

NO WAY HOME WASTELAND™ 3



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NO WAY HOME
A Wasteland Novella
By Carrie Cuinn

CHAPTER ONE

Angela Deth kept her eyes closed as she leaned against the factory wall, silently counting the seconds until those damn robots figured out she was free. *One-Arizona, two-Arizona, three-Arizona...* The longer it took, the more she started to feel like herself, but that was worse than spending every day in a daze. Once they found her, they'd shove another mental blocker on her head and again, the best parts of who she was would be erased by synth technology. *Six-Arizona, seven-Arizona, eight-Arizona...* She shifted impatiently. Even though the headband was cracked, taking it off before the synths arrived would mean another punishment. Eyes still closed, she reached over and felt the soft, aching scar on her other arm. It wasn't the only one they'd given her, but it was the newest.

Fifteen-Arizona, sixteen-Arizona, seventeen-Arizona...

Angela's skin began to itch along her arms, up her back, across her scalp. Her feet hurt. No, her right foot hurt. Her blood and bone foot. She sighed and shifted her weight to her left leg, the articulated metal one she woke up with after the crash. Brightly colored wires snaked up from it, across her belly, connecting to the battery stuck to her chest. The artificial limb she wore from her left knee down was the most advanced she'd ever seen, even better than Thrasher's, a genuine marvel, except she didn't ask for it, wasn't asked, it wasn't hers—

She shook her head suddenly, trying to push those thoughts away. It had to have been, she didn't know, *months* since the Ranger helicopter crashed in Los Angeles? Time slowed to a crawl while the blocker band thrummed. She remembered only scattered moments since, a jumble of minutes that added up to escape attempts, and pain, and capture. Every time.

Twenty-eight-Arizona, twenty-nine, thirty...

If the robots hadn't come for her by now, it meant they didn't know her headband was broken. She had to act fast.

Angela opened her eyes.

The overhead light was brighter than she expected. She put up a hand to shield her face while her eyes adjusted. She was in one of the smaller side rooms, a storage space full of boxes and crates the robots brought in from... wherever they found supplies. She must have been carrying one when she ran into the wall and shorted out the headband again: the box had broken open, its contents spilled out at her feet. Her bare and dirty feet, she realized—how long had she been without shoes? Maybe she could find new ones before the synths came back for her. She pulled the lid off the box in the closest stack to find pink plastic eggs, sealed into clear plastic bags.

That won't help, she thought, and tried another box. The next one held small plastic cups in various colors, and the next few crates were no help either, just more random collections of plastic. Probably raw materials for whatever the robots were always building here. From outside the room she heard synths and worker bots moving with their precise rhythm around the factory floor. She froze, listening for the sound of metal feet coming toward her, but if anything, the noises seemed to get quieter as she waited.

After a while the pain in her chest made her realize she had to breathe again. Angela stretched to try to stop shaking, and when that didn't work, she made herself go back to searching.

Finally, in a wooden crate at the bottom of the stack, she found a jumble of faded clothes in various sizes, and several worn black boots. She held one up to the light, checking for cracks in the leather or the sole, but it looked solid. She matched a pair and set them aside, pawing through the clothing as quickly as she could until she found a light blue bra. *Too small*, she thought, but put it with the boots, along with an ancient short-sleeved shirt made from some kind of yellow fabric in a very fine weave. She paused for a moment, running her fingers over the pre-war material.

A sudden clanging sound from across the factory floor made Angela jump. Her stomach tightened as she leaped up, hurriedly stuffing the rest of the clothes back in the crate. She stood straight up with it, half closed her eyes, and stacked it on top of the others as if she was doing the task she was assigned. She forced herself to slow down, making her movements methodical, as she moved another box back where she'd found it. Her heart raced as a huge yellow worker bot passed the open doorway to her room, but she kept to her pace, turning away from the bot to pick up another box.

Nothing to see here, she thought as hard as she could.

When Angela turned back toward the doorway, the worker bot was gone. All her fear hit her then in a trembling rush, and she collapsed to the floor, pulling her legs toward her chest. She hugged them both, even the synthetic monstrosity. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly to keep the tears in. Counting the seconds again: *One-Arizona, two-Arizona, three-Arizona...*

When she made it to thirty seconds, Angela forced herself to take one deep breath, then another, until her arms stopped shaking. Slowly, she pushed herself up and looked around. There was nothing watching her.

Her stomach still tying itself into knots, she undressed as quickly as she could. She dropped her overalls next to the boots but used her tattered shirt to rub some of the dirt off her skin, the closest thing she'd had to a bath in who knew how long. She tried on the too-small bra, expecting it to pinch her ribs but hoping that once the blocker band was reactivated she wouldn't notice anymore. It fit better than she expected. She ran her fingers over her ribs, her collarbones, around the power cell stuck to her

chest. She was thinner than she remembered. The damn synths hadn't been feeding her the way they used to. She looked at the discarded shirt on the floor, which was dirtier than it should have been.

Have they stopped caring about me? she wondered.

Before, she thought the synths had a plan for her. They must have pulled her from the wreckage for a reason. They'd kept her fed and put new clothes on her often enough that she didn't have to think about it. Now, she wasn't sure if there was a plan at all... and if there wasn't, they didn't need her anymore.

She finished dressing, keeping her old overalls. If her outfit hadn't changed too much, maybe none of the robots would notice. The boots were a size too big, but lacing them up, she felt a little like a soldier again, for the first time in a long while.

"Listen up, Angie," she whispered to herself. "What would ol' Snake do? Keep fighting or die trying, in that order." She breathed deep again, letting her muscles drop into familiar positions as she picked up a box. She held it in front of her, leaning forward slightly and looking toward the floor. She'd look like just another downtrodden captive, numbed by their neural blockers, moving supplies from one room to another. She hoped.

Her insides kept clenching, making her nauseated, but she managed to put one foot in front of the other until she was back in the main part of the factory. Here, a shiny silver path was worn into the old painted floor from metal feet that rarely deviated from choosing the same steps, over and over. She followed it as she crossed a room that seemed to go on forever, keeping her eyes down, her steps slow but straight. Past a hallway where two synths stood facing each other, speaking in low tones. Kept walking. Past a room that smelled like human waste and death. Slow and steady. Past worker bots disassembling something full of sparks and wires that might have been moving while they took it apart. Eyes down.

Just as Angela was about to duck into the room she vaguely remembered as the factory's control center, another worker bot walked toward her, its heavy metal feet thudding against the floor. She wanted to freeze but made her own feet keep moving, passing the bot just before the control room's open doorway. Risking a look back, she saw the bot wasn't paying any attention to her, so she quickly turned and stepped into the windowless room. She carefully set the box onto the floor, then leaned on the wall to catch her breath. This was as close to an escape as she'd ever gotten. Any second now, a pair of synths would burst in, grab her, and drag her down the hall kicking and screaming, to be swallowed back up by another neural blocker.

Pushing herself off the wall, she hurried over to the radio console, the only tech station she'd recognized the last time she was in there. Standing over it, though, she wasn't sure what to do next.

Really could use you here, Woodson, she thought, trying to remember the times she'd seen him working over the Rangers' radio setup back home. She spotted a pair of dusty headphones on the floor and grabbed them. Putting them over her ears would mean not being able to hear anything coming, so she slipped them around her neck while she hunted for the input jack.

There, she realized, *next to the big green button. If it'd been a snake, it would have bit you, kid.*

Angela almost cheered when the light came on and the console thrummed quietly to life.

Now or never, she thought. She put the headphones on and leaned over the mic stand in front of her. "If anyone can hear this," she said as loudly as she dared, "I don't know what frequency I'm on or where I am exactly, but I need the Arizona Rangers. Carlson, Woodson, you guys still in Los Angeles? General Vargas? *Anybody*? If you're out there, this is Captain Angela Deth, requesting immediate assistance. I'm being held captive by armed synths and worker bots in a factory of some kind. The place is gigantic. I think it's underground. And I think we're near the ocean—I can hear it sometimes. They've got other people held prisoner here, too."

She paused, biting her lip. "Please," she added. "I say again, this is Captain Angela Deth, and Rangers, if you can hear me, I need your help." She pressed a yellow button labeled "Repeat" and though it sounded hollow, her own voice came back at her through the headphones.

"I sure hope someone's listening," she said to herself as the adrenaline faded away. Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion hit her so hard her meat leg buckled, but the synthetic leg kept her upright, jerking her hip hard enough that the pain woke her up again. Angela yanked the headphones from the console, dropping them onto the floor where she'd found them. The green and yellow buttons were still lit up, though. She was looking for something to cover them when she heard footsteps headed her way. Leaving the console on, she rushed over to grab the box she'd left by the door. She took a moment to let her muscles settle, let her head tilt forward. The metallic sounds moving toward the control room were clear and bright—not the dull, heavy footsteps of a mindless worker bot, but the delicate steps of a synth.

Angela held her breath.

The synth passed by.

Angela stepped out of the control room, walking in the opposite direction from the receding footsteps as she thought about what to do next. With her eyes on the floor, she wasn't sure exactly where she was headed, so she followed the path so many others had walked before. She couldn't just wait for a rescue that might never come, right? But what other choice did she have?

"Human!" a worker bot called out suddenly. Angela froze, holding the box so tightly she hurt where it pressed into her arms. The bot thudded over to her. "Rest period," it said.

Angela didn't move.

"Rest period," the bot repeated, and pushed her with one oversized hand. Angela stumbled but managed to stay on her feet. The bot guided her around a corner, down a short hallway to an empty room, then shoved her inside. "Rest," it said. It left then, with Angela still holding the box.

She waited for a few minutes until it was clear the bot wasn't coming back, then dropped the box and sat. Her empty stomach rumbled, but Angela couldn't stop thinking she had to do more to get herself out of the factory. There was almost no chance anyone would hear her distress call, she thought, even if she had figured out how to work that radio console. She regretted not spending more time with Lieutenant Woodson when she had the chance, but there was always another mission. Another chance to keep Arizona safe.

Out of nowhere, she thought of Ace.

All right, Ace, what would you do? Crack a joke? Get yourself locked up? Well, I already did that part. It's the getting out I gotta do next. Angela spotted some pipes running up one corner of the room. She managed to unfold her stiff joints, crawling over to examine a little spigot almost hidden near the floor. *Of course,* she thought. *The plumbing. Thanks, Ace.*

After several tries, she managed to open the valve just enough for a thin stream of viscous fluid to drip out. It smelled like motor oil, and she had no idea if the bots even needed it, but it was all she could do. Exhaustion overtook her as she crawled to the far corner, collapsing into a heap.

Before she even knew she was asleep, Angela woke up to a loud siren blaring throughout the factory. She was still rubbing her eyes open when metal hands grabbed her, pulling her onto her feet.

"What have you done?" the synth asked her.

Angela looked toward the pipes, confused. *Was the leak that important?* The synth shook her arm violently. In the distance, Angela could hear running metal feet and, faintly, the unmistakable sound of gunfire.

"What have you done?" it asked again.

It's talking about the fighting, she realized. *Someone's come for me.*

Angela stood upright for the first time since they'd taken her so she could look directly into the synth's red eyes. "I called in the cavalry," she told it.

"I'm going home."

CHAPTER TWO

With her free hand, Angela ripped the blocker band from her head. The synth shoved her hard. She fell to the floor and barely rolled out of the way as its foot landed where her head had been the second before. The synth's foot smashed down onto the metal headband instead, grinding it into glittering bits of metal. Unfazed, the robot stepped toward her again.

With the tips of her fingers, Angela grabbed the box she'd been carrying and slid it toward the synth. Its foot crashed through it, barely slowing down. She scrambled to her feet to get around the synth while it shook off the box's lid, but it moved to block the door before she could escape. Putting her artificial leg back a step for balance, Angela raised both fists.

The synth advanced on her again, then stopped. It turned suddenly to pull a passing worker bot into the room. "Guard the human," the synth told it, "but do not kill." Then it was gone.

The worker bot turned its corrugated sheet metal face toward Angela. She lowered her hands. She hadn't been able to study the hulking bots before. Even though there were a lot more of them in the factory than the more intelligent synths, what she'd mostly seen of these bots had been their feet, thudding past her as she moved boxes or carried supplies from one room to another. The robots she'd fought in Arizona tended to be in little smoking pieces before too long, but she'd seen enough to know they were different shapes, different models from these. The one in front of her wasn't holding a weapon, but its massive body was heavily armored with yellow metal plates. The smarter synths were human sized, could maybe even pass for human in the right disguise, while this worker nearly filled the doorway.

"I don't suppose you want to let me out of here, big guy?" Angela asked.

It didn't answer.

"Why don't you take me to where the rest of the humans are? They're nearby, right?" She moved closer. "You could guard us all together." The bot didn't react in any way Angela could see, so she moved forward again, getting within a few steps of the doorway. She took a deep breath and then, as casually as she could, said, "You know what, big guy, I'll just peek my head out and look for 'em."

Before she could duck past it into the hallway, the bot came to life, thrusting its arm into Angela's path. The arm started to make a whirring, whining noise, and she could feel the hair on her arms stand as it charged up. Without warning, the bot fired a blue bolt into the hallway. Answering bullets ricocheted off the bot's yellow plating. One passed so close to Angela's face that she felt the air move before she'd heard the shot fired. She threw herself into a corner and covered her head with her hands.

Out in the hall, she could hear human voices yelling, but they weren't close enough yet to make out any words.

Heavy metal clanking passed them by as something huge ran toward the fight. A few seconds later, the unmistakable sound of machine gun fire rattled down the hall, louder than Angela remembered. She shoved her fists against her ears, but the machine gun was incessant. She couldn't block out the screaming from the end of the hall, even when she pressed as tightly as she could.

When the sharp scent of oily smoke stung her nose, Angela hesitantly put her hands down. It was quieter now. She rubbed away the tears she didn't realize had leaked out while her eyes were screwed shut, and stood up.

The yellow worker bot was collapsed in the doorway, smoke drifting up from half a dozen holes in its chest.

Angela took a deep breath, then peeked out into the hall. Nothing shot at her. There was a body in the far corner, limbs bent awkwardly. She moved toward it carefully. She passed a vacant storeroom on her right, stopping just before the perpendicular hallway on her left. Hearing nothing, she took a quick look around the corner... it was empty. She hurried past.

There were two more rooms on the right side of the hallway before she could reach the body, which looked more and more human the closer she got. The first of those rooms was dark, and nothing seemed to be moving inside it. She hesitated in the doorway. The room smelled of gunpowder and blood, so she checked the next room instead. This one was well lit, and though it was empty, the bright lights meant she couldn't miss the blood splattered across the floor. At least whoever had been injured in here made it out, one way or the other.

She couldn't say the same for the dead man at the end of the hall. He was mostly intact, though his right arm was twisted around behind his back, and she couldn't tell from his mismatched outfit whether he was a rescuer or another captive. His wounds had been cauterized by whatever killed him, and he smelled uncomfortably like meat cooked over an open flame. Crouching beside his body, Angela quickly checked his pockets for anything she could use, but found only a clip of 5.56mm bullets in the front pocket of his pants. *Not much help without a gun to fire them*, she thought. There was nothing else: no trinkets, not a first aid kit, not a badge.

Not a Ranger, so who are you?

Just as she was about to give up, she spotted a metal tube poking out from behind the corpse, and wrenched it free.

"Hello, old friend," she said softly. The M1 was about the most basic assault rifle you could get, but as she stood up, Angela ran through a standard field check as familiar as breathing and instantly felt a

wave of calm wash over her. She swapped out its empty clip for the full one, slipped the strap over her shoulder, and patted the wooden stock gently. "Let's you and me find our way out of here."

Rifle ready, Angela pushed open the heavy door that separated her from the rest of the building, crossed the short corridor in front of her, and strode onto the factory floor. She stared for a moment, really seeing the place for the first time. It was a massive space, with twenty-foot ceilings and bright fluorescent lights overhead. Sound came rushing toward her: guns firing, metal clanking, and, somewhere to her left, screaming. She ran in that direction.

A synth appeared from a side room ahead of her and hurried toward the noise.

Without thinking, she raised the M1 and fired, twice, taking it down. She kept going, ducking when a spray of bullets ricocheted off a nearby wall. Another scream. She turned a corner just in time to see a synth fire on a kneeling prisoner. The man shuddered, blood spreading across his chest, and fell to the ground without a word. All around him were other bodies, bloody and motionless. Angela fired at the synth again and again, knocking it back, until the trigger of her rifle clicked uselessly.

The synth twitched a few times as its legs collapsed out from under it. She stood over it, watching it smoke and spark.

"Why?" she asked. The synth stared back at her but didn't answer. "Why?!" she repeated, screaming.

It didn't answer. Angela watched as the light faded from the robot's eyes, then kicked it as hard as she could.

Behind her, she heard the clank of metal feet against the floor. She turned around slowly. Two huge worker bots stood there, with a synth between them. It looked at Angela with its blank face but said nothing.

"I gave it my best shot," Angela told it. She let the empty rifle clatter to the floor and smiled faintly. "You had to guess I'd try this eventually."

"It was a known probability," the synth admitted. "Your presence was a necessary risk."

"Now what? Another headband? You put me back to work?"

"We have determined the status of the war has changed. Your value has been reassessed," the synth replied. It raised one hand, and behind it, one of the bots raised its arm. Angela saw it turn blue as it charged up, and sighed.

"Yeah," she said. "I was sick of this place anyway."

The synth spun around faster than any human could just as the worker bots began shaking violently. Then Angela heard bullets striking their metal bodies. She didn't move, but cocked her head

slightly and watched as they were gunned down. As the smoke cleared, four armed men swept into the room.

“Clear!” one of them yelled.

“Ma’am?” another one said to Angela. He had light brown skin and wore his black hair cropped close to his skull, and his eyes were a surprisingly honeyed shade of hazel. Not much taller than her, and probably a lot younger. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

A worn star-and-circle badge was pinned to his leather jacket.

“Rangers?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Ranger Gregory Usher. I sure do hope you’re Captain Deth.”

She nodded. Usher grinned and signaled the others. One man picked up Angela’s rifle and handed her a fresh clip before grabbing her hand to shake it vigorously. Another clapped her on the back. “Okay, men,” Usher said. “Let’s get Captain Deth topside.”

The unit took their places around Angela and started forward.

“We’re underground?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Usher replied. Seeing the look on her face, he added, “We’ll be out in a few minutes and then our lieutenant can explain anything you need to know.”

