

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Chapter 1

Robin Parks and Tyler Hedges sat on a large rock next to the side of the old dirt road, Bailey Way. Cousin Maggie would most likely be coming down this road any time now in her camper.

"Are you sure she's coming today?" Ty asked.

"My dad said she is," said Robin.

"Then how do you know she'll be using the road?"

"You're not supposed to fly over other peoples' property."

"But she's kind of a rebel isn't she?"

Robin's eyes lit up and she smiled. "Yeah. That's why I can't wait to talk to her."

"Let me come with you when you talk to her."

"I don't even know if she'll talk to me. My dad said she's kind of a loner—keeps to herself."

Ty kicked the dirt under his feet. "Yeah, she might not take too kindly to kids asking her questions, especially about getting kicked out of the Air Force."

"I'm not going to mention that, believe me."

Just then, Robin heard a distant rumbling. She and Ty stood and turned to their left. Robin squinted. As the vehicle came closer, she recognized it as Ben Polovich's drywall truck. It came barreling down the road on its huge rubber tires, making a racket and kicking up dust as it passed them by.

"Sure are a lot of houses going up lately," Ty commented.

"Yeah, people are eager to move out of the city. You can't blame them."

"I know, but I bet it's just a matter of time until the ballbombs attack again, and who knows if they'll just attack the cities next time?"

"I don't want to think about it," said Robin. What they did two years ago was bad enough. Robin had been ten when her mother was killed. Her mother been working in a downtown office when a cluster of ballbombs let loose on seven skyscrapers. Fortunately, they were not nukes, but they killed almost half a million people. Since that time, people had moved away from the cities. The skyscrapers had never been rebuilt. Instead, the city maintained two- or three-storey buildings for office workers.

"Well, whether you think about it or not, the bombs could come back anytime."

"Look." Robin pointed. "I think that's my mom's cousin." The camper skimmed quietly toward them, following the dirt road then cut across Pat Campbell's empty lot shortcutting to Robin's dad's property.

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"Hey, we're not allowed to cross the empty lot. Why is she?"

"Maggie Preston doesn't always follow the rules," my dad said.

"It's probably why she got kicked out of the Air Force," said Ty.

"Maybe, but I'm sure there's more to it than that. She was a good fighter pilot and blasted a lot of ballbombs. They must've had a pretty good reason to get rid of her."

Robin and Ty started walking in the direction of Robin's house. Neither said anything until they got to Robin's yard.

"So, she's gonna live in your little rental house?"

"That's the plan."

Ty looked at his chrono. "I'd better be getting on home. Got chores."

"Okay, see ya."

Robin took her time walking the rest of the way home. Cousin Maggie was already parked in the driveway of the small cottage. Robin stood on her own back porch for perhaps ten minutes, hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman. When Maggie didn't appear, Robin opened the screen door and stepped inside.

She heard voices coming from the living room, one of them her father's. She grabbed a can of soda from the cooler and peeked into the next room. Her father was sitting on the sofa and Cousin Maggie was in the big red chair.

"Oh, Robin, come on in," her father said. "You remember your mother's cousin."

Maggie stood as Robin came forward. All of a sudden she felt shy. "Yes, hello Cousin Maggie." She seemed shorter than Robin remembered. Only a few centimeters taller than Robin.

"You certainly have grown," Maggie said. She smiled and held out her hand. Robin shook it, but Maggie's hand was cold, stiff and hard. Maggie let her hand drop abruptly.

"I never know what to say to people when they tell me that," Robin stammered. "Yes, I've grown."

Maggie sat down. Robin took a place on the couch next to her father.

"As I was saying, Chess, I can get a bed from the second-hand store. I don't want to put you to any extra trouble."

Robin's father waved his hand. "No trouble at all. We've got an extra one not even being used. However, you're going to have to come up with the rest of the furniture on your own."

"I can make do for a few days until my pay from the Air Force comes."

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Robin's father leaned over. "To be honest, I'm glad to have a renter for our little cottage. I had to sell off five acres last year. I didn't want to sell the cottage as well."

"Times are tough for all of us, Chess. Glad I could help out."

Robin studied Maggie as she and her father were talking about boring stuff like the six-month lease, keeping the yard in shape, and payment for utilities. Maggie's orange hair was cropped short. It was a brighter color than Robin remembered. Probably from her not being in the sun much. She'd been living on the space station for a long time. Robin wanted to ask her all about being a fighter pilot and even more, why she was fired from her job. But her father had told her Maggie wanted to be left alone.

"Stay for dinner?" Robin's father asked Maggie after she had signed the lease and they both stood up.

"Not tonight, but thank you."

"Perhaps Friday night. My friend, Karen Trowbridge will be over. The kids will join us, and we'll make an evening of it."

Maggie hesitated. "I'll give it some thought. Thank you, Chess. Now, I'd better get busy."

Robin's dad glanced at Robin then back to Maggie. "Robin and I can help you unload if you'd like." Robin normally didn't like being volunteered for something without being consulted first, but she was curious about Maggie. What kind of stuff did she have in that camper?

"Oh, I can do it myself." Maggie started toward the front door. "Thank you though."

"Well, let me put that bed in there for you," Robin's father said.

"Okay, that would be fine."

Robin jumped up from the couch and followed her dad to the door. After Maggie left, he told her he could move the bed himself. "Go set the table for dinner, Robin. And find your brother."

"Yes, sir."

The next morning, Maggie's camper was gone before Robin left for school. She and her brother, Sam, had their usual cold cereal. Robin had fixed their lunches the night before, so all they had to do was rush up the road and catch the bus. Their father was still in bed, having stayed up late working on a neighbor's tractor. Since he'd lost his job at the city garage, he took local work whenever he could. Robin didn't know how long the money would hold out, but she was concerned, even though her father told her there was nothing to worry about.

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On the bus, Robin studied for the standardized test that would let her skip the eighth grade.

“What do you need to study for, Parks?” a rude boy taunted her. It was Rocky Trump. He was already in the eighth grade and thought he was king of the eighth grade.

Robin recognized him as a bully and knew he was jealous of her straight As. Of course, getting good grades didn’t make a person very popular. Robin didn’t care. She wanted out of this stupid elementary school and into high school. Actually, her dream was to get a scholarship from the Air Force Academy. She wanted to be a fighter pilot and knock down those ballbombs that had been responsible for her mother’s death as well as two-thirds of the people in the city that day.

She was tempted to call Rocky a retard, though he really wasn’t. Just lazy like most the kids, trying to do as little schoolwork as possible. But she held her tongue and continued focusing on the math in the study guide. She’d have to get some algebra tutoring if she couldn’t figure it out herself. But where? And how could she pay for it? Her family couldn’t even afford a hookup to the Net anymore. If she wanted to do research, she had to stay after school.

Robin had stayed late and taken the activity bus home. It wasn’t so crowded—only five other kids. The test was in two weeks, and she just had to pass it. If she got a good enough score to skip eighth grade, then she would apply for a scholarship to the Academy.

The next evening, Maggie and Ms. Trowbridge came over for dinner. Robin’s dad cooked a pot roast with boiled potatoes and carrots. Not one of Robin’s favorite meals, but she was curious enough about Maggie to look forward to the event. Robin’s father had started dating Ms. Trowbridge, a substitute teacher at Ridge Elementary, a few months ago, actually, right after Christmas. Robin didn’t think too much of her. She admitted to herself that she probably wouldn’t like anyone who dated her father. But she told herself she wouldn’t get upset until her father actually planned on marrying someone. No one could take the place of her mother.

“So, how was the trip out here Maggie? I hear the Chevy campers do pretty well across country.”

Cousin Maggie had just taken a bite of potato and had to wait to answer.

“Actually, not bad. The new air cushion suspension is much more comfortable than the models put out last year. A big improvement.”

“Wow, must’ve cost a lot for a new one,” Robin’s brother, Sam, chimed.

“Sam,” Robin’s father scolded. “That’s not polite.”

Sam shrugged his shoulders. “Why not?”

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"It's okay, Chess," Maggie said. "The new Chevy campers like mine range from \$150,000 to \$175,000. But I got a deal."

Robin wondered what kind of deal. Maybe it was part of her agreement to leave the Air Force. Maybe someone paid her off to keep quiet about something. She couldn't believe what the news reports said about Maggie. They'd said she hadn't followed orders and was responsible for the disappearance of two of her teammates. She finally proved it was not her fault, but she still had to be in the brig for three months for not following orders. After that, she was dishonorably discharged. Robin looked at Maggie inquiringly. Maggie gave her a stare that told her not to ask any questions.

"Would you like some more potatoes, Robin?" Ms. Trowbridge asked as she picked up the platter.

"No."

"Robin, where are your manners?" her father reprimanded.

"No, *thank you*, Ms. Trowbridge." The woman bugged Robin. She didn't know why. She was petite and very feminine. Robin didn't think she'd ever seen her wearing pants. Her short, curly brown hair always looked perfect, as did her makeup. But it wasn't her appearance that really bothered Robin. It was something more. Maybe it was how she tried to please everyone when Robin's father was around. Robin had experienced her as a substitute teacher a couple of times in sixth grade, and Ms. Trowbridge sure acted different in the classroom. She was constantly sending kids to the principal's office for hardly anything at all. Robin had whispered to her classmate one time, and was sent out of the room for a half hour. That was humiliating, considering Robin was the smartest kid in the class.

"May I be excused?" Robin asked her father.

"Me too?" said Sam.

Robin's dad hesitated. "As soon as you finish what's on your plates, both of you."

Robin and Sam hurriedly scooped the remainder of their food into their mouths and stood up before swallowing it. Robin felt Maggie's eyes on her but didn't meet them with her own.

"You're still responsible for the dishes, young lady. And you too, young man."

"We know," said Sam.

The next night, Chester went to Ms. Trowbridge's house. Robin wasn't surprised. He'd been staying all night with her on Saturdays for three weeks now. This might be one reason Robin resented her, she thought. She took Robin's dad away from her and Sam. And of course they wouldn't want to stay all night here in the presence of the kids. She wished Maggie would come over and keep them company.

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After Sam was tucked into bed, Robin went outside and climbed her favorite tree, the one that overlooked the valley and had a good view of the cottage. Maggie's lights were going on and off in various rooms. Then she opened the front door and headed for her camper. It was dark outside, so Robin wasn't sure if her eyes were deceiving her, but it looked like Maggie was wearing a short skirt, high heels, and a leather jacket. She only got a glimpse of her from the porch light as she came out the door. She threw her purse into the camper's cab and hopped in. The quiet antigrav engines started up, and the camper whisked away.

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Chapter 2

The long weeks of May finally came to an end, and Robin went to the city to take her tests. It was a wonder she had time to study for them with all the chores she had— weeding the new newly planted vegetable garden, feeding the chickens and rabbits, doing the dishes, dusting the house. She passed the tests in all areas to qualify her for ninth grade the coming academic year, having learned pre-algebra on her own. The tests for the Air Force Academy weren't until late August, so Robin suddenly had more time on her hands, that is, the time when she wasn't doing her chores or studying for the Air Force exam.

Robin had been in Maggie Preston's house only once since she'd moved in. That was to help her move a big chair in. Maggie appeared to be a neat housekeeper, as Robin saw nothing out of place. A shelf of books occupied two walls in the living room, a video display screen filled another wall, and a mass of electronic equipment was tucked under a desk in a corner, evidently, the operations center of her satellite system. An adjustable chair sat next to the desk, and one couch stretched across another wall.

"Since you'll be studying for the Air Force exam, I'll let you tap into my satellite system to study," Maggie offered. Other than that, I don't want to be bothered. Is that understood?"

Robin felt like telling her it had been clearly understood from the moment Maggie moved in that she didn't want company. Robin felt aggravated enough to respond with a question of her own.

"So why don't you ever want company?"

"I'm extremely busy," Maggie snapped.

Robin decided to push her luck. "Are you trying to get back into the Air Force?"

"That's none of your concern, Robin. It would be best if you didn't meddle in other peoples' affairs. Your father should have told you I didn't want to be bothered or questioned."

"He did," said Robin. "I just think it was unfair they...."

"Life isn't fair, young lady. Now you best be going."

"Yes, ma'am." Robin's heart was pounding and she felt blood rush to her face as she turned on her heel and walked out the door. Part of her felt like crying and another part of her was angry at Maggie's swift dismissal.

For the last two months, Robin noticed Maggie took off in her camper on Friday nights, occasionally Saturday nights, and returned late Sunday afternoons. Last weekend, Robin caught a glimpse of her climbing into her camper. She was wearing a short, tight skirt, high heels, and a red top that revealed a healthy amount of cleavage.

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No, Robin thought. She couldn't be a prostitute. Not Lieutenant Maggie Preston, decorated fighter pilot of the last war. But what else could she be doing? Money was hard to come by everywhere, and Maggie no longer drew a salary from the Air Force. Robin felt disappointed. She had looked up to Maggie for her bravery in battle. She hoped it wasn't true.

