



# Night Blind (The Technicians #11)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** In the chilly dawn of a new life, Shenita finds herself navigating unfamiliar territory. As she grapples with anger and disillusionment, unexpected footsteps herald the arrival of Gabriel Neary, a figure both enigmatic and unsettlingly familiar. Offering coffee and cryptic conversation, Gabriel presents Shenita with a choice: succumb to her rage or channel it into a purposeful path.

Drawn into a world of clandestine mentorship and hidden agendas, Shenita—now rechristened Helen—faces a journey fraught with uncertainty. With Mr. Slow as her guide, she embarks on a quest for redemption, teetering on the edge between salvation and damnation.

As the morning sun illuminates their clandestine pact, Helen grapples with the weight of her decisions. Trusting Gabriel means surrendering to a fate beyond her control, yet the promise of purpose beckons amidst the shadows of her past.

In a tale of redemption and reckoning, *Night Blind* explores the fragile balance between light and darkness, trust and betrayal. As Helen delves deeper into the world of *The Technicians*, she must confront the demons that lurk within her soul—and decide whether to embrace the monster within or banish it forever.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

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Crisp air, fresh, swept past dry cheeks, kissed by the dampness of the early morning.

The same dampness married the chill in the air, creating infantile ice chips that floated by, touching gently all they came in contact with during the waking of the day.

At her feet, leaves, dry from the night before, crunched as she walked.

The early morning hours, just before the sun broke over the horizon, had become her favorite thing to take part in to get the day going.

The world as she knew it was no more, and this was a new life, a life which didn't agree with her because the surrounding calmness didn't match the anger clamoring for release inside her soul.

Behind her, she heard heavy footfalls, intentionally alerting her to the approach of a person who more than likely, she didn't feel like being troubled by, who also more than likely would expect cordiality, which she also didn't feel like being troubled doing.

Instead of being angry about that as well, she stared at her feet.

Boots, leather, slightly discolored at the toes from the early morning dew, were surrounded by leaves that may have fallen yesterday.

These were no longer the crunchy leaves, the ones cast down from the tree yesterday, like unwanted tears.

The leaves on the top, damp from the morning's perspiration at trying to come awake, didn't understand the awareness of being cast aside to make room for the newer, greener foliage.

Trees, tall, elegant, and regal, no longer had a use for their protectiveness and tossed them to the ground to protect their roots as branches, round and dense, continued to grow and flourish.

Leaves, composted like piles of manure, would feed the grand oaks, being of no further use, and in the Spring, new leaves would grow—green, vibrant, and lovely—while the brown ones withered.

It was how she felt, now living on the outside of her cousin Cherry's life.

She was the leaves, no longer attached to the tree but pushed into the yard to wither and die.

Babysitting was the one thing that kept Cherry and her attached, as she'd been an integral part of Naomi's life in helping to raise the child.

Now, Cherry was married to a man who was hands-on in raising his daughter, and she would get invited into the home to share the table or a meal, but she lived outside in the yard.

True, her yard had a three-bedroom home that her cousin's husband had graciously given for her to live and for which she was grateful, but there needed to be more.

No matter how hard she tried to be appreciative, each night, as she was alone, the night enclosing the room made her feel like the leaves, lying in waste, rotting away.

It created an unspoken anger inside of her soul; an unspoken anger that craved to be

heard.

The anger needed to get fed. She needed to work off the anger. The anger needed a home. The anger needed to be targeted. The anger was becoming a silent rage.

“I can hear you walking up,” she mumbled as the footsteps grew nearer.

“I intentionally made a great deal of noise so you would hear me,” the voice said, startling her. It wasn’t Cherry’s husband, Mr. Slow. This was an entirely different animal, and she didn’t like it.

“And what do I owe the honor of a personal visit from...what was your thing...ah yeah, the Archangel?” She said with tight lips. She’d overheard Cherry and Mustang speak of the man after her rescue. This was another man, showing up in her life, planning to give her rules of what she could and could not do. She had no need of him or his handsome face.

“Coffee, conversation, and a thought or two shared between friends,” Gabriel Neary said, watching her eyes.

“We aren’t friends,” Shenita said, facing him. “You gave me a new name Helen McDaniel and an envelope with a few bucks. My life, as I knew, ended abruptly, and I have to start over. Therefore, I find nothing friendly in any of that, kind Sir.”

Gabriel stood his ground, understanding better than most the intricacies of life.

He knew death like the back of his hand.

He also understood anger and the need to train the emotion to be useful.

The Archangel was his handle with the Conclave of Angels, which handled the

Southeast Crew of Directions.

The Directions all had the operating handles of street signs, whereas the Great Lakes Technicians held the handles of bitter fruits, the Northeast were The Trees, the Midwest had handles of The Storms, and the Western crew was The Horses.

Technically, Cherry didn't belong to him.

Cherry was a Fruit, who now belonged to his cousin Michael, who belonged to Cherry as her husband.

The woman standing before him was a byproduct of a misfortunate circumstance that needed to be handled before it turned into a force of nature no one could control.

He gave a slight smile and said, "What if I disagree with how wrong you are?"

Shenita, now newly named Helen, felt her anger rising; she wanted to unleash it on him and beat his handsome face until his outer appearance matched the ugliness clamoring inside of her soul. This man had no idea how she felt. This man had no clue what she'd been through, and he had the audacity to stand in front of her and call himself her friend.

"If I weren't a lady, I probably would say 'Fuck you and fuck off,' but now I'm curious about how you feel you and me are friends?" she asked.

"Because Helen, I'm the reason you were found," he said. "I'm the reason your cousin could get to you as quickly as she did; granted, I wish it could have been faster, but she got there. Second, the life you led before wasn't much of a life, so don't look at me as if I took you or The Collector stole you away from your luxurious home, overflowing social calendar, and the man who was about to ask for your hand in marriage."

“Oh, nice. That's really nice, Mr. Handsome Life Fixer! How gentlemanly of you to strike a bitch when she's down,” Shenita said, tightening her lips.

“You're angry, and you have every right to be, but anger needs a home. Your anger is homeless and on the verge of becoming violent. I'm here to offer an opportunity to train that anger and give it purpose,” Gabriel said. “Also, easy on the foul language. You're too lovely of a woman to spew such words.”

“Yeah, whatever. What do you mean by purpose?”

“Yes, Helen, you need purpose,” he said. “You also made a promise to those other women that you were coming back for them. You promised to rescue them from that perverted fool who held you all captive. You can't do that, standing here angry at the world. You need skills. You need to be taught how to maneuver through the anger and put it to use.”

“Train me as what?”

“Train the anger, Helen,” he said, staring into her eyes.

The intensity of the stare sent an icy shiver down her back. The handsome face was a ruse. The man himself, while wrapped in shiny paper under the holiday tree, appeared to be a gift, when in fact he was something else entirely. His eyes were observant and present, yet distant. His gaze was focused, yet dark and warm in the same blinking of an eye. He was a great deal like Mr. Slow, his cousin. They were both closeted sociopaths.

“I'm intrigued,” she said, watching him. “Would you care for a cup of coffee?”

“Coffee works,” he replied, waiting for her next move.

She turned, walking up the stairs to the modular home where she lived alone. The wide decking for the front porch held two chairs with a small table between the Adirondack seats. Occasionally, her cousin Cherry would come to sit a spell, and they would chat here about nothing. The last conversation between them was about making applesauce from the apples on the tree in the yard. Neither of them liked applesauce, but it was easier than trying to speak about what had happened to Shenita in those few days with The Collector. Her hand waved to Gabriel Neary to join her on the porch and to take the extra seat.

Over her shoulder, she asked, “Cream and sugar?”

“Both please,” he said, as she disappeared into the home, returned a moment later with a tray laden with two mugs of steaming hot coffee and two sweet buns. “Thank you.”

“No, I need to thank you, Archangel, for saving my life,” she said. “I need to thank you for giving me an opportunity to live differently, I guess, but I’m lost. I have a part-time job to keep my lights on and to have a bit of food for my table, but the truck I drive is your Uncle Mark’s, which he loaned me, and I’m on the outside, alone.”

“Again, I disagree,” Gabriel replied, “because we are never truly alone. Before, you didn’t work outside of the home; your role was simply to take care of Naomi and Cherry and look after your family. You currently have a job as the bookkeeper for not only Detour’s beauty salon but also Naomi’s dance school. In a couple of days, new classes will begin at the Junior College should you want to get a degree in accounting and maybe a few certifications to make it a permanent career path.”

“True, or I could be trained to kill the bastard who kidnapped me,” she said, looking him in the eye.

“You don’t need to be trained to point a weapon and pull a trigger,” he explained.

“Any Yahoo with a working index finger can do that. I’m talking about something more. Are you interested in being something more, Helen?”

“Am I interested in being an accountant?”

“The books must be kept in balance, Helen,” Gabriel said gently. “There is a system of checks and balances in order for the ledgers to remain healthy.”

Shenita looked at him. She was seeing the man in a new light. Gabriel Neary was a predator, a handsome-faced snake oil salesman who showed up when a person was at their lowest, crying in a dark corner, and needing to lash out at something. She wanted to lash out at the world in retaliation for what The Collector had done to her, and this man knew it. He was here with a bag of balms to soothe her aches and damn it, she wanted what he was offering, if for no other reason than to temporarily ease her suffering.

“And enrolling in this Junior college, taking these classes, this will teach me where to place my anger? These classes will train me how to use my anger to track down the issues that are keeping me up at night?”

“Helen, I can almost guarantee you, that once you track down the issue and put it to bed, your sleep habits will not change that much,” he offered. “The peace you seek comes from purpose. A person needs a purpose in this world to fight off the demons who plague your rest.”

“You are scary,” she told him. “Your handsome face and fancy words are simply a disguise for recruitment into a cult.”

Gabriel Neary actually laughed. He burst into a gut-busting laugh that rang out through the trees. Across the yard, a door opened to the house where his cousin lived, bringing Mr. Slow into the doorway. Gabriel raised his cup in a morning salute. Slow

nodded, closed the door, and returned to the inside of his home.

Shenita was looking at Gabriel again.

The crinkles at the corners of his eyes when he smiled gave a gentle look to the eyes of a man who knew too much, had seen too much, and had felt too much.

He had shown up in person for her, and she was scared.

He'd shown up in person to recruit her into his crew of technical experts with the worst sales pitch she'd ever heard in her life, but she was hungry for a purpose.

The Archangel was offering her a resolution to balance the books for a much larger company.

She was excited but scared.

Her eyes asked a silent question, which he answered without prompting.

“My day job is to monitor cults and cult activities. The last thing I would ever want is to recruit for one,” he said, offering her a smile. “What I am offering is focus. I am asking for your trust. I am asking for you to allow me the opportunity to guide your anger, to train it to be of use, allowing you to rest well at night with no demons sitting at the foot of your bed.”

“I hear you, but are you replacing one demon with another?”

“The demon you feed, my dear, is the one who stays with you,” Gabriel said, watching her. “My request is simply to guide you towards the light. Will you allow me to guide you, Helen?”

She sat for a moment, staring into the breaking of the day. Gabriel Neary had arrived as the sun began to crest over the ridgeline. He sat on her porch having coffee and munching on a sweet roll as if it were something they did every day. From his back pocket, he removed a brochure for Sullivan University with a circle in red for accounting technology/Technician and bookkeeping. A glint came into his eyes as she accepted the paper, gaining a slight recognition of what she'd been handed. Her cousin Cherry, years ago, received a similar trifold document.

"Helen, the courses are paid in full for your two-year degree," he said. "Complete the training. Do the work. Keep your head down and stay focused on the result. I will do the rest. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," she said.

"If you have questions, now is the time to ask," he stated, getting to his feet and looking down at her.

She held the brochure in her hand, looking at it closely. She knew what it all meant, but didn't know how it would play out. What she knew and understood was the demon that sat on her bed each night and watched her toss in the little sleep she received. Maybe this training program and classes would make her so tired that when nightfall arrived, she'd have no choice but to sleep. If nothing else made sense, that simple part did.

"The demon I feed is the one that stays with me," she repeated his words. "I don't like my current one, so let us seek and feed a new monster."

"I don't make monsters, Helen," he corrected. "I am a master monster hunter."

"So says the monster standing before me. We create in our own image Archangel, and just because you're handsome doesn't disguise the monster that you are," she

said.

“Well, at least you think I’m handsome,” he replied, nodding as he left the porch. “I shall be in touch soon. Enjoy your classes.”

She watched him walk away, his back rigid, the wide shoulders, narrow waist and purposeful strides bringing back the shiver with a new realization. He was going to make her into a Technician. She was going to become a Technician; what kind she didn’t know and she didn’t care.

“Goodbye Shenita,” she said softly. “Hello, Helen. I have no idea what the fuck we just signed up to do, but it sure beats sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves. Also, you made a promise to go back and get those women. It’s time to get started on moving your life forward.”

She looked down at the brochure, and next to the school’s website was another website in an abbreviated short link form. In red ink was a username and password. Quickly, she went inside and located the laptop Cherry had recently given her to do the bookkeeping tasks for the hair salon and dance studio. First, she typed in the name of the short link and waited.

The black screen opened to a splotching wave of mixed-in colors, and then a gradient image of what looked like a horse ran across a speckled black screen.

A vibrantly colored blue screen appeared with a white unicorn, confused as to his whereabouts, followed by a sign-in box, asking for a username and password.

She entered both and waited.

Her breath caught when the boxes disappeared, and her face showed up on the screen with bright white letters.

Welcome to the Unicorn Academy, Helen. Let us begin.

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When Helen returned to the porch to collect the cups, a new fresh cup of coffee awaited her, along with Mr.

Slow, who sat in one chair, sipping his own morning eye opener.

In profile, she noticed the resemblance between him and the Archangel.

Questions zinged left and right, but with him, in the past month, she'd learned to say little and wait for him to open the conversation.

Unlike the Archangel, Slow didn't speak in subdued terminology, which could be taken in several different directions of understanding.

He was a straight shooter, and she appreciated that about him.

"I logged on," she said as she took a seat.

"I know. I received a notification for mentorship," he replied.

"You're going to be my trainer?" she asked as if it were unbelievable, and the one leaf clogging the drain would finally get noticed. "Well, this should be interesting."

He sipped the coffee, taking his time as if he were collecting words for an anagram solver. He swallowed, then sipped again while looking at his home across the walk path. This would be a change for them all, a change that required him and Helen to spend a great deal of time together, and he knew in his heart, that she didn't trust him. For the training to work and stick, that also needed to change.

Slow said, "First, I have to gain your trust."

"What makes you think I don't trust you?"

"Helen, you don't trust any man," he said softly. "However, for this to work, you need to trust me implicitly."

"Hell, I don't trust myself implicitly. I have four sweet rolls left in that pan on my counter. I don't trust myself to not eat all four of them today with the excuse that tomorrow they may be stale. This is life, and we live it where we can," she stated.

He said nothing. Slow simply sat sipping coffee as if he had all the time in the world to cross this bridge with her and stick a gun in her hand. Suddenly she thought of a knife, then an axe, or maybe even a Katana; a Katana would be kick-ass and she could use it to cut off dicks. Her eyebrows arched as she looked over at him with her eyes dancing.

"Too dark," he told her and squinted his eyes.

"What? I didn't say anything!"

"Your eyes said a lot," he told her, then sipped again from the mug.

He paused briefly, then continued.

"When Rebecca went missing, I felt it before my mother called me and said go find her.

I knew my sister would fight with everything she had until I arrived because she knew I was coming.

When Cherry called and said you were missing, I made calls to ensure she had the resources to find you, and she did.

I don't let down the women in my life and I don't let down the women I love."

She arched her eyebrows, inching her body away from him as if he'd farted and it was stinking up the air. "You love me?"

"Naomi loves you. Cherry loves you and you are a member of this family. You are a member of my family, and you took care of them until I could arrive. Therefore, yes," he said. "I will not let you down."

She turned in the seat to look him in the face. "Okay, but are you going to, at some point, try to fuck me?"

"You're an attractive woman and any man would be interested in an evening in your arms, but you're not for me," he said, not hesitating on his answer, "and to be clear, no, I'm not. Cherry sees you as her sister, and by marriage, you have become my sister as well. My role in your life is to be the voice on the other side of this phone."

He handed her a new device. The plastic was off the box as he passed it over. From his other pocket, he pulled out an additional phone, passing it to Helen as well.

"The first box is a work phone, pre-programmed with the needed phone numbers. Don't use it until instructed to do so," he said. "The second phone is an upgrade and you've been added to my family plan. We will begin tomorrow."

"Oh, already?"

"Yes, the on-campus classes start next week, and you and I start tomorrow," he said. "Keep in mind, this is a private life. No one knows, and it must stay that way. The

ledger is large, we work in sections, and work is plenty. There are a lot of monsters hiding under beds and in closets. We root them out and vanquish the fiends.”

“Okay, but what is to stop me from becoming the monster I am hunting?”

“Me,” he said with no emotion in his voice. “As your mentor, my job is to monitor and guide you. If you become a problem, it will also be my job to put you down.”

“You could do that, Michael Isaac Neary? You could do that and sleep at night?”

His eyes bore into hers and the shiver of cold returned, making her physically shake. Mr. Slow didn’t hesitate with his wording as he maintained eye contact with Helen. The last shards of coffee in his mug had grown cold and he tossed the liquid onto the leaves.

“Without hesitation, and I will sleep well after,” he said with a nod, then left the porch.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

The sound of the fax machine going off in the office made them all jump. It had been weeks since either Cherry or Slow had to go to work. The real question for all at the dinner table is who the fax was for and which machine was printing out an assignment. Cherry swallowed hard as she rose from the table.

“I will check it,” she said softly, leaning down to kiss the daughter she shared with Slow.

Naomi Ruth Neary, a precocious five-year-old, had recently celebrated her birthday. For now, her childcare was onsite at her father’s place of employment, but in the fall, she would enter Pre-K at a regular school. Unfortunately, Naomi didn’t do well with change. The sound of the machine in the other room meant change was coming, and one of her parents would leave in the middle of the night with a heavy sack and return looking very unhappy. She’d seen it with her Mommy, who would leave for days at a time, and she had seen it with her father as well, who returned looking sad around his eyes. She didn’t like the sound. The sound meant something bad her Mommy or Daddy had to go and do.

“Honeymoon is over,” Slow said, looking down at the meatloaf Helen had offered to cook. He’d decided once he tasted the meat that Helen’s cooking privileges would be revoked, and she could make her slop for some other unsuspecting sap. He wasn’t ever eating her cooking again. The fax machine was a saving grace. “No, let me.”

He volunteered, using the departure as an excuse to toss out the meatloaf and later grab an apple or prunes to rid his body of the greasy meat covered in thick, floating tomato sauce, which also tasted greasy. Second thoughts entered his head as he put down the apple, thinking maybe too much of a good thing would work in the opposite

direction, clearing his body of everything in his system.

In the office, he checked his fax. It was empty, meaning the work order on the line was for his wife. He sighed deeply, touching his chest and trying to get a grip on his emotions before returning to the other room. In his head, he wanted to ask her to quit, but in reality, he'd fought for her to maintain her position as she now resided in Kentucky with him but covered the state of Indiana as their Technician. Cherry's role as a sniper meant she did her job from a distance. It wasn't often she needed to get up close and personal, and in his mind, it was also a saving grace that his wife was very good at her job. Bragging wasn't his thing, but he knew she could pluck the brain stem from a body at 1,500 yards without blinking an eye. Sighing again, he called out.

"Baby, it's for you," he said, returning to the dining area.

In the last few months, his home had undergone a transformation. There were doll babies in his home office and crayons on the coffee table, and recently, he'd found a lacy tiny sock in his briefcase when he went to work. The desk in his office, which had once held an empty picture frame, currently held a family photo of him, his parents, and his sister, along with Cherry, Helen, and his daughter Naomi. A second frame held a photo of his beautiful wife, holding their daughter, and a third frame was of him doing story time with Naomi, which was taken when he wasn't looking, but captured a feeling he appreciated, so he gave it a place of honor on his desk away from home. One additional photo sat on his desk of Cherry and him in a pile of leaves in the backyard. This photo was taken by Helen.

"Perhaps a tracker?" he said to himself, thinking of what job he'd train her to do. She must have overheard him talking aloud as she approached him silently. The oil used in her hair gave off a distinct odor, and he always knew where she was, even if he couldn't physically see the body.

“May I ask a question?” Helen asked.

“Of course,” he replied.

“The fax machine...I never looked before because she told me not to,” Helen started, “so I didn’t, but can you help me understand?”

“The fax machine sends over work orders,” he told her. “They arrive on special paper, printed with ink used by the government which disappears from the paper in ten minutes.”

“Wait, what if the fax comes through when you’re not home?”

“Faxes only arrive when they know you’re home and close by the machine,” he explained. “The device I gave you serves more than one function. Don’t use it until instructed to do so.”

“The phone tracks me. What if I lose the phone?”

He lowered his voice, “When your training is complete and you’re awarded a designation, you get a brand with a chip in it.”

Slow turned, opening his collar. At the base of his neck was a branded cross. In the center of the cross sat a raised medallion. He pointed to the medallion.

“My handler monitors the chip when I am working,” he said.

Her eyes were wide as she began to realize several things. “Will you be my handler?”

“I am your mentor,” he told her. “My job is to teach and train you. If the training takes, then you shall be assigned to a handler.”

“Meaning I have to leave here, my cousin, Naomi...you...your protection?” she asked, feeling emotionally overloaded.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” he advised. “As a Technician, we are in control of our emotions at all times. We think, assess, monitor, and evaluate each situation before taking any action. The same philosophy is applied to our lives. Until recently, the lives of Technicians were solitary; however, it has been observed that we work better having something to come home to when the work is done.”

“When the work is done,” she scoffed. “You say it as if you’re going to rake the leaves in the yard when you go out and take lives.”

“Are you going to feel the same way when you are face to face with The Collector again, or are you going to end his existence and then go get a milkshake?”

“I’m going to get a slice of pie with a hot cup of coffee with the blood from his cut-off cock still on my hands,” she said, squinting.

