

UNSTOPPABLE

COUNTDOWN



NATALIE STANDIFORD

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Secret Agent Willard Standiford in recognition of his outstanding work in the field



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PROLOGUE

London, England

J. Rutherford Pierce watched the queen of England carefully as he made his way down the endless receiving line. First the prime minister of Australia, then a British pop star, now a French actress . . . The queen smiled, nodded, shook hands, and made small talk with each one of them, over and over and over again while photographers recorded every gesture. Pierce waited for his moment, his turn in the spotlight.

Of course, as the head of Founders Media he controlled most of the newspapers and TV stations, so he made sure his tour was the top story every day. But he had to give the reporters something to report, and that was the fun part. That was where he got to be creative. He might look like any handsome, superfit mogul touring Europe before announcing his candidacy for president of the United States, but his movie-star smile blinded the masses to the

truth: With every stare, he was planting seeds for his masterpiece — world war.

With his wife, Debi Ann, at his side — sweet, quiet, helmet-haired Debi Ann — he'd managed to alienate every European leader he'd met.

So far.

When he and Debi Ann finally reached the head of the line, the queen smiled and nodded at him just as she had to everyone else. Debi Ann lit up like a child on Christmas and gave the queen a deep curtsy.

Curse Debi Ann. He'd clearly instructed her not to curtsy. British subjects were required to curtsy before the queen, but Americans were not — though curtsying was encouraged and every other woman at the reception had done it. The plan was for Debi Ann to defiantly refuse to curtsy to a monarch. But she couldn't even handle that simple instruction.

Twenty minutes later, the pomp and circumstance was over and he and Debi Ann were seated at a tea table with the queen. He picked up his teacup. It was so delicate, made of fine bone china, white trimmed with gold, from the seventeen hundreds. Priceless, he thought. His mind couldn't help calculating the value of everything around him.

And then, once again, it struck him — that odd, annoying tremor. His fingers shook ever so slightly, and he couldn't control them. It was worse than the last time, in Spain, when his left leg shook visibly enough that he had to sit down to hide it, mystifying

and conveniently insulting the Spanish king.

The tremor jolted his hand and he dropped the priceless china cup. *Crash!* Tea splashed over the antique carpet and the cup shattered against the leg of the queen's chair. A few droplets of tea dotted her pale blue silk pump.

At the sound of trouble, the photographers swarmed. They snapped pictures of Pierce, the broken cup, the stained carpet, the queen's annoyed expression. It flashed over her face for only an instant, but they caught it. He'd flustered her, broken her practiced composure.

It could have been a disaster. But Pierce's quicksilver mind calculated a way to turn this mishap to his favor.

These days, everything seemed to go in his favor. Funny how that worked.

"Sorry there, ma'am," Pierce said, putting on a homespun American accent.

"Don't worry, it's quite all right," the queen assured him coldly.

Pierce was accosted by reporters on leaving the palace.

"What happened with the teacup?"

"Was the queen upset that you broke her china?"

"Will this affect US-British relations?"

"The queen didn't look happy, did she?" Pierce jested with the press. "Well, I'm sorry if one of the richest women in the world was upset over one little teacup, but if you ask me, I did her a favor. Did you see how

old that china was? I think it's about time she got some new dishes."

The joke hit its mark. The reporters laughed, and that night Pierce's quip was all over the international news. AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN TELLS IT LIKE IT IS, one headline read. J. RUTHERFORD PIERCE'S WORKING-CLASS BACKGROUND SHOWS, said another.

That "working-class background" was completely made up, of course. Pierce had expanded his father's newspaper company into a global conglomerate, but he hadn't exactly started out with nothing.

"Back in the States, Mr. Pierce's supporters are watching this European tour and cheering him on," an anchor reported. The film showed a group of Americans wearing tricorne hats, carrying signs that said PATRIOTISTS FOR PIERCE and WE DON'T NEED NO STINKIN' TEA!

It was all a lot of background noise, a smoke screen to cover up his real goal: to be the most powerful man in the world.

The tremors worried him, yes. But he would find a way to fix them. Only one thing truly stood in his way. Or, to put it differently, two kids. Amy and Dan Cahill.

They couldn't stop him. No one could. But Pierce was not a man who liked loose ends.

The Cahills are my final obstacle, he thought. But not for long. Because soon they'll be dead.

CHAPTER 1

Guatemala City, Guatemala

Amy Cahill put on her sunglasses in preparation for a paparazzi mob scene as the plane landed at La Aurora International Airport, but all looked quiet. Funny. This should have helped Amy relax, but she'd forgotten how to do that. Instead, the nerves in her neck tensed even more.

