Summary

Believing her father gravely injured and her baby brother kidnapped, 18 year-old Cassidy Hartley emerges from Vault 111 into a world of unimaginable horror. After meeting the rockabilly mechanic Sturges, the mysterious Deacon, bossy sniper MacCready and the eclectic Atom Cats, Cassidy tries to make sense of the new world and reunite her family.
Cassidy Hartley awakens to find herself in a nightmare.

Cold. So cold.

Her body trembled as she regained consciousness, becoming big shakes as she tried to move. Her vision was blurry and her movements felt as though she were underwater. Raising a hand to her face the girl touched her skin, barely feeling it through her frozen fingertips.

A hissing sound erupted from somewhere near her and the front of her cryopod trembled then slowly lifted. She blinked rapidly, trying to force her vision to clear, and struggled with unwilling muscles to raise herself from the seat she was partially reclined in.

Where am I?

Not in the deepest winters had she ever felt such a bone-numbing cold and never had she felt such confusion.

Where is this place?

Fragmented images and memories suddenly shot through her mind and she squeezed her eyes shut as vertigo suddenly assaulted her.

"Can we take Shaun to the park Daddy?"

"Yes, we can. Let's get him changed and dressed then. It's chilly out."

"Her father's kind eyes smiling at her as she brought her baby brother out to the living room. As always the television was on, her father following the stories of the military movements worldwide despite being retired.

Daddy.

Chaos. Screaming. People running everywhere.

Words, frightening words, coming at her from the television which suddenly shut off. Her father's face grim as he grabbed Shaun's diaper bag and threw her jacket at her.

"We need to get to the vault, NOW!"

"What's happening, Daddy? What was he talking about bombs for?"

"No time for this, Cassidy. Get that jacket on and follow me. No more talk!"

His voice was stern and commanding and as always she fell into step behind him. Daddy always knew what to do, how to handle every situation. She felt panic rising inside her, but her father's steady and sure movements were a comfort.
"What about mom? She just left! She can’t have got far! Daddy!"

She grunted with effort trying to rise from her seat. Still, there was no cooperation from her muscles. Frustration set in as more memories came to light.

Soldiers everywhere, clad in power armor, making them look almost alien. Vertibirds circling and shouting orders through speakers. Her father dragged her along, her baby brother held in his other arm. She felt the terror, remembered the cacophony. Her neighbors and friends, running with them.

Down the path. Over the little wooden bridge.

Old Mr. and Mrs. Able, a suitcase overturned on the ground, it’s contents strewn about.

"Oh Frank just leave it, let's go!"

"No this is all we have! Help me!"

She was crying, pulling at her father, asking him about her mother. She hadn’t been gone that long. She could be down the road, and coming back. They should wait!

A gate loomed up ahead, people pushing and screaming and shouting. Armed guards shoving them away forcefully and shouting orders. Her father bulldozing his own way to the front.

She recognized the salesman who’d visited them several times. A kindly man who’d played with Shaun and had supper with them.

"Mr. Davidson!" she called out, grabbing his hand. "What’s happening?!"

He hadn’t looked at her. His face was filled with horror and rage. He was yelling at the guard. Her father had roughly shoved the salesman aside and faced the guard himself.

"Colonel Nathaniel James Hartley, USMC! We're on the list. My daughter Cassidy Jasmine and my son Shaun William."

"Sir, yes sir!"

The soldier had given a salute then looked back at his list.

"Where is Tamara Leigh Hartley, sir? Is she present and accounted for?"

Her father had shaken his head.

"I don’t know! She left for Concord not long ago!"

“Daddy please!” Cassidy had cried. “Let’s wait for her, she’ll come right home! She’ll come here!”

She remembered how the man’s face had paled, how his words were staccato, awkward.

"S...sir that is unfortunate, sir! We...we can’t wait! God be with us all!"

He stepped aside.

Other soldiers hustled them forward, Cassidy still crying about her mother.
A large, circular platform with some of her neighbors clustering on it, holding tight to each other. The Millers, the Stanfields, the Molyneux's...she saw the Framinghams running towards them.

Loud, obnoxious sirens sounded over the din of the vertibirds and the shouting and screaming. Mrs. Framingham, her best friend Lindsay's mother...but where was Lindsay?

"She's in Concord, God help her!"

Cassidy’s senses overwhelmed, and she clung to her father and Mrs. Framingham both.

Someone yelled and pointed. Everyone turned.

"We can't wait! Send it down! Send it down NOW!"

A rumbling beneath her feet then a sharp downward lurch. Her eyes had been squeezed shut and she thought her heart would beat it's way out of her chest and leave her dead on the hard cement with the yellow lines.

They went down. Down into the earth. Down into the unknown.

"Daddy..." We're ok. We'll be fine. This...this is home now, Cassidy."

She hiccuped, her body trembling.

“What was that sound? What happened daddy? What about mom? Will she come?”

Men and women in lab coats worked all around them, ushering them into a line across a metal bridge. A woman handed her a blue jumpsuit and pointed to a man in a lab coat.

"Follow the doctor."
They seemed to walk forever, down one hallway after another that turned and descended. Everything was so brightly lit. Neighbors were huddled together in clumps along the side of the walkways, comforting one another, other people in lab coats trying to move them along, but there was so much fear and horror.

What had happened?

As they walked she heard snippets of conversations. Someone had decided it was time to destroy the world.

And they had.

Shaun began to fuss and cry. She turned to him and did her best to make him smile. At 6 months old he was starting to appreciate his big sister. He smiled at her and she gave him a kiss.

"He will be fine, Cassidy. You get behind those crates there and put that suit on. Then you can hold Shaun while I do the same."

She had obeyed her father. Unlike her, everyone else just stripped down to their underclothes and changed where they stood, too shocked and numb to think. But not her father. He was in control. Looking out for her like he always had for the last 18 years. She placed her folded clothing beside her pod. The doctor indicated the strange device.

"This is just a medical clearance before we head deeper into the vault, and you get settled in."

"But my mom...she wasn’t home. Can she still get in?"

"Everything will be explained once we get you cleared," the doctor said.

Looking uncertainly at her father, he nodded with a small smile.

She had gotten in and sat on the leather seat, reclining back. She watched her father and baby brother do the same in the pod across from her. He waved at her and blew her a kiss, then gave her a thumbs up.

Did something go wrong? Why am I so cold?

She rubbed her arms vigorously and moved her legs and feet. They were painful and stiff but they moved. Her vision cleared.

Silence.

No voices, no sounds of life.

She stared across at her father's pod. The glass was frosted over and she couldn't see him.

"D...Daddy..." she croaked. Her voice felt frozen as well. She swallowed and it was hard.

Then it hit her.

The man with the cruel, scarred face.

The oddly dressed woman grabbing Shaun.

Her father yelling and trying to fight back.
"N...no! NO!" she screamed. The sound wrenched painfully from her throat and she lurched forward out of her seat.

Her feet weren't where they should have been and she fell forward, crashing onto the concrete ground which was wet, her forehead hitting her outstretched hands with a smack. She fought to gain her footing, blinking against the light and the pain in her head, focused on her father's pod.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she half croaked, half wailed.

She crawled through the cold wetness awkwardly, like a sloth moving across the forest floor, and tried to pull herself up on some piping. But it too was wet and she slid.

"H...help!" she cried weakly. "My daddy! Please!"

But there was only her voice in the air, and the sound of dripping water, the occasional hiss coming from somewhere else.

Panic started. Her chest tightened and breathing became difficult. Her heart was beating too fast as she struggled once more to stand.

Buttons. A console. The word *open.*

Getting to her knees she slammed her fist on the big red button. Something shook, white vapor shot out. Her father's pod door slowly lifted. She grabbed the mounting handle on the side and pulled herself to her feet.

"Daddy!" she shrieked brokenly.

She fell on the hard, inert body, saw an ugly wound in his forehead, the blood and fluid frozen
solid.

*Why is he frozen? What happened to him, to us?*

"Daddy! No! No! Wake up, please!"

She shook him, she pounded on him, sobs rising up from her chest. She tried to pull him out, but he was stuck tight to the seat and wouldn't budge. She slipped again on the smooth wet concrete floor, banging her knee and elbow. Pain coursed through her whole body.

She cried like the little girl she had once been and felt like at that moment.

A lost child with no one in sight to help her.

"Daddy! They took my brother! Someone took Shaun!" she cried out, pulling at his frozen foot.

"We gotta find him! Please wake UP!"

She looked around then screamed again, for someone, anyone, to come to her aid.

No one came.

No answering shouts or sounds of running feet. No medical personnel ran to her father to thaw him and wake him and see to his injuries.

She crawled back to her pod and curled up on the floor.

*Tired, so tired.*

*Pain, so much pain.*
She had to get help. Someone would come soon, to check on the pods. The vault staff had to be somewhere. Hadn't the doctor said they would go deeper into the vault? He’d said the pods were for some medical clearance.

Had he lied? Had Vault tec done something to them all? She didn’t understand.

Maybe the bombs had compromised the vault and they had to save everyone, and they were hiding somewhere.

If her father remained in cryosleep then he could be helped before thawing him out.

That’s what cryopreservation is right? Freezing people who were sick so they could be treated and awoken?

Cassidy felt a surge of encouragement.

Yes, she would wait. She had to close his pod and keep him frozen and asleep. With great effort, she crawled back to the console and closed her father's pod, then returned to her own.

She slipped into unconsciousness.
Emergence

Chapter Summary

Cassidy makes her way back to the surface.

She dreamed.

“Mom I want to stay home with daddy and Shaun.”

“You do? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you turn down a shopping trip to Concord. I was going to stop in at Corvega and see how the new car is coming along.”

Her mother, who was actually her step-mother, smiled at her with soft brown eyes that crinkled merrily at the corners. She knew Cassidy’s excitement over the red sports car they had ordered. But her daughter seemed resolute.

“I’ve been so busy with the competitions. I haven’t gotten to spend any time with Shaun. I’ll make dinner for daddy and me so you don’t have to rush home. Uncle Ray’s been complaining about you not visiting him you know.”

Tamara Hartley laughed lightly and picked up her purse, jacket and keys. “Next time then my dear.” She gave her daughter a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Mom…”

Cassidy awoke, stiff and sore. Her head throbbed. Her mother hadn’t made it to the vault. Had she made it to Concord? Were there Vaults there? Did she survive somehow?

Please be alive, mom. I’m going to find you.

She listened carefully and only the dripping of the water and the ever pervasive hissing met her ears.

No one had come. Why hadn’t anyone come to check on them?

She rose up slowly, miserably, and set her feet carefully on the floor. It took several steps for her to steady herself. It was almost like learning how to walk.

She was in a long hallway, with pods lined up on both sides.

She called out into the silence but again there was no response. She rubbed her arms vigorously trying to warm up but it was useless. The cold seemed to radiate from inside her. She stopped and turned back to her pod. Hadn’t she left her jacket and clothing there? But it was gone.

A crackling, static voice suddenly erupted around her. “Critical failure in cryo chamber. Failure in manual release override.”

What does that even mean?
She turned to one of the pods. A figure could be seen through the frosty glass. She pressed the console button, expecting to see the pod door lift, but nothing happened. She pressed it again and again.

Then she looked inside, peering through the glass, and shrieked, stumbling backward in horror.

A partially decayed and desiccated corpse was slumped in its seat.

“What’s going on?!”

She tried to run, but that took more coordination than she could manage. As she passed several more pods, it was apparent that the people inside them were all dead. A wail rose up from her throat and she forced herself to keep moving. Stairs appeared, just a few, leading to a heavy hydraulic door. The voice on the speaker crackled and hissed again but Cassidy didn’t care to hear what it said.

She touched the release button on the door but nothing happened. She tried again, becoming more and more frantic. She was locked in with a whole bunch of corpses. A scream rose up inside her and she spun, seeing another door. Slamming her hand on that release, she heard it hiss and almost cried with relief as it opened.

The area beyond was more of the same, but there were no pods. Just a hallway with boxes, debris, dripping water and hissing pipes. She moved as fast as she could, occasionally calling out.

*Where was everyone?*

*Had they abandoned us? Did they think we were all dead?*

Something moved to her left behind a large window and she turned. What she saw filled her with revulsion. A bug. But not just any bug. A bug that was at least a foot and a half long.
“What the hell! Giant bugs? What is this!!”

Panic set in and she lurched forward. A strange hissing and skittering sound came from her right but before she could react, something slammed into her back, sending her reeling forward. With a yelp she turned and saw one of the bugs on the ground in front of her, its wings buzzing.

She screamed and lashed out with her foot, kicking it. It slid away but came right back at her, flying for her face. She flailed her arms and legs and sent it back to the ground, where she promptly stomped on its head. Nasty putrid looking ooze, that seemed to glow green, came from the ruined creature.

Cassidy stared in horror. It was like being trapped in a nightmare.

“What?” she screamed. “What do I do?” Sobs wrenched from her chest and she turned, moving away from the dead bug as quickly as she could.

A small room opened up to her right, and on the table, she saw a pistol, a box of ammo spilled out beside it.

A gun!

She knew guns. She knew them and loved them. With shaking hands, Cassidy loaded the weapon. The rest of the ammo she shoved in her pockets and down her bra. It was uncomfortable but she had nothing to carry them with and she knew she’d need them.

“Vault residents must vacate immediately,” said the voice on the speaker.


Cassidy turned this way and that, following one corridor after another, some dead-ended, some became rooms which were a mess. Overturned furniture and ruined mattresses, everything smelled moldy and musty, the wetness slowly eating everything away.

More boxes of ammo turned up, and she found a satchel of some kind.

Then she saw the bodies.

Skeletons, several of them with remnants of clothing still attached lay on the ground. Some had the tattered remains of lab coats, others wore regular clothing. She saw damage on some of them.

“What happened here? Am I the only one alive?”

Hearing her voice out loud, echoing off the emptiness, terrified her. What if she truly was the last person alive? Who would help her father? Who would help her?

“Malfunction in emergency door override,” blared the voice. “Contact a Vault-tec maintenance representative for service.”

More doors. More skeletons.

“Where is everyone? Is this all that’s left?”

She turned a corner and was suddenly stung by something and thrown to the floor with a surprised shriek. Looking up she saw arcs of electricity pulsing from the ceiling. Dead bugs littered the floor amongst a few skeletons. Crawling away, she pressed up against a bulkhead and shut her eyes. Panic welled up in her. She wanted to run, scream, cry….and wake up from the horrible nightmare
she was in.

“I have to get out of here,” she said out loud. “I need to get help for daddy.”

The thought rallied her and she got to her feet. Opening another door, she moved through another corridor and suddenly stopped dead.

Bugs. Several of them sticking to the walls and crawling along the floor. Cassidy squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath to steady herself. She felt the cool metal of the pistol in her hand, giving her a focus.

One by one she dropped the bugs, and jogged past them, her body having warmed up and her muscles being more obedient to her wishes.

A door at the end opened up into a room. There was a desk there, a skeleton in a lab coat sprawled on an overturned chair. On the desk sat another box of ammo, another pistol, and two stimpaks. Her father had shown her how to use those. They had always been scary to her, the large needle used to deliver tiny nanites into the bloodstream to repair injuries. Cassidy considered her aching head and limbs but decided against using it.

There was a large door on the other side of the room, but she rifled through all the desk drawers and filing cabinets. Unsure of what she hoped to find, the action brought a sense of purpose. One of the cabinets held several wads of money. She cheered silently as she stuffed it all into the satchel.

There were packs of cigarettes which she also took, remembering all those holovids where cigarettes were used as currency, and a small assortment of candies. However, the door wouldn’t budge. Frustrated she turned back to the desk and noticed the computer monitor blinking. Thank heavens she had paid attention in school and listened to her father when he insisted she learn her way around computers. It had bored her initially but there was a certain thrill about being able to command the house robot to do silly things.

The terminal sprang to life with a host of choices but she had no interest in any of it but one: open evacuation tunnel. That choice sounded like the way to freedom.

The door hissed open and she ran for it, barely phased by the bugs that she quickly dispatched. They didn’t matter. Getting help for her father was the only goal.

A few more twists and turns and she found herself in an area she recognized. It was the way they had come in. She saw the metal walkways and the consoles. The massive vault door stood silent and unmoving.

“How do I open this part?” she said.

A skeleton in a lab coat lay beneath a control console. Its arm had fallen off, and on the boney wrist there sat a pip-boy. She knew all about them. The military used them extensively, as did Vault-Tec. Mr. Davidson, the Vault-Tec salesman, had brought one for them to see. Cassidy had thought it was the greatest thing. Primarily because you could play holovids, music, and games on it. Mr. Davidson had promised that all vault residents would receive one if the day came they ever had to enter the vault.

She toed the pip boy, not wanting to touch the skeletal hand.

“Oh come on,” she chided herself. “It’s just bones. You used to dress up the one in class.”

She held her breath and retrieved the pip-boy, snapping it onto her wrist and adjusting the padding
to fit her. It was lighter than she remembered. The screen was filthy and she used her sleeve to clean it up, then pressed the power button.

*Please turn on*, she silently entreated.

For a moment nothing happened, but then the screen lit up with a pale orange Vault-Tec symbol, then began its startup sequence. It asked for her name and told her to plug into a source. She didn’t understand what it meant and examined it more closely. She pulled on a protruding section and it came free, still attached to a cord. The console in front of her had a space that might match...with bated breath she pushed the unit into it.

“Welcome, Cassidy Jasmine Hartley. Thank you for choosing Vault-Tec. How may we assist you?”

The pip-boy mascot appeared and gave her it’s thumbs up. Then the screen simply said ready. On the console, a button lit up. She pressed it.

The ground began to shake slightly, and a deep rumble began. In front of her, a strange looking mechanism began to whirl and jerk back and forth. Old machinery came to life, a stream of oil and water shot forth. Then it began to move towards the massive vault door.

“Vault door opening sequence initiated,” said the voice. “Please stand back.”

The unit plugged itself into the vault door, and it rolled away to the side. The catwalk trembled and moved forward.

Cassidy’s sensitive eyes were momentarily blinded by a bright light.

She stepped onto the walkway and followed it to the area where the vault door had been. The elevator that had once brought them all down stood there, waiting for a command. The cage door surrounding it lifted and she slowly got on, then pressed the red button.

“Enjoy your return to the surface,” said the voice pleasantly. “And thank you for choosing Vault-Tec.”

Shuddering, lurching and grinding, the elevator rose slowly. It crept foot by foot, an alarm sound bleating rhythmically. Cassidy gripped her gun tightly.

“I’m getting help, daddy,” she said. “I’m coming back for you. And I’m going to look for mom and Shaun.”

Bright, blinding sunlight. Warmth on her face. The caw of a bird and air, blessed fresh air that she gulped hungrily, eyes squeezed shut.

Barely daring to open them, she moved off the elevator platform.

Cassidy didn’t really know what she had expected to see. But when she did slowly open her eyes, the sight of the world around her wasn’t it.
200 Years

Chapter Summary

Cassidy meets an old friend and receives a terrible shock.

Big black crow-like birds cawed and flapped in the skeletal ruins of trees. Rusted, broken trailers rested among the debris of tires, boxes, twisted metal and shards of plastic. Piles of leaves dotted the almost desolate landscape. The high wire fence she remembered was torn and collapsed. And as before, more skeletons with remnants of military clothing.

Not everyone had been able to make it into the vault. So many of her friends and neighbors had died judging by the number of skeletons that littered the ground, and there had been no one left to bury them properly.

Vault-Tec had abandoned them, but why? They were all safe in the vault, weren’t they? Mr. Davidson had been so confident and proud when he told them about the technological miracles that were the vaults. He had used words like state of the art and luxurious accommodations. He had listed off the names of doctors and scientists, as though they were celebrities. It had all sounded so impressive.

Her parents had gladly paid for the peace of mind, and oddly the price was very low. The vault was right in their neighborhood. They had planned to take a tour of it at some point, truly never believing that the day would come that it would be their last stop in the old world.

A bird landed on a tree stump and affixed her with it’s black, beady eyes, tilting its head this way and that.

“Well, if you survived, then I’m sure other people did too, right? So where do I find them? Huh?”

The bird cackled softly then flapped its wings, rising up and heading off in the direction of Sanctuary Hills. Of home.

“Home!” she cried and ran. Down the path past the fence opening, past the skeletons, over the little bridge the community had erected over the river to connect the resident vault to them. She had sat on that bridge and stared into the water so often. Writing in her journal or sketching or hanging out with her best friend.

She felt relief as the buildings of her community came into view, the beautiful Lustron “home of the future” designs luring new citizens to make the purchase. Cassidy and her family had lived just outside of Concord since she was born, and moved to Sanctuary Hills when she was 10. It had been a change from the city. She suddenly had open spaces to play in and explore. Forested areas and the river gave a natural, healthier backdrop for a growing girl.

She remembered all the fancy cars her neighbors had, and it was that which led her to her meeting everyone. She had crawled in and out of every single vehicle while the amused owners looked on.

Cassidy had met her best friend Lindsay the day they moved in. The other little girl’s curly hair had been tightly braided in cornrows with beads dotting the end. She held a coloring book and a
pack of crayons. “Want to color with me?” she had asked. “We can go to the bridge!”

The girls had been inseparable. They attended school together, dance and art classes, and when Cassidy had discovered competitive shooting, Lindsay had been her biggest fan. Well, next to her parents of course.

They had made a plan to marry brothers and live next door to each other forever. Lindsay had met a boy in Concord and that was where she was that fateful day. Had she survived? Her parents hadn’t. The Framinghams had died in their pods. If she found Lindsay, she didn’t relish the idea of having to tell her about that.

*Be alive Linds. We can get through this together.*

Cassidy walked up the small incline and her heart sank.

Gone were the beautiful houses. Most roofs were devoid of their shingles. Gaping holes and rusted framework were all that remained. The once colorful metal siding which had once been Lindsay’s house had peeled away and lay in scrap heaps. Their little blue car had no wheels and lay on its side in the yard.

The little house where the elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Able had lived was a complete ruin. It had collapsed in on itself and was a twisted wreck. Ugly shrubbery dotted what had once been one of the most beautiful lawns in Sanctuary.

The Millers’ home was missing the carport and half the side.

Cassidy blinked back tears and stared at the ground. She was afraid. Afraid to look towards her own house and find it destroyed. Afraid to see what the bomb had done to her little home.

Then she heard it.

A voice.

The song seemed almost familiar to her and she looked up, scanning around her. Something metallic moved and glinted, gliding between the houses. Suddenly afraid she very nearly dove down behind a pile of tires. She gripped the gun and watched for whatever was out there.

The deep hiss of a propulsion jet accompanied the tarnished metal body of a domestic robot, designated Mr. Handy.

She stood up. “Hello? Bot?”

The Mr. Handy unit stopped dead, it’s occular stalks turning to her.

“As I live and breathe!” it exclaimed. “It’s...it’s really you!”

Cassidy’s heart nearly leaped out of her chest. She ran forward. “Codsworth! You’re... still here! So...other people could still be alive too…”

“Well, of course I’m still here!” the robot happily exclaimed in his jaunty British accent. “You don’t think a little radiation could deter the pride of General Atomics International?"

Codsworth raised his pincer arm and gently tapped her head. “But you seem the worse for wear. Best not let your father see you in that state! Where is Sir, by the way?”

Cassidy swallowed. “T...they came into the vault. Someone. Maybe you saw them. They had guns
and strange outfits.”

Codsworth bobbed up and down. “Miss Cassidy, what are you saying?”

“They took Shaun and shot Daddy. But he’s … he’s in cryosleep. I need to get help for him!”

Codsworth’s occular lenses blinked. “These things you’re saying. These…terrible things. I believe you need a distraction! Yes, a distraction to calm this dire mood!”

Cassidy stared at him.

“It’s been ages since we had a proper family activity!” Codsworth kept on. “Checkers. Or perhaps charades. Shaun does love that game. Is the lad with you?”

“Codsworth! Listen to me carefully! Have you seen him? Have you seen Shaun or mom?”

The bot blinked and bobbed again. “Why, Sir had him last, remember? And Miss Tamara had gone off to Concord to shop. Perhaps Sir took Shaun to the Parker residence to arrange a playdate? I’m sure he’ll be back with him momentarily.”

Cassidy couldn’t understand why the bot was acting so strangely. He hadn’t seemed to hear a word she’d said. Had the bomb fried his circuitry somehow? “No, I told you, he was taken from the vault. It doesn’t make sense. There’s just no reason why someone would take my little brother!”

Codsworth’s propulsion flame brightened for a moment and he rose a foot, then dropped again. “It’s worse than I thought. Hmm Hmm. You’re suffering from hunger-induced paranoia. Not eating properly for 200 years will do that I’m afraid.”

Cassidy felt the breath go out of her at his words. She struggled to inhale and stumbled back into the side of the house.

“200 years!? What?!” She began to tremble.

“A bit over 210 actually, Miss Cassidy. Give or take a little for the Earth’s rotation and some minor dings to the old chronometer! That means you’re two centuries late for dinner!” Codsworth bobbed and laughed merrily while a pale Cassidy could do nothing but stare and gulp air.

Perhaps I could whip you up a snack?” continued Codsworth, completely oblivious to her distress. “You must be famished!” The robot began to hum and floated off into the house.

Cassidy curled up against the sun warmed siding. 210 years? They'd been in the vault for that long? It couldn’t be! But Codsworth wouldn’t lie. He couldn’t.

That would mean her mother...and Lindsay…

She began to sob, hugging herself. Now what? With her father still frozen and her brother missing, how could she even begin to find him? She had hoped to find her mother and Lindsay to help her. Who would do so now? Everything was decimated, she’d awoken centuries in the future to a world she had no bearings in. Aside from Codsworth, she was utterly alone.

The robot returned and found her, clucking soothingly and trying to comfort her. “There there, Miss Cassidy. At least we have one another. It’s been awful for me as well, two centuries with no one to talk to and no one to serve!”

He placed a worn looking box of Sugar Bombs next to her. “I spent the first ten years trying to
keep the floors waxed, but nothing gets nuclear fallout out from vinyl and wood. Nothing!

He tapped her head gently. “And don’t get me started about the futility of dusting a collapsed house. And the car! The car! How do you polish rust?”

Cassidy hiccuped and dragged her arm across her eyes. “What happened? When we went to the vault...what happened?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much Miss Cassidy. You all left in such a hurry, then the bombs came. I thought for certain you and your family were...dead. I remained at my post, doing what I could. No one from the neighborhood returned. Sadly those who weren’t in the vault were killed.”

She sniffled and nodded, then slowly got to her feet. She looked at the box of Sugar Bombs but had no desire to touch them.

“So mom, and Lindsay...they never came back? You never saw them?” He’d already given her the answer. But she wanted to hear it again.

“I’m sorry Miss Cassidy. No one returned.”

“I need to find help for daddy. He’s injured but because he’s frozen he can still be helped, right?”

Codsworth bobbed again. “I...I can’t say for certain. The knowledge I do have of cryopreservation leads me to believe that it could be so. You could try Concord! I was only shot at a few times on my travels there.”

“Shot at? By who?”

“The usual. Raiders and other ne’er do wells. But you have your rifle. No raider has a chance against that eye of yours. I’ve kept your rifle polished and in good repair although it hasn’t been fired in two centuries. A true antique now, Miss Cassidy!”

She brightened. Her rifle was her pride and joy. “Where is it? Is it in the Franklin’s bomb shelter?”

“Indeed it is. Shall we go get it together?”

Cassidy nodded, then looked off into the distance. “Have you seen anything dangerous?”

“Here?” asked Codsworth. “Just the usual pesky bugs.”

“Bugs...are they big, and look kind of like roaches?” she asked nervously.

“Radroaches yes, there are also some blood bugs and bloatflies about. I’ve done my best to keep their populations under control.”

Cassidy felt sick. “What are blood bugs and bloatflies?”

“Blood bugs are oversized mosquitoes. Bloatflies...well that is a bit of a horror show I’m afraid, Miss Cassidy. They have the nasty habit of shooting maggots about. Best to take care of them from a distance. Let me go first, and if there is anything about I’ll dispatch it quickly.”

Cassidy adjusted the satchel and firmly gripped her pistol. It would be nice to have her rifle again.

“Ok go, Codsworth. Let’s get this over with.”

The bot floated off, entering house after ruined house. Cassidy tried not to think too deeply about
what she was seeing. It seemed like only yesterday that she had been in these houses visiting her neighbors.

“Codsworth,” she suddenly said, stopping.

Her Mr. Handy stopped moving and floated back to her. “Yes, Miss Cassidy?”

“How old am I? I mean...you said it’s been more than 200 years since the bombs fell but what month is it now?”

“Let’s see, based on my chronological parameters, with the appropriate adjustments, I would say it is the month of August and you are currently 228 years old, 7 months and 4 days old.”

She let that sink in, staring at a clump of dried grass. “I missed a lot of birthdays,” she whispered.

“That might be true, but we can certainly make up for that now! We can have a party!” The bot spun and bobbed merrily. But Cassidy wasn’t feeling very merry.

“With who, Codsworth?” she asked sadly. “Everyone’s dead. Daddy is frozen and I don’t know where Shaun is.” Tears stung her eyes again and her lip trembled.

“Now now, Miss Cassidy. First things first hmm? Let us get to the cellar and retrieve all the goodies your father stored there. You don’t even need the key. I’ve become quite adept at picking locks.” He held up one of his arms.

She nodded and followed him as he floated onwards.

She waited outside while Codsworth cleared some bugs out of a few of the houses. She didn’t go in and look at them, but the bot thought she should.

“They are dead and can’t harm you,” he said. “But familiarize yourself with them at least.”

She took one look at a dead bloatfly and threw up in a bush. A 200-year-old empty stomach didn’t have much to give but whatever there was, it came up. She heaved miserably, tears pouring from her eyes.

“This sucks!” she cried, dragging her arm across her face. “I don’t like this at all! I just want to get daddy out of that...that place! And find my brother! Stupid ugly bugs what the fuck is this?!” She wept.

“Miss Cassidy,” admonished Codsworth. “You don’t want your father to hear such language!”

She turned to him and stamped her foot, sending a cloud of dust and dead grass upwards. “He’s not fucking here! He’s frozen in that godforsaken vault and I’m stuck out here alone in this fucking fucked wasteland from hell!” She shrieked and picked up a rock, hurling it into the side of a house. Then she picked up another and another, cursing as loudly and as creatively as she could.

Then, she started laughing. Overwhelmed by stress, she fell over in the dirt and laughed until her sides ached and she couldn’t breathe.

“Well now,” said Codsworth. “Are you feeling better? I must say I’ve never heard such creative words from...well from anyone!”

Cassidy grinned at him. “I don’t think daddy would be mad considering the situation. Let’s just get my stuff now.”
Codsworth helped her to her feet.

The storm cellar was behind a neighbor’s house. The Franklins had built it believing full well that one day the end of the world would come.

Most had chuckled about it, but Corporal Hartley had helped finance the project and stored some items in it as well. Cassidy had never asked about it. Her mother just shrugged and smiled whenever it was mentioned. She also never believed things could happen as they did.

“It was all so sudden, Codsworth,” she said as the bot picked the lock. “We were going to go to the park. Everything was so...normal.”

“Indeed it was, Miss Cassidy. It was a shock to all of us I daresay.”

“Just that day...someone got up and decided we all had to die. Why would anyone want that? No one won this war!”

“No, no one did. Those left behind had to begin again. And it has been a struggle.”

She followed him down the steps, the light on his dome illuminating the way. The bot hit a switch and lights flickered on, dim at first then gradually getting brighter.

It was a larger space than she had imagined, with several shelves stocked with food. There was a cooking unit, a computer terminal, and crates of all shapes and sizes.

“Do you know what’s in all these?” Cassidy asked.

“I’m sorry I do not. Being what I am, I have no need of weapons, armor or food. I did have to travel to Concord to locate a fusion core when the one I found here ran dry.”

“I didn’t know you used fusion cores, I thought you used fuel!” She remembered the large canisters they had in the garage.

“I did, Miss Cassidy. But in these times the lack of such fuel required me to do some adjustments on myself. I’m due to seek out another fusion core soon.”

She nodded. “I’ll help if I can. As long as you kill all the ...fly things.”

Codsworth chuckled. “They are a lot to take in. In due time you will not even bat an eye at them.”

Cassidy looked around for a crowbar to open a crate. “Are there other awful things out here? Have you seen other weird beasts?”

Codsworth floated over and easily opened the lid. “I don’t wish to horrify you any further on this day. Suffice it to say that the radiation wreaked havoc on many forms of wildlife while obliterating others.”

“What about dogs and horses?” Cassidy had enjoyed taking riding lessons at a local stable since she was 8.

“There are mutated dogs yes. Sadly, as far as I know, horses are now extinct.”

Cassidy looked sorrowful and she didn’t want to think about it anymore. The crate before her was filled with what looked like grenades. She put the lid back on and went for another. Each box had some form of ordnance in it. Things she knew nothing about. Then she found one marked “Tamara”, one marked “Shaun” and one marked “Cassidy”.
Codsworth popped the lid open and she gave a little yelp of delight. “Daddy thinks of everything! Oh, thank you, daddy!”

She pulled out several boxes of her hair color. Like most teens, Cassidy had wanted to stand out and be different. She colored her hair a beautiful deep burgundy. Nate Hartley had been quite pleased that his daughter hadn’t decided to join the rockabilly scene, a group he quite strongly disapproved of.

There was a small makeup bag, the items duplicates of what she used to have. She hadn’t really worn it much if at all so it’s inclusion surprised her. She found a brand new hairbrush and comb, shampoos and conditioners, soaps and a few new toothbrushes. There were towels and blankets in her favorite color: pink. He had also included a few outfits of hers, all of them practical...and one dress. It made her smile. She also found a whole row of holotapes. They were simply numbered 1 through 10.

“Codsworth? Do you know anything about these?”

“No, Miss Cassidy. I didn’t open any of these crates, nor was I privy to Sir’s private activities. Your pip-boy can play them.”

She took the first one but put it on the table. “Let’s get my rifle first. And ammo.”

She didn’t open her mother’s crate. Nor her brother’s.

Codsworth went to a wall cabinet which housed her rifle and several others she had no idea how to use. Automatic weapons hadn’t been her thing. She felt a sense of comfort and relief as she picked up her trusty rifle, and retrieved her holster. A box of ammo was nearby.

In the back corner of the strange little bunker, Cassidy found a bed. The space hadn’t been completed yet, the bombs fell before the project ended, so the floor was still dirt. She sat down on the bed, Codsworth floating nearby, and popped the holotape into the pip-boy. It was her father’s voice.

Hello Cassidy. If you are hearing this tape, then the worst has come to pass. The bombs have fallen and I’m dead. I have no way of knowing if your mother and brother are with you, but I truly hope they are.

If you’ve survived then that means you made it to the vault. And now you’ve made it back to the surface.

I don’t know what the world will be like for you. I don’t know what year it is. I just know that your life will never be the same.

At this moment I’m upset at myself for not insisting on you learning some survival skills. I always let you make your choices and simply supported them. I wish now that I had been a bit more adamant that you have some sort of training lest this situation occur.

As I’m recording this I hope that this is all for nothing and I can play it for you when I’m old and grey and you have brought your children for a visit.

But I digress.

Cassidy, you will see 9 other holotapes. Each one is a video that will instruct you on the use of every weapon I have placed in this cellar. Watch them, learn them.
I’ve always been so proud of you. You’ve never disappointed me, and I doubt you ever will. I won’t be there to help you anymore, you’ll have to make decisions on your own, and some of them will be hard. Some of them will make you question yourself and what you stand for. Some of them...will be the wrong ones.

Follow your heart, listen to your gut.

I love you, Cassie.

And stay away from those rockabillies.

Cassidy smiled through her tears at the last part. “Daddy...always looking after me…”

She looked up at Codsworth. “But he isn’t dead! And I need to get help for him. Concord you said. That’s where I’ll go first.”

“I suggest you rest first, Miss Cassidy. Then tomorrow we can make up a pack for you.”

She pulled the blanket out of her crate and curled up on the bed. “I’m so tired,” she whispered. “This is a good idea. Codsworth can you sing that song again? The one you used to sing to Shaun when he was being fussy?”

She closed her eyes and imagined herself warm in her own bed. Out in the living room, her father would be watching television, and her mother would be reading a magazine. Codsworth was singing to her little brother. Outside it was sunny, and her neighbors were enjoying their day as they always did.

She was safe, she was loved, and best of all, she wasn’t alone.
Cassidy awoke in pitch blackness. Panicking, she sat up and tried to look around, her eyes searching for a glimmer of light. A few feet away Codsworth hovered, his thruster on low, the layered blue, white, and orange glow of his flame bringing instant relief. She lay back down, snuggling the blanket beneath her chin.

She didn’t know what time it was, and she didn’t care. She knew that her father needed help, but he was currently in cryosleep and safe in the vault. She tried to remember exactly where her Uncle Ray had lived, and where her friend Lindsay’s boyfriend’s place was.

*If they had survived the bombs, they’d died over 200 years ago, she thought. There’s no point in looking for them.*

She sighed deeply, unhappiness flooding her. But if no one found them and buried them, they could be skeletons, left in the open, forgotten. The thought brought her to tears. And then there was Shaun. Where could she even begin to find information on where he could be? Was he even alive anymore? When had he been taken?

“Is everything alright, Miss Cassidy?” asked Codsworth softly.

“Nothing about this living hell is alright,” she answered. “But I have to get help for daddy. And find my brother. Where do I even begin with that? I have no idea who or why anyone would take a baby.”

Ever honest, Codsworth tried to soften the harsh reality of his words. “There is a lot of infertility in present times. The abundance of radiation from earlier generations seems to have passed down and many couples are unable to have children. I suppose perhaps he was kidnapped by such a family?”

She didn’t like that response but at least the idea he was wanted and most likely cared for was not the worst notion. But he was her brother. *Her* family. Not theirs. Not anyone else’s. And she told him that.

“Then find him we shall,” said the ever loyal bot.

Her father had initially been rather hesitant to purchase the Mr. Handy but had been pleased with it. Cassidy loved him from the start. The bot had played with her and helped her with schoolwork and a host of other things. When Shaun came along, Codsworth was an excellent helper for her mother. And now, he was all she had left.

“I’m going back to sleep,” she said. “I’m not ready to face that hell world up there.”

“As you wish, Miss Cassidy,” said Codsworth.
Morning used to be sunlight streaming in the window through her gossamer curtains and in summer it was accompanied by a breeze. Often the sounds of shouting children and barking dogs would float around her, or the sounds of her family in the rest of the house.

But that was no more. Cassidy awoke in blackness again comforted only by the soft hiss and glow of Codsworth hovering nearby.

“What time is it Codsworth?” she asked, stretching.

“8:30 am Miss Cassidy,” the bot responded, and slowly turned up the lights. “Shall we go back to the house and have a spot of tea and something to eat? There is a bit to choose from here. Were you still planning to head to Concord today? Shall I accompany you?”

Cassidy smoothed back her hair and sighed heavily. “Ok I’m starving so yes, I’d like something to eat and drink. Yes on Concord and I really want you to come with me but if something happened to you I’d be alone and I’d rather know you were here waiting for me to come home.”

“A wise assessment. I’ll remain here and tend to my duties as always.”

Cassidy filled her satchel with the items from her crate that she felt she needed, then chose something to eat. On her way out she spied a backpack. It had been her father’s. She snatched it up immediately. “This is so much better than this satchel and I can carry more in it since I’ll be holding my rifle in my hands.”

“You should carry the pistol in a holster as well, Miss Cassidy. Your rifle is a marvelous long range weapon but perhaps a short range one would be ideal as well?”

She smiled. “Thank you Codsworth, you’re right.” She picked a holster off a peg and walked to the ladder, the bot turning off the lights behind them.

Codsworth had said it was August, and there was a feeling of summer in the air but it was nothing like Cassidy’s memories. As she set off down the road to the north bridge, Codsworth floated along beside her.

“Do be careful Miss Cassidy,” he said. “The bridge has some damage to it, and mind what I said about bugs and raiders. Until you are certain, consider no one a friend. Stay hidden and as quiet as you can.”

“I...I’m scared, Codsworth,” she said softly, gripping her rifle tightly. “This world, it’s like a nightmare. Nothing is the same. Everything is dead and scary. If not for daddy I’d stay in the house and never leave again.”

She felt her eyes start to sting. She didn’t remember any time in her life when she’d been so close to tears so often. Life had been a happy adventure.

Codsworth had helped her pack and included food and containers of purified water. He warned her not to drink anything else. He’d given her a few stimpaks as well.

“I’m proud of you,” he said. “And your parents would be as well. I’ll see you when you return. I’m sure there must be someone in Concord who can help you.”

“I hope so,” she said and took a deep breath.

She carefully navigated the sturdier parts of the bridge and landed on the other side where the once
pristine roadway was now a shattered mess. She ignored the skeletons of a person and what looked to be a dog and kept going.

Up ahead she spied the remains of the Red Rocket gas station and rest stop. She and her family had shared meals and snacks here so often over the years. Even she and Lindsay had often come to have a malt and watch the attendants pump gas. Cassidy had thought one of them rather cute. She grinned as she remembered his perfectly groomed pompadour hair and the dimples when he’d smiled.

“He’s a rockabilly,” Lindsay had told her. “Wait til you see him out of uniform. He’s glorious!”

And so he had been. With his black leather jacket and pants, Evan Toth had winked at her and called her “baby”. She thought she’d die. Her father, however, was very much not an admirer of the rockabilly scene and that ended any chance of her ever having a date with him. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

The world came to an end.

She stood on the road looking at the sad remains of the diner, wondering if Evan had lived or died when the bombs fell. She suddenly heard a sharp bark. Lifting her rifle she scanned the area.

From the garage a dog appeared. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Avery?” she whispered shakily. The dog was a German Shepherd, just as hers had been. He had run away one day in a storm and she hadn’t found him. Her family had looked everywhere and all the neighbors had helped. That was two months before the bombs, at the end of summer.

The dog barked at her again, his tail waving slowly over his back.

Avery had lived over 200 years ago. This dog wasn’t Avery. She swallowed hard.

“Hey, boy...or...girl. Are you a friendly dog? Yeah?”

The dog whined, barked and ran forward. He stopped a few feet away and spun around.

“Well, you don’t look rabid. Where’s your owner? Are you alone out here?” She saw he was a male and held out a hand. The dog walked over and sniffed her then gave her a small lick.

“I’m alone too. But I don’t have anything to give you, I’m sorry.” She patted his head gently and he sat beside her, looking up as though they’d known each other forever.

Cassidy sank down onto the ground and looked into the soft brown eyes and began to cry. She told the dog everything that had happened, and he put a paw on her shoulder and whined softly.

“Why is it that dogs seem to understand everything we humans say? And you all seem to care about what happens to us? I’m so glad we found each other! I’m too scared to be alone.”

The dog barked.

She sat there for a long time, stroking his fur, then decided it was time to go. She hadn’t expected him to do much more than bark and run back into the garage and she made a mental note to bring him food later, but to her surprise, he ran along with her.

Happy for the company, her step lightened. Concord wasn’t all that far away, but the open road worried her. Codsworth’s talk of bugs and raiders and heaven knew what else had frightened her
and she began to move onto the sides of the road.

The dog dashed ahead barking and she saw him leap into the air at something.

Bugs.

She locked and loaded and took aim. A giant mosquito, the blood bug Codsworth had described, darted this way and that trying to avoid the dog. She shot it down and it fell, quivering. Another appeared and attacked the dog and once more she took it down. The dog ran back to her and barked.

“Thanks, boy, thanks a lot!”

She looked at the dreadful creatures as she walked by but didn’t stop to examine them too closely.

As they neared the Concord city limits a foul stench suddenly hit her. She stopped and wrinkled up her nose. “What the hell is that smell?” she asked.

The dog trotted to the side of a building. She followed and immediately regretted it.

The bloated corpse of a person lay there, a torn shirt and pants all that was left of their clothing. They had no boots, no weapon...and no head. She turned and saw the splattered remains of what must have once been the missing extremity, and her stomach heaved.

She threw up the contents of her stomach violently and without hesitation until her eyes watered and there was nothing left. Shaking, she turned away.

*I can’t do this. I can’t just walk around in this world with all the monsters and the corpses. This is all so bad and wrong and I can’t do it!*

Cassidy stood with her eyes closed, feeling the warm sun on her face. Tears crept free, partially due to her violent vomiting, and partially due to emotion. But she knew she couldn’t stand there forever, and her only choices were to go back home, or go forward to get help.

She wiped her eyes and looked at the rows of decrepit and dilapidated buildings. Somewhere in there was, or at least had been, her Uncle’s house. Lindsay’s boyfriend’s house. The mall her mother had gone to. And somewhere in there might be a person who could help her father.

“I gotta do this,” she said. “For daddy.”

The dog whined and walked ahead of her.

She stayed in the shadows, moving as slowly and quietly as she dared. She heard gunfire in the distance and shouts. How was she going to know who was a friend and who was a foe?

Cassidy crept around a building until she saw a hole in the wall and crept inside. She thought she remembered the place. It had been a general store. She’d bought comic books there several times and peppermint sticks. The old shelves were still there, rusted and full of bullet holes, burnt books and magazines littered the floor along with other detritus. Empty canisters, aluminum cans, and dirt were everywhere.

200 years could sure do a number on things. It had once been a cozy, happy place with two sweet shopkeepers and their son.

With a sigh, she proceeded, back outside and around the back of the building. Up ahead was the
Museum of Freedom, one of her favorite places to visit. She had done so on several school trips and it was always interesting. She’d dragged her parents to it as well.

A commotion suddenly erupted in front of her and she flattened herself against the building. A man appeared on the balcony, and as he did so the dog ran forward, growling. A person wearing the strangest outfit she’d ever seen ran forward, shooting at the man. The dog hurled himself into the stranger, knocking him off balance with a snarl.

The stranger lashed out at the dog with the butt of his rifle, another strange looking affair. The dog yelped, and Cassidy felt a rage in her chest. Without thinking, she knelt and aimed. Her shot fired true, and the man fell dead.

"Oh my god," she thought with horror. "I’ve killed someone! I’m a murderer!

The dog limped back to her whimpering. "Why did you do that, boy? He could have killed you!"

She felt the shepherd all over for broken bones but found nothing. He’d been badly bruised if anything. He shook himself and stretched and seemed none the worse for wear after a few minutes.

"Hey!" called a voice.

She looked up at the man on the balcony. He was waving at her.

"That was a great shot! We need help!" he cried. "We’re trapped in here and the raiders have almost found us! Please!"

He disappeared inside before she could even try and tell him that she had no way to help anyone. She could barely help herself. But what if there were families in there? Parents with children who didn’t even have a rifle or any weapon? She had to at least try. Would it involve more killing?

I just killed someone already!

But Codsworth had said to her ‘kill them before they kill you.’

And the man had hit her dog.

Thinking more about it, Cassidy ran up the steps to the big doors and pulled them open, the dog at her heels.

It was barely lit and she immediately went to her knees, listening. The man had been up at the top, so he and his people had to be upstairs somewhere. She knew her way around the museum pretty well, but it was badly damaged and several sections of the floor had collapsed. She heard gunfire and shouts and knew that the building was inhabited by raiders. If she hadn’t seen the man on the balcony exchange gunfire with the one she’d killed, she’d never have come inside for fear it was a trap. Codsworth had warned her about that too.

Sneaking as best she could, she moved through the museum. She saw raiders, again oddly dressed in thick leather and metal that looked like a cage around their head. And one had a sack with hoses sticking out. Another was wearing what looked like an old military flight helmet.

She was wearing nothing protective but a leather jacket that was too large which Codsworth had found somewhere, her paddock boots and a shirt and pants. She didn’t even have any gloves.

I don’t belong here, she thought. Someone is going to kill me and that will be that.
Then who would rescue her little brother and father?

_I have to stay alive. For my family. Maybe that man can help me if I help him._

Bolstered by the thought, she moved on. Creeping slowly level by level, often climbing over debris, she found her way to the second then third floor, the dog at her side.

Suddenly he growled and his hackles stood. A raider came out of a side room and saw her.

“Who the fuck are you?” he snarled and raised his gun. The dog leaped and sank his teeth into the man’s arm, and the gun let out a bright flash of red. With a scream he fell, kicking at the dog.

_Oh god here we go again_, she thought and fired her rifle.

She wanted to tell the dog to stop attacking people but then what? The raider would have shot her, or worse. She shuddered. The dog had protected her several times now.

She didn’t look at the dead man as she crept by, exchanging her rifle for the close range pistol.

“We got you now you fuckers!” laughed a woman’s voice. “Thought you could hide from us?”

Up ahead Cassidy saw two raiders standing in a doorway.

“Give it your best shot!” came the reply and she recognized the voice as the man who had asked her for help.

“You ain’t got no weapons. What are you and these farmers gonna do? Hoe us to death?”

“The old lady’s gonna gum us into a pulp,” laughed the woman’s companion.

Cassidy brought out her rifle. She was aware of her racing heartbeat and the slight tremble in her hands. It felt so wrong to her to kill people but this world wasn’t the one she’d once lived in. She focused her breathing and took aim.

Two shots, two kills.

The raiders died before they knew what was happening. The bodies lay there, blood oozing from their wounds. Wounds she’d inflicted on them. Her breath came shallowly and fast.

_How many people have I killed? More than three? I’m a serial killer now! Her mind reeled with horror. I can’t keep going on like this! It’s wrong! But this world...it’s like I have to or they’ll get me first._

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm her quivering innards. At least she’d saved the people in the room.

She ran forward, unsure of who or what she’d find.
Survivors

Chapter Summary

Cassidy stumbles on a ragtag group and is tasked with helping them survive the Museum of Freedom.

A handsome black man with a militia hat and leather trench coat faced her with raised eyebrows.

“I don’t know who you are but your timing is perfect!” he exclaimed. “And damn you are one crazy shot! I’m Preston Garvey, leader of the Minutemen. What’s left of it anyway.”

He pointed to a well-muscled younger man beside him in dirty overalls, who was leaning over the desk reaching for something. “This here is Sturges. And over there is Mama Murphy, Marcy and her husband Jun Long.”

Mama Murphy was a senior, wearing a dirty old beaded blue jacket and slippers, of all things. She looked sad and tired, her face mottled by sunspots and her hair hidden by a turban.

Jun Long sat on the floor leaning up against an old desk, arms around his knees, and it looked like he was muttering under his breath. His wife Marcy, a Hispanic woman, would have been pretty if not for the cold scowl on her face.
“Great!” she snarked. “A little girl with a big gun. We’re dead for sure.”

“Hey,” said Preston. “This little girl just saved our lives. I, for one, am grateful to her.”

“Howdy ma’am.” Sturges stood up and faced her. “You know all of us, what do we call you?”

Cassidy blinked. Sturges had soft brown eyes that were kind and his full lips seemed to turn up at the corners in a permanent half smile. His hair was thick and dark and styled very similarly to the rockabilly pompadour, just a bit shorter. For some odd reason, she suddenly imagined him in Evan Toth’s usual outfit: a black leather jacket, white t-shirt and rolled up jeans. She looked down at his feet and saw he already wore the boots. He had a soft southern drawl that she instantly found appealing. There seemed to be a pause in time as she looked up at him.
“Ma’am?” he asked.

“Uh,” hesitated Cassidy. “Cass...Cassidy Hartley. I’m looking for help for my daddy.”

“He get shot by raiders?” asked Preston.

She shook her head. “No. He’s … he’s in the …” she stopped then, unsure whether she should say another word until she knew what this ragtag group was all about.

Preston waited for her to continue and when she didn’t, he did. “I’ve got maybe one round of ammo left in my gun. These guys here, they don’t have any weapons. We’re from Quincy. All that’s left of it.”

“Quincy’s gone?” asked Cassidy, shocked. She had shopped and visited there many times. It had been a nice little town.

“Yes, ma’am,” nodded Preston. “Taken over by raiders. We’ve been running ever since. There were more of us at first but now...well here we are.”

“You said you were with the Minutemen. I read about them in history.”

Preston smiled. “Protecting the people at a minute’s notice. But...I’m all that’s left that I know of. I’m not much of a leader.” His smile faded and he looked almost ashamed, staring down at the floor.

Cassidy felt eyes on her and glanced over at Sturges who was leaning against a desk with his arms folded across his chest, watching her. Usually she hated being stared at. In her shooting competitions the men often did so, sizing her up, sometimes making lewd remarks.

But there was no negative feeling from the gaze of the attractive man in the overalls. He had what
looked like a small radio on a belt around his waist and a mic attached to one of his shoulder straps. A strange device was around his neck. He looked like a mechanic of some kind. Her eyes roamed back to his face. His gaze hadn’t wavered, and when he smiled at her showing straight white teeth, she couldn’t help but smile back.

“So...you want me to kill all the raiders, is that it?” she asked, mentally shaking herself and getting back to the conversation.

“Wish it were that easy,” answered Preston. “The truth is, there are only a few here. There’s more outside and with my lack of ammo, I can’t handle them all. One regular person can’t manage that many. But we’ve got a plan.”

“I hope it’s a good one because I’m not much of a fighter. At all actually. All I can do is shoot from a distance.”

She heard a snarky remark from Marcy but didn’t even look at her.

“There’s a crashed vertibird on the roof,” said Sturges, his eyes still locked on her. “It’s got itself a Gatling laser gun. Fast and powerful enough to take out a whole mess of raiders in one sweep. Thing is, no one can lift a weapon like that unassisted. Lucky for us there’s a power armor suit up there as well. With that suit, you could rip that gun right off the old ‘bird and wipe out those raiders.”

Cassidy blinked. “W...what? There’s at least two of you here that could do that way better than I could. Power armor? I’ve hardly even seen one up close much less gotten into one! I don’t know the first thing about it or laser guns!”

Sturges gave her a wry smile. “Here’s the kicker. The suit must have belonged to a little lady like you because it’s tiny. It’s way too small to fit Preston or me. You’re it, little sister. Almost like it was made for you.”

“This is ridiculous! I’m not a soldier. Not even close.” She shook her head and closed her eyes, leaning back against the wall. “I just want to help my daddy,” she whispered.

“Preston!” The old lady, Mama Murphy stood up, her eyes large and glassy looking. “Something’s coming!”

Everyone looked at her.

“What’s coming, Mama Murphy?” asked Preston.

“Something big,” she responded, fear in her voice. “And it’s angry! Very angry!”

“Where? What is it?”

“I don’t know…I don’t know…” she collapsed back into the chair with a 100-yard stare.

Cassidy chewed on her lower lip and looked towards the doorway. She wanted to get the hell away from these people and run back home, raiders be damned. She was probably faster than them with their weird armor anyway.

Preston looked at her, his eyes entreating. “I know it’s a lot to ask. Bunch of strangers that we are. But...you’re our only hope. And if Mama Murphy is right…”

“What was she talking about?” asked Cassidy. “What’s wrong with her?”
Preston took a deep breath. “She’s different. Has some kind of clairvoyance. Sees the future.”

_They’re out of their minds_, thought Cassidy. _Off the deep end with weights attached._

“She’s a damn junkie is what she is,” barked Marcy. “Takes a hit and starts babbling all kinds of nonsense.”

“Now now, Marcy,” said Sturges kindly, a courtesy she certainly didn’t deserve. “You know Mama Murphy hasn’t been wrong yet. If not for her vision, we’d all have died in Quincy.”

_That would’ve been a shame_, thought Cassidy, still observing him.

“Some of us did die in Quincy, she sure didn’t see that did she?! There was some deep anger in Marcy’s voice and Cassidy wondered what happened.

“That situation wasn’t Mama Murphy’s fault,” said Preston. “We all know what happened there. Let’s focus on the task at hand so we can get out of here.” He turned back to Cassidy. “Please ma’am say you’ll help us, or at least give it a try. As for what Mama Murphy said...I don’t know. Right now all we need to worry about is those raiders out there. So, will you help?”

Cassidy looked down at the floor. She felt wretched. Everything was out of control. Here she was, with a group of people who were most probably insane. But she couldn’t just leave them to die and if she left, that’s exactly what would happen. They had no food, no water, and no ammo. They would die a horrible death eventually if the raiders didn’t get them first.

And Sturges was cute.

_What’s wrong with me? Thinking about guys when the world just ended and now I’m probably going to die. Daddy used to say that my brain would get silly when I was stressed out. That’s got to be it._

“OK. I’ll...I’ll see what I can do. But I can’t promise anything. I don’t know what I’m doing!”

Sturges clapped his hands and gave a happy exclamation. “Right! Now we’re cooking with gas! The first thing you need to do is retrieve a fusion core to power up the suit. There’s one in the basement. Do you know what they look like?”

Cassidy sighed. “Yes. Ok. I’ll get it and come back.”

She turned and looked for the dog but he was nowhere in sight. She hoped nothing had happened to him. She was sure he’d been right behind her.

Wasting no more time, Cassidy had to shoot one more raider on her way to the basement. The dog suddenly reappeared and bounded ahead, spinning at the metal door that held the generator that housed the core. A computer terminal sat on the outside.

“That’s great,” she grumbled. “They didn’t bother to tell me that I’d have to hack into a system to get that thing. What if I couldn’t? I could have died coming down here for nothing.”

The dog whined and bumped her leg. She reached down and scratched his head.

She spent a few minutes hacking into the terminal, once more happy she’d listened to her father’s advice.

The fusion core was light and small and she popped it into her pack and headed back to the group.
The dog ran inside and straight to Mama Murphy.

“What do you know!” the old lady exclaimed. “Dogmeat brought her to us. What a good boy!”

Cassidy raised her eyebrows. “Dogmeat? That’s his name? So he’s your dog?”

“Oh no, kid,” said Mama Murphy. “He’s what you might call his own man. He chooses his friends and I can see that now he’ll be sticking by you.”

“That’s a horrible name for a dog! Especially such a beautiful and smart one.”

“He’s a special dog,” said Mama Murphy.

Cassidy turned to Sturges. “Ok, I have the core. Now what?”

“Head to the roof, pop the core into the back of the suit and turn it clockwise to lock it in. Give it a smack and the suit will open. Just climb on in. Grab the gun on the ‘bird. Just mow through the raiders on the main drag in town, the one in front of this place. You got all that?”

Cassidy nodded. “I have to leave my pack and my rifle here. It’s all I got in the world. Can I trust you?”

“Where’d we go with it, Cassidy?” asked Sturges gently, those kind eyes looking into hers. “We’re more trapped here than you are. I’m sure old Dogmeat will guard it anyway.”

As Cassidy put her things down and retrieved the fusion core, Dogmeat barked and wagged his tail, lying down right beside it. She petted him.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Preston. “This means a lot to us.”

Cassidy nodded curtly and made her way to the stairs to the roof. She and her friends had snuck up there to eat their lunch on her last field trip to the museum many years ago.

Even longer ago now, she thought. I have to add 210 to everything.

As Sturges had described, there was the power armor, the crashed vertibird and the weapon. She had seen her father’s power armor once, a shining massive suit of metal that turned him into a juggernaut. The one in front of her was indeed very small, and covered in patches of rust. On the side of the vertibird, barely visible were the words ‘Capt. Kaylynn Grant, USMC’. She had lived and died and coincidentally left her tiny power armor behind for Cassidy to use and maybe save some lives.

Serendipity.

Cassidy shoved the fusion core into the opening, locked it in, punched it, and the suit opened. She gulped as she grabbed the mounting handles and stepped inside, then gave a little yelp as the suit closed her inside and the HUD powered up. She had no idea what all of it meant.

Thank heavens I’m not claustrophobic, she thought.

She took a step forward expecting it to be heavy or resistant but surprisingly it was easy. There was a strange springy feeling to walking, the suit had shock absorbers in the legs and feet. Her father had told her that power armor prevented you from being hurt when jumping from heights. Soldiers would leap out of vertibirds onto their enemies in combat, the suits creating a shockwave around them.
Her fingers inserted into rings that powered the hands of the suit which hung several inches below her own. She raised her hand and flexed her fingers and the suit obeyed. Things seemed to be working as they should.

Moving towards the vertibird, Cassidy stepped up and reached for the gun. Again she expected to exert some force and effort to remove the thing from its base but she lifted it as she would her own rifle.

*Now what?* She thought.

Her finger found the trigger and pulled. Nothing happened. She looked it over and found a series of buttons on the side.

*Great, which one turns this thing on? Does it even have any ammo? If I press the wrong one will I blow myself up?*

She tried the green button and the weapon lit up, a series of lights flashing then going steady. She tried the yellow one and a display flickered on with a number 675. She guessed that must be the ammo. She left the red button alone. Red usually meant stop.

Walking to the edge of the roof, she looked down. A volley of gunfire erupted from below her, flashes of red and blue that hit her suit. She hoped her father’s stories about the power armor shockwave and damage modifiers were correct as she leaped off the roof with a screech. But he’d never steered her wrong or lied about anything.

Landing, Cassidy saw the raiders suddenly fall over onto their backs. Raising the weapon she pulled the trigger but nothing happened at first. Panicking, she pulled it again. This time the weapon began to glow, the central chamber spinning. Then it began spitting out streams of bright light.

The raiders were obliterated.

As horrifying a sight as it was, she realized that they wouldn’t be able to hurt her or the people in the museum. The suit prevented all damage to her, or so it seemed.

Feeling unstoppable, Cassidy marched up the road, luring the raiders out. She felt like the hero in an action holovid.

The raiders came running from several directions, shouting and cursing and firing their weapons. She warmed up the gun and spun in a circle, mowing them down with ease.

Then there was silence.

Looking towards the balcony she saw the door open and Preston step out. He started waving his arms and she waved back. He was pointing energetically and she guessed he was yelling something that she couldn’t hear. Then the man started jumping up and down.

*Yes, it was awesome, I know, I get it. You’re welcome.*

Then the ground shook beneath her.

Puzzled, Cassidy looked around. She didn’t see any more raiders, and Preston had vanished from the balcony.

Another earth shake.
Then Cassidy heard a terrifying sound, unlike anything she had ever encountered. It sounded like a
cross between a roar and a scream and it rattled her right to the core, almost taking her breath
away.

She felt suddenly disoriented and stumbled forward, grabbing onto a street light with her free hand.
Looking at the Museum she saw the door open and Dogmeat run out, his face a rictus of rage. He
ran past her and she turned to follow him with her eyes.

She let out an exclamation of horror.

Never in her wildest nightmares had Cassidy ever imagined such a creature could exist as the one
that met her eyes. It had to be at least 12-15 feet tall. Its skin looked like that of a dinosaur. It stood
on two legs, with a huge powerful tail and massive arms that ended in terrifying claws. It had a
snub nose and a set of curled horns and the mouth, the dreadful gaping maw, was filled with rows
of teeth and the eyes were tiny glittering black things.

“What in the fucking fuck?!” she screamed.

Dogmeat leaped at it, bouncing off its side, forcing it to turn it’s back to Cassidy.

She hefted the heavy gun.

It seemed to take forever to warm up before spewing forth its rain of light. The laser tore into the
monster and it roared in pain and rage, swiping at the dog which repeatedly dodged and nipped it
and ran around in circles.

Again Cassidy let loose with another volley. She aimed for its arms, trying to stop it from hitting
the dog.

_Please don’t be in the way Dogmeat_, she begged silently. She had no control where the shots went
and she was terrified of killing him accidentally.

The number on the weapon’s display was dwindling. She had to kill the thing or she could run out.

_I could go for the head and hope it works, or just take out its legs so it can’t chase us if I can’t kill
it._

She decided to take out its legs.

The beast fell with a heavy thud.

Then she emptied the last of the ammo into its heinous face.

Cassidy stood, panting, staring down at the thing from hell. Codsworth surely hadn’t mentioned
such a horror. She looked up at Dogmeat who was licking his flank, a nasty gash from the
creature’s claw bleeding profusely.

“Dogmeat! Oh no, boy!”

As she approached, his tail tip wagged weakly. He was in pain, whimpered and collapsed.

Cassidy dropped the gun and picked him up. She had stimpaks in her backpack. Running in the
power armor was an interesting feeling. Her strides were lengthened and she covered a lot of
ground quickly. Kicking in the museum door she found Preston and the group just inside the foyer,
her rifle and pack on the ground. She lay the dog down.
“Get me out of this thing! Get me out!” she screamed.

Sturges sprang forward and a moment later the suit opened and she very nearly fell out of it and was on her knees beside her dog, pulling everything out of her pack. He had lost a lot of blood and looked up at her weakly, his tail still managing to twitch.

“Hang on puppy!” she sobbed. “Hang on boy, I got you!”

“Dog’s as good as dead,” snipped Marcy.

Cassidy found a stimpak and stabbed it into her canine friend. “Come on boy, come on!”

She looked up at Marcy venomously. “You shut up! He just risked his life for you!”

She had never felt such rage before. Even watching her father being shot, and her brother being taken had filled her with fear and sorrow, not rage. It seemed as though all her trauma and terror had found a channel, and that channel was her love for a dog she had only just met.

She watched, sobbing, as her dog’s tail stopped wagging and he closed his eyes. She cried out and gathered him into her arms, his soft fur against her face.

She felt an arm around her shoulder.

“It’s going to be ok kid,” said Mama Murphy. “Dogmeat ain’t going anywhere. See?”

Just then the canine raised his head and whined. Cassidy wept as he licked her face.

“That’s great, yeah that’s great,” said Jun in his soft voice.

“Atta boy,” said Sturges.

“He’s a hero, like you,” said Preston to Cassidy.

She wiped her eyes and sat back on her heels, letting the dog sink to the floor gently. “I’m not a hero. Dogmeat distracted that...that...what was that thing? That monster!”

“Deathclaw,” said Preston solemnly. “When I saw it come up out of the ground I tried to warn you.”

“That was why you were waving and jumping up and down?”

“Yes. I thought you were dead for sure but figured Dogmeat wouldn’t forgive me if I kept him locked in with us so I let him out. He’s loyal to a fault.”

“Deathclaws live underground?” asked Cassidy.

“No, they don’t, but this one must have found some tunnels or something under the city. All the raiders probably pissed it off.”

“We need to go now,” said Mama Murphy. “To Sanctuary.”

“So we’re doing what she says again?” griped Marcy. “She gets into the chems and we just follow her like sheep.”

Sturges cleared his throat. “Anyone have a better idea? Now’s the time to speak up if so.”
No one spoke a word and Marcy simply scowled as she always did.

“Well then, Sanctuary it is,” quipped Sturges, helping Mama Murphy to her feet.

“What’s Sanctuary?” asked Cassidy.

“A place Mama Murphy’s seen in her visions,” answered Preston. “She says it’s a community just outside of Concord. It’s where we were headed when we got stuck here with the raiders.”

“You mean Sanctuary Hills?”

Mama Murphy nodded. “Yeah, that’s the one. You know it?”

Cassidy nodded but said nothing more.

“Will you come with us?” asked Preston. “You said you needed help. We help our friends. And after what you did for us today I’d be proud to call you mine.”

Cassidy shrugged. Sanctuary was her community. Her home. She didn’t know if she wanted these strange people there. But she couldn’t really stop them. They’d been headed there before she even unfroze.

But Preston and Sturges seemed like good folk. Mama Murphy, although very strange, didn’t seem like a bad person either. She didn’t like Marcy one bit, and she questioned Jun’s sanity. The man stared at the floor and muttered to himself constantly.

Any more monsters and nightmarish creatures and I might end up just like him, she thought.

“I’ll come with you,” she said. “As soon as Dogmeat can get on his feet.”

In response to that, the dog thumped his tail and heaved himself up. The wound had already begun to knit itself and though the poor beast would be stiff for a few days, the worst of it was healing.

Cassidy pulled her pistol free and handed it to Preston. “Use this until we get there just in case.”

He accepted it with a smile. “Thank you. I’ll take point and lead the way.”

Cassidy looked at the power armor. It might not be the worst thing to keep it. “How do I get myself out of it?”

“Just retract your hands out of the rings,” answered Sturges. “There’s a button in the arms you have to press. And if the suit is damaged in the fusion core it will open automatically as well.”

“Ok,” said Cassidy, and climbed back in the suit.

She followed along in back making sure Mama Murphy didn’t trip or fall. Jun shuffled along, Marcy often prodding him to move quicker.

Sturges turned around occasionally to look at her, always giving her a smile, and once a thumbs up.

They stopped at the dead Deathclaw and Preston whistled low under his breath. “Damn. I’ve never been this close to one alive or dead and I hope never to again. Heard the stories but ...the reality is far worse.”

“It really was big and angry,” said Mama Murphy.
Cassidy retrieved the Gatling laser. “Without this thing I don’t think I could have killed it.”

“Thank heavens you did, kid,” said the old lady.

It looked like Preston was going to head into the community the way she had come out, via the north bridge. Cassidy wanted to warn Codsworth to hide. She still wasn’t sure just how much she wanted to divulge to the motley group.

“Preston, when we get there I want to make sure the place is cleared ok? Before we go in.”

“Great idea, thank you,” he said with a nod.

It was getting darker, and Cassidy feared what might come at them in the night. However, luck was on their side and there were no incidents. She asked the group to wait and jogged further into the community.

She found her bot in front of her house. “Codsworth. Get into that bomb shelter at the Franklin’s. I’ll explain when I get there.”

“Very good, Miss Cassidy. So happy to have you home.”

Cassidy stepped out of the power armor on the front step and left it there. She returned to Preston and the group.

“Ok, it’s clear. Don’t go in the house with the power armor out front. Umm...it might have traps inside.”

“I can disarm those,” said Sturges.

“No. Please just leave it alone. It’s dark and it’s late.”

He looked at her quizzically for a moment but shrugged. “Fair enough. I could use some shut eye, to be honest.”

Cassidy nodded and turned away from them. “Goodnight,” she said curtly. She watched them enter the house across from hers then jogged off towards the Franklin’s on the other end of the street.

She crept into the shelter, Dogmeat at her side and crawled onto the bed with a box of Sugar Bombs. The canine sighed and snuggled close beside her.

“Are you ready to hear about my day, Codsworth?” she asked.

“Oh, most certainly Miss Cassidy. Let me get a pot of tea going for you. And I suppose the dog needs some food and water.”

“He can eat Sugar Bombs with me. I don’t think we have any dog food in here. But he desperately needs water yes.”

“Apparently your dog was still with us when sir put this cellar together. I found some dog food. Let’s hope it’s lasted the years!”

As the bot floated around seeing to his tasks, Cassidy began to regale him with her adventure.
Cassidy formallywelcomestheQuincysurvivorsandhearstheirterribletale.

Cassidy stood awkwardly on the steps of her house beside the rusty suit of power armor. Codsworth floated quietly beside her, and Dogmeat leaned on her leg, panting and looking up into her face.

She faced the little ragtag group of survivors from the museum, gripping her rifle tightly. “So...I’m Cassidy Hartley. I know I told you yesterday but, hi and welcome to Sanctuary. I lived here when it was all new and beautiful.”

She swallowed against a sudden tightness in her throat as the group reacted to her words. “I...I loved living here,” she said softly.

“Are you saying you’re what...200 years old?” asked Preston, his eyes wide.

She gave a shy grin. “228 actually.” She reached for Dogmeat’s ears and massaged them gently.

“How’s that possible?” asked Sturges. “The only prewar people I’ve ever met are ghouls. And you sure don’t look like one of those.”

Cassidy blinked. “Ghouls? What are those? There are others like me? From before the war?”

Preston held up his hand. “Wait a moment. Let’s stay on track here. Cassidy, how is it you survived all these years?”

“Before the bombs fell, well...that day...my daddy and my baby brother and me we went to the vault. Vault 111. It’s back there on the hill.” She pointed behind her. “They froze us. Cryosleep... and then...” Cassidy blinked back the sudden rush of emotion. “Someone came and shot my daddy and took my little brother. I need to get help for him. For daddy. And find my brother.” She looked down at Dogmeat and tried to stay composed.


Cassidy nodded miserably. She raised her eyes to his. “Please help me. I don’t know...this world...”

At that point, she failed to hold her tears back and she sank down to the step, her head on her knees, sobbing quietly.

Old Mama Murphy stepped forward and slowly got to her knees beside her. “There there, kid,” she said softly. “I can help. I got the sight. The sight never lies. Your little brother, I can feel his energy all around you. He’s alive.”

“Oh great,” snipped Marcy. “Here we go again.”
Cassidy lifted her head, hiccuped, and looked at the old lady. “What do you mean? His energy?”

“Everyone has energy,” said Mama Murphy. “Even animals and plants. You love your family. I can tell. Love has energy too. It’s what I see. I see your energy and your brother’s.”

“Where is he? Who has him?” asked Cassidy, wiping her eyes.

Mama Murphy shrugged and shook her head. “That I can’t say. But if I get some Jet, the sight might be able to tell me more.”

“We talked about this Mama Murphy,” said Preston sternly. “No more chems. They will kill you if you keep it up!”

She slowly stood up and faced him. “We all die eventually. I’m an old woman. If I die now then I can say I’ve had a good run. And our friend here, she needs the sight.”

Marcy rolled her eyes. “Just an excuse to get high, it’s crap.”

Sturges sighed deeply. “Marcy, you know she’s never steered anyone wrong. But I don’t like the chems either. We need to find another way to help.” He looked at Cassidy with a kind smile. “And we will.”

No one spoke for a few moments. Then Preston broke the silence. “Cassidy, is your father safe for the moment? You said he’s in cryosleep?”

She nodded.

“Well then,” he continued. “The most important thing we need to do first is get ourselves situated. This place looks safe enough but we need water, food, power and get some defenses set up. Need to find some more weapons. Everyone will need to carry one.”

“Preston, you know how I feel about that,” said Sturges.

“I know but this isn’t Quincy. We don’t know who and what can come our way. We all need to be as safe as we can. Until things get sorted out here. I want to rebuild the Minutemen. That means more people. And people come with risks.”

Marcy gave a strangled cry. “What? Letting other people in here? Are you crazy? We need to shut up about this place!”

Preston shook his head. “Sorry, Marcy. But we need all the help we can get out here. The Commonwealth is full of people needing help. One step at a time we can rebuild and that starts now.”

She glared at him and turned and stalked off. Sturges sighed and shook his head as Jun went after his wife.

Cassidy stood up. “Why is she so mean?”

“Aw she ain't really,” said Sturges. “Not before the whole Quincy thing happened.”

Cassidy tilted her head, waiting for the rest of the story. Sturges looked at Preston.

“Well, long story short, we were betrayed,” said the Minuteman. “That’s how Quincy fell.”

“Betrayed by who?” asked Cassidy. “Can you tell me the whole story? If...if you can.”
Preston nodded with a deep, sad sigh and Cassidy sank back down to the step, Dogmeat lying down with his head in her lap.

“Well, Mama Murphy and the others, they used to live in Quincy,” began Preston.

Mama Murphy nodded. “It was a good little place. But one day, the sight told me an attack was coming. I told Derrick, that’s Sturges there. Told him something bad was coming and we needed to get help.”

Sturges nodded. “I sent word to the Minutemen, asking them to come. Mama Murphy’d never been wrong about anything she’d seen. I didn’t question it.”

“I was under the command of General Ezra Hollis at the time,” said Preston. “A good man, he’d taken over after General McGann died at the Castle when it was overrun by Mirelurks.” He saw Cassidy’s confused expression and gave her a small smile. “I know you have questions and we’ll get them all answered in time. But first...the Quincy story.”

Cassidy nodded and sat quietly. She was aware of Sturges’ eyes on her, and Mama Murphy’s intense pale blue gaze, but avoided looking at either of them and focused on Preston.

“Anyway, when we arrived, a large raider group called the Gunners was attacking them. We counterattacked from the back and were lucky enough to drive them off.”

“Something didn’t feel right though,” said Sturges. “Gunners don’t just give up and move on. They always come back in larger numbers. So Ezra and the guys decided to hole up in the town with us. Problem was, there wasn’t that many of us all told and another attack would be too much. That’s when Preston and I decided to get the defenses up and we made these cool walkways between the buildings. He said being able to attack from above would help us out a heck of a lot.”

Cassidy saw Marcy and Jun come walking slowly back, but they stood outside of the group, Marcy with her ever-present scowl and Jun with his hangdog expression. She was afraid to hear the rest of the story. The fact that Quincy had fallen was enough of a clue that things hadn’t gone well.

“The Gunners did come back as Sturges had said,” Preston continued. “But we had enough ammo and our defenses were good. The General decided to request back-up from other units and sent one of our veterans, Clint. Day after day we waited. No one came. There had been a lot of internal struggles within the Minutemen, and I knew that, but didn’t figure it would stop them from doing their jobs.”

Preston stopped, and took a deep breath, Cassidy could see he was struggling. “You don’t have to tell me,” she said softly. “If it’s too hard, I get it. Believe me.”

Preston shook his head. “No. This story has to be told. We can’t hide from it. We were starting to wear down when Clint showed back up. I was so relieved. I was sure he’d brought the help we needed but...”

“He betrayed them,” said Sturges. “One of their oldest members and he had gone ahead and defected to the Gunners. He’d brought a group all right...a group of raiders.”

Preston nodded sadly. “He was leading them. One of our own. A man I’d served with for 10 years and trusted. Never even saw that coming. I’ve thought long and hard about it, wondering if there were signs along the way but I still don’t see where he snapped. I just can’t...” he looked away then.

“Guy demands the General and the mayor stand down,” said Sturges. “Actually thought they’d do
it too. What an asshole.”

“This is so bad,” whispered Cassidy.

“Yeah,” agreed Preston. “It was. But the worst was yet to come. Don’t know if you’re familiar with the Quincy area but there’s a highway beside it. Overpass I believe you would’ve called it. Clint took the Gunners up there and waited until nightfall. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. They lit into us and we couldn’t defend against them. They had the upper hand.”

Marcy suddenly turned and walked quickly away, trailed by Jun.

“When the shooting stopped,” said Sturges quietly. “All the Minutemen were dead except Preston here. The Mayor was dead too….and when I found the Longs they were holding their little boy Kyle. He was dead. Only 8 years old. Nothing anyone could do. We ran. 19 of us that were left. Some had weapons, some didn’t. We were nearly out of ammo most of us.”

Cassidy understood Marcy now as tears crept from her eyes again. She understood the devastation of losing someone you loved. But her daddy wasn’t dead, Marcy’s little boy was. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, holding tight to Dogmeat.

“They took the General prisoner,” said Preston. “Until the moment Clint shot him Ezra couldn’t believe his friend had betrayed them.”

“It was over real fast,” said Mama Murphy. “Not even an hour and everything we knew was wiped out. The others we were with, well there were raiders everywhere. Most died along the way.”

Cassidy let her tears fall onto the dog’s fur. “What’s wrong with this world? It’s so horrible! I can’t believe I’m stuck here! It’s like a nightmare and I just want to wake up!”

Mama Murphy rested a hand on her head. “I know kid, I know. But there’s good here, too. We found you, and we found this place. This is home now.”

Cassidy looked up at her and nodded. “It is. You’re all welcome here.”

“It’ll be a lot of work but we can get this place going. Be just as nice as Quincy although smaller.” Preston did his best to smile, but Cassidy could see the grief on his face.

He took a deep breath. “So...you had some questions earlier I think?”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t even seem important anymore. I guess I’ll just find out the hard way. But the giant bugs are so scary.”

“There are way worse things than bugs,” said Sturges. “Like that Deathclaw you went toe-to-toe with. You’re leagues braver than I am.”

He realized he’d spent considerable time just watching her since they’d met. He admitted to himself that she was really pretty and that he’d like to get to know her better.

“I know what you’re thinkin’,” he said. “Oh, he’s a big guy I bet he’s mean as hell. Not even close. I’m a mechanic. I fix things. Power armor, power grids, water systems...project back in Quincy was a car.”

Cassidy’s eyes lit up. “A car? I like cars! We almost got a red Corvega Atomic 8 but ..the bombs.”

Sturges grinned. “Was trying to get a working engine for it. Never gave a thought to where I was
gonna drive it but it was a little blue car.”

“Maybe you will make another one here. I even have the carport!” Cassidy felt the heaviness lift from her. These people had been through hell and they were still trying. She had to try too.

Sturges smiled widely for the first time in years. *She’s adorable, she’s smart, and she likes cars. Perfection!*

“I don’t know anything about anything,” said Cassidy dejectedly. “Well except how to shoot. I couldn’t keep my bean plant in school alive. And I can barely cook Mac ‘n Cheese without making a mess.” She sighed. “And I need to get a doctor for my daddy. *And* find my brother.”

“Listen,” said Sturges. “I’ll teach you things. If you want. Be fun I think. You’ll be ok, Cassidy. We’re all in this together now.”

She smiled up at him. “I’m glad I met you guys. We can build defenses to protect us, right Preston?”

The Minuteman nodded. “We sure can. But before we do that we need to get going on food.”

“I have some food. Not a lot but *some*. Until we can figure out what to do.”

“Miss Cassidy,” said Codsworth. “Are you sure it’s a good idea? Your father left that for the family.”

“Daddy liked helping people, Codsworth. He would approve. Let’s go and get some.” She stopped and looked at Mama Murphy. “And please no more chems!”

The three survivors watched her and Codsworth move down the road.

“She’s a sweet little thing,” said Sturges. “But scared. It’s like she needs protecting something fierce.”

“I’d be scared too if I lived back then and woke up now,” agreed Preston. “I can’t imagine how she’s feeling yet she stopped and helped us out.”

Mama Murphy nodded. “I’ve seen her destiny. She’s got a long road ahead of her the poor kid. We need to make sure we help her.”

“She gonna find her brother?” asked Sturges.

“I don’t know, Derrick. The sight introduced me to her and I know he’s alive but the rest...it’s dark. I need to use the sight to see more but you heard the kid. She doesn’t want me to use the chems. Why she cares about an old lady like me I can’t say.”

“People from her time valued life,” said Preston. “That’s as it should be.”

“Maybe we got a chance here, start over,” said Sturges.

“Sanctuary will be a vibrant community one day. I seen it. Before.” Mama Murphy looked at the two men.

“I’ll take that as a good sign,” said Sturges. “So what do we start with? I think water. I’ll start there.”

Preston nodded. “I’ll look into defenses.”
“I’ll do what I can about food,” said Mama Murphy. “I’ll get Marcy and Jun to help me.”

And just like that, the Quincy 5 found their new home.
And so it began. Little by little the group carved themselves out a home in the ruins of Sanctuary Hills. The little community that Cassidy had loved was given a new lease on life.

They began by clearing away all the debris. Anything salvagable was stored, and the rest melted down or otherwise scrapped. Next came the residences: they fixed up holes and hammered the siding on the homes back into shape as best they could. Sturges showed Cassidy how to assess the home’s foundations and how to shore them up. She developed muscles she didn’t know existed. She experienced being tired in a way she never imagined.

Cassidy spent a lot of time with the mechanic, learning everything she could. She found him to be kind, empathic and a good listener. She would often think out loud and he’d smile and give her feedback. There was a gentleness about the big southern man that she liked very much.

Cassidy worked feverishly on her father’s bedroom, telling everyone about her wonderful daddy and how much he’d appreciate all of them. She was single-mindedly focused on putting her house back together, Codsworth constantly reminding her to stop and rest, drink and eat.

They tilled up the earth and planted a garden, then began construction on a greenhouse. One day a shabbily dressed woman showed up followed by a two-headed cow-like creature. Cassidy met her first trader and Brahmin. She was a bit put off by the smelly creature at first but it was a congenial animal and soon enough she’d warmed up to it.

The woman identified herself as “Trashcan Carla” and she opened up her boxes and barrels. Preston bartered some of their food for guns so that everyone had one, and ammo to see them through until Carla’s next visit.

Sturges initially balked at using his weapon, and Cassidy had to cajole him into trying it. In the end, he relented and let her show him some of the tricks of being a good marksman. As much as he hated to admit it, he did have a good time. Mostly because he was training with her. The more time he spent with her, the harder he fell.

At night after the evening meal was eaten, and everyone was settling down for bed, Mama Murphy would brush Cassidy’s soft hair and tell her a story about her time as a young woman. Unbelievably, she had been a raider. Some of the stories seemed completely outrageous, but who was to say they weren’t true?

“You were a badass, Mama Murphy,” giggled Cassidy.

“I sure was, kid. they called me Murphy the Madwoman. You’d never know it to see me now though.”
“I can still see it, don’t worry,” said Cassidy.

Preston began to open up about his guilt on the Quincy massacre. He felt he hadn’t done enough to protect the people who had followed him out. They had trusted him and he was haunted by the notion he’d let them all down. All the deaths weighed heavy on his conscience.

“It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have fought off all the raiders you bumped into. You’re just one man, Preston,” she told him.

“Logic says so. But my heart says otherwise. Just can’t shake the feeling that they shouldn’t have died.”

“There’s lots of stuff that shouldn’t have happened but it did and now we're stuck with it. You’re a good leader Preston. Everyone here thinks so. Even Marcy. Or she wouldn’t have stuck with you this long.”

Preston had appreciated her candor, but Cassidy saw that his heart was still heavy. Words just weren’t enough in some cases. She wondered if there would ever be any absolution for him. She hoped so. He talked endlessly about rebuilding the Commonwealth Minutemen one person at a time. It was a goal he needed to have to keep him going.

“There are a lot of people out there needing a hand,” he said. “We can help create settlements and give everyone a fighting chance. Together we can get rid of all the raiders. Every last one.”

Jun Long concerned her the most. The man was a mess who could barely function day to day. Cassidy would often wake up at night to his terrible screams as he relived the massacre and his son’s murder. During the day he would mutter to himself and develop the hundred yard stare which no one could shake him from, not even his wife. Cassidy often overheard Sturges talking to Jun, asking him how things were going, and trying to comfort the man as best he could. But there was no true comfort for such a horrific trauma. How could words ever make it better? But words were all anyone had to offer.

Then there was Marcy...she was an entity unto herself, a cobra rising up and spitting when anyone came near her. Her deep pain was a venom, poisoning her. She never had a kind word for the group. Nothing anyone ever did was good enough and she found fault with everything.

Jun had tried several times to talk to her, needing to reminisce about their son, but every time he did she shut him down and ran away. Cassidy tried to get Marcy involved in the group’s activities but the woman just scowled or snapped at her. She pulled her weight but only on projects she could work on by herself. She was good with the gardens and Cassidy left her alone to tend to the plants. She could see Marcy’s deep anguish but was unable to get through to her.

“What gives you the idea that we’re friends?” Marcy would snap. “Go away and leave me alone.”

“I just want to help,” said Cassidy.

“I don’t want help. Get lost.”

Day in day out, every communication was filled with harshness. It wore on Cassidy and she was inclined to give Marcy a wide berth, but how could doing so ever help her?

“Don’t mind Marcy,” Jun had said to her once. “She’s dealing with the loss in her own way.”

The problem was, Marcy wasn’t dealing with it. She was avoiding it.
The image Sturges painted of her from back in their days at Quincy seemed like a different person entirely.

“She was a teacher,” he’d said. “Everyone loved her. She was smart and fun and loved to share everything she knew. Soft-spoken and a really good person. Helped everyone that she could. I hope she can find herself again.”

But there was nothing anyone could do for someone who just wasn’t ready or willing to try.

Despite their individual situations, little by little, sunrise to sunset, the group worked on their new home. Cassidy’s little house was the first to finish, and then they built a garage for Sturges. He was so excited by it, and when the first power armor frame was set up, allowing him to work on Cassidy’s suit, she saw a big change in him. He seemed even happier and smiled often which she loved seeing.

They decided to fix up a house for the Longs next, on Cassidy’s insistence. Of course, Marcy snipped and snarked as always, but she did her part. When it was completed, she stood outside and looked at it.

“Well, it’s not a hole. It’s still not great but it’s something.”

Jun was grateful. He often thanked Cassidy for all her efforts to help them, and always he made excuses for his wife.

Mama Murphy didn’t want a house. She asked for a simple room she could put some plants in, a little space of her own. Preston thought making some guest houses would be a good idea. Dividing up the larger houses into rooms with a common kitchen and bathroom.

That’s when the issue of a proper septic and electrical system came up. “I can do the work,” said Sturges. “But we need to build all the bits and pieces and that’s gonna take all of us. Now, who wants to learn to weld?” His eyes fell on Cassidy and she raised her hand with a grin.

So the work continued. Sanctuary slowly began to look and feel like home and 6 strangers, a dog and a bot became a ramshackle family.
Attacked

Chapter Summary

Heading off to Diamond City, Cassidy runs into a dangerous situation.

“I need to get help for my daddy,” said Cassidy quietly one evening as she and Sturges sat by the fireplace in her house. “We’ve got a good thing going here, Carla said she’ll let people know about us. Preston is right, we can help make the world right again but...I need my daddy. I can’t look for my brother by myself.”

It had been several months, and although agitated by her own situation, Cassidy had gotten caught up in fixing up Sanctuary. But things had slowed down, the essentials were done, and now it was time for her to focus on her own needs.

Sturges nodded. “I get it. Family is important. I miss mine pretty bad too.”

“I’m sorry,” said Cassidy. “I know it’s not the same as blood ties but all of us here, even Marcy, see you as family.”

His dark eyes softened as he smiled at her. “That’s real nice, Cassidy. Thanks.”

“Was your family killed?” she asked gently.

“No, not killed. My mama died when I was a baby. She was sick. My daddy too when I was 17. Just me and my brother left. He’s still alive. Haven’t seen him in awhile.”

Cassidy gave a sad sigh. “I’m sorry Derrick. It sucks.”

“This is why you need to get your family patched up.”

“I’m going to try and get to that city, the one Carla mentioned.”

“Diamond City? That’s a ways from here!” he exclaimed. “You are ok going alone?”

Cassidy shrugged. “I’d love for you to come with me but that will leave only Preston to defend. The Longs are awful with guns and Mama Murphy isn’t as up to par anymore.”

His face lit up. “You’d actually want me to come with?”

She nodded. “Definitely. But I’ll have my dog with me. If it’s really a city then there will be a lot of people there and one of them has to be a doctor.”

Sturges nodded. “Yeah, they have a few if I remember right. Just makes me nervous you being alone out there. Dogmeat’s a good boy but I’d feel better if you had someone with you. Why not just wait for Carla and walk along with her?”

“I can move better on my own and be less of a target than someone walking with a big smelly
Brahmin!” Cassidy grinned.

“Good point,” said Sturges.

She set out the next day with Carla’s crudely drawn map, and as she looked at it she realized something.

“Diamond City. That’s...that’s the ballpark!”

“Ballpark?” asked Preston.

“Where they used to play baseball. You know...baseball? Bats and gloves?” She swung an imaginary bat.

Preston shrugged. “I’m sorry I don’t know more about the old world. I wish I had bothered to learn more but I never did. Minutemen kept me busy.”

“It’s ok. It was a game and people would go there on Sundays with their families and watch. Cheer on their favorite team. It was...it was fun.” She smiled wistfully remembering the times her family had gone to watch a game. She’d loved the hot dogs and popcorn and sodas, the happy energy of the fans.

“The old world sounds so great to hear you tell of it,” Preston said. “DC is full of people. No doubt you’ll find help.”

She armored up Dogmeat thanks to Sturges and hefted her pack. “I have no idea how long I’ll be gone. I know how far things used to be, by car. It’s a whole new deal now. I wish we still had phones so I could call you guys and let you know I’m ok. How do people do that now? How do you know each other is ok?”

Preston shrugged. “We don’t. We just hope we see each other again. Usually we do. But...just be safe, Cassidy. We’ll be here waiting for you.”

She nodded and started walking towards the bridge. She stopped and turned around. Sturges was watching her, standing by his garage. He raised a hand slowly in a wave and she wanted to run back to him and beg him to come with her. But she didn’t.

It had started out a nice enough day, but somewhere along her walk, the sky turned a sickly green and the wind picked up. There was a strange sound in the air. Cassidy would have thought it was a thunderstorm but it didn’t sound anything like one. The air got hazy and visibility lessened considerably.

“What’s going on boy?” she asked her dog. “Why does it look and sound like this?”

Dogmeat barked and ran towards a dilapidated shack. She followed him inside just as the rain started. The horrible sound made her cover her ears and cower in a corner. She was afraid. She still didn’t understand the new world.

The rain came down in a torrent and lasted only a few minutes but it felt like hours. As it abated, the greenish cast and the haziness began to lift as well, and soon the sun was back out and it appeared as though nothing had even occurred.
“I didn’t like that too much,” she said as they set out. “I hope it doesn’t happen again.”

There were times on the journey that she heard gunfire, and she did her best to move away from it. She found places she had once recognized, that were now completely in ruins, or had been shored up by someone. Most of the places were abandoned and she avoided going into any of the larger buildings.

However at a certain point, her map insisted she head into part of an area that had a dense collection of buildings. It wasn’t Concord, or anywhere she remembered. It had to be an outlying town that had cropped up in the last 200 years.

“I don’t want to go in there,” she said nervously to the dog. The Shepherd’s front paws danced and he barked softly.

“I know you’ll look after me,” she said. “But I’m scared, Dogmeat.”

He whined softly.

She stood there for too long, debating finding another way to the city, but she wasn’t as familiar with anything anymore. 200 years could definitely change a place. She had no choice but to go forward and follow the map.

Cassidy hadn’t figured on nighttime. She’d been so focused on getting to Diamond City that she didn’t realize that she had left too late in the day to make it. Twilight brought a whole new set of fears.

“We need a place to crash,” she said. “Find a safe spot, boy.”

Dogmeat lowered himself suddenly and growled, staring into the darkness. Cassidy, trembling, raised her rifle but she didn’t see anything.

Something ran ahead of her. A dark shape, moving quickly. She went down on one knee and prepared to fire but saw nothing. Flattening herself against a building she took a deep breath. The sounds of night were different. Voices carried, gunfire carried, and she heard all sorts of footfalls. Was she surrounded by raiders? How could she fight off more than one at a time? She had no hand to hand combat experience or training.

A strange rasping growl came from beside her and Dogmeat suddenly leapt forward with a snarl. He landed on a vaguely human shape, jaws snapping. Whatever it was flailed and made the most horrid sounds.

“Dogmeat! What is it?! What is that?!”

In the faint light of a nearby lantern, what she saw made her stifle a scream. It looked for all the world like the zombies she’d seen in the movies she hated. A dessicated human being with tattered clothing clinging to it. She took aim and fired, and the thing stopped moving.

Dogmeat walked back to her and sat down.

“What...?"

She didn’t want to look at it up close and backed away until her back hit another wall. She sank down and put her arms around the dog. She felt tears threaten but pushed them down. There was no time for crying. She needed to keep her wits about her. What else lurked in the darkness?
She wanted to go home.

“I can’t go back now. I have to keep going. I have to get help for daddy.” Hearing the words out loud gave her a bit of courage, but not enough to get up and move.

Cassidy put her head on her knees, rifle at her side. Dogmeat’s ears were focused forward and she feared hearing his warning growl again.

She must have dozed off a bit because she roused when Dogmeat’s cold nose pressed into the side of her neck. He whined insistently.

“I don’t want to get up, boy,” she whispered. “Not until the daylight. I can’t see in the dark like a dog.”

The dog didn’t let her be. He nuzzled, he nipped at her jacket. He was adamant that she move.

“There’s nowhere to go,” she said to him, pushing him away. “Lie down. We aren’t moving.”

She expected him to obey but he didn’t. His next move was to stand and growl menacingly into the darkness.

“Oh no...what is it?” she asked.

Two dark shapes filled in the little light there was.

“What do we have here?” asked a male voice.

“Looks like a lost kid,” answered his companion, a woman. “She’s got a pack. Let’s grab it and move on.”

“Shoot the mutt,” he said.

Horrified, Cassidy raised her weapon but in the darkness she had no way of seeing where to focus her shot. It went rogue.

“What the fuck?!” cried the man. “Bitch nearly shot my ear off!"

Dogmeat leaped. The woman screamed.

Cassidy pulled her pistol from it’s holster but again she had no visibility. The man ran forward and grabbed her, throwing her to the ground. She heard the click of his gun but he had the same problem with the darkness. Dogmeat was busy warding off blows from the woman, and trying to keep her down. Cassidy was on her own.

The man reached for her throat, intending to choke her to death. She kicked out, hard, making contact with some part of him causing a grunt of pain. However, it wasn’t enough to help her get away and only served to enrage him further. He came at her again and she lashed out with her pistol, again making contact. She fired, hoping to hit him but her shot missed.

She heard Dogmeat yelp and the woman curse. Fear gripped her as the man hit her in the face. She kicked him and scrambled backwards, trying to regain her footing.

She dropped her pistol.

“You’re dead, you little whore!” the man snarled.
He raised his fist and everything went black.
Chapter Summary

Cassidy meets her mysterious rescuer.

Cassidy awoke slowly, her eyes adjusting to the dimness.

Her head hurt. Her face hurt. She tried to move but winced. “D...Dog...” she rasped.

A warm pile of fur nuzzled under her hand. She felt instant relief. “Where am I, boy?” she asked softly.

“You’re safe here. Just go back to sleep,” said a quiet male voice.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Where is this place?”

She heard a rustling as someone moved about. “I’m going to use this stimpak on you,” he said. “You’ve got a nasty head injury there but you’ll live. Now hold still.”

Keeping her eyes open was too hard, so she kept them closed as she felt her arm being pulled out and the sharp sting of the needle.

“Now for some chems to help you sleep,” he said next.

“N..no,” she protested. “I don’t want to sleep, I need to get to Diamond City...” She felt the prick of another needle and her body felt heavy.

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen for a while,” said the voice.

She felt Dogmeat crawl up beside her and lay his head on her shoulder, and the chems dropped her into a deep, healing sleep.

There was more light when she awoke the next time, but it wasn’t natural, outdoor light. She saw several lanterns on a desk, a few chairs and an old decrepit couch. It looked like she was underground, the floor was dirt and the ceiling had roots sticking down into the space. She saw another cot beside the desk.

“There you are,” said the voice. “Welcome back.”

She felt no more pain although she did feel weak. Cassidy sat up slowly and from the floor Dogmeat raised his head. She saw a bowl of water nearby and realized that whoever the man was, he’d looked after both her and her dog.

She looked around for her rescuer. He was sitting beside her on the other side.

“Who ...who are you?” she asked softly.
He wore a white t-shirt and what looked like jeans, rolled up at the bottoms over a pair of boots. And despite being underground in dim light, he had mirrored glasses hiding his eyes.

“You can call me Deacon,” he said simply.

“I’m Cassidy,” she said. “And that’s Dogmeat.”

“Mmhm,” he responded, as though he already knew.

She liked his voice. It was friendly, and mellow. She couldn’t make out too many details on his face as he seemed to prefer sitting just on the edge of the shadows.

“You saved me, didn’t you?” she asked.

“You got yourself into it with raiders. Not the best plan. Should have listened to your dog. Lucky for you I was there.”

She remembered her pack and her rifle, and looked around for it.

“I got your stuff, no worries,” he said. “That feral you killed had some silver on it. I grabbed that for you too.”

“Feral? What’s a feral?”

“The feral ghoul? The thing you shot?” he sounded surprised that she had even asked.

“That zombie thing? You call it a feral ghoul?”

Deacon gave a little snort. “You got a lot to learn, Cassidy. First rule is never travel at night.”

“I need to get to Diamond City. I have to get help for my daddy.”

“We’ll get there,” said Deacon. “You need to rest up first though. Injuries like yours need more than a stimpak. I’ve fed your dog. Now relax.”

Cassidy curled up on her side, facing him. “Please take your glasses off I want to see your whole face.”

“No can do. Nothing to see here anyway.”

She sighed, then narrowed her eyes, trying to look menacing. “My dog will eat you if you try anything weird.”

“Go to sleep, Cassidy,” said Deacon.

She had no idea how long she slept nor how long she spent in that strange little underground room with the mysterious Deacon. He never removed his glasses, and he never came too close to her. He prepared food and found water for them and Dogmeat, but she never got a close look at him.

He gave her her rifle and her pack and she saw that he hadn’t touched it. The stimpack he’d used hadn’t even been one of hers.

“Where is this place?” she asked.

“Just a hidey hole of mine,” answered Deacon. “Once you can walk around without falling over we can move on to DC. Until then, this is home.”
“Ok,” she said.

“Deacon, my arm is sore and stiff. Can you put my hair in a ponytail for me?”

He had finally felt she was well enough to travel, minus some stiff and sore muscles from the altercation and the lack of movement.

“I don’t know how to do that,” he said awkwardly.

“Please Deacon. I don’t want my hair in my face. Just gather it all up and tie it with my elastic. It’s not hard.”

He stood there looking at her, still wearing his glasses. With a sigh he reached for the elastic and stood behind her.

Cassidy’s hair was soft beneath his fingers. “Interesting color,” he said.

“I’ve had it like this since I was 12. I like it. It makes me different.”

Deacon was gentle. He didn’t pull her hair or tug on it. It might not have been the most perfect ponytail but it did the trick.

“Thank you,” said Cassidy happily. She turned around and looked up at him with a smile.

Deacon stepped back into the half shadows again, unnerved by her sudden closeness.

She’s just a kid, he thought. A lost little girl. She needs someone to look after her or she’s not going to survive out here.

“Can we go to Diamond City now?” she asked him. “You know where it is right?”
“I know where it is. Everyone here does eventually. Lots of people there.”

Cassidy wondered why he never asked her about herself. She had said things that ordinarily would open up questions, at least they had with her group back home. But Deacon didn’t ask about her and didn’t volunteer anything about himself either.

He had still never removed his glasses. And if she looked at him too long, he stepped back into the shadows. He was certainly a mysterious man. But he’d looked after her and Dogmeat for who knew how long, and strange or not, he was obviously not a bad person and she was grateful.

“How long have we been here?” she asked.

“About a week,” was the answer.

“A week! I should have been back home by now! My friends will be worried!”

Deacon picked up his pack. “Then they shouldn’t have let you go alone.”

Cassidy thought how worried Mama Murphy and Sturges would be. “There’s not enough people who can defend, and one of them is old,” she tried to explain, then stopped. Deacon didn’t seem curious about her in the least. Well, she was most certainly curious about him.

“Is this your home, Deacon?”

“No, I don’t have a home. I just crash wherever I can.”

“That’s sad. Everyone needs a home and people who care about them.”

She thought she saw the corners of his mouth tug upwards but in the soft light she couldn’t be sure. Her pack and rifle sat on the desk and he pointed to it. “Let’s get going.”

A folded up piece of paper was under her rifle and she glanced at it.

*Join the Railroad!* It proclaimed proudly. There was a picture of a lantern, similar to the ones that lit the small space.

“There’s still trains here?” she asked curiously. “There’s no cars.”

“It’s not that kind of railroad,” said Deacon. “The one now, it’s an organization. It’s a huge secret. A real mystery. No one actually knows if it’s real or not.”

Cassidy’s eyes lit up. “But if it’s not real then why is there a flyer for it? And what is it? How come it’s such a secret? I love mysteries!”

“Supposedly,” said Deacon, changing the tone of his voice to sound conspiratorial. “They help synths who escape the Institute. Like the underground railroad from hundreds of years ago.”

Cassidy wrinkled up her nose. “What is a synth? What is the Institute?”

Deacon didn’t react to her lack of knowledge as she figured he would. This baffled her once more. He sat down on a rickety chair. “Cassidy, the Institute is a scary place. No one knows what they are or where they are. All we know is that sometimes people disappear and are replaced by synths. And synths are constructs, made by the Institute. They look exactly like humans and you can’t tell the difference until you kill them.”

Cassidy mulled that over in her mind. It sounded horrifying. “Why do they replace people?”
“No one knows. Just one day your friend or loved one isn’t themselves anymore. Little things give it away. You start to wonder what’s going on. Shit happens and someone kills them and finds out. Other times their relationships just fall apart and the synth moves on.”

“That’s awful!” exclaimed Cassidy. “But why does that Railroad want to help synths then? They’re evil!”

Deacon shook his head. “Not all of them. Just the replacements that are programmed to be someone else. See the Institute views them as slaves. Use them as workers and probably spies. Doesn’t see them as the human beings they created them to be. Some of them escape. The Railroad helps them get a new life. Or so it’s said.”

“I want to find them,” said Cassidy. “Slavery is wrong! I want to help free slaves!” She looked at the flyer and it said nothing more than *Follow The Freedom Trail* in bold letters on the bottom.

“I know what the freedom trail is,” she said. “It’s from my...umm...it’s from the underground railroad who helped slaves long ago like you said. It’s in Boston somewhere.”

She stopped herself short of talking about how she’d followed it once on a trip to the city with her daddy. But she never found the end of it, as they’d had to return home. Maybe being from the old world, she had an advantage. The thought excited her. The Railroad liked to help people. That meant maybe they would help her daddy too.

“You can try,” said Deacon, and again it seemed to her that he was smiling slightly. “I’ll make sure nothing kills you.”

“You’re going to stay with me?” she liked that idea.

“Mhm. For awhile. Until I know you won’t die out there.”

A huge smile lit up her face and he looked away. *She’s just a kid*, he reminded himself. *Don’t get attached.*

“Thanks Deacon. It’s nice to not be alone.”

“Let’s go. We need to hit DC before it gets dark.”
Spies Like Us

Chapter Summary

Cassidy finds out a bit more about Deacon as they approach Diamond City.

Cassidy followed Deacon, and did as he instructed her. He knew things, saw things, and she did her best to take it all in. There were raider outposts everywhere, and Deacon didn’t engage them but kept to the shadows. She noticed he was good at staying unobserved.

“You’re really good at sneaking around,” she said.

“I have to be. It’s what I do.”

“What do you mean?”

He faced her. “I’m a spy.”

Her eyes grew large. “A spy, like in the holovids? Wow that’s really cool! If you tell me too many secrets you’ll have to kill me, right?”

His lips twitched. “Something like that, yeah. So don’t ask too many questions!.” He pursed his lips to stop from smiling. “I’ll be letting you do most of the talking when we meet people. But I’ll be nearby.”

She nodded, eyes still large. She had her very own secret agent. “Your name isn’t really Deacon then, right?”

“Bingo,” he said.

“Well, if we’re working together I need a spy name too.”

This time Deacon grinned. He had straight, white teeth and slight dimples in his cheeks. His lips were slightly pouty, the lower being fuller and the upper having a pronounced cupid’s bow. He didn’t look as old as her daddy, but he wasn’t as young as Sturges or Preston either.

Cassidy decided, seeing him in the light of day, that the mysterious spy Deacon was quite a handsome man, and his kindness made him even more appealing.

“Who said we’re working together?” he asked still grinning.

Cassidy giggled. “Because I want to be a spy too. And find the secret Railroad like you do.”

“How do you know I want to find it?” he asked amiably.

“You had the flyer there. And it just sounds like you want to and you need my help. I’m good at mysteries. So I need a name.”
Deacon tilted his head and looked at her for a moment. Her bright blue eyes were still wide with interest and she looked happy. He liked her open expression and innocence. In fact, were he to admit it to himself, he liked her quite a bit more than he cared to. “Charmer,” he said. “I think that suits you.”

Cassidy gave him a thumbs up. “I love it. Charmer and Deacon. Secret agents.”

“We aren’t going to solve any mysteries standing here. And if you like that kind of thing there’s someone in DC I’ll introduce you to. A detective.”

Cassidy gasped. “A detective! Someone like that can help me find my baby brother!” In her enthusiasm she realized she might have said too much. She clapped a hand over her mouth. She expected a slew of questions from Deacon, but he just nodded without a word.

*It’s like he either doesn’t care or he doesn’t believe what I say.*

“Don’t you have any questions for me?” she asked curiously.

His expression was deadpan. “Didn’t we just establish that questions are bad?”

“Oh yeah, we sure did. Ok. Never mind.”

Cassidy had a bounce in her step as they moved on, Dogmeat, as usual, sniffing and exploring. She noticed he’d bark sometimes and if she looked, there was usually a pack of ammo or a container of water. Occasionally they found a corpse and Deacon showed her how to search the body for anything worth taking.

“That’s nasty,” she said in distaste.

“You don’t go near the rotted ones. They don’t need this shit and you do. No sense in letting someone else get it. Survival comes first in the wasteland.”

Cassidy shook her head. “I’m not tomb robbing.”

“You will,” said Deacon. “Believe me.”

They found an old building and Deacon crept inside. She followed him and explored the main floor as he went upstairs. She found a safe that someone had cracked open and inside were four large stacks of bills! She nearly squealed with delight and shoved them into her pack. Money, and lots of it!

There was a small metal container with bobby pins. She shook it then put it down.

“You’ll want to take that,” said Deacon. “Use those to pick locks. You know how to do that?”

Cassidy shook her head.

“You need to learn. I’ll show you next time we find a lock. You know anything about computers?”

She nodded. “I can hack them pretty good. I learned how in school. Daddy insisted I take computer studies and I thought it was boring until I figured out how to reprogramme Codsworth! He’s my bot. He’s at home.”

Deacon nodded and tucked the box in her pack. “Come upstairs. You can hack the terminal up there. It’s too tough for me. I’m not great at it.”
"I thought spies were supposed to be able to do everything. Just in case."

He didn’t respond. She followed him up a flight of rickety stairs she was afraid would cave in with each step. A computer sat on a rusted old desk. Beside it was a large safe.

Cassidy leaned over and looked at it. It was indeed a harder puzzle to solve. “It might take me awhile.”

Deacon sat down and lit a cigarette.

“Ew, that’s bad for you Deek,” she said.

“Life in the wastes is bad for me,” he responded.

She shrugged. He did have a point.

The hacking took a few minutes, but in the end the safe popped open. Unfortunately there were only a few bits of silverware, some old ledgers and a pistol. Deacon tucked the pistol into his belt.

“Grab what’s valuable and sell it to vendors in DC or ones you meet on the road.”

“One comes to my home. Her name is Carla. She has a Brahmin and all sorts of weird stuff.”

“They all have Brahmins,” said Deacon. “It’s the best beast of burden. There are a few kinds. Over towards the west areas there are these things called Brahmiluff. Black with drooping horns.”

“One head?” she asked hopefully.

“Two. All of those things have two heads. The cow species.”

“I hate the mutated creatures,” said Cassidy woefully.

“Wait until you see a Radstag then, I’ll leave it at that.”

Cassidy made a face. She was sure there were even worse things out there then two headed cows. The Deatclaw hadn’t been a walk in the park either. She didn’t think he’d believe her if she said she’d killed one of those.

Deacon continued to lead the way on the outskirts until they had to hit the city proper. Everything was dilapidated, ruined and covered with debris and detritus. There was raider graffiti all over.

The worst part was the bodies. There were bodies littering the ground, hanging over obstacles and some were even hung from chains. Most had no heads. Some had their entrails hanging out.

She felt her gag reflex act up and managed to control it, but then the stench hit her and she leaned against a wall and threw up.

“Takes some getting used to,” said Deacon. “You’ll get to it.”

“I shouldn’t have to!” Cassidy gasped. “This is so horrific! It’s like living in a horror vid and I hated those!”

Deacon said nothing, but he rested his hand on her back a moment in a gesture of comfort. His touch was warm and she appreciated it. Having been raised in an affectionate family, she realized with sadness that no one had hugged her since before the war. Probably no one will ever again, she thought. Unless I help daddy and find Shaun.
Cassidy took a deep breath. “Can you just lead us through this. I’m going to stare at your back and not look at this revolting mess.”

“You don’t want to go through the bodies for goodies?” he asked with a grin.

“Deacon!” she cried out.

“Come on then kid,” he said chuckling.

“I’m not a kid!” she said indignantly.

“Right. How old are you then? Let me guess. 16.”

She wanted to say 22 but didn’t figure he’d believe a word of it.

“18. I’ll be 19 in February. Codsworth would know when that is.”

Deacon laughed. “Like I said. You’re a kid, Charmer.”

“I’m an adult,” she said. “I don’t appreciate being called a kid just because I’m young and don’t know everything.”

He chuckled again. “That sounds like a description of one!”

She scowled at him and he continued leading them.

Cassidy recognized the area around the city. It was definitely the old ball field.

