

JEFF GOTTESFELD

UNDER THE STAIRS



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IGGY

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BREAK AND ENTER

ON THE RUN

SUMMER CAMP

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REBEL

UNDER THE STAIRS



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CHAPTER 1

THE CHEST

Paige Tyson grinned. She was with her friends. There was Ava Samuels, her best friend. Diego Jones. And Nate Borman. The kids were on Oak Lane.

At the top of a small hill was a big house. Diego's dad had bought it. The house had been boarded up for a long time. At least since before Paige was born. That was fourteen years ago.

The scary house had belonged to the Benson family. One morning the whole Benson family had

been found dead. Most were in their beds. One had been in the basement. They had been stabbed. No one had lived in the house since.

Until now. Diego and his family would move in. Today was the day they got the keys.

“Your dad has a lot of guts,” Ava told Diego.

“I don’t think it’s about guts,” Paige said. “Diego’s dad is all about making money.”

Diego nodded. They were almost at the house. “My dad wants us to live there for a year. He’ll fix it up. Then he’ll sell it. We’ll move again.”

“You don’t mind?” Nate asked.

“Nah. We’ve been doing it all my life. You guys know that. As long as we stay in town, it’s fine with me.”

“As long as you don’t die in this place,” Ava said.

Diego shook his head. “The cops said an intruder killed the Bensons.”

“Maybe,” Ava said. “Maybe not. Maybe it was an alien attack.”

Paige gave Ava a nudge with her arm. “Chill with your crazy ideas.”

Ava was famous for her crazy theories. She believed in ESP. Ghosts. Aliens. Paige thought it was bull. She believed in facts. The cops had said an intruder killed the Bensons. So that’s what had happened. No need to give Diego bad dreams.

Paige liked Diego a lot. He was a great artist. They hadn’t kissed. Yet. Paige had been in no rush. But she knew the time was coming. School was ending next week. The eighth-grade dance was Monday night. Maybe their first kiss would be there. For the longest time she hadn’t been ready. Now she was.

The kids got to the house. The place was big, brown, and old. It had a huge front porch. The porch could be nice if it got cleaned up. There was a moving truck out front. Also a huge pile of junk. The Joneses’ minivan too. But no people.

“Where are your folks, Diego? Hey. Maybe they’re dead already!” Ava said.

“Ava?” Diego said.

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.” Diego started up the stone walk. The kids followed him across the porch. They went through the open door. Inside was a sea of boxes. “Anyone home?” Diego called.

They heard his dad’s voice from upstairs. “Hey! Welcome! We’re all up here. You can’t believe all the stuff that was left behind. We’ve got to get it out before we can do anything.”

Diego’s mom appeared at the top of the staircase. She was small and pretty. She worked as a nurse. Paige liked her. Everyone liked her.

“Welcome,” she said. “I’d give you the tour. But today there’s no time. We’ve got two movers hauling stuff.” She snapped her fingers. “Hey! Can you guys do us a favor? Check out the basement? We could use a report on what’s down there. How much junk? Be careful. I don’t think there’s much light.”

“Sure thing, Mom. We can use our phones.” Diego held up his cellphone.

“You guys with your tech,” said his mom. “Thanks. Take it slow.”

It wasn't hard to find the basement door. The door was in a hallway. The hall lead to the kitchen. Diego found the light switch. Just one bulb worked. It made sense. Those bulbs had to be fourteen years old.

“Okay,” Paige said. “Let's use your cell lights.” She didn't want anyone to trip in the dark. They all switched on. Then they scanned the basement.

“Holy moly!” Nate said.

“You can say that again! You're going to need an army to clean this out,” Ava said.

Paige took in the scene. It was a total fire hazard. There was barely room to move.

The basement was full. Papers. Tables and chairs. Chests. Tools. Clothes. Books. Old newspapers in stacks. The Bensons had left it a mess.

Ava shined her light on a giant black chest to her right. It looked like a casket. A tiny lock held it shut. “What do you think is in there?”

“I know you. You think there’s a dead body,” Nate said.

“No I don’t. But let’s open it,” Ava said.

Paige looked up at Diego. “You want to? Your parents just wanted you to look around.”

Ava moved toward the box. “It could be money. Don’t you want to go upstairs with ten thousand bucks to show your dad, Diego? He loves money.”

Paige smiled. The chances of there being money in the chest were slim. But who knew? Maybe there was something of value.

Diego seemed to think the same thing. “Sure. Let’s check it out.”

They moved some junk. Diego tried to open the chest with his hands. The lock held. No-go. There was so much stuff in the basement. It was easy to find something to bust the lock. He used a brick.

Wham!

The lock broke. Diego eased it from the latch. All he had to do was open the lid. He stopped.

“What if there *is* a body in it?” he asked.

“That’s crazy,” Nate told him. “Just do it.”

Paige looked at him. “I think it’s fine.”

Diego opened the lid.

“Oh my God!” he screamed.

Paige retched. So did the other kids. She wasn’t sure what was in the chest. But it smelled awful.