



Snow Blind

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Category: Romance, Suspense

Description: Helen McDaniel returns in *Snow Blind*, the gripping fourth installment of the *Technicians of the Great Lakes* series. This time, she heads to Illinois, where she begins to unravel the intricate network linking the Technician crews. Under the guidance of accidents specialist Passion Fruit, Helen sharpens her skills—and uncovers the darker reality of “taking out the trash.” One mission, leaves Helen shaken. Needing space to regroup, she turns her focus to Mustang and the upcoming holiday season. Crafting her way through her emotions, she’s nesting and falling harder for the man who rescued her in more ways than one. As they build a life together in Indiana, their bond deepens. While Helen is looking for the Chrysalis, she also learns, the Chrysalis is looking for her with weirdly, hilarious results. Perfect for fans of action-packed series with strong, dynamic female leads, *Snow Blind* delivers suspense, emotional stakes, and new revelations as Helen steps further into the shadows of the Great Lakes Technician Crew.

Total Pages (Source): 61

Chapter 1-Accident

This was a test. It had to be a test. There was no way on God's pretty planet that the last six days of her life weren't some form of an endurance or mental capability test to not fall off the sanity wagon. She had driven the three hours and forty-six minutes from Plainfield, Indiana to Antioch, Illinois to begin her training with Passion Fruit, the Accidents Specialist. A weekend off to spend with her main squeeze, The Mustang, was just what she needed to clear her mind in preparation to learn how to stage accidents cleverly. Helen McDaniel, codename The Cranberry, was on the third leg of a hairy dog training regime to become a Technician. As an on-boarding member of the Great Lakes Crew of Forbidden Fruits, her training thus far was composed of spending three months with each member of the crew.

In August, she spent ten really weird days with The Bad Apple to assess her strengths and weaknesses. He cut the training time short after she shut down three warehouses of weirdness with kids taken off the streets of Milwaukee. What she saw in those buildings were the things that created lifelong nightmares. However, she endured. As a reward, The Cranberry earned a two-week break, which she spent in Oregon with her man before heading to Ohio to spend three months with Lemon to learn chemistry. In her opinion, the Bad Apple and Lemon needed to trade handles because that woman would test the patience of Job. They departed company as colleagues in early-November, and The Cranberry knew entirely too much about plants, toxins, and quick ways to stop a heart from beating. Today, on the evening of Veteran's Day, she arrived in Illinois to a really strange text message.

"This is a test. It has to be some form of a test," Helen said aloud as she arrived at the home of Passion Fruit. "What is that funky-ass smell?"

The instructions she'd received via text were very specific. There was a code for the gate.

ALL OF THESE STEPS she followed, arriving at the rear of the home to spot a sight she wasn't prepared to see.

"This is a test," she said aloud, exiting the vehicle with her purse dangling from her wrist. Helen dropped the key inside her purse and walked up to where Passion Fruit stood over a body that was immobile, lying on an old Army green woolen blanket. "This is a test."

"Stop standing there gawking and get over here and help me," Passion Fruit commanded.

Helen didn't ask questions. She dropped the handbag in a pile of dirt and ran over. She was told to grab the feet and on the count of three, they lifted a very heavy man onto a gurney. It had to be a test. Why would she arrive at someone's home to help them move a body? An alive body? Or was it no longer alive?

They hoisted the body onto the gurney, and with one lift of her foot, the transport table rose. Passion Fruit yelled at Helen, "Push!"

Helen obeyed, pushing the man on the hospital table into the home. A loud moan eked from his lips, leaving Helen to sigh in relief at the answer to her question about the man lying supine on the moveable bed.

"Okay, he's alive," Helen said.

"Not for long if we don't get a move on," Passion Fruit told her. "Remove the boots and start cutting off the pants. There's a bullet in him, we need to find it, plug the hole, then cauterize the wound."

Helen reached into her pocket and pulled out her favorite knife. She unlaced the boots and pulled them off his feet, noticing the immediate ballooning inside the socks. Her blade sliced through the fabric of the khakis, and she spotted the compound leg fracture.

"Compound fracture, right fibula," she noted, cutting away the fabric. She moved up the man's legs and continued cutting away the material. "Dislocated knee, contusions on the right quad, left quad, broken skin on left thigh."

Helen undid the belt. Gently, she pulled it open, cutting the fabric to expose boxer briefs, black, and damp. There was no blood on the legs except for the wounds. She continued up the torso while Passion Fruit started a fire in the large fireplace. The shirt came off, and a dark wound jumped out at Helen from his belly.

"There are internal injuries," she called back, cutting away the shirt. She located the hole in his left shoulder. "Bullet wound, upper left shoulder."

Blood pumped out slowly. She feared his heart rate was slowing down or either his body was running out of red juice, and the man would be dehydrated, dead from lack of blood. Her hand slid under his back, feeling.

Helen called out, "It is not a through and through; the bullet is still inside of him!"

It was then she made it to his face. She screamed in horror at what she saw. "Dear God, where is his face?"

A flap of what used to be the man's face hung to the side like chicken skin removed from a thigh before baking. Helen tried not to gag. "This is a stupid test. I think I quit."

"You can't quit," Passion Fruit said, coming up beside her and passing her a pair of

nitrile gloves. "If we quit, he dies."

"Is this one of your accidents gone wrong?"

"My accidents don't go wrong," Passion Fruit said. "We need to get the bullet out and run a line of at least two pints of O-neg, which is in that small fridge in the mudroom. Grab those please."

Helen didn't question, but mumbled under her breath, "Of course she has a mini blood bank, the bitch has a gurney! I am failing this test. I am so failing this test."

"Stop talking to yourself and bring me the blood," she said.

Helen returned with the two packs of life juice, passing them to Passion Fruit, who shook her head no. Passion Fruit explained what she was doing to locate the bullet as she used a slotted cannula to poke around in the hole in the man's left shoulder, digging around to locate the source of the blood loss.

"Can't you like use a magnet or something to attract it instead of digging in the man like that?"

"Bullets aren't ferromagnetic and are lead covered in copper," Passion Fruit spoke softly, locating the bullet. She pulled it out and laid it on his stomach. "Grab me that poker in the fireplace."

Helen did as she asked, bringing back the poker, thinking she wasn't going to stick that hot metal into that... Helen cried out, "Son of a bitch! I'm going to pass out! Jesus, hold my hand!"

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The smell of the burning flesh made Helen woozy as she held on to the edge of the gurney, trying desperately to not drop to the floor. Passion Fruit ignored her, opening a kit with needles and plastic tubing. The IV gurney pole popped up as she hung the bag of blood. A needle went into the man's arm as the blood began to drip in.

Next, she moved on to his face. A bottle of liquid was spritzed over the man's exposed dermis, and Passion Fruit gently lifted the flap of skin, pulling it over the unprotected flesh. She worked to pull the loose skin of the scraped-up nose. A medical stapler materialized in Passion Fruit's hand, and with precision, she stapled the man's face back into place.

"Eww, maybe you should leave it off and wait for it to grow back," Helen said holding her stomach.

"He needs healthy tissue for the reattachment to work, Cranberry," Passion Fruit corrected. "His dermal layer is still intact, which may allow this to heal correctly, but he's not going to look the same. It is going to be a gamble on whether this will heal or rot away, but I will do my best."

Helen, still woozy, tried to remain calmer than she felt, "What happened to him?"

"He was shot, Cranberry."

"I can see that," Helen said, "but the removal of the skin on his face, the bruises and contusions say so much more."

"I need you to say so much less while I work," Passion Fruit said. "In the mudroom is

casting material and my first aid kit. Please bring it."

"Sure," Helen replied, wondering why the woman didn't have her get it the first time she went into the mudroom. She returned to find the thin bone protruding from his leg had been popped into the place. Passion Fruit removed bone fragments from the open wound and cleaned it with items from the first aid kit. A stockinette was placed over the leg, followed by padding.

Helen stood by watching as a solution was made for the cast and placed over the leg, creating a protective encasement for the bones while he mended. Her eyes drifted up the body, and in this state the man would need help to get to the bathroom or through life. She stayed quiet, watching her new mentor work. The cast was in place as if made by a professional doctor, but Helen worried about what was next.

Passion Fruit removed her gloves, washed her hands, and donned another pair of gloves. When Helen looked around, the man's boxer briefs were down and his junk was in the woman's hands.

"Dear God, I have died and ended up in hell," Helen said.

"He needs a catheter until he is mobile," Passion Fruit said.

"Of course, you just happen to have all of this on hand," Helen said.

"I am a medical doctor," Passion Fruit replied. "I simply prefer animals to people, Cranberry."

She changed out the bag of blood, providing the second one to the man on the table, then she rolled him into the living room in front of the fire. She smeared Betadine over the cuts and abrasions and bandaged where necessary. A quilt was placed over him along with bandages over his face, giving him a mummy-like appearance.

"You didn't check his back for wounds," Helen said.

"Right now, we simply need him to be out of the woods," Passion Fruit replied.

"What if the woods come to you?"

"Huh?"

"Whoever shot this man is going to look for proof of death," Helen told her. "The injuries suggest a fall from a high place with a rough landing that ripped off his fucking face. The person who shot this dude will look for him."

"I left no traces," Passion Fruit said, "Plus where he landed, it would be hard to climb down to let alone...never mind. I'm tired."

"Should I even ask why you were where this poor man landed," Helen said, looking about the home. It left a lot to be desired and most of the furniture appeared to be shared by an animal of some size.

Before Helen could ask about the resident of the large bed by the fire, Passion Fruit opened the side door, allowing entry to a black dog larger than the woman. Helen stood, still staring at the beast and wondering why her life had taken such an odd turn or if the monster would go for her throat.

"Candy, this is Cranberry. Please say hello," Passion Fruit said to the dog.

To her surprise, the animal walked to Helen and offered a massive paw. Helen accepted, shaking the beast's hand. The dog remained in front of her, staring, as if it were waiting for something. Finally satisfied, Candy walked away.

Helen asked, "What is that beast of a dog and what just happened?"

“She is a Cane Corso, and she simply did an assessment of you as a person,” Passion Fruit said, watching the dog sniff at the man. A small growl came from the throat of the beast, followed by a whimper. "Yeah girl, I know. He is in for a rough couple of days."

"He's not the only one," Helen said, again looking about the house. "I guess I need to get settled in, and my belly is empty."

"Yeah, we'll do a clean-up of the kitchen, bleach everything down, and make supper," Passion Fruit said, watching the man.

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PASSION FRUIT NEEDED to go to the kitchen to pull together some form of sustenance for her and Cranberry. The day had been too weird to even begin to explain. She was in the area to set up shop to stage an accident for one Elliot Parker. It wasn't in the brief what he'd done to warrant an untimely accidental death, and it wasn't in her wheelhouse to ask, but simply do. The setup never happened as the man who was now on the gurney had screamed out, and came tumbling over the rock face, hitting jagged rock edges on his way down. The scrub of shrubs at ground level cushioned his blow a bit, but the drop below ended in a black hole. The hole is why Passion Fruit was certain the man's shooter wouldn't go any further looking for him.

She knew this because Elliot Parker's accidental death was to be the same fate, which is why she was on the lower ledge of the cliff facing. This had to be called in, but she wouldn't mention the man in her home. Helen, in the kitchen going through the man's pants, noticed there was no wallet. As a matter of fact, there was no coat, and it was November in Illinois.

"No wallet, but also no coat," Helen called out. "Was he camping and his personal effects are still at the top of wherever he fell?"

"All those are good questions and very valid observations," Passion Fruit commented, absently petting the dog while watching the labored breathing of the man on the gurney. A wayward thought crossed her mind, but she dismissed it. "I can't go back to the scene or I'd risk exposing myself."

"The better reasoning to play with is why risk exposing yourself by bringing home

someone else's problem, issue, or intended failure to end this man's existence," Helen replied. "Yes, it is in our nature to care, but we are the guardians of women and children, not men."

"Without men, Cranberry, there will be no women and children," she replied. "Your room will be the first one on the left down the hall. The bathroom in the hallway is for you. I have my own. As far as meals, I don't eat beef, mainly fish and fowl, but I do like bacon."

Helen said nothing. She worked on cleaning up the discarded material from the mystery man. The materials were carried outside to a burn barrel where she tossed them in per instructions and started a quick fire with lighter fluid and matches, ridding the evidence of the man in the other room. From her car, she took out her suitcase and computer bag. There were cards inside from the boys and a few from the girls at Lemon's house. This Technician had no wards, but a very large dog and a man on a gurney. She picked up her purse, returning to the home locating her room.

The room was boring with a twin sized bed, a crooked handmade quilt, and single pillow. The desk in the corner looked as if it had come straight from the side of the road, and the chair's tufting looked as if Candy had used it as a chew toy. She sighed softly, waiting for guidance on what she could bring to the world of Passion Fruit. A bigger concern became raised about what she would leave the world of Passion Fruit carrying because the woman seemed darker than the other Technicians. The demon riding her soul hadn't been vanquished. It was still within her.

"Jesus, be a fence," she whispered as she began to unpack to settle into her room for the next three months. "I have no idea what I am in store for with this woman."

LASHONDA TEMPLE BECAME the accidents specialists for the Technicians, well,

by accident. An accident she staged for her biological father didn't go as planned, but based on who the man was, it put her on the radar of a few people who needed her special skills, not the ones yet to be fully actualized, but the ones she was trained to do. Lashonda Kelani Temple was a licensed and trained medical doctor. A passionate woman about healthcare and women's rights, she had also found a passion for treating animals.

However, it came about in a slow fashion by way of her mother. Bertie Temple, a Nicaraguan national, had made her way to the US via a Coyote who sold her to a man who needed a housekeeper. Bertie Temple was the American name on the paperwork given to her by the man. The man seemed nice enough to start and gave Bertie her own quarters in his home with his wife and three children. The first night he had snuck into her quarters, he was gentle with her, only asking the minimal to get him through a dry spell. The dry spells became more frequent, and the hand polishing jobs turned into more. Eventually, without proper care and precaution, the man began to notice the fullness in Bertie's breasts.

The fondness he had for the woman led him to place her in a nice apartment with the understanding there would be no one but him. He even attended the birth of his child, whom he named Lashonda after his favorite dancer in a nightclub he owned in Chicago. The man remained active in Lashonda's life, bringing presents and attending recitals, and when she graduated from high school, her father gave her a compact car to start college.

The pride he felt when Lashonda got into medical school made him cry. His pride also led him to pay for an apartment and all of her textbooks during her training. This act, in itself, indebted Lashonda. During her third year of medical school, with the bare minimum of training, she received a call from her father to come to his club. A dancer required medical treatment.

The woman was in poor shape, and Lashonda asked no questions because her father

stood over her shoulder watching the care she provided to his new favorite dancer. Every weekend, it appeared her father had a new favorite dancer in his nightclub. Every weekend, a new favorite dancer needed medical care for wounds that she began to realize were inflicted by her father or the men who frequented his establishment.

The fourth year of medical school, the weekend trips to his club changed to weekends at specialized locations where immigrants were being trafficked into the country and needed care. She didn't agree with what her father was doing and refused to aid him any longer, especially when she began to see the similarities between the immigrant women and the ones she'd been treating at his club. Lashonda spoke up.

"I don't know why you're trying to act so damned surprised," the man said. "I picked your mother out of one of these line ups and made her my housekeeper. You are who you are because of me, so don't try to act like you are better than any of these people. Help them like I helped you."

Lashonda couldn't wait to speak with her mother to verify if the man was lying. Her heart broke when she learned he was telling the truth. She asked her mother why she never saw her with any men, thinking her mother was simply a pious woman who loved only her father.

Curiosity made her follow the man from his club one Friday to the home in Lincoln Park near Chicago. He shared the home with his wife and three children who all drove fancy cars. A Hispanic woman greeted him at the door to take his briefcase while his wife met him with loving arms. Lashonda sat in the compact car fuming as the kids showered him with affection, and the son waved farewell as he climbed into a shiny BMW heading off into the night, more than likely, to ruin a young woman's life.

It was then that she began to hate the man. Several times she attempted to stage

accidents to take him out of play and each time she failed. With each failure, she learned more and got better, and the last time she nearly succeeded, but a different man intervened. This man stopped her and shifted the focus of her anger.

"You need to finish medical school," the stranger told her. "Your country needs that anger, and we have a home for it."

"He's a terrible person who does terrible things," Lashonda said.

"If you take him out, he will be replaced with someone who does much worse," the stranger said. "He is a controlled menace. If we know where he is and what he's doing, we can keep watch."

"This isn't France! Who is this 'we' you keep referring to? That man needs to stop existing in this world!" she yelled through tears.

"If he didn't exist, there would be no you," the stranger said. "You have many years to go in your training. Don't get sidetracked. Let me help you."

"Michael Kurtzwilke needs to die," Lashonda said. "What kind of man sends his daughter to medical school so she can take care of the people he traffics and puts to work in his nightclubs and brothels? I hate his fucking guts!"

"Each of us has a purpose," the stranger said. "You are learning yours. Allow me to guide you. I will handle Kurtzwilke and get you into a residency away from his reach. Will you let me do that?"

"I have to look out for my mother," she said through sniffles.

"Where you go, we shall send her as well," the stranger said. "Will you let me help you find a home for your anger?"

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Lashonda agreed. Over the next seven years, she became a doctor to a group of people who seemed deadly and came to her in the middle of the night with gunshot wounds or worse. The stranger called them Technicians. She also became a Technician, serving as a medical doctor who didn't like practicing medicine and moved away from the public to a small place in Antioch, Illinois.

Her mother, who passed right after Lashonda began her residency, leaving Lashonda adrift with no anchor other than the handsome stranger. He aided her in staying affixed to this world where he said she was needed and assigned her to a woman named Azreal, who became her handler. She still had yet to make a friend. She treated and streeted the people sent to her for care, taking more time to aid in nursing wounded animals and setting traps for larger ones.

This was her life. This was her passion. This was the fruit of her labor. Fifteen years later, she emerged a hardened shell and an accidents specialist who also served as a medical doctor for the Forbidden Fruits of the Great Lakes. Her handle was Passion Fruit.

Chapter 2 - Trouble

The uneasiness of the events from the day before had killed Helen's appetite, even after a long day of being on the road, leaving a sad faced Mustang home alone, and arriving at a very cold home to find a Technician dragging a body. The next morning, however, her belly screamed for food, especially for hot cereal like a bowl of parmesan grits with scrambled cheesy eggs. To wash it down with a cup of hot coffee would be amazing, which fueled her into action to shower and dress. With her teeth freshly brushed, body cleanly scrubbed, and legs properly coated in her favorite

lotion, she stepped from the bedroom, almost wanting to check on the partially comatose resident across the hall, but this wasn't her circus, and that man wasn't her clown. Instead, she made her way to the kitchen.

Helen walked down the narrow hallway, coming to the space where the living room was on the left and the kitchen and dining on the right. However, the air felt different. Instinct made her reach for the knives in both of her sweater pockets, holding them, prepared to throw at anything big coming her way. Two hours ago, she'd heard Passion Fruit's truck crank up, along with the heavy paws of Candy the Cane Corso leaving the home. She hadn't heard them return.

Something was off.

Something was different.

Someone sat in the corner in the dark.

A pair of black boots were there, attached to a pair of legs, which weren't there when she went to bed. Helen wasn't sure if this was Passion Fruit's man, her father, brother, or anyone else. She would err on the side of caution, considering the person was in the home, but she wasn't taking any fucking chances.

"I am pretty deadly with these knives," she said in a voice much calmer than she felt. "I may not land both center mass of your chest, but one will get you. Come on into the light."

The boots moved. The legs attached to the boots brought the body of a man into the light of the kitchen. Helen's eyes started at the feet, working their way up the stranger's body. The boots were very similar to the ones her cousin Cherry wore when she was out and about doing her former job as a Technician. The black cargo pants appeared custom made, with lots of pockets in different shapes that showed the

imprint of knives and what looked like ninja stars. She made a mental note of the pants, definitely wanting to know where he'd gotten them made.

The shirt, in an inky black dark cotton, had three buttons open at the neck. She could see the marking of a tattoo as well as, what she wasn't sure...possibly scales. Dark skin, kissed by a life lived in the sun, covered the man's throat. A scraggly beard barely covered the strong chin. The lips she almost recognized, and the nose as well, but it was the eyes. A stare which nearly bore through her met the steely gaze when she made it to his eyes.

"Oh, okay," Helen said, putting the knives onto the kitchen table. She wasn't sure what fresh hell had brought this man to her doorstep, but she wasn't dealing with him without having coffee first.

"Do you know who I am?" the man asked in a heavily accented, deep baritone voice.

"Yeah, you're the Bushmaster's father...the Lancelot," Helen said, walking to the stove to start the kettle for coffee.

"The Fer de Lance," the man corrected.

"I knew it had a lance in there somewhere. Sorry, I need coffee," she said. "I also need breakfast. Are you hungry? Can you eat a bit?"

"Excuse me? Do you know why I am here?" he asked, perplexed by the woman who didn't seem surprised to see him, nor was she afraid. Perhaps he had the wrong one.

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"I figured you came all this way for a conversation or for clarification," Helen said, "I am not doing either without food or my coffee. I guess, technically it's your coffee. I seem to have developed an addiction to those dark roasted beans."

He scowled at her, uncertain if the woman was well. "Are you on the medication?"

"No, Sir, Señor, Mr. Fer de Lance, the last year of my life has been, well, let's just say, nothing much surprises me anymore," she told him. "Please, have a seat. Standing there lurking is not going to get you either clarification or a conversation that will make much sense."

She went about starting breakfast with the Drug Czar for an entire country sitting at the table as if it occurred every day. She started the kettle and took a Chemex coffee carafe from the counter and added the special filter, which she dampened with a bit of water from the kettle. The man sat at the table watching her, saying nothing.

Helen grabbed a pot from the wall of hanging cookware, added water, and placed it on the stove. She took a bowl of fresh eggs from the counter to the table where he sat. She held her hands up as if she were being patted down, using one hand to open the kitchen cabinet to remove a mixing bowl showing him, while moving slowly, she intended no harm. Helen repeated this action, taking a ceramic container from the countertop and bringing it to the table. She turned the container to face him and slowly opened the top to reveal the contents of ground corn. Again, her hands in the air, she stood facing him, standing on one side of the kitchen drawer, opening it slowly and reaching one hand in to remove the measuring cups. She removed a scoop of the grits from the ceramic container and took them to the pot on the stove.

Helen moved to the fridge and took out wedges of cheddar and parmesan, butter, and cream. She added a bit of cream to the pot of grits, broke off crumbles of the parmesan, and tossed them into the pot. She stirred with a wooden spoon.

Suddenly, she turned to face the man. Her nose was crinkled as if she suddenly smelled something foul. "Hey, wait a minute. That chair wasn't in that corner. You moved it there to be all dramatic, didn't you?"

The man's eyebrows arched as she pointed the grits covered wooden spoon at him. "You are unwell, aren't you?"

"No, that chair wasn't there before. You moved it," Helen said shaking the spoon at him. "You're lucky I didn't shoot you."

She cracked four eggs, then looked at the back door. She cracked two more. Helen looked down the hall, not knowing if the guest would be able to hold down food, and for good measure, cracked two more.

The Fer de Lance also looked toward the hallway as well. "Your handiwork?"

"If I have to do a job, I finish it," she said softly. "Not sure what that's about, plus it's not my house. I, like you, am a guest."

"Hmmm," he replied.

The kettle began to sing as he watched her remove a bag of coffee from Las Tierras. He would ask later how she came to know his brand, among other questions which compounded each minute he spent in her presence. Admiration came briefly as he watched her add two scoops of the coffee. She looked up at him, then added a smidgen of a scoop more. Slowly, she began to pour the water over the grounds, allowing them to bloom. This was the way he made coffee in his home as well.

She whisked the eggs, added cream, and grated a bit of cheese into the bowl. On the stove, a skillet that had warmed enough to melt butter became home to the eggs. Helen stirred the grits, scrambled the eggs, and came to the table to pour more water over the coffee.

"If you want bacon, it's in the fridge," she said to the man.

To her surprise, he rose to retrieve the meat. A bacon rack appeared on the table as the man pulled off six strips and placed them on the microwave safe cooker. Helen stuck it in the microwave and hit four. Once more, she poured water over the coffee as it slowly drained a black emotional equalizer into the carafe. The eggs, now softly scrambled, were ladled onto two plates, alongside bread which popped from the toaster. The microwave dinged, announcing the completion of the meat, and she removed the dish and placed the bacon on a paper towel to blot the grease.

Helen brought it to the table along with two coffee mugs. She removed the filter with the grounds and placed it a small bowl for use later in composting. The grits, stirred and ladled out on the plate next to the eggs, came to the table. She poured coffee for both of them and took a seat. With her head bowed, she prayed over the meal, then added sugar to her coffee with a dab of cream. Slowly, she sipped, sighing in delight.

"This is surreal," she said. "I would rank this as the equivalent of having a glass of wine with a Gallo brother. Your coffee is amazing, but I'm sure you know that."

He said nothing as he added a bit of cream to his own coffee and sipped. "You are not what I was expecting."

"I get that often," she replied. "What were you expecting, if I might ask?"

Looking over the rim of the mug he said to Helen, "A temptress."

Her eyebrows arched. "And who would I have tempted...oh. Is he alright? Micah, is he okay, did something happen to him?"

"He's Micah," the Fer de Lance said.

"Alita, is she well? I know they were talking about colleges; did he decide on one?"

"He has not," the Fer de Lance said.

"Then what may I clarify for you, Señor?"

Honestly, he didn't know where to start. He didn't even know how to begin his reasoning for being in the U.S., let alone in some strange woman's home, seeking another strange woman, to gain...clarification for the changes in his son. He picked up a strip of bacon, surprised at his own hunger, and bit into it.

"The tablet," the Fer de Lance said. "He spent so much time watching the red dot on the tablet. Obsessed almost. Fixated."

"Red dot?"

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"He was tracking the red dot," he said. "The red dot went from Ohio to Indiana. Each time the red dot stopped in Indiana, he became more agitated the longer the red dot stayed immobile. Then, when it moved again, he calmed down."

The realization that the red dot must be a device on her vehicle unnerved Helen. "Micah is tracking me? How and why?"

"You don't have an implanted transponder like the others," he told her. "He placed the tracker on your vehicle. I was informed that you were under his protection. I need clarification on what you've done to earn his loyalty."

"I cooked him some neck bones, collard greens, and corny bread," she said, pursing her lips.

The man's face was deadpan, making Helen burst into laughter, which was the wrong thing to do.

Anger coursed through him at the slip of a woman. "Are you laughing at my son?"

"No, I am laughing at this situation," Helen said. "My meeting him was a chance encounter as he made the delivery of supplies to The Lemon, a Technician in Ohio. I was there for training. A situation arose, he asked me to cover his back, I did, and he became... enamored."

"Enamored?"

"Yes, Sir, and he made his pitch for my affections," Helen said. "I will admit, on his

third try, I was impressed."

"Third? He attempted to woo you more than once by the use of that word, I assume."

"Yes, the second bid for my affection he threatened to fight my man. Shirt off, bare knuckles, fight him for me," Helen said to a disapproving father's face.

"And the third?"

She smiled at him. "I will confess, that one, I took a pause. Let me make sure I get the wording correct. Yes, he gave me two options, one he could make the sweet love to me on the white sandy beaches in Mexico, or he would feed me figs and decadent cheeses on 1800 thread count sheets in California wine country."

The Fer de Lance's eyes grew wide. Helen shared her feelings on such an offer from a person barely an adult. However, the offer was made by his son, which in itself, had a shelf life of its own.

"I also ruefully admit, I've never been to wine country or slept on 1800 thread count sheets, so I was like, hmmm," she said laughing aloud.

To her surprise, the man laughed too. The air settled between them. He still was unclear of how X equaled Y, but they were still talking.

The Fer de Lance asked, "You played with his affections?"

"No, I have a man where we share a home and life in Indiana," she said, pausing, allowing him to connect the red dots. When she was satisfied that he had, she began to pull together the answers he sought. "In your country and your world, he is a man. In my eyes, he is an 18-year-old fighting back, or trying to, against your rules. I am, in his mind, the manifestation of all the things you say he can't have."

The man squinted his eyes as if he were straining to hear her words. He knew what she meant, but for clarification, she would have to break it down to ensure he knew she understood his world. She also didn't need to have the trouble of a drug czar breathing down her neck.

"You set forth rules to protect him, which he explained since there were teenage girls in Lemon's home," she said, which made him sit up straighter in the chair. "Don't worry; he made it clear the girls in his eyes were children, and he didn't need a child in his bed. Micah also explained that your rules forbade him from indulging, even if he wanted to, because it was not your way."

The man leaned forward, "But he went for you?"

"He went for the idea of me," Helen said, "knowing I would refuse him, but he wanted fuel for whatever battle he's planning with you."

The Fer de Lance's eyebrows went up, "You think he is planning a confrontation with me?"

"Every child has a confrontation with their father at 18. Didn't you?" she asked as she saw the quiver at the side of his lip. "My father is a mechanical engineer. He put money aside from each paycheck for my college education."

"Did you attend university?"

"Nope," she said, laughing. "My cousin Abigail joined the military. I waited until she finished her training and followed her around the world. We lived in Germany, Okinawa, a year in South Korea, and then back to the states in North Carolina. Her last stop was Indiana."

A new silence between them grew louder with each second. A conversation was had,

but elucidation was still required. Helen eased into it. "What else is Micah doing other than tracking my movements that made you take time from your busy life to come see me?"

"He is the mokey," the Fer de Lance reluctantly admitted. "I came to find the woman whom he said broke his heart. I needed to look into the eyes of the person who would take advantage of him."

"Sir, no one takes advantage of the Bushmaster," Helen said in his defense. "That young man is a powerhouse, smart, and sharp as a tack. You have taught him well to lean into his Asperger's and use it in his favor, plus, a body would have to get past Alita. The Lemon is a chemistry professor who has written textbooks used at universities around the world, as well as where she teaches her students. Micah sat at her dinner table, discussing formulas, probabilities, and using wording I can't even spell. No one, I mean no one, takes advantage of him. He knows what he wants and goes after it. I simply represent the times he tried, but I would not yield."

When she said the word yield, his eyes showed a recognition. "No, not that dude. I understand he is friends with your eldest?"

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"You know of the Technician they call The Yield?"

"I've worked with him," she said.

He leaned forward, "What kind of Technician are you?"

"The worst kind," she replied, sipping her coffee, emptying the mug. "I am no seducer of men, nor women for that matter. I look harmless, which makes people trust me, but like the Fer de Lance, I strike without warning, and I am deadly."

He leaned forward. "I don't want to like you, but I do."

Helen asked, "Then, may we part as friendly, with no harm on my part to the Bushmaster's heart or ambitions? Also, can you tell me where you got those pants?"

"Perhaps, but my concerns are for your ambitions," he said. "I tracked you to your home, missing you by minutes. Your man is a large guy, but there are others watching you as well, asking what I asked. What kind of Technician are you?"

"Have you led them to me?"

"No, seeing me will make them beg off for now," he said. "However, they will come, especially considering the work you did in Wisconsin."

"I did more work in Ohio and shut down a small one in Indiana," she said.

"Move with caution," he warned. "They don't know who you are but are trying to not

only find out but also find you."

"Let them fuckers come. I will be ready," Helen said.

"Never invite danger into your life," he cautioned.

