

INTO THE GAUNTLET



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CHAPTER 1

Amy and Dan Cahill forgot to look for bugs in London.

They knew the drill. Arriving at a new hotel, they always had to scour their room for any listening devices or other top secret spy gear their enemies might have planted. They always checked for all possible exit routes and anything that could serve as a weapon, as well. Amy and Dan were only fourteen and eleven. But they'd developed the instincts of CIA pros.

Arriving in London, though, Amy stumbled three steps into the hotel room and collapsed onto the bed. Dan wobbled past her to sprawl on the couch. He sat, then slipped backward, weighed down by his backpack. He looked like he'd been flattened.

He has, Amy thought. We both have. Now that we know the truth. Now that we know how many lies we've been told all along, how many secrets were being kept from us, how much is expected of us . . .

Only the kids' wild-haired au pair, Nellie Gomez, seemed to have enough energy left to keep standing.

She even had enough energy to sway slightly to whatever crazy music she was listening to on her iPod as she tugged their duffel bag and cat carrier into the room. Dimly, Amy thought that she or Dan should have offered to help. But even carrying a duffel bag seemed beyond Amy right now.

Nellie turned to shut the door. Then she, too, seemed to collapse.

Did she faint? Amy wondered.

Before Amy had time to do anything, Nellie was standing again. She hadn't fainted. She'd just dipped down to the floor to pick up something Amy and Dan must have walked right over: a plain manila envelope.

Nellie held the envelope in the air like a prize.

"What do you think, kiddos?" she asked. "Wanna bet this is your next lead?"

They'd been warned to expect one—coded, of course, in case any of their enemies intercepted it. Normally, the two siblings would have dashed to grab the envelope, raced to open it, scrambled to break the latest code. At the very least, they would have told Nellie that at their ages—and with the fate of the world depending upon them—they were way too old to be called "kiddos."

Now Amy just shrugged.

Dan tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling.

"Kiddos?" Nellie said in a puzzled voice. She popped out her iPod earbuds. "Didn't you hear me?"

Nellie flipped the envelope over.

"Yep, addressed to Amy and Dan Cahill," she said. "And Nellie Gomez. Wow. Now I really feel official. This must have been slipped under the door, waiting for us." She held out the envelope toward the two siblings. "Who wants to do the honors?"

Neither kid moved.

Nellie shook the envelope at Amy and Dan.

"Come on, guys," she said. "It's a *lead*." She acted like they were as simple as Saladin the cat, always easily distracted with his favorite red snapper. "Don't you want to see what this says? Somebody's trying to help us!"

"If *somebody* wanted to help us," Amy retorted, "they would have just given us all the answers back in Jamaica."

She knew why they hadn't, but it was too much to think about right now.

"Or way back at the beginning," Dan added. "At the funeral."

Just over a month ago, Amy and Dan had gotten a huge surprise after the death of their beloved grandmother Grace. They'd been among a select group of relatives given an odd offer in Grace's will: They could have a million dollars apiece or a single Clue.

Amy and Dan had picked the Clue.

Since then, they'd been traipsing around the globe, scrambling to outsmart or outrun or simply avoid some of their least-charming relatives in the race to the final

prize. They'd lost count of how many times someone had tried to kill them.

When Amy wasn't completely terrified, there had also been moments she'd absolutely loved. Learning that she was brave enough to jump off that roof in Vienna. Being the only team to figure out the Clue in Cairo. Flying to the top of Mount Everest.

But only the day before, in Jamaica, Amy and Dan and Nellie had learned what the Clue hunt was really all about. Then the cruelty of it had sunk in on their long flight over the Atlantic. Before yesterday, they'd thought they were no different from the other teams — if you didn't count being younger, poorer, orphaned, and less informed. They'd thought their *goal*, at least, was the same: Win. Beat everyone else to the final prize.

But no, Amy thought bitterly. We're younger, poorer, and more ignorant—and it's not enough for us just to beat everyone else to the prize. For us to win, we also have to make everyone else forgive and forget five hundred years of backstabbing, in fighting, double-crossing and . . . murder.

How could anyone forgive or forget that?

"It's impossible," Amy muttered.

"The lead?" Nellie said, a baffled look spreading across her face. "You haven't even heard it yet."

"The whole clue hunt," Dan corrected. "It's useless. We can't win. Not the way we're supposed to. Why'd we even bother coming here?" He gestured toward the window. Since they were on the twelfth floor, all

they could see was a patch of gray sky. "I hate London. Doesn't it ever stop raining?"

Amy had a flash of remembering Dan's wild enthusiasm checking into another hotel, weeks ago, back in Egypt. He'd run around the room, delightedly calling out the names of every new object he discovered — "Stationery!" "Umbrella!" "Bible!" Amy felt guilty thinking about what the Clue hunt had done to that enthusiastic kid. It was like he'd turned into a grumpy old man about seventy years early.

