

ON THE RUN
THE FUGITIVE FACTOR

*Fugitive
Factor
by Gordon
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All Aiden could see was a line of cars pulling out after the green light. “What?”

She pointed. “The red Hummer.”

Glaring out over the wheel were the malevolent features of Hairless Joe. The Falconers’ head start — their one advantage — had already evaporated.

Aiden gulped. “I didn’t think he’d get out of there so fast!”

Meg twirled around frantically. There were no side streets to duck down, no alleys or parking garages. They were hemmed in by the city of Brookline.

Horns sounded as the H-2 cut off the other vehicles and accelerated toward them.

“Let’s get out of here!” cried Meg.

But Aiden stepped right out into the path of the speeding Hummer.

“Aiden — what are you doing?”

A freeway exit ramp bottlenecked with the road

just past the intersection. An endless line of vehicles stood there, waiting impatiently to merge. Aiden stuck two fingers in his mouth and emitted an ear-splitting whistle. Moving his other hand in a circular motion, he waved the stopped traffic forward.

"Come on!" his sister urged. "This is no time to play policeman!"

He windmilled his arms, drawing cars onto the street, as the Hummer closed in on him. The rage in Hairless Joe's eyes was visible now. The man understood what Aiden was trying to do and was determined to stop him.

"Aiden —" Meg warned.

Her brother was busy directing a massive tractor trailer onto the road. It was enormous — a semi pulling a fifty-foot flatbed loaded with stacked logs. Its turning radius was too wide, and it lurched to a halt, blocking all four lanes of traffic.

In that awful instant, Aiden realized two things:

1. He had succeeded in shutting down the entire street, and
2. He hadn't left himself enough time to get out of the Hummer's path.

His eyes widened in horror as its cowcatcher screamed toward him at sixty miles per hour.

"Oof!"

Meg hit him in the ribs with a diving tackle worthy of an NFL highlight film. She knocked him backward off his feet and fell over him. They tumbled, somersaulting one on top of the other along the pavement.

Hairless Joe stomped on the brakes, but it was too late. The Hummer slammed into the trailer's steel mass. The front of the H-2 crumpled with a sickening crunch. Steam poured out from under the hood.

The next thing Aiden knew, he and Meg were flat on their backs in the road, and thousand-pound logs were toppling off the damaged transport four feet above them. Without thinking, he clamped his arms around his sister and rolled the two of them under the trailer. There they cowered as a twenty-ton load of wood deposited itself on the streets of Brookline, Massachusetts.

There were cries and shouts and the sounds of car doors as motorists rushed to the spot of the collision. When the booming of falling timber finally ceased, the Falconers scrambled out from under the truck, shaken but, amazingly, unhurt.

Total chaos reigned. Vehicles clogged the roadway around the accident, parked at all angles. Be-

tween them were scattered dozens of logs, some of them forty feet long. The driver of the semi was out of the cab, trying to get to Hairless Joe, who was dazed and bleeding into the deflated airbag behind the wheel of the accordioned Hummer. Horns sounded from all directions, a symphony of discord.

“Hey, there’s a cop!” a motorist shouted at Aiden. “Call an ambulance!”

The witness later told the police of the inexplicable behavior of the officer on the scene. Instead of offering assistance or calling for backup, the patrolman straightened his crooked mustache and grabbed his companion, a young girl. Without a word to the many onlookers, the two of them fled, sprinting down the road as if pursued by a pack of vicious wolves.

It was almost noon by the time Agent Harris dragged himself up the stairs outside the twelfth precinct house. It was not the flight from Florida that had made him late. What a traffic jam! His taxi had sat at a dead stop for two hours with the meter running while he ran out of coffee, watching a hydraulic crane shuddering under Paul Bunyan-size logs.

Nothing was ever easy where those Falconer kids were concerned.

At least it was done — for Margaret, anyway. Her days as a fugitive were over.

A short, pudgy man with a fuzzy, not-quite-full beard hurried up the steps. He froze when he recognized Harris, whose towering stature made him difficult to miss.

“Agent Harris,” greeted Jeffrey Adler, deputy director of the Department of Juvenile Corrections.

Harris skipped the amenities. “Margaret Falconer is not a criminal.”

