

The Fugitive Factor by Gordon Korman



They were being hunted — even here, on the opposite end of the state.

They had to get out of Vermont. But that was putting the cart before the horse. First they had to get out of the hospital.

They increased their pace, turning left and left again, following the path of the corridor. Although the medical center wasn't huge, the endless halls were like a maze, with no windows to the outside. Heavy glass doors led to different wards and departments. Aiden's eyes darted from sign to sign: RADIOLOGY, MATERNITY, INTENSIVE CARE, AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY — where was EXIT?

"How do you get out of this dump?" Meg hissed.

Aiden shrugged helplessly. Was that Emergency coming up again?

Oh, no! We've been walking in circles!

All at once, their nurse stepped out of one of the

empty exam rooms, looking around in concern for her young patients.

Not knowing what else to do, Aiden grabbed Meg by the arm and yanked her through a pair of steel security doors. They felt the heat of the afternoon — they were outside the building. But this was no exit. They were in a narrow loading bay. Two white-coated med techs were climbing into the front of a waiting ambulance, its motor running.

One of them activated the siren. It resounded like a bomb blast in the confines of the loading bay. The earsplitting sound seemed to jump-start Meg. She ran up, unlatched the rear doors, and leaped aboard.

Aiden tried to follow her just as the ambulance lurched forward. His hand closed on the metal handle, and he found himself hanging off the back of the accelerating vehicle, floundering on the open door.

"Meg, help me!"

She waited for him to swing around and grabbed two fistfuls of his T-shirt. "Let go!" she ordered, and wrestled him inside. They collapsed in a heap on the metal floor.

The hospital's access road whipped by as they picked up speed.

From a kneeling position, Aiden managed to reach out and pull the door shut. "I hope you have a plan."

The ambulance swerved around a corner, flinging the two of them against a rack of oxygen tanks. Meg steadied herself against a wall-mounted stretcher. "We're *out*, bro!"

"We're in a moving ambulance!" Aiden exclaimed.

She shrugged. "It has to stop eventually."

"Yeah, but what if that happens forty miles out in the woods? Then how do we get to a bus station?" Aiden peered out the rear window. The short downtown strip of St. Johnsbury flashed by in the scratched glass.

All at once, the wail of the siren was replaced by a series of staccato blurps as the ambulance slowed in a cluster of traffic.

Aiden made a split-second decision. "Jump."

He yanked on the hatch and was just about to push it open when he saw the police car. It turned in from the intersection and fell into line right behind them.

The effort to keep the doors from flying wide open nearly tore his shoulder in two. The cruiser pulled even with them and then passed on the left.

Aiden knew this might be their last chance. "Now!" He unlatched the doors, and he and Meg bailed out. With another blurb of the siren, the ambulance sprung away, its open hatch rattling. The Falconers hopped up on the sidewalk and looked around furtively. No one was pointing and yelling at them. Their escape had gone unnoticed.

"Bus station," murmured Aiden.

"Right."

The walk was nerve-racking. Every glance from a passerby set Aiden's mind racing. Was that recognition? And what kind of recognition? *Did you hear about the two kids who jumped out of an ambulance? Did you hear about the two kids who ran away from the hospital?*

Worst of all, what if somebody connected the two kids from those stories with the two kids who were wanted by police on the other side of the state?

His imagination conjured up a crowded bus terminal filled with patrolling policemen, prying eyes, and suspicious questions. But the "station" turned out to be a Plexiglas shelter on the far end of town. A disintegrating hand-scrawled cardboard sign declared BUY TICKETS AT OWEN'S.

Owen's was the luncheonette across the street. A counterman who concealed a sumo-size potbelly un-

der a greasy white apron presided over ticket sales and "the best chowder in New England."

Throughout the transaction, Aiden expected the man to burst out with, *Why are you two going to Boston on your own? Where are your parents? What's the deal here?*

But all he asked them was, "You guys want some french fries to go?"

The bad news was, the next bus to Boston was the Moonlight Special. It didn't leave until midnight.

They split a take-out hamburger and a cup of chowder in the woods behind the bus stop. "One thing about life on the run," Aiden mumbled as he wolfed down his half. "There's never time to eat."

"Tell me about it," Meg agreed, polishing off the soup. "We should start the Fugitive Diet. You know, sic the FBI on fat people and see how much weight they lose. We'll get rich."

"Yeah, well, we sure aren't rich now," Aiden said glumly. "In Boston, we're going to have to figure out a way to get our hands on some cash."

"Maybe Jane What's-her-face will lend us some," Meg suggested hopefully. "She's our 'aunt,' after all."