She and the others—her brother, Dan; his friend Atticus; and Atticus's older brother, Jake—deplaned and walked through the airport toward the gate where they would board a chartered helicopter. They'd hired a local pilot who knew how to fly through the volcanic jungle mountains, since landing at Tikal was tricky.

"Nice and quiet," Jake said. "For a change." People—normal-looking people in the tourist uniform of shorts, sandals, and T-shirts—sat playing with their mobile phones, walked calmly to their gates, gazed in boredom at the same old duty-free chocolates that seemed to be for sale at every airport.

Amy didn't answer. There was nothing to add to Jake's observation other than: *For now.* Or: *We'll see.*

Besides, she doubted he'd meant the comment for her. He was barely speaking to her, communicating on an as-needed basis. The same went for Dan. Atticus slipped up occasionally and offered her gum or flashed her his sweet smile, but then Dan would glare at Att to chastise him for the small betrayal.

Amy told herself it didn't matter if they hated her. She wasn't racing around the world to make friends. As the leader of the Cahill family, she had to make hard choices—like leaving Dan, Atticus, and Jake behind when she headed to the Arctic Circle alone. Abandoning the few people she loved had felt like cutting off her own hand, but that didn't matter. She had a job to do. As long as the others didn't get in her way, whether they included her in their jokes and gum-sharing was their business.

There was a shout from a newsstand and Amy turned toward it.

"There they are!"

"The paps at two o'clock," Dan muttered. A small mob of photographers zeroed in on them, their gear clanking as they ran.

Amy couldn't contain an exasperated sigh. *Here we go again.*

It was bad enough that J. Rutherford Pierce sent murderous thugs after Amy and Dan wherever they went. On top of that, he'd ensured that the paparazzi

was obsessed with them—*Amy and Dan Cahill, the teenage leaders of the richest and most powerful family the world has ever known*. The source of their power was a serum that Pierce had managed to steal, enhancing his own power and making him exceedingly dangerous. Amy and Dan were on a desperate mission to find the antidote to that serum, and had come to Guatemala because they suspected the next ingredient they needed—“riven crystal,” whatever that was—was hidden in the ancient Mayan ruins of Tikal. But it was next to impossible to conduct a covert operation—or even to hide—when reporters publicized your every move.

“That way.” Jake pointed to a door marked VIP LOUNGE, manned by a guard.

Amy flashed a VIP Travel Club ID at the guard and they ducked inside, but not before one of the photographers spotted them and took some quick shots. The flash cast eerie shadows on the wall in front of her. She couldn’t let the photographers follow them to their waiting chopper. If the paparazzi found out where they were headed, that meant Pierce would know, too.

“Amy!” the photographer called. “Using your privilege to avoid the public? What are we, the unwashed hordes?” Amy ignored him and kept running, but the photog pushed past the guard, who couldn’t stop a whole mob determined to get around him.

Amy, Jake, Dan, and Atticus raced through the lounge, dodging placid passengers sipping drinks. Amy leaped over a side table just as a woman reached for

her coffee cup. The woman glared at her and snapped, “Rude children!” The comment bounced off Amy’s Teflon shell. The days when Amy cared about good manners were long gone. Her near-fatal trip to Svalbard had iced over what remained of her heart. Being hounded by the press could do that to a person — and being hunted by a powerful, ruthless killer, even more. Pierce hardly needed his army to find the Cahills — the press did that job for him.

Dan found a door at the back of the lounge and threw it open. “In here!”

The others followed him through a staff changing area. They ran past a flight attendant shrugging into his uniform jacket. “Hey! What are you — ?”

No time to hear the rest of that question. They ran past a long mirror, where another flight attendant spritzed his hair with spray. Amy got a faceful, wiped the spray from her eyes, and kept running without missing a beat.

They found another exit and made their way through the maze of the airport, leaping over suitcases and the legs of people sitting on the floor, until they ended up at baggage claim. A crowd of passengers had just arrived to pick up their luggage. “Try to get lost in the crowd,” Amy said. Even if the boys weren’t speaking to her, they couldn’t block out her orders.

They wove their way among the tired passengers impatient for their bags. Amy heard a shout from the edge of the crowd.

“There’s Amy!”

“Let us through!” The telltale flash of lightbulbs popped from across the large hall. The paparazzi had spotted them.

“What are you doing in Guatemala, Amy?” a reporter shouted over the crowd. “Planning to spoil the rain forest?”

“Dan, you following orders like a good boy?”

