

UNSTOPPABLE

FLASHPOINT



GORDON KORMAN

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For Rossana



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CHAPTER 1

Dan Cahill awoke from a bad dream only to find himself in the midst of a worse one.

Images of the past twelve hours flashed like a rapid-fire slide show of horror inside his brain: a madman with the power of the US presidency nearly within his grasp; Pony — ally and friend — killed, trying to rescue Dan . . .

And Amy . . .

Tears blurred his vision just as it returned to him. His sister was dying, a timer literally ticking her life away.

He blinked the moisture from his eyes. He was tied to the armrests of a leather airline seat. Dan had spent enough time aboard Jonah Wizard's Gulfstream to recognize the luxury interior of a private jet. Only this one didn't belong to Dan's celebrity cousin. . . .

"He's awake!" exclaimed a gruff, unpleasant voice.

Galt Pierce was striding down the aisle. He was blond, brawny, and ripped — *unnaturally* ripped. His older sister, Cara, was right behind him, slimmer,

feminine, but also muscular. Which meant this was the plane of J. Rutherford Pierce, head of Founders Media, billionaire, tycoon, megalomaniac, and the madman who wanted Dan dead.

Cara untied Dan's right arm and handed him a cup of water. Thirsty as he was, Dan couldn't resist tossing it back in her face. It was a pointless thing to do—but also deeply satisfying. *For Pony*, he thought, hatred flooding his soul. *And for Amy!* If it hadn't been for Cara's father, Amy never would have taken the serum that had started her on a death clock.

"You little—" Galt raised his hand, ready to bring it down hard across Dan's cheek.

Cara grabbed his wrist. "Don't!"

He stared at his sister. "You're letting him get away with that?"

"You think I want to?" Cara demanded, the water dripping down her cheeks and nose. "But if you break his jaw, how's he going to tell us what we need to know?"

"What you need to know?" Dan was instantly alert. Outside the window of the jet, the wings dipped, bringing a sliver of the Central American rain forest into view. Dan had felt it in the aircraft's motion, but his brain had been unable to process the information until now. "We're circling! We're still over Guatemala!"

"So?" Galt snapped.

"So you were waiting for me to wake up! You *need* me!"

“Don’t flatter yourself, Dan,” Cara said coolly. “We know exactly what you and your sister have been up to—”

“Our dad decoded your ratty old book!” Galt interrupted.

Dan gasped in mock horror. “You mean he figured out our secret recipe for potato salad?”

Galt howled his outrage, but Cara put a hand on his arm. Something about the gesture reminded Dan of Amy. Normally, such acts of big-sisterliness annoyed him to no end. But right then, he ached to see Amy, to know she was okay. Only, that would have meant she’d been captured along with him. And besides, she wasn’t okay. She was the polar opposite of okay.

“There’s an antidote to the serum,” Cara told Dan. “That’s what you and Amy have been working on. We want to know how much progress you’ve made.”

“Yeah, I’d be wondering about it, too, if I were you.” Dan sat back with a smirk. “Good luck with that.”

There was a rattling sound as a stainless steel rolling cart was pushed down the aisle by a Pierce employee. *Goon* might have been a better word. J. Rutherford Pierce’s henchmen looked like adult versions of Galt and Cara, and like Pierce himself. Big, muscular, enhanced—glowing, almost. It was all artificial. The key was the same secret that had made the Cahills the most influential, successful, and powerful family in history. The 39 Clues—a serum with thirty-nine ingredients that gave a person nearly superhuman

strength, genius, creativity, and cunning. Pierce had gotten hold of a modified version of the stuff and was feeding it to his staff, his family, and even himself. It had rendered him—and everybody around him—virtually unstoppable. That was why Dan; his sister, Amy; and their companions were risking everything on this quest—to assemble the ingredients of an ancient antidote to Gideon Cahill’s formula. It was the only way to thwart Pierce’s dangerous ambitions.

The attendant plucked a hypodermic syringe off the tray and held it up to the light. It was filled with clear liquid. Panicked, Dan tried to struggle, but Galt grabbed his free arm and pinned it to the seat.

A mewl of desperation escaped Dan as the needle drew nearer.

“Wimp.” Galt smirked. “If we wanted to kill you, you’d already be dead.”

“It’s sodium pentothal,” his sister added. “Truth serum.”

Dan knew the sting of the needle and braced himself for the onslaught to come. But instead of blinding pain or nausea, he experienced a flood of warmth and well-being. Warning bells went off somewhere inside his head.

Stop feeling good, stupid! That’s how the truth drug works! You get too comfortable and spill your guts!

