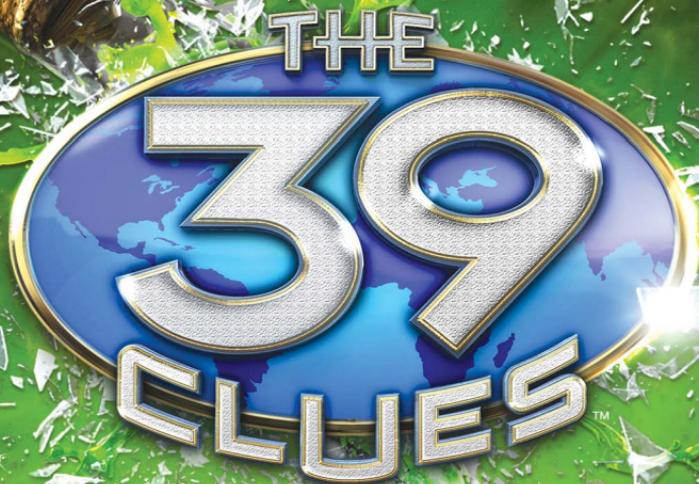


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SUPERSPECIAL OUTBREAK



o C. ALEXANDER LONDON o

SUPERSPECIAL

OUTBREAK



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CHAPTER 1

Boston, Massachusetts

Dan Cahill knew a thing or two about collectors.

When he was younger, he had collected baseball cards, autographs of famous outlaws, Civil War weapons, rare coins, and charcoal rubbings of tombstones. For a while, he had even collected his casts, but he'd broken so many bones that the size and smell of that particular collection had become, to quote his big sister, Amy, "disturbing."

However, the collector he was tracking through the streets of Boston was a different sort of collector entirely. Dan collected stuff he could geek out on—meteor fragments, memorabilia from obscure sports, creepy photos he found at flea markets.

The guy he had his eye on collected stuff he could sell for millions of dollars, stuff that was stolen from archaeology sites around the world and smuggled away from the countries to which it belonged: Buddhist relics from Cambodia, Zoroastrian statues from Iran, religious carvings from Egypt. The artifacts were priceless, sacred, and irreplaceable. They

should've been in museums or left in the temples or tombs where they'd been found. They were the sort of things that someone might kill for.

In fact, in this case, someone had. Hundreds of thousands had died because of the artifact this man was carrying in the rolling suitcase currently handcuffed to his wrist, and more might die if he figured out that he was being followed.

But Dan's team was good. The collector didn't have a clue. Dan smiled the smile of a mastermind and wondered if his cousin Jonah Wizard, international pop star, might write him a secret-agent theme song. Dan totally needed a theme song.

"The target went right at Quincy Market," Cara Pierce's voice whispered through Dan's earpiece.

Dan stopped writing lyrics in his imagination and whispered his next orders into the microphone on the cord of his earbuds. "Ham, when he hits Congress Street, execute Operation Bouncing Hammer."

"Gladly," Hamilton Holt replied.

Ham wasn't the most nuanced secret operative in the world, but when something—or *someone*—needed to get knocked down, he was just the guy to do it.

Dan Cahill still looked like your average American teenager. His hair was messy and in need of a cut, his wrinkled T-shirt was an ironic nod to a long-forgotten boy band, but the pen he had tucked behind his ear was actually a CO₂-powered injection syringe loaded with a nauseating toxin perfectly calibrated to the body mass of the smuggler.

Your average American teenager didn't usually have one of those. Although he was just fourteen years old, Dan was the leader of the most powerful family in the world and regularly did things that would make Special Forces soldiers gasp.

Dan glanced up from his phone just as his target appeared at the intersection across from his bench. At the same moment, burly, blond Hamilton Holt, wearing a New England Patriots football jersey and bright blue plastic sunglasses, came barreling out of a gift shop, his fist pumping the air.

"Yeah! Go Pats! Woo!" he yelled, a genuinely enthusiastic cheer for his football team. Never mind that their season hadn't actually started yet. In Boston, no one needed a reason to be loud about their team at any time of year. "We're gonna slay! YE-AHH!"

Ham turned his back to the smuggler to give a double fist pump to the street, and slammed his shoulders into the man as hard as he could.

The smuggler's feet left the ground as he tumbled backward. A smirk flitted across Hamilton's face as the man crashed onto the sidewalk with a sickening thump. The rolling suitcase bounced and wrenched the man's arm but stayed attached.

"I really hope that case is padded on the inside," Amy whispered over the radio.

Dan was already on his feet, rushing to help the guy up.

