

GORDON KORMAN

# KIDNAPPED



BOOK ONE

## THE ABDUCTION

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AN  
**APPLE**  
PAPERBACK

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# PROLOGUE

## INNOCENT!!!

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BALTIMORE, MD.

*Doctors John and Louise Falconer are home again. Fourteen months into life sentences for aiding foreign terrorists, shocking new evidence proved they had been framed. HORUS Global Group, a front for the terrorists, has been found responsible. All HORUS agents are believed to be either dead or behind bars at this time.*

*The Falconers are joined by their children, Aiden, 15, and Margaret, 11, who achieved almost as much notoriety as their parents in recent months. The two escaped from juvenile detention in Nebraska and became fugitives for eight weeks, logging more than 7,000 miles as they eluded the FBI, the juvenile authorities, and dozens of state and local police forces. All charges against them were dropped upon their parents' release.*

*The family declined an interview, stating only that they intended to put the episode behind them. "We've*

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*had enough of headlines,” Dr. John Falconer told reporters. “What we want—what we pray for—is just to get back to normal.”*

**N**ormal.

Meg couldn't hold back a bitter laugh. Like anything would ever be normal again, after Mom and Dad had been locked up for more than a year, and she and Aiden had been hunted like animals by the police, not to mention a professional killer. After their pictures had been displayed in newspapers and on TV. After the name "Falconer" had been turned into a synonym for *traitor*.

She surveyed the bustling playground. *This* was normal. Lunch recess — seventh grade. A babble of animated voices, hundreds of middle schoolers playing sports, running, wrestling, shouting . . .

*And me in the middle of it, reflected Meg, trying to pretend that I care about a pickup baseball game when I've lived through things other kids couldn't imagine in their wildest nightmares.*

"Strike one!"

Lost in her thoughts, Meg didn't even see the first pitch sail by. There were snickers around the diamond.

It was hard to believe that this group had once been her friends. They had shared classes and summer camps, birthday parties and sleepovers. Now they seemed so clueless, so innocent. Like kindergartners, almost . . .

“Strike two!”

She stepped out of the batter’s box as the catcher threw back the ball.

“Hey!” stage-whispered Wendell Butz from third base. “Let’s watch the traitor strike out!”

White-hot anger exploded inside her chest. Bad enough that Mom and Dad had suffered so much in prison. Bad enough that their children had been turned into out-laws . . .

*But it’s supposed to be OVER!*

It was a rage too powerful for Meg to control. She drew back the bat and let fly. Spinning like a boomerang, the aluminum projectile missed Wendell’s head and spiraled into foul territory. It smacked into the flagpole, knocking off the rusted metal cleat. The flag plunged forty feet to land in a heap in the grass.

There were three sharp blasts on a whistle.

**T**he principal’s office. Once upon a time, she’d been afraid of it. That fear seemed ridiculous now. How could a pudgy middle-aged guy intimidate her after she’d faced a killer?

Dr. Barstow did not look friendly. “I hope you have an explanation for what happened today, Meg.”

She studied the carpet. “I lost my cool.” What would be the point of ratting out Wendell, even though the jerk deserved it?

“The flag is the symbol of our country,” the principal said sternly. “It must never be allowed to touch the ground.”

*Wait a minute — I nearly took Wendell’s head off, and all Dr. Barstow cares about is the flag?*

“That wasn’t on purpose!” Meg defended herself. “If I could hit a doohickey on the side of a pole with a baseball bat from twenty yards away, I wouldn’t be here; I’d be at the Olympic trials.”

“That’ll do,” the principal admonished. “I’d think that somebody from *your* family would take special care to be respectful of the flag.”

“My parents are innocent!” Meg stormed. “And even after everything that’s happened, they still love their country. If that’s not patriotism, what is?”

One glance at Dr. Barstow’s cold granite expression, and Meg just knew. There were Falconer haters out there—people who would never accept that Mom and Dad had been cleared. And Meg’s own principal was one of them.

*Will we ever get our lives back?*

**W**ith great concentration, Aiden Falconer formed the coarse yarn into three rings and began to loop the free end through them. At that moment, the bus hit a bump, and the plant hanger he'd been working on converted itself to a tangle of twine in his lap.

*Macramé*, he thought in disgust. It was impossible to do macramé in a moving vehicle. The only reason he was in this stupid class was because he'd started school late. Macramé had been the only elective still open.

Last year, his elective had been Enriched Science Independent Study. He and Richie Pembleton had been building a Foucault pendulum for the science fair. It had only been half finished when the Falconer family nightmare had whisked him away. Even working alone, Richie had managed to place third at district. If Aiden had been there, Richie was sure they would have won.

Aiden craned his neck to look at his onetime best friend a few rows back, hidden beneath the Greenville Cubs baseball cap the boy never took off. It was not the science fair that bothered Richie. It was the Aiden Falconer who had returned from his ordeal—experienced, hardened, bitter. Aiden found it impossible to slip back into the regular comfortable ways with his buddy. The chess club held no interest for someone who had once gambled on strategies with his own life and that of



his sister hanging in the balance. The old shared jokes weren't funny anymore.

*Nothing's funny anymore.*

Richie was still Richie, but Aiden was forever changed.

It was one more thing his family's disaster had cost him. Not the biggest, certainly. But it was still sad.

The bus swung into the driveway of the middle school and lurched to a halt. He watched the newcomers filing aboard.

"Hey, bro." Meg took the empty seat beside him. She indicated the spaghetti of limp yarn in his lap. "Hang yourself yet?"

"If I hang myself with macramé," he assured her darkly, "it won't be by accident." He noticed the redness of her eyes behind the joking smile. "What?"

Barely concealing her anger, Meg told him about the incident at recess. "The minute that flag hit the ground, Barstow acted like I did it because all Falconers must be terrorists."

"Take it easy," Aiden soothed. "People get crazy about flags. There are complicated rules about how to fold them and handle them. If they touch the ground, that's a definite no-no."

She was bitter. "How was I supposed to know that cleat was rusted through?"

"It's not your fault the guy's sensitive."

"He's not sensitive — he hates us," she shot back. "Why can't people accept that Mom and Dad are innocent, and our family isn't the enemy anymore?"

Nowhere was that question more resounding than inside the Falconer home. The CRIME SCENE tape had been removed. There was a new front door replacing the one that had been bashed into toothpicks by an FBI battering ram. John and Louise Falconer had been reinstated as professors at the college. But they were on "research leave." Which really meant that nobody wanted to study criminology with professors who had once been called the worst traitors in half a century.

In the meantime, Mom was throwing herself into the task of getting the house back in shape. Dad had returned to his writing. In addition to his teaching career, he was the author of a series of detective novels. But he was plagued by writer's block. Even the action-packed adventures of his main character, Mac Mulvey, seemed blah after the Falconer family's wild ride.

After midnight, Aiden lay in bed, trying to think the shadows back into the corners of the room where they belonged.

*You can tell yourself that it's all over; that Mom and Dad are free; that HORUS is gone. But after a while the fear*

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*has become part of you, even if there's nothing left to be afraid of.*

The headlights on the street outside made the shadows on the wall move. Suddenly, there was a screech of tires, running footsteps on the walk, and a loud crash.