

UNSTOPPABLE

BREAKAWAY



JEFF HIRSCH

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For 39 Clues fans everywhere.
Thanks for making the new guy feel so welcome!



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CHAPTER 1

London

J. Rutherford Pierce smiled as the six mercenaries filed into his London office. Each one had been handpicked. The best of the best. Hardened soldiers who moved through their lives free of the fears and uncertainties of lesser men. And yet right now, each and every one of them was terrified. Pierce savored it. Some people liked wine. Some people liked fine food. Pierce liked fear.

Once the mercenaries were seated, Pierce pressed a button beneath his vast desk and the double doors behind them slammed shut.

“Sir,” their leader began. “We—”

“Candy?”

Pierce pushed a large crystal bowl toward the edge of his desk. It was full to the top with small red, white, and blue spheres. Americandy. His newest creation and currently the fastest-selling sweet in the United States. The men looked back at him, uncertain, off balance, just as he wanted. Pierce smiled as he plucked out a red one and devoured it.

"The red is my favorite," he said. "Cherry pie. The blue is blueberry pie and the white is apple pie. Had to fudge the color on that one a bit, of course. Go on."

He pushed the bowl forward again and each man took one. Of course they did. The world was a symphony and Pierce was a conductor.

Pierce opened their action report.

"Why Turkey?" he asked.

"Sir, the guides they hired indicated that the children were looking for leopards."

"Anatolian leopards," Pierce corrected.

"Y-yes, sir," the mercenary stammered. "Anatolian leopards. Which are extinct."

"And where are they headed now?"

"They're taking a private plane, sir, but we were able to access their flight plans. Rome first and then Tunis, Tunisia."

"Why?"

"We, uh, we don't know, sir."

Pierce turned the page to a simple black-and-white map. Turkey and then Tunisia. Turkey was the site of ancient Troy while Tunis was once Carthage, one of the greatest empires the world had ever known. Coincidence? Pierce thought not. But what did it mean? Extinct animals. Vanished empires.

What are they after?

"So, can you tell me any way in which you and your men did *not* fail in your mission?"

The leader hesitated. Pierce slammed the report onto the desktop and the fearless men before him leaped back in their seats.

“Children!” Pierce thundered. “A group of children who should be home playing video games and avoiding their math homework took you on and they won. They *beat* you. Now, I’m sure you all came here expecting punishment, severe punishment, but I’m not going to punish you. In fact, I’m going to give you each two gifts.”

The men, who had been staring down at the plush carpeting at their feet, looked up at him, tentative, but all breathing a little bit easier.

“The first gift,” Pierce said, “is the opportunity to redeem yourselves. Would anyone like to know what the second one is?”

The men nodded dumbly. Honestly, sometimes it was like the entire world was moving in slow motion except for him. Pierce smiled.

“The second gift is motivation.”

“Sir?” their leader said.

Pierce pulled a white pill out of a drawer in his desk and held it up to them.

“The candy you ate was filled with a slow-acting poison. Complete your assignment and return here to receive the antidote. If you are unable to complete your assignment, well, I imagine most of you would welcome a death of writhing agony after being

bested twice by a group of children, wouldn't you?"

The double doors behind the men swung open as if by the force of Pierce's will.

"There," he said. "Consider yourself motivated. Now go!"

Once they were gone, Pierce popped the antidote into his mouth and went back to his report. *The Cahills*.

Individually, none of them would be of concern, but together . . .

Pierce smiled as the answer came to him.

He reached for his phone.

"Contact the heads of all our European media units," he ordered his assistant. "Anyone who isn't standing in front of me in one hour is fired."

Pierce hung up and sat back in his chair. He watched London race about below.

It was a city with a rich and expansive history. Shakespeare. Churchill. Isaac Newton.

And I'll be the one to wipe it all away.

CHAPTER 2

Rome. The Next Day.

Amy Cahill was running out of time.

She had managed to make it out of the airport and onto the tarmac unseen, but her pursuers were smart. It wouldn't be long before they picked up her trail. The private jet was sitting just ahead, fueled up, its engines already spinning into a high-pitched whine. She had to get on board and in the air, fast, before they saw her.

She peeked around the dumpster she was hiding behind. A few members of the ground crew milled around the plane making final preparations, but otherwise the coast was clear. Amy cinched her backpack tight and started to move.

"Amy Cahill!"

