

Rangers at Roadsend

by

Jane Fletcher



2005

PART ONE

Chip Coppelli

16 September 533

CHAPTER ONE—A NEW GIRL IN THE SQUADRON

The new recruits to the Rangers were gasping as they stumbled up the road at an unsteady trot; many looked as though their legs were turning to rubber. Wisely, Sergeant Chip Coppelli stopped to let them pass, rather than relying on rank to grant her right of way. The recruits were clearly in no state to undertake evasive maneuvers. A grin spread across Chip's face at the sight of the exhausted women. It was not smug or malicious; an easygoing smile was merely her normal expression. Initial training for the Rangers was hell, as she well remembered, but sending out ill-prepared recruits would be verging on murder.

The trainees tottered to a halt in an open space nearby. Chip watched them form up in a line, swaying noticeably. A drill sergeant strutted forward slowly. The heavy, menacing steps made Chip's grin grow still broader. She wondered whether newly appointed drill sergeants were given lessons in swaggering or whether their gait was assessed for suitability before they were offered the job. And the voice! There must be a knack to sounding sarcastically ironic at full bellow. Chip could see the recruits flinch. It was a fair bet that they were all bitterly cursing themselves for applying to join the Rangers. Chip knew she had done so during her months as a trainee, but not seriously or for long. And the eight years since she had become a proper Ranger had been the happiest of her life—although it was fair to say that the preceding nineteen did not offer much in the way of competition.

With her path clear, Chip continued walking across the site, through the collection of barrack blocks, admin offices, stores, stables and training fields known as Fort Krowe. Her eyes took in the surroundings. The paths between the buildings were worn bare of grass, the ground still damp from the previous day's rain. From its hillside perch, the site commanded a view of the roofs of the town below and beyond them the

JANE FLETCHER

lowland pastures, cut by the Landfall road heading southeast. The sun shone in a cloudless blue sky, but the weight had gone from its heat. The wooded hillsides held the first tinge of red and orange. Autumn was on the way.

It had been a busy summer for the 23rd Squadron, chasing from one side of the Homelands to the other. The missions had been successful, and the only losses from the squadron were two women who had completed their period of enlistment and decided not to rejoin. The one from Chip's patrol had gone only two days before and was probably still nursing her hangover. Chip was not sure whether the woman was wise (in leaving rather than celebrating). While out on assignment, Chip always looked forward to returning to Fort Krowe for the chance to take things easy. It was only when she got back that she remembered how dull it was. Leaving the Rangers might well be the same.

The barracks allocated to the 23rd were on a gentle slope, slightly detached from the rest of the site. Chip looked at the wooden buildings fondly. Fort Krowe felt like home, far more so than her parents' house had ever done. She was just approaching the C Patrol bunkhouse when a voice called out, "Sergeant Coppelli."

Chip stopped and looked around. "What is it?"

The Ranger who had hailed her jogged closer. "Ma'am, Captain LeCoup wants to see you in the briefing room. Your new recruit is here."

"Already? That's great." Chip switched direction.

The briefing room was in the block housing the officers' quarters. In a normal barracks, it would have fulfilled a range of administrative functions, requiring desks, bookshelves and cabinets, but at Fort Krowe, there were divisional offices to take care of such things. The only furniture in the room was a large central table and benches pushed back around the walls.

When Chip entered the room, Captain LeCoup was half sitting on the table, with one foot dangling free. LeCoup was short and square, with a face that epitomized determination. In Chip's opinion, it would be a brave brick wall that dared stand in her way. LeCoup was looking displeased, which was not a rare expression for her, although her fairness and competence meant that it did not stop her troops from generally approving of her. The current focus of her displeasure appeared to be the woman standing at attention in front of her.

Rangers at Roadsend

LeCoup's eyes shifted as the door closed. "Sergeant Coppelli, the new member of your patrol is here. Private Katryn Nagata." Her voice was clipped.