“Woodson?” she asked.

Ranger Usher shook his head. “Not familiar with him, ma’am, but I’ll ask around for you.”

They made their way up a stairwell Angela only half remembered. The next floor was laid out nearly the same as the one below. Usher called out, waited thirty seconds, then signaled his team to go up another flight of stairs. A minute later, two armed women fell in behind them, half carrying a wounded man between them. One of Usher’s men, a round-faced kid, pulled a med kit from his pack and went to help them.

They were met at the next floor by a couple of middle-aged white women who’d been guarding the stairwell. “That everyone?” the blonde asked Usher. She had streaks of gray in her long braid.

“Steve’s injured,” he answered. “Mark didn’t make it.”

The brunette, who could have been the other woman’s sister, pointed toward the far end of the room. “Pete’s at the elevator. Get going so we can seal this off behind you.”

Usher nodded. “You heard ’em!” he yelled to his team. “Let’s go, hustle, *hustle!*” He broke into a half jog, leading Angela and the others past the remains of a gigantic many-legged robot. She was out of breath by the time they reached the half-dozen people waiting by the elevator door.

One of them, a tall black man with a Ranger badge on his armored vest, hit the call button and waved them inside as the elevator opened. One of his eyes was milky white. “No time for chitchat,” he

said loudly. He froze for a moment as Angela passed him, staring at her with his one clear eye, then recovered. "Time to go, people!"

The two women who'd been by the stairwell raced toward them; the man in charge threw his arm out to keep the doors from closing until they'd squeezed inside.

"Cutting it a little close, Jean?" he asked.

The blonde woman, who was at least a foot shorter than he was, shook her head nonchalantly as the elevator closed. "Plenty of time, Lieutenant."

A huge *boom* shook the elevator and the lights flickered briefly but came back on.

Jean shrugged. "See?"

"Y'all really are Rangers," Angela said.

The elevator stopped with a lurch when it reached the top, and she stumbled. The lieutenant pulled her upright, then motioned to his medic just as the elevator doors opened. Angela put her hand up to fend everyone off.

"Captain Deth," the lieutenant said, "I'm Fred Petterson of the LA Rangers. Most folks call me Pete. We're here to help you."

"You wanna help, Petterson, get me out into the sunshine," she said quietly.

"We're almost there." He took her arm to guide her through the rest of the building. Angela's feet started to drag by the time they reached a metal ladder, but she pulled herself up each rung. "Fifty more feet," he said when she crawled through the open hatch into what looked like a workshop. She leaned against him, forcing herself to walk across the room. He reached out and opened the door for her.

Angela blinked hard, expecting sunlight, but it was dark outside. The air was crisp, though, and smelled like grass. Above her, stars blanketed the night sky.

"We've got a minute while my guys bring the Jeep around," Petterson said. "If you'd like, I can try to answer any questions you might have."

"Sure," Angela whispered. "Where the hell am I?"

Before he could answer, she closed her eyes and passed out.

CHAPTER THREE

Angela opened her eyes, squinting against the sunlight. Someone moved between her and the light. She waited until he came into focus: a man about her age, with a flabby build and a nice-enough face. One swollen eye bulged out and she wondered if it was uncomfortable, but she was relieved too. Robot and synth faces were all the same, designed by something that mistook symmetry for perfection.

"You're human," she told him.

"I've been called worse," he answered. "I'm a doctor. Can you sit up?"

She did. She was wearing a loose-fitting shirt and shorts, someone else's, but clean at least. "Being upright's not as painful as I expected."

"That's good to hear," he said, "though I can't take much credit there. You were mostly in one piece when they brought you in. Cleaned you up and let you sleep."

"I appreciate that," Angela said. "Where are we?"

"Little town called Rodia. Used to be famous for our possum farm, now I guess people know us for being the place Rangers come to when they get shot." The doctor snorted. "You wanna tell me about the leg?"

"You got a name?" she countered.

"Horchata. Go ahead, make your jokes." He crossed his arms and waited.

Angela thought for a moment, then said, "I don't understand why that's funny."

"The drink?" he said, as if it were a question. "Came up from Mexico? My grandparents also came up from Mexico?"

She shrugged.

"Never mind. It's a dumbass nickname. What about you?"

"Deth, Angela, captain in the Arizona Rangers. You a Ranger too, Dr. Horchata?"

"No, but I do have other patients to attend to if you're just going to waste my time."

She put her hands up. "Okay, but I don't know much." She flexed her synthetic leg, pointed the foot. "I woke up with this after the 'copter crashed, must be a couple of months ago now? I know the battery pack stuck to my chest can come off, but when it does, leg stops working, so I leave it be."

"And this was right after you crashed?" Horchata asked. "You flew out from Arizona, dropped off part of your team, decided to do a flyover of Seal Beach, and your 'copter went down almost immediately. You remember that?"

The flaming wreckage, bodies I wasn't sure were moving, watching robot hands pull me away from my team...

"Yeah," she said. "Then the leg, the factory, and now I'm here." Angela wasn't ready yet to share how little she remembered in between those moments, but the doctor frowned as if he already knew. She wasn't ready for that conversation, so instead she asked, "How'd you hear all about my mission?"

"Pete filled me in," the doctor replied. "Well, you're lucky. The leg is, frankly, astounding. I've never seen a more advanced artificial limb. It seems to have integrated well. I can't make any promises about the battery life but I expect the rest of you will wear out before it does."

"Hey, Doc?" a man's voice called from another room.

Horchata frowned again. "I'm getting tired of trying to keep Pete away. Do you have any questions you wanna keep private before I let him in here?"

"Only one," Angela said. "How much to cut this piece of junk off me?"

His mouth dropped open.

"Doc, everything all right?" Pete said loudly, just on the other side of the curtain.

"No," he said to Angela, before turning and shouting, "Yes!" at Pete. Looking back to his patient, he pointed his finger at her and said again, firmly, "No."

Pete opened the curtain enough to poke his head in and asked, "Which is it, Horchata? Yes or no?"

The doctor sighed. "I give up. Talk to her now if you want. I've got work to do." He moved toward the exit as if he was going to brush past the other man, but stopped a moment to whisper something Angela couldn't make out. Pete looked concerned; Horchata shrugged and left the room, closing the curtain behind him.

Pete put on a smile and strolled over to the foot of Angela's bed. "I don't know if you remember me, Captain," he said. "I'm Lieutenant Fred Petterson, but I answer to Pete. I'm the most senior Ranger you'll find around here at the moment."

"Angela's fine," she said. "New recruits call me Captain, but I don't peg you for a newbie."

"I joined up right after Team Echo got here. They came west looking for you. I was a trader then, guns and ammo mostly, heard they were setting up shop out in Santa Fe Springs. I figured I could make some scrap, maybe get help with a few local problems. They took me on and I've been a Ranger ever since."

"Any of Team Echo still around? The rest of my team, Foxtrot? It was Lieutenant Wade Woodson, Captain Dave Carlson, couple of guys... hell, I can't remember their names. Left 'em at a water treatment plant, I think." She sighed. "Sorry, I'm still waking up."

"That's Santa Fe Springs," Pete said. "I met Woodson. He's not here now, but alive as far as I know if that's what you're wondering. We all went back to Arizona for, well, a while. They stayed; me and a couple others came back to get the LA Rangers into shape."

Angela leaned forward excitedly. “You’ve been to Arizona? What happened with the mission? Did Vargas sort out those radio broadcasts?” She started to get out of bed but Pete moved quickly to stop her.

“Whoa, whoa now!” he said. “You need rest.”

“What I *need* is to get home. I’ll settle for checking in with Vargas. He’s probably written me off for dead by now.”

“We have a lot to talk about, that’s for sure,” Pete said as he carefully helped her get her legs back underneath the thin blanket. “We can’t contact Arizona now anyway. Our radio tower here just receives, and it doesn’t have enough range to pick up anything further east than Whittier.” When he saw Angela didn’t react to the name, he added, “It’s a village near the foothills.”

“In California?”

“Yes, ma’am. This side of the radiation wall. You have to know, ma’am...” Pete started to say. He hesitated, steadied himself, and went on. “I was with Team Echo when we went to Seal Beach looking for you. We cleared every floor, we thought. There was no sign.” He cleared his throat. “I regret that we couldn’t find you.”

“I knew the job, Ranger.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Angela watched Pete growing more uncomfortable the longer she didn’t say anything else. His face told the story of a hard life: he was missing one ear, and though he had both of his eyes, one of them was milky white. It didn’t make him look weak, though. She wasn’t sure yet what she thought of these ‘LA Rangers,’ but their lieutenant reminded her of more than a few guys she served with over the years. Finally, she spoke up.

“If you absolutely, right now, needed to get in touch with the general, how would you do it?”

“About that...” Pete pulled the nearest chair over to her bed and sat down. “Captain, I’m so sorry to have to tell you this...”

When Pete was finished telling his story, the Ranger Base she’d called home was gone, and Thrasher and Vargas were gone, along with two years of her life—not a few months, like she’d thought. She hadn’t said a word while he spoke, and didn’t for a long time after.

Then she got out of bed. “Any idea where my clothes ran off to?”

“Um, some of the ladies in town put together a bunch of things,” he said, pointing toward a pile stacked on a nearby chair. “Your boots are under your bed. The rest of what you had on is being cleaned; I can go track it down if there’s anything you need right now.”

“Nothing I care about,” Angela said, already eyeing the stack. She walked over and started sorting the clothes into two groups. In the larger pile were obviously the nicest things Pete’s neighbors had to offer, Sunday dresses and special favorites saved for rare occasions—finer than anything Angela wore. The other pile was much smaller.

“Oh, that’s from Dante,” Pete said when he saw her examining a pair of worn canvas pants that might have been military issue a hundred years ago, or fashionably similar from a more recent tailor. “He’s a local farmer. Him and his husband are real fond of the Rangers.”

“Thank him for me, will you?” Angela said. She stripped off her shirt and Pete, realizing she meant to change in front of him, hurried to spin around.

Over his shoulder, he said, “No problem. Got everything you need now?”

“I could use a gun,” she said. “I prefer an assault rifle if you can spare one, but anything will do in a pinch. You can turn around now.”

Angela was dressed and lacing up her boots when Pete turned back. She’d chosen Dante’s hand-me-down pants and a black tank top that looked newer, by a few decades at least.

“You’re really not going to wait to recover, are you?” Pete asked.

“Would you?” She stood up. “Look, I owe you for roping your people into getting me out of that place. Truly. I don’t want to ask anything more of you. Point me in the direction of home and I’ll head out.”

Pete sighed. “I’m supposed to bring supplies up to Santa Fe Springs, and we’ve only got the one running vehicle right now. I can take you up there, for a start.”

“Their radio better than yours?”

“Yup. We got a deal?”

Angela smiled for the first time. “Deal. You load up. I need to have a word with the good doctor first.”

A few hours later, Angela had both met and said goodbye to damn near everyone in town. Pete commandeered the Jeep his team had used to rescue her, a big sand-colored vehicle with six seats, thick tires, and no roof. Pete drove, so Angela didn’t have to admit she didn’t know how.

He talked a bit, but other than saying, “Not a lot of working cars in Arizona,” Angela sat in silence.

Pete gave up on trying to make conversation and focused instead on the road—or what was left of it. Angela sat in the passenger seat, watching the world rush past. One hand rested on the M14 gifted to her by one of the traders who hung out at Rodia’s gate. She tensed whenever they hit a bump or rolled over a pothole. Pete saw her white-knuckled grip on her rifle and didn’t comment. Once they arrived at

the old water plant, she smiled and did her best impression of a confident Desert Ranger while the two old guys who watched over the place gave her the nickel tour.

They were nice enough, these men who used to be farmers until they'd answered the Ranger call the year before, and Angela didn't want to disappoint them. Not even when they told her their radio wasn't picking up Arizona anymore. Not since new radiation had drifted west from the smoking crater that used to be the Ranger Citadel.

When she could, she got herself a minute alone outside. California was greener than she'd expected. There was so much more building up in the back of her head, but the one thought Angela could let herself have was that California was lush and living. That thought was safe enough.

Pete cleared his throat behind her. "I'm sorry we didn't have better news for you," he said as he walked up next to her. "You should come back to Rodia with me. We'll figure out what to do for you next."

"I already know what to do next. I need to go home. All you need to figure out is whether you want to tell me how to get there."

"I can't let you take off alone, Captain. You don't know the area and it's a hell of a lot more dangerous than you think."

"I'm old and I'm jaded, Ranger. I already suspect a wolf behind every rock and a mine under every footstep." Angela shrugged. "A million things can go wrong between this here, right now, and where I need to be. But there *is* somewhere else I need to be."

"Look, I get that," Pete said, lowering his voice. "After what happened... I know Woodson was leading your people to a safer location. I don't know where that is, though. If you left now, walked a thousand miles due east, through the radiation wall, through the desert... you'd still end up alone in the middle of the desert."

"Tell me a better way. One that ends with me in Arizona. Nice as all this is," she said, waving one hand at the overgrown plants around them, "if you can't help me, I'll start walking."

Pete fidgeted with his pistol.

I'm guessing that's your tell, she thought, but I'm gonna keep that information to myself a while longer.

"All right," he said after a while. "There's one thing we can try, but no guarantees it'll break your way."

Angela grinned. "Guarantees take the fun out of living, Ranger. What are you thinking?"

"Ever heard of Hollywood?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Since leaving the locals' only working vehicle behind at the Ranger base, Pete and Angela had fallen into a pattern: they slept at night, hiked during the day, avoided trouble whenever they could, and talked very little. He'd tried to engage her in conversation several times, but unless he had a tactical question, he rarely got more than a sentence in response. Even then, he had to puzzle out whether her answer was guarded, sarcastic, or indifferent. She said everything in that same slow desert drawl, and didn't seem to have a sense of humor. But he could tell she was a good soldier. She was perceptive about hazards, walked miles a day without complaining, and though she outranked him, she seemed content to let him lead the way.

Pete raised his hand suddenly. Angela, who'd been walking about five feet behind him and a little to his left, froze immediately. He pointed toward a stand of young trees growing up through a decaying bus. Its paint was rusted off and most of the windows were busted out, giving the saplings ample opportunity. *Mother Nature is greedy*, Pete had told her the day before, when Angela had marveled at the ruins of a shopping center too overgrown to enter. *She got the planet in the divorce. She's going to take back everything she can get, and then some.*

Get her to come to Arizona, Angela had replied then. *I got farmers dying for a little motherin'.*

Now, something rustled behind the old bus. Angela raised her M14 from the sling ready position, resting her finger just next to the trigger, and circled around while Pete took the other side. She spotted a rough outline of the target—large enough to be a man, but squatting under fallen branches like an animal—and put the rifle's stock against her shoulder, waiting for it to move. Behind it, she could see Pete raise the re-bored revolver he wore strapped to his leg like a seasoned gunslinger.

"Come out with your hands up!" Pete yelled.

The beast leaped from the bushes and charged Angela. She lined it up with the tiny iron sights at the end of the rifle's barrel and squeezed the trigger. Before she could see if the shot landed, she was already dodging, just as the animal rushed past her. Pete's gun rang out once, twice.

Angela lined it up again, realizing as she did that the beast was a massive spiked toad. She squeezed the trigger again, staying put to watch a small crater of blood explode on the toad's front shoulder. It screamed, a terrible sound that didn't quite drown out the loud bang of Pete's pistol.

Bleeding from several wounds, the toad jumped straight toward Angela. Its gigantic tongue burst from its mouth, hitting her in the hand. The tongue curled around her rifle and yanked it back, violently ripping the gun away and pulling her off her feet at the same time. She couldn't see what was happening, but she heard Pete fire much closer this time.

The toad screamed again.

Angela was on her knees by the time the beast shuddered and died. A moment later Pete was beside her, one hand out to help her up.

"Borrow your knife?" she asked as he pulled her to her feet. He handed over a single-edged blade twice as long as his hand. "We got these things in Arizona, too," she said as she walked over to the toad. "They take something of yours, only one way to get it back." She leaned over it and started cutting.

She was still wiping toad guts from her rifle a couple of hours later. They'd hiked away from anything that looked like a trail that afternoon; only the pink and orange sky gave her a sense of the direction they were headed. "Hey, Pete," she asked, "is this rest stop of yours coming up soon? Sun's getting low."

Pete scanned the horizon. "Yeah, it's just up ahead. We can camp out there for the night." He adjusted his pack. "I'm past ready for a break myself."

The sun was nearly gone when they stepped carefully through a patch of unexploded landmines ("Old days," Pete had said with a shrug) into an open area. It was quieter here than it had been in the woods; no animals moving through the brush, no birds singing. The last of the daylight barely outlined a tall metal figure in the middle of the space.

"There are these places," Pete said quietly. "Left over from the old world. I was with Team Echo when we found this one a few years back." He looked up at the statue, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "I feel bigger than myself here."

"We found a few of these in Arizona, too," Angela said. "Not like this exactly. Other statues, none of which make a whole lotta sense to me, but I get it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Pete nodded. "There's a secret room too, just over that bridge. We can bunk down for the night."

"You don't like sleeping out under the stars?" Angela sounded as if she was making a joke, but there was nothing happy in her face.

"It's not that, Captain. You, uh... you ain't sleeping right." Pete had the good sense to look deeply uncomfortable, at least. "Nightmares are nothing to be ashamed of and ordinarily I wouldn't have said."

Angela crossed her arms as realization set in. "I'm loud. Talking in my sleep?" Pete didn't say anything. "Hollering?"

"A few times."

“Well, I guess we better go before we run out of light completely.” She started walking over the old slat bridge, her boots thumping heavily against the wood. “Not waiting for ya, Pete,” she called back over her shoulder.

Angela was quiet as Pete got them inside, then gave her the minute tour of the now-ruined Underworld Bar. It was windowless and the air was stuffy, but it smelled clean enough, and the single door meant they weren’t likely to be ambushed. Angela cleared a spot in the far corner to lay out her gear while Pete unwrapped the rest of the toad meat they’d roasted for lunch. It smelled just as sour as it had when it was freshly cooked, but they both ate it without complaining. Without noticing, really. She was more focused on the dismantled M14 laid out on the blanket in front of her: she sat cross-legged, cleaning each part, reassembling the rifle, dismantling it again. Pete was worried his revelation would make this tight-lipped Ranger even more taciturn than before.

