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opening extract from

The Nightmare Game

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Whose story is it? Does it belong to Robert, who found himself suddenly, terrifyingly, smaller than a fingernail? He survived the dangerous journey back to his full size, but can he rescue the other tiny people, who saved his life by taking him into their cavern?

Or is the focus on Lorn, whose 'real' life was so appalling that she chose to be small for ever, leaving nothing behind? Now that she's safe in the cavern, she'll have to cope with her horrific memories of the past. Is that the core of the story?

What about Emma, Robert's sister? She dared to believe what he told her, and she wants to help the people in the cavern. But how will she react if it starts to get dangerous?

And then there's Tom. Is he simply a friend, supporting Robert, or is he somehow more important? Will he get drawn in deeper as the mystery unfolds?

It doesn't do to forget Lorn's father, either. Or her mother and brother. Or Cam and Zak, and the others in the cavern. No one is insignificant. All their lives are woven together, inextricably. Pull at one thread, to see it better, and the rest of the cloth shrinks and distorts, twisting out of shape.

How can any story tell the real truth? How is it even possible to start . . . ?

Zak stroked the drum that lay in his lap, leaning back against the wall of the cavern and looking at the others as they settled into a circle. Their faces were hidden, except where the firelight caught them, and they were already silent and expectant. Waiting for the story to begin.

When everything was still, Zak tapped the drum-skin lightly and took a slow breath. 'Once upon a time,' he said, 'there was a man who kept his daughter in a hole in the ground.'

Lorn sat forward sharply, her eyes widening. *What are you doing? You can't make a story out of that.*

But he could. He was.

'The man had a wife and a son,' he said, 'and he loved them

well enough. But his daughter was the special one. She was more important than anything else in the whole wide world. Every morning he said to himself, "I'll bring her out of the hole tonight." But every evening, when he lifted off the lid and looked down at her—he couldn't do it.'

Bando burst out into one of his loud, incongruous laughs. 'She was too heavy to lift!'

'No, she wasn't heavy.' Gravely Zak shook his head. 'She wasn't heavy at all. She was as slender as a stalk of silkskin, as light as a moonbeam lying across the grass. He could have picked her up with one hand. But every time he saw her he thought, *She's too beautiful and fragile for the ugly, unkind world. If I take her out, greedy people will come and steal her away. She's safer where she is.* So every evening he put the lid back in its place and shut her away under the ground again.'

'Why did he do that?' Bando said, his simple, heavy face frowning and bewildered.

'Ssh!' Cam said impatiently.

She was trying to keep him in order, but for once her voice had no effect. She ran everything else that went on in the cavern, but Zak's stories were beyond her control. Zak had his own kind of authority and he used it now, ignoring Cam and weaving Bando's question into the story.

'The old man shut his daughter away because she was so precious to him. When he looked at her, all his troubles vanished. So he called her "Hope" and kept her away from the harsh, ugly world outside.'

Lorn felt herself grow hot and angry in the darkness. How could he know so much—and be so wrong? Stories were supposed to be made up, out of nothing, but this one was *real.* Somehow, Zak knew Hope's story—*her* story—and he was twisting it. She had been that poor, imprisoned girl, but not because a kind old man was keeping her safe. He'd locked her away in a deep, dark hole, because . . . because—

The words locked in her throat. She wanted to scream at Zak,

to stop him before he said anything else, but she couldn't make a sound.

Zak leaned forward, lowering his voice. 'And then, one evening, three evil robbers came snooping around the old man's house.'

Bando caught his breath.

'They crept across the garden,' Zak whispered, 'and peered through the cracks in the shutters. They saw the old man lift the lid off the hole where he kept his daughter safe.'

Bando had his hands over his mouth now, and the others were totally silent. Everyone but Lorn was caught up in the story.

'The robbers crouched by the window,' Zak said softly. 'They watched the old man looking down at his beautiful daughter. They watched as he stretched out his hands to her, and they saw him hesitate. Then they saw him replace the lid and settle himself beside the fire to sleep. So, when he and his wife and his son were all asleep–'

This time, his pause was long and dramatic. At the other end of the cavern, the cold wind roared in the entrance tunnel. Outside, the nightbird called from the top of the bitternut tree. But they were distant, insubstantial sounds. Nothing was real except Zak's voice in the flickering shadows.

'When the poor old man was fast asleep,' he whispered, 'the robbers sneaked up to his door–and smashed the lock.'

His voice rose suddenly, in a great crescendo.

'They broke into the house and ripped the lid off the hole in the ground–AND THEY SNATCHED HIS DAUGHTER OUT AND STOLE HER AWAY!'

MR WRONG NARRATES

1

They'd stolen Hope. Her secret room was uncovered, with its trapdoor tossed away to one side, and the space under the floor left gaping and exposed. She'd gone.

Warren stood on the edge of the hole, shivering in his pyjamas. The conservatory door was wide open, but he couldn't make the effort to close it and shut out the cold night air. He couldn't do anything except stare down into the shocking emptiness in front of him.

