



RAPID FIRE

CLIFFORD RILEY

SCHOLASTIC INC.

Clifford Riley wishes to acknowledge
the following Cahills:

Gavin Brown
Zachary Clark
Mallory Kass
Grace Kendall
Rebecca Leach
Christina McTighe
Jackie Reitzes



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This collection first printing, January 2013

ISBN 978-0-545-52287-8

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

13 14 15 16 17 18

Printed in China 137

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012
Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1
Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141
Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB



RAPID FIRE

LEGACY



Eight Months Before the Clue hunt

On Christmas morning, Grace Cahill learned she was dying of cancer.

She watched as Dr. Zimmerman set a thin folder down on the desk. They were in a wide study in Grace's house. She was the kind of person people made house calls for, even on Christmas. All that bad news from such a small file. It struck Grace as strange, though she wasn't sure why. She was an accomplished chemist and knew that the most terrible things often came in small doses.

"How long?" Grace asked, as though the question were an involuntary reaction. "Isn't that what people ask in this situation?"

Dr. Zimmerman sighed, removing her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose. "Patients at this stage usually have a time frame of around six months. That's about where I'd put you, Grace."

"Six . . ." It wasn't enough time. There was still too much to prepare, too much that the children didn't know. And if they weren't ready, the whole world could suffer. "I'll take eight," Grace said.

“Grace,” said Dr. Zimmerman. “You’re a strong and ambitious woman. I know you’re going to fight this, which is why I’m telling you six months instead of three. But you need to accept that you are dying. Soon.”

Grace found her eyes were locked on her hands, which were knotted firmly in her lap. They were the only things she *could* focus on right then. She didn’t dare meet the oncologist’s eyes, in case she betray not sadness or fear, but anger. Grace was furious with herself. She’d spent her whole life searching for the 39 Clues, but it still wasn’t enough time. She’d failed.

Dr. Zimmerman reached for Grace’s hands. “You need to be thinking about your loved ones right now. Your family. Are they taken care of? Have you spent the time with them that you need to? It’s Christmas morning, and where are they? Now is the moment to make sure they understand how much they mean to you, and ensure that they are provided for.”

Provided for. Grace’s thoughts snapped back to the legal documents locked in a hidden compartment in that very desk, right below her test results. They would change not only the lives of her family, but perhaps the very course of human history. Grace slowly withdrew her hands, patting out invisible wrinkles in her blouse.

“Thank you, Barbara. I think you’re right. There are affairs that still must be set in order.”

“I’m sorry, Grace. I’ll still do everything I can—”

“No, thank you. You said exactly what I needed to hear, I think. I’ll come to your office next week to talk treatments.”

Grace led Dr. Zimmerman to the door and said good-bye, then moved silently to the window. She was nearly eighty years old. Death was no stranger to her. She'd seen it take many others, including her beloved daughter and son-in-law. Staring death in the face now was nothing compared to finding it had sneaked by to claim her only child first.

Grace watched the snow begin to fall over the front lawn of her estate like a blanket, or a powder, or any of those soft and comforting things snow was supposed to be in moments like this. But she didn't need comfort right now. She needed to make a decision.

A coughing fit brought her cat, Saladin, into the room. Saladin was a large, gray Egyptian Mau and had been Grace's travel companion on many adventures. When she first started getting sick, it had been Saladin who seemed to sense it. In the week preceding her recent prognosis, he had barely left her side at all.

Grace's cough subsided. Reaching down to pet Saladin, she noticed his fur was wet with melted snow.

"You've been prowling the neighborhood, haven't you?" she said. "Quite a trek through the snow, just to fertilize the neighbors' yards."

Saladin mewed, as if feigning surprise at the accusation.

"Well, it'll be spring by the time they find your little gifts, and by then . . ." Grace paused. "By then, they'll have much bigger things to worry about. The whole world might."

Grace was the matriarch of the Cahills, the most influential family the world had ever known. George Washington,

Napoleon, Amelia Earhart—nearly every important figure in the last five hundred years had belonged to one of its five branches. Most of the family members themselves didn't know the true extent of the Cahill legacy—or the terrible responsibility that came with it. Only Grace had figured out the truth of the 39 Clues that concealed the source of the Cahills' great power. It had been the defining goal of her life to find each of the Clues, and protect them from her ruthless family.

