

GORDON KORMAN

ON THE RUN

1

CHASING THE FALCONERS

SCHOLASTIC



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At the Department of Juvenile Corrections in Washington, DC, Agent Emmanuel Harris strode past the secretary without stopping.

“Sir!” she shrilled. “Deputy Director Adler can’t be disturbed —”

Harris threw open the door, ducking so his head would clear the frame. “You *knew*,” he accused, pointing a missile-like index finger at the thirty-something bureaucrat behind the desk. “You *knew* the Falconers were at Sunnydale. And you knew they were missing five minutes after that place went up in smoke.”

“Sure, I did.” In an attempt to look older, Adler sported a patchy mustache that almost — but not quite — filled in the space above his upper lip. “I also knew that information was classified for the kids’ own good.”

The famous sarcasm. “Yeah, we did them a real favor, throwing them in jail —”

"It's not a jail," the deputy director interrupted.

"No," Harris agreed. "From what I hear, it's a pile of charcoal."

"Aiden and Margaret Falconer were never in the system. They were at Sunnydale for their own protection."

"Surrounded by lowlifes," Harris added. "Like this Reyes kid with manslaughter on his rap sheet."

"They're not the little angels you think they are. They escaped from federal custody —"

"I thought they were never in the system."

"— and we're charging the boy with arson. We have an eyewitness who says he deliberately started the fire with a kerosene lamp."

"A kerosene lamp?" the agent exploded. "What is this, the dark ages?"

"Hard work and a simple life is a proven approach in dealing with young offenders," the deputy director said stoutly. "Don't tell me my job."

"You're not *doing* your job," Harris insisted. "You need to find these kids before they get hurt."

"We'll track them down," Adler said confidently. "We traced them from a couple of stolen bikes to the train station in Gibbon, Nebraska. The next day, they were spotted outside Chicago. The local cops set up roadblocks, but somehow the kids dropped

off the radar. They had hooked up with Reyes by then."

Harris took a deep breath. "Suppose I can bring them in before they get into any more trouble. Could you look the other way on the fire? It was probably an accident anyway. What kid today knows how to use a kerosene lamp? You might as well hand him a flamethrower."

The deputy director regarded his lofty visitor with genuine interest. "You knocked off the biggest treason case in half a century. You're a hero in the FBI with a big future. Why can't you let go of these two kids?"

"Because I created them, that's why!" Harris snapped. "I made them what they are today — motherless, fatherless, homeless fugitives. Can't you get it through your head? Everything that happens to Aiden and Margaret Falconer — it's on me!"

Aiden had never been to New York City, but he recognized the skyline instantly from pictures and TV. As the tops of the gleaming towers sprouted from New Jersey's horizon, he allowed himself the tiniest breath of relief.

The East. We made it.

The nightmare of their near miss in Chicago was

over. From here, the country's busiest hub, trains and buses connected passengers to every conceivable destination. Including Vermont.

Miguel had become bubbly the minute they'd crossed over from Pennsylvania. "Wait till you see the sweet setup Freddy's got — flat-screen TV, surround sound, quicksand couch — you *sink* into those pillows!"

Now the Falconers were his best buddies. The bullying and intimidation evaporated the closer they got to his brother's house. For Aiden, the picture of Miguel holding a scissors to Meg's throat wasn't likely to fade anytime soon. But he had to admit that life in the Tahoe was certainly more pleasant when Miguel was in a good mood.

Union City, New Jersey, reminded Aiden of *The King of Queens* — endless tracts of long, narrow houses stacked close together like dominoes. Miguel pulled into the driveway of one of a row of identical cracker boxes.

"A millionth of a tank of gas to spare!" he declared triumphantly. He was positively beaming.

This was it — the end of the line for Miguel. Aiden was surprised at the lump in his throat. As nasty and unpredictable as Miguel was, it was com-

forting to have a partner who knew the ropes. Without him, the Falconers would be totally on their own.

So they allowed themselves to be coaxed up the front walk. "You guys kick back, maybe watch a movie, while I talk to Freddy. He's a smart guy. He can help you get where you're going."

