This is (likely) (no longer likely...it WILL be) a full trilogy novelization of my conception of a realistic run through of Fallout with a Female Sole Survivor. After my first run through as a male (with a war veteran background) I tried to rationalize why a female sole survivor, as a lawyer, wasn't immediately "chewed up and spit out" by the Commonwealth. I came up with an idea. Then I ran through the game, with mods, as an RP run, with that reason always foremost in my mind. And because I have a "type" my Sole Survivors always wind up with Piper. Nora ended up with her as well. Of course.

This is that story.

Notes
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Second, I am WELL aware that the thermal pulse of a nuclear weapon would precede by many seconds the arrival of the primary shockwave. Yes, in reality Nora, Nate, Shaun, and everyone on that platform have suffered 3rd degree burns over most of their bodies long before the shockwave arrives. I can't do anything about the order of events Bethesda has given me to work with. Blame the Rule of Cool (or Rule Of Visual Interest). I can't fix what happens in what order in the game.

Finally, one can assume that a Vault, designed to keep nuclear contamination OUT would have a HIGHER pressure atmosphere than the surrounding area (so that any opening would blow contamination AWAY from the opening). Nora was just too rushed to put that together.
Past as Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“War. War never changes…in 1945, my great-great-grandfather…”

“Allright, big guy, you’re gonna knock ‘em dead at the hall tonight. Now shoo. I’ve gotta get ready too,” said Nora Greene as she hip-checked her husband, Nate, to one side. “Run along, hon.” Nora looked herself over in the bathroom mirror, as she applied her lipstick, blush, and eyeshadow. The full pouty lips, the high prominent cheekbones, the button nose, and the epicanthic folds of her wide dark brown eyes, all of the features that made Nora a very attractive Chinese woman.

Nora grimaced slightly as she applied her blush. Because she was not ethnically Chinese. Not even slightly. Late 21st century medical technology had rendered relatively painless the surgeries that had shaved her jawline, and the bridge of her nose; the breaking, shattering really, that had moved her cheekbones up and forward to flatten her face; the skin tucks that provided her eyelids with their folds; that had plumped her lips and narrowed her mouth; and finally, the permanent chemical dyes inserted directly into her irises that changed them, forever, from hazel to a deep brown, and into her skin turning it pale, ghostly even. But no amount of technology was terribly effective at making the face looking back at her in the mirror any less a stranger.

Born Nora McAllister, of Concord, Massachusetts, on December 31st, 2050, she had been a typical Irish-American Massachusetts girl. And she’d grown up in the last great period of plenty the world would ever know.

Because during her childhood it had gradually dawned on everyone that two solid centuries of industrial exploitation had irrevocably consumed every major category of resource: coal, oil, clean water, uranium, and exotic metals. And all of the countries of the world had reacted exactly the way any severe pessimist would have predicted: by engaging in a rabid zero-sum sprint to get their hands on what little that remained.

She was one of the last to be able to remember plastics being a cheap way of manufacturing items. These days wood and steel had replaced plastic as the medium of choice for almost everything, from cars to tables, from guns to packaging. And then, in her second year of law school, in 2072, everything had changed, again. At least for her.

Turning away from the mirror, she walked down the hallway and greeted Codsworth, their new(ish) robot butler, a baby shower gift from Nate’s co-workers at the Museum of Freedom in Concord.

“Greetings, mum. Your coffee. 173.5 degrees Fahrenheit, brewed to perfection,” said Codsworth, handing Nora her mug. “And today’s newspaper, just delivered.” Nora glanced sourly at the headlines. They were not good, with international tensions, already bad, edging into “genuinely frightening” territory. The United States in the wake of its success in Alaska was pressing China hard and Nora knew that the Chinese High Command and Politburo were not going to react well.

Shaun’s cry broke her unpleasant train of thought. “Ah, sounds like someone made a stinky! I shall attend to young Shaun,” called Codsworth as he jetted down the hall.

Nate, picking up his own cup of coffee, chuckled appreciatively. “You know, I was nervous at first, but Codsworth’s really good with Shaun.”
“I know what you mean, I th-,” Nora broke off shushing Nate with a gesture, listening to the morning news. “…some unusual weather, as well. On the Island of Mambojao, the nights are cold. Unseasonably so for Southeast Asia. But for the 5th Infantry, that’s as comfortable as an autumn jamboree…all the easier for our mechanized hellcats to drive any screaming Commie meemies right into the Bohol Sea.

“Well, THAT’S not good, she thought.

Mambojao was major element in command and control of China’s DEWS Stations, and its loss would cripple China’s early warning network. Being half blinded would certainly make the people in Chinese high command extremely jumpy.

The doorbell rang. Nora walked over and peered through the window. *Oh lord, not this clown again*, she thought.

But then again, there were the reports on the news this morning. And the Boston Bugle article yesterday evening about the curious absence of the President and his cabinet from Washington. Maybe taking a sales call from Vault-Tec wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Nora opened the door. “Yes?”

The salesman removed his hat, “Good morning ma’am,” and then he launched into what had to be one of the most cringeworthy, unctuous, obsequious performances Nora had ever seen. *Blah, blah, blah* she thought, hoping that hadn’t actually come out of her mouth. Finally he seemed to run out of steam. Or whatever it was that was powering that high powered hose of crap.

“And because of your husband’s…,” his eyes widened slightly as he looked down, “…ah…your pardon madam, because of your service to our country, I am authorized to offer you, free of charge, an opening in our vault right here in Sanctuary, Vault 111. Prepared for the future!” A beat. “Do you mind telling me what you did to qualify for the ‘Welcome Home!’ package?”

*What a colossal ass*, she thought.

“No, you can’t ask,” she said, “And will there be room for my entire family?”

“I apologize, madam…and, certainly, there are slots for your husband and,” glancing down again, “son. You will have to leave your robot companion behind, I’m afraid,” said the man, placing his hat back on his head, “Please sign here and here.”

After Nora signed, the man practically fled.

“Mum,” Codsworth called from Shaun’s room, “Shaun has been changed, but he absolutely refuses to calm down. I think he needs some of that ‘maternal affection’ you seem to be so good at.”

Nate and Nora walked down the hall, and then Nora walked over to her son and smiled tenderly down at him. Once again, she was a little surprised at the fierce, uncompromising love that overwhelmed her, every time she looked at him. Waving her fingers in his face, “Who’s my good little boy?”

“Try the mobile, I fixed it last night,” Nate said, lounging in the doorway.

As Nora gave it a spin, he straightened and walked over. “The weather is supposed to be nice today. Why don’t we pack a picnic and go to the park?”

“Ri-ight. The park,” Nora said, “Because I was to get pregnant. Again.”
"Not necessarily, the evil part of her thought. You wouldn’t have to, not this time at least."

“Sir? Mum? You should come and see this,” said Codsworth from the other room.

“Codsworth, what’s wrong,” asked Nate.

Nora scooped up her son and followed Nate into the living room. The newscaster, normally at great pains to be seen as a red-blooded American male, projecting quiet confidence, looked shaken. Terrified even. "Followed by... yes, followed by flashes. Blinding flashes. Sounds of explosions... We're... we're trying to get confirmation... But we seem to have lost contact with our affiliate stations... We do have... coming in... confirmed reports. I repeat, confirmed reports of nuclear detonations in New York and Pennsylvania. My God…”

Suddenly the station flashed to the test pattern. “That was the main studio in Washington!” Nora said.

After one stricken moment, Nora became aware of the air raid sirens. That Nate had taken Shaun from her suddenly slack arms, and was pulling her to the door, “Come ON, honey, we have go. Now!”

As they fled down the main street of their suburb, Nora’s thoughts were whirling.

Who shot first? Does it even matter? Can I even trust anyone to tell the truth?

Turning down a gravel footpath, they ran up the hill overlooking Sanctuary Hills. A press of desperate folks clustered around the gate, including that sales creature that Nora had dismissed so rudely. Now she was left to hope he’d submitted the paperwork.

Great, Nora. Smart off first and repent later. Like THAT hasn’t bitten me in the ass before, right?

“Let me in, I AM Vault-Tec,” said the salesman. His only response was an electric whirring as the soldier to his left, in power armor, spun up a 5mm minigun. Immediately, he backed off and ran down the hill.

Nora pushed up through the crowd. “Let us in,” she said, “we’re on the list,” hoping against hope it was true.

Looking down, the officer compared a printout image with Nora. “Adult female, Nora Greene. Adult male, Nathaniel Greene. Infant male, Shaun Greene. Go on in,” and then, as they passed, “May god have mercy on us all.”

As they sprinted past more soldiers and Vault-Tec security guards, Nora called out, “What’s going to happen to everyone?”

No one answered, just waving Nora and her family forward up the hill, to the vault “door”, if you could call an enormous lift a “door”.

“Move to the center of the lift,” shouted the security guard in charge.

“Almost there,” called Nate as they took up positions near the center, leaving room for more. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” said Nora. And then the world went white.

They all watched in utter horror as an enormous mushroom cloud soundlessly rose into the
stratosphere.

“NOW! NOW! Send it down, NOW!” yelled the guard in charge. For one crazy moment Nora goggled at the man, clearly sacrificing himself to save the people on the elevator, Nora included. Nora would have been running full tilt for the elevator. She knew this.

The lift moved agonizingly slowly, as the shockwave from a positively enormous warhead blew through the forests to the southwest and barreled towards Nora. Crouching as the lift settled, Nora held her breath as the blast passed over the lake to the south and then…

A sound so loud you experienced it everywhere all at once; in your bones, your gut, and your ears only peripherally if at all. Not so much a sound as a deep down full-body massage of vibration, and as the lift descended enough to finally shut the door, a wave of heat shot past the opening, instantly raising the air temperature inside the shaft well over 100 degrees.

But nothing compared to what was at the very moment reaching the pulverized, crumpled bodies of everyone not immediately in the blast shadow of the hill. Not that those poor souls were spared, mind you. Instead of being crushed and then burned, they merely burned.

Nora’s mind shied away instinctively from the images her too active imagination was serving up. Her husband was alive. Nate was alive, and he was holding Shaun in his arms. And Shaun was squirming and beginning to fuss.

Her family was alive. If she hadn’t finally taken that salesman’s visit. If he hadn’t immediately filed the paperwork.

Why?

Her family was alive. If that guard hadn’t sent the platform down immediately. If the platform itself had been just inches per second slower. If the platform hadn’t been on a hill, giving the crouching people on the platform just few more precious inches of blast shadow.

Her family was alive. And if not safe, then at least they had a chance. There were a million things that could go wrong with any complex mechanical object, and a Vault was nothing if not a complex mechanical object.

Her family was alive. And she was moving, numbly, up a stair and across a gantry and through yet another blast door and into Vault 111.

Nora was greeted by a woman handing her a packet of clothes. “Your Vault suit,” she stated.

“Hi you three, come with me,” said an annoyingly cheerful doctor to Nora, Nate, and Shaun.

Well he HAS been training for this for years. While YOUR training…

No. That wasn’t the issue here. It never would be again. That was all done. Much like the world itself.

“This a great vault. State of the art,” said the doctor as they moved deeper into the facility. “Not that our other vaults aren’t great mind you,” as some residual loyalty to the company kicked in.

“What’s going to happen to us? Where are we going to live,” asked Nate.

“That will all be covered in the briefing after decontamination and depressurization,” said the doctor, escorting them down a hall past several groups of worried people, asking about their loved ones.
Depressurization?

That sounded wrong to Nora, but her overactive mind was skipping from one thing to the next, frantically, and the thought never got completed.

Reaching a pair of decontamination pods, the doctor instructed Nora and Nate to put on their vault suits.

“Who’s my little guy, huh? I’ll be right over here, sweetie,” Nora called to Shaun. “Just for a second.”

Nora climbed into the pod.

“Decontamination will start in 5…4…3…2…”

And the world ended.

Chapter End Notes

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What a Brave New World, That Has No People In It

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cold. Whiteness.

I’m cold. It’s very bright.

I am a person.

My name is Nora. I seem to be looking at a window.

I am in a decontamination pod, and I am cold. And there is a noise.

And that noise is made up of words…

“Manual override initiated. Cryogenic stasis suspended.”

Slowly, Nora’s eyes adjusted to the light. The window of the pod was rimed with frost from her breathing. Her arms and legs were, unsurprisingly, sluggish…as though she’d slept way too long. Sounds from outside her pod were muffled, but not that damned computer generated voice, “Manual override initiated. Cryogenic stasis suspended.” It would not. Shut. Up.

A figure moved in from the right. Clearly female, even in the bulky full body suit she wore. She spoke, gesturing at the pod next to her.

“This is the one here,” the woman pointed.

Wait. That’s Shaun’s pod. And Nate’s.

A rough, low voice from someone, somewhere, called out. “Open it.”

The speaker stalked into view. He walked like a barroom tough in his leather jacket…no…he walked like some of the hard cases Nora had known back when she was training. After her second year in law school. The ones who constantly tormented her, in the name of “toughening her up.” The fact that he held an enormous revolver, likely a .44 Magnum, and positioned himself so that the woman in the full body suit was not in his line of fire only deepened Nora’s twin senses of familiarity and dread.

The clamshell on her family’s pod hissed open. Nate was coughing. “Is…is it over? Are we OK?”

The bastard with the hand cannon replied, patting the air soothingly…but holding the pistol down at his side, out of Nate’s view. “Almost. Everything’s going to be fine.”

The woman in the suit began reaching out towards Shaun as Nora looked on in helpless horror. Nate pulled Shaun away from her, “No! I’ve got him.”

The man in the jacket leveled his pistol at Nate, and growled, “Let the boy go, I’m only gonna tell you once.”

Nora watched aghast as a brief struggle between the woman in the suit and Nate ended with a single shot, Nate jerking spasmodically then slumping in his pod.
“GOD-damnit! Get the kid out of here and let’s go,” ordered the man in the jacket, as he turned to Nora’s pod. He came up, and looked in at Nora appraisingly as Nora glared at him in pure rage, memorizing every line on his face, the multiple scars on the left side of his face, and the slight milky sheen of scar tissue on his left eye.

The man looked thoughtful, and muttered, “Least we still have the back-up,” then turned away from Nora’s pod.

The last thing Nora heard over the sound her of own shaky breathing was, “Cryogenic sequence re-initialized.”

Moments, or an eternity, or anything in between, later: “Critical failure in cryogenic array. All vault residents must vacate immediately.”

The cold was back, but this time, it was Nora’s pod opening. She tried to launch herself from her pod, to give chase, but succeeded in merely collapsing to the floor as her rubbery legs betrayed her. She took several shuddering gasps, then finally climbed to her feet.

She stumbled over to Nate’s pod. As she toggled the manual release, the pod hissed open and a blast of cold, but no longer super-cooled, air struck her…mumbling, “Come on, come on come on,” to the slow moving machinery and then, “…oh, god…,” as she realized the amount of damage.

Nate was, unquestionably, dead. The splash of now rapidly melting blood and chunks of bone from his exit wound clearly indicating the amount of trauma the mysterious assassin’s bullet had done. Reflexively, Nora pressed her fingers to Nate’s carotid artery. But there was no pulse. Looking down, she saw a scrap of Shaun’s blanket clutched in Nate’s left hand. Taking the swatch, Nora also slipped off and pocketed Nate’s wedding ring. She looked into his dead eyes. Holding up the torn remnant of Shaun’s blanket she told his corpse, “I’ll find who did this. And I will get Shaun BACK, I promise you…”

She turned away, and closed the pod.

_We’re already buried. And this is as good a coffin as any, I suppose._

Moving to the next occupied pod, she looked in on one of her neighbors, slumped down. Unconscious. Or dead. Tugging at the manual release only generated a short two note buzz that Nora presumed indicated non-functionality. Looking towards the door, she saw a control terminal on the wall. Activating it called up a local status report showing the cryogenic array status, life support status, and occupant status.

_Cryogenic Array. Did they FREEZE us? Why? Why would Vault-Tec do that?_

Selecting the Cryo Array, the display read, [Cryogenic Array: Offline. Premature termination resulting in system failure. Isolated manual and remote overrides detected. Controls disabled.]

So the system failed but parts were altered both by people here…presumably that bald fucker…and remotely. But from where? What about life support? How about the others?


_Oh god…with no life support…_

Nora selected Occupant status, and picked Mr.Coffredi’s pod. [Occupant Status: Deceased. Cause of death: Asphyxiation due to Life Support Failure.]
Rapidly scrolling through the other pods, Nora confirmed her fear: every single person in this part of the Vault was dead from asphyxiation when the Life Support was “terminated”. And the disabled controls suggested that “termination” was…deliberate.

Nora gritted her teeth and checked Nate and Shaun’s pod in the hope that perhaps some bit of information about Shaun would be there. [Occupant Status: Unknown – Pod Door Manual Override Engaged.]

Don’t I just know it? But there is NOTHING here to give me a lead. Just what I already know. Someone came here, opened the pod, killed my husband and…took my son.

What about me?

Nora selected her own pod status. At this point, she didn’t expect much information…

[Occupant Status: Unknown –Remote Override Engaged.]

WHAT!? “Remote Override”? So someone or something, somewhere else, revived me and opened the door. Presumably, the same people who shut off the life support for the others, then refroze them. Why? Why did someone do this? Why am *I* alive, when whoever did this cold-bloodedly murdered literally everyone else?

Clearly she wasn’t going to learn anything more poking through the local terminal. Time to move on. Besides, she was still freezing. However they’d put her into stasis, it clearly left her feeling colder than she’d been since…

Nope. That part of my life is over. Behind me.

But that evil part of her that looked over her shoulder, rose up strongly this time and begged to differ.

Oh, IS it? Really? Your husband is dead, shot by someone who clearly was on a mission. A mission that involved kidnapping your son, murdering every other soul in this vault, and leaving you alive. You barely have any leads, and YOU need to find your son. I think “that part” of your life is very much NOT over. I think you are going to need every skill you have, all of them, even the ones you don’t like to think about, to find out who did this, why they did it, and rescue your baby. And pay them back for what they did.

Nora went over to the hatch, flattened herself to one side, and activated it. Presumably whatever sociopath took her son, killed everyone else, and then released her could have found a less Byzantine manner of killing her than remotely releasing her into a sealed room…or lurking outside the pod chamber door with that unbelievably huge revolver to pick her off as she left, but…

Beijing Rules. “Assume NOTHING.”

And “nothing” is what she got. She peeked around the hatch combing. A hallway. Going down it, on her left was another cryopod chamber. The window showed it was empty of obvious life, so she toggled the hatch. Inside were more pods. More frozen corpses. Scrolling through the terminal to make sure, Nora quickly determined that this room, too, had been converted from “Vault” to “mausoleum”.

Attempting to head out of the Vault, Nora found the hatch to the entry hall sealed. Assuming her benefactor/tormentor wouldn’t thaw her out and release her merely to watch her starve to death inside a sealed Vault, she went back down the hall to the Maintenance hatch.
I’m making an assumption, but Beijing Rules. Again. “Never go against your gut.” And my gut says, there must be a way out. A release. Plus, I HAVE to make that assumption. Otherwise, why not lie down and die?

Down the stairs and around a corner. A window into the reactor room. And out of the corner of her eye, something moved. Too quick for her to make out, but too slowly to avoid leaving her feeling exceptionally vulnerable. Around that corner was a security office, if the posters exhorting diligence and compliance to the overseer were anything to go by.

The terminal was still powered up, and logged into the system. Nora “woke it up” and began reading.


The manual was series of implementation steps that made it very clear that security’s job was to scoot occupants into pods as fast as possible, without revealing what was about to happen to them, and then wait with Nora and her frozen compatriots for up to six months, then depart upon getting the “All Clear”. Leaving the occupants behind. Indefinitely.

Did they even plan to revive us or just keep us all asleep until fate, or mischance, or their own actions killed all of us?

The security log told another, closely related, story. The guards, settling in for a long winters nap in the Vault, killing time until the All Clear came. The dawning realization that the All Clear wasn’t getting called, coupled with the fact that supplies were dwindling rapidly. That the Overseer had locked down the exits. And finally, a mutiny.

So these guys thought they had it easy, babysitting a bunch of icicles until they realized that Vault-Tec never intended for THEM to leave either. And the lockdown keeping them, and me, here was initiated by the Overseer, who they could somehow force their way to.

Which means there IS a way for me to get out. All I have to do is make my way through an unknown Vault, force my way past any defenses, some of which may be automated, break into a presumably locked room, and open the hatches by way of some unknown to me mechanism. Easy peasy.

Rolling her eyes at herself, Nora quickly tossed the office, looking for keys, weaponry, anything she might be able to use to escape. She turned up a screwdriver, a couple bobby pins, and one 16 inch telescoping, flexible security baton.

So in a pinch, I can hit something and run away, and I should be able to pick locks, at least somewhat. It’s a start.

Nora left the Security Office, creeping along carefully. Turning the corner, she saw the cafeteria, and something in the doorway. That moved. Fairly rapidly, in fact.

Caught unawares, she flinched at the roach coming at her. But in this case, perspective was her enemy. After nothing hit her, she relaxed, momentarily assuming that she’d imagined it. Until the roach, fully 20 inches long, bit her. Startled more than hurt, she lashed out with the baton, smooshing the thing.

Giant Roaches? What the hell…

After a quick glance at the cafeteria, and associated barracks and toilet, revealed that avenue to be a dead end, she moved to open the reactor door.
I bet I can guess what that shadow in this room was. Best stay alert. God only knows what kind of diseases these things might be carrying. And, for that matter, better try and find some first aid or medical supplies. There must be some here somewhere.

In the reactor room and the corridor beyond, several more bugs came at her, and were quickly crushed. The far end of the hall held a hatch that opened into the Overseer’s Office.

**Jackpot. Pistol, three magazines, and a several boxes of ammo. Now we’re cooking with fusion.**

Nora quickly popped the magazine free of the grips, loaded it, loaded its two siblings, and snapped it back into the 10mm pistol, thumbing the receiver release and feeling the pistol jump as the slide fed the first round into the chamber. Toggling the safety, she quickly searched the rest of the room, turning up a few more bobby pins in a file cabinet, but more importantly, three Stimpacks.

**OK, that’s first aid dealt with. Everything into this Vault suit pouch. Now, let’s see what the Overseers terminal has to say…**

Much like the security terminal, the Overseer’s terminal told a story of promises betrayed on multiple levels. The residents were merely guinea pigs in a suspended animation experiment instead of clients; the guards, scientists, and overseer seem to have been a second order experiment about resource depletion and social unrest. And then, to top it all off, the overseer seemed to have been selected for self-centered sociopathy, if his comments about reducing the number of mouths to feed to put off opening the vault were any indication.

**It’s assholes all the way down, at Vault-Tec. Here, guys, abuse the residents. Hey, overseer, abuse the employees. Ooops, guess you missed that we’d abuse YOU, too. And all of that in order to prove what anyone who watched the last 50 years already knew...when resources get scarce, cooperation and social norms disintegrate. In other news, sun rises in East, water is wet.**

The final menu item, which Nora had studiously and with some difficulty avoided clicking on immediately was the Emergency Tunnel release. When she was sure she’d thoroughly stripped the place of potential resources and information, she selected the release. A hatchway in the far wall hissed open.

Beyond was another hall, with more of the roaches.

**As good a time as any to check the pistol.**

She released the safety, took up a good sight picture, slowly released her breath, and methodically worked her way through the insects, easily dispatching all of them.

**Good, don’t even have to adjust the sights much. Time to get out of here.**

At the far end, the hatch to the entry hall opened at a touch. Several skeletons of the original staff lay here. Nora stepped over one to reach the blast door control panel. Only to be stymied…the panel would only function after activation from a Pip-Boy system. Fortunately the skeleton over which she was currently standing was wearing one. Or more precisely, the Pip-Boy was lying on the ground with whomever this guy or gal was radius and ulna stuck through it.

The Pip-Boy was easily placed on her left forearm and activated at her touch. After a brief boot up sequence, she plugged her new wrist mounted computer in the door control console. After a brief chat, the two computers agreed that, yes, Nora was free to go, and the safety cover on the Vault door release button flipped open.

Striking the button with a remarkable degree of satisfaction, Nora watched the door screech open,
and the gantry extend through the opening. Walking out, not looking back, she entered the surface lift.

“Enjoy your return to the surface, and thank you for choosing Vault-Tec!”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter mainly gets poor Nora out of the ground.

Also, I went under general anesthetic once. Waking up from it is much like I've portrayed here.
As the lift slid to halt, Nora slitted her eyes as they adjusted to even more light. As she absorbed what she saw, she drew a deep breath. The hill the platform stood on overlooked her former home. The broken, compromised and collapsed homes told one story, the brown grass and spare trees another.

*Does anything, CAN anything even live here? How can people survive? Is everyone below ground? And where DID those people who took Shaun come from? Did I just escape the Vault only to die in a much larger, still utterly lifeless environment?*

She turned and began walking down the path back to Sanctuary Hills. Thoughts still whirling, she crossed the footbridge across a small creek and up into her old neighborhood proper. The houses were not as bad off as she had originally thought, some clearly providing at least some shelter. And as she knelt surveying the scene, the grass underfoot, though completely brown and dead looking, was actually soft and moist.

Experimentally, she broke off a twig from a nearby tree. Though it looked dead, the branch twisted and bent like a living twig. Leaving the botanical experiments for another time, she stood and moved cautiously into the street.

Looking up the street to her left, towards her former home, she saw a floating shape.

*No. It COULDN’T be.*

But there was in fact a Mr. Handy hovering in front of her former residence. As she approached it, it turned.

“As I live and breathe…It’s…It’s really you,” the robot, presumably Codsworth, exclaimed.


“The world, mum? Well, besides our geraniums still being the envy of Sanctuary Hills, I’m afraid things have been dreadfully dull around here. Things will be so much more exciting with you and sir back. Where IS your better half, by the by,” he replied.

*Whoa there. Is there some sort of dangerous malfunction going on here?*

Nora was acutely aware of his hedge trimmer attachment. Not to mention a new item on another manipulator arm that looked a bit like a blow torch. She briefly debated humoring him until she could deactivate him but decided to try honesty. Perhaps he’d seen something of the kidnappers. And she could always “deactivate” him highly informally with the pistol, if need be.

She settled on, “They killed him.”

“Mum, these things you’re saying. These terrible, terrible things. I believe you need a distraction. Yes! A distraction, to calm this dire mood. It’s been ages since we had a proper family activity. Checkers. Or perhaps Charades. Shaun does so love that game. Is the lad…with…you…” Codsworth replied.

At least he was showing no signs of incipient violence, so there was that. Trying again Nora said,
“Shaun’s been kidnapped.”

It was like talking to a floating brick wall. What came from Codsworth next, however, rocked Nora back. “It’s worse than I thought. You’re suffering from hunger induced paranoia. Not eating properly for 200 years will do that, I’m afraid.”

“200 years? What?!? Are you sure?”

“A bit over 210 actually, mum. Give a take a little for the Earth’s rotation and some minor dings to the ol’ chronometer, I’m afraid. That means you’re over…mmm…two CENTURIES late for dinner,” he chuckled, “Perhaps I can whip you up a snack? You must be famished.”

All right. Enough beating around the bush, either he’s seen something and I can snap him out of whatever this is, or he’s going to have to be shut down. I’m not having a blowtorch equipped, delusional robot hanging around.

Nora interrupted the Mr. Handy, “Codsworth, you’re acting a little weird. What’s wrong?”

That seemed to do it. Codsworth’s three manipulators drooped, and his eyes fell, “I…I…Oh mum! It’s been just horrible. Two centuries with no one to talk to, no one to serve. I spent the first ten years trying to keep the floors waxed, but nothing gets the nuclear fallout out of vinyl wood. Nothing! And don’t get me started about the futility of dusting a collapsed house. And the car. The car! How do you polish RUST?!”

At least he wasn’t delusional. He just took “British Stiff Upper Lip,” to the next level. The next several levels, in fact. Nora reached out, “Stay with me pal. Focus.”

Codsworth all but sobbed, “I’m afraid I don’t know anything mum. The bombs came and you all left in such a hurry. I thought for certain you and your family were…dead. I did find this holotape. I believe sir was going to present it to you as a surprise. But then…well…everything happened.” He held out a chip.

Nora took it. She wasn’t sure she was ready to listen to it, but this brave little robot had held onto it for over two centuries. He was owed. “Thank you, Codsworth.”

Codsworth sniffled, “You’re welcome.”

He perked up, “Now! Enough feeling sorry for myself. Shall we search the neighborhood together? Sir and young Shaun may turn up yet.”

Great. Back to manic. But right now I have no leads except a robot that’s been here over two centuries. If I want any local flavor before I try and track that asshole, he’s going to have to provide it.

“All right. Lead the way, Codsworth,” Nora gestured with the pistol.

Dogs and mosquitos proved to be if not a grotesque understatement, then highly misleading at the least. Nora should have recalled the size of the roaches when she heard “mosquitos”. Because while
not strictly speaking mosquitos, the balloon sized flies that shot disgusting little stinger pods from their lower thorax were certainly not the sort of thing one normally dealt with with a rolled up Daily Bugle.

Several houses, and multiple flies and roaches later, even Codsworth admitted, “Your family isn’t here either. They’re…they’re really gone, aren’t they?”

“Thanks for trying Codsworth,” Nora replied. Her shoulders slumped.

Now what?

Codsworth patted her with one manipulator, “You can’t give up, mum. What about the city? Concord is nearby, and well, the people there have only shot at me a FEW times…”

Nora looked up, shocked. “There’s still people alive in Concord?!”

“Yes! You remember the way? Just across the southern foot bridge out of the neighborhood and past the Red Rocket station? I shall remain here and secure the home front, on the chance that Sir and Young Shaun may return,” he offered.

Nora had one more thing to do before she left for Concord. She wasn’t exactly looking forward to it. But it was necessary, and frankly if this situation wasn’t exactly what she’d had in mind originally, she couldn’t think of a more appropriate moment.

“Codsworth? Are there any shovels about?” she asked.

After he’d provided her with a slightly rusty, but surprisingly well preserved shovel, she walked behind her house. Standing at the exact corner behind Shaun’s room, she walked off three and one half paces, and then began digging along the foundation. After about fifteen minutes of digging and she hit a metal case. Another five and the low flat box was out of the ground.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the seals.

Inside was a ballistic fabric shoulder holster, several boxes of 10mm ammunition, and a vacuum sealed, padded package. Tearing open the packet and pulling away the gun oil soaked padding revealed a small, deadly looking pistol, and a cigar shaped silencer for it.

Nora wasn’t exactly sure that “happy” was the right word for how she felt when she saw that her gun was very well preserved, and that even her custom holster had held up. “Relieved” might be a better one. She wiped away the oil with a clean rag, screwed the silencer onto the barrel, and began transferring 10mm rounds from her salvaged pistol magazine into the “new” one’s, then slotting the spare clips into the holster’s pockets.

By this time, it was getting late, so Nora decided to have Codsworth put together some form of bedding for her for the night, and then spent the last hour of daylight meticulously sighting in her pistol against an improvised target about 25 yards away. When she was satisfied with its accuracy, she went into her darkened home, where she found Codsworth had actually sewn up a makeshift sleeping bag from furniture material and stuffing.

She lay down in the bag, and with nothing else left to distract her, she slotted Nate’s holotape, labeled “Hi, Honey!” into her Pip-Boy. She listened, fist in her mouth, as her dead husband talked of his hopes and dreams for the two of them, and then coaxed her infant son to say what she knew were his first words. The tape ran out.

Nora cried until she fell asleep.
Nora is noticing something about her environment. Fallout presents a problem. Based on recovery at Chernobyl, the Commonwealth should be functionally recovered after 210 years. In practical terms, Fallout 4 should ACTUALLY look like Skyrim or Mass Effect depending on whether the war produces a lasting dark age. Since it doesn't there must be a (ludicrous, but plausible) reason it doesn't. This chapter includes the first piece of that particular puzzle.
Nora woke to sunlight slanting into the room, and Codsworth gently shaking her. “Mum, wake up. You wanted me to get you up at first light.”

Nora grimaced at Codsworth. “OK. OK. No ‘coffee brewed to perfection’?”

“Alas, mum. I am afraid that the stores of ground coffee have slowly rotted away. The unground too, come to think of it. But I do have a small ration of purified water, just the thing,” he spun and delivered a small can to her.

“I was kidding, Codsworth. But thanks for the water. Can I have a time and date update for this thing,” gesturing at the Pip-Boy. At his assent, she plugged the Pip-Boy lead into a port in Codsworth’s side. Glancing at the Pip-Boy she saw that it was 6:41 AM, Oct 24, 2287.

*What the hell? Whoever woke me up, did it on the exact two hundred and tenth anniversary of the War. Whoever that asshole is, he or she has a sick sense of humor.*

“OK, Codsworth, I’m headed out. I’ll try to check in periodically with progress reports,” she told him.

“Very well, mum. I feel I should warn you that the people in Concord have proven discourteous on occasion. They may turn out to be a bit rough.”

A “bit rough”? *Given Codsworth’s mosquito comments, what will these guys be? Leather clad killers in assless chaps, probably.*

She grinned at Codsworth, and with a small wave, headed out across the bridge. Soon the Red Rocket station was in view. As she walked up, she noticed movement.

It was a dog. Perhaps a “pesky neighborhood dog”. Nora drew her pistol, but did not raise it. The dog came up to her, moving more cautiously for the last few feet, then sniffed the air and plopped its rump down and looked up at her.

*Finally, an animal that is the right size and acts normal. I was beginning to wonder.*

She let the dog sniff her outstretched fist, then ruffled its neck fur. “Hey,” Nora checked the dog’s underside, “…boy! What are you doing all the way out here by yourself?”

The dog just quirked his head at her, and whined slightly. Nora turned away and the dog stood up to follow. “You lose your owner buddy? Okay then. Let’s stick together,” she called.

He woofed once, then trotted over to a small box under the coolant price sign. Pointing his nose at it, he looked at her, then the box.


The box proved to instead contain three bottles of diesel with soaked rags stuffed in top—“Molotov Cocktails”—and a pair of M9 fragmentation grenades. Nora looked over at the dog. “Useful, aren’t ya? I’ll have to dig up some treats for you fast, huh?”
Heading down the hill, as Nora neared the intersection to head into Concord, a turn she’d made many a time on her way to Law School classes she saw a cow corpse, and then two enormous mosquitos.

*Yep. That proboscis is a foot if it’s an inch. That is it. This world can officially bite my ass.*

She crouched, took aim, and shot each, frankly preposterous, insect. Moving up to check out the corpse, she saw the dog gulp down a fair amount of insect meat, then glance up at her happily, tongue lolling to one side. Nora nodded, “Like it, huh? Better you than me, boy.”

Continuing much more carefully and stealthily now, she made her way down into Concord. She picked up the pace a little as she heard firing break out. A medium sized firefight sounded like it was clearing its throat and getting ready to really get down to business.

She moved onto the main street, moving swiftly to the left side, on a small porch. Looking down the street, she could make out a figure on the balcony of the Museum of Freedom, from which laser fire was originating, and a number of figures moving down the street towards the Museum in small rushes.

She crept up until she could see one of the street guys about 30 feet away behind a car body, his gaze fixed on the balcony, showing no sign of noticing Nora.

*Oh, you have GOT to be kidding me. Really?*

The man, clad in leather and assless chaps, was aiming a rifle at the balcony figure. Gulping and hoping that she was guessing right, Nora opened fire.

After brief exchange of gunfire, during which Nora and the nameless man on the balcony traded off attracting the attention of the leather clad men, and one woman, by popping out of cover to fire, and aided by the dog who was fearless in grabbing legs and arms, the street was cleared out. Nora looked thoughtfully at the dog. Clearly someone had trained the animal, because it had cued off her actions, almost seeming to anticipate when she needed her next distraction.

This was an all too familiar situation, and was coming dangerously close to triggering her. She could feel the past reaching out for her, right here in the middle of her home town, 210 years after a nuclear war.

The man waved his arm, and yelled, “Hey! Up here. On the balcony! I’ve got a group of settlers inside. The raiders are almost through the door. Grab that laser musket and help us…”

“…help us over here, Ell Tee! You have to see this!”

Nora was looking up at three soldiers, laser rifles trained on her. Her shoulder was on fire from a through and through bolt wound, the stench of ozone thick in the air. The rest of her was freezing cold. She wasn’t dressed for the taiga. She sure wasn’t dressed for getting shot.

“What’s up, guys,” asked a strangely familiar voice.

“You’ll never believe this, Ell Tee. These Chinks just came out of the fucking treeline hellbent for leather. They were charging our position at a dead sprint, and this fine piece of ass right here was leading ‘em. Those fuckin’ commies’ll make anyone an infantryman, huh?”

“Yeah, but if they all look this good, I’m all for rushing the trenches,” another laughed, making the
immortal “finger through a hole” gesture.

The American infantry officer wandered over, and looked at her curiously. Nora gasped, “Nate? Nate Greene?!”

He gave her a hard look, “And just who the fuck are you, and how’d you learn to speak English THAT well? You’ve got no accent. What are you, some kind of spy?”

Nora laughed a little hysterically. “You have no idea, Nate. No idea at all.”

“How do you know my name, commie,” he asked, eyes narrowing dangerously.

“Because I grew up across the street. You lived at 46 Sudbury Road in Concord. Your parents were Sam and Diane Greene. I lived at 49 Sudbury.”

“That’s impossible, you don’t look anything like…” Nora interrupted him, “Nora Erin McAllister. It’s me, Nate!”

“You could have researched all that, been planted here,” Nate countered.

“Right, because the Chinese Alaska Commissariat has nothing better to do the plant a spy out in the middle of the forest outside Anchorage, with the life history of a ratty Irish-American kid from Concord memorized on the off chance that her childhood friend’s been commissioned in the American Infantry and is stationed where they left her to entrap him,” Nora rather rashly pointed out.

“They could’ve,” as he leveled his own rifle at her, lower lip stuck out in an expression Nora knew meant she was in trouble.

“Look, I can prove it to you, but maybe you want your guys to step away,” Nora offered.

“Anything you have to say, you can say in front of them.”

“All right, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. When you and I were eight, we went into my basement to play Doctor. I showed you mine, but when it came time for you to show me yours, you chickened out. I was so mad I punched you out. You had to tell your parents that Billy O’Brien got in fight with you, because you were embarrassed that a girl gave you a black eye. Billy never forgave you and wouldn’t talk to us all through our childhood. Which was fine by me, because he was always kind of an asshole.”

Nate’s face got redder and redder until about halfway through the story, when his expression suddenly softened. When his guys started laughing and asked him if he’d really gotten beat up by a girl, he shushed them. “Nora?

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Nate,” she said.

“But you look so dif…”

Nora interrupted, “Surgery, Nate. A LOT of surgeries, actually.”

He looked her over, “So now what do I do, Nora?”

She sighed. “You radio your higher ups, and then they radio their higher ups, until someone recognizes my name.”

“And then,” he asked.
“I get this stupid shoulder fixed, and I ask for my rescuer to come on leave with me,” she smiled.

Nora grabbed the musket that the man pointed to, a strange jury-rigged laser excitation chamber and focusing lens arrangement attached to a long wooden stock, looking for all the world like an old time muzzle loader. Then she scooped up the fusion cells on the ground nearby, and nodded to the dog.

“‘Raiders’ sounds like bad news, big guy. How ‘bout we go in and ruin their whole day,” she told him. He woofed.

After clearing the doorway, Nora moved quickly to her left, and paused to let her eyes adjust. Two men were on the remains of the floors above shooting over her head at the office that the man on the balcony must have been in. Cranking the musket, she draw a bead on the one on the third floor. Touching the stud, her beam blew his head apart. The other, however, had time to sprinkle her area with bullets before she got the musket cranked up again, taking him in his gut.

As he pitched forward, she chucked the musket away, “Fuck THIS thing,” she declared as she drew her small, shorter ranged, but semi-automatic pistol instead. She crept further into the museum, her movements covered by the activation of the exhibits.

Amazing. Those things still work.

The only other raider on the first floor was easily taken down by the dog, and she finished him off. The basement power unit was still running, and on a hunch, she picked the lock to the unit, breaking a bobby pin the process.

This is ridiculous. First chance I get, I make a decent torsion wrench and a proper set of picks.

Popping the Fusion Core, she was little disappointed that the lights didn’t go out.

Worth a shot. And I’m not any worse off, and have an FC to boot. I’m sure I can find a use for it. In a sock as a sap, if nothing else.

She moved up, and as she crept down the hall on the next floor she overheard two of them talking. She gestured for the dog to freeze, and he did.

“I’m telling you man, let’s just get out of here. We got no reason to hang around here and get shot.”

What a smart young man.

“Stop being such a fucking pansy. We hold out for the others. Like we’re supposed to,” the other, who Nora immediately began thinking of as “Sexist and Annoying”, replied.

“What are you deaf? Somebodies out there shootin’ the place up. I ain’t sitting around waiting to die…” said his much wiser compatriot.

“I swear to god, you make a move for that exit and I’ll cut you myself. Now shut your mouth or we’re never gonna get the drop on this bitch,” Sexist and Annoying said.

You’re never going to get the drop on me, because…ok…and now…because you’re both dead. Should’ve listened to your better half here, Sexist, Annoying, and Extra Dead.

Nora continued up the next set of stairs, and overheard yet another conversation.

Jesus Christ, these guys are IDIOTS. They are so damned busy running their mouths they couldn’t
hear an elephant sneaking up on them. And I’m MUCH quieter than most people.

“I’m comin’ in there and I’m gonna skin every last one of you,” said one.

Well that ends any debate I might have had about whether dropping these guys was the right thing to do.

“C’mon man…they ain’t going nowhere. We got other shit to deal with,” said the other.

Not for long asshole.

“You hear that? I gotta go take a little walk. But I’ll be back and you’ll be dead,” shouted the first.

Not an entirely…there you are…accurate statement…and that’s that.

The door at the end of the hall opened and a figure in a longcoat waved her in. She stepped over the last two Raider corpses and greeted him. He nodded, “Man I don’t know who you are but your timing’s impeccable. Preston Garvey, Commonwealth Minutemen.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “Minutemen? So now I’m traveling BACK in time?”

Preston sighed. “Protect the people at a minutes notice. That was the idea, anyways. So I joined up. Wanted to make a difference. And I did for a while, but…things fell apart. Now it looks like I’m the last Minuteman standing.”

Nora made a disgusted noise. “The world’s changed so much. NONE of this makes sense.”

Preston bent over and looked in her eyes, “You all right? Listen, we need your help. Then maybe we can help you, okay? What brought you all the way out here?”

Nora looked at him, “My baby, Shaun, has been kidnapped. He’s not even a year old.”

Preston made a face. “That’s messed up. I’m sorry. I know how this world can be. I mean, a month ago there were twenty of us. Yesterday, eight. Now, there’s five. First it was the ghouls in Lexington. And now Raiders.”

Nora gave him a sharp look. “What are ghouls?”

Preston looked momentarily shocked, “Wow, you really aren’t from around here. Ghouls are irradiated people. Most are just like you or me. But sometimes, the radiation, I don’t know, melts their brains or something, and they turn feral. Rip you apart. Eat you. We figured Concord would be a good place to settle. We were wrong. And now we’re trapped. But…we do have one idea.”

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Nora gave him a sharp look. “What are ghouls?”

Preston gestured to a man in their group, in overalls and a tool belt. “Sturges?”

The young handyman rested one hip on the desk behind him. “Ok, check this out. There’s a crashed vertibird up on the roof. Old school. Pre-war. Might have seen it on your way in. Well, looks like one of its passengers left behind a SERIOUSLY sweet goody. We’re talking a full suit of cherry T-45 power armor. Get that, you can rip the minigun off the ‘bird. Only there’s one hitch…the suit’s outta juice. It needs a pre-war FC, an old fusion core…”

Nora grinned at Sturges and began flipping her Fusion Core from hand to hand.

Sturges looked surprised, “Looks like our luck’s changing,” as Nora’s grin threatened her earlobes,
“….once you jack that core and grab the minigun, those raiders’ll know they picked the wrong fight,” he clapped Nora on the shoulder. “Good luck!”

She turned to walk out, and almost ran into an older lady, sitting in a box, who looked up at her, “Now look who Dogmeat brought us.”

Nora frowned, “So he’s YOUR dog.”

The old lady shook her head. “No, ma’am. Dogmeat is what you call his own man. You can’t chain a free spirit like that. But he chooses his friends and when he does, he sticks by ‘em. He’ll stay by YOU now. I saw it.”

Nora’s eyebrows went up. “You ‘saw it’?”

The lady gave a wan smile. “Chems, kiddo. They give old Mama Murphy the sight. Been that way for as long as I can remember.”

So, crazy, senile, or a little bit of both. Definitely high.

Nora nodded, “I’m listening.”

Mama Murphy went on, “I can see a bit of what was. A bit of what will be. Even a bit of what is, right now. And right now? There’s something coming. Drawn by the noise and chaos. And…it’s…angry…”

Nora looked her in the eye, almost daring her to be more specific. “So, what is it?”

Mama Murphy didn’t even acknowledge Nora’s skepticism. “Oh, it’s horrible, kid. I see claws. Horns. It’s death itself. A deathclaw.”

“OK, what’s a deathclaw? Aside from sounding completely nightmarish,” asked Nora.

“I need to rest now, and you? You have a job to do, kiddo.”

Chapter End Notes

Gahhh! WHY didn’t I check how AoOO imported formatting BEFORE I finished Book 1?? I might’ve picked something other than italics for Nora’s internal dialog. Especially here at the beginning where a LOT of the dialog is (by necessity) internal.

Also, I suppose Chapter Four is kinda late to be telling anyone reading this that there’s a TON of in game dialog here, interspersed with Nora’s reactions, thoughts, off “game” (but canon compliant) dialog, and as seen here, flashbacks.

Consulting any online resource for the Boston Area that gives you a day by day BMNT/Sunrise/Sunset/EENT time will show you that Codsworth takes his duties VERY seriously, as he’s wakened Nora at exactly "Sunrise" for Oct 24th. Also Oct 23rd, 2287 will be a Sunday, which makes this day Monday. Kinda feels like a Monday too.
Nora’s Run

Chapter Summary

NOTE: This chapter contains a (semi-) graphic depiction of sexual intercourse. Considering who's getting conceived and under what circumstances, it's absolutely necessary for plot and character development. But if (tame) smut offends you skip the portion of text that's marked out by the "flashback" dashes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nora told Dogmeat to wait in the office with the survivors, and headed for the roof. Immediately upon exiting the museum, she found the power armor and the vertibird. Inserting the fusion core into the back of the armor, she opened the back and climbed in.

Once the cycle was complete, the armor HUD booted up displaying the FC status, 50%, and the armor status. Apparently her right arm and left leg were damaged. But obviously still working. Looking up into the vertibird interior she could see the minigun. Ripping it off its mount and loading it with a drum of ammunition was fairly self-explanatory.

Taking a deep breath and clumping onto the roof proper, Nora looked down the main street. There were a whole LOT of them, now. Pressing the firing stud on the handle, the gun spun up but delayed firing. Nora let up on the trigger just as the first round went out.

*Uggg. Delay caused by spin up. And there goes what little chance I had of surprise.*

As return rounds ricocheted off her armor she tried to aim the unwieldy thing. After a couple false starts she realized you didn’t aim the minigun. You started it up and walked rounds into your target. Once she had that figured out she had a fine time dealing with the raiders. Until she fell off the building.

What happened was, Nora was engaged in a battle of wits vs minigun bullets with a raider she suspected was the leader. First, he was extremely difficult to get a bead on, and second, he was yelling orders at the other raiders. So she was either removing their leader, or sparing them some unwanted nagging. It could have been both, she supposed.

As Loudmouth took cover behind a car Nora discovered something Chryslus would have been very unhappy to discover a lawyer had learned about, if the company hadn’t ceased to exist 210 years and 1 day earlier. Under the hammering of 5mm rounds that she didn’t dare let up on lest she start the whole 2 second spinup sequence yet again, it turned out the car Loudmouth had selected as “cover” still had a viable reactor and volatile coolant. Which it demonstrated by engaging in rapid ballistic disassembly.

As the vehicle exploded, blowing what was left of Loudmouth across the street, Nora stumbled. Off the building. She discovered that, in addition to shrugging off bullets, the suit had a set of internal gyros that righted her, and explosive vents that pneumatically translated the force of her three story fall into a scythe of air that killed a raider who’d tried to hide in the shadow of the building.
This thing is great. I may NEVER take it off again.

“Suit power at 45%,” said a female voice inside the suit.

Shit. I can’t afford NOT to take it off, unless I know I’ll really, really, need it. And why is it always a woman’s voice on these things?

“My default voice is female, as studies have shown that men pay better attention to a female voice when they are in stressful conditions,” the suit said.

Did I say that out loud or is this thing reading my mind?

The suit was mum, and there was no owner’s manual to consult, so Nora settled on being more careful about making sure her internal dialog remained so. As she was having this one sided conversation, she moved down the main street with more raiders popping up.

Without warning, one of the sewer cargo covers flipped over 8 feet into the air and an enormous lizard emerged. Fast moving, with horns and huge claws on its foredigits, Nora assumed this was a Deathclaw. It was, as Mama Murphy had predicted, angry.

It was also refusing to go down. The raiders were shooting at it, at least until it got to them. Nora was shooting at it as she frantically backpedaled down the street. Preston was shooting at it from the balcony.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...that’s the last raider...here it comes....Jesus, go down already would you...

Nora held the trigger down in a panicked death grip as rounds thudded into the Deathclaw’s hide. It reached her and Nora figured she was a dead woman. It clawed at her, picked her up, rent at her suit, and then flung her down on the ground.

“Suit power at 40%,” intoned the woman in Nora’s ear.

Nora scooted back on her Power Armored backside, desperately starting up the minigun again and pouring fire into the thing’s belly. It smacked her again and she watched the impact eat yet more of her FC’s charge. Preston was firing every couple of seconds into its head, when miraculously, it gave an almighty gurgle and pitched over, dead.

Nora emptied the remainder of her ammo drum into the thing on the assumption that where Deathclaws were concerned there was no such thing as “excessive violence”, then turned and clumped back to the Museum.

Inside she found the small band of refugees. Preston was leaning over Mama Murphy, and she was saying something to him, then pointed at Nora.

“That was something,” Preston said, “I’m glad you’re on our side. You are on our side right?”

“Are you guys gonna be OK now?” Nora asked.

“For now. Until we can find someplace safe,” he answered.

“I told you, Preston, we gotta find Sanctuary,” Mama Murphy said.

“Oh come, ON,” Marcy Long’s voice dripped with derision. “There is no Sanctuary. She’s just higher than a kite, and making stuff up.”

Sturges interrupted, “Hold on. Hold on. Everybody take it easy. We’re all in this together. So,
Marcy, you got a better idea of what we should do next?” Sturges looked around the room, “ANYbody? Well then, Sanctuary it is. Let’s just hope it lives up to its name.”

Preston looked at Nora, “I know it’s a lot to ask, but why don’t you come with us, I could really use your help.”

Nora nodded. “All right Preston.”

As the group got up, Marcy poked her husband with her toe, “Come on Jun, time to go.”

Jun, looked up, “Oh, OK.”

Filing out, Preston called out, “I’ll take point folks. Nora can bring up the rear.”

As they walked through town, Sturges said, ‘I’ve never been so glad to leave a place as I am to leave this hole…um, no offense if you’re from here or something.”

“Actually, I am,” said Nora, “But you’re right, it pretty much is a hole now. I mean look over there,” Nora gestured at a park overrun with brown weeds, “I and Nate used to come here back when…”

“C’mon Nate. Nobody can see us.”

“What if we get caught?” Nate called up to Nora, who’d gone over a small embankment.

“I’ll argue us out of trouble. Put my school to some use,” she answered.

“You haven’t even finished law school, and you still have to go back.”

“Oh don’t be such a poop,” Nora stood at the top of the embankment, hands on her hips, “Now get up here.”

Nate grinned and climbed up.

After she led him behind the bushes, Nora turned and kissed Nate passionately, her hands already headed for his belt. He reached down to stop her, “Nora, did you get me drunk just so you could have your wicked way with me?”

“Of course, hon, absolutely. Now shut up and let me make you feel really good,” Nora pushed him down.

And do what I absolutely have to. They aren’t giving me any other options.

As she took him in her mouth, he sighed and ran his hands through her hair. Bobbing her head and licking him tenderly, she felt him rapidly harden. As she felt him start to move, she pulled off her panties and straddled him, her skirt covering their midsections, so that if someone DID blunder into them, it would look like an intense make-out session.

Nate fumbled in his jacket. Suddenly he looked crestfallen. “Nora, sweetie, I don’t…seem to have any condoms,”

“It’s OK Nate. I want to feel all of you. And it’s the total opposite of my time of the month. It’s safe. I’m like clockwork.”

Strictly speaking every word of that is true. I DO want to feel all of him. And not JUST because I’m
They both moaned as Nora sank down onto Nate. She looked into his eyes, and then began to move.

*I owe you. And it isn’t like I’m doing this to put you in the “marriage trap”. You’re 100% safe from me. I just need this, from you, in ways you can never understand.*

Nora used every trick in the book to speed Nate along. It wouldn’t do to get caught at THIS point in her plan. Within minutes, Nate was clenching Nora’s hips…trying to lift her off. Instead, she ground down onto him, rolling her hips until she felt him swell, then shudder, as he came in her.

Nora smiled tenderly and caressed Nate’s cheek. “Did you,” he started to ask.

“Yes,” she nodded, lying.

He looked up at her, “Well next time, I promise you, it’ll be in a hotel room, with room service.”

She laughed, relieved. “Deal!”

———

“You OK, ma’am?” Sturges looked at her, concerned.

“Yes. I’m just…remembering,” she replied.

“Well, don’t do that,” he complained. “In that suit, you just stopped moving like you were dead.”

As they continued up towards Sanctuary Hills, Sturges noticed the Red Rocket station. He turned to Preston, openly lusting after the stuff there. “Well look at that. I think I just found my new vacation home.”

Preston glanced over, “Your idea of heaven, eh, Sturges?” he asked.

Sturges nodded happily, and the small group continued on, Nora bringing up the rear as she clomped along in her suit. Looking at the power display, it hadn’t greatly fallen past the 38% the fight with the Raiders and Deathclaw had reduced it to. Apparently the inertial dampeners that absorbed the blows and bullet impacts ate a ton of power that merely walking around didn’t.

*The only problem is, strolling around in this noisy, oversized walking tank pretty much guarantees everything for miles around knows where you are, and what you’re wearing. And they’ll come loaded for bear.*

They came to the bridge back to Sanctuary Hills as full night fell. Nora switched on her headlamp, and Preston looked up at where it pointed in surprise. Pointing at the statue outside her suburb, he said, “Well I’ll be damned. It’s a monument to the original Minutemen. I knew it was somewhere around Concord. Which means this right here is the Old North Bridge. Where the first shots of the American Revolution were fired. I’d say that’s the best omen since Quincy.” Nora didn’t have the heart to tell him the wooden bridge into her suburb was a recent addition and that the real Old North Bridge had been dismantled back in 1788. He wasn’t that far off, as Sanctuary was located on the Concord River, near the Old Mill Pond.

*Let him have it. I think he needs this.*

As they moved into Sanctuary, and approached Nora’s house, Mama Murphy sidled up to her. “This is where you’re from. But there’s more to your destiny, isn’t there? I’ve seen it. I know your pain.”
Nora glanced down, Mama Murphy squinting in her headlamp light. “Tell me what you know,” Nora demanded.

Mama Murphy said, “You’re a woman out of time. Out of hope. But all’s not lost. I can feel your son’s energy. He’s alive.”

Nora resisted grabbing the old woman and shaking her. In this suit, that might well prove fatal. She glared, her look unseen, “Where is my son? Where’s Shaun?”

Mama Murphy looked apologetic, “I wish I knew kid. I really do. It’s not like I can see WHERE he is. Just that he…is. And even I don’t need the sight to tell you where to start looking. The biggest settlement around. Diamond City.”

“Where’s Diamond City?” Nora asked.

Mama Murphy walked away towards a building that Preston and Sturges were already setting up for the survivors. “I’m sorry. I’m tired now. Maybe later, bring me some chems, we’ll see what I can see.”

Nora grimaced, and clumped over to a makeshift power armor rack left by someone, at some time over the last 200 years, and opened the clamshell and backed out. She was frustrated by the old woman, sweaty, and tired, and as far as she knew the nearest showers were over 200 years away. She was literally in a filthy mood.

So when Preston came over she was perhaps a little short with him. “I’m glad you came with us. Should have listened to Mama Murphy all along. I think we could settle down here. Make it a place to call home. What do you think?” he started.

Nora glanced over sharply, “So you believe in these visions she has?”

He held her gaze, “I didn’t use to, but then how did she know about THIS place? I think maybe she has SOME kind of a gift. Best not ignore it completely. I mean look at this place,” he gestured around.

Nora grunted. “Don’t have to. I used to live here. Right over there, in fact,” she pointed to her house.

“What do you mean you lived here?”

“Before the war, and everything was ruined,” she replied.

Now he just looked confused, “What do you mean? Before what war? Are you saying…?”

Nora sighed. She said very clearly and distinctly, “I lived here over 200 years ago. I was frozen in a vault in cryosleep for most of it. Just woke up a little while ago.”

Preston whistled. “Like one of those old pre-war ghouls. That explains a lot. Did anyone else make it out of the Vault?”

Nora spoke flatly, “Just my son, but someone took him away while I was still trapped. Have you run across anyone with a baby boy?”

Preston shook his head. “Damn…I know I keep saying it, but I’m sorry. And no, I haven’t run across any kidnapped babies. We’ll keep an eye out, though. I think we could help each other,” he continued, his eyes a little desperate. “If you keep an eye out for people who need help maybe you could let them know that there’s Minutemen in the area now? Our only chance to start rebuilding is
“Ok, Preston. You have a deal,” she nodded.

As Nora and Dogmeat walked across the street, Codsworth emerged from the house. “Welcome back mum. I do hope you were able to find some assistance in Concord.”

Nora smiled. “I made a few new friends. How were things back here while I was gone?”

“Oh just catching up on some yardwork with the occasional pest control,” he said. Nora shuddered, imagining rats the size of a Corvega. Codsworth continued, “What’s next mum?”

“I have to go to someplace called Diamond City. Do me a favor. Keep an eye on these people. Make sure they don’t mess with the house, and do whatever you can to spruce the place up. I hope I can find a lead on Shaun in this so-called city. Other than this house specifically, they can do anything they want, do whatever you can to help the folks here. I think they’re OK, but you never can tell 100%.”

“Very good, mum.”

Nora went into the house and lay down in the sleeping bag Codsworth had made. It was adequate, but not exactly comfy. “Codsworth?” she called.

“Yes, mum?”

“Do you think you could build a real bed, sweetie?”

“I shall see to it immediately upon the morrow, Miss Nora.”

Chapter End Notes

"Sanctuary Hills", in game, is in fact located in the northern portion of Minuteman National Historic Park, and that is the replica bridge, Nora having been accurate about when the original was torn down. The pond, south of Sanctuary seems to be the Old Mill Pond, near and along the Concord River, which is the river south of Sanctuary. Preston is right however, in that they are ON the site of the "Shot heard 'round the world" (or at least in Britain where a guy named George probably said, "They bloody well did WHAT?")
Diamond City Is a Girl’s Best Friend

Chapter Summary

Guess Who makes her appearance (finally). Get used to her, she’s in it for the long haul.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nora’s Pip-Boy alarm woke her exactly when she’d told it to and she briefly thought of smashing the vile thing. Then calmer, marginally more awake heads prevailed and she got up out of the bedroll. She told Dogmeat, “Guard,” gestured at the house, and then walked across the street, where Preston’s group was making breakfast.

The group of survivors offered her a piece of roasted meat, and she drank some water from Codsworth. Sturges caught her eye, and she walked over.

“Awfully nice of you to offer your home like this,” he started, “So I reckon it’s only fair we spruce the place up. Give me a few days and you’ll hardly recognize the place. Just so you know, my door is always open. Some of the walls too. The roof now that I think of it. Better get back to it.”

Nora headed out. As she passed the Red Rocket Station, yet again, she made a mental note to check it out sometime.

*When I find Shaun. Everything else has to wait until I get my baby back. Or…there is no or.*

Moving cautiously through Concord, she confirmed that no Raiders had returned. She turned southeast along Highway 2. Before too long, she saw a figure coming up the highway, leading some kind of pack animal. Moving more slowly and cautiously, she soon made out that the person approaching was a woman, leading a two headed cow that was piled high with goods.

Nora walked up to the woman, who grumped, “So what’s your story, looking to trade, rob me, or just ask directions to Diamond City?”

Nora nodded, “Yeah, where exactly IS Diamond City?”

The woman made a disgusted noise. “Directions. Figures. Just keep going ‘til you see the sky line. You’ll find the ‘Great Green Jewel’, just inside the city limits.”

“Thanks so much for the precision directions, lady,” Nora said.

“The name’s Carla. Trashcan Carla,” the woman said as she turned up the road towards Concord.

“What a shock,” Nora said to her back.

Carla flipped her off as she walked away. But she did call over her shoulder, “But stay away from Lexington and Cambridge, smartass. Ferals. Wouldn’t wish ‘em on anyone.”

Nora shook her head, but she began looking for roads off to the right as she now intended to get into the city closer to Watertown and Brookline. The day was unusually warm for late October. So far,
October had felt more like August.

She was definitely uncomfortable in the blue, faux leather jumpsuit, but so far her other options were rotted shirts, pants, and dresses from pre-war houses, or assless chaps pulled off men and women she’d killed. Pass.

As she approached the Charles River she saw a small building, a greenhouse, surrounded by plants. Tending the plants were several dozen Mr. Handy’s. She walked up and a white Mr. Handy turned to her, and in a female voice, said, “Welcome to Graygarden darling. This is the Commonwealth’s first, and only, facility run entirely by robots. I am Ms. White”

Nora frowned. “This place seems familiar. I saw a bit on it in the news, back before the war. One of RobCo’s guys, Edward Grey, built an all robot facility.”

“You can’t possibly remember something from before the war, darling. I think you’re a little confused. You simply can’t have been alive back then,” the robot told her.

“OK, if you say so,” said Nora. Then a thought struck her. “Hey. Do you trade your produce?”

“Of course, darling. We’re not programmed for waste,” replied Ms. White.

“So would you know where Diamond City is?” asked Nora.

“Don’t you know darling? Everyone knows where Diamond City is,” said Ms. White.

“Imagine I don’t. Imagine you’re talking to a robot from before the war. Where IS Diamond City?”

“Why it’s at Fenway Park, darling. It’s built into the field and bleachers,” said Ms. White, now quite confused.

“Diamond City is Fenway Park. I thought it was something like the Emerald City from OZ, named after a jewel because of wealth and privilege. It’s called Diamond City because,” she began giggling, “It’s actually built ON a baseball diamond!” The laughter was threatening to turn hysterical, so Nora bit her lip.

Nora chewed her lip for a second, then said, “Thanks. I know exactly where to go now.”

“Before you go,” Ms. White called, “What do you think of the water around here?”

Nora looked confused, “Why?”

“Because it’s ghastly, simply ghastly. Pressure is down, radiation is up. This will never do. Perhaps you could lend a hand? Most of our water comes from the Weston Plant…be a dear and pay it a visit. Perhaps tidy the place up?”

*Oh what the hell. Maybe I do, maybe I don’t, but there’s no reason to be a total bitch to a bunch of robots.*

“Oh sure thing, as soon as I get the chance,” Nora said.

She left Greygarden, once again headed southeast, this time along Highway 3, intending the skirt the middle of Cambridge until she crossed at the Mass Ave Bridge. When she arrived the bridge was jammed in the up position from a tugboat collision, but someone had jury rigged some steps to allow crossing.

*Better stay quiet through here. There’s a TON of directions raiders could be coming at me here.* Not
Once across, she made her way along Park Drive, passing Beacon Street, and then heard gunshots from up ahead. At the intersection of Park and Boylston, some umpires were having a firefight with a group of Unstoppable Grognards.

Well, that’s what I get for starting feel like I was on familiar ground. Just because I know HOW to get there, doesn’t mean that I really understand WHAT’S there.

“I am Super Mutant,” proclaimed one of the big green Unstoppable Grognards standing on some scaffolding outside a building.

Nice of them to tell me what they are. I can’t keep calling them something from a Grognak comic.

The umpires were a bit more silent. Their rifles, identical to many other improvised looking numbers Nora had found on Raiders, and being used by the Super Mutants for that matter, made most of the noise on their side, absent an occasional curse word. They seemed to be professionals. Guards, maybe?

Nora was watching when a vastly misshapen hound-like creature charged one of the umps, and since it was actually in easy pistol range, Nora shot it before it could reach the umpire.

“Thanks, lady,” the umpire called, just before one of the Super Mutants caused him to dive for cover. Although 50 yards was a bit of a stretch, Nora took a shot at the Super Mutant who’d revealed himself, and was gratified to see him topple off the scaffolding. The rest of the Super Mutants were down as well, and other umpires came out from behind walls and stumps.

“Nice shooting. You seem like a gal after our own hearts,” said one of the umps, “Tell Danny that Bobby says you’re good people. He’ll let you in.”

“Thanks,” Nora said, then turned up Boylston towards the main gates at Fenway.

As she entered Yawkey Plaza in front of the main gate, Nora saw, and more importantly couldn’t help hearing, a woman having an argument with an intercom.

“What do you mean, you can’t open the gate? Stop playing around, Danny. I’m standing out in the open, for crying out loud,” said the woman, waving her arms.

The intercom, with “Danny” on the other end presumably, buzzed and then, “I got orders not to let you in Ms. Piper. I’m sorry. I’m just doing my job.”

The woman, named Something Piper, Nora guessed, leaned in. There was something about her that Nora couldn’t quite put her finger on. “Oooo! ‘Just doing your job.’ Protecting Diamond City means keeping me out, is that it? Oh look! It’s the scary reporter. Boo!”

That’s what it is. All that handwaving. She’s more alive than anyone I’ve seen since I woke up. She’s not just surviving out here.

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

Something stamped her foot, and growled in frustration. “You open this gate RIGHT NOW, Danny Sullivan. I live here. You can’t just lock me out. “

Something Piper sighed in exasperation. Nora was beginning to like her.
It doesn’t hurt that she’s cute, even in that ratty trenchcoat and ridiculous “Press” cap. No human looks good in a snap brim cap.

As Nora walked over, Something leaned in to the intercom, “I can wait allll day, Danny…”

Then she noticed Nora coming over. Something waved her over. Whispering, she looked at Nora intensely, pretty obviously willing Nora to play along. “Hey you. You want into Diamond City, right?”

Nora nodded.

In a normal tone of voice, “Wh- what was that? You say you’re a trader up from Quincy? You have enough supplies to keep the general store stocked for a whole month?”

Something turned to the Intercom, “You hear that, Danny? You gonna open the gate and let us in? Or are you gonna be the one talking to Crazy Myrna about losing out on all the supplies?”

“Jeeez. Alright. No need to make it personal. Gimme a minute,” as the door began rolling up.

I’d almost pay good money to know the backstory on Danny Sullivan and Crazy Myrna.

Something Piper nodded at Nora, “Better head inside before ol’ Danny catches onto the bluff.”

Nora caught Something’s arm and looked questioningly at her, “This place, Diamond City…”

Something smiled at Nora, and got, if anything, cuter, “Oh, the ‘green jewel’? She’s a sight. Everyone who’s anyone in the Commonwealth is from here, settled here,” Something pointed at herself, “Got kicked out of here.”

Something quirked her lips, “A big wall, some power, working plumbing, schools, and some security goons are what make Diamond City the big Monster it is.” Nora smirked a bit at that last bit.

“Heh. Love it or hate it, you’ll see for yourself soon enough. Let’s go,” said Something as she walked in.

The moment they entered the park, Something was accosted by a fat man in a suit, “Who let you back inside? I told Sullivan to keep you out. You devious, rabble rousing slanderer. The…,” Nora took an instant dislike to the smarmy politician. He wasn’t even smooth enough to remind her of a pre-war politician. “Libelist,” she interrupted.

The mayor goggled at her. “What?!?”

“Slander is spoken. Libel is written. If, as your guard implied, it was her article,” Nora pointed at Something, “Then what you should be accusing her of is libel. “

Something Piper glared at McDonough, then gestured at Nora, “Let’s ask the ‘copyeditor’ here. You support the news? Because the mayor is threatening to throw free speech in the gutter.”


Even when the press didn’t.

The Mayor cleared his throat. “Don’t mean you miss. You look like Diamond City material. Welcome to the great green jewel of the Commonwealth. Safe. Happy. A great place to settle down. Raise a family,” he turned to Something, “Don’t let this muckracker tell you otherwise.”
Nora was really starting to like “the muckraker”. She definitely had the right kind of enemies. “What are you two arguing about?”

Something looked over at her, “If you print lies, everyone’s happy. But if you print the truth….” She made a disgusted noise.

The mayor tried to interrupt. Clearly he was not liking the current topic much.

He cleared his throat. “Now, what brings you to our fair city?”

“I’m trying to find someone.”

“Who?”

Nora had no reason to hide the information, and a very good reason not to. “My baby boy. Shaun. He’s less than a year old.”

Something’s eyes went wide. “W-wait. Your son’s missing? Hear that McDonough? Is Diamond City Security gonna stand by while a mother searches for her infant son?”

McDonough looked down and left. “I’m afraid our security team can’t help, but I’m sure there’s someone who can help.”

Nora glared at the top of his head. “Great. Thanks for nothing.”

Something looked genuinely angry on Nora’s behalf. “This is ridiculous. Diamond City Security can’t spare one officer to help,” she turned on the Mayor, “I want the truth. What’s the REAL reason security never investigates any kidnappings?”

The mayor pointed his finger in Something’s face, “I’ve had enough of this. From now on, consider YOU and that little sister of yours on notice!”

The mayor turned and stalked off. Something called to his retreating back, “Yeah, keep talkin’ McDonough. That’s all you’re good for. “

She turned to Nora and plastered a fake smile on her face, “Mmmm, a big Diamond City ‘Welcome!’ from the mayor. You feel honored yet?”

Something turned thoughtful. “Look I gotta go check up on Nat, but…ummm…stop by my office later. I have an idea for an article you’d be beautiful…ummm…perfect for.”

Chapter End Notes

I always did want to have the lawyer correct McDonough. Because she's right. Slander is spoken, LIBEL is written.

