

The Girl Who Stole A Planet

by

Stephen Colegrove

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Cover design by Lilac

Editing by Alice Dragan (<https://alicedit.com>)

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Of all the orbital prisons in the galaxy, of all the rough-heeled planets that ever shot their violent, rough-heeled trash into orbit, this was the worst. Not just according to popular opinion, mind—they had a bag full of galactic trophies to prove it.

The penal station rotated against the vast panorama of space like a brilliant, four-spoked wheel, a white speck of discipline and free television hanging above the cloudy planetary orb of Kepler Prime. Inside the tubular hull, Detention Officer First Class Nistra tapped on the window of a thick titanium door with his claw.

“And thiss is Prince Treem,” he hissed. “The former ruler of Alpha Centauri, who murdered twelve million across four systems. Thiss gender-anomalous filth received one hundred thousand life sentences.”

Recruit Officer Flistra bowed his reptilian head and clacked his sharp teeth in respect.

“Yessssssir.”

Nistra pulled down on the jacket of his dark blue uniform and tromped in huge boots to the next porthole.

“Doctor Fistula,” he snarled, “designed a virus that wiped every trace of life from the outer rim's third arm. He was given three billion life sentences and a subscription to People magazine.”

“Yesssir,” said the recruit.

Nistra strode quickly past several doors, dismissing them with a wave of his scaly hand.

“Pop star, pop star, radio DJ ... here we are.”

Nistra unsealed the heavy security door with his thumbprint and marched along an empty corridor that had a gentle upward curve. After a full minute of walking, he stopped in front of a hatch covered in diagonal red and yellow stripes.

“There she is,” the giant reptile said with a shudder.

Recruit Flistra approached the hatch with small, reluctant steps. A digital placard fixed to the wall caught his eye.

“Armstrong, Amy,” he whispered. “Horrible! But I don't see a viewing window, Commander. I mean, Officer. Sir.”

Nistra shook his scaly head and stared at the recruit. “Didn't you have maximum security spheres in the outer rim?”

“No, sssir. We didn't, sssir.”

“Well, that's what it is—a maximum security sphere. There aren't any windows, because it would interfere with the stasis bubble.”

“How do you monitor the prisoner?”

Nistra waved a claw over the front of the door, and a hologram of the interior appeared in mid-air. A pale teenage girl lay on the concave floor of the chamber, both arms around the knees of her orange jumpsuit. A tangled mess of blonde hair covered her face and spread across the bottom of the sphere.

“I don't understand,” hissed Flistra. “It looks undeveloped and weak, like a five-toed *poona* who hasn't been given enough slurm.”

“Soup brain!” snapped Nistra. “Haven't you been watching the telefeed? She's the most dangerous prisoner in the five square kilometers of this orbiting station! Did you just fall off the galactic shuttle?”

“Actually, sir, I did, sir. You met me in the hangar bay five minutes ago.”

“Never mind, then. This is the most destructive, rapacious, and annoying creature that ever drew breath in this arm of the galaxy. It has an appetite greater than a legion of soldiers, a foul stench that can poison the atmosphere of a Class-M planet in fourteen seconds, and a voice louder and more annoying than all the drunken lizard fraternities at the galactic conference of drunken lizard fraternities! It’s a vile, disgusting beast from a species that hasn’t won a match in the Galactic Cup since the Galactic Cup was invented!”

“My apologiesss, Officer. I don’t watch football. Please ssssir, what is it called?”

Nistra opened a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth and snarled.

“My dim-witted, fizz-brained recruit from the outer rim—that’s a human teenager.”

1995 A.D.

Earth

Amy Armstrong stared out the window at the fog rolling up Forest Avenue, a white, billowing cloud that whipped across the street like smoke from a campfire. She wished it really were smoke and the whole town was burning down, starting with Pacific Grove Middle School.

Amy wrapped a strand of her long blonde hair around a pencil and rolled it all the way from the waist of her blue plaid skirt to above her ear like one of her foster mom’s curlers. She was bored, and all the other eighth graders in third period science were bored, too. It was the most boring class on the most boring morning in the most boring school in the most boring city in the entire universe. This would be the deduction of a neutral alien observer, if aliens actually existed and were the kind of nice peeping Tom aliens that liked to watch eighth graders yawn, doodle in their textbooks, and stare vacantly out the window at the occasional over-the-hill citizen walking his or her over-the-hill dog over the hill.

It might have been the fault of the substitute. Mr. Gomez had been a promising young man at one point in his life, with dreams of aeronautical engineering and designing interstellar warp engines, but that was before he checked the wrong box on a college application, triggering a cascade of events that began with a mis-categorized form and ended with a very pale and overweight man with a face like cold butter trying to teach physics to a room full of fourteen-year-old kids.

“Force equals mass times acceleration,” droned the tubby Mr. Gomez, and scraped a sliver of chalk across the blackboard.

Amy sighed. She wasn’t confused by physics or theories or theorems at all; in fact, she liked math and science. She knew that a television dropped from a second-story window is probably uncatchable, no matter how much your foster brother Tony whispers up to you that “it’s all good” and that “he can catch it.” The natural laws of the universe did their jobs without question and without dreaming about being someplace else. Gomez probably wanted to be at home watching the Sci-Fi Channel and the teenagers wanted to smoke behind the movie theater at the Del Monte Center or wander over to Asilomar and dig up clams. Amy hated clams and she hated cigarettes. What she liked was a free television. Next time she’d find one on the ground floor.

Mr. Gomez paused and the small portion of the class that wasn't sleeping watched an ambulance flash by the window and disappear up Forest Avenue, siren wailing.

Amy Armstrong didn't have a problem with school. What she had a problem with was anything that got in the way of her very local and very lucrative "property relocation" business. Certain people had a need for a certain type of property, perhaps a nineteen-inch TV-VCR combo. Amy found the certain property and relocated it to the new owner for a fee. The goods she collected in a secret compartment under her foster mom's garden shed had sometimes come into her hands serendipitously, falling "accidentally" into her pocket while on a visit to a schoolmate's house. At other times more planning was required, such as pretending for a month to be Sammie Wong's friend just so he'd invite her to his birthday party and just so she could drop his nineteen-inch television down to her foster brother Tony in the azalea bushes. Tony's shoulder was still sprained and bits of glass still sparkled in the azalea bushes.

A square of folded paper somersaulted through the air and landed on Amy's desk. She unfolded it in her lap, her eyes on Gomez. Scrawled on the note in pencil was, "HELP ME I HAVE SCABIES."

Amy laughed out loud at Helen's note, and then slapped a hand over her mouth.

Mr. Gomez turned from the blackboard and peered down his round, buttery nose at the class.

"What's so funny?"

He leaned over the class roster on his desk.

"Seat twelve—that would be Amelia Armstrong. Miss Armstrong, please explain Newton's law of universal gravitation."

