

ON THE RUN

THE FUGITIVE FACTOR



Sunday — twenty-four hours to Aunt Jane.

The waiting was the hardest part for Meg. Aiden was the lucky one. He could lose himself in the mindless tasks of mowing, trimming, and raking.

I'm going to go nuts, hanging around here all day, talking to myself and sweating out tomorrow.

A movie. That had been Aiden's suggestion. Like she could concentrate on entertainment when the family's whole future depended on the meeting with Jane Macintosh. Better to mope around the hotel.

On the other hand, there had been room robberies at the Royal Bostonian. There could be plainclothes detectives. Stuff like that got blamed on kids all the time. She was totally innocent, but the last thing she needed was adults snooping around. In the course of figuring out what she didn't do, they might stumble across what she did.

Okay. The movies.

She needed a newspaper — the film section. Then

again, who cared what she saw? And she didn't know Boston well enough to make head or tail of a theater address.

Better just to wander the streets until I see a marquee, she decided. *It's not like I'm in a hurry today.*

She stepped off the elevator into the lobby and spotted the girl right away. Chelsea, sunk into a leather armchair, looking twice as miserable as she had yesterday.

The thought came to Meg instantly. *She needs a movie more than I do.*

She marched over and plunked herself down on the sofa across from the sad girl. "Hey, Chelsea."

Chelsea looked startled, then wary. "Hi."

"How's it going? I'm Meg." She gave her real name without thinking, and decided it was the right thing to do. She was suddenly struck by a need to be with someone her own age on a true and equal footing. Friendship was a luxury fugitives couldn't afford. But that didn't mean she and Chelsea couldn't be friends for one afternoon. Besides, if she called herself Belinda one more time, she was going to forget who she really was.

Chelsea was silent, her eyes focused once again on the floor.

"This hotel is pretty posh," Meg went on, "but

there's not much to do. I was thinking of hitting a movie. Want to come?"

Chelsea regarded her as if Meg had just suggested they stow away on the space shuttle. "I'd better not," she said finally. "My dad wouldn't like it."

Meg shrugged. "He doesn't have to know. If he's out till dinner again, that's six hours from now. We could see *three* movies, and you'd still be back in time! Come on. Aren't you *bored*?"

Chelsea appeared hopeful for a moment. But then two large tears spilled from her eyes and rolled down her pale cheeks.

Meg was appalled. "Hey, what did I say? I know your dad's kind of strict, but —"

"That's not it!" Chelsea sobbed softly.

"Then what's wrong?" Meg persisted. "Listen, we've all got our problems. Me, too. But what really drives you nuts is when you're cooped up all day with nothing to do but think about them. Let's get out of here, Chelsea."

Chelsea didn't say yes; she didn't even nod. But allowing Meg to haul her out of the lobby and onto the street was consent enough.

It was amazing how freedom from the Royal Bostonian seemed to remove a thousand-pound weight from around Chelsea's neck. Her step light-

ened; her posture straightened; her entire face was transformed. It would have been exaggerating to say she smiled, but she seemed to face the world with something other than gloom and dread.

Maybe it's because I don't ask too many nosy questions, Meg mused. How can I? If I mind her business, she might want to mind mine.

Whatever the reason, Chelsea was relaxing, and Meg found herself loosening up, too. They found a movie theater after about twenty minutes of wandering. Meg bought her ticket with Aiden's hard-earned cash, then hesitated. Should she pay for Chelsea as well? Just because the girl was wealthy didn't mean her father kept her flush with spending money.

She needn't have worried. Chelsea reached into her pocket and pulled out a wad of bills three inches thick. She peeled off a twenty and crammed the rest back out of sight.

Meg was bug-eyed. "Your dad lets you carry that much money? You'd better be careful. Some people in the hotel got robbed last night."

Chelsea looked shocked, then terrified and close to tears.

Meg was instantly contrite. "Sorry. I didn't mean

to scare you. I'm sure you guys know what you're doing. Let's just see the show, okay?"

But the damage was done. Meg could almost see the shutters coming down behind the girl's eyes. As a potential friend, Chelsea was closed for business.

