

**CAHILLS vs. VESPER**  
**THE MEDUSA PLOT**

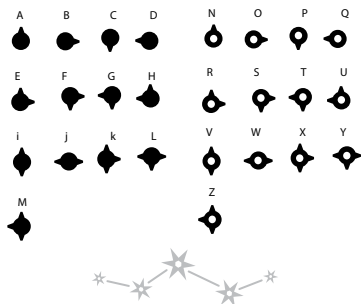


**GORDON KORMAN**

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For Charles Isaac Korman, who continues  
to put up with all this. — G.K.



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# CHAPTER 1

A branch had found its way up Dan's sleeve and was tickling his armpit, but it was totally worth it. From the tree, he was looking straight down on the porch swing by the patio doors. There sat his sister, Amy, next to her boyfriend, Evan Tolliver. This was going to be good. They had only been dating for a few months, but Amy had been obsessing over this guy for the past two years. Talk about a match made in heaven—the library nerd and the computer geek. He tapped the button to activate the sound recorder on his cell phone. Posterity had to know the exquisite words of romance that were about to pass between this Juliet and her loving Romeo.

*Come on, people, I don't have all day! The school bus will be here in ten minutes!*

Determined not to miss a single word—if there was ever going to be one—he inched forward on the branch, perched precariously above the couple.

The first sound that met his ears was certainly not an expression of love.

*“Mrrp.”*

Dan risked a glance over his shoulder. Sitting behind him on the same branch was Saladin, the much-pampered cat Amy and Dan had inherited from their grandmother, Grace Cahill. The Egyptian Mau’s green, inscrutable gaze skewered him like twin lasers. In his mouth, Saladin carried an empty tin of Russian caviar, his latest favorite snack.

“Not now, Saladin!” Dan whispered. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

The cat regarded him solemnly and began to stroll out onto the branch.

“Back off!” Dan hissed. “You’ll get us both killed!”

Saladin was no lightweight, thanks to his expensive taste for caviar, fresh red snapper, shrimp dumplings, and sushi. The branch was beginning to tremble.

In an attempt to restore balance, Dan shifted his weight. That was all the limb could take. With a crack, it tore away from the tree. Saladin leaped for the trunk and held on with his claws. The branch and Dan dropped as one unit, sprawling at the feet of the couple on the porch swing.

Amy and Evan shot out of the double seat, staring down at Dan amid the wreckage.

“Were you spying on us?” Amy demanded.

Dan picked himself up, brushing at a cut on his arm. “I was trying to coax Saladin out of the tree with some of that caviar he likes,” he explained, his face the picture of innocence.



Saladin interjected an outraged “Mrrp!” and the tin fell to the ground.

“And you can stay up there until you’ve learned your lesson!” Dan scolded the cat.

With an exasperated sigh, Amy shinnied up the trunk, wrapped her free hand around Saladin’s big belly, and clambered down again, setting the Egyptian Mau on the lawn. Dan noted the ease with which his sister scaled the tricky maple. She was an athlete now. That was something new. She trained constantly—running, rock climbing, working out like a maniac in their basement gym. It was the same old Amy, yet not quite. Two years before, she had been soft, timid, and unprepared when fate had unexpectedly required extraordinary things of two Boston orphans. So she had been preparing.

Dan felt the threat, too, but his sister had based her entire life on it.

Amy shook her head in disgust. “Just because you’ve elevated dweeb-hood to a fine art doesn’t give you the right to snoop on the rest of us. Don’t you have anything better to do?”

Dan glared back at her, stung. He could never tell her the truth. He *didn’t* have anything better to do.

Amy hadn’t been the only one crisscrossing the globe on a high-stakes treasure hunt two years before. Dan had been with her every step of the way—living by their wits, a split second ahead of disaster, with nothing less than the future of the world on the line.

*The 39 Clues.* Two years ago, he'd never even heard the term. But, by the end of their grandmother's funeral, he'd learned more than he'd ever wanted to know. He and Amy were part of the most influential family in history. The source of their power was hidden in the Clues.

The Clue hunt had stretched them to the limit of human endurance. It had shredded their very souls. It had very nearly gotten them both killed.

So why did it feel like it had been the only part of Dan's life that meant anything?

*When you've been through something like the clue hunt, the eighth grade just doesn't measure up. How could it?*

Drag yourself out of bed. Get on the school bus. Do homework. Repeat fifty thousand times.

Not that Dan wanted to return to being chased, blown up, shot at, punched, poisoned, strangled, and used as crocodile bait. It had been awful. Go back to that? Never!

And yet he had never felt so keenly alive as he had during those crazed, perilous weeks. Lately, Dan had become fascinated by stories of soldiers returning home from the horrors of war. They were thrilled to be out of it. Yet they struggled to fit back into their families and routines.

On the surface, Dan had everything he'd ever wanted. They were rich. They lived in a huge mansion with every video game, gadget, and entertainment system in existence. He had a degree of independence and



freedom most thirteen-year-olds only dreamed about.

