

# TIME MEDDLERS UNDERCOVER

## CHAPTER 1

### *The Code*



She was doing it again—tempting fate. No sane kid would go back in there. No sane kid would blindly follow Matt, who dared cars to crash into him and plunged into reckless adventures without a nibble of doubt or fear. Was that it? Had she lost her mind?

Sarah shivered and paused at the threshold to Matt’s old house. Her teeth sank into her lip as she pushed the door a crack wider. She had to keep going. Matt would notice if she lagged too far behind. She winced as the door rasped on rusty hinges, then crept into the foyer, her powder blue sneakers treading lightly on the hardwood floor. Not lightly enough, though, as a *creak* leaped off the floor, ricocheted in the hall and up the massive, winding staircase, mocking her like a witch’s cackle. No matter what Matt said, this house truly was haunted. A chilly breeze swept through the corridor, lifting ringlets of hair off the back of her neck and rustling past her to flutter over Matt’s bristly head. He didn’t turn around or even seem to notice. He was making for the stairs, his Nikes leaving definite tread marks on the oak floor like an animal’s footprints in mud.

“Matt. Take your shoes off,” Sarah whispered.

“Why?” he asked in a rather loud voice.

“Because,” she said, pointing to the tracks he was leaving. “What if Nadine’s around?”

“Nadine’s long gone,” said Matt. “The cops are still searching for her. She’s probably in China by now.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. All of her belongings are still here. At some point she’s going to come back to get them. Now that the police aren’t watching the house anymore, this is her chance. What if she catches us snooping around?”

“I don’t see what she could do to us. She’s just one scrawny woman.”

“She’s already caused quite a bit of damage for one scrawny woman.”

Sarah shuddered. That evil woman had ice chips for eyes and a bony face that, if it weren’t coated with make-up all the time, would have made her look like a hag. Nadine had been Matt’s guardian for the past twelve years since his father had disappeared, but she had cared little for him, doing the bare minimum to keep him clothed and fed. All she’d cared about was gaining control of the multiverse time machine—Matt’s father’s creation—and making those who stood in her way *disappear* into the past.

“She’s gone now,” said Matt, gazing at Sarah calmly. “So we don’t have to worry.”

“I can’t help it,” she said, still whispering.

“This is *my* house. We don’t have to whisper. And we don’t have to sneak around like a couple of thieves.”

“Then why are you hunched over and why are you walking on tiptoe?”

“Oh,” said Matt, straightening up and placing his feet squarely on the floor. “Got me there. But hey, I kind of like being a detective.”

Sarah smiled. “Admit it. You’d do anything for a thrill.”

“And you always come with,” he said.

Sarah’s eyes narrowed. She couldn’t deny it. Why did she always have to come with? Was it because they were best friends? Or was it that she couldn’t resist the aura of mystery or the sense of adventure that always seemed to accompany him? Her heart pattered as she surveyed the gigantic hallway of the dilapidated mansion.

“Right,” she said, looking away to conceal her frown. Well, at least there was a good reason for her to consent to this little “break and enter.” Matt still maintained hope that he could crack the code that Nadine had incorporated into Dr. Barnes’s—Matt’s father’s—computer. She’d trapped Dr. Barnes in the past, using his own creation—the time machine—against him. Sarah and Matt had been searching for this code for the past year, ever since Matt had come to live with her and her father, with no luck. The scientists selected to assist Matt, no matter how hard they battered

at the wall Nadine had erected in the computer, couldn't break it down. But maybe, just maybe, they could find clues the police might have missed in Nadine's personal paraphernalia.

The stairs groaned as they mounted the spiral staircase. "It sounds like a banshee," said Sarah, giggling. Matt rolled his eyes and kept climbing. It looked like he was trying his best to climb casually, but soon he'd hunched over again and his toes barely touched the steps. He turned back and winked.

"You really get into this, don't you?" said Sarah.

"And you don't? I seem to remember you breaking into the lab last year."