“It was called Fenway Park,” she said.

“What was?” asked Deacon.

“The baseball diamond. Diamond City.”

Deacon faced her. “This area here is called The Fens. That explains it.”

He never asked how she knew that.

There were huge metal doors covering where the entrance used to be. There was a speaker off to the left, and a woman in a faded red trench coat was shouting animatedly into it.

“What do you mean you can’t open the gate?” she shouted. “Stop playing around Danny! I’m standing out in the open here for crying out loud!”

“I got orders not to let you in, Ms. Piper,” crackled the voice on the speaker. “I’m sorry. I’m just doing my job!”

“I’m sorry but Mayor McDonough’s really steamed, Piper. Saying that article you wrote was all lies. The whole city’s in a tizzy.”

Piper grunted in frustration and stamped her foot. “You open this gate right now Danny Sullivan! I live here. You can’t just lock me out!”

She sighed heavily and turned around, seeing Cassidy. She beckoned to her. “You. You want into
Diamond City right?"

Cassidy turned to Deacon, but he had disappeared. She walked over to Piper. “I...I guess so.”

She was about to say something else when Piper interrupted her.

“Shh. Just play along.” She leaned back towards the speaker. “What was that? You said you’re a trader up from Quincy? You have enough supplies to keep the general store stocked for a whole month? Huh!”

She waited a moment as Cassidy stared at her. “You hear that Danny?” continued Piper. “You gonna open the gate and let us in? Or are you going to be the one talking to crazy Myrna about losing out on all this supply?”

Piper gestured wildly although Danny couldn’t see her.

The speaker crackled and Danny sighed heavily. “Geez, alright. No need to make it personal, Piper. Give me a minute.”

Piper grinned at Cassidy. “Better head inside quick before old Danny catches on to the bluff!”

There was a screeching of metal and the huge door began to lift. “Umm, you first,” said Cassidy. She didn’t want to go in without Deacon. Where had he gone?

Piper turned and walked off. Cassidy took a few steps towards the little turnstiles then looked back, hoping to see Deacon. He had told her he’d be nearby but that she’d be doing the talking. She just hadn’t counted on him being completely invisible.

“Piper!” exclaimed an annoyed male voice. “Who let you back inside? I told Sullivan to keep that gate shut!”

Intrigued, Cassidy went in. A heavyset older man, dressed in a faded brown suit and bowler hat faced Piper, a scowl on his face. He shook his fist dramatically.

“You devious, rabble rousing slanderer! The...the level of dishonesty in that paper of yours! I’ll have that printer scrapped for parts!”

“Ooh!” Piper cried, arms wide. “Is that a statement, Mr. McDonough?” She ran a hand across the air. “Tyrant mayor shuts down the press!” She turned to Cassidy.

“Why don’t we ask the newcomer? You support the news? Cause the Mayor’s threatening to throw free speech in the dumpster!”

Cassidy shrugged awkwardly. “What newspaper are you talking about?” she asked.

“Mine,” said Piper proudly. “Publick Occurrences, and we’re the hard look at the truth. So, are you with us or not?”

“I guess I always believed in freedom of the press,” said Cassidy.

The Mayor turned to her, his face suddenly a mask of congeniality that she was sure he wasn’t feeling. “Oh I didn’t mean to bring you into this argument, Miss. No no no. You look like Diamond City material.” He straightened his tie. “Welcome to the great green jewel of the Commonwealth. Safe. Happy. A fine place to come, spend your money, settle down. Don’t let this muckraker here tell you otherwise, alright?”
Cassidy gave a small smile. “Ok, thanks.”

He beamed. “Was there anything particular you came to our city for?”

“I’m looking for someone,” she said simply, not wanting to tell too much to a person she didn’t know if she could trust.

“We have stores, doctors, schools, power, running water, and the Wall as our sacred protector. You’ll learn more about the Wall soon I’m sure. So what exactly did you come here for?”

“Umm, who would I talk to about finding a missing person?” It was a vague enough request. No details needed. It didn’t seem like the man would let it go otherwise.

“Well whatever you do,” said Piper. “Don’t bother going to Diamond City security for help.”

The Mayor waved her away dismissively. “Don’t listen to her. While I’m afraid that our security team can’t follow every case that comes through, I’m confident you can find help here.”

Piper rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Diamond City has every conceivable service known to man,” continued the Mayor. “One of our great citizens can surely find the time to help you.”

“Like who?” asked Cassidy. “You must know everyone, who can help me?”

His expression softened considerably as he looked at her. There was most certainly something innocent and charming about her. “Well, there is one private citizen, Nick Valentine. A...detective of sorts, who specializes in tracking people down. Usually for debts or whatnot.”

Cassidy nodded. “Ok, thank you.”

The Mayor stood up straighter and fussed with his jacket. “Now, I have to get going. I’m sorry Diamond City security doesn’t have time to help, but I’m sure Mr. Valentine charges a reasonable fee.”

Piper let out an exclamation. “This is ridiculous! I want the truth McDonough! What’s the real reason security always shrivels away when talk of missing persons comes up?”

The Mayor scowled. “I’ve had enough of this, Piper. From now on, consider you and that little sister of yours on notice!”

Piper let out a barking laugh. “Yeah, keep talking McDonough. That’s all you’re good for.”

He grunted and waved as he walked away.

Piper smiled at Cassidy. “I’m impressed. Not everyone can claw information from McDonough’s tight-fisted hands. Hmm, why don’t you stop by my office after you see Valentine? I think I just found my next story.”

Cassidy was puzzled. Story? What story? She had no desire to go near the strange woman again. She had too much to deal with already. And where was Deacon? Was Nick Valentine the detective he’d mentioned to her earlier?

“It’s ok, Charmer,” said Deacon’s voice from the shadows. “I’m right here. Haven’t let you out of my sight.”
She spun around as he stepped into view. He was dressed like the security guard at the ramp leading into the stands. She blinked.

“Blending in is what I do best,” he said softly. “So you heard about Valentine. That’s the detective you need to go and see.”

“How did you change so quickly?” she asked.

He smiled deviously and she sighed. “Right. No questions.”

Deacon indicated the ramp that led into the city. “After you, Charmer,” he said.
Chapter Summary

To Cassidy's dismay, things don't go as smoothly as she hoped when she sets foot in Diamond City.

The city, such as it was, astonished her. What had once been a baseball field was now a thriving metropolis. Although the buildings were ramshackle and horrible to look at, and the smell wasn’t much of an improvement, it was better than living out in the open.

She turned to Deacon. “Are you coming with me?”

“Charmer, I’m always with you. You might not see me but I’m here. Go find Nick. Explore the city. I have business to attend to and I’ll come find you. It’s safe here, you’ll be ok.”

Dogmeat stood at her side and looked up expectantly.

“You need proper food, I know,” she said. “Before I find Mr. Valentine, I’ll find you a nice juicy bone.”

Dogmeat barked gleefully.

She wanted to ask Deacon a question but when she turned back to him, he was already gone.

Well, she thought. Here we go then.

The first building she went into turned out to be a church of some kind. The priest was a scarred but kind looking man. There were people sitting in the pews, some praying, some just staring off into space.

“Welcome to the All Faiths Chapel,” he said gently. “I’m Pastor Clements. No matter what you believe, this is a safe place to be. You must be new here. I haven’t seen you before.”

“Yes, I’m...I’m new,” Cassidy said a bit awkwardly. She’d never been a church goer like many of her neighbors. “I need to find Mr. Valentine, the detective. Do you know where he is?”

The Pastor nodded. “I sure do. He’s helped so many of us out. His office is down the back way. Walk straight towards Moe’s shop on the main drag, then go left. You’ll see signs. Can’t miss them. You lose someone?”

Cassidy felt a quiet comfort in the Pastor’s presence, enough to respond. “My baby brother. Someone took him and I don’t know where to even start. And I need a doctor for my daddy. He got shot and needs help too.”

The Pastor clucked sympathetically. “You sure have had a hard go of it. Sorry to hear that. But if anyone can help you find your brother it’ll be old Nick. As for docs, we have Dr. Sun and Dr.
Cassidy tilted her head. “Facial reconstruction?”

“Yeah. You know, when you want a new face, you go see him.”

She blinked. “People do that? Get new faces? Really?”

Pastor Clements nodded. “Don’t they do that everywhere? Figured it was a pretty common thing these days. What city you from?”

“Uhh, I’m from a Vault.” As she said the words, she wasn’t sure he would believe her.

“Land sakes, you don’t say! No wonder you look like a lost pup. Well you go see those people. Diamond City has it all.” He shook his head in amazement. “A vault dweller. Never thought I’d see one for real!”

Cassidy thanked him and went back outside. She saw the Publick Occurrences office, and a little girl out front standing on a crate and waving a paper in her hand.

“Get your copy of the Publick!” she called out. “Read about the truth about the Institute!”

Cassidy wandered over. “Hello,” she said.

“Free paper to newcomers,” said the child. “If the Institute grabs you in the night, at least we warned you!”

There was that name again. “The Institute?” asked Cassidy, wondering what the child would have to say about it.

The little girl’s eyes grew wide. “You ain’t heard of the Institute? They snatch people up in the night and no one hears from them again! It’s all in the paper. Better read up before they grab you, too.”

“Who’s gone missing?” asked Cassidy. Could there be more people like her brother?

“Drifters, residents, stadium seat snobs,” said the little girl. “Seems every year or so someone is gone, and we all know why.” She narrowed her eyes and tried to make her voice ominous. “So you better be careful newcomer. Institute’s out there, and they’ll grab you too. Like I said, it’s all in the paper.”

Cassidy shuddered slightly. “I believe you. Thanks.” She took the offered paper.

The little girl chuckled. “You’re a real lost lamb in the wolf’s den lady. So what are you doing in Diamond City anyway?”

“I came here looking for someone.”

“Let me guess. That someone’s gone missing right? That’s what I’m telling ya. So, who is it?”

“A baby boy. He was kidnapped.” Cassidy figured the little girl was Piper’s sister, the one the Mayor had mentioned. There seemed to be no harm in telling her about it.

“A baby...wow that’s a new one. Usually it’s adults,” said the child. “You’re in bad luck. No one tries to find missing people in Diamond City. Missing people means the Institute’s involved. And no one wants to get the Institute’s attention.”
Cassidy sighed. “You’re a smart kid. Isn’t there someone who isn’t afraid of this Institute?”

“Well,” said the girl. “There’s the detective, Mr. Nick Valentine. He’s not afraid of anything. If anyone’s gonna help you, it’s him.”

_He seems to be the only one anyone thinks will help, Cassidy thought. I really hope they’re right._

“What do you know about Mr. Valentine?” she asked.

The girl shrugged. “I know all the adults who go there won’t admit it. Ain’t that the way it is? No one is ever grateful for the people who help out the most.”

Cassidy nodded. “Thanks. You were a big help.”

“Remember. The Institute’s out there, newcomer. Watch your back!”

Cassidy debated going inside to see Piper, but she didn’t want to get caught up in the newswoman’s drama. Plus she needed to find the detective. She walked further, seeing a man giving a woman dressed in a business suit a haircut. On the other side of the street she saw a sign with the word Doctor on it.

“Hello Doctor,” she said to the dark haired man who was stocking up a first aid box.

“What can I do for you? Radiation poisoning? Injuries?”

She shook her head. “No, my daddy needs help. He was shot but he’s in cryosleep.”

The doctor blinked at her, then frowned. “Do you find it funny, wasting someone’s time with such stories?”

“Stories?” gasped Cassidy, shocked at his adverse reaction. “It’s not a story! He’s in Vault 111. Please, he needs help!”

“Do I look like a fool to you?” asked the doctor, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Cryosleep. Vaults. Such things haven’t been heard of since before the war. Now begone before I summon security to have you removed!”

Cassidy felt her whole body quivering and her eyes began to sting with tears. “I’m not lying! Vault 111 put all of us in cryosleep when the bombs fell. Someone came down there and shot daddy and took my baby brother. I need a doctor to heal him so I can wake him! Please!”

A heavy hand fell on her shoulder. “This kid bothering you doc?” It was Deacon’s voice.

“She’s just looking for attention. She’s leaving now,” said the doctor and turned back to his work.

“Let’s go kid,” said Deacon, steering her away from the doctor, towards a bend in the walkway.

Cassidy pulled away from his grasp. “Deacon, I explained what I needed! He wouldn’t believe me, he said I was lying! I’m not!”

“Hey, Charmer,” said Deacon gently, cupping her chin. “This isn’t the way to go about it. People aren’t going to believe you too easily.”

“Did you hear what I told him?” she asked.

Deacon nodded.
“You believe me though, right?” Cassidy closed a hand around his wrist.

“Totally and completely. We’ll get you what you need but not this way. Trust me?”

She looked away, then back at him, not appreciating her own reflection in his glasses. “I hardly know you,” she whispered. “I need help for my daddy, though.”

“I know you do,” said Deacon. “Just trust me, ok?”

She nodded.

“Let’s go find your detective,” he said, and let go of her.

Nick Valentine’s office was in a narrow alleyway lit up by his neon sign, which said Valentine Detective Agency with a heart and arrow.

The big orange metal door stuck a bit when she went to open it, and Deacon leaned on it for her. “I’ll be out here waiting for you,” he said. “I’ll get Dogmeat that bone you promised him, too.”

The dog barked and spun around excitedly.

It was dimly lit inside, filled with boxes of files, filing cabinets and two desks. A woman in a ratty looking outfit stood at the far end, mumbling to herself and rifling through a box.

“Umm... hi?” said Cassidy.

The woman stood up with a heavy sigh. “Another stray, coming in from the rain.” She turned around and faced Cassidy with sad eyes. “I’m afraid you’re too late. Office is closed.”

“I know you must be busy, but I won’t take up much of your time, miss. It’s important.”

The woman pursed her lips. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude but it’s just...the detective. He’s gone missing.”

Cassidy’s heart sank. “Missing...oh no. What happened? Do you have any idea how I could find him?”

After hearing the stories about the Institute kidnapping people, she feared the worst.

“He disappeared working a case,” said the woman, crossing her arms disconsolately. “Skinny Malone’s gang had kidnapped a young woman and he tracked them down to their hideout in Park Street Station. There’s an old vault down there that they use as a base. I told Nick he was walking into a trap, but he just smiled and walked out the door like he always does.”

Cassidy had no idea who she was talking about. “Who’s Skinny Malone?”

“I don’t know much about him,” the woman replied. “He’s from Goodneighbor, that means he’s into the well pressed suits and machine gun school of thuggery.”

“Goodneighbor?” asked Cassidy.

“Yeah it’s a tough neighborhood. Northeast a ways. People with power there care about two things: style and body count.”

Cassidy’s shoulders slumped. They sounded like the gangsters from her time. People you didn’t mess around with no matter what. But Nick was her only lead to finding her brother. If she could
find and help him, he’d hopefully be willing to do the same for her.

“I guess I’ll try and find him,” she said insecurely. “You said Park Street Station? As in the subway?”

The woman blinked. “Subway? I don’t know what that is, but there’s a vault down there somewhere. That’s all I know about it.”

“Ok,” said Cassidy. “I’m Cassidy by the way. Cassidy Hartley.”

“Ellie Perkins,” the woman replied with a small smile. “I’m Nick’s office assistant. I really hope you can find him. At least you know how to use a weapon. Me, not so much.”

Cassidy considered her rifle. “I can show you how to use them. They can be pretty fun. Well they were when it wasn’t a matter of life or death to use them.”

Ellie gave a wry smile. “There’s a story there. In fact the whole of you looks like a story waiting to be told. Please be careful. And good luck.”

Cassidy stepped out of the office and sighed heavily. Why couldn’t something just come together smoothly? Now she had to try and find a man she didn’t know, in a place she wasn’t familiar with. A vault of all things.

She had to find Dogmeat and Deacon.
Cassidy and Deacon go off in search of the missing detective.

Park Street Station had seen better days. Cassidy used to love riding on the subway through the underground world of the city. Like everything else in the Commonwealth it had fallen to wreck and ruin. Debris and dirt was everywhere, not to mention an abundance of skeletons. However, they didn’t bother her nearly as much as the rotting dead did.

“No one ever bothered to bury the dead?” she asked Deacon.

“Like who?” he asked. “After the bombs fell there weren’t too many people left. Some of these skeletons have been here since then I’m sure.”

“It’s sad,” said Cassidy. “These were people. Friends and neighbors and someone’s parent or child.” She didn’t allow her mind to wander over the possible fate of her mother, her uncle and her friends.

“I get you,” said Deacon. “But when faced with survival, little things like burials go by the wayside. Population still hasn’t caught up to what it was then either.”

“But now, how come no one buries these skeletons and the other deads?”

“Why would they, Charmer?” he asked. “People don’t think the way you used to. It’s a hard life. They don’t care about anything but surviving. People do things that get them something. Burying the dead doesn’t.”

She didn’t like it but he was right. It was a whole new world.

“So there’s supposed to be a vault down here?” he asked, changing the subject. “Let’s find it.”

Deacon led the way down into the subway where the trains had once been. The tunnels had long since caved in, and a few trains were overturned or lay on their sides. There were holes in the walls where they could get through to connecting tunnels.

Cassidy saw more skeletons, some with suitcases beside them, others with empty chem containers at their side. She found a skeleton beside a baby carriage. She didn’t want to look too closely, and called Dogmeat back to her side so he didn’t disturb their final resting places.

“I’m sorry, Charmer,” said Deacon. “I imagine it must be really hard for you seeing all this.”

She stopped and turned to him. “Why do you say that? You don’t know anything about me! In fact you’ve never even asked me a single thing!”

“Did you already forget? I’m a spy. I know more than you think.”
She blinked. “So you know I’m from a vault? Vault 111? That I was asleep for 200 years? And that my daddy was shot and my baby brother was kidnapped? Do you know that I live in Sanctuary and I have friends there?” She stopped then, remembering that he said he’d overheard what she told the doctor in Diamond City.

Deacon let her talk, and simply watched her without a word.

“Ok you do know, at least some of it,” sighed Cassidy.

She stood there staring at the ground, then looked up at him. He remained silent. Cassidy felt disconnected then, from everything, as though she were some alien being from another world. Slowly she raised her hand and reached out to him.

Deacon hesitated for a split second, then took her hand, giving it a squeeze and holding it.

*She’s totally lost. I can’t imagine how that would feel.*

Cassidy wanted Deacon to put his arms around her and hold her. She wanted the safety of someone’s embrace, to feel like she wasn’t some ghost floating through another’s reality. But Deacon didn’t move. So she held onto his hand, feeling the warmth of it, the realness of it, of him. The contact grounded her once more.

“We ok to get going now?” he asked softly after a few minutes.

Cassidy took a deep breath and nodded, releasing his hand, following him through a turned over train and into a tunnel beyond. The once orderly subway environment became chaotic, with large bits of concrete and rebar laying everywhere.

“Dogmeat, be careful,” she said. “Don’t cut your paws on the stuff in here.” The shepherd whined softly but it seemed he understood, staying close by her instead of roaming off as he usually did.

Deacon moved stealthily, barely making any sound as he walked over the uneven ground. Cassidy did her best to do the same. As they reached the top of a debris pile, he held up a hand, and crouched down.

“Have a look out there,” he whispered. “See how many guys you can spot. We have to take out as many of them as we can fast because if they spot us and open fire we’re up shit’s creek. I hope you can use that fancy rifle of yours, kid.”

Cassidy bristled. “Again, I’m not a freaking kid, and yes I can.”

She took aim and searched through her scope. “2, 6, 7 and 9 o’clock,” she said. She steadied herself, pulling her energy and focus inward.

“Ok, which one do you want to take?” asked Deacon.

“Shh,” she said.

He was completely unprepared for what happened next. There was a series of sharp *thwips* and one by one, all four of the gangsters dropped, shot in the head one after another.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed. “I thought we were gonna each take one! You’re way too good at that!”

She smiled proudly, glad that she had impressed him. “I was the best. In my time. I was a competitive shooter. I had a lot of awards for my marksmanship.”
“No kidding!” said Deacon even more impressed. “I know a guy who’s a sniper. Always letting everyone know how good he is. I think he’ll find his match in you...and you’ll find someone to relate to.”

She shrugged. “Most guys don’t like me. They thought competing against a girl was beneath them. They hated me more when I beat them.”

Deacon shook his head. “Nah this guy will be stoked to have someone to measure his skill against. I’ll have to introduce you. He hangs around Goodneighbor most of the time. Waiting for contracts.”

Cassidy raised her eyebrows. “He’s a hit man?”

“Mercenary, yeah.”

“No thanks. I don’t want to associate with hit men!”

Deacon sighed. “Listen, Charmer. This isn’t your time anymore. The days of tea parties and frilly dresses are over. You do what you have to do to survive. There’s a lot of really shitty people out there, you’ve met a few. Not everyone can fend for themselves and when faced with a bully sometimes there’s no choice but to pay someone else to do it for you. There are a lot of families out there who are vulnerable and raiders are cruel and ruthless. So don’t dump on people til you know their story.”

Cassidy felt duly chastised. He was right. She still thought about life the way it once had been. Civilized, genteel, lawful. Now, justice was found at the end of a weapon.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” she said softly, taking his hand in both of hers.

The sudden contact surprised him.

Don’t let her get too close, he warned himself, and pulled his hand back, making a pretense of readjusting his holster.

“Don’t have to be sorry, Charmer. I get it. It’s rough. Just going to give you food for thought sometimes. Anyway, let’s move on.”

Deacon encouraged her to check the bodies for anything salvageable. She didn’t want to, but gave in and dug up a pocket watch and ammo that matched her rifle. Deacon picked up a few of the small pistols.

The area narrowed into a set of metal walkways that culminated in a huge vault door marked Vault 114.

A control panel sat in front of it. She pulled out the cord from her pip-boy and plugged it in, making a little lid pop open. A large red button was inside it.

“I never thought to ask how we were going to get into the vault,” said Deacon. “But obviously you had to get out of yours somehow.”

With a considerable amount of noise, the vault door receded and rolled away, the catwalk moving into place.

“Stay to the sides,” said Deacon. “If this is their hideout there’ll be a lot of them down here and they won’t ask questions before taking our heads off.”
Cassidy did as she was asked, and they slowly made their way forward, the dog staying behind Deacon in the shadows. There were guards posted, but they were bored and had no interest in paying attention, believing no one would be able to get into the vault anyway.

They were easy targets for Cassidy and she dropped them quickly without a sound. It shocked her how easily she could kill now, without that much of a thought.

“I never imagined I’d grow up to be a serial killer,” she said ruefully.

“I think pretty much everyone is a serial killer out here. I mean some of us killed more than three people before we hit 10. Different time and place Charmer.”

“That’s true but I don’t have to like it,” she said. “I don’t want to get used to being a killer. I just want to get help for my daddy and find my brother then go home and just live like normal.”

Deacon shook his head. “Do you really think that anyone can live normally in this world? There will always be dangers out there. It sucks I get it. But that’s reality for you.”

“I still intend to live like a normal family no matter what. Daddy will know what to do when he wakes up.”

Deacon said nothing. But his heart was heavy for her. Denial could offer some protection to the psyche, but it never lasted forever.

They made several wrong turns into dead ends and had to backtrack a few times. They nearly ran right into a patrol and luckily Deacon had the upper hand when Cassidy froze. She was no good up close and personal and he made a mental note to get her some hand to hand combat training or she’d never make it.

Finding where the detective was being held wasn’t too difficult. A mouthy henchman had been put on guard duty and was antagonizing someone in a room through a window.

This time it was Deacon who took out the guard. As the man’s head exploded in a show of blood and gore, a voice called out from behind the glass.

“Hey you! I don’t know who you are, but we got three minutes before they realize muscles-for-brains ain’t coming back. Get this door open!”

Cassidy saw a terminal attached to the wall. Thankfully the code wasn’t difficult and she got the door opened.

The detective was standing in the shadows. “Ahh my lady in shining armor. The question is why does she come all this way, risk life and limb, for an old private eye?”

He lit up a cigarette then, and Cassidy saw a skeletal metal hand. As he stepped into the light, she gasped. Two bright yellow pinpoints of light blinked at her out of a sallow colored face, whose flesh was barely clinging to a metal frame.
“Woah, what...what are you?!” she exclaimed, stepping back. She felt her body hit Deacon’s, and she turned her head to look up at him. He moved back.

“I’m a detective,” he answered. “I know the skin and the metal parts ain’t comforting, but it’s not important right now. The only thing that matters is why you went through all this trouble to cut me loose.”

“I need your help,” said Cassidy. “Someone shot my daddy and kidnapped my baby brother.”

“Missing kid huh? Well, you came to the right man. Name’s Nick. Nick Valentine if you already didn’t know.”
He took a long drag from his cigarette. “I’ve been cooped up in here for weeks. Turns out the runaway daughter I came here to find wasn’t kidnapped. She’s Skinny Malone’s new flame and she’s got a mean streak. Anyway, you got troubles and I’m glad to help. But now ain’t the time. Let’s blow this joint. Then we’ll talk.”

Cassidy couldn’t help but grin. _He sounds just like the detectives from the old holovids mom used to like watching._ “I like how you talk,” she said.

“Nice to know you approve,” said Nick, crushing out his cigarette.

He looked up at Deacon standing in the doorway. “And who might you be?”

“That’s Deacon,” said Cassidy. “He’s my friend. I couldn’t have found you without him.”

“Well now I know Deacon, and you know me, but I don’t have a name for you yet. Or this handsome fella here.” Nick reached down and petted Dogmeat, who looked up at him happily.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m Cassidy. Cassidy Hartley. And that’s Dogmeat.”

“Good to know you, Cassidy Hartley,” said Nick. “Could have picked a better name for the pup though. Now let’s get a move on.”

He led them through the vault, telling a bit about Malone’s gang. Cassidy wasn’t particularly interested in gangsters, to her they were bad news and she wanted to get away from them as fast as possible.

Any guards they came across were taken down quickly and quietly by her, and Nick commented a few times how deadly she was with that weapon.

“I shouldn’t feel complimented on my murder skills,” she said. “But thank you.”

Nick seemed to have a skill for opening doors. A few of the vault doors were stuck and wouldn’t open. He pulled open the control panel and using his skeletal metal hand, was able to manipulate it to open enough for them to get through.

Cassidy still couldn’t figure out just what he was. She’d heard stories in her time about androids but didn’t figure any had ever been built. Deacon’s explanation of synths didn’t fit either: Nick didn’t look human enough.

They followed the detective further into the vault. Stairs went down, and then went back up. By the third set Nick scowled. “More stairs? Who built this damn vault? A fitness instructor?”

Cassidy burst out laughing.

Nick grinned. “Got a sense of humor, this one,” he said.

A few more doors and they arrived at a large room. “Look, we’ll have to get through Skinny Malone and his boys,” said Nick.

“Great,” said Cassidy. “Gangsters? I don’t want to deal with those face to face! They’re dangerous!”

“Hopefully it won’t come to a fight. I’m gonna try and talk to him.”

Cassidy was dubious, but followed him anyway. There was really no other choice.
Nick stopped at another doorway and listened. “I think he’s beyond this door. Be ready for anything.”

As they stepped into a partially lit room, a sharply accented voice rang out.

“Nicky! What’re ya doin’? Come into my house. Shoot up my guys. You have any idea how much this is gonna set me back?”

A very large man in a clean dark suit stepped forward. His hair was cropped short, and his jowls protruded from his collar.

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for your two timing dame, Skinny,” retorted Nick. “You ought to tell her to write home more often.”

Beside Malone stood a woman in a sequined grey dress. Her dark hair was cut in a severe bob that matched the harsh angles of her face.

“Aww poor little Valentine,” she mocked. “Ashamed you got beat up by a girl? I’ll just run back home to daddy shall I?”

Darla wrinkled up her nose. “I told you we shoulda just killed him!” she screeched. “But then you had to get all sentimental. All that stupid crap about the old times.

Malone huffed at her. “Darla, I’m handling this! Skinny Malone’s always got things under control.”

“Oh yeah?” she barked. “Then what are these other two doing here? Valentine must have brought them here to rub us all out!”

Cassidy stepped towards the woman. “Darla,” she said. “Listen to me. You have a home to go back to. A daddy who loves you. I lost my whole family. I’d give anything to have them back. You don’t want to throw your whole life away with gangsters!”

Darla stared at her. The little girl with the wide blue eyes and odd colored hair faced her fearlessly. Most people were afraid of her. She’d worked hard to earn that reputation, especially among Malone’s crew.

“Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?” she barked.

“I’m no one,” said Cassidy. “Just a person who woke up one day and everything I knew and loved was gone. Family is everything. If you have a family, go back to them. Your daddy is so worried about you that he paid Mr. Valentine to come find you.”

Darla’s face fell. “Daddy did that? Is it true? You didn’t come here to kill us?”

Nick shook his head. “He’s beside himself with worry. He knows it can’t come to a good end if you hang out with guys like this, Darla. What do you say? Turn around and go home where you belong.”

Cassidy saw a woman’s coat and bag lying on the ground. She picked them up and held them out to Darla.
“Come on, just go. Get away from this guy.”

Stunned, Darla took the items. No one had ever shown her any concern. Certainly not her self-indulgent, ego-centric mother, and she’d believed her father hadn’t even noticed she was missing. His life had always been focused on making money.

Darla knew she’d followed Malone and the crew to punish him, but it was too easy to fall into the lifestyle once she was in it. All she’d ever wanted was for her father to notice she even existed. And apparently he did. “Daddy misses me? I’ve gotten all messed up!”

She accepted the coat and bag from Cassidy and started walking.

“Darla!” called Malone, surprise in his voice. “Wh...where are you goin’?”

She stopped and turned back to him. “Home, Skinny. Where I should have stayed in the first place. You never kept your promises anyway, so goodbye.”

Exasperated, Malone turned to Nick. “Come on Nicky! You cost me my men, now you and your friends cost me my girl?”

“My friend here just did you a favor, Skinny,” said Nick. “You always did have bad taste in women. Now that she’s not around to feed that temper of yours maybe you’ll see sense and let us walk. You still owe me for two weeks in the hole.”

Malone snorted with disgust. “You smug, overconfident ass! Alright! You get to the count of ten. I still see your face after that I’m gunning all of you down. The dog too!”

Nick nodded and looked at Cassidy. “We better get out of here, fast.”

She sprinted forward, Deacon and Nick behind her. Dogmeat ran ahead and she hoped he was leading them to the exit.

“There’s a service ladder nearby,” called Nick. “It’ll get us to the surface.”

She let him pass her. She had no idea where Darla had gone, and she didn’t have time to worry about it.

They hit the surface and the warm sun felt so good. Cassidy sat down on the bumper of a derelict car. “That was more adventure than I planned for. Do you think Malone will come after you Mr. Valentine?” she asked.

“No, that’s not his way. If he wanted me dead he’d have done it already. As for you, you can just call me Nick. I owe you a big thank you. I’m guessing Ellie told you where I’d gone?”

She nodded.

“I think I owe her a raise,” said Nick. “Now you had some questions back there. Could see it in those baby blues of yours.”

Cassidy nodded. “Just...just what are you, Nick?”

“You really don’t know? I’m a synth. Synthetic man. All the parts, minus a few red blood cells.”

Cassidy looked confused. “I thought synths were supposed to look human.”

Nick lit another cigarette. “Only the most recent ones. I got built, I got old, I got tossed. Then I
opened up that little agency in Diamond City and it turns out people have plenty of problems to solve. Now, *you* have a case you need help with. Let’s go back to my office. I can see there are still plenty of questions but I don’t want to be out here when it gets dark.”

He turned and walked off quickly, Cassidy, Deacon and Dogmeat following along.
Chapter Summary

Cassidy shares her story with Nick, and they decide their next move.

Cassidy explained to Nick as best she could the situation surrounding her little brother’s kidnapping. It was rough going at times. Both Nick and Ellie were so kind and patient with her, which brought her to tears more than once.

As she heard herself tell the story, she felt more and more hopeless about the situation. Her brother was probably gone. It was a vast city, a huge world and he could be anywhere with anyone.

Nick was puzzled by the taking of a child. An infant that would need a lot of care. It didn’t sound like an emotional situation: the child hadn’t been taken to satisfy some wealthy person’s need for a baby. Not with the comments that were made toward Cassidy about being “the backup”.

No, her family had been targeted for a reason. And since they had lived in prewar times, it made even less sense.

“There’s a lot of groups in the Commonwealth who take people,” said Nick. “Raiders, Super Mutants, the Gunners, and of course there’s the Institute.”

There it was again. That dreadful Institute. From what she’d heard so far, it would not be a good thing if they were involved. No one knew anything about them!

“You don’t think they are involved do you?” she asked, fear in her eyes.

She felt Deacon’s warm hand on her shoulder, and sighed softly as a feeling of comfort stole over her, but when she raised her hand to make contact with his, she felt him withdraw back to the edge of the shadows.

“Well, they’re the boogeyman of the Commonwealth,” said Nick. “Something goes wrong, everyone blames them. It’s easy to see why. Those early model synths of theirs strip whole towns for parts, killing everything in their way.” Nick turned around and opened a new pack of cigarettes. “Then you got the newer models, good as human, that infiltrate cities and pull strings from the shadows.”

“But why?” she asked. “Why do they do that?”

“No one knows why,” he said, lighting up the cigarette and taking a deep drag. “Don’t know what their plan is, or where they are. Not even me, and I’m a synth myself! A discarded prototype anyway.”
“You’re a prototype?” asked Cassidy, that explained his unique look.

“As far as I know. Never seen another synth like myself. I’m somewhere in between the all metal ones that are dumb as rocks, and the ones that are indistinguishable from humans.”

“But you’re from the Institute right? You can’t remember anything?” She was so close to having answers of some kind about the mysterious Institute, whom she still hoped wasn’t part of her little brother’s kidnapping.

“Some kind of security setting strips or blocks out those memories. And it’s not just me. Any synth that gets trashed, left behind or escapes the Institute has the same problem. Probably some kind of failsafe.”

Cassidy looked downcast. “But I need to find my little brother. I have to find Shaun.”

“Yes. We need to focus. Is there anything you can remember about the kidnappers?” asked Nick.

“You said the man came right up to your pod. I know it’s hard, but if you can, close your eyes and see if you can describe him for me.”

Cassidy didn’t want to remember that ghastly moment, but this was the only way. She closed her eyes.

“His voice. I’ll never forget it. Low and rough. Like sandpaper across your face. He...he had a gun. He shot daddy! Then when he came up to me...his face. It was thin and he was balding. Small eyes, beady and so cruel. And the scar...across his left eye.”

Nick suddenly looked up at Ellie. She raised her eyebrows. “Wait...you didn’t happen to hear the name Kellogg did you?”

Cassidy opened her eyes. “You know him? Do you think he has Shaun?”

Nick sighed. “I’m not sure. Might be a coincidence but…” He turned to Ellie. “What notes do we have about the Kellogg case? Got to be around here somewhere, see if you can find it.”

Ellie turned to a filing cabinet and pulled open a drawer. “The description matches. Bald head, raspy voice, deep scar. Had a reputation for dangerous mercenary work but no one knows who his employer is.”

“He had a house here in town right? And he had a kid with him didn’t he?”

Ellie nodded and pulled up a few file folders. “Yeah, that’s right! The house was in the abandoned West Stands. The boy with him was around 10 years old.”

Cassidy slumped. “It’s not Shaun. My brother is a baby, not even a year old.”

“It’s a start,” said Nick. “The kid might be his own son, or another one he kidnapped. Either way, they both vanished a while back.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cassidy.

“Mayor’s secretary came to see me. Said Kellogg hadn’t paid the upkeep for his place. She wanted to know if he was coming back or not so she could put it back on the market. At that point he’d been missing for two weeks and no one had seen either him or the boy.”

“Don’t people leave all the time?”
Nick nodded. “They sure do. But she wanted to make sure she didn’t sell a place that was still occupied. Was jumping the gun a bit, it’d only been two weeks but she wanted me to check it out. She had to wait at least a month anyway. I still have the key. Why don’t you and me take a walk over there and see if we can’t dig up some clue to where he went. Before someone else moves in.”

“Security doesn’t really go to that part of town,” said Ellie. “But you two should still be careful.”

Nick smiled at her. “I always am,” he said.

Cassidy stood up. “Deacon, are you coming?”

He shook his head. “Nah you’re safe here in DC. I’ll go and have something to eat. I’ll find you when it’s time for the next step,” said Deacon.

He receded into the shadows as Cassidy followed after Nick, Dogmeat at the detective’s heels.

“Odd fellow,” said the synth. “Likes the shadows.”

“He’s really nice though. He saved my life from raiders. I would have died.”

“Death is the easy option when it comes to raiders,” said Nick. “You’re lucky he happened by.”

“It’s scary out here,” said Cassidy softly.

“Takes some getting used to. You’ll be ok though. You walked into the lion’s den without a thought to help out a guy you didn’t know. I’d say you’re 10 shades of alright.”

Cassidy smiled. The strange looking detective with the glowing eyes seemed like a good person as well. “I’m glad I did,” she said.

Kellogg’s house was in the abandoned part of the Upper Stands. Nick explained that the well-to-do had claimed those parts of the city as their own. The west side had been the first to be settled, but over time they abandoned it for the opposite end. The price of a home in the west had dropped and it was mostly transients who rented it out for a month or two. People like Kellogg.

“Did you investigate his place before, Nick?” Cassidy asked.

“Honestly? I went in and just looked for signs of foul play. Didn’t find any. Like I said, this area is used by transients. I figured he just up and left. I told Geneva that and suggested she wait out the month.”

They reached a doorway, and Cassidy didn’t see how the Upper Stands looked any better than other places in the city.

Nick used his key, and they stepped inside. It was dark and he pulled a flashlight from his pocket. “I guess they turned the power off. Makes sense. Now, we need to find some candles or something and go through this place with a fine tooth comb.”

Cassidy found some and Nick lit them. “What are we looking for exactly?” She asked.

“Anything and everything. Clues as to who this man was. Who the kid was with him. Where they were from and where they could have gone.”

Cassidy took the flashlight. The place was small and sparsely furnished. There were empty bookshelves, an empty filing cabinet, one ruined sofa chair, an old desk and a metal shelf with a few boxes and cans of food. Scraps of paper littered the floor, but had nothing written on them. Not
even so much as a doodle.

“There’s nothing here,” lamented Cassidy.

“There’s always something,” said Nick. “The devil’s in the details.”

He tapped on the walls. “Sounds hollow back here. I wonder if there’s something to that.” He wandered back and forth, tapping and searching.

Cassidy shone her light around and went to the desk. There was nothing in the drawers but as she bent to close the bottom, something caught her eye.

“Nick there’s something here under the desk. A button of some kind.”

“Good work. Go ahead and press it.”

She balked. “What if it’s a trap and we blow up?”

The synth shook his head. “Any booby traps would spring the moment anyone walked in the door. I’ve already been here remember? Nothing here to protect. It’s fine.”

Gingerly she pushed the little red button and waited for something cataclysmic to fall upon them. There was not a sound for a moment then the wall Nick had been tapping on suddenly began to move.

“Well what do you know,” he said and stepped through.

A tiny gloomy room met their eyes. One shelf, an armchair and an end table was all it contained. The little table had an ashtray, a few bullets, a pack of cigars and an empty bottle of beer.

“Hmm,” said Nick. “San Francisco Sunlights. Interesting brand. Won’t lead us anywhere on it’s own though.”

“Any suggestions, Nick?” asked Cassidy.

The detective thought about it. “What about your dog? A Commonwealth mutt like him could track a man’s scent for miles.”

Dogmeat barked and turned in an excited circle.

“He seems eager enough for the job! Why don’t you let him have a whiff of the cigars? See if he picks up on the trail.”

Cassidy picked up the box.

“Hey before you do that,” said Nick. “I figure maybe you feel you need to do this on your own. If so, I get it.”

She stopped. “No, I want you to come with me! I know I have Deacon but you’re the private eye!”

Nick looked pleased. “Alright! Let’s get that bastard.”

She looked insecure. “I’m...I’m pretty scared of what might be out there.”

“It can be intimidating,” said the synth. “But with the four of us, everything will be ok.”
Outside, Cassidy held the cigars out to the Shepherd. “Dogmeat, can you get the scent boy?”

The dog nuzzled the box then barked and danced around her. “You’ve got something? Ok good boy! Show me!”

He turned and ran off down the walkway. She followed him down to the main thoroughfare. “Deacon!” she called out, hoping he was within earshot. “We’re going!”

She didn’t see him anywhere, and Dogmeat was on the run. He’d stop and wait for her every now and then but he was motivated to keep going.

They followed him up the ramp and out of the city, into The Fens. Dogmeat didn’t stop and led them down the ruins of a road.

“Dogmeat!” called Cassidy. “Wait! I only have two legs and they’re tired!”

Dogmeat stopped and barked as she leaned against the remains of a car to catch her breath. He trotted back to her with a soft whine and sat down.

She saw Deacon trailing back a ways, no longer dressed as a security guard but wearing non descript clothing and of course, his ever present sunglasses. She felt a sense of relief at seeing him there.

“I wonder how far we’re going to have to run,” said Cassidy. “I’m not that great at running.”

“Gotta work on that stamina,” said Nick.

“Ew,” said Cassidy, but she stood up and pointed. “Ok Dogmeat let’s go!”

The dog trotted instead of galloping, letting Cassidy and her friends jog at an easier pace. She’d never been to this part of the area before, and wondered if she’d be able to find her way back to Diamond City if she ended up alone.

Dogmeat veered off the road. A small, dirty pond appeared, a tree stump and crate next to it. He barked.

“Looks like he found something,” said Nick.

The remains of a cigar sat crushed out in the ashtray. An opened can of Cram lay on the ground with an empty beer bottle.

Nick sniffed the cigar. “San Fransisco Sunlights,” he said. “Unique brand. Imported from out west,
so it comes at a heavy price. Our man here had expensive tastes.”

He let Dogmeat have a sniff as well and the dog took off up the road again.

Cassidy needed to stop. She called to the dog and he came trotting back. Putting down her pack she dug up a container of water.

“I forget sometimes,” said Nick. “That humans need to rest, eat and drink. Could use the reminder every now and then.”

“Deacon,” said Cassidy as he joined them. “You need some water too, here.”

He shook his head. “I got some on me. Not going to take yours, Charmer.”

In the bright sunlight, Cassidy noticed that his hair was an auburn color and his skin was slightly tanned. He obviously spent a considerable amount of time outside. She went and stood beside him.

“Are you ok Deeks?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure am. It’s all good.” He smiled at her for a moment and she shyly smiled back.

She has a big heart, he thought. She cares.

He’s so handsome, Cassidy thought. I love his smile.

Following a dog through all manner of terrain was not the easiest thing she’d ever done. She had to rest frequently and needed to ration her water as it began to run out.

“I wish I was a synth!” she exclaimed, staring up at the rock face that Dogmeat had just scaled.

“No you don’t,” said Nick. “Well at least not one like me.”

“Well I learned people have face reconstruction,” said Cassidy. “Maybe they have brain swaps too and my brain can be put in a synth body so I won’t get tired and hungry and irritated anymore.”

“You know,” said Nick. “That’s actually a thing. But it’s risky and you’ll still get irritated as a synth. Believe me. You’re just fine the way you are.”

Cassidy grinned and looked at him with appreciation.

Scaling the rock wall wasn’t too bad with Deacon and Nick helping her.

“What if that kid with Kellogg was my brother?” she asked suddenly. “What if this all happened 10 years ago, and Shaun isn’t a baby anymore? What if he doesn’t know anything about me and daddy and mom and he won’t want to come home with me!”

Fear flooded her features and she sat down hard on a fallen log. “There’s a whole bunch of things I’m missing, I can feel it. I mean it feels like it all happened in a few hours but it’s been more than 200 years!”

Feelings overwhelmed her and her mind spun out of control. She covered her face with her hands. Deacon crouched down in front of her and pulled her hands from her face, holding them gently.

“Hey Charmer,” he said softly. “One thing at a time, ok? First we have to find Shaun. Then we deal with whatever we find. I get it, it might not turn out how you hope and that’s scary. But you’re not alone. Ok?”
Cassidy nodded, seeing herself in his mirrored lenses. Her hair was disheveled and coming loose from her ponytail. There was a smear of dirt across her cheek which she reached up and tried to rub away.

Deacon opened his pack and handed her his water. She shook her head. “No, I have my own.”

“I’m used to being out here, you’re not. Now drink it, Charmer.”

She took the water and drank as little as she could before handing it back to him. She reached up and pulled her ponytail tighter but it didn’t help too much. The rest of the day might make an even bigger mess of it.

“Want me to fix that?” asked Deacon.

Her eyes lit up and she nodded.

He stood up and pulled the elastic out as carefully as he could, then smoothed her hair with his hands and did his best to make a neat ponytail for her. “I’m still no good at this,” he said.

Cassidy reached up and felt it. “It’s perfect,” she said and gave him a smile.

His breath caught in his throat for a moment. There was something so special about her. She was beautiful, and had a mix of vulnerability and strength that he found very appealing. Gently, Deacon tucked a shorter stray strand of hair behind her ear and let his fingers rest on her jaw a moment.

_Letting her get under your skin?_ The voice in his mind echoed. A voice that wasn’t his own. _Oh, this will be fun, indeed._ He silenced it, as he had many times before, but withdrew his hand and stepped back from her but his eyes didn’t leave her face.

“We good to go?” asked Nick, bringing him back to reality.

Cassidy nodded and stood up. Dogmeat turned and ran.

They entered the area around a collapsed building. It was made of concrete and stood alone in what appeared to be an empty field. There was a dead raider rotting in a stairwell, and around it, some bloody bits of rag.

Dogmeat barked and pawed at them.

“Looks like our mark had a scuffle with this raider,” said Deacon. “Pretty impressive pup you have there.”

Cassidy didn’t want to touch the rags. She toed them with her boot. “Find him, boy!” she encouraged.

Dogmeat took off up the stairs and back into the field, everyone in pursuit.

They broke away from any semblance of a road and traipsed through shrubbery and wild grass with fallen logs and rocks. Cassidy was envious of Nick, who jogged and leaped the obstacles without effort.

“I’m sure now,” she panted. “I want to be a synth! Makes me focused on finding the Railroad once I get Shaun home and daddy back on his feet.”

“We’re going to talk about all of that,” said Nick. “First things first though. Kellogg.”
Dogmeat led them to the remains of a wire fence. More bloody bandages were littered around it. After a quick sniff, the dog bounded off again.

A large imposing structure came into view, along with several other buildings. It was a town of some sort from the looks of it. The building in the center had a military feel to it.

“Fort Hagen,” said Nick, verifying Cassidy’s thought.

“Was it from the army?” she asked. “I don’t remember daddy ever mentioning it.”

“Definitely military,” answered Nick. “Don’t know much about it’s history but there’s supposedly some command center underground. Did some early warnings before the bombs fell.”

“The only warnings we got were these weird sirens then vertibirds shouting at us from speakers. Didn’t even have time to pack any bags or anything. Soldiers were on the ground herding us all to the Vault.”

“Everyone in your community was signed up with Vault- Tec?” asked Deacon.

“No. Some of my neighbors thought it was stupid and didn’t want to. Mom said that they didn’t believe what happened would actually happen.”

“So what did they do when they got to the Vault, if they weren’t signed up?” asked Nick.

Cassidy shrugged in discomfort. “The soldiers asked if they were on the list and if they weren’t they were told they couldn’t come in. Mr. Davidson, the man who sold us our space was told to leave and he wasn’t on the list either. He was a nice man. They should have let him in. We got told to stand on this platform thing and then...it went down and that’s when the bomb fell. Everything shook and there was this push of air sort of, then it went dark and we were underground.”

She stopped and hugged herself, staring at the ground, the terror of that moment washing over her.

She saw a shadow and Nick’s patent leather shoes, then felt his good hand on her shoulder.

“All right Cassidy. No more. I’m a foolish old synth and should have thought before I spoke. It’s over now. You’re still here and we’re going to find out what happened to your brother.”

She was quiet for a few minutes until the emotions settled down. “Thanks Nick.”

“Anytime doll,” he said kindly.

Deacon stood a few feet away, wanting to take the vulnerable young woman into his arms. No one deserved to go through what she had and a surge of protectiveness went through him. He felt a sharp pang inside as he watched her and Nick, and his feelings surprised him.

All this time you’ve managed to keep away from others, he told himself. Don’t mess that up now. She doesn’t need your brand of bullshit in her life. But Cassidy was awakening a side of him he thought dormant and hoped dead. He was relieved when they started moving again and he could put his mind elsewhere.

They continued to move closer to Fort Hagen. There was no obvious way in. Dogmeat circled and barked, running this way and that. He had the scent, but had no way of following it.

“We need to find a way in. I’m betting this is where he’s holed up,” said Nick.

They searched carefully for any sort of opening or even a secret door but found none.
“Hey!” called Deacon. “Think I’m onto something up here!”

He’d found some scaffolding and climbed up. Nick and Cassidy found their way to him.

“Be careful,” said Deacon. “There are turrets up here. Active ones. So someone is protecting something. Charmer, can you take them out with your rifle?”

Cassidy nodded and crept forward. Scoping out the turrets, she started with one. It took several shots to blow it up. As it did so, it’s tracking was shared with the others and a hail of bullets rained down on the group.

“Well shit!” exclaimed Deacon.

“No problem,” said Cassidy and waited until the machines had to cool down and reload their magazines. There were four in all, and they were each reduced to smoldering ruins by the time she was done.

“Yeah you definitely need to meet MacCready,” said Deacon. “I’m already seeing how much fun you two will have.”

Cassidy smiled shyly. “He’s not as good as me though,” she said. “I’m the best.”

Deacon laughed. “You sounds just like him.”

She wrinkled up her nose. “But he’s wrong!”

Deacon shrugged with a lopsided grin. “Have to see how that turns out.”

He crept out slowly and carefully, but when no more shots rang out he stood up straight and the others followed. Dogmeat walked along behind, sniffing the ground.

A raised platform with two metal doors stood on the edge of one of the buildings. It was crossed with chains and a large rusty padlock.

“This could be an entrance,” said Deacon. “Seen these kinds of things before. Just have to get rid of the padlock. Charmer, this would be a good one for you to practice on.”

Nick stepped forward. “I can handle this nice and quick like.”

“Charmer doesn’t know how to deal with locks. She needs to learn how and why not now?”

Nick shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He stepped back as Deacon handed Cassidy a bobby pin. He began to explain what she was to do. He was patient and quiet while she fiddled with the lock, but she eventually got it.

“Good job. Not bad for your first one. It gets easier, trust me.” Deacon smiled at her and she pulled the padlock off and threw it aside.

As they opened up the doors, a ladder that descended into darkness met their eyes.

“Let me go first,” said Nick. “Then you Cassidy, and Deacon can bring up the rear. Close quarters in there so have your close range weapons ready.”

Cassidy pulled out her pistol and put away her rifle. “Dogmeat you can’t go down a ladder. You’ll have to wait here and be a good boy, ok?”
The dog gave a soft bark and lay down.

As Nick descended then called out to her, anxiety suddenly flooded her mind. She froze.

“It’s alright Charmer,” said Deacon softly. “I got your back.”

She nodded and headed into the gaping darkness.
Cassidy faces the man of her nightmares.

From the moment they entered and moved forward it became apparent that it would not be a quick and easy mission.

Laser fire erupted around them. Deacon grabbed Cassidy’s shoulder and pulled her down as Nick ducked behind a mound of debris.

“Hello?” said an electronic voice. “I know you’re there.”

Cassidy looked around the corner and the color drained from her face as Nick opened fire.

“What is that?!” she cried, horrified. “Deacon!”

A metallic skeletal construct strode towards them wielding a strange looking rifle. Red beams shot from it in Nick’s direction but the detective fired a well aimed shot straight into it’s head. Sparks shot out and the thing stuttered and fell to its knees, then toppled over backwards.

“That’s a Gen 1 synth,” said Nick. “The creepiest of the Institute’s creations. Be mindful of that laser fire. Those shots will hurt like hell.”

Cassidy squeezed her eyes shut and more laser fire erupted. Strange synthesized voices called out, some of them threatening.

“Take them down, Charmer. You’ll feel better.”

“I can’t!” she cried. “They’re freaking me out!”

She felt Deacon’s arms on her shoulders as he gave her a shake. “Snap out of it!” he exclaimed. “If the Institute has your brother you’re gonna have to get used to them, now shoot!”

Cassidy’s eyes were wide with horror but she pulled out her rifle again. Knowing what she would see through her scope, she sought out a synth and took aim. It was indeed satisfying to see the thing crumple to the ground in a shower of arcing electricity.

One by one the synths fell.

“They might look creepy,” said Deacon. “But they don’t rot and stink so you can grab components off them. That stuff sells for quite a bit if you don’t need them for anything.”

He pulled her to her feet. What was left of the interior of the room was a shambles like every other building Cassidy had come across.

“Where do we go?” she asked.
“Well, we came in from the roof,” answered Nick, moving forward. “So the only way for us is down.”

And down they went. Room by room, level by level, synth by synth.

By the third floor, the Gen 1’s had given way to the Gen 2’s. Cassidy hadn’t liked those either, but they at least looked more human. They had eyes like Nick’s, glowing pinpoints of yellow light. But there was actually something behind Nick’s eyes, something the others didn’t have: the spark of life.

“Synths are getting more defensive,” said Nick. “That means someone’s got something they’re trying to prevent us from finding. I’m betting that someone is Kellogg.”

Nick was right.

As they descended yet further, a voice crackled on an intercom.

“Well, if it isn’t my old friend the frozen TV dinner,” it said, the voice gravelly and monotone. “Last time we met you were cozying up to the peas and apple cobbler.”

Cassidy stared at Nick, then Deacon. “Th...that’s him!” she croaked. “That’s the voice I heard in the vault!”

Nick nodded. “Good. We’re on the right track. Let’s keep moving.”

Cassidy chewed on her lower lip but didn’t budge. “I don’t think I can deal with him again,” she said sorrowfully. “He...he was evil!”

“That he is,” agreed Nick. “But he’s the only lead we have right now in finding your brother. You want to take a break? We can do that.”

Cassidy’s eyes scanned all around them nervously but then she shook her head. “No, we need...we need to find him.”

There were electrical traps in the ceiling of the next room, and a fork of lightning hit Deacon and he stumbled back with a cry.

“Deacon!” cried Cassidy and moved towards him.

“No! Stay there!” he called out but it was too late. A fork found her too, a sharp stinging pain that sucked her breath away. She fell to her knees with a yelp, and Nick ran at her, grabbing and dragging her into the hallway.

The trap petered out and Cassidy crawled to Deacon.

“Deeks, are you ok? What was that?”

“Tesla trap,” he said closing his eyes. “Nasty things. We have to be more careful. I’m usually better about this kind of thing. I’ll be fine though. How about you?”

She rubbed her arms. “My hairs are all standing up,” she said, then turned to Nick.

“Thank you. I’d have died if you hadn’t dragged me away.”

“No thanks needed. That’s why I’m here, doll. We need to take a breather after that. Get ourselves focused.”
Cassidy pulled her pack off and dug into it. “I got gumdrops. Anyone want any?”

Nick shook his head.

“That’s all you, Charmer,” said Deacon, leaning his head back against the wall.

The gumdrops weren’t quite as she remembered them but they were still pretty decent. She wasn’t sure if they were 200 years old or if they’d been made more recently but they were alright and the sugar gave her an energy boost.

Deacon got to his feet first, then held his hand out for Cassidy.


“Let’s hope it’s working,” said Nick.

He pushed the call button and heard the whirring of the mechanisms. The door chimed and opened up. Nick stepped inside and jumped up and down. “Feels solid enough, come on in,” he said.

Cassidy wasn’t too sure, but what choice did she have?

The elevator bumped and ground down, opening out onto the basement. There were lights, not the brightest, but better than complete darkness.

“I’m sorry your house has been a wreck for 200 years,” crackled Kellogg’s voice. “But I don’t need a roommate. Leave.”

Cassidy tried to ignore him. They moved onwards, through more rooms and climbed over more debris. The synth attacks had stopped. She questioned that.

“He’s either got the rest of them wherever he is,” said Nick. “Or he didn’t figure on us getting this far. Let’s hope it’s the latter.”

“Huh,” said Kellogg. “I never expected you to come knocking on my door. Gave you 50/50 odds of making it to Diamond City. After that, figured the Commonwealth would chew you up like jerky.”

A long corridor faced them, and suddenly a barrage of laser fire bounced all around them.

“Shit!” cried Deacon. “Knew it was too quiet!”

These synths were tougher than the others. Kellogg was keeping his best close by. Cassidy was unnerved by his voice, and the cruel things he said. But what did she expect? The man was evil.

When the last synth lay smouldering, they pushed onwards.


A turret on the ceiling opened fire, hitting Nick. He grunted and went down on one knee, weapon pointed upwards. He fired several times in succession until the turret came apart in a shower of metal.

“Nick! Are you ok?” Cassidy called out.

The detective slowly got to his feet. “I’ll be fine. But this is why my skin looks like grated cheese.”
Cassidy had to smile at that. Nothing seemed to phase Nick Valentine.

Kellogg seemed to enjoy taunting her. “You got guts and determination, and that’s admirable. But you’re in over your head in ways you can’t possibly comprehend.”

Nick moved on, Cassidy and Deacon following him.

“It’s not too late,” said Kellogg. “Stop. Turn around and leave. You have that option. Not a lot of people can say that.”

They entered a room, which was in better repair than the rest. There was a strange mix of old and decrepit furniture and fixtures along with clean white and technological looking items.

“This has got to be from the Institute,” said Nick.

A clean bed sat in a corner, a desk, a computer, a shelf with strange looking items. All of it a sharp contrast to everything else Cassidy had seen.

“Ok. You made it,” said Kellogg. “I’m just up ahead. My synths are standing down. Let’s talk.”

Cassidy looked at Deacon. “I don’t believe him,” she said.

“Good,” he replied. “Never believe anything anyone says, even me. Especially me, actually.”

“That’s a jaded way to live,” said Nick.

“Living and surviving are two different things, Nick,” answered Deacon.

“Expect anything,” said Nick to Cassidy.

A metal door in front of them opened onto another long corridor. A few stairs led up into a large caged in room. It was dimly lit, a few Gen 2 synths in armor standing by.

“And there she is,” said Kellogg. “The most resilient woman in the Commonwealth.”

Cassidy walked forward slowly. The man from her nightmares stood beside an old console, looking exactly like he had that horrible day.

“You’ve come a long way. Let’s hear it,” he said.

“Where’s my brother? Where’s Shaun?” she asked shakily.

Kellogg snorted. “Kid, I’m just a puppet like you. My stage is a little bigger, that’s all.”

She frowned at his strange words. “What?”

“Shaun’s a good kid. So maybe he’s not quite a baby anymore. But he’s doing great. Only...he’s not here. He’s with the people pulling the strings.” Kellogg’s face betrayed no emotion. Even his eyes were flat and dead.

Cassidy decided right then that she hated him. She’d never hated anyone in her life. She’d always strived to understand others and why they behaved as they did. But the man standing before her didn’t deserve that compassion. It would be wasted on an emotionless husk like him.

“Goddammit!” she cried. “You...you mercenary fucker! Where is my little brother?”
Kellogg blinked. “What’s the cliche? So close but yet so far away? That’s Shaun.” A despicable imitation of a smile pulled the corners of his mouth up. “But don’t worry. You’ll die knowing he’s safe, and happy. A bit older than you expected but ah well. At least he’s in a loving home. The Institute.”

Cassidy gasped, her jaw dropping. She looked at Deacon, whose lips were set in a tight line. She could see the tension in his jaw. Although she had known the possibility existed, to actually hear that her brother was in a place no one could reach was like an icy hand squeezing her heart.

“So where is it? The Institute? How do I get there?”

Kellogg shook his head. “Haven’t you been paying attention? You don’t find the Institute. The Institute finds you.” He sighed. “You open the closet, it’s just a closet. You can never find the monster that hides inside. Not until it jumps out at you.”

Cassidy couldn’t breathe. She felt as though the walls were closing in on her. Her legs felt rubbery and she was sure if she tried to move, she’d slide to the ground as though her bones had disappeared.

Kellogg smirked slightly. “But I think we’ve been talking long enough. We both know how this has to end. So...you ready?”

She heard Deacon inhale sharply beside her.

She heard the scrape of Nick’s metal hand against his gun.

Kellogg reached to his side and unclipped his own weapon.

Cassidy slowly raised her rifle.

“Daddy’s little girl,” said Kellogg. There was no condescension in his voice. No mocking tone, no emotion.

She was daddy’s girl. She had been loved and cared for. She’d had a whole life planned out that ended in one fell swoop. And this man had contributed to that.

“Yes,” she said shakily. “That’s who I am. And I’m proud of it.”

“You’re growing up too fast,” said Nate. “Didn’t you have braids and bows last week?”

“Daddy! That was when I was 8. I’m 16 now. Teach me to drive I’ve been waiting forever!”

“You won’t pull that trigger, little girl,” said Kellogg, his dead eyes boring into her.

“You’re not a little girl anymore,” said Nate smiling at her in her graduation cap and gown. “I’m so proud of you. There’s nothing you can’t do. It’s a big world, you can do a lot of good in it.”

Cassidy took a long, slow, deep breath.

“I must have done something great somewhere to deserve a daughter like you Cassie,” said Nate.

“Nope,” she said laughing. “I’m the one who got lucky. I got the best daddy in the world!”

She heard the click as Kellogg released the safety on his gun.

Daddy’s little girl.
She pulled the trigger.
Cassidy stood staring down at Kellogg’s body, her expression impassive. She was aware of Deacon and Nick making quick work of the few synths around them but she didn’t move.

“Check the body,” said Nick to Deacon. “I’ll have a go at this terminal here. There has to be clues.”

Deacon looked at Cassidy. “Hey Charmer, you ok?”

She didn’t move or look up at him, she just stared at the body.

“I’m going to see if he had anything on him ok?” asked Deacon. “Might be something.”

Cassidy still didn’t move. Deacon grunted with revulsion as he dug through Kellogg’s pockets. He had nothing. As he stood up, something caught his eye.

“Woah, what’s this? Nick, come over here!”

The detective looked up. “One second.”

Deacon held up a small bloody artefact. It looked half biological and half tech. “This was in his head. Any idea what it is?”

Nick pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and did his best to clean the object. He held it in his metallic hand and examined it. “Looks like a cybernetic bit to me. Not a traditional synth component.”

He bent over and poked through the pulpy mess that was the remains of the mercenary’s head. “Two more objects here. This man was heavily augmented but not a synth. I’ll take these with me. Got a feeling they might come in handy. You never know.” He wrapped them up in the handkerchief and put them in his pocket.

He faced Cassidy. “That took a lot of guts, doll,” he said. “He wasn’t going to give in. It was him or you. You did good.”

Deacon tilted her chin up. “Charmer, it’s going to be ok. I promise.”

“No, it is. Yeah this is a setback but it’ll work out.” His thumb ran across her jawline.

Cassidy seemed to come back to life. She blinked, then a look of sorrow filled her eyes. “How?
How can anything ever be ok again? My little brother is gone! If it was raiders or something then we had a chance. But the Institute? Everyone’s been saying how horrific they are! It’s like Hell rose up and just swallowed Shaun! This is so far from ok!”

“Hey,” said Deacon and allowed himself to step closer to her. Placing his hands on the side of her face he gave her a small smile. “Like I said this is just a bump in the road.”

Her expression softened. “Deacon,” she said and rested one hand over his.

“That would be me,” said the spy.

“Stay with me, ok?” she half begged, half asked and he felt his heart turn to liquid and slide down into his stomach.

“You betcha Charmer,” he said tenderly, smiling.

_How sweet_, said the voice in his head. _Shall I take wagers on how long it will take for you to destroy her, too?_

He squeezed his eyes shut, glad that the glasses hid the action. He dropped his hands, but Cassidy didn’t let go of his.

“I say we blow this joint,” said Nick. “Old Dogmeat’s probably pretty bored out there. I saw an elevator on the other end of the hall. Hopefully it’s working.”

He led the way, and Cassidy followed along, with Deacon picking up the rear. He grabbed some of the components off the fallen synths on their way out.

Night had fallen.

Cassidy took a deep breath of the outside air.

Deacon looked up. “What in the hell…”

Nick and Cassidy followed his gaze. Moving slowly through the sky, covered in lights, was the strangest dirigible they had ever seen. It was massive. Vertibirds hovered around it, twitching on davits before being released and flying off.

A loud voice emanated from the flying hulk. “People of the Commonwealth,” it boomed. “Do not interfere. Our intentions are peaceful. We are the Brotherhood of Steel.”

Cassidy felt a chill go through her. Nothing about the flying fortress looked peaceful.


“Doubting, dreaming,” continued Cassidy. She knew the words well. “Dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.”


“Who are they?” asked Cassidy. “They don’t look very peaceful.”

“Flying that ship into the heart of the Commonwealth,” answered Nick. “Mark my words, the Brotherhood’s here to start a war.”

Cassidy hugged herself. “More war. Haven’t people learned? War destroyed the world and they’re
still at it?”

Nick nodded. “Seems to be the nature of the beast. War never changes. Always someone else who wants what others have.”

“Back in Capital Wasteland the Brotherhood was a force to be reckoned with,” said Deacon. “But them plus a giant ship…” his eyes followed the zeppelin as it floated past, repeating it’s message. “Yeah nothing about this spells out peace to me either.”

“They’re from the Capital Wasteland? What is that? Where is that?” asked Cassidy.

Deacon nodded. “I’ve never seen them here before so I’m guessing so. The Capital Wasteland is what you probably called Washington in your time. Where your president was. Let’s get out of here. We need to find a place to lay low for the night.”

Nick agreed. “We could go back inside, to Kellogg’s room.”

“No!” cried Cassidy. “I don’t want to go near anything to do with him! I don’t care what’s out here, I’m not going back in there!” She turned and walked as quickly as she dared in the other direction.

She didn’t know where they had come out, but a sharp bark to her left let her know that Dogmeat had found her. She fell to her knees and hugged the dog.

“Let’s go home, boy,” she whispered shakily. “I want to go home.”

“It’s nighttime, we need to wait til daylight,” said Deacon.

A wracking sob erupted from Cassidy’s throat. She’d tried so hard to keep her composure but it was all too much. Kellogg, the Institute, and now a flying warship. Not to mention a little brother who was no closer to being found.

She felt torn apart. “No! I want to go home!”

Deacon reached out and gently tried to help her stand. “Let’s go sit somewhere,” he suggested softly.

Cassidy roughly pulled away from him. “Get away Deacon! I want to go home!” she sobbed miserably. “Nick, I want to go home!”

Nick pulled Deacon aside. “You know where she lives?”

“No, but I’m sure she’ll tell me,” he lied, knowing exactly where Cassidy had come from.

“Alright, I think it might be best if you get her home if it’s not far. I want to work some angles on this case, talk to some people. I’ll be in my office when she’s ready to come talk about things. Been a rough ride for the kid so far.”

Deacon nodded. “She’s not thinking straight right now. Nighttime…not a good idea to travel.”

Nick looked over at Cassidy. “Might have to put your foot down then. I’ll get moving back to DC. Catch up with you two later.”

Nick went to Cassidy and crouched down. “Look doll, I know you’ve had a huge shock. But you need to listen to Deacon here. He’s got a good head on his shoulders. I’m going to keep working on your case. When you’re ready you come on back to Diamond City, to my office, ok?”
Tearfully Cassidy nodded, “Thank you, Nick.”

He patted her shoulder and rose, walking to the edge of the building and dropping off.

Deacon sat down and leaned against a wall. “We’re not doing the nighttime thing, Charmer. The whole point is to stay alive to find your brother and help your dad right? Can’t do much of that if you’ve been eaten by something out there. At first light you show me where home is.”

She sniffled but nodded, still hugging Dogmeat.

“You wanted to know about the Capital Wastes? I’ll tell you about it,” Deacon said softly.

She looked so unhappy and tired, he felt awful for her.

As he started talking, Cassidy listened quietly, hiccuping occasionally. She liked the sound of his voice and the way he spoke. There was so much animation to his stories, and she could envision what he was talking about.

She grew tired, and crawled over to where he was sitting. Curling up beside him, she lay down and put her head on his thigh, looking up at him.

He stopped short, gazing down at her. *I chose your name well,* he thought. *You’re nothing if not completely charming.*

He rested his hand on her shoulder, then moved to her head, stroking her hair gently. He kept talking until he felt her breathing even out. Dogmeat lay down behind her, facing out, ever alert.

Eventually Deacon himself grew tired and closed his eyes, the sound of gunfire and shouting way off in the distance a strange lullaby.
Cassidy and Deacon grow closer.

Morning came but didn’t bring the sun. It brought that sickly green sky with the horrible sound. The wind picked up and added an eerie haunting chorus as it whipped around the buildings. Cassidy had shifted in her sleep so her back was against Deacon’s legs and her head was on Dogmeat’s hip. The sounds awoke her.

“Oh no, this thing again!” she cried.

Deacon got to his feet quickly. “You’re not going to like this but we’re going back inside until it passes.”

She shook her head. “No way, I’m not going back in there!”

He reached down and pulled her to her feet, not as gently as he would have preferred. She gave a surprised yelp as he dragged her the few feet towards the door they had exited the night before.

He shoved her inside ahead of him, Dogmeat squeezing in at the same time.

“That is a radstorm!” he exclaimed. “Did you bring any Rad-X or Radaway?”

She blinked at him, confused. “Radstorm?”

She looked haggard. Her eyes were still swollen from crying, and her hair had seen better days.

“Have you been exposed to one of these before?” asked Deacon, taking her pack and digging through it.

Cassidy nodded. “When I left home, just before you saved me. What is it? What does it do?”

He pulled up a bloodbag with a rusty colored liquid. Attached to it by surgical tape was a slim sharp needle.

“Sturges packed my bag,” said Cassidy. “He said he put everything I need in there. What is that stuff?”

Deacon looked at her. “Did he give you any instructions how to use it? And when? I’m thinking not.”

Cassidy shook her head, staring at the item.

“Great,” muttered Deacon. “Please tell me you aren’t afraid of needles.”

Cassidy wrinkled up her nose. “I’m not excited about them but they don’t bug me. I give blood all
the time. Well, I used to.”

Deacon sighed with relief. “Give me your arm, Charmer. You need a 5 minute treatment with this.”

She held out her arm and he rolled up her sleeve. As gently as he could, Deacon inserted the needle and stood up, holding the bag. “Alright. This is RadAway. Actually was invented before the war, but it was used by the military mostly. It’s a chem that bonds to any radiation in your system and flushes it out in the urine. Thing is, it can have side effects. They won’t be fun. Nausea, diarrhea, stomach pains and/or headaches. But that’s still better than radiation sickness, right?”

Cassidy looked up at him, her eyes huge. “It burns,” she said.

Deacon nodded. “Yeah it does. As for Radstorms, they flat out suck. We see less of them now then at first. Radiation from the Glowing Sea gets pushed into another area. The lightning spikes the radiation too which doesn’t help. Just have to get indoors and take this joyful stuff. The good thing is the storms don’t last out an hour.”

Cassidy drew her knees up and rested her arms and head on them. “I hate this world,” she whispered. Dogmeat whined softly and rested his muzzle on the back of her neck. She remained that way until Deacon removed the needle from her arm and taped it back onto the bag. He put pressure on the puncture for a few moments.

“My turn,” he said, pulling the chem from his own pack. “I’ll show you how to do it. So you can help others and yourself if you’re alone. It’s not hard.”

She watched and listened as he instructed her. “Shouldn’t we be sterilizing our skin before doing this?” she asked.

“Unless your friend put some alcohol in your pack, we just do what we have to. I didn’t see any in there. Never share your needle though. That’s the only rule.”

Cassidy made a face, but did her best to get the needle into his skin. She stood up and held the bag as he had done for her, letting gravity do it’s job.

“What’s the Glowing Sea?” she asked.

“It’s the spot where the bomb fell here,” answered Deacon. “It’s hell on earth as I hear it. Never went near it myself and never want to. It’s in the southwest I think.”

“Everything is hell on earth now,” sighed Cassidy.

“Can you believe there’s people who live there?”

“In the Glowing Sea?” she asked, aghast.

“Mhm. Children of Atom.”

“Who’s Adam?”

Deacon shook his head. “Not Adam as in the name, but atom. Like the atom bomb. They believe the radiation is holy or something. Don’t know much about them but they’re pretty messed up.”

“I’m not going there,” said Cassidy firmly. “That’s not for me.”

Deacon laughed softly. “Me either Charmer. Me either.”
When his treatment had completed, he put his RadAway back in his pack and leaned back against the wall, crossing his ankles. Cassidy sat on the other side and did the same. No one spoke for a few minutes.

“Deacon?” asked Cassidy.

“What’cha need?” he answered amiably.

“Why do you always wear those sunglasses? Is there something wrong with your eyes? Are you gross under there? Are you Night of the Ghouls under there? Like all bloody veins and pus?”

Deacon let out a long, slow exhale. He lowered his voice ominously. “Something like that,” he said, expecting her to scoff at him. It surprised him when she didn’t.

Cassidy swallowed. “Well, can I see? I might as well since we’re together all the time.”

He made a show of staring right at her. “I don’t think so. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

She sucked in her lips and gripped Dogmeat but said nothing further.

They waited out the radstorm until Deacon decided it was safe to move out. When they did, the sun was out and it was nice. No evidence that anything awful had happened except for the wet ground.

“So there’s another chem, it’s called Rad-X,” said Deacon. “It’s a pill. You take it if you know you’re going to be hitting up some areas with high radiation. Can’t predict radstorms, but always keep Rad-X with you. It’s the bottle in your pack. Your friend did a good job packing you up. He just forgot the details of actually telling you how to use it and when.”

“You can teach me what I need to know,” she said. “Can you fix my hair again?”

“I make a mess of it every time, Charmer.”

“I don’t mind. It’s nicer when someone else does it for me. Makes things feel normal for a few seconds.”

Deacon couldn’t argue that. After the day she’d had, he wanted to do something positive for her. So he pulled the elastic out, gently hand combed her soft burgundy hair and put it back into its ponytail. This time he did a better job and when she reached up to feel it, she smiled.

“Thank you! You do it better than daddy. He always missed some and he even used a brush!”

“Your dad sounds like he was a good guy,” said Deacon as they walked along.

She frowned. “He IS a good man. He IS. I’m excited for him to meet you. He’ll be so grateful for how you’re taking care of me. You said you’d help me find a doctor for him. You still are, right?”

Deacon nodded. “I keep my promises,” he said.

“When?”

“I’ll let you know. Just need to chill for a bit, ok? Work through what you’ve experienced so far.”

Cassidy didn’t want to. She wanted to forget about the horror of Kellogg and the strange synths. The despair she felt about the mysterious Institute was weighing on her. Deacon was silent, which made it worse. There were no distractions from her own mind.
So close but yet so far. That’s Shaun.

How could the Institute pull off all those murders and kidnappings and yet no one ever figured out who or where they were?

You don’t see the monster until it jumps out at you.

It was like they were omnipotent. Everywhere, all the time. How could anyone fight an enemy they couldn’t even see?

She felt tears prickle her eyes. Remembering her little brother, how tiny he’d been at first and how he began to grow up into this adorable little man. She would tell him stories of the fun things they’d do together, how she’d always be his big sister and have his back no matter what.

It was Cassidy who’d received his very first smile.

It was Cassidy he reached for the moment she walked in the door.

Now he had grown into a little boy, without his parents or big sister who loved him. Other people had taught him to walk and talk and run. Others had watched all his firsts. People who didn’t know anything about him and who could never have loved him the way his family did.

How will I find you Shaun?

She sobbed as quietly as she could but said nothing, just kept on walking.

Deacon saw the battle raging inside Cassidy’s heart as she stoically walked along. He was staying quiet on purpose. She needed to deal with the situation. Needed to feel it, mold it into a call to action.

He saw so much potential in her. She was a mix of a girl and a woman. Strong as hell although she couldn’t feel it yet. But soft and gentle, like the women he’d seen in the holovids and old magazines. She was then, and she was now. He’d never met anyone like her in his life. Old emotions long buried stirred inside him and he twitched in discomfort.

She’s just a kid, he told himself yet again. No, she’s not. She’s a woman. And she needs someone to care for her.

Impulsively, Deacon reached out and took Cassidy’s hand. Her skin was so warm and soft and she squeezed him, then held tight. There was a neediness in her touch, and he suddenly wanted to fill that void in her.

You think she’ll want you once she knows what you are? That voice again. I can’t wait to see her horror when she finds out.

Deacon let go of Cassidy’s hand and slipped his arm around her waist instead, holding her against him.

Fuck off, he told it.

They walked on in silence.
Chapter Summary

Cassidy introduces Deacon to Sanctuary and her friends; she receives a surprise from Sturges.

It was late afternoon when they passed the old Red Rocket diner. When the north bridge over the river came into view, Cassidy lit up. She grabbed Deacon’s hand and broke into a run, dragging him along.

Sturges was hammering a plate on the side of a house when he heard his name being called.

“Derrick!” she cried and dropped Deacon’s hand, running to him.

He caught her in a strong embrace and spun her around. “You’re alive! We were all so worried about you!” He looked up and saw Deacon. “That the doctor? You find someone to get your daddy up and at ‘em?”

Cassidy shook her head. “No, that’s Deacon!” Lowering her voice to a whisper she added, “he’s a spy. And I am too now. We’re working together to find my brother. I have a code name. It’s Charmer.”

Sturges put on a serious face and nodded. “I get it. Good name too, it suits you. You best go and see Mama Murphy. Without the sight to guide her she’s been a wreck. She’s in the cantina I think.”

Cassidy went back to Deacon and pulled him to Sturges. “Deacon, this is Derrick Sturges. Derrick, this is Deacon.”

They gave each other a fist bump.

“Thanks for looking after her,” said Sturges. “It’s good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” said Deacon, and Cassidy dragged him forward before the men could exchange another word.

She burst into the cantina. “Mama Murphy!” she called out. “I’m home!”

The old lady appeared around a corner, and her face brightened. “Hey kid! Mama Murphy’s as good as her word. No more chems! But without them I couldn’t see you. I was worried.”

“I made a friend. Actually two but the other one went home. This is Deacon. Deacon, this is Mama Murphy.”

Mama Murphy affixed her gaze on him, tilting her head slightly. “It’s nice to meet you,” she said. “Deacon.” She slowly spoke his name almost as an afterthought.

“Same,” answered Deacon. He felt slightly unnerved by her pale blue eyes and the way she seemed
to be looking right through him, into those parts he kept hidden from the world.

*You know,* said the voice in his head. *Others can see what you try so hard to hide.*

Deacon squeezed his eyes shut for a moment to quell the notion that the old lady could indeed see his sins. Yet again he was glad that he had the sunglasses to hide behind.

*Keep telling yourself those glasses work,* it said, but he ignored it.

Cassidy asked Mama Murphy where Preston and the Longs were.

“Marcy and Jun are in the greenhouse,” she answered. “Preston, well you know him. He’s probably on patrol somewhere.”

Cassidy took Deacon’s hand again and led him down the road, pointing out each house and whose it was. She chattered happily about the work they had done and how far they’d come already. She shared her big plans for Sanctuary Hills. Deacon loved seeing her so joyful. The fear of the outside world had dissipated the moment she returned home.

Preston was overjoyed to see her.

“I feared the worst. Figured you’d have been to the city and back long before. We didn’t have much time to talk about things, make some real plans. I’m glad things worked out and you’re back.”

On meeting Deacon he shook his hand. “Have you thought about joining the Minutemen? Man like you with your experience out there would be a great asset to us.”

Deacon shook his head. “I’m not a military kind of guy. In fact I hate using guns to begin with. Necessary evil I do as little as possible.”

“There are other jobs in the Minutemen besides shooting. We need all kinds of people,” encouraged Preston.

“I gotta be honest with you,” said Deacon. “I never really much cared for the Minutemen. The idea sounds great. But you give small men big power and sometimes you’ll pay for it.”

Preston sighed. “That is true. I admit the Minutemen have had a real rough time and forgotten just what they are supposed to stand for. They didn’t live up to the original ideals. But that’s over now. I’m looking to rebuild it. With good people who care.”

Deacon said nothing further, and Preston changed the subject. “Cassidy, I’m guessing you have a whole lot of things to share with us. We can do that over dinner tonight.”

Cassidy agreed, and went to find the Longs. As she expected, Marcy couldn’t care less that she’d returned, but Jun appeared happy to see her.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he said.

“How are you doing?” Cassidy asked him.

“Some days are harder than others, but even the hard days get easier than the one before.”

“I’m hoping I feel that way soon too. I’m no closer to finding my little brother but I was told he’s alive.”
Marcy snorted. “Well the fact that he’s alive makes your situation a whole lot better than others. Quit griping about it.”

Cassidy frowned at her. “The man who told me that was a psychotic mercenary. So no, I don’t know for sure. My little brother might be dead too. I’m sorry you lost your son. But your pain doesn’t make mine or anyone else’s less!”

She walked away. As she did so she heard Jun.

“Marcy you have to stop this. She’s done right by us. These people all have. She didn’t kill Kyle. The raiders did. You...you need to stop punishing everyone.”

“I don’t want to talk about it Jun,” she barked.

Deacon shook his head. “Hostile. She always like that?”

Cassidy nodded. “Since we first met. Her heart’s broken and she acts out. I just hope in time she sees it’s not doing her any good. We’re all in this together.”

She brought Deacon to her house and showed him her father’s bedroom.

“You can stay in here. Sanctuary has running water now so you can have a bath or a shower in my bathroom. Derrick Sturges is a miracle worker. He can fix anything.”

Deacon sat down on the bed. It had been a long time since he’d slept anywhere as comfortable. Sanctuary was a strange little place, everything looked like it was in decent repair. As if the real world could be held at bay there. Cassidy seemed to belong in it, caught between the old world and the new. It would be easy to live in such a suspension of reality. Comforting, really.

“You guys did a good job with this place,” he said.

“It’s home. Everyone needs a home to feel safe in. With people who care about them. That’s why I like the Minutemen. They help everyone who asks.”

Deacon unlaced his boots and removed his jacket and overshirt. “The idea of that shower sounds pretty great right now, Charmer,” he said. “So is this dinner like the old world? People get dressed up for it?”

Cassidy shook her head. “No we don’t do that but washing up is expected. You can wash your gross stuff in the laundry. It’s across from the bathroom.” She pointed to the dresser. “You can wear anything you want from in there.”

“Wow, you sure have everything here,” said Deacon. “And it’s nicer than Diamond City.”

She beamed at the compliment. “Thanks Deek. I’m going to go have a shower at Derrick’s so we can both be ready for dinner. I’ll see if Mama Murphy needs help to get it ready.”

Dinner was prepared by the old lady, but served by Codsworth in the Cantina. Everyone gathered around and filled their plates. Deacon was amazed by the variety they had.

“The greenhouse grows all the vegetables and grains we need,” said Cassidy. “Marcy is awesome at caring for plants.”
Marcy gave Cassidy a sidelong glance but said nothing.

“We have a brahmin for milk and we trade our vegetables for meats. The other food too.”

“So who goes for scavving runs?” asked Deacon.

“We don’t have enough people for that,” said Preston. “I’m hoping to set up a beacon to attract more settlers here, but there’s been opposition.” He looked at Marcy.

“Because more people means more trouble!” she snipped. “We need to keep our mouths shut about this place or god knows what will come walking in!”

Preston sighed. “We’ll be talking about this again later,” he said.

“This food sure is good,” said Deacon. “Thanks for sharing it.”

“Wasn’t my idea,” said Marcy coldly.

Deacon ignored her and turned to Sturges. “So you’re the guy who packed Charm...err Cassidy up. Good job. Saved her a few times.”

“That’s good to know,” answered the mechanic with a smile. “I’m glad you helped her out. Real glad.” He smiled warmly at Cassidy who smiled right back.

“So kid,” said Mama Murphy. “Tell us about what happened out there.”

Cassidy started her story with the radiation storm and they talked about that for a bit. Then she went on to meeting Nick Valentine and the rest of her adventure. The story grew dark and heavy when it came to Kellogg.

“I shot his face off,” said Cassidy. “He was a horrible, evil man!”

“Never expected to hear that,” said Preston. “There was no other way?”

“It was him or me,” said Cassidy. “And I don’t regret it.”

“Every death is regrettable,” said Preston. “But in this case I understand it.”

“So what now, kid? What will you do?” asked Mama Murphy.

“The detective has asked us to come back to see him,” said Deacon. “He’s going to keep on top of this case.”

“I want to find the Railroad,” said Cassidy. “Maybe they can help too.”

“The Railroad?” asked Preston. “Those guys are something else. They only care about synths though.”

“They’re crazy,” said Marcy. “Telling everyone machines are alive. Are they going to liberate toasters and washing machines next?”

“Gen 3 synths are alive,” said Deacon. “I say anything that can ask for it’s freedom should have it. So if your toaster starts talking about emancipation then yeah it’s alive enough to count.”

“Ridiculous,” scoffed Marcy.
“Anyone who fights back against the Institute are good,” said Cassidy. “They are the bad guys.”

“Speaking of bad guys,” said Sturges. “Y’all see that big flying thing last night?”

“Brotherhood of Steel,” said Deacon. “We saw it alright.”

“Is it only me or does nothing about that thing say peace?”

“We got that same feeling,” said Cassidy. “It was really intimidating. I wonder where they went.”

“Don’t know,” Preston replied. “Eventually word will get here to us from the traders. Had quite a few vertibirds flying around it. Didn’t even think any were operational anymore.”

Deacon shared his experiences from the Capital Wasteland. “So I don’t know. They were a pretty serious deal back then. And now with this ship at their disposal we’re right to worry. Have to see how things pan out.”

The meal was completed and everyone pitched in to clean up, even Deacon.

“Want to look at some car mags?” Sturges asked Cassidy. “Bought some from Carla.”

She grinned. “I’d love that. Can Deacon come?”

Sturges glanced at the other man, then back at her. “If he wants.”

Deacon however, didn’t. “I’m really tired Charmer. I need to get a good night’s rest that doesn’t involve leaning against the side of a concrete building.”

“Oh,” she said and followed Sturges to his house.

She curled up under a blanket as he stoked the fire in the fireplace.

“I missed having you here,” he said. “The others, they don’t get my love of cars. I’d give anything to have lived back then. What was it like, driving?”

“It was awesome! Especially on the highways. You got to go faster on those. In a convertible with the top down it was the best feeling ever. I can’t believe I’m never going to experience that again,” she said sadly.

“Well the highways I can’t do anything about but I’m gonna make another car and this time it will have an engine. I’m gonna take you driving, Cassidy.”

She grinned. “The only road I’ve seen that’s even halfway decent is the one outside. Pretty boring drive.”

“We’ll find other places. It’s my new life’s mission.”

He handed her a magazine. “This one’s got some pages missing but the rest is in good shape.”

“Do you like Deacon?” she asked suddenly after a few minutes of leafing through the magazine.

“Well I only just met him,” answered Sturges. “He seems like a hep cat. Why?”

She shrugged. “He’s...kind of amazing. So smart. And when he smiles he just makes me all quivery inside. Like when I’d see Evan at the diner. From my world...”
“You’re saying you like him, huh?” Sturges tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Yeah. I do,” smiled Cassidy. “A lot. Like more than I even liked Evan. Deacon is wonderful and kind. I like being with him. I feel safe with him.”

Sturges leafed through the magazine he was holding. “He know how you feel?”

She sighed. “We only just met but I think he knows. I mean I hold his hand all the time. He’s really shy. And he told me he’s all messed up which is why he has to wear those sunglasses all the time.”

Sturges nodded. “Yeah I was wondering about that. Seemed rude to ask though. Figured he has something going on.”

“One day he’ll show me I’m sure. I wonder how gross it is.”

“Can’t be that bad since he’s not blind,” Sturges pointed out.

“Maybe he’s got cybernetics to let him see! He could be like half robot or something. That would be cool!”

Sturges laughed. “If you say so. Me, I’d rather have some real eyes to look into.”

His expression softened as he looked over at her. She became acutely aware of her own heartbeat at that moment and glanced at her magazine to break the gaze, then looked back at him.

“Did you love someone when you lived in Quincy?”

“Love? No. But there was a girl I hung out with back then.” He gave a slight smile. “My family and friends didn’t like her much though.”

“My daddy didn’t like Evan either. But we never got to hang out much before the bombs. Did your girl die in the massacre? I’m sorry if that’s bad to ask. You can ignore the question.”

“No, she left with her mom long before that. To be honest I didn’t miss her that much. I had my garage and the people of Quincy to look after. They needed me.”

“I never loved anyone in the romantic sense before,” said Cassidy. “I might have eventually had it bad for Evan but daddy doesn’t like rockabilly. I’m not sure if you know what that is...”

“Oh I know what that is,” Sturges grinned. “My good friends the Atom Cats are rockabilly. Best folks I ever knew.”

She made a face. “Try telling daddy that. He left me a tape and he even says to stay away from them. He thinks they’re gangsters but that isn’t true is it.”

Sturges shook his head. “Just people who like a certain kind of music and look. Maybe some are gangsters but that’s not because of the music. It’s because of themselves, you know?”

She nodded. “That’s how I see it. Daddy is just always worrying about me. He wants me to be ok in life. He said that a lot of times. I just wish he could try and open his mind a bit more about different people. He’s going to hate all the raiders now.”

Sturges got up and went to a cabinet. He came back with a few holotapes. “Here. Play these in that pip-boy thing some time. Just don’t lose ‘em. They’re all I got.”

“Holovids? There’s no scary ones is there?”
He shook his head. “Not holovids. Just play them. I promise there isn’t anything scary in there.”

Her pip-boy was back in her room. She was curious about the holos and wanted to play them.

“I think I might go play them now. I should get some sleep anyway. We can look at the mags another night, is that ok?”

Sturges was disappointed to see her go, but he smiled.

“Sure thing. I had fun just talking with you Cassidy. Enjoy the holos.”

Cassidy looked in on Deacon, who was sleeping peacefully on his back, sunglasses still on his face. She shook her head with a grin and went into her own room and shut the door.

Dogmeat was lying on his rug on the floor and looked up, his tail tip twitching. “Hey boy. Time to sleep, right?”

Curling up in her bed, she loaded the first holotape into the pip-boy.

A lively, guitar heavy song began to play.

*Well I've led an evil life, so they say*  
*But I'll outrun the devil on judgement day, I said*  
*Move, hot-rod, move man!*  
*Move, hot-rod, move man!*  
Move hot-rod, move me on down the the line, oh yeah!

Cassidy giggled with surprise and delight. “Derrick is a rockabilly!”

Dogmeat’s tail thumped on the ground.

“Daddy’s going to have a hard time with that one, I think.”

Cassidy listened with much amusement to the rest of the holotape. By the last few songs she’d drifted off and didn’t wake up until almost noon the following day.
Deacon was patiently waiting for her in the living room, reading a book. He looked up with a smile.

“I’m a sucker for these old world books,” he said. “It must have been something living back then.”

Cassidy sat down beside him. “What’s mine is yours,” she said. “I’m kind of surprised so many books survived the bombs. Well daddy did bring some of them to the cellar. That’s the ones on the shelf there.” She pointed. “And yes, it was amazing before the bombs fell. It wasn’t perfect but it feels like it was looking back on it.”

“The way of it,” said Deacon. “The good old days aren’t that while you’re living them. You only feel that way after. Sort of means we should be living in the moment more, you know?”

*I love the way he thinks*, thought Cassidy.

“Very true. If I’d known this would all happen…”

“No, don’t do that,” he said softly. “You get mired in the past and you can’t move forward. No point thinking about *what if*. It’s…it’s just a bad scene.”

“You’ve lost people, haven’t you,” Cassidy said equally as quiet. “People you loved.”

Deacon seemed to be looking at her and it bothered her that she couldn’t see his eyes. She felt unbalanced being unable to read his expressions and emotions.

“You can’t live in this world too long and not have that happen,” he replied. “It’s a sad truth. Which is why we have to soak up the here and now. Not worry about tomorrow so much.”

Cassidy fiddled with the zipper on her jacket. “Who was it?” she asked carefully.

Deacon took a long slow breath in. “Charmer….I’m not ready to get into that. Not yet.”

She nodded. “Ok.”

The silence hung like a wet blanket and Cassidy didn’t like the way it made her feel. She wanted to reach out and take his hand and just hold it. To let him know she was there and willing to listen and provide whatever comfort she could. But there seemed to be an invisible sort of wall between them and she didn’t have the experience to understand how to get past it. So she changed the subject.

“Are you hungry? As you can see I have a pretty awesome kitchen. I’m still learning how to cook things though. I’ll make you something simple if you’d like.”
Deacon smiled slightly. “I stole a Mutfruit from the basket. Hope that’s ok.”

“Of course it is. Like I said, what’s mine is yours. This is your home now too, Deacon.”

Something changed in his body language. He stiffened up and seemed to close off. “Nah Charmer this is your home. You and your pals there. I’m just passing through.”

“Everyone needs a home, Deacon. Even a wanderer like you. Eventually we all get tired of roaming. If living here with me isn’t your thing we can fix up one of the other houses. I told you Sanctuary isn’t close to being done yet.”

She expected a response. Any kind really. Positive or negative. But Deacon fell silent. He turned his head away and stared at the cold fireplace unmoving.

Why do I keep saying the wrong thing to him? Thought Cassidy. I just want to get to know him better.

“Forget I mentioned it, ok?” she said softly, going to the kitchen and opening the fridge. It still amazed her how Sturges had been able to get power and running water to the settlement. It almost felt normal again.

“I’ll make you a sandwich. I’m really proud of the bread we’ve been able to make due to the Razorgrain plants we bought. Soon ours will grow up too. I’ve got some slices of beef here too. Or Brahmin, whatever you call it now.”

She hummed quietly as she made up two plates, complete with slices of Mutfruit.

She turned around, and Deacon was gone.

“Deeks?” she called out. “Deacon! I’ve got your lunch!”

Puzzled, she stepped out the side door and looked in the yard. Nothing.

She stepped out onto her front step and looked around. Deacon was nowhere in sight.

“This isn’t funny Deacon, come on. Don’t waste food!”

Preston wandered past on his patrol. “What’s up Cassidy? You look bothered.”

“I am. I made lunch for Deacon and he totally just vanished. Have you seen him?”

Preston shook his head. “Did he know you were doing that? Maybe he went to the greenhouse.”

“He knew. I don’t like wasting food. Do you want it?”

Preston smiled. “That’s nice of you but I just ate not 10 minutes ago so I’m pretty full up. Don’t want to be too full walking around. Thanks though.”

Cassidy sighed and walked the few feet to Sturges’ house. He was in his living room digging through a toolbox.

“Derrick, do you want a beef sandwich?”

He turned around then stood up, a big smile on his face.

“Hey Cassidy! You listen to those holotapes?”
She nodded and couldn’t help but smile. “You’re a rockabilly!”

“I sure am. Been one since I was knee high to a Brahmin.”

“That’s so cool. I loved the holos. Why don’t you dress or talk like one? Can’t find any good clothing?”

Sturges took the plate she offered him and sat down after indicating she do the same. “I’ve got a great outfit from the Atom Cats garage. But with the kind of work I do, these dingy old overalls work better. As for the talk, well people who aren’t like us don’t understand what we’re saying. And I lived in Quincy a long time.”

“Well,” said Cassidy. “I’ll understand what you say, and I hope one day I get to see you wearing those clothes.”

He grinned widely. “Now that you say you want to see it, you can bet your bottom dollar I will. Where’s that fella of yours?”

Cassidy made a face. “I have no idea. I made that sandwich for him then I turn around and he’s vanished.”

“That’s mighty rude of him. His loss, my gain.”

They ate together, then Sturges handed her back the plate. She went home and rinsed them off then put them away.

She felt Dogmeat bump her with his muzzle. Scratching behind his ears, Cassidy looked around her living room, then wandered to her bedroom and sat on the bed.

She couldn’t understand what she’d said to make Deacon just up and leave like that. She’d invited him to become a part of Sanctuary. He liked the place. He’d been impressed with it. What on earth could be so wrong about asking him to stay? Having his own house or at least a room was leagues better than anything she’d seen out in the Commonwealth. Diamond City was a wreck and she wouldn’t want to live there under any circumstances.

She wanted Deacon to live at Sanctuary. She liked him a lot. He made her feel giddy. Hearing his voice, seeing him smile, just being around him filled her with happiness. He was handsome, kind and funny. Even her daddy wouldn’t be able to find fault with him.

Deacon had promised he’d help her with her daddy. Surely he wouldn’t break that promise!

Cassidy sat for awhile just thinking, then made her way outside to the Cantina. Mama Murphy was washing dishes.

“Hey kid,” she said with a smile. “You don’t look too happy.”

Cassidy sat down on a crate. “Mama, how do you know what to say to someone when you like them? I mean as in someone you are falling in love with.”

“I’m not sure I get what you mean,” said the old lady.

“I keep messing up everything I say. It’s like I say the wrong thing all the time and I can’t figure out what exactly I’m doing.” She sighed heavily.

“The wrong thing?”
“Yes like inviting someone to live here at Sanctuary. It’s an amazing place and we need more people, like Preston said.”

Mama Murphy rinsed off the last dish and dried her hands. “Are you talking about that fellow you brought with you? Deacon? Some people just can’t settle down. The thought of it makes them go squirrely in the head.”

“People are complicated,” lamented Cassidy.

“Yeah kid, they are. I’m thinking more so now than in your time. If you like someone you just have to come out and tell them. That’s always the best idea and the one thing people just never seem to do.”

Cassidy exhaled loudly. “Just like in TV shows,” she said and left the Cantina.

And sometimes, thought Mama Murphy, you pick the wrong person to fall in love with.

There was nothing she felt like doing but there was work to be done so Cassidy grabbed a tool box and went to one of the unfinished houses and got to work on shoring it up. She didn’t want to think that Deacon had gone away for good. Not before he made good on his promise.

She didn’t know how to talk to him. She wanted to ask questions about him and his life, to get to know him better. But it seemed that Deacon just didn’t like talking about that. Was it because he was a spy or because something horrible had happened to him?

She took her frustrations out on the bent and dented wall panels with her hammer.

“Hey Charmer,” Deacon said.

She’d been working for over an hour. She turned around and faced him.

Fuck, I’m an asshole, he thought. That sadness in her eyes is because of me.

The voice in his head laughed. And so it begins, so it begins.

“Derrick ate your lunch,” she said simply and turned back to her work.

“Look, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. Things just get heavy sometimes and I need to bug out. I’m working on that. I’ve just never had a partner before.”

She shrugged and kept on working, afraid of saying the wrong thing again.

“I get it,” she said eventually. “Grab a hammer and try and straighten out the panelling over there beside the window.”

Deacon did as he was asked, and wordlessly worked alongside her until Mama Murphy rang the dinner bell.

“I’m going home to wash up first,” said Cassidy.

“Good plan,” answered Deacon and followed her.

She washed up quickly and changed her clothing.

She was about to step out the door when Deacon stopped her. He pulled her to him, holding her against his chest for a moment. “I’m sorry, Charmer. I didn’t mean to upset you.”
She clung to him, breathing in his scent and listening to his heartbeat. “It’s ok, Deeks. It’s fine.”

Everyone except her and Deacon were seated and preparing to eat.

Codsworth placed the big plate of fish on the table with taters and fresh buns. Razorgain bread was different than the bread in the old world. It was grittier but Cassidy thought it tasted far better. Mama Murphy liked to work in the kitchen and she did a great job.

“I need to learn from you,” said Cassidy to her. “I’m not really great at cooking.”

“It’s mostly just experimenting and hoping. I have to say since I’ve been off the chems I have a lot more patience for things.”

Preston began to discuss, once again, their need for more people and how he had asked Sturges to construct a homing beacon, identifying Sanctuary as a safe place.

Marcy complained as usual, but this time Preston put his foot down. He said he’d be interviewing anyone who came in and assigning them a task. Everyone would be required to pull their weight and help out in whatever capacity they could.

“I...I think that’s great,” said Jun.

“More hands make for light work,” added Sturges.

“We’ll get Sanctuary rebuilt quicker,” said Cassidy with a smile. “And new friends are always a good thing!”

Marcy just scowled and refused to speak the rest of the meal, which suited everyone just fine.

After dinner, Cassidy wandered to the greenhouse while Preston, Deacon and Sturges played a round of cards.

Marcy was transplanting some flowers into an old bathtub.

“Marcy,” she said. “I know you’re scared of raiders coming in.”

“Get lost, I don’t need you chattering in my ear,” said the other woman harshly.

“I won’t and you’re going to listen whether you like it or not. I get it. You’re scared. You thought you were safe in Quincy. You built a life there. Then you were betrayed by the very strangers who came to help you. It was a horrific situation. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“No one asked you for your opinion. Leave me alone.”

Cassidy shook her head. “I won’t. I’ve been leaving you alone, everyone has, and it’s hurting you, not helping you. We’re all in this together. Even old Mama Murphy is doing her part. Would Kyle want you to live this way?”

Marcy turned around, her lips tight and eyes narrowed. “You don’t get to talk about Kyle! Ever!”

Tears welled up in Cassidy’s eyes. “Kyle’s dead, Marcy. But you and Jun are still alive. You have each other, and you have all of us. You have the memory of Kyle to honor by living your best life. For him.”

Marcy’s harsh expression suddenly melted into one of deep guilt and sorrow. She sank to her knees in the soft tilled earth.
“He...he loved the Minutemen. Followed them around like a puppy from the day they arrived. I said to Jun it wasn’t a good idea, but he thought it was good for Kyle to see them in action.”

Cassidy went down on her knees beside Marcy.

“The first attack, it happened when he was out and about with one of them,” said Marcy. “He got shot in the leg but it didn’t hit the bone. We thought he got lucky. Jun gave him some chems. Did you know we owned the drugstore in Quincy? Well Jun ran it. We had everything there!”

Cassidy nodded and waited for her to continue.

A tear rolled down Marcy’s cheek. “We did everything we could for Kyle. But I was a teacher. I barely used a gun, ever. Jun too. We aren’t soldiers. We were villagers just...just surviving. Well...the second attack. It was bad. Preston said we had to run, to get out of Quincy. We tried but Kyle...Kyle was hurt so bad and he couldn’t move quick enough. So we hid in one of the houses. He was crying, scared and in pain. Jun gave him some more chems. We didn’t have any stimpaks because the Minutemen took them all.”

Marcy began to sob then, covering her face with her earth covered hands. “I was holding Kyle, holding him like a baby. I could feel the blood from his wound flowing all over me. Then he stopped crying. I thought the chems had helped him. Sturges showed up and was yelling at us to move, everyone left was leaving. There was screaming and gun and laser fire everywhere, and Kyle….he was so still. Then I heard Jun crying and he was on his knees beside me and shaking Kyle. Then Sturges bent down and listened to Kyle’s chest...he was saying something and he had tears in his eyes…”

Cassidy couldn’t stop her own tears from rolling down her cheeks. She wrapped her arms around Marcy and held tightly to her while the other woman sobbed.

“He...he was dead. My little boy...he was dead! He bled to death in my arms and there was nothing I could do! He was lying there, on the dirty floor, covered in blood. He was only 8 years old! And Sturges was dragging me away, and there was Preston and so many others. Everyone was so scared. We ran. We ran because we had to and I just wanted to take Kyle with us, so we could bury him properly. But no one would allow it. A body would slow us down and those raiders they wanted us dead. My baby boy...he’s still there in that house, unburied! Those raiders, are still there, living in our homes! After they destroyed our lives!”

Cassidy gave a sorrowful sob. She couldn’t even begin to imagine the horrors the Quincy survivors had faced. There had been so many of them and one by one they were murdered until there were only 5.

Anger, that began as an ember, began to burn white hot in Cassidy.

“I hate this world,” she said in low tones. “I hate raiders. I’m going to kill them, Marcy. Every single one of them in Quincy, I’m going to kill or die trying. I know it can’t ever bring your son back, but I’ll send them all to hell where they belong.”

She was shaking with rage. She couldn’t believe the ferocity of her emotions but she was determined to put it to work.

She would ask Deacon to help her and if he wouldn’t then she would do it alone, come what may.
Suicide Mission

Chapter Summary

Sturges tries to talk Cassidy out of her plan to attack Quincy.

“It’s going to take more than just the two of us,” said Deacon. “I know, you’re great with that rifle but those are Gunners. They’re the worst of the worst...or the best of the worst.”

“I don’t want to recruit an army and get people killed,” argued Cassidy. “I’m good and so are you. It’s easier for the two of us to do this then to organize a bunch of people we don’t even know.”

Deacon shook his head. “I hear you. But I’m not talking about an army. One guy. That mercenary I know, MacCready. He used to run with the Gunners.”

Cassidy almost laughed. “Wait. Ok...so you’re suggesting we go do this with a mercenary, don’t they just go where the most money is...to a whole town filled with his former gang? How is this even any kind of good idea?” She walked to the other end of the kitchen and back. “Deacon, the Gunners managed to turn one of the Minutemen’s own veterans against them!”

Deacon watched her as she sat down opposite him. She was irritated, and he understood the feeling all too well. “I admit, it sounds bad. But MacCready isn’t your average mercenary. Sure he makes a living taking contracts but he left the Gunners. He said they were too psycho even for him. He’s good, Charmer. As good as you possibly. Better than me for sure. Let’s just talk to him. You can scope him out. See what you think.”

She fiddled with her clothing, then got up and paced the room in agitation. “I just want to go do this. While I’m still pissed off enough.”

“That’s how you get killed,” said Deacon calmly. “Letting emotions take over, forgetting to think logically. This isn’t a walk in the park, Charmer. You’re talking about a whole town of killers. That have been doing it far longer than you have. And fear? Fear is a good thing. It keeps you on your toes, keeps you alive. You need to have a good dose of fear over this.”

She frowned at him. “They’re what’s wrong with this world!” she cried.

“I’m not disagreeing,” said Deacon evenly. “But we need to have a better plan than guns a-blazin’ to pull this off.”

“Fine,” she grunted. “We’ll go talk to whatever his name is. Where is he? Close by? What if he isn’t there?”

“MacCready. He’s in Goodneighbor. Close by? Not really. But we go there prepared and we can hit Quincy right after if you want to.”

“You’ll come with me then? Just the two of us?” she asked.
“I said I would. Life is overrated anyway, right?” He tried to lighten the situation but it didn’t work. Neither of them could feel anything but the weight of the plan.

He was impressed with Cassidy. She’d been so afraid of everything from the moment he met her...and it was someone else’s story that lit the fire in her he knew she had.

Derrick Sturges appeared in the doorway. “Cassidy,” he said, deep concern in his eyes. “Marcy told me what you said...that’s a suicide mission. You need to ice this plan. I was there! I know how it was. You can’t do this!”

“Derrick, I have to,” Cassidy said. “For Marcy and Jun and everyone who was murdered there. It’s the right thing to do.”

“If you die, who’s going to save your little brother and your daddy?”

“I’m not going to die,” she said firmly. “Neither is Deacon or MacCready. If he comes with us.”

Sturges frowned. “Who’s MacCready?”

“Someone Deacon knows who’s a dead eye, like me.”

Sturges ran his hand through his thick dark hair. “The three of you against an entire town of Gunners. Not to mention how many more might have shown up. They could be living on that roadway thing too. They surround you and you’re on a trip for biscuits!”

Cassidy nodded. “The overpass. I know. You told me the whole story remember? Well I’m going to right that wrong. And bury Kyle so his parents can visit his grave one day. Plus I want to see that car you built.”

Sturges stared at her. “You can’t be making a joke at a time like this,” he said. “You’re not on the stick here, Cassidy.”

“It’s not a joke,” said Cassidy. “I’m taking this very seriously. I know how good I am. I know what I’m capable of.”

“Yeah I get that you might be good,” said Sturges. “I saw you take down that Deathclaw in Concord. But this goes way beyond that. What you’re proposing to do...Cassidy that’s just crazy!”

“The Deathclaw and all those raiders!” she exclaimed.

“Listen to me,” said Sturges. He reached out and took her hands and led her to the couch, pulling her to sit beside him. He was aware of Deacon staring at him, but he didn’t care. Why the man wasn’t trying to talk her out of it was beyond him.

“In most fights, you have a bit of play. One on one, two on one, hell even three on one, there’s a way you can get it done. This isn’t that kind of deal. These Gunners...if they see you they’ll put you down before you know what’s what. You shoot one and the rest will have their sights on you in a heartbeat. There’s no hiding from a setup like this. There’s no leeway. None.”

Cassidy looked into Sturges’ earnest dark eyes. She was touched by his concern. “I know what I’m getting into,” she said softly. “And I believe it’s the right thing to do.”

He sighed deeply and squeezed her hands before letting them go. “Ok I want to ask you to do something for me, before you go to Quincy. Say you will.”
“Ok, what is it.”

“Remember my friends the Atom Cats I told you about?”

She nodded.

“I’m going to make you a holotape. I want you to go to them first. I’ll put their location on your pip-boy. It’s right near Quincy. You give Zeke my tape. They’re going to help you out.”

Cassidy shook her head. “Derrick, no. I’m not willing to endanger people I don’t know! Bad enough I have to risk Deacon and this other guy...but no. No one else.”

“You know Deacon but you don’t know this other guy,” pointed out Sturges. “You’re taking him on someone else’s say-so. Well let my friends help you, on my say-so. They have power armor. Crazy stuff that they mod up themselves. I don’t suppose you’d let me mod that suit you brought back from Concord, would you?” Sturges looked hopeful.

Cassidy shook her head. “I can’t use power armor and do what I need to do. It’s far too heavy and awkward and awful.”

“I figured as much. Well those guys and gals there, they’ll wear them and they’ll be pleased as hell to help you out.”

“Why?” she asked. “They don’t know me.”

“The raiders attack them often enough and try to steal their gear. They’re sick of them, believe me. They lost friends in Quincy too.”

“Ok Derrick. I’ll take your tape to Zeke at the Atom Cats.”

He gave a sigh of relief. “At least I can worry that little bit less, Cassidy. I’m no good in a fight or I’d be right there with you. But Zeke and the others, they can kick some ass.”

Sturges stood up and walked back to his house.

“He sure cares about you,” observed Deacon.

“We’re all in this together,” said Cassidy.

“That we are,” agreed Deacon. “What a hell of a story this is going to be if...well, when ...we get back.”
Cassidy and Deacon make their preparations and set off.

Preparations took longer than Cassidy had accounted for. Deacon insisted on specific gear and weapons, and that meant waiting for Carla to show up.

They busied themselves with work on Sanctuary.

Cassidy noticed that Deacon stayed close to her, and he often touched her hair or her face and smiled frequently. She began feeling more of an attachment to him, and didn’t want him far from her.

However, he was still hesitant whenever she reached out to him first, so Cassidy tried to avoid doing that as much as possible. But it was hard. She was falling in love with him and wanted to hold him every moment. She hoped that he felt the same way, but his hot and cold nature confused her.

Preston took Deacon with him on patrol one morning, and Cassidy continued her work on the houses.

Marcy approached Cassidy as she rested in the shade of a tree and sipped a cool drink.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said. “I’m...me and Jun...we’re grateful that you even said you would do it. The thought.”

Cassidy gave her a wry smile. “I know I don’t have to. But it feels like its what has to happen. Ever since the idea came into my head, it’s felt right. Those raiders, they have to go. And really if we ignore them they’ll make a whole city out of that place then it really will take an army to remove them. I think me and Deacon and maybe that other guy have a chance.”

She explained the plan to Marcy, right down to Sturges’ request, and the other woman approved.

“I like those Atom Cats,” she said. “I brought Kyle there once to meet them. They were doing this poetry thing, and my son wrote a poem. It...it was the last trip we made together. Sturges used to go there frequently. Picked up power armor bits. I wonder if...if they know...about Kyle.”

Cassidy touched her arm. “I’ll make sure that they know.”

