

# GORDON KORMAN

## ON THE RUN



# CHASING THE FALCONERS

 SCHOLASTIC



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Miguel pulled the carton from the back of the closet and dumped out its contents. *Junk*, he thought, riffling through the pile of expired coupon books, broken swim goggles, single gloves, and cheap toys.

He stood on tiptoe and felt around the shelf. Something heavy bounced off his forehead and hit the carpet. What the — ?

It was a thick hardback novel. He squinted at the cover in the dim light. *The Venus Flytrap Gambit* — *A Mac Mulvey Mystery*. At the bottom it said, *by John Falconer*.

Their father. He wasn't just a teacher; he was an author, too. Miguel remembered hearing something about that back when the Falconers first got busted. Not that Miguel was a news junkie, but you had to be deaf, dumb, and blind to miss *that* story.

Were Aiden and Meg lying about not being rich? You sure couldn't tell by this house. But this wasn't

their real crib. It was just someplace they went for the summers.

“Rentals!” he spat in disgust. Little sis hit it right on the nose. There was nothing to rob in this dive. No cash, no jewelry — nothing worth the space it would take up in his pockets.

A noise startled him. He hadn’t heard the others coming downstairs. “No offense,” he added loudly. “I’m sure your family had some laughs in this — ”

The face appeared out of the shadows. Chalky white skin on a completely shaved head.

*A cop? Or some homeless guy who moved in when the summer people left?*

“Yo, who are — ?”

A large hand with the power of a robotic claw grabbed Miguel by the throat. He tried to yell for help, but no sound came out.

Miguel Reyes had been in many fights in his fifteen years. He had been picked on by his stepfather, by gang kids, and by inmates at three juvenile prisons. But he knew instantly that something was different now.

This assailant was no bully. He was an assassin.

*He’s trying to strangle me!*

Unable to breathe or struggle free, Miguel felt around for a weapon. There was nothing — just *The Venus Flytrap Gambit*. His hand closed around

the thick novel. It would have to do. Lack of oxygen was sapping his strength. His vision was darkening around the edges. It was now or never.

With all the force he could muster, he swung the book at the bald head, aiming the corner of the hardbound cover at the man’s eye. There was a cry of pain. Miguel sucked in a huge breath as the constricting grip released his throat.

He tried to kick at his attacker, but the powerful hands caught his leg in midair and hurled Miguel into a bookcase. Magazines and cheap knickknacks rained down on him.

“*Help!*” He realized right then how much he needed it. Whoever this bald guy was, he meant business.

Those two pampered kids upstairs were all that stood between Miguel and murder.

They heard the sounds of the struggle, followed by Miguel’s muffled cry.

Aiden was instantly on his feet, stuffing the photograph into his pocket. “The cops!”

Meg looked around. The stairs were the only way out. Except — “The window!”

“What about Miguel?”

“We can’t help him,” Meg reasoned, remember-

ing Miguel's own logic at the truck stop. "If the cops have him, he's already done."

With effort, Aiden and Meg managed to get the window open and scramble out into the rain. The A-frame roof was so steep that Meg had to slither snake-style as she led the way to the overhang of the front porch. She let herself slide until she was able to wrap her arms and legs around the wooden post and shinny to the ground. An anxious moment later, Aiden jumped down beside her.

"Let's get out of here," hissed Meg.

"Wait." Aiden looked around. The lakefront was still deserted. "Do you see any police cars?"

"If we can walk, so can the cops," Meg argued.

"Yeah, but why would they?" Staying flush against the front of the house, Aiden peered in the window. From the outside, the interior seemed pitch-dark, but he could hear the bump and crash of slamming doors and toppling furniture.

*A fight?*

No, more like a chase through rooms and hallways. Miguel wasn't going down easily.

*But why would he resist arrest when there's no hope?*

"Where's the girl?" roared a man's voice.

"What did I do?" Tough Miguel's reply was a plaintive whimper.

"Where's your sister?" the voice demanded.

*He thinks Miguel is me!*

Then it happened. A sudden flash of yellow. A short, sharp crack.

Gunshot.

