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opening extract from

The 39 Clues 2: One False Note

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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.

CHAPTER 2

"Sugar maple!" Mary-Todd Holt knelt over her husband. "Are you all right?"

Eisenhower sat up, an egg-size lump blooming on his crown. "Of course I'm all right!" he managed, his words slurred. "You think a little insect can stop *me*?"

Reagan was unconvinced. "I don't know, Dad. She brained you with a baseball bat!"

"Hockey stick," Dan corrected.

"Those could be your last words, brat —" The victim leaped to his feet, then reeled and almost went down again.

His wife reached out to steady him, but Eisenhower shook her off. "I'm fine. It's just the motion of the train. You think I can't take a shot? They said that at the Point, and look at me now!"

"What do you want?" Amy demanded.

"*That's* putting on your thinking cap," Mary-Todd approved. "Give us the clue from Paris, and nothing will happen to you."

"It's better than you deserve," her husband added, rubbing his head gingerly.

"We don't have it," Amy told them. "The Kabras took it."

"They took the *bottle*," Madison corrected. "Don't worry, they'll pay soon enough. You've got the paper."

"What paper?" Dan asked defiantly.

In reply, Eisenhower grasped Dan by the collar and lifted him as easily as he might have raised his arm to signal a waiter. "Listen, you little stinkbug. You think you're hot stuff because you two were Grace's favorites. But to me, the pair of you mean less than what gets cleaned out of the bottom of a birdcage!"

His massive paw closed on Dan's neck, squeezing like an industrial-strength vise. Dan gasped for breath and realized he had none. He was being strangled.

His eyes sought his sister's, but he found no help there, only a mirror image of his own horror. It was easy to laugh at the Holts, with their bodybuilder physiques, their gung ho coaching jargon, and their matching warm-up suits. This was the chilling wake-up call. They were dangerous enemies. And with the stakes so high, they were capable of—

Of what?

Amy wasn't willing to find out. "Stop it! We'll give you anything you want!"

Madison was triumphant. "I told you they'd fold under the full-court press."

"Now, Madison," her mother admonished. "Amy did the smart thing. Not all Cahills have what it takes."

Amy ran to help Dan, who had been dropped unceremoniously onto a lumpy mailbag. With relief, she noted that normal color was returning to his cheeks.

He was upset. "You shouldn't have done that!"

"Grace wouldn't want us to get killed," she whispered. "We'll find another way."

The Holts began marching them toward the back of the train.

"Don't get any ideas," Eisenhower muttered as a porter sidled past them.

Reluctantly, they approached their seats. Hamilton sat with Nellie, his bodybuilder bulk pressing her painfully against the train window.

But the au pair's discomfort was instantly forgotten at the sight of Amy and Dan. "Did they hurt you?" she asked anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"We're fine," Amy said glumly. To Eisenhower, she added, "It's in the overhead."

The Holts very nearly trampled one another in their eagerness to get the luggage bin open. With a yowl, Saladin dropped to the floor. In his wake fluttered a blizzard of shredded paper—all that remained of the original sheet music penned by Mozart himself.

"Our clue!" Nellie wailed.

"*Your* clue?" The roar that came from Eisenhower was barely human. He grabbed Saladin, held him upside down, and shook him.

With a feline gulp that sounded more like a hiccup, Saladin burped up a hairball liberally sprinkled with musical notes. There was nothing that could be salvaged. It was confetti.

Eisenhower Holt's explosion of temper proved that his muscles extended all the way to his vocal cords. The outburst sent passengers scurrying for adjoining cars. A moment later, a uniformed conductor rushed up the aisle, picking his way through the agitated travelers.

"What is going on here?" demanded the man in a heavy French accent. "You will show me your ticket for this train."

"You call this a train?" roared Eisenhower. "If this was back in the States, I wouldn't let my gerbil ride this rattletrap!"

The conductor flushed red. "You will surrender your passport, *monsieur*! At the next station, you will talk to the authorities!"

"Why wait?" Eisenhower thrust the cat into Amy's hands. "Take your rat. Holts—fast break!"

All five members of the family raced out the connecting door and hurled themselves from the moving train.

Amy and Dan stared out the window at the sight of their cousins rolling down the hillside in tight formation.

"Wow!" Nellie breathed. "That's something you don't see every day."

Amy was close to tears. "I hate them! Now we've lost our only lead!"

"It wasn't much of a lead, Amy," Dan said softly. "Just music. Even if it was by Mozart—big whoop."

"It *is* a big whoop," his sister lamented. "Just because we couldn't find what was hidden in the piece doesn't mean it wasn't there. At least I wanted to play the notes on a piano. Maybe it would have told us something."

Her brother looked surprised. "You want the notes? That's easy enough." He folded down a tray table, opened a fresh napkin, and began to work.

Amy watched in amazement as he drew the five-line staff and began to place notes on it.
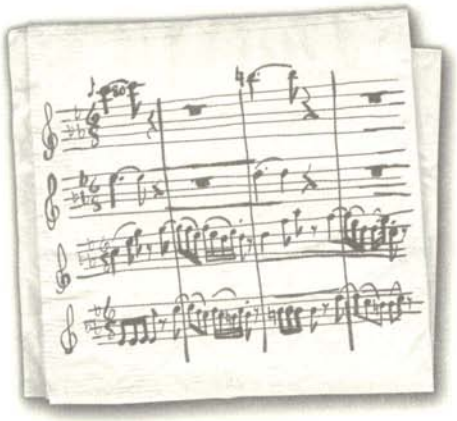
"You can't write music!"

"Maybe not," he agreed without looking up. "But I've been staring at that sheet since Paris. This is it. I guarantee it."

Amy didn't argue. Her brother had a photographic memory. Their grandmother had commented on it many times. Had she known back then that his talent would be of vital importance one day?

By the time the train rattled over the border into Germany, Dan had reproduced the sheet music, perfect in every detail.

Saladin was not allowed anywhere near it.



As Amy, Dan, and Nellie walked out of Vienna's Westbahnhof railway station, they had no way of knowing that they were being spied on.

In the backseat of a sleek black limousine parked opposite the main entrance, Natalie Kabra peered through high-powered binoculars, watching their every move.

"I see them," she said to her brother, Ian, seated beside her in the supple leather of the car's interior. She made a face. "They always look like homeless people. And where's their luggage? A duffel bag and backpacks. Are they really that poor?"

"Poor excuses for Cahills," Ian replied absently, contemplating a chess move on the limo's pull-down screen. Since Paris, he had been matching wits with a Russian supercomputer outside Vladivostok. "What a stupid move," he murmured to his opponent. "I thought computers were supposed to be smart."

Natalie was annoyed. "Ian, could you pay attention, please! Superior intelligence doesn't mean we can't still make a mess of this." Her brother was brilliant, but no one was as brilliant as Ian thought he was. Sometimes common sense was more valuable than IQ points. He had plenty of the latter. Natalie knew it was her job to add a touch of the former. She respected her brother's talents—but he had to be watched.

Chortling, Ian sacrificed a bishop, expertly plotting toward checkmate seven moves away. "*We* have the bottle from Paris," he reminded his sister. "None of the other teams stand a chance. Especially not those Cahill charity cases. The contest is ours to win."

"Or lose, if we get overconfident," his sister reminded him. "Wait—they're getting into a taxi." She tapped on the glass partition. "Driver—follow that car."