And only Grace knew that the Cahills weren't alone in the search for the Clues. A shadowy organization, the Vespers, lurked somewhere in the dark places of the world, and crept into her thoughts now.

Grace produced a small key seemingly from nowhere, and moved quickly from the window to the large, carved cherrywood desk at the center of the room. She opened a drawer in the desk, then felt around within it. There was a soft clicking noise as a smaller, hidden compartment descended into place. She unlocked the secret drawer and pulled it open. Splayed within, like an open deck of cards, were the legal documents that would set into motion a deadly serious scavenger hunt for the very Clues she'd worked her whole life to protect. But she was dying, and someone must come forward who was strong enough to stand against the Vespers.

Now that the moment had finally arrived, however, she found that she was hesitating.

She picked up the small pen that lay beside the documents. Just a bit of ink to paper, and she would drop her

only grandchildren into the fray. Such terrible things from such small doses.

Grace set the pen down.

All her life, Grace had been tormented by the worry that someone with selfish or evil aims would find the 39 Clues. But for five hundred years, the Clues had remained safely hidden.

Saladin approached cautiously, watching Grace tuck the documents back into the secret desk drawer.

No one had ever been able to locate all the Clues. Soon Grace would be dead, and here she was on Christmas morning, laying plans to protect them from her grave. She wouldn't place such a heavy burden on the two people she loved most—Amy and Dan Cahill, her grandchildren.

Grace locked the drawer once more, and moved hurriedly to the phone on the other side of the room. Saladin scampered out of her path as she crossed, now completely oblivious to him.

The world was safe enough without eccentric old Grace Cahill shaking things up one last time. The Vespers hadn't been heard from in over a decade, and Grace pushed them firmly out of her mind. It was decided.

The secrets of the Clues would die with her.



It was Christmas, and Dan Cahill was not in a good mood.

"Sit down, dweeb," Amy said. "You're making me nervous."

“What’s taking her so long?” Dan said, pacing back into the cramped living room from the bathroom. “Grace was supposed to call two hours ago!” Dan was dressed in his usual Christmas outfit: a black ninja costume, complete with plastic throwing stars stuffed into his pockets.

“I can’t imagine why she’d be trying to delay the inevitable,” said Amy, looking back down at the Tchaikovsky biography she had open on her lap. “Maybe it has something to do with the neighbors seeing an eleven-year-old ninja being driven up to her house.”

“Grace has way weirder people than me coming in and out all the time,” Dan said. “You, on the other hand, are about as boring as it gets. If Grace is worried about anyone cramping her style, I’d point to the gloomy nerd reading about Chucklesky.”

“Tchaikovsky. He composed the score for the ballet *The Nutcracker*.”

Dan threw his hands up. “How am I supposed to get any better at making you sound like a loser if you just do all the work for me?”

Amy cocked her arm back to throw her book at her brother. Dan yelped and bolted into his room, slamming the door. A handwritten sign on the front read FORT NO-NERDS.

Amy sighed and lowered the book back onto her lap. At this point she was just pretending to read—she couldn’t actually concentrate on the sentences in front of her while she waited for Grace’s call. In her pocket, her cell phone felt like it weighed a thousand pounds, and she kept imagining she felt it ringing. But it never did.

Dan was always a little exasperating this time of year—even more than his usual day-to-day annoying—but this holiday had been especially trying for the two Cahill siblings.

Amy looked around, taking in the tiny apartment. Paper Christmas decorations and streamers were strewn along half the room. They cut off abruptly, though, the streamers falling limply to the carpet. Frida, their most recent au pair, had been hanging them when Amy and Dan's guardian called to lay her off.

Amy and Dan were orphans. Their parents had died in a fire years ago. Though they were legally in the care of their great-aunt Beatrice, she opted to have the siblings housed apart from her, hiring a constant and varied stream of live-in au pairs to watch over them. They never lasted very long. Beatrice had a habit of quickly firing them, often for no reason at all.

Dan emerged from his room after a few minutes. He'd switched out the ninja getup for a sweater, jeans, and his backpack, but he still had the mask hanging around his neck. He held a plastic throwing star up in a defensive position.

"Try anything with the book, and you're getting this right between the eyes," he said.

"If you throw that anywhere near my face, dweeb, they'll be burying you in that goofy costume."

Dan narrowed his eyes. "You are a worthy rival, nerd-san."

