

Chapter 1

“So, the people who run these haunted houses actually charge money to scare people?”

My best friend, Joey takes the stick of gum I offer.

“That’s right.” I pop a fresh stick into my own mouth.

He shoves aside my laptop, dirty clothes, and remote-control car and sits on my bed to unwrap it. “I don’t get it, Elbie.”

“It’s not complicated. Folks just like being scared.”

“I’ve never enjoyed it.”

“Then you’ve probably never experienced a really good haunted house.”

“Is that a joke?” Joey pats my bed. “I’m sitting in a haunted house right now.”

I never thought of it that way, but Joey does have a point, considering my family lives above a funeral home. Like my dad, my grandpops was a mortician, the person who gets your loved one ready for their funeral. Anyway, a mortician needs a place to work, so grandpops bought this house and turned the upstairs into a real nice home for his family to live. The rest of the place, he turned into the Virtue Funeral Home. Years later, Grandpops retired

and moved to Florida, and now we live upstairs. The basement is where Dad prepares his “clients” for their last public appearance, and the ground floor is where the money stuff gets done and services are arranged and performed.

So, yeah. Joey’s right. There’s always at least one body in this place. Sometimes a lot more. And every one of them has a ghost following it around. Lucky for us, the ghosts leave when their body leaves.

“I guess if you go by the definition of the word, you can call this place a haunted house,” I say, “What the girls’ drama class is putting together is a fake haunted house filled with actors. You know, fake ghosts.” I glance in the mirror to check my cornrows, grab my fishing pole, and head for the door.

Joey follows. “And that’s what you and the girls intend to try out for? Being fake ghosts?”

“Or monsters...or chainsaw killers. Whatever job the teacher thinks would suit us.” I open the door and discover my black-and-white cat, Skunky, is stretched out across the hallway. He’s blocking my path, so I hop over him.

Soft organ music wafts up from the chapel. There’s a viewing about to start downstairs, so I peer down over the railing into the lobby and find Joey’s older sister, Theresa down there cleaning her glasses, and her English and much taller BFF, Kerry standing there watching her. I smile because they’re right where they usually stand.

“Help.” Joey’s voice is soft because he knows there’s a viewing going on.

I turn back and find him stuck in the open doorway. In front of him, Skunky lies motionless, unless you count the occasional flick of his tail.

Grinning, I whisper, "Just jump over. Like I did."

But Joey's not stupid. "No," he says in his Abbyl flat tone. "That's what Skunky wants me to do so he can leap up and claw my..." He covers his privates with both hands, a smart move when Skunky's involved.

"Oh, all right." I rest the fishing pole against the wall, pet the white stripe down the length of Skunky's otherwise black body, and pick him up.

"Thank you." Joey eyes the fishing pole as he steps out into the hallway. "What's that for?"

"You'll see." I put Skunky down and wave Joey over to the railing. Below us, Kerry stands by as Theresa speaks to the ghosts of Mrs. Conway, a black-haired woman with gray streaks in her hair and a young freckle-faced guy named Brandon, the ghosts of two clients who just came in yesterday. Their conversation ends when the front door opens, and an older man in a dark-blue suit steps into the lobby. He signs the guest book then steps into the glass-walled chapel.

Joey and I lean over the railing to see inside. Besides Blue Suit, there's only one other mourner, an ancient-looking bald guy with wispy, fly-away hair. Dressed in a baggy gray suit, he's seated in the front row and has a saggy walrus moustache...just like the man in the casket.

“Hey,” Joey whispers. “That’s the dead man’s ghost, isn’t it?”

“Sure looks like it.”

“Don’t you know? I thought you meet all the ghosts.”

“Yeah, usually, but for some reason, my dad doesn’t want me near this one. He even made the basement off-limits to me until after the funeral. Heck, I don’t even know the old guy’s name.”

“Is that typical?” Joey studies the scene. “Having so few mourners?”

“Not really.” It’s sad for our client, but considering what I’m about to do, the fewer people in that chapel today, the better. I wait until Dad steps inside and closes the doors behind him then pull a huge and very realistic-looking plastic tarantula from the pouch of my hoodie. Plastic, of course. “Watch this.”

Joey’s eyes widen as I shove the hook on the end of the fishing line through the spider’s back. “Oh, I see,” he says calmly. “They’re going to scream.”

“That’s the plan.” I swing the pole out over the girls and lower the spider.

“Your dad’s going to be mad.”

“You know what they say, it’s better to ask for forgiveness than for permission.”

“Better for who? And your folks would never give you permission to—”

I let the line drop, and the tarantula plops onto Kerry’s shoulder, then jumps over to Theresa’s. Mrs. Conroy and Brandon vanish as the girls’ screams fill the air. Inside the chapel, Blue Suit and the ghost peer out into the lobby. Dad too, and as quiet as a snake, he slips out of the chapel and follows the girls’ gaze up to Joey, me, and the fishing pole.

“Sorry, Dad.” I reel in my spider and fling it and the pole into my bedroom, then dash down the stairs with Joey right behind me. “I...I didn’t think they would scream like that.”

“How did you expect they would scream?” Joey asks once we reach the bottom.

“No, that’s not what I...”

The girls giggle as Dad lowers his face to my level. His eyes are lasers, but to my surprise, they don’t burn as much as other times. “Boy, you are lucky the attendance at this viewing is so limited,” he tells me. “If that chapel was full, the only place you’d be going is to your room.”

I look past him into the chapel. “Limited? Any fewer people in there, and...” Dad turns his eye lasers up a notch. I shut up.

He straightens and eyes Kerry. "Elbie says your drama teacher might let him work at that haunted house she's putting together. But he's not a class member, so...?"

"No, Elbie's right," Kerry says. "The house is huge, and the class is small, so there is a good chance we'll be needing a bit of extra assistance."

"And this is taking place in that trashed-out place three streets over? The one with the iron fence surrounding the property?"

"Yes, 707 Cypress Avenue. It's been empty for years." She nudges Theresa. "Kind of like your house before you moved in."

Dad shoots me a be-good-or-else scowl, then looks from Kerry to Theresa. "Well, tell your teacher to give Elbie the boot if he pulls any of his tricks. Anything at all."

I answer for them. "Great idea, Dad." Not sure if he's in the mood for fist bumps, I give him a quick hug. "Don't want to be late. See you later." To be honest, we're ahead of schedule, but since I'm afraid he might change his mind and ground me, I hustle the others out the door. The moment we reach the sidewalk, Theresa gives me a sideways shove, and I flop onto the front lawn.

"Jerk, you know how I hate spiders." She glares down, and we lock eyes. "Swear you'll never do that again."

"Okay, okay. I swear." Geesh. You'd think I had dropped a real spider on her.

“Good enough, but if you’re lying, I will squash you like a bug.” She pulls me to my feet.

At six feet two, Kerry still looms over me. “And if Theresa doesn’t squash you, I will.” She pokes my chest with her finger. “Come on, Ms. Dinkle doesn’t like it when kids show up late, so get your skates on.”

“I hope that’s another of your English idioms,” Joe says. “Because I don’t own skates.”