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Opening extract from

The Fabulous Four Fish Fingers

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THE HOLE

Tumchester prison housed some of the meanest, ugliest criminals ever to crawl the earth. Crooks like Father XXXmas (the fake Santa with maggots in his beard), Knuckles McLucky (the three-armed bandit) and Theresa the Sneezer (who blew germs from her nose with the force of a hurricane).

But there was one crook so nasty his name was spoken only in whispers. He was locked behind a gigantic steel door and he scared the living daylights out of the guards as well as all the other prisoners.

He was known as The Panteater. He looked like an anteater, walked like an anteater and smelled like an anteater – but he was allergic to ants. So he ate pants. Cotton pants, nylon pants, pants with elastic, pants with frilly bits, stretchy pants, silky pants, stripy pants, spotty pants, Spider-Man pants. Even pants with holes in. Even pants that had been on for a few days and needed a good wash.

The Panteater hadn't tasted his favourite food

since they locked him in jail, but he wouldn't have to wait much longer . . .

Prison Officer Stan Button stared through the peephole in The Panteater's cell door and shook his head. Tumchester's most infamous baddie was crouched down inside a little tent, putting on a puppet show. He had one hand stuffed in a rubber crocodile and the other in a policeman. Suddenly, the policeman started bashing the crocodile on the head with a sausage.

'You're a very, very naughty boy,' he yelled.

The crocodile shouted, 'So are you!' and slapped the policeman in the face with a sardine. Then the crocodile said, 'It's time for a kip,' and both puppets hopped into bed and went to sleep.

The Panteater had told Stan he wanted to put on shows for kids when he got out of jail so he needed the tent and the puppets to practise. But this was the worst show Stan had ever seen (and that was saying something because he'd watched The Panteater do the same silly thing for weeks). The guard carried on his rounds.

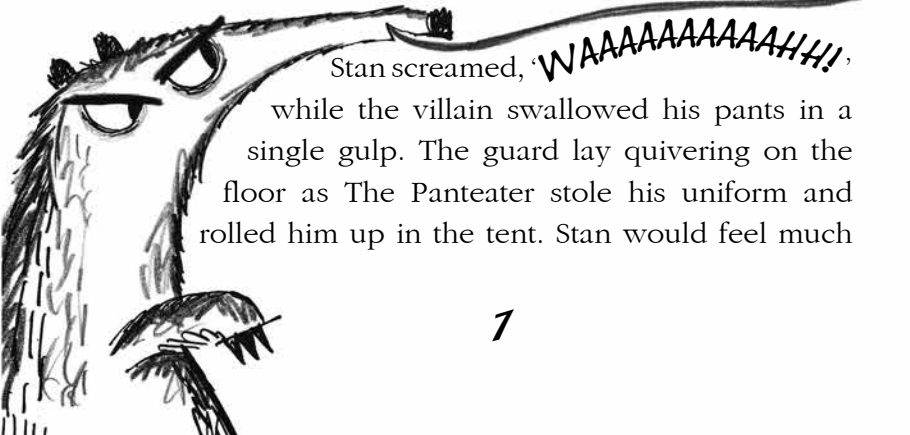
An hour later, Stan came back and peered through The Panteater's peephole again. The puppets were *still* snoozing. *Something smells a bit fishy to me*, he thought, *and I don't mean that crocodile's breath.* Stan marched sternly into the cell, but before he

could speak he noticed something peculiar on the wall behind the tent. A hole. A big hole. A Panteater-sized hole. 'Oh n-n-n-no!' stuttered the guard. 'He's out!'

Soon alarms were ringing, whistles were blowing and every guard in Tumchester prison was out searching for The Panteater. Except for Stan, who was left in the cell trying to figure out what had happened. He stared at the hole and the pile of bricks and scratched his head. How could something as big as a Panteater escape without showing up on the CCTV?

Poor Stan never thought to look *underneath* the tent. If he had, he might have noticed another Panteater-sized hole in the floorboards. And he might have seen Tumchester's hairiest, scariest crook hiding there, silently licking his lips.

The guard didn't know what hit him. The Panteater's tongue shot up his trouser leg like a boa constrictor and wrapped itself around his undies in a blink.



Stan screamed, 'WAAAAAAAAAHH!!', while the villain swallowed his pants in a single gulp. The guard lay quivering on the floor as The Panteater stole his uniform and rolled him up in the tent. Stan would feel much

better in about ten minutes, but that was all the time The Panteater needed. He pulled his new hat down low over his face and walked out with Stan's keys jangling in his pocket.

