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an extract from

Feel the Fear

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'Fearlessness is often regarded as one of the keys to freedom. But does fear not serve a purpose? Is this deeply primal emotion not there to guide us, to help us sidestep danger and prompt us to take a safer path?

The question should be asked: is it always a positive quality to be fearless?

Why do we fear fear?'

DR JOSEPHINE HONEYBONE, *founder of the Heimlich Good Emotion Institute, from her thesis,* The Worthy Emotion.

Chapter 9.
The Scorpion Spectre at the Scarlet Pagoda

RUBY WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THE EVENING. Not so much the 'do' itself – all that party yacking was sure to be a total yawn – but the costumes, *they* promised to be pretty interesting.

Aside from reading, movies were Ruby's greatest passion, particularly thrillers and horror – a passion she shared with Mrs Digby. Nothing cheered Mrs Digby as much as a good murder story. *Too bad she isn't prepared to risk a few ghosts, thought Ruby*. Tonight was going to be a bonanza of thriller movie memorabilia.

Ruby took longer than usual to get ready. She'd had to make a couple of minor adjustments to the new dress she had bought – namely hacking four inches off the hem and fixing it in place with tacky glue. She was largely pleased with the over-all effect, and once she had her new shades on too she really looked the business. All in all, she was looking forward to the costume show. At least it would take her mind off worrying about that dumb Spectrum test.

'*That's* what you're wearing?'

Sabina Redfort stared at her daughter, who was attired in a strange misshapen dress with worn-looking shoes and over-the-knee socks. Obscuring her eyes were a pair of huge white, square-framed sunglasses.

The dress had very obviously been purchased at a vintage store or possibly off a charity rail. It was on the large side and covered in a loud pink and yellow paisley print. She had pulled it together with a wide white buckle belt.

Jeepers! thought Sabina, *maybe the kid actually pulled it out of a dumpster*.

'What?' said Ruby, reading her mother's thoughts, made obvious by the expression on her face.

Her mother closed her eyes and shook her head like she was trying to dislodge the vision.

'OK,' said Sabina, 'I'm not going to make a thing of it, let's just go and have a nice time. I'll pretend you're wearing that lovely peach dress I got you at the department store – why *aren't* you wearing that lovely peach dress I got you at the department store?'

Brant Redfort, now dressed in an elegant black suit, walked into the living room to find his wife, a picture in rose with matching accessories.

'You look sensational honey,' he said kissing his wife. 'You too... Ruby.' He uttered this compliment before he had really taken in the vision that was his daughter. 'You look very... very...' He paused, searching for some word that might not insult but that might also be truthful. He could find no word.

'I'll take *very very*,' said Ruby. 'No need to get your underwear in a bunch on my account.'

Hitch drove the Redforts to the venue. It was a big deal affair, red carpet and the whole circus.

The costume show was being held at the Scarlet Pagoda – the proceeds from the very expensive tickets and raffle would hopefully raise enough money to keep the old art deco building from crumbling to dust. The place was considered an architectural gem of great historical importance, having been built in the heydays of the roaring twenties. Any elderly star worth an Oscar had tripped across this stage.

And many of those stars had left their footprints – literally. Outside the theatre was Twinford's own walk of fame, where brass star shapes were set into the sidewalk, commemorating the town's most famous. Next to each star was a cast of the actors' shoes, their footprints pressed into wet concrete.

Ruby and her family walked past the footprints, and as they walked Sabina gave a running commentary.

'There's Fletch Gregory, what a man, and oh, look at dear little Arthur Mudge's teeny feet – I always thought he was taller, and goodness, are those *really* Margo Bardem's?'

And on into the theatre.

It had begun as a theatre for circus and stage productions, then much later it had become a movie theatre. But now it was just a room, a large empty space, where each week another tiny gold mosaic tile would drop from the ceiling. A place where the elegant ladies who silently stared out from the murals faded a little more each year. Soon, if nothing were done, their faces would disappear altogether and then the wrecking ball would be called in.

For tonight, though, it was a sparkling extravaganza of a party; a hint of the things to come when it was renovated. Everyone who was anyone was there, champagne glasses in hand, laughing and chatting as elegant young waiters glided around with silver trays of canapés.

As soon as Ruby and her parents walked in they were surrounded. 'It's such a wonderful example of the deco era,' said Dora Shoering, Twinford's self-declared expert on all things historical. She had to talk loudly over the hubbub of voices and chinking glasses. 'You can touch the history, run your hands over it, breathe it into your lungs.' The women all took deep breaths.