With Meg hot on his heels, Aiden barreled in the front door just as the shooter moved to make his escape. There was an audible crunch as Aiden's forehead collided with the bald man's jaw. The pistol dropped to the floor of the foyer with a clatter. Aiden was jolted back into Meg, sending her sprawling onto the stoop.

The intruder recovered quickly and lashed out with a lightning fist. The hammer blow caught Aiden in the cheek, knocking him into the wall. His head struck something round and hard, and he saw stars. A rail?

*No, it's the muskie!* The preserved body was solid as granite.

"Get the gun!" cried Meg.

But Aiden was too slow. By the time he spotted the pistol on the linoleum, the attacker's hand was already closing on the grip.

The blast of terror was as cold as liquid nitrogen. In less than a second, the muzzle would swing up at Aiden, and his life would be over.



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With a desperation and purpose he would not have believed possible, Aiden wrenched the mounted muskie off its wall hooks. Before the man could point the weapon, Aiden raised the trophy high and slammed it down on the side of his opponent's head.

The frame snapped in two. The assassin went rigid and dropped like a stone, out cold. The wood and the muskie itself landed on his unmoving back.

*Mom always said this eyesore served no earthly purpose, Aiden reflected. She was wrong.*

But there was no time to think about that now. "Miguel!" He hauled Meg to her feet, and the two of them stepped over the unconscious intruder and ran into the house, calling for their companion.

"In here," came a weak voice from the kitchen.

In the laundry alcove, Miguel lay propped against the washing machine. Even in the gloom, they could see his face was pale, almost ashen. Blood oozed from a bullet wound in his shoulder. The

entire front of his T-shirt was stained crimson.

Aiden got under one shoulder, Meg the other, and they were able to hoist him to his feet. Miguel howled in agony at the sudden movement.

"We'll get you to a hospital," promised Aiden.

"What about Hairless Joe?"

"Forget him," soothed Meg.

"He had a *gun!*"

"I had a fish," Aiden replied.

Miguel saw his attacker prostrate on the floor with the fossilized muskie on his back. "You know this guy?"

Meg shook her head. "Do you?"

"Figured him for a cop. But cops don't whack people." He regarded Aiden. "This guy thought I was you. Somebody wants you dead. Both of you."

Aiden and Meg exchanged an uneasy look. Tens of thousands of people wished harm on their parents. But on *them*? It was hard to fathom.

"Maybe we should tie him up with the curtain cords," Meg suggested. "Make him tell us what's going on."

"We've got to get Miguel to a doctor," Aiden argued. "That's the most important thing."

"Take his piece at least," Miguel rasped. "He could come to any minute."

Aiden had never touched a gun in his life. He picked up the weapon with two fingers, handling it like a sleeping tarantula. The metal felt cold, malevolent. This was an instrument of evil, a delivery system for harm and death.

Once outside, he hurled it into Lake Champlain. It was a relief to be rid of it.

The relentless rain cranked Miguel's suffering beyond the tolerance level. There was simply no way to keep his shoulder dry. Aiden couldn't help noticing how much red-tinged water was dripping down from the bloodstained T-shirt.

*He needs medical attention. And fast!*

Heart sinking, Aiden looked for a house with some lights on. Why wasn't anybody home? Just then, a car turned onto the shore road, heading away from them.

"Wait here!" Aiden shrugged out from under Miguel and took off after the white Mercedes. "*Stop! Come back! My friend's hurt!*"

With the windows shut and the wipers on maximum, there was little chance of the driver hearing his cries.

Aiden broke into a full sprint, splashing through puddles that were more like ponds.

*Don't be stupid! You can't outrun a car. You'll have to find some other way.*

He dashed to the side of the road, scooped up a fistful of rain-drenched turf, and flung it with all his might at the receding sedan. It hit with a splat, showering mud and grass over the rear windshield and trunk.

Aiden had just an instant to consider that the owner of a gleaming white Mercedes probably wouldn't think much of being muck-bombed by a total stranger.

And then the brake lights flashed on.

**I**t was well after dark by the time Agent Harris made it to Colchester. Because of the storm, the bridges across the top of Lake Champlain were closed. He'd had no choice but to drive all the way north around the lake. This included a one-hour wait at the Canadian border and another delay crossing back into the United States.

