

THE SWORD THIEF



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For Tina, Nick, and Joe, always.

—PL



CHAPTER 1

They were toast.

Amy Cahill eyed the battered black duffel bag rumbling up the airport conveyor belt. It bulged at the corners. The sign above the belt said THANK YOU FOR VISITING VENICE: RANDOM PIECES OF CHECKED LUGGAGE WILL BE SEARCHED in five languages.

“Oh, great,” Amy said. “How random is ‘random’?”

“I told you, a ninja warrior must always keep his swords in his carry-on,” whispered her brother, Dan, who had been operating on brain deficit for as long as Amy could remember.

“Excuse me, Jackie Chan, but carry-on luggage is *always* X-rayed,” Amy whispered back. “There are extra-special rules about samurai swords in *backpacks*. Even if they belong to scrawny, delusional eleven-year-olds who think they’re ninjas.”

“What was wrong with ‘we need them to slice the veal parmigiana’?” Dan said. “It would have worked fine. The Italians understand food.”

“Can you understand ‘five to twenty years, no parole’?”

Dan shrugged. He lifted up a mesh-sided pet carrier, inside of which a very disgruntled-looking Egyptian Mau was eyeing him suspiciously. “Bye-bye, Saladin,” he sang into the mesh. “Remember, when we get to Tokyo . . . red snapper sushi every night!”

“*Mrrp?*” whined Saladin from inside the carrier, as Dan set it gently onto the conveyor belt.

“Mmmm, hmm, ohh . . . *aaaaaaaaghhhh!*” came a strangled yelp from behind them. Although everyone else in the vicinity was turning with a look of alarm, Amy and Dan knew it was their au pair, Nellie Gomez, dancing to a tune on her iPod. She didn’t care that she sounded like a dying meerkat, which was one of the many cool things about Nellie Gomez.

Amy watched as the carrier disappeared through the cargo window. If the officials did search the bag, there would be alarms. Screaming Italian cops. She, Dan, and Nellie would have to run.

Not that they weren’t used to that. They’d been running a lot lately. It began the day they accepted the challenge in their grandmother Grace’s will. They’d had to go to her mansion in Massachusetts for that—and immediately afterward the mansion went up in flames. Since then, they’d nearly been killed in a collapsing building in Philadelphia, attacked by monks in Austria, and chased by boats through the canals

of Venice. They'd been the target of dirty tricks from every branch of the Cahill family.

Once in a while—like every three seconds—Amy wondered why the heck they were doing this. She and Dan could have opted for a cool million dollars each, like a lot of Cahill family members did. But Grace had offered another choice: a race for 39 Clues to a secret that had been hidden for centuries, the greatest source of power the world had known.

Until then, Amy and Dan had been leading pretty lame, ordinary lives. After their parents had died seven years ago, their crabby Aunt Beatrice had taken them in—and the only cool thing she'd ever done was hire Nellie. But now they knew they were part of something way bigger, a huge family that included ancestors like Ben Franklin and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It seemed like all the great geniuses of the world had been Cahills. That was pretty amazing.

"Hey, Amy, did you ever want to, like, get on the conveyor belt and see what happened? Like, 'Hey, don't mind me, I'm just hanging with the cargo?'"

And then there was Dan.

"Come on!" Amy grabbed her brother by the arm and headed for the departure gates. Nellie was right on their heels, spinning the wheel of her iPod with one hand and adjusting her snake nose ring with the other.

Amy eyed the airport clock. 2:13. The flight was scheduled to leave at 2:37. This was an international

flight. You were supposed to arrive at the airport *two hours* in advance, not twenty-four minutes. “We’re not going to make it!” Amy said.

Now they were running toward gate 4, dodging other passengers. “Guess they didn’t find Rufus and Remus, huh?” Dan called out.

“Who are Rufus and Remus?” Amy asked.

“The swords!” Dan said. “I named them after the founders of Italy.”

“It’s *Romulus* and Remus,” Amy hissed. “And they founded Rome. And don’t *ever* say that word!”

“Rome?”

“No—*s-w-o-r-d*.” Amy dropped her voice to a whisper as they pulled up to the rear of a very long security line. “Do you want us to go to *j-a-i-l*?”

“O-o-p-s.”

“O-O-O-O . . .” Nellie wailed off-key to some unidentifiable punk track.

The security line seemed to take, like, thirty-two hours. The worst part for Amy, as always, was having to take off her jade necklace to go through the X-ray machine. She hated to part from that necklace even for a minute. When they emerged, the clock read 2:31. They raced down a long corridor toward the gate.

