

ONE FALSE NOTE



GORDON KORMAN

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For all the brother-sister teams,
from the Mozarts through the Cahills,
from a grateful only child
— GK



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CHAPTER 1

The hunger strike began two hours east of Paris.

Saladin took a single dainty whiff of the open cat food tin and turned up his nose.

“Come on, Saladin,” coaxed fourteen-year-old Amy Cahill. “Here’s your dinner. It’s a long way to Vienna.”

The Egyptian Mau emitted a haughty snort that was a clinic in nonverbal communication: *You’ve got to be kidding me.*

“He’s used to red snapper,” Amy said apologetically to Nellie Gomez, the Cahills’ au pair.

Nellie was unmoved. “Do you have any idea how much fresh fish costs? We’ve got to make our money last. Who knows how long we’ll be running around looking for these precious clues of yours?”

Saladin let out a disapproving “*Mrrp!*”

Dan Cahill, Amy’s eleven-year-old brother, looked up from the page of sheet music he was examining. “I’m with you, dude. I can’t believe we had to take the slowest train in Europe. We’ve got to get *moving!*”

The competition has private jets, and we're wasting time on the Loser Express. Are we going to stop in every podunk town in France?"

"No," Nellie told him honestly. "Pretty soon it'll stop in every podunk town in Germany. Then every podunk town in Austria. Look, it was cheap, okay? I didn't agree to babysit you guys on this quest—"

"Au pair us on the quest," Dan amended.

"—just to have you drop out halfway through because you blew all your cash on snapper and expensive train tickets," she concluded.

"We really appreciate your help, Nellie," Amy told her. "We could never do this without you."

Amy was still dizzy from the whirlwind of the past two weeks. *One minute you're an orphan; the next, you're part of the most powerful family the world has ever known!*

An unbelievable twist for two kids who had been palmed off on an uncaring guardian who, in turn, palmed them off on a series of au pairs. Now they knew the truth—they were relatives of Benjamin Franklin, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and more—geniuses, visionaries, and global leaders.

We were nobody. Suddenly we have a chance to shape the world. . . .

All thanks to the contest their grandmother Grace had set up in her will. Somehow, the secret of the Cahills' centuries-old power had been lost—a secret that could only be found by assembling 39 Clues. Those

Clues were hidden all around the globe. So this was a treasure hunt. But *what* a treasure hunt—spanning oceans and continents, with nothing less than world domination as the prize.

Yet high stakes meant high risks. Their rivals would stop at nothing to defeat them. Already there had been casualties.

There will probably be many more. . . .

Amy regarded Dan in the seat opposite her. *Two weeks ago, we were fighting over the TV remote. . . .*

She couldn't seem to get through to Dan how weird it all was. Her brother saw nothing unusual about belonging to the strongest, most influential family in history. He accepted it without question. After all, it said great things about *him*. He saw no drawbacks to being a high roller in the scheme of things. The poor kid was only eleven—no parents, and now even Grace was gone.

In all the excitement over the contest, they had hardly mourned their grandmother's death. It didn't seem right. Amy and Grace Cahill had been so close. Still, Grace was the one who had started them on this dangerous roller coaster. Sometimes Amy didn't know what to feel. . . .

She shook her head to clear it and focused on her brother. He was scouring the sheet music, looking for hidden markings or secret writing.

"Any luck?" Amy asked him.

"Zilch," he told her. "Are you sure this Mozart dude was a Cahill? I mean, Ben Franklin hardly blew his

nose without planting a coded message in the Kleenex. This is nothing but boring music.”

Amy rolled her green eyes. “‘This Mozart dude’? Were you born a dweeb, or did you have to get a diploma? Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is considered the greatest classical composer who ever lived.”

“Right, classical. Boring.”

“Musical notes correspond to the letters A through G,” Nellie mused. “Maybe there’s a message that way.”

“Been there, done that,” Dan reported. “I even tried unscrambling the letters in case the words were anagrams. Face it—we almost got killed for a clue that isn’t really a clue.”

“It’s a clue,” Amy insisted. “It has to be.”

Clues. 39 of them. Never before had a contest held so much promise—or so much danger. With ultimate power hanging in the balance, the deaths of two American orphans would be barely a footnote.

But we didn’t die. We found the first clue—after a treacherous obstacle course through the life of Benjamin Franklin. Amy was convinced that Mozart was the key to the second. The answer lay at the end of these railroad tracks in Vienna, where Mozart had lived and composed some of the greatest music of all time.

They could only hope that the competition wouldn’t get there first.



"I hate France," muttered Hamilton Holt, clutching a tiny hamburger in his massive hand. "It's like the whole country's on a diet."

The Holts stood at the lunch counter in the small railroad station thirty kilometers east of Dijon, France. They hoped to pass for an American family on vacation, but they looked more like the offensive line of a football team—even the twin daughters, who were no older than Dan.

"Eyes on the prize, Ham," Eisenhower Holt reminded his son. "When we find the thirty-nine clues, we can kiss these starvation rations good-bye and hit some all-you-can-eat buffets back in the States. But for now, we've got to catch up with those Cahill brats."

Madison took a bite of her own lunch and made a face. "There's too much mustard!"

"It's Dijon, stupid," her twin, Reagan, told her. "This is the mustard capital of the world."

Madison sucker punched her in the stomach. The blow would have stopped a rhino in its tracks, but Reagan just stuck her tongue out defiantly. It took a lot to damage a Holt.