Amy smirked and shook her head. "Listen, I wouldn't worry," she said, as a sort of peace offering. "I'm sure Grace

is busy with something important. Maybe she's getting us a really incredible present . . . a little bit late."

She wished there was more she could do for Dan. Her little brother would never admit how sad he was, but she knew. Earlier in the day she'd presented him with his Christmas present to try to cheer him up, a huge pack full of bottle rockets. It had taken her months to save up for the gift and convince Frida to do the actual purchasing for her. Still, it was worth it to see Dan get excited about something, even if just for a little while. She knew that presents weren't everything. Every holiday story since holiday stories began had drilled that point home. But they didn't hurt, either.

Dan shrugged and lowered the throwing star. He shook his backpack off and dug through it, pulling out the pack of bottle rockets.

"Can we shoot some of these off while we wait?"

Amy thought about it for a moment. "You wouldn't rather do it at Grace's house, with all that space in the yard?"

"I have some ideas I want to try out," Dan said with a grin. "Like, what happens if you tie two, or even three rockets together, end to end, so they're all pulling in opposite directions?"

"Someone gets hurt, probably," Amy said doubtfully.

"Or something even cooler than that."

"We should probably just wait for Grace," Amy said, looking back down at her biography.

Dan crossed his arms. "You know what? I'm tired of waiting. If we aren't important enough for her to pick us

up on time *on Christmas*, I don't see why she should keep me from having fun. I'm going out." He replaced the rockets in his backpack and slipped it over his shoulders, then stalked over to the apartment door and opened it.

"Wait, what?" Amy said, looking up from the book. "No! What should I say to Grace?"

"Tell her I'm busy with something important."

Slam.

Suddenly, Amy was alone in the apartment. Alone with Tchaikovsky.

Fine. If Dan wanted to act like a brat, that wasn't her problem. She lifted the book to her face and stared at it intently.

All of ten seconds passed before she hauled herself up with a sigh of resignation, grabbed her coat from the hanger by the door, and followed her brother out.

"Dan, wait!"



Amy huffed as she ran carefully along the slick Boston sidewalks.

"Stupid . . . dweeb . . .," she said to no one in particular.

Dan had broken into a run as soon as he noticed his sister was following him, and the twerp was smaller and way faster than her. What did he think he was accomplishing by shooting off like this, anyway?

He's going to give himself an asthma attack, Amy thought.

It was especially embarrassing when they passed the odd jogger or dog walker who was out that day. Dan had

pulled the ninja mask back up over his face, and Amy wasn't so far behind that she couldn't see the looks of confusion—and then amusement—that came over strangers' faces as they watched a pint-sized ninja run by. Or the looks of pity that followed as she came panting after.

"Everything okay?" one woman asked as she passed.

Amy was sure her face was Christmas-ornament red from the exertion already, but if it wasn't, she would have blushed furiously.

"Mm . . . hm!" she wheezed, lowering her head and sprinting forward.

Eventually, Dan curved left, hitting Hyde Park Avenue.

Oh, dweeb, where are you going? Amy pleaded internally.

He surprised her when he curved again, this time onto a road Amy didn't recognize. The scenery changed drastically as she followed. The apartment-filled street gave way to large, decrepit warehouses. The area was a gray and white mix of cement, stone, and the occasional bare, skeleton-thin tree.

Between the holiday and the weather, Amy expected that such a sparse industrial street would be completely empty, but was surprised to see three figures in dark motorcycle outfits standing near the entrance of a warehouse. All three wore jet-black helmets with the visors down. One of the three, the tallest and broadest by far, had a bright red stripe that cut across his jacket like a bloody wound. Amy tried not to look, but could see from the corner of her eye three helmets turning as she passed. She found herself holding her breath. Something about their faceless visors creeped her out.

She picked up her speed.

About a block down, she spotted Dan. He'd pulled the ninja mask up from his mouth and was leaning against the side of a brick building. Amy could tell that his breathing was a little ragged.

Not that she was in great shape herself, but Dan had asthma, and almost never remembered to bring his inhaler anywhere with him.

Amy came to a stop a few feet from Dan, and nearly doubled over.

"You . . . are such . . . a child," she panted.

Dan didn't respond. He just leaned against the wall, trying to suck in air.

Amy fumbled through her coat pocket. She'd taken to keeping a spare inhaler on her whenever she went anywhere with her brother. She pulled it out now and handed it to him.

