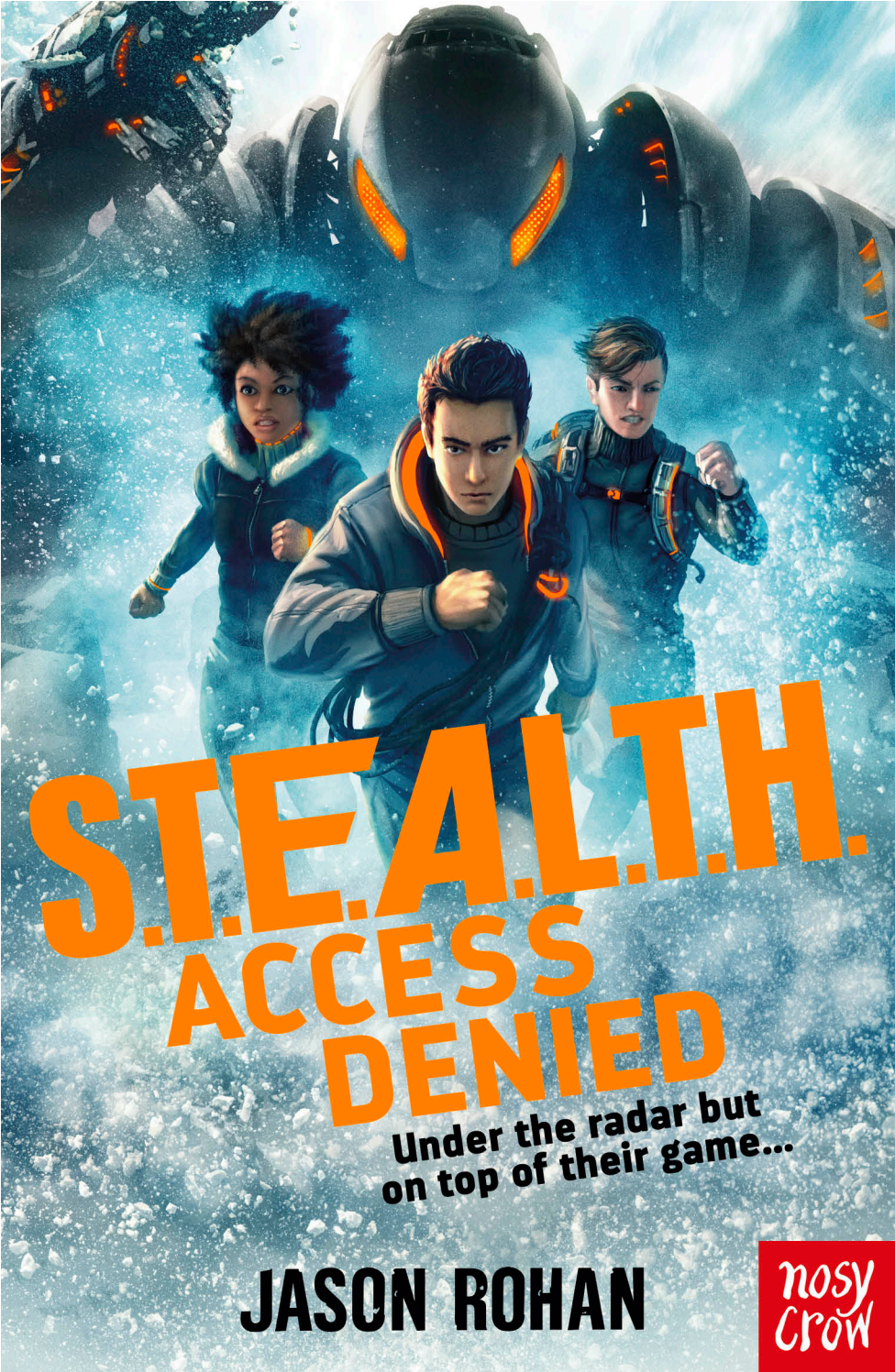

S.T.E.A.L.T.H.
ACCESS DENIED
Under the radar but on top of their game...
JASON ROHAN
nosy crow


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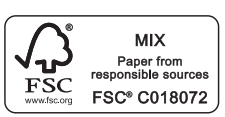
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To Dominik, Ben and Jacob,
the original S.T.E.A.L.T.H. team members

08:52

“Why are there police at your house?”

