

Chapter 1: House Arrest

Casey floored the gas pedal and the silver Lamborghini whined like a jet, acceleration thrusting us back into the grey leather seats. The sports car sliced through the almost deserted district on the edge of downtown, ramshackle warehouses and abandoned stores on either side of the street zipping past our windows in a blur. The road ahead lay empty, apart from a few pieces of litter that had been caught by a puff of wind.

The speedometer hit one sixty. Red and blue lights flashing in the side mirror showed the police cruiser, still less than a block behind us—two 12-year-olds on the run, accused of a crime we didn't commit.

"Faster!" I shouted above the blaring siren.

"This *is* faster!" Casey's cool blue eyes focused on the road ahead.

We faced a dead end several blocks down the street. *Shoot*. On a straightaway, there was no way the cop car would be able to catch us, but here we'd need to be creative. I searched for somewhere—an alley, a side road—where we could lose them.

My twin sister slammed on the brakes as a white delivery truck lurched out of an alley to our left. I braced for a crash, but Casey had other plans. "Woohoo!" she cried, as her foot jumped over to the gas pedal and she cranked the steering wheel hard.

We skidded right, the sound of squealing tires filling our ears. Shooting past the truck, we missed its front bumper by a hair, but now had another problem. "Casey!" I shouted as we barreled straight toward a vacant store.

"I see it." She yanked the steering wheel back to the left, but too late. "Hold on!"

The front tires hit the curb, hurling us both forward against our seat belts; then we were airborne. The sports car soared over the sidewalk and smashed through the store window, sending a shower of glass in all directions. For one bizarre moment, we seemed to be gliding through the air in ultra-slow motion. I remember two things. First, a lone mannequin that stood guard in the forsaken shop, and how the Lamborghini's gracefully sloping hood clipped off her bald head as the car descended, flipping it back onto the windshield with a crack, and then off out of sight. You don't see that every day. And the second thing: screaming. Mine, and Casey's.

We landed with a jolt that snapped our chins to our chests. The sports car plowed through an assortment of shelving and boxes with a din of clanging and crashing, in spite of Casey hauling on the steering wheel and jamming the brakes. We were tossed about like rag dolls as the car slid along the brick wall on the far side of the shop, halting with a bone-rattling thump when it hit the back wall. The Lamborghini's engine snarled one last time, then fell silent.

I shook my head and took a breath to collect my wits. Was that blood on my jeans? No. Jam from breakfast. I seemed to be alright. A loose brick dropped from the wall onto the fender.

I turned to my sister. "Are you okay?"

She scowled. "Yeah, yeah. Let's get outta here!" She took one look at her door, pressed firmly against the wall, and said, "Go! Your side!"

I pulled the handle, elbowed the door open and burst out into the great cloud of dust that we had kicked up. I blinked and rubbed my eyes with the sleeve of my black and white striped rugby shirt. Casey scrambled out after me, coughing.

Quiet. No siren. Where were they? Beyond the big open space where the store window had been, we could see the truck stopped in the middle of the road, driver's door open. But no one in sight.

Casey and I exchanged glances, and she nodded toward the road. We edged forward, Casey in the lead, heading for the right side of the window. Near the opening, I noticed the mannequin head and bent down to pick it up.

"Simon!" Casey hissed. She peeked out through the front of the store and beckoned me to join her. When she saw what I was doing, she shook her head. "Hurry up!"

"What is it?"

"The cop car. Look!"

Peering around Casey, I followed a trail of skid marks that led to the police cruiser, its front end crumpled against the side of an overfull garbage dumpster. The bin had once contained even more trash, but much of its slimy, stinking contents had spewed out onto the previously shiny vehicle. The truck driver, helping the officers out of their car, spotted us and pointed in our direction.

"Let's go!" Casey jumped out onto the street, darted off to the left, and cut down a narrow alley beside the store. I raced after her, turned the corner, then paused. The old brick warehouse beside the store cast a shadow over the garbage-strewn lane, and I couldn't help but wonder what dangers might lie hidden in its darker corners.