Sarah ground her teeth into her lower lip. Yes, *she*, the girl who always abided by the rules, had become somewhat of a delinquent since she'd met Matt. "Let's not talk about it. Let's just find Nadine's code and get the heck out of here." She'd forgotten to whisper. Her words bounced off the vaulted ceiling and rained down on her.

"Shh!" Matt put a finger to his lips.

"Nothing to worry about," he says," she muttered, tiptoeing into the hallway close behind him.

They stopped beside the elaborate French doors leading into Nadine's old bedroom. Matt pushed them open hesitantly. A gush of stale air rushed out of the room, stirring up cobwebs and driving several insects scuttling under the furniture.

"I swear this place is haunted," said Sarah. "How did you ever live here?"

Matt shrugged. "You survive, I guess, with what you have. The house never bothered me. Just Nadine."

He walked purposefully into the bedroom, dust clouds swirling after him.

Sarah hung back for a second. Crossing this threshold seemed like crossing into another time period. Nadine had state-of-the-art organizers, computers, and video recorders on her desk. There wasn't a paper to be seen. Everything was filed, even her make-up and perfume. Not a wrinkle deformed her bedspread; not a mislaid item of clothing spoiled the creamy carpet. Sarah finally swallowed her reluctance, entered the room, and walked over to the dark mahogany dresser.

"What are you doing?" asked Matt. "You're not going to go through her underwear, are you?" He crinkled his nose.

"The police have already looked in this room. If she left anything, it would have to be hidden someplace they missed or didn't want to look through."

“Okay,” he said, “*you* can do it. *I’ll* look through her desk.” He opened the top drawer of the matching mahogany desk.

Sarah sorted through a drawer, lifting and shaking underwear, examining pantyhose. She ran her hand along the bottom and back panel, but found nothing unusual. She slammed the drawer shut.

“Anything?” Matt asked.

“Nothing but skimpy silk undies.”

Matt shuddered.

“You?”

“No luck,” he said. “Maybe we should try somewhere else.” He pulled the next drawer open. *Click*. At the same time, a slightly louder click came from downstairs.

“Matt. Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“There was a noise downstairs. I think it was the front door.”

“That’s impossible,” whispered Matt. “I locked it after we came in.”

“And who else has a key?” asked Sarah, raising her eyebrows.

“Oh no,” said Matt, shaking his head vigorously. “Not good.”

“We’ve got to hide.” Sarah looked frantically around the room. She dove for the closet door at the same time as Matt. They scrambled inside and yanked the door towards them just as a floorboard creaked on the second floor of the house.

Sarah and Matt peeked through the crack they had left between the door and the jamb. A thin scarecrow of a woman thrust her high forehead and narrow nose through the French doors into the room.

“Bloody kids,” she muttered, her greasy blond hair hanging in tangled clumps around her face. Devoid of make-up and creased with frown lines, her face looked like a goblin mask. This was nothing like the Nadine that Sarah remembered. Life as a fugitive had, apparently, wreaked havoc on the formerly immaculate woman.

Nadine wobbled on the chipped heels of her pumps towards her dresser. She wrenched open a drawer and withdrew underwear and knee-highs. “Bloody miserable kids,” she muttered.

Matt made a motion with his finger circling his ear. *Crazy*. Sarah nodded.

Nadine turned abruptly and headed for the closet. Sarah and Matt backed up—it seemed forever—in the enormous walk-in until they hit a wall. Long evening gowns hung beside them in the corner. They snuggled in behind the silk layers and puffy taffeta, trying not to rustle the material. Sarah held her breath as Nadine teetered into the closet and thrust aside dresses and suits. She shrank towards Matt as the woman came dangerously close to their corner. Finally Nadine withdrew some items of clothing and stumbled back into the room. The door to the closet remained ajar.

Matt and Sarah sighed silently and rested their heads against each other, but Sarah sensed something in Matt that was more than just fear. His neck and shoulders appeared tight, his eyes narrowed with intensity. Sarah tried to snare Matt's arm as he sneaked out from behind the gowns and crept towards the opening, but he shook her hand off. It seemed like he'd come to a decision and she probably wasn't going to like it. He pantomimed attacking Nadine, making punching motions.