After an hour or so, Pete pointed at the big sign on the wall. “What do you think?”

“Do I think we’re gonna ‘live and die in a society that will not repeat the mistakes that led to the destruction of the world’?” she asked, reading it aloud. “All I see is us repeating the same mistakes over and over. When I was just starting out with Vargas and the others, we thought we could change things. Live forever. Save the future. We didn’t even know for certain California was a real place and yet, here I am, so what do I know?” She sighed. “Hell, I already told you I was jaded. Maybe I’m not the right person to ask.”

“I get it, Captain. World is as it ever was. All we can do is keep trying to make it right.”

She groaned. “I’ve told you a dozen times already. Nobody but the new kids call me Captain.”

“You really want me to call you Angela, ma’am?”

She groaned again, exaggerated and loud. “Oh, ma’am is even worse! I’m old but I’m not that old.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” Pete said with a smile. He leaned closer. “I’ll stop calling you Captain if you tell me something real.”

“I could just shoot you,” she said with a small sigh, as if she was actually considering it.

“Waste of bullets,” he answered, in case she was.

“I asked your Doc Horchata to cut my leg off.”

“What the hell, Captain!” Pete exclaimed. “Ain’t one synthetic limb enough?”

For the first time in a while, Angela smiled. “I don’t want to get rid of my flesh-and-blood leg, Pete. I want to swap out what those synths did to me for a nice, simple...” She waved her hands around for a moment, searching for the right word.

“Prosthetic?” Pete asked.

“Yeah, that. Metal and leather, like what everyone else gets. Hell, I’ll even take a peg leg at this point. Carve me up a wooden stump and I’ll hobble around on that. As long as it doesn’t have computer chips and who knows what else is in this battery,” she said, thumping her chest.

Pete sat down on a nearby chair. “That’s a relief, frankly, cause I, uh... I have to tell you one more thing. It’s about what happened to Rose, who was a damn fine woman and a dead eye with a pistol. And a Ranger named Thrasher, though I didn’t see that myself. The general told me about it. Rose, though...” Pete shook his head. “I saw what Matthias and that AI did to Rose.”

When he was done telling the story, Angela wiped her eyes. “Thrasher was a good man,” she told him, her voice soft and very sad. “He was another one from my very first Ranger team: me, him, Vargas, and Hell Razor. And Ace, later on. I guess I’m the only one left.”

“Having your fake leg replaced might mean being in California a bit longer, recovering and all. You okay with that?”

“Whatever they’re made of, *both* my legs are a part of me and I’m fine with that,” she said, “but I don’t want to be walking around with one that got forced on me. Especially not if some computer can take it over whenever it wants.”

“There’s a doctor in Hollywood, used to be with the Mannerites—those ‘kindness and cannibalism’ folks I told you about? If anyone can help you, I bet it’s him. Brother Thomas will make sure you see him first thing.” Pete stood up, stretching his arms and trying to stifle a yawn. “I’m going to head outside for a minute to try getting him on the radio again. We’re close enough now it should work this time. You get some sleep, Captain.” He grinned then, embarrassed. “I mean, Angela.” He grabbed the handheld from his pack and headed out of the room.

There’s no chance I’m getting a wink in this place alone, Angela thought to herself, but by the time Pete returned, she was curled up around her reconditioned rifle, sound asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Angela swallowed the last drop of water from her canteen. Their hike from the bar had been uneventful, but there hadn't been a safe water source to refill their supplies, so by the time Hollywood loomed large in front of them, she and Pete had run dry. She made sure he had a drink before she finished it off, though; he wasn't pestering her for conversation, and once they were out of the trees, walking over the patches of broken concrete that used to be a highway, he was sweating more than before. Without his toothy grin, his face was lined with ghosts of the past.

She hadn't paid much attention when they first met, other than her initial observations, as she'd expected him to stay behind in Rodia when she headed for home. Now, Angela figured Pete was probably her age, a man who'd had a whole other life before he heard the Ranger's call.

"Let's check that out," she said suddenly, pointing toward the crumbling walls of a building almost hidden by climbing vines. He nodded, let her lead the way.

They stepped carefully through the tall grass, over chunks of broken brick, until they got around one corner of the building... to find that one corner was all that remained. The rest had collapsed years before and been reclaimed by the plants. They looked over what was left in what had probably been someone's kitchen, but there wasn't much.

Angela motioned for Pete to sit down on an empty ammo crate. "I need a minute," she said. He obliged with obvious relief.

"Anything we can use?" he asked as she examined the long-dead appliances.

"Just this," she said, pulling a shiny metal toaster from inside the refrigerator. "I know folks hide things in 'em, but I've always been kind of hit or miss about getting them open."

"What happens when you miss?"

"They usually blow up." She set it on the ground. It threw off a few sparks. "I'm gonna let this one be," she added.

"We should head out," Pete said, starting to get up, but she waved at him to sit back down.

"We take a minute to catch our breath," she told him.

"We, or me?" he asked.

Angela shrugged. "A team's only as fast as the slowest guy."

He sighed. "Fine, but if we're gonna sit here, we should do something to pass the time. Tell me about Woodson."

"Why do you want to know what I think? You met him."

"I met the man when he was running a skeleton crew trying to find you, and I watched him take over the Rangers after Vargas died, but I don't know him. You do."

"My memories ain't the same as your experience," she said, frowning.

"I'll be honest, Captain. I get the impression you don't approve of his being the general now, and I'd like to know why."

"I didn't say that." Angela leaned against the dead oven and crossed her arms over her chest. "Woodson's smarter than I'll ever be, and Vargas trusted him. More than he did me, I think. But he hadn't been out in the field for at least a decade when I knew him. My last memory of him is as a lieutenant, a radio operator, taking my orders and staying behind where it was safe. Then I spend two years rotting underground and Woodson ends up in charge of the whole outfit?"

"You don't think he's qualified?" Pete asked gently.

"I think he didn't look for me," she snapped. She shook her head. "He knows giving orders from the other side of a radio. What's he know about being a soldier?"

"There was a vote," Pete said.

"Yeah," Angela said. "My opinions don't matter much now." She kicked the toaster, which threw up more sparks. It jerked once, making a dull clunking sound.

"We should go," Pete said. He stood up quickly, watching the toaster.

They backed away carefully.

Out on the road, Angela walked quickly, staying ahead of Pete. He gave her space and did his best to keep up. It was quiet for another hour or so, as the landscape changed from wildlife and growing things into run-down buildings and rusted-out cars.

"Heads up," he said quietly. "Keep walking but be ready. This close to the city could be anything."

She moved her finger to rest alongside her rifle's trigger. Up ahead, she could make out three figures in the middle of the road. "Raiders?"

"Could be business. Lot of traders come to the city now that Veronica's cleaned the place up. Could be trouble. They've already seen us, so let's not start nothing until it's something." He stood up straighter, relaxing his gait so he walked less like a soldier. Angela slowed just enough to let Pete get a few steps ahead of her without making it obvious.

"Following your lead," she said.

The three were dressed in a mismatch of random clothes: torn pants, brightly colored shirts, accentuated with strips of contrasting fabric tied around one's arm, another's leg. The guns they carried were serious enough—one had a huge sniper rifle on their shoulder—but Angela knew no matter what they were wearing, their lack of trigger discipline meant they could be accidentally dangerous.

"Hey, there, friends!" Pete called out in an affable tone Angela hadn't heard before. "It's so nice to see friendly faces out here on a hot day. Are you maybe interested in a trade?"

The one with the blue mohawk walked forward to meet them. He had a shiny ring through one eyebrow and carried a shotgun with both hands. "Who are you?" he asked loudly.

"Name's Fred," Pete said, laughing cheerfully, "but ain't nobody call me that. All over LA they know me as Pistol Pete, gun seller and honest trader. You got a name, son?"

"That one's Tommy," said a voice from one side of the road, "and your salesman's patter has roused me from a sound sleep." A tall bearded man stepped out from behind the remains of a broken-down truck, dusting off the long black coat he carried. He wore black pants and a long-sleeved black shirt under a Kevlar vest that had seen some action. "He was told to be on the lookout for a couple of Rangers," the man said, "so I think the appearance of an itinerant trader may have confused him."

Angela spotted the white collar at his neck and tightened her grip on the rifle.

"Screw you, preacher," Tommy said, without any real malice. He went back to his friends and lit a cigarette, which they passed between the three of them.

"My 'patter' has smoothed the way more than once, brother," Pete replied. He stepped forward to meet the preacher in the middle of the road, and the two clasped hands. "Good to see you, man!"

The black-clad man looked a little embarrassed, but shook Pete's hand vigorously. Pete turned and gestured toward Angela.

"My friend, let me introduce you to Captain Angela Deth of the Arizona Rangers. Angela, this is Brother Thomas."

"When you talked about him before, I thought he was your *actual* brother," she said quietly. "I don't like priests."

"Don't worry," Pete said, a huge grin spilling out over his face as the other man drew closer. "Neither does he."

Thomas nodded respectfully. "I prayed for your soul, ma'am."

Angela crossed her arms. "My soul was in Seal Beach with the rest of me, Father."

He glanced at Pete, who shook his head slightly. To Angela, Thomas said, "Yes, ma'am. I regret we didn't find you sooner."

She shrugged. "Not your job, Father. You just offer up your bullets when the time is right and we'll be square. The prayers you can keep to yourself."

"Understood, but one thing if I may? It's *Brother* Thomas, not Father."

"What's the difference?"

"A father leads. His family, his flock. A brother stands at your side, arm in arm."

Angela sighed, relaxing a little. "Brothers in arms. Yeah, that I understand."

"Hey, we should go," Tommy called out. "Mistress Veronica wanted us to bring you straight back."

Brother Thomas put on his coat. "Captain, if you'll allow us, we've come to escort you to Hollywood."

"I hear you have a doctor I need to see." She looked up at Brother Thomas with her head cocked. "Can you get me there without a sermon?"

"We're at your service, Captain," Pete answered for him. "If you want to walk the rest of the way in silence, so be it. We'll get you where you need to be."

She held them both in a long look, then, without saying anything more, walked past them to introduce herself to Tommy's friends.

"God may be testing us," Thomas said quietly. "Historically, that has not gone well for people."

"Let's hope the captain is a little more forgiving," Pete replied.

CHAPTER SIX

A pretty blonde girl, barely old enough to be working at the Hideaway, poked her head into Angela's tiny bedroom and smiled. Her candy-pink lipstick perfectly matched the string bikini she wore under a black lace minidress. "Miss Veronica would like to know if you're joining her for breakfast? Oh, your leg looks, like, *so good!*"

Angela was sitting on the edge of the bed, adjusting her new prosthetic. On her knee, she wore a black sock; the metal cup fit snugly over her joint, with a knob on the side that varied the amount of pressure to keep the limb on. "Thank you, Mindy," she said, extending her leg. "Only took a couple weeks to get the hang of this. Your smith did a great job."

Mindy smiled cutely. "She's new in town! She mostly works for Jean Rambeau at the Gun Shop, but Doc Eddy has her helping out with"—Mindy leaned forward and dropped her voice into a stage whisper—"all the amputees." She nodded to herself and her voice became bubbly again. "It's hard out there in the world. I'm so lucky Mistress Veronica gave me a job here. Oh! Breakfast!"

"I'll be there in a minute," Angela said reassuringly.

"That's like, *so great*. We have a special guest this morning!" Mindy blew her a kiss and left before Angela could ask anything else.

For the last few weeks, breakfast at the Hideaway meant sitting in a corner of the basement kitchen, watching the night shift grab a snack before bed while the day staff caught up on gossip. It was a compromise of sorts.

The first day after Doctor Edwinson had disconnected her synthetic leg, Angela did her best to sit quietly in the king-size bed usually reserved for wealthy clients. When she slipped out of bed because she wasn't used to silk sheets, she didn't blame anyone but herself. She thanked each person on staff when they came by to offer their particular services, then told each one of them to go away. And when Veronica's personal stylist wheeled in a whole rack of new clothes for Angela to try on, she hardly swore at all.

On the second day, the mistress had suggested that a small room in the staff quarters with a single bed might better suit Angela's recovery. Someone came by twice a day to ask questions about Arizona or her life as a Ranger—which always included a very polite request that she accompany them on a little walk, exactly as the doctor prescribed—and Angela was welcome to rustle up a meal for herself in the kitchen whenever she wanted. Other than the absolute luxury of a daily shower in the staff bathroom, Angela might not have realized she was in the finest brothel on the West Coast.

She finished dressing, tied on the .38 revolver Pete left with her, slipped her pack over one shoulder, picked up her M14, and headed up to Veronica's lair.

The mistress was standing in front of her office, talking in a low voice with a dark-haired man in a long jacket. Veronica had the graying hair typical of someone who'd survived into her fifties but was beautifully muscled. Staff gossip said her physique came from the grueling punishments she doled out to her most devoted clients. Every time Angela saw her, she was wearing a sleeveless outfit that seemed designed to show those muscles off.

The man she didn't know, so Angela held back to give them privacy.

After a moment, Veronica put her hand on his arm and whispered something that made his head whip around. When he did, Angela saw that his long jacket was actually priestly robes, and the high collar on his black shirt held a clerical collar.

"I'll come back another time," she said. "I don't mean to interrupt."

"Please don't go," Veronica said. "I'd like to introduce you to Ascension McDade."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I don't have need of a priest at this time." Her hand dropped to rest on the grip of the .38.

Veronica smiled. "Ascension McDade is the head of God's Militia, who own that big radio tower on Mount Lee." Looking at McDade, she gestured at Angela. "Ascension, may I introduce Captain Angela Deth of the Arizona Rangers?"

McDade nodded. "I have observed these new California Rangers for some time," he said. "I believe they are making progress, dealing with the sinners too far gone to be saved. For that, you have my thanks." He was older than Angela expected.

"That's all on Ranger Petterson," she said, "but I'm glad to hear it."

"Ascension has come to talk about you using his radio tower to contact Arizona," Veronica said sweetly, though her grip on his arm tightened. Angela could see that his fingers were turning white. "Shall we discuss it over breakfast, then?"

"Lead the way, Mistress," Ascension said in a small voice.

Angela followed them up another flight of stairs to the main floor, where an old conference room had been redecorated as a formal dining area. Mindy spent an entire hour once talking about the furniture and wallpaper and Mistress Veronica's preference for working out deals over a fancy dinner—or in her dungeon, depending on the problem to be solved—instead of the office of the brothel's previous owner, Heidi Hollander. (Mindy talked about people long dead as if they were just in the other room, but she didn't mind carrying the conversation during their walks so Angela could focus on getting used to her new prosthetic instead.)

A handsome young man wearing leather chaps—and not much else—served them poached eggs and asparagus under a savory sauce before closing the door behind him as he left.

While they ate, McDade and Veronica filled her in on recent changes to the way God's Militia operated in Hollywood. "We have your Rangers to thank for ushering in a new era of peace," Ascension told her, his voice trembling. "The old Militia was corrupt in so many ways. The vilest of sins were committed in God's name. Sins of greed, sins of the flesh..."

Under the table, Veronica stomped her foot, and McDade bit his lip.

"You already know how they helped us here in Hollywood, Captain Deth. We're incredibly grateful."

"You've done enough for me, ma'am. Letting me rest up here and all. It's appreciated."

"Of course," Veronica said. "And now that you're feeling better, you want to head east. Ascension's Militia tower is the only one in the area capable of reaching your Ranger Woodson. He's taken over from the dear departed General Vargas, as I understand it."

"That's right," Angela said. "I'm surprised you know that."

Veronica smiled. "It's a small town, dear. We all try to watch out for one another. After breakfast, I've arranged for an escort who's... familiar with the Militia's ways. He'll take you up to the tower."

"Ms. Deth looks as if she's ready to go now," McDade said, pointing to the rifle she'd hung from the back of her antique chair.

"The captain is always prepared, Ascension. Like those old scouts." Veronica patted his hand gently. "She takes her guns with her everywhere she goes."

"I pray that will help you, Ms. Deth. I'm afraid there's one small obstacle in your path, but if your cause is right with the Lord, he will guide you. Of that I have no doubt."

Veronica drew back her hand. "What obstacle is this, Ascension?"

"I was informed this morning that the radio's long-distance repeater was... taken."

Veronica put her hands in her lap. "Taken by who?"

"Well, listen," McDade said quickly. "The tower is outside the Bastion. Technically, I have no reason to go there myself. The daily prayer broadcasts are still heard all throughout Hollywood, so, believe me, I had no idea that tower had suffered any damage."

"Can we get it back?" Angela asked.

"Oh, yes, I think so," McDade answered happily. "A technician was repairing the component when he was attacked by wild animals. They dragged him into the woods, along with the repeater. God willing, if you find the beasts you will find the part."

Angela stood up. "It sounds like I should hustle, then. Thanks again, ma'am. You run a fine establishment here."

"You are welcome any time, Captain," Veronica said, smiling wide. "It would be our pleasure to see you again."

Angela shouldered her pack and rifle as she headed toward the door. Behind her, McDade also stood.

"Not you," Veronica said, her voice hard. "You, *sit*."

Angela was careful to make sure the door clicked as she shut it behind her.

A man was standing near the Hideaway's front entrance, just barely inside the building. It took a minute for Angela to recognize Brother Thomas. "You got a shave," she said, pointing at his cleaned-up goatee.

"You got a haircut," he replied. "Looks redder now, too."

"It was always red, but being in a box underground for two years takes the shine off a girl," she said. "I've been out in the sun more. You preachers always get your beard trimmed at a whorehouse, or is there no other barber here in town?"

"It's the only service he'll let us perform," Mindy said with a giggle as she rushed over to give Angela a hug. "I heard you were, like, *leaving*! You have to send me a postcard! I've always wanted one."

"I'll do my best?" Angela said uncertainly, looking at Brother Thomas over the top of Mindy's head. She patted the girl's back with one hand. "Take care now."

Mindy let go, turning to Thomas with a petite scowl on her face. "You be nice to her! She's like, *really*, the best." Before Thomas could reply, Mindy blew them both a kiss and rushed off.

"She seems like a nice kid," Angela said as they walked through town.

"A lot of them are," Thomas said. "That's what makes it worse, people preying on nice young kids who come here for the Hollywood dream." He sighed. "Hollywood's better now, I know. It's hard for me to be here is all."

"You going to be okay on Militia property?"

