

MINE!

Natalie Hyde

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PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

Scholastic New Zealand Limited

Private Bag 94407, Botany, Manukau 2163, New Zealand

Scholastic Children's Books

Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1DB, UK

www.scholastic.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Hyde, Natalie, 1963-, author

Mine! / Natalie Hyde.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-4431-4660-9 (softcover).--ISBN 978-1-4431-4661-6 (HTML)

I. Title.

PS8615.Y44M56 2017

jC813'.6

C2017-901506-0

C2017-901507-9

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6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada 139

17 18 19 20 21

For Sheldon, who appreciates a sweet ride.

CHAPTER 1

THE NAME'S DIRK STARK

Moose snot is a real thing, you know. So are bogs deep enough to swallow a man whole, and mosquitoes the size of bats. Okay, maybe not as big as bats, but bigger than any mosquito I've ever seen. And I'm not kidding about the moose snot. I should know, seeing as it was running down my arm.

If you had told me one week ago that I'd be stranded up a tree, covered in moose snot with onions stinking up my pockets, I'd have thought you were nuts. One week ago I was sitting in our living room trying to concentrate on my favourite TV show, where contestants get knocked into water by padded bars and oversized boxing gloves as they try to get through an obstacle course. But I could barely hear their *umpfs* and *ows* as they went flying, because someone was pounding on our apartment door.

Now, I had lived here long enough to know that nobody good ever pounded on the door. Friends who wanted to hang with you and church ladies bringing around Christmas food hampers always knocked. Cops coming to take your dad away for the latest “Failure to Appear” and landlords looking for the rent always pounded with their fists. So I did my best to ignore it, but the incessant pounding was now accompanied by a lady’s voice calling, “Mr. Dearing. Mr. Dearing! I need you to open the door right now.”

I winced at the name. You know, sometimes I really hated being a Dearing. As far as I could tell, no one named Dearing ever amounted to anything. They were all losers. And I didn’t want to be one of them. So I’d made a plan. When I turned eighteen, I was going to change my name. Did you know you could do that? Just pay some money and presto! chango! you had a new name. One that you *picked* — not one that your parents thought was cute or funny or unique.

I’ve decided on the name “Dirk Stark.” I like how tough the name Dirk sounds. Not like Chris. Chris sounds all soft and mushy with that “s” on the end. A “Chris” sounded like someone weak, who was deathly afraid of small spaces and cried in secret. Someone named “Dirk” could crush

pop cans with one hand and would stand up to bullies. No one would pick on someone named Dirk. And Stark, because, well, my favourite superhero is Iron Man, a.k.a. Tony Stark. I had to wait another five years until I was old enough, but then I would be Dirk Stark and say goodbye to Chris Dearing forever.

“Mr. Dearing. MR. DEARING! You need to answer this door!” The voice was getting pretty loud now. I knew who it was anyway. It had to be Mrs. Critch, the wife of the landlord. He always sent her to do the dirty work of collecting rent payments that were late. And ours usually was. I couldn’t stand her. She was as thin as a stick and wore gobs of mascara, which made her look like an underfed zombie.

Best to get it over with because there is one truth about landlords — they never go away. Even if you stay really quiet and don’t watch TV or squeak the floorboards, they know you’re there and they’ll keep hounding you until you talk to them.

I hurried to the kitchen. I had a secret hiding spot where I kept any money I found in my dad’s wallet for rent. He needed help like that, otherwise there wouldn’t be any money left. The one hundred dollars in there so far was a start and would get Mrs. Critch to leave, at least for a

while. But when I looked in the English Breakfast Tea tin, it was empty.

Not good. It meant Dad had found my latest spot and I'd have to find another. That also meant he hadn't gone to work today like I'd hoped when I came home after school and he wasn't there. Down on Ainslie Street, near the warehouses, there is a place where men can go and look for work. Dock managers and construction foremen come around in vans looking for day labourers. It doesn't pay much but you can squeeze out enough for the rent if you work every day. Which he usually doesn't.

I went to the door and unlocked it. I kept the chain on, though. That was something Shard taught me when we moved here. Always keep the chain on when you are talking to someone at the door.

I opened it as far as the chain would allow and looked through the crack. It wasn't Mrs. Critch after all. It was someone I had never seen before. She was stuffed into a tan-coloured suit so tight it looked like it would burst at the seams the minute she moved. Her little piggy eyes were almost hidden by her puffy cheeks, and she was breathing hard.

"Are you Christopher Dearing?"

Five years from now I could say, "No, I'm not,"

but for today, I still was. Then it hit me: How did she know my name? She wasn't a tenant — I knew everyone who lived here. Other than Shard's family, they were pretty much all old people. This wasn't the best neighbourhood for raising a family. Maybe she was a distant relative of mine? I knew my dad's family pretty well, but not my mom's. They lived out west somewhere. My heart skipped a beat. Maybe this lady had a message from my mom.

I nodded, a lump in my throat.

"I'm from Family Services. The school board called me."

Uh oh. That couldn't be good. I shouldn't have admitted who I was. Shard would lecture me about that later, for sure.

"Why did they call you?" I asked.

"You've missed sixteen days in the last six months."

"Oh, my dad's been sick. I've been taking care of him." It was my usual answer when anyone asked me about missing school. And it wasn't even really a lie. Truth was I did have to look after my dad a lot these days.

"Can I speak to him?"

I looked over my shoulder at my father's empty bedroom.

"He's not well enough for visitors."

“It will only take a moment.” The woman moved her pointy shoe forward like she was going to jam it between the door and the frame and stop me from closing it. A wave of panic washed over me, so I slammed the door shut and clicked the lock.

The banging started again.

“Christopher? Christopher, open the door. I need to speak to your father.”

I just stood there, staring at the closed door and willing her to leave.

“Have it your way, Christopher. I’m coming back with the police.”