Aiden grimaced. "I'll be happy if she knows what happened to Frank Lindenauer."

"Amen to that."

They remained under cover of the woods until nightfall and then moved to a small park beside the bus stop. Just past midnight, they boarded an air-conditioned Greyhound to Boston. Meg sank into a padded seat near the back and closed her eyes.

"No sleeping," Aiden ordered.

"Aw, come on," she protested. "It's the Moonlight Special. You're supposed to sleep."

"If the cops stop the bus, we have to be ready to run for it."

"The cops think we're still in Colchester. Nobody knows we're here."

He was adamant. "No sleeping."

By the time the bus had left the town limits, both Falconers were dead to the world.



Agent Emmanuel Harris of the FBI took a sip from the steaming cup and nearly gagged. Ugh! What passed for coffee in these small-town police stations tasted more like raw sewage. Hadn't these people ever heard of Starbucks?

Chief Bumgartner of the Colchester PD hooked his thumbs in his pants pockets. "What do you say, Harris? Time to take down the roadblocks?"

Harris barely had the strength to shake his head. It was nearly three in the morning. Except for a ninety-minute catnap on a too-short cot in one of the holding cells, he'd been going nonstop for forty-eight hours. "It's too soon."

"Can't be too soon for me," the chief informed him. "A department our size hasn't got the manpower for this kind of operation. Unless," he added, "you bureau hotshots want to send us some extra bodies to work the checkpoints."

Harris did his best to fold his six-foot-seven frame

into a chair designed for someone half his size. "I wish I could. This case isn't under FBI jurisdiction. It belongs to Juvenile Corrections."

"So what's the big deal about a couple of kids? Even if their names happen to be Falconer" — Bumgartner's face turned suddenly urgent — "you don't think they're working for their folks, do you? Finishing what their parents started?"

"No, nothing like that," Harris said with a sigh.

How could he ever explain it? That Emmanuel Harris, the hero who had brought to justice the most notorious traitors of the past half century, lay awake nights wondering if the right people were in prison.

The FBI was certain that John and Louise Falconer were guilty. Harris wished he shared their confidence. And that wasn't the only thing weighing on his mind.

If John and Louise Falconer turned out to be innocent, that meant their son and daughter were on the run, risking their lives, thanks to the Bureau's mistake.

Thanks to Harris's mistake.

"How about twelve more hours?" he bargained. "We've got them. I can feel it. How could they get past those roadblocks?"

One of the younger officers hung up the phone. "Chief, that was Tom Vickers out on Route 3. Says his quad bike is missing."

The next thing Aiden knew, a hand was shaking him out of a deep sleep.

"Kid, wake up."

With effort, he raised a single heavy eyelid. The driver of the Moonlight Special stood over him. "Boston. Last stop."

"Five more minutes," pleaded a slumbering Meg beside him.

Aiden squinted out the window at the dimly lit terminal. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to five," the driver informed him. He seemed pleased. "We're twenty minutes early." He examined them closely. "That's why there's nobody here to meet you, right?"

"Great." Meg opened a wary eye. "We're early, and Dad's always late."

Aiden was filled with admiration. Even half asleep, his little sister was right on the ball. "Come on, Belinda," he told her. "Let's get some breakfast."

They scrambled off the Greyhound and were gone before the driver could comment on their lack of luggage.

Keeping their faces down, they hurried out of the terminal. A bus station was the last place fugitives should be hanging around. But that left them in a near-deserted inner city in the middle of the night. It was more than a little creepy — concrete jungle, dark streets, shady characters . . .

Oh, grow up! Meg scolded herself. *After everything that's happened, getting mugged is the least of our worries!*

She pulled the crumpled paper out of her pocket. "Two-forty East University Street, apartment twenty-three C. I hope Aunt Jane likes an early wake-up call."

Aiden frowned. "Where can we find a city map at this hour?"

"I've got a better idea." With grim determination, Meg strode out into the middle of the road, threw up her arm, and yelled, "Taxi!"

Almost immediately, a Shamrock cab appeared out of nowhere and pulled up beside her.

"Where to, kid?"

"Two-forty East University," Meg replied. She beckoned to Aiden. "You coming?"

Reluctantly, he got in beside her. "We've only got eighteen dollars!" he hissed. "What if it isn't enough?"

She shrugged. "We stole an ATV and drove it off a mountain. Why are you stressing over stiffing a cabdriver a couple of bucks?"

The ride only cost them twelve. But their relief quickly turned to dismay; 240 East University Street was an enclosed mini-mall in the middle of a long block of seedy storefronts.

"She lives *here*?" Meg exclaimed as the cab pulled away.

