

Escape To Hope

Cory Pole soldered the last component onto her printed circuit board and passed it along to the inspector, a woman who towered over Cory at 1.9 meters tall. Fortunately, Cory had more time to grow and could possibly reach her full height within a year or two.

Just barely twelve years old, Cory had been abducted almost seven months ago from the streets of Portland, Oregon, in a raid of homeless children by what were known as the Mercy Marines. More like the mercenary marines, Cory thought. They were corporate owned and not related to the real United States Marines. The MM had scooped up at least fifty kids that night back in January of 2235. Cory had heard of such abductions but never thought one would happen in such a small, west coast town as Portland. Yes, it had been cold sleeping outside under bridges or sandwiched between buildings, but at least she had been free and she'd made a couple of friends too, Peter and Rags, older boys who sort of took care of her when anyone tried to bully her out of her space or steal her food. She wondered where they were now.

"Hey, kid. Stop your daydreamin'," shouted Inspector Crib. Cory liked to think of her as Inspector Crab but dared not address the grouchy woman by that name or else she'd get a hard slap across the mouth.

Cory said nothing, only gave the woman a frown and started work on her next circuit board. She could probably finish four more before her shift was over if she didn't mess any up. Carelessness had cut into her lunch period when she first started the job a few months back, and she had quickly learned to focus on her work and reduce her number of errors. So Cory carefully placed a new set of integrated circuits, capacitors, resistors, and transistors in front of a new partially built circuit board. They should have machines to do the entire board, Cory thought, but they didn't have the equipment. Since the economy took a nosedive after the last war, why not use cheap child labor instead? Yeah, just ship the kids to an orbital habitat and keep them locked up. It was hard to escape when you were living in space, but Cory was always trying to figure out some way of doing so.

One possible way to get off this double-doughnut prison, unoriginally named OH-17, would be to stow away on a supply ship. Those only came once every three weeks, and it would be nearly impossible to get beyond security, which was tighter than a swimsuit on an elephant. Another possibility was to jump a civilian transport from OH-18. Once a week, Cory and her coworkers were allowed to accompany a shipment of parts over to the neighboring orbital habitat and use their recreational facilities for several hours, not long enough according to Cory, but enough time to find a way onto a passenger liner. OH-18 was twice as large as OH-17, its double toruses approximately 4.2 kilometers in diameter, and was used as a giant hotel, casino, and entertainment center.

"Ouch," Cory blurted, when a dot of hot liquid solder flowed from her gun to the tip of her index finger.

"Told ya to stop your daydreamin'," The Crab said.

Cory didn't respond. She quickly wiped her finger and finished up her board just in time for the noon whistle.

Lunch was Cory's favorite time of the day. She not only got an entire hour off, she got to sit with the boys. Only girls worked the circuit board line. The reason—girls had smaller fingers and could more easily put together the microcircuitry and hang on to the components. Boys assembled parts for the large defensive battle drones the station was manufacturing. A defensive shield was supposed to go into place as well, but powering it was still a problem.

Someone had picked up on a distant signal from a radio telescope several years ago. The signal was becoming stronger, and yes, they were preparing for an alien invasion. Cory didn't know whether to believe it or not—that aliens were really coming to attack the Earth—actually, no one knew. But those in power had decided it was better to be safe than sorry. All Cory was sorry about was that she was stuck on this orbiting factory.

Cory sat down with her tray of barely edible food and joined Oscar, Jeff, Billy, and Casho at the long lunch table in the mess hall. For some reason, unknown to her, she got along with boys much better than girls, especially older girls. The teens she worked with tended to pick on

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her. Not that she couldn't take their snobbishness and insults, they were just annoying after a while. She'd found she could deal with them better if she just kept her mouth shut. She didn't know why they didn't like her—she didn't care, mind you—but it was much more enjoyable to hang out with the boys. Too bad she couldn't work with them as well.

"Hey, Core," said Jeff. "Casho's come up with an escape plan."

They all laughed. "Hope it's not like his last one," said Billy. "We all landed in the slammer for a week."

"But they had to let us out because they needed our expert labor," said Oscar.

"Pasting circuit boards into drone heads?" said Billy. "We're the ones who are drones."

"So what's the escape plan, Casho?" Cory asked.

Cory and the others listened while Casho explained. When he was finished, Cory actually thought they had a chance.

"That's nuts," said Oscar. "Sure, it wouldn't be that hard to hide in a shipping container, but we'd have to go through vacuum while being loaded."

"Not if we wear pressure suits," said Casho. Cory assumed that was part of the plan, even though Casho hadn't mentioned it. Actually, it would be more difficult to get a hold of a suit than to hide in a container. The suits were locked up in a highly secured storage compartment protected by a force field.

Before Cory could bring up the security issue, Casho continued. "We wait until the shift change at midnight. That's when Rocky comes on duty. She usually gets a cup of coffee before her shift. Once Benny has left, and just as Rocky is sitting down, we surprise her."

"We? All of us?" said Jeff.

"Shut up," said Oscar. "I want to hear how this crazy plan is gonna work. We don't even have any weapons."

Casho just smiled and waited patiently for the bickering to stop. When it had, he spoke. "We don't need weapons. All we do is wait until Rocky goes to sleep, then we disable the force field and use her key card to unlock the pressure suit room."

"Goes to sleep?" Cory asked.

"We spike her coffee with this." Casho pulled a little white pill from his jeans pocket.

"What's that?" Cory said.

"I got it from a buddy of mine—has a prescription to help him sleep. Knocks him right out, he says."

Cory rolled her eyes back. "I don't know, Casho. I mean, most sleeping pills take at least an hour to kick in."

"According to my buddy, these take fifteen minutes at the most."

Cory looked around at the others. They wore skeptical looks. But to her it was worth a risk to have a chance to escape to Earth. When the transports brought food and supplies to the OH's, they took back some finished parts. Some of the defensive drones were used to police large Earth cities like L.A. and New York. If she ended up in one of those cities, she could manage. Especially if her friends were with her.

"So what do you say?" Casho asked, looking at each one of them. No one answered. "Okay, sleep on it and let me know tomorrow. We got a ship coming on Friday. That's only two days from now."

Just then the "lunch-is-over" whistle blew, and they scattered for two more hours of work, then two of school.

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Cory had a hard time concentrating on her studies. Usually, she had no problem focusing on her lessons, but this was the day she and her friends were going to smuggle themselves out of the station. Most of what was taught had to do with her work—how to operate the chip shooters, how to repair the wave solder machine, or when to use the pick-and-place equipment. Some of this equipment wasn't available yet, but the station was supposed to get it in the near future. Her lessons included math and reading, but not enough time was devoted to regular school stuff that kids were supposed to learn. The fact that school was even available was because the bosses of this sweatshop didn't want their workers illiterate. It was important to be able to read directions and do simple calculations so as not to mess up the job. Cory made it a point to read during the small amount of free time she had each day. The school had a small library of ancient beat-up books salvaged from the war. Dale Burns, the librarian, was helpful in locating the books Cory wanted to read—mostly young adult fiction having to do with horses or dogs. She liked mysteries as well, and Librarian Burns encouraged the kids to read.

"Pole, what's the answer to this problem?" the instructor said. Clearly, she noticed Cory hadn't been paying attention.

Cory jerked herself out of her preoccupation with the coming events of tonight. "Um, sorry, what was the question?"

Instructor Feinstein frowned, but the school bell clanged and saved Cory from the embarrassment of not being able to solve the math problem. She immediately grabbed her slate and ducked out the door before Feinstein could keep her after class.

Next was exercise class, and as far as Cory was concerned, it wasn't long enough. Not that she loved to exercise, it was just that she knew the reduced gravity habitat where she was living was taking its toll on her bones and muscles. If she ever did escape to Earth, she would be wobbly on her legs. Actually, she was scared she wouldn't even be able to stand up when and if she arrived. She had started her own regiment of exercises about five weeks ago when she overheard some of the adults talking about the reduced gravity environment causing muscle atrophy. But she didn't do them every day. It was hard to discipline herself to get up a half-hour early and do push-ups and sit-ups. That was pretty much the only time she had for the extra exercising. After dinner was no good—she just wanted to relax. And she refused to work out on her day off—that was for recreation.

At dinner, Cory sat with the boys. They placed themselves away from the other kids so they could finalize their plans in private. Casho volunteered to spike the security guard's coffee, since it was his idea in the first place. They would all watch and wait behind a stack of containers in Cargo Bay A until the guard went to sleep. Casho would then remove the keycard from the guard's belt and they would all slip into the storage compartment and help each other on with the pressure suits. Easy, Cory thought. Maybe too easy.

Cory knew she would be unable to sleep that night. Lights in her dormitory were shut off at 10 pm. No exceptions. So she lay awake listening to the other girls softly snoring. When she was convinced they were all asleep, she grabbed her clothes and tiptoed into the bathroom.

Her heart was pounding as she stepped into her overalls and quickly disposed of her pajamas in the laundry chute. She really couldn't take anything with her, like a change of clothes or even her slate. She'd be cramped enough in the container wearing the pressure suit, and her slate, even when turned off, would give off an electronic signature, which could be detected by the scanners. She was almost certain the containers weren't scanned for body heat—she just hoped that was the case. She had no money, but she figured that wherever she and the boys ended up, they could help each other out. Though she didn't like the idea, they might have to steal some food from a street vendor or grocery store. One thing she already had in her overalls pocket was a small paper photo of her parents, which had been taken eight and a half months before they were killed. She didn't know what good it would do to carry it around—she'd never see them again—but she didn't have the will power to leave it behind. At least it was a reminder that once she'd *had* parents.