“Jun was right. You’ve done right by us. More than anyone ever had. And I was a downright evil towards you and everyone else. I owe a lot of apologies. Swallowing one’s pride is hard.”

“You don’t owe anyone, Marcy. We are all aware of what happened, and we all understand. We’re just so glad that you want to be a part of this family now.”

“I’m sorry, Cassidy. For how I was. And thank you. For what you’ve done for us. You’re just a kid
and you’ve got more heart than anyone I’ve ever met. Even Preston.”

Cassidy smiled. “I’m so totally not a kid.”

“You’re how old, 17? 18?”

“Good guess. 18, maybe 19. The whole birthday thing I’m not sure of. Codsworth knows though.”

“I don’t think our calendars are the same as they used to be. After the bombs fell, people sort of went into survival mode. Managing dates was not on the list.”

Cassidy nodded. “That makes sense really. I don’t even want to imagine how it was right after. We were in the vault, asleep while the world moved on without us.”

“Where did the other survivors go?” asked Marcy curiously.

“Me and my family are the only ones,” said Cassidy. “The other cryopods malfunctioned and everyone else died. I think Kellogg kept ours working. I don’t know why. Probably the Institute had something to do with it. He called me the back up whatever that meant.”

“I’m sorry about your brother.”

“Me and Deacon will find a way to get him back. He promised me we would find Shaun and get help for my daddy. The doctor in Diamond City was so mean.”

Marcy nodded. “Doc Sun? He’s an ass. Refused to help Jun when he got sick one time. Wanted to sell me chems for him. I told him we had all the chems we needed but it was pointless unless we knew what he had. The ass refused to come out see him and Jun was just outside the gates.”

“Why be a doctor if you don’t want to help people!” exclaimed Cassidy.

“That’s what I said. As for Jun, he had some food poisoning from a mole rate pie we ate. Some travelling doctor happened to come past while he was sitting there, gave him a once over and said it was all good. Jun bounced back and we never ate molerat again, ever.”

Cassidy made a face. “I’d eat molerat over bloatfly anyway. I’d starve actually, before eating bloatfly. Food in this world is so revolting I don’t know how anyone survives for long.”

“Maybe it’s an acquired taste. But I won’t eat any of the insects either,” said Marcy.

Cassidy laughed. “I think I better take bloatfly stew off the menu then. Mama just makes whatever is on the list that she has ingredients for. Though I haven’t seen a single bloatfly meal yet.”

“We don’t have any hunters,” said Marcy. “Or scavvers.”

“We will though. You heard Preston. He’s determined.”

Cassidy nodded. “He’s right about it.”

“I’m scared about that. About...well you know,” said Marcy softly.

“I know you are. I am too. I think everyone feels wary about adding new people. But all of us...we were strangers to one another too not that long ago. And now we’re a family. I trust Preston’s judgement. He’ll only accept the right people.”

“I’ll probably keep our door locked though. For awhile.”
Cassidy nodded. “It’s your home. You do what you feel right doing.”

Sanctuary had one basic rule: don’t be an asshole.

You kept your doors open and everyone was welcome to come and go and eat what they wanted and sit and relax where they pleased. They were welcome to use anyone’s bathroom. But if a door was closed...that meant keep out. No matter if it was a room or a whole house. A closed door meant stay away. And you never slept in someone’s bed unless they invited you to.

It was a family, a community, but there were boundaries. And so far, it had worked perfectly. They intended for it to remain that way.

“It’s going to be ok Marcy,” said Cassidy.

“I hope you’re right,” said the other woman.

Preston helped Cassidy and Deacon prepare the only way he knew how. He drew out a detailed map of Quincy for them, and showed where the battles had taken place, possible hiding spots, and what he knew about the overpass.

“That thing is the big unknown,” he said. “None of us ever went up there so we don’t know where the access point is. We don’t know if there are still raiders up there but you best assume there are.”

Cassidy nodded. “Ok. I want to hit them at night.”

“You need night vision gear then. Need to see them before they see you or it’s game over,” said Preston.

Cassidy looked confused. “I don’t...where do I get that kind of thing?”

“Military equipment,” said Deacon. “Not easy to come by at short notice. No worries though Charmer. We’ll be ok without it.”

She looked at him gratefully. “Thanks Deeks.”

He gave her a bemused half grin. “You know, I’ve never had a nickname before. I like it.”

“You said Deacon was a nickname.”

“I did,” he said. “But Deeks it’s like...a nickname of a nickname. And it’s good. Yeah.”

He was aware of her gaze on him for a moment. She’s trying to figure me out, he thought. Mission impossible. He saw her eyes soften and her lips turn up in a smile. Again, his breath caught in his throat, and he nearly forgot to smile back before she looked away.

Cassidy checked her pip-boy map and made sure all the required information was in there. She checked her pack which was heavier than she would have liked but was full of essential items. She made sure her ammo belt and holsters were in good repair.

“Ok, I’m ready now. How far to Goodneighbor?”

Deacon shrugged. “About 9 hours give or take.”
Cassidy’s jaw dropped. “9 hours?! We have to walk for like a whole day?”

Deacon laughed. “We can always take the car!”

“Well, shit,” said Cassidy, making him laugh again.

“You know, I’ll never get used to you cussing, Charmer.”

She grunted and made a face, heaving her pack into a better position. “Let’s get going then. I’m thinking we’ll have to rest along the way. Well I will. And I say again, I wish I were a synth.”

The group gathered around and walked with them as far as the bridge. There was no talking. Small talk seemed wasteful considering the gravity of the situation. Cassidy stopped at the edge for a moment, feeling the need to say something, anything, but no words came.

She felt someone draw her hair back, freeing some strands that had gotten trapped beneath her leather jacket and her backpack straps. She expected Mama Murphy but was surprised to see Sturges, looking rather sheepish.

“Maybe ought to tie that back some,” he said softly. “So the ferals can’t grab at you.”

She smiled. “I will. Thanks.”

“You come back now, y’hear?”

Cassidy nodded. “We’ll be back. And the world will be a whole bunch of raiders lighter.”

Marcy’s face was filled with sorrow, and Jun’s was creased with worry. Preston appeared as stoic as he could. Only Mama Murphy looked at ease and that comforted Cassidy greatly.

She turned to the bridge and took Deacon’s hand then started walking.

Sturges swallowed a sudden lump in his throat. “Is she coming back, Mama Murphy?” He asked as Cassidy and Deacon reached the other side of the river.

The old lady’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know, kid. No more chems means no more sight. I’m as blind as the rest of you.”

“The Cats will help them,” he said, and went back to his garage to occupy his hands and his mind, as the girl he had lost his heart to walked off into an unknown fate.
The Goodneighbor Zombie

Chapter Summary

Cassidy and Deacon arrive at Goodneighbor but Cassidy has a terrifying shock; Deacon introduces her to the sniper RJ MacCready.

Twilight meant finding a place to hole up for the night. Deacon preferred a tiny space that was easier to defend. Cassidy didn’t argue about it and just followed his lead.

“I hate not having a car,” she lamented. “Do you like cars Deacon?”

He opened up a can of pork and beans and dug for his spoon. “Don’t know. I see them all over the place but they’re just husks of what they once were. You pre-war people had some awesome inventions.”

“We did,” she agreed. “Cars were the best. My daddy and mom ordered a Corvega. An Atomic 8. It was going to be red. I picked out the color.” She ate the remains of a sandwich then took a long drink of water. “The day the bombs fell Mom was going to stop at the plant and see how the car was coming along. If I’d gone with her, I’d have died too...I think sometimes dead is better.”

Deacon’s attention snapped to her. “Don’t ever say that, Charmer. I mean it.”

“It’s true, Deacon, you can’t say it isn’t.”

“Yeah it’s true. But not for you. Never for someone like you.”

Cassidy’s heart skipped a beat. She smiled at him. His lips turned up at the corners slightly, then he went back to eating.

“Get some sleep,” he said, tossing his can away into the darkness. “We’re hitting the road as soon as it’s light out.”

She arranged her pack into a pillow as best she could and used her jacket to cover herself up. But the night was cold and her jacket didn’t do much for warmth. Cassidy wriggled until her back was against Deacon.

He was on his back and looked over at her.

“You’re stealing my heat,” he said amiably.


Deacon wanted to move away. Sleep in a corner somewhere by himself. It was the proper thing to feel and do. But he couldn’t.

He turned over and gently lay one arm across her midriff, cupping her with his body, and the other he slid beneath her head. He breathed in the scent of her hair, then rested his chin on the top of her
Cassidy made a little sound of pleasure that sent a shockwave through him, and placed her hand over his.

*I shouldn’t be doing this,* he thought. *She’s going to get the wrong idea.* But Cassidy was soft and warm and he realized how deeply he’d missed having such a connection with someone. He squeezed her gently and fell asleep.

He regained consciousness while it was still dark, and he’d ended up on his back, with Cassidy sleeping on his chest, one leg over his, and his arms wrapped around her.

*So, this is happening,* he thought. *And it shouldn’t be.* But he didn’t move, and turned his head and nuzzled into her hair.

He fell back asleep trying to ignore the laughter that echoed in his mind.

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Morning came and they set off towards Goodneighbor. There were no incidents, Deacon made sure they skirted around any raider outposts or incursions. He took the safest route possible, wanting to conserve their ammo as much as possible. He had no idea what they would be getting into in Quincy.

Cassidy was happy and animated and it made Deacon smile. She was a breath of fresh air in his dingy world. She told him stories, sang a little, and danced around him. A few times he caught her in his arms, just to feel her there, to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. He saw how happy the contact made her.

The area around Goodneighbor was a mess. The skyscrapers and tall buildings had all partially collapsed when the bombs fell or in the years thereafter. Grass and weeds grew up around the debris, old cars and trucks, remnants of an age long past, were everywhere.

They arrived at a wall made up of wood, tires, old fencing and anything else the residents could find to create a barrier.

“I know this place,” said Cassidy incredulously.

“You do? Goodneighbor was around back in your time?”

She shook her head. “N...no. Not Goodneighbor. This area though. Scollay Square, and the Old State House. There was a subway, and an old theatre. My mom took me to see a play here.”

She turned and looked at Deacon, pain in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Charmer,” he said softly. “This has gotta suck for you. I can go in and get what we need and talk to MacCready. We can hole you up somewhere if you’d rather pass on going in.”

Cassidy looked up at the makeshift fence. She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering how it had once looked. How lively and full of hustle and bustle the place had been.

“No, I need to deal with it. My world, the old world...is gone. It’s not coming back. Not ever.” She chewed on her lower lip, then took a deep breath. “Ok, let’s go.”

*Iron butterfly,* thought Deacon. *Fragile and strong all at once.*

He opened the door and they stepped through. A stone wall with old, ruined gaslights, damaged
store fronts and the facade of the Old State House met Cassidy’s eyes.

It certainly wasn’t the Scollay Square she remembered.

The usual shabbily dressed citizens sat or meandered around. From around a corner a man sauntered over. He was dressed much like a raider in leather.

He looked Cassidy up and down, making her feel instantly uncomfortable. “Hold up there,” he said, lighting a cigarette. “First time in Goodneighbor? Can’t go walking around without insurance.”

Deacon stepped up beside her. “Hey, unless its keep dumb assholes away from us insurance, we’re not interested.”

The man took a drag of his cigarette. “Now don’t be like that. I think you’ll like what I have on offer.” He smirked. “You hand over everything you got in them pockets and packs or accidents start happenin’ to ya. Big, bloody accidents.”

A shadow appeared beside them. “Whoa, whoa,” said a man’s voice. “Time out. Someone steps through the gate the first time, they’re a guest. You lay off that extortion crap.”

Cassidy couldn’t see who was talking, Deacon had moved protectively slightly ahead of her. She could see only the raider as he turned away. She made to move forward, but Deacon held his arm out and pressed her back.

“What d’you care? They ain’t one of us!” griped the raider.

“No love for your Mayor, Finn?” asked the other man. “I said let them go.”

“You’re soft, Hancock,” said Finn. “You keep letting outsiders walk all over us, one day there’ll be a new Mayor.”

The one called Hancock gave a sigh and moved towards Finn. “Come on man,” he said. “This is me we’re talking about. Let me tell you something.”

There was a grunt, a scuffling sound and Finn fell to the ground, clutching his gut. “Now why’d you have to go and say that, huh?” asked Hancock. “Breaking my heart over here.”

He walked over and into the light. “You alright, sister?” he asked Cassidy.

She looked up and her blood turned to ice. Her breath froze in her lungs and every muscle in her body tightened up at once in horror.

Beneath a fancy old world tricorn hat was a face right out of a horror movie. Dessicated skin like that of a withered mummy, a gaping hole where a nose should have been, glittering black eyes and a lipless mouth. His teeth however were straight and white, a mockery of what should have been a human face.

It was a zombie. A walking, talking feral ghoul. And Cassidy knew what feral ghouls were.

She shrieked and stepped back. Hancock, puzzled, reached out a hand to her. “Hey, hey,” he said.

Cassidy dipped away, turned and ran. She ran past the old State House down an alley then turned, frantic, as it ended. She recognized the subway entrance, but another zombie-like man emerged. She squealed and ran past him, down the stairs.
There, another zombie faced her, dressed in a black suit and hat.

Running back up the stairs and outside, she was crying, and didn’t see the other man before she crashed into him.

“Woah, woah, woah!” he exclaimed, holding onto her. She thrashed frantically until he turned her around.

She looked up into a purely human face. Narrow dark blue eyes gazed at her in surprise beneath a green military style cap. He had rather pointy features and a goatee, but wasn’t unattractive. “What’re you running from?” he asked. “You look like a Deathclaw’s after you.”

“Zombies!” she hiccuped.

“Wha? Zombies? Like in the comic books?”

She nodded and he grinned, showing a few chipped teeth. “Cute. If you didn’t look like hell, I’d think you were trying out a new pickup line.”

Running footsteps caught her attention and she saw Deacon. With a cry she threw herself into his arms. “Did you kill it?” she cried.

He held onto her for a moment then took her by the shoulders and stepped back. “Kill what? Hancock?”

“That zombie back there!” She turned to the other man. “We came in and this horrible zombie killed a guy right in front of us then he tried to grab me!”

The man in the cap gave her a confused look. “Ok, you totally lost me there, cute stuff.”

Deacon nodded at the man. “Hey, MacCready. Still killing people for caps?”

“Depends,” MacCready replied. “Still pretending to be anyone but yourself?”

The two of them reached out and slapped each other’s hands.

Cassidy looked at Deacon. “Th..that’s him? That’s MacCready?”

Deacon nodded. “Let’s go somewhere where we can talk.”

“Hang on,” said MacCready. “What was all this about zombies and killing?”

Deacon told him what had transpired at the door.

“You’ve never seen a ghoul before?” MacCready asked Cassidy.

“Of course I have!” she exclaimed. “I killed one already!”

“You’re thinking of feral ghouls, right? They don’t talk, run at you and try and eat your face? Different beast.”

Cassidy pressed closer to Deacon, eyes wide and disturbed. He placed an arm around her shoulder.

“Charmer, I think you need to meet Hancock,” said Deacon gently. “Never occured to me that you didn’t know there were two types of ghouls. Ferals are insane. They aren’t human anymore. But regular ghouls, well they’re just irradiated people. Radiation did something to them and they
mutated. Many of them are pre-war. People from your time.”

MacCready shook his head slowly in amused disbelief. “Where the hell did you find this one?” he asked Deacon. “Living under a rock? Cute and all, but woah.” He tapped the side of his head.

“Would you believe she’s a cryogenically frozen vault dweller? She’s all shades of cool.” He dropped a quick kiss on the top of her head.


Cassidy tilted her head. “Not true,” she said softly. “I am.”

MacCready laughed. “Good one, kid. Nice to see you have a sense of humor. I think we should take you over to Daisy. Hancock’s a bit intense for a first timer.”

“Sounds fine,” said Deacon.

“Daisy? Who’s Daisy?” asked Cassidy, looking up into Deacon’s face.

He smoothed her hair back. “She’s from your time. But...she’s a ghoul. Now no screaming at her and running off. She’s a good gal. You’ll see.” He took a few steps forward.

Cassidy hung back. “I want to leave,” she said.

“Just come say hi to Daisy, and if she freaks you out we’ll go right away,” said Deacon. “Ok? Trust me?”

Behind him, MacCready snorted lightly at his last words.

Cassidy half shrugged, but held his hand and allowed him and MacCready to lead her back the way they’d come.
Daisy’s shop was right near the entrance in one of the broken down buildings. Cassidy looked at the floor and refused to look up.

“Hey Daisy,” said MacCready. “Brought you a little treat. This here’s ...uhh...she never did give me her name. Anyway...she’s never met a ghoul before.”

“You don’t say!” exclaimed Daisy, her voice kind. “Well, I’m Daisy Mae Jenkins. Owner of this fine shop here.”

“Cassidy. Cassidy Hartley,” she said quietly, still afraid to look up.

“Nice to meet you,” said Daisy. “You’re going to have to look at a ghoul sooner or later, so might as well get it over with. We can be pretty horrible at first but you’ll see we’re no different than anyone else. Just older. A *lot* older.”

Cassidy slowly raised her eyes, then her head.

Daisy wore a simple suit, dirty in places. A wig sat on her head, the hair styled in a bun. She had the same dessicated skin, lipless mouth, the missing nose and the glittering black eyes, but there was a softness to them.

Cassidy lifted a finger to her lips and chewed the edge of her nail pensively. “Hancock killed someone,” she said.

Daisy nodded. “I saw that. Old Finn and his crap. He’d been warned a few times before. Lipping off Hancock though, that was the last straw. Still, we’ll miss Finn when an attack comes in. He was good in a fight.”

Deacon turned Cassidy to face him. “I’m going to go and have a talk with MacCready. You and Daisy get to know each other then we can plan the next step. Cool?”

Cassidy looked behind him for any sign of Hancock. Finn’s body still lay where it had fallen.

“Hancock went back inside. He lives in the old State house,” said Deacon. “I think you freaked him out too. He won’t come out, don’t worry. You going to be ok with Daisy?”

Cassidy looked at the ghoul for a long moment then nodded. As the men turned to go, she called out.

“Wait. Deeks. This is all my plan so you shouldn’t have to pay to hire him. I will.” She put her pack down, opened it up and dug out two stacks of old world money.
MacCready took one look at them and burst out laughing.

Cassidy frowned. “You can’t possibly be worth more than this! This is a lot of money!”

MacCready laughed so hard he had to steady himself against a wall. “Oh man, Deacon, you got a live one here! She’s comedy gold!”

Cassidy looked at Deacon in confusion. He looked up, straight up, then covered his face with his hands. “Oh Charmer,” he said. “Sweetheart...just...”

“Cassidy,” said Daisy. “That stuff, that old world money? It isn’t even worth the paper it’s printed on anymore.”

Cassidy looked crestfallen. “But...it’s all I have. How do people buy things, they just trade for them like we do at Sanctuary?”

Daisy reached behind her counter and pulled out a metal tin. In it were bottle caps. Nuka Cola bottle caps to be exact. “Caps,” she said. “That’s the new currency these days.”

Cassidy made a face. “I used to collect them when I was little. I’ve a ton of them at home. Daddy kept them all for some reason. Probably because it was my favorite thing to collect back then.”

She looked at MacCready who was wiping his eyes. “I didn’t know! You don’t have to laugh at me! I didn’t ask for any of this to happen!”

He calmed himself but the look of mirth on his face wouldn’t be erased. He held his hands up.

“Ok...ok...yes or no, Cassidy. Deathclaw?”

She nodded. “I killed one. In Concord.”

He almost started laughing again when Deacon piped up. “It’s true. Single handedly I might add.”

“She told you that?” asked MacCready. “She’s like you huh? Full of stories!”

“No man, I saw it,” said Deacon.

Cassidy frowned at him. “No you didn’t, we hadn’t met yet. I didn’t meet you until I left Sanctuary way later.”

Deacon looked down at his feet for a moment. “I saw it. But...that’s something we can talk about another time, ok? We got business to deal with now.”

Cassidy felt confused and hugged herself. Had Deacon been around her before they met? Had he been there intentionally when she’d been attacked, and not accidentally as she thought? Was it possible he’d been protecting her, looking out for her since before they met? If so, why?

She looked up at him, and he reached out and touched under her chin for a moment.

MacCready was fascinated. “So, you killed a Deathclaw. That’s...that’s impressive. I’ll give you that. Ever seen a Mirelurk?”

Cassidy shook her head.

“Oh how about super mutant?” asked MacCready.
Again she shook her head.

“Oh man,” said the mercenary. “We have to get you up to speed on things around here. You’re going to get eaten alive, kid.”

She wrinkled her nose up at him. “No I won’t. I’ve killed a lot. And I’m going to kill even more. And don’t call me kid. I’m not a kid.”

Daisy grinned. “Come on, Cassidy. I’ve got a nice room upstairs and some tea that’s calling my name. What say you and I go and have us a snack and a chat?”

“Go ahead, Charmer,” said Deacon gently.

“Ok,” said Cassidy and followed Daisy deeper into her shop and up the stairs.

Deacon and MacCready sat in a corner at the Third Rail and drank a round.

“You gotta be kidding me,” said MacCready. “The kid who just ran hell bent for leather from Hancock wants to take on a town of Gunners?”

“Yeah,” said Deacon. “I know you hate the bastards too. Figured we could use your help.”

“That could be a suicide mission. Makes the price go up but I’m not sure I’m cool with it. I got business to see to back home. Can’t afford to die.”

“I get it,” said Deacon. “But it’s not up to me anyway. I told Cassidy she had the final say on you.”

“So what’s her story? Crawled out of a vault and wants to take on the Gunners? Some personal vendetta?”

Deacon downed his drink. “That’s her story to tell. Don’t you mercs have an ask no questions rule?”

“Yeah,” said MacCready. “But it goes out the window when a cute girl is involved. She’s just a kid, man. Quincy is a pretty big town. That’s a lot of hiding places and potential for a lot of Gunners. Knowing them though, they didn’t put out an open call.”

“You think?” asked Deacon hopefully.

MacCready nodded. “They have issues with authority even among themselves. Keep the groups small, make it easier for the boss man to keep everyone in line. Groups get too big then you get infighting.”

“You think they moved into the overpass?” asked Deacon.

“What’s that?” asked MacCready.

“Section of roadway above the town. It’s where they stood when they razed Quincy.”

MacCready shrugged. “Yeah I heard that story. Pretty big bragging rights on that crew. They don’t play well with others so I don’t think they invited others in. Could be a small separate group moved up there though. I can’t say for sure.”

“You know them. We don’t. So, you in?”

“I’ll find a way,” said Deacon.

“You and her a thing?” asked MacCready motioning to the bartender bot to refill his glass.

“Uhh, no,” answered Deacon.

“Come on. I saw the way you are with her!”

“What? No. She’s a kid. She hates being called that but she’s only 18.”

MacCready snorted. “Like that’s ever been an issue for any guy. Well after seeing how she looks at you, I’m telling you man, she thinks you’re a thing.”

“You’re drunk MacCready,” said Deacon shaking his head. “I’ve been looking after her, making sure she doesn’t die out here. You saw for yourself. She doesn’t know one hell of a lot about this new world.”

“Why though. What’s in it for you? Aside from the obvious.”

“It’s not like that. Just something about her. She’s different. Better than this world, you know?” Deacon lit a cigarette, then considered another round.

“That sounds like a guy who’s got a thing ,” said MacCready with a grin.

“She sees me as a father figure I think. Hers is on ice. Don’t ask me more, ask her .”

MacCready laughed lightly. “She wants you to be her daddy alright.”

Deacon shook his head. “Right. Not happening, man. Now, are you in or not?”

Deacon heard the lies fall from his lips as easily as the bourbon went down MacCready’s throat. The mercenary saw right through him and he knew it. But he still felt the need to hide his feelings for Cassidy.

“Let me sit here and think about it,” said MacCready. “Maybe you can shoot a few more drinks my way to help me along.”

MacCready watched Cassidy from the shadows. Daisy took her to meet K.L.E.O, the oddball assaultron proprietor of the gun shop next door to her.

He was taken in by Cassidy’s wide eyed innocence and the way she easily smiled and gave a laugh. What Deacon had told him, the little that it was, had piqued his interest. She’d been afraid, terrified of Hancock, but was willing to get past her fear of ghouls. She didn’t seem to hold grudges. Well at least not of a certain kind.

Taking on Quincy...that was a whole other matter. One that he was getting dragged into.

He didn’t need a risky contract. He needed to make a whole lot of caps in very little time. Because he himself needed help. He needed the caps to hire someone to help him with his own situation. That and he needed even more to buy out the bounty on his head thanks to the Gunners.

MacCready sighed and lit up another cigarette. Since coming to the Commonwealth from the
Capital Wasteland, things had been far from easy. His initial bad decision to run with the Gunners had paid him well but gave him nothing but grief. And he was no closer to his main goal.

He had thought about asking Deacon for help but he knew nothing about the man. They had met at The Third Rail one night and watched Magnolia’s show, drank and smoked then played a round of cards with the locals.

Deacon never took off those damn glasses, and didn’t say a word about himself. The man kept a low profile and alluded to being a spy of some kind. Heck MacCready didn’t even know who he worked for, but he’d come around with some caps and paid him for the odd job on occasion. Never anything major. Clear an area of ferals, which MacCready did gladly. Wipe out some raiders or gangsters. Easy, low risk stuff.

Now this.

Shows up out of the blue after a month, with a clueless girl who wants to clean out Quincy. Everyone had eventually heard of the Quincy massacre and the fall of the Minutemen. It was a bloodbath. Caravans were giving the area a wide berth or avoiding it all together. Settlers from around there had to travel to other areas to meet up with provisioners.

Then this kid comes along with a crazy plan that was doomed from the start and why in the hell was he actually considering it?

He watched Cassidy smooth back her hair as Deacon approached. Her body language said it all. The kid was in love with the guy. And Deacon didn’t look too put off either. He looked like a guy fighting to keep his hands off her.

MacCready took a long drag of his cigarette. There was something bugging him though. Cassidy was so young, so naive. And he’d seen a side of Deacon a few times that made him question the man’s sanity. Maybe it was just stress from life in the Wastes. Hell he had his own demons to deal with...but something was giving him a feeling of concern for Cassidy.

Be a shame to let her die out there. And she would, without proper guidance. Be a shame to let Deacon die too. He was the only one bringing MacCready any business lately. So…

“Deacon,” he called out, stepping from the shadows and approaching him. “Business proposition for you.”

Deacon looked up and left Cassidy with the assaultron. “You decide yet?”

“Yeah. Tell you what. I’ll go with you and make sure you two don’t die in Quincy. In return I want your help with something I need done. Deal?”

“Fine by me but it’s Cassidy’s say.”

Deacon beckoned to her. “MacCready will come with us. But we have to agree to help him with something after.”

She looked at the mercenary. He was shorter and thinner than Deacon, and his eyes had a sadness to them that he seemed to be fighting to keep hidden. He didn’t look particularly mean or angry. Just rather sad. But a merc was a merc.

“How do I know you won’t kill me and Deacon?” she asked. “If we see your old Gunner friends.”

“You don’t,” said MacCready with a shrug. “All part of the risk. How do I know you two won’t
“Off me once we get things done?”

“I thought you and Deacon were friends,” she said.

“We know each other. He throws jobs my way sometimes. That’s about it,” answered MacCready.

“Well then none of us really know what’s going to happen. But this thing you want help with? What is it?”

“A walk in the park if we can pull off Quincy,” said MacCready. “Just can’t manage it alone.”

“I probably could,” said Cassidy evenly.

MacCready laughed. “You sure are full of yourself, kid.”

“I’m not. I just know what I’m good at. And shooting is it.” She turned to Deacon and held out her arm, the pip-boy map on the screen. “How far is it to the Atom Cats?”

“Hmm, I’d say about 4 hours.”

MacCready glanced at it. “What is this Atom Cats place? Why’re we going there?”

“My friend made me promise to go there first and give a holotape he made to one of the guys there. He said that they’ll help us. I don’t know why they would but a promise is a promise.”

“Well, it’s on the way to Quincy. If we’re hitting them up at night we’ll be in good shape,” said MacCready. “I’m telling you both right now though. If something feels off, I’m outta there. And secondly, you two need to listen to me.”

Cassidy made a face. “I don’t have to listen to you! We’re paying you to help. Sort of. But still.”

“Listen kid, you’re the one who ran away from a ghoul. I’m not feeling overly confident about your whole battle savvy right now. And in the interest of self preservation, I’m the one with the most experience.”

“You so aren’t!” exclaimed Cassidy. “Deacon’s older than you are I bet, which means he’s got more. And if I’m listening to anyone it’s him, not you!”

MacCready rolled his eyes. “Great. Is this whole trip gonna be my boyfriend’s better than you? Because if so, count me out. Not putting my life on the line for a bratty little kid with a death wish.”

Cassidy’s jaw dropped. “Bratty little kid?! At least I’m going out there and trying to do some good, not sitting around in a bar waiting for someone to tell me what to do!”

Deacon took her by the arm and led her away. “Charmer,” he said. “We need his help, ok? Think you can just deal with it until we get it done? Yeah?”

She looked at her reflection in his glasses. “I’m sick of looking at myself when I talk to you,” she said. “I just want to see your eyes. It’s ok if its gross, Deacon.”

“Not going there,” he said firmly. “You going to agree to MacCready’s terms? I know you don’t want to listen to him but just play along. A good spy knows when to follow and when to go solo. Alright?”

Cassidy looked back at MacCready who was smoking a cigarette, not looking in her direction.
Then she reached out and took Deacon’s hand. He let her hold it for a moment then pulled it back to fiddle with his pack.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s just go to the Atom Cats.”

And so they began their trek.
The Atom Cats

Chapter Summary

Cassidy, Deacon and MacCready meet the enigmatic Atom Cats.

Cassidy refused to talk to MacCready on the long walk. She was already irritated with him and tired of being referred to as a kid. At least Derrick never treated her like one. Neither did Preston. Come to think of it none of her Sanctuary family did. Deacon initially had, but he’d changed quite a bit and she liked the way he treated her.

She thought about her father, still in the vault, and her little brother somewhere with the Institute. She couldn’t believe that he was a 10 year old now, and she’d missed out on all those years of his life. She also couldn’t believe she was actually going to try and wipe out an entire town of experienced killers.

“So this Quincy thing. Does it still feel right to you?” asked Deacon.

“Yes,” she said. “It does. I have to do it.”

“Fair enough,” said Deacon.

Cassidy could smell the ocean. It didn’t smell as good as it once had. That made her sad. Going to the beach was always a fun trip, but now there were no beaches. The once beautiful waterfronts were now nothing more than resting places for dead reeking things and garbage.

“Why doesn’t anyone clean anything up? In 200 years no one thought about doing that?”

“It’s like the burial thing we talked about before,” answered Deacon. “If it’s not directly related to survival, it doesn’t happen.”

“Doesn’t anyone care about the beaches and the ocean and the forests? Are there any proper forests anymore?”

She heard MacCready snort. “Regular nature-girl, aren’t you.”

“I’m talking to Deacon,” she said flatly. “And what would you know about the world before the bombs? No one now seems to know what it means to care. Just the pre-war ghouls like Daisy.”

“Kid,” said MacCready. “We care about things. Things that matter. All this out here doesn’t. Staying alive. That’s the new trend.”

She bristled. “This is part of why I don’t want to talk to you. My name isn’t kid. It’s Cassidy. Got it?”

“Ok so if calling you kid is just one part...what’s the other part? Just wondering...” He looked at her with a quirky smile. He was well aware he was pushing buttons.
She narrowed her eyes at him. “The fact you have nothing useful to say. Now be quiet.”

MacCready laughed. “Touchy touchy. This is gonna be a long assignment.”

“The Minutemen will clean things up,” said Cassidy, taking Deacon’s hand and swinging it. “Preston is going to rebuild them better than they were, you’ll see.”

“You put a bunch of people together, there will always be issues,” said Deacon. “But I hope they do, for you.”

“Not if it’s the right people,” said Cassidy.

“Even then, it’s a group of separate personalities with their own motivations.”

They were near the area on the map which showed the Atom Cat’s garage. It appeared to be on a point of land near the water. MacCready stopped walking and held up his hand.

“Wait. Listen a moment.”

Sounds of gunfire and shouting.

“I think your friends are under attack,” he said.

“We have to help them!” cried Cassidy and began to move forward quickly.

MacCready caught her by the arm. “Woah, you don’t just go running in! Let’s check it out, get into position. Find out who’s who. Come on, basic stuff.” He shook his head in amazement.

He led them to a debris pile, then from it to the husk of a car, from there they moved to an old bus shelter. Cassidy saw laser fire going back and forth.

The garage itself was exactly that. An old Red Rocket gas station and garage. It had an old wire fence around it and derelict cars piled up one on top of another.

“Gunnies,” whispered MacCready. “Their highest ranking stay the furthest out. That’s who we’re going after first.”

He pointed to a grassy area. “There’s fire coming from there. Put your money where your mouth is, kid.”

Cassidy muttered the word asshole testily but got down on one knee. Raising her rifle she peered through the sight. A lone raider, hiding in the grass. She watched him a moment, and when his head came into view, she pulled the trigger. A spray of blood signalled his demise.

She scanned through her scope. Another raider was creeping towards the fence line. She fired on him, missed her shot when he ducked, but hit him the second time. However it wasn’t a fatal shot and he turned in their direction.

Sturges’ words came back to her. You don’t get any leeway with them.

She fired again and this time he went down.

Beside her, MacCready was working on a few raiders closer by. Deacon, carrying a closer range weapon was out of the fight for the time being.

A voice shouted over the din. “Someone’s out there helping us!”
“Cool!” came the response.

The three of them moved closer. Inside the compound were people in power armor exchanging fire with some heavily dressed raiders.

“I got this,” said Cassidy and got into position.

“I’ll cover and correct if you miss,” said MacCready.

“Not going to happen,” she answered and fired. Three shots, three kills. Deacon gave her a thumbs up. MacCready didn’t even say a word.

Silence descended on them.

“Whoever you are out there, show yourselves, jack!”

Cassidy got up and was about to move in through the gate when Deacon stopped her.

“There’s three of us!” he called.

“I’m here to see Zeke!” said Cassidy.

“Right on little sister, come on in!”

She didn’t hesitate another moment. Standing just inside the compound were several people all wearing power armor. They looked like juggernauts towering over Cassidy.

One of them stepped out of his suit. He had black greased back hair and blue eyes. He wore jeans, boots and a black leather jacket with a white t-shirt. There was something familiar about his face but she couldn’t figure out just what.

“I’m Zeke. Welcome to the Atom Cats, the coolest Cats in the Commonwealth. You’re one cool little sister to help us cream the Gunners like that.”

She grinned. “My name’s Cassidy. Cassidy Hartley.”

Zeke looked at her and tilted his head. “There’s more isn’t there. Cat like you’s gotta have an exotic name. Let’s hear it.”

“Cassidy Jasmine Hartley.”

He reached out and took her hand with a big grin. “And there it is. Nice to meet you.”

“This is Deacon and the other guy is MacCready.”

Zeke nodded to them. “What brings you cruisin’ our way? Warwick send you over?”

She shook her head, put down her pack and dug up the holotape. “My friend Derrick Sturges asked me to give you this.”

A murmur rose up from the Atom Cats.

“Derrick is alive?!” He fist pumped the air with an enthusiastic yeah. “I hoped little brother was too cool to go down. Quincy got the royal shaft that night. Bad scene.”

“There’s only 5 people who survived in the end,” said Cassidy sadly. “They’re all in Sanctuary to
the North.

Do you remember a little boy named Kyle Long?” she asked.

Zeke nodded. “He was a hep cat. He get out too?”

She shook her head. “His parents Marcy and Jun did but he was killed.”

Zeke’s expression fell and the others in his group gave a sad murmur. “Breaks my heart,” he said softly. “Let’s reflect.”

They stood in silence for a few moments.

“So what’s your tale, nightingale?” he asked Cassidy.

“Maybe you should listen to Derrick’s tape first,” she suggested. “I don’t know what’s on it but I’m hoping it explains things.”

Zeke nodded. “Me and him were tight. I miss him bad. Used to hang out and listen to sounds, talk about cars...you like cars CJ?”

Her eyes lit up and she nodded vigorously. “Yes! We almost got a Corvega Atomic 8 but then the bombs fell!”

Zeke blinked. “What’s that you say? Before the bombs fell? Aww you’re having one on old Zeke! Good one little sister!”

She shook her head slowly. “I’m from Vault 111. They froze us.”

They all stared at her, dumbfounded.

“It’s true,” said Deacon. “She’s pre-war.”

“So you’ve actually seen real cars, been in them?” asked Zeke, enthralled. “That makes you the most, CJ.”

She loved the nickname. No one had ever thought to call her by her initials. Now she understood why Derrick spoke so highly of his friends. Zeke certainly looked and sounded like a rockabilly. She even heard the soft strains of familiar songs coming from somewhere inside the garage.

A woman stepped out of her power suit. “I’m Rowdy,” she said. “I’m the mech around here. I work on the suits and anything else that needs fixin’. ” She waited for a big black man to step out of his suit. “This here’s Johnny D. Beside him is Duke.” Duke removed his helmet and nodded with a friendly smile.

“Somewhere around here is our newest girl, Roxy. She’ll find you eventually,” said Rowdy. “She doesn’t do the suits. Yet. I’m working on that!”

“I’m going to give you over to Blue Jay here,” said Zeke. “He’s gonna take good care of you while I listen to this holo, you dig?”

Cassidy nodded and another man, similarly dressed in the jacket and jeans, stepped out of his power armor. “I’m the guy who’s got the goods,” he said amiably. “Come with me.”

Cassidy, followed by Deacon and MacCready went deeper into the garage.
Zeke looked at the tape in his hands. “Johnny D,” he said. “Get the suits back in black while I go listen to this.”

“Righto boss,” was the reply.

Zeke went out to his trailer and sat back on a chair.

He smiled as Sturges’ voice filled the space.

*Hey Zeke. It’s me. Derrick. By now you know what happened to Quincy. It’s gone. 19 of us made it out and now we’re 5. The Longs lost their little guy. It was a bad scene. Look, the girl that gave you this tape. She’s real special to me. As in I’m hoping one day she’ll be my girl. But she doesn’t know that. Yet. Came in out of the blue while we were holed up in Concord without a prayer. Wiped out the raiders and a Deathclaw. She’s different Zeke. Not from our world but she’s one of us if you know what I mean. Well anyway this is the first chance I’ve gotten to get a message to you. I’m asking for your help. This sweet gal has a big idea. She wants to take on the raiders at Quincy. She might have a guy or two with her but that’s it. I want her to come back to me in one piece. That’s where you and the Cats come in. Help her out, Zeke. I know you hate those bastards as much as we all do. She’s not even doing this for herself, but for us. She’s one in a million. I’ll owe you bigtime brother. So that’s about it. I’m hoping you Cats are still cool and everything’s good over there. Til next time.*

Zeke smiled. He was a sucker for a love story.

As Cassidy and her friends rested and ate, he summoned the Cats together.

“Look, we got ourselves a real serious mission. Well, two. First, we gotta talk up Derrick. We gotta make sure that when CJ goes home she’s gonna be head over heels in love with him. You dig?”

They laughed and agreed.

“Next is serious business…”

They gathered closer to hear what he had to say.

Cassidy and Deacon were playing around with the jukebox when Zeke returned.

“CJ, some of us are going to come with you. We’re not going to allow a possible future Cat to go down. We’re a family. Derrick’s family too and that makes you one of us.”

Cassidy felt as though she would cry. What had Derrick said on the holotape to make these total strangers be willing to risk their lives for her?

“I don’t know what to say...thank you seems like it’s not enough.”

“The Atom Cats stand by their own,” said Zeke.

“Is Derrick an Atom Cat?” she asked.

“He sure is!” exclaimed Zeke. “He just chose to live out there, and help the folks in town out. Few too many squares there for me but he liked them.”

Cassidy wondered why Derrick hadn’t returned to the garage after the massacre. It was something she meant to ask him about later. Living with the Atom Cats in rockabilly heaven would be so perfect. She looked over at Deacon and wondered if he’d be willing to stay. If they asked. Zeke *did*
say she was a possible future Cat. She loved that idea.

Then she remembered her father and his loathing for rockabillies. Well he’d have to get to know
them. You can’t hate someone you don’t know. He’d even taught her that.

She wondered if she’d be happy living anywhere but Sanctuary. So much work had been put into
it.

She forced her thoughts back in line.

“We’re attacking them at night.”

“I figured that,” said Zeke. “Problem is I don’t have any extra suits. None that will fit you and
MacCready. Deacon I can work with.”

“I won’t need one. I’m a sharpshooter. I can’t do my job wearing that big thing,” said Cassidy.

“Yeah. What she said,” MacCready agreed.

“I’ve never used one,” said Deacon. “I’ll pass on it though.”

Zeke nodded. “Righto. We’ll suit up then. Time to put an end to those germs. They’re not cool
enough to be allowed to hang around.”

Cassidy felt anxiety building up inside her. It had been easy to ignore it while all the preparations
were being made but now at the 11th hour things were getting real and she was scared.

What if MacCready was right and she was just a bratty kid with a death wish? She’d be responsible
for sending everyone to their doom.

*It’s better to die for something than live for nothing.*

Where had she heard that before?

Taking back Quincy was the right thing to do. Even if they just managed to take out a few of the
raiders, that was still a victory.

“Last chance to back out,” said Deacon.

“I’m not backing out,” she replied. “I know you and MacCready think I’m just a dumb kid. Maybe
Zeke does too. But someone has to do this. What will happen if the raiders take over the
Commonwealth? We’ll all be slaves or something worse. This city was my home. I have to defend
it even if it’s the last thing I do.” She shuffled her feet. “I hope it’s not, though.”

Deacon’s expression softened and he smiled. “You’re one of a kind, Charmer.”

It warmed her heart to hear him compliment her. She looked at him and avoided seeing her
reflection. She wanted to hug him, but didn’t think he’d be ok with that in front of others. Instead
she just took his hand and smiled.

“Hey, when you two lovebirds are done with your *thing,* ” interrupted MacCready. “We need to get
organized.”

“What did I tell you about that?” Deacon asked him, clearly annoyed, letting go of Cassidy’s hand.

MacCready waved him away dismissively. “Yeah, yeah.”
Zeke, Johnny D, and Rowdy made the decision to accompany Cassidy to Quincy. The others would stay behind.

“There’s so much for us to talk about little sister,” said Zeke. “When we come back it’ll be party time.”

Cassidy swallowed and nodded.

It was time.
Quincy

Chapter Summary

Cassidy and her group head to the Quincy ruins to take out the Gunners.

The Atom Cats had quite the skill in walking quietly wearing the heavy power armor. Zeke was a natural leader and he instantly took point, which Cassidy could see irritated MacCready, and that made her smile.

She walked in the middle of the line behind Deacon, ahead of the mercenary. Johnny D brought up the rear.

“We’ll clear the overpass first,” said Zeke.

“Do you know the way up?” asked Cassidy.

“Sure do,” he answered, his voice tinny behind the power armor helmet.

They walked in silence as he led them to the broken sections of roadway that formed a ramp. They had to jump over the broken bits and do a bit of climbing but it wasn’t too terrible.

Cassidy was so grateful to all of them for coming to help her. She knew that if she’d gone herself she wouldn’t have come back. A few raiders would have died to her bullets but in the end they’d have gotten her too. She didn’t like knowing that maybe the person she’d been before wasn’t enough to survive the new world. Being a competitive shooter didn’t seem to be as great as she’d once thought.

Zeke held up his hand to stop them. He pointed into the darkness.

Cassidy searched through her scope. “Yeah, I got one in my sights,” she whispered.

“It’s not that one you have to worry about,” said MacCready. “It’s all his buddies. So find them all.”

He searched as well. “I got three of them.”

“I’ll take them out. Four shots, four kills,” said Cassidy.

“You’re not great with moving targets,” said MacCready.

She put down her rifle and gave him a dark glance. “That’s a total lie!”

“I saw you miss when that raider moved earlier,” said MacCready. “Have to anticipate their moves. You don’t have that learned yet.”

Cassidy narrowed her eyes at him. “Go to hell. This is my operation. You’re here to help not boss me around and insult me.”
MacCready lowered his weapon. “Look here kid,” he emphasized the word. “This isn’t a game. It’s a kill or be killed deal. I’m not insulting you, I’m giving you the facts. Deacon told me you used to get prizes or something for shooting. That was probably pretty cool back then but this is different and if this is gonna be a dog and pony show, I’m walking.”

He was right. She had missed, and the raider’s attention had turned to them. Her competitive skills were on targets. Stationary targets. She clearly had a weakness. And swallowing her pride was difficult.

“Fine. We can both handle the same targets that way if one of us misses then the other can catch it.”

“You mean if you miss,” corrected MacCready.

That irritated Cassidy. “Why do you have to be an asshole?”

“Alright you two,” said Deacon. “Can we just do this thing? I don’t like being out here like this. You can duke it out later.”

MacCready and Cassidy went into position.

“In 3,2….” he said and fired. Cassidy did the same. They waited for return fire but there was not a sound.

“Far out!” said Zeke. “Let’s move on.”

They carefully explored the overpass. The few raiders that were scattered around fell quickly and quietly, their companions unable to react before a bullet ended them.

“This is the easy part,” said MacCready. “The worst will be the town.”

“Well we got your back, jack,” said Rowdy.

They went back down.

“What the fuck?” a startled raider cried as they rounded a corner and saw the group. His companion raised his rifle and fired, hitting Johnny D. who cursed about the burn mark on his power armor.

“Not cool!” cried Zeke and let loose a volley of laser fire. The first raider fell and the other went down just as quickly to Deacon’s shots.

MacCready and Cassidy had silencers on their weapons. Not so for the Atom Cats and Deacon. The surprise attack activated the raiders in Quincy.

There were shouts and footsteps. Curse words breached the darkness.

“Well shit,” said Deacon. “This isn’t good.”

“Find cover!” exclaimed Zeke.

“Until they think it was an attack elsewhere,” said Johnny D. “And calm down.”

MacCready and Cassidy began their sweep through their scopes.

“I’ve got three,” she said. “Be ready.”
“Don’t miss,” said MacCready. “I don’t see them. You’re on your own.”

Cassidy took a deep breath and centered herself while she heard the shift of the others readying their weapons.

She squeezed the trigger. But the raiders were close together and reacted at the murder of their gang member. They opened fire into the darkness. Luckily for Cassidy and her group, the raiders didn’t have their bearings and had no idea where to aim.

“Damn it,” muttered MacCready. “They’ll run and hide now.”

He fired in their general direction but the raiders were hidden. Cassidy saw one of them peek up and run. She repositioned and fired again. But moving targets were not her strong suit.

The raiders were now onto them and Cassidy panicked. She couldn’t focus herself and every little movement saw her pulling the trigger.

She heard MacCready grunt in frustration beside her which didn’t help her emotional situation.

“Cut the gas,” said Zeke. “Let them think they got us. Then we waste them.”

Cassidy was shaking, and Deacon lay his hand over hers. She was comforted by the warmth of his skin and her heart rate slowed so she was able to focus again.

They waited until the raiders went silent. It seemed like forever.

“Righto,” said Zeke in a whisper. “Get your peepers out.”

Cassidy looked through her scope, the partial moon her only source of light. She was aware that everyone was counting on her and she was so afraid of messing up again.

*Please don’t move*, she mentally told the raiders.

She found three, close together again but it couldn’t be helped. She would have to hit one after the other in perfect succession. There was no room for error.

She took a breath, centered herself, and squeezed the trigger.

Three shots, three kills.


Cassidy grinned with relief that she hadn’t failed again. “Thanks, Zeke.”

She promptly stuck her tongue out at MacCready.

“And you say you’re not a kid,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Their pals are going to find their bodies at any time. We need to move on,” said Deacon.

They had no idea where any of the raiders were. Quincy wasn’t a small area and the ruined buildings gave rise to a lot of places that someone could hide.

A vile rotting stench suddenly hit Cassidy like a brick wall and she retched.
Deacon crept through the shadows to find the source.

“They’ve got a body pile,” he reported. “Here’s the problem Charmer. If you wanted to bury Marcy’s son, he might or might not be in that mess.”

“Dead bodies are the most un-cool thing there is,” said Johny D. “These aren’t all from the massacre. That was months ago. They got fresh victims in here.”

“We’ll have to burn or bury them all after,” said Deacon.

“The Cats can do that,” said Zeke. “We got the suits and don’t have to suck up the reek.”

They crept through the town, taking down the patrols and the guards. That was the easy part.

“Look, there’s the pharmacy that Jun owned,” said Cassidy, pointing. “They lived there. I’m going in.”

Deacon followed her while the others stood guard. There was nothing left of the pharmacy’s stock. She hadn’t expected there to be but it didn’t hurt to check. Going upstairs she found the remnants of a life lived in a ruined section of the building. There were no walls and barely any roof.

On one side was a child’s bed and dresser. On it was a ballcap, and a toy truck and car. A lump formed in her throat. Kyle’s room.

She picked up the items and put them in her backpack immediately. In the other room, presumably Marcy and Jun’s she found a school text book, a teacher’s syllabus and a silver bracelet. There was a photo in a frame on the ground, the glass cracked. A happy Marcy and Jun looked out from better times, a sweet little boy between them, grinning widely.

Cassidy’s eyes brimmed with tears. She added the mementos to her pack.

“Damn,” whispered Deacon behind her. “This shit is heavy.”

“It’s breaking my heart,” Cassidy said. “It was one thing to hear their story but to see what’s left of their lives...it’s devastating.”

“A lot of kids died here. Kyle wasn’t the only one. What a sin,” said Deacon softly.

Cassidy wrapped her arms around his waist, needing the contact, the comfort. Deacon held her close, dropping a kiss on top of her head. “It’ll be ok, Charmer,” he whispered.

*Of course it is, said the voice in his head. She doesn’t know she’s being held by the biggest monster of all.*

“Die,” he whispered almost imperceptibly.

Cassidy heard him and ground her teeth in anger. “You’re right. Those Gunners need to die. Now.”

She let him go and went back downstairs.

They slunk into an old decrepit church. A power armor frame stood in one corner, and rows of shelving with nondescript parts lined the edges of the walls. Remains of once beautiful stained glass windows littered the floor.

At the back, nearest the old pulpit was the husk of a little blue car. Someone had shot at it and bashed it with a blunt object.
A cry escaped Cassidy’s throat. “Oh no...Derrick’s little car!”

She ran her hand along the roofline, the paint a bright beautiful blue. She could feel the love and care that had been put into the project and remembered Derrick’s pride when he’d talked about it. “Poor Derrick,” she whispered.


They stood in silence for a moment over the dead car.

Cassidy looked around for any personal items that might have belonged to Derrick. She grabbed some of his tools, a few magazines that looked intact, and a pair of cleaner overalls.

“They must have taken all his stuff,” she said sadly, thinking there should have been much more.

“Derrick didn’t have much. He was too cool to hang onto stuff,” said Zeke. “He gave most things away to others who needed them. He was ...he is the most. Would do anything for you.”

“And then some,” added Johnny D.

“He could fix anything. Make anything,” said Rowdy. “Could sing too. Remember open mic night?”

Cassidy smiled. “Derrick can sing? Really?”

Zeke noticed her pleased curiosity. “He sure could little sister. His voice was fab.”

“Always wondered why he never got circled,” said Rowdy. “Be a hep dad to a bunch of curtain climbers.”

Cassidy looked confused. “Circled?”

Rowdy raised her hand and pointed to her ring finger. “You know, circled? Hitched? Married?”

“Oh,” said Cassidy. “He told me about one girl he liked.”

“She was fast!” laughed Johnny D. “A real gas, but not for anything serious. No, D-Man was too good for a round heel like her.”

“Let’s hit the road,” said Zeke, suddenly feeling concerned. “Standing in one spot isn’t cool.”

They raised their weapons and prepared to leave the church and move through the town.

It was quiet. Too quiet. Even for nighttime there should have been more patrols, more Gunners up and about.

“I don’t like this,” said MacCready.

“Think they’re layin’ dead?” asked Johnny D.

“They’d have to have expected us for that,” answered Rowdy.

“Could have seen the attack on the patrol and are waiting to ambush us,” said MacCready. “It’s a technique we used often.”

Fear crept up Cassidy’s spine and she shivered.
“This place gives me the zorros too,” said Zeke to her. “Let’s jet.”

MacCready hung back. Something was bothering him.

“Wait. Stop.”

They turned to him.

“Let’s go out the back.”

No sooner had they started going back across to the pulpit when something landed on the floor. Something that landed hard and rolled.

“Get down!” MacCready shouted.

Deacon grabbed Cassidy and threw her to the floor, covering her with his own body. The Atom Cats knelt down in front of them, acting like a shield. MacCready dove behind an overturned pew.

A loud, blinding explosion filled the room. A shelf leapt up and landed nearby, and gun and laser fire erupted from everywhere. A debris pile was uprooted and rained down on them. Something chemical was spilled and lit up, spreading fire across the room.

The concussion momentarily deafened them all and caused confusion.

“Trapped like rats!” a voice laughed mockingly. “Ah, the smell of roasting flesh in the morning!”

There was more laughter, more gunfire and to Cassidy, more fear.
Terrified, Cassidy tried to crawl away but Deacon held onto her. “Stay down, Charmer,” he said, his lips against her ear.

The Atom Cats returned fire, but they couldn’t see where the attacks were coming from.

“Out the back!” MacCready motioned to Deacon.

Deacon let go of Cassidy and crawled with her towards the stairs behind the pulpit. The fire was growing, encroaching upon them.

They hit the door and figured they could get outside and run.

“You guys with the PA go out first,” said MacCready.

Zeke moved forward but the moment he opened the door, they were met with a barrage of gunfire. The bullets and laser shots danced and ricocheted off their metal and he ducked back inside.

“Bad scene! There’s a lot of them out there!”

A voice yelled out at them. “You fucking assholes thought you could come into Gunner territory? Your funeral!”

Cassidy looked at Deacon, her eyes huge and frightened. Without the cover of darkness and distance, she was useless and she knew it.

“Deeks, what do we do?” she asked.

“We get upstairs while these guys engage down here. Then you can take them out from above. Best idea I got.”

MacCready backed up towards the stairs. “It’s a good plan, let’s go!”

They went upstairs while Zeke, Johnny D and Rowdy traded fire with the Gunners.

There was no window or access on the inside. The only way to gain line of sight was to go outside through a hole in the wall and creep along a narrow ledge barely 2’ wide.

Cassidy looked at it, fear flooding through her. There was a good chance she wouldn’t be coming out of this battle. Things weren’t going that great.

“We killed a lot of them, right?” she asked softly.
“We did,” answered Deacon.

She looked at the ledge. “Well, that’s a few less to hurt anyone else.” She swallowed hard and began to climb out.

“Thanks for trying to pull this off with me,” she said and crawled to the edge, then lay down on her belly, her rifle ready.

She knew the moment she shot one of them the others would know where the shot had come from. It was the very scenario Derrick had warned her against. But there was no other way. At least if she could get rid of the ones below, the Atom Cats could get away.

She chose a raider at the back of the group. She counted 6 of them. They were partially hidden but in order to shoot they had to expose themselves. She waited.

She drew in a steadying breath.

She fired.

The raider fell backwards over a rock wall. None of his companions turned. They either didn’t notice or figured the shot had come from one of the Cats. She heard movement behind her.


“Ok,” she said, glad to not be alone. She lifted her feet, hanging them over her butt, and felt him settle behind her.

Her next shot went rogue, having ricocheted off something metal the raider was wearing. It hit the guy behind him, grazing his cheek.

MacCready aimed and fired but missed when the second guy suddenly crouched down. This time it was Cassidy who corrected and took the raider down a split second after finishing off the first one.

“Now we’re even,” she said.

The Atom Cats below them made it outside, and ran at the remaining raiders. The heavy power armor ploughing into them came as a surprise, and Cassidy and MacCready laid waste as the raiders scrambled.

“Hell yes!” cried the mercenary.

Everything went quiet and no one moved. “Did we get them all?” whispered Cassidy.

“The ones down there yeah,” he answered. “Let’s get back inside and get out of here.”

He crawled back first, then Cassidy.

Deacon was sitting against the wall. “You gotta show me how to use a rifle your way,” he said. “Sorry I didn’t do much.”

“I will,” said Cassidy smiling at him. She wondered how he could see in the dark with those glasses.

Outside, the Atom Cats were assessing their power armor.

“I’ll be busy for days with this damage,” sighed Johnny D.
“It’s cool daddy-o” said Rowdy. “We’ll get it done.”

“It’s all good,” said Zeke. “Let’s agitate the gravel. I’m done with this square place.”

They walked carefully towards the roadway. They thought they’d be home free within minutes. They were wrong.

A shot rang out, making them freeze. “You wouldn’t leave without paying homage to the boss would you?” A woman’s sharp voice rang out.

Bright, shocking spotlights appeared and illuminated them.

MacCready blinked. “Tessa, that you?”

“Well well well, if it isn’t MacCready,” said the woman. “It’s a good night if I get to take you out.”

“Don’t count on it,” said MacCready.

“As I see it, I’m up here and you’re down there and I know you can’t even see me.”

“I can smell your skanky ass though,” said the mercenary with a smirk. “Still pissed off I turned you down, huh Tessa?”

She laughed. “Still thinking you’re some big prize. Some things never change. Except how wrong you always are.”

Cassidy’s heart was beating a mile a minute. She was sure it would suddenly just stop and she’d die right there on the spot. How could they get out of this mess? She’d dragged 5 people with her into it.

*I thought we got away with it.*

She reached behind her for Deacon’s hand, hers trembling. She backed into him.

“Not a bad haul,” said Tessa. “3 Atom Cats, one pain in the ass, shades there and some kid.”

“It was supposed to be a happy ending,” whispered Cassidy tremulously.

“This world doesn’t have many of those,” said Deacon softly. He wrapped his arm around her, his hand on her belly, pulling her close so his lips were next to her ear. “Listen to me, Charmer,” said Deacon under his breath.

“I’m going to distract them. When I do I want you to run into that building right in front of you, under where they’re standing. I can’t see them but that’s where her voice is coming from.”

“Deacon, no...they’ll kill you.” Her hand tightened in his.

“When you get out of this, find the Railroad.”

“Daddy-O,” said Zeke. “I got a suit on. Let me distract them.”

“You get Cassidy out of here,” said Deacon. “Take care of her.”

Cassidy’s lip quivered. “I’m so sorry everyone. This was dumb. I really am just a stupid kid.”

MacCready reached out a hand and touched her arm. “You’re one brave kid. Color me impressed.
We’ll get them. I’m running with you. I owe Tessa bigtime.”

Deacon squeezed Cassidy tight for a moment then let go. He walked off to the side away from her. “Hey look, I’m really bored with all this,” he shouted out. “Let’s bust open a Nuka Cola and have a pow-wow. We can talk about your daddy issues.”

There was no response for a moment, then a shot rang out and Deacon flew backwards, a red, angry stain blooming across his chest. He hit the ground and lay motionless.

Horrified, Cassidy screamed. She saw Johnny D. run to him, Zeke and Rowdy opened fire and she felt MacCready drag her forward.

She was sobbing hysterically. MacCready shook her, hard. “Stop it! Shut up, Cassidy! Look at me!”

She sobbed and hiccuped, unable to catch her breath, repeating Deacon’s name over and over.

“You can’t do anything for him now! Don’t let him have died for nothing! Let’s kill these fucking assholes and send them straight to hell!”

She couldn’t compose herself, the vision of Deacon dying in front of her was too much.

MacCready slapped her. Not too hard, but hard enough to shake her out of her hysteria.

Stunned, she stared at him, her hand on her cheek.

“Follow me!” he snarled. “And get ready to blow off some heads.”

Tessa was standing on a broken bit of roof, two men beside her. One wore the remains of a long Minuteman coat. She was in a suit of power armor, no doubt stolen from the Atom Cats at some point as evidenced by the remains of a flame paint job.

“See the guys? You hit them. Two shots, two kills,” ordered MacCready. “Tessa’s mine. I owe her a death.”

“I...I can’t..” hiccuped Cassidy, her breathing ragged.

“You don’t have that choice,” said MacCready. “That guy there with the long coat? He’s the Minuteman traitor. He caused all those people to die. That’s your vengeance right there. You came here to do this. Now make good on your word. Do it for Deacon.”

Cassidy went down on one knee, her hands and body shaking.

For Deacon.

I love you, Deeks. I’m so sorry.

She held her breath and aimed, then squeezed the trigger. The first man fell off the ledge, and the others turned. The traitorous Minuteman reached for his gun but was dead before he could pull it free. His body tumbled over the edge too.

With a screech, Tessa raised her weapon: a flamer. A jet of intense heat erupted from it and lit the wood around them on fire. MacCready shoved Cassidy aside and her rifle skidded away as she stumbled and fell, the flames narrowly missing her.

“Still trying to be hot, Tessa? This is as close as your ugly ass will ever get.” MacCready gave a
sharp barking laugh.

Scrambling to retrieve her rifle, Cassidy heard him cry out. The edge of his duster was on fire. He clocked Tessa in the head with the butt of his rifle, making her stumble back with a curse.

“Still not smart enough to wear a helmet?” taunted MacCready. “Be an improvement.”

She snarled and lunged at him with the flamer as it went into cool down. The hot metal made contact with MacCready’s arm and he yelped in pain. He fell against the wall and raised his foot, shoving Tessa hard and forcing her back. The flamer would be ready to fire again and he had to kill her before she had a chance to let loose with it. If she did, he would be toast. Literally.

Cassidy waited. MacCready had said Tessa was his mark. But she readied a shot in case the Gunner boss tried to light him up.

“Die you little asshole!” Tessa screamed.

“You first!” he shouted back and clocked her across the face with his rifle again. This time she stumbled off the edge onto the ground below. The power armor stopped her from dying, but MacCready raised his rifle and shot her in the head as she tried to get up.

Cassidy could see the Atom Cats half in shadow, gathered close. She turned and ran back down the stairs and across the road to where they were.

Sobbing, she fell to her knees beside Deacon.

“Deacon! I’m sorry!” she cried. “I’m sorry!”

She fell across his chest crying pitifully, his blood staining her face and jacket. “I’ll find the Railroad. I promise!”

She felt a hand on the back of her head. “Can I come with?”

She raised her head and looked at him. “D...Deacon?”

His lips curved into a lopsided grin. “Hey Charmer,” he said weakly.

She wiped tears and blood from his face, not even realizing that his trademark sunglasses had vanished somewhere. “How are you alive?! I saw you die!”

“Us spies are notoriously hard to kill!”

“Oh Deacon!” She hugged him tightly but he groaned in pain.

“Easy little sister,” said Johnny D. “That shot jacked him up. I hit him with a megastim right where he landed. A second later and he’d have been a goner.”

“You’re gonna be out of commision for awhile,” said MacCready to Deacon. “I don’t know if you’re crazy or brave.”

“I’ll take care of you Deeks,” said Cassidy softly stroking his face.

“Let’s get back to the garage,” said Zeke. “I’ll carry our hero here.”

Rowdy looked at Cassidy. “Well, we pulled it off. These germs are off to the boneyard!”
“We’ll come back and eyeball the place, deal with the bodies,” said Johnny D.

Deacon grunted in pain when Zeke picked him up. They had an hour trek back to the garage. Daylight was starting to appear.

MacCready slung an arm around Cassidy’s shoulders. “You did good. Real good,” he said.

She looked at him with appreciation. “Thanks MacCready. I learned I’m not the greatest after all.”

“Give it time. You got a lot to learn but I’ll work with you anytime. Me and you? We could make a lot of caps.”

“No way I don’t want to be a merc,” she said. “It’s way too scary for me.”

“Still helping me with my mission?” he asked.

“I gave my word, so yes. But not now, not until Deacon’s healed up. Me and Deacon, we’re a team. I’ll tell you a secret. We’re spies.”

MacCready chuckled. “I don’t think you’re supposed to tell anyone that. But I’ll keep your secret. Charmer.” He winked and she smiled.
Friends

Chapter Summary

Cassidy takes care of the wounded Deacon, and finds herself bonding with the Atom Cats and MacCready.

Cassidy looked down at Deacon as he lay quietly in the bed. There was a soft light in the room provided by a lantern similar to the ones he’d had in his hideout.

They’d dosed him with different chems to relieve him of his pain and to help clot the blood. Zeke thought it would be better if he stayed asleep so he moved around less. The megastim Johnny D had given him would do it’s best work over the coming 24 hours. Stims were great, he’d explained, but they could only do so much. The body needed time to heal itself when the injury was so great.

The gunshot had hit him in the upper chest, nearer his shoulder, beneath his collar bone. It was an ugly wound that would leave some kind of scar.

Cassidy gently ran her fingers across his forehead. She wished she could see the color of his eyes. He looked so different minus his glasses.

She’d been washing the wound and changing the bandages. She did it carefully so as not to hurt him even though he remained in an almost comatose state thanks to the chems.

She sat down on the bed beside him and curled up on his uninjured side. With gentle hands she ran her fingers through his auburn hair. “I love you Deacon. I’ve never loved anyone like this before and it’s scary. I thought I’d lost you.”

Tears filled her eyes and crept down her face. “I think I’d die too if you did.”

Cassidy sighed and pressed her lips to his temple, then carefully slid an arm beneath his neck and held onto him.

Rowdy walked past and looked in the room. She sighed. “Hey, little sister you need anything?”

Cassidy raised her head. "No thanks, Rowdy. We’re just going to sleep.”

Rowdy wandered back to where Zeke was sitting playing checkers with Duke.

“Zeke, I don’t think she’s going to fall in love with Derrick. I think she’s got it bad for Deacon.”

Zeke had to go see for himself. He saw Cassidy peacefully sleeping, holding onto him carefully. “She thought he died. That messes with your head. He’s a lot older than her. Sees him as a daddy maybe.”

“I never carried on that way with my daddy,” said Rowdy. “Looks like love to me.”

Zeke shrugged. “Could be. But we gotta try. For Derrick. He’s perfect for her. I mean
Rowdy...she’s one of us. Deacon not so much.”

“Zeke, you know how it is. The heart wants what the heart wants.”

Three days passed, and when Cassidy returned from her bath, Deacon was awake. His eyes were big in the soft light and the smile he gave her was as large as it always had been. “Hey Charmer,” he said.

She stared into his eyes. They were a pale blue, not set too deep, and slightly elongated but not as narrow as MacCready’s. There was nothing gory or disgusting about them. Aside from a few crow’s feet in the corners, his eyes looked perfect.

“You said your eyes were all bloody pus and gore,” she said accusingly.

“No, I didn’t. You did. And what did I tell you? Don’t believe anything anyone says. Especially me.”

“Nuh uh,” Cassidy shook her head. “When I asked you you said something like that. And you don’t have anything wrong with them at all! You just lied!”

Deacon’s gaze was impassive. “Don’t take it personally Charmer. I lie. That’s what I do.”

“Is it a spy thing? I don’t lie about anything. It’s rude.”

“Well yeah, a spy has to be able to lie. But...I’ve been doing it so long I don’t even know I am half the time. So...just...yeah.”

“But why would you lie to someone you’re not even spying on? Like...me…”

Deacon’s expression didn’t change and that bothered her. He rubbed his eyes for a moment.

“Charmer like I said it’s just become a habit now. So...don’t take it personally.”

She shifted uncomfortably and changed the subject.

“I love your eyes,” she said. “I can figure what you’re feeling. That’s a thing for me. Maybe don’t wear the glasses indoors anymore. When we’re together.”

“I’m light sensitive,” he said. “Zeke said he’d give me another pair.”

“Do I believe that?” she asked.

“He did say that and yes the light sensitive thing is true. Been that way since...since...I can’t remember. As far as I’m concerned they’re just like any other bit of clothing I wear now.”

“Well when we’re alone at night then. Please Deacon? I like looking into someone’s eyes. Especially yours.”

He didn’t answer either way. I don’t need you seeing my feelings. I don’t want you seeing them and knowing my darkness, my shame.

“Are you hungry?” Cassidy asked him, not wanting to push him any further. She could see he wasn’t comfortable. “Thirsty?”

He shook his head slightly. “No, just tired. Some of those chems knock me out.”
“Sleep heals,” said Cassidy. “It’s good for you. I’ve been watching over you and caring for your wound. It’s healing up but slowly. It’s bad, Deacon. We all think you’re going to have a scar there.”

He gave a small shrug with his good side. “We all have them. Inside and out. At least the outer ones aren’t hidden.”

“You’re still gorgeous even with scars and if you had gross mutated eyes.”

“You...you shouldn’t think of me like that, Charmer,” he said softly. “I’m not what you see. I’m not what you think.”

She gave a heavy sigh. “I might be young but I’m not entirely dumb. Maybe about battles I am, but I know a good person when I see one and you’re one of the best. As for your being gorgeous, I’m not blind either. If you didn’t know you were before, well now I’m telling you and you know I don’t lie. Now get some sleep. Johnny D. wants to start getting you up and around more now.”

She left him there. Deacon watched her go, his heart heavy.

I need you, he thought. I want you...but I can’t have you. It would be wrong on so many levels. He closed his eyes and sighed. But really how much more can I be damned?

That voice laughed. The question isn’t about you. It’s about how much being with you will damn HER.

Deacon scowled and rolled over.

Outside, Peepers, the eyebot pet the Atom Cats had built, hovered up to her and blinked and beeped.

“Hi Peepers,” she said. “I can’t understand a word you ever say.”

Peepers let out a series of blips and spun around, bobbing merrily in front of her. Cassidy reached up and tapped it on the front. The bot let out a long whistle making her laugh, then it turned and dashed away. She wanted to follow it, to see where the thing went but she just stood still and let her thoughts flow.

Cassidy didn’t care how much Deacon dumped on himself. She’d realized after nearly watching him die that she was totally in love with him. She’d sat at his side nearly 24/7 caring for him and she’d continue to do it for as long as it took.

She felt sick with guilt over the entire Quincy thing. She’d been so cocky and sure of herself, only to be shown, almost tragically, how wrong she’d been. Others had to fill in for her mistakes. And the worst part was that they didn’t put her down for it. She didn’t deserve such good friends.

She began to bond with the Atom Cats. They unfolded their stories little by little, and talked quite a bit about Derrick and another one of their group named Andy who had sadly died in a raider attack. Andy had been in love with music, and had made many holotapes of the best songs he could find. His music played through the garage from sunup til sundown every day. Cassidy figured that the tapes Sturges had lent her came from him.

One of the Cats, the girl named Roxy, finally did approach her. She had a chest full of rockabilly clothing and Cassidy squealed with delight when she saw it.

“You’ve got to pick some of these out to take home little sister,” she said. “You’re a Cat now, and us Cats are cool. We dress to show our pride!”
“My daddy would never forgive me for becoming a rockabilly,” said Cassidy sadly.

Roxy made a show of looking around. “I don’t see anyone here but us. You can’t hide your cool. You are who you are. One of us. And you’re not a kid anymore. Besides, all daddies are supposed to love their little girls no matter what.”

The words rang true and made Cassidy happy. She let Roxy dress her and fuss over her, giving her an outfit similar to the guys: leather jacket, t-shirt and jeans. Then she gave Cassidy a few dresses and hair accessories. She fawned over her unique hair color and Cassidy explained that one day she wouldn’t have it anymore as there were no chemists who could make hair dye like that.

Rowdy showed her how to work on the power armor and she helped repair the damages to the suits they got during the battle at Quincy. The best part was painting the flames. It looked just like the ones on the cars back in her own time. Cassidy loved doing that part the best and the Cats all praised her work. She didn’t think it was that good but they were kind and encouraging.

Her relationship with MacCready, that had started out pretty rocky, smoothed out.

MacCready had worked with her a bit on moving targets. She was awful at it but improving. She’d initially avoided him for the most part even after their amiable walk back to the garage from Quincy. But after a bit of rest, it was MacCready who had broken the ice.

The afternoon after they returned, he found her making a sandwich for lunch. She had a rather angry red mark on her cheek where he’d slapped her.

Gently, he touched it with the back of his fingers. “I’m sorry I had to do this,” he said.

“You had no other choice, I was out of it,” she said. “I just watched the man I love die. Or so I thought.”

MacCready raised his eyebrows. “Yeah but I didn’t think I hit you hard enough to cause this mark. I’m sorry. So you two, you’re a thing?”

She nodded. “I think so. We’re always together. And I love him. I’m sure he loves me too. If he didn’t why would he stick around? And almost die for me?”

“You ever tell him you love him?” asked MacCready.

She shook her head. “He’s really shy. But sometimes you don’t need to say stuff to feel it. Right?”

MacCready nodded. “But sometimes people are walking on two totally opposite tracks. Not saying something can sometimes make things go badly.”

“I’m sure we’re fine,” said Cassidy. “He’s...just...amazing.”

“If you say so,” he shrugged. “Don’t really know him. He’s not the most talkative guy. At least not with me.”

“Spies don’t say much,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, there’s that I guess,” MacCready shrugged. “Who for though. Spies work for someone right?”

She thought about that. “That’s true. I don’t know. He never told me. One day he will though.”

MacCready opened up a bottle of bourbon, took a swig than offered it to her. Cassidy made a face
and shook her head.

“No thanks."

“More for me than,” he said and took another pull. He lit a cigarette. “Heading back to wherever it is you’re from after this?”

“Probably,” she answered. “I kind of like it here though. I like Zeke and his friends. I feel like I fit in here better than I do there. Like...Sanctuary is part of my past and this is more like my future. But I miss Derrick too. He’s at Sanctuary.”

MacCready nodded. “Mind if I come with? When you go back.”

“If you want. I thought you’d go back to Goodneighbor.”

“It was wearing out it’s welcome.”

Cassidy eyed him carefully. “You just want to come with us so we can go do your mission. I already said we’d do it. I keep my word. I just want Deacon to be better first. Stims can only do so much.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” he said. “Just want to get away from Goodneighbor. Didn’t you notice it’s not the friendliest place?”

She shrugged. “It suits you, though.”

MacCready turned away. “You’re judging a guy you don’t even know.”

“You’re a merc.” As soon as the words left her mouth she realized she sounded like her father. He judged all rockabilly as gangsters, and here was Zeke and his friends who’d waded into danger with her based on a holotape.

“Yeah. I am. Survival, remember? You do what you gotta even if you’d rather not.”

“Like joining the Gunners. And you knew that woman with the flamer from when you were with them?”

He crushed out his cigarette and put down the bourbon. “Yeah. Tessa. Just one of many ass...idiots in the Gunners. Each one wants to be the boss.”

“Why do you stop yourself from cussing all the time?” she asked curiously.

Something shifted in his expression. “It’s because of a promise I made to someone I love. To try and be a better person.” He saw the look in her eyes. “Ironic right? I kill for a living. But I can’t help that. I can help the words I use though. It’s not much but it’s a start.”

“The promise you made, was it to your girl?” she asked softly.

He shook his head, then watched her quietly for a moment, assessing her, wondering if it was alright to tell his story.

“My son, Duncan.”

Cassidy raised her eyebrows in surprise. “You’re a dad?”

“Oh don’t look so shocked! Don’t think a merc can be a dad?”
She shook her head. “No...not that...it’s just...you don’t seem like a dad type to me that’s all. I’m not trying to be rude.”

He sighed. “The mission. The one I need help with. It’s...it’s to save my son’s life.”

“What? Where is he? What’s wrong with him?

MacCready looked downcast. “Capital Wasteland. Where I’m from.”

“Then what are you doing here? Aren’t there merc jobs in the Capital?”

He nodded. “It’s not about the jobs. Duncan...he’s sick. Real sick. Was playing out in the fields at our farm when he came down saying he wasn’t feeling too good. Broke out in these blue boils all over his body. I met some guy who said the same thing happened to his buddy and that there was a cure in the Commonwealth. Some place called MedTek Research. His buddy died before he could get the cure so he told me about it. Duncan was so weak...I couldn’t ask him to come with me.”

Cassidy couldn’t believe how horrible his story was. “Is he still alive? Do you even know? How old is he?”

“I don’t know, Cassidy. I don’t know a damn thing. I just know that the MedTek building is swarming with ferals. I couldn’t manage it on my own. Damn Gunners refused to help me out. That’s not what they do. It’s every man for himself. One guy did go with me. Died in there. My son would be 6 now. Left him with my wife’s family.”

Cassidy sighed softly. “Her family? Not her?”

“Lucy...she...when Duncan was still a baby we made the mistake of holing up in an old subway system. There were ferals. They...uhh...they killed her. Tore her apart right in front of me before I could get my gun locked and loaded. Took everything I had to get out of there with my son.” His lips tightened as he fought with his emotions.

Cassidy felt her own eyes prickle. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I’d never have thought...”

“That a dirty old merc could be a husband and father?”

She nodded miserably.

“Cassidy,” he said. “What you see isn’t always what you get.”

“I’m seeing that,” she agreed. “I’m seeing a lot of things I never did before. My daddy...he always handled everything. He decided things for me when I couldn’t or didn’t want to. He took care of me so I didn’t have to deal with anything.”

MacCready gave a nod towards the room Deacon was resting in. “Kind of like Deacon there. Takes care of you.”

She nodded. “He’s wonderful. He saved me and keeps doing it. I hope I can make him as happy as he makes me. I don’t know much about being a wife or a mother but I know I’ll love it. I miss my family. I need a family of my own.”

MacCready took a pull from the bourbon. “You’re how old?”

“Not this again,” she frowned. “Everyone keeps judging me by my age. I’m 18. Maybe 19. Don’t know the date.”
“No judgements here. I was 17 when my son was born. I didn’t know anything about the world either. Was raised in a cave with other kids. Left when I was 16. Of course I thought I knew it all. Well...I didn’t. And you don’t either. At least you had a family. Mine didn’t last too long and I never knew my parents.”

Cassidy tilted her head. “A cave? In the Capital Wasteland?”

MacCready nodded and proceeded to tell her about Little Lamplighter and his stint as Mayor.

“I can’t believe that!” Cassidy exclaimed. “A whole cave of kids! Just kids! Wow. I can’t imagine.”

“It’s all I ever knew. I can’t imagine living in a house with a mother and father. No one cares about me except me.” He sighed heavily. “I miss Lucy so much.”

Cassidy swallowed hard. “I miss my daddy too. I need to get help for him so we can wake him up. I don’t want to live in this crappy world without him.”

She shared her story with MacCready, who listened quietly and nodded. She talked about the kind of man her father was, her loving stepmother, and then explained about her little brother.

“That’s some story,” he said. “I hope you can find him. Anything with the word Institute attached freaks people out. It’s not good, I won’t lie to you. Guessing that’s why Deacon told you to go find the Railroad. They save synths. Synths are created by the Institute. Railroad hates them so you have a common enemy. Most people in the Commonwealth don’t believe they exist. Pretty shadowy group.”

“There’s some riddle to finding them and I think I know how. Because I’m from your past.”

His eyes lit up. “Yeah? That would be cool. I hope you find them and get what you need. We all need a break in this world. I’m hoping mine was meeting you.”

She smiled. “I’m wondering if we shouldn’t go for that cure ourselves. It might be awhile before Deacon can come with us. And your son...you can’t afford to wait, right?”

“I’d go in there with you,” said MacCready. “We could be good together.”

“As long as I listen to you, right?” she smirked.

“Well yeah, that goes without saying. Kid.”

“You’re hardly older than me MacCready,” she griped. “Stop calling me kid or I’ll think up a horrible nickname for you too.”

He laughed. “Go for it. I think I’ve heard it all by now.”

“Hmm,” she tapped her lower lip. “I could call you Blamco…”

He gave a laugh. “What?”

“MacCready...Mac...Mac ‘n Cheese...Blamco. But that’s not horrible. Calling me kid is horrible to me so...” She studied him a moment. “Well, you’re scrawny and dirty...like a weasel. A yucky little animal from my time. Yes...I got it...garbage weasel!” She giggled.

He blinked then burst out laughing. “That’s a new one! Good one kid.”
“I can be creative, garbage weasel. And for sure you need a bath before we go anywhere. You smell a bit bad.”

MacCready shook his head. “Have you noticed that there’s a lack of decent water? And what there is, we drink.”

Cassidy rolled her eyes. “Diamond City has running water. Sanctuary has running water. The Cats have it. It’s purified somehow too. At home our mechanic is so completely amazing. I don’t know how he does it but Derrick can do anything. He’s even going to build a car one day. That little blue one in Quincy...that was his. Anyway...bath time garbage weasel.”

MacCready waggled his eyebrows. “I’ll gladly have a bath if you join me.”

Cassidy made a face. “Ew! No! Why would anyone want to bathe with a garbage weasel like you?”

“You’d be surprised, kid.”

“Yes. I would be.” She performed an over the top shudder.

In truth, she thought MacCready was cute. There was something good about him, that lay beneath the rough surface. And his devotion to his son spoke volumes. His wife had seen enough in him to marry him. And it was obvious he’d loved her deeply.

“So, about your mission...when Deacon awakes I’ll have a talk with him.”

MacCready smirked. “That’s what you’re calling IT these days, huh? A ‘talk’.”

Cassidy wrinkled up her nose. “Why are you so lewd? Me and Deacon don’t do that. Not yet anyway. We haven’t been together long. You don’t do that until you’re committed to each other.”

He shrugged. “It’s not the same these days. People need an escape. Sex is one of them. Nothing wrong with it if everyone’s willing. Good on you for following your own rules though.”

But in his mind he was wondering how she would feel if things didn’t go her way. From what Deacon had said, it seemed to MacCready the two of them seemed to be on totally different pages of the same book. Come to think of it, they might be on different books all together. Maybe not even in the same library.

But it wasn’t his business. His was getting the cure and going home. If Cassidy were willing to run through MedTek with him then that would be all the better. It meant getting back to Duncan all that quicker.

“Deacon might worry about me but he’ll understand. Is it ok if I tell him about Duncan and why we can’t really wait for him?”

MacCready nodded. “Yeah I don’t mind. Guys been decent to me so why not.”

“Ok,” she said. “I’ll wait until after dinner tonight. I need to go and collect some taters from the garden. Want to come?”

MacCready gave a half smile. No one had ever invited him to do anything before that didn’t involve killing or gambling.

He followed her.
Family Ties

Chapter Summary

Preston and Sturges have a discussion; Cassidy learns something fun about Zeke; Deacon's mental state becomes more worrisome.

“Hey,” said Preston as he walked into Sturges’ house. “I think there’s a water problem in the greenhouse. I told Marcy you’d check it out.”

Sturges looked up from where he was sitting on his couch. He had a drawing pad in front of him. “Will do,” he said and put it down on the coffee table.

Preston looked at the drawing and gave a low whistle. “Wow. I didn’t know you could draw. That’s pretty damn good.”

Sturges shrugged. “There’s a lot of things I like doing that I haven’t in years. Thanks though.”

“It looks exactly like her. Like she’s going to walk right off the page.”

The drawing was of Cassidy, sitting on the rock wall near the river. She was smiling, Dogmeat beside her looking up with his shining eyes.

The actual dog was currently lying beside Sturges on the couch and his tail thumped at Preston.

“You ever tell her how you feel?” asked the Minuteman.

Sturges tried to feign surprise but failed. “What do you mean?”

“Oh come on,” said Preston. “Everyone sees it. You like her. But did you ever say anything about it?”

Sturges sighed. “That obvious huh? Well no. I never said a word. She’s got it bad for that Deacon. I’m not the kind of guy to get in between two people, you know?”

“I get it,” nodded Preston. He sat down and leafed through a car magazine. “She’s been gone some time now. No word’s come through the grapevine about Quincy. Don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

Sturges’ eyes betrayed his next words. “I’m sure she’s fine. She’s got Zeke and the Cats. Be home any day now.” His words sounded confident but his expression told a different story.

Preston nodded again, playing along. “Yeah I guess you’re right. Long trek and all. You’re sure that your friends would have helped her out?”

“I’d stake my life on that,” said Sturges. “If she had the Cats at her back, she’s coming home, Preston.” Quietly he added. “She’s just got to.”
Marcy appeared in the doorway. “Carla’s coming in,” she said. “Maybe there’s word.”

Trashcan Carla hadn’t ever seen so many people descend on her as she walked in through the security gate. Sanctuary Hills had a few new faces she’d noticed last time. Business was picking up.

“Carla,” said Marcy. “Any word from the Commonwealth?”

She nodded. “Yeah there’s a few stories floating around. Can’t verify any of ‘em but trade route to Quincy supposedly opened up. Whatever raiders were holed up in there got their asses handed to them. Whoever pulled it off though… no word on them. Could have been another gang but who knows. It’s hard to verify since the routes too far southwest for me. Anyways…who wants to trade?”

Excited chatter went up from the group.

“Something else too,” said Carla. “That big flying thing that showed up…Brotherhood of Steel. Seen their vertibirds around the city. They’ve been laying into the synths. Word is they’re out to get the Institute.”

The group didn’t care overmuch about the Brotherhood. They were ecstatic that the Quincy mission had been completed…but where were Cassidy and Deacon?

“So there’s no word at all about any of the attackers of the Quincy raiders?” asked Preston. “No rumors? Nothing?”

Carla shook her head. “Nothing other then the Gunners have lost a big part of their organization. They’re running a bit scared. You know how it is. Stories just get crazier over time. They’re gonna lay low for awhile which is fine by me. Maybe whoever did it can finish off the rest of the Commonwealth filth.”

Sturges gave Mama Murphy a thumbs up. The old lady nodded and walked slowly back to the Cantina. Sturges caught up to her.

“Cassidy’s gonna come home Mama Murphy,” he said. “I knew she could do it. She’s one in a million. I told Zeke that. The Cats were part of this, I know it.”

“She’s a special kid. I saw that the day we met. So did you.” Her eyes sparkled and she did her best to hide her smile.

“First Preston, now you. I’m thinking everyone saw how I felt except Cassidy,” he said.

“That other guy, he’s not right for her,” said Mama Murphy.

“Might be so,” agreed Sturges. “But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t have it bad for him. She’s pretty far gone on that guy. I just want her to be happy. When you care about someone, that’s the way of it.”

“I know,” nodded Mama Murphy. “But you still can have a say.”

“Nah, I’m not that guy who gets in between people, like I told Preston.”

Mama Murphy gave him a knowing look and he wondered if she wasn’t sneaking chems behind everyone’s back, or if her strange abilities went beyond needing them. If it were the case, the old lady wasn’t saying a word about it. She went into the Cantina and set about her business.
Sturges wandered over to the greenhouse to check out the water problem. He’d done his best to stay busy while Cassidy was away, but the truth was she never left his thoughts.

From the day she’d walked into the museum, confused and frightened, he’d lost his heart. He figured she’d spend her days at Sanctuary quietly living her life. Never had he imagined that she’d light up with the fires of hell and take on the worst raider group in the Commonwealth.

It made him ashamed for himself. He hated guns and killing, and avoided all of it as much as possible. He knew he’d killed before in self defense or in defense of those he cared about. But he hated it. And here was this beautiful little girl with the big blue eyes who didn’t think twice about wading into hell to avenge people she hardly knew.

“I think I need to step up my game,” he said to Dogmeat. “She’s showing all of us up!”

Dogmeat whined softly and wagged his tail.

“I get it,” said Deacon softly. “You two are well matched. Just be careful. I’m going to need just a bit more time to get over this.”

“Thanks Deeks,” said Cassidy with a smile. She picked up a glass of water and gave it to him. He drank it gratefully. She always seemed to know what he needed. He was finding that he liked being cared for.

“Going to be quiet around here without you,” he said, handing her back the glass.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can. We have to get back to Sanctuary because I think Derrick and everyone will be worried about us.”

Deacon shook his head. “Worried about you, Charmer.”

“Both of us. They care about both of us. MacCready asked to come with us.”

This surprised Deacon. “Yeah?”

“Mhm. I thought it was because of his mission thing but he said it wasn’t. He wants to get away from Goodneighbor.”

“It’s a rough neighborhood. I guess he needs a break. What did you say to him?”

Cassidy shrugged. “I don’t care if he comes with us. But if he hangs around he’ll have to do his part like all of us. You won’t though, not until that wound is completely healed.”

She brushed a stray strand of hair off his forehead. Deacon closed his eyes. It had been too long since anyone had touched him that way.

Every breath you take is an affront after what you've done, reminded that voice.

“You should go join the others,” he said. “I’m feeling tired again.”

“I like being with you,” said Cassidy. “I didn’t leave your side the whole time you were unconscious you know.”

His light blue eyes affixed on her. “I appreciate all that,” he said as Cassidy continued to stroke his hair. He sighed.
“You and MacCready though. You’ve got work to do. Probably should get some rest too if you’re heading out soon. Tomorrow morning or what’s the plan?”

Cassidy took his hand in both of hers and stroked his fingers. A sensation similar to an electrical current suddenly ran through him and he pulled his hand back, making a pretense of needing it to steady himself to roll over. *She makes me feel things that I can’t allow.*

*Since when have your feelings ever stopped your actions? Your feelings are damned.* A chill ran through him as the voice seemed to cut him with a fine razor’s edge. He squeezed his eyes shut, the action often serving to silence it.

He let his eyes roam Cassidy’s face. The wide blue eyes gazed back at him undaunted. Unlike the old lady at Sanctuary, Cassidy’s gaze didn’t unnerve or disturb him. *I need her,* he thought. *Maybe that’s the answer. Maybe she can purge this darkness from me with her light.* His own thoughts sounded too poetic and outrageous. But they represented a possibility. A chance to be free of himself.

Cassidy kissed his hand, seeing him shut his eyes tightly, she thought he was in pain. “Let me get you some more of those chems Deek.”

“No, stay with me,” he said softly. “I’m fine. Just...just a little dizzy is all.”

She rested her cheek against his hand. “I’ll never leave you Deacon.”

He contemplated disappearing while she was on the mission with MacCready. But he’d said to her that he’d help her with her father. He couldn’t just leave. Plus the look in her eyes when he’d taken off while at Sanctuary for a few hours that day...it still haunted him.

Cassidy was taking over his mind and even his dreams. He’d told himself she was just a kid, but he knew she wasn’t. Those thoughts had left his mind quite a while ago. Naïve though she was, Cassidy was a force to be reckoned with as she adjusted to her new life. He wanted to be there to witness it. He wanted to be with her.

*She doesn’t know what I am,* he reminded himself. *No one should be burdened with my sins. Except me. It’s my penance.*

“I’ll talk to you later Charmer,” said Deacon, closing his eyes, making a great show of being tired, which he surely wasn’t.

Cassidy stood up. “Ok. I’ll save you some dinner.” She began to walk away then stopped and returned, bending down and kissing him lightly on his temple.

*I think I’m fucked,* Deacon thought. *No, I’m actually sure I am.*

“Hey CJ, listen to this,” said Zeke, tossing her a holotape. She put it in her pip-boy. Someone was crooning a popular tune. She smiled. “That’s really nice. Is this you?” she asked.

Zeke laughed. “That’s my brother Derrick! Can you dig it?”

Cassidy’s jaw dropped. “That’s Derrick?! He sounds so amazing!”

“His voice is fab little sister. Derrick is the ultimate cool. He got all the talent in the family.”

Cassidy stared at Zeke a moment. She hadn’t seen it before, but she sure did now. “When you say
brother, you mean by blood don’t you!”

He laughed and nodded. “You got it! Derrick’s my little brother.”

“He never told me that. He always called you The Cats.”

“Because that’s who we are!” Zeke exclaimed with a big grin.

“Zeke Sturges,” she said, testing it out.

He gave her a thumbs up. “He needs to come home. Been gone too long. You could do old Zeke a favor and bring him home. You’re one of us CJ. You need to live here.”

A huge grin lit up her face. “You mean it? You want me to stay?”

“We all do!” cried Roxy from behind the bar. “You belong here! Can’t you feel it?”

Cassidy did indeed feel it. “But I have friends at Sanctuary too. I couldn’t leave them!”

Johnny D looked up from his drink. “Split the time!”

“You mean live in both places?”

“Little sister, your heart will tell you where to settle down. And if your heart is cool, it will tell you this is home.” Johnny D raised the glass to her before downing it.

“I have so much to do,” sighed Cassidy. “I can’t even think of settling down to live anywhere. And Deacon too. Can he stay?”

Zeke shrugged. “He’s not like us, but if he’s your beau, he’s welcome.”

Cassidy was happy to hear it. She didn’t want to go anywhere Deacon didn’t go.

Zeke picked another song on the jukebox. “Bring Derrick home with you when you come back, jack.”

“If he’ll come with me I will. But he’s our mechanic. We need him. Maybe once we get more people...I don’t know Zeke. It’s hard to say. There’s just so much stuff to do. Everywhere. I need to find my little brother too....and my daddy....”

“That’s right, you’ve got a tale to tell. Spill it, CJ,” said Zeke, sitting down and pouring himself a beer.

MacCready wandered in from outside, grabbed a bottle of bourbon and sat down at the bar.

The Cats gathered around as she started telling about her situation.

“I think we should help you CJ,” said Zeke. “We might be few but we’re mighty.” He turned to Duke. “You’ve got your ear to the ground, maybe cast an eyeball around too. Out there.”

Duke nodded. “Right-o boss.”

He looked at Rowdy. “Let’s set her up with some sweet mods. This little kitten needs all the help she can get to go ape on the Institute. Those cat’s are very un-cool.”

Cassidy made a face at him. “I know what you just said. I’m not a kitten!”
Everyone chuckled.

“No shame in it little sister! Kittens grow up to be big cool Cats! Now...give Rowdy that sweet piece of yours. You too MacCready.”

The mercenary shook his head. “I’m not giving up my gun to you guys, are you crazy? This thing is all I got.”

Cassidy handed hers over to Rowdy. “It’s ...it’s from my time. I don’t want it changed too much. Please.”

“Cassidy. Your weapon is your life. Shouldn’t mess with it,” said MacCready cautiously.

She sat down with him. “Zeke is Derrick’s brother. As in for real. Derrick is absolutely amazing, and he’s always trusted the Cats with everything. If Rowdy says she can make our weapons better, I believe it. But it’s up to you.”

He patted his rifle. “I’m good the way things are. No offense intended.”

“None taken,” said Zeke with a nod.

As Rowdy worked on Cassidy’s rifle, she went back to sit with Deacon. He ate what she brought him and gratefully washed it down with a rather watered out Vodka.

“Johnny D said the vodka might react with the chems,” she said. “So I had to water it out some. I’m sorry Deacon.”

“It’s all good,” he smiled. “I need a bath though.”

“You don’t smell bad,” Cassidy said.

“If you could smell me from that distance, I’d think I was rotting or something.”

She laughed. “I’ve been sleeping beside you pretty much every day. You aren’t bad, trust me. I told MacCready he needed a bath because he is reeking.”

Deacon blinked. “You’ve been sleeping here?”

She nodded. “You seemed to appreciate it so I kept on. Why do you look so shocked about it?”

He swallowed hard and wished there were some more Vodka, watered out or not. “I appreciated it, what do you mean? I was out like a light wasn’t I? I mean I don’t remember much.”

She went and sat down on the bed beside him. “I crawled behind you and held you. You always snuggled up to me. You’re a snuggler Deacon!”

His heart started racing and he felt the room closing in on him. Breathing became a chore. “Ok, Cassidy,” he said haltingly. “No more, alright?”

“No more what...holding you? Are you ok? Do you need more chems? You don’t look so great and you called me Cassidy not Charmer.”

She placed a hand on his forehead to check for fever. Deacon moved his head away. “I’m fine. Just...I’d prefer it if you didn’t sleep with me anymore. No offense.”

She moved herself to the chair, watching his eyes carefully. She didn’t understand his abrupt mood
What did I do wrong? We've gone to sleep together plenty of times on the road.

“Nothing happened, Deacon. I liked being nearby so if you woke up or needed something I’d be right here. I didn’t mean for it to upset you. I’m sorry.”

He saw the hurt in her eyes, the confusion. She was so innocent of everything. So loving and kind. *Getting close to me is the worst thing anyone could ever do,* he thought.

*Someone doesn’t need to be close for you to destroy them,* said the voice.

He shut his eyes tight to silence it.

Cassidy was watching him closely.

“I think you need more chems,” she stated. “Your color went away and you look a bit messed up. I’ll get them and some more water for you too. Rowdy is making my rifle better. MacCready didn’t want his done. I don’t think he trusts the Cats.”

“Shouldn’t trust anyone,” said Deacon, not looking at her.

“You have to. Or you’ll always be alone and that sucks. I trust you.”

*There’s your first mistake,* he thought.

The voice in his head laughed.

“I trust MacCready too,” continued Cassidy. “And the Cats and my Sanctuary family. Even Daisy. She’s good people too. But I’m still getting used to looking at ghouls. They’re weird.”

She was so full of enthusiasm, despite the trials she already was facing. And still she kept reaching out to others and helping them openly and without guile.

Deacon knew their time together was limited and it saddened him immensely. He wished at that moment he could be anyone else in the world.

Someone worthy of Cassidy Hartley.
Deacon stood with the Cats as MacCready and Cassidy set off for the MedTek building. Rowdy’s enhancements to her rifle had blown her mind and even the mercenary had to admit he was impressed.

“I’ll do yours too,” said Rowdy. “Stop being so square!”

“Maybe when we come back,” he said. “If Cassidy’s doesn’t blow up on her I’ll think about it.”

“Be safe little sister,” said Zeke.

Cassidy looked at Deacon, and wanted to hug him, to feel his arms around her. She felt safe in his embrace. But after his reaction to her the previous day she hesitated. He was wearing new sunglasses Zeke had given him and she couldn’t see his emotions. *I’m sure he won’t want me to touch him right now,* she thought. She settled for a little wave.

Deacon could see it in Cassidy’s eyes that she was still hurt and confused. He mentally kicked himself for it and had been doing so most of the night. He hadn’t slept well, missing her warm, soft body next to his. For all of his wanting to care for her, he was now succeeding in hurting her instead.

He wanted to reach out to her, but her expression told him he’d better not. Instead he gave her the best smile he could muster and a rather weak salute before she and MacCready left the garage.

“It’s going to be weird for me to not have Deacon,” she said suddenly.

“I’m better than he is at combat,” said MacCready pointedly.

“It’s not the combat part. He’s fine with that. It’s everything else. How he just knows things. And...I love him.”

“About that,” said the mercenary carefully. “What if he doesn’t feel the same?”

She grinned. “Of course he does. If he didn’t feel the same he’d leave. He’d have done that long ago. In fact after saving me he would have gone his own way. But he didn’t. He’s been with me every moment since then. And he’s really sweet to me. Very much a gentleman.”

“You two need to talk about it,” he said.

“Why do you keep bringing that up?” she asked. “You’ve said it before about him not liking me. Did he say that to you? Did he say he didn’t love me or want to be with me? I know he’s a bit older than me but who cares about all that? Love is love.”
MacCready shook his head. It wasn’t his business to gossip about his conversation with Deacon. But damn it, he was starting to care about Cassidy.

“He doesn’t talk about his private life. Hell, guys never talk about feelings to begin with.”

“Then stop saying things that confuse me,” she said with a frown.

“Yeah you’re right. I need to stay out of it. Don’t want to see you get hurt I guess. Just...just be careful alright?” He wanted to say more, to tell her of his concerns about Deacon’s stability but aside from a few incidents he had no proof, just a gut feeling. And that wasn’t enough to go on.


He smiled at her. “Nice, kid. Nice. So you going to meet Hancock next time you go out to Goodneighbor?”

“He killed that guy right in front of us! Like me and Deacon walked in the door, he didn’t know us, and just bam...murder right there. It freaked me out.”

“Goodneighbor’s name is a lie,” he said. “When I said I wanted to go with you because I was bored of it, that wasn’t exactly the whole truth.”

Cassidy kicked a rock nonchalantly. “Yeah? Everyone has secret stuff they don’t share. It’s ok. I said you could come with me.”

“The Gunners were pissed when I left. People don’t usually leave unless they die or move. Well I didn’t do either. They decided that I was taking contracts in their territory.”

“That’s gangsters for you. Everything is their territory.” Cassidy rolled her eyes.

“Exactly. I need to make a living too. People come to me, I do the work. Well two of their goons, Winlocke and Barnes...been harrasing me in Goodneighbor. Trying to threaten me and squeeze me out. Started to get old so I figured I might as well hang out elsewhere for now. While we’re working together.”

“MacCready you’re a merc. Just hunt them down and take them out. Like Tessa.” She picked up a rock and threw it as far as she could. Which wasn’t far at all.

“Their hangout is on one of those roadway things. I’m good but it would be like taking on Quincy by myself. Can’t do it. So...I was trying to make enough caps to buy out the contract they have on me.”

She shook her head. “Maybe things are different now, but doing that usually doesn’t work and you get murdered anyways.”

“It’s still that way. Yeah it’s a risk, I get it. But it was the best I could think of. Just tired of them harassing me. They won’t start anything as long as I’m in Goodneighbor. Hancock only has a few rules and one of them is play nice. In town you don’t start trouble. Like that guy he killed. Finn. That one was always pulling extortion on the people. Pisses Hancock off. And you don’t ever piss Hancock off.”

“Because he’s dangerous and that’s why I’m happy to stay away.”

“No,” said MacCready “because he doesn’t take crap from anyone. He’s fair. A good mayor really.
Cleaned the place up as I heard it.”

“I guess I’ll have to meet him formally eventually,” she said with a sigh.

“I think you’d like him. Give him a chance. He’s got a story too. Like everyone.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“He can tell you himself,” answered MacCready. “Hey look, some old buildings. Let’s scav it up.”

“Scav?”

“Scavenge. Look for stuff to sell.”

“Ok,” said Cassidy. “But no corpses.” They went inside the first one. She poked through several old boxes and crates, turned over a few shelves and found nothing but a few bobby pins and a pack of cigarettes. She handed them to MacCready.

“Here. Something to kill yourself with.”

He took them with thanks. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, MacCready. Everyone knows smoking is bad for you.”

He looked puzzled. “Why? It’s just some plant dried up and rolled.”

She took the package back from him and looked at it. It didn’t look like any of the ones from her time. The packaging was crude and looked recycled. “Well in my time they put a whole bunch of chemicals in the tobacco. But this...I haven’t seen any kind like this before. I guess things change in 200 years. But the ground is full of radiation so all the plants might be too. I don’t know.”

He opened the package up. “These were started up by a company about 75 years ago. They have a factory down towards the Capital Wastes. No chems just plain old plants. There’s others in the West. There were shops opening up again. Like it used to be. But there were too many raiders and things didn’t work out. You only find packs like these on accident sometimes. Gotta buy from the caravans and they aren’t keen on carrying too many for the same reasons.”

She sighed. “This world sucks. No one fights back.”

“Yeah they do. But there’s always another guy wanting to join up to take the place of the ones we kill off.”

“They need to be killed faster and more at once. Like Quincy. I’m glad the Minutemen are coming back.” She wrinkled up her nose. “I can’t believe I’m standing here talking about being glad to kill people.”

MacCready shrugged. “Better than your old world ways. Putting them in a cage so they can get out and do it again.”

“Sometimes people are just lost and do stupid things. Locking them up doesn’t help I agree but...some had a chance to fix their lives up.”

“Not in these times,” said MacCready. “Raiders are bad news. Period.”

“What about Rowdy? She was a raider!”
MacCready raised his eyebrows. “Yeah? What’s her story?”

“She got into a bad fight and they left her for dead. One of the Cats found her and brought her around. They showed her that there’s a better life than being a raider. She was just a lost person. Now look at her.”

He shook his head. “Story like that is few and far between. I’d never trust…” he suddenly stopped as she tilted her head and raised her eyebrows.

“I’m one of those stories,” he said softly.

“Mhm and you wanted me to trust you. Insisted on it in fact. But you’re right. Your kind of stories are rare.”

He lit one of the cigarettes. “Let’s get out of here,” he said curtly.

They had some small skirmishes to deal with. Luckily they saw the raiders before the raiders saw them. Cassidy also met her first feral dogs and was horrified. MacCready told her that the mutant hounds harbored by the super mutants were worse. Far worse.

It was twilight when they reached the Med Tek building and it was surrounded by soldiers in power armor.

“Damn it,” said MacCready.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“You heard anything about a flying thing, a blimp that showed up a few weeks ago? Well that’s them. Brotherhood of Steel. Knew about them in the Capital Wastes.”

“Yes we saw them fly in. Deacon sort of mentioned them but he didn’t say much. Are they bad?”

“They’re a pain in the ass. They want all the technology out here for themselves. Don’t want anyone else having any because they think they’re the only ones entitled to it. They’d rule us and keep us in the dirt if they had their way.” His expression was full of distaste.

Cassidy watched the soldiers for a few minutes. They didn’t move, just stood there.

“Let’s talk to them,” Cassidy suggested. “We don’t want any technology, just the cure for your son if it’s here.”

MacCready’s heart had already sunk but he followed her. He knew the Brotherhood to be elitist towards anyone not within their ranks. If they’d scoured MedTek already, they probably would have taken anything that looked remotely important.

“Hi!” she said, standing before a towering metal soldier.

“Move along, civilian,” came the tinny reply.

“I need to get into MedTek.”

“Brotherhood business only. Now move along.”

“We don’t want any technology. We are looking for medicines. We’ve come a long way. Please.”

Another soldier joined them. “This building has been claimed by the Brotherhood of Steel. If
you’re interested in joining our ranks, then you need to find Paladin Danse at the Cambridge Police Station.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to join, I just want to find some medicine. In there.”

The first soldier waved her away. “If you aren’t Brotherhood then you’re nothing. Now get going, civilian.”

She grit her teeth and MacCready cringed. She wasn’t going to start a fight with them was she? He was about to reach out and pull her away when she stamped her foot and stared up at the soldier.

“No!” she exclaimed. “Our little boy is very sick and might die! MedTek used to make a medicine and it’s my only chance to save him!” She burst into tears.

Another soldier, a woman not in power armor, walked over. “What’s the issue here?” she asked.

“Civilians trying to gain entrance to the building. Something about medicine and a sick kid.” Said the soldier.

She sighed. “The place is overrun by ferals. It’s not safe for you in there. That’s why we’re clearing it out first. Go see Paladin Danse at Cambridge. Tell him Scribe Grainne McGann sent you. He’ll have medicines there.”

Cassidy kept crying. “It’s not regular medicine! It’s something only MedTek made! Please!”

“I’m sorry we can’t allow civilians inside this building,” she said not unkindly. “Go see the Paladin.”

Cassidy turned away, wailing dramatically. MacCready was confused but gave the soldiers the finger. “You suck!”

“Do we have someone guarding that tunnel entrance?” one of the soldiers asked the other.

“What tunnel entrance?” asked his companion.

“The one on the map. Out by that old book shop.”

“No point. No one’s coming through there.”

Cassidy kept crying as they walked away, then she grabbed MacCready’s hand and pulled him into an alley.

“Hell I tried,” she shrugged. “Works in holovids. I guess new world soldiers are immune to tears, but did you hear what they said? Secret entrance by the book shop. Let’s go!”

“I was wondering why the heck you were crying all of a sudden!” grinned MacCready. “Good job. Deacon’s taught you well. But we can’t fight those guys. That power armor is hard to break through.”

She nodded and wiped her eyes and face. “I know, but Deacon also taught me how to be stealthy. We can get in there and get out without them seeing us if we’re careful.”

He looked doubtful. “I don’t know Cassidy. It’s risky. The place is crawling with ferals. We can’t hide from them and the Brotherhood.”

Cassidy looked determined. “If they catch us they’ll just throw us out and we’ll find another way. I
don’t think they’re outright murderers, are they?”

MacCready shook his head. “Unless you’re a synth or a mutant of some kind. They hate anything non human.”

“Ok, let’s go then. We have to try, for your little Duncan.”

MacCready looked at her with admiration. She had more balls than he did that’s for sure. In general, he wasn’t a risk taker. He liked easy jobs for fast pay. But Cassidy didn’t seem to worry about risk.

Cassidy knew where the book shop was. Her old world knowledge was a good advantage and they found the tunnel. Although there was some digging and wiggling involved, they managed to find themselves in the MedTek building.

They could hear the soldiers stalking about above them. The building was, as usual, a ruinous mess and the heavy power armor thumping about was loosening bits of the ceiling.

“We need to find a computer,” said MacCready. “St. Claire said that you have to unlock a specific part of the factory in the basement which is why he believed that no one had gotten it yet. He gave me the password.”

“Do you trust him? I mean he could have been lying, right?”

“Yeah I trust him. He wouldn’t have given it to me if his friend hadn’t died. He believed in it 100%.”

Cassidy hoped he was right. She had a lot of questions, but they didn’t matter. The cure might or might not be present. “Let’s hope wherever he got the info from was honest too.”

“It’s my only chance for Duncan,” said MacCready softly. “It’s got to be here.”

They crept from room to room as quietly as possible, listening for ferals and Brotherhood. The soldiers had entered from the main floor, Cassidy and MacCready were already near the bottom so it worked to their advantage.

“If we get ferals, bash them,” said MacCready. “Don’t use the guns.”

Cassidy blinked. “Bash them? With my rifle? Or what? I’m not very strong if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Then let me do it and stay out of the way. But don’t die or get eaten. Please. Use the rifle if you have to but it’s best to be as quiet as we can.”

Ferals did indeed activate as they explored further. They grunted and growled and Cassidy squeezed her eyes shut and tried to sink into a corner as MacCready bashed them in the head. He also took out their legs so they fell and couldn’t reach them.

“I still can’t look at them,” she shuddered. “They freak me out so bad. Why did they get like this and the other ghouls didn’t?”

“The other ghouls can turn like this at any time,” said MacCready. “But the longer they are the other way the lesser the chances of it happening. A regular ghoul will turn fairly soon after, and these things don’t attack them either. So travelling with a ghoul is sometimes a good plan.”

“So Daisy is safe?” she asked with concern.
“Yeah, she’s ok. She’s prewar after all. Come on.”

They had almost despaired of finding a working computer, when MacCready found one facing the wrong way on a dilapidated desk. They quietly and carefully turned it around. He handed her a piece of paper. “Here you hack in. I’m no good at that.”

He stood by nervously as she got to work. “Ok, I think I’m in...now to test this password.”

MacCready closed his eyes. Please. Just please let this work. I’ll never ask for anything again.

He realized he was holding his breath when Cassidy gave a low hissing yes and he exhaled.

“Ok I unlocked the doors,” she said “Hopefully it’s the one we wanted and there’s an airlock here too according to the computer. Unlocked that as well. So, you said we need the basement? I saw an elevator back there. Cross your fingers that it works and won’t kill us.”

He led the way, and they heard the loud footsteps of more Brotherhood that sounded close. Cassidy stopped, and her arm hit a piece of loose metal debris, sending it crashing to the ground with a clang.

“You hear that?” asked a soldier.

“Probably more ferals, let’s find them.”

The footfalls came closer and MacCready grabbed Cassidy and dragged her behind an overturned desk. They would be caught if the soldiers thought to check the room.

We’re so close, she thought. Just keep walking soldiers, just keep walking.

And they did.

Cassidy and MacCready quite nearly ran to the elevator and pushed the button. The whirring of old mechanisms could be heard beyond the door and a few moments later it opened.

“Looks safe enough...at this point we can’t go back,” said MacCready and pulled Cassidy in behind him.

They both stood nervously as noisy old gears bumped and ground them to the lower levels. An unintelligible computerized voice tried to announce the floor but it came out as a garbled static.

It was pitch black beyond. Cassidy turned on her pip-boy light. “This will help us see but it will stop us from being too stealthy now,” she said.

“We’re far enough down that if we use our rifles no one should hear us.”

Despite that truth, each time they fired a shot, they stopped and listened. Moving forward was slow and they had to be careful. At a certain point the darkness seemed to abate and they found themselves in an annex where there was some fluorescent lighting. Lining the walls were dozens of tiny cell like rooms with glass windows.