Arun blinked in response, unable to decide which was more weird: what Donna had said, or that she had spoken to him at all.

“Wuh?” was the best he could manage.

Donna gripped the lapel of his school blazer and hauled him aside. Other Year Sevens surged past in the corridor, hurrying to their classrooms for registration.

“I said, why are the feds at your house, dummy? I saw them show up just after you left.”

Arun shook his head, dumbfounded. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s right, Donna,” Sam said, sticking up for his best friend.

“How would you know?” Donna sneered.

“Let me go,” Arun said, trying to pull away. “We’ll be late for registration.” The corridor was almost clear.

“Listen,” Donna said, “you can go to class and be teacher’s pet, or you can come with me and suss what’s

going on. They were plain-clothes cops, you know."

"How would *you* know that?" Sam said.

"Because I know," Donna said. She stormed off towards the stairs to the playground. "You coming?"

The two boys looked at each other for a moment, before Arun shrugged and trotted after her.

Sam stared, watching his friend disappear down the stairs. He could hardly believe it: Arun had ditched him – for a girl too. Then again, what if Donna was right and the police really were at Arun's house?

"Hey, wait for me!" he said, and hurried to catch up.

"Follow me," Donna said. "Do what I do, walk where I walk. Just don't run – that's a dead giveaway."

Donna led the way out of the Most Sacred Heart High School with practised ease, guiding the boys past the bicycle racks, round the sports hall and across the grass to the main gates, making sure to keep the hedges between them and the school building, before slipping out into the street.

Arun said nothing. Everyone knew Donna skipped classes; he just never expected to be joining her.

"Why would the police be at my house?" Arun said, giving in to curiosity.

"Beats me." Donna shrugged. "Maybe your dad's jacked

a bank or something."

"Ha!" Sam scoffed. "More like *your* da— *Oof!*"

Donna's fist disappeared into his middle before he could finish. Sam doubled over and sagged to his knees, holding his wounded belly.

"You take that back! You take that back right now!" Donna shouted, standing over him.

"Can you two keep it down?" Arun said, helping Sam to straighten up. "We're in enough trouble already, skipping class, without telling the whole street we're here."

"She punched me!" Sam wailed.

"And you deserved it," Arun said, ignoring the scandalised look on Sam's face. "Now say sorry and let's go."

Donna stood with her arms folded, jaw thrust out, and glared at Sam. He looked to Arun for help but his friend's mind was elsewhere.

"All right. I'm sorry," Sam mumbled.

Donna sucked her teeth and said, "Man, why am I even bothering to help a couple of losers like you?" She marched towards the main road.

Arun hesitated, waiting for Sam to move.

"I thought we were friends," Sam said.

"We are," Arun said. "It's just – if she's right, I have to know what's going on. I can't wait until school's finished.

You'd be the same."

"Yeah, I suppose."

The two boys ran after the departing girl. They had almost caught her up, when a man's voice from behind bellowed, "You kids, stay where you are!"

Arun and Sam looked back to see a slab of muscle marching towards them from the direction of the school. "I've found the brat," the lump said into his phone. "I'll bring him in."

"Who's that?" Sam asked.

"I don't know," Arun replied with a shrug. "Doesn't look like a teacher."

The brute reached them, checked the phone in his hand and said to Arun, "You're Arun Lal, right?"

"Maybe," Arun said, unsure if it was meant as a question or a statement.

"You need to come with me. Just you."

"I've only just left the school grounds," Arun protested. "It's hardly truanting."

"I don't care about truanting. This is for your own safety. Now I won't tell you again," the bruiser said. "Come with me – or else."

"Who are you?" Donna asked. She came closer, pushing a frizzy lock of hair behind her ear while keeping her other

hand pressed firmly in her blazer pocket.

"Police. This boy's under arrest."

Donna tilted her head. "On what charge?"

"Littering. Trespass. Who cares? I don't answer to you."