Amy risked a glance at Dan, knowing that remark had hit a sore spot. “I don’t want them to know where we’re going,” Amy told the others. “We’ve got to leave the airport for a while. The chopper will just have to wait.”

“While we do what?” Jake demanded.

“I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

Amy led them through a corridor to the airport exit, her eyes scouring the terminal for some other way to get out. But the airport exit was blocked by a wall of six big, muscular, stone-faced men in black suits. Amy knew them all too well by now.

Pierce’s men. The soldiers of the Founders Media army.

They homed in on the Cahills, muscles rippling, like tigers preparing to spring for the kill.

“Back!” Amy shouted to the others. “Back the way we came!”

Trapped between the muscle and the paparazzi, Amy would rather take on the paps. Pierce’s soldiers couldn’t be seen attacking kids. Amy knew Pierce’s men had orders to kill, but it had to look like an accident. As they backtracked into the baggage hall, there was a loud buzz

and flashing yellow light, and one of the luggage carousels began to spin. Suitcases started spilling out and riding around the conveyer belt. The passengers crowded around, eagerly waiting to grab their bags, temporarily blocking the paps from reaching the Cahills.

“This way!” Dan jumped on the carousel and rode it to the end, disappearing behind a rubber mat. Amy, Jake, and Atticus slipped through the crowd and jumped on the conveyer belt before the paparazzi could reach them.

“Get down!” Amy grabbed Atticus and the two of them hid behind a large red suitcase held together with twine. Someone reached for the suitcase and pulled it off the conveyer, suddenly exposing Amy and Att.

“Hey!” the man shouted in shock when they were revealed. “There are kids riding this thing!”

Amy grabbed Att’s hand and jumped off the belt into the center of the conveyer ring. An airport security guard stepped onto the edge of the conveyer to grab them, but one of Pierce’s men shoved him aside. Amy could see the crowd parting as Pierce’s soldiers surged forward.

Amy, Atticus, and Jake ran and jumped back onto the circling belt behind a big box that hadn’t been claimed. One of the men grabbed Atticus’s arm and yanked him off.

“Let go!” Jake jumped up, kicking the man swiftly in the chest. The man reeled, knocking the soldier behind him over. They stumbled, tripping over luggage and landing in a heap on the floor.

Amy ducked as a rubber mat swept over their heads, knocking Att's glasses askew. Dan waited for them on the other side as they were dumped out into a secure luggage area and tumbled down a ramp. It was like streaking down a very lumpy slide. Airport workers stared at them in shock and then erupted into a clamor of angry Spanish.

"Don't worry, dudes, we're out of here," Dan said.

Amy glanced back. One of Pierce's men came through the flap, but an airport security guard dragged him back. Security couldn't hold him for long, she knew. "Gate Seven. Move it," she told the others.

They ran past carts piled with luggage, out onto the tarmac. Six of Pierce's men emerged from the luggage area, scanned the tarmac, and pointed in their direction. "Where's our chopper?" Jake asked Amy.

Amy nodded at a helicopter revving up on the tarmac. "That's it up ahead."

"We're not going to make it!" Atticus cried.

Atticus was right. Pierce's thugs had taken a small dose of the serum, and their super-enhanced bodies could run faster than the kids ever could. Without that chemical advantage, the kids had no chance in a flat-out race.

Amy and the others charged for the chopper, but she could feel the men closing in, a hundred yards behind her, fifty, twenty . . . their footsteps pounding, louder and louder, each step sounding of doom.

CHAPTER 2

Amy could almost feel the soldiers' hot breath on her neck—it had a certain odor, a kind of green kale smell mixed with chlorine and ammonia. She knew that smell all too well by now, from far too many run-ins with brick-like men who were trying to kill her.

She turned, preparing to fight. There were five men, four kids . . . outmanned and out-muscled, but if they were smart they might have a chance at escape. She spotted two airport mechanics inspecting a plane about a hundred feet away. Maybe if she could get their attention, the soldiers would be afraid to attack.

She jumped up, waving and shouting, “Hey!” as one of Pierce’s men leaped for her. She ducked and let him sail over her, landing with a thud on the runway. Just then a loaded luggage truck zoomed out of the terminal, heading for a jet waiting on the tarmac.

“Jump on!” Amy shouted. She leaped onto the truck as it passed, hiding behind the mountain of suitcases. She reached for Atticus’s hand to haul him up after her, but it was slick with sweat and slipped through her fingers.

He ran, panting, to keep up with the racing truck. She grabbed hold of his wrist this time and yanked him up so hard she nearly dislocated his shoulder.

