

THE LAST RESORT

THE CLAIMING

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1

Teddy jolted out of bed as the first rays of sunlight made their way into his room. He was too happy and excited to go back to sleep. His new friends, Lila and Caleb, were back from their visit to Arizona, and they all had plans to meet up later. He couldn't believe it. He, Teddy, was going to hang out with real-life friends! Actual kids his age! Lila was even switching to his school!

His heart raced in his chest. But not in an unpleasant way. Instead, in a vibrant, seize-the-day type of way.

It was too early to go over to the inn where Lila and Caleb lived, so he went to his computer and opened the Phantom Hunters forum—a site about ghosts, paranormal activity, and unexplained mysteries. He'd been a member of the community for years. But ever since he'd posted his story about facing down the Fire Maiden with Lila and Caleb, he'd become, well, kind of a big deal!

He quickly scrolled through the comments, soaking in every bit of

praise and adoration for what he and his friends had accomplished. And that gave him even *more* energy!

Normally, he was sluggish in the morning. Especially when he'd had one of his nightmares. Mornings during the school year were a particular struggle. His mom repeatedly yelling up to him. His sisters yelling. And finally, his dad knocking on his door. (His dad was not a yeller.) It took a while for Teddy's brain and body to warm up. But today, he felt like he could run a hundred miles, ace a math test, and clean his room in one fell swoop.

Luckily, none of those things needed to be done because it was still summer. Two glorious days left. Teddy planned to enjoy every second of them. And he hadn't had a single nightmare since they'd forced the Fire Maiden through the portal!

He threw his favorite *Goonies* T-shirt on over his head and burst out of his room, flying down the stairs. Nadia was already in the kitchen, dressed in her lifeguard uniform. Her curly black hair that matched his was pulled into a braid.

"You're up early," she said.

He could hear the judgment in her voice. His sisters were morning people. More than that, they were what he called shiny people. Responsible people. Good-at-everything people.

And he was Teddy.

If they didn't all share the same hair, he would have serious questions about whether they were related.

But today was different. Today was not a day for feeling bad about himself, because he was a hero today. He was not only a hero; he was a hero with FRIENDS. It was like he hadn't realized how lonely he had been for years, but now there was a buzzing inside him, a lightness. He beamed as he grabbed a bowl for his cereal.

"What's with you?" Nadia asked Teddy, narrowing her eyes as his other sister, Dena, entered the kitchen. She was dressed in a polo and pressed khakis. She had an internship at city hall. It sounded to Teddy like she mostly sorted mail, but the way she carried herself you would think she was the president.

Dena playfully rubbed the top of Teddy's head. "Surprised to see you so early, bud."

"It's not like I always sleep in," he said, filling his mouth with a spoonful of sugary cereal.

"Right." Nadia and Dena exchanged a smirk.

"Plus, what's wrong with sleeping?" Teddy continued. "You know it's the most important thing you can do for your brain. And I've had a lot going on. I've needed to get rest for my strength."

"Haven't you just been watching your horror movies?" Nadia shot

a judgmental glance at his T-shirt. “Or staying up late on your computer solving cold cases?”

Teddy took another bite of cereal. He was *dying* to tell them about the Fire Maiden, but he knew that never in a million years would they believe him. Plus, worse than not believing him, they would think he was hallucinating. That he was seeing things again. That his bad nightmares from before were back. That he was obsessing over the one terrible thing he was supposed to be over by now.

“They’re not my horror movies,” he finally decided on saying. “They’re movies that are beloved by many across the world.”

“Right,” Nadia said again. *Right* was her favorite word. Teddy wondered if that was because she was used to always *being* right. Nadia was the oldest in their family, and she had set an impossible standard for everyone. Not only was she a star student, she was also an accomplished athlete. Last year, she had earned the silver medal at the swimming state championship. This year, she was determined to get gold. She was working this summer as a lifeguard at the local pool. Or rather, she was the head lifeguard, thank you very much.

Dena did her best to follow in Nadia’s footsteps. She, too, excelled at school. She, too, had extracurricular activities where she was celebrated.