“Yeah, we need to get started in the morning helping you focus that anger,” he said. “And that is dark. Very dark. Monsters are created in the dark. I will not train a monster, Helen.”

Her response was cut off by Cherry’s entrance, dressed in all black and carrying her work bag. On the floor in his office was a retractable door that housed their weaponry. Helen was able to see this in full for the first time as Cherry extracted her rifle, two knives, and her handgun with ammunition. She loaded her bag, passed out kisses, and left through the back door.

Helen looked at Slow. “You’re not going to say anything to her before she leaves?”

“And distract her from the focus required to handle the task she’s been given? No, I

won't. She knows we are here waiting for her return. Cherry has to go to work. you know the routine; you know the process," he said.

"True, but I don't like it, never have, and never will," Helen added, "but we support with love."

"We support with love," he repeated.

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In his lap, as he sat on the couch, Naomi rested. He opened the book to begin reading a new series to her since they'd covered most of the fairy tales. Slow had moved up the nightly reading to a chapter book, wanting to increase the mental engagement of the words to imagery in the child's mind. They were nearing bedtime as Helen prepared to head to her home.

"Good night," Helen said, coming from Naomi's room after putting away laundry for the child. No one had asked her to take on the task, but it was a small thing she enjoyed doing for her little niece.

"Night-night, Aunt Nita," Naomi said.

"Aunt Helen," Slow corrected.

"Aunt Helen, good night," Naomi parroted, waving small fingers at her Aunt. "Should we watch her get home, Daddy?"

"She's fine, Naomi."

"No, she's not," the child said. "She lives all alone in that big house. And why did she have to get a new name? I liked the old one. I don't like the name Helen."

“Helen is her new name to go with her new life,” Slow gently explained. “When I married your Mom, she got a new name. Her name is now Abigail Barnes Neary.”

“Are you going to marry Aunt Nita...I mean Aunt Helen too, to make her a Neary as well?”

“The state of Kentucky will not let me do that unless she is my cousin,” he said, laughing at his own joke.

“I like living in Ke-lucky ,” she said softly, snuggling into his chest. He wouldn’t correct her because he knew something else was coming from her tiny little mouth which would make him uncomfortable for the rest of his manly life. “Mommy is always sad when she comes back from work. You didn’t kiss her or tell her you loved her before she left. What if she doesn’t come back this time? How will she know you love her, Daddy?”

“Naomi, how do you know that I love you?”

She looked up at him, her eyes bright and dancing. The smile came slowly as she looked him in the eyes she’d inherited from her father. Her small hand touched his cheek as she showed off her tiny teeth, one of which he noticed was loose.

“I know you love me when you look at me like you are now. I feel it inside my tummy. Not the funny feeling I get when I have to poop and my tummy feels icky, but a squishy feeling, like butterflies and fireflies are inside my belly, Daddy. That’s how I know you love me,” she said, leaning up to kiss his cheek.

“Your Mom gets a similar feeling when I look at her, and she also knows that I love her and will be waiting for her to come home to us,” he said.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Bunny?” he replied, using the codename he’d given her based on the ears poking out of the side of her head. She’d earned those ears from her mother.

“How will Aunt Nita...I mean Aunt Helen know you love her? You don’t look at her that way. I watched you tonight at dinner. You don’t look at her like that, but you love her too?”

“I love Aunt Helen like I love your Aunt Rebecca,” he said, hoping to bring an end to the conversation.

“Aunt Rebecca smells funny,” she said, nodding her head. “Aunt Helen is Mommy’s Sister. Aunt Rebecca is your sister. Are you and Mommy going to make me a sister or a brother? It would be nice if you gave Mommy a baby. I think it would be nice if you gave Aunt Helen a baby too, so she would have her own child and wouldn’t need to live alone, but I don’t think she can have babies, Daddy.”

His ears were alert, learning information that would be critical in training a new Technician. He wanted to know what his daughter had learned just by observation. She was an astute child who picked up on small details most kids wouldn’t pay much attention to on a normal day.

“How do you know she can’t have babies, Bunny?”

“In the bathroom under the sink, she never had any panty napkins like my Mommy,” Naomi stated. “When Aunt...I’m just going to call her Auntie; the Helen...Nita thing confuses me. Wait, what was I saying? Okay, I remember; when Auntie buys panty napkins for Mommy from the store, she never buys any for herself. Daddy, when I become a woman, am I going to need to wear panty napkins? I don’t think I’d like that very much.”

“Good grief,” he said, blowing out the loud whoosh of air he didn’t realize he’d been

holding.

“Mommy said when she no longer needed to buy napkins to put in her panties, it would mean she was going to have a baby. I asked if Auntie was going to have a baby since she didn’t need any napkins for her panties, and Mommy said no. She said Auntie couldn’t have babies, and it made me sad,” she told him.

Slow had nothing to say on the matter. He held his words out of sheer fear of what his daughter would say next. Growing up with a sister, he’d learned a lot of things about girls becoming women, and dating in high school and college he’d learned even more. However, nothing in his life had prepared him to be a Girl Dad, and his daughter was slowly traumatizing him on a cellular level.

“Daddy, did you know that panty napkins are to soak up the blood that comes out of Mommy’s vagina? I hope my vagina doesn’t bleed like that. I won’t like that either,” she told him.

“I have died and gone to Dad Hell, and my soul is still sitting here crying out for help,” he said under his breath. “Bunny, can we please finish the story?”

“Sure Daddy, but if I have stuff that starts coming out of my vagina, I will tell you, okay?”

“Tell your mother or your aunts first, okay?”

“You don’t want to know, Daddy?”

“Sweetheart, these conversations should be had...,” Slow stopped himself. “You can feel free to talk to me about anything on your mind, Bunny. Daddy will listen.”

“You are the best Daddy ever!”

“Thank you. Now, let’s finish up Chapter 2,” he said, opening the book, collecting the bookmark, and trying to focus on the page. Once he finished the story, he would find a quiet place to lick his wounds, possibly cry, and pray for all the wrongs he’d ever done in his life. “Chapter 2: Focus.”

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Naomi, resting peacefully in her room, left him alone with his thoughts. He’d learned an important bit of information. If Helen couldn’t have children, training her to rescue them could backfire or make her far more emotional than she needed to be. The position of tracker in recovering lost children would be out of the range for an assignment although he would teach her the basics to cover the skillset.

The job of femme fatale, like Mrs. Hump who needed to be replaced, was still open, but Helen’s experience with The Collector meant she would shrink from the touch of a man. The Southeast crew still needed a cleaner, who also hadn’t been replaced since losing Wrong Way. He’d seen Wrong Way cut up and dissolve a body into one of those barrels in the back of her van. It took him months to recover mentally from witnessing such a task. Although he hunted for his meat, seeing blood didn’t bother him as much, especially since his handle was based on him watching a person bleed out nice and slow but cutting them up like a side of beef, freaked him out.

Tomorrow, they would hunt to see how she did with blood.

Blood was always a telltale sign of a good Technician. A tech who didn’t balk at the sight of it, especially if the blood was by their hand, was a red flag. However, a tech who vomited when they saw large amounts was also not a person who needed a weapon in hand.

“A retrieval agent, maybe? No blood, no weapons, no cleaning, just get the materials and return it to the owner,” he said, aloud, ending his night. “Good night, Cherry;

come home to me in one piece.”

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Wendell Edward Langdon Pierce, street name Welp, was a nasty piece of work, a low-level street pharmacist by trade who had leveled up during the pandemic to home deliveries, which morphed into home invasions. A prison sentence of five years working in the hospital wing introduced the welp of a man to a new business venture, tissue harvesting. For inmates with no relatives to claim the bodies, Pierce had found a means to work out deals with the funeral homes who collected to remains.

Upon his release, the adventurous entrepreneur turned from reselling the tissue of the deceased to creating his own supply chain. Once he hit the radar of The Company and was notified to cease and desist, for a moment, Pierce had backed down. It would have been a win-win situation, but being the man that he was, Welp found a new source of materials. He began targeting parents with sick children and large medical bills who could not afford to pay for burial services. He formed a small company that donated bodies for scientific experiments, which Wendell used as a cover to continue his business of preying upon the less fortunate for profit.

Tonight, his time was up. On a rooftop in downtown Indianapolis, Cherry sat with her high-powered rifle, complete with muzzle and flash suppressor, aimed at the doorway. Wendell stepped into the night, flanked by two goons and a woman who appeared to have given up on life. Through the scope of her rifle, Cherry could see the dried tears on the woman's cheeks. The woman was shaking her head no as the goons attempted to pressure her into the back seat of the vehicle.

Cherry inhaled deeply, holding the breath, her finger on the trigger, and then she pulled. A red splotch hit the white brick of the hotel entry, and Wendell stood for a second then dropped. By the time his body fully crumpled to the floor, Cherry's weapon was slung across her back, and she was down the fire escape. Her vehicle

was parked in the back of a dark alley, and she opened the door, sliding in the weapon and silently re-engaging the alarm. Screams were heard as feet ran left and right away from Wendell's body.

With the collar of her shirt up, the dress coat she wore cinched at the waist, and the nice boots she liked to wear when doing jobs in the city, she made her way to the scene. Like others, she wanted to see and worked her way through the crowd. In the confusion, Cherry called out, "Has anyone called 9-1-1?"

Goon Number One shook his head no as Cherry took out her phone. She aimed it at Wendell's body, snapping a photo without a flash. Next, she hit the zero on the phone to call the operator, who answered immediately.

"I'd like to report a shooting on Lexington and Fifth," she said to the operator. "It looks like a head wound."

The operator responded, "Dispatching emergency services."

"Thank you," Cherry said, sending the image and terminating the call. "An ambulance is on the way."

Stepping back from the crowd, her hand slipped into the woman's who was with the three men. She pulled at her arm, taking her away from the crowd. In Cherry's pocket were a few loose bills that she shoved in the woman's hand. "Run now, and don't look back."

The woman accepted the money and took off down the street. Cherry slowly made her way down the alley and into her truck. With the headlights off, she backed out of the alley and onto a side street. Headlights on, she made her way to I-65 Southbound toward Louisville. At this time in the wee hours, she could be home in less than an hour and a half, resting peacefully next to her hunk of a husband. She sent him a text

with an ETA.

In silence, she drove, lost in her thoughts knowing, that if things were to change, she couldn't continue this as a profession. The money was good, but at times, it felt dirty. Her soul felt dirty. She was losing her taste for the work.

An hour and forty minutes later, she pulled her vehicle into the garage at the rear of the home. Her weapon in hand, the alarm disengaged, Cherry entered the home she shared with Slow and her daughter. In the bathroom, a bath had been drawn with a glass of wine beside the tub on a small table he'd purchased just to hold her goblet. She stripped down and soaked away the ick of ending the existence of Wendell Edward Langdon Pierce.

Thirty minutes later, in jammies, she slid into the bed next to her husband who stirred a little. Cherry snuggled up to him, wanting the ugly image in her mind to be gone and replaced with a new one. His large hand caressed her mid-section silently filling it with a son he'd name Luke. She offered a small kiss on his chest.

"How was the evening with Naomi; any issues?"

"Yes, she wanted to talk to me about her vagina and the possibilities of stuff coming out of it," he whispered, snuggling closer. "I'm not okay. Hold me."

Cherry chuckled, turning to face him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, her face in his chest. "I love you."

"I love you too," he told her.

"Michael, tomorrow, would you like to talk about my vagina?"

"Only if the conversation centers around its relationship with my penis and the stuff

coming out of it,” he chuckled again. “Now, go to sleep.”

That night, she slept. In the past, it had taken days to come down from a job. Michael Isaac Neary was good for her. He was good for Bunny. He was also good for Helen. She needed to be better for him.

He deserved that from them all.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Nude. Helen McDaniel stood in front of the mirror noticing the changes to her body. The bare breasts she had once taken pride in, were now scarred by deep cuts from a straight razor, healed, but with raised keloids as a harsh reminder of what The Collector did to her body. A damp hand ran across the abdomen, also scarred, from another moment in her life where a different man had harmed her body to a level where it is incapable of producing a life, leaving her to travel the road into old age alone, caring for another's child or children, since she'd never had any of her own.

"The bottle is broken, Helen, and the milk is saturated with glass shards; don't cry about it, just go and buy more, but this time, in a plastic container," she said softly.

Years of pep talks kept her sane. She wasn't one to argue or complain. It wasn't her way. She was the person who got things done, silently, without causing a ripple. There were times when she sincerely wondered if her quiet demeanor and unassuming manner became the reason men made her the choice for their dark obsessions. At times, she felt like there was a target on her back that yelled pick me to abuse when she made a concerted effort to not be noticed. Maybe, she scoffed, as she wrapped the towel around her waist, wanting to be unnoticed is what made men take notice.

The clock chimed ten after seven as she dressed in jeans, a warm jacket with a hat, and a scarf around her neck. Recently, her cousin had given her a pair of soft leather gloves which she added to her hands, and then she stopped. Turning back, she added a bit of almond-scented lotion to her hands and put on the gloves before going to meet Slow in the yard. Today she was starting her training.

He waited, staring at her mutherfuckingly as she approached. In his right hand, he

held a mug of steamy yumminess which she could smell. He scowled at her, growling almost when he said, “Jergens.”

“Excuse me?”

“You put on Jergens lotion, almond scented. Also, you’re wearing,” he paused, raising his head as if to give his nostrils ample access to her scent, “off-brand deodorant, and you bathed in Dove soap.”

“Wonderful, are you also going to sniff out what tissue I wiped my butt with as well?”

“No, as a Technician, your body is your weapon,” he told her. “First, your mind, then your body, and at the end of your hand the delivery system. It is important to not have a scent when you are hunting. If the animals can smell you, they will run and avoid you. The key is to blend in, leave no traces.”

“Noted,” she said, looking about. “Are we hunting today?”

“You’re not physically ready,” he said. “You need to build your core, shift your center of gravity, and add ten pounds of muscle.”

“How do you know anything about my center of gravity, and what makes you think I need to put on ten pounds? I’m stronger than you think,” she said, raising her chin in defiance.

Slow extended his arm, flexing his hand at the wrist. His fingers splayed wide, and he took one step forward, pressing his hand to her chest. The impact lifted Helen from the ground, her legs in the air as she went flying, landing on her bottom in a pile of leaves. She looked at him from the ground, noticing he hadn’t even spilled the contents of his cup.

“Ouch,” she said, scrambling to her feet.

“This week, we build muscle,” he said, pointing to a pile of wood.

“And what am I supposed to do with that?”

“Chop it,” he said, turning to pick up a red-handled axe. “Chop it to match what you see in that pile. Add what you cut this week and add to the pile, make sure you cover the stash to avoid the dampness. By the end of the week, the wood on the ground should be split and stacked.”

Helen looked at the low stores of wood in the hopper. It was a lot of wood to cut. She didn’t know how to chop wood and didn’t want to do it either.

“Can’t I go to the gym instead?”

“Muscles made in the gym don’t have the same impact as muscles built from doing physical labor,” he told her. “At the end of the week, you’re going to be sore. Your hands will have blisters, and your back is going to ache like you’ve never felt.”

“Is that supposed to motivate me?”

“No, those blocks of wood should represent every single disappointment in your life. Failures, letdowns, injustices, and any other issues which piss you the hell off are represented in that wood,” he told her. “This week, take your anger out on the pile.”

“Yes, oh great Sensei,” she added, almost in a mocking tone.

“Funny; next week, we begin hunting for rabbits, deer, and wild hog,” he said. “We will need meat for the winter. Can you shoot?”

“Cherry taught me to fire rifles, small arms, grenade launchers,” she said, looking at the wood pile.

“Good to know; pace yourself,” he said.

“That’s it?”

“For now,” he said, stopping and lifting the axe in his left hand. “There are two ways to do this, one is like this.”

Slow raised his arm to bring the axe down hard into the wood. He lifted his arm, bringing the axe and wood into the air, then came down hard on the wooden stump, causing the wood wedged by the axe to splinter in two. He picked up another piece of wood, seating it squarely on the wooden stump, this time raising the axe, bringing it down hard onto the wood, splintering the chunk.

“It will more than likely take you half a day to figure out what works best for you to get the job done by the end of the week,” he told her, nodding his head and leaving. “Keep on the gloves; it will lessen the blisters.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” she said, looking at the pile of wood. “I’m tough. I’ve survived worse. I can do this. I can cut this wood.”

Fifteen minutes later, she cursed Mr. Slow, his pile of wood, the children he would sire, and the dog he didn’t possess. Next, she cursed her cousin for mating with such a man who could knock her on the ass with one hand and split a log while holding a cup of coffee in the other. He’d made it look so easy.

Her first attempt with the axe, the pain and force of the contact with the wood reverberated up her arm, shaking her lungs. The second try felt like she’d been hit in the chest. On the third try, she actually managed to chip the log.

“Argh!” she yelled, throwing her weight into the fourth effort, which seated the axe head in the wood. She raised the wood with the axed lodge inside, thinking of The Collector, bringing it down hard on the stump. “Shit. Shit. Shit!”

The pain shimmied up her arms and into her midsection. The intensity of the pain felt as if her fallopian tube wrapped itself around an ovary making it spit an egg into nothingness. “If I had a uterus, I would definitely be bleeding from my vag right now.”

She continued to work, managing to split a total of ten logs by lunch, and she was tired. The back door opened to Cherry stepped outside to look at her. “Come inside. I made us some lunch.”

“I didn’t know you had returned,” Helen said, looking at the garages. The way the doors closed she couldn’t tell what vehicle was inside. Relief covered her at seeing her cousin had made it home safely.

“Quick job; only an hour and some change away,” Cherry said. “I know your hands are hurting.”

“My body is hurting, but I’m not going to quit,” she told Cherry. “This is hard, Abi.”

Abi was the name she called her cousin, which was short for Abigail. Whenever they talked about the job her cousin did, she always referred to her as Cherry, but at this moment, reassurances were needed to get her through the day.

“I know, but try receiving your training from the good ol’ United States Government,” Cherry said. “In Basic Training, there are two weeks of physical conditioning while mind fucking you into submission.”

Helen smiled as she went to the bath to wash her hands. A bowl of hearty beef soup

waited for her on the table, and she was truly hungry. Slow liked soups and stews. Meat, potatoes, and a piece of bread to sop up the gravy is what the man considered to be a meal. It worked, but so did the man.

“Speaking of mind fucking,” Helen said, “I’ll pick up Naomi and take her to dance class this evening. After, she and I can head to Mark and Ruth’s for a bite to eat. I know Ruth would love to see her granddaughter on a day other than Sunday. This way, you can make your man a nice dinner and be alone.”

“Helen, you don’t need to do that,” Cherry said, watching her cousin’s face.

“I know, but he deserves it,” she said. “He deserves to come home to a steak dinner with a baked potato fully loaded and oozing with butter, and to be as loud as he’d like making love to you without ears around.”

Cherry arched her brows, “Do you know something I don’t Cuz?”

“Yes, I know your husband’s life has been turned upside down in the past four and a half months,” she told Cherry. “He has made so many adjustments to add three women to his quiet and once solitary world. The house he’s given me, what he’s become for Naomi, what he means to you, even what he means to me, the safe feeling he gives me to not live in total fear is priceless. I am grateful to him. Michael needs a night with you without restrictions.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Cherry responded, taking a seat at the table. “May I ask how you’re doing?”

“Venting my anger on chunks of wood works. Next week, I’ve decided to take a few classes,” she said, skirting the obvious about her training as a Technician. “I think, just to keep in practice, I’m going to help Michael hunt for the winter stores of meat. You know, earn my keep, and I kind of like that venison stew.”

Cherry's eyes misted. "I love you, Helen," she confessed. "I love and respect your silent strength when I know, in your head, you're going through hell."

"You didn't leave me behind, Abi. You didn't leave me behind to figure it out and neither did Michael," she said softly. "I love you both for allowing me to be a part of this family."

"You're all the family I have."

"Not anymore," she said, "there's Mark and Ruth, and of course Rebecca. Michelle is Naomi's favorite cousin, and Uncle Joe, is a hoot. The family is larger than I expected."

"I like them all. The Nearys are good people," Cherry added, starting on her bowl of soup. Her husband Michael Isaac Neary was a good man who deserved a good life. Tonight, he would come home to a steak dinner, a piping hot potato, and an eagerly hot wife. It would be the optimal way to end his day.

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Thus far, it had been a shit day. His newly appointed right hand Carlotta Boone was a pain in his tuchus. It seemed that every two hours, she had a new idea on how to streamline processes, until finally, he informed her with no emotion in his voice to learn how to walk before she took off running. The tactic worked, and for the remainder of the week, she stayed quiet and focused on the task at hand. The last thing he needed to do on his day job as well as at home was to instruct a student unwilling to listen to learn.

He thought of Helen and the pile of wood. She was a trooper, but her eyes said there was far more trauma in her life than what The Collector had inflicted. Those eyes spoke of a deep-rooted pain of being tossed aside or sacrificed for the larger picture.

He knew it happened with single mothers; he simply didn't know of anyone personally who had grown up in that kind of environment. The silver framed photo on his desk held a family photo of himself, his parents, and his sister, as well as Helen, Cherry, and Naomi. A separate frame held an image of Naomi showing off her tiny little teeth and wearing her hair loose with a yellow headband. The ears protruded from the side of her head like directional antennae, and he'd never seen a more adorable sight in his life.

A knocking at his office door made him look up, drawing him from the moment of joy at looking at his child. The joy completely left him when he spotted Luca Jones, the Human Resource Manager for his department, the Blue Campus of Homeland Security. In his hand, Luca held a gift-wrapped box as he entered through the door and shoved it at Slow.

"I was going over your personal records, Neary, and noticed Naomi had a birthday last week, so I picked up a little something for our dancing queen," Luca said, holding the gift like it was the Holy Grail.

"Thank you, but I can't accept it," he told Luca.

"It's not for you; it's for Naomi."

Slow turned fully in his seat to face the HR Manager. "One, I'm not okay with a male outside of my family heaping gifts on my daughter," he said. "It sets a bad precedent. Two, I don't know anything about you and your kids or their birthdays, so I don't want to feel obligated to reciprocate to your children that I don't know, nor want to know. Again, thanks, but no."

