

THE MAZE OF BONES



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CHAPTER 1

Five minutes before she died, Grace Cahill changed her will.

Her lawyer brought out the alternate version, which had been her most guarded secret for seven years. Whether or not she would actually be crazy enough to use it, William McIntyre had never been certain.

“Madam,” he asked, “are you sure?”

Grace gazed out the window, across the sunlit meadows of her estate. Her cat, Saladin, snuggled beside her as he had throughout her illness, but his presence was not enough to comfort her today. She was about to set in motion events that might cause the end of civilization.

“Yes, William.” Her every breath was painful. “I’m sure.”

William broke the seal on the brown leather folder. He was a tall craggy man. His nose was pointed like a sundial so it always cast a shadow over one side of his face. He had been Grace’s adviser, her closest confidant, for half her life. They’d shared many secrets over the years, but none as perilous as this.

He held the document for her to review. A fit of coughing wracked her body. Saladin meowed with concern. Once the coughing passed, William helped her take the pen. She scrawled her weak signature across the paper.

"They're so young," William lamented. "If only their parents—"

"But their parents didn't," Grace said bitterly. "And now the children must be old enough. They are our only chance."

"If they don't succeed—"

"Then five hundred years of work have been for nothing," Grace said. "Everything collapses. The family, the world—all of it."

William nodded grimly. He took the folder from her hands.

Grace sat back, stroking Saladin's silver fur. The scene outside the window made her sad. It was too gorgeous a day to die. She wanted to have one last picnic with the children. She wanted to be young and strong and travel the world again.

But her eyesight was failing. Her lungs labored. She clutched her jade necklace—a good-luck talisman she'd found in China years ago. It had seen her through many close calls with death, many lucky misses. But the talisman couldn't help her anymore.

She'd worked hard to prepare for this day. Still, there was so much she'd left undone . . . so much she had never told the children.

"It will have to be enough," she whispered.

And with that, Grace Cahill closed her eyes for the last time.



When he was sure Grace had passed away, William McIntyre went to the window and closed the curtains. William preferred darkness. It seemed more proper for the business at hand.

The door opened behind him. Grace's cat hissed and disappeared under the bed.

William didn't look back. He was staring at Grace Cahill's signature on her new will, which had just become the most important document in the Cahill family's history.

"Well?" a brusque voice said.

William turned. A man stood in the doorway, his face obscured by shadows, his suit as black as oil.

"It's time," William said. "Make sure they suspect nothing."

William couldn't tell for sure, but he thought the man in black smiled.

"Don't worry," the man promised. "They'll never have a clue."

CHAPTER 2

Dan Cahill thought he had the most annoying big sister on the planet. And that was *before* she set fire to two million dollars.

It all started when they went to their grandmother's funeral. Secretly, Dan was excited, because he was hoping to make a rubbing of the tombstone after everyone else was gone. He figured Grace wouldn't care. She'd been a cool grandmother.

Dan loved collecting things. He collected baseball cards, autographs of famous outlaws, Civil War weapons, rare coins, and every cast he'd ever had since kindergarten (all twelve of them). At the moment, what he liked collecting best were charcoal rubbings of tombstones. He had some awesome ones back at the apartment. His favorite read:

PRUELLA GOODE

1891–1929

I'M DEAD. LET'S HAVE A PARTY.

He figured if he had a rubbing of Grace's tombstone in his collection, maybe it wouldn't feel quite so much like she was gone forever.

Anyway, the whole way from Boston to the funeral in Worcester County, his great-aunt Beatrice was driving like a very slow lunatic. She went twenty-five miles an hour on the highway and kept drifting across lanes so the other cars honked and swerved and ran into guardrails and stuff. Aunt Beatrice just kept clutching the wheel with her jeweled fingers. Her wrinkly face was made up with Day-Glo red lipstick and rouge, which made her blue hair look even bluer. Dan wondered if she gave the other drivers nightmares about old clowns.

"Amy!" she snapped, as another SUV careened down the exit ramp because Beatrice had just pulled in front of it. "Stop reading in the car! It's not safe!"

"But, Aunt Beatrice—"

"Young lady, close that book!"

Amy did, which was typical. She never put up a fight with adults. Amy had long reddish-brown hair, unlike Dan's, which was dark blond. This helped Dan pretend his sister was an alien imposter, but unfortunately they had the same eyes—green like jade, their grandmother used to say.

