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THE LUCKY HOUSE DETECTIVE AGENCY

SCARLETT LI

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KNIGHTS OF

To the original Wendy & Stephen

CHAPTER ONE

"Clues hide in plain sight," I say. "All good detectives know that."

I point to the kitchen crime-scene sketch I've drawn on the Lucky House Takeaway whiteboard.

"Come on, we haven't much time," says Isaac.

My watch reads 17:39:08. He's right. Only twenty minutes before our takeaway opens. Lucky House is the only place for Chinese food in Leighton-on-Sea so Saturday nights are really busy. Mum will kill me if I don't open up on time, but our latest *Secret Detective Society* book has vanished. Isaac and I are desperate to find it so we can discover how *The Mystery of the Milky-Eyed Mummy* ends.

"Take the freezer, for example," I continue.

"The freezer?" Isaac asks.

"Found in most Chinese kitchens," I say in my best David Attenborough voice. "But why? What is inside these enormous freezers?"

"Er, spring rolls," Isaac answers. "We *are* in your

family takeaway."

Ignoring his smart aleck comment, I part the plastic strip curtain that separates the front of the takeaway, where we serve our customers, from the kitchen. The two of us head towards the massive chest freezer.

Icy fumes drift into my face as I prise open the lid.

"Felix, wait!" Isaac grabs hold of my Spider-Man T-shirt. "You can only go in for 60 seconds, or else you might get frostbite. Your nose will turn black and fall off. Give me your watch – I'll time you."

"You do it then," I reply.

Isaac shakes his head. "You know I'm allergic to prawns. Even frozen ones."

I can't argue with that. Isaac has shellfish allergies, not to mention dust allergies, grass allergies and pet allergies, so he's always sniffing, sneezing or scratching. He never goes anywhere without his antihistamines.

I hand over my watch, which I know can withstand freezing conditions. It's a Casio G-Shock. My Por-Por and Gung-Gung sent it to me for my tenth birthday from Hong Kong. You can't even get it in the UK, let alone Leighton-on-Sea. But I also know Isaac likes to feel useful.

"Ready, go!" Isaac shouts.

Sucking in a big breath, I plunge my head into the frozen depths. I wonder if this is how the famous explorer Scott of the Antarctic felt at the South Pole.

"Is it there?" asks Isaac.

I pat what I think are bags of frozen wontons and spring rolls. Nothing feels like a frozen book.

"No," I gasp. My hands are starting to hurt from the cold.

"Felix Lee!"

Oh no, Mum's fifteen-minute warning. I pull my head out.

"Well?" Isaac asks. My teeth are chattering, so I just shake my head. Isaac looks unimpressed by my brief but dangerous submersion into glacial conditions.

"Feeeeelix Leeeee ! Ah jai – fai dee la!"

Uh-oh. Mum's telling me to hurry up. That's Cantonese, by the way; it's what we speak at home. I don't know anyone who can stretch a vowel out like Mum. It's from all the Chinese opera songs she sings. Mum says it's music, but to me it sounds like drunk cats wailing – at least the way she sings it. When I moan about it, she tells me I don't know how to appreciate Chinese opera as an art form. She's right about that.

Isaac and I slip back through the plastic strip curtain. Through the front window, I see two of our regulars, No Peppers and his best friend, Only Chips Please, already waiting at the door. They always come together on the weekends. Sweet-and-Sour Granny is in the queue too. She knows everything about everyone in our town. Isaac and I think she was a spy during the war. She's got the skills and she looks old enough. We call all our customers by their orders 'cos in the early days of opening Mum always forgot their names. She said it was because they all sounded the same. John. Tom. Joan.

One day, Sweet-and-Sour Granny said, "Just call us by our orders," and it's stuck ever since. No Peppers always gets beef-and-pepper chop suey without peppers, and Only Chips Please always gets 'only chips please'. Mum feels sorry for him and usually slips in extra spring rolls or prawn crackers. I asked her why once and she started crying, saying it's important to look after old people. She misses Por-Por and Gung-Gung a lot.

We open at 6 p.m. and I'll be answering the phone, on lid duty and running orders. I'm eleven, so technically it's child labour. But I made the mistake

of mentioning this once and got a long lecture about Mum and Dad's tough Hong Kong childhoods. How they worked before they could walk – it went on and on.

Luckily Isaac's around to help. We've been best friends since we met in primary school. Isaac is super smart. My parents think he is a good influence on me. They call him the 'second son they never had'! That's OK 'cos if I had to have a brother, I would want it to be Isaac – even though we don't look anything alike because my parents are Chinese and his are Jamaican. His dad is a paramedic and has to work nights and weekends, so Isaac often hangs around at ours. His mum, Eileen, died three years ago from cancer. It was really sad. Eileen was Mum's first friend in Leighton-on-Sea and Mum promised her that we'd look out for Isaac and his dad. I'm going to Isaac's house later for a sleepover. His dad isn't working tonight and said I could stay over to give my parents a break. A break from what? I'm a delight!

"Yoo-hoo, lads. Ready to open?"

Bev enters from the back. Her blue eyeshadow, red lipstick and curled silver hair remind me of the women in the old musicals she watches.

When we opened Lucky House, Bev was one of our first customers. She started helping out on weekends after she and Mum became friends. She wouldn't take any wages but Mum insisted, so now they have a weekly fake fight where Mum forces cash and food on Bev, and Bev pretends to turn it down. She says she doesn't need the money; she just enjoys our company. Bev does crosswords when it's slow, while Isaac and I take turns reading the latest *Secret Detective Society* story out loud or doing our homework.

"Five minutes," she says. "Action stations."

She shrugs off her cardigan, folding it into her handbag. Just before she stores her bag under the front counter, I see a familiar-looking red paperback sticking out.

