

GORDON KORMAN

ON THE RUN

1

CHASING THE FALCONERS

■ SCHOLASTIC



12

Miguel couldn't find any money to steal, but he did unearth some travel confirmations. The MacKinnons of 144 Purple Sage Path, Hillside Park, Illinois, were at Disney World. They had flown United, rented from Hertz, and were staying at the Grand Floridian while the Sunnydale escapees "borrowed" their home.

"He's not just a thief and a killer," Meg whispered to Aiden. "He's also a pretty decent spy."

With the family on vacation, the house was empty of food except for three frozen pizzas — all gone by the time *Judge Judy* came on television.

"The legacy of Sunnydale," Aiden observed. "We can watch anything, no matter how boring."

"Bring on Dr. Phil," agreed Meg.

Miguel had a complaint. "Compared to my brother's setup, this dinky screen is a postage stamp."

The looting of the upstairs bedrooms was next. The MacKinnons had four children, and there were

clothes for everyone. To Miguel's humiliation, he was a perfect fit for Mrs. MacKinnon's shoes.

He set to work in the garage blackening a pair of ladies' Reeboks with a tube of General Motors touch-up paint. Aiden and Meg channel surfed in the den, searching for details on the hunt for the Sunnydale escapees.

The Chicago news did a short account of the chase at the train station, but it was sandwiched between local crime pieces. CNN had nothing, although the scrolling updates at the bottom of the screen did mention that all but six of the missing juvenile offenders had been apprehended.

"I wonder who the other three are," mused Aiden.

"That's so like you, bro," Meg told him. "You worry about the wrong stuff. Who cares who else made it? *We* made it; that's all that matters. The big question is how do we get to Vermont from here? And" — she dropped her voice to a whisper — "how do we get away from that maniac? The sooner we kiss off Miguel, the sooner we can both breathe easier."

Aiden hesitated. He wasn't convinced that splitting from Miguel was the wisest course for them. As fugitives, the Falconers were completely clueless,

flying by the seat of their pants. Miguel, on the other hand, had experience living outside the law. Yes, he was dangerous. But he might be a valuable guide.

For a while, anyway.

Miguel strolled into the room, modeling the painted Reeboks. "Check it out. I must be bad or something."

"Bad isn't the half of it," Meg muttered.

"Cheer up, little sis. You should be smiling. Why don't you ask me how we're going to get out of here?"

Aiden came alive. "You have a plan?"

In answer, Miguel jingled a set of car keys.

"But," — Meg was incredulous — "we don't know how to drive!"

"Speak for yourself. I was boosting rides when you were still playing with Barbies."

"Absolutely not," Aiden said firmly. "Come on, Miguel, these poor people! We break into their house, eat their food, steal their clothes. We're not going to rip off their car. No way!"

Dear Mr. and Mrs. MacKinnon,

There's probably not much we can say to make you forgive us for what we did to you. We're very sorry, but we had no choice. Someday, if things work out,

we hope we can pay you back. Trust me, no one wants that more than we do. . . .

The car horn echoed through the house like an air raid siren.

“Our chauffeur awaits,” Meg commented dryly.

Aiden was still staring at the paper. *It's the only way*, he thought, convincing himself for at least the fifth time. *The cops will be expecting us to hop a train or bus. This is our ticket out, our ticket east. . . .*

More honking. Hurriedly, he scribbled the rest of the note:

Please believe me — this is not how we usually are.
We're not bad people but we're DESPERATE!!!

He put down the pen and said, “Let's go.”

Miguel grinned down from the wheel of a black Chevy Tahoe. “You navigate,” he told Aiden, indicating a tattered map spread across the passenger seat. Meg climbed into the back.

They had delayed their departure until cover of darkness. Opening the garage door flooded Purple Sage Path with blazing light.

They can probably see us from the space shuttle!
Aiden thought nervously.

Now that the moment had arrived, abandoning their refuge seemed reckless and insane. Inside the MacKinnons' house, they were safe. Outside, anything could happen.

“Watch it,” Meg exclaimed as the heavy SUV bounced over the curbstones. “You're on the lawn!”

Miguel snorted in glee. “This is grand theft auto! Gonna yell at me for tire marks on the grass?” He shifted out of reverse and roared off.