Back in the street, one of the officers barked into his radio, "Unit 511 requesting backup at Maple and Kole."

Casey, nearing the end of the alley, called back to me, "Simon! Hurry up!" Her impatient-bordering-on-angry voice.

She was right. This was no time to hesitate. I sprinted ahead into the shadows.

Our pursuer continued his message. "We are on foot in pursuit of two suspects—juveniles; one male, one female, both Caucasian. Female is tall, average build, medium length blond hair. Male: slim, short light brown hair; also tall—"

"What!" Casey had stopped running.

"What is it?" *Had she run into trouble?*

"You're not tall!" she said.

"Casey! What are you . . ." I caught up to her, and found her awaiting me with arms folded across the front of her purple T-shirt. The cops had entered the alley. They would be on us in seconds. "Let's go! They're gaining on us!" I turned to go, then stopped. "And what do you mean I'm not tall?"

"I'm tall. You're short."

"Last time Dad measured us, you were barely a centimetre taller!" *Why did she always have to argue?*

"Okay." She shrugged. "I'm not tall; just above average. And *you* are short."

"I'm *not* short! I'm as tall as most kids."

"Not as tall as me."

It was always a competition with her; it didn't matter what. Taller, smarter. Better. I should have just ignored her, but why should she get her way all the time? "Not as *bossy* as you either!"

"Bossy? Bossy!" Casey's eyes narrowed. "I'm *not* bossy! And I *told* you to stop saying that!"

Obviously angry, she'd probably get us into even more trouble if I didn't stop. "Okay! Fine. I'm short, and you're . . . super nice. Let's go! They'll catch us!" I started to run, but she didn't follow. "Casey . . ."

"Oh, you don't wanna get caught? No problem." She pulled out her gun, which had been tucked in the waist of her jeans.

"Casey, what—"

"BAM!"

"Are you nuts?" I shrieked. "You shot me!"

"It's an empty water pistol, Simon. You'll live."

"You always wreck the game!"

"What do you mean?" She smiled sweetly. "I did it just for you. Killing you will keep it . . . *short*." She stepped forward and gave me a little pat on the head.

I guess that's when I jumped on her. I can't remember all the details; it happened so fast and ended so quickly.

Mom put a stop to it. "Hey! What on earth do you two think you're doing?"

Bashing each other with our fists seemed like the obvious answer, but probably not the one she wanted. Adults are funny that way. So we said nothing, and Mom stood there waiting with several bags of groceries hanging from each hand.

"Don't look at me," Casey said. "He started it!"

"Are you kidding me? You did!"

She looked at Mom and shrugged.

"She shot me!" I paused, realizing that I might need to explain this a little. "Well, not *really*. I mean, she doesn't *actually* have a gun, but—"

Mom sighed. Deeply. "How many times have I told you that if you're going to run around, it's either downstairs or outside? Now here I am breaking up a fistfight in the middle of our living room, and our guests will be here any minute!" She shook her head, turned and marched into the kitchen with her load, calling back to us, "Casey, empty the dishwasher. And Simon, I already told you to take the garbage out!"

With Mom so busy getting ready, we escaped with only the tongue-lashing and a couple of minor chores. Maybe she figured that the upcoming visit would be punishment enough. See, the company was Aunt Emily, Uncle Robert and Cousin Ernest. And Cousin Ernest—well . . .

My mother used the word *obnoxious* to describe him once when she thought my sister and I weren't listening. Casey insists *snotty* suits him better. Anyway, we're not allowed to call him either one, so we go with *Cousin Ernest*. I suppose the *Cousin* part reminds us that we have to put up with him because we're related. It's probably also the reason none of us have killed him yet.

Considering what he was about to do, that might have been our best bet. A preemptive strike. But then I guess none of this would have happened.