"Grognard" is an old term for hard-core wargamer, from Napoleon's term for his Old Guard (Grognard="Grumblers"). But, since Marvel's Incredible Hulk was originally conceived in the mid 60s, well away from the timeline divergence I'm putting at somewhere between 1948 and 1952 to seperate us and "Fallout", I'm using Hubris Comic's character Grognak to introduce big green aggressive guys. And I can TOTALLY see the writers using "Grognard" as a big green, strong antagonist to
Grognak.
Nora walked up one of the section passageways into the park. The ballpark was a riot of shacks, pallet walkways, and various permanent structures. There were houses running up the bleachers, and alleyways running every which way. Stairs down and up, making the whole thing look a bit like a corrugated tin medieval village. In the middle of the field, there was a market surrounding what would have been the pitcher’s mound, with a smoke stack arrangement pretty much centered on the mound.

Nora made her way down the stairs to an area behind home plate. To her left, there was a girl, somewhere between twelve and fourteen, who bore a remarkable resemblance to Something Piper. She was standing on a box, with a sheaf of broadsheets under her left arm. She launched into a spiel as Nora walked up.

“Is the Institute spying on your home, read the Publick and find out,” she cried out. She looked right at Nora, “Free paper to newcomers, so if the Institute grabs you in your sleep you can’t say we didn’t warn you,” she finished.

“The Institute?”

The little girl looked disgusted. “You ain’t heard of the Institute lady? They snatch people in the night, and no one hears from ‘em again. It’s all in the paper. Better read one before they get you too,” she waved a broadsheet at Nora, who could make out the name, “Publick Occurrences”, at the top, and the article name, “The Synthetic Truth” as she took it.

“Who’s gone missing?” asked Nora.

The newsgirl rolled her eyes. “Drifters, residents, stadium seat snobs. Seems every year or so, someone’s gone and we all know why. So you better be careful, newcomer.”

Nora smiled at the girl. “I believe you. Thanks!”

“So what are you doing in Diamond City anyways?”

“I came here looking for someone,” Nora answered.

“Lemme guess, that someone’s gone missing, right? That’s what I’m tellin’ ya. Who is it?” asked the girl.

“I’m looking for my baby, Shaun,” said Nora

“You have a son lady? Wow, you’re OLD!” the girl said, with the casual unconscious cruelty of the very (annoyingly) young. She continued, “You’re out of luck, no one tries to find missing people
here. Missing people means the Institute’s involved. And NO one wants the Institute’s attention.”

Nora decided on “wheedle” instead of “smite”, though it was close. “You’re a smart kid. There must be SOMEone in town who isn’t afraid of the Institute,” she coaxed.

The girl, flattered, looked thoughtful. “Well…there is the detective. Mr. Valentine. He’s not afraid of anything. If there’s anyone who can help, it’s him,” she said.

“Thanks, kid,” said Nora as she stepped away.

She looked down at the paper. The article was “The Synthetic Truth”, by Piper Wright.

Ohhh…Piper is her FIRST name. Huh. That’s kind of a cute name. Goes with the whole package.

Wait a minute! I just met “Ms. Right”. Heh.

Nora abruptly turned and walked back to the newspaper’s office, knocked, and walked in.

Piper looked up from her desk as Nora walked in. She smiled at Nora, and said, “Glad you dropped by. How you holding up, Blue?”

“Why are you calling me that?” replied Nora.

Piper looked amused, “Cause of the blue jumpsuit you’re wearing? You’re a Vault dweller.”

Nora’s lip quirked. “My actual name is Nora,” she said.

“Huh,” Piper looked like she was thinking for a moment, and then shrugged and smiled brightly. “Nope. I’m sticking with ‘Blue’, Blue.”

“OK. But only as long as I can call you ‘Something’,” said Nora.

It was Piper’s turn to look confused. Nora grinned. “When I heard the guard call you Ms. Piper, I figured your last name was Piper, and since I didn’t know your first name, I kept thinking of you as ‘Something Piper’.”

Piper laughed. “I’ve been called a lot worse.”

“How about I shorten it to ‘Thing’?” asked Nora, raising one eyebrow.

Piper just laughed. Then she turned serious. “So here’s the deal. I want an interview. Your life story in print. I think it’s time Diamond City had a little outside perspective on the Commonwealth. You do that,” she said looking Nora up and down speculatively, “And, uh…tell you what, I’ll come with you. Watch your backside…ah, back while you get used to world above ground.”

Nora looked over at Piper.

Do I detect a little blush, there, Ms. Wright?

Nora nodded, “All right Piper, I’m in.”

Piper pulled out a notebook. “Let’s get down to business. So I know you’re from a Vault. How would you describe your time on the inside?”

Nora couldn’t resist. That blush had been awfully cute. “It was just me and a THOUSAND guinea pigs. They turned…carnivorous,” she said in an ominous voice.
Piper flushed again. “Ok… I guess satirical is a style…,” she said under her breath.

Nora took pity. “Seriously? My family and I were frozen, I didn’t actually spend much time in the Vault. Not while we were conscious anyways.”

Piper gaped. “W-wait. They boxed you up in a fridge? The whole time? Are you saying you were alive BEFORE the war?”

Nora spread her arms. “Behold! I am immortal,” she intoned.

Piper nodded. “Y’know. I guess you kinda are, aren’t you?” Then she realized what and who she was talking to. “Oh my god. ‘The Woman Out Of Time’. You’ve seen the Commonwealth, Diamond City? How does it compare?”


Piper looked a little surprised, “That’s… surprisingly inspiring Blue. We’re definitely quoting you on that. Now I already know you’re looking for your son, Shaun. Do you suspect the Institute was involved?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

Piper nodded, “No one ever does. That’s what makes them so scary. For the last part, I want to do something different. I want you to make a statement to Diamond City directly. The threat of kidnapping is all but ignored… everyone wants to pretend it didn’t happen,” Piper looked serious, “What would you say to someone else who’s lost a loved one? But might be too scared, or too numb to look?”

Nora thought about her baby boy, about watching him torn from his dead father’s arms. She looked at Piper, tears welling up, “No matter how much you want to give up… don’t. You HAVE to have hope. That you’ll see them again. Or, at the very least, that you’ll know the truth.”

Piper patted Nora on her shoulder, “Thanks, Blue. I know that had to be hard.”

She clapped her hands. Looking over at Nora, and in a “Let’s forget about that whole ‘tearing up’ thing” tone she said, “Sooo… I agreed to come with you. Watch your back? Just say the word. I can’t wait to see where the story goes next.”

Nora tried to give her an out. “You sure you want to travel with me?”

Piper shrugged. “Well, it’s that or get back to writing the paper. I guess the paper can wait.”

“I need to find Nick Valentine,” said Nora.

Piper grinned. “That’s easy. Nick and I go way back. We tend to keep running into each other on jobs. He’s a great guy.”

Nora nodded Piper out of her office. They walked a short ways to the main market area, where McDonough was giving a speech to a large gathering of Diamond City citizens.

“I would like to address the subject that is on everyone’s mind, and that is the disgusting article Piper has written…” Piper grumbled under her breath.

That smarmy, two-bit, con artist of a politician. How dare he say that? That article was no more
libeling him that my Great-Aunt Kathleen's Chicken Stew recipe was.

Whoa! Nora! Where’d THAT come from?

McDonough was just getting warmed up. “Diamond City has stood united for 150 years. And what keeps us united are two things. First is the great green guardian. The Wall. Our protector and our savior from the filth outside. And second is our trust and faith in each other. That faith and trust that has given us prosperity, security, and education for every citizen.”

What, couldn’t find a way to stick an apple pie into the middle of all that? Hmmm. Do they still have Apple Pie anymore? I wonder…knock it off Nora!

And they practically worship The Green Monster. Kinda funny when you think about it.

“And while the paper might point their fingers at synths and other ghost stories to drive us apart, will NOT betray that sacred trust. Now…I want everyone to hear the next words VERY carefully. I. Am not. A synth. I am the same flesh and blood boy who grew up on these streets. Who was born in a shack just down the waterfront to Martha and Patrick McDonough. And I will not abandon my city due to the heinous allegations of the press. God bless this city. God bless the wall.”

Nora looked over at Piper, who had stood through the entire speech thin lipped and pretty clearly furious.

You know what? I’m not even gonna touch this. That woman has every right to be royally pissed off, and I’m gonna let her enjoy whatever nastiness she’s mentally sending his way. He earned it.

After a bit, Nora tapped Piper on the shoulder and nodded her head to the side. Visibly gathering herself, Piper led Nora around a couple bends to an alley way that had a neon sign of a heart, with “Valentine’s Detective Agency” inside it, hanging at the entrance. Gesturing “After You” Piper stepped to one side and Nora opened the door.

Across the cluttered office a woman stood, with her back to them, going sadly through a box of paperwork. She was muttering to herself. Piper walked over and touched the woman on the shoulder.

Ellie? What’s wrong?”

The woman, Ellie, turned and hugged Piper. “Nick was working a case. Skinny Malone’s gang had kidnapped a young woman, and he’d 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.”


Ellie shook her head, “I don’t know much about him, but he’s from Goodneighbor, and that means he’s in the ‘well-pressed suits and machine gun’ school of thuggery.”

Piper nodded, and Nora came forward. She looked over Ellie, and asked, “Is it possible he’s still alive?”

Ellie shrugged, “He’s been gone three days now,” she answered, “and with raiders, I’d say no way, but maybe a Goodneighbor gangster is less bloodthirsty? Maybe.”

Look at her. Jesus, I’ve never seen a clearer case of woman in love. Ellie is just barely holding it together. Even if he weren’t my only lead, I’d be saying this next thing. When did that change, do you think?
When you stopped putting me in a box and decided to do something good with me.

Just when I thought you were gone.

Well, you’re not schizophrenic, Nora. I’m you, and you know it. And it’s just a set of tools. You can use a hammer to build a house or tear one down. It’s how you use it that matters.

OK, fine! Then I am going to use it.


“How, Blue? You’re fresh out of the Vault. You don’t even know this world,” said Piper, looking at her over Ellie’s head, buried in her shoulder.

“That’s fair,” said Nora, “This world doesn’t know me, either. Let’s see who comes out ahead in the end.”

Chapter End Notes

For those unfamiliar with Boston and/or Fenway Park, what the Residents of Diamond City call, with great reverence "The Wall", is known today as "The Green Monster"; the enormous left field fence that was raised artificially high to compensate for how close in it is (owing to an inability to move Landsdowne Street).

In case it hasn’t shown yet, I lived in Massachusetts for 6 years, and New England for another 7 after that. Boston is familiar to me. Between history and a good look at Google Maps, Nora and Piper won’t be traveling along "a street", it will be "Memorial Drive" (if they’re on the road along the Charles in Cambridge) or "Storrow Drive" (along the Charles on the Boston side). And it will flatly drive me nuts not to refer to the airport as "Logan". (If you find a stray reference let me know!)
Leaving Ellie after telling her to stop throwing away case files, Nora and Piper walked back to the town center. The regular vendors were all closing up, but there were two stalls, staffed by robots, that remained open, Diamond City Surplus and Power Noodles. Piper led Nora over to the noodle stand, underneath the stack of the generator, and called out to the Waittron, “Hey Takahashi. How’re they hanging?”

“Na-ni-shimashko-ha?” asked the robot.

“No!” said Piper, winking at Nora, “Really?”

“Na-ni-shimashko-ha?” it repeated.

“But she seems so trustworthy!” Piper said.

“Na-ni-shimashko-ha?” it asserted.

“The jig is up Blue. Ol’ Tak here gave you up. I bet your name isn’t even Blue, right,” Piper said, while laughing.

“Guilty as charged. Oh, how I rue the day I invited that robot into my nefarious conspiracy,” said Nora, utterly deadpan.

Piper lightly pushed Nora in the shoulder and then sat down at the stand, holding up two fingers. Nora’s speculation about Piper’s body language was derailed by the sight of Piper counting out Nuka-Cola bottle caps and sliding them over in exchange for two bowls of what looked like ramen.

“You use bottlecaps as currency?!?” asked Nora.

“Well sure, Blue. It got started when caravanners got tired of bartering everything, and needed an efficient, lightweight, hard to counterfeit way to keep track of value. After a while, they just have value because we all agree they have value,” Piper told her. “Besides, every time I drink a Nuka-Cola, I get a refund just by opening it,” Piper suddenly grinned, “And this girl opens ‘em a LOT.”

“Well, that’s no sillier than passing around scraps of paper, I guess,” Nora said.

“Oh we still do that too,” said Piper, “But usually Pre-War money gets pulped and turned into writing paper or stuff like that. Don’t tell me you don’t have any caps?”

“Ummm…” Nora looked sheepish, “No. How do I make money?”

“Same way everyone else does. Find a job, do something no one else is able or willing to. Shoot raiders and take their stuff. You know…socially useful activities.”

Nora blushed, thinking about how many pipe guns she’d left in her wake. “Crap,” she burst out, “I’m an idiot.”

Piper smiled at Nora, “Let me guess, no cash?”

Nora nodded. Piper shook her head, and, waving back at her office/home, said, “You can sleep at
my place tonight. We’ll start out for Park Street Station in the morning.”

“Why not now?” asked Nora.

“When the sun goes down, the crazies come out,” answered Piper, “Even worse than daytime. ‘Sides I’m tired, you’ve got to be tired, and I need to make sure Nat gets to bed.”

“Nat?” Nora raised her eyebrows.

“My little sis. I’ve been ‘acting mom’ for longer than I care to think about,” Piper replied.

Nora nodded. “Deal.”

The two finished their noodles and walked back to Publick Occurrences together. Nora was stealing glances every now and then.

Is that a smile? Dammit, I can’t tell. Really, I mean really, I’m acting like a schoolgirl over what is probably nothing at all. Get a grip.

Piper led Nora in and busied herself cajoling and occasionally threatening her sister to get her to get ready to go to bed. When Nat had finally settled down, Piper sat next to Nora. “Why don’t you take my bed,” she said, “I can sleep here on the couch.”

“Absolutely not,” said Nora, “I’m the non-paying guest. I’ll take the couch. Ah!” she put a finger on Piper lips, when the latter tried to object. “Not a word. It’s final. Bed, you. Couch, me. I wouldn’t say no to a blanket, though.”

Piper laughed, nodded, and got out a blanket before heading up the stairs to her bed. “Night Blue,” she called down.

“Night, Thing,” Nora called back. Her only answer was a silvery peal of laughter.

Her last thought before falling asleep was, Those were soft lips.

Piper woke her up the next morning with a cup of coffee and a plate of something that might conceivably have been eggs and some kind of breakfast meat. Mangy eggs and carbonized meat.

Nora sipped the coffee, which was not bad, and took a bite of eggs, which she swallowed exactly as if they were allegedly food and she had to eat SOMETHing. “Nice,” she lied, “Did you make these?”

Piper smiled and nodded as she scooped up a spoonful of her eggs and…

I think it’s fried Cram. Oh my god. If I weren’t starving… Well, nobody’s perfect. Although HOW do you burn fried Cram this bad?

Piper tucked in gusto. Nora less so. When they were finished, they left Piper’s house and headed out of the park. Heading east on Boylston, after a short while they left the guarded area around Fenway and began moving more slowly and cautiously. As they approached the west End of the Common, Piper whispered, “Blue! This is the Common.”

As Nora raised an eyebrow, with a, “Yes. And?” expression, Piper went on, “People don’t come back from here, Blue.”

“Then we stay quiet,” Nora whispered.

They crept along the south edge, then turned north until they reached the Park Street T Station. Like
its many Greater Boston counterparts it consisted of an aboveground kiosk and, inside a double pair of doors, a set of escalators down. The escalators had long ago stopped working. As Nora and Piper crept down one side they heard a pair of voices inside the station. Flattening herself to one side of the archway, Nora peeked quickly around.

Looking back at Piper, she signaled two fingers, then one finger, which she pointed left, then at herself. Then one finger, which she pointed right, then at Piper. Translated, it meant, “Two guys. I’ll take the guy on the left, you take the guy on the right.”

Piper looked at Nora, and then frowned slightly and shrugged. Translated it meant, “I have no idea what it is that you’re doing.”

Nora rolled her eyes at Piper, then turned back and eased partially out of cover. Translated it meant, “Ugh. Fine! I’ll do it myself.”

She sighted on the more difficult of the two targets. As her pistol spat twice she shifted aim to the other, who reacted to the sudden shooting of his partner by staring around wildly, followed by falling over dead himself.

Nora swiftly slid into the station, moving left out of the doorway just in time to snap off a pair of shots at another gangster coming from the station office. Although she dropped him as well, the one coming from the bathroom got off a shot that creased Nora’s right thigh. Nora winced and at that Piper stopped goggling at Nora’s elimination of three gangsters in a quarter minute, and shot the bathroom latecomer.

At that point, another thug fired at them from behind a ticket counter. Taking cover behind a pair of turnstiles, both women started looking for ways to get rid of the guy. Piper fired off several rounds, blindly over the top of the turnstile. Nora, on the other hand, remembered the grenades that Dogmeat had found a couple days prior, and fished one out of her Vault suit pouch. Pulling the pin, she lobbed it over the counter.

Piper, seeing what Nora was up to, yelled, “Catch!”

The remaining gangster had a moment to stare before the grenade blew. Nora glanced over the turnstile, and seeing nothing, rolled out of cover, and then, with her pistol ready, swept over the area and confirmed that no more enemies were emerging.

She turned to Piper, who was already at her side applying a Stimpack to Nora’s wound, and somewhat crossly said, “What the hell was that? How hard could, ‘I’ll take the guy on the left, you take the guy on the right,’ even be???”

“How should I know? I have no idea where you picked up ANY of this. I’m just trying to keep up with you,” said Piper somewhat plaintively.

Nora took Piper’s hand from her wound, looked down at the newspaperwoman, and said, “You’re right, sweetie. I’m sorry, that was MY fault.”

“Yeah, well, OK. Just remember I’m not some kind of holotape hero. And you’re the one that got your friends killed.”
hurt,” Piper replied. Then suddenly blushed again.

“Consider it a lesson learned, Piper. For both of us. I’ll teach you hand signals when we get a chance. For now, I’ll let you pick your target and I’ll adjust as needed, OK?” and smiled at her, “Besides, it’s just a graze. Stings like hell, not much else.”

Piper nodded. Nora collected up several guns dropped by the gangsters, and stuffed them in a duffel bag one of the thugs had been carrying. The pair moved farther into the station. At the train platform they ran into several more of Goodneighbor’s “finest”. As Nora had come to expect, they tended to come into the open and charge her and Piper’s positions. Which led to them coming to grief, rather quickly.

*Apparently ‘Charge wildly,’ is normally a very successful tactic around here. Well, I see no reason to disabuse them of the notion that it works.*

Nora and Piper moved deeper into the tunnels, eliminating Gangsters in groups of two or three at time pretty easily. Eventually they found themselves at a Vault door, with “114” painted in the center. Piper poked at the control box fruitlessly, and turned to Nora, who was smiling at her.

“What?” Piper said.

“Voila!” replied Nora, pulling out her Pip-Boy lead. Sloting in the receptacle. And pounding on the Vault Door Release button. With an unholy screeching, the door rolled aside and the gantry extended. As they were crossing, Nora heard one of the bad guys coming out complaining, “Is that you Roger? God I hate the noise that door makes.”

*You and me both. The difference is that I’ll be around to hear the thing close back up. I hope.*

After they eliminated that gangster, they went down set of stairs, where they heard yet another pair of chatty guards. One of them had a rough, strange voice. His partner was complaining about building a Vault in a subway station. Strange Voice answered him, “Because that was the point you moron. We ran this scam all the time before the war. Keep a bunch of our guys employed.”

Piper caught Nora’s eye. She held up two fingers. Then one finger, pointed it right and then at herself. Then one finger, pointed it left, then at Nora.

Nora made the hole with a finger going through it gesture, and smacked her forehead quietly. Then aimed her pistol at the guy on the left. Piper shot her guy, and moments later Nora shot hers. They stood up. Piper looked at Nora. “OK, Blue. I have no idea what you said. I think. I can make some guesses.”

“Oh?” said Nora.

“Nah. You tell me, Blue.”

“OK,” said Nora. She made the finger through a hole gesture, “‘Fucking’,,” then she lightly smacked her forehead, “‘Duh!’”

Piper stared for a second then broke down laughing.

Smiling herself, Nora checked the two guards. One had a horrible skin condition, insofar as the skin looked like it was falling off. All the soft tissue of his nose had disappeared. Nora caught Piper’s eye as the latter calmed from laughing to chuckles. “What on earth is up here?” she asked.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a ghoul. Oh crap! You probably haven’t, have you?”
“Nope. And what was that about ‘before the war’?”

“A lot of ghouls were alive during the war. No better way to get horribly irradiated. And ghouls don’t seem to die of natural causes. Violence sure,” Piper nodded at the ghoul, “But not even starvation or dehydration kills ‘em. Hell, radiation heals them.”

Nora nodded. And it occurred to her that she had just ended the life of someone who’d lived for over two hundred years.

What makes someone willing to risk over two hundred YEARS alive by being a gangster wiseguy?

The two women continued through the Vault, occasionally needing to kill unfriendly strangers, both normal human and ghoul. Eventually they found themselves in a large arched room. Across the way, and up a level, another of the seemingly endless stream of suit wearing wiseguys was taunting someone in a locked room.

“How you doin’ in there Valentine? Feelin’ hungry? Wanna snack?”

From inside the two heard the reply, “Keep talkin’ meathead. It’ll give Skinny Malone more time to think about how he’s gonna bump you off.”

Piper looked over at Nora, and silently mouthed, “Nick.”

Nora nodded and headed up the stars as fast as she could without instantly alerting Meathead.

“Don’t give me that crap Valentine. You know nothin’. You got nothin’,” said Meathead as Nora took steps two at a time.

“Really? I saw him writing your name down in that black book of his…’lousy cheating card shark’ I think were his exact words. The he struck the name across three times…,” replied Nick.

Nora was on the landing, taking up a sight picture, and easing out her breath, “Three strikes? In the black book? But…” said Meathead, just before Nora’s shot entered the left side of his head.

He collapsed like a rag doll. Nora moved to the door, as Nick called out, “Hey you, I don’t know who you are, but we have about three minutes before they realize muscles for brains ain’t coming back. Get that door open.”

Nora checked the terminal. Password locked. But it was fairly easy to convince the poorly secured unit to allow her root access, at which point opening the door was a matter of selecting menu items.

The door hissed open, and a plastic skinned zombie with glowing eyes and metallic bones grinned crookedly at her. He was dressed in a shabby trench coat, khaki trousers, a white shirt, loosened tie, and a beat up fedora to complete the image.

“Uh…” started Nora.

Nick interrupted, “Gotta love the irony of the reverse damsel in distress scenario. Question is, why did our heroine risk life and limb for an old private eye?”

Chapter End Notes
It's only Nora's third full day above ground. She's had no reason to discuss economics yet. She's been missing out on some loot.

Also, she's on her best behavior at the moment. She has a way worse potty mouth, but isn't willing to let Piper see it yet. Although she is starting to have moments.

(I blame Nora's voice actor, Courtenay Taylor. No one one sounds better saying "fuck!" in the business...as Jack/Subject Zero in Mass Effect she raised to profanity to art form and it kinda bled through.)
“What…who…ahh…” Nora was rarely at a loss for words, but she was now. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting, but this hadn’t been it. With difficulty, she gathered her thoughts. When she looked at Piper, she saw the other woman smirking a little.

_She knew what I’d find. This is her getting even with me, by withholding a little piece of information._

“Ummm… I need you to find someone, but…it’s complicated. I don’t exactly know where they could be, or even exactly how long they’ve been gone,” she finally got out.

The metal zombie looked utterly unfazed, by any of this. He said, “I’ve done jobs with less. Somehow, ‘nice and simple’ never makes it onto the menu in my world,” he chuckled a little ruefully.

_He? It? No, he. Definitely ‘he’, not ‘it’. _

Nick continued, “I’ve been cooped up in here for days. Turns out the runaway daughter I came to find wasn’t kidnapped. She’s Skinny’s new squeeze, and she’s got a mean streak. Anyway, you got troubles and I’m glad to help. But now is not the time. Let’s blow this joint. Then we’ll talk.”

The three continued through the Vault with Nick in the lead. Through utilitarian barrack after utilitarian barrack, and up staircase after staircase. At one point Nick stopped, and muttered, “Another staircase?!? Who built this place, anyway? A fitness instructor?”

Nora snickered at that, and Nick glanced back and grinned. As they neared what Nora’s sense of direction said was the entrance, Nick turned. “Ok, we’re getting close. Skinny Malone and the rest of his boys are waiting for us somewhere. The name’s, uh, ironic. But don’t let that fool you. He’s dangerous.”

Nora nodded. As they entered what seemed to be the reception station, she motioned Nick and Piper to stop for a moment, while she hacked another terminal. What she really wanted was some kind of camera covering the entrance. What she got was secret Vault instructions.

_Well, of course. Wouldn’t be Vault-Tec with a dick move in here somewhere. Let’s see…a Vault for Boston’s elite? But all those barracks and stairs… OH! Oh ho ho. And wouldn’t THEY have been surprised? OK, occasionally even a dick has a point, but you aren’t off the hook, Vault-Tec asshats. Let me get ahold of one of you, and won’t you be surprised. One of you Vault-Tec pricks has to be a ghoul now._

Nora waved them to continue. Piper looked at her inquiringly. “Wanted to see if there were any surveillance cameras. No such luck,” Nora told her. Piper nodded.
The door slid open and the saw a man nearly as wide as he was tall, holding a tommygun. He was flanked by two more gunsels, and what Nora could only call “a Gangster’s Moll”, holding a bat.

Malone spoke, “Nicky, what are you doin’? You come in my house. Shoot up my guys. You have any idea how much this is gonna set me back?”

Nick shrugged, “I wouldn’t BE here if it weren’t for your two timing dame Skinny. You oughta tell her to write home more often.”

The moll interrupted. Her voice was somehow both hard and whiny at the same time, “Awww, poor little Valentine. Ashamed you got beat up by a girl? I’ll just run home to daddy, shall I?”

Skinny ignored her, and said to Nick, “Shoulda left it alone Nicky. This ain’t the old neighborhood. In this Vault, I’m king of the castle, you hear me? And I ain’t letting some private dick shut us down now that I got a good thing goin’.”

The moll whined again, “I TOLD you we shoulda killed him, but you had to get all sentimental. All that crap about the ‘old days’.”

Skinny glared at her, “Darla I’m HANDLING this! Skinny Malone’s always got things under control.”

*People who talk about themselves in the third person NEVER have things under control.*

Darla pointed at Nora and Piper, who were doing their best to be flies on the wall, “Oh yeah, then what are these dames doin’ here huh? Valentine must have called a couple wisegals to rub us out.”

Nora had had enough. She looked Darla in the eye, “You have no idea who you’re dealing with. NO one here does. For god’s sake, if I wanted you dead, your corpses would already be cooling. Now shut up and let me try and save everybody’s life here.”

Skinny looked at her. Was that a trace of fear she saw? Maybe. He said, “Hey! Who’s running the show here? You go something to say, say it to me.”

Nora went with ‘scared’. It was one of the best ways to exploit someone. “This is all just a misunderstanding, Skinny. You know that. You let us walk, and we don’t come back. You keep your vault,” she said, willing him to take the offer.

Skinny hesitated, wavered, then he went for it, “You and Nick and this broad here shoot up my crew and you just expect me to…” He growled low in his throat, “Rrrgh. Fine! You’re lucky I still owe him for the time back at that spooky-ass quarry. You get ONE chance to leave. Skinny Malone is putting his foot down. One….”

*AGAIN with the third person? You really should see someone about that, Skinny.*

Nora, Piper, and Nick walked quickly out of the Vault. Out of the Vault, and into a service passage and up a ladder into the Back Bay. Nick looked up and sighed. Without looking down, he said, “Look at that Commonwealth sky. Never thought anything so naturally ominous could look so inviting…” He looked over at Nora. “Thanks for getting me out. How did you know where to find me? Not many people knew where I went.”

“Your secretary, Ellie. She sent me.”

Nick smiled, “She did? I should give her a raise.” Nora looked him over. Did he have no idea? How do you even read a robot face? He continued, “Now you mentioned a missing person…come to my
office in Diamond City. Give me the details. Besides, I think you’ve earned a chance and clear your head.”

Nora shook her head. “I have a couple things to check on first. Maybe get you a lead? I’ll meet you in Diamond City.”

Nick waved. “See you in Diamond City…” He left headed west.

Piper raised an eyebrow. Nora shrugged, “I figure we should check out Goodneighbor. We’re close, and frankly the kind of asshole that would kidnap a kid sounds like he’d blend right in there.”

Piper looked thoughtful, then nodded, “Makes sense Blue. Follow me.”

The pair traveled several more blocks, dodging a small group of Super Mutants in a building, then came around a corner. There was a huge fence. In neon, it said “Goodneighbor” and there was an arrow pointing at a door. Nora shrugged and went through.

And came face to face with a large, imposing man in leathers. “Hold up there. First time in Goodneighbor? Can’t go walking around without insurance.”

Nora wavered between ‘reasonable’ and ‘smite’. This time she came down on ‘smite’, hard. “Unless it’s ‘keep-dumb-assholes-away-from-me’ insurance? I’m not interested,” she said, hand easing towards her holstered pistol. Piper snickered.

The man was not taking the hint. He looked over Nora, blue Vault suit, big brown eyes and all, and reached a very incorrect conclusion, “Now don’t be like that. I think you’ll like my offer. You hand over everything you got in them pockets, or ‘accidents’ are gonna happen to you. Big, bloody ‘accidents’.”

A slender, almost emaciated, ghoul in the most outlandish get up Nora had seen yet, a tricorn hat and red Colonial-era frock coat, came striding over quickly, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Time out. Someone steps through the gate the first time, they’re a guest. You lay off that extortion crap.”

The man glanced over, “What d’you care? She ain’t one of us.”

The ghoul opened his arms, and quirked his head to one side, “No love for your mayor, Finn?” The arms dropped and the mayor looked the man in the eye. “I said, let her go.”

Finn shook his head, “You’re getting soft Hancock. You keep letting outsiders walk all over us, one day there’s gonna be a new mayor.”

Hancock replied, “C’mon man. This is me we’re talking about,” he stepped forward and gripped Finn’s shoulder.

From behind his back, where Finn couldn’t see, but Nora could, he drew a nasty looking knife. Piper stepped forward, but Nora reached out and restrained her, shaking her head slightly. Hancock continued, “Let me tell you something…”

Then the knife was out, and plunging under Finn’s breastbone and into his heart, one, two, three times. Hancock sidestepped the small splash of blood and let Finn’s lifeless body fall to the ground. He looked down at Finn, and shook his head, “Now why’d you have to go and say that, huh? Breaking my heart here,” he looked over at Nora, “You all right sister?”

Nora shrugged. “I’m good. I could have taken care of him.”
Hancock took in her stance, the wicked little pistol in her shoulder holster, and then back at her, “You might’ve at that. Now don’t let this little incident taint your view of our little community. Goodneighbor’s of the people, for the people. You feel me?”

She nodded, “I feel you.”

He nodded once, sharply, “Good. Stay cool, and I think you’ll be a fine part of the neighborhood. As long as you remember who’s in charge.”

Nora looked right in Hancock’s eyes, “Of the people, for the people. I got it.”

“Well he’s a little more cutthroat than a typical politician. Just a little. But I can do business with him. I’ll have to remember that.

Piper was looking at Nora. Eyes like saucers. “What was THAT, Blue?”

“When in Rome, hon. When in Rome, you do what Romans do. Now the mayor of this little burb knows I’m safe. Reliable. Which I totally will be. Unless I need not to be.”

*Beijing Rules. Five: Go with the flow. And seven: Lull them into a sense of complacency. Nine, pick the time and place for action. Final rule: Keep your options open. Honey, this right here was a master class in it. From both of us. And you have no idea. But I think HE does. Yeah, I need to keep an eye on THAT guy. Hancock, was it?

Nora saw a shop across for the entrance, named “Kill Or Be Killed”. That seemed just the spot to convert a duffle full of pistols and submachine guns into bottle caps. As she walked up, a robot with a strangely female silhouette greeted her.

“Anything that can kill a man, I sell. Except suicidal depression. That is unfortunately not packageable,” it, no SHE, intoned.

“What are you?” asked Nora.

“I’m a woman, baby. Can’t you tell?”

“I can see that. A very…robotic…woman,” said Nora.

“Fine. I am an assaultron, designation K.L.E.O. I used to kill for other people. I decided to go into business for myself. Business was good, and now I’m a respectable businesswoman. Call me Kleo. Now are you going to do business or do I have to run a weapon test?”

“Nope. Let’s start dealing,” replied Nora.

A few minutes and a couple thousand caps later, Nora felt that she’d done well indeed.

“Let’s get a drink,” she said to Piper.

“But what about Nick? What are we even doing here Blue?” asked the other woman.

“First, selling loot,” Nora jingled her pouch, “and second, from everything I’ve heard about this place, it’s just the spot for that asshole that took Shaun to lay low, or not so low. And the best place to go to casually pump the locals is the local watering hole.”

Piper suddenly got an “Ah ha!” expression. “The Third Rail, then,” she said, “It’s THE Goodneighbor spot for drinks and casual mayhem. Just the kind of thing you’re looking for.”
The two went into the bar, and down the stairs into the Scollay Square T station, converted into a halfway decent nightclub. A very attractive woman was singing in one corner. She was good. Really good. Piper and Nora took a pair of stools, and ordered a pair of drinks…pre-war whiskey.

The woman wrapped up a set, and, after promising to return soon, walked over to the Mr Handy waiting bar, “One water, Charlie, thanks.”

“Sure thing Magnolia,” replied the Mr. Handy in a lower class London accent.

*Where the hell did he get THAT programming? Someone wants serious atmosphere here.*

Nora walked over, “Excuse me miss?”

Magnolia looked up, “Mmm? What’s the matter sweetheart? Don’t tell me you didn’t like the song.”

Nora shook her head, “Loved the song, it was perfect.”

Piper chimed in, “Nice set this evening, ma’am…of songs that is…,” then blushing deeply, “Gah! is it hot in here?”

*Oh for… That’s it, as soon as I get what I can from the nightingale here, I am soooo clearing the air with Piper.*

Magnolia smiled, sincerely, “Well thank you. A girl tries her best.”

The she turned speculative. She looked Nora up and down. “Now there’s something special about you. Don’t tell me, let me guess. It’s your eyes. Quick…intense. I bet you never miss a detail. Like what you see? So what brings you to my part of town?”

“What do you think?” asked Nora.

“We’re all trying to forget something aren’t we?” observed Magnolia.

“True, but in this case, I’m looking for someone. Who might be willing to take on some…very difficult tasks. For money and lots of it.”

“Oh hon, no man is worth that. But if you’re dead set, MacCready is in the back room.”

Nora nodded, thanked Magnolia for her time, and seemingly casually, but quickly, walked over to the back room. Her tension was for naught, though, as none of the three men inside were bald or scarred. Two of them seemed to be having what could only be described as a non-compete contract dispute. Ultimately, one of them, presumably MacCready, ran the other two, Winlock and Barnes, off.

“Whatcha staring at sister?” he asked.

“Looking for information,” said Nora.

“You’re outta luck, I’m the shooting people desk, not the information desk.”

“Have you ever run across a man, bald, scarred. VERY good at his job?” asked Nora.

He held out his hand. Nora counted out 25 caps. At his eloquent look, she counted out 20 more. He looked sour, but admitted, “Nope. No one like that.”

“I sure will, doll,” he called to her back.

Piper looked furious. “That absolute bastard,” she said, “He had the nerve to hit on you after cheating you?!?”

“Mmm hmm, he sure did. Let’s get a refill, Piper,” said Nora.

After Whitechapel Charlie refilled their glasses, Nora turned to Piper, and raising her glass, clinked it with Piper’s, then asked, “Do you mind if I ask a VERY personal question, Piper?”

“I make my living being terminally nosy, Blue. Be a tad hypocritical for me to say no, now wouldn’t it?” replied Piper.

“Are you a lesbian?” Nora said.

Piper sputtered as a bit of very good scotch went the wrong way. She managed to choke out, “What on Earth makes you think that, Blue?”

Nora began ticking items off of her fingers, “Well, first, every single one of your sexual Freudian slips has involved women,” she raised another finger, “Second, you’ve been pretty protective of me…”

“Blue, that’s just ‘cause you’re new…” Piper began. Nora shushed her with a look. Another finger went up.

“Third, whenever I catch you at it, you blush redder than a tomato,” at which Piper slumped back, looking defeated.

A fourth finger went up. “Last, but certainly not least, you’ve been checking out my ass for the better part of two days now, hon.”

Piper, blood red now, simply nodded.

“There’s my blushing girl,” smiled Nora, “Shall I turn around and let you ogle my butt some more?”

“Blue!” Piper exclaimed.

Nora laughed. Piper frowned at her and said, “It’s not fair, Blue. Yes, I’m a lesbian. Well, I would be if being Nat’s big sis slash mom left me any time for any kind of love life at all.”

“So how is it not fair?” asked Nora.

Piper, the dam having burst, seemed to lose all restraint. “Because you had a husband and a baby. Because you’re straight, that’s why!”

Nora shook her head. “Nope. Bisexual.”

Nora was getting a little vehement, and Piper was shocked into remaining silent. Nora continued, “Let me explain it another way to you. Nate used to play softball for his work team. He was a lefty, so he usually pitched,” Piper was looking confused, but Nora plowed on, “One of his co-workers, Dan Simons, was a switch hitter.”
Piper looked baffled. Nora rolled her eyes, “Dan was ambidextrous. Batted right or left. He wasn’t left or right handed. He used BOTH. And never, not once, did I hear Nate claim that Dan was just a left hander who couldn’t make up his mind!”

Nora looked right into Piper’s eyes, “I am bisexual. I find men AND women desirable. It was one of the reasons…well, anyway. I. Like. Girls. Too, Piper.”

Piper looked surprised. For several moments. Her eyes got big and she blushed again. Then she gulped down her whiskey.

Chapter End Notes

In game, the vendors money supply is capped, and Nora would have had to spread the selling around. Which is boring and redundant to have to write about, so I didn't.
Thanks For The Memories

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

They had couple more drinks at The Third Rail and listened while Magnolia worked her way through both Pre-War oldies and some new stuff which, as it happened, she’d written. By the end of dinner, Piper and Nora qualified as new fans. They also qualified as “inebriated” which led to Piper declaring that the two of them stay in Goodneighbor for the night.

“It’s already after dark, Blue. Even if we weren’t tipsy, I’d say we should probably stay. Under these circumstances…pffft! We have to stay,” she insisted.

Nora nodded. As they made their way to the hotel in town, she looked over at the Old Howard Theater. “Hey! What’s ‘The Memory Den’?”

“You got me, Blue,” Piper replied, “I try not to hang out here often.”

At the hotel the found that there was only one room, and that Piper and Nora would have to share. Piper, unsurprisingly, turned pink at that news. On a whim, and wanting to give Piper a chance to gather herself up, Nora asked the desk clerk about The Memory Den.

“Oh you’d love it,” she informed them, “Relive old memories, like you were there. Better even. The machine picks up all kind of stuff you don’t consciously remember. I’ve been a couple times. Always good to remind you of better times.”

Nora looked at Piper. “Don’t look at me, Blue. I’m not trying it.”

“C’mon. It’ll be fun…,” Nora was wheedling her friend, “Do you know how long it’s been since I did something just for fun? It’s been two hundred and ten years, and…um… 9 days, since I did something just because.”

Piper looked at Nora, looked like she wanted to argue, but gave in. “You win, Blue. Memory Den it is.”

The pair went down the street to the theater and walked in. Nora wasn’t sure what she had been expecting, but jasmine scented incense and soft music would not have been at the top of the list. They walked over to a blonde sitting, reclining really, in the middle of the room on a platform.

As they walked up, she looked them and down and then, “I think you’ve stepped into the wrong place sweethearts. You don’t look like you need the Memory Den. We let our selective clients sample the past. And we don’t accept just anyone.”

Nora smiled and said, “Why not?”

The woman, not even missing a beat, said, “It’s no secret that reliving a memory can be about having a good time, or it can be helpful in remembering something you’ve lost. But like anything worth doing, honey, it can have a kick to it. The first time can be…traumatic.”

Nora nodded. “You’re cautious. But I can handle it.”

Piper put her hand on Nora’s arm, and looked at her questioningly. Nora just nodded. Piper shrugged. The woman, observing the byplay, looked thoughtful, “Well there’s little enough harm in
giving you a trial run. Now, memories involving other people are easiest. Recent events involving loved ones. Anything come to mind?"

*What possible harm could there be? And I miss him so…*

“I lost my baby recently. Kidnapping. I’d do anything to see him again,” Nora stated.

The woman looked sympathetic, and said, “A missing child? That’s awful. I am so sorry sweetheart, but I think we can help. Have a seat. Dr. Amari? We have a new client. Can you find a memory about a baby? Our client is a mother.”

Nora walked over to a recliner inside some kind of high tech, wired up pod. Sitting down, the pod reminded her a little of the pods inside the Vault. These pods were clear, but still, Nora felt a blip of claustrophobia as the clamshell hissed shut.

She saw Piper walk over to Dr. Amari’s console and watch as the doctor turned dials, slid sliders, and did other inscrutable activities. Her claustrophobia was growing, but Nora suppressed it.

*I will NOT be some kind of fainting violet who can’t handle being in a damn cabinet!*

“All right. Scanning the hippocampus,” Amari paused momentarily, “Got something. Very recent. The temporal lobe return is strong.”

The proprietor called out, “That’s it. Lift the curtain honey. It’s show time.”

Everything went white.

When she could see again, Nora at first didn’t recognize where she was. In part because she wasn’t seeing it all from inside a pod. She heard Amari as if on a speaker, “Here you are. Your memory. Just relax, we’ll be monitoring the feed on this end.”

Nora heard Piper the same way, “This is so cool Blue. I can see everything. Where are you? It looks strange.”

Then the memory “spoke”. She heard it, again. “Manual override initiated. Cryogenic stasis suspended.”

*Oh God, Nate and Shaun! I can’t…I can’t watch this again.*

She watched a hazmat suit clothed figure consult the terminal. “Vault computers are still working. That’s good. Checking through the logs. Hopefully it’s all…”

*This is new. This must be what the desk clerk meant. I must have heard all this, but never really consciously remembered it.*

The man, that BASTARD, replied, “Just…just find it.”

*It? IT?!? They were my husband and son, you rat bastard fucker.*

The suited man pointed, “Pod C6, down the hall near the end.”

The killer and his accomplice walked down the hall. Nora followed, and saw herself as if from outside, staring through the pod window. She heard Piper calling, “Blue? Blue, tell me this isn’t what I think it is.”

*It should have been me. Why didn’t they take me?*
“This is the one. Here,” said that horrible woman.

“Open it.”

Why did you do this? Why?

Nate coughed and again, “Is…is it over? Are we OK?”

No…no, please no.

She saw the gun come out. And she heard, as if from a distance, Piper pleading with Amari, “This is when her son was kidnapped! Her husband was killed. You have to pull her out. Please!”

The woman pulled on Shaun, and the fatal tug of war between Nate and the woman started.

The killer pointed his gun, “Let the boy go, I’m only gonna tell you once.”

And then that horrible boom.

“Oh my God,” Piper cried.

The man shook his head, “God-dammit! Get the kid out here and let’s go,” he looked into Nora’s pod, “Least we still have the back-up.”

God DAMN you! I am going to kill you.

“Cryogenic sequence re-initialized.”

Nora heard Amari, “We’re reaching the end of the memory. You’ll be out in seconds. Try to calm down…your blood pressure is spiking…I’ll have you out in three…two…one.”

The world came back. As the clamshell hissed open, Piper was reaching in to help Nora out. As Nora stood up, Piper didn’t let go. She was hugging Nora, stroking her back, “Easy there sweetie, I’ve got you. I am so, soo sorry, Blue.”

Nora was crying. She couldn’t stop. Nora pulled her face back. Through her own tears, Nora could see that Piper was crying too. Nora laid her head on Piper’s shoulder. Piper kept stroking her back, and murmuring, “I’ve got you,” over and over.

When the two of them were able to look up and wipe away some of the tears, Amari and the Proprietor were looking stricken. “We had no idea, honey,” said the Proprietor.

“It’s OK. It may have been my fault. When the pod closed I was remembering the pod in the Vault. I think I may be claustrophobic now,” said Nora.

Amari spoke, “Anything I or Irma can do for you, ever, just ask. I can’t apologize enough. It takes time to shut off a lounger, and by the time your friend here realized what was going on, it was too late.”

Nora nodded. After a bit, she and Piper had calmed down enough that the short walk to the hotel wouldn’t be an invitation to harass two sobbing women. As they walked back to the hotel, Piper looked thoughtful then commented, “Always on good behavior aren’t ya?”

Nora was confused, “I…try to be?”

Piper continued, “Seems like you’re doing better than ‘trying’. Look at that situation. Most people
would have been yelling at Amari and Irma. But you let them off the hook. And stayed rational at the same time. Too few folks can be bothered. Course in my experience playing nice only gets you so far. I mean look at Diamond City, a place I’ve been trying to warn of real danger. But every issue I publish, all I hear is, ‘Ohhh Piper why don’t you ever publish anything happy?’, and ‘Piper, why can’t you write something nice for a change?’ It’s enough to make me want to hang up my hat some days.”

*I wish you would sweetheart. God, that is one ugly cap. I’d never say it to her, though.*

Nora limited herself to, “Sounds exhausting.”

Piper smiled. Nodding she said, “No kidding. But people, they deserve to know the truth. Sure, it can be scary knowing what’s really out there. A night doesn’t go by I’m not afraid some Institute drone’ll decide today’s the day to pay old Piper and Nat a visit. But it’s worth it. Because I know that the truth is what protects us.”

Nora raised one eyebrow, “Scared huh? Could’ve fooled me.”

Piper shook her head. “I’m pushy, not crazy. Honestly, these days I’m more scared for my sister. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to her. But I’m not the only one with something to lose. That’s why people deserve to know what’s out there, good or bad.”

Piper stopped walking and looked at Nora. Seriously, she said, “I’ve never told anyone else this before, but I’ve seen firsthand what the truth can do. My sister and I grew up part of the militia. ‘Keeping the raiders off our back, and the mirelurks out of the latrines,’ as he said. Well, one day, Dad turns up dead.”

Nora started to say something, but Piper shook her head. She continued, “His captain, asshole named Mayburn, claims raiders must’ve gotten him on watch. I didn’t buy it. Started making inquiries. Turns out, the captain had sold us out. Thought he wasn’t getting paid enough to babysit the town. He was gonna leave the gates open one night, let a group sack the place, and split the take. Dad found out and was going to turn Mayburn in, but Mayburn got to him first. And I wasn’t about let that bastard get away with murder. I tried talking to the mayor, but he wouldn’t listen. Sooo…I papered the entire town in posters, ‘Wanted for gross dereliction of duty: Captain Mayburn.’ The mayor sure wanted to talk after that. The town threw Mayburn out on his ass and were dug in when a VERY surprised group of raiders finally showed.”

Nora asked, “What happened after that?”

Piper shrugged. “We made do. Sis was still pretty young at the time, and mom was…out of the picture, so we got by on the kindness of others for a while. Eventually I saved up enough to book us both passage with a caravan and then we moved on up to the big city. Called it home ever since.”

*Why was your mom ‘out of the picture’? No. It can wait. The two of us have dealt with more than enough emotional trauma for one night.*

Nora held both of Piper’s hands in her own as she faced her. “You know you saved those people.”

Piper smiled as she shook her head. She said, “No. Those people saved themselves. Because they knew the truth.”

“I see what you mean, Piper. Will you always make sure I know the truth too?” asked Nora.

Piper was blushing again.
God, she’s adorable.

“You got it, Blue. Always.”

They finished walking back to the hotel, and made their way up all the stairs to their room. As they walked in, Nora looked at the bed, all made up neatly, and said “I don’t know what bugs me more, sleeping in this dirty jumpsuit, or sleeping in this jumpsuit, dirty.”

“What do you mean Blue?”

Nora sighed, “I have been wearing this stupid Vault suit for 4 solid days, and I have been busy. I’m surprised you aren’t making me sleep in the hall.”

“Blue, even I know that Vault suits are supposed to be quickdrying. And the hotel has a shower. So take one, and wash your suit at the same time. Hang it to dry,” Piper recommended.

“What?!?”

“Yeah, in Diamond City we get enough traffic in and out of Vault 81 that I know that your Vault suit is meant to be practically wash ‘n wear,” said Piper.

Nora raised a finger, and then thought twice. She stated, “OK. We’re gonna put a pin in that whole ‘other Vault’ thing and concentrate on the important part, which is that there is functioning plumbing available. Was there plumbing at your house?!?”


“You didn’t ask, Blue.”

Nora threw her hands up in the air. “Rrrrgggghh! Fine! I will be back in little bit. Maybe a long bit.”

With that she stalked out of the hotel room to the shower, Piper’s laughter chasing her down the hall. Once the shower was running, Nora washed and wrung out her panties, bra, and undershirt and laid them on the radiator to dry. Then she threw the Vault suit in, scrubbed it and set it aside and then went herself.

The water felt better than anything. Better than a meal when you’re starving. Better than sex. The water, and the soap, and the wringing out of all the stress hormones from her trauma in the Memory Den combined in a great, literally cleansing, wave of catharsis.

By the time she, reluctantly, left the shower, she felt truly human again. Enough, even, to forgive that whole, “You didn’t ask,” thing. Her panties and bra were dry, and her undershirt was barely damp. She put on her t-shirt and panties and carried the rest of her clothing back. She hung her Vault suit up in the corner and then turned fast enough to catch Piper in bed checking her out.

She smiled to herself. Piper really was adorable. And she seemed to actually care for Nora.

I have to admit. It feels pretty good when I catch her looking at me.

Nora slid into bed, with her back to Piper. She reached up and shut off the one light. “This was a day, Piper. I just wanted to thank you for what you did in the Den. “

She felt Piper shift next to her, “You could hear me?”

“Yeah. I heard you trying to stop the playback,” and goddammit, she was crying again. Would she
never get over this?

This time it feels different. Why does it feel different?

Piper heard Nora snuffling quietly in the dark, and reached out to stroke Nora’s shoulder. “Piper,” Nora said.

“Yeah, Blue?”

“Would you hold me? Just for a little while? Please,” asked Nora.

Piper slid over and put an arm over Nora, who sighed and snuggled back.

I almost forgot how much I like being Little Spoon. This feels really good.

A short while later, Nora’s breathing steadied out, and she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

The Old Howard Theater, aka The Memory Den, was the site the famous Mary Goodneighbor (stage name "Irma The Body") burlesque show that led to it’s closing in 1953.

So we can learn three things from that: the timeline divergence was sometime from sometime prior to 1953 to 1960 when the Old Howard was torn down after a fire, that Irma of the memory den is based on Mary Goodneighbor (including her looks), and that the Bethesda people did their research. Given some of the pictures of Mary I found online, we can also learn that at least one Bethesda staffer was paid to look at boobs during Irma's character design.

Who says research for fiction is a waste of time?

October 23rd, 2077 was Saturday. So when Nora says it's been 210 years and 9 days since she did something "just because", she's counting the four days she's been above ground and adding the five weekdays preceding the Great War.

When I was in the Army, we'd been on a live fire exercise (and gotten unbelievably dirty and sweaty) for 5 days when a water tank was put on our firing point. My Fire Direction Section sergeant and I ran out to shampoo our hair. Getting even a part of you clean, when you've been dirty that long feels exactly like I've described here. Oh. Also Piper is very lucky Nora is a forgiving woman. Shower blocking someone like that isn't funny.
Nora woke naturally. No Pip-Boy screaming in her ear. Just feeling Piper’s weight shifting the bed as she got up and walked over to her pile of clothes.

Wow. She’s even prettier than I first thought. Cute underwear. Whoops, she’s turning, close your eyes, close your eyes.

Piper leaned over Nora, “C’mon Blue. Time to move.”

Nora groaned, but rolled out of bed. Stretched and then walked over to her now clean Vault suit. There was still a rip where the gangster’s bullet grazed her. Her thigh, however, was clean.

Stimpacks. For scar free stupidity. If it weren't for ripped clothes, and major trauma, you’d never know people even got hurt.

She pulled the vault suit on, and strapped on her shoulder holster. Piper was watching her. “Where did you get that, Blue? I’ve never seen anything like it at Arturo’s.”

Nora gestured at the pistol, “This? A little something from before the war that I was saving for a rainy day.”

“And is it raining?” replied Piper.

“For the purposes of this metaphor? Pouring,” said Nora. “But weird rain. Like you were planning on an ordinary downpour and got lemonade and vodka rain instead.”

“I like lemonade and vodka,” said Piper.

“Yeah, this downpour has had its moments,” admitted Nora.

They made their way back to Diamond City pretty quickly. The area, the Common aside, was straightforward, and Nora was getting the hang of things. As they walked in, Nat came running up to them.

“Hey Nat, how are things,” said Piper.

“You’ll never guess. Yesterday in school, Sheng Kowalski tried to kiss me,” Nat replied.

“No! What’d you do?” asked Piper.


“Aw man!”

Nora watched the whole exchange with a fond smile. Piper looked up and caught Nora looking. She shrugged and smiled. Nora flashed her a thumbs up.

What am I doing? I’ve only been a mother for 5 months. Piper has been Nat’s ‘mother’ in all but
name for what, seven, eight, maybe nine years? She’s probably way better at all this than I am. Except diapers. I bet I have her beat there.

As they walked through the market, Nora glanced over at Piper, “Mind if I ask another personal question?”

“Oh god, here we go again,” said Piper. She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath, “Ok Blue. Shoot.”

“How old are you?” asked Nora.

“What?! You couldn’t have started with THAT one, and THEN worked your way up to ‘Do you like kissing girls, like, LOTS’?” Piper laughed.

Nora shrugged. Piper grinned, and said, “23. You?”

“26, going on 27, this New Years’ Eve. Hey! Is that a thing people still do?”

Piper chuckled, “If by ‘a thing people do’ you mean get plastered and find someone to kiss at midnight? Then yeah.”

Nora smiled at Piper, “That sounds like a plan, then.”

“What brought that on, if I might ask?” asked Piper, blushing.

“Well I was watching you with Nat, and it was totally sweet and adorable, and then I gave you a thumbs up, and it hit me.”

“What’s that, Blue?”

“You’ve been Nat’s ‘mom’ for way longer than I’ve been Shaun’s. I’ve only been a mom for a bit over 5 months.”

“Yeah, well you had to be pregnant too. Get huge,” Piper mimed holding an enormous melon in front of her, while she puffed out her cheeks.

Nora laughed, “Well, yeah, I was pretty big at the end there. But not the whole time. I barely showed when…”

Nora, will you marry me?”

“Nate, I told you that you don’t have to do this. I did not end up pregnant just to trap you.”

“No you didn’t. That’s not why I’m asking. I’m asking because we’re good together. Because we’ve been friends since before you had boobs. Although the boobs are nice now…” Nate waggled his eyebrows.

“Will you stop joking? I’m serious!” Nora said.

“Ok, I seriously want to marry you,” Nate said.

“Nate, dammit!”

“Miss McAllister, I want to marry you. I want be there for you and the baby. I want to build
something. I’m not dumb, you’ve told me why you had no choice. That doesn’t matter. I still want to make an honest woman out of you. Please be Mrs. Greene, Nora.”

“The boat on ‘Honest Woman’ left a long time ago, Nate,” replied Nora.

“Well, you aren’t quite a professional Liar, yet,” he said.

“That’s ‘Lawyer’, and that’s not what I meant…”

“I know what you meant, sweetheart. Still doesn’t matter. You know I’m just going to keep asking until I wear you down,” said Nate.

Nora covered her face with her hands. Finally, she nodded. “Yes. Yes, Nate, I will marry you.”

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“Anyway, you only get,” and here Nora held her hands out in front of her like she was cradling a pregnant belly, “And,” she blew her cheeks up, “the last few months. It’s not so bad.”

“I was fourteen when Dad got killed. Nat was five,” Piper said, “I’ve been ‘mom’ for nine years now.”

“Yeah, about your mom,” started Nora. She stopped. Piper was shaking her head, just barely, but this was clearly a dangerous topic. “Ok, Piper. Got it.” Nora nodded once, sharply.

“Thanks, Blue. Maybe someday,” Piper said.

“Ok, but I still know more about poopy diapers than you do,” said Nora.

Piper giggled. “I’ll bet you do, Blue. I’ll bet you do.”

By this time, they’d reached the Valentine’s Detective Agency Office. Nora opened the door. Nick was sitting in the back, and Ellie was sitting at her desk in front.

She got up and hugged Nora, “You saved Nick. And this agency. And my job. Thank you.”

_And I bet that’s EXACTLY the order of importance where you’re concerned._

Nora smiled at Ellie, “Happy to do it.”

Ellie stepped back, “Yeah, go diving into scary prewar ruins all the time do you?” The she handed Nora a generous pouch of caps. “Here. I know caps weren’t on the table when you agreed to do this, but I owe you. Big,” she looked thoughtful, “Y’know, we could sure use the help around here, and Nick could use a partner.”

Nick had gotten up and walked over. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. One case at a time Ellie,” he interrupted.

“Our friend needs our help first,” he turned to Nora and sat down in Ellie’s spot, “Take a seat. Make yourself comfortable.”

Nora sat in the “client chair”. Nick cleared his throat, “When you’re trying to find someone, the devil is in the details. Tell me everything you can, no matter how…painful.”

“You’d be surprised how many details I have, Nick” answered Nora.

Nick raised an eyebrow.
“Memory Den,” said Piper.

“Huh. How IS Irma?” asked Nick.

“Fine,” said Nora shortly, “Here’s what I know. We were frozen in Vault 111. A three person team came. They were looking for Shaun specifically. They looked everything up on the terminal. They went right to Nate and Shaun’s pod.”

Nick nodded, “You were on ice, and more importantly sealed away. That’s lot of obstacles to get out of the way for just one particular person. What else?”

“They killed Nate,” said Nora, “They were taking Shaun. He’s only five months old. There was a struggle and that man shot him the moment there was a problem. He was trying to keep them… from taking Shaun…and they…”

Ellie patted Nora’s shoulder, “It’s OK. You don’t need to say anymore.”

Nora shook her head, “No. I do need to.”

Nick steepled his fingers together. “Whoever took your baby had an agenda. There’s a LOT of groups in the Commonwealth that take people: Raiders, Super Mutants, Gunners, and of course, there’s The Institute.”

Nora asked, “Who are the Gunners? They’re the only group I’ve never heard of.”

“High-end mercenaries. No job too brutal. They’re in the running as likely suspects, but they wouldn’t be the ones pulling the strings.”

“So you think the Institute is responsible,” said Nora.

Nick nodded, “Something goes wrong, everyone blames them. Easy to see why. Those early model synths strip whole towns for parts, killing anything in their way. Then you got the newer models, good as human, that infiltrate and pull strings from the shadows. And worst of all, no one knows why. Not even me, and I’m a synth myself. A discarded prototype anyway.”

“Either way I need to find Shaun.”

Nick said, “Right. This speculation is getting us off track. Let’s focus on what you saw, what they looked like.”

Piper said, “Well, that’s going to be easy. We just sat through a repeat showing. He was big, bald…”

Nora finished, “…scar across his left eye.”

Nick sat up straight. “Wait…you didn’t hear the name ‘Kellogg’ did you?”

Nora shook her head. "No they never said their names. I’m sure of it.”

Nick sat back, “No, it’s way too big to be a coincidence. Ellie, what notes do we have about the Kellogg case?”

Ellie looked thoughtful, “The description matches. Bald head. Scar. Reputation for dangerous mercenary work, but no one knows who his employer is.”

“I think maybe we can make a guess now,” said Nick, “He bought a house here in town, right? And he had a kid with him, didn’t he?”
Ellie nodded as she pulled the file, “Yeah the house in the West Stands. The boy was about ten years old.”

*That can’t be Shaun. It just can’t.*

“Maybe it’s another kidnapped kid,” Nora said.

“Either that, or he has a son of his own. Not a comforting thought in either case…,” Nick shrugged. “Both of them vanished a while ago. Haven’t been heard or seen since. Let’s you and I take a walk over to Kellogg’s last known address. See if we can snoop out where he went.”

Ellie called after them as they headed out of Nick’s office, “Security doesn’t really go to that part of town. You guys should be careful.”

As they made their way down several alleys, and up a staircase lined with hovels, Nick looked over his shoulder, “I didn’t want Ellie to hear this, but you need to know. Everything I dug up about Kellogg before his disappearance was bad news.”

Nick turned, “He’s more than just a mercenary. He’s a professional. Quick, clean, thorough. Has no enemies, because they’re all dead…except you. Nine to one, he’s our man.”

Eventually they made their way to dead end alley. Nick examined the door. “Here we are…keep an eye out. That’s one heck of a lock… Why don’t you give it a try?”

Nora tried, but without a proper set of picks it was hopeless. Nick was watching. When she growled in frustration, he said, “No luck? Guess we need to find a key. Why don’t you check with Geneva at the mayor’s?”

He pointed up to the owner’s box, high above the field. Nora nodded and she and Piper headed back through the twisty little passages. They emerged near the market. A vendor hawking baseball bats pointed at Nora, “You there. You need a genuine hickory swatter.”

Nora frowned, annoyed, “What’s a swatter?”

The vendor chuckled, “Hah, a rookie…a swatter is a Diamond City tradition. It used to be that this whole place was a stadium. And two teams would meet and play a game called ‘baseball’. One team would beat the other team to death with things called ‘baseball bats’. The best bats were called Swatters. True fact.”

*I swear to god some days it is just not worth getting out of bed…*

“Hey dumbass, that is NOT how baseball was played,” Nora said, crossly.

The vendor replied, “Is that so, little Miss Smarty-Pants? If you’re such an expert how do YOU think it was played?”

Nora gazed off into the distance, “It was America’s pastime. A sport for everyone on warm summer days,” then she focused on the man again. “The two teams took turns on offense trying to hit the ball and move their people around the bases, and on defense to keep the other team from hitting the ball and moving their people. There were good pitches, called strikes, and bad ones, called balls. And it wasn’t violent,” Nora looked thoughtful, “Mostly.”

“Huh, that sounds much better than what I’ve always heard,” said Piper.

“I like my version better,” said the vendor, and Nora flipped him off as she strolled away.
Piper and Nora continued, and took the lift to the mayor’s office. Nora approached the secretary, Geneva. “I need some information about a house,” she said.

Geneva looked up, “The only house we got is available for 2000 caps.”

“That’s interesting, but I’m talking about the abandoned one in the West Stands,” replied Nora.

“Oh. That’s being foreclosed on. Can’t help you,” said the secretary.

“Please? I need to find my son, and I think the man who lived there may have something to do with his kidnapping.”

Geneva met Nora’s eyes, held them for a second, and then let her breath out. And pulled out a key. Set it on her desk. She looked at Nora, “I seem to have forgotten my purse. I’ll need to go get it. You should definitely not take advantage of my leaving this key here to look inside that house,” and with that she stepped away.

Piper quickly snatched the key. “Even I can read a straight line like that, Blue. Let’s go.”

They returned to the shack quickly. Nora just barely avoided running. When they arrived Nick was waiting, “Why don’t you do the honors?” he asked.

Nora opened the door and the three of them entered. Inside was a desk, a radio, a couple chairs, and some stairs up to a loft with a bed and sleeping bag.

“This place seem small to you?” asked Nick, who was pacing off distances. Nora searched around the desk. A small button was mounted on the left side. She pressed it and an entire wall slid open.

“Hello,” said Nick, “this is all a merc’s favorite things.”

Nora joined him the room and quickly and thoroughly went through the contents. “San Francisco Sunlights. His cigar brand, I’m guessing,” she said holding up a half smoked stogie.

“I bet you’re right,” replied Nick, “But how do we track them?”

“I have a ‘Very Good Dog’ back in Sanctuary,” Nora said, “We’ll have to go get him, but I think if we put Dogmeat on the case, he could track Kellogg.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Chapter End Notes

I love baseball, and I am so irritated by Moe Cronin that I literally will sit through an extra loading screen and sell to Becky Fallon rather than the guy. It’s gratifying to be able to flip him off finally.
Nick decided to join the two of them as they went back to Sanctuary to pick up Dogmeat. The three left Diamond City, headed north and west. After they’d walked for a bit, Nora glanced over at Piper. Ever since she’d called the other woman out for objectifying her backside, Piper had studiously avoided looking at Nora as they walked.

Nora leaned over and whispered to Piper, “You know, when I said you were checking out my ass for the better part of two days, I didn’t mean I wanted you to stop.”

Piper looked up sharply. Nora nodded and smiled. Slowly, Piper smiled back at her. Nora turned and walked ahead. A short while later, a thought struck her. She turned suddenly. Piper looked away abruptly. Nora grinned and called the other woman over. Piper looked a little guilty as she sped up to catch up with Nora.

“Blue, I…” she began.

“Oh pfft,” said Nora. “That’s not what this is about. I just remembered what you said last night about another Vault, 81 I think. I kind of forgot about it while I was concentrating on not strangling you. Where is this Vault anyway?”

Piper looked thoughtful and pointed in the general direction of Sanctuary, “About an hour and half that way,” she answered.

“Well,” the second voice drew out the word, “OK. I’ll allow it. Alert security that we have a visitor.”

“I’m from Vault 111. Can we please come in? I’m looking for other survivors,” Nora answered.

“Who is it?” asked a different voice on the intercom. Before Nora could repeat herself, the first voiced answered, “Someone from the outside claims they’re from another Vault. Vault 111.”

“Vault 111? Never heard of it,” commented the second voice, “If they want in they can earn it like everyone else.”

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“Vault 111? Never heard of it,” commented the second voice, “If they want in they can earn it like everyone else.”

“Pardon me, Overseer, but they DO have a working Pip-Boy,” said the first voice.

“Look, I’m just trying to find other survivors and see how they’re doing,” interrupted Nora.

“Well,” the second voice drew out the word, “OK. I’ll allow it. Alert security that we have a visitor.”
The door screeched open, and the gantry extended. Nora, Piper, and Nick crossed over. The Overseer, a woman in what looked to be her late 40s watched the procession of Nora, Piper, and Nick with a little bemusement. She took in Nora in her Vault suit, and reached out to shake Nora’s hand. “Vault 111, huh. That’s a new one. How is it doing?”

“It’s a crypt,” Nora reported, bluntly. “I’m the only survivor.”

“Oh my god,” said the Overseer. “You’re from yet another dead Vault. I’m afraid we seem to be an outlier. We’ve been pretty much self-reliant since the war. We only opened up about 10 years ago, when we ran critically low on some essential trace minerals for our diet.”

Nora nodded. “I think maybe you got lucky. The two Vaults I’ve been in, including my own, seem to have been set up as rather unethical human experiments.”

The overseer looked distressed but not entirely shocked. “We’ve begun to suspect that Vault-Tec was not the benevolent organization we had thought it was. What happened to you?”

*I don’t see any duplicity here. I don’t think these people are part of anything suspicious. Fair enough.*

“Every one of us was put in cryosleep. I don’t think they ever intended to wake us up. I’m not really sure what they hoped to learn, nor why I was awakened. Not yet at least,” Nora said.

“Cryosleep? Then you’re…”

“From before the war. Yes. I watched one of the first bombs to hit Boston go off, just before I went underground,” Nora answered.

Piper touched Nora’s arm, “Blue? You were there? I mean, I knew you were from before the war, but you SAW the bombs?”

“Bomb. One bomb. Big. Went off southwest of Boston.”

“Southwest? But that’s the…” Piper started.

“You were from before the war?” interrupted the Overseer, “I have so many questions.”

Nora nodded. At that point it was abundantly clear that the three of them were now valued guests. The overseer took them down to her office. They talked for a couple hours about the world before the bombs, when the Overseer, whose name was Gwen, glanced at her Pip-Boy. “Oh good lord. I’ve kept you here far too long. I can’t possibly let you head out tonight. Since I’m the one who lost track of time, I’d love to be your host at least for the night. We have a several rooms we can lend you. I can give you meal chits, and I’d love to continue this talk.”

Nora glanced over at Piper. “Don’t look at ME, Blue. Do you have any idea how many articles I’ve gotten out of this little talk?” said the newspaperwoman.

Nick nodded. “And I’ve just been enjoying tales of the old days. I don’t remember the bombs. Went in for my memory recording a week before the end.”

“WHAT!?!?” three voices said simultaneously.

“Get dinner. I don’t need it, but you guys do,” said the synth calmly.

As they waited for food, then ate, then enjoyed an after dinner drink, then two, all three women
listened, rapt, as Nick laid out his history.

Nick had been a cop in the Boston Police Department just before the war. He’d joined the BPD for the express purpose of heading up a combined BPD/State Police effort to bring down Eddie Winter, a notorious crime boss from South Boston. The operation had gone horribly wrong, and Nick’s fiancé, Jennifer Lands, had been kidnapped and executed, presumably by Winter’s men.

The flesh and blood Nick Valentine had slipped into what was clearly clinical depression. His supervisors had sent him to some CIT researchers to have his brain scanned. That was the last thing Nick the Synth remembered of his pre-war life. The next thing Nick Valentine remembered, he was waking up on a trash heap in South Boston.

After a while he made his way to Diamond City, by way of rescuing the mayor’s daughter from raiders. Apparently, he bluffed them into believing that he was rigged to explode by beeping at them. By this point in the evening all three ladies found the story incredibly hilarious. The vodka may have had something to do with it. Nick’s deadpan delivery didn’t hurt. At first, Nora thought Nick was incurably matter-of-fact, but slowly she was realizing that Nick had the wickedest, driest sense of humor she’d ever encountered.

The night grew late, and eventually the two humans went to bed. Nick ran diagnostics and self-repair subroutines. It amounted to the same thing. The next morning, as the three of them were getting ready to leave they overheard a guard talking about “the poor boy.” They went looking for the Overseer and found her in discussion with the Vault’s Chief Physician.

A boy of about ten had been bitten by a molerat. He was dying. And apparently, there was a whole other, “secret” Vault for him to have been bitten in.

“I wonder,” said Nora as Gwen laid out the chain of events that had led up the boy, Austin’s, illness. “Maybe you got lucky, and the ‘secret’ vault never managed to do whatever Vault-Tec intended.”

Gwen looked furious, “Either way, one of my people is sick, and the only answer lies in the ‘other’ vault. I hate to ask but…”

“Done,” said Nora. “You don’t even have to ask. I’ll see what we can find out. If there’s a way to help Austin…”

A woman next to Gwen almost sobbed with relief. “Please, stranger. Save my grandson.”

As security led them to the newly discovered passage, Nora leaned over to Piper and whispered, “When exactly did I become ‘Shane’?”

