

ON THE RUN

CHASING THE FALCONERS

by Gordon Korman



It wasn't a prison.

Not technically, anyway.

No bars, cells, electrified fencing, guard towers, or razor wire.

People who drove by probably never noticed the logo of the Department of Juvenile Corrections on the mailbox that stood at the end of the long lane leading to County Road 413. To them, this sprawling property was just another farm — one of thousands of dusty puzzle pieces that covered this part of Nebraska.

Farm. Aiden Falconer winced. He hated that word. Sunnydale Farm, they called it — a name so deliberately cheerful it turned his stomach.

His eyes took in the empty, far-flung acreage. This broad, flat land wasn't meant for crops. It was a barrier. Anybody trying to escape would have to cross that pool-table-flat boundary in full view of the supervisors, for too many miles and too many min-

utes. It was as effective as a moat full of alligators.

Welcome to Alcatraz Junior.

True, there were a few farmy things. A modest cornfield and a few acres of soybeans. Busy work for the “residents.”

Inmates, Aiden thought bitterly.

Life at Sunnydale Farm was based on one simple principle: that the residents could not be allowed so much as a second of free time. For these juvenile offenders, time meant trouble.

So there was school. Seven hours, broken only by a twenty-minute Gulp 'n' Gag lunch. The rest of each day, from five A.M. wakeup until lights-out at nine, the eighteen boys and twelve girls worked the “farm” — tilling, planting, fertilizing, pruning, and picking. They tended the chickens and fought with the geese.

And they milked the cows.

Aiden hated milking duty almost as much as he hated Sunnydale itself, and his reason for being there. Okay, animals weren't clean freaks, but that barn stank to high heaven and was hot as a sauna. To enter it was to stop breathing until the chore was done and you could stagger out, blue in the face and gasping for air.

Milking was an art that he seemed incapable of mastering. Some of the residents could plunk themselves down on the stool, reach under the cow, and you'd hear *squirt, squirt, squirt*. Aiden would plaster his face against the flank of the beast, his hands working like pistons. The *squirt, squirt, squirt* never came.

The frustration was maddening. He was a Falconer, from a family known for its brains. His parents were both PhD's. Respected scientists.

Or at least they used to be. . . .

No. Don't go there.

The cow was losing patience with Aidan's incompetence. It happened just the way it always did. First the twitching. In a few seconds, it would turn its massive head and moo at him. Next, the shuffling and stamping. And then the kick. He would go one way, the stool would go the other, and the pail would be upended, spilling into the straw of the stall the few drops he had managed to squeeze out.

His escape came a split second before the cow went into total revolt. Aiden jumped up and fled the barn, feeling sick and breathless, his tan jumpsuit drenched with sweat.

“What a wuss.” Miguel Reyes walked toward the

henhouse, carrying a sack of chicken feed. “Nobody’s scared of cows. Dumbest animals on the planet — next to *you*.”

As he passed by, he made sure to whack Aiden on the side of the head with the heavy bag.

“Ow!”

“Are you okay?” Meg Falconer peered anxiously around the corner of the barn.

Aiden could never quite get used to the sight of his eleven-year-old sister in this terrible place. At fifteen, he was as old as most of the juvenile offenders banished to this prison camp. But Meg was just a kid, ripped out of sixth grade.

“Beat it!” he hissed at her. Boys and girls were supposed to stay separated except during classes and Gulp ’n’ Gag.

Meg had never been big on following rules. She usually got by on a sweet smile and wide-eyed innocence — all fake.

“Are you going to let him get away with that?” she demanded.

Aiden stared at her. “This isn’t some self-esteem game about standing up to bullies. That guy was in Juvie before this. For *manslaughter*!”

“But where does it stop?” she demanded. “Mom and Dad — framed! The two of us, stuck away in

the back of beyond! We don’t even know who we *are* anymore.”

“If I pick a fight with Miguel,” Aiden warned, “I’ll know *exactly* who I am. I’ll be the dead guy in the morgue!”

“Hey!” came an angry shout.

The supervisor who stormed over was named Ray. The residents called him Rage because he was always in one. In Aiden’s opinion, that nickname could have gone to any of the other jailers at Sunnydale. There was a kind of permanent anger in the people who worked there — probably from dealing with delinquents like Miguel day in and day out. The “supes” got sassed so often that they lived in a constant state of being bent out of shape.

Ray was scowling as usual. “Well, what do you know — Eagleson and Eagleson. A regular family reunion.”

Eagleson — that was their identity at Sunnydale. Falcon, eagle — like this was some kind of April Fools’ prank. The court had ordered the change. After the media circus of their parents’ trial, *Falconer* might as well have been *Dracula* as a last name. The judge said he didn’t want the children suffering for their parents’ crimes.