Quickly, Cory snuck out of the bathroom and into the hallway. As she made her way "down" to the cargo bay, she forced herself to focus on the task at hand and not to think about

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getting caught. Small lights dotted the walkways in the corridors, and Cory thought she saw a shadow flicker across the wall. She gasped and dropped to the floor, as there was no place for her to hide. Now, her heart was beating so hard, she was afraid someone might hear it. Gradually, her breathing slowed, and she got to her feet when the shadow didn't return. Besides, she'd heard nothing. Must've been her imagination.

Rather than risk making noise by using the stairway or the elevator, Cory disabled the alarm on the emergency exit and slid down the fire pole. She dropped lightly on her feet and checked her surroundings. Nobody around. As she made her way to the cargo bay, she noticed another larger shadow move across the wall. It moved slowly, then stopped and remained stationary. Probably the transport ship. Good.

Cory found the ladder to the cargo bay and cautiously stepped down each rung. Her knees were shaking. What if the boys didn't come? What if Casho's plan to drug the security guard didn't work? Any number of things could go wrong. She certainly didn't want to spend any time in the slammer, and if she were caught trying to escape OH-17, she'd be very closely watched from then on. She'd never have an opportunity like this again.

"Hurry up!" a voice whispered loudly. She nearly jumped out of her skin. It was Billy at the bottom of the ladder. She gave him a scowl, then hopped down. He grabbed her arm and they both ducked behind some stacked containers.

"What's going on?" Cory whispered.

"Shh," Billy voiced. He was scared.

When they had safely tucked themselves out of sight from anyone who might happen to step into the cargo bay, Billy told her that Casho was in the process of drugging the Rocky's coffee. Oscar was hiding behind another set of containers, and Jeff hadn't shown up yet. That would be bad—if Jeff didn't show up. He'd be questioned and forced to tell Casho's plan, and eventually, they would all be caught.

Billy and Cory waited behind the stack of containers for what seemed like hours, but in fact only twenty-seven minutes had passed when Casho appeared and motioned them toward the pressure suit locker. Cory looked for the guard's unconscious body, but Casho had apparently stashed it away somewhere.

Moments later, Billy showed up, and the four of them entered the suit locker.

"Where's Jeff?" Cory asked Oscar.

"Wouldn't come. I tried to drag him out of bed, but he wouldn't budge. Chickened out I guess."

"Not good," said Cory.

"We can't worry about that now," said Casho. "C'mon, let's get into these suits."

Cory was the first one into her suit. The boys helped her check the seals and the air supply, then Casho escorted her out the suit room door and helped her into what appeared to be the first container to be loaded onto the transport ship. Once the container's lid closed on top of her, Cory panicked. She was lying down and unable to sit up for lack of space. Everything was dark, and she felt a sudden urge to break out of the container. But her desire to escape OH-17 was strong enough to force her to slow her breathing. She couldn't see her gauge, but she knew her hyperventilating would reduce her seven-hour air supply faster than she would like.

After an indeterminable amount of time, but what seemed like at least thirty minutes, Cory heard the whine of the hydraulic lift and felt the container rise. She felt herself swing to her right about thirty degrees, then be deposited onto the conveyor rollers. The thud wasn't as hard as she'd imagined it would be, but she was padded by the boxes of parts underneath her.

Cory hoped the boys were not far behind. She heard another thud as a second container was placed on the conveyor. Maybe Casho was in that one. No, he'd be the last, making sure

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Billy and Oscar were suited up correctly. Soon, she heard another thud. Now the rollers started moving.

Just as Cory was starting to relax, believing the escape plan would work, a klaxon went off. Even through the container and the pressure suit, it was loud. It was either a fire drill or the real thing. Or perhaps a hull breach—that would be bad. In either real case scenario, the damaged area would be sealed off from the rest of the habitat. She had moved only a few centimeters when the rollers stopped. Then she heard a voice announce: “Attention, all occupants of OH-17, this is Lt. Peking of the Mercy Marines. Listen up. Proceed at once to Cargo Bay C. Everyone is required to leave this station.” At least that’s what it sounded like the lieutenant said. The shadows she had seen along the corridor must’ve been from the marines’ ship.

Fortunately, Cory was in Cargo Bay A, but now she had to get out of the box. Or maybe not. She certainly didn’t want to go with the Mercy Marines. They were the outfit that had snatched her off the streets of Portland and brought her here in the first place. Who knew where they were taking everyone in this raid? If she could somehow get herself to OH-18, she might still figure out a way to stow on a transport to Earth. Transports never left OH-17 for Earth.

Cory decided to stay put for a while longer. Eventually the containers would be transported to OH-18. Or would they? If the marines were evacuating the station, maybe there was some life support problem. The thought startled her, and she decided to unlatch the container. To her dismay, it would not open. She had counted on being able to unlock it from the inside. She pounded the top and sides of the container, yelling as she did so. Nothing.

She continued pounding and yelling for help. When no one came to her rescue and she realized the lid was not going to budge, she started to cry. The vacuums inside her helmet turned on to remove the moisture from her tears, and fans whirred in her ears. She forced herself to stop crying. Then she gave one last long loud scream. No response. Okay then, if she was going to die in here, so be it. She certainly didn’t want to die and firmly believed it was not her time—she was much too young—but young people died all the time. In her short life, she had tried to control her fate as much as possible, but it seemed her fate had a will of its own. First, her parents die in a car bomb, then she is taken to a raggedy kids’ refugee camp. She escapes a few days later and establishes a life for herself on the streets, then the damn Mercy Marines kidnap her and bring her to this orbiting sweatshop. Now, she is trapped inside a cargo container and will most likely die.

Cory felt a sudden chill followed by a profound sense of sadness. Sadness of her parents’ death, of never seeing the boys again, and of her own impending death overwhelmed her. Then something unexpected happened. She had to go to the bathroom. And her face itched inside the helmet. Her neck was also beginning to ache, and she wiggled uncomfortably. It seemed absurd that her reflections on life and death would be interrupted by trivial physical discomforts.

As Cory was pondering her new predicament, she heard what sounded like muffled gunshots. With renewed hope, she started pounding and yelling. “Hey, over here, in the container. Let me out! Help!” More gunshots followed. Cory waited for a break in the shooting, then yelled and pounded again.

“Stevenson, go find out what that is,” a man yelled.

Finally, Cory thought. She heard footsteps coming toward her. “Over here,” she yelled as loudly as she could. She coughed. Her throat was sore from all the yelling and the dry oxygen that was flowing through her suit.

“Hold on, I’m trying to open this,” the man yelled through the lid. Cory stopped pounding, and her heart slowed. Now she *really* had to pee and could hardly wait to get out of the container and the confining pressure suit.

“I need some help over here,” the man yelled.

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Jeez, Cory thought. I can't wait much longer. She heard another set of footsteps approaching.

"Oldman, I need something to pry this lid off."

"Got it right here," said the other man.

Cory heard some shuffling, then another gunshot in the distance.

"Hurry up, man, the Sergeant and Ritter need us over there," said the first man, evidently named Stevenson.

Then Cory heard a metallic prying sound on the lid of the container. Hurry, she thought.

Finally, the lid popped open and Cory struggled to sit up, but the two men, both in private first class uniforms, pulled her up out of the container by her arms. Cory ignored their puzzled looks and removed her helmet. Before they could ask her anything, she ran off toward the lavatory in the corner of the cargo bay.

"Hey," yelled one of the men. "Come back, it's dangerous out there."

Just as Cory was entering the lavatory, a bullet ricocheted off the bulkhead above, making a pinging sound. She shut the door quickly and shed the rest of her pressure suit. She stayed in the lavatory for twenty minutes, maybe longer, until the gunshots ceased. Then she cracked open the door and cautiously stuck her head outside. She saw no one, then she heard a woman yell.

"Find the girl. You know we have to bring back *all* the kids to get our pay."

Cory didn't want to be left alone on the station, so she decided to let the marines find her. She was never going to make it to OH-18 now. She shut the lavatory door behind her and set her sights for the cargo bay door.

She was in the center of the cargo bay when she spotted one of the soldiers who had freed her from the box. He spoke into a mouthpiece attached to his shoulder. "Sergeant, Corporal, I've found her."

Cory approached him slowly as he ran toward her. His nametag read Oldman. He grabbed her arm a little too hard, and she jerked it away. But she walked along cooperatively with him.

Once Cory and Oldman reached Cargo Bay C, they were met by two men and a woman. One of the men was the other soldier who had pulled her out of the box, Stevenson. The other wore sergeant's stripes and stood at least ten centimeters taller than Stevenson. The woman wore corporal's stripes and a nametag that read, Ritter. She gave Cory a quick stern look.

"Okay, I think we got all the kids now," said the Sergeant. Let's get out of here."

Oldman took Cory's hand and they ran several meters until they came to the passenger-loading gate.

Just then, a shot was fired, and the sergeant collapsed into Ritter's arms. Cory jumped back, and Oldman helped Ritter drag the sergeant out of the loading gate area into a small adjoining room.

"Dunn!" Ritter said as she slapped his face. "Don't you die on me, dammit!" Ritter pulled off the sergeant's flak jacket and removed a bandana from her pocket. She wadded it up and pressed it against the red liquid oozing from just below his left shoulder. "Cheap body armor doesn't work worth a damn," she muttered.

Too close to the heart, Cory thought.

Ritter looked scared, but she quickly recovered and took command. "Oldman, find out how many kids they got on the transport. If she's the last one," she nodded toward Cory, "tell them to get outta here and send us one of their shuttles. No use endangering the rest of 'em while they wait around for us."

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"Yes, ma'am," said Oldman.

"Stevenson, check and see if there's any more of 'em out there. I gotta stay here with Dunn."

"What about the kid?" said Stevenson.

"She stays with me."

Cory stood watching over Dunn while Ritter tried to wake him. He seemed like a nice enough man from what little she'd seen of him. Now his rugged face, a scar drawn crookedly across his cheek, was relaxed, and he reminded Cory of a big teddy bear with a shaved head. As for Ritter, Cory could see she was distraught and trying hard not to break.

