

# The Fugitive Factor by Gordon Korman



Sleep.

There was no describing the depth and perfection of it. For days, the Falconers had been snatching catnaps in haylofts, boxcars, and buses. The nighttime was far too valuable to waste on rest. When all was dark and prying eyes were shut, that was the time to run, to flee.

*But this, thought Meg through delicious dreams, nowhere to go, nothing to accomplish but sleep, sleep, sleep, on a feathery bed in the best hotel in Boston —*

When the phone rang, she lifted several inches off the mattress and snatched up the receiver in hazy outrage. Still half asleep, she struggled to put together a stream of curses to howl at this inconsiderate —

A recorded voice came on the line: "This is your automated wake-up call. The time is now seven A.M."

Wake-up call?

That was when she saw Aiden bustling around

the palatial living room, pulling on his grass-stained T-shirt.

"What are you doing, bro? It's the middle of the night."

"I'm going to meet the crew," he told her.

"On Saturday?"

"They work seven days a week in the summer," he explained. "Tomorrow, too."

"But" — she could barely think straight — "but the room's already paid for. Why break your neck?"

"We still have to eat," Aiden reminded her. "Money means survival. Survival means a chance to help Mom and Dad." He paused at the door. "How do I look?"

"Disgusting," she replied honestly. "And you look better than you smell. Don't you think the crew's going to notice that your clothes reek?"

He shrugged. "Five minutes in the hot sun, and we'll all smell the same. But you've got a point." His shirt was ripped and filthy. When Meg took stock of her own clothing, she noted that her shorts were starting to unravel at the cuffs.

He produced four twenty-dollar bills and handed them to his sister. "Buy us some clothes. Nothing expensive, but if we look too gross, we'll attract attention."

“We’ll attract *flies*,” Meg amended sourly. She wrinkled her nose. “You already do. Get out of here, Aiden. Go make us rich.”

The newspapers seemed to call out to Meg. She had been staring at them for twenty minutes now — ever since the bundle had been heaved from the back of a truck to the sidewalk beside the shuttered newsstand.

*I can sell these.* She recalled Aiden’s words: *Money means survival.*

But as she stooped to grab the twine binding, an unpleasant voice declared, “You want a paper, you pay a buck like everybody else.”

The newsstand owner was glaring at her as he undid the padlock on his curbside booth.

“Just reading the stock market report,” she mumbled, and hurried away. That would be swell — to get arrested for swiping newspapers after coming so far. Aiden would kill her, and he’d be right to.

She stepped back through the polished brass entryway into the muted light of the elegant lobby. But was she any safer in here? Rich people had eyes, too, and so did snooty desk clerks and bellhops. After all, how many eleven-year-olds hung out in five-star hotels?

The thought had barely crossed her mind when the door to the coffee shop opened and out stepped a girl who looked exactly Meg’s age and size. She was accompanied by her father; at least he appeared to be her father — a youngish man in a well-tailored pin-striped suit. The daughter was beautifully dressed as well, in pink denim pants and matching jacket. It was obvious these people belonged at the Royal Bostonian. They looked like an ad for a swank country club — clear-eyed, handsome, and wealthy. It made Meg even more conscious of her tattered shorts and T-shirt. Aiden was right — she and her brother needed something decent to wear, especially in a place like this.

There was only one flaw in the father-and-daughter portrait. The man looked busy and slightly impatient. And the girl was the picture of misery.

“I’ll be in meetings all day, Chelsea,” Meg heard him say, “so you’re on your own until dinner. Don’t waste the whole day in front of the TV.”

Chelsea said something in an inaudible voice, never raising her eyes from the marble floor.

Her father frowned. “I have to go now. Use your time *well*.”

He went outside and allowed the doorman to hail

him a taxi. The girl started for the elevators, head down, feet dragging.

Meg was surprised to feel a flush of anger toward this girl she had never even met. Where did Chelsea get off acting like the world had just ended? She should have been the happiest kid alive.

It was not the girl's fine clothes and money that brought out Meg's envy. It was this: Whatever the reason for her long face and sad eyes, Chelsea had something Meg could only dream about — the chance to be with her father.