The sound of the truck arriving was his cue to leave. He stood up, his eyes on the door. From the other room, he retrieved his coat and hat and returned to the table to take a seat. The back door opened, bringing in Candy, who spotted him and growled.

The Fer de Lance clicked his tongue twice and lowered his tone, praising the pretty girl. He called her over, "Ven aca mi bonita."

To both the surprise of Passion Fruit, who stood frozen in the doorway, and to Helen, the dog obeyed. He rubbed Candy between the ears, provided her with a handful of cheesy eggs and stood. His coat he put on in a flourish, capped off with the Bolero on his head.

"I must depart. Thank you for the meal, the conversation, and the clarification," he said, nodding his head to Passion Fruit.

"Anytime," Helen replied.

And with that, he was gone along with the coffee mug that was the only thing, outside of the two strips of bacon he had touched with ungloved hands.

Passion Fruit looked at Helen. "I could swear that man looked like Eduardo Delgado, the Fer de Lance."

"Yeah, looks can be deceiving," Helen said, trying to wrap her mind around the direction her life was taking. He'd shown up, looking for her, not as a Drug Czar, but

as a concerned father. She respected that, considering it was Micah. Then a thought hit her. She hadn't spoken to her own father in the past month. A mental note was added to her list to call him later. "I made breakfast."

"Helen, I do hope you don't plan to have guests in my home," Passion Fruit said.

"I didn't plan it; that man simply goes wherever the fuck he wants," she said, smiling.
"You want some coffee?"

Chapter 3- Misadventure

Elliot Parker needed to clear his head. Pieces of the puzzle were coming together faster than his mind could process the results. If the person he thought was in charge of one of the largest trafficking operations in the Great Lakes was whom he believed it to be, then shit was going to hit the fan. He was no whistle-blower, but there came a time when a man needed to take a stand for the little guy. The courage required to make such a statement needed support. At this point, he needed his head examined, which was why he wanted the weekend away- to put things in perspective.

He wanted to hike a few trails at Burgess Falls and camp out over the weekend, and then on Monday, a decision would be made. The idea to save on fuel by riding his motorcycle and towing his compact trailer. The trailer was large enough for him to sleep inside and big enough to carry the necessary camping supplies. He'd made it to the campsite, securing his spot for the weekend and feeling better about his decision to get away. Once he settled in, he planned to hike the 1.5-mile strenuous trail to see the waterfall. The gorge, he'd heard, was closed indefinitely, and he had no plans to venture in that direction, but a few photos would work nicely for his album.

Arriving at the spot where he planned to camp for the weekend, he began to search for stones to make a small fire pit. He'd only brought four wooden logs with him so he'd have to find more wood if he planned to stay warm. Content with the progress, he wanted to stretch his legs after the ride out on the bike. All he took with him were a bottle of water and his camera, since it was only a mile.

Midway up the trail, he noticed no one else was out hiking or walking. An uneasy feeling came over him, making him look around to see if he was being followed or

hunted by something with four legs. As far as he knew, there were no large predators in this part of the country. He nearly made it to the waterfall when he noticed pilings of brush over the path.

"Going back," he said, looking over the edge of the cliff.

As he turned, a sound startled him. His body was hit with a thud and he stumbled, grabbing his shoulder at the delayed pain reaching his brain telling him there was an injury to his person. The sight of the blood had him turn in the direction the bullet came from, causing him to lose his footing and go over the edge. Pain was all he remembered as he hit rocks on his way down the cliff. A snap came from his leg, indicating a broken bone, but when he landed, the wind was knocked out of him and he lost consciousness.

His eyelids fluttered. He groaned from the pain radiating through his body. Trying to move, he realized he was no longer on the ground, nor in the woods. He was in a home. It wasn't his home. He made an attempt to move his leg, discovering it to be in a cast. He wanted to sit up, but his belly ached, his ribs hurt, and his face was in pain.

A shaky hand went to his face, feeling the gauze over his nose, chin, and forehead.

"Are these staples?" he whispered as his hand ran along his cheek.

Curiosity sent his good hand under the covers. His underwear was on, but a catheter was inserted into his junk. Fear set in. He wasn't in a hospital. Where am I? A new fear was unlocked when he felt his shoulder and realized he wasn't imagining things; he'd been shot.

"Where am I?" he said softly.

"You're here with us," a voice replied.

"Who is us?"

"Your guardian angels, I guess," the voice said. "You have a lot of recovery ahead of you, and you're hidden for now."

"I was shot," he said, swallowing hard. He felt dehydrated in his mouth, but his eyes saw the IV in his arm. "Am I in a hospital?"

"Someone tried to kill you," the lady said. "Before you do anything or say anything more, we need to give you time to wrap your head around what has happened before you start talking."

He didn't know who tried to kill him. He didn't know the voice of the woman who was his supposed guardian angel, but life had taught him to trust few, say less, and shut up. He'd seen this movie, telling the person everything they needed to know, not knowing that perhaps the person being his savior could also be his captor.

She asked, "What is your name?"

"I go by Bryan," he replied, uncertain if she had his wallet and ID. "My mind is fuzzy. Where am I please?"

"Bryan, you're with me," the feminine voice repeated.

"Yeah, but are you my savior or my captor?" he asked before blacking out.

Passion Fruit couldn't answer the question because she honestly didn't know herself. The fax machine had gone off in her office on Saturday issuing a work order for the same area where the man was camping. In the world where she existed, no one believed in coincidences. The perplexing portion of the day occurred when a body came tumbling over the rock face where she was staging a scene for the accident of a

man who would come tumbling over the same rock face. However, in her scenario, the man didn't have a bullet in him.

She had more than one problem. One, the work order she received had not been executed and she had no results for her boss Azrael. Two, the likelihood that her target and this man were connected held a high probability of what the fucks. And last but not least, her target could still be out there, so she went and looked this morning.

In her hunt to find clues of the person for whom she had been staging the accident, the only things she found at the campsite were the motorcycle, an extra pair of boots, and a backpack. Any identification for the man had been removed. When the Cranberry had cut away his pants, there was no wallet to be found in those either. She could only go by the name he gave her, which was Bryan. She would keep her eye on the news for a missing man whose last known location was Burgess Falls.

Passion Fruit exited the room, carrying the collected bag of urine. There was a pink tint to it, but it wasn't a cloudy deep pink. She concluded the internal injuries weren't severe enough to warrant opening him up to search for damaged organs. Cranberry waited for her in the living room.

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"I want to ask questions, but I'm not sure if I should," Helen said to her. "However, if whoever shot him is looking for proof, they are going to come tracking. I thought the guest this morning was tracking him."

She walked past Cranberry to the makeshift surgical room off the kitchen, "You weren't expecting him?"

"No, he was the last person I would ever expect to see," Helen admitted remorsefully.

"Then why was he here?" she asked as she donned gloves before emptying the waste down a drain.

"A concerned father trying to understand a son who is more than likely so much like him that it is unnerving to them both," she replied.

"And why, pray tell, is this man coming to see you about his son? Are you in a relationship with a younger man because he...Cranberry who was that? Was that the Fer de Lance?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny," Helen said, "but he did take your coffee mug. It was the only thing I saw him physically touch outside of taking the bacon from the fridge."

"Shit, I don't want to know," she said, looking at Helen. "Honestly, I have no idea what to do with you or how to train you to stage accidents. We have three months together, and right now, I am at a loss."

"Well, I learned how to install a catheter yesterday against my will," Helen said, trying not to laugh. "I don't know if I will be able to make eye contact with him once he gets on his feet."

"Against your will?"

"Yes! I would not have voluntarily chosen to witness that process ever! I also learned how to do a basic debridement of a wound and put on a plaster cast," Helen said. "You ran an IV line, pushing two pints of O-Neg, which you happen to have in the medical fridge as well as a gurney in your home. I swapped out the blood bags for a saline solution for hydration for the patient. I assisted in the removal of a bullet and cauterized a wound with a hot poker. I did a physical examination of a man's injuries, tending to the most critical. And that was my first day with you."

"Well, yeah, there was that," Passion Fruit said. "Can we go back to the Fer de Lance being in my home? How did he get in and why is that chair over in the corner?"

"He moved it there to be all dramatic and shit," Helen said. "He tracked me here. Evidently, I have a tracker on my vehicle."

"Cranberry, we need to remove it."

"I think I might be safer with it there for now," she said. "It is how he found me, and until I get a transponder, let it be under his watchful eye."

Passion Fruit watched her face. "Do you want to discuss why he was here to talk to you about his son?"

"Nope; do you want to discuss why you brought that man into your home to mend and repair? Is a bitch lonely for some company that talks back, unlike the dog?"

Passion Fruit stared at her. She wanted to open up and talk. She needed to talk to someone, but it was too soon in the mentorship to be that candid with anybody, especially an untrained Technician.

Helen picked up on it. "Hey, I get it. I do. You don't know me or anything about me. I was sent here to train, yet you have no idea what I know, but you have learned in the past twelve hours that I am teachable."

"True."

"You also learned that I walked up and saw you dragging a body. I asked no questions, but jumped in to help," Helen said, "so you can count on me."

"Also, true."

"I didn't freak out at the sight of blood, nor to walking out and finding a stranger inside the home," she said. "I think we will figure it out as we go along. My name is Helen."

"Lashonda," she replied.

"Okay, you don't look like a Lashonda," Helen said, eyeing the woman with Hispanic features but Albino looking skin.

"My daddy named me after his favorite stripper," she confessed.

"Shenita is my birth name, so my daddy must have wanted me to become one, so we have that in common," Helen said.

"You father in your life?"

"Yes, but not like he wants to be," she replied. "Partially my fault. Primarily my wish."

"Same," Lashonda said, "my father is a bad man."

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"My father ran off with my mother's sister," she replied.

"Well, mine picked my mother out of the women he trafficked from Central America, took her home to his family, made her his housekeeper and then his whore," she said.

Helen watched the anger in the woman, an anger which still needed a home to flourish and infest every living organism around the open sore. However, she saw another flicker of an idea in her eyes, leading her to ask, "So he paid for you to attend medical school?"

"How did you guess that?" Lashonda asked.

"You hate and respect him at the same time," Helen said. "Fathers can do that to people, but what I have come to understand in the past few months is that men are also fragile. The right male figures in their lives to guide them can either make them into wonderful, loving fathers or assholes."

She said it with honesty, thinking of Mark Neary and how he had raised his son Michael, who was known as Mr. Slow. Michael had married Helen's cousin Abigail and was a wonderful father to his daughter Naomi and became a friend to Helen. His brother, whom she was involved in a relationship with, was raised by the same man and was also a good guy.

"And what does that mean to me, Helen?"

"It means, Lashonda, that your anger needs a new direction and focus," she said. "You're fixated on who he is now. The real way to get to a man like that is to

understand where he came from and how he was made into the monster he is. You get those answers and you understand the man."

Lashonda scowled at her. "You're smarter than you look."

"Why do people keep saying that? Do I look like a dumbass or if I am mentally dull? You know the Fer de Lance asked me if I was unwell or on the medication," she said, frowning imitating his accent.

It was then that Lashonda Temple actually laughed. She laughed loudly, holding her belly. Each time the laughter eased off, she looked at Helen and laughed harder.

"I don't think it's that funny," Helen said, poking out her lip.

"Honey, when the baddest mutherfucker on two continents asks if you're unwell or on medication, you know that your radar is left of center," she said, laughing again. "I changed my mind; you are going to be so much fun to train."

Helen didn't appreciate Lashonda's sense of humor, especially at her expense. "And the dude in the other room?"

"He lied to me and said his name was Bryan," Lashonda said, picking up on the change in Helen's tone. "Let's get his fingerprints, run them through the database, and find out who he really is."

"Roger that," Helen said. "Question. Why were you in the same spot where he was shot, or why were you in the same spot where he fell?"

"I was there to stage an accident for a contract, which I didn't fulfill," she said. "Azrael is not going to be pleased with me."

Helen stated, "So we need to reacquire your target and restage the set up. Let me get my computer and get an update on where the target's next move is to help you get in place. Will that help?"

"Naw, I got it," she said looking down the hall. "Helen, this feels weird. I think I fucked up in a way that is going to change a few things. Coincidences and me aren't good friends. That dude being in the same location I was staging an accident is just too weird."

"You got an image of the target...but wait...yeah, the dude in the other room is missing his face. I mean, it's there, but in a Phantom of the Opera kind of way," Helen replied, turning down her lips.

"Again, too coincidental. If the universe is his silent ally, I'm supposed to help him," Lashonda said.

"Let's just make sure we help ourselves first," Helen said, going for her Technician kit to remove her finger printing set.

Today they would find out who he was, or at least she thought they would. In the room where the man's bandaged hands were, she looked at his fingers, ready to ink them for fingerprinting, only to discover the man had none.

Helen was taken aback. She whispered into the void, "What in the fresh hell did this accident-prone cat drag home?"

Chapter 4- Mischance

Lashonda Temple had graduated medical school at the top of her class. She could easily spot and diagnose patients, sometimes without even touching them; however, touching them was the problem. Dr. Temple, didn't like the part of being a doctor where she touched live people. A cadaver she could deal with, but a person on the table who talked back, asked questions, and often incorrectly self-diagnosed themselves ranked high on her list of "icks". The icks included dicks who thought they knew it all, or in instances when she needed to examine a penis, the dick on the table became an erect prick. In her father's business, the icks came in the form of tricks who got their kicks slinging bricks in the dark back room doing dirty deeds. The icks grew into quick fixes of men with bullet holes or women with cuts and contusions requiring patching up with slick sticks, and new bodies often ended on her table with the aid of a click of the mouse which sent a fax which sent Passion Fruit to work. She wrote prescriptions for the broken souls, placing bandages where she could or offering counsel when they would listen. Few returned to offer friendship, say thank you, or even share a cup of coffee. Patients made her sick. The more she thought about it, the more she became plagued with the "icks", making her walk away from it all. All this also meant she'd earned no friends and lived a lonely existence taking care of the infrequent Technician or injured animals.

An opportunity to work with the woman called Cranberry intrigued her, almost bringing a feeling of excitement to cover over the icky. Today, she'd actually laughed; she didn't remember the last time that had happened. A feeling of almost optimism coursed through her as she walked to the room where the man rested. Yesterday, the mode of operation was to save his life. Today, the assessment would begin to unravel the clues of his life to determine if what she had saved was worthy

of her time or a costly mistake.

Helen followed her into the room. The man's eyes were closed. Lashonda pulled the covers up from his feet, noticing the soles. Her lips turned down, and she re-covered his feet, moving up his body, gently attempting to turn the man to his side. His mass was immovable, prompting her to grip the sheeting on the gurney and pulling him towards her.

"Cranberry," she said, using the codename in the man's presence, "come and hold him steady while I examine his back."

Helen moved quickly, holding the edges of the sheeting. She kept her eyes on the mentor as Passion Fruit looked at the man's back. Bryan. He'd told Passion Fruit his name was Bryan.

She asked her mentor, "What are you looking for on Mr. Bryan?"

"This," Passion Fruit said, pointing to the patch of skin. The dark, grayish brown patch of skin looked like a tattoo of the start of a reticulated python coming through the skin on his body. "Along with the thick soles of his feet and this reticulated hyperpigmentation, he has a genetic disorder called NFJS, or Naegeli-Franceschetti-Jadassohn syndrome, an ectodermal disorder, which has resulted in the loss of his fingerprints. You can slowly lower him to his back."

Helen again did as she was told. "Man, I was hoping when he woke up, he'd have a cool story or maybe he was a spy or some shit. I would have possibly settled for him having asshole brothers who threw something hot which he caught, and it burned his fingers."

Cranberry stood beside the gurney looking down at the face. He may have been handsome if his face hadn't been peeled back like an orange rind then stapled to the

front of his head. A once aristocratic nose, now reduced to scarred up mangled flesh, would never look the same. The idea of having no fingerprints could mean a life of starting over, anew, away from whatever demons had brought him to this end.

"She is right," Bryan said, startling Helen.

His eyes opened to reveal green irises looking back at her. Helen moved closer to the bed; she touched his hand, placing it within her own. A soft smile formed at the corners of her lips.

"This must be scary for you," she told him.

"Understatement," he said, swallowing hard. "I want to sit up, but I hurt all over. I was shot?"

"Yes," Passion Fruit said. "We covered that already. There is a bullet hole in your shoulder. You fell over a cliff, tore off half your face. You also broke your leg and have internal injuries. The real question is who wants you dead?"

Helen didn't like the in-your-face approach to Bryan. Such tactics would make the man clam up and tell them nothing. She wasn't authorized to play good cop, bad cop, but Passion Fruit had a bit too much passion for her liking. Helen took a chance.

"An even better question is who would be wondering if you're still alive, Bryan? If those people are looking for you to take you out, and there is no physical body to be found, the next steps will be to connect with those in your primary circle," she said. "I would hate for your girlfriend, Mom, or siblings to be in danger because of some shady shit you're into. Sir, are you into some shady shit?"

"Why, are you worried that it will come to your door?" he asked, feeling suddenly unsafe with these two. The one who seemed to have the medical knowledge was

overtly bitter and bitchy. The other one, who held his hand while looking him in the eye asking poignant, thought-provoking questions, he found to be unsettling, which also felt... scary.

Helen smiled at him. "Anything that comes to this door will rue crossing the threshold," she replied. "You get some rest. There is a long journey ahead of you in this recovery. Healing is the priority, or at least staying alive, if that's what you want. If you don't want that, let me know."

His eyes grew wide. "I hit my head when I broke my face. I'm not sure I understand what you're saying," Bryan answered.

"You understand me just fine, Mr. Bryan. I've learned that surviving may not always be the best course of action. Death can sometimes be a reprieve from the pain of living, having to continue, having to heal, or forgiving. If we don't learn to forgive, the anger eats us, makes us bitter," she told him. "Your choice. Live and fight another day or say the word and sleep in peace for an eternity."

"You're scary," he whispered, the pain coming at him at a ferocious pace. "Pain. Pain."

"Greet it, allow it to feed your recovery," Passion Fruit told him. "I will give you antibiotics, but no pain meds. This will be difficult, but you're either going to embrace the man you were or walk tall as the man you need to become."

"Bitch," he said under his breath.

Helen was taken aback by the sudden change in his tone. She was also amazed at the cheek of the man who lay flat on his back at Passion Fruit's mercy. Perhaps this is why she chose not to coddle him. Helen expected anger from Passion Fruit at the words the man used, but there was none. Passion Fruit spoke to him in a calm tone.

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"This bitch could push this gurney into the back of my van, then roll your ass out to your campsite and let them have at you," Passion Fruit said. "I took a chance thinking there was a man inside of you worth of a second chance to get it right. Do you wish to get it right, or do you want to go back to being the person who earned that bullet?"

Bryan closed his eyes. "I was wrong, you're scarier," he mumbled. "There are good people in the world who get killed. People who are trying to do the right thing on the wrong day also get bullet holes. I'm more man than you think. However, cruelty in any form is not cute."

"You think I'm being cruel?" Passion Fruit asked.

"The pain is a reminder of me being dumb. Failure to help me manage it is you being cruel," he said, sighing deeply. He was done talking to either of them for now. The stinging, followed by a deep throb, radiated up his leg. Concentration and deep breathing would be required to get through the healing without pain medication. Antibiotics would be welcomed. The company of the women would not.

Silently, they left the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts. He was also alone with the pain. It was then, in a new solitude that he began to cry. The tears came as a cleansing agent, washing away the idea of having to get back out there and fight alone. Two scary women had him locked away from those who wished him harm.

At least these two would help him heal. He was safer here with them than out there taking a chance and being the crosshairs of whoever tried to make him dead. Deep in his heart, he knew who it was, but he would deal with each day as it came. Today, he was faced with a new opponent: pain.

"This is going to hurt a lot," he said, sobbing into the pillow.

IN THE LIVING ROOM, Helen stood in the middle of the floor. The home was drab and needed some color. Hell, Passion Fruit needed some color. Her blond hair hung to her shoulders with no bounce to it. The colors of the clothing she wore were also drab and gave no clue who she was or how she lived. She honestly looked as if she said, "Fuck it" in 2016 to the Personality Fairy and never went back to claim an optimist trait.

"No pain meds are kind of harsh," Helen said.

"Not knowing who he is when he is on his feet is one thing; having him high and not knowing who he is when he is on his feet is another," Passion Fruit said. "I don't know enough of his medical history or his mental state to give him a narcotic. It could go horribly wrong."

"You can give him at least some acetaminophen," Helen said.

"I will, but not on an empty stomach," she replied. "The fall didn't evacuate his bowels if you noticed when you took off his pants. He may be empty. I have to start with a cup of broth this morning and in the afternoon, some mashed potatoes."

"What do you mean when he is on his feet?"

Passion Fruit wasn't a large woman. On a good day, if she was carrying two bricks in her pocket, she may have weighed a good hundred and twenty pounds. However, Helen had learned to not underestimate people.

"Helen, how much do you weigh, a buck twenty?"

"Somewhere around there," Helen said.

"Face me," Lashonda said, watching Helen turn. She tucked her tongue under, pressing it to the bottom row of teeth and whistled. Before Helen had a chance to react, Candy, the Cane Corso, ran at Helen and dove into her, knocking her to the ground.

The weight of the dog, in the position she landed, pressed Helen to the floor. Lashonda watched her struggle to get up from under the 99-pound dog, and Helen was losing. Candy pressed her body into Helen, becoming dead weight, pinning her to the floor.

"Good Girl," Lashonda said, giving two whistles, and Candy moved off Helen.

Slowly, she got to her feet, scowling at Lashonda. "You could have warned me."

"Candy weighs almost a hundred pounds. Bryan is twice that," she said. "When you look at your weight in comparison to his, you will need double the speed to counter his mass, to equal his energy. Basically, an Einsteinian approach to taking down a son of a bitch. You have to hit fast and quick to take down someone twice your size. E is the equivalent of energy equaling mass times the doubled speed of light."

Helen stared at her mutherfuckingly. Last month, Lemon had her learning chemistry, and now this heffah wanted her to do math.

"You are using Einstein's E equals MC squared to explain your big ass dog assaulting me?"

"No, I am using math to explain that as a woman who weighs a buck twenty, you have to learn to use your weight as an asset and not as a hindrance." She explained it calmly, as if Helen were the second dumbest person on the planet. "If he were to

come at us, it would take me, you, and Candy to take him down if he were high and had no fear. Plus, if who shot him comes to the door, he needs to be sober as a parson."

"Where the hell would you find a fucking parson, Lashonda? Are you one of those people who likes to play with words to fuck with people's heads? You could have simply said, sober as a nun, but nah, you have to go with a freaking parson," Helen said, feeling irritated. Scowling, she asked, "So what's the plan? For my training?"

"You have to learn the high-end calculations of math to stage accidents," she replied. "The mass of the target and the speed of fall, which computes with the amount of energy required to end a life. In the interim, you need to learn to fight."

"I can take down a full-grown man," Helen boasted, sticking out her chest.

"Yes, but what will you do when he gets up and comes at you head on? I saw you use the knives; cute, but I'm going to teach you how to use those hands with your pretty painted nails to throw a blow and knock the wind out of a man," Lashonda said.

"You? How..." was all Helen remembered asking when she woke up on the couch, and an hour had passed.

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She didn't remember seeing Passion Fruit's fist come to her face. She knew it had to be her face because Helen's jaw hurt. It hurt badly.

"Did you hit me in my freaking face?" Helen asked, sitting up, but had to lie back down because of the headache.

"I hit you in the jaw, knocking you the hell out," Lashonda said, coming into the living room holding a tray.

"And why in the hell did you do that?"

"To teach you size doesn't always seem like a threat if you know the math," she said, setting down the tray. You can hit someone in the solar plexus to stun them temporarily or hit their jaw, like I did to knock you out. A blow to the temple will jar the brain, also causing unconsciousness and can be dangerous. These things you will learn this week."

"Oh goodie," Helen replied facetiously.

"Whatever," Lashonda added. "I need you. We have to remove Bryan's catheter, get him on his feet, and in one of these chairs."

"Who is we, little woman? I don't want to see that man's wiener, and I sure as hell don't want to see you remove the catheter."

"He needs to be on his feet," Lashonda remarked, "so let's move."

"I don't think I like you, Penis Whisperer," Helen mumbled under her breath. Slowly, she got to her feet, walking into the room where Bryan lay awake looking at them both. The gauze wrapped around his face gave him the appearance of an unemployed mummy extra.

Helen could tell he was in pain, and she felt for him.

Passion Fruit spoke, "I need to remove the catheter, get you on your feet, and get some broth into your belly. If you can hold down the broth, I will give you a couple of acetaminophen tablets to help a bit. Then this afternoon you can have some mashed potatoes."

"Okay," he said softly, feeling defeated. Helen stared into his eyes as Lashonda gloved up, pulled back the covers, and took him into her hand. She removed the catheter holding the bag of yellow body waste up to the light.

"There is only a little pink in it today, but you do have internal injuries, so we need to move slowly, Bryan," Lashonda stated.

She stuck his penis back into his underpants as if it were a thing she did each time she had completed her daily usage of the tool. He didn't react to her touching him. The pain may have prevented him from thinking of anything sexual.

"The bathroom you will use is the one off the kitchen next to my office. It is wider and will accommodate this walker," she said, pushing it to him. "I will need to go and get you some clothes but first, we need to get you on your feet."

Bryan said little as he attempted to swing the cast to the floor. Helen moved to help him on the mischance he would fall, but Passion Fruit held her hand out to stop her. They watched him struggle, the pain-riddled body moving as best he could. Finally, he was on his feet and leaning into the walker. His arms shook from the strain.

"We're going to the chair in the living room," Passion Fruit said, grabbing the sheeting from the bed and wrapping it around his waist. She held one end; the other she gave to Helen.

He moved slowly, going from the room where he'd been resting to the living room and the chair. Sitting down made him wince. Passion Fruit moved the table over so he could rest the casted foot. His eye held shimmers of tears, and she passed him a cup of hot broth.

"Now we can begin," Passion Fruit told him.

Helen wasn't sure what they were beginning, and neither was Bryan. The hot broth seemed to make him feel better about his lot in life. Passion Fruit was watching her.

"Cranberry, I need you to go into town to get him some clothes, shoes, and items for this cold weather," Passion Fruit said. "Do you have any cash?"

"I do."

"Good; use that. Not a lot of things; he has a cast so the pants will need to be cut to fit over it, so keep it reasonable," Passion Fruit told her.

"On it," Helen said, rising to get her purse. She wasn't sure why she had to use her money, and knowing she wouldn't get reimbursed, because, hell, no one knew Passion Fruit had this man in her home. She didn't argue. Helen was happy to be out of the house for a while.

Chapter 5-Unfortunate Incident

The ache to her jaw added to the dull throb in her belly, which churned with acid as she sat behind the wheel of her vehicle, attempting to listen to the universe. A feeling like this didn't come at her often, but when it did, Helen recognized it as the start of fear. Why she felt afraid, Helen wasn't sure, but life had taught her to listen.

Another issue of contention for her was having to use her money to buy clothes for a dude that wasn't her man. Instead of embarrassing him by asking his sizes, she had rummaged through the burn piles of trash to find any remnants of the cut away pants, shirt, and jacket. Finding none, she used Mustang's sizes, cutting Bryan down by four, and Helen made a note in her handy dandy planner of his sizes, then used her phone to search for local stores.

She sat behind the wheel of the SUV wondering why she needed to be the one to go into town to buy Bryan some drawers. He wasn't her man, and personally, she was offended Passion Fruit had given her such a task as if she were the hired help.

"Well, technically, I am, but that's beside the fucking point," she grumbled, starting up the Subaru.

She pressed the button to open the garage door where she'd been told to park out of sight and eased her way out of the garage onto the gravel drive. The nose of the vehicle pointed toward town, and she made her way down the road. An uneasiness came to her again as she reached for her personal cell phone. It rang in her hand, nearly making her jump. Helen hit the brakes and looked down at the device. It showed no number and only read unknown as the caller's identification.

“Nope, not today,” she said, setting the device down.

A text message flashed and instructed her to take the call. She stared at it, watching it ring. A second text came.

GENTLY, SHE SLID HER index finger across the screen, connecting the caller.

"Yes?" she said into the device.

“Ola, Tia,” the deep voice said.

“Bushmaster?” She softly spoke into the line.

“Sí, it is I,” he said. “I understand you had a visitor yesterday.”

“Correct; we had a nice chit chat,” she said taking her foot off the brake. “Are you well?”

A loud sigh preceded his next words. “As one can expect in such scenarios, he is angry, a predicament I often find myself in with him.”

Helen knew Micah Delgado was speaking of his relationship with his father. Father and son relationships were often as complex as the relationship between a father and daughter, which she understood well. She attempted to offer a bit of solace.

“He was curious as to what and why. I don’t understand the why myself,” she said to Micah Delgado, recently inked by the cartel and given the handle of The Bushmaster. He'd placed a tracker on her vehicle to keep tabs on her comings and goings. Currently, she was going, and he was tracking. She too wanted to understand the what and the why for his actions. Helen inquired again about his why in tracking her movements.

“Too many interested parties in you, Cranberry, which raises red flags. I am keeping watch to keep you safe,” Micah told her.

“Keeping me safe from whom, Bushmaster?”

“I find slight amusement,” he replied, “in the things we often look the hardest to find, which are usually right under the nose. Be careful today. Pay attention to those paying attention to you.”

“Okay, weird and cryptic. Hey, how is Alita?”

The pause came as if he were attempting to gather the complicated thoughts hovering on the periphery of his brain. The relationship between him and his personal guard Alita would be one that would grow in complication as they aged. At 18, the young man was navigating his own place in the world. A beautiful young woman as a bodyguard would change his life in ways he had yet to figure out, but that was for another conversation and another story.

“She wants to go to the winter formal. I would rather shoe the horses and muck the stalls, but we do what we must.”

“Bushmaster, be young while you can,” she told him. “Adulthood isn’t all that fun.”

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“Hmm, neither are teenage rites of passage,” he said. “Stay safe.”

Micah Delgado ended the call.

She continued to drive toward town, storing the conversation for a mental vivisection later. The words he’d shared would have to wait. Her Technician phone was ringing.

“Please let it be an assignment,” she replied, taking the call. “Go for Cranberry.”

“This is the Operator; I have a request for a connect from The Bad Apple. Will you accept the call?”

"Yes," she said, holding the device, listening to the silence. A few clicks occurred, then a hiss, and finally background sounds.

"Cranberry?" the deep voice said. "You there?"

"I am here. How may I be of assistance?"

It was the pauses she hated. Life could be so much easier if people simply said what was on their minds instead of the coy games of cat and mouse. She wanted to know what he wanted from her.

"Uhm, Stephen has finally perfected his cranberry sweet potato souffle," Bad Apple said as he spoke of his young ward, a flamboyant chap who enjoyed cooking.

"Good to know," she replied, wondering what the hell that had to do with her.

"He's planning to make it for Thanksgiving," Bad Apple said. "I'm calling to offer you and The Mustang an invitation for dinner and a weekend of family fun. Can you guys make it?"

Helen sat on the lone back road not far from Passion Fruit's place. No one would be able to find the place unless they knew exactly where to look. Even with her vehicle stored in the barn, the cabin sat forlornly into the hillside, seemingly abandoned. She understood the request and call, but it wasn't her decision to make.

"Apple, you will need to place that request direct to the source," she said. "He will be able to provide you with an answer."

"You don't keep you guys' calendar for stuff like that?"