The wind had subsided, but the rain was still pouring down when he finally turned onto the main shore road. Suddenly, his headlights illuminated a running figure, dead ahead.

With a cry of shock, Harris stomped on the brake

pedal. The wheels locked up, sending the Mini Cooper into a slide. At the last instant, the man vaulted up onto the front of the compact vehicle. He bounced off the hood and tumbled into the windshield as the car lurched to a halt.

Harris caught a glimpse of him in the glow of the streetlamp — a pale, round-faced man with a completely shaved head. Apparently, he was unhurt, because he jumped off the hood and hit the road in a full sprint.

Harris rolled down his window. "*Hey, come back! You should see a doctor!*" he shouted at the fleeing form. But the man was gone, barreling up the road that led away from the lake. He was in such a hurry that he probably never even noticed he'd nearly gotten himself killed.

That was when Harris heard the siren.

An ambulance screeched around the corner, its flashing lights playing across the ferry terminal like a disco ball. It raced up the road and stopped beside a white Mercedes.

Harris wheeled around and pulled even with the two vehicles. He nearly scrambled his brains against the Mini Cooper's door frame as he leaped out. But he recovered enough to flash his badge at the two paramedics. "Emmanuel Harris — FBI."

They were loading a thin olive-skinned teenager in a bloodstained T-shirt onto a stretcher.

"FBI?" The teen regarded the agent's lanky frame. "You look more like NBA."

"You're Reyes, right?" said Harris. "What happened?"

"I got shot. By some mean-looking bullet head straight out of some slasher flick."

"What about the Falconers?" the agent persisted. "A boy and a girl — they call themselves Eagle-son —"

Miguel's jaw stiffened. "Don't know any eagles, falcons — no kinds of birds, yo."

The driver of the Mercedes spoke up. "It was two kids who flagged me down. They brought this one over, told me to call nine-one-one, and took off into the woods."

"How long ago?"

"Maybe ten minutes. They were in a real hurry to get out of here."

"He's lying!" rasped Miguel, determined to protect his friends. "I was alone, and some guy put a cap in me! If you cops spent less time hassling people, there wouldn't be so many wackos running around —"

"Quiet!" Harris snapped. Ten minutes! If those

bridges had been open . . . if the borders hadn't been so slow . . . if the ferries could have run . . .

If only he could have gotten here ten minutes sooner, those kids would be in custody right now. Instead of on the run, where anything could happen. Where they were risking their futures, their safety, their very *lives*, with every reckless footfall.

He was amazed at the depth of his emotions. Aiden and Margaret Falconer were not his problem. They weren't even his case. They were the responsibility of Adler and Juvenile Corrections, not the FBI.

Their *parents* had been Harris's case — case closed, and a job well done, too. The trial of the new millennium, two dangerous traitors behind bars.

And what did Harris get? A promotion, a pat on the back, and something else, too. Something agents weren't supposed to have.

A deep, nagging suspicion that the wrong people were in prison. And that two innocent children might be fugitives because of the government's haste to bring someone — *anyone* — to justice.

Well, at least that part would be over soon. With a sigh, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed the Colchester police. Ten minutes wasn't much of a head start when you were traveling on foot.

They wouldn't get far.



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The ATV was a quad, with four fat wheels and an engine that might have been built for a jumbo jet. The speedometer said they were doing better than fifty over rugged terrain, bouncing like riders on a mechanical bull. Aiden had all but epoxied himself to the handlebars; Meg was clamped around his midsection with force enough to collapse his rib cage. The onslaught of wind and rain threatened to hurl them off the speeding contraption at any moment.

The roar should have been enough to attract every cop in Vermont. But that was the advantage of the ATV. They were cutting across farms and fields, far from any roads or highways.

Another crime — was there such a thing as “grand theft dune buggy”? The scary part was not so much that they'd stolen it; Aiden had lost track of the number of times they had broken the law by now. It was the fact that they never thought twice about taking the quad from that garage.