**M**eg had never shopped at a secondhand store in her life. But the Back Bay Thrift Shop was just what she needed. New clothes seemed unnatural somehow — road-map creases along geometric folds.

*Clothes should look lived in, not straight from the package.*

The answer — buy lived-in clothes.

An added bonus: The thrift shop was really cheap. For Aiden's eighty dollars she was able to pick up shorts and jeans for both of them, an assortment of T-shirts and sweatshirts, and a pile of socks and underwear.

She was so pleased with herself that she waited for Aiden in the lobby so she could surprise him

with the purchases as soon as he returned from work. *That's just what he needs*, she thought with a chuckle, *to be stalked with a bag full of boxers.*

The elevator doors parted, and out stepped Chelsea, still clad in the pink denim jacket and pants. If anything, she looked even more bowed down and miserable than she had that morning. It was as if the sun rose in the sky by means of levering its weight against her slim shoulders.

"Cheer up, Chelsea," Meg heard herself call out. "He'll be back soon enough."

The girl stared at her with such a mixture of shock and chagrin that Meg quickly added, "Your dad. I overheard you guys this morning. He's coming home for dinner, right?"

Chelsea was taken aback. Apparently, the possibility that someone might talk to her was a thought that had never crossed her mind. "He works a lot," she said finally. "You can never be sure when he might get done."

"It's a total yawn to be stuck here on your own all day," Meg agreed. "I mean, there are worse places. But still — how do you pass the time?"

"I — I have to go," the girl said stiffly. She rushed back into the elevator and let the doors swallow her up.

Meg frowned at the gleaming brass of the old-fashioned dial. Chelsea got off at the ninth floor. Meg could have sworn that she'd just come down from six.

*Well, maybe that answers my question, she reflected. She's so bored that she spends her days riding the elevators and wandering around the Royal Bostonian.*

A few minutes later, she tested her theory on Aiden, who had just returned from his day on the work crew.

He was suspicious. "Sounds fishy to me. Why would her father bring her on a business trip just to sit in the hotel?"

"It only sounds fishy because that's *our* story," Meg pointed out. "At least her father is a real person. Let's hope nobody starts wondering why they never see Louise Graham."

"You're right," said Aiden. "Still — if this girl stands out enough for you to notice her, then you probably stand out enough for somebody else to notice you. Tomorrow, when I'm at work, you should lie low somewhere."

"Aw, Aiden," Meg groaned. "Mom and Dad are in prison, and you've got me lounging around like some rich old lady who lives with her cats. There must be something I can do to help."

"Until we see Jane Macintosh on Monday, all we can do is to keep from getting caught. Nobody's ever going to find me pushing a lawn mower through some Brookline backyard. And you" — a smile slowly took hold of his normally serious features — "someplace dark, where all anybody ever sees is the back of your head."

"Don't talk in riddles," Meg said irritably. "I'm not in the mood."

"Go see a movie."



The trial.

Aiden dreamed about it often. He hadn't been in the courtroom for the whole thing, but it sure felt that way. He had read enough press coverage and studied enough transcripts for his mind to cobble together a complete and vivid memory of those five terrible months.

Most of it was almost, but not quite, boring enough to numb the horror of what was happening. *Endless* lawyer talk. Motions, objections, and sidebars — all as exciting as reading the telephone book out loud.

Then one day Dr. John Falconer's confident "Of course we'll be found innocent" had become "Of course we *are* innocent."

Even now, a year later, Aiden took it like a sucker punch to the gut. Something had changed — and not for the better.

"And the jury knows it, right?" Meg had asked.

Mom's reply: "No matter what happens, we'll never stop loving you."

Aiden had seen it then. Not Meg — not yet. But at that moment, the unthinkable had become thinkable. The "trial of the new millennium" would not go well for their parents.

In the end, it had come down to the Falconers' word against the will and might of the United States government. The secretary of Homeland Security himself took the stand against them. And that nine-foot FBI agent — Harris, the one who'd arrested the Falconers in the first place. Without Frank Lindenauer, there had been no way to refute the charges — no proof that the husband and wife criminologists had been working for the CIA all along.

