



# RUBY REDFORT

FEEL THE FEAR

**LAUREN CHILD**

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF CLARICE BEAN



*Don't miss the previous Ruby Redfort adventures:*

***Ruby Redfort Look Into My Eyes***

***Ruby Redfort Take Your Last Breath***

***Ruby Redfort Catch Your Death***

**LAUREN CHILD** first introduced the character of Ruby Redfort in her three award-winning, best-selling CLARICE BEAN novels. Since then she has been inundated with letters from fans asking for the RUBY REDFORT books. Those letters worked, because this is number four in the series.

Lauren is also the creator of the **CHARLIE AND LOLA** books, as well as associate producer on the TV show of the same name. Her books have won many prizes, including the Smarties Prize (four times), the Kate Greenaway Medal, and the Red House Children's Book Award.

The RUBY REDFORT series features codes and puzzles created with the help of super-geek consultant Marcus du Sautoy, Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University and all-around genius.

**“Fearlessness is often regarded as one of the keys to freedom. But does fear not serve a purpose? Is this deeply primal emotion not there to guide us, to help us sidestep danger and prompt us to take a safer path?**

**The question should be asked: Is it always a positive quality to be fearless?**

**Why do we fear fear?”**

**DR. JOSEPHINE HONEYBONE**, *founder of the Heimlich Good Emotion Institute, from her thesis, The Worthy Emotion*



# Fall

ONE BRIGHT SUNNY DAY IN OCTOBER, a woman looked up to see a five-year-old girl wriggle out of a tiny fifteenth-story window. As far as the woman could make out, the child was lured by the desire to reach a yellow balloon that had become snagged on the ironwork of the building's fire escape. The girl seemed unaware of the life-threatening drop that yawned beneath her and, without concern, edged forward on hands and knees. She paused when she encountered a hole in the rusting metal walkway — then put her hand through it as if to make sure the gap was real.

The woman on the sidewalk held her breath.

The child reached out across the void but could not quite grasp the long pink ribbon that tethered the balloon, and it gave a mocking nod, turning to reveal its printed smiley face. The girl, who was attending her cousin's birthday, wondered if the balloon had floated in from some other celebration. Because *this* balloon was different from most: attached to its string was a

brown paper tag, like an old-fashioned luggage label. The child began to wonder if the tag was a message, a greeting from some faraway place.

What was it trying to tell her?

All at once the little girl stood up quite straight — then she confidently stepped onto the metal beam that had once supported the fire escape, her fingers almost within touching distance of the balloon now, but not quite. For one whole minute the child stood completely still, and then, very slowly, she took her hands from the safety rail, spread her arms wide like a tightrope walker might, and continued to pursue the balloon by stepping one foot exactly in front of the other along the narrow iron strut that jutted from the building.

The woman on the sidewalk gasped, unsure if she should call out or if her cry might cause the girl to lose her balance and fall. She could neither run for help nor warn the child — so she just stood there rooted to the ground, waiting for tragedy to play out.

The girl, unaware of the woman's dilemma, was interested only in the label tied to the balloon's string. *What did it say?*

She grabbed for it, but as she did so, her foot slipped, she toppled forward, and, with the yellow balloon in hand, fell toward the earth.



The woman on the sidewalk covered her eyes and screamed, and a man walking his dog froze.

As the child fell, she thought about Agent Deliberately Dangerous and his amazing floating cloak—a gravity-defying garment that always brought him safely back down to earth. She thought about what she had eaten for breakfast: a bowl of Puffed Pops and two whole glasses of banana milk. Was this enough to make the difference between floating like a leaf and plummeting like a stone? She thought about what noise she would make when she hit the sidewalk. Would it make a *boing* sound like that Looney Toons dog, or would she land, catlike, on her feet?

And just as it seemed she was going to smack down hard on the pavement, something amazing happened. A truck drew up—it belonged to the Twinford Mattress Company—and the little girl landed with a puff, plumb-square in the middle of it. Of course all of this happened in the space of 3.2 seconds, but it played out in cartoon time.

