

GORDON KORMAN

ON THE RUN

1

CHASING THE FALCONERS

 SCHOLASTIC



7

Both Falconers leaped off their bikes to avoid a painful collision.

Meg hit the ground running, but Aiden was pitched into the ditch.

The driver jumped out of his truck. "Hey!"

As Aiden struggled to climb the embankment, he suddenly recognized their pursuer. It was the teenage attendant from the gas station.

"What do you want from us?" Aiden demanded, steeling himself to fight for their freedom.

"You're from Sunnydale, right? The kids who ran away?"

"So what?" Aiden shot back.

"I was there. When I was fifteen. I did a year on that farm."

Meg turned around. "There's no such place anymore."

The teenager grinned. "No tears from this graduate."

"Is that what this is about?" asked Aiden. "An alumni meeting? We're in kind of a hurry."

The attendant turned serious. "You're in a *big* hurry. Jimmy — my boss — ratted you out. You've got to ditch those bikes. I'll drop them up north a ways — throw the cops off the scent."

The look that passed between Aiden and Meg spoke volumes. Ever since their parents' arrest, they had been mistreated, lied to, jerked around, ignored, and neglected. Worse, they had been treated as if they were guilty of some unspecified vile crime. It had never occurred to them that anyone might try to help them.

"Thanks for the heads-up," Aiden said finally. "Can you tell us how far the railroad tracks are?"

"Three, maybe four miles. But it's not safe on the road. Cut through the fields, keep low. And take these." He reached into the cab of the pickup and pulled out two shrink-wrapped submarine sandwiches from the mini-mart.

"We have no money," Aiden said stiffly.

The gas jockey smiled. "Jimmy's food tastes like wet newspaper. Trust me — you're paying exactly what it's worth." He loaded the first of the bikes into the truck's flatbed. "Now, take off."

Meg hated ham and cheese. But her mini-mart sandwich tasted like it had been prepared by a gourmet chef. She finished it down to the last crumb, then licked at bits of mustard on her fingers.

She turned a jaundiced eye on her brother, trudging beside her through the wheat field. Aiden still had three-quarters of his sandwich left. He was nibbling slowly, savoring every morsel, making it last.

"You're doing that on purpose," she said irritably.

"Doing what?"

"Waving that lousy sandwich in my face when you know I haven't got one."

"You had one. You ate it."

"Like a normal person," she insisted. "I didn't turn it into a three-day picnic."

"Do you want a piece?" he offered.

"No. It's yours."

"Well, then, let me eat it," he mumbled, mouth full. "My way."

But after a few more bites, he took the wad of clear plastic from his pocket, carefully unfolded it, and rewrapped the remaining half sandwich.

"Now what are you doing?" Meg demanded.

"Saving it for later. Who knows when our next meal will be."

She stormed ahead, putting her brother and his annoying habits out of her sight. Aiden always had to have a plan, even for something as stupid as a ham sandwich. What could you expect from a kid who used to sort his Halloween candy into alphabetical order and would still be eating the Zagnuts in April? It was almost as if his personality had been custom-crafted to get on Meg's nerves.

Hey, she reminded herself sharply, he didn't get on your nerves when he busted through smoke and flames to rescue you.

But even then Aiden had needed an instruction manual — the how-to he'd taken from one of Dad's cheese-ball detective novels. How was a guy like that going to get all the way from a wheat field in Nebraska to a place in Vermont he barely even remembered, with no money and no plan?

The challenge that lay ahead simply could not be met by a person like Aiden. This called for someone who could think on her feet and fly by the seat of her pants.

Someone like Meg.

It's my job to get us through this. I have to be sharp, on my toes. I can't let anything get past me —

"Meg!"

She looked back and realized instantly that be-

tween her and Aiden was a railroad track. She had actually walked right over it and missed it.

They made a left turn and walked along the line of the track. Somewhere on this shiny double rail to infinity lay the station at Gibbon, where two fugitive kids could hop a freight east.

Gibbon. It was still miles away. Ten? Twenty? Fifty?

Every time she pictured the mini-mart map, the dot that was Gibbon had somehow slithered farther away from them.

She swallowed her pride. "Hey, bro, how about we crack open that half sandwich?"

"We should probably wait," he warned, but finally gave in.

This time the food wasn't half as satisfying in her mouth, the ham too salty, the bread stale. Of course they should have held out longer. Why was Aiden always right?

She cast him a resentful look, and her eye was caught by a speck over his shoulder — a moving speck.

He was instantly alert to her distress. "What?"

She pointed. "I'm being paranoid, right? There are millions of reasons for a helicopter to be up there."

“Sure,” Aiden said uncertainly, and couldn’t name one. “But just in case —” He did a three-sixty. Nothing but acre after acre of golden wheat. Not a shrub, not a rock. Zero cover.

Eleven of us unaccounted for in a big open state . . . Meg felt the panic rising in her throat. Of course the juvenile authorities would search by air! At ground level, you could disappear into the Nebraska fields. But not when you were being hunted from above.

Aiden grabbed her arm and began running alongside the rails.