The defense had presented witnesses — mostly Uncle Frank's many ex-girlfriends. The "aunts" — Aunt Trudy, Aunt Rachel, Aunt Essie, Aunt Ursula. The strategy had backfired. The testimony proved that the Falconers knew a man who called himself Frank Lindenauer, but little else. None of the girlfriends realized he was with the CIA. Not only had he kept his career secret, but each "aunt" believed Lindenauer was in a different line of work. Depending on which ex was on the stand, he was an architect, a massage therapist, an editor at *Mad*

magazine, and the leader of a crew that put out oil well fires.

Soon these “jobs” were greeted by laughter in the courtroom. TV talk show hosts made top-ten lists about them. For Aiden, that was the cruelest part. The destruction of their family had already become a kind of reality show. Now it was turning into a sitcom as well.

There was certainly nothing funny about the verdict: guilty on all counts. And sentencing — Aiden didn’t have to imagine that. He and Meg had both been there. The defense lawyers had felt the Falconer children might elicit sympathy from the judge.

There had been none.

Life behind bars.

Life.

*Strange name for a prison sentence,* Aiden had thought at the time. They called it life, but it was really the opposite of that. More like the end of life. The end of a comfortable, loving home; cracking jokes around the dinner table; Monopoly games fought to the death; making fun of the drugstore detective novels Dad wrote for fun.

The end of a family.

There had been total chaos in the courtroom.

Reporters scrambled for cell phones and Palm Pilots. A media feeding frenzy in full swing.

And for the Falconers and their two children — disbelief, tears, and, worst of all —

Time to say good-bye.

*No! It's too awful to remember! No one should have to carry something like this around in his mind.*

The pain was so sharp, the images so vivid. He could hear the excited voices, the running feet, the police sirens —

*Wait a minute — there weren't any sirens at the trial. . . .*

He sat bolt upright in the canopy bed, chest heaving, his face streaked with tears. The courtroom was gone, but —

“Sirens!” he whispered. They were wailing in the street below. The colored glow of flashing lights danced across the walls of the Provincetown Suite.

Barely keeping his panic under control, he dashed into the other bedroom and shook his sleeping sister by the shoulders. “Meg!”

“You’re a dead man if you’re still there when I open my eyes,” she murmured without stirring.

“Cops!”

Fifty alarm clocks could not have provided a more total wake-up call. Meg bounded out of bed as

if juiced with high voltage, flinging the heavy down comforter halfway across the room. "Here?"

"Outside." He flattened himself to the wall and peered down through the window. "In front of the building."

"Do you think they traced the frequent-flyer miles?" asked Meg, scrambling into her new jeans.

Aiden dismissed this with a wave of his hand. Another lesson from Fugitive 101: Worrying about the past was wasted energy. There was only the *now* — the next minute, the next move. "They'll be watching the elevators," he mused, pulling on pants and a shirt. "Probably the stairs, too."

"What about the window?" suggested Meg. "We can tie blankets together and climb down."

"Too risky. If they spot us, we'll be hanging there like ripe fruit." He frowned. There had to be some way.

The answer came from the craziest possible source — Mac Mulvey, the main character of Dad's detective novels. The books were filled with heart-pounding, rapid-fire action that bordered on unbelievable. Yet Mulvey's wild stunts had saved Aiden and Meg more than once since their flight from Sunnydale.

Over the years, Dr. John Falconer had plotted his

hero into dozens of deadly traps. Aiden racked his brains. Had Mulvey ever found himself cornered in a building, surrounded by enemies?

"*The See Newark and Die Incident!*" he exclaimed.

"The *what?*" All at once, she stared at him. "We're surrounded by cops, and you're talking about Dad's book?"

"Remember the abandoned apartment house? Mulvey had the microfilm, but Corelli's goons were getting closer —"

"Aiden, get to the point!"

