

ON THE RUN

THE FUGITIVE FACTOR



1

The boy stepped timidly into the lobby of the Red Jacket Motor Lodge. He looked about fifteen or sixteen, tall and thin, with short dark hair.

“What can I do for you, son?” the desk clerk asked.

“This might sound weird.” The boy’s shorts and T-shirt were ragged and dirty, but so many kids dressed that way these days that the clerk barely noticed. “My uncle Frank stayed in this hotel. Nine years ago.”

“You’re sure? That’s a long time.”

The teen nodded earnestly. “It was my birthday. I was six. But he’s kind of lost touch with the family, so my mom wanted me to ask if maybe you still have his address on the computer.”

“We’re not allowed to give out guest information,” the man said. “Not even after nine years.”

“Are you sure?” the boy wheedled. “It would re-

ally mean a lot to my mom. She hasn't seen her brother since forever."

"Sorry," the desk clerk told him. "Hotel rules."

As the disappointed boy slunk out of the lobby, the man wondered if perhaps he should alert the police about the young visitor with the strange request. After all, there had been fugitives spotted in the area — the children of those notorious Falconers. And wasn't the older one a teenager?

But this had been a lone kid, not a pair. Besides, people who are running from the cops don't walk into public places to make unusual requests. This was nothing — just a summer family trying to track down a long-lost relative.

Had the desk clerk been paying closer attention, he would have seen the teenager jog not to a waiting car but around the side of the building to the narrow ravine behind the motel. There, Aiden Falconer found his sister, Meg, crouched in the underbrush.

"It's a no-go," he reported sadly. "The guy's a stickler."

"It figures." Meg pulled from her pocket a weathered photo that showed a young man and woman

sunning in lounge chairs on the pool deck of this very hotel.

The man had long red hair and a beard. Frank Lindenauer — Uncle Frank, they had once called him. He was much more than a family friend. He was their parents' CIA handler. Frank Lindenauer had convinced the husband-and-wife criminologist team of John and Louise Falconer to develop profiles to help American agents identify terrorist sleeper cells.

Meg shuddered at the thought. What had gone wrong? How had the Falconers' profiles fallen into the hands of the very terrorists they had been designed to defeat?

Maybe Lindenauer knew. He was the only person who could prove that the Falconers had been working for the CIA the whole time. They weren't traitors . . . they were *patriots*. If only they could have found him before the trial.

Stop! Meg commanded herself. That kind of thinking was useless. It made her sad. Worse, it made her weak — the one thing she and Aiden couldn't afford to be if they were going to get their parents out of prison and clear their names.

"Listen," Meg said determinedly. "The informa-

tion we need is on that computer in there. It's our only lead. Without it we're dead in the water. If that desk clerk was a thousand-pound grizzly bear, we couldn't let him stop us!"

"I agree," Aiden said readily. "But what can we do? Knock him out with a tire iron?"

Meg was stubborn. "If that's what it takes."

"Be serious!"

Meg thought it over. "Stay hidden, but keep an eye on the office. When the guy leaves, that's our chance."

Aiden looked dubious. "But what if he doesn't leave?"

"He'll leave. Trust me."

Meg walked along the narrow dirt lane that separated the back of the motel from the woods. She kept an eye on the row of identical bathroom windows in the facade of cedar shakes.

Closed . . . closed . . . closed . . . jackpot.

The metal sash was raised a couple of inches. Meg peered inside. No toothbrushes or toiletries on the vanity. Beyond the bathroom door, two made beds.

Nobody home.

She pushed the window open and hoisted herself up and in.

Smoke detector right over the bed. Perfect.

She pulled a box of matches from her pocket, struck one, and held it to the corner of the yellow pages under the nightstand. There was instant combustion. She climbed onto the bed and held the blazing directory like a torch to the smoke alarm.

The siren went off almost immediately. Meg jumped down, rushed to the bathroom, and tossed the flaming phone book into the toilet bowl. Then she wriggled back out through the window and hit the ground running.



When the alarm went off, Aiden reacted with shock. A fire? Now?

Or — he watched the desk clerk rush out of the office — Meg's plan in action?

Typical Meg — using an M-1 tank to swat a mosquito. He hoped she wasn't crazy enough to burn down the motel.

He sprinted into the office, where the wailing Klaxon was cranked way beyond the tolerance level. Wincing, he ducked behind the desk and pounced on the computer.

GUEST FILES. He clicked the tab for nine years before. Under NAME SEARCH, he typed LINDENAUER.

SEARCH RESULTS = 0.

Aiden frowned. What was going on here?

Lindenauer wasn't the simplest name in the world. Maybe it had been entered wrong. He tried a few possible misspellings: *Lyndenauer . . . Lindenauer . . . Lindinauer . . .*

Nothing.

