

**UNSTOPPABLE**

**NOWHERE TO RUN**



**JUDE WATSON**

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# PROLOGUE

*Somewhere off the coast of Maine*

There was only one house on the island. The rest was pine forest, a thick, dark, bristling screen that threw the beach into shadow for most of the sunlit summer days. It also concealed most of the buildings, the three pools—outdoor, indoor, and lap—the tennis courts, the helipad, the landing strip, and the four-car garage from any passing sailboat. Only tourists came close. The locals knew better.

They knew the muscled men in tight black T-shirts in the fast rubber boats who would cut your fishing line or blare a warning with a horn that could make your eardrums bleed.

They knew the treacherous currents, too. They knew how the wind seemed to whip through the channel at a speed and ferocity that you didn't feel in the harbor. They knew to stay away.

The sound of a violin soared through the still air. A sixteen-year-old girl watched her fingers moving

without error, notes sliding and falling like pure water. What used to confound her now flowed. She knew that if she worked at her skill she could succeed, even though she had no talent.

That's what her father tells her.

The thirteen-year-old boy just defeated his tennis pro in straight sets without breaking a sweat. He saw the surprise on the coach's face. Just wait until the guy found out he was fired. The boy's dad always fires a coach after he's been defeated.

*They lack the killer instinct, his father said. You want to turn out like that?*

He whacked the tennis ball hard, sending it back over the net. The coach had bent down to retrieve his bag, and the ball slammed into his back. Ow. That must have *hurt*. The boy knew it well from experience.

"Never turn your back on a competitor!" the boy jeered.

That's what his father tells him.

*Killer instinct.*

Far out to sea, a man was swimming, moving as precisely and tirelessly as a machine. Even though he had three pools, he preferred swimming in the open sea. This year the seals had been swimming closer and closer to shore. This meant, he knew, that the great white sharks were lurking close, moving constantly in order to feed.

It added a certain . . . spice to the swim.

The man reached the dock with several powerful

strokes. He hauled himself up and strode toward the house. A short but powerfully muscled man in a black T-shirt tossed him a towel, and he wiped his face and threw it on the ground. He did not worry about towels. They were picked up, laundered, and stacked again. He didn't have to see it or think about it. He was always thinking great thoughts now. Thoughts large and complex enough to take in the world.

He entered through the French doors into the den. He almost recoiled from the sight of hundreds of glassy eyes staring at him. His wife was arranging and rearranging her collection. Again. He hurried past before she had a chance to talk to him.

His office was cool and quiet. He pulled on a terry-cloth robe and activated the many transparent screens. Data flashed by, and he absorbed it all quickly and completely. Things were so different now. His strategic thinking was almost as fast as the computer data streaking across his screens.

Almost there. So close he could taste it.

There are only two people alive on the planet who can stop it.

It's time to eliminate them.

*Somewhere near Mt. Washington, New Hampshire*

In the small town where the men occasionally went for supplies, their story was that they were on a corporate retreat, testing their skills in the wilderness. The

men — they were all men — looked remarkably alike. They were all fit and muscular with close-cropped hair. They usually wore track pants and T-shirts, or hiking gear. They were friendly, but not forthcoming. After they left, the shopkeeper or gas station attendant would realize that they were hard to tell apart. They had names that were hard to distinguish: Joe, Frank, John, Mike.

Over a hundred men had been shifted into and out of the camp, but for the past four weeks the group had been whittled down to six. Six of the best, six of the brightest, six of the most trustworthy.

They had always been in shape; that was their job. But this last month they'd doubled their strength and then doubled it again. They had climbed the mountain fourteen times. They attended classes in combat driving, surveillance, and martial arts. They had been fitted for Italian suits, handmade shoes with rubber soles, and jackets with pockets that will hold their weaponry close and without detection.

They were ready. They just didn't know for what.

All they knew was that they had never felt so powerful. So at the top of their game.

As they sat on hard chairs watching their screens flash with a simulated escape from a metropolitan area, the leader of the men heard the chime of a text. He was the tallest, and the tannest. His teeth were very white and even; his real teeth had been knocked out in a bar fight years ago in Corsica. His face registered no

emotion as he told the rest that it was time to mobilize. They had received their targets.

He connected his phone to the computer. On a large transparent screen floated two photographs.

“Target One, Target Two,” he said in a flat tone.

The men showed no emotion. Even though their targets were kids.

# CHAPTER 1

*Attleboro, Massachusetts*

It was a sunny, beautiful day. A day you felt glad to be alive.

Too bad Amy Cahill was surrounded by the dead.

Amy bowed her head and squeezed her eyes shut. She was only sixteen, but she'd attended too many funerals. She'd said too many good-byes.

Six months ago she'd buried her cousin and her uncle, and today, a marker would be placed for William James McIntyre, family attorney and deeply loved friend.

Her cell phone chimed in her pocket. She slipped it out and read the text. It was from her boyfriend, Jake Rosenbloom. It was six hours later in Rome, where he lived. It would be close to dusk there, and he'd be putting away his books and starting to think about dinner.

I know the service is this morning. I wish I could be there with you. You ok?

Amy's finger was poised over the keyboard. Her gaze drifted down the grassy hill to where a polished gray marker stood gleaming next to weathered, tilting gravestones, the many generations of the Tolliver family who had lived in Attleboro since before the Revolutionary War. Too far away to read the name, but she didn't have to.

#### EVAN JOSEPH TOLLIVER

She slipped her phone back in her pocket. Tears stung her eyes. She'd put on a black dress and gone to Evan's wake six months earlier. His mother had shut the door in her face. Amy had understood. After all, she blamed herself for Evan's death just as much as his mother did. If it weren't for Amy, Evan would still be alive. He would still be volunteering at the local shelter, still be president of the computer club, still be teasing his little sister, still be in line for hazelnut coffee with whipped cream. He would be alive on the earth, feeling the wind, appreciating the sky, every sense alert to this early spring day. Instead, he was in the ground. He had been her boyfriend and he had died for her. And he'd never known she was going to dump him for Jake.

She'd never even had a date before crushing on Evan. She'd just been plain Amy Cahill, the straight-A student in jeans and sneakers. Unremarkable and overlooked. She wasn't the kind of girl boys noticed. Then she'd looked at Evan, and he'd looked back.