Amy was three years older and six inches taller than Dan, and she never let him forget it—like being fourteen

was such a big deal. Usually, she wore jeans and some old T-shirt because she didn't like people noticing her, but today she was wearing a black dress so she looked like a vampire's bride.

Dan hoped her outfit was as uncomfortable as his stupid suit and tie. Aunt Beatrice had thrown a fit when he tried to go to the funeral in his ninja clothes. It wasn't as if Grace would care if he was comfortable and deadly, the way he felt when he pretended to be a ninja, but of course Aunt Beatrice didn't understand. Sometimes it was hard for him to believe she and Grace were sisters.

"Remind me to fire your au pair as soon as we return to Boston," Beatrice grumbled. "You two have been entirely too spoiled."

"Nellie's nice!" Dan protested.

"Hmph! This *Nellie* almost let you burn down the neighbor's apartment building!"

"Exactly!"

Every couple of weeks, Beatrice fired their au pair and hired a new one. The only good thing was that Aunt Beatrice didn't live with them personally. She lived across town in a building that didn't allow kids, so sometimes it took her a few days to hear about Dan's latest exploits.

Nellie had lasted longer than most. Dan liked her because she made amazing waffles and she usually cranked her iPod up to brain-damage level. She didn't

even hear when Dan's bottle rocket collection went off and strafed the building across the alley. Dan would miss Nellie when she got fired.

Aunt Beatrice kept driving and muttering about spoiled children. Amy secretly went back to her huge book. The last two days, since they got the news about Grace's death, Amy had been reading even more than usual. Dan knew it was her way of hiding, but he kind of resented it because it shut him out, too.

"What are you reading this time?" he asked. "*Medieval European Doorknobs? Bath Towels Through the Ages?*"

Amy gave him an ugly face—or an uglier-than-usual face. "None of your business, dweeb."

"You can't call a ninja lord *dweeb*. You have disgraced the family. You must commit seppuku."

Amy rolled her eyes.

After a few more miles, the city melted into farmland. It started to look like Grace country, and even though Dan had promised himself he wouldn't get sappy, he began to feel sad. Grace had been the coolest ever. She'd treated him and Amy like real people, not kids. That's why she'd insisted they simply call her Grace, not Grandmother or Gran or Nana or any silly name like that. She'd been one of the only people who'd ever cared about them. Now she was dead, and they had to go to the funeral and see a bunch of relatives who had *never* been nice to them. . . .



The family cemetery sat at the bottom of the hill from the mansion. Dan thought it was kind of stupid they'd hired a hearse to carry Grace a hundred yards down the driveway. They could've put wheels on the coffin like they have on suitcases and that would've worked just as well.

Summer storm clouds rumbled overhead. The family mansion looked dark and gloomy on its hill, like a lord's castle. Dan loved the place, with its billion rooms and chimneys and stained glass windows.

He loved the family graveyard even more. A dozen crumbling tombstones spread out across a green meadow ringed in trees, right next to a little creek. Some of the stones were so old the writing had faded away. Grace used to take Amy and him down to the meadow on their weekend visits. Grace and Amy would spend the afternoon on a picnic blanket, reading and talking, while Dan explored the graves and the woods and the creek.

Stop that, Dan told himself. You're getting sentimental.

"So many people," Amy murmured, as they walked down the driveway.

"You're not going to freak out, are you?"

Amy fiddled with the collar of her dress. "I'm—I'm not freaking out. I just—"

"You hate crowds," he finished. "But you *knew* there'd be a crowd. They come every year."

Each winter, as long as Dan could remember, Grace had invited relatives from all over the world for a weeklong holiday. The mansion filled up with Chinese Cahills and British Cahills and South African Cahills and Venezuelan Cahills. Most of them didn't even go by the name Cahill, but Grace assured him they were all related. She'd explain about cousins and second cousins and cousins three times removed until Dan's brain started to hurt. Amy would usually go hide in the library with the cat.

"I know," she said. "But . . . I mean, *look* at them all."

She had a point. About four hundred people were gathering at the grave site.

"They just want her fortune," Dan decided.

"Dan!"

"Well? It's true."

They had just joined the procession when Dan suddenly got flipped upside down.

"Hey!" he yelled.

"Look, guys," a girl said. "We caught a rat!"

Dan wasn't in a good position to see, but he could make out the Holt sisters—Madison and Reagan—standing on either side of him, holding him by his ankles. The twins had matching purple running suits, blond pigtails, and crooked smiles. They were only eleven, same as Dan, but they had no trouble holding him. Dan saw more purple running suits behind them—the rest of the Holt family. Their pit bull,

Arnold, raced around their legs and barked.