Chip covered her surprise. Everyone managed to annoy LeCoup at some time; however, doing it within minutes of arriving in the squadron was both unusual and unwise. Chip took a few steps forward until she was standing beside the newcomer and then turned to look at her.

She was almost exactly the same height as Chip, her body lightly built but too well balanced to appear weak. Her head was small and neat, with a finely cut profile. The first thought to strike Chip was that Katryn Nagata was incredibly good-looking. The second thought—that the woman was older than she had expected, in her mid-twenties—was followed immediately by a mental double take. LeCoup had given the woman's rank as private, not Leading Ranger. A quick glance at Katryn's shoulder badge confirmed it. The shield was blank.

Promotion to Leading Ranger was a formality granted when a woman had completed two years of service and was marked by a single bar on her badge. It was possible for an officer to recommend that the promotion be delayed, but it was exceptional for that to happen, and certainly for no more than a year. In Chip's experience, you only met someone the newcomer's age who had an empty badge if she had been busted to private for a disciplinary offense.

LeCoup's next words supported this inference. "Private Nagata has been transferred to us from the 12th."

Chip mentally completed the story. The offense had not only been serious enough to merit demotion, but also had made Katryn so unpopular with the other members of her squadron that it had been necessary to move her. Gross cowardice would have done it, or stealing from her comrades, and either would probably have earned her a flogging as well. Whatever the crime, she was unlikely to be an asset to the 23rd. Chip could understand LeCoup's annoyance.

Chip studied Katryn's face in profile. The new arrival's gaze was fixed on the wall; her jaw was clamped shut. She was trying to look impassive, but the line of her mouth gave her away. She was miserably nervous, and she was very beautiful. Chip knocked the thought away and turned back to LeCoup.

The captain was glaring at Katryn, but then she sucked in a deep breath. "Okay, Private. You're not the person I'd have chosen, but I

JANE FLETCHER

suppose someone had to have you. I'll assume that all appropriate action has been taken and we can draw a line under the past. You're in the 23rd Squadron now, and this is day one. Behave yourself, and things will be fine. Step out of line, and you'll regret it. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll be in C Patrol, under Sergeant Coppelli here. She'll be watching you very carefully. Make sure she sees only good things." LeCoup paused, glaring. "She's all yours, Sergeant. Dismissed."

Chip led the way to the C Patrol bunkhouse. The dormitory layout was standard. An unlit iron stove was close by the door. A single bed for the corporal and double bunks for the other six members of the patrol stood in the corners. The door to the sergeant's room was at one end. All remaining wall space was taken up with lockers to hold the Rangers' possessions.

Chip pointed out the vacant top bunk and spare locker. "They'll be yours."

"Yes, ma'am." Katryn's voice was taut to the breaking point.

Chip looked at her. Katryn's hands were shaking visibly. Her eyes were bleak and despairing. "Trapped" was the word that came to Chip's mind. A ripple of sympathy flowed through her. Everyone made mistakes. You should not have to pay for them more than once. In a lighter tone, she said, "Don't be too worried by Captain LeCoup; she doesn't do the chummy act, but she's not vindictive, and she means exactly what she says. She's given you a clean sheet in the squadron. The rest is up to you."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you." Katryn sounded no happier. She looked like a condemned woman on her way to the scaffold.

Chip stepped closer and put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. You're over the worst bit with LeCoup and me. The rest of the patrol can do reasonable impersonations of human beings—on a good day."

On cue, the door opened, and Lee came in. Chip accosted her and made the introductions. "This is Private Katryn Nagata, who has joined C Patrol, and this is Corporal Lee Horte, who is going to sort out your horse in the stables, show you where everything is and trot you around to say hello to everyone while I go and put my feet up in the approved fashion for sergeants."

