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opening extract from

Colony

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The Mojave Desert: California **1980**

The teenager woke up on the floor in the back of a bouncing jeep. A full moon swung sickeningly in the inky sky as the vehicle pitched and juddered across uneven ground. The boy's jaw was clenched and his muscles ached with cold—all he was wearing was a thin paper gown.

He rolled over and found himself face to face with a dead soldier. The man's pupils had rolled upwards and his lower lip quivered in time with the vehicle's vibration, making it look as if he was praying. Jerking back, the boy collided with a limp pair of legs. Another soldier was sprawled over a pile of jerrycans—blood saturating the back of his jacket. The teenager let out a rasp of terror.

The jeep slewed to a halt. The boy scuttled back to the tailgate holding out thin white arms to ward off the driver.

'It's all right, son. I ain't gonna harm you.' It was too dark to see the stranger's face but the voice was female, gruff yet deliberately reassuring. 'Dan, isn't it?'

'Dan Salty,' the boy replied shakily. 'I got dead guys on either side of me.'

'Yeah. Sorry about that.' The figure turned off the ignition and climbed awkwardly into the back of the vehicle. 'But we're gonna need these fellas.'

Now that she was closer Dan could see the woman had a broad pretty face with thick black eyebrows, bright blue eyes, and a gap between her front teeth. Her chin and hair were hidden by a fur-rimmed parka hood.

'Got you some clothes here.' She pulled a bundle from under one of the seats, elbowing a corpse aside to get it clear. 'Better put them on before you get hypothermia.'

'What happened?' the teenager croaked. 'I remember everyone was dying!'

'We've got to get to the foothills before the sun comes up.' The woman thrust the pack onto his knees. 'Get dressed. I'll explain when we're moving again.'

Dan Salty looked down at the flimsy gown barely covering his body.

'Could you turn away? Please?'

'Sure, honey.' The woman swivelled round and returned to the driver's seat. 'Just don't hit me with a lug wrench when my back's turned. I'm on your side.' She crunched the gears and the jeep jolted into action again.

'Why haven't you got the headlights on?' Dan struggled into oversized combat fatigues and a roll-neck jersey then pulled on a pair of boots. None of it was easy to do in the darkness of a bouncing jeep with two dead bodies knocking him from side to side.

'Out here a spotter plane can see headlights miles away.' The woman hunched over the wheel, peering into the darkness. 'Don't even dare light a damned cigarette. You get up here with me when you're dressed and shout if you see any obstacles. Like this boulder.' She wrenched at the steering wheel and the jeep leapt into the air, landing with a teeth-jarring crunch. One of the soldier's arms jolted up in what looked like a casual salute.

Dan gave a moan and clambered quickly into the passenger seat. The woman winked at him.

'Name's Louise Martin.' She swerved to avoid a shallow ravine that had materialized out of the gloom. 'When we reach the foothills we're gonna hide this jeep in a gulley. Then we're gonna walk till we drop. Try and cover as much ground as we can before the sun gets too high. It can get pretty toasty out here in the daytime.' She gave a low chuckle. 'Don't wanna spend too long in the heat. Not with my condition.'

'Your condition?'

'I'm pregnant, son. An I already got a ten-year-old daughter. I need to whisk that young lady off somewheres, before the army realize I'm still alive.'

They didn't speak for a while. The boy heard the howl of an animal somewhere in the darkness.

'Coyote.' The woman cocked her head. 'Means the foothills are close.'

'I recognize you,' Dan said. 'You helped them do tests on the prisoners.'

'That I did.'

'Do you still work for them?'

Louise glanced back at the dead men behind her, then sideways at her apprehensive companion.

'I reckon I just quit.'