SCAREDY CAT

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and Chris Grabenstein

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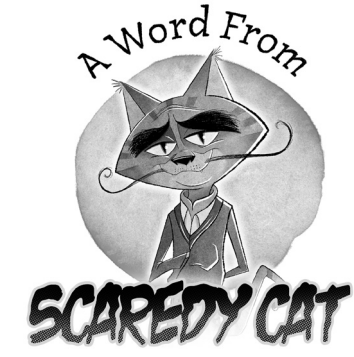
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Pay close attention.

Closer.

Even closer.

Oh, that's so much better. Except for your breath. Reminds me of a dog I met once.

Now listen to me. L—I—S—T—E—N. Oh, yes. I'm used to being listened to. I demand it. I insist on it. I will be listened to!!!

You've heard of Scaredy Cats, correct? Nod your head if you're listening. Now nod your head if I'm right. Aha, you *have* heard of Scaredy Cats.

Well, I'm a real Scaredy Cat, but, as you will see,

I'm not the one who is afraid. Oh, no. That should be you. Mee-OWWWWW!

There are others like me. Not nearly as talented, or fierce, or clever. But there are Scaredy Cats in your small town, your big city, your neighborhood, maybe even your backyard. We Scaredy Cats are everywhere. It's just that human beings can't see us. Only cats can see a Scaredy Cat.

Are you with me so far, dear hearts?

I am the Scaredy Cat on Strawberry Lane—a cul-de-sac (look it up) in the western suburbs of Fairview. The homes here are very lovely. Practically mansions. Why, there's even a gorgeous green golf course. Strawberry Lane runs right alongside the back nine. That's what golfers call the final holes on an eighteen-hole course. (You can look that up, too!)

Everything was going as it should. Fine and dandy, the cat's meow. But then a certain family moved to Strawberry Lane. That would be the Wilde family.

But why should I care about these Wildes?

I don't.

In fact, I couldn't care less about all human beans. They mean nothing to a Scaredy Cat as magnificent as I.

My complete focus was on the Wildes' two cats, whom they brought with them to my domain!

Poop, two and a half, a gray British shorthair. And yes, the vet gave her that name in honor of her nervous bowel syndrome. The name stuck. So did poop to the sides of her litter box. She's better now. But, well, let's just say I aim to make her bowels nervous again.

The other Wilde cat? Pasha, almost four, born in St. Petersburg. No, not St. Petersburg, Florida. St. Petersburg, *Russia*. Pasha is a white long-haired Persian cat. Speaks six languages. Once met Vladimir Putin, or so he claims. Repeatedly.

Now, this is important for our story. You must have noticed that cats are, shall we say, a teensy-weensy bit totally crazy, spooked-out, cat-eyed paranoid!

Always looking over their shoulders. Skittish. Often staring down long hallways at nothing. Frequently gazing out windows at…nothing. Jumping off couches and benches, and tables, and mantelpieces when they hear the slightest *poof* of a noise.

Well, Scaredy Cats are why they do that.

I am why they do that.

To be as clear as I can, I am a shadowy presence

that only cats can see. I'm not exactly a ghost, but that's a good way to think about me—especially if you don't think very well.

I'm scarier than any human ghost, though, because, as I'm sure you know, cats are far superior to humans in every way.

My job, my duty—nay, my calling—is to make sure that the cats in my realm act more cattish than any other cats on this planet or any other. My mission, should I choose to accept it, and I have, is to maintain the proper cat order, the catus quo, to resist any and all change to our cattiness or cattitude.

Cats are proud, cats are stubborn, cats are finicky, and I plan to keep it that way, especially in *my* domain!

And that is precisely the way life was on Strawberry Lane until Poop and Pasha arrived on my culde-sac. (Haven't you looked it up yet? I told you to look it up paragraphs ago!)

Here's what happened. And I should warn you—this is not a happy story. This, dear hearts, is a ghost story.



Chapter 1

That's a pretty good picture of me. I really am that gorgeous.

You should've seen my kitten pictures. Adorable.

Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Poop. Formerly of London. Currently residing in Fairview, USA. And yes, I used to have an, uh, issue. I'm all better now. Thanks for asking. Besides, I love my name. It makes human beans say, "Time to scoop Poop's poop."

Anyway, six months after moving from London to the United States, I could tell that things weren't really working out for me in my first home.

Don't get me wrong. The place was comfy. Plenty

of food, a nice fluffy bed, lots of toys (some filled with catnip), a jumbo-sized litter box, and fifteen different rooms for me to romp around in. There were also window shades with strings attached. Love me some string to tug.

But I liked to sleep in front of the TV. I couldn't help it. TVs are warm. The people inside them are often highly entertaining. So I'd just curl up in a ball and snooze, snuggled up against that cozy, toasty screen. I didn't know I was blocking the bottom part of the picture or that the bottom part of the picture was so earth-shatteringly important to the Man's enjoyment of sporting events.

"I can't see if the putt made it into the cup!" he'd shout. "The cat's butt's blocking half the green!"

When he said that, I rolled over—in classic belly rub position. No belly rub was forthcoming.

"Her belly's more bloated than her butt!" the Man growled at the Woman. "This lazy cat cost us four hundred pounds. Now she almost weighs that much!"

Pounds are what people in England—where I was born—use for money. I believe, if what I read in the business section of the newspaper I peed on this morning (the litter box was sooooo far away) is

correct, four hundred British pounds equals about five hundred American dollars.

Why so much? Well, first of all, you saw my picture, right? I am *so* worth it.

Second, the Woman insisted that the Man purchase her a stunning, purebred, imported-from-jolly-old-England British shorthair cat with gray fur to match all the dove-gray furniture in the living room, no matter the cost. She found me online, paid to have me shipped over from England. She kept the name the London vet had given me. (I think she thought *poop* meant something else in jolly old England. You know, like *chips* meaning "French fries.")

Anyhow, that was then, this is now.

"I'm thinking of remodeling" is what the Woman said in reply to the Man when he so rudely complained about my butt and belly blocking his TV.

"What?" he growled.

"Gray is so last year. I want to do the whole house over in crisp blacks and whites." She flapped a magazine at the Man. "A black-and-white tuxedo cat would work much better with our new decor."

"Fine. That means this tubby tabby has to go."

"She's not a tabby, honey. She's a gray British shorthair. But yes. She should go. The sooner the

better. The decorator is dropping by tomorrow and I don't want to insult her color scheme or delicate sensibilities…"

"Fine," snarled the Man. "It's worth five times five hundred dollars to have my TV back the way it's supposed to be!"

The Man grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and very unceremoniously, if you ask me, tossed me out the door into the backyard.

I remember it was a cold and drizzly night.

My paws plodded through puddles as I made my way to the garbage cans. What can I say? I was hungry. Emotional distress is a food trigger for me.

But as I approached the trash barrels set out near the curb, I heard a hiss.

Then two orange eyes started glowing in the darkness between the trash bins.

It scared me silly. I would've pooped my pants except cats don't wear pants, so I just pooped on the lawn.

The evil creature hissed again.

I took off running. Okay, I jogged. Fine, it was more of a waddle.

I headed to the nearest clump of trees. I was too terrified to pay attention to where I was going.

And that's how I ended up lost.

The next morning, however, I was found.

Not by my people.

Oh, no. I was hauled away by a burly fellow who worked for something called the Fairview Animal Care Center. It sounded lovely. A place where all they did was take care of animals. I was expecting an endless kibble buffet, dangly things on strings to chase, and constant belly rubs.

I was wrong.

It was a prison.