Chip shot a warning glance at Lee before heading out through the door. Lee would be a good person to help Katryn settle in. It had

Rangers at Roadsend

to be stressful to be dumped in a group of strangers who were going to distrust you. Lee was the calmest person Chip had ever met. In five years in the Rangers, fighting their way out of countless dangerous situations, Chip had never heard Lee lose her composure enough to mutter an oath stronger than “Oh, dear.” Lee was far more diplomatic than the average Ranger and could be counted on to not overplay a drama. Lee would also protect Katryn from too much tactless curiosity from the other patrol members.

Standing outside the bunkhouse, Chip paused and thought. It was not just her and the captain who would add things together and draw conclusions. For the sake of unity in the patrol, it would be nice to have the facts; no matter what, they would be better than rumor. While Lee sorted out the practical details, Chip decided to go back for a talk with Captain LeCoup and see whether she could find out exactly what Katryn Nagata had done.



General mail arrived at Fort Krowe once a week. Rather than have the staff pestered by every woman on site, it was the responsibility of sergeants to collect and distribute mail to their patrols. It was Chip’s next task after leaving Captain LeCoup—no wiser than before. The captain was not withholding information about the new recruit; there was simply none to be had.

“You’re early; you’ll have to hang on!” the clerk shouted as Chip entered the mail office.

“You mean you’re not ready yet?” Chip’s tone was teasing.

“That was the general implication.”

“You’ll have to start taking shorter lunch breaks.”

“I haven’t had a lunch break today.”

“You mean your morning tea break overran so much, there wasn’t time to fit one in?”

In reply, the clerk merely glared at her tormentor, but there was no real animosity on either side. The mock arguments were part of a traditional baiting game between divisional staff and those on active service in the squadrons.

Most of the office was taken up with desks and cabinets, but in a corner were a few stools. Chip selected one and sat down. After a few

JANE FLETCHER

minutes, the door opened again, and Sergeant Aisha O'Neil of A Patrol entered, with Kimberly Ramon close behind. They were, respectively, the oldest and youngest sergeants in the 23rd. Ash O'Neil had been a sergeant when Chip joined the squadron. It was known that she had repeatedly turned down promotion to lieutenant, claiming that she preferred to stick with what she was good at. And there was no one who would deny that Ash was an exceptionally good sergeant.

Kim Ramon of B Patrol was also well respected. Reaching the rank of sergeant at twenty-four was fast work, and there was little doubt she would go much farther. She had been tipped as captain since her first month in the Rangers. Chip felt no resentment at knowing she would be overtaken on the promotion ladder, especially because Kim was her best friend.

"You can tell who hasn't got enough work to do," Kim teased, seeing Chip already there waiting.

"I'm merely maintaining good morale by making sure my patrol get their mail promptly," Chip answered in kind. Then she raised her voice. "Or at least they would if the staff didn't fart about so much."

"Sod off!" The answer was shouted back.

"What has happened to witty repartee?" Chip shook her head sadly.

"You weren't expecting wit from divisional staff, were you?" Kim spoke in mock innocence.

The three sergeants grinned at the harassed clerk and then settled down to wait. Ash rested her back against the wall and said, "I hear we've got a new girl in the squadron. I take it she's in your patrol."

"Yes. Turned up about an hour ago," Chip confirmed.

"You frowned when you said that."

"Mmm." Chip hesitated—not because she had doubts about the discretion of her fellow sergeants, who would soon learn everything via the grapevine anyway, but because she was uncertain what to make of the information she had to give.

"There's a problem with her?" Kim prompted.

"Well, she's not a new recruit. She's a transfer," Chip began. "Her name's Katryn Nagata. She must be twenty-five or so, and she's got the rank of private."

There were a few seconds of silence while the other two added things up. "What did she do?" Ash asked eventually.

Rangers at Roadsend

“We don’t know, which is really winding up LeCoup. I’ve come here straight from talking to her. Apparently, the transfer papers have got no information on them at all.”

“Isn’t there a record of the court-martial?”

“There must be—somewhere, but it hasn’t got here yet. She’s been transferred from the 12th, which is in Western Division...I think.”

