

THE EMPEROR'S CODE



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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.

CHAPTER 2

To Dan, *The Last Emperor* was as boring as the ten-hour flight to Beijing.

"You should pay attention," Amy advised. "This will be good preparation for our trip to China."

"Mmm," he murmured, eyelids heavy. The only good that could come from being cheated out of *Terminator* would be if this lousy film put him to sleep.

He had just dozed off when Amy suddenly dug her fingernails into his arm. "Dan!"

"What's the big idea?" His bleary eyes focused on his sister, who was pointing at the screen. "Come on, Amy. I went to sleep to get away from *The Last Emperor!*"

"Look!" Amy insisted. "On that wall!"

Dan squinted. The scene showed the three-year-old Puyi, emperor of China, playing in the Forbidden City, the vast imperial complex. There were hundreds of ornately decorated palaces, temples, and statues. And there, painted on the side of a small building—

"The Janus crest!" he exclaimed in amazement.

Amy frowned. "Why's it in *The Last Emperor?*"

"A lot of showbiz people are Janus," Dan suggested. "Maybe the guy who made this movie was one of them."

"Maybe," his sister said grudgingly, "but I doubt it. *The Last Emperor* was shot in the eighties. The paint on that wall looks a lot older than that."

"But who else could have—?" Dan goggled. "You mean *him*?" He pointed to the toddler clad in royal robes on the screen. "Pee-yoo?"

Amy was disgusted. "The name is Puyi, and he was emperor of China, not a bad smell."

"And you think he comes from one of the Asian branches of the Cahills?"

"It doesn't have to be Puyi," Amy reasoned. "The Forbidden City has existed for centuries. And a lot more people than just emperors have lived there. Don't forget the imperial court, attendants, monks, eunuchs—"

"What's a eunuch?" Dan interrupted.

"Well . . ." Amy blushed, choosing her words carefully. "You know how Saladin was neutered to keep him from making any cat babies—"

"Yeah, but they don't do that to *people*—" Dan's face drained of color. "Do they?"

"In ancient China they did," his sister replied.

Dan was wary. "But they stopped, right?"

She rolled her eyes. "A lot of cultures used to do things we'd consider weird today. Including our own. And anyway, China is where our parents went after they left Africa, and Grace traveled there, too. The movie is even more proof that we're on the right track. Ours

are the only two seats on this plane getting *The Last Emperor*. Somebody wanted us to see the Janus crest.”

“Yeah, but what if it was the competition sending us on a wild goose chase?” Dan asked. “Or the Madrigals, trying to . . .” The skin around his lips tightened to a grimace.

“It’s a chance we’ll have to take,” Amy decided. “At least we know our first stop in Beijing: the Forbidden City, home to China’s rulers a half century before Gideon Cahill was even born.”

Eyes on the prize. It made sense.

It was also a very Madrigal way of thinking.



The new Beijing terminal was one of the most advanced airport buildings in the world. It was ultramodern, yet distinctly Chinese, the curves of its soaring glass ceiling incorporating ancient colors and designs.

“According to the guidebook, the whole place was inspired by the form of the Chinese dragon,” Amy told her travel companions.

Dan’s eyes were set on the signs leading to baggage claim. “Let’s hope the airline didn’t send Saladin to Antarctica.”

The pet carrier circled a luggage carousel, partly hidden by much larger suitcases, boxes, and trunks. Outraged mewing could be heard halfway across the international arrivals lobby.

Dan dug the carrier out from beneath a bag of golf clubs. He peered in at the cat. “Chill out, buddy.”

He received a sharp *mrrp* of admonishment in return.

As they left the baggage claim, the cat's agitation grew. He clawed nonstop at the mesh of the carrier.

Amy was worried. "What's wrong with Saladin, Dan? Is he sick?"

"He's probably just stir-crazy," Dan replied. "I'm going to cut him loose, let him stretch his legs."

"You can't do that," Nellie protested. "We're in the middle of a crowded airport."

But Dan had already sprung the door.

Saladin burst from the carrier like he'd been shot out of a cannon, claws skittering on the tiles. He spun around, getting his bearings. Then, before their horrified eyes, he launched himself at a tall, lean older man seated on a nearby bench, reading a newspaper.

"Saladin!" Amy gasped. "No!"

A cry of shock escaped the victim, and he leaped to his feet, sending his hat flopping to the floor.

Dan grabbed the cat. Amy picked up the fallen hat and held it out to its owner. "Sorry, mister—" Her eyes fell on his diamond-handled walking stick.

He accepted the hat with a sheepish smile. It was Alistair Oh, Cahill cousin and competitor in the search for the 39 Clues.

"Ah, hello, children. You're looking well."

