

Fugitive
Factor
by Gordon
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The Constables' Dayroom was a small office on the third floor, equipped with a folding cot and a tiny bathroom. It was normally used for minor first aid and for police personnel to grab a short nap between shifts. For this reason, it was seldom called by its real name. The staff of the twelfth precinct referred to it as the crash pad.

Today, however, the crash pad was serving as a holding cell for Meg Falconer. She'd been brought here, half asleep, in the middle of the night, and tucked in by somebody nice. This morning, she had woken up to find a toothbrush, toothpaste, washcloth, soap, and towel all neatly laid out in the bathroom.

But make no mistake about it, she thought darkly, the door's locked from the outside, there's a steel security gate on the window, and I'm surrounded by cops. This is a jail.

At least Aiden got away. She comforted herself

with the thought of her brother far from this place, maybe even en route to another city. In her mental picture, he was carrying on the crusade to prove their parents' innocence. He was Mom and Dad's only hope now.

And mine, too, she realized.

But in her heart she knew Aiden was almost as helpless as she was. Jane Macintosh had been their only clue. Sure, he was free to go on searching. But where?

Aiden's a smart guy. He'll figure it out.

Yes, but he could also be a pretty big wimp. Meg was reasonably sure her brother had toyed with the idea of turning them both in after their parents' plea on television. True, he could show real guts sometimes. But that usually came when he was doing something straight out of one of Dad's cheese-ball detective novels.

Oh, God, Aiden, please don't blow this!

Restless, she wandered to the window and peered down through the steel mesh into the parking lot. The feds were coming to get her this morning. The next car that pulled up to the station could very well have that jerk, Agent Harris, at the wheel. She snickered when a tiny subcompact putt-putted up the ramp. Well, this one wasn't him. A seven-foot ox

like Harris couldn't fit his pinky toe into that motorized roller skate.

She watched the comings and goings for a while, sinking herself into a deep despair. As games went, Where's Harris? was not likely to put her into a good mood.

And then she saw him. Not Emmanuel Harris. That would have been bad enough. But this —

Out of a fire-engine-red Hummer H-2 stepped a large, muscular man with a bull neck and a completely bald head.

Meg turned to stone at the window, recalling where she had seen this person before. A deserted lake house in Vermont; a desperate struggle in near darkness; shots ringing out in the night; a terrified flight from a madman with a gun . . .

This madman.

The light had been bad at their first meeting, but there was no question in her mind.

You never forget the face of someone who wants you dead.

She was looking at Hairless Joe.

She watched the assassin cross the parking lot to the station entrance, her mind working at lightning speed.

Hairless Joe here? Why?

It couldn't be a coincidence.

When someone tries to kill you in Colchester, Vermont, and tracks you down six days later in Brookline, Massachusetts, it's because he's hunting you.

Hairless Joe was here for her. Somehow he must have found out that she was in custody at the twelfth precinct. And he had come to finish the job.

I can't even run away! I'm a sitting duck!

She raced to the door and rattled the handle. "Hey!" she bellowed at top volume. "Help me! It's an emergency! You've got to let me out of here!"

No one answered.

With a sinking heart, she remembered from sleepy impressions of last night that her bedroom/prison was tucked away in a corner of the third floor, surrounded by storerooms and equipment closets.

"He's going to kill me!" she screamed, pounding on the door with her fists. "I'm not kidding around! I need protection!"

She hacked and kicked at the doorknob, to no avail. She pulled an old framed photograph off the wall and bashed the lock with it. The glass shattered, and the frame fell to pieces, but it had no effect on the handle. She was still trapped.

"Help! Help!"

Another thought came to her: If Hairless Joe had learned where she was, maybe he had friends here, or some kind of fake police ID. Then he'd have the run of the place. All her cries for help might only serve to lead him to her.

I'm completely out of options.

No. There was one more.

If she couldn't run away, she had to stand and fight.



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It took everything Aiden had to work up the courage to leave the men's room. He had Meg's location — the crash pad, whatever that was. But there was also time pressure. The feds were coming for her that morning. Aiden had to reach her first.