So tonight, Robin climbed up in her tree overlooking Maggie's house and waited for her to unlock the back of her camper and throw some things in. Maggie usually went back into the house once after that before getting into the cab to take off. Robin would have a minute or two to sneak into the camper, if Maggie didn't lock it, which she usually didn't. Robin knew she shouldn't do this, and she would be in deep, deep you-know-what if she were caught. She had told her dad she was spending the night at her friend Sandy's house. That gave her a good excuse to take a bag with her. Robin's plan was to find out where Maggie went and maybe even spy on her if possible. Then she would catch a transit back from town—she assumed Maggie was going into the city—before Maggie discovered her. If she arrived home in the middle of the night, she would try not to wake her dad. If she did, she'd tell him that she and Sandy had an argument and Sandy's dad drove her home. But she hoped she didn't have to tell that story. She'd already lied, and she didn't want to tell another.

Robin threw down her bag and scrambled out of the tree, falling and scraping her knee as she did. She struggled to her feet, grabbed her bag, and dashed toward the camper. Then she quietly opened the back door and slid in, latching the door from the inside ever so carefully. Whew, she made it. A few seconds later, Maggie emerged from her house and climbed into the cab of the camper. Robin could see her head through a small window between the back and the front. Then it occurred to Robin that Maggie would probably lock up the back before she went wherever she was going. Robin's heartbeat quickened at the thought. She looked around inside the camper. There was an almost full-sized bed hanging over the cab and a smaller bed that probably doubled as the seat for a kitchen table. A small stove and tiny icebox filled the other side. The toilet and shower hid in a corner on the tableside. She could hide in there if need be, but for how long? And what if Maggie brought her clients in here? She'd really be in trouble then. Robin tried the latch and discovered she could lock and unlock it from inside. Whew! She was free to escape whenever the camper came to a stop.

The antigrav engines whispered on. The camper sat for a moment while the pressure built. Robin heard a soft whine indicating the engines were ready to propel them off to their destination, wherever that might be.

Robin took a deep breath. She looked out the small porthole next to the single bed. The terrain was spotted with occasional rubble-filled wasteland between her neighborhood and the city. She hadn't been into the city for almost a year, when her dad had gone to look for work. As they drew near the city, Robin noticed more areas that had been affected by the ballbombs. Entire neighborhoods had been wiped out.

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Some were left in shambles while others were being rebuilt. But most had not been rebuilt. Robin knew people were moving farther and farther away from major cities. She'd seen that on news reports.

Just then, the camper hit an air pocket. Robin fell off the bed and landed on the floor with a thump. She hoped Maggie hadn't heard that. No harm done. She got up and made sure she held onto something for the remainder of the trip.

There wasn't much traffic at the RV altitude, so the camper reached the city much faster than a regular car would normally arrive. Maggie slowed, and adrenaline rushed to Robin's head. She became alert like a fox hunting its prey.

They wove around several streets until Maggie entered a multi-storied parking garage. Maggie found a stall on the second level, and Robin jumped out before Maggie lowered the vehicle into the security basin. It was now, or be locked inside the camper for who knew how long?

Robin gently closed the doors behind her and slipped around to the passenger side of the vehicle just in time to avoid detection by Maggie, who then opened the camper's back doors, removed a long, canvas bag, and then closed the doors.

Robin followed Maggie out of the garage, across the skybridge, and down a flight of stairs and onto the street. I wonder what's in the bag, Robin thought. It looked as if it could be a firearm.

Maggie moved quickly, and Robin almost missed seeing her slip into the alley entrance of the Flying Crow Bar.

Robin warily walked around to the street side of the bar. It was getting dark, and she certainly wanted to be out in the open, not hidden away where someone would more likely mug her. She stuffed her long hair up into her baseball hat and tried to walk like a boy. She could pass for one if she kept her head down and pretended like she knew the streets.

When no one was looking, Robin casually walked to the front door of the bar. The door was conveniently propped open, and Robin stuck her head inside just long enough to see several pool tables and three men sitting on barstools. Robin walked around the block so as not to appear to be loitering. Then she stuck her head in the doorway again and spotted Maggie taking a shot with a pool stick. Robin gasped and withdrew again. So this is what she was doing—not selling her body, not being a hired killer or a drug dealer, but hustling pool.

"That's a hundred you owe me, Glen. Pay up," Maggie demanded. So that's how she's getting money, Robin thought.

Maggie would probably be here for a while, so Robin found a small diner down the street. She hated to pay good money for food, but her stomach was growling. She had completely forgotten to pack herself a bite to eat. But the hamburger, fries, and

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chocolate milkshake turned out to be worth it. She'd not had any of this type of food for weeks, not since she finished her test for high school and had gone out to eat with the test group.

Robin lingered at the diner as long as she could until the man server gave her the eye a few times. She wanted to find out where Maggie went after the bar, but it was only a few minutes after nine, and the bar would be open until 2 a.m.

She decided to see if the camper was still in the parking garage. She'd just stroll by the Flying Crow Bar on her way and peek in the door one more time.

As Robin passed the bar, she heard the familiar crack of pool balls breaking. A quick peek told her more people were playing, but she didn't catch a glimpse of Maggie this time.

On her way to the parking garage, two people came out of nowhere and jumped her, grabbing her arms from each side. Immediately, cement met her eyes. She felt her chin grind into the sidewalk as her arms were yanked in back of her. She started to yell, but a large hand muffled her mouth. She felt other hands stuffing into her jacket and jeans pockets, ripping out the contents. In an instant, her wallet along with some loose change was gone. However, they didn't get her pocketknife, safely zipped away in a hidden pocket of her jeans. All of a sudden, her arms were free, and she looked up to see two teens, a boy and a girl, running down the street. They vanished around a corner before she could even move.

Robin struggled into a sitting position and felt sharp pain in her knees. The teens had slammed her body face down onto the pavement. She moaned, but managed to stand up and dust herself off. Two adults walked by and gave her a strange look, as if she were some sort of alien.

She managed to take a few steps while checking her pockets. Yes, all her money was gone. Now she would have to wait for a ride from Maggie instead of taking the transit.

Fortunately, the camper was still there when Robin arrived, exhausted. There was no way to get inside until Maggie elevated the camper all the way out of the security basin, and there was really nowhere for her to sit and wait.

Robin looked up and spotted a security guard several meters away. She did *not* want to be spotted by him. He would insist on calling her dad, and then she'd be in big trouble. She was going to have a hard time explaining the scrape on her chin as is. She hadn't seen it herself, but it hurt like crazy and had bled a little when she touched it.

Robin quickly ducked behind a car. The security guard acted as though he'd heard her and started walking in her direction, a suspicious look on his pasty round face. Robin held her breath until he passed and turned back. Then she let it out slowly. That was a close one.

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She might as well stay here. She sat down on the cold cement, remembering how her father had told her not to sit on cement—it could give her a cold. A pillow would be nice, but she wasn't going to worry about it. She'd just sit here for a minute. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

Robin woke to the hydraulic whine of a car door opening. She didn't know how long she'd been asleep. It was the car she was hiding behind. Its owner was leaving. She quickly moved behind another car. Her knees hurt worse than they had right after she'd been mugged.

She noticed more and more people entering the parking garage. In fact, it seemed like some kind of mass exodus. Maybe she could sneak to the stairs without anyone noticing. As she was hobbling into the stairwell, someone bumped into her.

"Excuse me," Robin mumbled. She felt hands on her shoulders and looked up into the face of Cousin Maggie.

"Robin, what are you doing here?" The alarm on Maggie's face was more intense than her tone of voice.

"I...."

"You're hurt," Maggie interrupted before Robin could think up a reasonable sounding lie. Maggie lifted Robin's chin and examined the abrasion.

"Some teens attacked me and stole my money," Robin said, trying her best not to cry. She didn't want Maggie to think she was some kind of wimp, especially since Maggie had been a strong Air Force pilot and Robin was trying to get into the Force.

"I'm sorry, Robin, but you have no business being downtown by yourself, especially at night."

"I know." Robin was relieved that Maggie didn't make a bigger fuss over her. Being lectured to was much better and allowed Robin to more easily retain her composure.

Maggie turned and put an arm around Robin's shoulder. "Come on, we've got to get out of here."

Robin followed Maggie to her camper. Maggie's steps were quick, and Robin limped along trying to keep up with her.

When they reached the camper, Maggie clicked her remote to raise the vehicle. She quickly slid inside, urging Robin to do the same. The doors whined shut and Maggie started the engine.

"What's going on?" Robin asked. "Everyone is rushing to their vehicles."

Maggie backed out quickly but was stuck behind seven or eight other vehicles waiting to exit the garage. Robin was still waiting for an answer when Maggie's turn came, and she shot out the parking garage's door. She climbed into the RV lane above

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the city, and then turned toward Robin. "I'm afraid that more ballbombs have been released."

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Chapter 3

Robin's heart jumped. "Where?" she asked, alarmed.

"Reports have come in from all over—mostly rural areas this time. We've got to get home and check on your father and brother."

Robin's throat was tight all the way home, and she was grateful Maggie didn't ask her again what she was doing downtown by herself at night. Right now, they were both staring straight out the window, intent on getting back home as quickly as possible.

The airways were streaked with vehicle lights, people racing out of the city going to check on their families and friends. No one seemed to care if they might be going toward the attacks. Even the RV lane was crowded. Many people dropped out of their lanes and illegally passed others. Robin saw two collisions before they reached the rural area.

Maggie slowed the camper as they approached their property. Lights had gone out around their houses, and all they had to go on were the camper's headlights.

Maggie scanned the area before touching down. Robin wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a big hole blown in her father's house. Maybe, she hoped, it was her eyes playing tricks on her. Maggie's small house looked intact.

Maggie grabbed a flashlight from her camper, and Robin followed her into her cottage. Maggie opened her refrigerator and took out a bottle of orange juice and one of milk. There wasn't much else in there.

"Go through the cupboards and grab us some food," Maggie ordered Robin. Maggie scooted an empty box into the kitchen. "Put it in here. We don't know how long before we come back."

"What about my house?" Robin asked. She was eager to get over there and check on her dad and brother.

"We'll get there in a few minutes." Maggie was busy gathering clothing and stuffing it into duffel bags.

After they had loaded their goods, including Maggie's computer, into the camper, Maggie drove it over to Robin's house.

Robin's eyes had not been playing tricks on her. The garage, kitchen, and her bedroom had been hit. They both ran into Robin's house and scurried throughout looking for Robin's dad and Sam. Their clothing and belongings were there as well as suitcases and bags. The rest of the house was intact, but her brother and father were nowhere to be found.

Maggie went into the garage. Robin went in a few minutes later. The car was totaled, and the truck was crushed in the rear. Wood and metal were scattered everywhere, and there was a large hole in the roof. Robin ran toward the car.

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"Be careful," said Maggie. "Lots of sharp objects everywhere."

Robin ignored her and started tearing through the car.

"I already looked," said Maggie. "No sign of them."

Robin's relief was only temporary. "Then where could they be?"

Maggie shrugged. "Don't know."

"Maybe they're in the cellar," Robin said. She heard panic in her voice and saw anxiety on Maggie's face.

Maggie opened the trap door and led the way down the creaky wooden stairs to the musty cellar, where the flashlight revealed a few jars of canned fruit but mostly cobwebs. No one had been down here since Robin's mom had died. She used to can fruit and store it here.

The flashlight darted around the room, but there was no brother and no dad. "Where could they be?" Robin said.

"They could be at a neighbor's or the local bomb shelter," Maggie replied.

Just then Robin heard an explosion in the distance, but it was enough to rock the house.

"Ballbombs!" Maggie yelled and grabbed Robin by the arm. "Get down now!"

Two more explosions rocked the house, a little closer this time. Then nothing.

After some time, Robin asked, "How long do we have to stay down here?" Robin asked.

Maggie was silent, as if she hadn't heard Robin's question.

"I'm hungry. Can't we go upstairs?"

Maggie seemed to hear Robin this time. "I'll go get something out of the kitchen. You stay here. We don't know how long the bombs will hang around."

"I want to go too." Robin started to get up.

"No!" Maggie insisted.

Robin sat back down on the cold floor and folded her arms.

"I'll be right back. In the mean time, you can find us something comfortable to sit on. There must be something down here. Sleeping bags? Folding chairs?"

Robin managed to find a couple of old rolled up sleeping bags. She batted a few spiders away and laid them out on the floor, one on top of the other. It was hard to see with only the small pinpoint flashlight she had. When Maggie got back, she would suggest trying the emergency generator, but access to it was from outside.

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Maggie returned with a box of crackers and some cheese that was still a little cold, the refrigerator's power having gone out about three hours ago according to its battery powered chrono. She also brought some blankets from Robin's bed. Robin ate hungrily. She hadn't realized how long it had been since she'd eaten at the diner downtown. Four hours? Six hours? She looked at her own wrist chrono and was shocked to discover it was 4:17 a.m.