Hope should have been down there. All his life, he'd had a secret sister, hidden in her room under the floor. All his life, he'd known that he mustn't say anything about her. Mustn't even speak her name—*Hope Armstrong*—in case he gave her away to the rest of the world. Locked inside his head, the letters of that forbidden name had swirled around, making cryptic, hidden patterns. *Prongo Hamster. H. Poor-Garments. Grasp the moron.*

But none of those meant anything now. There was nothing left to hide.

His mother and father came running downstairs, pulling on the rest of their clothes. His father snatched up the car keys and his mother took the big torch from the hall table. Neither of them stopped to tell him where they were going. They hadn't told him anything.

But he knew. They were going after the kidnappers. They were going to find Hope and bring her back home, where she belonged, back to the secret room that kept her safe.

He heard the front door open and close. He heard the car start up, sliding out of the garage and down the close. It slipped away into the night, leaving him on his own, standing in the cold conservatory.

He shook his head from side to side, trying not to imagine Hope out there in the dark. She would be in an unfamiliar place, with people she didn't know. How could she understand what was going on? She'd be terrified.

He might have saved her, if only he'd yelled in time. The memory ran over and over in his head, repeating endlessly. He'd crept downstairs, because he couldn't sleep, and when he'd opened the kitchen door—there they were, carrying Hope out of the conservatory.

That was when he should have shouted. Bellowed, with all the breath in his lungs. *Dad! Wake up! They're stealing Hope!* If he'd done that, his father might have rescued her.

But he'd been afraid—because it was his fault. He'd seen the boys before. They'd been ready for him when he came off the school bus, yesterday, blocking the pavement and hassling him. Threatening terrible things unless he promised to turn off the burglar alarm. He hadn't even thought that they might be kidnappers, but he should have stood up to them. He should have realized—

No. He blocked out those thoughts. *It's not my fault. There were three of them, counting the girl. All bigger than me. And how could I have guessed what they were planning?*

But the accusing voice in his head didn't stop. To deaden it, he went into the kitchen to look for something to eat. There were no crisps left, but he made himself a sandwich, squirting mayonnaise on to the peanut butter and topping it with a slice of cheese. Chewing on the first mouthful, he went back to the conservatory and switched on the light.

It looked even more of a mess now that he could see properly. The wooden lid that should have been covering

the secret entrance was lying upside down near the door. The carpet that went over it was rolled up in one corner. And the TV—which should have been standing on the carpet—was pushed to one side, with the screen facing the window.

It was still turned on, as usual. Warren let the sound wash over him and munched his sandwich, struggling to believe what had happened. His father had always said, *If people know Hope's there, they'll come and take her away.* But that had never seemed real, even though he'd heard it all his life. How could Hope go away? She belonged in her special room. He couldn't imagine her anywhere else.

But his father had been right all along. The kidnappers had found out about her and they'd sneaked in and snatched her away.

After a while, he remembered the photograph. He went into the study and turned on the computer, sorting through all the picture files until he found it.

It was one of the kidnappers. The tall one. They'd caught him snooping around, a few days ago. That must have been when he'd seen Hope, but they hadn't realized that. So they'd just taken a photo to scare him off. *If you come back, we'll call the police and show them your picture.*

That wasn't true, of course. They could never call the police, because of Hope. But the tall boy had no way of knowing that. He'd looked scared and furious as Warren's father tugged at his hair, dragging his head round to face the camera.

And there was the picture on the computer. Warren opened the file and stared at the wild, fierce eyes and the angry mouth, pulled sideways into a snarl. That was exactly how he'd looked. Cruel and savage, with a strong nose and dark, untidy hair.

The sort of person who could frighten you into doing anything.

The sky was still dark when the car came back. Warren heard it pull into the kerb and stop, with the engine idling. One of the doors slammed and footsteps came up the path.

Then the car started up again, driving back down the close and away.

His mother came in on her own, with her shoulders slumped and the torch in her hand, still switched on. She looked haggard and wretched.

'We couldn't catch them,' she said dully. Before Warren could ask. 'We chased them right across town, but they ran through all the back alleys.'

'But Hope can't run,' Warren said. 'She—'

'They dumped her into a supermarket trolley and pushed her away—like a bag of potatoes. She must have been so scared—' His mother broke off, pressing her lips together to stop them trembling.

'Dad will catch them,' Warren said quickly. 'He's got the car. He'll find them and bring her home.'

But his mother shook her head. Vaguely, as though she couldn't take in what he meant. 'I always thought it would be the police who came,' she said. 'Or maybe social workers. But they're just teenagers. What could they possibly want—?' Her mouth twisted suddenly and she sat down on the chair in the hall, covering her face with her hands.

'It's probably just a joke,' Warren said. Babbling desperately, to stop her bursting into tears. 'Why would they want to keep her? They'll probably bring her back after an hour or two. They're not going to take her to hospital—'

His mother was rigid, her face still hidden in her hands.