Meg appeared at his arm. "Find it?" She had to shout to be heard.

Aiden shook his head and kept trying. *Lindenower . . . Lindenour . . .*

"What if he didn't pay?" Meg suggested.

"What?"

"He'd only be on the computer if he was the one who paid for the room," Meg reasoned. "Maybe his girlfriend paid. What was her name?"

"Aunt —" Another problem. Uncle Frank had a lot of girlfriends. All of them had been introduced as Aunt Somebody. Even Mom and Dad used to have trouble telling them apart. They had referred to Lindenauer's many relationships as the soap opera. The joke had turned agonizingly unfunny during the trial. In their attempts to find the CIA agent himself, the Falconers' lawyers had tracked down a handful of his exes — a gaggle of aunts. But no uncle.

Aiden frowned. He was missing something important. The last year and a half had been just a blur, but not the trial. He remembered everything about *that* — every word, every detail, right down to the jingling of their parents' leg irons as they were led away for the final time. How could anybody forget the end of the world?

When he'd been away from the courtroom, he'd pored over the transcripts, memorizing the testimony he'd missed. He especially recalled the desperate meetings with Mom, Dad, and the lawyers as they scrambled to come up with evidence, no matter how flimsy, that Frank Lindenauer existed and had worked for the CIA. The parade of exes — Aunt Brigitte, Aunt Caroline, Aunt Trudy . . .

He had a murky vision of a tall brunette holding out a wrapped present. His heart skipped a beat. *My birthday! My sixth birthday!*

Aiden's birthday was July 24th. They had celebrated in Vermont! The missing ex was the girlfriend in the picture! What was her name? Aunt —

Come on! Think!

"Jane! Aunt Jane!"

"Jane what?" Meg demanded.

"I don't know!" He typed in JANE.

SEARCH RESULTS = 39.

He narrowed the time frame to July.

SEARCH RESULTS = 4.

A quartet of records filled the screen. Only one fell over July 24th:

JANE MACINTOSH, 240 EAST UNIVERSITY STREET,
#23C, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

"That's the one."

Meg scribbled the address down on a sheet of hotel stationery and stuffed it in her pocket. "We're golden!"

And then a fire engine squealed into the hotel parking lot, sirens blaring.



They fled, pounding for the trees as uniformed firefighters jumped down from the pumper.

The desk clerk came running from the opposite direction. "Stop those kids!"

But Aiden and Meg had already reached the cover of the ravine.

"Please tell me the hotel isn't on fire," panted Aiden, sidestepping trees left and right.

"I just set off the alarm," Meg gasped in reply. "It must call the fire department automatically."

They burst out the other side of the woods and made for their getaway vehicle — a stolen four-wheeler parked in the low brush at the edge of a farmer's field.

They jumped on, and Aiden gunned the engine. The quad roared to life and sprang forward, bouncing on the uneven ground. In no time, they were up to fifty miles an hour, and the combination of wind and rough ride threatened to fling them off the seat.

"Hang on!" cried Aiden.

In thirty seconds, they were across the property, crashing through a weathered corral fence into an apple orchard. A phalanx of sturdy trunks seemed to leap out at them. Aiden wheeled to the right, nearly flipping the quad over. At the last instant, he recovered and blasted down a narrow alley between the trees.

They flew through the orchard, the all-terrain vehicle's speedometer inching toward sixty. The road loomed dead ahead. Suddenly, four squad cars whizzed past, lights flashing.

Aiden killed the motor, and they lurched to a halt. There they sat, barely breathing, as the wailing sirens faded into the distance.

"Think they'll come back?" Meg whispered in his ear.

"I doubt they saw us." But he was ready to flee at the faintest hint of the cruisers returning.

A very long sixty seconds passed. At last, Aiden gunned the engine, and they were off again, jouncing over the tarmac and into the open country on the other side.

While the authorities prowled the grid of roads and highways, the quad carried the Falconers across

farms and fields, far from the patrols and roadblocks designed to capture them. The vehicle was so ideal for their getaway that Aiden almost forgave himself for boosting it in the first place.

Fugitive 101 — don't feel guilty about breaking the law. It's the only way to survive.

Yet the stealing, lying, and running from police left a bad taste in his mouth. Meg wasn't as squeamish. She could shrug it off as necessary. She even saw a vague future time when they would make it all right again. Was she ignorant, or just young? Aiden couldn't be sure, but he knew he didn't share her simple optimism.

They headed east — at least they guessed it was east. As they rode, the terrain became rockier. There were no more farms, just small hillside orchards. They crossed roads cluttered with billboards advertising ski resorts. Everywhere they looked, mountains lay ahead.

