

Praise for
Scare B'n'B

[Praise for *contd* – to come]

Scare B'n'B

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Books by Catherine Doyle

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Scare B'n'B

Catherine Doyle

Illustrated by Rachael Dean

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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-5514-1; EBOOK: 978-1-5266-5512-7

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typesetting by Six Red Marbles India

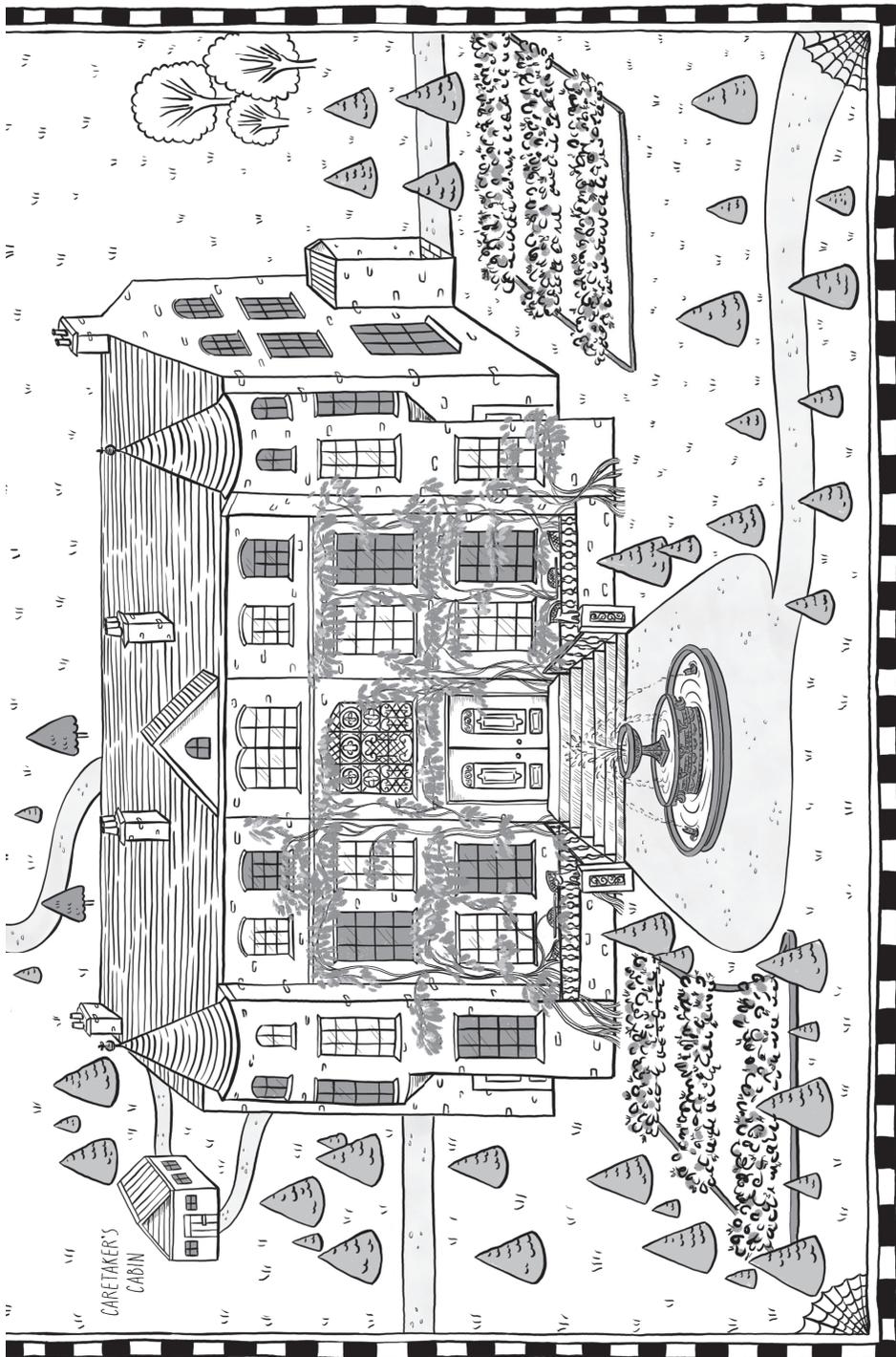
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



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[*Dedication To come*]







Chapter One

The Man in the Window

On a warm summer's day in the sleepy district of Little Snoring, a very old duke with a curiously young face stood by the window in the west wing of Tartarus Hall, awaiting the arrival of his newest victims.