"What can I do?" said Cory.

Ritter whipped her head around and gave Cory an intense stare. Cory flinched ever so slightly, but she maintained eye contact with the corporal. Ritter blinked and looked away. "Just stay put."

Finally, the big sergeant's eyes opened and Ritter's face relaxed. "Wayne," she said softly. He reached out and wrapped his hand around Ritter's wrist.

"Listen, if I don't make it," he said with ragged breath, "leave me here. Don't endanger yourselves trying to drag me out."

Ritter gave him a stern look. "Don't you talk like that! You're gonna make it Sarge. You're gonna make it because we need you. The marines need you."

"Scuse me, ma'am," said Oldman. "The transport has just left the dock. There's a shuttle waiting for us at Gate 12, Cargo Bay B.

"How far's that?" Ritter said.

Oldman consulted his holoschematic of the station. "Bout ninety meters around the ring from here."

"Well, I hope no one gets to it before we do." She grabbed her shoulder mike. "Stevenson, what's the situation out there?"

"Can't find anyone," he said through static.

"Get back here then," she ordered.

Once Stevenson was back, he and Oldman constructed a makeshift stretcher from some canvas and poles they found in the cargo bay. Cory found a first aid kit, and she and Ritter bandaged up the sergeant as best as they could. Cory watched in fascination as Ritter injected him with morphine. It wasn't long before Dunn's face relaxed into a smile.

"Stevenson and Oldman, stay behind me," said Ritter. "Kid, you get in back."

Cory did as she was told, staying close to Oldman, who held the back of the stretcher.

They had made it up the ramp to Gate 12 of Cargo Bay B when Ritter held up her hand, signaling them to stop. Cory waited in anticipation while Ritter moved ahead, her automatic rifle scanning the area. She put her ear to Gate 12's door and listened for a moment. Then she carefully pulled the door open, ignoring the automatic opening button. As she was peeking into the room, the door swished wide open, and she ducked just in time to miss a spray of bullets from automatic weapons fire.

Ritter backed up and punched the door closed. She motioned the others back, and Cory stopped behind the soldiers carrying the stretcher. But the door swished open again, and a tall woman with a handgun fired another round of shots at the group.

Cory recognized Inspector Crib from the factory. Ritter immediately shot her before Crib could fire another round. Crib collapsed in the doorway, and Ritter leaned down to feel her pulse. Ritter stepped over the woman and quickly checked the area, then she looked back

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and motioned Cory and the others into the loading gate. Cory was shocked as she stepped over the woman's body. She didn't like Crib, but she never wished for her to die.

"C'mon people," Ritter commanded. "There may be more of 'em hiding in the station."

Cory followed the soldiers up the ramp and was about to enter the shuttle when she felt a red-hot poker stab into her right thigh. She collapsed and nearly passed out but was shaken awake by two strong arms jerking her into the air. She was placed on a mat inside the shuttle and watched while several pair of camouflaged legs scrambled about. The pain was still there, burning a hole into her leg. It made her delirious, and she felt her consciousness slip away.

Cory woke to a sharp prick in her arm and saw Ritter withdrawing a needle.

"You got shot, kid," said Ritter. "And I don't mean the shot I just gave you. You're gonna be okay though."

Cory looked up to see Ritter's hazel eyes looking through a tanned and freckled face. Her short blond hair looked unnatural against her complexion, and Cory guessed her real hair color was red or reddish brown.

"Cory, my name's Cory," she told the woman.

"Right, sorry ki... Cory. I've been a little too busy to ask your name. Mine's Ritter." Her eyebrows went up and she forced a smile. "Anyway, you should be feelin' no pain now. Gave you a shot of morphine."

Ritter started to leave, but Cory grabbed her arm. "Is there a bullet in me?"

Ritter hesitated. "Yep, but we're gettin' you and the sarge to a hospital ASAP."

Cory looked down at her leg to see a big hole cut in her overalls and a bandage around her thigh.

"Don't worry, you're gonna be okay. The bullet's not deep." She gave Cory's arm a quick pat then stood up and walked away.

The corporal was right. Cory could barely feel the bullet in her leg now. A sense of well being drifted over her like a soft, warm blanket, and she closed her eyes and dozed off to the gentle hum of the shuttle's life support systems.

When Cory woke, her body felt much heavier, and the pain in her leg had returned, though not nearly as severe as at first. The two privates, Oldman and Stevenson, were arguing with Ritter.

"I say we take her directly to the CCLC. They can hospitalize her," said Stevenson.

"Yeah, without her, we don't get paid," said Oldman.

"Forget it," said Ritter. "She needs hospitalization first. I'm in charge, and I say we take her to the base. She'll be released in a few days, and I'll personally see to it the CCLC gets her."

"I say we let Sarge make the decision," Stevenson insisted.

"Sarge is out of it, if you hadn't noticed," Ritter said sarcastically. "Now get back on the helm. We're gonna hafta switch to manual real soon now."

Ritter wound her way toward Cory, who was still strapped down with Velcro. She said nothing as she ripped apart the noisy straps.

"What are you going to do with me?" Cory asked.

"Get you to a marine base hospital," Ritter answered without looking at her. "You think you can walk if someone holds up your right side?"

Cory moved her good leg. "Maybe. What's the CCLC?"

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Ritter whipped her head around and bored her eyes into Cory's. Then her face softened. "It's the Concerned Citizens for the Liberation of Children. They're who funded your rescue."

Cory frowned. "Sounds too good to be true. What are they going to do with me?"

Ritter shrugged. "Couldn't say."

Ritter gently lifted Cory into a chair and buckled her in. "We'll be landing soon. You stay put." Then she headed to the flight deck and secured herself into place behind the two privates.

Cory glanced at the sergeant. He was still sleeping but had been secured for landing. She wondered what his decision about her would have been if he were in command, but it sounded like she would be in luck for a while, anyway. Ritter wanted her at the base hospital. Maybe she could somehow escape once she was en route to the CCLC, wherever that was.

The shuttle touched down lightly on a long runway in the middle of a desert. Cory guessed it was somewhere in California. A medical aid truck met the shuttle out on the field. Indeed, Cory's legs were weak as she had anticipated, and not because of the bullet lodged in her thigh. She needed to become accustomed to full gravity again.

Once the truck reached the base's hospital, a low flat rectangular building that looked like most the other buildings on the base, Ritter, Stevenson, and Oldman hopped out of the truck and entered the facility. Two medics moved the sergeant onto a gurney, while another pushed Cory in a wheelchair.

A considerable amount of time was spent in the hospital's administration office while Cory was questioned. The pain in her leg was getting worse, and she wished someone would give her another shot of morphine.

Finally, Cory was rolled into a small room that appeared to be a doctor's examination room. Her temperature and blood pressure were taken by a short, chubby young man in a white coat. She was then told to disrobe and put on a hospital gown. About five minutes later, an older man dressed in desert fatigues and sporting a full head of white hair, entered the room and gave her a shot in her thigh.

"Ouch!" Cory yelled.

"Just a local anesthetic so I can remove the bullet," he said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Cory closed her eyes and lay down on the examination table, her legs hanging over the side. Her fingers were cold and she had goose bumps on her arms. The office's air conditioning was turned up full blast. But her thigh became numb in a few minutes.

The doctor returned wearing a white surgical mask and carrying some steel instruments in his gloved hands.

I'm not going to watch, Cory thought. Part of her was curious—not curious enough though. She closed her eyes tightly and stuck her fingers in her ears just in case the procedure involved some kind of unnerving grating sound.

"All done," said the doctor.

Cory sat up. Her thigh was wrapped in a white bandage. She looked for her clothes, but they were gone. "Where's my overalls?" she asked, alarmed.

"Probably thrown away. Don't worry, we'll find something for you to wear. For now, you can put on that bathrobe." He pointed to a white cotton robe hanging on the back of the door.

"But I had something in the pocket," she said.

"I'm sure the pockets were checked." The doctor seemed in a hurry to get Cory out of the office.

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The guy who had taken Cory's temperature and blood pressure returned with a wheelchair. "Going to take you to the recovery room—elevate that leg, get some fluids into you."

Cory dozed off in the recovery room, and when she awoke, Sergeant Dunn was lying in a bed next to her. His chest was bare except for the wide bandage that shrouded his shoulder and right side.

"Glad you made it in one piece," he said to her breathlessly.

Cory was caught off guard. She thought he had been sleeping. "You too," she said, knowing his injury was much more serious than hers.

He smiled but said nothing more.

Cory returned to her own thoughts. She wondered how long she would be kept at the marine base before being delivered to the CCLC. She moved her right leg slightly. Ouch. It still hurt. Certainly she would be unable to escape from the marines on her way to the CCLC, in whatever manner she might be transported.

Just then, Corporal Ritter walked in and stepped right up to Dunn's bed. "How're ya feelin', Sarge?"

"Been worse," he replied.

"When?"

Dunn frowned thoughtfully. "How 'bout the time that rattlesnake bit me and you had to suck out the poison? How could you forget that, Ritter?"

"Short term memory, I guess." She waved him off. "Anyway, I came to tell you there should be a regular room ready for you by tomorrow morning. Hospital's kinda crowded today."

"That's okay," he said. "I got some good company." He turned his head toward Cory and gave her a wink.

Cory felt herself blush. She wasn't used to anyone being nice to her, especially adults.

Ritter looked at Cory but continued speaking to Dunn. "How's the kid doing anyway?"

"Okay, I guess. "Ask her yourself."

Cory frowned.

"Sorry, Cory. I meant to call you Cory. Just habit," said Ritter. She circled around the end of both beds and quickly examined Cory's leg dressing. "Looks like they patched you up real tight."

