

Chasing the Falconers by Gordon Korman



If there was a force that could overpower Aiden's anger and resentment at the fate that had overtaken his family, it was sheer boredom. The routine at Sunnydale was so repetitive, so dull, that days slipped into weeks, and weeks slipped into months without anybody noticing how much of life was being wasted.

It had been over four months since the Falconers' arrival at the farm. The corn was getting higher and the days were getting shorter. Other than that, there was very little indication that time was passing at all.

Even the changes didn't seem like changes in the great numbness that was Sunnydale. Gary completed his term and was released. The very next day, his replacement showed up. Eugene from Boston, aggravated assault. He looked and acted exactly like Gary and even inherited Gary's spot in the pecking order and seat at the TV.

Last Wednesday, Aiden and Meg had spoken to

their father in prison in Florida. Dr. Falconer had tried to sound upbeat. "Hang in there, kids. You won't be in that place forever."

Meg had cried, and Aiden had come pretty close himself. The awful flip side of that statement was obvious: Dad would be in *his* jail forever, and Mom in hers. Life meant life.

Every night at Sunnydale, two residents were selected to see to the animals' food and water supplies overnight and into the morning. Turndown service, the supervisors called it.

Aiden found no humor in their gag. The duty was creepy in the extreme. There was no electricity in any of the outbuildings, so the barn and coops were pitch-black.

Aiden entered the gloom of the henhouse, holding up the kerosene lantern, leading the way for Seth Lowinger, his partner tonight. The hens stirred as the intruders passed from roost to roost, filling water cups and feed trays.

Seth, whose crime was creating a high-tech computer virus that had shut down every ATM in eleven states, couldn't figure out how to open a sack of chicken feed.

"You just tear it, Seth," Aiden told him. "Where the stitching is."

"I don't see any stitching," Seth complained. "What — over here? It won't tear."

Aiden bit back a sarcastic remark. He would not become like Miguel and the others and make fun of someone who was even lower on the totem pole than he was.

He set the lantern down on the floor and ripped open the heavy paper. As he handed the feed back to Seth, the bottom of the bag knocked over the kerosene lamp. The little glass door fell open, and the flame licked out to the straw-strewn floor.

Aiden quickly dropped to his knees to beat out the small fire. All at once, Miguel's words echoed in his ears: *One match and this whole dump burns. . . .*

Suddenly, he was frozen, staring transfixed at the fingers of flame rising from the parched-dry hay.

"Hey!" cried Seth. "*Hey!*"

It jolted Aiden out of his reverie. But by the time he moved to put out the fire, there was no stopping it. Miguel had been right. The farm was a tinderbox.

Aiden pounded at the flames with the feed bag, but the blaze was spreading faster than he could stamp it out, accelerated by the spilled kerosene.

A tinderbox . . . a tinderbox . . .

There was nothing in here that would contain a

fire. In a matter of seconds, half the floor was burning.

Seth was in a full-blown panic. "It's going up the walls!"

The sensation that overtook Aiden was like walking from semiconsciousness into terrifying reality. This was nothing that he and Seth could handle on their own. It was no longer a mishap that could be covered up.

"The supes!" he choked in the thickening smoke. "Get the supes!"

Seth was uncertain. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll — I'll take care of things here." It was pure babble, but it was enough for Seth. He raced out into the night. The rush of air from the door fed the flames, which were reaching for the roosts. The hens scattered in agitation.

Aiden was sure there were a million things he should be doing. Yet in this frantic moment, only one thought possessed him. He had to save the chickens.

The chickens didn't agree. Or at least they were so worked up by the smoke and fire that they could not be herded toward the door.

The moment was as absurd as it was awful. His parents were locked up for life; he and Meg were ex-

iled to a prison farm, a place he had just set on fire. And what was he doing? Rampaging around a smoke-filled henhouse, windmilling his arms and screaming in an attempt to scare the chickens outside.

He burst through the door, kicking the last bird ahead of him. A horrifying sight met his eyes. The coop was an inferno, the sheets of flame bent diagonal by a strong wind. As he watched, a gust jumped the blaze to the top of the log rail fence. The ancient wood was like kindling. The fire tightrope-walked across it, advancing quickly and steadily toward —

“The barn!”

It would be next, with the cows trapped in their stalls. Aiden loathed those animals, but they couldn't be left to die. Not that way.