Two cars were trundling up the long driveway. At first glance, this was not an unusual occurrence, particularly given the flurry of activity that had recently engulfed the old manor. Servants had been here for months already, scurrying about like dutiful mice, carrying swinging paint tins and ladders, tinkering with the pipes and cleaning out the sooty fireplaces,

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talking about their boring lives and tedious sports teams between noisy slurps of tea.

The duke had left them to it, blending seamlessly into the new gold-leaf wallpaper, where he observed the renovations with a quiet sense of pride. He didn't like to haunt the servants, especially while they were being useful.

Weeks of eavesdropping had informed the duke that the new owners of Tartarus Hall were arriving on this very day. Yes indeed. The big fish were finally coming to the pond.

Now here they were, wheezing up the driveway.

The first of the two cars was old and red and spluttering like a bad case of consumption.

The second car was blue and boxy, and groaning under the weight of a tattered green armchair.

'Well, well, well,' said the duke into the dusty silence. 'Who do we have here?'

It had been ages since anyone had lived at Tartarus Hall. In its most recent swell of boredom, even the blackbirds had packed up their nests and flown away.

The duke missed the chaos of life; the raucous laughter that once filled his kitchens, children giggling

as they chased each other through the garden maze, the stolen midnight whispers that often wafted from the library. Oh, how he *lived* for gossip.

The duke missed new visitors and new voices, the satisfying click-clack of heels on his stairwells, the drawn-out *ooohs* and *aaahs* of admirers come to marvel at the grand majesty of his home.

He missed their terrified screams as they all ran away.

The screams *really* put a pep in his step. There was nothing quite like a dawn chorus of terror; the rattle of suitcases trundling down the driveway, then the satisfying squeal of tyres on gravel as they all sped away like hounds on the hunt.

The duke gave a wistful sigh. It had been *ages* since he'd done a good spooking. Meanwhile, his sworn nemesis, Oswald Fairweather, the irritatingly undead Earl of Snyder Park, had haunted himself into the *Snoring Gazette* on *three* separate occasions last year. *And*, if swirling rumours were to be believed, Fairweather's antics had even garnered his dilapidated manor a coveted spot on the next season of *Scotland's Most Haunted Homes*.

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Ugh! Death could be *so* unfair sometimes.

The last woman who lived at Tartarus had loathed visitors. She didn't even keep servants. Not even a scullery maid! She never batted an eyelid at anything the duke did, not the blinking lights or the ghostly gramophone. She napped through the time he dropped an encyclopedia on her head and didn't notice the exploding toilet for *nine weeks!*

Eleanora, she called herself.

What a *bore-a*.

In the end, the duke simply had to wait for her to die.

A most dreary task.

But now – *finally* – things were changing. It was *his* time to shine.

As the cars trundled to a stop by the wishing fountain, the duke's moustache twitched with the beginnings of a smile. He rubbed his hands together as the back door of the red car swung open.

A dog bounded out. It was short and blond and bouncy, with curly hair and a fluffy tail. It vaguely reminded the duke of his younger sister, Arabella. Next, a woman emerged. She was short and slim, with brown skin, curly black hair and large, round eyes. Her toothy

smile widened as she looked upon the imposing facade of Tartarus Hall. She clapped her hands, as though the mere act of its existence impressed her.

A *lady of fine taste*, decided the duke, despite the utter tragedy of her mustard trousers.

From the blue car, a man emerged. He was as pale as a sheet and tall as a beanpole, with large black spectacles, a shock of copper hair and a matching beard. He put his hands on his hips and rolled back on his heels, grinning up at the mansion like it was an old friend. Then he turned his smile towards the woman, grabbing her hand. She smiled back, and his blue eyes softened behind his spectacles.

The duke knew that look.

It was *love*.

He gagged loudly.

The blue car spat out another occupant. A hunched old woman with short lavender hair, papery white skin and a leopard-print walking stick. She hobbled around the car at the pace of a tortoise, glanced up, presumably to make sure her ramshackle armchair had survived the journey, and then squinted at the house like it had personally offended her.

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Rude!

A pale, scowling teenage boy emerged on the heels of the old woman and shuffled towards the mansion like a prisoner on his way to the gallows. He wore scuffed trainers and ripped jeans, while his messy brown hair lent the impression of a disgruntled hedgehog.

Not to be outdone, the red car spat out its own boy. This one was younger than the mopey one. Short and narrow, with brown skin, big eyes and better-behaved hair. He didn't move towards the mansion. Rather, he lingered where he stood, his fists balled at his sides as he glanced nervously towards the blue car.