"Yeah, but it still hurts. Don't touch it."

Ritter drew back her hand. "Oh, I wouldn't do that."

"So when are you sending me to that place?" Cory asked, getting right to the point.

"The CCLC?"

Cory nodded.

Ritter shrugged. "In a day or two, I reckon."

"Where is it anyway?"

"Headquarters are in Napa, California. Not that far from here."

Cory looked away, trying to hide her disappointment, but Ritter noticed.

"Don't worry. I'm sure they'll take good care of you."

Cory turned back, looking into Ritter's hazel eyes. "Thought you didn't know anything about them."

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Ritter shifted and leaned over Cory. "Well, I had some time on my hands, so I did a little research."

Cory frowned. "I just want to go back to Portland. That's where I was living when you people took me away. I know you want to get your money, but I don't like being sold from one place to another. In Portland I was free," Cory said resentfully.

"I had nothin' to do with that raid—didn't even know about it 'til after it was over," Ritter said.

"But you would've been in on it if they told you to."

Ritter didn't answer, and Cory took that to mean "yes."

"Listen, kid. You want to know what I found out about this outfit or not?" Ritter sounded impatient, but Cory was curious.

"Sure."

Ritter found a chair and pulled it up beside Cory's bed. "Here's the deal. These people are farmers and they want to adopt kids like you. They believe it's wrong, what you been subject to on the OH. They want to give you a home and family."

"What's the catch?" said Cory, but she'd already guessed it.

"You'd just be required to help out on the farm."

"I knew it."

"Any kid would be required to do this—even their own. Gotta earn your keep wherever you are. Those're just the facts of life. It's not a free ride anywhere."

Cory waited a moment before responding. "They got kids living here at your marine base?"

"Sure. Marines have families, just like other people."

"What about you, Ritter?"

"No kids for me. I got enough trouble just takin' care of myself."

"You married?"

"Nope. Hey, what's with all the questions?" She sounded like she was pretending to be irritated.

"Just wondering." Cory shifted to her side and looked at Ritter curiously. "So, what do the kids do here at the base? You put 'em to work too?"

Ritter thought for a moment. "Mostly they go to school, and those who're sixteen or above sometimes get jobs at the commissary or bookstore. I think they work in the cafeteria too, but you might have to be eighteen to do that—I'm not sure."

"Hmm," muttered Cory. "I bet they get paid, too."

Ritter shrugged. "Couldn't say." She looked at her watch, stood up, and told Cory she had to go but would see her tomorrow.

There was no TV in the room and nothing much for Cory to do but sleep or talk to Sergeant Dunn.

"You got kids?" she asked him. His eyes were closed, but he wasn't asleep.

"Yup," came his answer right away. "Got three."

Cory knew from experience, even in her short lifetime, that people liked to talk about their kids. It turned out the sergeant had a six-year-old girl and two boys, ten and sixteen. The sixteen-year-old had a job stocking shelves in the commissary, and according to Sarge, he got a paid a small salary. Sarge's wife was in the Mercy Marines as well and was currently on assignment somewhere in Nevada.

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They chatted until Cory got the hint that Sarge wanted to sleep. It was more than a hint, as he began snoring while she was talking to him about her life in Portland. Could've been he didn't really care about the house where she spent her younger years or how her parents were killed or how she found a gang of kids to live with on the streets. More than likely though, he was in need of rest to heal from his wound. He seemed like a nice enough man, and she felt more at ease with him than with Ritter. Ritter seemed too intense, like she was going to bite Cory's head off if she said the wrong thing.

Cory spent a restless night, waking every couple of hours to go to the bathroom. Must be from all that water they pumped into me, she thought. She would limp across the room on one crutch to the bathroom and back again to her bed. Plus, Sarge was really snoring loudly, and that didn't help any. She lay awake watching light dance across the walls from the monitors hooked up to the eight or ten patients in the recovery room. Finally, around 3 am, she was tired enough to fall asleep in spite of the beeping monitors and Sarge's snoring.

When Cory woke again, the sun was blasting through the windows, and the wall clock read 0913. She turned away from the window, groaned, and buried her head in her pillow. Not long after that, she felt a hand on her back.

"Time to get up and use that leg a little," said a deep male voice. Didn't he know she'd been using her leg all night, hobbling back and forth to the bathroom?

Reluctantly, she turned over. The man's body and face didn't match his voice. He was short for a guy, and he had a boyish clean-shaven face. He was young, maybe eighteen or nineteen.

"You a nurse?" she asked.

"Yes," his baritone answered. "My name is Michael. And you're getting out of here today if your vitals check out." He clicked something in her ear and pulled it out again. "No fever, that's good," he said, consulting the small instrument in his hand.

"I'm hungry," said Cory. "Don't I get to eat first?"

"Certainly. You get yourself out of bed, get dressed, and I'll accompany you to the cafeteria. Your clothes are waiting for you in the dressing room."

Cory found a brand new pair of olive drab cargo pants and a camouflage T-shirt. She quickly dressed, happy to find the photo of her parents inside the shirt pocket, intact. She liked the pants a lot better than her overalls, even though they were a little too large. She would grow into them.

She examined her surroundings as Michael rolled her to the cafeteria. The thought of getting out of the hospital brightened her, but thinking about going to Napa, wherever that was, made her uneasy.

Cory had a quiet meal with Michael. Neither of them spoke much as Cory wolfed down her pancakes and bacon. She hadn't realized how hungry she was.

"Another Coke?" Michael asked as Cory sucked the remaining liquid through her straw.

"No thanks."

"Okay then, let's go."

Michael wheeled her out of the hospital and across the tarmac to a truck depot, where men and women were servicing everything from small jeeps to large troop transports.

"We share this base with the real marines," Michael said.

Cory nodded, noticing the USMC insignia on many of the vehicles. There was no way she was going to escape this place. She would just have to go to this Napa place and try to get to Portland from there.

Just then, Corporal Ritter hopped down from one of the larger troop transports and headed for Cory.

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"I'll take it from here, Lieutenant," she said to Michael, giving him a soft salute.

Michael leaned over Cory. "It was nice meeting you."

Cory stood up while Ritter helped her out of the wheelchair. The pressure on her bad leg didn't hurt nearly as much as it had the day before. Ritter put her arm around Cory's shoulder, supporting her as they walked toward a huge truck, its sides draped in olive drab canvas. Two "real" marines boosted Cory into the back of the truck, and Ritter climbed in after her, hauling an aluminum crutch.

The truck was hot inside, made worse by lack of air.

"Don't worry," Ritter said. "Once we get movin', we'll get a breeze."

They sat down on a long wooden bench. It wasn't very comfortable. "How long is this ride?"

"Pretty long—a few hours," Ritter answered. "We'll be making a couple of pit stops along the way though."

"Where is this Napa anyway?"

"Northwest of here. Closer to Portland in case you're wonderin'."

More soldiers climbed into the truck, filling the benches on both sides. Two men hoisted a dozen or so large jugs of water into the truck and passed them around. Ritter removed her jacket and fanned her face with her clipboard. It was going to be a long, hot trip.

After the last pit stop, Cory slept until they reached their destination. She woke with her head in Ritter's lap when the engine shut off. It felt cooler here, and she was eager to get out of the truck.

"I think you're gonna like it here, kid," said Ritter. She just couldn't seem to drop that "kid," and Cory had given up trying to correct her.

A soldier lifted Cory out the back end of the truck. Ritter followed, carrying the crutch. The air was clean and sweet, and Cory took a deep breath. Cory took the crutch and limped into a large white tent. She and Ritter stepped up to a table labeled MIGRANT WORKERS PROCESSING CENTER. An older woman with soft features and a grandmotherly smile directed them to another table. Ritter stepped in front of Cory.

"I'm Corporal Ritter from the Mercy Marines, delivering your last child from Orbital Habitat 17." She backed up and put her arm around Cory's shoulders. "This is Cory Pole."

A young man in a flannel shirt and denim overalls stood and introduced himself. "I'm Danny Cordova." He smiled at Cory and she relaxed. He seemed friendly enough. Maybe Ritter was right—maybe this place would be okay.

"So, I need a voucher from you," Ritter told Danny.

"Of course," the young redhead replied. He shuffled some papers and eventually came up with the right one. "I need you to sign this."

Ritter quickly scanned the paper, then scribbled her signature. Danny handed her another piece of paper, which she examined for a longer period of time, then attached it to her clipboard and shook his hand.

Danny took Cory's hand, but Ritter stopped him. "Give us a minute, okay?" Danny nodded.

Ritter walked Cory over to the end of the table and sat down on a stool so that her eyes were level with Cory's. Her face looked red and puffy like she might cry. Maybe it was just her ruddy complexion, probably from being out in the sun a lot, Cory thought.

"Listen ki...Cory," she corrected herself. "I think you'll be okay here. I really do."

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"Yeah, I'll be okay." Cory didn't know what else to say. Why was Ritter still sitting there looking at her?

After a long moment, Ritter cleared her throat and hopped off the stool. "Okay, then," she said more formally. "You take care." She picked up her bag and clipboard and left the tent, not looking back.

Danny appeared beside Cory and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Shall we go?"

Cory paused, still looking in the direction where Ritter had gone. She didn't know whether she hated the woman or worse, cared about her. These conflicting feelings were new to her. In the past, she always knew how she felt about someone. She didn't like the adults who ran OH-17. She did like Casho, Billy, Jeff, and Oscar. She hated the people who bombed the car her parents were in when they died. She cared about the gang members she'd hung around with in Portland. But she never hated *and* cared about anyone at the same time. And after her parents died, she'd been very careful not to love anyone again.