A couple of blocks away, when the truck stopped at a red light, the child climbed out unnoticed and walked back to the party, balloon in hand.

When she got to the street corner, she paused to examine the tag. Disappointingly, there was no message; it was entirely blank,

except for an image of two eyes tightly shut. Still, she untied it from the balloon's string and tucked it in her pocket. She had gone to a lot of trouble to get it, and in any case, who knew when a brown label might come in handy?

She let go of the smiling balloon, and it climbed back into the sky until it was so high it was no longer visible.

The woman from the sidewalk searched and searched, but there was no sign, no visible trace of the girl who had fallen from the sky.

# **An Ordinary Kid**

WHEN RUBY REDFORT WAS YOUNGER, she and thirty-three other participants were asked to watch a film that showed six people—three in white T-shirts and three in black T-shirts—throwing basketballs to one another. The task was to count the number of times the players in white passed the ball.

Ruby counted sixteen passes.

This was the correct answer.

She also noticed the gorilla.

Or, more accurately, the man in the gorilla suit who walked across the basketball court, stopped, beat his chest, and strolled out of the shot.

Fifteen of her co-watchers noticed this too.

Ruby *also* noticed that one of the three players dressed in black departed the game when the gorilla appeared.

*Five* of her co-watchers noticed this too.

Ruby noticed the curtain in the background change color, from red to orange.

*Zero* of her co-watchers noticed this.

The psychologists conducting the experiment declared that Ruby was a remarkably focused individual but also had an extraordinary ability to see everything all at once.

Aside from the things Ruby had spotted in the content of the film, she had *also* noticed one of her co-watchers (the one with the mole on her left cheek) sticking a piece of chewing gum (the brand was Fruity Chews) under the adjacent seat, another (the guy with hay fever) knocking over his glass of water, and a third (a woman with a Band-Aid on her fourth finger) anxiously twisting her earring (she was wearing mismatched socks, very slightly different shades of green).

Not that *any* of these three observations had anything to do with the experiment Ruby was taking part in.

***Some several years later . . .***



# CHAPTER 1

## **A Nice Glass of Milk**

**RUBY REDFORT LOOKED DOWN.**

She could see the traffic moving like little inching bugs, far, far beneath her feet. She could feel a hot breeze on her face and hear the muffled sounds of car horns and sirens. It was a day like most of the days had been that summer — too hot to be comfortable, the sort of heat that brought irritability and rage and left a sense of general malaise.

Ruby surveyed the whole beautiful picture that was Twinford City — all detail gone from this height, just the matrix of streets and buildings, huge skyscrapers punctuating the grid. Outside the city, the big beyond: desert to the east, ocean to the west, and mountains marching north. From up here on her ledge, she could see the giant blinking eye that was the logo of the city eye hospital, with its slogan beneath it: “The Window to Your Soul.”

The eye-hospital sign had been there since 1937 and was something of a landmark. People actually traveled downtown to have their picture taken with the neon eye winking above them.

As Ruby sat there on the ledge of the Sandwich, she was contemplating recent events, and the various ways she had almost met her death—the past couple of months had offered a range of possibilities. Death by wolf, death by gunshot, death by exposure, death by cliff fall, death by fire. In one way it didn't make for happy reminiscing, but in another it sort of did. She was alive, after all, because somehow she had dodged bullets—metaphorical and literal—and was now sitting calmly watching the world go by. It was unlike Ruby to dwell on things, but Mr. Death had come so close to knocking at her door that she found herself fascinated by the very thought of it.

Now here she was sitting on the window ledge of a skyscraper, with news of an approaching storm on its way. Some would regard this as a risky activity. Ruby did not. Disappointingly, as far as she was concerned, at this exact moment there were no gusting winds, no adverse weather conditions, not even a stray pigeon looking to take a peck out of her. She judged her spot on Mr. Barnaby H. Cleethorps's windowsill to be no more dangerous than sitting on a park bench in Twinford Square. Well, that wasn't quite true; there was the danger that Mr. Cleethorps



would finish his meeting with her father early and they would both give her grief for parking her behind on the ledge of his seventy-second-floor window and playing fast and loose with gravity. But it was hardly the high-octane excitement Ruby had become used to during the past five months as a Spectrum agent.