“Don’t you think we have a better chance just lying in the wheat?” she cried. But then she saw it, too. About a quarter mile ahead, the tracks crossed a river via a narrow trestle bridge. If they could make it before the chopper got close enough to spot them —

They flew, with all the misery and horror of the past months acting as their booster rockets.

Meg risked a glance over her shoulder. The features of the helicopter were fully visible now. It was a bubble top, moving in a sweeping motion back and forth over the fields — a classic search pattern. She was sure she would have heard the clatter of the rotors except for the pounding of her own heart in her ears.

Their heavy footfalls made a gonging sound as the Falconers pounded onto the metal of the bridge.

Aiden swung a leg up to straddle the railing. “Get underneath!” he rasped. “Fast!”

Meg didn’t have to be told twice.

They eased themselves over the side and climbed spiderlike along the support girders until they were well-hidden by the top of the bridge. Gasping, they hung there, directly below the midpoint of the span.

“Do you think they saw us?” quavered Meg.

“We’ll know soon enough.”

They listened for several minutes. The sound of the chopper swelled and faded as it continued the track lines of its search. A good sign — it meant the crew hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary.

Meg felt the muscles in her arms cramping up as she attempted to wiggle herself into a more comfortable position in the crook of two girders.

All at once, she detected a different sensation — a superfast vibration that seemed to permeate her entire body.

She looked over at her brother. “Do you feel like you’re buzzing all over?”

The expression on his face was pure agony. “Hang on, Meg, and hang on tight! There’s a train coming!”



Meg could hear it now, the great lumbering locomotive, the rumble of many hundreds of wheels, and the screech of brakes as the engineer slowed down to take the bridge. The roar drowned out the sound of the helicopter.

And it was growing louder. The vibration grew so intense that Meg was positive her teeth were jarring loose.

The train hurtled out onto the steel span above them. The noise was unimaginable — the squeal of metal on metal far louder than any jet engine. It was as if the bridge itself went into convulsions, shaking the Falconers like rag dolls in the mouth of an angry terrier.

Robbed of all but the barest consciousness, Meg shut her eyes and squeezed the girder. A single thought played like a tune through her agony: *Mom and Dad will never find out what happened to us. . . .*

The wild vibration acted like Novocain on her body. Numbness set in; she could not feel the girder. Her eyes blinked open, and she realized in horror that it was no longer there.

She was falling.

Then she was in the cool water, shocked to awareness and choking. The compulsion to swim for air was automatic. She broke the surface just in time to see a huge cannonball splash beside her. A second later, her brother bobbed up. The caboose cleared the bridge, and the noise began to fade as the train moved off.

“Are you okay?” Aiden spluttered.

She nodded. “The chopper?”

Treading water, they both peered up from their position in the shadow of the bridge. The helicopter was gone. The crisis was over as quickly as it had come upon them.

Typically, Aiden was agonizing over their close call, shivering and reliving every moment of the ordeal.

Leave it to him, Meg thought, to obsess over something that didn't happen.

“Aiden, we made it!” she interrupted. “What’s the big deal?”

The big deal turned out to be this: They now had to finish their long walk to Gibbon in drenched discomfort.

The day was warm and sunny, but dusk was at hand, and clouds of mosquitoes rose from the fields, looking to light on any damp surface. The T-shirts dried after an hour or so, but the pants stayed soggy, clinging, chafing. The shoes didn't dry at all, squishing and oozing with every step.

The night was hideous. Aiden stumbled along the tracks, his arms windmilling as he slapped at the dozens of mosquitoes attacking his body.

"Do you have to do that?" Meg muttered into the deepening darkness. "They're mosquitoes, bro, not piranhas."

"That's easy for you to say. They're not eating you alive. I've got fair skin, and the water attracts them, you know."

She was unmoved. "If you didn't want to get wet, you shouldn't have fallen off that bridge."

"I didn't fall off," he retorted, killing three bugs with one slap. "I jumped off — to rescue you."

Meg bit her lip. Who was she crabbing at? The only person who cared what happened to her.

Soon it was every bit as dark as it had been the

night before — that suffocating unbroken blackness that made them feel they were the only two people left in the world. At least tonight they had the tracks to keep them on their course.

Just before midnight, another train came by, this one a westbound freight. Hiding amid the wheat, Aiden noticed in the passing glow of its single headlight that both his arms were covered in raised welts. The word "itch" didn't do justice to the feeling.

But the real enemy was not the mosquitoes, nor the chafed skin, nor aching feet. Lack of sleep was catching up with the Falconers. They had dozed only a couple of hours in the hayloft. The rest of the time, they had been not only awake but on the run, operating at top awareness and energy.

If we can't get a few hours' rest, something awful's going to happen, Aiden thought numbly. But how could they stop now? Miserable as it was, darkness was the best time for them to travel out in the open like this. *If we could only make it to Gibbon and stow away on a freight train. Then we could get some sleep.*

They saw their first electric light at about two A.M., a bare bulb outside a barn that housed a fertilizer wholesaler. Other signs of civilization flickered ahead.

"Is this the town?" Meg asked in dismay.

“Probably just the outskirts,” he told her. “There’s supposed to be a train station around here somewhere.”