Teddy had his horror movies.

He was also the top commentator on the Phantom Hunters board. Not that his sisters cared about that. But it was a pretty big deal.

And, Teddy thought, smiling again, *I saved the world*. Or at least the town. That felt big enough to be important. Right?

Outside the kitchen window, a sparrow flitted from branch to branch of the big old maple tree. *You're welcome*, Teddy thought. *I saved you*.

Again, he didn't know if this was strictly true. But it seemed safe to reason that if the Fire Maiden wrought destruction on the entire town, the tiny brown sparrow would have been adversely affected.

Lila, Caleb, and Teddy had managed to force the Fire Maiden back through the portal—the mirror that acted as a passageway between the land of the living and the spirit world. She was gone. They were safe.

Everyone was safe now. The nightmares that'd plagued the town were gone. Although he would have given anything to have saved poor Mr. Santiago, whose pug, Meatball, now lived with Lila and Caleb.

His sisters were talking to each other. Trading notes about all the important things that they were going to accomplish that day.

Through a mouthful of cereal, he asked, "Where are Mom and Dad?"

"They took a morning jog together because Dad doesn't have to

be at the clinic until eleven. It's Wednesday," Nadia answered.

She said the words *It's Wednesday* in the *Are you clueless or something?* way she often addressed Teddy.

"Right," he said, trying on her word for size.

His father ran the local veterinary clinic. His mom managed the finances for said clinic. It was sort of adorable that they got along so well. But Teddy was twelve, and almost in seventh grade, which meant he was no longer allowed to find anything about his parents adorable. Or at least not out loud.

"They trusted that Dena and I could keep an eye on you. Though we figured you'd still be sleeping before we left. I was going to write you a note—"

"I can handle myself," Teddy said. He didn't wait for her to butt in with one of her *rights*. Instead, he kept talking. "And I have a busy day today. I've been working on a very important project with my friends." He paused, chewing some more cereal. Froot Loops, in Teddy's opinion, should be their own separate food group. They were one of the most delicious things on the planet.

"It's something very important," he repeated. "My best friend and I . . . well, I can't talk too much about it."

Dena's eyebrow shot up. Nadia spun around to stare at him.

"Your best friend?" Nadia asked, incredulous.

“Something very important?” Dena asked, echoing Nadia’s incredulity.

“Yes.” Teddy put his spoon down. He reveled in having his sisters’ full attention. “I can’t tell you too much about it because it’s top secret, but we had a huge success recently. It’s all very exciting.”

It had been years since Teddy had talked about friends with his sisters. Mainly because he hadn’t had any to talk about. He didn’t bring home friends after school. And he never got invited over to anyone else’s house, either. No birthday parties or afternoon arcade hangouts.

His family had chalked this up to Teddy’s eccentric personality. His obsession with his Phantom Hunters online forum and ’80s horror movies. And that definitely didn’t help. But they refused to accept the real reason: After everything that happened that winter when he was nine . . . other kids avoided him. Some didn’t know what to say. Others seemed a little afraid of him. That’s why Teddy had been so grateful for the Phantoms; they were from all over the world, and didn’t know anything about his past.

His mom was always trying to encourage him to get off the computer and make friends “in real life,” as if that were so easy.

But now he had friends. In real life. And he was going to talk about them.

“Okay, Teddy Bear,” Nadia said with a laugh. Dena giggled, too.

Heat rose in Teddy’s ears. He didn’t want to let them get to him. Not today of all days. But he couldn’t ignore the annoyance that was rising in his belly.

He tried to calm himself down by remembering that Lila’s dad called her Lila-Bear. It was something they had in common. His friend!

“Fine.” He stood up and splashed the remains of his cereal out in the sink. Tiny dots of milk splattered on the countertop. “You don’t have to believe me. But I’m probably responsible for saving your lives.”

His sisters laughed some more. Teddy shook his head. He was determined not to let them get him down. He *had* done something important.

And even greater than that, he had plans today.

Plans with his friends.