If this isn’t suffering, then what is? Aiden wondered

angrily. *We're banished to this Old-McDonald-Had-a-Jail, mingling with dangerous offenders. While Mom and Dad rot in prison for something they didn't even do —*

He took a breath. The Falconer kids were at Sunnydale because none of their relatives would take them in. Who could blame the distant cousins for wanting to shield their own families from the scandal? A day didn't go by without Mom and Dad decried as traitors in every newspaper in the country.

Aiden and Meg had committed no crime. They were here because there was no other place for them.

"Sorry, Ray. It won't happen again —"

His sister cut him off. "That's funny, Ray. You're quick enough to catch us talking. But someone using a sack of feed as a deadly weapon — you missed that, didn't you?"

The supervisor's scowl deepened. "You little snot, how'd you like to lose your telephone privileges for a month?"

That shut Meg up. Those weekly phone calls were the only contact the Falconer kids had with their parents in prison in Florida.

All the contact we'll ever have . . .

Luckily, Meg had the brains not to fight with a

supe. She retreated to her work in the soybean fields, and Aiden steeled himself for round two with the cows.

But later, as he was busing his tray after Gulp 'n' Gag, Meg stepped out in front of him, her eyes like lasers. She grabbed both his wrists with such intensity that it took all his strength to keep the dishes and cutlery from sliding to the floor.

"We have to get out of here," she murmured urgently.

"Get a grip," he whispered back. "There's no way out of this place."

"We *have* to!" she insisted. "We're Mom and Dad's only chance."

For a second, he thought he might start losing it right there in the mess. Wouldn't *that* show Miguel and the others how tough he was. "The appeal —"

She shook her head fervently. "The government will never let them go. The case is closed. We're the only ones who can prove our parents are innocent, and you know it!"

Classic Meg. She didn't live in the real world. Escape was impossible. But even if they could get away, then what? How would two kids come up with evidence that would clear the Falconers after so many top lawyers had failed?

And then there was the question he dreaded most of all. The unthinkable thought, the one he dared not ever speak aloud, even to his own sister.

What if he and Meg set out to exonerate their parents, only to discover that they had been guilty all along?



“Dude, your house is on TV!”

With those six words in the school hall, the nightmare had begun.

A group of students had gathered around the wall-mounted screen in the media center. The sound was muted, but Aiden could see it — his own front door.

His first thought was idiotic: *New paint job still looking good . . .*

Not *What's going on?* or *Why is my house on CNN?* The paint job.

The camera pulled back, and he saw the police. More like an *army*. Scores of commandos in body armor surrounded the Falconer home, shields deployed, weapons pointed. A roadblock cut off their quiet street. Choppers circled overhead.

What the — ?

The rest was a blur. Exploding tear gas canisters. The battering ram reducing the door to toothpicks.

His parents hustled out in handcuffs by an FBI agent the size of Shaquille O'Neal.

And then the call over the P.A.: "Would Aiden Falconer please come to the main office? Aiden Falconer . . ."

Like things were totally normal. Like they were going to tell him that Mom had forgotten to sign his field-trip form.

That was March 7. The day the world ended. The day life changed forever for Aiden and Meg.

The details came twenty-one hours later. At long last, they were allowed to see their parents in a windowless maximum-security cell guarded by two soldiers armed with automatic rifles.

The charge: passing classified information to enemies of the state.

"Classified information?" Aiden stared at his father. "What would you be doing with classified information? You're a teacher at a college nobody's ever heard of! And you write detective novels!"

"*Bad* detective novels," Meg added breathlessly.

The Falconers told their story. Husband and wife professors — both respected criminologists. Three years before, they had been approached by an old family friend who turned out to be an undercover CIA recruiter. Their country needed their expertise,

Agent Frank Lindenauer told them, in the global war on terror.

For the next eighteen months, the two professors worked for the government. They developed profiles for United States operatives to identify terrorist sleeper cells throughout the world. It was going beautifully, Lindenauer assured them. Thanks to the Falconers' work, the CIA had the foreign extremists on the run.

And then everything fell apart.

Somehow, the Falconer profiles had fallen into the hands of the terrorists themselves. Knowing what the Americans were looking for had surely helped them avoid capture.

Now the Department of Homeland Security accused the two criminologists of aiding the enemies of their country. The crime was treason.

"So?" wailed Meg. "Just get Frank Whatsisface to explain that you're the good guys!"

That was the problem: Agent Frank Lindenauer had disappeared off the face of the earth.

For months, the Falconers and their lawyers tried to reach him, with no success. Worse, the CIA claimed it employed no such operative. He was the professors' only contact — the one person who could back up their story.

During the trial, witness after witness detailed how the Falconers' work had become a training manual for sleeper agents. Captured extremists testified that the profiles were widely used in the terrorist world.

Without their CIA handler, the Falconers had no way to defend themselves. It was over before it started. But the sentence was beyond their wildest nightmares:

"You are remanded to the custody of the Department of Corrections for a term of not less than the length of your natural lives."

The gavel came down like a pistol shot. It was a moment that happened on television a dozen times a day. But TV never showed the real story — the shattered lives, the ruined families.