How curious.

Something was already spooking this boy.

Perhaps he had an acute fear of armchairs?

The duke chortled. *How embarrassing.*

But ... *no.*

The final door of the blue car was opening now. A girl emerged, one pink ankle boot after another. She looked to be around the same age as the boy. She had a swoop of blonde hair, pale, freckled skin and a scowl that could make a rose bush wither. She smiled briefly

up at the grown-ups, waited for them to look away, then turned to the boy and drew the tip of her index finger across her throat.

The boy shrank backwards.

The duke grinned.

He'd give them a *real* taste of fear. Oh yes he would.

A trill of excitement bubbled up inside him, making him float to the balls of his feet. He rolled back his shoulders, inhaled through his nose and for the first time in fifty long years, indulged himself in his most favourite evil laugh.

'MwahahaHAHAHAHAHA—'

It was interrupted by a high-pitched squall.

'WAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!'

No! The duke flung himself at the window with a horrified gasp, pressing his nose against the glass. The curly-haired woman was now lifting a yowling, red-faced creature from the back seat of the red car.

Balderdash! Was there anything worse than a baby?

Babies made for terrible house guests. Not only were they pathologically messy and chronically self-involved, but they also tended to be frustratingly *unspookable*. It was almost impossible to haunt a baby.

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To those toothless terrors, everything was just one big game of *peek-a-boo*.

But the others ...

He would make blubbering messes of the rest ... Tartarus Hall would be famous again. He would be famous. Not just a ghoul to be reckoned with, but the most renowned (and fashionable) haunter in the known universe.

Put that in your pipe and choke on it, Fairweather!

Still fizzing with giddiness, the duke stepped back from the window. He smoothed the tails of his frock-coat, then polished the gold buttons with the edge of his sleeve. The game was afoot now. There was news to spread, preparations to be made ... toilets to rig.

With a final, satisfied twitch of his moustache, he spun on the heel of his boot and strode right through the bedroom door, laughing at the top of his lungs.

Chapter Two

The Evil Stepsister

Ted McKenley was afraid of many things. At ten years old, he could already fill an entire notebook with his fears. Like spiders and quicksand and mouldy cheese. And moths and sharks and false teeth. PE. Nuns. Nuns with false teeth who taught PE. The list went on and on. But of all the fears that rattled around inside his head, there was nothing in the world that terrified Ted more than his stepsister, Frankie Spawn-of-the-Devil Stark.

Which was unfortunate, really, because he was just about to move in with her. For the *entire* summer. And every other school holiday after that! Agh!

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At least the house was big.

If you could even call it a house.

Tartarus Hall was a magnificent beast of a mansion: three sprawling storeys of pale grey stone with windows so large and looming they looked like prying eyes, and two spiralling turrets that looked like a huge pair of horns. Wisteria was strung around the grand exterior like a purple scarf, and the fancy front entrance was made up of six stone steps that led to two towering bronze doors.

Even Eugene Stark, Ted's stepdad, a man as tall as a tree and with arms like branches, would have to stand on his tiptoes to reach the top of them.

Tartarus was definitely a home fit for fancy people, like kings and queens and Elton John. Having been built over seven hundred years ago, Tartarus *had* been a royal home long ago, but for years it had stood, silent and sad, tucked away at the edge of the Scottish village of Little Snoring, where almost everyone had forgotten about it entirely.

With twenty-eight bedrooms, and four separate wings, including the old servants' quarter at the back of the house, Tartarus was way too big for their small,

mismatched brood, and yet, when Ted imagined spending the rest of the summer here with his sworn nemesis, Frankie I-Watch-You-Sleeping Stark, it still didn't feel big enough.

Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, he lied to himself, as Mum's red car wound up the twisty driveway. In a couple of weeks, once the final renovations at Tartarus Hall were complete and the manor home officially became a thriving boutique hotel, they would be sharing the mansion with people from all over the world. Which meant more human shields to hide behind. And new victims for Frankie.

That was the grand plan.