Ruby was in the Sandwich Building—or rather sitting on the outside of it—because her father had insisted on bringing her to work with him.

“Until that cast comes off your arm, honey, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Her father had become rather overprotective since Ruby’s accident, and he would now only trust her care to his equally jittery wife, Sabina, or the housekeeper, Mrs. Digby. A broken arm, an injured foot, singed hair—how close his only child had come to being burned to a cinder!

Forest fires are very unpredictable. *What was she even doing out there on Wolf Paw Mountain?* Brant Redfort had asked himself, and indeed anyone and everyone who had walked through the door, in the days after the incident.

Brant, as a consequence, was now plagued by fear: he was waking up at four a.m. contemplating the horror of life without his girl. The thought was making him crazy. His fearfulness spread to his wife like a contagious disease, and now for the very

first time in Ruby's thirteen years, her parents wanted to know exactly where she was and exactly what she was doing at all times. Ruby was going "nuts," as she so delicately put it.

"Let them worry," advised Mrs. Digby, a wise old bird who had been with the family since Mrs. Redfort was a girl. "They've never had the sane sense to worry before; it will do them the power of good to employ a little imagination."

"Why?" asked Ruby. "What's the point of them getting all torn up with terror? What good is it gonna do them?"

"They're too trusting," replied Mrs. Digby. "They don't see the bad in things like I do." Mrs. Digby was a big believer in seeing the bad in things—think the worst and you will never be disappointed. It was a motto that had stood her in good stead.

So for now Ruby was doing what her parents wanted; she was biding her time and looking forward to the day when she could lose the arm cast and get her parents off her case.

Ruby's father was in advertising—the public relations, meet 'n' greet, shake-you-by-the-hand side of the business. Being friendly to the big clients was an important job, and Brant Redfort was very good at it. Typically, therefore, Brant searched for a tie that might appeal to the client—in this instance, Barnaby Cleethorps, a conservative fellow but a jolly sort. Brant had picked out one that was patterned a little like a red-and-white

checkered tablecloth, scattered with tiny picnic things. Just the ticket, he had winked at himself in the mirror.

As Brant came down for breakfast that morning, he caught sight of his daughter, lounging on the patio table, banana milk in one hand, zombie comic in the other, her T-shirt bearing the words ***what are you looking at. duh brain?***

He sighed. It seemed unlikely that Ruby would be following him into a career in public relations.

“Now, be careful, Ruby,” warned her mother. “There are some unsavory types downtown.”

“You do know I’m going to Dad’s client’s office, don’tcha?” said Ruby, sucking down the dregs of her banana milk.

“Say no more,” muttered Mrs. Digby, who had a notion that the advertising business was rife with unsavory types.

Brant kissed his wife on the cheek. “I’ll keep an eye on her, honey — never fear. What possible harm can come to her in Barnaby Cleethorps’s offices?”

Sabina kissed her daughter and hugged her as if a month might pass before seeing her again.

“Mom, you gotta chill,” said Ruby, disentangling herself from her mother’s embrace and stepping into the chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned car.

They arrived on Third Avenue and took the elevator up to

the seventy-second floor. Mr. Cleethorps greeted them — “Nice to meet you, young Ruby” — and pumped Ruby’s good hand so hard, she thought it might come loose from its socket. “I see you have been in the wars, but I understand from your father that you’re quite the brave little lady.”

Ruby smiled the smile of a five-year-old, which was obviously what Mr. Cleethorps had mistaken her for. “How about a drink for our small guest,” he said. He turned to his assistant, who nodded and smiled and went off to find something suitable — Ruby suspected milk.

