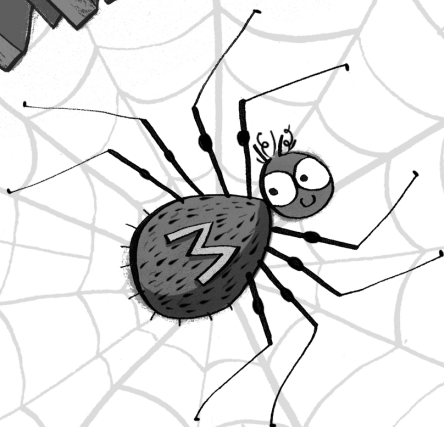


# MILTON THE MIGHTY



**EMMA READ**

**Chicken  
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*For my spiderlings,  
Elly and Alden*

# CHAPTER 1

## Running and Screaming

Milton was strolling home after a week-end away in the downstairs loo, when he heard the scream.

He froze. It was coming from the big house human, but it wasn't an ordinary scream. It was an all-eight-leg wobbler, as his dad would've said.

*Surely he's not screaming like that at me?*

As a tiny false widow spider, Milton was completely unscreamworthy, utterly unterrifying and occasionally mistaken for a raisin.

Milton glanced up, and there was Mr Macey on the stairs, looking right at him. The human

cleaned his glasses and checked again, and on confirming that Milton *was* actually there and not merely a dirty smudge on the lens, he took an enormous inhale, ready to let rip again.

*He is screaming at me!*

Milton's heart beat faster as a second pair of footsteps pounded on the staircase above.

'DAD?!' Zoe called. 'Dad? Are you OK? What's happened? Are you hurt? Have we won the lottery?'

Mr M was now cowering on the stairs, clutching the spindles like a prisoner behind bars.

Zoe peered over the banister. 'Er, Dad, please tell me you're not screaming the house down because of that teeny spider.'

'But it's **THAT** spider – from the paper.'

'Well, I don't think it's going to leap all the way up here and grab you.' Zoe sighed. 'What do you want me to do with it?'

'Throw something at it. Kill it – quick!'

*What?!'*

Milton suddenly remembered basic training:

*when humans scream, spiders should run.*

But Zoe said, 'No! It's not hurting anyone.'

'Not yet. And it's not going to get the chance. I've changed my mind. We're evacuating. I'll call Uncle Henry and we'll stay with him. Go and pack a bag . . . and don't go down there, whatever you do.' Mr Macey's gaze remained locked on Milton, as if he might indeed leap over a metre into the air and eat him for lunch.

Zoe followed her dad upstairs, shaking her head as he crawled all the way to the master bedroom on his hands and knees.

From Milton's viewpoint, this was some very peculiar behaviour from his already baffling humans. Mr Macey was no spider fan, for sure, but that scream was something else. Milton set off towards the front door and his house under the skirting board, frowning and looking forward to a large glass of ladybird juice. But then he heard footsteps – fast ones. It was Zoe again. She was sprinting down the stairs (even

though her dad always told her off for that), with the dreaded cup-and-birthday-card combo in her hand.

Milton liked Zoe, the smaller of his two house humans. She wasn't the running and screaming type at all. She'd occasionally 'eek' at him if he appeared suddenly (like from under the sofa while the telly was on). But even she was behaving strangely now. Her eyes narrowed like a cat, and locked on to him as she reached the bottom step. At best, being trapped under a cup meant a quick trip outside, which Milton frankly didn't have time for. At worst . . .

Milton ran in the opposite direction as fast as his eight little legs would carry him, towards the dining room and the relative safety of the dark and dusty space behind the radiator. Scuttling at top speed across the wooden floor, he risked a quick look back and saw Zoe getting closer, the cup looming large in her hand. 'Be still, little spider,' she whispered.

The radiator was still miles away!

He remembered a TV show he'd watched, late one night with Mr M (well, maybe not *with* him – Milton had been hiding under the rug: it was a pretty scary show). A boy was being chased on the TV and Mr M shouted at the telly, 'For goodness' sake, zigzag!' Zigzagging apparently made you more difficult to catch.

So Milton zigzagged.

The zigging was fine, but as he turned to zag, he tripped over a gap in the floorboards and went flying.

Halfway through an impressive loop the loop, he saw his friend Ralph on the far side of the kitchen.

'Watcha, Milt. Out for a bit of keep-fit?' he called. Then he saw Zoe. 'Oh!'

Milton sailed through the air, then bounced off the cupboard under the stairs like a shiny brown pinball, rolling to a stop against the radiator pipe, which was hot and singed his leg hairs.

'Yikes, Milt, you OK?' shouted Ralph. 'You need me to pee on that?'



