

# THE DEMONS' DOOR

## Chapter One

There's this thing about ghosts: once you've seen one, you can basically see them all.

At least the ones that want to be seen.

At the age of eleven, Zack Jennings was learning the rules of the spirit world pretty quickly. He'd only seen his first real-live (make that "real-dead") spook maybe a month or two ago. Now they seemed to be everywhere. When he went to summer camp in the middle of July, he met the boy who drowned in the lake.

Back in 1973.

When he hung out at the library, he occasionally saw this pudgy woman reading over people's shoulders because she couldn't flip the pages herself anymore, what with being dead and all.

His mother had always claimed Zack had a hyperactive imagination, but even he couldn't make this stuff up. The ghosts he saw were as real as electricity, wind, and gravity—things nobody could see but everybody knew were there.

Some called being a Ghost Seer a gift. Well, if it was, Zack figured it was like getting a paisley-and-plaid sweater for Christmas when what you really wanted was an iPod. Seven weeks after learning he could see spirits, Zack was already tired of being special.

Being special could wear a guy out.

On the first Saturday of August, as he stepped into the brightly lit breakfast room of the Marriott Extended-Stay Hotel near North Chester, Connecticut, it happened once again: He saw an apparition lurking near a small table in the far corner of the room.

Zack could tell: This one was a demon.

Zack and his family—his dad, his new stepmom, and his dog—were currently residing at a hotel because their house had burned down when Zack had battled the evil spirit haunting the crossroads nearby. The fire had been Zack's fault, and his allowance would be docked for the damages until he turned twenty-one. After that, Zack's dad would probably do payroll deductions. And now, here Zack was, less than twenty feet away from yet another fiend, who probably wanted to destroy some other part of Zack's life when all Zack wanted to do was grab a bowl of cereal and maybe a banana from the breakfast buffet.

Zack had come down to the lobby on his own.

His dad, who didn't believe in ghosts anyway, had gone into New York City for

weekend work at his office.

His stepmom, Judy, an author, was upstairs, busily working on last-minute rewrites to *Curiosity Cat*, a new musical, based on her children's books, that was about to have its world premiere at a theatre called The Hanging Hill Playhouse.

His trusty dog, Zipper, was also upstairs—snoozing between the cushions of a very comfy hotel couch.

There were other people in the breakfast room, the same ones Zack saw most mornings: Divorced Guy, Moving Family, Vacationing Family, Businessman, Other Divorced Guy.

The ghost was new.

Zack could tell the man sitting at the table in the far corner of the breakfast room was a ghost because he was wearing old-fashioned clothes—the kind convicts in chain gangs sometimes wore in the movies. *Old* movies.

The ghost was, or had been, a hulking giant with a serious scowl carved into his watermelon-sized head. He wore a denim prison jumpsuit, loosely laced work boots, and a tin hat that looked like an upside-down spaghetti strainer with electrical cables clamped to battery posts where its legs should have been.

He'd shown up sitting in his own chair: a colossal throne made out of thick planks of rough-hewn lumber. Wide, double-holed leather belts were buckled tight across his chest, arms, and legs.

Zack suddenly realized the guy was strapped into an electric chair, the thing they used fifty years ago to execute hard-core criminals on death row in the state penitentiary.

The giant caught Zack staring.

"Pssst! Hey, kid!"

Zack pretended not to see or hear the man.

"I know you can see and hear me, kid."

So much for pretending.

"Come here. Undo these belt buckles!"

Slowly, very slowly, Zack turned his back on the ghost so he could face the breakfast buffet and make like he was picking out a banana. Behind him, he heard the sizzling sputter of sparks. He smelled ozone, like when an electrical outlet short-circuits and scorches the toaster plug. Zack whipped around just in time to see the last zig of a lightning bolt zap and *zizz* off the big guy's metal cap. Smoke wafted up from his razored scalp.

"Where's the bank?" the man in the chair demanded.

Zack didn't answer.

"Used to be a bank right here. Connecticut Building and Loan. Biggest heist of my career." Watermelon Head grinned. His teeth were the color of coffee beans. "Happiest day of my life, kid. Good times."

Zack glanced guardedly around the room. Nobody else could see or hear the ghost reminiscing about his bygone days of glory.

"Come on! Undo these straps!"

Now one of the kids in the Moving Family, a girl about six, was gawking at Zack like he was nuts. He didn't blame her. He probably looked pretty crazy: frozen in place, staring across the room at an empty table, mouth hanging open.

"Be a pal, kid! I've been stuck in this chair since 1959."

Zack didn't budge.

"You deaf? I said turn me loose!"

Zack stayed where he was.

"Oh, I get it," the trapped beast snarled. "Some kind of tough guy, hunh?"

Zack shook his head and slid his black-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. He was sort of short and kind of skinny and really didn't look all that tough, even when he took off the glasses.

"Do you know who I am, kid?"

Again, Zack shook his head while the girl, the normal kid, kept gawking at him. "Folks called me Mad Dog Murphy on account of the fact that I went bonkers here at the bank. Killed six people. Two of 'em kids! So shake a leg and unbuckle these straps! You think I want to spend eternity sitting on my keester on top of Old Sparky?"

Now a second ghost materialized directly across the table from the angry giant lashed into his sizzle seat. A woman. Zack couldn't see her face, just the back of her curly hair.

"Doll face!" Mad Dog Murphy said with a sinister smile. "What're you doin' here?"

The woman didn't say a word.

"What? Forget it, sister! I ain't leaving the kid alone!"

The woman raised both arms and the two ghosts began to disappear slowly. As they faded away, Zack heard Mad Dog Murphy's voice echoing off the walls in some kind of tunnel: "I'll be back, kid! You'll see! I'm comin' back to get you, Zack Jennings!"

All of a sudden, Zack didn't feel so hungry. How did this ghost know his name? None of the others ever did.

He decided maybe he'd skip breakfast, go back to the room, pack his suitcase. "Are you okay?" asked the girl who had been staring at him.

"Yeah."

Now her mother was staring at him, too. "Are you sure?" the mother asked. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

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