Sabina coughed – the Pagoda was a haven for dust mites. 'You know your onions, Dora, I mean it would be a perfect sadness if it were destroyed,' she said.

'I totally agree,' agreed Marjorie Humbert, who was now looking for a tissue, having just run her hands over history. 'It would be Twinford's bitter loss.'

Elaine Lemon joined them. 'So what are you ladies talking about? Gossip I hope!'

'Oh we were just saying how it would be the most terrible pity if they were to flatten this building,' said Marjorie.

'I so concur,' said Elaine, opting for a sad-face expression. 'It would be the most awful tragedy.' She paused. 'A tragic one.' In truth, Elaine was not there because she was remotely interested in the Scarlet Pagoda, but had eagerly accepted Sabina's offer of a free ticket because everyone else was going.

Ruby felt this conversation wasn't really going places and so moved off in search of something entertaining. As she circled around the room she recognised many big names from the stage and screen, including one of her favourites, Erica Grey. She was a star of the B movies and had played some of the most curious and monstrous villains on the medium-sized screen. She was originally from Alabama and spoke in a drawn-out drawl, her voice rich and deep. Every few sentences she would throw her head back and laugh – her red lip-sticked mouth opening wide to display perfectly white shinning teeth.

Ruby weaved her way on through the crowd and caught a glimpse of Crazy Cops actor Dirk Draylon as he made his way to his seat on the other side of the catwalk. Apparently the show was about to begin.

Boy, Mrs Digby would love this, she thought.

There were many other well-known personalities mingling in the crowd but none whom Ruby felt eager to shake hands with. Not because she didn't admire them, she did, she just had a wariness about meeting screen heroes; meeting one's hero could be a mistake, a big let down. This illusionary world that was film often survived better if it was never contaminated by real life.

At least that's what she thought until she met the make-up artist Fredrick Lutz. Frederick Lutz was a man Ruby greatly admired – a true artist, he had created some of the most startling monsters, villains and victims of the screen, as well as making up the faces of the great and beautiful.

They chatted for a while and then he thanked her for her compliments, and as she moved off to find her seat he called, 'If you ever need make-up for a very important occasion then think of me – it would be my great pleasure, Ms Redfort.'

'You can bet I will,' said Ruby, who was already considering

Halloween. Then she turned and bumped heads with her friend, Red Monroe.

'I've been looking for you,' said Red, rubbing her forehead.

'Hey Red, where's Sadie?' asked Ruby clutching her nose.

'Oh, Sadie's just back stage helping the radioactive lobster fix his pincers.' She said this as if it was not so very different from mentioning that someone needed help straightening their bow tie.

Red's mom, usually referred to as 'Sadie', was a costume designer – she mainly designed for thrillers and Sci-fi flicks and had done more than her share of B-movie work. Ruby liked hanging out at Red's place because her mother always had something unusual going on in her studio and Mrs Monroe was often to be found with pencil poised, asking some kind of curious question. '*So Ruby, tell me, what do you think a Grungemeister looks like? Do you think he would have fingers or grabbers*?'

Ruby and Red made their way to their seats. Elliot Finch was already there, studying the programme.

The lights went down. Everyone clapped.

'Clancy not here?' whispered Red.

'He had to smile for his dad,' replied Ruby.

'That kid's gonna dislocate his jaw one of these days,' said Red.

'Tell me about it,' said Ruby.

A crabby lady in the row behind them started making shushing sounds.

'Welcome to the opening of the Twinford Film Festival – A Date with Thrills!' said the host Ray Conner, bounding onto the stage.

Applause from the audience.

Ray Conner was a bit of a cheeseball, in Ruby's opinion.

'As you all know, tonight's extravaganza is a fundraiser in aid of this beautiful theatre of ours, the Scarlet Pagoda.'

Pause for more applause. Smiling from the host.

'The title of this year's festival is A Date with Thrills, in other words, Thriller Flicks, be they comic, romantic or just plain terrifying. And tonight we are particularly celebrating our wonderful costume designers, all too often unseen.'

More clapping, especially from Red, whose mother was a costume designer, after all.

Smiling and nodding from host.