Amy cleared her throat. "The attractive force between two bodies is directly proportional to the product of their masses and indirectly proportional to the distance between them."

The boys in the back of the room snickered, and the class wag Robert Calcetti spoke up.

"Bodies? She meant boobies!"

"Quiet!" Gomez's bald head turned crimson and he slammed his chalk in the blackboard gutter. "Thank you, Amy. You are correct."

Ten minutes later a bell clanged in the hallway, and the drowsy teens sprang up like it was The Final Trump and they were a blue-blazered, plaid-skirted throng of believers heading for the sky.

Amy and Helen squeezed through a hallway lined with slamming lockers, dropped books, and uniformed kids scrambling for their next class. Eighth graders hooted and hollered at the seventh graders, the seventh graders scowled and yelled at the sixth graders, and the sixth graders squirted desperately through the human mob, trying only to survive.

Helen nudged Amy with an elbow and yelled over the din. "Are we still skipping out during fifth period?"

Amy nodded and leaned into her friend's ear. "Yeah, but I'll meet you at DMC later. I have to deliver a Sega Saturn."

The first day of sixth grade, Amy had seen Helen sitting alone in the cafeteria and decided that the short and chunky girl would do for a best friend. She was one of the only Asian kids in the school and a good student, which always helped if you were Amy and had a reputation that needed a boost at times. Lay down with dogs and you get fleas, as the old saying goes. Amy was an unrepentant thief, but she did everything she could to appear as clean as the wind-driven snow.

Appearance was half the battle. Amy kept her blonde hair long and straight, cut her bangs razor-sharp, and flattened the pleats of her skirts with an iron “repurposed” from an open window of Timmy Wilson’s house. She always kept her face washed, fingernails clean and short, and spoke in the sweetest and politest of tones when around adults. The few experiences she’d had with the juvenile justice system and authority figures in general had taught her that anyone who acts like a criminal, gets treated like a criminal. Nose piercings and tattoos didn’t earn trust with suspicious adults. The problem of looking like an innocent fourteen-year-old girl was that people didn’t want to buy a hot Miata from you, but that’s what foster brothers were for.

Helen hugged Amy. “See you later!”

“Bye! I’ll be there at two o’clock.”

Amy leaned against the lime-painted bricks in the hallway and watched the tubby girl twist through the crowd of kids toward her art class. It was funny—Amy had picked Helen because she looked like the one kid who’d never steal a paper clip, and two years later she was as good at “property repurposing” as Amy.

The bulbous face and brown, stringy octopus hair of Mary Katherine Prezbolewski rose above the heads in the noisy hallway, her great black eyes rolling back and forth over the crowd like those of a hammerhead shark. A pair of spindly seventh-graders trailed behind the mountainous body, carrying her field hockey stick and backpack.

Amy imagined the Earth’s gravitational forces shifting with every step of the impossibly huge fifteen-year-old. She gritted her teeth, pulled her shoulders back, and put on her best smile for the giantess.

“Good morning, M.K.,” she chirped.

Mary Katherine Prezbolewski slowed to a stop in front of Amy and the black, emotionless eyes glistened down at her.

“Armstrong, you little insect. Where’s my nineteen-inch TV-VCR combo?”

Amy shrugged. “It’s not the best choice for a birthday present. I’ve got a slightly used Casio synthesizer your dad would just love. Let’s see ... Oh! Does he play golf? I can get you eighteen holes at Pebble Beach or Spyglass, take your pick.”

M.K. towered over Amy like a corpulent mermaid, one who smelled like she took frequent showers in mackerel guts.

“Listen, Armstrong,” she growled. “When my dad wants a nineteen-inch TV-VCR combo for his fishing boat, he gets a nineteen-inch TV-VCR combo for his fishing boat. It’s his birthday today, and that’s what he wants. Are you trying to ruin his birthday by not giving him a nineteen-inch TV-VCR combo for his fishing boat?”

“You don’t have to keep repeating it, you know. I get it. There’s just been a problem with the TV.”

M.K. poked a finger on Amy’s chest. “If it’s not at my house by five today, your little blonde head won’t have any other problems to worry about.”

Amy beamed. “Thanks, M.K.!”

“No. I mean I’ll break you in half, you skinny little Barbie. I’ll come at you like Hurricane Hugo!”

The bell rang and Amy sprinted away from M.K.’s oceanic mass and toward fourth period math.

She was ignoring algebra completely and in the midst of considering last-minute sources for a television, including getting a ride to Circuit City, when the ancient brass grille of the intercom speaker crackled above the classroom door.

“Amelia Armstrong to the office, please,” came the hollow voice of the office secretary. “Amelia Armstrong to the office.”

Amy stuffed her books and papers into her backpack and left the rest of the envious and bored eighth graders with their algebra formulae. She skipped down the hall, certain it was Tony getting her out of school early to help unload some merchandise that had “fallen off a truck.” That boy always had something in the works. Just in case it wasn’t Tony, she dumped a half-dozen stolen Tupac CDs in the trash and a Mont Blanc pen she’d swiped from Mrs. Pound when the librarian hadn’t been looking.

The nurse met her in front of the glass doors of the office. Her face was pale and her eyes didn’t want to stay on anything too long, so Amy knew something was up.

“Good morning, Nurse Nelson!” Amy said brightly.

The nurse twisted her mouth. She opened and closed it strangely for a few seconds, as if she didn’t know how to begin, and then cleared her throat.

“Amy, your mother had a heart attack.”

Pacific Grove spread across the western rocks of the Monterey Bay like green moss on a cold, sea-sprayed wooden piling. It was a town full of perambulating retirees with halos of white hair, a town of driftwood artists, ceramic frog collectors, coconut painters, photographers, golfers, tourists, seagull haters, scuba divers, aquarium lovers, and during the monarch butterfly festival, was packed from Lighthouse Drive to Asilomar with visitors from the rest of California who had discovered last week that they loved butterflies. It was a foggy town with a slow, foggy way of life, which is one of the reasons Lucia Armstrong liked it.

Amy had always been Lucia’s favorite among the six foster children, and she hadn’t made a secret of it. The other children didn’t mind because everyone liked Amy. She kept them supplied with the newest electronic toys and video games, and added the income from her “business” to the household by secretly replacing the staples that everyone needed but nobody kept track of like soap, toothpaste, laundry detergent, shampoo, bleach, toilet paper, milk, eggs, flour, sugar, butter, and pancake syrup. Lucia was neither superstitious nor religious, simply an overworked FedEx driver with six children and too few hours in the day. If leprechauns or fairies or Old Scratch himself were topping up her dandruff shampoo and Tide, she wasn’t asking questions.

The school nurse drove Amy up the hill to Community Hospital where she, Tony, and the four little ones watched a team of white-coated doctors and frantically busy hospital staff wheel Lucia out of the emergency room. She was still in her navy blue FedEx uniform. A clear oxygen mask covered her face and a rainbow of wires crossed her body, monitoring her heart, providing intravenous fluid, and displaying the oxygen saturation in her blood.

