



The four forty-eight pulled into Gibbon station a few minutes early. Truck farmers were spread along the road, their bushel baskets ready for loading onto the boxcars. The train crew was in position to open up cars five and six in the powerful spotlights of the work area. To anyone inside that brighter-than-day zone, this train had no engine, nor any caboose. The lights were blinding, the night around them inky-black.

Far behind the loading area, nearly a quarter mile to the rear, three shadowy figures slipped out of the underbrush and stole over to car forty-one, the third last on the long freight.

A hand reached up, released the latch, and slid the heavy metal door slightly open. An athletic silhouette hoisted itself up and inside, then bent down to assist two companions.

When the corrugated metal was pulled shut

again, it left no sign that anyone had ever been there.

The interior was pitch-black, darker even than the Nebraska night, and soundless, except for the ragged breathing of the three runaways.

Suddenly, a match blazed, illuminating all three of their faces. Miguel shone this temporary light into the four corners of the car. It was empty except for a few tattered sheets of newsprint and a single large crate pushed up against the front wall.

"Looks like we got the presidential suite," he said cheerfully.

"Let's just hope we don't get fleas," was Meg's comment.

"Let's just hope we don't get *caught*," Aiden amended. "What's in that big box?"

Miguel lit another match and went over to investigate. "Hey, Eagledink. What does T-N-T spell?"

"Put out that match!" rasped Aiden in a panic.

Miguel nearly choked on his laughter. "You are such a sucker! It's just some old tarps. Our beds, dummy."

Beside him, Aiden heard Meg snicker.

There was an abrupt lurch and a screech from the steel wheels. The train began to creep forward.

Miguel shared out the tarpaulins. They were

rough and stiff and smelled strongly of cabbages. To the fugitives, they were the softest of perfumed feather beds.

All three were asleep before the train had gathered full speed.

"Aiden — time to get your shoes on."

Six-year-old Aiden Falconer sat cross-legged on the shag carpeting of his small bedroom in the summer-house. Spread out on the floor in front of him were a dozen color photographs, the boy's pride and joy. He had taken them himself, using his own camera, and his very first roll of film.

"Come on, Aiden. We have to be at the Colchester Grill at six."

"I'm busy," he called down the stairs. He hated restaurants where you had to sit in your chair the whole time, waiting forever for people to bring food you weren't going to like anyway. They never had hamburgers. And pretty soon Meg would be crying.

"Uncle Frank and Aunt Jane will wonder what happened to us."

"I'm not going." He selected a single picture out of his array — Uncle Frank and Aunt Jane. They were nice enough, he supposed, but so boring. Whenever they

were around, all Mom and Dad wanted to do was talk. And eat dinner for three hours.

He prepared to rip the snapshot into a billion pieces. But he could hear his mother's footsteps starting up the stairs. Quickly, he collected his pictures, stuffed them into the cigar box that held his summer treasures, and stashed that in his secret hiding place. He got the loose piece of panel back in its slot just as his mother burst into the room.

"What is the matter with you, Aiden? We are going out to dinner, and that's that."

She reached down and hoisted him high in the air. As he swung around past the window, he saw the gleaming waters of Lake Champlain on a summer afternoon. The dock was festooned with hundreds of colored flags. At the near end, the ferry was boarding for its trip to the New York side of the lake.

"Come on, sweetie," his mother coaxed. "You'll have fun."

As she held him, he had a strange feeling that he should be hugging her harder, never letting go. . . .

Aiden awoke sucking air, because someone had taken his mother away, and she was never coming back.

"Hey — Eagledink!" Miguel was shaking him.

Aiden sat up in the darkness of the boxcar. The dream was still very real in his mind. *Colchester. The house was in Colchester, Vermont.*

Miguel brayed a derisive laugh. "You were crying for Mommy. You've got some serious hang-ups about your folks. What gives?"

Aiden looked around, orienting himself. A thin line of light showed at the edge of the sliding door. Daylight. He checked his watch: 4:05.

We've been asleep for eleven hours!

"Meg?"

"Still snoozing," said Miguel.

"No, I'm not," came her drowsy voice. "Where are we?"

"Stopped," Aiden said. It was only then that he realized it himself. The train was standing still. He turned to Miguel. "How long have we been stopped?"