To counteract the effect—*fight it, fight it!*—he forced his mind onto unpleasant thoughts. For a Cahill, there were always a lot of options. The death of his parents

in a fire when he was only four; the sight of poor Pony, his eyes wide with terror, dropping from a helicopter to a violent end on the rain forest floor. And most painful of all, the last days he'd spent with Amy.

Amy had saved his life, but in order to do it, she'd had to take the serum. Not the modified version that Pierce was using to dose his people, but the real thing—Gideon Cahill's five-hundred-year-old recipe, pure and strong. The real serum produced extraordinary results almost instantly. But no one had ever survived longer than a week after taking it. Now it was doubly urgent to complete the antidote. Amy's life depended on it.

Dan pulled himself up short. *Did I say that out loud or just think it?* He realized uneasily that he couldn't be sure. It was the injection working on his mind.

"And how many ingredients have you collected so far?" Cara probed.

"What?" The sodium pentothal was making it impossible to distinguish between thoughts and speech. "Did I say antidote? I meant *anecdote*—you know, like a funny story—"

Galt muscled into his view. "The ingredients—do you have them all?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Dan announced, pleased that his resistance seemed to be working now. Of the seven antidote components mentioned in the diary of his ancestor, Olivia Cahill, Amy and Dan had already acquired three. Other Cahill

sources around the globe had come up with three more. That left just one remaining.

In horror, Dan heard the sound of his own voice. He was *talking*, and Cara and Galt were nodding and listening! He tried to add, “Forget that! I’m lying!” but the words just wouldn’t come out.

“Confirm the location of the final ingredient,” Galt persisted.

The antidote had been assembled from the ancient wisdom of seven lost cities. The last of these—the one Dan must not reveal—was located in modern Cambodia, in the ancient Khmer civilization of Angkor.

“Anger?” Galt was no scholar. “Dad said it was in Cambodia.”

“Not *Anger*,” Cara corrected. “*Angkor*—and it *is* in Cambodia. Angkor was one of the most developed societies of the ancient world!”

No! Dan was in agony. *I spilled that, too, although the Pierces seemed to know it already. I’m a living, breathing Wikipedia!* He had to stop himself before he gave up any more information. But how? The injection made it impossible to keep anything secret.

Galt was like a bloodhound. “What’s the ingredient, and where do we find it in this Angkor place?”

Dan bit down on his lip until he tasted blood. He had to get out of this, but the enemy was *himself* and the chemical inside him that was turning him into a blabbermouth. Then he spotted the bottle on the rolling tray. *Chloroform*, read the label.

Knockout drops!

He pulled his hand free of Galt's grip and grabbed for the bottle. In the ensuing struggle, the contents spilled onto Dan's shirt. Crowing in triumph, he buried his face in the wet fabric and breathed the strong solvent odor. With a great sense of accomplishment, he felt himself slipping away.

You can't talk if you're unconscious!

He slumped in the seat, useless to them now.



Galt slapped Dan's face, but the prisoner did not stir. The sharp contact filled Galt with an exhilaration he wouldn't have believed possible. Finally, he was a part of his father's plans! Not just posing for father-and-son pictures, but taking action. He was a real Piercer now, a soldier for the cause!

"Wake up!" Energized, he reared back to strike another blow, but his sister grabbed his wrist.

"It's no use," she told him. "He's out like a light."

Galt turned to the man with the syringe. "Toss him out the door."

"Are you crazy?" Cara exploded. "We're at fifteen thousand feet!"

Galt glared at his sister. Where did she get off contradicting him? "He's already told us what we need to know."

"Think, Galt—this is huge! An antidote in Cahill

hands—it's the one thing that could wreck Dad's plans."

"All the more reason for *him* to go skydiving without a parachute!" growled Galt, indicating the unmoving Dan.

She shook her head. "I've heard he has a photographic memory—that means he can tell us everything the Cahills have seen and done. The kid has more uses than a Swiss Army knife. We're not going to harm a single hair on his head."

Galt opened his mouth to overrule her, but bit back the angry words. He looked around the cabin at his father's hired muscle. There was something in their expressions and body language that told him they were tuned in to his sister's orders, not his own.

When had *that* happened? *He* had always been Dad's favorite, and he'd grown up believing he'd be Dad's heir. Sure, Cara would be entitled to her share of the money. Yet the business, the *power*—J. Rutherford Pierce was going to be president of the United States soon. And even that was only the first step in Dad's master plan. . . .

"Tie the prisoner back in his seat," Cara ordered the henchmen. "I'm going to talk to the pilot about a flight plan to Cambodia."

Galt burned with resentment. Those should have been *his* lines.

The Pierce siblings worked for their father, but that didn't necessarily mean they were on the same side.