So what was the problem? Why did he feel like his world was coming out of a tinny twelve-inch black-and-white TV built in 1967?

*Maybe I'm just bored. . . .*

Either way something was missing.

A series of flashes from the opposite end of the estate caught his attention. He squinted to see Sinead Starling in the window of the guest cottage, angling a hand mirror into the sun.

"Hey, isn't that Morse code?" Evan asked.

"It's probably that Soviet cold-war code she just broke," said Amy. "That's her new favorite."

"Why does she need *any* code?" Dan grumbled. "She lives in our guest house. She can talk to us any time she wants."

He already knew the answer. Tall, strikingly pretty, and brilliant, Sinead never did anything the easy way. She had turned down the genius grant from the MacArthur Foundation to fix up the guest house and join Amy's personal boot camp. They had been bitter rivals during the Clue hunt, yet in no time at all, the two had become as close as sisters.

Sinead was cool, Dan had to admit—for a person with a favorite code.

The flashes ceased and Sinead emerged from the small home. She hopped onto a four-wheel ATV and roared across the rolling property up to Amy, Dan, and Evan. A pair of welder's goggles was pushed

off her forehead into her mane of auburn hair.

“The school bus is running early,” she reported. “I was up on the roof, and I saw it coming down the highway.”

“Why were you on the roof?” asked Evan.

“I’m retrofitting the furnace for zero carbon emissions, and I had to make a few chimney modifications. You guys should really let me take a crack at that monster in Grace’s house. Your energy efficiency is pathetic.”

Everyone still called the main residence Grace’s house after Amy and Dan’s grandmother, even though Grace herself had never lived there. The original mansion had been destroyed by fire right after her funeral. Amy and Dan had rebuilt it from pictures and loving memory. From the outside, it was as close to the original as they could possibly make it—a haven and a place of happiness for two orphans. Inside was another story: infrared cameras, Geiger counters, bulletproof windows. And those were just the security features.

They heard the roar of an engine followed by the screech of an ancient transmission as the bus geared down approaching their gate. Evan took Amy’s wrist and began to escort her toward the road.

*Can those two do anything without touching?* Dan reflected, falling in behind them. The constant hand-holding irritated him. Ditto the arms around shoulders, hanging off each other, and general



closeness. It was like a spotlight on his isolation.

“See you later,” Amy told Sinead.

Sinead didn’t attend school. The education system had more to learn from her than vice versa.

Her mind was still on furnace modifications. “I could cut your heating bill by two-thirds.”

“We’re loaded, remember?” Dan retorted.

“Global warming doesn’t care what’s in your bank account,” she called after them. “Think it over.”

The bus lurched to a halt and the door folded open. The three hustled down the long drive and boarded.

Dan found an empty row of seats and slumped across it. On both sides of the aisle, pairs of friends jabbered excitedly about sports and TV and books and the day ahead.

Not Dan. For him, this was the most pointless part of a routine that was less than awesome to begin with. Why would two kids with enough money to buy thirty Maseratis take the bus to school?

He would never understand it. If they ever created a school transit exhibit in the Smithsonian, the bus to Attleboro Junior/Senior High would be prominently displayed. It was old; it was hot; it was overcrowded; it smelled. Shock absorbers? What shock absorbers? Every bump and pothole vibrated up and down his spine.

Amy said it was necessary. They had to blend in. Right—like that was going to happen. During the Clue hunt, he and Amy had seen and done things—awful

things no kid should even know about. They had memories that would never fade. It was especially true for Dan. . . .

He checked his cell phone. 8:40 A.M. School hadn't even started yet, and he was already counting the minutes before he could go home. If real life felt lame after all he'd been through, that went double for Attleboro Junior High.

He regarded his sister a few rows ahead. Yep—she and Evan were doing *The Lean*. It reminded Dan of a house of cards. Pull either one away and the other would probably drop like a stone. He wasn't sure why they bugged him so much. By all rights, he should be happy for Amy. Her crush on Evan dated back to freshman year. She was so shy it was a miracle she'd ever mustered the courage to talk to him. But now that they were finally dating, they were in their own little world. They probably didn't even notice the grinding gears, the popping springs, and the earsplitting roar of the engine as the bus struggled to stay ahead of the cement truck directly behind it.

Dan frowned. The mixer was really close—only a few feet off the bus's rear bumper.

*What's wrong with that driver? Doesn't he know how dangerous it is to tailgate?*

The thought had barely crossed Dan's mind when the truck put on a burst of speed and slammed right into the back of the bus.

It was 8:42 A.M. Eastern Standard Time, exactly the



same instant as the Cahill kidnappings around the world.



The impact knocked Evan out of his seat and dumped Amy on top of him. Shouts and cries from all around indicated that other students had been shaken up as well.

A split second later, the tanker truck in front squealed its tires as it pulled broadside, blocking the road. The bus driver slammed on the brakes. Smoke from burning rubber darkened the windshield.

