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I've always loved carnivals. *Always*. Ferris wheels, games, the smell of nachos and hot dogs, and the excited shouts and shrieks that fill the air on a hot summer day. I love everything about carnivals.

Except the clowns.

Oh, I used to like clowns. I thought they were kind of funny the way they were always goofing off and squirting everyone with water. I thought clowns were fun.

Not anymore. Not after what I just went

through.

I'm Kayleigh. Kayleigh Fisher. I'm eleven, but I'll be twelve really soon. I have a brother named Andy, but I usually don't admit it. He's a goof. Not always, but most of the time. He's a year younger than me, and when he's not acting like a complete goof-off, we hang out together.

We live in Kalamazoo, Michigan, which is a city that began as a fur trading post in the 1700s. In 1831, the town was first called 'Bronson' after Titus Bronson, one of the first settlers. It was renamed 'Kalamazoo' in 1837, which comes from the Potawatomi Indian expression 'Kikalamazoo,' which means 'the rapids at the river crossing'.

If you ever come to Kalamazoo, you're bound to see billboards on the side of the highway that say 'Kalamazoo . . . Sounds Like Fun.'

That's true. We have a lot of fun in Kalamazoo.

Until the carnival came to town. Until the Klowns showed up. Yes, that's 'Klowns' with a 'K'. Soon, you'll know why its spelled like that.

The big, colorful tents seemed to arrive overnight. Within one single day, the Arcadia Festival Site had been turned into a huge gallery of fun. Flyers had been hung up all over the city talking about carnival week. And the carnival was going to open on

the day of my birthday! What fun. My friends and I had been saving money for over a month. We couldn't wait.

One morning when I went outside, I saw a line of big semi-trucks driving by. They were all different colors, and on the sides of the trailers, colorful carnival scenes had been painted.

Seeing them arrive, my blood started pumping. *They're here!* I thought. *They're finally here!*

As the semi-trucks rolled on past, I stood on the sidewalk and waved. Some of them honked their horns as they went by. My blood pumped harder and I got more and more excited with every arriving truck — until I saw who — or what — was driving them.

They were circus clowns! Circus clowns were driving the semi-trucks. They all had white face-paint and different colored hair. Some clowns had orange hair, some had green or yellow. They looked silly.

But there was something wrong with these clowns. I couldn't put my finger on it, but these clowns just didn't look . . . well . . . *normal*. These clowns looked scary. Scary . . . and *mean*.

They all waved at me as they headed for the festival site, but I stopped waving when one of them looked at me. He smiled, but it just didn't seem to be a happy smile. The clown looked like he was angry.

Oh, he was smiling, all right. But he still looked angry. His eyes were big and round, and he was glaring at me. He looked spooky.

The convoy finally passed by, and I threw away my suspicious thoughts.

*Sheesh, Kayleigh, I thought. Don't be ridiculous. They're circus clowns. Circus clowns are supposed to make you happy.*

I ran back to the house and pushed away my thoughts about crazy clowns. After all, the carnival was in town! It wouldn't be long now. Soon, the air would be filled with the delicious aroma of cotton candy, elephant ears, and popcorn. Kids would be laughing and screaming as they whirled about on the dazzling rides. Bells would ring and happy calliope music would drift across the city. For the next week, my friends, my brother and I would almost *live* at the carnival. The next week would be nothing but nonstop fun.

Or so I thought.

Today was Friday. Tomorrow was my birthday. And tomorrow, the carnival would open.

The nightmare was about to begin

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The next morning, my brother woke me up. In the summer, I like to sleep in late. *Really* late. I like to get up right around the crack of noon.

“Happy birthday, Kayleigh!” he shouted from the doorway of my bedroom. “It’s almost eleven! Come on! The carnival will be open in an hour!”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I ran a brush through my dark brown hair and got dressed. In less than ten minutes we had both polished off a bowl of *Cap’n Crunch* and were out the door.

We were off and on our way. The carnival was in town! What fun. I'm not sure what I liked better: the carnival, or my birthday.

Hooray! I was twelve. Almost a teenager.

*Almost.*

As soon as we rounded our block, we could see the Arcadia Festival Site in the distance. The site is not too far from where we live, and the carnival was being held there this year. Striped tents and brightly colored rides jutted up into the blue sky like wide, fat skyscrapers. Nothing was moving yet, since the carnival didn't officially open till noon.

Andy and I walked quickly along the sidewalk, almost breaking into a run. Mom and Dad had given me ten dollars for my birthday so I'd have money for the rides, and I had stuffed the money into the pocket of my jeans. I had a ten-dollar bill, a few one-dollar bills from my bank, and a bunch of quarters. The quarters jingled as I walked.