A young dark woman who was very pregnant answered the door. "Angie!" cried Miguel, enfolding her in a big bear hug. "Look at you, girl! Why didn't Freddy tell me?"

Aiden couldn't help noticing that Angie did not seem happy at the sight of the newcomers. "Come in, come in," she said furtively, rushing to shut the door behind them. "*Freddy, we got company!*"

Miguel didn't pick up on her discomfort. "So, when's the baby due?"

"Uh — three weeks. *Freddy!*"

The house was small and shabby, with cracked plaster walls dividing the space into tiny rooms. At the end of the hall, Aiden could see an enormous TV screen — the subject of Miguel's endless bragging at Sunnydale.

"You *idiot!*"

Coming down the stairs was a man in his early

twenties — an older version of Miguel on a sturdier, more muscular frame. Despite the similarities in appearance, their expressions could not have been more different. Freddy Reyes was an unhealthy shade of purple.

“Are you crazy, coming here? Bringing *them*” — pointing at the Falconers. “Did anybody tell you who their parents are?”

“They’re my friends,” Miguel said defensively. “You know how it is when you’re with people on the inside.”

“Didn’t you think the cops would come to me when you went on the lam?” Freddy demanded. “They’ve been here three times already, and that’s just when they’ve knocked on the door! Angie and me — we see them cruising by, keeping an eye on the place.”

Aiden felt his heart lurch. Any passing police officer would find a stolen SUV parked in plain sight on the driveway.

“I’ll move the car,” Miguel promised. “Park it on another street. I’ll be careful.”

“You’ll be more than careful!” Freddy thundered. “You’ll be *gone!*”

“What are you talking about, Fred?”

“You can’t stay here, man! I’m still on parole. If they catch me with you, I’m back in the can. I can’t risk that — not with a kid coming!”

The blow was so hard, so unexpected, that even Aiden felt the sting. For Miguel, coming to New Jersey to live with his brother had always been the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. He had contemplated it, fantasized about it, obsessed over it — in custody, and on every mile of their long flight from Nebraska. And now the dream was in ashes, just like the juvenile detention facility that had once held him.

Miguel was shattered. “That’s crazy, Freddy!” He searched his brother’s face for some sign of softening. There was none. “Well, what about Ma? Could I stay with her?”

“Ma’s on antidepressants — like she has been ever since you whacked her husband. I swear, Miguel — you go over there, and I’ll beat your lousy head in. Leave us all alone — you’re not part of this family anymore!”

“But — ” It was barely a whisper. “What am I going to do? I’ve got nowhere to go. No money — ”

Freddy pulled a wad of cash out of his pocket, peeled off a couple of bills for himself, and pressed

the rest into his brother's palm. "I wish it could be different, kid, but you gotta get lost. If anybody asks, you never saw me."

Miguel stared blankly down at the bills in his hand. It would have been impossible to tell he was crying, if not for the trembling of his shoulders. One time at Sunnydale, Gary Donovan had smacked him with a planting spade hard enough to open a four-inch gash on his head — sixty stitches. Miguel never uttered a peep. Aiden remembered thinking that no amount of pain would ever get tears out of this guy.

I was wrong.

Miguel might have stood rooted to the spot forever if Meg hadn't taken his arm and led him out of the house. He followed meekly, without protest.

Aiden brought up the rear, but at the door, he turned angry eyes on the elder Reyes. It was stupid, he knew. He always criticized Meg for speaking up out of pure brash emotion, when no good could possibly come of it. But this had to be said.

"Ever heard of self-defense?" he challenged. "Big family man — why didn't you get a decent lawyer for your own brother? Better yet, why didn't you keep your stepfather off him before it came to that?"

Freddy's eyes bulged. "I should turn you in right now!"

But Aiden was already on the cement path back to the car.

Miguel slumped in the Tahoe's passenger seat, his head lolling against its rest. He reminded Aiden of an old *Far Side* cartoon of a boneless chicken ranch, with formless poultry flopping limply around a farmyard.

But there's nothing funny about Miguel's life right now.

Meg was trying to urge him behind the wheel. "We've got to get out of here. You heard Freddy. The cops could come around any minute."