It was the movie that saved the day, not because it was good, but because it was so bad that it was hilarious. The two girls sat in the front row, stifling screams and desperately trying not to choke on their popcorn.

Afterward, they reenacted the hokey chase scene along the streets of downtown Boston, pursuing each other with melodramatic intensity and peals of laughter. At one point, Chelsea darted through a troop of Cub Scouts, hurdling the string they all held to keep the group together, and disappeared into an alley. By the time Meg pounded onto the scene, the alley was deserted, and Chelsea was waving down at her from a fifth-floor fire escape.

Meg gawked up at her. "What are you — a monkey? Or a trapeze artist?"

Even from forty feet below, Meg could see Chelsea's expression change as the girl shut down once again. Even in fun, she couldn't handle any personal remarks.

This time, the change was permanent. The two returned to the hotel in uncomfortable silence.

Things went from bad to worse when they hit the lobby. For there, pacing up and down in a cold fury, was Chelsea's father.

He took hold of his daughter by the shoulders. "Are you out of your mind? I told you exactly what was expected of you today! And none of it included stepping out that door!"

Meg took a protective step forward. He was almost shaking the poor girl, getting right in her face, bullying and threatening. Chelsea was crying. It was obvious she was terrified of the man.

And suddenly Meg turned away, realizing she'd been on the verge of making a serious mistake. Even if speaking up for Chelsea was the right thing to do, Meg had greater responsibilities — to Aiden, and what the two of them were trying to accomplish; to Mom and Dad and the future of the Falconer family. Nothing was worth risking getting caught.

She slunk off to the elevator without a backward glance, reflecting that, yes, Chelsea was pretty weird. And no wonder.

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Aiden and Meg stood on the sidewalk, gazing across East University Street at the glass and gunmetal mini-mall that housed Arrow Travel. They had been there for close to an hour already, trying to work up the courage to go inside.

Aiden was part embarrassed and part bewildered by the paralyzing fear that turned his legs to jelly. A fugitive lived with fear every moment of every day. They had been chased by police and Juvenile authorities and set upon by a mysterious attacker who seemed to be out to kill them. What was so frightening about approaching a travel agent?

Maybe it was this: If the meeting failed, if Jane Macintosh couldn't help them find Frank Lindenaar, then the Falconer kids would be nowhere, with all their bridges burned. There could be no next move, no plan B, no alternative trail to follow. It would be the end of all hope for Mom and Dad.

Meg shot him a nervous smile. "You could always go back to cutting lawns."

She had a knack for knowing what was eating him, and he was grateful to her for breaking the silence. "No, thanks." He swallowed hard. "I guess we'd better get this done."

It was ten to nine, the tail end of rush hour, and the streets were crowded. But the mini-mall, with its cracked terrazzo and dingy storefronts, was mostly deserted. Things became even quieter as they walked down the stalled escalator to the basement level and Arrow Travel.

"Good morning, kids. How can I help you?"

Aiden was battered by disappointment. The woman behind the desk was a complete and total stranger. She bore absolutely no resemblance to the Aunt Jane of Aiden's memory or to the young woman in the crinkled photograph in his pocket.

In a shaky voice he barely recognized as his own, he said, "Jane Macintosh?"

She looked surprised. "Do I know you?"

Wordlessly, Aiden pulled out the picture of Aunt Jane and Uncle Frank reclining in lounge chairs around the pool at the Red Jacket Motor Lodge in Colchester, Vermont. He held it for her and stood there, waiting, scarcely daring to breathe. He was

barely aware of it when Meg's small hand stole into his.

It's a lost cause. She isn't the person in the picture. She's fatter. And blond, instead of brunette. We got it wrong! We made a mistake somewhere.

With a series of nearly audible clicks, Jane Macintosh recognized her younger self and her then-boyfriend. She remembered the vacation and the young family she had spent it with. And from that point, she took a guess at who might be coming to her with this piece of her history.

"Oh, my God!" She gawked at the two young people in her office. "You're not — the *Falconer* kids? Aiden?" She turned to the girl, who had been just a baby nine years ago. "Meg?"

The relief that flooded over Aiden was like the bursting of a dam. The emotion was too much for him to handle. There were no tears, but he was incapable of speech.