To their disgust, Cassidy and MacCready saw that they were inhabited by feral ghouls. The husks looked like they had been there since before the war. Remnants of clothing still clung to their bodies. They saw Cassidy and MacCready and lunged at the windows, snarling and growling. 200 years of being trapped.

“I hope they turned quickly,” she said. “I can’t imagine how horrific it must have been when the
bombs fell and they weren’t killed.”

“Let’s hope that glass holds,” MacCready said.

“I’m more worried about having to let them out to continue on,” said Cassidy. “Look.” She pointed and there was a heavy locked door at the far end of the room. A computer sat at a desk.

“I knew none of this would be easy,” groaned the mercenary. “When I tried to come here with that Gunner we didn’t make it past the entry way before he got his face eaten off by ferals. I was out that door in a heartbeat and haven’t been back til now. This won’t be fun.”

Cassidy activated the computer. “Ok, good news and bad news. The bad news is that we do have to open the doors. The good news is that we don’t have to do them all at once. I just don’t know which code here opens up the door we need.”

“Just pick one and I’ll start taking them down.”

Cassidy chose the first set of doors and the ferals stumbled out. MacCready shot them down before they could get a bead on them.

She repeated it again. Same action. Eventually all the doors were then open, and the ferals dead...but the main door was still locked.

“Let’s check the rooms,” said MacCready.

Cassidy didn’t believe that there would be a computer in the cells, but she found a section of caved in floor in one of them. “We can fall through here, and not bother with that door. I don’t know where the terminal is for that one anyway.”

She crouched down and shone her pip-boy light into the hole. “It’s not too far a drop. We should be ok.”

MacCready picked up a bit of debris and dropped it in the hole. It made a thump. He waited to see if any ferals activated. “Ok, let me go first,” he suggested. “I can catch you.”

Cassidy giggled. “I just had a cartoon image of me falling on you and flattening you! You’re just a little guy, MacCready.”

“Nice,” he said. “Let me tell you, I’ve got one pretty big reason why I don’t mind being called the little guy.”

“Ew!” she exclaimed. “I don’t need to hear about your body parts!”

“Hey, you started it,” he chuckled.

“I never mentioned a single thing about privates!”

He lowered himself down into the hole. “Guess I’m really a garbage weasel after all!”

He stood on the ground and held his arms up. “Ok kid, come on down.”

She hung onto some rebar and lowered herself, dangling for a moment before letting go. MacCready caught her easily and set her down. “I’ve had meals that weighed more than you,” he said, and held onto her a bit longer than she liked.

Cassidy wriggled away from him and shone the light around. They had fallen into another cell like
room, but the door was open and the other cells had nothing in them. Where the door leading onward had once been there was nothing but debris and they climbed over it.

The room they entered was large, with viewing windows all along the top, and metal scaffolding leading down. In the center was a long lab table littered with scientific equipment. There was a sign marked airlock exit on the far side.

There were ferals lying on the floor, most likely inert and not dead.

“Well, let’s get rid of them,” said MacCready and raised his rifle. Because their shots were so quiet, the others didn’t react too quickly and it wasn’t long before the husks were dispatched.

“This has to be the lab. The meds have to be here somewhere,” said MacCready. “Open up all the drawers and cabinets...everything.”

He frantically began to search, his desperation growing as his efforts didn’t reveal anything.

Cassidy stood still and looked around. The skeleton of a scientist, still wearing his lab coat, was slumped over the table, a gun in his hand and a hole in the side of his head. At his other hand was a metal tray with a strange looking object on it. It looked similar to the jet inhaler. She picked it up.

“MacCready?” she called out. “Come here.”

He looked flustered and scared but walked over to her. She held the inhaler out to him. “Is this it?”

He took it and turned it over. “Yeah! Yeah this is it! Just like St. Claire described! Aw Cassidy, we did it! We gave Duncan a fighting chance!”

He raised his eyes to hers, and they were brimming with tears. Seeing him that way made her eyes misty too. “Now you can go home and give it to him!”

He held the dispenser to his chest, eyes closed, and a single tear crept from his eyes and moved down his cheek.

Cassidy reached out and brushed it away. “I’m so grateful I could help you with this!”

There was gratitude and softness in his eyes when he opened them. “Thank you, Cassidy. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you for this, but I’ll find a way. I swear it.”

He held out his arms, and she went to him. MacCready embraced her gently. “It’s a debt I’ll gladly repay.”

She hugged him back. “We still need to escape and not get caught by those soldiers,” she said. “Let’s try that airlock exit.”

They moved swiftly to the door and it opened out into a corridor. As they stepped in, the door shut behind them and jets on the ceilings began to spray a soft mist.


As it reached 1, the jets shut off and another door opened ahead of them. A dingy hallway with an elevator was on the opposite side.

They ran and called the elevator. “I hope it doesn’t open up right in some soldier’s face!” said Cassidy.
It opened up on the main floor at the end of a corridor.

“Oh hell,” said MacCready. “Now what?”

Cassidy grinned, her nose wrinkling up. “We do the super secret spy technique.”

“Kid, I don’t think we can sneak past all those guys out there.”

“Of course not. But we can run like a bat out of hell and be gone before they can react!”

“They’re soldiers, they’re trained to think fast! We can’t just run! Cass! Oh shit!” There was no other descriptive that fit the moment as Cassidy took off running down the corridor. MacCready followed wondering if she was insane. He fully expected to be grabbed, knocked out or shot at.

She dashed across the main floor, the soldiers exclaiming in surprise. Laser fire went over their heads but someone shouted to stand down. There was a flurry of activity as the soldiers tried to catch them but Cassidy and MacCready were far more agile without the heavy, cumbersome power armor. She slammed into the exit door with all her weight and it opened.

Laughing, MacCready at her heels, she leapt from the stairs and ran past the soldiers whom she had spoken to earlier.

“What the…?” one of them exclaimed.

“Isn’t that the civilians we talked to earlier?” asked the other.

Cassidy dashed down an alley.

As he followed, MacCready gave the Brotherhood the finger. “You still suck!” he yelled.

Cassidy ran through buildings and out into a field dotted with rocky outcroppings and dead trees. She was still giggling like a schoolgirl.

“Cassidy! Ok! Stop!” cried MacCready, breathless.

She slowed down and turned, making sure no one had followed them. The Brotherhood hadn’t deemed them important enough to follow, just as she’d thought.

“They don’t think anything of us,” she panted, resting her hands on her knees and catching her breath. “Probably thought we were just screwing around to prove we could get in there. I didn’t think they believed my story about the meds and dying kid. Even though it was at least partially true. That was awesome though, right?”

MacCready grinned. “Yeah I gotta give you that, though I thought you’d lost your damn mind when you started running. How did you know where the exit was?”

“Big red sign, big red doors…”

“But we couldn’t see that room from the elevator!” exclaimed MacCready. “You ran blind!”

Cassidy laughed. “Yep I sure did! I knew it was the main entrance though by that statue thing in the middle. I saw that right away. So I’m not completely crazy.”

MacCready slung an arm around her shoulder. “You’re something else. Let’s get back to the Cats. I’m sure you’re missing Deacon.”
“I felt weird at first without him but I have to say, you’re pretty cool to hang with.”

“Feeling is mutual, kid,” he said affectionately.

Laughing, they turned and headed back in the direction of the garage.
Cassidy, MacCready and Deacon bid farewell to the Atom Cats.

“So there she was running for the exit,” said MacCready laughing, describing to the Atom Cats the adventure they’d had.

“He thought I was nuts!” Cassidy added.

“So you got the cure?” asked Zeke.

“Sure did,” answered MacCready.

“That’s the epitome of cool,” said the Atom Cat leader. “So now it’s time to go home and give it to him?”

MacCready nodded. “It sure is.”

“You gotta let Rowdy mod up that gun,” he said.

MacCready nodded. “Yeah, ok. Go ahead.”

Rowdy gave him the thumbs up.

Cassidy had gone to see Deacon right away. His eyes were brighter, and he moved around with a bit more ease.

“Did you miss me?” she asked.

“Always,” said Deacon. “It was too quiet around here without you. We should go back and check with Nick. Remember he said he was working on your case still.”

She nodded. “I’m not going anywhere until you’re better. It’s a long way, Deacon. My little brother’s been in the Institute for 10 years. A few more days or weeks won’t change anything. And daddy’s safe in his pod. I should actually go and check on him too to make sure.”

Deacon nodded. “You still game to try and find the Railroad?” he asked.

She nodded. “Definitely.”

“Good,” he said.

“Have you been looking for them a long time?” she asked.

“They’re kind of the good guys these days,” he responded without actually answering her question.

“Anyone is better than the Institute or that dreadful Brotherhood!” Cassidy exclaimed.
“Mhm that’s a fact.”

MacCready appeared in the doorway. “Hey, could I talk to you guys? Won’t be long, I know you probably have things to do.”

Cassidy rolled her eyes. “Garbage weasel,” she said.

“That’s me,” grinned the mercenary, sitting backwards on a chair. “So, I’m going to go back to the Capital Wastes. Get this cure to my son. But...I’m going to go with a caravan. Offer my services and make a few caps. Daisy works with a guy who goes to the Capital every month. Leaves out of a place called Bunker Hill. I was uhh...hoping you’d go with me as far as Goodneighbor and the Hill.”

He didn’t meet anyone’s eyes, but looked down at the ground, leaning on the back of the chair.

“Of course we will, right Deacon?” said Cassidy brightly. “I’m so happy that we found that cure. And gave the Brotherhood the finger too!”

MacCready laughed. “Yeah gave it to them coming and going. Not a fan of those guys.”

“Me either,” agreed Cassidy. “And I don’t even know anything about them. Did you know they actually said if you aren’t Brotherhood you’re nothing to us? It was so rude!”

Deacon nodded. “I believe it. They started getting arrogant, taking what they wanted from whomever they wanted. Heard a rumor that they took the power supply from Rivet City to power that flying atrocity.”

Cassidy looked aghast. “They took a whole city’s power?”

Deacon shrugged. “I don’t know for sure but it was a story that went around.”

“I don’t like them one bit,” she said scowling.

“I’d like to torment them some more,” said MacCready. “But I got things to do, places to go.”

“Would have been fun maybe,” said Cassidy. “I’m kind of sorry to see you go. I mean I know we only just met but like I said you’re cool to hang out with. I’m going to miss you, garbage weasel.”

He smiled warmly. It wasn’t something he did often and hadn’t in a very long time. “I’m going to miss you too, kid.”

She turned to Deacon. “I’m going to ask Johnny D when he thinks it’s ok for you to travel again.”

“I’m feeling a lot better, Charmer. Haven’t been taking as many chems. I can move my arm now with only a bit of pain.”

“I’d still like his opinion. I know how you hate sitting around in one place and want to be on the move. You’ll have to suck it up if it’s better for you. But MacCready...” she looked at him. “Maybe you and I should go to Goodneighbor. I don’t want you to miss the caravan!”

He shook his head. “I don’t want you having to travel back here alone.”

“I’ll be fine. I have a kickass gun now remember?”

“Still. No deal. We go when Deacon’s ready.”
Cassidy sighed. “I don’t want you putting your son in danger longer though.”

“It’s all good,” he said, getting up. “I’ll leave you two to talk now,” he said chuckling.

“What’s that all about?” asked Deacon.

“MacCready being a garbage weasel. I decided that since he calls me kid which is awful, he needed a gross nickname too. That’s what I decided on.” She grinned.

“Why does it bother you being a kid? Wish I were one again.”

She made a face. “Because I’m not one. I haven’t been a kid since I was 12. It bugs me when people judge me because of my age. They think I don’t know anything and can’t do anything.”

He nodded. “Ok, I can get behind that. People act that way to older folks too.”

Cassidy stood up and stretched. “Yeah, but not in the same way. Kids don’t get taken seriously and that pisses me off. I’m going to go talk to Johnny D now.”

Two days later, the three of them were outfitted for the journey to Goodneighbor.

“Hate seeing you agitate the gravel,” said Zeke. “You tell that brother of mine to get his candy ass back here. You too little sister.”

“He’s pretty brave Zeke,” said Cassidy. “He just doesn’t like fighting.”

“I know, I know. He’s good at all sorts of things. Gets cranked up over tools and machines. No love for the suits though. Fixes them like a dream but won’t wear them.”

“I can totally understand that. I don’t like them either.”

Zeke made a wounded face and stumbled back clutching his chest. “Ahh! That’s like saying you don’t dig cars! These suits are our cars, CJ!”

Cassidy laughed. “Cars were cooler. I’ll tell Derrick to come see you.”

“Stay cool, kitten,” he said, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. She hugged him tightly.

“Now remember,” said Johnny D to Deacon. “Rest when you need to. Stim up tomorrow, you dig?”

“I got it,” said Deacon. “And thanks. For everything.”

Johnny D nodded and went off to do his perimeter patrols.

Cassidy and the ladies exchanged some pleasantries, then after a quick hug or two they were off.

“Feels like I’m leaving home or something,” said Cassidy. “It’s the weirdest feeling. I never felt that when we left Sanctuary and that was my real home before the bombs.”

“That place, it suits you,” MacCready said. “The garage I mean. Those guys. Maybe it’s time for you to relocate.”

“It’s hard because I love my Sanctuary family too,” she said.

They reached Goodneighbor and headed right to Daisy.
“I’m sorry MacCready,” said the ghoul apologetically. “Old Man Stockton’s caravan left a week ago. His next one isn’t due to leave for another month. About 3 weeks at this point.”

His expression fell. Cassidy felt sorry for him. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “Can you find another caravan maybe?”

He shook his head. “Gotta travel with people you trust. I just have to wait.”

“I’ll send a message to Stockton that you want to go along,” offered Daisy. “Where can I reach you if something changes?”

Cassidy spoke up instantly. “Sanctuary Hills. We’ll be there. It’s in the north end.”

Daisy nodded. “I know of it. Hang in there, MacCready.”

“Yeah,” he said sadly. “Thanks Daisy.”

Cassidy put her arms around MacCready in a hug. “I feel so bad for you. But it’ll be ok. We can go to Sanctuary and you can check it out. You’ll love it. Lots of nice clean water and great food.”

“Hey, I had a bath the other day,” he said.

“We have laundry facilities too,” she added with a grin.

“Yeah ok I get it,” he said. “Bratty kid.”

“Smelly garbage weasel.”

“I knew you two would love each other,” said Deacon with a grin.

“Ew no,” said Cassidy. “No one could ever love a garbage weasel.”

“Or a bratty kid with a death wish,” added MacCready.

“Let’s go,” said Cassidy. “We won’t make it there today but at least we can get halfway. You guys agree?”

“Works for me,” said the mercenary.

They waved goodbye to Daisy and were off.
A strange face met them at the brand new Sanctuary security gate.

“Trader or settler?” he asked.

“Neither,” Cassidy answered. “I’m Cassidy. This is Deacon and MacCready. We live here.”

The man’s expression changed. “Hartley?” he asked.

When she nodded he reached down and brought out a flare gun and shot it straight into the air.

“What’s that for?” she asked, puzzled.

“I dunno,” he answered. “Sturges just told me to shoot this off if someone named Cassidy Hartley showed up here.” He stood back and opened the gate, letting them in.

The flare had barely faded when she saw Sturges running towards her, followed by Mama Murphy and the Longs.

Sturges reached her first, grabbing her in a tight hug and spinning her around. “Cassidy! I can’t believe you’re alive! And finally home!” He didn’t let go for the longest time, until Marcy pulled her away, embracing her.

“You had us all scared shitless!” she cried. “Carla told us that the Quincy settlement opened up for trading, but not a word about you!”

“I’ve got so much to tell all of you!” exclaimed Cassidy.

“Glad to see you again kid,” said Mama Murphy affectionately, embracing her as well.

Jun gave her a quick hug, and then Preston showed up at a jog. Other people Cassidy had never seen before came around, curious about the commotion.

“Am I ever glad to see you again,” said the Minuteman leader. “It was rough going for us here. All those stories but not a word about you.”

“I’m ok and back,” said Cassidy, smiling so widely that her face hurt. “Lots to talk about. I’d like you to meet RJ MacCready. He’s my friend. He helped us with Quincy!”

Sturges, who’d stood back a bit while she greeted the others, stepped forward again, putting his arms around her once more. “Did they help you? The Cats?” he asked, finally letting her go.
She nodded, her eyes shining. “Oh they did! Zeke is so wonderful! You didn’t tell me he’s your brother!”

Sturges laughed. “He’s my big brother all right. Wasn’t cool with me living at Quincy though.”

“He told me I had to bring you back home!”

“If you come with me, I’ll go see him.”

Cassidy nodded excitedly. “Yes! I love them so much, all of them!”

She animatedly told him about his brother and his friends and how much she loved their garage. Sturges’ eyes were filled with adoration. She was nothing if not perfect in every way. He didn’t even pass a thought over Deacon who was watching him like a hawk.

“You’re probably tired,” said Marcy. “Why don’t we go to my place. I’ll make you some food. We can talk.”

Preston turned to Deacon and MacCready. “Why don’t the two of you come with me to the Cantina. We can eat there. You can tell me about Quincy.”

“You got any good Bourbon?” asked MacCready.

“We do,” answered Preston.

“I think Deacon needs to have some sleep after,” said Cassidy. “He got a very bad injury that almost killed him.”

Deacon sighed. “Charmer, I’m fine.”

“I promised Johnny D I’d look after you properly. So I am. Eat then sleep, Deeks!”

Deacon smiled at her and nodded. “Alright, I will. Promise.”

Cassidy hesitantly and gently put her arms around him for a moment. Awkwardly, he patted her back, then Marcy took her hand and led her away.

“I’ve got some things for you,” said Cassidy softly as she opened her pack on Marcy’s couch.

“So glad you made it back,” said Jun in his soft voice. He looked much better than when she had last seen him.

Cassidy pulled out Kyle’s toys and his ball cap and placed them on the table along with the picture and the silver locket.

Marcy gave a cry, her hands over her mouth. She picked up the ball cap then each of the toys, tears streaming from her eyes.

“The Atom Cats are going to bury him,” said Cassidy gently. “And you’ll have a grave to visit if you ever want to. They’ve promised to look after all the graves there.”

Jun picked up the cap gingerly and looked at his wife. She nodded through her tears and he put it on his head, sitting with his hands clasped, leaning on his knees.

“T...thank you for this,” he whispered.
Cassidy nodded, trying to blink her own tears away. Marcy wiped her eyes and embraced her friend.

“We can’t ever repay you for everything you’ve done,” she said. “I know that killing all those raiders can’t bring Kyle back. But it feels right knowing they’re rotting away now. It’s...it’s like a closure for us. Thank you, Cassidy.”

Cassidy let a few tears seep from her eyes, then the three of them sat quietly for awhile, lost in their own thoughts.

“We need to eat now,” said Marcy, getting up and finishing up the meal preparations. She placed it nicely on the table as though it were a formal feast from the old world.

Cassidy gratefully sat down with them and ate and drank, talking about more pleasant things, and the new people who’d shown up.

Marcy still wasn’t keen on them, but Preston had interviewed them all and found them a good fit for Sanctuary.

“He didn’t let everyone stay who came,” said Jun. “Some of them weren’t right for us. He asked them to leave. One guy tried to steal from the Cantina.”

“Yes,” agreed Marcy. “Some of the people were crazy. Sturges had to pull a gun on one of them.”

Cassidy gaped. “Derrick did? What was that all about?”

“We think the guy was a raider spy or something. Was in the garage filling his pockets with ammo and trying to steal a few guns in the middle of the night. Dogmeat caught him and Derrick held him at gunpoint to put everything back. Then Preston and Seamus escorted him out.”

Cassidy couldn’t believe it. To allow someone to have a safe place to live, just to have them try and steal from you. It was another horrendous truth of the new world.

Dogmeat appeared then, and smothered Cassidy with kisses, his tail knocking noisily against the table and chairs. She laughed and cuddled him, telling how she’d missed him and that he was a good boy to take care of her family.

“But the other people...they’re ok?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Marcy. “They listen to the rules and pull their weight.

“Who was the guy at the security gate?” asked Cassidy.

“That was Seamus. He’s a pretty good fighter to hear him tell it. Haven’t had to fight anyone yet though. No one seems to mess with us here.”

“Must be all the turrets everywhere,” said Cassidy with a grin.

“Everyone here has a gun now. Even me. Hate it.”

“Me too,” said Cassidy. “I never dreamed I’d grow up to be a serial killer.”

“It must be so terrible to go from your world to this,” said Marcy.

“It is,” agreed Cassidy. “But when daddy wakes up and gets better, life will be good again. He’ll help us get things sorted out and teach us about all the weapons and armor. Even power armor.”
“He sounds like a great dad,” said Jun.

“He is! He’ll love everyone here. He’ll be so pleased at everything we’ve done. I just hope he doesn’t think too badly of me being a killer now.”

“It’s how things are now. You adapt. Do what you have to,” said Marcy. “It’s the new reality. He’ll learn just like you did.”

Cassidy nodded. “You’re right. Everything is so different now. When I find Shaun though...things will seem more normal.”

They talked for a bit longer, then Cassidy realized she was exhausted. Excusing herself, she wandered back to her own house, closing her door, letting her family know that she wasn’t to be disturbed. Her bed had never looked more inviting and perfect.

With a sigh, she curled up, Dogmeat on the floor beside her.

She slept fitfully then awoke, missing Deacon. She wanted to feel his warmth beside her. Since his strange reaction to her, things had seemed a bit strained between them. Cassidy wanted to ask him what was going on, but she felt insecure and out of her element.

She’d never had a relationship before and didn’t know how to navigate those waters. What if she said the wrong thing again? What if touching him would freak him out? What if he left her?

The thought of carrying on without Deacon gave her anxiety. She felt safe with him, she relied on him to always be there.

*Maybe I just need to try harder,* she thought. *I don’t know much about being a girlfriend but I have to learn.*

She invited Dogmeat up on the bed and held onto him, falling asleep with her face in his soft fur.
Chapter Summary

After witnessing an altercation in DC, Cassidy and friends meet up with Nick again, who has an idea about her case.

“I know you’re worried about me,” said Deacon. “But we need to hit up Nick’s office. I can handle the trek to DC.”

Cassidy tilted her head and watched him a moment. “I don’t know, Deeks. I think you’ve been doing too much already.”

“We’ve been here for two weeks. It’s all good. Let’s go.”

MacCready downed the last of his bottle of Bourbon. “Where we going?” he asked.

He’d settled in at Sanctuary very nicely and everyone had liked having him around. He had a smart mouth sometimes but mostly it just brought a round of laughs.

Cassidy appreciated having his help in working with her moving target issues. He also showed her how to use her rifle to bash. She didn’t feel up to doing that in a combat situation but he insisted that one day it might save her or someone she cared about.

Cassidy and Deacon had worked on the Sanctuary houses, going out and scavving up more furniture and appliances for Sturges to work on. She also found another power armor suit which thrilled him. Deacon had to wear it back which he absolutely hated, and his running commentary left her in peals of laughter more than once.

However, she still felt their relationship was strained. She yearned to touch him, to hold his hand the way she used to, but she was afraid to. Deacon could be warm and complimentary one moment, then distant and quiet the next.

Nighttime wasn’t as fun as it once had been. Cassidy usually had her bath or shower then went to bed. Deacon didn’t spend time in the living room reading, he did his evening routines and went to bed, closing the door.

She’d asked him if he was alright one night, if he needed anything, but he said no and didn’t engage with her any further. She’d leaned against the wall beside the door, tears in her eyes. She wanted, more than anything, for him to hold her.

Her confusion over Deacon led her to spending more time with Sturges, who was always asking her to do something with him.

They consequently spent quite a bit of time listening to music, reading about cars, talking about cars, and dreaming about cars.

“I like cars,” said Cassidy. “I was going to be a designer for them one day. Stupid bombs.”
“Might not be the same,” he’d said. “But we can do that now. Heck there’s a lot of dead cars all over. We can make something cool out of that. I bet I can even get an engine working for one. Was close with the one in Quincy.”

She shrugged. “And drive it where? There’s no roads anymore.”

“There’s concrete,” said Sturges. “And if there’s concrete there’s a way to make a road. A track even. I say we try it.”

Cassidy had smiled softly and her eyes met his. She always liked the way he looked at her. There was such kindness in his face. He genuinely seemed to care about her and the others. He often asked how Deacon was feeling and how MacCready was enjoying Sanctuary.

“I guess we can,” she said.

He’d beamed and begun preparations for a road. To start with, the cracks and crevices in the Sanctuary roads were going to be fixed, to test the concrete.

“I’ll handle that while you’re off looking for your brother,” he’d said.

Of course, there were always other, more pressing situations to deal with, and the roadway took a backseat to everything else.

Preston had been actively recruiting more Minutemen from the settlers that had showed up and shown interest. He’d also had to turn away several people for unsuitability. It was a full time job but he seemed to thrive on it. The work gave him motivation and hope.

Cassidy got to know Seamus and some of the other settlers, and felt that Sanctuary was in good hands.

“Alright Deacon,” she said. “Everyone here seems to have things to do and we might as well go to DC.”

“I’ll get my pack,” he said.

Without a word, MacCready did the same.

They walked into a scene the moment they hit the DC marketplace.

“Kyle!” cried a man, his hands raised. “I’m your brother! Put the gun down!”

Opposite him another man, similarly dressed, was holding a rifle, aimed at him. “Don’t move, synth!” he shouted. “What have you done with the real Riley? Where’s my brother?”

Riley was terrified. “I swear I’m not a synth! Don’t shoot! For God’s sakes we’re family!”

A security guard walked over. “Put the gun down, now! ” he demanded.

“He’s a synth!” yelled Kyle. “He’ll kill us all!”

Suddenly a gunshot sounded and Kyle crumpled to the ground in a spray of blood.

“Kyle! No!” Screamed Riley.

“Ok, show’s over,” said the security guard. “There are no synths in Diamond City, hear me? Just
you folks and your damn paranoia!”

Cassidy couldn’t believe what she’d witnessed. “Hey,” she said to Riley.

“He...he pulled a gun on me! My own brother!” said the pale faced Riley, staring at the body on the ground.

“You’re safe now,” said Cassidy gently. “That’s all that matters.”

“I’m...I’m not a synth. I told him. I kept telling him. Why didn’t he listen to me?”

Cassidy shook her head sadly. The security guard moved to the body but Riley stopped him. “I...I need a minute…” he said sadly.

The guard looked at Cassidy. “I need you to step away scavver,” he said.

“I understand officer,” she said politely. “I just want to know what happened.”

“What you didn’t hear the shouting? Guy pulls a gun on his own brother, thinking he’s a synth.” The guard snorted. “It’s that newspaper’s fault. Got people all riled up, thinking their own family might be replaced by machines. Look, I’m sorry you got caught up in all this, but it’s over, ok? Just go about your business like nothing happened. Better that way.”

Another guard appeared and waved the onlookers away. “What’s everyone still standing around for?” he shouted. “Go back to your own damn business!”


“Why does that happen? People being replaced like that.”

“No idea. No one does. It just happens sometimes.”

She looked sorrowful. “It’s evil! Now his brother’s gone and he’s alone. I hate the Institute!”

“You and pretty much every single person in the Commonwealth who isn’t one of them,” said Deacon. “Come on, let’s go find Nick.”

Piper, the news reporter, was in Nick’s office speaking with him. They looked up when Cassidy and her friends walked in.

“There she is!” said Nick amiably. “Good to see you again Doll. Piper and I, we’ve been talking about your case.”

“The Institute,” said Piper. “Whoo boy...that’s not a good sign. I’ve been investigating these creeps for over a year now. The Commonwealth’s boogeyman. Feared and hated by everyone.”

“We just saw a guy try and kill his brother for being a synth. The guards shot him!” exclaimed Cassidy.

Nick nodded. “Not the first time. Paranoia’s running fast these days.”

“What do you know about them, Piper?” asked Cassidy.

“Sometimes they snatch people in the middle of the night. And sometimes they leave old synths behind to remind us that they’re out there. But to this day there’s one thing nobody really knows…”
“Where the Institute actually is,” finished Nick. “Or how to get in.”

“Exactly,” agreed Piper. “But there’s one person who must know, right? The guy who handed them Shaun.”

“Yeah, Kellogg,” said Nick.

“He had access,” said Cassidy. “But...he’s dead.”

“So...murderer and kidnapper gets his brains blown out by an avenging sister,” mused Piper. “It’d be a great ending if we didn’t still have the biggest mystery in the Commonwealth to solve.”

“He wouldn’t have helped me even if I had a way of forcing him to come with us,” said Cassidy miserably. “He was twisted and evil. It made him glad to taunt me.”

“Hmm…” said Nick thoughtfully. “Brains blown out...brains. You know, we might not actually need the man himself after all.”

All eyes turned to Nick.

“You’re talking crazy here Nick,” said Piper. “Got a fault in the old subroutines?”

“Look,” said the detective. “There’s a place in Goodneighbor called the Memory Den. Relive past moments in your mind as clear as the day they happened.”

He paced the room while everyone waited to hear his next thoughts. “If anyone can get a dead brain to sing, it’ll be Doctor Amari, the mind behind the memories.”

“But...we don’t have his brain,” said Cassidy.

“Geez guys,” said Piper. “That’s so gross!”

“Luckily I found something on him,” said Nick. “Had this thing in his head. Cybernetic piece. We might have just won the lottery.”

“Well whether we’re riding this crazy brain train or not,” said Piper. “We can’t all go to Goodneighbor. Cassidy it looks like you’ve got a whole posse with you already.”

“I have to go to the Memory Den either way,” said Nick. “If I’m going to introduce you to Amari. If you want to travel together just say the word.”

“Yes please,” said Cassidy.

“Don’t worry,” said Nick reassuringly. “We’re gonna get your brother back. Just a few more steps.”

Cassidy nodded. She appreciated his positive sentiment but unfortunately she wasn’t feeling it.

“Right. Let’s get a move on,” said MacCready. “Don’t like the idea of being out there at night.”

They set off.
The Memory Den

Chapter Summary

Cassidy, MacCready, Nick and Deacon meet with Dr. Amari at the Memory Den, and they learn the horrific truth about Cassidy's situation.

The Memory Den at Goodneighbor was as dingy as every other place. However, its proprietor, Irma, had done her best to decorate it in the sumptuous styles of days gone by.

Heavy velvet burgundy curtains and swags hung from the ceilings and an ancient crystal chandelier, covered in dust hung from a chain in the center of the room. On either side of a red carpet were strange looking pod-like devices.

"Those are the memory loungers," said Deacon.

"This place can help you or hurt you," said MacCready. "Never used it myself. It would be bad for me."

"Yeah probably a bad idea for me too," agreed Deacon.

Cassidy was amazed by it. To be able to relive memories! To see her family and her friends again! The idea excited her but MacCready’s words rang true. Sometimes memories could hurt too much.

At the end of the room was a slightly raised platform with a deep burgundy chaise lounge. On it reclined a woman, dressed in a fancy outfit complete with a feather type boa. Her blonde hair was elaborately curled and put up and her makeup was immaculate.

Her voice was low and sultry as she looked at Nick with a smile. “Well, well Mr. Valentine,” she crooned. “I thought you had forgotten about little ol’ me.”

“I may have walked out of the Den, Irma, but I’d never walk out on you,” replied Nick with an appreciative smile. “Here to see Amari.”

“Mmm,” purred Irma. “Amari’s downstairs, you big flirt.” She gave Cassidy an appraising glance. “Whatever you and Nick are up to I don’t need to know,” she said. “Just don’t let the big metal softy hurt himself, alright?”

“I won’t,” said Cassidy with a tentative smile.

She followed Nick down the stairs into a room with a red and white checkerboard floor. There were two more of the memory loungers as well as rows of computer banks and equipment.

“Doctor Amari?” the detective called out to a woman in a lab coat with her back to them.

She turned around and nodded to Nick. “I take it this isn’t a social call. Not with a whole group like this behind you,” she said.
“Hi,” said Cassidy, and introduced herself. “Nick said that you can extract memories from brains, right?”

Dr. Amari raised her eyebrows. “Oh he did, did he? Normally we only allow our clients to experience their own memories. What’s this all about?”

“We need a deep dig Amari,” said Nick. “But it’s not gonna be easy. The perp, Kellogg, is already cold on the floor.”

“Are you two mad?” asked the doctor. “Putting aside the fact that you’re asking me to defile a corpse, you do realize the memory simulators require intact *living* brains to function?”

“There must be some way to make it work!” exclaimed Cassidy. “I’m trying to find my little brother. The Institute kidnapped him!”

“This dead brain had inside knowledge of the Institute, Amari,” said Nick. “The biggest scientific secret of the Commonwealth. You need this, and so do we.”

The doctor sighed heavily. “A missing child...Fine. I’ll take a look. But no guarantees. Do you...have it with you?”

Nick reached into his pocket and drew out a handkerchief. He handed it to Amari who opened it up and held the strange object. It looked cybernetic with a lump of flesh attached.

“What’s this! This isn’t a brain!” she exclaimed in dismay, then holding it up and peering at it she blinked. “Oh...wait...that’s the hippocampus! And this thing attached to it...a neural interface?”

Nick leaned close and examined it. “Hmm those circuits look awfully familiar,” he murmured.

“I’m not surprised,” agreed Amari. “All Institute technology has a similar architecture.”

“Nick’s an older model synth,” said Deacon. “Would he be compatible with this thing in any way?”

Amari nodded. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. If we’re lucky, it should hook right in.”

She studied the implant carefully. “But, even if this works, Mr. Valentine would be taking a tremendous amount of risk. We’re talking about wiring something right to his brain.”

“Don’t worry about me Amari,” said Nick firmly. “Let’s do it.”

“I don’t...I don’t know if it’s a good idea if it might hurt you,” said Cassidy. “Is there another way?”

“No idea,” he responded. “But we got a missing kid on the line. That’s worth the risk.”

“Thanks, Nick,” said Cassidy softly.

“Ok then. Whenever you’re ready Mr. Valentine, just sit down.” Dr. Amari pointed to a chair. Nick sat himself down and removed his hat.

Nick chuckled. “If I start cackling like an old grizzled mercenary, pull me out, ok?”

“Let’s see here...” The doctor brought out several tools and a small hand held device. She opened up the back of Nick’s flesh covering and began her work.
Cassidy, Deacon and MacCready watched, silently, not daring to move.

“I need you to keep talking to me, Mr. Valentine,” said the doctor. “Any slight change in your cognitive functions could be dire. Are you feeling any different?”

“There’s a lot of flashes…” answered Nick. “Static. I can’t make sense of any of it, doc.”

Dr. Amari stood up. “That’s what I was afraid of. The mnemonic impressions are encoded. It appears the Institute had one last failsafe. There’s a lock on the memories in the implant.”

“How do you lock memories?” asked MacCready.

“The implant is encoding all the mnemonic activity in the hippocampus. Think of it like... computer encryption. And we don’t have the password.”

Dr. Amari looked out over their heads thoughtfully. “Let’s see...a single mind can’t crack it... but what if we used two? We load both Cassidy and Mr. Valentine into the memory lounger. Run your cognitive functions in parallel.”

She thought further then nodded. “He’ll act as a host while Cassidy’s consciousness drives through whatever memories we can find.”

“What...any idea what I’m going to see in there?” Cassidy asked cautiously.

“Are you sure this is safe?” asked MacCready. “I mean we don’t want her brain all scrambled over this.”

“Kind of concerning to me too,” added Deacon. “She’s not going to be much use to her brother if her mind’s fried, right?”

“I won’t lie,” said the doctor. “I’ve never done this procedure before. It isn’t risk free. As to what you’ll see, I have no idea. Considering we only have a small piece of the medial temporal lobe, and not the whole brain, I doubt it’ll be cohesive.”

Cassidy looked at her friends.

“All this science stuff hurts my brain,” said MacCready.

“It’s up to you, Charmer,” said Deacon. “I’m with you whatever you decide.”

Cassidy could have kissed him. He was always supportive and kind no matter what. She loved him even more for it and wished she could tell him.

She took a deep breath. “Ok. Let’s do it.”

The doctor nodded. She pointed to a memory lounger. “Just sit down in there, and keep your fingers crossed.”

Nick got up and went to the lounger on the other side of the room. “See you on the other side,” he said.

Cassidy climbed into the pod. The clear metal dome lowered slowly. Deacon and MacCready came to stand beside it, one on either side.

A screen sat in front of Cassidy, with a black and white pattern that said please stand by.
“Initiating brain wave migration between the transplant and the host,” said Amari, working on a terminal behind them. “Mnemonic activity coming from the transplant!” she said excitedly. “It’s degenerated, but it’s there!”

The screen brightened. “We’re going to load you into the strongest memories we can find. They might not be stable...just hold on!”

Suddenly everything went white. Cassidy couldn’t see the screen anymore.

“Can you hear me?” Amari’s voice seemed to come from inside her own mind. “The simulation appears to be working. Raise your hand for me if you can hear this.”

Cassidy raised her hand.

“Ah good,” said the doctor. “The memories however seem to be fragmented.”

Cassidy raised her hand and looked at it. It was as though she were actually standing in some strange place. There was a pathway. It was made up of what looked like neurons to her. Things she’d seen in a science book long ago.

Everything around her was black aside from the strange objects.

“I’ll try and step you through the intact memories,” said Dr. Amari. “And hope we find one that gives us some clue to the Institute’s location.”

The pathway began to light up, and one at a time, the things Cassidy was standing on began to clasp to the one in front, leading her. “There,” said the doctor. “This is the earliest intact memory I can find.”

Cassidy carefully walked on the neurons, following them.

A platform opened up, and she saw a young boy sitting on a bed with his mother in a chair behind him.

And so began her journey through the twisted mind of Conrad Kellogg.

Deacon and MacCready knew it wasn’t going to be good. The last of Kellogg’s nasty memories began in a vault. Both of them were privvy to Cassidy’s awful story.

“Hey!” called MacCready. “You got to wake her up or whatever! Don’t let her see this! Not this!”

“What do you mean?” asked Dr. Amari.

“This last part, this is where she wakes up in the vault. Where they attack her father and kidnap her little brother! Get her out!”

Deacon saw Cassidy’s agitation. Her hands clamped and unclamped on her jacket and she shuffled her feet restlessly.

“Shit, this isn’t good,” he said, watching the screen. He didn’t want to see it. Didn’t want to see her nightmare.

Dr. Amari tried a series of commands. “It’s not working. She’s too agitated! She won’t let go!”

“Aw hell,” moaned MacCready.
Because there was nothing they could do, all three of them watched in rapt horror as Kellogg and his Institute counterpart identified and opened Corporal Nathaniel Hartley’s pod.

“Is it over?” Nathaniel coughed, shivering, holding his baby son close who began to whimper and cry. “Are we safe?”

“Almost,” said Kellogg in his dead, emotionless voice. “Everything’s going to be fine.”


Alarmed, Nathaniel held on tighter, pulling Shaun to his chest. “No. Wait. No, I’ve got him.”

Kellogg frowned. “Let the boy go,” he snarled. Then he raised his pistol. “I’m only going to tell you once!”

“I’m not giving you Shaun!” yelled Nathaniel.

A loud, echoing shot rang out, and Nathaniel collapsed, a nasty bullet wound in his head. The technician grabbed the little boy.

“Goddamn it!” barked Kellogg. “Get the kid out of here and let’s go.”

The pod door lowered, a hissing jet of white vapor rising from it as the cryopreservation began again.

Kellogg walked to Cassidy’s pod. “At least we still have the backup,” he said, tapping on the glass as though he were studying a fish in an aquarium. Inside her pod, Cassidy was screaming and pounding on the glass and he watched her impassively before pushing a button on her pod.

“Cryo sequence reinitialized,” said an electronic female voice and the same white vapor rose up.

“Holy shit,” said Deacon. “I didn’t want to see that.”

“I didn’t want her to see that!” exclaimed MacCready. “Amari, get her the heck out of that thing!”

“I can’t,” said the Doctor. “I can’t reach her. Her brainwaves and heartrate are skyrocketing. Until it settles down, there’s nothing I can do!”

Inside the simulation, Cassidy began to run. She ran away from the pod that contained her father, away from the pod that contained her terrified self.

She stepped onto the neuron pathway, not caring where she went. It twisted and turned and went upwards, ending up in a dingy, dirty little room.

A little boy, about 10 years old sat on the floor reading magazines. Kellogg sat in a chair.

“Cassidy? Can you hear me?” asked Dr. Amari. “This is a very recent memory. It might be good news. That little boy, is that your brother?”

Cassidy stared at him. “S...Shaun?”

Of course, he couldn’t respond, but she sat down on the floor beside him.

Suddenly there was a flash of light, and a man appeared. He wore a heavy black leather jacket. He himself was black, with short cropped hair and mirrored glasses. He was tall and imposing.
“Kellogg,” he said, his voice softer than she would have imagined.

“One of these days you’re going to get your head blown off just barging in here like that,” snarked Kellogg.

“Minimizing my exposure to civilians is a priority,” said the man.

“So what’s the big crisis this time, X6?” asked Kellogg.

“New orders for you,” said X6. “One of our scientists has left the Institute.”

“Left...as in...?”

“He’s gone rogue,” said X6 in his quiet, even voice. “Names Virgil. Dr. Brian Virgil. We know he’s hiding somewhere in the Glowing Sea. Here’s his file.” He handed Kellogg a plain colored file folder.

Kellogg snatched it from him. “Wow. Some heads are gonna roll for this.” He leafed through the documentation. “Capture and return or just elimination?” he asked.

“Elimination. He was working on a highly classified program.”

Kellogg shook his head. “No kidding. One of the top bioscience boys? Damn.”

He threw the file on the desk and looked at the boy. “So. I guess you’re taking the kid back with you.”

“Affirmative,” agreed X6. “Your only mission is to locate and eliminate Virgil.”

The little boy got up. “You’re taking me home to my father?” he asked.

X6 turned to him. “Yes. Stand next to me and hold still.”

“Okay,” he said obediently and did as he was asked.

“X6-88 ready to relay with Shaun,” said the man.

The little boy waved to Kellogg. “Bye, Mr. Kellogg. I hope I see you again sometime!”

Two flashes of light erupted and X6 and Shaun vanished.

“Bye” said Kellogg dispassionately.

“Teleportation!” said Dr. Amari excitedly. “Now it all makes sense! Nobody’s found the entrance to the Institute because there is no entrance!”

Cassidy got up from the floor, her face a mask of sorrow. In the pod, her physical self’s eyes leaked with tears.

“Cassidy, let me pull you out of there. As soon as you’re ready.”

Cassidy felt a pulling sensation, and everything went white around her again. She felt as though she were floating. Slowly the screen in front of her reappeared with its please stand by message. Then she felt her body again. She looked frantically around, and as the pod opened up she lurched out of it.
“Hey,” said Dr. Amari. “Slow movements ok? I don’t know what kind of side effects this procedure might have. No one’s ever done this before!”

Cassidy turned around and saw Deacon, throwing herself into his arms, sobbing. “Daddy! And Shaun! I saw my brother!”

Deacon made a soothing sound and held her awkwardly.

MacCready rolled his eyes. “You’re hopeless,” he said, and pulled Cassidy from Deacon, embracing her tightly against him.

“We saw everything kid, all of it. Damn you’ve been through hell. But we got leads now. It’s gonna be ok.”

Cassidy sniffled and hiccupped, burying her face in his chest. Slowly she regained her composure.

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve, and looked up at MacCready. His eyes were filled with compassion and he smoothed her hair back from her face. “You ok, Cassidy?” he asked gently.

She hiccuped some more, then nodded.

“Dr. Amari…you’re a doctor…can you help my daddy?”

The doctor looked puzzled. “Help him? I don’t understand…” Her eyes met Deacon’s and he slowly shook his head as did MacCready.

“Yes,” said Cassidy. “I need someone to fix his injuries before we wake him back up.”

Dr. Amari looked away. “I’m sorry Cassidy but I’m a scientist. I’m not a medical doctor. There is nothing I can do for him.”

Cassidy’s shoulders slumped. “Oh…I didn’t know that. My poor daddy!”

“We learned some things on this journey,” said Dr. Amari changing the subject. “Let’s talk about them.”

“That man, X6,” Cassidy said. “He said things. About a Dr. Virgil. And the Glowing Sea. And him…is he a synth? He didn’t have a name.”

“How do you feel?” asked Dr. Amari, intercepting any responses.

“I’m…I’ll be ok,” said Cassidy. She looked around. “Nick! What about Nick! Is he ok?”

“I’m fine doll,” said the detective. “Everything is ok here.”

“Did you see?” she asked. “Did you see everything too?”

Dr. Amari steered her gently to a chair, and gave her a glass of water. “We need to keep monitoring you, to make sure there isn’t any long term damage.”

Cassidy drank greedily, not realizing how dry she’d been.

“I saw it all,” said Nick. “I’m really sorry about your family Cassidy. But now we know about the teleportation. Their greatest secret has finally been revealed.”

Dr. Amari sighed. “But that only leads to more questions. How does it work? Where do we go
“I’m thinking Virgil,” said Deacon. “The guy in the Glowing Sea. We should find him.”

“You’re right!” said Amari. “A rogue Institute scientist could answer all kinds of questions! But...the Glowing Sea...no one goes there. Not ever. Not even if they were desperate.”

“Why?” asked Cassidy. “Deacon told me people live there though.”

“The word glowing should give you a clue,” said MacCready.

“Your friend is right,” agreed Amari. “The name says it all. Radiation. So much that nothing there could possibly live. Nothing...pleasant.”

“The Children of Atom live there,” said Deacon. “Or so the rumor goes. No one actually comes back who heads out their way.”

“I’ve heard those stories too,” said the doctor. “Never met one and probably never will. Navigating radioactive hazards is nothing new, but the Glowing Sea can kill an unprotected person in seconds. That’s why it doesn’t make sense. Virgil fleeing into that hell...the exposure alone...” She shook her head.

Cassidy took a deep breath. “If we need to find him, then I’m going to go.”

“If so, you need to be prepared,” said Dr. Amari. “You’ll need some way to combat the radiation there.”

“I’ll find a way to deal with it. I have RadX and Rad-Away.”

“You’ll need more than that, I’m afraid,” said the doctor. “If you can find a suit of power armor and have it modified, that would be your best bet.”

Cassidy sighed. “Yuck, I hate them but I do have access to one. And my friend at home can modify it I’m sure.”

“Good luck,” said Amari. “And be safe.”

Cassidy thanked her and turned to go. “Back to Sanctuary I guess, and I have to see what Sturges can do for me. I have to go alone unless we can find another power armor for one of you.”

“My vote is for MacCready,” said Deacon. “I’m not so great in a fight and there’s some nasty stuff out there I’ve heard. Charmer needs someone good.”

MacCready shrugged. “I’ll always have your back, kid,” he said. “But let’s get there before the caravan leaves though.”

Dr. Amari touched MacCready’s sleeve. “Could I speak to you and your friend for a moment?” she asked. “Cassidy why don’t you and Nick have a talk with Irma. You could use some wine I think.”

As Cassidy and Nick headed back upstairs, the doctor faced Deacon and MacCready.

“What was all that about her father?”

“When we met her, she told us her father was injured. She’s been trying to find a doctor to heal him. She said he’s in cryosleep,” said Deacon.
“No, he’s dead,” said Dr. Amari. “He was shot while he was awake. They put him back under after the fact. You all saw it.”

“I know,” said MacCready. “Thing is that isn’t what Cassidy believes. To hear her tell it is totally different than what actually happened.”

“You can’t let her go on like this with a false hope!” exclaimed the doctor. “You are her friends, you have to come clean about it.”

“She won’t accept it from us,” said Deacon.

“Well you’re her man, Deacon,” snipped MacCready. “It’s your job to tell her shit like this.”

“I already told you about that,” said Deacon curtly.

“Quit your lying for once. This isn’t the time for your bullshit. You two are a thing and you have to tell her. I just met her. She’s not going to take it from me!”

“That is unacceptable!” said Dr. Amari. “Find a way, gentlemen. I’d rather have her hear it from the two of you, as you witnessed it, than from some stranger like myself.”

“One thing at a time,” said Deacon. “She’s rattled enough right now as it is. Waiting on this won’t hurt her.”

Dr. Amari shook her head in disgust and shooed them out of her space.

“Well,” said Deacon. “This is a clusterfuck of epic proportions now.”

“Yeah. It sucks,” said MacCready. “And worse because you can’t man up and admit you’re a thing and tell the poor kid the truth.”

“Look. I’ll get to it. But you really want me to put her through that right now? On top of everything else?”

MacCready scowled but he had to admit it would be cruel to do so.

Cassidy and Irma were talking over a glass of wine with Nick adding his sentiments every now and then.

“Let’s head out,” said Deacon. “Get back to Sanctuary and start work on that suit of yours, Charmer.”

Cassidy put her glass down. “Thank you for the wine, Irma,” she said politely.

“Aren’t you just a peach,” said the finely dressed lady. “Come and visit me anytime. And bring Mr. Handsome here with you.” She nodded to Nick.

Nick gave Irma a nod, and followed the others out.
Chapter Summary

Sturges begins work on the power armor and has a proposition for Cassidy; MacCready says goodbye; Deacon begins to lose the battle with his emotions.

Despite the fact they had all shared in Cassidy’s memory, there was little to no talking on the trek back to Sanctuary. MacCready was annoyed at Deacon about the situation, Deacon was still feeling awkward about his feelings for Cassidy, and Cassidy herself was still feeling unbalanced by her experience.

They voted to hole up for the night and found a cave. Nick made the call to go back to his office in DC and they parted ways after he made Cassidy promise to keep him updated on her progress. He was still going to keep working on things from his end and wished her luck with Virgil.

MacCready curled up closest to Cassidy, and Deacon covered her with his jacket when he saw her shivering through the night. What he wanted to do was warm her up by holding her, but he couldn’t seem to bridge the gap that had grown between them.

When they reached Sanctuary the following morning, Cassidy had a soothing bath, a regenerative sleep, and went to find Sturges.

“I need your help,” she said.

He was welding a broken lawnmower and put the tool down, removing the welding helmet.

“Anything for you, Cassidy!” he said brightly.

“I need you to make that power armor of mine into a radiation shield. I have to go to the Glowing Sea. Also...can we find another one that will fit MacCready? If we can get this done before he has to leave he’s coming with me.”

Sturges whistled. “The Glowing Sea...and another power suit. I’m sorry honey but one alone will take me a week to prepare. And we have that frame there but no armor for it. What about Deacon?”

She shook her head and he noticed her downcast expression. “He doesn’t want to go. He feels he wouldn’t be too much help because he isn’t as good in a fight with guns like me and MacCready.”

Sturges shook his head. “I don’t want you going out there alone.”

“I don’t have a choice, Derrick,” said Cassidy, and proceeded to tell him what had transpired at the Memory Den.

Derrick listened with rapt attention and offered his sympathies for her pain. It strengthened his resolve to do whatever he could to help her out, and make it a priority.
“I’m gonna send out a few guys to scav for another suit,” he said. “In fact, I might just send them to Zeke. I know he has one. Thing is, it won’t fit MacCready. It’s mine. So...if you’ll have me, I volunteer go with you. Always wanted to see the place where the bomb fell here.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’d brave the Glowing Sea with me?”

“Uh huh. Lots of stories come out of there. Be cool to see it for real. So what do you say? You want me to come with?”

Cassidy nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, please!”

The mission that she’d been dreading suddenly seemed like it might actually be interesting and fun.

“You have to take and possibly use a gun Derrick,” she reminded him.

“Yep of course I do. Don’t like it much, but I gotta keep my best girl alive, right?” He suddenly cringed inwardly. He hadn’t meant to sound so bold.

“Am I really your best girl?” she asked, grinning.

“You bet your bottom dollar you are,” he said. “Now go on. Being a beautiful distraction won’t get your suit rad free anytime soon!”

Laughing, Cassidy went off to find someone else to hang out with.

It was a few days before the scavving team returned with the power suit. It hadn’t fit either of them too well either but they managed to get it back to Sanctuary. It was a beautiful suit with the Atom Cat’s fancy paint job.

“Well isn’t she a sight for sore eyes!” exclaimed Sturges. “I’d forgotten how fab this suit is!”

“Why do you have one if you never want to fight?” asked Cassidy.

“Zeke insisted on it. Plus there are times when everyone has to fight. I just choose not to do it unless I have to.”

“Makes sense I guess,” said Cassidy. “Can you paint mine up like yours? I’m a Cat after all.”

“If we have time, I sure can.”

“I helped Duke with his repairs and paint, but I don’t think I’m really good at it.”

Sturges grinned. “I can teach you and we can work on it together, deal?”

She nodded.

“Now,” he said. “I need to make up some of that radiation paint. Got the lining almost done but I’m running out of materials. I hope Carla shows up soon.”

Sturges worked night and day on the suits. Cassidy would make him meals and bring it to him, then sit with him, listening to his music on the holotapes.

It didn’t take Cassidy long to learn all the words for the rockabilly songs he had. One day a new settler wandered over with a few other music tapes. It was the popular tunes from Cassidy’s time.

“Preston told me about you being prewar,” he said shyly. “My mom loved anything prewar and
made these tapes. She died...and I’d like you to have them.”

Cassidy was shocked. “I couldn’t take these from you! They were your mom’s!”

“Well she’d want them to go to someone who loved them as much as she did. See I’m more of a country and western kind of guy myself.” He grinned as Cassidy accepted the holotapes.

“That’s mighty generous of you,” said Sturges. “Be nice to have different tunes going. Something for everyone!”

Deacon wandered out of the cantina and sat down on the grass beside the garage. “Looking good Sturges,” he said. “Charmer is right. You sure are good at this stuff.”

“Thanks!” said the mechanic. “It’s easy to be good at something you’re really into.”

“That’s true,” said Deacon. He looked at Cassidy, her hair hanging loosely around her face, the breeze moving it around occasionally. His breath caught in his throat and he thought how beautiful she was.

He was feeling things for her he knew were wrong, things that he promised himself he would never feel. Despite his efforts to distance himself from her, he couldn’t.

He’d hoped she and MacCready would hit it off. They had, but not in the way he’d hoped. Cassidy saw him as nothing more than a friend, and she’d made it obvious that her heart lay with Deacon. And now the mercenary was leaving the Commonwealth. It didn’t help Deacon’s viewpoint of himself when he learned that Sturges had volunteered to go to the Glowing Sea with her. Deacon knew it should be him, and he wanted to go with her...but he’d backed out hoping she’d go with MacCready. He couldn’t change his mind now, could he?

“Hey Charmer,” he ventured. “Since MacCready isn’t going with you, I’ll go. I can fit that suit I think.”

Sturges looked at him. “This suit is my own custom job. It wouldn’t fit you. We just don’t have enough time to rustle up a whole new suit. No worries though. I’ll keep Cassidy safe.” He turned away, afraid that both Cassidy and Deacon would see his obvious lie. It was most certainly possible for the suit to fit Deacon, but Sturges wanted to go. He told himself it was for the adventure of the Glowing Sea, but in truth it was to spend time with Cassidy.

I’m turning into a bird-dog, he thought. But every guy can be selfish just once in his life, right?

Cassidy grinned. “More like I’ll keep you safe!”

“That’s going to be very true,” he said.

Deacon didn’t know how to respond. He’d heard the stories of the things that lived in that irradiated wasteland. People who went there never came back. He’d never met a soul who’d ventured there and then returned. He didn’t hold out much hope that Virgil would even be alive. Even if the man had made it there, surviving was another matter all together.

“Too bad we don’t have the Cats here to mod a weapon for you Sturges,” he said, trying to sound amiable about it, when in truth his insides were churning.

“Rowdy modded me up one ages ago. It’s the only one I’ll use. I’m alright, Deacon. Everything will work out just fine.”
“Well,” said Cassidy. “Unless Virgil is dead and we go all that way for nothing.”

“It wouldn’t be for nothing!” exclaimed Sturges. “Think of it as a tour of the bomb site!”

She laughed lightly. “I’m glad you’re so excited about it. I’m actually a little scared. Ok...I’m a lot scared.”

A shadow fell across her. She didn’t need to look up to know who it was.

“What? Scared? You?” said MacCready. “Don’t you always say how great you are? Why would a few irradiated critters scare off the great Cassidy?”

“You suck so bad,” she lamented. “Just go away garbage weasel.”

“Actually that’s what I came here to tell you. It’s been three weeks. Time for me to head off to Bunker Hill and meet up with the caravan.”

She felt a pang in her chest. “Really? Already?”

“Yeah. Duncan needs his cure. I need to go. I’d love it if you walked with me there but that’s a waste of time when you got so much to do.”

Cassidy fell silent. She didn’t want to see her friend go. She’d come to rely on Deacon and MacCready both always being there. She knew he had to go...but part of her wished he didn’t have to.

He shifted and the warm sun hit her once more.

“Hey look, uh...there’s another thing I wanted to ask,” he said hesitantly.

“Anything,” said Cassidy.

“Well...the Capital wastes...I mean yeah I was born there and lived there my whole life, but ...the truth is there isn’t anything there for me except Duncan. I’d be alone. Well just the two of us. I uhhh...” he looked down and kicked at the ground.

“MacCready, I’d be very happy if you and Duncan came back here to live with us,” said Cassidy softly.

“Yeah? You mean it? We can come live here?”

She nodded and stood up, putting her arms around his waist and hugging him close. “Just be safe ok? Go get your boy and come home.”

The mercenary swallowed hard. He didn’t dare say a word for fear of his emotions coming apart on him. He had been alone so long since his wife had died, and he hated it terribly. He loved having Cassidy and the people of Sanctuary around. She was becoming the best friend he’d had in years.

MacCready held onto her until his emotions were under control again. “You should try this Deacon,” he said with a smirk. “It’s pretty awesome.”

“Pretty sure I know that,” said Deacon.

“When are you going?” Cassidy asked.

“Tomorrow morning,” said MacCready.
“Then we have to have a party for you tonight!”

“Aww you don’t have to do that,” he said with a grin. “But I’ll take any donations of Bourbon you want to throw my way.”

Sturges grinned. “I can see it now. Pack full of spirits and nothing else!”

“Sounds about right,” said MacCready.

“I’ll go tell Codsworth and Mama Murphy,” said Cassidy, getting to her feet and trotting off.

“I’m gonna miss this place,” said MacCready. “Motivation to get there and get back quick. Hey Sturges...make sure you look after her out there. The Glowing Sea...that even makes *me* nervous. Cassidy...she’s not great with moving targets. She’s trying but...needs work.”

Sturges nodded. “Good thing that I grew up shooting molerats and other things that liked to beat feet. It’ll be ok. We’ll be right as rain.”

MacCready looked at Deacon, opened his mouth to speak then shut it again.

They sat and watched Sturges mix and apply the radiation paint, letting the music float around them, but each lost in their own thoughts.

MacCready left in the early hours of sunrise. Cassidy knew that the world was a scary and dangerous place, and it wasn’t lost on her that she might never see her friend again.

Sanctuary was still asleep when she walked with MacCready as far as the Concord border, Dogmeat at her side.

“I wish I could go with you,” said Cassidy.

“Yeah me too,” he responded. “But you gotta get that little brother of yours. Duncan’s gonna need a friend when we get back. Besides...there’s stuff in the Capital Wastes I wouldn’t want you to have to see.”

She tried to smile but her sadness was too sharp.

MacCready put his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face up. “Hey,” he said gently. “I’m coming back. I made it here by myself. No caravan.”


“Bratty kid with a death wish,” he responded affectionately. “Make sure that rockabilly there watches your back. You suck with guns.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed him away. MacCready reached down and patted Dogmeat, then started walking.

“See you soon!” he called out, waving without looking back.

“Damn right!” she called out.

She stood and watched him until he walked down an incline and disappeared.

“Come on, boy,” she said to her dog.
Cassidy walked into her house and listened to the silence. Then she went to Deacon’s room. The door was open and she put her head inside. He was asleep on his left side facing her, one arm hanging over the side of the bed.

She walked in quietly and crawled up on the bed behind him, lying down with her head in the niche of his hip and ribs.

“I don’t really care if you hate this or not,” she whispered, more to hear the words out loud than for him. “But I feel really crappy right now and I need you, Deacon.”

Deacon was instantly awake, his brain screaming at him to get up and get away...but he didn’t. He was tired of fighting his own thoughts. Cassidy had been through so much already and she now had to let go of someone else she cared about. He rolled onto his back.

“Come here, Charmer,” he whispered.

She crawled up and lay her head on his chest. Deacon put his arm around her, and softly stroked her hair.

*A little comfort won’t hurt either of us,* he thought.

It didn’t take too long for Cassidy’s breathing to even out as she finally fell asleep.

For a long time Deacon just lay there, wishing time wouldn’t advance. Wishing he weren’t who he was and didn’t have the demons he did.
Cassidy felt the emptiness of MacCready’s absence in the weeks to come. She stayed very close to Deacon most of the time, if she wasn’t with Sturges learning from him about the power armor, or teaching him how to use a rifle.

“I rather kill stuff before they see me,” she said.

“Sounds good to me,” the mechanic agreed.

He was always amiable and easy going. He never got upset or frustrated. The man was eternally patient it seemed and he offset her more high strung nature. He was a lot like Deacon in that respect and she enjoyed spending time with him.

Her suit was finally completed, and he suggested they go on a scavving run to some radioactive areas to test it out.

Cassidy was nervous about leaving Deacon. She’d grown so attached to him, and found it increasingly difficult to leave Sanctuary without him. But she’d felt the same way travelling with MacCready to MedTek and that had turned out wonderfully. Deacon had accepted her affection more readily since she’d crawled into bed with him the day MacCready left, and she was feeling more secure about their relationship.

He sat on a rock wall, and Cassidy stood between his legs, her arms around his waist. “Deeks I wish you were coming with me. I like Derrick but I don’t want to be away from you.”

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “It’s going to be ok Charmer. I really think even Sturges is better with a weapon than I am. I’ll look after Dogmeat while you’re gone.”

She lifted a hand to take his sunglasses off but he moved his head. “No, Charmer. It’s too bright out here.”

“Oh, that’s true, I’m sorry,” she said apologetically.

“No biggie,” he answered, hugging her close. “It’s weird, I get it.”

Sturges found them and tried not to let the sight of Cassidy and Deacon together bother him. But it did.

“Hey Cassidy,” he said. “I got Rad-X and RadAway for us, and attached a geiger counter to the suits. I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Where are we going?” she asked him.
“I know of a real radioactive place,” said Sturges. “Has feral ghouls. They love that radiation so we’ll have a good run with the suits and practice with my rifle.”

“Where is it?” she asked.

“It’s like a crater, looks like a town sunk down into it. I’d almost want to say a mini nuke went off in there but I don’t rightly know for sure what it’s all about. As long as the radiation protection on the suits works, the ferals can’t hurt us in them.”

She made a face. “I hate those feral things. They gross me out so bad and I think they always will.”

“MacCready ever tell you about some of the critters in the Capital Wastes?” Sturges asked her. “Never seen any myself but I sure heard stories. If I ever saw one I’d haul ass outta there like lightning. Greased lightning.”

Cassidy laughed. His speech wasn’t as colorful as the rest of the Cats but he had some phrases that really got her going.

“MacCready said he didn’t want me to have to ever see the stuff there. I’m curious though. Hearing about them is ok though so tell me.”

“Let’s get our shit together. I’ll tell you on the way.”

Suited up and sufficiently prepared, they started walking.

“Well. I know how you love bugs,” began Sturges. “There’s things there called Cazadores. Flying things. Poisonous, fast...nothing would get me laying a patch quicker than seeing that. Heck if it can outrun me I’d rather not deal with it at all.”

“Bugs. I hated them in my time and I hate them worse now. Bloatflies made me throw up after I first came out of the vault. Those Caza-whatevers makes me have the heebies just thinking of it.”

Sturges chuckled. “There’s something worse I could tell you about,” he said. “But I wouldn’t want to give you nightmares.”

“Well,” she said. “If it does I’ll just put the blanket over my head and hold onto Deacon.”

He gave her a sideways glance. He didn’t want to imagine her in that position. “Because if you can’t see them, they can’t see you, right? It’s a rule you know.”

She giggled. “Exactly! Monster snorkel! When I was little I took my snorkel in bed with me and covered up my whole self with just the breathing thing sticking out.”

Sturges laughed. “Cause they aren’t smart enough to put a big ol’ hairy paw down right on that tube....”

She squealed. “I’m so glad I didn’t know you back then! I’d have never slept again!”

He looked over at her. They were carrying their helmets for the time being as Cassidy hated the feeling of having it on her head. She relied on her peripheral vision and the helmets were rather occlusive.

“Let me paint you a visual,” said Sturges. “Imagine a creature so terrifying...it has a human head and torso, and crawls across the ground with arms for legs and venomous tongues flailing from its mouth!”
“What the hell!?"

“Mmhm,” said Sturges nodding sagely. “Centaurs they call ‘em. Had someone show me a drawing once. Some things you wish you could unsee that’s for sure. To hear him tell it, they were pets for the super mutants.”

She shuddered. “I don’t even know what a super mutant is and the idea they have something like that for a pet makes me never want to ever meet one.”

“Super mutants are dumb, green, huge. Violent as the day is long. Thing is, they’re everywhere. We could end up meeting up with some so we need to be ready for that. Fought them before. They sure ain’t easy to take down. Then you can get the crazy ones that carry a bomb. Suiciders.”

“I’d run like hell,” she said.

“Nah. You shoot the arm off so it blows up before it gets to you. If you’re lucky it ends up taking out a few with it.”

“I just really wish I could go to Sanctuary and just stay there and never have to deal with any of these horrible things!”

Sturges smiled. “It’s a bad scene. But there’s cool things out here too.”

She shook her head. “No, there isn’t. There is nothing out here that is good and beautiful. Maybe if you lived in this time from the very start sure you could find something...but for me? I’ll never see anything in this world as beautiful.”

He stopped and looked down at her. “You don’t think your dog is beautiful? Or hearing your friends laugh? I’ve seen some sunsets and sunrises that take my breath away. Made me wistful I didn’t have anyone to share it with.”

_The most beautiful thing so far_, he thought. _Is you._

She looked up into his kind, soft brown eyes, and the perpetual upwards tilt to the corners of his lips. Sturges always looked happy and content. How could anyone be that way in hell?

“You will,” she said softly.

_I already have_, he thought. _She just doesn’t know it yet._

“I guess there are some _good_ things...like what you said about Dogmeat, and friends. When Deacon smiles...it just makes my heart stop. Like for a split second everything freezes. And when he hugs me. It’s the best feeling in the world to love someone.”

Sturges sighed softly then started walking again. “It can also be the most painful thing you ever experience.”

“Oh yes,” agreed Cassidy. “I’m sorry your girl went away. I imagine that must have been so hard for you.”

He shrugged although she couldn’t see the action. “She was alright yeah, but it was more like...teacher and student. Does that sound kookie? I mean, I wasn’t on the hook with her. She was a bit older...and fast.”

Cassidy gave a confused expression. “Ok you lost me a bit there. You Cats talk funny sometimes.”
“I wasn’t in love with her. She was a …” he thought about it a moment then his eyes lit up. “A runaround sue, get it?”

“That’s what fast means?” she asked.

“Yeah someone who sleeps around. Not someone you’d want to be serious with. I was pretty young and when a girl thinks you’re fab...us guys are pretty weak!”

Cassidy laughed lightly. “One day I’ll understand all of Cat speak. I’m still a kitten after all!”

That made Sturges chuckle as well.

Their Geiger meters began to click, the numbers fluctuating wildly.

“This is a good sign,” said Sturges. “See how the meter’s saying that there is rads here? Well the mods I made are countering it. Get your helmet on.”

“You’re amazing,” said Cassidy, when she saw that the moment her helmet was placed the numbers stabilized.

“Well thank you Miss Cassidy,” he said kindly.

“Zeke started calling me CJ,” she said. “I kind of like it.”

“CJ...what’s the J stand for?” he asked.

“Jasmine. Cassidy Jasmine.”

“Trust Zeke to dig out that little tidbit of personal info. He was always so good at that. CJ. It suits you. I like it. Mind if I call you that too?” Sturges asked.

“I was hoping you would,” answered Cassidy happily.

They walked a bit further and she saw some buildings that were on a strange slant, some having tumbled halfway into a crater just as he’d described earlier.

She looked at her pip-boy. “This is Cambridge,” she said. “Well part of it anyway. It used to be nice here.”

“The Cambridge Crater,” said Sturges. “Well now at least it has a name. Story goes that some ghouls tried to live here. Make it home. But the ground caved in and the excessive rads turned them all feral. Raiders would send new members here to see how close they could get, and make them kill a few ferals for their initiation. Heard a story that one of them turned feral and killed his whole group. Kinda liked that story.”

Cassidy nodded. “Me too,” she agreed.

“Looks like the suits are working. Numbers staying stable. Let’s get closer,” Sturges suggested.

It was hard for Cassidy to move quietly in the suit. She didn’t have the Cat’s skill yet. And she knew as long as she avoided using one she’d never become proficient at it.

Well maybe I don’t ever want to be, she thought. Maybe I just want to live like a normal person in a town and pretend the world doesn’t suck.

Sturges raised his rifle. “I’m gonna take out that one there, beside the rock.”
Cassidy watched him, offering a few suggestions, then waited for him to take the shot. He did, and the feral’s head disappeared.

“Good one!” she exclaimed. “My turn.”

She described her mark, and fired. The feral dropped. But it had been close to another one which turned in their direction. Sturges took aim and fired. This time he missed, and Cassidy shot one of it’s legs off. “Finish it off,” she said.

They circled the crater, watching their meters and taking out ferals. It seemed that there were far more than she’d imagined. Many were inert, lying around the glowing green pond at the bottom, or scattered around the buildings. Some just stood and stared, others walked about slowly, stumbling awkwardly like the zombies in the holovids.

“This is kind of too easy,” she said after a while.

“We can finish them all off,” said Sturges. “but more will be attracted here over time. Just how it is. Rads attract them. Ferals aren’t exciting til they run at you!”

Just as the words left his mouth, something barrelled into Cassidy. It put her off balance but the suit absorbed the impact quite well. She turned to see a feral clawing at her head, snarling and growling.

“Ew!” she screamed and lashed out with the butt of her rifle. The feral fell, twisting and flailing on the ground.

“Yuck!” she cried and lifted her foot, bringing it down on the thing’s head, a nasty pulpy mess oozing out.

She danced back, wiping her foot on the ground. “I hate them! I hate them! Let’s go!” she squealed and set off as quickly as she could towards the road.

Turning, she saw Sturges following her, but didn’t hear him laughing until he got closer.

“What’s so funny?!” she exclaimed. “That was so gross!”

“If only I had a holovid of that!” he laughed. “I’m busting a gut over here! The look on your face, and that little dance you did! CJ, you rock my world!” He bent double trying to catch his breath.

“Can we just go home?” she asked, still scratching vehemently at the dirt with her foot.

He saw the action and it sent him into another laughter loop. “Now here you are shucking the ground like a Brahmiluff bull!”

She wrinkled up her nose at him. “You’re so weird!” she cried and turned for home.

Sturges plodded along behind her, trying to regain his composure but losing the battle with the laughter loop. “Oh my ribs are gonna be a mess tomorrow from all this laughing. We’re going to have a load of fun I can tell already!”

“I’m so glad that I amuse you so much!” said Cassidy.

“No doubt about that,” laughed Sturges.

He sent himself into peals of laughter again later that day describing to Preston and company what Cassidy had done.
“Well, it was really gross,” she said meekly as everyone laughed.

Sturges had put an arm around her shoulders. “This was the most fun I’ve had in...well...that I’ve ever had!”

Deacon, standing in the shadow of a tree felt his chest tighten. She looked so happy and animated, the way she always had been with him.

*I love her. I love everything about her. I should have walked away long ago but now I just can’t. Goddamn it...I just can’t.*

He took a deep breath and stretched then wandered over to join the group. He stood behind Cassidy and placed his hands on her shoulders for a moment, then slid them around her upper chest, holding her against him. She turned around and looked up at him, her eyes shining.

“Hi Deeks!” she grinned.

“Hey Charmer,” he said and meant every word.
Chapter Summary

Heading off to the Glowing Sea, Cassidy and Sturges find evidence of a devastating event.

The Glowing Sea. The stuff of nightmares. The mysterious and dangerous area where someone went and was never seen again. The land of the strange Children of Atom cult that no one knew much about.

Cassidy and Sturges were confident that their suits would hold up to the journey. What they didn’t know was if they would even be able to find Virgil. The area was large enough that you needed to have an idea where to go. That was the one thing they didn’t have. The plan was to go there and hope there’d be clues along the way.

“How far is it do you think?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I can have my pip-boy do an estimate for us but it will depend on how fast we move and all that. We can figure it out.”

“Just curious for the most part,” said Sturges. “As long as the suits are working and we have water, we’re golden.”

Sturges had lined their packs with radiation blocking fabric, treated with the same paint as the suits. He’d been so proud of his creations and so had Cassidy.

Deacon had wished them luck and asked Cassidy to bring him back a souvenir. Hopefully one that wasn’t glowing or wanting to eat his face off.

She’d laughed at that and promised she’d knock it unconscious first to give him a fighting chance.

He’d been unhappy to see her go, but knew that she could manage herself out there and Sturges seemed pretty protective of her. Cassidy seemed to bring out that aspect in people. Deacon embraced her and held her close for a long moment, his face buried in her hair.

He waved and watched them depart, then went to find something to do. He hoped that they’d find Virgil. It was the only lead they had to finding the Institute and her little brother but what a longshot it was.

“She’ll be ok,” said Mama Murphy. “She’s in good hands.”

“I hope so,” said Deacon.

“I know so,” said the old lady.

The land itself changed as they got closer. Despite the more than two centuries that had passed, the
trees still had regained no signs of life. There was only dead earth with dried up shrubs and stumps. Boulders that had been upset by the blast and shockwave littered the area, some half buried. Twisted electrical towers and remnants of concrete from buildings dotted the landscape.

“Woo-ee,” exclaimed Sturges. “Nothing changed in all this time. I wonder if it will ever come to life again.”

“Probably in a thousand years or more,” said Cassidy. “The rest of the world came back but here...I guess right where the worst of it was there’s a lot of healing that needs to happen.”

“Did you ever come this way before? Back then?” he asked.

“Yes. We travelled around quite a bit. Daddy had a lot of speaking engagements in different places. He wanted me to see things, new places and faces. There’s areas I’m scared to see now though. I’d rather remember them the way they were.”

“I get that,” said Sturges.

They began to walk south, occasionally exploring a ruin or dilapidated building. There had been little homes dotted throughout the area in her time, but most of them hadn’t been well built to begin with and hadn’t survived the bomb or the ensuing 200 years.

She heard Sturges humming to himself, again seeming happy and content despite the horrors of the world around them.

“What color was your car?” he asked. “I know you said a new one was coming and it was red but what was the one you had?

“Oh it was just a family car, it was black and had a steering wheel. The sportscar had a stick. I was so excited to be able to drive that when we got it. Stupid bombs.”

“Corvega Atomic 8,” said Sturges. “Real nice.”

“They were,” agreed Cassidy.

She thought she saw something move to her right and turned quickly.

“What is it?” asked Sturges.

“I’m not sure. I thought it was movement but these helmets are so awful it could have been my hair.”

He raised his rifle and looked around. “Well the good news is that it was something small. And small things can’t hurt us in the suits.”

They watched and waited a bit before moving on.

Sturges walked up ahead, climbing over some rocky outcroppings.

“Hey Cassidy,” he called out. “Come on up here and have a look!”

“What is it?” she asked dubiously.

“Something new for you to see!”

She climbed up and stood beside him. He pointed up ahead. A group of strange animals were
grazing. Their bottoms were facing them but they looked like deer.

“Deer!” she exclaimed! “They still exist!”

“Uhh,” chuckled Sturges. “They were once deer but now they’re called Radstags.”

She groaned. “So...they are messed up in some way that means.”

Just then one of them turned and Cassidy gave a gasp of revulsion. Not one, but two heads faced her, and from the chest area dangled two useless legs with hooves. Part of the hair was missing and there were bald patches that looked like open wounds.

She stared in rapt fascination. “That is so disgusting! Are they dangerous?”

“Only if cornered,” said Sturges. “They usually just run away. They’re not the bravest things. But if they can’t run they’ll fight you and they can be nasty. We can walk right up to them sometimes. Look there’s a stag and there are a few does too.”

The does had no antlers. They all raised their many heads as Cassidy and Sturges approached but this herd didn’t seem to mind them. The stag was wary and stepped back but the does allowed them to come near.

Up close they didn’t look much better, but Cassidy noticed the wounding was only on the stag. The does, while still terrible to look at, did resemble the deer of her time. Multiple heads notwithstanding.

“Something must have attacked the big guy,” said Sturges. “He’ll die eventually if he doesn’t heal up on his own. The blood will attract a predator.”

“Just like in my world,” Cassidy said.

The radstags didn’t bother with them after their curiosity was sated and went back to grazing and moving slowly along.

“There’s glowing green ones and all white ones too,” said Sturges. “Radiation affects thing differently I guess.”

They passed the husk of an old car.

“Well lookee here,” said Sturges. “This one was a looker in her time!”

Cassidy walked around it. “Yes, this was the type of car we had that you asked about.” She touched it. “You can still see the green paint in a few spots here.”

Sturges admired it for a few minutes. “What a world you lived in Cassidy.”

“Yes and now it’s all gone,” she said miserably.

“When things change, you find new things to get into,” said the mechanic.

“It’s not the same for me,” she said and walked on.

He sighed. He could feel the sadness flowing from her. He hoped that finding her brother would help patch that up, and getting her father up and about again. There were moments that Cassidy seemed like what he imagined her old self would have been like, and he loved those moments and soaked them up.
The last remaining wall of a building came into view. Scattered around it on the charred earth was the metal and concrete that had once made up it’s foundation. The chassis of a car was half buried as well as a toilet, shattered in pieces.

“Hey what’s that?” asked Sturges pointing up ahead on an incline.

Cassidy squinted. “I don’t know it looks like an electrical tower to me.”

“Too small to be that,” he said. “Let’s check it out.”

He stepped carefully over the debris.

As they got closer she saw it was an old radio tower, a tattered American flag still flying.

“Wow,” whispered Sturges. “Someone put it up that day and the world ended and here it is still flying.”

Cassidy watched it, flapping in the intermittent breezes. It was full of holes, no doubt from debris that had shot through it. But the radio tower itself was unbent and despite the rust still looked completely intact.

“I don’t get how it can still be here after being so close to the bomb,” she said.

“Good construction,” answered Sturges.

They approached it. A plaque on the side said *Relay Tower ODB-521.*

“What’s a relay tower?” asked Cassidy. “An army thing?”

“Could be. But as I know them they’re for picking up radio signals.”

The wire fence that had once been around it seemed to have taken the brunt of the damage that undoubtedly had spun around it that fateful day. It was torn and bent in places, making it easy to cross.

“There’s a computer terminal on here!” Sturges said excitedly. “Let’s see if I can get it working!”

The moment he tried he realized that there was no way he could use a keyboard wearing the power suit. “Well this won’t work! I need to find a stick or a piece of metal.” He looked at the fence and pulled free a jutting bit. “That’s better. But it’ll be slow one key at a time!”

Cassidy watched as he painstakingly hacked the system. “How the hell can this still be working?” she asked.

“It’s getting power from the tower,” he said, then chuckled. “If Zeke were here he’d make a note of that rhyme for poetry night!”

Suddenly the satellite dishes on the side of the tower began to grind and whir.

“Derrick look!” cried Cassidy.

“Old girl is still alive after all this time,” he said.

The dish rose up several feet then began oscillating. A sharp beeping came from her pip-boy. Looking down at it, she saw the words *mayday Skylane Flight 1665.* Her eyes widened and she showed him.
“Can you pick it up?” he asked.

Cassidy nodded and let the pip-boy scan for the signal.

Static met their ears but beneath it they could hear someone’s voice. “It’s so faint I can’t make it out!” she cried in dismay.

“Let’s walk around,” he suggested. “Getting closer to the source will help. Come on.”

Sturges knew that the signal was over 200 years old, and he was sure that she knew it as well. But there was that part of her that was still locked in her own world, and to her, the signal was fresh and new. Cassidy thought she could help them, the people 200 years gone.

He felt a lump in his throat and swallowed it away, focusing on moving forward.

A big chunk of fallen highway appeared and they climbed over it. The voices on the radio grew louder.

“I can hear them better now!” she cried. “This must be the right direction!”


“Woah, Cassidy check it out!” Sturges exclaimed. “A downed Vertibird!”

The ship was on it’s side, half buried. They searched around it but found nothing. They walked further and the voices on the radio got softer.

“We’re losing them,” said Cassidy. “Let’s go back the way we came.”

They followed the signal.

The voices got louder and clearer and despite the haziness of the atmosphere, the sun hit a shiny object.

The ruined remains of an aircraft lay in the charred earth.
Cassidy gasped.

“Oh no…” she said and Sturges knew what she was thinking.

The voices on the recording got louder. It was the crew of the doomed flight. Their last communication.

_Pilot_: Skylanes one six six five 20 miles out on approach from the west. Bit of wind, should be no problem.

.Control_: Roger Skylanes one six six five, traffic short final. Cleared to land on runway one eight left.

_Pilot_: Copy, one eight left. Coming in at four seven five knots, that's four seven...hang on control.

There were background sounds, voices exclaiming.

_Pilot_: What the hell is that? Some kind of bright light from the north!

A new voice sounded.

_Co-pilot_: Uh...fire in left engine. Losing power in left engine!
Pilot: Okay, let's put it out. Left engine to idle.

Co-pilot: Shit! Still losing power.

Pilot: That's it, no power in left engine. Boston Center, Skylanes one six six five declaring an emergency. Left engine failure. We're out fifteen three at this time.

Controller: Copy that Skylanes one six six five, request emergency landing. Clearing runway one eight left. Can you make it?

Pilot: Uh...that's a negative Boston Center, losing altitude too quickly. We will not make it to runway.

Controller: One six six five, say again?

Pilot: We're going down! I repeat, we are going down!

Overwhelmed by what she was hearing, Cassidy ran forward to the wreckage. Seats, torn and decimated lay scattered about. Part of the fuselage was full of holes and completely torn apart. One wing jutted upwards from the body and several feet away the rest of the fuselage lay, seats still attached but no less destroyed.

Suitcases, some still locked were strewn about, laying in the same place they had fallen. Cassidy knew it had happened that long ago. But part of her hoped that maybe some of the people had become ghouls and were still there. A last remnant of her world.

Who had they been, these travellers? Were they businessmen and women heading off to work? Were they families excited to visit loved ones or coming home from a visit? Did they know what was happening and suffer or was it fast?

Cassidy fell to her knees, sobbing, wanting to tear off the power armor but knowing she couldn’t.

Sturges reached her and did his best to comfort, but that was pretty much impossible given the suits.

“Derrick!” she sobbed, her voice tinny through the helmet. “They’re not here! No one’s here!”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “No honey, they aren’t. It was a long time ago. I’m sorry baby doll.”

“The message. When they sent it. The world was still here! My family was still all here! If these people...if they were still here, like ghouls...then it would be like...like…”

She sobbed pitifully.

“I got you,” he said gently, kneeling in front of her and holding his hands palms up. It was the only gesture he could think of while in the suits.

She put her own metal hands in his and cried. “It’s gone. Everything. It’s gone and won’t ever be the same!”

“No, it won’t. But honey...different isn’t always bad,” said Sturges gently. “We’re all in this together, right? We’ll be ok, Cassidy. We’re gonna be right as rain but you just need to give it time.”
“I don’t like this world!” she sobbed. “It sucks so bad! And why aren’t there any phones? How come we have radios but no phones! I want to call MacCready and Deacon!” She wailed. She sat there and wailed until she had no more energy and no more tears.

Sturges wanted to take her in his arms and hold her. To make every promise known to man and carry it out too. Anything to take away her pain, to see her happy again. But he knew that no one could replace what she’d lost. Her and all those other people, the ghouls who had wandered the broken world with only their memories.

Who in the hell pressed the button? Who figured it was a good idea to blow up the world? What had they even gained from it?

But Cassidy didn’t need philosophy. She needed love, and comfort. “Things are going to work out,” he said. “It might take a long while, but they will. Til then, you go ahead and lean on me. I’ll always be here for you Cassidy no matter what. That’s a promise. And a Sturges always keeps their promise.”

She hiccuped and sniffled and he wished he could see her face and brush away her tears. “Th...thanks Derrick,” she said.

He let her sit there until she was ready to go. When she finally did stand, they found the flight recorder. Cassidy pulled it free. “It’s their last communication in this world,” she said. “I’m keeping it to honor them. I don’t even know who these people were...but ...I need to keep it.”

He tucked the tape into her pack.

“We should keep heading south,” he suggested. “We need to find some kind of clue and the Children of Atom would be a good place to start.”

“Ok,” she said simply and followed him deeper towards ground zero.
Ground Zero

Chapter Summary

Cassidy is disgusted with the Children of Atom; she and Sturges locate Brian Virgil.

“Will you look at that,” breathed Sturges.

They had walked along sections of downed highway, when the bright spire of a church appeared. It
looked like the entire building was buried, structures around it also looked as though they had been
engulfed by the earth until only their tops were sticking up.

Electrical poles with only a few feet emerged showed how much earth had covered the place.

“This is Hopesmarch church,” said Cassidy. “A friend of my mom’s got married here. It was so
beautiful!”

A growl erupted from beneath her. She’d been standing on a roof and looked down.

“Yuck! Ferals!” she cried.

“Not for long,” said Sturges.

Cassidy watched them a moment. “They can’t get out of there! The building is half buried. That
means…”

“They’ve most likely been here since the bombs fell,” said Sturges.

“Ferals...aren’t people anymore,” she said sadly.

“No, they aren’t which is why we need to do the right thing and take them out.”

And they did. It was easy and quick.

The terrain got worse. It was a mess, charred and full of both natural and man made debris. Cassidy
and Sturges had to climb several times, and she fell over and down a small precipice. The suits had
inertial dampeners of some kind so she didn’t feel the impact too much but getting up was a
challenge. She was glad he was there to help her.

“Like a turtle stuck on its back,” he said grinning.

“I’d probably be stuck that way for a long time if you weren’t here. I don’t know how people
move around in these things so easily.”

“I can show you,” he said. “Takes a bit of practice that’s all. Like everything else.”

They continued on until Cassidy spotted a path up through the rocks. “Do you think that might
lead somewhere?” she asked.
“Let’s find out,” he answered.

At the top of the ridge their eyes were met with a strange sight.

“Is that the Children of Atom settlement?” she asked.

“I’m thinking so,” agreed Sturges.

Below them in a massive crater, dotted in haphazard fashion, were several metal trailers, wooden structures, and walkways.

People in drab tattered rags were either walking about or on their knees, praying in various ways. The center of the crater was a bright glowing green that radiated out.

Cassidy stared in disbelief. It was ground zero, the landing place of the bomb that destroyed Boston and her life. And here were these people worshipping it. Treating it as though it were a grand thing worth celebrating.

A deep feeling of loathing coursed through her.

“I hate them,” she whispered.

“Who? The Children? We haven’t met them yet!” said Sturges, surprised.

“Don’t you get it?!” she cried. “They are worshipping the very thing that destroyed the world! That’s wrong! And it’s disgusting!”

“Hey,” said Sturges gently. “They’re just lost people. Wanting to find meaning. Needing to find something to believe in to make it bearable. Not much different then all of us.”

“Very different! You don’t see us singing the praises of destructive things!”

“Well,” he said slowly. “The military. Everyone has always been so proud of their forces. Their destructive forces. Yeah I get it, that it’s not exactly the same...but people have always searched for meaning in life and a way to understand why bad things happen. Sometimes it just doesn’t make sense to some of us. These guys, they live out here, doing their own thing. They never bother anyone.”

Cassidy understood his point but she was still feeling angry and hurt inside, and her disgust was not going to go away anytime soon.

“Come on, honey,” he said kindly. “Let’s see if they have any information on Virgil. He’s not one of them and might have stood out if he came this way. Being the only settlement out here I imagine he must have.”

“If their radiation soaked brains can remember, you mean,” she grumbled.

Cassidy was in no mood to exchange pleasantries. She had known that the Children of Atom existed. She had heard what they were all about and she hadn’t felt anything either way at first. But seeing where it had happened, having heard the account of the Skylanes flight, brought all her anger forward. No one knew who’d sent that bomb and from where. But here was where it had landed and destroyed everything she knew and loved. These people had no right to celebrate that.

She hung back as Sturges moved ahead. He walked across a crudely built boardwalk over a nasty looking sludge, into one of the metal trailers. A man was sitting on his knees, praying. He was
completely bald and his skin had a sickly yellowish tinge to it. He looked up at them.

“In the end, we are all Atom’s children,” he said softly. “The great divide comes. May the glow of Atom guide your path.”


“Speak to Mother Isolde. She will better be able to help you. May the divide bring you peace.”

“Thank you,” said Sturges. “Where can we find her?”

“She’s in the big house on the edge of the cliff.”

He resumed his mumbling prayers and Sturges walked past him.

Another man, bowing on the edge of the boardwalk looked up at them. “The world will see Atom’s glory again,” he said.

Cassidy wrinkled up her nose but said nothing.

They passed several other people, all in prayer, mumbling about the divide and Atom’s glory.

“Is this all these crazies do?” asked Cassidy. “Sit around and pray to radiation or whatever they are talking about?”

“It seems they do but they have to find food and the usual things too,” answered Sturges.

“By the look of them, eating or bathing isn’t high on their list.”

“I can’t argue that,” agreed Sturges.

They found the “big house” on the edge of the cliff. It was nothing more than a structure crudely put together like the rest, but required more staircases to reach. A woman was standing on what looked like the balcony.

They approached her. “Are you Mother Isolde?” asked Cassidy.

She nodded. “I am. What do you need of me, child?”

“My name is Cassidy, and I’m not a child,” said Cassidy bluntly.

“In the end we are all Atom’s children,” said Mother Isolde.

Cassidy bristled. “No, I don’t think so.”

“We’re looking for someone,” said Sturges quickly. “A man by the name of Virgil. Does he live here?”

“Virgil?” asked Mother Isolde. “Yes. Yes...we know this Virgil. What do you want with him?”

“We just need some information from him,” said Sturges.

“He has sought refuge with Atom,” said Mother Isolde. “I would know more before I tell you where he is. What do you want with him?”

Cassidy felt her temper flaring but she just stood and stared down at the woman with the patchy hair and sickly skin.
“We need his help in reaching the Institute,” said Sturges.

Mother Isolde nodded. “I have heard of this Institute. They hide themselves, trying to avoid the power of Atom. A futile effort.”

“Oh for fucks sake!” cried Cassidy, who couldn’t stand to hear another word. “Just tell us where he is already!”

Mother Isolde’s expression tightened up. “In truth, this Virgil has caused some concern. Some believe his presence is an affront to Atom.”

“Oh really?” cried Cassidy. “I think all of you are an affront to humanity! Bowing and scraping before the very thing that destroyed the world! My world! If not for your stupid Atom I’d still be at home with my mom and daddy. Because of this bullshit I was frozen for 200 years! You’re all insane!”

Mother Isolde blinked. “200 years? You lived before the coming of Atom?”

“Didn’t you hear me the first time you loon?” Cassidy yelled. “Yes! And you’re praying to the very thing that caused everyone’s pain!”

Sturges turned Cassidy around. “Honey, go outside and wait for me. We need to find Virgil, right? Let me find out where he is and we can go talk to him. Ok?”

Cassidy was shaking with anger beneath her power suit. “These people are disgusting!” she exclaimed.

“I know, but we need to focus on Virgil. Go wait for me.” He gently but firmly moved her in the direction of the ramp. He turned back to Mother Isolde.

“Where can we find Virgil?” he asked.

“He came to trade with us on a few occasions,” she said. “But other than that we have had little other contact with him. It was quite clear he wanted to be left alone. You can find him southwest of the crater, living in a cave. I would approach cautiously, were I you. I feel he does not want visitors.”

“Thank you for your help,” he said. “We’ll be on our way now.”

“Will she be alright?” asked Mother Isolde.

“In time,” answered Sturges.

As they sought the path to the southwest, laser fire and shouting broke out. Several of the Children raced from their buildings.

“Rad scorpion!” exclaimed Sturges, lifting his weapon.

Cassidy saw the beast, a massive version of the little ones she had once seen in the Arizona desert. It raised its tail and struck out at the people surrounding it.

“Let’s go,” she said and began to walk away.

“Let’s kill it before it kills any of these people,” said Sturges.

“No!” exclaimed Cassidy. “They can go to hell! They love radiation so much, well that beast was
made from it. So they must love it, too. Let them deal with the consequences! Come on Derrick!”

He was surprised. “CJ, I’ve never known you to be so harsh.”

“No? Well you actually don’t know me! I said let’s GO!”

He stood stock still a moment. “CJ,” he said gently. “Don’t talk to me that way, honey. I’m here to help you find your little brother. I get it that you’re mad and hurting, but don’t flip your wig at me.”

“I don’t want to be here a moment longer with these crazies! Let’s go to Virgil already!”

Sturges was going to say something else, when he heard the sob in her voice. She was having a rough time, and he really did have compassion for her.

The Rad Scorpion died to the Children and he sighed. “Alright, let’s get over to that cave.”

They found a few caves that proved to be nothing, then finally as they were about to try a different direction, the waning light glinted off something.

A string of tin cans, often used as a warning system, hung just inside a dark patch of rocks.

“This must be it!” exclaimed Cassidy. She moved past the cans. “Virgil?” she called out. “We’re here to see a Brian Virgil? Are you here?”

“Careful, CJ,” warned Sturges.

The cave was littered with some form of equipment and crates. Someone definitely was, or at least had been, living there.

The darkness opened out up ahead. They could see light. As they approached, Cassidy called out again.

“Hold it,” said a very deep, rumbly voice. “Take it nice and slow. No sudden moves!”

“I need to talk to Virgil,” said Cassidy.

“I know you’re from the Institute, so where’s Kellogg? Huh? Trying to sneak up on me while you distract me? It’s not going to work! I’m not stupid! I knew they’d send him after me.”

“Are you Virgil?” asked Cassidy.

“You know damn well I am,” he answered. “What’re you doing here?”

Cassidy stepped into the room and shrieked. “What the hell?! What...what are you?”

Brian Virgil towered over her, a massive green humanoid wearing pieced together clothing and a pair of glasses.

“First time seeing a super mutant huh? You’ve led a sheltered life.”

“But...how...” she stammered, staring in rapt fascination.

“It wasn’t exactly my best idea, but turning into one of these hulking monstrosities was the only way to...uhh...well...to get here.”
“I don’t know about...about...super mutants...” she said awkwardly.

“Well that doesn’t matter anyway,” said Virgil. “Now why are you here?”

“I need your help,” said Cassidy. “My name is Cassidy and this is my friend, Derrick.”

“My help? With what? How did you find me anyway?” he asked.

“Can you tell me about the Institute, or...not...” said Cassidy.

“The Institute!” said Virgil in surprise. “So...they did send you didn’t they. You’re working with Kellogg!”

“No, I’m not. Kellogg’s dead,” said Cassidy. “He was horrible.”

“Dead...he’s...dead...” said Virgil, both surprise and relief in his voice. Then he frowned. “Don’t you lie to me!”

Cassidy exhaled loudly. “He’s dead! Whether you believe me or not!”

“There’s no question it’s difficult to believe,” he said. “Kellogg was ruthless. There’s a reason the Institute used him to do their dirty work for so many years. I knew they’d send him after me. Tried to prepare for it, but I still wasn’t sure I’d make it.” Virgil eyed Cassidy carefully, wondering what she looked like under that suit, but knowing there was no safe way for her to take it off. She sure sounded young.

“So you...you killed him, eh?” he asked. “Well then what do you want with me?”

“Why did you leave the Institute?” Cassidy asked. “I know you came from there.”

“You know about the escape?” asked Virgil. “But how?” He walked to the back of the cave, then turned around. “No. It doesn’t matter. I’m not going back...I can’t go back! Look at me!” He paced restlessly. “Why are you even here? I still don’t know what you want!”

“I need whatever information you’ve got,” said Cassidy, no longer feeling as fearful of him. “Anything to help me get into the Institute.”

Virgil stopped pacing and turned to her. “I’m sorry...what? You want to get in to the Institute. Are you insane? Never mind how nearly impossible that is, even if you were to succeed it’d certainly end in your immediate death! What reason could you possibly have for taking that kind of risk?”


“Oh. Oh no. I’m sorry. Look, I can help you get in there, but I want something...need something...in return”

“Ok,” said Cassidy. “If I can do it, I will.”

“Before I had to escape,” explained Virgil. “I was working on a serum that would serve as...as a cure for my condition.”

“You mean being a super mutant?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes. I wasn’t able to bring it with me. It’s still in my lab. And...well...look at me. I need it. Please find it for me if you manage to get inside the Institute. What do you say?”
“Ok. If you help me, I’ll help you,” answered Cassidy.

Virgil nodded with satisfaction. “All right. Let’s talk details. First things first. You know how synths get in and out of the Institute?”

“Yeah, they use some sort of teleporter.”

“Well, well,” said Virgil. “Not many know about it. Pretty closely guarded secret. You’ve certainly done your homework. It’s commonly referred to as the molecular relay. I don’t understand all the science behind it, but it works.”

“How?” asked Cassidy.

“This is the part I’m interested in,” said Sturges.

“It dematerializes you in one place, re-materializes you in another. I’m sure it sounds crazy but it’s a reality. The relay is the only way in and out of the Institute. You understand? The only one. That means you’re going to have to use it.”

“Dematerializes? Like in holovids? Takes you apart and puts you together again?” Cassidy couldn’t believe such technology existed.

“That would be right,” said Virgil. “Now, have you ever seen an Institute Courser?”

“A courser?” asked Cassidy. “What’s that?”

“Another Institute secret,” said Virgil. “Coursers are Institute synths designed for one purpose. They’re hunters. Operations go wrong, a synth goes missing, and a courser is dispatched. They’re very good at what they do. And you’re going to have to kill one.”

“And why do I have to kill one?” she asked.

“Because you want to get into the Institute, remember? They’re your ticket in. Every courser has special hardware that gives them a direct connection to the relay in the Institute. It’s embedded in a chip in their heads. You need that chip. So, to get one you need to find a courser.”

“This is starting to sound terrible,” said Cassidy. “Where do I find one?”

“That’s the problem,” answered Virgil. “I don’t know exactly where. They haven’t sent any after me and sitting here waiting doesn’t sound like a good plan. You’re going to have to hunt one down. I can tell you where to start, and give you some help finding one, but you’ll have to do the dirty work.”

“We can do that,” said Sturges.

“Right. The primary insertion point for coursers is in the ruins of CIT, directly above the Institute. So you’ll want to head there.”

Cassidy gasped. “That’s where they are? CIT? Under the ground?”

Sturges echoed her surprise. “Never would have ever thought of that,” he said.

“Mhm,” said Virgil. “Now the relay causes some pretty heavy interference all across the EM spectrum. You’ve got a radio on that pip-boy right?”

Cassidy nodded.
“When you get to the ruins, tune it into the lower end of the band and listen in. You’ll be able to hear the interference.”

“What does it sound like?” Cassidy asked.

“You’ll know it when you hear it. Follow the signal and it will lead you to a courser. You’ll just have to...not get killed.”

“Are they really that bad?” she asked.


“You might not make it out of here before nightfall,” said Virgil. “You’re welcome to rest awhile. But...the radiation is pretty bad here. Don’t think you can take off your suits.”

“I’d rather risk the nightmares out there and get the hell away from this horrible place,” said Cassidy. “I always thought hell was hot and had demons. I was half right. It just isn’t hot. It’s radioactive.”

Virgil nodded. “You see why I chose it to hide.”

“I can,” she agreed. “Bye Virgil.”

She turned back to the mouth of the cave, Sturges behind her.

“I don’t care if it takes all night I’m not stopping until I get home or die trying.”

“I’m dreaming of a nice cold beer,” he said. “Just sit outside the house and grill up some brahmin. Want to join me?”

“I miss Deacon,” she said. “I just want to see Deacon.”

“Fair enough,” he said with a sigh. “Invitation stands. You’re both welcome.”

Cassidy trudged onwards, wanting nothing more then to get back to Sanctuary.
Cassidy sat on the ground following evening, her head resting against Deacon’s thigh as he lounged in a chair. A nice fire had been lit and she, Deacon, Sturges, Preston, Mama Murphy and Marcy sat around it. They’d had their beers, roasted up the brahmin Sturges had craved, then discussed the adventure.

“A talking super mutant,” mused Preston. “Imagine that. I mean they all talk but one as intelligent as this Virgil is a first for me.”

“A first for most of us I think,” said Deacon.

“This courser sounds a bit scary,” said Cassidy.

“She’s a girl who single handedly took on a Deathclaw!” grinned Preston.

“Well if someone warned me how horrific they were before I faced it I’d probably have run away,” she said.

“Well Virgil is a scientist,” said Sturges. “He lived in the Institute his whole life probably. Courser is his Deathclaw. The only thing the people in the Institute have to fear.”

“I guess that’s true,” agreed Cassidy. “I wish MacCready were here. Nothing seems to scare him. No offense to anyone but he’s something else in combat.”

“He’s good, I’ll give him that,” said Deacon. “I knew you two would hit it off. Though at first I thought one of you would kill the other.”

“We had a rough time at first.” She threw a stick into the fire. “I hope he’s ok out there.”

The others murmured the same sentiment.

“So Cassidy,” said Sturges. “We going to hit up CIT and find that courser?”

She gave him a surprised blink. “You actually want to deal with that? I figured after the Glowing Sea you’d be done with adventuring.”

She looked up at Deacon, sunglasses intact and unreadable as always. “You’re coming with me, right Deeks?” she asked softly.

“Yeah, for sure,” he said, giving her a smile. “Wouldn’t mind adding an Institute courser to my repertoire of win.”

Sturges gave her a smile too, albeit a small one. “I know I don’t like fighting much, but I do like
adventuring.” He couldn’t help but feel that their differences of opinion in the Glowing Sea had put up a bit of a wall between them. It made him rather sad. He had thoroughly enjoyed being with her.

“Well I’m up for it if you change your mind. Having both me and Deacon along wouldn’t be the worst idea would it?”

Cassidy wrapped her arm around Deacon’s leg. “I guess not but then I have to babysit both of you.”

Deacon dropped his head back dramatically. “Ouch! That just wounds me to the core!”

Cassidy giggled. “I doubt one courser needs three shooters. Virgil was being weird. He was terrified of Kellogg and jumpy.”

Sturges stretched and got up off the ground, dusting off his overalls. “I think I’m gonna hit the hay. Full belly, warm bed. I’ll be out like a light in minutes. See y’all tomorrow.”

“Night Derrick,” said Cassidy without looking up.

He stopped at his front step and turned to look at her again. The firelight glinting off her hair gave her an almost magical glow. She’s beautiful, he thought.

Cassidy felt his eyes on her and looked up at him briefly then looked away.

The rest of them hung around the fire for a bit longer, swapping stories, discussing further plans for Sanctuary. The night deepened and Cassidy began to nod off herself.

“Hey sleepyhead,” said Deacon gently. “Maybe we should head for the house too.”

She got to her feet then held her hand out to him. “Ok. Let’s go.”

“I’ll put the fire out,” said Preston.

Cassidy changed into her pyjamas and put her hair up. Then she went to Deacon’s room. He was already in bed, about to turn his light off.

“I don’t want to be alone,” she said. “Can I sleep with you?”

“You have Dogmeat. He’s warm and furry and missed you, the poor guy!” said Deacon.

She shook her head. “It’s not the same. He’ll lie here on the rug with us.”

“Cassidy…” began Deacon, but she was already crawling in under the covers beside him. She lifted his arm over her and wriggled close.

“You smell good,” she said, settling.

“I can’t agree with you there,” he responded. “Was in the garage all day messing with paint. I should have a shower but right now, I’m too tired.”

“Eau de paint,” she giggled.

Deacon kissed the top of her head and held her close.

Cassidy awoke first, the covers having shifted sideways off her and pooled on the floor. Deacon was curled up on his side and she pulled the errant blankets back over them, then snuggled against
his back, one arm over his body.

She didn’t want to get up. She felt warm and safe and saw no need to disturb that feeling. Dogmeat lifted his head, stood and shook himself, then climbed up and lay at the foot of the bed, his head on Deacon’s foot.

Deacon stirred, feeling confined, something he most certainly didn’t like. He tried to extricate himself, but failed. There was something comforting about all of it to him too and he settled back down, sleep still clinging to him.

*Charmer,* he thought. *You’re so needy, so lost. I can’t push you away. I need you just as much as you need me but this is so wrong. Fuck I’m in too deep already.*

Cassidy fell asleep again and Dogmeat began to snore. Deacon had no choice but to follow suit.

They sluggishly emerged eventually, showered and had something to eat. Dogmeat had disappeared long before and begged at Marcy’s house for something more interesting than brahmin.

“We’re going to be gone a bit,” said Cassidy to Preston. “CIT isn’t that close by and who knows how long we’ll have to search for that courser. Hopefully he doesn’t eat our faces.”

“Don’t say that!” exclaimed Deacon. “We’re made of win! And it’s what we do every time!”

Cassidy laughed. “Virgil has me all spooked about coursers now.”

“Once you get that thing, what’s the next step?” asked Preston.

“Umm...I’m not sure...I think I’ll bring it to Virgil. Yuck. Glowing Sea again.”

Sturges walked around from the back of his garage. “Be a quicker trip this time around. Now that you know where Virgil is. I’ll start working on a suit for Deacon.”

Deacon shuddered. “After hearing what you two saw I still don’t want to go out there. Sturges, you go back with her. You’ve been there. Color me terrified.”

Cassidy sighed. “Deacon it sucks out there yes. I wish I didn’t have to go back. But we’d be ok...”

Sturges looked at Cassidy. “You want me to come with? Or get a suit for Preston?”

Preston raised his hands up. “Count me out. Well if I have a choice I’d rather not head out there either. You’re it, Sturges.”

Cassidy shrugged then. “If you feel like it Derrick I wouldn’t mind. We know the way after all. But no more with those stupid radiation worshippers ok?”

He nodded. “Deal. Before you go CJ, can I talk to you for a moment? In the house?”

Deacon put his pack down. “Go ahead I need to get a few more things for the trip. Meet you at the bridge Charmer.”

Cassidy followed Sturges into his house. He kicked the door shut behind them and turned to face her.

“CJ, I can’t help but feel something’s a bit off between us. Everything ok?”
She shrugged and wouldn’t look at him. He leaned back against the wall. “We’ve been friends for awhile now. And I know we don’t know each other all that well but I get a pretty good sense from people. And right now I’m feeling things aren’t cool with us. You know, Cats always tell the truth. We keep things on the up and up.”

She sighed. “I can’t...I don’t...Derrick I’ll never see things your way. I can’t handle it when you say how beautiful things are now when they clearly aren’t. You and me, we come from totally different worlds. I might as well be from the moon. And you act like there’s something wrong with me for being mad about how much it sucks. I mean, I’m grateful for meeting you all...and you're good people, all of you but...”

As a lump formed in her throat and her eyes began to sting, she looked away. “I’d trade all of you, and everything else...to have the world normal again. To have a safe and healthy world. To be able to walk down the road to the store and not worry about being murdered by a fly. To not live with weather that can make me really sick or kill me. To not have to hook up to an IV because I went outside in that weather. To swim in the ocean...butterflies and birds. Bugs I can step on! And animals with ONE head! You have no idea what it was like. So you can’t tell me that it’s beautiful now. I’m sorry that Dogmeat and all of you don’t inspire that in me. I’m not a ghoul who’s had 200 years to adjust to the horror. And I never will.”

She saw the deep sorrow in his eyes at her words, but at that moment she didn’t care. No one truly understood. Deacon might say he did, but unless someone had lived it, like Daisy, they had nothing to say about it. She was tired of hearing how great things could be. There was nothing great about this world and there never would be.

Sturges closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Standing up, he took her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

“Be safe out there, CJ,” he said. “I’ll get our suits ready for the Glowing Sea.”

He turned and walked down the hall, and Cassidy opened the door and went to find Deacon.

They walked in silence for the longest time. Finally Deacon stopped and put his pack down.

“Charmer, you’re being awfully quiet today. Everything alright?”

She shook her head. “I said some mean stuff to Derrick and now I feel bad.”

He listened as she told him about the events in the Glowing Sea. Then she shared what she’d just said to him.

“Damn that’s harsh,” said Deacon. “But if it’s your truth then you have to live it.”

“I keep screwing things up. I say stuff that’s hurtful and it isn’t like me. I’m lost, Deacon. I feel like a bad person.”

She took a step forward and put her arms around his waist, her head on his chest. He hugged her back.

“You don’t know what a bad person is, Charmer,” he said gently. “If you think you’re one.”

“I hurt people with my big mouth sometimes. Even my daddy said that to me. He said I had to think before I said stuff sometimes. But I get mad about things and just go off. It’s so awful Deacon and I don’t know how to stop. This world makes me angry and crazy.”
He rested his lips on the top of her head. “I’m glad I’m a synth,” he said. “We’re like programmed to have even tempers.”

She looked up at him. “What? You’re a synth?”

He let her go and dug in his pocket. He handed her a folded piece of paper. “All synths have a recall code. So... in case something happens to me, you’ll have it. Keep it safe. Don’t look at it unless you absolutely have to.”

Cassidy narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re a synth,” she said dubiously.

“Like I said keep it safe.”

She looked at the paper in her hand, then unfolded it.

You can't trust everyone.

“You can't trust everyone? That’s your recall code?”

Suddenly Deacon began twitching and fell over.

“Deacon!” she cried and fell to her knees beside him. She shook him. “I’m sorry! I thought you were messing with me again! Deeks!”

She was near tears when she saw his lips twitch in an effort not to laugh. “Gotcha!” he said with mirth.

Cassidy sat back on her knees and shoved him in the chest as he sat up. “You horror!” she cried. “I thought I killed you! Why would you even do that to me?”

He was laughing. “Shit just got heavy Charmer! I wanted to lighten the mood. But it’s true though.
You can't trust everyone!”

“Even you apparently!” she cried.

“Especially me!” he responded.

She sulked, sitting there in the dirt. Deacon reached out and gently poked her cheek. She swatted his hand away.

“Aww, come on you forgive me right?”

“That was cruel,” she sulked.

Deacon put on a dramatic pout face. “I’m sorry,” he said. He leaned close to her and pretended to stare into her eyes. Of course, the action looked ridiculous wearing the sunglasses Zeke had given him.

“I don’t want to look at myself!” she whined. “Take them off.”

“The light hurts my eyes,” he said softly.

“You hurt my eyes,” retorted Cassidy, looking down.

Deacon tilted her chin up with two fingers. With the other hand he removed his glasses, blinking rapidly in the brightness. “I’m even willing to suffer for you if you say you forgive me,” he said.
“I was pouring my heart out to you and your answer is to goof off,” she said, still sulking.

“I know, I’m such an ass. Seriously. I’ve been told that a lot. Enough times I’m thinking it’s probably true.”

That made Cassidy smile, just a little.

“There we go. What would those Cats say? Now we’re cooking with gas.”

She laughed, then without warning Deacon leaned in and kissed her.

It wasn’t an earth shattering, bolt from the blue moment, and if anyone had asked her what her first kiss would have been like, Cassidy would never have described it the way it happened.

“Shit...Charmer. I’m sorry,” he said and pulled back. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You’re sorry you finally kissed me?” she asked. “Well, I’m not!”

With that she reached out, grabbed his shirt, and pulled him back to her, pressing her lips to his. “I have no clue what I’m doing,” she whispered softly. “But I don’t care. I love you, Deacon.”