"Again, you need to make the request directly to him. Anything else I can assist you with?"

"I guess not," Apple said, surprised at the coldness in her voice. "They miss you. I thought it would be nice...you know."

"Make the call; he will give you an answer," she said, feeling irritated for some reason. "Cranberry out."

She ended the call, scowling into the coldness in the car cabin although the heater was blaring on full blast. The heat seemed to only whisper hints of warmth, making her shudder. The drive from the homestead in Plainville, Indiana to where Bad Apple lived in Janesville, Wisconsin was nearly five hours and a different time zone. Even if they got up early to make the drive to arrive by dinner, an overnight stay would be required.

The idea also created issues. Her cousin Cherry more than likely expected her home

for Thanksgiving, and in her heart, she'd rather have a pap smear than do that, but she also wasn't prepared to deal with Oscar, who lived with Bad Apple. The kid tugged at her Mom's heartstrings, and she wasn't prepared mentally to tango with that either, at least not now. There were so many issues to deal with just living full-time or whatever it was she was doing with Mustang and whatever future they had.

"It's just too much," she said softly, easing off the brake and beginning the drive into town.

Her personal cell phone rang, and she growled loudly at another person, wanting to connect. Angrily, she answered the call.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, Cous, how are you?" Cherry's voice came through the line. "I was calling to see if you were coming for Thanksgiving. I know Ruth is planning to put on a spread."

"Not sure right now," she answered truthfully. "There is a great deal happening on this end."

"Okay, I was also missing you. Naomi keeps asking about you; she misses you as well," Cherry said. "Michael was also wondering how the training was going."

"Every day is an adventure," Helen said, not wanting to say anything more over the line.

"Oh. Okay then. You'll let me know?"

"I will let you know. Love you," Helen said and ended the call. Before she made it to the store, two additional calls came in, one from her mother, which she refused to

take, and oddly enough, the second call she answered.

"Hello," she said into the line.

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"Been thinking about you a lot lately," the strong male voice said. "I know you moved, and I didn't know where to send my annual Christmas card. Are you doing okay?"

"I'm okay, Daddy," she said, gripping the steering wheel. "How is everything on your end?"

"Dunno. I am feeling nostalgic, I guess. Me and the holiday season," Darnell Nelson told his daughter. "It's been so long since I've seen you, Punkin. It would be nice to see you, be a real part of your life. Maybe when you have some kids, I can, you know, see my grandkids, be a part of their lives."

He went through this every holiday season. It was Seasonal Affective Disorder, and it also made her sad that this was the extent of her relationship with her father. Perhaps it was time for a change for them all. She'd talk to Mustang about meeting him and... who knew?

"Daddy, let me see what I can do. You have some time off that you could use for a visit. Would you like that?"

She could hear him smiling through the phone. "I'd like that, Punkin. I'd like that a lot. I am putting in my retirement paperwork soon and will have time on my hands. I just hope...I dunno what I'm hoping for really. I'm just hoping."

"I will call you back in a couple of days when I can work it all out," she told him.

"Love you, Punkin. I really do," Darnell said.

"Love you, back Daddy," she said and disconnected the blue tooth. "Well, fuck me sideways."

She wanted to turn off the phone but didn't. As she finally made it into town, a few thoughts crossed her mind. Bryan needed mental stimulation. A bookstore would be great if he liked to read. Possibly a few puzzles. It became the first stop.

The bookstore wasn't very large and didn't have a big selection of fiction, but it was enough to get a soul started on a few conversational reads. She thought of her ex, who fancied himself a reader of action-adventure stories for men. Helen located a Clive Cussler, a Clancy, and a James Patterson. For good measure, she added a Koontz.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she raised her eyes to spot the man following her about the store. For good measure, she circled back around the shelving unit and added a Garwood to the pile. Now he wasn't trying to hide following her about the place.

"Sir, it would be difficult to steal five of these thick books, which I can check out at the library for free if you don't want my business," Helen said, challenging him.

"Oh no, I'm sorry," he said, holding up his hands in defense. "You are simply...lovely."

"Excuse me?" Helen asked, wondering what fresh hell this creeper was about to unleash on her. She placed her hand in her jacket pocket, feeling for her knives.

"You're lovely," the man said. "You don't have any of those long fake acrylic nails or those caterpillar eyelashes or garish makeup. Your hair is natural without a bunch of extensions, and you are simply refreshing to look at. Just lovely."

"Thank you," she said, taking the last book to the register.

"I've never seen you here before. Are you new to the area?"

"Passing through," she told him.

"If you pass through again, would you be interested in lunch, maybe coffee, I mean I don't see a ring," he said, looking down at her fingers.

Helen blinked several times. He was asking her out on a date. It had been so long since a man had actually approached her like he had some sense and asked her out without yelling at her across a store or calling her Shawty or Miss Ma'am. She gave a slight smirk.

"Flattered, but I'm taken," she said, watching the sales lady ring up the sales.

"Just thought I'd shoot my shot. Pretty lady like you, I should have known," the man said, watching the clerk totaling her purchases.

Helen paid cash and left the store. She tossed the items on the backseat of the Subaru before making her way over to the local big box store. The uneasiness returned as she shopped for items for Bryan, thinking of function over form, including a button-down sweater and easy slip-on shirts. She felt she'd scored big when she located gym pants that snapped up the legs, creating an easy on and off situation for the cast. When she looked up, the man from the bookstore was also in the same aisle. She now looked at him differently.

Helen processed the man as a threat, a six foot, two-hundred-pound, solid mass of a threat. Passion Fruit's words came back to her; she would need to catch him off guard and drop him to get away if it came to such ends.

"I see you do have a man," he said.

"Listen, whatever you're thinking, you don't want none of this," Helen said. "My sweet appearance is a façade, and I will hurt you."

"Whoa? I spotted you when I came into the store. I wasn't following you," the man said. "No harm."

A security guard approached them, asking, "Miss, is this man bothering you?"

"Yes, he is," Helen said. "He's following me about the store and making me uncomfortable."

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"Sir, this way please," the security guard said, ushering the man away. He looked back at Helen again. She couldn't read his eyes. It was a red flag, and this man was a danger to her.

Helen wasn't taking any chances. She hurried to the register, paid for her purchases, and left the store. She couldn't run the risk of the man following her to Passion Fruit's place, so she took another tactic.

"I heard your words, Bushmaster. I received them as well," she said, pulling into a coffee shop parking lot.

Helen parked the vehicle and waited. It didn't take long for the man to locate her vehicle, look inside, and search to see which direction she'd gone. For good measure, she peeked her head out, looking surprised at seeing him, and darted into an alley. Her body, pressed against the bricks in an entryway, was out of sight of the footsteps she heard coming down the alleyway.

She kept in mind her first lesson with Passion Fruit: energy equals mass times force squared. The element of surprise was on her side as the man walked past her. Helen sprung, taking him down to his knees. She used the butt of her 9mm to pop him in the temple, knocking him unconscious. For good measure, she took his wallet, removing any cash as well as a couple of credit cards and snapping a photo of his ID. For good measure, she took it anyway. Hurriedly, she left the alley, climbing into her vehicle and speeding away.

"What the frack is that about," she said, gripping the steering wheel.

She made good time, arriving back at the cabin when her phone rang again. This time, it was her man. Her heart rate was still high when she pulled into the garage and closed the door, cutting the engine.

"Hey," she said as she answered the call.

"Hey, how goes your day?" Mustang asked.

"Weird; yours?"

"Same," he said. "Got a call from Bad Apple, wanting us to come for Thanksgiving and spend the weekend."

"What did you say?"

"I said yes because he told me Stephen is making a special cranberry sweet potato souffle for you," Mustang said. "Who is Stephen, and can he cook?"

"Long story, but okay, we are heading to Wisconsin for Thanksgiving," she replied. "I will let Cherry know not to expect me."

"Good enough, but why did you say your day is weird?"

"Got a call from my Daddy," she said. "The holiday season makes him get all emotional. I want to invite him for a visit, but didn't know how you'd feel about that. Should I invite him to Kentucky instead?"

"Of course not. I want to meet him," Mustang said. "When are you thinking?"

"Let me get with Azreal and see what the schedule is. I know we have to be in Kentucky for Christmas," she said. "Maybe the week before?"

"Sounds about right, then I can ask him for your hand in marriage," Mustang said.

"You're so traditional. I like it," she said, smiling. She wanted to tell him about the man, but he'd go all Alpha male and want to rush to her rescue. Therefore, she kept it to herself. "Talk soon?"

"Talk soon and be safe."

"Roger that," she said, terminating the call. A better idea came to mind as she pressed one on her Technician phone. The call was answered on the second ring.

"State your need," the voice said.

"Got a bogey on my tail in Antioch," Helen said. "Picked it up in the bookstore, then again in Target, and it followed me to a coffee shop."

Azreal, her handler, asked, "Any idea what it is about or a description?"

"I can go you one better," Helen said, texting the image of the license to Azreal. "He also has a Chase credit card, and an American Express Platinum business card."

"How did you get these items, Cranberry?"

"He experienced an unfortunate incident, Boss. I lured him into an alley and knocked him the fuck out, that's how. I also robbed him of his cash, you know, working on staging accidents and shit. I couldn't take the chance of him following me back to Passion Fruit's place," she said. "Also, as a heads up, The Bushmaster placed a tracker on my vehicle. He said people are trying to find me."

"God help them if they do," Azreal said, shocked at the honesty of the slip of a woman. "Where is this man now?"

"I left him in the alley in a puddle of what I hope is piss water," Helen said. "Azreal, who is after me and why?"

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"The Chrysalis," she said. "You've ruffled some feathers, and they want to know who and what you are."

"When they find out, let me know," she said, pausing. "You might want to get me implanted sooner rather than later. Just in case some shit goes sideways."

"I'll get Passion Fruit to do it today. It hurts," Azreal said.

"So does life."

"Lie low for a minute and stay out of sight until I can find out who this man is, Cranberry," Azreal said.

"Will do, but we are supposed to be at Bad Apple's for Thanksgiving, plus what is the schedule for the Holidays? Can you let me know?" Helen said. "I have some family issues; you know Daddy wants to have the whole Yuletide Cheer crap."

"You're a pain in the ass," Azreal said, disconnecting the call.

"She loves me," Helen said, gathering the items to head into the home, praying Passion Fruit and Bryan hadn't killed each other while she was gone.

Chapter 6- Injury

Bryan sat in the chair, feeling colder than he ever had in the entirety of his 42 years on the planet. Regret filled his belly as he thought of the women who had wanted to start a family and bring him onto the path of fatherhood. He didn't want kids. The

world wasn't the place to bring children into for other sick minded people to sit around planning how to rob them of their innocence. He saw no reason to do it, and he also saw no reason to spend the rest of his life slaving away to save money for their education, only to have them go off into the world and return home as a single young parent.

He'd seen it in his youth. Young girls, wide-eyed, eager to enter the world to become engaged citizens, only to arrive at a cage match in a college town where they were the prey. Grown men, who had time to perfect methods to stalk, prime, and groom young women for assault, simply because they could, are what he saw at colleges and universities. It didn't matter how many times he stood in front of the classroom, issuing the warning to young freshman women, the words went in one ear and out the other.

No, he saw no need to marry and have children. He didn't want daughters who refused to listen to warnings about going to men's apartments and dorm rooms and accepting drinks from people they don't know. The time-honored warnings to young men also went unheeded, cautioning the chaps that if it feels suspect and she is not looking you in the eye saying yes, then stop what you're doing. If you stop and it goes no further, then you have made a wise choice.

"You don't want to ruin your entire life for three and a half minutes," Bryan would caution the young men.

Again, in one ear and out the other. The sad reality of adding insult to a perilous injury almost appeared ironic as he sat in a cabin, he didn't know where, in a pair of underwear he'd had on for entirely too many days, wrapped in a pink quilt. The quilt was ugly and misshapen, and the threads were coming out of the fabric squares. The fabric reminded him of the quilt his little cousin attempted to make for a home economics class that went ass up. This one was worse, and it smelled like mothballs.

He looked up to find the woman looking at him. The dog was watching him as well. It was a big fucking dog.

Bryan asked, "What's her name?"

"Who? Cranberry?"

Bryan pointed at the dog, "The dog, not the other scary woman."

"Candy the Cane Corso," Passion Fruit said. "What's your name?"

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"Bryan, like I said," he commented.

"It would help at some point to be honest with me," she told him.

"Okay, I have to pee," he said, looking at her. "The bathroom seems a long distance from this chair. As much as the broth was warmly wonderful, it hit an empty stomach and is going right through me. I may not be strong enough to get down the hall, and you aren't strong enough to keep me from falling and busting my ass," he spoke.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," she said, walking over and passing him a plastic urinal for men.

"Great," he said, struggling to lower the casted foot to the floor. "Between the pain and the constant humiliation, I'm thinking maybe death would have been easier."

"Death is never easy, Bryan. We think it is because the time on earth comes to an end, but we don't know what comes after," she told him.

Passion Fruit looped a sheet around his waist. The walker was moved in front of him, as she used her feet as leverage against the chair which was braced against the wall. She pulled hard, getting him to his feet. The pink quilt that she'd attempted to make one cold, lonely winter, she draped over his shoulders to provide him privacy as he relieved himself into the urinal. Her back remained to him as he did his business. She heard the top of the container snap close and a grunt from the man.

"Any way to wash my hands?" he asked, placing his hands on the sides of the chair and lowering himself down.

Passion Fruit collected the urine, examining the contents for color and clarity. She passed him a package of wet naps as she walked away to pour out the waste. When she returned, his head was lowered.

"What is troubling you?"

"I'm hungry," he said softly. "I want some food, but I refuse to suffer the degradation of you sitting me on a shitter and examining my stool. Lady, what are we doing here?"

"Sir, you have internal injuries and a bullet hole in your shoulder from where someone attempted to unalive you," she told him. "The skin of your face was detached from your skull, which I had to staple in place, and I'm praying you suffer no infections. To add to all of that, you are sitting in my face, fucking lying to me about who you are and who wants you dead. I took a chance by saving your life. The least of your worries is taking a shit in front of me."

"Will you at least give me some food so I can have the strength to try to get to the toilet?"

"Is that seriously your primary concern at this point, Bryan?"

"I have nothing else to go on," he said, softly.

"Bryan, is there someone at home waiting for your return?"

He hung his head low and said, "Unfortunately no. I only have my aunt. I lived in the apartment over her garage and look after her. Aunt Ella, her kids are shit stains who left her to rot in her dementia. I moved in to help, but a month ago, I had to place her in memory care."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "Your job? The place where you work?"

"Sabbatical, to write my book," he said. "I was starting it next week. Rented a place in Colorado, out of the way to commune with nature kind of thing."

"So, in other words, no one will miss you," Passion Fruit said, regretting the words.

His head was hung low as the reality of his life hit hard. He began to cry not only for his circumstance, but for the life he believed gave him so much freedom that had become a private prison. At a low point in his life, there was no one to call. No one would miss him. No one was searching for him, and these women could do as they pleased and it would be the end of his existence.

No one would know.

Tears streamed from his eyes at the realization as the sound of the back door opening, ushering in cold air from outside. The temperature had dropped considerably in the last hour, and he felt it in the ache in his bones. The woman Cranberry had returned. Her arms were loaded with bags, and she stopped in front of him and Passion Fruit. She scowled fiercely at her new mentor.

"Aw man, are you picking on Bryan? You made him cry," Helen said, dropping the bags.

"No, it's okay," he said softly. "Reality hit me, and the idea that no one is looking for me and no one will miss me really hurts. I am also at your mercy, so if there are awful things you wanted to do to me, imprison me, I can't fight you. I am relying on your grace and depending on your kindness, if there is any in you."

"Passion Fruit, will you feed this man?" Helen said. "Bryan, I got you clothes, shoes, slippers, a few books, and some puzzles to help with your mental dexterity while you

heal."

Passion Fruit spoke up, "He's supposed to be working on his book. I don't know what kind, but I have an extra laptop around here and a few notebooks, if that will help."

The glistening of tears in his eyes were of relief. "You'd do that for me?"

"Yes, even though you are being less than honest with us, I will," Passion Fruit said.

"You will need to tell us what is after you."

"I wish I knew myself," he said, looking at the items Helen presented to him. He found himself sniffing as he looked at the books. "I like Cussler. This is thoughtful. Puzzles. Nice. Thank you...Cranberry."

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"You're welcome," she said, looking at them both. "Hey, we all need to be honest with each other. I'll go first. I picked up a bogey in town."

"A what?" Bryan said.

"A creeper following me. I picked him up in the bookstore, and he followed me to Target," Helen said. "I'm not sure if he was looking for me, you, or Bryan."

Passion Fruit went into high alert, "Where is this creeper now, Cranberry?"

"I left him knocked the hell out in a back alley in town," she said. "Boss said to lie low for a minute, but I will need to roll out for Thanksgiving. She will be calling later to issue the order for my neck thingy."

"I'm implanting you today?"

"Yeah, hey, you may need to put one in Bryan too, just in case," Helen said. "He's valuable enough for someone to want him gone. Until we know who and why, it may be in our best interest to keep him safe."

"You'd protect me...but why?" Bryan said, holding the thousand-piece puzzle to his chest as if he'd just gotten the latest PlayStation. "I can't walk. I can't contribute anything, and I am in so much flacking pain, I am about to cry. Again."

Helen knew how it felt to feel hopeless. "I was in a situation not too long ago but I never gave up that someone was coming to rescue me. Help arrived and I paid it forward. Surviving this is your sign from the universe that what you've been doing

ain't working and you need to change."

"I'm not a bad a person," he said. "I saw things and put pieces together that at the time made no sense. When it began to become clear, I was looking for help to tell what I knew. Then I was shot."

Passion Fruit leaned forward, "What do you know, Bryan?"

"I'm still not sure, so for now, can we get me well?" he asked. "Get me on my feet so if that bogey comes looking, I can help mount a defense with you."

Passion Fruit asked, "You'd fight beside us?"

"I'd fight for us because Cranberry is right. It's time for me to make some changes," he said. "I have some money, not a lot, but I can contribute."

"Touching your accounts would be a sign you're alive," Passion Fruit said.

"Hey, I stole the credit cards of the bogey following me," Helen added to both Bryan and Passion Fruit's shocked faces. "Well, I wanted it to look like a mugging, so I mugged him."

"You are scary," Bryan said. "You actually robbed the man, I mean, won't he know it's you?"

"No, I hit him in the temple from behind and dropped him like the sack of shit he is," Helen said, nodding her head with pride.

"Dear Lord, you're a terrifying little thing," Bryan said, touching the caked blood in his hair. "You look like a housewife on her way to get the kids from soccer practice and you've confessed that you robbed a man in an alley. Am I dead and no one told

me?"

Passion Fruit's phone rang in the other room. She held up her hand and placed her finger to her lips. She made a beeline for the Technician phone. She answered the phone using the Spanish word for passion fruit.

"Maracuya," she said into the line.

"Requesting an implant for the Cranberry," Azreal stated. "Activation code CB2317. Synchronize to Channel 3, Line 8, Code Blue."

Passion Fruit replied, "I authenticate, Code Green, Line 6, Channel 2."

"Make it happen today," Azreal said. "There is a bogey."

"So I've been told," Passion Fruit replied.

"You stay vigilant; people are interested in her."

"As am I. Maracuya out," she said, ending the call. She held onto the phone, thinking of what Helen said to her about implanting Bryan. For a moment, a wayward thought crossed her mind. This year, she wouldn't be spending Thanksgiving alone.

Then it happened.

Passion Fruit smiled.

She was still smiling when she walked into the room to face Cranberry and Bryan. The smile wasn't something her face was accustomed to doing, which based on the reaction from the people in the house reiterated the fact.

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"Oh God, she's gotten orders to kill me," Bryan said, trying not to show fear, but he was nearly chuckling when he said it. "She's smiling. I'm going to die!"

Helen picked up on his sense of humor. "Or worse, she's decided to keep you and make you her love slave."

"Dear Jesus, not that," Bryan said, coughing and holding his side. "I'm not sure it even works. I mean, the pain would keep me from focusing to make him stand up and want to play. Oh, God, it hurts to laugh."

"Well, she did hold it in her hand, staring at it when she put in that catheter," Helen remarked. "I think she liked it, or it has been a long time since she's seen one."

Bryan held his side as he looked at Passion Fruit, and burst into laughter. He looked down at his crotch, squeezing his eyes as if he were giving his penis a silent command to wake up. He looked at her and shook his head no.

"He said his feelings are hurt and he doesn't want to play," Bryan said laughing again.

"Funny, both of you can kiss my ass," Passion Fruit commented, not appreciating the humor at her expense. "Cranberry, let's get this done."

She left the room and returned with what looked like a ray gun of death. Helen began to back away. Passion Fruit moved quickly, performing what Helen later deemed a Vulcan neck pinch, immobilizing her as she injected a small tracking device at the base of her neck and top of her spine. Passion Fruit sent a text with her phone, Helen

heard a beep, Bryan shouted that her neck was glowing, and then the light went out.

"What in the actual hell, Passion Fruit!" Helen said, rubbing her neck. "I think I peed a little. That hurts!"

"That's nothing; when it heals, I have to brand you," she said, smiling in a way that made Helen shudder. Her focus then turned to Bryan.

Bryan was shaking his head no, trying to get on his feet, the casted foot swinging back and forth across the floor as he tried to get away. "Nope. I don't want any of that. Nope. None for me."

"I can't use the same ones on you," she said, reaching into her pocket to remove a needle long enough to inseminate a horse. "This one is my personal trackers that I use on the animals I rescue. Come here, love slave."

"Not funny," he said, trying to stand but failing. "I'm not a stray puppy for you to put in a tracker. I don't want it."

Passion Fruit moved quickly, inserting the needle between his shoulder blades, under the subcutaneous tissue, pressing in. His eyes watered and he slumped over. Bryan watched Candy the Cane Corso, understanding how she felt.

He lay across the arm of the chair, his butt in the air, the cast dangling from his foot. The position he lay in exposed his genitals, and he was in too much pain to tuck away his junk. Helen threw the blanket across his lower half.

He whimpered, touching the gauze wrapped around his face, "I feel extra violated. You just keep adding insult to injury. Does this mean I now belong to you?"

His eyes met hers.

Passion Fruit didn't blink. "If you'd like," she said softly. "There are worse ways to spend your evenings."

Chapter 7-Contretemps

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The order came from on high. The Chrysalis ruled the Great Lakes with an iron fist, for not only human trafficking, but drugs, women, and shady after-hours spots. The High Council consisted of the three: Hornworm, Swallowtail, and the Imperial. A simple request came in the middle of the night in a text message:

THAT'S WHERE LAWRENCE Canton had made his mistake. He'd engaged with the Technician who, thus far, had no name. She was an enigma. His job, or rather the work order he'd received, simply dictated he track the woman and collect some intel. It wasn't an easy task, and he'd been paid handsomely to get started.

Based on what he knew of the Technicians, each one drove a black late model Ford F-150. The Archangels, or the handlers for each regional crew, the tailgates of their vehicles sported iridescent angel wings. The Watchers, or the Seraphim who didn't engage with bad people or good ones for the matter, simply kept watch, and reported the findings to a higher power. The Seraphim also drove black Ford F-150s with cherubic iridescent angels on the tailgate. These were easy to follow.

However, the woman was not. As far as he could tell, she didn't own a Ford F-150. The first job she undertook, Karlton and Ramon Santos, she was driving the shop of The Cherry on Top, a sniper. The Cherry used to cover Indiana. Thus far, he could find no trails of her, and everything on the woman dead ended.

"Maybe she's taking over Indiana," Lawrence said softly, going over his notes.

This approach also ended nowhere. He went to look over what he'd discovered in Wisconsin where the woman had shut down three Fields of Flowers in one night with minimal loss of life. Wisconsin was the territory of a master tracker, assassin and an

all-around Bad Apple. However, his vehicle wasn't used that night. The F-150 used belonged to a Technician out of Pennsylvania, which technically was part of the Great Lakes region, but the dude was not a Fruit. He was a master tracker as well, with no yield in him.

"Dead end again," Lawrence said, continuing to search.

When he could not find a vehicle, he began to look for patterns. Patterns indicated methodology, and the woman appeared methodical, but he couldn't find a name for her. Lawrence looked for more warehouse closures in Wisconsin in the Milwaukee area and found none.

However, for three months, there was a sizeable amount of activity in mid-Ohio, with two Fields of Flowers being raided and a startup in Indiana shut down. It was then he started to pull the footage from CCTV, and an odd thing happened.

"I see you, Miss Ma'am," he said, smiling as he spotted the Wilderness Green Subaru.

He found the Subaru in Wisconsin, up around Janesville. Other tapes showed the same Subaru with Kentucky plates, in Ohio, in Indiana, and recently in the area around Antioch, Illinois. Ironically, as many cameras as the vehicle appeared in, the license plates were indiscernible. Lawrence couldn't even get a partial on the plates.

"Let's see how and where you spend your time, Miss Ma'am," Lawrence said, noticing the frequent stops to bookstores and coffee shops, and she seemed to prefer shopping at Target versus Walmart.

"I've got you," he said proudly after nearly a month of hunting for the woman. "I just have to wait."

Two weeks he spent observing the three bookstores in Antioch, and just as he was

about to give up, a Subaru in Wilderness Green, pulled up to the front door. The one day he'd forgotten his camera was the one day when she'd showed up.

"She's black," Lawrence said, watching the woman exit the vehicle.

It wasn't so much the way the manner in which the lady got out of the vehicle; it was the method in which she got out of the vehicle that made him know for certain, he'd found his target. The woman opened the door slightly, checking all the mirrors of the car before slipping out of the door. A crossbody bag was slung over the sweater she wore, then she slipped on her coat. Cautious eyes scanned as if she were checking her sectors, and suddenly, her eyes stopped on him. He almost wanted to slide down in the seat, but that would have been too obvious.

For the oddest reason, he wanted her to know he was watching her movements. She noticed. A scowl came to her face and she pressed the fob in her hand to secure the vehicle. In the store, and based on where he stood on the street, her back never turned to the window.

"This is her," he said, making treks to the bookstore. He needed to see her up close.

The work order said not to engage, but after a month and a half of looking for a woman, he felt as if she owed him at least a smile. Everything in his soul told him not to enter the store, to not engage, just as the work order dictated, but he wanted to hear her voice. He needed to speak to her, possibly know her name.

"Simply lovely," he found himself saying aloud as he got closer to her. She smelled of cinnamon as if she'd been baking. "I've never seen you here before; are you new to the area?"

"Passing through," the woman told him.

He tried to ask her for coffee, or dinner, to talk. She was lovely. All natural. No fake tits, fake eyelashes, or those long acrylic nails with poo stuck under them. She wore a simple glosser on the full lips, and he was drawn to her like a hair on a biscuit.

Lawrence stepped aside as she made the purchases for books to be read by a man. The woman had a man. Jealously coursed through him at the thought of the cinnamon he smelled which indicated she'd baked fresh goods for the big-headed joker to enjoy when he came in from work. He'd be greeted with her loving arms and the gifts she'd been thoughtful to buy for him to read on his lunch breaks at the shit job where he worked.

He found himself craving her attention and wanting to know more about her. Lawrence watched her start up the car, and once she'd reached the traffic light on the corner, he made a beeline for his own vehicle. There were only two directions to head when you left the bookstore.

"She's going to Target," he said, based on what he'd learned about her patterns.

Lawrence found no need to rush since he knew where she was going. He'd give Miss Ma'am time to get to the store and get comfortable in her shopping. Then, he'd find her in the men's department, getting her man new socks, maybe a robe and new slippers that he'd wear as he sat in front of the fireplace, snacking on those cinnamon buns she made for him to eat after dinner.

"Bastard," he said, finding himself growing angry.

The anger showed on his face when he walked up to her in the store. She didn't seem too surprised to see him, although the act was put on for the security guard.

"He's making me uncomfortable," she confessed to the security guard, who escorted Lawrence from the store.

It didn't matter. When she left Target, she would go to a local coffee shop. There was a Big Bucks coffee shop inside the retailer, but she didn't seem like the type to order from the Seattle coffee maker. Miss Ma'am would want a local Mom and Pop shop, and he knew where she'd end up.

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He drove there and waited. If she were true to form, this would be the next stop for some frou-frou bullshit with whipped cream sprinkled with fairy wings with a double pump of Madagascar vanilla shots picked by a blind monkey hanging upside down the mountainside where the sun only lasted for six hours. Lawrence smiled at his own jest as the Subaru pulled up.

Again, he watched her exit routine from the vehicle. A desire so powerful to kiss her shocked even him. Maybe if things worked out, he could be a hero for Swallowtail and bring the woman to them, broken, of course. A night or two under his watchful care and administration, and he could bring the woman to the Chrysalis as punishment for her transgressions.

"Wait, what is she doing?" he asked as he spotted her darting down the alley. The contretemps of her actions were puzzling him.

Hurriedly, he exited the truck, not caring if the door slammed. He jogged across the road, careful not to draw attention to himself. Easy steps led him into the alley as he searched for his mark. A moment of hesitation came hurling at his head when he thought about the last lines of the text, DO NOT ENGAGE. She was a slip of woman. No real threat to him. He could easily overpower her, knock her out, then stash her in a doorway while he fetched his vehicle.

The excitement of a possible private evening with the lady distracted him. He never saw the blow coming to his temple as he dropped to his knees, landing on his face in the alley. The lady left him there, minus the cash in his wallet and the credit cards. She even took his identification.

At home later that night, fear consumed him. She'd taken his identification, meaning she knew who he was, and she knew where he lived, and with that kind of information, she would know who he worked for to find her. He was screwed, not only with the Chrysalis for failing to follow the missive, but he had engaged with her, just as they told him not to, and now, he was going to more than likely be killed.

Days passed, and he would have to make the call. He'd have to confess to Swallowtail his failure and pray she didn't take his life. Finally, when the worrying turned to making him physically ill, he entered his kitchen in the middle of the night. On the counter sat his driver's license and the two credit cards taken from his wallet. Next to it was a single cranberry.

"What the hell is this?" he said looking around. Sweat beads popped up on his forehead and his mouth went dry.

Lawrence rushed to check the doors and windows for a point of entry. The alarm had been on and still was. The woman had entered his home. Fear coursed through him as he ran back to the bedroom and on his pillow was a copy of one of the books she'd purchased in the bookstore.

"Fuccccccck!" he screamed, realizing she'd still been in his home when he went to the kitchen. "What have I done? Oh God, what have I done?"

HELEN WAS ON THE MOVE. The Subaru was compromised. It was a five-hour drive to Louisville to drop off the car and pick up the Colorado pick up Mustang had given her. It would also be a good time to spend a day or so with Cherry before driving the two hours home to Plainfield. Thus far, she hadn't told her cousin that she was living with Mustang in Indiana or even told Cherry that Mustang had moved to Indiana. They would tell everyone at Christmas.

However, she needed to make a quick stop in Orland Park to return the driver's license and credit cards to one Lawrence Canton, a professional tracker used by the Chrysalis. It would seem Lawrence was contracted to find her. He'd succeeded, but she simply needed to drop by his place to let him know she'd also found him.

Spending three months with Lemon had taught her the finer points of accessing security systems with chemicals. A drop of acid here and a mixture of a few chemicals there and the systems were deactivated. She let herself into his home and even took a moment to watch him sleep.