Aunt Jane ran out from behind her desk and pulled the brother and sister into her arms. "I can't imagine what you've both been through!" she exclaimed in a choked voice. "I watched the trial! I can't believe what your parents are accused of!"

"None of it's true!" said Meg stoutly.

"And what they said about Frank —"

Aiden found his voice at last. "Where's Frank? Why didn't he come forward during the trial?"

"Sweetheart, I don't know," Aunt Jane replied. "I haven't seen him for almost as long as I haven't seen you. We were only together for a few months. I'd barely thought about him until your poor parents started making the news."

"Did you know he was a CIA agent?" Aiden asked.

"That's why I never got in touch with your parents' lawyers," Aunt Jane explained. "I couldn't have helped their case. Frank told me he was some kind of art dealer. That's why he traveled so much."

"That was his cover!" Meg reasoned. "The other girlfriends all thought stuff like that, too."

Aunt Jane shrugged helplessly. "You might be right. But I can't help you find him. I don't know anything about the man. I can't even tell you if he's still alive."

Here it was, the dead end Aiden had feared all along. And yet he felt no panic, no despair, only a calm determination.

"Aunt Jane," he began, "we escaped from a prison farm in Nebraska. We were almost murdered by a psycho in Vermont. We're wanted by every cop and Juvenile officer in the country. We tracked you

down from nine-year-old records in a motel that's located two thousand miles away from where we started out. The fact is — we've got nowhere to go after this. You *have* to help us!"

She looked genuinely distressed. "But I told you! I would if I could."

"Just talk to us," Aiden pleaded. "Talk about Frank Lindenauer. You might remember something new, or a detail that you don't think is important but might ring a bell with us."

"I'll try. I really will." She sat them down in the office's small waiting area — two folding chairs in front of a closed-captioned TV set tuned to CNN. She perched on the edge of her desk.

"I met Frank in ski school, of all places. We were both learning to snowboard. By the end of the weekend, we were an item. Everything was fast with Frank. He was a fast talker; he walked like he was being chased — I had to scramble to keep up with him on the sidewalk. He made a lot of money and spent it before it ever hit his pocket. He had this old BMW that he'd brought over from Germany, where there's no speed limit. He had that car up to a hundred and forty on the Mass Pike! I was screaming in his ear to slow down, but he just laughed. That's part of the reason we broke up. I honestly thought

he was going to get me killed! He was *always* a crazy driver.”

“What was he like?” Meg persisted. “Was he a nice person? Was he good to you?”

“In his way, I suppose. He was charming, the life of every party. And I was nuts about him. He was just hard to pin down.”

“Because he was a CIA agent,” Aiden said with a nod.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. “I never believed that CIA stuff when it came up during the trial. But now that I think about it, there was plenty that pointed to Frank being more than he seemed. There were a lot of girls like me, and he told each of us he was in a different line of work.”

“Another thing — in all the time I knew him, he threw cash around like it was free. He never once paid for anything with a credit card. I figured he was just paranoid about someone stealing the number. But when you think about it, a credit card is something that can be traced.”

The telephone rang, but she let an answering machine pick it up. “Listen, kids, I’ve been away for a few days, so I really have to get back to my clients. But I promise I won’t let you down. After work, let’s all three of us go to the police. I’ll tell them every-

thing I know about Frank. If there’s anything to find, they’re the people who are trained to find it.”

“No chance!” said Meg stubbornly. “They don’t want the truth. They just want to keep Mom and Dad in jail forever!”

“You have to understand, Aunt Jane,” Aiden explained. “We can’t trust the authorities. Nobody knows why Frank Lindenauer didn’t come forward to support Mom and Dad at the trial. But one of the reasons might be that the government wouldn’t let him. Remember, the CIA refused to admit that they even had an agent by that name.”

“But you’re just kids,” she pleaded. “This is too much for you to handle on your own.”

“We made it this far,” Meg said, her jaw set.

Aunt Jane wasn’t giving up. “But what if I tell them — ”

“All you have is an opinion,” Aiden cut her off. “For the government to open a closed case, something big has to happen. We can’t go to the police until we find Frank Lindenauer and bring him along with us. Otherwise, they’ll just throw us back into juvenile detention. And then no one will be looking for the truth.”