"I got nowhere to go," mumbled Miguel. "Back into the system — that's as good a place as anywhere else."

Aiden would not have believed he'd ever be capable of such sympathy toward the bully who had once made a career of tormenting him. Yet he recognized Miguel's despair almost instantly. It was the combination of misery and hopelessness Aiden and Meg had felt during the trial, in the foster homes, and at Sunnydale. He knew from bitter experience that nothing he could do would cheer Miguel up. The

best he could hope for was to show the boy he wasn't completely alone.

"There's a lake house in Colchester, Vermont," he said slowly. "Our old summer cottage. We think there might be a clue there — a picture of a guy who can prove our parents are innocent."

It felt good to say it out loud — almost as if discussing it made it real.

Not just the distant memory of a six-year-old.

"What's your point, Falcon?" Miguel groaned. "It's been a rough day."

Meg supplied the answer. "Are you up for a road trip?"



Aiden Falconer had never driven a car in his life. Now he had no choice. Miguel was utterly defeated and deflated. Once the terror of kids who were terrors themselves, he now couldn't muster the will to haul himself out of the Tahoe's passenger seat. So Aiden took over the wheel.

He had no license, of course — he was only fifteen. But that was minor compared with the stack of crimes he and Meg had committed so far. Even *that* seemed small in the face of their larger mission. Vermont was just a few hundred miles away. Vermont, Colchester, the house on the lake. And the secret hiding place.

He backed out of the driveway with agonizing slowness, still managing to knock over a garbage can. A half mile down the street, he pulled into an abandoned strip mall. There, he drove the huge SUV in circles, building his confidence and skill.

Before getting on the turnpike, they stopped for gas. Aiden couldn't believe how easy this was when you had actual money to pay for it. Miguel still hadn't moved from the seat, but he had no problem buying their fuel. "Take it all," he mumbled, tossing wadded up bills at Aiden. "I don't want *anything* from Freddy."

While Aiden watched the attendant fill the tank, Meg invested in a road map at the mini-mart. They found Colchester near the top of Vermont, about three hundred fifty miles away.

"Six hours' drive," Meg estimated. "If you don't wrap us around a telephone pole."

"Or get pulled over," Aiden added nervously.

It took them almost nine. Aiden missed a couple of exits, and his inexperience made it difficult to navigate back to the right road. A steady soaking rain began to fall, slowing them down further.

It was night by the time they reached the outskirts of Colchester. A 7-Eleven served as their pit stop for hot dogs and directions — a simple left toward the eastern shore of Lake Champlain. It was too dark to begin the search for the vacation house, so they pulled into a cheap motel for the night.

The desk clerk regarded Meg suspiciously. "I'll need your dad to come in and sign for the key."

"Oh, that's okay," she told him. "He gave me the money."

The old man shook his head. "State law. Got to be eighteen to check into a hotel, dear."

Meg thought fast. "Okay, but if the baby wakes up, Dad's going to be mad. She's been crying since Yonkers, and we finally got her to sleep."

The clerk peered out the window at the Tahoe, which was being buffeted by sheets of blowing rain. He took a key from the drawer and placed it on the counter in front of Meg. "Room twenty-two," he said kindly. "There's a canopy by the soda machine so the baby won't get wet."

"Thanks, mister." Meg's big mouth had never let her down.

She hoped Aiden's memory was just as reliable.

The rain continued all night, playing a soft but persistent drumroll on the roof of the Olympia Motel. It did nothing to disturb the exhausted fugitives. This was their first night in real beds since Sunnydale. They slept like the dead.

But in the morning, Miguel began to examine their surroundings with a more critical eye. "This place is a hole, yo. You took me out of Jersey to come to this dump?"

"We took you out of Jersey because you wouldn't leave your brother's driveway," Meg shot right back.

Miguel was offended. "I was just chilling. I don't need help from anybody, least of all some *girl!*"

He had been gradually coming alive in the course of yesterday's drive. Now he was back to his old self. Meg liked him better sullen and silent.

There was little chance of that now. "Vermont, huh? I'm not impressed. Let's see if there's any action around." He was about to throw open the tattered curtains when he jumped back, cursing.

"What's wrong?" asked Aiden.

