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opening extract from

Scared to Death

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Prologue



'Don't make me go in there. Please don't make me go in there!'

The terrified boy is trying to get away from the crimson door with its cracked, peeling paint. He plants his feet, glancing anxiously over his shoulder at a menace he can only imagine. His mind fills with a wild, fluttering panic. 'I won't do it! I won't! Please don't be mean. There's something down there.'

He's never heard the sound of darkness before but he can hear it now. Behind the deep red door there's the thing in the dark with its shadowy breath. It's waiting for him. He tries to fight back against his brother. He's seven years old. The brother he's always called Red Man, or Red for short, because he liked everything to be red, is eight (nearly nine as he keeps telling everybody). A year makes a lot of difference at that age.

I won't go.

You can't make me.

But there's fear in his voice and fear takes all the fight out of you. Weakness creeps in and strength leaks out. He tries to tell his older brother he won't play. It's a stupid game. But instead he ends up pleading tearfully not to be sent down there, into the cellar, where the darkness is waiting for him. He tries to shove past but he isn't strong enough. Fear is a blade that cuts your muscles like strings.

'Oh, stop being such a baby,' Red says. He gives his brother a rough shove, propelling him towards the door. 'Baby!'

The baby is starting to think Red's enjoying the game too much. He's always looked up to his brother but today he's being horrible.

'Don't call me that,' the baby cries, unable to stop himself being forced ever closer to the door. 'I hate it. Please, Red. It's dark in there. Something's moving.'

Red laughs at him. 'What are you afraid of the cellar for? I'm not. I don't mind going in, do I? I don't mind sitting in the dark, all on my own. Remember last time? I was down there ages. I didn't cry. I wasn't scared. I wasn't a baby . . . Baby!'

It's true. Red's always up for a dare. He just opens the door and shuts it behind him, as if he's been shutting himself in dark, dusty cellars all his life. Red doesn't mind the dark. Maybe it's because he's older.

'You're just a scaredy cat,' Red chuckles. 'You're just a stupid little scaredy cat.' He sees his brother's chin wobble and laughs again. 'Now you're crying. Cry baby! Cry baby!'

The younger boy fights back the tears. He doesn't want to cry in front of his big brother. But he can't help himself. Hot tears start spilling down his cheeks. Soon he's knuckling his eyes. It's true. He is scared. Who wouldn't be, stuck in here with the stifling, snuffling darkness? His chest is heaving. He's never been so frightened. They played the game once before and the things he saw down there made his flesh crawl. The dark felt bad. It smelled bad. It was alive, so alive it could brush right against you.

'Go on. Go through the door. I dare you.'

No, this time it's different. I won't play.

Even as he tries to resist Red starts shoving and pushing him back, blocking his escape route. He can sense the clawing darkness behind him, just beyond the door.

'What's the matter with you?' Red demands. 'It's only a stupid cellar. It won't hurt you.'

'Stop it!' he yells. 'I'm telling Nana on you.'

'Go on then, baby,' Red retorts. 'Shout to her. She can't hear you. The telly's on too loud.'

The baby fights and shouts. He wriggles and twists, trying to fight his way out of Red's grip but it's a losing battle. Red is bigger and stronger than he is. He feels his shoes scuffing against the floor, struggling for purchase. For all his efforts, he's being pushed backwards, protesting and sobbing.

'Don't make me go, Red. I'm so scared.'

But there's no sympathy in his brother's eyes. They're hard and cruel. Red gets like this sometimes, especially

when he doesn't get his way. 'We're playing jail,' he says. 'You've been wicked. You're going to jail.'

A scream of utter horror explodes from the baby's throat. 'No!'

He hears footsteps from the floor above. Somebody's heard his cries. They're going to save him from the things in the dark.

'Nana!' he starts to shout but Red covers his mouth, muffling his pleas for help.

Red's hand is sweaty and strong. There's nothing he can do now. He hears the door open, the rusty hinges squealing, then he's stumbling, pitching into the dark, staggering down the stairs and skinning his shins along the way. Here comes the dark, rushing up to grab him.

'No!'

Even as this final howl of terror bursts from his lungs, the door slams shut behind him.

'Red! Red!'