He threw open the door and barreled into the manure smell. It was so dark that he moved by touch alone, pawing at stall barriers and big bodies.

“Everybody out!”

His cries had little effect on the sleeping cattle. He pounded on their sides and kicked at their legs with all his might — anything to start them ambling toward the door and safety.

Now he could see smoke curling in through the

gaps between the wallboards. The outside structure was on fire. There wasn't much time.

“Come on, you idiots! *Move!*”

There were nine cows at Sunnydale. He had to drag them out one at a time. One head-butted him into a post, one tried to bite him, and four kicked him after he had led them outside. Some gratitude.

By this time, the entire chicken coop was engulfed in a pillar of flame twenty feet high. Its collapse was spectacular, sending a fountain of sparks up into the night sky.

Aiden gawked, awestruck, as the wind scattered the thousands of airborne embers. They sailed high over the main house and then descended like a blanket to cover the wood-shingle roof. There was instant combustion.

His alarm soared to a new and more urgent level. This wasn't about chickens and cows anymore. That house was full of people!

And the next thought, far more terrifying:

Meg.

The girls' dormitory was smaller than the boys', but with identical rows of bunk beds on each side of the room.

Meg was the only girl in bed, staring at the blank piece of paper that was supposed to be a letter to her mother.

What's there to say? she thought morosely. *That I hate it here? It'll only make her feel worse.*

One thing was clear. No matter how terrible Sunnydale Farm may have been, a federal penitentiary had to be a thousand times worse.

She sniffed. Smoke. Leticia was probably lighting up again. The girl must have a ten-year supply of cigarettes hidden here somewhere. The supervisors searched the place twice a week and still couldn't find anything.

She peered through the door to the adjoining TV lounge where the rest of the girls were gathered. Odd — no one was smoking. A few of them were painting their toenails. That blew Meg's mind. Convicted of robbery, assault, drug dealing, and grand theft auto, they were acting like this was a giggle-fest slumber party.

When she heard the yelling, she rushed to the window and threw up the blinds. Whatever was happening, it was on the other side of the building, where the animals were. But the yard looked somehow — wrong. There was an eerie reflective glow.

The northern lights? In Nebraska?

A groaning sound filled the room. The floor shuddered.

An earthquake?

And then the ceiling disintegrated, and it was raining fire.

A large chunk of burning roof tile hit the pillow inches from her head. With a cry of shock, Meg hurled herself to the floor and rolled for cover. But there was no cover. Hot sparks singed her face.

Out in the TV lounge, there were screams, followed by a mad scramble.

Breathing into her T-shirt, Meg took a quick inventory of herself. Nothing broken, nothing burning. A large chunk of roof barred the way to the lounge — the only exit. A wall of flame.

"Help me!" she screamed. "I can't get out!"

There was no response, no sound at all. They had abandoned her here.

She looked around wildly. There had to be a way out. "There's a solution for everything," Mom had always said, "if you're willing to take the time to think it through."

She yanked the top drawer out of the nightstand, dumped the contents, and raced over to the window. Swinging with all her strength, she began to hack at the glass. To her dismay, it broke but did not shatter.

It was security glass, she recalled in growing panic, with wire mesh embedded in each pane.

With reserve power she didn't know she had, she picked up the entire nightstand and flung it. It struck the window and bounced away.

She stepped back. *Can't get through the door; can't get through the window. No other exit.*

Unbelievable. She was going to die in this fire.

And all because I didn't want to paint my stupid toenails!

"Meg!"

Out of the fire itself appeared a steaming, smoldering shape, staggering directly through the burning roof tiles that blocked the door. Meg looked on in amazement as the flaming blanket was flung aside to reveal Aiden, wild-eyed and desperate.

"How did you do that?" she blurted. "Why aren't you dead?"

In answer, he ripped the blankets off two bunks and dragged her into the adjoining bathroom. He turned the shower on full blast and crammed both of them into the spray.

She stared at him. "This is safe?"

"In *The Case of the Pharaoh's Mask* —" he panted.

"Dad's *book*?" She began to beat at his chest and face with her open hands. "You got this from Dad's

book? Are you crazy? The biggest fire he ever survived was a backyard barbecue!"