"Follow me." He took her hand and led her out of the suite. Dead ahead, a bell sounded, and a spit-shined leather shoe at the end of a navy blue uniform pant leg stepped off the elevator.

*A cop!*

They stopped on a dime and raced as one in the opposite direction. Aiden's heartbeat was a drum-roll. It had been close. Another step would have put them directly in the officer's line of vision.

Meg mouthed the words "Where are we going?" But Aiden didn't dare answer, not with the enemy right here on the fourth floor. He saw a sign — EMPLOYEES ONLY — and blasted through the door, dragging Meg behind him. They plowed into a snarl of housekeeping trolleys and bellhop carts. Aiden

scanned the cramped space desperately. The object of his search was something he had never seen before, and he wasn't quite certain what to look for.

In *The See Newark and Die Incident*, Mac Mulvey was trapped inside a condemned apartment house. The Royal Bostonian was a palace compared to that dump, but Aiden was betting that the grand old hotel, with its stone gargoyles and brass appointments, had been built around the same time.

Then he spotted it — a rectangular hole in the wall, covered by hanging canvas straps. That was how Mulvey had managed to get past Corelli's enforcers — straight down the laundry chute.



Meg stared at him. "You're kidding, right?"

He hoisted himself up to the opening. "If we get separated —"

As usual, it was a subject she was unwilling to discuss. "We won't," she interrupted, and shoved him over the edge.

Aiden had always pictured Mulvey coasting through the guts of the abandoned apartment house on something like a slide. But the Royal Bostonian's laundry chute was an empty shaft. He toppled out to find nothing but thin air beneath him. With a cry of shock, he dropped like a stone through blackness that was broken only by wisps of light from the floors he hurtled past.

"Aiden!" cried Meg's voice from above.

He tried to shout a warning but could not get his mouth to form real words. He could feel himself accelerating. Terminal velocity, they called it —



the top speed for a falling body about to strike the earth.

*I'm going to be a grease spot in the hotel basement!*

The necessity of saving his sister from the same fate wrenched the scream from his throat, allowing him to produce language. "Don't jump!"

The impact came a split second later, a slamming jolt he felt from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. There was a loud metallic crash, and the darkness was replaced by a supernova of brilliant color in his brain. It blanked out all sensation, all thought except one: *Is this how it feels when you die?*

Then, suddenly, the light was back. The world flipped violently and he was somersaulting down the slope of an open aluminum hopper. His arms flailed, but he could not grab hold of anything to stop his descent, or even slow it. With a cartwheel of his stomach, he felt the metal beneath him disappear, and he was free-falling again, bracing himself for the final crash.

*Wump!*

An enormous mountain of tangled bedclothes cushioned his landing. His momentum drove him deep into the pile of sheets and pillowcases. He managed to swim to the surface just in time to see a

howling, thrashing form drop from the hopper, missing him by inches.

He burrowed back down into the mound of linens and came up with his wild-eyed sister. She glared at him. "If we survive this," she said, "I'm going to kill you!"

"Come on!" They crawled out of the laundry and stood panting amid the banks of industrial-strength washing machines and dryers. Compared to the sumptuous lobby and plush guest accommodations, the Royal Bostonian's basement reminded Aiden of visiting his parents in prison — airless heat, fluorescent lighting, concrete floors. With effort, he forced the thought from his mind and pulled Meg out of the laundry room.

As they navigated the long hall, the faint scent of garbage gradually gave way to a different odor — car exhaust, spilled oil, burned rubber.

"The garage!" he exclaimed.

Meg was worried. "Won't that be the first place the cops look?"

"It's the only way out of the basement," he insisted. "We've got to chance it."

Crouching low, they darted through the rows of vehicles, pausing under cover of the taller SUVs.

They were just about to make a break for the exit ramp when the screech of tires froze them in their tracks. Brilliant headlights played across the cement walls. The Falconers dove back behind a Volvo wagon.

A sleek convertible swung off the ramp and screeched to a halt. A uniformed valet hopped out and tossed the keys to his partner in the glass booth.

"It's over," he announced. "The cops just left."