Piper looked baffled, but Nick snickered. “You heard that?” asked Nora.

“Sure did. High gain audio receptors,” he replied.


“Just remember how Shane ended up,” said Nick. Then he leaned over and whispered in Nora’s ear, “Plus, Shane never had a girl as cute as Piper drooling over HIS backside.”

Nora broke down. Piper was looking on, confused. “What are you two talking about,” she asked.

Nora waved a hand, “Nothing, Piper. Pre-war stuff. Don’t worry about it.”
Soon enough, they were at the entrance. As they made their way into the secret vault, Nora and Nick traded off hacking terminals.

_This place was SERIOUSLY fucked up. I thought cryosleep was bad. These people were supposed to be lab rats. If Vault-Tec’s screening hadn’t screwed up and selected an Overseer with a conscience they’d all be long dead._

That first Overseer had waited until events forced his hand, and then isolated the ‘secret’ Vault from the regular Vault. That secret Vault had been conducting bioweapon trials, and concocting vaccines at the same time.

_No point in making a weapon as dangerous to your own people as the enemy._

Based on the notes they were reading, there was a better than even chance there was some kind of cure somewhere in here. But the terminal entries also spoke of unusually large, aggressive, and clever molerats.

So the first attack didn’t take them by surprise. Before the first molerat even burrowed up under them, the three had worked out a plan. Nick, the one of them utterly immune to bioweapons by virtue of possessing no “bio” to speak of, would draw the molerats out, while Piper and Nora shot everything that moved that wasn’t one of the three of them.

For a wonder, the plan worked perfectly. Molerats fruitlessly gnawed at Nick, and Piper and Nora sent a legion of furless, burrowing mammals to whatever rodent Valhalla they might find themselves in.

They checked every desk and office they came across, without success. Nora was about to reluctantly throw in the towel when the three found a door sealed by a fairly difficult to hack terminal. Nick and Nora, working together, were able to coax it into cooperating.

The door hissed open, and as they entered, shut behind them. Up a set of stairs, they found three lockers on their sides. Each locker had a name and a neatly folded lab coat on it.

A short distance away, there was a window looking into a room with a Ms. Nanny in it. Its eyestalks focused on them, and it said in a French accent, “Oh. A stranger. Are you Vault-Tec security? I’ve waited so very patiently for you to arrive.”

_Might as well go along with it._

Nora nodded, “Yes. Yes, I am.”

The Ms. Nanny all but clapped her manipulators together, “Superb! I placed an emergency call so long ago. I was beginning to think something dreadful must have happened. I am pleased to report that I completed my primary duties 83 years ago. Thousands of pathogens were grown in the mole rat hosts. Then a single broad spectrum cure was developed to treat them all. Vary satisfying work for many decades. Now please tell me you are authorized to release me from the lab.”

_She has a CURE! Austin needs that, desperately. Anything I have to do or say…_

Nora smiled at the robot, “Oh I am SO authorized. You are released.”

The Ms. Nanny introduced herself, “I am Contagions Vulnerability Robotic Infirmary Engineer, or ‘Curie’. Since you are authorized, I entrust you with broad spectrum cure I developed. However there is only one dose left, and I can no longer make any more. If you have any equivalent to my Hippocratic Oath, please use this where it will do the most good.”
Curie invited herself to accompany them back to the main Vault, which was fine as far as Nora was concerned. When they got to the infirmary, Nora handed the cure to Gwen. “Use this,” she said, “I hope to god it works. It better for all we went through getting it.”

They all waited with bated breath, while the doctor injected the boy. Horrible minutes passed as they waited. Then Austin stirred, and his eyes opened. The infirmary erupted in cheers and sobs of happiness. Nora stood a little off to one side, her shoulders slumped in relief. She felt a skeletal hand grip her shoulder.

She looked up into Nick’s sympathetic, glowing eyes. “You did good, Nora,” he said. “I should know. I’ve spent two lifetimes trying to do the right thing. I can tell you don’t believe it about yourself for some reason, but you’re a good person. You know,” he went on, “It took me a long time to realize home is where you make it. “

He looked into Nora’s eyes, “With some time, and effort, and some luck,” and at that he nodded his head at Piper, celebrating with the Vault folks over Austin’s recovery, “This place can be home for you too.”

He gave her shoulder a final squeeze and stepped away, to let Nora be alone with her thoughts.

After a few minutes, her reverie was interrupted by Curie. The robot glided over and fixed Nora with all three eyes. “I have a favor to ask. May I travel with you? I wish to see, and observe, and gather data to further human knowledge. I fear that will be difficult, if not impossible, within the confines of this Vault.”

Nora shrugged, then smiled at the robot. “What the hell,” she said, “The more the merrier, Curie. Come on.”

The group, two humans, a synth, and a robot left the Vault and headed north, towards Sanctuary. Curie very nearly drove Nora to distraction with all her flitting about, gathering samples. But Nora revised her opinion about half way back to her former home.

Curie had collected yet another plant sample, when she turned to Nora and stated, “I have formed a hypothesis.”

Nora blinked. “What?”

“A hypothesis. You observe that all the vegetation appears dead or dormant, no? And yet, when you test the grass it is moist. Many trees which appear lifeless are in fact resilient and growing.”

“You know, I had noticed that twigs that should have been brittle were in fact moist and green, yes.”

“Superb! My spectrographic scans show that while much of the vegetation in the Commonwealth appears utterly lacking in chlorophyll, it is in fact rich in beta-carotene and lycopene.”

Nora looked confused. Curie explained. “Beta-carotene and lycopene are lesser, but still capable, photosynthetic compounds. I believe,” and here Curie floated in a manner that looked for all the world to Nora as if she were lecturing a college classroom, “That evolutionary pressures have stripped most vegetation of chlorophyll based photosynthesis.”

Nora gave Curie a “go on” gesture. “You see, when vegetation began to regrow after the bombs, I believe that green grass and trees were an invitation to animals to feast on them. Whereas trees and grass that used more beta-carotene and lycopene for their photosynthesis remained brown, and hence, did not invite predation.”
Curie’s eyestalks bobbed, “And thus while it APPEARS dead, we are in fact surrounded by vibrant, living plant life.”

Nora’s eyes widened. “Oh, I get it! I was so sure that this world was dead. It’s not, is it?”

Curie rotated her torso in a gesture analogous to shaking her head. “No, Nora. It is not. It is very far from dead. In places you find life similar to what existed prior to the war. But in others,” she gestured with a manipulator, “Different. But full of life. Vital. Life is endlessly inventive, Nora.”

“Different. But not dead. Not hopeless,” Nora glanced over at Piper, sharing a joke with Nick as they walked. “No. Not so hopeless, after all. Thank you, Curie.”

Chapter End Notes

I did a fair amount of research, and the beta-carotene/lycopene argument is in reality, specious.

Having said THAT, it's also as close as I can get to something that sounds plausible. They ARE photosynthetic compounds. They are not green, and would be mainly brownish. Where it falls down is that there is a REASON chlorophyll is the chemistry of choice. It's way WAY more efficient. So if you were using beta-carotene and lycopene you’d need a larger light gathering area. And no, the bark becoming that surface isn't enough. Trees would need MORE leaves, not a total absence. Oh well, it gives a lovely little poetic moment between Curie and Nora, and moves this volume's central narrative of "Nora loves Piper" along some more.

(Book 1 goes along the main plot, but it's about Nora and Piper's relationship, Book 2 will cover the back half of the main game and covers Father and Nora's relationship. Book 3 will cover the DLC...well Nuka-World and Far Harbor...and [REDACTED]'s relationship.)
The four travelers finally headed up the hill and around the bend leading to the bridge to Sanctuary. Sturges and the others had been busy. They’d put up a makeshift wall around the suburb. Sturges had even managed to get his hands on the materials to make a few automated turrets. Which became obvious to the group when, as they crossed the bridge to the main gate, a pair of the turrets trained their guns on the four.

Nora froze, and gestured for the rest to freeze. She put her hands up. “Hey!” she yelled, “Like to come on in! Please?!”

After a tense minute, Preston came running up. He pressed a button, and Nora heard a click, and then the machine guns resumed a random sweep of the area along the bridge and far bank of the Concord River. “There you go. I had them remember all of you as friendlies.”

“Can’t be too careful,” Nora nodded, “You guys have been busy.”

“Well, your robot has been a big part of it. He pretty much finished up furnishing your place by the end of the first day, then he and Sturges just went nuts, as you can see,” said Preston, smiling.

“I’d say,” nodded Nora, “Preston, these are my friends, Piper Wright and Nick Valentine of Diamond City, and Curie, a robotic doctor from Vault 81.”

Nora indicated each of them in turn. Preston smiled hugely, “Ms. Wright, I love your paper. I really appreciate everything you do to keep people informed.”

Piper blushed, as Nora turned and half-jokingly said, “See, Piper? There’s at least one fan!”


Preston looked genuinely outraged. “That’s their problem, Ms. Wright. You ever need anything from the Minutemen, from a quote to a guard unit, you just let me know.”

Piper smiled at Preston. “I like you,” she said, “You ever need a story told, you get ahold of me.”

“I hate to break up this little love-fest you two have going on, but I need to find Dogmeat, and,” checking her Pip-Boy, “Get everybody set up to spend the night tonight.”

The group, plus Preston, headed to Nora’s house. Codsworth had outdone himself. The house had furniture, including a bed. There was also electricity and running water.

“Codsworth! Sturges!” Nora yelled. Both of them came running, or floating as the case might be, looking worried. She grinned at them hugely and swept them both in a huge hug. Sturges looked baffled, and Codsworth was patting her, “What could possibly have come over you, mum?”

Piper cleared her throat. “She seems to have this bizarre plumbing fetish, guys. Sorry about that.”

Nora laughed and stuck her tongue out at Piper. Then she hugged Sturges again. He gently patted her shoulder as if he wasn’t really sure what to be doing. Nora let him go, and turned to head for the
shower. Sturges cleared his throat. “Ah, ma’am? I need to talk something through with you and Preston.”

“Sturges, as my Knight in Running Water, you have but to ask,” said Nora. Piper rolled her eyes.

“Well, we got power up and running,” Sturges started, “And a purifier going, and water lines. We even have some crops in and growing. But, well, that’s kind of the problem.”

“Indoor plumbing is never a problem,” stated Nora. Piper mouthed the word, “Fetish,” to Preston and Sturges. Preston snickered, but Sturges plowed on.

“I didn’t feel right bringing this up to Preston without you ma’am. The way I see it, this is kind of your town. But we need people. Jun and Marcy can barely manage the farm alone, and there’s just too much repair and building that has to get done for me and Codsworth to help them. Preston needs more guards, and Mama Murphy…well she needs a doctor.”

“Is there something wrong?” Nora started.

Sturges shook his head, “She’s just old ma’am. But she needs more than casual first aid sometimes, and none of us are in a position to help. We need people.”

“You said that before,” said Nora, “Since you’re you, I’m guessing you have an idea.”

Sturges nodded. “Sure do. I can rig up a recruitment radio beacon. I’d bet we could bring a batch of folks in to really grow this place into something. But…”

“But?” Nora asked.

“If we put a up a beacon, we could attract the wrong kind of attention too. And this is your home, ma’am. I reckon you have the right to tell us not to chance it.”

Nora looked at Sturges. She swept her arm around. At the wall. At the generator chugging away up the street. At all the construction work around her. “Sturges. If anyone has a right to claim ownership of Sanctuary, it’s you. Not me. If you say you need more people, then do what you need to. Make this a city. One to be proud of.”

Curie floated forward, “If you have someone in need of a doctor, please take me to them.”

Sturges nodded. “So you’re a doc, miss?” he asked.

“Among other things. I am a scientist, but medicine is one of my many fields of study,” said Curie.

As Sturges and Curie left to see Mama Murphy, Nora called out, “Sturges, in case I wasn’t clear, you feel free to fire that beacon up!” She turned to the rest of them, “Now if you’ll excuse me…”

Piper laughed, “I’m surprised it took you this long to shoo us away, Blue.”

“You can just run along, Thing.”

A little more than half an hour later, and driven mainly by a lack of more hot water than by satiation, Nora left the shower. She found a new Vault suit, and a fresh set of panties, bra, and t-shirt. Piper, who’d heard the water shut off, called, “They went and looted the Vault the day after you left. Brought back anything that might be useful.”

“Ummm…” began Nora, as she dressed.
“I had the exact same thought, Blue. I asked what they did about the bodies. They told me that they put up an inscription on each, well, coffin I guess. Preston said some words. He and Sturges wanted you to know they were careful with everyone, but especially your husband,” Piper came around the corner.

“You OK?” she asked, looking concerned.

Nora looked thoughtful. She nodded. “Maybe the fact that we’re right on that bastard’s trail is focusing me on something other than crying about Shaun all the time.”

Piper shrugged. The two women went out, and across the street, where Sturges was using a metalworking bench. Nora patted his arm, and he flipped up his welders mask. “Hey Sturges, can you do me a favor? I need you to make something,” she said.

“Sure thing, whatcha got in mind, ma’am?”

“Well I need two or three torsion wrenches…” she began. At his quizzical look, she explained, “They look a bit like Allen wrenches, but the short ends need to be thin, to go into locks. They’ll need to be strong, but not too rigid.”

Sturges nodded. Nora continued, “Then, I’m going to need a full set of picks. They need to have several different shapes…” she started sketching them out. Sturges was nodding. As they wrapped up, Nora looked at him. “Thanks Sturges. I’m sick and tired of trying to make bobby pins and a screwdriver stand in for a proper pick set.”

Piper was watching the whole thing and looked at Nora and said, “You really do have a talent for finding trouble. You know that?”

Nora’s lips quirked, “I don’t really try. It usually finds me.”

Piper grinned, “Hey, I’m not one to judge. Honestly it’s just nice to not be doing this alone for a change. In my line of work, things can get pretty hairy. I’ve been shot at, poisoned, nearly executed. Heck, they call the lock up in Diamond City ‘The Piper Suite’. Anything for a story I suppose.”

Nora looked shocked, “Someone poisoned you?!?”

Piper nodded. “Are you kidding me? I barely had the paper GOING before I got poisoned,” she said.

“The first time,” she continued, “I published an article about a caravan cartel that was conspiring to drive up food prices in the city. Article went over well, even got a boycott organized. So I pop over to The Dugout for a victory drink.”

She looked rueful, “I’d already taken a swig when I realized something was…wrong. Vadim wasn’t at the bar. The beer tasted off, more so than usual. And I start feeling real woozy. To this day, I don’t know what he slipped me, but right then I knew I had to get it out. So I’m looking around for something, and there it is. The still. I just start CHUGGING moonshine. I’m still not totally convinced it was better than just dying from the poison. But it worked. Bleaugh!” Piper mimed throwing up. Epically.

She smiled, “And while I was passed out on the floor, security managed to grab the bartender. He rats out his bosses and they all get to share some time in the pen.”

Nora shook her head, “You lead an exciting life.”
Piper looked at Nora thoughtfully, “Never more than I have with you. Getting in trouble is what folks like us do. I just want you to know I’m real happy to be along for the ride.”

Nora smiled, “I feel the same, Piper. I like having you close.”

Piper nodded happily.

Nora said, “On that note,” and led Piper around the corner to the doghouse that Codsworth had built for Dogmeat.

Nora crouched down and said, “Dogmeat? This is Piper,” she pointed at Piper, “She’s a friend.”

Dogmeat’s tail thumped, and he nosed Piper’s hand, getting a good sniff in. He looked at Piper, wagged his tail a couple times, then yawned.

“OK, big guy. See you in the morning. We have a big day ahead of us,” Nora nodded, as Dogmeat headed off to do his doggie thing.

At that point, Curie returned. “Nora, I am afraid I must stay here for a bit. These people are in dire need of a doctor. Mama Murphy is on the verge of congestive heart failure, and will not cease trying to get chems.”

“If you think so, Curie. You would know better than the rest of us what’s needed,” said Nora.

“I must, yes. But there is no reason that my responsibility to my Hippocratic Oath must stop my scientific inquiry. This area is rich in biodiversity.”

Nora gave Curie a serious look, “Good. I would hate to keep you from your research.”

After dinner, Nick offered to give Preston a full night off by patrolling the wall while Piper and Nora headed for Nora’s house. When they got there, Nora looked at Piper, “Why don’t you take the bed…”

Piper looked mischievous. “Nope. I’m the non-paying guest in YOUR house. You, bed. Me, couch. I wouldn’t say no to a blanket though.”

Nora laughed. “How long have you been holding onto that one?”

Piper just looked smug. Nora went on, “I don’t think we have any blankets, Piper. But I do have the sleeping bag Codsworth first made for me.”

“Sounds perfect, Blue.”

Nora got the bag, and laid it out on her couch. Piper stripped down to her underwear and slipped into the bag.

_Damn. She just keeps getting better looking. And now she caught me looking. I am not going to live this down. Nope, not if that grin is anything to go by._

Nora turned and went down the hallway. She heard Piper behind her. “This bag smells like you, Blue.”

“Gee Piper, I’m sorry. It didn’t look dirty…”

“No, no! It’s nice. It doesn’t smell bad, it just smells…you. I like it,” Piper said.
“Well OK then. Good night, Thing.”

“G’Night Blue.”

Chapter End Notes

I always figured Preston, as someone recreating the very beginnings of the country, and Piper, upholder of one of its core requirements of a free press, would get along way better than just the, "S'up?/Not Much" bit of dialog you get in game.

Also, I continue to play with Nora's shower thing for some time. That total lack of plumbing early on really scarred her.

The torsion wrenches and real picks give Nora the ability to pick any lock in the game now. Plus, c'mon. Bobby pins??

One of the things I set out to do was come up with story based reasons for what happened in game. If one were to play the game, with minor side quest detours, with a mod that allowed multiple companions, THEN at about this time in the game, you would get your first "flirt" dialog with Piper. The logic of the task I set for myself has Piper and Nora move right along, as you will see. (In point of actual fact, I had to walk away from the "romance" dialog in order to have where we'll get to it in the novel, so if you mimicked my play through, you'd almost certainly have a romance with Piper prior to when Nora and Piper finally stop circling each other in the story).
Nora woke in the pre-dawn darkness.

Today. Well, today or tomorrow. I’ll have Shaun, and that bald rat bastard fucker will be dead. And then everything will be OK. It’ll be over. Maybe I can even settle down with my baby, and…

Nora sat up, unable to sleep any longer. She got up, dressed and went out to look at the stars. There were so many. Light pollution was minimal, even with power and lights now working in Sanctuary, and she could clearly make out the Milky Way.

The last time I could see it this clearly was back in Alaska. I hope it’s not an evil, if pretty, omen.

Nora shivered, and suddenly, she felt Piper come up behind her and put a hand on one shoulder. Nora turned. “Cold, Blue?” asked Piper.

“Not really, just thinking,” Nora replied.

“Soon, Blue. Next couple days for sure, you’re going to get your baby back,” Piper looked a little wistful.

“I was just thinking the same thing. So I can’t sleep. Obviously.”

“Well, it’ll be light in a couple hours. I know I’m always going on about traveling in the dark…” began Piper.

Nora chuckled. Piper continued, “So you know what it means when I say, let’s get started now. Right now. The sooner we get started, the sooner Dogmeat finds Kellogg, you get Shaun back, and get on with your life.”

Dogmeat, having heard his name, trotted up and looked the two women with his head cocked. “Want to help me today, boy?” asked Nora.

He woofed once. They went out to collect Nick and start out for Diamond City. After waking another guard, they left Sanctuary and retraced their steps to Diamond City.

As they walked southeast towards Fenway, shortly after a gorgeous dawn, Piper looked over at Nora. “So, you’re not an idiot,” she said.

“Um. Thanks, I guess?” said Nora.

“No! No, Blue. Not like that, I mean you’re the one person I trust for advice. About my sister. Becoming me.” Piper looked troubled.
“Becoming you, how?” asked Nora.

“Well, you’ve seen me. One mess after another. My mouth getting me into trouble almost as often as it gets me out. Nat looks up to me. So much so that she seems to be taking on my less endearing traits. I’m hoping some time apart helps cool her off. She can go back to being sweet innocent Nat, papergirl and all-round upstanding citizen,” said Piper.

“You know you just described yourself, right?” asked Nora.

“I’m serious Blue! How do I get her to be better than me?”

“You don’t, Piper. You love her, you raise her as best you can, and you never forget she’s your family. She will be who she’s going to be,” Nora looked right at Piper, “And you don’t really get to decide that part for her. You just have to love her no matter what. Believe me.”

Piper nodded and was very quiet for the rest of the walk.

They got to Diamond City shortly after noon. After a brief meal break at Power Noodles, they went over to Kellogg’s abandoned shack. Nora entered, retrieved Kellogg’s used cigar, and let Dogmeat get a good long sniff.


Dogmeat bowed, wagged, woofed once and started down the alleys, leading Nora and her friends. He made his way directly to the exit, and out the front gate. He headed off down Brookline Avenue for a quite a ways.

Once they reached Chestnut Hill, he stopped and began casting around. Nora saw a small campsite nearby on Chestnut Hill Reservoir, and found another one of Kellogg’s old stogies. Dogmeat picked up the scent almost immediately, and turned up a set of the old Boston and Maine Railroad tracks.

When they reached the Mass Pike, they found a pile of dead raiders, a couple expended stimpacks, and a bloody rag that Dogmeat took one whiff of and barked to continue on.

*Rag’s dry, but these guys haven’t been looted yet. They can’t have been here THAT long or the scavengers, animal and otherwise, would have been here.*

Dogmeat continued along the B&M railbed until they came to the Commonwealth Avenue bridge across the Charles. As they passed south of Forest Grove, they were ambushed by a batch of ferals.

*What is it with these things? They’re like speedy zombies. Mindless. As long as you stay observant, and they don’t get too close, it’s pretty straightforward. Bloody. Disgusting. Depressing. But straightforward.*

A bit further up Commonwealth, they came across another battle site. This one had a partially functional Assaultron, in three pieces, calling out. “Alert, Alert.”

“What happened here?” asked Nora.

“Threat level Omega. He….killed…us,” the Assaultron buzzed, before returning to its mantra of, “Alert, alert.”

After that charming scene, Dogmeat led them up to an intersection and then took off cross country. Eventually he led them to a fence. There were signs every fifty feet saying “Property of the US Army. Keep Out.” Dogmeat led them along the fence, and to a hole, where the entire group decided...
not to Keep Out.

After they went through the fence and up the hill, they found themselves on Yankee Division Road, in Ft. Hagen. As they approached the front doors of the headquarters, Dogmeat began whining and scratching at the barricaded entrance.

“Is this it boy? Is he in here?” asked Nora.

Dogmeat woofed.

Nick looked around. “Well this entrance is a bust. When need to find another way in.”

“It’s getting dark,” observed Nora.

“So?” said Piper. “Blue, we’re within spitting distance of your baby. If you think I’m even thinking of taking a break before you get your baby back, then you really don’t know me.”

Nora gave Piper a grateful smile. Nick just looked determined, and said, “What she said, Nora.”

Dogmeat just woofed once. Nora looked at them all, her friends, with tears in her eyes. She took a deep breath. “Thank you,” was her only reply.

After a moment, Nora led the group around the side, to a parking garage. “Usually places with a garage have a way inside directly from the garage,” she observed.

“Scratch usually,” called Piper, “Make it definitely.”

Nora looked over. Piper was standing in front of an open access door. Smiling.

Nora gave her a grateful look, and the group entered. Forced to go up by barred doors, they climbed two flights, but froze as they heard artificial voices talking about searching the area for possible intruders. Nora drew a deep breath. She looked at her companions…her friends. She gave them a look. Both eyebrows up.

There’s no going back from this, Nick, Piper. From this moment on, we’ll be on the Institute’s radar.

Nick nodded once. Piper gave her an inscrutable look, and her eyes were watering, but then she nodded imperceptibly.

And then it started.

As they moved through the upper office level a synth found them and as their combined shots took it down, and they heard more coming for them.

“Now I understand, you are hiding because your fear death,” said one before a combination of shots from Piper’s 10mm and Nora’s custom pistol shredded its head. The enemies were seemingly endless, but there were moments that Nora would remember to her dying day.

Like the time she came around a corner, and two turrets and three synths opened up. As Nick and Piper fired wildly, Nora leapt forward to hack a terminal behind a pillar. As she gained access and then rooted the two turrets and turned them from threat to ally, firing on the synths for them, she looked down. Her left foot was two inches from a mine that had been left in front of the terminal.

Or when she had just finished disarming a door trap trigger just as a synth opened the door. Staring up and goggling at the cavernous barrel of the laser it was pointing at her moments before she heard Piper screaming and firing over and over into it.
Or when, as they worked their way to a sub-basement a door opened and a turret swept the area Piper had been standing in seconds earlier. But where she was no longer because Nora had tackled Piper to the floor and was covering her as Nick shot and blew up the turret and the synth next to it.

As they approached the entrance to the command center, Nora heard a voice that slithered up along her spine and then crushed her spirit.

“If it isn’t my old friend the frozen TV dinner. Last time we met, you were cozying up with the peas and apple cobbler.”

Oh god. It’s him. It’s the monster. I want to kill him. The real question is “Can I?” Am I good enough? Or is he going to kill me, and Piper, and my friends? Have I led her to her death?

Shaking her head, Nora led the group to the final door to the command center. “Sorry your house has been wrecked for 200 years. But I don’t need a roommate. Leave.”

_Canned Orders Over Loudspeaker. Just when I thought I couldn’t hate him more._

As Nora and her team dispatched a group of synths near a commissary, he said, “Heh. 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.”

_No, asshole. I will NOT be “chewed up”. Pass, thanks._

The constant taunting over the intercom was having the opposite effect that Nora imagined he wanted. Rather than increasing her apprehension, she could feel her resolve growing. As long as Kellogg had remained a threatening enigma, she had feared him. Now, increasingly, she just wanted him to Shut Up.

As she made her way through a service tunnel he continued to inadvertently encourage her. “Look. You’re pissed off. I get it. I do. But whatever you hope to accomplish in here? It’s not going to go your way.”

_I’m going to get my baby, kill you, and then…_

As she reached the final complex, she saw an open door into an armory. Inside were grenades, ammo, and an M24 Sniper Rifle with a suppressor attached.

_There HAVE been times when I really haven’t wanted or been able to have to get close. This pistol isn’t adequate for all situations. I think I’ll just take this, thanks. Have to sight it in properly before I can use it though._

Slinging the rifle over her shoulder, she handed out grenades and ammo to her friends. Except for Dogmeat. But then, he had teeth.

“You’ve got guts and determination, and that’s admirable. But you are in over your head in ways you can’t possibly comprehend.”

_You are a sick and twisted man. Ridding the word of you is a public service. On the other hand, I can’t kill you twice as dead, so what do you have to lose trying to taunt me, you frightened…_

_Hey! He’s scared. He never thought I’d make it out of the vault. Let alone reach him in his lair. And now I’m coming for him. I’m practically ON him. He’s scared. Holy shit! HE’S SCARED._

As if he wanted to confirm her thoughts, “It’s not too late. Stop. Turn around and leave. You have
that option. Not a lot of people can say that.”

Nora shook her head grimly. This conflict, the fight coming up, was as much moral as physical. And she suspected she’d already won.

As she reached what she assumed was his room, she heard him sigh. “OK, you made it. I’m just up ahead. My synths are standing down. Let’s talk.”

Nora took a deep breath and looked over her friends. Piper was watching her. Nick was just nodding.

“So how do we play this?” she asked them.

Nick started to say something, but Piper stepped up. “You make him give you your baby, Nora. And if he doesn’t? You fuck him up until he does.”

Nora looked at Piper in shock. There was no mercy in the other woman’s face.

She’s as angry as I am. Why?

Oh! Oh, Piper.

“Right,” Nora nodded once.

As they walked into the control center, the lights came up, and Nora faced the man who’d haunted her dreams for the last week. Bald, vicious. Flanked by two synths. He stepped out from behind a console, and as if playing to the cheap seats, he spread his arms and spoke. “And there she is. The most resilient woman in the Commonwealth. You came a long way. Let’s hear it.”

Nora was in No Mood. “Enough! Just…where is my baby?”

Kellogg shrugged, “Lady, I’m just a puppet like you. My stage is a little bigger is all. Shaun’s a good kid. He’s doing great. Only, he’s not here. He’s with the people pulling the strings.”

Nora’s fist bunched up as she stared at the one person she hated more than anyone she’d ever hated before. “Tell me where is, damn it.”

Kellogg smiled maliciously, “Fine, I guess you’ve earned that much. Shaun’s in a good place. Where he’s safe and comfortable and loved. A place he calls home. The Institute.”

Nora looked into his eyes. He wasn’t lying. “The Institute? Well I will find him, no matter where he is. Nothing will stop me. Nothing.”

Kellogg sighed, “God you’re persistent. I’ll give you credit. It’s the way a parent should act. The way I’d be acting if I were in your place, I like to think. Even if it is useless. But I think we’ve been talking long enough. We both know how this has to end. So…you ready?”

Nora glared at him. “In a hundred years, when I finally die, I hope I go to Hell so I can kill you all over again, you son of a bitch.”

At that, the synths opened fire, and Nora rolled to her left. The room was filled with consoles, cover, and furniture to hide behind. This fight was rapidly going to turn into a lethal game of Hide and Seek. As if to punctuate her thoughts, Kellogg disappeared. Literally, as he activated a Stealth Boy chameleon unit.

Piper shrieked incoherently and out of the corner of her eye Nora saw her kick a synth trying to
grapple her, then empty her pistol into it. At the same time, Nick was thinking ahead. He pulled the pin on a frag grenade, and tossed it at the feet of the other synth.

As it went off, Nora heard the synth’s dying buzz, but also a muffled curse. There was spurt of blood.

“Piper, fire up the left side. Nick, fire up the right side. He has to reveal himself sometime,” Nora called. She was trying to keep track of 30 seconds until Stealth Boy deactivated.

*Although there’s no guarantee he doesn’t just have another Stealth Boy.*

And then Dogmeat got involved. His nose didn’t give a damn about the Stealth Boy’s chameleon field. He smelled blood. And his person and her mate were in trouble.

He grabbed Kellogg’s arm and shook it. Kellogg swore and clawed at the dog. But the damage had been done. The two humans and the synth could tell where Kellogg was by where Dogmeat was. All three pistols spoke, over and over and over.

Kellogg collapsed as Dogmeat yelped. Nora ran up to Dogmeat. He had a hideous gash along one flank. She pulled a stimpack and injected him. At the same time Nick covered Kellogg with his pistol. But Kellogg was a corpse.

As Nick prodded the corpse with his foot, Nora searched him. The arm, where Dogmeat had worried at him, was torn and metal stuck out of his body. More than that, in the ruins of Kellogg’s head was a gleam of circuitry. Grimacing, Nora reached in and pulled it out. Her grisly trophy secured, she looked up at Nick and Piper.

“Good job, Nora. That bastard won’t be hurting anyone else,” said Nick.

Nora nodded. “So we know my son is in the Institute, but we still don’t know where the Institute is.”

Nick shook his head, “Even I don’t know and they built me.”

Piper said, “There has to be a way, Nick.”

Nick shrugged, “We’re in the weeds here. We need to look at this from a different angle. Let’s head back to Diamond City and work out our next move.”

Nora looked at Dogmeat. He was hurt badly. She unzipped her suit and pulled her t-shirt off and began tearing it up for bandages. As she bandaged him up, she started rigging out a sling arrangement.

*If I take Kellogg’s jacket, that could be the body of a sling. If I tore the top of the vault suit and used it as strapping, I could rig a something like a fanny pouch. For an 80 pound German Shepherd.*

As soon as she figured out what Nora was up to, Piper helped her set up the sling to carry her friend.

Once Dogmeat was situated and Nora felt reasonably comfortable, they headed for the exit. Nick had opened the main doors to the command center, and a nearby elevator activated at the same time.

“Well that’s convenient,” observed Piper.

“Don’t care,” said Nora, “I suspect Dogmeat is not gonna get any lighter the longer we take.”

The three entered the elevator, and pressed the top button. The ride was brief. As the door opened, they could see the sky though a transom window. It was still dark. They opened the door, and
stepped on the roof. Above them was an enormous airship, lit up with spotlights, with Vertibirds circling it in the pre-dawn twilight. A loudspeaker crackled.

“People of the Commonwealth. Do not interfere. Our intentions are peaceful. We are the Brotherhood of Steel.”

The airship glided slowly eastward, towards Boston.

“That can’t be good,” said Piper.

Chapter End Notes

The title, of course, refers to the line in the poem "The Second Coming" by WB Yeats:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

I suspect that Books 2 and 3 will also have titles based on the poem ("Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” is just MADE for this story, candidly), but this is the only one in Book 1. But Kellogg is, if nothing else, a rough beast.
The small group made its way to the ground and then headed east themselves. Since they could head straight to Diamond City with no detours, it only took a few hours, but by the end of it Nora’s back and shoulders were burning. Dogmeat seemed to sense that he was being cared for, and didn’t struggle in the sling. He whimpered from time to time, but Nora and Piper were always quick to stroke his head or scratch his ear to comfort him. But he did weigh 80 pounds, and by the time they trudged through the Diamond City gate, Nora HURT.

They immediately went to Doctor Sun at the Mega-Surgery Center.

“If this is a medical emergency, we’d better get you looked at right away,” he said.

Nora half turned, showing him Dogmeat. “Here’s the patient doc,” she said.

“You must be joking,” he replied.

“Not even a little. Look, I know this is irregular, but I have a ton of caps, and he’s my friend. Fix him. Please?”

“All right. Even if he is a dog, it’ll be nice to do something other than take care of plastic surgery patients. Put him on the table over there,” said Sun.

Nora carefully backed Dogmeat onto the table. She gave him a pat, and said, “This is the doctor who’s going to help you. So even if it hurts some, let him, OK?” Dogmeat whined, but held still as Sun began to probe at the dog’s wound.

Piper poked Nora’s shoulder. “I think maybe a little modesty might become you, Blue.”

“Huh? Oh!” said Nora as she realized that, aside from her bra, she was now topless. “You got anything that might fit?”

Piper nodded, “Sure. But I think it’s time to spend some of your cash on clothes for you that don’t scream, ‘I’m a Vault Dweller, mess with me,’ to every raider and thug in the Commonwealth.”

She led Nora in to Fallon’s Basement. Inside, Becky Fallon was surly, but did have the kind of thing Nora was looking for. In addition to dresses and slacks, she had a stock of more robust clothing. Nora selected a several sets of fatigue pants in black and green, several shirts that were various dark colors, and a black denim vest, covered in pockets and loops. That last was needed for storing some of her munitions, as well as her lockpick set.

She also selected a set of rugged boots. The boots from the Vault suit hadn’t really been designed for the kind of walking she’d been doing. Once she was fully outfitted, and extras delivered to Piper’s office, she shrugged into her shoulder holster, and slung the sniper rifle slung diagonally across her back.

“Now you don’t look like a walking ‘Victim Here’ sign, Blue.”

“Still with the ‘Blue’?” Nora rolled her eyes.
“Absolutely. You may be the model of a modern major wastelander,” Piper said, “But you’ll always be Blue to me.”

The three left Fallon’s and headed for Valentine’s office. Once there, Ellie fussed over Nick as the three discussed what came next.

“So now what?” asked Nora.

“Well, I’ve been investigating these creeps for over a year now. The Commonwealth’s boogeyman, feared and hated by everyone,” started Piper.

“True enough,” said Nick.

“Sometimes they snatch people in the middle of the night. And sometimes they leave old synths behind, to remind us they’re out there. But to this day,” Piper continued, “There’s one thing nobody really knows…”

Nick chimed in so that they both said, “…Where the Institute really is.”

Nick alone added, “Or how to get in.”

Piper nodded. “Exactly, but one person knows. Knew. The guy who just handed them Shaun. The person we had to kill in Fort Hagen.”

Nora looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “Man like that would’ve had access. In and out,” she mused.

Nick interrupted, “But we all know that angle isn’t going to work.”

Nora looked stubborn, “You have any other ideas? Piper?”

Piper shook her head. Nick said, “Talk about a literal dead end.”

They sat there. Piper looked especially dejected. “A murderer and a kidnapper gets his brains blown out by an avenging mother,” she sighed, “It’d be a great ending if we didn’t still have the biggest mystery in the Commonwealth to solve…”

Nick sat up straight, “‘Gets his brains blown out.’ Huh…his brains. You know, we may not need the man at all.”

Piper gave him a worried look, “You’re talking crazy here Nick. Got a fault in the ole sub-routines?”

Nick was on a roll. Nora was starting to see why the original Nick, and Nick, Version 2, were and continued to be such an effective detective. Once he had his teeth in a problem, he just kept picking at it.

“What about the Memory Den? If anyone could get a dead brain to sing, it’d be Dr. Amari,” he said.

Nora looked up at him in shock, “God, I hope you’re right Nick.”

Nick looked thoughtful now, “We’re gonna need a piece of Kellogg’s brain. Enough gray matter to bring to Amari and see if this is going to work.”

“Jesus Nick…Gross! Seriously?!” said Piper.

Valentine looked at her and spread his hands, “What choice do we have, we’ve got no leads.
Nora held up the piece of tech she’d retrieved from the shattered mess that had been Kellogg’s cranium. “Actually, I think I already have something. Kellogg had….this thing…attached to his head.”

Piper looked nauseated. “Ewww, Blue! Not you too!”

Valentine smiled at the disgusting melding of flesh, metal, and plastic. “Cybernetics, huh? We may have just won the lottery.”

The three headed out and Nora ran over to Nat. Piper looked confused, until Nora brought Nat over to the Mega-Surgery. As she introduced Nat to Dogmeat, his tail thumped a couple times. Nora paid Sun, and then put a pouch full of caps in Nat’s hands.

Nora looked at Nat seriously, “So you’ll take care of him for me while we’re gone? You can use the money to buy food for him,” she looked up at Piper, “It’ll be OK for him to stay at the Publick, right?”

“Jeez, Blue. You should know you don’t even have to ask. Of course he’s welcome. For as long as you want,” Piper answered.

The three arrived in Goodneighbor a short while later and immediately headed for the Memory Den. When they entered, Nick led the way, and as he walked in, Irma looked up, “Well, well, Mr. Valentine. I thought you had forgotten about little old me.”

Nick smiled, “I may have walked out of the Den Irma, but I’d never walk out on you.”

Irma looked past Nick to Nora and Piper. “Oh, my darlings! How nice to see you again, even if you are hanging around with this shameless flirt,” she elbowed Nick, “What can we do for you?”

“We really need to see Dr. Amari, Irma,” said Piper.

“She’s downstairs in her lab. Head on down, ladies.”

As they entered the lab, Dr. Amari looked up and said, “Hello. I take it this isn’t a social call?”

Nora gestured at the detective, “This one is all yours Nick.”

“We need a memory dig Amari, but it’s not gonna be easy. The perp, Kellogg, is already cold on the floor.”

Dr. Amari’s eyes widened. “Are you three mad? Putting aside the fact that you’re asking me to defile a corpse you do understand that the memory simulators require an intact, LIVING brain to function? I know I owe you, but I can’t change physical laws for you.”

Nora gave the Doctor a pleading look, “Please. You’re the only one that could make this work.”

Nick added, “This dead brain had inside knowledge of the Institute Amari. The biggest scientific secret of the Commonwealth. We need this.”

Dr. Amari closed her eyes briefly, “Fine. I’ll take a look. But no guarantees. Do you have…it…with you?”

Nora held up the cybernetic interface. “Here’s what I could find.”
Amari took it from her, and looked at it, “What’s this? This isn’t a brain! This is…wait…” she rotated the thing and turned it over, “That’s the hippocampus. And this thing attached to it. A neural interface?”

Nick nodded. “Those circuits look awfully familiar.”

Amari looked up, “I’m not surprised. From what I’ve seen, all institute technology uses a similar architecture. Institute technology being what it is, we could use Nick and the implant as a substitute for a living consciousness. But it’s an incredible risk…we’re talking about wiring something to his brain.”

Nick chuckled, “I’m well past my warranty date anyways.”

Nora squeezed Nick’s shoulder and looked into his glowing eyes. “I really appreciate this Nick.”

Nick patted her hand, “You can thank me when we find your son. Let’s do this. If I start cackling like an old grizzled mercenary, pull me out, OK?”

Nick walked over to a memory lounger and sat down. He gripped the armrests tightly.

Dr. Amari hooked up several leads to the thing Nora had given her. She called over her shoulder, to Nick, “Keep talking. Any change in your neural state could be significant.”

Nick sounded like he was in pain, “There’s a lot of flashes…static…I can’t make any sense of it.”

Dr. Amari’s shoulders slumped. “That’s what I was afraid of. The mnemonic impressions are encoded. I appears the Institute has one last failsafe.”

Nora walked over to Amari and looked down on the chunk of metal and flesh that she had literally ripped out of Kellogg. But her question was, “Is Nick going to be OK?”

Amari nodded. “Yes. The connections appear stable. It should be as simple as unplugging once we’re done.”

She looked thoughtful. “The encryption is too strong for one mind…what about two? We load you AND Mr. Valentine into memory loungers and run your cognitive functions in parallel. He’ll act as a host while YOUR consciousness drives through any memories we can find.”

Nora nodded. “Whatever it takes. Let’s get started.”

She entered the other lounger in the lab, and as the clamshell hissed shut, once again felt a stab of fear.

*This is ridiculous. I have been through way worse than an enclosed space.*

But her subconscious said, *Bet me,* and continued to do its best “trapped animal” imitation. Then the world went white.

She found herself in a formless space that was weirdly more comforting than the inside of the pod.

She “heard” Amari’s voice as she floated. “Can you hear me? Good. The simulation appears to be working, but the memories are quite fragmentary…there…”

Some kind of Structure appeared in the distance, and Nora moved to it as if on rails. “This is the earliest intact memory I can find. Remember, you will experience these memories AS Kellogg. So there will be some disorientation.”
Nora arrived in Kellogg’s memories. For better or worse, she was committed.

Chapter End Notes

In order to out it Nora in a non-sucky outfit way for the rest of my playthrough, I relied on (and highly recommend) Eli's Armor Compendium by Elianora. She does excellent mod work.
There was a boy sitting on a bed. A woman was sitting next to him. A radio was playing and from beyond the room, through a door, Nora heard, “Turn down the fuckin’…”

As she turned to face the noise she learned that Amari had not been kidding. It WAS disorienting. She had thoughts that weren’t her own slithering through her brain. It wasn’t like when her “evil” self spoke. Nora knew that her “evil half” was really herself, the pragmatic part of her that worried about WHAT got done much more than HOW it got done. This was entirely different. It was a casual but skin-crawlingly intimate “conversation” with Kellogg.

*Dad was either drunk or not around. I guess he must have run with one of the raider gangs but…I never really knew what he did. I never knew why mom was with him. Maybe at some point in his life he wasn’t a complete asshole.*

The radio mentioned a “vote” in “Shady Sands”, and something called the New California Republic. The woman looked up, “What a joke…”

*Mom knew how it was. She wasn’t…soft, but, uh, she loved me in her own way. And she protected me from dad. That cost her. I never knew what happened to her after I left. I didn’t WANT to know. Not then, anyway.*

The woman handed the child a .44 magnum revolver. A familiar one. In some sense everything that led up to this moment had started with a woman giving a child a gun.

*I was such a dummy back then. What did I know about how the world worked? I think now she wanted me to kill him. I should have. Instead, I ended up running away. I told myself I wanted to find somewhere out from under the thumb of the NCR and all their rules. But really I was running from the guilt of not protecting her from dad. Doesn’t matter now though.*

The woman gestured at the radio, “All that nonsense on the radio…”

*People always hoping for something better. They usually ended up with something worse.*

Amari cut in, “This doesn’t seem to be what we’re looking for. There’s another memory ‘close’ to you in the temporal sequence.”

*And again Nora was off, swooping along to another piece of “reality”.*

A man that looked a lot like Kellogg, but with hair, was talking to a woman washing dishes in a kitchen, while a baby napped in a nearby crib.

The man was gesturing, “It’s going to be fine…”

*The thing about happiness. You only know you had it, when it’s already gone. You may THINK that you’re happy. But, uh, you don’t really believe it. Focus on the petty bullshit, the next job, whatever. It’s only looking back, by comparison with what comes after, that you understand, “That’s what happiness felt like”.*

The woman turned to talk to Kellogg. Through the window, Nora saw the Golden Gate.
I thought San Francisco was my chance to start fresh. I was the hot shit, the gunslinger from the Hub, rolling into town with the world at my feet. Everybody knew I was the one who’d shot Valdez, and I could write my ticket with any outfit in town. It all worked out pretty damn well for a while.

Kellogg was talking to the woman, “…Sarah, you got to give it a chance…”

I was the worst thing that ever happened to her. If she’d never met me, she’d have stayed in the Hub, maybe hooked up with someone who didn’t…kill people for a living. Probably been happier than she was with me. Almost certainly lived longer.

Kellogg was really trying to get Sarah to believe his line. He’d pulled his gun, and was gesturing, “…This is what’s going to keep you and Mary safe…” Which Nora found more than a little specious as an argument given that at that exact moment the rat bastard fucker MORON was pointing the gun RIGHT AT the baby…

Whatever made me THINK a guy like me should have a daughter? I never deserved her…not for one second.

Amari called, “Let’s keep looking.”

The next structure was a utility tunnel much like the ones she’d been through at Hagen. Ironic. Even more so, when she realized there weren’t any Kellogg memories to access, just a sense of red rage. A voice taunted Kellogg over loudspeakers.

“How did you THINK this was going to end Kellogg?”

The voice sounded psychopathic.

“You thought you could fuck with us and we wouldn’t fuck with you?”

There was a giggling edge to the voice that Nora found supremely disturbing.

“Just so you know…they died like dogs. And you weren’t there to help them.”

She heard Amari. “I found another memory to try. I’ll connect you.”

Nora thought, What happened to your wife and child doesn’t fucking EXCUSE what you’ve done. I have had horrible shit happen to me, and the only, the ONLY, people who’ve suffered are the fucks responsible for it. I’m NOT you, you douchecanoe.

With that firmly decided in her own mind, Nora swooped to the next vignette.

It was in a bar. Kellogg sat as two men approached him. He looked bored.

I didn’t care where I was going. Ended up mostly wandering east. Getting as far away from San Francisco as I could, maybe.

Nora looked over at the bartender.

I don’t remember much from that time. It all kind of blends together. There was almost always a bar, though. That’s universal.

One of the men was speaking, “…care of people’s problems…”

There was always a job for someone like me. Didn’t matter what it was, didn’t matter who I was supposed to kill. I got pretty good at it.
The other was speaking, “..pay you when the jobs done…”

There was always SOMEone who wanted someone else dead. Sometimes just roughed up, but… ahh…dead was usually what they wanted. Sometimes they thought they could cheat me. That was usually only when I first arrived somewhere. Didn’t matter to me. I just took it as part of the job. A little extra thrown in for ‘free’. I always got paid in the end, one way or another.

Nora heard Amari call her, “I think we’re getting closer.”

She heard Piper say, “Well that asshole Kellogg is starting to look like himself, so yeah.”

And Amari, “Try this next one.”

The next structure looks like a warehouse, and there were four synths, with a woman in a white lab suit sitting behind a desk. Kellogg was in front of them.

The woman was talking, “…glad you decided to meet…”

I finally ended up in the Commonwealth. I kind of ran out of road, plus I’d come to terms with life. I wasn’t going to be stupid enough to get mixed up with caring about other people again. It was just me against the world. And the world had it coming.

Kellogg was talking, and he seemed foolishly confident, “…I wanted to see for myself…”

You heard all sorts of rumors about the Institute, but I figured they were just a convenient bogeyman for anything bad that ever happened. They were real, all right, but they didn’t know anything about operating on the surface. Relied on their synths for everything. They had the resources I needed, and I had the expertise THEY needed. Turned into a permanent arrangement, which suited me just fine.

Kellogg was trying to muscle his way into the Institute. Based on how things turned out Nora figured that she knew how it would go. Sure enough, when the woman said. “Initiate” and four synths went down in about 10 seconds, Nora wasn’t exactly surprised.

The first synths weren’t all that impressive. I’m good, but I’m not THAT good. But the Institute could always make more, and kept making them better each time. They still give me the creeps, but…you have to get used to them if you want to work with the Institute.

The woman’s inhuman calm as she negotiated the term of Kellogg’s employment after all four synths went down made Nora suspect she was their supervisor, a human form synth.

“…now, about your offer…”

Nora heard Amari, sounding a bit like she was talking to herself at this point, “Getting warmer. One of these HAS to tell us something. We’re running out of brain here…there’s one…”

There it was again.

“Manual override initiated…”

And from Amari, “Oh god, not again. Hang on, we’ll try to get you through this as quickly as possible.”

Nora looked at the suited figure hacking the terminal. “…computers are still working…”

The ‘eggheads’ never liked taking orders from a dirty contaminated degenerate like me. But they needed me and I made sure they knew it.
There was new information here. As painful a third run through was going to be, there was NEW INFORMATION.

As Amari said, “I’ve found another intact memory. Whenever you’re ready,” Nora instead focused on Kellogg.

*I was now the Institute’s main operator in the Commonwealth. If they needed something done, they came to me. It wasn’t usual for anybody from the Institute to come along on a mission, so this one stood out. I didn’t know THEN who it was we were grabbing from the vault. Of course neither did they. Not really.*

“What are you doing Blue? C’mon, Nora. Get out of there,” said Piper.

Nora ignored her friends. The suited man was speaking, “...Pod C6, just down…”

*I never knew why we didn’t immediately refreeze the rest of them, but we had our orders. ‘Suspend life support, wait, then refreeze the remains.” I guess the old man didn’t want so many loose ends. Too bad he left alive the ONE person he shouldn’t have.*

Nora mentally noted every death in that Vault as, “The Institute CHOSE To Do This,” as well as putting another mental card in the “Why was "I" left alive” file. But she added a card to the new category, the “Why refreeze them after they died?” file.

“Jesus Blue,” said Piper, “Why don’t you leave? Are you so cold blooded as to go through that again, just for little more information?”

Kellogg had pulled his pistol and was pointing it at Nate, “…tell you once…”

*I’m glad I didn’t have to kill the kid. I’m not saying I haven’t done it, but…ahhh…I never like to. But it was better this way. Better than taking his kid and leaving him alive.*

Kellogg was looking at Nora in her pod. And she felt how bizarre the situation was. She was seeing herself through his eyes, even as she knew what homicidal thoughts were flowing in that woman inside the pod.

*Even then I knew it was a mistake, leaving her alive. I understood that kind of revenge, no one better. But I was cocky enough to assume I could handle a soft, pre-War Vault Dweller, even if she somehow got thawed out. At least I know those Institute bastards will soon get what’s coming to them too. If she could take ME out, they won’t be able to hide from her for long…*

And the Amari was calling, “I’m…sorry you had to go through that, yet again…”

And she was swooping again. It was Kellogg’s shack. There was a boy of about ten listening to the radio and Kellogg was cleaning his weapon. The radio had Diamond City Radio station playing. Travis, the DJ, was talking about Piper’s article. “….Piper’s really done it this time…”

“That’s the day before I met you, Blue! We know when this happened!”

Nora sighed in relief. That boy COULDN’T be Shaun. She’d met Piper just two days after she’d left the Vault. This was literally the day she’d rescued Preston, and fought the Deathclaw.

*This whole setup in Diamond City was part of some elaborate plan of the old man’s. Seems obvious now that we were bait for our friend from the Vault. The timing couldn’t have been an accident. That’s not how the old man works. I wonder if he outsmarted me in the end. Another ‘loose end’ tied off.*
Travis was going on and on. “…The mayor…ummm…he’s going to be really mad…”

It wasn’t my idea to settle down in Diamond City with the kid. I thought it was terrible idea, actually. But it was one of the old man’s pet projects, so here we were. Me and the kid like a happy little family. I ended up kinda liking it. A reminder of what my life might have been if things had turned out differently. But there’s no going back. I knew it was just temporary, and it would be back to normal business before too long.

A black man in a leather longcoat stepped into the shack. “…Kellogg…”

The new breed of synths could easily pass as human. Some of them did. But the coursers – they weren’t built to blend in. They were killing machines, pure and simple. Smarter, stronger, and faster than almost any real human. I’m just glad they were always on MY side.

The Coursers and Kellogg were discussing his next target. A man named Dr. Brian Virgil. There was a dossier. Nora focused on it, hoping for more information.

If anything like this had happened before, I’d never heard of it. Maybe a sign that the old man was losing his grip. Finding someone in the Glowing Sea wasn’t going to be any picnic, but I never expected an Institute egghead to give me SO much trouble.

The Coursers and the boy were standing in the middle of the room. The Coursers called, “X6-88, ready to relay with Shaun…” and then the two disappeared in a flash of light.

WHAT?!?!? No!!!!

Nora heard Amari, as if in the distance, “Teleportation. Now it all makes sense. Nobody’s found the entrance to the Institute, because there IS no entrance. Let me pull you out of there…”

Nora came back to herself. The pod hissed open. Amari was looking down at her. “Slow movements OK? I don’t know what kind of side effects the procedure might have had. No one’s ever…done this before. How do you feel?”

Nora looked at her. She was furious. And heartsick. And strung out. She settled on, “I feel like shit.”

“Well, if you can express yourself like that, you can’t be too bad,” said Amari.

Nora hung her head. She said, “Well, we got what we needed. The Institute uses teleportation to get in and out.”

Amari nodded. “Yes. Their greatest secret has finally been revealed. But it only leads to more questions. How does it work? Where do we go next?”

Nora gathered herself, “That scientist Kellogg was supposed to track down. Virgil. We need to find him.”

Amari looked thoughtful. “A rogue Institute scientist could answer all sorts of questions, And the memory said he was in the Glowing Sea? That doesn’t make sense. NOTHING goes there. Nothing…sane.”

“Why?”

“The name says it all. Nothing could survive there. Nothing pleasant at least. Navigating radiation hazards is one thing, but the Glowing Sea can kill a human in seconds. That’s why it doesn’t make sense.”
Nora said, “That's got to be why. To mask his tracks, and to make the Institute think twice...three times...about following him there.”

Amari shook her head. “If Virgil found a way to survive there, you’ll have to do the same.”

Nora looked at the Doctor. “How do I fight THAT much radiation?”

Amari ticked options off on her fingers, “There are chemical compounds...Rad-X, RadAway. You’d need as much as you could carry. Maybe more. Or a sealed environment suit. Or maybe...one of those suits of Power Armor? That would be perfect.”

Nora nodded numbly. “Thanks. I’ll find a way.”

She stumbled out of the lab and up the stairs. Piper was waiting near the entrance. She looked worried. “Blue, are you OK?”

Then Nora was in Piper’s arms. “Oh Piper, it WAS Shaun. It’s been TEN YEARS,” she said in great hiccoughing bursts, “My baby is grown up. I missed it. He’s been trapped forever. All his life, he…”

Piper stroked Nora’s back, “Shhhh, hon. We’ll find him and rescue him, I promise you…” and then she kissed Nora’s cheek.

She stopped as Nora pulled back, looking at Piper with something...indescribable...in her expression. Then, without warning, Nora grabbed Piper’s face in both hands and kissed her. Passionately.

Chapter End Notes

As a mechanism to make you sympathize with Kellogg, this bit is a huge FAIL...my reaction is much like Nora's. Kellogg had a choice about how he could react and he picked "douchcanoe". As a way of differentiating a Sole Survivor with an ounce of humanity from Kellogg? Very successful. (Although, Nora is kinda lying to herself at the moment. From a certain point of view.)

But at least I can finally express how unbelievably angry I get watch him wave a LOADED PISTOL in the general direction of an infant. I spent three years on active duty in the Army, as Field Artillery officer. We handled firearms and explosives all the time, and we were never that casual. And his finger's inside the trigger guard, I just...argghhhh.

Also, the dance has ended. Or just begun, depending on whether you want to see a romance, or a relationship. I prefer the latter.
Piper stiffened for a microsecond, then flowed up against Nora, and kissed her back, her hands going round Nora’s neck and back. Nora was making tiny little mewing noises as they kissed. As they broke the kiss, Nora nestled her face in Piper’s neck.

“Blue, I—•“

“Piper, do you want me to kiss you again?” face still buried.

“Well, y…yes.,” Piper kissed Nora’s hair, “Yes, yes I do Blue.”

“Then don’t try to stop me. Do you have any idea how long I’ve been thinking about kissing you?” asked Nora.

“Goodness, Blue. I don’t know what to say.”

Nora kissed the place where Piper’s neck joined her shoulder. Piper pulled Nora closer. But some compulsively honest part of her whispered into Nora’s ear. “It’s just…Blue, I’m loud and pushy and constantly getting in over my head. Why would someone like you ever want someone like me?”

Nora raised her head, and looked into Piper’s lovely hazel eyes. “Is it SO hard to believe that I could fall for you, Piper?”

Piper shook her head, “Well, n-no. But I don’t exactly feel like you’ve seen me at my best thus far, Blue. How many relationships established in a hail of gunfire actually work out? Would you really want to end up with me?”

Nora took Piper’s hands in hers, “You don’t need to be flawless Piper. Because you’re perfect for me.”

Piper smiled to herself, and then Nora kissed her again.

And Nick cleared his throat.

Nora looked over at him. “Yes?”

“Not to be a spoilsport, but it IS getting late.”

Piper laughed. “We should go get the new ‘Piper Suite’ at the Rexford.”

Nora smiled and planted a little kiss on Piper’s lips. “Yeah. We might as well spend the night here in Goodneighbor. It’s too late to make it back to Diamond City.”

Nick nodded. “Let’s get some dinner. Then you two can get some sleep and we’ll start out for Diamond City in the morning.”

After checking into the room, the three went over to the Third Rail for dinner. As they were eating, Magnolia noticed Piper and Nora holding hands. She smiled to herself, and the next chance she got she sang a song for them. Piper was blushing uncontrollably, and in Nora’s opinion, adorably. It was a song about new loves, and not forgetting, but replacing old loves. It was Nora’s story.
After they finished eating, the three of them paid their bill, and went up the stairs. The Commonwealth sky was clear, and the Milky Way shone down. A good omen this time, clearly.

The three of them, made their way across the square and headed into the hotel. Nick waved good bye to the pair as they headed upstairs, and he sat down in the lobby to wait, and run diagnostics.

They went into the room, where Piper turned and kissed Nora, running her hands over Nora’s neck and back. Nora made small contented noises as they kissed, but paused when Piper slipped out of her pants, and started folding them neatly and then, started to pull off her t-shirt. Nora stopped her.

“Maybe we should wait. We shouldn’t rush into the physical side too fast,” she said. “You never know how a relationship established in a hail of gunfire is going to go.”

“Very funny, Nora. But OK,” said Piper, as she smoothed her top back down.

Nora smiled at Piper, and kissed her tenderly.

As they laid down, Nora looked over her shoulder. “Piper,” she said, mock-plaintively.

“Yes, Blue?”

“Would you hold me?”

She heard Piper chuckle. “Sure Blue.”

Some time later Nora woke up. Her shirt had been pulled up. Not off, but very nearly. And she felt bare skin on her back. As she thought about it, she realized what she felt was Piper’s breasts and tummy against her back and bottom.

And one of Piper’s hands was cupping one of Nora’s breasts, and the other…the other was sliding into her panties. “I couldn’t wait Blue. God, I want you so badly,” breathed Piper into her ear.

Nora smiled. “Even when you’re seducing an innocent woman, you pay attention to grammar?”

“Always,” and then Nora gasped.

An eternity later Piper, flushing, cried out, “I love you Nora.”

Moments later, as she caught her own breath, Nora started laughing. “Oh my god, Piper. That felt so good,” and she caressed Piper’s cheek.

Piper mumbled something and buried her face into Nora’s chest.

What could be bothering her...OH!

Nora pulled Piper’s face up, as she settled in facing her new girlfriend and lover. “Hey Piper,” she said, “You know how people say you shouldn’t take what someone says when they’re horny seriously?”

Piper covered her face and nodded.

Nora continued, “And if you want to say certain words, you should wait until you’re no longer uncontrollably horny to say it?”

Piper face still covered, nodded again.
“Piper?” Nora pulled Piper’s hands away from her face, and looked her in the eyes, “Are you listening?”

Piper nodded again.

Nora held Piper’s face, and solemnly said, “I love you, Piper Wright.”

Piper burst into tears and started laughing all at the same time. “Oh Nora, I love you!”

Then a thought struck her, “Oh god, what do I tell Nat?!”

Nora laughed, “You tell her she’s stuck with the, ‘Old lady who’s a real lost lamb,’ because her Big Sis is in love but that you still love her, very much, and nothing will ever change that no matter what. And then you tell her I love her too.”

Piper kissed Nora. Then she rolled over, and pressed her bottom into Nora. Nora settled in, cuddling Piper’s body into hers. Piper made small contented noises as she relaxed.

Nora kissed Piper’s ear. “Good night, Thing.”

Piper kissed Nora’s hand. “Good night, Blue. I love you.”

_I like being Big Spoon too. And I love Piper._

Chapter End Notes

I struggled massively with this chapter but not for the reasons you might suspect.

In my head, the song Magnolia sings for Nora and Piper is "In My Life" by the Beatles. But 1965, even over in Britain, is probably too far from whenever the timelines split for that song to be realistic. Not to mention that Rubber Soul came out at the beginning of the hippie movement, and the world of Fallout (the future as imagined by 1950s SF authors, plus nuclear war) doesn't allow for hippies and the ascendancy of the counter-culture. Diamond City Radio has a TON of songs from the 50s, and one, Crawl Out Through The Fallout, that was a novelty song put out in 1960. That's as late as I feel like I can go, culturally...the world of Fallout is WAY more Farnham's Freehold than A Canticle For Leibowitz as SF. I didn't want to even nod at canon unfriendly songs lest I invite cries of "heretic".

Still, this is the song they heard, because this IS Nora's story with Piper:

"There are places I'll remember
All my life though some have changed
Some forever not for better
Some have gone and some remain
All these places had their moments
With lovers and friends I still can recall
Some are dead and some are living
In my life I've loved them all

But of all these friends and lovers
There is no one compares with you
And these memories lose their meaning
When I think of love as something new
Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more

Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more
In my life I love you more”

And because the song is lovely on more than a lyric level:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eCh3y5VROM
The Council of Nora

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next morning, Piper and Nora came down the stairs holding hands, and Nick smiled as he saw them. Nora looked at him seriously, and then smiled back. Her expression turned to shock as he hugged her, then Piper.

“You have no idea how close I was getting to locking you two in the office and refusing to let you out until you two idiots worked it out,” he said.

Piper blushed. “You knew? How?”


“Nat?!”?

“She’s your sister Piper. Of course she knew. She acts like it’s ‘gross’, but I’ve also caught her looking at Nora,” Nick said.

“Looking at her how?” asked Piper.

“Like she’s sizing up a new mom, Piper. I’d be surprised if Dogmeat doesn’t smell like little girl and printers ink and never wants to leave by the time we get back. Because she,” he gestured at Nora, “asked Nat to look after him.”

“Well, she’s not much older…than…” Nora wound down.

“Oh, Blue. I know it hurts,” said Piper, taking Nora’s hand.

“You know I almost forgot. Last night,” started Nora.

“That was the point,” said Nick, “You needed last night, Piper needed last night, and god knows I needed last night. If I had to watch you two look at each other and sigh much more…” Nick smiled, “Anyway, we’re in a different race now, Nora. It’s not a sprint to get your baby back from a kidnapper. It’s a marathon to get your son back from people who’ve been getting ready for this for ten years. This is going to take way more preparation.”

“I can’t go off half-cocked. Got it, Nick. Let’s head back to Diamond City,” said Nora.

The trip back seemed to take almost no time, Nora was so familiar with it. It was also a more pleasurable walk. Piper was with her, and Nora could finally admit...

I love her. And what does that MEAN? Do I want it to be a permanent thing? Do I want a relationship?

Yes. Yes, I do. We just fit. She’s a little pushy, and kinda goofy. It softens my edges. She makes me better just by being herself. But…what’s in it for HER? Am I being selfish? Again? Do I have any right to expect her to take me as broken as I am?

As they made their way into Diamond City, Piper’s hand found Nora’s. As they descended the stairs, Nora saw Nat on her usual soapbox, but she had an assistant.
Dogmeat was sitting by her. Nora watched, fascinated, as Dogmeat herded a passerby over to Nat, who launched into her spiel. The man shook his head, but he was smiling. Another resident watched the whole performance and came over, gave Dogmeat a pat, and bought a paper.

Nora leaned over and whispered to Piper, “I think you may need to add some more issues to each run, if that group act stays out here.”

Piper nodded. She never let go of Nora’s hand as she walked up to Nat. “Hey, kiddo. How’re sales?”

Nat looked over at Piper and at Nora holding Piper’s hand. She looked thoughtful. She hopped off her box, and came over. Ignoring Piper, she said “Hey lady, your dog is real cool.”

“Nat! Her name is Nora, not ‘lady’,” said Piper.

“OK. OK. Nora. Anyway he’s really cool. Can he stay?”

“Nat!” Piper blushed.

“It’s OK, Piper,” Nora leaned over, at eye level with Nat. “He might be able to. Is that something you’d really like?”

“Maybe, I dunno,” said Nat.

Nora reached out and held one of Nat’s hands. “OK, sweetie. Well, when you make a decision, let me and Piper know, OK?” She let go, and Nat turned away slowly and then hopped up on her soapbox.

As Nick, Nora, and Piper went into the Publick, Piper asked Nora, “Was what went on there what I think went on there?”

“Well, I’ll say this, hon. I think it was only partly about a dog,” said Nora. “At least she didn’t spit on you.”

“What?”

“Yeah, a couple years ago, I was really smitten with a girl in town. Anyway, Nat hated her. One day, she was trying to get on Nat’s good side, and Nat just looked at her from her soapbox, and SPIT on her. So, I’m furious, and yelling at Nat, and the girl just left. Apparently, I was too much work, because she wound up with an upper stand guy a week later. Two weeks after THAT, she takes him for every cap he’s got and skips town.”

“So Nat’s a good judge of character. And now I get why you have a bit of a chip about bisexuals,” observed Nora.

“That, and the fact that anytime you want, you can just pick a man, and everything is fine for you. I have to find a woman I like, and one who likes women at that, and then likes ME back, in order to have a relationship,” said Piper.

“Fair. But you don’t have that problem anymore,” replied Nora.

“Hmmm. True.”

They sat down, and both Nick and Piper looked at Nora expectantly.
“You’re looking at me?” she asked.

Piper smiled at Nora, but she said, “Blue, Shaun is your son. We’ll follow your lead, but they really have to be your decisions.”

Nora took a deep breath. “OK. So the problem breaks down into three pieces, as I see it. One, we have to find this Dr. Virgil and get him to tell us how to get into the Institute. Two, we have to take any information from him and actually get into the institute. And finally, with a ten or so year old boy, we have to get out of the Institute in such a way as to ensure that they don’t immediately take Shaun back, slaughter us, and possibly replace us with synths. How’m I doing so far?”

“That sounds about right, Nora,” said Nick. “With the understanding that for step one, we have to get in and out of the Glowing Sea alive, while tracking down a rogue Institute Scientist. It’s not a problem for me, but you and Piper are going to need something more than your undeniable good looks to ward off the radiation.

Piper rolled her eyes at him, “Irma was right. You ARE a shameless flirt.”

Nick shrugged. But he was smiling. Nora was still frowning. “So I asked Amari about ways to combat radiation and she said Rad-X and RadAway, but possibly in quantities too great to practically carry, protective gear, or Power Armor,” Nora said as she looked up, “Now I do have one suit, but not many fusion cores. But that doesn’t do us any good.”

Piper looked stubborn. “You bet it doesn’t. You need two suits because I am NOT letting you go into the Glowing Sea without me.”

Nick said, “Radiation isn’t a problem for me, but I think Power Armor is your best bet. The Glowing Sea is full of life that is too hideously dangerous to face in just a hazmat suit. Deathclaws are just one among MANY threats there.”

“Well, I’ll just run down to Super Duper Mart and pick another one up, and a twelve pack of FCs while I’m at it,” snarked Nora.

“Blue! He’s just trying to help,” said Piper.

Nora thought for a second, and nodded. “Sorry, Piper, Nick. That’s something I should have warned you about. I always did speak before I thought. It’s gotten me into trouble before and I apologize.”

Piper smiled and squeezed Nora’s hand, “That’s OK, Blue. I love you even with your sassmouth,” then she winked at Nora.

“So in order to get at Virgil, we need at least one additional set of armor, and possibly two, as the one I have didn’t do that hot against a Deathclaw. Seriously, does anyone know where to get some?” asked Nora.

Piper looked disgusted. “I know a perfect place to get some. It’s hanging about two hundred feet over Boston International Airport, right now. Unfortunately I know something about the owners and the cold steel, angry scowls, and bad haircuts are the least of the offensive things about them.”

Nora raised her eyebrows at Piper, questioningly. Piper sighed and said, “The Brotherhood of Steel, Nora. I did an article a couple years back on some Capitol Wasteland refugees. The Brotherhood has a BUNCH of power armor suits, but they’ve been running the Capitol Wasteland with an iron fist inside a spiked, electrified steel glove for about 6 years now.”

Nora said, “So they have armor? Is there any way to get at it?”
Piper shook her head. “Not for all the caps in the world, sweetheart. They keep tech to themselves. They were a bit more openhanded thirty years ago when they arrived in the Capitol Wasteland. But after their Elder died and was replaced by a teenager, they began demanding ‘taxes’ and ‘levies’. I’d call it protection money and slavery, but it’s so militaristically medieval it might be more accurate to call it feudalism.”

“There’s NO way to get our hands on some?” repeated Nora.

“Not without joining, Blue….” Piper looked shocked at the expression on Nora’s face, “I m-mean they DO recruit among locals, but they expect obedience and a willingness to bully everyone and they expect you to buy into their racist agenda.”

Nora looked thoughtful. “There’s no reason I have to tell them what I’m actually thinking.”

“We-ell, it WOULD get us the armor we need. And I have a lead on how to contact them, but Blue, are you sure you can fool them for long enough to get what we need? Not to mention, once we get what we need from them, won’t they be upset about you leaving?” Piper asked.

Nora looked confident, “Piper, the one thing I am certain about is that they will never imagine anything is wrong until and unless I want them to.”

Nick shook his head ruefully. “That’s a dangerous course of action, Nora. I’m not sure you’ve thought it through, and you may make a very dangerous enemy. But I have to admit that while there might be suits of armor around the Commonwealth, I don’t know where they might be, nor how to get enough FCs to make them go,” he sighed, “Just because it’s not a good option, doesn’t mean it’s not also the least bad option you have.”