“Where are they taking her?” Amy asked.

Tony shrugged. “Probably surgery. Lots of knives and lots of blood.”

“Stop saying things like that,” hissed Amy. “You’re scaring the little ones.”

The four younger kids—Billy, Anna, Viv, and Eugenia—stood together in a tight pack, their eyes wide and their small knuckles white on the handles of their brightly colored lunch boxes.

“Sorry,” said Tony. “I’m sorry. I just ... what do we do now?”

Amy squinted at a television hanging in a corner of the waiting room. “I don’t know. But I need to find a nineteen-inch TV-VCR combo.”

Tony spread his arms. “Lucia had a heart attack and you want to go shopping?”

“It’s a life and death situation!”

“Exactly,” said Tony. “I’ll take the kids home for lunch. Amy, stay at the hospital. Call the house if anything changes.”

Lucia came out of surgery in the afternoon.

Amy felt bad about trying to leave the hospital earlier. She stayed in Lucia’s room all afternoon, and left only once to grab a sandwich and once to break into a storage room. No luck in the storage room and the sandwich was too dry.

“Hello, darling,” was the first thing Lucia said, her mouth and eyes sleepy from the painkillers, her West Virginia drawl even more syrupy than normal.

Amy jerked up from the chair beside the bed.

“You’re awake!”

Lucia blinked slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Scaring y’all. I was carrying a box up the drive of this house on Grand Avenue. It kept getting heavier and heavier, and I started to sweat through my shirt—”

“It’s okay, Lucia,” said Amy, and squeezed her hand. “You don’t have to worry about it. Tony’s watching the kids and I’m here if you need anything.”

The slow rumble of a laugh traveled through Lucia’s sunken chest. She turned her head of short, graying hair on the hospital pillow, causing the plastic cover to crackle noisily.

“Don’t tell a mother not to worry,” she said to Amy. “Sometimes worrying’s all we got.”

Amy stayed with her foster mother until about eight-thirty in the evening, when Tony and the little kids showed up. Visiting hours ended at nine, and then Tony drove everyone back to the house on Pine Avenue.

The street where they lived was long and wide, and a few blocks up the hill from the main drag on Lighthouse. Like that street, Pine ran west to the ocean and east to Monterey, but happily for the residents of the stucco-covered ranch houses, lacked the hustle and bustle of the sidewalk cafes, liquor stores, sandwich eateries, organic breakfast joints, and ceramic butterfly shops of Lighthouse. Although safe from retail shenanigans, the placid environment of Pine Avenue could be disturbed by sirens from the fire department at the intersection of Pine and Forest. Since Pacific Grove was full to the brim with armies of seasoned, white-haired citizens, these peeling disturbances seemed to happen day and night.

Lucia’s house was on Pine several blocks west of Forest. A massive three-story house belonging to E.G. Woodley, eminent lawyer and raconteur, had burned to ash in 1912 on the very spot. The parcel never returned to its former glory, but still retained the massive dike of earth that Woodley had had trucked in from the valley to serve as foundation for his mansion. Perhaps

he disliked the gravel sidewalks on Pine, or simply wished to rise above the rest of the street. Over the next fifty years the grassy slopes supported dwellings of a more humble nature, until 1963 when Lucia's great uncle Luccesse sold every one of his artichoke fields near Castroville and bought a grocery store in Monterey. He leveled the rickety shacks on the parcel and built a sturdy ranch-style house with four bedrooms. Uncle Luccesse had the money for a grander design that included a second story, but his sister had fallen down a staircase at the tender age of seven, forever prejudicing his opinions on a house with more than one floor.

Upon his death in 1991 the house traveled through the probate system and ended up in the lap of the nearest relative, Lucia Armstrong, who pulled her children out of their schools in Salinas before the signatures on the deed had time to dry. If there was anything to complain about living in Pacific Grove, it certainly wasn't the schools. Uncle Luccesse had let the place go a bit in his dotage, but the cozy heart of the cottage was still there. Lucia and the children pulled off the red clapboard siding and slapped on chicken wire and stucco, painting everything a blinding shade of white. The overgrown front yard was weeded, seeded, and fertilized, and a tall redwood fence sprang up to surround the house on the little hill. The cedar shakes on the roof were replaced with safer asphalt shingles. The rusted garden hut was tossed out and a large, wood-framed shed was built in its place. Painted white, of course.

Tony pulled the car into the driveway at the back, the headlights shining on dark windows and an empty house. This time of night they should have gleamed, should have rattled from Lucia's call to bedtime and hummed from her loud toothbrush commandments. The house was a constant hive of children. Sometimes there were as few as six foster kids like now, but sometimes there had been as many as ten, including a baby. Since Lucia was just down the street from the police department, they quickly got to know her. If someone got clipped for possession or a felony and they had kids, Lucia watched them for a few days or a week until relatives or more permanent arrangements could be made. Amy had been one of those kids, but the difference was that she'd stayed. Nobody liked asking about it because it had been a long time ago and you didn't ask about those kinds of things anyway.

Tony unlocked the house and escaped to his room, while Amy played Lucia's part and led the four younger kids in their bedtime routines. She may have been only fourteen, but she'd learned that people are slaves to the same old patterns, day after day. It made stealing from big, bad adults so much easier when you knew what time they woke up, ate breakfast, went to work, visited the relatives, or played bridge.

Amy took a shower, brushed her teeth and hair, and changed out of her school uniform into an old t-shirt. She turned off the light in her room, climbed to the top bunk, and lay on top of the covers. Eugenia was supposed to sleep in the bottom bunk, but Amy paid her a weekly stipend to stay in Billy and Anna's room and so she could have the room to herself. Amy listened to the squeal of a siren going down Forest while she stared at the glowing stars on the ceiling. The constellations were all in the right places, but it wasn't the same thing as the big sky out in the mountains, or in Carmel Valley. You couldn't make a ceiling spin round and round every night and with the seasons.

She closed her eyes and might have fallen asleep if something hadn't tapped on the glass of the bedroom window.

Amy slid off the top bunk and crept across the room. After three more taps on the glass she grabbed the window sash and pushed it up.

"What's the password?" she whispered at the darkness.

Helen giggled and climbed into the room. “There’s no password, silly.”

“Just checking,” said Amy. “Could be anyone out there.” She inhaled in mock fright and held both hands up to her mouth. “Maybe even a boy!”

“Now you’re really being silly,” said Helen. “Every boy in the school is scared to death of you after you put that dead pelican under Leroy Jenkins’s bed.”

“He deserved it. Always staring at me in homeroom.”

“I think he just liked you.”

“The last thing I need is for people to like me.”

“Apart from grown-ups, you mean?”

Amy snorted. “Of course. They don’t count.”

Bedsprings squealed as Helen sat on the lower bunk. She had changed into street clothes—jeans and a long shirt.