"Cops! And they're — oh, man. Not good!"

Aiden and Meg peered out the streaming glass. Two cruisers, lights flashing, and two uniformed officers to match. There was no question about it — they were heading toward —

"The car!" groaned Meg. "Can they tell it's stolen?"

"They can if the MacKinnons came home from Disney World," Aiden reasoned.

Miguel paced the small room like a caged tiger.

"We gotta get out of here!"

Meg felt the panic rising inside her. *No escape through the front door . . .*

Then she saw it. "The bathroom!"

A narrow window led to the alley behind the motel. Aiden got there first. He leaped onto the toilet seat, flipped the latch, and pushed. "Stuck!"

Over the years, dozens of sloppy paint jobs had sealed the frame shut. Aiden pulled out the keys to the Tahoe and began to chisel at the layers of enamel.

"Hurry!" Meg urged tensely. One of the cops was on his way to the office.

In a minute, he'll know exactly where we are!

Aiden and Miguel grabbed the handle and pulled with all their strength.

And then the first cop was jogging back toward them. Meg heard him call to his partner, "Twenty-two!"

"Guys — "

There was a crack as the window jerked open. Miguel climbed onto the toilet tank and wiggled through the opening.

"Meg!" Aiden cried.

She didn't wait for an engraved invitation. She bolted into the bathroom a split second before the cops entered with their passkey.

"Police! Freeze!"

But Meg wouldn't have stopped for a stampede of elephants. Aiden practically threw her out the win-

dow into the rain. She hit the ground, reached up, and pulled him through. He landed right on top of her. She felt her ankle twist, a stab of fire, as the two of them went down.

No time for pain. Not now . . .

And then the first officer was glaring at her through the glass.

"Run!" she yelled, hauling Aiden to his feet. They sprinted after Miguel, who was already halfway to the woods.

A quick glance over her shoulder. *Where are the cops?*

"Look!" Aiden pointed. The two officers were rounding the corner of the building in hot pursuit.

The Falconers blasted into the trees, pounding blindly through mud and wet underbrush. Bracken and low branches scratched at their faces and bodies, but they blundered on, not daring to slow down. A cry of shock rang out somewhere in front of them.

"Miguel?" Aiden panted.

Meg looked around desperately. There was nothing but trees and brush — and the rapid rustling of their own frenzied movements.

And then the forest floor disappeared beneath them.

She heard another scream — her own. The next

thing Meg knew, she was flat on her back, hurtling down a steep bluff toward the lakefront. Thirty-six hours of steady rain had converted the slope into a black diamond ski hill, coated with slick muck instead of snow.

She called to Aiden, just a few feet away, but no sound came out. Her words were sucked right back inside her, along with her breath, as she plunged ahead. She could see Miguel ahead of them, a slime-covered rocket sled, racing wildly out of control.

Frantically, she tried to dig her arms into the grade to slow her descent. Instead, she accelerated. The tickly sensation of free fall — that roller-coaster feeling — took hold in her stomach.

But a roller coaster is a controlled drop! Who knows what's at the bottom of this slide? Rocks? A barbed wire fence? A brick wall?

Determinedly, she kicked a sneaker deep into the mud. All at once, her momentum halted. The world twisted violently, and she bounced head over heels, her slide now a roll. Lake Champlain became a spinning blur, and she lost all sense of where she was.

She cried, "Help!" Or maybe it was just her mind screaming as she tumbled toward —

Toward what?

Suddenly, it was all over. She was sprawled across the broken line of a paved road —

With a big pickup truck coming right at me!

Two sets of hands grabbed her wrists and yanked her up and out of the way just before the pickup roared past.

“You okay?” Aiden gasped, his face white behind a layer of sludge.

She nodded, gasping for breath. “Where are the cops?”

“We gotta disappear!” Miguel scouted the area. They were right at the shore — a small neighborhood of docks and beach cottages. “This way!”

The Falconers had no choice but to follow. Surely the officers would be here soon. Or their colleagues would, answering a radio call to be on the lookout for three dazed and filthy kids.