"Don't know. I've been sleeping like you."

They could hear voices outside — Aiden listened — strident voices, barking orders. The rumble and slam of boxcar doors kept repeating itself, and — was that a siren?

"Something's up," Meg said nervously.

Miguel slid the door open a few inches and flat-

tened himself so he could peer up the length of the train. "Cops," he said.

Aiden was horrified. "Searching the train?"

"No, dancing the hula. Get a grip!"

"*You* get a grip!" Aiden hissed angrily. "This is *your* fault! They probably saw the busted candy machine in Gibbon and knew we were on this freight!"

"Can we run for it?" Meg interrupted.

Miguel shook his head. "They're too close. We're trapped."



Trapped in a boxcar.

Something frantic rattled around in Aiden's head. He should know about this! This was familiar.

That's crazy! You've never been on a train that wasn't a commuter. What do you know about escaping from a freight car?

Then he remembered. Mac Mulvey, Dad's recurring detective hero, had once broken out of a locked freezer car via —

He looked up and there it was. The shaft of light from the open slider shone on an emergency hatch in the ceiling. He rushed over to the wooden crate and began positioning it in the center of the car.

"What are you going to do, Eagledink?" scoffed Miguel. "Mail yourself out of here?"

Aiden pointed straight up. Instantly, he had two helpers. When the crate was in place, he scrambled up the wooden side and balanced on the narrow

rim. The trapdoor was held in place by a small latch. He popped the hatch, reached up, and took hold of the roof of the car.

Here goes, he thought. If the police were watching the top of the train, this would be his last act as a free person. *One . . . two . . .* — a silent prayer — *three!*

He heaved himself up through the opening and flopped flat onto the metal surface. He could see tall buildings in the distance — a skyline. They were outside a big city. But their immediate surroundings were lower and leafier. This was a suburban station. To his left, about a dozen cops patrolled the platform, searching the train. And they were only *two cars away!*

"Hurry!" he hissed, reaching down to help Meg and then Miguel to the roof of the boxcar.

He looked around desperately. To his right was an empty track. There weren't any officers on that side. But it was a twelve-foot drop to the ground.

A broken ankle — not a good idea for a fugitive.

"Follow me," he whispered.

Keeping low, he slithered forward on the metal roof, scrambling over the four-foot gap to the next car. Over his shoulder, he could see Miguel and Meg following him. The three snaked silently ahead,

barely daring to breathe. Soon Aiden found himself on a different kind of surface — a thick lattice cage.

The powerful farm odor reached him almost immediately. A livestock carrier. Animals lowing wafted up from below.

He peered down through the bars. Didn't it figure?

Cows.

He slunk to the edge of the car and eased over the side. Using the steel struts as ladder rungs, he began to climb down. The cows mooed at him; one even pressed its snout right up to the opening and licked him. But he was able to clamber low enough to jump to the ground.

Miguel landed beside him a few seconds later. Meg came last. As her sneakers made contact with the gravel, she lost her footing and lurched toward the open track. Miguel grabbed her arm and propped her back into balance.

He gestured meaningfully at the spot where she had almost fallen. This was a commuter line. It had an electrified third rail. Had Meg touched it, she would have been seriously injured or even killed.

Her mouth formed the word "thanks," but she allowed no sound to come out.

Hidden behind the bulk of the train, they scampered the length of the station. A small metal ladder provided access to the outbound platform. They scrambled up, trying to look like local kids and not fleeing felons.

They were in luck. The vacant side was nearly deserted. At this time of day, people returning from a day's work in the city just wanted to get home. No one was hanging around.

They strode purposefully toward the stairway to the parking lot. It was a hundred yards away — a single football field. For the first time, Aiden allowed the notion to enter his mind that they might survive this latest close call.

They were halfway there — the fifty-yard line — when the bathroom door opened and out stepped a pudgy, middle-aged policeman. It was too late to turn, too late to hide. The only plan of action was to keep walking. As they drew close, Aiden noticed the fax in the officer's hand. The page was dotted with photographs — murky mugshots of the Sunnydale runaways.

Strangely — amazingly — the cop let them pass. They forged on, eyes fixed straight ahead. Was it possible that he simply hadn't noticed them?

