

THE VIPER'S NEST



PETER LERANGIS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON AUCKLAND
SYDNEY MEXICO CITY NEW DELHI HONG KONG

CHAPTER 1

Amy Cahill didn't believe in omens. But black snow was falling, the earth was rumbling beneath her feet, her brother was meowing, and her uncle Alistair was prancing on the beach in pink pajamas.

She had to admit, the signs were not promising.

"Ahoy, Nellie!" Alistair shouted across the Java Sea, his hands cupped to his mouth. "Rescue us, dear girl!"

Amy wiped a dark flake from her cheek. *Ash.*

Could it be left over from the fire last night?

Don't think of that. Not now.

Out at sea, a distant engine noise grew louder. On a small launch, speeding toward the tiny Indonesian island where they were stranded, was Amy and Dan's au pair, Nellie Gomez. In the eerie morning darkness, sky and water merged into a blue-gray wall, and she seemed to be floating in midair.

"Mrrrrrrrrrrp!" Dan wailed.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked.

"Imitating an Egyptian Mau." Dan gave Amy an exasperated look, as if what he had just said made per-

fect sense. “Saladin hates the water. If he hears another Mau, maybe he’ll come on deck with Nellie — and we’ll see him at least! Don’t you miss him?”

Amy sighed. “I do. But after last night . . . I mean, I love Saladin, too, Dan, but honestly I haven’t thought too much about him.”

She heard a distant rumble of thunder. As she glanced out to sea, her eyes stung. A tear washed a gray line down her cheek. How could a fire from last night still produce so much ash? It was only one building. A place where she and Dan and Alistair would have become charcoal if it weren’t for . . .

Don’t think of her. Think about normal things. Peanut butter. Homework. TV. Saladin.

But images from last night were racing through her mind. The flames licking up the wall . . . Dan’s expression, like a frightened toddler . . . Alistair shouting to them . . . the call from out the window, from the last person they’d wanted to see . . . the woman who had almost murdered them in Russia.

You thought she was trying to burn you alive last night. But she wasn’t. It wasn’t Irina.

Isabel Kabra had done it. She had burned down their house in Massachusetts all those years ago, and Dan and Amy’s parents hadn’t been able to escape. Now Isabel was finishing the job. She was a murderer. A Lucian killing machine in pearls and perfume.

Until last night, Isabel had been one of the two people Amy had feared most.

The other was the blond woman who had called up to them from below the ledge.

Yesterday, if you'd asked Amy to list the *Predictions Least Likely Ever to Come True in a Million Years*, right up there with *The world will turn into cheese* and *My brother Dan will say he loves me*, would have been this:

Irina Spasky will sacrifice herself – for us.

But Irina had leaped to the roof on a pole, into the flames. She had held that pole in front of their window so they could slide to safety. Then she had disappeared into the fire before Amy's eyes. Why?

How could a person change so much?

"Earth to Amy," Dan said. "Dude, can you hear what Nellie's saying?"

Stop. Thinking.

Amy's thoughts blew away into the smoky air. Out at sea, Nellie was waving frantically. Behind her, the sky was dark with ominous low clouds.

"The dear girl looks frightened," Alistair said.

"There's a storm coming," Amy said.

"Maybe she just noticed your pjs, Uncle Alistair," Dan suggested. "They *are* kind of scary."

Alistair glanced down. His silken sleepwear was tattered and sooty from the previous night's fire. "Oh, dear, would you pardon me while I change?"

Now Nellie was gesturing to something behind her, toward an island called Rakata. Amy stiffened. In 1883, the Krakatau volcano had erupted there, one of the worst natural disasters in recorded history.

Amy remembered the words of the motorboat skipper who had taken them here.

Not good today . . . very active.

She felt the ash on her cheek and suddenly it made sense. She held out her blackened fingertips toward her brother. It wasn't only the storm Nellie was worried about. "I—I think she's trying to tell us something about the volcano," Amy said.

Dan's eyes lit up. "Whoa. Are we going to be like Pompeii? Like, *hmm-hmm*, here we are, cleaning the kitchen—*whoa, zap!*—lavafied!"

"This is no joke," Amy said. "For your information, the last time the volcano blew, there were tidal waves all over the South Seas. Thirty-six thousand people died."

Dan took a deep breath. "Okay, Amy, let's chill. Nellie's almost here. In a few moments we'll be riding away, cuddling Saladin, everything situation normal. . . ."

"We have no lead, Dan," Amy said. "Even if we make it out of here, where do we go—back to Boston, so Social Services will take us to Aunt Beatrice?"

Dan glanced over toward where Alistair had disappeared. "I bet he knows where to go next."

"Great. After Alistair freshens up, we'll ask him," Amy said. "Do we have a lie detector handy? And where is he, anyway?"

As far as Amy was concerned, Alistair was the Whac-A-Mole of reliability. One minute he'd pop up in your life as protector and best friend. The next minute he'd betray you, and you wanted to bonk him down again.

Where had he gone to change clothes? Did he have a secret hiding place here? Was he going to vanish now, the way he had after the cave-in in Seoul?

The Ekaterinas had been on the Clues search for years. So had the other Cahill branches—the Tomas, the Lucians, and the Janus—all with money, experience, and the willingness to kill. The odds were so on their side. Grandmother Grace's will had raised the stakes by inviting handpicked Cahills to join a bizarre hunt to find 39 Clues that would lead to the greatest power ever known. But the will had given an out, too. Amy and Dan could have taken a million dollars each and forgotten about the hunt.

That choice would have been *normal*.

But Grace wanted them to find the Clues. And Amy couldn't imagine not doing what Grace wanted. Dan couldn't imagine not finding the greatest power ever known. Then there was the part about tracking hints left by famous ancestors, like Mozart and Ben Franklin. So here they were, four continents and six Clues later: a fourteen-year-old girl, her eleven-year-old brother, and an au pair whose main espionage training had involved downloading punk tunes and mastering tattoo pain—that is, unless she was really a master spy.

In the 39 Clues search, Abnormal was the new Normal.

Once again, Nellie's voice pierced the air. She was closer now, the launch's engine noise softening as it

prepared to dock. Now her cry was crystal clear.

“POLICE!” She gestured over her shoulder.
“POLICE!”

“They’re going to arrest the volcano?” Dan asked.

“Come on!” Amy said, grabbing her brother’s arm and heading toward Alistair. “A house burned down, Dan — and somebody died! Police investigate stuff like that. *Uncle Alistair! Nellie’s being followed by the cops!*”

Alistair emerged from the nearby woods in a crisply pressed gray silk suit, his yellow shirt bright and clean, his bowler hat tilted just so. His face fell as he heard Nellie’s cry. “Isabel . . .” he murmured. “She must have told the police we’re to blame. That’s her *modus operandi*.”

Dan sighed. “You know, I follow you just fine and then *bam!* You stick in the vocabulary words.”

Alistair gently placed the tip of his cane on Dan’s foot, pinning him in place. He leaned into his nephew. “I know what you are doing. You believe that humor will lighten our load. But some things do not have a lighter side — like being thrown in jail in Jakarta. Because that, young man, is where we are all headed.”