Navigation was bedlam, with Meg calling out street names and Aiden poring over the map, trying to place them in the spaghetti of roads and highways. The chaos just made Miguel laugh harder and drive faster. He was having the time of his life.

Nothing like an A-felony to bring out your inner child.

All at once, Meg cried, “Elmhurst Road — turn left!”

Miguel yanked on the wheel, and there it was — the entrance to the interstate, half a mile ahead. Flashing lights played off the tops of a parking lot of stopped cars clogging the roadway. There, before the ramp, were stationed four uniformed policemen, shining flashlights into windshields.

Aiden's formless fears suddenly crystallized with a crunch. “Roadblock!” he rasped.

Meg was incredulous “For *us*? But — ” Her reasoning crumbled to dust. Of course the police would be expecting them to make a break for it. And where would the cops look? Freeway entrances near the spot where the fugitives were last seen.

Miguel threw the Tahoe into reverse, but it was too late. There were already several cars behind them.

Aiden looked around frantically. On their left, a two-foot-high concrete barrier separated them from oncoming traffic. On the right was a huge construction site — a deep ditch that took up an entire city block. “They’ve got us,” he groaned.

“They’ve got squat,” said Miguel, shutting off the headlights. With a grinding of gears, he shifted into four-wheel drive, swung out of the line of cars, and gunned the engine.

The Tahoe roared off the edge of the excavation. They were airborne, unconnected to anything on the ground. Through his horror and disbelief, Aiden felt gravity take over from the force of the car’s forward momentum. They were falling.

The SUV lurched as its tires made contact with the dirt truck ramp. They rattled across the mud and rocks of the ditch, swerving at the last second to avoid cement mixers and portable generators.

Aiden peered out the back window. “I don’t think anybody’s following us. Hey, how’d you know that truck ramp was going to be there?”

Miguel’s gaze never wavered from the obstacle course of construction equipment. “I didn’t.”

At the far side of the site, another ramp led back to street level. No sirens or flashing lights awaited them there.

They had dodged the bullet.

They crossed the city by dimly lit surface roads. They would have to get on the freeway eventually, but the metro area was an awfully large haystack, and three kids in a Tahoe represented a single needle. The Chicago grid hid them all the way to the Indiana border.

Later, as they stopped for a bathroom break, Meg whispered to her brother: “This guy was ready to drive off a twenty-foot cliff. We’ve got to ditch him before he gets us killed.”

Aiden was toying with the idea that the opposite might be true. If they were to have a prayer of helping their parents, they would have to watch Miguel, to learn from him, almost *be* him in a sense.

To survive as a fugitive, you have to be a little bit crazy.



13

For the next two hundred miles, Aiden and Meg peered out the rear window of the Tahoe, expecting to see a line of police cruisers closing in on them, sirens wailing. But after a while, even fear becomes a routine emotion. Meg fell asleep just west of Toledo, Ohio. And somewhere along the south shore of Lake Erie, Aiden, too, surrendered to his overpowering fatigue.

Fevered dreams gave him little peace. Even as every broken line on the asphalt drew them closer to the east and their past with Frank Lindenauer, Aiden's time-faded memory tried and failed to paint a picture of the family friend who was the Falconers' CIA contact. The photograph — he could see the snapshot, but the face remained blank.

And the questions. Always the questions.

Why hadn't Lindenauer come forward during the trial? Was he sick? Dead? Suffering from amnesia? Or living in some isolated cabin where

he simply hadn't heard about the Falconers' plight?

Oh, come on. He knew. Everybody knew. CNN called it the trial of the new millennium!

Why had he hung his friends out to dry that way? The one person who could have proved they were innocent . . .

If they were innocent —

How can you think that? Of course they're innocent! Does Meg ever have the slightest doubt about Mom and Dad? What kind of son are you?

"Eagledink." Miguel was shaking his shoulder.

"I'm awake." The digital readout said 3:34 A.M. Chicago time — 4:34 in the east. They were pulling into a highway service area. In the darkness, he could make out a few other cars and a lot of big rigs — truckers taking advantage of the empty roads. "Why are we stopping?"