"My mum's a lawyer," Donna said. "I know my rights."

"Yeah? Well, why don't you just wind your neck in, or I'll arrest you too?"

Donna's eyes narrowed. "I want to see your warrant card."

The man glanced around to check the street was clear, before unbuttoning his jacket.

"Right here," he said, drawing it back to reveal an automatic pistol in a shoulder holster. "Now, bog off before things really get nast— *AaAAGH!*"

It was only from the corner of his eye, but Arun saw Donna's hand whip up from her pocket, heard the *pfft-pfft* of a spray bottle, and the next thing he knew the big man was doubled over with his hands covering his face, shrieking, "My eyes! My eyes!" His phone lay on the pavement at Arun's feet.

"Don't just stand there, you idiots!" Donna yelled. "Run!"

Arun snatched up the phone and tore down the road after her.

09:16

Donna, Arun and Sam raced round another corner and ducked into a front garden bordered by a tall hedge. Sam sank down, clutching the stitch in his side and heaving in great lungfuls of air.

Arun finally looked at the phone in his hand. “No way.”

Smiling up at him was his own face, only a few years younger and holding an enormous ice cream.

“What’s that about?” Sam asked, peering over his shoulder. “Why’s that bloke got your picture on his phone?”

Donna ducked her head round the hedge and kneeled on the grass. “No sign of him,” she panted. “Reckon we ditched him.”

“Who was that?” Arun said, putting the phone away. “And what did you do to him?”

Donna pulled a scuffed hair conditioner bottle from her blazer pocket. “Home-made pepper spray,” she said. “My own recipe. Mash up some Trini Scorpion peppers, mix ’em with my grandma’s pickle, strain off the juice, and – major licks. It’s good on burgers too.”

Arun was incredulous. “You carry that stuff around? Why?”

Donna shrugged. “Never know when you’ll need it.”

“That was awesome!” Sam said.

Donna ignored him. “What was that geezer up to anyway?” she said to Arun. “Was he trying to … kidnap you?”

Arun snorted. “No! He must’ve been from the school or something.”

Donna cuffed him round the head. “Hello? Duh! He had a gun, you doughnut. If he’s a copper, then I’m Beyoncé. Man, I can’t believe you’re supposed to be clever.” She rose to her feet. “Come on, let’s go see what the real Five-O are doing at your place.”

As they approached Arun’s house at 23 Mitchell Drive, Donna ducked down and indicated a silver Audi Q5, parked outside.

“See? Told you,” she said. “Unmarked police car.”

“How can you tell?” Sam asked.

“Because I can,” Donna said. “Alloy wheels, extra mirrors, plain plates – it’s all there.”

“Hmm … assuming you’re right,” Arun said, sounding unconvinced, “what now?”

Donna shrugged. “I am right. It’s your house. How do we get in?”

“What, besides ringing the doorbell and saying ‘Hello, Mum, I bunked off school’ in front of two police officers?”

He paused, thought for a moment, then added, “The back door’s usually unlocked when Mum’s at home.”

“Let’s roll then. After you.”

Still crouched down, Arun led the way on to the drive, through the side gate and round to the rear of the house. They huddled in the shadows, with the back garden stretched out before them. A bench outside the kitchen extension was shaded by the overhang. The door to the utility room was slightly ajar.

“Now what?” Sam whispered.

“We have to get close enough to listen in and see why Arun’s mum’s getting nicked,” Donna explained with exaggerated patience.

Arun glared at her. “My mum’s not getting arrested. It’s probably just a mistake, or something she witnessed.”

“Hello? Plain-clothes detectives? Duh!”

“You’d know all about that,” Sam said.

“Do I have to punch you again?”

“Will you two stop arguing?” Arun said. “What we need is a diversion…”

His eyes lit upon the bird table and he smiled.

Inside Arun’s house, Detective Inspector Andrew Moss perched on the sofa, cradling a cup of milky tea, now cold. His partner, Detective Constable Sunny Patel, sat opposite, her notebook in hand.

