

“Maybe the police found out and the freaks had to move on,” I said. “Maybe there isn’t any show tonight.”

“Maybe,” Steve said.

I looked at him and licked my lips nervously. “What do you think we should do?” I asked.

He stared back at me and hesitated before replying. “I think we should go in,” he finally said. “We’ve come this far. It’d be silly to turn back now, without knowing for sure.”

“I agree,” I said, nodding. Then I gazed up at the scary building and gulped. It looked like the sort of place you saw in a horror movie, where lots of people go in but don’t come out. “Are you scared?” I asked Steve.

“No,” he said, but I could hear his teeth chattering and knew he was lying. “Are *you*?” he asked.

“Course not,” I said. We looked at each other and grinned. We knew we were both terrified, but at least we were together. It’s not so bad being scared if you’re not alone.

“Shall we enter?” Steve asked, trying to sound cheerful.

“Might as well,” I said.

We took a deep breath, crossed our fingers, then started up the steps (there were nine stone steps leading up to the door, each one cracked and covered with moss) and went in.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

WE FOUND ourselves standing in a long, dark, cold corridor. I had my jacket on, but shivered all the same. It was freezing!

"Why is it so cold?" I asked Steve. "It was warm outside."

"Old houses are like that," he told me.

We started to walk. There was a light down by the other end, so the further in we got, the brighter it became. I was glad of that. I don't think I could have made it otherwise: it would have been too scary!

The walls were scratched and scribbled-on, and bits of the ceiling were flaky. It was a creepy place. It would have been bad enough in the middle of the day, but this was ten o'clock, only two hours away from midnight!

"There's a door here," Steve said and stopped. He pushed it ajar and it creaked loudly. I almost turned and ran. It sounded like the lid of a coffin being tugged open!

Steve showed no fear and stuck his head in. He said nothing for a few seconds, while his eyes got used to the dark, then pulled back. "It's the stairs up to the balcony," he said.

"Where the kid fell from?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Do you think we should go up?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't think so. It's dark up there, no sign of any sort of light. We'll try it if we can't find another way in, but I think—"

"Can I help you boys?" somebody said behind us, and we nearly jumped out of our skins!

hurried round to the rear. It was deserted. Empty old houses, junk yards, scrap heaps. There would be people moving about later in the day, but right then it looked like a ghost town. I didn't even see a cat or a dog.

As I'd thought, there were plenty of ways to get into the theatre. There were two doors and loads of windows to choose from.

Several cars and vans were parked outside the building. I didn't spot any signs or pictures on them, but I was sure they belonged to the Cirque Du Freak. It suddenly struck me that the freaks most probably slept in the vans. If Mr Crepsley had a home in one of them, my plan was sunk.

I snuck into the theatre, which felt even colder than it had been on Saturday night, and tiptoed down a long corridor, then another, then another! It was like a maze back here and I started worrying about finding my way out. Maybe I should go back and bring a ball of string, so I could mark my way and

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No! It was too late for that. If I left, I'd never have the guts to return. I'd just have to remember my steps as best I could and say a little prayer when it came time to leave.

I saw no sign of any freaks, and began to think I was on a fool's errand, that they were all in the vans or in nearby hotels. I'd been searching for twenty minutes and my legs felt heavy after so much walking. Maybe I should quit and forget the crazy plan.

I was about to give up when I found a set of stairs leading down to a cellar. I paused at the top for ages, biting my lips, wondering if I should go down. I'd seen enough horror films to know this was the most likely spot for a vampire, but I'd also seen loads where the hero walked down to a similar cellar, only to be attacked, murdered and chopped up into little pieces!

Finally I took a deep breath and started down. My shoes were making too much noise, so I eased them off and padded along in just my socks. I picked up loads of splinters, but was so nervous, I didn't feel the pain.

There was a huge cage near the bottom of the stairs. I edged over to it and looked through the bars. The Wolf Man was inside, lying on his back, asleep and snoring. He twitched and moaned as I watched. I jumped back from the cage. If he woke, his howls would bring the whole freak show down on me in seconds flat!

As I was stumbling backwards, my foot hit something soft and slimy. I turned my head slowly and saw I was standing over the snake-boy! He was stretched out on the floor, his snake wrapped around him, and his eyes were wide open!

I don't know how I managed not to scream or faint, but somehow I kept quiet and stayed on my feet, and that saved me. Because, even though the snake-boy's eyes were open, he was fast asleep. I knew by the way he was breathing: deeply, heavily, in and out.

I tried not to think about what would have happened if I'd fallen on him and the snake and woken them up.

Enough was enough. I gave one last look around the dark cellar, promising myself I'd leave if I didn't spot the vampire. For a few seconds I saw nothing and got ready to scam, but then I noticed what might have been a large box near one of the walls.

It *might* have been a large box. But it wasn't. I knew all too well what it really was. It was a coffin!

I gulped, then walked carefully over to the coffin. It was about two metres long and eighty centimetres wide. The wood was dark and stained. Moss was growing in patches, and I could see a family of cockroaches in one of the corners.

replace the cash Steve took from his mum. Besides, it was more fun walking. It was spookier!

We told ghost stories as we walked. Steve did most of the talking, because he knows way more than me. He was on top form. Sometimes he forgets the ends of stories, or gets names mixed up, but not tonight. It was better than being with Stephen King!

It was a long walk, longer than we thought, and we almost didn't make it on time. We had to run the last half-kilometre. We were panting like dogs when we got there.

The venue was an old theatre which used to show movies. I'd passed it once or twice in the past. Steve told me once that it was shut down because a boy fell off the balcony and got killed. He said it was haunted. I asked my dad about it, and he said it was a load of lies. It's hard sometimes to know whether you should believe the stories your dad tells you or the ones your best friend tells you.

There was no name outside the door, and no cars parked nearby, and no queue. We stopped out front and bent over until we got our breath back. Then we stood and looked at the building. It was tall and dark and covered in jagged grey stones. Lots of the windows were broken, and the door looked like a giant's open mouth.

"Are you sure this is the place?" I asked, trying not to sound scared.

"This is what it says on the tickets," Steve said and checked again, just to be sure. "Yep, this is it."