

MARKETABLE SKILLS

A "Crime and Rockets" play by Scotto Moore

Carissa enters, a teenager coming home from school. Mother sits at their kitchen table, glass of whiskey sitting untouched in front of her. Next to her is Steven, a smooth corporate lawyer. Mother and Carissa are just above poverty level on a mining colony far from Earth. Steve's fancy suit is a stark contrast. Carissa freezes in the doorway when she sees him.

STEVEN: You must be Carissa. Your mother's told me quite a bit about you. I'm Steven. Corporate sent me. Please, join us.

MOTHER: Go on, girl, sit.

Carissa reluctantly sits at the table.

CARISSA: Ma, what's going on?

MOTHER: Sally finally left.

CARISSA: Left for where?

MOTHER: Left for wherever she felt like going. Left our *home*. Left *me*. Left for good this time.

CARISSA: Why'd she leave?

MOTHER: She left because of *you*, Carissa.

CARISSA: But *why*, what did I do to make her leave?

MOTHER: You wouldn't stop asking us *questions!* You *never* stop asking! Sometimes you oughta let people have their secrets! I told you that a million times, but you don't care what I got to say unless I'm answering your damn questions!

STEVEN: Carissa, your mother thought we might be able to help protect you.

CARISSA: And why exactly would I need *your* protection?

STEVEN: People are spreading stories about what you can do. Your classmates like to whisper. Sally's pals at the tavern got an earful I'm sure. You're lucky this colony is so remote, really. I imagine they don't teach too much ancient history in school, not when you've got an important trade like ore mining to learn. Local born constables don't yet recognize what they've got on their hands. But someday a bounty hunter will hear those stories about you, or an enforcement officer will rotate through, and your luck will finally run out. Your wise mother saw it coming, couldn't let that happen to her little girl. Instead she reached out to corporate, rightfully assuming we'd see opportunity where others do not.

CARISSA: Mother, what did you tell them about me?

MOTHER: The truth, ironic enough. Told them anytime my daughter asks me a question, I'm forced to answer her with the truth, whether I actually want to or not. Sally too and now she's gone. It's like some kind of mind control.

STEVEN: I'd like to experience this for myself, Carissa, if you don't mind. Go ahead and ask me any question you like. The more personal the better, I promise I won't mind. Ask me a question that you'd never want to answer yourself, and let's see if your "mind control" works on me.

Carissa refuses.

STEVEN: Carissa, did you ever learn in school about the psionic colonies?

Carissa doesn't provide any indication yes or no.

STEVEN: The psionics were people who could affect their environment or those around them using only the power of their thoughts. Historically, most psionics were telekinetic, but some were telepathic, and a few were even said to be precognitive or psychic. We never got the chance to learn how psionic powers worked before their colonies were obliterated.

CARISSA: What's ancient history got to do with me?

STEVEN: If what your mother says is true, you may well be a psionic yourself.

MOTHER: I'm sorry, girl, for raising you to be so willfully obtuse. And I'm sorry you inherited our family's curse. Skipped me, skipped your grandma, guess I started to believe it was all dried up and you were gonna be safe and normal.

STEVEN: Corporate can imagine many profitable uses for your skill, Carissa. If it's real.

CARISSA: What makes you think I'd ever use my skill for corporate profit?

STEVEN: Your skill is highly *illegal*. In fact "seditious" is the term of art. If I turn you over to enforcement, they'll execute you on sight, no trial necessary. That's the only known defense against psionics, after all.

CARISSA: So what does corporate want with me exactly?

STEVEN: Corporate wants to *hire* you. To advise our contract team, to help negotiate trade agreements, to root out competitive espionage... there's quite a list.

MOTHER: With Sally gone... one of us needs to find some honest work, you understand? And you'll be safe. Enforcement won't dare touch a corporate asset.

CARISSA: Ma, did you *tell* enforcement about me? Do they know?

MOTHER: Christ, girl, no. Never. *Pause*. But Sally said some very mean things about you when she was leaving. They might know soon if they ain't heard by now.

STEVEN: Sally didn't tell enforcement about you. A team from human resources intervened on your behalf. Carissa, I'm empowered to offer you a lucrative employment position on the spot, and take you back with me to corporate headquarters - pending my confirmation of your skill. So go on, I'm sure you've had time to think of a challenging personal question for me by now.

Carissa pauses, evaluating this man, making a decision. The following sequence is a barrage in which Carissa asks a series of questions so rapidly and intensely that Steven's answers spill from him in a torrent.

CARISSA: How did you stop Sally from telling enforcement about me?

STEVEN: A team from human resources intervened on your behalf-

CARISSA: No corporate jargon, what did they *do* to her?

STEVEN: They killed her, execution style, several shots from behind-

CARISSA: What did they do with her body?

STEVEN: Smuggled it out on a cargo shuttle, they'll space it with waste disposal en route to the station-

CARISSA: What will happen to my mother if I go with you to headquarters?

STEVEN: She'll be killed in an explosion, we'll make it look like a power surge-

CARISSA: Why do you need to kill anybody?

STEVEN: Your value decreases relative to the number of people who know what you can do-

CARISSA: What will happen to me if I refuse to take the job?

STEVEN: We'll abduct you from your home, put you in cryo, deliver you to the R&D lab back at headquarters-

CARISSA: What if I *do* take the job?

STEVEN: There's no job! We just want to learn how your powers work! You'll be a lab rat for the rest of your life!

CARISSA: Where's your human resources team now?

STEVEN: At the hotel, waiting to find out if you're coming with us willingly or by force.

CARISSA: Are they monitoring us via audiovisual signal?

STEVEN: Of course not, any field transmission or recording could be discoverable by opposing counsel and permissible in court-

CARISSA: Are you carrying a weapon on your person?

STEVEN: No, I'm not-

CARISSA: That was probably a mistake.

She produces a small futuristic pistol and points it at him.

STEVEN: What are you going to do with that?

CARISSA: You don't ask the questions here, asshole.

MOTHER: Carissa, Jesus! Why do you have that?

CARISSA: They shoot people like me on sight, Ma. I do know a *little* history.

STEVEN: I'll appeal to the senior team. I understand your value much better now - you could be an executive candidate with the right mentor. Your skill demonstration was very impressive.

CARISSA: My skill demonstration isn't finished. Here's that personal question you wanted. Steven, are you married?

He pauses, becoming suddenly disoriented.

STEVEN: I... I don't remember... I can't... I must not be...

CARISSA: That looks like a wedding ring on your finger. Are you sure you're not married?

STEVEN: I have... no idea... I don't have...

CARISSA: You don't have anyone that you care about, back on Earth maybe?

STEVEN: I... I don't... why can't I remember this?

CARISSA: My skill works two ways, Steven. I can compel you to *tell* the truth... or I can compel you to *forget* the truth.

MOTHER: Are you kidding me, girl?

CARISSA: Sorry, Ma, you wouldn't remember me learning that little twist. Guess I shoulda used it on Sally so she wouldn't hate me so much, but I just... always hoped she loved us down deep.

MOTHER: She did love us, baby. I know she did.

CARISSA: Now Steven, unless you wanna forget a few other important things like your *job* and your *name* and your *reason to live*... you're gonna smuggle us all out of this shithole colony. We're a team now.

STEVEN: No matter where you take me, corporate will track you down.

CARISSA: Corporate won't have to track me down. By the time I get done working my way through headquarters, I'm gonna be their fucking CEO.