This place is a rabbit warren, he thought in rising panic. All the hallways look the same.

He spied a stairwell up ahead. Should he go to the upper floors? Down to the basement?

It was risky. The farther he got from the main squad room, the harder it would be to explain why he was wandering through the precinct house.

And then he saw it: At the base of the stairs was a fire department map of the layout of the building, floor by floor, room by room.

Aiden ran to it, reading every caption, taking in every detail. Crash pad . . . crash pad . . .

Oh, come on, where's the crash pad?

He remembered from Dad's books that cops had nicknames for everything. The precinct was the "house," the criminal was the "perp," an arrest was a "collar." So what on this diagram could be a crash pad?

His eyes fell upon a small room in the east corner of the third floor. The icon that identified it was a stick figure lying on a small bed.

Crash pad! A place to crash!

A bedroom!

He took the stairs three at a time. Each step, he knew, drew him farther away from any believable explanation of what he was doing there.

No cops . . . so far, so good.

He rounded the second-floor landing to see an older woman on the way down. Not an officer — probably just a secretary. Aiden lowered his head and brushed right past her.

Third floor. According to the map, the crash pad was in the far corner of the building. He scouted the long hall. The coast was clear.

But if anybody sees me . . .

This was hostile territory, and he was a wanted man.

Left turn. Or was Meg being held off to the right?

All at once, he wasn't sure. Uncertainty swelled inside him, and with it came an icy panic.

Calm down. This is too important!

Mentally, he rotated the firefighter's map until the layout lined up with the array of corridors and doorways in front of him.

Left. Definitely left.

His heart was pounding in his ears. The crash pad was at the end of this hall. As he walked lightly past closed storerooms and deserted offices, he allowed himself to feel a faint surge of hope. The third floor had none of the buzz of activity and conversation that filled the rest of the building.

Maybe — just maybe — he was going to reach his sister.

Aiden stopped in front of the last door. CONSTABLES' DAYROOM, it was marked. Aiden tried the knob.

Locked — *oh, no!* Wait, it was locked from *this* side! He twisted the bolt until there was a click, and the door swung wide.

In an instant, Aiden took in the small room with the folding cot. It was deserted. He peered into the bathroom. Empty.

Desperately, he looked around. *Have they already come to get her? Am I too late?*

And then his eyes fell on the closet.

Meg crouched behind some hanging uniforms. Fear had sharpened her ears into precision instruments. Someone was in the crash pad — his clumsy, hurried movements rattled around her hypersensitive brain.

Hairless Joe.

He was only a few feet away from her.

She heard the jiggle of a hand on the doorknob.

This is it!

Channeling years of gymnastics training into a single move, Meg grabbed hold of the hanging bar, swung back, and slammed both feet into the closet door with battering-ram force. It jolted open, smacking Aiden right in the nose. He staggered back and crumpled to the ground, whacking his head on the metal side of the cot.

Meg was on him in an instant, brandishing a spike of broken glass from the picture frame. With a battle cry, she brought it to the throat of her enemy, her stalker, her . . .

. . . brother?

“Aiden, you idiot!” she hissed, dropping the shard. “What are you *doing* here?”

“Rescuing you!” He sat up woozily, his shaky hand alternately rubbing his bleeding nose and his throbbing crown. †

Meg’s face flamed bright red. “You’re not supposed to be rescuing me! You’re supposed to be hundreds of miles from here, looking for a way to help Mom and Dad!”

“Not without you,” Aiden said firmly.

“Yes, without me. If that’s what it takes.”

“No,” he repeated. “We’re in this together. Deal with it.”

“I *was* dealing with it!” she stormed. “I was ready to take my lumps for the family. But don’t you see? We’re *both* trapped now! This place is crawling with police!”

“Yeah, how about that, Meg? You were ready to slice a cop!”

“Not a cop!” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Hairless Joe.”

“Hairless Joe?” Aiden pulled up short. “What’s he got to do with anything?”