'During the next few weeks Twinford movie theatres will be showing some fabulous films from years gone by. The wonderful work of stars such as: Betsy Blume, Leonard Fuller and Crompton Haynes, culminating in a tribute to the wonderful actress, Margo Bardem, who as a young thing worked in this

theatre as a hairdresser and whose career began with a romantic thriller that was both shot and later premiered in this very auditorium in 1952, and who subsequently went on to dominate the romantic thriller genre.'

More applause. A tight smile from Betsy Blume.

'Sadly, Margo Bardem can't be here tonight...'

A groan from the audience.

'...*but* she will of course be joining us for the film festival finale on Friday 15th!'

Applause.

'Thank you, thank you,' said Ray, trying to be heard above the clapping. 'This, folks, will be a very special occasion, because on the night at this very theatre will be the world premiere of *Feel the Fear*, a movie that also features the Scarlet Pagoda in some scenes. A movie shot in 1954 but for some reason never shown, so you lucky people will have the chance to be its first audience!'

Wild applause now.

'Jeepers,' whispered Elliot, 'I wish this guy would move it along a little.'

'Talking of this wonderful actress, one of the highlights of *this* particular evening will be the fabulous costumes worn by Ms Bardem in the thrillers: *The Truth Will Out, The Last Wish, Catch Your Death* and of course *The Cat that Got the Canary*. Yes, tonight you will all be fortunate enough to see those awe-inspiring outfits worn by Ms Bardem that made those particular pictures such a movie sensation...' He paused for suspense.

'The feather dress...' Applause.

'The white fur trim gown...' Applause.

'And yes, those legendary size 3s, the Little Yellow Shoes.' Applause.

'The list goes on,' said Ray, who was going on a little too much as far as Ruby was concerned.

'You will also be dazzled by costumes from films such as *Fingers from Outer Space*, *It's Behind You* and *The Claw at the Window*.

There was a loud whistling – there were obviously a lot of *The Claw at The Window* appreciators in the audience.

'And folks, let's not forget the other of this evening's highlights – the raffle!'

More frenzy, Ruby suspected most of it generated by her own mother.

After a bit more build-up, the show finally began. Music started up, Ray Conner thankfully slipped stage right, and a succession of models started strutting across the stage in a variety of outfits, each one more outlandish than the last. Ruby was engrossed – it was as if her favourite movies were coming to

life.

Red too leaned forward in her seat. 'Isn't that the dress from *Two's company, Three's a Shroud*?'

'I believe so,' said Ruby.

'It looks like it's made from actual cobwebs and look at that...' As Red stretched her arm out to point towards another costume classic, she knocked her drink right into her lap.

'Oh cripes, not again!' said Red, violently wiping at her dress.

'If that's a blue slushy, Red, you better go pour water on it,' said Elliot. 'That stuff stains, man – talk about radioactive.'

Red had an accident of this nature most hours of the week, and she was well practised at dashing to restrooms or water fountains.

While Red made her way to the bathroom to deal with the slushy, Ruby and Elliot continued to enjoy the show – there was so much more to the outfits than one ever saw when just viewing on a screen. It was fair to say, some of the costumes were a whole lot better than the movies they had appeared in.

Fifteen minutes later, Ruby looked up to see Red making her way back to her seat. By the looks on people's faces she was stepping on an awful lot of toes. As she got closer, Ruby saw that the blood seemed to have drained from her face, which gave her a strange almost ghostly appearance.

'What's up with you?' Ruby asked, as Red finally sat down beside her. 'You look like you just ran into the Scorpion Spectre.'

'Yeah, well maybe I did – I got lost and ended up backstage, and there is something weird back there. It may not be the scorpion but it sure to goodness put the wind up me.'

'Seriously?' said Elliot.

'I tell you, I think this place is haunted, just like they say,' said Red.

Ruby gave her the once over. 'Look, maybe you should ease up on the slushies Red – you know they put a lot of chemicals in those things. I think some of them mighta gone to your head.'

'I'm not kidding around, you guys. I know I tend to walk into a lot of things but this time I swear I tripped over something that wasn't there – I mean there was something there, nothing I could see, but there was something – I mean, I couldn't have tripped over nothing, right? And I swear I heard footsteps.'

'Red, you are always tripping over nothing,' said Ruby.

Red stared back at them both. 'Well this time I didn't,' she said firmly. 'This time it wasn't down to me.'

And the weirdest thing was... Ruby believed her.

Chapter 10.
Funny peculiar

IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER THE INTERVAL, just ten minutes into the second half of the show, that something seemed to go wrong.