Nora nodded. She turned to Piper and asked, “So what’s this lead you have on the Brotherhood?”

Piper still looked troubled, but she said, “I know from some sources that there’s a military style outpost in the Cambridge police station. At first I thought Gunner’s because they were way more disciplined than your usual raider gang, but the guy I talked to said that except for one of them, they all had power armor on. That’s not typical.”

Nick suddenly looked alert. “There was something I wanted to ask your help with that involved the Cambridge Police Station,” he said.

Nora looked satisfied. “Then we’re agreed. Travel to Cambridge and see what’s up. Talk our way onto a blimp. Help Nick. Sounds like a busy day,” she said as she slapped the table and got up.

Piper still looked worried. Nora saw that, and took Piper’s hand in hers. “Look, Piper. It’s not like I’m going to sign enlistment papers when I walk up. We go out there, we take a look. If we get the creepy crawlies about them for any reason, we back off and try to find some other way of dealing with the Glowing Sea.”

“Oh I know that, Blue. What has me worried is what Nick said. What if this really is the least bad choice and it’s still awful?”

Chapter End Notes

Certain things HAVE happen when a nerd is involved (Hi. I'm a nerd.).
There WILL be references to:
Star Wars (if possible),
Star Trek (if humanly possible),
Monty Python (even if you're writing a TRAGEDY, there will be a bit from the Dead Parrot Skit),
Lord Of The Rings (even if you have to drag a reference KICKING AND SCREAMING to the table).

This is your LoTR reference.
In The Valley Of Death Rode The Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning the three set out to see what was up at Cambridge Police Station after Nora took a brief trip to the mayor’s office. When she came back down the lift, Piper looked at her questioningly. “What’s up with that? Need a little dose of ‘fathead’ this morning?”

Nora just looked smug and shook her head. “Don’t worry about it, Thing. I’m not gonna push him out the window. In addition to being illegal, I know you be FURIOUS with me if I beat you to it.”

The trip to the station was relatively short, but not so short as to keep Nora from reviewing the conversation she’d had after she, Piper, and Nat had had dinner at Power Noodles.

Nick had come over to the stool next to Nora, and while Nat and Piper slurped down another bowl, he leaned over and told her about why he needed into the Cambridge PD. In Nora’s opinion it boiled down to Nick having the weirdest case of split personality.

Not that I’m one to talk, what with my whole “evil half” thing, but he truly talks as if Nick Valentine, Pre-War flesh and blood cop, and Nick Valentine, Diamond City synth detective were two entirely separate people.

I just don’t buy into any kind of “immortal soul not being transferred” argument. And that’s about the only way they could be “different” people. Nick, Version 2, has all of Nick, Version 1’s memories. He acts as Nick, Version 1 would’ve, or at least as he thought he would’ve. I don’t see it. He IS Nick Valentine.

Nora had listened to Nick go on and on about what was his and what was “Nick’s” and finally Nora had interrupted, “Nick. You say that without ‘Nick’s’ memories you’d just be a shell, yes? What do you think I’d be without my memories? If I was struck with permanent total amnesia, right now, would I be me?” she asked.

She’d started waving her hands, “Or would I be something new, with Nora’s face and body and nothing else? Because I have to tell you, I AM the sum of my memories. So what if your chassis is metal instead of bone and viscera? You’re still Nick Valentine. There’s no difference, except the hardware ‘Nick Valentine’ is operating on. And besides, I need a friend from before, Nick. You don’t get to leave me alone here.”

Nick had looked unconvinced. He nodded at Piper. “What about your…ummm…”

“This is what I mean Nick. Who else is going to have a hard time calling Piper my girlfriend? It’s cute, because while you clearly were all set to fix us up, you still can hardly bring yourself to call us a couple. That’s the old world’s prejudices talking. And every time you do something that reminds me of the old world, I know I have at least one person out here who gets my jokes, who knows what the hell I’m talking about,” Nora had said. She’d smiled at him, “I love her, but you are my best friend in this new world.”

This is going to take a lot of time, but I’m going to put in the time because Nick, Ellie, and whatever “Nick and Ellie” might become deserve my best work.

At any rate, Nick let her know that just at the end, shortly before he’d gone into CIT for recording, he’d learned of a series of holotapes left by Eddie Winter that revealed the code to get into a bunker.
And something else. Nick had learned that Eddie Winter had sought to live forever. By exposing himself to ungodly amounts of gamma radiation.

Nora’d been shocked, “Whoa, Nick, you can’t be saying what I THINK you’re saying…”

He’d nodded. “Oh, I’m saying it all right. Eddie Winter went and turned himself into a ghoul. Two hundred years before it was fashionable. Hell. He may have been the first one. And I’m convinced that he’s still locked in that shelter. Safe and sound, ready to come out and begin his evil reign all over again. I’m gonna find him, and I’m gonna kill him, so that never happens. You in?”

Nora had agreed. And therefore the trip to Cambridge PD. Regardless of the possible Brotherhood of Steel outpost there, one of the holotapes that Winter had left was there. Nick felt it was a good place to start, but that they’d be lucky if the damn things weren’t all over the Commonwealth. Nora had looked him in the eye, taken his skeletal right hand in hers and swore she’d help him find the tapes. And get Eddie Winter.

So the three of them made their way past the Great Dome of CIT, headed north along Mass Ave. Not too long later they heard the snap and sizzle of laser fire. They picked up the pace and quickly came upon the Police Station under siege from a mob of ferals. Nora, Piper, and Nick made short work of the group to the south and entered the main yard.

One soldier was down, another was tending the downed soldier, and a single power armor clad soldier was trying to hold them all off. He was not doing well. Several ferals had managed to get all the way to him and claw at his armor. It was only a matter of time before he was mobbed and the station overrun. Nora and her friends set up a line and kept the ferals off the soldier until, finally, the waves stopped.

The soldier, not even breathing hard for all that he’d just barely escaped being eaten, said, “We appreciate the assistance civilian, but what’s your business here?”

What. A. Tool.

Among other things.

Nora rolled her eyes and replied, “Pest exterminator. I heard you have a feral problem.”

Piper looked over at Nick and whispered, “Total sassmouth.”

Without even looking back, Nora said, “Knock it off.”

The soldier scowled and stated, “Evading my questions is a surefire way of getting yourself ejected from the compound. Are you from a local settlement?”

None of your damn business soldier boy. Are ALL of them this bad, I wonder?

Instead Nora felt it was only fair to point out who, exactly, had saved whom. “Do all these questions really matter? After all, I helped you fight those ferals.”

The soldier’s expression relaxed a little. “You make a fair point. If I appear suspicious, it’s because our mission here has been difficult. Since the moment we arrived in the Commonwealth, we’ve been constantly under fire. If you want to continue pitching in, we could use an extra gun on our side.”

Nora shrugged, “I want to help, but I don’t like all the secrecy. Who are you? Really.”

The soldiers shoulders slumped imperceptibly. High handed hadn’t gotten the job done. “I’m Paladin
Danse, Brotherhood of Steel. That’s Scribe Haylen and Knight Rhys. I’ve been trying to send a distress call to our vessel at Boston Airport, but our signal is too weak.”

The woman, Scribe Haylen, who had been administering first aid to the man, Knight Rhys, turned to Dance, and interrupted, “Sir?”

“Proceed, Haylen,” he replied.

*NOW I remember how irritating military people are…*

“I’ve modified the radio mast on the roof, but it still can’t reach the Prydwen. We need something to boost the signal. Sir.”

Danse turned to Nora, “Our target is Arc Jet Systems, and it contains the technology we need: The Deep Range Transmitter. We infiltrate the facility, secure the transmitter and bring it back here. So what do you say? Are you willing to lend the Brotherhood of Steel a hand?”

*What a high handed jerk. OK, time to test how honest soldier boy here is going to be.*

Nora asked, “Who or what is the Brotherhood of Steel?”

Danse looked at her and claimed, “Our order seeks to understand the nature of technology, its power, its meaning to us as humans. And we fight to secure that power from those who abuse it.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “This is just a fancy way of saying that you’re looting everything you can get your hands on.”

Danse shook his head, emphatically. “Looting implies that we trying to benefit ourselves. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Will you help us?”

“It’s a good plan if we make it back,” admitted Nora.

Danse turned to his team. “Haylen. Take Rhys inside and patch him up. Rhys. Once you’re on your feet, I want you to secure the perimeter.”

They nodded. Then Rhys looked at Nick. “Machines shouldn’t have free will, abomination.”

*Oh for…*

Nick simply looked at Rhys. “Why? Jealous because you gave yours up?”

*Heh. Good one Nick. Still, better break this up for a bit.*

Nora turned to Nick and leaned in. “Nice one, Nick, but for now, maybe you head back to the office? No need to rile up the Brownshirt Brigade here, huh?”

Nick nodded. “You two watch yourself out there, OK?”

Piper just squeezed his hand, and said, “We will Nick. Don’t worry.”

As Nick left, Danse put on his power armor helmet, and led them down an alley and towards Memorial Drive. They continued out Memorial.

Piper hung back with Nora as Danse led the way. “Blue, what was all that back there? I already told you about the Brotherhood.”
Nora looked thoughtful. “I knew about the Brotherhood, but he didn’t know that I knew. I gave him a chance to lie. See what he’d do.”

“Well he wasn’t exactly truthful, Blue. The Brotherhood mainly grabs tech, and tells the rest of us to get lost. I wouldn’t say they’re doing it for us.”

“Yeah. But I was watching him. He believes this stuff. To him, I suspect, ‘grabbing everything not nailed down’ is protecting us from ourselves. Because only he and his buddies can be trusted.” Nora held up a finger as Piper started to object. “Didn’t say I bought his line. But I think HE has.” Then she nodded her head towards Danse, “Time to catch up, sweetheart.”

As they came alongside, Danse said, almost to himself, “If it were up to me, I’d relocate my team, but Haylen picked up some signals that could only come from high technology sources.” He shook his head ruefully, “It might surprise you to know my recon team isn’t the first recon team to visit the Commonwealth. Over the last seven years two other teams were sent here to gather technology. The first team’s mission was a huge success. The second wasn’t so fortunate. Shortly after they arrived we lost contact. As far as my team goes, we’ve lost four good men to this godforsaken wasteland. We’ve been a target since the moment we arrived. But I have no intentions of giving up…or ending up missing.”

Yeah. I might have some feedback about that. If you didn’t ACTIVELY go out of your way to alienate the locals you might not’ve lost all your people.

As they arrived at one of the many defense contractors located in Boston, many of them located, as this one was, not far off Highway 128/I-95, Danse turned to the two, and said, “Listen up, we do this clean and quiet, by the book. No heroics.”

Oh brother.

All Nora said out loud was, “Understood.”

He continued, “The primary target is the Deep Range Transmitter. Stay focused and check your fire. I don’t want to be hit by stray bullets.”

You check YOURS, Danse. I was picking off ferals climbing ON you. You’re the one that was getting careless with the laser.

Nora nodded. As they entered, Nora and Piper drew their pistols. The building was actually in fairly decent shape all things considered. If there had been more than one big bomb allocated to Boston, this place would have been way worse. When they were teenagers, Nate and some of his friends used to joke that 128 should be called “First Strike Highway” because of all the defense contracting firms located along it.

Inside a security office Danse gestured at a batch of destroyed Protectrons. “Look at this. No spent casings. These robots were assaulted by Institute Synths.”

Nora shook her head, “Wonderful.”

The next room seemed a dead end. The door didn’t budge. Danse was looking at it thoughtfully. He turned to Piper and Nora. “Do you ladies have any grenades on you?”

Nora shuddered at the thought of a semi-controlled charge going off in an enclosed space of doubtful structural integrity. “Let me check the terminal, Danse,” she said.

Hacking the terminal was fairly easy.
Well I never thought this skill would be that useful again. Shows what I know. There’s a shocking amount of need for electronic breaking and entering. Not to mention the normal kind.

The door opened at her command. And a batch of synths poured in. Naturally.

Danse was firing. Not that wildly, Nora was happy to note. And lasers didn’t have the ricochet problem bullets did. She had to give him that. Nevertheless she called out to Piper, “You shoot on the right, I’ll take the left.” Piper gulped and nodded, and within minutes, they’d brought down a number of synths.

Danse shouted and charged forward. Nora sighed. She looked at Piper, “Charge of the Fathead Brigade. Into the office complex of death rode the three of us. Led about as well as Tennyson’s poor bastards.”

Piper snickered. “Right?”

They followed. As it turned out, because of dumb luck, Danse managed to take down the synths in the next area. “Power armor, right?” observed Piper. Nora nodded.

The three of them made their way through the facility. Eventually they ended up in a large circular chamber, with a large rocket motor suspended inside. Danse gestured to the top of the test chamber. “That’s our target. I’d bet anything the Deep Range Transmitter is there. But the stairs have collapsed and the elevator is out, so we’ll have to get some sort of emergency power activated.”

He led them down the stairs, and, while searching a set of rooms off the chamber Nora found the motor controls. “Hey Danse, the motor controls are here and powering this area up will probably make them active. You might want to get out of the test chamber, just in case.”

He looked over at them. “The armor can take it if it accidentally fires. Don’t worry about me.”

Nora looked over at Piper, “Ours is not to reason why, his is but to do and die, into the test chamber of death, rode the Fathead Brigade.”

Piper grinned, “Sassmouth.”

Nora shook her head. “Are you ever going to get tired of that?”

Piper looked thoughtful. “I don’t really think so, Blue.” Then she kissed Nora. “It’s so very you, dollface.”

Again, a terminal that was easily hacked allowed her to reroute power. A few moments work and power came back on. And after it did, synths began pouring from the control room high above, the plunge not damaging them in the slightest. Danse was quickly overrun.

He called to Nora, “Fire It! Fire the motor.”

Nora looked at Piper, shrugged, and pressed the “Ignite” button. Immediately, the engine lit off, and very quickly ramped up to max thrust, the two hundred year old test fixture groaning. After about ten seconds at max thrust it shut down, but the damage had been done. Every synth in the chamber was slagged, and Danse’s armor was glowing cherry red.

“And me without my marshmallows,” said Piper.

“Hush, you,” said Nora, “Let’s go see if he’s OK.”
He was, as it turned out. Which was fine by Nora, because she wasn’t sure what she could have done to help him when getting within 10 feet was not possible. He went up the elevator first. When he failed to destroy the elevator on his trip up, Nora and Piper followed. By the time they got to the control room, all the remaining synths were destroyed, some showing signs of having been hugged to death.

Danse leaned over and grabbed the Deep Range transmitter from one of the synths. “Let’s depart the AO,” he called.

Outside, he turned to Nora, “Well that could’ve gone smoother, but mission accomplished.”

Nora was annoyed, “Smother? I thought we did fine.”

Danse shook his head, “That sweep was sloppy. We were caught unprepared more than once, Which is unacceptable. However your extra gun gave us the edge we needed.”

He’d given Nora the opening she needed, exactly as much as she needed access to power armor. “I thought we worked well together.”

Danse nodded. “Agreed. We had a lot thrown at us back there, Our op could’ve ended in disaster, but you kept you cool and handled it like a soldier. There’s no doubt in my mind you’ve got what it takes. Would you be willing to join the Brotherhood of Steel? Or should we just say our good byes?”

_Jackpot! I only have to put up with this nonsense a little while longer…_

“I’d be honored.”

Danse nodded sharply once. “Meet me back at the station in a couple days. I’ll have transmitted your application by then. See you soon soldier!”

After he left, Piper leaned in. “Well that couldn’t have gone better. You’ll be eyes inside the Brotherhood. Hey. That’d move some papers. Let’s take notes.”

**Chapter End Notes**

We're starting a long running philosophical argument that's going to run through the series... "What is a human being?" Because it's embedded in the structure of the game, and because I actually, even at my age, LIKE the college dorm room argument form of discourse.

Nick is taking an absolutist position on continuity of consciousness here, where Nora is taking a more utilitarian one. I sympathize with utilitarian arguments in the main. So call me on it if I start torching straw men. :-)

Also, I am taking Bethesda at face value about the underlying society of 2077. They've left it ambiguous about what the world prior to 23 Oct 2077 was ACTUALLY like, but I am taking a maximalist position on "The future as visualized by the 1950s SF authors", and it's a strongly hetero-normitive, conformist, moderately to strongly gendered, but only lightly racialized one, much like the SF of the 50s.

And Eddie Winter is SO Whitey Bulger is hurts.
My 15 years as a New Englander (and Red Sox fan) have left me ready to be a Fallout 4 fanatic. They did their research. (The first time I played the game, ever, I knew Diamond City was at Fenway, and saw a street sign for Boylston Street and I knew I was close...and seconds later realized, this was MY game, now and forever.) And at the risk of dating me as ANCIENT, when I was young and living in Mass, we really did call I-95/Highway 128 (the 128 of The Modern Lovers "Roadrunner") the "First Strike Highway" for it's likely position on Soviet planners target lists.
As they were most of the way to Sanctuary at this point, Nora and Piper decided to return to Sanctuary and see what Sturges and Preston had managed in their absence. Not to mention Nora was a little worried about how Curie was settling in.

*I admit I’m even a little concerned about that old fraud, Mama Murphy. She may be full of it, but I believe Curie when she says congestive heart failure. If that old woman doesn’t stop popping pills and shooting up, she’s going to die.*

When they arrived they found relatively few additional obvious changes, save that there were new faces in the town, and Sturges had built Curie a clinic. Curie was inside cataloging a fairly impressive set of supplies, when Nora walked in.

“Oh, you surprised me. I have managed to put together a serviceable hospital. What do you think?” She actually managed to hover expectantly.

“I’m impressed Curie. You clearly are set up to take care of a number of people. “

“Oh madam, you have no idea. Since you left last, a dozen or so have come to see us. Most have been allowed to stay. Preston has formed a guard, and Marcy is organizing farmers. I believe that with some time, this will turn into a vibrant community.”

Nora nodded. “And how goes the research?”

Curie shook her torso in the negative. “I have spent much effort gathering information. And my self-diagnostics have come to a grim conclusion. It is not lack of data or lack of collaboration which stifies my scientific progress. The inescapable truth is that there has never been a great robot scientist.” Her manipulators fell dejectedly.

Nora patted Curie’s casing, “Robots can do amazing things, surely they’ve contributed to science.”

Curie’s eyes focused on Nora, “When directed by a human, they have. But on our own, we tread predictable paths. The greatest scientific minds, an Einstein, or Planck, or even a Curie, my namesake, has always had something beyond raw data analysis capabilities. They had a spark. This elusive inspiration is something I must possess.”

*Oh boy. Where is she going with this?*

“Ummm. How do you expect to do something about that?” asked Nora.

Curie gestured, “If I am to advance my understanding of medicine in this strange world, I must embark on a great adventure. I must become human. I must find a way to download all that I am into a human brain.”

“Wait, what?!?” said Piper.

“You know what? That’s not actually impossible,” observed Nora.

“Are you crazy Blue? How are we supposed to put her into a brain…oh.”
“Yeah. Amari,” said Nora. “But Curie, I’m not going to kill someone. You’re going to have to wait until we find someone brain dead.”

Curie replied, “I would not accept anything less, Nora. I will wait so very patiently until conditions are perfect.”

_I can certainly trust you on that. You waited 83 years to leave a room, I think I can trust you to wait as long as it takes to get a proper ‘donor’._

After speaking more with Curie, Nora found that Preston was still recruiting, and that the Long’s seemed to be happy with the new farmers. At the very least, Marcy only complained every so often. Which amounted to the same thing.

In addition, Mama Murphy was still around. Curie was finding it hard to keep her away from chems, but had had some success in getting help in maintaining a watch on the old woman.

_I do not buy into this ‘sight’ shit. But I’m not going to wish an old woman ill, either._

Before bed, Nora called Codsworth over and had an in-depth conversation with him. When she finished he glided off purposefully.

“What was THAT about, Blue?” asked Piper.

“Don’t worry about it sweetheart. You need to keep your strength up. I have a few tricks I want to show you tonight.”

Piper blushed crimson.

“But first, I need a shower,” said Nora.

Piper rolled her eyes, “Fetish. I need underwear with a picture of a showerhead on it,” but she was smiling and shooed Nora off.

The next morning, the three set out for Goodneighbor. Piper was glowing. Curie confided in Nora, “I believe your friend is in a ‘good mood’. And she keeps giving you looks. Very intense looks.”

“It’s a human thing, Curie. If we’re successful you may learn about it.”

“I hope so. She seems VERY happy,” said Curie. Nora laughed.

When they arrived in Goodneighbor, it was like returning to a familiar friend. It was shortly after 2 PM when the three entered the Memory Den. They made their way to Amari’s lab. She turned and smiled at Nora and Piper. “What can I do for you, my friends?”

“My friend here needs your help.” said Nora, gesturing at Curie.

Amari raised an eyebrow, “Oh? I’m not a mechanic. What could she possibly want from me?”

Curie glided forward. “Greetings Doctor. I wish to download my data and core programming into a human brain.”

Amari looked at Curie in shock. “You want to what?” She turned to Nora, “Is she serious?”

Nora shrugged helplessly, “Curie has a lot of Pre-War research data, but she can’t continue her important work as a robot.”
Amari turned to Curie, “Why not?”

Curie said, "There are fundamental limitations in my robotic systems. I have no capacity for the human trait of inspiration."

Amari looked thoughtful. “I’ve never considered anything like what you’re proposing. It’s an interesting problem,’ she looked off into the distance. She barely noticed them anymore. “The memories wouldn’t be hard. We translate those from brain to computer and back all the time here. It’s how the loungers work. Her personality though? All those pieces of robotic, programmed decision making?” She shook her head, “A normal organic brain wouldn’t know what to do with them.” The she perked up, “A synth brain, on the other hand, is already somewhere between the two.”

Nora interrupted, “Synth or human, I’m not assassinating a thinking being just for this.”

Amari was offended, “I’m suggesting nothing of the kind. Allow me to explain. I’ve worked on synths before. Giving them memory wipes, so they can live a life free of the Institute. But the procedure isn’t always successful. If something goes wrong it can leave them in a brain dead state. Living, but with no cognition.” She raised a finger, “I know a caretaker for one of these brain dead synths. If they’re willing, we could try transferring your friend’s consciousness into her.”

Curie sounded excited. “That sounds ethically acceptable. I’d like to try.”

Amari nodded and turned to Nora, “We just need her caretakers consent. Give me a day to get into contact with them. They’re understandably cautious, but I think they’ll hear me out.”

Curie glided over. She said, “I will stay with the doctor. Assuming all goes well I want to be ready for the procedure.”

“Are you sure about this, Curie?” asked Piper.

“I’ve never been more sure of myself, Piper,” said the robot.

“OK. I have to say, being human does have its good points,” Piper said looking at Nora.

Nora smiled at Piper, “If you’re trying to get me to blush, Thing, you’ll have to try harder than that.”

Curie laid a manipulator on each of them. “You are my greatest friends. I know that with your help, I will be successful.”

As they left the Memory Den, Nora turned to Piper. “How would YOU like to spend the next 24 hours?”

Piper looked pained, “What a setup line, Blue. I know what I want to say, but I think we should head to Cambridge. The sooner we can get that group of nut jobs to give up a suit or two of armor, the sooner we can never see them again.”

Nora nodded. “Good point. Dammit. Let’s head out.”

By the time they reached the Cambridge PD, it was dusk. They walked up the steps, and as they did Nora consciously got her game face on.

When she walked in, Danse was briefing the two soldiers. He looked at Nora, and looked pleased. He turned to the others. “Haylen, Rhys, it’s time to welcome our newest recruit. She shows a lot of promise.”
Nora raised her eyebrows, “I’m only in it for the spiffy uniforms.”

Piper muttered, “Sassmouth,” behind her, but Nora ignored it.

Haylen looked amused. “Oh yeah? And here I thought you’d joined up for a sense of purpose. Although they are spiffy,” she said, gesturing to her mud spattered and grimy overalls.

Only Nora could hear Piper mutter under her breath, “Oh great. Now, there’s two of them.”

Rhys, on the other hand, just looked contemptuous, “So you decided to stay, huh?”

Danse chopped the air with his hand, “Rhys that’s enough. You’re going to have to learn to work together,” and he turned to Nora, “and you need to understand what it means to be part of the Brotherhood. We’re not soldiers of fortune. We’re an army and we’ve dedicated our lives to strict code. If you intend to stay, you need to obey our tenets without question.”

*Oh boy. I’ve heard this song before. And it never leads anywhere good.*

But what she did was nod, “Understood.”

Danse continued, “I only ask for two things. Honesty and respect. You fall in line and you stay in line. I give you an order and you follow it. Simple as that. I’m going to recommend you for the rank of Knight. Now, nothing’s official until you speak with Elder Maxson, but I wanted you to know.”

*Yep. Second verse, same as the first. I’ve heard this speech plenty of times Danse. Always from people who weren’t being honest, and weren’t worthy of respect.*

Haylen stood a little straighter, “Ad victorium, Knight.”

Rhys lip curled, “She doesn’t know what it means.”

“It means ‘To Victory’. I was lawyer. I know Latin, Knight Rhys. ‘Cuiusvis hominis est errare, nullius nisi insipientis in errore perseverare’,” she replied.

He looked confused. “What?”

Nora smiled and shook her head. “Some other time Knight.”

Nora took her leave of the little group and found her way to the evidence room. There was a terminal, easily accessed that told her the tape she was looking for was in Locker 3-B. After a brief search, the locker was found, between 3-A and 3-C. Inside was a tape. And only one tape. Plus a note that the other nine tapes had been sent to various Commonwealth locations, as well as the Boston Office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Drugs, Tobacco, Firearms, and Lasers.

She was trying to coax more information out of the terminal when Danse interrupted. “We’re both to report to the Prydwen.”

Nora nodded. “Come on Piper.”

Danse shook his head. “Civilians are not allowed,” he said.

Nora looked sad. “That’s too bad. If you want the Commonwealth to hear your side of the story, you need more than a loudspeaker. You need the press on your side. Plus, I’m not going without her.”

Danse tried staring Nora down. She just looked back, blandly. After several long moments, he threw his hands up. “Very well, she can come. As long as she minds herself.”
Whew. That was a bet and a half. I was pretty sure a ‘Paladin’ had enough juice to make that decision. Lucky for me. Plus, there’s always beating a hasty retreat.

Danse turned and headed for the stairs. Nora caught up, and said, “Excuse me Paladin? Where are we going?”

He just smirked and continued. Once on the roof, Nora realized what was up. On the pad stood a Vertibird, its engines already spooling up. Piper gave a whoop and clambered aboard, sitting on the bench in the passenger compartment. Danse climbed in next, standing in a mount for power armor clad soldiers, his boots clipped into the deck. He reached to his right and plugged an intercom lead into his armor.

Nora climbed aboard last, and accepted the headset Danse handed her. Once she was jacked in, she saw Danse’s lips move, and the Vertibird sprang off the pad. The she heard a rush of static, and the Danse’s voice in her ear.

“That’s a 5mm minigun, soldier. Feel free to engage any targets of opportunity but make sure of your targets. We don’t need to needlessly antagonize the locals.”

Sure. You finally figure out to stop going out of your way to cause yourself trouble. Well done, you. That should last about five seconds.

As the vertibird banked sharply over the Great Dome of the CIT building, and then again to take up a route running along the Charles, her prediction came true.

“So, knight. I was observing you and your…companion…at the Arc Jet facility. You are aware that we have regulations about fraternizing with the locals, let alone engaging in an aberrant relationship.”

Aaaaaaand there’s the intolerant asshat I’ve learned to expect of the Brotherhood.

“Are you saying that I can no longer see Piper, Paladin?” she asked.

He took a long moment. “I’m not saying that you must cut off contact with locals, or even a pre-existing relationship. But that kind of relationship…”

“What kind would that be, Paladin?” asked Nora mildly.

“It would be best if you didn’t rub Elder Maxson’s nose in an…unnatural…relationship,” he said.

Fuck him. AND you.

“Understood, Paladin.”

They continued flying down the Charles, past downtown Boston. Piper, unaware of the conversation Nora had just had, was excitedly pulling Nora’s sleeve and pointing at various landmarks. After a few minutes, Nora joined her in sightseeing as they flew towards the enormous airship hanging over the airport.

As they approached the Prydwen, Danse’s voice came over the intercom, “Get ready soldier. This is the moment everything changes.”

Too late. That moment was when I watched a hydrogen bomb obliterate my entire life.

The aircraft docked with the blimp, and the three of them hopped off. Danse must have radioed ahead, because no one tried getting rid of Piper again.
Danse walked up to another soldier, an officer by his general looks, and saluted. “Permission to come aboard sir?”

The officer returned the salute. “Permission granted, Paladin,” he turned to Nora, “And is this our new recruit?”

“Yes sir,” answered Danse.

“You’ll be pleased to know that Elder Maxson has approved your request, and placed the recruit in your charge.”

Danse nodded. “Very good sir. Our orders?”

“You are to attend the Elder’s briefing on the command deck. Immediately.”

Danse saluted, then turned to Nora, “Come on, Knight. At the double.”

The three of them climbed a ladder to the main hatch and entered the hull of the Prydwen. Maxson was already gathering officers. He was a surprisingly young man, with a wicked scar down one side of his face. He began to speak.

“Brothers and Sisters, the road behind us has been long and fraught with difficulty. Each and every one of you has surpassed my expectations by rapidly facilitating our arrival in the Commonwealth. You have accomplished this amazing feat without a hint of purpose or direction, and most impressively, without question,” he began.

*Oh my god. I’m dealing with the head fanatic in a crew of them.*

Maxson continued, “Now that the ship is in position, it is the time to reveal our purpose and our mission. Beneath the Commonwealth, there is a cancer known as ‘The Institute’, a malignant growth that needs to be cut before it infects the surface. They are experimenting with dangerous technologies that could prove to be the world’s undoing for the second time in recent history. The Institute Scientists have created a weapon that transcends the destructive nature of the atom bomb.”

*I’ve seen an atom bomb you maniac. Nothing is more dangerous.*

Now the madman was pacing, “They call their creation the ‘synth’, a robotic abomination of technology that is free-thinking and masquerades as a human being. This notion that a machine can be granted free will is not only offensive, but horribly dangerous. And like the atom, if it isn’t harnessed properly, it has the potential of rendering us extinct as a species. I am not prepared to allow the Institute to continue this line of experimentation. Therefore, the Institute and their ‘synths’ are considered enemies of the Brotherhood of Steel, and should be dealt with swiftly and mercilessly. This campaign will be costly and many lives will be lost. But in the end, we will be saving humankind from its worst enemy... itself. Ad Victoriam!”

Nora was irritated. Somehow she doubted that Maxson expected to be among the lives lost. He turned to her. “I care about them, you know. The people of the Commonwealth.”

*Careful. Beijing Rules, Nora.*

“I can see that. They’re playing with fire and we need to save them,” she replied.

He nodded his head, “Exactly. I just hope we’re here in time. I refuse to allow the mistakes of the past to be repeated.”
“I’m sure you can stop them, sir.”

He turned businesslike. “Paladin Danse’s reports were quite clear regarding your abilities. And he concludes you’ll be an asset for us. You couldn’t get a better recommendation. Therefore, I’m commissioning you to the rank of Knight. And befitting your title, we’re issuing you a suit of Power Armor, to protect you on the field of battle.”

Nora stood at attention, “I’ll do my best, sir.”

“I certain you will. In any event, once you’ve familiarized yourself with the Prydwen and my staff, report to the Flight Deck for new orders.”

Nora saluted, turned, and departed the room. As soon as they were out of earshot, she leaned over and whispered to Piper, “That man is a dangerous maniac. And that he commands these people is terrifying.”

Chapter End Notes

First, the Brotherhood's attitude towards homosexuality is canonically supported by the points made by Veronica Santangelo in New Vegas: when you're a small population always under threat of inbreeding and dying out you have an attitude about people taking themselves out of the reproducing population. In this, I feel I'm just having the Brotherhood say the quiet part out loud.

Second, Rhys is an example of the Brotherhood's problem in not antagonizing the locals...and Nora is calling him on it: "Cuiusvis hominis est errare, nullius nisi insipientis in errore perseverare," is a quote from Cicero and it means, "Any man can make a mistake; only a fool keeps making the same one."
The pair made their way into the main compartments of the ship. The first stop was the Head Scribe. The scribes were apparently the Brotherhoods designation for science crew, medics and engineers. Tech and combat support, in short. His rank and name was Proctor Quinlan. Arrogant and supercilious, he briefed Nora on the scribe functions amongst the Brotherhood.

Instead of being obviously dangerous, he substituted an almost obsessive devotion to detachment. In its way, that was as concerning as Maxson’s fanaticism. Quinlan was responsible for determining the targets for “sweep and retrieve” missions, which made him Head Looter. After he finished with a request to sweep any areas for technical documentation, he sent Nora over to the head medical officer, Knight-Captain Cade.

Nora was beginning to learn the bizarre rank structure of the Brotherhood. Knights seemed to be non-commissioned officers…doers. Paladins were commissioned officers. In a more rational military, they’d be planners. In the Brotherhood, with its rigid and centralized top-down process, they were more like glorified doers…like the field grade officers in the Chinese army. So the doctor was like a Sergeant Major more than an officer. Which struck Nora as strange. Or indicative of how much value they put on medical care.

After reporting to Cade, she received an intake physical that was perfunctory at best, until the very end. After gathering her history, and the usual basic checks, Cade asked her two questions that brought her up short.

“Have you ever had sexual relations with a non-human?”

_What in the actual fuck? He could only mean ghouls. Why would they care?_

“Well there WAS this one guy in college. I mean, it was a dare, and I had to get really drunk…” she said.

Behind her she heard Piper whisper, “Sassmouth. And, eww.”

“I'll mark that down as a no.”

“Why ask?”

“You’d be surprised how many say yes. It does indicate a certain laxity when it comes to purity,” he said.

“Hmmm. What qualifies as impure?” asked Nora.

“The usual. Mutations, aberrant behavior like homosexuality, cannibalism,”

Nora nodded, “Can’t stand the raiders that go for cannibalism. I go out of my way to hunt them down.”

Piper started to open her mouth, but Nora gave her a Look and curt shake of her head.

Cade finished up with the question, “Under what conditions would you be willing to kill a human?”
“OK, why an ethics question in a physical?”

“Just answer the question please, Knight.”

“If I were ordered to, sure,” she replied.

“That’s a commendable attitude. I think you’ll fit right in, Knight.”

As they walked down the passageway, Piper whispered to Nora, “What was that about?”

“His questions? I suspect they want to be sure they’re getting nice little automatons, when they recruit.”

“No, Blue, those answers!”

“Oh. So they’d think I’M a nice little automaton, too. I lie, Piper. You might have noticed. I need the power armor to find Virgil so I can go get my son. I would do anything to make that happen. I’ll damn sure SAY anything,” Nora whispered back, fiercely.

The next officer, Proctor Ingram, was less troubling. An older woman in a power armor frame, she seemed cheery for someone whose legs had disappeared. She made some casual chit chat, and pointed out a suit for Nora. It was the first interaction Nora’d had with a Brotherhood senior officer that didn’t leave her with the strong urge to shower.

The last officer returned it though. On two levels. Apparently Proctor Tegan had been locked into his Quartermaster’s office, sleeping and eating in there. But in addition, he offered Nora a job. To go extort food from the locals. The justification was that the Brotherhood was protecting them, so they should pony up some food. That was just a hop, skip, and a jump from a full-on protection racket.

As they were leaving, Nora whispered to Piper, “I see what you mean about ‘feudalism’. I’m pretty sure that justification would have sounded familiar to any Dark Ages Warlord headbanger.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Blue.”

“Tell me about it. Just go with the flow. But these guys are rapidly making a run for second place on my fecal roster. Right after the Institute. In the meantime, we do only what we absolutely have to for them, and cut off contact when we can.”

Piper nodded.

Now that they’d met all the main staff officers, they left to meet Maxson on the flight deck. They found him at the stern, overlooking Ft. Strong on Deer Island. Danse was there as well.

He turned, and Nora saw the fanatic’s gleam in his eyes, “Now that you’re familiarized with the Prydwen and her crew, are you ready for your next assignment sister?”

Nora nodded in her best military manner, “Yes, sir.”

Maxson smiled, “Good. Let’s get right to it then, shall we? Take a look over there. That’s Ft. Strong, and it is infested with Super Mutants. Having those aberrations of nature close enough to smell is making me sick to my stomach. To make matters worse, they’re sitting on top of a massive supply of Fat Man shells, which we could use in our campaign. I want you to head over there, wipe out everything that moves, and secure that stockpile. Understood?”

Oh Jesus. I don’t much care for Super Mutants, but they don’t actually smell at this range. OK, their
dietary habits usually leave a little something to be desired, but this guy. And portable nukes would top the list of things I’d prefer you not get your hands on. Just slightly less than letting Super Mutants keep them. I just have to hope this doesn’t come back around and bite my ass.

What she said was, “Consider it done.”

Maxson looked over at Ft. Strong and sneered, “I realize you are eager to take the fight to the Institute, but it will have to wait. The Brotherhood cannot allow these abominations to have nuclear arsenal at their fingertips. We have a vertibird on standby, fully armed and ready to depart. Use it to carry our message to Ft. Strong, and wipe those dirty muties from the face of the earth.”

*OK, he’s not just a fanatic. He’s a racist fanatic. Bigots with the most firepower in the Commonwealth. This just gets better and better. They might as well paint the armor white and wear hoods. It’d be more honest.*

Nora cleared her throat. “Elder? Permission to speak freely?”

“Go ahead, Knight.”

“I’ll be heading off to draw my armor, but sir, do you want our interactions with the Commonwealth to go smoothly?” asked Nora.

“You know I do, Knight.”

Nora nodded. “Well, sir. Most of the Commonwealth sees Super Mutants as a hideous threat. Clearing out a nest of them, sitting on a pile of Fat Man rounds? About the best press we could possibly get.”

Maxson gestured at Piper, “That is why your friend has been allowed aboard Knight. You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know. I do see the merit in your argument already.”

Nora continued, “Yes, sir. It’s just…sir, in order for us to get good press, the press has to survive long enough to write the story.”

Maxson raised an eyebrow, “And?”

“Sir, if you could see your way to issuing Ms. Wright a set of Power Armor, it would radically improve her odds of seeing the story and living to write it,” Nora continued as Maxson started to scowl, “In my day, the Army would frequently issue military grade equipment to embedded reporters, including body armor.”

Maxson thought for several tense moments, long enough for Nora to second guess going after a second set of armor. Then he nodded. “Very well, see to it Danse.”

Nora slowly and silently let out the breath she’d been holding. Then she and Piper went above to collect their armor suits, and in Nora’s case, a laser rifle and fusion cells to power it. It had a reflex sight, a glowing circle showing the point of impact. As it was a laser, the sight was good out to the maximum range of the rifle, which was effective to about 500 yards.

Then she, Piper, and Danse boarded the Vertibird. The flight to Ft. Strong was brief, and briefly exciting. When they arrived, Nora head Piper swear over the team radio net, and call, “Behemoth!”

Danse was all business. “Good eyes, civilian. Lancer, eyes up. Circle the LZ until we clear the hostiles. Knight, open up with the minigun, now.”
For once Nora was in complete agreement. The thing was huge, like a 4x scale model of a Super Mutant. It was something she preferred to encounter from the air, if she had to at all. She pressed down on the firing stud and did her best to keep the tracer rounds pounding into the Behemoth, with four regular rounds hitting for every tracer.

Eventually it went down, and Nora continued raking the other Super Mutants as the Vertibird flared into for a landing and then as Danse and Piper jumped out and began firing. With the addition of the minigun, the mutants went down fast.

After that they moved into the building. The fighting was almost immediate, but not too bad. Nora and Danse fired left and right respectively and the Super Mutants simply charged up the hallways to the left and right of the entrance, and in neither case did a Mutant make it even halfway down the hall.

After that, it was easy. Down into the storage area, shoot down yet another hallway as Mutants ran up it into Nora and Danse’s laser fire. There was brief moment of excitement, when one of the Mutants turned out to have a missile launcher, but the first shot missed and he didn’t get a second.

When they finished, Dance looked at Nora, “You must hate mutants as much as I do.”

_No. Not really. They don’t bother me, I won’t bother them. But I will find my son. For that I need these suits. Maybe more stuff, so I’m not going to burn any bridges, but no more nukes for you guys._

“You know it Paladin.”

“Very good Knight. I will remain here to secure the stockpile. You have orders to return to the Prydwen.”

Nora nodded, then realized that he couldn’t possibly see her in her helmet and said, “Yes, sir.”

When she and Piper left the Fort, they could see the vertibird had landed at the original insertion spot.

_Sea ms like nobody is bringing their “A” game in this century. They’ve probably got good reason to be complacent, but extracting from exactly the same spot? Stupid._

The two boarded the vertibird and were silent for the flight back to the Prydwen. As they made their way up to Maxson’s Command Deck, Nora could actually feel Piper bursting with questions, but her lover was savvy enough to realize that the suits could easily have monitors.

_Or maybe she’s just waiting to REALLY give me a piece of her mind. That’s always a possibility. But either way I’d bet anything these things are bugged. Or monitored, or whatever the Brotherhood of Racial Purity calls it._

Maxson was looking out at the Commonwealth. He turned. “Knight, I’m told you have a personal reason for finding the Institute?”

Nora answered, “Yes, sir. They have my son. He’s ten. I want him back.”

Maxson smiled grimly, “And I want to get the Institute, so this will be easy. Knight, I’m putting you on detached duty. Your mission is run down every available lead on the Institute. Find them. Find a way in. You will have considerable leeway in this. Your performance at Ft. Strong was nothing less than exemplary. And I expect great things from you on this.”

_It doesn’t get any better than this. Detached duty? He won’t expect more than periodic reports. And as long as I make sure he only gets MY version of events…_
Nora said, “Very good, sir. Anything else?”

“Yes. Take these. They’re vertibird signal grenades. They’re infused with aerosolized transmitters. Set one off, and shortly a Brotherhood vertibird will show up for you. Proctor Tegan has more, should you need them.”

“Are there any limits to using these? Range or anything of the sort?”

“No, Knight. For all intents and purposes, if you’re in the Commonwealth, they’ll work. Dismissed. Oh, and I look forward to Ms. Wright’s articles.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

Nora saluted, and she and Piper left. They went to see Tegan, and wheedled a dozen fusion cores out of him. Then the two of them headed for the nearest Vertibird. After boarding it, Nora transmitted Sanctuary’s coordinates to the lancer-sergeant flying it. As the ‘bird dropped away from the Prydwen, Piper came onto the radio net. “Blue, where’d you get all the military, ‘yes sir, no sir’ stuff?”

So much for her knowing the suits are bugged. Jesus, I hate to do this…but this is important and that means my girlfriend’s hurt feelings are a small price to pay.

“Girl Scouts, Piper.”

“I don’t think Girl Scouts were that militant, Blue.”

“You should have seen our cookie sales. I’d prefer not to talk about it. Shall we discuss your mother instead?”

Piper gave an audible gasp, and then fell silent for the rest of the trip.

Chapter End Notes

The title is a play on George Wallace’s “Segregation Today, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever”, itself a (not very thinly veiled) dogwhistle of the Ku Klux Klan motto “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Forever”.

OK, I don’t like the classic Brotherhood of Steel. Lyon's offshoot was promising but clearly non-viable within the structure of the organization. Here's hoping Veronica is right about their long term viability.
Come Together

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they landed in Sanctuary, the entire town came out to see the ‘bird landing in one of the open spaces on the northeast side of town. As Nora and Piper hopped out, Sturges came up. Nora held one finger up and gestured for Sturges to follow. Piper remained sullenly silent. As they arrived at Nora’s neighbor across the street, a house that had become a de facto town hall, Nora opened her suit and got out and signaled Piper to do the same.

Once Piper had gotten out of hers, she walked over, tears streaking her cheek. Nora gave her an apologetic look but held her finger to her lips. She popped the FC from her suit, then Piper’s, then led Piper and Sturges into her home. Then her shoulders slumped, and she collapsed into the couch that Sturges and Codsworth had made for her.

“Sturges. Do NOT power those things up until you go through every inch of them for recording devices and radio monitors. If you can’t be sure you got any and all listening devices, I need you to ‘accidentally’ break the radios, and replace them with ones I can trust.”

Piper listened with gradually dawning comprehension. Sturges just nodded. “You got it, boss. When do you need them by?”

Nora heaved a sigh. “As soon as possible, Sturges. But not one second before you’re sure I can trust them not to tattle to daddy.”

Sturges smiled and left. Nora patted the seat next to her and Piper sat there. Nora looked over. “OK, Piper. Let me have it. God knows I deserve it. I said something shitty to you, and I did it knowing exactly what it would do to you. I said it BECAUSE I knew what it would do to you.”

Piper looked over at her. “Nora, do you love me?”

Nora looked over and said, “Oh, god. Yes. Yes I do Piper. Though god knows you have a right to ask that question. There’s a part of me. I call it my ‘evil self’, but that’s bullshit. Truth is, I’m broken Piper. You need to know this. Because I really want you to stay with me, but you have a right to know.”

Piper looked confused. Nora closed her eyes. She let he head fall back and began talking.

“All my life,” Nora began, “I’ve had a, let’s call it ‘ruthless’, streak. I try to be a good person in the end, but when it comes down to it I can use some pretty shitty means. If I see something that needs doing, I do it. The most efficient way possible.”

Piper said, “The ends justify the means, I get it.”

Nora shook her head hard. “No, it’s more than that. I mean that for me the ends MUST justify the means. The way I’m wired, I have to be SURE that the end I’m chasing is worth what’s going to happen when I go for it. That’s the difference. ‘The ends justify the means,’ is self-serving. ‘The ends must justify the means,’ means that unless you have a damn good reason, you’d better not tell me to make it happen.”

Piper looked at her, tears still in her eyes. “And if you do have a ‘damn good reason’?”
“Then you hurt the feelings of the woman you love more than anything to avoid letting a maniac with way more power than any sane person, let alone a racist fanatic, should have known that you have no intention of letting him have what he wants,” Nora answered. “I’m so sorry Piper, but I had to keep you from saying anything that might let Maxson know our real intentions.”

Piper nodded. “OK, Blue. Apology provisionally accepted. I’m still pissed at you, but I guess you DO love me. And I’m hopelessly in love with you, so there’s that.”

Nora looked at Piper and smiled. Then reached out to hold Piper. As Piper settled in and started snuggling, Nora saw her Pip-Boy display and said, “Hey, it’s been 24 hours. Let’s go get Curie.”

Piper laughed. “We can’t make it to Goodneighbor before dark, Blue.”

Nora held up a signal grenade with a meaningful look. Piper rolled her eyes, “C’mon Blue. What’s the hurry?”

“No, I want to get to Goodneighbor in time to get over to Diamond City by nightfall.”

“OK, that just begs the question, why do you want to get back to Diamond City?”

Nora looked at Piper, “Because I did something really shitty. I’d like to balance it out with something nice, and on the same day if possible. The maniacs may be maniacs, but they have air travel.”

So the two of the headed back to the landing site, and Nora pulled the tab on the signal grenade and tossed it out. After a while, a vertibird came over the horizon and picked the two up. Nora gave the pilot the coordinates for Goodneighbor and they took off.

Piper slapped Nora’s thigh. “I don’t think I’ll ever get over how it looks from up here,” she yelled over the rotors.

Nora nodded, and gave Piper’s shoulder a squeeze. The pilot was good, and was able to land in the square just outside Goodneighbor’s walls. The two went in, and into the Memory Den, ignoring the speculative looks some of the residents gave them.

They went down the stairs to Amari’s lab. There was a woman, motionless, in a memory pod, and another, rougher looking, older woman with Amari. That woman looked over at them as they entered. “You’re the one that wants to use G5-19s body? I just don’t have the caps to keep her alive any more. Life support ain’t easy or cheap going any more, you know? I was gonna pull the plug on her, but what you’re proposing sounds a little better. Better than letting her rot.”

Nora nodded. “She’ll be giving what’s left of her life for someone else.”

The woman said, “That sounds pretty good,” and she looked thoughtful. “Since G5 has no one else, for what it’s worth, you’ve got my consent.”

Amari touched the woman’s arm, “Thank you. I know this must be difficult” she turned to Curie. “Curie, let’s begin. Terminate all non-essential operations,” at which point Curie the Ms. Nanny bot dropped to the floor. Amari looked at a couple displays, “All right. Connection complete.”

She began twisting knobs and adjusting sliders. “I have access to your friend’s memories. G5s already been prepped, so this shouldn’t take long.”

She pressed a button, “Yes. There.”

Piper looked at Amari. “Is it really that easy?”
Amari smiled, “It looks that easy because I’ve spent the last day doing all the prep work, including compressing all of Curie’s memories down into a much more efficient package.”

The woman inside the lounger was moving now. Holding her chest. She spoke in Curie’s accent, “My…chassis. What is happening?”

Amari was calm and soothing, “Just breathe. It’s an autonomic function. Just let your body do what it must. Don’t think about it.”

“I feel…strange,” Curie observed.

Amari looked at Curie, and began checking her vitals. “Listen to me. What is your name?”

As she squinted while Amari shone lights in her eyes, Curie said, “My designation is Contagious Vulnerability Robotic Infirmary Engineer. Cee-Vee-Arr-Eye-Eee. Or ‘Curie’.”

Piper looked at her. “Oh my god. Is that really you Curie?”

Curie turned, “Yes! You sound so different with these ears.”

Amari took Curie’s pulse. “Good. Very good. Let’s test some cognitive functions. What is 1+2?”

Curie looked confused. “Three.”

Amari said, “The sites on your brain that handle math respond to simple equations exactly the same as complex ones. I’d rather check 1+2 than the volume of cylinder 4 inches in radius and 10 inches high.”

“Ah,” said Curie. “A bit over 125 cubic inches.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Now, if I threw a baseball at you, what would you do?” asked Amari.

“Uh, move.”

“Think of a strong memory. The first that comes to mind. Tell me about it,” Amari watched Curie closely.

Curie sighed. “Dr. Burrow was very old. He was the last living scientist in my section of Vault 81. He was on his bed. He said to me, ‘Curie, you must…’ And he died before he could finish the sentence. Oh! My insides feel…peculiar. What is that?”

Nora touched her arm, “You might be feeling grief. For a friend.”

Curie looked confused, “This unit has no ‘friends’. But…there! My chest is tightening when I think of poor Dr. Burrow.”

Amari pulled Nora aside. “The operation appears successful. But I think it will take a bit of adjustment for your new friend. She may need your help to make the transition.”

Curie came over, “Thank you doctor. For this opportunity.”

Amari nodded, “I hope you are very successful, Dr. Curie.”

“Dr. Curie? I suppose I am now. Hmmm.”

As they left the Memory Den Curie seemed to be trying to feel every possible feeling at one time.
After Piper pulled her away from a vagrant that she’d been sniffing rather inconsiderately, Piper looked at Nora, “Let’s get out of here and back to Diamond City, where they’ll only take her caps, not sell the spare parts as well.”

Curie looked at Piper. “But I have no spare parts.”

“That’s the point, sweetie. Let’s go,” Piper replied.

Although it was November and the sun was going down earlier and earlier, they made it back to Diamond City with time to spare. As they walked down the stairs to the market, Codsworth came up to Nora. “All is ready, mum.”

Piper looked at Codsworth, surprised. “What are you doing here Codsworth?”

Before he could answer, Nora interrupted. “You know how I insisted on sleeping on your couch when we met, because it was your house?” she asked as they rounded the corner at Mega-Surgery.

“Yes,” Piper said, starting to sound suspicious.

“And then you slept on the couch at my house?”

“Yes, Nora, I don’t have brain damage.”

“Well, I thought, it was time that we had a place together,” and then Nora opened up a door in one corner of the market, leading Piper into the place she’d bought.

“Oh my god Blue, what?!”

Nora looked at her, no, THEIR home for the first time. Codsworth had outdone himself. The entry was a comfy living room/kitchen/dining nook set up with a seating area of a couch and easy chairs, a dining nook salvaged from a diner, and a kitchen area with a stove and refrigerator. The area was pleasantly lit. Around the corner was an office area with a terminal. There was a sign that said “The Reporter is:” and a card that Codsworth was flipping from “Out” to “In”. Piper giggled at that.

Cure sat down and started tapping at the terminal, experimentally. Beyond Piper’s office was a wall with a door. Through the door, Codsworth had built a series of rooms. There was a stair up to two bedrooms with single beds in them. On the ground floor in the back area was a bathroom with a shower. Piper turned to Nora, and said, “Fetish!”

“You don’t the half of it, honey. Just wait. He seems to have managed everything.”

There was another door in and out of the home. In that area, Codsworth had assembled a small machine shop and arms locker. Piper looked at Nora. She shrugged, “Being realistic, Piper. Need a place to hang our guns when we’re not using ‘em.”

There was also a guest room with a double bed across from the shop and across from the bathroom. Nora took Piper’s hand in hers. “Now for the best part, Thing. Assuming he got it set up.”

Codsworth interrupted, “That I did mum. You’ll find it all to your specification.”

Nora led Piper back to the living room, where Curie was still reading the terminal. And then up a set of stairs to a room closed off from the lower part. There was a dresser, a double bed, and a desk with another terminal. There was another set of stairs going up a half level to a door. Inside was a bathroom, with the tub already surrounded by candles, just lit by Codsworth, and a bottle of wine sitting on a table, with two glasses. There was toilet and a sink, but the tub had the air of an altar.
Piper turned to Nora. “That settles it. This is a full blown obsession. I’m not even sure if the point is to get me naked, or for you to get into the bath.”

Nora waved a hand. “Pfftt. I’ve seen you naked already. Do you know how long it’s been since I had a bubble bath and a glass of wine?”

Piper laughed, then took Nora in her arms and kissed her tenderly. “OK, Blue. You’re totally forgiven. IF you share the wine, that is.”

“I plan to. In fact, I plan to get you drunk and have my wicked way with you,” said Nora.

“You don’t have to get me drunk, Nora,” said Piper.

“Quit ruining my fantasy of despoiling an innocent young virgin, Piper,” said Nora.

Piper chuckled then had a thought, “Hey. There are three more bedrooms, and you said one was guest room. The other two?”

“Well, I plan on getting my son back, and Nat needs a room of her own,” said Nora.

Piper looked at Nora in surprise, “I guess I didn’t think it through. You’re pretty serious aren’t you?”

“Deadly, Piper. I want to be with you. For as long as you’ll have me.”

Piper kissed Nora again, fiercely this time. “That’s going to be a very long time.”

Chapter End Notes

Now we start seeing some of how it was that Nora is where she is...
The next morning Nora woke up in Piper’s arms.

*I still prefer being Little Spoon. But when Piper’s holding me? Mmm. I love it. And this is our home. OUR home. Someday, I’m going to get Shaun back and we can be a complete family. I wonder how he’ll feel about big sister. I wonder how NAT’ll feel about having a little brother.*

Nora got up quietly and went downstairs. She could smell coffee. As she came down the stairs and into the living room, Codsworth glided over. He said, “Greetings, mum. Your coffee. 173.5 degrees Fahrenheit, brewed to perfection,” and then handed it to her.

Nora looked at the coffee. She sat it down, ironically on the coffee table Codsworth had made, and then sat on the couch and began sobbing.

Codsworth patted her shoulder. “There there, mum. I’m sure it’s nothing that bad.”

Nora just looked at him, and covered her face. She heard him go up the stairs, and he and Piper talking, then Piper came rushing down. She took Nora in her arms, and began rubbing her back, “Shhh…It’s OK hon. It’s OK.”

Nora buried her face in Piper’s neck. “I’m a horrible person. I don’t deserve you. I don’t deserve THIS!” She waved around her.

“What, Blue? Why not?”

“It wasn’t me. I didn’t stop it. I couldn’t make myself…and now I’m…I’m drinking…coffee like nothing even…happened.”

“Oh god,” said Piper. “You shouldn’t feel guilty for being alive Nora. You have done more to find and rescue your son in less time than any human being has a right to expect. Now stop being hard on yourself and drink your coffee. It’s not cheap anymore.”

“I’m…it’s not…it’s not right Piper. I’m alive and they’re dead, and I’m involving you in all of this, and I have no right. None. You have no idea about what I’ve done. I shouldn’t be alive.”

Piper grabbed Nora’s face. “Don’t you say that. Not ever! I love you. Nothing, NOTHING is so bad that I am not happier than I’ve ever been. I am with the woman I love. I am IN love. You are with me, and I don’t care about what happened before. We’ll get Shaun back. I promise you.”

Nora looked at Piper. “But you don’t know the things I’ve done…”

Piper put a finger to Nora’s lips. “When…hell, IF…you want to tell me, you do that. Not one second earlier. And frankly, we have more to do than worry about your alleged youthful misdeeds.”

Nora reluctantly nodded. Piper looked at her, her worry clear. “Nora, I’m not asking you to just stop feeling guilty. This is the Commonwealth. We all feel Survivor’s Guilt. Every last one of has a reason. My mom?”

Nora tried to interrupt, but Piper shushed her. “No. You clearly need to hear this. My mom was a
piece of shit raider, Nora. She tried to settle down when she had me. But after Nat was born? Couldn’t take it. She ran off to join a new Raider gang. Called themselves the Disciples. Never heard from her again. Don’t want to hear from her. But if he hadn’t had to raise two girls all by himself, maybe dad could have just left rather than stick around under Mayburn. That’s my fault, if you want call it that. I learned to handle it. You’ll learn too, Nora.”

Nora sighed, shakily, and nodded. Then she sipped the coffee. It was a damn good cup of coffee. About then, Nat and Dogmeat came down from her room, looking for breakfast. Nora smiled, a little sadly, as she greeted Dogmeat. “Have you found someone to look after, boy?”

He woofed and his tail thumped the floor. She looked at him seriously. “OK, Big Guy. This is your job now. Look after Nat, and keep her safe while her big sis and I travel.” She looked at Codsworth. “Both of you. You have the most precious things I can leave with you. Nat and our home. Protect them. Keep them safe for when we return. And make sure Nat gets to school.”

Nat, who up to then was thinking how cool it was that she was about have the run of Diamond City with a personal dog protector and a robot butler, suddenly realized the cost. “Aw, maaann!”

Codsworth spoke as if greatly moved, “I shall repay your trust with my undying devotion, mum.”

Dogmeat just woofed again.

Curie came from the back as well, rubbing her eyes. “I believe I had one of those ‘dreams’ of which you humans speak. There was a man in them who looked like Dr. Burrow, and he was doing the most pleasurable things to me…”

Piper rushed to interrupt, “I know what you mean Curie, but wouldn’t you like to try coffee? It will make you more alert. Won’t that be awesome?”

“I am a physician, Ms. Wright. I know all about the adenosine blocking effects of methyltheobromine in organic consumers,” replied Curie.

“Actually that all sounds great. Let’s have a real breakfast,” said Nora.

“Hey, I can make breakfast,” said Piper.

“Honey? I love you, but no, you can’t,” said Nora.

“What’s THAT mean?” asked Piper.

“I’m going to take the Fifth on that, and let Codsworth make breakfast,” replied Nora.

Breakfast was an amusing affair. Nat was constantly amazed at the food. Toast that was the proper shade of brown. Eggs that were moist but not runny. Fried cram that DIDN’T double as hockey puck. Through it all, Piper visibly pouted. Dogmeat just enjoyed the bites that Nat was sneaking him. I seem to have lost my dog to a little girl. You know what? Good. He SHOULD have a girl to look after him, and be looked after BY him.

After breakfast, Nora and Piper strapped on their weapons. Nora stowed her picks, and a few grenades, after taping the spoons down, in her vest, then shrugged on her shoulder holster and slung her .308 M24 over her shoulder. Piper just shoved her 10mm in her coat pocket. They left and headed to Valentine’s. Curie came with them, stating that Sanctuary needed its doctor and she needed to get back.
When they arrived at the office Ellie and Nick were working through some files. Nick looked up and smiled, “How are you ladies?”

“Better now that I’ve got my oldest friend with me,” replied Nora.

“Hey!!” said Piper, “I’ve known you longer, Blue.”

“Sure thing, Thing, but you’re only 23. Nick is what, 210 plus 35? 40?”

“The original Nick was 34 when the bombs fell,” said Nick. Nora watched as a cloud rolled over Ellie’s face.

Looking over at Ellie almost as much as Nick, Nora said, “Nick? When are you going to accept there’s only one Nick Valentine, and you’re it?”

He waved his hand. “Ready to head out?”

Nora smiled, “Almost. Here you go,” and she handed him the first of Eddie’s tapes. “There’s more of them, in Quincy, Southie, and the Coast Guard Station on the Charles.”

Nick nodded, but Curie looked confused. “Southie?”

“Ah. Old pre-war slang. South Boston. Relatively poor. Heavily Irish American. The people and location were known as ‘Southie’. Fair amount of crime,” answered Nick.

Curie nodded, and Nora turned to Nick. “Ready to head out again? I think we’re about done with the KKK in Power Armor. For now anyway. They put me on ‘detached duty’ to look for the Institute.”

“Awfully nice of them to tell you to do what you were planning on anyway,” observed Nick.

“Isn’t it just,” said Nora.

The four headed out, making the trek back to Sanctuary Hills, or “Sanctuary” as even Nora was coming to call it.

As they walked, Nora turned to Piper. “Honey?”

“Yeah, Blue?”

“I’m sorry about the ‘breakfast’ crack.”

Piper laughed. “Don’t be. I’m a crappy cook.”

At Nora’s shocked look she shrugged. “I’ve eaten good food, Blue. I know what it tastes like. I’m not an idiot. But I AM a shitty cook. Frankly, when you ate everything I made you that first morning? I totally fell in love with you then. You cared enough about me to fake enjoying burnt Cram. Which meant you cared about my feelings, and you probably liked me as well.”

Nora smiled. “Plus, I have a great ass.”

Piper snickered. “True, you do.”

It was after midday when they finally arrived. As the four made their way up the hill, a number of new villagers ran off to get Preston and Sturges. When both of them arrived, Nora smiled. “Place is growing, Preston.”
“Yes, ma’am. And who is this newcomer?” he asked looking at Curie.

“That’s going to take some explaining. And I think I’ll let her do that later, but this is Curie.”

“There’s another person named Curie living here now?”

“Non, Preston, I am the original Curie,” Curie interrupted.

“Really? Good lord, Miss Curie, you’re beautiful,” Preston exclaimed.

Curie blushed, then put her hands to her face. “It is ‘Dr. Curie’ and why are my cheeks hot?” she asked.

Nora looked at Preston and said, “Stop teasing the poor woman Preston, she’s a day old.”

“I apologize, Dr. Curie. I wasn’t trying to embarrass you or hit on you, you’re just very pretty.”

“What is ‘hit on’?” asked Curie.

Nora smiled at her. “I’ll let Preston explain that later.”

“Very well,” Curie said. “I will be in my clinic if you need me,” and with that she walked away, a little too quickly.

Nora turned to Preston, “I’m not telling you what to do, but don’t start something with her unless you’re serious. She has no experience at human life.”

He nodded seriously. “I won’t ma’am. On a less personal note, I’m thinking of sending a group to take over the Red Rocket as a second location,” he answered.

Nora nodded. “You totally should,” then she turned to Sturges, “Well?”

He shook his head. “I won’t hit on Curie either, if that’s what you want.”

Nora rolled her eyes at him, and Sturges looked confused, then said, “Oh, that! I don’t know if you’re paranoid, or they’re that good, but I didn’t find anything. So I tore out anything that linked in any way to an antenna, and replaced it with new components.”

“Fair enough,” said Nora, “Are they ready?”

“Absolutely. I made a few upgrades, under the hood so to speak,” Sturges said, “If you’re headed into the Glowing Sea, I felt like I should strengthen the armor and add some special mods. The legs have increased carrying capacity, the torso has Motion Assist for extra strength, and the helmets have a Targeting HUD. Also I made Piper’s set maroon, like her coat. Made yours blue.”

Piper snickered, “It’s so you, Blue.”

Nora gave her a smile, then turned to Sturges. “So we’re all set?”

Sturges nodded.

Nora looked thoughtful. “OK, look at this map,” as she held out her Pip-Boy. She engaged the lower left. “This is the ‘Glowing Sea’. As near as I can guess from what I remember, that’s where the bomb I saw went off, somewhere near Natick. So we need to pick a point just south of Lake Cochituate. Then head in, and hope we find something. If we don’t, we pull out and try again. Until we find some trace of an Institute Scientist hiding out.”
Or I start glowing in the dark. That’s possible too.

“Sounds like a plan, Nora,” said Nick.

“OK. So let’s get some sleep and head out in the morning.”

Piper and Nora spent a long night that hardly qualified as restful, but they did manage to sleep. Some. They got up and ate breakfast. Afterwards, Nora got up, sighed heavily and looked at Piper. “Time to suit up,” she said, then kissed Piper. “I love you Piper. “

As she climbed into her armor, she heard Piper. “That had better have been a downpayment, Blue. Not goodbye.”

Nora nodded.

Whoops. Armor.

“Yes, hon, downpayment.”

Nora threw a signal grenade as Piper clumped up. She still had her pistol. Nora had kept the Laser Rifle for the trip. Nick looked incongruous in his old trench coat and his revolver. As the ‘bird approached, Nora said to the others, “OK, this is it.”

When the Vertibird landed, Nora sent a set of coordinates to the pilot, set just at the edge of the Glowing Sea, near Lake Cochituate, that they’d selected. As they flew south they all tried not to think about what they were doing. About 15 minutes later, as the ‘bird flared in for a landing, Nora observed the area to the south was bare of life. They hopped out of the aircraft, and then headed in that direction.

“Nick? I think we should try to get as close to the center as possible. If someone were hiding out in the Glowing Sea, they wouldn’t just go to the edge and stop.”

“I agree, Nora. They’d want get well in before settling in. Especially if they were hiding from the Institute,” Nick answered.

A few minutes later, Nora’s Geiger counter began clicking. Although the armor took care of most of it, a residual amount made it through.

I’ll need a hefty dose of RadAway when this is over. But at this rate, I could stay for days.

About twenty minutes later they got to the edge of the Glowing Sea proper. The ambient dosage was already lethal after an hour’s unprotected exposure, it was only getting worse, and all the trees were down, uniformly blown down away from the blast. Nora sighted along them and took a compass heading.

Follow this heading, and I bet we get to Ground Zero.

The three began clumping along the route. Shortly, they made an ugly discovery. It wasn’t that nothing lived there. As Amari had said, nothing PLEASANT loved there. The scorpion the size of a goddamned pony? It lived there. Although Nora’s armor took the hits and the laser rifle did a number on him, the three proceeded more cautiously after that.

Which was good, because that meant they skirted a shallow pool scummed over with glowing orange mutated algae and THAT meant they avoided the mosquitos and wasps from hell that hovered over it. And they were able to give a wide berth to the Deathclaw fighting a horde of feral
ghouls. And another scorpion locked in a life and death struggle with a huge pack of molerats.

“Piper?” Nora called after awhile.

“Yeah, Blue?”

“Are we sure the Power Armor is…enough?”

“No, sweetheart. I’m not sure.”

As concerned as the two Power Armor clad women felt, Nick just looked bizarre, a humanoid wearing a trench coat in the middle of all this insanity and radiation. After a while, Nora felt bad that he didn’t have his own suit, as pointless as that would have been.

But after a couple hours of careful movement along Nora’s heading, they came to a slope. By this point the radiation would have been lethal after a couple minutes outside the armor. They went another mile, and then found themselves at the lip of a crater. The atmosphere above it was visibly glowing with radiation, even in broad daylight. The thing was, according to Nora’s rangefinder, over a half mile across and 800 feet deep.

What was really shocking was not the evidence of the surface detonation of the bomb that had destroyed Nora’s life; it was the small community smack in the middle of it.

Chapter End Notes

Let me start this by saying something about writing fiction. I never knew how an author could say, “And then my characters started doing [x],” where [x] was NOT the plan they originally had for them.

Until now. I had NOT intended for Preston and Curie to start flirting and hook up during my plans for the series. THEY seemed to have ideas of their own. Pair of teenagers, those two.

PTSD leads to all kinds of mood swings, and not all of them are angry outbursts. I tried to give Nora less stereotypical symptoms than angry outbursts for her triggering events.

Finally, the crater dimensions come, again from NukeMap (http://www.nuclearsecrecy.com/nukemap/) for a 25 Mt surface burst.
Hoping for two things, that the inhabitants would understand that the Power Armor meant they didn’t want to die of radiation exposure as opposed to attacking, and that they might have heard of Virgil, the three entered the little settlement. Nora headed for a woman who seemed to be calmly waiting on the group.

“Hold strangers,” said the woman, who despite her location didn’t look extra dead. “You tread on Atom’s holy ground.”

“Oh boy,” said Piper over the radio channel. “Children of Atom. Let me.”

“Greetings sister,” Piper said over her speakers. “I come bearing greetings from Charlestown.”

“And how fare our brethren there?” asked the woman.

“We fare well, although there was a blasphemer we were sent to find,” said Piper.

“You have but to ask sister,” said the woman.

“We seek a man named Virgil, sister. He blasphemed Atom and left, saying he would prove Atom false in the Glowing Sea. Though we are sure Division must have taken him, my High Confessor has sent me to make certain of his fate.”

*Wait. I just put it together. I’m in a literal hell, looking for a guy named Virgil. For guidance. The universe has a sick sense of humor.*

The woman was nodding. “We know of him. Truly he has proved troublesome, though not to the extent you speak of. He lives in a cave a little ways south and east of here. Go that way,” and she pointed to a cut in the crater behind her, “And you will soon find him.”

“Thank you sister. Atom guide you,” said Piper.

As they were leaving the crater, Nora called Piper on the radio. “What the hell, Piper?”

“Remember the execution I told you about?”

Nora said yes and Piper continued, “Children of Atom. I was investigating contaminated water at Bunker Hill and it turned out the Children were behind it. Well, I did the ‘find out’ part just fine, but messed up the ‘get away clean’ bit. There I was about to kicked into a sewer and I looked up and faked my best religious vision. I said, ‘Atom! He reveals himself,’” and they BOUGHT it. After that the worst they did was make me memorize religious doctrine for three days while I looked for an escape opportunity. And even that part turned out ok.”

“How so?” asked Nora.

“Blue, you were right there,” answered Piper.

“Oh? OH!!”

“Right,” said Piper.
Nick interrupted, “I think this may be it, ladies,” he said, gesturing at a cave. The three entered the cave. There were two turrets, but they didn’t activate, and they continued into the cave, where they were stopped by a Super Mutant.

“Hold it. No sudden moves. 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,” he said, “I knew they’d send him after me.