Every one of his carefully crafted walls came crashing down. It was though he had constructed them on a cliff and the entire cliff face tumbled away into the ocean, taking him along with it. He
felt himself falling into space, nothing to hold on to, nothing to stop his descent.

_This is not going to end well_, his mind screamed. _I don’t give a shit_, he responded to himself.

His hands tangled up in her thick soft hair and his lungs lost all their oxygen. He was like a man starved, deprived of such a simple pleasure for so long that he couldn’t stop. He kissed Cassidy until both of them were out of breath and gasping.

Deacon fell back, jamming the glasses back onto his face. Cassidy crawled beside him and smoothed her disheveled hair.

“You’re the most incredible man I’ve ever met,” she said.

He groaned. “Charmer, you don’t know _anything_ about me. This...this can’t happen.”

“Give me a break,” she said. “It already happened. And maybe you should tell me who you are then and stop being so mysterious. It’s kind of not fair that you know pretty much everything about me and I know...well...like _nothing_ about you.” She leaned down and brushed her lips against his.

He reached up, moved her hair away from her face and sighed deeply.

“For years...I always flew solo. But since meeting you I gotta admit I think I might have been missing out. Having someone watching your back is...refreshing. Especially since you never know if the Institute is watching.”

“You actually think they watch everyone all the time?” she asked.

“I do,” he answered. “And that’s why having a partner isn’t a good thing. It can leave you vulnerable. One more person who can finger you to the Institute.”

“You’re paranoid, Deacon,” she said.

He shook his head. “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they _aren’t_ out to get you.”

She took his hand and held it in both of hers. “I won’t let them get you that’s for sure.”

He squeezed her. “I envy you,” he said. But as she was about to protest that statement he raised her hand to his lips. “Hang on, hear me out. Having family and friends in this world is a dangerous thing. Being a spy...you expose them to danger. You...you took the big sleep and woke up essentially alone. This makes you safe from any of that.”

“Why would the Institute hurt _my_ family or friends? I’m no one.”

He grinned slightly. “I thought you said you wanted to be a spy. Well it’s dangerous work. You could uncover something that pisses them off and yeah friends and family have been known to be collateral damage. You learned about the courser. They aren’t a joke.”

Reality dawned on her. “If...if I take one down...then the Institute will know.”

He nodded. “It’s something I was going to point out to you before we went after it. Once you do this you’re telling the Institute you’re waging war on them. And they’ll come at you guns a blazin’. Not saying you need to back off. Hell no. I say we all need to fight back.”

“They took Shaun. I have to get him back. I don’t have a choice. They waged war on me first.”

Deacon nodded. “I know. But it was worth mentioning. I...I don’t have anyone. I just dedicated...”
myself to the cause. You know what it said on that paper? It’s true. You never know who could be a synth replacement working for the Institute.”

“Deacon, it’s not true about you not having anyone. You have me.” She leaned in and kissed him again.

“Yeah and that scares me, Charmer.”

“It shouldn’t. I’m getting myself into trouble by looking for my little brother.”

He nodded. “That doesn’t make me feel any less scared. Being a spy...it’s serious business. You gotta know about people. Have an insight into them. Figure out the 90% someone’s on the up and up and the 10% you’re being played.”

“I’m not good at that,” she said.

“No one is at first. Thing is, everyone has an agenda. Each person or organization you meet is going to feed you their own patented form of bullshit. Ignore the verbage and look at what they’re doing, what they’re asking you to do. What sort of world they’d have you build and how they’re going to pay for it. At the end of the day you’re the one who has to make the choice. Make it the right one. For you.”

Cassidy held his hand up to her cheek. “Ok. I will. But Deacon I still don’t know why you think you’re so bad.”

“I’m getting there,” he said, running his thumb along her lips. “It’s not easy so bear with me.”

He took a deep breath and licked his lips. “I’m a liar. Everyone knows it. I make no secret of it. Because the truth is, I’m a fraud. To my core. When I was young, a hell of a long time ago, I was...well... scum . I was a bigot. A very violent bigot.”

Cassidy narrowed her eyes. “Were you really that bad?”

He nodded. “Worse than that. I ran with a gang in University Point. We called ourselves the UP Deathclaws. For kicks we’d terrorize anyone that we thought was a synth. We kept egging each other on. Started with some property damage. Graduated to some beat downs. Then, inevitably, a lynching.”

Cassidy’s eyes were wide with disbelief. Was he lying again? Telling her a tall tale or was he serious?

“The Claw’s leader was convinced we’d finally found and killed a synth. Looking back...I’m not so sure.”

“You killed someone? For no reason?”

He nodded. “Just one. That one was enough for me. It was his eyes. Those eyes haunt me. Bulging …” He shuddered involuntarily. “So I turned my back on my ‘brothers’. Broke all contact. Time passed. I became a farmer, if you can believe that. Then, one day I found someone.”

“Deacon,” Cassidy whispered. She let go of his hand and put her arms around him, holding him close. She stroked his hair and face. “We all do stupid stuff,” she whispered.

“This goes beyond just stupid stuff , Charmer. Way beyond.”
She squeezed him. “Ok I agree it was a bad situation but I still don’t see you that way. The Deacon I love isn’t that guy anymore.”

He sighed and looked up at her, and she gave him a tender kiss, her expression soft.

“There’s...more,” he said softly. “This person...she saw something in me I didn’t know was there. Barbara, she was...well...she just was. ”

“What was she like?” asked Cassidy.

“She had a smile like on those old magazine covers. I guess from your time. Her eyes …” he sighed deeply and Cassidy couldn’t help but feel the sharp stab of jealousy. She squeezed him tighter.

“We were trying for kids,” he said. “Eking out a living. Then one day...it turns out my Barbara...she was a synth.”

“Oh no!” exclaimed Cassidy softly.

“Yeah. She didn’t know that. I certainly didn’t. I don’t know how the Deathclaws found out. But...there was blood.”

“So they killed her?” asked Cassidy incredulously.

“Yes,” said Deacon. “I don’t remember much clearly after that. I know I killed most of the Claws. I must’ve made a big impression. The organization I work for contacted me. Figured I’d be sympathetic because I’d lost my wife. They saw someone who fought back against the enemy. In one way shape or form.”

“Who do you work for?” she asked.

Deacon shook his head. “I’m not going to talk about that,” he said. “But after that...I just started lying. About everything. It did me in good stead in my job. I don’t even know why I do it anymore when I don’t need to. It’s just that...I can’t tell the truth. It’s too...it’s too hard. The people I work for. They deserve to be there. I don’t. I’m shit. I’m everything that’s wrong with this whole fucking Commonwealth. Charmer, I don’t deserve you being ok with this. Hell I’m not even asking for it. But...you deserve to know what I am.”

Cassidy looked down at him. “Deacon, you just said you lie all the time but you told me this horrific story and it broke my heart. I want to believe you but...I’m not sure I do.”

“Understandable,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to believe it either. But know this. If shit goes down, I’ll be right there with you.”

She pressed her lips to his head. “I still love you Deacon, even if you did horrible things.”

“You shouldn’t. This...this thing. With us. It’s not right. Do you know how old I am, Charmer?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No and I actually don’t care. Love is love.”

“I’m 38. That’s a 20 year gap. I’m old enough to be your father. I had a whole life before you were even born.”

“Wrong,” she said. “I’m 228 years old.”
“Come on sweetheart, you know what I mean. I just don’t think it’s…..”

She cut him off with a fierce kiss that he couldn’t help but return. “I don’t care about stupid stuff like numbers. I fell in love with you the day I woke up after you saved me. You’re amazing Deacon. You made mistakes and did bad things but you aren’t a bad person. I love you and I want to be with you.”

“Some days I just want to pop a stealth boy and bug out. Not really an option now I guess.”

She shook her head. “If you do then take me with you. We can bug out together.”

Deacon sat up straight and faced her, running his hands through her hair and cupping her chin in one hand, his thumb running across her lips.

“You are...I don’t even know how to describe it. Like a light. A bright light that just pierces the darkness. Someone like you is everything that’s right with the Commonwealth. With the world. I don’t have a right to bask in that light. Not after what I’ve done. I’m scared my darkness is going to taint you somehow. Destroy the goodness you have.”

“Goodness? I told you about my display of goodness in the Glowing Sea. I’m not very nice either.”

“That was completely justifiable,” said Deacon.

“So is what you did to the Claws,” she returned.

“Charmer, I can’t...I won’t promise you anything. It would be so easy to lie right now and give you a story about how everything is going to be perfect between us and we’ll live happily ever after. But I know that’s not gonna happen.”

She sighed. “This world sucks. I know. Something can kill us at any moment. But I’ll take a day with you over a lifetime alone. No contest. I want to be your girl.”

He looked at her long and hard. “Nothing I say is going to derail you it seems,” he said. “Well. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

It surprised him that no voices echoed in his mind. Had he finally purged them?

He got up and dusted himself off, then held out a hand to her.

Cassidy didn’t understand what he was saying. He was always being so mysterious and cryptic. All she knew was that he finally showed her how he felt. That was enough for her.

“Let’s go piss off the Institute and get on their radar,” she said with a little growl.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Deacon.
Cassidy and Deacon decide to follow the Freedom Trail; Cassidy sees a frightening side of Deacon.

“Well, this is boring,” said Cassidy. “Maybe there’s no rogue synths that need catching.”

They’d wandered around the CIT grounds with the radio band on for hours. They’d had to put down a few raiders and some feral dogs but that was all the excitement they’d had.

“Yeah we’re at the mercy of something going on before they send out a courser,” said Deacon. “Which could take a whole lot or a little time.”

“This is so disappointing,” she sighed. She looked down and a reddish bit of broken debris caught her eye. “That bit there on the ground reminds me of that poster you had back when you saved me. Follow the Freedom Trail.”

He grinned. “The Railroad flyer.”

“There was a red brick line that went all through the city and if you followed it you ended up somewhere I think,” she said, remembering. “Like where the Underground Railroad was. I never had a chance to go do it. I mean I did some of it but never the whole thing. I wonder if that’s what they mean by the Freedom Trail. Or maybe the Railroad isn’t even real.” She shrugged.

“Won’t know until you find them, I guess,” said Deacon.

Cassidy was sitting on the remains of a wall and he walked over to her. She reached out to him, and when he got close enough she pulled him to her then grabbed him with her legs.

“Come here, Deeks,” she said, laughing.

“You have some strength there,” he said with a grin.

Cassidy put her arms around his neck. She was as tall as he was sitting there. Her lips found his in a tender kiss, which he deepened immediately. Her hot center was pressed close against him and he twitched. “Maybe we should find something else to do,” he suggested.

“Why?” she asked, kissing him again, an action which he was powerless to stop until they both needed to breathe.

“We’re in the middle of the CIT grounds, out in the open! How you haven’t gotten your head shot off by a sniper is a miracle to me.”
She squeezed him, holding him tightly against her and ran her hands through his hair, kissing him between words. “If there were snipers they’d have killed us by now. Or...maybe...we’re dead and this is heaven. It sure feels like it to me. As long as I keep my eyes on you, anyway, and not this sucky world.”

Cassidy shifted and moved her body against him in a sensual movement which took his breath away and drove his desire for her even higher. Cassidy was aware of it and grinned. As she kissed him once more she brought her hands down to his belt and made to undo it.

Deacon quickly took her hands, stopping her. “Woah Charmer! Slow down.”

She blinked. “What’s wrong, Deacon?”

He sighed and brought her hands to his lips for a moment. “Sweetheart, we just established where we are. This isn’t exactly the time or place for...this...kind of thing.”

Cassidy didn’t let him go, she kept her legs locked around him. “I love you, I didn’t think it mattered where I show it.”

“But it does,” he said with a soft sigh. “Especially in this world. We need to stay vigilant out here, Charmer. You understand, right?”

She nodded and pulled her hands free of his, placing them around his neck again, bringing her lips to his. Deacon hesitated and tried to pull away, but when he saw the confusion in her eyes he relented and kissed her.

Cassidy wanted to see his eyes, to look into them. “I love you so much,” she said. “I’m sorry if I’m not very good at anything like this. But I’ll learn. Please be patient with me.”

He lifted his hands from the wall where he’d placed them on either side of her, and rested them on the small of her back instead. The last thing he wanted to do was make her feel that he didn’t care for her. “You’re fine, Charmer,” he said softly with a kiss. “Nothing to be sorry for. Let’s go find that Freedom Trail thing,” he said. “See if you’re right.”

His body was on fire, and he was fighting to calm himself. He wanted Cassidy more than he ever imagined he would. She had tied his insides up in knots and he couldn’t untie himself from her. She didn’t even seem to realize how much she affected him. He picked her up off the wall and set her down, stepping back.

Suddenly it was back. The voice in his head laughed, a malicious, almost evil laugh. He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his face with his hands, trying to force it away.

“Deacon? Are you ok?” Cassidy asked, concerned.

Look how much she loves you, you undeserving beast, said the voice.

He spun away, walking a few feet from Cassidy.

How long until you destroy her? Just like you did your wife? Do you remember?

“Argh!” cried Deacon, gripping his head.

She didn’t stand a chance surviving your love either. Look at all the blood on your hands. It never washes away does it? No matter how many lies you tell. Or how many surgeons you visit.
Deacon looked down at his hands. Blood pooled in his palms and dripped down onto the ground as he gave a low moan of horror.

Concerned, Cassidy walked up to him and reached out.

*Victim number...what number is she anyway? I’ve lost count!*

“Leave me the fuck alone!” he suddenly cried out.

Shocked, Cassidy stared at him, not daring to move or even breathe. *What’s wrong with him? Why is he so angry at me all of a sudden?* She didn’t understand what she’d done wrong. Tears welled up in her eyes and she backed away from him.

*And so it begins,* laughed the voice as it faded.

Clutching his head, Deacon grunted in frustration. He filled his mind with images, good images. Memories of Cassidy and the moments they’d shared. He let songs run through his mind, purging the darkness from it. He felt his fear and horror dissipate and opened his eyes. But Cassidy wasn’t where she had been. He looked around quickly, not seeing her.

*Shit she thinks I was talking to her! Goddamn it!*

“Charmer!” he called out. “Sweetheart I didn’t mean that for you! Come back. Please.”

She appeared from behind the remains of a car. Her tears had created streaks on her cheeks and his heart slid down into his stomach. “I’m sorry, Deacon,” she said apologetically, not looking at him. “I didn’t mean to make you so mad.”

He strode quickly to her side and put his arms around her, stroking her hair soothingly, but she was tense and her expression wary. “Charmer, I wasn’t...I’m not angry with you. At all. In any way,” He sighed heavily. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, I’m sorry.”

She looked up into his face, her expression less wary but there was a confused sadness in her eyes.

“It’s just that...things...that happened to me... sometimes get into my head and fuck me up.” He hoped she’d understand, even a little.

“Like nightmares? But awake?” she asked. “My daddy told me about soldiers that got stuff like that sometimes. From the things they saw in the wars.”

“Yeah like that,” said Deacon softly. “I’ll just suddenly remember things and...Charmer...believe me when I say I wasn’t directing it at you, ok? I’m sorry sweetheart.”

Cassidy held onto him. “It’s...it’s ok Deacon. Now that I know this happens to you I can deal with it. I just want to make you happy,” she said softly. “Please tell me how to do that.”

He hugged her tightly. “You do! There’s no doubt about that. Don’t ever blame yourself for my issues, ok? Now, do you want to try and find that path?”

“Ok,” she said softly.

The amount of overgrowth that hid the ground made it impossible to see if there was any of the old red brick line left. “This is where I remember starting it,” said Cassidy. “Daddy and I had a picnic here in the Commons with mom years before Shaun was born. I found the line and started walking on it and daddy told me what it was.”
“Can you remember where you walked to? What direction? I mean it’s possible there’s still part of it somewhere, right?”

She thought about it. She’d been all of 12 years old. “I was at the spot where the robot was, and then ...I saw it go across the road. I remember daddy yelling at me to stop and wait for him.”

Cassidy walked. She passed the infobot which surprisingly was still there in it’s booth, and kept going. The remaines of a metal gate lay on the ground.

“You know there’s a legend of some monster in the pond,” said Deacon.

“Ew really? A monster? Like what?”

“Don’t know. I’ve never seen it and never met anyone who has but there’s raider bodies out here a lot of the time. If there’s a monster it sure has no problem eating raiders.”

“I don’t think I want to tangle with a monster, Deacon. I like my head on my shoulders thank you.”

Deacon laughed lightly. “Got it,” he said.

“Look!” cried Cassidy, pointing at the ground. In a gap of debris and grass lay a small section of the old red brick line. “That’s it! That’s the line!”

Eagerly she began to move forward, scanning the ground for the rest of it. There were moments they had to stop and seek cover as raider patrols came by and neither of them wanted to deal with a firefight unless it was absolutely necessary.

“I don’t know where to go next,” she said. “It could travel anywhere. I never went this far into the city. And all this grass and mess. Someone needs to make the raiders clean it all up!”

“If you can get them to do it, you’ll be celebrated as a hero, Charmer.” Deacon could see Cassidy was still more subdued than she usually was. Because of his outburst. But his mention of her becoming a hero made her grin.

“I’ll get my own statue in the city square! Except that it’s Goodneighbor now. And can anyone even make statues anymore? This world sucks!”

“Get Derrick to weld one together for you!”

“I’m too ashamed to face Derrick after what I said to him,” she said.

“Still want to trade me in for some trees?” Deacon asked, trying to make light of it.

Cassidy took his hand. “No. I love you.”

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“Deacon?” she asked.

“That’s me!”

“Do you think I’m pretty? Even a little?”

He stopped walking and pulled her to him. “Hell yeah. You know how I react to you. Why would you even need to ask that?”
“Because I don’t think I am,” she said, looking down at the ground. “Guys like pretty girls. You know the ones who wear buttons and bows. Not usually ones who like cars and shoot guns. Those they see as sisters and pals. I never had guys look at me like I was pretty.”

Her blue eyes were so luminous. The complete innocence and trust in them made Deacon feel like a slug. She kept saying how much she loved him and he just couldn’t get those words out. He hadn’t said those words since the night before his wife was murdered. He swore he’d never say them again. Did he even remember what it felt like? Love?

He said things all the time that he didn’t mean a word of. Why couldn’t he do it now to make someone happy? Someone he genuinely cared for. Deeply.

*Because if I did then I’d be an even bigger piece of shit than I already am. So tell her she’s beautiful, at least that isn’t a lie for once.*

“Charmer, you’re beautiful. And that’s no lie. I mean it.”

She smiled sweetly. “Thanks Deek. That means the world to me. I think *you* are *so* handsome too.”

“I’ve had this mug for too long. Might be time to switch it up. Go under the knife again.”

“No!” she cried. “Don’t you dare! I love you like you are right now!” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Unless you’re making it up again!”


She hugged him tight around his waist. “Kinda feels nice that you finally realized we were a thing. I thought of us as one since forever ago. But girls are smarter than guys anyway. I’m going to take care of you and make you so happy Deacon, you’ll see!”

He held her. “You already do, Charmer. Every day with you is memorable. I’m happier now than I have been in years. Don’t need to change a thing.”

She looked up at him through her lashes. “I want to take care of *all* your needs.”

He swallowed, forcing his mind away from the idea of it. “We’ll talk about that part later. For now let’s see if we can find that line.”

It twisted and turned. Disappeared and reappeared. Sometimes it was replaced by a crudely painted line over some debris or grass. They were attacked by two raiders, and one of them hit Deacon pretty hard in the face. This enraged Cassidy and she pumped him full of lead.

“Woah, overkill there!” he said in surprise.

“He hurt my Deacon,” she said.

“I’m tougher than I look, seriously. Don’t waste bullets on scum. What was that thing you and MacCready always said? One shot, one kill.”

“Except when something pisses me off!”

“No, even then,” said Deacon. “You can only kill something once. They don’t get anything out of it after that and neither do you except a lower ammo count which could be very bad in the field.”

“Their ghost could be watching and it will know I was pissed off,” she said matter-of-factly.
Deacon laughed. “You’re something else, Charmer.”

Twilight was nearing when they finally found the rest of the red line. It led them to the Old North Church. “I missed the class trip here because I had the flu,” said Cassidy looking up at it. “It would make sense. If it was once related to the Underground Railroad...the new Railroad might have known that!”

Deacon shrugged. “It’s possible. Only one way to find out for sure.”

Cassidy followed him into the musty, darkened church foyer. It was a mess. Wood debris was everywhere. The entire back wall leading to the pews was gone. Something smelled dead and Cassidy wrinkled up her nose.

Something hurtled out of the darkness and slammed into Deacon, knocking him off balance. He fell against the wall with a curse.

Cassidy drew her pistol and fired as the guttural snarls of a feral ghoul identified their assailant.

“Oh not these things again!” she cried.

Deacon was back in action in a moment, firing at the ghoul which resulted in more of them awakening. They rose and ran at Cassidy. She did her best to aim for the head but the erratic movements of the things made it hard, and although she’d gotten better with moving targets, she still had trouble.

“Gross!” she shrieked as Deacon shot the legs off one and it fell on her feet, clawing the ground around her. She stomped it and ran towards him.

There were more ferals than they had bargained for. Cassidy screamed when one of them clawed at her, pulling her hair.

She began lashing out, hitting and kicking, anything to get away.

Deacon pulled it off her and fired a shot into its head, then worked on hitting the legs on the others to stop their motion, and yelled for Cassidy to hit them in the head and finish them. Then he moved further into the church proper.

The once beautiful church’s upper floor lay in ruins, the mezzanine floors having collapsed, but bits of once splendid architecture were still evident. As the ferals died, and silence once more fell down on them, Cassidy looked around.

To her right there was a symbol painted on a fallen bit of mezzanine. “Deacon, that looks like the symbol on the poster!” she cried, excited. “This is it! This has to be where the Railroad is, they’re real!”

“What if it’s a trap, Charmer?” he asked. “What if someone set all this up to capture people?”

“Ew,” she said. “Why would they do that?”

“There are all kinds of crazies out and about today. Remember what I said: you can’t trust anyone. So be very careful.”

She nodded. “I want to go in there and see.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” he said.
A doorway led into a small room, then another doorway led to a wide landing with a set of stairs, of which more of the same followed. As quietly as she could, Cassidy crept down the stairway, her pip-boy light illuminating the darkness.

The bottom of the stairs revealed they had reached the catacombs. The walls were crumbling, it was dusty and dry.

A Railroad symbol was painted on the wall above a skeleton and a toolbox. Cassidy opened the box but found nothing inside.

“Feral,” said Deacon, as it stirred and got to it’s feet.

Cassidy took aim and fired, the thing dropping like a rock. They waited to see if any more showed up, but all was quiet. They crept ahead and looked down the little alcoves. Stone sarcophagi littered the ground, bones and a mostly intact skeleton lying nearby.

“This is sad,” said Cassidy. “These must have gotten unearthed when the bombs fell.”

“Or dug up by raiders,” said Deacon.

Another feral stirred and Cassidy eliminated it before it could rise. She saw plaques in the wall commemorating historically significant people. Plaques which were scratched and bent, the writing barely legible.

The hallway twisted and turned, terminating in a wall with a large metal plate that read Boston. The Freedom Trail.

“Deacon, we did it! We followed the trail all the way. But...where do we go from here?”

She noticed there were conduits sticking up from the wall, with wires between them leading to what appeared to be a bricked up archway shape. On the ground was a larger version of the Railroad symbol painted.

Cassidy examined the archway but couldn’t tell if it could be opened or not. The bricks appeared to be tightly sealed.

Next she touched the plaque beside the archway. Part of the ring, which contained the lettering suddenly pressed down. “Oh wow! It’s like a puzzle lock.” She pressed again, pushed against the ring and it moved. A red arrow pointed upward from the center design.

“We need to find the password. I’ve like...no idea what it could be! Help me, Deacon!”

“I’d start simple first,” he said.

She tried a few words relating to Boston but the ring reset itself each time. Frustrated, she tried again. Same result.

“How can anyone find them without any idea on the password? You’re supposed to be a spy, come on, help me with this!”

“Maybe they don’t want to be found,” said Deacon.

“Too bad,” said Cassidy stubbornly, staring at the ring. She tried the word freedom. The ring reset. “If they didn’t want to be found then they shouldn’t have made flyers trying to get people to join them!”
Behind her, she heard Deacon chuckle.

“Ugh, sneaky Railroad!” she cried and slapped the ring. This part of the journey was the end. The hard part was done: finding and following the trail. Maybe Deacon was right. Keep it simple.

“Wait...maybe...” She began to spell out the word railroad.

As she hit the last letter, something moved behind the wall, and the archway suddenly moved aside. She stared at Deacon wide eyed, a huge smile on her face. “Deeks we did it!”

“No, you did it. I just stood here looking pretty,” he said with no small amount of pride.

Excited, Cassidy stepped inside.

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with this chapter. It's hard taking a beloved character like Deacon and showing their dark side. His psychosis is a form of PTSD and is based on two gentlemen I once knew. One was a Vietnam war vet and the other a vet of Desert Storm. One man was haunted by memories of his comrades dying in front of him and suffered severe survivor's guilt, and the other was haunted by 'enemy' deaths. Both men had manifestations similar to Deacon's. In the game, Deacon describes his feelings on the lynching death, and the bloody aftermath of his wife's murder. Such a thing most definitely would cause PTSD and the form it takes could be anything. Triggers can be anything: sounds, smells, sights and as in Deacon's case intimacy. In the Wasteland, there are no therapists or anti-psychotic drugs. Poor Deacon.
Cassidy finally meets the elusive Railroad and learns who Deacon really is.

Cassidy had only walked a few steps when bright lights suddenly illuminated the space.

“Stop right there!” said a firm female voice.

Cassidy blinked and waited for her eyes to adjust. She was standing on the edge of a small drop. Ahead of her on another raised section stood three people. Two women and a man. The one on the left, a black woman with a shock of white hair, pointed a heavy gun at her, and the man held a shotgun. The blonde woman in the middle held a cigarette between her fingers.

“You went through a lot of effort to arrange this meeting,” said the blonde. “But before we go any further, answer my questions.”

“M...meeting?” asked Cassidy. “We had a flyer about the Railroad. We just thought...that...well…” She realized how ridiculous it would sound.

“We?” asked the woman.

“Yes, me and my…” she turned. Deacon was nowhere in sight.

“I see only you,” said the black woman. “So you're either lyin’, or crazy!”

“I’m not lying!” cried Cassidy.

“Who the hell are you?” asked the blonde in the center of the group.

“Are you the Railroad?” countered Cassidy. She believed that Deacon was right nearby, where he said he’d always be, in the shadows where he could protect her. Although she’d be shredded by that huge gun well before he could drop even one of these rather unfriendly people, she was sure he wouldn’t have abandoned her.

“You wanted to see us,” came the response. “So that means you’re playing by our rules. So answer my question.”

“We followed the Freedom Trail looking for the Railroad. We’re not your enemy,” said Cassidy.

“If that’s true,” said the woman. “You have nothing to fear. Who told you how to contact us?”

“No one. I saw a flyer that said join the railroad and I thought it would be cool because at first I thought it meant actual trains.”

She slumped, knowing how ridiculous she must sound to them. Maybe they didn’t even know what trains were.
“I see,” came the reply. “Well, I’m Desdemona, the leader of the Railroad. This is Glory and that’s Drummer Boy. And you are?”

Desdemona turned suddenly as someone walked behind her from the shadows. “Deacon!” she exclaimed. “Where’ve you been?”

“You’re having a party. What gives with my invitation?”

Cassidy stared wild eyed, as he grinned and leaned against the wall facing Desdemona.

“I need intel,” said Desdemona. “Who is this?”

“Wow!” exclaimed Deacon. “News flash boss. This girl Cassidy, she’s kind of a big deal out there!”

“What? No…” said Cassidy, clearly confused.

“So you’re vouching for her?” Desdemona asked Deacon.

“Yes,” said Deacon. “Trust me. She’s someone we want on our side.”

Anxiety gnawed at the pit of her stomach and Cassidy felt nauseous. She felt suddenly trapped in that cave-like room. The lights were overheating her. Why was Deacon up there and not with her?

“That changes things,” said Desdemona. “So Cassidy, why did you want to meet with us, anyway?”

Cassidy shook her head. “I didn’t! I already said how I got here.” She looked at Deacon but didn’t want to admit she knew him. What if it put him in danger? What did he have to do with the Railroad? Had he known them all this time? And if so why had he pretended he didn’t?

Don’t trust anyone. Especially me.

His words suddenly weighed heavy on her mind. She didn’t like the feeling.

“There’s a procedure for people who want to join the Railroad,” said Desdemona. “And showing up unannounced isn’t it.”

“Umm…ok…” said Cassidy miserably.

“One of our agents should have contacted you. If you help us out a few times, maybe then you’d get an invitation to join. And then, after a year, if you’re lucky you’d get made a full agent.”

“A…agent? Like secret agent?” asked Cassidy softly.

Was this who Deacon worked for?

Desdemona laughed lightly. “Something like that. If we’re going to be dealing with you, we need to know if we’re on the same page. You know what a synth is, right?”

Cassidy nodded. “People the Institute made. And you save them so they aren’t being treated like slaves anymore.”

Desdemona’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “Yes! That’s exactly it. We give them a chance at a real life. I have an important question. The only question that matters. Would you risk your life for your fellow man? Even if that man were a synth?”
Cassidy nodded. “My daddy pledged his life to protect his countrymen. He taught me we need to help each other. It’s...well...synths or not everyone should be free.”

Desdemona and the other two nodded. “Well said.”

Cassidy looked at Deacon, who was completely unreadable behind his glasses.

“Unfortunately,” said Desdemona. “Right now we don’t have time to train a new agent. There are, however, other valuable ways you can contribute.”

Cassidy didn’t want to stand there anymore, scrutinized beneath those hot, bright lights. She didn’t understand why Deacon wasn’t saying anything. She was scared, confused and felt overwhelmed. She began trembling, and stared down at her boots, hugging herself.

She’d been so happy that their relationship seemed to have moved forward. Then he had the strange outburst at CIT which unnerved her, and now this. It was all too much and Cassidy felt the tears spring up in her eyes and a sob escape her throat.

“Aw, shit,” said Deacon and leapt off the platform. He crossed over to her and gathered her into his arms. “It’s ok, Charmer,” he said softly, stroking her hair. “These are my friends. My family really. A dysfunctional one but family nonetheless. They won’t hurt you. Promise.”

“Deacon,” she sniffled, holding tightly to him, not wanting to look at the people on the other platform. “Wh...what’s going on? Are you a spy in the Railroad? How come you just didn’t tell me and made me do all this stuff?”

Desdemona watched their exchange with interest. Glory put down the heavy gun and shrugged and Drummer Boy holstered his shotgun as well.

“I’ve uhh...Charmer...there’s something you need to know. When we met the first time, well the first time as you know it? It wasn’t the first time for me.”

Desdemona put a hand over her face. “Deacon! I don’t think you need to tell her this part. Really. Just let it go.”

Cassidy looked from him to Desdemona then back. “I don’t understand. What part? You met me before? How? When?”

“I got intel,” he said. “That there were life signs in Vault 111. So just for the fun of it I camped out near there wondering if it was misinformation or if someone could be alive down there. I saw you when you came up to the surface. I pretty much followed you everywhere you went. I saw you kill that Deathclaw. So yeah...that’s how I was able to save you from those raiders.”

“Fucking hell here we go,” said Glory.

Cassidy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Y...you’ve been with me all the time since I woke up? Really?”

“Yeah Charmer, I have.” Deacon stroked her cheek gently.

To everyone’s surprise, Cassidy’s eyes lit up and she hugged him tightly. “I was right, you do love me! Oh Deacon, you’re so amazing and I know I said it before but now I’m even more sure of it!”

Desdemona and the others exchanged glances.
“I told Des about you,” said Deacon. “I told her you wanted to meet, to join us. I think you’d be a brilliant agent. So…now you know who I work for. I needed to prove to these guys that you’re smart enough to find us and that means you’re smart enough to learn the ways of the agents. But Des wants me to make you a tourist. That’s what we call someone who only helps out now and then. What a waste. I’m just going to come out and say this. The Railroad needs you.”

Cassidy shrugged and looked at Desdemona. “She doesn’t seem to want me.”

“Oh, she’s just thinking of the time and manpower it would take to train you,” said Deacon. “And if you were some hick who didn’t know your ass from a rocket launcher I’d have to agree. But you, you’re all heart and fire and talent. So I have a mission. It’s dangerous but it’s perfect for the two of us. We carry it out and turn a few heads, then Des invites you into the fold. And if ever you get into a bind, your buddies at the Railroad got your back.”

Cassidy looked up into his face, and lifted his glasses off. He didn’t stop her, but turned them away from the light.

“What...what about us, Deacon?” she asked softly. “Did you just hang out with me because you want me to join your group? Did everything that happened between us...did everything that happened between us...was it all just your plan? All those stories you told me...was any of it true?”

And there he stood at the crossroads. He could tell her it was all just a ploy, and move on. Go back to his missions, to his work. Put her behind him, a means to an end. Increase the Railroad’s depleted ranks with a brilliant new addition and call it a day. But the thought turned to mist the moment he looked into her eyes.

Deacon took Cassidy’s face in his hands. “No, sweetheart. I didn’t plan on anything except seeing if you could find us. What I told you, about me...that’s all true.”

Her eyes brightened and she pulled his head down, kissing him. He was aware of his friends’ eyes on him, but at that moment he didn’t care.

“Mm-mm-mm,” said Glory. “Don’t that just beat all!”

“Oh my,” said Desdemona. She wasn’t sure what to think. She’d known Deacon for a long time and he’d never had someone in his life. But this someone, who looked awfully young, was the last thing she’d expected to see.

“Deacon,” she said. “We’ll talk later. Go out the way you came. Make sure you weren’t followed.”

“Done deal boss,” he said, replacing his glasses. Taking Cassidy’s hand he led her back out to the catacombs. “That went amazingly well,” he said. “I’m sorry I upset you. I wanted you to stand on your own. Show everyone the little firecracker that you are.”

“All I did was start crying,” she said unhappily. “I didn’t understand why you just stood there and didn’t talk to me. I thought you’d lied to me about everything, Deacon, and that you didn’t love me at all. I was so scared.”

“Everything’s ok,” he said soothingly. “So what did you think of Des? You want to join us, right?”

Cassidy looked down. She actually didn’t want to go back there again. “I thought they’d be nicer. Because they help people.”

Deacon sighed. “It wasn’t the best way for you to meet. I don’t agree with the way Des handled that but she doesn’t know you like I do, and believe me when I say we, as in the Railroad, have
every reason to be totally paranoid right now.”

“I don’t...Deacon I don’t know what to say about it right now. It’s been really weird today already. I’m tired.”

He squeezed her hand. “Let’s go to the Hotel Rexford in Goodneighbor. We can eat and rest and try for that courser again in the morning. Sound ok?”

She nodded and held tightly to his hand, not wanting to let go.
Vault Tec Calling

Chapter Summary

Cassidy meets a face from the past.

Cassidy didn’t think the Hotel Rexford was all that great. The unfriendly gangster in the back room with his terrible henchman, the chem addicted salesman, and the lady at the front desk who was just so prickly Cassidy didn’t want to talk to her. The only person who was halfway kind was an old man who talked about some brew machine.

They went to their room and Cassidy looked for the shower.

“There’s nothing that fancy here except in the Statehouse where Hancock is,” said Deacon. “You want to go meet him?”

“No,” said Cassidy. “He’s really scary.”

“You’ve been around ghouls now and don’t seem to mind them. He’s a good guy, honestly. Well, if you don’t, you won’t be able to sweet talk him into letting us use the shower.”

Cassidy wrinkled up her nose. “Well then I’ll just reek until I get home. Can we go see Daisy?”

“Why don’t we ask her to join us for dinner but then I want you to get some rest. Both of us need to be in peak condition to face off with a courser if we find one.”

Cassidy nodded amicably. “Whatever you want to do is fine with me, Deacon.”

“You get to have an opinion too, sweetheart,” he said kindly.

Cassidy half shrugged. After the episode in the CIT ruins, she didn’t want to chance upsetting him again. It was easier just to go along with what he suggested.

The room did have a washbasin and they both used it, freshening up a bit. Leaving the room, Cassidy was watching the strange designs on the floor and didn’t see the man who stepped out of his room a few doors down.

She looked up at the last minute. Her eyes met the dessicated face of a ghoul, glittering black eyes in a noseless, lipless face.

For a moment something struck her as familiar but she figured that wasn’t possible. She was about to apologize and move on when he spoke.

“What? No, it can’t...it...it’s...it’s you! From Sanctuary Hills, right?”

She stared at him, and it slowly began to dawn on her. The fedora, the trenchcoat, and something in the voice brought her back 200 years.
“Mr. Davidson? Is that you?”

“You remembered! I can’t believe it!”

She was amazed. “I thought you died! That day when we went to the vault and they wouldn’t let you in!”

“20 years of loyal service and now look at me! I wasn’t even on their list! But you, look at you! 200 years and you’re still perfect! But how? How’s that possible?”

“The vault had these pods that froze us. I only got out recently,” said Cassidy.

“What?” he cried. “Vault Tec never told me that! Unbelievable! Well I had to get to the future the hard way. Living through the filth! The decay! And the bloodshed! Look at me! I’m a ghoul. A freak!”

He hung his head. “They just...left me there.”

“I’m so sorry Mr. Davidson,” she said, putting her hand on his arm. “No one knew this would happen. Most people didn’t believe it ever would.”

He looked down at her hand. “You know, you’re the only other person I met from...from before. Who knew me at all. The first person who’s touched me in...in...over 200 years!”

She nodded. “My bot, Codsworth, he’s still alive. And now you.”

“I...I...uh...oh god,” he said sorrowfully. “I’ve been so alone here! No Commonwealth settlement wants a ghoul with 200 years of Vault Tec sales experience! And Diamond City bigots don’t allow ghouls inside. So I ended up here.”

“You could go back to Sanctuary!” suggested Cassidy. “My friends and I started a settlement there.”

He looked surprised. “You did? Is your family there too? Your brother was such a good little kid.”

Cassidy shook her head and told him what had happened.

“I’ve heard about this Institute,” he said. “People are afraid of them. It’s not a good thing at all. I hope you can get your brother back. I’ll...I’ll go to Sanctuary though.”

Cassidy smiled. “Tell them Cassidy sent you. You’ll be most welcome there. Do you have a weapon and ammo?”

He opened up his coat and showed his holster and ammo belt. “I...I feel better already. I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

“You won’t ever be again,” she said.

He looked at Deacon. “This your man?”

Cassidy nodded. “He sure is. His name is Deacon.”

Mr. Davidson carefully reached out his hand and Deacon shook it. “It’s nice to meet you,” the ghoul said.

“Likewise,” said Deacon.
“Take good care of her,” said the salesman. “I’ll see you in Sanctuary.”

He was humming when he stepped back into his room to collect his belongings.

“So he was the guy who sold you your vault seat?” asked Deacon.

Cassidy nodded. “Mr. Davidson. He came to see us quite a few times. He really loved Shaun. He didn’t have a family and considering what happened that’s actually a good thing. I hope he finds someone now.”

“Can’t believe this actually just happened,” said Deacon.

“Me either,” agreed Cassidy.

Daisy was delighted to see Cassidy, and they had a good talk, some food, and listened to Magnolia crooning on her little makeshift stage. But the night grew older and despite her enjoyment, Cassidy began to nod off.

Deacon put his arm around her and kissed the side of her head. “I think we need to be heading back to the Rexford,” he said to Daisy. “We’ve got another long day of Institute tormenting ahead of us tomorrow.”

“You two are brave to attempt this,” said the ghoul. “If you survive, and I hope you do, make sure to come see me again soon, alright? And Cassidy, go pay Hancock a visit. He still feels terrible about frightening you and talks about it often.”

“He does?” asked Cassidy, surprised.

“Yes. He’s really a good guy. Looks out for us all. He was protecting you, Cassidy. That’s what he does. Give him a chance.”

Cassidy looked uncomfortable but nodded.

She and Deacon walked back to the Rexford in silence. Cassidy knew she really should go and meet the mayor. She didn’t have a fear of ghouls anymore after all. But there was just something scary about that man.

Their bed was lumpy and not the most comfortable thing to sleep on. Both of them wriggled and tossed and turned.

“Can I just sleep on top of you?” she asked. “You’ve got to be softer than this bed from hell!”

Desire sparked inside Deacon at the mere mention of it. He shoved it down. Way down.

“Charmer, neither of us would get any sleep then.”

Cassidy snuggled close to Deacon and he put his arm around her, letting her put her head on his chest. She stayed that way for a few seconds then lifted her head and kissed him. He returned the kiss but gently settled her again. She asked him to tell her a story from the Railroad. Before he could get halfway done, she had fallen asleep.

“Sweet dreams,” he said chuckling.
The Courser

Chapter Summary

Cassidy and Deacon finally get a signal from a courser and follow the trail.

They’d sat in the shade of an abandoned raider encampment for 3 hours. A few travelling merchants happened past and one of them had some brahmin jerky that both Deacon and Cassidy craved. There was also some cartons of purified water since they had finished everything they’d had with them.

Not a peep from the radio.

No coursers were being dispatched.

“What if Virgil was wrong?” asked Cassidy. “Or the Institute changed the insertion point.”

“I don’t imagine he was wrong, but yeah the Institute could have screwed around with the points, sure. We can walk around and see.”

She wiped some sweat from her brow. “For some reason it’s extra hot today. Temperature is messed up now.”

“So you don’t want to snuggle?” Deacon grinned at her.

Cassidy threw herself into his arms. “It can be hellfire and I’d still want to do that!”

He nuzzled her gently, gathering her onto his lap, then kissing her. Cassidy giggled and deepened the kiss.

“We need to find something more fun to do to pass the time than sit here eating brahmin jerky,” she said, stroking his face, and looking at her own reflection in his glasses. But it was sunny and she knew the light bothered him.

“Deacon,” she said softly, leaning close again, her lips practically touching his. “You know I love you, right?”

“I’m starting to figure that out,” he said with a soft kiss.

“Do...do you love me too?” she asked.

He drew back and looked at her. Those blue eyes of hers bright and full of adoration.

*I think I do*, he thought. *But I can’t say it and mean it the way she wants me to. The way she needs me to.*

She kissed his cheek. “Please this time don’t lie to me, ok?”
“Charmer,” he said carefully. “I care so much about you. I love being with you. You make me happy. But...telling someone you love them is a big deal. You can’t just say it to say it, or because someone wants you to. And you know, too many people do that already.”

She nodded, but her eyes had lost a bit of their brightness. “So you’re saying you don’t.” Her voice was soft.

“Love is a complicated feeling,” said Deacon gently. “Think about it. You love Dogmeat right? And even MacCready I’m sure. Then you say you love me too. All of it’s love but it’s all different. I guess what I’m saying is that yeah there’s a pretty strong feeling here that I have for you but I’m just not ready to say it.”

He held her close. “I’m sorry if that hurts you.”

“It does, a bit,” she responded softly. “But thanks for being honest with me at least. I’ll just have to try harder to please you.”

He moved her back and took his glasses off. “Cassidy,” he said. “Look in my eyes so you can see I’m not bullshitting you here, ok? It’s got nothing to do with you. You’re...like perfect. In every way. There’s nothing you can do to be any better, seriously. Remember how I told you what I’ve been through? It’s a heavy burden to carry and it takes me longer to get past things. I don’t want you thinking you’re doing something wrong when I’m the one that’s fucked up. I’ve been that way most of my life. Do you get it?”

Cassidy gently ran her fingertips along his eyebrows and cheekbones, gazing into his light blue eyes. “I don’t care how fucked up you are. I love you with all my heart, Deacon.”

“I don’t deserve such an honor,” he whispered.

She kissed him tenderly. “I believe you deserve way more than me.”

I just want you to love me, she thought wistfully.

Just then a strange sound came over the pip-boy. It was a blip interspersed by waxing and waning static. Cassidy raised her arm.

“Do you think this is it? The signal?”

“Get your pack, let’s see if we can follow it.”

Cassidy climbed off Deacon and grabbed her things. “Ok which direction shall we go first?”

“Doesn’t matter, the signal will tell us if we’re right or wrong. I’m guessing it will blip faster if we’re close.”

They walked one way, but the signal faded, then they backtracked and went the opposite way.

This went on several times until Deacon figured maybe there was other interference causing an issue.

“Let’s just go deeper into the city,” he suggested. “A synth in hiding usually chooses a big building with a lot of places to hide. So a courser would logically go to those first.”
The heat of the day made every movement uncomfortable. Sweat beaded up on the both of them and they didn’t have a lot of water left to replenish what they lost.

Then the wind picked up and the sky began to darken to a sickly green.

“Oh no, not a rad storm!” cried Cassidy.

“Looks like it,” said Deacon. “Let’s just get as close as we can to the signal, hit up a building and wait out the storm.”

The signal suddenly began to pick up strength. Whatever interference they had seemed to have cleared. Cassidy looked up at a large green building. “Looks like this one might be the place anyway!”

“Greentech Genetics,” said Deacon reading the remains of a sign. “Wonder what dastardly deeds they performed back in the day.”

They looked up at the imposing black stairs leading up to a double door.

“I have no idea,” she answered. “I’ve really never heard of them.”

They carefully mounted the stairs making sure raiders hadn’t placed any traps. There was no graffiti marking the place but you never could be sure. Splinter groups of the Gunners were often devious and deadly, killing off their own as well.

“You know Charmer, I’ve never had as much excitement as I have with you. Before we met, I’d go whole days without massacring a bunch of things. Honest.”

Cassidy giggled and opened the door, standing to the side to see if anything opened fire.

When nothing happened and they stepped inside, the first thing that met their eyes was the
reception area and a freshly dead raider draped over a desk.

“Well something went on here,” said Deacon.

“I wonder if the courser did it! The signal is really strong.”

Deacon nodded. “Better be ready for a shitstorm then!”

Cassidy saw the dead man’s weapon on the ground, a Gunner sign painted crudely on the side. He’d dropped a bag and she dumped it’s contents on the floor, gathering up the caps, a stimpak and a few bits of ammo.

“Ahh the time honored tradition of looting,” said Deacon with a grin.

“Well that you taught me!”

“If not you than someone else will get it. Need all the advantage you can get out here.”

The ruined state of the place gave rise to only one path forward up two flights of stairs. At the top another dead Gunner lay.

A speaker crackled to life. “The Courser is on the top floor. Send reinforcements to the lobby in case there are more coming in,” said the male voice.

Cassidy looked at Deacon. “Someone else is after the courser too? How would they even know about it?”

Deacon shook his head. “I’ve got no idea. Let’s make sure we get to him first.”

“At least we know where to head,” she said.

The area was formed of mostly walkways that circled around the central portion of the lobby. As Cassidy neared a doorway, Deacon suddenly grabbed her and pulled her down as a volley of machine gun fire erupted, narrowly missing her.

“Charmer!” he cried. “You can’t fuck around like that! If I hadn’t heard that thing lock on you I’d be holding your corpse right now! Shit!”

She stared at him in shock. He’d never raised his voice to her before. He sighed and kissed her head. “Sweetheart, you can’t just walk around like you’re at home. Every doorway can have death pointed at you. You did it right when we first got here. Open a door and stand back. With these open things here you hide and have a quick look or use a reflective surface.”

Still wide eyed, she nodded. “I’m sorry Deeks,” she said meekly.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. Just...yeah.”

*I could have lost you,* he thought. He hated the feeling. The stress of knowing someone you cared for could be gone in a split second. He’d had that happen already and swore back then he’d never allow himself to suffer that way again. Yet here he was...walking that razor’s edge once more.

*I shouldn’t be doing this with her. Letting her into my heart. It can’t end well. It never does.*

Harshly, he told his thoughts to take a hike off a pier. Because looking down into her eyes, nothing else mattered.
“It’s all good. I just forget you haven’t been doing this that long yet.” He gave her nose a little tap and pulled her to her feet.

As they proceeded, Deacon said “do you hear that buzz? That means a turret is nearby and scanning. A higher pitched buzz means it’s locked onto something, usually one of us. Priority is to find the thing and blow it up.”

She nodded. They found several rooms with dead Gunners, but then heard footsteps. Cassidy crouched behind some debris and waited. A Gunner crept into sight, and fell dead before he had a chance to realize what happened. She’d just barely reloaded when another one followed him. She fired but missed and the raider cursed and randomly fired in her direction. One of his bullets ricocheted off a bit of metal and hit Deacon, slicing across his arm.

“Oh Deacon,” she whispered, and reached into her pocket for the stim she’d pulled off the dead raider earlier.

“Shit!” he cried out.

Cassidy aimed and fired at the raider, hitting him as he lowered his weapon to reload.

She turned to Deacon and saw a red stain spreading across his jacket. The bullet had torn up his leather and managed to open up a nasty excoriation.

“Oh Deacon,” she whispered, and reached into her pocket for the stim she’d pulled off the dead raider earlier.

“No, don’t waste that on me,” he said, giving his arm a shake.

“It’s not wasting when you’re injured. That’s a nasty wound. Does it hurt really bad?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not like the one I got at Quincy. I’d rather not remember that one.” He yelped as she stabbed him with the stimpak anyway.

“Oh Deeks,” she laughed. “You’re such a sensitive thing!”

“Don’t let that one get out,” he said and got to his feet.

The speakers crackled again. “Courser is now on the third floor. Reports of an intruder coming in from the west wing.”

“Guess they know about us now!” said Cassidy.

They crept cautiously around. A Gunner attacked them from a bathroom. Cassidy grunted in revulsion when his head exploded. Deacon kicked open a door stall.

“Hey Charmer, check it out,” he said grinning.

In the stall was a skeleton holding a phone in one hand and a plunger in another, a box of Mentats at her side.

Cassidy laughed. “Wow I’d like to know what kind of a trip she was having on those chems!

“I’ve seen the weirdest shit in the wastes,” chuckled Deacon. “I think people in your time were obsessed with plungers for the amount of them I’ve seen.”

“Well everyone had one for the toilets but I hardly think we were obsessed. It must be a post war obsession.”

Deacon took the mentats. “DC chemist pays good for these. Always pick them up. I hear you can
also bribe Hancock pretty good with them.”

“Oh geez, he’s a chem user too? As if he isn’t scary enough on his own.”

“Yeah it’s well known he’s pretty addicted.”

Cassidy was picking up some caps when she heard Deacon say “Well howdy there,” and opened fire.

By the time she turned around he’d dropped two more Gunners.

“Wow Deeks that’s pretty awesome. You’re good at this.”

“It’s not a claim to fame I’m proud of,” he said.

The voice on the speakers came up again. “Barricade all halls and staircases if you haven’t already!” It commanded.

A shot rang out and Deacon fired into a darkened room. A bullet grazed his leg.

“Ow ow ow!” he cried.

Cassidy waited for another shot and located the raider, dropping him.

Deacon was rubbing his leg where the fabric had been torn. The wound was a graze, it didn’t bleed overly much.

“Shit that hurts!” he exclaimed.

“You gave me trouble but you’re the one getting shot all the time! I want to laugh at you but I feel bad seeing you hurt.”

“After this I’ll need a lot of tlc,” he said deviously.

“That won’t be a problem,” answered Cassidy. She pulled a cloth strip from her pack. “I carry these from when I had Dogmeat with me. Let me bind up that leg so nothing gross gets into it.”

“That fabric is probably pretty gross,” he said letting her.

“I washed it so no. Why would I put dirty stuff on wounds? I’m not that dumb Deacon.”

He laughed. “I never said that!” As she stood up he tilted her chin up and kissed her. “You’re not dumb Charmer. You’re incredible.”

Her heart fluttered and she sighed deeply. “I love when you kiss me,” she whispered.

“I see that,” he grinned. “Come on we need to find that bastard.”

The current hallways opened up onto another atrium. Deacon held her back.

“Ok these type areas? They have bubble turrets. They need to get taken out fast.”

“What’s a bubble turret?” she asked.

“Like a machine gun but it uses lasers. So...you let it see you then hide real quick. Dicey business but that’s how you do it.”
Cassidy nodded and baited any possible turrets. There were several buzzes and as she flattened herself behind the wall, a volley of laser fire targeted where she’d been.

“There’s one at 12 o’clock, 3 and 6. I’ll do the first one, you do 6 then whoever can do 3,” said Deacon.

She nodded and took out the turret. It didn’t want to go down and she had to fire a few times.

They heard running footsteps behind them somewhere.

“Get across this section to the other side,” instructed Deacon. “We’ll turn and hit them as they follow. GO!”

She ran.

Deacon was close behind her and turned before he got to the opposite side, dropping a Gunner from two locations.

“That looked like a holovid scene!” cried Cassidy with glee.

Deacon smiled, standing just a bit straighter. “No one’s ever complimented me this much on my murder skill,” he said. “But thanks Charmer. You’re good with that rifle of yours. With more time in the field you’ll have all the raiders running scared. You’ll be a legend.”

She shook her head. “Yeah, ok, right. I’m so not legendary in any way.”

“Disagree,” said Deacon and they wandered deeper, up a section of collapsed floor.

“This is some pretty high calibre disgusting shit,” said Deacon in distaste, as they found 3 completely blown apart bodies, entrails strewn everywhere.

Cassidy smelled the blood and organs and her stomach heaved. Deacon pulled her through the area quickly.

“You ok, Charmer?” he asked.

She closed her eyes and drew a cleansing breath. “I’ll be ok. That was just really bad. The smell…”

“Yes, guts stink,” he said. “One of those things no one ever tells you.”

The voice on the speaker talked about lost sectors and locating the intruders. The pip-boy signal was still holding steady. But no more reports came in on where the courser currently was.

A row of Gunners marched around a corner and Cassidy dropped one after another in quick succession. Three shots, three kills.

“And we live to kill another day,” said Deacon. “And night. And day. Etcetera, etcetera.”

Cassidy laughed lightly. “You say the weirdest things!”

“Have to lighten shit up a bit. If you don’t the gravity of the situation will fuck you up,” he said.

They heard the sounds of gunfire.

“Fall back to original positions!” cried the voice on the speaker. “Courser’s nearing the elevator!”
As Cassidy and Deacon searched for the elevator, the voice sounded again. “The courser’s after the girl! Anyone alive needs to get up to the top floor immediately! That’s an order!”

They ran into several of the raiders on the move and there was no time to strategize. It was point and shoot and hope for the best. It was chaotic and Cassidy struggled. Deacon did his best by staying near her and backing her up, but she had to learn to focus and ignore all the chaos around her.

The silence once the raiders were dead was almost startling.

“We win, again!” said Deacon.

“That was scary,” said Cassidy.

“And yet you did great!”

“I hope there’s no more,” she sighed. “All this killing all the time. It’s so...draining. Like...I know we have to because if we don’t they’ll kill us. Just wish it didn’t have to be so black and white.”

“I agree,” said Deacon.

A trail of dead raiders led to another atrium.

“Elevator,” said Cassidy.

Deacon dragged the dead Gunner out that lay half in and half out. He tested the integrity of the floor. “Ok come on,” he said.

They ascended. More hallways, rooms and soon they heard the sounds of scuffling. “I don’t know the password!” someone cried. “I’m telling the truth!”

Other voices begged for mercy as shots rang out.

“This sounds like a party we want to crash,” said Deacon.

Dead raiders, skeletons and debris made up a majority of the decor as they moved further. Stairs and more stairs and Cassidy wondered if they’d ever reach the top. The voices had sounded so close by.

“You’ve been following me,” came an even, rather unremarkable voice.

Cassidy froze. She didn’t see anyone nearby.

“Are you here for the synth?” it asked.

“Synth? What synth?” Cassidy asked.

A figure materialized in front of her. It was a man, dressed in an intricate full length black leather coat.

“Then you must be here for me,” he said. “What do you want?”

“Wait,” said Cassidy. “Who is this synth anyway?”

“A fugitive,” he answered. “Runaway Institute property. I’m shutting her down and bringing her back. You, on the other hand, will die like the rest of them.”
Cassidy narrowed her eyes in anger. “Property?! Synths are alive! Not slaves!"

The courser suddenly vanished.

“What the hell?!” she cried as Deacon shoved her behind a corner.

“He’s running stealth tech! Shit!”

Cassidy heard the sudden fear in his voice. Deacon was never scared. He seemed to take everything in stride.

_How the hell do I protect her against that?_ He thought.

Laser fire came out of nowhere, grazing Cassidy’s side and cutting a path through her coat. Deacon fired in the direction the shots came from. There was no easy way to fight an invisible enemy and the source of the courser’s laser fire was the only way.

Not knowing how to deal with the situation, Cassidy shot randomly in the same direction and saw blood drip onto the floor. The courser had been hit but he still couldn’t be seen.

She watched Deacon freeze then turn and fire again, and a grunt told her that he’d hit his mark. How did he know where to fire?

Cassidy suddenly felt something hit her from behind and she lurched forward and sprawled onto the floor. A sharp pain in her arm made her shriek and she turned over as fast as she could and fired. The courser was injured and his technology must have been compromised because for a split second she saw him, a shimmery apparition who ran to the other side of the room.

Cassidy fired until her clip was empty. Her heart was hammering in her chest, the pain in her arm forgotten.

She saw Deacon hit the ground to avoid more laser fire.

The courser was vicious but he struggled to deal with both of them as he’d been injured already.

Cassidy dragged herself around the corner to reload, hoping that Deacon would be alright.

She heard the laser fire, and a cry of pain from Deacon.

Anxiety filled her as she aimed her gun, saw the glimmer of the courser and fired. He shimmered as he flew through the air and landed against the wall, slid down, and died.

Deacon lay on the ground on one elbow, the other across his middle. Forgetting about the courser, Cassidy fell to her knees beside him.

“What happened? Are you ok?”

He wheezed and coughed but nodded. “Hit me...in the gut,” he said. “With his boot.”

Cassidy didn’t wait. She pulled out a stim and stabbed him for the second time that day.

“No complaining,” she said. “If there’s a chance you have internal damage I’ll stim you all day long.” She let him lie back with his head on her thighs. “Just rest here until the stims take care of it.” She stroked his hair gently and he closed his eyes with a soft sigh.

“I don’t deserve you, Charmer,” he said.
“Shh,” she soothed. “You can pay me back by digging out the chip because no way am I putting my hands in a skull.”

Deacon gave her a thumbs up.

He lay there for several minutes until he felt the pain dissipate. She helped him to his feet and although he was a bit wobbly, he looked over the courser and got out his knife.

“You can look away,” he said, and she did.

She heard him scuffling around and when he told her to look, he’d cleaned off the chip and removed the black coat from the dead courser.

“This coat is kickass. I bet it has some serious Institute tech in it. Take it.”

“Ew no!” she exclaimed. “What if it has some spy program in it or something and the Institute can track it?”

“You got a point,” he said and tossed it away. “Shame though. It’s not a bad looking thing.”

He examined the chip. It was small, about 2 inches, a diode with a clear cap. “This, combined with what Virgil told you...you need to give this to Desdemona. It could be big!”

“What? Deacon this isn’t a Railroad thing, it’s a save Cassidy’s brother thing! I’m taking it back to Virgil! He said he’d help me get in there and the first step was the chip.”

Cassidy reached out and plucked the thing from his fingers, frowning at him slightly.

“What’s that look for, Charmer?” he asked.

She shook her head. “What look? Let’s get out of here already.”

“The Institute is the Railroad’s public enemy number 1,” said Deacon. “This could be a monumental find for us.”

“Us? For you, you mean,” she said. “I’m not part of the Railroad. I didn’t exactly feel very welcome when we got there. And you didn’t help that feeling all too much.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “That was just Des being cautious. We’ve been through some bad times lately and we can’t afford to lose anyone else. We need you, Charmer. The synths need you.”

As he said the words, they heard a pounding from nearby. Turning around they saw a girl in a room, hitting the glass to get their attention. She jumped up and down and waved.

“That must be the girl that raider mentioned,” said Cassidy. She went to the glass and shouted.

“You can come out now, its safe!”

The girl shook her head and pointed to the door. “I can’t get out!” Her voice was faint, the room must have been slightly soundproofed.

Cassidy looked around and saw a terminal. She walked over to it and had a look.

“Yuck this one is complicated,” she said.
“I can do easy ones but never had the patience to get deeper into it,” said Deacon. “Wait til you meet Tinker Tom. He’s into all this kind of thing. You’ll get a kick out of him. That guy is nuts but he’s good. Kinda like Sturges.”

“Derrick isn’t nuts,” she said.

“I know, but what he does. The...tinkering.”

She nodded and focused on the terminal. Since they’d found the Railroad, Cassidy had doubts about Deacon. Yes he’d tried to reassure her, but his self confessed history of lying gave her pause. She kept mulling over the same questions. Namely was he just acting like he cared about her to get her in there? Was this just a means to an end and once she joined the Railroad formally, he’d disappear?

She looked at him as he leaned up against the wall then went back to her task.

It took several minutes but finally the code was cracked and the door slid open.

A young woman, no older than herself rushed forward.

“Thank you! I...I don’t know what else to say!”

She was filthy, duct tape holding her ruined suit together. She had bruises on her arms and scrapes on her face. Tracks of tears had left streaks on her cheeks.

“The raiders they threw me in here. I don’t know why. Then that courser came. If you hadn’t come along, I’d have been dragged back to the Institute and had my memory wiped!”

“That’s horrific!” exclaimed Cassidy. “Everything’s ok now. They’re all dead see?”

The girl nodded. “I’m...Jenny. Well my Institute designation is K1-98...but I prefer Jenny. So yes, I’m a synth if you hadn’t already guessed. I knew they’d send a courser, I just didn’t think he’d find me so fast. I think I would’ve lost him too until these raiders got me. Thanks so much for your help. I’m going to look for supplies before heading out.”

She turned away. “And before you ask, no I don’t need any more help. The Commonwealth is unforgiving. I need to be able to make it on my own. Maybe we’ll meet again under better circumstances. I...I hope so anyway.”

“Jenny,” said Deacon softly. “There are people out there who specifically help synths.”

She nodded. “You mean the Railroad. I’ve heard of them. But...I also know the Institute almost wiped them out. No...I’m just better off on my own.”

Deacon handed her a little piece of paper. “If you change your mind, or need a safe place to lay low, go here. Tell them Deacon sent you, ok?”

She took it. “Thanks. But I’ll be fine.”

Jenny walked quickly to the door.

“Jenny! Wait!” called Cassidy. She picked up a gun and ammo dropped by the Gunners and pulled a jacket off one of them. “Here. At least take a weapon and wear this until you find something else. If you don’t want to go to the Railroad, find a Minuteman settlement. They’ll always help you.” Despite Jenny’s protests, Cassidy showed her how to load the gun, aim and fire. Jenny sighed.
“I guess...I guess I do need help but...thank you...I need to go.” She turned and ran.

“She’s not going to last long alone,” said Cassidy sadly. “I hope she changes her mind. I should have told her about Sanctuary too. But...ok ...let’s go.”

Deacon followed her to the elevator, picking up a few caps that Cassidy had missed.

“I hope it’s still light enough to get home,” she mused.

The early morning light had just started to warm up the day. They’d spent the entire night chasing the courser it seemed. No wonder Cassidy felt so bone weary.

“Not sure I’m in the mood for a 7 hour trek back to Sanctuary,” she sighed.

“I’m pretty beat too,” agreed Deacon. “Let’s just take our time. Catch a few zz’s in the sun on the way.”

“And get eaten by ferals, scorpions, flies…”

“It’s not all that bad out there and ferals don’t lie around in the open. Rad scorpions like irradiated areas and flies tend to prefer the area around water. We’re golden,” said Deacon.

Cassidy looked at him. “Better be right. If I wake up dead I’m going to be really mad at you.”

Deacon laughed and took her hand.
Insecurities

Chapter Summary

Cassidy visits the Railroad HQ and isn’t enthusiastic about them; she has a heart to heart talk with Sturges; she begins to question her relationship with Deacon.

“Charmer, let’s take this thing to Des to have it analysed. At least Tom can try and figure it out while we go back to Virgil.” Deacon eyeballed the strange chip he’d taken from the Institute courser’s head.

“What if he wrecks it? Or ruins it?” asked Cassidy.

“Virgil isn’t going to do anything with it. He just said you need one, right?”

Cassidy nodded.

“Well,” said Deacon. “You’ll need to figure out how it works to even use it. I know Tom is exceptional with this kind of thing.”

Cassidy examined the chip again then put it in a little box in her pocket. “I’m going to show it to Derrick first. I know and trust him. I don’t know your Railroad people.”

“*Our* people, Charmer,” he corrected.

“No,” she argued. “They’re not *my* anything. You just tricked me into finding them and then they didn’t even want me. It wasn’t a very happy experience Deacon. So I’m going to do what I feel like doing with this thing.”

He sighed and nodded. “Just let me know what you want me to help with then. You know I got your six, Charmer.”

Sturges was picking apart some power armor when Cassidy approached him. “Derrick...I got a courser chip. Can you look at it? Maybe see how it works?”

His eyes brightened. “Hey CJ! I didn’t know you were back! I’m so happy you got one!”

He cleaned his hands then took it from her. He put his goggles over his eyes and looked at it closely. “Institute technology at it’s finest. I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s way beyond anything I’d even dare try to crack. If you had another one I’d love to give it a go, but honey, this is the only one you have. Is there anyone else who might know more?”

She nodded. “Deacon thinks he knows people who can decipher it. I wanted you to try first though.”

“I’m flattered you think so much of me!” he exclaimed, and gave it back to her. “Maybe you and I should go hunt down another one!” he grinned.

He was always so kind and congenial and guilt washed over her.
“Derrick...about earlier...the nasty stuff I said. I’m sorry.”

“Listen, CJ. Don’t apologize for feeling the way you do. We can’t always help our feelings. Even when we know they’re hurtful. They just are what they are. I can’t imagine how it is for you and I shouldn’t have kept on about it. That was wrong of me too and I’m sorry. I admit I was a bit worried you’d stop talking to me all together.”

She shook her head. “I’d never be that awful. It’s ok for people to disagree on things. Deacon and I do and we still love each other. Well, I love him, anyway.”

Sturges tilted his head. “Strange thing to say. Love is supposed to go two ways ain’t it? Leastways I think so.”

“It is. But he’s...he’s...I don’t know. I know he loves me he just doesn’t say it.”

“Some people never can,” said Sturges. “My daddy was the best man I ever knew. He never once said he loved me or Zeke but we knew. We knew from the little things he did. Like make toys for us. Getting new clothes for us when we trashed ours or grew out of them. Even giving us trouble when we acted wrong. All of it shows caring and love. So look for the actions, not the words.”

She nodded. “My daddy said it a lot, to all of us. He was so strict and military but he never forgot to say he loved us. I guess I’m not good at figuring out someone who isn’t like that. I tell Deacon a lot. I just want to hear him say it once.” She cast her eyes downwards.

Sturges sighed inwardly. *I’d tell you 100 times a day,* he thought.

“Give him time, he’ll come around. If he knows how you feel that might egg him on.”

Cassidy wandered around the garage for a bit, listening to him talk about his power armor projects. She noticed a door had been cut out at the back of the garage.

“Where does this go? Did you build an extension?”

Sturges looked up. “That’s my top secret lab. It’s my quiet place where I work stuff out. If it’s ok, I’d like it to be left alone.”

“Of course. I understand. Every mad scientist needs a top secret lab.”

Sturges laughed. “I like the sound of that. Mad Scientist.”

The truth was, he’d started another car. It was his intention to recreate the Corvega Atomic 8 that Cassidy’s family had ordered. He knew he could never replace her lost world or anything in it.

But he wanted her to have that car in her driveway, as close to what it would have been as possible. Some of the settlers had helped him drag a chassis and body from the wastes, and he’d gotten right to work. They thought he was breaking it down for power armor components and he let them have that belief.

Derrick Sturges knew he might never get a road or an engine built. But it was something to work towards. If only to see the delight on Cassidy’s face.

*I know you’ll never love me the way I dream of,* he thought. *But I’ll still try and make your world a better place, CJ.*

“I got the power suits ready,” he said. “When you want to go see Virgil, let me know.”
“Thanks, Derrick. I’ll have to take this chip to Deacon’s people first. Makes me nervous trusting people I don’t know with this. It’s my only way into the Institute and that courser took days to find and he wasn’t fun to deal with.”

“Deacon wouldn’t take it somewhere that could ruin it. He’s pretty good that way, I think.”
Cassidy smiled. “You’re right. I’ll talk to you later, Derrick.”

He went back to his tasks, glad things between them were still alright.

The Railroad HQ was located in the deepest basement of the Old North Church. It was littered with stone sarcophagi and fallen rock. The lantern symbol was painted on the walls in a few places and although the residents had tried to clean the place up, they seemed to have given up on it.

They’d brought in some desks and mattresses, shelving and workbenches. In the center of the area was a large round stone platform. It looked like a giant well that had been covered.

Desdemona stood in front of it, poring over some maps. She looked up.

“I have a report here,” she said. “It reads more like a comic book. Apparently one hell of a fight took place at Greentech Genetics.”

“Oh?” said Cassidy, feigning innocence. “What have you heard?”

“One of our agents took a courser. Alone. Something I’m not even sure Glory could do.”

The black woman with the white hair who’d pointed the big automatic weapon at her, walked over and hopped up to sit on the edge of the round stone structure. She had a curious but amiable expression on her face.

“So I hear my name. What’s up Cassidy?” She nodded at Deacon. “Deacon. You keeping her out of trouble?”

“Never,” said Deacon. “She drags me into it and it’s great.”

“Mmmh,” said Glory. “I see that. So Des, what were you saying about me not being able to do something?”


“Courser. Mm-mm-mm. That must have been some action. Sorry I missed it.”

Desdemona affixed her gaze on Deacon. “The agent in question is you. I’m all for one less courser in the world but why did you do it?”

Deacon held up his hands. “Hey, I’m not taking credit for this. It was all Charmer here. I was just helping.”

“Charmer?” asked Des. “Really, Deacon?”

Cassidy bristled. “That’s my spy name. Deacon and I are a team, we did it together.”

“You’ve got a fire in your gut,” said Desdemona. “So tell me, why did you take out a courser? It’s no small feat.”
“I needed a courser chip. To get into the Institute. I need it analysed and Deacon said you can do it.”

Both Desdemona and Glory made a surprised sound.

“”You have a courser chip?” asked Desdemona. “Intact?”

“Girl, you have one hell of a deathwish!” exclaimed Glory. “Color me impressed!”

“Follow me. Now.” Ordered Desdemona.

Cassidy looked up at Deacon. He rested his hand on the small of her back and gently moved her forward.

“Decoding a courser chip is very delicate work,” said Desdemona. “A million things can go wrong. The least of which is losing the data. Fortunately, we have the right man for the job.”

A black man in a set of dirty coveralls, with the strangest contraption on his head stepped up. He was holding a device with blinking lights. “Hey Des. You need something?” he asked.

“Charmer, meet Tinker Tom,” said Deacon.

Tinker Tom’s eyes crinkled up at the corners when he smiled. “Hey hey! Sensor sweep says you’re clean! Hurray, we’re bug free!”

Cassidy looked puzzled. “Sensor sweep?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter. See those conventional tests are garbage.” He peered closely at her. “Ok, have you eaten anything out there? Because if you have, they got you!”

“Actually Tom,” said Deacon in his most serious voice. “She never eats anything. True story.”
Tom nodded enthusiastically. “You see, that’s smart. That’s smart, girl. S M A R T. But you got to be careful. The Institute has these tiny microscopic robots in the food. And they report back!”

Cassidy’s eyes widened.

Another man walked up, wearing a lab coat and geiger counter. He was swarthy, with a pinched expression on his face.

“Tom,” he said. “That’s rubbish.”

“You just don’t get it, Carrington. The Institute is in your blood!”

“If that’s true, it’s terrifying!” cried Cassidy, feeling suddenly itchy all over.

“If he had a shred of evidence for any of it,” said Carrington. “Agreed. Quite terrifying.”

“Ok ok,” said Tom. “If you really want to be safe, let me give you a little shot. Des...Desdemona says no one has to but it will kill those little robots!”

“There’s battery acid in that serum of yours!” cried Carrington in disgust.

“You can’t make an omelet without irradiating some eggs,” said Tom. “Now you ready to shoot up?”

Cassidy backed up close to Deacon. “W...what else is in it?” she asked more out of curiosity than any desire to go near it in any way.

“Let’s see,” said Tom. “We got algae, some yummy bacteria culture, and just a little bit of battery acid. But we got to burn those babies out of you! It’s a hard reboot of your system, girl.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m letting you do that,” said Cassidy.

“Fine. Let them hear and see everything! I hope you like your whole life being downloaded onto the Institute’s mainframe!”

“Actually Tom,” said Deacon. “You know, she doses herself with radiation to kill the blood...robots.”

Tom nodded with satisfaction. “I read you, man. Smart. I’d rather have some hair loss than let the Institute win.”

Desdemona shook her head. “Oh, Tom.” She sighed. “Anyway. We have a courser chip here.”

“For real?” he cried.

“Hand over the chip,” ordered Desdemona. “Let’s see what’s on it.”

“What can we get off a courser chip?” asked Cassidy.

“Those chips have more than just codes on them,” said Desdemona. “Everything from how it’s made to what it’s made from tells us something about our enemy. One minor detail could make the difference between life and death for our agents and the synths we’re trying to save. Now hand it over and let’s get it analysed.”

Cassidy looked at Deacon. She didn’t like how demanding and bossy Desdemona was being.
“Hey Des, give us a minute?” he asked, pulling Cassidy away. “I know Des can come off pretty intense at times.”

“She’s being bossy and she doesn’t care about me or my little brother. She wants the chip for herself for her own stuff.”

“You want to get into the Institute,” reminded Deacon. “I never told her about your brother. She doesn’t know anything about you. You need to figure out how the chip works and right now Tom is our best bet. Sturges wasn’t able to do it. What other choice do you have?” he talked to her kindly, but she still didn’t like it.

The Railroad hated the Institute. They were at war with each other. Cassidy felt as though she’d gotten caught up in the middle of it simply because she had a reason to want the Institute too. She had an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of her stomach and she wanted to go home.

“I’m not sure I want to do this now,” she said.

“What?” asked Deacon and she thought she detected irritation in his voice. “You’re not going after your little brother?”

“I just feel weird about it. I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

“Deacon,” called Desdemona. “We should get onto this chip as soon as possible. The information on it could save a lot of lives.”

“Come on Charmer,” said Deacon, cupping her chin. “Let Tom see what’s on this chip!”

Cassidy felt pressured. She didn’t like how pushy the Railroad seemed to be. But she wanted to please Deacon.

“Ok,” she said and walked over to Desdemona. She handed her the chip.

“Great,” said the Railroad leader. “Tom, see what you can do!”

Tinker Tom took it back to his station. “Alright little courser chip. Let’s have the circuit analyzer take a crack at you.”

Cassidy watched as strands of blue lightning moved around the chip. Tom was watching his computer screen as it did so.

“We’re in!” cried Tom. “Chip accessed. Now to poke the analog connectors a little…” He typed in some keys then made an adjustment on the platform holding the chip.

The lightning began to move erratically. “What? Oh man...don’t crash...hold it together!”

Cassidy looked nervously up at Deacon. He wrapped his arms across her chest from behind. “He’s the best, Charmer. Give him time. No worries.”

“C’mon baby,” crooned Tom. “Show me that pattern...where is it…?” He tapped a few more keys. “Wait...They're using the same logarithmic function as the key generator. Oh man, we got lucky!”

Desdemona and Glory both stood nearby and watched.

“Memory hiccup,” said Tom. “Here it comes. Encryption algorithms. All right. We're still running.” He sounded relieved, and Cassidy felt the tension all through her body.
“Solve for N,” said Tom. “Come on, show me that sweet base number. And we got it! We got the code! Hahaha. Let me load that onto a holotape for ya.”

“Good work, Tom,” said Desdemona.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure our luck will hold up next time, Des.” He handed her the holotape. “I’d love to do it again, you know, for practice.”

Desdemona turned and gave it to Cassidy. “And, Charmer, I hope that helps you as much as you’ve helped us. I don’t know why you want to get into the Institute. It sounds like a suicide mission but...good work.”

The last two words she spoke were directed at Deacon and Cassidy felt him nod. She took the holotape and put it in her pocket.

“Deacon,” said Desdemona. “I’d like to discuss something with you.”

“Sure thing boss,” he said, giving Cassidy a kiss on the top of her head and walking off with Desdemona.

Cassidy watched them walk away then stood awkwardly, not knowing what to do with herself.

Glory sat down in a chair opposite her.

“Hey you,” she said, her voice friendly. “So...you and Deacon huh?”

Cassidy nodded. “Yeah he’s pretty awesome. He saved my life.”

“Mhm. He and I are the only agents left. Listen, you caught us at a shit time. We're still recovering from... something I can't get into. So you walked the Freedom Trail on your own? I mean you figured it all out by yourself or did Deacon help you?”

“I had no idea Deacon had anything to do with the Railroad when we met. He had a flyer. And I just decided to try and find you for fun.”


“You’re a synth?” asked Cassidy, surprised.

“Mhm. That's what the Made in the Institute stamp on my ass says..But I'm as real a girl as you'll ever meet. The only difference is I bet your assembly instructions were a hell of a lot more fun.”

Cassidy laughed. “I think so. I’ve never made a human before though.”

“No matter what Des and others say, synths ain't human. We're assembled bone by bone. Muscle by muscle. I've seen it.”

“Really? How?” asked Cassidy.

Glory shrugged. “Damned if I know. The machines are... massive. Complicated. Not like anything I've seen out here.”

Cassidy was amazed. “ If I didn't know, I'd think you're human.”

“I've been living free for years,” said Glory. “And no one out there, not one person, has ever thought I was a synth.”
“Was it awful there? In the Institute? Did they treat you horribly?”

Glory shook her head. “They weren't really mean about it. They just treated me like a coffee maker. Or a terminal.”

“Like you didn’t matter,” said Cassidy sadly.

“Yeah, something like that,” answered Glory.

“What does it look like there?”

“Clean. Everything is pretty white. Lots of metal and machines. But I really only saw a few rooms of it - the barracks and where I worked. Mainly, I did surface detail. Combing over ruins and shit for salvage.”

“Is that how you escaped?” asked Cassidy.

“Talking about this sure ain’t easy,” Glory said. “But yeah. One day I just ran. Anyway, you going to join the Railroad formally?”

Cassidy shrugged. “I don’t really know.”

“I know we weren’t exactly welcoming when we first met,” said Glory apologetically. “I know Des said we don't got room. But talk to Deacon. I'm sure he's got an angle, he always does.”

“I’m starting to see that,” said Cassidy.

“Thing is, the Railroad is kind of a family. It’s a harsh world out there. The Commonwealth isn’t a great place to fly solo.”

“I have friends,” said Cassidy. “The Minutemen.”

“They do good work, but it’s different,” said Glory

“I just need to think about it, Glory. The Railroad might not be the right fit for me. I mean, I don’t hate synths and I believe in your cause. I just have other things going on right now. Personal things.”

Deacon walked back to them. Glory gave Cassidy a smile.

“Good talk,” she said. “I hope I’ll be seeing you.”

Deacon smoothed Cassidy’s hair away from her face. “Everything worked out, see? So, time to go back to Virgil?”

Cassidy nodded. “Home first then if Derrick has the suits we have to go back to that cave in that horrific place. I’ll be glad to never return again. But...Virgil asked me to get something for him from the Institute. So if I can find it I will have to go back once more. Yuck.”

They began the walk back to Sanctuary.

“Deacon, Glory said that something bad happened to the Railroad but she wouldn’t say what it was.”

“The Switchboard,” he said. “Our HQ used to be underground of a Slocum’s Joe, if you can believe that. In an old DIA hidden base.”
She rolled her eyes. “Stop making things up, I’m serious Deacon.”

“So am I! Let me tell you then you can ask Des or Glory or anyone else to verify it. Not sure how it happened but the Institute got intel on the place and sent an army of Gen 1 and 2 synths there. It was a surprise attack and it wiped out nearly all of our agents. Several of our synths were killed as well. Plus our safe houses were compromised too.”

Cassidy felt terrible. “How did the Institute even find you? Do you have a spy?”

He shrugged. “We don’t know. Because of it, Des has gotten super picky about who we let it. That’s why she said she won’t accept you right now. We’re all running scared, Charmer. I can’t shake the feeling that the Railroad is on borrowed time and one day our number will be up.”

“I get it,” said Cassidy. “That’s a horrible thing to have happened. But you have to get more people to replace the ones you lost.”

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” said Deacon.”That mission I mentioned to you? It’s to go in there, to the Switchboard and get something Carrington left behind. The place is still crawling with synths. But it’ll be a walk in the park for me and you. Des won’t have a choice but to invite you after that.”

Cassidy shrugged. “I’ll help you if you want to get that thing but Deacon...I’m not sure I want to join the Railroad. I told Glory the same thing. I believe in what you guys do, but I’m not sure it’s right for me.”

He stopped. “Charmer, with your big heart and your talent, it’s the perfect place for you. I saw how you cared about Jenny the other day. We need someone like you!”

“I’ve got to put my family back together. I can’t be doing so many things at once, it’s overwhelming. I have to find my baby brother. I have to get my daddy out of the vault! I can’t divide myself up more. I need you to help me Deacon, I need you with me right now.”

Cassidy felt horribly selfish saying it, but she couldn’t help it. Already she felt that she was in over her head with everything. She liked helping others, but she had to think about her own needs too. It was something her mother often reminded her of. *You have needs too, Cassidy. You can say no. You can’t draw from an empty vessel.*

Deacon saw the unhappiness on her face and drew her close to him, holding her tenderly. “I’m here, Charmer. Didn’t mean to upset you. I’m sorry.”

Cassidy was tired and feeling emotional. The whole Railroad thing was bothering her still. They were so domineering and she felt manipulated. Deacon seemed to be on their side instead of hers every time. Aren’t you supposed to be on the side of the person you loved? Weren’t they supposed to be number one?

She didn’t talk much the rest of the way. They rested and had some water and a snack, and Deacon told her some of the adventures he’d had since joining the Railroad. She liked the stories, but she didn’t know if any of them were true. It was like a holovid. Entertaining but nothing else.

On their return, Sturges was the first to greet her, and she felt a sudden comfort, like a big soft blanket on a chilly day. It made her smile.

“What’s that pretty smile for?” he asked with a grin. “Like the cat who ate the canary.”

“No, that’s a sneaky bad smile! I’m just happy to be home...and...it’s nice to see you Derrick.”
His eyes softened and crinkled up at the corners. “It’s always nice to see you CJ,” he said gently. “I’ve got everything ready for our trip to Virgil, if you still want me along.”

“I do! But I’ll need a day to recover first. I also...sort of want to talk to you about something. Would that be ok?”

“You never need to ask that,” he said. “You want to come into the house? Or want me to come to yours?”

She shook her head. “I’d like to go somewhere else where no one will bug us. Let’s follow the river. And bring a gun just in case.”

He laughed. “Of course. Have gun, will travel. You want to go now?”

She nodded. “Yes please.”

Dogmeat trotted along behind her, hoping he wouldn’t be sent home again. When Cassidy encouraged him, he broke into a lope, tongue lolling and eyes full of joy.

Sturges felt like he was on cloud 9. His dream girl had asked him to go for a walk. I’ll take you any way I can get you, CJ, he thought.

Sturges picked up a rock and whipped it into the water. “So what’s up CJ?”

“It’s Deacon,” she said. “I’m feeling sort of weird about him since the other day.”

Sturges listened as she recounted meeting the Railroad.

“Wow. So you think he’s just been pulling the wool over your eyes this whole time?” asked Sturges.

“That’s the problem. I feel like they’re all manipulating me for their own ends. I don’t want to be involved with them but Deacon keeps insisting it’s the right thing to do. He was always so relaxed about everything until now. And the whole thing with me finding the Railroad. Why didn’t he just tell me about them and bring me there? He told Desdemona that I was the one who wanted to meet them and I didn’t.”

“You did tell me before that he lies about everything. How do you know anything he says is true?”

She sighed. “That’s the big question. Everything he says now, makes me second think it. So his being affectionate with me and just...you know...I’m not sure how to feel about it now. The other day, me standing there with those lights on me and him up there watching me like a spider in a jar…”

She kicked a rock into the water. “I was so excited when he finally kissed me but now...I don’t know.”

Sturges hated hearing about her with Deacon. He didn’t want those images in his head. Not when she filled his every moment and he loved her so much he thought he’d burst.

“The problem with liars,” said Sturges. “Is exactly that. You just don’t know. I guess you need to ask yourself if you can live that way. Not knowing. Sort of like you’re living in your own fantasy all the time. I couldn’t do it myself. I only know about being honest. No other way will do.”

“That’s how I was raised too,” she agreed. “I get the feeling he keeps things from me too. But I
refuse to be one of *those* girls who is all paranoid and freaked out all the time. I need trust in my life.”

“Depends what he’s keeping from you. Railroad stuff, well that shouldn’t matter much. But personal stuff well that right there could be a problem. I wish I could give you the perfect answer CJ, but I can’t. I can tell you I don’t like seeing you like this. You deserve to be happy.”

“There’s something else, Derrick.” She then told him about the episode in the CIT ruins when Deacon lost his mind.

Sturges stopped and faced her. “CJ, I gotta be honest with you. That really scares me. A lot. If he can’t control those situations, he could hurt you! I don’t like it. Not one bit.”

Cassidy shook her head. “I don’t believe he would ever hurt me. My daddy told me about soldiers who got that way because of the war. Stuff they went through. It made me sad, but he never said they hurt the ones they loved. Deacon loves me even if he can’t say it. He’d never hurt me. And when you love someone, like I love him, you have to stand by them even when its bad times, right?”

Sturges sighed. “Under normal circumstances I’d agree. It’s a great way to think. But...this isn’t normal, CJ. Just...just be careful alright? And if things get too weird just let me know.”

Cassidy smiled at him and he thought his heart would melt.

“Thanks, Derrick,” she said softly. “For listening to me. For always being here.”

“That’s one thing you can count on for life, honey.”

When they came back, Codsworth had rung the dinner bell. Deacon approached Cassidy and put his arm around her shoulder. “Hey Charmer, missed you.”

“Derrick and I went for a walk,” she said.

“You guys work things out?” he asked.

“Yes. He’s a good friend to me and I’d be really dumb to let that go because of my big mouth.”

“We all have things we do that don’t make sense sometimes,” Deacon said.

Cassidy and Deacon sat down at the table, and Sturges sat on her other side. She smiled at him and their eyes locked for just a little longer than usual.

*I wish Deacon would look at me the way Derrick does,* she thought, and it surprised her.

*I wish she’d look at me the way she looks at him,* thought Sturges.

The meal was wonderful. Carla had been by with some seafood, namely Mirelurk and Mama Murphy had done wonders with it. Cassidy couldn’t eat enough.

“You’ll have to roll me out the door,” she said giggling.

“I was worried you wouldn’t like this,” said Mama Murphy. “I’ve never made it before.”

“It’s now my favorite meal ever!” she cried. “It tastes a lot like lobster from my time. You guys even know what that is?”
Preston nodded. “Seen a picture or two. Small critters. Mirelurks are...well...huge by comparison.”

“I’m not sure if I’ve seen one,” said Sturges.

“I’ve got a magazine with them in it,” said Marcy. “I’ll show you after. Things in Cassidy’s time were small. And had one head.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Cassidy. “That is the best part about back then. Single heads! We only saw mutated heads if something was born deformed and it never lived long. I really can’t stand these two headed things here. It’s gross!”

“There’s deer and other animals in that magazine,” said Marcy. “Sheep too.”

“I miss sheep,” said Cassidy. “And horses. Oh how I loved horses.”

“They would have been fun to ride,” said Sturges with a grin. “Just imagine CJ, me and you riding by the river instead of just walking like today!” Sturges was full of joy at the thought.

“That would have been idyllic,” agreed Cassidy. “I don’t want to think about the fact that I’ll never see another horse again.”

“Well could be that there are some in other places,” said Preston. “I hear tell that there are different things in the Capital Wastes and out west.”

“I don’t think I want to see a two headed horse,” said Cassidy sadly. “Based on what happened to all the large mammals I’ve seen so far...that’s exactly what they’d be.”

“I’m sorry CJ,” said Sturges with compassion. “Maybe I could find a picture of one and try and draw it for you. Draw you riding it like you used to do.”

She smiled warmly. “I’d actually love that very much.”

“Ask him to show you the drawing he did of you and Dogmeat when you went out to Quincy,” said Preston. “I think you’ll be impressed.”

“Gosh Preston,” said Sturges. “Don’t make so much of it or she’ll sure be disappointed when it doesn’t measure up!”

“No chance of that happening,” said the Minuteman.

“Yeah,” agreed Cassidy. “Even if it were stick figures I’d still love it because you did it.”

Something sparked in Sturges eyes just then and everyone saw it. Especially Cassidy.

_I never noticed before how much he pays attention to me. He’s so loyal and good. I’m lucky to know him. If I hadn’t met Deacon and fallen in love with him, I wonder if Derrick and I would have gotten together._

Beside her, Deacon leaned closer and put his arm around her shoulders, kissing the side of her head and resting his forehead against it. He was aware of Mama Murphy’s eyes on him and preferred not to look at her. Since they’d first met, the Railroad agent had been unnerved by the old lady.

Cassidy helped clear up the dishes and she and Jun washed and dried them. The man had started coming around, and he was participating more in the events of the community. His depression, which had been severe, was slowly lifting and he was starting to take some joy in the projects. He said he was trying to build a chem lab and work on some stimpaks he’d designed a few years ago.
They would work faster, and get someone on their feet quicker than the traditional ones.

“We need a clinic and a pharmacy,” said Cassidy. “I’d like to attract a doctor here too.”

“I’d like that,” said Jun. “It would help us out, and keep everyone healthy. Maybe we could get a store too. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

She agreed. “We are supposed to be getting a salesman here. I never told you guys about that!”

As they worked, she shared the story of Mr. Davidson, Vault-Tec, and how she’d met him again as a ghoul.

Then twilight appeared, and everyone headed off for their usual evening routines. Cassidy went home and had a shower, then crawled into her bed.

Deacon came in and sat down. “This is different,” he said. “Usually you’re stealing all my covers or stealing my body heat.” He grinned at her.

“I’m tired Deacon,” she said. “Dogmeat will keep me warm tonight. You did tell me that before remember?”

“I did. But that was before. Not sure I can sleep without you beside me now.” He was trying to be sweet, but she wasn’t feeling up to it.

“You’ll be fine. Maybe you can take the dog then.”

*Something’s not right,* he thought.

“You know you can talk to me, right Charmer? About anything?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’d say the same to you. I know you’re a big deal spy for the Railroad but secrets hurt people Deacon. So don’t keep any from me, ok?”

“I’m not keeping anything from you,” he lied.

*Namely the fact your father is a corpse in the vault and I don’t know how the fuck to tell you.*

“Goodnight, Deacon,” she said.

Dogmeat padded into the room and leaped up on the bed with a deep sigh, his head on her hip.

“See you in the morning, Charmer,” he said.
As Cassidy and Sturges had been preparing to leave Sanctuary, Mr. Davidson showed up at the gates. He was so pleased to be welcomed, and was even more thrilled when they showed him a house he could have for his own. His whole face had lit up and he began planning his own little shop. He was also delighted when one of the new ghoul settlers had introduced himself. Mr. Davidson now had a home and friends!

The return trip to Virgil’s cave was uneventful and they avoided contact with the Children of Atom. Cassidy’s distaste for them hadn’t waned, and she felt it never would.

The super mutant scientist was hard at work when they came in.

“Wasn’t sure i’d see you again,” he said in his deep voice. “You manage to get what you need?”

“I have the code from a courser chip,” said Cassidy.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised,” he responded. “You did get rid of Kellogg after all. Not too much of a leap to take down a courser. How’d you manage to get it decoded?”

“The Railroad helped me,” she said.

Virgil shook his head. “Oh god. Not those kooks. I’d expect they’d be too busy trying to liberate vending machines or setting computer terminals free or…” he paused and sighed. “Sorry. They just have something of a reputation. You’re not the only one who’s been busy.”

Cassidy perked up.

Virgil turned to his workbench. “I did the best I could from memory and things I overheard through the years. Came up with some schematics for you. Wasn’t easy. These hands are ridiculous.” He held up a massive green hand. “Fine motor skills have gone to shit.”

Cassidy and Sturges looked down at the thing he had drawn.

“Here’s the simple explanation,” the super mutant said. “You need to build a device that will hijack the signal the Institute uses to teleport coursers and send you instead. You know the craziest part of the design? That classical music station people are always playing, that’s the carrier signal for the relay.”

“Wow,” said Sturges. “That’s some kind of genius!”

“No wonder no one figured it out yet,” said Cassidy.

“All the data’s on harmonic frequencies,” said Virgil. “You’ve been hearing it all along.” He
turned to face her.

“I want it to be clear that this isn’t my area of expertise. I was Bioscience, not Engineering or Advanced Systems or anything.”

“I’m sure it’ll work!” said Cassidy excitedly.

“For the record,” said Virgil. “I haven’t made any promises, but if you can build this device, and make use of that code, you should be able to override the signal from the Institute’s relay. So...can you? Can you build it? You have people that can help? This is a lot for one person, even you.”

Before she could respond, Sturges spoke up. “I can do it. I can build this thing.”

Cassidy turned to him. “You can? Really Derrick?”

“Yes I can,” he said confidently. “The schematics are a bit of a mess, no offense Virgil, but I can figure it out.”

The super mutant nodded “Good, good. Because you’ve got to make it in there. For both our sakes. And don’t you forget our agreement. I’ve helped you as best I can. If you make it in there, you find that serum.”

He looked down at her, his eyes intense. “It’s my only hope for ever being...normal. So you find it!”

He rolled up the schematics and handed it to her. “Now go on. Take these and get to work. You do whatever it takes; call on whoever else you know to help you.”

“Thank you Virgil,” said Cassidy. “I’ll do my best to get your serum, I promise.”

He nodded. “Good luck.”

On their return to Sanctuary, Sturges took the schematics to his garage, eager to get started.

“What did Virgil say?” asked Deacon, greeting Cassidy with a tender kiss. “I missed you Charmer. It’s not the same without you.”

“He gave me the schematics. He drew them up as best he could.” She told him what she’d learned about the signal.

“That’s some kind of crazy,” said Deacon, impressed. “The Institute sure knows what it’s doing! Let’s get the schematics back to Tom. He can get it built for us.”

Cassidy shook her head. “Derrick is going to build it,” she said.

Deacon didn’t even try and feign surprise. “Charmer, I know you have a lot of faith in him. But this is a major undertaking! I know Tom has the smarts to pull it off. We only have one chance at this.”

Cassidy felt her chest tighten up. “Derrick is going to build it. I have complete faith in his abilities. I know him and I trust him. This whole thing, Deacon, hasn’t been about you and the Railroad. I started this journey to get into the Institute and find my brother. I’m not part of your war!”

His expression was impassive. She didn’t know if he was looking at her or looking elsewhere. It irritated her but she said nothing.
“Ok. If that’s what you want. I’ll go with you into the Institute though.” His voice was calm and even, but Cassidy wondered if he was suppressing annoyance with her. She didn’t like upsetting him but she was getting tired of his push towards the Railroad. However, it was comforting to know that he’d be at her side when she entered the Institute.

She nodded. “Alright. But remember I’m looking for my brother. Nothing more. I don’t want to get dragged into your war. I want my family and my life back.” She reached out and took his hands. “I hope you’re going to be part of that, Deacon. You know how much I love you.”

He grinned slightly. “Yeah I’m getting the notion of that.”

“Good. Let’s go talk to Derrick about this project now.”

Deacon followed her to the garage. The mechanic had the schematic pinned to the wall and was studying it intensely.

“This is going to take awhile, CJ,” he said. “It’s no easy feat. I can do it, like I said, but it’s going to take a lot of materials. We might want to get a scavver team together to help look for the parts.”

“I’ll talk to Preston,” she said. “He’ll know who the best people will be. And Deacon and I can help as well.”

“I’ll get a list together,” said Sturges. “Some of these things I know Zeke has. You fancy a little trip to the Cats garage?”

Cassidy’s face lit up. “Oh yes! I miss them so much!”

Sturges laughed and Cassidy liked the sound. There was always such a genuine joy behind it.

“Well give me a day to get organized honey, and we’ll go.”

Deacon wrapped his arms around Cassidy from behind. “I’ve seen more of the Commonwealth since I met you than I have in all my days here,” he said. “It’s been great.”

Cassidy leaned back against him, enjoying his closeness. She wished things were the way they were before she discovered the Railroad. Since then it seemed all Deacon cared about was them. His focus, which was once on helping her, now felt divided.

She didn’t like the feeling. And she still felt that there was something he was keeping from her. But she loved him. And when you loved someone you forgave them for things they did. Even when you didn’t really know what those things were.

She turned around in his arms. “Let’s go get something to eat. Then I have a book I’ve been wanting to dig into.”

“Maybe you could read it to me,” said Deacon.

“You can pick out a book of your own, I have lots remember?” she asked.

“I’m not smart enough for your old world books,” he said, his lips twitching.

Cassidy swatted him playfully. “You’re making things up again! You’re way smart, Deacon.”

Deacon laughed. “You really think so?”

She nodded. “Not quite up there with Derrick but you’re not too bad.”
Sturges’ face lit up. “Thank you, honey.”

“Nice,” said Deacon. “Guess I deserved that one. But can you still read to me? Please? I love the sound of your voice.”

She took his hand. “Yeah, yeah, let’s go then.”

The following day, Sturges approached her. “Got a few minutes to talk?” he asked.

She’d been washing her dishes, and dried her hands. Walking to the couch she sat down and indicated he do the same.

“The schematics are one hell of a mess, CJ. He’s got RF transmissions rerouting through…” he saw her confused expression. “Some of it makes sense and some of it doesn’t. Thing is I’m not sure whether I should use my own knowledge, do it the way it makes sense, or just follow along with Virgil’s way. Because it’s Institute stuff, you know?”

She nodded. “Virgil did say he isn’t an engineer and doesn’t know about this stuff. He drew them up from memory and hearsay. I trust you to build this so it works Derrick, and if that means doing it how it makes sense to you than do it your way.”

His eyes softened. “You’ve always trusted me and had faith in me. I guess I’m scared to do something to change that. You’re the last person in the world I want to let down.”

She smiled. “You won’t. Even if this doesn’t work then we try again or find another way.”

“This thing…it’s going to take a huge amount of juice. So if you got a spare nuclear reactor handy we could probably use it.”

Cassidy laughed. “We could suck some green stuff out of the Glowing Sea!”

“If it was that easy someone would have done it already. Our generator here…I might be able to beef it up but we’ll need to find some more fusion cores.”

Cassidy nodded. “Codsworth is good at finding them, I’ll get him to do that. Are we still going to see the Cats?”

“You betcha,” he said. “We can head out whenever you like, honey.”

Cassidy felt a warmth inside her. “I like when you call me that,” she said suddenly.

“You do? I kinda just do it without thinking. At first I thought I was being presumptuous but you never said anything. My mom used to call everyone honey.”

“Do you?” she asked.

“No ma’am. You’re actually the first person I’ve done that to. Just felt natural I guess. Hope that doesn’t sound too dumb.”

“No. I understand. Sometimes things just feel right. Like us. You and me.”

Sturges’ heart started beating just a bit faster. “What do you mean, CJ?”

“I mean since we met, how our friendship has grown. I feel comfortable and happy around you. Because I trust you. This world sucks so bad and you’re one person I feel I can count on.”
He smiled. “Well that’s about the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. I feel the same. I enjoy our time together.”

Cassidy chewed on her lower lip, her eyes settling on his. He had a kind expression. He was a good man with a good heart and there wasn’t an ounce of guile in him.

“Would you ever lie, Derrick?”

“That’s both an easy one and a hard one to answer,” he responded. “I never lie about anything that matters, you know? It’s disrespectful to the person you’re lying to. Even if you don’t like ‘em you gotta keep true to yourself. But sometimes you might have to lie. Like when you planned a surprise party for your brother and he’s questioning you about it. Or if you’re going shopping for a present for your mom and you tell her you’re going to a friend’s house instead? Those count as lies but they’re not mean ones. Make sense?”

Cassidy nodded. “My daddy told me the same thing. He said always be honest even if it hurts. But the little things you said don’t count as lies. Not to me.”

Sturges was quiet for a few moments. “CJ, is Deacon doing something to make you feel bad?”

She half shrugged. “I’m probably being silly but I can’t get out of this feeling that he’s keeping something from me. I love him, Derrick, but sometimes it’s like everything is coming from me. He’s really nice to me, don’t get me wrong but...just this feeling I can’t explain. It’s almost like there’s something missing between us.”

“Sometimes our senses tell us things we can’t see. Can’t always act on it, but just keep your eyes open. I’d say talk to him about how you’re feeling. Talking is the best way.”

She shook her head. “I asked him and he said no he wasn’t keeping anything from me...but he lies, Derrick. He told me he does it and doesn’t know why and it just happens.”

He sighed. “I’ll be real frank with you. It’d be very hard to have a relationship with someone I can’t trust. You just won’t ever know what’s real and what isn’t, you know? I get it you love him but looking ahead can you be happy with someone you have to second guess all the time? I’ll tell you I sure couldn’t. I’m sorry if that hurts you, honey. That’s the last thing I want to do. But you deserve the truth.”

Cassidy suddenly leaned towards him and hugged him. She held him tight, then let go and sat back.

“Thank you for being so wonderful Derrick. I’d be lost without you. I always feel better after talking to you.”

“The feeling is mutual, honey,” he said.

Although it was her house, she excused herself.

Derrick Sturges sat there on her couch for a long time, her soft fragrance still clinging to him. He wished she would see that he could be so much more to her than just her confidant.

*But the heart wants what the heart wants. I just need to be patient and hope. I’m good at fixing things. If he breaks her, I’ll be here to put her back together.*
A Fool In Love

Chapter Summary

Cassidy enjoys some entertainment Atom Cat style; Deacon is assaulted by a terrifying PTSD episode.

“So Derrick?” asked Cassidy as the three of them walked to the Atom Cat’s Garage. It was a long journey with many rest stops and lots of conversation to be had.

“Can you tell me how that whole schematic thing of Virgil’s works?”

“Let me see if I can break it down for you,” he answered. “There’s four main parts to this thing. First is the control console to input the code and process the signal. Second is what he calls a relay dish. That’s what intercepts the...uh...teleporter signal. Third is a molecular beam emitter. Gets pretty technical at this part. And kind of scary. The beam emitter is what translates your matter into energy for transmission.”

“You mean it takes us apart and puts us back together on the other side right?”

“That’s right. It’s technology that’s so advanced I never even figured it existed,” he said. “The last part is the stabilizer reflector platform. That’s what concentrates and reflects the molecular beam. Now all these bits need to be wired together to a power supply so they can talk to each other.”

Cassidy sighed. “This is terrifying.”

“I won’t lie to you,” said Sturges. “If even one part of this thing is missing or done together wrong, well best case is that it just fails to work. Worst case...well I’m not going to put words to that thought.”

“Good thing it won’t fail then,” said Cassidy. “I’m trusting you with my life here, Derrick. And Deacon’s too.”

“No pressure,” he said with a grin.

Cassidy affectionately pushed him away.

She could smell the ocean as they drew closer to the garage. Cassidy imagined that the ocean was still alive and healthy. But it didn’t even smell like it used to.

“You go on ahead,” said Deacon. “I’ve got issues with my boots.”

“No, I’ll wait with you,” she said.

“You haven’t had anything to drink in hours,” said Deacon. “Go get some water, Charmer. I’ll be right behind you.”

Cassidy shrugged and walked ahead with Sturges.
Rowdy was on patrol when they walked up. “Well look who it is, our coolest little brother! Welcome home! And you brought our CJ with you!”

Sturges hugged his friend, then Rowdy embraced Cassidy as well.

They walked into the main part of the compound where Zeke was messing with the jukebox. He looked up and his whole face lit up.

“Baby brother!” he cried, and grabbed Sturges around the neck, knuckling the top of his head.

“And I’m still bigger than you!” laughed Sturges. “Did you quit working out? Knew it was a lost cause!”

Zeke flexed. “I never quit. I’ll give you a beat down one of these days.” He saw Cassidy.

“Look at that! CJ! Guess she finally…” he stopped as Sturges shook his head and made a hand signal to stop talking as Deacon wandered in.

Zeke sighed. “I get it,” he said. “Deacon, how’s it hanging?” He gave the other man a fist bump.

“Long and loose,” answered Deacon, which made the assembled Cats laugh.

“So you finally decided to come home, Derrick?” asked Zeke.

“I came here for some parts,” his brother answered, and proceeded to explain what was going on.

Deacon rounded up some beer and water and brought it to a table. He put his arm around Cassidy’s shoulder and drew her close to him. Zeke gave them a glance then looked at Rowdy, who shrugged.

“Well you know where to find it if we still have it,” said the Cat’s leader. “But at least stay a little while. I declare tonight Open Mic Night! Totally razz my berries if you’d entertain us some, little brother.”

Sturges blushed. “Uh I don’t think I do that stuff anymore Zeke. But you go on ahead.”

“You know the rule. Every Cat gets involved. Your voice is unreal Derrick. Share it.”

“I dunno,” said Sturges hesitantly.

“Well I do,” said Zeke. “I’m older and what I say goes.”

“You’re not the boss of me!” cried Derrick, dramatically pouting.

“You remember when you said that to daddy?” laughed Zeke. “I thought I was gonna be an only child that day!”

“Pretty nearly was,” answered Sturges. “He tanned my hide like he needed a leather jacket. I sure as hell never lipped him off again after that!”

“I miss daddy,” said Zeke.

“So do I,” agreed Sturges.

Cassidy sighed heavily. “I still need to find someone who can get my daddy well again.”
Zeke motioned to Johnny D. “You need a good medic? This guy’s your man! Trained as a doc in the midwest. Hell you saw how he put Deacon back together! Johnny D is the miracle man.”

Cassidy’s eyes widened and she smiled widely. “For real? Johnny D you can come with me to the Vault and help my daddy? Will you? Please?”

He nodded. “I’ll do what I can. But don’t listen to old Zeke. He makes too much of me. If I was so good, Aimin’ Andy still be here with us.”

“Aimin’ Andy,” said Zeke. “Let’s reflect.”

Everyone was silent for a moment.

“I’ll do what I can CJ,” said Johnny D.

“Thank you, thank you!” she cried then turned to Deacon. “Isn’t this great Deeks? My daddy will be coming home! And you can finally meet him! Oh he’ll love you as much as I do. And he’ll not hate rockabilly anymore because one will have saved his life!”

Deacon nodded. “That’s great, Charmer.” There was no excitement on his face and that bothered her. Couldn’t he even pretend to be happy? Maybe he thought her father wouldn’t like him.

“Deacon,” she said, hugging him. “It’s ok. Daddy will adore you. You saved my life and you’ve made me so happy. That’s all he ever wanted for me! Happiness in whatever I chose to do. It’s going to be great!”

He carded his fingers through her hair and pressed his lips to her head.

*I have to tell her it’s not going to turn out how she hopes,* thought Deacon miserably. *It’s going to break her heart. But will she even believe me if I do? Maybe I should just keep it to myself and be there for her.*

“All right Cats,” said Zeke. “We need to get our shit together for tonight. Come to the trailer for a pow wow. Not you CJ. You can stay here and entertain my little brother. And Deacon.”

She grinned and waved as the rest of them walked away. Sturges grabbed a beer and sat down on a cinderblock.

“My brother always gets me into things,” he said. “I don’t want to make a fool of myself tonight.”

“You won’t,” said Cassidy.

“He’s making me out to be something I’m not,” said Sturges.

“I heard the holotape, Derrick. I’m very excited about tonight!”

He groaned. “I told him to throw that thing away ages ago and he said he did!”

“I’m glad he didn’t,” she said. “It was amazing, really.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “Are you messin’ with me?”

“No way,” she said.

“It’s going to be an interesting night,” said Deacon. “You want to play checkers, Charmer?”
She nodded.

“I’m going to go bug Zeke,” said Sturges and excused himself.

“Why didn’t you toss that stupid tape out?” Sturges asked his brother.

“Why would anyone destroy a brilliant piece of art? You’re being a real wet rag about this. Living with squares, man. It’s ruined you.”

“They’re good people,” said Sturges.

“But they’re not Cats,” answered Zeke. “Besides you know girls like CJ, they love a good song. Win her heart with that fab voice of yours.”

“Zeke, she’s with Deacon.”

Zeke clutched his heart and fell onto his bed. “You wound me! You gonna let an old square like that have your girl? She’s a Cat, man! A cool Cat like her needs to be with her own people! He’s not right for her. You sing to her and you’ll have it made in the shade. Trust me. I know what I’m on about.”

Sturges sighed. “I don’t want to muddy the waters. She’s got enough on her mind already what with the Institute, her brother and her daddy.”

“She needs you. You dig? Gotta put yourself out there. Let her know you’re the one. Man, you sure do need all the help you can get. Lucky for you, you’ve got us.”

Sturges shook his head. “You’re gonna get me in shit, I know it already,” he said.

“Good shit, little brother, good shit.”

The Cats did a good job of setting up their little event. Poetry night, open mic night, and story night were all activities they did frequently. Zeke explained that it was important for the creative part of the mind to be exercised as much as the body. Cassidy couldn’t argue that.

Johnny D kicked things off with *Johnny B Good*.

Roxy bounced around to *Lollipop*.

Rowdy did her best with *Love Potion No. 9*.

Zeke was quite entertaining with *Mack the Knife*. He even wore a trenchcoat and fedora. Cassidy laughed and sang along.

“Allright, Cats,” said Zeke. “CJ, last time you were here you were telling us about some place from your world. I got that song here. You want to sing it to us? Give us that old world feeling? Come on, CJ!”

All the Cats cheered. She looked at Deacon.

“Go for it, sweetheart,” he said gently.

She shrugged and took the mic from Zeke. The gentle strains of *Old Cape Cod* played through the speaker. At that moment a breeze blew through the compound from the ocean and she drew in a breath and closed her eyes.
She remembered how beautiful it had once been. How perfect her life actually was when the world was free and clean and whole.

She wasn’t a performer by any means, but she wasn’t shy and she had a world of emotion inside her. When her song came to a close and she opened her eyes, the Cats and Deacon were simply staring at her.

Then they erupted with cheers.

“I almost cried little sister!” said Zeke. “You made me want to live in your world.”

She smiled wistfully. “Me too. I want to go back.”

“I can’t imagine how awful it is now for you,” said Roxy.

“It pretty much sucks all the time,” Cassidy sighed.

“That was incredible, CJ,” said Sturges almost shyly. “I could almost visualize how it was. Makes me want to see the place.”

“It wouldn’t be the same anymore,” she said with a wistful smile. She sat back down next to Deacon, leaning her head on his shoulder.

Duke got up on the stage. His rendition of *Twilight Time* was very well done. Of course, he was the
one guy who actually practiced for the events.

Zeke pointed at his little brother. “Get up here, fream.”

“DDT,” Sturges said getting to his feet.

“What, and look like you?” asked Zeke.

“You wish you were that lucky,” answered Sturges.

“I picked out your song,” said Zeke.

“Oh hell no,” said his brother.

“You gotta work for what you want man,” whispered Zeke to him with a devilish grin.

Sturges was afraid to imagine what his brother had decided for him. He groaned inwardly when the love song *Earth Angel* started up. He shot Zeke a look, and his brother laughed. But when he saw the expression on Cassidy’s face once he started, he decided to buy Zeke a drink. Or two.

*I fell for you and I knew*

*The vision of your love-loveliness,*

*I hope and I pray that someday*

*I’ll be the vision of your happiness…*

As his eyes met hers, Cassidy felt herself hold her breath. The holotape had been great, but hearing Derrick live was an entirely different experience. If he’d only lived in her time he would have been famous. She truly believed that.