As it turned out, she was right. She rolled her eyes. Ruby was not a fan of milk, unless it was flavored with strawberry, chocolate, or her particular favorite, banana.

Once alone, Ruby set about finding a good place to dispose of her beverage. There were no plants in the reception area, and it didn’t seem like good manners to tip it into one of the ornamental glass vases. She scanned the room further, and that’s when she noticed that a section of the window in the waiting area could be opened. She stood on a stool, reached up, and pulled on the latch. She pushed the window open, and a fresh breeze blew in and Ruby couldn’t help wondering how nice it might feel to sit out in that pollution-free air. . . .



And that's how Ruby came to be sitting on the ledge of a very tall building, seven hundred feet above street level, wiggling her toes and contemplating the whole big picture. She felt truly calm sitting there on the edge of nowhere. Ruby Redfort had no issue with heights; she'd never suffered vertigo, never felt that strange desire to let herself fall. Fear had never dominated Ruby's actions, but now fear wasn't even playing a part. It seemed she had reached a state of fearlessness.

Ruby picked up the glass and flung the milk from it, watching it disperse into tiny droplets that disappeared into the air. She placed the empty glass carefully on the ledge and decided she wouldn't mind taking a little wander around the building, see her dad schmoozing Barnaby Cleethorps—why not?

The ledge was relatively wide, and it was easy to walk to the south corner window and peek into Mr. Cleethorps's office. A slide presentation was obviously in progress, since the slatted blinds were all pulled down, and Ruby could only observe what was going on by peeking through the gaps. A number of the Barnaby Cleethorps team were gathered around looking at designs prepared by the creatives at her father's agency. There, projected onto the screen, was the slogan the ad agency had spent weeks fine-tuning: "You Have to Feel It to Believe It!"

Ruby could see Mr. Barnaby Cleethorps's face, and it was not

a happy one. She adjusted her position on the ledge so she could see her father's expression. As always, he looked remarkably cool, not in any way flustered, but she knew he must be feeling the strain, because he was heading toward the window, and when her father was feeling tense, his response was usually to let in some air. Tension brought on a sort of claustrophobia—too much stress in one room made it difficult for him to breathe.

Ruby ducked down, making herself as small as she could. Not that Brant could have seen her through the venetian blind, but she didn't want to take any chances.

The opening of the seventy-second-floor window might have helped Brant Redfort regain his calm, but for his daughter it had entirely the opposite effect. The problem was that Ruby had not anticipated *how* the window might open; she was expecting it to hinge in the middle, when in fact this huge window was of the pivoting variety, and as her father yanked it open, Ruby was flung out into thin air. She landed in—or, more accurately, dangled *from*—one of those window-cleaning cradles that travels the length and breadth of skyscrapers, allowing maintenance guys to squeegee the acres of glass. Luckily there were no maintenance guys in it now, though *unluckily* it meant there was no one to pull Ruby back in.

Now, suspended seven hundred feet above the downtown

traffic that crawled and tooted beneath her, she could see the irony of the situation — her father, intent on keeping her safe, had almost brought about her demise.

But at this precise moment she was struggling to see the funny side.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Small Talk**

**HANGING THERE BY HER FINGERTIPS**, Ruby looked down at the map of streets. She could see the city's famous old movie theater, the Scarlet Pagoda; the Japanese garden in front of it; the lampposts decked in bunting and lights to celebrate this year's Twinford Film Festival: A Date with Thrills.

The festival was to be a celebration of romantic thriller movies of the kind that she and Mrs. Digby loved, and the situation Ruby currently found herself in was no doubt one seen in many of these pictures.

Only, for Ruby, this was no stunt; there was no safety net, and she needed to get a grip before someone raised the alarm. She heaved herself into the window-cleaning cradle and found the controls that would carry her back to her original window. She knew which one it was because it had an empty milk glass sitting in front of it.



She was just clambering out of the cradle when she heard a voice.

“Hey, kid, would you come in from there?”

Ruby looked up to see a tall, well-groomed man in a well-cut suit standing in the room. He appeared moderately anxious.