He's alone with the darkness, alone with its creeping terrors. He stands there blinking against the thick, musty darkness of the cellar. He knows his eyes will adjust to the dark. But that doesn't make him feel better. He tries to struggle back up the stairs to argue with his brother. Then the dark splits open. There's only a low, distant rumble at first. Soon the blackness parts and hot air rushes through the room. It's like somebody's opened an oven door.

'Let me out! Let me out! Red, it's coming.'

The darkness roars. Bright lights stutter, then they flicker and die. He can feel the ground rumbling beneath

his feet. It jolts and judders into every joint and socket, rattling right into the marrow of his bones. The vibrations shudder up his spine, crashing in his skull. The dust and litter of the cellar floor start to fly, a spinning, swirling maelstrom of stinging debris. Objects are disappearing into a howling, dark tunnel. They dance wildly, boxes, rusty tools, broken pieces of furniture, then they're gone in a cloud of dust. It's as if hundreds of tiny demons have taken to the air. But this is only the beginning. The real nightmare will take hold when the roaring stops.

There's a moment's silence before another sound comes, a monotonous, electronic ticking like some monstrous clock. Tick, tick, tickety tick. Then the footsteps begin. They're heavy and deliberate. They go on and on, thumping up from the bowels of the earth, treading an unseen spiral staircase. There's somebody there, the bogeyman, the terror man, the breathe-on-the-back-of-your-neck man.

The intruder is rising. He's coming closer. He's reaching out. Soon he'll be striding into the cellar. Soon he'll be there, the big, bad, night-walking man. Nobody can imagine how many nights the baby has lain on his side, never daring to roll over in case he sees him, the terror man.

'Red!'

He dreads the weight of the walker's hand on his shoulder.

'Please, Red. Open the door. He's after me.' His voice rises to a shrill scream. 'He's here!'

But something's preventing the walker going any further. He's reaching out but he can't quite touch. He wants to hold the little boy, to take him into his dark realm, but he can't. The baby can sense the terror man's frustration. Hopeful thoughts swarm through his mind.

You're swallowing up everything else, but you can't get me.

Run, run, as fast as you can ...

You can't catch me ...

The terror man starts to thresh and twist and turn but he can't close his huge shadowy hands around the little boy. That's it, the baby thinks. You're the one who's in jail and you can't drag me into your cell. No more than a few metres away, just about visible in the fog of flying debris, there's something imprisoned, and that something is the walker, the terror man.

Knowing he is safe from the clawing hands that scratch uselessly in the dark, the little boy's heart leaps. He can just about hear the walker. He's very close; almost close enough to grab his hand. The terror man snarls and roars as he tries to free himself. His foul, hot breath is on the boy's neck. He's there, in the gloom, clawing and grasping, but he doesn't come any closer.

The walker can't reach me.

'I want to get out now, Red,' he whimpers, calling up the stairs. But Red doesn't answer. So he shouts louder. 'You've got to let me out! Nana will shout at you for keeping me here. She'll tell Mum and Dad.'

But the door stays locked. The game is going on much

longer than it did last time. The footsteps have stopped but the walker is still there. That's him breathing, temporarily exhausted by his efforts. Then there's something new. A silvery glow strobes through the cellar. I won't look, he tells himself, but he can't help himself. Far, far below there's a bright, swirling light. It silhouettes the terrible figure of the walker.

One more push and he'll have me.

For the first time, when he calls his brother, he drops the family nickname. He calls his brother's real name. But that only makes Red angry.

'Call me Red!' his brother shouts back, furious that the rules are being broken. 'When we're playing I'm Red. Do it, baby, or I'll never let you out. I'll leave you down there for ever and ever.'

The baby doesn't like the sound of that. He obeys the order. He reverts to the nickname. In a thin, trembling voice he tries again. 'Don't leave me here, Red. Please.'

It isn't going to do him any good. Finally, from the bowels of the tunnel, something starts to emerge, the object that is casting the glow. The walker looks back over his shoulder. He welcomes the coming of the bright light. A huge building is rising. It's a church, a temple maybe. But the sounds that come from its walls aren't church sounds. They're terrible, unearthly shrieks and moans. The walls are brilliant white. The glowing chapel fills the tunnel. The little boy, panting, choking with fright, looks into the light and sees strange shapes rippling there like shoals of fish. This is even worse than the terror man. The white church fills him with

dread. Its brilliant, unnatural light splits the dark, lancing across the murk of the cellar. He stares at the dagger-like spire, the buttresses that cling to the walls the way fingers clutch the face of a lost soul. The whole building is rising noiselessly, floating towards him on a cloud of black night.