Amy shut her eyes, expecting a collision and a devastating explosion. But the bus lurched to a halt mere inches from the tanker's silver shell.

"Everybody off!" ordered the driver.

The passengers didn't have to be ordered twice. They ran out quickly.

Evan took Amy's hand. "Come on, let's get out of here!"

Amy looked back and confirmed that Dan was unhurt and in line behind them. Then she followed Evan down the bus's front steps.

She noticed two things immediately: 1) The cement truck driver was wearing a ski mask, revealing only his eyes, and 2) those eyes locked on her the instant she appeared.

*It's happening. . . .*

She had always known it would, but now that the situation was upon her, it was still a shock.

The man took something out of the pocket of his ski jacket. The rush of adrenaline was something Amy had not felt for two solid years. When the hand came up, holding a pistol, her foot was already flying forward. As she kicked the gun out of his grip, she could feel at least two of his fingers breaking. The weapon hit the ground and slid under the tanker and out of reach.

The students scattered in terror. The attacker reached for Amy with his good hand. Evan tried to step in front of his girlfriend and was yanked roughly out of the way.

But Amy was ready. She had been preparing for this moment since the end of the Clue hunt. This was why she'd gotten in shape and trained in martial arts.

She landed two quick punches, which rocked her assailant but did not knock him down. He came after her again, and this time he had backup. The driver and passenger of the tanker, also in ski masks, joined the fight.

Amy kept them at bay, punching and kicking with windmill speed and force. Still, she knew it was a losing battle. She was exhausting herself, and any one of her opponents had much more physical strength than she did.

*What will they do to me?* she thought in terror. *To Dan?*

In the Cahill world, the consequences of failure were usually severe.

"Amy—stand back!" came a voice over her shoulder.



Dan. She obeyed without hesitation, an instinct from the Clue hunt — the dozens of times he had saved her life and she had saved his.

Dan stepped forward, brandishing the hose from the tanker truck. He squeezed the trigger and soaked the three masked men from head to toe. Then he looked around at the shocked and silent students.

“Anybody got a match?”

The driver of the school bus pulled out a disposable lighter and tossed it to him.

That was enough for the three men in ski masks. They turned and ran, disappearing into the woods that fringed the road.

There was a deafening silence. Nobody moved a muscle. When the students finally found their voices, the frightened questions came in a cascade:

“Who *were* those guys?”

“Do you think they’ll come back?”

“Amy — where’d you learn to fight like that?”

“I—I—” Amy tried to speak up, but her stammer got in the way, as it always did in times of stress. Cahill matters had rained down on them before — but never in front of dozens of neighbors and schoolmates.

*In front of Evan!*

And speaking of Evan . . .

“Dan” —her boyfriend’s voice was hushed— “were you really going to do it?”

Dan’s legs seemed to collapse beneath him in slow

motion, and he sat down cross-legged in the middle of the road, the lighter still clenched in his fist. He registered shock, yet the look on his face was determined and stone-cold.

Amy knew him better than anyone in the world, but even she couldn't read his thoughts. Sometimes her brother was the same old Dan, who tried to collect everything from bottle caps to Egyptian mummies. But since the Clue hunt, there were times when he withdrew from her and could not be reached.

The Cahills' eyes locked — an exchange of pure anguish. They did not understand the reason for the attack on their school bus. But one thing was certain — those men had been after her and Dan. It was their Cahill history coming back to haunt them.

It had begun again.

The police sirens brought everyone back from speculation and into reality. Being scared to death was no excuse for revealing Cahill secrets. Brother and sister wordlessly agreed that there was only one thing they could not tell: the truth. Obviously, there was a busload of witnesses and a cement mixer and tanker truck that they couldn't wish away. But the next query — the *why* — was not up for discussion.

Cahill business was for Cahills only.

Not only were they the most powerful family of all time, the Cahills were also one of the most tragic. Both their incredible success and their terrible misfortune stemmed from the same source — the 39 Clues.



The Clues had turned out to be the thirty-nine ingredients of a remarkable serum that delivered enhanced intelligence, cunning, creativity, inventiveness, and physical strength to anyone brave enough to swallow it. On the surface, it offered the promise of a better human race. The reality, however, had been much more sinister.

The miracle formula had touched off a blood-spattered quest to control it. It had been nothing short of war between the five family branches—Lucian, Janus, Ekaterina, Tomas, and Madrigal. No one knew how many lives the Clue hunt had claimed over the centuries, from Gideon Cahill himself in 1507, to Amy and Dan’s parents in a horrific case of arson nine years ago. It had to be in the thousands.

Now the Clue hunt was over. Two years before, Amy and Dan had united with young members of all the Cahill family branches to destroy the serum outright. No one should have such power. The mere knowledge that the formula existed had turned the Cahills into ruthless murderers. They had put an end to five centuries of madness.

Yet Amy had always waited for the other shoe to drop. Peace and harmony had never been the Cahill way. She had a feeling that today’s attack was the first shot in the next war. And this one would make the Clue hunt seem like a stroll on Boston Common.