Dan pressed it to his lips and pushed down on the canister, breathing in the aerosol. His gasping breaths evened out. Then, slowly, they returned to normal.

"Thanks," he said meekly.

Amy sighed. "It's okay, dweeb."

"I'm sorry." Dan's voice cracked a bit, and it wasn't from being out of breath. Underneath the ninja mask, Amy could see that his eyes were red and moist. She realized now why he'd kept it on.

"I know," she said more softly. "It's okay."

Dan looked away, embarrassed.

Amy decided to give him a bit of room and turned around to survey the area. It was snowing heavily now.

She and Dan had never been to this part of Hyde Park before, and the neighborhood looked especially unfamiliar covered in white. It was also eerily quiet.

“Let’s get out of here, okay? I don’t like this place.”

“It’s not so bad,” Dan said, sniffing and standing up straight. “I don’t see a single library.”

“I’m serious, Dan,” Amy said.

Amy heard the sound of snow crunching underfoot behind her. Turning around, she could just make out three figures approaching through the snowfall. She realized they were the same three men from before.

Amy took a step back. “I think we should go.”

The biggest of the figures, the one with the bright red stripe on his jacket, reached into his pocket and pulled out a brown glass bottle. He uncapped it and held a white cloth to the lip.

It took a moment before Amy recognized what she was seeing. The action was familiar, but she couldn’t place from where.

“What’s he doing?” Dan said, his voice now serious.

Then it hit her. She’d read a spy novel earlier in the year, where some terrorists tried to bring down an agent by kidnapping his family. So they’d followed his daughter from school one day and . . .

“That’s chloroform!” Amy gasped.

“Why would—”

Suddenly, the men sprinted forward, heading straight for Amy and Dan.

“Run!” Amy screamed, grabbing Dan’s arm and turning in the other direction. She scrambled forward with her

brother in tow. The snow was making visibility difficult, not to mention running.

Dan pulled on his sister's arm, slowing her pace. "In there!" he said, pointing to a fenced-in side lot. The fence enclosing the lot was locked with a thick chain and padlock, but there was a gap between the chain and the gate that might just be wide enough for the two of them to squeeze through.

Amy curved toward the fence and moved to the side, pushing Dan in through the gap first. He was smaller, and slid through easily.

Dan turned once he was on the other side and grabbed Amy's arm. Amy glanced over her shoulder. Though obscured by snow, the three men couldn't have been more than twenty feet away. Amy tried slipping in through the bars while Dan pulled.

But she didn't fit. She was trapped outside with the kidnappers.

"Oh, no," she rasped. "Oh, no, no, no."

She wiggled around, trying desperately to squeeze through the gap. Dan groaned as he pulled.

"Come on, Amy!" he said. "Come on!"

"I can't!" Amy said in a panic.

Then, as if just to contradict her, Amy felt her body moving. Before she had a chance to feel relieved, she was suddenly through the fence, crashing onto Dan and sending them both spilling into the snow.

Amy was up in a flash and searching around the lot while Dan scrambled to his feet.

"Oh, no," she said. The lot was surprisingly large, but it

had no outlet besides the gate. All the doors to the warehouse were closed and bolted shut.

"Amy," Dan said, "look." He nodded in the direction of one of the doors. Positioned right next to the doorway was a series of five large metal dumpsters.

"No," Amy said, shaking her head. "No way."

"How long do you think it'll take those guys to climb a fence?" Dan said. "We have to hide!"

Dan raced to the farthest dumpster, lifted the lid, and shimmied inside. "Get in!" he hissed, peeking his head out. "It doesn't smell *that* bad."

Amy whimpered slightly as she put her hands on the metal lip of the dumpster, then scrambled ungracefully in beside her brother, lowering the lid behind her. She had to crouch into an awkward perching position once inside. It smelled *exactly* that bad.

"Ugh," Amy gagged. "This smells worse than the fort in your room."

"Shh!"

They could just make out the sounds of three gravelly voices coming from outside.

". . . they go?"

"Prob . . . to . . . out."

"No . . . saw . . . here."

There was a loud, metallic noise, followed by the sound of a chain falling away. They heard the gate swing open.

"What's going on?" Dan whispered. His voice was shaking, and Amy could feel him shivering beside her. "Why would anyone be after us, of all people?" Amy wanted to

take his hand, but was terrified she might lose her balance and make a noise.