"Jeez, you are such a hard ass," Luca said, reaching to close the door to Slow's office. He helped himself to a chair no one offered to him. Luca cleared his throat. "I don't have any children of my own. I'm seeing someone who has a daughter Naomi's age,

and I dunno, I want to make it more permanent, but I don't think I'm ready to take on someone else's kid. I don't even think I'm ready to have my own."

Slow sat staring at him mutherfuckingly, uncertain if the old demon who hung out next to him had been replaced with a new guardian from Hell with an offbeat sense of humor. He asked, "And why, dear Jesus, are you sharing this with me?"

"Because you are a man who can keep a secret," Luca confessed. "I need to talk to someone and my father, God bless his soul, is so desperate for grandchildren, he's thinking about adopting one of them babies from overseas. In a couple of years, he'll be in his own diapers talking about changing some on his grandson. Listen, I just want to talk to a man who understands the weirdness of being a girl-dad."

"Dude, you have no idea the amount of weirdness coming your way if you go through with this, but follow your heart," Slow said. "If you can find it in you to love the child as your own, then talk to the woman in your life about timing and planning your own biological to give the girl a sibling."

"You make it sound so easy. Are you and Abigail trying for another to give Naomi a sibling?"

"Honestly, that is none of your business," Slow said, rising, giving Luca the cue that his time was up.

"Sorry, didn't mean to overstay my welcome."

"You were never welcomed; you just barged in. Take your present," Slow said, passing the pretty wrapped gift box to him.

"No, and you can't make me," Luca said, sticking his tongue out at Slow. "Tell Naomi the head bully on your playground made you bring it home. And thanks."

“Whatever,” Slow said, looking at his watch. It was time to head home. Naomi had an early rehearsal tonight which meant Cherry had picked her up from daycare. All he wanted was a hot shower, possibly a cold beer, and eight long hours of sleep. “If my wife throws in a quick and dirty, I’d be okay with that as well.”

All the way home, his stomach rumbled, and he prayed that Helen hadn’t decided to cook dinner. As far as he was concerned, he secretly prayed his wife hadn’t either. The two beautiful women were both menaces in the kitchen. Every meal they cooked rested on a sheet pan, drizzled in olive oil with a bit of Mrs. Dash for seasoning, making each meal taste exactly the same as the last. It didn’t matter if it was chicken, fish, or pork, all of it tasted like greasy lemon peppered bad habits. He arrived home, taking his vehicle to the garage to park. He trudged slowly across the yard to the back door. He noticed the pile of wood was smaller, not by much, but Helen was working on it. She’d be sore tonight from her efforts.

He stepped inside the home to smell the wonderful scent of seared beef with onions. Inhaling deeply, he followed his nose to the dining area, his breath catching at seeing his wife. His eyes went from Cherry to the dining room table and back to Cherry, uncertain which to look at first. On the table, which was decorated with a white tablecloth, deep green napkins, and plates he’d never seen before rested the single most gorgeous cowboy steak he’d seen in a long time. A small bowl of sauteed mushrooms sat next to a container of brown gravy along with a steaming bowl of green peas with the butter dissolving into the perfect circles of goodness. A brown wicker basket held crusty brown rolls next to slices of aged white cheddar, and a beer, so cold there was condensation en masse on the side of the bottle, but the baked potato, loaded with sour cream and chives made his mouth water.

He turned to look at Cherry. She stood before him in a piece of lace with spaghetti straps to hold it on her shoulders, but the rest allowed him to see everything he loved about the woman. His wife even wore a pair of high-heeled strappy sandals to show off her amazing legs.

Slow swallowed hard, “This...and wow...you, amazing.” He paused, looking around, “Bunny?”

“She and Helen are having dinner with your parents. We have about three hours alone,” Cherry said, lifting the lace. “What would you like to put first in that filthy mouth of yours, Mr. Neary?”

He chuckled while removing his tie. He slowly removed his shoes, then his jacket. His eyes went to the table as he picked up a mushroom, sighing in delight as it hit his tongue. He took a swig of the beer, cold, refreshing, and delightful to the taste buds in his mouth, which felt rewarded after a long day.

“Listen, wife, you’re going to mess around for real, and tonight, when I’m done, you will most definitely be pregnant,” he said, reaching for her.

“Well, we are alone, and you can be as loud, as nasty, and as physical as I can tolerate,” she said, reaching for the bulge in his pants.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, Mrs. Neary,” he laughed, lifting her into his arms.

He carried his wife to the bedroom, tossing her on the bed like a rag doll and diving in behind her. In one motion, his pants were off, and with the next, the sheer negligée she wore became shreds. Slow leaned over her and whispered in her ear, a command so nasty, so raunchy, so debaucherous, she felt her girly parts leak with anticipation. It was all the encouragement he needed as he spent a solid hour non-stop making her wail like a three-dollar hooker auditioning for a starring role in an upcoming adult film.

“Damn, Michael Isaac Neary!”

“Baby, if it wasn’t for that steak in the other room, I would start on Round Two,” he said, kissing her passionately, as he disengaged their bodies.

He ate his meal with pleasure, looking across the table at his wife. Twice he reached for her, offering a passionate kiss, and finally after he’d eaten half the meal, they cleaned the kitchen and waited for the return of their family at the nine o’clock hour.

Naomi entered the front door, yawning, “Hey Daddy. Hi Mommy? Did you miss me?”

“Of course we did; we missed both of you,” he said, looking at Helen and nodding his head in appreciation. She in turn offered a mock salute.

“I’m going to head home,” Helen stated. “Good night, everyone.”

Slow spoke up, “No, stay for story time. Pour yourself a glass of wine, and Cherry will walk you home when I put Naomi to bed.”

“I don’t want to impose,” she said softly.

“You’re family; you are supposed to be here,” he said, reaching for the book on the coffee table.

Cherry rose to pour her cousin a glass of wine as Helen took a seat in the additional recliner he’d purchased for Helen when she came over on Friday nights to watch movies. She had a place in this home, and she understood where she fit in. Tonight, she’d done something small for him that had meant a great deal. Once a week, if she could, based on her new schedule, she’d give back to them in any way she could help.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

To say it would be unusual for Mark Neary, Chief Deputy of the US Marshals Field Office in Lexington, Kentucky, to arrive at the Blue Campaign Campus of Homeland Security for a personal visit would be up there with a vegan entering a steakhouse. Everyone watched through the glass office partition as Michael Neary looked up in surprise at seeing his father standing at his office door. His assistant Scarlet hadn't informed him of Mark's arrival, and people watched in awe of the interaction between father and son. A few made comments about actually witnessing Michael Isaac Neary smiling and showing emotion at the surprise visit. A collective sigh, along with a few ahhs, and awws, resounded through the workspace when father and son embraced. Mark Neary placed a gentle kiss on his son's temple while the son embraced his father as if he hadn't seen him in months, although they had been together the previous weekend.

"This is a surprise, Dad; is everything okay? Mom, Rebecca? Uncle Joe?" Slow asked with concern covering his face.

"Can't a man come to take his son to lunch, catch up, and talk about getting in some hunting this season?"

"Of course, of course, but you seldom, if ever, come into the offices in Louisville. Are you hunting someone?"

"Son, I came to take you to lunch and have some man time without the womenfolk," Mark said. "We are outnumbered and surrounded. They are trying to overpower us and make us have conversations about vaginas. That child of yours hit me in the mouth again when I tried to kiss her, so I'm here to file a complaint with the management."

Slow laughed loudly, making everyone in the office turn to stare at this version of the man they'd never seen. He was relaxed, grinning and talking to his father as if they were old friends. His boss Jerry Steinfeld noticed the shift in the energy of the floor, making him barrel from his office to barge in on the fun between the men. He entered the office without knocking, a detail Mark took exception to from the man his son referred to as his boss.

"Mark Neary, to what do we owe the honor of this visit," Jerry asked, extending his hand.

"Came to take my son to lunch, Steinfeld," Mark said, staring at the man as he would a felon.

"Dear Jesus, the way you Neary's look at people is very disconcerting!"

"Well, you can always concert in your own office, over there, since no one asked you to come over here," Mark said with a smile on his face. The smile was menacing and unsettling, and Jerry knew better than to offer anything more. He nodded his head and left the office, standing outside the glass walls, peering in as if he wanted the last puppy in the kennel but was twenty dollars shy of the cost.

Mark turned to his son, "I always assumed you took the scut work to lessen the time you had to work in this place and for a weasel like him."

"I keep the job as a cover, and I'm good at what I do," Slow replied.

"You any good at making me a grandson?"

"Daddy, I'm working on a lot of things, including myself," he said, looking at his father. "I did some shit last night which made me look in the mirror this morning asking Michael Isaac Neary some questions."

“Well, damn,” Mark said. “Any regrets?”

“No, but your grandson may arrive cursing and using dirty words no man should know until he’s completed two military combat tours in South America,” Slow said, laughing aloud again. “Daddy, that woman! Lord help me, that woman makes me stand tall, deliver, and look for shiny, sparkly items to buy her for no damned good reason, like this!”

He leaned back in his chair and opened his desk drawer. From the drawer, he pulled out a black velvet box and passed it over to his father. Michael shook his head as his father opened the box and let out a low wolf whistle. “This must have set you back a few bucks?”

“I spent half of the check from my last scut job on it,” Slow said, taking it from his father’s hand to place back in his desk drawer. “Right now, she has a simple band. I want to give her everything she deserves in life and more.”

“You truly love her. I can see it when you think no one is looking, how you watch her,” Mark said. “You watch her as if you find it hard to imagine she’s your wife.”

“It is hard to imagine that she is my life every day and gifted me with a beautiful daughter. Abigail is who I’ve wanted for years, but never felt I was man enough to break through the demons in her life, or if I wanted to be the one who held her when she woke up shaking from the nightmares,” he said.

“And now?”

“She vanquished her own demons, Daddy. She didn’t need me to ride in on my white Harley, guns blazing, to sweep her off her feet. All she needs is for me to be there when she comes home, and when she turns over at night to hit a solid support beam,” he said.

“What about the other one?”

“The Archangel made a visit and enrolled her in accounting classes,” he told his father.

Mark physically pouted as he leaned forward. “If she takes my handle of Slippery When Wet, there will be repercussions and consequences! I will show up and fight a mutherf...”

“Daddy, let’s go get some lunch,” Michael said, rising and laughing as he collected his coat. He passed by his assistant’s desk to let her know he’d be off campus for a couple of hours. It did not escape anyone’s notice of the similarities between father and son as they stood in front of the elevator waiting for a car to arrive.

These were the moments Slow treasured. His father had been his best friend for the majority of his life; even though he had a decent relationship with his cousins, his dad was the go-to guy in his world. Silently he prayed that Jesus still loved him and would bless him and Abigail with a son because he wanted to be able to give his own son all the things his father had given to him. He was a good man because of Mark Neary.

He lived a good life that he was proud to have. There were three additional women in his life who loved him, simply because he showed up and did what a man needed to do. That kind of love, he thought to himself, you can’t buy or force.

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Cheboygan, Michigan

He believed himself to be a good man and was good to his women. These dolls were his pride and joy. No one else wanted them, and they were castoffs. He rescued the

babies, giving them a home with family and purpose. He wasn't forcing them to love him, or at least he didn't think so.

"Good morning, my lovelies," he said to the women in the small rooms where he kept them behind locked doors. "How is everyone on this fine Friday? I have to head out for the weekend, so you have food stores to last until I return. Please make sure to hydrate while I am away. Daddy is going hunting."

"We don't want another sister-wife," Irish said, hoping to stop the reign of madness.

"Yeah, the last one nearly got us all caught, Daddy," Italy said, coming to the door and holding the bars.

"She is the one I'm hunting," he said, smiling lasciviously. "I must tell you, ladies, as much as I love you, there is no real fire in the sex. With her, I don't think my cock has been that hard since I was a kid. She was tight, too. China you are a snug fit, but you never get wet enough for me to really throw a good hump into you. My Chocolate Queen got nice and wet; shit, I'm hard again simply thinking about her. Mexicali, I shall come inside your cell for you to ride me and ease my burden."

He opened the door, but this time Mexicali punched him in the erection. She wanted to be free of him. She wanted to be out of her cage and living anywhere but with the psycho who called himself her husband. For a year, she'd been held against her will as he tried often to impregnate her to no avail. Not one of the women had conceived.

Mexicali pointed to his penis, scowling and using her hands to symbolize his sex was bad. She used her arms to mimic cradling a child, then pointed at his penis. Again, she used the word bad in sign language. Sign language was her only method of communicating with him since he removed her tongue.

The Collector was furious. He yelled at her, "Keep talking shit to me, and next time it

won't be your tongue I cut out!"

It wasn't him who was flawed. The unclean, impure women were at fault. And now, his Chocolate Queen had left him for that big, brawny brute of a man. If she were fucking him...he didn't believe it after having the joy of his cock inside of her making her cum, she would want that brute in her bed. Shenita belonged in his bed, and he planned to find her. He would scour the corners of Indiana until he located his woman and then he had an idea.

He was so caught in his own thoughts, he forgot to lock Mexicali's door. She too noticed his mistake and gently pulled the door closed, so it would appear he had remembered to secure the entryway. Mexicali moved to the corner of the room, away from the exit, and would wait until he left.

In his office, he pulled out his phone. His first call was to Beauty Kurtzwilde, shocked to find the woman was no more, and had been killed and left for dead in a car near the Gene Snyder Airfield in Falmouth, Kentucky. She'd been stuck with a knife coated in venom from a Costa Rican eyelash viper that was found in her system. The venom would have shut down her organs if she hadn't exsanguinated first. That was no way to die.

The next call went to the head man himself. As much money as he'd paid over the years for a product, The Big Man could take his personal call. He punched in the number scribbled on a piece of paper in his wallet with no name on it written in ink only visible under a blacklight. The phone rang and a deep voice answered.

"What do you want, you fucking weirdo?"

"I want to find my last doll; she got away from me," The Collector said.

"You and your doll collecting are coming to an end. Keep what you have, and order

no more, and I would advise you to stop hunting for your own personal choices. You're bringing too much heat," Michael Kurtzwilde told him.

"I'm not responsi..."

"Shut your freaky little mouth, you twat-licking fool," Kurtzwilde yelled. "Beauty attempted to fill your last order and it got her dead. Not only did you get my best Captain dead, but it also got me a visit from a Colombian Viper; a nasty fucker who stood on my desk and kicked me in the goddamned face!"

"I'm a good customer, and I demand..." The Collector started.

"Demand? Demand? You can demand nothing, and if you call me again, I will personally arrive and end your tit-cutting life, Stanton Rogers," Kurtzwilde said and ended the call.

The Collector sat quietly. How did Kurtzwilde know he'd cut Shenita's breasts? Kurtzwilde also knew his given name, which meant others did as well. The fingers of his hand intertwined as he leaned back in the seat. His Chocolate Queen was ruining everything. For this, he would find her, bring her home, and punish the bitch every night until she broke. It was his vow. This was his promise and new mission which gave him a pop of energy.

She could know his name, but she never would understand the depths he would dive to bring her back. He would find his Chocolate Queen, and they would be happy together. If he needed to let the others go to make her happy, he would make that sacrifice, but they had seen his face.

The women would need to die.

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Louisville, Kentucky

Today, Helen went by the college to check out her new school. Like her niece Naomi, she liked school but never had the funds to work on a degree. She would start small and learn as much as she could in the time allotted for her training. The first thing she wanted to do, once she got her school credentials, was to log into the new laptop using the internet. Her first search was for Stanton Rogers.

The computer given to her by The Archangel allowed her access to files and record databases most people didn't know existed. Entering his name, she pulled deeds, tax records, and more. The Collector didn't have much in his name.

"He thinks he's smart, but he's not cleverer than a woman with a grudge and a promise to keep," she said softly. Curiosity made her do it, and she typed in China Rogers, bringing up a mid-sized cabin in Sheboygan near the Crib Light. "Found a spot you missed, Mr. Collector. I'm coming to your neighborhood, Mr. Rogers. I'm coming with an axe to split your nasty little head open."

For thoroughness, she typed in Mexicali Rogers and came up with nothing. She typed in Irish Rogers and came up with a few bars and nightclubs around the country. As a last resort, she typed in Italy Rogers, which brought up a home in Ludington, Michigan. That was the house where he'd taken her for those two weeks. She found him.

"Ah ha, good Sir. The game is afoot," Helen said, feeling a new sense of power.

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The power wasn't left on in the three-bedroom modular home for her return. When Helen arrived home, instead of finding a dark house in the tree line on Slow's property, she found her cousin waiting for her on the front porch. She parked the

truck Mark Neary had loaned her in the allocated space near the front door, parking and climbing the stairs of the decking to meet her cousin.

“Good evening,” Helen said. “Do you need a key to the place, or do you have bad news for me?”

“Why would I have bad news?”

“Why would you be sitting on the porch waiting for me to get home when it’s getting dark. Is everything okay?”

“Helen, everything is fine,” Cherry told her. “I miss you.”

“You saw me yesterday, and I live across your backyard,” Helen said, sighing deeply.

“Abi, are you hiding from your husband?”

Cherry laughed loudly, shaking her head no. “I am not hiding, I came over for some girl time, to chat, and have a cup of something hot and brown, plus, I come bearing gifts.”

“Gifts,” Helen said, uncovering the boxes sitting next to Cherry.

Helen unlocked the front door of the home, reaching inside the door to turn on the porch light. Illumination shone on the boxes to reveal a crafting table and a brand-new sewing machine. To go with the sewing machine was a smaller box with a die cutter and a crafting cutter. Helen’s eyes began to mist.

“We had to leave everything in our lives behind to start over,” Cherry said. “It is unfair for you to lose so much when you’ve given all that you have, each and every time I’ve asked. Please let me give back to you.”

“This is not necessary,” Helen said, wiping away her tears.

“For me, it is more than necessary, Helen,” she said moving closer to her cousin. She embraced her fully. “I’ve never taken time before to comfort you with touch and connection. Each time a demon popped up in your life, I just showed up to vanquish it, hoping you’d be okay in the end. I’m letting you know that I can give love and show you affection too. I can give you love.”

“Please stop, Abi,” Helen said. “I get it. I do. And for the life of me, I can’t understand why the demons are always coming for me. I don’t bother anyone. I mind my own business, and there is always some asshole wanting to hurt me...or own me...or control me.”

Cherry’s grip on her cousin tightened. The childhood memories were ugly. The journey to the life they shared in the small home was fraught with missteps but they were making it; barely, but they were making it. Life was finally turning in their favor.

“Those days are over,” Cherry said. “We don’t have to worry about making the rent and keeping the lights on while putting food on the table and staying warm. From my last job, I’m able to help replace your things.”

“You also need to give your husband a hefty chunk as well to cover me and these utilities,” she said.

“No need; the water is from his well. The homes are on separate septic systems, and the power comes from a huge generator in the back of the barn. That thing is massive. The gas is propane so everything is self-sustaining,” she told Helen. “We deserve this happiness.”

Helen pulled away from her cousin. In the dim light from the front porch, she looked

her cousin in the eyes. She gripped Cherry's shoulders and shook her a bit.

"I have to go back and get them," she said. "I knew you would come for me and I held on to fight until your arrival. They are expecting me to come back for them. I will get them free."

"Understood, but first, we have to take care of Helen before Helen can rescue anyone else."

"Helen is fine. Helen will be fine," she said, squinting her eyes. "That son of a biscuit eater knows I'm coming back and he's waiting. I'm going to get that bastard!"

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

A quiet evening at home on a Friday night meant a movie for Naomi with popcorn, drinks from hand-squeezed lemons mixed with lemon-lime soda, and at least two peanut butter cookies. If there was time, a family game of cards or an age-appropriate board game ensued, usually leading to Naomi winning at least one hand. Her story time came early tonight since she was rather tired from helping her Aunt Helen move the cut pieces of wood to the pile for the winter supply of heat. Proud of herself, Naomi waited to be tucked in and provided the proper number of kisses to her rosy cheeks before saying goodnight.

After, Helen spoke softly, taking note of behaviors in Mr. Slow with his daughter. The patience he showed and allowing the child to win a game as well as lose several others to bring her balance was noted. Helen had questions.

“You’re very good with her,” Helen commented. “Did you major in child psychology?”

“No, I am a criminologist,” he replied, “and my focus is on criminal and criminal behavior. I am a specialist.”

“Oh,” Helen said, looking at her cousin, who didn’t seem surprised. “And the working with Naomi, is that your natural parenting instincts based on your parents?”

The conversation she wanted to have been long overdue for them all. He was reluctant to have the talk but now was as good of time as any to clear the air to help them both understand. In his dating life, he had never reached a point of divulging the family business, and he honestly never expected to share his life with anyone who needed to know all the details. These two women did, and in the end, or at the end of

his spiel, he expected the same from them.

“My father, Uncle Joe, and Samuel Johnson all grew up together and went to the same church, which was pastored by Reverend Robert Johnson, who was Samuel’s father, and we called him Uncle Sammy,” Slow said, rising to make himself a hot cider. “Uncle Sammy had, or rather is succeeded by his son Brody, who lives in Pennsylvania now, and a daughter Elsa, who lives in Florida.”

Helen leaned forward in the seat, her eyes darting occasionally to her cousin, who had no facial expression to what he was telling them were tidbits of information that would be relevant to them at some point. She’d learned that about Slow. He only provided enough information to connect two points. The straight line in between the points, he walked with careful steps.

“Uncle Sammy, when he became pastor, took over the Summer Camps for foster kids, and during those summers, me, Rebecca, Zeke, Gabe, Bleu, Brody, and Elsa, became camp counselors,” he said. “Some of those kids weren’t right, and could never be right, and others, well, could be trained.”

He said the last part, looking at Cherry. His gaze then went to Helen. “We learned, through our summer camp program, that there were Christian settlements in Ohio and Kentucky that were less than legit. Many of those camps were breeding grounds for cults, which of course preyed on young girls and single mothers. In the back of all of our minds, we have a soft spot for single moms because we know what is out there.”

His eyes again went to Helen. “We understood, better than most, many times, a mother would sacrifice a daughter to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.”