"There's a generator outside," she told Maggie after they had finished eating.

"No, not safe."

"But there hasn't been any noise for a half hour at least."

"We won't need light to sleep. Anyway, daylight will be here soon."

Robin woke to the gentle jiggling of her shoulder. For a moment, she forgot where she was and examined the wall and ceiling trying to familiarize herself with her surroundings.

"We've got to get going," said a familiar voice. Cousin Maggie.

Robin didn't want to get out of the warm sleeping bag. "Why now?" she asked.

"National Guard is out, searching for folks. If we want to stay on our own, we'd better leave now."

Robin sat up quickly. "Maybe they'll find Dad and Sam."

"Let's hope someone finds them."

"I'd rather we did."

"Get on upstairs and wash up. The plumbing still works."

"What about the attacks?"

"I've been awake most the night. Haven't heard one since around 6 a.m."

Robin climbed out of the sleeping bag, slipped on her shoes, and ascended the old wooden stairs. Maggie waited impatiently for her. Evidently, she'd been ready to go since 6 a.m. as well. Robin checked her chrono. It was 10:43 a.m. She wasn't cold anymore.

The camper was just the right temperature, not needing the air conditioning yet. Riding in the front seat was much more comfortable than hiding in the back. They were both silent as the pockmarked countryside swept by. Robin was grateful Maggie didn't ask her if she had stowed away in her camper the night before. Certainly, she would have to explain eventually.

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It wasn't long before they came across a Red Cross flag sticking out of the ground. Maggie drove under the ground where the facility was located and brought the camper to a halt in the parking lot.

"I hope they have some food," Robin said.

"We've got some food," said Maggie.

Robin said nothing. She was hoping for a hot breakfast.

"I can cook us some eggs," Maggie said, as if reading her mind.

"Oh yeah, I forgot you have a stove in this thing." Still, Robin would rather have a meal in the shelter. It would be easier to approach the others for questioning, though she was shy about doing that.

Once inside the shelter, Maggie told the administrator that Robin was looking for Chester and Samuel Parks. The man checked a paper list, but couldn't find their names. "We're full up for beds, but you can join us for breakfast if you'd like," he told them. "Be about a half hour."

Robin shot Maggie a look.

"Thanks, we accept," Maggie said.

Breakfast was scrambled eggs—maybe powdered—Robin didn't care—they tasted good—hash browns, white toast with margarine, whole oranges, and no meat. There was coffee and hot water for tea and hot chocolate from two huge pots. A cheap brand of water bottles littered the table.

After Robin had stuffed herself too full, she bothered to check out the other people. First, she counted them—forty-three including staff. Their ages varied from old to young, the oldest-looking one being a man with a full head of white hair, a slightly bulging belly, and a very cool cane made of wood with a carved bird on top. She stared at him for a moment, and then looked away when he noticed her.

Most appeared to be families or partial families anyway. A few had young children under the age of four, who occasionally squealed. Robin spotted a girl younger than herself—perhaps ten or eleven—with a man who appeared to be her father, as she stayed close to him. A cute boy joined them at one point—maybe the brother. Robin felt a pang of sadness at the disappearance of her own brother and father.

Maggie was busy talking to folks, apparently asking them if they'd seen Chester and Sam, as she held pictures up for them to examine. Robin saw them shaking their heads no. Most people looked sad and some frightened. Robin was glad when Maggie said they were leaving.

They stopped at two more shelters before reaching the city. Fortunately, Robin didn't see any dead bodies lying around.

"The National Guard is probably picking them up pretty fast."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

“Yeah, or the aliens scooped them up and took them away.”

Maggie just gave her a look as if saying that was a bit farfetched.

Robin asked Maggie for her comm. She had tried Maggie’s comm dozens of times but could reach no one.

Evidently, Maggie had checked with people at the shelters regarding come service. “Satellites are knocked out, kid. No one’s communicator is working.”

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Chapter 4

After trying three entrances to the city and finding them all blockaded with guard stations and long lines of vehicles, Robin and Maggie resigned themselves to waiting at the fourth entrance they approached. Like the others, this entrance to the city limits was gated with tall chain-link fencing, apparently thrown up in a hurry, and the vehicle lanes were gated with force fields.

"Your business here?" a young guard sighed as if asking the question for the thousandth time.

"We're searching for family," Maggie answered.

"Identifications please."

They held out their arms and their photos, names, ages, and other information appeared on the guard's scanner. The guard raised an eyebrow at Maggie. "Air Force, huh?"

"Ex," Maggie said.

"Maybe not for long," said the guard. "They're recruiting over at the Federal Building. They need everyone they can get."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Maggie. "Can we go now?"

"As for your search, a makeshift morgue has been set up behind County Hospital. Might save yourselves some time if you look there first."

"Thanks." Maggie took off toward the hospital section of the city.

Robin was shocked at the number of body bags lined up under the huge white tent. Each one was labeled with a number. Photos with numbers corresponding to the bodies were posted on a huge bulletin board.

"I can do this, if you want to wait here," Maggie told Robin.

"No, I want to look," Robin said.

Together they examined over a hundred photos but could recognize no one. Some were hard to look at. Although most had no identifying physical damage, they often had expressions of fright on their faces—frozen when they suddenly died. Robin wondered what exactly they had seen.

"C'mon, let's get out of here," Maggie said. As they were leaving, three more bodies were ushered into the tent on air-cushioned gurneys. Robin looked on with morbid fascination.

"What if that's them," she said.

Maggie quickly scanned their numbers: 106, 107, 108. They waited another fifteen minutes or so—to Robin it seemed like at least an hour—until their photos were

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

posted. They turned out to be a middle-aged man and woman and a teen boy. Their expressions were of surprise more than terror. Robin shivered.

At the Federal Building, they had to wait for nearly an hour just to go through the security scanners. Robin had forgotten about the knife she had in her jeans pocket and had to relinquish it before going in. She scowled at the security guard, but Maggie jabbed her in the ribs with her elbow.

“Look suspicious and you’ll be detained. Act like everything’s okay and you might get your knife back when we leave.”

Robin forced a smile. She turned back toward the guard and said, “Sorry.” He nodded.

Maggie found her name among hundreds of others listed on a long computer printout and posted on the wall. She was to return to Air Force service immediately.

“What about me?” Robin said. Maggie had better not leave her here.

“Well, you certainly can’t go with me. There must be some place children are taken care of until they can hook up with their parents.”

Robin took offense to the word, “children.” She certainly was not a child.

“But we haven’t finished searching for Dad and Sam.”

“Listen, kid. This is a big city, and we could look for days and still not find them. I’ve got to report for duty.”

“Well, I’m not going to the refugee center or wherever they put homeless kids. And another thing, Maggie, I’m not a child.”

Maggie sighed. “Whatever. Let’s go check out what they do with people your age then.”

“I’d rather be on my own,” Robin protested.

“I can’t leave you on your own—you know that.”

“Why not? You can’t stay with me and you can’t take me with you either.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry, kid, I really am. C’mon now, let’s go find Social Services.” Maggie grabbed Robin’s hand, but Robin jerked it away.

“You don’t have to force me. I’ll come along.” But Robin planned to escape once she was out of Maggie’s sight.

Social Services was on the third floor of the Federal Building. Robin and Maggie encountered a line that ran out the door and halfway down the hall. It consisted of mostly children and teens.

“You gotta take a number,” said a teen girl a little older than Robin.

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Maggie grabbed Robin's hand and pulled her inside the office. She pulled a number from the machine. Inside the office, young children were shrieking, older kids were wrestling or fighting, and a few poor souls were coughing and blowing their noses. A social worker was trying to settle them all down without much luck.

Maggie managed to get the attention of the social worker. "What provisions do you make for these children?" she asked.

"Well," the man said. "We try to match them with volunteer adults, but if those cannot be found, we find a shelter for them, either here at this center or somewhere else in the city."

"I see." Maggie appeared deep in thought for a moment, and then she took Robin's hand again, this time more gently, and whispered in her ear, "Let's get out of here."

"We're running low on fuel," Maggie said. "There's a station a couple kilometers away."

"I hope they have a hand pump," said Robin.

"Or a generator."

When they reached the fueling station, vehicles were backed up the equivalent of about one city block for all six pumps.

"Oh great!" said Robin.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a long wait."

While they were waiting, Robin got out and wandered around outside the small deli building that accompanied the station. She was just about to go inside and get herself a soda, when she noticed a ripple of light about a meter away from the back of the building. It was at her eye level and sort of looked like lightning.

Startled, she jumped back. Fascinated, she waited to see if it would reappear, but it didn't. After a few minutes, she went inside and bought her soda, having to wait in a long line there too.

Maggie was almost to the pump when Robin returned to the camper.

"You look like you just saw a ghost," Maggie said.

"Not a ghost, but something weird like a crackle of lightning. I don't know, maybe it was my imagination."

Maggie pulled up to the pump. "Looks like a crank job." She had to prepay with cash to a man standing next to the pump. Good thing she still had some of her pool winnings with her.

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Just like the first cars invented—people had to turn the crank to get them going, Robin thought. Wonder when we'll get electricity back. Could be weeks.

Maggie hung up the hydrogen pump and got back into the camper. "Show me where you saw that lightning crackle," she told Robin.

"Sure." Robin was surprised at Maggie's interest. She thought Maggie would think it was Robin's imagination.

They drove over next to the deli building and got out of the vehicle. "Right there." Robin pointed. "But I saw it only once.

Maggie gazed across a field of sagebrush to the horizon in the east. Robin saw a light flash in her eyes and looked in the same direction. Lightning? But how could it be? There were no clouds in the sky.

"What is it"? Robin asked.

"The rift. It's started down here."

"Rift? What do you mean?"

Maggie didn't answer her question. "Just get back in the camper."

"Wait, I saw something." Robin ran toward the back of the deli building, and Maggie followed close behind."

"Listen, I don't need any trouble from a kid. Now, do what I tell you or you're going to wish I left you back at Social Services."

Robin ignored her and slowly stuck her hand out in front of her, fascinated by what appeared to be a small vortex in the air. The swirling funnel sucked her hand in, then her arm up to her elbow. Suddenly, she felt Maggie's strong, wiry arms around her waist, pulling on her with all her might. It seemed as if they were stuck in that position for several minutes until Robin fell backward on top of Maggie as they both collapsed onto the ground.

Slowly, they got up and brushed themselves off. Robin examined her arm. The part that had gone into the vortex felt like it wasn't even there, but its appearance hadn't changed. Robin could almost hear her heart pounding.

"What was that?"

Maggie looked stunned. She was staring at Robin with disbelief. Robin had never seen her like this.

"What?" Robin asked.

"I don't know," Maggie finally said.

"Maybe it has something to do with that rift you mentioned."

"Maybe. We'd better go."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

It took nearly two more hours to arrive at the Air Force base. They drove in silence, but Robin's mind was working overtime.

"She's my next of kin," Maggie told the security guard.

After showing their IDs, Maggie had to wait for clearance from someone the guard called with his two-way radio. Robin was worried they wouldn't let her into the base.

"Don't worry, I won't just leave you here," Maggie said, irritation in her voice.

Robin almost reminded her that she was going to leave her back at Social Services but said nothing. She didn't want to anger Maggie.

Before they were assigned to quarters, Robin had to sit in an office with Maggie while she explained to some colonel that she wasn't going to come back into the service until her name was cleared.

"That's going to take some time, Preston. We'll have to summon a judge, gather a committee, convene a hearing.... We just don't have that kind of time right now. We need you to report to the space station by tomorrow at the latest."

But Maggie was firm. "I'm sorry then, I cannot volunteer for this mission. And since I am officially discharged from the Air Force anyway, I will be returning to the city."

Maggie got up and started to leave, Robin following close behind. Darn, Robin had wanted to go to the space station or at least stay at the base.

Just as Maggie reached the door, the colonel spoke. "All right, Preston, I'll see what I can do, but I'm not promising anything."

Robin looked at Maggie, and it was as if Maggie could read her mind. "And another thing, Colonel. The girl goes to the space station with me."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Chapter 5

"If you won't let me attend the hearing," Robin said, "then tell me what happened."

Maggie sighed and sat down on one of the twin beds in their one-room quarters. "You're going to find out sooner or later anyway, so I might as well tell you my side of the story."

Robin sat on the other bed. "I'm listening."

"What have you heard?" Maggie began.

"Nothing really. I just overheard Dad telling Ms. Trowbridge that you didn't follow orders. I wasn't even supposed to know that."

"Well, your dad is right. I refused to follow orders and I'm not saying that was right."

I'm sure you had a good reason."

"I think so."

Robin waited while Maggie was silent for a moment.

"There were five in our squadron. Colonel Clausing, our C.O., was giving orders from the space station. He could see what was going on from our flight cams. Anyway, we were zipping around shooting down ballbombs when they just started disappearing—blinking out—before our eyes."

Robin was entranced and felt her eyes grow large, but she waited for more.