That night Cory slept in a bunkhouse with three other girls not much older than her. Their names were Maria, Rosa, and Elena. None of them had been on OH-17, but she wondered if she would eventually run into anyone familiar. It would be nice to see Casho and the other boys again. The girls, all sisters from Mexico, had been sent by their parents to Napa to work so they could send money back home. They told Cory they worked harvesting grapes eight hours a day for a dollar an hour. Good money for a kid, Cory thought. Only a few cents below the adult minimum wage. Maybe she would be paid that much too. It would be better than living with some family and working for nothing.

In the morning, Cory was told she would be staying in the bunkhouse until a family adopted her. "Adoption day" rolled around once a month, but she would be paid for her work until then. Fine with me, she thought. Maybe I can earn enough money to get a ride to Portland.

When Cory first saw the valley from the back of a flatbed truck, she gasped at its beauty. She passed rows of orange trees, apple trees, and olive trees until the truck made a turn into a field of rolling hills striped with grape plants. The girls familiarized her with the crops and told her the grapes were used for making wine. Cory had never seen such natural beauty before, having always lived in a city and more recently, in orbit. They told her the marine corps base where she'd been hospitalized was in the middle of what was known as the Mojave Desert. Cory was determined to get a hold of a map. Then maybe she could find her way out of here.

Dressed in a long-sleeved shirt, dungarees, boots and a hat, Cory began her first day as a grape harvester. Because of her recovering gunshot wound, she was set on a rolling cart, which she could manually operate. The other girls were on foot. Cory was shown how to carefully clip the grapes from the vines and deposit them into buckets, which were lined up along her row. Someone else would collect the buckets and dump them into the back of a large truck. They must need help pretty bad, Cory thought, to put her out here so soon after her injury. At least she could sit down instead of having to stand and bend over like the other girls.

It took forever for lunchtime to arrive. Cory was hot and sweaty and felt like taking a long shower. But that luxury wouldn't be available to her until the end of the workday at 4 pm, she was told.

At the workers' mess hall, Cory looked around to see if she could spot any familiar faces, but she had no such luck. She finally asked one of the cafeteria guards, a large, overweight woman with a sweaty face and a permanent frown, if she knew what happened to the kids from OH-17. It turned out the woman wasn't as mean as she looked. She told Cory she thought those kids had been taken to a place called Oakville the same day they arrived in Napa for processing.

"The highway between here and there is blown out in some places," the woman offered. "Had to be taken up there by air."

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"Thanks," said Cory. Well, that explained why they left her here to work—they didn't want to make an extra trip just to bring one kid to this Oakville place. Cory wondered how many roads were still in disrepair from the war. She didn't want to stow away on a truck to nowhere. She now felt even more determined to find a map.

By the time Cory was finished with her shift, she was soaking in sweat and more tired than she'd ever remembered. Working on OH-17 in a controlled environment didn't sound so bad now. She decided no matter how much they paid her, she didn't want to spend another day like this. But she did.

At the end of two weeks, Cory was more determined than ever to escape the work camp. Her leg wound was considerably healed, and she could walk without the aid of a crutch, though she still had a slight limp. With the help of Maria, she had obtained a detailed road map of Northern California. She was surprised to see how close she was to both San Francisco and Sacramento. She could catch a train from either city to Portland, if she had enough cash. She had no idea how much a train ticket would cost, but if she didn't have enough to get her all the way to Portland, she'd hitchhike the rest of the way. Every Friday night several trucks left the nearby winery to make deliveries to other cities. All she had to do was hop a ride on one of those, preferably not headed for L.A. With her small size, she could easily hide in the back of a truck among the boxes of wine.

Cory didn't have to think too long to come to a decision. This coming Saturday was adoption day. The girls told her that families from all over the valley came to view and purchase children. Fortunately for the girls, they already had a family back in Mexico, but they had heard stories of how adults would purchase kids, work them to death, not pay them, and not let them attend school. Cory certainly didn't want to end up in that predicament.

Friday evening came, and Cory was exhausted as usual. A bath and clean clothes perked her up a bit, but most of all she was nervous about her forthcoming escape. Maria and Rosa packed a lunch for her—cheese, crackers, and fruit they'd saved from their meals in the mess hall. Elena gave her a thick flannel shirt, assuring Cory she would need the warmth during the night. Cory was grateful and darn near cried when she said good-bye.

The warehouse was about four kilometers up the road, a distance Cory had traveled by truck but hadn't realized how far it would be to walk. After about twenty minutes, she stopped and rested. She was afraid that if she didn't get going pretty soon, the wine trucks would leave without her. She started out again, walking for about ten more minutes, when she spotted the building where the farm equipment was kept. Then she got an idea. Why not use one of the rolling carts she'd used in the grape fields?

Stealthily, she approached the door. She put her ear against it but heard no movement. She carefully lifted the bar that held the door shut and cracked the door open. The movement produced a sharp creaking sound, and Cory flinched. She conjured up the courage to go in—this endeavor was becoming a challenge—and shut the door behind her. She had to use her flashlight now.

The building was warm and stuffy inside, despite the cool temperature outside, and it smelled of oil and sweat. She flicked on her light and cautiously pointed it to the floor before scanning the farther areas in the building. She saw various machines including several cherry pickers, except they were used for picking oranges instead. Then she spotted a group of field rollers.

She had just begun to pull out a roller when she heard a loud snort. She jumped back, her heart pounding. She dared to point her light in the direction from where the offensive sound had come. Lodged among some kind of tractor machines was an old man with a gray beard, balding head, and ragged clothing. He snorted again and moved, but did not wake. Better get out of here while I can, Cory thought and turned the light away.

Once she got the field roller out of the building, it was easy to move it along the dirt road leading to the wine warehouse. It made a soft tapping sound, but not enough to wake anyone in the nearby farmhouses.

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Cory had almost reached the warehouse when the battery died in the field roller. She left the machine on the road and hobbled toward the warehouse, where she saw lights and a couple of people loading a truck, one driving a forklift, the other directing the driver. Hiding on the side of the building, Cory waited until the coast was clear then snuck inside the back of the truck behind some cases of wine. She hoped they didn't pack the truck too full, or she'd be squished.

Luck was with her, as Cory was unseen when the truck's back door was rolled shut, and she had enough room to crawl on top of the boxes and lie down.

The wine truck rumbled down the dirt road and turned onto smooth pavement. Cory figured they were now going south on State Route 121 where they would connect with Interstate 80 after about twenty kilometers. If the truck turned left, it would go northeast toward Sacramento. If it turned right, it would be headed for San Francisco.

About a half hour after the truck left the warehouse, it slowed and turned into what Cory guessed was a service station. She heard the driver get out and slam the cab door shut. Cory shifted on top of the boxes, trying to make herself more comfortable. She heard the driver connect the hydro hoses into his tanks, then walk away from the truck. Probably going to the bathroom, she thought. She'd like to do that too, but she figured she could probably make it the hundred kilometers to Sacramento or the seventy-five to San Francisco. She was certain some wine would be unloaded in one of those cities, and she could escape unnoticed and find a train station.

Perhaps ten, maybe fifteen minutes had gone by when she heard the driver disconnect the hoses and get back inside the truck. He started the engine and turned out of the station, but now Cory couldn't tell which direction the truck was going as it turned onto I-80. At least she was pretty sure it was I-80. Oh well, it didn't make much difference, as long as she could get to a large city and grab a train.

Before she could finish her thoughts, the truck came to an abrupt stop, and she heard a muffled voice order the driver out.

"What in the hell?" said the driver.

"Open up the back," said the voice.

"All right, all right, just put down the gun, Mister."

Cory's heart jumped. She scrambled off the top of the boxes and squeezed herself as best as she could between the front of the truck and the heavy cases of wine. This maneuver left her breathing loud and ragged. I'm caught for sure, she thought.

Cory heard a few staggered footsteps, then the back door of the truck rolled open with a thundering sound.

"Take out the boxes," the muffled voice demanded.

Cory briefly thought about removing the wine from a box and crawling inside, but she gave up the idea. Whoever this guy was would find her eventually, even if all the boxes had to be opened. Might as well make it easy for all of us, she thought. Resigned, she emerged atop the cases of wine and crawled out of the truck. There she met a masked figure dressed in all black, holding a machine gun.

The masked man grabbed Cory and ordered the driver to shut the door, get back into his truck, and drive away. Cory didn't struggle to escape from the guy's strong grip on her arm. He had a gun, and she certainly didn't want to upset him, though the thought quickly passed through her mind that he wouldn't kill her, having gone to all this trouble to find her.

Once the wine truck was out of sight, the guy pulled off his face mask and bent over to look at Cory in the dim light of a nearby street light. But the guy was no guy at all—the face belonged to Ritter. Her hair was shorter than Cory remembered and was dyed black.

"Sorry I had to give you a scare, kid, but I couldn't allow myself to be identified."

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Cory let out a long breath. She was relieved but also confused. "Ritter, what are you doing here?"

"You look cold, kid. Let's go over to my vehicle. I got an extra jacket you can wear."

Cory frowned.

"That is, if you want to go with me. I won't force you. We can talk first, but I gotta get off this freeway ramp."

Cory eyed Ritter's machine gun, which was propped against her left side. Ritter picked it up and removed the clip.

"You can hang onto this," she said as she handed the ammunition holder to Cory.

This is an odd thing for an adult to hand to a child, Cory thought, momentarily forgetting her unusual circumstances. Cory took the heavy cold metal object and looked into Ritter's hazel eyes. They were not angry, only concerned. "Okay," she said.

Ritter and Cory walked several paces back up the ramp from where the truck had stopped, passing a sign that read, I-80 East.

Ritter's vehicle was a stripped down Humvee minus topside machine gun and impact bar. It was painted gunmetal gray with more than a few primer spots dotting its surface. Ritter opened the passenger door and Cory stepped inside, sitting down in front of an array of navigational instruments. Ritter walked around the front of the vehicle and slid into the driver's seat.