Jake and Dan hauled themselves over the side at the last second.

Amy looked back to see how much ground they'd gained, but Pierce's men kept coming, not far behind the speeding truck. They had no time to spare. She waved frantically at the pilot of their helicopter, who was sitting at the controls. "Let's go!" she shouted at him. "Now!"

The chopper motor roared to life, and the rotors began to turn, slowly at first, then faster. The driver popped open the door.

"Jump!" Amy called to Jake, Dan, and Atticus. "Now!" She took Att's hand as they hopped off the speeding luggage truck. Amy landed on her knees and rolled over the hot tarmac. She pulled Atticus to his feet and ran for the chopper, Jake and Dan right behind them. Pierce's men were closing in. Amy and Dan scrambled aboard the helicopter. Jake pushed Atticus on, jumped in, and shut the door as the rotors whirred faster and the chopper lifted off.

The pilot yelled something at them in Spanish, and Jake yelled something back at him. "He's asking why those big men are chasing four kids," Jake translated. "I told him to just get us out of here." The pilot bellowed again, pointing at the tarmac just below. One of the thugs was leaping into the air, freakishly high, trying

to grab the landing skid. He barely missed, tumbling to the ground unhurt as the chopper rose out of his reach.

Amy breathed a quick sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness goons can’t fly,” Dan said. “Not even serum-enhanced goons.”

The boys settled into their seats behind the pilot and buckled up for the ride to Tikal. It was a big helicopter with two rows of three seats facing each other behind an enclosed two-seat cockpit. Amy poked her head into the cockpit to make sure the pilot knew where they were going and to thank him for his quick thinking.

“My pleasure,” he said in a thick accent, nodding but not meeting her eye. “Please sit down and buckle your seat belt, miss. The ride to Tikal can be bumpy. We’ll be flying over active volcanoes.”

Amy sat down and buckled up. Something was bothering her; something about the pilot didn’t look right. His torso was thick and lumpy under his jacket. “Did you notice anything strange about the pilot?” she whispered to Dan.

“Like what?” he asked coldly, as if it took super-human effort just to respond to her.

“Never mind.” Amy pressed her forehead against the window, frustrated.

The helicopter rose and left Guatemala City behind. Far below, a blanket of brown volcanic mountains rippled.

She shifted her leather bag to the floor and heard a tiny *clink*. She couldn’t resist another glance at Dan, who

was now engrossed in a computer game. His straight brown hair fell into his eyes, and he had to keep reaching up to sweep it out of his way. Amy tried to stifle a surge of tenderness for him, but the sight was enough to make her heart sting like skin recovering from frostbite. It sometimes was easy to forget that he was only thirteen. If they were still in Attleboro, the biggest thing they'd be fighting about would be haircuts and homework, arguments she'd likely lose because Dan was the most stubborn person she'd ever met.

No wonder they were barely speaking to each other.

Dan was sick of the whole Cahill thing. "I'm out," he'd told her. Once they finally took down Pierce, no more Cahill stuff for him. He planned to disappear and live out the rest of his life quietly and anonymously, with as little mystery, action, and adventure as he could manage.

Amy remembered a time, not so long ago, when Dan would have dismissed a life like that as boring. That's the kind of damage the Clue hunt had done to him. A boy whose life had been so stressful he was ready to retire at thirteen.

Atticus sat next to Dan, his wiry body curled in his seat, poring over Olivia's Codex, his older brother, Jake, beside him, reading over his shoulder. He'd been fixated on a page of weird, unfamiliar glyphs that he couldn't figure out. They were lined up in neat rows, each one a rounded square with a design inside, and between each one was a set of letters and numbers.

Amy had looked at the symbols but couldn't make much of them. Sometimes she saw something that looked like a face or a tongue or a monster. Sometimes they were just dots and lines and circles, almost decorative. They were complex shapes, not letters, exactly, but almost like rough drawings . . . though of what?

They had left the seat next to Amy empty. No one wanted to sit next to her. Jake least of all. Her heart cramped as the ghost of her cruel lie echoed in her head. *I don't love you. . . . You think there's this thing between us, but there never was, and there never will be.*

They didn't understand what it was like, being in charge. They didn't know how it felt to send someone you love off on a mission so dangerous that death was nearly certain. She refused to be the reason her little brother never got another haircut. One more mishap, and she'd be staring at his shaggy brown hair against the lining of a casket. From now on, she'd do what was necessary to keep her family—and the world—safe from Pierce.