She'd thought she was in love. Until she met intense, charismatic Jake Rosenbloom, and realized that she

hadn't had a clue what falling in love was really about.

If only she could remember the exhilaration she'd felt when she'd first realized that Jake loved her back. Now there was so much sorrow and guilt in her heart that she felt as though she was surrounded by fog.

She got up in the morning, brushed her teeth, and did her lesson plans. She and her brother, Dan, now were homeschooled by their former guardian, Nellie Gomez, and several tutors. It had been a rainy fall and a cold winter. The days had dissolved into grays. The books that had once given her comfort had blurred in front of her eyes. Italian lessons, history lessons, math problems, essays, projects.

For the past six months, she'd barely left the house except to run long, hard, cross-country miles. At night she wandered the house, second-guessing every decision she'd made during the battle with the criminal organization the Vespers. When had she gone wrong? Should she have refused to let Evan help them? Should she have ordered Mr. McIntyre back to the US? So many people she had loved had died. She had the clout to force them out of harm's way, but she hadn't.

Why hadn't she used that power?

At sixteen years old, Amy was head of the Cahills, the most powerful family in the world. Their ancestor, Gideon Cahill, had formulated an extraordinary serum at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Since that time the five branches of the family had battled, spied, lied, stolen, betrayed — all for one purpose only.

Each of the branches had one part of the serum. If the complete serum was assembled, it would make anyone who took it the most powerful person in the world.

After all those hundreds of years, Amy and Dan had been the first to put together the formula for the serum. But they and the other young members of the Cahill family had realized at last that the serum was too incredibly dangerous to even think about producing. Now the formula, a list of thirty-nine ingredients, their complicated calibration and precise amounts, was safely locked away.

In the steel-trap brain of her thirteen-year-old brother.

Amy's gaze drifted to her sandy-haired brother. Hard to believe that this skinny person now secretly slipping a worm into Aunt Beatrice's purse could be the most powerful kid in the world.

Protecting him — protecting *all* of the Cahills — was her job as head of the family.

*Guess I didn't do so well with you, Mac,* Amy said to the marble urn, her eyes filling with tears. *Murdered in a hotel room in Rome.*

She wiped her eyes. She had waited six months to bury the ashes of Mr. McIntyre. He was her last tie to security.

Mr. McIntyre had been more than her attorney; he'd been her best and most trusted adviser, and maybe her best friend.

Now here they stood, the only mourners except for Aunt Beatrice, who had started off the morning complaining that her hay fever was acting up and the funeral director had better “get this show on the road.”

The elegant marble box sat on a small table. It contained what was left of Mr. McIntyre. Just ashes. His kindness, his shrewdness, his intelligence—it was all gone from the world. Now there was just a box.

The funeral director, who Dan kept referring to behind his back as “Mr. Death,” had shown up late. He nervously wiped at the sweat on his forehead with a handkerchief. When he’d placed the marble box on the table, he’d almost dropped it.

“Is this his first funeral?” Dan whispered.

The tall, muscular clergyman looked more like a football coach. He’d brought a bouquet of wilted red roses. Not Mr. McIntyre’s style at all. Amy didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. This whole thing just felt surreal. She almost expected Mr. McIntyre to drive up and get out of a long black limousine and say “April Fool.”

“This is a disgrace,” Aunt Beatrice muttered. “Only three people at the service!”

“Henry Smood is in the hospital with appendicitis,” Amy said, referring to Mr. McIntyre’s law partner and their new attorney. “He was really upset that he couldn’t make it. And the hospital wouldn’t release Fiske.”

Aunt Beatrice sniffed. “I was talking about *family*,”

she said. "It used to be when a faithful retainer was buried, the Cahills showed up. Even if we despise each other, we used to know how important appearances are."

"Aunt Beatrice buried her *retainer*?" Dan whispered to Amy. "I just flushed mine down the toilet."

Amy stepped on his foot. Her brother made jokes when he was nervous, or scared. She was used to it, but Aunt Beatrice was not.

"Mr. McIntyre *was* family," Amy said.

"Dear," Aunt Beatrice replied, "only *family* is family."

Amy jerked her head away. Aunt Beatrice was tipping the ceremony from difficult to unbearable.

"The Templeton Cahills always used McIntyre and Smood," Aunt Beatrice went on. "And the Durham Cahills. And surely the Starlings could have showed up! Denise Starling used McIntyre for *years* until she decided he was too close to Grace and sent him that poison pen letter. Even if it *was* real poison, she should have let bygones be bygones. And Debra used him for her pre-nup with that nasty man with the strange name. Never should have married him in the first place . . ."

Aunt Beatrice droned on, naming Cahills Amy and Dan had never heard of. "They didn't come because I didn't invite them, Aunt Beatrice," Amy interrupted.

"But Mr. McIntyre was the family lawyer!" Aunt Beatrice sputtered. She narrowed her beady eyes at Amy. "Did you even *tell* anyone what you were doing?"

"No," Amy said. "I'm not interested in their opinions. I made the decision."

Aunt Beatrice opened her mouth, but Amy held up her hand. "And that's final."

Aunt Beatrice's mouth closed and opened like a fish feeding.

"Way to go," Dan muttered.

Amy gave a small smile. Sometimes it was difficult to be the head of the family, but when it came to Aunt Beatrice, she didn't have a problem.

"Are we ready to begin?" the funeral director whispered. Amy saw him sneak a glance at his watch before gazing down respectfully. She could almost picture him saying, "Dudes, let's get this show on the road."

The clergyman read a Bible verse in a wooden voice. Then he closed the book and nodded at Amy.

"Good-bye, Mr. McIntyre," Amy said. "You were our protector and our friend. The best of the best. Rest in peace."

"Good-bye, Mac," Dan said. "Sorry about the time I put a frog down your pants. Thanks for taking care of us."

Aunt Beatrice sneezed.

The clergyman gestured at the pile of dirt by the open grave. "Would you like to throw a handful of dirt into the grave?" he asked.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. I have *gardeners* for that sort of thing," Aunt Beatrice said. "I have an allergist appointment."