As they plodded on, the lights became more plentiful, and houses and low buildings appeared.

At last, there it was — a small, low, shedlike structure next to a level street crossing. On the side, a single lamp lit a one-word sign: GIBBON.

According to the schedule posted on the bulletin board, the first eastbound train of the day would stop here at 4:48 A.M.

“It’s perfect,” said Aiden. “It’ll still be dark, with not too many people around. We can sneak into a boxcar without anybody seeing us.”

“That’s two hours from now,” Meg calculated. “Let’s find someplace to grab a nap in the meantime.”

“No naps!” Aiden was adamant. “If we fall asleep now, a train wouldn’t wake us unless it was running over our heads! We can’t let the sun rise on us in this town. This is the first station east of Sunnydale.”

“Well, can we at least see if we can get into the station? I’d give anything for a real bathroom.”

The lock turned out to be broken, and they slipped inside with no trouble.

Just enough light was coming in through the high

windows for them to make out wooden benches and a small ticket and information kiosk.

By feeling her way along the wall, Meg located the ladies’ room.

“No lights,” Aiden reminded her. He sat down on a bench. No sooner was he settled onto the seat than his eyelids began to droop. He stood up quickly. *Great*, he thought. *Now I can’t even trust myself to relax for a minute.*

There was a rustling sound behind him. He sat down sharply, no longer in danger of dozing. *Stay cool*, he told himself. *It’s probably just a stray cat or a squirrel.*

Then it came again, and this time he was positive he heard a footstep. Somebody was in there! His imagination swelled with visions of muggers, murderers, and gangsters. But even if it was merely a homeless guy looking for a place to crash, that was almost as bad. He and Meg could not be seen by *anybody*.

Avoiding sudden moves, Aiden shuffled over to the ladies’ room and opened the door partway. “Hurry up,” he whispered softly.

“Huh?” said Meg over the sound of running water in the sink.

“Let’s go, Meg,” he hissed. “Now!”

At the sound of her approach, he grabbed her wrist and began hauling her to the exit. There was the pounding of running feet, and the Falconers ran, too.

Aiden was reaching for the knob when the other figure slammed into him, driving him back into his sister. The three tumbled to the floor. A split second later, the intruder leaped on top of Aiden, pinning him. Aiden felt metal, cold and sharp, pressed against his throat. A weapon.

A rush of terror shot through him, and he found himself looking up through wide eyes at the face of —

“Miguel?”

“Eagledink?”

Meg’s foot snapped out of the darkness and connected with the side of Miguel’s head. The blow knocked him off Aiden and into the station door. In a lightning-fast move, he was on his feet again, brandishing a sharpened screwdriver at Meg.

Aiden jumped in between them. “It’s only my sister! She didn’t know it was you!”

The dark-haired boy lowered the weapon. “Little sis packs a wallop!” He squinted in the darkness from face to face. “I’m impressed, Eagledink. I

thought a wimp like you would be back at Sunnydale, helping the supes clean up the mess.”

“That shows what *you* know!” Meg said belligerently.

Miguel nodded. “I was worried. After what I said that time about the farm being a firetrap, I figured you’d be diming me as the pyro.”

“I know you didn’t do it,” Aiden muttered, tight-lipped.

“Yeah? How?” Miguel’s mouth dropped open. “Eagledink — *you*? I was just bluffing! You must be bugging to really try it!”

“It was an accident,” Aiden insisted.

“However it happened,” Meg put in, “we’re not going back there.”

“Amen to that,” Miguel agreed fervently. “Hope this train’s going to Jersey. The sooner I get to my brother’s crib, the better. Where are you guys headed?”

“Delaware,” said Aiden, at the same time as Meg said, “Virginia.”

“Oooh, you don’t trust me.” Miguel grinned, taking mock offense. “Who can I tell without giving *myself* up? Like I care where you losers go. Hey, anybody hungry?”

"You've got food?" Meg asked anxiously.

Miguel pointed to a dark shape beside the information kiosk. "Candy machine."

"We don't have any money," said Aiden.

"My treat." Miguel jammed the screwdriver into the tool slot of the coin box and pried open the metal plate. Quarters cascaded onto the floor.

Aiden and Meg exchanged a look. They weren't thieves. Their honesty was what separated them from people like Miguel.

He read their minds. "You've got a lot of integrity for arsonists," he commented, investing some of his ill-gotten gains in a Snickers. "Remember, nobody's going to give you a reward for not robbing this machine."

Aiden hesitated. Was he crazy to think of himself and Meg as being better than Miguel? The three of them were fugitives, wanted by the law. And they were all guilty of stealing. The civilian clothes on their backs proved that. What was to be gained by denying themselves a couple of Mars bars? He and Meg were in a desperate situation. The odds against reaching Vermont had to be astronomical. It made no sense to tip them further. Why refuse nourishment just to preserve the fine line between themselves and Miguel? It probably didn't exist anyway.

"Why not?" he said with a twisted smile.

Meg had already scooped up a handful of coins and was stuffing them into the machine.

Miguel watched in amusement. "*That's* the spirit. It's a long way to Delaware. Or Virginia."