

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.