The voices were getting louder.

“. . . sure these are Grace Cahill’s grandkids?” one of the voices said. “. . . would they be out alone?”

Amy and Dan stopped breathing. Something was very wrong.

“Who knows . . . saved us the trouble . . .”

“. . . Vesper, and get some more people out here. Search the area until you find them. . . . whatever force is necessary.”

The voices and sound of crunching snow began moving farther away. Soon the lot was quiet.

“He said Grace’s name,” Dan whispered.

“They must be trying to get a ransom out of her,” said Amy. A deep, terrible panic was setting in. It seemed to pulse through her like a heartbeat, so intense it made her light-headed.

“What was that other thing he said?” Dan said. “About a Vespa?”

“They *w-were* wearing helmets,” Amy said. Her vision was slowly adjusting to the darkness. She couldn’t see much, but she could see that Dan’s eyes were wide with fear. She had to keep it together for her brother. Amy pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. The light from the screen illuminated the contents of the dumpster around them. It was blessedly un-full, but Amy couldn’t help imagining the vermin that probably made the place their home at night. Under the blue light of the phone, Dan’s face was

pale and serious. Huddled up in the corner of the dumpster, he looked as terrified as she felt.

"I'm calling the police," Amy said. "Make sure they aren't right outside."

"Espionage is what ninjas do best," Dan said, with a weak grin. He tried to sound tough, but his voice was thin and shaky. Dan rose up to risk a slow, careful look out from a small hole chewed out of the top corner by rust.

Two dark-clad figures stood near the entrance to the lot. The gate was wide open now, and Dan could just see that one of the figures had the handles of what he assumed were bolt cutters hanging out of his jacket pocket.

"Two of them are watching the exit," he whispered. "It looks like the third one left, the big one with the red stripe on his jacket. These guys really came prepared. They cut open the chain on the fence."

"Cut the *chain*?" Amy whispered. She swallowed, attempting desperately to shove the fear down into some manageable compartment of her brain. She needed to think. She needed to get help.

"I'm calling the p-police now," Amy said.

Oh, no, she thought. Her stammer was starting, as it always did when she was nervous and had to talk to people. And she was more than just nervous now. She was delirious with fear.

Amy looked down and took a deep breath. Somehow she managed to dial 911 into the phone with her shaking fingers. She placed it to her ear, and was startled when an operator answered after only a single ring.

“Nine-one-one,” the woman said coolly. “What’s your emergency?”

“H-hi,” Amy said, trying to remain calm.

Don’t stammer, don’t stammer, don’t stammer.

“He-hello, y-yes. My b-brother and I are near H-Hyde Park and these m-men are t-t-trying to hurt us.”

“Can you tell me where you are exactly?” the operator said, her voice becoming serious.

“I’m n-not sure,” Amy said. “We got a little l-l-lost.”

Dan peeked out of the dumpster again, then immediately shot back down. “Hang up, quick!”

In a panic, Amy ended the call. Seconds later she heard the snow crunch as feet passed in front of the dumpster, then stopped.

Then the whistling began.

Amy and Dan sat in silence, not daring to breathe, barely daring to think. Just above them, one of the kid-nappers casually and deliberately whistled a creepy old children’s song called “Alouette” that Amy recognized from school. The song was about plucking the feathers from a small bird.

This was it, Amy realized. They were caught. Dead, maybe. The guy was toying with them.

They waited for what seemed like an eternity. The whistling sounded like it was right in Amy’s ear. Her lungs burned with the effort of holding her breath.

Then the song suddenly finished. Amy expected the dumpster lid to go shooting up, to see that terrible black visor staring down at them. Instead, the crunching footsteps slowly moved off.

Amy breathed in the rank air of the dumpster, and it felt like a miracle. It was all she could do not to break into tears.

“They’re going to check the dumpsters eventually,” Dan whispered, after a few moments. “And they said more guys were on the way.” His voice was shakier than Amy had ever heard it.

“What do we do?” Amy said. “I can’t keep calling the police and hanging up. I don’t even know where we are.”

Amy jumped when she heard a loud metallic *bang* coming from the far end of the lot.

“What’s that?” she whispered.

Dan looked at her with round eyes. “They’ve started,” he said. It was the sound of a dumpster lid being thrown open.

In the darkness, Amy heard Dan unzipping his backpack. “I have an idea,” he said. “But we have to be prepared to run.”

