

Liars' Room

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CHAPTER ONE

STELLA

STELLA HILL WAS rinsing a bowl in the sink when her step-brother burst into the kitchen and shouted, “There’s a ghost in the basement!” The bowl slipped from her grip, hit the basin, and cracked in half.

“Simon! Look what you made me do!” she shouted.

He wore a wild expression, eyes wide, mouth stretched into a grimace. His fingers were curled into fists, and his chest heaved as if he’d just run around all three wings of their new house in record time. If he was trying to scare her, which he probably was, he was doing an excellent job.

Stella’s mom and her twin brother, Alex, rushed in from the dining room. “What’s the ruckus?” Mom asked, glancing at the broken bowl in the sink.

Stella felt her face go red.

“There’s a ghost in the basement!” Simon exclaimed again. “A real live ghost!”

“Ghosts aren’t real or alive,” Alex quipped.

Simon huffed, ready to argue, but Mom stepped in. “You know the basement is off-limits.” Since coming to Frost Meadow, Stella’s mother had become an expert in handling her stepson’s moods. “Why did you go down there?”

“I heard a voice.”

Alex stifled a laugh. Stella threw him a look.

Mom glanced at the twins. “Was it either of you?” They shook their heads. “Could it have been the radio, Simon? The television? Maybe there’s someone outside — ”

“It *wasn’t* the radio.” His voice edged toward a grumble. “It was a real voice. Coming from the basement. I went to check it out.”

Mom sighed. “It’s not safe down there. Your father and I — ”

Simon held out both hands to her. “Won’t you come see for yourself?”

For a moment, Stella thought he looked like an actual little kid and not the monster she’d known him to be.

“When we say it’s not safe, buddy, we mean for *everyone*. There’s exposed wire. Pieces of loose foundation. And junk from the old owner is all over the place. You could trip and split your head open.”

“Mom, that’s really gross,” said Stella.

Mom pursed her lips. “Why don’t you tell us what happened,” she said to Simon.

The four sat around the kitchen table. As Simon went on with his latest tale of ghostly intrigue, Stella concentrated on her notepad, which lay open to a sketch she’d been working on during breakfast. She’d seen the image in a dream — a majestic white horse in a field of red roses. It was an idea for a mural on her bedroom wall. But looking at it now, she realized that the poor horse looked trapped. Starting over on her sketch, she barely listened as Simon went on. She knew he was trying to scare her. Alex always said it was best to just ignore him.

Simon had never been a friend to the twins, even before their parents had gotten married. Now in this new house where the two families had become one, he seemed determined to frighten the bejesus out of them all. Every week since the move, he'd come up with another "true" ghost story about the estate. Wildwyck was a spooky building to begin with, but Mom and Charlie had bought it hoping to convert each wing into charming, *un*-spooky town houses they'd eventually sell. Stella and Alex had had many conversations about Simon before their parents' wedding earlier that year, and now Stella worried that their worst fears about him were coming true.

She couldn't understand why he did the horrible things that he did. For attention? For revenge? Because he didn't know any better?

Her first bad experience with her stepbrother had been at a Christmas party in Brooklyn several years back. Charlie had come from Ohio to visit for the week, and he'd brought Simon with him for the first time. Simon's older brother, Zachary, had stayed in Columbus with their mother. The night of the party, the twins had been hiding out in Alex's room when Simon swept in through the doorway.

"What's happening?" he asked, putting on a silly, deep voice.

Alex was quick to wipe away tears. He and Stella had been discussing how much they missed their dad at that time of year. "We were chatting," Stella answered quietly, hoping he'd take the hint and go away.

At that point, she didn't know that Simon was the type of kid who needed more than a hint. "About what?"

“Why are you so interested in what we’re doing?” Alex asked, annoyed.

“Because you didn’t *invite* me.” Simon smirked.

Stella didn’t want to hurt his feelings. “Sometimes me and Alex just need to be alone together.”

“That’s weird,” Simon went on. He picked up one of Alex’s models from a shelf — a large Japanese mecha. The colorful humanoid robot was made of many detailed plastic pieces that Alex and his dad had spent nearly a week carefully gluing together.

“Don’t touch that,” Alex said, standing.

“I’m just looking at it.”

“Put it down!”

Simon smiled. “Why are you getting so upset? It’s just a toy.”

“It’s not just a toy,” Alex insisted. “You have no idea what it is. Give it to me.” He lunged at Simon, but Simon stepped out of the way. Unfortunately, Simon bumped into the wall and dropped it. The model fell to the floor at the exact wrong angle, and then SNAP, one of its arms broke off.

Alex cried out, then grabbed at Simon’s shoulder, shoving him out into the hallway.

“Be careful!” Stella warned, chasing after them.

She wasn’t sure exactly what happened next except that the boys tripped and fell and then . . .

Simon was screaming.

Charlie and Mom raced up from the party. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

Simon held up his arm and showed his father a scrape on

his elbow. "I wanted to come up and say hi, but they . . . they hurt me!"

Stella's jaw dropped. There was no way Alex had done that. He'd barely touched him.