"Clausing told us to fly right into the spot where they disappeared. I wouldn't do it. My teammates followed orders—disappeared too. I waited for what seemed like an hour, though my chronometer said it had been only seventeen minutes. Finally, three of my team's ships came shooting back out, but one of them never returned. That's about it."

Robin frowned. "What was in there?"

Maggie shrugged. "Don't know. The three people who came back were as white as a sheet when they returned to the space station. They didn't even talk for a day or two, and when they did, they said they couldn't remember anything. But I think they remembered at least something about the experience. I think they were afraid no one would believe them. They had no cameras running in their ships, so there was no proof of anything."

Robin thought for a moment. "Is this the place they disappeared into...is that what the rift is?"

"I didn't want you to worry—that's why I didn't talk about it—but it very well could be. I've never seen one close to the earth's surface before yesterday though."

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After a moment of silence, Robin said, “I wonder if any people back home disappeared into the rift.” She was thinking of her dad and Sam but didn’t want to actually say their names, which might make the possibility more real. She couldn’t face that right now.

“Could very well be—you almost got sucked in.”

Maggie’s response didn’t make her feel any better. “So none of us is really safe.”

Maggie didn’t confirm or deny Robin’s statement. She just changed the subject. “C’mon, let’s get some dinner.”

During dinner, Robin found out that the Colonel—Elias Clausing was his name—had a drinking problem. Maggie didn’t trust his judgment and had refused to follow his orders because he was under the influence of alcohol at the time. However, her teammates wouldn’t back her up because they were afraid of demotion or court martial. Robin thought that the fact they had emerged from the rift in a sort of zombie state and that one of them had not returned at all should have been enough to clear Maggie of disobeying orders. But the officials had not seen it that way.

“Eat up, Robin. I’ve got a lot to do tonight to prepare for the hearing tomorrow.”

“Why can’t I come?”

“You could if it were up to me, but it’s not. News reporters aren’t even allowed near the courtroom. The Air Force wants to keep this quiet.”

“What can I do? Are there any other kids around here?”

“Might be—you can go over to the family recreation center and see.”

There were no kids at the recreation center—they might be in school or with their parents. She hit a few pool balls around and wondered how Maggie got to be such a hotshot player. It was hard to hit the balls into the pockets. Then she played some video games, but they were not very challenging. And she kept worrying about the outcome of the hearing. Maggie had been in the courtroom for almost two hours now. Robin had also been to the commissary and the cafeteria, and was now back in their small quarters watching broadcast holovision. At least the base had its own generators.

It was while she was watching news on one of the two available channels that Maggie burst into the room.

“What happened?” Robin asked cautiously.

“We leave for the space station tomorrow.”

“You were cleared?”

“Yep. Cleared and given a promotion to captain. They must really need fighter pilots bad.” Maggie grinned to herself.

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

"What happened to your colonel? He get into trouble?"

"Let's just say he's not a colonel anymore."

Robin wanted to ask more, but Maggie's answers were abrupt, eliminating any encouragement for further discussion.

"I didn't see anything on HV news about the hearing," Robin said, hoping to prompt more information from Maggie.

"Nope, and it won't be." Maggie busied herself tidying up the room, going through drawers, and starting to pack. Robin wondered why she didn't seem happier about the outcome of the hearing.

"The news said there are a lot of people missing—no bodies or anything—just missing," Robin said.

"That's right." Maggie tossed a duffel bag to Robin. "You can take one of these and your backpack. That's all."

Robin looked at the bag and knew she wouldn't fill it even halfway. "What will you do with your camper?"

"It can stay here, but I need to get a few things out of it. You stay here and get your things together. I'll be back later."

Robin wanted to go with her, just for something to do, but Maggie was out the door before she could even ask. Then she thought about how Maggie might feel, being tied down with a twelve-year-old, not having as much freedom as she once had.

Left alone in the room, Robin couldn't help let her thoughts dwell on her father and brother. She thought of Tyler and his family, of her friend Sandy, and even Ms. Trowbridge. Soon, tears welled up in her eyes, and she felt a huge lump in her throat. Darn, she hated it when she was a crybaby. But she just couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

After a few minutes, Robin's breath slowed and she managed to calm herself. She lay down on her bed and closed her eyes.

When Maggie returned, Robin pretended to be asleep, opening her eyes when she was sure Maggie wasn't looking. When Maggie opened the closet, Robin ran into the bathroom and shut the door. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was puffy and her eyes were red, so she splashed her face with cold water over and over again.

Robin examined her face for a long time, so long that Maggie finally knocked on the door.

"Everything okay in there?" she said through the door.

"Fine," Robin managed to say. "Be right out."

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She waited a moment, then came out of the bathroom with her head down and went straight for the duffel bag Maggie had left her. Maggie didn't bother her. Robin was grateful.

Robin packed all her things except what she was wearing and something to wear to bed. Then she sat down on the bed and stared at the TV.

Maggie rustled through some papers, found something, and then brought it over to Robin. "Mind if I sit down?"

Robin shrugged. "I don't care." She avoided Maggie's eyes.

Maggie handed her a small photo print. It was of two girls about Robin's age.

"What's this?"

"This is your mom and me when she was twelve and I was thirteen. She's the one on the left."

Robin sat up straighter and crossed her legs, Indian style. She examined the photo, and then handed it back to Maggie.

"You keep it," Maggie insisted.

Robin was slow to accept it, but kept the photo and set it down on the bed.

"You know, your mom and I were very close when we were your age. We spent several summers together."

Robin wondered why Maggie was telling her this, but Maggie continued. Her voice was softer and smoother than usual.

"I miss her too. I know there's nothing we can do to bring her back, but I'll do everything in my power to find your brother and dad. I promise you that."

Robin knew she meant well but had her doubts. No longer feeling as vulnerable, Robin looked Maggie in the eye.

"How?" she simply asked.

"I don't know yet," Maggie answered truthfully. "But I'll find a way."

Just then an alarm went off throughout the base.

"Grab your bags," Maggie said. "We may be leaving tonight."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Chapter 6

Huddled in the bomb shelter with scores of Air Force personnel and their families, Robin wondered if she would ever get out. The shelter consisted of a series of underground tunnels composed of cement with intermittent air ducts, basically like bunkers. Most of the people were sitting on sandbags. A few old wooden chairs were scattered here and there. Robin felt as if she couldn't breathe.

Robin tried to concentrate on reading her book, but every few minutes a barrage of ballbombs would explode somewhere within hearing range. Maggie was down some tunnel helping people get settled, but Robin was doubtful she would feel any better if Maggie were here by her side.

Down the tunnel to her left and through the dim light, Robin could barely make out a boy, perhaps her age, tending two little girls. They were fussing and crying every time a group of bombs exploded. Probably his little sisters, Robin thought. Despite her own fear, Robin found the girls' high-pitched outcries quite annoying. The teen boy must be very patient. At one point, he stood up, and Robin estimated he was her height or a little taller. She looked away when he turned toward her. As he walked in her direction, Robin buried her nose in her book without looking up until he was standing directly in front of her and she saw his faded jeans in front of her eyes.

"Excuse me," he said politely.

Robin straightened but remained seated as she looked up into his face.

"Do you happen to have a tissue?" He sounded shy and a little embarrassed. "For my sisters."

Robin stood and reached into her jacket pocket. "Just some paper napkins." She held them out before him, noticing his huge brown eyes. He seemed older than she had thought. Maybe thirteen or fourteen.

"That would be great. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Robin started to sit back down, but the boy introduced himself.

"I'm Walt. Walt Jango," he said.

"Robin Parks."

Walt held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Robin flushed as she took his large strong hand. It was slightly calloused as if he'd done his share of labor, for his age anyway. "You too."

When Robin said no more, Walt said, "Well, I'd better be getting back. Thank you again."

"Sure," Robin said and sat down again.

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A woman in fatigues next to her winked at Robin, and Robin flushed. Walt was really cute, but how could she think about that in the midst of this bombing raid and with her family missing? But she found it was hard not to think about him.

The bombing settled to a trickle and completely stopped after another hour. Then Maggie came after Robin. "Grab your bag. We're getting out of here."

Robin did as she was told and followed Maggie and the others out of the tunnels and into the open night air. She tried to keep track of Walt and his sisters, but they quickly disappeared into the night.

"Where are we going?" Robin asked.

"Over to the terminal."

Robin looked around, but it was difficult to see any damage with most of the lights bombed out and only flashlights to guide their way. Just before they reached the terminal, Robin spotted some damage to several barracks. A few craters had appeared in the area surrounding the airfield, illumined by floodlights.

"Fortunately, the planes can still use the field," Maggie said.

Yeah, very fortunate, Robin thought.

"We're evacuating as many as can be accommodated to the space station tonight."

Robin hoped Walt would be among those going, but she didn't say anything. It would be nice to have someone her age along.

Robin had never flown on a launch shuttle before. These small craft held two pilots and fifty passengers each. Three of them fit on the back of a much larger airplane that carried them to the edge of the atmosphere, where they took off into space. There were no children on her craft, though Robin didn't know if that was true for the other two shuttles. Everyone on her craft was uniformed Air Force personnel except for Robin. Maggie looked sharp in her uniform with her newly awarded captain's bars on her shoulders. Robin was proud for her.

When the plane started taxiing down the runway, Maggie slipped into the seat beside Robin and reached over to buckle her in. The straps were the over-the-shoulder type like pilots wore. Once they hit space, they would be weightless. This is going to be fun, Robin thought, and a rush of excitement filled her body from head to toe. She had dreamed of the time when she could go into space. It was one of the main reasons she wanted to join the Air Force.

The huge aircraft engines wound up, and the plane shot down the runway. Robin glanced at Maggie and couldn't help but grin. Maggie cracked a brief smile. It might have been the first time Robin had seen anything close to a smile on her face.

"Don't hold your breath," Maggie said over the thunder of the engines.

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Robin hadn't realized she was. She let out a huge breath.

Maggie smiled again and patted Robin's knee. "It's easy to do."

Robin relaxed and enjoyed the G-forces pulling tugging at her back and lifting her off the ground. When plane had reached its altitude and leveled off, she leaned into the small porthole and looked outside. It was barely dawn, and Robin saw the sun's light outline the curvature of the Earth.

"Prepare for launch," an automated voice announced.

There was nothing to do except mentally prepare, Robin thought. She was already strapped in tightly.

"You're going to love this," Maggie said.

Robin watched the display screen as the numbers counted down. Cameras showed the three shuttles lined up atop the aircraft. In a couple of minutes, the first shuttle took off. Two more minutes and the middle one launched. Robin held her breath as the third one—the one in which she was riding—shot away and turned "up" to a 73-degree angle from the aircraft. The force was so great, Robin felt the skin on her face push back, but it wasn't so great that a pressure suit was needed.

As Robin was trying to decide whether or not she liked the sensation, it abruptly stopped. The thrusters stopped, and the shuttle just hung in space. Robin's stomach rose to her throat and her hair flew up in front of her eyes. She should have tied it back but hadn't thought about it. Maggie had. She held a hair band out to Robin. Maggie's short hair didn't need one.

Now she wanted to unbuckle herself and float around, but she knew she'd be in big trouble if she did. She settled on looking out the porthole again, and this time, she saw total blackness. Maggie told her the earth was underneath them and the moon was only a sliver in the sky and on the other side of their craft.

"Why can't I see the stars?" Robin asked.

"Because we are too close to the earth. Its brightness outshines the stars."

I knew that, Robin thought. She'd just temporarily forgotten. With all the studying I've been doing for the Air Force Academy test, she felt stupid for asking.

Maggie pointed at the forward view screen, which had now separated into four segments. In the upper left quadrant was a breathtaking shot of the earth as it floated away from their ship, diminishing in size at a rapid rate. The upper right quadrant showed the slim crescent of the moon; the lower left quadrant displayed a nearby satellite, while the lower right quadrant revealed the space station in the distance. Robin was mesmerized.

As they approached the station, Robin made out several small fighter ships patrolling the perimeter of the station. Robin thought she would give anything to have

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that job. The sleek little ships had wide curved delta wings and a nose like the point of a dart.

"Is that the type you fly?" Robin asked Maggie.

Maggie squinted, but then the picture enlarged to fill the entire view screen. "Yes, those are the stingrays."

"You think you'll be flying one of them again?"

"Sure hope so."

The station loomed large until the patrol ships could no longer be seen. It was shaped like a huge spindle with six wheels circling it at equal intervals and connected to the spindle, or hub, by spokes. Multiple solar arrays extended from various locations of the spindle, making the station look like a giant flying insect.

"Docking in one minute," the automated voice announced.

Robin's heart raced. Finally, she'd get to experience freefall.

The ship gently landed in the docking bay, and Robin touched her belt, ready to release it.

"Not yet," Maggie said. "Wait until the all-clear announcement."

Robin was surprised how fast the gravity took hold inside the bay. She wasn't going to be able to float around after all.