Helen tickled the bottom of his foot as he tossed and turned, before finally sitting up. In the kitchen, she'd left his cards. She watched from the guest room as he passed by, going to the kitchen to discover the ID and credit cards. In his bedroom, she'd left a copy of the book *Watchers* by Koontz on his pillow, easing out the way she'd come in.

A small smile covered her lips, knowing it would fuck with his calm for the rest of his life.

"Yeah, I'm a fucking predator," Helen said, aiming the Subaru towards Louisville.

It wasn't something she would mention to Mustang. She didn't mention the tracker she had located on her car and transferred to the truck. She didn't mention any of it to anyone as she joined Cherry, Slow, and Naomi at the kitchen table for dinner. After dinner, she read a story to Naomi and listened to her speak about her pony, Miss Sprinkles. Helen sat and listened to her cousin complain about the disappearance of her vagina under the growing belly and the constant need to pee, along with other bodily functions Helen didn't care to hear about.

At the end of the evening, before walking to the home gifted to her by her cousin's husband, Slow stopped her.

"We miss you around here," Slow said.

"It's nice to be missed," Helen responded. "Ditto. Have a good night."

Cherry noticed the difference in Helen. Mr. Slow noticed the difference in Helen. The good news that he felt he needed to share with his wife, "She's no longer afraid to walk her path in the world."

"I'm more afraid for those crossing her path," Cherry said.

"Are you worried she no longer needs you, Abigail?" he asked, using her birth name versus the former Technician handle.

"No, she never needed me, Michael. I was always the one who needed her," Cherry confessed. "She knew it and allowed me the space to work through all the insecurities I had, but it worked out for both of us. Now is her time. I have to move aside and let her breathe."

"It's going to be interesting when all is said and done," Slow told his wife.

There were a number of things going through Helen's head. One was the home she had in Kentucky in the backyard of her cousin's property. The house needed a lot of personal touches, and when they returned for Christmas, she planned to decorate the hell out of it to make it fitting for her and Mustang. Secondly, the home they shared in Indiana required the same, and on her way home in a day or so, she planned to stop and buy up some things to make the place more personable. However, first, she needed to get through Thanksgiving with Bad Apple and the kids.

A smile sat at the corner of her lips imagining Mustang sleeping in one of the full-sized beds. His feet were going to hang over the edges. Then she imagined him meeting Stephen, and Ricky, and the laughter sneaked up on her.

"This is going to be good," she said, thinking of when her father would also meet the permanent man in her life. "Yeah, it's going to be good. First things first. Thanksgiving."

Chapter 8- Chance

Helen arose early on Wednesday morning, driving over to Mark and Ruth Neary's home to start the holiday baking. Ruth Neary, the adoptive mother of her man Mustang, and a true Southern Belle, began her holiday baking the day before Thanksgiving. This tradition meant the sweet potato pies, cookies, and pound cakes would be handled today, freeing the oven for the mac and cheese, ham, and turkey baking on Thursday for the big dinner.

However, since neither she nor Mustang would be attending Thanksgiving with his family, she wanted to bring a bit of home to him. It also helped to not have to do all the baking herself to take to Bad Apple's for dinner. In Helen's mind, it was a win-win.

Three hours later, loaded with a loaf pan pound cake, two sweet potato pies, and a dozen of Ruth Neary's famous peanut butter cookies, Helen headed for home. The two-hour drive from Louisville to Plainville wouldn't take much effort. She managed to wrangle a bit of cookie dough from Ruth as well, so that when her man came in from work, their home would be filled with the warm scents of holiday cheer.

To add to her list of making things cozy, when she left Antioch, she stopped in Naperville at a Wayfair Outlet to pick up items for their home in Indiana. Helen wanted to nest and put in touches which made the place feel as if she lived there. Too much of her life with Cherry had been temporary, from military duty stations, temporary housing, and renting places they could leave in a hurry if necessary. For the first time in her life, she was setting down roots.

She would have a favorite chair, a painting picked up at a local art show to hang in the guest room, or aprons for special occasions when they had over friends and family. Remorsefully, she didn't want to admit to looking forward to having Thanksgiving with Bad Apple, because it meant being honest with the sad state of her life with Cherry. They had holiday dinners, but most times, it was a sad bird that came in a pre-ordered meal box that was stuck in the oven and baked for 45 minutes. Now, she was planning and preparing meals from scratch, which actually tasted decent - thanks to Ruth Neary.

The drive home filled her head with happy thoughts. On her next break, she would order a new embroidery machine for the house along with a craft cutter, sewing machine, and one of those wall units for all of her crafting supplies. The next trip home, she'd set up her crafting room. This trip, she planned to work on the guest room for when her father came for a visit. The hall bathroom needed a bit of jazzing up, and the kitchen needed to say a woman lived in the home. Plus, she had a rug for the living room to kill the echo.

At the gate for the home compound, Helen entered her code as the gates opened just enough to allow her truck to drive through. She pulled around the house to the back door, parking the truck to unload the goodies. The keys jangled as she opened the door and raced to the panel to disarm the systems. A loud sigh escaped her lips.

"It feels good to be home," she said aloud.

Slowly, she began to unload the truck. The baked goods came in first, followed by the small bag of groceries for supper plans. Next, she dragged the rug into the home, moving the coffee table and rolling it out. It added immediate warmth to the space without too much color to overwhelm his male senses. A plush throw she tossed over the back of the couch, as she returned to the car, taking out items and placing them in their new homes.

"This Ficus is really needed in that corner," she said aloud, adding the plant. In the other corner she added a lemon tree, and in the master bedroom, she put in a snake plant. "Now the guest room."

A new rug, throw pillows, and a painting over the bed of two intertwined hands were hung. Fresh drapes hung at the windows and satisfied, she made herself a cup of tea. At a quarter of four, Helen checked her watch and began the prep for the arrival of her man.

Dinner would be simple, consisting of a hearty vegetable soup with chunks of beef, cheesy toast, and a side salad, which paired well with the bottle of Shiraz she grabbed to go with the meal. For an added touch, she set the table and lit a couple of candles. A quick shower and her favorite maxi dress were what she had on when the chime sounded to the back door and Mustang entered the home.

He looked at the table, inhaled the scent of freshly baked peanut butter cookies, and spotted the rug in the living room. His eyes went to his woman next. The smile which covered his face said everything Helen wanted to hear from him without the use of words.

"Welcome home Baby," she said, "dinner's ready. Get comfy, drop your gear and come tell me about your day."

"My day just got amazingly better," he said, opening his arms.

Helen walked into the embrace, kissing him with gusto. Mustang held up a finger. There were matters on his mind which needed taking care of before any sweet love could be made, plus the table looked amazing and dinner smelled wonderful.

"I missed you," he said softly, placing a kiss on her cheek.

"All I could think about was getting here," she said. "I spent the morning with Ruth baking, so I have two sweet potato pies and her sour cream pound cake."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

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"Yes. We can leave one pie here and take one to Apple's for Thanksgiving," she said.

"Or we can take it all and share the bounty," he replied, walking over to pull out the chair for her to sit. "This looks just wonderful, Helen. I needed this. It was a rough couple of days."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No, I want instead to give you this," he said, bending to one knee. From his coat pocket, he pulled out a velvet box, opening it to show it to her. "I know you can't wear it when you work, but I thought it would be nice to wear it this weekend."

Mustang slipped the ring on her left finger. Her small hands showcased the sparkling diamonds which accented the platinum setting. Helen smiled, and from her pocket, she also removed a velvet box, presenting it to him.

"Those chicks in your office also need to know you're taken," she told him, removing the diamond encrusted band to slip on his left hand.

"You got me an engagement ring?" he asked, looking down at his hand. For shits and giggles, he held up his hands and began to fan his face like to was trying to prevent his mascara from running with his tears. "It's so sudden. Yes, Helen. Yes, I shall marry you. I'm so happy right now. So happy. I need a moment."

"Oh, shut up," she said, laughing at him. "Let's eat before dinner gets cold."

RIGHT AT 8 A.M., MUSTANG, driving a black GMC Yukon, departed the compound, preparing for the five-hour drive to Janesville, Wisconsin, for Thanksgiving dinner with what he assumed to be a newfound couple of friends. For his own peace of mind, as a backup, he booked a local hotel room in case shit got weird. This was different for him and the first outing as a couple for him and Helen.

"Practice run for Christmas," she said aloud.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"This is our first outing as an official couple," she told him. "It can be a practice run for Christmas and having to explain to the family what is happening between us."

"I don't have, or rather we don't have, to explain shit," he said. "We are consenting, grown ass adults. Besides, when I tell Mama Ruth I have moved two hours away, the rest, she's not going to care about."

"True," she replied, enjoying the comfort of the leg room of the SUV. "Is this a rental?"

"No, I bought it to haul home all that shit you're planning to buy for Christmas," he said, "plus, didn't really want to drive five hours in the Cobra. I'm getting too old for that shit."

"I like it," she replied. "Roomy. Do you think we can make out in the back?"

"Shit, I have enough leg room where we can get freaky up front, if need be," he replied laughing. "Put on some tunes and let's enjoy the ride. It's good to be out of the office."

"Man, that is an understatement," she added, thinking of Passion Fruit locked in with

Bryan for the weekend.

The hours zoomed by as the Yukon ate the miles of the road, arriving in Janesville right at noon. The old farmhouse had a new life with a fresh coat of paint. The barn, which had been a doorless, falling-in mess, now possessed doors and the camper where Ricky had been living had a home. In the garage, she could also see Bad Apple's black Ford F-150, aimed at a side door, while Ricky's truck was parked in front of his camper. In the drive, where Helen instructed Mustang to park, a second small car sat. Helen didn't recognize the vehicle and decided not to speak about it.

Helen removed the cake and pies from the back seat, turning to find Bad Apple on the porch that no longer leaned to one side. He provided her a nod as Mustang rounded the vehicle to help Helen with the goodies. They walked up the stairs to be greeted.

"Mustang, Cranberry."

"Apple," Helen said, and Mustang provided a nod.

"Stephen has made snacks, a charcuterie board, finger sandwiches and other stuff, I have no idea what half of it is," Apple said. "Ricky is grilling the turkey, so I have limited hopes on that turning out well. If push comes to shove, we have potatoes and green beans, so we won't starve."

Mustang watched his eyes and asked, "You need help with anything?"

"Yes, a second turkey; if you can get one of those, then dinner may be saved," Apple said, opening the door for them to enter.

The pink chairs she'd purchased were still at the window, along with her teacup and a fresh steaming pot of hot water.

"Aunt Helen is here!" A young black man said as he barreled around the corner.

"Hello, Jeffrey," she added, opening her arms for an embrace. The young man looked good. He wore new sneakers, sported a fresh haircut, and wore a button-down shirt.

"This is Jay."

"Hey, Uncle Jay," he said, extending his hand for a shake, which Mustang accepted.

"Nice to meet you. Aunt Helen, you may have to go into the kitchen and help calm Stephen down. He's completely off the rails and has overwhelmed himself."

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Just as he said the words, Stephen entered the space, filling it with sparkles, fairy power, and wearing what could only be considered his Cowboy Carter tribute. Mustang didn't react to the young Asian boy dressed in all white, including chaps and a cowboy hat.

"Aunt Helen!" Stephen squealed. "The green beans still need to be destripped! Oscar has peeled away all the potatoes instead of just removing the skin. Mr. Ricky is completely ruining the turkey by putting it on the grill, and a bitch is about to pop a blood vessel."

Helen held up the box. "I have pound cake, peanut butter cookies, and two sweet potato pies," she said, passing the box to Jeffrey.

Stephen was looking at Mustang. He pointed at the muscle-bound man, prompting Helen to say, "This is Jay."

The young man pouted, asking, "Can Uncle Jay man a grill to stop Mr. Ricky from ruining my perfect Thanksgiving?"

"Hey, I can try," Mustang said. "Honestly, I must say I'm impressed you're wearing all white and have no food stains on you. So, whatever you need us to help with, point and we can make it happen."

"Oh God, I think I love him. Jay. Uncle Jay, whatever, please go stop Mr. Ricky," Stephen said.

"I have no idea who Mr. Ricky is, but point me in the direction," Mustang said,

smiling at Helen.

A boy, whom Mustang recognized, also appeared, making a beeline for Helen, but stopped when he saw the big man. "I remember you," Oscar said. "I remember you."

"And I remember you. You look good. You feeling, okay?"

"I guess; lots of drama around here," Oscar said. "Pretty noisy. Screeching. Meltdowns. Every. Day."

"Must be rough," Mustang said.

"Dude," Oscar said, emoting with his entire face before looking at Helen. "I heard cookies. Did you say cookies?"

Ricky entered from the newly built deck into the kitchen. Outside, lots of black smoke hovered around the grill. Bad Apple only shook his head. Mustang headed towards the back door, stopped by the deep voice of Ricky.

"Are you him?"

"I am Jay," Mustang said. "The fire seems a bit high; mind if I take a look?"

"Look all you want, but I got it," Ricky replied defensively.

"Awesome," Mustang nodded. "Have you ever heard of the three-smoke method for grilling large game birds?"

"The what?"

"Mind if I show you?"

"Three smoke method?" Ricky said, following Mustang out the back door. Helen turned to Bad Apple, smiling at him.

"He's a menace with anything other than a hammer, but he tries," Bad Apple said, giving a bit of a forced smile. "You look good. Nice ring. Has a date been set yet? We will want to be there."

"Of course," she answered. "Things seem to be going well."

"For the most part," he answered, taking a seat in one of the pink chairs, waiting for her to join him.

They shared a cup of tea, and nothing more was said. Mustang appeared in the kitchen asking Stephen for spices, seasonings, and vinegar water for the grill. Stephen, in return, passed Mustang a beer to go along with everything else he asked for, plus a tapas plate of finger foods. Helen joined him in the kitchen to finish preparing the holiday meal.

She fussed and fawned over the dining room table and the setting. Helen marveled over the souffle when it came out of the oven, she held nothing back praising Stephen's mac and cheese with the crunchy topping. Jeffrey went on about the Thanksgiving decorations and Stephen calmed down, bringing it all together.

Mustang became the conquering hero, entering the back door with the turkey spatchcocked on a platter, flattened and grilled to perfection. Helen found herself pleasantly surprised when the white van rolled up as Pear arrived, bringing drinks.

"Pear, this is Mustang," Helen said, making the brief introduction.

"I see you Cranberry, okay now," she replied, nodding at Mustang, who said nothing. "And he's wearing a ring. Go ahead, Sis!"

Helen looked at Mustang, who was back pretending as if he were crying and fanning his eyes to stop the tears. Bad Apple saw it and found himself laughing. Ricky wasn't amused.

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"You married our Helen?" Ricky asked.

"Yep," Mustang said, staring him in the eye.

The standoff lasted a minute. Mustang didn't break his stare and Ricky finally blinked. "You saved the turkey, so I will forgive you."

"Good to know," Mustang replied, as everyone came to the table for dinner.

Bad Apple blessed the meal. Food passed left. Food passed right, and Mustang was pleasingly surprised at how good the meal actually tasted. He told Stephen well done and even helped with the cleanup after dinner.

From the vantage point of standing away from the group, he was able to observe the woman he planned to marry. Each time one kid left her side, another popped up. When it wasn't a kid, the odd woman with the wild hair took a seat. The woman moved and Ricky sat with Helen, followed by Apple, and finally Oscar who popped in between chats for hugs and cuddles. Mustang, sitting alone at the table enjoying an after-dinner coffee, noticed the boy watching him.

"This should be interesting," Mustang said under his breath as the boy approached.

Oscar asked, "You liked that dinner?"

"It was well done," Mustang replied.

"Yeah, sometimes Stephen tries things that don't go together and we end up with

tummy aches," Oscar commented. "This was okay."

Mustang added no words, allowing the air between them to settle down, so the boy could say what was on his mind. Whatever it was, he'd already decided he wasn't taking any kids, not this one, or any other ones. However, he was fair, and he'd listen.

"Mister Jay, you got any kids?"

"No."

"You want any?"

"You offering?"

"Don't know. It would be cool to have a dad," Oscar said. "The kids at school are always talking about their weekend plans. It would be cool you know, to say, yeah, me and my dad, took out the...what do you call the boat, you know, for two people, with the sticks, which go like this."

He pretended to use oars as an example of what he was trying to show Mustang.

"A canoe?"

"Yeah, canoe," Oscar repeated. "What is the verb for using a canoe?"

"Canoeing."

"Yeah, I would be like, me and my Dad did some canoeing this weekend at the lake," Oscar said. "You canoe? Or do you go...canoeing?"

"Yes, I have a couple of canoes," Mustang said.

"You got any kids?"

"My answer hasn't changed since you asked two minutes ago," Mustang replied.

"Yeah, I know, but hey. Mr. Milton says a man has to state his intentions and be honest," Oscar explained.

The boy intrigued him, as well as did his thought processes. He was engaged and wanted to see where he was leading him in the conversation. Mustang asked, "What are your intentions and what are you being honest about?"

"Chaos," Oscar said. "Every day here is chaos. Jeffrey is driving and has a girlfriend. Stephen, well, is Stephen, but they are older and will be leaving soon."

"You worried about that?"

"I'm worried about who will come in to replace them," Oscar said. "Last week, a new kid showed up. He had crazy eyes. Mr. Milton couldn't let him stay. He was too far gone. The streets damaged him, and he made me feel unsafe. I want to feel safe."

"You're not safe here?"

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"I have a lock on my door, but Mr. Milton sleeps downstairs," Oscar said. "The next kid...you know, it only takes a second to catch you off guard. Then he's in my room. I want to feel safe. Hey, you got any kids?"

Mustang was listening to what the boy was saying and possibly asking for, but he wasn't sure. "You offering?"

"I want a dad, but I want to feel safe," Oscar said. "I want to go to bed with my door open if I want to, come home from school and there are no more kids in the house that may want to harm me. I want to go canoeing on the weekend, fishing, and go to my dad's job while he brags about me to the folks he works with. I don't want much, just a chance. I want a dad. You want a son?"

"How do you know I'm a good person or if I will make a suitable Dad?"

"Aunt Helen," he said. "Shedon'tstand for no bullshit. You can't be her man and be on some bullshit. You have to be right to be with that lady. Think about it; let me know."

"Think about what?"

"Me being your kid," Oscar said. "You can teach me stuff and help me with homework, and I can be your partner in life."

Mustang found himself smiling, intrigued, and again, fully engaged with the boy. He asked, "My partner in life?"

"Aunt Helen is not going to watch sporting games with you, go fishing, or help you

clean the canoe," Oscar said. "Partner. You keep me safe; I keep you safe."

"You're going to keep me safe?"

"There are times in this life when a man doesn't need to walk alone. I'll walk with you, have your back, keep you safe," Oscar explained.

"You can't do that for Mr. Milton?" Mustang inquired.

"He's broken," Oscar said. "His heart is in the right place, but he doesn't know how to give love. Aunt Helen keeps looking over at you with this look in her eye. She loves you, and you must know how to give love back, because she's not with the bullshit. You know how to love. I want some of that. Like I said, let me know. I'm a good kid. Won't be no trouble."

"You repeat yourself a lot," Mustang said.

"People don't hear me the first time, so I have to make sure what I'm saying is being communicated," Oscar said. "We have the weekend to try it out. Then we can go from there."

"And if my answer is no?"

"I'll try again on another day," he said, looking Mustang in the eye. "I will also give you my Christmas wish list before you go, in case, you know, you feel like getting me a present."

"Hmm," was all Mustang had to say as the evening came to a close.

The downstairs guest room had been completed as well as the en suite bath, giving them privacy from the family. The bed was too small and Mustang's feet hung over

the edge. Helen snuggled up next to him.

"You canceled the hotel room?"

"Yes."

He remained quiet, lying in the dark, holding her close. "They all love you. Even that Ricky guy, who I may have to fight before the weekend is over. He keeps eyeballing you in a way that makes me want to punch him in the face," Mustang whispered. "I think he's in love with you."

"He's also in love with Apple."

"Didn't see that coming."

"Why do you think they all love me, Jay?"

"Easy," he said, giving her a squeeze. "Because I love you too."

"I love you as well," she said, leaning into him.

"Oscar asked me to be his dad," Mustang said.

"Hmmm," she mumbled, saying no more.

"Nothing to say?"

"No," Helen said.

"He wants us to try it out over the weekend," Mustang said.

"Hmmp," she repeated and drifted off to sleep. Helen had nothing more to add to the conversation right now. Oscar was right. If he and Mustang were a good fit, the weekend would tell, and Jay would need to make the decision of whether he wanted to take on that task. She wouldn't say one way or another.

Whatever he decided, she'd support.

Chapter 9-Fluke

The uncomfortable bed prevented him from sleeping well. Childhood fears of monsters under the bed waiting to eat his toes hindered Mustang from getting a good night's rest with his feet hanging over the edge of the bed. The idea of a little Asian monster dressed like he was going to a sparkling fairy rodeo without horses haunted him. At daybreak, the sun pushing through the heavy curtains wasn't enough to stop the chill coming through the window, but the warmth of his woman at his side made it all feel...cozy.

He stared at the ceiling, going over the bits of information he'd gathered by simply watching. This weekend, he didn't know what he expected to learn, but being here wasn't a fluke. He was here to learn something, what, he wasn't sure. He sure as hell wasn't planning at the end of the trip to become some kid's daddy, but the boy had touched him and made him think.

"Hmm," was all he muttered as he peeled Helen off him and headed to the bathroom.

Having a bathroom in the room with them was a nice touch, and if he needed a few extra minutes to read on his phone, he could do so without a kid needing to brush his teeth or wash his face. The house in itself appeared to have good bones, and he could see that the man Ricky had put in the work.

"Apple and Ricky...", he mumbled, closing the bathroom door.

The smell of coffee cut his reading time short, and he washed his face and hands and brushed his teeth, and after slipping on a pair of loungers and an oversized tee, he headed for the kitchen. The large container, almost restaurant style, of a coffeemaker sat on the counter. He also smelled biscuits and bacon, and there was a container of eggs sitting at the edge of the countertop.

"Oh, good morning. Coffee?" Stephen asked.

"Yes, please," Mustang replied.

The first thing he noticed was the young man wore a pair of chinos with a button-down shirt and no mascara or lip gloss. He wore a simple pair of leather loafers with socks, a black banded watch and no earrings. All of it was intentional to send a message, to whom Mustang was uncertain, but if the kid made the effort, it would be rude to not comment.

"That's a different look," Mustang said. "Very preppy."

"Code switching," Stephen said. "Yesterday was a special occasion, so I had to go all out. Today, I'm not sure what the plan is, so I have to be the good little Asian kid who looks like a foreign exchange student."

"Funny," Mustang said, watching him pull the tray of biscuits and bacon from the oven. "You like to cook, I see."

"These biscuits will make you want to slap your Mama," Stephen said, "Ms. Helen taught me how to make these. I can't wait to see your face when you try one."

"I know how they taste; I grew up on them," Mustang replied. "Those are my Mama's biscuits. She taught Helen how to make them, and now you know as well."

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"Well, I'll be," Stephen said, popping a hot biscuit onto a saucer. "Yeah, I didn't really know I liked to cook until I got here. The places I lived, most only had one skillet and a pot that was used to make spaghetti or hamburger helping kind of meals. Aunt Helen bought these beautiful cookware sets for me, and man, I have not stopped creating yumminess."

"She did?" Mustang asked, noticing the ceramic coated matching cookware sets.

"Yeah, and I told her I wanted to be able to set the table for dinner with actual matching dishes and cloth napkins," Stephen said, smiling. He poured a cup of coffee for Mustang and placed it on the table. "Hon-T, that sister came through not only with the dishes but also the table to put them on and the cabinet to put my dishes away. I love her so much."

"I see."

"You know what else? Last month was my birthday and I turned 16. She sent me 16 scratcher cards and a bill. Two of the cards actually had money on them, so I ended up with like \$300 bucks for my birthday," he said. "I'm starting to save to look at going to culinary school."

"You want to be a chef?"

"Baker, maybe a pastry chef. I wanted to own a salon, provide services from the rooter to the tooter, but who wants to bleach assholes all day or pluck coochie hair with popsicle sticks and wax? Not this queen," Stephen said.

Mustang's eyebrows arched. "Disturbing visual, but I get it."

Jeffrey came down the stairs, and Stephen waved his hand in the air with a greeting. He told Jeffrey he was planning to do a load of laundry so if he had anything, he and the younger boy Oscar needed to bring their clothing downstairs.

"Stephen, it is too early in the morning to be Mother Henning," Jeffrey remarked, acknowledging Mustang. He grabbed a biscuit and a slice of bacon and took a seat. He looked Mustang in the eye. "I was wondering what you'd be like."

"Any reason why?" Mustang said.

Jeffrey spread jam on his biscuit and took a bite. He collected his thoughts. "You ever have a favorite teacher in school, and then one day, you're out and about and see that teacher with her man? After that, you see that joker everywhere, doing shady stuff, then you wonder how a nice lady like that ended up with him?"

"So, you were worried I would be a slag like your teacher's husband?"

"Didn't know, but it's weird. Nice women usually end up with an unemployed jerk who keeps their car all day and picks them up from work late, the tank on E, and Teacher just seems...defeated," Jeffrey said.

"It sounds as if you're speaking from experience."

"Maybe. I've lived in a lot of foster care homes," he said. "There are bad men out there. My girlfriend, her mom has one living with them. He likes to say stuff to my girl, tasteless jabs and jokes just close to crossing the line."

Mustang leaned forward. "How do you feel about that, or how do you plan to approach that situation?"

"I approached it," Jeffrey said. "In front of him, her mother, and my girl, I reminded her that the cell phone in her hand took video as well. All she needed was to hit the record button and show it to a school counselor and things said in the dark can come to light. Mr. Asswipe backed off. Men like that are all cowards, trying to prey and take advantage."

"Well done," Mustang said.

"Aunt Helen taught me and explained that I was a defender," Jeffrey said. "My job in this house is to look out for Stephen and Oscar. I have a car and drive them both to school and bring them home, so none of the school bus bullying crap."

Mustang found the young man to be interesting. He asked, "This is your senior year in high school?"

"Naw, I'm behind a year, so I have one more, then I'm off to the military, travel, see the world," he said. "I worry about Oscar, though. Stephen and I are older, so we know a little about the world. He needs a chance in a household with a mom and dad. A house with two dads is weird to him. Hell, it's weird to me, but they show us nothing, and we see nothing, which is okay, you know, overall. But kids need to see love in action to know it's real."

Mustang was listening. He was also understanding. "Is that why you were curious about me?"

"Aunt Helen gives love so readily to us, even when we didn't know we needed it," he said. "She has to have a well where she's drawing the love from, so I wanted to see how you loved her."

Mustang blinked several times, shocked at the insight and observation of someone so young. "How I love her..."

"The soft touches, the glances across the room, and when she passes by you, you always touch her. You kiss her a lot too," Jeffrey said. "I don't even think you realize how often you kiss on her. She likes it too. I hate to say it, but we like seeing it in action. It makes me feel...hopeful."

"I kiss her a lot. I do?"

"Yeah, each time she stands next to you, you lean down and kiss her. You treat her like she's precious to you, and it's cool; she deserves that," Jeffrey said, polishing off the biscuit. "So, what's the plan today?"

"I just came in for a cup of coffee," Mustang said. "Are there plans for today?"

"Oscar mentioned canoeing. It's November in Wisconsin, I don't know what frozen lake he plans to row a boat on, but he's a kid," Jeffrey said standing. "I need to go get my laundry before Stephen comes back in here flapping his arms like he's about to land a plane. Good chat."

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"If you say so," Mustang said, sitting and staring at the coffeepot. "What in the entire hell just happened..."

"Hey," Ricky's deep voice said, coming in from down the hall. "Stephen made them fairy biscuits again. I swear if he don't stop with all this baking, my ass is gonna be as wide as Texas."

"You don't have to eat them," Mustang said to Ricky.

"And destroy that child's self-esteem? I could never," he said, laughing. "So, what's the plan today?"

Mustang looked the man square in the face. "I'm the guest. Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"You have a point there, Chief Trooper," Ricky commented, looking at him. He had a thing on his mind, and if he had a word to say to Mustang, he wasn't planning to give the man an out or an in. However, the shared moment was interrupted by the arrival of Apple, who entered the space, changing the entire feel of the kitchen.

"Morning," Apple commented, heading for the coffeepot. "I tell you what...Stephen and these damned biscuits. I have put on at least ten pounds in the past three months."

Again, Mustang seemed confused by two grown men unable to control their eating habits. "You know, you don't have to eat more than one."

Apple turned suddenly, "And ruin that fragile child's mental well-being? I could

never!"

The three men sat at the table, enjoying coffee and a new day. Apple had no real plans for the weekend outside of spending time with Helen and getting to know the man in her life. Plus, the kids wanted to see her. A silence lingered between the three as Oscar made his appearance. To the surprise of the group, he went first to Mustang, offering a half-hug, which was returned by his "uncle." He offered a shy good morning to Apple and Ricky and took a seat, his eyes on Mustang.

"So, Uncle Jay, what's the plan for the day?"

Mustang, still confused about why everyone in the home thought he had a plan, was slightly irritated. Instead of allowing it to be shown to the kid, he offered a smile, followed by, "Oscar, can you tell me what you like to do?"

"I like to make stuff," Oscar said. "I have some building blocks and junk, but I need like a desk or a table to build the bigger ones."

Mustang asked, "Would you like to make a desk or a workstation to build on?"

His eyes lit up, "Well, yeah! In my room, I have to build on the floor, so I can't really see how it is all coming together. So, yeah!"

Mustang turned his attention to Ricky. "I assume you have a workshop here. Could you spare some wood or point me in the direction of a home repair store?"

"I have wood, saws, and even a lathe," Ricky said to Mustang.

"Good," Mustang offered. "Mr. Milton, would it be okay for Oscar to show me his room so I can see how much space we have to work with for this workstation?"

Apple waved his hand. A very ecstatic Oscar bounded up the stairs with Mustang in tow. He showed him the meager bedroom space with the bed and dresser, nightstand, and one lone lamp. With the space requirement in mind, Mustang's stomach growled, requiring more than a cup of coffee and biscuit.

Back in the kitchen, Mustang wanted breakfast and began to crack eggs and mix in cream, milk, and cheese. In the back of the fridge, he found scallions on their last legs, which he added to the mixture. He scrambled the eggs and plated some for himself and Oscar, as well as Helen, who had made an appearance in the kitchen. Mustang pulled out a chair and set the plated breakfast before her, along with a cup of coffee. A smile crossed his lips when he bent to kiss her cheek, thinking of the boy Jeffrey who pointed out this habit of his.

He took a seat at the table with Apple, Oscar, and Ricky. He looked at Helen. "Oscar and I are going to spend a couple of hours in Ricky's shop building him a workstation for his room for his Legos," he told her.

"Okay," she said, "and maybe a chair or a stool to go with it?"

"Depends on the wood and supplies on hand, versus me having to leave to go to a store or cut down branches off a tree," he said.

"Sounds like a plan," Helen replied.

She had nothing more to add, so Mustang completed his breakfast. He washed his dishes before heading to the bedroom to shower and get dressed, returning to get started on the first of his tasks. She watched his strong back as he walked to the barn with Ricky and Oscar to get started on the project, which only took a couple of hours. Mustang taught Oscar how to dovetail ends to connect the desk pieces as Ricky leant a hand with sanding and polishing the wood pieces before applying a thin coat of lacquer to the wood. A quick stool was made, using the lathe to carve legs the right

height for the new work desk.