Amy flattened herself against the dumpster as the door from the airport to the runway flew open. Her pursuers were heading down the stairway and onto the tarmac.

"Amy! Where are you?"

She had to distract them. Amy spied what she needed a few steps away. She dashed out of her hiding place to grab a metal can off a shelf. She poured its contents into the dumpster, then pulled a match from her jacket pocket. The trash lit with a deep *whump*, exploding into a wall of flame. Amy put her back into the quickly warming metal and pushed.

“A-my!” someone cried in a taunting singsong. “A-my Ca-hill! Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

Amy dug her sneakers into the asphalt and bore down on the dumpster, her spine burning against the hot steel, until she felt something give. The wheels squeaked and began to turn. Amy grunted and gave another push, and momentum took over. The dumpster raced out across the tarmac, the fire surging in the wind.

Gasps came from all around as the ground crew called out in frantic Italian. Her pursuers scattered, half of them running back to the terminal to get help while the others sprinted toward the dumpster. She had about two minutes of chaos. It was all she needed.

Amy bolted across the tarmac to the waiting plane. Dan and Ian were out of their seats and heading for the commotion when she ran up the stairs.

“Amy, what’s going on!?” Dan asked.

“Pierce’s men! Tell the pilot we have to get going!”

“But what about the others?”

“Now!”

Dan disappeared into the cockpit.

"Amy, are you all right?" Ian asked. "Was it Pierce's men? Did those ruffians hurt you?"

"I'm fine. We just need to—"

"Hey! What are you doing!?"

Amy froze, her back to the door. She slowly turned to face her pursuers.

"We were just getting snacks!"

Jonah and Jake stood at the foot of the stairs. Atticus, Pony, and Hamilton were behind them, holding up plastic bags that stretched under the weight of soda bottles, chips, pretzels, and candy.

"Don't look at me," Jake said as he led the group past her and into the plane. "I told them we had to get going."

"Little dudes can't be contained when they see snacks," Jonah said.

The boys passed Amy, dropping into their seats and pulling out snacks and video games. A din of conversation quickly filled the cabin. Ian hadn't moved from his place by the first row of seats. He was watching Amy intently, an unasked question in his eyes. The cockpit door opened again.

"Pilot says we're up in five," Dan said. "Hey, what happened to Pierce's goons?"

Amy found herself stuck for an answer, but Ian jumped in to save her.

"False alarm," he said. "Might as well get to our seats."

Amy hurried past everyone to the back of the plane.

Once the jet was airborne, she checked to make sure the boys were distracted and then pulled that morning's newspaper out of her backpack. Looking at it, she felt the same sick twist in her stomach she had when she'd first seen it at the airport newsstand.

The Cahills were the most powerful family history had ever known, but now they were up against their greatest challenge—J. Rutherford Pierce, a media tycoon with dreams of world domination. He had already manipulated a member of the Cahill family, a scientist named Sammy Mourad, to gain access to the Cahills' most closely guarded secret: a serum that granted near-superhuman strength and intelligence to anyone who took it. Amy and the others, afraid of what the serum would mean for the world in the hands of someone like Pierce, were on the trail of an antidote and had one component of it already, the whiskers of an Anatolian leopard. Only six more to go and they would stop Pierce for good.

Unfortunately, Pierce wasn't standing idly by while they searched. Not only had he sent teams of serum-enhanced mercenaries after them, he was attacking them daily in his many newspapers and television programs. At first he had contented himself with harassing Amy and Dan with dumb stories about what he called their irresponsible globe-trotting—and what they called TRYING TO SAVE THE WORLD!—or dumb gossip about Amy and Ian or Amy and Jake.

But now that had all changed. Amy lifted the

newspaper off her lap. Pierce wasn't just harassing them anymore. He was going for the throat.

"Everything okay?"

Amy jumped. Ian was leaning over the seat in front of her.

"Fine," Amy said as she hurriedly stuffed the newspaper into her backpack. "Everything's fine. Just . . . doing some research."

"Ah, well, you can never know too much," Ian said, falling into the seat across the aisle from Amy. "Speaking of which. Did you know the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis is known the world over as the Champs-Élysées of the near east? The cafés. The shops. The discos."

Amy couldn't help but laugh. "The discos? Honestly, Ian, who calls them discos anymore?"

"Well, the Tunisians, I expect," he sniffed. "So the plan is to rely on the Rosenblooms' father, then? He's a scientist of some sort?"