"This is how I tracked your driver," said Ritter as she tapped a box-shaped object sticking out from the dash between herself and Cory. Cory nodded. Ritter reached into the back, retrieved a black leather jacket, and dumped it onto Cory's lap. "Here, this should keep you warm."

Cory pulled on the too-large jacket and zipped it up. It was soft and warm. "So how did you know I was in that truck?"

"Well, I decided to further investigate that outfit there in Napa. After I left you, I grabbed a brochure on my way out of that place. The adoption dates were listed as well as their 'sliding scale' fees. So I decided I'd come and fetch you before adoption day. It's not right, those people sellin' kids like that. 'Liberation of Children,' my ass."

Cory smiled, then frowned. "But I was already in the truck. How did you know?"

"I'm gettin' to that," Ritter said a little impatiently.

"Sorry," said Cory.

"Anyway, I went to the office and pretended to be interested in the adoption. While I was in there, I spotted a map of the bunkhouses on the office desk. When the clerk stepped out to fetch more information for me, I stepped behind the counter and quickly found out which bunkhouse you were stayin' in. That was a close one too, because I barely got back behind the counter when the clerk came in."

Cory was intrigued and her eyes were wide open as she waited for Ritter to continue.

"I waited up on the hill until I saw the kids gettin' off work, but I couldn't figure out how to get to your place without being seen. So I waited until after dark, then went and knocked on your door. Some real nice girls let me in after I explained who I was. Evidently, you had told them about me."

Cory blushed. "Yeah, I did. We all talked about how we ended up at that place."

"No problem," said Ritter. "Glad you did, or those gals wouldn't have told me where you'd gone. Once they did, I lit outta there like a rocket-propelled grenade. I wasn't sure what truck you got into, but I figured it was the one that just took off right before I got there. I spotted the taillights but it took me a while to catch up to it cuz I headed down a dead end road by mistake. Lights can play tricks on you in the dark, and I didn't have any night vision

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goggles. Anyway, the Hummer's trackers did the rest for me. Once I got on paved road, I caught up with that truck real fast."

"Wow," was all Cory could think to say.

Ritter put her right arm across the seat, looked behind her, then shifted into reverse and charged the Humvee back off the freeway entrance ramp. Then she jammed it into forward and made a hairpin turn, jerking Cory toward the door. "Guess I should've shown you the seat belt first," Ritter said. Cory was not at all sure she wanted to ride with this woman, seat belt or not.

Ritter parked the vehicle in an alley behind a service station, possibly the same one where the wine truck had stopped. Light from a three-quarter moon shone into the front seat, and Cory spotted Ritter's face mask lying in the space between them. She picked it up and fingered the mouthpiece, evidently some kind of microphone.

"This what you used to sound like a guy?" Cory asked.

"Yep," Ritter answered. "It has six settings. You wanna see how it works?"

"Sure," said Cory, happy to have the diversion.

Cory put on the mask and spoke into the microphone. "Hello." Her voice sounded in baritone, like an adult man.

Ritter chuckled. "Say something else," she encouraged.

"I'm Cory, the truck driver." Ritter showed her how to switch voices, and Cory tried them all. "I'm Cory the fashion model," she said in a woman's voice. Then, "I'm Cory the skateboarder," she said in a teenaged boy's voice. She giggled, then became serious. "I'm Corporal Ritter of the Mercy Marines come to steal this kid away," she said in her own voice, but it came out muffled.

Ritter reached over and removed the face mask from Cory's face. Cory looked down into her lap, hoping she hadn't angered Ritter.

"Cory, look at me." Cory lifted her head and gazed into sympathetic eyes, certainly an uncommon sight for Ritter. "I'm not a corporal anymore. Not a marine either. I quit."

Cory gave her a puzzled look. Before Cory could ask why, Ritter answered. "I got to thinkin' about what you said—about how we marines would just go and do a job without carin' what it was." She paused, but Cory didn't say anything. "Anyway, I quit my job—gave two weeks' notice just like you're 'sposed to when you quit a job—and bought me this Hummer. I'm headin' up north and thought you might want to come along. I remember you sayin' somethin' about wantin' to go to Portland."

"I was already on my way there," said Cory.

"Yeah, well, I thought maybe you'd like some company and someone to look out for you on the way." Ritter shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and Cory wondered why she went to all the trouble to track her down, just to keep her company on the way to Portland.

"I have money for the train," said Cory. "I would've been okay."

"Sure you would've—I know you're a very capable girl, but I was also thinkin' that once we got to Portland and we hung around for a day or two, that you might want to come to Canada with me. I got a couple of job interviews there."

Cory frowned. "Why would I want to go there?"

Ritter shrugged. "Well I thought maybe you'd want to stay with me, you know, like I said before, have someone to look after you. 'Course it's up to you."

Cory wasn't sure she was hearing Ritter right, but she had to know, so she chanced to ask. "You mean you want to become my guardian?" Cory emotionally braced herself for a "no."

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"I guess that's what I'm tryin' to say, kid. I mean, yes, that *is* what I am sayin'—I'd like to be your legal guardian if you want. In Canada we should be able to obtain amnesty from this situation. Of course I'd expect you to do your share of the household chores, keep your room clean, and go to school. But I don't believe in kids workin', especially against their will, like you were doin' on OH-17 and in the Napa vineyards."

Cory's heart quickened, brought on by her mixed emotions. While she was really pleased with Ritter's answer, she couldn't bring herself to accept it—to truly trust Ritter's words. She was an adult for one thing, and a woman on top of that. Both types she had learned to distrust. So Cory approached the subject cautiously.

"What kind of job are you going to do in Canada?"

Ritter sat back and looked up at the windshield. "Thought I'd try my hand at bein' a paramedic. I've had some training in that area with the marines."

Cory remembered Ritter administering the injection of morphine to both herself and Sergeant Dunn. "Sounds okay," Cory said, offering her approval of the profession.

"The city of Vancouver needs them and provides the training. I'm sure to get one there or in Richmond."

"Where's that?"

"A suburb of Vancouver. If those don't work out, I'll try another town."

"What if those people from the CC... whatever it is come after me before we get to Canada? You'll have to give me back."

"CCLC," Ritter said. "I'm prepared to negotiate."

Cory thought about Ritter's machine gun and wondered what kind of negotiating she did. Then she thought about Inspector Crib lying dead in OH-17's cargo bay. "You know that tall woman you shot in the space station? Cory didn't want to use the word, "killed."

Ritter thought for a moment. "Yeah, I feel bad about that, kid. But it was in self-defense.

"Well, I didn't like her much, but...." Cory looked away.

"Cory, look at me." Cory slowly turned her head back into Ritter's line of sight, and Ritter caught her eyes. "I *never* want to kill anyone, but sometimes it just happens. That's a big reason I'm getting' out of the soldiering business. I want to *save* lives.

Evidently, Ritter had thought out her plan, but one thing puzzled Cory. "Why do you want *me* so much?" she dared to ask.

Ritter shrugged. "Dunno, really." Avoiding the subject any further, she said, "We'd best be going. You with me or not?"

Cory was still not ready to commit. She didn't know Ritter *that* well. For all she knew, the woman could turn out to be an abusive tyrant. She might even be lying about taking Cory to Portland. "Okay, let's say you drive me to Portland and I decide to stay." Cory figured a day or so on the road with Ritter would give her more time to know the woman.

"That's your choice," Ritter said without hesitation. She started the engine, pulled out from behind the service station, and peeled onto the I-80 eastbound ramp. This time, Cory remembered to fasten her seat belt.

Ritter drove fast, at least forty kilometers per hour over the speed limit, and it wasn't long before they hit the I-505 junction that would connect up with I-5 North. Cory had studied her map well.

"Figured we'd drive all night and miss the heat," Ritter said. "Air con's broken in this heap—one reason I got it so cheap."

Cory nodded. She was getting sleepy.

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"There's a sleeping bag in the back. You might as well get some shut-eye," Ritter offered. "There's some straps to keep you from rollin' around. You can figure 'em out."

Cory yawned. She was simply too tired to worry and decided to crawl into the sleeping bag. Once she was settled, her eyes closed. But she didn't drift off the sleep until she asked one last question. "Ritter, you have a first name?" No answer. "Ritter, you hear me?" Cory said louder.

A short hesitation followed and then Ritter answered. "Yeah, I got a first name. Lass. My name's Lass Ritter, but I prefer you keep callin' me Ritter."

Cory smiled. It was evident the ex-marine didn't like her first name, but Cory thought it was nice.

The electric hum of the Humvee's engine and the sound of the tires rolling over the pavement quickly lulled her to sleep.

When Cory woke, the vehicle was parked and sunlight was streaming through the windows. Birds were chattering loudly as if they were having some kind of bird convention.

Cory sat up. She was surprised at how stiff she felt. She was also cold, and her teeth chattered. She donned the too-large leather jacket and opened the vehicle's back door. Ritter was bending over a campsite grill, cooking bacon and eggs. The odor made her stomach growl, and she hobbled over to the site.

"Restrooms are that way." Ritter pointed without looking up. "Get cleaned up and by that time, I'll have breakfast ready." She quickly glanced at Cory then back down at her frying pan.

"Sure," said Cory. She grabbed a towel from the back of the Humvee and took off toward the restrooms.

When she returned to the campsite, Cory felt refreshed. It was amazing what a hot shower could do to change a person's whole outlook on life. Ritter had set up a couple of canvas campstools, and she motioned Cory to sit down. Then she dished the bacon and eggs onto some thin metal plates. The two of them sat and ate in silence, but Cory noticed Ritter kept glancing around, as if she were expecting someone.

"You think anyone's looking for us?" said Cory.

"Dunno, haven't heard anything on the radio."

"So once we get to Canada, they can't take me back?"