Since he was a kid, Mustang always traveled with a deck of cards. In hotel rooms, or layovers in airports, he would use the cards to play hands of solitaire, or if a bored traveler was interested, a couple of hands of gin rummy. After dinner, he pulled out the deck of cards, drawing the attention of Jeffrey, who knew street games to make a quick buck.

Mustang taught the boys how to play the card game of War, then Crazy Eights, and ending the evening playing Rummy. Pleased with the interaction, Jeffrey wanted to know what his new Uncle was going to teach him on Saturday, as well as Stephen, who had moved closer to sit next to Mustang. It surprised them all, when Stephen sat next to him and Mustang leaned into the boy, shouldering support as he discussed grilling techniques, he would show him on Saturday as well. Oscar came in for a hug to say goodnight, asking Mustang if he would tuck him in.

“And nope,” Mustang said, swatting the boy on the bottom and shooing him towards the stairs.

Ricky nodded his head at Mustang before retiring for the night. Apple, taking a moment, looked at Mustang, he smiled. A thing he didn't do often which came across as a snarl, making Mustang stare at him mutherfuckingly for nearly ten seconds.

“See you in the morning,” Mustang said, wondering what Saturday would bring.

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Oscar couldn't stop grinning on Saturday morning when the desk was moved into his room. He took care to move the blocks from the floor to the desktop. For good measure, on the lathe, Mustang had created a quick lamp to go on the desk. The pride the boy felt in helping to create a piece he would use nearly every day brought him to tears, and he followed Mustang about for the rest of the day.

Saturday morning, to be fair, Mustang spent time with Jeffrey, showing him how to use toothpaste to clean the dull headlights on his car. As they worked, he talked shop about cars, his Mustang Cobra, and traveling.

“This car is not much to look at, but it runs good,” Jeffrey said.

“Apple showed a lot of trust in you getting this for you,” Mustang said. “You’re going to be a good man.”

“I am a good man,” he said. “I just needed a chance to be something more than surviving on the street. I got that. We have that.”

“Good enough,” Mustang said, closing out the project.

In the afternoon, Mustang hung out with Stephen, showing him how to work the grill, smoking techniques, plus how to bar-b-que once, eat for three days to lessen cooking time. He even used dried branches from the sad apple tree in the yard to make chips for smoking meats.

"This is how you get applewood smoked meats like bacon and ham," he said to a very receptive Stephen.

“I was surprised at how nice you are to me, and not trying to get, you know, a little something on the side when she wasn’t looking,” Stephen said. “Those are the kinds of men I know. I haven’t met anyone like you before. I see why she loves you.”

“I can also see why she loves you,” Mustang said. He looked at the boy. When he worked at the summer camps in his youth, Mustang served as a counselor for teen boys, a few, who had yet to embrace their sexuality, unlike Stephen, who was fully invested in who he was and who he was going to be. “It is difficult to discern sometimes the difference between kindness and ulterior motives. I wanted to show that men can provide affection without wanting anything in return. I think you’re an amazing person, and I look forward to seeing the man you grow into.”

“Me?” Stephen said, his hand placed on his non-existent breasts. “You think I’m amazing?”

“Stephen, there is a light inside of you so bright, that I’m sure it scares you sometimes. You can turn it down, but don’t ever let anyone dim it. You’re beautiful, inside and out.”

“Oh my golly, I’m going to cry. Don’t make me cry, you big brute of man, being so nice and caring,” Stephen said, and immediately begin to cry.

Helen and Apple watched from the kitchen window as Mustang embraced the boy, holding him as a father would a son, allowing the emotions to flow without judgement. Ricky walked up, looking out the window as well.

“I want to fight him, but I like him,” he said looking out the window. “Hmmp.”

He said no more and walked away. In Ricky’s workshop, once they finished the project for Oscar, Mustang helped Ricky quickly organize the workspace, making the workflow process more cohesive, and the tools easier to access. For that alone, as

well and the wonderfully crafted desk and chair for Oscar, he'd earned the man's respect.

Finally, in the evening, he sat at the kitchen table with Apple, talking shop on tracking techniques, weaponry, and creating a stash for the house. Apple showed him the caches in the house under the floorboard Helen helped to set up, as well as the window defense systems. Mustang simply nodded, thinking how amazing his Helen was as a person and soon to be Technician. For shits and giggles, Helen timed the three men as they broke down 9mm's in a race, with Mustang losing once to each man, winning one round himself.

Sunday morning, packed and ready to go, Apple pulled Helen to the side. "I like him. He's a good guy."

Oscar making his last pitch, also pulling Mustang to the side. "Hey, you want a kid?"

"You offering?"

"You ready to be a dad?"

"Not sure yet," Mustang said.

"You know where I am when you're ready," Oscar said. "You'd make a great dad."

"Thanks, Oscar. Take care of yourself," Mustang said, opening the door for Helen to climb in. He had a lot to think about over the drive home, and she gave him the mental space to clear out a few of the ideas. The primary one on his mind was Ricky. "I'm not sure if that Ricky is totally playing for the other team, especially the way he looks at you."

"Doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"Because I only have eyes, time, and love for you, Big Guy," she replied, making Mustang smile.

His smile continued all the way home. The weekend wasn't a total bust, but as Helen climbed the back stairs, she slipped, falling and injuring her hand. It wouldn't prevent her from working, but the bruise was enough to be a cause of concern.

"I have to renew my insurance; I haven't worked, and the checks I'm getting while in training aren't much," she said. "Do you know anything about the health insurance coverage for the Technicians?"

"As far as I know, each crew has a medical doctor on staff," Mustang added. "Most Technicians are trained field medics and can perform the basics to keep from getting dead, but health care plans would be something you get on your own for regular checkups."

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"Well, that sucks."

"I can add you to my insurance on my job," he said.

"How do you plan to do that, as your live-in lover?"

"No," he said, staring her in the eyes. "We go over to the computer, fill out the marriage license application, take it to the courthouse in the morning, find a judge, and make it official. I take the paperwork to the office and add you to my insurance."

Helen stared at him. "In the morning, we go to the courthouse to get married so you can add me to your insurance?"

"Sounds like a plan, then later, we can have the church wedding when you're ready, decide on the honeymoon, and all that good stuff," Mustang said.

"Get married. In the morning."

"Helen, you're going to be my wife. I'm spending the rest of my life with you, and tomorrow, we get the documentation that takes me off of the market to make me yours," he explained. "It's what I want. I want you. I want you as Mrs. Helen Neary to come home to me in this house where we will be a family."

"A family," she said. "I saw Oscar petitioning you to be a member of this family of ours. You did great with him. He really likes you. They all like you. You impressed me by taking time with each of your newfound nephews."

His face showed no amusement. "Helen, are you changing the subject?"

"No, I am just letting you know you impress me. So, yeah, courthouse in the morning before I head out, and I become Helen Neary," she said softly. "I thought you wanted to ask my dad for my hand."

"I will," he said, "but tonight, I want to play house with you, Mrs. Neary."

"You want me to bring out the love potion?"

"Hell, no! I nearly sprained my back the last time with that shit," he said. "Tonight, I just want to be loved by you, nothing more, nothing less. And in the morning, I'm going to marry you."

"Roger that," Helen said, lifting her blouse. She winked at him and took off at a sprint toward the bedroom. Mustang was hot on her trail.

Chapter 10-Blow

The hour approached two in the afternoon as Helen entered the city limits of Antioch, Illinois, on her way to Passion Fruit's weird little cabin in the woods. The nearly four-hour return drive was postponed by her new husband, whom she found first thing in the morning, sitting in their kitchen, wearing a three-piece suit. She'd never seen him in a suit before, complete with necktie and pocket swatch. It made her girly parts clench at the man's sexiness.

"Well, you look all kinds of delicious," Helen said.

"We're getting legalized this morning," he said. "Will you please change into a pretty dress so we can head over to make us official?"

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Helen looked down at the travel attire she wore for the four-hour drive and shrugged. Coffee in hand, she went to the bedroom and quickly changed and returned wearing a soft cream-colored dress. She'd put her hair up, accenting twirling soft tendrils around her face and added a bit of lip gloss and mascara. She gave him a smile as she twirled on the floor.

The ride to the courthouse went without a hitch, and they obtained the license and found a judge to perform the ceremony. It would have been fine with one exception to the morning ritual. Mustang had other plans.

They stopped for breakfast as a celebratory meal to share their first dining out experience as man and wife. At home, Helen's intentions were to change clothing to hit the road, but again, her husband had other plans. Mustang carried his new bride across the threshold and continued on to the bedroom. He began to undress himself after he set her on the edge of the bed to watch him disrobe.

She was perplexed at his timing; although any sexy time with her man was welcome, she was going to be late getting back. "Now, Jay? You want to do this now?"

"I am yours," he said softly. "I have documentation here that says I belong to you. On this bed, I want to consummate our union before you leave me again for three weeks. I need you to tide me over. I need to make love to my wife."

Helen couldn't argue with his logic, and an hour and a half later, she was ready to hit the road. Her back ached and her thighs burned with the buildup of lactic acid, reminding her she was no spring chicken and hour-long love-making sessions were for twenty-year-olds. She had to stop twice on the four-hour drive to pee, which also

added to her travel time in the truck that she was unaccustomed to driving.

Just inside of the city limits, her technician phone rang, and Helen growled. She connected the line to her ear buds, taking the call.

"Go for Cranberry," she spoke in the earpiece.

The voice on the other end replied, "Interesting morning. Anything you want to tell me?"

"Naw, not really. I fell and hurt my hand. I needed some insurance. He made sure I will have some on his plan," Helen said honestly.

"Is that how you're going to tell your boss you got married?"

"Seriously, Boss Lady. My man isn't a working Technician, so it doesn't matter," Helen said. "Is this a concern or an issue with my training?"

"Only if you're planning to start a family and a year of training will be wasted on a breeder," Azreal told her.

"No worries on that front. I don't have the plumbing to create a life, and unless he plans to buy us some kids, then we won't have any," Helen said. "The reason for your call, Boss? I know it wasn't to talk about my morning."

The line was quiet. Azreal needed to cover a few points with Helen to ensure she had a good understanding of the what and where of the potentialities of life as a Technician. Not everyone was happy with the services they performed, especially if shutting down businesses killed the bad guy's revenue. However, there was information that Cranberry needed to be made aware of and fast. Azreal didn't like doing it over the phone, but there was little choice. Information was a commodity,

and the one who had the most was the power player in the game. Helen needed the information Azreal had, but first, clarification was required.

"The stalker you dropped in the alley, Lawrence Canton," Azrael said. "He's up and disappeared. He packed up his shit and is gone. We followed the money trail on who hired him, but the disappearance is strange. You know anything about it?"

Helen slowed for a traffic light. People milled about on the street, doing early afternoon shopping, going about their lives. In some ways, she envied the simplicity of it all, almost wanting to go back to her boring everyday life and making yummy meals for her man, but she was needed in the world to level the playing fields. She was honest with her boss, never one to lie willingly.

"I returned his ID and credit cards," Helen said.

Azreal's voice wasn't calm when she responded, "You did what?"

"Yeah, I broke into his house while he was asleep, tickled his foot to make him wake up, and when he went to the kitchen for water, he found the ID and cards on the counter," Helen said. "While he was in the kitchen, I left one of the books he saw me buy at the bookstore on his pillow. Scared the shit out of him because he knew I was more than likely still in his house."

"That was an unnecessary risk," Azreal cautioned, "and what if he'd caught you or hurt you?"

"I had a needle full of Taipan venom as a backup," Helen said.

"You are fucking scary," Azreal said, "but clever. Listen up, Clever. I have information you need to know, and this is important."

Helen pulled over to an empty parking spot. She placed the vehicle in Park and gave her boss her undivided attention for information which would be critical for what came next. Silence filled the cabin as she listened to Azreal give her just enough information to draw her own conclusions.

"The order to find you came from the Chrysalis," Azrael said. "I'm sure it's no surprise to you, but they know nothing about you, which works in our favor. However, one of the most prolific crime bosses in the greater Chicago area is Michael Kurtzwilde. He's a pimp, a dealer, a trafficker, a nightclub owner which doubles as a brothel, and an all about sleazebag. Everyone who is anyone is his on his payroll, so he's made himself the gold standard of douchebags."

"Okay," Helen said.

"He's also Passion Fruit's father," Azreal said. "She's not his only kid. He has others. Each one is trained to serve him in some way or another. Passion Fruit, Kurtzwilde sent to medical school so he'd have his very own doctor to take care of his...flock."

Helen was surprised at the information, speaking her private thoughts out loud, "What in the entire fuck?"

"Passion Fruit had a recent assignment she didn't complete; or at least, there is no proof of completion," Azreal said. "The work orders received, we don't question when they come through, so I have no idea who placed the work assignment for her."

"Do you think it was that Kurtzwilde dude?"

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"If it was, and she didn't make it happen, Daddy may pay her a visit," Azreal said. "If he shows up, he does not, I repeat, he does not need to see you or know you are there. Stay out of his line of sight because he may well be a part of the Chrysalis, and to find you with his daughter...I don't know. He's dangerous."

"Got it."

"No, Cranberry, he's really dangerous," Azrael explained. "He's so terrible that folks like the Delgados allow him to live because at least they know what he will do, versus a replacement. The man is protected, which gives him carte blanche to unalive anyone who is a threat to his way of making money. You are a threat to him. He will unalive you and send your body to your new husband in pieces each week just to drive your man insane."

"Dear God!"

"Be aware of what kind of people the Technicians monitor and remove. The veiled line between us and them is very thin," she cautioned. "We have to make sure we don't become the monsters we are hunting."

Helen listened, adding a lesson learned. "I was told by the Archangel that the demon which grows in us is the demon we feed. I have a home to come to and someone waiting at that home for me. I'm not going to be stupid."

"Good. I might be starting to like you. Also, you need a real wedding," Azreal said. "I want to be a bridesmaid."

The call ended, leaving Helen sitting in her car, wondering what the heck had just happened. Azreal had provided her with a great deal of information to sort through, but more importantly, she'd cautioned her that Passion Fruit may be in danger for failing to complete the assignment. This wasn't good.

"This isn't good at all," she said, making a mental note to look up Michael Kurtzwilde. However, as fate would intervene, she wouldn't need to look the man up. He was coming to pay a visit to his daughter and deal her a blow that Passion Fruit wasn't prepared to process.

HELEN HAD BARELY UNPACKED and stowed her luggage when a red light in the corner of the living room began to flash. She ran into the space, wondering what that light meant to Passion Fruit. At the old place she'd shared with Cherry in Indianapolis, the flashing red light meant unwanted company getting too close to the house. Her eyes scanned the room. Bryan sat in the chair with an empty male urinal next to him. He was working a puzzle and enjoying a cup of tea. Fresh new bandages covered his face and hands, but he still looked like a mummy on welfare.

Bryan asked, "What does the light mean?"

"It means I have company arriving in six minutes," Passion Fruit said, going to the monitors. She spotted the car coming up the long drive towards the cabin. "Shit, it's my father."

Helen's eyes grew wide. "Bryan, up and move fast. That man does not need to know either of us is here. On your feet! Grab anything that says you were here and move with a purpose."

She helped him get to his feet and started down the hall. Helen grabbed the mug he

was drinking from as well as the urinal, taking them both down the hall with her. In the bedroom, she pushed Bryan into a chair and held her finger to her lips.

"He's a bad man," she told Bryan. "He will make us both stop breathing and her too, if he knows we are here. Stay as quiet as you can."

Bryan didn't need to be told twice as the sound of a doorbell rang out. From where they sat in the bedroom, both he and Helen could hear the conversation clearly. Both wished they hadn't.

MICHAEL KURTZWILDE sucked all the air from a room. A man of imposing form, he stood at six feet three, weighed in at a solid two hundred and forty pounds, and was loads of redistributed muscle mass. The once blonde hair had grayed in the back and on the sides, but the blue eyes still were cold and icy.

"Daughter," he said, coming through the door.

"Father, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?" Passion Fruit asked.

Kurtzwilde looked about the place. It hadn't changed. The little cabin was still a shithole where his daughter wasted her skills as a doctor patching up animals of the two and four-legged variety. He knew she'd become a Technician to spite him, but that too, he'd made work in his favor.

"You had an assignment, which you have yet to complete," Kurtzwilde said. "The order was to make it look like an accident."

"I wasn't aware you knew what I did on the side," Passion Fruit told him.

"I am aware every time you leave this house, throw a hump in a shitty hotel room with a no faced stranger, and enjoy a glass a wine at that hovel you call a bar in Chi-Town," he told her. "What I am not understanding is why your mark is not dead. As a matter of fact, there are no signs of him at all."

"Then perhaps I did complete the assignment."

"Without proof, there is no payment, Daughter. Where is the proof of Elliott Parker's death?"

"Honestly, I was there, in place, and setting the stage for an untimely accident," she said truthfully. "A body came over the side of the mountain face with a hole in it that dropped at my feet and tumbled down the crevice. I wasn't sure if the next bullet would be for me, so I got clear and reported in."

"Bullshit!" he snapped at her. "Parker's clothes, his motorcycle, his backpack, and tent were all still at the campsite, but not him. Verification is required not only for your payment but to continue to be of value to your little crew of Fruits."

"Father, I can go back to the site to see if I can locate the body that fell or try to find this Parker guy and close the contract," she said. "You're not going to touch the Fruit in the bowl, are you?"

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"No, but I hear there is a new piece sitting in the dish. We don't know anything about her, and she's making trouble," he said. "The Chrysalis doesn't like trouble. I don't like trouble, which means I don't like her. People I don't like don't live long."

Passion Fruit asked, "Do you know who she is?"

"No, but you do," he said, squinting his eyes. "Tell your new friend to chill the fuck out and sit her ass still for a minute, or if they find her, it's going to be nasty."

"Father, I can't tell other Technicians what to do; it doesn't work like that," Passion Fruit said, wishing she'd made the failed attempts on the man's life successful. She hated the air he breathed.

"Do you think you're my only child that is a Technician?" Kurtzwilde said. "You have a brother down in Georgia. I have another son in the Midwest who works with the Storms named Thunder. I have a son who is on the Northeast Crew of the Trees named Elm. I even have a daughter who is a horse with the Western Crew named Morgan. Again, I tell you daughter, you are simply one of many."

"And you're telling me this; why?"

"I'm making you aware of how small your world actually is and to make sure you're not hooking up with your siblings," he said. "The one in Georgia, he's a real bad ass. You should reach out, get to know him. Living alone like this isn't good for you. You need a man to take care of you."

Passion Fruit wanted him gone. She wanted him, his testosterone, and male bullshit

that was toxifying her living space out of her home. More than anything else, she truly wanted him dead.

"Noted. Anything else, Father?"

"Yes, proof of completion is needed by the end of the week, or those people will make trouble. You don't need their trouble," he said, looking about the place. "Did you have a good Thanksgiving? Please tell me you weren't here alone eating microwaved turkey."

"No, I cooked a small bird and had dinner with a friend," she told him.

"You know, a few grandkids from you guys would be nice as well," Kurtzwilde told her, then looked at his watch. That was the cue for him to leave. The father and daughter time had come to a close. "Get it done. Send proof. Close the contract."

"Yes, Sir," Passion Fruit said, accepting the modicum of affection of his kiss on her cheek. He added in a half hug, patted her on her back, and opened his wallet. He pulled a wad of cash and dropped it on the stand beside the door.

"I know, but just in case you have an unexpected repair or need to purchase a cadaver," he said, winking at her.

She stood on the porch in the cold air, the bits of ice in the wind pecking at her face. The pain and discomfort were welcomed as she watched the powerful Range Rover make tracks down the hill. He wasn't driving. He never drove. The driver knew where she lived in case he ever needed to come back without her father. When the car passed the security threshold, she stepped back inside the house.

Passion Fruit was armed with a great deal of information. The primary information centered on her lying house guest, whom she hoped had heard all the conversation,

along with her new mentee. They were all in the gray and the situation was starting to turn a sickly bluish.

Helen came from the room, followed by Bryan. They both stared at Passion Fruit, and Bryan knew he needed to start talking. Passion Fruit stared at him, waiting for him to state what she already knew but didn't want to face, but Bryan said what she wasn't prepared to hear.

"He is Imperial," Bryan said.

Passion Fruit's eyebrows shot upwards, "Excuse me?"

"That man, his voice, I know it. He is Imperial, one of the Chrysalis," Bryan said. "I discovered it by accident, and I was going to turn over what I had when I came back from the camping trip, but they found me first."

"Either way, you were supposed to die, Elliot Parker, because I was also there to kill you," Passion Fruit said.

Bryan's eyes were wide. "What does this mean? I mean what are you going to do?"

Helen didn't know what to say. There was so much information in the man's Kurtzwilke's words confessing to having kids on every crew. She'd held her breath when he spoke and got to the Western crew of horses. If he'd said her man Mustang was one of his kids, she would have come from the room and shot him herself. However, she'd learned that he was looking for her, and the way he spoke meant he knew she was nearby and connected to his daughter.

Helen asked, "Yeah, Passion Fruit, what are we going to do?"

"Complete the job and kill Elliot Parker, but we need to stage an accident and we

need a body," Passion Fruit said.

Bryan's arms shook at the realization of what the woman meant. The man he was needed to die, and they had to have an unbreathing body to replace the very alive but broken body currently housed by the real Elliot Parker.

Bryan's new reality smacked him in the severely bandaged face, and he took a seat in the chair. "What in the entire hell?

Chapter 11-Causality

Helen was feeling what Bryan felt as well. She sat on the couch, staring into the crackling fireplace, watching the flames dance. In her mind, a thought occurred which never had before; she didn't need this shit. She could be home with her man, setting up her craft room to make cutesy embroidered shit for the house. Hell, it was the holiday season, and she hadn't visited her man's new job or even met his co-workers. Now that she was his wife, there was planning to do, cookies to bake for the office, and cute gifts to give. If, and she thought about it carefully, she left on the fifteenth of the sixteenth of the month; she had time to purchase a new sewing and embroidery machine. It only took maybe half an hour to an hour to make a cute mug rug, and in the back, she could slide in candy canes, hot chocolate, and tea bags. Heck, she even had enough time to get a few clear coffee mugs and use the sublimation machine to personalize the mugs. Well, once she knew the names of his co-workers.

"Cranberry?" Passion Fruit said, pulling her from her thoughts. Thus far, from both Bad Apple and Lemon, she'd heard how clever the new Technician Trainee was, how she thought differently, and how she saw ways through problems based on her survival instincts. This would be a lesson in staging accidents the lady would never forget, but Lemon needed to know what she was thinking before making a plan. "Your thoughts?"

Helen looked up and said, "I was thinking, I could be home with my man, preparing gifts for the holidays. Instead, I'm here with the two of you, preparing to plan a means to kill this man."

"I don't like that idea very much either, Ms. Cranberry," Bryan said. "Wait, you need to kill me?"

"Yes," Passion Fruit said softly, "but what I'm not understanding is where are your ID's? There was nothing on your body."

"Left boot," he replied, "under the insole. I keep it there in case someone tries to rob me while I'm hiking, or worse, someone shoots me and leaves me for dead."

Helen didn't like it. She also didn't particularly care for Bryan's withholding of information. Her hand went up. "First, your broken up ass needs to be honest. How in the hell did you find out Kurtzwilke is Imperial, and what is Imperial?"

Bryan swallowed hard, "The Chrysalis has three head butterflies, the Tiger Swallowtail, The Tomato Hornworm, and Imperial."

Helen asked, "You know this how?"

"Friends of mine took me to the Velvet Vault, his adult club in Chicago," Bryan said. "They paid for me to get the VIP treatment, and I was going to the bathroom, got turned around, and ended up by his office. I saw him, heard his voice, and learned about a shipment of fresh talent. He spotted me, so I pretended to be drunk, stumbling all over the place, holding my junk, saying I had to whiz in the pot before I whizzed in a THOT."

"Classy," Helen said, turning up her lips.

"Hey, spur of the moment," he replied. "Anyway, one of my friends is also with Homeland Security, and I mentioned the shipment, nothing more. The next day, the shipment was intercepted, and I knew that I needed to tell someone who Imperial was and what else I heard that night, but I was going to wait until after the hiking trip,

then I was due in Colorado to start working on my novel."

Passion Fruit shook her head. "The clubs have cameras throughout, you numbskull. Yes, you may have pretended to be drunk to get past him, but on the way from the bathroom, were you still stumbling? By the look on your face, I guess that means no. Also, your ID was scanned when you came in the club, so at any given time, that man knows who is in his building, and he's recording. He is always recording. If you got a lap dance with your pants pulled down, he has a recording of it for future use."

"What?" Bryan said, shocked there was proof of him being in the club and the treat his friends paid for him to receive.

"That's how those places work, Bryan. How do you think he's managed to stay in business for so long? No one can touch him, and he's evil," Passion Fruit snapped. "Now I have to stage your death."

Bryan leaned forward and asked, "Why did you save me?"

"Instinct kicked in to save your life, but I also wanted to understand why there was a shooter on my turf when I was there to do the same thing," she replied. "It might not have been the Chrysalis who put the bullet in you, especially if my father knew there was a contract on you. There is another player and someone you have pissed off. Who could that be?"

Bryan pointed at himself. "I am a college English professor. I don't really fail anyone, but I help them write well. As far as I know, I don't have any enemies."

"And your aunt's kids? Who is getting her house? Someone wants you dead," Passion Fruit said.

Helen was over all of it. "That's all well and dandy, and we have established someone

or several someones want him dead. The question is, how do we kill him off? Better yet, where are you going to get a replacement for the live, carnivorous, six-foot, green-eyed man with dusty blond hair?"

Bryan didn't care for her classification of him, "Why I gotta be carnivorous?"

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"You eat meat, don't you, Bryan? We can't get the body of a vegetarian and say it's you by simply placing your ID on the body," Helen said.

Passion Fruit leaned back into the oversized chair. This is what she wanted to hear from Cranberry. She needed to hear her thoughts on the steps required to make Bryan no longer be a part of the world.

Helen continued, "Bryan also has nice, well-maintained teeth, so there are dental records. Yeah, no fingerprints are one thing, but are you going to find a man with no teeth who is the same blood type with thick skin on his feet? "

"I have resources," Passion Fruit stated.

"Resources? And what the hell does that mean? You're going to call up Johnny J at Cadavers are Us to get a dead white man who has been decomposing for the past three weeks?" Helen asked.

Passion Fruit actually laughed. She liked Cranberry and her irreverent way of approaching a matter, and the questions were relevant. Today would be a learning exercise for them all.

"There are contracts I receive that aid and assist a person with getting a new life, which means I have to put an end to the old one," Passion Fruit explained. "Bryan's situation is no different. I have to put an end to his old life."

Bryan didn't like where the conversation was headed. "And I am simply supposed to start a new life? I have a book contract...my bank accounts...my life?"

"What life?" Passion Fruit asked. "You merely existed, grading papers, regurgitating information semester after semester to fresh faced ingenues who found you mildly attractive, and wiping drool from your aunt's lip. No one is going to miss you because you never really existed to begin with, if we're honest."

Helen was surprised at the harshness in her tone. "There is no need to be cruel, Passion Fruit. He's already scared, his world has been turned upside down, and now you're going to erase him. Let's find a center lane here."

"There is no center lane! He lived a shit life, thinking he was God's gift to women and didn't feel he needed to settle down with one and start a family, but hang out with his miscreant adult male pals in strip clubs getting dick rides from broken, trafficked women," Passion Fruit said. "Don't try to paint this fucker as a victim. Me saving his life is an opportunity for him to be better. Either he wants to be better, or we can finish the job."

Bryan hung his head. "Finish the job. I see no need to go on even trying. End me and toss me over the cliff, since you find no value in me."

Helen didn't care for the pity party. She didn't appreciate Passion Fruit's hard line towards Bryan either. Some men simply did the best they could with what they were given. Him taking care of his aunt was a sign he wasn't a bad human, just maybe selfish.

Helen wanted to know. "Bryan? Why are you single and have no kids? Do you have kids?"

"No, I don't. I never wanted them because the world is such a shit place," he said. "Each semester, I stand in front of the class and tell the young ladies the dos and don'ts of campus life, explaining that the men on campus have plans for them already and not to get caught in the traps. I say the same to the young men, that if she's not

looking you in the eye saying yes, she wants you, then don't ruin your life for three minutes of release. Yet, they never listen. I teach kids. I don't want them. The world is shitty. Bringing kids into this defunct society is selfish, which is why I never married or had any of my own."

Helen continued, "And your aunt that you were caring for?"

"Her kids never come to visit their mother," he said. "She was there all alone. People had broken into her home, stolen things, and still, her kids couldn't seem to be bothered. I grew up with her. It wasn't as if she was a bad mother. My Aunt is kind and loving, so I took care of her until it got to the point where she was beyond what I could do."

Helen listened carefully, and she asked a question, "Her retirement checks, are they still going into her accounts?"

"No, I had everything stopped and transferred to the memory care facility to take care of her," Bryan said, touching the gauze on his face. "You don't think my cousins...nah, no way?"

"If one or all of them were siphoning off her accounts, and you cut off the access to that free money, then possibly," Helen said, shifting her focus. "Now, what do we do, Passion Fruit?"

"I need to make a couple of calls, then you and I will need to go to work," she replied.

"I don't like this. For some reason, I feel like I'm going to regret all of this," Helen said.

At the end of the day, Helen not only questioned her desire to be a Technician, but also her understanding of the world she lived in and the people she never knew

existed. There was an entire universe of networks of magical fairies that supported the Conclave of Angels where people made phone calls to change lives, and she was stepping inside of the veil. Passion Fruit made a call which would forever change hers.

HELEN BROUGHT WORKclothes, just in case a job came up where she needed to provide an assist to Passion Fruit. She just didn't think it would be this soon. Dressed in black cargo pants, she thought of the Bushmaster's father and the pants he wore with the blades in them. A mental note was made to reach out to the Bushmaster and ask who his father's tailor was to make such delightful pants; it was nothing more than a distraction of riding shotgun in the black Ford F-150. They were going to get a body to stage an accident to kill off Elliot Parker. In her pocket were the man's ID cards they would leave on the body. She even had his shoes in the back of the truck.

The drive from Antioch to Chicago was roughly about an hour. Passion Fruit pulled up to a nondescript warehouse. Helen stood close behind her, the 9mm in her pocket and a blade in her right hand inside of her black pea coat. She said nothing as the door opened and a man, who was the epitome of every mad scientist of a warehouse troll, bade them to enter.

Goosebumps went up and down Helen's arms at the chill of the warehouse. Passion Fruit calmly followed the man into a freezer. Helen didn't want to enter, but she followed behind. In the freezer were slabs of bodies in varying states of decomposition.

"Three weeks' worth of decomp, white male, six feet," Passion Fruit said.

"Got two. Barney here has a bullet wound like you asked, and this guy, Chet, who had his junk cut off in an alley by a night worker, but he doesn't have a bullet

wound," the troll of a man said.

"Barney it is," Passion Fruit said. "Roll him out so we can get started."

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Helen swallowed hard and asked, "Get started doing what?"

"We have to break out his teeth, and you will need to burn off his fingerprints," Passion Fruit said.

"Nope," Helen said, "naw. Hell no. Not today, Satan's helpers."

"Cranberry, this is the job. You make it happen or you wash out," Passion Fruit said. "I have no tolerance for squeamish agents. Do the work, and we go home."

"Yeah, home sounds real damned good right now," Helen replied shivering at the thoughts of what needed to happen next. "How do I burn off fingerprints?"