What happens to a son and daughter when two loving parents are suddenly shut away for good?

At least the juvenile authorities got one thing right: They kept Aiden and Meg together. Mom and Dad weren't so lucky.

The foster homes were a disaster — accusations and fighting on the inside and encampments of reporters on the lawn. Falconer wasn't a name anymore; it was a glowing neon sign. After a few false starts, the judge decided that the only option was to

get these kids out of the spotlight. They had to disappear, taking their notorious pedigree with them.

That's Sunnydale, Aiden thought bitterly. The place you go when you want to be nowhere.

Gang members, purse snatchers, and car thieves made great camouflage.

The TV was barely watchable, with faded color and a jumping picture. Yet to the boys of Sunnydale, it was Disney World — their only entertainment besides bragging, threatening, and fighting. The two fuzzy channels were their sole connection to the world that lay beyond the endless fields.

Nowhere was the pecking order more obvious than around the TV. At six foot four, Latrell Chambers was able to claim for himself the only halfway comfortable chair. It didn't hurt his reputation as a tough guy that he used to belong to an infamous Seattle gang. Miguel was right up there, too, on a lumpy couch with a great viewing angle. Gary Donovan — armed robbery — had a beanbag chair that he defended with both fists. And so on down to Aiden, pretty close to rock bottom — obstructed view of a picture that was pretty obstructed to begin with. Only Seth Lowinger, computer hacker, had less status. He didn't watch TV at all.

Aiden wondered what the atmosphere was like in the girls' lounge. Was his eleven-year-old sister subjected to this kind of ugliness and intimidation? With Mom and Dad out of the game, Aiden had to stand up for Meg. But how could he do that when he could barely stand up for himself?

A half-eaten pear came sailing through the air and knocked the old-fashioned rabbit-ear antenna off the top of the set. Instantly, the picture dissolved into snow, and a howl went up from the spectators.

Gary Donovan smacked Miguel in the back of the head. "What's the matter with you, Reyes? It took us weeks to get that stupid thing exactly right!"

Miguel tossed his wadded-up napkin at the blank screen. "For what, yo? To watch reruns of *Touched by an Angel*? When I get out of here, I'm going to kick back with my brother in New Jersey. He's got, like, seven hundred channels, plasma screen, satellite dish, the works! That's for me."

"Dream on," sneered Latrell. "They're never going to let you out of here — not till you turn twenty-one, anyway."

Aiden waited for the explosion and fistfight, but Miguel just laughed.

"This cage can't hold me," he boasted. "I'm just chilling, that's all."

There was a lot of hooting and jeering, and Miguel was pelted with apple cores and candy wrappers.

Aiden spoke up. "You know a way out?"

Miguel snorted in his face. "Look at the big escape artist! You don't have the guts to milk a cow, Eagledink. You'd wet your pants before you hit the cornfield."

"Shut up, Reyes," snorted Gary. "There's no way out, and you know it. Not unless you can walk thirty miles in a Juvie jumpsuit without being seen."

"That's why you guys are a bunch of felons," said Miguel. "No creativity. Look around you. You see a cage. I see wood, and hay, and papers. One match, and this whole dump *burns*."

Gary opened his eyes wide. "You want to *torch* the place? And escape while the supes are manning the bucket brigade?"

Latrell gave a disinterested yawn. "You're talking nonsense, man. You've got a rap sheet like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Slap an arson on there, and they'll put you in the adult system no matter how old you are."

Miguel shrugged. "Gotta catch me first." He waved at Aiden. "Hey, Eagledink, go fix the antenna. And get it right this time."

Aiden did as he was told, but he never took his eyes off Miguel. "You're kidding about that, right? The fire? That can't work, can it?"

Miguel chuckled his contempt. "What are you in for, Eagle? Spitting on the sidewalk? Jaywalking? I know everybody's sheet in this place except you and your little sis. What did you do — whack your parents or something?"

Suddenly, there was nothing more important to Aiden than taking the antenna and ramming it down Miguel's throat. He was on the boy like a flying squirrel, almost screaming with rage.

What happened next was shocking and lightning fast. Miguel shrugged him off as easily as he might have flicked away a crumb. The punches were airborne like missiles, compact, bony fists slamming into Aiden's cheek and chin.

Aiden tasted blood and prepared himself to shed more. *I don't belong with these criminals*, he thought with amazing detachment. *How can I ever hope to defend myself against them?*

Latrell grabbed Miguel by the back of his collar and hauled him off Aiden. "Cut it out, fool! You want the supes on our necks?"

Gary hauled Aiden to his feet, but his real con-

cern was for the antenna, which was bent like a pretzel. "Aw, man, you broke it!"

Somehow, the TV picture was now clearer than it had ever been. That, Aiden assumed, was the only reason why he was allowed to go on living.

The incident did nothing to improve relations with Miguel. "You'd better watch your back, Eagledink," he promised grimly. "When you least expect it, this is the face that's going to be coming up behind you."