"He's lying!" Alex answered. "I didn't hurt him. Not on purpose. He broke my model."

Mom placed herself instinctively between Simon and the twins. She glanced through the doorway and saw the mecha lying on the floor, its arm separated from its torso. She kept her voice low so the party guests couldn't hear. "Alex . . . Stella . . . Go to your rooms."

Just before she reached her door, Stella looked back to see Simon sitting near the top of the stairs. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she'd caught him smiling before switching quickly back to tears. Maybe he was playing it up? Or maybe he'd really been hurt but was pleased to see the twins get what he thought they deserved?

From across the kitchen table, Alex caught Stella's gaze. She realized that he'd been listening more closely to Simon's tale than she had been. She felt glad she wasn't letting Simon get to her. The ghost stories he'd already come up with about Wildwyck had crept into her dreams and kept her up at night. Like many old buildings, the place creaked and bumped and whistled and whined into the wee hours, consistently making Stella wake with a start, wondering what might be staring at her from the shadows.

"I turned the knob," said Simon dramatically, as if his story was part of a game. It was how he always told his stories. If it *was* a game, Stella wasn't sure who was meant to be

the winner. “I pushed the door slowly, careful to not make a noise. I didn’t want to scare away whoever was humming down there in the dark.”

Not this again! she thought.

Simon had first mentioned a mysterious humming about a month ago, a week after moving day. He’d snuck into her room and hid under her sheets so that when she came upstairs, he could pop up and scare her. The way he told it was, he was lying very still when he heard Stella approaching, humming a song. Footsteps creaked on the stairs. The humming got louder — Stella was in the doorway. Floorboards squeaked as she crossed the room and then leaned over the mattress, bringing her face close to his. Simon heard a ragged breathing, like a strangled *Huhhhhhhh*, and he knew he’d been caught. She’d decided to scare him too. Her breath rustled the top sheet. He tossed it aside and shouted, *BOOO!*

But there was nobody in the room.

He hopped out of the bed and peered under the mattress to see if Stella was hiding. He checked around the edge of the doorway, but the hallway was empty too.

He found her at the kitchen table, eating breakfast.

Not humming.

When he told Stella what had happened in her bedroom, she was furious. She didn’t care so much about the ghost part, because *Really? A ghost?* What made her blood boil was that he’d snuck into her room. It was her private space, and he’d touched her things and messed up her bed. Teary-eyed, she’d complained to her mom about what Simon had done. Mom

made Simon promise to not go in Stella's bedroom again without her permission.

Simon had explained that he and Zachary always played tricks on each other, and he thought he could do the same with Stella and Alex, but now he knew better.

Or so he'd said.

"Down the dark stairs, I started to feel scared," Simon continued, his voice hushed.

"You *started* to feel scared?" Alex asked.

Simon ignored him. "The humming was still distant. Feeling my way forward, I found a cord, and when I pulled it, a light came on. The walls were cracked and crumbling and covered in cobwebs."

Mom shook her head. "Simon, this is why we don't want you down there."

"I know, but listen . . . The farther I got from the staircase, the louder the humming grew. It was coming from just around a bend. It sounded like a little kid."

"Yeah, right," said Alex. "You expect us to believe that there's a *little kid* hiding in our basement? Humming?"

"I don't expect anything," Simon answered. "I followed the voice into a new room. I noticed a small wooden door in the far wall, shut tight. It looks ancient. Wide planks and huge rusty nail heads. There isn't even a doorknob. Just a big metal loop bolted to the wood. The door is coated in dust, like something you'd see in a castle filled with vampires."

"Great," Stella mumbled to Alex. "Now it's *vampires*."

Mom shook her head. "Simon — "

“Wait, Bev, there’s more!”

“There’s always more,” said Alex.

“*Alex*,” Mom warned.

Simon barreled onward anyway. “The humming stopped. I asked, *Who’s there?* No answer. So I grabbed the rusted loop. The door wouldn’t budge. Bev, do you know if it’s bolted from the other side?”

“I’m not even sure which door you mean.”

“All of a sudden . . .” Simon slapped his palm against the table. “*BAM!*” Everyone flinched. Stella clasped her notebook, angry at herself for giving Simon what he wanted. “Something pounded from inside. I don’t even how to describe what I heard next. It was like a scream mixed with a howl and a sob. It didn’t sound human, but also, like, it wasn’t an animal? Next, there came a growling sound. It got so loud, I tripped backward. Almost fell. And that was *before* the door started rattling! I was so scared I couldn’t move. But then . . .” Simon looked around the table, meeting each of their stares. “It just stopped. I ran. Around the corner. Down the hall. Up the stairs. I ran until I found Stella in the kitchen. And I told her what I heard.”

“You told me it was a ghost,” Stella answered quietly. “That doesn’t sound like a ghost.”

“What does it sound like?” Simon asked.

“Werewolves,” Alex answered flatly. “Mom, call an exterminator.”

“Funny, Alex,” Mom sighed, then stood. “How about you three head outside for a bit?”

Simon scowled. “I didn’t finish the story.”