"Sorry, little man," Ham said to the smuggler on the ground, bending down and yanking the guy to

his feet, jostling him as much as possible in the process. “Ya hit tha pahvement *wicked* hahrd.”

“Don’t try to do an accent,” Dan whispered to Ham over the microphone, then spoke to the smuggler on the ground. “I know first aid!” he said cheerily. He grabbed the smuggler by his other arm. He and Ham pulled him in opposite directions. “Careful! He might have a concussion!”

“I’m—I’m fine—” The man tried to shake himself out of Ham’s grip, but Ham gripped him tighter. It would leave a bruise. “You are breaking my wrist, you brute!”

“Hey! Aye apahlahgized!” Ham yelled into the smuggler’s face. “Why don’t ya watch where yah’er goin’, ya lubber!”

Ham’s Boston accent had turned into a pirate accent, and Dan frowned at him. Ham closed his mouth and squeezed the guy’s arm harder. He was a better bruiser than he was an actor.

While the man was focused on freeing himself from Hamilton’s vise grip and getting his face away from the large and obviously disturbed teen, Dan pressed the injection pen against the smuggler’s backside and fired the needle. At the same instant, Hamilton squeezed the metal of the handcuffs into the smuggler’s wrist so hard it made him yelp. “OW!”

The human body can only pay attention to so many sensations at a time, and the pain in his wrist combined with Ham’s shouting distracted him completely from the fact he’d just been injected with

something. Any soreness he felt, he'd blame on his fall.

Dan stepped back and Ham let the guy go.

The collector turned and nearly knocked Dan over as he rushed past on his way to the door of the restaurant down the street, dragging the suitcase loudly behind him.

Once he'd gone inside, Dan looked over at Hamilton.

"Well done," he said. "You really sold the whole loudmouth fan thing. Except for the pirate bit."

"I never tried an accent before." Ham shrugged. "Thought it'd be fun. But the Pats really *are* gonna slay this year. No one's better than Tom Brady."

Dan agreed, but had more pressing concerns than the coming football season. "Phase one complete. Red Team is clear," he said into his microphone. "Puce Team is a go."

"Affirmative," his sister replied. "But I still don't forgive you for calling us the Puce Team."

"My operation, my team names," Dan said. "Anyway, puce is cool. It's the color of a bruise."

"Puce isn't just a color." Jonah Wizard's voice came over the earpiece. If he was in the right place, he'd be sitting at the best table in the restaurant, his eyes behind dark sunglasses, with a baseball cap pulled low over his face, looking like a celebrity trying to get noticed while trying not to get noticed.

Which was, in fact, exactly what he was.

"Puce is the French word for 'flea.' And if the paparazzi find out I was on Team Flea, Imma have Ham give you, Dan, a few puce bruises of your own."

Dan laughed. His cousin Jonah was an international superstar, but no matter how many albums he sold or movie franchises he launched, he couldn't stop worrying about his image. Of course, his image had helped the Cahills out on more missions than they could count, and this one would be no exception. In spite of the potential for embarrassment and/or gruesome death, Jonah never hesitated to do his part for the family.

"Puce Team is a go," Dan repeated into the microphone. He loved saying something was "a go." It was one of his favorite parts of leading a mission. He might start to use it in his everyday life, too. *Breakfast cereal is a go. Sleeping late is a go. Playing six hours of video games is definitely a go.*

"We've got the target inside," Amy said. "Jonah's got a clear view. They put him at a table as far from the bathroom as possible."

"Thank Nellie for that one," said Dan.

"She's not gonna like the next part," Amy replied.

"I think our smuggler will like it even less," Dan answered her. His plan was working perfectly. He never felt more relaxed than when all the pieces came together and everyone did what they were supposed to do. It was like playing chess. And now that the guy was inside the restaurant, it was check-mate time.

Over the earpiece, Amy gasped.

“Oh, come on,” said Dan. “Don’t be so dramatic. He’ll be fine. The poison’s just gonna make him puke. I mean . . . a lot. Like, build-an-ark levels of puke . . . but still, it’s totally safe.”

Amy didn’t respond. Not even to call him gross.

Something was wrong. Dan felt the first bead of sweat form at the small of his back.

“All teams check in,” he snapped.

“Clear,” said Cara.

“Clear,” said Ham.

“Clear,” said Jonah.

Amy didn’t respond.

“Amy?” Dan repeated.

“She’s a little busy right now.” A man’s voice came over the earpiece. “And if any of you do anything to get in my way, I will pull the trigger of the pistol I have pressed to her spine.”