The Egyptian Mau hissed at him from Dan's arms.

"You were spying on us!" Amy accused.

"Spying?" Uncle Alistair repeated. "No. I'm merely here to welcome you back to Asia and offer my assistance.

The language barrier can be quite a hurdle in China, but my Mandarin is excellent.”

Nellie’s eyes narrowed the way they always did when she suspected her charges were being taken advantage of. “And you’re making this offer out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Of course! Although”—Alistair’s gracious smile began to seem slightly forced—“it would be an excellent opportunity to bring one another up to date on our progress on the clue hunt.”

“Aha!” Dan exploded. “You only want to help so you can steal our clues because you know you’re *losing!*”

The smile disappeared, and Amy and Dan noticed their distant cousin’s exhausted, red-rimmed eyes.

“I’m afraid, children, that we all might be losing,” he admitted. “Ian and Natalie Kabra have been in China for several days already. Even more worrisome, the Holts have completely dropped off the radar screen.”

“Try the Mr. Universe contest,” Dan suggested.

Alistair regarded him ruefully. “We’ve all underestimated the Holts. In Ekat circles, the rumor is that they’ve made a major breakthrough. It’s not too late to catch them—*if* we work together.”

Amy’s eyes locked with her brother’s. Of all their competitors in the contest, Uncle Alistair was the only one who felt like family. True, he had betrayed them—and more than just once. But out of their Cahill cousins, Alistair alone seemed to care what happened to them.

The image of Uncle Alistair faded in Amy’s mind,

to be replaced by a much darker picture. That terrible night years before; the fire that had killed their parents. Alistair had been there.

Amy's eyes filled with tears. *Stop thinking about it!*

Alistair was no murderer. At worst, he had been Isabel's unwitting accomplice. Still, it would take a lot for her to confide in him. And as for Dan . . .

"Why can't you just lie and cheat like the others?" Dan snapped. "Can't you see that's better than being nice one minute and then turning around and selling us out? It may be very Cahill, but it *stinks!* Grace had a saying: Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, I'll konk you with this pet carrier!"

"You must reconsider," Alistair began urgently.

Nellie spoke up. "The kids said it's not happening."

"Yes, but—"

Dan let go of Saladin, and the Egyptian Mau pounced on Alistair's ankles. There was a ripping sound as the cat's claws removed most of the left cuff from Alistair's custom-tailored dress slacks. Fabric flapping, the old fellow hightailed it to the exit.

"If you change your mind, I'm at the Imperial Hotel," he tossed over his shoulder, and was gone.

Nellie put an arm around her two charges. "I hope you knuckleheads have a plan, now that you've sent Alistair packing."

Amy manufactured a nervous smile. "Next stop—the Gate of Heavenly Peace."

CHAPTER 3

The 39 Clues may have been a high-stakes treasure hunt with world domination as the prize. But sooner or later you always ended up in some dumb museum.

Sad but true, Dan thought as the smiling tour guide led them through vast halls filled with floor-to-ceiling display cases. The Palace Museum inside the Forbidden City held more than three hundred thousand ceramic and porcelain pieces alone.

“You could have soup in a different bowl every day for, like, a thousand years,” he whispered to Amy.

“This is the greatest art collection I’ve ever seen,” she marveled, missing his wisecrack. “Even better than the Janus stronghold in Venice!”

“Those emperors were Cahills, all right,” Dan decided. “Totally loaded—like everybody else in the family except us.”

Amy’s brow knit. “The emperors lived here for six centuries. How do we know which generation was involved in the clue hunt?”

“Our parents must have had an idea,” Dan put in.

“Why else would they come here after Africa?”

She nodded. “Good point. Let’s listen to the tour guide. We might learn something important.”

Dan groaned. Like there was going to be a Clue in the butterfly pattern on an old chamber pot. They already knew what they were looking for — the crest from *The Last Emperor*. It was out there somewhere, faded but still visible, on the wall of one of these buildings.

Dan checked his watch. Still more than three hours to go before they were meeting Nellie, who was off with Saladin, looking for a hotel. And no chance of pushing the time up. None of their new phones had service in China. They were trapped here with three hundred thousand plates.

“This collection began in the Ming dynasty, but the size increased greatly during the Qing,” the guide was saying. “The Qing emperors were renowned for their obsessive commitment to the arts. . . .”

“That’s it!” Amy hissed.

“That’s what?”

“Obsessed with art? Does that sound familiar?”

Dan was beginning to clue in. “The Janus! Those guys would trade their mothers for a painting!”

Amy’s eyes were alight with excitement. “Dan, it’s all coming together. Whatever brought our parents to China — it has something to do with the Janus branch. Something *big*.”