Aiden was too exhausted to answer, but his expression said it all. Maybe this wasn't safe, but it was infinitely safer than staying here to burn.

He draped one of the dripping blankets over her head and wrapped himself in the other one.

"Hold your breath!" he said harshly. "And whatever you do, don't stop!"

They ran, bursting through the flame-obscured doorway. Cowering under the wet wrapper, Meg couldn't see. But she knew when she was in the fire. There was extreme heat, and, most terrifying of all, a total absence of air — a baking vacuum.

And then it was over. Aiden ripped the blanket away, revealing the TV room, with the blaze miraculously behind them. "Roll!" he commanded.

She did. At that moment, she would have obeyed if he'd asked her to fly.

They pounded at each other's wet clothing, beating out any smoldering spots.

"Are you okay?" he rasped.

But Meg was listening to something else — an all-too-familiar creaking sound from above. The rest of the roof was about to cave in.

She grabbed her brother's hand. "*Run!!*" The two

of them blasted out of the building. The roar that came from behind told them the roof was collapsing in their wake. But they never looked back.

Outside was pure chaos, with the helpless supervisors squirting extinguisher foam on a fire that had already consumed everything in its path. The out-buildings were ashes. Cows, geese, chickens, and residents milled around in the confusion. Aiden got no more than fifty feet from the house before collapsing to the dirt, physically and emotionally drained.

"It's okay," Meg soothed. "We made it."

"How can it be okay? Look around you!"

Meg shrugged. "What do we care if their jail burns down?"

"But it's all my fault!"

Meg goggled. "You torched the farm?"

Aiden gasped out the story of the mishap with the kerosene lamp. "I could have put it out! I was *going* to — I just waited a few seconds! But by then it was too late. The supes are going to kill me!"

Meg drew him to his feet and led him farther away from the remains of the building. "The supes are never going to see you again," she said. "We can be a long way from here by sunup."

Aiden was horrified. "You mean take off? Don't you think we're in enough trouble already?"

"We're the only ones who *aren't* in trouble!" she argued. "They have no real right to keep us here. Besides, there is no 'here' anymore."

Aiden was racked with guilt. "Aren't you listening to me? I have to turn myself in. Somebody could be dead in that fire. It was almost *you*."

"The girls all got out," she reasoned, "and the boys had plenty of warning." She took hold of him by the shoulders. "Listen, bro. You just saved my life. Now I'm going to save yours. Let's blow this Popsicle stand."

His eyes were hopeless. "We'll never make it."

"The supes have their hands full," she insisted. "You think we'll be the only ones missing when the ashes cool? Besides, when they investigate, they'll hear that the roof fell on me, and you were in a barbecued chicken coop. Maybe they'll think we're dead."

"Even if we can get away," Aiden argued back, "we're in the middle of nowhere. We have no place to go, no money. You're in your pajamas. I'm in a jumpsuit that might as well have a sign that says JAILBIRD."

“This is what we’ve been praying for — a chance to get out of here, to help Mom and Dad! I don’t know how we’ll do it, but we definitely can’t if we’re locked away.” She played her trump card. “This place is dust. God knows where they’ll send us next. We might not even be together. This is a gift, Aiden. Say thank you and fly.”

Over Meg’s shoulder, Aiden saw the east wall of the main house collapse in a cascade of smoke and embers.

Whatever lay ahead, this chapter of their lives was over.

They sprinted for the cornfield.



We're fugitives.

The thought bounced off the walls of Aiden’s brain as he and his sister tramped through fields that seemed to have no end. The harvest moon and a billion stars lit their way for a while. But when the clouds rolled in, the prairie night wrapped them in velvet black. Soon their faces were scratched from the tall cornstalks.

One advantage of the zero visibility was that Aiden had finally stopped glancing over his shoulder, expecting to find Ray and the other supervisors bearing down on them. He wasn’t any less scared, but why look when there was no chance of seeing anything anyway?

“This can’t still be our cornfield,” Meg complained. “We’ve been walking for ages.”

“This is Nebraska,” Aiden reminded her. “You can cross the whole state without leaving cornfields.”

In three hours they had not yet come to a single road. But they knew one was not far away. They could hear distant sirens as emergency vehicles converged on Sunnydale Farm. Aiden pictured a fire truck roaring up to the facility to find every man-made structure already gone.