Cherry dropped her head, not wanting to make eye contact with her husband or her cousin. Slow had more to say, and when the time came for her to speak, she would,

but until she was asked or prompted, she had nothing to contribute to his lesson and attempt to educate them on very important details.

“Some of those kids, Gabriel was able to help,” Slow said. “You see, he saw patterns in the behaviors of the cults, what they looked for in members, and accurately predicted where the next cells would pop up. He gained the attention of The Company in Langley, who offered him the world. In exchange, they paid for his education. He has a ThD in Divinity.”

Helen frowned, trying to understand where Slow was going with this. She opened her mouth, only to be halted by Cherry, who placed her finger to her lips. Helen knew this meant to stay quiet.

“Although he is ordained, his skillsets proved useful in infiltrating another organization out of Chicago, also called The Company, lowercase letters for the title, run by Michael Kurtzwilke,” he said. “From that company, Gabriel was also recruited by the Cavalcade of Angels, giving him a source of income from many streams that he used to create his own specialized team.”

Slow returned to the couch, intentionally sitting away from Cherry, facing both his wife and her cousin. He sighed deeply, wanting to stop, but knowing he needed to continue. Helen needed to understand and Cherry was owed his back story. Until now, she had no idea how he’d become a Technician nor why. The why was as important as the job itself.

“With the backing of the government, plus funding to clean the cobwebs and balance the books from Uncle Sam’s Summer Houses, several of those kids who came through that summer camp were sent to college on the government’s dime,” Slow said, “and in return, they went to work for The Company.”

Cherry spoke, “Do I know any of these students?”

“Yes,” he said, pointing to himself. “One Way, Wrong Way, Mr. Merge, and Falling Rocks. Reverend Johnson’s son is Mr. Yield. The Mann is Kurtzwilde’s son, and Mr. Exit was the brother-in-law of The Glitter Man, a monster he inadvertently made while trying to protect his sister.”

“And like wow,” Cherry said, leaning forward.

“Stop and Hump belonged to Kurtzwilde, as well as Exit, who was sent to The Company by The Archangel; however, Hump worked more for Beauty, who in turn, tried to sell her to The Collector once she began adding up pieces that didn’t fit,” he said, looking at Helen. “It fell through. Hump is not only deadly, she is a bit mentally left of center but loyal and trustworthy. Beauty is dead, courtesy of a favor called in by Hump via a South American Drug Czar known as a Viper, and don’t ask. She called in the favor owed to her by a deadly Viper whom I think had dinner here at this table with me, Yield, and The Archangel. All I know is, a few days later, Beauty was dead. The Collector, at losing his chance at claiming Hump as his Black Doll, somehow happened upon Shenita and collected her instead.”

Helen leaned forward. “Shenita got away from him,” she said, referring to her former self in the third person.

“Shenita is still with him,” Slow corrected. “The thing the Archangel understands more than most is the nature of people. Working with those kids in the summertime, he, as well as most of us, learned that without purpose, the patterns of behavior continue. Women who are sexually abused choose men who treat them the same way. Poor people, even when given money, splurge on stupid shit because they expect every blessing to be taken away, not understanding the need to break the cycle.”

“Is that what you’re doing, Michael Isaac Neary, helping us break the cycle?” Helen asked her tongue in her cheek.

“I don’t know, Helen; have we broken the cycle?” he asked, also leaning forward, his hands resting on his knees. “Have we broken the cycle of the scared woman always afraid to fight, to speak up, fight back, stand up against the bully? Or did The Collector see in you what others saw and wanted to dominate and control you with simple acts of oppressive aggression?”

Helen popped to her feet. Slow had hit a nerve, and she wasn’t going to stand for it. It infuriated her to no end how he dared make such a sweeping generalization. He didn’t know her. He didn’t know her story or anything about her life.

“You don’t know me! I did fight! I fought that bastard, and I got free. I’m going back to save those women, and I fought that fucker!”

Slow bound to his feet, slamming down the mug, and took three steps towards Helen, his chest puffed up, his fists balled into meaty hammers of punishment, and she shrank. She shrank back into the chair and nearly curled into a ball. The child inside the woman still ached with loneliness and fear. The innocence was taken from her in the middle of the night and then used as a weapon against her she wore upon her chest like a badge. He could see it. Men could see it and almost smell the fear inside of her. The adult woman smelled of the need to be loved. She reeked of the desire to be needed and cherished for whatever modicum of affection doled out. Twice, she’d asked him what she feared, yet also secretly wanted. He wasn’t that kind of man. He stood over her, intimidating the woman.

Cherry was also on her feet; a weapon, he knew she had in the couch remained nestled between the pillows, but she was prepared to use her body as a shield between her husband and her cousin. Her eyes were wide with anger, daring him to make a move toward Helen, and in one move, she would reach between the pillows, if need be, to bring the dog to her heel, but Slow changed the tactic on her.

Michael Neary dropped to his knees in front of Helen. The fisted hands came together

as if he were about to pray. His eyes were on his wife.

“This cycle stops now,” he told them both. “Helen will learn to protect herself and walk through this world like a woman of purpose. Abigail will no longer have to put her life on hold to serve as a protector for her cousin because in less than three months Helen is going to be a badass, not scared or shrinking in the presence of a man with more power over her. Sit up, Helen. The time of cowering is over.”

He got to his feet, collected his mug, and bid them goodnight. Helen was no longer balled up in the chair, but her eyes were focused on her cousin. She knew the look. The look scared the shit out of her.

Tears welled in her eyes as she asked the question, “If he’d touched me, Abi, would you have?”

“More than likely, yes,” Abi said, looking at Helen, and the moment of doubt flickered in her eyes. The same concerns she had, her cousin also worried about. They never talked about any of the things that brought them to this point. More than likely, they never would.

“Don’t worry. I asked him straight up if he had any intentions of fucking me,” Helen said to Abi, who snapped her head around. “He said no. He is happy with you and doesn’t plan to ruin his family, besides, he told me he didn’t think I was that cute.”

“Helen, if he makes a move...”

“He’s not going to, Abi. He loves you and his daughter. He loves coming home to his family,” Helen said. She paused. “Do you think he knows?”

“Of course, he knows, you twit! He was testing me to see if I would draw down on him over you, and he knows I will in a heartbeat,” Cherry replied.

“Then he must also know you killed a man to protect me,” Helen said.

“Probably,” she answered. “I’m tired. Sleep in the guest room tonight. I have a bad feeling, and I think he does as well, which is why he’s changing tactics on you.”

“Abi?”

“Yes, Helen?”

“This is your time and your life. I won’t mess this up for you,” she said, wishing her cousin goodnight.

“Abi, don’t mess this up for yourself either,” Helen said softly, looking at the backdoor. She didn’t need to stay in their home; she had her own.

Helen set the alarm on the cabin, easing out of the back door and walking in the darkness to where she now called her sanctuary. He was right; the time for cowering was over. She’d fought back against The Collector and gotten free. Now, she had to work on getting free of the other Bogeymen and demons who haunted her sleep at night, like Smiley Robertson.

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2002,

Smiley Robertson was a good-looking man, with a wide smile, dancing eyes, and lascivious nature. Shenita’s mother Anita loved the man and saw no wrong in him, at least until she noticed the way he looked at her daughter. Already having lost Shenita’s father to her sister Stephanie, she wasn’t about to lose another man to her daughter. Stephanie had run off with her husband, leaving her daughter Abigail for Anita to take care of and making her go from a single mother of one to a single

mother of two very pretty young ladies far more attractive than Anita, and she resented both girls for it. She resented the way Smiley looked at Shenita. For Cherry, the idea was ludicrous considering Smiley was a forty-something-year-old man and Shenita a fourteen-year-old child who still played with Barbie dolls.

No one was dumb. Smiley was never left alone with either of the girls, and Cherry made sure to stay close to Shenita, even sharing a bed with her on the nights Smiley stayed over. It wasn't enough.

The man lied. He told Anita he'd be out of town for the weekend, and everyone relaxed. As much as Cherry tried to warn her Aunt about allowing a snake in the chicken coop, she never tried to protect her chicks.

He must have been watching the house.

Smiley saw when Anita left to go and play cards with her friends on Friday night.

Smiley must have been watching the house and waited for Cherry to leave to go the market for a Pepsi and a pack of peanuts. It was something she snuck off to do, and tonight, she didn't take Shenita with her because she must have planned to hang out a bit after with her friends.

Smiley must have been watching the house.

The moment both Anita and Cherry departed the home, Smiley Robertson let himself inside. In the twenty minutes, Cherry was away, he did enough damage to ruin Shenita's life; therefore, Cherry had no qualms about taking his. The two switch blades she carried at all times were in her pocket when she came through the back door and heard the scream. She heard the open-handed slap. She heard her cousin's cries, the pleas, the wails from the pain.

He must have been watching the house when she left. He must have been watching the house and waiting for his opportunity. He wouldn't hurt anyone else ever again. Cherry used the blades to cut him wide, to cut him deep, and to watch him bleed as she yanked his nude body from her aunt's bed. She wrapped his throat in Aunt Anita's favorite satin sheets she put on the full-sized mattress when Smiley came over on Thursday nights to make her aunt moan like a whore. She placed the sheets on the bed where Smiley was hurting Shenita. He would hurt her in this bed, dare her to tell, then come back, smelling her scent in the covers while he relived the fantasy in his sick head. He even had the nerve to pull out the special sheets for his time with Shenita. These were the same sheets Cherry wrapped around his waist to cover his nakedness.

When the police arrived, Cherry simply told them, "He must have been watching the house."

Aunt Anita never openly said she hated Cherry, but she did. Aunt Anita never openly said she resented her daughter, but she did. Aunt Anita never denied them the little they received, but Shenita's medical bills from the damage Smiley did to her bankrupted Aunt Anita.

The crappy house with the two hundred dollar-a-month mortgage was no more, and Aunt Anita resorted to placing the next apartment in Shenita's name, along with credit cards and utility bills. At the age of 18, Shenita's credit had been ruined.

Cherry, at the age of 18, joined the military. Already on the radar of The Company for taking care of Smiley, a small-time pimp who was trying to become a major player, they considered Cherry an asset, and she had received specialized training to work for her government. The special training came with a housing allowance that afforded her the ability to bring her cousin to live with her.

She saved every dime she could. They lived poorly, drawing no attention to

themselves. The plan was to do ten years and retire to the mountains to live a simple life off the grid. All was going to plan until the call came in for a job in Mexico. A few Homeland Security agents were taken by the Cartel, and Cherry and a few others were sent in to bring the agents home. She came home from Mexico, changed inside from what she'd seen. She was changed by three days and nights with a man whom she'd known casually but spent the weekend getting to know him intimately. Michael Isaac Neary changed her life.

Now, Cherry, a married woman with a child, needed to change once more. He was right. She couldn't spend her entire life looking after her cousin. Helen needed to charge up, level up, and become a badass. She could shoot and work a knife; Cherry taught her those things. She would leave it up to her husband to show Helen how to hone the skillsets to become a weapon.

She entered the bedroom quietly, pulling back the covers to slide in next to him. The warmth she sought he provided by pulling her close. There were words she wanted to share with him, but he silenced Cherry with a brief, but hot kiss.

"When I said my arms were wide and my shoulders strong enough to carry the weight, it is what I meant," he said to her.

"I can carry my own weight," she said, moving closer.

"Yeah, but you don't have to anymore," he said, kissing her again. "Neither of you do. I want you both to understand what it is like to be loved by men who only want the best for you."

"Men?"

"Yes, the Neary men," he said. "You are our family. We love and protect the women in our lives. I shall love and protect you all."

“It’s the love thing that makes me worry,” she whispered. “I have every right to be doubtful.”

“I am who you believe in your heart that I am,” he said, “I have nothing further to say on it. She’s your sister, which makes her my sister. Good night.”

She held onto him for nearly 30 minutes before drifting fitfully into an uneasy sleep. She could feel the weight of something horrible hanging over their heads. It was coming. She had no way to prepare for the unknown. Then suddenly, in a moment of clarity, Cherry got it. Her husband had explained that from childhood he’d been taught to see and understand the needs of others. He’d been taught to provide care and guidance. Michael Isaac Neary had degrees in criminology and he understood the criminal mind.

Her husband was also a trained assassin.

He was prepared.

Slow was always prepared. Cherry simply wished for once in her life, she could be as well, instead of being reactive. Helen was correct, this was a chance for something better. She didn’t want to mess it up.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

“We’re doing what?” Helen asked, uncertain if she had heard Slow correctly. If what he said was indeed what she’d heard, then she was most definitely unprepared for his scheduled activity for the day. Moreover, the idea of it scared the bejeezus out of her.

“I need to see how you handle yourself and a weapon,” he said, passing her the paintball gun.

“This is a paintball gun.”

“Well, I don’t want to get into the field and have you accidentally shoot me or worse,” he said. “This way, I get to see firsthand your natural inclinations when faced with a threat.”

Cherry didn’t much like the idea either. Her head snapped around at the sound of tires crunching on the gravel outside giving her a facial expression of annoyance. Naomi their daughter ran to the window to see who was arriving at their home. The look of disappointment on her face at seeing the first vehicle was palpable.

“Oh, it’s just the Grandpa Man,” she said, suddenly smiling when she saw the salt and peppered hair of her grandmother. “It’s Grandma! Grandma is here!”

She ran to the bathroom to check her hair and then her clothing, coming back to stand in the middle of the floor after checking her outfit. “Daddy, do I look cute? I want to look really cute when Grandma sees me and comes through the door.”

“You look fine, Bunny,” he said, disengaging the alarm. As he walked to the front door to let in his parents, a second and third vehicle arrived. One brought over his

sister Rebecca, and the other, his cousin Zeke with Tameka, his wife, and daughter Michelle. This would be the first time his cousin Zeke had come to his home; however, today had a purpose.

Cherry watched his face as the family members filed in, starting with his father. “Morning family,” Mark Neary said, holding up his paintball gun. His eyes went to Cherry, then back to his son. “I’m going to take you down, son. Slippery When Wet is taking you down.”

She took it as a threat, getting to her feet while looking at her father-in-law. “Sir, I’m not sure what your plans are for the day, but if this is a Neary playdate sort of luncheon, you’re playing around with the wrong piece of fruit.”

Ruth Neary, Slow’s mother, came through the door, followed by Rebecca, and they both flanked Mark. Mark offered a lopsided grin, looking at Cherry, as if he had ill intentions. Then she saw the sparkle in his eyes. “Me and my girls are going up against Michael and his girls,” Mark said.

Zeke Neary entered the door, followed by his wife and daughter. Cherry asked, “And what are you, the referee?”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Zeke said, “Tameka here will oversee the girls while we hit the course, which I have been wanting to see.”

“What course?” Helen asked, feeling concerned.

Slow greeted everyone, mentioning the pots of coffee ready in the kitchen along with sweet rolls, venison sausage, and biscuits he’d prepared for the morning. After the course, he planned to grill burgers and dogs to make a day out of it for the family. It was also good for Naomi to have a playmate over, and hopefully, soon, she could start to have sleepovers like his sister did when they were growing up.

Tameka greeted the family, passing around a covered container of blueberry muffins. She'd brought with her blueberry soaps and shampoos, which also went to the counter. Helen watched in confusion, not commenting, waiting to understand what would actually occur in the rollout of this day of family fun and bonding. Slow noticed the concerned expression in her eyes. He was learning to read her body language and unspoken expressions.

"There is a shooting range course about half a click down the property line," Slow said to her. "We will use paintballs instead of dummy ammo and work in teams. Cherry, you, and me against my Dad, Mom, and Rebecca."

Cherry's eyebrows arched as she looked at Ruth. "Michael, you seriously want me to shoot on a range course, with paintballs, at your Mom?"

Ruth stared at her mutherfuckingly, squinting a bit as she removed camo paint from her purse like a compact of finishing powder for a night at the opera. She used her fingers to swab the black grease under her eyes like a warrior, her gaze intense. "Just because I bake an awesome pound cake will not stop me from busting a cap in your butt, Ms. Ma'am!"

Naomi, amused by all of it, wanted to take part in the make-up and the playing of games. "Daddy, will I get to play too and bust a cap in somebody's butt?"

It was then Naomi noticed Michelle, who'd come in after her parents, and spotted Tameka fiddling with the buttons on the child's coat. She waved to Michelle and greeted her. "Oh hey, girl! What are we doing today?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Cherry exclaimed. "You want me to go out there and play war games with your parents and sister?"

Slow and Mark both looked at her, and she noticed Rebecca's eyes. For a moment,

Cherry nearly backed down. A sense of competitiveness kicked in and she nodded for her cousin to come closer. “Helen, I think we are about to have a side of Neary for lunch to go with those burgers. They have underestimated with whom they are dealing.”

Rebecca spoke up, “I think it might be you, my sister-by-law, who is failing to properly assess the threats that stand before you.”

Helen, now fully engaged in the game Slow was setting up, inched closer to her cousin. In her most intimidating voice, her hands on thin hips, she announced, with gusto, “You don’t want any of this, hairdresser! Where is my weapon? Oh, it’s on. It’s on, Madam Detour. You’re about to find out why they call it a country mile! Abi, let’s show them how we like to play rough.”

Slow chuckled a little at the mild-mannered woman turning into a mini beast. His daughter, also now with camo under her eyes, wanted to get out there and play with the family. She reached for her coat and scarf.

“Daddy, am I on you and Mommy’s team? I want to bust a cap in the Grandpa Man’s butt. Where is my gun?”

“Naomi, you and Michelle will stay with Tameka,” Slow corrected.

“No, I want to play too! It’s not fair. I want to bust a cap in Aunt Rebecca’s butt too! You know she still says I look funny.”

“Bunny, stop saying that,” Slow corrected, but he was too late. His father was a menace; a walking, talking, gun-toting, appointed by the law to chaperone the ill-conceived thinker’s daily routine, type of menace. The man had brought along with him two children’s paintball guns with mini ammo belts and helmets for Michelle and Naomi.

Mark was grinning as he passed the gear to Tameka and Cherry. “We’ll take Michelle on my team. Let’s do this! Everybody, it’s time to head out back; let’s huddle up!”

Cherry didn’t know there were three ATVs. She’d seen the golf cart, but never considered her husband having ATVs, although she knew he hunted on his land. Mark had brought along two of his own; Slow and Bunny took the first vehicle, Zeke and Michelle the second, and Cherry and Helen the third. Rebecca sat astride her own while Ruth wrapped her arm around her husband’s waist, holding up her weapon as if it were loaded with live rounds and set on repeat. She was still staring at Cherry as the ATV started up as if she planned to take her out of the game the first chance the old woman got to get the drop on her daughter-in-law. Cherry glanced at her husband, who simply winked, and she took that as her cue.

Over her shoulder, she whispered to her cousin, “Helen, let’s show these country bumpkins who they are fucking with.”

“On your six, Cousin,” Helen said, sliding onto the back of the ATV. All the motors started up as Tameka waved from the back porch, holding a blueberry muffin and watching them take off down the concourse between the homes.

Initially, the plan was to play the course, but after a quick pow-wow with the teams, Mark Neary wanted to up the ante. He suggested a quick run-through of the course for both teams as a warmup, and then taking the hunting lanes for one mile. His eyes were sparkling as he looked at Cherry. Mark gave her a wink as the twinkle in his eyes turned to a dancing glare.

“Old Man, you are cruising for a bruising,” she said.

“You might be the Cherry on Top, but I’m still Slippery When Wet,” he said, waggling his brows.

“Daddy, that is not a real handle. Stop saying it like it’s real; it makes me feel uncomfortable,” Slow told his father. He gathered Helen, Cherry, and Naomi for a huddle, doling out instructions to his team, making certain everyone understood the play. Mark waved his hand, and the teams went to the starting positions once Zeke was in place at the end of the course.

An orange flag went up as Mark and Slow started down the lanes, shooting targets, moving, firing paintballs, and reacting to pop-up hit men threatening their lives. A child target popped up, which was a new addition to the course Mark was not expecting, and he popped the child target in the forehead with a red paintball. He cursed, still moving, as Zeke aimed a water gun at Slow, saturating the front of his shirt, throwing him off, and making him miss the next target. With the element of surprise taken away, the water cannon didn’t throw Mark off, as they rounded the last corner, aiming at the final targets, both arriving at the same time to secure the flags.

Zeke called out, “Minus one point for each team; the score is tied.” In the air, he raised the orange flag, sending Helen and Rebecca down the line.

Slow watched Helen maneuver the course with confidence, firing, ducking, and rolling when unneeded, but hitting every target, bypassing the child, taking down the gunman, reacting to the water cannon, and missing getting soaked. Rebecca missed a gunman, got soaked by Zeke, and landed in a puddle of mud, coming in second place.

Slow chuckled, “Getting rusty, Sis.”

“Bite me, you Neanderthal,” she said, looking down the lane for the next pairing of shooters.

Next to come were Naomi and Michelle. He was impressed with his daughter, who had paid attention to what had transpired twice before her. He was further impressed that her mother had taught the child how to shoot. Ruth provided gentle coaching to

Michelle, who shot everything as well and moved with confidence through the course, handling her paintball weapon and crying as if she'd been bitten by a swarm of bees when her father squirted her in the chest with water.

What grabbed everyone's attention was Naomi. She'd watched her Aunt Helen and took a cute, almost adorable roll around the second marker, coming up next to the pop-up child target, she stood next to the child, looking innocent with her mini red helmet, easing around the child to fire a paintball at the gunman. She moved low, holding her weapon like she'd seen her Daddy do against the Grandpa Man, raising it, firing at the next gunman, and hitting him in the hand with a yellow dot. Naomi expected the water gun and moved out of range from the streams, darting left, coming up the side and around the back of the final gunman, shooting the target in the ear then claiming her victory flag. She looked at her father with pride, her tiny chest stuck out, which he rewarded with a fist bump.