“Eastern,” Ash corrected.

“Whatever.” Chip shrugged. “The legal documents are probably still doing the rounds in Landfall.”

“It’s not a good situation,” Kim said, shaking her head.

“No, not really. I’ve been trying to think of all the things you can get busted for.” Chip pursed her lips. “I suppose blasphemy wouldn’t bother me too much.”

“It’s not being busted to private that’s worrying.” Ash gave her opinion. “It’s having to be transferred. Upsetting the authorities can be a matter of bad luck. Upsetting your comrades points to something nasty.”

“How did she seem to you?” Kim asked.

“I didn’t talk to her much.”

“First impressions?”

“Well...” Chip caught her lower lip in her teeth, working to hide her grin. “I don’t know how to tell you this, Kim, but she may well take your place as pretty girl of the squadron.”

Kim laughed. “She’s welcome to it. The bonus pay for the post is abysmal.”

Chip tilted her head sideways. “She may be trouble, but at least she’ll be ornamental.”

Ash joined in the joking. “Don’t knock it. When you’ve been a sergeant as long as me, you’ll know the value of an ascetically pleasing patrol. Remember, for one reason or another, you have to spend an awful lot of time looking at them.”

“Okay, the mail is ready!” the clerk shouted over, interrupting the discussion.

The three sergeants picked up the appropriate piles of letters and wandered back to the barracks. “So what are you going to do about your new Ranger?” Kim asked when they were outside.

“What can I do? She’s been assigned to the 23rd. Anyway,

JANE FLETCHER

maybe she's learned her lesson. It's not fair to assume we need to do anything."

"I meant about finding out why she was court-martialed. You don't want to leave it to rumor."

"Oh, that," Chip said cheerily. "I've worked out just what to do. I'm going to ask her."



A small town had grown up next to Fort Krowe. Initially, it had existed solely to supply the needs of the Rangers, but over the years, it had acquired a life of its own. Unsurprisingly, from the first, the town had attracted bowyers and swordsmiths, who no longer confined their trade to the military. Blades and bows from Fort Krowe were prized throughout the Homelands. The weekly market in the main square was the center of this trade.

Kim looked around as she and Chip wove their way between the crates and half-dismantled stalls. It was the end of another frenetic day of buying and selling. Crowds were thinning, and the stalls were being taken down for the night. No one spared a second glance for the two Rangers in their uniforms of green and gray, strolling across the cobbles. The indifference brought a wry smile to Kim's lips. Anywhere else, they would have attracted a lot of attention, if only from wide-eyed children, but this was Fort Krowe, home of the Rangers.

As they reached the far side of the market, Chip tapped Kim's arm and pointed down a side street. "Do you mind if we go to the Cat and Fiddle tonight?"

"No," Kim agreed easily and changed direction. "Any particular reason?"

"The rest of my patrol are going there. I'm hoping the new girl will tag along so I'll get the chance for a little off duty chat."

"To try and find out why she was court-martialed?" Kim put a teasing edge to her voice.

"Of course. Why else?"

"Well, you did say she was attractive."

"I said she was prettier than you."

Instead of answering, Kim directed a sideways look at her friend.

Chip laughed. "Don't tell me you're worried."

Rangers at Roadsend

“About what?”

“That she might take away some of the adoring hordes that chase after you.”

This time, it was Kim who laughed. “There are enough women mesmerized by a Ranger’s uniform to go around.”

“And around and around.” Chip grinned. “Well, you should know.”

Kim made no attempt to deny the gibe. It was true that some women were fascinated by Rangers, and Kim was quite happy to admit that she made full use of the allure of her uniform—as did many others in the squadron. Maybe there was comment on her unrelenting pace as she worked her way through the stream of infatuated women, exceptional even among the free-living Rangers. However, she did not intend to get defensive about her behavior, especially not with her best friend. Chip knew her, and her life history, well enough to come up with some painfully sharp conjectures about the underlying causes, and it was not a subject that Kim felt ready to reflect on.