OUR HEROES

The Tumchester clock struck four as Morris and Gary sprinted out through the gates of Fish Street School.

The boys had been best mates since they were born in the same hospital on the same day. Gary Gamble was older by thirty-three minutes and these days he was also taller by thirty-three centimetres (if you included his blonde hair that he spiked up with gel). Morris Twiddle's brown, curly hair didn't suit gel. It just made him look like he'd gone through a car wash on his scooter, so he never bothered with it.

Today they were off to battle the flesh-eating zombies who lived in the field by the school. These 'zombies' were also known as stinging nettles and in the summer the two friends spent hours whacking them with intergalactic death spears (also known as sticks). The enemy were down to one last patch by an old house on the far side of the field. The house was so creepy that Morris and Gary had kept well away until now. But in its long, dark shadows grew the tallest nettles the boys had ever seen.

'For that, Mr Zombie Trousers, you will pay with your life,' shouted Morris, slicing a nettle in two.

'And I don't know why *you're* smiling,' yelled Gary, chopping another. 'Try laughing your head off now you haven't got one!'

It was all going well until Morris cried, 'Aagghh! Captain, I've been hit! Think I'm going to lose a leg.'

'Never mind, it'll save you a fortune in socks,' chuckled Gary.

Morris sat down to rub a dock leaf on his knee. 'That's the last time I wear shorts to a zombie fight,' he moaned.

At that moment, Bel and Ruby strolled into the field pushing a pram. From a distance they looked like two girls out playing Mummies, but they hadn't brought any dolls or babies with them. Only a big, green, hungry parrot called Marvin who was shrieking 'MAAAARVIN'S STAAAARVIN!' even though he'd just had his tea. Not to mention his breakfast, his lunch and an afternoon snack of two coconuts, three cheese sandwiches, a plate of spaghetti, a packet of cornflakes (including the packet) and a watermelon so big it could have been used as a basketball by a team of brontosauruses.

Gary shouted, 'Cease fire!' as the girls ran over with Marvin's cage jiggling on top of the pram.

'How's the war going?' asked Ruby.

'Casualties on both sides,' said Morris, still nursing his knee.

'You two fancy saving the world again?' asked Gary.

'Ooh, thanks very much,' said Bel, seizing a stick.

'Thought you'd never ask!' said Ruby and the girls quickly joined the fight.

Bel Singh's parents came from India and her skin was smooth and dark, while Ruby Rudd's was paler than milk. Bel's hair was long and Ruby's was kept short under a funky hat; Bel's nails were painted and Ruby's were chewed. But differences like those don't matter to best friends and the girls had plenty of other things in common. Top of the list was a love of slaying zombies.

'Jeepers creepers,' said Ruby, who lived with her gran and sometimes spoke like she was eighty-seven. 'These zombies are tough as old turnips!'

'Good job the Fish Fingers are here to save the world,' said Bel. The four children had called themselves the Fish Fingers since they were small. It had been Ruby's idea because, she pointed out, they all lived on Fish Street. And they all had fingers.

'Hey, Marvin,' Ruby called out, bouncing around as if she was on a trampoline. 'If you're still staaarving, how about fried zombie for tea?'

Ruby turned to look at her parrot, but Marvin's

cage was empty and the door was hanging open.

'Oh no!' she cried. '**MARVIN!**'

The children dropped their sticks.

'Come on,' said Gary, picking up the cage. 'We'll find him.'

'The bumps in the field must have shaken the door open,' said Bel.

'What if he's flown back to Africa?' asked Ruby.

'He's not jet-propelled,' said Morris. 'He can't have got that far.'

Luckily, it didn't take long to track Marvin down. He was sitting on the roof of the sinister old house squawking, 'MAAAARVIN'S STAAAARVIN!'

'My giddy aunt,' Ruby gasped. 'I don't fancy going in there.'

The house was surrounded by a high fence topped with barbed wire and there were signs saying **DANGER** and **FOR DEMOLITION**. It was the last place in Tumchester the children wanted to explore, but they didn't have much choice if they were going to catch that parrot.

Gary found some broken planks and they sneaked through the gap. Marvin was hopping across the guttering on the roof and whistling merrily.

'Down you come, little chap,' said Bel, but Marvin pretended he was Santa Claus and leapt down the chimney instead.



'Disaster,' said Morris.

'We have to go inside,' said Gary.