"I'm sure by now you've heard I used to be in the Militia myself, and now, I am not."

"That's the rumor," Angela admitted.

"It is the truth. The old Militia was corrupt. They used God as an excuse to kill whoever they wanted to grab power." A large man wearing a pink tutu stood out in front of the casino; he waved at Thomas as they walked past, and Thomas waved back. "I will not be a part of that perversion of God's laws."

"I also heard you and Ranger Pete killed more than a few Militia soldiers."

"We did." He looked at her then. "Does that bother you, Captain?"

"Less than you might think," she answered honestly. "I heard what good came of it, too."

"This way," he said, leading her down a side street. "I would not be allowed in the city if things had not changed. Perhaps my head would be, but only on a pike." He chuckled.

They hiked up into the hills, stopping at the tower to get more information from the radio operator. The animal tracks weren't difficult to find, especially once they got close enough to find scattered pieces of the previous radio tech. An hour later, they were headed back to the tower with two minor injuries, half a badger carcass with plenty of meat left on it, and a thankfully undamaged repeater module. The radio operator installed it on the outside of the tower while the Rangers stood guard.

Once he was done and they were inside the radio room, Thomas bandaged up Angela's arm where one of the badgers had got a hold of her, trying to pull her to the ground. He'd crushed its spine with his glowing plasma hammer, but its mate had charged him, grabbing his leg. Angela had aimed carefully, targeting the beast's torso, and dropped it with two shots.

With her arm wrapped up, she gestured for Thomas to put his leg up on an empty chair. "These pants aren't going to make it," she said dryly, gently pulling the tattered fabric away from the dried blood on his calf. She stitched up the biggest wounds, silently grateful that none were larger than her thumb. "The bite isn't deep. You'll be fine."

As the operator switched on the repeater, the speakers crackled. "Picking up new signals now. We have to aim the receiving dish in the right direction," he said, turning a dial. "Weather can affect the DX catches. Big pools of water can, too. I'll try our last known."

"You should wait here," Brother Thomas said, moving the empty chair in Angela's direction. "I'll keep watch outside."

She sat heavily, laying her rifle across her lap. "Thanks," she told him. Her knee hurt where it was rubbing against the edges of the metal cup. Through the speakers, she could hear the faint sounds of people talking, singing, muffled conversations, but nothing that made sense.

"I'm sorting out the local transmitters," the operator said, louder than necessary. "This might take a while."

Thomas gave him a thumbs up and headed outside.

"Captain, wake up," the operator said suddenly.

Angela blinked her eyes. "Was I sleeping?"

He nodded. "The headphones," he said, handing them to her.

She put them on.

"I say again, this is Ranger camp calling Mount Lee radio tower. Please repeat. You have information about Captain Angela Deth?" The voice was fading in and out, but sounded familiar.

"This is Captain Angela Deth," she replied. There was no answer. She repeated it, louder.

The speakers crackled with static.

"Speaker, can you verify?" the voice asked.

"What, like my name, rank, and serial number? You've got the name and rank and I've never been able to remember that damn number. I'd tell you to check in with the general, or Thrasher, or Ace, or even Hell Razor, but all my friends are dead."

"Go to secure channel four, Mount Lee tower."

The operator slid his chair to the far side of the radio panel to make the change. Angela waited until he signaled to her that it was done.

"Go ahead, Ranger camp," he said into his mic.

"Ma'am, can you tell me something only Captain Deth would know?"

Angela took a deep breath. "I left Ace's wrench in my locker when I got on the helicopter to go to California."

Someone on the other end started hollering. There was a clattering sound and then a new voice spoke.

"Holy shit," Wade Woodson said. "Angie! It's really you."

"Holy shit," she agreed. "It's really me."

"Have you met up with the local boys yet? We've got some recruits out there building up a California branch of the Rangers. Good guys."

"Pistol Pete led the team that got me out of Seal Beach, and Brother Thomas brought me up to the radio."

"Good to—" Woodson started to say, but his voice cut out, replaced with more static. The operator pushed buttons, trying to get the signal back. When that didn't work, he kicked the control panel, hard.

"Ranger camp, calling Mount Lee tower!" Woodson's voice shouted. "Come in, Mount Lee! Dammit, Riley, what's happening with the radio?"

"I'm here, Woodson," Angela said. "It's a bad signal."

"Copy that, Angie. It's the radiation, we think, worse than ever since—wait, do you know?"

"I know. Look, tell me where you are so I can hotfoot home."

"We're set up temporarily right now, but Angie, you don't have to try to get back here. We don't have a working helicopter right now, and the trip on foot is more dangerous than ever. I can reassign you to take over the LA Rangers."

"Not a chance in hell, Woodson."

"We're at the..." The radio cut out for a moment, then Woodson's voice came back. "Say again, the tower where Ace died." His voice crumbled into static again.

"I'm sorry," the operator said, sliding his headphones down to rest on his neck. "I don't think we're getting it back for a while."

"I understand," Angela told him as she took off her headphones and handed them over. "If you do, please let him know I'm on my way, and I'll check in if I can."

"Do you know where that is?" Brother Thomas asked from the doorway. "The new Ranger camp?"

"Yeah," Angela said. "I couldn't forget."

"We'll need to stop off in town before we head out," he said. He turned and started walking back down the hill. Angela scrambled to grab her gear and wave goodbye to the operator before breaking into a jog to catch up with him.

"I don't need an escort, Ranger," she told Thomas.

"We already worked it out, Pete and me."

"What's that mean, you *worked it out*?"

"He's waiting for us in Hollywood. Doing some shopping. He should have everything by the time we get back, then the three of us will go to Arizona. I expect it'll be a long walk through a rough patch of land, but Pete's got a line on some rad suits that'll help."

"I can't let you do that."

Thomas stopped suddenly. "Ma'am," he said carefully, "with all due respect, you aren't letting us do anything. Pete and me never got a chance to atone for leaving you to those synths all this time, and it weighs heavily on us. God put you in our path again, and He wants us to make this right."

"I don't care what your God wants," she said bitterly. "What he thinks is right depends on the day and the man saying it."

"Fine," Thomas said, kindly. "I believe it's what General Vargas would have wanted too." He shrugged. "I didn't know him long, but he made a great sacrifice, and I'm not much interested in letting him down. That okay with you?"

Angela looked him in the eyes. His white collar wasn't the only badge of office he wore proudly, she had to admit. The Ranger star on his jacket was just as prominent.

Maybe it matters to him just as much.

"Yeah," she decided finally. "That's okay with me."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Angela checked the counter on the arm of her radiation suit again. "Mine is clear," she said. Her voice sounded strange inside the plastic helmet. She watched the others do the same.

"Let's give it another mile," one of the guys said. Everyone's faceplates were fogged with sweat inside and caked with dust outside, but it didn't really matter which one of them said it. She was too tired to argue.

They walked on.

Crossing into Arizona meant three days on foot before they reached the radiation wall, and another four trudging across the wasteland in heavy protective suits. While the drifting green fog made for pretty lights at night, setting up the impermeable decon tent was such a pain in the ass that they only bothered to do it twice a day, to eat. At night, they slept in the suits.

Another mile turned to dust under their feet.

"Okay, that's enough," Angela said. "Not taking another step. Who's going to help me out of this thing?"

"Let me go first, Captain," one of the men said. He moved closer to her, turning so she could reach the main zipper on the back of his suit. The other man stepped forward as well, pulling off Thomas's helmet. The priest shook his damp hair and took a deep breath.

"Thank God," he said quietly.

"Good enough for me," Angela said. She started tugging at her own suit as Thomas helped her with the fastenings. He turned around to undo Pete's while Angela let her suit fall to the ground. "Is that a breeze?" she asked. "I have been sweating for days in that thing. I must smell like a rotting lizard."

"You do, ma'am," Pete said, "but we do too, so it's fair."

She nodded. "Not enough water to bathe, so I say we agree to pretend otherwise till we get somewhere civilized."

Pete laughed as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. "There a lot of civilization in this part of the desert?"

"No, so you two had better be good at pretending."

"Yes, ma'am," Thomas said. "It's almost nightfall. We could try hunting something, but I'm afraid this close to the radiation wall, it wouldn't be safe to eat."

"We have a day's rations," Pete said, but Angela shook her head.

"Might be more than a day till we find a safe meal. We should save it."

"All right, but my suit's been muffling the sounds of my starvation. Now that we're out in the open, my hunger might keep you both up at night." Pete patted his stomach.

"I'll risk it," Thomas said.

"Okay," Pete replied amiably, "but if it comes down to it, Brother, I'm eating you first."

They set up camp, changed into the one clean set of clothes they'd been saving for this moment, and settled down. Pete drew first watch, but they were hundreds of yards from the nearest rock or dead tree, and the moon was full, so nothing could get them without a long run across open ground first. He sat near the others with his gun in his hand.

"Damn, you *can* hear my stomach rumbling, can't you?" Pete said, just as Angela was falling asleep. "I can hear it. Yours too, Brother."

Thomas rubbed his belly thoughtfully. "You don't complain about not eating enough, Captain. What's your secret?"

She answered without looking at him. "The trick is to not think about it. Pick a spot on the horizon, put one foot in front of the other, and keep walking until you get there."

"And that works?" Brother Thomas asked.

"No," Angela said matter-of-factly. "But it's quieter."

Thomas waited several minutes in silence before changing the subject. "Speaking of quiet, you haven't said anything since the Ranger Citadel, Captain. Do you want to talk about it?" They'd seen it in the distance as they passed to the south of it. Angela sat on the hood of a rusted-out car for over an hour, just looking at it.

"I know we got as close as we could," she said quietly. "I thank you both for that." She rolled over and closed her eyes; this time, the men let her sleep.

The next morning they walked past three RSM signs on the side of the road, one after another, about half a mile apart. After the third one, Pete asked about it.

"The Red Skorpions used to be a gang," Angela told him. "Calling themselves a 'Militia' was some fool's way of making folks believe they were a respectable outfit, just so they could run scams on the farmers. Who they are now, though... it might not be the same. We saved Danforth's dogs once. He was their leader. Ya know, in case it made peace."

"I met him at the Citadel," Thomas said. "I can't speak to what happened with the treaty the general wanted, after his passing, but this Danforth showed up when he was needed, which isn't nothing."

"No," Angela said thoughtfully. "It's not nothing. Right now, I'm more interested in *that* sign," she added, pointing.

"Satellite Facility, one mile," Pete read aloud. "Are we stopping?"

"That's what it used to be," said Angela. "Now it's the Ag Center. They'll have water for sure. News, probably. Food to spare, *maybe*. So yes, I think we should."

"You had me at 'food'," Pete said.

The Agricultural Center was still standing, but in worse shape than Angela remembered. The strong outer wall was badly damaged and shoddily repaired in several places. Thick vines grew up and over the open gate, under the train track, and around discarded vehicles. Angela kept her finger near her rifle's trigger.

Nothing attacked her this time.

She was relieved to hear Kathy Lawson's voice when she buzzed the intercom, and more relieved when the other woman let them inside. After she said her thanks and made introductions, Angela asked, "Where's Matt?"

Kathy was a tall woman with dark brown skin and high cheekbones who looked annoyed every time Angela had ever seen her. This time, she was outright angry. "Another one I lost to your Rangers," she said. "He could have kept doing so much good here, but he ran off to the base the minute Vargas called, didn't he?"

"Matt was at the Last Battle?"

"Last stand, last battle, last war to end all wars," Kathy snapped. "Why do soldiers always call things the 'Last'? It sounds grand and heroic but it's never true. There's always another one." She kept talking before Angela could respond. "Yes, he took off as soon as he heard what was happening, fat lot of good that did any of us. Vargas still blew the place up, adding to the local radiation and making my job even harder."

"General Vargas sacrificed himself to save all our lives," Pete said angrily, but Kathy just laughed, a dry, humorless sound.

"He set Arizona back another hundred years," Kathy said. "Sure, he kept us alive. Now we can starve to death in new and creative ways. Oh, not all of us, though," she added. "Rose got there before us. She was supposed to help you people with one mission but came back to the farm as a body to fertilize her plants."

Pete fidgeted with his pistol. "Rose was a good woman," he said quietly.

"I knew her as well," Brother Thomas added. "We carry her loss with us." He lifted his cross for a moment in silent prayer.

"She was a great *scientist* and I needed her here," Kathy said, "just like I needed Matt, the same as I needed to not have another damn nuclear bomb go off in my backyard. But you Rangers don't exactly

think about the big picture. Shoot first and leave the rest for people like me to figure out.” She sighed then, and her shoulders dropped as if all the fight had suddenly drained out of her. She sat down on the nearest chair with a graceless thud, staring at her desk.

“I’m sorry, Kathy,” Angela said. “We shouldn’t have bothered you.”

The other woman replied without looking up. “I’ll have someone get your supplies and you can fill your canteens from our tank before you go.”

After they were back outside, Angela said bitterly, “Kathy’s never loved the Rangers, but I thought she’d at least appreciate what we did for her. We had to choose, Ag Center or Highpool... Guess it doesn’t matter now.”

She paused, biting her lip, then added, “You two should head back home. You’ve done enough, bringing me this far. I can get the rest of the way on my own.” She shifted her backpack as if it weren’t sitting right on her.

“Do you want us to take you back to Los Angeles, Captain?” Thomas asked. “Because that’s the only way we’re turning around.”

“No, guys... You don’t owe me anything.” She shifted her pack again. “It’s okay to go. I’d be sick of Arizona too by now if it weren’t everything I’ve ever known.”

“No way,” Pete cut in. “We’re with you, every step.”

Angela let it drop but kept biting her lip for another hour. After Ag Center, the terrain changed: more ruined buildings, shattered asphalt highways, distant signs of life. In the late morning they spotted a plume of smoke but it was in the northwest, away from the new Ranger camp. In the afternoon, they saw carcasses from half a dozen cattle, bones scattered around and picked clean. The pieces led roughly toward the east, so they followed. Twenty minutes later the path was blocked by a pitiful fence, barely protecting a ramshackle house.

Angela gestured for the men to wait outside. “Rangers don’t barge in,” she explained.

Still, the dust-worn woman who ventured out onto the porch a few minutes later was holding a shotgun. “What do you want?” she yelled. “We ain’t got nothing left ta’ steal.”

“We’re Rangers, ma’am,” Angela yelled back. “We saw some dead cattle nearby, came to make sure you were all right.”

“We ain’t all right! Our cattle are dead!”

“Yes, ma’am, we saw that,” Brother Thomas yelled, his face pink and sweaty under the hot sun.

Angela shook her head slightly. “There’s a way, here,” she cautioned in a whisper. Much louder, she asked, “Is there anything we can do for you?”

"You Rangers ain't done nothing in too long," the woman yelled back. "Those waste wolves ate our herd. We had one ranch hand but he's dead or run off, who knows. Now my husband is off dealin' with the RSM to buy new cows and those wolves are circling around at night, come for my chickens. They's all I have left."

"We can help you with the wolves, ma'am. Could you let us in so we can talk about this without yelling?" Angela put a friendly smile on her face and waved. "I can come in alone if you want to chat just us girls."

"The RSM is going to come help me," the woman said.

"Ma'am, all due respect, but the RSM don't help no one without a price. They're scavengers and slavers. You don't want anything to do with them." Angela kept the smile on her face. "We're here now, and the Rangers always help folk in need. No charge."

"Captain," Brother Thomas said. "Incoming."

She turned hard, rifle suddenly against her shoulder. Down the sights, she saw four men walking toward the farm. The two in the rear were dragging something large and heavy with them.

"That's close enough!" she shouted. "Identify yourselves!"

The others stopped in their tracks but the man in front laughed and kept walking forward. "How's about *you* identify yo'self, Missy?" He walked bow-legged and had thinning red hair, but obviously ate far better than the poor woman who lived at this farm.

She moved her finger to rest alongside the trigger. "Arizona Rangers."

He laughed again. "Oh, honey, there ain't no Rangers in these parts. This is RSM territories now." He motioned to his men to follow him as he walked around Angela and let himself in through the gate. "Howdy, Missus! We got them wolves that was bothering ya," he said loudly. "Bring it in, boys."

The woman squealed with delight as they dragged the dead waste wolf onto her porch.

"Come on," Angela told Thomas and Pete. "This was a mistake."

As they relaxed their weapons, the RSM leader came up behind them. "Y'all leaving already?" he asked.

"Looks like you have it in hand," Brother Thomas said. "Well done."

"Yeah, right, you're Rangers," the other man said. "You can try that line with these dumb hicks all ya want, won't get ya nothing."

"We really *are* Rangers," Pete insisted. He tapped the badge pinned to his bulletproof vest.

"Ya gear's good, I'll say that," he remarked, but Angela was the one person he was looking up and down.

"I know your type," she told him. "RSM saving the day? It ain't out of the goodness of your heart."

“Straight outta the Ranger playbook, sweetie,” he said. “Smile big and milk the suckers. Worked for them, it’ll work for us.” Laughing, he headed toward the farmhouse. “Hey, Missus, you got some sweet tea in there?”

“Now you’ve met the RSM,” Angela said as the Rangers walked away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The narrow pass, cut from the rock face on either side, was just large enough for the pre-war road that traveled through it. The Skorpions took advantage of this by blocking the road with a wooden barricade and collecting a "toll" from anyone needing to get through the area. The nearest alternate path to the new Ranger camp would have taken them a hundred miles out of the way as it skirted around a radiation field that was dangerous enough before the Citadel bomb went off. So Angela stood between Pete and Thomas with the worst of the afternoon sun beating them down, waiting for the RSM stooge in front of them to decide whether they were allowed to pass.

"This is the third checkpoint we've crossed today," Pete explained to him. "We're heading north up to the Ranger camp. Not carrying anything but our own supplies, not looking for any trouble."

"So you say," the militia man replied. He was a tall skinny kid with deep acne scars and teeth already going bad. Though there was a dilapidated vehicle parked behind him (an old brown Bronco with its top sheared off), he was alone. "We gotta check you for, uh, contrabands." He fidgeted with the strap of the shotgun he wore on his back.

"Young man," Thomas said, stepping closer, "I am a preacher and a Ranger. My friends are also Rangers. We don't carry 'contraband'."

"So you say," the kid repeated. "I'm gonna need your, uh, names and where you plan on going."

"We're heading to the Ranger camp to see General Woodson," Angela repeated. "Listen, kid, we've come a long way and I don't have time to stand around."

