

CHAPTER ONE

THE ACCIDENT

The twins were doing math questions when they heard the first siren scream past the school, heading north, and then stop not much farther on. Back in their old home in the city, they wouldn't have paid it any attention at all. But in the small town of Portland, even a single siren was unusual. When it was followed by another, as was the current case, it became almost interesting.

"That's the ambulance," said curly-haired Kyle, one of those kids who could recognize the slight individual variations in the sirens of the local emergency service vehicles. "And the second one is the fire engine. . . ."

His voice trailed off as another, more distant siren joined the mix, getting louder as it raced toward the town.

"And that's the rescue rig from Scarborough!" he exclaimed. "Something big must be going on!"

He jumped up and rushed to the window, followed by most of the class.

"Children, children!" admonished Mr. Carver, but as he didn't actually raise his voice, only the front row heard him and stayed in place.

Jack and Jaide looked at each other and didn't immediately follow, having already experienced quite a lot of disasters and emergencies in the last few weeks. Also, they were from the city and had a reputation to hold up as not

being impressed by something that probably wouldn't rate a mention on the news back home.

Over the cacophony of all the sirens, there came a deep, fast beat that the twins knew very well. The *wokka-wokka-wokka* of an approaching helicopter.

"Airswift Aeromedical 339, twin-engine," said Jaide, jumping up and angling quickly between a couple of kids to get to the window. Her brother, Jack, followed in her wake.

"How do *you* know?" asked Kyle.

"That's our mother's helicopter," said Jack. "This *must* be serious. Can you see anything?"

"Not really, but the helicopter looks like it's going to land near the iron bridge." Kyle craned up on tiptoe, trying to get a better view. "Yeah, there it goes — must be right in the middle of the road!"

"Class, I would particularly appreciate it if you would return to your seats," said Mr. Carver, still in his normal conversational voice, "while I endeavor to ascertain if this emergency affects the school."

His students didn't even turn around. The kids in back kept jostling to get to the window, while the kids in front pushed back with their elbows to stay in place.

"CHILDREN! Back to your seats!"

No one had ever heard Mr. Carver shout before. There was a moment of shock, followed by a sudden cascade of students rushing back to their desks, several of them tripping over the beanbags that were used during Mr. Carver's "meditation time." They didn't so much sit back down as do controlled crashes into their chairs.

"Continue with your math problems." Mr. Carver wasn't shouting now, but his voice was still louder than usual, clear even over the noise of the sirens and the helicopter winding down. "I am going to see what's going on. I expect

everyone to stay in their places unless requested otherwise, by me or another teacher.”

He took his phone out of his pocket as he strode out of the class, dialing with one hand as he pushed the door open with the other.

“Wow! I’ve never seen him like that before,” said Tara, the newest student in the school. “I mean, I thought he was nothing but peace and light all the time.”

“Nah, old Heath loses it occasionally,” said Kyle, using Mr. Carver’s first name, as he preferred his students to do, although few of them could ever bring themselves to do it. “Three years ago he freaked out when that tree branch fell down in the parking lot just before the bus left for the whale-watching excursion.”

“That wasn’t three years ago, Kyle,” said Miralda King, daughter of the mayor.

“Yes, it was,” Kyle snapped back.

“We went fossil-hunting on Mermaid Point three years ago,” retorted Miralda. “Whale-watching was *four* years ago.”

“Actually, it *was* three years ago,” said one of the other kids, and then all the locals who’d been at the school long enough started arguing about whether they had gone whale-watching four or three years ago, and whether or not the branch had fallen that year, or in fact some other year, when the bus was leaving for some different excursion.

“I guess you have to find your own excitement in a small town,” Tara whispered to Jaide.

“Whatever’s happening on the bridge is enough for me,” said Jaide. “I wish we could see what’s happening.”

“Can’t be too big, or we’d have to evacuate,” said Jack. “I mean, if it was a gas tanker that was going to explode or something.”