The flyspecked glass door was unlocked, but the stores and offices inside were empty and dark. Unit 23C was on the basement level opposite the only establishment that was open for business — a twenty-four-hour pawnshop.

Arrow Travel was a tiny agency with a single desk surrounded by posters of Greek islands and Alaskan glaciers. Racks of brochures stood against the back wall.

Meg was as quick to despair as she was to action. "I must have written the address down wrong! I could strangle myself! That was our only clue!"

"No, look." Aiden pointed through the window. On the neat desk sat a brass nameplate: JANE MACINTOSH. "She gave the hotel her work address. She's a travel agent. This is the right place!"

Meg had already moved on to the next disaster.

Hung around the inside doorknob was a sign: CLOSED UNTIL MONDAY.

Aiden followed her gaze. "Oh, come *on*!" he exclaimed in consternation. "Friday hasn't even started yet. How could they be closed up for the weekend?"

"It looks like she's running a one-woman show in there," Meg concluded. "I guess if she's the boss and all the employees, she sets the schedule, too."

There was an old-fashioned phone booth outside the pawnshop. The directory was dog-eared but still intact. Jane Macintosh was not listed.

"Why can't anything ever be easy?" Aiden lamented. "This should be her house, and she's happy to see us, and Frank Lindenauer is her next-door neighbor!"

"What are you getting so worked up about?" Meg soothed. "We found her. All we have to do is hang out till Monday and she'll be here."

"We have six bucks in the world, Meg, and no place to sleep. How can we live for three days on six bucks?"

"We had zero when we ran away from Sunnydale," his sister reminded him.

"That was in the middle of a Nebraska cornfield. This is a crowded city. We can't live on the street here. It's too dangerous!"

"You're right about that," she admitted. "If we're going to make it to Monday, we'll need some money. Okay, how do we get it?"

"Not by stealing," Aiden said quickly.

"That leaves work," his sister decided. "We'll do odd jobs."

"I'll do odd jobs," Aiden corrected. "I can pass for older. A kid your age trying to earn money would look suspicious."

Meg was incensed. "What am I supposed to do — twiddle my thumbs when I could be helping out?"

"You've got the most important job of all," Aiden argued. "It's up to you to find a hotel we can afford."

By this time it was daylight, and the streets were beginning to fill with early-bird commuters. Aiden and Meg split a bagel and juice and sat in a small outdoor café, watching Boston come alive around them.

Just after seven, a dusty landscaping truck, towing an equipment trailer, stopped at the curb. A group of four young men in work clothes hopped aboard the flatbed and tapped on the roof of the cab to signal that they were ready to go.

The driver stuck his head out. "Where's Rankin?"

"Sick," replied one of the crew.

The foreman was disgusted. "He gets conve-

niently sick on Fridays. We've got eleven houses to do in Brookline, and we're shorthanded."

The worker shrugged. "He said he'd try to send a replacement."

"Oh, yeah, you can really depend on Rankin. How long are we supposed to wait for this replacement? All day?"

Aiden jumped up. "Meet me here at five," he whispered to Meg. Then he was over the wrought-iron railing, across the sidewalk, and onto the trailer.

"Sorry I'm late. Rankin sent me."

The boss regarded him dubiously. "Where'd he find you — the day care center?"

"I start Harvard in the fall," Aiden lied defensively.

"Okay, college boy. The pay's twelve bucks an hour, cash. No dental plan. Got it?"

"Fine." It sounded better than fine. It sounded like survival — at least for one more day.



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Meg remained at the café for a long time. In a style that reminded her of her cautious, practical brother, she took microscopic bites of her half of the bagel, making it last. She wasn't easily intimidated, but the thought of finding a hotel in this huge city was something she would have given much to avoid. What could they afford, after all? Some crumbling fleabag full of roaches and rats? And who knew what kind of sleazy business went on in places like that? There could be bullets flying through the paper-thin walls.

She built this line of thinking into a pretty sizable grudge against Aiden for deserting her here. But to be fair, it really wouldn't have worked any other way. How was an eleven-year-old supposed to make money — by robbing a bank? On the other hand, would scouting out hotel rooms appear any less weird for a young girl? How many sixth-graders

hung around seedy neighborhoods, strolling from flophouse to flophouse, comparison shopping?

There had to be a better way. If she was home and had her laptop, she could just go online and price every hotel in Boston in a matter of minutes. She grimaced. Her laptop, along with everything else she owned, was in the storage facility of the Department of Juvenile Corrections in Washington, DC. She'd probably never see it again.

Suddenly, she had the answer. Her laptop may have been gone forever, but the Internet was still open for business. All she had to do was find a way to get on the Web.