The organiser came onto the catwalk to apologise for the hitch in proceedings, blaming it on a technical problem.

Then Ray the host came back on and made some so-so jokes suggesting it might be something to do with the *Claw at the Window* or the *Ecto Grabber* and everyone laughed good-naturedly.

The organiser returned to announce that unfortunately one of the star pieces had been mislaid but the show would go on.

Ruby and Red looked at each other.

'Told you,' said Red. 'Something is back there.'

'I'll go check it out,' said Ruby, nonchalantly. By now her curiosity had really got a grip, and even if it meant coming face to pincers with the Scorpion Spectre she needed to know just what was going down. Happily, she didn't believe in scorpion spectres so there wasn't a whole lot to fear, besides, she had come through a forest fire almost unscathed, she had survived two encounters with the evil Count von Viscount, she had escaped the clutches of a sea monster. She was beginning to think she might be invincible.

Ruby slipped out of her seat and made her way backstage. She did it with such confidence that no one accosted her, at least not until she reached the area where the show director was issuing orders.

'You can't come back here!' said an intimidating looking woman in an asymmetric dress and asymmetric haircut.

'I'm just...'

'Scram,' said the woman, slamming the door an inch in front of Ruby's nose.

'Darn it,' hissed Ruby. As she turned to leave, she spotted a whole stack of fish heads, giant ones. The fish heads were made from papier-mâché. Ruby recognised them; she knew the movie they came from, she had watched it over and over again squished in next to Mrs Digby on her settee. She had been just three when she first saw *The Sea of Fish Devils*.

Ruby picked up one of the heads and examined it. *Worth a try, I guess*. She pulled it down over her head so her face was totally

hidden – she could see out all right but no one could see in. It was uncomfortable but it was bearable. She checked the rack of costumes and found what she was looking for. Pulling it from its hanger she wriggled into one of the fish tails. There was no telling who she actually was now. She was just a short Fish Devil. She opened the door and this time the woman ushered her in.

'About time! Where's the rest of your shoal?'

Ruby shrugged.

'No one's a professional any more,' said the asymmetric woman, shaking her head. She looked more closely at the fish in front of her. 'Kinda small, aren't you? Your fins are dragging.'

The fish shrugged but said nothing. Then it indicated that it needed to go to the bathroom, the woman rolled her eyes and said, 'OK, but make it snappy, Bubbles.'

As Ruby threaded her way between the rails of costumes and boxes full of props and accessories, she overheard one of the models talking to the host. 'I swear, one minute they were totally there and, like, the next, you know, gone – weird, right? Only I swear I felt something – like air moving past me. A breeze, you know?' She sighed. 'Not that it matters, I could never have modelled them anyway.' She looked down at her feet. 'No chance of squeezing these US size 9s into those teeny tiny shoes – that Margo Bardem must have pixie feet.'

Ruby slipped out of the side door into the labyrinth of passageways. She shed her fish ensemble and tiptoed along the various backstage corridors. She had no real idea where she was headed but she followed the voices – they were coming from high up in the pagoda. Ruby had once been told that there was a strong room up top there, built long ago for a famously difficult actress who *insisted* on having a dressing room at the very top of the building and *insisted* that her valuables be locked safely away in the room next door while she performed on stage.

As Ruby climbed the next set of stairs, the voices became louder. Using the extendable mirror that was one of the many attachments belonging to the Escape Watch, she managed to peep around the wall. Two guards were explaining to the show organiser how they had not moved one inch from the door of the room that contained prop 53.

'Not only did we not move one inch from the place I am standing right now,' insisted one of the guards, 'but no one even so much as touched the handle of that door, let alone walked inside, at least not until the stage hand came to collect 'em.'

'That's right,' said the other guy, 'everything Stan says is exactly what happened – until you unlocked that door, no one went in.'

'So you want me to believe that you've been here the whole

time?'

'Look, lady, I don't want you to believe nothing. I'm telling you, me and Al never moved an inch from where we are stood now.'

'Not an inch,' confirmed Al. 'Everything's been ship-shape and exactly as it should be, so far as we're concerned.' Al picked up a little piece of paper from the floor as if to illustrate his point. 'Everything in the right place.' He tucked it into his pocket. 'Ship-shape, see.'

'So prop 53 was just spirited away? Is that what you're saying?'