Bang!

“What’s your idea?”

Suddenly, a light flared in the dumpster. In one hand Dan held a sterling Zippo lighter. In the other was the pack of bottle rockets Amy had gotten him for Christmas.

“Where’d you get that lighter?” she demanded.

“Frida,” Dan said, closing it. “She left it behind. Remember how she was always talking about camping and outdoorsy stuff? She said she kept a water-resistant lighter on her at all times, in case she needed emergency fire.”

There was a short beat of silence in the dumpster.

"Huh," said Dan. "Except probably now."

"Are you s-sure about th-this?" said Amy. "Bottle rockets?"

Bang! They were getting closer.

"No," said Dan. "But we're out of time. Just get ready to run, okay?"

Amy swallowed, and nodded at her brother.

Dan pulled two rockets from the pack. He stood up and peeked out from under the lid. The kidnappers were near the fence, checking a dumpster two down from them. So far so good. He aimed one of the rockets for the other end of the lot, away from both the entrance and the dumpster.

"Here goes," he said. Dan opened the Zippo and lit the fuse.

It hissed for half a second, then the rocket shot screaming away.

Crack!

"Over there!" one of the kidnappers shouted.

Amy started to rise. "Let's go!"

"Wait," Dan said, aiming the second rocket. "It's a two-part plan." He lit the fuse and the rocket shot off in the direction of the would-be kidnappers.

"Auuuurrrrgghh!"

"Run now!" Dan said.

Amy and Dan burst from the dumpster and scrambled for the entrance of the lot. Looking behind him, Dan saw that one of the kidnappers was frantically fanning his butt, which was smoking slightly.

"Part two was completely unnecessary, wasn't it?" Amy yelled as they ran.

“Yup!” shouted Dan.

“There they go!” The kidnappers had spotted them.

Amy grabbed Dan’s arm and surged forward. They made it out of the lot and turned left, heading back in the direction they’d come from. They ran as fast as they could back toward home, but the snow continued to fall heavily and the pair kept stumbling. Amy looked behind her and gasped. The men were just a few yards away, and gaining.

“Follow me,” she said, still tightly gripping Dan’s arm. She shot to the right, turning down a small side road. About halfway down, she turned right again.

“Wait, what?” Dan said. “We’re going back the other way!”

“Exactly,” said Amy. “It’s unpredictable. Hopefully the kidnappers won’t think we’d double back, either.”

The street they’d backtracked onto was just as deserted, but Amy spotted a battered plywood fence farther down in front of them. She ducked behind it, pulling Dan with her. After a few seconds, she could hear the slap of the kidnappers’ feet as they ran past.

It worked, Amy thought. *I can’t believe it worked!* She pulled Dan in closer to her.

Suddenly, Amy’s phone started vibrating. She reached into her jacket pocket, fumbling to pull it out. On the screen was the name *Grace Cahill*.

Amy hit ANSWER and placed the phone to her ear. “Grace, we’re in t-trouble,” Amy stammered.

“What’s happened?” her grandmother’s voice answered from the other end, wasting no time.

“We’re in Hyde Park. These m-men are following us,”

Amy whispered as loudly as she dared. “They said your n-n-name and they’re bringing more guys to try and f-find us.”

“Tell her about the Vespas,” Dan said.

“Shush!” Amy hissed.

“What did Dan just say?” Grace said, her voice rising. Amy’s heart almost stopped. She’d never heard her grandmother sound afraid before.

A voice from their left, getting louder. The kidnapers were returning. There was no time. She looked around her. The place was littered with garbage, including glass bottles, a large piece of tarp, and . . . twine.

She made a decision. If Dan could be brave in this awful situation, so could she. She didn’t have any other choice.

“Dan,” she whispered. “Get the bottle rockets out.”

“Amy, *do not* engage these men,” Grace said from the phone. “Do you understand me? I’m calling the police.”

“Grace . . . ,” Amy sobbed.

“Amy?” said Grace.

“We love you.”

“Amy, *no!* Do no—”

Amy hung up the phone. She looked over to Dan, who was holding a fistful of bottle rockets, his eyes wide.

“I’m going to get us out of this,” Amy said. “Don’t worry, d-dweeb.” It wasn’t exactly comforting.

Dan was shaking like the last leaf of winter, his face completely serious. “If only you’d brought that book about Chucklesky. That huge thing would scare these guys away for sure.”