“I heard what happened. Is Lucia okay?”

Amy stretched out on the fluffy rug at Helen’s feet. “Maybe. She’s at the hospital now. She’s talking, and I guess the operation went okay.”

Helen nodded. “Good. I mean, it’s not good that she’s in the hospital, but ... aw, you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do,” mumbled Amy. She turned onto her stomach and rested her forehead on her arms. “Do you ever wish you came from another planet?”

“Excuse me?”

Amy turned her head and brushed the blonde hair away from her eyes. “It’s just so boring around here. Going to the same boring school with the same boring teachers, stealing the same boring crap from the same boring people. Sometimes I dream that my real parents were aliens.”

“Blonde-haired, blue-eyed aliens?”

“Maybe. Who knows? I could be a shape shifter. Maybe they left me here to study the human race. Maybe that’s why I like physics and astronomy.”

“They’re jerks if they left you alone without even a beeper or instruction manual or anything,” said Helen. “I thought everything was cool here with Lucia. She’s never hassled you with too many rules like every other parent.”

Amy sighed. “I know, and I do like her. I just feel trapped here. Like I should be doing something somewhere else.”

“You and every other member of the human race,” said Helen. “You’re exactly like my Dad right now. He constantly talks about moving to Australia or New Zealand or Singapore or Bali. I think that might be his hobby—wanting to live somewhere else.”

“Yeah,” said Amy, and lay her head on the fluffy rug. She watched the long, delicate fibers move with her breath in the moonlight. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Amy?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you steal things?”

Amy snorted. “It’s not stealing—it’s ‘property relocation.’ Anyway, what a dumb question. I do it because I want bigger and better things, like another house for Lucia.”

“No. I mean, how did you start?”

“Tony. He saw me trying to shoplift a candy bar, and showed me how to do it without getting caught.”

“Did you ever think about ... not doing that? About quitting?”

“And go back to being poor? Never. What’s up with the twenty questions tonight?”

Helen shrugged. “Nothing. Well, it’s late and everything, so I’ll take off. My parents think I’m still at the youth group meeting.”

“No problem.”

“So how’d the thing go with M.K. and her TV?”

Amy jumped straight up from the rug like a cat on an electric fence.

“She’s going to kill me!”

“What? I thought you were going to buy another one.”

“I didn’t even think about it! I was at the hospital all day.”

“What do we do, then?”

Amy pulled on jeans, slippers, and grabbed a puffy jacket.

“To the Bat Cave, Robin!”

Uncle Luccesse had been a successful businessman and enterprising figure who looked to the future. In 1963 the future was not expected to be a bright one, and many intelligent people expected radioactive fallout to drastically reduce property values. After the Cuban Missile Crisis many bomb shelters were dug in back yards. Uncle Luccesse was in that group, but he had the time and money to do it right. Since he was digging a new foundation for the house in Pacific Grove, he had the contractors hollow out a rectangular cistern in the back, twelve feet deep and fifteen feet on each side. It was lined with concrete blocks and roofed with foot-wide timbers from an old barn his brother was getting rid of. The air supply could be closed off and had an ingenious filtration system that went through a container of water and required a hand crank. Access was through a metal hatch in the ground that led to a cast iron ladder and a small decontamination chamber. A larger metal hatch, this one vertical, led to the main area of the bomb shelter. Like the other hatch, it had been salvaged from a decommissioned submarine by Uncle Luccesse’s brother in Connecticut and transported at an economical rate by a relative in the freight business.

Uncle Luccesse kept the shelter clean, the doors oiled, and rotated the food and water stock regularly until November 1989. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and crumble of the Soviet Union, all the fun went out of having a bomb shelter, and Uncle Luccesse had more time to spend on parcheesi and golf.

After his untimely death in 1991, Lucia took ownership of the property and had no use for the underground space. A bomb shelter was fine for an old man who lived during the Cold War, she thought, but in the modern age it was only good for spiders and millipedes. The garden shed was built directly over the little metal door to keep anyone from getting any ideas. This turned out to be the best feature of the shelter. When eleven-year-old Amy heard about it from Tony, she immediately pried up the floorboards and squealed like it was the fabled El Dorado.

The metal hatches had stiffened but weren’t yet frozen with rust. A bit of WD-40 cleared that up. The electric wire Luccesse had run down to the shelter was still hooked up to the house’s main panel, although the bulbs had to be replaced. Amy had sworn Tony to secrecy and began converting the underground space for her own purposes.

Amy and Helen crept out of the window and through the moonlight to the shed. Inside, Amy hooked her fingers in a crack where the floor met the wall, and pulled. The middle section of

floorboards swung up on hidden hinges to reveal the iron dome of the old submarine hatch. Amy spun the wheel, pulled up, and the old hatch clanked open, filling the shed with the smell of fresh earth, petroleum grease, and the bitter odor of oxidizing metal. The two girls climbed down the ladder in pitch-black darkness, spun open another submarine door, and stepped into the shelter. Amy flipped a switch and the room burst into brilliant pastel colors.

She was still a girl and this was her special place. The floor was painted baby blue, the walls pink, and the ceiling beams crisscrossed in a black and white zebra pattern. Amy had been in a brief unicorn and rainbow phase when she'd discovered the shelter and the walls bore the evidence, covered floor to ceiling in mystical animals and curving single and double rainbows, some with pots of gold and tiny green men.

On the right side of the square chamber stood a pair of cots with sleeping bags, a tall series of shelves packed with purloined books, and a desk with a reading lamp. An old black rotary phone sat on the desk. One of the only things Tony had done for the place was to run an intercom line through the ground up to the house. If anyone got stuck in the shelter, they just had to dial zero and the house phone would ring. Someday Amy wanted to fix it up like a real phone.

On the left side of the room were the shelves of the old food storage, and this was where Amy kept her "repurposed property." The light gleamed on a Casio keyboard, stacks of video games, CDs, tapes, watches, action figures, and piles of comic books.

Helen dropped onto the cot with a sigh. "You're in a tight spot, Amy. Anything on those shelves that might tame the savage beast, so to speak? I mean literally. She is a beast."

Amy put her hands on her waist. "I'm in a tight spot? Once she's done with me, that savage beast is going to eat all my friends starting with you, little Asian smarty-pants."

"She likes games, doesn't she? Give her a whole stack."

Amy thumbed through the plastic cases and shook her head. "None of these are real new. She's probably played them all. I had a couple of consoles and some nice jewelry last week, but sold everything at the flea market on Sunday. Anyway, I don't think even the British crown jewels would make M.K. happy at this point."

"Not even the new Mariah Carey album?"

"No. She thinks I ruined her dad's birthday. Mariah can't fix that."

"How about I stash some weed in her locker and report her like that one girl, what was her name ... Victoria Sanchez?"

"I don't have any weed and I don't like how that turned out."

