

CAHILLS vs. VESPERS

SHATTERPROOF



ROLAND SMITH

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For the fearless foursome
Will, Jack, Ethan, and JR.
— R.S.



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CHAPTER 1

On a bus to Berlin, Germany

“Bluetooth earpieces are so geeky,” Dan Cahill said.

“But they free up your hands for surfing the web, stealing priceless jewels, and eating pastry,” Atticus said, taking a huge bite out of an apple strudel.

“And picking your nose,” Dan added, which caused Atticus to blow a mouthful of strudel all over the seat in front of them occupied by Dan’s sister, Amy, who was trying to sleep.

Amy had heard the entire lame exchange—and felt the half-chewed pastry chunks splatter the back of her head—but she resisted the strong urge to turn around and tell the boys to shut up. She was happy that the old, goofy Dan was back, acting like a complete idiot. He had grown up way too much in the past few weeks, and she hadn’t liked what he was turning into. Dan had seen too much, too fast, and lately she’d caught glimpses of something dark inside him.

And the pressure on the two of them was growing.



Vesper One was not just a step ahead, he was miles ahead of them. He not only knew what they were going to do before they did it, he even seemed to know what they were thinking. *But so far, no hostages have died*, she reminded herself. *We have handled every ridiculous and dangerous task Vesper One has thrown at us. Our friends are still alive.*

She wondered how much longer it could last.

Seven members of the Cahill family had been kidnapped and a man known only as Vesper One was threatening to kill them one at a time unless Amy and Dan delivered a series of bizarre ransoms. He was pulling their strings like a puppet master, teasing them, commanding them, and they had no choice but to obey. Which is why Amy found herself on a bus, in a snowstorm, moving doggedly toward their next target even though their flight had been canceled.

"I've discovered that Berlin is not the only place having weird weather," Atticus said to Dan.

Their long flight from Samarkand had barely landed in Heidelberg when the airport was closed due to the earliest snowfall in Germany's history. The airline company put the grumbling passengers on buses for a slushy six-hour drive to Berlin.

"There's a heat wave in Attleboro—upper nineties. In the Pacific Northwest, where some places get one hundred twenty-plus inches of rain, they're having a drought. Climatologists are scrambling to figure out the strange weather shift."

Dan wasn't paying attention. "You strudel-chunked your laptop!" he said.

This started another round of hysterical giggling, causing several other passengers to curse in German and "Shh!" them, which the boys completely ignored.

Amy shook her head in wonder. Listening to the two boys, you wouldn't know that a couple days earlier, Atticus had almost been murdered. She pulled a strudel chunk out of her hair. *It's as if none of it ever happened. But it did happen. Worse things have happened. . . .*

Amy looked out the window at the blowing snow in the gray waning light and pushed the worries firmly out of her mind. They were just entering Berlin, the site of their current assignment. Vesper One had sent them yet another cryptic ransom note on the satellite phone he had so kindly provided for them. Every time it chimed, Amy felt dread surge deep in her belly.

Well, time to celebrate. And what better place than the cheerful city of Berlin? Home of a priceless jewel, in a heavily guarded museum. I trust you have heard of it. Because your next assignment is to liberate it. And deliver it to me.

Thanks in advance. And a jolly "Guten Tag!" from Uncle Alistair.

Vesper One



The puppet master at work, Amy thought bitterly. No mention of the name of the museum, which jewel, or how long we have to steal it before he murders one of our friends.

Jake Rosenbloom, Atticus's older half brother, was sound asleep in the window seat next to her. He was an arrogant jerk, but she had to admit he was easy to look at, even with his brown eyes closed, his lips half open, and a tiny drop of drool leaking from the corner of his mouth. Looking at him, she found her lips fluttering upward into a smile until she caught herself and abruptly frowned.

There's nothing to smile about! she reminded herself.

The boys were uncharacteristically silent. Amy leaned out of her seat and looked back to see what trouble they had found. Dan had the window seat and was looking at his smartphone. Atticus was hunched over in the aisle seat, his dreads dangling over the laptop screen as his nimble fingers flew over the keyboard like a virtuoso pianist.

"Any luck figuring out which museum we're supposed to . . ." Amy didn't want to say "rob" for fear of being overheard.

Atticus shook his head. "There are over a hundred and seventy museums and galleries in Berlin. It's impossible to say which one of them has—"

"What we're looking for," Amy interrupted. Atticus was a genius, but he was only eleven years old. He sometimes forgot that anyone could be eavesdropping.

"Uh . . . right," he said, darting a quick look at their fellow passengers.

"We're here," Dan said, wiping the fog off the window with his hand. He looked at Amy. "What's your plan?"

"I don't have a plan, uh, Frederick."

"Frederick?" Dan said.

"Frederick Wimple," Amy said. It was just the latest of a series of fake identities, counterfeit passports, and forged birth certificates cooked up by a team of Cahills at their command center in Attleboro. *Where is Sinead coming up with these names?* Amy wondered.

"Just kidding," Dan said loudly, trying to cover his lapse. "You know I hate it when you call me Frederick. Call me Fred. If you don't, I'll start calling you Fi instead of Fiona."

"Sorry, Fred." Amy rolled her eyes.

The bus stopped and the interior lights came on.

Jake's eyes snapped open and he flinched in his chair. "Where are we?"

"Brandenburg International Airport," Amy answered.