'Get back!' he cries, his heart throwing itself against his rib cage like a panicky bird.

Then he hears Red's mocking laughter on the other side of the door.

'I can hear you, scaredy cat,' Red says. 'Is that you going meow?' He starts to sing. 'Scaredy cat, scaredy cat, pees his pants when he sees a rat.'

The younger boy, trapped in the underground room, can't believe Red's doing this. Suddenly he hates his brother.

I won't let the walker have me. He's not going to take me to the white church. You hear me, Red Man!

A scarlet rage fills him, pounding in his temples, screaming through his veins, clawing at the inside of his skull. The pressure builds and builds. Fury chokes him. The pulse of it throbs in his throat until he can't breathe.

I won't give in. I won't go.

He squeezes his hands into fists.

'Do you hear me!'

Then the fear takes over and the tide of fury ebbs for a second.

This isn't fair. You're my brother. Why won't you let me out?

At that point the taunting resumes: 'Scaredy cat, scaredy cat, pees his pants when he sees a rat.'

'Stop it, Red!' he shrieks. 'Why are you being so mean?'

The answer comes straight back at him. 'Because I can, scaredy cat. Because I want to, you smelly little pees-his-pants. You know something, baby, I like things the way they are. I don't think I'll ever let you out.'

The fury swells once more.

'I hate you, Red!'

Red doesn't care.

'Scaredy cat, scaredy cat . . .'

All the hate and fear boil up inside the baby, more powerfully than before, producing a single, searing, unstoppable jet of fury.

'You little cry baby.'

At that moment the world catches fire, turning the darkness to ash. The captive flames break their bonds and rush up the stairs.

'I'm not a baby!' he yells with all his might, hurling the insult back at Red.

A hot, swirling tide of hate and fright fills the cellar and blows the door off its hinges, sweeping his older brother off his feet and pinning him to the floor. Red lies there screaming, wriggling under the weight of the door. But he is being crushed by something more than wood. Tiny flames, forged into blazing nails, penetrate the panels and sear his flesh, pinning the door to him, crucifying him against the floor.

Released from his noxious, stifling prison, the baby-

no-more races up the stairs. He's free. He looks down at the struggling boy. He doesn't see his brother, he sees his jailer instead. He loathes Red for forcing him to go down there in that terrible, clinging dark. Red sees his terrible, rage-filled eyes. They scorch his flesh. Suddenly the roles are reversed.

'I didn't mean it,' Red shrieks, 'didn't mean it . . .'

Flames coat the door, engulfing the trapped child beneath. The older boy feels his flesh catch fire. The Red Man screams until his throat burns. He looks scared to death. And he is . . .

. . . scared . . .

. . . to death.

Red chokes. Liquid fire seeps into his ears, his nostrils, his mouth. Pain bubbles and burns and boils in every tortured atom of his being. His eyes roll back in his head. He writhes in agony, kicking his feet and pounding his fists.

'P . . . lease!'

Spittle bubbles on his lips. The flames are reducing him to ash. Then the drumming feet fall still. The pounding fists slip limply to the floor. He has stopped struggling for breath. A thin, wormlike trail of blood spills from his right ear and hisses on the blackened flesh. Finally, it is over.

Released from the dark, the baby-no-more stumbles over to a space under the stairs. He is numb, barely conscious. He is oblivious to the still, ashen form lying motionless by the cellar door. He can hear Nana coming. She'll make things better. She'll give him a cuddle and

get him milk and biscuits. His eyelids droop and his head lolls against the wall. While he waits for her, the dying embers inside him burn down, destroying all memory of this day. Miraculously, just a few metres across the hallway, all evidence of the fire has vanished. The Red Man is whole again. His skin looks untouched by flame. He looks so peaceful he could be asleep. But he is as dead as if he had been condemned to the furnace. His brother succumbs to sleep, unaware of what he has done. The incident has been seared from his memory.

It will be eight years before he remembers what happened here.