It was so simple — the library! They offered free Internet access to the public.

I'm the public!

Didn't it figure — the cashier had no idea where the nearest library was. But a customer pointed her in the direction of the Cliffhaven branch, just a few blocks away, opening at nine.

The two-hundred-year-old building was spectacular, almost a miniature castle, built around a high stone turret. Inside, however, it could have been any library in the world — rows of beige metal shelving, faded carpeting, and well-worn oak tables and chairs.

The computers were behind the periodical section. Since it was early, she had no problem snagging a cubicle.

She searched keywords BOSTON and LODGING, and soon navigated her way onto a hotel site. She selected her price range — the lowest — and began to scroll through the possibilities.

They looked “scuzzy.” That was her mother’s word to describe hotels where the musty smell told the whole story. For Mom, mustiness implied a vast list of other failings — dirt, mildew, germs, infestation — all of them deal breakers.

I wonder if it’s musty in jail. . . .

No. That line of thinking had to be cut off right away, before she ended up in tears.

She concentrated on the task at hand. The real problem was that even the inexpensive hotels were pretty expensive. After all, ninety bucks per night may have been a great bargain for Boston, but not if you didn’t have the ninety bucks.

She sighed glumly. There were probably plenty of places cheaper than that, but they weren’t the kind of establishments that advertised on the Web. Those hotels could be accessed only by walking down a garbage-strewn street to a front door reinforced with wire grating.

It was her first time online since the foster homes they’d lived in before Sunnydale. As if propelled by an irresistible force, her fingers began to meander around the keyboard, doing what she had promised herself she would never do. Back on the Google home page, she typed in the most infamous last name in America — Falconer.

The response was overwhelming: one-point-five-million hits. Each link held some special kind of torture. Pictures of the trial, that nightmare circus — the vengeful faces of the jurors; the angry bias in the judge’s eyes; the steely indifference of that towering FBI agent — Harris, the man who had ruined all their lives; Mom and Dad in prison jumpsuits . . .

Oh, Mom, you always hated orange!

But the news updates weren’t the worst of it. The letters — the postings on personal Web pages and blogs — were so vicious, they sent chills down her spine. “Hang ’em high,” “bring back the electric chair,” “burn that scum alive,” “killing’s too good for them.”

Why are you reading this? she demanded of herself. *These morons don’t know our family. They have no idea what they’re talking about!*

Yet, like a rubbernecker at an accident scene, she

could not look away. She tried to convince herself that these opinions belonged to a few crackpots. But deep down she knew that the postings genuinely represented how people in the country felt about the Falconers.

Everybody believes they worked for terrorists! I'd hate them myself if I didn't know the truth!

If you need any more evidence that our justice system is broken, consider the fact that John and Louise Falconer were not executed and are living at taxpayers' expense in prison. Now it seems pretty obvious that their children, their teenage son at least, were their accomplices. Why else would two minors escape from their youth farm by burning the place to the ground, without giving so much as a thought to the many lives they put in danger?

Meg pulled up short. *That's us!*

Of course, she and Aiden knew that their escape had been reported in the news. But they'd always assumed it was a local story — in Nebraska, where Sunnydale was; in Chicago, where they'd been chased by police; and in Vermont, where a terrifying

stranger they'd nicknamed Hairless Joe had suddenly appeared and tried to kill them.

This was different. Now they were becoming part of their parents' story, the desperado children of public enemies one and two.

That couldn't be good. The key to surviving as a fugitive was staying invisible. Being kids made it hard enough — they were constantly explaining why they were on their own. But if this somehow turned into *Falconers: The Sequel*, they were going to be more famous than Bonnie and Clyde. They wouldn't be able to walk down the street without half a dozen people dialing nine one one on their cell phones. There'd be zero chance of saving Mom and Dad then.

There's a solution to all this, she reminded herself, scrolling farther down. *Keep off the Internet. You'll only drive yourself crazy.*

Anyway, not all the one-point-five-million hits were about Mom and Dad. There were also some Web sites about falconry and falconry schools. There was a Falconer Center for the Performing Arts in Liverpool, England, and a luxury yacht called *The Falconer* that was available for rental . . . fascinating stuff. Yeah, right.

Her eyes wandered from the links to the ads that dotted the screen: fad diets, dating services, *Join Trans-Atlantica SkyPoints, America's #1 Frequent Flyer Program . . .*

She was amazed at the surge of warmth that took hold in her gut. Her parents used to travel extensively on the lecture circuit. Both of them had zillions of miles piled up with various airlines, including Trans-Atlantica. It was almost as if she had come upon a piece of her parents on the Web.