Their arrival at the tavern put a temporary end to the conversation. The taproom of the Cat and Fiddle was busy. Even so, it was not hard to spot the group of Rangers in the corner. Chip led the way, with Kim half a step behind. As they sauntered over, loud voices hailed the two sergeants. Both were well liked and, off duty, welcome drinking companions. Kim immediately identified the newcomer at the back of the group. The woman was clearly uneasy, although making an effort to fit in. The other members of the patrol were being polite, but they were also unsure how to react to the new addition to the squadron.

While they were still out of earshot, Kim whispered, “I take it that’s her?”

“Yes.”

“Not bad,” Kim said appraisingly. Chip had not exaggerated her appearance. “But you don’t need me to tell you to be careful.”

“I said I thought she was good-looking. I didn’t say I planned on doing anything.”

“I heard what you said. I also heard how you said it.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not about to do anything daft.” Chip rapped her knuckles gently on Kim’s arm. “Anyway, there’s no chance that someone who looks like that would have the slightest interest in anyone who looks like me.”

JANE FLETCHER

Kim managed to stifle her sigh. It was an old point of contention. Chip often claimed that her adolescent delight in being able to pick up lovers at will had gone with the knowledge that the women were attracted purely by her uniform. If Kim argued, Chip would cite the mirror as evidence, saying that the most flattering word she could come up with to describe her own face was “interesting.” Chip said it without bitterness or false modesty, but in Kim’s opinion, that still did not make it correct.

Kim had tried unsuccessfully to explain that only when Chip was studying her own reflection was her face inanimate, humorless and critical, which made all the difference. Many women had told Chip that she had a nice smile; Kim just wished Chip would take what they said seriously.

Yet now was not the time for a fresh attempt to change Chip’s opinion of herself. The new squadron member was a far more immediate concern. Just before they reached the group of Rangers, Kim caught hold of Chip’s shoulder and pulled her around so that their eyes met. “Friendship” was too weak a word for the bond between them. Each had risked her life for the other on countless occasions. The vigilance did not stop when they were off duty, and something about Chip’s reaction to the sight of Katryn set off alarm bells in Kim’s head.

She lowered her voice to an earnest whisper. “Just remember, she’s trouble.”



It was late in the evening before Chip got the chance for a private chat. The tavern was clearing slowly. Kim, true to form, was homing in on a soft-faced trader from Landfall. Katryn was sitting alone at a table in an alcove. Chip took her drink and slid in opposite.

“How are you doing?” Chip opened the conversation.

“I’m fine, thank you, ma’am.”

“We’re off duty. You can call me Chip.”

“Yes, ma—” Katryn swallowed and looked anxiously toward the bar, as though searching for advice. Her eyes dropped to her almost-empty tankard. Chip pointed at it.

“Can I buy you another one?”

“Oh, no...I...” Katryn was floundering for words. “I don’t drink

Rangers at Roadsend

much, but thank you.”

Chip studied the downcast face. She had tried to work out a tactful way to approach the subject, but everything she had thought of sounded contrived. It did not seem hopeful that Katryn was going to volunteer the information, so blunt honesty was going to have to do.

Chip settled back slightly in her chair, in order not to appear too intimidating, and asked, “Why were you court-martialed?”

“Pardon?” Katryn’s head shot up.

Chip did not repeat her words, judging that Katryn’s response was not due to mishearing.

Katryn met her gaze for a few tense seconds and then shook her head. “I haven’t been court-martialed.”

“So why aren’t you a Leading Ranger?”

“I haven’t been in the Rangers long enough to qualify. I only completed initial training in January.”