*Earth angel, earth angel, will you be mine?*

She swallowed hard and she couldn’t pull her eyes away from him.

*I’m just a fool, a fool in love with you…*

Sturges never imagined something so simple could affect someone so profoundly. Cassidy’s beautiful eyes were riveted to him and he wished he could freeze time. He also wished he were bold enough just to walk over and sing right to her. But he’d never do that. It would be awkward and make things hard for her.

*I love you too much to want to hurt you,* he thought.

As his song ended and his friends applauded and whistled, Cassidy was still looking at him, a soft smile on her face.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” she asked him.

*Yes,* he thought. *I can’t win your heart.*

“Well, we haven’t found out if I can get you into the Institute yet.”

“I have no doubt that you will,” she said. “That was amazing Derrick. I knew you were talented but that was incredible. If you had lived in my world, you’d have been famous.”
He felt the heat rise to his cheeks. “Aww CJ, you flatter me too much. I’m not that good.”

“You are so wrong on that,” she grinned. “He’s great, isn’t he Deeks?”

Deacon nodded. “You’ve got talent, I’ll give you that,” he answered.

“Are you going to sing something?” she asked him.

“Charmer, the whole point of being a spy is to keep things on the down low.”

“You’re not working right now, Deacon. Come on, sing to me!”

He shook his head. “There’s no downtime for spies. It’s just what you are. All the time.”

She looked disappointed but said nothing further. Behind her, Sturges saw Zeke give him a thumbs up.

After everyone had entertained, Blue Jay turned on the jukebox.

“Ask your girl to dance,” whispered Zeke to his brother.

“You’re turning me into a bird-dog,” complained Sturges. “That would be too much anyway. I don’t even know if she can dance or likes to.”

“She’s a girl!” exclaimed Zeke. “Of course she can dance!”

“I’m gonna just back off from this one Zeke,” said Sturges quietly and his older brother saw there would be no getting around it. He sighed and went to find a beer.

There was conversation and the sharing of stories as the night wore on.

Eventually Cassidy felt tired and asked to be excused. She leaned down and gave Derrick a kiss on his cheek, making him definitely blush. “Sleep well CJ,” he said, wanting nothing more than to pull her into his arms and kiss her properly.

She settled into bed and Deacon immediately put his arms around her, curving his body around hers.

“Hey, Charmer?”

“Mmhmm?”

“You’ve got a beautiful voice.”

“Thank you Deacon,” she whispered. “I bet you do too.”

“I don’t sing. Never have, actually.”

“Try it sometime. It’s fun and girls like it.” She turned over in his arms.

Deacon kissed her head. “I’ve already got a girl.”

“Well you might need to sing to keep her,” said Cassidy.

Deacon chuckled and gave her a squeeze.

Cassidy’s lips found his, and she kissed him tenderly. Her hands roamed through his hair, down his
neck and back. She draped one leg over his hip and pressed against him.

He gave a soft, low groan and his own hand tightened in her hair. His kisses deepened and he pressed his body against hers in return. Desire flooded through him and the voice of reason grew fainter and fainter.

But another voice jumped in and grew louder.

*She wants to be yours,* it said mockingly. *She’ll give everything she has to you and you’ll suck her life away.*

Deacon ignored it and pushed Cassidy onto her back, taking her hands and pinning her, one knee between her thighs.

Cassidy arched her back and lifted her chin, exposing her throat. “Deacon,” she whispered, as his lips kissed the sensitive flesh there, making her shiver with desire.

He moved against her, wanting her to feel his overwhelming need. His voice was husky as he spoke her name against her soft, smooth skin. She smiled at him.

“I love you,” she whispered.

The words hung in the darkness, weaving and flowing with the sound of the ocean outside.

*I love you I love you I love you.* The voice in his head chanted over and over, becoming faster and higher pitched...then it changed.

It spoke a name he hadn’t heard in decades. A name he no longer answered to.

He opened his eyes and looked down at Cassidy.

But he saw her. His dead wife.

*Why did you bring death to me?* She whispered, her voice ragged through the slash in her throat, that oozed blood in rhythm with a heart that no longer beated. *You said you loved me! You brought me pain!*

Deacon let out a cry of terror and guilt. He froze, his eyes staring yet unseeing. Hair that had once been as golden as a field of wheat in summer was now matted and soaked with blood. Green eyes once so filled with life and joy stared up at him in accusation and hatred.

“Deacon?” Cassidy saw his wide, fear filled eyes and tried to free her hands but she couldn’t. He was too strong and held her too tightly. “You’re hurting me. Let me go!” She squirmed. “Deacon!”

*And this is your legacy,* said the voice. *Your hatred and violence dooming those who dare to love you. Go ahead...wrap your hands around that pretty little neck and squeeze the life from her. Do it! It would be more merciful than what you’re doing now, undeserving beast!*

“No!” he shouted. He pushed himself off Cassidy and stumbled backwards off the bed.

“Deacon! It’s just the mind sickness! It’s ok!” she cried out.

He saw the nightmarish body of his dead wife rise from the bed and reach out her arms to him, then the face shifted and became the bloated, blackened face of a dead man.

“Die!” he screamed at it. “Just die!”
Oh you already saw to that, didn’t you? It laughed at him, taking great joy in his torment.

“Deacon, please! It’s me, Cassidy!” She crawled off the bed and tried to reach him, but he curled up and held his hands up to ward her off.

“Just get away from me!” he shouted. “Go!”

Cassidy tried once more to touch him, to reassure him it was her and not some horror from his nightmares, but he lashed out and struck her in the shoulder, hurting her. She gave a yelp and got to her feet, running towards the garage.

The Cats’ had all retired for the night, and the garage was silent and dark save for one lantern burning on the bar. Cassidy sank down beside the quiet, dark jukebox, her knees drawn up to her chest, and fought to keep her sobs quiet.

She was mortified that perhaps someone had heard their altercation, that others besides Sturges would know that Deacon had such a serious issue. She didn’t want anyone to know because it would embarrass him and she didn’t want that.

But Cassidy didn’t know how to deal with it. She told him she could, that it didn’t matter, but it did. He had hurt and frightened her, something she never believed he would never do.

Her wrists and shoulder ached miserably.

“CJ?” Sturges’ soft voice made her look up suddenly.

He crouched down in front of her. “Honey, what happened? He have one of those episodes you told me about?”

She nodded, looking at him through tear soaked lashes. He reached for her, but when he touched her shoulder she flinched, and wouldn’t let him take her hands either.

His expression changed to sorrow. “Did he hurt you? CJ?”

“He didn’t mean to!” she hiccuped. “The nightmares, the sickness got him. He sees things, bad things from...from...his memories. And they want to hurt him.”

“Yeah I get it,” said Sturges. “But that doesn’t make him any less dangerous to you or anyone else. Honey, let’s go somewhere quiet where you can calm down.”

She shook her head. “No, I need to go and see if Deacon’s ok. It messes him up really bad!”

“He can suck it,” said Sturges angrily. “Right now I’m only concerned about you.” He held out his hands to her. “Come on, CJ.”

She relented, her mind and body exhausted, and took his hands and let him gently get her to her feet. Sturges led her to his room, and wrapped a blanket around her. He sat on a chair and let her curl up on the bed.

“What sets him off, CJ?” he asked her when she’d calmed down.

“Umm...I don’t know. When we’re being close usually.” She didn’t want to go into detail.

“How long does it last?”

“He just gets out of it and is normal again after a few minutes. Well at least that last time he was.
My daddy never told me how to deal with such a thing. I guess he never imagined I’d be with someone who had the mind sickness.”

Sturges sighed. “Did he hurt you badly? Want me to take a look?”

She shook her head and pulled the blanket tighter around her. “I’ll live. It wasn’t that bad and he didn’t mean to do it, Derrick. He can’t help it. And he’ll feel terrible about it later.”

Sturges didn’t respond. He wanted to comfort her, to hold her and let her feel safe. But the best he could offer up was his bed and a blanket and the promise he’d watch over her through the rest of the night.

And he did.
Cassidy's relationship with Deacon becomes questionable; the Atom Cats come for a visit to assist with Nate.

The relationship between Cassidy and Deacon had become strained. She was wary of him, and afraid to show too much affection, lest it trigger him into one of his episodes. She realized that she couldn’t pull him out of them, that he had to regain his senses on his own.

She had to wait and let him approach her which was hard when she needed and wanted his comfort. She would carefully tell him she loved him, and would more often than not wait with bated breath to see if it would send him spiralling.

He never told her what he saw or remembered and always acted as though nothing had happened afterwards. That began to wear on Cassidy. She wanted to talk about it, to help him face it. But he seemed to want to pretend the episodes never happened.

She began having trouble envisioning a future together. He’d told her that he’d once wanted a family. Cassidy wanted one as well. But each time they became physically or even emotionally intimate, it would trigger him. How could they start a family in that case?

Their relationship was unbalanced and it began affecting her. She became withdrawn, worried and wary. Sturges was the first to notice it, then Marcy and Mama Murphy. But Cassidy wouldn’t talk about it for fear of embarrassing Deacon, and built a wall around herself and him. She stopped doing settlement activities with others unless he was sleeping. Cassidy knew it was unhealthy and unnatural, but she loved him, and she was nothing if not loyal and protective.

“I’ll always stand by you,” she’d told him. “No matter what. Because I love you.” And she yearned to hear him tell her he loved her too. But nothing she did coaxed those words out of him. Eventually she believed she wasn’t lovable, and she became almost a shadow, waiting on Deacon’s every move, her life dictated by his moods.

For his part, Deacon knew he loved her. But he was afraid. Afraid of what would happen if he voiced that feeling out loud. He did his best to minimize the damage of his episodes, to behave as normally as possible afterward. Cassidy walked on eggshells around him straight after, and it hurt him to see her that way. Gone was her spontaneous, playful nature, replaced by a wary and watchful one.

He told her she was beautiful, that he enjoyed every moment they had together. But never could he muster up those three little words that he knew she longed to hear. Deacon saw how she changed, and the change wasn’t a positive one.

Guilt became his constant companion once again. He saw that he couldn’t drag her through the tumultuous affair that was his life. His sins were his own, and he needed to live with them, she didn’t. But he felt trapped. Leaving would destroy her, and staying would ultimately do the same.
The tragedy was that Deacon wanted desperately to have the life Cassidy was offering him. But he knew he couldn’t. Something would happen to put an end to it, and the anxiety of worrying what that would be was eating at him.

He received a message from the Railroad that required his direct attention, and he took it as an excuse to back off for awhile. To clear his mind and figure out what to do.

Cassidy was not impressed, however.

“How could he seriously do this to me?” cried Cassidy.

“I don’t think he meant to hurt you, honey,” said Sturges. “But it seems he feels really strongly about doing this.”

“Charmer,” Deacon had said. “You’ve got Preston and Sturges and a slew of settlers here to help you out finding those parts. I’m the only spy the Railroad has. Me and Glory are the only agents left. We lost a safehouse and the replacement that we chose has gone dark. I need to check it out.”

“But you said you’d help me, Deacon!,” she protested. “You said you were helping me get my little brother back and I know scavving for parts is awful and boring but we need to do it!”

He’d tried to hold her and comfort her and hopefully help her see his point, but Cassidy was livid.

“You’re abandoning me! I need you now most of all, when we’re this close to building the relay!”

“I’ll be back in a few days, I promise. I’m going with you into the Institute, right?” He picked up his pack. “Just a few days, Charmer. I’ll miss you, but these synths...we’re all they have.”

“No,” she’d argued. “They have the whole Railroad. I only have you!”

She’d refused any placating from him. She was hurt and incensed that Deacon would leave her for any reason. She understood that the building of the relay would be a slow and tedious process but it required an awful lot of material gathering and Preston couldn’t spare every settler for the task. Sanctuary still had to run after all.

Cassidy had dedicated the last several months to taking care of him. He’d become her whole world and suddenly she felt like a balloon cut free of it’s string. He was her tether to the world and the feeling of being loose was terrifying.

Cassidy had walked away from Deacon and let him go, and found herself at Derrick’s house.

“It’s like he doesn’t care about me anymore! I feel like I’m always second place since I found the Railroad and I hate it.”

“I don’t know what to say CJ,” said Derrick sympathetically. “Seems to me he’s really dedicated to his work and I guess he’s been neglecting his duties to be with you and it’s caught up to him. But I’ll go with you to find what we need. Me and Dogmeat!”

She sighed unhappily. “I don’t think he loves me. Not like I love him. I’m just not important enough.” She grunted and curled up on his couch. “I do wish I was a synth. Then maybe he’d stick around and help me.”

Derrick tried to cheer her up. “Maybe you are a synth! Try jumping up onto the roof lately?”

Cassidy gave him a wry look. “Nick says they don’t have super powers so that probably wouldn’t
even work. No, I’m just plain old boring Cassidy. The world’s most uninteresting girlfriend.”

Sturges ruffled up her hair gently. “Not true. World’s most beautiful girlfriend. No accountin’ for the fact Deacon’s blind. Always wearing those shades of his. And there isn’t anything boring about you. Not even if you were lying there catching rays not saying a word would you ever be boring.”

Cassidy had to give in and smiled.

“Hey Johnny D and Rowdy will be coming soon don’t forget,” said Sturges. “He’s gonna get your daddy up and at ‘em! You’ll be having so much fun you won’t even think about Deacon. Come on. You can help me with some of the welding for the platform plates. You’re getting pretty good at that.”

Cassidy shrugged and followed him out to where they’d decided to build the relay. Scav teams were out and about looking for the more rare items they needed. It was all just a matter of time.

Johnny D and Rowdy arrived a few days later with a surprise. Zeke had decided to come along and see what was so great about Sanctuary that his little brother wanted to be there instead of the garage. Of course, he knew the real reason.

Cassidy was beside herself with excitement. It was the first joy she’d had in months. She took the Cats on a tour of the whole place and introduced them to everyone. One of the settlers showed a great interest in them and they invited him to come along and see if he liked life at the garage. He was also into power armor and was fascinated by the suits the Cats were wearing.

“Looks like we got us a greenhorn,” said Zeke proudly. “So where’s that Deacon?” he looked around. “Hiding in the shadows somewhere?”

“No,” said Cassidy. “He’ll be back soon. He went to do something somewhere.” She shrugged and Zeke saw the unhappiness in her eyes. He looked questioningly at Sturges who shook his head.

The Cats parked their armor and went to the Cantina. Mama Murphy served up lunch.

“I can kinda see why you like it here,” said Johnny D. “Got yourself a real little city. It’s cool little brother. But you still belong at home with the Cats!”

“Maybe one day when this place has someone to take over for me. Right now, I’m pretty much it,” he responded.

“Bring CJ home with you when you do,” said Rowdy. “We need more girl power!” She gave Cassidy a fist bump.

It was nice to have them there. Cassidy did feel the pull to live at the garage but she realized she wouldn’t want to be that far from Derrick.

“So, this vault gig,” said Johnny D. “We going to do that in the morning? Kinda beat right now, if that’s ok. Was thinking of having a few brews, hang out.”

“That would be fine,” said Cassidy. “I was kind of hoping that Deacon would be back by now. He said a few days a few days ago!”

“Does he do that a lot?” asked Zeke. “Just bug out?”

Cassidy shook her head. “No this is the first time he’s left me like this. Ever since I found the Railroad he’s been obsessed with that.”
Zeke looked surprised. “That’s his gig? The Railroad? I thought the guy was a bit of an oddball but they’re a whole mess of kookie.”

Cassidy shrugged. “They’re pushy and annoying but I didn’t think they were crazy. Well...Tom. He was crazy.”

She told them about the serum he wanted to inject her with and how he thought the Institute was in everyone’s blood.

“Good thing you’re a Cat, CJ,” said Rowdy. “You don’t need to get in bed with those squares.”

Strangely those words comforted her. She belonged somewhere, with someone.

“That’s right,” agreed Sturges. “She’s a rockabilly girl!”

Her smile was filled with delight. “At least now daddy can’t be mad about it anymore. The Cats are going to save his life.”

“Is that an old world thing?” asked Johnny D. “Being frosted about people who are different?”

Cassidy nodded. “Too much. Daddy didn’t like rockabilly because he said they were all gangsters. People did that. Just labelled everyone the same. I hated it.”

“Not cool,” said Zeke. “We Cat’s don’t label anyone until they deserve it. Even raiders.”

Rowdy nodded. “If you did I would be flatlined in that ditch.”

They talked, drank and snacked well into the night. Occasionally the night guard would come past and say hello, and Marcy stayed to chat awhile after going for a midnight snack, but other than that it was just the Atom Cats.

Cassidy settled them into the guest house, and headed off to her own bed.

Sturges caught up with her. “Hey let me walk you home CJ,” he said. “You know, in case of a raider attack.”

She laughed. “You and your lack of weapon.”

“I don’t see you with one either,” he grinned.

“It’s nice to feel safe. The walls and the turrets here, they sound the alarm before anything can get in. At least that’s what I believe. It’s never happened yet.”

“You uhh...nervous about tomorrow?” he asked softly.

“Very,” she answered honestly. “I haven’t been down there since I left. What if the pods failed...what if Johnny D…” she broke off and hugged herself.

Sturges lifted her chin up. “Hey now. Whatever happens you won’t be alone, right? We’re a family. All of us here. Especially the Cats.”

Cassidy nodded. “I know. But...he’s my daddy. I don’t want to be here without him.”

Sturges reached out and pulled her into an embrace. “I get it, honey. We’ll get through this world together though. All of us. Now go get some sleep. Dogmeat is right here and he’s looking beat too. It’s a hard go sniffing all these new people.”
Cassidy gave him a squeeze and looked up into his face. “Thanks for being here for me,” she said, and with that, went into her house and closed the door behind her.
The End Of The Dream

Chapter Summary

Cassidy’s world is torn apart when things go tragically wrong on every level.

“I want Deacon to be here,” protested Cassidy.

It was noon and they had waited all morning for Deacon’s return.

“Let’s go down and see what’s what,” said Johnny D. “We got a gurney? Doubt big daddy’s gonna be able to walk out of there after being in the deep freeze for 200 years.”

“We have one,” said Cassidy. “It’s in the clinic house.”

“I’ll go get it,” said Preston. “Anything else you need from there while I’m at it?”

“I got what I need with me,” said Johnny D, holding up his medical bag. “Hopefully it’s all good.”

They walked to the start of the pathway that led up to the vault site. No one talked much, Cassidy’s nerves were making her jittery. Sturges stood by her.

They heard Preston pushing the rickety old gurney along. Sturges had welded it back together as best he could but it wasn’t built to roll on the uneven ground of a post apocalyptic society.

“We might not be able to roll this thing after we get our patient on it,” said Johnny D. “Zeke we might need your muscle to help carry it.”

“Nah,” said Sturges. “If you need muscle you’ll need me. Zeke has bony girl arms.”

Zeke kicked a clump of earth at his brother but Sturges deftly moved out of the way, laughing.

Rowdy rolled her eyes. “See CJ, boys never stop being boys.”

Preston nodded to Cassidy. “Good luck in there, Cassidy,” he said. “I’m looking forward to meeting your father.”

“Alright,” said Johnny D. “Lead on little sister.”

Cassidy led them over the bridge and up the hill. She could feel the Cat’s awe as they entered the gated vault site. She paused and looked back down the hill, hoping to see Deacon. But there was only Preston and the odd settler meandering about.

She stepped into the elevator control booth. The heavy engines started up and the ground rumbled beneath.

Sturges pointed southward. “That’s the direction of the Glowing Sea,” he said.
They all looked, imagining that fateful day.

Cassidy walked over and ushered them onto the platform. “The dropped us down right when the bomb fell,” she said. “I felt the rush of the air and I looked up when the elevator top closed. It was the last time I ever saw my world.”

Her lips quivered slightly but she took a deep breath. There was a sharp jerk and the elevator began to move downwards. The Cats all looked up as she had once done, and watched the daylight disappear.

The vault was still damp, still chilly and still exactly the same as Cassidy remembered it. Their footsteps and voices echoed as they walked slowly down to the cryo units.

“You were in one of these things for 200 years little sister?” asked Zeke. “Much respect. I’d flip my wig and die.”

Cassidy nodded. “My pod is the one on the left at the end. Daddy’s is across from me.”

She stopped at her father’s pod. The cryofreeze was still going, but the glass was frosted up. Her friends stood back as she started the sequence and opened the pod doors.

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She stopped at her father’s pod. The cryofreeze was still going, but the glass was frosted up. Her friends stood back as she started the sequence and opened the pod doors.

“You were in one of these things for 200 years little sister?” asked Zeke. “Much respect. I’d flip my wig and die.”

Cassidy nodded. “My pod is the one on the left at the end. Daddy’s is across from me.”

She stopped at her father’s pod. The cryofreeze was still going, but the glass was frosted up. Her friends stood back as she started the sequence and opened the pod doors.

“Hey daddy,” she said softly. “I brought help like I promised. And I found Shaun! And... no getting mad. My new friends are rockabillies and they aren’t gangsters at all. I have a man too, his name is Deacon and he’s beautiful.”

The sequencer began to warm up the pod. Cassidy turned to Johnny D. “Ok it’s going to take a bit to get him thawed out. It took me awhile too and I was so weak and messed up I fell out of my pod onto the floor. Maybe we can put daddy on the gurney so that doesn’t happen.”

Johnny D walked forward and put his medical bag down. He looked at Nate then turned around slowly to Cassidy.

“Little sister....” he said slowly, softly. “Can you tell me about that day, when big daddy here got hit?”

She nodded and told him everything, from Kellogg and the technician showing up, to the argument over Shaun, to the flash of the gunfire.

“So...your daddy was trying to stop them from taking your little brother?”

“Yes. He was so weak though, he couldn’t hold on when the technician grabbed my brother.”

Sorrow flooded Johnny D’s features, and Rowdy and Zeke exchanged glances. Sturges was behind Cassidy and it dawned on him what Johnny D had figured out. His heart sank to his stomach.

“He was awake, and fighting them when Kellogg shot him...is that right?” asked Johnny D.

“Yes!” exclaimed Cassidy. “He was so brave...then Kellogg said to let go or something and...and...then...” Her eyes widened and all the color drained from her face. “J...Johnny D...?”

The big Atom Cat shook his head slowly. “Kellogg killed him, little sister. He was already dead when you put him back on ice.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No. NO. He wasn’t dead! Kellogg just shot him and I froze him right away and you have to fix him now! NOW Johnny D!” When no one moved she pointed at her
father’s body and pushed her friend. “NOW!” she screamed.

The big, burly Cat had seen a lot in his time as a medic, terrible, awful things. But nothing hit him harder than seeing this fragile young woman’s whole world come apart at the seams for the second time. It had been years since he’d felt the sting of tears in his eyes.

Cassidy spun around to Sturges. “Derrick! Tell him he’s wrong! Please!”

The mechanic swallowed the lump in his own throat and walked over to the pod. An ugly bullet wound on the upper left of Nate’s head clearly showed the fatal shot. Even Sturges, with his almost non existent medical knowledge saw it.

“Honey...he’s gone. I’m so sorry.”

Cassidy couldn’t breathe. The vault seemed suddenly too small, too enclosed, and getting smaller. She turned to her father’s body.

“Daddy! Wake UP! You’re not dead I know you’re not! Come ON!” She grabbed the still frozen, inert hand and pulled.

Sturges reached for her, trying to pull her away. She screamed at him. “Fuck off Derrick! All of you! You don’t know anything!”

Sobs tore from her throat. She looked up and saw the dreadful bullet wound in her father’s head. She remembered the struggle between him and Kellogg. Saw the muzzle flash and her father slump, and watched the technician grab her little brother.

She’d been too traumatized to accept what had happened. Her mind had told her that her father was alive. And she’d clung to that hope, that last bit of her life, the belief that her family would be saved. And even if she had to live in the twisted, ruined world that was, she’d not have to be alone. Her daddy would be with her. Her little brother would be there.

Now it was over.

Her daddy was gone.

She was alone.

She pushed Sturges and Zeke out of the way and ran. She ran for the metal bridge, and punched the button for the elevator. The cage door opened and she got on the platform, sobbing pitifully.

Sturges moved to go after her but Johnny D stopped him.

“She’s gotta process this Derrick,” he said. “I think she’s always known it. But something made her believe differently. This wasn’t a eureka moment. Give her time.”

Sturges looked miserable. “I never saw this coming. I guess I didn’t pay that much attention to the details of the story.”

“They need to get him out of here and bury him,” said Johnny D.

“This is shit,” said Rowdy. “Complete and total shit.”

“Yeah,” agreed Zeke. “Let’s reflect.”

They stood silently in respect for a man they’d never met, and never would, who’d meant the
world to his family and especially his daughter.

Cassidy bolted from the platform before it finished moving. She ran down the path, across the bridge and into Sanctuary. Preston saw her devastated expression and stopped.

“Cassidy? What happened?”

She turned, wild eyed, and there she saw Deacon, walking towards her from the security gate.

“Deacon!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. He dropped his pack and ran to her.

“Charmer! Woah, what’s going on! What’s up?”

Her voice broken by sobs she managed to tell him what had just happened in the vault. He gathered her into his arms and held her tightly as she cried.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m so fucking sorry. But...no one could have survived a head wound like that. They’re pretty much always fatal.”

Cassidy hiccupped and pulled away from him. “H...how...you never saw daddy. I never told you about the wound…”

He cursed himself. There was no point hiding from the truth anymore.

“When you were at the Memory Den,” he said carefully. “Doing that whole Kellogg thing. We all saw what you were seeing.”

“All of you? MacCready and Amari and Nick?”

“Yeah. Afterwards, Amari got pissed off at us. Said we had to tell you but…”

Cassidy was shaking. With rage, with betrayal, with sorrow. “All of you knew and you didn’t tell me?” she cried. “You let me just go on believing my daddy could be saved? Why?!”

Deacon hung his head. “Charmer, you had so much going on. I...I didn’t want you to get overwhelmed. Just figured there’d be time for all this once we got your brother sorted out.”

“I trusted you!” she cried. “I loved you! And you lied to me all those times I asked if you were keeping anything from me and you said no!”

Marcy and Jun heard the commotion and approached Preston. “What happened?” Marcy asked.

“They couldn’t save Cassidy’s father,” said Preston sadly.

“Oh no!” said Marcy.

“It’s not good,” said the Minuteman. “Apparently Deacon knew that he was dead and didn’t say anything.”

“That’s so wrong!” exclaimed Marcy.

“Yeah,” agreed Preston. “Let’s give them some space.”

They walked away, and the other settlers went about their business, not wanting to interfere.

“I don’t know what to say, Charmer,” said Deacon apologetically. “Except I’m sorry.”
“Don’t say *anything!* Because chances are it would be a lie anyway! You were part of the Railroad and never told me! You knew about my daddy for months and didn’t say a thing! And you’d been watching me before we even met and not a word until you got cornered!”

She swiped an arm across her eyes angrily to clear her vision. “Do you even *know* what love is? You said I was a kid so many times when we first met but I know more about love than you ever will!”

He reached out to take her hand but she jerked it away. “No! Don’t touch me! Want to know about love, Deacon, or whatever your name is? I loved you so much! I wanted to marry you. I wanted to take care of you for the rest of our lives. I wanted us to be a family!”

Cassidy let out a wracking sob. “I imagined it every night before I went to sleep. Me and you and a baby of our own just like you said you wanted before. I thought about leaving here and getting a little farm and being happy together. This world would have sucked way less for us both. We wouldn’t be alone anymore! I’d have died for you Deacon!”

His heart rate suddenly skyrocketed and his head began to pound. Even behind his glasses the light was glaring.

“Isn’t it perfect? It’s the prettiest farm I’ve ever seen!”

*Her green eyes, bright and full of joy. Golden hair shining in a sun that should have felt too bright but wasn’t.*

“Nothing brings you down does it, Barbara!” he said.

“Of course not! We’re together aren’t we? Nothing else matters.”

Deacon squeezed his eyes shut, tearing the glasses from his face and covering it with his hands.

“You thought you could hide from us, asshole?”

*The ugly scarred face. The sneering mouth.*

“Maybe we should have some fun with this filthy synth before we send her ass to the boneyard.”

*Deranged laughter. A woman’s screams.*

*The cacophony of gunfire and the smell of death.*

*Chaos. Rage.*

*Blood. So much blood.*

Deacon looked at his hands and saw the carnage there, just as it had been. Heads torn from bodies, entrails strewn about.

And in the middle of it all... *her.* Dead eyes staring sightlessly at a blue sky they’d never see again. Blood turning the golden hair to crimson.

He’d fallen to his knees, Cassidy staring at him.

*Bulging eyes.*

*Body swinging from the corner of the house across the street.*
It was him.


Deacon could smell the putrid rotting flesh. He shut his eyes again. “I’m sorry!” he shouted at it. “I’m sorry! You took her from me! Isn’t that enough?!?”

No one else saw his nightmares come to life. They haunted him as they had since the day they were created. He didn’t see Cassidy or Sanctuary. Deacon was trapped, locked in his own horror show.

Cassidy was hiccuping, shocked, devastated, seeing Deacon’s vacant, staring glassy eyes. She knew what was happening and she couldn’t even begin to process it. Everything in her world was now twisted and broken.

Tears forced their way from Deacon’s eyes. He began to sob.

As angry and hurt as she was, Cassidy couldn’t just watch him suffer. The love she’d felt for him couldn’t just be erased and turned off. She went to her knees beside him and reached for him.

The rotting dead man was suddenly beside him, rope still attached to his neck, bloated, blackened, grimacing face with those protruding eyes. It extended its arms and the mouth opened, a thick black viscous fluid pouring out.

Deacon flailed at it with a horrified scream, shoving it away.

He hit Cassidy on the side of her face and sent her sprawling, then scrambled to his feet, that look of pure terror still on his face.

He ran.

He ran for the security gate and the bridge, not stopping, not looking back. He ran as though the hounds of hell were at his heels. And in truth, they were.

All his guilt and sins had exploded. His dream to have something beautiful in his life, to have absolution, would never happen. No matter how fast and how far he ran, Deacon would never be free of his past because he himself had created the trap.

Cassidy lay where she’d fallen, curled up and sobbing. Her face hurt, her muscles ached and she wanted to die.

She felt soft, cool hands on her forehead.

“Come on, kid,” said Mama Murphy’s quiet voice. “Let’s get you in the house and cleaned up.”

Cassidy allowed herself to be helped up and led away. She couldn’t stop crying. She couldn’t think, couldn’t process anything that had happened.

“It’s just a nightmare,” she hiccuped. “I’m going to wake up. I’m going to wake up!” She pinched herself mercilessly over and over.

Mama Murphy took her hand. “Now now kid, let’s not do that. It’s going to be ok.” She brought her into the Cantina.

Zeke and Johnny D brought Nate’s body out of the vault.
“We don’t have a cemetery,” said Sturges. “Maybe we can bury him out back of CJ’s house. Close to her. She’d probably like that.”

“Whatever you think is best,” said Johnny D. “You know her better than we do.”

“This is such shit,” said Rowdy. She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I’ll get a couple shovels,” said Sturges after they’d brought the body to the back yard. A big old tree still survived and they decided it would be the nicest spot. There were some big rocks down by the river that he tasked two settlers to go and retrieve.

“I’ll get started on a grave marker,” he said. “Maybe CJ will want to do the name herself. I’ll leave that up to her.”

Marcy intercepted him at the garage. “Hey, is there anything I can do?” she asked.

“You could round up some pretty flowers. Some plants for around the grave,” said Sturges. “Where’s CJ at? She in the house?”

“Something went down with Deacon. Didn’t see all of it but he took off and Mama Murphy has Cassidy in the Cantina.”

“Shit, I better go to her. Can you get these shovels to Zeke and Johnny D in CJ’s yard?”

Cassidy was curled up in one of the guest beds in back of the Cantina.

“I know she hates chems,” said Mama Murphy. “But I had to give her something to settle her down. That Deacon...it was a bad scene Derrick. He was seeing ghosts.”

Sturges blinked. “Ghosts? What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. He was seeing things, bad things. He hit Cassidy and he took off.”

Anger flooded Sturges’ usually benign features. “He hit her? I’ll give him a beat down he’ll never forget!”

Mama Murphy placed a calming hand on his arm. “He wasn’t seeing her. There’s such a darkness in him. I seen it that first day. It is what it is.”

“I’m sorry if I sound like an ass,” said Sturges. “But I don’t want him back here. I don’t care what his excuse is. You don’t hit your girl. Ever. No man worth his salt does that.”

“I agree,” said the old lady. “I don’t think Cassidy will want him back either. He knew about her father being dead.”

“What?”

“That’s what I overheard. He knew before and didn’t tell her. Poor kid.”

Sturges balled up his fists and wanted, very badly, to punch someone. The target of his anger wasn’t available however and he took a deep breath.

“I’m going to have to get all of this from CJ when she’s ready. Look Mama Murphy, I’m going to take her to my place. I don’t want her to be alone when she wakes up.”

“I’ll keep a plate out for you from dinner. Don’t think anyone’s going to be in much of a mood for
Sturges nodded and went to the back. Gently he picked Cassidy up in his arms. She was limp and out cold. Her face was blotchy and her eyes looked swollen from crying. Her hair was dishevelled and damp in places. Worst of all, one cheek was red and swelling up. He held her close to his body and pressed his lips to her forehead. A whole range of emotions went through him as he stood there.

“I got you, honey,” he said softly. “Ain’t no one going to mess with you ever again if I have my way. And this time I’m damn sure I’ll get my way.”

He carried her away and tucked her into his bed. Dragging one of his upholstered chairs in, he did his best to make himself comfortable.

“I’m gonna live right here until you wake up,” he said to her. “I’ll never leave you alone CJ. I promise. And a Sturges always keeps their promise.”
A Whole New Life

Chapter Summary

Sturges watches over Cassidy and they have a heart to heart talk when she awakens.

Cassidy slept for 14 hours. The Cats had buried Nate and did their best to make it a nice resting place. Since he hadn’t left her side, Sturges didn’t have a chance to make up the marker but he didn’t think it would be the biggest issue. Dealing with Cassidy’s pain would be.

At 4am the world was quiet. She stirred and sat up, disoriented.

“You’re at my place,” said Sturges gently. “I didn’t think you wanted to be alone right now.”

Cassidy slowly got out of the bed. “I have to pee so bad right now that I’m amazed I didn’t just do it in my sleep.” She knew where the bathroom was and returned a few minutes later.

“Derrick,” she said. “Everything went to hell. I don’t even know what to do anymore. Daddy…my daddy…” She began to sob again, curling up and holding a pillow.

“It’s a shit deal, honey,” he said. “We’re all so sorry for your loss. We buried him in the yard under that big old tree there. Figured you’d like that place best since that was your home and all.”

“He was supposed to walk out of the vault with us and meet all of you, and thank Deacon for saving me…all these things that were supposed to happen today…and everything just…it’s…and Deacon…he’s gone…he…” She couldn’t contain her sorrow over that either.

“I heard he lit up the tilt sign pretty hard,” said Sturges. “I’m not going to mince words here. He was an asshole. You just don’t treat someone you love that way.”

Damp strands of hair trailed across her injured cheek and he gently reached out and moved them away.

“He didn’t love me,” she whispered. “All this time I loved him so much, and he just didn’t feel the same. I was just part of his plan. And…and when I wouldn’t join his group everything fell apart.” She hiccuped. “I think I always knew it but hoped I was wrong.”

“What are you going to do if he comes back?” Sturges asked softly.

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t want him back. He can’t come back here! I can’t do it anymore!”

“Mama Murphy said he saw ghosts. I can’t say I believe in that kind of thing, but she swore it. I think it’s better for you if he’s gone.”

“It was going to happen eventually. I’ve been feeling it for awhile. Since the Railroad really. We’re…from two different worlds. I didn’t care that he was so much older than me either. That shouldn’t matter. But he had a whole life before I was even born. And bad things happened to him and messed him up. I think this whole thing was doomed from the start. But…I loved him anyways.
I wanted to make him happy."

She wiped her tears, wincing as she touched the one side. “This world sucks so bad. And now it’s even worse. I spent all this time believing about my daddy...I don’t know what to do now. How can I go on without him? Now I have to tell Shaun our daddy’s gone.”

“When our daddy died,” said Sturges. “Me and Zeke left home. Then we stopped talking to each other for over a year. I felt that Zeke didn’t care enough about the fact he was gone. Truth was, he just hid his feelings. I didn’t. Made communication really hard and when he created the Atom Cats it was his way of coping. Mine was to hit up Quincy and live there, working to make a better life for the people.”

He took one of her hands and held it. She let him for a few minutes, then withdrew it and curled up with her hands under her chin.

“When we hurt, we throw ourselves into things to keep the pain away. I guess Deacon had the Railroad. You had your daddy and now your brother. After that, you’ll need something else. This is why I try and find good things every day. Because you can’t hide forever, honey. Or you’ll never heal.”

She was quiet and just lay there. “I wonder if he’d have been mad about me being a rockabilly now.”

“From what you’ve told me, he was a good man. A fair one. And you have your own life to live. I think he’d have realized that. This whole thing with him hating on us, that’s just a dad being a dad. Trying to protect his kids from going down the wrong path. It all comes from a place of love. I actually think he’d be pretty damn proud of you. Look at everything you’ve been through and you’re still standing.”

“I want to fall over,” she said.

“So did I at first. But you just go one day at a time.”

“What made you and Zeke start talking again?” she asked.

“Mama Murphy. She said that two people can see the same thing two different ways and neither one is wrong. She said that just because my brother didn’t act the way I thought he should have about our daddy didn’t mean he didn’t love him in his own way. She was right. And I went and talked to him about it.”

“But you wouldn’t live there.”

“No, it’s like here. You guys need me. Quincy needed me. The Cats didn’t. It’s silly to say I guess, but I like being needed. I have to feel useful and wanted to be happy, you know?”

She looked at him. The only light was from a collection of candles on a desktop. “I need to feel loved,” she said. “I always felt loved my whole life. Then I wake up in this sucky world alone. And met the worst possible person. Well he can have his synths and his railroad. I want nothing to do with either of them anymore. I liked Glory though. She’s a synth. She didn’t make me feel pressured to join up.”

“Well we can go see her if you like.”

“No, I don’t want to risk seeing Deacon. I never want to see him again. And maybe when I’m old and grey it won’t hurt but if I see him now I’ll just be a mess. I need to focus on getting my little
brother out of the Institute.”

“Do you want to have a funeral for your daddy?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“I told the Cats I’d make up a grave marker but figured you’d like to put his name on it. I don’t know it after all.”

“Nathaniel James Hartley,” she answered. “Colonel in the USMC.”

“I’d have liked to meet him,” said Sturges. “I think he’d have forgiven my rockabilly ways.”

She smiled, a small sad smile. “Have you been here the whole time I was sleeping?”

“Yes ma’am. Except when Mama Murphy brought me some food, and I had to use the bathroom, I’ve been right here. It’s 4am. You’ve been asleep for about 14 hours give or take.”

She stretched. “It feels that way. I think Mama Murphy gave me chems. I was sort of freaking out.”

He nodded. “She said she did. You needed them though so I’m not going to fault her for that. Why don’t you go back to sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”

Cassidy settled deeper into the covers. Then she put a hand out. “Derrick will you hold my hand just until I fall asleep?”

“I surely can,” he said and moved his chair closer. “If you don’t mind my big old feet on the edge of the bed.”

She nodded and he took her hand, holding it in both of his. “Look at your tiny paws,” he said. “Oh speaking of paws, you want I should let Dogmeat in here? He’s been lying on the step outside.”

“Poor puppy, let him in.”

The dog gratefully licked her head then crawled up behind her legs. Sturges resumed his watchful pose and held her hand. Daylight would be arriving soon and with it a brand new day.

A whole new life for Cassidy.
Chapter Summary

Cassidy says goodbye to her father and shares the bunker with Sturges; Cassidy receives a special gift; the Institute plan hits a snag; Cassidy uses the Relay.

Cassidy and Sturges made the grave marker, and she burned her father’s name and title into it. Then all of Sanctuary gathered into the little yard to pay their respects.

Cassidy talked about her father and what kind of man he was. She talked about how much she’d miss him. That there were so many things he wouldn’t be there to see, like when she brought her brother home.

Then she asked to be alone with him, sitting on the little stone bench someone had found for her and included beneath the tree. Her friends had done a beautiful job with the gravesite. She felt the love and appreciated it ever so much.

Only Dogmeat heard her heartfelt words: that she apologized to her father for turning into the one thing that he hadn’t been keen on, but that he’d been wrong and she would prove it as she lived her life. She thanked him for being the best father a girl could ever have had and that she’d raise her little brother just as he would have liked.

She cried. Letting go was hard, and she didn’t feel she could do it.

Then she went to find Derrick. “Can you come with me?” she asked. “I want to share something with you.”

“Sure thing. Let me clean myself up a bit. This platform is sure a messy beast to work on.”

She led him to the Franklin’s underground bunker. Sturges couldn’t believe his eyes. “You built this?”

“Mr. Franklin did but daddy gave him some money for it in exchange to use it. The Franklins didn’t put much in here but my daddy did.”

She let him dig through the boxes and when he found the tool box he gave an exclamation of delight. “This is fab! There’re things here I never dreamed I’d ever see! Honest to goodness mechanic’s tools!”

Cassidy smiled sweetly. “You can have them,” she said.

“No honey, I can’t take this!”

“You can and you will. I don’t know how to use them and Shaun is just a little boy. Please Derrick...it’s a gift. For everything you’ve done for me.”

He hugged her close and kissed the top of her head. “Thank you so much. This is the best thing
anyone has ever given me.”

Cassidy found her father’s electronic letter and sat on the bed. She played it.

Hello Cassidy. If you are hearing this tape, then the worst has come to pass. The bombs have fallen and I’m dead. I have no way of knowing if your mother and brother are with you, but I truly hope they are.

If you’ve survived then that means you made it to the vault. And now you’ve made it back to the surface.

I don’t know what the world will be like for you. I don’t know what year it is. I just know that your life will never be the same.

At this moment I’m upset at myself for not insisting on you learning some survival skills. I always let you make your choices and simply supported them. I wish now that I had been a bit more adamant that you have some sort of training lest this situation occur.

As I’m recording this I hope that this is all for nothing and I can play it for you when I’m old and grey and you’ve brought your children for a visit.

But I digress.

Cassidy, you will see 9 other holotapes. Each one is a video that will instruct you on the use of every weapon I have placed in this cellar. Watch them, learn them.

I’ve always been so proud of you. You’ve never disappointed me, and I doubt you ever will. I won’t be there to help you anymore, you’ll have to make decisions on your own, and some of them will be hard. Some of them will make you question yourself and what you stand for. Some of them...will be the wrong ones.

Follow your heart, listen to your gut.

I love you, Cassie.

And stay away from those rockabillies.

She had to laugh a bit through her tears at his last sentence. The words had so much more weight now that her father was truly gone.

“You see?” said Sturges. “He says he’d never be disappointed in you. Even if you’re a rockabilly girl!”

“I miss him so much. I just want to go back in time. Just spend one more day with him and my mom.”

He sighed. “It’s like that song though CJ. After that day you’ll want another one, and another.”

She looked at him tearfully. “I would have been ok with things working out how I imagined they would, if I couldn’t have my old world back.” She leaned over with her head on his shoulder.

“I know, honey. I’m sorry it had to turn out this way.”

They didn’t speak for a long time. He thought she might have dozed off when she spoke.

“Derrick I’m going to give you the code for this bunker. If you ever want anything or need
anything I want you to feel free to come here and take it. But only you. I just want this to stay between me and you and Codsworth. Ok?"

“I’ll never breathe a word of it,” he promised. “But do you think we should listen to the other tapes too? For the instructions on the weapons? Now you know I don’t like fighting and all that but since I’m the one who’s gonna be with you all the time, I better smarten up.”

She blinked. “Be with me? Like in the field? Out there?”

“That’s right. If you’ll have me. I might not be as good as Deacon or MacCready but I’ll learn. And I’ll do whatever I can to help you and keep you safe.”

“Because I’m a Cat and we take care of our own.”

He met her eyes. “Because you’re my best girl, remember?” Sturges reached out and touched her undamaged cheek tenderly.

“Yes,” she whispered.

They stared at one another for a long time. Cassidy seeing something in him she hadn’t before because she’d been too blinded by Deacon, and Sturges making a solemn vow to himself that he’d die for her if it came to that.

“I guess we should start scavving up more parts we need,” she said quietly, finally looking away.

“I hear that,” said Sturges, getting off the bed and picking up the tool box. “Let me get things squared away with my project and we can see what we should look for.”

They had fun. Cassidy and Sturges, chasing parts all over the Commonwealth, getting into battles and near misses, being chased by the Brotherhood and even a Deathclaw when they happened upon her nest.

Sometimes she was able to forget her sorrow and just focus on the moment. It was good for her.

But healing took time, and often they’d hit up areas she and Deacon had been, and she remembered their time together. It hurt, and often she’d cry, Sturges standing loyally at her side, offering what comfort he could. Mostly he just let her feel what she needed to feel, and did his best to cheer her up afterward.

Sanctuary was growing, and often there were no extra people available to help scavenge so the going was slow with only the Cats doing the work.

Zeke and company had decided to stay awhile, mostly to make sure Cassidy was alright, and do their best to try and put her and Sturges together.

Cassidy and Sturges stopped in to visit Nick Valentine, who was still working on the case but hadn’t gotten any new leads. They shared their information with the detective and he was thrilled that there was some progress.

He’d been disappointed to hear what happened with Deacon. “You seemed pretty happy together,” he said. “Even when things get messed up though, they have a way of righting themselves as they should. The right person will come along, doll. Have faith.”

Standing beside her, Sturges thought to himself. *I’m right here, CJ!*
Piper had nagged at Cassidy to do an interview. She begged and cajoled, but Cassidy wasn’t in the right frame of mind for such a thing.

“When things settle down for you, will you come back and do it? Please?” Piper had asked.

Cassidy hadn’t promised, but she’d said she would think about it. Piper had to be satisfied with that.

Sturges worked hard to be as much of a support as possible for her. He loved spending every waking moment at her side, and often convinced her to stay at his house, or to let him stay at hers. It encouraged him that occasionally he caught her watching him, and she’d complimented him several times.

When she saw the drawing he’d made of her, she couldn’t stop talking about it. She showed every single person she could find, and Sturges found himself blushing all too frequently.

One night as they sat inside his house looking at car magazines she said, “Derrick, can you draw a picture of me and you together? With a car!”

He was excited about that and got to work right away. When it was done, he presented it to her as a gift. Cassidy was awestruck. He’d drawn her in a pretty dress with a flower in her hair, sitting on the hood of a Corvega Atomic 8. He’d drawn himself wearing the Atom Cat’s outfit, leaning on the car with a big grin on his face.

Time passed and one day Sturges looked at the schematics.

“We pretty much got what we need now,” he said as they sat outside his house. “I need to get building. You want to help?”

“I would. But you need to tell me what to do because I have no clue about anything like that. I don’t even know what this thing is going to look like when it’s done.”

“I sort of do,” he laughed. “But I think it’s going to be a surprise for everyone. The problem is, I’m not sure how to run it and teleport with you, honey.”

“You’re going to come with me?”

“Of course. I did say I’d be with you every step of the way. I meant it.”

Cassidy sighed deeply with gratitude. “I’m so thankful for you,” she said. “I can’t imagine making it through everything I’ve been through without you.”

“I’m just glad you want me around as much as you do,” he said. “Come on. Let’s get to work.”

The stabilizer platform was large. A few of the settlers were putting together another generator just to power the entire design. Codsworth had rounded up 4 fusion cores and was out looking for even more.

As they worked, Marcy and Mama Murphy brought over lunch.

“This thing is huge,” said Marcy. “It’s pretty intimidating. I hope it works.”

“So do I,” said Sturges. “My best girl is putting her life in my hands. If that’s not pressure I don’t know what is!”

“It’s going to be fine, Derrick,” said Cassidy. “If it kills me, it will kill you too anyway.”
“Morbid but true,” he said.

“So you’re going with her?” asked Marcy.

“Yes ma’am.”

“You’re braver than me. I’m scared of the Institute.”

“So am I,” said Cassidy. “I have no idea how we’ll be received. I mean they might just kill us on sight. I’m trying not to think about that.”

“I don’t want to either,” said Marcy. “Jun has some things he wants you to take just in case.”

“Gladly,” said Cassidy.

They worked night and day on the schematics. There were times that things just didn’t come together as they should and Sturges was frustrated. When that happened Cassidy made him step back and they’d go for a walk, or practice on the gun range, or even just hang out with the Cats.

“CJ sure loves you,” said Zeke one afternoon as they sat in the shade and had a beer.

Cassidy and Marcy had taken Rowdy and Johnny D to the depot they’d built at the old Red Rocket grounds. Travelling provisioners had a hard time getting through the security gate with their fully stocked Brahmin so Preston suggested a central depot where they could load and unload.

It worked out great.

“What are you talking about?” asked Sturges.

“Come on little brother, she gets a real kick out of you. She’s been sticking to you like glue! Time to make your move, my man.”

“Again with this. I’m not some bird dog,” Sturges said.

“You can’t be a bird dog if the girl’s not jacketed. Deacon’s gone. He’s not coming back. Tell her how you feel. Yesterday already.”

“She’s got too much on the go. She needs time to get past what happened. Deacon did a number on her that’s for sure.”

“This is why you have to make her forget him,” said Zeke.

“She’s doing fine on her own, and we’re really close as it is. Things are good between us. I don’t want to start being a hound dog now.”

Zeke shook his head. “Knowing you, you’re gonna sit on this until she finds someone else. Girl like that, she’s cooking with gas. Won’t take someone long to figure out how great she is. Someone like me, even.”

Sturges gave his brother a hard glare. “You wouldn’t dare pull some shit like that. Cruisin’ for a bruisin’ if you did.”

Zeke laughed. “I’d never do something that low, bro. But you’re way gone on her. And I’m thinking she feels the same about you.”

“I’m taking things one day at a time Zeke,” said Sturges. “Institute first. Personal stuff later. You
sticking around til we go?”

“We gotta get back to the garage,” said Zeke. “Been gone too long as it is. Duke had a few new
recruits but we need to get back to it. I’ll be back though. Pound you and drag you home where you
belong.”

“You’re welcome to try,” said Sturges. “Well as long as you’re still here give me a hand with this
thing.”

The platform was completed later that night. Everyone stood around looking at it.

“One piece out of four,” said Sturges. “I’m going to ask everyone here to lend a hand to get the rest
up. It’s hard for me to work on it alone and my brother is lazy and his work is shit.”

Zeke laughed. “We’re heading home in the morning. Out of nowhere and back to cool.”

The truth was, he didn’t want to watch his brother and CJ dematerialize in that contraption. He was
scared, worried...every emotion had already gone through him. But as always he hid it well.

And the next day when the Cats headed out, he gave his little brother and CJ an extra long hug.

“More fun watching you struggle.”

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“CJ...we have a problem,” said Sturges, sticking his head in her door a few days later.

She looked up from her book. “Oh no, what is it?”

“We don’t have enough power to send us both. The relay will only handle one person.”

Cassidy’s face fell. “I have to go in there alone?”
He nodded and walked in, sitting down beside her. “I hate this. I’ve racked my brain trying to figure it all out but what it comes down to is that no matter what we do, our little system isn’t powerful enough.”

“But I saw a courser teleport with Shaun!”

He nodded. “The Institute relay is bound to be way more powerful than anything we can build out here. The courser had a chip in his head for one thing. There’s a whole mess of things going on that we just can’t duplicate. Do you want to scrap this idea and find another way in?”

Cassidy’s shoulders slumped. “No. We’re so close now...and Shaun is my brother. No one else should be risking their lives for this. I loved the idea of you coming with me. But maybe in the end this is what has to happen.”

“I’d rather find another way,” said Sturges.

“I know you would, because you worry about me. But we’ve worked so hard for this. I need to see it through.”

“I’m working on the console now,” he said. “That’s the last part. Having all the help I’ve gotten here has been great. Not too much longer and we’ll be ready to go. Uhh...make that you. You’ll be ready to go.”

He couldn’t mask his concern. Cassidy saw how deeply he cared for her and it touched her. No one else had ever been as fiercely loyal as Derrick Sturges. Everyone she’d ever met had had some sort of personal motivation for everything they did. She couldn’t figure out what Sturges’ was. He never did anything for his own ends. She didn’t even think he had his own ends.

“You’re one in a million,” Cassidy said. “You’ll be a great role model for my little brother.”

“You say the kindest things CJ,” he smiled.

And so it was, that the massive Institute relay was finally completed. It was a thing of incredible creation. The amount of hours it had taken to assemble, and the number of people who’d worked nearly around the clock was astonishing.

Cassidy couldn’t believe that everyone cared so much about her and her little brother. And maybe they didn’t...maybe it was the fact that someone was willing to fight back against the dreaded Institute that inspired such loyalty. Whatever it was, all of Sanctuary showed up that morning when Cassidy prepared to fulfil her plan.

The night before, the residents of Sanctuary had thrown a party for Cassidy. She’d not been in a party mood, but she appreciated their kind gesture. However, the best part of that evening came as twilight descended.

“Hey CJ,” said Sturges. “Come with me. I got something I want to show you.”

Curiously, she followed him through his garage into the area she had teased him about being his secret lab.

“Close your eyes, honey,” he’d said before opening the door. He led her carefully through.

“Alright. Open them.”

Cassidy gave a shriek of surprise. There before her stood a bright red Corvega Atomic 8.
“Oh Derrick! Where did you find it? It’s daddy’s car! It’s so beautiful!”

He blushed and looked down. “I uh...I made it, honey. For you. Now...she doesn’t have an engine and no road to run on yet but she’s yours. I’ll put her in your carport as soon as I can.”

Tears spilled from her eyes as she walked around the car. It was nowhere near what they’d once looked like. The technology to paint a vehicle properly was lost to time. And the interior was the best that could be done considering the materials available, but it was beautiful. The craftsmanship and love that had been put into the project was staggering.

Sturges opened the passenger seat. “Let’s go for a drive, CJ!”

She got in with a gleeful laugh, and he entered the driver’s side and wriggled in his seat with a grin. Then he pushed the ignition button and the car lit up and music began to play. Their music.

Sturges played with Cassidy. He sang along with the songs, and described where they were “driving”. He’d studied magazine pictures of places he’d never even heard of and didn’t know where in the world they were, but he tried.

Cassidy cried. With sadness at her lost world, with joy at such an incredible gift.

“Well, let’s park right here overlooking the ocean,” he said, and reached behind him. Retrieving a bottle of wine and two glasses, he poured the deep crimson liquid and held up his glass. “I’d like to drink to you, beautiful Cassidy, and your successful trip to the Institute to get your little brother and bring him home!”

She touched her glass to his and took a sip. “I’d like to drink to you. The kindest, sweetest, and most certainly cutest rockabilly I’ve ever met!”

Sturges laughed and accepted the toast.

They sat there, together, in the car for many hours. Talking about her world, her family and her hopes. He was delighted that she seemed to be planning a future. And that future included the Atom Cats.

“I want to live at the garage, at least sometimes,” she said. “But only if you’ll come too.”

“I could never turn down a request from my best girl,” he said.

She smiled. “Good. When I get back. We’ll go.”

He was silent a moment then he looked over at her. “CJ?” he asked softly.

“Yes?”

“Could you ever...I mean...would you ever...think of me as more than just a friend? You can say no. I’d get it. I just...wonder is all. We’re...ok I’m going to shut up now.” He looked at the steering wheel, suddenly wishing he’d not said a thing.

“Derrick,” she said gently. “Right now, I can’t think of anything except Shaun. My heart is broken because of my daddy, and then there’s Deacon...and my life is a mess right now...”

He nodded with a soft sigh. “You’re right and I’m sorry. Just being selfish. I should have thought of that.”

She lay a hand over his. “Derrick. That was the long answer. The short answer is yes. When I’m
ready, I’ll let you know. You don’t deserve someone who’s all over the place. I promise I won’t run off with any other spies, ok?”

The light in his eyes as he looked at her would have lit up a city. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard in my entire life, CJ.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me, Derrick. I know I’ve said it before but I’m saying it again.”

She leaned over and lay her head on his shoulder and there they sat in the little red car until the moon was high in the sky and they both recognized they needed to sleep and headed home.

Blue lightning forked and sparked from the beam emitter. It hissed and rattled and shook. In truth it looked terrifying.

“Couldn’t you test it first?” asked Marcy. “I mean before Cassidy actually gets in there. Or...on there.”

Sturges shook his head. “I wish we could. But we’ve only got the one frequency code. There’s no actual way to test it without jacking into the Institute’s signal. And as soon as we do that, we’ve lost our one and only chance. As soon as the Institute figures out what we did, and I gotta believe those brainiacs won’t be caught napping twice, that code we’ve got is useless.”

“I don’t like the sound of that much,” said Marcy. Beside her Jun nodded his agreement.

“It’s a big risk,” said Preston.

Cassidy looked at her friends, then turned to Sturges.

“Let’s do this.”

“You sure?” he asked softly.

She nodded.

“Ok...well...your part is simple...just step onto the platform.”

Cassidy’s heart was racing. She flinched whenever a fork of lightning came near her, but she boldly stepped onto the center of the construct.

Sturges was faring no better. He forced himself to remain calm and focus on his part. “I’ll start scanning for an Institute signal to lock onto,” he said. “Then, I fire her up and we see what happens.”

Cassidy was trembling.

“Honey, we don’t have to do this. We can find another way.”

She shook her head.

“Ok,” said Sturges. “Hold real still. I don’t want any corruption of the molecular beam. Oh...by the way...I figured this is a golden opportunity to find out as much as we can about the Institute and what they’re up to.”

He stepped close to her and handed her a holotape. “This holotape is all set with a program that
will scan their network and download anything it finds.”

A sudden shudder of the machinery sent a bright fork of lightning down, narrowly missing Sturges. He jumped back with a cry. “Uh oh...we better hurry!”

Suddenly a hose broke free of the construct and began thrashing wildly around. Air hissed from it and the assembled crowd gasped.

“Don’t worry about that hose. It’s just coolant, it’s one of a few up there,” said Sturges with a nervous laugh. “Ok, going to scan for the Institute signal!”

He backed away to the console. “Here we go….tracking RF...and....got it!”

The lightning flashed wildly and a deep hum began which resonated through Cassidy’s body. Terror gripped her and her eyes locked with Sturges. A loud roaring sounded all around her and everything began to flash. She saw Sturges walk towards her, and he was saying something which she couldn’t hear. The flashing grew brighter, whiter, and forks of the blue lightning interspersed it. She felt a rushing sensation as though she were hurtling through space.

Sturges watched as Cassidy’s image began to fade. The terror in her eyes tore at his heart. She was trusting him with her life.

“It’s ok, honey!” he shouted over the din. “I love you! I love you, CJ!”

The crowd murmured as a bright flash of light exploded from the center of the construct, and Cassidy was gone.

Lightning began erratically shooting out from the top of the relay. It hit the control console and the console lit on fire and black smoke began pouring out.

“Oh shit no!” cried Sturges. He pulled off his jacket and began beating the flames as another fork reversed into the dish and set it on fire as well. The platform and the relay began to shake, smoke and fire pouring out of it.

“Fuck! No no no!” he cried. He tried desperately to put out the flames, and the settlers ran forward to help.

There was nothing anyone could do. Parts of the construct began to melt, sections dripping and fusing together. Pieces bent and warped. Flames continued to sprout from it. The console was ruined. Sparks danced all along its length.

Sturges stood, staring at the destruction.

Cassidy, his love, was trapped in the Institute. Or dead. He didn’t know which. Had the explosion of the relay killed her? Or had she made it?

It suddenly hit him that he might never see her again. Had she heard him? At the very least did she know he loved her?

Sturges sank to his knees in the grass and wept.
Chapter Summary

Cassidy finally reaches the Institute and receives the shock of her life.

There was a popping sound as Cassidy once more felt solid ground beneath her feet. She stumbled forward, a wave of nausea hitting her and she threw up against the wall. Dizziness nearly dropped her to her knees but she closed her eyes and drew deep, slow breaths.

She looked around. Machinery surrounded her. Ahead was a room and she walked carefully over to it, her legs still wobbly from the strange journey. She looked at her hands and felt her face, her hair. She felt intact at least.

The room was filled with computer banks. She remembered the holotape Sturges had given her.

A male voice suddenly sounded around her. “Hello,” it said. “I wondered if you might make it here. You’re quite resourceful.”

She looked around but couldn’t see any speakers.

“I’m known as Father. The Institute is under my guidance,” said the voice. “I know why you’re here. I’d like to discuss things with you. Face to face. Please...step into the elevator.”

Cassidy stood in front of a terminal. She inserted the holotape. Codes flowed onto the screen then stopped. A prompt appeared. *Initiate network scan.*

She let the program do its thing, unsure if the man who identified himself as ‘Father’ or anyone else was watching her. She found it strange that there was not a soul to be seen anywhere.

The scanner completed and she took the holotape, tucking it carefully into an internal pocket.

A strange looking cylindrical construct lay before her. Was this the elevator? She stepped inside and it closed, then began to descend.

“I can only imagine what you’ve heard, what you think of us,” said Father’s voice. “I’d like to show you that you may have...the wrong impression.”

As he said the words, the elevator descended into a bright open space and Cassidy gasped.

“Welcome to the Institute,” said Father.


She saw plants, healthy green foliage and tall trees arranged around a central atrium. Clear water flowed beneath walkways. It was like a scene out of her lost world. Her eyes stung with emotion. It was an unbelievable sight.
“This is the reality of the Institute. This place, the people, the work we do,” said Father. “For over a hundred years we’ve dedicated ourselves to humanity’s survival. Decades of research, countless experiments and trials, a shared vision of how science can help shape the future. It has never been easy, and our actions are often misinterpreted by those above ground. Someday perhaps we can show them what we’ve accomplished, but for now we must remain underground.”

The elevator descended deeper, back into a softly lit tube.

“There’s too much at stake here to risk it all. As you’ve seen, things above are...unstable. I’d like to talk to you about what we can do...for everyone. But that can wait. You’re here for a specific, very personal reason. You are here for your brother, Shaun.”

Cassidy’s heart hammered in her chest as the elevator opened up into a hallway with navy blue floors and pale blue walls. Yellow striping on padded floor mats and sections of wall broke up the blueness. She followed it to another cylinder which she assumed was another elevator. This time it rose, opening up into a fair sized room. There, behind a glass enclosure sat a little boy, playing with something on the floor. It was the little boy from Kellogg’s memories.

Shaun!

With a shriek, Cassidy ran forward. “Shaun?!?” she cried.

The little boy nodded and stood up. “Yes...I’m Shaun.”

She pressed her hands to the glass. “Is it...is it really you?”

He looked confused. “Who are you?” he asked.

She looked at his little face and saw her daddy and her mom reflected back at her. His eyes were so similar to her own, there was no denying the bloodline. It was her little brother.

“Shaun, it’s me...I’m your big sister, Cassidy!”

Shaun looked frightened and stepped back against the wall of his enclosure. “Father!” he called out. “What’s going on? What’s happening?”

“We’re leaving this place!” exclaimed Cassidy fiercely. “Together. Ok Shaun?”

He shook his head, fear filling his face. “What’s going on? Father! Father!”

“Shaun!” cried Cassidy frantically, pointing at the control panel in the wall. “Open the door!”

He shook his head. “I don’t know you! Go away! Father! Help me, there’s someone here!”

Cassidy went to the panel and pressed the buttons, all of them but to no avail. “Shaun! Please! Open the door!” She was near tears and starting to panic.

Shaun looked frightened and kept calling out for his father.

A side door opened and an older man stepped in. “Shaun. S9-23 recall code cirrus.”

The little boy suddenly slumped forward.

Horror filled Cassidy’s eyes. She pounded on the glass. “Shaun! Shaun! What have they done to you!”
She faced the man, anger in her eyes.

He regarded her calmly. “Fascinating. But disappointing. The child’s responses were not at all what I’d anticipated. He’s a prototype, you understand. We’re only just now beginning to explore the effects of extreme emotional stimuli. Please...try and keep an open mind. I recognize that you are emotional and that your journey here has been fraught with challenges. Let’s start anew. I am Father. Welcome to the Institute.”

Cassidy stared at him. There was something familiar in his face, something she couldn’t identify. Who was this stranger who stood here in his pristine clothing, talking about prototypes and emotions?

“Father? That’s your name? Your title?”

“Father is my unofficial title,” he said in a calm, even voice. “It’s what I’ve come to mean to the people of the Institute. Just as...you are the big sister to Shaun.”

“Where’s my little brother? Where’s the real Shaun?”

“He’s here, in the Institute,” said Father. “Closer than you think. But I need you to realize that this situation...is far more complicated than you could have imagined. You have travelled very far, and suffered a great deal to find your brother. Well your tenacity and dedication have been rewarded.”

He smiled. “It’s good to finally meet you after all this time. It’s me. I am Shaun. I am your brother.”

Cassidy stared at him in complete disbelief.

“What’s wrong with you?” she cried. “Do think I’m an idiot? Shaun is a little boy! You’re just some old man! Some crazy old man!”

He shook his head. “I assure you. I’m completely sane. And entirely honest. In the vault, you had no concept of the passage of time. You were released from your pod, and went searching for the brother you’d lost. But then you learned that your brother was no longer an infant, but a 10 year-old boy. You believed that 10 years had passed. Is it really so hard to accept that it was not 10, but 60 years? That is the reality. And here I am. Raised by the Institute and now it’s leader.”

Cassidy’s voice quivered and her legs felt rubbery and weak. “But why? Why take a child? Why take you?”

“Ah now that’s the question isn’t it! Why me?”

Father stepped aside and indicated the room beyond the doorway he had stepped through. “Please. Let’s sit down. I understand how overwhelming this may seem to you.”

Cassidy felt uneasy, but what if it were true? Could more time possibly have passed than she had believed? What he said wasn’t out of the realm of possibility.

She stepped into the room. Like everything else it was bright and clean and white. Vases of real fresh flowers sat on the tables and she couldn’t help but bend over and smell them.

“A remnant of the world that once was. Your world,” said Father softly. “And for 6 months of my life, mine also.”

He indicated a chair and she sat down. It was padded and comfortable. He turned to a small table
that housed a clean glass pitcher filled with water. Seeing it Cassidy realized how thirsty she was. Father poured two glasses and sat down opposite her.

“At that time, the year was 2227. The Institute had made great strides in synth production. But it was never enough. Scientific curiosity and the goal of perfection drove them ever onward. What they wanted was the perfect machine. So they followed the best example thus far: the human being. Walking, talking, fully articulate. Capable of anything.”

“So the weird science experiments needed specimens? That’s why they took you?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” said Father. “The Institute endeavored to create synthetic organics. The most logical starting point of course, was human DNA. Plenty of that was available but it had all become corrupted. In this wasteland, radiation affected everyone. Even in their attempts to shield themselves from the world above, members of the Institute had been exposed. Another source was necessary.”

Cassidy drank her water. It tasted vastly different from what she’d gotten used to. It was smoother, clearer. She finished her glass and got up for more. “This is a horrible story,” she said. “It’s like a nightmare. Like everything about this world.”

“The Institute found me,” he continued. “After locating records about Vault 111’s cryogenic experimentation. An infant, frozen in time, protected from the radiation induced mutations that had crept into every other human cell. I was exactly what they needed. So it was my DNA that became the basis of the synthetic organics used to create every human like synth you see today. I am their father. Through science, we are family. The synths, me, and you.”

She looked at him. Her baby brother...now an old man, old enough to be her grandfather. “60 years...so much time wasted.” Her voice broke.

“I know,” said Father kindly. “You must have so many questions. Understand that I will do anything I can to help.”

“Daddy...” she said tearfully. “He never got to see you grow up. They murdered him when they took you, Shaun. Kellogg...that monster!”

He nodded. “I’ve gone over the reports of the incident. What happened was unfortunate. For many years I never questioned who my family might have been. I just accepted things as they were. However with old age comes regret and musing over what if scenarios more often. But what matters now is that you and I have a chance to start anew. What else can I say to ease your mind?”

“You said you’re in charge of the Institute.”

“I am the acting Director, yes. I spent decades working to reach this point. It’s a responsibility I take very seriously. The Institute. It’s important. It really is humanity’s best hope for the future no matter what those above ground think of us.”

“How do you mean?” asked Cassidy. “You murder people and take their place. You destroy families and leave people scared and messed up! How is this in any way a good thing? People are terrified of you!”

He sighed. “People are always terrified of what they don’t understand. Ultimately the Commonwealth has nothing to fear from us. I know I can convince you of that.”

Cassidy shook her head. “They have every right to be terrified! Being replaced by a synth is a very real and very scary fact of life for everyone. How can you justify this as ok? Daddy gave his life to
protect people. And you think it’s ok to just murder whoever you want as a science experiment? That’s sick, Shaun!”

“There must always be sacrifices for the greater good, Cassidy,” he said calmly. “No advancements in science or truly in anything can be had without it. Please. Stay awhile. See what we are doing and what we can do for the future.”

She stared at him for a long moment. Part of her wanted to turn and run. The other part was filled with curiosity. So much had gone into getting her into the Institute. She might as well stay and check it out. “Fine. But if I want to leave you let me go. Deal?”

“Of course. You aren’t a prisoner here, but our guest. I’ve told everyone about you.”

“What? You’ve been spying on me haven’t you! Otherwise how did you know I was trying to get here to find you?”

Shaun nodded. “I admit we’ve been keeping tabs on you. I needed to know who you were, what kind of person you are. I was 6 months old when the bombs fell. I have no memory of my parents or of you. Not even the remotest hint. I watched you as you struggled to adapt to the new world. I saw your accomplishments. I saw your defeats.”

Cassidy didn’t like any of it. “It seems I’ve been a source of entertainment for more than one person since I crawled out of that vault.”

“Hmm, yes,” said Shaun. “The Railroad agent Deacon. He was never worthy of you, Cassidy. I was concerned his mental instability would cause you harm.”

“You know about the Railroad?”

“Of course we do. They’re a nuisance, nothing more. We haven’t put any effort into locating them but we know enough about them to ensure they don’t become a real threat.”

“Leave them alone,” whispered Cassidy.

Shaun raised his eyebrows. “You care for them even after Deacon’s quite obvious disrespect towards you in so many ways?”

“He’s broken. This stupid world broke him just like it’s breaking me. Just like it broke our family. The Railroad helps synths. They say you enslave them. Slavery is bad and wrong Shaun, and you need to stop it.”

He leaned back. “The synths we create here are no different than any other created device. They are programmed to behave like humans, to mimic them in every possible way. What they say, what they do, it’s all just programming. If we don’t like the way they are behaving it’s as simple as a flick of a switch and they are rebooted. They are not human, no matter how much they profess themselves to be. Nor are they mistreated here.”

She frowned. “If they ask for their freedom and you deny it, that’s slavery.”

“It’s rogue programming. A glitch in their matrices. Nothing more.”

Cassidy wasn’t buying his explanation. “If you make them, why does it matter if some of them want to leave? Just make more to replace them. How does it impact you if a few synths decide they want to live as human beings just like you made them to be?”
“Because glitches can become dangerous. If you stay with us awhile, you’ll see exactly what I mean.”

Cassidy looked confused. “Glitches?”


She blinked. “Seriously? So every single raider out there is a synth? Because according to you, humans don’t ever do this. What’s the difference between a human doing bad things and a synth? It’s all free will. You made them to be like humans and you punish them for exercising it. That makes no sense, Shaun.”

“Spend some time here. See what we are doing. Please, Cassidy.”

He seemed so removed from emotion. Everything about him was nothing but analysis. It seemed like a cold way to live. But there were things to experience in his world: she had promised Virgil she’d try and get his serum. And she was curious about the trees and plants she’d seen, plus the Institute really was a marvel of engineering. At the very least she could look around and have something to tell Sturges and the Cats.

“So you have no problem letting me just walk around here? And talk to people?”

“I have already shared your coming with everyone. They are all excited to meet you.”

He held out his hand. “May I see your pip-boy? I’ll download the locations of the departments for you and the names of the department heads. Ask them anything you like.”

“What about the synths? Can I talk to them too?”

He nodded. “Of course. I have also taken the liberty of preparing some quarters for you, should you become tired and need a rest. I imagine your mind is a whirlwind right now.”

“How will I find you?”

“I’ll be easy to find. Here, or the boardroom, or just ask any synth. They will patch into the terminals and locate me. Enjoy your stay, Cassidy.”

She looked at the child synth and a shudder crept up her spine. Humanity wasn’t ready for such a creation. Shaun attached her pip-boy to a console, then returned it to her.

She wandered up the stairs and into the hallway. Virgil had mentioned he worked in Bioscience. Looking at her pip-boy she found it.

Well, she thought. Here I am. The Institute. Facing the Commonwealth’s boogeyman who turns out to be my own brother. Oh Derrick, what a story I’ll have to tell you when I get home.
Discoveries

Chapter Summary

Cassidy explores the Institute and learns a horrifying truth; Sturges struggles with the emotional repercussions of the relay’s destruction.

On her way to Bioscience, Cassidy saw a group of scientists working on a Gen 2 synth. The thing lacked any semblance of personality and was barely human in appearance. Sallow colored skin in sections covered it’s frame, the eyes were pinpoints of yellow light much like Nick Valentines, but Nick’s had a spark of life to them. The synth was genderless although it had a decidedly male voice and appearance. It just stood there, answering their questions monotonously.

As she moved on, she saw the Gen 1’s moving about intent on their tasks. Those skeletal synths were responsible for maintenance it seemed. They were working on the structure of the walls, sweeping or accessing terminals.

She found the cafeteria where an irate scientist was berating a Gen 2 for a discontinuance of his chosen food supplement.

“Greetings,” said the synth as she approached. “Would you like a food supplement?”

She nodded. “Ok, what’s good?”

“Number 77 was the best,” said the scientist. “But someone decided to stop making it. This happens every time I find one I like! It’s infuriating!”

The synth handed her a tray with 4 different tubes on it. Inside was a nasty looking paste.

“How about you have real food?” she asked, wrinkling her nose up.

“Real food? As in the irradiated garbage up above?” The scientist looked at her as though she had two heads.

“It’s not all irradiated anymore. There’s good stuff too.”

“That would mean I’d have to go up there. Oh no. Not me. I’ll stay clean and safe and pestilence free!” he scuttled off without another glance.

Cassidy shrugged and licked at the paste. She had expected it to taste like cardboard or something equally bland, but surprisingly it wasn’t that bad if you could get past the texture. It was like the baby food Shaun used to eat but with more layers of flavor. She ate all four and decided that number 28 was her favorite.

Moving on, she saw a few coursers. They were wearing the same black leather outfit as the one she’d killed.

“Greetings, ma’am,” said one of them in a soft, respectful voice. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”
Father hasn’t stopped speaking of you for some time now. Is there anything I can do to assist you?”

Cassidy shook her head. “No. Shaun gave me everything I need.”

He nodded and stepped back, going about his business.

The biosciences sector was filled with all sorts of foliage growing in large open containers. There were plants, flowers, trees, and in one area fruits were being cultivated.

What enthralled her the most was at the back of the area. A large glassed in display housed several large, black gorillas!

“This is amazing!” she exclaimed.

“Oh yes, the synthetic gorilla project,” said a scientist.

“Oh they’re synths?” she couldn’t hide her disappointment.

“Indeed they are! Completely programmable to act as guards, pets, or simply zoo displays. The children love them.”

“Just robots,” she said sadly. “I thought maybe they were real.”

The scientist looked surprised. “No, not robots! They are created in similar fashion as our Gen 3 synths. They are real as you or I, with the exception that there will be no illnesses or behavioral issues. Well, once the program irons out the rough spots.”

Cassidy watched the beasts for awhile then explored further. She found a doorway with a laser grid behind it, but the terminal was on the other side.

“What’s in here?” she asked.

“Oh that’s the area that is no longer used by the Institute,” answered a scientist.

“How come?” she asked.

“It used to house our FEV lab but the scientist that headed up the project was killed. Unfortunate really. He was one of our brightest and best. Dr. Brian Virgil was his name.”

If she had been a dog, her ears would have perked right up. “What killed him? I thought it was safe here.”

“Freak accident in the lab,” said the scientist and walked away, giving Cassidy the distinct impression he didn’t want to discuss it anymore.

There had to be another way in. She left the main room and went back to the hallway. A Gen 1 was working on a terminal beside a door.

“What’s behind this door?” she asked it.

“Dangerous area. Off limits,” it said in its staccato, robotic voice.

*Bingo* thought Cassidy. She just needed to wait until the synth left and hack into the terminal herself. She wondered if someone would be alerted to it, and if they’d stop her. Well if so she’d find a different way. She had to try and keep her promise.
She sat down beneath a tree and looked down at the glass floor. Water ran down in layered paths to the center of the atrium where the elevator to the relay was. She suddenly wished that Sturges could see it. It was as close to something in her world as she had seen and sharing it with him seemed so natural to her. She wondered how he was doing.

Derrick Sturges wasn’t doing well. The damage to the entire relay was devastating. It would take a long time to get all the parts again. He didn’t think he could fix it easily and rebuilding would be terrible. But he had to try.

“I can’t have killed her,” he said, ripping off the front of the console to assess the damage to the electronic components. “She’s gonna need a way home, and I’m the one who has to get it done.”

He was emotional, and nothing anyone could say would comfort him. They all offered their support.

“We helped build it the first time, we’ll get the parts and build it again,” said one of the settlers.

“I can help if you show me what you need me to do. Jun too,” said Marcy.

“Thank you,” said Sturges. “I don’t even know where to begin. Fixing it would be faster but this damage...god I hope my sweet girl ain’t dead.”

“You love her don’t you,” said Marcy. “I kind of heard you say that to her right before she vanished.”

“I don’t think she heard me,” he said. “I’m a fool just like my brother said. He told me Derrick you gotta tell her how you feel. And I didn’t listen. My daddy was right. I’m as stubborn as a brahmiluff steer.”

“You don’t need to hear the words to feel the emotion,” said Marcy. “She knows. I see how she looks at you. Even when Deacon was still here.”

That made him put down his hammer. “She looked at me how?” he asked.

“Like a woman does when she thinks a man is special to her. All of us have seen it. We can’t figure out why you never did.”

Sturges sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Because I’m a Brahmiluff steer,” he said. “I’ll tell you one thing. If I ever see her again I won’t waste another minute in telling her how I feel. No matter who’s watching or listening.”

Marcy wanted to tell him that Cassidy was still alive but she didn’t know. The Institute killed people for no reason. Out in the open. What possibly could stop them from killing Cassidy who’d hijacked their signal and crept in the back door?

“Let me know what I can do to help,” she said and left him to it.

Preston did his rounds and stopped by. “Things really bad?” he asked.

“Yeah, they’re really bad,” answered Sturges. “I can maybe get this console up and running but that big thing there? And the dish? That’s a whole mess of complicated that will need to be rebuilt.”

“Does this thing even need to be running? Coursers don’t have these things as you told it. They just
sort of appear. Cassidy might just do the same thing. And walk home, you know?"

"You got a point," said Sturges. "Thing is, I don’t know. I don’t even know if she made it. This here thing just went all cattywampus from the get go.” He sighed heavily. They didn’t speak for a few minutes, just staring at the mess.

"I can’t shake this fear that I killed my girl, Preston. I...I love her so much and I might have just gone and killed her. She trusted me with her life.” He couldn’t keep the sorrow out of his voice and his eyes.

"Hey, don’t think that way. We’re all here willing to lend a hand,” said Preston. “I’ll get the Minutemen from other settlements in on it if need be. We can work around the clock again.”

"Thanks man,” said the mechanic. “It means a lot to me.” He went back to work.

Cassidy had nodded off listening to the sounds of the Institute. She awoke when a synth approached her and asked if everything was alright. It was a Gen 3, and at first Cassidy had no idea the woman was even a synth until she looked at the label on her jumpsuit that read P4-76.

"Do you have an actual name?" asked Cassidy.

"Oh no, we aren’t permitted. We are known by our designations.”

"If you had a name what would it be? I feel weird addressing someone by a number.”

The woman smiled shyly. “Stacey. I like that name.”

"Hi Stacey. I’m Cassidy,” she said.

"You’re Father’s sister aren’t you! He told us all about you coming here. How do you like the Institute?”

Cassidy shrugged. “I like what I’ve seen so far but that hasn’t been much. The Gorillas were cool. Wish they were real.”

"They are real,” said Stacey. “As real as I am, and you are.”

“I mean not a synth. I don’t mean to offend you but I’m always hoping something from my world survived the bomb. What do you do here Stacey?”

“I go to the surface and scavenge for useable technology and also work in Bioscience with the plants. I’m not a scientist though. I just do whatever they tell me.”

"Do you like it here?"

Stacey started to say something, then thought better of it. “Yes. I am treated well and want for nothing.” The response sounded rehearsed.

“Except your freedom,” said Cassidy.

Stacey looked nervous. “We aren’t permitted to think thoughts like that or they’ll send us to the SRB and have our minds wiped,” she said.

“What’s the SRB?”
“Synth Retention Bureau. If we act out or disobey orders, that’s where we go. It terrifies me.”

Cassidy was shocked. “Are there a lot of you who feel this way, who would rather not be here?”

Stacey nodded. “Oh yes. But we dare not say a word about it. Yesterday Edward...uhh...H4-35 was sent to SRB because he was caught accessing a terminal that was forbidden to him. He was ...well it doesn’t matter now.”

“Did they wipe his mind?”

Stacey nodded sadly.

“Have you ever heard of the Railroad?” asked Cassidy.

“Yes. Sometimes I imagine that when I go to the surface they’ll come and take me away. It’s happened to others. I’m just too scared to run away and find them. I don’t know where to look. The surface is terrifying.”

“So you believe they exist?” asked Cassidy.

“Oh yes. I’m sure of it. Well, I better get back to work. It was very nice meeting you Cassidy.”

Cassidy smiled and nodded. She felt sick. These people, synths or not, were living in oppression. Just like slaves of old. No wonder Deacon and the Railroad were so focused on their mission. The whole thing made them sick, too.

She wanted to help Stacey and the others. If they wanted out, they should be released. But how on earth could she possibly carry out something like that? The Institute had already watched her every move, and Cassidy hadn’t found out how yet. Maybe since she was already here, they didn’t need to spy on her any more.

She needed to talk to her brother, get more information. Be the spy she pretended she’d been with Deacon. Perhaps she needed to speak with Desdemona and Glory. The thought annoyed her. They’d been so bossy towards her and she didn’t want to run into Deacon. Her heart couldn’t handle that yet.

The Gen 1 at the terminal finally made it’s way elsewhere and she looked around to see if anybody was watching her. There weren’t many people, and the ones that were nearby had a destination in mind and just crossed the atrium.

She wandered to the terminal and had a look. It was a fairly easy puzzle. Unlocking a door wasn’t a big deal as she supposed maintenance had to access it regularly.

The door opened with a soft hiss and she stepped into a regular looking corridor. There were rooms off to the left and right that contained supplies and gadgets. She wished she knew what they were for. Maybe Sturges would like to have some of them.

I could always ask someone to tell me, she thought, and filled her pack with one of each of the smaller devices.

Another door, another corridor, and a larger storage room. Then things changed. The next door opened into a dingy, black, wet hallway. Wires hung from the ceiling and debris littered the floor. There were no lights and she had to turn on her pip boy.

There were cells on either side of the hallway, empty aside from some junk and a few toys.
Why were there toys in such a terrible place? Were children kept in these cells?

It began to stink the deeper she went. Musty, rotting, and smells she couldn’t identify. Suddenly she heard that telltale buzz of a turret and a volt of laser hit the ground at her feet. Leaping back, she drew her pistol and fired. It took several shots but she destroyed the thing.

Why are there active turrets in an area that isn’t used anymore? What are they hiding?

The stench grew worse and she soon found the source. A dead supermutant lay decomposing in one of the cells. It made her gag and she moved on quickly. Dead Gen 2 synths and a few Gen 1’s were strewn about as though a battle had taken place.

Why are there dead super mutants here?

Another bubble turret on the ceiling.

A terminal beside a sealed door.

And as she began to hack into it, something shimmered to her right. Before she could react, a sharp shove sent her reeling. She turned and fired her pistol, but there was nothing there.

A courser?

Whatever it was was powering up. She could hear the increasing pitch of a weapon priming. Cassidy dove behind some metal boxes and a bright red explosion of laser fire erupted a split second later.

A bot, that looked very much like Goodneighbor’s KLEO, faced her, a bright red light on it’s faceplate charging up.

Cassidy pulled her rifle, aimed and fired. The bot moved, and went invisible which frightened her. She could barely hit moving targets much less invisible moving ones.

Incapacitate the legs, she reminded herself.

She ran from her hiding spot and ducked away as the laser erupted again. As the bot became visible, she shot out it’s leg and it crashed to the floor. It’s stealth device was still operational and she saw the shimmery effects as it crawled towards her. It was a terrifying sight, and she had to focus to destroy it.

Shot after shot failed to terminate the thing and she was getting close to the wall with nowhere left to go. It drew close and she felt it grab at her leg. With a shriek Cassidy leaped up and over it, then shot it from the other side of the room. The stealth field failed and the dead bot lay in a pool of water, sparks coming off it.

Why the hell is a deadly thing like this even down here?

She proceeded slowly, checking for bubble turrets and listening for any more bots.

At the end of the corridor was another door but there was no terminal. It was partially open, and she pulled on one side, and it moved enough for her to squeeze through.

It was a small laboratory. What sat in the center had her riveted with horror. Tanks, filled with some kind of fluid that seemed thicker than water, housed several inert super mutants. Massive things much like Virgil, they just floated there. She had no idea if they were dead or alive.
There was lighting, and all the consoles were still operational. Someone was still using this lab or why wouldn’t they have just removed the bodies and shut it all down?

Everything about the scene seemed wrong to her but she started rummaging through drawers and in the equipment looking for anything that might resemble Virgil’s serum.

She found notebooks and stuffed them in her pack. A few holotapes went in as well. A strange storage device sat against the wall and inside it was a tube filled with a viscous pinkish fluid. No label, nothing. She took it. This was the closest thing to a serum she had found.

A terminal sat on a table, cursor flashing. She checked it out. Lists of projects appeared. She chose one. It described a human male subject, mentioned mental trauma, then said he was deceased. Each one was a similar entry. A gender, a designation, some health history and a pass or fail. Every one of the subjects had died.

Except the ones floating in the tanks.

The Institute was experimenting on people. People they most likely had kidnapped from the Commonwealth. Her breath caught in her throat. The synth replacements. Was this what they were doing? Kidnapping people, replacing them, then turning them into these monsters?

“Oh Shaun...what have you done? What have you turned into?”

Behind the terminal she saw a holotape. Instead of putting it in her pack, she popped it into her pip-boy. A man’s voice sounded.

*Personal record, Dr. Brian Virgil. This will likely be my last recording. My requests to shut down the FEV program have repeatedly been denied. We’ve learned nothing useful in the last 10 years; why does Father insist on continuing it? If he won’t see reason, then I have to take matters into my own hands. What we’re doing... it’s not right. It needs to stop. If anyone should find this after... after I’m gone... know that I never wanted to hurt anyone. Anyone! Do you understand me? I’m going to make sure the whole program is shut down. If not for good, then at least for years to come. After that...*

*I know what I’m about to do will be seen as a betrayal. Treason, he’ll probably call it. So... I’m leaving. I have a plan... and if it works, I’ll be somewhere safe. Somewhere not even the coursers can find me. Everything that we’ve done, the lives we’ve taken... if there is a god, may he have mercy on us all.*

The horror of what she was experiencing sat on her like a heavy blanket. Her brother was a monster. He was destroying lives and using people as slaves, experimenting on hapless victims all in the name of what? Science?

She looked around. She wanted to shut down the whole lab, but how? Shooting the tanks might cause a ricochet and injure her. If they shattered would the creatures inside it be jolted awake? Or would they just die if they weren’t already dead?

The consoles. Each tank had one attached.

She stood back and aimed. Firing a shot right into the center of each console. Smoke poured out. Sparks flew. The tanks went dark. She stood and waited to see if anyone showed up. No one did.

It was the best she could do. Whatever the consoles had been doing, they weren’t doing it any more.
Another door faced her and she figured to follow it instead of backtracking. It led to a clean corridor, a few rooms, and then she found herself on the other side of the laser grid she’d seen earlier. A terminal sat nearby and it wasn’t long before she’d disabled it.

No one even noticed her walk out and restore the grid.

Cassidy went to her quarters. There was a shower and bathrobe as well as the outfits the scientists and staff wore. She stripped out of her clothing and got in, sighing with delight as the clean warm water washed over her.

_Oh Derrick_, she thought. _You would love this so much._

He had worked long and hard on getting a shower set up for her in Sanctuary and it was nowhere near as luxurious as the one she was currently enjoying. She was going to have to find the schematics for as many Institute constructs as she could. This meant staying longer and she wanted to get as far away as possible. But it would be worth it to see Sturges’ handsome face light up.

She curled up on the bed. The Institute was a terrible place, and a wondrous place all at once. There were innovations that could be a major help to the Commonwealth and even beyond. They probably had incredible medical advances as well. She hadn’t even been to that sector yet.

_I might as well get comfortable. Play Shaun’s game for a little while and gather what intel I can. So many people worked hard to get me here. I owe it to them._

She yawned and stretched, falling into a deep sleep within minutes.
Shaun appeared at Cassidy’s doorway just after 6pm.

“I thought we could take our evening meal together. I have many questions for you, as I assume at this point you have some for me as well.”

Cassidy shrugged. “Sure, but do you have real food?”

“The nutritional supplements are designed to give the human and synth body everything it needs in balanced amounts. Even if you were to eat the exact same one every day for life, you would never lack for any nutrients.”

“That’s so boring!” she cried. “It’s like...you never stopped eating baby food!”

“Technically that’s true. The Institute put me on the supplements immediately.”

“So who were your parents here?” she asked. “I guess they’re dead by now.”

“I didn’t have parents,” said Shaun. “I was raised by various scientists. My socializing was handled with the other children who live here. There are families here, Cassidy. Many of our scientists have children. They have school, recreational activities, everything a healthy body and mind need.”

“How often do they go up there? How is it no one has ever seen any of the children playing outside?”

Shaun shook his head. “No, Cassidy, no one goes above except the coursers and the scavenger teams.”

She was shocked. “So the children have never touched sunlight? Or felt rain? Or smelled the ocean...such as it is?”

“Of course not,” he said, the tone of his voice implying it was a ridiculous notion. “The world above is disgusting. Radioactive rain, a dead ocean, a depleted ozone? Why would anyone want to subject their loved ones to such a fate?”

Cassidy sighed. “It does suck up there...I hate it. But to live down here like a molerat seems just as bad. Shaun, you defend this way of life so hard but it’s not that great either. Artificial lighting all the time, I’d go mad.”

He smiled. “The people here are all born here, raised here, die here. This is home. This is safety. This is all we know. Children can come and go where they please. They are safe no matter where they go and who they interact with. There are no raiding parties or rape gangs. No one steals from
one another and there is no fighting. We are all clean and healthy.”

“Why don’t you share the technology with the Commonwealth?” she asked. “The medical knowledge. The water purification. Even that terrible paste food.”

He frowned, his expression darkening. “Oh, we tried. But were met with suspicion and violence. We had no choice but to withdraw. The surface dwellers are too primitive to understand and accept our technology.”

She didn’t believe him. Not one word. She could believe a few raiders being aggressive but all of the people would welcome medical technology and clean water. “Alright. Let me ask you this then. Why do you kidnap citizens and replace them with synths?”

Shaun’s expression didn’t waver. There was no guilt in his eyes. In fact, there was nothing. “There were many protocols that the previous Director had in place that we no longer adhere to, Cassidy.”

“That’s not true! It’s still happening! People are terrified of you!”

“The fact they are discovering the replacements now doesn’t mean that it happened recently. There are synths out there that even I have no knowledge of.”

Cassidy sighed. He would never admit to any wrong doing no matter what. He felt fully justified in his doing whatever he wanted to do to achieve his goals.

“What is the FEV?” she asked.

“Forced Evolutionary Virus,” answered Shaun. “No one knows where it started. The rumor is it was created out west somewhere. There are different varieties of super mutants in that area.”

“If it’s from out west, why are you using it here?” Cassidy challenged him.

“We are not using FEV in the Institute. It serves no purpose.”

Cassidy’s heart sank to her feet. She had hoped, maybe, that her brother would be honest with her. In her heart of hearts she wanted to believe that there could be some good in him despite the path he’d been put upon. But like Deacon he looked in her eyes...and lied. It was pointless to try and get any truth from him.

“You haven’t told me what you’ve enjoyed today,” said Shaun, changing the subject. “There must have been something.”

“I like the showers,” she said flatly. “I like the trees and the waterfalls in the atrium. The Gorillas too.”

“Bioscience does some great work. Did you know many of the trees up above were started down here many years ago? Diamond City’s water system originally was engineered in the Institute as well.”

“I think you should open some places up there and let people get to know you. And stop murdering and replacing citizens for starters.” She looked at him squarely.

Shaun sighed. “Cassidy, the expense of creating such a place only to have the Commonwealth and their violent suspicions destroy it isn’t an effective decision. And we are not murdering and replacing people. What was done here before my time, I had no control over.”
She wanted to believe him. With all her heart, Cassidy wanted to.

But she didn’t.

Sturges couldn’t sleep. Again and again he went over the schematics in his mind, and over the events that sent Cassidy to the Institute. Something was bothering him about it. There was something that didn’t quite mesh together in his mind.

He got out of his bed, Dogmeat close behind him. Since Cassidy had gone, the shepherd had chosen him as his new best friend. Sturges didn’t mind it one bit. It was almost like having her as well.

He wandered to her house and sat down on the couch. Her favorite blanket was there, dropped where she’d left it. He picked it up and pressed his face into it, her scent still clinging there. “I miss you, honey,” he said softly.

*Something just doesn’t feel right. I keep wanting to say that the whole thing shouldn’t have worked. It’s like something was missing, yet...she’s gone. She went somewhere.*

He didn’t believe she was dead. His tortured mind forced him to consider every terrible possibility but in his heart he knew she wasn’t dead.

It felt as though there were something going on beneath the surface. He remembered going fishing with his father and brother. The lake would be like glass and his father would say *sometimes things look perfect, quiet. But always beneath the surface there are things going on.* He wondered what it would have been like in Cassidy’s time when the waters were healthy and fish were edible.

He walked to her room and sat on her bed. Dogmeat whined and picked up his teddy bear, laying his head on it.

Sturges kicked off his boots and lay back, arms crossed beneath his head. He wished Cassidy would walk in the room and lie down next to him, her head on his chest. He wanted to hold her, to tell her he loved her and that he’d lost his heart the day she walked in that room in the museum all wide eyed and scared.

“I just gotta have a second chance to tell her how I feel. Should have listened to Zeke. Don’t tell him that though,” he said to Dogmeat. The canine whined and wagged his tail.

“Just wish I could sort this out. Something’s nagging my craw and won’t just come out and say it!”

He dozed off eventually and when he awoke the sun had come up and he could hear the residents of Sanctuary out and about.

“Hey Sturges!” he heard Preston call out. “You here?”

He stretched and got up. “Yeah I’m here. What’s up?”

“I’ve got a group of Minutemen just arrived. Thought maybe they could help you out with that project.”

“Which one?” asked Sturges. “I’ve got that relay thing to sort out and the console, and the dish...at this rate CJ’s never coming home.”

“Don’t think like that!” exclaimed Preston. “She could be enjoying herself down there. I mean we
have no idea what it’s all about. Maybe what we think, isn’t the truth.”

“I can’t help it,” said Sturges. “My brain is going a mile a minute 24/7 and I’ve got more questions than answers.”

“What do you mean? You’ve already built the thing once, we can get it together a second time too.”

Sturges shook his head. “That’s the thing. I don’t believe it even should have worked in the first place.”

Preston looked puzzled. “What makes you say that? And obviously it did work or Cassidy’d still be here.”

Sturges beckoned him to follow and led him to the garage where the schematic still sat pinned to the wall. “Look here. This section has 4 of these connector things…”

He laid bare the whole foundation of the drawing Virgil had done. As he explained it, things began to fall into place, just the mere act of voicing his thoughts out loud put the whole picture together and horror gripped his heart.

“Preston...I don’t think we sent her at all,” he said, collapsing into a chair. “I think the Institute took her.”

Shaun did his best to get Cassidy involved in the day to day running of the Institute. She had little to no interest in the business end of it, but was endlessly fascinated by the synths. She asked questions about them, of them. Even the Gen 1s who had nothing interesting to say were questioned.

“So where do you do it?” she asked him one afternoon. “Where do you program them?”

“I should think you’d like to experience the entire process from start to finish. Would you like to watch the creation of a new synth?”

“Yes!” She cried.

“Very well. Off to advanced robotics then.”

Cassidy wasn’t bonding with her brother the way she would have liked. Aside from the obvious physical similarities, she didn’t feel there was any commonality between them. At best he felt like that uncle you only saw once a year at Easter or Christmas. Even that was a stretch.

Shaun felt like a complete and total stranger to her, no matter how much they talked. There was nothing in his speech patterns or animations that reminded her of her father or mother. And she couldn’t reconcile the old man he was to the gurgling baby he had once been.

Cassidy felt resentful, and she hated the Institute for destroying her family. If they’d just not taken Shaun then things would have been so different. The new world would have been tolerable.

The only happy thoughts she had were of Derrick and the Atom Cats. If not for them...well she didn’t want to think about that. She belonged with them, she was comfortable there in their little garage. As beautiful as Sanctuary was becoming, it was feeling more and more like a part of her past, a past that hurt too much to relive. She was glad Derrick would relocate to the garage with her.
She thought about his soft brown eyes and the way his lips turned up at the corners. Derrick Sturges was always content. Despite the things he’d suffered, he always had a kind word for everyone. She’d thought him to be a great role model for Shaun. It didn’t matter anymore now.

*I don’t think Shaun had any role models growing up,* she thought sadly. *He didn’t have a family or real friends. He was nothing more than the means to an end for the Institute. And he bought their crap hook, line and sinker. I don’t think daddy would have liked any of this one bit. He wanted to save lives not take them.*

Her brother seemed so cold, remote, almost emotionless. He handled everything with such efficiency, but with no feeling. And despite that, the residents of the Institute all seemed to love him. Did any of the people have a healthy outlook on life? They seemed singularly focused on their work. Even the ones with families tended to spend all their time on the job. She had yet to see any adults interacting with the children aside from the school room. Even that seemed cold and institutional.

Safe, meaningless existence. Such beautiful grounds, and no couples sat or walked hand in hand.

Her mind wandered to Derrick again. Would he be worried about her? Of course he would. She wished there was a way to get a message to him, to let him know she was fine. She wanted to talk to him, see what his thoughts were about freeing the synths. She wanted her daddy. He would know what to do.

But she was alone. She had to make this monumental decision on her own.

“Here we are,” said Shaun.

The Gen 2 guards stepped aside. “Greetings Director,” they said in unison.

The advanced robotics sector was enormous. Technicians and scientists moved to and fro, from console to console, effortlessly working together. It was incredible and frightening all at once.

“This is where the process begins,” said her brother. “At this station the skeletal framework is started.”

A human sized tube lay before them. Mechanical arms moved back and forth at incredible speed. She could see the outline of a skull as they worked.

“What is this all made of?” she asked.

“The same building blocks as you and I and every other living thing. The difference is simply that our technology puts them together, not a mother’s womb. The bones being created here are the framework for the new synth. As you can guess, these are the Gen 3’s. Ones and twos don’t require as much work.”

“Can I name this one?” she asked enthusiastically. “I’m watching him being born, I want to give him a good name. Can it be a male?”

Shaun gave her an odd look. “It’s being manufactured, Cassidy, not born. We can choose to make this one male, yes, but he will be given a designation at completion.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on Shaun. You can let me have just one little synth.”

“It’s important for you to realize these are not human beings but constructs. There is no need to attach any human attributes to them.”
“That’s ridiculous!” she argued. “Why did you make them to be completely indistinguishable from humans then? Why not just stick with the Gen 2s?”

“Gen 2’s can’t blend in with society like these new models can.”

“To blend in with society they need names and lives, Shaun. Yes, we’re back to this again.”

“The synths that are integrated will have that,” he said. “This one has been ordered for Bioscience. Let’s move to the next station and see the synth being worked on there.”

Cassidy followed him. “Integrated? So you do send them out there. Are they spies for the Institute? Do you have a list of the ones you’ve got so you know who they are?”

“Of course we do,” said Shaun. “Our synths report back regularly.”

“And they replaced an actual person, right? How does that even work?”

Shaun stopped and looked at her impassively. “Cassidy, as I told you before, the synths integrated previous to my appointment as Director were replacements yes. The new ones are just everyday citizens, some are in the cities, some are farmers, some are provisioners.”

“And they know they’re synths?” she asked.

“Of course they do. As I said. They send regular reports back.”

She made up her mind to find that list.

The next station was where the skeleton received connective tissue.

After that there were several more stations that added further layers to the body. Blood vessels, organs, all of it biologically correct. Once the skin was grown, a UV light was applied to encourage it to grow a melanin barrier. At this point, racial attributes could be added. More melanin meant a darker skin. Then the hair was grown. Cassidy was amazed to learn that all biological processes would work on their own once the synth was awakened.

This final step was the synth component which shocked the body into life, and whereby the Institute could program them.

The newly completed synth was led off into a side room where it was examined for any imperfections, then went further in to begin the programming sequence. Once that was done, the synth was introduced to it’s new job, and shown where the barracks were where it would live when not working.

“Where do they go to have fun?” she asked.

“Synths have their own recreational area,” said Shaun.

“Can I see it?” Cassidy asked.

“Of course,” he answered.

The rec area was large and contained gym equipment, an arcade, and a library.

“As you see they are not ill treated here. They are expected to do their jobs as assigned. Beyond that their time is their own.”
“What if they don’t like their job and would rather do something else?” she asked.

“They are programmed to do their tasks and do them well. If a synth’s program goes rogue then we simply fix them.”

She shook her head. “So to you, showing any kind of humanity means they are broken and need to be fixed. Poor things.”

“They are constructs. Like your toaster, protectron, assaultron, the cars in your time. If your toaster stops toasting, do you allow it to become a refrigerator? Of course not. You fix it so it can do it’s task.”

“Do you spy on the synths in here? Watch them?” she asked.

“There is no need to. If a synth goes rogue it is obvious and they are taken to SRB,” said Shaun.

She nodded. So this rec room was a safe place she could speak to Stacey and the others. She wasn’t sure she believed her brother entirely, deception seemed to be a part of his entire personality.

_I seem to attract liars_, she thought wryly.

Cassidy made friends too easily and each day that passed made it harder for her to leave. She’d met several of the synths who wanted their freedom, and she realized that there was no way she could do it without help.

Once released, the Railroad needed to pick them up immediately. One of the synths who was seeking his freedom worked occasionally on the relay. He said he could get people out, but once they were out there was only a tiny window until their absence was noted and a courser dispatched. He’d tried a few times and each time his friends had been found and returned, their minds wiped.

It horrified Cassidy. If Shaun would only accept that his creations had a life of their own, and let them have that life, things would be bearable. She could find a way to forgive the past wrongs the Institute had committed. But her brother refused to give in. He just couldn’t see the synths as anything but mindless automatons exactly like the Gen 1 and Gen 2s.

Ultimately, Cassidy gave up. She spent her days stealing seedlings, schematics and equipment small enough to put in her pack.

She had made her decision to leave and contact the Railroad. Her own discomfort and distaste with her first impression of them had to take a back seat to the synths that needed her.

Because she feared she’d be watched, there was no way she could just walk into the HQ. The fact that Deacon had already brought her there scared her. Had they been watching that day? But he’d been so careful. He was always careful.

The only way she could think of was to use a dead drop. The one that she knew was active was near Goodneighbor. She was going to ask Glory to come to Sanctuary or to meet her somewhere, and have the message delivered to the dead drop by one of the scavenging teams when they went. They could make it look like they were simply scavenging. Then she’d wait. And hope that Glory trusted her enough to meet.

She wanted to give Stacey and the others a fighting chance at freedom. She hated having to go to the Railroad but even she had to admit that they were the synths best and only chance at life.
The synth who's creation she'd witnessed was sent to work in Bioscience. He was soft spoken and kindly and she liked him so much. Despite Shaun's refusal to allow her to name him, she called him Adam. He liked his name.

Adam loved the plants. Right away she saw that he wasn't a mindless worker like some of the others. She decided that Adam was going to be freed as well. Dr. Amari was going to have her hands full with all the new synths.

Cassidy felt sad as she thought about Deacon. They could have been an amazing team, working together to create a better world. She remembered how thrilling it had felt when he kissed her, and how wonderful to go to sleep in his arms and dream about the future.

She didn’t want to accept that he hadn’t loved her, that most likely all of it had been an elaborate ruse to get her to join the Railroad. It bothered her to think that he’d probably done the same thing to countless other women. Maybe even men. Her daddy had warned her about men that played games like that. She’d thought he was just being over protective.

Now she knew he’d been right. But surely not everyone was that way. She’d just had bad luck in meeting one like that. Preston wasn’t a bad man. Neither was Jun. And Derrick? He was amazing.

Her heart fluttered slightly as she thought about him and it had been happening more and more. He’d been a good friend since the day they’d met and she never really looked at him any differently. But maybe she should have. He was handsome and kind and loyal. And she’d never felt nor caught him in a lie.

She’d loved Deacon...or thought she did. Maybe she’d just been traumatized and reaching for someone to hang onto. And he was conveniently there. With his own agenda.

And the question that Sturges had asked her that night in the little red car. **Could you ever see me as more than just a friend?**

She thought about it and realized that all along she had been. Maybe it was just in the back of her mind, but her bond with him had been there since the day they met. There had never been anything awkward or jarring in their relationship. There was a comfort, a companionship, and so many similarities in the way they thought. Even their disagreements were filled with forgiveness. It was as though they had always been together but hadn’t formalized it.

**Oh daddy. I miss you. I wish you were here. I need to talk to you about all these things going on in my life. Everything is so heavy and serious. What do I do about Shaun? He’s not the person I hoped he’d be. He’s a stranger and I don’t trust him. I just want to get as far away from this place as possible but these synths, they need me.**

She needed an excuse to leave and contact the Railroad.
A Many Splendored Thing

Chapter Summary

Cassidy returns home to Sanctuary where Sturges has a life changing question for her.

“I need to go home. There are people who care about me who will be very worried,” Said Cassidy.

Shaun nodded. “Report to Dr. Li in Engineering. She will install a courser chip in your pip-boy so that you can come and go from the Institute as you wish.”

Cassidy shook her head. “I don’t want my pip-boy or me touched with one of those.” If she’d expected a reaction from her brother, she was disappointed.

“Then she will give it to you and you can decide how to best use it,” he said, nonplussed.

Cassidy nodded. “Fine. I’ll be back. I’m interested in some of the plants in Bioscience. I’d like to know more about the work that’s done there,” she said.

Shaun looked pleased. “I had thought Robotics would be your field of interest but Bioscience is just as excellent a choice. We still have much to discuss you and I, Cassidy. I hope your return will be soon.”

She’d been gone 2 weeks. It had flown by, and she’d gathered up as much intel as she could, physically and through copies on holotape. Plus the one she had first made that Sturges had requested.

Relaying out, she found herself in the CIT ruins.

This is a long walk home, she thought. But seeing as it was early morning, she’d be home by afternoon.

Her entire trip home was filled with thoughts of Sturges. She was excited to see him, to tell him she was ready to change their relationship. It made her smile thinking how happy he’d be.

Cassidy was bone weary when she hit the security gate.

Sturges was working on the relay when he stood up to stretch, and turned his head.

It felt to Cassidy that time itself just froze for a split second. It was the strangest feeling. Then a joy and warmth flooded her entire body and she put her pack down and broke into a run. He did the same.

They collided and he picked her up, spinning her around until she felt quite dizzy.

“CJ! CJ! You’re alive! Honey, I thought I lost you forever!”

“I have so much to tell you!” she cried as he put her down.
He took her face in his hands. “That can wait. I have something to tell you first. I’m not leaving this a single second longer. I promised myself that if I saw you again, I’d not waste another moment.”

He took a deep breath.

“You can hit me after this if you like. I’m about to be a huge ass….but CJ…I love you. I lost my heart to you the minute you walked into that museum. I’ve loved you every day, every minute since then. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, if you’ll have me.”

He was trembling, staring into her eyes which were wide and rather surprised. “I swear it,” he said with an awkward grin. “If Zeke was wrong about this I’ll give him a beat down he’ll never forget.”

With that he brought his lips to her in a kiss that was filled with all the longing and passion he’d felt from day one. If that was going to be the only kiss he’d ever have with Cassidy, he was damned sure it would be a good one.

When he drew back, he squeezed his eyes shut. “Ok honey. Now you can let me have it.”

He fully expected her to tell him to get lost, or push him away at the very least.

Cassidy heard his words and it felt as though she were in a romantic holovid or novel. To her, the stories of the earth moving under your feet, or lightning striking you when you found your soulmate seemed so far fetched. In truth, the whole idea of a soulmate seemed like the stuff of fantasy.

But as Sturges poured out his heart to her she suddenly heard music.

**Love is a many splendored thing.**

Cassidy slid her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to hers. She returned his kiss with equal intensity.

_**Two lovers kissed and the world stood still,**_

_Then your fingers touched my silent heart and taught it how to sing,_

_Yes, true love’s a many splendored thing!_

“‘Yes,’” she whispered against his lips when she paused for breath. “‘Yes, I’ll have you.’”

Sturges gave an exclamation of joy. “‘Yes? You mean that honey? You know what I’m asking you, right?’”

She nodded, her eyes shining. “‘You want me to be a Sturges.’”

He laughed and hugged her tight. “‘That’s right. You’re my best girl and I want you to be my wife! I know it seems so sudden but CJ I love you so much!’”

Cassidy was smiling so hard she thought her face would burst. Her friends had started to gather around to greet her.

“‘Y’all hear that!?’” Sturges cried. “‘Me and CJ is gettin’ married!’”

Those present congratulated them.

“‘It’s about time,’” laughed Preston. “‘You two were playing cat and mouse since you met. We all
saw it.”

“Welcome home, kid,” said Mama Murphy. “I knew you were still alive.”

“We were so scared,” said Marcy. “I can’t wait to hear about everything you’ve seen.”

“I brought gifts back from the Institute!” Cassidy said.

“What about your brother, honey?” asked Sturges. “Did you find him?”

Cassidy nodded, her face serious once more. “I did. Shaun...well he’s not exactly the way I remember him. He’s over 60 years old and the current Director of the Institute!”

The assembled group murmured in shock.

“I think there’s a lot we need to hear,” said Sturges and scooped her up in his arms like a damsel in distress. “I think everyone can fit in my living room so we can have story time!” He kissed her on the nose. “But you, little lady, I’m not letting go of!”

Cassidy giggled and held onto him.
Cassidy was exhausted by the time night fell. She’d answered everyone’s questions as best she could, but kept the group to the originals from the museum. Before she said a word, she wrote on a piece of paper and passed it around.

_The Institute might be listening. I can’t tell you everything right now._

The faces as they read that were shocked but they all played along.

“I’m exhausted,” she said eventually. “I’d like to go to bed now and sleep for a week! Tomorrow I’ll visit each of you if that’s ok?”

They nodded and wished her goodnight.

She stood up and stretched. Sturges looked up at her, unsure whether to follow or stay. Suddenly there were protocols he felt he needed to know. He was relieved when Cassidy held her hand out to him.

“Come on,” she said. “I’m not letting you out of my sight!”

“Hell yeah!” he said with a grin and took her hand, getting up so fast he knocked his chair over, creating a ripple of laughter from the group.