Nora had a hunch. "Are you Virgil?"

He scowled. He did it well. Super Mutants were built for scowling. “You know damn well I am. What’re you doing here?”

*What the hell. I can always shoot him later if it turns out to be needed.*

“I need your help.”

Virgil looked shocked, “My help? With what? How did you even find me anyway?”

Nora asked, “What can you tell me about the Institute?”

That just excited Virgil’s overactive paranoia. “The Institute? So, they did send you. You’re working with Kellogg!”

Nora shook her head, remembered nobody could see her do that and said, “Relax, big guy, Kellogg won’t be coming after you. He’s dead.”

Virgil shook his head. “Dead? Don’t you lie to me!”

“Is it so hard to believe?”

Virgil nodded, “Of course it is. 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. And you killed him? Then what do you want with me?”

Nora said, “I need to get into the Institute and you’ve gotten OUT of the Institute. I figure you can tell me what I need to do.”

Virgil leaned back in sudden shock. “I’m sorry, what?!? You want to get into the Institute? Are you insane? Never mind how nearly impossible that is, because even if you were to succeed it’d almost certainly end in your immediate death. What reason could you possibly have for taking that kind of risk?”

“Does it really matter to you?”

“Fine. You know what? I don’t even want to know. You want to get yourself killed, that’s your problem. But that’s what’s going to happen. I could help you get in there, but I want something in return,” he said.

“You help me, I’ll help you.”

Virgil said, “Before I was forced to leave I was working on a serum to reverse this mutation. It could return me to normal. So if you get in there, I need you to find it in my old office, and bring it to me. Assuming, against all odds, you survive. I think that’s pretty reasonable. But first things first. You know how synths get in and out of the Institute?”
Nora answered, “Yeah, they use some kind of teleportation.”

Virgil looked impressed. Or constipated. Nora chose to believe the former. “Well, well…you’ve certainly done your homework. It’s called the Molecular Relay. I don’t understand the science behind it, but it works. De-materializes you in one place, re-materializes you in another. The relay is the only way in or out of the Institute. The only way. That’s means if you’re going to get in, you’re going to have to use it. Have you ever seen an Institute Courser?”

Nora said, “No. What does that have to do with getting into the Institute?”

Virgil answered her, “Another secret of the Institute. Trust me when I say it’s a good thing that you haven’t found out the hard way. Coursers are institute synths, designed for one purpose. They’re hunters. Operations go wrong, synths go missing, a Courser is sent out. They’re very good at what they do. And you have to take one out.”

“What? Why?”

Virgil acted like he was explaining things to a moron, “Because you want to get into the institute. They’re your ticket in. Every Courser has special hardware that gives them a connection to the Relay. It’s embedded in a chip. In their heads. You need it. But to get it you need to find a Courser. I don’t know exactly where you can find one. They haven’t sent any out after me, and sitting here waiting doesn’t seem like a good plan. You’re going to have to hunt one down. I can tell you where to start, but you’re going to have to do the dirty work.”

“Fair enough. How do I find one to kill?”

“You don’t mince words. Good,” Virgil said. “The primary insertion point for all Coursers is the CIT ruins, directly above the Institute. So you’ll want to keep a watch there. The relay causes interference across the EM spectrum. If you use a radio, and tune it to the lower end of the FM band, and listen. If there’s a Courser active nearby, you’ll pick up that interference. Follow the signal and it’ll lead you to the Courser. Then you just have to…not get killed. Not going to lie, the odds aren’t your favor. But if you do find one, and you survive, remember I need that serum. I-I really to hope you find whatever you’re looking for.”

Nora said, “So do I. I’ll see you after I’m done.”

The three left Virgil’s little hidden hole and headed back out into the Glowing Sea. They began retracing their steps. As they went, they talked about ways to find a Courser.

“You’re probably not going to get lucky and just pick up a signal right away. That’s not how the world works,” observed Nick.

“Well we can’t just sit there and stare at the spot twenty four seven and wait until something happens,” said Piper.

“Wait. Maybe we can,” said Nora.

“Are you crazy Blue? I’d go nuts and take you with me,” said Piper.

“Not us specifically, but the royal ‘us’. Preston wanted me to help him rebuild the Minutemen,” Nora said.

Nick nodded, and Piper said, “That’s a great idea. I’m right there with ya. We need the Minutemen. How’s that solve THIS problem, though?”
“Well, the three of us can’t stake out CIT for as long as it takes, right?” asked Nora. She went on, not waiting on the answer, “But if we had dozens of Minutemen, they could post a watch and get ahold of us when they detected something.”

“But we don’t have dozens of Minutemen. We have one. Preston,” said Piper.

“We have one NOW. That doesn’t have to remain the case,” answered Nora.

“Oh! I see what you’re getting at,” said Piper.

“I like this plan,” said Nick. “I especially like the part where we get the Minutemen back as part of it.”

Nora sounded worried. “I hope he has some ideas about to help rebuild the Minutemen. Maybe a request for help or two.”

“Don’t get your hopes up Blue. It may take a while for him to get us something.”

Chapter End Notes

Until I was writing this, I *swear* I didn't put "Virgil", "Hell", and "Guide" together. I had the insight about 2 seconds before Nora had it.

And that last line is a little in joke for anyone who's ever spent the better part of Fallout 4 avoiding Preston Garvey and Radio Freedom like they do telemarketers.
Nora stared at the bleak landscape of the Glowing Sea, for mile after mile as the group made its way back north.

_This place is unspeakably awful. How is it that nothing has grown back? It’s been 210 years for god’s sake. What kind of bomb WAS that, anyways?_

As Nora and her friends cautiously moved toward the edge, there was the occasional creature sighting. They had almost managed to get clear of the Glowing Sea when their luck ran out. A Deathclaw picked up their scent, or however the vile things detected their prey, roared, and charged them. All three of them concentrated fire on it, but it got to Piper first.

Nora shrieked in horror as the monster got Piper down, held her down with a foot and raked away with its claws. She began pouring laser fire into it, but Nick yelled, “It laughs at lasers, Nora. Use a gun.”

_That’s my girlfriend you fucker! Rifle, pistol? Pistol, pistol!_

Nora dropped her rifle and pulled her pistol. Then she did something stupid. Very stupid. She ran up to the Deathclaw, standing over Piper, and began emptying her pistol into the thing’s face as fast as she could reload. It tried cuffing her away, but her upgraded armor allowed her to, not ignore, but discount the attack.

As if from a distance she heard herself screaming at it, “Leave her alone you fucker. Die, die, DIE!”

Then she was just screaming incoherently. It took Nick a good thirty seconds after it died to pull her away. And even then, the only way he pulled her off was to finally get through to Nora that he couldn’t check Piper until she moved.

There was a pregnant pause and then Piper shakily said, “The next time I get mad at McDonough, I’m just going to tell you he’s a Deathclaw. You’ll probably pull his entire office off the bleachers. Then kick him to death.”

Nora just held Piper’s gauntleted hand. The radiation was still lethal or she’d have popped the suit, rads be damned, to hold Piper.

_I can’t lose her. I can’t. Oh my god. I can’t, can I? I’m going to have to do something about that. Soon._

Nora had intended to walk back to Sanctuary, but her helmet, torso, and right arm were showing red. After a brief consult with Piper, they determined that Piper’s armor was in even worse shape, with only her left leg armor over fifty percent.

_Well, the original thought was to keep Maxson from knowing where Virgil was. And while the fact that he’s a Super Mutant makes it even more critical, we can’t trek from Natick to Concord in Power Armor THIS beat up. Unless we want to end up losing it. Dropping us off on the edge of the Glowing Sea, and picking us up at the edge of the Glowing Sea will have to do for concealment._

Nora pulled the tab of another signal grenade and they waited. After a bit, a Vertibird appeared.
After it landed the three climbed aboard. Piper’s suit in particular was making a grinding noise. The flight to Sanctuary was quick.

*This is definitely the way to travel. The strings that are attached are kind of pricey though. The more I use the ’birds, the better picture Maxson gets of what I’m up to.*

As they landed in Sanctuary once again the ‘bird was a brief wonder for anyone not actively engaged elsewhere. And Sturges, who always came to see the Vertibird no matter what. Nora and Piper climbed out of their suits letting Sturges rack them for repairs.

“We really mistreated them Sturges,” said Nora. “Sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it, boss. I kinda figured you’d need them as strong as I could make ‘em.”

“That reminds me,” said Nora, “This is for making sure my girlfriend didn’t die.” And she kissed him on his cheek. “And this is from Piper…”

Piper pushed her to one side. “Piper can kiss him just fine, Blue,” she said, “And THIS is for keeping MY girlfriend safe when she wiggled out and did everything short of kick the thing in the balls to get it off me.” And she kissed him on the other cheek.

Sturges was blushing crimson at this point. “Aw shucks. It weren’t nothin’.”

Piper said, “Wasn’t anything.”

But Nora shook her head. “It WAS something, Sturges. I didn’t lose the love of my life today because of you and I will figure out a way to repay you. I promise.”

She turned to Piper, “Speaking of repaying, before it slips my mind again, you need to write a puff piece on the Brotherhood for Maxson.”

Piper looked shocked, “Really Blue? After all we saw of them?”

Nora nodded reluctantly. “We may still need them in the future. I don’t want to burn every bridge, just yet.”

“But the Brotherhood. Eww.”

Nora laughed, then turned serious. “Piper, you’re good. I’m not just saying that because you’re my girlfriend. I’ve read your stuff. It’s not BU Journalism School stuff. It reads more like what we’d have called an OpEd back when, but I bet you can write any number of pieces that LOOK like they’re pumping up the Brotherhood as far as Maxson and his band of heavily armed bigots can tell, but to Commonwealth people would read like a warning.”

Piper looked thoughtful. Nora could almost see her starting to write the articles in her head.

*I even love it when she does this. I can tell she’s writing in her head already and god, she LIVES for it. And she really is good at it. Even if I’ve pretty clearly ceased to exist for her at the moment.*

Then Nora remembered her post Glowing Sea plans, and shook out a couple doses of RadAway for her and Piper to take to flush their system. Piper took her tablet and immediately returned to “PiperWritingLand™”. By that time Preston had joined them. Nora turned to him.

“Preston, I owe you an apology in advance. I haven’t done much for the Minutemen, and now I’m going to ask how I can get your help. In my defense, I’ve been chasing my son, and now I’ve
reached the limit of what I can do alone, or even with the help of a few friends. I need an army. I need a network. So while it’s a little self-serving, I need to know specific things I can do to build up the Minutemen.”

Preston shook his head, “That’s OK Nora. You brought us to Sanctuary. We’ve been working on making it a real town, and a base. I told you that you had our help when you needed it, and that we might be able to help each other. That offer didn’t have an expiration date. I would have expected you to try to get your baby back fast.”

“Son,” interrupted Nora.

“That’s what I said,” said Preston.

“No, Preston. I wasn’t on ice for a little while after my son was kidnapped. It was ten years. He’s ten yours old now. I did get the fucker who took him though. Problem is, he worked for the Institute.”

“Oh man, that’s awful. I’m sorry. How can the Minutemen help?”

“That’s the thing. I have to stalk and kill an Institute Courser….a hunter killer. But to do that, I need a stakeout on the CIT ruins by a team with a radio.”

“If we HAD a team, I’d give them to you.”

“And thus my self-serving question: ‘Is there anything I can do to help build the Minutemen back up?’” Nora asked

“I’ve heard of a settlement that needs our help. The place is called Tenpines Bluff. They’re having raider problems. And you might want to check the Abernathy’s. The last time I visited a week ago, they weren’t interested. Maybe after our guys moving into the Red Rocket, they’d be more open to us,” Preston replied.

“That sounds good, Preston. We can head out in the morning,” said Nora.

As she and Piper and Nick settled into her house in Sanctuary, Nora took advantage of the repairs Codsworth and Sturges had made. She collected some Tatoes and some Brahmin cuts and served Piper grilled steaks with grilled tatoes.

“I’ll do better another time, but I had pretty limited ingredients, and no stove,” she said as she served Piper. “Where do you get spices in Diamond City?”

Piper looked thoughtful. “Sometimes Diamond City Surplus, sometime Chem-I-Care. Depends on whether the spice can be used in a chem. Of course, there’s salvage as well. Most people just use salt. You can get that by purifying sea water,” she took a bite of steak. “Oh my god, Blue. This is delicious! Where’d you learn how to cook like this?”

“My mother. Back before the war, all little girls learned how to cook. Always liked cooking, but then I can BE traditional. I just prefer that it be my choice. Also we all learned how to sew. Clean up. Always hated cleaning though.”

Piper nodded. “I hate it too. But this food? I could marry you for just this alone!”

Nora just smiled. After dinner, Nick and Nora kept Piper in stitches talking about pre-war American culture and mores. Piper found the attitudes about women back then equal parts annoying and comical. She found attitudes about homosexuality and “normalcy” infuriating. She kept talking about what “she would have done”.
Nora just shook her head. “You have no idea how strong the pressure to conform really was, Piper. Women were allowed to do almost any jobs that men did, but we were ALWAYS expected to cook, clean, and take care of children. If there was a conflict between ‘homemaking’ and ‘career’, you dropped your career.”

Nick nodded. “And the Original Nick never questioned it. I do, but I’ve had near 50 plus years of the new world. Eventually it rubbed off on the new me that insisting that women wait on you hand and foot is kind of a scummy move.”

Nora interrupted, “You mean you learned not to be a sexist pig, Nick.”

“Guilty as charged,” was his only response.

“As far as gays were concerned, Piper,” Nora continued, “The politicians that ran the country were REALLY big on ‘normal’. They LIKED ‘normal’. And gays and lesbians? Gay men might hit on ‘em, and lesbians didn’t give a shit about ‘em either way. Not normal. Made the men running the country super uncomfortable. Although that didn’t stop them from…well, nevermind. Point being, most of us were underground. The ones who weren’t bisexual got beards, and then had affairs on the side. There was a couple right here in Sanctuary Hills that I knew of, two lovely women who had husbands with no clue as to who they really loved. That’s how it was.”

Piper looked furious. “How could they DO that? How could you all put up with it?”

Nora shook her head. “The pressure to conform was insane, sweetheart. Humans are social animals. Facing the possibility of being disowned by your family, fired from your job, and ostracized by most people versus hiding your sexuality? It wasn’t even a close call.”

Nick nodded. “I never had to work Vice, thank god. Because if you did speak up for homosexuals, the law would come down on you. Hard. Homicide was clean cut. If you killed someone, that’s a choice. Who you love? Not. And I always thought that those laws were unfair. But no one was willing to speak up.”

Piper merely looked truculent. “Well, I’m glad THAT idiocy didn’t survive past the bombs.”

Nora nodded. “I guess the survivors had more important things to worry about than what the guy or gal next door was rubbing up against.”

Then Nick uncharacteristically opened up a bit more about how he…or “the Original Nick” depending on whether you thought like Nora or thought like Nick…came to Boston from New York.

That led to a brief mock fight between Nick and Nora. When she learned he was from New York, she asked him if he was a New York Giants, a Brooklyn Dodgers, or a New York Yankees fan. When Nick confessed the last, Nora feigned outrage at a YANKEES fan living on the sacred grounds of Fenway Park.

Piper looked at them in confused amusement, “I don’t get it Blue. What’s the problem?”

Nora looked at Piper, “You remember how I told Moe Cronin that baseball wasn’t violent?”

“Yeah. You said it wasn’t violent, mostly,” replied Piper.

Nora faked a death stare at Nick, “This is about to be one of the times where ‘Mostly’ turns into ‘But not always’.”
Nick looked superior. “Not my fault Williams wasn’t qualified to carry DiMaggio’s bats for him.”

Nora stood up. “That is IT, tin man! You are going DOWN.”

Piper stood up in alarm and then blushed as Nora and Nick burst into laughter.

Piper waved a finger under Nick’s nose, then Nora’s, “You two are AWFUL. I am going to bed,” she looked at Nora over her shoulder, “And if you’re lucky I might let you join me.”

‘Sassy’ was the only way to describe how she walked off.

After she left, Nick looked at Nora, “You in real trouble?”

Nora shook her head, “Nah. But I better join her before I get accused of not taking a hint to go to bed.”

Nora was right. The only danger she faced that night was a pulled muscle. But it was worth it.

Chapter End Notes

The Glowing Sea, like the Commonwealth, shouldn't look and act like the war was 20 years earlier rather than 210. I have no idea what kind of bomb it was that went off, but it has to have been some kind of super-enhanced radiation weapon with some sort of 1950s "Handwavium Rays" incorporated into it.

If Nora and Piper's relationship is on fast forward I can only plead that some situations like war zones can put relationships into fast forward. And the Commonwealth is a war zone, and Nora's situation in it is a war zone on steroids.

Finally that domestic scene does two things. First, Nora and Nick and Piper can start talking about pre-war society so as to continue laying out Nora's backstory, and second, Nora is going to start using cooking as a therapeutic tool. Because *I* like cooking.
By mutual agreement, Nora and Piper slept in the next morning. The sun was well up by the time Nora got out of bed. She watched as Piper stretched delightfully, then she caught Nora looking.

Nora smiled at her, “You know you’re beautiful, right?”

Piper just grinned back like the cat that ate the canary.

Nora gave her a kiss and said, “Let’s check out the Abernathy’s and then head through Concord out to this Tenpines Bluff. Preston gave me map coordinates for both of them. Neither of them are very far and we can take it easy for once.”

After a leisurely start, Nick, Piper, and Nora headed out. Abernathy was quite close, not too far to the west of the Red Rocket Station. As the three passed that location they saw that Preston had indeed sent people out to begin building there, too, making a second settlement that doubled as a guard outpost for the new “City” of Sanctuary.

After another 30 minutes of walking they found Abernathy Farm at Preston’s coordinates. It was a large farmhouse built around a major power transmission tower. There were three people working the land. As the three newcomers walked up, the Abernathy’s looked wary. Nora waved her arm over her head, “Can we come in?” she called loudly.

The man and the older woman nodded, and Nora and the rest of them walked in, hands well away from any weapons.

“OK, stranger. What do you want?” said the man.

“I’m from over the hill…Sanctuary,” said Nora. “We were just checking on you. Preston said you were nearby, and we figured we’d see how you were doing.”

“You trying to reform the Minutemen too?” said the older woman.

Nora nodded.

“Well you weren’t a big help when they were killing my Mary,” said the woman.

“I’m sorry. If we could’ve helped we should’ve,” said Nora. “I can understand your anger,” as she turned away.

The man put a hand on her shoulder. Nora turned back. “Not your fault stronger,” said the man, giving the woman a look. “Connie is upset, but to be fair, we told that Preston that we weren’t interested, and the whole thing happened so fast there wasn’t any time to call you folk for help.”

Nora nodded. “I’m still sorry…”

“Blake,” said the man.

“Blake,” replied Nora. “I’m very sorry for your loss. If there’s anything we can do,” she continued.

“Actually, there is,” said Connie. “It won’t bring her back, but she was wearing a locket, my mother’s, when they killed her. It would mean a lot to be able to put it with her,” she gestured to the back of the shack.
“And they took it?” asked Nora.

Connie nodded. “If you get it back, we might rethink our Minuteman answer.”

“Not to mention that if we get it back, we’ll probably have left a bunch of Raider corpses in our wake,” said Nora.

Connie started to object, but Nora laid a hand on her arm, “It’s OK Connie, I understand. I didn’t disapprove. I’m not overly fond of raiders myself. Do you know where these assholes are?”

Blake nodded, and gave Nora some map coordinates. When Nora consulted her Pip-Boy, she found that the place the raiders came from, USAF Satellite Station Olivia, was pretty much on their way to Tenpines Bluff. Nora nodded. “We’ll see what we can do.”

The Abernathy’s waved them on their way, and the trio made their way through Concord, but this time Nora took the road to the northeast out of town. Before they’d been walking long they saw a satellite dish. Nora kneeled and surveyed the scene through her rifle scope. From where she was kneeling, she could see one raider pacing on the dishes walkway.

Nora laid the crosshairs of the scope on the raider’s head, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. As she did so, she repositioned the crosshairs and gently squeezed. With a muffled crack, the rifle kicked. Though the scope, even with the recoil, she saw a puff of red on his left temple as he dropped like a sack of potatoes.

Well, this is way better than have to get up into spitting distance and hope I can get the drop on them. But it’s time to reposition.

Nora and her friends moved off to the right as they moved cautiously up the hill. As they crossed a crest and Nora could see into the station’s compound, there was one more raider and a dog looking at where Nora had been. She repeated her process on the remaining raider.

OK. Hold still. This is going to be challenging. Get a good picture. OK...head. And he’s down. Move, smooth smooth, slow is smooth, smooth is fast. Next round in. Bring the scope down...the dog is looking. He doesn’t have us yet, center of mass, just behind the foreleg. And he’s down.

Nora and her team moved in now. But those three were it for exterior guards. As they entered the facility, Nora said to both of them, “Hold fire until they realize we’re there. I’m the only one with a silencer.” Piper smiled as she pulled one out and screwed it into her pistol.

“Piper!”

“I picked it up at Arturo’s after I started traveling with you Blue. I haven’t been holding out on you. I promise.”

Nora just smiled and shook her head. “Ok Nick, you need to hold fire. That revolver won’t silence.”

He nodded, and then they went into the facility and down some stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs some clever boy or girl had rigged up a laser tripwire. Nora deactivated it, and they moved into the facility, very cautiously and silently.

I can hear footsteps, coming this way. These guys at least don’t talk all the time.

As a raider came into view both Nora and Piper shot him. There were no shouts. They crept up to a set of windows overlooking an equipment room. Nora took a look, two raiders and a dog, and
signaled Piper – three targets and Nora would take the right, and Piper should take the left. This time Piper nodded.

Nora counted down from five and then shot her victim as Piper shot hers. The dog barely had time to notice that something had happened before it too was shot by both women.

Nora held her breath after the dog yipped, but no one came to see if something was up. So they moved down a set of stairs and a lower hallway leading to two sets of doors, both open, when another raider walked across one of the doorways. They froze and waited, until he crossed back across the doorway, whereupon Nora shot him. There was still no alarm.

*So these guys are at least quiet and stupid, instead of loud and stupid.*

Then she heard voices.

*Nevermind.*

“Hey, Ack Ack. Didja hear someone iced that crew Jared sent into Concord?”

A woman, presumably Ack Ack, answered, “Yeah. I heard. Saved us the trouble, right?” And she laughed.

*Why do you suppose she’s named Ack Ack? Ok, I have a shot on one of them now, and there’s a counter for cover after as well. So…...and he’s down, roll up to the counter and…holy SHIT, that’s why she’s called that!*

As Ack Ack’s 5mm minigun roared, bullets chewing at the counter, Piper called, “Hey, asshole!” and Nora watched as first one, then two Molotov Cocktails sailed over her head and burst, presumably on or around Ack Ack and her friends, judging by the screaming.

Nora peeped over the counter and Ack Ack and her associates were all on fire. She popped up, and as she was shooting each of that group, another raider came out of a storage room to her left. Which she only realized when she heard Nick’s revolver crack, twice, as the raider went down. Nora finished shooting each of the other raiders in turn rather than let them continue to suffer.

Piper was gagging in a corner, pretty clearly horrified by what happened when you hit human beings with burning oil in an enclosed space. Nora went over and stroked her shoulder, while privately thinking that it was lucky that the oil smell was keeping the burning meat smell away.

“Why don’t you go get some fresh air, sweetheart?” she said to Piper, who nodded and headed out.

After the flames went down, she searched the area and eventually found the Abernathy’s locket in a footlocker next to what she presumed was Ack Ack’s bed. Then she and Nick of them fanned out through the complex netting several fusion cores. The location didn’t yield much else, and Nora put the Abernathy’s locket into a sealed pocket for safe storage. Then she gathered up the weapons for sale.

After that she left the station without a backwards glance.

“Are you OK, Piper?” she asked as she came out.

Piper was grey but nodded.

“You know, if you two hadn’t done something, I might’ve died. You did the right thing.”
Piper nodded again.

“Right about now, you’re deciding never to throw another Molotov ever again, aren’t you?”

Piper nodded a third time.

“That’s OK, you can hand me the last two, sweetie,” said Nora.

Piper looked at Nora in shock. Nora gazed back levelly and took the satchel from Piper. Then she looked at Piper, and said, “To answer you, yes, I will use these when I need to. But only when I need to.”

Piper gulped and nodded one final time. Then Nora took her hand and headed over towards Tenpines Bluff. Rather than go back south to the main road, east along that, then back north on another road, the three headed directly east, cross country.

After an uneventful trek cross country, the three approached a small settlement that was located, appropriately enough for its name, on top of a bluff which made for a very defensible position. Once again, Nora stopped well short of the settlement perimeter. This time she called out, “Commonwealth Minutemen! We’re here about your call. How can we help?”

“Commonwealth Minutemen? I thought you people disbanded. I never really expected you to show up…” shouted one of the homesteaders.

“I’ll just take off then, if you don’t want our help,” Nora called back.

Piper nudged Nora and whispered, “Blue!”

Nora turned and whispered back, “Well, I’m tired of people telling me they don’t expect me. Am I here in front of you or what, idiot.”

“Well, it’s not nice,” Piper said, “Even if it IS accurate.”

While the two of them were having their little etiquette discussion, the homesteaders had called back. Since Nick was the only one paying attention, he called back, “OK, we’ll come on, seeing,” and here he turned so Nora and Piper could see him, “As you’ve asked for our help again so nicely.”

As they walked in, Nora asked, “OK, what’s the situation?”

The female homesteader introduced herself, “I’m Evelyn, and this is my husband, Eric. We’ve had raider problems. We know where they’re coming from, but there’s a ton of them and they’re dug in tighter than a tick. I wouldn’t be offended if you turned us down, there must be two or three dozen of them.

“That’s a lot. But where are they?” Nora asked.

“They holed up in the Corvega Plant South of Lexington,” said Eric.

“That’s going to be hard to miss,” said Nora, recalling the size of the place before the war.

“Thanks, ma’am,” said Evelyn.

“You can thank me if I don’t come back dead,” said Nora.
Nick, Nora, and Piper made their way south. Before too long they were in the hills overlooking Lexington, and beyond it the massive Corvega factory complex. Nora used the sniper rifle’s scope and could just barely make out forms moving along the many walkways slung up among the stacks and roof top equipment.

She looked over her shoulder. “Well, they’re there alright. We’re going to have to move in quietly. I’ve heard that Lexington is infested with ferals, so we need to swing wide,” Piper was nodding at that, and Nora continued, “Because the last thing we need to have happen is get into a fight with ferals and then bring a ton of raiders down on us.”

She opened her Pip-Boy map and scrolled down on the scale. “We’ll swing to the west side here,” she pointed at the map, and then scrolled in to show the route she wanted to follow around the west side of Lexington. The three of them moved more cautiously.

*It’d be just my luck if this was the group to set out pickets and just generally not be idiots.*

The sun was setting when the three of them reached a small house on a hill that looked directly at the plant. Nora peeked through a window at the plant. It looked peaceful at this distance. Only one of the raiders was visible at the moment, the one highest up in the scaffolding. Nora sat back against the building wall, and fished out some brahmin jerky and started chewing.

Piper looked at her, “OK, I give. We’re here. Make with the holotape heroine act.” She was smiling, but was pretty clearly confused.

Nora pointed past the slumped wall to the west at the sun, still a fingers breadth above the horizon. “Can’t,” she said, “I set up in that window, and the first shot I take someone is likely to make me out silhouetted against the horizon. A least we’re not rushing against dawn. Last thing I need is light reflecting against my optics.”

Piper looked at her, opened her mouth, and then shook her head. She mumbled something. The most Nora could make out was, “Said…take her time…tell me…ready…” and Piper shook her head.

Nick scooted over to Nora. He leaned in and very quietly said, “At some point you’re going to have to level with her, Nora. The longer you wait, the more irritated she’s going to be. You know, 200 years later, it’s just not a big deal, right? Lots of people have done way worse things.”

Nora looked at him in shock. “You know?”

Nick shook his head, “I guessed. I’m a detective, remember. I knew one of you guys, back in the Winter’s End days, working for BADTFL. Wasn’t sure until now. Makes sense though.”

“‘I can’t tell her, Nick. She thinks I’m a good person, and I can’t lose her.”

He shook his head, “First, the only way you could possibly lose her is to outright betray her, and second, you are a good person. Maybe you did some…questionable…things in your past, but that’s doesn’t make you bad. Practical, maybe.”

Nora sighed. “More like ruthless than practical, Nick, and much more than merely ‘questionable’
things. Vicious, vile. Look, do me a favor?"

Nick nodded and Nora continued, “Keep it to yourself please. I need to find the right time to tell her.”

Nick looked dubious, but he nodded.

Nora looked thankful, then sat up. “Shadows are here. Time to get set up.”

Nora opened the rifle’s bipod, and set the legs firmly on the windowsill. She snugged the butt into her shoulder and laid her cheek on the pad, holding the weapon steady at either end, and placing her eye at exactly the spot it had been when she’d zeroed the rifle a few days earlier.

Oh this is just lovely. I’m in shadow and they’re still in light up on the roof of the factory. I may get most of them before I even need to move. Shit. Is that a breeze?

“Nick, what do you think on the wind?” she asked.

“Why are you worried about the wind, Blue? You never worried about it before,” said Piper.

“That’s because the last time it was a 300 yard shot. I could’ve made those shots without the scope if I had to. This is more like 800 yards, sweetheart. I have to worry about wind AND drop,” replied Nora.

Nick dropped some grass. “I’d say about 5 to 7 miles per hour left to right, Nora. Not much different up there?”

“I agree, and nope, doesn’t look like it,” Nora said.

—

“…with wind, the simple rule of thumb is range in hundreds, minus one for full cross wind, with one minute of angle per 10 miles per hour. Those targets are 700 yards. Figure wind speed as you were taught. Furthermore with a rifle zeroed at 200 yards, you add 2-3-4-5-6-7 for distances out to 1000 yards to compensate for bullet drop. Fire when you’re ready, and if you get a first round hit, you can have seconds on dessert.”

Nora grimaced to herself.

Nothing like becoming an expert in killing people half a mile away. When you don’t want be an expert in killing people AT ALL. So 18 minutes up for 700 yards, and with the wind at 15 miles per hour right to left adjust right 9 minutes. Click those into the scope, crosshairs center of mass, deep breath, let it out slow, crosshairs back on center and…

CRACK. And a backlight on the silhouette showed that Nora had placed her bullet directly in the target’s heart.

“Very nice, candidate,” said the instructor, “But from this angle, I can see your ass has gotten much too big. Can’t damage the prime assets now can we? No dessert at all for you.”

Nora just shook her head.

Typical. As the only woman in the class, I get a private room. So they figure out a way to fuck with me for it, every single time.
Nora put the range and wind adjustments into her scope, and then sighted on the raider on the scaffold. She got herself ready, and slowly squeezed. With a muffled crack, the rifle kicked back into her shoulder, and she worked the bolt, while a bit under a half mile away, and two hundred feet up, a human being collapsed like a sack of potatoes. Dead.

“I think there’s movement down and left, Nora, on the lower rooftop,” said Nick quietly.

There was in fact movement. There were two more Raiders, at the edge of the roof, squinting into the sun trying to pick out where the shots and come from.

*Oh for the love of… Are these idiots constitutionally incapable to taking cover when someone is shooting them up?*

Two more cracks, as fast as Nora could reload, and two more corpses lay on the roof. Even at this distance she could hear shouting. It looked like several roof personnel were coming towards the edge, but also that some ground based Raiders were headed their way.

“Piper, Nick. I don’t want to try and reposition yet. This is too good a spot. Keep those assholes off me,” Nora called out.

Piper moved to the edge of the building and peered around as two raiders began beating the bushes. Nick began talking to Nora in that same calm, low volume voice. “The two on the ground are 100 yards out and coming slowly. I haven’t seen any movement on the roof yet.”

“I can hear both groups shouting. Let me know if you see anyone on the upper roof and scaffolding, Nick. Also, when Piper opens up. I’m watching the lower roof. And if Piper gets into trouble, we drop everything and help her,” Nora ordered.


“What? I’ve got targets showing!”

“I can’t see Piper, she’s disappeared…oh!”

Nora also heard the four muffled shots, two each, from behind the Raiders, and then the groans of the dying. In turn, she shot the two Raiders who’d come up to help their associates on the lower roof.

“On the upper scaffold, two more,” called Nick.

Nora looked up, and saw that those two had opened up, shooting in the general direction of Nora’s sniper nest, but not actually anywhere close. She laid the crosshairs on the first one, and watched as a red bloom appeared on his chest, and he dropped. But she wound up rushing her next shot. She took that Raider right in her pelvis. She dropped, but through the scope, Nora could see her writhing in pain.

*Well, let’s just sit tight and see if that pulls anybody else out into the open. I can’t hear any screaming, so maybe she’s already in shock. Or just too far away.*

After a couple minutes Nora glanced at her Pip-Boy.

*I think if anyone WAS going to come and help her, they’d have done it by now. So take up the sight picture, center of mass, and…*

With a final muffled report the last Raider died, high above them.
Nora turned, and was startled to find Piper right behind her. “Whoa! You’ve gotten super sneaky, Thing.”

Piper smirked, “I’ll bet that’s the last thing those two thought too.”

Nora smiled as well. “Let’s go down and see what we can see, shall we?”

“Oh, let’s do,” said Piper and then offered Nora her arm.

Nora set her scope back to zero up and zero right/left, and folded back the bipod. Then she took Piper’s arm, and the three of them moved out and began retracing the steps of Piper’s two victims. As they snuck through the low brush in the growing twilight, they heard more footsteps, then more Raiders appeared running along the street running in front of the factory.

There were three total. Nora flopped onto her belly, and sighted her rifle.

*Less than 300 yards, just shoot, nothing fancy, center of mass…and one is down. Reload, reload, and once more, maybe 200 yards. Got him. Reload, reload, — shit!*  

Nora fumbled the reload. In her haste her hand slipped off the bolt handle. The raider was closing. Less than a hundred yards now. Nora dropped her rifle, and drew her pistol. As he got within 50 yards she opened fire, dropping him on the third shot.

The three waited to see if anyone else was going to show up. No one did. Nora picked her rifle back up, blew on the chamber, and then pulled her cleaning brush to get rid of any residual dirt, and finally, slung the closed and reloaded rifle on her back. They continued down on the street. Then they entered the plant through the front door.

In reception, Nick whispered, “You two get a bit ahead. I’ll be backup, but you guys are way quieter than I am.”

“More quiet,” corrected Piper.

“Whatever,” said Nick.

They quickly cleared the front office, catching one Raider with her pants literally down, in the bathroom. They stalked their way through the cubicles, killing three more Raiders until they reached the factory area. Which was a dumpster fire of a maze.

There were never more than three Raiders in any section as they made their way through the maze, occasionally backtracking when they recognized where they were. It was easy to get the drop on them.

*It’s very useful to be the only people who know that there even IS a fight. These guys are too used to having their way against simple farmers, and so strung out on chems it’s a wonder they don’t shoot themselves.*

Eventually the group made it up to the final assembly floor. When they arrived, they could hear the usual chatter, but this time, they heard one raider addressed as “Jared”. Nora raised her eyebrows and looked over at Piper, who smiled and flashed the thumbs up.

Nora surveyed the scene, and when she saw a Protectron pod with a terminal attached to it a little ways away she got an evil grin, which she let her friends see. She crept up to the terminal, and quickly hacked into it. Sure enough, the Protectron was controlled from the terminal, so she hacked the robot too. And then sent it out to attack the Raiders.
When she got back to the group, the Protectron had already warned the Raiders of their rights, followed by opening fire. By the time a turret had finally felled the robot, he’d killed one, wounded another, and set one of the partially completed Corvegas aflame.

Which provided Nora with her second wicked idea of the evening.

She shot several more rounds into the car. As it blew, it set off a chain reaction through the plant. Piper, Nick, and Nora all lay flat waiting for the explosions to end. Most of the raiders lacked the common sense to do that, and frankly, most of them were too close for it to make much difference. Jared was still stumbling in his office, and Nora unslung her rifle, and carefully shot him. Then the group waited for the explosions and flames to die down.

At that point, nothing much was moving in the plant. They entered Jared’s office and read the entry in his terminals.

Let’s see. Oh shit. He knew Mama Murphy. And he certainly believed in her visions. This group was even more strung out than usual because he kept trying to recreate “The Sight”. And she was the reason that Preston was in so much trouble in Concord. That wasn’t generic Raider trouble. They were hunting his group specifically. To capture her. Those poor bastards.

They left the corpses behind, after gathering guns for sale, and went out a side door. Nora looked at Piper, “Are you as tired as I am?”

Piper laughed wearily, “More, I think.”

“Right,” said Nora as she pulled the tab on a signal grenade and tossed it out. She sat down on a pile of tires and waited until a vertibird landed a short while later.

She, Nick, and Piper climbed into the ‘bird, and Nora gave the Lancer flying the thing coordinates for Tenpines, then slumped down onto the bench and waited for the brief flight to end. After he landed she rolled out and approached Evelyn and Eric.

“They’re all dead,” she said as she plodded up.

“Oh thank god,” said Evelyn, “We’ve been thinking and we’ve agreed to join the Minutemen.”

“That’s nice,” said Nora.

“Where’s the nearest bed?” demanded Piper.

“Forgive the two of them,” put in Nick, “They’re dead on their feet.”

Evelyn smiled understandingly and led Nora and Piper to a bed in their shack, whereupon both women collapsed onto it and were asleep in moments. But not before Nora snuggled into Piper’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

Piper is getting sneaky, because she wants to keep up with Blue.
The next morning, Piper woke up first, and she sat up suddenly. “Oh crap, Blue, how rude WERE we?”

“Pretty rude,” answered Nick, who was sitting just outside, “But seeing as you were both obviously exhausted, and had just gotten done slaughtering all the Raiders threatening the nice people, they decided not to make an issue of it.”

Nora sat up and stretched, then went out to apologize. She found Evelyn and Eric in the field. “I just wanted to say sorry. I vaguely remember being a bit of an asshole when we got back.”

Evelyn laughed. “No problem, child. Nick told us about the fight. I’m surprised you didn’t cuss us out. We had no idea there were that many of them. Thank you so much.”

Nora nodded. Piper came up and handed her a carefully hoarded Pre-War snack cake for breakfast. Nora unwrapped it and bit into it. Her eyebrows went up, “These things really DO last forever, don’t they?”

Piper, her own mouth full, nodded happily.

After they finished breakfast, Nora, Piper, and Nick said goodbye to Evelyn and Eric and headed back towards Sanctuary.

By mid-morning, they were approaching the Abernathy’s farm. Blake recognized them and waved them in. “Good news?”

Nora nodded. “They won’t be bothering you anymore. Their leader was a nasty piece of work, but she got what was coming,” she said. Piper looked momentarily queasy, but Nora continued, “Here you go,” she handed Blake the locket, “Looks like Ack Ack was keeping it as a trophy.”

Blake raised his eyebrows, “Ack Ack?”

Nora looked rueful. “Don’t ask. Let’s just say she was chatty, carried a real big gun, and I’m lucky my rashness didn’t cost me more.”

Blake nodded. “Well you and the Minutemen can count on us,” he said.

Nora looked thoughtful. “This area has a ton of farm space. I’m thinking we channel trade through the Red Rocket as a trading post and Minuteman base. On a side note, be aware that we have an honest to god doctor at Sanctuary, if someone gets sick or hurt.”

Blake was surprised, “Really? That’s great news. An actual doctor less than an hour away is really something. Thanks, Nora.”

Nora smiled and said, “Not just a doctor, a clinic. I think we’ll be putting beds in for a full-on hospital, soon,” she had a sudden thought. “Hey, if we start growing enough can we send farmers over here along with some militia?”

Blake nodded, “Sure. What do you have in mind?”
“Actually? I’m thinking a division of labor. Sanctuary has a wall that we’ve set up, a ton of available structures and enough land to farm at subsistence levels and the Red Rocket is defensible, really defensible. I think if we set up fortifications there, and a barracks, then you guys can produce enough food to support yourselves and Red Rocket as well as build up stores in Sanctuary,” Nora was warming to her topic and didn’t really notice Piper taking her hand and looking at her fondly.

Nora continued, “And then, if there’s a real problem, say a determined Raider offensive, the Minutemen at Red Rocket can buy you guys the time to get inside the walls at Sanctuary and then conduct a fighting retreat themselves. We can rebuild things, but lost lives are lost forever.”

Blake looked shocked, “You’ve given this some thought. That’s sounds good, but how will it work in practice?”

“I don’t know, Blake, but you know what? I’m tired of just ‘surviving’. I want more. I want safety. I want plumbing. I want electricity. I want sitting down to be with my family at the end of the day and relaxing, and most of all I want my old world back, but better than it was. No more rich and politically connected assholes making the rest of us suffer because they don’t care if the whole world is a hellscape so long as they own the biggest piece of the hellscape. I want more for my boy, and her sister,” she looked over at Piper, and was shocked at the frankly adoring gaze she was receiving. “Um…anyway…the next generation deserves better. I want to give it to them. I’m willing to try anything once.”

Blake, Connie, and Lucy were staring at her. “Never mind the Minutemen, we’re signing up with YOU,” said Connie.

Nora blushed, “I think the Minutemen can be a pretty good symbol. We just have to take it for ourselves.”

They said their goodbyes, and Connie and Lucy hugged all three of them, and Blake shook everyone’s hands, and then they headed back towards Sanctuary. Piper looked at Nora. “Nora? Sweetheart? I love you. I love you so much.”

Nora blushed again. And then Nick chimed in. “You know, I said it before, but now? You keep acting like you think you’re not a good person. I’ve decided you’re right. You’re not a good person. You are an amazing person.”

Nora shook her head, “It’s just selfishness Nick.”

Piper grabbed Nora’s shoulder. “Nope, Blue. I’ve seen selfish. This,” she waved her arms, “Is so far from selfish you can’t get there from here.”

Nora shook her head, and headed for Sanctuary. But she was thinking.

When they got back, Preston was waiting. “Well?” he asked.

Nora opened her mouth, but Piper interrupted, “I hope you signed up to rebuild not just the Minutemen but the Commonwealth Provisional Government, because I think that’s what she really has in mind.”

Nick nodded. Preston raised his eyebrows. “What happened out there?”

Nora started, “Well I may have gotten little carried away at the Abernathy’s…”

Piper interrupted again, “Yeah, by declaring that she wanted peace and security for everyone, not just a few lucky folks in Diamond City.”
“OK, OK,” said Nora, “Just let me finish, honey. We have Tenpines setup and the Abernathy’s are joining. We should set up trading routes and send some farmers to the Abernathy’s. Maybe a beacon at Tenpines. It’s particularly easy to defend.”

Preston chuckled, “I’m beginning to see what you mean, Piper.” Piper made the “See???” gesture.

Preston continued, turning to Nora, “If you are really trying to recreate the CPG, I think you need to hear this. You know I’m one of the last Minutemen, but I never really told you what happened to us.”

Nora shook her head, “Are you really the last Minuteman?”

Preston looked thoughtful, “Maybe not literally. There must be a lot of former Minutemen out there who gave up in disgust after the Quincy massacre. But we were the last active group of Minutemen. And now it’s just me.”

“I keep hearing about ‘Quincy’,” said Nora, “What actually happened there?”

Preston was staring into the distance at things and people that weren’t there anymore. Nora recognized the look. He said, “I thought everyone knew about that. I was with Colonel Hollis’ group. A mercenary group called the Gunners was attacking Quincy. The people there called for the Minutemen’s help. We were the only ones who came.”

He refocused on Nora, “The other groups just turned their backs on us. On us, and the folks in Quincy. Only a few of us got out alive. Colonel Hollis was dead. So I ended up in charge of the survivors. We never found a safe place. One disaster after another…you saw how it ended in Concord.”

“I know how it feels to be an only survivor,” said Nora.

Preston nodded rapidly, “I guess you do. That’s why I’m talking to you. I can’t rebuild the Minutemen, but I think you can.”

“What???”

Preston gestured at Nick and Piper. “I think these two know what I mean. It’s not me, Nora. Never could be,” he said a little sadly. “That’s not who I am. I can lead men in a firefight. I can hold a perimeter. But that’s not going to be enough to bring the Minutemen back from the brink. We need someone who can lead. I think that’s you. If you really ARE trying to recreate the Commonwealth Provisional Government, that might be a good inspiration. Maybe next time, the other settlements wouldn’t turn their back.”

Nora looked dubious, “What makes you think I can do this?’

“Good god, Blue, what on Earth makes you think you can’t? I like to think I have more sense than most, and I’d follow you anywhere,” said Piper.

Preston said, “You saved us in Concord. There wasn’t anything in it for you. You had your own problems to deal with but you did it anyway. That kind of selflessness has been in pretty short supply around here for quite a while.”

Nick said, “If you think Piper only thinks you’d be a good pick because she’s your…ahhh…girlfriend.” Nora smiled at him fondly for his old fashioned attitude and for wanting to overcome it, “Then let me say, I agree with both of them.”
Nora held up her hands, “Okay. I guess I’ll do it.”

Preston clapped her on her shoulder, “I feel like this is a whole new start for the Minutemen. Don’t worry. I’ll be right beside you all the way…General.”

“Wait, what? Why are you calling me General?” asked Nora.

“The leader of the Minutemen has always held the rank of General. Our last leader was General Becker. After he died back in ’82, nobody could agree in who should take his place. The one good thing about being the last Minuteman is there’s no one to argue with me when I say you’re the new general. It’s your job to make it more than an empty title,” said Preston.

Nora looked shocked but nodded.

“And because of all the growth, we’ve got a problem. It’s a good problem, but it’s still a problem. With Tenpines pretty far away, and other settlements likely to be even farther, we need some way to communicate. We need the Castle,” declared Preston.

“What’s the Castle?” asked Nora.

Preston eyes gleamed as he described it. “The Castle was our headquarters. We had a radio station and a network of stations for reporting. We lost it a while back, to some kind of ‘sea monster’. Nobody who was actually there got out alive. We only have a few reports from distant observers. It must have been something awful, based on the reports.”

He looked at Nora, “We need to take it back.”

*Sounds like a nightmare. And one I have to deal with. I need that reporting network to catch the Courser, and I need that Courser to get into the Institute, and I need to get into the Institute to get my son back. Therefore I have to take the Castle for the Minutemen. See Nick? Selfish."

“Alright Preston, what’s the plan?”

“I’ll round up some of the militia members here and we’ll head down. Meet you at the Castle,” he showed her on her Pip-Boy map where he wanted to meet them.

“What are we waiting for? Let’s do this.”

Chapter End Notes

Ft Independence has been on that particular site since 1634 and was known as Castle William until 1776, when it became Ft. Adams, which is what it remained until about 1795, when John Adams (!, and has anyone else been required to UNname something after themselves?) presided over the name change to Ft. Independence. The structure as seen both today and in the game was built around 1833 which was during or shortly after the Federal period of architecture (and Empire style doesn’t ring quite so well).

There's quite a bit about it, including it's role in inspiring Edgar Allen Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (and thus the discovery of a skeleton in the wall, during "Old Guns") available online for the curious.
Having Fun Storming The Castle

Before Preston left, Nora told him she’d meet him at first light. Then she, Piper, and Nick met in Nora’s living room. Nora started. “Sea monster?”

Piper looked dubious, but she said, “Well, I bet big green ugly super-mutants weren’t something you thought of before the bombs, either.”

“Actually, we kinda did. When I first got to Diamond City, I thought I wandered into a fight between some umpires and Unstoppable Grognards. From Grognak?” said Nora.

Piper looked surprised. “Hey, I see your point, they DO kinda look like Grognard. But I thought Umpires chose the victorious dead.”

“No those are Valkyries, in Norse myth…Oh! Oh, I get it. I am going to totally wring Moe Cronin’s stupid bat-hawking, baseball-perverting neck,” Nora said, only semi-joking. “No. Umpires enforced the rules in baseball, and decided if a pitch was a strike or a ball, and if a runner was safe or out. They wore outfits like Diamond City guards, right down to blue uniforms.”

“What’s a ball, strike, and safe and out?” asked Piper.

Nick interrupted. “We’re getting more than little off topic,” he said, “I’ll teach you how and why to swear at umps another time, Piper,” Nick turned to Nora and said, “I was around in Diamond City when the Castle was wiped out. All we heard was that something huge came out of the sea, knocked down walls, and slaughtered everyone inside.”

Nora looked troubled. “I’ve seen functionally immortal radiation victims, Super Mutants, and cockroaches the size of a small dog. Let’s assume that a sea monster was to blame and that it or a descendant is still in the area. How do we plan for it?”

Nick thought for a bit, then said, “Do you still have that missile launcher from Ft. Strong?”

Nora nodded. Nick got up and left, with a quick, “Be right back,” over his shoulder.

Piper looked at Nora. “Maybe we should go in Power Armor?” she suggested.

Nora thought for a second and nodded. “We’ve got quite a few FCs and if ‘sea monster’ isn’t a good enough reason to use the suits then we might as well sell ‘em.”

By that time, Nick had returned, Sturges in tow. “Sturges, Nora has a missile launcher and we’re going to going up against something unknown, at least as big as a house. Is there any way you could soup up the launcher?”

Sturges eyes seemed to glow, “Is there ever! I’ve had a couple ideas I’ve been dying to try out. Basically I’d like to modify the ammo to come in a four pack, and I’m pretty sure I can rig up a guidance system as well. If that works, I’ll put them in turrets at our settlements.”

Nora handed him the launcher she’d taken from the Super Mutants. Then she rummaged in the stores for the Minutemen and found 12 missiles, and handed them to Sturges as well. He left quickly, eager to get busy,

“Well,” said Piper, “That’s that. When do we leave?”
“About 6:30AM,” said Nora.

Piper shook her head. “That’s not enough time to get down to the Castle from here, unless you meant ‘first light after dinnertime’ when you told Preston when we’d get there.”

Nora smiled, “No sweetheart. I’m letting Brotherhood Air fly us again.”

Pier looked dubious. “Aren’t we going to that well a bit often? Won’t Bullethead get ideas if we keep using ‘birds, but not reporting?’

“Maybe, but his people have been trying to find the Institute for a while now. They’ve got Vertibirds flying all over the Commonwealth. We just have to say ‘Didn’t pan out,’ and we should be good,” Nora replied.

“And when he notices the armed outpost right across the Harbor from him?”

“Well, yeah, that might bug him, but I figure I’ll tell him I need the Minutemen as cannon fodder for the search. He’s a big enough asshole to buy it,” said Nora, “And it has the virtue of being partly true.”

“OK, OK. Twist my arm on flying all over. I won’t fight you on ‘not walking’,” said Piper.

Nora set her alarm for 6AM, and then she and Piper went to bed. As they settled in Piper cuddled up to Nora, and said, “Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

Nora turned over and looked in her lover’s eyes. “Yes, but feel free to do it some more.”

Piper smiled. “What you said at the Abernathy’s...”

Nora grimaced, “When I started spouting off?”

Piper shook her head, “No, when you were explaining why you were rebuilding the Minutemen, and making them even better. You’re not just trying to get Shaun back are you?”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Nora said thoughtfully, “It kind of all runs together. I want Shaun to be safe when he’s back. That means no Raider attacks. That means strong defenses and order over a greater area than where my gun can shoot. That means government, and one that cares about more than small areas. So yeah, I’m after more, but for selfish reasons.”

Piper put her finger on Nora’s lips, “Hush you. Selfish would be crawling into a safe place like Diamond City and never coming out again. You’ve decided to make life better for everyone. That is NOT the path of least resistance, trust me.” She kissed Nora tenderly, and snuggled up. “G’night Blue. I love you.”

“I love you too, Thing.” The two fell asleep quickly.

The next morning when Nora’s Pip-Boy went off, Nora once again thought semi-seriously about destroying it. Behind her, Piper stirred. Groaning, she told Nora, “Smash it. Smash it with a rock.”

Nora chuckled. “Clearly I’m with the right woman. That’s how I feel about it too. Get up lazybones. We gotta get Nick and suit up.”

Piper groaned and gave her girlfriend the finger. But she got up.

Nora stretched and headed out to her armor. Nick was waiting for them, holding a heavily modified missile launcher. He handed it to Nora, “Here you go, one Sturges Special, guaranteed to ruin
someone or something’s day.”

Nora took the launcher and clipped it to the storage point on her armor’s left back. Then she opened the clamshell and climbed in. She clumped out of her carport and met Piper coming from the other side of the street in her set of armor. She called over to Nora, “Let’s try to only use our robot powers for good.”

Nora laughed and popped a signal grenade. Shortly, a Vertibird appeared on the horizon and shortly thereafter flared out for landing. Nick, Nora, and Piper clambered aboard, and Nora fed the Lancer coordinates for the Castle.

As the ‘bird lifted off and banked to take up a southeasterly heading Nora marveled at all the progress at Sanctuary. Walls, defenses, and farms, and beyond that a newborn trade network.

*It's beginning to actually LOOK like a city. Pity it’s way out at the edge of everything, or I’d ask Piper to move herself and Nat out here. The Diamond City house is probably safe enough. It’s central at least. Still don’t trust McDonough though.*

Soon they were picking up altitude to clear buildings in central Boston. Once they’d cleared Trinity Tower, Nora could see the Castle on the horizon. As they approached, Nora spoke to the pilot over the intercom, “Lancer, please orbit the fort. I’d like to get a look around it.”

“Well thing Knight.”

As they flew in a large circle about the Castle, they could easily see a handful of Mirelurks and a large number of egg nests all over the battlements and courtyard. Then Nora peered at the sea, and the lagoon south of the structure. With the sun low on the horizon, it was hard to make anything out.

*Dammit, I just had to pick “first light”. So “tough gal” sounding. Now I can hardly see anything… wait.*

“Lancer, just orbit the lagoon please. Piper, Nick, do you see a darker area too?” she asked her friends.

Piper sounded thoughtful, “Maybe. Not certain though.”

Nick nodded. “I see a spot, close to the bank by the Castle. Could just be a rock outcropping though.”

Nora agreed, “Yeah it could be. Or it could be trouble. We’ll assume it’s the thing whatever it might be, but keep a watch in other directions. OK, Lancer, do me a favor and land where that guy is waving. That little shack right there,” Nora pointed at a concession stand just west of the fortification.

The ‘bird landed with a thump, and the three jumped out. Preston hustled up, followed by a few volunteers he’d brought from Sanctuary.

“There it is. Pretty impressive. Its real name is Fort Independence. But the Minutemen always called it the Castle. Now you can see why I wanted to take it back,” he said.

By now Nora was used to the Power Armor and instead of nodding, said, “Definitely. For 600 years old this place is in pretty good shape.”

Preston nodded enthusiastically, “We take this place back, people will know we mean business. We need to clear the courtyard. That’s where the most opposition will be.”
“Maybe not,” said Nora.

She sketched the ground, based on her aerial recon. “There are egg nests, here, here, and over here on the battlements and there’s a ton of them in the courtyard. I also could see six Mirelurks moving around. Though there may be more. You know how they like to burrow. But the real issue is here,” and she sketched in the lagoon and marked a spot about halfway from its center to a large gap in the Castle’s walls.

“There may be something right here. Big. I’m guessing some type of ‘lurk,” said Nora.

“That, or a batch of rocks,” said Piper.

Nora said, “Agreed. Which is why after we sweep across the courtyard, I’ll position myself here,” and she gestured at a spot on the south bastion with a clear field of fire over the entire lagoon. “But after we clear the courtyard, I also want someone watching the harbor on the other side, while the rest of the unit mops up egg nests. Use fire. If something pops up here or on the other side or anywhere else, we all converge on that spot and kill it.”

Nora looked up, and realized she was surrounded by Minutemen looking over the map. One of them volunteered to be the other look out after the objective was secured. Preston broke the remaining troops into two groups.

With that, the Minutemen formed up and moved quietly in position, just downslope from the other breached wall, to the west. “On your signal, General,” said Preston.

Nora swept her arm forward and the troops moved out in small rushes. One group got set up at the breach and then suddenly opened fire, as a Mirelurk sensed their presence. The second group moved up and fired into the charging ‘lurks as well. The kept their fire low to get the bellies, and the Mirelurks went down in rows.

“Grenades,” yelled Preston, and a half dozen Molotov Cocktails sailed over the line and burst in the courtyard, setting up a wall of fire through which several more ‘lurks and hatchlings tried to cross only to burn or get shot down.

As the flames died down, Preston shouted again, “Group Two, advance to the objective.”

The group Nora to which had attached herself took off and moved into the courtyard, shooting nests and the hatchlings. They began fanning out. Nora radioed Piper, “Stay in the courtyard, Honey.”

“Sh’yeah. No,” said Piper. “I’m headed up there,” and she pointed at the bastion opposite the one Nora planned to occupy.

Nora growled, but then ground out, “OK, up we go,” then she called out to Preston via speaker, “Preston, start mopping up and set lookouts to the north.”

She and Piper clambered up the rubble pile to their spots on the wall and watched. Nora got her launcher ready. Piper pulled out a Laser Rifle. “Hey!” said Nora, “That looks like mine!”

“It should,” replied Piper, “Since it is.”

“You--,” Nora started, then, “Movement! In the water. Lagoon side!” she yelled.

As soon as the thing was visible and partly out of the water, Nora painted it with her laser and as fast as she could pull the launch trigger, sent four missiles into the thing. The she quickly pulled one of her two reload packs off her right leg, and snapped it into position. By this time the thing was mostly
out of the water.

It was in fact as big as a house, taller and thinner than she would have thought, but resembling a gargantuan Mirelurk. Piper was pumping laser fire into it, and the creature was spitting some kind of liquid towards the Castle; acid, if the smoking rock was any indicator. There were a number of Minutemen converging on the breach as well, firing their laser muskets as they advanced.

*C’mon, rear up, you fucker. Show me your belly.*

As if it could hear her, the creature reared up and began squirting more acid at the Minutemen. As it did so, Nora got her first clear shot at targeting its unarmored belly. She painted it with her laser again and as fast as she could squeeze, sent four more missiles into the thing.

Without looking, she grabbed the reload pack she’d stored on her left leg and snapped it on the launcher. She looked up just in time to see the thing topple over, it’s stomach blown open with pink and charred innards spilling out. There were numerous scorch marks around its eyes, proof that Piper had been getting at its vulnerable places as well.

Then she heard someone scream, “Medic!”

One of the Minutemen was down, with acid burns all over her. Her friends looked up as Nora came over.

“She’s hurt real bad.”

Nora looked down, gulped, and then lied to Theresa. “I think it looks worse than it is,” she said to the gasping woman, then switched to the Brotherhood radio for her Vertibird, “I need a MEDEVAC immediately, pickup at Ft. Independence courtyard.”

“Roger, Pilum is inbound, 3 mikes,” came the reply.

Nora switched back to speaker. “I’m going to get her to help,” she said, “So get Theresa ready to move on a stretcher.”

Preston came running up. “How bad is it…” and then he saw her. He turned, and then turned again, already composed.

“I’m getting her a MEDEVAC,” Nora told him.

Nick joined them and immediately started organizing the stretcher, while Preston asked, “Now what?”

“I fly her to the Prydwen and get her to the doc. You stay here. Get this place set up then come back to Sanctuary,” Nora said.

Preston saluted, “Yes, ma’am.”

Nick was checking Theresa and telling her she’d be OK, and that he had some Med-X, which he administered. He looked up at Nora, “Cop first aid training.”

By that time the Vertibird was settling in the middle of the courtyard. Nora led the group over and got Theresa set up in the stretcher clamps. Then she, Nick, and Piper climbed in. As the ‘bird lifted off, the Lancer said, “Ah, Knight? The Elder for you.”

Nora switched to radio, “Yes, Elder?”
“Are you intending to bring a wastelander aboard for medical treatment, Knight?”

“Yessir,” she said, “I need the indigenous troops as a force multiplier for my search.”

“I see,” he replied. “That is ingenious Knight. Well done. However, this vessel is not a daycare center for every wastelander with the sniffles. You’ll have to have her treated elsewhere.”

“But Elder,” Nora started.

“Carry on, Knight,” he said, “Maxson, Out.”

Nora swore under her breath. She turned to Nick and Piper, “Can Sun treat this?” she asked.

Nick shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said. “She’s hurt too bad.”

“Badly,” corrected Piper, though still clearly shaken.

“OK,” Nora said, “Let’s hope Curie can help her.” She switched to intercom, “Lancer, set course for Sanctuary, and floor it.”

“Beg pardon ma’am?”

“As fast as this thing will go, Lancer. Now.”

The Vertibird banked hard left, and picked up speed.

They were still 5 minutes out from Sanctuary when Theresa died.
When they arrived, the three of them climbed out and carefully took Theresa’s stretcher off the Vertibird. Piper and Nora took her to the town center. Curie came running up with medical kit as they gently lowered the stretcher to the ground. Nora opened her suit and climbed out followed closely by Piper. Both women had tears running down their cheeks.

Nora shook her head. “We lost her, Curie,” she said.

Curie closed Theresa’s eyes and carefully paced a blanket over her. “You must not blame yourself, Nora,” she said.

“I don’t,” Nora said. “Well…mostly, I don’t. I put her in that courtyard. But Maxson and his bigotry put her in the ground. At some point, he’ll pay the bill.”

Piper nodded. “I need to write another article. When I’m through, he’ll never know what hit him.”

“Right. Now, Curie can you get her ready for burial?” asked Nora.

“Certainly. Where are we going to bury her?” replied Curie.

Nora sighed. “In Vault 111. I can’t think of a spot better suited. Everybody there was betrayed by the people who should have been protecting them, too.”

Curie and another woman who seemed to be working as Curie’s assistant picked up Theresa and carried her away.

Nora shook her head. “Let’s get the suits parked Piper,” she said as she climbed back into hers.

Taking it to its rack Nora played the scene over and over in her head.

*Could I have gotten that beast on the first volley if I’d been more patient? Or shot up its acid ducts? Hell, I don’t even know when Theresa got hit. Could’ve been the first spurt of acid for all I know.*

*But I am going burn Maxson’s shit down. All of it. He’s a dead man walking. He just doesn’t know it yet.*

She heard a rapping on her helmet. Piper was in front of her, “Earth to Blue? Are you in there?”

Nora opened the clamshell. “Sorry, I was thinking,” she said.

Piper nodded, “If you’re anything like me, you were blaming yourself.”

“Only a little. Too busy adding her to Maxson’s tab,” replied Nora.

“I can see that. Let’s go get a drink,” said Piper.

Nora looked surprised. Piper smiled gently, and took Nora’s hand. “They’ve built a bar and restaurant here for the residents. Let’s go watch the nightlife. Well, the afternoon-life.”

Nora smiled wanly and they headed over. When they got there, they saw that Nick and Curie had
already arrived. When Nick saw the couple walking in, he turned to the bartender and ordered a couple drinks.

Nora sat at the counter. Piper was behind her rubbing her shoulders. She took a slug of the vodka. Then she carefully put the drink down, laid her head on the counter and sobbed.

“I can’t keep doing this…how many more people do I have to kill just to get Shaun back? How many? And why me? Why do I have to be the chooser of the slain?”

Piper came up and squeezed Nora’s shoulder. “Because, honey, you take responsibility. That’s what Preston saw in you. That’s why Theresa was willing to die to take that Castle. Is it fair? No. It sucks that your world was wiped out, your husband killed, and your baby stolen only to emerge into a world that keeps demanding more and more and more from you. And when you rebuild the Minutemen, you’re liable to find another, even bigger demand behind that one.”

Piper lifted Nora’s face, “It’s not fair, but I will always be here for you when it gets to be too much. Because I love you. And because while you take responsibility for everyone, I’m taking responsibility for YOU.”

Nora gulped once and then hugged Piper to her. Head buried in Piper’s shoulder, she mumbled, “Take me home, Piper.”

The two women left, headed for Nora’s house. The bartender looked at Nick. “She seemed pretty wrung out. Is she gonna be OK?”

Nick shook his head. “I honestly don’t know. It may turn into a race between finding her son and the breakdown.”

Late the next morning Nora and Piper emerged from the house. Nora still had bags under her eyes. Nick started over and looked at Piper questioningly. Piper waggled her hand side to side, then waved Nick over.

“How are you ladies doing this morning,” said Nick with a fair amount of fake enthusiasm.

“I don’t know about you, but we had a tough time getting to sleep,” said Piper.

“I don’t actually sleep, so I guess you could say the same for me,” said Nick.

Nora chuckled at that, then they all heard the guard yell that the Minutemen were back. Nora’s face fell, but she straightened up and began walking to meet them. Piper shook her head, “Dammit Nicky, can’t we catch a break?”

“Maybe it’s best. Let’s wait and see how this plays out,” he replied.

Nora met Preston’s group just inside the gate. She saw Theresa’s friends walking towards the front, and she waved them over. They made a little semi-circle around her. She looked them all in the eyes, her own tearing up as she said, “I am so, so sorry, but I failed you. Your friend died just before we landed here. I take full responsibility. Maybe Dr. Sun in Diamond City could have helped, and I thought I could save her, but…”

One of the Minutemen came forward, “General. Don’t. You were taking her home to Dr. Curie. We TRUST the Doc. It’s not your fault. You did something. We were just watching her die. You did more for her than anyone else would have. It’s OK.”

Then he reached out and held her shoulder. And Nora broke down. Completely. As she fell to her
knees Piper started forward, but Nick held her back. She turned and looked at him in shock.

“Wait,” he whispered, then nodded his head at the group. Theresa’s friends had surrounded Nora, and were kneeling, holding her. He continued, “You can’t help her this time. She needs these kids to tell her that she’s one of them, and that it’s OK, and that they still consider her one of them. This is what I meant. When I was a cop I got training. This may be just what the doctor ordered.”

The small knot of people were lifting Nora to her feet, and holding her up, still murmuring their reassurances. That first Minuteman looked into Nora’s eyes. “General. You may be responsible for us, but you need to remember that each one of us is a volunteer. We all truly believe that what you’re doing is worth the risk. It’s NOT your fault. Now let’s get back to work, OK?”

Nora wiped the tears from her eyes, and nodded quickly. Preston, who’d been maintaining a respectful distance, came up. “The Castle is secured ma’am. I’ve left a detachment and I’ll continue sending likely troops down there. We’ve also set up a trade route from Red Rocket. I’ve made sure it’s a bit better armed than usual.”

He smiled, “And finally, we have radios up and running. Not just Radio Freedom, but also two way comms. Here’s a set for your house In Diamond City, General Greene.” Then he looked thoughtful, “Hey wasn’t there a General Greene in…”

Nora interrupted, “Yes. He was Washington’s second in command. When enough incompetents had screwed things up in the South, Washington got the Continental Congress to approve his personal choice. They almost immediately started winning battles. Ask me how I know all this.”

“OK,” Preston said, “How DO you know all this?”

“Because that General’s name was Nathaniel Greene,” said Nora.

“Like your…” Preston started.

“EXACTLY like my husband. He was a huge military history buff since I met him in first grade. Revolutionary War, Civil War…” Nora said. She stopped abruptly. Then she got a far off look. “I know how we’re going to honor Theresa…what WAS her last name?”

“O’Brien,” said Preston.

Nora nodded. “I need to speak with Sturges. Organize the burial party. We’re taking her to the Vault.”

Preston raised his eyebrows. Nora saw and said, “Just like at Arlington, I’m taking somebody’s shitty behavior and making some hallowed ground.”

About two hours later, the Minutemen had formed up behind Theresa O’Brien’s friends, who were carrying her body, and Nora led them all up the hill overlooking Sanctuary and to the Vault. She saw a small plaque next to the lift that said, “Here lie 100 souls, taken too soon. May we remember the examples of their lives and the lessons of their deaths.”

Nora led the group onto the lift, and signaled Sturges who was standing by the control. As the lift descended, Piper’s hand crept into Nora’s. Nora leaned over, and whispered, “You know, it’s not very military for the General to hold her girlfriend’s hand.”

“Don’t care,” Piper whispered back.

As the lift stopped, the funeral procession continued into the vault. They took Theresa to one of the
many unused pods. They opened it, and carefully placed her body in it. Then they closed it up. Nora looked over the group, and said, “I didn’t know Theresa for very long, but in that short time she taught me something very important. That some things ARE important enough to die for. That they just have to be the right things. And she did just that. She chose her cause and she committed fully. That’s what she taught me.”

Some of her friends also said some words over the body, and the group got ready to leave the Vault. Nora told them to wait a second, then took Piper into another room. They walked up to Pod C6. There was a small plaque stating that this was Nathaniel Greene.

Piper got wide eyed, “Is that…are you OK?”

Nora nodded and held Piper’s hand.

*Nate. I’m sorry I didn’t love you wholeheartedly. You deserved that. But I did love you. This is Piper. I think I was meant to be with her. And I’m not going to waste another minute second guessing. But I thought you needed to know.*

Then she and Piper rejoined the group and left the vault. As they rose into the light Nora turned to the group. “Hold up here a second.”

She turned to the control room and called Sturges over, “Do you have it?”

He nodded and waved several Sanctuary citizens over. They were carrying a huge sign. Sturges set it in a temporary stand. He muttered to Nora, “There’ll be a more permanent sign and mount. This is the best I could do with short notice.”

Nora turned to the group, and said, “If I could have your attention? I wish to make some short remarks, because this place is no longer Vault 111. Vault 111 was a testament to man’s inhumanity to his fellow man. We are going to make this place a monument to the best in humanity. Therefore, in my dual role as the Sole Survivor of Vault 111, and in my capacity as General Nora Greene of the Commonwealth Minutemen, the duly authorized military of the Commonwealth Provisional Government,” and there were a few gasps at that, “I declare this ground the Greene-O’Brien National Cemetery.”

Sturges and one of his helpers pulled off the cloth from the sign. It had a version of the Great Seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. But instead of the Latin around the perimeter it had the words “Commonwealth Provisional Government”.

Nora turned to the crowd, “Over four hundred years ago a man stood in spot very much like this, and declared a cemetery open. But he also explained to everyone there, and to history, why he was opening it. He spoke of his nation, a nation that has been lost to us, and the war for that nation that he was fighting. And today we are fighting to not just make a new nation for ourselves, but more importantly, for our children. And for their children. And what he said then is as important now as it was then.”

She looked over all of them, and said “We have come to dedicate a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that a nation might be born. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men and women who died here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for
which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes the best way to begin working on PTSD is to put the person in a group of people who understand what they're REALLY feeling. In many cases one of the best things to do for someone with PTSD is to get them back to their unit. Among the people they understand and who understand them back. For Nora, this is becoming the Minutemen. She's not "fixed" because you're never "fixed". PTSD is about your memories, and they'll always be memories. The best you can hope for is to de-link the emotional response from the memory. For various reasons, hers is more self directed--suicidal thoughts, depression, crying jags--than outwardly directed--anger in short--for character reasons. Nevertheless in prior chapters, and in this one, she's beginning to make the trauma a memory, by therapeutic methods, that according to my research have been shown to work. In Nora's case, cooking for friends and being with her Minutemen. Nothing works immediately and frequently you have to try a bunch of different things until you find something that works.

