

the Experiment



QUICKREADS

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“**M**r. Ramos!” The psychology professor’s voice startled Claudio as he sat before the computer.

“Oh, hi, Mr. Fruder,” Claudio said. Odin Fruder was standing behind him in the empty computer lab. The man’s tall, angular frame loomed like a bent, leafless tree. Claudio didn’t like him. He wished he didn’t need the money he earned as the professor’s assistant.

“I see you’re here very early today, Mr. Ramos,” the professor said. “I like that. You’re a dutiful fellow!”

“Yeah, I’m doing research for a project,” Claudio said. “I don’t get much time to keep

up with homework, what with my part-time job. And it's like a three-ring circus at home. I've got three noisy little brothers, you know."

Mr. Fruder smiled. He had a very large mouth and several gleaming gold teeth. Somehow his smile reminded Claudio of an alligator's smirk. Although Claudio really had nothing against the teacher, the man just looked sinister. "You have a hard time, don't you, Mr. Ramos?" he asked in a smooth and oily voice. "You struggle to make ends meet. It's a real challenge for your family to stay afloat, eh?"

"Yeah," Claudio admitted, wondering what this was all about.

"Mr. Ramos, you are a very bright student. I would like you to do a special project for me. There would be additional pay, of course. But best of all, the project will be *interesting*." Mr. Fruder's small, reptilian eyes gleamed. "You see, I'm doing a very important research paper on how various people react to fearful situations. Your part is simple. I want you to take several students out to a cavern. Once

you get there you'll pretend to be trapped for a few hours. And you'll make note of the other students' behavior—"

Claudio was shocked. "That sounds—uh—really wild," he said nervously. How could he dupe his friends into being Fruder's unwitting guinea pigs?

"Your pay for the job would be excellent," Mr. Fruder said. "How much does your after-school job at that burger joint pay?"

"Uh—you know—minimum wage. Maybe a couple hundred bucks a month for part-time," Claudio said.

"For just one morning's work, I am offering a thousand dollars," Mr. Fruder said with a sly grin. He removed a thousand-dollar bill from his wallet. Then he wiggled it under Claudio's nose. He looked like a fisherman dangling a worm in front of a hungry fish!

A thousand dollars? Claudio felt weak. The whole room seemed to dance.



“So, what’s this all about again?” Claudio asked. “I mean—it’s not dangerous or anything, is it?”

Mr. Fruder settled his long body into a desk beside Claudio. “It’s child’s play. All you need to do is take three of your fellow students to this cavern.” He took a map from his briefcase. “The directions are here. After you lead them deep inside, there will be a fake landslide and a giant boulder will block your escape.”

“Huh? A landslide?” Claudio groaned. “That sounds risky.”

“No, no, no! I’ll send a fellow out there with a forklift. He’ll simply drop a big boulder in front of the cavern entrance. It will make a loud noise, and you will cry, ‘Oh! A landslide! We’re trapped!’ ” The gold teeth in Mr. Fruder’s mouth seemed to glitter with delight. “For the next few hours, your fellow students will scramble about, looking in vain for an escape—and *you* will

jot down their reactions for my research paper. The forklift guy will hurry back to shove the boulder aside. He'll pretend that he heard the landslide and came to help. Then *voilà*—you will be rescued! And *you* will be a thousand dollars richer!”

The idea of easy money sounded good to Claudio. Dad's wages as a clerk in a convenience store weren't that good. And even when Mom worked part-time there was never enough money.

Claudio figured he could help at home, buy himself a few things, and then throw a nice party for his friends to make up for putting them through the ordeal. Of course, they would never know what really had happened.

“I guess I could do it,” Claudio said.

“Excellent. We shall plan it for Wednesday. Tell your fellow students that it's a field trip. Say that they're supposed to find prehistoric cave paintings that reveal the emotional level of the cave folk,” Mr. Fruder said.

“So, should I just pick any three kids?” Claudio asked.

“No—no indeed. I’ve already done that. Ask Ben Dunlap, Spike Hawley, and Dede Keene. I chose them carefully for the *types* of people they represent,” Mr. Fruder said.

Although he knew them all, Claudio was glad that none of the three was a close friend. They were all in Mr. Fruder’s psychology class. Ben was smart. He could even catch mistakes that teachers sometimes made. Spike was a clown and a wise guy who enjoyed disrupting class. Dede flirted a lot, but nobody could get a date with her. She liked to tease. At lunchtime, all three of them loved to sit around dissing teachers. Their jokes were actually pretty funny. Claudio had to admit that he, too, often joined in.

A thousand dollars! “Okay, Mr. Fruder, I guess it’s a deal,” Claudio said, trying to smile.



Claudio met with the three students on Tuesday. He wasn't proud of what he was doing. But he really needed the money. And nobody was going to get hurt, so what was the harm?

"Listen," Claudio said, "Mr. Fruder wants four of us to go to this cavern in the Chocolate Mountains to look for prehistoric cave paintings. We'll all get 350 grade points just for participating. And on Saturday I'm throwing a pizza party for all of us."

"So what are *you* getting out of it, man?" Ben asked curiously. "I don't need the 350 points. I already got an A in old Fruder's stupid class."

"Well, you know I'm Mr. Fruder's teaching assistant. He expects me to organize this kind of thing—as part of my job," Claudio said.

"*I* could use 350 points," Spike said. "That'd jump me up to a 'B' for sure."

"I could use the points, too," Dede

admitted, “but aren’t there bats in those caverns?”

“Nah,” Claudio said, turning to Ben. “If you go along, Ben, Mr. Fruder will mention all of our names in his important research paper. That’ll look good on your college applications.”

Ben nodded. “Yeah, I suppose that makes sense. How long will it take?”

“Just a couple hours. I’ll pick you all up in my van at eight in the morning. We shouldn’t be in the cavern more than thirty minutes—just long enough to scope out the paintings,” Claudio said. He was feeling guiltier than he thought he would. He’d never pulled such a stunt before. He felt like a rat. But he kept reminding himself that nobody was going to be the worse for it.

“Well, why not?” Ben said. “Might as well humor the old fool. Fruder looks just like Frankenstein’s monster—have you noticed? I stuck a movie poster of the monster on his bulletin board last week. When he saw it, I just about died laughing at the look on his face.”

Dede giggled. “I bet Fruder was ugly even when he was our age,” she said.

Spike laughed, too. “Can you just imagine him as a teenager? I bet he had more zits than a garbage pail has flies!”

Everybody roared at that. Claudio laughed, too. He never started any of the ridicule against Mr. Fruder—but he *never* tried to stop it, either. Right now he had too much on his mind to worry about how the weird old teacher was losing the respect of his class.



Claudio got together some tape recorders and notebooks for the project. The night before he’d also gotten further instructions from Odin Fruder. One more time Mr. Fruder had told him not to worry. The party would be trapped in the cavern no longer than two hours at the most. Then they would all be rescued by the man driving the forklift.

Claudio picked up Spike first.