Aiden aimed the quad at the valleys between peaks. But even there, the terrain rose steeply. The huge tires jerked and trembled as the vehicle negotiated the boulder-strewn ground. Meg clung to Aiden, and Aiden clung to the handlebars. The world tilted upward. The speedometer needle trembled barely above zero.

This isn't driving. It's motorized rock climbing!

They forged onward, ascending a narrow ridge that rose above a picturesque landscape. Higher up, Aiden could make out a ski lodge. Below was a small neighborhood of condos. It was a spectacular spot, but Aiden was nervous.

"If we have to go back, there's no way we'll have the space to turn this thing around!" he called over his shoulder.

Meg shared none of his trepidation. "Why would we have to go back?"

"What if the ridge ends in a hundred-foot cliff?"

"You think too much, bro!" Meg exclaimed. "We're doing fine. This is the only way to travel."

With that, the ATV's big motor sputtered, coughed, and went silent. Aiden twisted the key in the starter. The engine caught for a second and then died again. The quad, no longer under its own power, keeled over sideways. The seat tilted up and around, until the two riders were hanging on for dear life.

"What happened?" cried Meg. "What's going on?"

Heart sinking, Aiden caught a glimpse of the fuel gauge. "We're out of gas!"

"How could you not notice something like that?"

she yelled in Aiden's ear as gravity and the angle of the quad pressed her into his back.

"What was I supposed to do? Pull into a gas station?"

"Yeah, but — *uh-oh!*"

They both felt the tipping point a split second before the quad toppled over.

"Jump!" Aiden cried.

They threw themselves free just as the vehicle rolled. Aiden found a handhold on an outcropping of rock, but Meg began to slide. He watched in terror as the half ton of metal first skidded and then bounced down the slope, coming up on Meg from behind.

"Duck!"

It struck a boulder and was propelled up. Meg stared in horror. For an instant, the ATV blotted out the sun as it sailed over her, spraying her with stray bolts and fiberglass fragments. She tucked in her head, arms, and legs — and prayed.

Crash!



4

Aiden let go of the handhold, digging in his heels in an attempt to control his descent. The plan succeeded too well. He jolted to a sudden stop and somersaulted over. All at once, he was rolling. The world around him became a twirling blur of stone and sky, but he did manage to catch sight of his tumbling sister twenty feet ahead of him.

"Meg!" He could not tell if the careening ATV had hit her — only that it was past her now, bashing itself to pieces as it caromed down. He barely noticed his own jolts and scrapes as the uneven rock surface brutalized him. His sister was all that mattered.

Then he was in the brush, brambles and twigs grazing his skin. The vegetation slowed him to the point where he could clamp his hands around the trunk of a juniper bush. He hauled himself to his feet, scanning the scrub for Meg.

She lay at the bottom of a small hollow, just a few feet away from the wreckage of the ATV. She wasn't moving.

Careful not to lose balance again, he sidestepped down the grade to her. His dread easily overpowered any pain he might be feeling from his trip down the mountain. This predicament — their parents in jail; he and Meg running for their lives — the one thing that made it even remotely bearable was the fact that Aiden and Meg were in it together.

There was a faint groan, and Meg turned her scratched and dirty face up to regard him. "I'm always waiting around for you," she complained. "You're slowing me down, bro."

"Are you okay?"

"Barely." She struggled unsteadily to her feet. "That tin-plated piece of junk missed me by, like, three inches. I could be a smudge on that rock up there."

"Can you walk?" Aiden asked in concern. "Because I don't think there's another way out of here."

His sister took two experimental steps. "Maybe we should head for those ski condos. We're both in need of repairs."

Aiden looked ruefully at the remains of the ATV:

"Talk about repairs! We've had to steal stuff before, but this is the first time we've totaled anything. Somebody's out one quad."

"We can't think about that," Meg reminded him quickly.

He was not consoled. "Well, what am I supposed to think about?"

"Think about helping Mom and Dad," she suggested. "Think about Jane Macintosh. Think about getting to Boston."

They trudged across rocky ground in the direction of the neighborhood they had seen from the ridge. It felt good to be moving again, despite the aches and stings of their injuries.

They made their way in silence for a while, and then Meg asked, "Where do you think we are?"

It was a good question. Back in Colchester, the whole world was looking for them. The police had put out an APB. The search was probably doubled now, after the near miss at the Red Jacket Motor Lodge. Had they put enough distance between themselves and that heavy heat? Could they talk to people and ask directions without worrying they might be recognized?

"We probably made it fifty miles or more," he es-

timated. "But Vermont's pretty small. We should avoid the locals if we can. At least until we get out of the state."