Arun’s mother, Heidi, sat between them, her hands clasped tightly. No one spoke. *TOCK-TOCK-TOCK.* The only sound was the mantelpiece clock counting the seconds – which was why DI Moss jumped at the sudden blare of a car alarm and spilt tea on to his lap. *BEEP-BEEP-BEEP!* He ran to the front door to see who was stupid enough to try stealing an unmarked police car, while DC Patel and Mrs Lal rushed to the window.

Moss was just in time to see a flash of amber leap from the roof of the car and bolt for the safety of the nearest tree, flying up the trunk. Scowling, he wandered out to the car and saw that someone had scattered bird seed on the roof. He swore under his breath, brushed it clean and went back into the house.

Upstairs, the three children stayed low on the landing, listening intently for voices from the living room.

“I can’t believe that worked!” Donna whispered, and

gave Arun a congratulatory thump on the arm.

He put a finger to his lips and they heard the front door close as DI Moss returned.

"What was it?" DC Patel asked. "Is the alarm playing up again?" She handed Moss a paper towel to dab the tea stain.

"No. A stupid cat chasing some birds jumped on the car and set off the alarm."

"That would be next door's ginger tom," Arun's mother said. "Horrible pest, always pooping in our yard."

Silence returned, before Heidi finally said, "What happens now? This waiting around is killing me."

"You have to be patient, Mrs Lal." It was Patel's voice, soothing and reassuring. "We have a specialist team on the way from MI6; they're trained to deal with kidnappings. Your husband is going to be just fine."

Listening from the upstairs landing, Donna's eyes were wide as she stared at Arun. "No freaking way! Someone's kidnapped your dad!"

09:35

Crouched upstairs on the landing, Sam poked Arun in the ribs. "Did she say 'MI6'? That's British secret service. You know … James Bond stuff," he whispered.

Donna leaned closer to Arun and hissed, "This is madness! I thought your dad was just some dry old banker."

"So did I," Arun said.

Outside, two black Range Rovers pulled up and eight men stepped out, all dressed in black suits and dark sunglasses. Only the colour of their ties differed.

BING-BONG! DI Moss sprang to answer the doorbell.

Donna put a finger to her lips and leaned forward to listen to the voices in the hall.

"Inspector Moss?" a gravelly voice said. "You can call me Quinn. My team will handle things from here. Your babysitting duties are done. You're free to go."

"If you don't mind, Mr Quinn, we'd like to stay. You know, take some notes, learn from the best," Moss said.

"Actually, I do mind, but flattery is good. You can stay on

two conditions: one, keep your gob shut; and two, stay out of my way. Deal?"

"Deal."

Donna turned towards the boys with both eyebrows raised, as the clumping of feet made its way into the living room.

"Mrs Lal?" Quinn said, extending his hand. "Or may I call you Heidi? The name's Quinn, from British Intelligence. Can I ask what you know of your husband's job?"

"I-I don't see why that…" Arun's mum hesitated. "Krishan works for the government. He's an analyst at the Bank of England."

Quinn grunted. "Is he now? This morning, on the way to work, his car was involved in a minor traffic accident. I'd like you to take a look at this." He handed her an iPad. "This is CCTV footage taken from around Chelsea Bridge at seven fifty-seven this morning," Quinn said. "You can see your husband's BMW coming into frame now. He stops here at the red light."

Listening from upstairs, Arun closed his eyes and tried to picture the scene.

Quinn continued. "Watch. As soon as the light goes green and he starts to roll – *BANG!* – he gets T-boned, right

here, by a black Volvo V90 that jumps the light."

The black-and-white footage was silent but it was easy to imagine the screeching of tyres, followed by the crunch of metal against metal and the pattering of glass on tarmac.

Arun's mum watched through her fingers.

"If you go back, pause and zoom in, you can see the airbag inflating, so we're pretty sure Krishan wasn't hurt, just shaken up a bit. And now, if I let it go on, you'll see that here, about twenty seconds later, an ambulance pulls up and takes your husband away."

"Mr Quinn … are you saying that this … accident … was deliberate?" Heidi said. "A set-up?"