*We had to get out of town.* And even more important: *We had to get away from Hairless Joe.*

Yesterday, Aiden couldn't have imagined their predicament getting any worse. But the close call with the monstrous bald stranger had ratcheted their fear up to a new, soul-shaking level. Before, the worst thing that could have happened to them was getting caught.

*Now somebody wants us dead.*

But who? Why? And how had he found them at the lake house?

They had been in full flight for a couple of hours when the old barn appeared in the ATV's single headlamp. It came up so suddenly that they almost crashed through the rotted plank walls. Aiden yanked the handlebars around. For an awful instant, he thought the speeding vehicle would roll. But the huge wheels bit into the turf, and Aiden and Meg whiplashed to a halt six inches in front of an ancient rusted tractor.

Aiden aimed the quad's light into the barn, and they hurried inside to shelter from the elements. The storm had brought down the temperature, so they were both soaked to the skin and shivering.

"I can't stop shaking," Aiden managed, teeth

chattering. "Is summer over already? What's it going to be like being a fugitive in January?"

"I'd still be shaking in a sauna," Meg said feelingly. "Who was that guy, and why was he trying to kill us?"

Aiden shrugged. "The whole country hates our parents. I guess it was only a matter of time before somebody tried to take it out on us."

"How do you know it wasn't just bad luck?" Meg suggested hopefully. "You know, a crazy person who picked a house at random."

Aiden shook his head. "He was gunning for us. He even said, 'Where's your sister?' when he thought Miguel was me."

"Miguel." She nodded sadly. "I hope he's okay."

"He got hit in the shoulder, which means the bullet missed the vital organs." Aiden paused, suddenly thoughtful. "I hated that kid more than I hated Sunnydale. More than what happened to us, almost. Now I feel like I've lost a brother. I mean, he's not dead, but he's caught. He's going back into the system."

After the frantic commotion at the house and the clamor of the ATV, the quiet between them was as jarring as a sonic boom. Both knew what "back into



the system” represented for Miguel. Not another place like Sunnydale, but real jail, with bars and armed guards and inmates who could teach Miguel the true meaning of tough.

At last, Meg put an arm around her brother’s shoulders. “We’re still kicking, bro. That’s the important thing. What’s our next move?”

Carefully, Aiden pulled the soggy, partially crumpled photograph out of his pocket. It seemed even more bizarre in this setting — to be huddled in the headlamp of a stolen ATV in an abandoned barn, studying a nine-year-old image of two strangers sunbathing.

Uncle Frank, who could straighten everything out. The key to it all.

The despair was completely unexpected. One minute he was examining the photograph; the next, he was staring into a bottomless pit of desolation.

*I was nuts to think this picture could somehow help our parents. I don’t recognize this guy, and even if I did, so what? Does he even look like this today?*

Aiden felt completely deflated. What did he expect? That one glance at this snapshot would tell him how to get in touch with the man who held the family’s fate in his hands? Did he imagine Lindener would be holding up a sign with his contact

information on it — [WWW.CALLUNCLEFRANK.COM?](http://WWW.CALLUNCLEFRANK.COM?)

*I must have been out of my mind to risk our lives crossing the entire country for a dumb old picture that doesn’t give the slightest clue —*

And then he saw it.

Above the reclining figures, almost out of frame, a life preserver was mounted on the slats of the pool area fence. Printed on the white plastic ring, small but clear, was:

RED JACKET BEACH MOTOR LODGE  
MALLET’S BAY, VERMONT

Meg noticed it, too. “It’s only the name of the hotel,” she pointed out.

Aiden’s heart began to pound “Yeah, but hotels have computers. They keep records. Addresses, phone numbers . . .”

“It’s a clue,” she agreed grudgingly.

At that moment, Aiden realized that he and his sister were not ordinary fugitives. Fugitives ran away from justice. The Falconers were running toward it.

As long as there was a place to start, a lead to follow, a stone left unturned in the quest to prove their parents’ innocence, then there was hope.

He peered out of the barn. In the blinding light of the headlamp, everything else appeared dark.

*Somewhere, he thought, in that vast blackness between here and the end of the earth, is Frank Lindener.*

They would find him.