"My feet are killing me," groaned Meg. "I think my slippers disintegrated an hour ago."

Aiden was shocked. Because he was wearing work boots, he'd assumed that Meg was, too. But no, she had on the thin slippers that were issued to the residents for use in the main house — flimsy, barely socks.

"We can't stop," he told her. "Want to wear my boots for a while?"

"Those clodhoppers? I'd be crippled in an hour."

And they pushed on.

They reached their first road after midnight and trudged along the soft shoulder. Where they were headed was anybody's guess. At this point, the only important direction was *away*.

It was easier going, but the appearance of every set of headlights had them diving into the corn. For all they knew, word of the fire had spread via the media, and the entire county was searching for escapees from Sunnydale.

Fugitives have no friends.

But they couldn't stay hidden forever. Especially not in the daylight. Come sunup, they had to find a way to blend in, to look normal.

"We need clothes," Aiden decided.

"No problem," Meg said sarcastically. "I'll weave a new wardrobe out of some of this corn silk."

"I'm serious. We need to be able to walk around without attracting attention. We can't look like we just broke out of jail."

"It's no big mystery, bro. There are no stores, and even if there were, we have no money. Whatever we get, we have to steal."

Aiden made a face in the darkness. She was right, of course. She usually was. But the idea of stealing made him feel unclean. At least before, he and Meg hadn't belonged in the juvenile corrections system.

If this is what it takes to survive as fugitives, pretty soon our rap sheets will be twice as long as anybody else's.

As the adrenaline of their escape wore off, weariness set in. There were times that Aiden was pretty sure he was asleep on his feet, awakened only by the fresh twist of a leg cramp or the mild sting of yet another mosquito bite. At one point, Meg almost wandered out into the middle of the road, and

Aiden had to grab her and steer her back on course.

Not that there were cars anymore. His watch told him it was after three. Even the distant sirens had stopped by this time. Either that or they were now out of range. Only the chirping of locusts and crickets proved to Aiden that a world existed out there in the darkness. It was a tiny comfort to know that he and Meg weren't completely alone in the universe. In this spot, at this moment, it sure felt that way.

Five A.M. — twenty-four hours since they'd last slept. God, Meg looked tired!

Then it hit him. *I can see her.* Sunrise wouldn't be for another hour or more, but after a night submerged in black ink, even the faintest predawn glow brought the world into sharp focus.

Her voice startled him. "A house." He would have bet all the money he didn't have that she'd been sleepwalking.

Then he spotted it, too — a small wood-frame farmhouse with attached shed and a large modern barn in the back. The windows were dark, and — this was the kind of coincidence that always happened in Dad's detective novels — there was a carousel hung with clothes just outside the shed.

"Jackpot!" breathed Meg.

They approached cautiously. It was still mostly

dark. But farmers were notoriously early risers. It would be a tragedy to get caught clothes-napping after making it so far.

Meg whispered a logical concern. "What if nothing fits?"

"It's still better than burned pajamas and a jailbird suit." Her brother pulled down a pair of khakis and a T-shirt.

Meg scowled at the label on her own selection. "Fatso! Hey, can you reach those shorts?"

The dog came out of nowhere, an oversize German shepherd in full flight. Against the backdrop of stillness, the barking was like the roar of carpet bombing exploding all around them.

The Falconers dropped the clothes and ran. The animal bounded after them, and Aiden realized with a sinking heart that there was no way they could escape. Two kids, exhausted and sleep deprived, didn't stand a chance against a full-speed attack dog.

As they scrambled around the laundry carousel, Meg reached up and yanked on a large white sheet. It billowed down, engulfing the leaping dog. The shepherd yelped and hit the ground, wrapping itself in linen.

It was all the time Aiden and Meg needed. They

raced into the barn and clambered up the ladder to the loft. Through a small window, they could see the white sheet jerking around like a spastic ghost as the dog struggled to free itself.

"It'll come after us," quavered Meg.

"Shhh. I don't think it can get up the ladder."

Crouched amid the bales of hay, Aiden was aware of an all-too-familiar smell. He looked down into the barn. Cows. Was there no escaping them?

"Someone's coming!" Meg hissed.

Sure enough, a light was shining in the house. Then the porch lamp came on.

The Falconers threw themselves flat to the floor of the loft and prayed.

ON THE RUN

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