“Now boarding all remaining passengers for Japan Airlines, flight eight-oh-seven to Tokyo, at gate four,” said a voice over the PA system in heavily accented English. “Have your boarding passes ready, and . . . *arrrrrrivederci!*”

They pulled up to the rear of the line behind a sniffling toddler who turned and sneezed on Nellie. “Ew. Manners?” she said, wiping her arm on her sleeve.

“Has anyone seen my boarding pass?” Dan said, rummaging in his pockets.

“Have mine,” drawled Nellie. “It’s covered with boogers.”

“Try inside your book,” Amy said, pointing toward the paperback stuffed in Dan’s back pants pocket.

He pulled out a dog-eared copy of *Classic All-Time Movie Comedies*, which he’d found in the backseat of the cab on the way to the airport. The boarding pass was marking page 93. “It’s a *Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*,” Dan said.

“That’s the smartest observation you’ve made all day,” Amy said.

“It’s the name of a movie,” Dan replied. “I’m reading about it. The plot is so awesome—”

“Step forward, please—welcome aboard!” chirped a perky blond flight attendant whose Japan Airlines headset bobbed every time she nodded a greeting. She was wearing a name tag that read I. RINALDI.

Nellie handed over her boarding pass and headed into the accordion-walled tunnel that led to the plane’s hatch. “Um, guys, this shouldn’t be so hard to do,” she called over her shoulder.

Dan held out his pass to the attendant. “It’s really a funny movie. Like, all these old-school comedians, searching for this treasure—”

“Sorry, he’s challenged,” Amy said to the attendant, handing over her pass and nudging him toward the tunnel.

But Ms. Rinaldi scooted in front of them, blocking their path. “*Un momento?*” she said, trying to keep her airline smile while listening to something over her headset. “*Sì . . . ah, sì sì sì sì . . . buono,*” she said into the headset mike.

Then, with a shrug toward Dan and Amy, she said, “You come with me, please?”

As they followed her toward the corner, Amy tried to keep herself from shaking. The swords. They’d found the swords.

Dan was looking all puppy-eyed at her. Sometimes all she needed to do was look at him, and she knew exactly what he was thinking.

Maybe we should run, his eyes were saying.

Uh, where? she said back to him silently.

I will make myself invisible by using ninja mind control, he was thinking.

You have to HAVE a mind to do it, she beamed to him.

Nellie peered out from the tunnel entrance. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“It is routine,” Ms. Rinaldi called out, turning to face Amy and Dan. “My supervisor tells me it is random check. You please wait here by the wall?”

She bustled away, holding the two boarding passes, and disappeared around the corner.

From inside the tunnel, another attendant called out to Nellie, “Please take your seat, dear. Don’t worry, the plane will not leave without all passengers.”

“I hate airports.” Nellie rolled her eyes and turned back toward the plane. “See you inside. I’ll save you a bag of peanuts.”

As she disappeared, Amy hissed to her brother, “I knew it—they searched your duffel. They’re going to detain us and contact Aunt Beatrice, and that’s the last we’ll ever see of Nellie —”

“Will you stop being so gloomy?” Dan said. “We’ll tell them someone else put the swor—the you-know-whats in the duffel. We never saw them before in our lives. We’re kids. They always believe kids. And besides, maybe they *haven’t* searched our bags. Maybe they’re just double-checking your passport to make sure they can allow someone so ugly to board a plane—”

Amy elbowed him in the ribs.

“Final boarding call, flight eight-oh-seven to Tokyo, gate four!” a voice boomed.

A third attendant was putting a web-ribbon barrier in front of the tunnel.

Amy was nervous now. They weren’t going to hold the plane forever. “We have to get that flight attendant—Rinaldi,” she said. “Come on!”

Amy grabbed Dan by the arm and they raced to the corner, taking it at a run.

Whomp! They ran smack into another pair who were racing toward the gate. Amy bounced away, the

wind momentarily knocked out of her. She bumped into Dan, who nearly fell to the floor. “What the—?” he blurted.

The two strangers were wrapped in full-length black trench coats with high collars obscuring their faces. One of them wore expensive black dress shoes; the other, jewel-encrusted sneakers. As they barreled past Dan and Amy, waving boarding passes in the air, one of them called out, “Clear, please!”

Amy recognized the voice. She grabbed Dan and whirled around. The two were grabbing the barrier and pulling it aside. “Wait!” Amy said.

An airline official shouted at them, too, sprinting to head them off. The two politely stopped and handed over their boarding passes. He examined the passes quickly, nodded, and pulled back the barrier. “Enjoy your flight, Amy and Dan,” he said.

The two passengers stepped into the tunnel entrance and immediately turned around. They pulled down their raised collars and grinned.

Amy gasped at the sight of their cousins, their archrivals in the search for the 39 Clues, a pair whose nastiness was surpassed only by their wealth and cunning.

“*Sayonara*, suckers!” sang Ian and Natalie Kabra.