Moving like a cat, Miguel led them to a small marina by the ferry pier. Without hesitation, he burrowed under the tarpaulin that covered the open stern of a sailboat. He lifted the sheeting, beckoning Aiden and Meg to join him. The hatch was unlocked, and the three fugitives scrambled into the cramped cabin.

They were quite a sight — wild-eyed from the chase and caked with mud.

But we're safe, thought Meg. For now, anyway.

Aiden looked haunted. “I — I think I saw it,” he rasped, struggling to catch his breath. “No — I’m sure of it.”

“Saw what?” asked Miguel.

“The house — just past the ferry terminal on the lake side.” He clasped his sister’s hands, dribbling wet muck on the deck. “We made it, Meg. We’re here.”



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Agent Harris knew it was a long shot. Still, in law enforcement, sometimes it was better to be lucky than smart.

SEARCH PARAMETERS: _____

He typed “Chicago,” and then “three juveniles.” The computer searched the FBI’s database of crime reports from coast to coast. More than six hundred hits registered. Another waste of time.

He frowned. How had the Falconers avoided capture for so long? The Chicago police had been right on their tail. There were officers watching the airports, train stations, and bus terminals. If the fugitives were still in that neighborhood, surely they would have been found by now.

Of course, Aiden and Margaret were with the Reyes boy. He was a hardened criminal, with a rap

sheet and a half. He might know a few tricks that wouldn’t occur to a couple of professors’ kids.

Hmmm . . .

Eyebrows raised, Harris added “stolen car” to the search keywords.

Suddenly, there it was — a 2003 Chevy Tahoe, taken from a suburban Chicago home and recovered at a motel in Colchester, Vermont. Officers there pursued three juveniles, who were still at large.

It was them. It had to be.

All the flights to Burlington, Vermont — near Colchester — were delayed because of high winds and heavy rain. Wherever the fugitives were hiding, they were probably soaked to the skin. The airline said it had been pouring up there for a day and a half. The National Weather Service was predicting no letup in the storm.

Finally, a break. A friend in the military offered Agent Harris a seat on a helicopter transport to Ethan Allen Air Base on the west coast of Lake Champlain in upstate New York. From there, a one-hour ferry ride would take him straight into Colchester.

The flight was a nightmare. Howling winds blew

the chopper around like a kite. The ride was so bumpy that his entire Starbucks Extra-Dark Roast emptied itself onto his pants, one slosh at a time. Agent Harris considered wasting good coffee a crime against humanity, but today he didn't mind. He was too airsick to drink it anyway.

He landed in Plattsburgh, New York, to find that all ferries to Vermont had been suspended due to the bad weather. Standing in the blowing rain in front of the locked ticket booth, he used language not at all becoming an agent of the United States government.

He was in luck, though. There was one rental car still available in the city of Plattsburgh — a Mini Cooper. He practically needed a shoehorn to cram his six-foot-seven frame into it.

The route around Lake Champlain would take him almost to the Canadian border, eighty miles out of his way.

Would the Falconer kids still be in Colchester by the time he got there?

The inside of the sailboat had become a sauna. The tarpaulin sealed the air inside, making the cabin as stuffy as a tomb.

Aiden was too anxious to notice that it was impossible to breathe.

They were being hunted — there was no question about that. Police sirens — distant, yet not distant enough — wailed all day long. Car doors slammed and voices spoke over walkie-talkies. As the storm pounded Lake Champlain, the boat bobbed in the waves, jerking its mooring lines and bumping up against the dock. To Aiden, every jolt, every sound was the SWAT team, preparing to swoop down and arrest them.

Seasickness amplified their discomfort. When they got used to the motion, hunger came.

Miguel gazed bleakly around the small refrigerator. "What kind of people own this crate? They got food to put on food, but no food to put it on."

It was true. The tiny galley had plenty of condiments — ketchup, mustard, and a hot sauce that claimed to be banned in thirteen states. Beyond that, there was nothing more than a half sleeve of moldy saltines.

"Just be grateful they're not the kind of people who enjoy boating in the rain," Meg replied grimly.

By late afternoon, the sirens had ceased. In fact, there were very few sounds at all from the world

outside the sailboat. Whatever vacationers were still around had given up on the day. With the ferries canceled and the rain still going strong, the lake-front was deserted.