"Exactly." Quinn nodded. "Now, the London Ambulance Service does like to brag about improved response times but twenty seconds, in rush-hour traffic, is some going." He cleared his throat. "The Volvo had false registration plates, as did the ambulance. Witnesses report Krishan being pulled unconscious from his car by two paramedics who chucked him into the ambulance. This was at seven fifty-nine this morning, and no one has seen or heard from your husband since."

Heidi covered her mouth with her hand.

"Now, think carefully," Quinn said. "Do you know anyone

who could be harbouring a grudge against your husband? Anyone at all?"

Heidi shook her head, blinking back tears. "No. Krishan was – is – well liked by everyone. He's thoughtful, considerate, remembers everyone's birthdays, never has a bad word to say."

Quinn sighed. "That's what I was afraid of. So, if it isn't anything personal, it has to be professional." He turned to one of his agents who wore an emerald tie. "Green, get the prime minister's office on the phone. Now."

Upstairs, Sam stifled a groan and kicked his leg out.

"Shhh!" Donna hissed.

Sam winced. "It's cramp! I can't help it."

Quinn froze, looking up at the ceiling. "Mrs Lal, is there anyone else at home?"

"No. Arun … my son, is at school."

Quinn's gaze swung back to Heidi. "Then what was that noise? Brown, go and check it out."

Brown reached into his jacket and drew a Glock 37 automatic pistol. Once in the hall, he screwed a silencer on to the barrel and moved for the stairs.

09:52

Donna's eyes were wide. "Someone's coming!"

"This way!" Arun whispered, shuffling silently across the carpeted landing towards his parents' room.

Brown's soft footsteps on the stairs were getting closer. Arun counted them: he knew there were thirteen steps; a tiny creak meant Brown was on number six.

Donna and Sam crawled after him into the front bedroom. Inside was a double bed with four decorative cushions propped up against the pillows, a dresser, bedside cabinets and fitted wardrobes along the wall.

"Under the bed," Arun hissed.

Donna hit the floor and shimmied under.

"We won't all fit," Sam said, judging the space.

"You're right," Arun agreed. "Get in the wardrobe – quick!"

Brown reached the landing, and cocked his head to listen. He could have sworn he'd heard faint whispers but maybe he'd imagined it. Four doors led off the landing, all closed.

He went to the nearest on his immediate left. Pressing

his back against the wall, he pushed the door open and sent his pistol muzzle ahead to sweep the room. He peered in to see a toilet and washbasin. One junior toothbrush stood in a Spider-Man cup by the sink. The boy's bathroom, Brown surmised, stepping out again.

He opened the opposite door, which led into a bedroom with an elevated single bunk bed and a desk underneath, which had a crate full of electronic circuitry beside it. A half-built quadcopter drone rested on a chest of drawers, the remaining parts laid out beside it, and a high-powered telescope stood on a tripod by the window.

Two doors remained. Brown tried the door on the far side of the landing, furthest from the stairs. The room beyond was small, neat and centred around a cluttered desk with a flat-screen monitor and laptop docking station sitting on it. Bookcases lined three walls crammed with all manner of texts – classics, fantasies, thrillers, advanced mathematics textbooks, souvenir football programmes, *National Geographic* magazines, graphic novels. Pride of place on the remaining wall went to a signed Newcastle United football shirt mounted in a glass case, with a large number of framed certificates and diplomas around it. Krishan Lal's study, Brown decided, which meant the last door must be the master bedroom.

His black-gloved hand reached for the door.

Inside the bedroom, hidden amid the shoes and dust under the bed, Arun and Donna were listening to Brown's movements, tracking his path from room to room.

"Here he comes," Arun whispered as the door handle began to turn.

Donna's eyes lit up as an idea struck her. "What's your home number?" she asked Arun.

"Huh?"

"Your home phone number? What is it?"

The door opened and they could see a pair of black shoes enter the room. The children held their breath, not daring to make a sound.

Donna reached for her smartphone and waved it in front of Arun's face.

The feet walked up to the bed and stopped.

Arun shut his eyes tightly, willing the shoes to walk away. They didn't. Donna prodded him and he opened his eyes to see the feet pacing slowly round the bed, towards the adjoining bathroom.

Arun started keying numbers into Donna's phone and the digits appeared mutely.

Brown finished checking the en-suite bathroom and