Amy bent down and threw dirt into the grave. Dan did the same. The clergyman handed her the roses and she dropped those in, too. *Sorry, Mac*, she told him silently. *I know you'd prefer tulips*. A sudden memory came to her, of Mr. McIntyre in Grace's garden in his shirtsleeves on a fine May day, regarding a bed of yellow tulips, saying *Now there's a cheerful flower!*

Tears filled her eyes and she almost asked Aunt Beatrice for a tissue, but her aunt had already stalked off. Her driver was hurrying to open the car door.

Mr. Death had left, too — he was almost running as he made his way through the gravestones to his car.

*That's odd*, Amy thought. *Why did the funeral director leave so quickly? He didn't even say good-bye.*

The clergyman leaned over to pick up the shovel. Amy didn't think she could bear seeing the grave filled up.

As she turned away, something hard hit the back of her head. Pain blinded her, and she felt herself shoved into the open grave.

## CHAPTER 2

Amy hit the ground on her hands and knees, feeling the shock shudder through her bones. She looked up. The light was blocked out as a heavy object came flying down at her. She moved by instinct rather than thought, rolling herself into a ball against the wall of the grave.

Dan landed with a cry. She heard his breath leave his body in a soft *uh*.

“HELP!” Amy shouted.

In answer, a shovelful of dirt rained down on her upturned face. She spat it out.

“Are you okay?” she asked her brother.

He nodded, his face white with pain and fear. His breath was short, and he dug into his pocket for his inhaler. Dan had asthma, and Amy could see the clouds of fine dirt hanging in the air, settling down to choke his airway.

She shouted for help again, but all she saw was the glint of the shovel as more dirt rained down.

“He pushed me in,” Dan said, choking and wheezing. “Deliberately . . .”

*This can't be happening!*

Panic shuddered through her. Her mind whirled. They had no enemies anymore. They had united the family, they had decimated a global criminal organization. They had gone back to being two kids living in a mansion that was too big for them, haunted by all the things they had done and seen. Their only enemies were memories.

So why was this happening again? The horror of it spooled out, making her brain operate on white noise. She couldn't seem to think, or breathe.

Amy was hit by another barrage of soil. Whoever was trying to bury them was working fast and methodically, not even bothering to peek over the edge.

*It doesn't matter who's doing it. You have to get out of here.*

Amy could feel the dirt in her hair and down her collar and in her ears. She remembered the pile by the open grave. How long would it take before they were covered? How long would it take to suffocate, until the dirt filled her mouth and her ears and her eyes . . .

*It's fifth-grade math all over again, she thought crazily. If the man can scoop a shovelful every ten seconds, and the grave is six feet deep . . .*

“Amy!” Dan's pale face was suddenly sharp as the buzz of panic cleared. He placed an urgent hand

on her sleeve. "We've got to get out of here!"

Her brain kicked in at last. Instinct clicked with experience; everything speeded up and she felt very clear. She looked around, assessing, planning. She measured the grave with a quick glance. Probably three feet square. The sides were steep. Amy tried to climb, but the dirt crumbled in her hands. She tried to jam in a toe, but she couldn't get up. Okay, next plan.

"Watch out!" Dan slammed into her, knocking her sideways as the marble box was tossed into the grave as well. It missed Amy's skull by a fraction of an inch and landed on Dan's foot. He let out a grunt of pain and bent over.

Now it was just the two of them and Mr. McIntyre's ashes.

Amy eyed the box. It wasn't just a box. It was a step. It was about a foot high, just what she needed. It was a chance. She'd only get one.

"Dan," Amy whispered. "Get on the urn. Hurry!"

Dan knew what she wanted him to do without her even asking. He balanced on the box. He bent down slightly, making a cradle of his fingers.

Amy looked up, timing her move. One, two, three and she was up, hands on his shoulders, then, using the side of the grave to keep her steady, she balanced, crouching on his shoulders. She felt Dan's body shaking with her weight. He had to hold on, just hold on for three more seconds. She was counting on the machine-

like efficiency of their attacker, the precision of his timing as he used the shovel. *Two, one . . .*

She straightened and jumped just as the glint of the shovel went over the lip of the grave. The metal edge glanced against her head—more pain, thank you very much—but she grabbed at it and yanked hard, then fell backward into the grave as Dan flattened himself against the side.

She crashed to her knees, stunned and bleeding—but she had the shovel.

A face appeared against the rectangle of blue sky. The man had ripped off the clergyman collar. He flashed a smile, his teeth white and even.

“Nice work, missy. You got your little toy. Going to dig yourself even deeper?”

The face disappeared. They heard the sound of retreating footsteps. He would be back.

No time to hesitate, no time to press some cloth against the blood on her forehead, only time to wipe it out of her eyes. She jumped back on the marble box, grabbed the shovel by the long handle, and shoved it into the side of the grave, as hard as she could. The shovel fell out, the loose dirt unable to hold it. It had to go deeper.

“Help me, Dan!” He got behind her, and together, grasping the handle, they forced it tightly into the side of the earth. Dan held the shovel and nodded at her. His green eyes were bright against the dirt and blood mixed on his face.

"I've got you," he told her. "Go."

It had to be her, they both knew that. She was a rock climber, a scrambler, she knew how to find the tiny niches, how to plant her body against the wall and get up. She hoisted herself up on the shovel handle and dug her fingers into the earth, closing her eyes as she made a ledge for her fingertips. Dan yanked out the shovel and she hung there while he jammed it a foot higher. She heard him panting hard and fast. She tested the handle.

"Ready?"

"GO!" Dan grunted, and she used the handle to spring up, up to the top of the hole. Every muscle was straining, but she knew she could do it. *Had* to do it. Her hands smacked down over the edge. Her arm muscles quivered as she quickly scanned the cemetery. The man was now about fifty yards away. He was running toward the utility shed. Behind him another man emerged, holding a shovel.

Amy gathered every particle of strength she had and hauled herself over the edge. Her face hit the dirt. She had time to grab one breath—only one—before she found her feet.

Something made her attacker turn, some flicker at the corner of his eye, and he saw her. Both men spurted into a run. Straight at her.

She made a swift calculation. They were fast, much faster than she expected. There was no way she would have time to get Dan out. She had to lead them away.

She streaked down the hill. She felt the benefit of pushing herself through all those punishing runs. Dan had pointed out that they were safe now, she didn't have to be quite so . . . intense, but Amy had found solace in those dawn runs. Now they would help her.

