

FORBIDDEN CHILD

GWEN NEWELL



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BOOKS

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MOSCOW, IDAHO

To N.D. Wilson.
Thanks, Nate, for everything.

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1. THE ESCAPE

IN WINTER UNDER A CLOUDY SKY, THE NORTH ATLANTIC WAS GRAY LIKE ICE, GRAY like whales, gray like the *Escape*. The *Escape* was the last American ship on the seas, and she had been sailing for forty years. She was a battered old cruise liner carrying eight thousand souls through the ocean over what was once New England.

At two hundred fifty feet above the waterline, the ship rose like a small skyscraper, and she was so long that if you stood her up on her end, she would needle the same sky as the Empire State Building. Except there was no Empire State Building now. No New York City. No New York State. No America. Around the *Escape*, as far as the eye could see, the ocean waves rolled like deep thoughts to the tug of the moon, but they did not crest into breakers on the beach because all the beaches were gone.

Snapping in the wind against the white sky was the *Escape's* flag: the solid gold silhouette of a muscular woman raising both arms to heaven against a blood-red field. Beneath the flag stood a giant billboard, now chipped and faded. The billboard read: KEEPING YOU SAFE UNTIL THE WORLD IS SAFE AGAIN.

No eager faces peered from the windows, for most of the *Escape's* windows had been blinded with black-out boards or plastered over with white tape. On the top deck, no happy hands clasped the railing as passengers looked out to sea. No excited bare feet ran here and there. Nobody was sipping cocktails.

In fact, hardly anybody was on the top deck at all, for it was illegal for unauthorized crew to set foot anywhere outside the hull. Four lone guards wearing stumpy wool coats and holding shabby rifles shuffled slowly up and down the deck, one guard for each side of the ship. The cruise ship's gaudy lounge chairs were long gone. The speakers piping pop music had been silenced. The swimming pools were empty, and there is nothing in the world so empty as an empty swimming pool.

All in all, the *Escape* looked like a ghost ship adrift on the wintry waves, but not according to the eight thousand Americans living below. If you asked them, they would tell you the *Escape* was their home. Their haven. Their life. And nobody would have said this louder than Piper Pascal.

On this morning, far below the top deck, deep inside the *Escape's* hull, thirteen-year-old Piper climbed silently down from her bunk bed in her cold, dim cabin and tucked her thin cotton shirt into her wool skirt, pulled on her wool sweater, laced her boots, which were too big for her, and tied her braid with string. Her breath came in white puffs in the near darkness. Today, Godmother's Day, the first day of the week, was the only day the crew was allowed to sleep in, but Piper never did. Today, like any other day, she strapped on her belt and inserted her extendable rubber truncheon, radio, flashlight, and a pair of handcuffs flaking rust. Onto her shirt collar, she pinned a single silver bar.

She was Lieutenant Piper Pascal, leader of the Children's Army, spy in the Secret Agency Countering Terrorism—SACT—and she did not sleep in.

Piper's face would have freckled in the sun had she ever seen it, and her hazel eyes would have sparkled had she been born fifty years earlier and lived in a normal house with parents called Mom and Dad and opened a stocking on Christmas morning and had felt beach sand between her toes and had known what chocolate tasted like and had read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. But Piper Pascal did not know any of those things. If you had told her she must be sad, she would quietly reply that sadness was impossible aboard the *Escape*, the perfect world of the Godmother.