“He’s *here!*”

He stared at her in disbelief. “But — ” There

were a dozen reasons why that made no sense at all.

"I just saw him in the parking lot," Meg insisted.

"Hairless Joe? *Our* Hairless Joe? You're positive?"

"I never forget a psycho. He's *tracking* us, Aiden! He must have found out I was with the Brookline police. That's why you shouldn't be here. Now the two of us are in danger!"

"Not for long," Aiden grunted with determination.

"That's easy for you to say. You can just waltz out the way you waltzed in. I'm a prisoner here. My only ticket out is with J. Edgar Giraffe."

He stiffened. "Harris? *He's* coming for you?"

Meg shrugged miserably. "Him or someone just like him. What difference does it make? Either way, I'm not leaving unless it's on the arm of some cop." She frowned at the look of inspired purpose on her brother's face. "What?"

And then she followed his gaze into the closet.

The uniforms! Aiden was going to dress himself up as a police officer and try to march her straight out the front door.

It was brilliant — or possibly very, very stupid. But one thing was clear to Meg. It was their only chance.

She joined him at the closet, searching for a set of dress blues to fit Aiden's slender frame.

"This one feels okay." He pulled the papers of Frank Lindenauer's motor vehicle file out of his pants and stuffed them in the jacket pocket.

"What's that?" Meg asked.

"I'll explain later." He felt around for the buttons and found them on the wrong side. "Wait a minute — this is a *woman's* uniform!"

"It's not my fault you're a beanpole." Meg drew the slacks off the hanger and handed them over. "Hurry up. Hairless Joe could be here any minute."

Aiden scrambled out of his khakis and pulled on the striped trousers. They were a little short, but not obviously so.

Meg fastened the high military collar, pulling it up to conceal his polo shirt. "Nice mustache, incidentally," she told him. "Looks like somebody glued a caterpillar to your face."

He was irritable. "It was more convincing before you put that door through my sinuses. It wasn't meant for soaking up blood."

"Hold still." She got down to her knees and painted his white socks and sneakers with black shoe polish. It wasn't perfect — not by a long shot. But with any luck, nobody would be examining his feet.

"Ready?" Aiden breathed.

She nodded nervously. "Shouldn't I be handcuffed or something?"

"Here." He brought her wrists gently together and draped a Brookline PD windbreaker over them. "Stay close to me. And look under arrest."

As they stepped out of the crash pad, Meg glanced back at the piece of paper she had placed on the pillow of the folding cot.

"What's that?" her brother asked.

"Nothing." She closed the door behind them. "Let's go."



Aiden marched his sister down the corridor, his face carved from granite. It was an expression he had witnessed on others more times than he cared to remember — the humorless, impassive expression of a policeman escorting a manacled Mom or Dad. After all the Falconer family had been through, the effort of playing captor made him sick.

Too much thinking! he scolded himself. Getting out was all that mattered.

The third floor was still deserted, but the stairs were another story. They passed an officer on the first flight down, and two more on the next. The experience of being looked over by three cops was like an interrogation by enemy spies. But to Aiden's amazement, nobody stopped the escaping siblings. One of the officers even wished Aiden a grunted "Welcome aboard."

He thinks I'm a new recruit!

They reached the ground level and turned down

the central hallway. Okay — barely a football field to go. But it was a teeming, chaotic hundred yards that confronted them. At least eighty people lay between the Falconers and the exit, half of them police personnel.

Meg had never seemed younger — or more terrified. Aiden grimaced from the effort of maintaining his cop face. Ahead lay only peril, but there was no turning back.

They began to walk through the milling crowd. Blue uniforms were all around them, jostling their elbows and shoulders. They did not stop, did not even dare to turn their heads to the left or right. At one moment, the windbreaker slipped from Meg's wrists, revealing that she wore no handcuffs. Aiden shrugged the jacket back into place before anybody noticed.

Fifty yards . . .