She led them down a sloping hill, leaping over gravestones. All the while she was searching frantically for help, her gaze sweeping the cemetery for any sign of people. They wouldn't attack her if there were people around. She hoped.

She was almost at the Tolliver plot now. She had miscalculated. They were almost on top of her. How could they be so *fast*? She'd had such a big lead!

Amy leaped over a crumbling old headstone, and she felt rather than heard the displacement of air as the shovel was raised. With a sudden swerve, she doubled back and saw the second man's look of surprise as she headed straight toward him with a classic spinning kick, right at his throat.

She connected *hard*.

Why didn't he go down? He wasn't even *winded*.

He just spun away and lifted the shovel, and she ducked at the last minute. It crashed down on the polished granite behind her. The wooden handle snapped, but the steel end of the tool cracked the edge of the stone.

VAN TOLLIVER

The sight of Evan's desecrated stone gave her such a spurt of rage that she picked up the chunk of splintered

rock and threw it at the man's head. Blood spurted from his mouth. He smiled. She had a confused impression of eyes the color of the gravestones, blood streaking perfect white teeth.

He raised the splintered end of the handle. She dropped down behind Evan's stone as the man charged. Evan would protect her, one last time.

The handle hit the stone and cracked, and she was off and running before he could grab it again. He was on her heels. She could hear his breathing. So close. She knew any second he would grab her hair, crash into her, and bring her down. . . . And now she saw the other one ahead of her, knees bent and ready, waiting for whatever direction she would choose to go. They would run her down, and for some reason that she would never know, they would kill her, and then they would go back for Dan.

Suddenly, she saw a car turn into the cemetery road, a bright red Toyota. It was the best sight in the world. People.

Amy veered at the last second and started down the hill, leaping over gravestones, waving her arms, and shrieking, "HEY!"

The car pulled over. A youngish woman got out. Amy was confused when, instead of helping, she began to take pictures of Amy with a long-lensed camera.

Another car pulled in. Now Amy was truly confused. Two men got out and began shooting her as well. What was going on?

Her attackers seemed to simply melt away. One moment they were right on her heels, and the next they were almost at a black car, walking quickly, like mourners eager to go home.

Amy turned and ran back toward McIntyre's grave. She lay flat and looked down at Dan. "They're gone. Are you okay?"

Dan's face was a pale oval. She saw the strain around his mouth and knew how afraid he'd been that someone else would be returning. "Sure. I've been buried alive. Never better."

"Wait. I'll get a ladder." She hurried down the hill to the utility shed. To her relief, there was a ladder leaning against the side. She hoisted it and quickly returned to Dan. Amy slid the ladder into the hole and a second later her brother clambered up.

"Do I look as bad as you do?" Dan asked. "Because you look like a zombie. Which I guess makes sense considering we just climbed out of a grave . . ."

A bright yellow Jeep turned into the cemetery, going too fast. Amy grinned. There was only one person she knew who could be late for a funeral and then speed in a cemetery. Nellie.

## CHAPTER 3

Dan felt his legs shaking as they jogged toward Nellie's car. He quickly dived into the backseat of the Jeep as Amy climbed into the front. He didn't want them to know how terrified he'd been, waiting those long minutes at the bottom of a grave.

"Kiddos! I'm so sorry! Did I miss everything?" Nellie twisted around and was rooting through the contents in the back, trying to straighten out her usual jumble, which Dan considered an impossible task. The familiarity of the gesture, the usual smell of the car — what was it, exactly, a mixture of popcorn, apples, and that bottle of wheatgrass shampoo Nellie had spilled a year ago? — whatever it was, it helped him feel safe.

When Nellie had returned to college in the winter session, she'd tried for a few days to tone down her look, but now her hair was back to its usual crazy style, jet-black with bleached platinum ends. She was always late, but she claimed it was because she was "mad overscheduled." In addition to tutoring them, she took a full load of classes at Boston University,

juggled at least two boyfriends, and cooked at a café in Boston on Wednesday and Saturday nights. Dan grinned when he saw her struggle to sweep her chaos off the backseat onto the floor: on her arm was a new temporary tattoo. The word *FOCUS* blared at him from her tanned forearm.

Nellie had once been their au pair, which meant he had once had the greatest au pair in the history of civilization. She'd traveled the world with them on the hunt for the 39 Clues, watching out for them and protecting them. Now she was like a mashup of older sister and best friend.

Nellie swept the various items—a water bottle, a towel, a cookbook, a bag of apples—off the seat while she talked.

“I had one freaky morning,” she said, tossing a half-eaten sandwich back in a paper bag. “My phone got wonky—it ate all my photos!—and then your Uncle Fiske called—he’s doing okay, but I think we should go visit—and then I completely *forgot* that I had put cinnamon rolls in the oven, and I *raced* to get here on time, even though I knew Auntie Beatrice would give me the hairy eyeball if I was late . . . and then this red car sideswiped me. . . .” Nellie’s head popped up. “Hey, I think that’s the car!” she cried, pointing to the red Toyota. Then, finally, she caught sight of Amy and Dan. “Why are you both so dirty? Is that BLOOD?”

“We’re okay,” Amy reassured her, reaching back for the towel.

"You are most definitely NOT! What happened?"

"I'll tell you while we drive," Amy said. "There's a whole bunch of photographers here, for some reason. Maybe somebody famous is getting buried today." Amy wiped her face and then tossed the towel to Dan.

Nellie put the car into gear and headed toward the cemetery gates. "Okay, spill, because I am about to totally freak out on you. Did you fall out of a tree or something?"

"We fell into a grave," Dan said. "Because we were pushed. Then some goon tried to bury us alive."

Two of them chased me across the cemetery," Amy added.

Nellie almost swerved off the road as she turned to look at Dan. "That's not funny."

"I didn't think it was, either," Dan said, wiping the last of the dirt off his face.

Nellie's hands gripped the steering wheel. He saw her face change. She, like them, was a Madrigal, the branch of the family that was now in charge of all the Cahills.

"Any idea who they were?" she asked.

"We don't know," Amy said. "That's the trouble." She gazed out the window. "It's starting again, Nellie. I can feel it."

Nellie gave her a quick glance. "What?"

"Some darkness we can't see. It's coming for us. Again."

“Are you *positive* it wasn’t just some random crazy guys . . .”