'It's the only explanation,' said Al, 'and I don't mind telling you, as of today, I'm never working here again. This place is haunted – no two ways about it. When your stage-hand guy came up to fetch your so called *prop 53*, I felt the weirdest sensation, like someone brushed right by me. So as of tomorrow, lady, you can find another security guard for your grand finale premiere shindig.'

The woman shook her head, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. But despite her protests Stan and Al were not to be persuaded otherwise.

'Ghosts or no ghosts,' she said, 'could you at least assure me that all exits have security on them? No one – and I repeat, no one – costumed or otherwise, is to leave this building without being checked for stolen items!' She turned to leave and then added, 'And that includes me!'

The security guy nodded. 'Affirmative,' he said, 'no one leaves without our clearance.'

If this was true, thought Ruby, then the thief was very possibly still somewhere in the building, lurking, waiting for his chance to escape. But how was he going to do that? She looked around.

Via a window? she thought.

She ran back down the stairs. There were no windows on the ground floor and the windows on the stairway did not open and there were no missing or broken panes of glass. *No way out.* She started down the corridor back towards front of stage.

It was when she rounded the next corner that she thought she heard something, something a little like soft movements. *Coulda been a mouse... or a rat.* She shivered. *Pull it together Redfort.*

By the time Ruby made it back to her seat the show was just wrapping up. The raffle had been drawn, the pledges of financial support all collected and now it was the showstopper finish – atmospheric lights, sinister sound effects, and a parade of the monstrous and villainous were playing out on the stage, complete with a shoal of Fish Devils.

Ruby tried to appreciate it all, but she was understandably

distracted by what she had overheard. As the last outrageous costume left the stage, the theatre broke into applause.

Few of the audience seemed to have been bothered by the non-appearance of prop 53, there was so much else to look at. Sabina Redfort, however, was very disappointed.

'Where do you think they got to? I thought they were supposed to be one of the highlights of the evening?'

'I'm sure they were there,' said Brant, 'you probably just missed them.'

'I don't think I would just miss the Little Yellow Shoes, Brant, get real,' said Sabina.

'Well,' said Brant, 'don't be too disappointed – don't forget, *you did* win the Ada Borland prize.'

'Oh yes!' cied Sabina, 'Ruby, I won the raffle and you, you lucky kid, are going to have your portrait taken by the great Ada Borland!'

Ruby didn't *feel* so lucky – she was never too thrilled about smiling for the camera. It was usually a very boring activity. But what she said was, 'Super.'

'You had lady luck on your side,' said Brant.

'Well,' said Sabina, 'I cut the odds a little. I did purchase a hundred and twenty-two tickets.'

The Redforts, carried by the tide, spilled out onto the street with most of the other theatre-goers. Brant glanced up at the old building. 'Looking at it, you can't help kind of believing this old place might just be haunted.' He winked at Barbara Bartholomew. 'Kind of exciting isn't it, Barb.'

Barbara gave an involuntary shiver. 'Gives me the creeps,' she said.

Ruby said nothing the whole journey home. Her brain was trying to make connections and bring a little logic into the evening's events. She listened to her parents' conversation but they spoke of nothing more interesting than their appreciation of the canapés and concern that the valet parking was under-staffed – they seemed to have forgotten about the Little Yellow Shoes already.

Ruby took a juice from the refrigerator, bid her parents goodnight and climbed the stairs to her room.

OK, so Red Monroe was about as gullible as they came and no one was more accident-prone, but it was weird that Red, the security guards *and* the model had all experienced something so similar; had all sensed a presence that they just couldn't explain. Ruby might have been tempted to write this off: imaginations stirred by the theatre's rumoured hauntings; the spooky sensations conjured by the noises and drafts of an old building. People could be pretty suggestible and once one person

described a strange experience, often others would follow suit. Ruby had read all about it in Dr Stephanie Randleman's book, *I Think I Saw That Too*.

On the other hand, it was important not to dismiss a possibility just because it sounded like the far-fetched ramblings of a gaggle of highly suggestible folk. Was it *possible* that the rumours about the Scarlet Pagoda had some substance after all? Ruby remembered back to the case she had worked on involving the Sea Whisperer. In that instance, the people who had claimed they had heard a whispering sound coming from the ocean had not imagined it – it was absolutely true.

She too had heard it, and even seen the creature the sound came from, but ghosts? Ghosts were a stretch – Ruby would need a lot more evidence before she concluded that something from the spirit world was responsible for stealing a pair of size 3s.