"Don't worry," Maggie said. "You'll get your chance to play in low gravity. There's a gymnasium in the hub. Gravity is point nine Gs on the outer wheel, but you knew that."

"Yeah, I knew that," Robin repeated. "Centrifugal force." She wondered how many other obvious facts she had forgotten. This must be what people meant by being "spaced out." She chuckled to herself.

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Chapter 7

Robin followed Maggie through the maze of shops in Blue Ring. She wanted to stop and look at all the merchandise, but Maggie moved swiftly until an Air Force officer Maggie knew stopped them.

"Maggie Preston!" the tall man exclaimed. "I should say, "Captain Preston. Congratulations." He held out his hand and Maggie shook it.

"Matt Jango. I didn't expect to see you here." Robin saw by his single bars that he was a first lieutenant.

"Yes, they wanted me so bad, they transferred my family here." Then Robin remembered Walt's last name was Jango. Could this be his father?

"I hear we're starting duty tomorrow morning," Maggie said. "At least I am. I haven't checked on my team yet. We just got in."

Robin cleared her throat, letting Maggie know she was being ignored.

"Oh, sorry, Matt. This is my niece, Robin Parks. Robin, this is Lieutenant Jango."

Lieutenant Jango held out his hand. It was warm and firm. "Nice to meet you, Robin."

"You too, sir." Lieutenant Jango's hair was dark blond, swept back in a long crew cut. His face was handsome, like Walt's. "Excuse me, sir, but do you have a son named Walt?"

Lieutenant Jango burst out in a smile. "Sure do. You know Walt?"

"Yes, sir. Met him at the base." Robin paused. "In the bomb shelter."

"I see. Well, he's here now with his sisters. In fact, I'd better get back to him. We need assignment to quarters."

"Us too," said Maggie. "See you later, Matt."

"How come you called me your niece?" Robin asked Maggie.

Maggie shrugged. I don't know. It just seemed easier than introducing you as my cousin's kid. You can call me you aunt if you want.

Robin glanced over to her, satisfied with this agreement. "Okay."

"I think you'd be better off living in the dorms," the man in charge of education, Mr. Brock, said. "You'd be staying in a room with another girl and going to school six hours a day. That includes physical education too."

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Robin glanced at Maggie and back to Mr. Brock. Part of her wanted to live in the dorms, but another part of her didn't want to be separated from Maggie.

"Who would be supervising us?" Robin asked.

"Don't worry, young lady. We have three adult couples staffing the dorms around the clock." He smiled, and Robin felt embarrassed for asking the question, though she didn't know why.

"If you live in the dorms," Maggie said, "you won't have to be alone so much. I'm going to be on duty quite a lot of the time."

Maggie definitely wanted Robin out of her hair.

"So when do I move into the dorms?" Robin asked Mr. Brock.

"We can arrange it this afternoon. We just need your aunt to sign the release forms."

Maggie signed the electronic pad without even reading the agreement. Fine, Robin thought. If she doesn't want me around, I don't want her around either.

Robin's roommate turned out to be a chatty eleven-year-old who was interested in clothes, make-up, and boys. Kim Shane was a typical Air Force brat, Robin thought. Her mother was a colonel and her father was the CFO in a huge aerodynamics company. Robin and Kim were stuck in a small room, and the only place Robin could find any privacy was in the communal bathroom in the corridor. Robin was tempted to call Maggie and ask to move in with her, but she had too much pride to do that.

The teacher sat at her desk in the front of the classroom, checking the students' work on her electronic book. "Very good, Robin," Mrs. Clark's voice spoke into her ear. It appears this math is too easy for you. I'm going to give you ninth grade level. Have you had any algebra?"

Robin typed, "A little."

Mrs. Clark shot an algebra lesson to her. It was a bit more challenging than the arithmetic she'd been doing before. She actually had to read the lesson and follow instructions, but she soon caught on. If she ever did get back to earth, she hoped that she could get into the Air Force Academy by acing her exams on this station.

One day, her science teacher, Mr. Ward, announced some job openings around the station. "If you are under sixteen, you will have to get the consent of your parent or guardian. No one is allowed to work more than twenty hours a week. Most of the jobs are ten to twelve hours a week. These jobs are not on the Net, so you will have to see one of the counselors if you are interested."

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Robin was immediately interested. However, she had no desire to see a counselor. She knew the counselor would notice how shut down she was becoming. Although her grades were excellent, she felt as if she were being sucked into a deep hole. She knew she was becoming more and more withdrawn, but if anyone wanted to talk to her about her feelings, she would want to punch them. Anger and resentment were growing out of proportion, but Robin didn't know how *not* to feel the way she did. Maybe she could fake being happy.

"So, tell me why you want to work in the grocery store," Mrs. Flan said. She was old, wrinkly, and overweight. But that wasn't what really bothered Robin. It was the way Mrs. Flan stared at her, boring her beady eyes right into Robin's private thoughts. Robin held onto her willpower.

"I thought it would be nice to learn how the produce is farmed and brought to market." That was true. Robin was itching to get over to Green Ring, the agricultural wheel of the station.

"Uh-huh? And..."

Oooo, Robin felt like slugging her in the face, but she maintained her cheerful attitude. "I like to organize things. You know, like stocking shelves. And I don't mind sweeping the floor and stuff like that."

"I see. And how do you feel about waiting on customers? They will need their groceries boxed and bagged, and some of them will want you to deliver to their quarters."

"Oh, fine. I like people," Robin lied.

Mrs. Flan gave Robin one long last stare and then dismissed her. "All right, Ms. Parks. I'll give you a call in a day or two."

Robin stood. "Thank you Mrs. Flan. I really appreciate the opportunity to have this interview." Robin thought she was going to throw up with all the sickly sweet talk she was spewing forth, but she maintained her cool as she exited the office.

The next day in P.E., Robin overheard Sally Sloven, Nancy Grip, and Julie Jones talking in the locker room. They were huddled together whispering. However, their words carried, and Robin distinctly heard Julie say that Robin's aunt should never have gotten back into the Air Force. "I think the hearing was fixed. Someone must have been bribed."

Robin never did find out the details of the hearing except that two of the witnesses had come forth. But Julie's words and assumption angered her.

When it came time to play dodge ball, Julie was on the opposite team from Robin. Robin knew the rules—you weren't supposed to throw the ball above the waist

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at anyone. But after the game started, she couldn't help but target Julie. At first she aimed for her legs, like you were supposed to do. But she kept missing her. Then she found herself aiming a little higher—toward Julie's waist. But Julie kept dodging her volleys. Robin kept growing angrier and angrier until finally she threw the ball directly at Julie's head. She just barely missed her, but the look on Julie's face was worth it. Then the whistle blew.

"Parks, step out of the game," Mr. Ryan shouted. Robin dropped the ball. Panting, she walked slowly off the court.

"What is wrong with you, young lady?" Mr. Ryan reprimanded. "You've got a serious attitude problem."

Robin just hung her head and didn't reply, but Mr. Ryan was insistent.

"Talk to me, Parks." He shook her arms, and Robin looked up.

"I don't know, okay?"

"You don't know. I demand a better answer than that."

"I don't have one." Robin wasn't going to be a snitch. She'd get Julie back somehow.

"Okay, you're out of the game. I'm going to have to report this to your guardian."

"Fine," Robin said and stomped off the court and into the locker room. She was shaking as she got dressed. She really didn't know what was wrong with her except she was mad at that stupid Julie for trash talking Maggie. But it felt like more than that.

"You are suspended from class for two weeks, but you won't be getting out of your homework," Mrs. Flan ordered her.

Big deal, Robin thought. I can whiz right through most the homework.

"Furthermore, you will not be allowed to stay in the dorms. Your aunt has agreed to let you stay in her quarters for that period of time."

"Yes, ma'am." She tried not to sound too happy about that decision.

"And one more thing. Hank Ribrow has agreed to let you serve your community service in the greenhouses over on Green Ring. You will be spending four hours per day weekdays and eight hours per day on weekends."

If this was punishment, Robin sure didn't see it that way. "What will I be doing?"

"Hank will explain. You report this afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am. Is that all?"

"You know you will not be paid."

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Robin nodded. "Of course."

"If you behave yourself and do a good job, Hank will consider hiring you two hours a day at minimum wage."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your aunt will meet you at the dorms to help you move your belongings at 1900 hours. Dismissed."

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Chapter 8

"I don't have kids and I'm not used to dealing with stuff like this," Maggie said. "I really don't need this right now. I'm working ten-hour shifts, seven days a week. We don't have enough pilots, and the bombs are popping out all over the place. So please, Robin, tell me the whole story."

Robin stared at her tea. "I don't want to be a snitch."

"Sometimes you have to be. Why protect someone you think is wrong anyway?"

Robin shrugged. "I was just defending you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I overheard Julie talking to some other girls saying your hearing was fixed and that someone was bribed. It really made me mad. You wouldn't do that." Robin looked up into Maggie's eyes.

Maggie frowned. "I wonder where they got that idea. What's this Julie girl's last name?"

"Jones."

Maggie thought for a moment. "There are three Jones I can think of right off the bat. Hector Jones was on the hearing panel."

"It's not true, right?"

Maggie was deep in thought, but responded after a couple of seconds. "Of course it's not true."

"So where'd she get an idea like that?"

"Who knows? Could have made it up just to provoke you." Maggie gulped down the rest of her coffee and stood up. "Gotta go. Now you try and behave yourself, kid. I really can't deal with any more problems. Okay?"

"Sure, Maggie." Robin felt a lot better after telling Maggie what had happened. She still felt irritated by what Julie had said, but she wasn't quite as angry now.

So far, Robin had only been in the Blue Ring of the station. She hadn't even gone through the shaft, but today she would take a capsule through one of the Blue Ring's spokes and ride the maglev train two rings away to Green Ring. She gathered up her jacket, stuffed a few candies in the pockets, and made her way to Strut B.

Robin stepped into the small capsule that would take her down one of the six spokes to the long shaft that was the hub of the station. The ride was fun but much too short. Once inside the shaft, she delighted in the noticeable weightlessness she felt. Then she boarded the magnetic levitation train, floating to a spot on one of its walls and

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fastening in with the hooks that were built into her jumpsuit and also attached to the inside of the train. Others rode attached to the ceiling, floor or walls. Robin was momentarily disoriented, but for the most part, this was fun. And she'd get to do this every day, twice a day, for two weeks. Wow, maybe she should get punished more often! She giggled to herself.

Her first job consisted of cleaning up dirt from spilt pots. Hank told her there had been a power outage in Green Ring a couple of days ago and it lost rotation, thus losing gravity.

"You should have seen it, girl. Everything that was not tied down started floating, and when the power came back on, crash!" Hank slapped his hands together abruptly, which made Robin jump back a step. "Anyway, it left quite a mess, as you can see. You can start by sweeping up the dirt and dumping it into that big container over there." He pointed to a rectangular wooden structure that reminded Robin of a sand box. "My assistant will soon be here and continue rebuilding plant boxes." Hank shoved a broom at Robin. "Get to work now."

Almost the entire ring was agricultural. There were a few offices and sleeping quarters as well as one cafeteria. If Robin looked far enough across the floor, she could see the curvature of the ring. The ceiling was concealed by tall plants, mostly fruit trees, whose roots went right down through the floor's metal grating.

It took Robin almost two hours to get the floor cleaned up. Just as she was dumping the last of the dirt into the wooden box, she heard a young man's voice. "Nice job," he said. She looked up and saw Walt.

"Walt Jango?"

Walt smiled. "You remembered my name." He held out his hand. "Robin, isn't it?" Robin nodded and shook his hand. "Sorry, I don't remember your last name."

"Parks. I didn't think you were on the station. I haven't seen you in any of my classes. I think I met your dad though." Robin surprised herself. She wasn't usually this talkative, but Walt had a way of making her feel at ease.

"Yep, Matt Jango is my dad. As for class, I've got to take care of my sisters, so I do my lessons from home. I miss out on the group activities, but that's okay. Those little girls are plenty active." He smiled, and Robin thought it was the handsomest smile she'd ever seen.

Robin felt how lit up her own face felt. "Well, I just started doing classes from home too."

"Is that right?"

Robin looked down. "It's part of my punishment, just like this job is."

"I see," said Walt. "And what did you do to deserve such a harsh punishment?"

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Was he teasing her? Yes, he was. Robin laughed. "I tried to kill a girl with the dodge ball."

"Sounds serious," he said but *he* didn't sound serious.

"Hey, stop your yapping, you two. Time to get back to work." Hank interrupted them, but he didn't sound overly serious either.

For the next couple of hours, Walt built planter boxes and Robin filled them with dirt. They worked without much conversation. Robin wondered if Walt didn't ask her about why she tried to "kill" a girl with the dodge ball because he was being polite or because he didn't care. She really didn't want to talk about the incident. On the other hand, she felt a little disappointed because Walt didn't ask.

When her shift was over, Robin and Walt traveled back to Blue Ring. On the way, Robin asked him if he would be at work the next day.

"I've worked two hours a day for the past year now," Walt said.