His focus was now on the last run pairing, his mother and his wife. With a conflict of emotions running high in him as Zeke raised the flag the two took off. His mother moving with style and grace, and his wife, moving with trained precision, were picking off targets, making clean shots. Both women avoided shooting the child, but an unused gunman target popped up in the lane, surprising Ruth, leaving Cherry to pop the target with a cherry red paintball. She pointed to Ruth, giving a silent signal. Zeke raised the water gun only to be hit by both Ruth's green paintball in his chest and Cherry's red paint in his belly simultaneously. Ruth crouched low, preparing for the last target, and Cherry perched herself on the high board, swinging her body in one motion to seat herself on the top as she fired a final round into the target. From her vantage point, she could see the end of the lane and the victory flag. The next shot went into Ruth's flag, knocking it to the ground and out of the reach of her mother-in-law. Ruth scrambled to get to her flag to finish the race, while Cherry took her time, walking into the final frame and securing her flag. She looked at her husband and double-winked, adding an additional tongue click.

Zeke called out from his stand, impressed with his cousin-in-law's tactic, stating proudly, "Ladies and gentlemen, the infamous Cherry on Top."

She bowed in acceptance of the acknowledgment, providing a hug to her daughter and praise to Michelle for not quitting, although she was wet in the chest. Michelle pouted, looking at her father, angry at him for shooting her with water. Her face was taut, but she held her weapon, looking him in the eyes, ready for the next rounds.

Mark picked up on the charged air. "Okay, let's do it. Me and my girls against you once more son, but this time, we scatter into the wood line, moving to get a single victory flag from the opponent."

Naomi didn't understand. She asked her father, "Daddy, what is he saying? I get to shoot the Grandpa Man in the butt and take his flag?"

Mark bent down to one knee, raising the cover on the face plate of the helmet. "Yes, if you can shoot me, little one because I am very Slippery When Wet."

She frowned at him, not understanding, but she wanted to play the game. She looked at her parents, then at her grandfather, back to her mother, then her father. Her eyes had questions and suddenly, she turned to look at her grandfather once more, staring at him mutherfuckingly, then she smiled wide, showing off her tiny teeth. "Okay, Grandpa Man, let's do it!"

"Naomi, if we play, this means you can get shot with the paintballs. They do hurt," Cherry explained.

"Not if I shoot him first," she said, mimicking the wink her father did earlier, only her wink required the entire small head to bob.

Zeke blew the whistle, calling for places. Both teams headed to the starting point,

moving to the wood line. Huddled together, Mark provided his team instructions, as did Slow, giving specific directions to his daughter, who gave a tiny thumbs up. Helen's eyes were scanning, keeping watch on Rebecca as he spoke. Rebecca in turn sent menacing hand gestures to Helen with threats of bodily harm in sign language. Helen returned the conversational chatter with a hand gesture of her own, making Rebecca laugh.

The whistle sounded with two short blows. The teams came to the starting line. A louder single blow sounded from the whistle and they were off. Naomi stayed in the lane, running around the targets, making her way to the flag for capture, but a booming voice called.

"Oh no you don't!" Mark yelled, startling the child, who tripped over her feet.

Naomi tumbled forward, landing on the ammo belt, her paintball weapon under her body. She cried out, loudly, wailing at the top of her voice. The cries echoed through the wood line. Mark, concerned she'd injured herself by falling on the weapon, ran at full speed, coming to her side. The crumpled body folded, her tiny form wracking from the tears.

"It's okay, Bunny, I got you," Mark said, reaching for the child. He turned her over to see where she was hurt, only to come face to face with a mini paintball gun aimed at his chest.

Her tiny teeth smiled at him as she pulled the trigger. "Gotchu, Grandpa Man," she said, scrambling away and going for the flag.

She nearly made it to flag, when Michelle, hiding behind the pop-up target of the child, aimed through the arms of the metal target, shooting Naomi in her handful of bottom.

“Owww! That smarts!” Naomi said, falling to the ground and rubbing her butt.

Michelle moved forward, flanked by Ruth coming from the wood line, who was halted by a cherry red paintball in her chest. Cherry didn’t cover herself fast enough, as Rebecca got her in the arm, taking her out of play. Helen closed in on Cherry’s side, swung around then aimed, popping Rebecca in the thigh with a blue paintball. She double-tapped, popping Michelle in the helmet, and moving quickly, secured the flag.

Slow emerged from the wood line, cradling his paintball gun like an infant, pleased with his team and the victory. Mark, outdone with his granddaughter, sat in the grass in defeat. He scowled at everyone, upset with himself, announcing, “The oldest trick in the book and I fell for it. Me, the slippery one, fell for that trick,” he said, disgusted with himself.

Ruth, no worse for wear, walked over to help her husband off the ground and get on his feet from his wounded pride. Naomi, proud of herself for taking him out, came over and tugged on his arm. He bent down to meet her smiling face as she removed her helmet, and to his surprise, she gave him three small butterfly kisses on his cheek.

Mark sniffled a little bit at the affection she offered, surprised that it caught him off guard, tugging so hard on his heartstrings. “Well, that does soften the blow a bit.”

The love fest came to a grinding halt as Tameka arrived in the golf cart. The speed at which she drove caught everyone’s attention, making Slow, Zeke, and Mark move to the cart. Tameka’s attention went to Slow.

“The fax machine went off,” she announced.

Cherry asked, “Which one, left or right?”

“Both,” Tameka said.

“Cherry, on me,” Slow called out, taking off at a trot. Cherry, hot on his heels, followed, making a beeline for the home.

The two sheets of paper sat on the respective machines like sour omens in the center of a perfectly good afternoon of family fun. In the middle of planning to cook hot dogs and burgers, notices came in for work orders requiring the handling of some sick bastard who’d gotten too big for his britches. Cherry was due in Evansville by nightfall. Slow was headed to Bowling Green.

The family arrived at the home, the mood somber, as they entered the back door. Helen knew the procedure and drill after having supported her cousin’s life for so many years. She took command of the situation.

“Mark, let’s fire up the grill. I chopped a heckaton of firewood last week, so we’ll get some burgers on the flame. Ruth, there is butter, flour, sugar, and I’m sure baking powder. I will leave it to your magical hands to create a lovely dessert. Tameka, if you would, get the girls cleaned up and settled, please,” she said, looking at Zeke. “Sir, if you’d be so kind to get the meat ready for the grill. It is in bowls in the fridge. Just add the seasoning and shape the patties for burgers. We can get this afternoon moving. Rebecca, on me, as we extend the dining table and get out the paper plates and utensils. This is a day that the Lord has made.”

Everyone looked at the calmness of Helen in the middle of the change in the tone of the afternoon. All replied, “Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

“Very good, everyone,” Helen said, turning her attention to the kids, “Naomi, maybe you should show Michelle your room?”

Naomi, ready on cue, took up the call, her hand on a tiny hip as she waved to

Michelle. “Come on, girl. I have a Princess Poppy bedroom,” she told Michelle, who followed along while removing her wet shirt.

Cherry was motionless, her mind now on the target of the evening. It was time to go to work and her burger would be to go. Tonight, if she were lucky to make it back to tuck her child in, would not have the same feeling. Naomi did well today, as did Michelle, but she couldn’t celebrate her daughter’s accomplishment. She was being pulled away to go and terminate the life of a scumbag who was more than likely not only doing an illegal thing but an immoral thing as well. Helen, saying no words, stood toe to toe with her cousin, who looked up. The eyes were distant. Helen shook her head, no, and Cherry nodded, moving away slowly to gather her gear.

Zeke watched the children walk away, but his focus was now on Helen and Cherry. The closeness between the two did not go unnoticed. Unlike himself, doling out affection, he walked over to Helen, his arm going around her shoulder. “I can only hope and pray that Michelle and Naomi will have what you have with Abigail.”

“I don’t know if you should pray for what we have,” Helen said removing his arm from her person. “I don’t even know what we have, but I will stab a rock for her. She is my ride-or-die. So, on that note, I guess, you can simply offer a prayer for us all.”

Whenever her cousin left the home, a prayer was all Helen had to go on that Cherry would return. There were backup plans in place should anything happen to Cherry, but she always came home. She had to come home because Helen and Naomi needed her and she needed them. Cherry also had a husband who would stay awake until she was safely home. For now, it was enough.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Indianapolis, Indiana (The Collector)

This was not enough. Shenita left him and he missed her. He obsessed over her, and often returned to the home where she'd lived, hoping she'd come back to the bed where he'd slept, so he could sneak in on her, sharing an encounter one more time. The taste of her in his mouth left him on rock for hours, and not one of his Dolls could take away the ache. Oh, they made the desire go down, but the taste of Shenita lingered in his mouth and returned later in the evening when he belched, making him long to be inside of her again.

The obsession was harmful. He came to the home where she'd lived, smelling the scent of her on the sheets, making him moan like a whore as the scent of her on the pillows made him hornier than he'd ever been. Unable to contain the force of the feeling hitting him, he yanked down his pants, rubbing one out as he thought about his Chocolate Queen. The tightness of her around his thick member made his member jump in the loose-fitted jeans. The way she'd reacted to the shock of him made her cum so hard and also made him long for her.

He'd made her squirt. Shenita came so hard she squirted, and the look on her face said she'd never done that before.

"I bet she was also surprised how big my cock is," he said, sitting in the shrubbery and watching the house.

A sign sat in the yard.

An ugly sign.

A disgusting sign which advertised the house had been sold. A sold red banner across the sign meant she wasn't coming back. The house wasn't in her name, but someone named Abigail Barnes, who had miraculously dropped off the radar along with his Chocolate Queen. He searched for Abigail Barnes and kept hitting dead ends.

"Bitches," he mumbled, getting to his feet, turning, and bumping into something.

He looked up to see a man.

A large man.

A muscled black man.

"Oh fuck," he yelled, lunging forward and knocking the man off balance enough for him to break free of the grasp.

He ran as fast as his legs could carry him away from the home of his Chocolate Queen. He ambled his way down the dark slope of the water run-off, through the wet grass, and up the other side of the sunken area to where he'd parked his truck. Shaking hands started the vehicle as he pressed his foot down hard on the gas, praying, desperate to get away. His eyes went back and forth to the rear-view mirror, trying to see if he was being followed. Halfway up Highway 31, aiming for South Bend, then on to Elkhart, driving at a clip to I-69 to Flint, he drove at a steady pace connecting to I-75 to take him into Cheboygan. He could be home by midnight if he pushed.

"That was close," he said, checking the rearview once more. He was pushing his luck longing for her the way he did. "Her man was watching the house. I recognize that big fucker. He is touching my girl. He's touching my Chocolate Queen. I'll fix him. I'll show them all, and she will, at the end of all of this nonsense, be mine again. This I vow. This I promise."

In his anger, his muddled mind no longer thought clearly. The Collector, always the hunter, never realized the rabbit now had the gun. Mustang, who'd come home to Michigan for a law enforcement conference, was called in to aid Cherry in finding her cousin. A friend, and former Army Ranger, Ricky Collins was on the job with the force in Michigan with the State Troopers. Collins, making a few calls to the powers that be, managed to get Mustang attached to liaison with the Michigan State Troopers to apprehend The Collector. Thus far, all of his hunches had proven accurate. The man was obsessed with Shenita and couldn't let go. All he had to do was park and wait. The Collector didn't disappoint.

Mustang spotted the man when he arrived at the home. He backtracked his steps to locate the vehicle he'd driven, placing two trackers on the vehicle in different locations. He fully expected The Collector to realize, more than likely, first thing in the morning why Mustang didn't follow him, and locate the tracking device under the rear of the truck. Tracker one would be easy for him to find.

It was the second tracker that would bring his Chocolate Queen to his door. She would not come to him to return to his bed or to his ever-watchful care. Shenita would come as the avenging angel of death to end his existence. In the morning, he would realize that as well.

As far as Mustang was concerned, they all needed to be prepared. He climbed in his rented vehicle, aiming the nose towards Kentucky. A visit was required to his old childhood friend, the Technician called Slow.

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Evansville, Indiana

It was slow-moving. Karlton Manford went into the building to sell his dirty little secrets and get his wick damp. Men like him always played both sides of the long

game, inadvertently coming up short in the game of life. Today would be his last day on the board as Cherry arrived to end his reign of nonsense.

Karlton wasn't a smart man or even a clever thief. He was the worst kind of criminal, a man favored by luck. No matter what came his way, luckily, he managed to skirt the consequences, moving on to the next home to infest it like a vagabond roach with a one-legged girlfriend.

She spotted him going inside the building. Careful canvassing of the neighborhood didn't leave many high buildings or vantage points to perch, set up, and take her shot. Cherry was a long-range sniper and preferred not to do up close and personal. Besides, the work order specified it needed to look like a hit. She was good at that.

"Damn it," she scoffed, looking around and finding the only vantage point to get a good clean shot and not be seen would be from a tree.

In her early Army days, her spotter grew up in a family of arborists. During a war game exercise at Ft. Wainright, he'd convinced her to gear up and perch herself high in a tree. No one would expect it, and he'd been correct. She looked around, spotting several. A copse of Eastern Red Cedars lined the street. Cherry exited the vehicle, walked slowly down the street, and arrived at the small set of trees lining the dark road. The trees were surrounded by shrubbery as well, which would hide any other materials she would need after making the shot and scampering into the brush. The center tree Cherry chose would be perfect.

Easing her way to her shop, a black Ford F-150, she took out her weapon and a bit of rope and went to the chosen tree. The McMillan TAC-50, her weapon of choice, dissembled in a small carrying bag, appeared as nothing more than a cheap handbag. Rope in hand, she tossed it over the lowest branch, creating a climbing winch, and hoisted her weight on the lower branch. From here, she wiggled her way through the dense foliage of the tree, climbing nearly six feet up and finding the perfect branch.

The rope hung loosely around her waist, as she assembled her weapon, seated a round in the chamber, and secured it to the branch. She worried about the recoil at this height, and for a moment, second-guessed herself. The ammo pack around her waist carried her Technician phone and a few extra rounds, which she never used. Cherry always got the target on the first shot.

Movement on her left startled her as she turned, coming face to face with an angry Waxwing, who felt Cherry was entirely too close to its nest. The small bird charged, coming at her face. Cherry attempted to fight it off, and too late realized she wasn't anchored in the tree. She tumbled down, hitting branches as she went and landing at an awkward angle on her right foot.

"Shit," she said, trying to stand, but the foot couldn't bear her weight. It also hurt like hell. The Cherry on Top was down. Even worse, her phone was in the tree. The pain was entirely too intense, making her heart race, and the best she could do at this point was crawl into the shrubbery. The tears threatened to take over as she crawled, dragging the foot and making it to the bushes. In the dark, she could feel the swelling. She touched her ankle and felt bone protruding. "Fuck! Not good Cherry. Not good."

She leaned into the bushes and waited. This was going to cost her not only a paycheck, but she would lose points for missing the target. Today, Karlton Manford got lucky again.

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Bowling Green, Kentucky

The job was done and Slow packed up to head home. A deep puncture left in the thigh of Candace Gay would ensure a tiring, methodical death. The blood would leave her body with each pump of her heart until her body was left with nothing more than trickles of red life oil. Hurting women was not his thing, but the job was the job.

Candace was a thief who committed treason. The court system took too long, and sometimes the good ole Gub'ment of the USA likes to make an example of people. Candace was today's example of what not to do when working with highly classified documents.

He'd reached his truck when the call came in.

"Slow's Down," he said into the line.

"So is the Cherry on Top," the voice said. It wasn't his handler, The Archangel. This voice belonged to a woman.

"Azreal?"

"Sending GPS coordinates to you," the voice said.

His heart was racing. Bile rose in his throat. He had questions and wanted to ask, but he didn't. All he could ask was what he posed, "Status?"

"Don't know," the voice replied. "You're closest to the Cherry. Get moving."

"Slow's Down," he said, ending the call.

His phone pinged with the coordinates of a downed Technician. He'd been given this task once or twice before. More recently, he received a call to find Mrs. Hump. Now, he received the call to get to the Cherry on Top. Fear filled him as he moved with precision, following the voice on the navigation, making haste to get to Cherry. He was an hour and forty-three minutes away. He needed to get there faster.

He made it to where the GPS said she was and all he spotted was a bunch of shrubbery. Slow didn't see her shop. He parked on the back side of the shrub,

crouching low and following the red dot. It stopped at a bush. He reached his hand inside the shrub and felt an arm.

The body attached to the arm jumped.

“It’s me,” he said, reaching into the bushes and pulling her out slowly. “Where are you hurt?”

“My right foot. Compound fracture,” she told him.

Slow lifted her into his arms, carrying her close to his chest, sighing in relief she was alive and not bleeding out or worse. It was simply a broken foot.

“My weapon. The job,” she said.

“Not my concern,” he said.

“We have to finish the job,” she told him.

“Not my job to finish,” he added, placing her inside of his shop.

“My weapon.”

“Your handler will send someone to retrieve it.”

“My shop.”

“Listen, my job was to retrieve you,” he said, buckling her in and looking at the foot.

“As the Technician sent to do the task, I am completing the task. As your man, I am so full of emotions right now that I don’t know what to say. In the interest of not saying something stupid and overtly alpha male, I’m going to focus on the task

assigned to the Technician. When I get you to safety and the foot taken care of, we will have a conversation with me in the role of your man.”

She was ready to hit him with something heavy, “The role of my man? I missed completing an assignment. I fell out of a fucking tree after being attacked by a goddamn bird! My weapon is still in the tree along with my Technician’s phone. The shop is a mile down the road, and you want to talk about being an alpha male?”

“Abigail,” he said, after walking around the truck to the driver's side. He held his tongue and focused on the drive. They started down the road, knowing it would be two hours before they arrived home. The doctor would be there waiting for them, but in four hours, a lot could go wrong with her foot.

He took a pause, measuring his words before speaking. “I got a call that you were down. I had to put all of my emotions to the side to get here and not shake the shit out of you for being careless,” he told her. “Yes, your man. I am also your husband and the father to our child, and the idea of you no longer breathing when I arrived or being near death is fucking with my calm, so sit over there and please shut the hell up. My heart is about to burst out of my chest with joy at seeing it’s just a broken foot. If...I can’t think about the rest. I can’t think about waking up tomorrow and you no longer being at my side. So, give me a moment to deal with what I’m feeling, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, looking at the profile. Then she felt it. All of the pain, the anguish, the emotions she couldn’t express before living a life that didn’t appreciate her talents and ability, hit her in the guts. An entire life of being strong for herself, for Helen, for Naomi, never left her room to cry or be vulnerable. The sob left her throat in a wail, and she cried out in sheer relief at not having to spend the next month trying to figure out how to live. He came for her. She didn’t have to call him, beg, or even explain what happened, her husband had shown up.

“I have never been happier to see anyone in my life, Michael. Thank you for coming for me.”

“I will come for you every time, Abigail. I love you,” he said, aiming the vehicle towards home.

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Cheboygan, Michigan

The darkness of the garage is what made him notice the green glow on the ground. He'd barely gotten out of the truck when he noticed the light. Moving with haste, he dropped to the ground, looking underneath the truck to spot the device. It was a tracker. The big bastard had placed a tracker on his vehicle.

“Don't panic. Don't panic,” he said, getting inside the vehicle, cranking it, and opening the garage door. “This is an easy fix.”

He drove towards the Mackinac Bridge going through the Hiawatha National Forest to the Village of Newberry, a quaint little place where the biggest employer was the Department of Corrections. The Village Council was going to be shocked when the FBI and others descended upon the town. He smiled a wicked smile as he dropped the tracker just outside of the prison gate and headed home.

“You have to get up earlier than that, you muscle-bound moron, to get one over on me. I am The Collector! You don't collect me, you knot-headed bastard,” he screamed at the rear-view mirror.

He was emotional.

He didn't do emotional.

She was making him emotional and why? He only had her for a week, and this is what she'd done to him. She didn't understand love and didn't deserve a man like him as her own.

"By why do I want you so much, Shenita?"

Now, it wasn't about simply finding his Chocolate Queen to punish her for causing him so much dismay, but it had become a matter of artistic pride. He could no longer shop for pretty dolls with Kurtzwilde's Company. He was going to find her, or maybe let her come to him and set a trap.

"I like that, let her come to me..." he said smiling into the same rear-view mirror. "I shall return home to prepare your new room. A place for us to love. A place for us to call home."

## Chapter 8 - Drill

Home. They arrived home a little after one a.m. and he, in all honesty, was more tired than he'd ever been in his life. It truly had been a hell of a long day that started on a high note with the family playing a bit of paintball, which would lead to a cookout of burgers and sausage dogs on the grill. His mother was making her yummy sour cream pound cake and Rebecca his sister made the most killer baked beans with green peppers, sausage, and ground beef. The saliva in his mouth began to water as he sat in his shop staring at the place they called home.

In the yard were still the vehicle his parents had driven over earlier in the day, or rather yesterday, with his sister in the back seat. His cousin Zeke, his pregnant wife Tameka, and his daughter Michelle were also inside the home. However, in his driveway were three additional vehicles, the first an unmarked white cargo van. The

vehicle belonged to Doctor Elden Thomas, the medical professional assigned to the Southeast Directions. He must have been in the area to make it to Louisville so quickly.

The second vehicle he also recognized. The black Ford F-150 was similar to his own and the one driven by his wife, but this truck had one major difference. On the tailgate were iridescent angel wings, open and spanning the width of the tailgate. It was a symbol for law enforcement that the driver of said vehicle was an Archangel. The iridescent wings of this angel were green, meaning the vehicle belonged to Azreal, the Archangel who oversaw the group of Technicians called the Fruits of the Great Lakes of which his wife was a member.

When an agent was compromised, as Cherry had been on her last assignment, the rule was to maintain radio silence and go to ground. The rally point was where aid would converge to determine the next steps. In this situation, the ground point for convergence was his home, previously a secretive place that very few people were aware of, well, at least until now.

The final car he didn't know, but he had an idea who it was based on the style of vehicle and the person knowing where he lived. Slow sat still in the truck, saying nothing, knowing he needed to get Cherry inside to have the Doc assess her, but he was just plumb tired. The past week had been a great deal with his job and his daughter wanting to have conversations about her vagina, in conjunction with having to train an onboarding Technician whom he feared was entirely too perfect for the job and would end up enjoying the work. In his professional assessment as a criminologist, no one should enjoy the work they did, no matter how much of a necessity it was in the overall scheme of the universe.