"Bring her down here and pretend to be her friend, but wait until she falls asleep and put a pillow over her face?"

Amy squinted at Helen. "How much chocolate did you eat today?"

"Couple of Snickers."

"Okay. First of all, she wouldn't fit down the ladder, and second, I'm not killing anyone in my secret stronghold. Think about the smell."

"How about give her an empty box?"

"She'll be even madder when she opens it."

Helen spread her arms. "What if it's full of cyanide? Or even better—laughing gas?"

Amy laughed. "Yeah, that's a good one. Climb out of here and run back to your house, silly girl."

"But what are you gonna do?"

Amy shook her head. "I'll think of something. I always do."

Chapter Two

Amy tossed and turned half the night, then woke up early and dressed for school. She packed lunches for the four little ones and shooed the groggy children out of bed and into the bathroom. Amy wasn't the best cook, but that didn't matter because Tony was already up. He fixed eggs, bacon, and toast for himself and the kids. Amy wasn't hungry, but had a boiled egg and a few raw carrots.

They usually walked to school, but Tony was going up to the hospital to see Lucia so everyone piled into the station wagon. It creaked and bounced up the street like a houseboat with wheels. Tony dropped the kids off at their school, and then turned back toward Forest Avenue.

"Don't bother," said Amy. "I'm going to the hospital."

"Are you sure? I was going to watch her today. You can come visit after school."

"I'm not going to school today."

"What's going on?"

Amy didn't say anything. Tony kept glancing at her as he passed the school and continued up the hill and out of P.G., the old car swaying in the curves and the pine trees full of morning mist.

They stopped in the hospital parking lot at the top of the hill. The car's engine clanked for ten seconds after Tony turned the key off, but he just sat there.

"Amy, tell me what's going on. If it's about Lucia ... sometimes these things happen. People get sick and we do the best we can for them."

"It's not that. There's a girl at school who's going to kick the living crap out of me."

Tony laughed. "Is that all? Just fight her. Make sure she throws the first punch, though. I know you want everyone to think you're as dewy-eyed and innocent as a newborn lamb."

"She's three hundred pounds! One punch and I'll be dead!"

"That big, huh? What's a girl like that doing in eighth grade?"

"Nothing good, I tell you," said Amy. "She's been held back a couple times. All the social promotion in the world couldn't keep this girl from failing."

"Why's she mad at you?"

Amy rubbed her nose and looked out the window at the cold pine trees around the parking lot.

"I promised a TV to her. That one you dropped."

"Really? Now I feel like it's my fault. Come on."

Tony got out of the station wagon and swung the back gate wide open. He looked left and right, then pulled carpet and a plastic cover off the cargo floor. Around the spare tire lay an assortment of weapons.

Amy gasped. "What are you doing with all these?"

"Protecting myself. It's a thing, you know, since I'm my own favorite person in the whole world."

“Is that a gun? You’re only sixteen! You can’t have a gun. Where do you think you are—the East side of Salinas?”

Tony smirked. “You’re only fourteen. What do you know about Salinas?”

Amy shook her head. “A gun, Tony?”

The teenage boy held up the snub-nosed revolver. “It’s only a .38. You can barely kill someone with this. You’d probably hurt them a lot worse if you chucked it at them instead of pulling the trigger.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“Well, if you don’t want to use a gun—which is loaded with blanks by the way—then I have other problem-solvers.” He set the gun on the tire and held up a succession of weapons, starting with a switchblade, an expandable baton, brass knuckles, a strange-looking wooden bat, a huge cherry bomb, and finally a can of aerosol deodorant.

“That’s nice,” said Amy. “At least I won’t have B.O. while I’m beaten to a pulp.”

Tony pulled a disposable lighter from his pocket and pointed the deodorant can away from the car. He flicked the lighter, pressed down on the deodorant toggle, and a gout of flame burst from the nozzle.

Amy jumped back from the sudden flash of heat. “Good gravy!”

“Exactly,” said Tony. “Only old-school aerosol stuff can do that. I’ve got a supplier.”

“Thanks for the kind thoughts, but I just want to keep all my teeth. I don’t want to see my name in the papers or cause an international incident. Taking a weapon to school could make all my problems worse.”

“It’s just deodorant,” said Tony, and sprayed under his arms. “Not very good deodorant, but deodorant.”

“Sorry.”

Tony shook his head. “Brave girl. I admire your principles. Stop! Don’t even think about making that joke.” Tony rummaged through the hidden area and held up a pair of black leather gloves. “This is more your style. Silent and deadly.”

“Gloves? What are those good for?”

“Quite a bit,” said Tony, and tossed them to Amy.

She caught the gloves at her chest, but the unexpected heaviness almost caused her to drop them to the asphalt.

“Whoa! These weigh a ton!”

“Gloves for cops,” said Tony. “That’s a girl cop size. Designed to put the beat down on degenerates like you and me. Lined with lead on the back and knuckles to make your punches hit hard, and Kevlar mesh on the palms to stop knives. Got them in a trade. The good thing is, they’re not illegal and won’t get you in trouble.”

Amy slid the gloves over her hands. The black leather felt good and weighty on her fingers, like she could hit a concrete wall and just walk away.

“We shouldn’t be talking about all this nasty stuff,” she said. “Let’s go see Lucia.”

Tony laughed and closed the car door.

“Oh, Amy. Just like a girl—always practical.”

He put an arm around her and they walked through the blowing mist toward the hospital.

Amy spent a few minutes with Lucia, who had been taken off the strongest drugs and was talking just like her old self, then rode down the hill with Tony to school. Amy signed in at the office and then went to second period English.

She knew M.K. would be looking for her between class periods, so when the bell rang she sprinted upstairs to the library, hid out there until the bell rang, and then snuck down the hall to science class. Mr. Gomez was peeved at her tardiness, but she could handle peeved.

Helen tossed a folded note at her when Gomez had his back turned.

I’VE GOT AN IDEA, said the scribbled pencil on the creased paper.

When the bell rang to end class, Amy stayed in the room and huddled together with Helen.

“Did you fix things with M.K.?”

Amy brushed back a strand of blonde hair. “Not yet. I’ve been avoiding that elephant.”

“Her seventh grade spies are everywhere, so don’t expect it to last. You should probably do something.”

Amy pulled the leather gloves from the waistband of her uniform skirt.

“Tony gave me these,” she said. “They’re cop gloves. Maybe I can ambush her, give the cow a black eye or two.”

“Have you been watching too much television? She’ll crush you like a dinner roll. Her body is so massive and the nerves so spread out, it’s like throwing rocks at an aircraft carrier. Even if you do hit her first, she won’t feel a thing until you’re on the floor of the girl’s bathroom, probably missing a few teeth.”

“Thanks for that mental image,” said Amy. “You’re such a great friend.”

“And the smartest one you have. But enough about me—I’ve got an idea to keep you from losing your pearly whites or any other body parts.”

