

THE BLACK CIRCLE



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SCHOLASTIC INC.

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON AUCKLAND SYDNEY  
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# CHAPTER 1

Amy Cahill liked to be the first one up in the morning. But not if it was because someone was screaming outside her hotel-room door.

“Telegram for Mr. Cahill!”

The words were accompanied by a thunderous knocking. Amy bolted upright in a panic, a terrifying thought racing through her mind. *Madrigals!*

The yell came again.

“Message for you!”

Amy, her brother, Dan, and their au pair, Nellie, had fled to a different Cairo hotel in the night, afraid they might be attacked by the mysterious sect they knew so little about. *The Madrigals couldn't know where we are, could they?*

Dan rolled off the fuzzy gold couch he was sleeping on and landed on the floor with a thud.

“No, Irina! Not the Catfish Hunter!” he yelled. Amy sighed. Once again, her brother was locked in a dream in which their cousin Irina Spasky was shredding a beloved baseball card with her fingernails.

“Wake up, Dan. You’re dreaming.”

Amy had never felt so tired in her life, and her brother was, as usual, acting like an idiot.

“Telegram!”

The knock at the door came again.

“Dan! Get . . . the . . . door!”

Amy stuffed her face in a pillow and screamed. She was awake for good and she knew it. Peering past her pillow, she saw that Nellie was still totally dead to the world.

“Coming!” cried Amy. “Hold your horses!”

When she reached the door, she hesitated, a familiar fear gripping her insides. What if she let someone dangerous in?

*Come on, Amy, get a grip.*

Amy opened the door, her eyes settling on an Egyptian bellboy standing in the hall. He was shorter than she was by a mile, wearing a spiffy red uniform with gold buttons up the front that was at least two sizes too big. In his hands was a sealed envelope.

“For you, madam, from the desk. Someone has leaved it.”

Amy took the envelope, and the bellboy stepped a tiny bit closer, beaming at her expectantly.

“I bring message from the desk,” said the bellboy. “For you, madam.”

His feet were halfway in and halfway out of the room, which made Amy nervous.

“Is there something else you have for me?” asked Amy.

“Someone has leaved it for you,” he said, pointing at the envelope with a happy grin.

“Give him this,” said Dan. “Then I can go back to sleep.”

Dan’s voice was muffled, and when Amy turned around, she saw that he was talking into the carpeted floor, too lazy to lift his head. He was holding up a five-pound Egyptian note, worth about one dollar.

Amy shut the door. Curiosity had killed any hope of going back to bed. The envelope had been addressed on an old-style typewriter that appeared to be missing the capital A. The underline was also randomly stuck on some of the letters.



She tore it open and sat on the couch, her face whitening as she scanned the note. Saladin meowed hungrily and raised his back, claws bared on the gold bedspread.

“Dan, you better get up here.”

Dan didn’t move, so she yelled.

“TELEGRAM FOR DAN!”

Dan lifted his head as if mustering the energy for a comeback, but Amy could tell her brother was still clawing his way out of dreamland. He stood up from the floor and dropped heavily onto the couch. Nellie was still curled up under the covers on one of the two beds in the room, the thin white cord of her iPod earbuds snaking out from under a pile of seven pillows covering her head.

“That girl could sleep through a demolition derby,” said Dan.

“Dan! Listen!” Amy said, holding the telegram as she began to read. “Cairo International Airport, locker number 328. 56-12-19. NRR.”

“Sounds like a lame trap set by one of our competitors. Let’s order room service and go back to bed.”

“I don’t think so,” said Amy. She held out the message so Dan could examine it. What he found on the paper took his breath away.

								
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DATE:								
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DESIGN PATENT №								
349384 - 0245								
-5653 - 00345								
<b>TELEGRAM</b>								
<small>Cairo Modern Telegraph transmits and delivers messages subject to certain terms and conditions.</small>								
<b>TO: DAN CAHILL</b>		<b>FROM:</b>						
<p>Cairo International Airport, locker number 328. 56-12-19. NRR.</p> <p>Under the birch tree Six inches deep Lies a treasure of bottle caps A child did keep.</p>								

Lazy Dan left the building and was replaced by Alarmed Dan.

“No one knows about this, not even Nellie.”

“Grace knew,” said Amy. “You, me, and Grace. Whoever sent this must have known Grace well enough to get this out of her.”