“Let’s fling him into the creek,” Madison said.

“I wanna fling him into the bushes!” Reagan said.

“We never do *my* ideas!”

Their older brother, Hamilton, laughed like an idiot. Next to him, their dad, Eisenhower Holt, and their mom, Mary-Todd, grinned like this was all good fun.

“Now, girls,” Eisenhower said. “We can’t go flinging people at a funeral. This is a happy occasion!”

“Amy!” Dan called. “A little help here?”

Her face had gone pale. She mumbled, “Dr-dr-drop . . .”

Dan sighed in exasperation. “She’s trying to say ‘DROP ME!’”

Madison and Reagan did — on his head.

“Ow!” Dan said.

“M-M-Madison!” Amy protested.

“Y-y-yes?” Madison mimicked. “I think all those books are turning your brain to mush, weirdo.”

If it had been anybody else, Dan would’ve hit back, but he knew better with the Holts. Even Madison and Reagan, the youngest, could cream him. The whole Holt family was way too buff. They had meaty hands and thick necks and faces that looked like G.I. Joe figures. Even the mom looked like she should be shaving and chewing on a cigar.

“I hope you losers took a good last look around the house,” Madison said. “You’re not going to be invited back here anymore, now that the old witch is dead.”

“*Rawf!*” said Arnold the pit bull.

Dan looked around for Beatrice, but as usual she wasn’t anywhere near them. She’d drifted off to talk to the other old people.

“Grace wasn’t a witch,” Dan said. “And *we’re* going to inherit this place!”

The big brother, Hamilton, laughed. “Yeah, right.” His hair was combed toward the middle so it stuck up like a shark fin. “Wait till they read the will, runt. I’m gonna kick you out myself!”

“All right, team,” the dad said. “Enough of this. Formation!”

The family lined up and started jogging toward the grave site, knocking other relatives out of their way as Arnold snapped at everyone’s heels.

“Is your head okay?” Amy asked guiltily.

Dan nodded. He was a little annoyed Amy hadn’t helped him, but there was no point complaining about it. She always got tongue-tied around other people. “Man, I hate the Holts.”

“We’ve got worse problems.” Amy pointed toward the grave site, and Dan’s heart sank.

“The Cobras,” he muttered.

Ian and Natalie Kabra were standing by Grace’s coffin, looking like perfect little angels as they talked to the preacher. They wore matching designer mourning outfits that complemented their silky black hair and cinnamon-colored skin. They could’ve been child supermodels.

"They won't try anything during the funeral," Dan said hopefully. "They're just here for Grace's money like the rest of them. But they won't get it."

Amy frowned. "Dan . . . did you really believe what you said, about us inheriting the mansion?"

"Of course! You know Grace liked us best. We spent more time with her than anybody."

Amy sighed like Dan was too young to understand, which Dan hated.

"Come on," she said. "We might as well get this over with." And together they waded into the crowd.



The funeral was a blur to Dan. The minister said some stuff about ashes. They lowered the coffin into the ground. Everybody tossed in a shovelful of dirt. Dan thought the mourners enjoyed this part too much, especially Ian and Natalie.

He recognized a few more relatives: Alistair Oh, the old Korean dude with the diamond-tipped walking stick who always insisted they call him Uncle; the Russian lady Irina Spasky, who had a twitch in one eye so everybody called her Spaz behind her back; the Starling triplets—Ned, Ted, and Sinead, who looked like part of a cloned Ivy League lacrosse team. Even that kid from television was there: Jonah Wizard. He stood to one side, getting his picture taken with a bunch of girls, and there was a line of people

waiting to talk to him. He was dressed just like on TV, with lots of silver chains and bracelets, ripped jeans, and a black muscle shirt (which was kind of stupid, since he didn't have any muscles). An older African-American guy in a business suit stood behind him, punching notes in a BlackBerry. Probably Jonah's dad. Dan had heard that Jonah Wizard was related to the Cahills, but he'd never seen him in person before. He wondered if he should get an autograph for his collection.

After the service, a guy in a charcoal-gray suit stepped to the podium. He looked vaguely familiar to Dan. The man had a long pointed nose and a balding head. He reminded Dan of a vulture.