The desk man yawned with disinterest. "What was it all about?"

"A couple of high-society types came home from the opera and found their room got hit. Third robbery this week."

Aiden and Meg were thunderstruck. It had never occurred to either one of them that the police were there for a reason that had nothing to do with the fugitive Falconers.

Silently, they slunk out of the garage and crept down the deserted basement hall.

"I can't believe we almost got killed — for nothing!" groaned Meg.

Aiden rubbed a bruise on the hip that had made harsh contact with the aluminum hopper. "I'll take that any day of the week," he said tremulously. "The cops aren't on to us. That's all that matters."

Meg hauled open the heavy door to the hotel stairwell. "I'm going back to bed. The next time you wake me up, the building had better be on fire."

**T**he McAllister Maximum Security Correction Facility in Thomaston, Florida, was a concrete and steel wasteland. The three thousand inmates imprisoned there were serving long sentences and were required to check all hope at the gate along with their personal effects.

This was the place that was now home to Dr. John Falconer and would be for the rest of his natural life.

Dr. Louise Falconer, his wife, was incarcerated at a women's facility ten miles away. Although physically close, the couple might as well have been on separate planets. The outer walls of McAllister were two feet thick, the window bars reinforced with titanium. The property was surrounded by three perimeters of electrified fencing, topped with bales of razor wire. Overseeing all this were twelve guard towers, manned 24/7, fixed with machine guns.

On the 28th of August, John Falconer was removed from his cell and marched, shackled and under heavy guard, to a windowless meeting room in

the heart of the complex. There he found his wife waiting for him.

It should have been a happy reunion. But for a couple who knew that their children were missing, it was instead a heart-stopping shock.

"What's wrong? What happened?" he demanded, twisting and turning as the irons were removed. "The kids —"

A very tall figure stepped out of a shadowed corner. "Nothing's happened," Agent Emmanuel Harris said quickly. "Not that we know of."

John wheeled to face the six-foot-seven FBI agent. "You! What are *you* doing here?"

"I've come for your help."

John snorted a bitter laugh. "The one advantage to being already convicted is that I don't have to talk to you anymore. I'm still a criminologist. I know my rights!"

"John, listen to what he has to say!" his wife pleaded.

He embraced her, and they clung together. "You don't have to talk to him, either."

"We both have to — for Aiden and Meg."

Harris eased his bulk into a chair. "You don't have to like me. In fact, I'd be pretty surprised if you

did. But we can all agree that Aiden and Margaret shouldn't be out on the street."

"I guess that makes you look pretty bad, huh?" John sneered. "Outsmarted by a couple of kids?"

"They've been smart," Harris acknowledged. "And resourceful. But mostly, they've been lucky, and luck always runs out. It's time to bring them in before something terrible happens."

Louise Falconer's outrage bubbled to the surface. "They're not going to turn themselves in so you can put them on another prison farm with criminals and delinquents! Offer them a decent life and they'll cooperate."

Harris looked grim. "They won't. We interrogated the boy they escaped with, Miguel Reyes. According to him, your kids are on the run looking for evidence to prove your innocence. They won't surrender, even if we offer to put them up at Club Med."

The parents looked profoundly shocked.

"I can't believe it!" murmured Louise. "They think they're doing it for *us*!"

"There's more," said Harris evenly. "They're leaving a trail of stolen vehicles, breaking and entering, vagrancy, and petty theft behind them. Also, Juve-

nile Corrections is talking about charging them with arson. I can get all that dropped — today. But if they're out there much longer, sooner or later they're going to do something *nobody* can fix. In that case, a prison farm will be their future, not just their past."

The Falconers exchanged agonized glances.

"That's if they make it at all," Harris went on. "You know how we picked up the Reyes kid? He got shot. And your son and daughter were in the same house at the time. It's a tough world. The kind of people living in this place — there are plenty of them still on the outside. You hate me; that's fine. But you've got to help me help your kids."

When John Falconer spoke again, it was with the voice of utter defeat. "Okay. Just tell us what we have to do."

ON THE RUN

THE FUGITIVE FACTOR