“Great. I’m very attached to them.”

The room began to fill with students for the next class. Amy grabbed Helen’s sleeve and pulled her toward the door.

“Come on.”

“What about my idea?”

“Let’s stand in front of the office and you can tell me. M.K. won’t kill me in front of the office. I hope.”

The two girls pushed through the rowdy hallway filled with banging lockers and hooting middle-schoolers.

“Okay,” said Helen. “M.K. likes video games, right?”

“Doesn’t everybody? I already told you I don’t have any good ones to trade.”

“So you need to re-stock,” said Helen. “In homeroom, Calcetti and his buddies were talking about this rich kid they knew, some friend of Calcetti’s cousin. They were over at his house last night, and the rich kid has a Super Nintendo.”

“I can get one of those at Circuit City. Besides, M.K. already has one.”

They stopped in front of the glass windows of the office. Helen glanced left and right, then leaned close.

“This kid has a gold one,” she whispered.

“Why are you whispering? I’ve got a pink one with flowers on it. You helped me paint it, remember?”

“No, it’s really gold, the metal and everything. Calcetti said he felt how heavy it was. This rich kid’s dad works for Nintendo or something, and it’s like the only gold one ever made. The rich kid even showed Calcetti a photo of him holding up the thing with a bunch of Japanese guys in suits.”

“Where’s the rich kid live?”

“Down in the Highlands, right on the ocean,” said Helen. “The big house in the curve, where they’re doing all the construction.”

“Are you sure?”

Helen nodded. “That’s what Calcetti said.”

Amy frowned, and pulled a Chapstick from the pocket of her uniform blazer. She rubbed it along her lips and glanced up and down the hallway. Back and forth, left and right.

“All right,” she said. “A gold Super Nintendo should keep M.K. off my back. But I have to look at the place first.”

“Yeah, of course. You wanna do it after school? I can go with you.”

Amy shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

She ducked into a nearby girl’s bathroom and did jumping jacks until she was flushed and her uniform blouse soaked with sweat, and then told the school nurse she had stomach cramps. The nurse made her lie down in the medical room for half an hour and sent her back to class. Amy went straight to the girl’s bathroom, did jumping jacks, and reported to the office with a fever. After a few rounds of this, the nurse gave in and drove Amy up the hill to the hospital herself.

Amy had succeeded in keeping her cute and straight nose perfectly cute and perfectly straight, exactly the way she liked it, and her blue eyes from turning black and blue by Mary Katherine’s sledgehammer fists. Tomorrow was another day, though, and she needed the most precious of all treasures to placate the most enraged of all eighth graders. It wasn’t like she could just heave any old thing at

M.K. and expect her to be happy, even if it was valuable. M.K. had only two hobbies: playing video games and punching middle-schoolers in the face. Amy wanted no part of the latter.

After the doctor had pronounced her a perfectly fine fourteen-year-old, Amy escaped from the emergency room and Nurse Nelson's watchful eye by pleading to stay with her foster mother for the rest of the day. Nurse Nelson was not a kind woman, but luckily happened to be the kind of nurse who hates sick people and hanging about hospitals. The reason she worked at the school was because she very rarely saw any sick people at all, only schoolchildren who made up stories about stomach cramps or a fever. She saw no reason to argue, and in fact left the hospital at a rapid jog due to the dizzying effect of the smell of alcohol disinfectant.

Lucia was sitting up when Amy came to her room.

"There you are, Amy. Is school out already?"

Amy shrugged. "The nurse gave me a note."

Lucia's hug was longer and tighter than normal. When Amy pulled away, Lucia's eyes were wet.

"Stay with me today," she said. "When you left this morning, I felt like I'd never see you again."

Tony stood up from beside the bed. "Don't be silly, Lucia! The doctor said you're getting better and better."

"Right," said Amy.

Lucia shook her head. "It's not about me, Amy. It's about you."

Amy smiled and hugged her foster mother again. "Don't worry. I'm fourteen and I can take care of myself."

Lucia sighed and leaned back in her bed. A pine branch scraped across the window, and everyone stared out at the trees in the mist.

"I know you're fourteen," said Lucia, still looking outside. "But there's a black cloud coming, darling. A cloud I can't see through."

Tony chuckled. "Don't be so dramatic. Everything's fine."

Lucia turned her head away from the window. "Son, could you get me a cup of water?"

"Sure thing."

Once Tony left the room, Lucia's expression changed. Her eyes turned sharp as she stared at Amy and the muscles in her jaw clenched. There was no fear, only a grim determination.

"Amy, I want to tell you something very important."

"What's going on, Lucia?"

"Life is going on, Amy; life, and old age. I want you to promise to forget about me."

"Don't talk like that! You're my mom!"

Lucia shook her head. "That's not what I mean. Amy, the world is full of regular people like me, and brilliant, white-burning stars like you. A smart and

pretty girl like you is going to have a massive opportunity land in her lap sooner than you think. No, just let me talk. It might be tomorrow or it might be two years from now, but when that thing happens, don't look back. Don't let me slow down your dreams."

"Lucia, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It's okay if you don't understand it. Just don't forget it."

Amy had lunch in the hospital cafeteria, and rode home with Tony when he showed up after school. She tried to push Lucia's strange comments out of her mind, and guessed it was just the stress of the heart attack and being in a hospital.

"Can you drive me down the coast before dinner?"

Tony slowed the car to a stop at a red light and glanced at her. "What for?"

"It's a birthday party," said Amy. "For one of my friends."

Tony laughed. "Girl, you don't know anybody down the coast. You're going to steal something."

Amy batted her eyes. "How could I do a thing like that? I'm only fourteen. I don't know peas from carrots."

"I ain't heard lies that big since the last time I fished off the wharf," said Tony. "Well, okay. Just watch yourself and don't do anything stupid."

Amy squealed. She leaned over from the passenger seat and kissed him on the cheek. "You're the greatest!"

Tony sighed. "The whoppers just keep on coming ..."

Back home, Amy dashed to her room and emptied out her drawers searching for a good outfit. She tossed blouses, skirts, dresses, sweaters, slacks, and socks over her shoulder like a deranged pack rat.

"Too young, too young, too old, too boring, too trumpy, too itchy, too yesterday, too high school ..."

She finally settled on a short skirt of dark brown corduroy, a tan, button-up blouse, white knee socks, and a brown beret. Into a knapsack went a brown sash covered with merit badges, a bottle of water, a sandwich, a gray blanket, a penlight with red cellophane taped over the end, and a pair of binoculars.

Amy walked a couple of blocks to the grocery on Lighthouse and bought a box of Nerds. She poured the colored rocks into her mouth and dialed Robbie Calcetti's number on the pay phone outside. His mother answered.

"Hello?"

Amy turned the charm level in her voice up to eleven.

"Hello, Mrs. Calcetti. Could I speak to Robbie, please? It's about homework."

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Amy Armstrong."