If you suspect that you have PTSD, see a professional competent in its diagnosis. There's nothing wrong in feeling like you do. When I was an officer we were trained that PTSD was not a matter of IF but WHEN. With enough time pumping adrenaline in fight or flight response, EVERYONE will show symptoms. "Half to failure" was about 60 days cumulative. So get help. Find support groups. They're there, and there's a whole wide web of knowledge that you can access with a device most of you can find conveniently located in a pocket or purse to find them. Use it.

If you want to quote Lincoln while you're at it? Wouldn't blame you.

Finally, Nora is the character most likely to tell me to fuck off, she's doing it HER way. Like this chapter. I wanted to create the CPG at some point, in the future. Theresa O'Brien's death REALLY upset Nora though, and she told me to sit down, shut up, and write that she was declaring it here and now. She's really relentless sometimes. So here you go.
As Piper, Nick, and Nora walked back to Diamond City, Piper said, “You know that’s planting a big fat target on your back. The Institute will HAVE to take notice, right?”

Nora rolled her eyes, “Oh, like killing Kellogg didn’t do that.”

“Fair enough,” said Nick. “But Lincoln? Isn’t that a little ‘on the nose’?”

“Oh it’s entirely on the nose Nick. That’s the point. This all has to be about something more, or I’m just killing people and getting people killed on a roaring rampage of revenge. It’s one of two things holding me together.”

Nick nodded thoughtfully. The rest of the trip Piper spent her time peppering Nora with questions about Lincoln. The history texts that survived had been sketchy at best. Nora extracted a promise to properly attribute her speech, “There’s no way I’m going to go down as history’s greatest plagiarist.”

When they got back to Diamond City the little group broke up. Nick peeled off first, saying, “I better get back to the office. Ellie’s going to have a backlog a mile long. But don’t be a stranger.” And he headed towards his office.

Then Nora lost Piper to her desk. The second that they got home, Piper made a beeline for it, flipping the “Out” sign to “In” almost as an afterthought. Nora groused, “Sure, dump me for some newsprint, Piper.”

Without even pausing in her typing, Piper said over her shoulder, “You were the one who wanted articles that make Maxson think we’re promoting him while actually warning anyone who reads this about the Brotherhood. That’s not as easy as it sounds.”

Nora laughed, “All right, all right. I know when I’m beaten. I’m going to do some selling and shopping. Be back in a bit.”

Nora walked around the market. It was a busy, vibrant spot, with vendors hawking their wares, and with Takahashi serving everyone who came up with the same enigmatic phrase. After she sold some of her loot, she got down to business.

First she visited Solomon at Chem-I-Care. Looking over his selection, she caught his attention. “Do you guys use sage for anything?”

Solomon nodded. “Sure do, dude. Great for upset tummies. And the runs. You got a rumbly tummy?”

Nora laughed and shook her head. “No, but I’d like to buy some fresh leaves off you.”

Solomon looked confused. “Just leaves?”

Nora nodded.

“OK, but I’m gonna have to charge you 5 caps for a bundle,” he said apologetically.

Nora smiled at him, “If I can make this work, and word gets out? You should think about charging
more."

He looked confused, but she just gave him a wave and moved on. Her next stop was Choice Chops. There she asked, “Hey Polly. Do chickens still exist, are they edible, and if so, can I get a couple butchered?”

Polly nodded, “Rad Chickens, yeah.”

Nora looked worried for a second, “How big is a rad chicken?”

Polly smiled and held her hands about a foot apart. Nora nodded, relieved. “So about the same as pre-war chickens. That’s a switch. OK so I need two of those. Now, by any chance do you smoke meats?” she asked hopefully.

Polly nodded, “It’s about the only way to make molerat edible in my opinion.” She showed Nora a choice of sliced smoked meats, and Nora pointed at one that looked a nice deep red.

“How big is a rad chicken?”

Nora shook her head, but she paid for the slice and tasted it.

A bit more strongly flavored than I’d like, but close enough to sub in for Prosciutto. Let’s see how it tastes with the sage...

Polly looked on, a bit confused, as Nora took a sage leaf, wrapped it in the slice, and chewed it thoughtfully. Then Nora nodded, and told the vendor, “I’ll take four slices please.”

Next, she went over to the Dugout Inn. Vadim was loudly boasting of his exploits with a mirelurk. One of the patron’s was scoffing, “A mirelurk? That’s like 2 out of 10 on the danger scale.”

Nora cut in, “I wouldn’t be so cocky about that.”

“What do you know…” started the man. Then he looked at Nora’s face. “Ooookay. I’ll just be over there, minding my own business. WAY over there.” He left abruptly.

“Hey!” Vadim said, “I was not finished with story. Why do you interrupt?”

“I need a dry white wine, Vadim,” Nora replied.

“Pah! You do not want simple wine. Not when you could have Bobrov’s Best!”

Nora looked at him levelly. “If you knew what my last two days had been like, and if you knew why I wanted this wine, dry, three full bottles? You would not be yanking my damn chain, Vadim. Wine. Now.”

“OK, OK. I kid,” he said.

He produced three bottles of wine. Nora tasted one and it was actually passable. She nodded at him and counted out the caps.

Finally she went to Fallon’s and picked up the package that she’d requested of Becky the last time she’d been in the City. She counted out a ridiculous amount of caps.
When she got home, she put two bottles in the fridge and pulled out the butter, and some fresh noodles that Codsworth had laid in, and pulled some razorgrain flour off the shelf.

She got out a pot, filled it with water and put it on the stove. Then she put some flour onto a plate and shook some salt and pepper into it.

Given how popular salt and pepper were before the war, it’s going to be quite a while until we run out of salvage.

Setting the plate aside, she took the chickens and carefully filleted the breasts. She thought for a second, and deboned the thigh, leg and wing meat as well, setting it into the refrigerator, covered.

Then she laid out the boneless breasts, and pulled out the frying pan.

This is the part I really love. Good for what pisses you off.

She covered each breast with a cloth, then hauled off and whacked one with the frying pan, quite hard.

“Hey!” she heard Piper call.

WHACK! On that same breast, then moving on to the next, WHACK!

“What the hell, Blue? Are you trying to…” Piper started before Nora interrupted her by another WHACK!

“OK Blue, I agree that I sometimes have to hit my dinner before eating it, but normally I stop when it’s dead, let alone cut up and ready for the pot,” Piper said, quickly, finishing just before Nora could interrupt her with another WHACK!

Piper was briefly concerned when she saw Nora’s shoulders shaking, but was relieved to discover it was because Nora was laughing silently. She kissed Nora on the cheek from behind, and asked, “What on earth are you doing sweetheart?”

“I should insist on a surprise, but I love company when I cook, and besides this did tear you away from your work,” Nora said. She took out a measuring cup and poured out two cups of wine.

Then she poured two full glasses of the wine, and handed one to Piper. She clinked glasses with her, then took a sip.

Piper looked on, interested, as Nora resumed the chicken whackings. “Hmmm. What’s that for?” Piper asked.

“I need the chicken breasts to be about a half inch thick,” replied Nora.

“OK. Why?” Piper asked again.

“Because I’m going to sauté these things and if they aren’t thin enough you either burn the outside or leave the middle uncooked. The latter is unsafe, the former is a crime,” Nora said.

When she’d gotten the breasts the way she wanted them, she took two sage leaves each per breast and laid them out on each breast, then covered that with the molerat meat. She pressed down, letting natural moisture adhere the pieces, then dredged each lightly through the flour. Then she put a generous dollop of butter into the pan, and began heating it. Piper was looking on, fascinated.
When the butter had melted and was just starting to turn brown, Nora laid each breast in the pan, molerat side down. Then she took a sip of wine and noted the time. She looked at Piper, and raised her glass. “I love cooking with wine. Sometimes I even put it in the food.” Piper snickered and sipped herself.

When the breasts had been in about 4 minutes, Nora turned them over and pulled a Mutfruit from the fridge.

Good thing these have citrus in them, both for this dish, and you know, avoiding scurvy.

She was juicing the mutfruit in with the two cups of wine when three minutes were up. Nora pulled the breasts off and set them aside. Then she poured the wine/mutfruit juice into the pan. Piper looked at her questioningly.

“Deglazing the pan, sweetie. This will loosen up the brown chunks, and give the sauce a beautiful brown color when I’m done,” Nora said. Piper nodded, and Nora continued, “But in the middle, it can look like shit. Scares me every time.”

Nora measured out two more cups, of water this time, then measured out five tablespoons of flour from the plate she’d used to dredge the breasts and mixed it into the water. When it was thoroughly mixed, she poured that into the pan, where the wine was already at a rolling boil. She stirred the mixture, and as Nora promised, it took on a hideous grey color a minute or two before it turned a rich brown color and thickened. Then Nora reduced the heat to just above off and put the breasts into the sauce.

She started heating the water, and began setting two places in the dining nook. Piper was gazing at her with a speculative look in her eyes. She looked like she was about to say something, then just took another sip, shaking her head.

By then the water was boiling, and Nora dumped the fresh noodles in, and opened a chilled bottle of white. Turning, she saw Piper looking at her. “Checking out my ass, darling?”

“That too. You like to cook don’t you?”

Nora thought for a second, then nodded. “It’s therapeutic. I’d forgotten how good it felt to do something that other people could enjoy, until that night back in Sanctuary when I grilled steak and tatoes for you.”

“Well if this is your therapy, it smells heavenly,” said Piper.

“OK, honey, go ahead and sit down,” Nora said.

Nora poured off the water from the noodles and buttered those as well. About that time, Codsworth came in and reported, “All set, mum. I am here for Ms. Ellie and Natalie’s dinner.”

Nora nodded, and handed Codsworth two plates, covered, to deliver and set the other two plates down for herself and Piper. The breasts had been placed in a bed of noodles, and sauce drizzled over everything.

Piper said, “I am beginning to smell a setup.”

Nora smiled, “I wanted to have you to myself for a while when we got here,” she admitted. “So I asked Nick to ask Ellie to look after Nat for dinner.”

Nora took a bite quickly to check herself. It tasted almost spot on. “What, honey? Don’t you like it?” she asked.

“No! I love it! This is better than anything I’ve ever eaten. Ever.”

Nora grinned. “Then it’s living up to its name. Traditionally you make this with veal, but I always subbed in chicken breast. And you should roll it, but I feel like that’s just precious and fiddly.”

Piper cocked her head, “What’s ‘veal’?”

“Immature Brahmin, kept penned and fed milk until slaughtered at about five months old,” Nora said.

Piper looked appalled. “That sounds awful.”

Nora nodded. “Therefore, the chicken. Tastes similar, and who doesn’t like eating dinosaur?”

She continued. “I call this Chicken Saltimbocca alla Nora,” she smiled, “Saltimbocca is Italian for ‘jumps in your mouth’, because whoever named it was full of themselves. Although it is pretty tasty.”

Piper smiled and took another forkful. Nora turned serious. She raised her glass, “To coming home. To OUR home.”

Piper raised her glass, and sipped again.

Nora looked at Piper, “I love you, Piper.”

Piper smiled, and said, “And I love you, Nora.”

The two ate quietly, but occasionally holding hands, or smiling at the other. Nora couldn’t recall feeling this comfortable for many years. Since before law school at least.

I’m truly home. This is what I been trying to get to since before I even ran into Nate, so long ago. Piper is the one.

As they began winding down on dinner, Nora got up. “Time for dessert.”

Piper laughed and said, “What unbelievable thing are you going to give me now? Liquid sunshine?”

Nora turned and put a box in front of Piper. Opening it she said, “I want to give you my life.”

Inside the box was a ring. Nora looked at Piper, “Piper Wright, will you marry me?”

Chapter End Notes

If you would like to make something to propose to your girlfriend over, you could do worse than Chicken Saltimbocca alla Nora. For it you need:

4 skinless boneless radchicken breast halves (you can sub in ordinary organic chicken breast halves)
8 large fresh sage leaves
8 thin smoked molerat slices (about 3 ounces) (if you HAVE to you can get any of a
number of prosciuttos available in your area)
1/2 cup and 1 to 1.5 tablespoons all purpose razograin flour per cup of liquid...in this case 5 (and use the 1/2 cup for the light dredging)
8 tablespoon butter per 4 chicken breast halves (if you have to use two pans for sautéing, use 4 tablespoons in each)
2 cups dry white wine (if you HAVE to use Bobrov's you can. Ideally you should use wine you would drink. There's no such thing as "cooking wine". Only wine you're willing to put into your body and shit wine. Don't drink shit wine)
2 cups low-salt chicken broth or purified water if you're proposing on the relative spur of the moment and have not this laid in a broth supply from boiled bones.
2 tablespoons fresh Mutfruit juice (Lemon juice will do in a pinch)

Place radchicken between a clean cloth or 2 sheets of plastic wrap on work surface.
Using mallet/pot/cast iron skillet (preferred), pound chicken to 1/2-inch thickness.
Sprinkle chicken with salt and pepper if you've been lucky scavving.
Place 2 sage leaves atop each chicken breast half.
Top each chicken breast with 1 molerat slice, pressing to adhere.
Spread 1/2 cup flour on plate.
Turn chicken in flour to lightly coat both sides.
Melt butter in large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until JUST BEFORE it turns brown...with skill you'll know.
Add chicken, molerat side down; cook 4 minutes.
Turn chicken over and cook just until cooked through, about 3 minutes.
Transfer to platter and cover to keep warm; reserve skillet.
Mix wine with mutfruit juice in small bowl. Add to skillet; bring to boil. Scrape/whisk as it boils (deglaazing).
Add 5 tablespoons flour to 2 cups water/broth and whisk.
Pour into already boiling wine; whisk until sauce thickens slightly, about a minute or so.
Season to taste with salt and pepper. Spoon sauce over chicken.
Serve with orzo, couscous, flat noodles, or rice depending on what part of the wasteland you're from and or what you like if you're fortunate enough to have access to choices.
And with dry white wine to your personal taste or what those assholes the Bobrovs have available that day.

[Proposal optional]
Piper looked shocked for a moment, then she began laughing and crying simultaneously. “Oh god, Nora, yes! Yes!”

Nora’s knees almost buckled in relief. She kneeled down and pulled Piper in for a kiss. So tenderly, Piper cupped her face as they kissed. As they were breaking up, the door opened. Ellie, Codsworth, and Natalie were walking in.

Ellie took in the scene, and looked simultaneously apologetic and happy. Piper was grinning from ear to ear, and Nora looked like she’d just survived a 10 foot flop into a dry pool. Nat gave them an inscrutable look.

Nora turned, and reached out to Nat. “I know it’s sudden honey. I wanted to give you more time to get used to the idea, but… Well, anyway, I need to know if Dogmeat can stay with you forever,” she looked at the girl, “And, if it’s OK, your sister and I would like to get married.”

“What’s going to happen to me?” asked Nat.

Nora smiled, “You’ll live here, with me and your sister. You’ll go to school, and sell papers, and take care of Dogmeat, and Codsworth will take care of you when we can’t be around. It will pretty much be what’s been going on the last few days, only you’ll have two people acting like your mom. Which I suppose will suck, but on the plus side, the next time Sheng tries to kiss you, I’ll break into his shack and put itching powder in his underwear.”

Piper laughed, and said, “Nora, you will do no such thing. Your wife says, ‘No way.’”

Nora looked at Piper, “Wife? I like the sound of that,” she turned to Nat. “OK, I guess I won’t be putting itching powder in Sheng’s underwear,” she said, nodding her head the whole time.

Nat giggled, and held out her hand, which Nora solemnly shook, “OK. Deal,” said Nat.

Nora looked puzzled, “On the wedding thing, or you know, the itching powder thing?” she asked.

“Both, I guess,” said Nat.

Ellie clapped her hands, tears in her eyes. “Oh, I’m so happy for you two,” she turned to Piper, “I’ve wanted you to find someone ever since you and Nick became friends,” and she turned to Nora, “And I’ve wanted YOU with Piper ever since I first saw the two of you together.”

Then she hugged Piper and Nora, and wiped the tears away. Nat looked puzzled.

“If everyone’s so damn happy, why are you all crying,” she asked.

Piper opened her mouth, but Nora beat her to it. “Nat. Language.”

She raised a finger. “Sometimes we cry because we’re so full of ANY emotion that we cry, not just when we’re sad. Your sister and I are happy because we’re in love,” Nat made gagging noises, “And because you’re at least marginally OK with it, and willing to be part of a new family. And Ellie’s happy because she’s Piper’s good friend who wants the best for her.”
Ellie added, “And because Nora is turning out to be as good a friend as Piper is. I want the best for you both.”

Piper slipped her ring on. She looked at Nora, “It’s perfect, sweetheart.”

Nora smiled, then turned to Nat. “As my first act as your in loco parentis, I’d like you to take Dogmeat and get ready for bed.”

“What’s ‘in loco parentis’?” asked Nat.

“Crazy parent,” said Nora. The she shook her head, “Actually, someone who is acting in the place of a parent. So shoo, bedtime.”

Nat rolled her eyes, but she did it. Nora was going to take that as a win.

Ellie, Nora, and Piper stayed up a while, planning. Piper asked Ellie to be her Maid of Honor. Nora asked Ellie to tell Nick and let him know she planned to ask him to be her Man of Honor. Ellie agreed to help keep wedding preparations going during any absences. Eventually all the planning and wine had been exhausted and Ellie returned home.

Nora and Piper went up to their bedroom. As Nora was undressing she heard Piper behind her. She turned. Piper was gazing at her lovingly. “It just hit me, Nora. We’re really getting married. You’re going to be my wife.”

Nora nodded. “And you’re going to be mine. Is that scary?”

Piper shook her head. “I think the only scary thing about it is that it’s NOT scary. At all. Is that weird?”

Nora smiled. “No. I know exactly how you feel. Exactly.”

Piper held out her arms, “C’mere Mrs. Greene.”

Nora slid into Piper’s arms. But she was thoughtful. For a few minutes. Then thought left her and all that was left was feeling.

The next morning, Nora woke up, naked and tangled in the sheets with Piper. She rolled over to look at her sleeping love. Piper looked sweet and innocent. Which only went to prove that looks are deceiving. Nora kissed her fiancé on the cheek and then got up and showered and got dressed.

Nora was on her second cup of coffee when Piper came down the stairs, yawning. “Morning,” she said between yawns.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” said Nora, “Nick has something he wants help on.”

“Can you take it, Blue?” Piper replied. “I have GOT to get these articles done or eventually the Vertibirds are gonna stop responding.”

Nora nodded and said, “I’m gonna miss you, but I guess real life has to start back up sometime. We can’t just live on looted raider gear. As socially useful as it is.”

Piper chuckled. The she had a thought. “Blue? Sweetheart?”

“Yes, Thing?”

“I just had an idea,” Piper said, unusually diffident. “What would you say to being my cooking
columnist?”

“Was it that good?” Nora asked.

“Blue, you have no idea. You want to rebuild civilization? Take away fine cuisine from that supercilious prick Wellingham at the Colonial Taphouse and let everyone make incredible food,” Piper said.

“Sure, why not? But why so nervous, honey?”

Piper looked worried. “Cause I’m a perfectionist. I’ll probably constantly correct your grammar and proofread everything like a Super Mutant with a bad tooth.”

Nora laughed, “As opposed to constantly correcting Nick, and minding the difference between an adverb and an adjective even when your fingers are buried in my vagina?”

“Blue!” Piper exclaimed, shocked. Then, “Well yeah. You have a point. If your point was, ‘If it were going to bug me, Piper, I would’ve said something by now’.”

Nora nodded, “Pretty much on the nose there, Thing,” then she kissed Piper actually on the nose, strapped on her gear and went to find Nick.

He was, as she suspected, in his office. Ellie looked up as Nora came in and got up and hugged her, and congratulated her again. Nick came over, smiling as well. He held out his hand, and said, “Congratulations. Although I’m not sure who’s luckier. You or Piper.”

Nora smiled, “Oh, me. Definitely.”

Nick looked thoughtful. “Have you had that talk with her? The one we talked about?”

Nora shook her head, “No. And I should. But it’s been such a pair of days. From one of my lowest moments to one of my best.”

Nick shook his head, “You know, she’ll forgive you almost anything, but you really, really shouldn’t start off actually needing that forgiveness, Nora.”

Nora nodded, then changed the subject. “So whatcha need Nick?”

Nick shook his head, “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, but I’ll let you get away with it,” he raised a finger, “This time.”

She nodded. He continued, “I have a client who wants me to check into fight fixing at the Combat Zone.”

“Sounds dicey,” said Nora.

Nick nodded, “Considering that the Combat Zone is already a place for extremely questionable characters? You bet. So, what do you say? Want to partner up?”

Nora laughed, “Seems like this is my day for job offers.”

Nick looked puzzled. Nora continued, “Piper wants me to write a column on cooking for her.”

Nick smiled, “I smelled the stuff you sent over for Nat and Ellie. Piper knows a good deal when she sees one. She gets a first rate column for the price of putting up with you. It’s a steal.”
Nora rolled her eyes. “Are we going to head out, or continue the ‘Pick on Nora’ game?”

“We’re heading out,” Nick said, then checked his .44 Revolver.

“Expecting trouble?” asked Nora.

“Trouble is my business,” said Nick.

“Philip Marlowe! You old fraud!” said Nora

Nick grinned lopsidedly and gestured at the door.

Nora laughed and walked out. The walk to the Common was uneventful, and then Nick took the lead and led them south of the Common, into the old Theater District. The fight club was set up in the Cutler Theater.

Outside was a board with “Tommy’s Rules”. Which were, “No fighting OUTside the cage”, “No caps? No entry”, and “No begging. No loitering”.

Charming little establishment. I’ll have to bring Piper here on a date sometime.

The entered, into a foyer plastered with junk with two Raiders, in cages, and a board that said, “Didn’t Pay Up” outside. Nora gestured for Nick to move quietly and she eased the door open.

Inside, the theater was built around an enormous cage, in which a woman was fighting the largest Raider that Nora’d ever met. And they WERE Raiders. If there were any doubt, the impaled corpses wiped any doubts from Nora’s mind. She leaned over and whispered, barely audibly into Nick’s ear, trusting his high gain receptors to make out what she was saying, “OK. Whoever sent you here must not have known. I say we take them down. I’ll snipe as many as possible from up high before they can react, then we finish them off.”

Nick nodded and gave her the thumbs up. They moved quietly to the top rear of the theater.

OK. So let’s assess. I make four guys. One in the center on the balcony, one in that kitchen and two on stage. Like they’re guarding against an escape. With the lights, I should take the two on the balcony first, the lights should mess up any chance that the stage ones have to see me.

So, line up the harder shot. And he’s down. The other hasn’t realized what’s going on yet. The next round’s in. And now that one’s dead. Nobody’s made us yet. Gotta love this noise. Now for Stagehand One. And she’s down, people noticing. Two is looking around, stay in the open…and now you’re dead.

Three more, right up the middle. Come to mama. And one dead. They think I’m at ground level. That’ll cost them. And two.

NOW they’ve figured it out. Coming round the sides. Rifle over shoulder, pistol out. Oops, HE got a little close. But too late. Damn, Nick’s gun is loud. One left. The big bastard. I’d run if I were him. Must be high.

And now he’s dead.

Nora came out of her combat focus. The air, which had had a slight funk to it, now was coppery with the odor of blood.

If she was a scorekeeper, Nora would have beat Nick’s tally by eight to one. Any way you looked at
it, it had been a slaughter. Most of the Raiders had died before they even really got their act together. Which was fine as far as Nora was concerned. Fair fights were for suckers.

There were two people left, other than Nick and Nora. They were crouched in the ring. When Nora approached, the woman stood up first. She took up a combat stance, side on, feet shoulder width apart. A nice stable base from which to move while presenting a minimum target.

The man, the ghoul, simply stood up. “Is it over?” he asked.

“Pretty much,” said Nick.

“Well, damn. There goes my earnings.”

“What the hell,” started Nora. “You were happy about this?”

The ghoul shrugged, “Nah. If I’d been OK with it I wouldn’t have contacted Nick. I just didn’t figure you’d roll in here and redecorate the place with body fluids.”

“Ya planned this, Tommy?” asked the woman in thick Irish Brogue.

*How the hell did someone from Ireland end up here? Illegal immigrants? Yeah TWO HUNDRED years ago, maybe. This world is weird. Now that I think about it, why the hell do Yefim and Vadim have Russian accents? There must have been immigrant communities that formed after the war. If a couple ended up ghouls, they’d have been the nucleus of the community and kept the accents alive. Closest explanation I’ve got. Might as well run with it.*

“Not the part where our livelihood gets killed, Little Bird,” he turned to Nick and Nora, “What do you say to buying out her contract?”

Nora shook her head, “Doesn’t she get a say?”

“She is named Cait, and no. That’s not how contracts work,” said Tommy.

“Well I want to know what she wants,” said Nora.

“Ya know what Tommy? Ya can take yer shite ring and shove it up yer arse,” said Cait. “You and me? We’re fecking through, ya gobshite.”

“I know enough Southie slang to know that that means she’s taking our offer,” said Nick.

Nora nodded. “But only if you want to.”

“It’s not like I’ve a lot of fecking choices do I now,” said Cait. “Let’s get out o’ here.”

Chapter End Notes

That really IS the only way I can imagine both an Irish and Russian accents remaining 210 years after international commerce has broken down. Might as well claim it for canon. Boston's a melting pot (AND Ireland West) such that I could see that happening that way.

Also, "Trouble Is My Business" was a collection of Philip Marlowe short stories written
by Raymond Chandler and published in 1950. So of course both timelines will have "The Big Sleep", "Farewell My Lovely", and "The Long Goodbye". There will be another literary reference that is ACTUALLY very nearly contemporaneous with Chandler that won't FEEL like it is. Coming up in six chapters.
Cait gathered up her belongings, which amounted to a pouch full of caps, a duffel stuffed with something, and an old, beat up sawed off shotgun. She turned after gathering it all and shot Nora a challenging look.

Nora shrugged, “If you’d like to follow us, I believe we’re set to get out of this ‘shithole’.”

Cait glared, “Are ye makin’ fun o’ me?”

Nora shook her head, emphatically. “This place maybe. You? Never. I saw you going toe to toe with that big asshole.”

Cait smiled, “I was wipin’ the floor with him when you lot interrupted.”

As they left, Cait walked up to one of the prisoners. “Hey, arsehole. Remember askin’ me to fuck you?”

He shook his head, “I didn’t ask you.”

Cait nodded. “Exactly.” Then she blew his head off with her shotgun.

Nora and Nick looked briefly shocked, more at the lack of affect on Cait’s part than the act itself. Cait turned, and walked out of the Zone. They continued back to Diamond City. When they got back, Nick looked at Nora significantly, but Nora shook her head slightly.

Cait was watching the byplay closely, and with suspicion, when Nora turned and said, “Let’s get you set up.”

“So what hole ya gonna park me in?”

Nora shook her head and led Cait to her home. They walked in and found Piper buried in an article. She looked up and then did a double take.

Nora said, “Piper, this is Cait. She’ll be staying with us until she can find,” and here she looked right at Cait, “A nice place to live. She was in the Combat Zone as a pit fighter, but Nick and I wound up killing the raiders that had taken the place over.”

Nora almost willed her fiancé to take the hint and treat Cait well. The last thing she wanted to be seen as was another abusive user. In large part because she refused to BE another abusive user.

Either Nora got lucky or she’d actually developed telepathy, because Piper just started up with questions; how was Cait feeling, did she want to talk about the Combat Zone, could she quote her in an article, and on and on. With no judgement about bringing a somewhat volatile pit fighter into the house.

Nora interrupted, “I’m sure you can trap Cait for an interview another time, sweetheart. Can I get the woman settled into the guest room for now?”

Piper just smiled and nodded. She waited the bare minimum of a polite interval, then turned back to her screen. Nora shrugged apologetically, “Piper has a bit of a mania about her paper, I’m afraid.”
Cait just nodded. But she stiffened when she saw the guest room. Nora saw, and somewhat concerned, asked, “Is it OK?”

“That’s not it,” Cait said, and she looked at Nora somewhat suspiciously. “Never you mind. Where should I put me gear?”

Nora gestured, “Anywhere you want. We’ll be having dinner in a few hours. The shower and toilet are in the room over there,” and she pointed at the bath. “I’m available if you need anything.”

Nora turned to go, then turned around again. “Before I forget, that door,” she pointed at the outside door, “Also leads outside. If you need to head out, you can use either door.”

She strikes me as someone who may not want me to know when she’s going out or coming in. I’ll need to give her room, because damn! I thought I had PTSD…

She headed back to the living room. Piper intercepted her. “You know who that is, right?”

Nora nodded. “Yep… Cait. I told you her name, remember?”

Piper shook her head. “No. She’s known throughout the area as a pit fighter. A mean one”

Nora looked at Piper, “Is she any danger to Nat?”

Piper shook her head. “I’ve never heard of her hurting anyone who wasn’t in the ring or asking for it, now that you ask.”

“Ok sweetie. So we have a guest that, unless I miss my guess, has serious trust issues, and a willingness to use violence to achieve her goals, but doesn’t hurt anyone who isn’t basically asking for it, yes?”

Piper nodded. Nora continued, “Sound like anyone else you know? Someone you’re engaged to maybe?”

Piper thought for a second, “Maybe. But I just don’t see you the same way.”

Nora shook her head, “I suspect a lot of people would, although,” she looked thoughtful, “Most of them are dead now.”

They heard a snicker from behind them. The both turned and Cait was there. Piper turned red, but Cait just looked at them and said, “Did I hear ye right? You lot are engaged? Gonna get married?”

Nora nodded. Cait looked thoughtful. “Then maybe I don’t haveta jam a chair under me doorknob. Newlyweds and those about ta be tend not to be lookin’ to get in anyone else’s pants in my experience. Not that a threesome wouldn’t be a fair craic.”

Piper said, without thinking, “Never gonna happen, Cait.” Then she turned red. “I apologize. That was a little sharp.”

Cait shook her head, “Don’t worry darlin’. It was honest, and maybe I’ll stick around fer a bit after all. It’s in me contract and all.”

Nora nodded sharply. “Sorry you overheard that, but Nat’s only 14. If there were going to be an issue, we’d have to come to some other arrangement.”

Cait shrugged. “Ye’d be pretty piss poor parents if ya weren’t concerned. And I know from piss poor parents.”
Nora waited to see if any more were forthcoming. When it wasn’t, she nodded and said, “OK. I’m headed out shopping.”

Piper patted her tummy. “Are you trying to fatten me up so no other girls come chasing after me, Blue?”

Cait watched the byplay between the two with a slightly baffled look and then shrugged and headed back to her room. Nora went out and got stuff for dinner, while Piper finished the next set of articles.

As they all, including Nat, gathered for dinner Cait continued her slightly puzzled air. Nat was a little sullen about yet another person intruding on her and her sister’s life but not obvious about it. For now.

Nora continued trying to jolly Nat along a bit, while not being overly permissive. It was more difficult, and scarier, than anything she’d done up to now. At any rate, as far as she could tell she hadn’t, yet, managed to irreparably screw up.

The next day, Nora went shopping at Arturo’s. She managed to snag herself a semi-automatic, “silenced”…more like sound suppressed…version of a Combat Shotgun. It cost a pretty penny in caps, but Cait clearly favored shotguns and Nora wanted to be sure Cait felt accepted.

When she got back, Cait was in her room. As Nora came around the corner, she saw Cait pretty clearly shooting up some kind of drug. Nora said nothing, even as Cait waited for her reaction, but instead she smiled and handed Cait the new shotgun.

“I thought you could use an upgrade, and I was over by Arturo’s and this was on sale, so I picked it up for you,” Nora said.

Cait expertly racked the slide and checked the chamber. “This looks a fair treat, Nora. Thanks.” Nora nodded, and turned.

“Is there anythin’ else?” Cait asked.

Nora looked over her shoulder. “Nope,” she said, then stepped out.

When she got to the living room she found Piper deep in thought. “What’s up, Thing?” she said.

Piper snapped out of her reverie, then smiled and patted the seat next to her. Nora sat down and snuggled in.

Piper turned her head, and said in a low tone, “I’m just a little worried about Cait.”

“How so? Are you thinking she’s dangerous?”

Piper shrugged, “Well, yeah, but not to us. But I don’t think she’s in very good shape. She seems strung out.”

Nora looked serious and said, “That’s probably because she is.” At Piper’s look she continued, “I just caught her injecting something. I thought waiting for the call to go hunt an unstoppable killer robot would be the hardest part. Now I find myself responsible for that poor woman, who’s basically a version of what I could very easily have been.”

Nora looked up at the ceiling, “At any one of a number of times, at that.” She looked back down at Piper. “I want to try and help her, sweetheart. I’d understand if you want the both of us to leave while we figure out what we can do for her, but I hope you feel safe enough to let her stay.”

Piper shook her head, “Never mind the fact that I just finally got you to ask me to marry you,” she
started, then grinned impishly at Nora’s look, “Let’s be honest. I’d be safer with my holotape hero here with me even if you brought back a super-mutant rather than an OK, albeit terribly damaged, woman than I would with you gone.”

They heard Cait clear her throat. She looked at them both seriously. “Have a minute? Got somethin’ on me mind.”

They both nodded, and Piper said, “Something wrong Cait?”

Cait shrugged, “I dunno, you tell me.” She turned to Nora, “After Tommy stuck me with you I was expecting to hate yer guts. Not only because you picked up my contract, but because I was waitin’ for you to order me around like the hired help.”

She looked at both of them, “Now so far you’ve both been treatin’ me like a friend. Hell, you’ve been damn near nice to me. Your kindness is startin’ to make me wonder. If there’s anything I learned it’s that nobody does anything for someone else without expectin’ somethin’ in return.”

Nora shook her head, “We’re not, but I can see that surviving must have been rough for you.”

Cait got a faraway look. “I spent three years in the Combat Zone. It smelled like puke and piss, but I called it home. I was making some caps, had me own bed and three hot meals a day.” She focused on Nora and Piper, “Then the Raiders took the place…and they aren’t exactly the gentle type. After they moved in, if you didn’t keep lookin’ over your shoulder you were liable to get sucker punched…or worse. Buying my way out of problems was the only way to avoid…worse.” She shuddered slightly. “So, I guess I’m waitin’ for you to hand me the bill.”

Nora shook her head, and Piper stood up and said, “There’s no bill Cait. Never will be.”

Cait looked dubious, “Tell you what, give me some time and I’ll come up with somethin’ I can do to repay you. I’m not a rich girl, but I’m sure I can come up with something.”

There was one good sign from the encounter. Cait didn’t return to her room. She chose to remain in the living room as Nora made dinner and took notes about what she was doing, and why, for her first Diamond City Chef article for the Publick and as Piper wrote about some of the latest interactions with the Brotherhood.

Piper even used Cait as a test audience. She kept handing Cait sample sentences and asking if she felt that the guy being discussed was trustworthy or not. After the fifth time, Cait threw up her hands, and said, “What’re ye tryin’ to do here?”

Piper took her question seriously. “Nora and I want to make Maxson and the Brotherhood think we’re promoting them, while actually telling the Commonwealth to be worried.”

“So why not just tell everyone to head for the hills?” asked Cait.

Nora said over her shoulder as she sliced tatoes, “Because we want to keep using the Brotherhood for our own purposes and not burn bridges. Yet. So Piper has to write articles that Maxson thinks are good for him, but are really bad for him.”

“Ohhh. I getcha. Makes sense,” said Cait. “Then I’d go with that version there. Subtle, but gets the point across to anyone that’s thrown down with a Raider.”

The next day, around midmorning, the radio crackled to life. “General. The bun is in the oven. Repeat. The bun is in the oven.”
Piper laughed. “That’s the code you picked? Blue!”

Nora shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” she looked at Cait. “Want to repay all this kindness?”

Cait nodded, “You know I do.”

“Well, we’re about to have to hunt down and kill an unstoppable Institute Murder Machine. We could use the help. I won’t lie, it’s going to be hideously dangerous,” said Nora.

“It sounds a fair treat. Let’s go kill somethin’”

Chapter End Notes

Nora pretty clearly wants VERY MUCH to rehabilitate Cait.

Again, this is one of those times where Nora got out from under my thumb and started deciding what was going to happen, although this was a mild case. I didn't realize how much of Cait she saw in herself until I started writing this bit, though.
By the time the three had reached the Mass Ave Bridge, Nora’s Pip-Boy had picked up the signal, but it remained fairly constant as they crossed.

*If the signal is constant, then we’re traveling along a signal contour line. So we need to turn left or right on the far side.*

Nora picked right, just because that was the direction of the CIT Ruins themselves. She was rewarded almost instantly as the signal strength climbed, so she, Cait, and Piper continued along Memorial Drive. The signal continued to grow until they got closer to the Longfellow Bridge. By this time they were sneaking along, as it was easy to make out a Raider Camp on the Cambridge side of the bridge.

When Nora took a left to avoid the Raiders, she was quickly rewarded with a rapidly increasing signal. In front of her was a huge green building. The signal clearly led inside. “Well, here we go,” she said.

When they entered the building there wasn’t any doubt. There were two bodies, Gunners by the look of them, in the reception area. They’d been shredded and there was blood all over the wall. Nora hissed in surprise and drew her pistol. Piper gulped and drew hers. Cait didn’t even react, but she unslung her shotgun and held it ready.

As the three came out of a side stairwell and headed for the atrium, there was a chatter of weapons fire, then several thumps as grenades went off. A voice called over the loudspeakers, “The Courser’s on the second floor. Kill on sight, and send reinforcements to the lobby in case there are more.”

Before Nora and her friends could make it around the atrium, the reinforcements arrived. Two Gunners came through the far door, and were cut down immediately by Nora and Cait. A window opened to expose a turret, but that was dealt with by Piper.

Then they were in a hallway, moving as fast as stealth allowed, listening to the trail of screams and explosions. The loudspeaker guy spoke again, “What’s going on down there? How many are we dealing with?”

Two Gunners came from a side room, but they were looking the wrong way, up and away from Nora, who quickly killed both of them. Cait leaned over and whispered, “So all that in the Combat Zone weren’t just luck. You are just that good.”

“Wasn’t just luck,” corrected Piper, automatically.

Cait’s eyes narrowed. “Are ye mocking me manner o’ speakin’, girlie?”

Piper looked innocent, “Me? Never.”

“Right.”

Mercifully they were interrupted by another burst of gunfire and another Gunner popping out of cover thinking the danger had passed only to discover their error.
If this goes on much longer, we should easily catch up. They’ll be focused on that murderbot.

“The Courser is now on the third floor. Reports of a second intruder in the east wing, near the courtyard.”

**Dammit! I just HAD to jinx it.**

At that point, it became a little more difficult. For one thing, Gunners had a distressing tendency to actually use cover. But they would get impatient and rush a bit early. By staying stealthy, and letting their adversaries come to them, the three of them made their way to the Gunner staging area.

Shortly before they arrived, the loudspeakers cracked again. “The Courser’s after the girl. Anyone alive needs to get to the top floor immediately.”

The Gunners had locked the elevator out of the lower floors, but once Nora’s group cleared the guard post, they could ride most of the rest of the way. When the doors opened, they were in a central well of a multi-floor room. Above them they could hear what they assumed was the Courser. At least it had the same flat affect that the Courser in Kellogg’s memories had.

Someone, presumably a Gunner, was begging, “I don’t know the password. I’m telling the truth.”

“I don’t believe that you are.”

**Brrr. That is one cold bastard.**

The man became frantic, “No, please! You don’t have to do this,” followed by a scream and then there was a sickening series of wet pops and crunches.

**I think he just crushed that man’s skull. Yeesh.**

The three were taking the steps up as fast as they could go. The Courser moved on to the next one, “All he had to do was tell me the password. Now, are you going to cooperate?”

The next voice was absolutely panicked, justifiably. “Oh God…OK, don’t shoot. Just let me think…”

Whatever thinking Gunner Number Two was doing was not obvious or fast enough for the Courser. There was a brief sizzle of laser fire, followed by a gurgling gasp, and then that one’s leg tapped out his final spasms.

**Might’ve been trying to get away. Shit, this thing is stone cold. The only way we can possibly take it is to surprise it and then we all fire just as fast as we can.**

Nora gathered the other two, and in the lowest possible tones, outlined the plan for maximum violence on the target. She tried to time her statements to times when the Courser was talking.

He had moved on to the next victim. “I’m going to get in there, it’s just a matter of time. Tell me the password.”

**How many of them does he HAVE up there? He’s going through them like popcorn. I wouldn’t exactly weep except that the only thing keeping him occupied is his torture porn. If he runs out of Gunners before we arrive, I can’t count on surprise.**

His latest victim was either the dumbest person ever to push air past his teeth, or the ballsiest bastard on the planet. He was actually trying to bargain with the thing.
“Look I already told you that I don’t have it. I’ll help you find a way in but listen, we took the girl fair and square. All we want is a little compensation in return,” said the budding entrepreneur/soon to be dead man.

“You are in no position to negotiate,” said the Courser.

The Gunner, bargaining for time, said, “Let me…let me think,” and then there was another sickening crack. Nora recognized that particular sound. It was what you got when you snapped a neck.

“And now you,” said the Courser. The three were moving absolutely as fast as they could safely.

The next one was blubbering incoherently. It had reached the point where no one in that room could fool themselves into thinking that they were getting out alive. It had been non-survivable ever since the Courser reached them, of course, but humans can talk themselves into believing almost anything.

Calmly, the Courser said, “Time’s running out.”

The next one begged, “No please wait. You can have the girl, just let me go.” Then he gave a little grunt as he too died.

And now Nora and her group were at the door. Nora put one hand on the door, then showed the others two fingers, then one, and then opened the door. She moved through fast and cleared the way for Cait and Piper.

The Courser had turned to the last Gunner, “Get over here,” then grabbed his victim, just as the three women began pumping bullets and shot into him at close range.

What really killed him, in the end, was the little residual sadism he indulged. Instead of immediately turning and returning fire or taking cover, the Courser took the last man’s head in his hands and twisted. The sound of breaking vertebrae were masked by the pops of suppressed pistol and shotgun fire, but there was no mistaking the unnatural angle of the Gunner’s head as he fell to the floor, rapidly dying.

By that time, Cait’s shotgun was taking fist sized chunks out of the Courser as Nora and Piper pummeled him with pistol fire, head, chest, hands, gut. Piper got lucky, and one shot shattered a Stealth Boy the Courser had pulled out. He didn’t get a chance at second one, as the combined effect of 30 odd pistol wounds and at least 20 shotgun blasts finally, finally dropped him.

Silence reigned, except for the slowing spats of arterial blood from the Courser’s neck. Nora had gotten in a lucky hit on his Carotid Artery.

Jesus. *Both of the Deathclaws I’ve killed went down easier than this guy. No wonder Kellogg was glad they were on his side. The Institute seems to like their combat operatives on the “monster” side of man/monster.*

As the three of them were gasping for air, a window opened. All three jumped and pointed their weapons, but it turned out to be a woman on the other side of a steel lattice.

She said, “Help me. I know you’re not here for me, but I can’t get out. Not on my own.”

Cait said, “Relax lady, it’s going to be fine.”

The woman smiled wryly, “I guess I don’t really have a choice do I?”

Nora turned her attention to the terminal holding the door shut. It had impressive encryption, and it
took Nora a couple tries and some serous swearing before the door opened. When she finally got the thing to do what she wanted, she looked up. Piper was laughing, and Cait was slowly applauding.

Piper looked at Nora and said, “Blue, can I also ask you to write an article on ‘How to swear for three solid minutes without once repeating yourself, using anatomically impossible activities’?”

“Oh shove it, Thing,” replied Nora.

The woman walked up, “Thank you. I don’t know what to say.”

Nora smiled, “‘Thank you’ will do. Who are you?”

“My Institute designation is K1-98. But I prefer Jenny. So, yes, I’m a synth. If you hadn’t already guessed.”

Jenny shook her head, “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, but I was captured by these mercenaries,” she gestured at the corpses strewn about the room, “And then all this happened.”

She shook Nora’s hand, “Thanks again for your help. But before you ask, no, I don’t need any more help.” She looked determined, “The Commonwealth is unforgiving and I need to make on my own or I’m dead.” Then she smiled, “Maybe we’ll meet again under better circumstances. I hope we do.”

With that, Jenny left, after helping herself to one of the Courser’s weapons, a laser pistol.

Nora rolled the Courser over and reached into the brain casing, then pulled out a compact piece of circuitry about half the size of her palm.

“Eww, Blue. You seem to spend a lot of time rooting around in the brains of Institute people,” said Piper. “If you think you’re so much as touching me before you take a shower, you’re nuts.”

Nora smiled, then noticed a Fat Man Nuke Launcher on a shipping crate. It was almost fully assembled. It looked like the Gunners had been trying to get it operational when the Courser had arrived. Nora finished the job and then tried to sling it over her back. It kept getting hung up on her rifle.

“Here darlin’. Let me carry that for you,” said Cait.

“I don’t want to just treat you like a pack mule, Cait.”

“Let me think. Giving me the biggest damn gun we got? Doesn’t strike me as ‘pack mule’. More like ‘badass’,” said Cait.

Nora laughed, “I hadn’t looked at it that way,” she said.

They left in the now active elevator, and left the building behind, heading for Diamond City. It took almost no time to get back, and true to her word, Piper put the chip in a plastic bag, and sent Nora to shower. “I know you want to anyway, you shower fetishist, but right now your wife-to-be wants you in that shower even more than YOU want to be in it, Blue.”

Nora laughed and took her shower. By the time she climbed out and put on a fresh set of clothes, Piper’d gone and gotten Nick and Cait had settled into the sofa.

Showing Nick the chip, Nora said, “Any ideas on how to decode this?”

Nick shrugged. “As much as I hate the idea, the only thing I can come up with is to repeat our
performance with Kellogg’s memories.

Nora’s shoulders slumped. “That’s what I was afraid you were going to say.”

Cait looked puzzled. “Are ye gonna need me any further?”

Nora shook her head, “Don’t think so, unless you really want to watch me and Nick go through that…things…memories.”

“Pass, thanks,” said Cait, “Ye got anythin’ more up my alley?”

Nora thought for a second, and then it came to her in a flash, “Yeah actually. How would you like to be in charge of the garrison at the Red Rocket outside Sanctuary?”

“In charge. As in, the boss o’ all of ‘em?” said Cait.

Nora nodded, “Yep. Tell Preston you’re there because I think you can turn the garrison there into genuinely dangerous fighters. I need them to be a reaction force, Cait. Whip ‘em into shape.”

“Well if that don’t beat all. Me, in charge o’ them. You’re a nutter, Nora.”

“Maybe. Like a fox,” said Nora.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll leave it for the reader to determine WHO the title is referring to....

And the game makes Coursers too easy to kill. I’ve fixed that.
The next morning, Cait left for Red Rocket, and Nick, Nora, and Piper headed out to Goodneighbor. Before long they were walking into the Memory Den, although this time out, knowing what they were facing, Nick and Nora were quiet and subdued. Amari was at her console and looked up as they came in.

“You’re back! The Glowing Sea. What happened?” she asked as she greeted them warmly.

“We went in, we found Virgil, we got out. But there was a complication,” said Nick.

“A complication?”

“Do you know anything about decoding a Courser Chip?” asked Nora.

“A what?!!?” exclaimed Amari.

“A Courser Chip. We have one. We need to decode it,” said Nora.


“So can we decode it like we did Kellogg’s implant?” said Piper.

“Unfortunately I can’t help you. I’ve worked on a lot of synths, but never a Courser. And that chip won’t work like Kellogg’s memory record,” Amari said.

“I don’t know what the chip does, let alone how to decode it,” she continued. At their looks, she added, “But there are people who might. I work with a group, and they’re the only ones I know that even have a chance at cracking Institute security. They’re called the Railroad.”

Nora sighed, “The Railroad?”

Amari nodded. “They help synths escape the Institute. I don’t know who they all are. Usually an agent of theirs just shows up with someone who needs a new set of memories. One of them gave me a code phrase. Said it would help me find them, if there was ever an emergency,” she looked a little embarrassed at being forced to play cloak and daggers. “Follow the Freedom Trail.”

Piper asked, “Any idea what the code phrase means?”

Nora said, “I might have an idea. The Freedom Trail was a series of landmarks connected by a walking trail marked with red bricks and paint. It started at the Common and ran past the State House, the Old Granary Cemetery, Fanueil Hall, and ultimately ends at the USS Constitution.”

“Oh boy,” said Piper.

Nick nodded. “That pretty much walks you past every place sane people don’t visit.”

Nora shrugged. Amari interrupted, “Hopefully they’ve placed other clues to tell you where to go after that. Hidden in plain sight. That’s how they think.”

Nora smiled. “Time to go play tourist, guys. Thanks, Dr. Amari.”
They left the Den, and walked out of Goodneighbor headed for the Common. They walked right past the Old Granary Cemetery, but Nora waved them on. “There may be something about the sequence. Do it out of order and it may not work.”

Soon they made their way to the Common Entrance. They remained quiet, as the Common’s reputation pretty much demanded stealth. At the very start of the trail, there was a hand painted sign, “At journey’s end, follow freedom’s lantern.” There didn’t seem to be any other instructions, until Nora noticed that the bronze trail marker had been painted. There was a ‘7’ and an arrow pointing at the ‘A’.

“7 and an A. OK, let’s follow the Red Brick Trail,” said Nora.

The trail led to the State House next.

“Want to try and get the Sacred Cod?” Nora asked the other two. Even Nick looked confused. Nora rolled her eyes, “I forgot you’re a transplant, Nick.”

“Blue, have you slipped a gear?” asked Piper.

Nora shook her head. “No one appreciates a 5 foot, carved wooden cod anymore,” she mock complained.

“Oh my god, really?” asked Piper.

Nora nodded. “Swear to god. The Sacred Cod is a carved wooden fish kept in the State House, in the House Chamber. The Brass Holy Mackerel is in the Senate. Above the chandelier.”

Piper looked cross, “Now you’re just messing with us, Blue.”

Nora shook her head. “Sometime when we have more time to explore, we’ll go see. I’m not kidding hon. Swear on my heart.”

Piper looked thoughtful. “OK. But if I find out you’re pulling my leg, you’re on the sofa for a week.”

Nick checked the bronze marker. “4 and L. It looks like a code.”

Nora said, “More like a cipher. Maybe a simple substitution.”

The third marker was at the Old Granary. As were a large group of ferals that came out of the weeds as they approached it. As usual, they were more nuisance than threat, at least as long as you were alert. The code was a 2 and an A. Nora nodded.

The next one was right outside Goodneighbor. Nora blinked for second and then remembered that Hancock hung his tricorn at the Old State House. “6 O.”

The trail led to the Old Corner Bookstore, where the marker read 3 I. Nora looked at the rest of them. “Next stop, Fanueil Hall.”

Nick said, “Then we need to be set up for bear. There’s a whole mess of Super Mutants there.”

Nora nodded. They moved carefully up and over a parking garage, and saw that there was a stair down to Congress Street in front of the Hall. Nora positioned Piper and Nick at the top of the stair with whispered instructions to shoot anything that tried coming up.

Then she moved a short distance right and set up on the balcony. And started shooting. It took
several casualties before the Mutants even figured out what was going on, and there was some brief excitement when something Piper called a “suicider” came out. Apparently they had a tactic of running up and smashing a mini nuke on you. Nora got him before he even got to the street. She also made note of the ticking of the activated Fat Man shells. That was a post-war experience she could do without now that she knew what to listen for.

Fanueil Hall’s combination was 5 and R. They followed the red line around a couple corners, occasionally losing it in rubble only to pick it up a short while later, until they reached Paul Revere’s house, whose marker read 8 D.

Then the trail led to the Old North Church. While the Freedom Trail didn’t actually end there, there was a lantern painted on the wall. And the marker read 1 and R.

“Oh, come ON,” said Nora. “You have got to be kidding me. R, A, I, L, R, O, A, D? That’s a secret code? OK, let’s get in there and meet these yahoos. I want to give them a piece of my mind.”

They opened the door and headed in. There were lamps painted on the door lintel, then inside there was one painted on a collapsed balcony in front of the door to the basement. They followed the stairs down to a broken out wall leading to the crypt. There were a number of the lanterns painted on the walls, along with green phosphorescent paint that lit the area up sufficiently.

They wound up at a section of wall that had clearly been patched with one of the lanterns on the floor in front of it. Next to it was one of the Freedom Trail markers with a painted arrow and nothing else on it, and that was hooked up to some wiring. Nora examined it for traps, but nothing leapt out at her. As she tentatively prodded at it, the outer ring moved under her fingers.

“It spins,” she said to herself. After she spun it to an R, she waited for a second. Nothing happened.

Piper, who had been watching, said, “Every time there was a number, it was in the middle section of the marker.” She pressed the center piece, and it depressed, and made an audible click. Nora nodded and gave Piper a thumbs up. Then she rotated the ring to an A, then an I, and so forth, pressing the center at every stop.

When she got to D and pressed, instead of a click, she heard a hydraulic hissing and the new section slid out of the way. The inside was pitch black. Nora activated her Pip-Boy lamp and moved into the passage. Before they’d taken more than a few steps, several powerful floodlights snapped on and Nora could barely make out three forms in front of her. Since one of them was pointing a minigun at them, she froze.

The center figure, a woman by her voice, spoke. “Stop right there. You went to a lot of effort to arrange this meeting. But before we go any further answer my questions. Who the hell are you?”

Nora replied, “You went to a lot of effort to make this place findable. Why don’t you tell me who you are first.”

The woman nodded, “All right. In a world full of suspicion, treachery, and hunters, we’re the synths only friends. We’re the Railroad. Now you answer my question.”

Nora relaxed slightly. Only slightly, as the minigun muzzle hadn’t moved yet. The lights had been moved slightly so that Nora and Piper weren’t squinting. She said, “I followed the Freedom Trail looking for you. The clues were a little obvious. But I’m not your enemy.”

The woman looked a little upset at Nora’s jab, and said, “If that’s true, you have nothing to fear. Who told you how to contact us?”
Nora shook her head, “I don’t want to get anyone in trouble.”

The woman just said, “We’ll find out, one way or another.”

Nora replied, “If you don’t want people finding you, why bother with the trail wandering over half of downtown Boston? And that code hardly qualifies as subtle. The only thing difficult about the code is where you have to go to get it.”

The woman smiled, wryly, “Because sometimes we need to be found. But just begs the last question, why are you here?”

Finally, Down to business.

“Let’s say, hypothetically, I’ve come into possession of a Courser Chip. Would you be able to help?” said Nora.

The woman looked shocked. “You have what?! This is not a joking matter.”

Another person joined them. He was a middle aged and wearing a t-shirt, jeans, and incongruously for the setting, sunglasses.

He strolled up and observed, “I didn’t know we were having a party. What gives with my invitation? Oh. I see you invited the Courser-killer. Nice.”

The woman turned to the newcomer, “Deacon, you’re late. You’re saying this intruder actually killed a Courser? Single handedly? That’d give even Glory a run for her money.”

Deacon spread his hands, “News flash, boss. This lady is kind of a big deal. If you’re done interrogating her, you might want to show this Courser murdering machine a little courtesy.” He shrugged, “Just a thought.”

Nora interrupted. “It wasn’t single-handed. I had friends with me.”

Deacon nodded. “Yeah. You had two other people with you, including Ms. Wright here and that Irish pit fighter, Cait. Not 80 heavily armed maniacs. And all three of you walked out, unhurt. That qualifies as single handed in anyone’s book.”

The woman looked impressed, “I owe you an apology. Anyone who kills a Courser is good in my book. I’m Desdemona and I’m leader of the Railroad.”

Nora nodded. “Nora Greene. You already know Piper, and this is,” she started.

Deacon interrupted. “Nick, you old dog. How’s it going?”

“Just fine, Deacon. I’m a little hurt it took this long for your folks to invite me to a party.”

Deacon looked a little pained. “Yeah, about that,” he rubbed the back of his neck, “What with you being a Gen 2 with a prototype personality overlay, we kinda decided you might have a tattletale code buried in there somewhere. But it’s all good. You’re here now.”

Nora looked over at Nick a bit sharply. He shrugged apologetically. “Hey, I didn’t know where to go either. And Deacon comes and goes a lot. Could’ve been weeks before I saw him again.”

Nora rolled her eyes, and turned back to Desdemona. “Hopefully we can work something out. I need the chip decoded.”

Nora put her hands on her hips, “The security provided by putting the code to open your door on a bunch of markers in plain view of the entire Commonwealth and a bread crumb trail leading right here?”

Desdemona shrugged. “You were followed for the better part of your trip, you know. It wouldn’t have been hard for you to have an accident.”

Nora glared at Desdemona, “Like that would’ve stopped me. Your code is R, A, I, L, R, O, A, D, for pity’s sake. I’m going to suggest you’re not that secure. Now are you going to help me get to my son or not?!?”

Deacon interrupted, “Dez, we need to let her in. She has an intact Courser Chip, for god’s sake.”

Desdemona gave him a stubborn look, “That violates our security protocols.”

Deacon waved his hands, “To hell with that. She. Killed. A. Courser! There’s no way she’s working for the Institute.”

Desdemona gave a little sigh. She turned to the other man in the room, “Drummer Boy, go have everyone clear out of the main room, but tell Tinker Tom to stay. Report back when they’re set.”

Drummer Boy nodded and went down the passage behind them.

While they waited, Desdemona said, “We’re letting you into our Headquarters. You’re the first outsider ever to be given this privilege. We’ll discuss the details about your chip inside.”

When Drummer Boy returned and nodded, Nora left Piper and Nick when Desdemona led her through a door. Desdemona said, “Decoding a Courser Chip is a very delicate operation. A million things can go wrong. The least of which is losing the data. Fortunately, we have the right man for the job.”

Chapter End Notes

If someone notices that I’ve repeated a letter/number combination and missed another? Keep it to yourself. I edited that section, in conjunction with the Fallout wiki about 8 times, and I Kept. Finding. Mistakes. I give. At this point, as far as I’m concerned Tinker Tom injected himself with some damn battery acid when he set them up, and Nora is a good enough pattern recognizer to put it together even with a missing piece.

The Sacred Cod (and the Brass Holy Mackerel) are REAL and can be found in the Massachusetts State House today. And I mean TODAY. Go look. Unless the cod has been stolen as has happened in its past. (Once in 1933 by the editors of The Harvard Lampoon, which led to a 2 day cat and mouse game between the sons of privilege on one hand and a batch of pissed off cops on the other, until the cod was returned in a hand off out of a spy novel. The second time was in 1968, and the perpetrators never took it out of the building, as it was later found in a disused hallway. Odds are, if you go to look it’ll be there. But maybe not...) The current cod has hung, absent the aforementioned interruptions, in the Massachusetts House since 1784. A brass fish on the chandelier chain in the Senate IS known as the Holy Mackerel, probably out of Fish
Envy on the part of the Senate. My hand to heaven...I have made not ONE WORD of this up. Nora probably wishes she had Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_Cod
As they walked into a large room, crowded with tables and shelving and a few tables covered with cloths, they were greeted by a somewhat manic, nervous man, presumably Tinker Tom.

“Hey Dez. You need something?” he asked.

Desdemona nodded, “Tom, our visitor here has a Courser Chip.”

He looked thrilled. “Whoa! For real? Man it’s been ages.”

*Given what I had to go through to get it, I can see that.*

Desdemona turned to Nora, “Right some ground rules. Tom will get you the codes, but once he’s done we get the chip.”

Nora nodded, “That’s fair. Deal.”

Desdemona smiled, and turned to Tom, “All right. Tom, make it happen.”

Tom looked over the chip carefully and cleaned the contacts thoroughly. Then he said, under his breath, “All right little Courser Chip, let’s have the circuit analyzer have a look at you…”

He attached a pair of leads to the “analyzer” and then began booting up a terminal next to it. After a few moments he looked at Desdemona, “We’re in. Chip accessed. Let me work on the encryption key…”

Desdemona turned to Nora, “If we’re going to be dealing more with each other, I need to be sure we’re on the same page. The Institute treats synths as property, as tools….”

Nora interrupted, “That sounds like slavery.”

Desdemona nodded, “Which is why we named ourselves the Railroad. We seek to free synths from their bondage. Give them a chance at a real life.

Nora said, “So your lax security has a reason. You’re not a pure intelligence agency. Your job is to rescue people who may not even know you exist…”

Desdemona’s face scrunched up a little at the security crack.

*There’s a story there. Suffer a breach did we? Double agent? Someone get caught in a Honey Trap? What?*

Desdemona held Nora’s gaze, “I have a question, the only question that matters. Would you risk your life for your fellow man, even is that man is a synth?”

Nora shrugged, then answered honestly, “I risk my life for people every day. Makes no difference if they’re natural or artificial.”

Desdemona looked pleased, “Well said. Someone with your skills, your beliefs, normally we’d try to recruit them. But right now we don’t have time to train up a new agent. There are, however, valuable ways you can contribute. And in turn we have resources that can help you find your son. See Deacon for details.”
So something DID happen. And recently too.

Tom suddenly exclaimed, “I got you, you Institute bastard. I got you!” He looked triumphant, and his fingers flew across the keys, “Let me load that on the holotape for ya!”

After a couple more taps at the keyboard, he popped a holotape, and handed it to Nora, while fairly quivering with glee.

Desdemona smiled at him, “Good work, Tom.”

Tom suddenly looked pained, “Not sure our luck’ll hold up next time, Dez.”

Desdemona didn’t react. “Start working on the rest of the chip,” she said, then turned to Nora, “And you. I’d love to work with you more. Let me know if you’re interested after you speak with Deacon.”

Desdemona gestured at the door, and she and Nora left. When they got back to the antechamber, the rest of the Railroad people left the room leaving Nora, Nick, and Piper with Deacon.

Deacon looked at them apologetically. “Hope you didn’t mind the reception. When you tango with the Institute you got to be careful when someone new gets on the dance floor.”

“You’ve,” corrected Piper.

Nora smiled, “She was just being cautious.”


Nora looked at him, head tilted slightly, “Why did you vouch for me?”

Deacon looked smug, which candidly, he was really good at, “In our little outfit it’s my job to know things. And with everything you’ve done it’s clear you’re capable. A dangerous enemy. And, I’m betting, a valuable ally.”

That’s not all is it? It has something to do with why Dez is so twitchy about security...

“But why the trust, you can’t be taking it all on faith,” she insisted.

He looked pained, “I don’t know if we can trust you. I hope we can. We just survived a hell of a crisis. So we may just be a teeny, weeny bit desperate for new members. If everything was sunshine and bottlecaps, we’d probably play a longer getting to know you game. But we don’t have that luxury.”

Bingo. There it is. What kind of crisis?

“Is that all?” she pressed.

He sighed, “All right, I have a short list of people I think would be a good fit for our family. You piqued my interest, and maybe I asked around. Did my homework.”

He looked around, and then said, “If you hadn’t found us there’s a good chance I would’ve found you instead. Thanks for saving me the trip. So Dez wants to make you a ‘tourist’. That’s what we call someone who helps out with the odd job here and there. What. A. Waste. I’m just gonna come right out and say it; the Railroad needs you.”
Nora looked quite skeptical, “You sure you need me? Dez didn’t seem to care.”

Deacon shook his head. “She’s just thinking of the time and manpower it would take to train you. And if you were some hick from the burbs who didn’t know your ass from a rocket launcher, she’d be right. But I’m betting someone like you just needs a few pointers and a target.”

_Pointers. From whom and for whom, Amateur Hour?

“You can skip the pointers but you have my attention.”

Deacon launched into a sales pitch, “I got a job. Too big for me. Perfect for this small group. You help me out, we turn a few heads, and then Dez invites you into the fold. And then if you get in a bind, your buddies from the Railroad have your back.”

_That is actually attractive. They may have serious professionalism problems, but they’ve been useful so far. And not in the skeevy Brotherhood way. They’re a little monomaniacal, but not dangerously, and not about something trivial._

“Sign me up then,” said Nora.

Deacon smiled, “Perfecto. We’ll meet up at the old freeway outside Lexington. I’ll fill you in once you get there.”

Deacon went into the headquarters and Nora’s group filed out of the Church. Nora looked up at the steeple. Piper looked where she was looking and said, “Cap for your thoughts.”

Nora chuckled, “Mean it? Because I’ve thought about hiding that godawful thing for over a week.”

“That’s BOTTLEcap, Blue. And what’s the matter with my cap?”

“There isn’t a person on the planet, living or dead, that looks good in a snapbrim cap, Thing. There’s a lot of ways I can show my love for you, but the one where you know I’m serious? I haven’t stolen or hidden that thing,” said Nora, but smiling.

“What I was THINKING about,” she continued, “Was Paul Revere’s lamps and the Underground Railroad. This group uses the lamp icons, but pretty obviously is a new slave rescue operation.” She turned back to the church. “I never thought in those terms, but Jenny really opened my eyes.”

Nora turned deadly serious and looked back to Piper, “We’ve been so obsessed about how bad synths can be, like the coursers or the ones who replace humans, that we’ve forgotten that if they’re that good a ‘copy’ of people then they’re people themselves.”

Nick nodded, “I never thought I was ‘the one good synth’.”

Nora shrugged, “We keep confusing ‘The Institute’, with ‘synths’. Many of them are as much the victim of the Institute as any kidnappee.”

Piper asked, “So now what?”

Nora focused back on her fiancé. “Now? Now we help these people. Their cause is just. And I’m done only helping someone because I can get something from them. These guys? I can really help them.”

“Because...?” asked Nick.

Nora glared, “Because reasons.”
Nick smiled sadly, “Well, I hate to break up a soiree, but I have to get back to the office. Let me know how it goes.”

He stepped away, but not before whispering, “Before you marry the girl, Nora…”
The next day, in the midmorning, Nora and Piper found Deacon, west of Lexington, south of Concord, at a section of partly collapsed freeway. He’d shed almost everything from the prior day, save his sunglasses. Now he blended into the background. Just another wastelander in a Commonwealth full of them.

Piper peered at him, “Deacon is that you?”

He smiled, “Like the disguise? It’s wastelander camo. So, about the job. The Railroad’s only been recently using the Old North Church. Our old base was under a Slocum’s Joe. We had a pretty sweet setup until the Institute found us.”

Nora winced, “That sounds really, really bad.”

Deacon pulled a face, “It was a disaster with a capital D. The survivors didn’t have time to grab anything. So we’re getting something important we left behind.”

Nora nodded. Deacon turned and headed up a ramp composed of collapsed freeway. “Now, we have a tourist nearby. He or she has intel on the base. So let’s pump him for information before we dive in.”

Deacon began looking around as he climbed onto the freeway proper, “I’m looking for Railsign. Symbols we use to communicate. If you like that, we got signs and countersigns, dead drops, even a secret handshake. OK, maybe I never got the handshake to take off.”

Nora rolled her eyes at that, but held her tongue. They left Piper at the top of the ramp, as Deacon pointed out that the tourist was a jumpy one, and two was pushing it.

As they approached a stocky man at the end of the freeway segment, Deacon turned to Nora and said, “You take point on the conversation. Look no matter what he says, you say ‘Mine is in the shop’. Trust me.”

As they walked up, the man turned, looked indescribably relieved and said, “Oh thank god. Do you have a Geiger counter? Do you have a goddamn Geiger counter?”

Nora shrugged slightly and said, “Mine is in the shop.” Then she examined him. He seemed nervous, but not by their presence, so he probably hadn’t sold them out. She said, “Tell me what’s going on.”

He spoke in a rush, “I signed on for some light recon. But little Slocum’s Joe of yours is crawling with chrome dome synth sons of bitches.” He glared at them. “The fronts fortified to hell and back. They got the mother of all minefields. I couldn’t draw you a map if I tried.”

Nora nodded, “I appreciate all you’ve done.”

“Yeah, well I’m getting the hell out of here before them chrome domes notice me,” and then he was off. Fast.

Deacon looked at Nora, “Well isn’t Ricky a ray of sunshine. You believe him?”
Nora looked thoughtful, “He’s probably telling the truth but you never know.”

Deacon nodded, “I agree. First rule in this business is never go against your gut…”

“Second,” interrupted Nora.

“What?”

“Second rule is never go against your gut,” she said. “So, if we take him at his word…”

“The front door has mines, synths, and probably other fun and exciting prizes,” he finished. “So we go in through the escape tunnel.”

They went back down the freeway. When they got to Piper, she looked at them and said, “What did you do to terrify that guy?”

“Wasn’t us,” said Deacon. Then he led them through the woods to a culvert that had a locked hatch which Deacon opened.

When they were in, he turned to them and said, “The back entrance is safer, but be ready for Gen 1s and 2s.”

Nora asked, “Gen 1s and 2s?”

Deacon grinned, “The synths didn’t start off as nigh perfect copies of people. The Institute had to work up to that level of hubris. 1s and 2s were stepping stones.” He continued, “The Railroad’s not fully united on where we stand on them. Everyone wants to liberate the Gen 3s, the human looking ones. Some of the synths like Glory, think we should help earlier models too.”

He shrugged, “But Gen 1s are basically like a Protectron. So the line gets blurry. Do we defend AI rights? Terminals? Hell, turrets? Anytime it gets brought up, pow! Fireworks. All the old arguments flare up. That’s why Glory and some of the others won’t do missions like this. Welcome to your piece of the family squabble. You’re welcome.”

He led them to a terminal. He poked away, with password after password. “Dammit. They didn’t miss a trick. I’m locked out. I guess the front entrance is it, mines and all.”

Nora shook her head. “Let me give it a try.”

Piper sideeyed Deacon. “How are you about swearing?”

“Why?” he asked.

“Oh, no reason,” she said, looking innocent.

A couple minutes later, Deacon was looking at Nora impressed on two levels. One being her ability to hack extraordinarily difficult terminals.

The door opened and they went into the escape tunnel proper. Before they went further in, Deacon tugged on Nora’s sleeve and nodded into the facility. “It’s time you learn why we’re here. We’re looking for a prototype developed by our good Dr. Carrington.”

Nora raised an eyebrow, “Who’s Carrington?”

Deacon grimaced, “All goes well, you’ll meet him soon enough.”
When they got to the first staircase down in the tunnel network, they heard synths, the older Gen 1 and 2 types, judging by the voices. Nora simply rolled several frag grenades down the stair and listened to the older models buzzing and deactivating. She grinned and flashed a thumbs up, then went down carefully, pistol sweeping. When she saw the final synth, a couple rounds brought him down quickly.