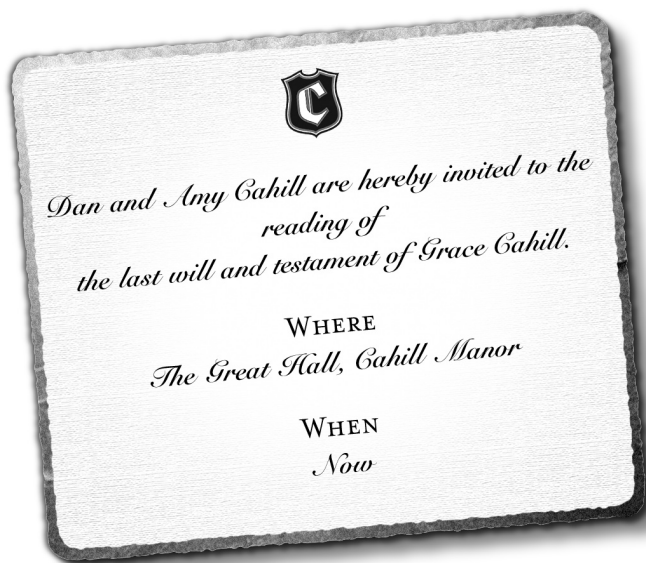
"Thank you all for coming," he said gravely. "I am William McIntyre, Madame Cahill's lawyer and executor."

"Executor?" Dan whispered to Amy. "He killed her?"

"No, you idiot," Amy whispered back. "That means he's in charge of her will."

"If you will look inside your programs," William McIntyre continued, "some of you will find a gold invitation card."

Excited murmuring broke out as four hundred people leafed through their programs. Then most of them cursed and shouted complaints when they found nothing. Dan ripped through his program. Inside was a card with a gold-leafed border. It read:



"I knew it!" Dan said.

"I assure you," Mr. McIntyre said, raising his voice above the crowd, "the invitations were not done randomly. I apologize to those of you who were excluded. Grace Cahill meant you no disrespect. Of all the members of the Cahill clan, only a few were chosen as the most likely."

The crowd started yelling and arguing. Finally, Dan couldn't stand it anymore. He called out, "Most likely to what?"

"In your case, Dan," Ian Kabra muttered right behind him, "to be a stupid American git."

His sister, Natalie, giggled. She was holding an invitation and looking very pleased with herself.

Before Dan could kick Ian in a soft spot, the gray-suited man answered. "To be the beneficiaries of Grace Cahill's will. Now, if you please, those with invitations will gather in the Great Hall."

People with invitations hurried toward the house like somebody had just yelled "Free food!"

Natalie Kabra winked at Dan. "Ciao, cousin. Must run collect our fortune." Then she and her brother strolled up the drive.

"Forget them," Amy said. "Dan, maybe you're right. Maybe we'll inherit something."

But Dan frowned. If this invitation was such a great thing, why did the lawyer guy look so grim? And why had Grace included the Kabras?

As he passed through the main entrance of the mansion, Dan glanced up at the stone crest above the door—a large C surrounded by four smaller designs—a dragon, a bear, a wolf, and two snakes entwined around a sword. The crest had always fascinated Dan, though he didn't know what it meant. All the animals seemed to glare at him, like they were about to strike. He followed the crowd inside, wondering why those animals were so mad.

The Great Hall was as big as a basketball court, with tons of armor and swords lining the walls and huge windows that looked like Batman could crash through them any minute.

William McIntyre stood at a table in front with a projector screen behind him, while everybody else filed into rows of seats. There were about forty people in all, including the Holts and the Kabras and Aunt Beatrice, who looked completely disgusted to be there—or maybe she was just disgusted that everybody *else* had been invited to her sister's will reading.

Mr. McIntyre raised his hand for quiet. He slipped a document from a brown leather folder, adjusted his bifocals, and began to read: "I, Grace Cahill, being of sound mind and body, do hereby divide my entire estate among those who accept the challenge and those who do not."

"Whoa," Eisenhower Holt interrupted. "What challenge? What's she mean?"

"I am getting to that, sir." Mr. McIntyre cleared his throat and continued: "You have been chosen as the most likely to succeed in the greatest, most perilous undertaking of all time—a quest of vital importance to the Cahill family and the world at large."

Forty people started talking at once, asking questions and demanding answers.

"'Perilous undertaking'?" Cousin Ingrid shouted. "What is she talking about?"

"I thought this was about money!" Uncle José yelled. "A quest? Who does she think we are? We're Cahills, not adventurers!"