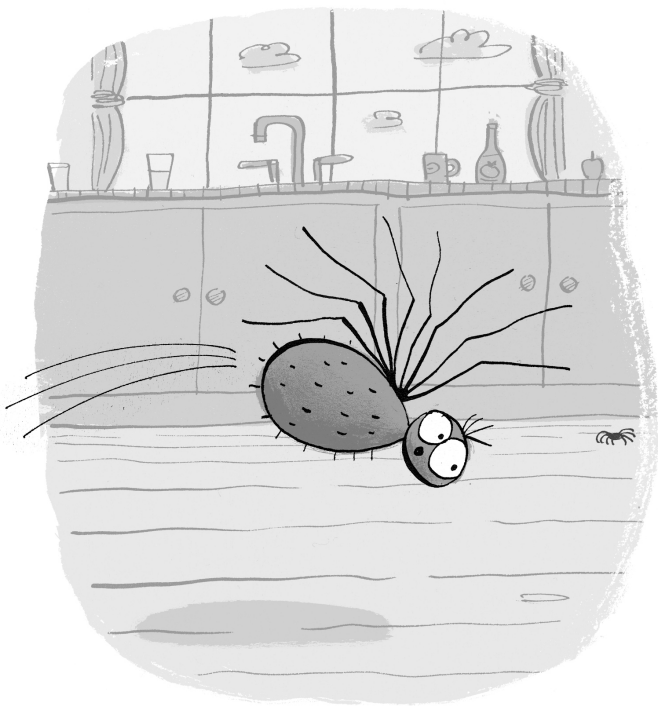
Milton grimaced, his world spinning. ‘Eww, no. What’s wrong with you?’

‘Sorry, I thought that was what you did for burns. Anyway, what’ve you done to upset Zoe?’

Milton righted himself.

*If Zoe sees Ralph maybe she’ll turn her attention to him.*

Big *and* hairy, Ralph was definitely scream-worthy.



Just then, Zoe's giant feet crashed between them.

'Come on! Behind the radiator,' called Milton. But it was too late, Zoe saw Ralph and screamed.

*There we go.*

Ralph knew exactly what to do when humans screamed – he screamed too, and ran around the kitchen, where he and Zoe did a sort of scream-and-dance number together, like a *Strictly* Halloween special.

Milton used the diversion to drag his bumped and bruised body to safety behind the radiator. He knew he should fold up his legs, thank his lucky webs and wait until dark to emerge, but Milton was his father's son and couldn't help feeling curious. Something strange was going on and . . .

*Oh, there's her Blue Peter badge – I knew she wouldn't have lost it at school.*

*Concentrate, Milton!*

Peeking above the top of the radiator, he saw

Ralph charging out of the kitchen towards him, waving his legs. Zoe was rummaging in a cupboard behind him. Then, Zoe spun around on her heels to face Milton.

‘Right, you.’ She glared at him, cup in one hand, feather duster in the other.

Milton fell down the back of the radiator in fright.

*Why are they so interested in me all of a sudden?*

‘Milton, you lunatic! What are you doing?’ yelled Ralph.

Milton had slid almost to the floor and was hanging upside down by a thread. A ball of dust stuck to his head like a fluffy grey wig.

‘Come on, run – the radiator’s not safe from that feather duster.’ Ralph brushed Milton off and the pair dashed along the skirting board towards the bookcase.

‘What’s going on?’ said Milton, stumbling behind Ralph and trying to keep up. ‘I’m not big and hairy. I’m not used to this kind of attention.’

‘Stay alive first, ask questions later. Honestly, Milton, you’re the cleverest little spider I know, but sometimes common sense ain’t your strong point. Now run faster!’

The pair scurried to a towering stack of books beside Zoe’s dad’s desk, and clambered to the top. Books made for a decent hiding place but they were not to be trusted. Many a spider had been turned into a small brown splodge by the *thwack* of a good novel.

They made themselves small(er) and tucked into a gap to catch their breath.

Milton felt for vibrations in the air with the hairs on his legs. ‘Where’s she gone? I can’t hear anything.’

‘Let’s get away from these books and head for the fridge, to be on the safe side. No one ever dusts behind there.’

One leg at a time, the spiders crept on to the dining table and made a dash for it. Except halfway along Milton caught sight of something out of one of his side eyes . . . something

was glowing on the laptop screen. He stopped, then ran off towards it.

‘Milt?’ Ralph said in an urgent whisper. ‘What are you doing? Come on, you’re asking to go under that cup.’

But Milton wasn’t listening. ‘There’s something on the screen. Just a bit closer . . . need to have a have a quick . . .’

Ralph looked on, helpless, as Zoe reappeared from behind Milton. She had swapped the cup for her dad’s mobile phone.

‘Gotcha!’

The phone made a crunchy sound, and flashed as bright as the sun, momentarily blinding Milton’s sensitive front eyes. He froze again. With his side eyes, he saw Mr M tearing down the stairs with a holdall. ‘Come on, Zoe, get your coat on. Uncle Henry said we can stay until we know what to do about that . . . *insect*.’

‘It’s not an insect, it’s an arachnid,’ called Zoe. ‘Seriously, Dad – I’m not moving out because of a spider. I’ve got school!’

Mr Macey gave her a panicked look as he grabbed a bunch of keys and made for the front door. Milton's vision was starting to return.

'Zoe. Get over here right now. We're not staying. It's not safe.'

Zoe moved slowly towards her dad, hands outstretched, taking care not to spook him. 'Come on now, it'll be fine. You go upstairs and I'll bring you a nice cup of tea. I'll take a look in one of my books, see if we can't figure this out without running away.'

Zoe went into the kitchen again and, once her back was turned, Ralph sprinted to the laptop. 'Milton, what the— oh!'

Milton was staring at the screen.

On Zoe's laptop, the web page of a well-known tabloid newspaper glowed brightly.

The headline read, in enormous letters:

## **KILLER SPIDERS ON THE RAMPAGE**

And under the headline was a picture of Milton.