Cherry was also quiet, sitting and staring at the home. Her foot throbbed like a son of a bitch in heat, her wrist panged her, and the tummy which growled loudly reminded her of the need for food, plus, she had to poop. She noticed the extra vehicles in the

yard and absently turned to Slow. “I don’t think we have enough toilet paper,” she announced.

Slow turned his head slowly to look at her. “That’s where your mind went?”

“Well, yeah. I bought a twelve-pack of family-sized rolls, but then I gave four rolls to Helen, but that’s a lot of butts. I don’t think we have enough if they are planning to stay another day,” she told him. “Why, what are you thinking?”

“Pound cake,” he said. “I was thinking when we left to go to work, Ma was pulling out that yummy pound cake, and I hope they saved me some. Also, I didn’t eat a lot before we left, you know, didn’t want to be sluggish, so I’m hungry. I hope there are some burgers left or even a sausage dog.”

“You are a sociopath, you know that?”

“Says the woman who fell out of a tree, broke her ankle, left her weapon in the same tree, and is now worried about the amount of shit paper in the house,” he said, cutting the engine. “There is a stash of paper products in the shed, along with soaps, canned goods, and other end-of-the-world supply shit.”

She sighed deeply as he opened the door to his shop. On the ride home, they had both remained silent, not talking but needing to say more. One of the things she loved about him was lots of words were not needed for an understanding. Currently, they have an understanding. Her boss was in the house to assess her status, determine the next steps for the assignment she’d failed, and possibly fire her as a failed Technician.

“Let’s face it head-on and together,” he said, coming around the truck. He opened the door and lifted Cherry in his arms, being aware of the foot, but also noticing that she was wincing and had bruising on her face. “Yeah, you hurt more than just your foot.”

He climbed the stairs of the front porch and reached for the handle to find his father standing there, the door wide. His eyes were on Cherry. His eyes went to his son. Questions rose in his expression, and then there was a look of relief. Instinctually, Mark Neary embraced them both, squeezing Cherry between them, and providing a fatherly kiss on her cheek.

“Dad,” Slow said, moving around his father but pausing to hear the words his dad had been holding until his arrival.

“Hey, people started arriving. I knew something was wrong when the Doc came through the door followed by the very scary lady,” Mark said.

“Azreal.”

“Oh, just fucking dandy, the Angel of Death—why does that not surprise me in the least,” Mark said with his eyes wide. “She nearly scared the truck nuts off of me. Then the Doc, and that wife of his...wow, those two, I have questions.”

“Wife?” Slow said, turning his body with Cherry still in his arms to spot Mrs. Hump, the former femme fatale of their team. “Hmmp.”

He carried Cherry to the sofa where the Doctor came over to check her status. Small feet were heard running down the hall, and Slow sighed deeply. He was tired, too tired tonight to handle what would come from his daughter’s tiny mouth, plus he was hungry. He spotted the boy child. The child was holding one of the trucks given to Naomi by the people in his office. Michelle followed behind the boy holding a doll in her hand. His own daughter stood silently, looking at all the people in her home. Her little face showed relief at seeing her parents had returned.

“Doc,” Slow said to the man. It was the handle the Technicians called him, who bent to check Cherry’s foot. No one knew what kind of doctor he was or if he in fact even

held a medical license, but the Archangel found him, and The Company employed him, therefore he was their physician for the business.

Doc spoke, looking at Cherry's foot. "Compound break, but I will need to X-ray it for chips, fractures, and the like. Are you pregnant or think you might be expecting?"

Everyone in the room turned to Cherry, staring at her. She blushed furiously at being put on the spot. She replied, "Not to my knowledge, but let's play it safe, just in case." She looked at her boss in embarrassment.

Naomi, hearing the p-word, stood in front of her parents, concerned at seeing her mother's foot and also balked at seeing the blood. "Pregnant? Is Mommy pregnant like Michelle's Mommy? Daddy! Did you put a baby in Mommy's vagina?"

The boy stepped forward, and he looked at Slow. "Hey Mister, remember me? I am Bud. Bud Thomas. My daddy is the doctor, and you know what he told me? He told me that you have to place your penis in a vagina to make babies. I'm keeping my penis to myself. I don't want to make any babies."

"Dear Lord, be merciful with me," he said, looking at the little boy mutherfuckingly before going to the dining table and taking a seat. He simply wanted food and sleep and for the day to come to a quiet close. "Good to see you, Bud."

"I smell better too Mister, so you don't have to give me a bath again," Bud said to Slow.

Hump joined him at the table, followed by Naomi, who wanted to sit on his lap. Helen, figuring Slow would be hungry when he returned home, removed the plate she'd saved for him from the warming drawer of the oven and placed it in front of him on the table, along with a bottle of hand sanitizer. She also brought over a small bowl of coleslaw and a slice of pound cake. When the Doc finished with Cherry, she

would feed her too.

“Thank you, Helen,” he said, saying a quick prayer, not looking up.

Hump was smiling at Slow, which made Naomi squint her eyes, staring at this new pretty woman mutherfuckingly. Hump didn’t miss the connection, saying, “Ah, she is your biological. A lot has changed since we last saw each other.”

“For you as well,” he said, nodding to her hand and the rock that glimmered on her left ring finger. Bud had come to the table to see what people were eating, and he wanted a moment of reassurance from his mother, Ms. Hump, who provided him a hug and a kiss.

“I never did get a chance to say thank you, for saving my life...for coming for me when I needed you most,” she told Slow.

“Hump, I knew you’d fight with everything you had in you, knowing I was coming. You knew I would come for you,” he said, looking at the plate of food he desperately needed to sustain himself.

“Doc, whom I did marry, as if you didn’t already know that, he told me, while I was down, you kept watch,” she said, blushing. “He also added, when speaking on my initial wounds and care, you never left me alone with him, not even to change my bandages. I appreciate that more than you know.”

“You were defenseless. I wouldn’t leave you to anyone’s mercy in that state,” he told her. “Not even him.”

Helen was always watching the interaction between Slow and Hump. Her cousin’s husband had a rapport with the woman, but there wasn’t any sexual tension between the two. She didn’t come across as a friend to Slow, however, there was something

there. Cherry glanced at them several times as well, finally dismissing Hump as a threat to her happy family, focusing on the pain in her foot. Hump didn't miss any of it.

She held up the hand, giving him a better view of the ring he nodded acknowledging, before asking him, "Are both of the ladies yours?"

"Just the one I carried inside," he said. "The other one is her cousin."

"Interesting," Hump said, arching a brow. She instructed her son to either take a seat or return to the room to play. The boy, however, was fixed on Naomi. He was not budging until the girl moved. Slow continued to eat, then answered Hump.

"Not interesting at all," Slow said in a lowered tone. "When The Collector failed to acquire you, he stumbled upon her. It took nearly two weeks to find her."

Naomi, also fixed on Bud, was now staring at the boy. "Why do you keep looking at me like that? If you try and kiss me, I will bop you in the mouth."

Bud answered, "I don't want to kiss you. I want to go and play in your room. I can't just go and play in there without you. So, I'm waiting."

Naomi eyeballed him, looking at Hump. "Is she your Mommy?"

"Yep," Bud said.

"She's pretty, but not as pretty as my mommy," Naomi said.

Bud shrugged. "I think my Mommy is the most beautifulest woman in the world. And she makes a good peach pie. Do you like peach pie?"

“I like peanut butter cookies,” Naomi said.

Slow, over all of it, “Can you guys go to Naomi’s room and play in there?”

“Okay Daddy,” she said, her gaze going back to Hump as if she were silently threatening her to not try any funny business. However, Naomi still hadn’t moved. Too much was happening and she didn’t want to miss anything. He bit into the burger, chewing as if he had all the time in the world. His focus returned to Hump, “I had to call in back up to help locate Helen, that’s my wife’s cousin, but the Collector got away. The tracker is still on the trail and hopefully, has some good news for me.”

“Okay, then it explains the mystery man in the bathroom,” Hump said as the sound of a toilet flushing echoed through the house.

The doctor, busy with Cherry’s foot, didn’t look up as Azreal wanted to know the extent of the damage. As she feared, the Cherry on Top was out of play. The day was coming anyway to the end of her reign as the team sniper, living with a man like Slow who would want a son to go along with the cute little daughter. The edge in Cherry wasn’t there anymore either; Azreal spotted that as well when he carried her through the door. Her mother-in-law was fussing over her, and the sister-in-law brought her food; Cherry was loving the attention and affection, leaving the angry bitter female tiger who blew out people’s brains for a living to morph into a now domesticated feline. Domesticated cats didn’t like to hunt. Now she had two problems – an unfulfilled contract and the loss of a prime piece of fruit in her salad bowl.

From the bathroom walked in a man with wide shoulders that carried so much of the weight of life; he entered the living space, nearly sucking the air out of the room. He didn’t say who he was but Mark and Ruth Neary knew him well, giving him access to the house. Cherry looked up, saw him, and smiled, and to Helen, he appeared to be a distant memory, fuzzy around the edges, but familiar.

“Mustang,” Slow said.

“Slow,” he replied.

“To what do I owe the honor?”

“Came to deliver some news,” Mustang said, looking at the cake on the neat saucer.

“Hey, I didn’t get any of Mama Ruth’s pound cake!”

Slow squinted, staring at him with determination to get to the crux of the matter,

“Will you focus, man?”

“No, I want some of Mama Ruth’s pound cake too,” he complained, and a slice on a saucer got shoved into his hand by Helen. “Thanks; good to see you’re doing well.”

Helen blinked several times. Her memory banks were overloaded as she searched her mind to remember the man, but a scent hit her. A woodsy, oaky smell, then it came back. He’d carried her. On the street where she collapsed, her eyes fluttering, feet bleeding, and nearly exhausted, he was with her cousin on the rescue. She nodded to him.

“Thank you for helping to save my life,” she said softly, “Have you located him? Do you know where he is?”

Now everyone was looking at Mustang. “Yes, I’ve located him and the women. I was coming to let you know as well as Azreal and was informed that all of you were in one place.”

Azreal stood up. She wasn’t an attractive woman by any means, but capable, skilled, and smarter than your average bear. Unfortunately, she had the features of one as well—an angry bear, fresh out of hibernation seeking food from an unsuspecting

picnicker who would be shocked at her arrival.

“We have a pressing matter at hand,” she said, looking at Cherry. “The assignment needs to be closed. You left your shop with a great amount of equipment in it. Where is your weapon?”

“Still in the tree whose inhabitants objected to me being in the branches,” Cherry added, “along with my ammo belt and Tech phone.”

“Not good,” Azreal said. “Before we can think about The Collector, we have to close the job.”

Mustang spoke up, “I can’t do it since I’m assigned to Oregon. Who do you have closest who can pitch hit?”

“Bad Apple is too far away. We don’t have enough time for Passion Fruit to stage an accident, and Lemon is down with the flu,” Azreal explained.

A small voice spoke up, “I’ll take care of it.”

Everyone looked around to see who had spoken. The voice said again, “I’ll close the contract if I can get a second set of hands as a backup. I’ll close the contract, then go take care of The Collector and free those women. Besides, I told them I was coming back, and I promised him I’d be back to take care of him too.”

Mark stepped forward, about to speak, but Slow shook his head no to his father. Ruth wanted to speak, but Slow shook his head no to his mother. His eyes were on his wife. She looked at Helen.

“Melody, my favorite rifle is in the center tree. There are five trees. Melody is on branch 7 seven in tree three,” she said. “My shop is one mile down the road, west of

the tree, and my cards for fuel and other identifications are in the secret compartment.”

Helen didn’t flinch. “You’re set up in the tree, is the weapon fixed on the entry or the exit?”

“One and the same,” Cherry replied. “He entered to make the deal, and being as rapacious as he is, he’ll be back tonight to sample the merchandise he’s going to deliver.”

Helen said, “I didn’t see the data; is it supposed to look like a hit from a rival, or is the shot meant to send a message based on the caliber of the bullet?”

“Send the message,” Cherry said.

“I need to get to your vehicle to make it happen,” Helen said, looking at Mustang. “Will you ride with me to close the assignment?”

Mustang’s eyes were wide. The same woman he helped rescue a few months prior was now going out to take an assignment missed by the Cherry on Top. His facial expression said everything his mouth didn’t. Helen didn’t want to hear his alpha male bullshit on her abilities to pull a trigger or any got-damned thing else. She was fed up with men trying to dictate how she’d exist in this world.

“People have underestimated me my entire life,” Helen said. “I’m still standing. I’m still here, and I am a much better shot than my cousin. Azreal, make the call.”

Azrael frowned, a thing she should never do, which made Naomi recoil, gripping her father’s arms. Azreal’s deep husky voice spoke, “Shit, at this point, I don’t have much of a choice other than to take it myself, and I’m not climbing any trees.”

“Then we have it,” Helen said. “Let’s get everyone settled in for the night. I have two bedrooms and a pull-out couch at my place. Mustang, take the couch here with Slow. Zeke and Tameka you can take the second bedroom at my place, Doc and the pretty lady may have the other. Logically, the boy can stay here with the girls, Bunny has a trundle mattress under her bed that can hold the boy, and Michelle can share her bed. Azreal, you can take my couch. Rebecca, there is a fold-up bed in the closet to the right which can be rolled into the bedroom with your parents. Mustang, you and I can rest up and head out in the afternoon and return your rental once I retrieve the shop and complete the assignment. You lead me to The Collector, and I can handle that and get the women safe, which I hope Azreal can provide backup with law enforcement and social services, then I will get you on your way.”

Mark didn’t like how calm Helen was sounding. It worried him. “Hold on a cotton-picking minute. You are making this entire operation sound simply cleaner than duck nuts, and it’s not. You’re talking about ending not one life but two here, young lady.”

Helen’s demeanor changed. She ushered the kids into Naomi’s room where they didn’t need to hear what she had to say next. She quickly helped the kids return to Naomi’s room to get settled by Tameka. Zeke was also paying close attention to the woman who said little, but when she spoke, she dropped a mouthful.

She returned with a cold steely stare aimed at Mark Neary. “Sir, with all due respect, things are sometimes simple. We have to eat. Your son has taken on a great deal, and my cousin and I can carry our own weight. We need the money, and that mutherfucker who took me and those women needs to die.”

“Yes but...,” Mark started.

“He gave each of us a name, Sir,” she said. “I was his Chocolate Queen, and he snatched me so I could cook him soul food. He still has with him, or at least I pray they are alive, Irish, Italy, China, and Mexicali. The last one talked too much and

gave him too much lip in English and in Spanish, and he cut out her tongue. He washed me from head to toe with bleach water telling me I was unclean. We had dinner with me chained to a table and when I challenged him? he took me, on the floor in front of those women, like I was nothing more than cattle to be bred. I'm not going to even start to say what he did before cutting up my feet and my breasts before letting me go. Therefore, you have no right to mansplain to me the need for the life choices of these filthy men who prey upon women."

"Helen, I'm sorry for what happened to you by that man," Mark said.

"Mr. Neary, please stop," she said, sounding aggravated. "You have no idea the number of women in your life or whom you work with or know who have fallen victim to some creep and never speak on it. Yes, you're aware of what has happened to each of us in this room, but The Collector and the ass rash from the assignment are indicative of a mental rot of manhood in this country. I'm not killing him out of vengeance. I'm killing him out of necessity. I'm going to sleep fine. And just so we are clear, a man from my childhood who left me barren is the demon that haunts my sleep. I am going to slay both of those dragons and learn to sleep well."

"You're right, I can't understand or prevent you from doing what you feel is right or necessary, but you are loved, Helen," Mark said. "You're building a life here with our family, your family."

"Will the family still be here after I put a few well-placed bullets in a son of a bitch?" She asked, moving closer to the back door, "Yeah. Thought so. Good night, family," she offered, pointing to Tameka who'd returned to the communal space after settling in the children, her pregnancy in full second trimester making the woman appear to be out of balance.

Naomi, who'd been sent to bed, returned. Too much was happening in the house and she wasn't sleepy. She popped under her father's arm, climbing into his lap.

Suddenly, her small eyes roamed the room, landing on Tameka's belly, fully understanding a baby was growing inside of Michelle's mommy's tummy, and she'd heard it was a little boy. What she hadn't thought about she suddenly reasoned as she looked at the belly, then at Zeke, and back to Tameka's belly now protruding from under her top.

"Daddy," she said softly, "how is that baby getting out of there?"

"Huh?" he asked, not wanting to hear anything else from his daughter.

"Daddy, she has a baby in her tummy. How does that baby get out of there? Is that baby gonna come out of her vagina?"

Before he could answer, Naomi began to bawl at the top of her lungs. "Daddy, I don't want to be a girl. I don't want any stuff coming out of my vagina but pee!"

Mrs. Hump covered her mouth to keep from laughing. Mustang's eyes grew wide at the small confession from the child. Cherry, in obvious pain, closed her eyes as the Doc snapped the bones into place for the resetting. Slow was at the end of his rope. He got to his feet, passed his daughter to his mother, and gave a small salute. It was late, he was tired, his belly was full, and his heart was in flux.

His wife was benched.

His best friend had returned and was taking his sister-in-law on a killing assignment.

His daughter was obsessed with her vagina.

All he needed was sleep.

"I'm going to bed," he said, leaving the room and entering his bedroom. He didn't

bother to undress, but simply flung himself on the bed and closed his eyes. The one man in the world he trusted more than his father was Mustang. He knew the rules, he knew the drill, and they would get the job done, one way or another. “Good enough.”

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The rooms emptied with family members dispersing to bedrooms and a blanket and pillow appeared for Mustang to get comfortable. Helen was standing near the couch after having silently returned from her home where she'd gotten the Doc and his wife settled, along with Azreal and Zeke with his wife. Ruth and Mark were in bed along with the children. He knew she was there as he'd heard the creak of the hinges on the back door. The lotion she wore smelled of almonds.

“You’re using Jergens lotion on your skin,” he said, “I can smell you a mile away.” He removed his boots, as he accepted the pillow and blanket.

“You and Slow must go back a long way,” Helen said to Mustang. “He acknowledged you being here and you called Ruth ‘Mama.’ There is a story there. Maybe I can hear it in between me climbing out of a tree and driving to Michigan.”

“Maybe,” he said, leaning over to unfasten his boots.

“Fair enough,” she replied, only needing one answer to know his entire story. Therefore, she asked, “How did you like working as a camp counselor with Reverend Johnson in the summers?”

Mustang’s head snapped around to look at her fully. She wasn’t as innocent as she appeared. Helen wasn’t a timid mouse who needed protecting. The woman was astute and sharp. It didn’t escape his notice how she managed everyone in the room. The timid mouse had silenced Mark Neary, shutting him down. She fascinated Mustang in a way he didn’t understand, but he was interested to see how the two upcoming

situations would be handled.

“Hmmpf,” he replied, “get some rest; we have a lot to discuss tomorrow.”

“No, we don’t actually. The less we talk about it, the better. Let it unfold esoterically. You stay close on my heels, let me get it done, and offer aid when I ask or am about to mess up,” she whispered.

“So, you’re dragging me along as your bitch?”

“No, I need you to be my shadow and keep me safe,” she told him. “Slow trusts you, therefore, I trust you. I remember the feeling of safety when you lifted me in your arms, carrying me away from the ugliness. Keep me alive and get us both back here safely. Can you do that for us all?”

“Us all?”

“Yes Mustang, for our family?”

He nodded, feeling overwhelmed by emotion. She saw through him as if all of his years of wandering had brought him back here. Mustang came through the door to be hugged and kissed on his temple by Mark Neary as he always did when he walked through the door. The terrible parents God had given him were replaced when he was 13 by Mark and Ruth Neary. He’d grown up in the house with Rebecca and Michael. At the age of 15, during a swimming incident at summer camp, Rebecca nearly drowned. He was closest to the Neary girl and brought her from the water, breathing life into the slumped form, and resuscitating her body. Mustang, at 16 years old, when asked if he wanted to file to become emancipated, opted instead for a request to be adopted.

Mark and Ruth Neary saw no issue with the request, nor did their two children. He

was adopted, and by his own request renamed Jairus Paul Neary. Mustang was a Neary, and Helen was correct, he would do what was necessary for the family.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Home. They arrived home a little after one a.m. and he, in all honesty, was more tired than he'd ever been in his life. It truly had been a hell of a long day that started on a high note with the family playing a bit of paintball, which would lead to a cookout of burgers and sausage dogs on the grill. His mother was making her yummy sour cream pound cake and Rebecca his sister made the most killer baked beans with green peppers, sausage, and ground beef. The saliva in his mouth began to water as he sat in his shop staring at the place they called home.

In the yard were still the vehicle his parents had driven over earlier in the day, or rather yesterday, with his sister in the back seat. His cousin Zeke, his pregnant wife Tameka, and his daughter Michelle were also inside the home. However, in his driveway were three additional vehicles, the first an unmarked white cargo van. The vehicle belonged to Doctor Elden Thomas, the medical professional assigned to the Southeast Directions. He must have been in the area to make it to Louisville so quickly.

The second vehicle he also recognized. The black Ford F-150 was similar to his own and the one driven by his wife, but this truck had one major difference. On the tailgate were iridescent angel wings, open and spanning the width of the tailgate. It was a symbol for law enforcement that the driver of said vehicle was an Archangel. The iridescent wings of this angel were green, meaning the vehicle belonged to Azreal, the Archangel who oversaw the group of Technicians called the Fruits of the Great Lakes of which his wife was a member.

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convergence was his home, previously a secretive place that very few people were aware of, well, at least until now.

The final car he didn't know, but he had an idea who it was based on the style of vehicle and the person knowing where he lived. Slow sat still in the truck, saying nothing, knowing he needed to get Cherry inside to have the Doc assess her, but he was just plumb tired. The past week had been a great deal with his job and his daughter wanting to have conversations about her vagina, in conjunction with having to train an onboarding Technician whom he feared was entirely too perfect for the job and would end up enjoying the work. In his professional assessment as a criminologist, no one should enjoy the work they did, no matter how much of a necessity it was in the overall scheme of the universe.