"I'm gonna need to call this in. Can you, uh, stand over there?" He pointed toward an overturned metal barrel.

The Rangers dragged themselves over to it while the kid went to his truck to use the radio mounted under its dash. The Bronco had a red scorpion spray-painted on its driver's side door, and the kid kept tapping it absentmindedly while he talked. Pete tried to get Angela to sit down on the barrel but she refused. Instead, she shifted her weight to her meat leg and tried to ignore the pain in her other knee.

"There's no shame in resting if you need it, Captain," Brother Thomas said kindly.

"No, there's not, but it'd be a real shame if we relaxed our guard around these assholes and one of 'em shot you," she said. "We're so close to camp. One more day of walking and we'd be there, if we can ever get by this guy."

"You notice the roads?" Pete asked quietly. "The patches are gravel and clay, but at least they've been repaired."

"Locals seem happy," Thomas added. "RSM might not be all talk."

"You don't know them. That jackass from the farm proved the Skorpions haven't changed." Angela straightened. "This is ridiculous. There's three of us and one of him." She strode over to the checkpoint kid. "Hey! Are we done here?"

He fumbled for his shotgun, getting it aimed roughly in Angela's direction but pointing toward the ground. "You just hold on," he stammered. "Just wait a minute."

"I'm not gonna hurt you," she said angrily. "Let us through and we won't be your problem anymore." Before he could say anything else, she heard the rumbling sound of running engines getting louder. She sighed. "You're going to make this a pain in my ass, aren't you?"

"I got orders," he said, backing away from her.

She risked a glance back at the other Rangers. Thomas had unstrapped the humongous plasma hammer he'd carried all the way from Hollywood and had it resting on the overturned barrel as if he was using it to support his weight. Pete stood next to him, his revolver still in its holster, but he fidgeted with its handle again.

Yeah, I'm pretty sure we're in for some trouble too, buddy, Angela thought.

Two junkyard vehicles rushed toward them, careening around a corner much too fast for the road. One was a pickup truck that was mostly black where the paint wasn't covered up by welded-on pieces of rusted metal. The other probably used to be a Jeep but now was a Jeep-shaped pile of scrap metal, spikes, and sharp edges. The black truck squealed to a stop just short of the checkpoint kid's Bronco. The Jeep skidded and slowed down but bumped into the Bronco as it came to a stop, denting the already rust-pocked side panel.

Angela could see three or four men in the open Jeep and another couple of men sitting in the pickup's flat bed. They were all armed. The Jeep's passenger side door opened and a man stepped out. He was vaguely familiar, but Angela couldn't quite place him.

He knew her, though. "Angela Deth of the Arizona Rangers!" he said excitedly. He was a wiry man in his middle age, with a patchy beard and stringy hair. He wore a leather jacket that had so many bullet holes it couldn't have offered any real protection.

"We met, Mister?" she asked. "You got a face I might've seen around."

He laughed. "You Rangers always were shit for remembering the people you've screwed over. Does Highpool ring a bell?"

Angela sighed with sad realization. "Sean Bergin," she said. "You went and joined up with the Skorpions after all. I gotta say, I'm kind of surprised you followed through there."

"Oh, the surprises ain't over yet, sweetheart." He smiled. "You and your friends are gonna come with me."

She shook her head. "Thanks for the offer, Sean, but we got places to be. Let us pass and we won't have no trouble here."

Sean raised his hand and his guys raised their weapons. "It ain't a request, Ranger. Danforth wants to see you, and you owe him at least that."

"Sure," said Angela sarcastically. "I'll pay him a visit right after I check in at camp."

"Nope," said Sean. "Now. Or I show him your corpse instead."

Behind her, a shot rang out. One of the guys in the pickup's bed shook violently, then fell out of the truck and landed on the dirt with a thud.

The world exploded into double time:

Angela raised her rifle and fired, clipping Sean on the shoulder.

Pete shot a second time. The bullet went awry, missing its target completely.

Brother Thomas ran past Angela, tackling the checkpoint kid and wrestling his keys away.

Sean drew his gun.

One of the men in the Jeep fired his shotgun. He was out of range so the blast went wide. A few of the pellets hit Sean on the back, and he screamed, dropping his gun.

Pete grabbed Angela by the arm, pulling her along with him toward the brown Bronco. The two of them climbed into the back just as Thomas hopped into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Angela breathed again. The world slowed down to almost its normal speed. With Thomas driving, Pete positioned himself in the Bronco's back seat, facing the Jeep, which was coming up fast behind them. He fired at it, once, twice.

Angela leaned forward and grabbed the radio's mic. "Come in, Ranger camp, come in please," she said. When there was no reply, she changed the channel and tried again. "Come in, Ranger camp, come in."

The radio crackled to life. "This is Ranger camp, who is this? Over."

"This is Ranger Angela Deth," she said quickly. "We're under attack from the Red Skorpions. We're driving toward you and—fuck!" A bullet hit the dashboard. She handed the mic to Thomas, who took it without question. He drove one-handed while she turned around in her seat.

"We're in a brown chopped-up Bronco, no top, red scorpion on the door, with two scrap-covered trucks behind us and closing fast," Thomas said into the radio. "We could use some help here."

"Copy that, Ranger," the voice on the radio said. "We've got people moving to the mouth of the canyon now. Come in hot and we'll close ranks behind you."

Over the sound of the car sputtering and the staccato of gunfire behind them, a new sound appeared: the wail of a siren from something ahead and to the right of them. The sound wavered, fading for a second then growing louder, then fading again before getting louder again.

“That’s a Ranger attack warning siren,” Angela yelled. “It has to be coming from the camp. Drive toward it!”

Thomas swerved left to avoid a huge saguaro cactus lying on its side like a log; he corrected hard to head back toward the Ranger camp.

“Sonofabitch!” Pete screamed. Angela turned to see him holding his side a few inches below the bottom of his armored vest. Red blood dripped through his fingers.

“I got ya,” she said loudly as she got behind him and leaned forward, supporting his weight.

He fired again.

The black truck wavered, then veered straight into the dead cactus. Angela watched a Skorpion fly out of the truck bed; with all the dust she didn’t see where he landed, but the Jeep bounced as it drove around the truck like it was going over a bump in the road.

If that bastard wasn’t dead when he hit the ground, he certainly is now, she thought.

“Captain, is this the place?” Thomas yelled.

She turned her head. Hills rose up in front of them, but he was pointing at a break in the rock. Beyond it she could barely make out the tip of a radio tower. “That’s it!”

Thomas slammed his foot down on the gas. The Bronco lurched forward but there was a wide-open stretch of desert before they’d be safe, with the Skorpions gaining on them. Angela shifted Pete’s weight to her left side so she could raise her rifle. It was awkward but she thought she had a clear shot.

“Pete, cover your ears,” she said as she lined up the Jeep’s driver in her sights. He jerked out of the way the best he could in the second before she fired, but the rifle slammed against his shoulder when it kicked back. “I’m not sure if I hit anything,” she told him.

Answering shots rang out—over and over, automatic fire. Bullets bounced off the Bronco’s tailgate and one of the back tires exploded. The truck shuddered and swerved violently, tossing Angela and Pete around the back seat.

“Nearly there!” Thomas called out. “Hold on tight!” He turned the wheel one way, then another, snaking across the desert. The Skorpions in the Jeep kept shooting.

The Ranger’s stolen Bronco wobbled as the rubber from the damaged tire stripped off the wheel and disappeared into the cloud of dust behind them.

The missing tire slowed them down and made it hard to steer. Thomas fought to keep the truck pointing straight at the canyon entrance and didn’t slow until they were through the opening, beyond

the well-armed Rangers waiting on either side of the path. Rangers filled in the space the truck had just passed as Thomas jerked hard on the wheel while stomping on the brake.

The truck spun completely around before its engine cut out, convulsing as it died. Angela scrambled to get Pete back on his feet and out onto the ground. He still had his revolver in one hand. She dragged him as far as she could until Thomas could climb down from the truck. The preacher picked up Pete's feet and together they laid him down on the ground about ten feet away. Thomas gently took Pete's gun and faced the oncoming Skorpions.

Other Rangers were already shooting. The Jeep slowed but didn't stop. It rolled into the Bronco in a loud crash that pushed the brown truck forward several feet, narrowly missing Thomas. The Jeep's driver slumped across the wheel—he'd sprouted an extra hole in his head where his brain used to be.

A man rushed toward her with his gun drawn, firing over her head at the remaining Skorpions. He stopped just in front of her, looked down, and asked, "Are you all right, Angie? You hit anywhere?" He was tall and lean, with broad shoulders and a face she'd have recognized anywhere.

"Fuck *me*," she said. "Matt Forrestal. I thought you were dead."

CHAPTER NINE

"Somebody tell me we got all of them!" Matt yelled. "And get me a medic!" Overlapping voices made it hard for Angela to make out what was going on around her, so she reloaded her rifle. Without the roaring engines and gunfire, the alarm siren was uncomfortably loud.

A couple of people in green fatigues checked the Skorpions. "No survivors, sir," one of them said.

Matt gestured to a kid who took off running toward the camp.

A brown-skinned woman moved forward to check Pete's wounds. She motioned for help, and a couple of Rangers helped Pete to his feet, slowly walking him toward the camp. Angela hadn't seen any of them before.

"Captain, if you don't mind?" Brother Thomas said.

She nodded, and he went to Pete's side, taking over for one of the Rangers who was holding him up.

"I don't think I've met those fellows before," Matt said, his voice friendly.

"I don't know half these Rangers," she replied, gesturing at the ones who were pulling the dead Skorpions from the Jeep and securing the area. "But I appreciate all y'all right now."

"When I heard you were alive, Angie..." The siren cut out suddenly. Matt took a deep breath. "It is damn good to see you. Come on," he added, putting one arm around her shoulders. "These folks know what they're doing. Let me take you to General Woodson."

"All clear," a voice said over loudspeakers. "All clear."

Matt led Angela through the tent city that had sprung up around the radio tower. "It's not the old base," he said, "but it's home."

"The base wasn't the first place Rangers settled," Angela replied with a shrug. "This ain't the prison, so it'll do."

"Are we going to talk about it, Angie?" Matt asked. "What happened to you?" The gray at his temples was spreading into the rest of his hair, but otherwise he was the same lean, self-assured Ranger she left behind two years ago.

He's my friend, she thought. If I can talk to anyone these days, it's Matt. But what she said was "Nothing to talk about. I'm here now. Same as you. Speaking of, you want to tell me why you're not at the Ag Center?"

"I answered the general's call. Once a Ranger..." He smiled. "You know the drill. And after, there was so much that needed doing, I stayed to help out. Took over as supply sergeant, 'cause somebody

always needs gear or guns or bullets, and I guess an old Ranger like me is good for that kind of work. Kathy's done a fine job at the Ag Center without me."

"She seemed pretty pissed about it when I stopped by there looking for you."

"Well, that's just Kathy. She never liked you." He laughed. "It's not personal, Angie. She thinks *all* Rangers are a waste of time. She only tolerated me because I was retired. But she's done a lot to keep us fed regardless, which is better than relying on good feelings when times are hard. Look, I want to show you around more, let you say hi to the guys, but Woodson's gonna want to see you first. Got any last-minute questions?"

"Couple," she said. "First one is, you were in a wheelchair when I left. Did you get a prosthetic?"

"Nope, these are my own two legs," Matt replied. "There's a longer science-y explanation and Kathy's probably the best one to answer it, but it's something about the mutant plant that got me before you showed up. Regenerative properties, she said. By the time Vargas needed me, I was practically good as new. What's your other question?"

"Since when is there a railroad here?" She pointed at the shiny new track that snaked out of the camp to the north, toward the Rail Nomads.

"You'll need to talk to Woodson about that one. He's in the radio tent, right over there."

A stocky young Asian man ran over and said breathlessly, "Captain Deth?" He paused for a second, wheezing. "Uh, you don't remember me, but you helped my mom out at the Leve L'Upe Mine when we had that cave-in." He pressed one hand to his barrel chest.

"Oh, sure. Take deep breaths," she said, imitating it for him. "What are you doing here?"

He drew himself up, smiling proudly. "I'm a Ranger because of you. Joined up as soon as I knew my mom was going to be okay without me. Name's Takayuki. Anything you need, you let me know. Heya, Ranger Forrestal," he added.

Matt spoke first. "Son, the captain has to attend a meeting with the general, so could you do her a favor and see that those two guys who came in with her get settled? They are *genuine* California Rangers, all the way from Los Angeles."

"Wow, really? Yes, sir, I'm on it." With a quick salute, Takayuki jogged away.

"He's a good kid," Matt said. "Thinks being a Ranger is like the stories his mom told him growing up, big heroics and saving the world every other week. He'll get his feet under him. This is your stop, Angie. Find me after?" He hugged her then, unexpectedly. If he noticed how hesitantly she returned his embrace, he didn't comment on it.

When she entered the radio tent, an older man signaled her to be quiet, but realizing who she was, tried to salute her instead, and dropped the stack of papers he was holding. He managed to gather them up and seemed to consider saluting her again. Instead, he left the tent entirely.

Across the room, Woodson was yelling into a microphone. He looked much the same as he had before she'd last seen him in California: a handsome black man in his forties, medium height and in fighting shape, if most of the fight was to get a radio antenna fixed or a signal triangulated. His hair was short but she could see new patches of gray scattered through it. He spotted Angela and waved her over.

She was limping by the time she reached him. A young black man brought her a chair and she collapsed into it. She thanked him, barely noticing his resemblance to the new general before he was gone; she made a mental note to ask Woodson about it later.

"I am sorry for your loss, but there is no way I'm handing over one of my Rangers," Woodson said into the mic. "We both know she didn't do anything wrong... No, no. I can't let you do that either..." There was a longer pause while Woodson listened carefully to the person on the other side of the radio, and then, "All right. How about I confine her to camp while we sort this out?"

"Confine *who* to camp?" Angela asked indignantly.

Woodson went on like he hadn't heard her. "Danforth, I need you to have a talk with your men, too. Something like this should never have happened. All right.... Copy that." He switched off the mic and handed his headset off to another operator.

Then he looked at Angela. "How is this even possible?"

"It was Sean Bergin. Used to be the security chief at Highpool?" She shrugged. "I was with Team Echo when we went to mop up, after we saved the Ag Center. He was the last survivor, and I don't know, he blamed us. Said something about his nephew, from years back, but that was the last I saw him until today. Minute he shows up, he orders his men to capture us."

"That's not what I meant, but good to know," Woodson said. He stood up. "I was asking how you, Angela Deth, missing, presumed dead, not only survived two years in captivity but walked back across the desert, all the way here? Who the hell are you to do such a thing?" He grinned wider than she'd ever seen before, and added, "You're a got'damn Desert Ranger, that's who you are."

"You gonna tell that to Danforth?" she asked.

Woodson waved his hand. "Danforth'll come around. But I need you to do me a favor and lay low till he does. We're barely holding on out here, and we can't afford to go to war with the RSM."

"Since when are the Rangers afraid of a two-bit operation like the Red Skorpions?"

Woodson frowned. "Look around, Angie. The Rangers *are* the two-bit operation now."

"What does that mean?"

"Losing the Citadel and setting that bomb off saved the day but cost us a lot of goodwill with the neighbors. We don't have the support we used to, we don't have the numbers we used to, and the guys we do have, most of them only joined up in the last year. Our place here's changed since you left, and there's new things happening I barely have a handle on yet. You don't understand what Arizona is now."

"We've come out of hard times before." She waved her hand in the general direction of north. "We've got a railroad now, Woodson. That happened after we lost the Citadel."

"That *happened* because the Rail Nomads got help from Danforth's men to get it done. We lost eighty percent of our equipment, half our manpower, most of our scrap." Woodson rubbed his forehead. "The RSM stepped in every place we faltered, and they did the jobs we couldn't."

The young black man who'd gotten Angela a chair came back with a clipboard. "I'm sorry," Woodson told her. "I've got to deal with this. I will find you later and explain everything. I promise. You got a bunk yet?"

"Matt's got a kid setting us up. Don't worry about me." Angela stood up, shouldering her pack.

"I don't have to, do I?" Woodson asked. "You'll stay in camp and give me some time to deal with Danforth?"

"I don't trust him, but it's your call now, *General*." She saluted quickly.

He groaned. "We'll talk about that later, too."

She held herself together enough to walk stiffly out of the radio tent. As she let the canvas tent flap fall shut behind her, she stumbled, and someone grabbed her left arm, pulling her upright. She fumbled for the pistol still strapped to her leg—

"Hey, Angie, it's me!"

She looked up to see Matt holding her arm. All the energy went out of her then. He realized it the same moment she did, and steered her to a nearby weapons trunk so she could sit instead of fall.

"Too much time on my feet," she explained, pulling her pant leg up to reveal the metal prosthetic. "Long story, but I promise I'm fine. A real night's sleep with it off will do wonders."

"Aw, hell, Angie. I'm sorry. That crack about 'my own two legs' was a foolish thing to say."

"It's fine, Matt. Believe me, I fought for this one," she said, lifting her metal leg to show it off. "No regrets."

"Right, then," he replied. "First stop, you get a nap. I happen to know of a free bed not far from here." He offered his hand. "I'll get you there."

The empty bed turned out to be in the medical tent, but Angela was too relieved to be angry about Matt tricking her. The Rangers' field surgeon helped her remove the prosthetic, cleaned up and bandaged the sores that'd opened up on her knee from wearing it too long, and declared it a solidly

made replacement, as long as Angela took care of herself far better than she had been. Sleep came within a minute of lying down on the spare cot, deep and without dreams.

When she woke, she found Takayuki asleep on a chair next to her. "He insisted," a nurse said with a shrug, then kicked the chair leg. Takayuki snorted and opened his eyes. "She's up," the nurse said to him. "We need this space for real patients, and you two are just fine, so both of y'all, out." But she winked at Angela when she said it.

Takayuki led Angela outside to a nearby campfire. Matt was there on a wooden bench with Thomas and Pete, who'd been bandaged up. "I'm fine, Captain," Pete insisted when she asked about it. "Through and through, not but an inch from the outside. It's such a small wound they barely stitched me up before they sent me on my way. You hungry?" He offered her a bowl that had been sitting next to him. "Chili with a fried egg on top," he said as he handed it over. "Yum!"