"Oh, I thought you were living at the base."

"Only temporarily while my dad had some business there."

"What do you do for fun?"

"Well, most kids find this boring, but I play with my amateur radio set."

"Doesn't sound boring to me. You contact any aliens yet?"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Yes." They both laughed.

"Since you asked, I actually am trying to send signals through the rift. Maybe contact people who might have disappeared in there."

"Now that sounds interesting. Really. Any luck?"

"Don't know. Signals go in but I don't think they can send any back. I've got a receiver, but haven't gotten any responses yet."

"Hmm. If I were you, I'd keep trying. You might be the first person ever to get a signal from over there."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

Robin and Walt transferred to the capsule. Neither talked during the ride up the spoke. Once they arrived in Blue Ring, Robin spoke first.

"Where is your mom?"

Walt didn't seem to mind the question. "New York. They're divorced."

"Oh, sorry."

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"That's okay. How about your parents?"

"My mom died a few years ago in the first ballbomb attacks. My dad and brother are missing."

"Sorry," Walt said softly as if he really meant it.

"Yeah, my mom's cousin, Maggie, is taking care of me. But she calls me her niece. It's easier than explaining the cousin thing."

When they reached the living units and were about to part company, Robin told Walt about getting her arm sucked into the vortex.

Walt's eyes grew large. "Really!"

"Yeah, I haven't told anyone. Of course, Maggie knows."

"Wow, were you scared?"

"It startled me. I'm sure glad Maggie was there to pull me out."

"I wonder what's in there."

"Me too, but I sure don't want to go in to find out."

"Yeah, you might never return."

They parted ways and Robin sauntered into Maggie's quarters. Maggie was sitting at the counter, sipping coffee and reading her comm. Her flight bag was on a stool next to the door, indicating she was about to leave for her shift.

"How'd it go?" Maggie asked without turning around.

"Okay. A lot of cleanup."

"Hmm." She gulped down the last of her coffee and twisted the chair of her stool around. "Darn these things," she said about the stool. "Wish they didn't have to be bolted down."

"Well I wish the planters in Green Ring had been bolted down. Had to clean up the mess from the last time they lost rotation." But Robin's tone of voice was light.

Maggie gave her full attention to Robin. "You don't seem too unhappy for someone who's being punished."

Robin shrugged. She wasn't ready to talk about Walt yet. She wanted to keep him all to herself for a while. "Working in the greenhouses is kind of interesting."

"I've got to go on shift, so you stay out of trouble while I'm gone."

"Don't worry. I've learned my lesson." Why did Maggie think she'd get into trouble, just because she'd made one little mistake? What about all the other times she had cooperated? Didn't those count for anything?

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Robin took her things into the small room that Maggie had used as a storeroom before Robin moved in. A narrow bed was attached to the curvature of the wall and held a tubular set of cubbies underneath that rolled open and closed. There was only one tiny nightstand and no closet. No window either. One positive thing about the room is it had a holo generator on the ceiling where Robin could watch vids or broadcast.

After showering and changing her clothes, Robin came back out into the common room to get something to eat. Maggie was just going out the door when they both felt an abrupt jolt.

"What was that?" Robin yelled.

Maggie looked bewildered. "Don't know." She shut the door to the quarters. "Better grab onto something."

Robin started toward one of the handrails that was attached to the wall, but before she reached it, another stronger jolt threw her to the floor. Maggie's flight bag and the stool it was on tumbled over. Maggie dashed toward Robin.

"Are you okay?"

Robin caught her breath and straightened to a sitting position. "Yeah, I think so."

Then the station started moving, pushing them against the wall near Maggie's room. The lights dimmed, and a perimeter of red lights around the ceiling began flashing. Then a computer voice announced: Emergency. "All non-essential personnel evacuate the station."

"That means people will be jamming the transit ways trying to get to the shuttle bays," said Maggie.

"What's going on?"

Maggie switched on the viewscreen. At first it showed only static. Then a flat picture of the outside of the station appeared. Robin could see White Ring, Blue Ring, Green Ring, Red Ring, and only part of Yellow Ring. Black Ring had disappeared.

"Is there something wrong with the camera?" Robin asked. "Why is only part of the station showing?"

"Look," Maggie pointed. "Yellow Ring is disappearing too. I'm afraid the station is being sucked into the rift."

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Chapter 9

Maggie took Robin's arm in one hand and grabbed her flight bag with the other. The two of them headed down the corridor toward the shopping area. People were scurrying here and there, and a few vendors had erected force fields around their businesses. There hadn't been time for others to do so. Maggie dragged Robin to the nearest turbo shaft and they caught a capsule to the hub of the station.

"Where are we going? The shuttle bays are in the rings."

"It'll take too long to get a shuttle. We're going directly to my fighter."

Robin's heart jumped. She'd dreamed of flying in a fighter but never believed she could do so this soon. She certainly wished the circumstances were different.

"You still flying the Stingray?" Robin knew there was a new fighter out called the Shark, which gobbled up the ballbombs and converted them into fuel. But the Stingray, though older, seemed cooler. Its long spear-like nose shot laser cannons and blasted away the tiniest ballbombs. But it consumed more power and had to go back to the station for refueling more often.

"Yep. I refuse to fly anything but." Maggie and Robin reached the fighter bay and floated over to Maggie's ship, using handrails and poles. Most of the twenty-four ships in the bay were already out in space, protecting the station and fighting off the bombs. Maggie's was one of three left.

A maintenance worker finished fueling and checking the Stingray while Maggie and Robin climbed the ladder, legs dangling below them in the microgravity. Maggie slipped into the front seat then grasped Robin's arm, helping her into the back seat.

"Put on the helmet," Maggie ordered. Robin did as she was told. "You know how they work?"

"I think so." Robin had practiced with Maggie's helmet a number of times, but had never interfaced it with the ship. She put on the helmet and snapped the goggles into place. The audio and video activated immediately. Robin could hear the controllers speaking to Maggie and Maggie answering back. The visuals were holos of the outside of the ship and could be set to any viewpoint Robin wished. "Wow, this is awesome."

"No time for play, Robin. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

"I want to help," Robin said. "I can cover your six." That was a military expression she'd picked up. It meant she could watch the rear of the ship.

"Never mind that. Sensors will detect anything sneaking up on us and rear cannons will take care of them. Strap in now, just like we did in the launch vehicle."

"Aye aye, Captain." Robin was so excited, she momentarily forgot their lives were in danger. She buckled the heavy straps over her shoulders and around her waist

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while Maggie closed the transparent partition between their seats and filled the compartments with oxygen.

“Ready?” Maggie asked after the oxygen stopped hissing.

“Ready,” Robin echoed.

“Cleared for takeoff,” she heard the controller say. And swoosh! They were out of the bay before Robin knew it.

Switching viewpoints was interesting until it started making Robin feel queasy. She shut the goggles off and focused on looking out the canopy. There was enough action out there without the goggles. Maggie shot apart two ballbombs right away then did a barrel roll and came up on another, larger bomb just as it was appearing out of the rift. A Shark nearby tried to grab a bite of it and came up short, so Maggie plugged two fireballs right into it, and it instantly disintegrated.

Robin’s earbuds crackled. “Captain Preston.”

“Preston here, over.”

“We need you to fly close in by Red Ring and shoot your grappling hooks around its rim.”

“I’m not sure if I have enough tether, Major.”

“You’ve got enough if you get within thirty feet of the rim.”

“That’s awful close.”

“We’ve got another Stingray coming up on the opposite side. We’ve got to try and pull the station back out of the rift.”

“I’ll give it my best shot, Major. Over and out.”

Robin looked out her canopy. The station came up fast. It looked as though they were going to crash right into it, but Maggie pulled away just as she shot the hook at the ring. She missed.

“Darn,” Maggie said out loud. She swept away from the station and circled back around, giving herself time to reel in the tether before trying again.

“You scared me,” Robin said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it this time.” Maggie sounded determined. Robin hoped she was right.

By this time, Yellow Ring had completely disappeared, and Red Ring was nearing the rift. Maggie swooped even closer to Red Ring this time and shot out her grappling hook. This time it circled the ring with room to spare. Then Maggie pulled it tight.

“Okay, you and Lieutenant Chan tug on my mark,” Major Fredericks said.

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At the count of three, both Stingrays jerked their tethers, but nothing happened. The station kept disappearing into the rift.

"Now what?" Robin said.

"Don't know. Try again I guess. Get more Stingrays to help." But the other Stingrays were busy fighting off ballbombs.

"This isn't doing any good," Maggie told Major Fredericks. "I'm disengaging."

"You might as well too, Lieutenant," the major replied. "Both of you get out of there before you get swallowed up."

Robin switched to her goggles again to get a view of the tether. She watched for several long seconds, but the tether stayed attached to the Stingray. "It's not detaching."

"I know." Maggie sounded irritated.

"Anything I can do? Any manual controls?" Robin asked.

"Tried that. Maybe yours will work. Just below the seat, there's a lever...." Maggie's voice cut off in mid-sentence.

Robin found the lever and pushed on it with all her strength, but it wouldn't depress.

"It won't budge," she spoke into her small comm. No answer came from Maggie. Robin unbuckled herself and half stood, as much as she could in the small cockpit without gravity. She grabbed the rails on either side of the cockpit then stomped on the lever with both feet. It moved! She checked the outside view again and saw the tether was free from the Stingray and dangling from Red Ring.

"I did it, Maggie!" Still, no answer. Robin peered into the cockpit in front of her and saw that Maggie was slumped over to the left. Her heart raced. She found the button that opened the divider between cockpits and climbed through. She shook Maggie by the shoulders, but she did not respond. Then she removed Maggie's helmet and put her ear to Maggie's nose. She was still breathing, to Robin's relief.

Robin checked Maggie's cockpit controls for any sign of malfunction. Everything looked in working order. Then she climbed back into her own seat. She switched over to the controller's channel and spoke with a shaky voice. "Station Control, this is Robin Parks in Stingray N725."

"Yes, N725."

"I think Captain Preston is unconscious. She won't respond."

"Is she breathing?"

"Yes, and there is plenty of oxygen left in the ship."

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"Listen to me very carefully, Robin. You are free from your tether, but the rift is still pulling you in, slightly faster than the station."

Robin had to force herself to breathe. She was being sucked into the rift, and Maggie could be dying. Just then, a ballbomb streaked across the bow of the Stingray and knocked out its long firing spear. "Oh, great!"

"What is it?" the controller asked. Robin told him.

"Okay, you see those button pads labeled MAN and AUTO just off to your left?"

Robin nodded then realized the controller couldn't see her. "Yes, I see them."

"Press MAN. That will put you on manual."

Robin did as she was told.

"You will now need to make a quarter turn and engage thrusters. That will point you in the opposite direction of the rift."

"I see the button. It says TH PWR. Right?"

"Very good. Go ahead."

Robin did as she was told, but the Stingray was stubborn. It turned a few degrees but no more. The suction from the rift was too great.

"Try and stay calm," the controller said. His steady voice calmed her only slightly.

Robin took a deep breath. "Now what?"

Tell me how much fuel you have left.

Robin knew where to look for that. "A little over a quarter tank."

There was no response from the controller.

"Are you there?"

"Yes. Please stand by."

Stand by? How could she stand by when she was being sucked into the rift?

Finally, the controller came back. "Lieutenant Chan is coming after you. He's going to hook his tether onto your tail and try and pull you out."

"Okay." Robin had never been this scared in her life. She was going to be sucked into the rift—she just knew it. Her short life began to flash through her mind. Her childhood, her mom dying, Cousin Maggie moving into the cottage, her dad and brother disappearing.

"Ms. Parks." The voice through her comm brought her back to the present moment. "This is Lieutenant Chan. Please follow my instructions exactly."

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“Yes, sir.”

“Put thrusters on full power. Don’t worry about your fuel supply. I’ll tow you once I get a hold of you.”

Robin depressed the TH PWR button and held it down. She watched as Lieutenant Chan’s grappling hook snaked toward her ship and caught the tail section. He started to pull, but it was no use. Both ships were sucked into the rift.

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Chapter 10

At first, Robin couldn't feel her body. She touched her arm with her hand and held it there until she felt a slight tingling. Slowly, feeling came back to her body, but she felt lighter than she'd ever felt, even in microgravity. She put her hand out in front of her mouth and blew on it. But she couldn't feel her breath. Her lungs were going through the motion of breathing, but no air was moving in or out.

She tried to communicate with the controller, but she got nothing. Not even static. "Hello, hello," she repeated time and again. At least she could hear her own voice.

Robin looked down at her hands and discovered they were sweating. Her hands shook as she removed her helmet. If only Maggie would wake up, I wouldn't be so scared, she thought.

She climbed through to Maggie's cockpit again. "Please wake up!" she said as she shook Maggie's shoulders again. And then Maggie opened her eyes.

"What happened?" Maggie asked as she sat up.

"You passed out, I guess."

