.

“Looks like we’ve got another ghost.” She blinks as her words come out as vapor.

“Well, yeah,” I wheeze, “Either that, or the maid snuck in to get a jump on her cleaning.” Chest tightening, I point at the nightstand. “Pass me my inhaler and a couple of tissues, would you? They’re right there beside you.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather keep my hands under the covers. I don’t like the look of that butcher knife.”

“It’s plastic, remember?” I give her a shove. “Just do it.”

“Oh, all right.” Eyes glued to the clown, she darts one hand out and snags both inhaler and tissue box with one swift motion.

“Thanks.” I take a long draw from my inhaler and give my nose a good blow. “Now, turn on that table lamp.”

Her gaze bounces between me and the clown. “What for?”

“So we can see the clown better, obviously.”

“Fine.” Gaze never leaving the doll, she clicks on the lamp.

I was hoping the light would make the thing less scary, but it doesn’t. Chalk-white skin. Six-inch smile. I thank God the knife really *is* plastic and, heart beating through my pajama top, whisper into Theresa’s ear, “There’s obviously a ghost in the room. We should try communicating with it.”

Unlike her and Joey, who see and hear ghosts without any help, I can’t unless I have my ghost-chasing equipment with me. But despite such a unique privilege, or maybe because of it, Theresa’s always been skittish around spirits, even though she’s had plenty of experience since moving into her grandmum’s old Victorian. I suggest she start with some introductions, and after a bit of whining, she gives in.

“Hello . . . ?” she calls out. “My name’s Theresa. What’s yours?” Huddled like kittens, we stare.

“So, what’s going on?” I ask. “Did it speak? Can you see it?”

“Nuh-uh.”

Three-o-nine arrives, and here we sit, Theresa gaping and me breathing through my mouth. The longer I’m forced to stay awake, the more I want to slap the grin off that stupid clown’s face. Realizing if the ghost was going to hurt us it would have done it by now, I sit up.

“Oy, you ghost. Do something already. We know you’re here. You’ve turned the room into a walk-in refrigerator.” Again, we stare.

“Is this going to go on all night?” I groan. “Come on, you blasted clown. Do something.”

Again, we stare, but this time our wait isn’t long. Slowly and deliberately, the clown’s crossed leg slides off its mate, and the big yellow shoe lands with a thump onto my favorite jeans.

“That’s it?” I blow out a sigh. “I’m sick as a dog, and you kept me up for that?” With exhaustion beating out my fear, I say, “Look, if you’ve got something to say, then say it. Otherwise, we’re going to pick you up from that chair and toss you into the parking lot.”

Grumbling, Theresa knees me under the blankets. “Maybe you are.”

I raise the sheet to block the ghost’s view of our mouths. “Play along, silly. I think we can bluff it.” When nothing happens, I toss back the covers.

“Okay, here I come.”

“Wait.” Theresa swings her arm over to stop me. “I see something.” “What?”

From the look on her face, it’s closer to a six-week-old beagle puppy than any bone-chilling ghoul. She pulls herself forward and kneels on the bed, eyes no longer on the clown, but on the empty wall beside it.

“Hey, you’re just a kid.” She tips her head.

"Tell me." I grip her arm. "What are you seeing?"

Still facing the wall, Theresa signals for me to be quiet. "Uh huh . . . uh huh . . . I understand." She turns back to me. "His name is Stanley Corcoran. He was learning to be a circus clown when he died, but they buried him in regular clothes. Judging by that and the way he keeps fading in and out, I'd say he lived some time back in the 1800s. How old were you, Stanley? Twelve?" She looks away, but turns back after a few moments.

"Thirteen. He died on June tenth, 1862. He also smells like cotton candy."

"He told you that?"

"Just the part about when he died. The smell I figured out for myself."

I attempt a sniff, but with both nostrils feeling as if they're plugged with concrete, I drop back onto my pillow, frustrated. "So, what brings him here? The lovely décor?"

Theresa gives me one of her eye rolls, then turns back to the empty space on the wall. At first, She furrows her dark eyebrows, but after a bit, they relax, and she pivots her attention back to me.

"Actually, yes, he does like it here. And he's from London, just like you." Smiling, she covers her mouth with her hand. "*His* accent's even worse than yours."

Ignoring Theresa's little dig, I yawn. Normally, I'd be thrilled for any ghost contact, but the way I feel now, even an appearance from William Shakespeare would make me grumpy.

"So, what killed you?" I ask, wishing the ghost would go away. "Did the brakes go out on your clown car?"

"Not funny." Theresa turns back to the ghost. "How *did* you die, Stanley?"

After a few more nods and one long stretched-out *aaaawwww*, Theresa turns back to me with moist eyes. "That was such a sad story. He says the circus was in London, the first city on their world tour, when something spooked the elephants. The audience freaked out, and all the screaming drove the big bull

elephant crazy. Stanley was afraid it would stampede the crowd, so he ran over to help calm it down.”

I give my nose another swipe. “I’m guessing that didn’t end well.”

Her nose crinkles. “No . . . it didn’t.”

“So, if he died over in England, how did he end up here, half-way across the world in California?”

“Good question.” She gazes back at the not-so-empty wall, and after a few more nods, tells me, “He loved the circus so much he didn’t want to leave it. Says he followed the troop for years, all over the world. But somewhere around 1970, they went out of business and all their stuff got sold. Some pieces even ended up here, at The Thousand Clowns.” She looks back at her new ghost friend. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that, Stanley?” She listens, and a slow smile grows. “Really? No, we weren’t planning on it.”

“What?” I pull some more tissue from the box. “What weren’t we planning?”

“A trip to England. He says we’ll be going soon.”

“We are?” Doubtful, but not one to argue with ghosts, I blow my nose and say, “That’s nice. I haven’t seen my gran for over a year.”

“He also says we’re going to meet an old friend of his. Someone named Reggie. He asked us to give him his regards.”

“Sure, sure.” Again, I raise up on my elbows. “I don’t get it, Stanley. You seem like a nice enough bloke. Shouldn’t you be leaving this place?”

“Seriously? That’s not really for us to—”

“I wasn’t talking about the Thousand Clowns, I meant here. On Earth. He’s been dead over a hundred years. Isn’t it time he moved on?”

“Yeah, Stanley.” Theresa looks back. “Why haven’t you moved on?” She listens to the ghost’s response, then frowns. “He says he doesn’t know how.”

“Really?” I thought it would be instinctive, the way birds just jump out of their nests and fly. Anxious to get back to sleep, I say, “Maybe we can help him. Do you see a light, Stanley?”

Still looking at the ghost, Theresa shakes her head and says, "No. Just the ones here in the room. Look harder, Stanley. It's got to be there." After a few seconds, her face brightens. "He sees it now. Says he never noticed it

before because it's so small, like one tiny star in the sky."

I sit up. "Go to it. Don't be afraid."

"He's doing it," Theresa says. Wide-eyed, her gaze elevates. "He's rising up, Kerry. He's . . . he's gone."

"Terrific. Now we can *all* get some rest." I flop back onto my pillow and nudge her with my foot. "Go on. Back to your own bed before you catch this stupid cold."