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Slow turned his head slowly to look at her. "That's where your mind went?"

"Well, yeah. I bought a twelve-pack of family-sized rolls, but then I gave four rolls to Helen, but that's a lot of butts. I don't think we have enough if they are planning to stay another day," she told him. "Why, what are you thinking?"

"Pound cake," he said. "I was thinking when we left to go to work, Ma was pulling out that yummy pound cake, and I hope they saved me some. Also, I didn't eat a lot before we left, you know, didn't want to be sluggish, so I'm hungry. I hope there are some burgers left or even a sausage dog."

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“Hey, people started arriving. I knew something was wrong when the Doc came through the door followed by the very scary lady,” Mark said.

“Azreal.”

“Oh, just fucking dandy, the Angel of Death—why does that not surprise me in the

least,” Mark said with his eyes wide. “She nearly scared the truck nuts off of me. Then the Doc, and that wife of his...wow, those two, I have questions.”

“Wife?” Slow said, turning his body with Cherry still in his arms to spot Mrs. Hump, the former femme fatale of their team. “Hmmp.”

He carried Cherry to the sofa where the Doctor came over to check her status. Small feet were heard running down the hall, and Slow sighed deeply. He was tired, too tired tonight to handle what would come from his daughter’s tiny mouth, plus he was hungry. He spotted the boy child. The child was holding one of the trucks given to Naomi by the people in his office. Michelle followed behind the boy holding a doll in her hand. His own daughter stood silently, looking at all the people in her home. Her little face showed relief at seeing her parents had returned.

“Doc,” Slow said to the man. It was the handle the Technicians called him, who bent to check Cherry’s foot. No one knew what kind of doctor he was or if he in fact even held a medical license, but the Archangel found him, and The Company employed him, therefore he was their physician for the business.

Doc spoke, looking at Cherry’s foot. “Compound break, but I will need to X-ray it for chips, fractures, and the like. Are you pregnant or think you might be expecting?”

Everyone in the room turned to Cherry, staring at her. She blushed furiously at being put on the spot. She replied, “Not to my knowledge, but let’s play it safe, just in case.” She looked at her boss in embarrassment.

Naomi, hearing the p-word, stood in front of her parents, concerned at seeing her mother’s foot and also balked at seeing the blood. “Pregnant? Is Mommy pregnant like Michelle’s Mommy? Daddy! Did you put a baby in Mommy’s vagina?”

The boy stepped forward, and he looked at Slow. “Hey Mister, remember me? I am

Bud. Bud Thomas. My daddy is the doctor, and you know what he told me? He told me that you have to place your penis in a vagina to make babies. I'm keeping my penis to myself. I don't want to make any babies."

"Dear Lord, be merciful with me," he said, looking at the little boy mutherfuckingly before going to the dining table and taking a seat. He simply wanted food and sleep and for the day to come to a quiet close. "Good to see you, Bud."

"I smell better too Mister, so you don't have to give me a bath again," Bud said to Slow.

Hump joined him at the table, followed by Naomi, who wanted to sit on his lap. Helen, figuring Slow would be hungry when he returned home, removed the plate she'd saved for him from the warming drawer of the oven and placed it in front of him on the table, along with a bottle of hand sanitizer. She also brought over a small bowl of coleslaw and a slice of pound cake. When the Doc finished with Cherry, she would feed her too.

"Thank you, Helen," he said, saying a quick prayer, not looking up.

Hump was smiling at Slow, which made Naomi squint her eyes, staring at this new pretty woman mutherfuckingly. Hump didn't miss the connection, saying, "Ah, she is your biological. A lot has changed since we last saw each other."

"For you as well," he said, nodding to her hand and the rock that glimmered on her left ring finger. Bud had come to the table to see what people were eating, and he wanted a moment of reassurance from his mother, Ms. Hump, who provided him a hug and a kiss.

"I never did get a chance to say thank you, for saving my life...for coming for me when I needed you most," she told Slow.

“Hump, I knew you’d fight with everything you had in you, knowing I was coming. You knew I would come for you,” he said, looking at the plate of food he desperately needed to sustain himself.

“Doc, whom I did marry, as if you didn’t already know that, he told me, while I was down, you kept watch,” she said, blushing. “He also added, when speaking on my initial wounds and care, you never left me alone with him, not even to change my bandages. I appreciate that more than you know.”

“You were defenseless. I wouldn’t leave you to anyone’s mercy in that state,” he told her. “Not even him.”

Helen was always watching the interaction between Slow and Hump. Her cousin’s husband had a rapport with the woman, but there wasn’t any sexual tension between the two. She didn’t come across as a friend to Slow, however, there was something there. Cherry glanced at them several times as well, finally dismissing Hump as a threat to her happy family, focusing on the pain in her foot. Hump didn’t miss any of it.

She held up the hand, giving him a better view of the ring he nodded acknowledging, before asking him, “Are both of the ladies yours?”

“Just the one I carried inside,” he said. “The other one is her cousin.”

“Interesting,” Hump said, arching a brow. She instructed her son to either take a seat or return to the room to play. The boy, however, was fixed on Noami. He was not budging until the girl moved. Slow continued to eat, then answered Hump.

“Not interesting at all,” Slow said in a lowered tone. “When The Collector failed to acquire you, he stumbled upon her. It took nearly two weeks to find her.”

Naomi, also fixed on Bud, was now staring at the boy. “Why do you keep looking at me like that? If you try and kiss me, I will bop you in the mouth.”

Bud answered, “I don’t want to kiss you. I want to go and play in your room. I can’t just go and play in there without you. So, I’m waiting.”

Naomi eyeballed him, looking at Hump. “Is she your Mommy?”

“Yep,” Bud said.

“She’s pretty, but not as pretty as my mommy,” Naomi said.

Bud shrugged. “I think my Mommy is the most beautifulest woman in the world. And she makes a good peach pie. Do you like peach pie?”

“I like peanut butter cookies,” Naomi said.

Slow, over all of it, “Can you guys go to Naomi’s room and play in there?”

“Okay Daddy,” she said, her gaze going back to Hump as if she were silently threatening her to not try any funny business. However, Naomi still hadn’t moved. Too much was happening and she didn’t want to miss anything. He bit into the burger, chewing as if he had all the time in the world. His focus returned to Hump, “I had to call in back up to help locate Helen, that’s my wife’s cousin, but the Collector got away. The tracker is still on the trail and hopefully, has some good news for me.”

“Okay, then it explains the mystery man in the bathroom,” Hump said as the sound of a toilet flushing echoed through the house.

The doctor, busy with Cherry’s foot, didn’t look up as Azreal wanted to know the extent of the damage. As she feared, the Cherry on Top was out of play. The day was

coming anyway to the end of her reign as the team sniper, living with a man like Slow who would want a son to go along with the cute little daughter. The edge in Cherry wasn't there anymore either; Azreal spotted that as well when he carried her through the door. Her mother-in-law was fussing over her, and the sister-in-law brought her food; Cherry was loving the attention and affection, leaving the angry bitter female tiger who blew out people's brains for a living to morph into a now domesticated feline. Domesticated cats didn't like to hunt. Now she had two problems – an unfulfilled contract and the loss of a prime piece of fruit in her salad bowl.

From the bathroom walked in a man with wide shoulders that carried so much of the weight of life; he entered the living space, nearly sucking the air out of the room. He didn't say who he was but Mark and Ruth Neary knew him well, giving him access to the house. Cherry looked up, saw him, and smiled, and to Helen, he appeared to be a distant memory, fuzzy around the edges, but familiar.

"Mustang," Slow said.

"Slow," he replied.

"To what do I owe the honor?"

"Came to deliver some news," Mustang said, looking at the cake on the neat saucer.

"Hey, I didn't get any of Mama Ruth's pound cake!"

Slow squinted, staring at him with determination to get to the crux of the matter, "Will you focus, man?"

"No, I want some of Mama Ruth's pound cake too," he complained, and a slice on a saucer got shoved into his hand by Helen. "Thanks; good to see you're doing well."

Helen blinked several times. Her memory banks were overloaded as she searched her mind to remember the man, but a scent hit her. A woodsy, oaky smell, then it came back. He'd carried her. On the street where she collapsed, her eyes fluttering, feet bleeding, and nearly exhausted, he was with her cousin on the rescue. She nodded to him.

"Thank you for helping to save my life," she said softly, "Have you located him? Do you know where he is?"

Now everyone was looking at Mustang. "Yes, I've located him and the women. I was coming to let you know as well as Azreal and was informed that all of you were in one place."

Azreal stood up. She wasn't an attractive woman by any means, but capable, skilled, and smarter than your average bear. Unfortunately, she had the features of one as well—an angry bear, fresh out of hibernation seeking food from an unsuspecting picnicker who would be shocked at her arrival.

"We have a pressing matter at hand," she said, looking at Cherry. "The assignment needs to be closed. You left your shop with a great amount of equipment in it. Where is your weapon?"

"Still in the tree whose inhabitants objected to me being in the branches," Cherry added, "along with my ammo belt and Tech phone."

"Not good," Azreal said. "Before we can think about The Collector, we have to close the job."

Mustang spoke up, "I can't do it since I'm assigned to Oregon. Who do you have closest who can pitch hit?"

“Bad Apple is too far away. We don’t have enough time for Passion Fruit to stage an accident, and Lemon is down with the flu,” Azreal explained.

A small voice spoke up, “I’ll take care of it.”

Everyone looked around to see who had spoken. The voice said again, “I’ll close the contract if I can get a second set of hands as a backup. I’ll close the contract, then go take care of The Collector and free those women. Besides, I told them I was coming back, and I promised him I’d be back to take care of him too.”

Mark stepped forward, about to speak, but Slow shook his head no to his father. Ruth wanted to speak, but Slow shook his head no to his mother. His eyes were on his wife. She looked at Helen.

“Melody, my favorite rifle is in the center tree. There are five trees. Melody is on branch 7 seven in tree three,” she said. “My shop is one mile down the road, west of the tree, and my cards for fuel and other identifications are in the secret compartment.”

Helen didn’t flinch. “You’re set up in the tree, is the weapon fixed on the entry or the exit?”

“One and the same,” Cherry replied. “He entered to make the deal, and being as rapacious as he is, he’ll be back tonight to sample the merchandise he’s going to deliver.”

Helen said, “I didn’t see the data; is it supposed to look like a hit from a rival, or is the shot meant to send a message based on the caliber of the bullet?”

“Send the message,” Cherry said.

“I need to get to your vehicle to make it happen,” Helen said, looking at Mustang.  
“Will you ride with me to close the assignment?”

Mustang’s eyes were wide. The same woman he helped rescue a few months prior was now going out to take an assignment missed by the Cherry on Top. His facial expression said everything his mouth didn’t. Helen didn’t want to hear his alpha male bullshit on her abilities to pull a trigger or any got-damned thing else. She was fed up with men trying to dictate how she’d exist in this world.

“People have underestimated me my entire life,” Helen said. “I’m still standing. I’m still here, and I am a much better shot than my cousin. Azreal, make the call.”

Azrael frowned, a thing she should never do, which made Naomi recoil, gripping her father’s arms. Azreal’s deep husky voice spoke, “Shit, at this point, I don’t have much of a choice other than to take it myself, and I’m not climbing any trees.”

“Then we have it,” Helen said. “Let’s get everyone settled in for the night. I have two bedrooms and a pull-out couch at my place. Mustang, take the couch here with Slow. Zeke and Tameka you can take the second bedroom at my place, Doc and the pretty lady may have the other. Logically, the boy can stay here with the girls, Bunny has a trundle mattress under her bed that can hold the boy, and Michelle can share her bed. Azreal, you can take my couch. Rebecca, there is a fold-up bed in the closet to the right which can be rolled into the bedroom with your parents. Mustang, you and I can rest up and head out in the afternoon and return your rental once I retrieve the shop and complete the assignment. You lead me to The Collector, and I can handle that and get the women safe, which I hope Azreal can provide backup with law enforcement and social services, then I will get you on your way.”

Mark didn’t like how calm Helen was sounding. It worried him. “Hold on a cotton-picking minute. You are making this entire operation sound simply cleaner than duck nuts, and it’s not. You’re talking about ending not one life but two here, young lady.”

Helen's demeanor changed. She ushered the kids into Naomi's room where they didn't need to hear what she had to say next. She quickly helped the kids return to Naomi's room to get settled by Tameka. Zeke was also paying close attention to the woman who said little, but when she spoke, she dropped a mouthful.

She returned with a cold steely stare aimed at Mark Neary. "Sir, with all due respect, things are sometimes simple. We have to eat. Your son has taken on a great deal, and my cousin and I can carry our own weight. We need the money, and that mutherfucker who took me and those women needs to die."

"Yes but..." Mark started.

"He gave each of us a name, Sir," she said. "I was his Chocolate Queen, and he snatched me so I could cook him soul food. He still has with him, or at least I pray they are alive, Irish, Italy, China, and Mexicali. The last one talked too much and gave him too much lip in English and in Spanish, and he cut out her tongue. He washed me from head to toe with bleach water telling me I was unclean. We had dinner with me chained to a table and when I challenged him? he took me, on the floor in front of those women, like I was nothing more than cattle to be bred. I'm not going to even start to say what he did before cutting up my feet and my breasts before letting me go. Therefore, you have no right to mansplain to me the need for the life choices of these filthy men who prey upon women."

"Helen, I'm sorry for what happened to you by that man," Mark said.

"Mr. Neary, please stop," she said, sounding aggravated. "You have no idea the number of women in your life or whom you work with or know who have fallen victim to some creep and never speak on it. Yes, you're aware of what has happened to each of us in this room, but The Collector and the ass rash from the assignment are indicative of a mental rot of manhood in this country. I'm not killing him out of vengeance. I'm killing him out of necessity. I'm going to sleep fine. And just so we

are clear, a man from my childhood who left me barren is the demon that haunts my sleep. I am going to slay both of those dragons and learn to sleep well.”

“You’re right, I can’t understand or prevent you from doing what you feel is right or necessary, but you are loved, Helen,” Mark said. “You’re building a life here with our family, your family.”

“Will the family still be here after I put a few well-placed bullets in a son of a bitch?” She asked, moving closer to the back door, “Yeah. Thought so. Good night, family,” she offered, pointing to Tameka who’d returned to the communal space after settling in the children, her pregnancy in full second trimester making the woman appear to be out of balance.

Naomi, who’d been sent to bed, returned. Too much was happening in the house and she wasn’t sleepy. She popped under her father’s arm, climbing into his lap. Suddenly, her small eyes roamed the room, landing on Tameka’s belly, fully understanding a baby was growing inside of Michelle’s mommy’s tummy, and she’d heard it was a little boy. What she hadn’t thought about she suddenly reasoned as she looked at the belly, then at Zeke, and back to Tameka’s belly now protruding from under her top.

“Daddy,” she said softly, “how is that baby getting out of there?”

“Huh?” he asked, not wanting to hear anything else from his daughter.

“Daddy, she has a baby in her tummy. How does that baby get out of there? Is that baby gonna come out of her vagina?”

Before he could answer, Naomi began to bawl at the top of her lungs. “Daddy, I don’t want to be a girl. I don’t want any stuff coming out of my vagina but pee!”

Mrs. Hump covered her mouth to keep from laughing. Mustang's eyes grew wide at the small confession from the child. Cherry, in obvious pain, closed her eyes as the Doc snapped the bones into place for the resetting. Slow was at the end of his rope. He got to his feet, passed his daughter to his mother, and gave a small salute. It was late, he was tired, his belly was full, and his heart was in flux.

His wife was benched.

His best friend had returned and was taking his sister-in-law on a killing assignment.

His daughter was obsessed with her vagina.

All he needed was sleep.

"I'm going to bed," he said, leaving the room and entering his bedroom. He didn't bother to undress, but simply flung himself on the bed and closed his eyes. The one man in the world he trusted more than his father was Mustang. He knew the rules, he knew the drill, and they would get the job done, one way or another. "Good enough."

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The rooms emptied with family members dispersing to bedrooms and a blanket and pillow appeared for Mustang to get comfortable. Helen was standing near the couch after having silently returned from her home where she'd gotten the Doc and his wife settled, along with Azreal and Zeke with his wife. Ruth and Mark were in bed along with the children. He knew she was there as he'd heard the creak of the hinges on the back door. The lotion she wore smelled of almonds.

"You're using Jergens lotion on your skin," he said, "I can smell you a mile away." He removed his boots, as he accepted the pillow and blanket.

“You and Slow must go back a long way,” Helen said to Mustang. “He acknowledged you being here and you called Ruth ‘Mama.’ There is a story there. Maybe I can hear it in between me climbing out of a tree and driving to Michigan.”

“Maybe,” he said, leaning over to unfasten his boots.

“Fair enough,” she replied, only needing one answer to know his entire story. Therefore, she asked, “How did you like working as a camp counselor with Reverend Johnson in the summers?”

Mustang’s head snapped around to look at her fully. She wasn’t as innocent as she appeared. Helen wasn’t a timid mouse who needed protecting. The woman was astute and sharp. It didn’t escape his notice how she managed everyone in the room. The timid mouse had silenced Mark Neary, shutting him down. She fascinated Mustang in a way he didn’t understand, but he was interested to see how the two upcoming situations would be handled.

“Hmmpf,” he replied, “get some rest; we have a lot to discuss tomorrow.”

“No, we don’t actually. The less we talk about it, the better. Let it unfold esoterically. You stay close on my heels, let me get it done, and offer aid when I ask or am about to mess up,” she whispered.

“So, you’re dragging me along as your bitch?”

“No, I need you to be my shadow and keep me safe,” she told him. “Slow trusts you, therefore, I trust you. I remember the feeling of safety when you lifted me in your arms, carrying me away from the ugliness. Keep me alive and get us both back here safely. Can you do that for us all?”

“Us all?”

“Yes Mustang, for our family?”

He nodded, feeling overwhelmed by emotion. She saw through him as if all of his years of wandering had brought him back here. Mustang came through the door to be hugged and kissed on his temple by Mark Neary as he always did when he walked through the door. The terrible parents God had given him were replaced when he was 13 by Mark and Ruth Neary. He'd grown up in the house with Rebecca and Michael. At the age of 15, during a swimming incident at summer camp, Rebecca nearly drowned. He was closest to the Neary girl and brought her from the water, breathing life into the slumped form, and resuscitating her body. Mustang, at 16 years old, when asked if he wanted to file to become emancipated, opted instead for a request to be adopted.

Mark and Ruth Neary saw no issue with the request, nor did their two children. He was adopted, and by his own request renamed Jairus Paul Neary. Mustang was a Neary, and Helen was correct, he would do what was necessary for the family.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Michael Isaac Neary was an early riser out of habit, not necessity. He'd never been one to sleep in unless ill or too sore to get out of bed; either way, he would still move. This morning, before everyone was awake in the house, he rose to make a pot of coffee, have a bagel, and think through the last 48 hours of his ever-changing life. In the kitchen, he stood at the sink, looking out over his land when the final drop of black attitude changer hit the glass carafe. He poured two cups and walked over to the couch to hand the second cup to Mustang, who he knew was awake the moment he entered the kitchen.

"Mustang," he said, passing the cup.

"Mr. Slow," he replied, accepting the mug. His long, muscular legs swung from the couch, bringing him to an upright sitting position. He sniffed at the chicory coffee his adopted brother loved to make, sipping and allowing the dark brew to slide down his throat. "Married with a kid, huh? And I didn't even get an invite for either. The kid is what, about five?"

"All of this is new, I mean like five months or so new," Slow told him.

"Secret baby?"

"Real secret; found out when the cousin went missing," he said.

"The marriage?"

"Gabriel..." Slow replied.

“Explains a great deal of why you called me to help,” Mustang said. “I just happened to be in Michigan for the conference.”

“I know, and you are the best tracker out there,” he said.

The silence between them wasn't thick with the unresolved drama between brothers. Mustang had taken a job with the State Troopers after college, taking his first assignment in Michigan, where he also went to college. A conference on the West Coast took him to Oregon where he fell in love with the vibe of the state and opted to stay. A special task force put together to locate and find missing women and children arose, and as one of the best trackers on the force, he was attached to the group to help out. In his free time while on the assignment, he'd taken it upon himself to track and find The Collector.

“Speaking of that, you know I don't like to fire my weapon,” he said, cutting his eyes at Slow. “How is Helen, is that her name, going to handle this assignment she's volunteered us for? I mean, if she gets cold feet, I'm not going to complete the job.”

“The anger in her is enough to complete the task; my fear is that she will like it,” Slow said. “You know how The Company feels about people who enjoy the job.”

“Yeah, I do,” he said. “Azreal is a tough cookie.”

“Says the man who works for Belial, the Angel of Lawlessness,” Slow said, almost smiling.

Mustang drew back in horror. His face contorted as he looked at Slow. “Dear Jesus! Was that a smile? Were you smiling? I need to go get Pops. I think you might be ill,” he said shivering.

Slow gave him a playful punch in the arm as they heard a set of heavy footfalls

entering the space. Mark Neary was awake. He went first to the bathroom, returning to pour himself a cup of coffee and join his sons. Mug in hand, he sat across from them in the recliner taking his first morning sip. “Morning, my sons,” he said.

“Dad,” Slow replied.

“Pops,” Mustang said.

Mark leaned back in the seat, his eyes on both of the men. There were issues on his heart and weighing heavily in his mind. Now was the time to discuss it.

“Listen, we are outnumbered and about to be overrun,” he told his sons. “We need more Neary men, particularly from the two of you.”

Slow said nothing as Mustang looked around, trying to figure out who Mark was talking to because he didn’t think it was him. Sons meant a home and a steady woman in his life who wanted to talk about her feelings and the bloating in her belly from drinking cow milk. He had tried it once, and he didn’t like dirty panties on the floor of the bathroom, so living with a woman wasn’t on his planner for the next decade.

“I’m talking to both of you,” Mark said, reaching over to thump Mustang on the ear. “My brother Joe has his first grandson from Bleu. Zeke’s wife is expecting a boy, and I think Gabriel’s wife is having one as well. That’s three Nearys for Joe, and no Neary boys to carry on my line.”

