

CAHILLS vs. VESPER

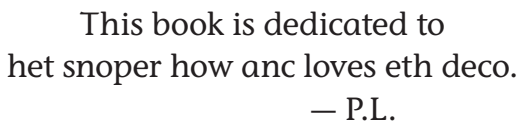
THE DEAD OF NIGHT



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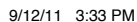
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CHAPTER 1

In all his eleven years, Atticus Rosenbloom never imagined he'd die on a bed of fresh rolls and sticky buns.

Of course, he never imagined being tied up, shoved into a sack, thrown into the back of a bakery truck, and taken on a high-speed tour over every pothole in the Czech Republic, either. If he needed any proof that hanging out with Amy and Dan Cahill was trouble, this was it.

"Wohogashamee?" he shouted. It was the best he could manage for "Where are you guys taking me?" with a bandanna pulled across his mouth.

It was no use. They couldn't hear him.

He fought back desperate tears. This had to be a mistake. They must have wanted some other nerdy kid with dreads, a plaid shirt, and beat-up Vans.

He jerked his body left and right, trying to loosen the ropes around his wrists. His head banged against a row of metal shelves. Breads and pastries cascaded to the floor, their sweet, yeasty smell seeming to mock him.



“Careful with the crullers, will you?” came a taunt from the front seat. “We may need them on the flight.”

Atticus froze. He knew the voice.

His brain, which had absorbed eleven languages already, did not forget distinctive sounds. Or near-death experiences. Like yesterday’s, when Dan and Amy lay trapped in a locked, burning library. Atticus and his half brother, Jake, had tried to help, only to be attacked by a woman and a guy dressed in black.

A guy with the same voice as this cruller-loving kidnapper.

Dan said they were killers. Twins. Vespers.

Suddenly, the whole thing was making some awful sense.

He knew Dan and Amy were Madrigals, the elite branch of the world’s most powerful family, the Cahills. The Vespers were bad guys who had kidnapped seven Cahills. As ransom, Dan and Amy had to perform nasty tasks—breaking into museums, stealing ancient artifacts, solving impossible codes. Which they were capable of doing, because they’d found something equally impossible called the 39 Clues.

So why did the Vespers gas Dan and Amy in a library? And why do they want me?

Nuts. The whole thing was nuts!

The truck veered abruptly to the right. Atticus slid on a layer of raspberry jam and banged against the rear door.

As he screamed in pain, the truck came to a



sudden stop. The door opened and a pair of hands untied his sack. In a moment, Atticus was squinting against the sudden sunlight. The *whoosh* of a jet engine nearly knocked him over.

"Sorry for the bumpy ride," his abductor said, yanking the gag out of his mouth. "The next will be smoother."

Atticus's eyes quickly adjusted. The guy was maybe in his twenties. He looked like he'd wandered off the set of a magazine shoot for *Travel + Leisure*—blond, blue-eyed, tanned, and buff. Atticus could feel the rope being untied from his hands and replaced with a handcuff on one wrist behind him. A silky female voice added, "How many boys your age can say they've been on a private jet—for free?"

"I'm not a boy!" Atticus blurted, the words spilling out of his mouth faster than he could think. "Okay, chronologically, yes, eleven years old fits the definition, but in actuality, I'm a college freshman. So if you're looking for a boy, you've made a mistake!"

The woman came around to his side, her wrist now cuffed to his. "Just because we're holding hands, college boy, don't get any ideas."

Atticus recoiled from her clammy grip. She was unmistakably this guy's twin, but with the blondness cranked up to eleven. Her baker's uniform had extra-long sleeves to hide the handcuffs from sight.

"We don't make mistakes, Atticus," the guy said. "We know you won the county fifth-grade chess



championship, and the state spelling bee on the word *renaissance*. By the way, I always had trouble with that word—”

“Let me go right now or I’ll scream bloody murder!” Atticus shouted.

The man grabbed Atticus by the shirt collar. “If you scream, little dude, there *will* be bloody murder. And with that one hundred seventy-five IQ, you’re too smart to put your brother and father in danger.”

Atticus tried not to panic. The bits of knowledge—the cruel taunts—were like pricks of a tiny knife blade, keeping him off balance.

The man looked away briefly, checking his reflection in the window of a tan-brick building nearby. He ran his fingers carefully through his hair. “You babysit, Cheyenne. I’ll run ahead to see that the jet’s ready.”

“Make it quick, Casper,” his sister said, pushing Atticus forward. “And be sure there are enough mirrors on board for you.”

“Your names are *Casper* and *Cheyenne*?” Atticus managed.

“And our last name is Wyoming. Want to make something of it?” Cheyenne yanked his wrist, picking up the pace. “We’d planned on giving you a meal, a parachute, and a safe landing. We could always forget the parachute.”

“Wh-what are you going to do with me?” Atticus asked.