“Tchaikovsky,” Amy said with a small smile. She

grabbed one of the bigger glass bottles nearby. “How many rockets can we fit into this?”

“Five safely,” Dan said. “Let’s try fifteen.”

“Do it,” Amy said, handing the bottle to him. She picked up a bit of twine from the ground. “Okay, Dan, ready to see what happens when you tie three bottle rocket ends together so they all pull in different directions?”

Dan looked up at his sister. A huge grin spread across his face.



Two faceless, black-clad figures stalked back along the side street, methodically searching the area. They kicked over every trash can, crumpled every box, checked every doorway, and smashed in every window. They moved with ruthless precision. The chase had gone on long enough.

Halfway down the street, one of the figures stopped in place, and motioned for the other to be quiet. His partner slowly lowered the recycling bin he’d been looking under.

There. Yes. Definitely the sound of whispering. He moved, slowly and silently, to the corner of a side street. Peering around, he spotted a shadow hidden behind a bit of dilapidated wooden fencing. A long section of tarp hung out from behind the fence. The Cahill brats were clearly trying to hide under the tarp.

The man and his partner sneaked up very slowly to the fence, treading carefully once they were on the tarp. Turning, the man nodded to his partner, who nodded back. They lunged around the fence.

There stood Dan alone, with a ninja mask pulled over his face. Fifteen hissing bottle rockets were pointed right at them.

“Screaming bottle of death-jutsu!” Dan yelled.

The rockets exploded into the air just as the men turned to run. Behind them, Amy burst out from under a section of tarp. She made a noise that was part battle cry and part scream of terror, and pulled hard on it.

Amy was no Wonder Woman, but the men’s panic and the slick, snow-covered surface of the tarp were enough. The two kidnappers fell on top of each other, under a shower of fireworks. Amy threw the tarp over the kidnappers. Dan lit the bottle rocket daisy chain and tossed it in after them, then tied the ends of the tarp in a quick, messy knot. Inside, there was a series of screeches and cracks, and the kidnappers started shrieking.

Amy grabbed Dan’s hand and ran.

“That whole thing would have been much cooler in my ninja costume,” Dan puffed.

“No, it wouldn’t,” said Amy. She rounded the corner that led back the way they came, in toward town.

And slammed right into the third kidnapper.

Things seemed to happen in slow motion. Both Amy and the kidnapper were knocked back. Dan let go of Amy’s hand, and before he even realized what he was doing he charged forward, pushing the off-balance figure with all his strength.

Somehow the shove worked, and the man fell over into the snow. Dan grabbed Amy, pulling her back into a run.

But the kidnapper was up fast, and chasing them

down. Looking back, Amy realized that he was gaining on them with incredible speed, even in the snow. His shining, blank visor gave no clue as to the person inside, but he was close enough that Amy could see herself reflected in the helmet, running, her face a contorted mask of fear. In the quiet of the snowy street, Amy could hear the man's heavy, growling breaths under his helmet as he ran.

Then he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a gleaming steel knife.

For a brief second, the blade caught the reflection of the red stripe in the kidnapper's jacket, and Amy imagined it covered in blood.

"No, no, no, no," she pleaded, straining forward. Though she ran desperately, it was difficult to get any traction in the snow. Her legs were burning, but she willed them to keep going. Snow whipped past her face, but Amy couldn't feel it anymore. All she could think about was the gleam of the knife and the blank visor of the kidnapper behind her.

"He's gaining!" Dan screamed. *"He's got a knife!"*

"I know!"

Amy didn't dare look behind her again—he sounded too close. Any second now she'd be wrenched back and feel the edge of that knife pushed against her neck.

Then she saw it.

The route she'd taken from the populated street was right in front of them. It glowed with a shifting white and blue light, like some magical pathway home in a fairy tale. And below the noise of her ragged breathing, of the slap of

the man's feet just behind them, she heard a sound more wonderful than all the Tchaikovsky scores combined—a car engine.

Amy made a hard left turn, practically dragging Dan with her. There, idling on the side of the road, was a police car flashing its lights. Amy had never seen anything more beautiful.

“It’s them!” said a nearby voice. “The kids who made the call!”

Two police officers rushed over to Amy and Dan. Huffing and wheezing, Dan turned around to point to their pursuer, but the street was empty of anything except soft, white snow.