If that makes them angry, then too bad. She'd rather have them angry and alive than dead. She put her backpack under her seat and heard the *clink* again. It had been made by a small flask of Cahill serum. No one knew she had it. She hated the idea of having a full, undiluted dose of the serum near her. It was like keeping something radioactive next to your skin, like Superman carrying around Kryptonite.

Atticus was working on decoding the formula from Olivia Cahill's Codex. Lately he'd been obsessed with a recipe in the book for "Crystal Sugar Candy." "If you want some candy so badly, Atticus, I'll buy you some when we land," Amy joked, mostly to try to jolt one of them into acknowledging her presence.

"It's not that," Atticus said. "Rock crystal candy is very simple to make. This recipe is ridiculously complicated. There's something else going on here."

"Crystal . . ." Amy mused. "Maybe there's a connection to riven crystal."

"Maybe," Dan said. "But what is riven crystal?"

"Read the description again, Jake," Amy said.

Atticus handed the Codex to Jake. Olivia's description of the crystal was written in Latin, and Amy's Latin was poor-to-nonexistent.

Amy's phone buzzed. "Finally," she said with relief. They'd been out of cell range and out of touch with their base in Attleboro for several hours, and it made her nervous. "It's Ian. Hang on a sec, Jake."

She could sense Jake stiffening from across the aisle and caught the annoyance—or was it anger?—that flashed across his face.

"Ian?"

"Amy."

"It's good to hear your voice."

"Yes, we've been trying to reach you since you left US airspace," Ian said. "Did you make the chopper we set up for you?"

“Yes.” No point in going into how they’d barely made it out of the airport alive. “Thanks for your help, Ian.”

Out of the corner of her eye she could swear she saw Jake wrinkle his nose and mutter, “Thanks for your help, Ian” under his breath. *Typical*. Jake could barely look at her without grimacing, yet watching her talk to a boy she’d once had a crush on turned him from dark and brooding into prickly and childish.

“How’s Ian?” Jake asked when she got off the phone. He straightened his spine, buttoning the top button of his shirt and sticking his nose into the air. “Tip-top shape, I hope?” he added in a terrible, exaggerated British accent. “All’s jolly well in old Attleboro, is it? Or as I call it, Yankee Purgatory? I do hope I’ll be able to leave this blasted land of rubes and return to civilization one of these days.”

Dan and Atticus snickered in their seats. Amy crossed her arms, annoyed. “Just read me Olivia’s description of the ingredient, please.”

“I say, it says here that she used flakes of a riven crystal chipped off a stone from a Mayan temple in Tikal.” Jake was still using his fake Ian accent.

“Thank you. You can drop the accent now.”

“Jolly good. Funny, I thought you liked British accents.”

“Jake—”

“My mistake.”

“Yes. It *is* your mistake. What else does Olivia say? In your regular accent, please.”

Jake frowned at the book. “Basically, Olivia looked at the rock under a magnifying glass and saw that its crystals had an unusual zigzag structure, as if it had been deformed by some great pressure.”

“That sounds like shocked quartz. I saw it on *Weird But True*,” Dan said. “It’s found in places where nuclear devices have been set off, but also in places where a meteor crashed to earth.”

“Chicxulub!” Atticus said.

“Gesundheit,” Dan said back.

“No, the Chicxulub crater,” Atticus continued. “A meteor hit the earth there about sixty-five million years ago. It caused giant tsunamis and sent up so much dust it almost caused an artificial ice age—like a nuclear winter. Some scientists think that meteor is responsible for the extinction of the dinosaurs.”

“I’m a fan of the volcanic theory myself,” Dan chimed. “That volcano dust wiped them out.”

“Whatever, a meteor landed there,” Atticus said. “They’ve found shocked quartz in that spot, deformed by the impact of the meteor. But it’s in the Yucatán, in Mexico, not in Guatemala.”

“The Maya traded all over Central America,” Jake said. “They could easily have traded for stones from the Yucatán.”

“If all we need is a piece of shocked quartz, we can buy it off the Internet,” Dan said. “We don’t need to fly all the way to Guatemala.”

“The book specifically calls for a ‘riven crystal from

Tikal,” Jake said. “It must have some special properties.”

“Did the Maya build temples out of it?” Dan asked.

“I checked into that,” Amy replied. She was grateful that, at least when they were discussing the antidote, the others dropped the silent treatment. “The temples are built of local limestone. But they might have put special stones at the altars of the temples, maybe something they traded for, something unique.”

Tikal was a national park and archaeological treasure. The ruins of a great ancient city—a fallen empire—had been hidden by centuries of jungle growth, but in 1956 archaeologists began to excavate and were amazed at what they found: whole cities made of stone, huge Mayan pyramids and temples, miles and miles of ancient buildings.