Sarah shook her head. Was he crazy? That woman was evil. There was no telling what she would do.

Matt clenched his fist.

Sarah grabbed his arm again, pleading silently for him to reconsider. Matt looked at Nadine, now hunched over her make-up table trying to repair her face, then back at Sarah. She shook her head again. Why couldn't he see that this was madness?

Matt ground his fist into his hand. With his chin thrust out, he crept up to the door. Sarah stepped in behind him and peered over his shoulder.

Nadine rose from the table, her icy blue eyes now enhanced with black eyeliner. She crossed over to a mirror beside her bed. Strange. She'd just spent five minutes gazing at her reflection in front of her make-up table. Why was she looking in another mirror? Sarah puckered her brow as the woman reached out and caressed the smooth surface. She must see more in that ghastly face than Sarah did.

With a jerk Nadine slid the mirror aside, revealing a square steel door with a dial on the right-hand side. A safe! She spun the dial right, then left, then right. *Click*. It opened. She reached inside and clamped her spindly fingers on a dark object with a bluish sheen.

Matt coiled back, ready to spring on her, but he froze at the last second. Sarah peered over his shoulder and sucked in a gasp.

The object was *a gun*.

Sarah yanked Matt back into the closet, clamping a hand over his mouth.

Nadine moved as a distant shadow through the room, the gun extended from her hand like an extra appendage. Any thought Matt might have had about jumping Nadine seemed to have sped from his mind. His chest was heaving silently, his eyes flicking from Nadine in the other room to Sarah whose hand was still clamped over his mouth. They heard a *click* as Nadine released the clip to check if the gun was loaded. She slammed the magazine back into the pistol. The *snap* echoed throughout the room and drummed into Sarah's head. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. She couldn't believe it when Nadine lowered her arm and aimed at the closet.

"I'll stop you kids," she snarled. "One of these days . . ." She laughed—an eerie high-pitched laugh that sent chills down Sarah's spine.

Nadine tucked the gun into her purse and walked out the door, leaving the safe wide open. Her sneer was still vividly imprinted in Sarah's mind as the front door slammed shut.

Matt sighed loudly. Sarah couldn't seem to catch her breath. She was gasping, hyperventilating.

"I . . . don't . . . feel . . . so good."

"Look at me," said Matt, grasping her arms and making her face him. "Calm down. She's gone. We're okay."

"I . . . thought she . . . was going . . . to shoot us."

"So did I," said Matt, "but she didn't really see us. She only pictured us in her mind. We're safe for now."

"For now."

"Besides, what kind of detective are you if you can't face the wrong end of a gun barrel once in a while?"

"Matt. I just decided. I don't want to be a detective anymore."

Matt released her arms and walked into the room.

"Matt. I'm waiting for you to say the same thing."

Matt didn't answer. Sarah reluctantly left the shelter of the closet.

"What are you doing?"

He was heading for the safe.

"Have you flipped out? Let's get out of here."

“I think she left something behind.”

Sarah shuffled after him and peered into the murky black hole. “I don’t see anything.”

“*Voilà!*” Matt held up a spool of film the size of a large button.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I think it’s microfilm. This might be our code.”

“Why would she use microfilm? It’s way outdated.”

“I know it’s kind of strange, but then again, *she*’s kind of strange. I don’t really care as long as I’ve got something to go on now.” Matt’s face was radiant as he clasped the film to his chest. He peered into the safe again and removed another small object with a rounded tip and blunt bottom.

“A *bullet*,” Sarah gasped. She backed up a step.

“It’s not going to bite,” said Matt, “unless it’s in a gun.”

“I hate guns.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about guns or Nadine anymore,” he said, “because, with this . . .” he threw the microfilm up in the air and caught it, “. . . I’m going to set my dad free.”