Finally, we made it to Arcadia. A tall, wire fence went around the whole carnival area, and the main gate was still closed. There was already a line of people waiting to get in.

I looked at my watch. It was 11:30. We still had another half hour before the carnival would open.

We stood in line and waited for a few minutes.

More and more people began to arrive, and we saw a few of our friends. Families brought their children, boys brought their girlfriends, girls brought their boyfriends. A lot of people were all waiting to be the first inside.

*"Hey Kayleigh,"* Andy suddenly whispered. He spoke quietly so no one else nearby could hear him. *"I think I know a place around back where we could see what's going on. Wanna go check it out?"*

*"You mean sneak into the carnival?!?!"* I said. That was not something I wanted to do.

*"Of course not!"* he whispered. *"But the tents are right by the fence! We can get real close to the rides and the tents and see what's going on before anyone else."*

I have to admit, that sounded fun. But we'd lose our place in line. Nevertheless, I agreed to go with him. It would be fun to see everything close up, and before anyone else.

We stepped out of line and followed the fence as it wound around the big field. Tents and rides towered above us, just on the other side of the fence. We were so close, we could have reached out and touched some of the steel beams that held up the rides.

Soon, we came to a tent that had been set up right next to the fence. It was red and white striped,

and it was right near the rear entrance of the festival site. This was the entrance that was used by the semi-trucks to unload all of their equipment. It was a private entrance, to be used by the carnival workers only.

*And the gate was open!*

Did we dare?

No, we shouldn't. We shouldn't, and we wouldn't. Sneaking into the carnival would get us into a lot of trouble.

We stopped walking and looked around. Suddenly a clown came into view! He was walking between two trucks, then he turned and went into a tent.

*"Andy," I whispered, raising my arm. "Look at that tent."*

Andy looked to where I was pointing. The clown had gone through the opening of the tent and was no longer in sight. Above the opening of the tent was a big, hand-painted sign that read:

**KLOWNS ONLY - ALL OTHERS KEEP OUT**

Someone had better give the clowns some spelling lessons. 'Clowns' is supposed to be spelled

with the letter C, not a K.

*"That must be where they put their make-up on,"* Andy said. He turned his head and shot me a sneaky grin. "Wanna go see how the clowns put on their make-up?" he asked.

That would be cool!

But no. We'd have to go through the rear entrance, and we'd get in trouble for sure. And besides . . . I suddenly remembered seeing the clowns yesterday, and the strange looks they all had on their faces. Now I wasn't sure if I wanted to see the clowns, after all.

"Look over there," Andy said, pointing. "There's a tear in the side of the tent! It's right by the fence! We can walk over there and peek through from this side of the fence! We don't even have to sneak inside!"

I was going to say no, that we should just go back and wait in line. But when Andy started walking along the fence toward the tent, I followed.

After all . . . we *were* on the other side of the fence. We weren't doing anything wrong. How could we get into trouble?

We walked quietly to where the rip in the tent was. The tear was only about six inches long, but it was wide enough to see through. I leaned forward,

my face almost pressing against the mesh wire fence.

I was peering through the rip in the canvas when a movement close by, from inside, caught my attention.

It was a shadow. The looming shadow of a clown against the canvas tent. It was dark, and I could clearly see his form as he moved.

He stopped just a few feet from where we were. All we could see was his silhouette, but it was easy to see all of his features: his arms, his legs, his head, and his curly hair.

But what was in his hand almost made me scream in horror.

*The clown was holding a knife!*

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We stayed as still as we could. I was too afraid to even breathe. I thought that if I took a breath, the clown would hear me. My heart was doing flip-flops in my chest, and I was almost certain that the clown could hear it.

Had the clown spotted us? Had he heard us? He was right near the edge of the tent, gripping the knife tightly in his hand. It looked like he was staring

right at us. Maybe he could see our shadows like we could see his shadow.

Right beside me, Andy was motionless. His eyes were fixed on the huge clown shadow only a few feet from us. Neither of us moved.

Then the clown began walking away from the side of the tent. Whew! He hadn't seen us, after all.

Andy leaned forward and peered through the rip in the tent.

*"For gosh sakes,"* he whispered quietly. I could hear the relief in his voice. *"The clown is holding a butter knife! I think he's making a sandwich!"*

I almost started to laugh. *Of course,* I thought. *That's all it was. A butter knife.* I felt silly, thinking that it could have been anything else.

I was relieved, but I still felt uneasy. I couldn't put my finger on it, but the clowns made me nervous. I didn't like the way they looked at me yesterday. I know it sounds crazy, but something told me that I needed to watch out for the clowns.

*These* clowns, anyway.