\textit{Hate to admit it but that rat bastard Kellogg was right. Gen 1s and 2s aren’t difficult. In small groups.}

As they continued down the tunnel, they found more Railroad people, gunned down from behind as they tried to escape. Nora looked over at Deacon, “This was really bad.”

Deacon shook his head, “You have no idea. It’s why Dez is so gun-shy. It hasn’t been this bad since shortly after the Railroad was founded.”

“What would you know about that?” asked Nora.

Deacon just grinned. He gestured ahead of them. “Prepare to be shocked. Not every Slocum’s Joe has a massive tunnel complex underneath it. We’re entering a secret Defense Intelligence Agency lab. A place that never officially existed. Called the Switchboard. The prototype is locked up in the heart of the facility.”

Nora looked up sharply, “A secret WHAT lab?”

Deacon shrugged. “DIA. We found it awhile back, along with some…resources…that the lab had been working on and took it over. Really supercharged our efforts.”

Nora gave Deacon a look, then moved on. When they arrived at the facility, she peered in and saw several synths moving around. She signaled to Piper, “Two synths low, left and right, one synth high. I’ll take high. You take two lows.”

Piper nodded. Deacon looked confused and about to say something, and Nora put her fingers to her lips and shushed him.

Opening the door, Nora brought her rifle up and dropped the synth in the office looking out above the main floor. As she did she heard Piper’s pistol spit our four shots, and heard the buzzing ‘deaths’ of the two lower synths.

The Deacon’s rifle went off, loudly, as another synth came out of the office on the stairway to the left. One laser shot from their left missed Nora, and Piper turned and killed that one as well. Nora blew her fiancé a kiss, then shouldered her rifle and drew her pistol. They both fanned out and cleared the rest of the room. Piper’d been a quick study.

Deacon was looking at both of them, clearly impressed now. “This is what I was talking about,” he said.

Nora ignored him, but Piper nodded. They made their way up to the office, to what was fairly clearly the Officer In Charge’s desk. There was a terminal with some nasty encryption on it. Piper looked over Nora’s shoulders. “Ouch. That’s gonna take a while.”

Deacon agreed. “We’ve never been able to get into that one. Not even Tom cracked it. That one and…well, there were a couple we never managed.”

Nora just shook her head. Seconds later she was in. Piper looked surprised. “No swearing?”
Nora grinned, “Fucking Shitsnacks! Happy now?”

Piper giggled, then looked at the monitor. Nora had called up DEFCON Status 2077. Nora looked at Piper. “Wouldn’t YOU like to know why your world died?”

“281632RJAN77 ANCHORAGE ALL CLEAR **DEFCON3**”

So they called Anchorage secured at 4:32 PM Eastern Time on the 28th of January. And dropped the Defense Readiness Condition to Three.

“230003ROCT77 COMPACFLT REPORTS 3 USOS OFF CALIF COAST, JCS ADVISE”

Day of the war. Oct 23rd. 3 minutes past midnight Eastern Time, the Pacific Fleet Command notified the Joint Chiefs that they’d picked up three unidentified submerged objects of California and requested advice.

“230337ROCT77 USAF HAS EYES ON SQUADRON OF AIRPLANES (POSS. CHINESE) AT HIGH ATTITUDE OFF BERING STRAIGHT”

Now the Air Force gets in on it. At 3:37 AM they saw planes, and assumed they were Chinese. But what heading?

“230913ROCT77 IONDS REPORTS 4 PROBABLE LAUNCHES **DEFCON 2**”

Oh. 9:13 AM local the Integrated Orbital Nuclear Detection System picked up 4 heat plumes. And set Condition Two. We were getting ready to go to Cambridge. I’d just picked up my coffee cup and started talking to that salesman.

“230917ROCT77 NORAD CONFIRMS BIRDS IN AIR **DEFCON1**”

My god, it was that close. I hadn’t even finished talking to that salesman and we were already screwed.

“230926ROCT77 AUTHENTICATED ORDER -- RESPONSE SCENARIO MX-CN91 -- REPEAT MX-CN91”

That answers that question. The Chinese shot first. And 9 minutes later, JCS confirms authentication of launch orders for plan MX-CN91. Whatever THAT was. Probably ‘Launch Everything At Everyone’ judging by the results.

“230942ROCT77 PENNSYLVANIA, NEW YORK -- CONFIRM STRIKE”

The last time I held Shaun.

“230947ROCT77 OFFLINE - OFFLINE - OFFLINE”

The bomb went off. And we went down into the Vault. 34 minutes of war and my world ends.

A single tear trickled down Nora’s cheek. Piper laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Deacon was looking on. “What’s up? That’s all ancient history.”

Piper rounded on him. “You know everything, including that she’s trying to get her baby back from The Institute, and you don’t know where she came from?”

Deacon shook his head, “No. I just started getting word of a mover and shaker a few weeks ago.
She’s been making a lot of waves, but I never traced them back.”

Piper calmed down. A little. “She was frozen. In a vault. She’s from before the War. She’s reading about the end of her world.”

Deacon looked shocked. “Oh. Oh, I’m sorry. That was thoughtless,” then he quirked his head to one side. “Hey, if you came from before the war, how come you’re so good at this part of the job? I assumed you came in from the Capital Wasteland, but your skills…”

Nora straightened up suddenly, and wiped the tear away, roughly, with the heel of her palm. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s grab this gizmo, and get out.”

She selected the menu item “Deactivate Security Grid” and then picked up her pistol and led them out the door on the other side of the office. The three synths in the security checkpoint outside were almost a relief. They definitely received more than their share of bullets from Nora.

As they moved down the hallway that led to that guard post, there was a large lab to the right. Inside were blue prints on the walls and workstations about the room. “That’s the other terminal we never could open up,” Deacon said, pointing.

“OK, let me give it a try,” said Nora. Again, she was in quickly.

Let’s see what’s here. A batch of transcriptions of dialog with a ‘Predictive Analytic Machine’. And…a bunch of bullethead generals ignoring her warnings. What. A. Shock. And a ton of projects, blueprints and specs. Let’s just download all that, shall we?

After that the three of them went back to the main hall and took a left this time off the main hallway and ambushed a small group of three in a workroom with a large safe door. Deacon was fishing around in a pouch, then pulled a hand holotape player out. He fiddled with it, “Where’s that play button?” followed by the machine playing a voice. Carrington, Nora supposed.

“Carrington, Stanley. Salus aegroti suprema lex.”

Deacon grinned, “Open says me.”

Nora asked, “Is Carrington your medical doctor?”

“Yes. How would you know that?” Deacon said.

“Nevermind,” Nora answered.

The door opened, and Deacon shook his head. “So Tommy Whispers didn’t make it out.” He picked up a sniper rifle that was laying next to a body. “He’d want you to have his rifle. You’re a lot like he was.”

Nora took the weapon from Deacon. It was a heavily modified Type 79 Chinese-made sniper rifle. Maybe originally brought back by a trophy hunter who got stationed to Switchboard. She’d need to get some appropriate ammo, but this would outperform her M24, being semi-automatic and with a highly precise receiver. And already silenced to boot.

“I appreciate it.”

Deacon nodded. “May it serve you as well…umm…better than it did Tommy.” He turned and pointed at the shelving. “Grab the prototype. You give that to Dez and she HAS to let you in,” he said.
Nora turned and grabbed the mass of wires and metal that Deacon was pointing at. “OK, let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

In publishing this novel I've realized that mainly I have Chapters that really are Triads. I could smoosh three chapters together and get one cohesive bit. BUT, this one is a tetrad, and needs to end with the next Chapter, The Database of Revelations. Then a triad, and then a dyad, and back to triads until the finale which is also a tetrad (or more accurately a triad with an epilog chapter). So more update for you.

yay.

Getting near the end. I'm now about 35000 words into book 2. I'll need to slow up updates for books 2 and 3.

A note on the in game terminal entries...the DEFCON status. That is REAL time/date terminology used in military OPORDs and EAMs (Emergency Action Messages...and if you are in a nuclear capable artillery unit, like some [cough] people you really DON'T want to get a REAL EAM, it'll ruin your...and the world's...whole day).

Translated it goes DDTTTTTTMMMYYY, where DD is date numeric (23), TTTTT is 24 hour clock time and a time zone code letter (0947R), MMM is a three letter month code (OCT), and YY is the last two digits of the year (77). The time that Nora saw the bomb go off was 230947ROCT77 or 9:47AM Eastern Standard Time, Oct 23, 2077. The R is fixed, and means Greenwich Mean Time (Z or Zulu) -5 hours...i.e, Eastern Standard Time. Eastern Daylight Time and Central Standard Time are S (Sierra). As I write this very note, in Milwaukee Wisconsin, it is 221816TMAY18. Or 6:16PM Central Daylight Time, May 22, 2018. See? Easy peasy. (And meant to make sure that you start making booms at the same time everyone else is making booms, even if you're coordinating booms all over the world.)

Also in our REAL world "IONDS" in the Integrated Orbital Nuclear DETONATION Detection System (Integrated Orbital NuDet Detection System). The real world has DSP (Defense Support Program...which is a particularly bloodless acronym for our Holy Shit The World Is Ending system).
The Database of Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The three made their way to the “front” of the facility, taking down two more synths before taking the elevator up. They found themselves in the basement kitchen of the donut shop. Deacon turned to the two of them. “We got what we came for. Let’s split up and meet back at the catacombs.”

Nora looked him over. “Was all of that worth it?”

Deacon shrugged. “All I know is that Dez authorized the op. I hope we didn’t go through that for new coffee maker.”

Nora nodded, “Should be way easier to fight any synth from THIS side.”

Deacon smiled and the three made their way to the surface, where it was considerably easier to destroy the two synths and two turrets inside the shop from behind and then kill the rest from the upper floor as they tried to get back to the shop.

However, Deacon stepped on the mine that had been placed right in the doorway. He collapsed, “Ow!! Son of a bitch, my leg!”

Nora ran over as Piper dropped what they hoped was the last synth, and checked his leg. Some burning and a few shrapnel lacerations was all he’d suffered. “You were incredibly lucky, Deacon,” Nora told him.

“Why do I not FEEL lucky?” he said.

“Probably because it hurts like hell. Remember, pain is…” she said.

He looked disgusted, “…weakness leaving your body. I get it.”

She shook her head. “I was going to say, ‘Pain is the universe telling you you did something really stupid.’ That other thing makes no sense.”

He laughed. Then winced. “I guess laughing is stupid under the circumstances.”

“Only for you, Deacon. Hey Piper! Come over here and bandage up Einstein here. I’m going to pick out a route through the minefield.”

The synths had only laid a surface minefield. Good enough hold someone up, and effective as long as they were covered, say, by unsleeping, humorless robots ready to shoot anyone who wandered in. But easy for someone paying attention and not being shot at, as Nora was, to mark a safe route out.

Nora and Piper took one of Deacon’s arms and helped him hop out of Lexington. Then they got lucky for a change, and ran into one of the supply caravans running between Red Rocket and the Castle. The caravancer recognized Nora, and saluted.

Nora’s lips quirked. “You never salute in the field, soldier. Not unless you’re trying to flush out snipers.”

He blushed. “Sorry General.” Nora could see Deacon over her shoulder, looking entirely too interested.
Nora rolled her eyes, but told the caravaner to rig up a ride for Deacon. Then the three of them went with the caravan to Diamond City, which had turned into a stop for her Minutemen on their way to and from The Castle.

When they arrived, Nora and Piper helped Deacon to Dr. Sun’s office, and waited while he dressed Deacon’s wounds, and administered a Stimpack and some Med-X. When he was finished, Deacon flexed his leg, and then got up and took some experimental steps. He looked up at Nora and grinned.

“All I have is this dead sexy limp. The girls at HQ’ll love it. I’ll need to work on my wounded, stoic, but not TOO stoic look,” he said as he pulled a face.

“That just looks constipated, Deacon,” said Nora.

“I’ll have to work on it,” he said, “Anyways, give me a little time to grease the skids at HQ. Give me a half hour head start.”

Nora nodded and Deacon left. The two dropped off Nora’s old rifle at home and went to Arturo’s to pick up some 7.62mm ammunition for the Type 79. Nora went out to the farm in centerfield, and sighted it in using the Diamond City Security Range. Then the two went to get Nick.

As they entered the office, Nick greeted them. Before he could start in, Nora asked, “Want to come and join the Railroad? Or watch us join,” she looked thoughtful. “Or just me,” she finished.

“Nope, Blue, where you go, I go. Though it may kill me to keep secrets,” Piper said.

“I’ll watch, but I’ve pretty much had it with secrets and being ordered around ever since Winter’s End,” said Nick.

The three of them made their way to the Old North Church. Nora was planning on skirting around Fanueil Hall, but Nick had her head almost straight north from Goodneighbor, owing to the Raider base in Haymarket Mall. They then took Hull Street past the Copp’s Hill Cemetery and came up behind the church.

Finally, they went down into the Catacombs. As they were entering HQ they heard Deacon’s voice.

“… and the new girl patched me up, put me on her shoulder, and blasted her way through the rest of the complex. Synths everywhere.”

Dez looked skeptical, “Carrying you the whole time?”

Deacon nodded enthusiastically as Nora, Nick, and Piper came up. “Amazing, right?”

“That’s one word for it.” Dez turned to Nora, “Deacon told me you single handedly secured Carrington’s prototype, disabled a minefield, and wiped out a hundred Gen 1s. So is any of that true?”

Nora waggled her hand side to side, “Mostly true. But there were more like 30 synths and Deacon wasn’t injured until he walked into a mine right at the end, it wasn’t hard to pick a safe route through a surface laid minefield, and it was me AND Piper carrying him between us after that.”

Dez’ eyebrows went up as she turned back, “Frankly, with you Deacon, that story hardly even counts as a mild fib.”

Deacon looked at Nora, “She would have fallen for it, you know.”
Dez rolled her eyes, “Don’t flatter yourself.” She continued, “I was expecting Deacon to grab a full team, including Glory, to secure that prototype. But instead, the three of you cleared out Switchboard.”

Deacon said, “You’d be insane not to sign her…both of them…up, Dez.”

Desdemona nodded. “You’ve certainly made an impression on Deacon. He’s never spoken about, or lied about, anyone so highly before. Welcome to the Railroad, agents.”

Nora smiled, “Glad to be aboard.” Piper just gulped.

Dez said, “It seems we’re very lucky to have you. So you’re in. Now we need to know what to call you. Secrecy keeps us alive. Code names are a part of that. So what’re yours?” she asked Piper and Nora.

“Don’t you assign them?” asked Nora.

Dez shook her head, “No. It doesn’t work like that. Your life, your name, your choice.”

*It is. That’s how they differ from an Intelligence Agency. It’s your choice. It not ALL about security. Everyone here isn’t just a volunteer. They’re answering a call. So who AM I? ‘They never see me coming’? First, silly, second, way too long. But even way back in the Museum of Freedom, they really never knew I was there…and what was the guy’s name who ‘gave’ me the Type 79?*

“Call me…Whisper.”

Dez eyebrows went up again, “After Tommy, or…? Either way, it’s very fitting. “ Then she turned to Piper. Piper grinned and said, “Well if she’s Whisper, then I can only be Crier.”


Piper nodded.

Dez looked pleased. “It’s time to meet the rest of the gang. First there’s a couple people I want to introduce you to individually, here. You’ve met Drummer Boy. He’s our Runner and monitors dead drops.”

“Hi again, rook,” he said. Nora nodded.

“And this is Glory,” said Dez.

Nora shook Glory’s hand. Glory looked her over, “So you’re the new heavy?”

Nora asked, “What do you mean heavy?”

Glory said, “A heavy. Someone able to take whatever shit the Institute and Commonwealth hand out and come back for more. So the Switchboard was crawling with bad guys. Mines and shit too. Was any of that true or is Deacon fucking with me again?”

Nora shrugged, “I didn’t do it alone, but yeah, that was pretty much the size of it.”

Glory nodded approvingly, “Badass. How’d you do it? Please tell me you didn’t go with that ‘in and out like a ghost’ shit.”
“Well only if ghosts leave a lot of wreckage in their wake, but yeah,” Nora said, “They never saw us coming.”

Glory smiled, “Welcome. After we lost Tommy Whispers, we need another tough bitch who can get things done.” She pointed at herself, “They call me Glory, the ass kicking poster child of a liberated synth. The Angel of Death.”

Nora nodded as well, “I like it.”

Glory chuckled, “What’s not to like? You’re helping out my people, so some advice? Kiss up to Tinker Tom, he’s batshit crazy, but he’s got all the good stuff.”

Nora grinned and nodded. And then turned and saw the man who’d decrypted her chip, Tinker Tom.

“The sensor sweep says you’re clean. Hurray, we’re bug free,” he said.

Nora frowned, “I went through a sweep?”

“Every test Dez would let me run; Full EMF scan, biological sniffers, and other state of the art security. So the sweep says we’re clean. But tests lie, man. Have you eaten anything out there?”

“Oh for… Yeah, I’ve eaten food,” said Nora.

Tom looked worried, “Oh, oh, oh I knew it…The Institute has these tiny robots in the food, man. And they report back.”

Piper suppressed a snicker, as Tom continued, “OK. OK. If you really want to be safe, let me give you a little shot. Dez - Desdemona - says no one HAS to, but it will kill the little robots.”

Deacon said, “There’s battery acid in that serum of yours.”

Tom waved him off, “You can’t nuke an omelet without irradiating some eggs. You ready to shoot up?” he asked Nora, entirely too eagerly.

“There is no way in hell I’m letting you do that,” said Nora.

“Fine. Let them see and hear everything. I hope you like your whole life downloaded onto an Institute mainframe,” said Tom.

Kiss up, Nora. Glory’s advice…

“Actually I dose myself with radiation to get rid of the little blood…robots.”

Tom nodded, smiling again. “I read you, rather have some hair loss than let the Institute win.” He smiled at Nora, “You get it. I make things around here, so you go do…things…and come back and I will set you up.”

Shaking her head, Nora chuckled quietly and looked up to find Deacon. "Welcome to the family. We’re a colorful, and arguably insane, bunch, but you’re stuck with us now,” he said. “And Nick, our casa is su casa anytime, even if you don’t join.”

“Thanks,” said Nick. Nora nodded.

Deacon and Dez led them through the door to HQ. As they went down the stairs, Dez said, “This is it. It may lack the amenities at the Switchboard, but it’s safe. And we’ve taken precautions not to get ambushed again. Things are chaotic right not, so there’s plenty for you to do.”
As they walked into a large arched vaulted room in the catacombs Desdemona waved everyone not asleep in one of the bunks scattered around them over. "Listen up everyone. This is Whisper and this is Crier. They did the switchboard op with Deacon. They’re full agents, effective immediately. I’m counting on each of you to show them the ropes. Feel free to welcome them aboard. That is all."

A grey assaultron with the letters “PAM” stenciled on its chest came over. She turned to Piper, “Piper Louise Wright. Proprietor and sole author of ‘Publick Occurrences’. Originally classified as ‘Potentially Sympathetic’ but avoided due to anti-synth sentiment…”

“Hey!” interrupted Piper. “It was anti-Institute sentiment, not anti-synth.”

“Noted,” said PAM. Continuing, she said, “Considered highly reliable and a significant asset for intelligence gathering if we could secure her loyalty, as profiles indicate that she is very resistant to shifting allegiances once given.”

Piper leaned back, somewhat mollified.


Nora’s shoulders slumped. “Well, shit.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I telegraphed this too much, but next chapter has some residual revelations that most of you probably HAVEN’T seen coming a MILE away....

Also, of COURSE Piper joined with her fiancé.
There were a few gasps, and Nora heard Piper say, “Blue?” then PAM continued, “As ranking surviving DIA officer, this unit is now at your disposal.”

At that, there was a rising crescendo of angry voices until Nora put an end to that particular dumpster fire. “PAM, effective immediately transfer primary reporting to Head of Railroad, Desdemona, or her designees.”

Desdemona said, “What on earth is going on here?” and Nora gave her an apologetic look.

“I gave you PAM back, didn’t I?” she said.

“How were you in a position to take her in the first place?” started Desdemona.

Nick interrupted, “I thought you were an agent, I had no idea you were BLACKLIST.”

Piper gave a shrill whistle. Everyone fell silent. “OK. She’s MY fiancé, and I get first crack,” she glared at Dez and Nick. “She gave you,” she pointed at Dez, “Your toy back, so calm down.” And she turned to Nick, “What do you MEAN, you knew?”

Nick looked at Nora, “You got me into this,” when Piper grabbed him.

She looked into his glowing eyes, “Never mind her, answer me.”

“Back when I was with the Boston PD on Operation Winter’s End, there were a couple of DIA spooks that I knew,” Nick said, “After a while everything about Nora, her skills, what she’d done, what she could do, all added up to DIA spook.”

“Spook?” asked Piper.

“Slang for spy,” started Nora.

Piper gave her girlfriend a sharp look. “I will get to YOU in a minute, Nora, let Nick answer his questions himself.”

Nora shut up, and saw Desdemona and Deacon looking on with great interest.

“What she said. ‘Spook’ is slang for spy, or agent, or Intelligence Officer. Intelligence Officer is what the DIA called them. Usually they called themselves spies, or spooks,” he said.

“So you thought she was a spy. Like on all those Pre-War holotapes. A DIA agent like what’s his name…Felix Lantern from all those James Bond holotapes?”

Nick nodded, “Felix Leiter. Yes. But, well, she’s actually BLACKLIST…”

“And how do YOU know about BLACKLIST?” asked Nora. Piper started to interrupt her fiancé, but there was a desperate look in her love’s eyes that stopped her. Nora was under more stress at this instant than she’d ever showed Piper. Ever. And Piper was getting the idea that she herself was the source.
“One of the guys at BADTFL had been saved by a BLACKLIST agent. He’d been captured by the Chinese, and if captured the guy was supposed to kill himself. Instead, while he was being moved from his POW camp in Alaska to Secret Police Headquarters in Anchorage, a BLACKLIST agent singlehandedly hijacked the transport, rammed the guard car over a cliff and then shot out the tires of the chase truck so it too ended up in a mountain valley.” Nick looked apologetic. “He got drunk one night. I was curious.”

Deacon and Desdemona were now hanging on every word.

“Was the guy’s name Shane Black?” asked Nora.

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

Nora chuckled sadly, “It’s a small world. Or it was.”

Nick looked surprised, “Were you the one who got him out?”

“Of course not. Chinese POW facilities don’t have female guards. I couldn’t have gotten within a hundred meters of that truck without getting caught,” Nora said.

“Oh. I suppose it was a silly question,” said Nick.

“I was the one who found out he’d gotten caught and planned and authorized the op,” Nora said.

Now Desdemona and Deacon’s jaws dropped, and Nick chuckled softly, “Yeah, I heard about you guys all right. He loved you.”

Piper waved at both of them. “Blue, you were a spy?”

Nora closed her eyes. “I…I kept trying to find just the right time to tell you, but I was always chickening out.” She looked down, around. Anywhere but at Piper, “What if you hated me for lying to you?”

“Just because you were a…spook…a spy like that guy Felix from the DIA in the Bond stories? Really?”

Nick cleared his throat. “She was BLACKLIST, Piper. It’s more like she was 007.”

To Nora’s utter and everlasting shock, Piper started giggling. “Nick, are you saying,” and she started giggling harder as she spoke, “I’m…engaged….to…Jane Bond??”

Nora waved her hand in irritation, and then Piper’s eyes got wide, and she suddenly burst out fully laughing. When she could finally stand up straight, she looked over at Nora who was standing and looking at Piper in shock.

Nora said, “I’m a BOND GIRL? For real?”

“I…I’m sorry for lying Piper,” Nora said.

“I’m not thrilled that you hid it from me Nora. But I could never hate you. I love you,” she got an impish smile, “You’re my holotape hero, and I’m the sexy girl that gets the hero at the end. What’s not to love about that?”

“Why isn’t she more upset? What is the matter with me, that I can’t get them to understand?”

“I’ve done…horrible…things Piper. BLACKLIST didn’t usually rescue agents in trouble. We were spies and assassins,” Nora said.
But you were the one who arranged to get Shane rescued and extracted, Nora. I told you all along you were too hard on yourself,” said Nick.

Fine. I guess I’m going to have to show them.

Nora sighed. “PAM, how many people have I killed?”

“This unit has no idea of your activities after 23 October, 2077,” replied PAM.

“OK. Let me rephrase. How many reported kills are in DIA records for Major Nora McAllister, from the period from 2 October 2072 until leaving active duty on 24 September 2076?”

“Those records are codeword classified JADE SUN clearance only.”

“Give all present JADE SUN clearance immediately,” answered Nora.

“You do not have permission to issue blanket clearances at this time, only RAILROAD ALPHA or her designees.”

Nora grabbed her temple. THAT migraine was coming back. She hadn’t had to deal with it for 211 years, but it was back with a vengeance. “Dez?” she pleaded.

Desdemona stepped forward. “PAM. Authorize Agent Whisper full clearance authority for ALL records prior to the general nuclear exchange on October 23rd. Retain clearance authority for all Railroad activities to me and me alone unless otherwise directed by me.” Dez looked over at Nora. “And ONLY Agent Whisper, aka JADE SUN, may access records pertaining to JADE SUN unless I and Agent Deacon BOTH agree that such records are urgently needed.”

Nora looked at Desdemona with naked gratitude. “Thank you, Desdemona,” she said.

Desdemona smiled at her, “Your life, your name. And your choice only, Whisper.”

Nora turned. “PAM. My previous question stands, and all present are given JADE SUN clearance for the purpose of answering my questions at this time.”

“From 2 October 2072 until 24 September 2076 you have 48 reported kills, although DIA reports that you also killed your primary training agent, Captain Alexander Smith, by suffocation after your graduation from DIA Training.”

How the fuck…

Piper asked, “Why would Blue do that?”

PAM answered, “DIA records state that Smith is believed to have had a sexual relationship with Major, then Candidate, McAllister. The relationship was inferred to have been non-consensual based on profiles of Candidate McAllister and Captain Smith. DIA Training Command believed Smith must have blackmailed McAllister for sexual congress. Her acquiescence to the liaison prior to and his murder after her graduation were seen as a ‘graduation exercise’ of sorts for Major McAllister.”

“Blue?”

“I killed him by smothering him with his own pillow while he slept after we fucked. He wanted a graduation send off. I gave him one,” Nora replied.

“OK…” Piper sounded troubled.
“It’s all cards on the table time, Piper,” Nora said tightly.

Piper looked at Nora a little strangely. Nora ignored the look. “PAM. Records for murder number 22, Ian Fowler.”

“Counting the killing of Captain Smith as 0, termination number 22 was Ian Fowler, a DIA agent who was posing as a Soviet journalist, Yevgeni Lochenko. He made contact with Major McAllister after recognizing her in her cover identity as Huang Lien Mei, a female staffer for Chinese Defense Minister Yang Bao-Zhe. He was subsequently blown and caught by the Eighth Bureau of the Ministry for State Security. While in captivity he was visited by Huang Lien Mei who offered him water. She sipped the water to show him and the monitor cameras that it was safe. Fowler died three days later, with all his muscles seized up and immobilized.”

Nora pressed on, “Was the death painful?”

PAM replied, “By all reports in my database, it would have been.”

“How was he poisoned?” Nora asked.

“McAllister introduced the first element of a binary poison at their first meeting, well before she knew he would be captured. It was presumed by DIA as a precaution given his knowledge of her identity. Since she only consumed the second element, and since the second element, unlike the first, is rapidly broken down by the human liver, she was safe from its effects within four days. She received a commendation for her records as a result of her actions.”

“Nora,” Piper said, compassion in her eyes, “You were in a dangerous spot. He’d threatened you just by recognizing you, didn’t he?”

*Fine. ALL cards on the table…*

Nora waved off Piper. Her eyes were far away now, and full of pain. “PAM, kills number 46 and 47.”

“Zhao Chung was McAllister’s target and 46th termination. He was a researcher working on advanced stealth systems that would withstand the heat of re-entry. In essence, a stealth field for nuclear warheads. Major McAllister was able to rig a prototype that Zhao was working on to explode.”

“And 47?” Nora continued.

“Zhao Huifen. Zhao Chung’s ten year old daughter was also killed by the blast.”

Nora’s eyes closed. “Was I aware the little girl was in the blast radius?”

PAM replied, “Yes.”

Nora went on, “Could I have stopped the explosion?”

“Yes.”

“But I didn’t.”

“No.”
Nora looked over at Piper. Nora could easily see that her eyes were full of tears.

*And this is how I lose her. Because I do NOT deserve her. Just like I didn’t deserve Shaun. I tried to lie my way to happiness again and that never works.*

Nora abruptly turned and left the room. Unfortunately she walked into the records room. There was no exit. She turned to leave. Desdemona and Deacon were in front of her. “Whisper,” Dez started.

“What?” snapped Nora.

“I can’t grant absolution. But I can give you something…noble…to do. We…need you. I had no idea how badly until this very moment. We’re almost dead. The Railroad was nearly destroyed and we…I…desperately need your skill and your knowledge if we’re going to survive. Please.”

Nora looked up at Dez’s plea. And saw Piper over Dez’s shoulder.

“You may not be able to grant absolution, Desdemona,” said Piper. “But I could.”

Dez and Deacon moved to the side and Piper came up to Nora. “Nora. You did some awful things,” she started. Nora just hung her head silently crying.

Piper grabbed Nora’s shoulders and shook her until she looked up. There was no hate in Piper’s eyes. Only compassion. “Nora. It doesn’t matter what you did in your old life. By wasteland standards, killing 49 people is a slow weekend for a Raider, and a typical year for almost all of us. Nick just told me that by pre-war standards you’d see yourself as a mass murderer. And I can SEE that it’s eating you up inside. But I love you and I…I grant you absolution. What is it Catholics say? ‘Ego te absolvo’.”

Nora shook her head over and over. “I saw you crying about the little girl.”

Piper said, “Of course I cried about the little girl. I cried because a little girl died, but I also cried because I could see it was DESTROYING you. You’re so wracked with guilt over all of this and you won’t let me help you.”

“I killed a little girl,” Nora repeated.

“Yes. And that’s bad. But you didn’t set out to kill her specifically. And that’s not what’s actually important. What’s really important, and why I will NEVER leave you is this…you actually feel bad about all this. Do have any idea how few people these days would even understand why you’re upset? Maybe one in ten.”

*I guess the world really is different. Maybe that’s why I keep trying to change it, if only to make it the kind of place that would condemn me for my sins.*

Nora looked at Piper. There really was nothing but care and compassion in her eyes. No accusation. Well maybe a little, because….

Piper bopped Nora lightly about her head, “Now stop beating yourself up about this, you idiot. I agreed to marry you, and I’d prefer not to marry Debbie Downer.”

Nora looked back into Piper’s eyes. And gave her a small smile.

It was the first time there hadn’t been a little lie buried deep inside in the smile.
This is the literary reference that is very nearly contemporaneous with Chandler...at least late Chandler...but won't feel like it. Most of what we think of when we think of Bond is the movies, and mostly Goldfinger and on (1964 plus). But Sir Ian Fleming's novels were written more than a decade earlier.

Based on his own exploits during World War 2 in the Special Intelligence Service (SIS, aka MI6) Fleming based Bond on what might be thought of as Winston Churchill's ideal spy. The first novel, Casino Royale, was started in 1952 and published in 1953, in Britain. I feel safe in deciding the the world of Fallout has the novels of James Bond. And if there are novels, there will be movies, and later, holotapes. We're already into a second lap into Bond as reboot, and there is real talk that the next Bond will be a woman, here in the real world. So I want get there first. Either way, I am certain that Piper, to the extent that post-war people can get scavenged holotapes, has heard of and thrilled to, the exploits of Britain's most famous and outrageous spy. And she has enough of an ego to find the idea of being the "real life" Bond Girl infinitely amusing.

And poor Nora is dealing with the ethical fact that, while SHE is scarred by her time "in the cold", her time is as emotionally engaging to Piper and the others as any other remote curiosity. Or in Dez's case, insofar as the god of espionage has dropped into her lap an Athena, full formed from the brow of Zeus, to save her and her organization.
After a few moments, Nora took a deep breath. “So the wedding isn’t off?”

Piper looked shocked, “Of course not. First, I love you. Second,” she cocked a hip to one side and assumed a deliberately overdone sexy pose, “I’m a Bond Girl. I’d never turn down the chance to be the one to finally get Jane Bond to marry and settle down.”

Nora’s lips quirked. “I’m starting to wonder which is worse. You not knowing, or you knowing.”

Nick cleared his throat, “You know that answer to that Nora.”

She turned and nodded at him. She was smiling, a little sadly, at him as well. “You get to say, ‘I told you so,’” tin man.”

He smiled, “I usually do. But I’ve never been as surprised before, while still being right.”

She sighed. “Fair enough. And teasing aside,” and she looked back at Piper, “It’s a relief to level with people. Especially you, Piper.”

Piper looked her over, “You OK, Blue? I know I’m joking about it but still…I had no idea. I still find it a little hard to believe. I meet a wonderful woman. Who just happens to like women. Who turns out to love me. Who turns out to be a super-spy.”

Deacon snapped his fingers, “THAT’S why you got into those computers at the Switchboard so easily. You weren’t hacking them. You were logging in.”

Nora nodded. “By the way, give this to Tinker Tom. I downloaded all the little things that they were working on in that lab,” Nora handed Deacon her holotape.

Desdemona asked Nora, “Should we call you JADE SUN, now?”

“Oh, god no. Please don’t. There may be more security in a random code name, but ‘Whisper’ really means something. And frankly, as you can tell, there are some pretty awful memories tied up in JADE SUN.”

“So, Miss McAllister, you see you really have no choice.”

“He was trying to blackmail Susan,” Nora protested.

“Ahh. But had he actually done so yet, Miss McAllister?” The government agent raised one finger. “He had not,” the man said, answering his own question, “And while I am sure that you merely meant to deliver a…thorough…lesson, the fact remains, he is in a coma with significant brain damage. That you inflicted on him.”

“I had no intention for it to go that far…” started Nora.

The government agent shook his head curtly. “The fact remains that it DID get that far, Ms. McAllister. Now you have two choices. One, face charges of aggravated assault and attempted homicide raised to conspiracy to commit murder because of the morals component, or take my offer.
Serve your country admirably. Your test scores show that you would be extremely valuable to the organization I represent.”

“And if I fail in training?” asked Nora.

“I suggest that you do not, Ms. McAllister. It would be most…unfortunate…if that were to happen.”

Nora thought for a moment and then grabbed the paper in front of her, and signed it.

“Very good, Ms. McAllister. As soon as your second year of law school is done, you will be taken to the Farm for training.”

“The Farm?” asked Nora.

“A special location, much like Basic and Advanced Training for the Army. However, I doubt the Army has a course in how to seduce men AND women. But then, thanks to Susan, you don’t need that training, do you?” he replied, blandly.

Nora stood up suddenly, but the man simply wagged his finger, “Ah, ah, ah, Ms. McAllister. Temper. Between the information we could provide the Boston Police Department Vice Squad, or the Violent Crimes Office,” his voice turned hard, “We own you. Don’t get out of line and do exactly as you’re told.”

“Get used to hearing the term,” he looked down at his Pip-Boy, and then up at Nora, “JADE SUN. It’s your new designation. When someone addresses you as JADE SUN, you’ll know they have the highest levels of clearance. You will obey their orders as if your life depends on it. Because I assure you, it does.”

Desdemona said, “If you would please call Dr. Carrington over, Deacon, we need to have a conference.”

Nick, Piper, and Nora went into a corner in the meantime. Nora looked at Piper and Nick, “I still can’t believe you don’t hate me,” she said.

Nick shook his head. “Let me,” he said to Piper. “Nora, you’re an incredible woman; fast, smart, as skilled as the DIA can make you. But I’ve been in both worlds. Both before and after the Great War. What you considered a grim war zone is Piper’s everyday life. It’s my everyday life. She has different standards. We all do. It’s to your credit that you don’t.”

Piper nodded, “I’d heard that people were nicer before the war. I never thought I’d see it first hand. But your training, the part of your life you call your ‘evil’ self? I don’t think you’d have survived long enough to make it to me without those skills, and that attitude. And now that you’ve actually been around long enough to understand what’s going on? It’s why we took down that Courser when all those Gunners died.”

“And it’s NOT a criticism, Nora,” Nick said, “You need those skills, and yes, that ruthlessness, in order to take the fight to the Institute and win. Because we know something they can’t know.”

Nora nodded. “Who I really am. None of those records would have made it to Vault-Tec. I guarantee that. The Institute must, has to believe that I’m just a lawyer. A mother seeking her son.”

Nick nodded. “Exactly. They have no idea what you’re really capable of. You’re literally the Joker in the deck.”
Desdemona was walking up with man in a lab coat. Nora vaguely recalled him as one of the crowd at her unmasking.

“Agent Whisper,” he said, a faint note of disapproval in his voice.

Nora nodded, “I take it from the subtext of your tone that you are not happy about that,” she said.

Dez looked surprised and Carrington cleared his throat. “Without knowing anything about you Dez has invited you to join HQ,” he said. He nodded at Dez. “It would have been nice if she’d consulted with her second in command, but what’s done is done.”

Dez interrupted, “You have no idea how wrong you are if you think she’s a liability. Not,” she added, “That I really had any way of knowing that when I invited her, mind you. Whisper, may we share with the good doctor?”

Nora nodded. “PAM, please authorize Carrington, Stanley, to access JADE SUN clearance items to include service record and test scores, but NOT mission details or specifics.” She turned to Carrington. “Need to know. You don’t need to. I’m sure you understand.”

He nodded, confused. Somewhere along the line the situation had spiraled completely out of his control. Dez looked a little amused at his expression. Carrington went into a corner to consult with PAM, while Dez spoke with Nora.

“It’s unfortunate so many people heard PAM,” she said. “I have Deacon impressing the need for secrecy on everyone in HQ…it’s too much to expect that the ones who were awake not say anything to the ones who weren’t when the excitement started, but we should be able to keep the news inside HQ. Because the last thing we need is for the Institute…”

“To get any notion of who I really am,” finished Nora. “We were just having a discussion on that very issue.”

Dez nodded, “Good. We’re thinking along the same lines. So here’s the deal. Carrington is still my second in command, based on his time with us, if nothing else. But you, Whisper, are now not just a heavy, but my advisor on everything we’re doing. I can’t afford any more Switchboards. I’m betting you can help. First off, we lost a LOT of safehouses during the Switchboard strike…”

“They were simultaneous?” Nora asked.

Dez nodded, “As near as we can tell.”

Oh shit. I really do NOT want to start my time with these people precipitating a mole hunt, and stirring up paranoia. Is there any other explanation? I really hope so.

“OK,” Nora said. “And what do the minders say?”

“‘Minders’?” asked Dez.

Nora suppressed the eyeroll. “Someone from HQ whose job it is to cycle through a set number of safehouses every time period…week, month, whatever makes operational sense…making sure everything works and they remain secure. Minders, lamplighters, whatever…”

“Oh!” Dez said, “You mean our runners. Yes, they check the dead drops for information from the safehouses. There’s been nothing. We’ve confirmed all the quiet ones have been hit, except for Augusta. That one is still uncertain”
Nora nodded. “When did proof of life markers end?”

“What do you mean?” Dez asked.

“Proof of life markers. Unique markers in a pre-arranged place. One sign means, ‘Everything’s OK’ and another means, ‘I have problems’. Proof of life. When they stop, it usually means enemy action. You either act or cut the asset loose and pull in your feelers,” said Nora.

“We don’t have anything like that,” Dez said.

“You’ll need to make some up for any remaining safehouses. And agents. And tourists. And they ALL have to be different. No more marking things the same way every time,” Nora said. “You can keep some ‘Railsign’, like caches and danger signs and so forth. But stop marking dead drops the same damn way every time.”

“Done. We can have PAM generate unique signs for each need,” said Dez.

“Then I need to know if any safehouses WEREN’T hit, and all the details surrounding them,” said Nora. “After that, I need to know what traffic a safehouse has.”

“Then we’re in luck,” interrupted Carrington, who’d finished with PAM and caught the back end of the conversation. “I have a message that Old Man Stockton at Bunker Hill has put something in one of his dead drops. Based on past behavior, he wants HQ to take care of something he can’t manage on his own…”

Dez broke Carrington off. “Stockton is almost always the first stop for a synth that we’ve contacted. He then routes them from Bunker Hill to an appropriate safehouse, so he’s frequently requesting assistance just by virtue of who and where he is, at the start of the synth pipeline.”

“Wait. Are you telling me that most of the safehouses got hit, and headquarters got hit. They got hit simultaneously, but your highest traffic and information node was UNTOUCHED?” exclaimed Nora.

“Now that you say it like that…” started Carrington.

Nora looked at them both. “I need to see this for myself. Now. We can use whatever mission this Stockton has as a cover, but I need to see what’s going on there with my own eyes.”

“Why?” asked Carrington.

“Because Stockton won’t know I’m evaluating him if he thinks I’m just there to help him. And the fact that Bunker Hill wasn’t hit strongly suggests the mole is there, not here,” Nora answered.

“You suspect a mole?” asked Dez.

“Yep. I wasn’t looking forward to raising that subject with you about HQ people, but it’s been a while since you relocated here and yet you haven’t been hit again. Whereas Bunker Hill was never hit. Which argues that the mole isn’t here. If the mole was at HQ originally, and they hit HQ, why wouldn’t they hit HQ again and again until you were wiped out? But if the mole is in Bunker Hill and it WASN’T hit, they wouldn’t have any reason to hit it now. In fact they’d want to keep it active for damage assessment.”

Everyone except Deacon and Carrington looked a little lost at the double and triple thinking going on. Those two were nodding. Their minds moved in the same twisty little passages Nora’s lived in. “I assume that everyone who’s in HQ now was in HQ at the beginning, and there’s no one that’s no
longer in HQ that used to be?” asked Nora.

“With one exception,” replied Dez.

“OK, quarantine that person too. Mushroom them, and I’ll vet them next. Bunker Hill is still the best bet.” Nora said.

“Will do,” said Carrington, who had in the space of the conversation gone from visibly sceptical to supportive.

Nora continued, “As long as Stockton doesn’t know he’s being checked out we have a chance to find out who he is in the dark,” said Nora.

Dez and Carrington raised their eyebrows. Nora expanded, “Who you are in the dark…when you’re unobserved… is who you really are.”

Dez nodded. “OK, Whisper, go and find out.”

As Deacon, Piper, and Nick came over, Piper poked Nora’s arm. “Hey, Blue, you know that applies to you too right? For the last month or so, other than with Nick, you’ve been in the dark. And I have to say, who you are in the dark, Nora, is actually a pretty good person.”

Chapter End Notes

Did Nora volunteer, or was she drafted? Neither. She was threatened and blackmailed into signing away her life to protect a lover in law school, and to stay out of jail. Possibly Death Row… I have no idea what Pre-War America of Fallout would have as a maximum sentence for attempted homicide, but I could see a needle at the end of that process, easily.
You’re In A Maze Of Twisty Little Passages, All Very Slightly Different

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As they made their way through HQ, Deacon said, “We should use the back entrance. First, if we use the front too much we’ll blow this place and second, the back entrance is closer to Bunker Hill.”

Nora nodded. “Lead the way Deacon.”

The four of them made their way out a back door, then through some sewers and finally up a stair where a locked door greeted them. After feeding the Railroad passcode into it, it opened and they found themselves in a collapsed building. The door to the back entrance was deceptively hidden under wreckage so that you couldn’t even tell it was there until you were right next to it.

Nick turned to Nora, “I should head back to Diamond City. I’m not actually one of you guys and I might make your guy nervous…and the last thing you need is to wonder if he’s nervous because he’s guilty or because I’m there blowing his cover.”

Deacon shook his head, “You’re ‘one of us’ Nick, because we’re all about synths. Just because the Institute doesn’t mess with you doesn’t mean you’re not a synth. But you ARE right that Stockton might get jumpy with you around, so it’s probably best.”

Nick grinned his lopsided grin, and turned to Nora and said, “I’ll do some more follow-up on the Winter Case. Maybe we can close it out soon.”

And with that he gave a wave and headed southwest towards Diamond City. Nora, Piper and Deacon walked along the Charles on the Harborwalk until they got to the Charlestown Bridge. The Tobin Bridge span was high overhead, with large segments blasted out. They crossed the bridge and headed west along Memorial Drive. The dead drop was a mailbox. Nora lips thinned as she saw the standard railsign for a dead drop.

“This is what I’m talking about Deacon. How do we know The Opposition hasn’t ID’ed the marker and planted instructions for us to walk into a trap?” she asked.

“‘Opposition’?” Deacon said.

Nora snorted, “I’m back in the game an hour and I’m falling back on old habits. Back before the war, we never talked about the Chinese, especially Bureau 8, as anything but ‘The Opposition’. As if naming them summoned them. ‘The Institute’ I mean. How do we know that the Institute hasn’t read this piece of mail?”

“We don’t. It’s a risk we take,” he raised a finger, “I get that you’re showing us how it’s a risk we can manage better, but it’s still a risk.”

“Fair enough,” Nora said.

Piper interrupted. “How much were you holding back for fear I’d notice, Blue? My god, I think you’re moving faster, more smoothly, and admitting to noticing more. I can SEE a difference in you now.”

Nora thought for a sec. “Maybe I’m not trying to hide or I’m covering up my skills less than I have in the past. Maybe. But the rest of it is just you knowing, Thing. Now that you know I’m some kind of
combat monster, like a Courser, you just see it more clearly.”

Piper looked troubled for a moment, but let that last bit lie for now.

Deacon opened the mailbox and withdrew a holotape. When they listened to it on Nora’s Pip-Boy, it turned out that a route from Bunker Hill to Ticonderoga safehouse had been compromised by a raider base smack on the route. A synth needed escort along the route while they found a new, relatively Raider free routing.

“Is this often a problem?” asked Nora.

Deacon shrugged. “It’s a thing, yeah. We could probably stand to do a little more in the way of civic improvements by wiping out Raider camps. Because we probably ought to be focusing on more than just synths. But according to Carrington AND Dez, humans have their own organizations and we’re all the synths have, so we only worry about synths.”

Nora shook her head, “That’s short sighted. You help people, they become allies. Allies multiply your capabilities.”

Piper interrupted, “This is what Nick and I are trying to get you to see, Blue. You want to do good things for folks out here.”

Nora shrugged, “So that I can get more out of them.”

Piper stood hands on hips, “‘Enlightened Self Interest’ is still enlightened, Nora!”

“Maybe,” replied Nora.

“Rrrgh!” Piper threw her hands in the air. “You are the most stubborn woman I’ve ever known, and I include myself in that list.”

“You love me for it,” Nora said.

“I love you because you are always trying to make the world better for more than just yourself, Blue. I love you DESPITE that stubborn self-loathing thing you have going on.”

Deacon gently cleared his throat, “I sense that the two of you aren’t going to resolve this anytime soon, so if I could direct your attention to the matter at hand? We need to check in with Stockton.”

Nora and Piper both nodded, and then went back to Washington Street and headed up Bunker Hill, towards the Monument. There was a shanty town built up around it, but the people there had carefully built an inner wall surrounding the settlement and then a cleared zone around the wall with barricades cutting off most access to the area around them.

“Someone has trust issues,” Piper noted.

“Justifiably,” replied Deacon.

“Point,” said Piper.

They went in, where a woman, who introduced herself as Kessler, said, “I see you’re back, Ms. Wright. Welcome. And your two friends?”

Piper started to speak, when Nora interrupted her and said, “Nora Greene and Shane Black of Diamond City.”
Kessler nodded, “Well if Ms. Wright can vouch for you, then you’re welcome.”

Nora nodded and they all went past the statue of William Prescott and into the lodge next to the monument, where Stockton and another trader had set up shop. Nora leaned over and whispered, “I’ll take lead guys. Keep your eyes open for everything. We’ll compare notes after.”

As she walked up to Stockton, he glanced over them and said, “Welcome my friend. Might I ask, do you have a Geiger counter?”

Nora shrugged and said, “I’m sorry but mine is in the shop.”

Stockton looked her over, as Piper wandered all about the place and Deacon was watching for any eavesdroppers. He looked dubious, “You? I was expecting someone a bit more armed. You’re with our mutual friends, yes?”

Nora suppressed her eyeroll, “Let’s say I am.”

He seemed awfully concerned about me, but let’s see how this plays out.

He nodded, “Of course. You’ve just joined haven’t you? All you need to know is this is the first stop for all our new packages. So maintaining proper security and preventing unnecessary delay is crucial.”

Nora shrugged and said, “A trader always has to move his merchandise efficiently.”

Deacon chimed in, “And we’re all about making good trade routes.”

Stockton agreed, saying, “Exactly. My current package has been in my possession far too long. I’m supposed to deliver the package someplace nearby. But raiders have complicated matters. So if you could…?”

Nora finished the thought, “Facilitate delivery. I can do that.”

Stockton leaned in, “We’re supposed to make the delivery at night. So once you clear out the undesirables, we’ll meet after sunset.”

Nora nodded and Piper, Deacon, and Nora independently, wandered out the gate. After they regrouped, and as they walked towards the rendezvous point, a church in Charlestown, Nora quizzed Deacon about safehouses and Stockton. There were four safehouses left; Dayton, Griswold, Stanwix, and Ticonderoga. Of those, most…Griswold, Dayton, and Stanwix…were “final stops” on the way out of the Commonwealth, after a synth’s identity had been cleaned. And since the Institute hadn’t hit the cleaner, who was, in a closely guarded secret, Dr. Amari at the Memory Den, there was additional evidence that the leak was at Bunker Hill.

“Wait, what?” said Piper at that last.

“I know it sounds weird, but follow my logic,” said Nora. “We can assume that they didn’t hit the Memory Den because they didn’t know what it does for The Railroad. If they didn’t hit the Memory Den, which is the next stop after the houses they DID hit, then we know that they didn’t follow synths down the chain, so of course they wouldn’t THEN successfully follow synths from the Memory Den to Griswold or Stanwix or Dayton. If the mole were at HQ we can assume they’d know the WHOLE chain; Den, Stanwix, Dayton, and Griswold included. But they were not hit, therefore the mole is not at HQ. If the mole’s not at HQ and HQ immediately upstream and the Safehouses immediately downstream of Bunker Hill were hit, but Bunker Hill wasn’t hit, that argues that Bunker Hill is the leak.”
“My head hurts, Blue.”

Nora smiled. “Now you’re starting to understand the difference between being James Bond and being Jane Bond. Jane lives in a world of secrets, betrayal, mistrust, and paranoia. James lives in a world of martinis.”

Deacon nodded. Piper looked a bit sad when she said, “You guys just think differently, don’t you.”

“So the only safehouse immediately downstream of Bunker Hill that wasn’t hit was Ticonderoga,” said Deacon. “I know the caretaker at Ticon, and I don’t think he’d betray us, but you never really know.”

“For what it’s worth, my money’s on Stockton,” said Nora, “So let’s stay alert for possible ambushes, and if the force at the church is overwhelming or god forbid a Courser, we break contact and regroup at my house in Sanctuary until we’re SURE we’re not blowing HQ.”

“Well we should find out soon. This is the first op he’s called since Switchboard. We put a moratorium on movement after we got hit, and just lifted it,” said Deacon.

“This is a perfect test then,” observed Nora.

“Except the part where we’re bait for The Institute,” said Piper.

“Details, details,” said Deacon.

As they made their way closer to the church they all got quiet. When they could see the church they halted and Deacon and Nora observed it for a bit through their scopes.

“I see three, you?” said Deacon.

“Yep, two men, one woman?”

Deacon lowered his rifle, “Uh-huh. Shall we move in closer?”

Nora nodded and the three crept stealthily to the church, alert to the possibility of ambush the whole time. But nothing happened. When they peered in there were three Raiders, who were easily, and simultaneously, killed by Nora and her two friends.

Then they waited. There were a few undamaged pews they could sit in, and the windows were not blocked, so at least one of them kept watch continually. While they peered out windows, Nora quizzed Deacon on the remaining “pre-cleaning” safe house; Ticonderoga. It had been recently established when the Institute strike happened.

“So they hadn’t taken in any synths between moving and the attack?” asked Nora.

“No, they’d taken a couple,” Deacon answered.

_Huh. That doesn’t make any sense…_”

“Deacon, does Stockton work with anybody at Bunker Hill?” Nora asked.

“Work with? No. He runs a batch of caravans though. They move all through the Commonwealth.”

“Who?” Nora asked a bit sharply.

“He’s got four; Doc Weathers, Lucas Miller, Trashcan Carla, and Cricket,” said Deacon.
“Do they come to Bunker Hill routinely?” Nora asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“I have a suspicion, but I want to run this thread to ground first,” Nora said. “People miss too much when they jump to conclusions.”

At that moment, Piper, who was looking north towards the Charles, called out, “Here comes Stockton.”

Nora and Deacon moved to cover the door and his approach, more as a formality than out of any expectation of an attack at this point.

As he walked up, Stockton smiled, “Everything looks clear. This is H2-22. H2, here’s the person I talked to you about.”

Nora nodded. “I met a synth named K1-98 once, but she preferred Jenny. Do you have any preferences, H2?”

He shook his head, “Why? H2-22 is my designation.”

Stockton shook his head. He said, with more than some venom, “The Institute doesn’t bother to name its property. Synths are just numbers and letters to them. And they encourage that attitude in the synths.” He turned to a lamp in the window, “I'll fire up the signal. Time for me to go. Keep H2 safe. Someone will be here shortly.”

And with that, he left. Nora went to the window, but Stockton went quite directly down the road and out of sight back towards Bunker Hill.

_Hmmm. I’ll let Deacon and Piper lead. I’m going to look out for a tail…_

“Deacon, does Stockton always escort synths to the RV point?” she asked.

He nodded. “Pretty much. Seems to be a point with him for some reason. Why?”

“Because either he’s a REALLY good actor…or he genuinely hates the Institute. Not exactly a mole’s profile. I suppose he could be putting on an act to deflect suspicion, but I have a feeling…”

“Again, what?” Deacon asked.

Nora shook her head. “Need more data. First let’s get H2 moved to the next stop, then we can reassess.”

At that moment, a man walked in. Nora pointed her pistol at him, and he raised his hands, “Deacon my man…”

Nora interrupted. “Do you have a Geiger counter?”

The man smiled, “Right you are. ‘Mine is in the shop.’ Deacon, long time, same old face! What gives man?”

Deacon shook his head, “Who has time lately? Been too busy running around, putting out fires.”

H2-22 said, “Are you going to take me to a safe place?”

Nora looked over at Piper at the pathetic tone in H2’s voice. She’d never been more certain that she was needed, and that she could do something good in the process. Piper looked back, and then smiled and said, “See?”

“Maybe,” said Nora.

“There’s a lot of ‘yes’ in that ‘maybe’ Blue,” Piper shot back.

“Maybe.”

Piper just rolled her eyes.

High Rise laid out the problem. About halfway from the church to the safehouse, there was a shopping mall, Monsignor Plaza, that was now infested with Raiders. He needed help in escorting H2 through that part. Nora nodded, and the little group moved out.

Deacon and Piper led the way, and Nora used every trick in the book, including dropping a magazine, then turning around to pick it up. There was nothing.

When the inevitable occurred and the raiders opened up on the group from a makeshift bunker with a turret, the group was ready. Deacon shot out the turret from long range, and Piper and High Rise peppered the opening with bullets, while Nora rolled up and dropped a grenade into the opening. There was cursing, a blast and then silence.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. When they arrived High Rise thanked them and invited them in for a rest. Nora looked him over, “Do many agents visit the safehouse?” she asked.

He nodded, “Sure, any time you need to hole up for a few. Happens all the time.”

Nora nodded, thoughtful. They made their excuses and headed back for HQ.

“BOTTLEcap for your thoughts, sweetie,” said Piper.

“OK. First, Deacon, how often are Stockton’s caravan people in Bunker Hill?” Nora asked.

“Once a week, and they don’t overlap, so, four out of seven,” he answered.

Nora nodded. “Right. I think that’s it. I don’t think the leak is Stockton. I think it’s one of his caravan people.”

Nora continued, “First, Stockton really hates the Institute. He could be acting, and my bullshit-meter may be on the fritz, so that’s just one piece of evidence.” Nora ticked off the point on her hand.

She raised another finger, “Second, no one followed us. I know that for certain. If Ticonderoga has been operating this long, with agents in and out, and with Stockton going halfway for every synth? If it were him, it would have been hit by now. Another piece of evidence.”

She raised her third finger, “Finally, there were only a few synths that moved into Ticonderoga between their move and the Institute strike. I think they weren’t hit because, by a 6 in 7 chance, the leak wasn’t at Bunker Hill the day those few synths were moved and the Institute didn’t know where they were.”

Piper nodded then asked, “So how do we figure out who the leak actually is?”
“Oh that part is simple, honey. We give each of them a different fake story, or some chickenfeed, and see which piece the Institute bites on. That’ll tell us who to isolate,” Nora said.

Deacon asked, “Chickenfeed?”

Nora smiled, “So you guys missed that one, huh? ‘Chickenfeed’ is some kind of low level, marginal value but real intelligence that you use as bait in something like this, or in feeding disinformation to the Opposition…Institute…so they don’t know you know about or have turned one of theirs.”

Piper shook her head. “Your head is full of twists and turns, Blue. “

“I’m a maze of twisty little passages, all alike, huh?” Nora said grinning.

“Well, slightly different passages, I guess,” Piper said.

Nora looked surprised, “I guess so. Good point, Thing.”

Chapter End Notes

The title comes from Zork. I'm a nerd.

The Chinese Ministry of State Security has 17 bureaus. Bureau 8 is Counter-Intelligence; "Responsible for monitoring, investigating, and potentially detaining foreigners suspected of counterintelligence activities. This Bureau is reported to primarily investigate diplomats, businessmen, and reporters."

Ironically, I, personally have been to China on business and got to play tourist at both Tiananmen Square (the Forbidden Palace is at one end) and the Summer Palace in Beijing. I have been where Nora would very much like never to go...
When they got back to HQ, Nora called Dez, Carrington, and PAM over to join them. They went into the records room and shut the door, and Dez looked at Nora expectantly.

Nora smiled and said, “I think we can rule out anyone at HQ. We should still keep that one guy or gal…”

“Guy,” interrupted Carrington.

Nora nodded, “That one guy isolated, because I can’t be 100% yet, but I’m pretty sure that the leak is one of Stockton’s caravan traders. For personal reasons, I’d love for it to be Trashcan Carla, but we’re not gonna rely on my gut. We’re going to drop a rumor that we’re bringing in K1-98, aka Jenny, in.”

Nora raised a finger, “Since they already dispatched one Courser, our chip-donor, to get her back, and since they’ll assume she knows how that Courser got killed, now they’re going to want her back even more. So we tell each of the caravaners, well…let them overhear really, that she’s holed up but each gets a different spot. Then we put a watcher on all four spots and see which one gets hit.”

Nora’s grin turned positively feral. She said, “Then we’ll know exactly who the leak is.”

Dez nodded. “Then we plug the leak.”

Nora shook her head, “No. Under NO circumstances do we kill that leak. First, we would finally know where the leak is and if we kill them, the Institute will just try and find a way to penetrate that we DON’T know about. But second, and much more important, since we know who the leak IS we can seriously screw with The Institute; feed them disinformation, chickenfeed, and generally encourage a phenomenal number of wild goose chases.”

Carrington said, “Chickenfeed?”

Deacon smiled, “I’ll bring you up to speed on some spy lingo we haven’t caught up on later.”

Nora said, “At any rate, we lay the trap, ID the leak, and then make it work for us. Right? PAM, create the four stories and make sure we plant them properly, and get watchers in place. It’s going to take at least four days to fully plant all the stories, but we have to be set up for observation before we plant anything.”

Dez nodded. “Do it PAM.”

Carrington cleared his throat. “There is the matter of Augusta. Has it been hit, when did it get hit, did anyone survive, did the synths there manage to escape, and if so, where are they?”

Nora nodded as he ticked off his list. “I didn’t think it would turn out that Crier and I would head home and have tea and crumpets while we waited. We’ll go stick our noses in there.”
“Are you going to be safe?” asked Dez. “I don’t want to lose your expertise to an Institute Courser.”

“I’ll be fine. If anything seems off, I’ll abort and get the hell out. Plus, as far as I can tell, only Glory might be able to give me a run for my money,” said Nora.

Piper looked dubious, “You sure about that Blue?”

Nora nodded. “About this? Yes. I know what I can do.”

“I’m gonna stick with her too, boss,” said Deacon.

Dez nodded, “Keep her safe, Deacon. We can’t afford to lose her now. And on that note, Tom needs to see you all.”

They walked back into the main room of HQ, and found Tom testing a new gun. Or more accurately, Tom was standing well-clear of the agent testing the new gun. Which turned out to be a good thing when the weapon’s recoil threw the agent back 4 feet into the pile of mattresses Tom had thoughtfully provided.

When he saw Nora, his face lit up. “Hey Whisper. That download you found for me at Switchboard had some seriously sweet goodies. But the best from where you’re standing? Ballistic Polymer Weave. It’s an underlayer I can put into almost any outfit. Makes a T-Shirt as good as a bunch of Combat Armor. And the best part is no one will know you’re wearing it!”

By the end of his speech he was practically vibrating with glee.

Nora grinned. “It can go into anything? Then in that case, let get you my pants and shirts and Piper’s pants and shirts. We’ll bring a batch into you for conversion, but let’s start with these,” and she gestured at their outfits.

They borrowed some clothes from Tom that he had already converted, and within a couple hours, their regular outfits were armored up. Once they were back on, Nora looked at Tom, impressed.

“I can’t even tell there’s been any change. This really acts as armor?” she asked.

Tom nodded, “But remember, you’re not bulletproof. Just highly resistant.”

“Got it,” Nora said. “It’s still better than the last two times I was shot.”

“Two times?” said Piper, “When was the other time?”

“Back in 2076, in Alaska. Through and through laser bolt in the shoulder,” Nora said. “There’s no scar, because Nate was jabbing me with a Stimpack whenever I so much as slowed down walking.”

“That was when you met your husband?” Piper asked.

“Well no, I met him when we were First Graders. That was when I ran into him as an adult. In Alaska. When my mission had been blown and I had to literally run for my life,” said Nora.

“So the Chinese shot you?”

“No, the Americans shot me. Because as far as they could tell, they were getting attacked by a squad of Chinese infantry with a woman leading the charge.”

“Care to elaborate?” asked Piper.
“Maybe another time honey,” replied Nora.

“It sounds like a long story anyway,” grumped Piper.

Tom watched the back and forth, and then said, “Whatever. Just remember to get me your other clothing. It’ll be awesome.”

Deacon selected a couple outfits from Tom’s collection for changing into if he needed a disguise. Then Piper and Nora went into the back room and collapsed onto one of the mattresses provided.

As Nora snuggled back into Piper, the latter couldn’t hold back any longer. “Why can’t you tell me about that time you got shot anyway?” she asked.

Nora sighed. “Because I’m not proud of what happened next. The DIA wanted to send me back to Alaska after more facial surgery. I couldn’t stand the thought of heading back. I’d just…killed…that little girl, and then a Chinese General who caught me transmitting. I had probably gotten careless. Maybe I wanted to get caught and executed, I don’t know.”

At that Piper cuddled her fiancé closer, and Nora continued, “I knew, just knew, there was no way they were done using me. But there was a loophole. American society was really traditional. We’ve had those talks.”

Piper nodded against the back of Nora’s head, and said, “Gotcha, Blue. Go on.”

“One of the things that I hoped they’d be traditional about was abortion. I seduced Nate…well, I got him hammered…and we had sex in the park. I made sure he didn’t have any condoms, I gave him head to get him super-horny, and I made sure it was a public place so he had no chance to go looking for a rubber,” Nora said.

“Wow.” Piper shifted behind Nora, “How’d you make sure he didn’t have any condoms?”

“I picked his pocket and threw them in the trash,” Nora replied.

“Oh. What do you mean ‘you hoped’?”

Nora held very still for a second. “Well, they’d proven really flexible about bisexuality because there were some high value targets within Chinese high command that were lesbians. They needed a woman who could get close enough to steal secrets or to assassinate someone, even a lesbian. I was their bisexual hitwoman.”

Piper hugged Nora closer, “It’s OK Blue. Nobody blames you. Nobody here thinks worse of you, OK?”

Nora shook her head, “Except me. I think worse of me.”

“Oh Blue,” and Piper kissed the back of Nora’s neck, “But were they more traditional?”

“Turns out, yes. When I got pregnant with Shaun, I made damn sure I got tested as soon as possible. And I got lucky. They eventually decided that they wouldn’t send me back. I mean it’s not like it was a huge risk for me. If I didn’t get pregnant, I was going back to China. If I did get pregnant and they made me have abortion, I was going back to China. But If I got pregnant and they didn’t make me have an abortion, I was out. Free. It wasn’t any kind of ‘gamble’ at all,” Nora paused. “What I didn’t count on was falling hopelessly in love with Shaun.”

“I can see that,” said Piper.
“So I was ‘inactivated’ to the Reserves, as you heard, and Nate was at the end of his term, and things were going well for the US. Anchorage was liberated, and the invasion of China was finally advancing. So they let him out. And he looked me up. He tried to propose. I yelled at him, and threw him out. He came back. I told him exactly why I was pregnant. That I’d used him. I threw him out again,” Nora shook her head. “He came back. It was obvious that he wasn’t giving up. And, candidly, the sex hadn’t been bad. He proposed. Again. I gave in.”

“Did you love him, Blue?” asked Piper.

“I loved him but I wasn’t IN love with him, like I am with you. Now that we’re together, I can see where I shortchanged poor Nate. He should have found someone to love him the way I love you. But he wasn’t going to go away, and I did love him, in my own way at the time.”

Piper snuggled in. “That’s a good answer. I guess I can’t be jealous. And he did keep you alive. And then you came to me.”

Nora nodded. “At any rate, I finished my law degree, Nate got a job at the Museum of Freedom and we moved into Sanctuary Hills. Right under a Vault-Tec Vault. And then we pushed the Chinese into a corner that they couldn’t see a way out of, and they did the unthinkable.”

Nora turned to Piper, “And that’s the full history lesson.”

Piper smiled, “Well, it’s the short version. I expect to get the long version eventually, but I agree that there are more important things to do than dot every i and cross every t.”

The next morning, Nora, Piper, and Deacon left for the Augusta dead drops looking for clues.
Georgia On My Mind

Chapter Summary

Nora finally reaches a true breaking point....

The three of them made their way to a dead drop in the West End. The holotape was brief and to the point, “Augusta is still dark. Location enclosed. Exercise extreme caution.”

Augusta, as it turned out, was in Kendall Hospital in Cambridge. Nora sighed.

*I was hoping to avoid having to go very deep into Cambridge. Nuts.*

“I guess the ‘best’ way to get there is to head straight north from CIT,” said Piper, looking over Nora’s shoulder at the Pip-Boy map and making air quotes with her fingers.

Nora nodded. “Let’s keep our eyes peeled. Ferals are everywhere in that area.”

That turned out to be the understatement of the year. It took them 2 hours of careful movement to go the 1 mile from CIT to the hospital. Every hundred yards or so, there was another feral nest, and after each was wiped out, the group had to wait, every sense alert, to see if a new batch of ghouls were going to pop up.

By the time they got to the actual entrance to the hospital Nora was tired, cross, and on edge. None of which was improved when it turned out the main entrance was blocked and they had to make their way through several mutated mosquito nests to the emergency entrance.

“If they ARE alive in there, they’re about to be in trouble, and if they have been wiped out, whoever did the wiping is going to be in really deep trouble,” Nora gritted out between clenched teeth.

So when they entered the facility and heard the familiar sounds of a gang of Raiders; arguing, comments about drugs, and the occasional smack of a fistfight, it was actually something of a relief to Nora that she’d be able to vent her irritation on a suitable target.

There was a scent on the air that Nora would have preferred not to think about, but she readily identified as burning flesh. They went around a corner and found the Emergency Department reception desk walled off, and a Raider lounging by the counter.

Nora’s first shot took him in the side of the head and he collapsed soundlessly, which allowed her to clear the supply room behind the counter, where another raider was cooking chems. After he went down, the group methodically worked its way around the perimeter of the waiting room. They couldn’t go straight down the middle because of the pyre in the middle of the room, where Nora could make out bodies, their limbs twisted by tightened tendons, in the fire. It was the source of the smell, and Piper gagged behind her.

Nora patted her fiancé’s arm, and gave her sympathetic look, but still put a finger to her lips. They could hear a woman above them, bitching about guard duty and about cleaning up the bodies. Piper looked pale but nodded.

Piper got another lesson in a more “uninhibited” Nora when they reached a sleeping Raider in the
Emergency Room Gift Shop. Nora slipped a utility knife from a sheath at her waist, and pouncing
suddenly, covered the Raider’s mouth and slit his throat. As the man spasmed under her, Nora held
his head so the blood splashed away from her and kept him from making any noise. When she was
satisfied he was dead, she wiped the knife on his shirt and resheathed it.

Piper was looking at her, eyes wide. Nora looked back levelly, and whispered, “I have no intention
of having someone sneak up on me from behind, shooting him isn’t any more merciful, and much
likelier to result in noise.”

They made their way from there up a set of stairs, and to the raider on the second floor that they’d
been listening to the entire time. She was lounging in the lab, but outside was a laundry hamper full
of bodies. They didn’t seem to be Raiders, and most had died from laser wounds.

The Raider came out of the lab just as Nora was inspecting in the hamper. Piper’s shot took her in
her chest, followed by a second shot that missed as the Raider collapsed backwards, dead. Nora gave
Piper a grateful look as they waited to hear if anyone had noticed. The room was silent, but for the
crackle of the flames.

Nora then quickly cleared the lab, and gestured Deacon and Piper to look at the two synths that had
been gunned down by the Raiders. In low tones, Nora said, “I think maybe the Institute hit Augusta
and then the leave behind guards got taken out by Raiders, who’ve occupied the hospital.”

Piper nodded, “Sounds plausible, Blue.”

Deacon agreed, “Makes sense to me, boss.”

They broke up and thoroughly tossed the area looking for any further clues about what had
happened. There was nothing further. Nora sighed.

“So, I don’t think that, ‘We got there, found Raiders, a bunch of dead Railroad people with laser
burns, and dead synths with pipe gun damage so we’re satisfied the Institute hit Augusta and the
leave behinds from The Institute were offed by Raiders who set up camp,’ is in any way a complete
report,” she said.

“I wouldn’t end a story that way, Blue, that’s for certain,” Piper answered.