Dan could see Amy’s face in the rearview mirror. He knew that look. She was going back over the details, thinking about every word, every gesture. She shook her head firmly. “No. This was targeted. They must have paid off the funeral director. And . . .”

“They knew who we were,” Dan said. “I’m sure of it.”

“Cahills gone rogue?” Nellie asked.

Amy and Dan considered this. Even though now the family of Cahills had agreed on peace, and their digital network had linked all the branches, they didn’t know every Cahill personally.

“I don’t think so,” Amy said slowly. “There was something . . . professional about these guys. Like hired muscle.”

“Muscle is the word,” Dan agreed. “That was no minister. I thought it was weird that he looked like a buff version of the Incredible Hulk.”

“Whoever they were, these guys were Olympic-caliber athletes,” Amy said. “When I kicked the guy, it was like slamming into a wall.”

Nellie chewed on her lip. “We’ll figure it out,” she said.

Her voice was confident, but Dan knew that when Nellie chewed on her lip, she was seriously freaked. They were quiet for the rest of the drive.

They drove through the back roads of Attleboro

until they came to the Cahill property. Nellie punched in the code for the iron gates and they pulled into the winding drive. As soon as the gates closed behind them, Dan relaxed. He realized that his hands had been curled into fists during the drive.

Grace's mansion loomed ahead, across a meadow and behind a stand of trees. Dan let out a long breath. Home.

Nellie pulled up by the kitchen door and turned off the engine. "Let's hit the Cahill network and see if there are any alerts."

Hanging up their jackets in the mudroom, they took the back stairs two at a time. They didn't use much of the house now—mostly the kitchen, the bedrooms, and Grace's library, a place where they often congregated in the late afternoons, a fire in the fireplace, Amy's head drooping over a book. Dan had heard her walking the house at night. He knew there was nothing he could do to break her sadness.

*I'm one of the richest kids on the planet, and I'm helpless.*

Two years ago, after the hunt for the 39 Clues, Amy had unfurled a grand plan to refurbish their grandmother's mansion. She knew trouble was coming and so she built a command center, with a whole bunch of guest rooms and bathrooms and a separate kitchen, in case Cahills had to bunk in and stay over.

Amy had even bought an orbiting satellite for all their communication needs, which she named *Gideon* after the first Cahill. It helped to have a gazillion

dollars. Amy wasn't the type of girl to buy sweaters and purses. She bought *satellites*. That just about made her the coolest sister in the galaxy, he figured.

Now Dan used the command center computer to keep at least two chess games going at the same time with his best pal, Atticus Rosenbloom, who lived in Rome with his brother, Jake. Dan knew that something wasn't quite right with his sister and Jake now, but he would rather eat a dish of salamander jelly than ask her about it.

As he walked into the room he saw immediately that he'd been checkmated. Atticus had left a message: *LOSER*.

Beaten by an eleven-year-old. Well, at least Atticus was a genius. He'd graduated from high school and had already been accepted at Harvard, Yale, and the University of Chicago. Dan typed back: *NOT FOR LONG*.

He saw his sister flinch as she crossed the threshold. He knew this room reminded her of Evan.

Saladin rubbed against his ankles and he picked him up. He settled the cat in his lap as he sat at the main computer. He began checking the Cahill feed.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he reported. He let out a small sigh of relief. At least their family was intact.

Nellie sat at a second computer, a frown on her face. "Your personal alert system is going crazy, though. Look at all these hits."

Amy leaned over her shoulder. "It's a gossip site," she said, surprise in her voice.

Nellie clicked on the link, and an image sprang to life. Amy and Dan in front of Interpol headquarters.

CAHILL BRATS STEAL ART FOR KICKS! screamed the headline. Underneath, in smaller type, it said: *Claim That Thefts Were "Just Pranks." Did They Bribe Their Way to Freedom?*

"What?" Amy exclaimed.

"We never said the thefts were pranks!" Dan protested. "And we didn't bribe anybody! Interpol totally got that we only stole stuff to rescue hostages!"

"And they agreed to keep the story quiet," Amy said. "So how did a gossip site get this photo?"

The picture showed a jet-lagged Amy with a large cardboard cup of coffee. Dan was bent over his phone.

Nellie swallowed. "I took that picture. My phone was hacked!"

"But that was only this morning!" Amy pointed out.

"I *noticed* it this morning," Nellie corrected, her voice grim as she clicked through on more links. "It could have happened weeks or even months ago. I hardly ever use that camera."

## CAHILL KIDS SKATE AWAY ON THEFT CHARGES

The photograph was taken a few years ago, of Dan and Amy Rollerblading.

"That's my photo for sure," Nellie said. She began to type frantically. "I've got to get our genius tech guy on this."

Dan nudged Nellie over so that he could take her

place at the keyboard of the computer. "Look at this," he said. "It's from today."

Amy saw a photograph of herself leaping over a tombstone. Her mouth was open, her hair was flying, and it looked as though she was laughing. She knew the moment that photograph had been taken. She'd been shouting at the young woman who'd raised the camera to her face. But matched with the headline, it looked as though she was having the time of her life.

AMY SEZ: "GHOULS ARE COOL!"

CAHILL KIDS CHOOSE HISTORIC CEMETERY FOR WILD PARTY

"We're like the poster children for the rich and bratty," Amy said. "How did this *happen*?"

Dan clicked through to the next photo, then quickly clicked past it. "This is all just compost. No need to look at it."

"What was that? Come on, I've already seen the worst." Amy hit the **BACK** button.

She gave a sharp intake of breath when Evan's face appeared.

THE TRAGIC DEATH THAT HAUNTS AMY

*Did she cause her first love's death?*

Dan looked at his sister's stricken face. Quickly, he clicked away again.

"It doesn't matter what it says. It's just trash."

"They're just trying to drive traffic," Nellie said. "Not enough going on with celebrities in Hollywood, so they found a new target. What I'm wondering is why

you two. And why the attack today.”

“Do you think they’re connected?” Amy asked.

“They’re both attacks, aren’t they?” Nellie said, taking the keyboard away from Dan. She began clicking and dragging. “One is on you physically, the other on your reputations.”

Nellie quickly compiled the stories into a spreadsheet. Dan watched her drag and drop, looking for a pattern.

“Let’s plug these sites and tabloids into a search engine and see who the parent companies are,” Nellie said.