"One moment. Robert!"

After a long pause, three heavy thumps vibrated in the receiver against Amy's ear.

"Yeah, whaddya want?"

"Robert, it's a girl. Be polite!" came the muffled voice of Mrs. Calcetti.

“Sorry,” he said. The phone rustled and the teenager’s voice came through clearly. “Whaddya want ... please?”

“Robbie, this is Amy. I heard you went to a party last night.”

“So?”

“A dear, close friend of mine wanted the name of the birthday boy.”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because I’ll give you a bunch of comics. I’ve got a whole stash from my brother.”

“Even Namor the Submariner?”

“The whole series,” said Amy.

Robert sniffed. “If you’re stupid enough to give away comics, I’ll take ‘em. The kid’s name is Frankie Yamagashi. He lives in the Highlands, across the road from that hotel in the curve, whatever it’s called.”

“I know. Thanks, Robbie.”

“Wait! What about the comics?”

“Keep your pants on. I’ll bring ‘em tomorrow.”

Amy hung up the phone and walked home.

South of Carmel the mountains come straight to the sea.

This is not a beachfront paradise. This is not a place where Nature whispers that she loves you. This is a place of gray rocks older than mankind, rock soaked black in the surf and made razor-sharp by the wind. This is a place where experienced swimmers drown in riptides, divers tangle in the thick seaweed, and stones cut your feet to shreds on the way to the beach. This is a place to lose your way in the midnight fog and stumble off a cliff. This is the dark, wintry soul of a state that has no winter. Even on the best days full of sunshine when the water is sapphire and you can see twenty miles down the coast to the lighthouse, the mountains and rocks and sea are still there, waiting for the fog to come back and your mistake to happen. Sharp and tough-barked pines cling to the mountains next to the sea, and between these trees are houses.

Amy didn’t care about all that crap; she just wanted a Super Nintendo made of pure gold.

Tony had dropped her off a half mile north of the place on Highway 1, and she walked the rest of the way. He’d said he’d pick her up at ten.

A dozen pickups and white vans were parked along the side of the road near the house. Through the fence Amy saw a two-story mansion of gray stone and huge windows facing the ocean. A platoon of workers hammered on a skeleton of fresh wood next to the house—someone had obviously decided that the obscene amount of square footage in the place wasn’t obscene enough. Amy squinted through the pines and guessed there were two dozen rooms inside. She had no problem stealing from fat cats, but more rooms meant security systems, or guards.

Amy crossed Highway 1 and climbed the rocky, pine-covered slope of the opposite side. She found a comfortable little niche on the shadowy side of a boulder, pulled out her blanket and binoculars, and settled in for a long wait.

Around four-thirty the construction crew left all at once with a burst of tired but jovial Spanish and joined the other cars speeding up the highway toward Monterey. The wrought iron gate across the driveway clanked and opened with a steady, motorized hum, and a black Mercedes drove out, an Asian woman behind the wheel and a teenage boy in the back seat.

Time crept by slowly, but Amy was good at waiting. Patience and a cute nose were the best qualities of any girl, Tony always said. Knowing the girls he'd dated, Amy didn't believe a word.

A large orange tabby stopped at the white-painted fog line at the edge of the road. He looked left and right, and then slunk across the road toward the house with his tail low to the ground. The sun dipped behind the clouds in the west and changed the sky to brilliant orange and red. Lights came on in the other houses but Frankie's stayed dark.

A white pickup with the gold badge of the Monterey County Sheriff's Office slowly drove by.

Amy hurriedly kicked off the blanket and pulled her beret lower on her head. She arranged the sash covered with patches over her shoulder and pointed the binoculars at the cedar and pine trees across the road.

Gravel crunched as the white pickup pulled into the tiny parking area in front of the house. A tanned deputy in forest-green pants and a tan shirt got out and walked across the road, the leather of his gun belt squeaking with each step.

"Hey there, little girl," he said.

Amy smiled. "Hello, officer!"

"Are you okay up there? Do you need any help?"

"Actually I do. Have you seen any condors around here? I need one more bird for my merit badge."

The deputy laughed. "A condor? You have to go fifty miles down the coast to see one of those. How about I give you a ride home? It's getting dark."

Amy cringed inside, but kept up her smile. The cop was going to put her in a bind.

"I don't need a ride, officer! I can walk."

The deputy glanced across the highway at the half-dozen cliffside houses.

"Where do you live?"

Amy started to groan in frustration, but turned the sound into a giggle.

"Frankie Yamagashi's house right there," she said. "I'm his cousin."

The deputy looked her up and down for a moment. At last he nodded.

"All right," he said. "Don't stay out here too long, and be careful when you cross the road."

"I promise!"

The deputy got back in his pickup and pulled out with a pop of gravel. Amy waited until his brake lights disappeared around the bend, then stuffed everything into her knapsack and scampered down the rocks. She hid behind a tree until a quiet gap appeared in the traffic, and then dashed across the road to a clump of cinnamon-barked manzanita bushes. Covering her face from the sharp branches, Amy crawled through the shrubbery until she found a dark space next to the redwood fence safe from passing headlights.

She relaxed among the tea leaf and pine smell of the manzanita, and went over her options. The deputy would be back, and he'd forced Amy to give up Frankie's name. She hoped he wasn't good police; the kind who'd knock on doors and scope out her story. If a one-of-a-kind game console disappeared from the Yamagashi house, that little blonde Girl Scout with the binoculars would be front and center for any questions.

Amy sighed. This is what happened when you did anything at the last minute. If she walked away, Mary Katherine would break her nose. If she got caught, she could be sent to a group home or another foster family. If she snatched the gold console and gave it to M.K., she'd just be another slave to the giant teenager, who'd threaten to tell the cops.

Ideally she'd have time to case the house, find the location of the console, and maybe leave another gold-painted SNES as a decoy. She'd make friends with this kid Frankie, find out the family travel patterns, and maybe wait for a weekend or a vacation.

But sometimes you had to suck it up and put on the big girl panties, and it looked like this was one of those "sometimes." Amy thought she could handle any blackmail Mary Katherine threw her way. She might even have time to double-cross her or steal the console back before Frankie noticed it was missing.

Amy stuck her hands into the cop gloves and felt the bottom of the redwood fence for a loose board or gap. Twenty feet along the weather-beaten fence she found a depression in the earth and a wobbly board, probably where that orange cat slipped through. Amy checked but it was too narrow to squeeze through even for her slender body.

She stuffed the Brownie sash into her knapsack and pulled a pair of black jeans over her legs, then tied her blonde hair into a ponytail, pinned it up with a barrette, and covered it with the brown beret.

Amy stood up carefully in the thick shrubbery, listening after every snap of a twig for a sudden bark or a footstep. She stretched her arms, hopped up, and felt barbed wire at the top of the tall redwood fence. The sharp prongs didn't penetrate her leather gloves, luckily. Amy folded the wool blanket along its length about six times, and then jumped up with her arms extended to lay it over the top of the fence. She still hadn't heard anything suspicious from inside, so leapt up and pulled herself over the top, using the layers of the blanket as protection against the barbed wire.