No celebration — not yet. *But we're making it. Nobody's giving us a second glance.*

The thought had barely crossed Aiden's mind when someone *did* give them a second glance. In fact, the man stared at them so hard that his eyes nearly shot sparks.

He was in plainclothes like a detective, with a police badge clipped to his shirt pocket.

But this was no detective.

Aiden made the identification in an instant, just as Meg had done. The broad, muscular frame, the shiny bald dome, the ferocious expression . . .

He was looking at Hairless Joe.

He heard Meg gasp, and chomped down hard on the inside of his cheek to contain his own reaction.

The dilemma tore him in two. They had to get away. But the cops would be all over Meg if she tried to run. They were caught — at the mercy of this man who had tracked them from Vermont, who had shot Miguel Reyes, who had already tried to murder them once before.

Immobilized by fate, overpowered by dread, they could only wait for their enemy to attack.

Why doesn't he just do it? Aiden wondered through his agony. He's got us cornered!

The answer was obvious: A crowded police station wasn't exactly the best place in the world for a homicide.

He's just as stuck as we are!

The very same cops who threatened the Falconers' freedom were probably also the only reason they were still alive.

Summoning every particle of courage in his exhausted soul, Aiden took another step toward the

door. Meg shot him an astounded look but walked along with him. Hairless Joe followed but dared not strike. Anger and malice oozed from every pore on the assassin's bald head. No words passed between them, but the messages of threat and defiance were coming thick and fast, and with impact.

This isn't happening. This is a dream. They were wading through wall-to-wall people, pushing past cops. Hairless Joe was three feet behind them. He couldn't make a move on them here, but as soon as they were out in the street, they were fair game. They could fight, but Aiden knew they didn't stand a chance against this killer.

They were beyond the desk now, and the crowd was beginning to thin out. The front door was only twenty feet away. Hairless Joe pushed between an elderly couple to keep pace. His hand brushed against the back of Aiden's police blazer.

Aiden recoiled from the touch as if he'd been splashed with acid. The touch of a man who wanted him dead . . .

If there's a time to run, it's right now!

But Hairless Joe was too close.

What they needed was a head start. Sixty seconds, even thirty. But what could they do without bringing an entire station full of cops down on Meg?

Then it hit him: Use the cops as a weapon.

He shoved Meg toward the exit, spun around, and made a big show of waving both arms in the direction of the enemy. At the top of his lungs he belted, "Gun!!!"

What happened next was a series of split-second actions. Like compass needles drawn to magnetic north, every officer within earshot wheeled toward the source of the disturbance. A few may have noticed that the stocky bald man was wearing a badge, but most saw a uniformed cop pointing at a noncop, warning that the outsider had a firearm.

Hairless Joe disappeared beneath a barrage of flying blue bodies. Aiden was never sure exactly how many officers flung themselves on top of the bewildered assassin. The instant the ruckus began, he grabbed his sister and hauled her out the door.

They were in full flight along the busy sidewalk, dodging pedestrians and baby carriages. But it was still rush hour. Heavy traffic stopped them at the first intersection.

Meg regarded her brother in pop-eyed respect. "That," she panted, "was the coolest thing I've ever seen!"

Aiden picked his way between idling vehicles.

“Keep moving! Pretty soon they’re going to realize Hairless Joe has a badge!”

They scrambled through the cars, ignoring the honking of horns and the curses of frustrated motorists. Trapped in the gap between a taxi and a station wagon, flanked by trucks on both sides, Aiden threw up his hands in frustration. “We’re *sorry!*” he bellowed. “Give us a break!”

To his surprise, the horns and shouts ceased abruptly, and the drivers inched forward to clear a path for him.

“Your uniform!” Meg supplied, trailing behind him. “They think you’re a cop!”

They hit the sidewalk running. Aiden’s chest burned, but he didn’t let up, pouring all available energy into the effort to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the police station.

Suddenly, Meg grabbed his arm and squeezed hard enough to splinter bone.

“Aiden,” she gasped. “Look!”

ON THE RUN

THE FUGITIVE FACTOR