"Well . . ." Nellie frowned uncertainly. For a moment, Amy thought she would say, *You're right, kiddos. It never stops raining in London, and this clue hunt is insane. I'm only twenty years old, and you aren't even my real family. I'm going home. Now.* Then she shook her head, her black-and-blond-dyed hair flaring out. "Look, kiddos. I promised your grandmother —"

"She's dead," Dan said in the same old-before-his-time voice. "She's dead, Lester's dead, Irina's dead. . . ."

Mom and Dad are dead, Amy finished in her head. Back in Jamaica, they'd counted all those deaths as reasons to complete the Clue hunt. Lester had been an innocent bystander, drawn into things only because he'd been willing to help. Irina was a former enemy who'd given her life to save Amy and Dan. And the children's parents had gone to their deaths trying to save a single Clue from falling into the wrong hands.

What did any of those deaths mean if Amy and Dan didn't keep trying?

But how could Amy and Dan keep trying when everything was impossible?

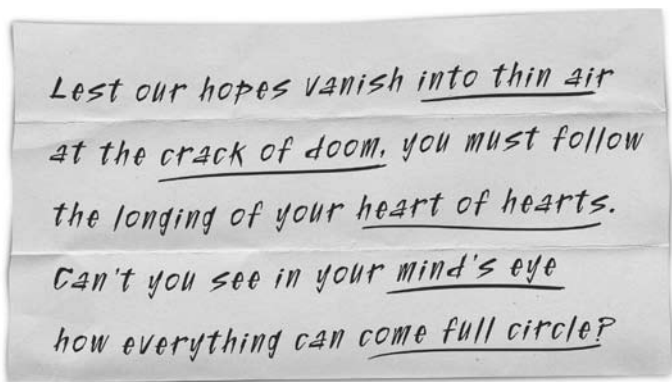
Nellie looked from Amy to Dan as if she could read their minds.

“Let’s take this one step at a time, okay?” she said quietly. “Just listen.”

She tore open the envelope and began reading aloud:

“Lest our hopes vanish into thin air at the crack of doom, you must follow the longing of your heart of hearts. Can’t you see in your mind’s eye how everything can come full circle?” She looked up. “Does that make any sense to you? Some of the words are underlined — that might mean something.”

She held out the note first to Amy, then to Dan:



Lest our hopes vanish into thin air
at the crack of doom, you must follow
the longing of your heart of hearts.
Can't you see in your mind's eye
how everything can come full circle?

Something tickled Amy’s mind, but she ignored it.

Doesn’t matter, she thought. We can’t win.

“It doesn’t mean anything to me,” Dan said bitterly.

Mrrp, complained Saladin from his cat carrier. He sounded just as cranky as Dan. Nellie bent down to push the lever that set him free.

“At least I can make the cat happy,” Nellie mumbled.

But Saladin didn’t rub against her leg in thanks. He stiffened and growled low in his throat. And then he sprang straight toward the window.

“Saladin!” Amy shouted.

She glanced quickly to see if the window was open — it was, but there was a screen. Saladin, mid-leap, hissed at it. No, he was hissing at something beyond the screen, perched on the window ledge outside.

It was a monkey.

Amy blinked. And then, in spite of everything, she grinned. The monkey reminded her of one of her favorite books set in London: *The Little Princess*, where a monkey homesick for India climbed across the rooftops to visit a lonely girl who was also homesick for India. And then the monkey led to her finding a new family, even though her parents were dead. . . .

Amy’s grin faded.

Fiction, she told herself. *Something else that isn’t true.*

Anyhow, this monkey wasn’t carrying treats. He was baring his teeth at Saladin, slamming his hand against the screen. He must have had something sharp in his hand — just his claws? Or a *knife*? — because the screen split. The monkey sprang over Saladin, dropping

to the floor. And then in three quick bounds, he was at Nellie's side. He leaped up and snatched the paper from her hand.

"No! That's *ours!*" Nellie yelled.

She dived for the monkey, trying to snatch the paper back. But the monkey darted away.

"I'll get him!" Dan called.

He jumped up from the couch. He must have forgotten he still had his backpack on because he just fell forward, missing the monkey by a mile. The monkey skittered sideways toward Amy.

"I'll try!" Amy hollered.

She scrambled up and darted to the right. The monkey darted to the left.

Saladin jumped down from the windowsill, as if he thought he and Amy could corner the monkey together. The monkey easily sprang past them.

He turned around once he reached the windowsill again. He grinned and nodded up and down, making a *kee-kee-kee* sound.

"Is that monkey *laughing* at us?" Nellie demanded, outraged. She rushed toward the windowsill.

The monkey only laughed harder. Then, just as Nellie reached for him, he tossed a coinlike object into the room and plunged out the window.

He was gone.

With their only lead.