Dan noticed Ian and Natalie Kabra exchange a meaningful look. Irina Spasky whispered something

in Alistair Oh's ear, but most of the other spectators looked as confused as Dan felt.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please," Mr. McIntyre said. "If you will direct your attention to the screen, perhaps Madame Cahill can explain things better than I."

Dan's heart did a flip-flop. What was Mr. McIntyre talking about? Then a projector on the ceiling hummed to life. The shouting in the room died down as Grace's image flickered on the screen.

She was sitting up in bed with Saladin on her lap. She wore a black dressing gown, like she was a mourner at her own funeral, but she looked healthier than the last time Dan had seen her. Her complexion was pink. Her face and hands didn't look as thin. The video must've been made months ago, before her cancer got bad. Dan got a lump in his throat. He had a crazy urge to call to her: *Grace, it's me! It's Dan!* But of course it was just an image. He looked at Amy and saw a tear trickling down the base of her nose.

"Fellow Cahills," Grace said. "If you are watching this, it means I am dead, and I have decided to use my alternate will. No doubt you are arguing amongst yourselves and giving poor Mr. McIntyre a hard time about this contest I have instituted." Grace gave the camera a dry smile. "You always were a stubborn bunch. For once, close your mouths and listen."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Eisenhower Holt protested, but his wife shushed him.

"I assure you," Grace continued, "this contest is no trick. It is deadly serious business. Most of you know you belong to the Cahill family, but many of you may not realize just how important our family is. I tell you the Cahills have had a greater impact on human civilization than any other family in history."

More confused shouting broke out. Irina Spasky stood up and yelled, "Silence! I wish to hear!"

"My relatives," Grace's image said, "you stand on the brink of our greatest challenge. Each of you has the potential to succeed. Some of you may decide to form a team with other people in this room to pursue the challenge. Some of you may prefer to take up the challenge alone. Most of you, I'm afraid, will decline the challenge and run away with your tails between your legs. Only *one* team will succeed, and each of you must sacrifice your share of the inheritance to participate."

She held up a manila envelope sealed with red wax. Her eyes were as bright and hard as steel. "If you accept, you shall be given the first of thirty-nine clues. These clues will lead you to a secret, which, should you find it, will make you the most powerful, influential human beings on the planet. You will realize the destiny of the Cahill family. I now beg you all to listen to Mr. McIntyre. Allow him to explain the rules. Think long and hard before you make your choice." She stared straight into the camera, and Dan wanted her to say something special to them: *Dan and Amy, I'll*

miss you most of all. Nobody else in this room really matters to me. Something like that.

Instead, Grace said, "I'm counting on you all. Good luck, and good-bye."

The screen went dark. Amy gripped Dan's hand. Her fingers were trembling. To Dan, it felt like they'd just lost Grace all over again. Then everyone around them started talking at once.

"Greatest family in history?" Cousin Ingrid yelled. "Is she crazy?"

"*Stubborn?*" Eisenhower Holt shouted. "She called *us* stubborn?"

"William!" Alistair Oh's voice rose above the rest. "Just a moment! There are people here I don't even recognize, people who may not even be members of the family. How do we know—"

"If you are in this room, sir," Mr. McIntyre said, "you are a Cahill. Whether your surname is Cahill or not doesn't matter. Everyone here has Cahill blood."

"Even you, Mr. McIntyre?" Natalie Kabra asked in her silky British accent.

The old lawyer flushed. "That, miss, is beside the point. Now, if I might be allowed to finish—"

"But what's this about sacrificing our inheritance?" Aunt Beatrice complained. "Where's the money? It's just like my sister to come up with some foolishness!"

"Madam," Mr. McIntyre said, "you may certainly decline the challenge. If you do, you will receive what is under your chair."

Immediately, forty people felt around under their chairs. Eisenhower Holt was so anxious he picked up Reagan's chair with her still in it. Dan discovered an envelope under his, stuck on with tape. When he opened it, he found a green slip of paper with a bunch of numbers and the words ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND. Amy had one, too. So did everybody in the room.

"What you now hold is a bank voucher," Mr. McIntyre explained. "It shall only be activated if and when you renounce your claim to the challenge. If you so choose, each of you may walk out of this room with one million dollars and never have to think of Grace Cahill or her last wishes again. Or . . . you may choose a clue—a single clue that will be your only inheritance. No money. No property. Just a clue that might lead you to the most important treasure in the world and make you powerful beyond belief . . ."

William's gray eyes seemed to settle on Dan particularly. ". . . or it might kill you. One million dollars or the clue. You have five minutes to decide."