Nora gestured to the way forward, an elevator that was still working. They piled in and Nora pressed
the only button that was working, the fifth floor button. As they rode, they all reloaded their weapons
and got set. Thankfully the elevator arrival opened on an empty room.

The three entered a hall, where Nora heard the telltale whir of a turret spinning up, swung right…the
only direction she could turn…and destroyed the turret before it started shooting. Then down a ramp,
and around a corner where they saw a grisly sight; a person impaled on a hook, their decapitated
head pinned to their hands hanging in a corner next to a set of double doors.

Nora shook her head and moved past the warning/disease vector the Raiders had left and listened
intently. On the other side there were definitely multiple Raiders, so she cracked the door slightly and
peered through. On the far side of the chamber was a Raider carrying a missile launcher. In the
middle of the chamber there was a distinct LACK of middle, as the floor had collapsed. To the right
was a walkway around the perimeter, occupied by another Raider. And there were more out of her
sight, as she heard several more talking.

So missile boy first, obviously, followed by that guy on the walkway. Then I move into the shadows
beyond where victim number two is currently leaning against the wall. Right.
Nora opened the door further and her rifle came up and she quickly and, thanks to her suppressor, quietly dropped him. Then she swung right, and dropped the other Raider who, having seen his compatriot slump, had suddenly straightened. Fortunately, the rifle shot propelled that Raider into the shadows beyond.

Nora, Deacon, and Piper moved into those shadows themselves. To their right was a ramp down to another partial floor, and the central part of the room was a five story drop into the basement. Along the walls were bits of original floor, and a fairly complete set of shanties ringing the central well offering living quarters.

Also to Nora’s right was a Raider and his dog, and she hastily slung her rifle and drew her pistol for the short range engagement. As she was dropping both of them before they could figure out where she and her friends were, a woman two stories down, and across the central chasm snapped a shot in their direction, and Piper returned fire.

The woman in question ducked a little too energetically, perhaps high on something, lost her footing and fell the three stories to the basement floor. Nora looked down. The woman’s leg was twisted unnaturally, clearly broken, but that didn’t explain the raw terror on the woman’s face as she tried to scrabble on hands and one knee to a cage that had dropped to the middle of the floor.

The woman looked to her right as she dragged herself towards the center, and she shrieked in panic. From one large hallway in the basement a juvenile Deathclaw was charging towards the woman. Nora unslung her rifle, aimed, and shot the Deathclaw several times. It wasn’t enough.

The Deathclaw reached the woman, and grabbing her by her bad leg pulled her in close where its other foreclaw raked at her, gutting her from collarbone to hip. Her screaming reached a crescendo and then abruptly cut off as the Deathclaw’s jaws closed around her head.

Nora heard the other Raiders jeering at their erstwhile compatriot for a brief moment, until, as if seeing herself from the outside, she began shooting them all. Raider after Raider would make a mistake, and Nora and her friends were waiting, shooting them the moment the smallest part of their body was exposed to one of them.

*What in the fuck is WRONG with these people? What could be so…broken…in them that this is amusing? That they cultivated a MONSTER for the sheer demonic thrill of feeding it victims? I’m not entirely sure they’re even human anymore.*

The Deathclaw was finishing eating its victim when Nora turned her attention to it. The steel jacketed bullets pierced its hide better than 10mm pistol rounds, and the semi-automatic action allowed her to empty the clip into the creature in the space of seconds, finishing off the job she’d tried to do before.

As the Deathclaw’s final pained roars died down, silence fell but for the labored breathing of Nora, Piper, and Deacon. For once, even the ever sardonic Deacon had no sarcastic remarks at hand. They just looked at each other in mutual shock and horror.

Two floors down was a room with radio equipment in it. The three started their search there and shortly, they found a holotape kicked under a pile of garbage. Nora slotted it in her Pip-Boy, and they all listened, “We are under attack. Repeat. We are- My God. Listen, Augusta is not going to make it. They knew exactly where we were. Tell-,” there was a sizzle of laser fire and the tape ended.

Nora pocketed the tape. She looked at the other two, “Let’s get the fuck out of here.” And she turned and retraced their steps.
They left the hospital and then left Central Cambridge by the route they’d come in. Nora would almost have welcomed the cleanliness of a simple feral attack, but none showed themselves. A short while later, or a subjective eternity to Nora, they arrived back at Headquarters.

As the three trudged down the steps, Desdemona walked up, “What’s the status of Augusta?”

As Nora looked up at her, Dez took a step back, shocked. Nora chucked the holotape at Dez.

“A Augusta got hit. By the Institute. The mole must have given the safehouse up because the Opposition knew exactly where to go,” Nora said.

“And the synths?” Dez started.

“The synths AND the humans there are all fucking dead. And eaten,” Nora snapped. “I need a shower.”

Nora brushed past Dez and walked off, sat down, and held her head in her hands, staring down at her feet.

“Eaten?” Dez asked.

Deacon touched Dez on the arm. He shook his head gently. “Boss? Just leave it lie, OK?”

Dez looked at Deacon in surprise. Evidently she saw something there because she just walked over, placed her hand on Nora’s shoulder and said, “Hey Whisper. Why don’t you and Crier take some time for yourselves, OK? I’ll send Deacon to Diamond City if something important pops up.”

Nora nodded, not looking up.

“Blue? You’re not going to break down on me are you?” Piper asked.

Nora looked up at Piper, “Like I have in the past? No. No I won’t. I felt guilty and responsible and overwhelmed then.”

She looked away, at something maybe only she could see, “No, this isn’t guilt, Piper,” and she looked back at her lover.

“I’m fucking furious.”
Several hours later, the pair walked into Diamond City. As they went down the stairs towards Publick Occurrences where Nat and Dogmeat were selling papers, Piper looked over at Nora, “Do you feel like talking about it yet, sweetheart?”

Nora nodded. “First, though, we say ‘Hi’ to Nat, and get Nick over. He’s going to want to hear about it all.”

As they walked up, Nat hopped off her stand, ran over and uncharacteristically hugged Piper. Piper looked over at Nora in surprise, and Nora just smiled.

“I bet it’s jealousy, Thing. She’s mad you spend so much time with me...oof,” as Nat hugged Nora too.

“What’s up, Nat?” asked Piper.

“I was worried, Piper! Mr. Valentine came back without you guys, and he wouldn’t say where you were but he said you were safe. But if you were safe, why wouldn’t he say where you were, and…”

Nora smiled, “Hey kiddo. Slow your roll, OK? Nick and Ellie will always tell you the truth…they just may not tell you the whole truth.”

“Ok,” said Nat.

“So I guess I get to stay huh?” said Nora.

Nat nodded. “You get to stay, Nora.” She was so serious about it that Nora and Piper couldn’t help smiling.

Piper went and got Nick, while Nora stored their gear. She waited on the couch, thinking, until the two of them got back and stood when they walked in.

“Nick,” she nodded.

“Nora,” he replied, “Piper here brought me up to speed on Augusta. And she tells you had a powerful…ahh…negative reaction to it all.”

Nora gave a short barking laugh. “That’s an award winning understatement. Yeah. I’m pissed. And about the only people on the planet I’m not at least a little angry with right now are you two, Nat, and Dogmeat.”

“Mum?” said Codsworth.

“And Codsworth. Although I’m still a little upset that you called Raiders ‘A little bit rough’. I’m choosing to see that as British Understatement.”

“I assure you, Mum, that I endeavor to never give offense,” Codsworth started.

“Don’t worry about it sweetie. I’m not actually mad at you,” Nora said.

“Getting back on track,” Nick said, “What’s the issue?”

“Fundamentally? I’m not satisfied with my options right now, and I want to discuss them with both
of you. And maybe vent a little.”

Piper nodded. “OK, Blue, shoot.”

“Where to start,” Nora said. “Let’s open with, ‘Why am I talking about all this now and not one of the other 4 times I’ve had a raving breakdown about this world’,” Nora said.

“I wouldn’t call them ‘raving’,” said Nick.

“Nevertheless,” Nora shook her head, “I’m guessing Piper told you about the Deathclaw at Augusta and how the Raiders acted?”

Nick nodded, and Nora continued, “I distinctly recall thinking, ‘I’m not sure they’re entirely human,’ and that in turn got me thinking, at least once I wasn’t fighting for my life.”

Nora began pacing, “No single group I’ve run across in the Commonwealth cares about much more than their parochial interests...and yes, Nick, I can HEAR you thinking that means I’m a better person than I think I am. Maybe you’re right, or maybe I’m trying to drag the world kicking and screaming to a place where the things I’ve done are totally beyond the pale. Maybe both.”

She stopped for a second, and looked at them both, “But what happened there just illustrates my problem,” and she began ticking off her fingers, “The Brotherhood doesn’t care what happened in that hospital because the sick twists in question were human. So they just don’t give a shit.”She raised the finger, “Doesn’t mean I think they approve of Raiders. I just can see that they don’t actually care to do anything about it.”

Nora raised a second finger, “The Institute, as near as I can tell, doesn’t care about any of us except insofar as we interfere with whatever the hell it is they’re actually up to with synths.”

She raised a third finger, “The Railroad doesn’t care about humans. They’re so focused on helping synths, they’ll walk right past a problem like those Raiders on the way to worrying about a few synths, most of whom were probably reclaimed. When we got back Dez asked me about the synths at Augusta. NOTHING about all those corpses that were fed to that…that THING in the basement so those assholes could have their entertainment, dropping people in and seeing what happened.”

She raised a fourth finger, “And the Minutemen…’my’ Minutemen, ARE actually a big problem for any synth. Most Commonwealth people would as soon shoot a synth as look at them and the Minutemen really are ‘The People’ in every meaningful way, including their bigotry. Does H2 deserve that? Does Jenny? No. They didn’t ask to be made, and they sure as shit didn’t REQUEST to be part of the Institute’s agenda. So where do ‘The People’ get off hunting them? And the worst part of THAT is that I am nominally in charge of the Minutemen, and I know…I KNOW…that the second I gave a hard and fast order to lay off the synths, I’d be out on my ass so fast I’d bounce.”

Nora ran down. She hung her head, “It just makes me so angry.”

Piper shot up from her seat. “Then use that anger, Blue! Dammit, DO something! You think every piece of the Commonwealth is lacking. Well news flash, sweetheart. I agree with you.”

Piper’s hands went to her hips and she leaned forward. “But now I know you’re big time spy. A secret agent. Oooh!” Her hands waved. Sarcastic jazz hands. “You CAN do something. Maybe you think it shouldn’t be sneaky and underhanded and maybe that’s the only way you can DO things, but goddammit, as much as I love you, I know you can do better than just bitch about it.”

Nora looked up. Piper wasn’t exactly angry, but for the first time in their relationship she sensed that she was both being judged and falling short. Not fatally so, just in the “I’m terribly disappointed in
you right now” sense.

“So what’ll be, big time secret agent woman? Are you going sit back on your ass and whine or are you going to do something to make this place change? Because I’m betting that you can be an agent of change…for all of us,” Piper wound down.

Nora hotly raised a finger to make a point, and then a thought occurred to her.

Who died and made me right all the time? Maybe Piper’s right. She probably is. She almost certainly is.

“You know what honey? You’re right. There’s got to be a way to square this. I can’t see how yet, but there has to be. And maybe I’m the right person to do it.”

Nick broke in. “I’m sure you’re the right person, and based on everything I’ve seen so far you’ll figure it out.”

But now Nick looked sheepish, as he continued, “I hate to bring it up, especially since you two are trying to save the world from itself, but I originally wanted to let you know that I finally found all of Eddie’s tapes. I had been hoping you guys might want to help me close out my case.”

Nora grinned crookedly. “Leaving aside that asking you to put a pin on a case that you have been chasing for 210 years would be a fool’s game, sometimes you need to do something else and let your subconscious work on a problem. This couldn’t hurt, and it might help.”

“So what’s the deal Nick?” Piper asked.

“I’ve been able to determine that Eddie’s hideout is under Andrew Station in Columbus Park. I have the tapes and I’m pretty sure what they mean. I’d like to head over and confront that bastard, and finally complete Winter’s End,” Nick said.

“And by confront you mean?” asked Nora.

“Kill.”
Nick played the tapes for Nora and Piper.

Piper laughed, “How hard is that? Every tape has exactly one number mentioned. I bet it’s a number pad lock.”

“You can see why they never figured it out though, right?” said Nick.

Piper shook her head. “Seems pretty dumb of ‘em to me.”

Nora nodded. “Actually, it makes sense. After 210 years the only thing we’re listening for is some kind of pattern between all the tapes.”

“And?” said Piper.

Nora smiled, “In 2077, remember, everyone mentioned on the tapes was still alive, sweetheart. And in a position to be arrested. Hell even these two,” Nora gestured at the two tapes sent to Winter’s girlfriend, Claire Pozinski, “Have incriminating information on them.”

Piper gave Nora the “Yes, and?” look.

“So each tape would have been used in a different case. And kept separately. Oh, someone would have figured it out eventually. But then we had the Great War. They never were put together,” observed Nora.

“Until now,” said Nick.

“I’m guessing old Eddie would have found himself talking to the Feds at some point if the War hadn’t intervened,” said Nora.

“At any rate, I’m going to take the old bastard down, and I’d love some company,” said Nick.

Either Eddie’s a ghoul and at the least, should pay for what he did to Nick’s fiancé, or he’s dead and Nick needs to let it go. In either case, I want to be there for him.

Nora smiled, “Sure thing, Nick.”

The next morning, the three of them left Diamond City then picked up Massachusetts Avenue southeast, until they came across Southampton running more east than southeast, and followed it all the way to Andrew Station.

There was a hill on the far side of I-93 that Nora used as a vantage point to scout out activity in the station. It was basically configured as a covered over barn or warehouse. When she saw who was there, she looked up from the scope and her smile was the feral one she got when she saw a good use for her skills.

“Raiders,” she said.

There were two on the roof and at least two and a dog inside the station.
So line up the shot on one of the rooftop people. Adjust for wind and distance.

Nora entered her adjustments into the scope and took up the picture.

That’s my target. If I manage to miss the femoral artery, this idiot’s thrashing and screaming will attract most of them. Like lambs to the slaughter. Payback’s a bitch and so am I…

At the last moment, Nora moved the reticle up from the Raider’s leg to his chest. The red puff was exactly over his heart and he dropped instantly. The other roof Raider looked around wildly, and dove behind cover. But he was looking the wrong way, and Nora’s next shot took him the back of the head.

By this time both of the other Raiders plus an additional two Raiders she hadn’t seen plus the dog had started up from the inside of the station to the roof, emerging onto it by three entrances. Nora picked the group farthest away from her to start with. Her first shot took the lead Raider in the throat, but the one immediately following him ducked under cover. From the right direction this time.

It’s not like the guy right in front of him getting killed wasn’t a pretty good hint, but he gets the Einstein award. Especially since that guy with the dog is just looking around wildly. Hell the dog is smarter…it’s actually headed this way. As opposed to stupid…and dead.

Nora adjusted her aim, and the dog was killed as well. The slowest Raider was just finishing climbing the scaffolding at the back of the station, closest to Nora, when her shot caught him the middle of his back, and he dropped like a puppet with cut strings.

Nora opened her non-scope eye and scanned the roof for movement or flashes. She got lucky as the remaining Raider moved from one piece of cover to another. She aimed in the direction of the cover he’d taken, and when he peeked over the top, she shot him in his face.

They waited a few minutes to see if there was anyone else around and stupid enough to stick his or her head up. No one volunteered so Nora slung her rifle, and drew her pistol and moved down to the station.

One of these days, I’m going to end up in a fight where I don’t know exactly where the Opposition is, or I won’t be the only one who knows there’s a fight. I guess we’ll find out how good the ballistic weave is then…

When they entered the station, it turned that if Nora was going to be surprised one day, then this was not that day.

They handily dispatched a pair of Raiders at the ticket kiosk, and continued into the station. As usual, most of the resistance was centered on the station, but Nora and her friends used the cover of pillars and benches to pick off first the turrets that the Raiders had set up, and then the Raiders themselves.

Maybe killing them is getting to be routine, but I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of killing these people. Never again.

As the gunfire died down, and the last Raider had fallen, Nick led their little group into some water control tunnels. In the end, they wound up at an armored door, with, yes, a keypad outside it.

Nick quickly keyed in the code and the door opened. Nora’s pistol was up, and she saw a ghoul, with Winter’s trademark white mane. She leveled her pistol at him and stepped into the room, keeping the muzzle aimed at him at all times, but clearing the way for Nick.

Winter looked at her, “Who the fuck are you?”
Nora’s week came crashing down on her. At that moment this ghoul…this mobster…represented everything she hated; the loss of a more peaceful world, her son’s kidnapping, the violence, the vicious Raiders, all of it. She looked at him and said in her best Cait accent, “Aw c’mon Eddie. It’s me, yer old pal, Molly McFuckyerself.”

Winter shook his head. “All this time and the first person through my door is a wise-ass. Well, you are easy on the eye, so that’s something. Just how the fuck did you…no. No way. Don’t tell me you cracked the code. After all this time,” he laughed. It was a nasty laugh. “Well hey, it’s been what...200 years? That code it was a joke. I just wanted to prove how dumb the feds were. Turns out? Pretty dumb. So take your pretty ass somewhere else.”

Piper stepped forward angrily, but Nora put her arm out. Piper stopped and looked at Nora, who inclined her head towards Nick, who was walking up to Winter. “I’m not going anywhere until I get what I came for,” he said.


“The name’s Valentine. Nick Valentine.”


**Dammit Nick, don’t let him get you with that line.**

Nick’s gun came up, “You killed my fiancé. Jennifer Lands. There are some crimes even you can’t get away with, Winter.”

Winter smirked. He said, “Your fiancé? You mean Valentine’s fiancé. Pretty girl. Shame what happened to her. But hey, you or, you know, the real Valentine?”

**You unspeakable fuck…**

Eddie continued, “You shoulda backed off when he had the chance. But what gives? Why do you even care? Some girl gets whacked 200 years ago and you come in my home, acting the hard guy? Christ look at you. You’re not even alive.”

Nick’s lips twisted, “Then I guess I’m in good company,” and his big revolver boomed twice. Eddie toppled, his expression still contemptuous.

Nick looked down at Eddie’s ruined body. “We’re done here. There’s one more thing I have to do. I wouldn’t mind the company if you wanted to tag along.”

He led Nora and Piper further into the complex. So much further, that in fact ‘heading further into the complex’ became ‘heading out of the complex’. Before they rounded one of a number of bends in the tunnel, they heard voices. Nora raised her fist in the freeze signal, then peered around the corner. There were several raiders. In an enclosed space.

Nora fished out three frag grenades and laid them out in front of her. She then grabbed one and began tossing them in. Screaming started immediately. Screaming shortly after, as the first blew just as Nora was pulling the pin on the third. She waited until the second blew, then flipped the last one into the room, and watched in a kind of weird slow motion as the spoon flipped off and, unseen, the brief 5 second fuse activated.
When the grenade blew, time began again. Nora entered the room, and swept the area in front of her with her pistol. While everyone wasn’t dead, yet, no one was in a condition to oppose them.

The three left out a ladder than led to a Joe’s Spuckies.

Weird. I always called ‘em ‘Subs’, or later at UMass, ‘Grinders’. Why did Southie’s call them ‘Spuckies’? Hey! I always heard Winter was thought to operate out of a strip club. ‘The Wicked Pissah’. It was a damn sub shop all along?

Get a grip Nora. You’re in an emotional minefield with Nick now…everything you’ve been working on could end here and now. You need to PAY ATTENTION.

Nick walked along the street to spot on the bank of the Bass River. He knelted. If robotic eyes could show pain, his did.

“This is it. In this spot, two hundred years ago, one of Eddie’s boys put a bullet in Jenny Lands back. Now Eddie’s as dead as Jenny…and Nick. And I’m at a loss. All I know is that without you, Eddie’d still be at large,” Nick said.

Nora shook her head, “Nick. You ARE Nick. And yes, you got closure. That sick fucking mobster back there deserved to die, for killing Jenny if nothing else.”

Piper stepped forward, and Nora looked at her, “Piper. I know you don’t like to think about that kind of informal justice, but no one was going to take Eddie to Alcatraz. And Nick,” she nodded sharply at the synth, “Is a cop. And I’m an assassin. Some people? Some people you just kill. We both know that.”

Nora turned to Nick, “We’re having this out here and now, tin man. You are Nick.”

Nick shook his head, “I don’t know. Winter was the last bit of the original Nick Valentine. The last proof aside from some long lost archive, I was ever more than a mechanical copy of some cop from a bygone era.”

“No!” Nora chopped the air with her hand. “You are NOT a ‘mechanical copy’. You’re Nick. You know that dammit. You are…you.”

Nick shook his head. “I wish it was that easy. I MAY have been Nick Valentine. I had his memories, his fears. All that poor bastard’s hope. *I* remember getting the call to head to some lab in Cambridge to get that neuro-trans-whatever. And the next thing I know, I’m in a trash heap, my family, my home, my entire life, gone! Then I figure out all those things? They weren’t even mine! Everything I ever I was belonged to Nick. I thought with Winter snuffed out, I could finally be free.”

Nick looked up at Nora and Piper, “But being out here with you, what I’ve finally realized is that taking down Winter, it wasn’t about Jenny or Nick or even you or me. It was about justice, about doing what’s right, however long it took. And that act, that’s OURS. And all the other good we’ve done? Ours, and ours alone. And even if that’s the only thing in this world that I can ever claim as mine, not Nick’s or the Institute’s, but mine, then I can die happy.”

“Nick! That’s it! You just gave me an idea,” exclaimed Nora. “Also, YOU are Nick. You and I got justice for Jenny. Jenny was YOUR fiancé and YOU are capable of love. You are a man, running on silicon hardware…not a machine that thinks it’s a man.”

Piper broke in, “And if you WERE a ‘machine that thinks it’s a man’ tell me exactly how you would act differently? Huh? So what difference does it make?”
Nick shook his head, “What do you mean, you have an idea?”

Nora smiled, “I’ll give your own words back to you. I recognize what you’re doing and I’ll let you get away with it…this time.”

Nora turned to both of them. “Nick is right,” she gestured to Nick. And then she kissed Piper soundly, “And you’re right, Piper. Entirely.”

Piper and Nick looked confused.

“We make it OURS! The Railroad cares about synths. The Minutemen care about the people. So we force THOSE two to work together. Eventually, the people will see synths as people too. But in the meantime, as long as The Railroad and The Minutemen talk to one another, and coordinate, it doesn’t matter what people feel. We just don’t let them know why they’re doing what they’re doing. You’re right Piper, it needs to be sneaky and underhanded. For now.”

Piper looked at Nora with dawning understanding. “And you’re the conduit. You’re the General of the Minutemen, AND you’re Agent Whisper of The Railroad. The two organizations work together, because they’re practically run by the same people.”

Nora nodded. “And then we make the CPG a reality. And Shaun and Nat grow up in a civilized Commonwealth.”

Chapter End Notes

So "spuckies" is South Boston slang for subs, "Grinders" is the rest of Massachusetts...with occasional pockets of "Subs".
Cait’s Addiction

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After they’d made their way back to Diamond City, Piper and Nora were surprised to find colored lights going up everywhere. Nora consulted her Pip-Boy and saw that it was December 23rd.

Nora looked over at Piper, “I completely lost track of the date. Is there anywhere to get a tree, hon? Is that still done?”

Piper nodded enthusiastically, “You bet. I’ll get the tree, and pull out my decorations.”

Nora smiled fondly at Piper, “And I’ll do some quick Christmas Shopping for you and Nat…”

Piper kissed Nora soundly. “Deal!”

Nora quickly found what she wanted to get Nat, and then made arrangements for Piper’s present.

*I hope that Piper isn’t mad about what I got Nat, but it’s time.*

And just as Nora finished hiding the presents, Piper opened the door and brought in a lovely 6 foot tree. “How much do you love me, Blue?”

Nora smiled, “You know the answer to that question, Thing…”

Piper smirked, “Good, run over to the Publick and get the two boxes in the middle of the room… they’re the ornaments and lights.”

Nora shook her head. “I should have seen that coming…” but she did so, and since it was getting close to dark, waved Nat over. “Time to knock off, kiddo. We have a tree to decorate.”

Codsworth made mulled wine, and the three of them set up the tree, and hung the lights and ornaments. Nora stood back and observed her little family. Her lover, and her step-sister/daughter to be. Nat normally tried to play the tough girl, but clearly the Wright women loved Christmas because Nora could see, for the first time, the little girl that the Wasteland hadn’t completely killed in Nat.

Codsworth laid a manipulator on her shoulder, “Miss Nora. I have to say that when I lost you, I thought you would never return. I’d resigned myself to a lonely vigil for the rest of my days.”

He patted her, “And then you returned, but with that awful news. I thought I would have to watch as you fell into a pit of despair. I heard you crying that first night. And it broke my robotic heart.”

Nora turned to look at him, and he said, “Instead, you brought hope to people. And then you began to make a new family, and you included me in it. And you and Miss Piper, and Young Miss Natalie, are the world to me now. We will find Shaun. I know it. Because this is our family,” and he swept his arm to encompass Piper and Nat hanging ornaments and Dogmeat laying by them as they pulled little glass orbs from a box. “And it WILL be whole again.”

Nora kissed Codsworth on his casing, “That means a lot to me sweetie. Thanks!”

Once the tree was up and the rest of the family was washing up after dinner, Nora ran up the stairs and wrapped Nat’s present and Piper’s present and took them down and put them under the tree. Nat’s was a large box, but Piper’s seemed to be a small flat rectangle.
They, in turn, brought Nora’s present down. A flat rectangular box. They both seemed incredibly excited about it.

As they were lying in bed later, Nora turned to Piper. “Sweetie?”

Piper giggled, “Good lord, Blue. Again? You’re insatiable.”

Nora smiled, “Not that, although now that you mention it…,” she kissed Piper, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh?”

“We should have Nick and Ellie over for Christmas dinner.”

“Well duh, Blue. I figured that was a given, seeing as how you’re trying to hook them up.”

“You noticed?” asked Nora.

“Only because you haven’t bothered to hide it from me. Nick still thinks it’s all about him being Nick, and Ellie doesn’t have a clue.”

“OK. Then it’s agreed,” Nora said. “Now about the other part…”

Piper smiled and wriggled up close to Nora, “Why don’t you show me?”

The next morning, Nora caught Nat shaking her present.

“Codsworth, I need you to make sure Nat doesn’t break her gift before it’s even opened,” Nora called.

“Yes, mum, I will but I’m afraid there is an urgent message for you on the wireless,” he said.

Nora identified herself on the radio, and got the news from the operator at Red Rocket. Cait was in serious trouble. She’d been taken to see Dr. Curie, but the message was that Curie needed them. Quickly. Nora looked up to see Piper already pulling on her coat and slipping her pistol into her pocket.

“Codsworth? Keep things going for Christmas. We’ll be back soon,” Nora said.

As she and Piper left Diamond City, Nora saw Piper wrapping her scarf more tightly. Nora raised an eyebrow and Piper said, “What? We’re obviously flying everywhere today.”

Nora merely nodded in agreement. Within minutes they were taking off from the plaza outside Fenway and flying north-northwest rapidly. A short time later the vertibird landed at Sanctuary. Nora spoke to the Lancer flying the thing, “Don’t go anywhere. I have no idea if we’re going to need you right away or not.”

She nodded and Piper and Nora went into the Clinic to speak with Curie. Curie spoke to them in low tones, “It is Cait. She has reached a crisis point. She MUST not use chems any further, but her system is too far gone for traditional anti-addiction methods. She believes that she has a solution, but has not yet shared it with me.”

With that, Curie led them back into patient rooms. Cait was laying under the covers of one bed looking like shit, not to put too fine a point on it.

She looked up at Nora and Piper and said, “I never thought I’d be sayin’ this but I need your help, please.”
Nora looked grave and said, “Anything you need, Cait.”

Cait took a deep breath, “OK, it’s like this. Ever since I left home I’ve been usin’ Psycho. I dunno why I’m still taking that crap, but I can’t stop and believe me, I’ve tried. I can’t go a day without and I’m fuckin’ sick and tired of it.” She looked away from Nora and continued, “I’ve even been doin’ it behind yer back…sneakin’ doses when you weren’t lookin’.” Cait looked back up at Nora, “And it’s been makin’ me sick. I’ve been spittin’ blood and I don’t feel right inside. I need to get this shite out of me system before I end up dead.”

Nora nodded, and said, “Tell us how.”

“There might be a way, but it won’t be easy. There’s a vault out here, a place called Vault 95. I’ve heard that Vault-Tec used it as some kinda experiment for cleanin’ up junkies. They supposedly had some kind of method to clean ‘em up, some kind of machine. If we could get inside, maybe that machine could help me.”

Nora took a deep breath. Vault-Tec were her least favorite people, but for Cait, she’d willingly face a dozen Vaults. “We’ll get you there. Right now.”

“Look I know ye think I’m some low-life…wait, r-right now? As in this minute?” said Cait.

Nora nodded, “No time like the present. I’ve got a Vertibird on the pad ready to go.”

“Right now?” Cait repeated.

“Yep. Hop to it, Cait. We’re headed out.”

Cait levered herself out of bed, and creakily slung her shotgun over her shoulder. As Piper slung one of Cait’s arms over her shoulder and propped her up, it was clear that Piper’s main job would be carrying her. Curie took one look at what was going on, and slid under Cait’s arm, displacing Piper.

As the four of them made their way to the Vertibird, Preston came running up. “I can’t let you head out without a guard, Dr. Curie,” he said.

Nora looked at him in surprise. While her little crew was showing real signs of turning into a parade, which was the opposite of what she wanted, she invited Preston ‘to help Curie with Cait’, but mainly because it was obvious that she’d have to bring him anyway.

They piled into the vertibird, with Nora uncharacteristically in the co-pilot’s seat. She kept hands and feet well away from any controls, and brought up her Pip-Boy map. She’d gotten a read on Vault 95 during their trip to the Glowing Sea…95 was right on the edge, and there was a settlement nearby, not affiliated with the CPG, down slope from the Vault. She gave the Lancer coordinates for the settlement, Somerville, and turned to her band.

“We’ll insert here,” as she gestured to Somerville, “And make our way up this draw. When we get close, Preston and I will do a short recon to determine what’s going on there. Then we’ll make a plan to deal with whatever we find.”

Everyone nodded, and a bit less than a half hour later, the ‘bird dropped and her crew hopped or hobbled out. The head of the settlers approached, hands raised, “We don’t want any trouble…oh. You’re not Gunners.”

Nora shook her head, “Why would you think that?”

“There’s a whole mess of ‘em up thataway,” and he pointed towards Vault 95, “And they’ve
been…’requisitioning’ food from us. Without paying.”

“Raiding, you mean,” replied Nora.

“If you want to be blunt, yes,” said the man. “I can’t do anything about it. I have to look after my two youngsters here. But if you could, I’d be grateful. I’ve heard of you guys. Minutemen, right?”


The man’s eyebrows went up. “I don’t know about that, we’re pretty isolated here.”

Preston stepped forward, “We don’t make distinctions, friend. If you want to join, we’d provide a radio, and a pledge. Your problems are our problems. We come when you call.”

Cait piped up, “Oi’d personally lead th’team to kick their arses.”

The man looked skeptical. “No offense ma’am, but you don’t look like you’re in any shape to kick a radroach’s ass.”

“Yeah, well, just y’wait,” came a weak but characteristically belligerent reply.

Preston leaned in, “If she brought her crew from Red Rocket I wouldn’t bet against her, friend. The rest of the Minutemen have taken to calling her group ‘The Regulars’.”

Nora interrupted, “So the Vault is full of Gunners, then?”

The man nodded. Nora smiled, “Well that makes things easy, we go in shooting.”

Nora looked at her Pip-Boy. It was noon. “Ok guys, we’re wasting time. I expect to be home by Christmas. With Cait cured. So let’s get a move on.”

The small band headed west up the draw, carefully and quietly. Before long a large hill and cliff, with a Vault entrance embedded in it was visible. There was a guard contingent up at the top of the Vault Entrance.

Nora estimated range and windage, set them in her scope, and began shooting. The others could barely make out her targets, but she shot several times, then moved off to her right. After moving a few hundred yards, she set up again. And repeated the exercise once more.

After that, she gave a satisfied nod, slung her rifle and led them directly towards the Vault.

“What was all that about, General?” asked Preston.

Nora shook her head, but Piper said, in a sing-song voice, “I know something you don’t know.”

Nora just gave Piper a sharp look.

The group made their way to the elevator, where they barely all fit, but when the elevator opened, they could hear the sounds of Gunners deeper in the Vault. Nora put her finger to her lips gestured for them to stay put. She peered around the corner into the three story atrium.

*I make an even dozen of the bastards, and they’ve got four turrets up there. Dammit. This would be suicidal.*

*Hey, maybe…*
Nora retraced her steps. Sure enough, there was a terminal in the office that she’d seen out of the corner of her eye. She hacked into it and lucked out. The terminal was part of the network with the turrets. Nora waved the group in close.

“OK,” she whispered, “When I override the turrets, and they open up on the Gunners, everyone get in on the fun, right?”

They all looked eager except Curie, who looked a little sick to her stomach. Nora quickly and expertly overrode the targeting parameters of all the turrets in the network.

She was rewarded out of all proportion. Not only did the four in the atrium open up, but they could hear other turrets far off in the complex, firing away. The Gunners in front of them withered in the crossfire between Nora and her friends, and the turrets ringing the room.

The gunfire elsewhere in the complex continued for a good long time. After going up to the Overseer’s office and consulting the schematic on the wall, the group made its way directly to the treatment center. Only a few Gunners remained, and there were numerous corpses. But when the group had passed through, all that remained were corpses.

Finally, they arrived. Cait was hanging back. Nora came up to her, and Cait gave Nora a haunted look. “This must be it. The clean room. The answer to me problems is sittin’ in that room, but I dunno if I should go through with it.”

Nora’s jaw dropped, “Don’t you want to get better?”

Cait nodded, “But, I don’t know. My bodies tellin’ me to get it over with. But what if the psycho’s the only thing keepin’ me together. What if this opens me eyes and I don’t like what I see. There were REASONS I dulled the pain. Things I didn’t want to face. Things I was tryin’ to forget. I’d rather be spittin’ blood than relivin’ the past.”

Nora bent down to look Cait in the eye, “Whatever it is, we’ll all face it together.”

Cait closed her eyes, “You’ve already done so much and you keep offerin’ to do more,” and her eyes opened. “I’m gonna sit in the chair. When I’m ready, hit the switch.”

Curie helped Cait into the chair, and Piper elbowed Nora. She inclined her head towards Preston, who was gazing at Curie with something just this side of worship. Nora sighed.

_I’m going to end up as Yenta to the whole damned Commonwealth at this rate. George Washington was “The Father of His Country”. I seem to be headed for “The Nosy, Busybody Aunt” of mine._

Curie began strapping Cait in, murmuring reassurances to the woman in the chair. When she finished, and tugged to make sure the straps were holding, she turned and nodded to Nora, standing by at the control terminal.

When Nora selected “Activate” she learned the reason for the straps.

Cait shrieked and her back arched and then she began thrashing, held in position only by her forehead, wrist and bicep, and ankle straps. The shrieking went on and on. At one point, Nora made to move to the terminal, but Curie called sharply, “Non! This must continue, hard as it may be!”

After what seemed an eternity, the shrieks became whimpers, the whimpers gasps, and finally, the gasps became heavy breathing. At that point, Curie unbuckled Cait from the chair. “How are you feeling?” Curie asked.
“Strange. I feel really strange. Everythin’ feels…clearer. Colors, sounds, smells…nothin’ is like I remember. The cravin’, the pain, it’s disappeared. Was I that far gone?” Cait mused.

Nora spoke up, “I was worried.”

Curie shook her head, “It is not fully over. You must see me regularly, or the underlying psychological reasons that you became addicted in the first place will reassert themselves.”

“And you can always talk with me, Cait. Anytime you need to,” added Preston.

Cait looked determined, “I’m never gonna forget what you did for me. You all stepped up and helped when everyone else cashed out. I know I suck at thank yous, so that’s the best I can do. Now how about we get out of here?”

Nora glanced at her Pip-Boy. It was 12:04 AM. “One more thing Cait,” she smiled, “Merry Christmas.”

Chapter End Notes

This was the exact time that Cait came out of the chamber, as it happened. Which I decided to incorporate.
After they exited the Vault, Nora called a Vertibird. After a bit, one came, and the whole crew climbed in again. She had the Lancer return them all to Diamond City. As they began to descend in front of Fenway, Preston came on the intercom, “General, aren’t you taking us back to Sanctuary?”

Nora replied, “No. You’re all our guests for Christmas. I checked with Piper just now and we’d love to have you all visit. Besides, I’m making Christmas Dinner and I’d love to treat you all.” Behind her, Piper nodded.

Cait came onto the Intercom, “In that case, I’m in. I had yer food th’ last time and it was fantastic. You’ll not hear me turnin’ more down.”

Once the ‘bird had landed and the five of them got to the front door, Nora told them all to keep it down as Nat was likely sleeping, since it was 1:30AM. Which was embarrassing when she opened the door and was greeted by Nat, Dogmeat, and Codsworth all waiting.

“I can see your orders get obeyed to the letter, General,” said Preston.

Laughing, Nora sent Dogmeat and Nat up to her room. Then she showed Curie and Cait to the guest room, and Preston to the spare single bedroom. Then she went upstairs, where Piper was already in the shower. Nora went up to their bath and tried to tease Piper about taking a shower.

Piper wasn’t going to let her get away with that, though, “When you’re sleeping with someone who’s got a fetish, Blue, you learn to enjoy their particular kink, or else…”

Serves me right for trying to tease someone who works in words. Hey, wait a sec!

“So what you’re saying is I should start bringing a terminal into bed with us?” she asked in a voice that dripped innocence.

For a second there was nothing, and then Piper began laughing, hard. “Not bad, Blue.”

Nora slipped off her clothes and got in herself, and the two of them spent a pleasant period washing each other.

“Normally, I’d try something, Sweetheart…” Nora started.

“But we’re both tired, Nat is gonna get us up early, and besides, we have the rest of our lives together to make love. I get it,” then she got a wicked grin, “Not even married yet, and you’re already turning me down in favor of sleep!”

“Just for that…” Nora said.

“Just for that you’re going to get out, dry off, get in bed, and cuddle me up for a change until I fall asleep in your arms, right?” said Piper.

“For a change?”

“Yep, usually I hold you, you know,” Piper said.
Nora shrugged. “I like being held. I spend so much time trying to be the big time secret agent woman that it just feels good to be held at night, Hon. That’s all.”

Piper smiled at her fiancé fondly. “I know.”

They got out, dried off, and slipped into panties and a t-shirt each as PJs, since they had guests. Then Nora kissed Piper goodnight, and cuddled up behind her as big spoon.

“G’night Thing. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Blue. I love you,” Piper said.

The next morning came early, but not actually as early as Nora had feared. Nat was 14 and had long ago figured out Santa Claus. The Wasteland did not favor the survival of people who believed in fairy tales much past very young childhood.

But at some point, the excitement of the prospect of a family Christmas with more than just her sister got to her, and they heard her bumping around downstairs, semi-deliberately trying to wake them up. Piper sat up quickly, but Nora laid a hand on her arm.

“I know you want to get up too, but let Codsworth make coffee first, Hon. Set the precedent,” she smiled.

Soon they could smell the coffee, and at that point, Nora and Piper pulled on bathrobes and went down the stairs.

They found Nat practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. As Nora and Piper cuddled together on the couch with their first cups of coffee, their other guests came out, also lured by the scent of fresh coffee.

Nora smiled and called for Codsworth to get Curie, Cait, and Preston coffee. Preston took his mug gratefully and said, “I get why you’ve moved here, General. We may be building a new city up in Sanctuary, but this place is already set up.”

Nora nodded, “Plus, I’m marrying the owner of its newspaper, Preston. Sometimes you move for your spouse,” as she smiled at Piper.

Piper kissed Nora on the cheek, and pointed out her gift to Nat. As Nat tore open the paper, they all looked on. It was a Ushanka style fur cap. Nat seemed quite pleased. Piper turned to Nora and said, “Her fur cap gave up the ghost last year, and it is getting colder now.”

Nora smiled, but as she saw Nat reaching for her present from Nora, she quickly told Piper, “OK, I got that for Nat but you can veto it if you want but I just thought that she’s old enough now and it was time for her to have one…”

At that point, Nat pulled a computer terminal from the box, and Piper burst out laughing. “I was SURE you’d gotten her a pistol, Blue.”

“What? No. Not without talking to you first, sweetie. No, a terminal, so she can write articles. Like her sister.”

Piper laughed, “After all our conversations, I can see where you might think I’d be pissed, but I really did listen to your answer. It’s all up to Nat, sweetie. You were right.”

Nora, who’d been sweating, laughed in relief. She looked at the others and said, “I apologize but we
had no idea you’d be here or I’d have gotten something.”

All three of her houseguests immediately tripped over each other protesting that she shouldn’t worry about it. In the process, Nora found her lap full of box. Nat had laid it in her lap. As she looked at it, Piper commented, “So, Nat and I talked about this, and you need to know that Nat thought it was a really good idea, too. Not just me.”

Nora tore away the wrapping, and then opened the box. Inside was a tissue wrapped piece of clothing. White. Nora’s heart leapt, as she pulled out and looked at a wedding dress.

“You still have to go to Becky and have it fitted, Blue. And you have no idea how hard it was to not make it blue…”

Nora looked up and Piper was grinning.

“I love it, Piper. And this morning is like the reverse of O. Henry’s story.”

“Which one?”

Nora said, “I can’t remember the name. I read it in school. The one about Christmas gifts…”

“Oh! ‘The Gift of the Magi’,” said Piper.

Nora smiled and nodded.

“Why?” asked Piper. Nora picked up her gift and put the small rectangle in Piper’s lap.

Piper unwrapped her present and laughed.

Piper Louise Wright
And
Nora Erin McAllister Greene
Invite you to celebrate their marriage
At All Faiths Chapel
Entry Way, Diamond City
4:00 PM, December 31st, 2287

Dancing and drinking to follow at
Dugout Inn, 1st Base Street, Diamond City
(Piper and Nora will provide food for the reception
As we are not crazy)

“Vadim is going to LOVE his invitation,” Piper giggled.

“He hasn’t seen it, but Scarlett has. She had your exact reaction,” Nora said, “And everything is arranged. I didn’t get you a dress though.”

“That’s OK, Ellie will help me pick one out,” Piper said. Then she leaned into Nora and kissed her tenderly. Nat made gagging noises, but was smiling as she did so. “So what’s the hurry Blue?” Piper asked.
“Other than the obvious? It’s my birthday, and what I want for my birthday is to be married to the woman I love,” replied Nora.

Curie sighed romantically, and Preston got a little misty-eyed. Even Cait smiled, although her contribution was, “I knew ye two weren’t a threat to me that first night. Never seen two people more in love,” and she paused dramatically, “It’s enough to fair make y’gag, it is.”

Nat giggled at that.

Nora gave Cait the finger, which Piper tried to hide from Nat, which lead to Nora kissing Piper, so she could continue to give Cait the finger. Which led to a brief wrestling match, which ended when Nora inadvertently flashed the group her panties. Which Piper thought was hilarious, as the entire room was full of women, one robot, a dog, and one male who’d been facing the wrong way at the time.

After they’d all gotten dressed, Nora took Preston out to collect Nick and Ellie.

“Nora?” said Preston.

“Yes, Preston? “

“It’s been two months since you came out of that Vault and rescued me, and I thought you should know how much it means to me that you’ve invited me to relax with you. I know you’ve been going flat out since you woke up, and it’s good that you’ve finally gotten a chance to switch off,” he said.

“Thank you Preston. That means a lot to me. I feel the same,” said Nora.

“And I should also tell you that pink isn’t a good color for General’s panties.”

Preston laughed as Nora blushed and punched him on the arm. “You saw?”

“Just for a second,” he smiled, “Besides, even IF you weren’t my superior officer, Nora, you’re taken, and by someone I respect at that.”

Fine, Garvey. Two can play the “Embarrass You” game…

“Well, I’m pretty sure Curie would look cute in pink,” she said, side eying Preston.

She couldn’t tell if he was blushing, but he did stammer on his reply, “Wh-wh-why would you think that?”

“One, because she would, and two, because I’m not an idiot. I see the way you look at her,” Nora said. “When I said, ‘Don’t toy with her emotions,’ I didn’t mean avoid her, I just meant if you try something, be aware that she’s new to all this.”

“Will do, General. Ma’am.”

“Oh for…just for that, I’m seating the two of you next to each other at dinner,” Nora said.

“But…but…,” Preston said.

Nora nodded once, sharply. “That’s right, you mess with the General, the General will fix your little red wagon, Garvey.”

Yenta the Matchmaker strikes again. Nosy, Busybody Aunt of Her Country, indeed.
Even if it does mean Cait sits next to Nat. I’ll have to extra vigilant on language for the next week, or Nat’ll sound like a longshoreman by the reception.

The arrived at Valentine’s Detective Agency and knocked. Nick opened the door and invited them in. Preston shook Nick’s hand as they walked in.

“Ready to head out Nick?” Nora asked.

“Well for some reason Ellie is taking a while getting ready,” said Nick.

“Did you ever understand women, Nick, or have you always been clueless?” Nora replied.

“Well I was engaged…Nick was engaged, so I must’ve,” Nick said.

Ah HA! Freudian slip.

“It’s a Christmas dinner Nick, she wants to look good. Haven’t you done a Christmas with Ellie before?”

“I always gave her the week off and I kept working,” he replied.

Nora shook her head, “Well that’s just sad. And it isn’t going to happen again as long as I’m around.”

At that point, Ellie came around the corner, wearing a little black dress she’d gotten at Fallon’s. Nick looked shocked. “You clean up nice, Ellie,” he said.

She gave him an arch look, “This isn’t the first time I’ve worn this, gumshoe.” She flashed a smile at Nora and led them all back out of the office.

The girl has game. Good for her. Even if the only other time she ACTUALLY wore that thing was trying it on at Fallon’s. Keep him off balance Ellie, while I figure something out.

Chapter End Notes

From now to the end of Book 1, Agent of Change? Pure Fluff. All the fluff. I had to IMPORT fluff.
Diamond City had finally gotten cold, and there were a few flakes in the air as the four rushed from one end of town to the other. But Nora was gratified when Nick swept off his trenchcoat and offered it to Ellie for the trip. Ellie gave him a grateful smile and wrapped it about her shoulders.

_I knew you had it in you Nick. Seeing the lady in a slightly different light are we? Wait ‘til I make the Maid and Man of Honor dance at the wedding._

When they got back to Piper and Nora’s House, the spitting flakes had picked up, and the house was warm and unusually inviting, with laughter and the smells of the hors d’oeuvres wafting out. Mirelurk Puffs, if Nora was any judge.

“Codsworth, sweetie, you’ve outdone yourself,” she called as she put her own coat to one side and took Nick’s from Ellie.

“Thank you, mum. Oh my! It is so delightful to be the assistant host at a real party for the first time in two hundred and ten years,” he called back.

Nora looked around. Cait and Curie were chatting, and she could see a blush creeping up Curie’s neck, that blossomed up to her cheeks as she turned and saw Preston. Clearly the pit fighter had seen the same thing as Nora and Piper. And probably then some, being at Red Rocket instead of Diamond City most of the time. And acting on it with her trademark directness it seemed.

Nat had finished setting up her terminal near Piper’s, and was tapping away, and Codsworth had opened a bottle of wine. Nora took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. This was civilization. All she had to do was extend it to the edges of the Commonwealth.

_Easy Peasy, Nora._

She smiled wryly, then put her apron on and tied it round her waist. Apparently, the sight of Nora in jeans and a blouse, wearing an apron was too much for Piper.

She pointed at Nora, and called out, “Check out the domestic, big time secr…,” Nick surreptitiously kicked her shin, and she finished, “Errr…General, in her apron.”

Nora shot her fiancé a look and Piper shrugged apologetically. No one seemed to have noticed.

Nora shook her head then smiled and blew Piper a kiss as she pulled Prime Brahmin rib off the counter. She placed it on a rack in a roasting pan and lightly salted it. Codsworth had pulled it out about an hour and half earlier to get to room temp. While she let that finish warming she lit the oven. When the oven thermometer she’d scavenged said 325, she put the roast in and left it and set a timer for an hour and 45 minutes.

Preston and Nick were watching her, and Nora could see Curie and Ellie watching them, so she decided to do her bit for the women of the Commonwealth and to give Preston and Nick some cooking lessons. “I set the timer on the Pip-Boy for an hour, forty five because that’s when I need to start checking the temp,” she said.

Nick nodded, but Preston asked, “What temperature are you shooting for?”
“About 120-125,” Nora replied, “In a large party like this, Medium Rare is safe, and if someone wants it a little more done, they can have the ends. If you want Medium Well or Well Done, you can march your happy ass to The Dugout Inn and eat elsewhere.”

Nick laughed and started paying more attention. “So what are you all eating?” he asked.

“Oh you’re ‘eating’ too, Nick, even if you can’t eat, you can enjoy our company,” Nora answered. “But to answer your question, I like to have a fairly simple Christmas Dinner. Rib roast,” she gestured at the oven, “Roast tatoes, steamed snap beans, and Yorkshire pudding.”

They both raised eyebrows at the last item. “You’ll see,” she said. She and Piper pleasantly circulated, sipping some red wine from the Bobrovs for the next hour and half. Codsworth was humming happily as he passed among them, and praised Nora and Piper as hostesses. When the timer went off, Nora checked the meat temp, at 100 degrees, and waved over Nick and Preston.

“Yorkshire pudding,” she looked at them, “Four radchicken eggs, to 1 cup milk, to 1 cup flour. For eight people, double it. 8 to 2 to 2. Stir the milk into the flour.” As she was speaking she showed them how to do each step, “Then mix in the eggs,” she cracked and mixed in the eggs. “Finally, 2 teaspoons of salt,” and she mixed that in.

“Then let sit for a half hour,” she said smiling. “In the meantime, sprinkle salt and pepper and some corn oil on the tatoes, and add some of these spices, that you sent your robot butler to get,” she smiled at them, “Or ask mine the next time you’re in town…” as Nick began chuckling.

“And put the snap beans on a screen bowl over a pot, and cover it.”

She now pulled out the roast and checked it again. It had gotten to 110 in the 20 minutes since she’d checked it. And she’d acquired even more of an audience, as Ellie and Curie had come over to watch as well.

“So here comes the very most important part. Are you ready?” she asked. They all nodded.

“You watch everything while I run upstairs and change,” and at that, Nora pulled off her apron, and shot upstairs.

She quickly pulled on a blue flowered dress, in honor of Piper’s nickname for her, a pair of low heels she’d found at Fallon’s, ran a brush through her hair, and touched up her makeup, and then went back down.

Piper looked a little surprised as Nora came back down. She came over, “Should I be wearing a dress?”

“Not unless you want to, and I mean it. Slacks and a blouse is fine sweetie. I just wanted to play Pre-War gracious hostess for a day. Just for a change,” Nora replied seriously.

Piper looked at Nora solemnly, “OK, Blue. I think that I should let you be the star for the day,” and she kissed Nora.

Nora smiled and went back, put on her apron, and checked the meat. It was 120. She pulled it out, turned up the oven, raising the temp to 425, and put in a tray of tatoes to roast.

Then she pulled out some muffin cup trays. She looked at her audience, now including Cait and Piper. In honor of the former, she said, “Very important at this stage to use wine,” and theatrically finished off her glass. She was rewarded with laughter from Cait.
Then she pulled lard from her fridge. “This is the trick to good Yorkshire pudding. Some folks will tell you to use beef drippings,” she pointed to the roasting pan, “Those people are evil. They want you to fail. You can get the beef flavor by taking bite of pudding with a bite of beef later. Use lard instead. Make a pea sized or small marble sized ball of lard,” and she pinched and rolled, “and put one in the bottom of each cup. Then pour in the batter, but no more than half way. Unless you really want to make a big mess.”

She checked the tatoes, which at 25 minutes, were done, and she put them to the side and started the pot boiling to steam the beans and put the pudding in the oven, and setting her Pip-Boy to 20 minutes.

Then she sent her guests to the table, and Codsworth began slicing the roast, while Nora poured them all wine, even for Nat, as well as glasses of purified water. By that time she was able to pull off the beans, butter them and transfer to a dish, transfer the tatoes to a dish, and Codsworth placed the slices of beef on a platter. Placing all of them on the table, Nora’s Pip-Boy went off, and she took out the pudding, now golden brown popovers, and placed them on the table as well.

As she sat, she turned to Curie and said, “Usually the host or hostess serves the roast, but since this is your very first Christmas, Curie, I would love it if you served us all.”

Curie blushed again, but smiled, “I would be honored,” she managed. Nora started them off by passing her plate to Curie, and in turn each of them was served by the effectively newborn synth. Even Nick, who smiled and inhaled deeply.

When they’d all been served the roast, the trays and dishes went round and everyone took their sides as well. When everyone was set, Nora raised her glass.

“I’m not devout and it would be hypocritical of me to lead a prayer, but I would like to make a toast. To friends, and to new love,” and she looked at Piper while still catching Preston’s eye and noting that Curie was giving him a direct look, “And to putting both together to make a new family.”

Everyone raised a glass, even Nick, and everyone but Nick sipped. Then they began eating, and chatting, and laughing, and in two cases, flirting, if you included the looks Piper was giving Nora.

Nora let it wash over her.

*I need this. I need to know it’s not all Raiders and Gunners and all manner of human refuse. Unless Dez hits me with the end of the world, I am on vacation. With my wife to be.*

Then she turned to Piper and gave her a fond smile, and a little kiss on the cheek. Piper smiled as well and took Nora’s hand as they looked around the table. Curie smiling, blushing, paying much too much attention to Preston for it to be subtle. Preston, finally noticing that Curie seemed interested, which only went to prove that he didn’t actually have cinderblocks for brains.

Ellie, resolutely chatting with Cait and Nat and Nick, in a way that hid how aware she was of Nick at all times. Nick, clueless.

*Yenta has her work cut out with those two. If Preston doesn’t make a move on Curie within a couple days I’ll eat my vest, but Nick and Ellie have a LOT of practice at not hooking up.*

Cait, teaching Nat new swear words.

*Oh, nevermind. She’s just combining words I’ve used myself. I’ll let hypocrisy take a holiday too.*

She smiled to herself. It was a very merry Christmas.
Chapter End Notes

The Roast Beef "recipe" is from "Cooking With Julia". The only thing that is difficult about Roast Prime Rib is COST. It's high stakes cooking. For the most part, it's prep, low heat, wait an couple hours and eat. But a 5 rib rack? Not inexpensive. Therefore scary.

Also, use the lard trick for Yorkshire Pudding. Works way better than mucking about with beef drippings, which are less plentiful than they were anyway, because butchers trim meat much more lean than they used to.
The Wedding Of Two Centuries

The next week was a blur. As Nora suspected, it included a blossoming romance between Curie and Preston. Even before midweek those two were holding hands. By Friday, two days before the wedding they were publicly kissing. No one was willing to take Nora up on whether Cait would be in the single room the evening of the wedding. The general consensus was that everyone was amazed that the two had restrained themselves thus far.

Piper and Ellie selected both a wedding dress for Piper and a bridesmaid’s dress for Ellie, and Piper had made sure that the dress flattered Ellie as she was all in with Nora on ‘Operation Get Nick Together With Ellie Somehow’. Nora had insisted that as Nick was her Man of Honor he should wear a tux, and not his ratty trenchcoat. He fought her, but not too hard. Step one complete.

Codsworth laid in supplies, and was truly in his element preparing food for the reception. Vadim and Yefim put up a protest about the food crack in the invitation, but not too hard. First, they knew why people came into the Dugout, and it wasn’t the food. Second, they’d read Nora’s first couple cooking columns, and knew that Nora knew what she was doing and wanted, and no one had any doubt about what condition they’d be in when she got done with them if they messed up her day with Piper. And third, Codsworth had let them taste some of what he was making. Which had probably been the goal of the protests in the first place.

The invitations went out the Monday after Christmas, to allow for travel. It was supposed to be small, but Nora invited Deacon, Dez, and Glory. Piper and Nora invited the Abernathy’s, and Eric and Evelyn from Tenpines, and Irma and Dr. Amari from Goodneighbor. Piper invited Danny Sullivan, specifically because, ‘If you hadn’t been so shamefully following your orders, I might not have met the woman of my dreams’. Danny accepted.

Finally, Sturges, Marcy and Jun, and Mama Murphy were invited. Nora thought long and hard about inviting the chemhead to her wedding, but Curie assured her that Mama Murphy was staying clean. Nevertheless, Nora cornered Solomon at Chem-I-Care and issued some bloodcurdling threats should it turn out that Mama Murphy got chems from him.

And the final touch on the preparations was redoing Curie’s invitation. She had visited Nora on Wednesday and informed Nora, very seriously, “Preston and I have been speaking, and I believe that I require a new invitation.”

“Oh,” said Nora, “How so?”

“Because it is not accurate. Preston is correct that if I am ‘Doctor Curie’ then by definition my last name is Curie, and as I am now a synthetic humanoid, I require a first name,” Curie answered.

Nora’s lips quirked, “Did Preston suggest one?”

“Non. He refused to on the grounds that he would never tell me what to do. I found that a very pleasing sentiment, but not as apparently pleasing as my suggestion was,” Curie said.

“And that was…?” asked Nora.

“I suggested that my first name should be ‘Marie’ based on my last name. He felt that name was ‘beautiful’ which I found flattering.”

“I would be happy to change your invitation, Marie,” said Nora. “But I feel like I should also say that when I see you and Preston together…”
Marie interrupted, “You worry for me, that I am not used to what men and women do together? I am a doctor, Nora. My knowledge may be theoretical rather than practical at this point, but I am not ignorant. And I know what I want, and Preston is not doing anything that does not greatly please me.”

Nora’s efforts to place bets about Marie and Preston shortly after that conversation were instantly turned down. There may have a sucker born every minute, but none of them currently resided in Diamond City.

On Saturday, Nora had insisted that Piper go back to the Publick for the night. Piper wasn’t happy about it, but in some ways Nora was very traditional about weddings, and in this case Piper agreed to bend. As a result, the next time they saw one another was at 4 the next day, when they entered at opposite doors of the chapel.

Both of them wore white wedding dresses but not veils. Ellie had told Piper, “You’re both brides and you both deserve to look beautiful and be seen. It may not just be your day, or her day. But it IS your day together,” and Piper had taken it to heart. She was so beautiful walking through the door that it almost took Nora’s breath away, literally.

There was a small hitch in her step, and then she continued to march in to meet her wife to be. As she went past Deacon, he whispered, “I was planning to spend the day reading Sartre, but you had to go and ruin it,” which caused Dez to nearly elbow him until Dez saw Nora’s lips quirk as she suppressed a giggle. As usual Deacon knew exactly how to defuse tension.

As Nora stepped past Nick, Piper met her in the middle. Without thinking, Nora reached out and took Piper’s hand. Piper gave Nora’s a brief squeeze. Piper’s eyes shone as she looked at Nora, and then they both turned to face Pastor Clements.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the joining in wedded bliss of Piper Louise Wright and Nora Erin McAllister Greene. Matrimony should always be entered into solemnly and with reverence and honor. And into this arrangement and in this manner come these two together to be joined. If anyone here can show just cause why Nora or Piper should not be so joined, speak now or forever hold your peace,” he began.

“Oh my god. I’m getting married. To Piper.”

Pastor Clements went on, “Marriage is a sacred union between two lives and shall forever remain unbroken. It is the basis of a stable and loving relationship and of the joining of two hearts, two bodies and two souls. Nora and Piper have each promised the other that she will always be there to support the other and to provide love and care in times of joy and in times of adversity.”

He turned to Piper and said, “Do you, Piper, take Nora to be your lawfully wedded wife and to live together forever? Do you promise to love, comfort, honor and cherish her, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse for as long as you both shall live?”

Piper, trembling slightly, said clearly, “I do.”

Pastor Clements then turned to Nora. “Do you, Nora, take Piper to be your lawfully wedded wife and to live together forever? Do you promise to love, comfort, honor and cherish her, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse for as long as you both shall live?”

“I have never wanted anything more in my life.

“I do.”
Piper turned to Ellie, and Nora turned to Nick, to get their wedding rings. As they did so, Clements looked over their friends, “The wedding ring’s circle symbolizes the unbroken and everlasting love and commitment between wife and wife,” and then he looked over to Piper, “Piper, repeat after me: ‘With this ring, I thee wed.’”

Piper looked into Nora’s eyes, “Nora Erin, with this ring I thee wed.”

Nora smiled tenderly at Piper as she slipped the ring onto Nora’s finger. And she heard Pastor Clements say, with a slight laugh in his voice, “Nora, repeat after me: ‘Piper Louise, with this ring I thee wed.’”

Nora would forever after not be able to recall what the ring felt like, or what Piper’s fingers felt like, but to her final day she could always see the look in Piper’s eyes, as she said, “Piper Louise, with this ring, I thee wed.”

“By the power vested in me, and with the lawful authority of the settlement of Diamond City, I now pronounce you wife and wife. You may kiss.”

And as applause broke out, Piper and Nora melted into each other’s arms, and kissed.

Pastor Clements addressed the whole group, “This joyous day celebrates the commitment and love with which Piper and Nora start their lives together. Through their words and actions, they are joined together in the most solemn of bonds. May I introduce Ms. And Mrs. Piper and Nora Wright.”

Piper pulled back in shock and stared at Nora, who was smiling at her wife. “I told you that sometimes I’m traditional,” and she laid her forehead against Piper’s and gazed into her eyes. “I’ve always wanted to be Mrs. Wright, ever since I proposed. And now you’re stuck with me.”

Piper smiled, and said, “Forever,” and then she kissed her wife again.

And Nat didn’t even fake gagging. She was too busy discovering why people sometimes cried when they were happy.
Yellow glowing light. There is something soft and warm along my side.

I am a person. I feel a little hungover. But not TOO bad.

I see a mass of black hair. The hair belongs to Piper. My wife.

My name is Nora Wright.

Nora laid in bed as she listened to Piper, softly snoring as she laid half on Nora with one leg thrown over both of Nora’s. Nora smiled to herself as she recalled pieces of the evening. They’d laid their dresses down carefully. They’d removed their lingerie rather less so, in several cases removing it from their partner rather enthusiastically. Everything had been gathered by Codsworth.

It was a VERY good reception.

Nora remembered the walk, with Piper, to the Dugout Inn. Several of the guards had greeted Piper, very quietly, telling her that they’d always liked her, and they were sorry about what McDonough had them do. Almost any other day, Piper might’ve challenged them. But she surprised herself, her wife, and the guards themselves by blushing and thanking them.

Vadim and Yefim expansively greeted the wedding party at the door and escorted them in, as the bar was closed to anyone else for the night, for which privilege Nora had paid very well. Codsworth had rushed ahead of the party after leaving the chapel and was setting out trays of hors d’oeuvres. The Bobrovs themselves were manning the bar.

And after the two of them had greeted their guests, everyone took seats as they had drinks and then a dinner. Codsworth had made radsalmon steak fillets for everyone, and Nora had tried hard not to think about how monumentally large salmon had grown. Their meal had been interrupted continually, once Nick introduced the concept of “Newlyweds kissing whenever the room demanded it,” to the rest of Diamond City.

Which only made Step Two of Nora’s plan the sweeter, when after she and Piper had had the first dance, they brought out the Maid of Honor and Man of Honor, and insisted they dance next. Ellie was gorgeous in the dress they’d selected for her at Fallon’s Basement, and Nick actually looked pretty good in his tux. And though Nick never actually showed it, he had to have sensed the way in which Ellie fitted herself against him. Nora had selected a slow romantic song for both her dance with Piper, but also Nick’s with Ellie.

And Ellie had slipped. She’d actually shown some of what Nora had seen since the very first day they’d met. That she cared, deeply, for the detective. That she stayed by him out of more than a need for a paycheck. And that she was molded up against Nick out of more than the need to do a traditional dance at a wedding reception. In short, Nora was SURE that her friend had just had his nose rubbed in the fact that Ellie carried a torch for him.

Nora had decided to let it lie for now. She wanted Nick to think about it. She had also started thinking about all the portraits and sculptures that would come in later years, entitled “The Nosy, Busybody Aunt of Her Country”.
As Nora lay holding Piper, and stroking her hair, she’d thought about Cait. Who’d asked about the rooms. Nora had bought out the bar for the night, but what about the Dugout Inn’s rooms? Nora had informed Cait that at 10 caps a night, “renting out” all three rooms for the night had been the least of her expenses.

A good while later, Nora had caught a mildly buzzed Cait towing a more than mildly buzzed Danny Sullivan into the back. Nora had informed Cait that she hadn’t rented the rooms to become a madam. Cait informed Nora that in addition to her wedding night responsibilities with Piper, she should also go off and engage in that kind of activity with herself.

As the evening wore on, all the guests found time to visit the couple. Deacon and Dez came to visit, and Nora apologized to Deacon. Dez had looked puzzled. Nora smiled, and informed them both that she greatly regretted providing a really effective counter-argument to “Hell is other people”. Deacon had laughed hugely and kissed Nora on the cheek as he told her he’d specifically said that for that reason.

And Nora recalled, while caressing Piper’s bare shoulder, the exact moment she caught Marie leading Preston into another of the back rooms. What little of her knowledge had remained theoretical up to that moment was surely about to become practical. She had had a very determined look on her face, while his look was more bemused but giddy. He was highly unlikely to propose anything she wouldn’t find pleasurable and she was about to solicit a LOT of suggestions.

But her favorite memory was later in the evening, while she and Piper were dancing, and Piper had had her dress tugged. Nat was pulling on it. Nat had looked back at Nick and Ellie, who were giving her a thumbs up, and then she’d said to her sister, “May I cut in and dance with Nora, please,” so seriously that Piper had simply nodded and stepped away before it really registered what had happened, and when she tried to turn back, Ellie had caught her and pulled her over to chat.

Nat had put up her arms and Nora stooped a little to begin dancing with her new sister/daughter-in-law. Nat had looked up and seriously said, “Nora, I want you to know how happy you make Piper. I never knew how to make it happen before, but I did want Piper to be happy, and you make her happy. But you make me happy too. I feel like I finally have a mom as well as a sister.”

Nat continued, “I’m glad Piper found you. I’m glad you married her. I’m glad we have you.”

Nora smiled at Nat, “I love you too, Nat. You know that right?”

Nat nodded.

“Good, because there’s going to be times when I piss you off sweetie, but I’ll always know how you feel. Because you told me,” and with that, she kissed Nat’s forehead, and they wandered off the floor to find a snack.

Piper had found them then, and the three of them had a family moment in the middle of the reception. And that was Nora’s best memory of the night.

Nora felt Piper stir next to her and then rise up on one elbow to look at her. “Good morning, Mrs. Wright,” she said. And then she looked Nora in the eyes, “And what the hell brought that last surprise on, might I finally ask?”

Nora smiled, “Now that we have some privacy, sure. I didn’t really want to stay a Greene. Not least because it was never mine to begin with. It was Nate’s and the poor man is gone. And Nora McAllister is the name I had when…well, you know.”
Nora sat up, kissed her wife, then flopped back. “I’ve wanted to be Nora Wright, the wife of Piper Wright, since the night I proposed. So I made arrangements with the Pastor to spring it on you. Because I don’t WANT to be Nora McAllister, the killer, and I don’t WANT to be Nora Greene, the victim. I want to be Nora Wright, the ‘Agent of Change’.”

Piper smiled at Nora. “You’ve given this some serious thought, Blue.”

“You have no idea, Thing,” said Nora. “I’m serious, by the way. I am Nora Wright and will be forever.”

“I had no doubts, Blue. You have a whim of steel,” she looked thoughtful. “Spares me the trouble of changing Nat’s name.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. She’ll always be Natalie Wright, won’t she?”

Piper nodded. “Until Sheng gets involved.”

Nora said, “Eww,” but not so loudly that they couldn’t hear Nat saying it too.

Nora quickly pulled on a t-shirt, handed another to Piper, and then yelled at the ceiling, “Natalie Wright, get up here,” as she threw the blanket over her wife and herself.

Nat burst into the room. Nora looked at her, “Were you listening, and how long have you been home?”

Nat looked truculent, and said, “Not long, and you didn’t say anything interesting.”

“Nat! Do you think I and your sister have a right to privacy?” Nora asked.

Nat mumbled something.

“What was that, young lady?” said Nora.

“I said, ‘Yes, Mom’! What more do you want?” Nat shouted.

Nora and Piper stopped, shocked.

“Wait, what?” said Nora.

Even Nat looked a little shocked.

“Umm…’mom’?”

Nora’s entire expression melted, and she held her arms out to Nat. Nat shyly let Nora hug her.

“Really, sweetie?”

Nat mumbled again.

“What?” said Piper.

“Mom! Yes! I want a mom! Okay? Happy?!?”

Nora started laughing, and Piper was smiling at her sister.

“Well, sweetie, your sister and I do NEED privacy from time to time, OK? But that doesn’t change how I feel about you,” said Nora. “And you know what?”
Nat shrugged.

“We Wright women have to stick together. Right?” Nora smiled at her sister-in…no, at her daughter. “Because we’re family.”

Nat nodded.

Nora said, “So let’s have a family breakfast.”

“Only as long as you or Codsworth make it,” said Nat.

“Hey!” exclaimed Piper.

“You know she’s right sweetheart,” said Nora.

“I didn’t say she was WRONG,” said Piper. “I said ‘Hey!’.”

“OK, Nat, head downstairs, and let us get dressed.”

While Nat ran downstairs and Codsworth started breakfast, Nora smiled as she and Piper got dressed. It was so ordinary, and pedestrian. And yet…

She’s my wife. And I’m hers. And we’re going to have a family breakfast. And I seriously think my heart is going to burst.

As Nora sat with her wife and daughter, and reveled in her newborn family, she had a premonition. That while she would have many more moments like this and that her family was secure, that while she had suffered and overcome obstacles, that the worst? The worst was yet to come.

She was absolutely correct.

[End Of Book 1, To Be Continued In Book 2, "The Ceremony of Innocence"].

Chapter End Notes

Huh. An even 50 chapters. Anyway, I wanted to get this out at the start of the long weekend.

Chapter 1 of Agent of Change, Book 2, "The Ceremony of Innocence" will come out Monday Night, but the schedule will be one chapter at a time. I’m currently about a third of the way through Book 2, and I will strictly adhere to "Finish a chapter, post a (much earlier) chapter" to minimize the times I have to rewrite directly to AO3 because of "oh shit" moments.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!