“Just as I thought,” Atticus announced, waving the paper he’d been using to decode the candy recipe.

“It won’t make candy?” Dan asked.

“Not unless you like candy so hard it will break your teeth,” Atticus said. “It’s a coded message. Sugar, or sucrose, has a chemical formula of $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$, but when I decoded this ingredient list, the formula for ‘sugar’ reads SiO_2 . That’s the chemical formula for quartz. But it goes on to describe a molecular structure that’s a little off, not quite right for quartz. Once I applied the molecular structure for riven quartz to the code, I figured it out. The antidote requires a special piece of riven rock, which has certain molecular properties. One of those special pieces is embedded in the ruins

of a Mayan temple in Tikal. The piece Olivia used was broken off from that crystal.”

“But Tikal is *full* of ruined temples,” Amy said.

“And it’s gigantic,” Jake added. “How will we know which temple holds the crystal we need?”

“Let me have the book back, Jake,” Atticus said. He opened it to the page covered with weird glyphs.

“Check it out.” Dan nodded at the window. “That volcano is spewing ash.”

Just then the chopper blew through a brief black cloud. Everything went dark outside the windows. For a second, Amy had the feeling she was suffocating. But the black cloud—the ash Dan had just been talking about—disappeared quickly.

The chopper swerved to the right, then veered sharply to the left. It lurched up and down.

“What’s going on?” Jake asked.

Another lurch, and Amy felt her stomach drop to her knees.

“Whoa!” Atticus shouted.

“This is better than a roller coaster!” Dan said.

“This isn’t good.” They were far from Guatemala City now, flying over mountains and jungle that looked like the middle of nowhere. Amy opened the partition dividing the cockpit from the passenger seats and caught the pilot quickly sitting down.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

The pilot didn’t look at her. “No English.”

No English? Hadn’t he told her to sit down and buckle

her seat belt? She noticed his coat on the seat next to him. She leaned farther into the cockpit and immediately realized why the pilot had looked like he had a lump under his coat. He had a parachute strapped to his back.

A wave of anxious nausea washed over Amy. “What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded. The pilot refused to meet her eye. The chopper lurched again, just missing the side of a mountain.

“He’s wearing a parachute!” she told the others. “I think he’s going to jump!”

“Pierce must have gotten to him,” Dan said.

The pilot jerked on the handle of the cockpit door to his left, trying to open it and throw himself out. “Grab him!” Jake shouted.

Amy ducked out of the way. Jake dove through the partition and grabbed the pilot before he could open the outside door. “Dan, help me!”

Dan reached through the partition door and helped Jake drag the pilot into the passenger area. The chopper immediately began to drop.

“Amy — take the controls!” Jake barked.

Amy crawled over Dan and Jake, who were wrestling the pilot, into the front seat and grabbed the controls. She panicked. Now what?

“Steady this thing!” Jake shouted.

“How?” Amy shrieked back at him.

“I don’t know!” Jake called back.

The chopper nosed down toward the trees. She

pulled on the control stick in front of her and the nose tilted up. The chopper didn't rise, but it stopped falling. It leveled and moved forward — straight for the side of a volcano.

“AMY!” Dan screamed.

“I'm trying!” She found a lever on the floor to her left. She hadn't tried that one yet. She yanked on it, praying it would do something good.

The chopper rose. It lifted over the volcano. Amy looked down into the dark abyss at the top and thought she saw a puff of smoke.

The pilot escaped from Jake's hold and threw his upper body into the cockpit, trying to knock her hand away from the controls. “Get him out of here!” she shouted.

Jake, Dan, and Atticus dragged the pilot back to the second row of seats. The chopper dropped fast, down toward a green valley. “Pull up! Up!” Jake shouted.

“I know!” Amy yanked on the lever again with all her might. The chopper rose up toward the sky, pulling out of the valley and almost shaving off the top of a hill. It wobbled. She straightened out and the chopper steadied, but then it started spinning, circling around in the air. Amy frantically tugged at the control stick again, and the chopper nosed forward.

The boys struggled to subdue the pilot, but he wasn't going down without a fight. He managed to unlatch the passenger door. Amy felt the change in pressure. She looked back to see what was happening, and the

chopper swerved a deep left. Everyone tumbled over to that side.

“Amy, watch it!” Dan shouted.

Amy concentrated on keeping the chopper steady. The pilot had grabbed Atticus by the arms as a kind of hostage.

“Let him go!” Jake yelled.