Atticus stuck his head between the seats. "Berlin, bro. It's still snowing."

"Great," Jake said, wiping the corner of his mouth and working the kink out of his neck.

Amy smiled again, but when Jake caught the look and smiled back, she frowned and glared at him.

Dan narrowed his eyes. "What's with you, Fiona?"





"I'm just happy that we're getting off this bus," she snapped.

"Right," Dan said.



They found their rented Mercedes SUV deep inside the parking structure.

"I'll drive," Dan said.

"In your dreams, Frederick," Amy said. "You don't have a license."

"Shotgun!" Atticus said, jumping into the passenger seat.

"I didn't want to sit up there anyway," Dan claimed, climbing into the backseat next to Amy.



Jake settled into the driver's seat and started the engine, but before he could adjust his mirrors, flashing blue lights appeared behind them. A police car was blocking them in.

Amy's stomach lurched. *Interpol?* They were caught already. She met Jake's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Maybe they're just checking out the rental cars leaving the parking lot," he suggested.

"And maybe they're not," Amy spat. "If we get arrested, a hostage will die!"

Two gigantic policemen got out of the car. "Exit the vehicle!" one of them shouted. "*Schnell!*"

"Remember, your name is Fred Wimple," Amy whispered to her brother as they climbed out of the SUV and lined up beside it.

"Passports!" the larger policeman snapped.

"They're in our bags," Jake said, keeping his voice calm and steady.

"Get them!"

"Sure. No problem. No need to shout." Jake popped the back hatch open, but as he reached in to grab his pack, the second policeman pushed him roughly aside.

"Hey!" Jake balled his hands into fists.

Amy signaled him with a small shake of her head. Something wasn't right about the two cops. *If they know, why don't they just arrest us? Why are they hassling us like this?*

Jake took a deep breath.

The second policeman pulled their things out onto the ground and turned to Amy. "Which one is yours?"

Amy pointed at a small blue backpack.

The policeman grabbed it, turned it upside down, and shook everything out.

Jake stepped forward, but Amy gripped his arm.

"Let it go," she whispered.

The policeman found Amy's fake passport, then rummaged through the other packs until he held all four in his hand.

"Your business in Berlin?"

"We're tourists," Amy stammered, her knees going weak.

"Name of your hotel?"

"We . . . we were just on our way to find one."

The policeman looked at Dan. "Frederick Wimple?"





"Right," Dan answered.

"Wrong," the policeman said. "Your passport is a forgery. Your name is Dan Cahill." He pulled his pistol from its holster. "And you are all under arrest!"

Amy let out a gasp of horror. Dan's head jerked toward the nearest exit. She followed his gaze. It was a hundred feet away. They'd never make it.

The second policeman pulled four sets of flex-cuffs off his belt. "Turn around and put your hands on your heads."

Jake stepped in front of the pistol, shielding the others.

"There's some kind of mistake," he said, trying to stall for time.

"No mistake. Turn around. All of you!"

There was an agonizing pause as they calculated their options and realized they didn't have any.

"We better do what he says," Amy said in defeat.

Reluctantly, Jake turned around with the others. Amy leaned against her brother, waiting for the plastic cuffs to squeeze around her wrists. Barely two steps into Berlin, and they'd already failed.

Which hostage will die? Which hostage have we just killed?

"Something's not right," Jake whispered.

"I'll say," Dan hissed back. "We're in a parking structure with two giants with badges, guns, and no witnesses. We need to get—"

Two doors slammed behind them, followed by

the screech of rubber on cement. Amy whipped her head around to see the police car barreling through the exit. For a second, the four kids were too stunned to move.

"Quick! Let's get out of here!" Amy said.

Just then, the Vesper phone chimed.

Ha-ha. Scared you! A bag within your bag. Replace the paste with the real one at the Pergamon Museum. Because of your late arrival you only have a couple hours before closing time. If you fail, it's Death-Oh-Clock for Uncle Alistair (per Dan's request), and perhaps I'll include the youngest as a special bonus . . . Cousin Phoenix. Oh, and speaking of dead things, I've wiped the phone you swiped from Luna. You can no longer get in touch with me. I'm very unhappy with you. I'll let you know what your punishment will be. Have a nice day. ☺

Vesper One

Dan slammed his fist into the car. "He's going to punish us through Alistair!"

Amy put a hand lightly on her brother's shoulder. "We don't know that."

"Amy's right," Jake said. "He's just messing with us.





The only way to keep our heads straight is to ignore him and stay on task."

Amy didn't like the look on Dan's face as he turned on Jake. "Easy for you to say. You don't even know Alistair!"

"Stop!" Amy ordered. "I've had enough testosterone in the past five minutes to last me a lifetime. We need to focus."

She picked up Luna's pink cell phone and tossed it to Dan. "Check the phone." She looked at Jake and Atticus. "Help me get this stuff back in my pack."

"Phone's toast," Dan said after a second. He threw it against a cement pillar and it burst into a hundred pink pieces.

"Was that necessary?" Amy asked.

"Probably not," Dan answered, "but it felt good."

Amy shook her head, then noticed something in the pile that hadn't been in her backpack earlier. It was a small black velvet bag. She picked it up.

"What's that?" Dan asked.

"A bag within your bag," Atticus said.

Amy loosened the drawstrings and dumped a diamond the size of a marshmallow into her palm.