"Bev, is that our *Secret Detective Society* in your bag?" I ask.

Bev pulls out our missing book. There it is! Isaac and I high-five. Mystery solved.

"Sorry, lads – I meant to put it back before you noticed. After hearing you read it out last night, I *had* to know how it ended."

"Well, don't tell us," Isaac says, tucking it away under the front counter.

We can finally finish *The Mystery of the Milky-Eyed Mummy* tonight at Isaac's. Phew!

While I switch on the lights, Isaac wipes the whiteboard clean and writes up the Specials of the Day. (*Black bean pork* and *Beef cashew chow mein.)* The beige wall phone's already ringing and it's only 5.57 p.m. It's going to be a busy night.

"Lucky House Takeaway," Beverly answers in her posh voice, twisting the phone cord around her fingers. "Can I help?"

The last thing I do before opening is thank Optimus Prime a.k.a. our lucky money plant. I named him after my favourite Transformer when I was five, because I really wanted a pet and I wasn't allowed one. Optimus is a jade plant, which many Chinese people believe attracts good fortune and luck. The Dings (more on them later – especially my NEMESIS, Nina Ding) have about fifteen in their house and it seems to work 'cos they are rich; something Auntie Ding always reminds us of. Optimus sits on a plinth in an alcove inside our takeaway, near the front door. He's grown loads over the eight years we've had him and now he's almost as tall as me.

Optimus came over from Hong Kong with Mum

and Dad as a cutting from Por-Por's money plant. Mum says it was a lot of trouble to bring him, but Optimus is her most treasured possession. She dusts his leaves, which look like spongy green Smarties, every single day. Since she's been growing him, Mum and Dad opened Lucky House and now we're about to celebrate its six-year anniversary. Mum always says: as Optimus grows strong, so does our family luck and fortune. (Actually, she always calls him Octopus. Mum isn't a Transformers fan.) So, every day before we open, I thank him for the good luck.

Flipping up the panel at the end of the counter, I walk towards the alcove where he sits, watching over all of us.

"Thanks, Optimus," I whisper, brushing his leaves with my fingertips before unlocking the door.

"We're open!" I bellow to the queue outside. A swarm of customers rush in, forcing me to squash up by Optimus. Only Chips Please's new mobility scooter careens in, narrowly missing several customers, and bumps straight into the front counter.

"Sorry," he says. "I don't have the hang of these scooter brakes yet."

Everyone crowds around the counter, trying to get

Bev's attention.

"Come help, boys," she calls just as No Peppers enters, heading straight for Optimus.

"So beautiful," he murmurs. No Peppers loves plants.

I smell a pungent cloud of too-much aftershave and turn to see Ed, our delivery boy. He's put so much gel in his hair it stands upright. He's wearing the brown hoodie and green combat trousers that are his second skin. I've never seen him wear anything else. Even Mum has stopped trying to get him to smarten up.

"Sorry I'm late," he drawls, pulling down his headphones. "My bike had a flat on the way." He pulls out a packet of crisps from the pocket of his baggy jeans. "Want some?"

I roll my eyes and Isaac whispers, "Wasn't that his excuse last week?" but we both take a handful of crisps all the same.

"Felix!" I see Bev's hand in the air, waving a bunch of order slips.

"Coming!" I shout, pushing my way through the crowd. Ducking back under the counter, I grab the slips from Bev and step through the strip curtain to the kitchen.

Standing in front of the massive range cooker, Dad

is heating oil in the wok. Tubs filled with chopped onion, garlic, ginger, diced meats, peas and chopped prawns are next to him. A jar of cornflour sits next to stacks of spring rolls defrosting from the freezer.

"Let's see, son." Dad holds out his hand for the first order. He's a man of few words but big actions. He throws a bunch of ingredients into the hot wok. Everything sizzles as he tosses the food high in the air, catching every single bit back into the wok. He scrapes the food into the waiting takeaway boxes, neatly placed next to the containers of egg fried rice he prepared a few minutes ago.

"Thanks, Dad." I add lids to the completed orders.

Just as I turn round, to head back to Bev, I hear a loud crash from the front of the takeaway. Rushing out, I scan over the countertop, but all I can see are the faces of hungry customers.

"What was that?" I ask Bev but she's too busy ringing up orders.

Isaac is on the phone taking orders, so I flip up the counter hatch to investigate, dodging elbows and trying not to step on customers' feet. Something crunches under my shoe. I look down and see patches of dark soil scattered across the tiled floor. Confused,

I follow the trail until I freeze in my tracks.

It's Optimus!

He's fallen onto the ground and out of his pot! Bits of him have snapped off and straggly roots poke out from the mess of soil, leaves and splintered branches strewn across the floor. The pot is still in one piece, but it's damaged the floor tiles it landed on. I feel sick to my stomach.

"Waaah!"

I turn to see the crowd of customers parting to reveal Mum standing there. Her eyes are huge. She looks like she's going to cry.

"Our lucky plant!" Mum wails. "Who broke it? This will bring bad luck and destroy us!"

"*Destroy us?*" I stare up at her. Tears are running down her face. "Mum? Are you OK?"

She takes a deep, shuddery breath.

"This plant is family, our lucky guardian," she says. "Kept us safe since Hong Kong. But look at it now…" Her voice chokes and she starts to weep.

At first, I feel helpless. But as I look down at poor Optimus, a strange feeling sweeps over me.

Somewhere in my head, I can hear it – destiny is calling. I feel the winds of change, transforming

me from an eleven-year-old boy to a true detective. A synthesised soundtrack crescendos inside my head, the chorus chanting: *FELIX! FELIX! FELIX!*

This is it. I clench my fists and square my stance.

"Don't worry, Mum," I say. "Isaac and I will get to the bottom of this. We will fix Optimus and save our family luck."

