

CAHILLS vs. VESPERS
THE MEDUSA PLOT

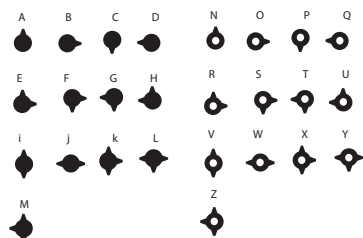


GORDON KORMAN

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



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62

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PROLOGUE

Napa Valley, California, 5:42 A.M., Pacific Time Zone

Fiske Cahill loved the early morning—the glorious moment when the sun’s rays broke over the mountaintops. He would always be an easterner, but there was no place quite like California.

He eased himself into the mineral bath, feeling the bracing sting of water heated by magma trapped deep within the earth. The ache and stiffness of his sixty-nine-year-old body seemed to melt away, and he knew complete relaxation and contentment. Nothing could spoil the perfection of this moment.

He closed his eyes. That was his first mistake.

There was a tiny splash as the snake hit the water. It was a water moccasin, a baby—the venom is strongest in the very young.

Fiske never saw it. He was aware of a sudden stab, followed by blinding pain and then blackness.

Two men in coveralls lifted him out of the tub and administered a tiny injection of antivenom to his

abdomen. Then they wrapped him up in a vinyl pool cover, carried him to a panel truck, and loaded him inside.

As an afterthought, one of the men fished the snake out of the water and tossed it into some tall grass. If it survived and happened to bite another resort guest, it was no concern of theirs.

Ponce, Puerto Rico, 9:42 A.M., Atlantic Time Zone

Long, powerful strokes propelled Reagan Holt through the sparkling Caribbean. At thirteen, she had already completed seven Ironman triathlons, but now she was training for the world championships. Puerto Rico's lesser-known southern coast was the ideal place for it—great weather, uncrowded roads for running and cycling, and warm, crystal-clear water for swimming. There was even entertainment for these grueling ocean marathons. Through her goggles, she enjoyed the floor show: hundreds of fish species, colorful coral, and . . .

A jolt of surprise threw off her rhythm, and she struggled to maintain her textbook form. At first she thought it was an undersea mirage, but no. Twenty yards away, a few feet below the surface, floated a scuba diver in an antishark cage!

What's going on?

That was when she saw the hammerhead.

It was big—an eighteen footer at least. It moved in a serpentine pattern, its oddly placed eyes sweeping the

reef. When its attention locked on Reagan, she knew instantly. The long body became a guided missile hurtling toward her. Panic was immediate and total. Not even the fastest human could outswim a shark.

The cage. It was her only option. She made for it, expecting at any moment to feel the devastating bite of jagged teeth. The diver read her mind and opened the cage door. She flung herself inside, slamming the gate shut behind her just as the hammer-shaped snout smashed into the titanium bars. The very sea itself seemed to shake. Reagan was thrown back against the frame, but the structure held.

The diver pulled on a signal rope, and a mechanical winch began to lift the cage out of the water. As they broke the surface, she spied the boat. Relief flooded over her. The cost of this training session would not be her life.

Crew members swung them in over the gunwale and set them down on the deck.

It was all Reagan could do to maintain her footing as she stepped onto the wood planking. “Thanks, you guys! That was so close—”

And then she noticed that one of the sailors was pointing a gun at her.

London, UK, 1:42 P.M., Greenwich Mean Time Zone

When anyone advised Natalie Kabra to “find a happy place,” that place was always Harrods.



That was the reason for this mental health day away from her boarding school. When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping. And where better than the most famous department store in the world, located in the heart of London's Knightsbridge?

A glance at a bus-stand billboard took the wind out of her sails. It was an advertisement for AidWorksWonders, a nonprofit organization dedicated to global disaster relief. Peering compassionately out was the organization's founder, radiating charity, goodwill, and kindness.



Natalie didn't believe it for a second, and she was in a position to know. That woman, Isabel Kabra, was Natalie's mother—a hard-hearted, cold-blooded conspirator, arsonist, murderer, and terrorist. The only reason she had formed an organization that did good in the world was that it had been her ticket out of jail, to parole and community service. Natalie pitied the poor community Isabel was assigned to serve.

Just the sight of her mother almost made her turn around and go back to school. It had been Mum who

had first introduced her to Harrods. But one couldn't blame Harrods for that, Natalie concluded, stepping in through the brass-plated revolving door.

Muscle memory took her directly to the Girls' department—designer only, of course. Without once consulting a price tag, she collected an armload of outfits and headed for the fitting room. She stepped inside, wondering at the second click that came a moment after she shut the door. She tried the handle. Locked.

And then her world tilted, dropping her against the mirror. The entire cubicle lifted suddenly and began to move forward.

In the Girls' department, the shoppers paid little attention to the large box being carried out of the department by two employees in Harrods uniforms. No one heard the screams that could not penetrate the soundproof enclosure.

Paris, France, 2:42 P.M., Central European Time Zone

To Nellie Gomez, Les Fraises was the best sidewalk café in Paris, and she had tried most of them.

Nellie adored Paris. As much as she missed home, this monthlong class in French cuisine was a dream come true. She loved living in a place where nose rings and punk-rock hair and makeup were considered completely normal. She loved the sights of the city, from the ancient Roman ruins to the ultramodern glass pyramid entrance to the Louvre.

But mostly, she loved the food. Her seminar on sauces had run through lunch, which gave her the perfect excuse to visit Les Fraises in the state she was usually in – hungry.

The chocolate-strawberry croissant looked a little different as the waitress placed the plate on the table next to her espresso. Was that confectioner’s sugar on top? Was the chef trying to improve upon perfection? She was anxious to find out.