The girls gulped, then Ruby nodded and so did Bel. (Bel would have followed Ruby anywhere. Unless she was going somewhere with rabbits. Even thinking about rabbits gave Bel goosebumps.) Morris had the jitters too, but he wasn't about to admit it.

'It's bound to be locked,' Morris said, hoping he was right, but Gary climbed the steps anyway. He gave the door a shove and to everybody's surprise, it swung open.

The four children walked slowly across the floorboards, treading through dust and bits of gravel that looked like little teeth.

'This place is crumbling to bits,' said Morris as Ruby bit her fingernails.

'Marvin, where are you?' she called nervously, but her voice just echoed off the damp walls.

As their eyes got used to the gloom, the children got braver and entered the living room. There were cobwebs everywhere, curtains with holes at the windows and a very old-fashioned record player in the corner. It was decorated with tiny carvings of bluebells and toadstools and there was a big brass horn sticking out of the top. There was also a shiny handle on the side and Marvin was using this for a perch.

'MAAAARVIN'S STAAAARVIN!' he squawked.

The four pals circled the record player and Ruby whispered, 'Come on, boy.'

The parrot gave a little chirrup, as if to say he didn't know what all the fuss was about, flapped his wings and hopped on to Ruby's shoulder.

'Welcome home,' sighed Ruby. 'But don't do that to me again.'

'Come on,' said Morris. 'Before we get caught.'

'Just a sec,' said Bel. 'Don't you think the record player's amazing?'

'Er, what's a record player?' asked Gary.

'This is,' said Ruby, blowing dust off the lid. 'My gran has got one. It plays music.'

'Very nice,' said Gary. 'Not as cool as an MP3 though. You'd look well stupid carrying that around the playground.'

'We really need to go,' said Morris, who was now getting the shivers on top of the jitters.

'Look, there's a record as well,' said Bel. 'Let's see if it plays.'

Morris let out a breath. 'If we have to,' he sighed.

Ruby wound the handle and put the record on the turntable. As it started to spin, she lowered a metal arm with a needle on the end down into the grooves of the record. Soon they could hear tiny sounds coming from the brass horn.

tiddly pom tiddly pom tiddly pom pom pom . . .



'Oooh, that's lovely,' said Bel. It made her think of fireflies and moonbeams.



'Smashing,' said Ruby, who thought she could smell strawberries and apricots.



tiddly pom tiddly pom tiddly pom pom pom . . .

'Sounds like a cat with its head stuck in a trumpet to me,' said Morris.

'Bit quiet, though, isn't it?' said Gary and he peered inside the horn. 'Hang on,' he said, sticking his fingers in and pulling out a ball of fluff.

TIDDLY POM TIDDLY POM TIDDLY POM POM POM...

It was much louder now.

TIDDLY POM TIDDLY POM TIDDLY POM POM POM...

Spirits lifted by the music, the children began to dance, but then—

TIDDLY POM POM SSSSS-K-K-K-K!



The sudden scraping noise startled them. It was the needle, jammed in the middle of the record.

'*Now* can we go?' said Morris. 'This place is way too creepy.'

The four friends raced outside and ducked under the fence. Ruby put Marvin back in his cage on the pram and they all went to sit under an oak tree in the middle of the field. It was only then that Gary remembered he'd stuffed the ball of fluff in his pocket. He pulled it out, gave it a shake and found it had ears and a nose.

'Wowzer!' he said. 'Check this out.'

'It's not a dead rabbit is it?' asked Bel.

'No,' said Gary, wiping the dirt from its little face. 'It's . . . a teddy bear.'

The bear had a miniature mobile phone in its paw and there was a sticker on the back that read:

IF FOUND PLEASE DIAL 27-33-36-61

'Sounds like bingo numbers,' said Ruby.

'I tell you what's strange,' said Bel. 'They're the same as our house numbers. It starts with Gary's, then mine, Ruby's, and Morris's.'

The children felt the hairs on the back of their necks stand up.

'It's turning out to be a very freaky Friday,' said Morris.

'I'm going to call it,' said Gary, pressing the tiny

numbers on the phone. 'There might be a reward.'

They all huddled in, but there wasn't even a crackle. Just a long silence. Morris was about to say, 'I knew it was a joke,' but it came out as 'I knew it was AAAAARRGGHH!' because there was a flash, a bang, and a cloud of white smoke.

A man the size of a penguin now stood before them. He was wearing a Viking helmet, flip flops and a purple tracksuit. He had a big nose and he was eating a packet of crisps.