“Am I making you nervous?” asked Ruby.

“The only person making me nervous is the meter maid on Third Avenue, where I’m double-parked.”

“Geez, Hitch, why don’t you just find a parking spot like a normal person?”

“You think it’s easy parking in this city?” Hitch replied.

Ruby sighed, swiveled herself around, and dropped back in through the window. She landed on the long elegant coffee table, the main feature of the sleek reception room. Pens went skidding across its surface and a bowl of marbles overturned, its contents spinning in all directions and disappearing under furniture.

Hitch rolled his eyes. “Good going, kid.”

“OK, OK,” said Ruby, gathering up the pens and plonking them back in their pen pot. “Don’t have a total baby about it, man.”

*HITCH: It’s not me who’s going to have the “baby.”*

*Mr. Barnaby H. Cleethorps is a very particular man.*

RUBY: *What's he gonna do, dangle me out of the window by my toes?*

HITCH: *Probably.*

RUBY: *Boy, this guy must really like his pens tidy!*

HITCH: *You better believe it, Redfort.*

RUBY: *So what are you doing here? You back from summer vacation?*

HITCH: *Something like that.*

RUBY: *Where have you been, anyway?*

HITCH: *It's classified.*

RUBY: *Your vacations are classified?*

HITCH: *I wasn't on vacation.*

RUBY: *But you just said you were.*

HITCH: *No, I didn't; you did.*

RUBY: *Boy, have I missed small-talking to you. So where are we going?*

HITCH: *Elevator.*

RUBY: *You know I can't leave — my dad won't let me out of his sight.*

HITCH: *I've cleared it; your father has entrusted me with your safety.*

RUBY: *He clearly doesn't know your safety record — so what are we doing?*

HITCH: *I'm going to have a cup of coffee, and you are going to be grilled.*

RUBY: *Huh?*

HITCH: *Our boss, she wants to talk to you.*

To the outside world, Hitch was the Redforts' household manager, but to the few in the know, he was actually a highly trained Spectrum agent, living undercover at the Redfort home, stationed there to mentor and protect Ruby Redfort, Spectrum's youngest recruit. Their boss was LB, head of Spectrum 8.

They took the elevator down to street level. It wasn't the quickest ride, since the building was an old one and the elevator cars were far from state-of-the-art.

"I thought I was on sick leave," said Ruby.

"Not anymore," said Hitch.

"Anything going down at Spectrum?" asked Ruby. "A new case?" Ruby had been a Spectrum agent and expert code breaker since April, and in that time she had worked on three cases. All three had nearly gotten her killed. But then evading death sort of went with the territory.

"Don't ask me. I'm just the bozo driving the car," replied Hitch.

Ruby gave him a look, aware that if anyone was going to

know anything, then it was Hitch. But that said, there was no point trying to get him to talk; if he didn't want to, then he never would. That was the thing about Hitch: he kept his mouth shut. **SPECTRUM RULE 1: KEEP IT ZIPPED.** He had to: as one of the highest-ranking agents at Spectrum 8, he was trusted with heavily classified information. He didn't squeal for anything or anybody.

So how had a top-notch spy wound up working undercover as bodyguard to a thirteen-year-old kid? Hitch, for one, asked himself this question practically every day.

They strode out of the Sandwich Building and saw a meter maid busy studying Hitch's car.

Where to start? He was parked in a tow zone, facing in the wrong direction, one of the wheels up on the sidewalk, the vehicle abandoned for twenty-one minutes. This was going to be one long ticket.

Hitch just raised an eyebrow. "Wait here, kid."

The meter maid had her hands on her hips, like she meant business. She looked ready for a fight, like she was thinking, *Here he comes, another bozo who doesn't want to take responsibility for his own dumb actions.*

Hitch strolled over, and the meter maid crossed her arms—a defensive move.

Hitch leaned against his car and began talking — well, not so much talking as chatting. The meter maid shifted her weight and relaxed her arms so she now stood with one hand on her hip — was she actually smiling?