The slim teenager dropped behind a lilac bush. She pulled her blanket off the fence and squatted in the dark, watching and waiting.

At the bottom of a slope covered in pine trees, twilight framed the house against a gray ocean. The deep bass and rumble of waves crashing on the rocks was much louder than out on the street, and the moist earth beneath Amy's feet seemed to vibrate with each regular, unending boom. A brick path wound through the trees, and the air was full of the smell of flowers and pine needles. Apart from the glow of walkway lights and a spotlight at the main door, the majestic house lay dark and silent.

Amy scanned the entire area with her binoculars. A security camera swiveled maliciously above the double red doors of the main entrance. Amy spotted other cameras at the corners of the house.

After ten minutes, nothing had changed. Amy searched the ground around her feet, and then tossed a rock at the main entrance. The pebble cracked on the sidewalk and bounced away. Amy hit the red door on her third try. Still no response. She crept through the trees and threw a handful of tiny stones at the closest window, one after the other. Nothing.

Amy waited in the shadow of a big cedar and thought over the problem. The security cameras at each side of the house panned back and forth, but as they swept away from Amy and toward the ocean, created a blind spot around the wooden skeleton of the new construction. Another camera should have covered that area, and must have been removed while the work was going on. Amy waited until the cameras rotated back to the sea, then sprinted across the garden and into the building site.

She crouched with her back to a concrete wall waiting for a yell or footsteps, but heard only the creak of pine branches lifting in the breeze and the rumble of the ocean.

Bare plywood covered the floor of the addition, dotted with scraps of wood and a thin blanket of sawdust. The woody, moist smell of fresh-cut lumber tickled Amy's nose, and above her head, the dark rafters were framed against a purple sky.

Amy felt around the wall and touched the hinges of a door. The knob turned freely but the door wouldn't budge, even with Amy's shoulder and all her weight against it. Something had jammed it in place, intentionally or otherwise. There was no sign of a keyhole and the wooden door sounded hollow against a faint knock of Amy's knuckles, so she guessed it was jammed for security.

A pigtail was always useful on jobs because it was basically a tiny crowbar. Amy took one from her knapsack and slid the flat end beneath the half-inch gap in the bottom of the door and the kicker plate. The pigtail knocked against something a few inches from the door jamb. Amy started from the other side and worked the pigtail back and forth until the thing popped away and the door swung freely. She pushed the door and inside on the linoleum floor lay a rough-cut wedge of wood—

a cheap doorstep. Amy crept inside, shut the door, and put the wedge back in place.

Boxes of ceramic tile and construction tools were stacked around the dark room, and it was full of the chalky smell of drywall. Vertical smears of spackle marked the unpainted walls. Amy moved through the room at a crouch and avoided the windows crossed with blue painter's tape.

A clear plastic curtain blocked passage into the main house. Nearby, a sign in flowery letters proclaimed, "Please Wear Shoe Covers," and pointed to a wicker basket.

"Don't mind if I do," Amy murmured.

She took a pair of the white cotton sheaths from the basket and slipped them over her shoes. Amy slowly pushed through the plastic and gasped in shock.

She'd been through a mansion or two in the last few years, but nothing like this. Huge paintings of cowboys and Western landscapes covered the walls, and the ceiling glowed from hidden lights at the cornices. The floor was waxed hardwood, and overstuffed leather furniture waited around the room on fluffy rugs. Across the room and to the left were dark wooden doors and a mahogany staircase. To the right lay the foyer and the red doors of the main entrance.

Nothing but the regular tick of a clock broke the silence, not even the high-pitched whine of a television. In Amy's experience, the only people left in a dark house would either be sleeping or watching television.

Amy scanned the room for cameras, saw none, and then crept through the rooms in the first floor. A house like this probably had a playroom for video games, foosball, pool—a space for kids to hang out. She could have asked Calcetti where the gold SNES was, but that was like yelling "I WANT TO STEAL IT" over the public broadcast system.

Rich places like this were more like a museum or a house on another planet. They could afford a maid, a good one who actually cleaned things. The rooms smelled of lavender and clean metal and leather, not like the places that normal people lived. Normal houses smelled like the people and things inside them, which meant pizza, ripe cantaloupe, cat urine, and bleach.

Amy found a kitchen, dining room, library, exercise room, office, sunroom, conservatory, garage, and several bathrooms on the first floor, but no playroom and no gold Super Nintendo.

She worked her way carefully up mahogany steps to the second floor and poked her head into luxuriously appointed bedrooms filled with more paintings and huge beds covered in puffy down comforters.

The fourth door was ajar. Amy listened for a moment, then pushed it open a bit with her gloved finger. Through the crack she saw a bed covered with a rumpled Spiderman blanket and a *Dumb & Dumber* movie poster on the wall.

"Bingo," she said, and crept inside.

G.I. Joes and a spray of tiny plastic weapons covered the red carpet as if Little Big Horn had broken out at the Hasbro factory. Posters of Schwarzenegger and the

Lethal Weapon series covered the walls. A bookshelf was loaded down with a battalion of Transformers in the midst of robotic conflict; some hanging by white string, plastic guns extended, and others sprawled in the agony of defeat. The room was filled with the disgusting stench of a teenage boy: Cool Ranch Doritos, model glue, and body odor.

A neon blue leather sofa stood at the foot of the bed and faced a huge, thirty-two inch television in a black entertainment center. Purple and lilac Super Nintendo controllers lay on the carpet in a tangle of wires. Amy followed the trail of cords to a glass cabinet beside the television, where a golden, blocky treasure reflected the crimson shine from her flashlight.

“Double Bingo!”

Amy opened the glass door. She unplugged the power, video, and all four controllers from the gleaming Super Nintendo, and then pulled it off the shelf.

“Yowza,” she whispered, and set the console on the carpet.

It weighed a ton and Amy was glad she had the cop gloves to protect her fingers. She wondered if the thing would rip through the bottom of her knapsack. The best thing would be to hide it inside the knapsack and carry everything in her arms. It wouldn't be easy, but nothing about today had been easy.

A swish came from outside the room and Amy flattened against the side of the bookshelf. The door creaked open and the large orange tabby padded inside, his green eyes wide and striped tail held straight up. The cat trotted past the bed and went straight to the gold Super Nintendo on the carpet. He bent down to sniff it.

It was just a cat. Amy let out a loud sigh, and released all her nervous, clenched-up tension.

The cat sprang three feet straight up and landed in the tangle of controller cords. It hissed and spat as it squirmed in the cables for a few seconds, causing Amy to giggle.

The cat freed himself from the cords with a frantic somersault, and bared his teeth at the laughing girl.

“What's so funny?” said the cat.