"With this," the troll said, passing her what looked like a mini-iron. The gurney rolled into the main room.

Helen stood in horror as they stretched the man's mouth open. Passion Fruit took a small hammer and hit the man in the teeth. Helen gasped. Passion Fruit pointed at the iron which the troll had plugged in.

A dab of saliva went to her finger as Helen tested the heat of the iron. She heard the sizzle. Taking a deep breath, she lifted Barney's hand and pressed his index finger to the iron. The smell of burning skin nearly made her gag.

"Oh God. Oh, God!" Helen said, doing the next finger, followed by the next until she reached the thumb on his right hand.

A case of the icky willies hit her, and she began an unladylike dance in the middle of the floor, trying to shake off the colly wobbles. The sound of the teeth breaking, the smell of the burning flesh, and a naked Barney with a blue green bullet hole were almost too much. She danced more, looking like Flavor Flav not believing the hype.

"Cranberry, stop fooling around. We still have to get him dressed," Passion Fruit said, reaching into the man's mouth and pulling out molars.

"Father, forgive me for all of my sins," Helen said, moving around the table to start on the other hand.

She moved faster this time, feeling sicker by the moment. Passion Fruit, now on top of the gurney, straddled Barney and pulled out the last of the teeth. The troll disappeared, coming back with clothing that Barney had been wearing. All of it smelled like urine and alcohol.

"No," Helen said. "The victim wasn't a drinker."

"We're setting him on fire so it doesn't matter," Passion Fruit said. "We're going to set him on fire, toss him over the cliff, and hope the brush catches ablaze to alert the authorities. Then his body will be found with the ID in the left boot."

"I have died and gone to Hell," Helen said, burning off the remaining fingerprints. "If we are setting him on fire, why am I burning off his fingerprints?"

"Because you need to know how, that's why," Passion Fruit explained. "Plus, there is always some clever coroner who finds a bit of flesh that she hydrates and imprints. This way, we take no chances. Get him dressed, please."

Just as she had removed Bryan's clothing, she began to dress Barney. His socks went on first, then the stained, dirty underpants. She struggled to get on his pants, and

Bryan's boots were a size too small.

"These boots might be too small," Helen said aloud.

"Then you might have to break his toes," Passion Fruit called back.

"The Devil is a liar, Barney, these boots are going on your damned feet tonight," Helen said, determined to make the shoe fit on the cadaver. The boots were worked onto his feet, followed by the shirt. She looked at the man, saying a prayer for his departed soul.

The troll wrapped Barney in a blanket and carried him out to the truck. As the tailgate came down, an accelerant was poured over poor Barney tucked inside the plastic sheeting encapsulated him. Helen, sitting shotgun once more, remained quiet as they rode to the site where Bryan was last seen hiking. At the edge of the cliff in the black of night, they set Barney's body at the edge of the ravine. One click of the lighter and the body was on fire. Passion Fruit snapped a photo with her phone.

Passion Fruit gave the body a kick, and over the side of the cliff he went. Hurriedly, they ran to the truck, driving away in no real hurry, heading to her cabin where Bryan and Candy the Cane Corso awaited. Helen was near tears at what they'd done to Barney, but she was also at an understanding with Passion Fruit.

She asked Passion Fruit, "You're keeping him for yourself, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about, Helen?"

"Bryan? You're going to give him a new identity, and when he heals, you hope he will want to stay with you and write his book," Helen said.

"And what if I do?"

"You are so mean to him, Lashonda! You're basically his captor, and now you want to act as his liberator, making him beholden to you. Give the man a choice," Helen said. "Provide him everything he needs to start a life over, even moving the contract to his new name so he can write his book, but don't make it seem like he owes you. It won't work out in the long run."

"You talk as if you're speaking from experience," Passion Fruit said.

"I am," she confessed. "I had a boyfriend, and that's what he was, a boy pretending to be a man, pretending to be my friend. He saw himself as my liberator, and he was giving me this cool life by helping me, and every chance he got, he tried to gaslight me or spent time intentionally chipping away at my self-esteem."

"Well, how did that end?"

"He came home to a place without me," Helen said. "I didn't bother to take anything other than what I was wearing. I changed my number, quit my job, and moved to another city. Lashonda, people don't like feeling beholden. If he wants to stay with you after he heals, let it be up to him."

"Hmmp," was all Lashonda said as sirens wailed in the background. Silence stayed in the vehicle as they returned to the home where Bryan waited patiently for their return.

He looked at Helen's face, then at Passion Fruit's. A nod was all he gave as he hobbled his way to the room where he stayed. He'd made a friend in Candy the Cane Corso, who followed along with him, sleeping at his feet.

"Well, the dog likes him," Helen said, bidding Passion Fruit goodnight.

In the other room, Lashonda Temple sent the information ahead to her handler that the job had been done. However, there was additional information that needed to be shared with Azrael. She called, not wanting to say what was next.

On the call, she explained everything that had happened. Bryan being at her cabin, discovering who he was, and the arrival of her father. Passion Fruit explained the connection between Bryan and Kurtzwilde, adding to the information dump of her father being the Imperial in the Chrysalis. Further, she went on to explain her father's cryptic warning of Cranberry needing to take a seat for a while. Reluctantly, the last two parts she didn't want to say, but needed to put out in the universe.

"My father listed his other bastard children, all which are Technicians, including the one in Georgia, Elm, Thunder, and Morgan," she said.

"Noted, and we are aware," Azreal said. "Anything else?"

"Cranberry needs a break," she told their boss. "We had to do some things tonight that mentally may be fucking with her head. The holidays are coming up, so let her head home and come back after the New Year. If she decides not to come back, then you also have an answer and resolution of her fitness to handle the tough work."

"How tough?"

"Burning off fingerprints, removing teeth, dressing a dead man, then setting him on fire," Passion Fruit said.

"Well, that would fuck with my head too," Azreal commented. "And the man?"

"Who? Bryan?"

"No, Paul Bunyan! What do you need?"

"A new life package," Passion Fruit stated. "He had a book deal, so can we work some magic, clean his accounts, and move them to the new name? He's still broken up, his face is bandaged, and he's going to be nothing to look at for a long time, but he deserves to at least get a chance to work on his book."

Azreal didn't like this, but she appreciated the humanity in Passion fruit coming through, "You going soft on me?"

"There is nothing soft about me, not even my hair. Maracuyaout," she said, ending the call.

Helen needed to go home for a while. Passion Fruit also needed time to figure out a path forward with the man. There weren't many men she was comfortable to be around, and she liked Bryan. Secretly, she hoped he wanted to stay with her, but chances were slim.

"All we can do is hope someone else is tired of being lonely too," she said, whistling for Candy the Cane Corso to follow her to the bedroom. She was calling it a night.

Chapter 12-Happy Chance

Helen stood at the kitchen sink looking out the window at the dense wood line and snow falling. Her stomach wasn't in the mood for coffee. Her brain wasn't in the mood for conversation. Yesterday had taken a toll on her mentally. A low-down person had put a bullet in a drunk, pissy Barney, leaving the man for dead. Adding insult to his nasty demise, she had helped mutilate his body and set it afire after his death. People sucked. A small smile hovered at the corner of her lips as she thought of Chet, the other body on the slab. Yeah, people sucked.

Passion Fruit walked into the kitchen and noticed the smirk on Helen's face. "Good to see you're feeling optimistic this morning."

"Always hopeful, but I was thinking people suck," Helen said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Chet, the cadaver," she replied. "What if he was a Muslim? He's going to arrive at his afterlife to 40 virgins and nothing to prick them with if you know what I mean."

"Can you imagine poor Chet wondering why his excitement at seeing his afterlife prize triggers no physical reaction, only to look down and see no penis? He will be yelling, fuccck!"

"And the virgins will reply, not in this afterlife, Dickless," Helen said.

Passion Fruit burst into laughter. She liked Helen and her outlook on the follies of

life. When the laughter ended, she inquired, "How do you decompress, Helen?"

"Crafting. I had an online store on one of those crafting sites where I made cutesy shit for the home and sold my pattern designs. It brought in butter and egg money," she said.

"Go home and craft, Cranberry. Yesterday was a lot even for a seasoned Technician. Come back the first Monday of the New Year if you still want this life," Passion Fruit said.

Helen mentally nearly took off running, but she stayed still, trying to remain cool. "The Boss is okay with that?"

"Yes, she agrees with my medical assessment of you needing time to process what you have seen, had to do, and comprehend."

"Home?" she spoke the words softly like Dorothy speaking to Glenda the Good on returning to the farm in Kansas.

Passion spotted the sparkle in her eyes and knew this was the right call. "Yes. Go home to your man and your crafting machines. First Monday in January, come back to continue your training."

"Okay, you don't have to tell me twice," Helen said, heading for her quarters to collect her things. In the hallway, she passed Bryan making his way for coffee.

"I'm heading home for the holidays," she told him. "You have choices and options, don't think you don't, but be honest with her and yourself. Loneliness can make us believe we're good when reality says otherwise."

Bryan liked the woman called Cranberry. She was scary, but there was a calming

effect about her which came with the voice of reason. She'd stood up for him when she didn't have to. Last night when they returned, the facial expression and look in her eyes indicated she'd done a thing she wasn't comfortable with aiding him in having a shot at a new life. He asked from a place of honesty, "Do you think I should stay here?"

"Right now, until you heal, I would. Talk about options and make a plan, but more specifically, talk it out, figure it out. It's quiet enough here to write that book," she told him. "You will have company, and when that cast comes off, Candy can take you for walks to strengthen that leg. Rebuild, Bryan."

"Can I come with you?" Bryan asked.

"You need to be under medical supervision," she said. "She will take good care of her patient. Plus, she's already seen you naked and held your flaccid penis and still looks you in the eye with a straight face."

Bryan actually blushed and found himself laughing. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Hey, if she can respect you when Oscar is in a dormant state, and she still wants to talk to you, there is a start," Helen said with a wink.

"Oscar?"

"The Mayer Weiner," she said and burst into laughter. "I gotta get a move on to get ahead of the snow. Be good, Bryan."

"You are really scary, and I shall miss you," Bryan said.

"Ditto," Helen said, heading into her room.

It took less than five minutes to throw her items in a suitcase, wave goodbye, and head to the garage. She wasn't planning to call anyone. She wouldn't even tell her husband she was on the way home. He would get off work and find her home, wearing an apron and pair of heels and pulling out a meatloaf from the oven.

"Meatloaf sounds good," she said, opening the garage and beginning to drive.

*

FOUR HOURS WAS A LONGtime to relive watching a corpse getting set on fire or hearing the sound of a hammer against enamel. Crafting was her safe place. It was what she did in moments of stress. Her crafting page was still up on the Craftwithme site with instant downloads and offered a trickle of income to a pre-paid card account. She hadn't checked it in a while and on a pit stop for snacks, she jumped at the amount.

"I am definitely going shopping," she said, searching for a second-hand furniture store.

Helen located a store on her way home as well as a sewing center. She stopped at both places, spent entirely too much money, and had armloads of fabrics with embellishments. There was enough time to make gifts for the people in her man's office, the family, and something special for Cherry's new baby. She had time.

She arrived home, waving at the cameras, knowing Mustang would see the notice on his phone of her coming through the main gate. Her man would also see her bring in the two office desks, used but perfect for holding her new sewing machine on one and the new embroidery machine on the other. The bookcase, although not very heavy, was the perfect height to hold the new cutting machine, stacks of neatly cut fabric in 1-yard cuts, bags of scraps for embroidery projects, and fat eight stacks perfect for mug rugs would be the ideal Christmas gift for Mustang's co-workers. At the sewing center, she had purchased software and when she looked at her total, her credit card

was going to hate her, but the family would be happy with the new gifts. She even made a quick stop at the craft store to buy a mug press for sublimations.

"The mugs can match the rugs," she said with a false sense of accomplishment.

In between setting up the machines and organizing her craft room, the meatloaf would have been easier, but chicken seemed like a lighter fare. She sauteed chicken, boiled pasta, and prepared a quick salad. By the time her hunky hubby came home, she would toss the chicken and pasta in pesto, and dinner would be served. Helen took a look around the home she shared with Mustang. He had strong masculine styles with bold chunky pieces of furniture which she had softened with the rugs and curtains.

The embroidery machine was pretty much the same as the one at her house in Kentucky that Cherry gave her, but a bit of an upgrade. At the store, she'd purchased blank kitchen towels that were loaded in the quilting hoop and ten minutes later, the first one read "Neary" surrounded by laurel wreaths.

"I like," she said, loading the second kitchen towel into the machine.

By the time her husband came through the back door, she'd completed kitchen towels and embroidered a very large N in the bathroom guest towels. She smiled at Mustang and offered him a kiss.

"You're home," he said, "and dinner smells wonderful."

He took note of the kitchen towels which bore their last name, the dinner on the table, and the sound of a machine running in the other room. He pointed, walking in the direction of the noise.

"Okay and wow," he said, staring into the space that had been empty when he left this

morning. Now, it was a functional craft room with two workstations and a flip up cutting table mounted to the wall. "You've been busy."

"Yes, I have some time off until the first Monday of the New Year," she told him. "I'm looking forward to the downtime to get holiday gifts done."

"That is some craft room set up," he said, returning to the kitchen, looking at his wife. She didn't need to say it. He knew. A bad thing happened. He could see a bad thing had occurred in her training program, and she wasn't okay. "Is crafting how you deal with stress?"

"Yup. And I'm going to craft the hell out of some presents for Christmas and put your Mamma to shame," she told him. "Also, I need the names of your coworkers so I can craft a few mug rugs with tea and cocoa goodies for them. When is your last day at work before the holidays?"

"We are off on the twentieth," he said. "Helen, do you want to talk about it?"

"Nope," she said. "I'm going to make cute shit, love all over you, cook some amazing meals, and show up at your job with cookies, brownies, and cupcakes. Everyone in your office is going to be like, 'Oh wow, Neary, you're so lucky.'"

"That I am," Mustang commented. "Helen, we can discuss it if you want. I know that some parts of what is done as a Technician you will take to your grave. A solo Technician has to carry that sweetheart, but you don't."

"I do. I have to carry the reality of what it is I signed up to do," she said. "I can't be the protector and defender of the women and children of Indiana without facing down the ugly habits of men. Three weeks is what I have to decide if I will continue or re-open my online craft business and make cute shit for money."

"Helen, if you want to stay home, I can more than easily take care of you," he told her.

"I know, but I have something, Jay. There is a skill in me to do good. I know things and understand issues on a deeper level. So much information came at me that time is needed to sort through all of it. I was given so much information in a large brain dump that I need a moment to sort through it all. Crafting helps me think," she said. "Who is the Technician for Georgia?"

"Huh?"

"The Technician for Georgia, do you know him?"

"I've come in contact with him once, didn't make it long. He's not a friendly fella and he doesn't like people," Mustang said. "Any reason why?"

"His father is Kurtzwilde," she replied.

"Yes. It is a well-known fact."

"Kurtzwilde is Imperial of the Chrysalis," she told Jay, looking at his face. "He's also Passion Fruit's father. Oh, by your face, you didn't know that. Well, hold on to your hat, Trooper Neary; he's also Morgan's father on your former team as well as Thunder and Elm."

"Say what?"

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"That is only the tip of the iceberg of my last two days," she said. "That man made a personal visit. I think he knew me and Bryan were in the other room, and he basically told me to go sit my ass down and be quiet for a minute."

Alarm bells were going off in his head. The last thing she ever needed to do was to come face to face with the slimiest eel in the pool. "Helen, you were in the same room with Kurtzwilde, and who is Bryan?"

"Bryan is Passion Fruit's love slave captive, soon to be lover, I guess," she told him. "No, and I wasn't in the same room with that man. I was hiding in the other room with Bryan and Candy the Cane Corso. You know that damned dog weighs 100 pounds. That bitch knocked me down and pinned me to the floor like we were in a wrestling match."

Mustang could see the distress in the normally calm woman. She wasn't calm. He was concerned. "Baby, do we need to get away for a few days?"

"No, I need to create cutesy shit with people's names on the items. I need to make love to you each morning before sending you off to work, and if my cooter ain't too sore, hit that monkey again when you come through the door in the evening," she said, winking at him.

"Monkey? Helen, are you okay?"

Helen looked at the man she'd married. He was all sorts of handsome, great in bed, and a provider. He was a man who'd married her to ensure she had medical insurance, among other things. He also loved and supported her desire to be a

Technician. She had to peel her emotions off her sleeve and put on her big girl panties. Time was what she needed to grow a larger pair.

"I'm home with my man. I can't be more okay than that," she told him. "My role in your life is to be the woman who loves and supports you. In between me going to do odd jobs for my side gig, I am a crafter. Your co-workers will know me as Suzie Homemaker, who sends treats to the office. I'm going to be okay. I need this time with you in our home."

"Roger that," he said. "The kitchen towels are cute. Helen, whatever you need. I'm here for you."

"I know, Jay, and I'm here for you as well," she said. "I guess next week I need to schedule a visit with my dad so you two can meet. I also need to make gifts for the boys and get those in the mail. I'm thinking about monogrammed bathrobes.:"

"Hell, I want one of those myself," he said.

"I got you, Jay," she said, plating the food for dinner.

She was home. She had three weeks to clear her head and wrap her mind around creating accidents for bodies alive and the recently deceased. There were no happy chance meetings or weird coincidences. The universe had spoken. Her understanding of death had been altered. In truth, so had Helen.

NEVER IN HIS ADULt life would he have imagined the words which formed in his head. He wouldn't speak them aloud, but he felt the phrasing all the way to his soul. Helen's first weekend home, the change in her creating cutesy shit, as she called it, was a version of the woman he'd never seen. She was nesting all over the place, and

he actually liked it. Hell, most of it he was loving, and by the end of the first week, in his heart he thought, "Fuck them Technicians. My wife needs to be home with me."

He'd never considered himself to be a selfish man, but Helen made him want to chop down trees to make her new pieces of furniture. On Monday, when he returned to work, in his lunch box was a note and a yummy lunch that wasn't leftovers from the night before. He opened the note in her girly handwriting, which almost looked like a Disney font, to read an inappropriate note about his stroke game with suggestions on methods to make her moan like a woman going into labor.

"Oh, my God," he said aloud, nearly choking,

"You okay over there, Neary?" James, his Deputy Director, asked.

"Yeah, my wife has a twisted sense of humor," he replied, smirking at the contents of the lunch pail.

"Hope to meet her soon," James replied.

"Perhaps," Mustang added. The note placed him in a good mood for the rest of the day. He had become excited to go to work each day and more excited to come home in the evening to see what his little bird had created in their nest. To say he was surprised was an understatement.

The mantle, which initially only held a photo of the two of them, was now covered with frames and photos of him and Helen doing activities with the family. He smiled at the photo of him and Naomi with her pony Misses Sprinkles. The image which really tugged at his heartstrings was a photo of Mark, his father, and Michael, his brother, standing around the grill, laughing.

"Helen, when did you take these photos?" he asked, looking at the photo of him in the

kitchen with Ruth, licking the batter off the tines from the cake paddles.

"I have a lot of photos of you on my personal phone," she said, walking down the hall with a load of laundry.

He followed her but stopped in the hallway. This morning, the walls had been bare. This afternoon, there were printed canvas images of moments from their lives. A black-and-white image on canvas of Oscar and him working on the desk hung in the center of the wall on the right. Surrounding the larger image were smaller black and whites of Jeffrey and him working on the car, Stephen and him at the grill, and Apple and him at the table talking shop. There was also a photo of Ricky and him, but Mustang was looking at the man as if he were a suspect he'd pulled over on the side of the road. However, his breath was taken away by the imagery on the left.

In the center was a brightly colored image of him and Helen on their wedding day at the courthouse. He remembered the woman taking several photos with Helen's phone but never imagined this. He also didn't imagine seeing the image of them in his workshop in Oregon making the end tables or of the two of them in his canoe.

"Fuck them Technicians," he said, feeling emotional at how their home was coming together. "Helen, this is wonderful. I love all of this. You are amazing."

She'd never had the opportunity to nest like this before, and she planned to take full advantage of having a home to share with a man who told her encouraging words, hopeful words, loving words, like she was amazing. It felt good.

It felt even better on Friday when she arrived at his job in time for the holiday celebration, he'd mentioned to her in passing. Mustang received a call that a visitor was waiting for him at the front desk. He arrived to see Helen standing there with a large wicker basket she used to do laundry.

"Honey, what are you doing here?" he asked, surprised to see her. He was also surprised at the basket loaded with lots of cellophane wrapped items. "Let me get that...what is this?"

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"I brought goodies and gifts for your team," she said, smiling. "The holiday gathering is today, correct?"

"Yes, I didn't realize I'd mentioned it to you," he said, taking the basket.

Helen was provided a visitor's pass, and he escorted her to the break room where the team was gathered. She waved to everyone as he made the introductions. Her eyes scanned the room for the one woman who thought there would be an opportunity to become her husband's work wife and eventual side piece. Helen found her in less than ten seconds. She was the one woman scowling at her.

"Everyone, this is my wife Helen," Mustang announced. "I have no idea what is in this heavy basket, so I will leave it up to her. Honey, do I need to do anything to help with...what is this?"

"I made a couple dozen of your Mama's famous peanut butter cookies," she said, lifting out the platter of cupcakes. "These are cupcakes with holiday sprinkles."

The small group gathered around as the wicker basket began to get unloaded. "Let's see, I have holiday gifts from us to your team. This one is for James, who loves to fish."

Helen began passing out the gifts in clear cellphone bags with red and green ribbons. In each bag was a personalized mug which matched the personalized mug mat, which came with a pack of cocoa, mini marshmallows, a holiday season tea bag, and a peppermint.

"It's not much, but Jay has told me so much about each of you, I wanted to do a little something for his work family," Helen said as her watch beeped.

She looked at her husband, who was looking at her with so much love and pride in his eyes that Helen felt emotional. The team all fawned over the gifts as he moved to stand closer to her.

"This is nice; thank you," he said, offering a kiss to her temple. He'd laughed at the kid Jeffrey's comment about how often he kissed his wife, but he wasn't ashamed.

Helen's watch beeped again, "Honey, I have to get to the airport. Daddy's plane will be landing soon. The steaks are marinating, but don't forget to pick up some beer."

Mustang was scowling, "And why am I not having wine with my steak, wife?"

"Because my Daddy prefers beer," she said. "We are playing nice, remember?"

"No, he can have beer, and I will have a full-bodied red," he said, laughing. "You might want to stop at a convenience store for him to pick up a six."

Helen provided a quick kiss to his cheek, wished everyone a happy holiday, and was off to the airport. On top of everything else in her life, she now had to spend the weekend with her overly emotional father who hated the holidays. Maybe this year, she could offer him a bit of seasonal cheer.

Chapter 13-Hazard

Darnell Nelson, at the ripe age of 64, looked like he stepped out of the pages of *Gentleman's Quarterly*, showing how a man should age gracefully. At six foot two, the grey in his hair was spread evenly, and not patchy, giving him a refined look. The long wool coat, accented at the neck with a coordinating scarf stated he was a man of

means. An overnight case, like the ones used by airline pilots, he dragged behind him coming out the main terminal of the airport. His daughter had told him to come to the curb.

Helen pulled up, rolling down the window. "Hey Daddy, put your case in the back and hop in."

Darnell at least expected her to get out of the vehicle to give him an embrace, versus picking him up on the curb as if he were the trick for the night. At this point, though, he was so happy to see his daughter, he didn't care. He followed her instructions, climbing into the passenger seat, offering a wide smile.

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"Hey there Punkin!" Darnell said. "Oh my, it is so good to see my baby!"

"Good to see you as well, Daddy," Helen said. "We don't have far to go to reach the house. Plainfield is only about a thirty-minute ride. It will give us a chance to cover some critical points."

"Critical points?" he asked, turning slightly in the seat to look at her.

"Yes. One, life has beenlife-ing, and my name has changed. It is no longer Shenita Nelson, but Helen McDaniel," she said, leaving off a critical point of her last name now being Neary.

He sighed deeply, feeling some sort of way about changing the name he'd given her at birth, "Any particular reason why you changed the name I gave you?"

"Again, life has beenlife-ing, along with major life changes which constituted the name change," she explained.

"Witness protection?"

"Nothing so dramatic," she replied.

"You're not single? I see rings on the finger," he said.

"Critical point two," Helen said. "He's going to ask you for my hand because that's who he is, but he also married me already since we live together and because, well, that's who he is. We will have a wedding later, and you will get to walk me down the

aisle, but no snide comments referring to me as a cow that was being milked for free, okay?"

Darnell held up his hands and said, "Okay. So, what is this man of yours like? Will I like him or is he a knuckle-dragging knot-head?"

"I won't discuss him with you since you'll have all weekend to get to know him and ask those questions yourself," she stated. "He is grilling steaks for dinner and will open a bottle of red. If you want beer, we will need to stop and get it. I also have a few turkey breasts and Dover sole to grill in case you're watching your A1C."

"Funny," he said, looking about. "This is a bleak-looking place to raise a family. Are you planning on having children, Punkin?"

"Critical point three, Daddy. I can't have them because life waslife-ing. Jay isn't really trying to have kids either," she explained.

"What kind of man doesn't want kids?"

"What kind of man has a kid that he never sees?"

"That's not fair," Darnell said.

"Neither is your pre-assessment of Jay. Save your judgement until you meet him and have a conversation," she said, entering the Plainfield city limit.

Eight minutes later, Helen arrived at the gate and entered her code. She instructed her father to place his hand on the dashboard as a white light scanned over him. Darnell's face contorted, wondering what the hell his daughter had gotten herself into.

"You're married to a white man, aren't you?" he asked, looking about the property

with the rundown outbuildings but brand-new metal six-car garage. "Is he one of those survivalist types with lots of guns, ammo, and knives? Ooh, is he going to go hunting this weekend and come back and field dress a deer?"

Helen pulled around back of the home, parking the pickup truck under the parking cover Jay recently had installed for her vehicles. The covering went to the back porch in case it rained so she wouldn't get wet bringing in groceries and supplies.

"Welcome to our home, Daddy," she said, cutting the engine. Helen led the way to the back door and disengaged the alarm. Darnell stood on the deck, looking over the property from a fresh angle. The back deck was nice. He could see the man who was working on it had plans in mind to spend a great deal of time on the deck cooking, watching the game, and living his life.

Inside the home, Darnell Nelson immediately felt relaxed. It was homey, not stuffy with items no one could touch, or expensive furnishings you were allowed to look at and not sit on to have a snack. He liked it.

He asked his daughter, "Is this a mobile home?"

"A manufactured home with four bedrooms and two and a half baths," she said. "Follow me to the guest room where you'll be staying."

Darnell didn't know what to expect when he entered the bedroom. A queen-sized bed with a comfy quilt, embroidered pillowcases, and monogrammed throw pillows awaited him. Art hung on the walls and the furniture pieces all matched. In his heart, he chastised himself for thinking his daughter would live in a rundown home or a stinking apartment building where all the neighbors fried fish on Friday and cooked cabbage on Saturday.

"You have a lovely home," he said as the sound of tires on gravel drew his attention.

"Daddy, let me take your coat," she said, waiting for him to remove the outer garment.

As she expected, under the coat, he wore a sport blazer with matching pants and a button-down shirt. A Phillip Stein watch sat on his left wrist and a matching wedding band on his left hand drew her eye. This is what she didn't want to mention but would to get it out of the way.

"How is Aunt Stephanie?" she asked, knowing her father had married her mother's sister.

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"She's doing well. Steph has a hot yoga studio in Corning and it is going pretty good," he said, giving a smile, but his attention was on the sound of the alarm announcing the door was opening.

Darnell made his way to the main living area to come face to face with the man he expected to be a redneck of a loser who oppressed his daughter and talked down to her. He'd mentally prepared himself to dislike the man before he'd laid eyes on him or opened his mouth. He'd met one or two of his daughter's boyfriends, and like her mother, her taste in men was suspect. Entering the kitchen, he pulled back.

"Whoa, and hello," Darnell said.

Mustang did a once over of the well-dressed man, assessing him as educated, opinionated and a potential pain in the ass. However, for Helen's sake, he planned to be on his best behavior to make nice with her father. It wasn't what she said about her father which made him not think highly of Darnell Nelson, but all the things she omitted.

"Mr. Nelson, nice to meet you. I'm Jarius. Please call me Jay," he said, offering a handshake. "How was the flight out?"

"I hate flying in those sardine canes of bacteria, but I wanted to see my baby," he said, looking at Mustang's uniform. "You're a State Trooper?"

"I am, but currently an instructor at the academy here in Plainfield," he said. "You're an engineer?"

"Yes, I have spent most of my life working for Corning," Darnell told him. "I'm retiring soon. Looking forward to easy days, fishing, and golfing, and I was hoping to spend time with the grandkids."

Helen swatted her father, who seemed to have a case of early onset of I know what you said, but I'm old and I have the I will say what I want disease.

Darnell commented, "I see you with the kids on the images in the hall. Are those yours? Why you don't want anymore?"

"Sir, I have no kids," Jay said. "Those boys are Helen's, well, now I guess my nephews."

"What nephews? Abigail had kids?" he asked, turning to look at the mantle, seeing Cherry. He moved to the mantle, looking at the photos of Cherry with Slow and Naomi. "Abigail has a child?"

"Yes, and one on the way. She is due in the next month or so. It's a boy whom they have named Luke," Helen told him.

"I spoke with her two weeks ago and she didn't tell me I had a grandchild," Darnell said. "Neither of you have ever mentioned I had a grandchild."

Helen's eyebrows arched. Mustang looked away. He wanted to hear all the upcoming conversation, and he really wanted to get those steaks on the grill, but now he was thinking of a good pan sear on the stove instead so he could hear this.

Helen asked, "Grandchild? I'm not understanding."

"Abigail is your sister," Darnell said. "She's my daughter as well."

Mustang held up his finger. "Hold on. I need to get out of this uniform and open a bottle of wine, and you guys need to sit close by while I cook these steaks. I want to hear this."

"Jay!" Helen shouted, shocked at his lack of sensitivity during this mind-blowing moment.

"What? How did you not know she's your sister? Hell, does she know she's your sister and if so, why has she never mentioned it, and always calling you cousin?" Jay wanted to know.

Darnell asked, "You know Abigail?"

"Of course; she'd married to my brother," Jay countered.

"Well, that is a bit of incestuousness happening there," Darnell said.

"Daddy, seriously? How, as the black ass pot, are you questioning the validity of the existence of the kettle's right to let off some steam? What do you mean, you're her father?"

"I could use that glass of wine now," Darnell said, not wanting to hash this up. This was part of his depression. This was the sadness that sickened him every year at the holidays. A few bad decisions, and Anita Barnes, the mother of the daughter standing before him, had used them to punish him forever.

Helen needed a moment to center her breathing. How on God's dying planet did she not know Cherry was her biological sister? Although they were raised together as such, it had never occurred to her they could be actual sisters. Then she thought about her mother, and all of her questions were pushed aside. Anita Barnes was not only petty, but jealous-hearted, and coveting anything her sister had. It should not have

been a surprise to find out she'd also screwed her sister's man and made a child for a check.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Helen said.

Darnell made a move towards Helen and stopped short. "Punkin, I thought you knew."

"No Daddy, I didn't. I just assumed when you sent presents to me and Abi that you were giving her presents so she wouldn't be resentful of my father giving me stuff and hers not being around," Helen said.