The telephone rang again, and once more Aunt Jane made no move for it. Aiden could see she was

thinking it over. At last, she scribbled an address on a Post-it note and handed it to him.

"I'll help you if I can, but there's one condition. You have to come and stay with me. I can't have you living on the street."

Aiden stifled a grin, thinking of their luxury suite at the five-star Royal Bostonian.

"I should be home by six," she continued. "Take a taxi. Do you need money?"

Aiden shook his head. "I've been working. But are you sure you want us in your house? I mean, talking to us is one thing. But isn't it a crime to harbor fugitives?"

She gave him a watery smile. "Your mom and dad didn't know me from a hole in the ground, but they were lovely to me on that Vermont trip. My biggest worry is that I might not be able to help you." She escorted them to the door. "I'll see you at six. We'll order pizza or something."

"Thanks, Aunt Jane," said Aiden. And he truly meant it. Nothing was solved, and still might never be. But just the idea that someone was on their side made him feel a lot less alone.

They were just about to exit Arrow Travel when the door of the next office opened, and out stepped an impeccably dressed fortyish man carrying a

leather briefcase. The Falconers were so used to being anonymous strangers in this city that it took a moment for Meg to realize that she recognized this person.

It was Chelsea's father.

She turned to Aunt Jane. "Next door — that's a pawnshop, right?"

The travel agent made a face. "I suppose you could call it that. I'm pretty sure it's a front for fencing stolen goods. This complex has really gone downhill. I've got to find some new office space."

Once out in the mini-mall, Meg shared her discovery with Aiden.

"So what?" he said, preoccupied. "So he visits a pawnshop. Maybe he's not as rich as you think he is."

"Don't you get it?" she persisted, annoyed that he didn't share her excitement. "I told you how Chelsea bought a movie ticket with a wad of bills that would choke a hippo! And she climbed that fire escape like the Human Fly! She's the hotel burglar! Her father makes her rob people's rooms, and then he comes here to sell the stuff!"

Aiden looked at her with respect. "You're probably right, Meg. Now we know who to thank for our trip down the laundry chute."

Meg was outraged. "Is that all it means to you? That complete jerk is forcing his daughter into a life of crime!"

"How do you know he's forcing her?"

"Are you kidding? The girl is totally miserable! She cries every time the wind blows! She's *definitely* a victim. Now, what are we going to do about it?"

Aiden looked her straight in the eye. "I'll tell you what we're going to do about it. We're going to go back to the hotel, pack up our stuff, and get out of there before she works her way up to *our* room!"

"Come on!" his sister countered. "All we have to do is tip off the cops. Nothing'll happen to Chelsea once they realize her father's making her do it."

Aiden groaned in frustration. "You can't be serious! We have to steer clear of cops, no matter what! How would you feel if we lost our chance to help Mom and Dad over something like this?"

She was chastened. "Okay. I just feel bad for her, that's all. It's frustrating to know you can help somebody, but you don't dare try it."

Aiden had another argument. "I don't think we of all people should have anything to do with putting someone else's father in jail."

"This is different," Meg insisted. "The guy de-

serves it. He's a bully and a jerk." A raindrop splashed off the tip of her nose.

The two ducked into a bus shelter just before a heavy cloudburst deluged the street. When a downtown bus happened along a few minutes later, it seemed natural to hop aboard and ride it back to the Royal Bostonian.

Meg sat in listless silence, watching the rain stream down the grimy window. *Can't help Chelsea*, she thought. *We'll find out tonight if we can help Mom and Dad.*

And suddenly, Mom and Dad were directly in her line of vision.



13

Meg goggled. *Twenty* Moms and Dads, as a matter of fact.

She was on her feet in a split second, slapping repeatedly at the signal to request a stop.

“Meg, what are you doing?” hissed a bewildered Aiden.

The bus driver glanced back to see who was ringing the bell over and over again. “I heard you the first time, kid.”

Meg continued to hit the bell. “Stop the bus! It’s an emergency!”

The bus lurched to a halt, and Meg hauled Aiden out into the rain.

“What’s with you?” he complained. “We’re getting drenched!”