*Man, you're good,* thought Ruby. Hitch could talk his way out of a maze.

The conversation, for that's what it had become, went on for some time. *What is he telling her?*

The meter maid looked over to where Ruby stood, then she stuck her ticket pad back in her pocket. She laughed and nodded.

She raised an arm as if to high-five Hitch. He wasn't the high-fiving type, Ruby knew that, so instead he gave her a kind of salute. Happy with that, the meter maid walked off whistling a merry tune.

Ruby climbed into the car. "What did you say to her?"

"Just explained what a great kid you are," replied Hitch as he slid into the driver's seat.

"Yeah, right — apart from that?" said Ruby.

"I said I could get her courtside tickets to the Twinford Sneakers play-offs."

"And can you?"

"Sure — the organizer is an old friend of mine."

"I thought you secret agents didn't have friends."

“No, you’re thinking of tax inspectors,” said Hitch, starting the engine. “I’ve got more friends than I can handle.”

“Funny,” said Ruby, “I’ve never met any of them.”

“They’re all the shy and retiring type,” said Hitch.

Ruby looked at him. “You sure they’re not the invisible, imaginary type?”

“Oh, they’re just quiet,” said Hitch. “A game of cards and an early night.”

“Sounds like a hoot — wish I could meet ‘em.”

“Ah, you wouldn’t like ‘em, kid,” said Hitch. “Not one of them has an interest in bubble gum.”

## CHAPTER 3

### -8

IT WAS NO REAL SURPRISE TO RUBY that Hitch himself was bringing her into HQ today. Sure, she had been into the building's hub many times and worked endless long hours in its secure surrounds, but even so, knowledge of the "way in" was not a given. The spy agency's entrance moved frequently, and Ruby was not among the privileged few informed of Spectrum 8's plans and architectural changes. Hitch was her link to this underground world, and without him, she could very easily find herself shut out in the cold. You mess up, you're out for good.

Last time Ruby had visited was by way of the toddler playground in the middle of Central City Park, and to Ruby's huge annoyance *and* humiliation, Vapona Begwell — fellow pupil, school-yard enemy, and major irritation — had observed her crawling into the kids' caterpillar tunnel. Ruby still hadn't lived it down, and Bugwart (as Ruby called her) wasn't about to let anyone forget it — ever.

Of course, Vapona had no idea what “Little Red Ridingfort” was actually doing in the caterpillar tunnel, and she never would. To tell the secret of Spectrum was forbidden. That said, there was one person outside the organization who did know, and he was Clancy Crew, the most loyal ally a schoolkid could have, and Ruby Redfort’s closest friend. He would part with body parts before divulging a sworn-to secret.

“So where is the Spectrum portal this time?” asked Ruby.

“If I told you it was the toddler playground, what would you say?” replied Hitch.

“You have to be kidding!” said Ruby. “You’re telling me I have to walk into the little-kid playground and crawl into that tunnel *again*?”

Hitch said nothing.

“Man, I bet this was your idea. You get a big kick outta this, don’t you? Humiliate the kid, watch her street credibility sink below zero — I bet you’re laughing all day long.”

Hitch looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

“You really serious about this?” asked Ruby.

“Nah, I’m just messing with you, Redfort. You should see the look on your face. You know, you can really whine when you want to.”



“You shouldn’t kid around with people that way. It interferes with a trusting relationship.”

“You shouldn’t get wound up so easily, Redfort. You’ll get a reputation for being flighty.”

Ruby glared at him.

It had been around five months now since Hitch had walked through the Redforts’ front door and taken up work in their stylish modern home under the guise of household manager. Ruby’s mom still insisted on introducing him as the butler, even though Hitch had on many occasions more than hinted that he would prefer her not to.