"Abigail knows I'm her father; she just doesn't like me. She's never liked me," he said. "Even as an infant, she'd cry when I held her. One time, I took her to the park and she didn't want to leave. She threw such a tantrum, the mothers in the park called the police on me. Stephanie had to come to the station to pick us both up."

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"Daddy, I'm at a loss for words here. I want to understand, but I don't want the toxicity of the knowing the sordid details of that to ruin the weekend," she told him.

"Baby, there is no toxicity," Darnell said. "Stephanie and I wanted more children and she couldn't conceive again. Anita offered to help, so she did."

Helen sighed deeply. She knew her mother and the way the woman thought. "Let me guess, no turkey baster was involved and you made me the old-fashioned way?"

"Well, we were all consenting adults," Darnell said, bugging his eyes and looking at Mustang to cosign on the bro code for having a threesome. Mustang shook his head no. He was not cosigning on anything the man said. Darnell moved on. "Anyway, once you were born, Anita wasn't willing to let you go. I got a job offer from Wedgewood in the UK and wanted to take you girls with us. Anita would only agree to let you go if she could come. Your mother was too much drama, so you stayed in the US. Abigail didn't want to leave you, and didn't want to be anywhere near me, so we left you both with Anita."

"Daddy, my mother is one of the pettiest, most trifling and envious people I know. You thought it was a good idea to.... you know what, never mind," Helen said. "You're here to visit me, and we shall have a visit."

"Punkin, hold on," he said. "I'd never met anyone like Anita so I had no idea. I was a nerd who did engineering. My father was a nerd who married in college and stayed married to my mother until he died. It was exciting and we created such lovely girls, and my daughters were beautiful."

"And my mother is certifiable. She hates Aunt Stephanie and covets everything she has, and you walked into the web, but again, that was years ago, and you've reaped what you sowed," Helen said.

Darnell was looking for the wine. Mustang hadn't officially changed out of his uniform, only removing the outer shirt and work boots. He was behind the stove, preparing the pan for the meat.

"Aren't you being hard on me? It's bad enough Abigail hates me, but you too, Shenita?"

"It's Helen. Shenita is no more, just like this conversation is about to be no more," Helen said. "Abigail can't respect a man who chose his own career ambitions and his wife's sister over his own children's wellbeing."

"I didn't choose my wife's sister. Stephanie and I were together. The second pregnancy with Abigail went awry and she couldn't have anymore. We wanted a sibling for her and Anita offered," Darnell said.

Helen was done with the conversation, "And your easy solution has left you with two children you barely know, a grandchild you didn't know existed, and chronic depression. Daddy, healing needs to occur in your soul for you to make this right. Yes, I am an adult, but this is messed up. My mother was never right, and this is...simply wrong."

"Shen...I mean Helen, she's still your mother," Darnell said.

Helen had heard that phrase one time too many. People were constantly making excuses for Anita's bad behavior, selfishness, and inability to care about how anyone else felt but herself. She was the epitome of a narcissist and her father wasn't far behind.

"Daddy, do you think for one minute that people told the Bundy's, that, well, Ted is still your son, and you should love him, anyway? No! My mother is a piece of work, and the pain of her narcissism and selfishness has caused more damage than you can ever know," Helen said.

She looked at Mustang, who was flipping the steaks from the pan. Helen stood to get the salad and the sauteed asparagus she'd cooked earlier. The conversation was over. "Let's simply enjoy the weekend and your visit," she said, not broaching the matter again.

At the end of the evening, when she climbed into bed, she snuggled up against her husband, wrapping herself around him like he was her very own cuddle toy. Mustang could feel the dampness on his chest from her tears. He'd never known Helen to cry. A large hand patted her back.

"People suck," she said.

"True, but for every bad one there is a good one," he replied.

"My Daddy is not a bad man; he's just not a good one," she said. "He came from a line of people who saw him as a hope. He was smart, went to college, and worked for a company with great benefits. When he could, he sent a few bills home to his mother, who didn't need them, but it was the act. Stephanie, like Abigail, has a very fair complexion, whereas my mother, like me, is darker. My father has never had anyone to really tell him no, so he learned to do whatever he could as long as he didn't get caught."

"Is that how you see men, Helen?"

"Most men will have a line they won't cross. Usually, fucking two sisters is that line, especially when one is covetous with an evil heart," she said, feeling a need to qualify

her statement. "My mother is a nurse. Stephanie is flighty, does yoga, eats the equivalent of tree bark, and checks her poop with each movement. The two aren't even close in personality. He slept with my mom because he wanted to and could get away with it. He did it under the guise of giving Abigail a playmate. This deal was struck with a woman who found out she couldn't have more kids."

"You make him sound horrible. They were consenting adults," Mustang said.

"Okay then, husband, I want a child. Please arrange with Michael and Abigail to have sex to make me one," she told him.

"Uhm no," he said.

"See how simple that was? He's not a good man," Helen said. "Let's get through the weekend and move on. You've met him. Ask for my hand, we'll give him a date to show up at the wedding to officially hand me off to you and then fuck him."

Helen was starting to see why Abigail didn't like the man. Her bullshit barometer had sensitivity settings higher than Helen's own. However, Helen was learning. She was learning fast, and burning off fingerprints and breaking teeth out of a cadaver paled in comparison to dealing with family bullshit.

MUSTANG WAS UP AT HIS usual hour on a Saturday morning. He planned to hit his workshop to finish the table he was making for Abigail as a Christmas present for the new nursery. The new coffee pot Helen had purchased allowed her to set it at night so when he reached the kitchen, hot coffee would be ready for him to enjoy. She was thoughtful like that.

A sound of shuffling feet caught his attention. He turned to find Darnell in a bathrobe

and matching jammies with leather slippers coming his way. He reeked of class, but like Abigail, his spirit was off. Mustang didn't trust him, he didn't know why, but something wasn't right with dear old dad.

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"Morning, Mr. Nelson, care for a cup of coffee?"

"Sure, that would be great," Darnell said, coming to the counter. He pulled out a chair and took a seat. He noticed the touches in the kitchen along with the other homey touches in the home his daughter shared with this man. "So, what's your thing?"

Mustang poured him coffee and passed the cup to him. "My thing?"

"You're up early on a Saturday morning. Are you going for an early run, hunting, you know, your thing?"

"Ah," Mustang said, sipping the black brew. "I like to keep my weekend hours the same as the weekday hours, you know, Circadian rhythm alignment and all. Today, I am making a piece of furniture as a Christmas present for the nursery for Abigail."

"Hmm, you make furniture?"

"Yes, the coffee table, I made. The end tables, Helen and I made together," Mustang said. "You're welcome to join me, take a look about the place."

"In the picture on the wall of you and the boy, it looks like you two were making a desk."

"We were. Oscar wanted a desk for his bedroom where he could play with his Legos and not step on them on the floor," he said. "We found a few pieces of wood and created him a desk with a work stool."

"A man who is good with his hands," Darnell said. "So, may I ask, why do you plan to ask me for her hand if you've already married my Punkin?"

Mustang thought long and hard about this question he'd been expecting from the man. On the drive home from work, he'd imagined how he would answer the request, and from his heart, he gave Darnell Nelson his answer. He even smiled when he delivered the words.

"You see this house? I'm excited to come home each day to see what new touches she's added to our nest," Mustang said. "Initially, I'd planned to wait, but Helen deserved more from me as her man. I saw no logic in her living and operating as the woman of this house without having the documentation to go with the tasks. She is my wife. I come home to my wife."

"Hmm," Darnell said. "You love her a great deal. I can see that. In a couple of years, when you get the hankering to be a father, and she can't deliver, are you going to turn on her?"

Mustang didn't miss a beat, "And what, go ask Abigail to give me a son? No, not my thing; besides, the boy in the painting, he asked me to be his dad."

"What? You're going to just take in some kid and raise him as your own?"

It was official. Mustang didn't like this fucker. In her father's mind, he was delivering sage wisdom. In Mustang's mind, the man was full of shit with no real clue how the world worked. He had no idea he was standing in front of a former Technician and one of the best trackers on the North American continent. He also didn't know, in the other room slobbering on a pillow was a skilled assassin who dropped two men with easy trigger pulls and went on to rescue women held captive by a psycho and rescue that same child in the photo.

This man knew nothing about life.

"Sir, raising kids doesn't seem to be a point of expertise in your life or in your wheelhouse," Mustang said. "Sorry to be so blunt, considering you know nothing about me, my background or even that kid's. You also know nothing of that kid's relationship with your daughter. So, if we could, this weekend, I ask that you sit back and observe. Spend time with us. Get to know us, and we move from there."

"Honest. Direct. To the point," Darnell said.

"In my line of work, hesitation gets you dead," Mustang added. "She brought you here to spend the weekend with us. Let's just do that. Is that cool? Are you cool?"

"I'm cool," he replied. Darnell paused, making eye contact with Mustang, who didn't blink and didn't flinch at the direct stare. "Do we get breakfast before going to your workshop to make furniture?"

"Sure, I cooked dinner. Helen made the sides, so breakfast is your turn," Mustang said to Darnell's shocked face. "What, this ain't no hotel for my wife to be waiting on you, Daddy or not. Get in here, make some pancakes, waffles, or whatever your cooking repertoire can yield."

Darnell smiled and said, "Oh, it's like that?"

"It's exactly like that," Mustang said, giving him a wink. Darnell watched his son-in-law pour an additional cup of coffee that he carried toward the bedroom for Helen.

There were more gifts to make for the family, and Monday, they would be heading for Louisville for Christmas, arriving in the same vehicle. He and Helen would also stay in her house on his brother's land. The family would also learn he'd taken a new job closer to home, and he'd moved to Indiana and bought a house and land, and also,

that he'd gotten married.

"My Mama is going to hang me up by my toenails," he said, waving the coffee under Helen's nose, watching her puffy eyes pop open. "Hey, your Dad's making breakfast then we're heading out to my workshop."

"Have fun; don't break him," Helen said, sitting up, and accepting the liquid eye opener.

MUSTANG DIDN'T PARTICULARLY enjoy Darnell Nelson's company, but he'd spent time sitting on back roads in squad cars with men who didn't understand the purpose of a vagina, outside of poking it with their wieners. He could get through a couple of days of an overdressed dandy who thought he was cool. Halfway through the first setting of wood screws for the bookshelves he was making for Helen for Christmas, Darnell, turned out to be, kind of okay.

They talked about life and choices. They talked about fatherhood in which Darnell asked about Mustang's father. He spoke highly of Mark.

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“That’s the white guy in the picture, right? You a side baby?” Darnell asked.

“Adopted,” he said.

“Biological?”

“No good,” Mustang. “Lived with my grandmother in Wisconsin for a while. Went to Summer camp with the Johnsons, who are friends with the Neary’s. Gran died while I was at camp, and I had nowhere else to go. They took me in.”

“Sound like good people,” he said. “And how do they treat my daughters?”

“They love them, and Naomi, my Ma is wrapped around her finger. Hell, so am I,” he said, looking at him smiling. “My brother is a good man. Abigail chose well.”

“Your Ma and...Helen?”

Mustang smiled. The smile was so wide and so bright that Darnell found himself smiling too. He asked, “what?”

“My mother is a homemaker. She loves baking, making cutesy shit, and overly decorating,” he said, pointing a paintbrush towards the house. “She found a kindred spirit in Helen who hangs under her like my sister never does. It’s a nice balance.”

“You really love my baby, don’t you?”

“Sir, I will drop any man or beast coming her way, threatening her harm, including

you,” he said, staring Darnell in the eyes.

“Noted,” he said looking at the bookcases. “These are nice. Where will they go?”

“In her craft room. I have a special Christmas gift for her, and she’s going to need these shelves,” he said, smiling as he worked. “But first, I need to turn the legs on this table for Abigail for the nursery. So, grab some goggles, an apron and let’s get to work. I’ll tell her you helped make this for Luke.”

Darnell understood. He was happy to be a part of their lives in any way it came. After a quick lunch, a stroll through town to secure ice cream in the dead of Winter, they returned to the home for a pleasant dinner. He watched his daughter take out a book, sit next to her husband on the couch, and read. The husband, simply content to end his day, leaned back on the couch, allowing Helen to use him as an oversized pillow. There was no rush, no chaos, no unnecessary words spoken. She sipped her tea and breathed evenly.

“This is really...nice,” Darnell said, excusing himself for the night as the emotions took over him. He stopped once in the hallway to look at the photo of Mustang and Oscar. “Hmm, a possible grandson?”

Chapter 14-Happy Chance

Helen held a cup of cocoa as she stared at the dancing electric flames in the fireplace. She leaned against Mustang, holding the mug, not really drinking, deep in her own thoughts. This morning, they had taken her father to the airport and dropped that joker on the curb. As a dutiful daughter, she’d provided the man a hug, glad to see the back of his head. Her mind, full of so many thoughts and a week in Kentucky with her cousin, who was her sister, fathered by a man they both disliked, but now, for two totally different reasons.

Mustang leaned down, kissing her on the temple. "Helen," he said in a hushed tone.

"Hmm?"

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"Helen," he said again, taking a pause, "I am your man, your husband, and your champion, but first and foremost, I am your friend. As friends, and all those other things, we should be honest with each other."

"Okay, honest."

"Will you always be honest with me?" he asked.

"Probably not completely," she told him.

"Is there a reason why you would opt to not be honest with the man who shares your life?"

"Jay," she said, taking a pause, "most men say they want honesty, and when you are, there is punishment and retribution. The retribution comes from the other person's unwillingness to take the words constructively, but personally. Therefore, there may be times my words to you shall be buffered, as you will do to me."

"You think I will buffer my responses to you?"

"Yep."

"Like what?"

Helen turned on the couch and looked him in the eyes. There were things she wanted to say to him, and things she wanted to tell her man, but couldn't. If he knew half of what had occurred in her life over the past six months, he'd want to make her quit to

stay home baking him cookies. However, if he wanted to test his theory, she was all for it.

"Janis at your office considers herself your work wife," she said. "How many times have you spoken to her about me, especially on the weeks when I'm not here and you're feeling lonely?"

Mustang blinked several times. Helen had only met the woman on Friday and didn't have a conversation with Janis, but she'd picked up on something he may not have been aware of himself. He squinted.

"See what I mean," she said.

"Okay, then you share a truth with me," he said.

"Sure; fire your barber," Helen said. "That tape line is disrespectful to your forehead and profile."

Mustang found himself nearly choking in laughter. "I trimmed it myself."

Helen held up her hand as she rose from the couch. In the kitchen from under the counter, she removed her purse. She pulled a crisp hundred from her wallet and brought it over to him. He accepted the bill.

"You're paying for my next haircut?"

"Yes, by a professional, and get a pedicure too, 'cuz them feetz are rough," she said, winking at him.

"I love you," he confessed. "I've never met anyone like you, and I am almost entranced by you, Helen. When you came to my office on Friday with your little

basket of goodies, I couldn't get over how absolutely lovely you looked. I had a moment of shameful pride at knowing you were mine."

"That's sweet," she said, crinkling her nose and leaning up to kiss his cheek. "Just so you know, and I want to be clear on this, I will break into Janis' house while she's sleeping and plug her asshole with fire crackers that I can detonate remotely. That heffah don't want none of this. She'd better back off my man."

He found himself laughing again. He squeezed her tight, thinking of all the random fairy tale creatures dancing about in that head of hers. He wanted to know about her training, yet he was afraid to understand what she had to do to learn to deal with the ugliness of the world. If she told him honestly, he'd want her to quit. He already wanted her to quit and he felt like a shit in doing so.

"I want to know, but the alpha male in me will want to go all protective, beat my chest, show you my bank statements, and ask you to stay home," he said. "I have no right, so I won't ask, but I will support."

"For that, I love you more and more each moment of each day," she told him. "I don't know why I have to do this, but I do. There are Oscars out there waiting for someone to show up to rescue them. Rooms with women locked in cages, sold to men for sadistic pleasures and holding onto hope that someone is coming. Whatever the reason I am on this path, I have to see it through. Even when I have to do shit that won't let me sleep, at the end of the night, I'm coming home to you. Love on me, cuddle with me, and hold me close to your heart. In return, I shall do the same."

"Simple enough," he said. "Helen, when you've had enough or have seen a situation you can't close out of your mind, say the word. I will come for you every time."

"And when Janis progresses to touching you for no reason, say the word and that bung hole of hers will get plugged," she said laughing. "Seriously, I hear you, and

when it's time to call it quits, you won't have to come for me. I will be home, my weapons cleaned and stored."

"And the boy?"

"Who, Oscar?"

"Yeah," he said, thinking about her father. "We can have a good life, just us, but after meeting and talking to your father, I was worried that maybe what you see in me is the narcissist in him. A life with no kids and no worries, just my expensive toys, makes me feel like, I don't know, if he is what I will turn into in my old age."

Helen set down her mug. He had her full attention and she felt a surge of anger course through her entire being. She could barely blink as she processed his words.

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"You and that man are nothing alike," she said. "You are kind, thoughtful, and loving. Jay, you give when no one asks, and you ask for so little in return. I hung those images in the hallway to commemorate how giving and loving you are. My father is a self-centered ass. Aunt Stephanie is a flighty bird that, if given seeds, she will sit still and spend hours picking out her favorites. He loves her, but it's weird."

Suddenly, a thought hit her. In the recesses of her mind, she began to go over the plants Lemon had her catalog in the greenhouse. She thought of all the natural herbs and plants that could be used to achieve a desired effect in a human body. Plants that were used by pharmaceutical companies to make medicines. Medicines which were sold to hospitals.

Her mother was a nurse. Her mother had access to medicines. Her mother understood how certain medications, when mixed with certain natural remedies could affect a body. A second thought hit her hard and low.

"Nah," she said, dismissing the idea of her mother, possibly, chemically, partially lobotomizing her sister so she could have her man.

"Penny for a couple of those thoughts," he said.

"Dismissed and moving on," she replied. "Are we loading the truck tonight so we don't forget anything for the trip tomorrow?"

"We should be okay," he said. "A two-hour drive sure as hell beats all day travel across the country. I'm just worried that being so close, every weekend I will probably have one or all of them here."

"You set the terms. You make the rules," she said. "Be firm! Stand your ground!"

"Yeah, tell Mark Neary that when he finds out that I've been here for nearly four months and haven't said a word about it."

"Jay, you have a new job, a new home, and a new state, and you have so much to learn."

"Helen, you left out the part about a new wife," he said, smiling.

"Yeah, there's that," she said, looking at him. "It's going to be a long fucking week. There is the happy chance that my cousin sister won't be whining and expecting me to rub her feet."

"True, but we have our own living space that we can retreat to get away from them all," he said, smiling. "It's going to be a great trip."

Chapter 15-Mishap

Jarius "The Mustang" Neary learned two very important lessons on being a husband, all in one day. The first lesson was that he didn't understand "wife speak." He completely missed the cue when he was asked the previous day if the vehicle needed to be loaded prior to departure the next morning. In the brisk cold of the morning, when he thought he would be sticking in two suitcases, he found himself lowering the rear seats of the SUV in order to load in four large storage tubs. Being the smart man that he was, he refused to lower himself by asking his wife about the contents of the heavy ass containers, which would undoubtedly alter the amount of fuel to be used for a two-hour trip. His brain also felt fuzzy after he loaded in his suitcase that by airline standards was the ideal weight, versus the one his wife had with a matching cosmetic case and flowery carry-on bag. He also couldn't understand why the suitcase had a cup holder and weighed enough to safely carry a small child.

"Do you have everything?" Mustang asked, looking at his wife. To his shocked face, she actually went back inside the home for a walkthrough and came out with more items in her hand.

The second lesson he learned about being a husband was that all the items loaded into the vehicle had to be unloaded when they arrived at their destination, meaning he would need to help remove the contents of the tubs. He'd missed the memo on that portion because as soon as they reached Louisville and the vehicle was parked at Helen's double wide manufactured home, his father and brother were waiting for him. Both seemed shocked to see Helen climb from the vehicle, but her brother-in-law was extra happy to see her.

"Helen," Slow said, actually pulling her into a hug. He squeezed her so tightly, she knew there would be bruising.

"Michael, Mark, good to see you both," she said. "Abi and Ruth inside?"

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"Abi yes, Ruth no," Mark replied. "We have to go and cut down some trees."

She asked, "Cut down trees?"

"Yes, the Christmas tree," Mark said. "Our tradition is that when Jay arrives two days before Christmas, we ride out on Michael's land to cut down the Christmas tree."

Michael sighed, "We have to cut two this year, one for my parents and now one for my home for my wife."

Helen looked at Mustang. He wanted to look away. This meant he had to cut down another tree because his wife was going to want one for their house. She gave him that look.

Mustang gave one back. Today was Monday. Tuesday was Christmas Eve. Wednesday was Christmas. Friday, maybe Saturday, they were leaving. She didn't need her own tree. He looked at Helen, whose facial expression indicated he'd better not come back and not have her damned tree. He nodded in submission, rolling his eyes upwards.

Mark tugged at his arm. Michael wanted to talk, but Helen hadn't moved from beside the vehicle. Mustang was about to walk away, but iciness from his wife made him stop dead in his tracks.

"Hey, can you guys help me unload this stuff in the truck while I get Helen settled before we go off chopping down trees," Mustang said, watching her face soften.

"Yeah, no worries," Slow replied, looking at Helen to go open the front door. "How much stuff could she...whoa. Okay. How long are you guys staying?"

"It is Christmas decorations for the house and presents for the family," she told them.

In a matter of minutes, with three men working, the vehicle was unloaded. Slow got the heat going in the home. Mark started the kettle, and in a flash, Helen was ready to get settled in before she went over to check on Cherry.

"She's been waiting for you. They both have," Slow told her. "Hell, me too."

"Give me a moment to get situated, and I will give you the break you need," she told him.

Michael Neary placed both his hands together in the prayer position, bending at the waist as a thank you. This meant Cherry was getting on his nerves, and he wanted another body to break up the whine fest. She could be needy. When Cherry was needy, she could also be bitchy. Before Helen planned to deal with any of that, she wanted to nest a bit in the home she and Mustang would have to escape the family for the next week.

"Honey, are you good?" Mustang asked.

"I'm good," she replied, waving him off.

The cupboard was bare, but in one of the bins, she had the basic food stores. Bread, wine, tuna packs, cheese, and coffee. As a backup, she had enough to make a Charcuterie board if the guys came back from "tree hunting" and wanted a snack. Mustang turned to leave but stopped to provide an affectionate peck.

"I wasn't going to leave without unloading and getting you settled first," he said.

"No worries," she replied, knowing he was anxious to run off to play with the guys. She also knew they had questions for him, which would be relayed to both Ruth and Cherry and answer a great deal of their questions without her having to explain herself to either woman. "I have to set up this nest."

She began to unpack holiday bedding and items she'd created for the home. In one container, there were presents for the family. Another container held decorations for their very first tree as husband and wife in their second home. Helen smiled at the irony of it all.

MUSTANG SAT NEAR THE window on the bench seat of Mark Neary's old pickup truck. Mark had loaned it to Helen to drive for basic transportation until Mustang had purchased the lady two vehicles of her own, the Subaru and the Chevy Colorado pickup. He was beginning to take pride at his foresight in getting her the truck, considering all the shit she'd brought with her.

Slow, who sat in the center seat of the truck since he was smaller than Mustang by at least twenty pounds, brought back many memories of early morning fishing trips with their dad. He thought fondly of the hunting trips, and although Mustang didn't care much for killing animals, he went along for the male bonding. Today would be no different once the questions about he and Helen were out of the way.

Mark asked, "What all did she have in those tubs?"

"I have no idea, outside of Christmas gifts," he said.

Michael commented, "It's a good thing her car is here so she can get groceries or whatever you need for the week."

Mark circled back, "Did you fly in to where she was training, and you guys drove in together?"

Mustang inhaled deeply and said, "No, we drove from home this morning. It's only a two-hour drive from here."

He could feel the heads turning in the vehicle as they drove across the land, headed towards the woods to locate the appropriate sized trees. Mark and Ruth had high ceilings, so a six-footer was needed. Helen's house wasn't very large, so an average tree would work. He had no idea what his brother would want for his cabin.

"I'm quiet because I'm waiting for you to finish explaining what the heck any of that means," Mark said.

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Mustang shrugged. "I got tired of being on those back roads. The work I did in locating The Collector got me noticed. A job offer was presented to teach at the Academy in Plainfield, Indiana, and I took it. I've only been there about three months, so getting settled, the holidays and all, has been a bit much. But, since I was coming home for Christmas and we were doing this, it was just easier to tell you two once, and you can explain it to Ma and Abigail."

Slow turned his head. "Indiana; her territory. She was okay with you moving into her territory, or was it her idea?"

"Naw, the offer came through when she was hanging with me in Oregon," he said. "We discussed it. I kind of asked her to marry me, we picked some land, then I bought the property. I sent some money to Gabriel, he purchased and sent a triple wide to the land, and some people to put up a privacy fence, new septic, satellites, yaddah, yaddah, and now we have a home."

Mark was trying to keep up with all the information in his statement. "You asked her to marry you?"

Mustang in his laid-back manner replied, "We're going to do a formal ceremony later when she's completed her training, as I told her father over breakfast this past weekend. Do you know that man makes an omelet that simply melts on your tongue? Anyway, last month, I think it was, we went to the courthouse because she fell and hurt her hand and didn't have decent insurance. We got married and I put Helen on my insurance after we got back from Thanksgiving weekend with Bad Apple and the kids. She now has dental and vision coverage too."

Slow tried to turn in the seat. "Who are you and where is my brother? Jay, if you're in there, blink twice!!"

Mustang looked at his brother, then blinked twice. He offered a soft smile, then continued, "She was given three weeks off before returning to training and... I bet she's... Oh, this is going to be good."

"What?" Both Mark and Michael asked in unison.

"She's probably nesting and making that little house more like our home in Indiana, so we can be comfortable this week," he said. "She really has a great decorating eye."

"She does?" Slow asked, thinking of the one yellow throw pillow Cherry had added to the couch.

"Yeah, Helen's very crafty and very creative," he said. "The Christmas gifts she brought to my office and made for my team, man, those people will not leave me alone. They loved the gifts and are trying to weasel their way to our home since somebody, I'm not calling any names, but it starts with Helen, mentioned a cookout soon. I told that woman, I have to work with those ass wipes, they don't need to be in my house coveting my belongings and gossiping. It was bad enough when she began packing me the special lunches stored in a Bento box type of container. I told her, she was going to get me beat up on the playground by the bullies. You know that James offered to pay me for my wife to make him lunch too? I tell you, the nerve of some folks, trying to get my goodies. I don't share shit like that!"

Mark slowed the truck. "Who are you and where is my son? If you're in there, blink twice."

Mustang leaned forward, looking around his brother and at their father. He blinked twice. Mark wouldn't let it go.

"Son, to make sure I'm understanding everything you've said, and to be clear, you and Helen are married. Her dad came for a visit this past weekend, and you've moved to Indiana, sold your home on the vineyard in Oregon, and now you're teaching at the Trooper Academy in Indiana?" he asked. "Are there any other bombshells you want to drop while you're at it?"

Again, in his laid-back fashion, Mustang said, "Yeah, we both found out Friday that Helen and Cherry are actually sisters and not cousins. They have the same Daddy. Cherry has always known, not sure why she never told Helen, or why no one, not even her mother, mentioned it to her."

The silence in the truck was deafening. Mustang had moved on to other things. He had some ideas in his own head, and one was the perfect little Christmas tree for their first holiday together.

"Ooh, that tree right there! Daddy, pull over. I found the tree for me and Helen's first Christmas together," he said, smiling. His back was going to hurt like hell later, but this year, they had chain saws. None of that whacking at the base of a tree until it fell over and one of the three of them was exhausted.

Slow looked at their father. "Well, damn."

He also wondered why his wife had never mentioned it to Helen or to him for that matter if the two ladies being sisters. It would be an interesting conversation between the two women. One thing he would admit, he was glad as hell he wasn't there in the house.

"HELLO," HELEN CALLED, coming through the back door. "Hello?"

Naomi, her six-year-old niece, came bolting to the back door, hurling her small body at Helen, who caught her mid leap. She provided a ton of kisses to the small cheeks and hugged her. Down the hall, a round-bellied Cherry appeared.

"Aunt Helen! Aunt Helen! Guess what?"

"What?" Helen said, overcome with the child's enthusiasm at seeing her.

"Me and Daddy went to the doctor with Mommy. They took her in the room where they had this funny-looking table," Naomi explained. Her small hands attempted to demonstrate the size and width of the table. "The doctor said he needed to check on Luke, but I bet he put Mommy on that table and looked in her vagina to see how Luke was doing. He used a light. Aunt Helen, do you think Luke was trying to cover his baby eyes like this?"

"Oh Lord child, I have missed you," Helen said, taking a deep breath.

"I'm glad somebody is missing her. I don't think I'm going to survive these two weeks of her being home every day and me being so, well, large," Cherry said. "Plus, my feet are crusty and need to be shaved. My cooter is covered in an afro, and I smell funny all the time. I don't want to do this again ever.

"Good to see you, Abi," Helen said.

"You say that now until you're down there, trimming my cooter fro," Cherry told her.

Cherry took a seat, placing a cup of water on what may have been an end table, but it looked like a log with a round piece of glass placed on top. She assumed it was Michael's way of making an end table. Helen smiled, thinking how much Cherry would appreciate the gift Mustang had made for her nursery.

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"You're smiling; life must be good. Catch me up on the world of Helen," Cherry said, sending Naomi off to her room to play.

"Nothing much to tell," she said. "Daddy came for a visit this past weekend."

Cherry arched an eyebrow. "There is a lot to unpack in that single sentence. One, you have another home where he came for a visit because I know like hell that weirdo Passion Fruit didn't let some strange black man in her home. And two, I warned you about allowing demonic spirits to enter your safe spaces."

"Demonic spirits, Abi?"

"You can feel it on him," Cherry said. "Even as I child I felt the wrongness of that silver tongued, suit-wearing demon."

"He told me we are sisters," Helen said.

"Yeah and? You and I have always been together and had each other's backs. My child has called you Aunt from the beginning; that was one of her first words, so what's the issue?"

"I didn't know, that's all."

Cherry pursed her lips, "And now that you do, how many fucks does it take to get to the center of how this has changed your life?"

"Wow, you're still angry with him," Helen said. "You're right, it doesn't, but he was

surprised to learn he was a grandfather. I'm certain at some point today that he'll be calling, wanting to be a part of Naomi and Luke's lives."

"I don't give a llama's right coochie lip about what that man wants; he is not, nor will ever be, a part of my children's lives." Cherry said. "He forfeited that right by leaving us with your nihilistic mother."

Helen reached over to touch Cherry's hand. At one point in their teen years, Helen had learned her touch often soothed Cherry's bristling fur. She wasn't high strung, or even low strung for that matter, but she hovered between pessimism and fuck it on a regular basis. In other words, the woman was exhausting.

"I thought about, well, the other day, with my mom being a nurse and having access to medicines and Aunt Stephanie being so spacey...never mind, I shouldn't have brought it up."

"It's up. It's in the air, so let's speak on it," Cherry said. "I think for years your mother doing the Munchausen by Proxy on Stephanie to control her and make her dependent on Anita was enough for any soul. I figured that out years ago, and when my mom got away from her and left for Europe with Darnell, she started getting better. However, he's just as controlling, but in a different way. My mother has never known freedom."

"He said she has a new yoga studio," Helen said.