“We’re taking you to a more secure place,” Cheyenne





replied. "For a few questions. A simple transfer of . . . guardianship."

The blade twisted.

Atticus had always taken pride in being different. In being one of a kind. But there was one aspect he'd trade in a nanosecond.

He could still hear his mother's words on her death-bed: *I am passing along Guardianship to you. . . . You must continue. Tradition. So much at stake.*

All he knew was that Guardians fought the Vespers. And that he was the only one left.

"I—I don't know anything about Guardians!" Atticus said.

"Maybe you'll change your mind when we're through with you," Cheyenne said.

Atticus's legs wobbled. "What if my mom died before she could tell me anything?"

"I'd say that was pretty bad parenting," Cheyenne said with a shrug.

Atticus's panicked eyes scanned the airport. In minutes they would be on a plane, speeding away from Prague. He would be Hostage Number Eight. Caught by two Vespers who had already tried to gas Dan and Amy.

The Wyomings would think nothing of whacking Atticus Rosenbloom.

Think, Atticus. It's the one thing you're good at.

Casper was barking orders to a gray-haired airport worker at a hangar fifty yards beyond the tan-brick





building. Cheyenne was pulling hard, trying to walk faster.

Atticus hated holding hands with this creep. The last female he had ever held hands with was his mom.

Mom, who was the kindest, smartest woman he ever knew.

Mom, who was a Guardian. Who told him in her last breath to *stay friends with Dan Cahill*. Who knew trouble was ahead.

Guardians were mixed up with the Cahills. Mom must have known something like this would happen. She had been taking precautions for years. She had secret papers. A weird tech guru on retainer.

Beezer.

The name popped like a flash of neon out of an inky mental cloud—Max Beezer, Mom’s tech guy. Atticus and Jake had found tons of his little gadgets after Mom had died. Max had turned most of them over to Mom’s assistant, Dave Speminer, but he had saved some of the cool ones for Atticus. Like the miniature tracker that he and Jake had been tinkering with yesterday. Neither of them was sure how it worked. It was nanotech. Weird design, way too tiny.

But worth a try.

He needed a moment alone. With his key chain.

Frantically he felt in his left pocket, but the chain was gone. He slowed down and moaned deeply, doubling over.

Cheyenne glared at him. “What?”





"Nothing. I'm okay. Really." Atticus convulsed again. "All those pastries on the truck . . . plus motion sickness. Bad combo. But I'll be f-f-fine."

"Oh, great—" Cheyenne stopped.

Casper's voice bellowed from within: "What do you mean, the plane isn't ready? Hello? Earth to old guy? We paid you in advance."

Cheyenne rolled her eyes. "Don't ever treat your elders like that if you grow up." Glancing toward the battered men's room door, she said, "This isn't a stupid trick, is it?"

Atticus gulped down some air. "I'll just"—breath—"sit next to you on the plane"—breath—"and hold it in."

"No, you won't." She pushed him toward the men's room door, kicked it open, and immediately blanched. "Ucch. That is the grossest thing I've seen in my life."

"I don't mind." Atticus pulled her inside, but she yanked back.

Reaching into her pocket, she took out a set of cuff keys and unlocked him. "You have two minutes. And don't try anything funny, or you will be so sorry."

Atticus peered into the bathroom and grimaced. "I need my key chain. So I can use my disinfectant."

"Your *what*?" Cheyenne said.

"My Germ Away," Atticus replied.

"What kind of eleven-year-old boy takes disinfectant into a men's room?" Cheyenne snapped.

"A clean one?" Atticus offered with a shrug. "It's just that . . . well, *you* see the sink and the toilet. . . . I mean,





we'll be handcuffed together and all. . . ."

Cheyenne's face was turning green. She reached into her pocket and pulled out Atticus's enormous key ring. It contained seven keys, five plastic store rewards cards, a screwdriver, a flash drive, and a tiny but festive-looking can of Germ Away. She carefully examined the ring, item by item.

Atticus held his breath.

A slow smile crept across his captor's face as she held up the flash drive. "Ooh, clever boy. A transmitter!" She unhooked the drive, dropped it to the ground, and crushed it beneath her boot. With a triumphant, malevolent grin, she handed the key ring to Atticus. "Welcome to the big leagues, where IQ runs a distant second to street smarts. You have two minutes."

Atticus's jaw dropped. He cast a forlorn glance at the shattered pile of plastic and steel on the ground. As he turned to the men's room, he fought back a sob.

Slamming the door behind him, he flicked on the light.

One minute and fifty-four seconds.

He turned the sink taps all the way. Brown water gushed out loudly into a stained basin. He moaned. He could hear Cheyenne calling out to her brother.

Atticus held up his key ring, separating out the small can of Germ Away. Carefully he twisted open the cap.

It beeped.

Fingers shaking, he tapped an app on the tiny screen. And he began typing a code into the keypad.