They crested a small rise and gazed over the neighborhood of ski chalets. An ancient rusted pickup truck that was once blue rattled onto the road below. The spry old fellow who jumped out was at least sixty years older than the truck, and plainly agitated.

"I can't believe you two are walking! I've never seen such a fall in all my born days! Are you all right?"

"Oh, it looked worse than it was," Meg said cheerfully, hoping there wasn't too much visible blood running from her many cuts.

"We're totally fine," Aiden added. "Thanks anyway."

The man shook his head in disgust. "What were your parents thinking, letting you ride off on that newfangled buzz bomb?"

The Falconers exchanged a look. What was probably going through their parents' minds at this moment was a combination of *How did this happen to us?* and *How are we going to survive it?* What else was there to think about in prison?

"Don't worry about us," Meg said airily. "We can walk home from here."

"Walk, nothing," the old man said stubbornly. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

"But we're okay," Aiden protested, alarmed. "Just a few bumps —"

"Then the doctor can send you home. Get in the truck." He opened the driver's door and climbed inside.

They hesitated. "Should we run?" whispered Meg.

Aiden shook his head imperceptibly. "Then he might call the cops."

"But what if someone at the hospital recognizes us?"

"Take it easy. We walk inside, he drives away, we walk back out again."

They piled in and the truck backfired to life. Their chauffeur proceeded down the road at eight miles an hour, staring through his cracked windshield with dogged concentration.

The silence was so uncomfortable that Aiden felt he had to say something. "I hope we're not taking you out of your way."

It opened up the floodgates. "I had to go into

town anyway. The Andersons need a new ball cock for their toilet. I'm the handyman hereabouts. The only one, as a matter of fact — Lester Mercure's the name. That's like Mercury, but with an 'e' instead of a 'y' — French, you know. . . ."

By the time they'd pulled up in front of the small medical center in the town of St. Johnsbury, the Falconers knew much of Lester Mercure's life story, plus much of the private business of the "city slickers" who owned the ski condos in the area.

Aiden opened the passenger door. "Well, thanks for the ride. Uh — we owe you one."

The handyman got out of the truck himself and began shepherding them toward Emergency. "I'm coming in there with you."

"But what about the Andersons' toilet?" blurted Meg.

"I saw what happened," the old man said stubbornly. "The doctor might need to talk to me."

Aiden and Meg had no choice but to allow themselves to be escorted inside to the check-in desk. Aiden gave his name as Gary Donovan — one of his fellow inmates at Sunnydale Farm, the juvenile detention facility he and his sister had escaped from. Meg used another Sunnydale identity, Belinda Gustafson, the toughest, meanest girl in the dormi-

tory. It made sense to pretend they were unrelated. The police would be looking for a brother and sister.

And then Lester put his two cents in. "I saw the whole thing," he told the admitting nurse. "They were riding on this mechanized whatchamacallit, when it tipped over and threw them off the ridge. Darned near scared me to death. I thought I'd be cleaning up the bodies."

They took seats in the waiting room among a few other patients. To their dismay, Lester came with them. Meg cast Aiden an agonized look. How would they ever get out of this place under the watchful eye of this well-meaning old bore?

They waited until Aiden thought he would go insane. Somewhere in this town, buses were departing for Boston, home of Jane Macintosh, who might know where to find Frank Lindenauer. A bus might be leaving at that very moment. . . .

And what are we doing?

Sitting in a hospital with Lester Mercure, with an "e," not a "y."

A police officer came into Emergency, and Aiden nearly jumped out of his skin.

Calm down. He's just filing a report on some car accident. He isn't looking for fugitives.

At long last, a nurse called for Donovan and

Gustafson. Lester accompanied them to the open door.

"Are you family?" the nurse asked him.

"No, but I witnessed the incident firsthand. Darnedest thing I ever saw. They were riding up a mountain on some kind of cockamamie dune buggy —"

"Why don't you wait in the lounge where you'll be comfortable?" she suggested, her tone polite but firm.

Aiden and Meg were pathetically grateful. The nurse escorted them to two separate exam rooms and told them the doctor would be right in.

Aiden waited a few seconds for her to walk away before running next door. Meg had the same idea, and the two collided in the hall.

"Let's blow this Popsicle stand," urged Meg.

"Right."

They couldn't leave through the waiting room — Lester would be sitting right there. They walked briskly down the brightly lit corridor, slaloming around medical center employees and rolling equipment carts. Luckily, the place was busy, and the doctors and nurses who rushed to and fro had little time to think about a couple of kids.

All at once, Meg let out a little gasp and stopped

short. Aiden followed the twitch of her gesturing elbow. In the center of a bulletin board plastered with hospital announcements was tacked a blotchy fax with two small photographs.

Aiden recognized the murky images immediately.

Our mug shots from Sunnydale!