It had all come together rather spectacularly. Less than a year after Eugene and Mum's wedding, when baby Hazel was beginning to teethe and Frankie was blissfully far away at boarding school, Eugene had received a mysterious phone call from the lawyer of his dead great-aunt Eleanora, whom he had met only once as a young boy. It turned out that Great-Aunt Eleanora was loaded – and a total recluse – and at the hour of her death had decided to leave the old manor house to Eugene in her will, with no explanation

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beyond two simple words: *Good luck!*

Ted wished for some of that luck as he climbed out of Mum's car after Darwin, his over-excited cockapoo. Mum was standing with Eugene by the steps, admiring the newly painted window shutters. Luke, Frankie's fourteen-year-old brother, was sulking by the fountain and Nana Elsie, Luke and Frankie's terrifying grandmother, was swinging her walking stick around, trying to chase a wasp away from her dilapidated armchair, which she had insisted on carting all the way up here from North London.

Baby Hazel was still snoozing in the back of Mum's car. Which meant Ted was already one ally down. Two, if he counted Darwin, who had run off to pee in the hydrangeas.

This meant he was standing by himself when Frankie emerged from her dad's car like a snake coming out of the long grass. As she sized up her new summer home, Ted was reminded of the last time he had seen her. She had come home from boarding school for Mum's birthday and greeted Ted by popping a balloon in his face. The visit before that, she had left a snail on his pillow. Then there was the time she emptied a can

of beans into his schoolbag, which he only noticed when he went to fish out his pencils during art class.

His classmates had been calling him 'Bean Boy' ever since. Even Mr Babbage had joined in.

Now Frankie was glaring at him, the promise of more misery glinting in her cold grey eyes.

Great.

Ted scrubbed his hands across his face.

'Just get it over with,' he muttered to himself. 'Go over and say hello. Maybe she'll be in a good mood.'

After all, it wasn't every day your dad inherited a surprise giant mansion.

Since Eugene had had to detour to collect Frankie from boarding school on the drive up here, and then Nana Elsie's chair had accidentally flown off on the motorway, causing a four-mile traffic jam and a three-hour delay to their journey, they had arrived at Tartarus late in the afternoon. Thanks to a nearby village fête, the workers had gone home already and Martha, the new hotel manager, had locked up for the rest of the day. Leaving them all alone.

While Mum and Eugene fumbled their way through the ring of keys that opened every door in Tartarus, trying

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to find the one that would let them inside, Ted seized his courage and marched over to Frankie.

As he passed the fountain, he offered a quick hello to Luke, who was glowering at his reflection in the stagnant water. His stepbrother offered an answering grunt. A warm greeting by Luke's standards.

Frankie folded her arms as she watched Ted approach, revealing her wristful of colourful scrunchies.

Ted swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. 'Hey, Frankie,' he said lightly.

She narrowed her eyes. 'What do you want?'

'Just saying hello.'

'You never say hello to me,' she said suspiciously. 'When I come home from boarding school you always hide in your closet.'

Ted's cheeks grew hot. How did she know that?

'That was one time.'

'Embarrassing, all the same.'

Ted scowled. 'Why are you so mean?'

Frankie jerked her chin and Ted wondered if he had actually managed to hurt her feelings. He reminded himself that evil robots don't have human emotions.

'Why are you so boring?' she shot back. 'You're like

that sad grey horse from *Winnie-the-Pooh*.'

'You seem extra cranky from the long journey,' said Ted, before he could stop himself. 'Why didn't you just fly here on your broomstick?'

They glared hard at each other.

'I know what you're doing, you know,' said Frankie, turning back to Tartarus. 'You're trying to distract me from the race. Well, I'm not going to fall for it.'

Ted frowned. 'What race?'

She tossed him a knowing look as she tightened her ponytail. 'The race for the best bedroom, obviously.'

Ted stared at her blankly.

Across the driveway, Eugene jangled the ring of keys. 'Bingo!' he announced, before slotting the right one into the front door.

Tartarus Hall groaned open.

Frankie sank into a runner's crouch. 'There might be a bajillion bedrooms in this place but Dad says we've got to choose from the ones in the old servants' quarters. I bet most of them are full of spiders, and I'm not spending my summer in a horror movie.'

Ted's eyes went wide as Frankie's words sank in. If her history of absolute unbridled villainy was anything

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to go by, she'd somehow make sure he ended up in a broom closet. Full of rats and mould and bugs. He had to secure a safe space. A bunker. A Ted-cave, preferably with a strong lock and an elaborate intruder system to keep evil stepsisters out.

'LATER, LOSER!' Frankie took off like a firework, streaking across the driveway and up the stone steps.

Ted thundered after her, nearly knocking over Nana Elsie. Darwin, sensing a game was afoot, followed on his heels, barking maniacally. Ted took the stone steps three at a time, barrelling past Mum and Eugene, and promptly tripping over the lip in the doorway.