I glanced down at my watch. It was 11:55.

"Come on!" I urged Andy. "It's almost time to go inside!"

Reluctantly, he drew away from the fence and stood up. We walked back to the main entrance

where a huge crowd of people had gathered. Kids were screaming and laughing, parents were chattering, and smiles were everywhere. We had to get in the back of the line, but I didn't care. I was too excited.

Suddenly, carnival music filled the air. Rides began to squeak and move, slowly at first, then faster. The air was electric and filled with excitement. The crowd around us let out a cheer, and a wave of applause swept through. Andy and I clapped our hands. The roar of applause and cheering was deafening.

The gates opened up, and the crowd began to move slowly forward.

The carnival was opening! The carnival was opening, and there were hundreds—even thousands—of people coming. They were coming to ride the rides and play the games. They were coming to gorge themselves on hot dogs and candy and popcorn and all kinds of scrumptious food. They were coming to have fun, just like we were.

Of course, the clowns had other plans.





The line moved quickly, and soon we were at the gate. I dug into my pocket for my money to buy tickets.

When I looked up and saw the clown, I gasped. Clowns were selling tickets! I hadn't seen them before, but there were five or six of them. They sat in ticket booths and sold tickets to people. They looked like the same clowns that were driving the semi-trucks yesterday.

Andy was behind me. "Come on," he prodded. "You're holding up the line."

But I couldn't move. I just stared at the clown. I stared at the clown, and the clown stared back at me. He didn't say anything. He didn't move. He just gazed at me with cold, dark eyes.

And his *smile*.

He was smiling, but it didn't look like a happy smile. It was more of a sneer, like he was all smug and had something to hide. I didn't like the way he looked at all.

Then I noticed something else. *All of the other clowns had the same, strange look on their faces.* They were smiling, but, they all had this cold, dead stare as they took money and exchanged tickets.

"Kayleigh," Andy persisted from behind me. He nudged my shoulder. "Come on! Give him your money!"

I managed to reach out and hand my money to the clown, but I snapped my arm back quickly so I wouldn't touch his hand. He never took his eyes off of mine while he pulled out a strip of yellow tickets and handed them back to me.

I reached out to take the tickets—and he grabbed my wrist!

I would have screamed, but my breath was gone. I couldn't even get my mouth open. I was horrified. The clown's grasp on my wrist was tight

and firm. He had wiry, strong hands, and I don't think I could have struggled free if I tried.

The clown leaned closer. I could feel his hand pulling on my arm, pulling me closer, pulling me toward him.

"Enjoy the rides," he wheezed. "Enjoy the rides . . ." His voice was low and gruff, like an animal's growl. His smile grew wider, exposing crooked, yellow teeth. His grip loosened, and I finally yanked my hand from his grasp. I spun and walked hurriedly past Andy and stopped a few feet away.

"What's up with you?" Andy turned and asked me. Then he turned back around and faced the ticket window, handing the clown his money. In a moment, he was stuffing the wad of tickets into his pocket. He strode over to me.

"Didn't you notice anything different about that clown?" I asked him. He turned and looked back at the ticket booth, then turned and faced me. He had a dumbfounded look on his face.

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "Like, what?"

"I don't know," I answered nervously. "But he just didn't seem . . . well, you know . . . *normal*."

"He's a circus clown, Kayleigh," Andy snickered. "He's not *supposed* to be normal."

“Yeah, but –”

“Let’s go,” he interrupted, turning his attention to the rides that were whirling about. He started walking toward the colorful midway.

I couldn’t help but take one more glance at the strange clown in the ticket booth. It was like I could sense him watching me, glaring at me from his chair. I turned to look at him, to prove to myself that he *wasn’t* looking at me.

*But he was!*

He was staring at me with that same, awful grin.

And his mouth was moving! He wasn’t speaking, not out loud anyway. But just the same, I could understand him. I watched his lips move, and I could understand what he was saying.

*Enjoy the rides*, he mouthed. *Enjoy the rides . . . .*

I turned and ran as fast as I could, bumping into people as I tried to catch up with Andy. The clown’s voice kept rolling through my head.

*Enjoy the rides*, it repeated, over and over and over in that deep, throaty growl. *Enjoy the rides . . . .*

Something was very, very wrong at the carnival. *Very* wrong. Why I stayed, I’ll never know. I think it was because that deep down, I was hoping I was mistaken. I was hoping that the dark feeling I

had, the feeling that was balled up in my gut like a knot, was nothing but my own imagination running away with me.

I was hoping that I was wrong about the clowns.

But I wasn't wrong—and I knew it. And it wasn't going to take very long to find out that my worst fears were about to come true.

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