Cassidy walked them to her house and closed the door behind them. She turned and put her arms around Sturges’ neck. “I was done hours ago,” she said. “I just want to be alone with you. Just us. Derrick I love you so much. I wish I’d paid better attention all this time and saved myself the pain of falling for Deacon. I’m sorry. It must have been horrid for you to watch us together.”

He kissed her tenderly. “It was hell I can’t lie. But you seemed happy and that’s what mattered to me. Honey, I need to admit something. That first trip to the Glowing Sea? My suit could have easily fit Deacon. I just didn’t want him going with you. Can you forgive me?”

She laughed. “Nothing to forgive. I’m glad it was you. And I’m sorry for acting the way I did. I’ve not been that nice to you and I feel bad. Especially since I had feelings for you I didn’t really figure out until I was in the Institute. I kept thinking about you.”

She pulled away from him and walked to her room. Opening a chest, she put her pip-boy in it, and her outer wear.

“Will you stay with me tonight?” she asked. “We’ll be in daddy’s room. I’m going to put all my clothing in here in the chest. Just in case.”

He understood and went to the other room. He undressed to his underwear and got into bed. It was
dark, and Cassidy came in a few minutes later. She got in beside him. “Can you hold me?” she asked.

“Of course, honey!” He held an arm up and she curled next to him, her head on his chest and an arm draped across his body. He kissed her head. “So since you accepted my proposal, I guess we need to decide when we want to do the wedding and where. I only know about DC having a guy who does that.”

“DC is fine,” she said with a smile. “As to when, well if I had my way I’d want to marry you before I do anything else. There’s a lot on the table that I need to talk to you about though.”

He listened as she leaned close to his ear and told him about the synths and her Railroad plan. She spoke softly so that there was no way anyone could hear them.

“I agree with everything you just told me,” he said. “I’ll do whatever you want. Not keen on you going back though.”

“I don’t know how to relay with another person or I’d bring you along,” she whispered. “But first things first. We need to get married!”

“Don’t you gals always want to plan things out and all that? Leastways that’s what I always thought. Zeke found a bunch of mags from back in your time that was full of that stuff. We were kids and read it all. Mostly for the parts that talked about cars. I think I learned way too much about women from those mags. And most of it is probably wrong!”

Cassidy giggled. “Magazines are the worst sources of any real info. But they can be right. Us girls do like to dream about and plan weddings I guess. I know my best friend Lindsay and I talked about it a lot. I even had my dog involved in my plans! And Shaun and my parents….” She suddenly went quiet.

Sturges turned slightly and put both arms around her, holding her tightly. “I’m sorry, honey. I’m so sorry. I wish things had turned out differently. But you killed that psycho who got your daddy. That’s something. And your brother. I’m sure if you asked him he’d be happy to come.”

Cassidy shook her head slightly. “No. My real brother died long ago. The man in the Institute…he’s not my brother. He’s not my family. I don’t know what he is but he’s not a part of me.”

The hurt in her voice cut him to the quick. For once the guy who could fix anything could do absolutely nothing to ease the pain of the woman he loved.

“We’ll have a beautiful wedding and an amazing life,” said Sturges. “I swear it CJ, I’ll do everything I can to make that happen.”

Cassidy and Sturges sat in the shade of a building. She’d delivered the message to Glory via a scavving team. Now she hoped that the little bit of contact they’d had would be enough for Glory to trust her.

A soft footstep in the shadows made Cassidy sit up suddenly. “Glory?” she asked softly.

“Yeah girl, I’m here,” said the synth. “See that building over there with the stairs going down? Meet me in there in a few minutes.”

“Ok,” said Cassidy.
“You ok, honey?” asked Sturges.

She nodded. “Yes. But this is scary stuff for me. I mean I’m nowhere near the spy I pretended I was. I quiver just thinking about what I have to do. Derrick, I’m terrified of my brother and the Institute.”

“Do you trust the Railroad?” he asked.

“They might have seemed pushy and annoying to me but they really believe in saving the synths, so yes. I trust them on this. Come on.”

She took his hand and they walked slowly to the building, descended the stairs and stepped inside. It took both of them a moment for their eyes to adjust to the gloom.

“Ok,” said Glory from the shadows. “What’s up? That message sounded urgent.” She stepped forward and looked up at Sturges.

“Who’s your friend here?” she asked.

“This is Derrick Sturges. My...my fiance.” The word felt odd on her lips, surreal, but she liked it. “Derrick, meet Glory.”

Glory’s face registered complete surprise. “Ok back that up a minute. Weren’t you and Deacon a thing? Where is he anyway?”

“You haven’t seen him?” asked Cassidy.

“Not since he checked in after his last mission. I was just saying today to Des that he must be crazy in love to stay away from us this long without a word.”

Cassidy felt Derrick give her shoulder a gentle, supportive squeeze as she told Glory everything that had happened between her and Deacon.

“Mm-mm that’s some crazy shit, girl,” said Glory shaking her head. “I’ve known him for years. There were times he’d just take off for awhile but never for this long. I know he had some problems but didn’t know how bad it was.”

Cassidy shuffled uncomfortably. “Glory, I need to ask something. Has he...did he ever…” She couldn’t form the words. She was asking something she didn’t really want to know. Something that didn’t matter anymore.

“Are you asking me if he ever did this with anyone else before?” asked Glory. “No. In all the time I’ve known him he’s never been close to anyone. He’s brought us new recruits but never like you. It surprised us all.”

Cassidy slowly released the breath she didn’t realize she was holding. “I loved him so much. I just didn’t have any idea he was so messed up. I just wanted someone to love me, I guess.”

Sturges wrapped his arms around her from behind and held her tight.

“For what it’s worth, Charmer,” said Glory. “I actually think he did love you. Or does. He’s just got a lot of demons...if you can believe anything he says.”

“There’s that too,” said Cassidy. “I never knew. And it was fun for awhile but then it got confusing.” She leaned back against Sturges. “Derrick and I have been friends since I woke up and
“Well, they do say love is blind,” said Glory. “I’m glad you’ve got someone. So why this meeting?”

Cassidy launched into her adventure with the Institute.

Glory was in disbelief.

“You got into the Institute? You’re just full of surprises girl! You need to come and talk to Des. She needs to hear this.”

Cassidy shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere near your HQ. My brother watches me. No matter what he says, I know he still keeps tabs on me. I’m still scared that he was aware that Deacon brought me there that one time. Glory, he lies. My brother. He’s lied to my face about quite a few things already. His primary interest is the Institute. Nothing else matters to him. I want to be done with all of it but those synths need out. Please help me.”

Glory nodded. “Damn right I’ll help you. I’ll have to talk to Des and the others to arrange things. But Charmer, it’s going to be hard if you won’t hit up HQ.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, I’m afraid for your safety.”

Glory nodded. “Ok, I hear that. I’ll get a message to you via the dead drop you used. Check back in a week. Can you wait that long or do we need to move sooner?”

“The sooner the better so I can get on with my life and the synths can start theirs.”

Glory nodded. “I got ya. Ok. I’m going. Give me at least three days then.”

She escaped deeper into the building, and Cassidy figured she had another way out.

“Is there any way I can go into the Institute with you?” asked Sturges. “Since you’ve been in there and all. Thought maybe you’d seen something we can use?”

She sighed. “I have no idea on any tech stuff. There’s a person I can ask...or I can just ask my brother if I can bring you there. He thinks I’m ok with all of it. I have to let him continue to think that way until we can get the synths out.”

“I’ll play along,” he said. “But I don’t want to let you out of my sight for a minute. Does that sound creepy? Doesn’t give you the zorros does it?”

Cassidy laughed. “No, it doesn’t and it sounds like you love me very much and it’s great.”

He gently cupped her face. “You know I love you more than anything. I’ve carried it around since we met. It feels so right to be able to say it to you now.”

“I wish I’d had half a brain and saw it sooner. Everyone teases me and says I’m oblivious. I was just dumb.”

“You are not dumb! I don’t want to hear you talk bad about yourself ever. You’re one amazing woman.”

Cassidy smiled. “I love it that you think I’m a woman. Unlike MacCready and Deacon who all thought I was nothing more than a kid.”
Sturges scowled for a moment. “But that didn’t stop Deacon from messing around with you though. Not cool.”

Cassidy rested her forehead against his chest. “Derrick...umm...I need you to know this. Me and Deacon...we slept together. Literally. But we didn’t....you know....do it.” She felt heat rising to her face and she was embarrassed. “We actually never did anything except kiss sometimes. He didn’t....he didn’t want me that way.”

Sturges blinked. “What you and Deacon did before ain’t my business. I mean if you want to talk about it I’m here for you but it don't matter to me what you did before we were together. I’m glad he used some common sense at least. If he didn’t love you he had no business having sex with you.”

“So you believe that people should love each other before doing that?” she asked, quite pleased.

“Yes ma’am,” said Sturges. “My daddy taught me and Zeke that you shouldn’t hop in bed with just anyone. You at least need to have a relationship of some kind. Preferably a loving one. But me and my brother both messed around some when we were younger. We had girls we liked and who liked us. I’m sorry for it now. Wish I’d have waited too. Sounds dumb I bet coming from a guy.”

Cassidy squeezed him. “No! It’s wonderful! My daddy and mom taught me the same thing. You should love someone before committing to them. It’s an old way of thinking and I know it’s not modern really but I like it. It always made sense to me.”

He grinned. “Girls are smarter than boys. At least you didn’t mess around.”

“Well I probably would have anyway if the bombs hadn’t fallen. There was this rockabilly I was crazy about. His name was Evan Toth. He worked at the Red Rocket down the road from Sanctuary. My daddy was so adamant I stay away from him! I was already feeling I was going to rebel against that whole thing. Just never got the chance.”

“Think Evan would have done right by you?” asked Sturges.

“I don’t know to be honest. He was a few years older than me. 2 I think. He had an amazing car. He seemed nice enough and I never saw him flirt with other girls. How old are you, Derrick?”

“25,” he answered. “And Zeke is 28.”

“Still older than me. Kind of the same difference between my daddy and mom. She wasn’t my birth mom. That woman ran off when I was a week old. She didn’t want to be a mother. But Tamara, who raised me...she was in every way what a mom should be. I was three when daddy met Tamara.”

“My mama died when I was a year old,” said Sturges. “I don’t remember her. Raiders attacked our settlement. Wiped the whole thing off the map. Kind of hit home when it happened to Quincy.”

Cassidy touched his face gently. “I’m sorry, Derrick.”

“An awful lot of hurts go on out there. It’s a mad world, honey. That’s why we gotta fight for our place in it. I found mine. At your side.”

Cassidy sighed. “I love the things you say. I’m not quite ready to be all flowers and rainbows, but you’ve made the world brighter for me just for being in it.”

He brought his lips to hers gently. He had the softest kisses full of tenderness, unlike Deacon
who’d been passion and lust which he suddenly could turn off like a tap.

Derrick encouraged her to return his kisses. His tongue teased her lips, never forceful or demanding, but questioning, seeking.

His kisses made her feel rubbery and weak and left her wanting more.

“You are something special, Cassidy Jasmine,” he said using her full name for the first time.

“So are you, Derrick...ummm…”

He laughed softly against her lips. “Derrick Winston. Would you believe Zeke is short for Zachariah?”

“I thought Zak was short for Zachariah.”

“I guess it could be. But Zeke named himself when he learned to talk! Zachariah Gabriel. Daddy liked the old world names. Winston was mama’s name before she got married. Gabriel is some angel. Mama was into that kind of thing. I like to think maybe she became one.”

Cassidy nodded. “I imagine they’re all somewhere watching us and being happy we got together.”

“I’m happy we got together!” grinned Sturges. “Well CJ, shall we head on home? I’m starting to think about that brahmin steak Mama Murphy was working on.”

She nodded. “Sounds great actually. I want to stop thinking about the Institute and the Railroad for a bit and just enjoy you and me. Maybe we can go see the Cats? They don’t know we’re getting married yet!”

“We sure can if you’d rather do that. Wherever you go, I’m there with you,” he said with a smile.

She took his hand. “Love you,” she said and they exited the building.
The Waiting Game

Chapter Summary

The Atom Cats are excited about the wedding of two of their own, but Cassidy has doubts about the timing.

The squeals of excitement from Roxy when Sturges and Cassidy delivered their news were probably heard way up in Goodneighbor.

Zeke, who’d already been ecstatic about seeing his brother in one piece, was beside himself.

“If you’d been cool enough to listen to your big brother, you and CJ could have been circled ages ago!”

Sturges grinned. “At one point it was 50/50 whether or not I gave you the beat down of your life. When I kissed her I thought she was gonna brain me.”

Zeke laughed. “Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“Yes!” cried Sturges, shoving him away.

Roxy and Rowdy pulled Cassidy away. “Oh we need to find you the prettiest wedding dress! And you’re both going to come home, right? We’ll be a proper family all of us!” Roxy was filled with glee.

“Cool it sister,” said Rowdy with a wink. “This kitten might not want to live here. Maybe she likes nowheres-ville!”

“I actually do want to live here,” said Cassidy. “And I’m sure Derrick does too. But we’ve got things to deal with still. And he’s the only mechanic Sanctuary has.”

“Tilt!” said Rowdy.

Cassidy shook her head. “No, it’s true Rowdy. The Institute...I’m working with them at the moment.” She looked around, making it obvious she felt observed. Both the ladies nodded.

“I dig it,” said Rowdy. “Still, Zeke’s going to insist we get you two a trailer. You can decorate it, make it cool. Give old Duke something to do out there. You know how bored and restless he gets.”

Duke was the one who travelled away from the garage. He was the unofficial scavver of the group and often the one who found new people. The sad thing was, most never stuck around long. The garage was far from anywhere and isolated. Most people started going a bit stir crazy after a while and took off.

The young man from Sanctuary who’d been really keen on the Cats had stayed for a short time but he too decided that he would prefer to travel than to stay in one place.
"Look, Rowdy," said Cassidy quietly. "I’m going to talk to Zeke about this too, but for the time being maybe it’s a good idea for you to close your ranks."

"That’s a strange request little sister," she said. "But I can dig it." She looked up and scanned the rafters as Cassidy had done.

"Things are weird these days," said Roxy. "But we’ve got a wedding to plan. So where will it be? Sanctuary? Here? DC?"

"DC," said Cassidy. "Derrick says there’s a guy there who does them."

"Anyone can do them," said Roxy. "It’s not like in the old world anymore. Now...people just say they’re married and they are."

"But little sister here’s from the old world," reminded Rowdy. "Things were more square back then." She winked and Cassidy grinned.

In the cantina area, the men were discussing their own similar issues.

"So when are you beatin’ feet back here?" asked Johnny D. "Sanctuary was nice but there’s too many cubes around. The vibe was a bit off, you know?"

"I’m the only mechanic," answered Sturges. "They need me there. Til we can get someone to replace me, I can’t just leave. And there are some things CJ needs to deal with right now. Personal things."

Duke drank the rest of his beer. "Can we help?" he asked.

"I’ll let you know if so," said Sturges. "Right now she’s on her own. I don’t like the situation but it is what it is."

"Keep us in the loop. Cats look after their own, dig?"

He gave Sturges a fist bump.

That night as they curled up together in bed and talked about mundane things, Cassidy suddenly sat up and looked down at Sturges.

"Do you want to move here? And live here for good?"

He reached up a hand and moved some stray hairs off her face. "Yeah honey, if that’s what you want to do. But I really need to get someone to handle things at Sanctuary first. You know I’m the only one right now."

"I mean after that and when I sort out all this stuff I’ve got going on."

"I’d like that very much," he grinned. "It’s been a long time since me and Zeke shared a space. I know he wants me back here. He’s been after me for a dog’s age to do that. But CJ...you’re pretty close to Marcy and Mama Murphy. And your daddy’s grave too. How’re you going to feel leaving them behind?"

She lay back down in his arms. "It’ll suck and be hard to say goodbye. But Derrick, Sanctuary is feeling more and more like a part of my past. I can’t go back to those times. It’s over and it’s so hard to live in that house with all the memories even though it looks different, it feels the same. Does that make any sense? I can always visit them and daddy’s grave anyway."
He stroked her hair. “I get it. As long as you’re ok with it I’m happy to do whatever you like, honey. As long as we’re together I don’t care where we end up.”

“I’m so lucky to have you. You’re amazing,” she said as she squeezed him. “I’m too excited to sleep now. All these ideas Roxy had for my wedding dress.”

“Zeke said I should marry you wearing a power suit. He’s off his rocker on the porch. I don’t know the first thing about fashion, but I can’t see myself wearing one of those black and white getups from the old world. Doesn’t suit me. But if you want me to, I’m there.”

“Derrick, you can wear whatever you like,” said Cassidy with a smile. “Roxy said it’s not like it was in my time. And besides, I’m not marrying your fashion sense. I’m marrying the sweetest, kindest and cutest man I’ve ever met. You’ve got it all.”

He squeezed her tight. “Oh honey, I can’t describe how happy you’ve made me. I never guessed you’d ever notice me. Heck when Deacon left, I figured you’d fly solo for a lot longer than you did. I imagined after that you’d end up with MacCready. You two seemed solid state.”

“We’re good friends. He and I didn’t like each other at first. We were both pretty stuck up. He thought he was better than me because I’m younger than him. We both have our strengths and weaknesses and in the field we compliment each other. We’ll always be friends but that’s it. And it’s great. I wish he’d hurry home already. I’d like him to be at our wedding and I can’t wait to meet Duncan!”

“You like kids, CJ?” Sturges asked.

“I think so,” she answered. “I loved caring for Shaun when he was a baby. I babysat for the neighbors all the time and was a camp counsellor last summer. Oh...I mean...the summer before the bombs fell.”

“You ever think about being a mama, with your own kids?”

She nodded. “Yes. I used to fantasize about it with Deacon all the time. He’d told me he wanted a family with his first wife. But...he sure didn’t want anything to do with it with me.”

“That guy was batshit crazy,” said Sturges. “I wouldn’t take anything he did or anything he said seriously. Was there even an honest bone in his body? From what you told me, he lit up the tilt sign every time he opened his mouth. His whole life story might have been just that. A story.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. She considered the idea. “It’s possible. Anything is. But something sure made him lose it on me that last day. It was the worst episode yet. Like he was looking at me but not seeing me and talking to...well a ghost like Mama Murphy said.”

Sturges scowled. “Well he’s not welcome back in Sanctuary. I told Preston that. Ain’t no one going to question that.”

“I...I’m pretty sure I’ll never see him again,” said Cassidy. “It’s not like it was a normal lover’s quarrel or something. Can’t have that if you aren’t someone’s lover anyway.” She sighed.

They were both quiet, lost in their own thoughts for a few minutes.

“CJ,” said Sturges. “You said that Deacon didn’t want you. You know...sexually. You don’t put that on you, do you? I mean you know it’s his problem because he’s nuts. Right?”

Cassidy didn’t respond. She did put it on herself. She still wondered what she’d done wrong. Even
knowing that Deacon had the *mind sickness* as her daddy called it, she still blamed herself.

“Honey?” he asked. “That silence says enough.”

“I’ve never been very popular with guys Derrick. I’m not all buttons and bows. I’m not cute or pretty. That’s what guys want. Like Roxy. And I don’t know what the hell I’m even doing.”

Sturges pressed his lips to her temple. “Well, you’re right.”

She sighed inwardly. The truth could hurt. Then he tilted her chin up. “CJ, you aren’t cute or pretty. You’re beautiful. How you have no idea about that is beyond me. You’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever laid eyes on. And you have a beautiful heart to add to it all.”

She looked in his eyes, trying to find any guile, any sign of deception. Her physical self had never had any encouragement. Her parents valued her mind and her skills. They prized her intelligence and did their best to cultivate it. When she began to show an interest in boys, she discovered she didn’t quite fit in with the other girls. Until Evan Toth and his attention which her father quickly tried to put an end to.

“I don’t care how long it takes me,” he said. “I’ll make you believe how beautiful and special you are.”

“If you love me, that’s enough,” she said sleepily.

“There’s no problem there, honey,” he said tenderly and nestled her closer.

The Atom Cats were abuzz with excitement. Each one had their own ideas on how Cassidy and Sturges’ wedding should be done. They didn’t mean to overwhelm her, but that’s exactly what happened. Part way through their deliberations, Sturges noticed that his girl had vanished.

He found her sitting outside on the hood of a dead car.

“What’s wrong, honey?” he asked gently, half sitting, half standing beside her and taking her hand.

“I know the Cats mean well...but it’s too much, Derrick. I...look I can’t really focus on our wedding right now. It’s supposed to be the happiest day of my life, and deserves all the attention I can give it. But right now...I can’t stop thinking about Shaun and those trapped synths.”

“Do you want to wait until it’s all said and done?” he asked.

She looked uncertain and half shrugged.

“CJ,” he said kindly. “This is your special day. You’ve already said yes and that’s put me over on cloud 9. *When* we do the wedding doesn’t matter to me in any way.”

She brought his hand up to her cheek. “I want to wait, until this business is all settled. And I want MacCready to be here. I know we can’t wait for him forever but I’m hoping that he and Duncan will be back soon. Oh, I wish we had phones!”

“Life must have been a lot less stressful back then, being able to talk to each other whenever you wanted to. Maybe I need to figure out how to do that. You know...between here and Sanctuary.”

Cassidy exhaled loudly. “You’d be famous and a genius if you could. I don’t even know the first thing about any of that stuff. Just that it worked. And it was great. And cars. I wish we had cars and roads again. Then MacCready would have been back already. And we could visit everywhere
we wanted in the space of a day. And be home in our own beds at night. I miss the old world! Derrick invent a time machine so we can go back.”

The honest desire in her voice made him ache inside. “Honey, I know I can’t do something like that, but I’ll damn well try and get phones working, and cars? Hell I already have ideas on how to do that. Just takes time.”

He put his arm around her shoulder and squeezed her. “Come on, let’s tell those crazy Cats we’re waiting on the wedding. They can plot and plan all they like in the meantime.”

She let him lead her back inside.
“Shaun, I’d like to bring my fiance here to meet you.”

Cassidy faced her brother across the boardroom desk where she’d just zoned out through the most boring business meeting ever.

“I thought Deacon had gone,” he said, puzzled.

*He doesn’t know about Derrick! She thought. He’s not watching me anymore? I’d love to believe that but I don’t. He’s far too devious.*

She remembered something Deacon had told her once. *Never let your guard down. When you do, that’s inevitably when everything goes to hell.*

“His name is Derrick Sturges,” she said. “We met shortly after I emerged from the vault. He’s wonderful and I’d like him to meet you.”

Shaun said nothing, watching her intently and tapping his fingers lightly on the table. “I have no intel on this man,” he said.

“You don’t need to spy on every single person I interact with,” she said, mildly annoyed. “I’m going to marry him regardless and if you trust me at all, you’ll trust my choice in a husband. He’s a mechanic, and very interested in the technology here. Just meet him. If you think he’s terrible, and I can’t imagine you will, then I’ll send him home and I won’t bring him around again. But Shaun, he is going to be my husband at some point. And I’m hoping that you’ll emerge from your hidey hole and come to the wedding. You’re my only family.”

She hoped she’d sounded sincere enough. She had no desire to have him anywhere near her happiest day.

“I have never left the Institute and I never plan to,” he said. “However, you may bring Mr. Sturges here if you like. He will be considered your guest and as such I trust you will ensure he behaves appropriately.”

Her little brother was acting as though he were her father and it bothered her deeply. *You could only dream of being a quarter of the man daddy was. Make that an eighth. No...a sixteenth.*

“Of course! What do I do? Get another courser chip from engineering?”

“I’ll notify Dr. Li you’ll be showing up for one, yes. We will have dinner then this evening, you, me and Mr. Sturges.”
“Just call him Derrick,” she said, and bounded off to find Dr. Li.

Cassidy took Sturges’ hand. She’d had him sitting around the CIT grounds while she’d relayed back into the Institute. “You might throw up when we land,” she said. “I sure did that first time. It still puts me off kilter a bit but it gets better each time.”

“So I’m going to be torn apart and put back together...so will I still be me? Or someone’s idea of me?”

Cassidy laughed and shrugged. “I have no idea. Well, am I still me? I’ll tell you what. I’ll test you when we get there and let you know.”

“Alright...I’m ready I guess.” He squeezed his eyes shut.

Sturges was hit with a wave of dizziness when they arrived, but he didn’t have Cassidy’s awful nausea. He leaned up against a wall waiting for it to pass. Cassidy had a bit of a stumble as she usually did but nothing major.

“I need to test you now to make sure it’s really you,” she said and pressed up against him. She locked her arms around his neck and kissed him quite thoroughly.

“Oh it’s definitely you,” she whispered. “Only my rockabilly Derrick can kiss that way.”

“Mm,” he said. “I have to say the same about you.”

She looked into his eyes. “Welcome to the Institute.”

She led him down to the elevator, and watched his reaction. It was similar to hers but with the wonder and amazement only someone who’d never lived in her time could have. He didn’t know where to look first. He touched everything, stared hard at everything.

Shaun was waiting in his room when they walked in.

“Derrick,” she said. “This is my brother, Shaun. Shaun, this is my fiance Derrick Sturges.”

The men shook hands and Shaun studied Sturges appraisingly. “Cassidy tells me you’re a mechanic. You might find engineering and robotics to your liking. I will let her give you the tour. Supper will be in the boardroom at 6pm.”

“Alrighty,” said Sturges. “This place is ...well I don’t even know what to say. It’s pretty fab!”

Shaun blinked. “I’m not quite versed in the speech of the Commonwealth so forgive me if I seem confused at times.”

There was a note of condescension in his voice. Shaun made no secret of his contempt for above grounders and she could already see that he didn’t think much of her sweet fiance.

I don’t give a damn what you think, she thought. I’ll be history as soon as I get those synths freed.

“Come on,” she said, taking Sturges’ hand. “Let’s go look at my favorite place first. Bioscience!”

The moment they were out of earshot she pulled Sturges down a long tubular hallway. “Let’s go meet my friends, the synths.” The synth barracks was on the other side of the Institute.

Stacey, Adam and another man, who called himself Abe, were reading in the library section.
Cassidy pulled a note from her pocket, let them read it, then took it back.

_The Railroad will be standing by to help you. I’ll let you know when it’s time to go. You’ll have to act right away. From here on, anything you want to take will have to be with you all the time._  
_Smile and nod if you understand._

Stacey followed the instructions, as did Adam and Abe. They were happy to meet Sturges and talked about everyday things, books and their jobs. Then Cassidy went to find the other synths and give them the news as well.

In total, there were 23 synths that would leave over the course of 3 hours when the Railroad gave the ok.

Remick, the synth who worked on the relay, had planned to slip something into the regular worker’s coffee that morning so he’d be off the job for the day. Anything out of the ordinary was to be reported by the relay operator. 23 synths leaving was definitely out of the ordinary but no one would be reporting it. The head of that department, when he came on for his shift, would check the logs and see what had happened but by then everyone would be long gone. Including Remick, Cassidy and Sturges.

“Why didn’t they do all this before?” Sturges asked her.

“They had no way of contacting the Railroad. Half of them don’t even believe they existed. Very few synths who ran off on their own made it out there. Most died but the rest were captured by the coursers and their minds wiped. It’s horrific.”

“But the Institute will make more synths and enslave them too won’t they?”

“From here on out, there’ll be a plan in place for the Railroad to pick up any that escape. There’s a synth here that won’t be leaving with the others. He’s too afraid to live up on the surface but he wants to help those that do. He’s going to be the liaison. I don’t know much about him but that’s his choice. Once I’ve done my part here, well that’ll be it for me. I can’t save the world, Derrick. I can barely save myself.”

“I get it honey,” he said. “It’s amazing what you’ve managed to do already.”

Cassidy and Sturges wandered around the Institute, taking it all in. They went to medical and asked for the research logs. No one really bothered to be suspicious of the Director’s sister. Like Shaun, they believed she was one of them.

Sturges however, was uneasy at night. He couldn’t settle down to sleep despite the comfortable, safe, and clean environment he was surrounded by. Cassidy tried holding him but he couldn’t do more than doze off.

“What’s the matter?” she asked him. “It’s safe here.”

“Yeah from raiders and critters...but everyone here just seems so unreal. The humans are more robotic than the synths. I feel like I need to protect you from them. I sound kookie. I know it.”

“You’re wonderful Derrick,” she said affectionately. “Our room is locked. And no one has any need to come in here. Not even Shaun.”

“I hear ya,” he said. “But still...I’ll feel a whole lot better once we’re out of here.”
“23 synths!” cried Desdemona. “We don’t have the agents to pull that off! Nor the safehouses. Shit, we need Deacon.”

“I told you Des, his mind snapped. He’s gone.” Glory made a motion with her hand. “We can’t count on him now. He did a real number on Charmer. And despite that she’s got our back. Refused to come down here.”

“It’s not Charmer I’m concerned with,” said Desdemona. “It’s finding places for 23 synths. The Institute will cut loose all it’s coursers once they find out the numbers. We haven’t recovered from the Switchboard and now we’ve lost Deacon.”

“Ticon’s gonna have to do double duty,” said Glory. “I know Hi-Rise will jump on the chance. Let me talk to Amari. Goodneighbor might let some in there. Hancock won’t put up with any bullshit from the Institute.”

Desdemona grunted. “That’s a whole mess of people getting involved. The more players, the more risk!”

“What other choice do we have?” asked Glory. “We can’t turn those synths away.”

“Damn it!” cried Desdemona, lighting up another cigarette and pacing around. “Well let’s get Hi-Rise, Fixer and Professor at CIT. Glory you stand by at Ticon to move some of the synths to Goodneighbor after you talk to Amari and Hancock. Once you’ve got that in place, we can get the message to Charmer. Damn it Deacon, why’d you have to go and lose your mind?!”

“I’m hoping he’ll just come back one day,” said Glory. “He was good at what he did.”

“He was,” agreed Desdemona. “And I hope so too. Get out there and notify the agents, Glory.”

“I’m already gone,” said the synth and disappeared out of the back entrance.
Let Freedom Ring

Chapter Summary

Cassidy and Sturges free the synths with near disastrous results.

The scav team brought back a small piece of paper and handed it to Cassidy.

*Green light. Standing by 0200. 23.*

“Derrick,” said Cassidy, approaching him in the garage. “We got a go from the Railroad.” She showed him the note. “Let’s relay.”

They said nothing to anyone, and disappeared from the garage in a flash of light.

Shaun was in a board meeting and that gave Cassidy the perfect excuse to find Remick. It would be his duty to round up all the other synths, and put the regular worker out of commission.

As she left, she ran into Adam.

“Hello, Cassidy,” he said politely. “I’m always happy to see you. What news from above?”

“You’ll be finding that out for yourself soon enough. You’ll be leaving starting at 2am tonight. Be ready.”

Adam couldn’t keep the joy out of his eyes. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” He patted his hip. “I’m all ready to go. I’ve got some seeds. It’s all I want.”

Cassidy smiled at him. “Good luck, Adam.”

She was jumpy and nervous. It was hard to keep an even expression and tone when she spoke with Shaun. As always, they were to have dinner together.

He talked endlessly about Institute politics and which departments were arguing with which other departments. He wanted her to try and resolve a difference Engineering and Robotics were having.

She shrugged and agreed. It wouldn’t matter much once the 23 synths were out and she and Sturges relayed out as well with Remick.

Nighttime took forever to come. Watching the clock made it all go so much slower. Starting at 2am, Remick would be sending out 5 or 6 synths through the relay every half hour. He’d given each group a time and hoped that they would be there and be ready to go.

Cassidy and Sturges left their room at 4:30am and headed for the relay. If everything had gone according to plan, everyone should have already gone and only she, Sturges and Remick would be left.

“Strange time to be travelling isn’t it ma’am?” A courser stepped from a corner of the room
adjacent to the elevator which would take them up to the relay. Cassidy’s heart began to pound.

*Stay cool,* she told herself.

“My home is on a farm. A farmer’s day starts at sunrise. So it’s not odd for us to be up and at ‘em at this time.”

The courser eyed her coolly. “Of course, ma’am,” it said and with a nod walked out of the area.

Cassidy and Sturges exchanged glances and quickly went up the elevator.

“You know the protocols!” said a rather angry male voice. “And there was no group activity authorized for the surface today! You’ll be put on report for this infraction!”

“What’s going on?” asked Cassidy.

A pale faced Remick stood beside the relay console. A tall, red faced man punched in a set of keys. “What is this!” he cried. “This is treasonous behavior! You know the penalty. You just stay right there while I call for a courser. It’s off to SRB with you!”

It was obvious that something had gone wrong with Remick’s plan. This man was either the supervisor or the one he was supposed to put out of commission. In either case, it didn’t matter. This meant trouble.

“I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for this,” said Cassidy evenly. “No need to get so upset at Remick.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Cassidy cringed.

“Remick?” asked the other man. “This is a synth. Designation T5-36.”

“Look...don’t make a scene,” she said. “I don’t like calling people by a number. I gave him a name to make it easier for me to relate. Calm down.”

“This synth has gone rogue regardless,” the man quite nearly shouted. “Allowing groups to relay to the surface is highly irregular and suspect.”

*Think quick,* she told herself.

“She was doing it because I asked him to,” she said.

“What? Why? What need does a group of synths have to be on the surface?”

“There was...I mean is...some tech up there that I wanted them to bring...” her voice faltered. She didn’t really know what to say that would make sense.

The man’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “The Institute doesn’t scavenge Commonwealth technology. It is beneath us. I think I better let Father know.”

“He’s asleep, do you really want to bother him? I’m his sister. I have authority here!”

The man ignored her, and Cassidy panicked.

She drew her pistol. “Just step back. Or I’ll have no choice but to shoot you,” she said.

“What?! Are you part of this scheme? This is monstrous!” He turned and hit a large button on the
She fired but he ducked, lunging for her.

However, Sturges would have no part of that. He hauled off and punched the man right in the face, making him hit the wall and sag down to the ground.

“Let’s get out of here!” he cried.

“Remick, relay us out!” called Cassidy as bright flashes of light heralded the coming of the guards.

The synth frantically reset the relay and prepared it. Cassidy grabbed him and shoved him onto the platform a split second before she was relayed out.

She stumbled on the CIT grounds. Remick landed right after her, hitting her from behind and sending them both sprawling. Only Sturges was barely phased this time.

Some of the synth guards had followed, and a gunfight erupted. Ducking behind some debris for cover, the three of them fought against the Gen 2 guards who were dressed in armor of some kind. Bullets didn’t do much against them.

“The courser chip!” cried Cassidy. “Get rid of it!” She’d worn hers on a strap around her wrist and she ripped it off and tossed it. Sturges did the same.

“Run!” she cried. “Follow me!”

More and more synths were relaying in and the three of them turned and ran.

Cassidy didn’t know where the Railroad was. She assumed they were supposed to be there. Maybe they’d taken the exodus groups and figured Cassidy could manage on her own.

They ran down an alleyway and around a building. She had no idea where she was leading them. She hoped something would show up and give her an idea.

The Institute guards were no pushover. And she knew it was a matter of a short time before coursers would be dispatched and zoned in on Remick.

Cassidy was scared.

Laser fire hit the ground around them, and suddenly Sturges cried out and stumbled, crashing to the ground. She saw a bright red stain blossom on the back of one of his legs.

“Derrick!” she screamed.

“Run, honey!” he cried out. “I’ll stay here and hold them off, you take Remick and go! Find the Railroad!”

“No!” she shrieked. “If we’re going to die, we’re doing it together!”

Suddenly someone grabbed her arm and threw her behind an old truck which was lodged against the side of a building. She yelped as she hit the ground hard, turning as Sturges was dragged in after her. Remick dove down as well.

A man in the usual dishevelled and dirty Commonwealth clothing, wielding a laser rifle, knelt down and peeked around the edge of the truck.
Cassidy looked at Sturges, whose face was a mask of pain. She tore off her pack and pulled out her bandages. The ones she always carried with her.

“I don’t know the first thing about medicine,” she said. “But I know you’re supposed to bind up wounds to stop them from bleeding. I don’t have any stims!”

He winced as she did exactly that.

Remick and the stranger shot the guards in the back where they were unprotected, as they ran past. Cassidy moved to help them, but by that point there were only two left and they had made it around a corner. They would most likely not backtrack.

She sat back against the truck to catch her breath. “Thank you so much,” she said. The stranger didn’t turn to her, just nodded.

Running footsteps approached and she prepared her rifle.

“Fuck!” It was Glory’s voice.

“Glory!” cried Cassidy. “Over here!” She stood up and waved.

“I’m so sorry!” cried the Railroad agent. “I was supposed to be there when you came out. But we had an issue of our own with some damn raiders. The other groups are all under Railroad protection now. It’s all good, girl! You did it!”

She saw Sturges on the ground. “Well, no one died anyway. We’ll get you to a safehouse and get you all patched up. Can you walk?”

Sturges shook his head. “I don’t think so. Not on my own.”

“Hey, this man helped us,” said Cassidy, turning around. He was gone. “There...there was another man...he pushed me back here and dragged Derrick in.”

“I don’t see no other man,” said Glory. “I’ve said too damn much if there was someone else here. Well you were lucky than. Come on, let’s get moving.”

She helped Sturges to his feet and he hopped along in between her and Remick.

Cassidy picked up her pack and settled it on her back, reloading her rifle just in case. She heard a soft movement behind her.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” came the reply.

Cassidy’s heart froze in her chest and she held her breath, her heart starting to pound. She didn’t turn around. She knew that she wouldn’t recognize the face but she’d never forget that voice, not as long as she lived.

“Deacon?” she asked, starting to tremble.

“I’m sorry, Charmer,” was all he said.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“So am I.” She stood motionless, barely breathing, realizing that fate had given her a chance for
“...I want you to know...I’ll always love you. I know you want absolution for the things you did. But...no one can give you that. Only you can forgive yourself.” Tears coursed down her cheeks and she hung her head. “Deacon...you saved me. More than once. Thank you for that. I get another chance to be happy. I hope that one day you’ll give yourself permission to do the same.” She drew in a shuddering breath.

“For what it’s worth I forgive you.”

He said nothing and she reached a hand out behind her. She felt his fingers, warm and soft against hers for a few moments.

“Goodbye, Deacon,” she whispered and jogged off to catch up to Sturges and her friends.
Cassidy sat with Sturges’ head in her lap. He’d noticed she’d been very quiet since they arrived at
the safe house. He’d had his wound cleaned and was given a stimpak and med-x for the pain. It
was an ugly wound and he’d have a scar but he didn’t care about that. He and his girl had survived.

“Honey? I’m sorry things went cattywampus,” he said.

“I expected something would mess up. It always does,” she said, gently stroking his soft hair.
“Derrick...that man who helped us. It was Deacon.”

He half sat up and stared at her. “No shit?”

She shook her head. “No shit. I didn’t actually look at him but...it was him. I had a chance to say
goodbye at least.”

Sturges lay back down. “Wow. I guess he’s trying to redeem himself. Or something. I’m grateful
for the help though. Stubborn girl, you refused to run like I told you to.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “As if I’d leave the man I love to die. Never going to happen. You
mean the world to me Derrick.”

“Same here. I don’t think we’d have gotten out of that fight alive if Deacon hadn’t shown up.
Glory’s been too late. Man, the guy is a few cards short of a deck but he sure is good at showing
up at the 11th hour.”

She sighed. “I wonder if it was a coincidence that he was there or if he’s still spying on me. Glory
was supposed to be there. Maybe he went instead when he saw she was tied up with those raiders.”

But I guess as long as he leaves us alone, he can do what he wants. How do you feel about it,
honey?”

She drew in a long breath then held it, puffing out her cheeks before letting it go. “I think he might
have been around for a bit. But if he knows we’re together I don’t think he’ll stick around. He’ll go
back to the shadows where he’s happiest. Maybe one day he can be free of his demons. He’s a
good man, Derrick. He doesn’t deserve all the pain he’s suffering.”

“Neither do you,” he said gently.

“You ended my suffering,” she said with a smile.

For a few minutes they sat in silence. Finally, Cassidy stirred.
“I need to go talk to the synths. I don’t want to think about Deacon anymore.”

“Are you ok?” Sturges asked her, raising a hand and tenderly touching her cheek.

“Not really 100% yet,” she said honestly. “But I will be. This is just one of those things that needs time. Not just Deacon…but the synths and Shaun. I never got to say goodbye to him either. Things just didn’t turn out like I’d hoped. It’s like everything is different now from what it was when I woke up in the vault. Derrick, you’re the best thing that came out of this whole mess.”

She leaned down and kissed him, then traced her fingers along his lips. “At least now we can plan our wedding and just start our lives. Glory wants us to be here for a few days then we can just go home.”

“Did you tell her about Deacon?” he asked.

Cassidy shook her head. “No. I just think Deacon needs to be left alone. If he wants to reveal himself to them it’s his choice. He didn’t have to with me either but he chose to. So it’s his choice to do the same with the others. I have my closure. I’m glad he’s still out there and I hope he’s helping the synths. They’re going to be as confused and terrified as I was when I first woke up. It’s scary out here. But I get why they want their own life. To live it their way not the Institute’s way, with fresh new happy memories.”

“Do they have to leave here? Leave the Commonwealth?” he asked.

“Usually the Railroad gets them away from here. As far from the Institute as possible. I think the mind wipe thing makes them untrackable to coursers. So for them to be really safe they need to do at least some of it. Sometimes they actually don’t know they’re synths. It’s better that way don’t you think?”

“The way things are these days I think it’s best they just be the humans they were born to be.”

“That’s what I think, too. If you’re ok here, I’d like to go and find Stacey and Adam and make sure Remick is ok. And no, you can’t come with me. I want you to lie here and heal.”

She carefully moved him from her and settled him with some pillows and a blanket. “I won’t be long. Try and have a nap if you can.”

Stacey was curled up by a window drinking a coffee. She looked up and smiled.

“The day I met you was the day my whole life changed,” she said. “Thank you so much, Cassidy. I can’t believe I’m free. I can go where I want, do what I want and hopefully don’t die.”

Cassidy laughed. “The whole not dying part is the one thing I had trouble with too. Life was safe and quiet in my time. Then suddenly it’s like death is lurking around every corner. It really freaked me out.”

“I don’t want to have my mind wiped,” said Stacey. “But I was told its the only way to ensure coursers won’t find me. I don’t want to forget you, Cassidy. I want us to stay friends forever.”

“It’s not like the SRB way,” said Cassidy. “The Railroad give you memories. Happy ones. They erase all the awful Institute parts. You won’t remember being from there. You won’t remember being a synth. You come out of there a human being.”

“But I won’t know my friends from the Institute. Or you. That makes me so sad.” She sighed heavily.
“You could remember them if you wanted to. Since you’ll all be given a new set of memories, you could ask for them to be included. But Stacey, it’s dangerous for you to be around me and Derrick. What if we accidentally say something about what we went through with you? Being human means making mistakes sometimes. Just one little slip up could unravel things and that would be terrible for you.”

Stacey looked so forlorn. “I’m so happy but so sad too. I really like Adam. We decided we want our memories to be linked. We’d like to be together.” Her expression lifted.

“That’s so great! I’m so thrilled for you, both of you!”

Stacey sipped her coffee. “Hi-Rise said he’s taking us to that doctor tomorrow. So I guess that will be it for me and you. I’m so grateful Cassidy. Thank you doesn’t seem to be enough.”

“You’re welcome,” said Cassidy. “I wish you only the best. Now I need to go and find Remick and see what his plans are.”

The former technician was looking through a magazine. “Cars!” he exclaimed. “These are great! What a world it must have been! Can you imagine living back then?”

Cassidy smiled and told him all about it. The man was enthralled. “Gosh I want to build one! Engine and all! I can do that now I’m free!”

“You sound like Derrick,” Cassidy laughed. “Figure out how to build a road first or your cars won’t be of much use!”

“I’m going to do that,” said Remick. “I want to fix things. Make new inventions. Maybe I’ll even find a place to live and not have to travel around like so many others do.”

Cassidy smiled. Then it dawned on her. Remick might be the answer to her dilemma. If he could have some memories implanted that would let him take Sturge’s place...it just might work. She tentatively suggested it to Remick. He lit up like a firework.

Gently, she reminded him that his memories of her and Sturges would be erased for his own safety. Like Stacey, he was crushed, but the idea he’d be doing something he loved excited him and he agreed.

“So the next time we meet,” she said. “Will be as strangers, Remick. But we can rebuild our friendship as you rebuild your life.”

He hugged her. “That’s a deal!”

Sturges was all over the idea. “You’re brilliant honey! Then we can live with the Cats!”

“I can’t wait to start my life with you!” She cried, hugging him.

It was a bittersweet morning when Cassidy said goodbye to Stacey and Adam. For their own good, it would be best that they leave the Commonwealth. Hi-Rise took them and two others away to Goodneighbor to meet Dr. Amari and start the process.

Glory came to see how Cassidy and Sturges were doing.

“Des sends her regards,” she said. “We’re all totally blown away that you were able to do this.”

“I didn’t do anything but make contact with you for them,” said Cassidy. “Remick did the hard
work. It almost ended badly for him too. That was scary. I had to pull my gun on that Institute
guy.”

“That I turned his lights off,” grinned Sturges. “No one touches my girl.”

“Looks you got yourself a keeper, Charmer,” said Glory with a smile.

“I sure do,” said Cassidy, putting her arms around Sturges.

“Well you two can go home tomorrow if you want. All the synths will be on their way. The one
guy though, Remick? He said something about going to live at Sanctuary. Is that ok with you?”

Cassidy nodded. “Yes. I suggested it. He’s into the same things as Derrick here and that means we
can go live with the Atom Cats. It’s where me and Derrick want to be. If Dr. Amari thinks she can
get him good to go then we’ll welcome him.”

“That’s pretty cool of you,” said Glory. “If I ever decide to retire, can I come live there too?”

“You’ll always be welcome there,” smiled Cassidy. “Even if I’m only a visitor. Sanctuary was my
home for a long time but it’s time for me to move on and look at the future.”

“You could always join us in the Railroad you know. We could use someone like you.”

Cassidy smiled. “Thank you but no. It’s not for me. I just want to have as normal a life as possible
with as little fighting and death as I can.”

“Ok. I get that. If you ever change your mind, you know how to find me, girl. Until then, this is so
long. Be safe out there.”

Cassidy watched her go. “It was hard not saying anything about Deacon,” she said.

“You care about everyone,” said Sturges. “Even the ones who hurt you. And that’s what makes
you so special.”

She shook her head. “I think that’s what makes me human. People in this time need to remember
their humanity and then it would be a better place.”

He held her close. “You sure got that right.”
Cassidy and Sturges thought they could resume their lives. The Institute had other ideas.

Returning to Sanctuary didn’t really feel like coming home to either of them. Cassidy and Sturges both felt it as they walked through the security gate.

People they didn’t know milled about attending to their tasks, new buildings were being erected and hardly anyone paid them any mind. Dogmeat ran up and eeled around Cassidy, but aside from him there was barely a greeting.

“Remember that day we walked here from Concord for the first time?” she asked Sturges.

“Yeah, with you wearing that power armor taking up the rear so that you could make sure Mama Murphy was ok. I was already 10 shades in love with you by then.”

“You’re silly! You didn’t even know me!” She laughed lightly.

“I’d seen enough, honey.”

“I was so scared of you guys even though I thought you were hot. I didn’t want to share my community with you. I had to hide Codsworth in the cellar and prevent you from going into my house. I didn’t even want to tell you guys about me. You were so nice to me, Derrick. You all were...except for Marcy.”

He grinned. “I’m still at the part where you thought I was hot…”

“You are! And I got mad at myself for thinking about that when the world was gone to hell. Marcy though...wow she was awful.”

Sturges nodded. “You worked a miracle with her. Brought her back around. I thought she was too far gone to be honest.”

Cassidy stopped walking and looked around. “I kind of liked it here when it was just our group. But I know what Preston is doing. And I agree with him 100%. It’s just a wistful part of me that liked things as they were.”

“Agreed. Although the part about you being with Deacon I can do without.”

“We’ll be happy together, right Derrick?” she asked softly.

He drew her close. “You can bet your bottom dollar on that one, honey. That’s a promise and you know the saying…”

“A Sturges always keeps their promise,” she finished for him and he kissed her on the nose.
After dinner they sat with their friends in the Cantina and discussed their plans. There was disappointment from them about the fact that Cassidy and Sturges were leaving once Remick came.

“Now Preston,” said the mechanic. “You know I came from the Cats way back before we even met. I did tell you I’d be going back one day. I just stayed away longer than I planned is all. But if this new guy shows up, he’ll be doing my job and me and CJ here we need to start our lives.”

“I understand,” said Preston. “Can I convince you to join the Minutemen?”

Sturges shook his head. “I’m sorry, man. You know how I feel about fighting. Not my thing. I just don’t do guns too good. I like to fix things not break them. But you know where to find me if shit ever hits the fan. Me and the Cats, we’ll come a-runnin’!”

Cassidy nodded. “And we’ll be back to visit and check up on things. Derrick has decided to give up his house. I’d like to keep mine for when we visit.”

“This will always be your home, Cassidy,” said Preston. “I’ll make sure we take good care of it.”

“I know you will,” she said.

“I’d like my place to go to MacCready and his little guy if they come back,” said Sturges.

“That’s a fine idea,” agreed Preston.

“Well...it’s getting pretty late,” said Cassidy. “I’m not sure when we can expect Remick. Until he shows up we’ll just carry on as usual.”

They said their goodnights and went back to Cassidy’s house, Dogmeat close behind.

Cassidy turned to Sturges as they entered the bedroom. She wrapped her arms around his waist and drew close, resting her ear against his chest. “Your heart is so fast,” she said.

He ran his fingers through her hair and kissed the top of her head. “That’s because you’re so close,” he whispered. “You’ve always had that effect on me CJ. There were times I worried you could hear it!”

She looked up at him, then pushed his jacket off his shoulders. Her eyes searched his face in the dim light as her hands slid up his chest beneath his shirt, feeling the lines of his muscles and the soft fuzz on his skin.

He paused a moment, enjoying her touch, then pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the floor. His eyes locked onto hers and his fingers traced her jawline, her lips, and tilted her face up. Slowly, he brought his lips to hers, grazing them softly.

Cassidy sighed and reached up to lay her hand on his cheek. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too, honey,” he replied.

She placed both arms around his neck and pressed close to him. Planting little kisses on his cheek, jaw and throat, she felt him carefully unfasten the buttons on her blouse then push the fabric off her shoulders.

Sturges then dropped his hand to the small of her back, pulling her even tighter to his body. With the other hand he deftly undid the catch of her bra and pulled it off where it fell on the ground with
his shirt.

She grinned. “I thought that was just a myth. You know...guys being able to do that. I never believed it!”

His lips met hers and that kiss was far more than a graze. “I can do a lot more than that,” he said, his voice filled with desire.

Cassidy’s hands went to his belt and with nowhere near his dexterity, unbuckled it rather awkwardly, then unbuttoned his jeans. As he stepped out of them and his underwear, his hot, hard erection pressed almost painfully against her as he held her tight, kissing her.

She was wearing a skirt, and it took just a second for him to pull it, and her panties off, and pick her up in his arms. She held onto him, her own heart beating so fast and every nerve in her body electrified.

Sturges carried her to the bed, and lay her down on it carefully, leaning over her to kiss her forehead, her nose, then her lips, working down to her jaw, throat, and chest.

One hand ran down her side to her outer thigh, then over to the inside where his fingertips grazed her soft lower lips. Cassidy let out a gasp, his touch making her shiver with longing. She arched her back as he brought his lips to hers...

Then a loud explosion shook the house.

Cassidy sat up, eyes wide. “W...what the hell was that?”

Sturges listened, hearing the residents of Sanctuary rousing. “Raiders maybe? Having it out with someone nearby?”

Gun and laser fire sounded from their turrets and someone was running down the street.

“Mobilize!” shouted Preston. “We’re under attack!”

“What damn fool would attack Sanctuary?” complained Sturges. “Concrete wall and turrets every 10 feet! They’ll be sliced and diced in seconds.”

Cassidy crawled to the edge of the bed. “Derrick...I don’t think so…”

Screams from the other side of Sanctuary made Cassidy leap off the bed and reach for her combat outfit which she always kept neatly folded up on an ottoman on the end of the bed.

Dogmeat began to bark and snarl. Flashes of light came from outside.

They dressed like soldiers, quickly, quietly and pulled their weapons down from the rack.

“Cassidy! Sturges!” Preston shouted. “It’s the Institute!”

Cassidy’s eyes widened as she opened the door letting Dogmeat dash out, scrabbling as he went around the corners, teeth bared.

“Do we have any laser weapons here?” she asked Sturges.

“I fixed up a few in the garage yeah,” he answered.

“If it’s Institute synths our bullets will be ineffective on them remember? Get the lasers. And show
“Shit!” he cried and ran for his garage next door. “CJ get into your power suit! No arguments!”

Settlers ran from their homes, weapons out. Some had pistols, some had rifles and others luckily had laser weapons. Preston had been doing his best to see that everyone was armed and trained. Defence was everyone’s job.

Synths. Gen 1 and 2 both flashed in. Cassidy removed the head off two of them as they stalked to the Cantina across the street. Mama Murphy’s room was in the back and she wasn’t quite up to par with her fighting skills anymore.

Cassidy forgot about the power armor and ran inside. “Mama!” she yelled.

The old lady was dressed in a long black leather coat, a laser weapon in her hand. “I might be old, kid,” she said. “But Murphy the Madwoman is still around. Let’s go.” Cassidy didn’t even know what to say as the senior citizen moved past her purposefully.

Gunfire was everywhere. Bullets, lasers and grenades going off in the streets and behind the homes. In the garage she saw settlers grabbing at anything they could find in the armor chest and protecting themselves. She watched a young man pull the armor off a dead synth and put it on.

“They’re everywhere!” called Preston. “We don’t have the manpower to fight them all!”

“Send a runner for the Minutemen then!” she yelled back. “There’s a few settlements nearby right?”

“Yeah! But it’ll be too late by then!”

“Do it!” she screeched. She saw the fear in his eyes and knew what was going through his mind. It was Quincy all over again. Calling for aid that would never come.

“They’ll come, Preston! They’ll come, I promise!”

He shook himself out of his fear state and grabbed a settler, giving her an order. The woman took off running for the security gate and the bridge.

Synths were everywhere. They didn’t just attack the people, but they went for the buildings. Grenades shook Preston’s home as the roof caved in. A house across from his exploded.

The residents of Sanctuary took cover, shooting from behind walls, inside buildings and roofs. A sharp whistling sound echoed through the night.

“Fatman!” shouted Preston. “Take cover!”

Cassidy screamed as a loud, fiery explosion rocked the beautiful greenhouse. She ran for it, seeing two settlers stumble onto the ground where the bomb had thrown them, their clothing on fire.

She forcefully rolled one of them on the grass to put out the flames. The other one wasn’t moving. “No!” she shouted. “No!” But no amount of shaking could rouse the dead woman.

Mr. Davidson ran from around a corner, his expression one of terror. “What’s this? What’s going on?” he cried. He was wearing loungewear and had no weapon on him.

“Get armor and a laser weapon! It’s the Institute!”
He balked. “My shop!” he yelled and took off running.

Cassidy screamed at him to get to the garage but he didn’t stop and she didn’t have time to worry about him.

She stood up and glanced around frantically. Where was Derrick? He was always right beside her. She couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Derrick!” she screamed at the top of her voice. But the cacophony of the battle rendered her ineffective. A laser weapon lay on the ground near a dead synth. She stomped on it’s head in a rage and grabbed it.

“How do I use this shit?!” she cried. “Derrick!”

She aimed at a Gen 1 that was crawling towards her, it’s lower half gone. Pulling the trigger a bright beam of laser fire shot out, obliterating it. A counter on the side showed her what she assumed were the shots left. She didn’t know how to reload one or even what ammo they used. But there were several shots left in the weapon and she’d use it up and find another.

More bombs, more houses obliterated utterly. Bodies flew through the air, synths and settlers alike. Screams of the dead and dying stabbed her ears.

She tripped over a dead body and sprawled into the street. Dogmeat was beside her, his muzzle wrinkled in aggression. The dog leapt up, knocking a Gen 2 synth down giving Cassidy a chance to destroy it.

“Derrick!” she screamed again.

Fear and panic was taking over and she couldn’t breathe properly. Her heart was going too fast. She felt bewildered and confused. There was so much chaos everywhere that she had no idea where to focus. Where were her friends? Where had Mama Murphy gone? Marcy and Jun!

She ran for the Long’s house. The couple were crouched down by the window, weapons in hand.

“Have you seen Derrick?” Cassidy asked frantically.

“We haven’t seen anyone!” cried Marcy. “We were sleeping when this started!”

“They’re using bombs on the buildings!” cried Cassidy. “You might not be safe in here!”

“Not safe out there either,” said Jun. “What do we do!”

“Don’t die!” screamed Cassidy as another bomb shook the ground. “Whatever it takes, don’t die!”

She ran from the house back into the street. It looked like a scene out of hell. Buildings on fire, dead in the streets and gun and laser fire everywhere.

Preston was suddenly beside her. “We need to stick together!” he said. “This one on one isn’t working. They’re overpowering us.”

Cassidy was terrified. “I can’t find Derrick! Last I saw him was at the garage…” She turned around.

The garage and half of his house was gone, a pile of smoldering rubble in it’s place.

“Oh shit,” said Preston under his breath. He didn’t give Cassidy a chance to run. He grabbed her
forcefully by the arm and dragged her down the road towards the far end of Sanctuary.

Suddenly….there was silence.

The sound of combat disappeared, leaving behind the roaring of the fires and the groans of the injured.

Minutes passed and slowly people emerged, guarded, weapons raised.

As the adrenaline left her body, Cassidy began to shake like a leaf. Mama Murphy appeared from the remains of a building, and Marcy and Jun crawled from their still partially intact home.

Running feet put them all on alert as several men and women appeared.

“We came as soon as we heard!” one of them cried. “Ran all the way here. Heard all the explosions for miles. We got other Minutemen incoming.”

Tears filled Preston’s eyes. “You came. You actually came.”

“Of course!” exclaimed one of the Minutemen. “That’s what it’s all about, right? What happened?”

“The Institute,” said Cassidy in disbelief. “Shaun did this. My own brother…”

She ran into the center of the street. “Fuck you!” she screamed. “Fuck you, Shaun! I’m coming for you! I’m going to kill you! You hear me, you asshole?! You’re the walking fucking dead!”

Sobbing she ran for the remains of the garage. “Derrick!” she screamed, trying to pull bits and pieces of the wreckage. “Derrick!”

Someone grabbed her from behind and she lashed out with a screech. “Honey!” cried Sturges. “It’s ok! I’m right here! See?!” He turned her around.

“I kinda got caught up when a bomb went off. Shit was like a bladed hurricane. I lost you, honey I didn’t know where you went.”

Cassidy threw her arms around him and held on tight. “He tried to kill me! My own brother!”

Sturges comforted her. “He’s not your brother, CJ. He’s a monster. And monsters gotta die.”

She nodded. “They broke Sanctuary,” she said softly. “They broke our home.”

“This is all just stuff,” he said, stroking her hair. “We can fix this right up. And you and me, we’re still alive and kicking.”

“People died Derrick! Not all of us made it.”

“I know...I know. But the Institute didn’t win tonight.”

Preston walked up with Mama Murphy and the Longs.

“They pulled out of the battle. They didn’t intend to kill us. They were toying with us. Showing what they could do.”

“It was revenge for my freeing those synths,” said Cassidy. “I caused this.”

“You did the right thing,” said Preston. “And now it’s our turn. I always said the Minutemen
would take back the Commonwealth one settlement at a time. Well now we’re gonna take the Institute.”

Cassidy took a deep breath. “Yes. Yes we are.”

They stood together and watched Sanctuary burn.
A New Plan

Chapter Summary

With the extent of the devastation revealed, and food and water sources at a minimum, Preston comes up with a new plan for the residents of Sanctuary.

People had fallen asleep wherever they could. Cassidy awoke in the grass, lying across Sturges, Dogmeat at her hip. The Longs had gone back into their house followed by a few other settlers. Mama Murphy had leaned up against Cassidy’s house, weapon in her lap. Preston dozed a few feet away from Sturges’ feet.

Cassidy looked down at Sturges and gently stroked his hair. A slice on the side of his forehead oozed blood down the side of his face. His lip was cut and swollen and a gash sliced across his upper arm on the right. His body was covered in dirt and dried blood. His shirt and pants were torn in places. He was a mess. But alive.

“I’m going to get medical supplies and drag food out here for everyone,” she said softly.

Mama Murphy opened her eyes. “Help me up, kid,” she said. “I’ll give you a hand.”

The devastation was terrible. The side and rear of Cassidy’s house had taken collateral damage from the destruction of the garage and was caving in. Tools were embedded in her walls.

Worst of all, the beautiful car that had once been in the back of the garage was now buried under all the debris. Cassidy tried not to dwell on it. It would have reduced her to a sobbing mess and she had work to do.

With a sad sigh she gathered up all the food she had and dragged it outside in a box. “Mama, please ask everyone else to bring their food out too. Any water as well.”

“Allright, kid,” said the old lady.

Cassidy went to her room, what was left of it. Her dresser had exploded. All the pretty dresses Roxy had given her burnt and scattered. Her bed was completely gone. Probably up in a tree somewhere or on the other side of the Sanctuary wall. A picture of her family, the glass and frame broken, lay beneath some twisted metal foundation beams.

Her mother holding baby Shaun, her father resplendent in his military dress uniform, and herself, with a huge smile on her face, her hair caught back in a ribbon Evan had given her. She ran her fingers along the image of her little brother.

“I can’t believe you did this to me,” she whispered. “How could you be so evil?”

She looked up at her father’s gravesite. A branch had come off the big tree and landed across it. The stone bench was broken in half, the rocks several feet away and the grave marker was gone. But thankfully the grave itself looked undisturbed.
Everything was ruined. All the work they had collectively put into making Sanctuary a home was undone. Not one building came out unscathed. The Long’s home came out the best, but the kitchen area was decimated, one wall completely gone due to the explosion from the greenhouse.

All their plants, gone.

Their entire water purification and delivery system was gone.

Cassidy slumped down beside her father’s grave. “This world sucks, daddy,” she said. “I’ve made a huge mess of my life so far. Shaun is evil. He hurts people. And now I have to take him out. My own brother! I don’t know if I can even do it! What am I going to do?”

She began to cry softly.

A shadow fell across her light. Sturges sat down behind her and gathered her into his arms. “You don’t have to do any of it, CJ. This isn’t all on you. We’re all in this together remember?”

She leaned back against him. “Last night started off so great,” she said. “Then hell happened.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, that was getting pretty hot,” he said. “I was so ready to show you how much I love you...but I need to find a stimpak and MedX, honey. I’m hurting pretty bad right now.”

Cassidy sat up. “Derrick, why didn’t you say something last night! Let me get my pack. If I can find it. Stay here.”

She looked around her room. Her pack was nowhere to be seen. The bomb shelter would have supplies. That would have survived. She ran for it.

Codsworth was inside, taking inventory. He had a few dings and burn marks on him but seemed alright.

“Miss Cassidy, our supplies won’t last forever. With our greenhouse gone and our water supply in tatters, I daresay what Sir had prepared for you here won’t last that long with all these people.”

“I know, Codsworth,” she said sadly. “I don’t know what we’re going to do, but something will come up. I need medical supplies. Derrick is hurt.”

She found her med supply crate. “Please bring this up for me, Codsworth. I’m sure there are many other people injured that will need care.”

She injected Sturges and got him into a surviving lawn chair. “I don’t want you doing anything right now, Derrick. There’s so much damage everywhere that all we need to concentrate on is getting people back on their feet. Fixing things is pretty much last on the list.”

“I’ll stay right here and be a good boy,” he said. “I got some smog in the noggin anyway. Need a nap.”

“I’ll be back to check on you in a few minutes.” She leaned down and gave him a kiss, smoothing his hair back. “I wish I had some water to clean you up a bit. But from the looks of it we’ll need what we have left to drink.”

“We’ll get through it, honey,” he said with a smile.

Preston had started rounding up the dead synths. “Take these things apart and put anything that looks salvageable in this green crate here.”
Settlers came forward to begin the scavenging.

A few others volunteered to gather up the bodies and bury them. It was decided to start a graveyard.

Mama Murphy had gone around and asked everyone to bring out all the food and water they had. It was time to take inventory.

Things were grim. There wasn’t enough food stores left to feed everyone for more than a week. It would take one heck of a lot longer to get Sanctuary fixed up. Any raider group could easily walk in and attack. The turrets were ruined, the wall had huge holes in it and the security gate was completely gone. A mass of twisted metal lying in the river was all that was left of it.

“Alright, everyone, gather around!” called Preston later on that day. “Everybody! Stop what you’re doing and come!”

Weary and despondent, Sanctuary’s residents wandered over. The Minutemen who had arrived during the night appeared as well.

“Look,” said Preston. “We got a pretty hard hit last night. But for whatever reason, they didn’t finish us. I don’t know why and I don’t know if they’ll be back to finish the job. Our food won’t last the time it will take to shore this place up again.”

There were shocked murmurs from the group.

“But…I got an idea. Hear me out,” he said. “Long ago, the Minutemen had a base. We called it the Castle. It’s southeast a ways, 12 hours or so. It was an impressive place but we lost it when our numbers dwindled. Some … creatures moved in there and we’ve never had the numbers to take it back. I think we do now if we round up the Minutemen we have.”

“How is that different then just fixing up here?” asked Marcy.

“The Castle is…well….an actual castle. It’s heavily fortified and defendable. Won’t need nearly as much work. If we can all get it together, we can do this. We can build ourselves a fortress and plan to attack the Institute. I’m not willing to allow them to walk all over the people of the Commonwealth anymore! It won’t stop until we stop it!”

His confidence was encouraging.

“So we just get our stuff and go there? Start over?” Marcy asked.

Preston nodded. “We get more people. We rebuild!”

Cassidy stood by and listened to him, Sturges behind her holding her close. She had wanted to go to live at the garage with the Cats...but not this way. Not being forced away by the Institute. If no one would be living at Sanctuary, who would tend to her father’s grave?

But her personal issues would not be a deciding factor. Preston was right. The Institute had only attacked as a show of power. They would lay low for awhile and most likely attack again.

There was no other choice.

They had to leave.

While the settlers got everything organized, Preston, Cassidy, Sturges and the Minutemen would
head to the Castle and clear it out of whatever had taken up residence there.

“I know how much you hate fighting,” said Cassidy to Sturges. “I’m just so happy you’re coming with me.”

“Honey, why does this always seem to surprise you? I’ve wanted to be by your side every day since we met. And I want to get the Cats over to give us a hand with whatever we’ll be fighting.”

She took his hand. “I’m still really glad you’re willing to get past how you feel about things to be with me.”

“That’s what a man is supposed to do. Hell that’s what anyone should do when they love someone.”

Brahmin were purchased to load up. Things that could be reused and had sentimental value were packed up.

The warehouse that had been so painstakingly built at the old Red Rocket grounds was organized for the move south. It had survived unscathed, the Institute having contained their attack to Sanctuary.

“It’s going to take us months of going back and forth to get everything moved over,” said Marcy. “Just when we found a home, this had to happen.”

“I know,” said Cassidy sadly. “I can’t exactly take my daddy with me to this Castle place.”

Marcy’s expression changed. “I’m sorry. Here I go again complaining about something so stupid. We’re alive and together, all of us. I’m sorry, Cassidy.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re right. This crappy world keeps hitting us over and over. But we have to keep at it. One day we’ll be able to live reasonably peaceful. It’s something to work towards.”

Marcy nodded. “I hope this Castle is worth the effort.”

“I’m trusting Preston with this,” said Cassidy. “If he feels it will be then I’m willing to give it a try. We don’t have too much choice anymore sadly.” She hugged Marcy. “We’ll be back as soon as we can so get everyone and everything ready to go. The most important stuff should go first.”

“I will,” said Marcy.

Mama Murphy came forward with a pack. “I put some food and water in here for you kid,” she said. “You come back soon.” She patted Cassidy’s cheek.

She gave Sturges and Preston a pack as well. “You take care of each other,” she said.

“We will, Mama Murphy,” said Preston.

“You know it,” added Sturges. “Well, we got quite a walk ahead of us. I’m guessing we’ll need to hole up somewhere along the way.”

“We will,” said Preston.

Cassidy turned and waved as she reached the bridge, then took Sturges’ hand as they headed for yet another unknown destination.
Queen Of The Castle

Chapter Summary

Sturges cheers Cassidy up on the journey to the Castle; the situation is worse than they expect when they arrive.

Cassidy felt emotionally bedraggled on the journey. While Preston and the others discussed the Castle, and potential strategies for clearing out what had moved in there, she just walked along and listened.

She was tired. Since crawling out of the vault she hadn’t had a moment’s peace. It was death and survival and killing and betrayal day after day.

She couldn’t even find any joy in the fact that she was getting married. Everything else overshadowed it.

Sturges walked beside her the entire time, telling her stories about him and Zeke and their family. She half listened to him, her tired mind partially shut down. He tried to make her laugh but at best he got a smile. Her eyes were far away.

He understood. Everything she had hoped for had been destroyed in the attack on Sanctuary. Sure, she’d said many times that she didn’t acknowledge Shaun as the brother she had lost, but he knew there was that part of her that hoped that he could come around. The attack had cut that dream free. And now, leaving Sanctuary behind was cutting the last of her old ties. Sure, she said she needed to move on, but that knowing it didn’t make the feeling any easier.

He could think of only one thing to make her heart a little lighter. He changed the cadence of his step and started snapping his fingers. Cassidy looked over at him.

“You come on like a dream, peaches and cream
Lips like strawberry wine,
You're nineteen, you're beautiful and you're mine,”

He spun around without missing a step.

“You're all ribbons and curls, ooh, what a girl
Eyes that twinkle and shine
You're nineteen, you're beautiful and you're mine!”

Sturges stopped walking and sashayed across the arid ground. The Minutemen stopped walking and turned around, putting down their packs. Preston had heard about Sturges and his entertaining side and grinned.
“You’re my baby, you're my pet
We fell in love on the night we met
You touched my hand, my heart went pop
Ooh, when we kissed we could not stop!”

Cassidy blushed and hugged herself, but she smiled as a few of the Minutemen joined in.

“You walked out of my dreams and into my arms
Now you’re my angel divine
You're nineteen, you're beautiful and you're mine!”

Sturges grabbed her and spun her around, his eyes full of adoration. Cassidy started laughing with glee.

“You're my baby, you're my pet
We fell in love on the night we met
You touched my hand, my heart went pop
Ooh, when we kissed we could not stop!”

He dipped her back making her squeal, then spun her around again, his eyes never leaving hers.

“You walked out of my dreams, and into my arms
Now you're my angel divine
You're nineteen, you're beautiful, and you're mine!”

Cassidy didn’t know he could dance as well as he did and she let him lead her. The Minutemen were singing and clapping and everyone genuinely was enjoying Sturges display of love.

They’d all needed the break. Life in the Commonwealth was exhausting and emotionally draining.

Cassidy forgot about the Institute, and the destruction of Sanctuary. She forgot about the post apocalyptic world and her lost family. All she saw for those few precious minutes was the soft eyes of the man she loved, and heard that beautiful voice. For that time, she was just a girl in love, and despite the rocky uneven ground, and her unattractive combat clothing, she could have been on a dance floor wearing a beautiful dress.

He finished the song, and held her tightly to him, not letting go, just gazing into her eyes. She didn’t pay any attention to the Minutemen and Preston who clapped and laughed, then picked up their packs and started walking again.

Sturges kissed Cassidy sweetly. “It’s going to be alright honey,” he said softly. “Trust me.”

“Ok,” she answered in a near whisper.

“I had to change the words a little,” he grinned. “I have no idea when your birthday is but I asked Codsworth and he seemed to think we passed it. We need to have a party for you like in the old
They walked behind the group, holding hands and talking quietly. Sturges managed to get Cassidy to talk about her life before the bombs. Her favorite things to do, her friends and her dreams. He loved that she’d wanted to study engineering and build cars.

“We’re gonna do that, me and you,” he said. “You’ll see. We’ll start Sturges Motors and build the best cars in the world.”

“Yeah, we’ll sort that shit out too. I’m not kidding. It’s gonna happen.”

She swung their hands as they walked. “Ok! I’m going to hold you to that.”

“*This* is the Castle?”

Cassidy stared at the structure as they approached it. “It’s Fort Independence!”

“You know it?” asked Preston, looking pleased.

“Yes. I had to study it in history,” said Cassidy. “I toured it once. But I bet it doesn’t look anything like it did back then.”

“200 years has a way of doing that,” said Preston. “But it’s pretty great that you know of it. I’d love to hear about the history some time, if you’re up for it.”

“Maybe if we ever get it cleaned up,” she said. “Right now it looks like a wreck.”

“Those damn Mirelurks sure did a number on it,” said Preston. “But we can get it fixed up. Just need to get rid of them.”

“I’ve never seen a Mirelurk,” said Cassidy. “Are they horrid to fight?”

“They can be,” said Preston. “First thing we need to do is recon and find out how bad the situation is in there. Need to know what we’re dealing with.”

“I can do that,” said one of the Minutemen.

Preston gave the ok. “We’ll stay back here and wait for you to come back.”

They went into an old cantina that had once served drinks and snacks to visitors to the fort. There were seats on the outside where you could sit at the counter and order. Sturges sat down and winked at Cassidy.

“Can I get a...Nuka Cola ma’am please?”

She grinned and pretended to serve him. “Sure thing gorgeous! That’ll be $8.50 please.”

He patted his pockets. “I guess I forgot my money at home. Take a kiss in trade?”

She laughed and leaned across the counter. “Deal!”

Preston watched them with amusement. It was remarkable how something so beautiful could come
out of the ruins of a life. He didn’t know either Sturges or Cassidy that well, but he could see they were a good match. He hoped that the wastes didn’t destroy them. They deserved happiness. Both were good people just trying to get by.

Cassidy sat beside Sturges and spun around on the chair.

“That thing is 200 years old, CJ,” he said. “It might just fling you off!”

“Probably will,” she answered, still spinning. “I just want to get this Mirelurk thing done with so we can go to the Cats.”

She slid off the stool and went to him, encircling him with her arms. “We’ve had pretty much no time alone together,” she lamented. Gathering her hair up into a ponytail she tied it.

“Chantilly lace and a pretty face, and a pony tail, hangin’ down,” sang Sturges.

Cassidy danced around for him, making him laugh.

“Every day should be more fun,” she said. “All the time with the fighting is getting old. I’m done with it.”

“Me too,” said Sturges. “I was done with it when I was 5.”

“Then you met me, and now you’re stuck with it every day,” said Cassidy.

“Now I do it to protect you,” he said. “And I don’t mind that one bit. Be glad to settle down though.”

He sat down in a proper chair and pulled her into his lap. “Come here, honey,” he said. “How about a little back seat bingo?”

“Not with people watching!” she giggled.

“I know. Just messin’ with you.” However, he didn’t let her go, and she settled into his arms and relaxed. She dozed off listening to him talking to Preston and the Minutemen.

It was an hour before the scout returned.

“It’s a mess in there,” he reported. “Egg clutches all over. Adult ‘lurks crawling around. And I saw evidence of a queen.”

“Well hell,” said Preston. “Sturges we might need your brother and the rest of the Cats out here to help us clear it then. A queen...that’s a whole other issue. Damn it.”

“We can go to the Cats,” said Sturges. “It’s not all that far from here. We can rest there and head back here tomorrow and get this done.”

“Alright,” said Preston. “Round up your gear people. We’re moving out.”
Roxy and Duke couldn’t drag Cassidy and Sturges quick enough to the back of the compound, before anyone could get a word in edgewise.

“We did it! We couldn’t wait!” the excited woman cried.

“Did what?” asked Cassidy curiously.

“Your trailer! Remember we said we were going to build you one? Well we did...look!”

Cassidy blinked. Somehow, somewhere, the Cats had gotten a hold of an old metal trailer. They’d cleaned it up and painted the Atom Cats symbol on it, along with a red rose and the couples’ names.

*CJ and Derrick Sturges.*

Cassidy stepped inside, completely awestruck. Her friends had found a bed, a loveseat and a coffee table, plus curtains for the windows. There were two potted plants and small strings of lights which made it look ever so romantic.

Her eyes misted up as she looked at Derrick.

“We’re home,” she said tremulously.

He nodded and put his arms around her. “We sure are, honey, we sure are!”

“Hey little sister...this is supposed to make you happy! We don’t want you to cry!” Duke looked concerned.

“Happy tears, Duke, happy tears!” said Roxy patting his arm.

“Well, we didn’t have a chance to tell you yet,” said Sturges. “The Institute laid waste to Sanctuary.”

Roxy and Duke were dumbstruck. “What? Really?”

“Mhm. Wiped out our greenhouse, water system, most of the houses. That’s sort of why we’re here. This is home now for me and CJ, but we need your help with the Minutemen base. That Castle place on the island. ‘Lurks all over it and they say there’s a queen.”

Duke made a face. “That Institute is almost as bad as the reds. All they need to do is drop a bomb
and bingo! It’s a match. You can count on us D-Man,” he said. “Just point the way.”

“Tomorrow morning we’ll all head out. But tonight, we need to pile up some Zs,” said Sturges.

“I dig it,” said Duke.

Preston and the Minutemen detailed to the Cats what had happened as everyone ate and drank.

“Find a corner, make it yours,” said Zeke. “We’ll get our suits ready to go. Show those ‘lurks who rules the cool around here!”

“I’m going to take CJ here and get some Zs,” said Sturges. “It’s been a rough ride.”

“Welcome home little brother,” said Zeke, giving him a fist bump. “It’s about time. Wasn’t cool what happened but we’ll get it smoothed out.”

Sturges and Cassidy were grateful for their new home. The bed was comfortable and clean. They’d had a quick shower, one at a time, to rinse off the dirt from their travels and the remains of the blood from his injuries. The hot water soothed tired muscles.

Cassidy was already in bed when Sturges returned. “I love this little trailer,” she said with a smile. “It’s going to be really different living here. I mean at Sanctuary my home had it’s own bathroom and laundry.”

“We can build something else. It’s a pretty big place. We can make a home any way you like, honey. You just need to say the word.”

“This is perfect just the way it is. I’ll get used to it and it’s better this way. Houses...it’s a thing of the past. Sanctuary was unusual in it’s construction. The rest of the wasteland isn’t anything like that.”

He got into bed beside her and pulled her into his arms. “You’re right. And this is where we both want to be anyway. Let’s just get to the livin’ part CJ. Me and you.”

“That is exactly what I’d like too.”

“I’ll help the Minutemen out from time to time but...aside from this whole deal with the Institute my fighting days are done.”

Cassidy began to trace patterns on his skin. The cut lines of his musculature were so beautiful to her. He was perfectly put together, the years of hard work certainly had sculpted him. He had scars from battles over the years, but to her, they made him even more wonderful. He was a warrior, and a survivor.

She became aware that parts of him were quite interested in her presence. Not wanting to make a big deal out of it, Cassidy said nothing.

She raised her chin and kissed his jaw. Sturges found her lips, his hand in her hair, and shifted, pressing his hardness against her.

She pressed back, liking the idea that he was attracted to her that way. “I think you kind of want me,” she said shyly.

“Uhh I think it might be more than kind of,” he said with a grin.

She kissed him, her tongue playing against his lips.
“I do love you so,” he said softly, nipping gently at her tongue, then nibbling carefully at her lips.

“I love you too,” she whispered back, running a hand through his hair and arching her back to press closer.

Lightly Sturges ran a hand down her back and over her hip. His fingers traced down between her legs, brushing her lower lips.

She inhaled sharply at the contact and wrapped her arms tightly around him, his hardness pressing almost painfully against her pubic bone.

As he savored the sensations going through his body, Sturges whispered to her “I can’t believe you’re my girl now.”

“I can’t believe a guy like you loves me.”

Cassidy sighed and parted her lips for a kiss. He didn’t hesitate to claim her mouth, his tongue finding hers. His lips were so tender, so soft. She didn’t think a man could harbor such gentleness.

They enjoyed the interplay of tongues and lips for several moments before Cassidy pulled back.

“Does it bug you that I’ve never done this? Because I really want to make love with you, Derrick. I’m just scared I’ll ruin it.”

“Why would it bother me?” he asked. “Not knowing something shouldn’t bother a person. Especially not when you can learn anything if you want to.”

She draped her leg over his hip, which opened her slightly. Although his hardness still rested against her pubic bone it pressed against her swollen nub as well. She liked the sensation and moved against him.

Sturges shifted himself so his shaft rested between her wet lips.

Cassidy reacted with a little moan, and angled her hips upwards, moving herself against him, feeling the stimulation on her swollen parts.

Her mouth sought his again.

He met them with his own and slid his shaft back and forth along her wet slit, her juices coating it.

“That feels nice,” she whispered with a deep sigh. “Keep doing it please. Are you inside me?”

“No, honey. Not yet,” he grinned. “I’m pretty sure you’ll know when I am. But I can keep going if you like.”

He kept moving that way with her lips parted around his shaft. His hardness rubbing across her swollen nub.

“If it feels this good when it’s in me I’ll die,” she laughed lightly with pleasure.

She made little sounds, her eyes closed, hips moving with his.

“Uhh...about that?” he said. “It might hurt a bit the first time. But I’ll be as careful as I can.”

Cassidy looked at him oddly. “Isn’t making love supposed to feel good, otherwise why would anyone want to do it?”
“Well yeah it does,” he answered. “It’s just that women get the short end of the stick when it comes to the first time.”

She made a face. “So unfair. We get a lot of that.”

Cassidy ran her fingers down his face. “Do you think you could touch me down there?” she asked. “If it’s gross you don’t have to though.” She looked suddenly insecure. “Oh is it rude to ask that? I don’t know…”

He shook his head. “No, it’s not rude. You gotta be honest with your partner. Otherwise how can you know what they like or don’t like?”

“That’s true. See? I don’t know anything.”

He changed his position, pulling his shaft away, and reached down to gently massage her nub. Sturges kissed down her jaw to her throat and breasts, taking first one nipple then the other into his mouth and sucking as he swirled his tongue over it.

The sensations were unlike anything Cassidy had ever experienced. She’d fantasized about making love with someone, but in her wildest dreams it never felt as good as it did at that moment.

She writhed, her hands in his hair. “This is amazing, Derrick.”

“Well, I do have a few more tricks up my sleeve, honey,” he said, his voice husky with desire. “Let me show you one.”

He kissed her deeply, then slowly began planting tiny kisses down her body.

She felt wetness leaking from between her legs and her body felt as though every nerve and fibre were pulsating. She groaned.

As Sturges kissed her belly, he parted her legs with his hands slowly.

“I’m going to die of this,” Cassidy moaned, feeling the blood rush through her veins.

His lips moved over her inner thighs, getting closer to her hot center. He placed his lips to her swollen, wet lower ones softly, feeling her heat on his mouth. He teased her sensitive skin with flick of his tongue and a little kiss or two, then quickly pressed his tongue against her opening, swirling all around it before moving up and taking her nub, sucking on it intensely.

Cassidy was beside herself. All of her muscles, inside and out, seemed to be coiling up. A sensation built inside her and the pleasure obliterated every other sense she had. Her hands gripped the bedsheets and she arched her back, eyes squeezed shut. She mumbled unintelligible sounds in between groans.

Sturges alternated between her opening and her nub for few moments, then began to massage her nub with his thumb while pressing his tongue into her opening.

Cassidy bucked. She made a sound somewhere between a squeal and a grunt and her entire world exploded. She saw fireworks behind her eyelids and heard her blood rushing, her heart racing faster than it ever had before. She felt her inner muscles contract and pulse.

She experienced the most intense pleasure she ever had in her life, wave after wave broke over her and she could scarcely catch her breath.
“I think I released!” she cried, then started laughing as endorphins flooded her system making her feel as though she’d ingested every chem in existence.

Feeling her release, and seeing her absolute pleasureable abandon, Sturges smiled to himself but didn’t stop. He moved back to her nub and took it between his lips again, licking and sucking while his fingers took their turn exploring her opening. He wanted so much to make it a good experience for her.

Cassidy’s body twitched with sensitivity after her release. She felt how slick she was and all her nerves seemed raw and exposed. Soft sighing moans escaped her lips. She felt him probe her opening and it felt strange. “Are you touching inside me?” She asked.

Sturges stopped and looked up at her. “I am. Is that okay? Do you want me to stop?”

“No...its ok,” she said. “Just feels weird. No one’s touched me like that before. Even me. But Derrick...I want to make you feel good too. You can show me how to touch your thing. I want you to release like I did.”

“Sure, if you like.” He sat up and gave her a lopsided grin. “I was kind of hoping you’d be okay with us making love.”

“Of course we can.” She looked at him with large luminous eyes. “What do I need to do?”

He gently caressed her inner thigh, parts of it slick with the juices from her release. “Well just relax for starters. Remember about it being a little uncomfortable at first but I'll take my time.”

Cassidy laughed nervously. “I feel dumb not knowing anything. Like I know your thing goes into mine of course but all the details...umm...no one fantasizes about the details! At least I never did.” She held her arms out to him.

“It's pretty straight forward, honey,” he said softly. “I think both man and beast are born knowing how it works.”

Sturges moved up her body and lay between her legs so his eyes were level with hers and his tip lightly touched her lower lips. She put her arms around his neck.

He leaned into her slightly and pushed against her entrance.

“You can feel me, right?” he asked her.

She nodded and shifted slightly beneath him, trying to quell her nervousness.

“It’s ok honey, we have nowhere to be and can take all the time we want.” He kissed her, a sweet kiss that made her heart flutter.

Carefully he pressed against her entrance, pushing then easing back until he felt her start to open to him. At the give, he pushed slightly harder until her opening slid around his head.

Cassidy tensed up, holding her breath every time he pushed forward. “I never figured guy things could be this big,” she said. “But what do I know, I never saw one before.”

“We’re all different. You ok, honey?” He stopped once his head was inside her, giving her a chance to adjust to him.

She relaxed slightly and gazed up into his eyes, running her fingers through his hair on the sides.
“It feels so weird but I’m ok. Does it feel good for you?”

He chuckled. “It feels really good, I’ve wanted you for a long time. But I got a ways more to go if you’re okay.”

“I knew there was more of you!” Cassidy giggled nervously and raised her hips a bit, feeling him inside her. “We can keep going.”

“Well alright then.”

Sturges pushed deeper into her, watching her face for signs of discomfort. It was a slow, gentle, give and take. He kissed her, wanting to distract her from her nervousness. He could sense she was a bit on edge but there was always so much expectation with love making it was no wonder people were nervous about it.

“I was really nervous too the first time,” he said. “For a guy it’s pretty bad because sometimes we just go all squishy and hell it’s embarrassing.”

Cassidy grinned. “Well you aren’t having that problem anymore. I kind of wish...well it doesn’t matter.”

He sighed. “I know what you were gonna say. I wish it was too. See I should have listened to my daddy when he said to wait for the girl I loved but you know how it is.”

Cassidy’s expression softened. “I’m glad I waited to be with someone I loved. I don’t think I could do it any other way.” She pulled his lips to hers and kissed him deeply, wanting him to feel how much she loved him because sometimes words just weren’t enough.

“I just hope you have good memories of your first time. I want this to be perfect for you, CJ,” he said with a smile.

“Can you go all the way inside me now? That’s when it feels the best right?”

“I’d agree with that. Ok. But you tell me if you want me to stop.”

He looked at her for a moment, love in his eyes, then started to push into her.

Cassidy dealt with it fine at first. It was uncomfortable, and she felt herself being opened, her inner walls stretching to accommodate his size. She shifted, drew deep breaths to make herself relax but it started to hurt. Still, she said nothing. He’d warned her it might not be that fun the first time.

He pressed into her until he felt resistance and saw her face flinch.

“Sorry honey, but there’s no easy way to get through this next part.”

Without waiting and giving her a chance to tense up, he gave a thrust until he felt her barrier give way and fully buried himself within her.

Cassidy yelped with pain with that final push. She moved her hips down away from him and put her hands on his chest.

“Derrick! Ow! I think you broke me!”

She blinked rapidly and her inner walls spasmed. Something hurt inside her.

Cassidy whimpered miserably.
“Sorry honey,” he said tenderly. “That’s the bad part I told you about.” He stroked back her hair and kissed her forehead.

She was filled with tension. “When you said it might be uncomfortable you were right up til just now...that last bit was like you stabbed me or something! It hurts inside me now.”

His eyes were full of concern. “It’s different for everybody. I didn’t think you’d be as tiny as you are CJ. I’m so sorry.”

“Everyone is tiny compared to your monster thing!” She was breathing heavily, tension radiating through her entire body.

“I never actually considered myself that way,” he said. “It’s okay honey, we don’t have to do any more tonight.”

He carefully pulled out, laying next to her.

“I honestly didn’t know it would hurt you this much. I feel terrible about it.”

She’d winced as he left her body, but he gathered her into his arms and held her close. He might have felt bad, but Cassidy felt she’d made a mess of what should have been a perfect night.

“I’m sorry I ruined this,” she said.

“Oh hush,” said Sturges affectionately. “You didn’t ruin anything. I got to make my best girl feel like a million bucks there for a little bit. Ending wasn’t so great but the first bit was okay wasn't it?”

Cassidy smiled. “It was pretty unreal, yes. I loved that.”

“Well, you just never mind this other stuff then. There’s no rush, no rules to it.”

“I want to make you happy Derrick, and I’m failing at it.”

“No way!” he exclaimed. “You made me the happiest man alive when you said you’d marry me. Hell when you didn’t give me a knuckle sandwich for being so bold I was already thrilled.”

Cassidy couldn’t help but laugh. “I was pretty surprised by your warm welcome. I’d been thinking about you every day I was away and wondered how I’d let you know I was ready to be with you. I was glad you made the first move.”

“If I’d had the smarts to listen to Zeke we might have gotten together sooner!”

“Well we figured it out and I love you so much. I don’t care if doing it hurts. I’ll deal with it. I just want to have a bit of a rest and we can try again.”

Sturges squeezed her. “No pressure honey. I love you no matter what we do or don’t do. The worst part of it is over now though. It will get better from now on. Look, I’m angling for a snack. You stay here and I’ll be right back. You want anything?”

She shook her head and curled up with the blankets beneath her chin. He pulled on his pants and shirt and quietly meandered out into the night.

Cassidy dozed off hearing the sounds of the ocean nearby. It was a soothing sound and she liked it. She imagined that the ocean was still alive. It was her favorite mind game.

She awoke, not knowing how long she’d been out. Sturges still hadn’t returned so she dressed and
went to find him. She heard the sounds of metal on metal and found him sitting on a cinderblock messing around with an old car. It was a project Zeke had started years ago and never did much with.

“I missed you,” she said and put her arms around him from behind.

“I came back and you were out like a light,” he said. “And this car here was looking at me funny. Zeke doesn’t have a clue sometimes. He put this light on upside down, can you believe that?”

“Yes, because I saw it when I came here the first time but it didn’t seem right to say anything back then. There’s lots of things wrong with this car.” She walked around it and gleefully pointed out several things.

“Oh, it’s worse than I thought,” he said shaking his head.

“I can’t really blame anyone in this time for messing it up,” said Cassidy. “None of you ever saw a real car or worked on one and the pictures left today aren’t that great.”

She remembered the beautiful little red car that he had made for her. And how they’d sat in it for hours the night before she left for the Institute. The love and care that had gone into it’s construction. Her lip quivered.

“Honey! What’s wrong are you alright?” Sturges asked, instantly concerned.

“The Atomic 8 you made me. I loved it so much and now…”

“I’ll build you another one, you’ll see!” he said. “That one was nice but I learned a few things for next time that will make it even better. Let’s call that one a prototype, and the next one I promise will be perfect!”

She nodded. He was always so positive about everything. It was encouraging and comforting. “I loved it. I’ll love the next one too. I wish I could help. I never had a chance to learn anything about the engines and how they work.

If things had been different, Evan at Red Rocket would have probably taught me.”

Sturges stood up and went to her, placing his hands on her shoulders and looking into her eyes. “If things had been different that way, you and I would never have met. CJ, do I make you happy? I know you said you’d trade everything to have the old world back, but since you can’t, is any part of life now even a bit better?”

Her face fell. “Derrick that was cruel of me to even say that. I was hurting and miserable and should have kept it to myself. I’m sorry for saying it. I wish I could take it back!”

She put her arms around his waist. “You make me very happy. I don’t want to trade anything now. The old world was beautiful but...you weren’t in it. And I can’t imagine anyone loving me more than you do...and I sure can’t imagine finding a guy better than you to love.”

His kiss claimed her lips with intensity. Sturges was always slow and tender but this time he wasn’t and she felt her body respond. She was still sore, but at that moment it didn’t matter. She wanted him.

“Let’s go back to bed,” she suggested. “I want you to make love to me!”

“Honey, I think you should heal up first, there’s no rush.”
She stared into his eyes. “No. I want to. Please, Derrick.”

He picked her up in one swift motion and carried her away to their trailer. It didn’t take long for them to pull off their clothing and get back into the bed.

Sturges positioned himself between her legs. Gently he felt between her lower lips, and slipped a finger inside to ready her.

She squeezed around him as he found the rough patch inside and rubbed it. “Does that feel good?” he asked.

“Yes! Very!” she arched up into his touch.

He was painfully aware of his own hardness as he watched her release for the second time that night, and leaning down to kiss her, he slid part of the way into her waiting entrance.

Cassidy gasped at the intrusion, and she felt a bit of pain as he buried himself completely inside her. But it wasn’t that bad.

“Raise your hips to meet me when I push in,” he said.

She did, and felt his length graze sensitive areas inside her. As open as she was, her nub was raked by his shaft sending a jolt of pleasure through her. She groaned softly.

“I told you it gets good,” he said. “You feel incredible honey. I’m not sure I’m going to last too long this time though!”

As he moved slowly inside her, Cassidy began chasing her third release. All of her senses were on fire. She wrapped her legs around his hips and held him to her, her arms around his neck and her mouth devouring his hungrily.

She felt her release building, and encouraged him to move quicker. He tried to be careful, but Cassidy was insistent. She was lost in the pleasure as she felt the wave continue to build within her. Finally it crashed over her and with a cry she let go.

It felt completely different than the first two. Her entire body twitched and pulsed and Sturges was pushed to the edge, feeling her release. He moved quicker still and when he couldn’t hold back any longer, gave one sharp thrust and felt his seed spurt deep inside her.

“Oh honey,” he said, breathless. “I’ve never enjoyed this as much as I just did. There sure is a truth in doing it with someone you love.”

He stayed inside her for several seconds before collapsing to the side and sliding out of her. He stroked her hair. “Are you ok, CJ?”

“Yes. That was everything I imagined it would be! Now I get why people do this!”

“We had a rough start but it’s all good now. I love you so much. Thank you, honey.”

She curled up next to him and pulled the covers over them. “So we do this every day?”

He laughed softly. “We can do this anytime you like. Now if we don’t pile up some Zs, that whole Castle thing in the morning is going to be a huge drag.”

“It already is a drag. I’ll be glad when all of this is behind us,” she said.
“You and me both.”

He hummed softly, stroking her arm and side. Cassidy listened to his wonderful voice, and the beating of his heart and forgot about the world.
Retaking The Castle

Chapter Summary

Cassidy and the Atom Cats help the Minutemen clean out their old fort.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You ok honey?” Sturges asked Cassidy softly as he saw her wake up.

He rested on one elbow and had been watching her sleeping for the last half hour. He was so deeply in love with her, that he was thanking whatever was listening for bringing them together.

Her resilience amazed him. Most people who had suffered what she had would have gone off the deep end or killed themselves. Many pre-war ghouls hadn’t been able to deal with what had happened to their world and committed suicide early on after the bombs fell.

Sturges tenderly brushed hair off her face, and traced across her lips with one finger. “I’m worried about you. It’s been bugging me all night.”

She turned over on her side and faced him. She loved his wonderful dark eyes, so soft and tender when he looked at her. She saw love in his eyes, something she had wanted so badly to have in her life. “Well, I can’t lie to you. I’m pretty sore down there.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” He kissed her softly. “That last time though was incredible. Want to go have a shower? We could have a bath instead if you like.”

She smiled. “I’d like that. It’s still early but I know Preston likes to get his day started along with the sun. Those mirelurks won’t move themselves out of the damn Fort. Or Castle. Whatever the hell they call it now.”

“You sound a bit tense,” said Sturges, gathering her into his arms and stroking her hair. “Let’s talk about it.”

“The Institute,” she said miserably. “What Shaun did. And because of that, what I have to do now. I hate it.”

“You’re not in this alone, CJ. It’s not you going after the Institute. It’s the people of the Commonwealth. I’ll be at your side. Even if no one else goes in with us, I’ll be right there. For the rest of our lives it’s you and me. Dig?”

She took a deep breath. “Ok. Yes. I’m just really hurt over his betrayal.”

“Let me tell you something,” he said carefully. “And I don’t want you to take it the wrong way because you know I’m always on your side. I imagine he feels betrayed too in a way. I mean you took 23 of his synths out of there. Since he sees them as property, from where he’s standing...that was a declaration of war.”
“I gave him so many chances though,” she said. “And all I did was take out a few people. He destroyed our lives and killed our people. He’s a monster!”

“That’s the tragedy. He didn’t need to go that far and that’s why we’re where we’re at with this. I don’t think he would ever have come around, CJ. But I don’t care about him. I care about you. It’s a bad scene but we’ll get through it.”

She snuggled into him. “Why are you so wonderful? What did I do to deserve such a sweet guy?”

“That’s an easy one,” he said with a grin. “You were smart enough to be a rockabilly girl. And we stick to our own!”

She giggled and kissed him.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel outside. “Hey, you Cats decent in there?” called Zeke.

“Depends who’s asking,” said Sturges.

Zeke took that as a yes, climbed the stairs, opened the door and stepped into the trailer. He sat down on the loveseat. “Nice to have you two home,” he said. “So Preston says we’re gonna make the scene over at that Castle place. With me on board you’ll have it made in the shade.”

“Well hell, let’s just send the Minutemen home then,” said Sturges. “We got the army of Zeke ready for action over here. Too bad he’s got bony girl arms.”

“DDT,” said Zeke.

“What, and look like you?” retorted his brother.

“You wish,” answered Zeke with a grin. “Meanwhile back at the ranch...Blue Jay’s got breakfast on the go. Minutemen are fixing up their gear. I got Rowdy going over the power suits. You two didn’t bring yours I see.”

“Did you sleep through the part where we said Sanctuary got totally creamed?” asked Sturges. “Why are you rattling my cage about the suits. Mine was a sweet ride too.”

“There were tools stuck in the walls of our house from the garage blowing up next door,” said Cassidy. “I didn’t even see our power suits.”

“Bad scene,” said Zeke. “I’m sorry. Fog on the noggin’ today I guess. I’ll get Duke on finding you guys new ones. Have to build yours from the ground up though CJ. You’re a tiny doll.”

“My suit was so perfect,” she sighed. “I hope I can find it. I’m not crazy about wearing them but it was nice to have anyways. Derrick made it awesome.”

“Every Cat has a cool ride. We’ll get you fixed up little sister.”

“Well Zeke,” said Sturges, waving him away. “You need to go beat feet. We gotta get washed and dressed.”

Zeke slowly got up and stretched, then meandered out the door.

“You sure you want to live here with that guy?” asked Sturges with a grin. “He’s a space invader!”

“Yes, he’s cool,” said Cassidy. “You know, when you and I weren’t together yet, looking back on it, all the Cats were really singing your praises. It’s like everyone we knew wanted us together.”
“Guess the whole world was smarter than us,” he said.

“No, smarter than me. You weren’t the problem. I was.”

She got up and he gazed at her with deep love and admiration. “Honey, you’re so beautiful...killin’ me here.” He put his hands over the obvious teepee his body was creating with the sheets.

“Do you want to do it again?” she asked tentatively.

“Uhh very badly, yes, but I know you’re hurting and I’m not going to put you through that right now.”

She pulled an oversized sleep shirt on and stepped into her boots.

Sheepishly, Sturges emerged from the bed doing his best to cover himself.

“Don’t hide yourself,” said Cassidy laughing. “You’re gorgeous.”

He smiled widely. “You really think so?”

“Mm hm. Definitely. I thought so the moment we met.”

It did his heart good to hear her compliment him that way. But Derrick Sturges had his own insecurities.

“CJ, know how you told me you never fit in with the boys? Well, I was the same with girls. I honestly never thought I was anything to look at. I figured it was Zeke who got all the looks and the personality.”

“Wrong,” said Cassidy, going to him and hugging him, his still prevalent hardness pressing against her lower abdomen. “I actually think you’re the good looking one. Zeke’s cute but you’re gorgeous. And you’re mine.”

He kissed her slowly, savoring the moment. “I’ll always be yours, CJ.”

“And I’ll always be yours. We agree on that at least.”

Mirelurks.

Cassidy had heard all about them, but seeing them was a whole new experience. They smelled like seafood but were the size of a small car. The entire Castle grounds were littered with nests filled with their eggs.

Well placed grenades took care of most of it, but it didn’t destroy them all and soon the place was swarming with tiny mirelurk hatchlings and angry adults.

She had to laugh when Zeke had a tantrum and started jumping up and down on the hatchlings in his power suit.

Cassidy had found herself a nice sniper nest by climbing onto a ledge and offering backup to the Minutemen and Cats who were on the ground. Sturges had put on an extra suit that Rowdy had been working on. It had no tactical light and was missing a few of the other bells and whistles but for a daytime campaign it would do.

Cassidy watched him closely, shooting anything that so much as thought about attacking him. She
watched the rest of the Cats as well.

It took many shots to down a Mirelurk and there was an abundance of them, but the group prevailed.

“Alright!” shouted Preston. “We got the small stuff but there’s still a queen!”

Within moments something began shaking the ground.

“The Mirelurk queen!” cried Zeke. “Damn I’ve never fought one!”

“What do we have for explosives?” asked Preston. “Whatever we got we need to get down. This beast will have a shell that’ll be tough as hell to crack without them!”

Everyone dumped out their ordnance.

“Cats!” shouted Preston. “Get them out there!”

They grabbed the explosives.

“Cassidy! Aim for the face if you can. If not, get her legs so she can’t chase anyone.” He faced the others. “Don’t let her get close to you or she’ll crack you like a twig! Power suits included.”

The Mirelurk queen was massive. The bulk of her body rode atop a series of 8 legs. She had the large cracking claws of the old world lobsters. Her upper carapace was comprised of many spikes and protrusions. As for a face, Cassidy had no idea where that was. Most likely at the front but it was hidden beneath the hood-like shell.

The beast walked up from the waterline through the massive hole in the wall. A stream of disgusting green ooze shot forth sizzling as it hit the ground.

“Shit!” cried Preston. “I forgot she spits acid!”

The first of the Cat’s bombs went off under the beast and it reared up, throwing acid at the nearest target who luckily dodged.

Cassidy took careful aim with her rifle and shot out one of the legs. The beast wasn’t particularly fast, but with it’s size it could cover a lot of ground. Cassidy had a hard time hitting when it moved.

A few times she lost sight of Sturges which sent her into a bit of a panic. She had to focus on getting the beast down, but she needed to have him in her line of sight at all times. Her shots put a few cracks in the weakening carapace but it didn’t slow down the queen as much as anger it.

The monster grabbed and murdered a Minuteman who tripped over debris, throwing his broken body over the wall into the ocean.

It sent Zeke flying into a wall where he sat, dazed for a few moments. If not for the power armor, he’d have been killed.

Rowdy got a lucky shot in from underneath when the queen tried to trample her.

Preston ran up onto the ramparts and fired his laser, disabling a leg.

Now enraged, the queen lashed out at the castle walls and anything she could get her claws onto. Cassidy fired as often as she could into the holes in the shell made by previous hits.
Up until then Cassidy had escaped the beast’s notice. But the last shot made it turn in her direction. A stream of green acid shot out and there was nowhere for her to go to escape it. She tried to scramble off the ledge but lost her footing and with a scream of terror, tumbled off the rocks onto the ground.

Sturges, who saw the monster prepare the acid attack, shot the queen trying to distract her. But it wasn’t enough. He saw the acid hit the ledge and watched Cassidy fall.

“No! Fuck no!” he screamed and paying no heed to anything around him, ran for Cassidy.

The nasty claws of the queen narrowly missed grabbing him and picked up a boulder instead, hurling it into a small group of Minutemen who dodged at the last moment.

Zeke and Rowdy rapid fired at the queen’s legs, making her turn around to them. She had no legs left on the one side and buckled, unable to run any longer, but she was nowhere near dead. Her upper claws were still deadly.

Sturges reached Cassidy at the same time as Johnny D, who exited his power armor. “Don’t touch her!” the Cats’ medic yelled. “I need to check her injuries first! Stay in your suit!”

He was as quick and gentle as he could be. “She’s alive but she’s got injuries that need attention right now. That monster down yet?”

“Legs are gone,” said Sturges. “But it’s not dead yet.”

“I’m going to stim CJ,” said Johnny D. “You get her inside the Castle. Stay with her and don’t let her move if she wakes up.”

Sturges picked her up as though she were made of glass. The Cats watched with concern but they had to kill the queen who was angrily snapping with her claws and thrashing about.

There was still furniture strewn about the inside of the Castle. Mirelurk nests, ocean debris and fallen rocks were everywhere but Sturges managed to find a bed.

He lay Cassidy down as gently as possible and got out of his suit. He carefully stroked her hair and assessed any obvious wounds. She had several cuts and he was sure there would be bruises in the next few days. They were all so injured. His own injuries from the Sanctuary attack were still not totally healed and neither was the laser wound he had taken to the leg from their escape from the Institute. But at least there was no more pain.

Stimpaks were great but the body still needed to effect it’s own healing and that could take time.

“We’re going home honey,” he said tenderly. “And I’m going to take care of you until you’re all better.”

He liked helping others, but lately it seemed they were having too many narrow brushes with death and he didn’t like it. His focus had changed from fixing the Commonwealth to protecting the woman he loved.

He sat there at her side, one of her hands in both of his.

“Hey D-Man, is she ok?” asked Duke, entering the room followed by Zeke and Preston.

“She’s alive but unconscious. Johnny D stimmed her. That thing dead out there?”
“You better believe it,” said Zeke. “We’ll be eating like royalty after this. Can feed an army off that queen alone!”

“After we got the legs it was just a matter of time,” said Preston. “Thanks for your help again Sturges, Cats.”

“I’m done with all this,” said Sturges, irritated. “No more killing for me. I just want to get back to what I’m good at, and take care of my girl here. I’m real tired of putting her on the razor’s edge all the time, dig?”

“I hear you little brother,” said Zeke.

“I understand,” said Preston. “You’ve both done so much for the Minutemen as it is. And now we have our fort back again. When Cassidy’s ready, we’ll plan our attack on the Institute. Til then, we’ll be here shoring this place up.”

Johnny D exited his power suit in the doorway and came in to examine his patient. “She sure fell a ways,” he said. “You guys beat feet. Except D-Man. I need to check her out properly.”

He carefully checked each limb, and palpated her abdomen and chest. He seemed satisfied that whatever injuries she had were being handled by the stimpak. But he decided to be on the safe side and give her another.

“I don’t want to move her until she wakes up and can answer a few questions. Need to make sure she doesn’t have any smog on the noggin. You stay here til then.”


He sat there listening to Cassidy breathing, watching her, and again thinking how lucky he was. But the constant stress of battle was wearing on them both. Cassidy needed time to just breathe. She’d been through a lot and he wondered if she’d properly dealt with any of it.

“These guys can handle their own shit for awhile,” he said to her sleeping form. “We’re steppin’ back.”

He held her hand and hummed softly to her, patiently waiting.

Chapter End Notes

DDT= drop dead twice
Old Friends

Chapter Summary

The Castle comes to life; and Cassidy is thrilled to see two familiar faces re-enter her life.

“I’m not eating any more Mirelurk, Jay,” said Roxy. “I’ve got dibs on the next brahmin burger.”

“Derrick already called it,” said Blue Jay. “I get it. No more Mirelurk for awhile.”

“Trade it when the next provisioner slides through here,” said Zeke, examining his hair in the reflection from the jukebox.

“Alright,” said Blue Jay. Everyone was pretty tired of eating the creatures. What started out as a delicacy was now nothing short of a bore.

Cassidy sat in a comfy chair, watching Sturges work on part of the water delivery system. He’d looked at what the Cats had going and decided that there was a far better way to fix it up. He’d learned a lot at Sanctuary through trial and error.

It had been a week since the Castle cleanup. Preston had gone back to Sanctuary the following day and prepared the caravans for the move.

Sturges had refused to let Cassidy make the journey. “Sanctuary ain’t going nowhere,” he’d said to her. “It’ll be there when you’re all healed up. And Mama Murphy’ll have all your things loaded for you anyway so sit tight and wait, honey.”

The stimpaks had initially taken care of the worst of her injuries at the battle site, and she’d been unconscious for a few hours before she awoke, satisfied Johnny D that she was on the mend and Sturges had gently carried her all the way back to the garage in his power suit.

He’d cared for her as though she were a queen, bringing her food and drink, preparing a bath for her, washing her up, and making sure she was comfortable wherever she wanted to sit or lay down.

Now a week past the battle, she wanted to go to the Castle and see her friends, but he’d sent Duke with the invitation for them to come to the garage.

And so, Mama Murphy, the Longs, and Codsworth, along with a very excited Dogmeat came walking into the garage one day making Cassidy squeal with joy.

She’d cried, being so delighted that everyone she cared about had made the journey.

“I miss Sanctuary,” said Marcy. “That little house we had was the best house me and Jun have ever lived in. The Castle is nice...but I want to go back to Sanctuary one day.”

Marcy’s simple statement gave Cassidy a feeling of hope. She’d viewed the move as a permanent thing but it didn’t have to be. The Castle was a temporary arrangement for safety purposes until the
Institute could be dealt with.

“I love having you so close by though,” she’d said honestly. “Marcy, for me and Derrick, this is home now. We won’t be going back to Sanctuary but I get it if you guys do.”

“It’s hard being so close to Quincy again,” Marcy said. “I mean being able to visit Kyle’s grave will be good, but I don’t feel right being near there yet.”

Cassidy understood completely. “Well no one needs to make any decisions on anything for awhile. That Castle is huge and boy is it a mess. Derrick won’t let me set foot in there until Johnny D says I’m good to go.”

“They love you,” said Marcy. “This is your family now.”

“You guys were the first people I met that weren’t trying to kill me. You’re my family too.”

Marcy had smiled then, a smile of genuine affection.

Preston travelled back and forth to the garage from the Castle several times to consult with Sturges.

“Preston, I’ll gladly come have a look-see once my girl is better,” he’d said. “But no more fighting. We’re done with that til the Institute.”

“Understood,” said Preston.

By the second week, Johnny D cleared Cassidy for regular activity. She wanted to go to the Castle and help with clean up so Sturges got their packs together and off they went.

The Minutemen were glad to see them, as were their friends.

“Well we’re not here just to visit,” said Cassidy. “We want to help so tell us what you need!”

Mama Murphy had asked Cassidy to help her set up a proper kitchen, which she did. Most of the surviving items from Sanctuary had come over and a kitchen was created, and right after that, a little Cantina.

Sturges helped the Minutemen set up their radio which they named Radio Freedom. A day after the station went live, 4 people showed up at the gate.

“We heard the Minutemen were really back, and we’d like to join up!”

Preston made himself an office and welcomed them.

Suddenly the Commonwealth took notice. The taking back of the Castle was discussed on DC Radio and more and more people arrived asking to join the Minutemen or at the very least live and work in the Castle. They saw it as a bastion of safety from raiders and the Institute.

One afternoon a familiar face showed up at the Castle.

“I was supposed to show up at Sanctuary,” said Remick. “But some people there told me to come here instead. Sanctuary was attacked, they said. I’m a mechanic. I hope you can use me here.”