Amy didn’t dare turn away from the controls — one slip and the chopper would crash, or tip and knock Atticus out. Behind her she heard thumping, grunting, and shouting. But when Jake cried out desperately, “No! No!” she had to turn to see what was happening.

The pilot was leaning out of the helicopter with Atticus clutched in one arm. He was going to jump and take Atticus with him. But the pilot had a parachute, and Atticus didn’t.

Dan threw all his weight on one of the pilot’s legs, and Jake tugged on his arm, trying to reel him back into the chopper. Suddenly, the pilot screamed.

Amy turned her attention to the front of the chopper. She was about to fly straight into a cliff. She pulled the cyclic up and the chopper rose over the cliff, nearly scraping off its landing skids. Sweat broke out on her forehead. It dripped into her eyes, but she didn’t dare release the controls to wipe it away.

“We’ll handle this, Amy!” Jake yelled. “Just fly this thing!”

Amy concentrated on the control panel and tried not to look back to see what was happening

behind her. But it was hard. The sounds coming from the backseat—grunts, groans of pain, heavy thuds—terrified her. She couldn't see, but she felt each thud like a punch in the stomach.



Dan felt every muscle in his body exert itself, from his straining eyeballs to the toes that curled around the leg of a seat. The pilot hung out the cabin door, bent at the waist, head dangling, still clutching Atticus. Jake was tugging on the pilot's legs and Dan held Att's feet, bracing his legs against a seat. Atticus's eyes were huge with terror as he strained to grab Dan's hand. He was panting, his breath fast and shallow like a terrified rabbit's.

The pilot gave Jake a mighty kick in the chin, knocking him backward. "Ugh!" Jake's grip loosened, and the pilot tumbled out the door.

"Att!" Dan screamed. Atticus's little body seemed to float out into the air over the jungle below. Dan clutched Att's foot, but his sneaker slipped off in his hand. Jake lunged for his brother and caught him by the torso. With a huge effort he heaved his body back into the cabin, Atticus in his arms. They collapsed on the floor.

Dan looked down just before yanking the cabin door shut. The pilot's chute opened as he floated into the jungle and disappeared among the treetops.

CHAPTER 3

The chopper was flying a little steadier now that no one was dangling out the open door, but it swerved left and right. Amy had no idea how to keep it going straight.

“Is everyone all right back there?” she screamed.

Atticus rubbed his legs as if they hurt, but he swallowed and nodded. “I’m okay.”

“Amy, can you fly this thing?” Dan asked.

“No!” She scanned the control board in a panic. She knew they were supposed to head north toward Tikal. But which way was north? “Which one of these things is the compass?”

Jake jumped into the copilot’s seat. “That’s it. I think.”

“Maybe we can talk to a control tower or something?” Amy said. “And they could tell me what to do?”

Jake strapped on the pilot’s mic and headphones and toyed with the controls until he made radio contact with someone speaking Spanish.

“It’s the control tower at Tikal!” said Jake. He fired

off something in Spanish to them. They answered back with something that sounded like a question, and disbelief. Jake replied. Over the radio came shouts of shock and horror.

“What are they saying?” Amy asked Jake.

“They keep asking to speak to the pilot, and when I told them he bailed and a teenage girl was trying to fly to Tikal, they kind of lost it.”

“Okay, but what should I DO?”

Jake spoke over the radio in Spanish again. A tidal wave of panicky Spanish flooded back. “Keep your sights about half a mile ahead if you can,” Jake translated. He showed her what each of the controls did and how to work the two pedals on the floor. “Head north-northwest, so keep the compass pointed at this number 33.” He pointed to the spot where the compass should point.

“What?! How do I do that?”

After another exchange in Spanish, Jake told her how to adjust the cyclic and collective controls and the throttle. She pushed on the cyclic too hard and the chopper started to nosedive.

Dan and Atticus screamed. “Not so hard!” Jake shouted. “Light pressure!”

“Okay, okay!” She could hardly think. Spread out below them was nothing but smoking volcanoes and the thick cover of jungle. No place to land that she could see. And if she couldn’t keep this chopper in the air, they’d crash. Their lives were in her hands, and her

hands felt about as useful as two bricks.

“Steady,” Jake said. “A little more pressure on the right pedal. Now just keep us going like this. . . .”

She pressed too hard on the pedal and the chopper lurched again. *No, stop it, stop it!*

“Whoa!” Dan shouted.

“Ease up! Ease up!” Jake cried.