A thought occurred to her. After the trial, the government had padlocked the Falconers' home and frozen their assets and bank accounts. But what about frequent-flyer programs? Had the FBI shut those down as well?

She clicked on the link to the Trans-Atlantica site and typed in her father's name. A PIN was required, but that was easy. The password used by all the Falconers for everything was Mugsy, a tribute to an old family pet.

When the account information appeared on the screen, Meg had to hold herself back from cheering. *In your face, Agent Harris. You didn't think of everything!*

The idea struck her so abruptly that she was al-

most swept off her chair: *I wonder if there's a way to use these miles to book us a hotel room in Boston.*

The disappointment was instant. That would be really smart — checking in with a reservation booked in the name of a front-page traitor. That would be perfect for two kids trying not to be noticed.

Then it hit her. Mom! She had as many points as Dad. But she had always traveled under her maiden name, Louise Graham.

Excitedly, Meg called up her mother's frequent-flyer account using the same PIN. She whistled admiringly. Mom had more than seven hundred thousand SkyPoints.

That'll do, she thought to herself with a smile that was rare these days. *That'll do very nicely.*

Aiden slunk through the crowded downtown sidewalks, the soles of his sneakers barely lifting off the concrete. He had never been so exhausted in his life. Even the escape from Sunnydale — countless hours of fleeing through cornfields — hadn't left him in this much pain. The raking/pruning/lifting/hauling/pushing/bending of the landscaping work had strained muscles he hadn't even known existed. The

simple act of sidestepping a hot dog vendor's cart required so much concentration that he thought he might pass out from the effort.

He hoped Meg had been able to arrange for a place to spend the night. If he didn't find a bed to flop on soon, he was going to drop dead at any minute.

When he spotted her, perched on the wrought-iron railing of the café, the flood of relief that washed over him was astonishing. He'd been so wrapped up in his own misery, he'd given barely a thought to his little sister. There was nobody braver, stronger, and more capable, but she was still only eleven years old. Abandoning her in the middle of Boston with no food, no shelter, and a few lonely dollars would never have been his first choice. Seeing her there, safe and sound — *and a little too relaxed, if you ask me* — brought home just how worried he'd been about her.

"Sorry I'm late," he greeted breathlessly. "They dropped us off in a different place, and I couldn't find the café."

She was fresh as a daisy, sipping on a Coke. "No offense, bro, but you look like they dragged you behind the truck."

He was too weary to take offense. "Tell me we live somewhere."

She smiled knowingly. "Follow me."

Mercifully, it was only a ten-minute walk before they came to the elegant marquee of the Royal Bostonian Hotel. Aiden stared round-eyed as his sister marched in an elegant brassbound door held open by a liveried doorman.

"You're kidding," he whispered, awed by the gigantic crystal chandeliers in the opulent lobby.

"I got us a suite," she announced smugly.

He pulled her behind a marble pillar. "Are you *crazy*? We can't afford to breathe the air in this place, let alone stay here! You know what I earned today? Ninety-six bucks! That wouldn't buy you a closet in this palace!"

"Relax," she soothed. "It's taken care of."

"By whom?"

"By Mom."

He gawked at her. What was the matter with Meg? Had the strain of their family tragedy pushed her over the edge? Was she starting to lose it?

She took his hand and pulled him into the paneled elevator. When the door closed and they were alone, she explained how she had used Louise Gra-

ham's SkyPoints to book them a long weekend in a five-star hotel.

"I'm Belinda Graham, and you're my brother, Gary," she explained as the elevator opened onto the fourth-floor hall. "Louise is our mother, but she's in meetings all day. Check it out."

If Aiden had been surprised before, now he was thunderstruck. The Provincetown Suite looked like something out of a movie — a vast, elegantly appointed Victorian parlor and two luxurious bedrooms, featuring king-size canopy beds.

Aiden was overawed. "How many points did she have?"

"They upgraded me," Meg confided. "I'm adorable. The king of Spain stayed here last year — probably not on frequent-flyer miles."

Aiden regarded her with respect. "I can't believe you pulled this off. But you have to know it's risky. This suite can be traced to Mom."

She shrugged. "If the FBI didn't close down the frequent-flyer accounts during the trial, why would they remember them now?"

It made sense. Still — "But we're supposed to be keeping a low profile, Meg. You've got to know this isn't it."

She looked him straight in the eye. "Are our lives

so fantastic that we don't deserve to catch a break once in a blue moon? We're stuck until Monday. What does it hurt if we live a little?"

He looked behind her to the Jacuzzi tub in the gleaming marble bathroom. The soothing jets were on his aching muscles inside of five minutes.