"Well, namaste for her and whoop-de do-da doo," Cherry replied, looking at Helen's face. "I'm sorry. You brought him up, knowing how I feel about him."

"You asked for an update; I gave an update."

It grew quiet between them. The energy would shift from this point, and Cherry

would change the subject to a neutral topic. She had never wanted therapy but rather allowed the anger to fuel her. Helen didn't want to be that person. She wasn't going to be angry. She planned to be happy.

Cherry smiled and said, "So, have you broken out any teeth on a dead body yet?"

"No, not that mishap, but I did burn off his fingerprints and watch his corpse get set on fire," Helen admitted.

"My first one, I cried for days. Do you remember that time I came home and couldn't stop crying? Yeah, I had a big one that I broke out his teeth, burned off his fingerprints, and then burned his body," Cherry said. "I almost quit the Technicians that day. The contract said it needed to look personal. A long-range shot wasn't going to do it, so I had to get in there and make it happen. How are you handling it?"

"I was given three weeks off to process the fucked-upness of it all," Helen said. "On my way home, I stopped by a sewing center and dropped ten grand between that and a fabric shop using up the coins I didn't know I was still making from the craft site deposited on one of those debit cards. You have lots of homemade cute shit for Christmas for you, Michael, Naomi, and Luke."

"Crafting is your go-to stress reliever. Personally, a good...hah, let me stop," Cherry said, cutting her eyes at Helen. "How are you and the Mustang fairing?"

"Well," Helen said, "I messed around in Lemon's lab and made a love potion. I used it on him. The man married me."

Cherry sat still, looking at her cousin. Helen held up her hand to show off the rings. The two burst into laughter.

"Can I get some of that love potion after I have this child?"

"Nope, my Sista, you'll have to make your own," Helen said, chuckling. "Yeah, the special ingredients requires that a chick will need to make her own."

The space between them was quiet as the sound of a truck pulled them away from the much-needed girl time. Cherry looked out the window to see Mustang unloading a live tree. He was looking for the water hose while Michael unloaded his own tree. Soon they would bring them into the home, and the holiday festivities could begin.

This would be the first Christmas Helen was ever looking forward to celebrating. She had presents for her family. She had love in her heart, and as far as she was concerned, it would be enough to charge her cells to get back to Illinois for her training.

"I am a Technician," she said softly. "I am the protector of the defenseless and the women and children of the state of Indiana. My name is Helen McDaniel Neary and my handle is The Cranberry."

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She'd reached the point in the process where she needed to start saying it aloud for it to sink in. Her life was changing. The Cranberry needed to prepare mentally for the work ahead.

Chapter 16-Coincidence

The family fun festivities required an entire plan, which Helen looked forward to taking part in with the Neary family. Helen and Cherry's previous holiday celebrations had simply consisted of her mother putting up a tree and baking a cake for Christmas, but the holiday meant lots of overtime at the hospital which left Helen and Cherry to make the best of it on their own. As the years had progressed with Cherry stationed in Japan, Germany, and even Korea, the desire for a Christmas tree and holiday traditions just didn't mean as much. However, now that Cherry was a mother, new plans could be undertaken and her cousin slash sister appeared pleasantly happy to take part in the activities.

As far as Helen understood, today being two days before Christmas meant the cutting down of the holiday tree. Dinner at the Neary home would consist of eggnog making while the tree was being trimmed and a new ornament added for each family member. Helen was informed that she, Abigail, and Naomi would add their first ornaments to the tree. Abigail would need to work on her ornament for next year for Luke. As a Christmas present for each member of the family, Helen had found an embroidery file to make tree ornaments, which was one of the gifts she'd made for each Neary.

Christmas Eve morning was a time set aside for the men to hunt game. If a deer were taken down, it would get field dressed, and sausages would be made for the grill as

well as a good venison roast. The womenfolk would take over the kitchen to begin baking holiday yummys. The cakes went into the oven, along with pies and this year, Ruth Neary planned to build mini-gingerbread houses where Naomi would be the village queen. Helen was excited to do it all with Ruth, whom she absolutely loved, and enjoyed being in the kitchen learning from the family matriarch.

Christmas Day activities were brunch and present opening, along with a sit-down holiday dinner. A turkey, from what she understood, would get deep fried outside, and inside a ham or a goose would bake. Side dishes, how many Helen was uncertain, would be made for the holiday feast and the family would begin to wrap up the end of the year.

This year was a major life change for Mustang. Usually, when he returned for Christmas and Ruth's birthday, he stayed in the guest room at the familial home. He wasn't too excited to tell Ruth he wasn't staying this year. However, first there were things to be done in his own home that he would share with Helen.

"I need to get a tree stand for a live tree," he told Helen.

"No worries; I brought one with me," she said, showing him the holder near the window.

Just as he'd suspected, she'd done her thing, nesting the place while he was out tree hunting, chopping one down for them and growing alpha male chest hairs. In the bathroom were embroidered towels he couldn't use to wipe his hands or he would get scolded like a child. This made him smile. In the bedroom, there was a heavy holiday quilt with matching shams and foo-foo pillows. Helen had even added matching heavy drapes. The living room had festive red curtains and embroidered pillows rested on the couch next to a heavy wool red throw.

Mark helped bring in the tree, spotting the differences from earlier in the home. He

stood still in the space, wondering what their home in Indiana was like. There were photos of Helen and his son on the mantle, and on the wall was a framed photo of what he assumed was their wedding day. Mark felt emotional standing in the living room. He thought of his son's home in Oregon. It was a house which held his stuff, but it didn't feel like a home. The house in Oregon felt like a place where his son ate, slept, and made furniture. He truly wanted to visit the new home his son shared with Helen in Indiana, but Mark wouldn't push it. Jay would invite them out when the time was right, and Mark was looking forward to it because he really liked Helen. She had a nice energy even after what she'd been through; he appreciated how she embraced the negative, but didn't allow it to engulf who she was meant to become. Initially, he'd had doubts and questions, but looking about the space and how quickly she'd transformed it for herself and his son, he nodded.

"Ruth is looking forward to seeing you this afternoon," he said to Helen.

"And I can't wait to see her! I have so much to share with her," Helen replied, smiling widely. "Her biscuit recipe is becoming quiet famous. I am so excited to get in there and start baking with her."

Helen's smile was like a ray of sunshine and Mark felt choked up. He'd worried about Jay being so far from his family and alone. This pip of a woman had gotten his son to move closer to home and take a safer job. For that, he was grateful. He only wished her job wasn't so dangerous, but they were learning. Love, he'd found out through nearly forty-five years of being the man for Ruth Neary, was about learning.

A Christmas tree was in her home. A lovely tree which filled the home with the smell of pine, and tonight, with the few lights and ornaments she'd brought along in one of the tubs, Mustang and she would decorate their first tree. It wasn't much, but a start.

"Be back soon," Mustang said. "I've gotta help Michael get his tree in the cabin, then take the big tree to the house with Daddy."

"I'm fine, go," she said, watching his strong back. Suddenly, she decided to go over to the main house again to see Naomi's reaction to seeing Jay. More than anything, she wanted to know what revelation her niece would share with him.

She entered the back door as the child launched herself in the air. Mustang held her high above his head, bringing her in for a squeeze. To her surprise, he accepted the butterfly kisses to his cheeks even though he thought kids were walking petri dishes.

"Uncle Jay! Guess what?"

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"What, Miss Princess Naomi?"

"Misses Sprinkles broke her toenail! She sure did, and Bleu, the one with the beard, took her over to his house for the winter. He said she'd get new shoes, but Uncle Jay, he has other horses. Big horses and she's little. Do you think they will pick on her, 'cause she's smaller than them?"

"I think Bleu and Jason will make sure Misses Sprinkles will make friends with Lancelot and Guinevere," he said. "They are nice horses."

"Okay, good," she answered, batting her lashes and grinning at him, showing off missing her front teeth. "Next time, can you get me a car? I can drive it from here to the barn to take her treats when she comes back."

"Can't you ask your Daddy to get you a little car?"

"No, he thinks I'm a little kid and can't do anything by myself," Naomi explained. "If I had my own little pink car, I could put apples in the back and drive over to the barn to feed Misses Sprinkles."

A sparkle came to his eye, imagining Naomi in a little pink Jeep, driving through the backyard over to the barn. For shits and giggles, first chance he got, one was getting ordered and delivered to the house. He looked to see Michael staring at him. Then this brother shot a bird at him.

"Don't even think about it," Michael said to him.

"What? I didn't do anything," he said, laughing. Mustang proceeded to help set up the tree and then Naomi noticed her grandfather.

"Oh. Hey, Grandpa Man! I didn't see you. How you doing?" she asked.

Mark was offended. "I don't get hugs and kisses or a story?"

"A story about what, Grandpa Man?"

"Stop calling me that. I am just Grandpa."

"Okay Just Grandpa," she said, smiling and showing off the tiny teeth. "Will you let Grandma know I'll be over soon as I shower and get dressed? I know she misses me."

Mark growled at the dismissal. He'd had enough of little Miss Highhanded. "Sure. You guys ready?"

"Ready," both men called out. Michael trailed the pickup in his own vehicle so he could drive them back to the house later in the day. To Helen, it would have been logical for everyone to go now to save on the travel, but it wasn't her circus, and they weren't her elephants to herd.

THE AFTERNOON PROVED interesting as everyone arrived at the family home to trim the tree. Ruth Neary was in a full-blown supermom mode, having gotten all the details from Mark on Jay moving to Indiana, his new job, and of course getting married. In a gust of air, she stood in the middle of the floor, making her announcement.

"Dang gone it! At least one of my kids is going to have a wedding! I am going to start

planning this wedding ceremony right away. Helen, what are your colors and themes?" Ruth asked.

Mustang didn't blink or hesitate when he responded, "Ma, no you are not."

"What do you mean? This will be the wedding for the season," Ruth said.

"Ma, it will be Helen's wedding, and Helen's wedding to plan," he said. "If she wants your help, she'll ask for it."

"I'm going to start planning," Ruth muttered.

"Again, no, you are not," Mustang said. "Helen is in the middle of life altering training which requires her focus. She doesn't need to worry about baby's breath, spaghetti straps, or what flavor icing is on a cake. Take a back seat, Ma. She'll let you know what she needs."

"It's not fair, I want a wedding," Ruth pouted.

"Then plan a recommitment ceremony for you and Dad," he said. "My wife has other concerns at the moment, and when she's ready to begin planning her dream wedding, if she even wants to do it, then she will begin the process."

Ruth waved her hand at him and said, "A recommitment ceremony?"

"Isn't there a big anniversary coming up? Dad, aren't you retiring soon? What about Abigail's baby shower? There are other events to work on, Ma," Mustang said, trying to shift her focus.

"Oh, a retirement party," Ruth said, heading to the kitchen for more cranberries.

Helen walked over to Mustang, and in his ear, she whispered something so raunchy, bordering on distasteful, and absolutely hilarious about his penis that he found himself blushing. She looked him squarely in the eyes, saying simply, "I didn't know it was possible to love a man as much as I love you right now. Thank you."

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He said nothing, simply happy to be home with family, but not having to spend five days at the beck and call of his mother's whims nearly made him dance. There was a reason he came home only twice a year; his mother, God bless her soul, was absolutely exhausting. One of the things he appreciated about Helen was her ability to sit still. Instead of the flurry of emotions and bounding about, she would sit with a book, enjoying the blessing of being in a safe space.

"I love you as well," he said, looking at his brother, who again shot him a bird while mouthing that he was an unpleasant name reserved for feminine male inmates. "Love you too, Michael."

The love fest continued in the privacy of the home they shared while they decorated the perfectly sized tree. Helen promised him a special reward for cutting down such an ideal tree, ending with spending the night making sweet love. A smile remained plastered on her face during the entire week, which only widened on Christmas morning when her husband opened his present.

"My monogrammed bathrobe! Hell yeah!" he said, proud of the gift. He opened the other packages, surprised at the thoughtfulness of his wife's gifting. "Your turn."

Helen didn't expect any of the gifts her husband would give to be a surprise. She expected jewelry, but what surprised her in the other boxes were the gift cards. There was a gift card to the craft store, a gift card for online embroidery shops, and to her shock, a pamphlet on Quilt Town USA, the home of the Missouri Star Quilt Company.

"Jay, what is this?" she asked, looking further to find a prepaid gift card.

"One free weekend, we can drive over to Hamilton," he said. "It is about an eight-hour drive from the house but imagine the fabrics! I have a preloaded gift card with about a thousand bucks on it for you to buy crafting stuff. Your Dad helped me finish the bookcases for your craft room to house the fabrics. Here is a photo of the cases. Do you like them?"

Helen began to cry. She opened her mouth and howled, bawled, slobbered and cried like an infant.

"Baby, did I do something wrong? You don't like the gift?"

"Jay, this is the most perfect gift in the world. You see me. You get me. You understand what I need to be happy," she told him.

"Well, hell. The last one has a gift card to the bookstore, so shit, I'm scared for you to open that one," he said, opening his arms.

"Our first Christmas together is so perfect," she said, kissing him with icky, snot-laced smooches.

"I love being married to you," he told her with the smile still plastered on her face.

In the other room, her Technician phone rang, and she nearly growled at having the perfect mood ruined by work shit. She answered the phone, accepting the call through the company operator. On the other line was Bad Apple, who wanted her to put the phone on speaker.

"Cranberry, is Mustang close by? If so, can you put the call on speaker?"

"Sure thing. Merry Christmas," Helen said cheerfully. "Did the gifts arrive on time? I have confirmation on delivery, but you know how those things go."

Bad Apple was beside himself with the gifts received from his new extended family. "Cranberry, Mustang, we are floored. I only have the P.O. Box for you so I sent a card. Now I feel like a schmuck after opening these wonderful presents. The boys, Ricky, we are all in shock. Mustang, man, you did the damned thang. Thank you both."

"You're welcome. Merry Christmas," Mustang said, pressing the button to end the call.

Helen looked at him. "I sent monogrammed bathrobes and man grooming kits to the guys. Jay, did you send something as well?"

Mustang shrugged and said, "Yeah, I sent each one of them a tool kit."

"A tool kit?"

"Yeah, for Apple, I sent a new gun cleaning kit. Ricky got a grilling kit. Stephen got a chef's tool kit complete with knife sharpeners, and the Jeffrey and Oscar received their first tools in a neat little toolbox."

Helen blinked. The tears began to roll down her cheeks, and before she knew it, she had thrown herself into his arms and cried harder, soaking his chest with tears. "I love you so much. You are just the absolute best. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but Lord am I thankful. Those kids, Oscar, knowing you care. Oh, my God. You got a gift for Ricky too. Oh my, God. I love you so much. Will you marry me so I can be yours forever and ever?"

Mustang said nothing as the warm, squishy feeling moved to his belly. He knew he was in love and this was how it felt. There were no fancy trips to remote Caribbean Islands, extravagant dining at exclusive restaurants, or high-end designer purses, but a simple thought gift for others and a few gift cards. The feeling continued with the

knowledge of having chosen the right woman to be his partner filling his soul with gladness as a smile also became plastered to his face.

Helen's technician's cell phone rang, but no number showed on the screen. She looked at it, sliding her finger across the glass to engage the call. An idea formed on who it could be, but she would allow this to play out.

"Go for Cranberry," she said as static filled the line.

"Ola Tia, Feliz Navid," the voice said.

"Happy Christmas to you as well. Did you get the gifts I sent?" She asked, knowing good and well he had.

"Si, we did," he said, "Thoughtful of you andgracias."

"Is Alita nearby, so I can say hello?"

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“Of course, una momento,” he said, calling for his assassin body guard to come to the line in a bundle of holiday cheer.

“Ola Tia, I love the robe, thank you for thinking of me,” she said. “Is your Christmas going well?”

“It is,” she replied. “You two take care of each other, keep me updated and next time you’re on the continent, if we can connect, let me know.”

“Of course. Be well,” Alita said, ending the call.

Mustang sat looking at her. His eyes blinked several times. He pointed at the phone. “Tia? On the continent? Helen?”

“The Bushmaster. He got my Christmas gifts,” she said smiling.

“The Bushmaster?”

“Yeah, the Colombian Bushmaster,” she said, arching an eyebrow.

Mustang inhaled deeply, “he called you Tia, as in Auntie?”

“Yeah, his actual Aunt is Odessa Blakemore, and I am a sad substitution, but it’s better to have him calling me Auntie rather than trying to fight you to win my affections,” she said shrugging.

“What?” He said scrunching his face. “You said Colombian. Blakemore. Hold the

hell up. Bushmaster as in snake. As in Viper. As in Delgado. Helen, how in the actual hell...those people are dangerous. The father, the Fer de Lance, that man is a Bona fide sociopath!”

“He’s not that bad,” she said before she knew it.

“Stop right there,” he said. “When. How. Stop it! You have not met that man and not told me. Where did you? Nope. Not doing this. You’re pulling my leg and I am not playing that game with you.”

She shrugged again as her technician phone rang. Again, no number on the displayed on the screen. Helen slid her finger across the glass, but this time placing the call on speaker.

“Go for Cranberry,” she said.

“Bon dia, Cranberry,” the deep baritone voice said.

“Good day to you Señor,” she replied, “please note you are on speaker and the Mustang is seated next to me.”

“Ah, a fitting name for such a stallion of a man,” he said, pausing briefly. “I received your gift.”

Helen was grinning. “I hope it brought a smile to your face. Be honest, tell me what you thought of it.”

The line was silent, then he spoke. “I opened your gift and thought, this is, how do you say,ah si...the bullshit.”

To her surprise, she heard him chuckle. He’d gotten the gist of the joke and the

practicality of the gift. It did make him laugh, and Helen was pleased.

“Cranberry, thank you,” he said. “The gift, the clarity of the situation and the conversation, it has made a difference for us both.”

“Glad to be of service, Señor.”

Another pause in the line, “I have commissioned my tailor to craft you four pairs of mis pantalones. They should arrive after the new year. Feliz Navidad Cranberry.”

“Happy Christmas, Señor,” she said as he disconnected the call. She looked at her husband, who sat staring at her mutherfuckingly. Helen rose, to pour fresh cups of coffee for them both, and to grab a cinnamon bun to pass to her husband. He sipped the coffee and finally found his words.

“Helen, what in the entire fuck? Was that the Fer de Lance? You sent a Christmas present to the baddest son of a gun on two continents!! What did you send and why does he consider it to be bullshit, and wait and damned minute, he called me a stallion! I have never seen or met that man.”

“He’s seen you,” she said.

“And where did this happen?”

“He came to our house, looking for me, but I just left, so he followed me to Passion Fruit’s place,” she said.

Mustang rubbed his temples, “How did he follow you? Are you leaving a trail, Helen?”

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“No, silly. The Bushmaster put a tracker on my car since I hadn’t been implanted yet, you know to keep watch, since I am under his protection,” she said scowling.

He was shaking his head. “And what did you do to earn such loyalty?”

“I cooked him some neck bones, collard greens and cornbread with the little corn nibbles in the bread,” she told him. “I also made his Daddy breakfast and we had a chat.”

A pain shot through his temple and he thought for one moment his head was about to explode. This is what she meant about him not being able to handle the truth. She was telling him the truth and he was about to lose his shit. His Helen, and the Fer de Lance, having breakfast, like they were old friends. His stomach roiled. His right eye twitched. He thought he was having a stroke and was unable to voice the words.

“And his gift,” he asked, as he found his words.

“Well, he showed up at Passion Fruit’s place trying to be all intimidating and shit,” she said. “That man was trying to interact with me before coffee when just the day before was already trying on my soul with me having to undress Bryan and watching Passion Fruit put in a catheter in that man against my will. I mean I turned around and she had that little pink turtle's head in her hand, and I was like ugh.”

“Dear God, save me,” Mustang said, wiping at his eyes.

“Anyway, he stepped out of the shadows trying to be all creepy and shit, and I was like, oh,” she said. “He was shocked that I wasn’t scared, asking, do you know who I

am, and I was like yeah, you're the Bushmaster's Daddy, the Lancelot. He, of course, corrected me on his title, which gave me the idea for the gift."

"Helen, be merciful on my soul, what was the gift?"

"The Bushmaster travels with his own coffee beans, so I figured if he did, it was learned from his father," she said. "So, I made him a travel coffee bean bag holder."

"Yeah, but he said it was some bullshit," Mustang commented.

The smile on Helen's face was the very reason he should have asked her to stop talking, but again, he was invested in the nonsense and encouraged her to continue.

"I sent him an embroidered coffee bean bag carrier," she said smiling. "The bag has a little viper on the front of it baring its fangs that is sitting on a few loose coffee beans. It is embroidered with the words Lancelot's Bag o' Beans."

Helen burst into laughter. Mustang laughed as well. "He's right, that is some bullshit. You are bat shit crazy and I'm here for it."

"I hope so, because I'm inviting them to the wedding," she said.

Mustang had reached the end limits of his surprise well loaded with liquid drops of Helen's fairy tonic. "Sure, why the hell not?"

"Good, you will like him. He's not so bad, and that son of his, Lawd, plus his little assassin body guard, she is a tough cookie," Helen said smiling. "Let get ready for the rest of the day."

THE SMILE REMAINED all week, even upon their departure with Cherry pouting and Naomi crying. Michael appeared a little sad, but Mustang came through.

"We have two guest rooms, and I have crafted a portable toddler bed for Naomi. I am two hours away. If you start driving at 8 a.m., you will be at my front door by 10:15. That's not even a bathroom stop," he said. "Call first to make sure it is a good time for a visit; the door is always open for you guys."

"Thank you," Michael said, waving at them as they left.

Mustang in return, shot his brother a bird.

It had been a good week celebrating the holidays with the Neary's, but the following Monday, Helen needed to be on the road. The down time was helpful, but she had skills to build, men to kill, and scales to balance. The break was nice, and, in the vehicle, she didn't talk of work; instead, she talked of weekend getaways, the potential trip to Missouri, and a potential vacation on a sunny beach.

"Honeymoon?"

She asked, "Island or mountains?"

"I like the mountains, but sometime in Costa Rica sounds pretty neat," he said. "Do you have a passport?"

"I can call the Archangel and get one," she said, laughing. "Heck, I don't want to call that dude for anything."

Mustang held his tongue. He didn't want Helen to go back to training. Having her home was wonderful. Spending time with the family was amazing, and he'd been saved from worrying about whether his wife would get along with his mother. He

was saved from mean girl actions between his sister and wife. It was an ideal situation, and overall, he was happy.

"I don't want you to leave, but I know this is what you have to see to completion," he said to her on that Monday. "If shit gets sticky, all you have to do is call. I shall come for you."

"And if Janis at the office gets touchy, all you have to do is call, and I will come for her," she chuckled. "Listen, I love you. I shall finish up with Passion Fruit and be back by the end of the month. My time with her will be over."

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"I love you too; be safe."

"If not safe, careful," she said with a wink, backing out and pointing the nose of the pickup toward Illinois. Three weeks. Three weeks to get the training complete. For a moment, she felt as if she'd seen too much and experienced her own form of being snow blind, being exposed to too much ultraviolet bullshit, but she was ready.

"I am Helen McDaniel Neary. I am the Cranberry. I am the Technician for the great state of Indiana. My watch is beginning," she said aloud as she hit the interstate. She repeated it once more to remind herself of what tasks lie ahead.

Epilogue

The moment Helen reached the Antioch city limit, her Technician phone rang. She knew who it was. The earpiece wasn't in her ear, making her pull over to an empty spot to connect the call.

"Go for Cranberry."

"I see you're headed back," the voice said. "I hope the break helped. There are three hard weeks ahead and jobs to get done."

"Not afraid of a little hard work," she said.

"It seems you gave holiday gifts to Pear, Lemon, Apple, and those kids. You even sent presents for Lemon's girls and the Seraphim. I don't see anything for me," the voice said.

“To do so would mean I would need to track your location in Michigan, and since you’re so far out, near that fingertip, getting a package to you would be difficult,” she told the voice. “I sent it to your PO Box. Evidently, you haven’t checked it in a while.”

“So, you did think about me,” the voice said.

“We are a team. One finger can’t function on a hand without backup and support, especially from the thumb,” she said. “My years of supporting Cherry gives me a unique insight into the loneliness of this job. It’s important to know people care about you.”

“You get on my fucking nerves,” the voice said. “I need to provide you with an update.”

“Listening.”

“The visitor you had coffee with has made it clear that if one hair on your head is touched, they will have the full wrath of his vengeance,” the voice said. “Cranberry, what did you do?”

“I made him breakfast and had a conversation.”

“What...how in the hell? He just showed up on your doorstep and you let him inside. Cranberry, please explain it to me as if I were a first grader,” Azrael said.

“Boss, I woke up, and he was in her house,” she said. “Passion Fruit was gone, and when I realized who he was, I made coffee and breakfast so we could have a talk. He assumed that I had seduced his son, when he delivered the product to Lemon. The Bushmaster, that’s his son, put a tracker on my vehicle, and each time the tracker went to Indiana, his son got mopey, mewling that his heart was broken. Daddy came

to see what was up.”

“You have a tracker on your vehicle you failed to mention to me?”

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“I did tell you. I also changed vehicles after the bookstore creep, put the tracker on my second vehicle, which is pre-transponder, just in case, you know,” Helen said.

“No, I don’t know, you scary little woman,” Azreal shouted. “You get a visit from the Fer de Lance and fail to mention it. You have a tracker placed on your vehicle those people are monitoring and you fail to mention it! I truly want to fly to where you are and beat your ass.”

“Mentioning it would have changed nothing,” Helen replied. “He came as a father. I dealt with him as a father. He did warn me, just as Kurtzwilde did, that people are watching.”

“They are, but the Fer de Lance has put out the word, but not your name or your specialty.”

“I don’t have a specialty,” Helen said.

“You do, and in the next four months, you’ll step fully into and embrace your gift,” the voice said. “Stay low. Learn. Minnesota is cold as hell. When you head to Sour Grapes, make sure you bring real winter clothing.”

“Roger that, Cranberry out,” she ended the call before Azreal could, and it felt good.

The boss had mentioned her specialty. As far as Helen knew, she didn’t have one. People liked to talk to her because they felt comfortable around her. However, she didn’t consider that to be a specialty.

She put her tunes on and made her way to Passion Fruit's house, parking in the garage. Helen entered through the back door to find them both in the kitchen waiting. Even Candy the Cane Corso sat looking at Helen, sporting her new embroidered doggy coat for big animals. The toy Helen sent to her for Christmas, hung in the massive jaws and she gave a soft bark. She watched their faces, trying to understand the matter at hand, and then she smiled.

"You two got on each other's nerves, didn't you?" Helen asked.

Bryan spoke first, "Oh dear God, yes! Three weeks we've been locked in here together, and she's done all of my puzzles!"

"Not all of them, plus the books you bought, he spoiled the ending of two of them for me," Passion Fruit snapped.

"Kids," Helen said. "I brought more books, puzzles, and even a few paint by number sets."

Bryan offered a cheese eating grin and said, "Yay!"

The bandages were off his face, and considering all that had happened to the skin covering his mug, he didn't look half bad. The staples had left a Bride of Frankenstein path along his hairline, but overall, Passion Fruit did well putting Humpty Dumpty back together.

Passion Fruit offered a sideways grin. "The Christmas presents arrived. Cute. Nice. Thanks. You are crafty. Candy loves that stupid jacket."

"And I'm relaxed," Helen added as she passed the bag to Bryan. "What's the word and plan for ole Bryan here?"

He looked in the bag, excited at his goodies, and told her, "It is Calvin O'Grady. I'm

Irish now, from Hoboken, and I got a better book deal with a signing bonus. My next of kin have been notified of my untimely death, and my cousins wanted to know how much money I had in my accounts.”

Helen said, “so, it was a money factor.”

“Turns out it was,” Passion Fruit added. “Cousin Joe was sifting off Mom’s accounts to pay for his online porn addiction. Evidently, his inability to get his rocks off had him angry enough to follow Bryan and put a bullet in him.”

Bryan asked, “Cranberry, how’d you know?”

“I have learned, it is always one of the three P’s of life: power, profit or poonanny,” she said. “A man will kill for all three.”

“I was raised that those three P’s for a man meant protect, procreate, and provide,” he spoke, feeling silly for mentioning it. “So, Cranberry, how was your Christmas?”

She smiled, pushing her suitcase to the side. There was lots to tell that she could share as well as the new recipes she’d received from Ruth. Passion Fruit needed a bit of variety in her diet.

Oddly, there was a reluctance in her to come back to this place. The vibe was wrong, but in her heart, she knew it had to be done. Bryan was waiting for her to come back, and she’d brought with her what he needed. Passion Fruit was waiting for her to come back, and she’d brought with her treats for the dark-hearted little woman. She had seen a need for connection, and she was able to provide it for them both.

On the stove was a pot of stew that looked as if it had been sitting there for a couple of days. Helen knew Passion Fruit ate what she hunted on the land. The stew was more than likely an animal that scavenged for a meal, which Helen wasn’t happy to put in her mouth. For shits and giggles, she brought the second bag to the table in the

kitchen and opened it to pull out three very large turkey breasts. Both Bryan and Passion Fruit licked their lips. Helen also pulled out russet potatoes, carrots, and a stalk of romaine lettuce. She could almost hear them salivating. She tossed Candy a new chewy bone which the dig happily accepted.

“So,” she began, as she took the turkey breasts to the sink to clean and season, “let me start on Monday with the Christmas tree hunt and cutting, the eggnog making, and the tree trimming.”

They sat at the table listening as Helen cooked the turkey breasts like she’d seen Mustang do when her father was there. Carefully, she didn’t mention any names, nor the revelation of her cousin being her sister, or her father being a dick. At the end of the day, a man is either a good guy or he’s not. However, it didn’t matter; she understood the connections. Helen McDaniel Neary had a unique sense of how things connected together whether it made sense or not. After dinner, when Passion Fruit cleared up the plates, she pulled Helen aside.

“I don’t know how you’re going to take this, and I’m not comfortable saying it, but when the boxes arrived with the Christmas presents, Bryan and I both cried,” she said. “We missed you. The idea of you caring enough to send us presents to open on Christmas meant a lot. On Christmas morning, we both sat, eager to open our gifts. There were even presents in the box for Candy. It meant so much and neither of us realized the missing connections in our lives from having no one for so long. Him losing everything, me being bitter about life...getting cutesy shit with our names embroidered on them, that was really, thoughtful. You get it, Helen. You connect with others in a way I’ve never seen from people. Cranberry, what kind of Technician are you going to be? A cold-blooded killer, ain’t it for certain.”

Helen had had some time to think about Azreal’s words. She’d had time to put the pieces together to make the connections of what Bryan needed and the friendship Passion Fruit required. It was beginning to come together.

"I am a Technician who can make the connections," she said softly. "I am the protector of the defenseless and the women and children of the state of Indiana. I can see into the hearts of men and understand, we each must care for our fellow man in order for us all to survive. My handle is The Cranberry."

She sat that evening in front of the fire, reading the latest crime thriller, pissed at the lack of clarity in the details. She had first-hand knowledge on the disposing of a body and this author wasn't on point with the writing. The quietness of the evening was broken by the sound of a fax machine in the other room. Bryan's eyebrows went up, Candy the Cane Corso barked. Passion Fruit sighed, and Helen simply closed her book.

"Time for the ladies to go to work," she said looking at Passion Fruit. The Cranberry was about to learn how to stage an accident from start to finish. Helen was ready for what came next.

- The End -