'Mum?' He dabbed nervously at her shoulder. 'We will get her back, won't we? You don't think she's really—going to die?'

His mother was crying silently into her hands. It took Warren a few moments to realize that he was crying too.

It was almost morning by the time the car came up the close again. It bumped on to the drive and stopped abruptly, as though the engine had failed.

Warren was asleep, with his head on the kitchen table. He was woken roughly, by the edge of the table ramming into his stomach as his mother pushed it away from her. She jumped up and ran into the hall while Warren was still struggling to catch his breath.

Without standing up, he saw her wrench the front door open, but it seemed a long time before anyone came through it. When his father finally walked into the house, Warren was so stunned that all he could do was stare.

It was like watching a different person. Someone who walked mechanically, looking blank and dazed. Over his shoulder, the car was just visible. It was parked carelessly, half on the drive and half on the grass, with the lights left on and the driver's door hanging open.

What had happened to him? He'd gone out full of energy and anger, determined to get Hope back. And once he'd decided to do something, he never gave up. It must have taken something shocking—something cataclysmic—to change him like this.

Hope's dead already. That was the worst thing Warren could imagine. *She's dead—and he's seen her body.*

He gripped the edge of the kitchen table, afraid to move. This was different from anything else in his life. There weren't any instructions about what to say, or how to behave. He was petrified.

His father walked straight down the hall and into the kitchen. For a second, he looked as though he was heading straight for the place where Warren was sitting. *It wasn't my fault,* said the panicky, terrified voice in Warren's head. *I didn't know—I didn't guess—*

But his father went straight past him without even a glance, heading into the utility room. Warren heard him open the cupboard where he kept his tools. And he still hadn't spoken.

Warren couldn't bear the tension any longer. 'Where's Hope?' he said. The words came out in a squeak. 'Where have they taken her? How can we get her back?'

His father answered without looking round. 'There's no hope,' Warren heard him say.

'We must be able to do *something,*' Warren muttered. Babbling again, to fill the silence. 'We have to get her back.'

His father shut the cupboard and turned round, with the big claw hammer in one hand and a jar of nails in the other.

'Weren't you listening?' he said. His eyes were cold. 'There is no such person as Hope. There never has been.'

Warren stared with his mouth open. His brain wouldn't make sense of the words. 'But—'

'You've never had a sister,' his father said harshly. 'Ask your friends. Ask anyone. You've always been an only child.'

He came back out through the kitchen, knocking his wife aside as though he hadn't even seen her. She watched him cross the hall and go into the living room. Then she looked round at Warren.

'I don't understand,' she said, in a scared, bewildered voice. 'What's he talking about?'

Warren didn't know what to say. He stared back at her, shaking his head stupidly.

And then the noises started.

They came from beyond the living room, from the conservatory. There was a dragging, scraping sound and then the unmistakable thump of a hammer against wood. Warren heard his mother catch her breath. She went straight out of the kitchen and across the hall.

When she reached the living room door, she gave a cry. Not loud, but full of pain. *I don't want to see,* Warren thought desperately. *Whatever it is, I don't want to see.* But he forced himself to stand up and follow her. She had stopped in the doorway, but he could see over her shoulder, across the living room and into the conservatory.

His father had dropped the wooden lid back into place, closing off the entrance to Hope's room. Now he was hammering nails in all around the edge, so that no one could open the trapdoor again.

Warren and his mother stood without a word, watching him hammer his way round the square. When the last nail was knocked down, he stood up and stepped aside, looking across at his wife.

'Put the carpet back,' he said crisply. 'And the television. Get this room back to normal.' Picking up the jar of nails, he walked out of the conservatory and back across the living room. As he came through the door, his wife caught at his sleeve.

'Dan—'

He twitched his arm free and pushed past her, without answering. For a second she stood where she was, staring at the wooden square with its border of nails. Then she dropped her head and went to carry out his orders.

Warren scurried after her. 'I'll help,' he said. He wanted her to smile, but she didn't even look at him. Just nodded and kept walking.

They lifted the carpet back into position and unrolled it, making certain that it covered the trapdoor. Then they carried the television from the side of the conservatory

and placed it carefully in the centre of the carpet. As they set it down, Warren's father came back.

'And turn that thing off,' he said sharply, waving his hand at the TV.

It was never turned off. There was always a television on in the conservatory, filling it with light and sound. It was so normal that Warren had never even wondered why it was there.

Now, for the first time, he understood that it was because of Hope. The blare from the television had covered the small sounds she made as she moved around under the floor, muttering to herself.

His mother reached for the button—and then stopped. Slowly she turned to face her husband. 'Hope's dead, isn't she? Tell me. I need to know.'

He answered without looking at her, and there was something in his face that made Warren shiver.

'Our only daughter was called Abigail,' he said. 'She died sixteen years ago, when the doctors insisted on taking her into hospital. We had no second chance. There was never any such person as Hope.'

Pushing past his wife, he pressed the button on the front of the television. The sound stopped and the picture disappeared. For the first time in Warren's life, the conservatory was silent and dark.