"Chili is really just beans and tomatoes," Matt said, "but ol' Hungry makes a mean cornbread." He handed her a plate covered by a small towel. "This is Mike," he added, nodding toward the young man sitting next to him.

"Folks call me 'Monster Mike' because of these." He put both arms out to show off the sprawling monster tattoos that crawled up from his wrists and disappeared under his short sleeves. "Nice to meet ya."

"Same," Angela said. She took the plate in one hand, the bowl in her other, and carefully sat down.

"Pete is on his second bowl," Brother Thomas told her. "I do believe he'll pull through."

"Oh, it's about to be a *third* bowl of chili," Pete said. "I am in love with your chef."

Thomas went on as if he hadn't heard his friend. "These folks were just telling us about some trouble with the local rail men."

Matt opened his mouth to speak but Takayuki got there first. "You remember the Rail Nomads, right, Captain? Well, Sergeant Forrestal is real friendly with Ralphy's mom Libby, and she's been sending notes that sound like she's trying to say there's trouble without *saying* there's trouble, you know?" He shoveled another spoonful of chili into his mouth and kept talking. "Me and Ralphy are pals 'cause we joined up about the same time, so we've been trying to figure it out."

"You want to go take a look?" Angela asked.

"Oh yeah, I do," Takayuki said, then paused and looked at Matt. "She probably meant to ask you, huh?"

"I am concerned," Matt admitted. "It's not high on our official list of priorities at the moment, though."

"He means the general said no," Takayuki added helpfully.

"I got that, thanks," Angela said. "Take a walk with me, Matt?"

The two of them strolled through the camp. Other Rangers were clustered around other campfires, grabbing a meal or sharing news from the day. She saw a few old faces, shook a few hands, but many of these folks were new to her.

"I thought I'd feel at home once I got back to Arizona, but... I don't know."

"This is my tent," Matt said suddenly. "Wait here a minute." He came back out with a bundle of fabric wrapped around something heavy, and handed it to her. "I kept this for you. I didn't think I'd have a chance to give it back, but... here."

She unwrapped it. The fabric turned out to be her old denim jacket, the one she'd ripped the sleeves off of years ago. It was folded around Ace's wrench. She held it in her hand.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I didn't want to take it with me on that mission... I never thought I'd get it back."

"We need to hold on to what brings us peace, Angie."

"Like you and Ralph's mom?" she asked.

He motioned for them to keep walking. "She is peaceful," he said coyly. "But I am worried. Usually she'd have come down to see me by now, but it's been weeks. And her letters don't make a lot of sense."

"Why don't you go check it out?" she asked.

Matt shrugged. "General's orders. He thinks we're overextended as is, and he's right. My hands are tied."

"But maybe mine aren't, since I'm already in hot water with him?"

"I've got people checking in with me a dozen times a day, looking for orders or bringing in news and weapon parts," Matt said. "If I go with you, it won't be an hour before someone figures out we're gone." He sighed. "But I don't want to lose you again."

"I wasn't lost," she said with a smile. "More like temporarily misplaced."

"All the years I've known you, Angie, whatever happens rolls right off you. Not this time, I don't think."

"Nothing is forever, Matt, except death, radiation, and the Arizona Rangers."

"Just don't forget you're not alone anymore, okay? We're a team."

Angela didn't recognize the expression on his face. "I know," she told him. "Which means I need to try talking to Woodson one more time before I do anything he's gonna regret."

"We've circled back around," he pointed out. "There's the radio tent, which is practically where Woodson lives most days. Since we're here..." Matt shrugged. "You know it's what Vargas would want."

He saw a squad coming in from the canyon's entrance. "I need to check in with these guys, Angie. Good luck."

She watched Matt walk away to greet the returning Rangers, then headed into the radio tent.

CHAPTER TEN

Woodson was right where she'd left him, managing a half dozen things at once in the radio tent. She waited until he noticed her. When he did, he waved her over, motioning for her to pull up a chair while he finished handing out paperwork to the three Rangers who were standing around him.

"Angie, hey, one more second," he said, signing something for an older man who'd just rushed up with it. "I swear this job is mostly sending teams out to find supplies of paper and then using the paper to order teams to go out for supplies." He watched her face for a moment. "You never did think I was funny."

She showed him Ace's wrench. "Matt held on to this for me," she said. "I don't have much of a sense of humor and I was just thinking about how Ace always hated that."

"But he loved *you*," Woodson said quietly, leaning forward a little. "We're all glad to have you back."

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"Sir? All right. If that's the way it is." He sat back. "You here for a briefing, Captain?"

"I know you said you'd come to me, but I gotta admit, I got more questions than patience."

He frowned. "Hit me."

"What's happening with the Rail Camp? There's talk something's not right there."

"I know Danforth's men have been in and out of there a lot lately, helping out with the railroad expansion, so if there was trouble we'd have heard about it," Woodson said with a shrug. "But if it makes you feel better, I can put a call out to the RSM station not far from there, get them to check it out."

"What if the Skorpions are the problem? They're scam artists and thugs, Woodson. Always have been."

"Listen, I know things are a bit different now but take some time, get your feet under you, and it'll all make sense. Have you got a bunk yet?" He looked around the room. "I can get someone to find you a tent, hold on a second..."

"*Respectfully*, you're changing the subject. I don't understand why you've gotten us involved with these bastards," she said, scowling. "The general wouldn't have stood for the way things are falling apart around here."

"Angie, you know Vargas wanted peace with these guys. And you know what? When the base was under attack, they showed up for us. Danforth himself went into the building at Vargas's side." He looked at her for a moment. "I don't know why you're acting like you don't understand this."

"I just hate feeling like we're giving away the whole of Arizona."

"We wouldn't *have* Arizona at all if the RSM hadn't stepped up. We need to keep things the way they are for now while I work on getting us some other options."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"We're broke, barely keeping the guys fed, and we can't be everywhere at once," Woodson said, his voice dropping into a low growl. "I've already told you that. You weren't here and hard decisions had to be made."

"That wasn't my fault."

"It wasn't mine either, Angie." He took a deep breath to calm himself. "I don't blame you for what happened in LA. If anything, I got lucky that you left me behind. So *this* is not about that. Listen, something's come up recently, and we do have a chance to change our situation here. It's not a done deal yet, and even when it is, it won't change things overnight. You have to be patient."

"What is it?" Angela asked.

"An alliance, with an outfit out of Colorado that's got food, guns, scrap. Their leader's called the Patriarch; he said they need lawmen, guys they can trust to help them bring the peace, and he's willing to pay for our help. If he's on the level, he's our best chance at keeping the Rangers in Arizona, with or without the RSM. But I need time to make this deal, okay?"

"No, not okay. I need to catch up here, Woodson. A minute ago, I didn't know Colorado existed. Has anyone been there? Did you send out a scouting team?"

"Angie, I want to keep this friendly, but your opinions aren't going to dictate what the Rangers do. Like it or not, I am the general now."

"So until you decide otherwise, we look the other way while the Skorpions take what they want and make us look bad in the process?"

"No, of course not." Woodson stopped himself from raising his voice, but it was obviously a struggle. "Angie, we're still the *Rangers*. We can't be everywhere at once, but we damn sure try."

"You weren't there when we went back to the prison," she snapped. "You don't know what Danforth did there, not up close. Did you see the people he enslaved? Smell the rot and blood and starvation he's personally responsible for? You can't trust him."

"That's not happening anymore. We—us, the Rangers, *me*—made sure of it. Are you really questioning my judgment when you haven't even been back a day?" Woodson slapped the table next to him, knocking papers to the ground. "We can't be doing this, Angie. Arizona needs us to be united here, so we can get what Colorado has to offer. The general had a vision and *I'm* going to see it through."

"Everything's changing," Angela said quietly. "What the hell did I even come back for?"

"You came back because this is your home," Woodson said. "Same as I would've done. I'm glad to see you still want to fight for Arizona because God knows I need soldiers like you. Are you willing to follow my lead?"

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"You can't pretend worth a damn, Angie. Your sour face gives you away."

"I don't have to like it to understand when I'm given an order."

He nodded. "Let's try this again. You've been walking for weeks over rough terrain, and it's a big adjustment, being back here. I'll give you that. You need rest. *That's* my order."

"Put my feet up, take it easy, and oh by the way, don't leave the camp?"

"It'd be better for everyone right now if you didn't. But if you're concerned about the Rail Nomads, I'll call Danforth. Maybe give him a chance to surprise you?"

"I don't think that's necessary, sir. It's nothing that can't wait till things settle out here." She stood up and added, "If you don't mind, I'd like to be excused to get some shut-eye." She saluted stiffly, and Woodson waved her away.

She found the others by the north entrance to the Ranger camp, where the new rail line stopped. Monster Mike and Takayuki she expected, but her California friends were there too.

"You should stay here and recover," she told Pete.

"It's just a little recon, right?" he asked. "Nothing I can't handle even with a few more holes in me."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Brother Thomas offered. She nodded.

The hike up to the Rail Nomads wasn't difficult under the cover of night since they could follow the train track north, but approaching the town, Angela grew uneasy. From the cover of a sand dune, she had the others duck down and wait. Through her binoculars, the Topekan side looked cleaner and more prosperous than before. They'd come up through what used to be No Man's Land, but with the junkies gone, it was empty. The radio tower had been repaired. Some of the rail cars she could see from her position had fresh coats of paint.

But the people walked quickly with their heads down and didn't stop to chat with one another.

"We should split up," she whispered. "Tak, Monster, you know the area, right?"

"I don't really," Monster Mike said. "I should stick with you."

"Pete and Thomas, you go with Takayuki, check out the Atchison side of the camp. Monster and I will skirt around to the north. It looks like there's something going on I can't quite make out. Meet behind Quarex's arcade in thirty."

Angela crouched down, keeping her body small while she jogged from recon spot to recon spot with Monster a few feet behind her. They moved around the outside edge of the town that way, keeping

a row of rail cars between them and the lights, stopping every few cars to peer out from a new vantage point. The northernmost point in the Rail camp used to be an unoccupied area where a fellow turned radioactive mushrooms into drugs, but now there was a huge metal warehouse. Guarding it were a couple of burly white guys, armed with assault rifles—not Native Americans, like almost all the Atchisons and Topekans were.

“This is wrong,” Angela whispered. Monster pointed toward the back of the building, where a metal stairway led up to a small platform and a second-story window, barely visible from where they were. They climbed down the side of the hill a bit to avoid the lights, then up the stairs to the platform. The window wasn’t locked; she could see beyond it into a tiny empty room, so she opened the window as quietly as she could and they climbed inside.

The office had one closed door and a large window overlooking the warehouse floor. Here, the sound of metal clanging against metal was so loud they could move easier since no one would hear their footsteps. She motioned for Monster to join her, squatting so they could just see out through the window.

Below them, more than a dozen Nomads were hard at work on a train car like nothing Angela had ever seen. The wheels were hidden behind reinforced plates, and the whole front of the car was a giant cannon, surrounded by .50-caliber guns. Wandering around the room were armed men, like the two who’d been guarding the warehouse door outside: mostly white, wearing leather vests and jackets she could now see had something red painted on the back of each one. The one closest to her turned around and she recognized the symbol.

A red scorpion.

“We gotta report this,” she whispered to Monster, but he pointed at an older Native man who was working alongside the others. He wore white feathers in his hair and was turning a huge wrench with one arm... the only one he had.

“Isn’t that Kekkahbah?” Monster asked. “He’s their boss, so doesn’t that mean everything’s fine?”

Just then, a woman near Kekkahbah bumped into one of the Skorpions and spilled the bucket of screws she was carrying. The man hit her hard, knocking her to the ground. Kekkahbah leaped up.

“There’s no need for that,” the Topekan leader said. “We’re doing everything you ask.”

The Skorpion kicked the fallen woman in the stomach.

Kekkahbah rushed toward her, but several Skorpions caught him and held him back. They started punching him viciously. One of the Skorpions was standing a few feet to the side, watching Kekkahbah’s beating. After a minute he called out to the workers. “This is what happens when you step outta line, folks!” he said loudly. “Everybody get back to work, and you don’t stop until I say so!”

"We can't take them all," Angela whispered. "Let's regroup." She looked over at Monster Mike, who'd stood up.

His rifle was aimed at her head.

"Drop your guns and get up," he said. She did. "Now open that door and walk out with your hands on your head." He followed her out onto the landing. "I got her!" he yelled down.

The Skorpion leader motioned for the others to stop beating Kekkahbah, who was slumped over, barely held upright by the two guys who had his arms pinned. "Well, who's this?"

"This is Angela Deth," Monster called out. He poked her in the back with his rifle, pushing her forward. As they walked down the stairs into the factory, Monster added, "I told you she was coming and I got her!"

"Where the others at?" the leader asked when Angela was standing in front of him. She didn't answer.

"They went to the Atchison side," Monster said. "Just a couple of guys, not even locals, and an Asian kid. He's big but he ain't smart, so they're nothing to worry about."

"You let me decide that," the Skorpion boss said. "Somebody bring me the radio." When he had it, he said into the mic, "This is Tommy Two Guns, in the factory. We got Angela Deth."

"Perfect timing," someone on the other end replied. "Switch over to the Ranger channel and make sure Captain Deth's listening." The boss turned the radio dial.

Another voice was speaking, a man with the same slow drawl as a lot of the Rail Nomads. "— attack, please help us," he was saying.

There was a gunfight somewhere near him; Angela could hear the sound of the shots over the radio.

"She's killed several of my people," the man went on. "We need help. Please, Rangers, come and save us..."

More gunfire.

"This is the good part," the Skorpion boss whispered.

The man on the radio continued. "Rangers, Red Skorpion Militia, anybody who can come to our aid, please save us from Angela Deth."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They dragged Angela over to the meeting hall, where another half dozen Skorpions were waiting outside the doors. Takayuki, Pete, and Thomas were brought along a few minutes later, disarmed and tied up. Pete and Tak didn't look too bad, but Thomas was bleeding heavily from a wound in his thigh and couldn't stand on his own.

"Sorry, Captain," Takayuki said.

One of the RSM guys hit him in the head with the butt of a rifle. Tak stumbled but didn't fall. His face scrunched up in anger and he clenched his fists, but he saw Angela shake her head slightly, so he relaxed them.

Inside the meeting hall was much the same as Angela remembered: a wide-open space with a metal cage on one side, bolted to the wall, and a floor of large square concrete tiles. There were fewer crates and barrels this time, but there were chairs and tables scattered around the room as if the space was used less for storage now and more for... meetings. Regular community events.

Everything changes, Angela thought.

Toward the back of the room, in the same spot that Kekkahbah had stood the first time Angela met him, she saw Casey James on his knees. Holding a pistol to his head was a large man with wild red hair and a full beard. He was in his thirties, maybe, with thick arms and a maniac's grin.

"Danforth," she said. "Of course."

"Angela Deth, as I live and breathe," he said excitedly. "Though of course that's despite what you did, isn't it?"

"Bergin started it," she said. "He died because he came after us for no reason."

"I wasn't talking about Uncle Sean, but yeah, you're gonna pay for that too," Danforth said. "Lock this guy up."

The Skorpions grabbed Casey and threw him into the cage.

"You know what?" Danforth added. "Lock 'em all up." While the Rangers were shoved into the cage with the Nomad chiefs, he conferred quietly with a couple of the Skorpions, including the warehouse boss.

"It's me you want," Angela said from inside the cage as it was locked shut. "Why not just kill me and leave the Rangers out of it?" Behind her, Pete was checking Thomas's leg, so she moved between them and the Skorpions to keep her guys out of sight. She hit a metal bar with her hand. "Hey, look at me!"

"I want you *all* dead," Danforth said, dismissing his guys with a wave of his hand. He turned to look at Angela. "I would have killed that snake Vargas at the base if he hadn't blown himself up, but my revenge is bigger than you now. I'm gonna get it all."

"Why?" she asked. "The Rangers have only ever helped people. That's what we do."

"What you do? How about what you *did*?" Danforth laughed. "You, Vargas, Hell Razor, and Thrasher. It's been twenty years, but I never forgot your names."

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

"I was a kid," he sneered, a sick grin pulling his lips back from his teeth, "and you shot me."

"I ain't never shot a kid in my life," Angela said.

"You, one of *them*, does it matter who pulled the trigger? You killed my dog, you shot me, and you left me for dead. God! I have been waiting for this day!" He slapped his hip. "Whether you remember or not, you're all gonna pay."

"Your dog? Wait a minute. You're... Bobby?" Angela said gently. "Sean said something about it when we rescued him from raiders, but he didn't say *you* were that kid."

"You remember shooting the *dog* but not me?" Danforth snarled.

"Bobby, listen—"

"*Nobody calls me Bobby!*" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Do you know what they did when you left? *They buried me!*"

"That's terrible," she told him. "It should never have happened."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, nodding his head. "*Yeah*. You see it. You know you deserve this." He walked to the radio and yanked the mic free. He held it up for Angela to see the dangling wires. "I'm gonna leave this on so you can hear your friends die," he said, the uneven grin back on his face. "And Candy," he added, "show 'em what else they won!"

A bottle-blond in leather pants who'd been leaning against the wall said, "Hi, I'm Candy, and I'll be blowing you up tonight." She brought her backpack over to the cage and opened it up, showing off a nest of multicolored wires, a few tools, and several homemade pipe bombs.

"We gotta talk about this, Danforth," Angela said hurriedly. "You must want a way out, peace with the Rangers, or you'd have just shot me dead and been done with it."

"You think small," Danforth said. "I dream big. Big as all of Arizona." He spread his arms wide. "It's gonna be mine now. And you will die, Angela *Deth*, once I'm sure that you realize everything bad happening to everyone you care about is all your fault. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a train to catch."

He signaled to his men, and all but one followed him out the door. That one stayed and kept his gun trained on Angela and the others in the cage as Candy got started.

Candy hummed while she worked. She wrapped wires around the cage's lock, threading them through the door so it couldn't be opened without setting off one of the pipe bombs. The rest she attached to each corner of the cage, still humming. The song was upbeat, the sort of thing that got stuck in your head. She shimmied along to the rhythm as she stepped lightly over to the far side of the room, out of reach from anyone inside the cage. There, she set up a pressure plate, attached to each of the colorful wires she'd used to string up the bombs. She hooked one last wire to it, which she held on to as she and the guard walked outside, closing the meeting hall's doors behind them.

There was a scraping sound as the pressure plate was pulled slowly toward the door from outside.

