

THE NEIGHBORS' SECRET

A MADDIE MYSTERY
BOOK 1

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I dedicated this book to my wonderful family, to all girls who feel compelled to solve mysteries and puzzles, and to those who know that little people can do big things.

CHAPTER 1

OMG!

OMG! Heard about the Yeti! You broke in?
Love you but U R cray cray. ROTFL!

Seeing these words flash across the screen, Maddie shut her laptop and swallowed hard. It had been weeks since she'd received one of these texts. She thought people had finally moved on. But no. In three months, no one else's disaster had topped her own. Her eyes welled up.

Determined not to cry, Maddie blinked and glanced at the fudge brownies she'd baked for Rachel. She grimaced. Not even the promise of her favorite snack could persuade Rachel to be on time. Rachel never used to be late. She had changed so much since eighth grade began. Two months ago, they were inseparable. Now, Maddie wondered, *Am I losing my BFF?*

Sighing, she sat back in her chair and surveyed the neighborhood from her front porch. A navy Audi with Virginia plates caught her eye. *Who's that?* It turned into the driveway of the house across the street. *Ooh! It must be the new neighbors. Maybe they have a girl my age?* Maddie leaned forward and peered at the car but couldn't see inside. Then, as the garage

door opened, the car's right rear taillight popped off and fell onto the driveway with a clang. Her right eyebrow shot up. Something poked out from the hole where the light had been. *That couldn't be—fingers?* Maddie sprang up and blinked: They were fingers! And they were wiggling. The car disappeared behind the closing garage door with its taillight still lying on the driveway. She shivered. *Is there a person in that trunk?*

I've got to help! Maddie leaped down over all four porch steps at once and sprinted across the sidewalk. As she ran into the street, a horn blared and brakes squealed. A huge truck was barreling toward her. Maddie stood frozen, her heart pounding in her ears. Then, she sprang backward onto the sidewalk just before the truck screeched to a stop inches away from her. A cold sweat overcame her as she crumpled onto the ground.

The truck driver, a blond, tanned version of the Hulk, stormed out of the truck. As he fiddled with his dark glasses, an eye tattooed on his bulging left forearm stared at her. "You okay, kid?" he asked.

Maddie nodded "yes" and stood. Her neck hurt trying to look up at him.

"What did you think you were doing, little lady? Didn't anyone ever tell you to look both ways before crossing the street? I could have killed you."

"I...I..." Maddie hesitated. He already thought she was an idiot; if she told him what she'd seen, he'd think she was also nuts. Yet she needed to act now and needed help. Her parents weren't home; even if they were, they'd only think her hyperactive imagination had run wild again. The Hulk would have to do. Ignoring that nagging stranger danger alarm, she took a deep breath and erupted like a volcano, blurting out everything. Given his eye roll, she added, "It's true. Look, there's the taillight." She turned and pointed to the spot on the

driveway where she'd seen the taillight. It was gone. *What?!* It had been there. Heat filled her cheeks.

He gave a long, low whistle. "That's quite a story, princess. So, you see a taillight there?"

Her lips quivered. "No. I...I...I don't."

"I didn't see anyone come and move it. Did you?"

"No, but...but," Maddie stammered. "But I swear it was there, and I swear I saw a person's hand coming out of the trunk."

The guy studied her for a moment. "So, you were running over there to save a trapped person. What was your plan? Knock on the door and ask your neighbors to let the person out?" His sarcasm was unmistakable.

"No. I...I...don't know them. They're new. I don't know what I was going to do." She looked down at the ground and kicked a rock. Her face still burned. Then, she looked up and stared him right in the eye. "But I know what I saw." She folded her arms and tapped her foot.

"Calm down, kid. Listen, we're delivering a refrigerator to that house. We've got to go through the garage. When we pass the car, we'll see if someone's in it. If there is, we'll save them and call the police. Okay?"

The guy sitting in the passenger side of the truck banged on the window and motioned to hurry up. The driver hand signaled one minute. "Look, we got to stay on schedule. We good?"

At a loss, Maddie nodded and trudged back to her porch. Once seated, she pulled out her phone to dial 911. Her fingers froze, poised above the keyboard. The driver thought she was nuts. Without evidence, the police would, too.

Then, thinking of that text she'd received earlier, she realized something worse—the police might recognize her as the girl who called them this past summer about seeing a Yeti eating a person at the Petrones' house. In fairness, through the window, she'd seen legs flailing in the mouth of this crea-

ture as it ran around the dark living room. The police refused to respond, claiming Yetis weren't real. Desperate to save the poor person, Maddie got Rachel to break into the Petrones' home with her, setting off the house alarm. When the police responded, they found the two girls in the living room staring at a ginormous, hairy dog trying to eat dog treats that Mrs. Petrone had forgotten to remove from the front right pocket of her pants when she threw them into the laundry pile. The police were furious. No, Maddie couldn't call them.

Maddie's shoulders tightened as the driver backed into the driveway, got out, and rang the doorbell. Moments later, he rejoined his coworker, and they disappeared behind the truck. Maddie leaned forward as the garage door opened, but the truck blocked her view of the car. *They'll see the person in the trunk.* Her heart raced. The top corner of a refrigerator box peeked out over the truck and vanished. For the next ten minutes, she stared at 18 Maple Avenue. All was quiet. She couldn't see anything.

Frustrated, Maddie got up again and walked to the street. This time, she looked both ways before crossing and checked the new neighbors' front windows to make sure no one was watching. Walking behind the truck, she spotted the car. It looked perfect. The taillight was right where it was supposed to be. She crouched down and looked for scratches or cracks on the taillight. Nothing. She tapped on the trunk and whispered, "Hello?" Putting her ear to the trunk, she listened. No response. She tried the trunk. It popped open. One empty cardboard box sat inside the otherwise clean trunk. After quietly closing the trunk, she looked around. No sign of broken glass. Nothing looked amiss. She stood there puzzled. While the Yeti incident had everyone joking about her crazy ideas, she was sure she hadn't imagined the taillight and wiggling fingers.

Voices and footsteps jolted Maddie into action. Being caught sneaking around in their garage was not how she

wanted to meet the new neighbors. She snuck out and dashed back to her porch. Despite her heart racing, she tried to appear relaxed by leaning into the faded green-and-white, striped cushion on the white slatted lounging chair. She started counting backward from one hundred. By forty-three, the pounding in her ears started dying down.

Seconds later, she caught a glimpse of a giant box, presumably the same one now holding the old refrigerator, peeking out over the truck before they loaded it. As the driver reached the cab, he looked in her direction and gave her a thumbs-up. Oddly, her neck tensed as his partner got in the other side and the truck pulled away.

She took a final glance at the car disappearing behind the closing door. It still looked normal. *Did I really imagine everything? What if I didn't? What should I do? I'll ask Rachel. She's smart.* Trying to calm herself, she looked toward Brainerd Lake at the end of her tree-lined street and watched the sun, now a huge, glowing orange ball, set over the lake's glassy, mirror-like surface. Normally, that view relaxed her. Not today. *Why did Rachel have to be late today?*

A cool fall gust blew strands of long auburn hair across her face. Maddie wiped them away and inhaled deeply, taking in the cool, crisp air. Instead, she caught a whiff of the brownies. Her appetite whetted, she reached toward the plate on the table next to her and was about to take one when she noticed the empty chair beyond it. She stopped. She'd wait for Rachel. *Where is Rachel?*