Amy set her backpack aside. "An archaeologist. Apparently, his passion is lost civilizations. He's in Tunis studying the Carthaginian ruins."

Amy hoped Dr. Rosenbloom would be able to help. He would certainly have his work cut out for him. Amy and Dan had found an ancient notebook left to them by Olivia Cahill, one of the founders of the Cahill family. The notebook gave instructions on how to create the antidote, but much of it was in code. Atticus and Jake's analysis of Olivia's notes made

them certain that the next piece of the antidote was a plant native to the area around Tunisia, called silphium. Of course, because nothing was ever easy, silphium was supposed to be just as extinct as the Anatolian leopard.

Ian turned to look out the window next to him, where the sun was painting the clouds gold and orange.

"You know, it's funny," he said. "I was on the phone with Nellie when the others were off getting their snacks and I saw you coming out the door to the runway. But I didn't spot any of Pierce's men."

Amy could feel Ian staring at her, waiting for a response. When he didn't get one he looked up the aisle, making sure the others were absorbed in their games. He leaned in close, and when he spoke again, his voice was low and halting, as if he were picking his way through a minefield.

"Due to recent . . . events," he said, struggling with how to refer to the death of his younger sister, Natalie, "I, too, have been sometimes tempted to isolate myself but, to my surprise, I've found that having people around, even" — he glanced at the others on the plane — "*these people, somewhat alleviates* —"

"Pierce's men were there," Amy said through gritted teeth. "I'm not lying."

"I would never suggest you were," Ian said. "I simply —"

"Amy?"

The anxious roil in Amy's stomach jumped twofold when she saw Jake standing in the aisle in front of her.

"You okay?" he asked.

"We were just having ourselves a bit of a chat," Ian said. "Nothing for the likes of you to worry about."

"Atticus has some ideas he wants to run past you," Jake said to Amy.

She started to get up but Ian put his hand on hers, holding her back.

"If you keep troubling Amy with every little thing—"

"Maybe you should let Amy decide what's little and what's—"

"Guys!" Amy cried.

Ian and Jake shut up instantly, as shocked to hear Amy yell as she was to do it.

"I just need a minute," she said. "Okay? Alone? Jake, I'll be with you soon."

There was a tense pause and then Jake stalked off to the front of the plane. Ian was about to say something but Amy turned away from him, and a beat later he pushed himself up out of his seat and left.

Amy closed her eyes and tried to quiet her mind, but she kept hearing the sound of her own raised voice. Was there a worse sound, Amy wondered, than your own voice, yelling at people you love? Not only that, but she could feel that newspaper sitting in the pack next to her, like an itch demanding to be scratched. Amy pulled it out and spread it across her lap.

The headline read: THE CAHILL WEB OF EVIL.

COVER STORY

THE CAHILL

WEB
OF
EVIL

To each side, two columns of three pictures each were laid out like mug shots. Atticus, Jake, and Pony on one side and Ian, Hamilton, and Jonah on the other. Pictures of Amy and Dan — deeply shadowed in Photoshop to make them look especially sinister — sat between the columns, with spidery lines running from their pictures to the other six.

The article that accompanied the pictures alleged that Amy and Dan were not simply international nuisances, but were heading up a far-reaching criminal conspiracy with the others.

Hamilton Holt! the article screamed next to Hamilton's picture. *A burly brute who uses his fists*

to lay down the law on whoever dares to contradict the Cahill cabal!

Atticus Rosenbloom—the cabal's twisted mastermind. This pint-sized provocateur uses his big brain and his connections to the worldwide academic elite to subvert the will of decent freedom-loving people everywhere!

It went on and on. Ian was a member of the global elite who provided them with an entrance into high society, while Jonah Wizard gleefully poisoned the youth of the world through insidious messages in his music. Amy could hardly breathe looking at all of it. It was one thing for Pierce to attack her and Dan, but it was something else entirely to go after their friends.

Amy looked up the aisle. Jonah was showing Hamilton a new video game while Atticus and Dan were practicing their aim by throwing Skittles into each other's mouths.

It was amazing that they could seem so normal after all they had been through. Atticus and Jake had both lost their mothers, Ian had lost his sister, and Jonah's cousin Phoenix had nearly died.

Amy crumbled the newspaper in her fist. *They've all been through so much, she thought. It's up to me to make sure they don't lose anything else.*