"That's smart," Takayuki said. "Now no one can get in without setting the whole thing off."

Angela stared at the explosives wrapped about the cage, biting her lip as she thought.

"This is the end for us, my friend," Kekkabhah said, grasping Casey's single hand. He coughed, and blood trickled down his chin. "I am grateful that our people made peace while we still could."

Casey nodded. "My daughter and our peace are my two great accomplishments," he said softly.

Brother Thomas reached into his jacket, pulling out a cross and a small book not bigger than a deck of cards. "I am only newly a Ranger," he said, "but I have been for many years a man of God. If it helps you, I can hear confession of any burdens you wish to release before we die."

"No," Angela said firmly.

"We need faith now more than ever," Thomas insisted.

"I don't need religion for that," Angela said, turning to look at him. "I have faith in the Rangers. And I do need *you*, Thomas. I didn't trust you when we met, but you convinced me a couple times over. I understand if you feel ready to quit because a part of me does too, but we can't. Pretty clear Danforth is planning to attack the Ranger camp, and I didn't like his crack about catching a train. I'm too angry to let that happen. We gotta get out of here ASAP, so—any ideas?"

"We can unlock the cell," Casey said.

"As a sign of trust," Kekkabhah added, "we each have keys, so neither of us could imprison each other's families."

"But that doesn't help us with the bombs," Casey said. "If we don't defuse them first, the key won't do us much good."

"I was watching her," Takayuki mumbled. "Lieutenant Tan was teaching me about making explosives—you know, on my days off and stuff. I've seen him handle way worse and he still has most of his fingers. But the way it's all tied together... I have to be out there where she connected everything."

"And we can't get you out there until the bombs are disconnected from the door," Pete said.

"Yeah," Tak said.

An hour passed. They spent ten minutes of it brainstorming ideas but no one could think of a plan that wouldn't end in a loud noise and a lot of blood. Tak sighed and rested his head on his knees. "I'm sorry. I didn't know Mike was a traitor."

"Oh, kid—that's not your fault," Angela told him. "Matt didn't know, and he's been a Ranger longer than you've been alive. I'm not angry at *you*."

She took a deep breath. "Being angry with the world is what's keeping me going. Whatever it is, deep inside you, that makes you want to fight and win and just plain stay alive, that's what you gotta hold on to right now. So, any ideas?"

"After everything you been through?" Pete asked her. "You see a way outta this?"

"My whole adult life has been having faith in the Rangers. I was lost, and Vargas found me. I found Ace. When Ace died, I had the mission. At Seal Beach, when those damn synths were messing with my head and keeping me in the dark all that time... I had the ocean." She sat down, her back against the cage bars. "I used to think I could hear the ocean from where I was and that kept me going, the thought of seeing all that water one day. I was angry that the robots were keeping me from it. After Pete here got me out, I realized... it was the sound of my own blood in my ears." She shrugged. "I wasn't anywhere *near* the water, but it was my brain's way of giving me something to live for, because deep down, I didn't want to give up. Not then, not now."

There was a clicking sound, then a piece of the floor moved upward a few inches. Angela nudged Casey James, who roused Kekkahbah. "Topekan or Atchison," Casey called out, "do not be afraid. The Skorpions have gone."

The piece of floor turned out to be a trapdoor. A woman pushed it open and climbed out. She was at least Angela's age, with small wrinkles around her eyes and at the corners of her lips, though her long hair was deep brown all the way through.

"Libby Parker," Kekkahbah said. "A fine Topekan woman. Unbowed by the oppression of our people." He coughed.

"That's enough out of you," Casey told him. To Libby, he said, "Be careful, please. We've been wired with explosives."

"Hi, Mrs. Parker!" Tak said excitedly. He leaned toward Pete and added, "That's Ralph's mom."

"Can I help?" Libby asked.

"Has Danforth left yet?" Angela asked.

"No. He's in the shed with the new train, shouting at people."

Angela nodded. Then they weren't too late. "Do you know anything about demolitions?"

Libby shook her head.

"Is there anyone else around here who does?"

"Chief James," Libby said, pointing.

"That's never been proved," Casey replied. "But even if it were true, I can't do anything from in here."

"I can," Takayuki said.

Everyone looked at him.

"I mean I can talk Mrs. Parker through it," he said. "If... if you think that's okay."

"I trust you," Angela said. She leaned forward. "Look at me, Tak. Do I look scared?"

"No, ma'am."

"That's 'cause I know you got this." She smiled. "Do your thing."

Takayuki closed his eyes for a moment. "The lieutenant says you gotta think twice as hard before you cut a wire as when you put it in, if you wanna keep all your fingers," he said. "Okay, got it."

He pulled a tiny pair of wire cutters from a pocket of his pants; it was smaller than the palm of his hand. "Gift from the general," he said, showing it to Angela. "General *Woodson*, that is. He says being a Ranger is specializing in helping people instead of any particular skill, but a good Ranger has got a lot of those too." He passed the cutters through the bars to Libby.

She took them. "Now what?"

"You gotta go to the middle of the room where that pile of wires is," he told her.

Libby walked to the right spot and kneeled on the floor. When she was ready, Takayuki called out instructions to her, telling her which wires to cut and which to ignore. She moved slowly, carefully doing as Tak said. With each cut she got more entangled. Before long she was at the center of the pile of wires: there was a blue one resting across her shoulder, a set of black and white wires draped across her arm, and a pile of cut and discarded pieces in her lap.

Brother Thomas prayed quietly.

"I'm not sure which is the red one and which is the pink one," Libby said at one point. "In this light, they look the same."

"I've got a box of matches," Pete offered. "Come get 'em."

"No!" Tak yelled.

Everyone froze.

Tak lowered his voice. "Please don't move, Mrs. Parker. Now that you've started cutting the wires, you have to finish or you might pull the wrong one while you're setting them down."

"I understand," she said, "but I still don't know which of these is red."

"I'm sorry to suggest this, ma'am," Angela said, "but you need to cut yourself. When you see the wires next to your blood, you'll be able to tell which is right."

Libby nodded. She used the wire cutters to snip off a tiny piece of her palm, just big enough for a few drops of blood to squeeze out. She held her palm next to the wires, comparing.

"I think it's this one," she said, cutting a wire. When nothing exploded, she let out a deep breath. "What's next?" she asked.

Takayuki closed his eyes and calmly recited the rest of the instructions. When she was done, Libby brushed the dead wires off like she was casting away spiderwebs.

Casey pulled the chain from around his neck and handed a thumbnail-sized key to Tak. "You should do the honors," the Atchison chief said.

With the key inside, the lock clicked, and the door swung open.

"Good," said Angela. "Now we gotta get out of here and get to that train shed."

"I will take Mrs. Parker and my friend out through the trapdoor," Casey said, supporting Kekkahbah under his one arm. "I can shut off the power as a diversion, then get him to the Atchison camp where he'll be safe. That should give you a chance to surprise those guarding the front door without anyone setting off an alarm."

"Thanks, Casey," Angela said. "I hope we meet again."

"It's quieter when you don't come around, woman," Kekkahbah grumbled, his arm around Casey's shoulders, "but you prove yourself honorable every time. Thank you."

Libby held up the trapdoor while the Rail Chiefs climbed down into the tunnel under the floor. "Captain, could you do me a favor?" she asked.

"Of course, Mrs. Parker. Anything."

"Could you look for my son Ralph when you get back to camp? Whatever's about to happen there, I think he'd be safer with you watching out for him." She smiled.

"I'll do my best, ma'am," Angela said.

Libby dropped down into the tunnel, letting the trapdoor fall shut.

The Rangers waited until the power cut out. Angela slammed open the meeting hall's door as hard as she could, knocking down a Skorpion on the other side, who shouted indignantly. Takayuki rushed past her to tackle the other guard, wrestling him into submission. Pete relieved them both of their rifles, giving one to Angela.

"Let us go first," she said to Tak. "Can you get the brother?"

Takayuki responded by picking Thomas up in a fireman's carry. "Ready, Captain," Tak said, ignoring Thomas's protests.

Angela slid down the embankment, with Pete right behind her. The dirt street was empty so she scurried across the wide-open space, her footsteps muffled by dust. She was heading for the warehouse when suddenly its huge doors opened. She and Pete quickly found a hiding spot behind a nearby rail car.

"Only shoot Skorpions," she cautioned as she peeked around the corner. "Dammit!"

Pete looked over her shoulder. The gunnery rail car was rolling out from the warehouse, pulled by an old patched-up steam engine that looked familiar. Outside in the light, the rolling weapon was even more terrible: at least seventy feet long, the rail carriage had ten sets of wheels supporting the first half and another ten sets under its back half. The heavy artillery cannon mounted in the middle was fully extended, jutting out beyond the front of the carriage.

"I bet my teeth they're driving that right up to the Ranger camp," Angela whispered. "Do you see any way to stop it?"

"No," Pete said, and swore under his breath.

Steam built up in the engine; it chuffed loudly as it forced its way out through the chimney.

"I don't know what to do," Angela said to herself. "Someone tell me what to do."

Suddenly the engine jerked ahead, pulling the heavier artillery car with it, and slowly rolled toward the Ranger camp.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Captain!" Thomas called out. He was on his feet and holding a stocky submachine gun as he limped toward her. There were several Rail Nomads with him, all armed.

"Casey sent reinforcements," Tak explained as they reached the spot where Angela and Pete were hiding. "Did you see the train that left town with the big guns?" he asked.

"Yeah, and it's probably on its way to help Danforth wipe out the Rangers," Angela said. "We gotta take down the Skorpions in the warehouse first, though."

"No need," one of the Nomads said. He held a bullhorn in his hand. "We were preparing for this before you arrived." Raising it to his lips, he shouted, "Switch man's sleeping, train hundred and two!"

Gunfire rang out inside the warehouse and, just as suddenly, stopped. A moment later, a Nomad woman appeared in the open doorway and shouted back, "Back on track and headed for you!"

The man with the bullhorn walked out and waved at her. To Angela he said, "We can take care of ourselves. Is there anything you need?"

"Got a working vehicle that isn't a train?" she asked.

"I have the finest vehicle you have ever seen," the man replied with a wide grin.

By the time the sun rose, the team was making their way south in a 1985 Winnebago Chieftain, following the train tracks. Billy Herringshaw—the Rail Nomad with the bullhorn—insisted on coming with them to ensure the Winnebago was returned promptly. It'd been found under a tarp when the Atchisons were scouting for spare rail and spikes at a nearby yard, and the Topekan engineer had been able to get it running again with minimal effort. The RV's century-old beige paint job was practically brand new, and Billy showed off its gas generator and retractable awning with great pride. There was an entire book dedicated to the wondrous vehicle, Billy said, though he couldn't read it himself.

With Thomas at the wheel, Angela sat in the passenger seat, watching out for the gunnery train. The others sat on the plaid pink couch that was built into a C shape around the RV's wooden table. They were traveling at a good speed over the rough terrain, but the train had a head start. They were more than halfway to the Ranger camp before Angela spotted the steam engine puffing along the track with its enormous gun carriage.

Someone on the train must have seen them as well, because one of the smaller .50 caliber guns turned to point in their direction.

"We're coming up on a curve in the track," Billy said. He'd come forward and was squatting between the front seats. "Turn right after that big cactus there and drive across the flat part of the desert. You'll cut them off."

There was a loud bang and a puff of smoke as the .50 cal fired. The hand-sized bullet hit the ground near the Winnebago, kicking up dust.

"There must be Skorpion gunners on the train," Billy said sadly. "I guarantee none of *my* people would fire upon our majestic Chieftain."

"You sure this thing can handle driving on sand?" Thomas asked.

"I have faith," Billy said. "Besides, I laid this part of the track myself. The land here is hard enough to be stone."

"What about the rest of the guns on the train?" Pete asked as Thomas turned the wheel. "We're awful exposed out here now that it's daylight."

"The big artillery gun can't shoot to the side or backward," Billy explained. "There's a turnaround loop at the Ranger camp for unloading supplies. They have to stop the train there with the engine facing toward the camp for the mortar shells to fly in the right direction."

"But the .50 cal's can still get us?" Pete asked.

"Yes, but there's only one or two that face the rear. Until we're alongside the train, the rest cannot target us."

"Won't we be next to the train when we pass it?"

"Unfortunately," Billy admitted.

"We need to derail the train," Angela said.

Billy stood up quickly, banging his head on the RV's low ceiling, then sat down again. "You can't!" he said, rubbing his head. "My people have a very bad history with train wrecks."

"You got a better idea?" she asked. "I don't want to hurt any Nomads if I can possibly help it. But I can't let that train get anywhere near the Ranger camp."

The .50 caliber gun fired again. The passenger side mirror exploded.

Billy whimpered.

"Okay, what if we just blow up the tracks?" Angela asked. "Will that stop the train without derailing it?"

"You wanna blow up the train tracks?" Takayuki asked incredulously. "I mean, yeah, would that work?"

Billy looked desperate. "If it were far enough in front of the train so the engineer had time to slow down... maybe."

"Still got those pipe bombs, Tak?" Angela asked. "Can we throw them at the track as we drive past it?"

“Oh yeah, I got the bombs,” he said, sounding happier. “I gotta attach them to the track, though. If I drop them, they might blow before we can get away, or bounce and not do enough damage to stop the train.”

Angela looked through the windshield, watching the train barreling down the track. “Do we have time for that?” she asked.

“I know a spot, but we’ll have to take a detour,” Billy said. He stood up again, carefully. “It’s better if I drive.”

“Fine with me,” Thomas said.

Angela got out of the way so Billy could get closer. Thomas raised himself off his seat while Billy slid under him. He held onto the wheel until the Nomad driver said, “Ready!” and then dropped into the passenger seat.

Billy turned the wheel sharply, and the train disappeared from sight.

“Tell me what we’re doing,” Angela said.

“There’s a bridge up ahead, but the only way to get there before the train is to go this way,” Billy replied, his foot holding down the gas pedal.

Thomas switched on the small radio mounted under the dash and twisted the dial until he found the Rangers’ emergency channel. Through static, they could hear General Woodson calling in reinforcements. “Sounds like RSM is already there,” he said. “We ought to warn the camp about the train, in case we can’t stop it.”

“Woodson will fight whether he knows we’re coming or not,” Angela replied. “The only thing we’ll accomplish by radioing in is giving away our one advantage: Danforth doesn’t know we escaped.” She flinched as the RV bounced over a crack in the ground. “You *do* know how to drive this, right?” she asked Billy, her voice hard.

“Actually, this is my first time driving,” Billy replied happily.

“God favors those who make bold choices in the pursuit of righteousness,” Thomas told him.

“I can’t tell if he’s serious,” Tak whispered behind them.

“Best not to worry about it,” Pete replied.

Even at full speed, the ancient Winnebago struggled against the desert terrain. It bounced and skipped along, swaying wildly from side to side. The windshield collected dust until it was nearly opaque. Billy switched on the wipers to brush the dust off; more accumulated so quickly that he had to leave the wipers on.

From somewhere nearby, the train’s whistle blew. It sounded like the call of a dove but a hundred times louder.

"How much longer?" Angela asked.

"About half a mile from the bridge," Billy said.

The whistle blew another time.

"I see it!" Thomas shouted, pointing as they drove around a small hill and the train came into view. They were running parallel to it.

The rumble from the train's engine started out as another vibration in the already-shaking vehicle, grew into a sound and then into a roar as, foot by foot, the RV pulled alongside the train.

The train's .50 cal guns began to swing slowly in their direction.

"Go faster, must go faster!" Billy said to himself. He leaned forward in his seat.

"There it is," Thomas said.

Angela spotted the bridge. It didn't curve upward at all but there was a break in the ground as it passed over what looked like an old road. "Get ready, Tak!" she said.

Billy jerked the wheel as the train's guns fired. Clouds of dust burst up as bullets rained down on the ground where the RV had just been.

He bounced up and down in his seat excitedly, as if he were riding a horse. "Faster, faster!" he cried out. He drove down the side of a hill. The Winnebago slid as much as it rolled forward, its tires spinning until their rubber connected with the road. It lurched, picking up speed.

They raced toward the bridge.

"Take this," Takayuki told Angela, shoving a backpack at her.

Billy slammed on the brakes with both feet, coming to a dead stop directly under the bridge. "Now, now!" he yelled.

Tak rushed out the door and spun around to grab the roof with both hands. He pulled himself up onto it, then leaned over and reached down. Angela shoved the pack into his hands and he disappeared.

Billy threw open his door and started to jump out, but Thomas grabbed the man's arm.

"Where you going?" the preacher asked.

"I've got to flag down the train!" Billy said in a panic. "They must stop in time." His eyes were wide.

"Let him go," Angela said.

When Billy was gone, Thomas slid over into the driver's seat and shut the door. They watched the Nomad run up the side of the hill, waving his arms frantically.

Pete leaned out the passenger side. "How much longer, Tak?" he yelled.

"Almost done" was the faint reply.

Thomas started the RV's engine.

The train's whistle blew again, much closer this time. Its guns fired again, one after another, little explosions: boom, boom, boom.

Billy came running down the hill toward the Winnebago. He saw Thomas behind the wheel and, without slowing down at all, adjusted course to circle around and climb in through the passenger door. "I did what I could," he said, panting. "I don't think they're going to stop."

Tak pounded on the roof. "Time to go!" he yelled. "Don't wait for me!"

Angela slammed the door shut as Thomas reversed hard out from under the bridge, driving backward away from it as the RV picked up speed.

"Faster, faster, faster," Billy whispered as the bridge dwindled and the oncoming train came back into view.

BOOM!

The explosion sent a cloud of dust in every direction. It rained down on the Winnebago.

Thomas turned the wipers back on.

"What's happening?" Pete asked. "Did we stop the train?"

Thomas slowly pressed the brake, bringing the RV to a gentle stop.

Angela grabbed the binoculars and focused them. "Looks like the engineer's pulling the brake handle with both hands," she said. "I don't know if that's enough."

The train began to slow. The brakes screamed, metal on metal, as the engine tried to undo the momentum of the heavy railgun carriage behind it. It slid into the dust cloud.

"I can't see it now," Angela said.

Takayuki opened the passenger door. He was covered in dust from head to toe.

"You're filthy," Billy said. "I don't know if I can let you sully our great Winnebago."

Takayuki coughed once. "Job's done," he replied, still standing in the doorway.