Even so, the fugitives waited until night had fallen before creeping out from under the tarpaulin.

Meg shuddered from the onslaught of blustery rain. "I was looking forward to getting out of that floating coffin. Now I'm ready to go back."

The summerhouse was smaller than Aiden remembered it, and the gleaming white paint had faded to a sort of air-pollution gray. But this was definitely the place. Same wooden shingles, same lamppost mailbox, same makeshift boat dock out back.

Getting in was Miguel's department. It took even less time than the MacKinnon home. He just pushed open a window, climbed inside, and helped Aiden and Meg in after him. "Hicks," he muttered. "They never lock anything."

Meg flicked the light switch. Nothing happened. She tried the one in the living room. Same result. "Power's off."

There was just enough glow from the street lamps to look around.

Aiden was mesmerized. *The outside may be differ-*

ent, but in here it's exactly like it was nine years ago.

Same shag carpeting. Same 1970s furniture. Even the muskie was there — a hideous two-foot-long openmouthed fish mounted on a wooden plaque. It still held the place of honor in the foyer. Mom used to be so grossed out by the thing that she claimed she could actually smell it decomposing.

Miguel squinted in the gloom. "Kind of a dump, yo."

"Nothing worth stealing?" Meg asked sarcastically.

Miguel shrugged. "I thought you Falcons were high society."

"Our parents are college professors," Aiden told him. "You know, before . . ." His voice trailed off. "I'm going to find my old room."

"I'll go with you," said Meg.

"I'll check out the TV," Miguel decided. "Maybe they've got some DVDs we can fence."

Upstairs, the outside lamplight shone a dull orange through the dormer windows. It was claustrophobic — the A-frame roof cut the bedrooms in half. Aiden remembered it being so *big*.

"Okay," Meg said. "Where's this famous hiding place?"

Aiden scanned the tiny room with anxious eyes.

Nine years was a long time. It was more than possible that someone had repaired the wall between then and now.

Funny — he had always known that. Yet right now the feeling that rose in him was close to panic.

If we can't find that picture, we're stuck. No leads, nowhere to go, no light at the end of the tunnel . . .

Being a fugitive wasn't fun, but at least they had some direction — the goal of saving their parents. If that turned out to be a dead end, they'd have nothing. They'd be wanderers. Worse, hunted animals.

Then he saw it. By the foot of the small desk, a square of paneling was attached at an odd angle. He dropped to his knees and began prying at it.

It didn't budge. Someone had nailed it into place. Had that person also removed his shoe box of treasures?

Can't think about that now. . . .

"Help me," he said, and Meg joined him on the floor.

There was a cracking sound, and the piece broke away from the wall. Aiden peered into the hole. This was it — the moment of truth.

"Yes!"

The cigar box was faded and dust-covered. But it was exactly where six-year-old Aiden had left it.

Reverently, as if handling an ancient artifact, he took it out and opened the lid.

There were a few rusted bottle caps, a penny minted in 1916, and a yellowed book of matches from the Colchester Grill. A couple of toy soldiers and a small cluster of amethyst crystals he had once discovered on the underside of a stone.

"Not exactly the crown jewels," Meg commented dryly.

Most of all, there were pictures. *Terrible* pictures, although back then Aiden had been so proud of them. They were blurry and clumsily framed, with subjects' heads cut off and large pink fingers in the way.

But as Aiden flipped through the stack, he realized these *were* the crown jewels. No, much more valuable than that —

The photographs showed the most notorious traitors in half a century, Doctors John and Louise Falconer, laughing, posing, and playing with baby Meg.

Oh, God, was there really a time like this? A time before trials, and prisons, and foster homes, and the Department of Juvenile Corrections? Were we ever really this happy?

Meg was choked up, too. "I forgot how they look when they smile."

And then the picture was right before their eyes in the dim light: a man and a woman, clad in bathing suits, relaxing on a hotel pool deck. The man was pale and lean, with long reddish-brown hair and a full beard.

Uncle Frank. The man who had started in motion the series of events that destroyed the Falconer family.

The only person who could save them.