This kind of undercover work would ordinarily be beneath someone of Hitch’s status, but Ruby Redfort was no ordinary assignment. The reason: she was the brightest code breaker to step into Spectrum since the late Bradley Baker. Bradley Baker had begun his career as a boy, had died a man, and was to this day a hero mourned by every agent at Spectrum. Bradley Baker was a legend and — to Ruby — a pain in the derriere.

It was hard to outdo a dead super-agent, but Ruby was certainly in the business of trying. She was ambitious — not just determined to *outclass* Baker’s code-breaking ability but also to

become at least as good a field agent. Whether she would or not remained to be seen.

So Hitch, for now, was her official protector. He had been a field agent for a long time now and was highly trained in many disciplines. It hadn't exactly been his idea of a whole bunch of fun. Watching over a schoolkid was not without its frustrations, particularly a schoolkid with a big mouth. But Ruby had grown on him. That was the thing about her — you just found yourself wishing she were there even when you wanted her to go jump in a lake.

She was sharp as a tack and keen as a knife, determined, hardworking, loyal, and — luckily — pretty funny as well. There were few Spectrum agents Hitch could say all that about.

Hitch's watch beeped. He took the call through his earpiece, and Ruby had no idea what was being said. All she knew was that three seconds later, they were heading back in the direction they had come and were now making their way once again to the downtown city center.

"What's the deal?" asked Ruby.

"I guess Spectrum is ramping up security," said Hitch. "They've moved the 'way in' again."

"Something happened?" she asked.

"Something's always happened," he replied.

Downtown, all the buildings were tall, even the short ones. Imposing stone department stores, offices, government buildings, banks, and apartment buildings. Skyscrapers rose up hundreds of feet, and when you looked up, the city tapered away into blue. The older Twinfordites often referred to this part of the city as Mini Manhattan or Little L.A., because it bore a certain resemblance to both: a sort of mixture of uptown New York and downtown L.A. Although in terms of square mileage it was not on the same scale as either.

The buildings were by and large attractive, many dating back to the 1920s and '30s. There were newer ones, of course, all glass and steel, but when one stood in just the right spot and looked up beyond the modern street signage and billboards, one could imagine Twinford City past. This was why downtown Twinford was often used for feature films depicting another age, when 1930s mobsters screeched through the streets and elegantly dressed couples danced through the night.

This part of town was an area that Ruby loved—it was exciting somehow to lose one's self, to become anonymous, in the crisscrossing streets, ant-like to someone looking down from the top of the gargantuan architecture.

Hitch parked underneath the building known as the Schroeder, in a single empty space among the seemingly endless

rows of stationary cars. There was nothing to indicate that this one lone parking spot had been reserved for Hitch's silver convertible, but Ruby got the impression that somehow it had. The parking ramps spiraled down below them, and Ruby wondered just how many vehicles were sitting under this vast building.

"Fifteen hundred," said Hitch, as if reading her thoughts. "Fifteen hundred seventeen if you count the maintenance team's trucks. All parked on three underground levels under seventy-seven floors of concrete, steel, and glass. Makes the mind boggle, doesn't it?"

"Makes the mind wonder if you shouldn't get out more," said Ruby. "Maybe call up some of those 'fun friends' of yours, live a little."

They climbed out of the car and walked across to the elevator. Someone had scratched a tiny image of a housefly next to the "down" button, and there was a trail line etched into the steel of the doors as if the fly had just buzzed out. The doors opened, and Ruby and Hitch stepped in. When Hitch snapped open what seemed to be an invisible panel and pressed some digits, the doors behind them closed and the doors in front of them opened. They exited. On the other side was a dusty old service elevator. Hitch clanged open its accordion metal gate, and they

stepped into the rough wide box. He punched the button marked “-8,” and a second or seven later, they began to move unsteadily toward the bottom of the elevator shaft, the dark lit up by a single naked lightbulb that swung above them, casting eerie shadows as they descended.

How many would guess that this tired-looking elevator with its stingy light source might lead to one of the world’s most sophisticated intelligence operations? Well, Ruby Redfort might; she had seen it all before.

# Ruby Redfort Feel the Fear

Lauren Child

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