"I'm thinkin' that, but I'm not positive."

"How much would you have to pay them for me?"

Ritter shrugged. "Dunno that either, but let's just hope it doesn't come to that."

Cory frowned. "I thought you were prepared to pay."

Ritter leaned over, rested her elbows on her knees, and cupped her head in her hands. "What I said is I was prepared to negotiate."

"What's that supposed to mean? You don't have the money to pay for me?"

"There are other ways to negotiate," Ritter said without offering any detail.

Cory assumed she meant fighting or holding someone at gunpoint, and she didn't like that idea at all. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

Ritter chuckled. "You got a bit of a smart mouth on you, kid, but I'll keep you anyway." Then seriously, "Like I said before, I don't believe sellin' human beings, and you're no exception."

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Cory felt a little better, but she had assumed Ritter had a pile of cash with her. If Ritter didn't have much money, how would they get by until Ritter got her first paycheck, assuming Ritter got a job? "So how much money do you have anyway?"

"Enough to get by for a while, and you're not supposed to worry about that stuff—you're the kid and I'm the adult, remember?"

Cory shrugged. "Okay, if you say so."

"I say so. Now finish up your breakfast. We need to get movin'."

Cory did as she was told, then washed the dishes while Ritter packed up the camping gear. Cory slipped into the front seat and checked the mapping system, happy that was working in the old beat up military vehicle.

Ritter slid into the driver's seat and leaned over to look at the visual display. "Yep, we're in the Siskiyou Mountains, almost to the Oregon border. Not long before we reach Portland."

That news cheered Cory up. She was eager to find her old friends, but she was still not sure if she would stay in Portland or go with Ritter. She had to admit to herself, having an adult looking after her was kind of nice, even if she drove like a maniac.

Cory and Ritter traveled down the other side of the mountain range across the border into Oregon. Cory consulted the map display as they drove past Ashland, Medford, Grants Pass, and Canyonville. The day grew warmer then hotter as the sun beat down on the Humvee. Ritter, stripped down to her tank top, was frequently wiping sweat from her face, and Cory threatened to cut off her long pants, but Ritter wouldn't let her. "You'll need those in Canada," Ritter had told her.

They were nineteen kilometers south of Roseburg when the engine's power suddenly dropped. Ritter cursed and pulled off the freeway at the next exit, parking in the first shade she could find. After sucking down a long drink of water, which included pouring some of it over her head, Ritter got out and popped the hood. Cory jumped out after her and they both inspected the engine. Steam appeared to be escaping from the center fuel cell.

"You have any tools?" Cory asked Ritter.

"Yeah." Ritter opened the back door of the Humvee and pawed through some blankets, rope, and camping supplies until she found a large canvas bag.

"Find something to open the top of that central cell," Cory said.

"Okay. What are we doing here, kid?"

"You'll see."

After some more cursing and banging up a couple of her fingers, Ritter got the top of the fuel cell off. Cory peered into the cell and found what she had expected. She pointed.

"See there?"

Ritter nodded.

"There's a water buildup around the cathode. Not good."

Ritter cocked her head. "And how do you know that, kid?"

Cory smiled, pleased with herself for knowing something Ritter didn't. "Told you, I hung out with a gang in Portland. The older kids would sometimes find abandoned cars and fix them up."

"Is that so?" Ritter's tone was more that of surprise than of disbelief, though Cory detected a bit of the latter. "So what do you propose we do about this problem?"

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"We can either figure out a way to remove the excess water, but that won't permanently solve the problem, or we can trash the cell and connect the remaining two cells together, which would be my choice," Cory said matter-of-factly.

Ritter laid the tool down and started to pace. After a moment, she marched back to the vehicle and kicked the left front tire hard. "Damn piece of crap!" she yelled. "Pete Parsons knew he was selling me a vehicle with defective parts and didn't say a thing!" She kicked the tire again, then let out a long sigh, trying to calm herself. Then in a quieter voice she said, "I wonder what else is wrong with this thing."

Cory had jumped back when Ritter blew up and decided to keep silent until the woman calmed down. She wanted to tell her that kicking the tire and swearing wouldn't do any good, but that might make her more angry. So Cory waited, staring at the ground, until Ritter came around.

"Sorry I blew my top, kid. It's just my way of dealing with things. Let's ditch that bad cell. You know how to connect the other two together?"

Cory cautiously looked at her. "Yeah, I can do that part if you have the tools."

"This is gonna slow us down, but havin' that bum cell in there will slow us even more," Ritter said.

And it's better than driving so fast too, Cory thought. And it'll reduce our chances of getting stopped for speeding. She wondered if Ritter had ever considered that her fast driving could attract a highway patrol who might just be looking for a runaway kid.

Cory quickly and efficiently connected the two fuel cells, then wiped her hands on a rag.

"Good job, kid." Ritter patted her on the back. "Let's start her up."

After they were rolling down the highway at a much reduced speed, Cory said, "Ritter, I think if you're going to be a parent, you probably shouldn't swear around your kid." Cory thought Ritter might get mad, but she felt she had to say something.

Ritter maintained her cool and nodded. "You're right. You're absolutely right, kid."

When Cory and Ritter hit Eugene, they stopped at a service station to fuel up. Cory spotted an X-Mart across the parking lot. She hoped to find a cheap pair of shorts in the store. Ritter gave her consent and they agreed to meet back at the station in an hour.

Walking into the giant department store was like coming into an oasis after a long walk in the desert sun. The air conditioning hit Cory suddenly, as if she had walked into a refrigerator. The cool temperature woke up her brain as well as her body. The store was filled with so many people and things, she was momentarily overwhelmed by the change in her environment. There were aisles of clothing, food, appliances, camping equipment, toys, household fixtures, books, magazines, and drugs. Shoppers, many with children tagging along, rolled carts throughout the store.

Cory didn't know where to begin to look for her shorts. She finally spotted a customer service desk where several people were waiting in line. Once it was her turn, she asked an overweight clerk with a mottled complexion where the girls department was.

"Aisle 28B, just past the women's lingerie," the woman said, eyeing her suspiciously. She probably wondered where Cory's mother was, or perhaps Cory's face had been shown on the news as a runaway from the Napa farms.

Cory thanked the woman, ignoring her gaze, and wound her way to the girls department where she found a pair of denim shorts she was sure would fit her. The price was right too—\$2.99—they usually cost twice as much. She didn't want to encounter any more suspicious looks from sales clerks, so she didn't bother trying them on.

On the way to the checkout counter, Cory passed a freezer full of ice cream bars and popsicles. She picked out a fudgesicle loaded with nuts, and checked herself out. She looked

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around for a wall clock and found one in the deli. She had plenty of time before she had to meet Ritter back at the service station, so she sat in a booth and munched down her fudgesicle, enjoying the air conditioning and watching the customers come and go.

When it was time to meet Ritter, Cory wandered back to the service station, but the Humvee was nowhere in sight. Cory's heart quickened as her mind raced, first thinking she was abandoned, then going over her options for traveling north. She looked around and saw a large semitruck pulled up to a hydro pump. It had a tri-state license—Washington, Oregon & California—so maybe it was heading north.

Cory watched the driver hop down from the truck's cab and stick the hoses in his tanks. Then he headed for the minimart that served the station. In the next few minutes, she would have to decide whether she was going to ask him for a ride. Some part of her said to wait for Ritter though. Why would she just take off?

Cory ran for the minimart, bought a small bottle of water, and asked for the restroom key. Whatever she decided to do, it wouldn't hurt to use the restroom first. And the privacy would allow her to change into her new shorts.

When she was finished in the restroom, Cory pushed the door open just in time to see an old beat-up Ford van pull up to the pumps. Cory looked beyond the van to make sure the semi was still there, then she went back into the minimart and returned the key.

As she opened the door to go back outside, there was Ritter directly in front of her on her way inside. Cory's heart registered relief as she halted, then walked back inside with Ritter. She waited while Ritter handed some cash to the clerk, then they both walked out again.

"Didn't mean to scare you," Ritter said, "but I traded in the Hummer for a van. Got a good deal too, with nearly a hundred bucks extra. I was just goin' in the service area to ask about a new fuel cell, and this mechanic couldn't take his eyes off the Hummer. Wait'll you see the van."

Cory didn't have to wait to see the van to guess which one it was. Ritter was getting a reputation, with Cory anyway, for acquiring ugly cars.

"See, here she is," said Ritter once they reached the van, her enthusiasm obvious.

Cory eyed the van cautiously as Ritter plugged in the hydro pumps. It was an ugly dark green with peeling paint and rust spots. There were also a few small dents in various places. The sides were windowless, the tires fair, and it had both front and back bumpers. "Everything work on this thing?" Cory yelled over to Ritter.

Ritter walked back from the pumps. "Yep, and it's got genuine synthetic platinum plated electrodes in all three fuel cells—I could tell from the brand name—Cell-U-Life—they don't make inferior cells. "It's got air conditioning too!"

"That's good," said Cory, trying to share the woman's enthusiasm. Somehow, "genuine" and "synthetic" didn't sound right together, but she knew the world's supply of real platinum had been depleted decades ago.

"This'll be good too, for camping—plenty of room in the back, and privacy too." Ritter hopped back to the pumps and removed them, then walked around to the van's passenger side and opened the door for Cory.

At least we're in a different vehicle in case that wine truck driver spotted the Humvee when Ritter found me, Cory thought.

Cory and Ritter reached Portland by late afternoon. At first glance, the city looked pretty much the same as when Cory left. The long array of bridges spread gracefully across the Willamette River, and the city's sleek transit tubes wormed around buildings, curving into the air like a giant carnival ride.

"Where is it you want to go?" Ritter asked.

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Cory sat up and leaned forward, peering out the front window. It took her a moment to get her bearings, but she quickly recognized where she was. "Um, east side of the Burnside Bridge. Turn right here."