Leather soles scraping against concrete — the

sound of someone turning around. Then: "Hey! Hey!!"

They ran, flying across the platform and down the stairs. The cop gave chase. "Police! Hey! Stop!"

In addition to being tougher than the Falconers, Miguel turned out to be faster as well. He blasted through the parking lot, opening a gap between himself and Aiden and Meg.

He'll get away and we won't! The thought brought Aiden hidden reserves of power, and he turned on the jets and kept pace. Meg was hot on his heels.

Luckily, the policeman wasn't much of an athlete. They could hear him puffing into his walkie-talkie: "Lewin to Caldwell . . . Chris, I've got 'em . . . fast little rats."

The parking lot was bordered by a small strip of stores and restaurants. Beyond that, subdivisions began.

Miguel never hesitated. He barreled headlong down tree-lined roads, wheeling left and right, navigating as if he'd lived here all his life.

The Falconers followed like the tail of a comet. They had no loyalty for Miguel Reyes; they didn't like him, and trusted him zero. But he ran with the kind of cool self-assurance that inspired confidence. Besides, if anybody was an expert at fleeing the po-

lice, it had to be this juvenile delinquent. For good or ill, their fates had become intertwined.

Aiden looked over his shoulder. He could no longer see Officer Lewin. It brought some relief, but reinforcements couldn't be far behind.

Miguel sensed that, for the moment, the coast was clear. He selected one of the scores of identical homes and dashed for it, hopping the fence with an effortless vault.

Aiden was practically babbling as he scrambled over the obstacle. "What are you doing? There's nowhere to hide here!"

Miguel indicated the house, a well-tended brick colonial surrounded by sculpted bushes. "What do you call that?"

Meg jumped down beside them. "A houseful of people," she panted. "With a telephone for calling the police."

"For a couple of Eagles, you guys are blind as bats. There's a pile of newspapers on the front stoop. They're on *vacation*, brainiacs. Nobody home. No alarm, either."

"How do you know?" puffed Aiden.

"No stickers in the windows. Alarm people love stickers." He pulled a grapefruit-sized stone out of the garden and headed for the patio doors.

The Falconers exchanged uneasy glances. Taking clothes from a drying rack or bikes that you planned to return was one thing. *This* was breaking and entering.

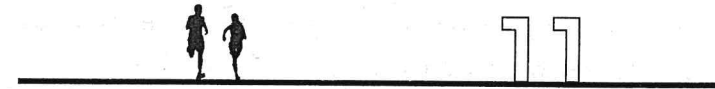
But pretty soon the whole neighborhood will be crawling with cops!

Amazing, Aiden marveled. The only way to survive as a fugitive was by breaking even more laws.

If the police really want to reduce crime, they should leave us alone.

Miguel hefted the rock and deftly punched out a single pane of glass from the French doors. He reached inside and flipped the latch.

They were in.



They cleaned up the glass and took in the telltale newspapers. The next order of business, according to Miguel, was their appearance.

“What’s wrong with how we look?” asked Aiden.

“Well, you’re both pretty ugly,” Miguel wisecracked, “but that’s not the problem. We match our mug shots, yo. Cops’ll make us in a heartbeat.”

He rustled through a few kitchen cabinets and drawers and came up with a pair of scissors. “Who’s first?”

“No way,” Meg said firmly. “I’m not letting this lunatic touch my hair.”

Miguel shrugged. “No skin off my back, little sis. More time for me to split while the cops are cuffing you.”

“There’s too much at stake to risk getting caught,” Aiden told her.

Meg hesitated. “You ever cut hair before?” she asked Miguel.

"I'm Vin Diesel's personal barber."

"Aiden —"

Aiden sighed. "Just do it."

Meg sat on a kitchen chair, biting back rage, as clumps of her long dark hair scattered on the floor. When she finally regarded herself in the mirror, she almost cried. She looked like a *geek*, with a Buster Brown cut that exposed her ears.

"You should stick to murder," she mumbled bitterly, "because as a stylist, you stink."

"Hey!" Miguel was upon her in an instant, grabbing a fistful of T-shirt and pushing her hard against the refrigerator. She felt the scissor blade pressing on the skin of her neck. "Don't you *ever* call me a murderer! You hear me?"