Dan was still too dumbstruck to respond, but Amy knew what he was thinking. Just last year he’d brought his prized collection of bottle caps to Grace’s mansion—everything from Dr. Pepper to vintage Coca-Cola—and all sixty-three caps in a super-cool old-school cigar box. Grace had given him a spade and told him he could bury it on the property if he wanted. He’d told Amy and Grace where the treasure was hidden, even how deep he’d buried the box, just in case he died unexpectedly, snowboarding or skydiving. As he said at the time, it paid to be safe with a bottle cap collection.

Dan looked at his sister, his green eyes brimming with hope.

“Do you think Grace is helping us again?”

Amy and Dan both used Grace’s name as if their grandmother were still alive, and for a moment it felt like she was. Their beloved old Grace, who’d given her heirs a choice: a million dollars or one of 39 Clues leading to immense power. Amy still couldn’t believe where the chase had led them in such a short time. They’d traversed four continents and been nearly killed more than once by their own relatives. If there was even a

chance Grace Cahill was still offering help from the grave, Amy knew they had to follow the trail.

“Come on. We’re getting out of here.”



Ten minutes later, Dan and Amy made their way down to the bustling hotel lobby with nothing but a backpack between them. Dan had insisted on bringing his precious laptop, and Amy had grabbed Nellie’s cell phone, just in case.

“I left Nellie a note saying we went looking for doughnuts. Let’s just hope this doesn’t take all morning. What we need right now is a way to the airport,” said Amy.

“No worries, I got it covered.”

Dan opened their backpack and removed a wad of money, stuffing the rumpled bills into his pocket. It didn’t amount to much, about fifty American dollars’ worth of Egyptian pound notes.

“Yo! Cabby! Yo!”

Dan held out a few bills and waited.

“We’re not in New York,” Amy hissed. “Try to act like you have a clue.”

As if by magic, a black-and-white car with a monstrous luggage rack pulled up and skidded to a stop. An Egyptian man jumped out and waved Dan and Amy over.

“Come, come! I have nice car for you!”

Dan tossed Amy an I-told-you-so look and marched for the car. The cabdriver hopped out and opened the door, then quick as a rabbit, snatched the backpack from Dan and headed for the trunk.

“No thanks, amigo. I’ll keep the bag on me if you don’t mind.”

The driver didn’t seem to understand, so Dan grabbed the backpack, handed the cabby a ten-pound note, and dove into the backseat, commando style.

Amy turned bright red and stammered an apology. She had a feeling Dan was warming up for a long morning of humiliating his sister.

“We’re in a hurry, my man,” said Dan, confirming Amy’s suspicions. “The airport, double time.”

“Fast is middle name!” The man laughed, slamming the door just shy of Amy’s foot and racing for the front seat.

“You see there, sis? Everything is fine. This guy is perfect. Just sit back and re-*laaaaaaah*—!”

The cab (and Dan) screamed into traffic, weaving and dodging like an amusement park ride gone haywire. Amy was tossed into Dan, then against the door, then back into Dan as they dodged honking buses and irate pedestrians. When they hit a slow patch, Amy caught sight of a big problem behind them. She turned to her brother, wide-eyed and worried.

"He does leave a little to be desired in the safety department, doesn't he? I'll ask him to take 'er down a notch."

"N-N-NO! Tell him to speed up! Speed up!"

Dan glanced past his sister's stricken face to the bright yellow Vespa zigzagging between cars behind them. Someone in a purple sweat suit was riding it, and that someone was huge.

"Hamilton Holt!"

It was Hamilton Holt of the Holt clan, a family of nitwits also in search of the 39 Clues. The last time Amy had seen him, Hamilton had left her for dead in a Tokyo train tunnel.

"Step on it!" yelled Amy, but the driver didn't seem to hear her. Dan pulled out another precious ten-pound note and tossed it into the front seat.

That seemed to get the driver's attention. His foot came down on the gas pedal like a hammer and the cab swerved violently into high gear. For the next ten minutes, Dan threw more and more money into the front seat until, at last, they looked back and Hamilton Holt was gone. When the cab lurched to a stop outside the Cairo airport, Dan checked his pockets. They were empty.

"Is okay," said the driver, grinning from ear to ear. "You pay plenty already!"

"Nicely done, dweeb. Now we're stuck at the airport with no money. Nellie's going to love us when we wake her up and she discovers we've stolen her phone, spent

most of our cash, and need a ride from the airport. And we don't even have any doughnuts yet! Could it get any worse?"

"I think it just did," said Dan.

Amy's heart sank as a black stretch limo pulled up to the curb behind them, and a door opened.

Ian and Natalie Kabra, a Clue-hunting team infinitely more dangerous than the Holts, had arrived on the scene.