Ritter wheeled the van down to the narrow street that ran next to the base of the bridge. "I'll wait here for you," she told Cory.

Cory hopped out and ran toward the small former night club, a dive of a place, where the gang sometimes hung out. Without hesitation, she knocked on the door. When no one answered, she knocked again louder, then waited a couple of minutes. She was about to walk away when the door opened, and a tall young man with a beard of several days' growth looked down on her.

"Yeah?" he said abruptly.

"I'm looking for the Burnside gang. Peter Goss?"

"Nope," he said, offering no further information.

"What about Rags Sutherland?"

"Listen, that gang moved out about three months ago. This is my place now." He started to shut the door, but Cory pushed it open.

"Wait. You know where they went?"

The young man sighed. "Just a minute." He shut the door then returned a few minutes later. "I heard they moved to Northwest Portland and that Peter guy—someone said he got himself a foster family, but I can't say for sure."

Cory was shocked. Peter, getting with a family? That couldn't be true—he'd always said he'd never live with a family—that our gang was his family. Besides, he was sixteen, old enough to take care of himself.

"That all?" said the guy at the door.

Cory looked up at him. "Yeah, thanks."

When she got back to the van, Ritter asked if she wanted to go try and find her friends.

"I don't know," said Cory. Northwest Portland was a really bad part of town. She'd ridden through there one time with some other kids only to witness a drive-by shooting too close to her line of sight. In fact, she didn't want to live anywhere west of the river—there were some shady characters running around downtown, especially at night. She felt let down, especially that Peter was no longer around. Even if he were, she wasn't sure if she'd want to go look for him. And the other kids like Newton, a boy three years her junior—she just hoped they were still alive. She had to face the fact that her former life had disappeared, or at least moved, while she was gone.

Ritter and Cory sat in the van while Cory pondered her situation. Ritter didn't push her to hurry up and make up her mind. They must have sat there for at least fifteen minutes, maybe longer. Finally, Cory said, "I'll go with you, but there's one more place I want to visit before leaving the city."

Ritter drove Cory through a neighborhood of older classic homes in Southeast Portland. The neighborhood had started sometime in the early 1900s, and the homes had been kept up as long as economically feasible, but Cory's dad had told her most of the houses had been torn down in the late 2000s and rebuilt to match the design of the earlier houses. But they all looked pretty old and run down now.

It was amazing, after all she'd been through in the last couple of years, that Cory remembered exactly where her parents' house had been. She directed Ritter to turn right here and left there until they arrived in front of a light gray, modest single-story wooden house just beyond the classic home area.

Ritter parked across the street from the house, and Cory waited a long moment before she cautiously got out of the van. A flood of emotions hit her. As she walked toward the

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house, she remembered playing in the front lawn with neighbor kids and climbing the big cherry tree that separated her house from the one next door. Now, the neighborhood looked deserted—maybe the families had moved away after her parents' car exploded in the driveway.

Cory dared not step onto the property. It could be protected by a force field and set off a burglar alarm. The windows were covered with bars that reminded her of a jail cell. She stood just next to the curb and felt inside her pocket for the photo of her parents. She held onto it but didn't pull it out. That would be too much, and she didn't want to cry in front of Ritter.

Finally, Cory turned around and headed back toward the van. Ritter was studying a paper map, seeming to be deep in thought. Or maybe she was pretending not to notice Cory. Whichever the case, Cory was grateful. She took a deep breath and steeled herself against her emotions.

"Okay, let's get out of here," she told Ritter after climbing back into the van.

Ritter folded her map and started the engine. They rolled out of the neighborhood and wound their way back to the freeway entrance, neither one of them saying a word. The last thing Cory remembered before climbing into the back of the van and falling asleep was the red, white and blue I-5 North sign.

It was dark by the time Cory and Ritter reached the Canadian border. Cory woke when the van came to a stop and she heard a man asking Ritter questions. Then Ritter pulled over to a parking lot and the back of the van opened up.

"C'mon out, Cory. They have to search our van," Ritter said as she poked her head inside.

Cory, still groggy from sleep, crawled out of the van and straightened her clothes.

"We've gotta wait for a while so they can check my documents," said Ritter. "Might as well go inside and sit down."

Cory sat on a wooden bench while Ritter got some drinks out of the coffee machine.

"Here you go," Ritter said as she handed Cory a cup of hot chocolate. "I can't guarantee it'll taste good."

"No problem," said Cory. She felt spacey, listless, unable to focus on any one thought. The easiest thing to do was just sit and stare at the floor. But once she took a sip of the hot chocolate, which really wasn't all that bad, she felt hungry. The hunger brought her mind into focus, and she wondered how long they would have to wait until they could be on their way again. Her legs were cold, and she needed to change into her long pants. She hoped Ritter could afford to buy her some new clothes, especially if she was going to school right away. And she wondered if Ritter really knew how to take care of a kid the way her parents had. The thought of her parents brought tears to her eyes. She felt extra vulnerable because she was cold and hungry. Ritter noticed.

"Hey, you okay kid?"

"Yeah," said Cory, quickly wiping her eyes and sitting up straighter.

"Hey, I'm starving. How about we get some big juicy burgers when we get outta here?"

"Yes, I'm hungry too." Cory's stomach growled. "And cold. Can I go change into my long pants?"

"Um, let me ask. Ritter went to the counter, and Cory saw her talking to a man there, then pointing to her. The man nodded. Cory stood. "He says I have to go with you, but yeah, you can change in the van."

Cory changed. Just before she was ready to go back into the office, a man walked toward the van and handed Ritter some papers. "You're all set," he said. "Enjoy your stay in Canada."

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The hamburger had to be the best Cory had ever tasted. She easily wolfed down a triple with cheese, then started on her fries. Ritter watched as if fascinated.

"You always eat this much?"

"Only when I'm real hungry." Cory frowned. "You sure you can afford to take care of me? I'm gonna need lots of food. And I'll grow, so I'll eventually need new clothes."

Ritter reached across the table and took Cory's hand. "Now you listen to me, kid. I wouldn't have ever decided to go through with this unless I knew I could do it. I don't want you worryin' about such things." She let go of Cory's hand and sat back. "Besides, it's a requirement that a person have at least a thousand U.S. dollars to get a three-month visa to stay in Canada."

Cory's eyes popped open wide. "A thousand dollars! But I thought you only had the hundred extra you got for trading in the Humvee."

"Surprised you, didn't I? Well, it's in the bank, but I got it. Was saving it for something special." She smiled.

Cory frowned and became serious again. "Are you disappointed on how you had to spend it?"

"Absolutely not, and I didn't *have* to make the choice I did. Listen, this is a new experience for me too. I know I'll never take the place of your real parents, but I'll do my best to take care of you. I don't want you worryin', ya hear?" Ritter stuck her hand out for Cory to shake.

Cory smiled and returned the handshake. Then she saluted. "Yes, ma'am."

Ritter laughed. She explained that they could go back to the states if they wanted once legal guardianship was established, and that that shouldn't take longer than three months. If they needed more time, they could renew their visas.

Cory wasn't sure where she wanted to live, in Canada or the U.S., but she didn't want to keep moving around. She'd done that enough. She wanted a regular life like the kids she saw on family TV shows. Maybe Ritter would even get married one day and she could have a father.

Cory stuck her hand into her pocket, feeling the photo.

"So," said Ritter, pausing before she spoke again. "What'cha got in your pocket?"

Cory pulled her hand out quickly. "Nothing."

"C'mon, show me. I know you've got something in there. I've seen you dig your hand into your pocket enough times."

Cory looked down and reluctantly pulled out the photograph of her parents. Ritter held out her hand, and Cory gave her the worn photo. Ritter studied it for a long moment.

"Your parents," she stated. She handed the photo back to Cory. "I'm sorry, kid. Maybe one day you'll tell me about them."

"Yeah," Cory said as she stuffed the photo back into her pocket.

As the two of them were walking back to the van, they stopped to gaze at the stars. The night was clear and cool, and the stars stood out brightly. They wouldn't be as visible once they reached Vancouver. Cory spotted Andromeda, Cassiopeia, and the Big Dipper. Then she saw what looked like a star exploding. Ritter saw it too. After that, two more explosions flashed in the sky.

"Might be some satellites went bad," said Ritter, but she sounded concerned. "The light was more yellow than white. Must've been something in orbit."

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Later, when they were settled in their motel room, Cory and Ritter sat down in front of the TV. They were watching a particularly funny episode of *I Love Lucy* when the program was interrupted by breaking news.

"CBC interrupts this program to bring you an update on the explosions in the southeastern sky at approximately 10:13 tonight. We now have reports from confirmed sources that Orbital Habitats 12, 17, and 18 were bombed by escaped prisoners, known terrorists, from the maximum security facility on L-5. The five men and two women stole an armed cargo transport from the orbiting facility located between the Earth and the moon, and proceeded to fire nuclear warheads into each space station. The escaped convicts now appear to be headed for an air base in the Middle East."

Ritter turned down the TV, and she and Cory stared at each other for a moment. They were thinking the same thing—Cory could have been on one of those stations if the Mercy Marines had not evacuated the children.

"They told us we were building parts for defensive drones and they were going to put up a power shield as well," Cory finally said. "For protection against unknown off-world life-forms."

"Aliens," Ritter said.

"Yeah, the bull they tell kids. Of course I never really believed it."

Ritter smiled. "Well, you never know. Maybe one day we'll have visitors from another world. I like to keep my mind open."

Cory thought for a moment. "Funny, I've always been more afraid of the people from Earth."

Ritter chuckled. "That's good, kid. What do you say we get some sleep? We've had a long day."

"Yeah, we have."

Cory lay in the darkness a long time before finally releasing herself to sleep.

THE END