

SCREAMERS

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For Colleen, who kept me laughing through one of the oddest years of my life.

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CHAPTER Eleven

I charged straight through the clown's mouth and into the funhouse without hesitation, but there was no sign of Aaliyah or anyone else.

"Aaliyah!" I shouted.

"Ha ha, hee hee, ha ha ha, ho ho, haaa . . ." The laughter was full of static and hiss. Maybe it was an old recording, but I couldn't be sure. It felt like someone was taunting me.

It's Beauregard's ghost, I finally allowed myself to admit. It was him watching you earlier in the day and he's the one who has Aaliyah.

Hoping they were close, I ran, turned a corner, and screamed. I'd come face to face with . . . myself. It was a slim, warped mirror that made me look twice as tall and half as wide.

I hate funhouses, I thought as I continued through the halls. There was only one way to go, which was either a blessing or a curse. I didn't have to think — I just had to

move quickly. But on the other hand, I felt a little like a lab rat being forced through a one-way maze, winding my way to the dead centre where I'd find Aaliyah too late, murdered, and I'd meet the same fate.

Don't think like that, I chided myself. You've made too many Screamers episodes.

Around another corner was a long tunnel that was rotating slowly. As soon as I ran into it, the tunnel sped up and rolled my feet out from under me. I landed hard on my back and had the wind knocked out of me. I groaned and gasped for air as the spinning tube rolled me over again and again. I crawled and scrambled forward as the tube continued to flip me over and the sides slammed against my legs, my arms, my chest and my head. I felt like a sack of bones trapped in a clothes dryer, but finally I reached the end and pulled myself out to solid ground.

My breath restored, I assessed the damage. I was sore all over but nothing too serious. Unsteadily I got to my feet. As tempting as it was to lay in a curled-up heap on the ground, I had to find Aaliyah.

The floor in the next hallway was made of panels that slid from side to side. I fell and banged my knee once or twice as I made my way through it. Compared to the rotating tunnel it was a walk in the park. But then, just as I was approaching the end, one of the last panels popped open, and out sprang a clown with glowing red eyes and a

hideous laugh. A second clown with red eyes reached for me through a gap in the wall, and a third plunged down from a hiding place in the ceiling. It took me a moment to realize they were mechanical clowns on retractable arms, designed to pop out as soon as someone got close. I pushed away the fake clown in front of me and moved on.

I entered a room of mirrors. Like the one that had greeted me when I first entered The Laffin' Place, there were mirrors that made me look tall and thin, but there were also mirrors that made me look short and squat, mirrors that gave me an hourglass shape and mirrors that made me look closer or farther away than I was. There were two long mirrors facing one another that created a countless number of shrinking Zoës stretching to infinity. The last mirror in the room, framed and hung on the wall beside the exit, looked completely normal. I paused for a second or two, expecting something to happen. But nothing did.

As I started to turn away, another face — not my own — peered out at me from within the mirror. It was a girl, her eyes overlapping mine. It wasn't just any girl — it was Ghost Girl. Mist swirled around her shoulders.

Suddenly she shrieked and lunged out of the mirror, grabbing my neck. Her nails dug into my skin, and her ice-cold fingers sent freezing jolts of pain through my body like pulses of electricity. The mist flowed out of the mirror, released when she'd reached through the glass surface.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even scream. It felt like my eyes were about to pop out of my skull. I grabbed her hands but was unable to peel her fingers away.

The world started to dim. My vision started to fade. I had no energy left. I felt tired, so tired. If only I could sleep.

You can sleep, a voice said in my head. My own? It didn't matter. I could sleep — the voice had said so — and that was all that mattered.

I closed my eyes and drifted off. It felt like falling.

"You did this!" the girl from the mirror shouted in my face, waking me from the dark pit my mind had tumbled into. "This is all your fault! You and your friends are going to die!"

She let go of my throat. Her hands faded and disappeared, as did her arms, her shoulders, her face and her head. Her eyes remained for half a heartbeat until I blinked and they were gone.

I dropped to the ground and gasped for air. As the ice slowly melted from my veins and my body warmed up, my mind began to process what had just happened.

I rubbed my neck as I got back to my feet and was surprised to find that the skin on my neck wasn't sore. Fearful that Ghost Girl might return, I looked at my reflection once more. There were no bruises or scratches where she'd grabbed me. It was as if the attack had never happened. I shook it off and ran out of the room. There was no time to lose.

The next room, and the final one in the funhouse, judging by the EXIT sign above the door on the far side, looked like a small child's bedroom. There was a four-poster bed, a play table, small chairs and a bookcase. Every surface was covered in toys — specifically, clowns. There were stuffed clowns, plastic clowns and antique porcelain clowns. Famous clowns like Ronald McDonald, Krusty the Clown and The Joker. There were also other dolls and figurines dressed to resemble clowns. I spotted Sadie Sees, a doll I'd had when I was a kid, just like most girls my age. Her face had been painted white, and her nose and mouth were smeared red. I pictured her eyes moving left to right the way they used to, which had always creeped me out a little, and her mouth opening to utter one of her equally creepy catchphrases: "Wouldn't it be fun if you were a doll like me?"

The largest clown doll — it was the same size as me — was lying on the bed as if in a deep sleep. There was no sign of Aaliyah or Beaugard, but then the clown on the bed shifted.

My heart leapt into my throat and I fought back tears. What fresh horror was this?

The clown doll's chest rose and fell. It was alive. It shifted again, groaned, then sat up slowly.

I noticed a black elastic string stretched around the back of its head. It wasn't a doll — it was a person wearing a

cheap plastic clown mask. As soon as I realized that, a hand reached up and removed the mask, revealing a familiar face.

“Aaliyah!” I shouted as I ran to her, wrapping my arms around her in relief.

“I think I fell asleep,” she said groggily. “Or passed out. What happened?” Her eyes suddenly went wide with fear and she pointed a trembling finger over my shoulder.

I turned around.

Beauregard was standing between us and the bookcase full of toy clowns.

“Boo!” he jeered.