“This can’t possibly all be for us,” Dan said, his mouth hanging open long after he’d finished speaking. The parlor of Grace’s mansion was filled wall to wall with Christmas decorations. Enormous, ornate wreaths hung on the walls, dressed in shimmering white ribbons, and almost every surface in the room was covered in flickering red and gold candles. A warm fire crackled conversationally from the fireplace in the back of the room, where two beautiful stockings were hanging, full to bursting.

At the center of the parlor, a giant tree towered over piles and piles of gifts in shining red and green wrapping paper, all of which was encircled by what looked like a functioning toy train set. It was as if a city of presents had been built into the side of a jolly green mountain.

Mugs of steaming chocolate, eggnog, and cider were laid out on a table, as well as a feast of meats, cheeses, and candy. Dan noted with approval that there were plenty of red gummies.

“Well, it isn’t for Beatrice,” said Grace, crossing her arms and smiling. Christmases at her mansion had always been elaborate. After everything Amy and Dan had been through, all the loss, she felt they deserved it. But this year Grace had gone all out.

“This is incredible,” Amy said, shaking her head. “It must have taken weeks to put all this together.”

Grace gave her an odd smile. “I had a feeling we’d want a big Christmas this year. A day to remember.”

When Amy and Dan had arrived at her house in a police car, Grace had ushered them inside quickly. The police said they wanted statements from the two, but Grace insisted they leave her grandchildren to enjoy what was left of their Christmas. In the end, the officers relented, so long as Grace promised to bring them to the station the next day. No one could stand up to Grace when she’d made up her mind.

Dan rushed over to the tree and lifted a box with his name on it, tearing into the wrapping paper.

Amy grabbed a cup of cider and sat down in one of the parlor’s plush leather chairs with a sigh of pleasure.

“My legs are killing me,” she said. “I’m never exercising again.”

“Baseball cards!” Dan shouted. His eyes widened as he pulled one out. “Do you know how much this one is

worth?!”

Amy plugged her ears. “If you don’t be quiet, I’m going to tell Grace to take it back.”

Dan answered by turning the train set on. It rattled to life and chugged forward with a pleasant whistle.

“I have my own questions for the two of you about what happened,” said Grace. “You must be exhausted and half-starved, though. Get to work on the chocolate and cider. I have a few calls to make, but when I get back you can unwrap the rest of your presents and tell me everything.”

“Okay,” said Dan, not even looking up from the cards fanned out in his hand.

“Thanks, Grace,” said Amy, sinking even deeper into the chair. “But can I take a shower first? We kind of had to spend a little time in a dumpster today.”

Grace smiled. “I’ve hidden in my fair share of trash cans before. Nothing to be embarrassed about. I’ll bring back some towels.”

Grace stepped from the parlor into a long, dark hallway and closed the door. The warm light of the fire and candles cut off abruptly, leaving only the light of the darkening twilight to guide her. Still, she moved surely down the hallway, stopping in front of a door and turning on a light in the room inside, where a phone was set out on a small side table.

Grace picked it up, and dialed a number from memory.

“Good afternoon. Yes, I know what day it is, so spare me the dramatics. I need you to begin preparations to hire Nellie Gomez right away. Beatrice won’t be a problem. I

will insist. Thank you.”

Grace hung up, staring out at nothing for a moment. When she broke into a small coughing fit, Saladin entered the room, watching her from afar.

“So,” Grace said softly, after the coughs subsided. “The Vespers are back.”

Her fingers clenched into tight fists. The pain of her regret was almost physical. Though it agonized her more than they would ever know, there was no choice. The Clue hunt *would go on*, and Dan and Amy would be right in the middle of it. If they only understood what they’d actually accomplished today, escaping the clutches of perhaps the most terrifying organization the world had ever seen. If they only . . .

They’re only children! Grace lifted her fists and pounded them into the side table. Saladin ran from the room in terror.

She exhaled softly. This was their last Christmas together. The last simple, uncomplicated one the two might ever have. She wouldn’t spoil it.

“Just one more call to make,” Grace said. She picked up the receiver, and her hand lingered over the buttons.

Then, slowly and deliberately, she dialed a number she thought she would never have to call. After three rings, a voice answered.

“Hello, Professor Astrid Rosenbloom? My name is Grace Cahill. Professor, it’s imperative that you listen to me with an open mind. The fate of the world may well be at stake.”