"Gas," Miguel told him. "We should've boosted something with a little more fuel efficiency."

"We're broke," Aiden mused.

"We were stupid," Miguel commented. "We should've swiped some jewelry out of that house, pawned it in Chicago."

Aiden fought down his natural revulsion to crime. *This is your new reality. Get used to it.*

He said, "If we can steal earrings, we can steal gas. Just fill up and fly, right?"

Miguel shook his head. "Place like this, they've got cameras on the pumps. They'd radio our plate numbers to every cop between here and the George Washington Bridge. What we need is a credit card."

"Where do we get one of those?"

Miguel fluttered his fingers. "I have hidden talents."

Aiden was appalled. "Rip off somebody's wallet and buy gas while he's still looking for it?"

"You got a better idea, Eagledink?"

Aiden thought he had. Or at least his father had — in the continuing adventures of Mac Mulvey.

Meg jolted awake in the back of the Tahoe, groggy and disoriented. "Where are we?"

"Getting gas," Miguel replied.

She sat up. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"It's not that kind of pit stop."

"Huh?" They were nowhere near the gas pumps. The Tahoe was parked in the middle of a covey of transport trucks, hidden from the main station. She squinted out the window. Aiden was stringing a garden hose between the SUV and a large box van. "What's he doing?"

Miguel rolled his eyes. "He gave me some lecture about science. I told him to go jack the Magic School Bus —"

Now Aiden had one end of the hose in his mouth. Suddenly, he yanked it free. Pale liquid spewed from the nozzle. He jammed it in the Tahoe's fuel door.

"He's siphoning from the truck!" Meg exclaimed in amazement. "It's higher than us, so once he starts the gas moving, gravity will empty it into our tank!"

Miguel was impressed. "Maybe I should've paid attention in school."

Aiden appeared nervous but triumphant as fuel from the much larger box van drained into the SUV.

And then a fist the size of a small ham closed on his shoulder.

A force several times his own strength yanked him away from the Tahoe. The siphoning hose came loose, spewing a fountain of gas. Aiden wheeled to find himself grappling with the driver of the truck, a cement head and shovel jaw atop a broad ridge of plaid shoulders.

Aiden managed to spin himself free, only to be locked in the crushing bear hug of a second lumber-jack type.

"Aiden!" Meg sprang for the door handle. But

Miguel started the engine and stomped on the accelerator. The Tahoe squealed ahead, narrowly threading the needle between a tanker truck and a lumber trailer.

The burst of speed plastered Meg against the door. "What are you doing?" she shrieked. "Go back!"

"He's done! Forget him!"

"No!"

Miguel aimed the Tahoe at the exit ramp that led to the interstate. "What do you think those guys'll do when they're through working him over? They'll turn him in! You want to go back into the system — a place with bars instead of chickens this time?"

"I'm not leaving!"

"I'm not asking!"

They were on the ramp now. In another few seconds they would be hurtling east on the freeway, abandoning Aiden to a beating and, worse, capture. Unable to think of anything else to do, Meg reached around the seat and clamped both hands over Miguel's eyes.

There was a cry of outrage as he batted them away. "You trying to get us killed?"

She lunged again, locking both arms around his

head. He struggled but could not budge her. "Are you *crazy*?"

She held on, wondering if she really *was* crazy. In another thirty feet they'd be on the interstate, surrounded by speeding cars. . . .

At the last moment, Miguel stomped on the brakes. The Tahoe spun out of control and lurched to a stop at the end of the ramp. Meg tumbled head over heels, landing on the floor mat in front of the passenger seat.

He glowered at her. "I've got no problem pitching you out that door *this minute*! You think I need some little girl slowing me down?"

Shaken and terrified, Meg glared right back into the teeth of his rage. "I'll crash the two of us, don't think I won't! *I'm not leaving my brother!*"



14

The punch in the gut knocked the wind out of Aiden, leaving him wheezing. The bigger of the two truckers held him in a full nelson, cursing and calling him every kind of punk in the book. The other man was more concerned with removing the siphoning hose from the box van's fuel tank.

Aiden knew he would never have a better chance. He brought his head forward and then snapped it back into his captor's shovel jaw. There were two grunts of pain — one of them from Aiden himself. The hold relaxed, and he exploded out of the tree-trunk arms.