With cold steel against her throat, Meg was too petrified to reply.

"Let her go, man!" cried Aiden, struggling to remain calm. "She didn't mean it!"

Miguel's eyes burned feverishly. "It was *manslaughter!*"

"We know that," Aiden soothed. "We're all friends here. We've got to stick together if we're going to get out of this, right?"

"They don't send murderers to milk cows!"

Miguel made no move to release her. "You do hard time for that!"

"We *know!*"

The scissors hit the tile floor with a clatter. Meg fled to her brother's arms. The message flashed between them: *Who's the real enemy — the police or Miguel?*

"It was manslaughter," the olive-skinned boy repeated to no one in particular. Then, his voice barely audible, he added, "Jerk had it coming, anyway."

Soon Aiden's curly top had been reduced to a tight crew cut. Meg was amazed at how his entire appearance was transformed. Her brother had always had a serious yet somehow goofy look to him. Now his cheekbones seemed higher, his jaw stronger, his eyes more deep set. His appearance was older, more mature. Could one haircut have done all this, she wondered? Or had life on the run already aged her brother?

They found a box of color formula in the upstairs bathroom. While Aiden dyed his fair hair jet-black, Meg massaged hydrogen peroxide into the Buster Brown. Her scalp stung like crazy, but twenty painful minutes later she was a platinum blond.

Miguel gave himself a quick haircut using a portable sideburn trimmer. He loved the new him so much that he paid the trimmer the ultimate compliment — he pocketed it.

Meg started to protest . . . and then the doorbell rang.

A lightning strike could not have produced such electricity inside the house. Meg ran to the window, hoping against hope that she wouldn't see what she knew she would — a police cruiser, parked at the curb.

Miguel saw it, too. "Heat."

Aiden was well on his way to panic. "Why'd you have to take in those newspapers?" he confronted Miguel. "Now they know somebody's here!"

"They'd check an empty house twice as close, Eagledink," Miguel retorted. "Maybe notice that missing glass out back."

The doorbell rang twice more. Meg could hear urgency in its tone. Sucking in a breath, she headed downstairs.

Aiden realized his sister's intentions too late. "Don't do it!"

But Meg just knew, although she wasn't sure how: *Don't give the cops a chance to snoop around.*

And there was only one way to do that.

She threw open the door and peered up at a tall, thin officer. Her heart nearly stopped when she saw he was holding a faxed page with their mug shots.

Get out of here! Slam the door and run!

Yet there was no recognition in the young cop's eyes.

He smiled at her. "Pardon the intrusion, son. Is your mom home?"

Meg struggled to conceal her amazement. He thought she was a *boy!*

She conjured her best shy expression. "My parents are at work," she mumbled, peering alternately at the officer and the floor. *Don't let him get a good look at you. . . .*

"You're kind of young to be here all alone," the cop said kindly. "Who's watching you?"

"Carolyn. My sister. She's fourteen."

"Maybe I should talk with her."

"Sure," Meg agreed. "But you'll have to wait till she gets out of the shower. She takes, like, twenty showers a day." She wrinkled her nose. "Girls do that."

The cop grinned. "So I've heard. Have you seen anybody suspicious in the neighborhood the last couple of hours? Big kids, teenagers — two boys and a girl?"

She shook her head. "Burglars?"

"Nothing to get worked up over," he reassured her. "Just keep the house locked until your folks get home. And if you see anybody suspicious, you know the number to call, right?"

"Nine-one-one?" she ventured, almost too timidly.

"Good boy. Sorry to bother you." He started down the walk, tossing one last sentence over his shoulder. "Have your folks call the station if they have any questions."

When the door clicked shut, Meg nearly collapsed with relief.

Aiden and Miguel stepped out from behind the wall, regarding her in openmouthed wonder.

Aiden was white with fear. "Are you nuts? What if he wanted to chat with big sister Carolyn?"

Meg shrugged, not managing to look as cool as she'd hoped. "He didn't."

Miguel was staring at her with a new light in his eyes, something neither Falconer had seen before. Respect?

"Little sis," he said, "you've got it going on!"

GORDON KORMAN

ON THE RUN

1

CHASING THE FALCONERS

 SCHOLASTIC