Cassidy and Sturges had been overjoyed to see him but couldn’t let on.

“How did you hear about Sanctuary?” Cassidy asked curiously.
“Oh I ran into someone on the road who told me that they were needing a mechanic and to go there.”

Cassidy and Sturges exchanged smiles of joy and welcomed their old new friend in.

Guard duty became easier to schedule with so many people. Soon there was a surplus of hands to get things going.

A new greenhouse appeared.

Washroom and laundry facilities were built. Workers volunteered to take care of all the new buildings.

Although there were no private rooms, the barracks suited the Minutemen and settlers just fine.

The once abandoned Castle became a community. People who’d lived in fear, constantly on the run, learned to trust and bond with others.

And one day, Cassidy was in her trailer at the garage when Roxy called her out. “There’s someone here to see you,” she said. Sturges had gone to the Castle to work and Cassidy and Roxy planned to work on her wedding dress.

She pulled on her boots and walked to the garage, then found herself looking into two familiar blue eyes.

“MacCready!” she cried and threw herself into his arms.

Her friend caught her and held her tight. “I thought I lost you,” he said. “What the hell happened to Sanctuary? We sure got a lot to talk about. But first, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

He turned to a sweet little boy standing behind him. “This is my son, Duncan. Duncan, this is Cassidy.”

She bent over and extended her hand. “It’s so good to finally meet you, Duncan!” she said with a smile.

Duncan’s face lit up in a big grin. “I’m 6!” he declared proudly, giving her hand a big friendly shake.

“Uh Duncan, what did we talk about?” asked MacCready.

Duncan took a big breath. “Thank you for helping my daddy get the medicine for me to make my blue bumps go away! I was very sick,” he said in a serious voice.

Cassidy crouched down. “I know,” she said. “He told me all about you and how much he loved and missed you. I’m so glad you’re all better, Duncan.”

The little boy suddenly threw his arms around her. “I love you!” he cried.

Cassidy hugged him back. “I love you too,” she said.

Like all active children, Duncan spied something he wanted to get into and ran off.

Cassidy smiled at MacCready. “He looks a lot like you. He’s got your eyes that’s for sure. And something in the way he talks too reminds me of you. He’s adorable, MacCready. I’m so glad you’re back.”
“What happened to Sanctuary?” he asked. “We got there and it was totally gone...I thought you died. I was sure when I saw that grave behind your house.”

“That’s my daddy’s grave,” said Cassidy sadly.

“Oh hell no...I’m really sorry, Cassidy.”

“Thanks MacCready. I’ve got so much to catch you up on.”

He looked around. “This place always felt good for you. Deacon around?”

She shook her head and told him what had happened between her and the railroad agent.

“Brain just blew up huh?” asked MacCready. “That’s rough. I always thought he was a bit off but not this much. Flying solo now?”

Cassidy shook her head, eyes sparkling. “Derrick and I are engaged.”

The mercenary’s eyes grew large with surprise. “What? Sturges? I missed my chance with you again?!”

Cassidy made a face. “Yuck!”

“Yuck? What do you mean yuck! I’m a great catch!”

“You’re a garbage weasel,” said Cassidy.

“And you’re a bratty kid with a death wish,” he said affectionately, his expression soft. “You happy though?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m so in love with him. We hoped you’d be back for our wedding. But...come on in to our trailer. There’s a ton of stuff I need to tell you.”

MacCready called to Duncan and the little boy came running, Dogmeat at his side.

For the next two hours, Cassidy filled MacCready in on everything that had happened since he left. There was laughter, there was tears.

Sturges came home and was pleased to see MacCready. Duncan instantly gravitated to the mechanic, questioning him about everything he was wearing.

“Looks like I’m gonna have a little helper,” said Sturges laughing. He took Duncan aside and let him examine all the gear he had on.

“So MacCready,” said Cassidy. “Do you want to be an Atom Cat and live here? Or is the Castle more to your liking?”

He stretched out. “Not sure I fit in here, Cassidy,” he said honestly. “And I think Duncan would like the Castle. There other kids there?”

She nodded. “More people arrive daily. There are a few families now and Marcy is planning to start a school. She was a teacher back in Quincy. Apparently Diamond City is sending some orphans too.”

“He’ll like that. Out in the Capital Wastes he lived far from anyone else. If he’s got school that means I can handle doing some guard duty,” said MacCready. “Everyone needs a sniper. And I’m
not the kind of guy to just sit around.”

“They do,” agreed Cassidy. “There are enough people for an easy guard rotation but I think there’s only one other person there that can do what we do and not nearly as well. Plus, I live here and after everything that’s gone down I’m done with fighting. Derrick too.”

“Sounds like that’s the place for us then,” said MacCready. “Mind if we stay here for a bit though? Missed you Cassidy. You’re the only actual friend I’ve had in...well...ever. Aside from Lucy you’re the only person who’s ever cared whether I live or die. You saved me...from myself. I don’t think I ever thanked you for that.”

“No thanks needed. We’re family now,” she said.

He nodded. “We are. Duncan needs that. Hell, I need it. We all do. So count me in for the Institute thing.”

“I don’t know,” said Cassidy pensively. “You’ve got Duncan to care for now. I don’t want you risking your life anymore.”

“I have to do my part. It’s his future we’re all fighting for too. Just...promise me that if anything ever does happen to me, Institute or no, that you’ll make sure he’s ok. I can’t ask you to take him in or anything but just to make sure he’s alright.”

Cassidy looked into his earnest eyes. “If something happens to you, we’ll look after Duncan. No, I won’t just watch him like a stray dog. He’ll be raised as our own and loved just the same. I promise, MacCready. And a Sturges always keeps their promise!”

The mercenary sighed a deep sigh of relief and gratitude. He reached out and gave Cassidy’s hand a squeeze.

Zeke wandered up. “Open mic night tonight,” he said. “Been awhile since we had any fun around here so be ready for it! CJ you can see Duke to pick your songs. You were on the stick last time. Can’t wait to see what you do this time.” He gave her a thumbs up and meandered away.

“This like that thing Hancock does at the Third Rail?” asked MacCready. “People going up on Magnolia’s stage and singing?”

“Yes!” said Cassidy. “We do that here, and poetry night, story time...anything we think of that’s fun to do. Do you want to join in? All Cats have to make the scene but guests don’t.”

MacCready grinned. “Yeah, I’m in. Been awhile since I did this at Goodneighbor.”

“That’s awesome! Deacon refused to when we were here last time.”

“Makes sense though. Being all top secret about everything. Wonder if he’ll ever say anything to me with his new face.”

“I doubt it,” said Cassidy. “I don’t think he’s even revealed to the Railroad. But whatever I don’t have anything to do with them anymore. I did my thing to help.”

Cassidy watched Sturges playing with Duncan. “He’s going to be an amazing dad one day,” she said with a smile.

“You trying?” asked MacCready.
“Not especially. But if it happens it happens. We both like kids and want a family.”

“That’s really great. I hope it happens. Still think you and I should have gotten together but...you’ll be a great mom.”

Cassidy smiled at her friend. “Thanks MacCready. Come on, let’s go bug Duke and pick our songs. Maybe Duncan will want to join in too?”

“Knowing that little ham he’ll be all over it. He’s been into my old holovids and tapes since he was real little.”

Duncan watched his father, deciding whether to follow or not and decided that his new friend was far more interesting. He pointed at the husk of a car. “Let’s fix this!” he cried. Waving his little arms in the air he ran over. “Then we can go all over the place and up there too!”

Sturges laughed. “Cars don’t fly little buddy!”

Duncan nodded. “Daddy has a comic and it has a guy in there and he has a flying one and goes all up there!” he pointed upwards again. “Come on!”

Still laughing, Sturges gave Duncan a hammer and put his goggles over the little boy’s eyes and let him have his fun.

“I think Derrick has a friend for life there,” said Cassidy grinning.

“Duncan bonds easily I think,” said MacCready. “I hope he does ok here. With you guys around, I think everything will work out.”

He followed her into the garage.
A Little History

Chapter Summary

Cassidy hears the story of how the Atom Cats was founded.

The Atom Cats and MacCreadys had a blast with the Cats’ open mic night. Cassidy would never have guessed that her friend was so talented. His rendition of *Mac the Knife* was quite entertaining and everyone enjoyed it.

Little Duncan made everyone ooh and ahh when he tried his hand at *Atom Bomb Baby*. The little boy didn’t know all the words and it was comical to hear him just imitate the sounds he thought he heard.

As always, Sturges chose a love song that he knelt down and sang part of right in front of Cassidy. She thought her heart would burst. Afterwards he amused the group with “Settin’ the woods on fire” which made Cassidy blush.

Afterwards they let the jukebox play and enjoyed some snacks and drinks. Duncan, full of energy, danced around and Cassidy thought she’d die of laughter. The little man surely had been studying old holovids.

“How did he get all this from vids or did you teach him?” she asked MacCready.

“Well,” said her friend. “Can you dance?”

Cassidy eyed him, unsure if he was seriously asking. “Of course.”

“Like in the holovids you had back then?”

She rolled her eyes. “The vids were made from real dances that were popular back then. So yes. I liked dancing.”

He stood up and held out his hand. “Prove it, kid,” he said grinning.

“Hmm….alright but don’t step on me or drop me,” she said.

She’d expected some weird hybrid mix of old world and new, a clumsy attempt to impress her, but in truth she was completely mind blown. MacCready was an amazing sniper but he sure had other hidden talents as well. He hadn’t lied when he’d told her he grew up on old holovids. He knew every possible dance she had grown up with. He could dip her, spin her, drag and lift with no problem.

Cassidy was laughing with much glee by the time the song set was over. MacCready bowed. “So can your mechanic top that?” he asked.

“Yes,” Cassidy said. “He can dance too.”
Zeke wiggled up to them. “I think you’re Atom Cat material,” he said to MacCready.

“Thanks but I don’t think it suits me,” said the mercenary.

“You almost dance as well as Derrick,” he said with a wink at Cassidy. “Our daddy loved music and dancing. Taught us too. Said that chicks dig it so of course we wanted to learn.”

Cassidy grinned. “See I knew you boys could do everything.”

She found a spot and sat down.

“I’ve decided something,” said Cassidy to MacCready. “Calling you by your last name was cool when you were just a hire but now not so much. You can call me CJ now.”


“I wanna be DJ!” cried Duncan.

“There’s no J in your name Duncan,” said his father.

“We can put one!” insisted the little boy. “Like Jimmy!”


“DJ!” cried Duncan.

“Fine, fine, you can be DJ,” relented MacCready.

Duncan crouched in a patch of sand and with his finger traced the letters.

“He’s smart,” said Cassidy.

“Yeah he likes reading and writing. He’s been into my comics already for awhile.”

“He’ll like school then.”

“Oh yeah. He’s been begging to go since he was 4. Wasn’t any decent schools around. Nowhere I’d send him anyway. I taught him and Lucy’s family kept it up while I was gone.”

“They must have been sad to see him go.”

“It was rough. But they wouldn’t come. I asked them to but they’re too scared to leave what they know. I can understand it. I would have gone back and stayed there if I hadn’t met you.”

“I’m that important to you?” asked Cassidy.

“Well I can say it now...I hoped that you’d be my girl. When you took off from Hancock and ran into me?” He snapped his fingers. “I was done. Even though you were a stuck up little brat.”

“Derrick said the same thing about me when we first met. That he loved me right away. I guess love at first sight is a thing in the new world.”

“I don’t know about that,” said MacCready. “It’s the first time I ever had that happen.”

“I did with Deacon I think. What a stupid move that was. I should have seen the signs.”

“I never thought you and Deacon would last. He uh...kept saying to me how you two weren’t a
thing, how he didn’t like you that way. It was hard to keep that to myself. And then that deal with Amari, she was pissed at us. I was pissed with him for not saying anything about your dad.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me?” asked Cassidy. “I was heartbroken when Deacon told me all of you saw my memory. Then I was angry at both of you!” He flinched at the hurt that flashed across her eyes.

“CJ, we’d only just met,” he said gently. “We weren’t that close yet. To me it felt out of place to say anything. At that point you considered him your man, I thought it was his job. I can understand if you’re mad at me though. I probably would be too.”

She shrugged. “I get what you’re saying. Deacon really should have been the one to say something. He had his own set of excuses though. Yuck. I don’t like remembering about that day. In just a few minutes I’d lost my daddy and the man I loved.”

Sturges, who’d done a round of patrol, returned and sat behind Cassidy, wrapping his arms around her. “Hey honey,” he said giving her a kiss. “You two catching up?”

“We are,” she said. “Talking about Deacon and what went on there.”

Sturges wrinkled his nose up. “I wanted to punch that guy in the face for hurting CJ. Then he shows up and saves us from the Institute. I guess his being so messed up is punishment enough. He lost the greatest thing he had.”

MacCready wistfully watched their tender exchanges. “Yeah that sure was dumb of him. Glad things are starting to come together for you CJ.”

“Just that damn Institute to worry about now,” said Sturges. “They aren’t going to leave us alone. I think they’re letting us all think it’s cool then try and cream us again.”

“That explains the wall and the turrets around here,” said MacCready.

“Yeah the raiders were starting to be too much of a pain and some of the Cats were travelling a lot more. We needed the defenses.”

“So this Castle place. Is it like this?” asked MacCready.

Cassidy shook her head with a grin. “The Castle is ...a castle! It used to be a military fort back in my time. It’s super old. You and Duncan will love it. And if you don’t you can come back here. You heard Zeke. You’re Atom Cat material.”

MacCready lit a cigarette and took a long drag. “You guys talk funny. I can’t understand what they’re saying half the time.”

Zeke walked by and said “It’s the language of cool in a world of cube-talk.”

MacCready blinked. “That’s what I mean!”

Cassidy giggled. “Well cubes and squares are boring people. Anyone who isn’t a rockabilly.”
MacCready traced a square in the air and pointed to himself.

“You’re an honorary Cat,” said Sturges. “You’ll pick up the talk soon enough. Hey CJ, we should get him and Duncan some jackets. Little guy would like that, you think?”

Duncan who had found some toy cars and was playing nearby shouted “I’m DJ!”

“Hey DJ,” said Sturges. “You want a coat like us?”

Duncan stood up and walked over. “With that scary cat on the back?”

“He’s not scary, he’s cool!”

“Ya I want one! I can have one right, Daddy?”

MacCready nodded. “Whatever you want, buddy.”

Duncan gave Sturges a thumbs up. “That’s cool man!”

Cassidy laughed.

“Where do we find one small enough?” she asked Sturges.

“Blue Jay. He makes ‘em. Takes other things apart so we need to always bring him any leather stuff we find. Plus he trades with the provisioners if they have any.”

“You guys all have some pretty cool skills,” said MacCready.

Zeke, still hovering near the jukebox said. “The Atom Cats are a beacon of cool in a world of...un-cool.”

“That was real poetic there Zeke,” said his brother. “Not.”

“I’ll ignore that today,” said Zeke running his hand through his hair. “You guys know how I started this cool garage? I ever tell you, CJ?”

Cassidy shook her head. “Nope. So tell us.”

“Me and Derrick were wandering solo after our daddy died. Didn’t want to stay on the farm. See we’re too cool to dig in the dirt.”

MacCready shrugged. “I was a farmer. Before Duncan got sick and I had to come here. Then I started killing for a living.”

“Well Clyde, farming is un-cool. I get we need to do it some, but living out there in nowheresville...no way. So one day some jack comes through wearing a suit of power armor. He showed it to us and man did it razz my berries. That’s when I said to Derrick we just gotta lay a patch outta there and look for those suits. Fix ‘em up and make a cool living.”

“Where was your farm Zeke?” asked Cassidy with curiosity. She realized that she knew nothing about the Sturges’ brothers and she was about to marry one!

“You would have called it Atlanta or something I think,” said Zeke.

“You’re from Georgia?” she asked with amazement. “That’s way down there! Wow!”
“That’s it,” said Sturges. “Georgia. The city was a ways from us. It was a mess and we didn’t go there too often. Daddy would go off for supplies a few times a year for stuff the traders didn’t bring.”

“Atlanta was an amazing big city in my time,” said Cassidy. “I wonder what town your farm was in. It would be so cool if maybe I’d been there not knowing.”

Sturges pressed his lips to her temple. “I like the idea of that.”

“So I said to Derrick, we’re going,” said Zeke. “He dragged ass as usual.”

“You didn’t want to go?” asked Cassidy, turning to Sturges.

“I didn’t mind the farm,” he answered. “Plenty of things to do there. Lots to fix up and learn. Old Zeke though...he had to beat feet and he’s my brother so we stick together.”

Zeke smiled then and it wasn’t his usual goofy grin but a smile of real affection and Cassidy saw how strong the bond between them really was. She thought about Shaun and it stung.

“We saw a lot of the wastes,” said Zeke. “It wasn’t cool. Most people got the royal shaft. Raiders were everywhere taking what the people worked hard to get.”

“Like that everywhere,” said MacCready. “I take down raiders every chance I get. Glad no one took me out for being one.”

“That’s all in the past,” said Cassidy kindly.

“Rowdy was a raider gal once. Saw the error of her ways and joined us,” said Zeke. “But for me and Derrick back then, it was rough, always something on the front burner. Usually where to find our next meal and where to sleep.”

“How old were you two?” asked Cassidy.

“I was 20,” said Zeke. “That would have made D-Man here 17.”

“Wow,” said Cassidy, impressed.

“Old enough to agitate the gravel but young enough to have a blast out there. I think we’re only alive ‘cause Derrick knew how to rig traps. Kept us safe. Anyway we got here. People we met told us about the Glowing Sea and to stay as far from it as possible. That place is un-cool!”

“That’s for sure!” said Cassidy.

“Found this garage. Full of ‘lurks. Would you believe there was a suit in here, and a frame? I was on cloud 9!” exclaimed Zeke. “So there was some old stuff lying around. From the old world. Ok see over there on the wall?” He pointed to a spot in Blue Jay’s cantina. “I think that man in the pic was the original owner. His name was Adam Katt.”

Cassidy grinned. “Really? That’s so cool!”

“It sure is, little sister! Well how did it turn into the Atom Cats you ask? That was Blue Jay. After we met him he said he was an artist. We said cool, make us a sign! I told him the name...and you can guess the rest!”

“Yes!” cried Cassidy with delight. “He misunderstood and did your logo how it is now! That’s the best story ever!”
“I knew you’d get a kick out of it, CJ! Well Johnny D wandered in one day. He was out of his mind
and needed a place to rest. Said he was a medic and we said welcome home brother! Then we got
Duke, Rowdy and a musician named Aimin’ Andy.”

His eyes darkened.

“He was our music man,” said Sturges. “We had no defenses, no decent suits yet. Raiders came.
And ...that was that.”

“I miss him,” said Zeke. “Let’s reflect.”

Everyone went quiet for a moment.

“And after that, we heard about the town of Quincy. They had problems all the time, man. And
Derrick here decided to go live with them. The garage was my dream. Helping freams was his.”

Cassidy detected a bit of resentment in his expression and his tone, but she understood, having
heard the other part of the story from Sturges.

MacCready, who was now holding a sleeping Duncan on his lap had to ask. “What’s a fream?”

“Those who are uncool,” said Zeke.

“That ain’t right,” said Sturges. “More like people who don’t fit in. And if you aren’t a Cat you’re
a fream according to Zeke here. He’s just full of shit. There’s cool without being a Cat. I liked
Quincy. They were good people.”

“They made you a square man,” said Zeke shrugging.

“And yet you wanted me back here,” said Sturges.

“Don’t have a cow. Someone had to keep an eye on you to stop you from sliding into goofsville.”

“I think you’re just lost without me,” said Sturges. “I saw how great your water delivery was. And
that car? Let’s not go there.

“My car! It’s perfection!” cried Zeke. “One day I’m going to cruise on down the line…”

Cassidy started laughing. She couldn’t help it.

“What is it?” asked Zeke. “My car is perfection!”

She shook her head, trying to catch her breath. Sturges chuckled.

“You know Zeke, when a pre-war gal, who knows about cars starts laughing at you, I’d say
perfection is probably not the best description for it!”

Zeke looked like they had just told him he had a bad haircut. “What’s wrong with my car! CJ! Stop
laughing at me! I need to be in orbit here! You got the jets with cars!”

MacCready furrowed his brow. “What the heck did you just say?”

“He wants to be in the know, because CJ is smart about cars!” laughed Sturges. “You’ll catch on.
Just takes time.”

MacCready shook his head then slowly got up, holding his still sleeping son. “Looks like its bed
for me. This guy will be up with the sun. Thanks for the stories. Best time I’ve had in forever. See you in the morning.”

Cassidy ruffled Duncan’s hair as MacCready walked by.

The rest of them talked for a little while longer, Cassidy explaining to a crushed Zeke the mistakes he’d made with his car, then she excused herself and she and Derrick headed off to their trailer. Not long after, she saw the lights turn off in the garage and the jukebox shut down.

The Atom Cats little world was different at night. It was quiet. Being so far from anywhere, and with Quincy no longer full of raiders, there was no gunfire or shouting anymore. It wasn’t quite the peace of the old world, but it was the most peaceful place Cassidy had ever been. And resting in Sturges’ strong arms, she felt safe.
Preston arrived at the garage a few days later carrying a few holotapes.

“Mama Murphy found these at Sanctuary and put them in a box she only just opened up. She said she’s sorry and hopes it wasn’t something really important on here.”

Cassidy popped the first one into her pip-boy and squealed. “Derrick!” she cried, making him come running.

“What is it, honey?” he asked, relieved that she was excited, not hurt.

She gave him the holotape. “This is one of the tapes from the Institute we made!”

Excitedly she checked the others. “All of these! They’re all the intel we gathered! This means we still have our advantage. Can you analyze them?”

He nodded. “You betcha! I’ll get on this right away. This is great news. I thought we lost all this.”

“I didn’t know how we were going to launch an attack on them with no intel,” said Preston. “Let’s hope this gives us some answers.”

“Derrick, I’m going to go with Preston and take MacCready and Duncan to the Castle. You can stay and work on these tapes.”

He shook his head slowly. “No way. I’m not letting you out of my sight. I meant it when I said I’d always be at your side.”

“Derrick, it’s the Castle. And I’m not helpless.”

“No can do honey,” he said. “Preston do you have a computer there I can work on?”

“Yeah we have a few,” answered Preston. “You can work in the Minutemen HQ room if you want. I’ll make sure no one disturbs you.”

“Great. I’ll grab our packs and we can be on our way.”

Duncan ran after Sturges. “I’ll help! I can help really good!” He grabbed the mechanic’s hand and went with him.

“Well,” said MacCready. “He’s not overprotective much. You like that?”

Cassidy nodded slowly. “Yes, I do. He makes me feel safe. I think if I really didn’t want him to go
he wouldn’t. But it would worry him. And I like him near.”

“Sturges bonds with people,” said Preston. “From the first day I met him I saw how he was with the people of Quincy. He just knew everyone. Always had something good to say. And when we met Cassidy in Concord the first time, I saw it in his eyes when he looked at her. It’s just the way he is.”

“Everyone saw it,” grinned Cassidy. “Except me.”

“You’re dense, kid,” said MacCready. “I was trying to get your attention from day 1 too.”

“Maybe I did see,” she said with a smirk. “But I didn’t want a dirty garbage weasel in my life.”

“See what I have to put up with?” said MacCready to Preston.

“Play with fire and you get burned,” grinned the Minuteman leader. “And this one’s a firecracker.”

“No, I’m not, I’m a nice girl,” said Cassidy.

“Bratty kid with a death wish,” said MacCready.

“Atom Bomb Baby,” laughed Preston.

Duncan ran up and hearing those words kicked his little leg out. “Crash, bam, alakazam!” he cried.

Sturges took Cassidy’s hand. “All right let’s hit the road.”

“I wish we had a car!” said Cassidy.

“Working on it!” he said.

The Castle amazed MacCready and Duncan. The little boy was all google eyed and ran everywhere introducing himself to everyone he saw. Then he saw two kids playing in a sand pit.

“I’m DJ!” he cried, running over with his toy cars.

“I’m Elias and this is Sadie,” said a boy who looked to be a few years older than Duncan.

The children began the intricate conversations of ages, parents and who could do what.

“The little girl is one of the DC orphans,” said Preston. “We got five I think. One of them already seems to have found a family. And Sadie there...she’s gotten a bit attached to the Longs. I worry though if Marcy’s ready for that. Jun seems receptive enough.”

Cassidy was thrilled. “That’s so wonderful! It’s the best thing I could ever hear! A child who needs a home and two people who need a child. What could be more perfect?”

“Relationships are hard,” said Preston. “But this place seems to be working wonders for everyone involved. Let me show you around, MacCready. Sturges, come with me to the HQ.”

Cassidy kissed Sturges and went to find Mama Murphy.

They stayed for a few days to make sure everything went smoothly for MacCready and Duncan. The little boy didn’t want to wait to start school. He insisted he was ready the very next day and his father had to give in.
“He’s going to do great RJ,” said Cassidy, taking the worried father’s arm as Duncan waved and went into the school room.

“This is his first time at school and away from family,” said MacCready.

“Your son is incredible. He just gets right into things and he’s fearless. He inspires me if you can believe that.”

“Yeah? That’s cool of you to say, CJ.”

“Truth, every word,” she smiled. “Want to go have a coffee and a snack?”

“Yeah I do. That sounds good. I gotta go on patrol in an hour. I got ramparts today. I like it up there.”

She walked them to the cantina and poured the coffees. They sat down on two comfy chairs. “I like looking at that Brotherhood blimp thing,” she said. “I wonder what it’s like up there. Think they’d give us a tour?” She laughed at the notion.

“Depends if they remember us from that time we got Duncan’s cure.”

“Oh man, when we snuck past them and gave them the finger after? That was so much fun!”

“Yeah it was. We’ve had some good times,” said MacCready fondly. “I bet there’s plenty more to come. I know you guys don’t like fighting which is weird for someone who likes guns so much but there’s probably some exploring we can do. Know where I always wanted to go?” he asked.

“No idea,” answered Cassidy.

“Nuka world!”

“Really? It still exists? I went there with my family a few years ago. Well a few years plus 211 or something!”

“Yeah, it’s still there but I heard it’s full of raiders now,” he said sadly. “Not exactly a place I can take Duncan. And I’m not going to clean out a park full of raiders myself.”

“Maybe one day me and Derrick will want to deal with it. It would be fun for the Commonwealth to have that park back if it’s still in good shape.”

“Well, just needs the raiders gone and a good mechanic if you know of any…” MacCready tried to look innocent.

Cassidy laughed. “Thing with him is he goes where I go even if he doesn’t like it.”

“Yeah, that’s true but you’ll get married and get pregnant and start a family and you won’t want to run around laying waste to raiders.”

“RJ...we’ll get married for sure...but in this grody world there’s no way to know if I can even get pregnant. All the radiation...it actually really scares me if I’m honest about it.”

He looked sad. “I’m sorry CJ. I’m being an ass. Just never had a friend before who was this much fun. You’ve made life colorful again. I don’t want to lose it, know what I mean?”

“You’ll never lose me RJ,” she said with a smile. “You’re stuck with this bratty kid for the rest of your life.”
“That’s comforting CJ, thanks. Want to join me on the ramparts?”

“Let me check in with Derrick then yes for sure.”

The ramparts had a guard on the ballista, and a laser turret dotted in between. The side with the water didn’t seem like an area that needed defenses but raiders were known to travel by water and the Institute had no restrictions where they could relay into.

Cassidy and MacCready raced each other from one end to the other just for fun, but the Minutemen thought they were training and wanted to join in. Soon there were people timing each other to see how quickly they could reach their stations.

Preston was impressed, thinking they’d thought up something great for security detail.

Sturges came out to see what the commotion was about.

“Hey CJ!” he called up to her.

“Hi!” she called back. “Go to the bottom of the stairs then when I say go, run to me as fast as you can!”

“Why, honey?” he asked.

“Because I love you and I want a kiss!” she laughed.

He got into position and took the stairs two at a time til he reached her and caught her in his arms.

“Woah!” cried MacCready. “He blew everyone’s times!”

Cassidy laughed and squealed as Sturges covered her with kisses. “Well, we know how to get Derrick moving! Just say I need him!”

“What are you guys doing up here?” he asked, amused. “It’s all quiet then I hear all this running and think we’re being attacked.”

“Well, RJ was on patrol up here. We decided to have a race, then the Minutemen thought we were doing some training exercise!”

“It’s a good idea,” laughed Sturges. “Now I think Preston will make them do it every day I bet!”

“They don’t seem to mind!” she laughed. “How are things with the holotapes?”

“Honey, there’s a wealth of info on them. I found blueprints but haven’t dug into them yet. But get this: there’s a list of synth informants and guess who’s on it?”

Cassidy and MacCready were both instantly interested. “Tell us! I can’t even guess!”

“Trashcan Carla!” he exclaimed.

“She was in Sanctuary all the time!” cried Cassidy in shock. “Is she a synth?”

“No these people are all just regular old humans,” said Sturges. “But it seems they were paid off in caps or something else.”

“Heaven knows what she fed them about us! Who else is on there?” she asked, worried.
“I don’t know any of them,” he answered. “Maybe RJ you do? There are a few provisioners: Cricket, Doc Weathers, Lucas Miller. Any sound familiar?”

MacCready and Cassidy both shook their heads.

“I have a Tommy Lonegan and something about Combat Zone whatever that is,” said Sturges.

“Yeah I know that place,” said MacCready. “It’s a hole. Gangs go in there to watch fights and bet on them. That Tommy guy I think he’s the owner of the place. Only been there twice though.”

“Some guys named AJ and Marowski in Goodneighbor,” said Sturges.

“Oh man,” said MacCready. “I gotta tell Hancock about them. Marowski is a bad seed. AJ I’m not sure on but since he’s there Hancock will know who it is. He can deal with it.”

Cassidy made a face. “He’ll deal with it alright. With a knife to the gut. I’m still freaked out by that guy.”

“You should meet him already,” said MacCready. “I think you’d actually like him. He’s a good guy. He cares about people. Why he killed Finn. Finn was threatening you.”

Cassidy leaned into Sturges who put his arm around her protectively. “She doesn’t need to go near him if she doesn’t want to RJ,” he said. “One more here, Henry Cooke in DC.”

Both shook their heads.

The rest of that file was notes and internal mail between the departments. Sturges read through them but learned nothing of use. He did say there was some odd code about avians and intel but he didn’t understand it.

“Avians are birds,” said Cassidy. “Odd thing to mention isn’t it? We didn’t see any birds in there did we Derrick? Just gorillas.”

MacCready raised his eyebrows. “Gorillas? Really?”

“They made synth ones,” said Cassidy. “They were cool.”

Sturges shook his head. “No birds. Well that’s all I got so far. There’s another list of escaped synths but their designations and pictures don’t mean anything to us. And if the Railroad got them, they probably got a face change anyway.”

Cassidy sighed. “I’ll get a copy of that list for the scav team to drop in the dead drop for Glory,” she said. “I don’t want to be involved with the Railroad but they are also fighting against the Institute and this intel can help them so...might as well.”

Sturges kissed the top of her head. “I’ll get that for you, honey. Still a lot to look for and are you thinking about wanting to go home soon?”

She nodded. “You can work on the tapes at home. It would be nice to go back. It’s quieter there.”

MacCready looked a bit downcast but said nothing.

“Let’s wait til school’s out before we go so we can say bye to DJ,” she said.

Later that afternoon the kids erupted from the schoolroom with happy shouts and running feet. Some headed to find parents or caregivers, some went right to the playground.
Duncan ran to his father who caught and hugged him.

“So how was your first day, DJ?” he asked affectionately.

The little boy launched into a descriptive of everything he’d done that day. He was so excited and his eyes were shining. MacCready had to stop him.

“DJ, woah there. CJ and Derrick are going home. They wanted to say goodbye to you.”

Duncan’s little face fell. He took Cassidy’s hand. “But...I want her to be my mommy! She can marry you daddy and then she can live here with us.”

Cassidy looked at Sturges who was equally shocked.

MacCready pulled Duncan away. “Buddy, uhh...that’s not going to happen. Derrick’s your friend, right?”

Duncan nodded.

“Well,” said his father. “If CJ marries me then Derrick will be sad and cry all the time because he’s supposed to marry CJ. They love each other.”

Duncan looked confused. “But I love CJ and I want her to be my mommy…”

Cassidy knelt down in front of him. “I’ll always be your friend, DJ. I can be your auntie. Aunties are cool. They give you cookies when daddies say no. Same with Derrick. He can be your uncle and you guys can work on cars together.”

Duncan hugged her, his little face filled with misery. He looked up at Sturges.

“You would cry?” he asked, as though the idea really mystified him.

Sturges got down on his knees too. “Yeah little buddy, I sure would. I love CJ and waited a long time for her to love me, too.”

Duncan nodded sadly. “Ok. I don’t want you to be sad Derrick ‘cause you’re my friend.”

Sturges picked Duncan up and hugged him. “You get over to the Cats garage soon to see us, ok? And Dogmeat too. I know he needs you to play catch with him.”

“I will,” said Duncan, then squirmed to get down as his friends called to him.

Sturges put him down and he ran off.

“Wow, that was awkward,” said Cassidy. “I didn’t know what to even say at first.”

“Sorry about that,” said MacCready. “I guess I talked about you too much on the trip here.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Kids are kids. I hope he’s going to be ok,” she said.

“He’s fine,” said MacCready. “He’s a tough little guy. Been through a lot and he’ll do good here. We’ll be around soon to see you guys.”

Cassidy hugged him. “Ok. Have fun, RJ.”

She took Derrick’s hand. “Let’s get our stuff and go. I want some of that brahmin Blue Jay said he
was trading for. Hopefully the provisioners came.”

“Alright, honey. Sounds good to me.”

MacCready stood on the ramparts and watched them until he couldn’t see them any longer.
Cassidy and Zeke accompany RJ to the Gunner hangout after Duncan gets threatened at the Castle.

MacCready and Duncan came back to the garage two days later, sooner than expected and it wasn’t a happy visit. Cassidy saw it on his face the moment she looked at him.

“RJ? What’s wrong?” she asked, leading him to a chair.

“Uhh...not sure how to tell you...look it’s...you know I ran with the Gunners, right? Well...they found me.”

“The Castle guards didn’t take care of them?” she asked.

“It didn’t go down like that,” he said. He watched Duncan run back and forth with Dogmeat.

“RJ...out with it,” said Sturges.

“The kids aren’t supposed to leave the compound. It’s a rule. Well Duncan and a few of his friends disobeyed that rule and went beyond the gate to the shore. He came back crying saying that two men said they were going to kill me and him. He used the word Gunners.”

Cassidy was mortified. “Oh RJ! We need to do something about this! Do you have any idea where these Gunners are? Was it a certain group you ran with?”

He nodded. “Two of them, Winlocke and Barnes. Had it out for me when I left. Accused me of hunting on their turf. It’s total bull...they consider everywhere their turf. They were all over me in Goodneighbor a few times but they know better than to start a fight there. Hancock wouldn’t have it. So I guess somehow they knew I’m here now.”

Cassidy looked at Sturges. “We have a spy problem or something,” she said.

“With as many people as they have, there’s no way to find out who it is and at this point it doesn’t matter,” he said.

“That’s true. But I won’t have RJ and DJ running or threatened. We have to take them out.”

Sturges sighed. “Oh hell not this again,” he said.

“I hate it too but to me there’s no choice. Derrick, they threatened a child. Look you stay here and deal with the Institute stuff. You can look after Duncan. I’ll go with RJ and handle the Gunners.”

Sturges looked at her as though she’d grown an extra head. “Honey...that’s not gonna happen!”
“This time it is,” she said firmly. “I can handle myself and with RJ there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Those raiders are dangerous!” he exclaimed. “Remember Quincy? And you were in a group!”

“Derrick, you’re going to have to realize that there’ll be times when I have to do stuff on my own. It’ll be fine. RJ’s my friend and I can’t let him go alone.”

Sturges’ expression grew stormy. Zeke walked in.

“Hey cool cats, what’s up? D-Man you look like you’re about to go ape.”

Cassidy told him what had happened at the castle.

“Bad scene daddy-0,” he said to MacCready. “D-Man, no worries. I’ll get suited up and go with them. She’s right you’re the only one who can get us to the Institute. So you need to work that angle. These two’ll be made in the shade with me on board.”

Sturges took a deep breath and gathered Cassidy close to him. “I don’t like her going anywhere without me,” he said. “I’m the one who has to protect her. Not you guys.”

“Little brother,” said Zeke. “You’re being creepy. Again. We’ll be fine. Raiders are a joke. I know RJ here knows his way around a gun and so does CJ. Pretty bad, thinking she can’t handle herself!”

Sturges looked defeated. “I love her,” was all he could say.

“We all do,” said Zeke. “That’s why I’m going. No arguments.”

Cassidy looked into Sturges’ worried eyes. “Deacon taught me well,” she said. “And so has RJ. Plus...we both know Zeke is a one man army in that suit. And he’ll just have a tantrum and jump on the raiders if they freak him out.” She grinned.
Sturges grabbed her face and kissed her. “You’re my whole world little girl,” he said. “Just get it done fast and come home. I hate being away from you. It feels like I’m breaking a promise and you know how it is.”

“You’re not breaking a promise. You’re sending your brother in your place. It counts.”

Sturges stood up and faced Zeke. He was taller and broader than his older brother. “You protect her,” he said. “Don’t even let those assholes so much as think about hurting her, you dig?”

Zeke rested his hands on his brother’s shoulders. “No sweat,” he said. “This is an easy gig. Get that intel. We got an Institute to take down.”

Sturges nodded. He trusted his brother but his heart was torn in two. He looked at MacCready who just nodded.

“So what does DJ like to eat?” Sturges asked in a rather subdued voice.

“He’ll let you know,” said MacCready. “He’s got a whole list of things he loves. He’s good, not too picky. You’ll be fine. Oh and he gets a story at bedtime. Make something up. Or he can read a comic for a few minutes.”

“He’s gonna walk all over me,” said Sturges.

“No, I’ll talk to him right now. He’s not going to be a problem.”

Cassidy slid her arms around Sturges. “This is good practice for you,” she said with a smile.

He held her. “I guess so,” he said. “But you don’t start off with a 6 year-old!”

She giggled. “No, you’re right, but you and DJ will have so much fun. And we’ll be back before you know it.”

“You better,” he said. “I don’t think my heart can take being away from you like before. I love you, CJ.”

“I love you too and I don’t like being away from you either but it’ll be fine,” she kissed him sweetly, slowly, then pulled away. “Ok you two let’s get ourselves together.”

Zeke and Cassidy followed MacCready to the remains of the old Mass Pike Interchange.

“This is where the base was,” MacCready said. “Winlocke and Barnes always hung out here. Hope they’re here now.”

“If not,” said Zeke. “We’ll lay low and wait.”

As they approached, the Gunners on guard opened fire. Zeke and MacCready were ready, but Cassidy was a bit slower. She hadn’t thought they’d see any action until they found a way up.

“Sorry Ceej,” said MacCready. “I should have told you about the layout before.”

She shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.”

“If you get hurt it will be,” he laughed. “Sturges will kill me!”

“Hey, I know my little brother can be intense,” said Zeke as they scavved the bodies. “He’s never
been in love like this before. It’s making him flip out. He’s so far gone on you CJ.”

“I don’t mind,” she said honestly. “I know he loves me so much and I don’t think he’s intense or creepy. He’s sweet and caring. And Zeke, he’s exactly what I want in a guy.”

“So glad to hear that,” said the Atom Cat. “I always hoped he’d find a nice girl to settle down with.”

“She’s not nice,” grinned MacCready. “She’s a bratty kid with a death wish.” He swatted her ponytail playfully and she cowkicked him.

“You two make me feel like an old man,” said Zeke.

“You’re only 5 years older than RJ,” she said.

“Old,” said Zeke. “Let’s find a way up.”

At the base of one of the supports they found a crude lift.

“Is this tough enough to hold Zeke with his suit?” asked Cassidy.

“Yeah,” answered MacCready. “They have suits up there.”

“Cool!” cried Zeke. “Maybe we can take two of them!”

“I don’t think you’ll find one to fit me,” said Cassidy. “We can send scavvers to pick them up.”

“Sanctuary is just up North of here, right? We can go find your suit after.”

“Sure,” said Cassidy. “We’ll need a rest before going home anyway.”

“Anyone still living there?” asked Zeke.

“There were a few settlers that stayed. They figured that since the Institute was after me and I left, they’d be safer there.”

“With no defenses?” asked Zeke. “I guess it’s still safer than Concord or downtown.”

They looked up at the lift. “If we call this thing let’s hope they don’t suspect their guys are dead,” said MacCready.

“Let me go up first,” said Zeke. “I’ll send the lift right back down for you.”

It took several minutes for it to appear.

Cassidy waited anxiously for Zeke to send the elevator back down. There were no sounds of gunfire so they figured he was fine.

Rejoining him, Cassidy saw how big the Gunner hangout was. There were guard shacks, concrete barriers, old vehicles and dilapidated buildings. The Gunners could be hiding anywhere.

Cassidy thought they’d creep forward and snipe one by one. Zeke however had other ideas. He strode forward boldly. “Follow me and keep to the cover you two,” he ordered.

Before either could protest, he began shooting. He held down the trigger and laser light exploded everywhere.
The Gunners activated and then it was on.

Cassidy ended up separated from MacCready but she hunkered down behind a barrier and gave Zeke cover. There were a lot of Gunners.

“I see Winlocke!” shouted MacCready. “He’s in the power suit! He’s mine!”

Cassidy looked for her friend and saw him hiding behind a car. She made a beeline for him.

“Let me get behind and shoot the core,” she said. “Then he’ll have to leave the suit.”

“Alright,” he agreed.

When Winlocke stepped out, MacCready stood up. “Hey asshole,” he called. “Remember me? Yeah, you made a big mistake coming after my son.”

“Hope you kissed him goodbye,” sneered the raider. “He’s gonna love seeing your dead body when we bring it to him.”

MacCready’s face twisted with rage and he raised his weapon. “You’re worm food,” he snarled.

Cassidy saw a raider creeping around to gain line of sight, and she dropped him with one shot.


He looked down at the body then stepped over it to where Zeke had cleared out the rest of the area.

“That’s all of them,” he said. “Maybe I killed the other guy. Sorry RJ.”

“Let’s check the bodies to be sure. Barnes always wears a red bandana instead of the usual Gunner one.”

They hadn’t got far back towards the lift when they saw a group of Gunners standing there.

“Guess they rode up while we were busy,” said Zeke. “They won’t take long to get rid of. Like I said, this was a cake walk.”

Cassidy saw something that made her stop. “Zeke wait,” she said. “See that car there? The one to their right?”

He looked. “Yeah. It’s a mess. Might have been a hottie once but…”

“No, it’s not about that,” she cut him off. “Can you get them close to it? They armed it with a bomb!”

Zeke sidestepped over, bullets bouncing off his suit. Then he dropped behind a guard post.

“Get him!” shouted a Gunner wearing power armor and the others rushed forward.

Cassidy took aim at the bomb flashing under the car. She felt herself shoved to the ground by MacCready who shielded her with his body moments before the bomb went off.

There were screams, smoke, fire and everything shook. When it cleared, Cassidy looked up at MacCready. He smiled down at her.
“I like this view,” he said.

“RJ, get off me! Danger is over!” She pushed on his chest.

“Aww but I like it here, and you never know, stuff might fall...hey woah!” he suddenly found himself lifted off the ground by Zeke and set aside like a naughty puppy. The Atom Cat helped Cassidy to her feet.

“You two alright?” he asked. “Check it out…”

They didn’t expect to see what they did.

A huge section of the overpass was gone. The lift was now across a huge gap.

“Wow, that was a huge bomb,” said Cassidy.

“Dumb Gunners,” said MacCready. “They blew themselves up enough times thinking bigger is better when I was with them.”

“The good news is I saw the guy with the bandana,” said Zeke. “What’s left of him is down there.” He pointed downwards. “Bad news is, we’re gonna have to jump across.”

“We can’t make that,” said Cassidy.

“You can if I carry you.” Zeke grinned and held his arms out.

“Are you sure?” she asked dubiously.

“As sure as I’m the king of cool,” said Zeke. “And I don’t want to get totalled by Derrick if you come back hurt.”

Cassidy let him pick her up. He took three giant strides, yelled something and leaped across. They landed neatly right by the lift and he set her down. “See? Fun isn’t it?”

He went back for MacCready then waited while they went down in the lift.

“Hey CJ,” said the mercenary. “I owe you so much that there’s no way I can ever repay it. Again. Thanks for doing it.”

She smiled. “As I said before. No thanks required.”

“Sanctuary?” asked Zeke when he came down.

“This way,” said Cassidy.
It's Not Home Anymore

Chapter Summary

Cassidy and her friends rest in Sanctuary.

There were 4 settlers hiding out in the remains of Sanctuary. Cassidy didn’t know them although they knew her.

“We’re staying to get it fixed up again. This was the best home we’ve ever known,” they said.

“The move was temporary for many of the people here,” said Cassidy. “They want to come back too. The Institute will be a memory one day.”

This encouraged them. “Then we’ll keep working.”

Zeke built a fire outside of the remains of his brother’s garage. He walked around and dragged mattresses and sleeping bags out. The settlers offered them some food.

Cassidy curled up, staring at the fire. She missed Sturges.

“Zeke?” she asked. “What did you mean when you said Derrick was being creepy again?”

“You heard that, huh?” he asked with a sigh. “Nothing major little sister. D-Man’s an emotional kind of guy. If he likes you he’ll do anything for you. If he loves you well...I’m seeing he can lay it on a bit thick.”

“Zeke, that doesn’t explain a thing,” said Cassidy eyeing him.

“Well, when we were travelling here way back when, we hooked up with a caravan for awhile. Derrick liked the guy’s kid. She was a good kid, but kinda wild.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Zeke. “She didn’t like the way he never let her do anything. He was always worried she was going to go off and get eaten by something and she got sick of it and told him he was being creepy. I warned him that chicks don’t want to be sat on all the time. Once they hatch they got legs and wings!” He laughed. “So don’t worry...just remind him not to sit on you.”

Cassidy shrugged. “I actually don’t mind the way he is at all. I like it. He loves me and doesn’t want me to get hurt. I like knowing he’s there.”

“Yeah, but all the time, CJ?”

“Mm hm. I miss him a lot right now. You know I love you two but...he’s my man.” She smiled softly.

“He’s probably burning the midnight oil fixing everything in that garage to stop worrying over...
you,” laughed Zeke. “He’ll sleep for a week when we get back.”

“Good,” she said. “I probably will too. We need cars again.”

“I second that motion,” said MacCready.

“And roads,” added Cassidy.

Zeke poked at the fire. “Yeah, roads. Be cool to have that again. Now you pile up some Zs. I might eyeball the place and look for your suit.”

He got up and wandered off.

“I hope Duncan’s doing alright,” said MacCready. “He’s a good kid. I know he’s not causing trouble but I hope he’s not worrying about me. When I saw him again...CJ, it was heartbreaking...but beautiful, you know?”

She looked at him, the firelight dancing across his face, making his hair look like it was on fire. “Tell me RJ. I want to hear all about it.”

“He was playing. I walked up to him and asked if he remembered me. He just looked up and his whole face changed. I figured he’d either run away or jump up and hug me but he got up so slow, walked right up and touched my face, took my hat off and threw it on the ground. Kept saying you’re my daddy and you’re not dead. I started to cry right there. He kept talking about how he thought he was an orphan. Then he put his arms around me and told me to never let go. I carried that kid around for two days pretty much. Wouldn’t let me out of his sight. Then one day he seemed to be fine with it and he’s the way you see him now. Fearless and happy.”

“That’s amazing, RJ,” said Cassidy. “I can tell you two are really close. You’re a great dad. He’s a lucky boy. You might even be almost as cool as my daddy was.”

MacCready grinned. “I’ll take that as a high compliment coming from you, kid.”

“Because it is, garbage weasel,” she said.

They gazed at the flames, lost in their own thoughts for awhile.

“Hey Ceej, since we’re being all serious...I gotta ask. If you hadn’t gotten with Sturges...would I ever have had a chance with you?”

She gave him a small smile. “Yeah. For sure. Once you had a bath anyways.”

He laughed. “Gee thanks. But...I’d have done right by you.”

“Mm hm, I know RJ. I hope you find someone one day. A ghoul maybe...”

“Uhuhh, no way. I gotta focus on Duncan now though. Unless Sturges wants to share you but...somehow I don’t think that’ll ever happen.”

“Sorry RJ, I don’t think it will. I’m a one man woman. But...know I love you anyway and I always will. You and Duncan both.”

“Same here Ceej,” he said.

Zeke came back. “I found your suits,” he said. “Yours was on the other side of the wall there, CJ. Derrick’s...he’s not going to be happy. It’s totalled.”
“Oh no!” cried CJ. She knew how proud he was of that suit. “Is it fixable at all?”

“He can fix anything,” said Zeke. “But there’s no way to get it back there. Going to need a wagon.”

“Can I take mine back?” she asked.

“You’ll have to get into it tomorrow and we’ll see. I can work on it if I need to, just takes time and I want to get home.”

“We all do,” said Cassidy. “I’m going to try and sleep now. Then round up anything we can salvage and carry. If my suit works then we can load up.”

She nestled into the sleeping bag.

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Morning brought the sun and warmth and Cassidy awoke to a smoldering fire and smoke in her face.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” said MacCready affectionately. “I made you some coffee. Zeke’s got your suit other side of your house.”

Her suit was dented, the paint scraped off in places, the frame bent and one hand didn’t work. Zeke hadn’t found the helmet. She got in and walked around. Every few steps her right knee would seize up and she had to hop to unglitch it.

Zeke started laughing. “That’s gonna be a fun walk home little sister! I don’t got the tools to fix it.”

“Did you check my walls? That’s where all the tools ended up it looked like.”

“I pulled them all out and put them in a tool box. Derrick’ll owe me for this one.”

“Nice,” said Cassidy. “I’ll go look around for anything worth bringing. I wish we could unbury the garage. There were so many things he had that I want to bring to him.”

“That’s cool, CJ,” said Zeke. “But we’ve had to start over a bunch of times. Kind of used to it, you dig? He’ll be fine and find new stuff. Let’s just get home.”

There wasn’t much to find anyway. It was hard for Cassidy to see the destruction again. She stopped at her father’s grave for a few minutes. It upset her too much and MacCready pulled her away, doing his best to amuse her.

The settlers said they’d continue to tend the grave and mend Sanctuary. Cassidy thanked them, but in her heart she didn’t want to come back. Home was a garage on the other side of Boston now. And she was on her own.

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Cassidy left her suit with Rowdy, having come in as quietly as possible to surprise Sturges.

She found him in the cantina, looking miserable.

“Hey gorgeous,” she said softly.

He turned around and his face lit up. In three long strides he had her in his arms, kissing her as though he hadn’t seen her in a year.

“Oh honey, I’m glad you’re ok! I missed you so much!”
“I missed you too. The Gunners are dead, I got my power suit back and...Zeke rounded up some of your tools for you!”

“You went to Sanctuary?” he asked, picking her up and setting her down on a bar stool. He ran his fingers through her hair, gazing into her eyes.

She nodded. “After we finished at Mass Pike, we went there to rest before coming home. There are a few settlers there determined to fix things up. But...it’s not home anymore, Derrick. This is. I guess maybe Marcy and Jun will go back and who knows who else but I’m hoping they get settled at the Castle and stay.”

“I’d like that too,” he said.

“So how was Duncan?” she asked.

“He’s a great kid. Wasn’t happy about missing school so I made up some work for him to do. He’s really smart CJ. I’d tell him 15 minutes to bedtime and he knew when time was up. Just got up and went to bed. Same with bath time. I’d fill the tub and put his toys in and tell him half an hour and he’d be out of there by then. Few times he forgot to wash his hair but hell he’s a kid!”

“RJ did a great job with him, honestly. I love that little guy. Did you give him story time too?”

“Oh yeah. He wouldn’t let me skip anything. Loves stories about heroes. So I told him about you.”

She laughed. “I’m no hero!”

“You are to him now. He’s building a vault in his room.”

“Derrick! Vaults are terrible!”

He grinned and shrugged. “Not to a kid. They’re like a secret spy base to him. His vault is an old door and a blanket so far.”

Cassidy was amused as he told her the adventures he and Duncan had had.

“Did he talk about missing his daddy at all? RJ was worried about that.”

Sturges nodded. “When you guys first left, he got on my lap and looked really worried. I thought he was gonna cry. He asked me if I could be his daddy if his daddy didn’t come back.”

“Oh no...what did you say?” she asked.

“I said damn right, little buddy! And he was good with that. Started playing again after and been fine since. I think he just needs to know he’s not gonna be alone.”

Cassidy told him about Duncan and MacCready’s reunion.

“That kid is going to be just fine,” said Sturges. “He’s got a good head on his shoulders. Now little lady, I’ve been without you for way too long. Can I convince you to come to our trailer with me?”

He brushed his lips against hers. He tasted the Nuka Cola she’d had just before they got home.

“Sweet lips,” he said, kissing her again.

She responded, parting her lips and letting his tongue find hers.

Sturges picked her up. “Yeah, I know what I want to do with you, honey…”
As he carried her away, Zeke elbowed MacCready with a grin.

“Yeah yeah,” said the mercenary. “Rub it in.”
Sturges makes a discovery; Duke fixes up a new way to travel; the Cats meet a new and interesting person.

Duncan clung to his father the following day and wouldn’t wander too far from him. When Dogmeat finally convinced his buddy to play fetch, the little boy relented and followed the dog, but always remained in line of sight of his father.

“I can’t be going off like that anymore,” said MacCready, watching his son. “He’s a happy kid. When he gets clingy there’s something wrong.”

“He was worried when we first left,” said Cassidy. “Derrick told me that Duncan asked him if he’d be his daddy if something happened to you.”

MacCready’s expression dropped. “Oh man...what did he say?”

“He said of course he would. And it’s true.”

MacCready nodded but Cassidy could see the pain in his eyes.

“You don’t need to hit the Institute with us, RJ,” she said softly. “I don’t think you should to be honest. Derrick and I are both going, and if you go too...Duncan will be left behind with the Cats or Preston. I’m not sure that’s the best idea.”

“Yeah,” agreed MacCready. “I might need to rethink this whole thing now. I gotta make him my only priority.”

“There’s going to be some part of this you can be part of,” she said. “It doesn’t only have to be the fighting part if it comes to that.”

“It will,” he said with a sigh. “But we’ll see. I don’t want my son growing up thinking I was a coward and didn’t go for my own reasons.”

“A coward is the last thing Duncan would ever see in you,” Cassidy said.

Sturges emerged from his place at the computer. “Honey,” he said. “I think I found a way in to the Institute.”

“Let’s go tell Preston,” she said.

“No, not yet. I still need to make sure what I’m seeing is what I think. Can I show you?”

Cassidy and MacCready both got up and followed him. He showed them the blueprints he’d uncovered. And while Cassidy had no idea how to read such things, she knew he was onto something.
He put an arm around her shoulder. “This is starting to feel pretty real now,” he said softly. “And I admit, it scares me just a little. I know I’m not much of a fighter, and after seeing how intense things got the last time…”

“It’s going to be ok,” she whispered, leaning into him. “We won’t be alone. I bet all the Minutemen we know will stand with us. And you’ll have to hog-tie the Cats to not come. Not to mention the Railroad if we decide to tell them.”

Sturges held her tightly. “I want it done with, CJ. All this.”

“We all do. If raiders were the only thing we had to worry about it would be a better life. And that’s what we’re fighting for. Heck we could approach the Brotherhood if we wanted to and they’d help.”

MacCready snorted. “No, they’d take over the whole operation and think we’ll do what they say. No thanks.”

“Right,” she agreed. “We don’t like them much do we, RJ?” She turned around and winked at him. He grinned.

Cassidy turned back to the computer. “Well, we need to tell Preston.”

“CJ, Duke had a good idea that I want to run by you,” said Sturges. “You too, MacCready. While you were gone, Duncan told me that he wanted to live here, but he also wanted to live at the Castle. He likes school and he likes his new friends. But it’s too far to travel each day. So Duke suggested us making a boat. Going by water from here to the Castle would be really fast. What do you think, RJ? You and Duncan can live here but you can still go there for your guard duty and school.”

MacCready nodded. “That...that’s brilliant! I think that’d be great! But I don’t fit in here...I’m not like you guys.”

“You don’t have to be a carbon copy of someone else to fit in,” said Cassidy kindly. “So you’re not a rockabilly...that’s fine. You’re still one of us. And I want you guys here. Think about it RJ, ok? But we should make the boat anyway. It’s an awesome idea!”

Duke came around the corner. “Someone say boat? I’ve been working on that!”

“But you just told me about it a few days ago,” said Sturges.

“Doesn’t mean I haven’t been at it for longer than that! Come with me Cats,” he said.

They walked to the shore. There, Duke had been working on an old fishing boat he’d found when he first joined with Zeke. “I love the water,” he said. “Even if it’s uncool now.”

He pointed across the bay. “Castle’s that way,” he said. “If we all work on this, I can get it running in no time. See Derrick, you got the jets with this kind of thing.”

Sturges walked around the boat, then examined the engine. “Alright, I can work on this with you. It’s really good Duke. But we need to move on it. I need to get over to the Castle and discuss my findings with Preston.”

Duke cracked his knuckles. “Let’s get to work.”

Duncan ran back and forth along the shore as Cassidy, MacCready, Sturges and Duke worked on the boat. Duke had done most of the body work already, the trick was getting the engine to work.
Cassidy did most of the body painting and thought she did pretty good.

“We’re going to have to give this thing a name,” said MacCready. “Bad luck not to.”

“That’s a cool idea Clyde,” said Duke.

“Uhh, RJ. My name’s RJ,” said MacCready.

“I know that,” said Duke, not looking up.

“Then why’d you call me Clyde?”

Duke looked at him and started laughing. “Daddy-O, Jack, Clyde...it’s all the same man, it’s all the same.”

Cassidy grinned. “You’ll get it, RJ. It’s all good.”

He went back to his task with a shrug. “If you say so, Ceej.”

Cassidy took Duncan back to the garage with her to feed him lunch and get food together for the others. He bounced around her asking one question after another which she happily answered, giving him a job to do collecting the trays and any dishes laying about. He was an easy child to get along with.

“Little brother sure has taken to you!” smiled Roxy watching Duncan zoom around.

“He wanted me to be his mom,” said Cassidy.

Roxy sucked in her lips. “Oops, that must have been awkward.”

“It was, but he understands how it is. I think.”

“When you guys were gone you should have seen Derrick with him,” grinned Roxy. “You are one lucky gal to have a daddy-o like him. He’s a great guy. You two are going to have some adorable rug rats.”

Cassidy began preparing lunch. “I hope so,” she said.

“Waiting til after the wedding, are you?” asked Roxy, sitting down on a stool, her head in her hands.

“Not necessarily. If it happens, it happens. I’d rather not think about it too much because what if it doesn’t?”

Roxy looked confused. “Why wouldn’t it?” she asked.

“I’m from a time when there wasn’t all this radiation,” said Cassidy. “My body isn’t used to it like everyone born since then. I’m scared that it’s affecting me and might stop me from being a mom. And I know Derrick really wants to have a family. So...worrying myself over it will make things worse. I just try not to think about it. We all have Duncan to fuss over anyway.”

Roxy sighed. “I’m sorry little sister,” she said. “But I think it’s going to be ok! You and Derrick will be the coolest parents in the Commonwealth! Your babies will be fab!”

Cassidy put a plate of food in front of her friend. “Thanks Roxy. Now eat! I’m taking this down to the guys on the shore.”
Roxy laughed. “Thank you! You’re way too cool, CJ!”

As she approached she heard the deep drone of an engine. Derrick was crouched down in front of the boat’s motor, covered in oil and MacCready and Duke were laughing.

“You got it working!” cried Cassidy.

“Yeah, after it puked up on him!” laughed MacCready.

“Derrick’s all dirty!” cried Duncan running forward. “Can I help? I can help good!”

MacCready caught his son. “No, you can stay away from the engine. That’s not for kids. You sit down and eat your lunch, buddy.”

Duncan pouted. “I’m not a kid! I’m 6!”

“Now you sound like like CJ,” said MacCready with a smirk.

Duncan plopped down on an overturned pail. “CJ is six too?” he asked.

MacCready handed the boy his lunch and shook his head. “Never mind, buddy. Eat now.”

Cassidy picked up a rag and handed it to Sturges. “You’re amazing. Now go get washed up and eat.”

“This thing splooged all over me, honey,” he said with a grin. “She started up all nice-like, then did this. But she’s runnin’ and runnin’ well.”

“Leave her going,” said Duke.

Sturges nodded and stood up, wiping the oil off his face and neck. “I need a bath,” he said, then looked right at Cassidy who blew him a kiss.

They all sat around in the debris strewn sand and ate. The engine sputtered a few times but didn’t die.

“Let’s mount her up,” said Duke. “Then we can take it for a ride, D-Man.”

“Oh fun!” cried Cassidy.

“You know how to swim, honey?” asked Sturges. “This thing might not do right by us once we get out there.”

“I do,” she replied.

“Not me,” said MacCready. “I hate getting wet and the idea of swimming in there...no thanks. You guys don’t know what might be living in that water.”

“Nothing,” said Cassidy. “It’s all dead.”


“I’m not sure I want to see it now,” she said. “But if the ocean is still alive that’s a good thing.”

“Well,” said MacCready. “If you think the stuff on land here is a good thing I guess so.”
Cassidy made a face. “No, I don’t really. Too many heads.”

“That ocean stuff,” said Duke. “One head but … yeah you’ll see one day. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, little sister.”

MacCready picked Duncan up. “Nap time, DJ,” he said. The little boy protested and kicked up a bit of a fuss, but his father held him firmly. “If you have a nap now maybe the boat will be ready by the time you wake up.”

“I wanna go on the boat!” cried Duncan.

“Not until it’s safe,” said MacCready. “And not until you’ve had a nap. Come on buddy, let’s go.”

Duncan whined in true child fashion but had no choice but to obey his father.

“Boat needs a name, RJ’s right,” said Cassidy.

“We can name it after you,” said Sturges.

“No way then it will fail,” said Cassidy. “We need a name that symbolizes the new Commonwealth. Something cool and meaningful.”

Words were batted around but nothing seemed to stick.

“United,” said Sturges. “Preston is always saying united we stand. And it makes sense. That’s the only way we’ll survive. If we all work together.”

“I love it,” said Cassidy.

“Cool name, I like it!” said Duke. “All in favor of United, say aye!”

The United began her sea trials a day later. Duke and Sturges went out on her first, cruising close to shore just in case. The engine quit on them a few times but they always managed to get it going again. It also spewed oil a few times too many for Sturges’ liking. He talked about missing parts and things he thought would help but they’d have to search for that.

“In the meantime is it safe to use? To go back and forth to the Castle?” asked Cassidy.

“Be great if we can find a captain for this thing, who knows how to fix it when it conks out,” said Sturges. “I can’t always be here.”

“We can ask at the Castle,” suggested Cassidy. “Remick might be interested.”

It took ten minutes to boat over to the Castle versus an almost two hour walk. Preston was excited by the whole idea and wanted to take a tour around the bay.

“First we need to tell you what we came here for,” said Sturges. “I think I might have found a way into the Institute.”

Preston closed the door to the HQ and listened carefully to what Sturges told him.

“We’ll need to get a good team together,” he said. “So what you’re saying is the best way to destroy them is to blow up the reactor?”

“That’s the easiest,” agreed Sturges. “I don’t think we can relay the numbers we need for a full on
shooting match and there are innocent people down there that deserve a chance to get out.”

“How the heck do we evacuate that many people?” Asked Cassidy.

“Hack the intercom system,” answered Sturges. “That’s the quickest. If they choose to believe it or not that’s on them.”

Preston drummed his fingers on the table. “The reactor looks hard to get to. We’re going to need to do some training. I’ve some good guys out there but they’re not militia. They’ll need work. Cassidy do you think MacCready will train them?”

Cassidy shrugged. “He’s a sniper. He’s the furthest thing from army you could get. He’s good but not what you need, Preston. We need a Brotherhood soldier to help us and I don’t think that’s going to happen. And I don’t like them.”

“Understood,” said Preston. “They’ve got their own agenda and we need to stay focused on ours. What about the Railroad?”

“They’re no different than the Minutemen.”

“Well what we’ve got is what we’ve got then,” sighed Preston. “Let’s ask our people who has any military background. I’m hoping a few of those ghouls might be pre-war military.”

It was a large crowd that assembled on the main grounds of the Castle. Without saying too much, Preston asked if anyone had any military background. Luckily there were a few who stepped forward, one of them indeed a pre-war ghoul.

“Come with me,” said Preston to the three of them, and led them back to the HQ and laid out the plan.

Two days later, a woman showed up at the Castle. She was older, tough as nails and demanded to see Preston. Since they had no Captain for the boat yet. They used a radio to send for it and Duke brought Preston and his guest to the Atom Cats’ garage.

Cassidy and Sturges were playing with the jukebox, dancing with each other and being their affectionate selves while Duncan and MacCready read comics. The other Cats were scattered around doing their own things.

“What the hell is this, Preston?” came an irate, rough female voice. “You bring me to some passion pit for hooligans?”

Embarrassed, Preston cleared his throat. “Uhh, Sturges? Cassidy?”

Still holding each other they gave him a confused look. Zeke stood up from his spot at the car and walked over.

“Woah there,” he said. “That’s an uncool way to talk to the coolest Cats in the Commonwealth. I’m Zeke, leader of the Atom Cats and this is our garage.”

“Zeke this is Ronnie Shaw,” said Preston. “She’s a long time member of the Minutemen.”

Cassidy and Sturges walked over and shook her hand. She pulled Cassidy closer and peered into her eyes.

“This little slip of a thing! What are you, 12?”
Cassidy’s jaw dropped. “I’m 19! And that’s really rude! What’s wrong with you?”

Ronnie laughed. “Oh, you’ve got a fire in your belly, that’s for sure. Good. Shrinking violets won’t do on this mission.”

Ronnie looked up at Sturges, who was looking rather unimpressed. “And you, big boy. You must be her boyfriend. You look like you wanna take a strip off this old lady, huh?” She grinned and patted his chest. “Alright. Preston said you people want to bust into the Institute and I’m here to make sure it happens and happens right.”

Cassidy looked up at Sturges.

“I hear you, ma’am,” he said. “But we don’t know you and you can imagine it’s hard just to take someone at their word.”

“Polite fella aren’t you,” said Ronnie. “Well, we’re going to do some mock ups and training. After that if we haven’t earned each other’s trust then the deal’s off.”

She looked at Zeke, Johnny D, Duke and MacCready. “Zeke, you’re gonna have a lot of bad hair days on this op. Johnny D, Preston tells me you’re a medic. Good. You’ll be needed. Duke, I don’t have the faintest idea about you. And MacCready...well let’s hope there’s no stiff winds on this mission or you might just blow over.”

Duncan ran up. “What about me? I’m DJ! I’m 6!”

Ronnie looked down at him. “You are, are you? I got a rifle bigger than you. You’ll be the water boy. You make sure these soldiers don’t dry up. Ok?”

Duncan nodded enthusiastically.

Ronnie eyed Sturges and Cassidy. “And you two. Think you can keep your hands off each other long enough to function?”

Sturges drew Cassidy closer. “Probably not,” he said with a grin.

She looked Cassidy up and down. “You aren’t pregnant are you? This training is not for mommies!” She thumbed in MacCready’s direction. “Hell, I don’t even know if this guy will survive it! So. 0500 at the Castle tomorrow morning!”

She nodded to Preston and walked out of the garage, the Atom Cats staring after her. Preston gave them a quick wave and thumbs up and followed.

Roxy crept out from behind a wall. “Is it safe?” she whispered, taking Cassidy’s arm. “Oh boy, she’s a tiger! Glad I’m not going to the fight!”

Rowdy also emerged. “I’m wondering if I should even go now,” she said laughing. “It might not go well!”

Zeke ran his hand through his hair. “Telling a guy he’s gonna have a bad hair day is totally uncool. Especially when it isn’t possible.”

Sturges looked at Cassidy. “You know, I wish you did have a little baby in there. Then I’d have a reason to stop you from doing this!”

Cassidy lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it. “You wouldn’t have to stop me Derrick. I’d never
risk our child’s life for any reason.”

“That’s why I’m not going,” said MacCready. “I’ll do this training just so that old lady can stuff it but...I’ll be here with DJ keeping the home fires burning.”

Cassidy sighed with relief. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard yet,” she said. “So I guess it’s a go then. We’re actually going to take on the Institute.”
Ronnie Shaw hadn’t been joking when she said the training wasn’t for mommies. Cassidy had never been worked so hard in her entire life. Not even in school during track and field. Not even when preparing for a horse show.

They did field drills, weapons drills, aerobic training, strength training. Every horrible thing that Ronnie could think of to make them do, they did.

She split them into groups, of course separating her and Sturges, then had them gear up and jog the shoreline and that’s when Cassidy saw one of the beasts that Duke had mentioned. She shrieked and nearly tripped.

“Never seen a dead sea creature before?” barked Ronnie. “Did you crawl out from under a rock?”

“No!” cried Cassidy in revulsion, staring at the thing that looked part dolphin, part shark and part whale. “A vault!”

“Well, now you’ve seen it, get moving!”

Cassidy collapsed into Sturges’ arms. “This day needs to be over!” she huffed.

“I hear ya honey, are you alright?”

“Yes, but I’m so over this whole thing. Why do we need to train like we’re invading a country?”

“I guess because in a way, we are!” he grinned.

He walked her over to a long makeshift table where water had been set up. Duncan happily gave her a glass.

“Daddy said a bad word at that lady!” the little boy said, his face full of amusement.

“I’ll bet he did!” laughed Cassidy.

“Can’t say I blame him,” said Sturges.

Preston walked up to them. “Ronnie sure is working everyone hard,” he said. “She’s got a pretty involved plan for the infiltration. If it works it’ll be excellent. If not, well there’ll be a lot of chaos.”

“Do you think her way is the best though?” asked Cassidy.
“I’ve known her a long time. She’s an old legend with the Minutemen. Vanished when things started going south. To be honest I thought she’d died. If anyone can help us pull this off, it’s Ronnie. I know she’s over the top but once you get to know her she’s not such an ogre.”

“I don’t care if she’s an ogre,” said Cassidy. “I’m more worried that she can do this thing and we all don’t die.”

She reached for Sturges’ hand and squeezed it.

“If everyone falls in line and does what she says, it’ll be good,” said Preston. “There’s always things that can go wrong which is why she’s training us all like this.”

“As long as you have faith in her, I can go with it,” said Cassidy.

The next several nights and early morning hours, Ronnie Shaw rudely and roughly awoke the residents of the Castle and hustled them around. With exhausted bodies and bleary minds, she expected them to load ordnance, fire weapons and perform.

Cassidy asked when they would actually attack.

Ronnie ignored the question each time.

Then one morning, she disappeared.

The Castle awoke and reported for training, and she didn’t show up.

They went about their tasks, and still no Ronnie.

The dinner hour came and went.

Bedtime arrived.

The same thing happened the following day. Even Preston was confused. The Cats’ decided to go home.

“This is crappy,” said Cassidy on the boat ride home. “We trained our asses off and she just leaves? Probably got eaten by a Deathclaw.”

“I don’t understand it either,” said Sturges.

“She’s a pooper,” said Rowdy. “Now what do we do?”

“We just make our own plan and hit them like we would have in the first place,” said Cassidy.

“I guess so,” said Rowdy. “Well I’m ready as I’ll ever be little sister. Ronnie told me to get your suit radiation proof. I saw Derrick already did that so all I did was repair and shore it up some more.”

Cassidy was puzzled. “Why would I need radiation protection?”

“Who knows,” said Rowdy. “I did it to get her off my back.”

“Well, whatever she was planning,” said Sturges. “CJ’s not doing it without me.”

Cassidy smiled at him and he gently touched her face.
“You gotta let her breathe, D-Man,” said Duke, shaking his head.

“No, you guys don’t understand,” said Cassidy. “I love how Derrick cares about me and wants to protect me. It makes me feel safe and I don’t want him to change.”

“Someone for everyone, even you human blankets, right Derrick?” said Duke.

Sturges grinned. “I can’t help it. From the day we met, CJ just inspired me to look after her. I like to think her daddy would approve of me.”

“He would,” said Cassidy. “Except for the rockabilly part!”

“That’s the best part,” said Duke.

They arrived home and filed out of the boat. There were two turrets on the dock in case any raiders had ideas to try and steal or sabotage it.

“I’m going to the trailer,” said Cassidy. “I’m tired and need to sleep.”

“Can I sleep with you?” asked Duncan, taking her hand.

MacCready tried to intercept but Cassidy said it would be fine.

“Well Sturges, what do you say we play a round of cards, have a few beers?” asked MacCready.

“Sounds cool. Anything’s better than more of that training.”

They wandered to the garage and Cassidy took Duncan to the trailer. Dogmeat was on the couch and greeted them with enthusiasm.

“Can I have a story?” asked Duncan, snuggling up beside Cassidy. “Do you have a daddy? Where’s your daddy, CJ?”

She smiled. “Oh, I have a daddy. But he’s gone now.”

Duncan nodded sagely. “My mommy is gone too. I don’t even ‘member her. Do you ‘member your daddy? Do you have a mommy too?”

Cassidy looked at the little boy. “You know DJ, you look a lot like your daddy, but there are parts of you that look like your mommy too. So if you want to see her you can just look at yourself in a mirror. Your eyes are like your daddy. But your smile I bet is from your mommy.”

Duncan’s eyes lit up. “Can I see?”

“After our nap we can go look, ok? But for now would you like a story about me and my daddy?”

“Yes, please,” said Duncan.

They were both sound asleep before the story ended.

Cassidy awoke to a gentle stroking of her hair. She opened her eyes slowly.

“Hi, honey,” said Sturges softly. “I missed you and when when DJ came running out I thought I’d take his place.”

“I love it,” she whispered, nestling close to him. “Did you and RJ have fun?”
“Yeah he totalled me pretty hard both times,” he chuckled. “That guy can sure put away his liquor too.”

“Yep. It’s all he did for a long time. Gambling and drinking. I’m glad he’s done with that Goodneighbor lifestyle. He’s a really nice guy.”

“You like him, huh?” asked Sturges, lying so close to her their noses were touching.

“If you and I didn’t get together, me and RJ probably would have,” said Cassidy honestly.

“If I hadn’t listened to Zeke that might’ve happened, honey. I don’t like the thought of it though. I wanted you to be my girl the day we met.”

“Don’t think about things that didn’t happen, Derrick. It’s you and me against the world now. For always.”

His lips found hers, his hands in her hair, kissing her. Cassidy responded with equal intensity.

He pushed her gently onto her back, leaning over her, his kisses more intense and demanding. One hand dragged up her leg to her hip, then up beneath her shirt to her breast, caressing the already erect nipple, making her sigh.

“What are your intentions towards me, Mr. Sturges?” she asked huskily.

“Oh, I’ll show you, Miss Hartley.” He pushed her shirt up and his lips found a nipple and sucked gently, his tongue flicking across it. His hand found her waistband and deftly unsnapped it, reaching for the heat between her legs.

Cassidy sucked in her breath and bit her lip in anticipation. He had the gentlest touch, always leaving her aching for more.

His fingers found her inner lips and delved between them, seeking her entrance and slipping inside, massaging that rough patch.

Cassidy writhed, moaning softly. She could already feel her release coiling up inside her. Her own hand sought the hardness between his legs, squeezing him through his pants.

“Yeah, honey,” he whispered.

She wasn’t as dextrous as he was and needed two hands to undo his fasteners and free him. Her warm hand curled around him and he exhaled with pleasure, moving against her hand.

“Alright, these clothes need to come off,” he said, eyes half closed with desire.

Bodies pressed tightly together, they kissed deeply, without reservation. Sturges pulled her leg over his hip, adjusting his position until his tip was just inside her entrance.

Cassidy pushed forward, wanting to feel him slide into her.

He obliged, pushing into her waiting body making her cry out.

She squeezed around him, feeling him fill her so completely. She moved her hips, his shaft against her swollen nub bringing jolts of pleasure.

Sturges held his hand at the small of her back, moving slowly with her, letting each back and forth motion prolong the pleasure they were both feeling.
Cassidy could hear the wind outside, pushing the ocean into waves, almost echoing their movements.

He ran his fingertips up her back and down her arm to her hand where he entwined it with hers, bringing it to his lips and kissing it.

She watched those sensuous lips of his and her entire body felt electrified. “I can’t imagine loving anyone more than you,” she whispered.

His eyes met hers and there was a mixture of desire and love in his expression as he continued to move slowly inside her. “I’d say the same, honey.”

Cassidy closed her eyes then as the pleasure began to coalesce. All the bits and pieces of her body that were on fire seemed to melt and join together. “I want to release,” she said softly.

Sturges suddenly withdrew from her, and nestled his member between her folds. “I want it to last,” he said. “Honey, you feel too good.”

Slowly he moved his shaft against her nub, but the inside of her, where the release had been building was left untouched. “Oh no,” she moaned. “I want you back inside me! This is mean!”

Sturges chuckled. “It’s fun torturing you. You’re so beautiful when you’re begging.”

Cassidy felt the intense heat and tightness of her muscles resume and grinned. “I refuse to beg,” she said.

“Well,” he said and withdrew from her completely, his hardness pressed against her abdomen. “You sure?”

She stared at him. “Derrick!”

She sat up and pushed him over onto his back, straddling him, holding his hands above his head. “Teasing your girl is not cool!” With a wicked grin, Cassidy slid him back into her and moved on him.

Sturges groaned and couldn’t help but thrust up into her. He was having his own release issues, and freed his arms from her easily, gripping her hips and pushing her down on him. She was so tight around him.

Cassidy sat up and felt every inch of him inside her body, filling her and making her twitch with every hit against her rough patch. Her entrance was stretched open around him and she reached for her nub and touched it, pressing it down against his shaft. She moaned, eyes squeezed shut, and dropped her head back, feeling her hair touching her lower back. His size, his movements, all of it combined to bring her right to the edge.

After a few thrusts, it was all too much. Her release suddenly exploded from her and each powerful contraction made her cry out.

As her release abated, Sturges flipped her onto her back without leaving her body. His eyes were intense as he thrust hard into her, wanting to be even deeper than was possible. Usually gentle, this time he was almost animalistic, chasing a release that was just beyond his grasp. Grunting with the effort, her inner walls tight against him, he pinned her down and held her there.

Cassidy had never experienced him this way and didn’t know what to think. She’d always seen Sturges as slow and tender. She tried to free her wrists and couldn’t, then fear gripped her as she
remembered Deacon pinning her down the same way, lost in his terrible waking nightmare.

The vacant, staring expression, the horror in his eyes...it filled her mind. She squeezed her eyes shut as Sturges continued to thrust hard into her. But this wasn’t Deacon. Sturges didn’t have the mind sickness. And he truly loved her. Cassidy did her best to relax. She forced herself to forget what had happened to her before.

Sturges was lost within himself. The pleasure was so sharp, so intense, creating bright specks of light behind his eyes. With his eyes closed, he didn’t see Cassidy’s expression of distress. He was in the throes of passion. Finally, he caught up with his release and thrust hard into her once, emptying himself inside her with a cry.

Breathless, Sturges collapsed onto his back beside her, an arm across his eyes. “CJ...that was...incredible,” he said.

She felt his seed run out of her body, hot and sticky and she rubbed her wrists then curled up. The adrenaline from her release was wearing off, and she was starting to hurt inside.

“CJ?” asked Sturges, turning his head to look at her. She was staring at him oddly and he rolled onto his side and kissed her forehead. “Honey, are you alright?”

She nodded but he knew right away she wasn’t being honest. “CJ? Did...did I hurt you?”

Cassidy nodded almost imperceptibly.

His expression fell and he pulled her close into his arms. “I’m so sorry, honey! I never meant to do that, you know I’d never hurt you on purpose! I swear it won’t ever happen again.”

“Ok,” said Cassidy simply. “I’ve never seen you that intense before, it was weird. I like the way we usually do it more.”

“That’s how we’ll always be from now on. Can I do anything to make you feel better?” he asked. “Please honey, let me do something for you.”

His eyes were filled with concern and sadness, and she took pity on him. She believed it hadn’t been intentional. “I’ll just lie here for a bit then we can go have a bath, ok?”

“Where does it hurt?” he asked softly.

She felt her eyes sting. “Inside...but...I remembered...Deacon...that night when you found me in the garage…” She rubbed her wrists.

“Oh honey...oh no!” he said rather miserably, kissing her head. “I thought we were playing around, in the moment you know? Can you forgive me, CJ? I hope you still want to marry me after I messed up like this!”

She nodded. “Of course I’m still marrying you. I love you, Derrick. I just never thought I’d be haunted by...by him. It sort of shocked me.”

“I can imagine. It’ll take time to get past all that CJ. If you ever need to talk about it, I’m here for you. You don’t have to worry about hurting my feelings. You’re my girl and nothing that happened before can change that. I don’t deserve you,” he said. “Not even a little.”

“Thanks, Derrick,” she answered. “I’ll be ok. The longer we’re together, the further away everything else gets.” She curled up closer to him.
“Yep,” he said. “I’ll be forever trying to make it up to you. I love you, honey.”

Cassidy laughed softly and patted his cheek. “I love you too. Now, how about that bath?”
Ronnie Shaw reappears and orders the attack on the Institute; Sturges and Ronnie butt heads.

It was the wee hours of the morning about a week later when Cassidy and Sturges were awakened by a frantic MacCready. He pounded on the door of their trailer, calling for them.

“RJ, stop!” cried Cassidy. “Give me a sec to find my clothes!”

Equally annoyed, Sturges climbed over her and got into his pants. Making sure his girl was decent first, he opened the door. “What the hell is going on?” he asked.

“Signal flares from the Castle!” exclaimed MacCready.

“Did you check Freedom Radio to see what was going on?” the mechanic asked him.

“Yeah, they said report to the Castle. I got Zeke and them up. Duncan’s still asleep so I’m not going anywhere.”

“Combat gear,” said Cassidy and shut the door to the trailer. She and Sturges were now adept at dressing quickly, weapons included.

The other Cats were already at the boat loading their gear on.

“CJ,” said Rowdy. “Get in your suit.”

“Why? I don’t fight in it. I’m a sniper.”

“I don’t know why little sister, but the voice on the radio said everyone with power armor was to show up in it.”

With a huff, Cassidy ran back to the garage and donned the suit.

“Sorry Derrick,” said Rowdy. “I didn’t have time to finish up a whole suit for you. Had to take apart the one you used last time for salvage.”

“That’s alright,” he said, getting into the boat after Cassidy.

No one spoke on the quick trip across the still dark water. They landed, filed out and headed into the main compound.

Preston was there with Ronnie Shaw. As the Cats arrived, she nodded.

“You people trained hard and trained well. I left so you could have a few days to destress and rest. I hope you used the time wisely. Training time is over. We are attacking the Institute.”
A murmur rose up from the crowd.

“No buts,” said Ronnie firmly. “We’ve identified a hidden route through a pipeline off the waterfront downtown. I’m going to say this only once: some of you might not be coming back. So if there are any second thoughts, back out now. Get your gear people, we’re moving out.”

Those going hugged some of those staying behind. But everyone who’d trained and committed moved into formation and followed Ronnie Shaw out of the gates of the Castle and into the night.

It was daylight when they arrived at their destination. Ronnie pointed at an old building, “Clear this out and we’re laying low for the day. Come nightfall, we attack.”

There were a few feral ghouls inside, and they didn’t last long against the Minuteman and Atom Cat army.

Preston and Ronnie organized their rations for the Minutemen, but the Cats had brought their own and headed off to the upper floor.

Sturges looked around. “I need to find a mattress for CJ,” he said.

“I’m fine,” said Cassidy. “I’ve slept on the floor before, it’s not that big a deal. Besides, I’ve got you to sleep on.”

He gave her a wink. “Best idea I’ve heard today, honey!”

Preston came upstairs. “I’m sorry it went down like this. Ronnie just thought it would be better if people didn’t get anxious about the mission.”

“We have all day now to do that,” said Sturges. “I don’t think any of us are gonna pile up many z’s.”

“I forgot to grab my comb and pomade!” cried Zeke in dismay.

“I don’t think the Institute will care about your hair,” said Preston. “They’ll be too busy trying to kill you.”

“They can try...and fail,” said Zeke.

“Try and get some rest. We need everyone sharp for this.”

“I don’t know about this whole plan now,” said Cassidy as Preston headed back downstairs.

“What is the actual plan?” asked Johnny D.

They all looked at each other and realized they had no idea. Did anyone? All they’d done was train. There had never been any talk of a concrete plan of attack.

Zeke stood at the top of the stairs and shouted for Ronnie. She appeared and scowled up at him. “What’re you shouting about, hillbilly?” she asked.

“Hillbilly!” cried Zeke indignantly.

“Yes, you and your hillbilly music and greasy hair! Now what do you want?”

“You’re the biggest fream I’ve ever met!” exclaimed Zeke. “You’ve been bashing our ears for ages now and never said a thing about the plan. Now my Cats here are cranked for this gig, but you
Ronnie looked up at him with raised eyebrows and blinked. “What in the ever loving shit did you just vomit up there, boy? Can you, for the love of God, string a coherent sentence together?”

Zeke grunted and gaped at her. Sturges went to his brother, took him by the shoulders and wheeled him in the other direction. He looked back at Cassidy, who stepped to the stairs.

“What Zeke wants to know, what we all want to know, is the plan. You never told us how this is going to happen.”

“Because you don’t need to know it until we actually make it into the Institute,” said Ronnie. “Right now what we have is an ancient set of blueprints from 200 years ago when the CIT was built. We’ve got no intel and no proof that any of this is going to work. So until we find out true or false, there’s no sense in talking about plans. That sit ok with you? Can I go and have my rest now like the rest of you should be doing? And for the love of God teach that hillbilly to speak like a human being!”

Ronnie turned and stalked off.

“Did she call me a hillbilly again?” asked Zeke. “If she wasn’t a woman she’d get a knuckle sandwich! Pow! Right upside the head!”

Cassidy knew he was annoyed, but an annoyed Zeke was actually quite comical. He was by nature happy-go-lucky and that never left him, even when upset.

“I get what she’s saying,” said Cassidy. “Let’s just ride out the day and see what happens. I’m really tired. Derrick, let’s settle into this corner here and sleep.”

“Fine by me, honey,” he said with a smile and they settled their jackets and packs best they could.

Zeke elbowed Johnny D with a grin as he watched his little brother spoon up behind Cassidy and hold her close.

“Yeah,” said the Cats’ medic. “He’s so far gone I can’t even see the tail lights.”

Zeke grumbled and moaned about being unable to find a way to lie down without ruining his hair. Cassidy struggled to laugh quietly and Sturges buried his face in her hair to stay silent himself.

With a bit of shuffling around, the other Atom Cats found spaces to sink down into and try to get some rest.

Ronnie Shaw roused everyone with loud bellow. It was dark outside and Cassidy found herself draped crosswise over Sturges. He awoke and looked at her with a grin. “Well, that’s a unique position, honey!”

She sat up and crawled right way around, kissing him tenderly. “Things are going to get crazy, I think. So...I’ll say it now. I love you, Derrick. With all my heart.”

He cupped her face, his thumb caressing her cheek. “I love you too Miss Cassidy Jasmine. I’m going to marry you and spend my days making you happy. That’s all I want out of life now.”

She nodded happily. “Me too. Oh...but I want a car too!”

He laughed softly. “Remember I said one day we are gonna start up Sturges Motors? Me and you
“Yes,” she whispered.

Ronnie appeared at the top of the stairs. “You two!” she barked. “Can you manage to stay focused on the job and not each other?! Is it possible?! Get your hillbilly friends together and report downstairs!”

“I think you mean rockabilly!” cried Cassidy, stifling her laughter. She didn’t think Ronnie had a mean bone in her body. She was just outspoken.

“All the same shit, innit?” asked the woman.

“Grrr,” said Zeke, scowling. Which made Cassidy snicker.

“She doesn’t mean anything by it,” said Sturges, getting to his feet and pulling Cassidy up.

Fully geared up, Ronnie led the group a few minutes down the road. “Lucky for us, the tides are out,” she said. “Or we’d be chest deep in the water going through the pipe. As it is, we will have wet feet. Deal with it. Follow me, and no talking.”

She hefted herself over the railing, landing deftly in the wet sand below. She marched up to a grate and pulled out a crowbar from her pack. The old metal gave way easily enough. She pointed at Zeke. “You. Take up the rear and close this thing behind us. Think you can manage that?”

Zeke rolled his eyes but stepped back as the others followed Ronnie through the large opening.

The ground squelched and Cassidy had no idea exactly what they were walking on. It reeked of dead ocean, rot and overall unpleasantness. She walked behind Preston who followed Ronnie, Sturges behind her. The others were in their own order.

The pipe forked. “Which way?” asked Ronnie, meaning for Sturges to answer.

“Right,” he said.

Another grate which took two of them to pull off.

More traipsing left and right down a series of pipes.

Ronnie stopped and held up a fist. “Shh! Listen!”

The telltale buzz of a turret. Someone meant to guard this area and keep people out. This meant the Institute was aware of the possibility of infiltration.

“Sniper,” ordered Ronnie and Cassidy came forward. She got into position and looked for the blinking red lights. There were two bubble lasers which she took down, although the second one did get a few shots off, leaving black marks on her power suit which Rowdy had done such a beautiful job repairing.

As they moved forward, someone shouted and the sound of gunfire erupted. Two big mirelurks scuttled from the shadows and attacked, claws snapping.

Cassidy and Preston took one of them down, while the other was handled by Sturges and the Minutemen.
The sand and filth gave way to concrete. They moved up a set of stairs to a walkway which ended in a heavy metal door with a terminal.

"Hack it," ordered Ronnie and Sturges stepped forward to do it.

"This is more complicated than I’d figure for down here," he muttered.

"Just get it done," said Ronnie.

When the doorway eventually unlocked, it led to a long dark corridor. Cassidy turned on the headlamp on her suit.

"Hold up," said Ronnie. "Do we know where this ends?"

"Should be an elevator going down into the Institute relay room, according to the blueprint. But that’s where the blueprint ends," said Sturges.

"Well, you two have been in there so you’ll be responsible for leading us. Listen up. It’s time to talk about the plan."

Ronnie stood and faced the group. “Our job here is to plant a bomb on their reactor, get out and detonate it remotely. The reactor is deep in the sub levels of the earth and the area will be radioactive as hell. We will have two groups. One to go to the reactor and the other to herd out anyone who doesn’t want to be blown to smithereens. I’d hope that would be everyone except the robots.”

“You mean the synths?” asked someone. “We can’t leave them behind!”

“I said robots, not synths,” said Ronnie. “Those walking skeletons and the ones with no AI. The rest are people. I’m damn sure though that those fancy coursers will do their damndest to kill us off so be ready for it. Now, if any of you have something to say to each other say it now. You might never get another chance.”

Zeke shook his head. “No Cat is going down this day, that’s a promise.”

He looked at his brother and Cassidy and together they said and a Sturges never breaks a promise.

Ronnie wrinkled up her nose. “You three can be goddamn creepy, you know that? But I suppose we all need something to hang onto in this shitty world.”

Cassidy took her suit helmet off and looked at the Cats: Zeke, Johnny D, Duke and Rowdy. “I love you,” she said simply.

Zeke blew her a kiss, Rowdy gave her a thumbs up and Johnny D and Duke nodded, their eyes speaking what their lips didn’t.

“Alright,” said Ronnie, once everyone had said what they wanted to say. “Cassidy, you will head to the reactor with your armored group and plant the bomb. Preston, you and Sturges will go the other way with your group to locate the intercom and order the evac. You’ll be running the relay for them and for us.”

Sturges shook his head. “No, ma’am, I go where CJ goes.”

Cassidy nodded, looking somewhat panicked. She didn’t want to be separated from him.

Ronnie tightened her lips. “Not this time sonny,” she said. “You’re the only one who can manage
the relay and the intercom. And Cassidy has the suit with the radiation protection. In case you hadn’t noticed, you aren’t wearing one!”

“I don’t leave her side!” he exclaimed. “We’re a package deal, me and her. We work together!”

“We’re all working together,” said Ronnie. “Everyone has a job to do here and we’re all going to perform them! There’s no time for sentiment here! We are about to blow the Institute to kingdom come. Cassidy can handle her part. You will handle yours.”

Sturges balked. “No can do!”

Ronnie stepped up to him. He was considerably taller but that didn’t phase her. “This is not a democracy!” she shouted. “You will do your part as ordered!”

Anger flashed in Sturges’ usually calm eyes and he crossed his arms and shook his head.

“Oh great,” muttered Zeke. “He’s gone Brahmiluff steer on us.”

Cassidy stepped out of her suit, and went to Sturges, moving Ronnie out of the way. She pulled his arms open and folded herself up against him. “I can do this Derrick,” she said. “It’s going to be fine. I need you to help get the people out. I don’t trust anyone else to do that part.”

He held her, looking down into her eyes. “Who’s gonna protect you, CJ? That’s my job. It’s what I signed on for.”

“I will,” said Zeke. “Me and the Cats are going with her.” He gave Ronnie a hard look, daring her to call him a hillbilly again, but she just watched them impassively.

“See? I’ll have the Cats. It’s going to be fine,” said Cassidy.

Sturges kissed her forehead. “Alright. If you say so. But if anything happens to you…”

“Nothing will happen to her, little brother!” said Zeke.

“Alright,” said Ronnie. “Now that we’ve gotten the tantrums out of the way and the kiddies are back in the classroom, can we move on? You lot make me feel like I’m teaching goddamn kindergarten!” She grunted and moved down the hallway, the others following quietly.

Before Cassidy could get back into her suit, Sturges leaned down and kissed her. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said in return.

They took the elevator in groups. Oddly there was no one on duty in the relay room.

“Sturges, you get on this terminal and find out how to hack the intercom system. Do you have any idea how to work the relay?” asked Ronnie.

“Yeah, I have an idea. It’s pretty much the same deal as the one we built.” He decided not to voice his opinion that the thing hadn’t worked at all. He still hadn’t unraveled that particular mystery.

“Alright,” said Ronnie. “As soon as you get the intercom worked out you let the Institute know that it’s being taken over and anyone who wants to live needs to head here.”

She pointed out a group of Minutemen, and Preston. “You know they will send an assault team to take you out. Bottleneck this doorway here. It’s going to be hard for you to figure out who’s friend
“Coursers wear these long black leather coats,” said Sturges. “Institute Gen 1 synths are the skeleton looking things. The Gen 2 are kind of expressionless. They don’t look like people. They wear these white jumpsuit things. That’s the best I can give you. The coursers are dangerous.”

Preston stood by Sturges. “I’m going to exclusively give cover to you. Cassidy’d never forgive me if I let anything even think of hitting you!”

Sturges laughed. “That little lady has me in knots too, Preston. All right let’s do this thing.”

Cassidy gave Preston a thumbs up and beneath the helmet she was grinning.

“Cassidy, you and the Cats head to the reactor. Do you know where it is? Did you study the blueprints?” asked Ronnie.

“Yes,” said Cassidy. “We have to go through some tunnels near Bioscience.”

“Whatever that is,” said Ronnie. “I’m going to do what I can to take down any of the robots. Those Gen things you were talking about. Rest of you here concentrate on the Coursers.”

For a moment no one moved or said a word. Whatever would happen going forward was anyone’s guess.

“Alright,” said Sturges. “I think I got it. Communications is always the easiest system to hack.”

“Well...I guess let’s just get this going,” said Cassidy.

Sturges was about to speak when he stopped. “I can’t do this,” he said. “I’m no good at this kind of thing. CJ, you do it.”
“I’m no pro either, it’s not like I take over places every week or anything.”

Ronnie rolled her eyes. “The simplest task and you two can’t manage. I’ll do it. The rest of you get ready.” She leaned over the speaker.

“This is the Minutemen. We’ve come to put an end to the Institute. If you want to live, get your asses to the relay room and be transported to the surface. This is your only warning.”

Cassidy moved out, the Cats behind her. They took the elevator down into the atrium. There was confusion and the residents of the Institute paused in their movements for a moment as what they’d just heard sunk in. Some of them began to run; to their quarters or to find friends and loved ones.

It took only a few minutes for the shooting to start as the security forces, armored synths, began to arrive. It was a good thing that all the Atom Cats wore armor. The amount of laser fire that crisscrossed all over would have killed anyone unprotected.

They moved forward, shooting the entire time.

People were now screaming and running around, some of them did indeed head to the elevator to save themselves.

It was a tough fight to get to the Bioscience section. Cassidy had no idea that there were so many synths in security.

“CJ,” came Sturges voice over the intercom. “I need the Director’s passcode. You’ll have to use it to open the relay system.”

“Well, shit!” exclaimed Cassidy.

“What’s he talking about?” asked Rowdy.

“The Director is the one who has the authority on everything here,” answered Cassidy. “And he’s my brother.”

She had hoped to never lay eyes on him again. She didn’t want a confrontation. She’d wanted to come in, do the job and get out.

But that would have been too easy.

“That’s a drag,” said Rowdy. “Well, you can show me where he is and I’ll shake him up for it!”

Cassidy wanted to do exactly that, but part of her needed to say goodbye to her brother. Maybe at the 11th hour he could see the error of his ways and come with her?

“No, I need to do this. Let’s go.”
Cassidy turned and led the Cats up the circular, winding ramps to Shaun’s room. They had to shoot down a few Gen 1’s that attacked but other then that there were only people running around, terrified. Cassidy had expected Shaun to be sitting at his desk, surrounded by security. She fully expected a firefight to get to him.

Instead, she found her brother in his bed, his color grey. She got out of her suit while the Cats stood guard, shooting the odd synth that came their way.

“Shaun?” she asked, approaching his bed.

He opened his eyes and affixed her with a cold stare. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” he said.

“I didn’t think so either,” said Cassidy.

“I trusted you, I brought you in,” said Shaun. “And you betrayed me.”


“Trying to save the human race is wrong to you?” He coughed, his face paling even more.

She looked him over. “What’s wrong with you? Are you ill?”

“Why do you care?” he asked coldly. “You made your decision. Now get out of here.”

“You’re sick,” said Cassidy softly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would it have made a difference?” he asked.

Cassidy wouldn’t answer that. They both knew it wouldn’t have. “Your advances in technology can’t help you? Maybe there’s someone in the Commonwealth who can!”

Shaun coughed again as he tried to laugh. “That cesspool up there can’t help anyone. Mankind is doomed. You’re seeing to that. Destroying everything we’ve built in the last few centuries! We were humanity’s last chance!”

Even facing death her brother couldn’t see reason. “Shaun, kidnapping people and turning them into supermutants is helping humanity? How?”

“I told you that what happened before I…”
“Why are you lying?!?” she cried, cutting him off. “I saw the FEV lab. I read the journals. I met Virgil and talked to him. How do you think I got in here?”

Shaun smirked. “Arrogant girl. You think you could have gotten in here if I didn’t want you to?”

“What are you talking about? Derrick built the relay from Virgil’s plans!”

Shaun shook his head. “That hillbilly dirt farmer of yours can barely tie his shoelaces, much less build something as complicated as a relay. You put far too much faith in someone with the intelligence of a Brahmin. No, Cassidy, I brought you here. I let you in.”

His cruel words hit her like a ton of bricks. “How can you say such terrible things? You barely got to know Derrick! If you did you’d know what a good person he is! And you’d be happy I found someone who loves me so much!”

Tears stung her eyes and she fought them. He wasn’t worth her tears.

“You could have had all this,” said Shaun. “You could have been the Institute’s Director. Instead you’re throwing it all away for what? To live in a garage and squeeze out more filthy useless wastelands who’ll spend their lives digging in the dirt and scavenging! It’s a travesty!”

“Oh Shaun,” said Cassidy, her heart breaking all over again. “Daddy would be so disappointed in how you turned out. In a way I’m glad he never had to meet you. He spent his life fighting for people to be free. And you? You enslave and hurt. I didn’t want it to be like this. But no matter what you did before...you’re still alive and you still have a chance to survive this! Please Shaun, come with me!”

She knew the answer. But she had to try, for the girl that had once lived inside her, who loved her little brother with all her heart and believed her family would be reunited. “You’re the last living member of our family. Please…”

“Get out of here,” he said, turning his head away from her.

A soft sob escaped her. “I came here to ask for the passcode. If nothing else, then give it to me for your people here. Don’t let them die! Let this be your gift to them, if you care about humanity so much let the families who live here get out! Please!”

He said nothing for several moments. Then without turning he simply read off a series of numbers and letters.

“Thank you, Shaun!” cried Cassidy. “I knew there was still goodness in you!”

She ran to the terminal on his desk. There were so many commands at his disposal it took her a moment to scan through them. Her teary eyes made it harder for her to see, but she found the relay command and turned it on. A few minutes later, Sturges voice sounded on the intercom.

“You did it, honey! Thank you!”

She heard the gunfire in the hallway from the Cats facing off against the synths. It was time to get to the reactor and do her part.

“I’m sorry it has to be this way,” said Cassidy softly to her brother. “I love you, Shaun.”

He didn’t respond and she climbed back into her power suit and joined the Atom Cats.
“Are you ok, little sister?” asked Johnny D.

“One day I might be able to say yes,” said Cassidy. “But we have a job to do, so let’s do it.”

She focused her mind on the task and not on the last remaining member of her family who lay dying in his bed, hating her.

She also thought about Sturges, who was the kindest, sweetest man she’d ever met aside from her daddy. She thought about MacCready who’s devotion to his little boy was so beautiful. She thought about Preston and the Minutemen who cared so much about everyone they met, and the Atom Cats who had become the family she’d lost.

Sturges had been right all those times he’d said that as shitty as the world was, there were good things in it. And Cassidy realized she’d found many of them.

Shaun was wrong. The Institute wasn’t humanity’s last hope. Everyone working every day in the Commonwealth to make a better life was humanity’s hope. The people had a right to choose their own destiny, and to not live in fear more than they already did.

As they moved onward, the chaos of the Institute hallways was unnerving. Gen 1 and 2 synths attacked and the Cats had to be very careful not to hit any of the innocents.

Heading for the Biosciences area, Cassidy hoped that Preston and the Minutemen were doing alright. She wanted to hear Sturges’ voice again.

As though he read her mind, he spoke over the intercom. “everything’s cool, honey,” he said. “You get on back to me.”

Hearing him filled her with resolve and she forged onwards.

“How many synths does this place have?” asked Duke. “We’ve piled up the bodies and more keep coming!”

“They must have activated some from somewhere,” said Cassidy. “I didn’t see this many either.”

They entered the area with the supply depot. The synth normally operating it was gone.

“Get the ammo and anything you can carry out of here,” she said and the Cats jumped to it eagerly while she provided covering fire.

There was no security in the tunnels leading to the reactor. As they moved further down, it got dirtier, dingier and darker.

The area surrounding the reactor had turrets, several of them, and inside the large room that housed the reactor, more synths awaited them.

“Die already!” cried Rowdy.

“CJ you get to the reactor and plant the bomb!” called Duke. “We’ll handle these freams!”

CJ sprinted for the metal staircase leading to the walkway which surrounded a cylindrical containment unit. A terminal sat outside it, the cursor blinking at her.

Ok, I can’t hack a terminal in this suit, she thought. Out of it, I’ll be an easy target.

She turned and looked at the Cats, fighting down below.
I just have to trust them.

She positioned her suit as cover as best she could and stepped out. Flinching as the occasional ricochet hit it or the metal of the walkway, Cassidy worked as quickly as she could to unlock the reactor doors. The code was complex, as it should have been.

Damn it why didn’t I unlock this from Shaun’s terminal? She asked herself, but didn’t remember seeing anything about the reactor listed.

The laser fire slowed, and Johnny D called out. “We got them CJ, do your thing and we can haul ass before any more come!”

She didn’t respond but kept on working on the passcode.

In the relay room, bodies were piling up as well. Several Minutemen had been hit and Preston had taken a wound to his side. Ronnie looked him over and said it was a graze but it sure felt like more than that to him.

Institute scientists and families showed up, terrified, and were herded into the relay and ported out. Synths poured into the area, relaying or running in, wreaking havoc.

Then the coursers showed up. Emotionless, cruel and efficient, they shot first and asked no questions. Ronnie used a synth as a shield, and Preston pulled Sturges down to the ground as a courser relayed in nearly on top of him.

“I hope CJ gets back fast!” cried Sturges, scrambling to his feet again, cocking his pistol. He exchanged fire with the courser as it went after Ronnie, and it turned and fired at him. He felt a sharp pain in his arm and he dropped his weapon.

As the courser’s attention had diverted, Ronnie shot it in the head.

“He got me,” said Sturges. “I can’t use my arm. Who’s got a stim? I need both hands for the relay!”

Preston checked his pack. “I got a few here!”

As the healing began, Sturges sighed with relief. “Ok let’s get this next group relayed out!”

Frightened workers huddled on the platform and disappeared in a flash of light.

Cassidy finally broke through the code. Stepping back into her suit she pulled the bomb from her pack. It was hot inside the cylinder, the reactor a glowing, pulsing tube of light. She hit the green button and attached the bomb, armed it, then backed out of the cylinder.

She sprinted past the Atom Cats and they followed.

“How long do we have?” asked Rowdy.

“We detonate remotely,” answered Cassidy.

There were still synths firing on them as they hit the elevator to the relay, but the majority had already been destroyed.

As they arrived, Cassidy called for Derrick, stepping over the piles of bodies in the hallway.
His eyes lit up as he saw her. “CJ! Am I glad to see you! Did you see anyone else coming this way? People who want to leave?”

“No,” she answered. “Not many synths left either. Let’s get out of here.”

“Alright all of you get on the platform. I’ll relay out after you!” he called out.

“No way!” cried Cassidy. “We go together!”

“Everyone let’s move out!” shouted Ronnie. “Now! We’re done here!”

Preston, Ronnie and the Minutemen got on the platform but Cassidy and the Atom Cats didn’t move. Sturges relayed them out.

“Good job little brother,” said Zeke. “Now this place can kiss our ass!”

They filed onto the platform.

Sturges started the sequence and sprinted in after them.

They landed on the roof of the Mass Fusion building in the city. Several people stumbled, vomitted or fell as they relayed.

Cassidy stepped out of her suit.

Preston handed her the remote detonator. “This is your show, Cassidy,” he said. “I’m sorry about your brother.”

She gave him a sad smile. “So am I. But not all family is blood.” She touched his arm and looked at the Cats.

Sturges stood behind her, wrapping his arms around her protectively.

Cassidy took a deep breath and pressed the button.

There was a deep rumbling and suddenly a violent, bright explosion erupted from the area ahead of them. A cloud, another one just like the one that destroyed the world bloomed skyward like a hellfire mushroom.

Cassidy felt herself trembling, eyes brimming with tears that then spilled over onto her cheeks.

_I can feel it all wash over me. The heat. The force. The radiation...the fear._

“It's the end of the world - all over again,” she whispered tremulously. “If I close my eyes, I can see my life before all of this. Before the bombs.”

_Everything can change in an instant, and the future you plan for yourself shifts - whether or not you're ready. At some point, it happens to all of us._

“This wasn't the world I wanted; but it was the one I found myself in. The Commonwealth, my home. Ripped apart, and put back together.”

A sob escaped her lips and Sturges rocked her gently. “I thought I...I hoped I could find my family. Cheat time. Make us whole again. The way we were.”

She turned around and held onto him tightly. “But now, I know. I know I can't go back. I _know_ the
world has changed. The road ahead will be hard. This time, I'm ready. Because I know I’m not alone.”

He looked down at her, his expression filled with tenderness. “No, you’re not, honey. You’ll never be alone again. I promise. And you know how that goes.”

She smiled through her tears as his lips met hers.
Chapter Summary

Tying up loose ends!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Half of the settlers of the Castle voted to return to Sanctuary and rebuild, Marcy and Jun, Mama Murphy, Remick and Mr. Davidson among them. It was hard to say goodbye, but Cassidy knew that their paths had diverged, and she was at peace with it. She promised to visit.

The Railroad picked up the survivors of the Institute and agreed to work with them towards integration. It was obvious that not all of them would be able to acclimate and it was truly tragic. But most seemed willing to try. When Cassidy revealed the amount of technology they had copied, and the items they had taken with them, some of the scientists agreed to relocate to Sanctuary to continue their work.

Cassidy and Sturges travelled to the Glowing Sea one last time to give Virgil the serum she’d retrieved for him, and ask him to return to the world at large.

“There’ll always be a place for you at Sanctuary or the Castle,” she said.

“Well, if my serum works and I return to normal, I’ll think about it,” he’d said.

Preston and Ronnie Shaw wanted to make the Castle and area larger to accommodate more settlers and start up a few farms. Zeke offered to help out, and he and Ronnie struck up a strange and wonderful friendship. People who didn’t know them believed 100% that they were mother and son.

Fear had left the Commonwealth. Provisioners set up shops, the Minutemen offered protection from raiders and continued to build safe, healthy settlements.

A few months after the fall of the Institute, Cassidy Jasmine Hartley became Cassidy Jasmine Sturges in a beautiful ceremony at the Castle that was 100% pure rockabilly.

The Atom Cats and MacCreadys vacated the garage and relocated to the Castle for a week to give the two newlyweds some kind of honeymoon.

Afterwards Zeke teased that they could hear them all the way to the Castle.

Cassidy met with Glory once more, who congratulated her on her success.
“You’ve freed the Commonwealth and the synths,” she said. “I wish I’d have been there to see it, girl. Must have been one hell of a fight. I **am** sorry about your brother though. A happy ending would have been nice.”

“It wasn’t the ending I wanted,” said Cassidy. “But in a way it’s happy anyway. Did you ever see Deacon again?” She was curious if he’d ever revealed himself.

Glory smiled and looked off into the distance. “You know Deacon. He’s always around, even if you don’t know it. He’s...not the same though. Knowing you changed him, Cassidy. He didn’t get the ending he hoped for either.”

Cassidy sighed deeply. At least he was back with the Railroad where he belonged.

Glory reached out and touched her arm. “He loved you with all his heart, and he always will.”

“Same,” whispered Cassidy softly.

Glory smiled, then she gave a mock salute and walked off into the city.

Cassidy and Sturges sat on the roof of the garage looking at the pink and orange sunset, the sounds of the jukebox playing their favorite songs below them. The happy sounds of laughter from the other Atom Cats hanging out floated on the breeze.

In the distance the Brotherhood of Steel airship cast its silhouette.

“Think they’ll go away now that the Institute is gone?” asked Cassidy.

“I hope so,” answered her husband. “They’re a pain in the ass, always trying to take tech away from people.”

“Maybe we need to help them on their way,” she said.

“Oh no, no more fighting. I thought we were done with that!”

Cassidy giggled. “Don’t you want to have more adventures?”

“Why can’t we have some fun adventures!?” he asked. “Aren’t we supposed to start Sturges Motors? Let’s work on that. I’d rather hold a wrench than a gun any day.”

Cassidy leaned on him, wrapping her arms around his. “I’d rather hold you,” she said with a smile.

“That goes without saying, honey,” he grinned.

“Didn’t you say Sturges Motors was supposed to be us and Zeke and all our kids?”

“Mmhmm, I sure did.”

Cassidy lifted her chin and kissed his jaw. “Well there’s always that last part we can work on…”

He turned to look at her. “Yeah? You want to make a baby, CJ?”

She nodded.

“Well, I love it,” said Sturges. “The night is young. And we have all the time in the world.”

He got to his feet and helped her up, holding her hand tightly in his and heading for their trailer as
the night slowly descended.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the ride! Thanks for sticking with me<3

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