The lumberjack brothers took off after him. But Aiden was flying, his high-stepping feet splashing in the puddled gas.

One thing I've gotten good at — running for my life.

Soon he was halfway across the parking lot. The question remained: Where was he running to? What could he do — hide in the woods outside

some interstate truck stop? Miguel and Meg were gone, and he had no way to find them.

Then he saw it. Down the service area's exit ramp, the Tahoe was backing up at fifty miles an hour. He could see his sister's white face in the window and Miguel peering over his shoulder as he reversed at top speed.

Aiden waved his arms. "Over here!"

They came perilously close to flattening him. Meg threw open the rear door and he leaped inside.

Miguel put the SUV in drive and they squealed off toward the highway. "I thought *I* was bugging, but you Eagles are loony tunes."

Meg lashed out at Miguel, pummeling his arm and shoulder.

He deflected the blows into the dashboard. The windshield wipers jumped to life and the radio came on. "I went back, didn't I?"

Meg was out of control, spluttering tears of rage. "He was going to *leave* you!"

"I was caught —" Aiden reasoned.

"*Traitor!*" she roared at Miguel.

And then a newscaster's voice spoke a very familiar name, "Sunnydale."

"*Quiet!*" ordered Aiden.

Silence fell in the SUV.

“. . . all but three of the missing residents are once again in custody,” the woman was saying. “Still at large are fifteen-year-old Miguel Reyes, and a brother and sister registered under the name Eagleson. The Department of Juvenile Corrections has just confirmed that the Eaglesons are, in fact, Aiden and Margaret Falconer, ages fifteen and eleven, children of convicted traitors John and Louise Falconer.”

Miguel pulled the Tahoe onto the shoulder in a screech of burning rubber. He turned on his passengers, eyes wide. “That’s *you*?” he asked in horror. “Your parents are *terrorists*?”

“No — ” Aiden began.

“But they helped terrorists. And you’re calling *me* a traitor?”

“They’re innocent!” Meg stormed.

“Innocent?” Miguel spat. “What does that mean? Remember Sunnydale? We were *all* innocent. Every place I’ve been — you can’t find anybody guilty. If you go by the people doing time, crime is nothing but an ugly rumor started by a bunch of cops.”

Meg was becoming belligerent. “Our parents were framed, and we’re going to prove it!”

Understanding struck Miguel. “So *that’s* the plan. You’re going to ride in on white horses and rescue Mommy and Daddy.”

“No,” Aiden said patiently. “We’re going to find evidence to clear their names.”

“You’re dreaming.”

“Maybe,” Aiden agreed. “But what else can we do? You know of another way to get justice?”

“Justice!” Miguel practically snarled the word. “You rich kids are all the same. Why are you entitled to justice? Where’s my justice?”

“It’s not the same thing,” Aiden argued. “Maybe you had a good reason for what you did, but you still did it.”

Miguel pulled out into traffic. When he spoke, his eyes were riveted to the horizon. He wouldn’t so much as glance at Aiden or Meg.

“Yeah, I’m a real cold-blooded killer. Know what I’m guilty of? Shoving. Felony shoving. Aggravated shoving. First-degree shoving. If you lived with my stepfather, you’d be sick of being his punching bag, too. How was I supposed to know the jerk was going to fall down the stairs? Cops said he broke his neck — killed instantly.”

“*That’s* what happened?” Meg exclaimed in amazement. “You just defended yourself? You’re innocent!”

“Don’t you get it?” Miguel asked bitterly. “There’s no innocent and guilty, just lucky and un-

lucky. Think my old lady's going to blow her savings on a lawyer for the kid who put her husband in the cemetery? Unlucky — same as your folks."

Aiden was thunderstruck. "Miguel — I don't know what to say. Being in jail for something you didn't even do — we both know what that's like."

Miguel twisted the radio dial, searching for music. "Listen, Eagle — Falcon — whoever you are. This car's rolling to my brother's place. Come, don't come — it makes no difference to me. But if New Jersey isn't in your travel plans, now's the time to do something about it."

Aiden and Meg said nothing. But as the Tahoe continued its long journey east, neither made any move to get out.

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