She snapped her foot off the pedal as if it had suddenly become burning hot, causing another lurch. She tried touching it lightly, and the chopper steadied again. Her heart raced, her hands shook, but she willed herself to focus on the controls. She felt as if she were wrestling with a shark, a big, uncontrollable, dangerous creature; one false move and it could chew you to bits. She glanced at Dan and Atticus in the seats behind her, clutching each other. *I won't let them die*, she told herself. *We won't crash, we won't crash. . . .*

A strong hand gripped her shoulder. She knew without looking that it was Jake's. She didn't say anything, didn't have time to think about it, but it calmed her just a little.

The radio barked Spanish. “The tower's got you on their radar. They'll guide us in,” Jake said. “We're almost over the Tikal National Park now. If you can find a clearing, they'll tell you how to land this thing. Head due west.”

“A clearing?” Amy scanned the land for an opening in the jungle. She saw nothing but thick vegetation for miles around. But then the trees began to get patchier,

as the ruins of temples became visible.

“Lower your altitude to three hundred feet,” Jake translated. “*Slowly.*”

Amy lowered the collective lever slowly. The front of her forehead throbbed with tension. The three lives in her care—Dan, Jake, Atticus—weighed on her heart so heavily she was afraid it would pull the helicopter down. But the strong hand still gripped her shoulder. That helped.

“Good. Now slow down. Thirty knots. Twenty knots.” Amy eyed the speedometer. “Ease the cyclic back and keep your nose up. UP!” Jake added as the nose began to point downward. Amy’s heart was in her throat, but she swallowed it down—*Think! Think!*—and pulled the nose up. They were skimming over the tops of the trees. Amy spotted a Mayan pyramid near a strange rectangular clearing—a narrow field of grass stretched between two stone structures. It almost looked like a landing strip, but it wasn’t very big.

“I’m going to land there,” she told Jake. Biting her lip, she slowed the chopper to a hover over the grass. She pulled the collective lever slowly to lower it. They dropped down even with the tops of the trees, then below the canopy of leaves, until she could practically see each blade of grass. There wasn’t much room for error.

The hand on her shoulder did not let go.

The control tower gave more instructions. “Arm the parking brake,” Jake translated.

“What does that mean?” Her head was spinning.

Everything was strange—the controls, trying to fly, the orders in Spanish, the jolting pain in her belly. . . .

More Spanish. “I think it’s this!” Jake pulled a lever. The chopper’s forward momentum stopped and it began to drop fast. They were thirty feet in the air, falling out of the sky straight down to the ground.

“Crash positions!” Amy shouted. Dan and Atticus bent forward in their seats, Atticus covering his eyes. Amy frantically pulled the nose up to slow their descent, but it didn’t help. The ground zoomed up into her face. She let go of the controls and covered her head.

Slam! The chopper crashed to the ground, tail smashing against a stone wall. Then the front thudded down. Amy’s forehead punched her knee. All was still.

Jake’s hand still gripped her shoulder. He’d never let go, not once.

She lifted her head. Jake lifted his. She turned and saw Dan and Atticus crouched on the floor. Atticus raised his head. But Dan didn’t move. “Dan! Are you okay?” She reached back and shook him. He sat up, rubbing his temple.

“Is it safe now? Are we on the ground?”

“Yes,” Amy said. She tasted metal, and realized her lip was bleeding where she’d been biting it. “Is everybody all right?” She put her hand on Atticus’s head, then on Dan’s.

Jake nodded at her. “Yes.” It was a miracle that no one was hurt.

Amy’s door had sprung open on landing. She

unbuckled her seat belt and tumbled out of the chopper. Jake jumped out of his side and helped the younger boys to solid ground. “Dan, you’re sure you’re okay?” Amy asked. “You too, Att?” They both looked unsteady on their legs.

Atticus straightened up tall, trying to be brave. “Just a few bruises,” he squeaked. He couldn’t hide the shakiness in his voice.

“I feel like I just got poured out of a blender,” Dan said. “But I’m okay.”

It was a skill he’d perfected over the years — masking his fear with jokiness — but her bubbling relief made it impossible for her guilt to take hold. “Thank goodness.”

“Hey, your mouth’s bleeding,” Dan said.

“I know.” Amy pressed her lips together, tasting the blood again. She inspected the damage. They’d landed on the tail and fallen forward onto the landing skids. The tail rotors had broken off and the tip of the tail was smashed. One of the back passenger windows had shattered and a door hung off its hinges, and their backpacks had been thrown out of the chopper onto the grass. Luckily, the chopper hadn’t been too high when they started to crash, or the damage would have been worse.

She took a deep breath and collapsed on the ground. “I’m never doing that again.”

“And I never *want* you to do that again,” Dan said.