Chip opened her mouth and then shut it again. Her eyebrows drew together in a frown. Of course, it was possible. Before a woman could apply to the Rangers, she had to complete two years’ probation in the Militia. The full term of enlistment was fourteen years. Those whose applications were successful spent the last twelve years in the Rangers. After that, it was possible to reenlist in seven-year extension periods, as long as the woman was not too old. Forty-four was the cutoff point for active field duty, sixty for divisional staff and seventy for command. To enlist in the Militia, a woman could be between sixteen and thirty, but in practice, it was extremely rare for anyone to join after the age of twenty. A fair proportion of the squadron had applied for the Militia and then the Rangers on the very first day they were eligible. Chip had not been quite so prompt, but she had still entered the Rangers before her nineteenth birthday. She had never heard of anyone very much older even wanting to transfer to the Rangers, let alone being accepted, but it was not prohibited by the rules.

“I didn’t...er...I...” Now it was Chip who was lost for words.

“I haven’t been charged with any crime, let alone found guilty.” Katryn’s voice was soft, with a bitter undertone.

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I made assumptions from your age.”

Katryn bit her lip and then nodded. “That’s all right. I know it’s unusual.”

The question of why she had been transferred remained, but

JANE FLETCHER

Chip felt that she had blundered into enough awkward mistakes for one evening. She decided to retreat to another subject, and it would be safest to let Katryn choose it. “Right. Well...um...is there anything I can tell you? About the squadron or whatever?”

“I don’t know much about Central Division, what the postings are like or...” Katryn’s voice trailed away into a shrug.

Chip nodded. It was a safe subject. “Varied, very varied. Northern, Eastern and Western Divisions have their section of border to protect. Central has to cover everything else.”

“The coast to the south?” Katryn suggested.

“Technically, yes. But though I’ve heard tales of sea monsters, they stay in the water and don’t cause us problems.”

Katryn’s face fell slightly. “A shame. I’ve always wanted to see the ocean.”

“Oh, you’ll get to see it, all right, and everywhere else in the Homelands as well. Whenever a local Militia has a problem too big to handle, they call on Central Division. We’re the smallest division—only five squadrons—and we cover the largest territory. On top of that, we are sometimes loaned to other divisions as reserves, particularly in winter, when snow lions get troublesome. We think of Fort Krowe as our base, but we don’t spend much time here.”

“It sounds like the 23rd sees a lot of action.”

“Oh, we do. Of all sorts.” Chip’s grin returned. “The other divisions rotate around the garrison towns on the borders. We get to visit places where they don’t normally see Rangers. You won’t believe how enthusiastically women will grab their once-in-a-lifetime chance to examine the contents of a Ranger’s uniform.”

Chip glanced across the tavern. Once-in-a-lifetime chance or not, Kim’s trader was clearly eager to undertake the investigation.

“I’m not into...I mean, if that’s what other Rangers want, it’s okay, but for myself, I don’t...” Katryn mumbled.

Chip yelped with laughter. “Now, that’s not the proper attitude for a Ranger.”

The humor missed Katryn. “I had a lover before, and she...” Her voice failed her. Katryn’s expression had been starting to open. It snapped shut, but before it closed, Chip saw into a raw pit of pain.

Chip slipped down in her chair, letting her gaze rise to the blackened beams of the ceiling. It would explain the transfer. Affairs between

Rangers at Roadsend

Rangers were not approved of, but they were impossible to forbid. In the closed world of barracks and field duty, many Rangers slept together, generally expressing no more than the intense camaraderie of active service. On a daily basis, your life lay in your comrades' hands, binding you closer than sisters. The authorities would take no action unless the relationship got out of hand, threatening the military discipline of the squadron, but then they would step in—hard. It was particularly likely in the case of an affair between an officer and her subordinate.

Katryn was attractive enough to make any Ranger forget herself. It would not be surprising if a sergeant, or someone of even higher rank, had fallen for her. Separating the lovers was the quick, ruthless answer, and Katryn, as the new recruit, would be the one to be moved.

Chip's face softened in sympathy. As she had thought before, it had to be hard to be dumped in a new squadron, in circumstances that guaranteed distrust. And it was so much harder to do it with a broken heart.