Nellie raised the pastry to her lips.

Poof!

A cloud of powder burst from the croissant, enveloping her face. It was gone in a few seconds. But by then, Nellie was slumped in her seat, unconscious.

An ambulance pulled up to the café. Two white-coated attendants emerged. They lifted Nellie out from behind the table, loaded her into the back, and drove away.

Tel Aviv, Israel, 3:42 P.M., Israel Standard Time Zone

“This way, children.”

Alistair Oh held out his arm and guided Ned and Ted Starling into the elevator of the medical office building. How tragic it was that Alistair, at sixty-six, would be offering his assistance to two teenagers in the very prime of youth and strength. It should have been the other way around.

Alas, such was the legacy of the search for the 39

Clues. The boys had been victims of a cowardly act of sabotage at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. Ned now suffered headaches of such intensity that he could not concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time. He was the lucky one. His brother was legally blind.

Alistair sighed. Perhaps Dr. Shallit could help. That was the purpose of their trip to Israel—to see the foremost neurologist in the world. He had achieved miraculous results for patients with similar injuries.

Alistair pressed the button, and the elevator began to ascend. At the eighteenth floor, the car slowed and stopped.

The door did not open.

The next thing he knew, they were dropping, free-falling down the elevator shaft, picking up speed.

“Children—” The word died on his lips. There was nothing reassuring to say about plummeting two hundred feet to a violent death.

He tightened his grip on the boys’ forearms. What an odd place for their lives to end. Yet it was somehow fitting that members of the same family branch should perish together.

In the space of a few vertical feet, the elevator went from terminal velocity to a dead stop. The sudden deceleration flattened all three of them to the floor. Ned bumped his head and cried out in pain and fear.

The door opened. Three large men blocked the entrance to the underground parking garage, their faces obscured by desert head scarves. The leader

reached down to grab Alistair. He underestimated the older man's determination. Alistair's diamond-handled cane came up and fractured the man's wrist.

The attacker cursed and withdrew in pain.

Alistair boosted the boys to their feet. "Run!" he ordered.

Ned took his blind brother's arm, ducked beneath the hands that were reaching for them, and took off down a long row of cars. One of the assailants followed in hot pursuit.

They were almost at the exit when Ted stubbed his foot against a cement parking curbstone. He never hit the floor. Their pursuer grabbed him in a powerful bear hug.

Ned hesitated as the onslaught of another headache shattered everything in his mind except pain.

No. Not now—

With almost superhuman effort, he turned back to his brother. Ted was caught, and Alistair was subdued back at the elevator. Only he was free.

Alistair's voice echoed in the concrete space. "Go! Call William McIntyre!"

With a heavy heart, Ned Starling fled.

Tokyo, Japan, 10:42 P.M., Japan Standard Time Zone

Phoenix Wizard was searching for the hip-hop vibe.

That's what his cousin Jonah had told him to look for. It should have been easy to find in a crowd of

screaming fans, all jumping, stomping, and shouting along with Jonah Wizard, the number one recording artist on the planet.

The teenage rapper was spectacular. From the upper decks of the enormous stadium he must have appeared insect-size on the stage far below. And yet every move, every beat, every “wassup, yo” sent ripples through the audience. Jonah was a hip-hop hypnotist, and all sixty-five thousand people in the arena were obeying his commands—to get wild, get loud, get *down*.

Except one.

Phoenix worshipped his A-list cousin. What twelve-year-old boy wouldn't idolize a celebrity? And Jonah wasn't just famous in the music world. He had starred in several movies, including *Gangsta Kronikles*, his first blockbuster; he had his own reality TV show. His face was immortalized on PEZ dispensers and motorized lollipop holders. Paparazzi followed him everywhere.

Yet the music—that was the part that left Phoenix flat. He would have cut his tongue out before saying it aloud, but he thought it was truly awful. Just talking, really. Bragging in time to a simple repeating beat.

Why can't I see what all these people see?

Jonah began to whip up the crowd to even greater heights. “I love Tokyo—it's the only place where ‘yo’ is part of the name of the town! *Get up and show me some moves!*”

The response was seismic. Those fans who weren't already standing rose to their feet in a wave of tens of

thousands of bodies. Phoenix was up with them, hoping that their enthusiasm was contagious.

He felt nothing. What could be more pathetic than a Wizard with no rhythm? All around him, people were gyrating as if their very lives depended on it. He watched, amazed, as bodies were lifted up and rolled across the top of the crowd, passing from hand to hand.

A teen girl floated over him, her expression sheer bliss. *She* had found the hip-hop vibe.

Determined to share the experience, he climbed onto the armrest of his seat, literally hoisting himself onto the “roof” of the audience. He felt a thrill when he started to move, twirling as he skimmed above the concertgoers’ heads. For some reason, there was no fear. The thousands of hands created a seamless surface. It was almost like swimming—riding ocean currents around the stadium. This was awesome! He couldn’t wait to tell Jonah about it after the concert.

And the ride was getting better! He seemed to be picking up speed. But why was he heading away from the stage toward one of the exit tunnels? That wasn’t where the action was!

Then he was down out of the throng, in the darkness of the concrete passage, flanked by two men in mirrored sunglasses.

“What—?”

A foul-smelling wet cloth covered his face. He attempted to struggle, but one whiff of the chloroform brought oblivion.



Although they took place in different time zones throughout the world, the kidnappings were executed at exactly the same moment. The victims had only one thing in common: All seven were members of the Cahill clan, the most powerful family in human history.