Maggie rubbed her head, and then looked down at her broken strap. "Must've whacked my head pretty good."

Robin thought so too, if she was knocked out with her helmet on.

Maggie straightened in her seat and removed her straps. "Darn, those deck hands should check over everything in the ship before it goes out. Must've not had time." Then she looked out the window beyond Robin, and her eyes grew large. "What in the heck are those?"

In Robin's panic, she had forgotten to look outside. All around their ship were different colored blobs swimming around space, changing form. A few of the station's shuttles were drifting nearby as well. They appeared to have no power. Robin could even see the space station—the *whole* space station, not just part of it. "We're inside the rift, Maggie," Robin said, mesmerized.

"But the space station. It's right there." Maggie straightened and put on her goggles. "Well I'll be. Robin, take a look."

Robin donned her own goggles and switched on the magnifiers. The part of the space station that had not gone into the rift was waving very slightly, as if it were reflected in water. The waving wasn't as obvious without the magnifiers.

"Let's see if we can move closer to the rift," Maggie said. She moved her hand quickly to grab the control stick, but her hand went right through it. "Dang!"

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Robin's eyeballs almost popped out of her head. Then she slapped her hand forcefully against the canopy of the ship and her hand went right through—right out into space. She pulled it back quickly and swallowed hard.

"You'd better not try that again," Maggie told her.

Robin gently touched the canopy and her hand stayed on the inside of the ship this time. "Guess we'd better not make any sudden movements."

"You try the radio?"

"Yep, nothing," Robin said. "Cameras are functional though."

"Good. If no one believes us, at least we'll have vids." Maggie tried the thrusters. They expelled fuel but the ship didn't move. "Gauge says we still have some fuel in the tank. Not very much though. If we aren't going anywhere, I'd better not waste it."

"Maggie, do you feel funny?"

Maggie was checking other controls on the ship, but she gave Robin a delayed answer. "As a matter of fact, I do. Must have something to do with being in the rift."

"I wonder how your squadron mates were able to get back out," Robin said. "At least it's possible."

"Yeah, but how with the ship dead in space?"

Robin put on her goggles again and watched the colored blobs. Some were red, others blue, yellow, and purple. Most of them were little swirling orbs. Sometimes they changed into linear shapes or funnels. They seemed to be congregating near the place where the space station was moving into the rift. Robin switched her goggles to maximum magnification. Very faintly, she could see a few of the blobs escaping to the other side. Once they did, they seemed to turn dark and lose their color.

"Maggie, we've got to find a way to get closer to the rift."

"Well, if you figure out a way, be sure and let me know." Robin figured her sarcasm was really covering up her fear. That was okay. She needed Maggie to be strong so she could be strong too.

Just then, the Stingray wobbled and spun around a couple of times as if a fierce wind had blown it. "What was that?" Robin asked.

"Don't know, but I think we're drifting toward the rift. Let's hope we keep going in that direction."

Closer now, Robin looked through her goggles once more and noticed the colored blobs seemed to be sucked toward the rift. Robin almost felt sorry for them, as they appeared to be resisting going to the other side. The Stingray flipped over, and Robin got a good view of a couple of red blobs floating through the rift. As soon as they

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were on the other side, their appearance changed dramatically. They turned into dark, hard, metallic, evil looking balls that suddenly moved in a straight trajectory, as if they were targeting something.

“Maggie, did you see that?”

“See what?” Maggie was preoccupied with checking the ships controls and systems.

“Put on your goggles.”

“There. You see that?”

“Amazing,” was all Maggie had to say.

Now Robin observed some of the Stingrays on the other side shooting at the ballbombs. She watched for quite some time and finally observed a pattern. When the fighters shot down the ballbombs, more colored blobs would escape to the other side and turn into bombs. Shooting them down was making the situation worse.

“Maggie, we’ve got to get them to stop shooting.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to keep trying the radio. Maybe someone will hear.” Robin remembered the radio had an extended frequency modulation capability. Walt had shown her on a discarded radio he’d obtained from a Stingray. She removed the radio from its casing and found instructions on the back. She flipped a few switches and instantly a low-pitched static came through. She tried all the extra frequencies but could get nothing intelligible.

“Try the lowest bandwidth and go through them all again,” Maggie suggested.

Robin did as she was told until she heard what sounded like a low, slow motion voice on the other end. She made out the words, “Can you hear me?” At least she thought that was what it said. She tried responding with her own voice. No answer. She tried several times more, but there was no response.

“Why don’t you try typing something?” Maggie suggested.

“Good idea.” Robin plugged in the radio’s small keypad and typed: STOP SHOOTING.

After what seemed like a few minutes, a response came through to the radio’s monitor: WHY?

IT’S MAKING IT WORSE, Robin typed. Then she added: WHO IS THIS?

There must have been a time distortion through the rift, as it took several minutes to receive an answer again. THIS IS WALT JANGO. I’LL TRY TO CONVINCE THEM. WHO IS THIS?

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Robin's heart pounded in her chest. Walt! That's right. He'd said he'd been experimenting with trying to communicate with anyone on the other side of the rift.

THIS IS ROBIN PARKS. I'M WITH MAGGIE PRESTON.

The Stingray drifted even closer to the rift. Suddenly, the cockpit filled with different sizes of red, blue, yellow, and purple blobs. Robin screamed. Maggie batted at them but her hand went right through them. "Relax, they can't hurt us," said Maggie.

Robin calmed down and focused on watching the blobs swirl around in circles then fly back outside the Stingray again, sort of like birds.

The shooting continued for quite some time. Robin returned to typing messages through the radio. USE THE SHARKS ONLY. NO STINGRAYS. With no power from the ship, the radio's battery started running low, so Maggie told Robin to stop using it. "We might need it again," she said.

"If they could only see what we see," Robin said, disappointed. The blobs seemed like gentle little lifeforms on this side, but they turned deadly when exposed to the other side. She wished they didn't have to be destroyed, but that was the only way to protect the space station—and earth—because some of them had gotten that far.

Robin played with putting her hand through objects, but she didn't put it through the hull of the ship again. That seemed too dangerous. She found that if she squeezed something hard enough, her hand would start to go through it. Once, when she was trying this with the control stick, she had a difficult time removing her hand. She had to let it completely relax before it would come back out again. But it didn't hurt.

"You'd better be careful," Maggie warned. We don't really know what we're dealing with here."

"You're right. I won't do that again."

"Look, Robin. I think they've finally gotten the message."

By this time, Robin and Maggie had drifted even closer to the rift and didn't need their goggles to see the Stingrays had stopped shooting. Sharks were gobbling up a few remaining ballbombs. Several bombs escaped but didn't hit the space station. Shuttles and ships easily dodged them.

Robin and Maggie's Stingray gently floated through the rift back to the other side, while more and more of the colored blobs stayed on their side, even floating away from the rift. "That's the answer," Robin said.

"Our firing at them must have created shock waves that widened the rift."

"But I wonder how it opened in the first place?"

"Don't know," Maggie said thoughtfully. "Could be years of weapons testing in outer space, recent disposal of nuclear waste beyond the moon, sonic booms, or even

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

something natural such as solar storms. At any rate, I'm sure scientists will be studying it for quite some time.

Once Maggie and the other ships and shuttles returned to their own side of the rift, their ships regained power and returned to the station's bays. Maybe humans did wrong by the colored blobs, but Robin wouldn't trade this experience for anything.

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Chapter 11

Julie Jones stood in the doorway of Mrs. Flan's office, looking perfect in her pink jump suit, curly short blonde hair, and white boots. Her nails were painted a deep pink to match her outfit. Robin felt awkward and too tall next to her, aware of her own stringy hair and unkempt nails.

"Sit down, girls," Mrs. Flan said. Julie batted her eyes at the counselor then gave Robin a dirty look.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Robin?" Mrs. Flan asked.

Robin's stomach knotted up. She understands why she had to apologize to Julie without Julie apologizing to her. Maggie had told her it was because Robin had merely overheard Julie talking about Maggie, and well, there was still freedom of speech.

"I apologize for trying to hit you in the face with the ball," Robin mumbled. She just couldn't look Julie in the face and felt like a coward because of it. But she was so darned angry, she was afraid she'd jump right up and pop Julie in the mouth.

"I didn't hear you," Julie said.

This time, Robin did look her in the eye. "I said, I apologize!"

"Thank you," Julie said with no sincerity in her voice.

Robin looked at Mrs. Flan. "May I go now?"

The counselor seemed to consider Robin's request for a moment then granted it. "Yes. But I expect proper behavior from you in the future. Is that understood?"

Robin wasn't sure but it looked as if Julie was smirking, just slightly. "Understood," Robin said and stood up to go. But she glared at Julie before leaving the room. Mrs. Flan didn't see that.

Almost two weeks had passed since Robin had been on the other side of the rift, now being called the fourth dimension by everyone on the station. It had taken several hours for her to feel normal again. She'd been disoriented and had to be in a pressure chamber to adapt to air flowing in and out of her lungs again. And the whole experience seemed like a dream. But everyone had seen the vids. The fourth dimension was real.

"How soon before the communications satellites are all up again?" Robin asked Maggie, who had been shuttling parts and crew from the station to repair the satellites.

"Hard to say. Those satellites are delicate pieces of equipment. Some of 'em have to be sent to the surface to have a complete overhaul. Those ballbombs really did a number on them."

"Yeah, they seem so peaceful when they stay in their own dimension."

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"We've just got to slow down with the sonic booms for a while. Hard to get anything up into space without them though."

"You think they'll really build a tether from earth to space?"

"I think it's the only way we'll be able to transport goods without widening the rift."

"What are you going to do now, Maggie? Fly shuttles from now on?"

"I'm hopin' to be trained on the Sharks, even though I prefer the Stingrays. We'll still need to protect our station. If we can gobble those things up before they make it to earth, it'll save a lot of damage."

"Yeah." Robin was thoughtful. "I'm not sure I want to be a fighter pilot anymore."

Maggie looked up from her computer. "You're young. You don't have to decide right now."

"I don't even know if I want to be in the Air Force. Maybe I'll just go to regular high school—if I ever get back home."

"You can do that too. I'm sure a decent family will take you in."

Robin's heart felt a pang of pain, still having heard nothing from her father, but she didn't say anything about it. Not knowing where her dad and brother were was too painful to discuss.

"Maggie, how come you left home when you were fifteen?"

Maggie closed her computer, got up, and poured herself a cup of coffee. "You really want to know?"

Robin got up from the couch and sat down at the kitchen table, hands cupped around her jaws, elbows on the table. Maggie sat across from her.

"Well, my dad was very strict. He wouldn't let me go out with my friends or date boys. I could do school activities, but that was it."

"I heard you ran with a rough crowd."

"That what your dad told you?"

"Um-hmm."

"To a certain extent, that's true. But I never stole anything, never joined any gangs." Maggie took a sip of her coffee.

"So how did you live?"

"Well, I ran away with my boyfriend, Jack. He was nineteen and had his own place. He worked at a service station while I went to school during the day. No one knew I wasn't living with my parents anymore."

"But I heard you got a GED."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

"That's right. I was caught when the school called my dad and he told them I was no longer living there. Then they kicked me out."

"So then what did you do?"

"By that time, I was sixteen and got a job where Jack worked, helping him in the garage. But that only lasted a few weeks."

"How come?"

"Well, when you live with someone and also work with that person, you often get in each other's hair. In my case, Jack was my boss at work and started acting like my boss at home as well. I got fed up with that pretty fast."

"Then what?"

"I had learned enough about cars to get a job in another garage, just doin' easy stuff like replacing fuel cells, changing tires, fixing antigrav lifters, that sort of thing. A real nice couple owned the place and let me sleep in their spare room off the garage. They never reported me as a runaway either. I lied to them and told them my parents were dead, but I think they knew it wasn't true."

"So then you studied for your GED?"

"Yeah, in the evenings, I studied. Flunked two of the six tests the first time I took it, but passed them the second time."

"How'd you happen to get into the Air Force?"

"Enlisted when I was eighteen. That's where I learned to play pool."

"Oh," Robin said in a long, drawn out sigh.

"By the way, I never did ask you what you were doing in town that night I found you in the parking garage."

Robin thought about lying but decided against it. She felt more comfortable with Maggie now, and she also knew Maggie could detect a lie pretty well. "Um, well, I...."

"C'mon, spit it out. What's the worse I could do to you?"

"I don't know? Maybe send me back to earth?"

"You indicated you want to do that anyway."

"Not yet."

"Chicken," Maggie taunted. "C'mon, tell me."

"Okay. I was just wondering where you went every weekend. I was just a bored and curious kid, you know?"

"So you followed me."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

"Actually, I stowed away in your camper."

"I thought as much. Well, now you know."

"Yes." Robin chanced to ask the next question. "Did you make a lot of money playing pool?"

"Sometimes. I really didn't like doing it though—cheating those poor guys outta their money, but I needed it."

Robin looked down at the table and played with a piece of paper napkin. "I know."

