

Chapter One

The pink-dotted curtains filtered out the light from the Moon, making the bright colors of the dolls and toys drab. A slight breeze blew, bringing delightful smells of popped corn and cotton candy. A merry tune danced in the air. He stood over her, watching her sleep. He had waited for so long to be on his own again.

Does she see my painted-on smile outlining my Cheshire grin full of pointed teeth? He wondered. Or does she know about the shiny object that reflects Moon's light on its smooth surface in my hand?

A faint squeak from the floorboards in the hallway alerted him that someone approached. He saw the pale hand open the door a fraction so drowsy eyes could look in on her sleeping peacefully. He turned his head a little to the door as it closed, leaving them alone in the room. His smile broadened.

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Mary stood at the sink. She looked out at the gray yard and driveway as she waited for the coffee to brew. Her flight this morning would take her to another city for another dull business meeting. She was satisfied with her decision to return to work after Susie was born. Darrin provided for them for many years, and now it was her turn to return the favor. The first part of the trip would be a whirlwind two days to negotiate contracts. Then, she would venture across the globe without coming home between the trips. The jet lag would be terrible. After that, home, but for only one day because they were on vacation.

"Mommy," the sleepy voice said.

She jumped slightly, not expecting anyone to be awake. She turned with a bright smile to see the little girl that stood in the doorway wearing pink-footed pajamas with a tutu around the center.

"Oh, Susie darling, I didn't mean to wake you."

"I wanted to give you hug before you left."

She squatted to be eye level with her daughter. Susie rushed forward and hugged her tightly.

"You should go back to bed, darling. It's too early for you to be awake. Thank you for the wonderful send-off, though."

"I love you mommy."

"I love you too, darling."

"Mommy?" She stopped on the threshold to the dining room.

"Yes?"

"Can we go to the Circus when you get back?"

Mary froze, her mind jumped to uncomfortable memories, then back to the little girl. “I don’t know if there will be any,” she replied, hoping that her cringe was undetectable. “Now back to bed, darling, I’ll call tonight.”

She disappeared into the shadows of the dining room. Mary could hear her feet padding on the carpet in the living room then her bubbly giggle.

“Hopefully, she’ll forget that by the time I return,” she muttered as she filled the coffee cup.

“What excitement does she want that you hope she’ll forget?”

She blew the swirling steam from the surface of coffee and took a sip before answering.

“The Circus.”

Darrin winced. “Yeah, I hope she forgets too, but knowing our daughter she won’t easily let it go.” He paused, picking the best way to say what he thought. “Maybe, we should take her. It’s not like—”

“Not like “they” will be there? I know they won’t be there, darling.” She shivered. “But anytime I hear calliope music, I panic. I just don’t know if I can ever look at a clown without thinking of them.”

He put his arm around her waist, and they stared out the window, their reflections glowed in the window. They watched a car pull into the driveway, and the man step out onto the concrete. She put her coffee cup into the sink, and then kissed him on the cheek. He pulled her suitcase through the garage and handed it to the driver.

“Good-bye, darling,” she said as she sat in the back of the car. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Maybe she’ll have forgotten by the time I get back.”

“I’ll do my best to get it out of her mind.”

A frown crossed her face as the car door shut her inside. In the tinted car window, he saw a blurred image of what appeared to be someone standing at the kitchen window. He turned his head quickly. The bright white scalloped curtains made the window look like an open, laughing mouth.

“Too much talk of the circus,” he said, turning his attention back to the departing car and waved as it headed down the street.

He looked at the clock’s luminescent blue numbers as he entered the kitchen. 6:15. He flipped on the small TV hanging under the cabinet. Since he was up, he would make Susie’s lunch and catch some tidbits of news before she came scampering back into the kitchen.

“Ha-ha,” floated down the hall to his ears.

She should be asleep. He thought and left the kitchen. A soft orange light pierced the darkness of the hallway from beneath the door. She giggled again, and he heard her whisper.

He put two fingertips on the doorknob, a cold sweat building on his forehead. He pushed the door open and froze. She had made a makeshift tent with a sheet, a chair and the posts at the foot of her bed. Her bare feet peeked out from underneath it.

Hoping that his voice would not crack, he said, "you should be sleeping."

She giggled and crawled backward toward him. The edge of her tutu bent in, then snapped back when it was passed the sheet that hung at the entrance.

"I know daddy, but I'm too excited about going to the Circus." Her smile radiated from ear to ear.

"But we don't know if the Circus will be at the beach when we go on vacation with mommy."

"It's OK daddy, they're here now."

"Here?"

"Yes, daddy," she laughed. "I saw them."

"You saw them?"

"Yeah, the Clowns and Magician and the elephants."

His face heated, and his heart thumped up into his throat. "I don't remember seeing them last night on anything we watched on TV."

"They did a parade in the street last night," she said as she stood.

"Last night? I don't remember hearing anything."

She stared back at him. He could tell that she was becoming upset with him for not believing her.

"Honey, it sounds like you had a wonderful dream."

"It wasn't a dream daddy; the Clown even came in to see my room."

His heart began to pound harder.

"What Clown? How did he get in? Did you let him in?"

She shrugged. "No, he was just here smiling at me."

He looked at her defiant stance and knew there was no point in arguing with her, she was too stubborn for him to win this early in the morning.

"Well I guess that means we are going to have to find out where the Circus is," he replied, forcing a smile. "Too bad mommy won't be able to go, she'll be so disappointed."

"Yeah," she screamed.

"How about watching some cartoons with me in the kitchen before you have to get ready for school?"

“Can we go to the Circus after school?”

“We’ll see.”

She ran out of the room to the kitchen. Apprehensively, he bent to peer under the sheet. Along the bed, dolls sat facing the chair. In the center, a doll lay face down. He picked it up and found that she had crudely colored its face to look like a clown. He dropped the doll as though it bit him and turned with a gasp as the closet door swung open slightly. He straightened and took a cautious step to the closet. Adrenaline spiked in his system. It felt as though his heart would erupt from his chest. He pulled the door open. Her clothes hung on the rod while others cluttered the floor in a collision with her shoes. He glanced at the top shelf to the shoeboxes and briefly remembered putting the Hanged Clown card in one.

“Come on daddy, I want to watch cartoons,” she yelled from the end of the hallway, and he retreated to join her.

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“Interesting,” he said from back of the closet. “She has seen me and some others too.”

“Why wouldn’t see? It’s not as though you’ve hidden,” Fire Breather said, twirling his butane soaked baton.

“True. I just wish the House of Buckets would be finished already.”

He nodded his agreement. “Magician said a few more days and everyone would be restored, then we will be whole again and not crammed with Hanged Clown; his jokes are really starting to wear on people’s nerves.”

“I don’t understand his fascination with Deuces.” Ace of Buckets shook his head.

“Me either.”