Dan nodded. “But how are we going to find the Janus crest if we’re stuck doing the dishes?”

Amy took in the walkie-talkie dangling from the guide's belt. "If that guy sees us sneaking away, he'll call security. Besides, we don't know where to look. The Forbidden City is the largest palace complex in the world. There are more than nine hundred buildings!"

Dan opened their brochure to the grounds plan of the 180-acre Forbidden City. "I think I remember the movie. If I can figure out which way to tilt this map—" He shifted the page, studying it intently. Dan had a photographic memory, but coordinating film scenes with a printed diagram was tricky. "Let's see, the doohickey of supreme whatchamacallit is over *there*—"

"Hall of Supreme Harmony," Amy corrected.

"—so I bet the Janus crest should be somewhere in *this* section, over by the whatchamacallit of tranquil thingamajig."

"Palace of Tranquil Longevity," Amy supplied.

"I'll find it," Dan decided. "Okay, you create a diversion—"

His sister was nervous. "What diversion? I can't do cartwheels in here. Something could get broken."

"Yeah," Dan said, "you wouldn't want these guys to run out of plates. It's not rocket science. Just go to the other side of the group and start asking boring questions. And while he's giving you boring answers, I'll slip away."

"Fine," she replied, sounding only a little miffed at his word choice. She raised her hand. "Ex-ex—" *Stop it*, she commanded herself. Her stammer often came out

at moments of stress, but this was *important*. “Excuse me, how old are those pieces—no, *these* over here—”

Amy had chosen well. A line of tall glass cases separated Dan from the group. It was no problem for him to slip out of the room. His sister was annoying, but he had to admit they made a pretty good team.

Not bad for a couple of Madrigals, he reflected, and immediately regretted the thought.

It was no joke. In Africa they’d learned that the aliases on their parents’ passports—Mr. and Mrs. Nudelman—matched the names of a notorious pair of murderers and thieves. Mom and Dad—the Bonnie and Clyde of the Southern Hemisphere? Ridiculous. A coincidence. And yet . . .

Husband and wife . . . ruthless killers . . .
Madrigals . . .

Just the thought of it made his shoulders sag.

He got lost a few times sneaking out of the building, wandering through the labyrinth of ornate rooms. At last, he managed to find an entrance and stepped out into the Forbidden City. It was an immense complex, with five ginormous palaces and seventeen that counted as merely huge—not to mention nearly a thousand smaller buildings of various shapes and sizes. The temples, monuments, and gardens seemed to go on forever. It really was a *city*—as if half of downtown Boston had all been built for one guy to live in. But this was far more colorful than any part of Boston—a kaleidoscope of imperial yellow, rich red, and glittering gold leaf.

Everything screamed wealth and luxury beyond imagination. Yet despite the size of the place, Dan couldn't escape a shut-in feeling — the four massive outer gates, the high walls, the observation towers at the corners. He tried to picture Puyi — the kid emperor from the movie — having all this as his personal playground. According to the tour guide, Puyi had officially abdicated at age six, but the Chinese government let him stay here until he was a young man.

Using the Gate of Heavenly Peace as a point of reference, Dan got his bearings and headed for the area he remembered from *The Last Emperor*. He knew a moment of uncertainty. Was he searching in China for a crest that was really six thousand miles away on a Hollywood soundstage?

Too late to worry about that now . . .

Soon he was in a section of smaller, lower buildings. Even though the Forbidden City had been the emperor's home, there had been plenty of attendants, monks, and — ouch — eunuchs who'd lived there, too. Maybe this was their neighborhood. As he began to pass between the rows, scanning walls for the Janus crest, he wondered how high up on the trouble scale it would be to get caught here. There were no tourists around, and also no security. Everybody seemed to be at Plates "R" Us, either looking at dishes or guarding them.

Dan forged on. Artwork, designs, and calligraphy surrounded him on pillars, signs, and walls. A very Janus place, for sure. So where was the crest?

A feeling of deep dread took hold in the pit of his stomach. This was their only lead. If they couldn't find it, they'd be left wandering around a vast country of more than a billion people without the faintest idea what they were looking for.

Frustration melted into alarm. He'd miscalculated somehow. Maybe his photographic memory wasn't as photographic as he'd thought. He spun around desperately. Nothing! Except—

Around the corner, on the wall of a small temple, his eyes fell on a shape that didn't belong. The letter S.

Everything else is in Chinese. What's an S doing there?

The paint was old and washed out, barely visible anymore. He squinted at the wall . . . and suddenly he was looking right at it.

It wasn't an S at all! It was the curled tail of an animal—a picture that had faded over the years, bleached by sun and worn by weather. A standing wolf in a fighting pose, glancing over its shoulder.

Symbol of the Janus branch!