"Well, I certainly hope you don't ever have to resort to gambling to make a living."

"I won't, Cousin Maggie. I promise."

"Don't promise me, kid. Promise yourself."

Robin continued in school, avoiding Julie Jones when possible. She also continued working two hours a day in the greenhouse, getting paid now that her punishment was over. She enjoyed nurturing and learning about the plants, but she had to admit the job wouldn't have been as interesting without Walt.

"So do you think our scientists will send a probe into the fourth dimension?" she asked Walt one day.

"I think they'll send several. Just think of what we could do if we could explore the other side. Maybe learn how to breathe without air or put our hands through solid matter right here in the third dimension."

"You mean bring the fourth dimension into the third?" Robin thought about all the possibilities. "We could go into space without a suit."

"Or reach inside an engine and fix it without taking it apart."

"Or put our hand inside a human body and remove a tumor."

They both stopped watering the plants for a moment to contemplate the possibilities.

"You know," said Walt. "I think it'll happen."

"I hope so."

Just then, Robin's comm buzzed. It was the Colonel. "Robin Parks. Please report to the communications center on Blue Ring."

Robin was startled. "What is it?"

"Your father has been found and is waiting to talk to you."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

Chapter 12

Robin's heart leapt at seeing her father's holo image, which sprouted up from the generator on the floor of the communications center. It was about half the size of his real image and was the first time Robin had seen her father as a hologram.

"Is this really you, Dad? Not a recording?"

There was a brief pause before Robin's father responded. "Yes, Robin. We're home. Sam's okay and so is Ms. Trowbridge."

Robin hadn't even worried about Ms. Trowbridge but was glad she was okay. Robin's throat felt dry all of a sudden. She swallowed. "Where were you? Cousin Maggie and I looked all over for you?"

"We can discuss that when you get home. The station personnel tell me they can arrange a shuttle for you in two days."

"Oh," Robin responded, not knowing whether she was really ready to leave the space station, Maggie, and especially Walt.

"So, honey. You contact me when you get to the Air Force base. I'll come and get you."

"Okay, Dad. I'm looking forward to seeing you and Sam." She didn't include Ms. Trowbridge, but at least she wasn't pretending she'd be glad to see her.

The image of Robin's father blinked out. Robin stared at the place where the image had been. Home, she was going home.

"You may return to your quarters now, Miss Parks," a technician said. "We will contact you when we've scheduled your trip."

The next evening, the station personnel planned a party for all those who would be leaving the station, now that the threat of the ballbombs was nearly over on earth. Since the shooting had stopped out in space and the Air Force had reduced its sonic booms, no ballbombs had dropped in almost two weeks. Enough satellites had been repaired to show various areas of the earth, but no ballbombs had been detected. However, scientists said a few were likely to filter through from time to time, and nothing could be done to stop that.

"I don't feel like going," Robin told Maggie.

"Why in the name of space not? You're one of the honored guests. You figured out why the little critters were getting through and turning into bombs."

"Walt is the real hero," Robin said. "I was just on the other end of the radio. Plus, I don't remember much. Too bad it all seems like a dream."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

"I don't remember any of it," said Maggie. "I think the younger you are, the better you remember."

"I suppose."

"They're going to show some of the recordings. Aren't you a bit interested in that?"

"Of course, but..."

"But what? Are you going all shy now?"

Robin hung her head. "I guess. I just don't feel like being sociable."

"Fake it. If you're going to be in the Air Force, you'll need to learn to fake it sometimes."

"I'm not sure I even want to be in the Air Force anymore."

Maggie walked over to where Robin was sitting on the couch and put her arm around her. "Listen, you're twelve. You won't always feel this way. There will be other boys you'll meet."

Robin sat up straight. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't think I never had a crush on a boy? If it weren't for leaving Walt, I expect you'd be overjoyed to be going home to your dad."

"I never said anything about Walt."

"You didn't need to. I can see how you light up when you're around him. He'll be at the party too. Don't you want to share your last full day here with him?"

Robin let out a big sigh and tears formed in her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. She had to be strong. Maggie wouldn't have cried over a boy, she was sure.

Maggie stood up and put her hands on Robin's shoulders. "Listen, you go take a shower and change into a fresh outfit. If you still don't want to go, I won't force you. Deal?"

Robin nodded without looking at Maggie.

Robin's heart sunk when she walked into the large room and spotted Walt talking to Julie Jones. They were chatting and laughing. Three other girls were standing around him waiting for their turn. Robin told herself to be brave. She wasn't going to let Julie Jones ruin her evening.

When Robin came closer, Walt spotted her and walked over to her, ignoring the other girls who were waiting to talk to him. "Robin, you made it!"

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

“Hi Walt.” He was dressed in tan slacks and a plaid cotton shirt and was holding a glass with pink liquid in it.

“Can I get you some punch?”

“Yes, thank you.” Robin swept her eyes across the room. A projector and chairs were set up for viewing the recordings of the fourth dimension. Robin was suddenly excited about seeing what had happened while she was out there. All she could remember were little colored blobs floating in space. Air Force personnel in dress uniforms were standing in small groups, drinking punch, and chatting. Maggie was talking to Walt’s dad. For a moment, she looked up, caught Robin’s eye, and gave her a wink.

Walt returned with her drink. “Have you seen any of the recordings yet?”

“Nope, but I have the entire text of our communication to each other while you were out there. Dad said I could show that to everyone.”

Robin felt a stab in her guts. “I hope I didn’t say anything stupid.”

Walt laughed. “You didn’t. Actually, I can show it to you right now before everyone sees it if you want.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“C’mon.”

Walt gently took Robin’s hand and led her to a small room off the larger one. His hand was soft and warm, but strong. Robin’s heart fluttered. They sat down at a little table and Walt took out his pocket reader and handed it to her. As she read, she relaxed. There was nothing in it proclaiming her love for Walt or anything personal like that. It was just back and forth communication about the little blobs, what they looked like, and how they were behaving. Then when Robin had told Walt to have people stop shooting, the two of them discussed how the blobs relaxed and stopped floating through the rift so much. That was it.

“It’s okay. Thanks for showing me, Walt.”

Robin got up to leave, but Walt held her arm. “Wait, Robin.”

Robin halted. “What?”

“I’m glad we became friends. I’m going to miss you.” His blue eyes looked longingly into hers.

Robin wished he hadn’t said that, wished he hadn’t looked at her that way. She was going to cry and that would really mess up her face. “Me too,” was all she could squeak out.

“My dad says we’ll be returning to earth in a few months—after all the satellites have been repaired.”

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

"Oh, where will you be staying?"

"Probably at the base where I first met you. At least we could see each other sometimes."

Hope filled Robin's heart, but her logical mind told her they'd be living too far apart to have a real relationship. "That would be nice. At least we can write and talk on the comm."

"Definitely," Walt said.

"I think we should be back in now."

"One more thing."

Robin wondered if Walt was going to kiss her. Her heart pounded.

"Yeah?"

"I've got something for you." Walt put his hand into his pocket and pulled something out. He opened his fist and there was a small cube-shaped package wrapped in silver paper. "Promise me you'll not open it until you get home."

"But that will be too hard. Can't I open it now?" Robin reached out to take the package, but Walt pulled his hand back.

"Promise?"

Robin sighed. "Oh, all right, I promise." Walt held out the tiny gift and Robin took it. She wondered if it was a ring. She suddenly felt too young to be going steady with a boy—even one she liked as much as Walt. She surprised herself by kissing Walt on the cheek. She wasn't sure but she thought he blushed. She left him quickly and walked back into the room where the announcer was about to speak.

Robin met her dad and Sam at the Air Force base. She was relieved that Ms. Trowbridge wasn't there. At least she could have this moment of homecoming without her.

"I missed you so much, Dad."

"I missed you too, Little Bird."

Robin and her dad hugged each other tight. He smelled as he always did, of musk cologne and Chap Stick. Sam joined the hug and they walked together from the gate, through the concourse, and out to the parking garage. Her dad had bought himself a new truck—brand new, not a used one. It was an air skimmer like Maggie's but without the camper part. It was midnight blue with gold flecks.

"Wow!" was all Robin could think to say.

"You like it?"

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

“Cool! But...how could you afford it?”

Robin's dad opened the door and helped Robin in. “You won't like hearing this, but Ms. Trowbridge and I bought it together.”

“Is she still hangin' around?” Robin asked.

“Yeah,” said Sam. “And they're getting married.”

There went Robin's happy homecoming. “Why on earth would you do that, Dad?”

“Don't start now, Robin.” He elevated the car out of the parking basin and fired up the engine.

“Sorry, it's just that...” Her words caught in her throat, but she had to say what was on her mind. “Don't you love Mom anymore?”

“How can you say that, Robin? Of course I do, but a man gets lonely after his wife dies. It's only natural to want to find another partner.”

“You've got me and Sam to keep you company. And Cousin Maggie's coming back to stay in the cottage for a while too.”

Robin's dad pulled the truck over before exiting the parking garage. “One day you'll understand. Now try and be nice to Ms. Trowbridge.”

“Okay, but I'm not calling her Mom.”

“You don't have to. In fact, you can start calling her Karen if you'd like.”

Robin folded her arms while her dad drove home. Neither of them said a word on the way.

Ms. Trowbridge was waiting at the house. “Welcome home, Robin.”

“Thanks.”

Robin avoided her eyes as she hauled her bags into the house. The kitchen had been fixed, and the house looked better than it had in a long time. There were small vases of flowers gracing the end tables in the living room and the windowsill in the kitchen, the couch displayed a new cover, and the dining table had a new green tablecloth over it. The house smelled clean and fresh. Robin dropped her bags and peaked into the garage. It still hadn't been repaired but had black plastic draped over exposed walls. Then she checked her room. It was still in disrepair. She would have to share Sam's room for a while.

Robin turned around and looked up into her father's eyes. “Where were you? Cousin Maggie and I looked all over. We went to three shelters, then into the city and checked the dead people at the morgue. We looked on the lists of missing. I almost ran away.”

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

"Come here, Little Bird." He took her hand. It was rough and calloused and much bigger than Walt's. "Sit down."

Robin sat in the big red chair and waited. Her dad and Sam sat on the couch.

"We were here the whole time," Sam said.

"Yes, apparently we could see you but you couldn't see us," her dad said.

"You remember?"

"Some of it," said her dad. "Sam remembers more."

Ms. Trowbridge joined them on the couch. "I don't remember much either, but I had my vid camera with me and we recorded you and Maggie that night and the next morning. We walked through walls and even reached out to touch you and Maggie, but our hands went right through you."

"The fourth dimension," Robin said. "When can I see the recording?"

"After dinner," said Robin's dad.

Robin looked on Ms. Trowbridge with new respect. "Thank you for recording it."

"You're welcome."

Maybe she wouldn't be so bad after all. If she weren't around, maybe her dad would feel hollow inside the way Robin felt without Walt. Just then, Robin's comm buzzed. She took it outside, answered it, and saw Walt's bright face.

"I just wanted to see if you made it home okay," he said.

"I did. Thanks for calling. What are you doing?"

"Just messing around with my radio. Some of the scientists are working on communicating with the blobs. They gave me a scholarship to go to the Air Force Academy."

"Are you going?"

"Don't know. Dad would have to get a full-time babysitter for my sisters."

"Well you deserve to get out of that job."

"I know, but I'd miss them and my dad."

"I know what you mean."

"So, Robin, are you still planning on attending the Academy?"

Robin sighed. "Well, my dad's getting married. I don't know how much use I'll be around here. I've got to think about it."

"I hope you do."

"I might go to regular high school for a year at least."

Cousin Maggie and the Ballbombs

"We'll keep in touch."

"Cousin Maggie's coming back pretty soon. I think I want to hang around and learn more stuff from her."

"Yeah, she's pretty interesting all right." There was a pause in the conversation, and then Walt asked, "How do you feel about your dad getting married?"

"Not too happy, but I'll get used to her I guess."

"Yeah, I don't know how I'd feel if my dad got married again, but it's bound to happen. Don't let it get you down."

"I'll try."

"Did you open my package yet?"

"Nope, not yet."

"Guess I'd better go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Walt kissed the screen. Robin's heart felt lighter, and she giggled.

"Bye, Walt. Talk to you soon."

Later that evening when everyone was in bed, Robin went outside and climbed her tree. The moon was almost full and it shed light on her as she took out Walt's package and slowly opened it, her heart pounding the entire time. Inside were a tiny holo generator and a hand-written note in large block letters.

"Dear Robin. One of the pilots recorded these images and showed me how to copy them into this little projector. I hope you enjoy this and it brings you memories of your stay on the space station." It was signed in cursive, "Love, Walt."

The note itself was enough to charge her heart. She took the small cube in her hand and pressed the "on" button. Out popped five colored blobs, all different colors, sizes and shapes. They shot up above her head and danced around and throughout the branches of the tree. She swirled around her head, changing shapes. She watched, entranced, for a long time before turning off the holo projector and letting them disappear into the night.