Within minutes, the results came back.

“They’re all owned by one media conglomerate,” Amy said. “Founders Media.”

“Never heard of it,” Dan said.

“It’s owned by some rich guy named J. Rutherford Pierce,” Nellie said. “I didn’t know he owned his own media company.”

“You’ve heard of him?” Amy asked.

“Sure,” Nellie said. “I mean, not my thing—if you’re not on the Cooking Channel, I don’t know who you are, basically—but he’s some kind of major political pundit. He has his own TV and radio shows, and his Twitter feed has over a million followers. Haven’t you heard of ‘Piercers?’”

At Amy’s and Dan’s blank looks, she turned back to the computer keys again.

“It’s what he calls his followers. ‘Piercers.’ His show

is called *Piercing Intellect*. They have this rah-rah Founding Fathers cult. Look, don't get me wrong, the Founders were seriously cool dudes, but if you think about it, what would they know about, you know, climate change or European debt or . . ."

"Nellie?" Dan spun a fast circle in his chair. "Losing us."

"Here — Pierce's bio."

Amy scanned it quickly. "Born in Maine, was the fourth generation to get into Harvard . . . but look, his business résumé isn't so great if you read between the lines. Three companies he worked for went bust. And then he ran for state senator and lost . . ."

"Two kids, Galt and Cara — hey, they're our ages, thirteen and sixteen — and a wife, Debi Ann," Dan said. He studied her picture. "Helmet hair."

"He bought a newspaper and that's how he built his fortune," Nellie continued. "Look, this is standard PR stuff. It doesn't give us the real deal. We'll have to dig for that."

"Look at the dates," Dan said. "He bought that one newspaper ten years ago. But suddenly within the last six months he's been acquiring like magazines and TV stations and websites. . . ."

"You're right, Dan," Nellie said. "He built a media empire in less than a year. How do you do that? He must be a mega-genius."

"A mega-genius who couldn't make it through Harvard," Dan said. "He finished up at Springfield

Polytechnic Community College. Where his dad built the new state-of-the-art aqua center.”

“There’s plenty of information,” Nellie said. “But it doesn’t say much at all. And it sure doesn’t answer why he’s targeting you.”

Dan spun around in his chair three times. Then he stopped himself with one hand on the desk.

“We’re not going to find out just sitting here,” he said. “We should just ask the dude.”

“You don’t just get to a guy like that,” Amy said. “You have to go through about seven assistants and a bunch of receptionists, and then he says no.”

“So, we ambush him,” Dan said.

Amy nodded. “We’d have to track his routine . . . pick a likely coordinate . . . it’s doable, but it will take some surveillance.”

“I love it when you talk like a spy kid,” Dan said. “Or, we could just show up HERE.” He reached over Nellie’s shoulder to enlarge one of the windows on the computer.

RUTHERFORD PIERCE TO LEAD REPORTERS ON TOUR OF FOUNDERS MEDIA HEADQUARTERS SITE IN DOWNTOWN BOSTON. *Protests planned.*

“Can we make it to Boston in time?” Amy asked.

Nellie grinned. “If I’m driving, we can.”

## CHAPTER 4

They jumped into the Jeep and Nellie gunned the car down the long, curving drive. She punched in the code and the electric gates swung open.

Cars were now parked on the grassy edges of the lane, slanted in crazy angles. Photographers sprang forward, their faces obscured by cameras.

The noise of camera shutters clicking sounded like hundreds of crickets on a still summer night. "Duck!" Nellie yelled.

Amy ducked, but not before seeing a camera snapping a picture of her frightened face.

Nellie gunned the motor and sped past them. Still clicking, the photographers ran for their cars.

"Can you lose them?" Amy asked. Her heart pounded. She felt hunted and trapped.

"Are you kidding?" Nellie sped down the street, then made a short right turn onto a dirt road. She squeaked past overgrown shrubbery to barrel down a driveway. "The Fieldstones won't mind," she said. "I gave Marylou my coffee cake recipe." She swerved

off the driveway, bumped over a grassy field, skirted a badminton net, then made a hard right onto a back road that ran along a lake. "We can get to the highway from here."

Nellie made several fast turns and approached the highway. She swung the car into the turning lane under the BOSTON sign.

"You see?" she said confidently. "All clear."

Dan twisted behind her. "Um, not. I think I see that red Toyota again. And a couple others. They must have made a guess that we might be headed to the city."

The drive was short and tense. Nellie went as fast as she dared, but cars kept swerving close, trying to get a picture. The photographers cut across three lanes of traffic, hung out of windows shooting, popped out of sunroofs.

"There's some hats back there," Nellie said. "Try to cover your faces so they can't take your picture. Maybe they'll give up."

Dan pawed through the hats. He held up a Mexican sombrero. "Uh, Nellie?"

"Free Hat Night at Don Jose's Cantina," Nellie explained. "You gotta try the chimichangas."

"Haven't you ever heard of Cap Day at the stadium?" Dan grumbled. He pulled on a plaid winter hat with earflaps and handed Amy a canvas beach hat. She pulled it down to her eyebrows. She couldn't hear the clicking of the shutters but she felt their intrusive chatter hammering inside her brain.

Nellie jerked the wheel suddenly to the right and exited off the highway, leaving two cars full of photographers zooming past, comical looks of surprise on their faces.

“See ya, suckers!” Nellie called as she gunned through a yellow light, made two successive quick left turns, and then plunged into the notorious Boston traffic.

After a few minutes of combat driving, Nellie pulled up in a bus lane with a cry of satisfaction. “I rule Beantown!”

They craned their necks and looked straight up at the skeleton of a skyscraper across the street.

FOUNDERS MEDIA

COMMUNICATION, SYNERGY, CONNECTION

YOUR FUTURE IS OUR PRESENT

A bus driver leaned on the horn behind them. “Text me when you’re done,” Nellie said. “I’ll meet you right here.”

Ignoring the blaring horn, Nellie scanned the sidewalk. “There’s a lot of security. How are you going to sneak in?”

“Just follow my first rule of life,” Dan said as he slid out of the Jeep. “Everybody’s gotta eat.”



Fifteen minutes later, Amy and Dan walked to the side construction entrance, both carrying bags from

Brown Bag Subs. The tantalizing aroma of meatball subs snaked up from the bags.