“Look!” she shrieked.

In the display window of TV Town, two dozen monitors, large and small, angled and flat, regular

and high definition, were all tuned to the same channel. The screens showed Drs. John and Louise Falconer, dressed alike in orange jumpsuits, seated at a bare table.

Aiden and Meg pushed their way through the crowd of people huddled from the rain in the recessed doorway of the store.

The voice of their father reached them like a homing signal the instant they burst inside.

“... we see what you’re doing. We understand it, and we love you for it. But it’s over. It’s time to give yourselves up.”

Aiden and Meg stared at each other, unable to believe their ears.

Then the camera focused on their mother, who looked thin and sleep deprived. “This is what we want you to do. Your future matters more than anything that’s happening to us. Our problems aren’t as important as your safety. Aiden, Meg, *please!* Find the nearest police station and turn yourselves in.”

The camera panned, and Aiden and Meg realized that, sitting beside their parents, was the hated FBI agent, Emmanuel Harris.

“Look who’s with them!” hissed Meg in a rage.

“Kids,” said Harris into the camera, “listen to

your parents. They want what's best for you. *Everyone* wants what's best for you. All the laws that have been broken up to now — we can work that out. You have my personal guarantee that you'll be treated fairly."

"Lousy traitors!" snarled a man standing close by them in the store. "They should have fried the both of them, and their rotten kids, too!"

The CNN anchor returned to the screen. "*You've been watching a dramatic plea from convicted traitors John and Louise Falconer, reaching out to their runaway children to give themselves up.*"

Then, shockingly, the screen filled with still images of Aiden and Meg — the mug shots from their arrival at Sunnydale Farm.

Observation #1: They looked very different now. Most of this was on purpose. Meg's long hair was cut short and bleached blond. Aiden, who was fairer, had dyed his hair jet-black. The kids were thinner, too, and stress and hardship had etched worry lines into their faces. The pictures were eight months old, but the people in them appeared at least two years younger.

Observation #2 (much scarier): They were still all too recognizable, especially in a crowd of shoppers

looking at the Sunnydale photographs projected onto a sixty-inch plasma screen.

"Oh, my God!" A frail elderly woman stood gawking at them. "It's *you!* You're those kids!"

The message flashed between brother and sister at tachyon speed: *Run!*

By the time heads turned to follow the woman's pointing finger, the Falconers were twin blurs blasting out through the crowd still huddling in the doorway. The blowing rain drenched them as they tore along the sidewalk.

With a sinking heart, Aiden realized that, because of the weather, they were virtually the only pedestrians on the street. If anyone heeded the old lady's warning, the Falconers would be as difficult to spot as a pair of polar bears.

Of course, it worked two ways. If somebody was after them, that would be obvious, too.

Aiden risked a backward glance. "Nobody's chasing us!"

"Yeah!" puffed Meg. "Because they're all on the phone to the cops!" She steered him through a narrow alley, and they pounded down cement stairs to an underground T-station. They boarded the first train that came along, without knowing where it

was headed. As long as it put distance between them and TV Town, it had to be the right direction.

Meg shivered in her wet clothes and tried to sink into her seat. "Is it just me," she whispered, "or is everybody looking at us?"

"I think it's only because we're soaked," Aiden murmured back.

"What are we going to *do*?" she persisted. "Our pictures were just on national TV! That woman recognized us! Other people will, too."

Aiden tried to be big brotherly, but it was clear that he was also badly shaken. "Take it easy."

But in spite of all assurances, Meg understood that the rules of this cruel game had changed once again. They were now exposed. From this moment on, the enemy could be anyone with a sharp eye, a good memory, and a TV set.

In the small office of Arrow Travel, Jane Macintosh reached for a tissue and blew her nose. Her eyes were still glued to the television in her waiting area, where the couple she had vacationed with nine years before had just issued an emotional plea to their fugitive children.

The same children she'd just agreed to harbor and help. Barely an hour had passed since they'd left

her office. It had seemed so sensible then — so much the right course of action.

But now, with their distraught parents begging for their safety, keeping them out in the world, with danger all around them, felt like the worst kind of madness.

What on earth was she going to do?