"Quiet, girls," Mary-Todd, their mother, admonished fondly. "I think I hear the train."

The family watched as the ancient diesel engine lumbered into view.

Madison frowned. "I thought trains in Europe were supposed to be fast."

"They're tricky, those Cahills, just like their parents," her father replied. "They took the last train we'd ever suspect to find them on. Okay, formation."

The family was used to Eisenhower's coaching lingo. He might have been kicked out of West Point, but that didn't mean he wasn't a great motivator. And nothing motivated the Holts like a chance to get even with their uppity relatives. This contest was the chance to prove they were as Cahill as any of them. They would be the first to find the 39 Clues — even if they had to chop all the others into coleslaw to make it happen.

They scattered, disappearing into the woods beyond the station.

The slow train chugged to a halt at the platform, and a few passengers disembarked. The conductors and station porters were too busy unloading luggage to notice the burly family of five climbing into the rear car. The Holts were aboard.

They began to search the coaches, working their way forward. The plan was to avoid attention, but that wasn't easy for the king-size Holts. Shoulders and knees were jostled. Feet were stepped on. Dirty looks were exchanged, along with mumbled curses in several different languages.

In the third car, Hamilton's swinging elbow knocked a woman's hat off, causing her to drop the birdcage in

her lap. The carrier clattered to the floor, the startled parakeet inside chirping and flapping its wings in agitation. Six rows ahead, this brought Saladin scrambling up the seat back to investigate. And when Amy looked to see what was bothering the cat —

“The Ho-Ho-” Moments of stress always brought out her stammer.

“Holts,” Dan breathed in alarm.

Luckily, the parakeet owner stooped to rescue the cage, blocking the aisle. Dan quickly shut Saladin and the sheet music into the overhead luggage bin.

“Come on, lady —” Eisenhower grumbled impatiently. Then he spotted Dan.

The big man plowed right over parakeet and owner. Dan grabbed Amy by the hand and fled for the opposite end of the car.

Nellie kicked a backpack into the aisle in front of Eisenhower’s running feet, and he belly flopped to the floor.

“*Excusez-moi, monsieur,*” Nellie said in perfect French, reaching to help him up.

Eisenhower batted her hand away. Out of options, she sat on him, pressing her full weight between his shoulder blades.

“What are you doing, you crazy foreigner?”

“That’s no foreigner, Dad!” Hamilton effortlessly plucked the au pair off his father and tossed her into her seat. “It’s the Cahill brats’ nanny!”

"I'll scream," Nellie threatened.

"Then I'll throw you through the window of the train," Hamilton promised. He spoke so matter-of-factly that there was little doubt he was both willing and able to do exactly that.

Eisenhower scrambled to his feet. "Keep her on ice, Ham. Don't take your eyes off her for a second."

He charged away, leading the stampede of Holts, predators in pursuit of prey.

Amy and Dan had already made it through the connector to the restaurant car. They raced between diners, dodging steaming plates of food. Dan risked a backward glance. The enraged features of Eisenhower Holt filled the window of the pass-through.

He nudged a waiter and pointed. "See that guy? He says you put steroids in his soup!"

Amy grabbed her brother's arm and fixed him with fearful eyes, hissing, "How can you joke about this? You know how dangerous they are!"

The Cahills scrambled through the hatch and burst into the next car. "Tell me about it," Dan said nervously. "I wish I could fit into a luggage bin like Saladin. Don't they have security on this train? Surely France has a law against five Neanderthals picking on a couple of kids."

Amy was horrified. "We can't talk to security! We can't risk anybody asking questions about who we are and what we're doing. Remember, Social Services is still looking for us in Boston." She threw open the door

of the forward pass-through and pushed Dan in ahead of her.

It was the mail car. Hundreds of canvas bags were piled everywhere, along with packages and crates of all shapes and sizes.

“Amy—” Dan began to stack boxes in front of the hatch.

His sister understood instantly. They worked together to build a barricade of parcels, wedging the topmost—a freeze-dried ham—under the door handle. Dan tried the lever. It didn’t budge.

A flurry of shouts came from the adjoining car. The Holts were almost upon them.

Amy and Dan made a break for the forward passage, dodging mailbags. Amy stepped into the connector and reached for the hatch to the next coach.

Locked.

She pounded on the scratched glass. Beyond it was a crew lounge, with couches and cots, all empty. She banged harder. No response.

They were cornered.

Across the car, Eisenhower’s granite face appeared in the window. The whole train seemed to shake as he slammed his shoulder against the door.

“They’re our cousins,” Amy reasoned uncertainly. “They’d never *really* hurt us . . .”

“They almost left us buried alive in Paris!” Dan shot back. From the floor he pulled up a hockey stick wrapped in brown paper.

“You can’t be serious . . . !”

At that moment, Eisenhower Holt took a running leap at the door. With a teeth-jarring crash, the hatch splintered loose and slammed into Dan. The boy went down hard. The stick clattered to the floor.

“Dan!” Blinded by rage, Amy snatched the stick and broke it over Eisenhower’s head. The big man absorbed the blow, wobbled, and collapsed on a mailbag.

Dan sat up, amazed. “Whoa! Knockout!”

The victory was short-lived. Holts stormed the car.

Madison grabbed Amy by the collar. Reagan yanked Dan upright.

They were caught.