

Chapter One

Reen Out on a Limb

The branch made a creaky noise when I crawled out on it, and the ground looked really far away. I wasn't worried, though. Oak tree limbs don't break.

"Psst." My cousin Joanie tried to whisper, but it sounded more like a moose wheezing. Joanie is nine years old, but she never learned how to whisper properly. She was sitting on a low branch like she was glued to the trunk of the tree.

A squirrel poked his head out of a knothole and gnawed on an acorn while he stared at me. Like he was surprised to see a girl halfway out on a limb. But this is my life. An investigative reporter knows no fear.

"Psst, Reen. Stop." Joanie's voice got louder and scaredier as I inched my way along the branch.

"Shh." I whispered back with much better form. "I want to hear what they're saying."

It's good practice for a reporter to eavesdrop on possible subjects, and I'd radared in on Phil Warren as he walked across campus with his girlfriend. They were so wrapped up in each other, they didn't even see us. They stopped next to a big elm tree a few feet away, and the girl

stood with her back against the trunk while he leaned toward her with his hand on the tree and a goofy expression on his face.

I'll never understand adults. If Phil was trying to impress his girlfriend, he'd do better if he stood on his head or did a couple of cartwheels. At least it would show a little talent. Maybe he could buy a yo-yo.

I crept another couple of inches forward, eased the notebook out of my pocket, and strained to hear. He called the girl Kathryn. I wrote it down.

Kathryn was saying something about Reverend Whitefield. I know him. He's the minister at the university chapel. She said, "He asked me to stop by today after lunch. It's about Mr. Tyme."

Mr. Tyme? Wasn't he the librarian who died in that fire?

Kathryn frowned. "Reverend Whitefield thinks there may have been foul play."

Foul play? Murder! My heart pounded and my future life unfolded in front of me like a YouTube video. I could solve the mystery and expose the killer! I'd be famous. I'd be rich. I'd be one of those people who gets a college degree without having to go to school.

Wait. She was talking again, but her voice was so low, I couldn't hear, so I tried to ease forward, but my foot caught on something. I looked back and saw my shoelace tangled around a twig. I tugged, but it wouldn't come loose.

Joanie and the squirrel were both staring at me with their mouths hanging open. I pulled again, but it wouldn't give. I tried to stretch myself like Elastigirl. No go. That twig was going to make me miss the most important news story of my life.

In situations like this, a reporter should ditch the finesse and go for brute strength, so I gritted my teeth and yanked my leg as hard as I could. The twig broke, my foot flew up in the air, and I fell backward.

The tree made a huge popping sound, and leaves spun around me like a green tornado. Joanie screamed, “Reeeen!” The squirrel dropped his acorn and dove back into the hole in the tree. And the branch fell out from under me.

Not good.