Three construction workers sat on a makeshift bench of two-by-fours and bricks, right outside a door marked CONSTRUCTION SITE DO NOT ENTER.

“You guys know Joe?” Dan asked, holding up the bag. “This is his order.”

“Just go through the door and yell,” one of the guys said. “He should be in the office.”

Amy and Dan pushed through the door. “How did you know a guy named Joe worked here?” Amy asked as they dropped the food bags on a table.

“That’s my second rule of life,” Dan said. “There’s always a guy named Joe.” He grabbed a yellow hard hat and tossed one to Amy.

“It’s starting to scare me how much you know about breaking and entering,” Amy observed, putting it on.

They stood in the hall, wondering which way to go. The building had girders and beams and drywall that marked a few rooms. Stacks of wood and glass littered the space, along with rolls of insulation and long snakelike bundles of rebar. Plastic buckets held empty coffee cups and scraps of metal and wood. Spray-painted in orange on the walls were mysterious letters and numbers. Large concrete columns marched down the space, and the dust spiraled in the air through the beams of light.

“I smell something,” Dan said.

“Danger?” Amy asked.

“Does danger smell like cookies?”

Amy sniffed the air. “And coffee.”

“If there’s a tour, there might be coffee for the press,” Dan said. “Maybe we can mingle and we won’t get noticed.”

Following their noses, they moved toward the front of the building. Soon they could hear murmuring voices.

“These are stale,” someone said.

“Hey, they’re free. Coffee’s not bad.”

Amy and Dan peered around the wall. About a dozen reporters stood scarfing down cookies and gulping coffee out of paper mugs.

They sidled in and lingered at the edge of the group.

“Where are you from?” one of the reporters asked Dan. He had spiky red hair and looked almost as young as they did.

“Uh . . . a national kids’ magazine,” he answered. “*Homeschooling Monthly*.”

The guy nodded. “Sounds cool. Wish I’d been homeschooled. Just not with, you know, my own parents. I’m with the web ‘zine *Celebrity Dish*.”

“Isn’t that owned by Founders Media?” Amy asked. “So, Mr. Pierce is kind of your boss?”

He shrugged. “We’re all part of the company. Your magazine, too—you just don’t know it. You think this guy wants bad press? He’s already got a stack of violations on this building. He’s throwing shade on a community garden—did you see the protestors? And

some poor construction guy got killed last month. They're putting this up so fast they've got safety inspectors breathing down their necks . . . but then they mysteriously go away. Hey, do you have your question ready? We're only allowed one each, you know. I'm going to ask what color pajamas he wears."

"You're going to ask about *pajamas*?" Dan blurted.

"I'm not going for a Pulitzer here, buddy. I just want to keep my job. If Pierce says polka dots, I've got a headline."

"Love that hard-hitting news," Dan muttered.

A trim young woman in a red suit entered the space, her high heels clicking. She was wearing, Dan noticed, a small headset tucked under her hair, a slender silver wire hovering near the corner of her mouth.

"Hi, guys! I'm Roxanne Crone. I'm Mr. Pierce's personal assistant, and I'll be escorting you from the hospitality suite to the reception suite." She waved her yellow hard hat. "Let's all put on our hats! Now follow me to the sixty-fifth floor!"

They followed Roxanne Crone and her clicking heels to a large cage elevator on the side of the building. The reporters filed inside. The cage rose up, up, high over the city. A gust of wind shook the wire mesh cage. Some of the reporters turned green. "Best view in Boston," Roxanne said, and pushed open the door.

They filed out into a space similar to the ground floor. Concrete floors, piles of stacked glass, machinery

lying idle. Wires hung down from the grid of the ceiling, coiled like snakes about to strike.

A room had been framed out with metal columns. At one end a podium had been set up, with red drapes hung behind it. The wind blew through the open space. Even though they were nowhere near the edge, Amy shivered. The reporters clustered together nervously. Everyone felt exposed, so high above the city, with no walls for protection.

Roxanne Crone stood behind the podium and spoke into the microphone. Her voice echoed and bounced from one concrete pillar to another.

“Welcome to the sixty-fifth floor of the new headquarters of Founders Media, the number one media conglomerate in the United States!”

There was a silence, and then a few claps began. Apparently applause was called for.

“Yes, isn’t it thrilling! The innovative design of Founders Media headquarters will include a one-square-block complex with three separate buildings, all joined by pedestrian bridges! The buildings will offer offices, retail, restaurants, and the Founders television studios. After a short press conference during which you can ask your preapproved questions, you will get a personal tour of the new Founders Media headquarters by J. Rutherford Pierce himself. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you J. Rutherford PIERCE!” She almost screamed his last name.

A tall man with silver hair and a movie-star smile strode through the curtains. The lights bounced off his burnished skin. He looked glowing and healthy and ready to take on the world. "So happy to be here today, my friends!" he said, taking his place at the podium. "I'll take a few questions before we start the tour."

"What is your secret of success?" someone asked.

"Work hard and love your country."

"What do you like to do on your day off?"

"Play with my dog, Sport, and grill some good meat!"

"As long as he doesn't grill Sport," Dan murmured to Amy. The reporter standing next to them overheard and chuckled.

"How do you account for your spectacular rise?"

"I worked hard and I love my country."

Dan groaned into Amy's ear. "Talk about puffball questions. How are we going to get to talk to him?"

"On the tour," she said.

"Not with all these handlers around," Dan said. "I say we shake things up." He raised his voice. "How much does it cost these days to bribe a safety inspector?"

The reporters instantly went quiet. The red-haired reporter turned and frantically motioned at Dan to shut up.

"I mean, does the cost go *up* or *down*, depending on how close you are to finishing the building?" Dan asked.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that." Pierce peered over the

crowd but couldn't see Amy and Dan, who were standing behind the taller reporters. His eyes cut to Roxanne Crone, and her sharp gaze raked the crowd.

"Any other questions?" he asked.

"What about the worker who was killed?" Amy asked. "Is it because you're cutting corners on safety?"

The red-haired journalist gave Amy and Dan a look of admiration. Amy saw him square his shoulders. He raised his hand. "And where did his widow get a million dollars, when he didn't have life insurance? Was she paid off?"

"Care to comment on that?" someone else yelled.