"Damn *right* it is, Ranger," Angela told him. "You did good." She dumped a canteen of water on him, rinsing off the worst of the dust.

"Fine," Billy said, "but try not to touch anything."

Tak shrugged. He stepped inside and found a spot on the floor.

"The dust is settling," Thomas called out. Everyone (except for Tak, who was afraid to get anything else dirty) moved forward to look out the windshield.

The bridge was gone. A pile of debris littered the ground where the RV had been parked.

The front of the train had come to a stop just past where the bridge ended. One set of the engine's wheels dangled over the end of the broken track, spinning uselessly. The Topekan engineer and a Skorpion were standing next to the engine, arguing.

Suddenly, three more Skorpions were marched off the gunnery car at the end of a Nomad's rifle. The one from the engine car turned and pointed his gun at the Nomad.

The engineer grabbed him and threw him off the bridge. He landed in the pile of debris, twitched, and stopped moving.

The Nomad with the rifle fired: once, twice, three times.

"Well, that's taken care of," Angela said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Thomas slowed the RV to a crawl as they neared the Ranger camp, pulling in to park behind a stand of scraggly trees. He left the engine idling and slid out of the way so Billy could take his place at the wheel. The Topekan nodded a silent goodbye as Angela and the others climbed out, then shifted into reverse and slowly backed away. The plan was for him to return to the Rail Nomads camp for reinforcements.

The hope was he'd have enough time to get back with those reinforcements before the Rangers lost.

Hidden by the trees, Angela used her rifle's scope to do a headcount on the Skorpion Militia already in place, blocking the camp's northern entrance. Dozens of armed men were in position behind and around seven or eight monstrous vehicles—scrap-covered junk like Sean Bergin's Jeep, more useful as barricades than as transportation. *Exactly* the same as Sean's Jeep, in fact, with all kinds of welded metal bits slapped on until the edges overlapped... She bit her lip to keep from swearing, suddenly understanding that Danforth's betrayal had been in the works for a long time.

"All right, boys," she said, laying her assault rifle on the flat rock between her and the others. "What else we got?" They piled up their weapons, mostly confiscated from the Skorpions defeated at the warehouse: a .45 pistol, an old M1 rifle, three knives, and the submachine Brother Thomas got from the Atchisons.

"I think this is yours, Pistol Pete," Angela said, handing over the .45. "Submachine gun?"

"That's me," Brother Thomas said, taking it from her. "I'll take a knife too if you don't mind." The rag tied around the bullet wound in his thigh had turned rust-colored where blood seeped through and dried. He limped when he moved but didn't complain; Angela didn't want to ask.

"Do you mind if I take this as well?" Pete asked as he picked up the old rifle. "The pistol doesn't have as much range." No one objected, so he checked the rifle's chamber and clip. "It'll do."

"Can I have a knife?" Tak asked excitedly.

"Whichever one you want, Ranger."

He picked up the big Bowie, leaving Angela the smaller folding knife. As he was strapping it to his leg, he suddenly stopped, patted his pocket, and exclaimed, "Oh! I have a leftover pipe bomb!" Realizing the others were staring at him, he sheepishly added, "It's safe."

"Throw it in the right direction is all I ask," Angela said. The sound of gunfire came from the direction of camp, not much more than soft pops at this distance, but unmistakable. "Dammit, it's started," she said. "We're not close enough."

"There's some rocks down the hill there that'd give us cover," Thomas said, looking through his binoculars.

"Yeah, all right," she replied. As Pete walked past her, she leaned over and whispered, "Keep an eye on him, with his leg. Might have to move fast."

"On it," Pete whispered back.

They made their way down the small hill. Thomas slid on a patch of loose gravel but stayed on his feet. The rocks were only about five feet high at their tallest point, so he and Pete had to crouch down to get enough cover. Tak squatted at the edge of the rocks, knife ready. Taking advantage of its flat top, Angela rested her rifle across one stone, leaning over to look through its scope.

"Only fire on people sporting RSM colors and tags. Don't want to risk any civilians or prisoners," she said softly. "Here we go."

She chose a burly white man wearing a leather vest with a red scorpion. He was aiming a long pistol. She took aim—

His head exploded.

She lined up another Skorpion, long hair and the red symbol on the back of the jacket, and fired again. The bullet caught them where their neck met their shoulders and they collapsed, screaming. Next to her, she was vaguely aware that Pete's gun was firing too, a whisper of faint pops she barely noticed. All that mattered was finding another Skorpion to put a bullet into.

A few of the Skorpions turned around to fight back, moving to the other side of their vehicles for protection. Bullets shattered against the rocks, forcing Angela's team to duck for cover.

Thomas slid into a seated position with his back to the rock and his submachine gun held firmly in both hands. "Incoming," he told the others. "From the trees."

Pete spun around, taking aim with his pistol.

"Stand down, Rangers," a man's voice called out. A squad of four swept down the hill, crouching to avoid getting hit by a stray bullet.

Angela pulled her rifle with her as she turned to put her back against the stone. "Hold your fire," she said suddenly. "I know him."

The new squad hustled over to the rocks and squatted down next to Angela's team. "Captain Hunter," one of the men said to Pete and Thomas. "Delta Squad."

"These folks are the best we have," Angela explained. "Nice to see you, Hunter."

"Damn glad to see you too, Captain," he said. "Especially since we were sent out to bring you in." Behind Angela, the Skorpions kept firing.

“Hey, do you mind?” a young Latino man asked Thomas. A bullet struck the ground next to him with a soft thud. “Name’s James Díaz, by the way.” He had a medic’s pack already open and was pointing at the preacher’s injury. Thomas stretched his leg out so Díaz could unwrap the blood-soaked rag. He cut away a few inches of Thomas’s pants to get a better look. “The wound needs attention,” Díaz said as he cleaned it, “but it’s clotted and the bullet missed the bone and arteries. You can stand on it but don’t move too quickly. I’ll put in a couple of stitches to keep it together; you need to see the doc once this is over. Okay?” He picked up a needle, already threaded, and began sewing.

Thomas flinched but kept himself together. “Got it,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Woodson sent us up to retrieve you from the Nomads,” Hunter said. “When we got there, they let us know the whole thing was a setup, so we hustled back double-time. Saw the derailed train—that your handiwork?”

Angela tilted her head in Takayuki’s direction. “Remind me to tell Tan he taught the kid good.”

Hunter looked impressed. “Roger that.” He popped up for a moment, shooting over the top of the rock. Someone screamed, and he ducked back down. “What’s our play?”

“Eight of us, fifty or so of them, no idea how many at the southern entrance...” Angela paused while a hail of bullets struck the rocks, sending razor-sharp chips flying. “We’re not making a big enough dent from back here.”

“I suggest we move closer to the fighting,” Hunter said. “My sniper will hang back to pick off combatants from a distance.”

“Thomas, can you stay to cover her?” Angela asked.

“Happy to, folks. Can somebody look out for my plasma hammer? Glows blue, some RSM bastard ran off with it at the Nomad’s camp.” Thomas clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Really’d like that back.”

“I’ll do my best, Brother,” Pete said with a grin.

Leaving Thomas and Delta Squad’s sniper safely behind the cluster of rocks, the rest of the Rangers moved south, firing on the Skorpion’s rear guard. Delta’s sniper fired smoothly and precisely—every sixty seconds, another Skorpion shuddered and died.

It wasn’t enough.

Tak lit his pipe bomb. He threw it toward the closest vehicle, a monster of a truck covered with what might have been a wrought-iron fence before it was welded to the truck. There was a moment where nothing happened and then *boom*. The truck exploded, throwing shrapnel into the Skorpions closest to it.

“Captain, look!” Pete said, pointing.

From across the fight, Angela could see a throng of people brawling hand to hand. Someone was pulled from the crowd and dragged atop a Skorpion's vehicle. It was a young man she'd thought she'd seen before... he wore a medic's armband and a Ranger's badge.

The medic's head spurted blood out the back as he was shot in the face. His body tumbled off the truck.

A buzzing noise came from Díaz's backpack; it morphed into static and then the mumble of voices. He pulled his pack off and opened it up.

"Angela! Angela..." a voice was saying. Danforth's voice. "Is that you back there? I do hope you're watching, Angela Deth. This won't end until you're dead and the Rangers are gone for good."

She took the mic from Díaz and pressed the transmitter button. "I'm asking you, Danforth, stop the attack so I can meet you face to face, just you and me."

"I spent years of my life trying to be the opposite of what you claimed to be," he said, "but I realized / could be what the Rangers should've been. / can protect me and mine and never let none of you bastards take from me again."

"I didn't shoot you," she said.

"You being in the room is enough. All Rangers are complicit as far as I'm concerned."

"I remember what happened, Danforth. There was a dog, and it attacked us. The bullet was never meant for you, but I'm sorry about it all."

"It's too late for your lies. Run if you want, but I ain't walking away from this fight now." He left the transmitter on but spoke to his men instead. "Soldiers!" he yelled. "Push into the Ranger camp! Kill every last one of these fuckers!"

Using her scope, Angela could see Woodson had every Ranger on the front line, even a couple of elderly vets. There was a woman in a wheelchair holding a shotgun with both hands. A huge man wearing a cook's apron ran forward with a cleaver held high about his head. He was shot in the shoulder and went down.

Angela's team pushed forward into the battle. Pete fired over and over, and behind her Hunter's assault rifle went off as often as her own.

A Skorpion rushed at them; Tak swung with his knife. It slashed deep into the man's neck.

Angela could see Danforth in front of her, just as he got close to Matt Forrestal. She fired at Danforth but missed, taking out the bottle blonde standing next to him instead.

Matt was jumped by a couple of Skorpions. Behind him, Angela could see Woodson fighting to get through the crowd toward them, swinging a sledgehammer left and right.

Angela took another shot, bringing down one of the guys clinging to Matt, but it wasn't enough. He was stabbed in the chest, over and over, blood soaking into his shirt. She lost sight of him in the crowd.

Danforth screamed with vengeful joy.

In that moment, Angela took her shot. Several bullets from her assault rifle ripped through Danforth's chest and he collapsed in a heap.

Shocked, the Skorpions stopped firing. Angela's team moved forward unchallenged. The crowd parted to let her through. Standing over Danforth, Angela watched the blood leaking from his chest with every heartbeat. "All this for something I can guarantee I didn't do," she said. "What a damn waste."

She crouched down, leaning over until her face was inches away from his. "If I'd have been the one that shot you seventeen years ago," Angela added softly, "you would've stayed dead."

"I knew it," Danforth whispered as red bubbles foamed up in his mouth. "Rangers ain't no heroes." He said something more but it was lost under his own blood. He clawed at his throat for a moment, shuddered, and lay still.

Woodson climbed up onto one of the Skorpion vehicles, a bullhorn in his hand. "You got three choices: surrender, run away, or die. Anybody who runs without dropping your guns, I will shoot you in the back." He paused for a moment. "Okay, now, drop 'em!"

A man with a faded scorpion tattoo on his face raised a pistol toward the general. Several shots rang out at once. The tattooed man jerked wildly as he sprouted holes all over his chest, spurting blood from multiple wounds as he fell to the ground.

There was a clatter as the rest of Skorpions let go of their weapons, turned around, and ran away into the desert.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Angela sat in the radio tent. Woodson had ordered everyone else out but didn't speak to her for several minutes. She watched him pace back and forth.

Finally, he stopped in front of her and asked, "Do you want to be general?"

"No," she said. She stretched her metal leg.

He went on as if he hadn't heard her. "After this last stunt, the Rangers would vote for you. It should've gone to a captain anyway, but the ones we had left didn't want it either. I'd like to stay on as radio operator, but otherwise... I'll step aside."

"Woodson," Angela said. "I don't want the job. I... I was just angry."

"What the hell for?" he asked.

"Same reason I was angry at everyone. You survived when Vargas and Thrasher didn't, when Dave Carlson didn't. You were free the two years that I wasn't. You got to make decisions for yourself when I feel like I've been doing what everyone but me wanted for years. It was too much change and not enough of things staying the same."

"How do you feel about it now?"

"Now I see," she said. "Even though you need more guys to prevent things like what happened with the RSM, there's no way I could've kept the Rangers going." She stretched her other leg and sighed. "I'm a soldier, Wade. I'm good on missions, but mainly when I can do whatever I think is right in the moment. I'm wrong about people sometimes, I don't always see the big picture, I don't plan on tomorrow. Most of what it takes to keep this outfit going? Those are your skills, not mine, and I'm glad you're in charge."

He frowned. "How am I supposed to punish you for disobeying orders when you say things like that, Angie?"

She shrugged. "That sounds like a command problem to me."

"Funny. We do have real problems, you know. Got locals preferring the Skorpions even now, radiation that never ends, not enough food, hard to find clean water—the works. We can't make it out here alone." He sat down in the chair closest to her. "I think we need to take this Patriarch up on his offer."

"I agree," Angela replied.

Woodson's face relaxed. "I'll get him on the radio. Maybe you can ask any questions you have, give me your opinion?"

"I can't stay. They're burying Matt this morning."

Woodson stood up quickly. "I'll go with you. I can contact Colorado later."

"You don't need to," she said. "You said the right words last night at dinner in front of the whole camp. This is just for Libby, so she can say goodbye too."

"I can still wait for you to get back," he offered, but she shook her head.

"I trust you, General," she said. "I need to start acting like it. You tell me when it's time for the next mission, and I'll stay out of your way until then."

He reached out a hand and she took it, letting him pull her up from the chair. "Dismissed, Captain," he said.

Angela found Takayuki burying Matt Forrestal near the markers that'd been set up for Vargas, Thrasher, Ace... even her. She lingered by her own headstone for a moment, reading the inscription:

Death Has Called His Daughter Home.

Soon enough, she thought, but not today.

Libby Parker stood near Matt's grave while Tak and Pete lowered his body into the ground. Brother Thomas was at the head of the grave, a cross in one hand and a Bible in the other. Libby had her head bowed. Each of her long, perfect braids hung down on either side of her neck. The feathers in her hair were white with thin black lines across each one—barn owl tail feathers, Angela guessed. They made her remember the time she'd seen a huge owl lift off from a carcass one morning just before dawn. It was one of those rare moments when Arizona wasn't only a dangerous wasteland. It could also be beautiful.

She gave Pete a hand up as he climbed out of the grave, and he pulled Takayuki up after him. She nodded to Brother Thomas, who continued his service. When he was done, he asked them all to bow their heads. Angela only stared at the ground during the minute of silence, but she kept her head down until Thomas said, "Amen."

When it was over, Libby looked around, spotted Angela, and walked over to her. "I want to thank you for coming to help my people," Libby told her softly. "I was also asked to inform you that our chiefs Kekkahbah and Casey James survived the fight at the Rail camp, and will recover."

"Have you heard from Ralphy?" Angela asked. "I didn't see him... after the fight."

Libby smiled. "My son was away on a mission, and didn't get back until the fighting was over. He sent me a message before his team set out again. I live without my husband, and now without Matt, but Ralphy gives me a reason to go on."

"I'm glad to hear that. I know"—she paused—"I know how it feels."

"After his father's death, Ralph was lost," Libby said. She took Angela's hand for a moment. "I never thought he'd find his way back to the Rangers, but I am glad he did." She let Takayuki lead her away then.

Pete and Thomas lingered, watching Angela.

"I want to thank you fellas," she started to say, then bit her lip. "Aw, hell. You've been better Rangers than I ever expected. I'm gonna be real sad to see you go."

"About that, ma'am..." Brother Thomas looked at Pete. "We've decided there's not a lot of reason to go back to LA right now."

Angela tried not to smile. "Huh. Well, there's maybe a place for you out here, if you like dry heat and questionable chow. How's your leg, Brother?"

"Patched up and ready to go," Thomas said. "As long as it's where you are."

"That's the deal, Captain," Pete said. "That's what we want."

"I gotta admit... there was nowhere I wanted to be but home with my fellow Rangers in Arizona... but now, it doesn't feel like home." She smiled. "If you stick with me, I can't promise where we're going to end up."

A Ranger jogged up. "Ma'am, the general's asked me to bring you," she said.

Angela nodded. To Pete and Thomas she said, "Be ready. I have a feeling we're about to get orders."

Back in the radio tent, Woodson was animated, pacing back and forth with a smile on his face. "I want you to know I hear everything you say, even when you're a pain in my ass," he said. "The Patriarch sketched out what he wants us to do for him, and what he will give us for doing it. It's a generous offer—more than generous. Almost..." He paused for a moment, then went on. "I've decided to send out scouts before fully committing to it. After what happened with Danforth, we need to know more about their setup, the people, the terrain. Everything."

"Sounds smart," Angela said. "California was like nothing I've ever seen before. I can't even picture what Colorado is gonna look like."

"We need time to regroup after the RSM attack anyway," he added, "and a survey mission buys us some time. I'd like *you* to lead the team."

"You gotta know it's real hard for me to trust anyone these days," she said. "I may not give this Patriarch a fair shake."

Woodson took a deep breath and asked, "What would Ace do?"

"When are you going to stop using Ace against me?"

"When it stops working. So tell me," Woodson asked again, "what would Ace do?"

"Ace would go on the mission for the good of the Rangers," Angela said, "even if it killed him."

"We already know nothing can kill you, Angie."

"I've had to let a lot of good folks die," she told Woodson, "but I guess I'm not ready to let Ace's dreams die too. I'll go to Colorado and check this Patriarch of yours out. I just hope he's who you want him to be." She sighed. "I get to pick my team?"

"I assumed you'd want the LA guys, and they've already said they want you."

The corner of her mouth turned upward. "Them, yeah. Need one more to round out a squad."

"Takayuki has asked to be assigned to you," Woodson said. "I believe he's already packed."

"That's exactly who I was thinking of." She grinned and stood up. "I guess this is goodbye again, sir."

"Be safe, Angie," Woodson said.

Angela saluted. Woodson returned it. He was handed a stack of papers and turned to deal with that.

She was gone before he turned back around.

Angela's team was waiting for her outside the tent. "Where to, Captain?" Takayuki asked first. He had a full pack on; Pete and Thomas were armed and carrying their gear. Thomas held his plasma hammer in one hand, retrieved from a Skorpion's corpse the day before.

"Growing up, I thought Arizona was the only place left in the world," she told them. "The more things change, the more I see how much the world needs us Rangers. We're the cavalry now, boys." Angela grinned.

"We're gonna save the future."