‘Careful, love!’ cried Mum. ‘It’s not a race!’

Yes it was. And Ted was losing! His knees slammed on to the black-and-white tiled floor, and he pitched forward, collecting a sheen of fresh polish on his hands. It was dim inside the large entrance hall, but with the doors open behind him, he could make out the huge dark-wood staircase ahead of him.

Frankie was already halfway up it. She paused to lean over the banister. ‘I saw that epic fall, just so you know.’

Ted burned with hatred as he scrambled to his feet. He took a quick puff of his inhaler to ease the tightness in his chest and set off again, before Mum could stop him. Darwin bounded ahead of him. ‘Go on, Dar. Knock her over,’ he called as he made for the stairs.

‘I heard that!’ she yelled over her shoulder.

Ted cleared the stairs and made it to the first-floor landing, which was a large square that split off in three different directions. The red carpet up here was plushy and new, and the oil portraits on the wall were full of stern-faced old men with silly moustaches and sad-looking women in frilly frocks, mournfully staring off into the distance.

Frankie was nowhere to be seen. Darwin went left,

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tracking a scent. As Ted followed him, the clatter of Frankie's footsteps faded. Hopefully she'd fallen down a laundry chute, never to be seen again.

He wandered into the east wing, but one glance at the rooms up here told him he was in the wrong part of the house. They were all newly renovated with the fancy wallpaper Mum had picked out. Each room had its own fireplace and four-poster bed, wide sash windows, and a minibar full of yummy snacks and drinks. They were intended for the hotel guests, not the family running it.

Ted ground his teeth, wishing he had waited for Mum and Eugene to show him where to go instead of letting Frankie bait him into a high-stakes race to nowhere. It was freezing up here, and despite how beautiful the rooms looked, there was a strange, musty smell in the air. Ted pulled his arms around himself as Darwin came to a sudden stop.

'Lost, are you, dearie?' Ted blinked. There was a woman standing at the other end of the hallway. 'These corridors do make a terrible maze of themselves sometimes. When I first started, I had to carry a map around in my apron!'

She snorted with laughter.

Ted stared at the woman, sure she hadn't been there a moment ago. She was short and round, with very pale skin, a friendly face and a neat crop of grey curls. She was wearing a black frock with a frilly white apron and what looked suspiciously like a folded napkin on her head.



'What's the matter, love?'

She wagged her feather duster at him. 'Duke got your tongue?'

Ted frowned at the odd expression but thought he'd better introduce himself. He'd hate to come off as an insufferably rude brat. That was Frankie's domain. 'Uh, hi. I'm Ted.' He gave an awkward little wave. 'Mum and Eugene are downstairs, unpacking the cars. Sorry we were a bit late getting here. There was an incident with Nana Elsie's armchair on the motorway. And then Hazel did a poonami, so we had to stop off at a petrol station.'

The woman stared at him blankly.

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‘Are you Martha?’ said Ted. ‘The new hotel manager?’

‘No, Master Ted. You can call me Nell,’ she said in her thick Scottish brogue. ‘I’m Head of Housekeeping here at Tartarus. As old as the bricks in the fireplace and as wise as the owls in the attic.’

Was it Ted’s imagination or was her grin getting wider?

‘Nothing gets past me,’ she went on. ‘Not a midnight whisper or a speck of dust.’

Ted clamped his lips shut. From what he could see, a whole lot of dust had already got past Nell. In fact, there were at least seven spiderwebs hanging from the chandelier directly above her head.

Darwin started growling.

Ted shushed him. ‘Sorry about him. He’s got trust issues. Speaking of, I don’t suppose you’ve seen a ten-year-old girl sneaking around up here? Mean, shifty energy? Big swoopy ponytail?’

‘Certainly not, Master Ted. But I’ll be sure to keep an eye out.’

‘If you do see her, feel free to trip her up.’

‘It would be my pleasure, Master Ted.’

Ted smiled at his brand-new ally. He was starting

to like weird old Nell. 'Do you know how to get to the old servants' quarters?'

Nell pointed past him, towards the landing. 'You'll want to take the narrow stairwell at the back of the house. Brings you right up to the south wing. The rooms there are modest, but they've got the loveliest view of the lake.'

'Brilliant!' Ted spun around to bolt back the way he had come.

'I hope you find yourself right at home here. Whether it be for a sunny afternoon or an unending eternity.'

'Wait. What was that last bit?'

But when Ted glanced over his shoulder, the hallway was empty.

Except for all those hanging spiderwebs.

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