“Tell that to the people she and her brother have robbed this past week,” Adler said sharply.

“And we didn’t push them to it,” Harris retorted. “Sending them to a prison farm.”

“Which they burned to the ground,” the deputy director reminded him.

“I’ll fight you for jurisdiction.”

Adler smiled thinly. “That’s good. At least you recognize that I’m the one who has it.”

Glaring at each other, they entered the building. Harris pressed the advantage of his much longer stride, beating Adler to the desk sergeant. He

flashed his badge. "Harris, FBI. I'm here to pick up Margaret Falconer."

The man grimaced. "A little late, aren't you?"

"I hit traffic. Somebody played pickup sticks with a redwood forest out there."

"That's not what I meant," said the sergeant. "The Falconer girl's gone."

"Gone?" repeated Harris. "Gone where? Who with?"

"With her brother, we think. Dressed himself as a cop and walked her right out that door."

Harris's face turned an unhealthy shade of purple. "And you just let them go? Aiden Falconer's a fifteen-year-old kid!"

The man was offended. "Take it easy. We'll get them back."

"You didn't notice when they strolled six feet in front of your desk," Harris growled. "What makes you think you'll find them now?"

"We've put out an APB. In Boston, too."

"It should be all of Massachusetts!" Harris raged. "And surrounding states!"

"That's next," the desk sergeant assured him.

"It should be *now*!" He turned, fuming, to Adler. "She's gone."

"Gone? How?"

"Escaped!" Harris's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Prisoners do that sometimes. For some crazy reason, they don't like going to jail!"

Adler faced the desk sergeant. "Are there any leads?"

The man shrugged. "Just the letter."

Harris pounced on this. "She left a letter?"

"But it didn't give us anything we could use. It wasn't really about her."

The FBI agent stared at the Brookline officer. "Then what *was* it about? A thank-you note for your hospitality?"

"She and her brother were holed up at the Royal Bostonian, a posh hotel in the city," he explained. "There have been a lot of high-profile robberies over there. Boston PD didn't have a clue. She put us on to a man using his daughter as a cat burglar. Gave us all the details — that the kid was being forced to steal against her will."

"You mean," Harris was bug-eyed, "that while Margaret Falconer was in this precinct house, in custody, under lock and key — she *solved a crime*?"

The man seemed a little miffed. "City cops took all the credit — they grabbed up the dad an hour

ago." He smiled slightly. "But — yeah. Nice little piece of detective work. She even supplied the address of the guy who was fencing the goods."

Adler was becoming impatient. "This is all very interesting, but that's *my* prisoner you've allowed to escape."

"And you are?" prompted the desk sergeant.

"Jeffrey Adler. Department of Juvenile Corrections."

The man regarded him in alarm. "You're not Adler!"

"I assure you that I am."

"But he was *here!* He had a badge — Adler from federal Juvenile. He came for the Falconer kid. The whole thing happened right under his nose!"

Harris jumped in. "Describe him."

The desk sergeant shrugged. "Big guy. Bald. You wouldn't believe what those kids did to him."

It was Agent Harris's second nasty shock of the past five minutes. Big guy. Bald. It could only be the mysterious shooter from the summer house in Vermont. Harris had nearly run over the man that rainy night —

Now part of him wished he had.

A feeling of uneasiness took hold in his gut, swelling until it filled the entire six-foot-seven-inch

space between the top of his head and the tips of his toes.

The attack in Vermont had been no random occurrence. Someone was after Aiden and Margaret Falconer. Someone besides the FBI, Juvenile Corrections, and several hundred state and local police forces.

Someone with a much darker motive.

But who?



Duck Tours were famous in Boston. Their brightly painted vehicles had once been military landing craft, designed to be launched in the water and driven up onto beaches. It was equally common to see these “ducks” driving through city streets or cruising the Charles River, full of sightseers who were encouraged to quack loudly at all passersby.

Two members of the one o'clock trip, however, chose not to join in the fun. They looked enough like tourists, although the teenage boy's pants were striped navy blue slacks, and on closer inspection, his dress shoes were sneakers that had been painted black. He sat with a preteen girl in the last row of the duck, poring over the motor vehicle records of one Francis X. Lindenauer.

