

THE EMPEROR'S CODE



GORDON KORMAN

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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

CHAPTER 1

The sneezing began the instant the pet carrier passed the passenger's nose.

A-choo! . . . a-choo! . . . a-choo! . . .

Frozen in the aisle of the British Airways 777, Amy and Dan Cahill waited for the spasm to end. It never did. Instead, the sneezes grew in intensity, each wheezing explosion shaking the poor man's entire body.

"It can't be *that* bad!" Dan said impatiently.

Inside the carrier, Saladin looked around anxiously, unnerved by the ruckus. "*Mrrp?*"

Nellie Gomez, the Cahill kids' au pair, came up behind them. With her iPod blaring the Ramones full blast, all she saw was the man squirming in watery-eyed distress. "I told you the taco stand was serving habanero peppers!" she announced too loudly.

Her booming voice drew the flight attendant to their row. She spoke to the sneezer in Chinese and then turned to Amy and Dan. "It seems Mr. Lee is allergic to cat hair. Your pet will have to ride in the cargo hold."

"But they let us keep him on the connecting flight from Madagascar," Amy protested.

By this time, Nellie had switched off her iPod. "Can't Mr. Lee move to another seat?"

"I'm sorry. The flight is completely full."

Saladin did not go quietly. The Egyptian Mau's outraged *mrrps* resounded through the cabin until the boarding door was closed.

Mr. Lee blew his nose as Amy and Dan squeezed past him into their seats. Nellie settled herself one row behind them, lost once again in her iPod.

"How lame is this?" Dan complained, already fidgeting, even though the plane had yet to pull back from the gate. "Our second million-hour flight in a row, and we don't even have Saladin. What could be worse?"

Their eyes met for about half a second, and then they both looked away. It was a stupid question, and Dan knew it. What could be worse? This was the *definition* of worse—the real reason Dan's mood was misery-minus, and why Amy had no patience for him. It had nothing to do with long flights and cats.

Madrigals!

After all these weeks, Amy and Dan had finally solved the mystery of which branch of the Cahill family they belonged to. Not the scheming and brilliant Lucians, masters of strategy. Not the creative geniuses, the Janus. Not the physically dominant Tomas, descended from warriors. Not the innovative Ekaterinas, the greatest inventors the world has ever known.

No. All these weeks circling the globe in the hunt for the 39 Clues, Amy and Dan had been Madrigals.

Madrigals. The worst of the worst. Madrigals had slaughtered the Russian royal family in the course of a killing spree that spanned continents. Their tools of the trade: stealth, sabotage, deceit, murder, and above all, terror. Even the Lucians feared the Madrigals—and everyone was afraid of the Lucians.

It's like living your whole life without ever looking in a mirror, Amy thought, and suddenly you see your reflection, and you're a monster.

How could they have been Madrigals without knowing it? All the way from Africa they had repeated that question, hammering themselves with it, hoping against hope that if they asked it enough, the answer might change from the awful truth.

But Madrigals were so secretive that they even kept secrets from themselves. Amy and Dan's grandmother, Grace, must have been a Madrigal, too. After the death of their parents, she'd been their closest relative in the world. Yet she'd never said a word about it to them.

Now Grace is gone, too, Amy reflected sadly. She and Dan were alone—except for Nellie. And, of course, Saladin, their grandmother's cherished pet.

They had barely gotten used to the idea that they were members of the illustrious Cahill family. The search for the 39 Clues still seemed unreal to them—a chance for two Boston orphans to become the most powerful people in human history! Yet this was the

ultimate shocker. Their mom and dad must have been Madrigals, too. Did that mean *they* were evil?

Amy had been soul-searching a lot lately, trying to see clearly what was inside her own heart. It wasn't all sweetness and light. Anger at the dirty tricks of the hunt. Isabel—just the name of her parents' killer kindled a heat shimmer that distorted her vision.

Isabel, who had held her as a child. Who had called her *dear* and played the part of the loving aunt.

Isabel, who had taken two happy kids and turned them into orphans . . .

Revenge!! It was more emotional surge than rational thought, the revving of a supercharged engine. It was so automatic, so pure, that it could only have come from the Madrigal at her core.

When you're evil, can you recognize it in yourself?

Aloud, she said to her brother, "Try to sleep. We're going to be jet-lagged like crazy when we get to China."

"I slept all the way from Africa," Dan grumbled.

The plane backed away from the gate, and the safety demonstrations began. "*Shortly after takeoff, we invite you to enjoy the video entertainment on your seat-back screen,*" came the announcement. "*Our first feature film is entitled Terminator Salvation.*"

"Yes!" Dan plucked the headphones out of the seat pocket. "Finally, something goes our way!"

"Your dweeb-hood will be studied by future generations," Amy informed him solemnly.

"Don't knock it," he lectured. "Good luck is like a

rash. It spreads. Maybe we'll get on a roll." He popped the phones over his ears as the 777 taxied through the airport traffic, rumbled down the runway, and took off.

London fell away beneath them, yet another city. Mr. Lee clutched his armrest, knuckles whitening with every bump and roll. But Amy and Dan were now experienced flyers who barely noticed the turbulence. In the space of weeks, two kids who had never left New England had visited more than a dozen countries on five different continents.

Dan reclined his chair and focused on the entertainment system in front of him. But when the screen came to life, it showed not the heart-pounding opening of *Terminator Salvation* but scenes of an ornate palace.

"What the—" Dan flipped through the channels. The palace was on every station.

"What's the problem?" Amy hissed.

"Where's the Terminator?"

Amy activated her own screen and peered at the palace scene. "I know this movie—" All at once, her expression softened. "It's *The Last Emperor*. I've seen it two or three times—with Grace."

A lump materialized in her throat. In the heat of the Clue hunt, it was easy to forget that it had been less than two months since Grace Cahill's death.

Grace . . . Madrigal . . . It was no misunderstanding. They'd even seen her secret Madrigal hideout.

I don't care! I loved her . . . still love her . . .

Dan was in no mood for sentimentality. "Man, they

put on the wrong movie!" As he reached for the flight attendant call button, he caught sight of the monitor in front of their allergic neighbor. There was the Terminator, in all his futuristic glory.

In dismay, Dan climbed halfway over the seat back and gawked at the upside-down cyborg on Nellie's screen. "Everybody's getting *Terminator* but us!"

Amy frowned. "Why would only two seats be showing something different?"

"There's an international conspiracy to bore me," mourned her brother.



Beneath the passenger concourses of Heathrow churned a beehive of activity. Down at the tarmac, an army of mechanics and baggage handlers kept one of the world's busiest airports humming.

Several maintenance people were enjoying a tea break when they noticed a new man in the locker room. He was older than the others — probably in his late sixties. As he shrugged out of his coverall, they observed that he was very well dressed in a cashmere blazer, turtleneck, and slacks, all black. Careful scrutiny would have revealed that his ID badge was counterfeit. He did not work here. He did not work anywhere.

Although none of the employees recognized the man in black, Amy and Dan would have. He had dogged their footsteps across more than half the globe.