Pierce blinked once. Twice. His smile didn't wobble. He swiveled toward Roxanne Crone.

She moved forward quickly as Pierce disappeared behind the red curtain. "We're out of time" she called cheerily. "Something has come up, and Mr. Pierce must leave us. I'll conduct the tour."

Amy called out, "Hey, what about the photo op?"

The reporters took up the question and began shouting at Roxanne Crone. Amy and Dan quickly moved forward and stepped behind the curtain, looking for Pierce.

"There he goes," Amy whispered.

Just behind a concrete column, they saw Pierce picking his way around a pile of stacked wood flooring.

Maneuvering around pails and tools and rolls of insulation, they tracked Pierce as he moved through the building. They could see that he was heading

toward elevators on the east side of the building.

"Mr. Pierce!" Amy yelled, running toward him. "We have a question!"

He turned, his smile frozen in place. Amy saw something flicker across his face when he saw her: recognition.

*He knows who we are.*

And then a second, more startling thought as his gray eyes stayed on her face.

*He hates me.*

"And who would you be?" he asked.

"You know who we are," Amy answered. "Amy and Dan Cahill. The kids you've been tormenting in your media outlets."

"I don't have anything to do with the content in my magazines and websites," Pierce said. "That's what the Third Amendment is all about, a free press."

"First Amendment," Amy replied, and noted two spots of red on his cheeks at her correction. "And freedom of the press means that the government can't censor the press. It doesn't mean that you can't forbid your employees from writing sensational and untrue stories just to sell papers."

"But that's my job, selling papers, little lady," Pierce said. "And magazines, and website content. But if you're upset about something, I suggest you contact our press office. It will make its way to the right person."

"You're the right person," Dan said. "You're the boss."

Two security guards appeared, wearing baseball

caps and tinted glasses. Amy and Dan hadn't heard them approach, but there they were, as solid and unyielding as the concrete pillars around them.

"Hey, fellas," Pierce said to them. "Gosh, this is why we lead a tour, kids. You can't go wandering off by yourself. Construction sites are hazardous places. Accidents can happen so easily when you're sixty-five stories up in a skyscraper without walls. Especially with the two Cahill daredevils! We wouldn't want you to go splat now, would we?"

Amy looked at him, startled. Could he be *threatening* them? Impossible. He was a businessman. A major media celebrity . . .

"Show them the way out, gentlemen," Pierce told the security guards. "The *right* way out, that is."

Dan doubled over and sneezed repeatedly. While Pierce backed up, an expression of distaste on his face at his explosions, Dan dipped his hand into the plastic bucket next to him and then shoved it in his pocket.

Pierce barked at the security goons, "Why are you still standing here?"

One of the guards roughly shoved Dan forward. "Move."

The guards led them in the opposite direction from the reporters. Amy's mind raced. Something wasn't right. Why weren't they being led back to the group?

They were being corralled toward the far end of the building. They emerged from the drywall corridor, and Amy suddenly had a direct line of sight to Pierce. He

stood stabbing the elevator button repeatedly. From this position Amy could also see what Pierce could not—the crowd of reporters hurrying toward him, Roxanne scurrying behind them, waving her arms. Pierce couldn't see them . . . but he could hear them. She could tell by the frown of irritation on his face.

It happened in a flash. Amy blinked as Pierce grabbed a nearby hanging rope, swung out over empty air, then dropped onto the partially completed pedestrian bridge a story below. He quickly walked over it, sixty-three stories above the city, then stepped into the skeleton of the building next door and disappeared.

*What was that?* Did the man just drop ten feet, land on a girder . . . and tightrope across it?

"Move it, sister," one of the guards said, nudging her along.

The guards pushed them past a curtain of thick plastic sheeting. Here the construction wasn't as far along as on the rest of the floor. Girders stretched out into empty air. There was no drywall at all, just a concrete floor. Construction equipment surrounded them. A piece of yellow tape acted as a flimsy barrier between them and open air.

"Oops, no elevator. Guess we made a mistake," one of the guards said. "So you're going to have to take the fast way down."

"Are you kidding?" Dan asked.

"I don't know," the guard said with a terrible smile. "Am I?"

The two guards herded them closer to the edge. Amy and Dan had to back up.

“C’mon, you kids are daredevils, right?” the other one said. “Let’s see what you can do. If you walk out on the girders, you can almost make it to the building next door. If you jump far enough.” He chortled.

They were close to the edge now. Amy didn’t want to look down, but she couldn’t help it. She could see tiny people moving below, cars and buses that looked like the metal toys Dan used to leave scattered on the floor when he was five.

“You’re scaring me!” Dan suddenly said. He shuddered, both hands in his pockets. “I—I’m afraid . . . of heights! NO! NO!” he screamed.

“Shut up, kid!”

Dan moved in a flash. His hand came out of his pocket and he threw ball bearings on the floor between them.

Amy didn’t need to be prompted. She knew what Dan was planning without one word being spoken. She and Dan ran in the opposite direction from the wildly rolling balls. They heard the curses of the guards as they windmilled their arms, trying to keep their balance and run at the same time. Both of them crashed to the floor.

Amy and Dan knew they had only seconds before the guards were after them again. They pushed through the thick plastic sheet and took off.

“This way,” Dan said, darting down a hallway.

Amy followed without question. She knew that her brother's photographic memory had stored the layout of the floor in his head. He was probably leading them back to the elevator they'd taken to get up here, in hopes that Roxanne had finally corralled the reporters. There would be safety in a crowd.

They heard the rustle of the plastic screen, then the *thump-thump* of running footsteps. The guards would be on them at any moment.

Then Amy heard the *whirr* of the elevator. Dan had already spurted toward the sound.

"There they are! Get them!" They heard the guttural voices behind them, but it would waste time to turn. They only had seconds now.

They burst out of the corridor just in time to see the top half of the reporters in the elevator as it descended past the floor.

"Our only chance," Amy said to Dan. "C'mon."

They both raced toward the descending cage and jumped.

Amy felt the cage rattle as she landed. Dan landed next to her. Roxanne Crone screamed, and one of the reporters shouted, "HEY!"

Amy and Dan dropped to their knees and laced their fingers through the mesh. The chilly wind threatened to blow them off the top of the cage.

Amy looked down through the wire cage. Roxanne's angry face stared up at her.

"Going down?" Dan asked.