“Aunt Jane was right,” marveled Meg. “He really was a terrible driver. Look at all those tickets. I'm amazed he didn't lose his license.”

“He did,” said Aiden in a low voice. “See? Nine years ago. He was driving illegally the whole time he was on vacation with us.”

“This is useless,” Meg groaned. “I mean, these records tell where he lived around here. But we have no idea where he went after that. Look — this letter was returned with no forwarding address. Are you sure you got all his files?”

Aiden shook his head. “Just the violations part. There were a couple of clerks nosing around. But I'll tell you one thing — no way are we going back to that police station to look for more.”

“I hear you,” Meg agreed. “If the cops didn't get us, Hairless Joe would. Although,” she added, not without a note of satisfaction in her voice, “he's probably out of commission for the next little while.”

“It's no joke,” Aiden said seriously. “That guy's hunting us, and he's good at it. He's got a fake police badge, and he must have some way to monitor their reports. How else could he know they were holding you in Brookline? We've got a bad enemy, and the worst part is, we don't even know why he's after us. Is he just some wacko who hates our parents? Or is something else going on?”

There was a scattering of quacking and applause as the duck turned off the road, angled down the embankment, and plunged into the Charles. As they hit the water, a blustery wind snatched the documents out of Aiden's hand. The Falconers watched in horror as the vital information took flight over the safety rail and scattered across the river.

They scrambled astern, trying to rescue what they could. Aiden reached for a paper only to have it disappear a split second before he could close his fingers on it. Meg dove for a letter that was hung up on the bar. She clamped her fist around the page, crumpling it into a ball before daring to pull it from the metal.

She turned to her brother. His face — and the dozens of papers littering the Charles — said it all. That file was all they had to lead them to the one man who could save their parents.

Now it was gone, except for the mangled sheet in Meg's hand.

Gingerly, as if handling a piece of thousand-year-old parchment, she unfolded the page. At first she thought it was a piece of windblown litter, since the logo did not match the other correspondence from the city of Brookline and the Commonwealth of

Massachusetts. Then she read the unfamiliar letterhead:

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF MOTOR VEHICLES
NOTICE OF LICENSE TRANSFER

We acknowledge receipt of the driving record for Francis X. Lindenauer. This license has been converted to California license #6672-787-901. Mr. Lindenauer's current address is 114 Cabrini Court, Apt. 2C, Venice Beach, CA, 90292. . . .

Her hands were shaking, but she kept an iron grip on the letter.

Inches from disaster, and here it was — the clue they'd both been praying for.

Aiden peered over her shoulder. When he spoke, his voice was husky with emotion. He said, "California, here we come."

"California," she repeated. It seemed like the end of the earth. "How are we *ever* going to get there?"

"We'll get there," he said confidently.

The statement was completely illogical. How could they make it all the way to the opposite side of the continent with forty dollars, faces that were be-

coming more famous every day, and a maniac on the loose who wanted them dead?

Yet somehow Meg knew they *would* get there — just as they'd performed dozens of other miracles since beginning their lives as fugitives.

They would accomplish these things because they *had* to. They had no choice, if they were going to help Mom and Dad.

The duck had conveyed them to the opposite side of the Charles. A few yards away, the grassy riverbank rose into a green, wooded park. A pleasant sign with gold lettering declared WELCOME TO CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS.

She regarded her brother. "Well, it isn't California. But at least it isn't Boston anymore."

Aiden nodded decisively. "On three: one . . . two . . . *three!*"

They heaved themselves up and over the safety rail and dropped to the knee-deep water. Meg took her brother's hand, and together they splashed toward Cambridge, amid the bewildered stares of their fellow tourists.

By the time the confused shouts got through to the driver of the duck, the fugitives had scrambled up the embankment and disappeared into the cover of the trees.

ON THE RUN

THE CHASE CONTINUES!

GORDON KORMAN

ON THE RUN

NOW YOU SEE THEM,
NOW YOU
DON'T

SCHOLASTIC

Aiden and Meg are now the nation's most famous fugitives. They have to work fast to prove their parents' innocence. But there's just one problem—there isn't any proof...yet.

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