“Dad, I’m working on it,” Slow said, smiling again. Mustang looked at him and shuddered once more.

“See that’s why I’m not trying to make no babies and sit around smiling like this joker. Dude, you’re grinning like a gas ball was freed from your colon,” he said.

“Pops, I’m not trying to get tied down and have any babies any time soon. I don’t even think I want kids.”

On cue, small feet were heard coming down the hall. Naomi was awake. She didn’t bother to stop at the bathroom but made a beeline for her father. The soft black curls sat askew on her head and the ears protruded, giving her the appearance of a cute little Munchkin.

“Morning, Daddy. Morning, Grandpa Man,” she said, looking at Mustang. “Daddy, who is that? I sent him last night, but Auntie made us go to bed before I could ask him name.”

“This is my brother, Jairus. We call him Jay, so you can call him Uncle Jay,” he told his daughter.

Her little face registered confusion as she gawked at Mustang. “Your brother? Him is black, but you are pink.”

“I am white, and yes he is a black man, but his name is Jairus Paul Neary, and he is my brother, which makes him your uncle,” he explained. “We call him Jay. He is your Uncle Jay.”

Her little eyes wandered to Mark, “Grandpa Man, did you make a black baby with another lady that wasn’t Grandma?”

Mustang burst into laughter. “I like her,” he said. “She’s sharp.”

Mark didn’t think it was funny. “No, I did not, Miss Smarty Pants, and stop calling me Grandpa Man. I am Grandpa,” he said.

Naomi wouldn’t let it go so easily. Her little eyes were homed in on the man who said

he was her daddy's brother. The man had kind eyes, but that didn't change what she was thinking. She felt they all needed to hear her tiny opinion.

"Well, where did you get him? Uncle Jay did Grandma make you with a black boyfriend that Grandpa Man didn't know about?" she asked to their shocked faces. "Auntie had a black boyfriend that my Mama didn't know about, and when my Mommy went to work, sometimes Auntie's black boyfriend would come over to the house, and they would be on the couch kissing and making funny noises. I didn't want to see any of that, so I would close my door."

"Good grief child," Slow said, "let's make you some breakfast. If food is in your little mouth, you can't traumatize people."

Mustang watched them walk away, Slow carrying his daughter to the kitchen over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He was still smiling as the child sat at the dining room table. Her small eyes drifted back to Mustang. He waved at her, hoping to break the way she stared at him mutherfuckingly, looking more and more like her father. She sat in silence as if she were dissecting him on a molecular level, which somewhat unnerved him. He turned his head to look at Mark, who was also looking at the child who was still quietly staring at Mustang.

"You love her a lot, don't you?"

"Yeah, but the first time I tried to kiss her cute little cheeks, she punched me in the mouth," Mark said. He and Mustang burst into laughter. "She is not one to mess with, that one. We played paintball, and you know, she got me. She shot me by playing possum and I fell for it. I was wounded. Still am. Slippery When Wet is all dried out."

Mustang shook his head, ignoring the handle his adopted father had given himself that didn't exist, commenting, "Michael seems different. This home feels different,"

“Jay, having someone to come home to each day makes a man different,” Mark told him. “The lone stallion looks good in the field, but he is happier with a herd. It’s time to find you a filly and create your own family.”

“I hear you, Pops, but I know I’m not ready,” he explained. “When the time comes, I shall take it as it arises.”

“Good enough. Let’s get the day moving,” he said softly before rising from the chair.

Incrementally, the family appeared as food came from the kitchen onto the table. Helen arrived along with Zeke, Tameka, and Azreal, after having had breakfast at her home. After breakfast, the family would depart.

The Doc with his wife and son were the first to leave after checking on Cherry. Her foot, broken in two places rested immobile in a cast for the next six to eight weeks. This also meant she would be unable to work for nearly two months, which made Azreal a bit of a bear this morning. She too was departing for home, after finding out what she needed to know. Their work life had morphed into a waiting game.

Mark and Ruth left with Rebecca. Zeke, Michelle, and Tameka departed as well, leaving Mustang, Cherry, Helen, and Slow seated in the living room. Cherry’s eyes were on Mustang, after also observing the way Ruth and Mark acted with him as well as Rebecca. He was more than a Technician. She waited for her husband, who spoke nothing of the connection to the man.

Mustang picked up on it, easing the awkwardness. “Michael, I tell you what. Pops has a nerve commanding we make more Neary’s to carry on his line. He said it as if we are going to mass-produce boys so he can teach them to fish and hunt like he did us.”

Cherry arched one eyebrow. “You’re a Neary as well?”

Naomi, who didn't want to be left out of the conversation, added, "Mommy, he is Daddy's black brother. I want a brother. Daddy likes him a lot, I seen him smiling at Uncle Jay."

"Brother?" Helen said, looking at Mustang.

"Legally, at least that's what my paperwork said when I was adopted at 16," he told them.

"Okay," Helen said.

"Okay," Cherry said, "that explains a lot."

"What does it explain, Mommy? I don't think I understand," Naomi said, looking at the large black man.

"It means that when your Aunt was in trouble, and I went to find her, your Daddy asked his brother to help me find the one person in the world who means as much to me as you do, my beautiful child, and that is Helen," she said. "He asked his brother to help me. He is going to help us again because he loves us."

"I don't know about all of that," Mustang said, averting his eyes from the child who continued to stare at him as if he'd eaten the last cookie in the canister.

"Daddy, do you love Uncle Jay as much as Mommy loves me and Aunt Helen?"

Slow sat quietly, not knowing where she was going with her new line of inquiry, but the squishy feeling had returned to his chest. His wife's broken foot meant she couldn't work the job he truly didn't want her to have in the first place, and fate had intervened on his behalf, leaving him grateful. He was grateful the injury was only a broken foot.

“I do, Naomi. I love him with everything in me, and I will fight a bear if need be to protect any one of you,” he said, feeling more emotional than was warranted. His eyes burned with the start of tears, and he was shocked at the purity of the emotions behind the words. He missed Mustang more than he realized, and having him home, for however long he would be here, was also a blessing he hadn’t known he needed.

“Daddy,” she said, scrambling down and walking over to Mustang. She pulled on her new Uncle’s arm, making him lean down. On his cheek, she planted four small kisses and gave him a hug around his neck with her small arms. “If you love him, then I will love him too.”

“Well, wow,” Mustang said, looking over to Helen, who was shaking her head no. He held up his hands to her as if he were asking her to explain.

“I’m not kissing you and telling you I love you,” she said, getting up from the table.

Mustang sat looking at his brother, a man slow to anger. Michael Isaac Neary always kept his emotions close to his chest, but today, Mustang saw a different side of him. His brother had a family that he loved. The little girl had also gotten to him, and a weird feeling sat in the pit of his stomach.

Suddenly the desire to buy her pony hit him along with wanting to have tea with her as he’d done with Rebecca when they were younger. He had a niece. She’d given him four germ-filled, bacteria-ridden kisses, and he liked it. He scowled in utter disdain at how much he appreciated her nasty little virus-carrying slob-filled points of affection.

Slow asked him, “Why are you frowning?”

“Because them slobbery, germ-laced kisses make me want to go buy her little ass a pony,” he said, frowning more.

Helen didn't miss a beat; she came from the kitchen, leaned over him, and kissed his other cheek four or five times. "If that's the case, I could use a pickup truck, Big Guy."

She burst into laughter as she patted his shoulder. Mustang was also quick on the uptake but chose his wording carefully. His eyes focused on hers when he spoke.

"I could take my response in more directions than one, but let's get through this assignment, get the payout, and see the next steps," Mustang said, "and just so you know, if that's what you truly need, all you have to do is ask, and I shall provide."

"Fine, Uncle Jay, is that your name? Mr. Neary? I could use a pickup truck so I can give Mark back his loaner to me and have my own wheels," she said. "Working part-time for Rebecca and going to school for accounting is not going to offer the funding I need to purchase a reliable vehicle that is my own."

Her eyes were sparkling when she spoke to him. She had a spark in her he hadn't noticed before, and the man in him nearly responded to it, but the Technician in him didn't have the time. However, she was family and he would see her more often than he needed to, which is what prompted what he said next, "Jairus Paul Neary."

"Jairus...the man who came to Jesus...wait, what did he want from Jesus?"

"He was the synagogue leader whose twelve-year-old daughter was ill," Mustang explained. "Jesus raised his daughter from the dead."

Cherry was fascinated by him. "Is this your birth name?"

"No, it is the name I chose when I was adopted," he said.

"Any particular reason why? I mean that is not your average name," Cherry said.

Mustang offered a soft smile to her, “Rebecca nearly drowned when she was 12. Pops and Michael were too far away, and I had just learned to swim. I gave it everything I had and pulled her from the water. I did CPR and cracked her rib because I didn’t know what I was doing, but I saved her life.”

Helen was frowning. “So you thought you were Jesus bringing Mark’s 12-year-old daughter Rebecca back from the dead?”

“No, Jairus had faith in Jesus, Helen. Mark and Ruth were teaching me about the power of faith, and although I couldn’t swim well, I had faith that I could help Rebecca and make a difference. I gave all I had in that belief, and in my faith, I saved Rebecca’s life. In my faith in getting away from my terrible parents, I was given a home with the Nearys and treated and loved as their own child. I could not and would not on that day have them lose a daughter,” he said. “Slow’s faith in me to find you is why I was sent to help Cherry. I come through, Helen. Every single time, I come through.”

Helen pressed her hand to her chest, seeing him in a new light. His gaze was intense as he rose from the table. All six feet two and a half inches of pure masculine energy hovered over her.

“As I said, all you have to do is ask me for what you need, and I shall come through for you, Helen,” he said, excusing himself from the table.

Everyone was quiet. Cherry was staring at her cousin, wondering what was going through her mind. Helen said it aloud, not meaning to as her eyes widened in disbelief, “I just felt my ovary release an egg for him to fertilize. I can’t even have children, but if I could, I would make that man into a Daddy on this very day,” she said pressing her hands over her nipples.

Slow stood up, and said, “Yeah, I need to be anywhere but here. Vaginas, nipples,

ovaries, what has happened to my life?”

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Outside, staring at the pile of firewood, Slow was joined by Mustang. They stood side by side. The home in the rear of the property was new. He pointed to it.

“Gabriel put it there for Helen to have her own space,” he said.

“Hmmp,” Mustang replied. “A lot has changed for you. You’re happy and deserve it, but do you think she is going to be able to get this done?”

He looked at the stack of firewood, evenly split and stacked. Helen had cut the wood in the time allotted. She was sore but didn’t complain. Her hands had blisters which she doctored and didn’t complain. Amid the chaos, she could be found sitting still, simply observing, which is what he assumed the woman had also taught his daughter—sit and observe. She was not a complainer. She’d been abused and didn’t complain.

“I think that woman is going to do things that will surprise us all,” Slow told Mustang. “Just get her home safe. You as well.”

“When the assignment is done, so am I. I’m headed to my home in Oregon when she is finished,” he said. “Maybe you and the fam should come for a visit. It has been a minute; I’ve upgraded the place.”

“We will, once the dust settles,” Slow said. “However, you offered to get Helen a truck. Where did that come from? Are you serious about it?”

“Yeah, I see something in her I once saw in myself, and having someone to believe in you means a lot. If all she is asking for is a truck, I can come through with it if it’s truly what she needs,” he said. “Is it what she needs?”

“There are days I’m not sure what she needs, Jay,” Slow confessed. “Maybe I’m too close to it to see the obvious, so I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry, I got this,” he said, winking.

“Take it easy with her; she is hard and fragile at the same time,” Slow told him. “I’m worried about the woman inside.”

“Brother, the woman inside of her is responding to all this man in front of her, and it’s not about sex, that’s not what she needs, but I hear you, and I got this,” he said, patting Slow on the back. “You know I always come through.”

“Yeah, and that’s what worries me,” Slow said.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

They stood on the front porch watching the black Mustang drive off as if their daughter were headed to prom with the star football player. Words escaped them both as the taillights disappeared into the night and a sense of dread filled them both. A yucky feeling sat in her gut as she looked at her husband.

Slow spoke first, "I don't think I will be ready when it's time for Naomi to go on her first date or even to the Senior Prom."

"Yeah, you know, in the end, someone is usually going to get fucked, and you just pray it's not your baby," Cherry said. "What have we done, Michael? We chose this life; she didn't! She is going out there to right the wrongs in the world armed with a false sense of hope, security, and that man."

"That man is my brother," he gently reminded her.

"That man also has a working dick," she reminded him, "and you remember the mental high after your first takedown. The adrenalin, the need to either kill something else or fuck until you pass out. She's not ready for this. She's not ready for him."

"He can handle whatever she needs," Slow said, looking over at her, "Jay was one of our best camp counselors. People respond to him in ways I've never seen, and he understands women on an almost poetic level, which is why he stays single. He thinks women are scary."

"I'm scared," she told him.

"Can she get the job done?"

“I believe she can,” Cherry replied.

“Then, let’s hold on to that,” he said, slipping her hand into his own. “How’s your foot feeling?”

Slowly, she turned her head to eyeball him, squinting at the out-of-the-blue question. An unanchored question from her husband such as this one had legs of its own. She wasn’t going to play the game.

“Why, you want to show me your working dick?”

“Yes, I would like for you to hold it, possibly spank it for being naughty,” he said laughing. “I’m thinking, you might need to choke that fucker until it spits up.”

“And you look so normal,” she told him. “You have a filthy mind and an even nastier mouth for such a good-looking man.”

“But do you love it?”

“Yes, and I also love you,” she said, pulling him by the hand. Naomi was in bed fast asleep, and it was time for adults to have a bedtime story. “Maybe our bedtime story tonight should be The Emperor’s New Clothes .

“Wasn’t that dude, like, naked?”

“Yes, yes he was,” she told him, double winking as she hobbled her way to the bedroom. “Now, please, try on this new suit I have for you.”

In her hand, she held up nothing as she hand-modeled the suit he would soon be wearing. Bare, open, and trusting of her, his clothing was gone. His hands were wide open and his body on the ready. The quiet times between them intensified the love

they made. As much as he wanted his son, what he wanted more than anything, he was getting, and that was his wife at home with him at night. At least, for the next two months.

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Evansville, Indiana

The two-hour drive was completed in silence. Helen, seated in the passenger seat, was focused on the small bit of information her cousin had provided. The image of the target had been shown to her. The man in question trafficked young boys who were taken from migrant camps with payments given to the parents. The unwitting parents were sold a lie that their children would be given a chance to live out the American Dream and adopted into rich families. In truth, the children were herded like cattle to private sales. Men and women with filthy appetites arrived, sitting around tables like vultures picking over scraps, bidding on the flesh of innocents, and hoping to take home a new toy.

The only difference Helen could surmise between The Collector and these pigs was at least the women he selected were adults. A man who opted to plant his seed in a child or worse, in her mind, had no place on this Earth. Taking a life such as his wouldn't cause her to lose sleep.

Mustang said nothing outside of the initial departure when he asked, "You have the keys to Cherry's shop?"

Helen held up a set, dangling them, and told him, "I keep the spares, just in case."

"Good enough," he told her as they arrived in Evansville just after 11 p.m. Mustang followed the dot on the GPS and quickly located the truck. He drove one mile east of the truck and located the five stands of trees. He didn't slow down at the center but

made his way around the block before letting Helen out of the vehicle.

He was amazed at how his heart raced as she flipped the hood up on her jacket, her head down, and made a beeline for the tree. In his head, he wanted to inventory what she'd brought with her, but Slow told him she had it. He trusted she did. The rally point was for the rental car company to return the Mustang before they headed to Sheboygan. It would be an eight-hour drive that wouldn't happen tonight. The best they could hope would be to stop outside of Chicago for the evening to rest.

Instead of going to the car rental place as instructed, he pulled two blocks up, parked, and turned off his lights. From where he sat, he had a clear line of sight to the middle tree. He could also see Helen on the dark street.

She disappeared behind the tree. All he could do was wait.

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Her heart thudded hard against her breastplate as she eased out of the vehicle, double-checked her pocket for the truck keys, and closed the vehicle door. She pulled the hood up on her jacket, lowered her head, and started a purposeful stride to the set of trees. Once she reached the middle tree, she slipped behind it, pulled out a climber's rope, and tossed it upwards and over a branch. Quickly, she made a Swiss seat with the dynamic rope and hastily hoisted her body into the tree.

From the lower branch, she looked up, seeing the weapon nestled in the trees. She also looked for the bird's nest. Helen worked her way up the branch and located the nest, thankful the mother was not in the shreds of dry leaves and twigs. Smartly, she pulled the nest out, checking for eggs and spotting two, she gave a quick, "Aww." She climbed up three more branches, securing the nest away from her firing zone.

Lowering herself to the working branch, she found that the ammo pouch and phone

were still there. From her left pocket, she took out a phone charger and connected the phone to give it juice after she ensured the lights were off on it so no one could see the light from the screen in the middle of a fucking tree. With the ammo pouch around her waist and the Swiss seat cinched to the branch, she took her position.

Melody, Cherry's favorite rifle, was also the weapon her cousin used to train Helen to shoot. Cherry used the Smith and Wesson handgun to teach her to fire small arms. Over the years, her cousin had taught her hand-to-hand combat, knife skills, survival tactics, and more. She only had to wait for the target.

Right on time, Karlton Manford arrived at the back door of the establishment with not only three young boys but also a girl child. Through the scope, Helen saw several things occur between Karlton, the girl child, and another man, and they were not even inside the building. The girl was crying, scared, and trying to pull away from the men.

Helen took a deep breath, held it, then pulled the trigger. Before she exhaled, she pulled it again, taking down the other man as well. For good measure, a round or two extra were fired into the window of the building, shattering the glass. She didn't know if it was timing or bad luck on their part, but the arrival of a patrol car passing by earned a nice bullet in the back tire, making it stop in front of the building. Suspicious police officers jumped out, running towards the building, sending men scurrying from the door like roaches when the lights came on. More children poured out of the building, making a mess of the crime scene where two dead men lay in the road.

She used Cherry's phone, attached the mini zoom lens for the camera, and snapped a photo of a very dead Karlton Manford. Helen snapped several of the second man before returning the phone to the ammo pocket and breaking Melody down to fit in the bag that looked like a very raggedy old purse.

Sirens echoed as looky-loos gathered, coming out of other buildings to see what was happening at the shady nightclub. The amount of ease it took to lower herself from the tree surprised her, and she gave a silent bit of thanks to Slow for making her chop the wood. Whether she'd built muscle or not, she'd built confidence and had completed an assignment as a Technician. She wasn't an official member. She'd only started her training in the Unicorn Academy. However, the assignment was done.

She milled in with the oncoming crowd, walking through the throng of arrivals and making her way down the street to Cherry's shop. She didn't use the remote to unlock it but opted to open the truck by hand. Once she placed Melody on the floor of the truck in the secret compartment, she started the shop. Instead of driving through the throng of people, she backed up, going around the fray to meet Mustang at the car rental.

Her only thoughts were to get to Mustang.

Her focus was to get to Mustang.

"Drive Helen; get to Mustang," she repeated over and over until she arrived at the preset meeting place.

He was coming out of the office when she pulled up. She slowed and unlocked the doors of the truck as he slung his overnight bag onto the back seat and climbed inside.

"Head up I-74 to Joliet where we will stay the night before heading to the second stop," he told her.

"We are staying the night?"

"Helen, it's after midnight, we are both tired, and rest is required," he said, leaning

the bulk of him into the seat. He plotted the address in the GPS of the truck. “Head there for the night.”

“Okay, nothing else to say?”

“Did you send the confirmation image to the preset one in the phone?”

“Oh, let me do that now,” she said, looking at the phone, finding the image, and clicking send. Thinking better of it, she sent the second image as well. “Done. Onward.”

She was calm. Driving would keep her focused on the task of getting them to the hotel. If she focused on the task of driving the truck, she wouldn’t want to talk.

“Good, because I don’t feel like it anyway,” he said aloud.

“Excuse me, are you talking to me?”

“Only to myself, Helen,” he said, leaning into the seat and closing his eyes.

It took an entire six hours to get from Evansville to Joliet, and by the time they arrived, she was wiped out. Not only was she wiped out but the emotions of what she’d done grabbed her by the leg, yanking hard. The distance in her eyes concerned him as he requested one suite in the hotel.

“A suite?”

“Yeah, close by, yet enough space to not make it weird,” Mustang said. “I don’t like weird.”

“As if anything about this is normal,” she said, following behind him to the elevator.

The hotel room was nothing fancy. The suite had a separate bedroom with a closing door, a water closet, and a pull-out couch. Mustang immediately announced he wasn't taking the couch after having slept on one last night at Slow's place.

"Shower, rinse some of it off, and try to catch some kip," he said, taking his bag to the bedroom.

Helen didn't argue; she was tired. In the bathroom, she closed the door, locked it, and started the shower. She gave extra attention to her shoulder, which felt sore from the kick of Melody, the sniper rifle, but overall, she'd done well. Her mind remained focused on the task of cleaning her body and putting on a pair of loose-fitted pjs. She exited the bathroom to find him not in the bedroom but up front setting up her pull-out bed.

"Good night," he said, allowing her to pass.

"Night," she said, taking a seat on the made-up bed.

She could hear the shower starting in the other room, and she snuggled down under the covers. Helen closed her eyes and to her shock, she saw the splash of red from where her bullet had made contact with Karlton's head. Her eyes popped open. Blood from the second man flashed in her mind, and the realization of what she'd done hit her in the chest like a blow. Suddenly she couldn't breathe. She looked up, and Mustang was beside the couch on one knee. He was talking to her, talking her down, bringing her out of the darkness.

"That's it, good, breathe. Slowly inhale, hold for four, exhale for four, hold for four, inhale for four," he said, walking her through until the breathing evened out. "Good. Very good. Slowly. There ya go."

"What happened?"

“Reality is a kick in the chest,” he said, “so try to rest and breathe through it. We have a lot to do in 48 hours unless you want to go home.”

“No, I need to get this done,” she said.

“Good enough,” he said, going to the bedroom. He didn’t lock the door because he also knew what would come next. It took nearly fifteen minutes for her to get up her courage to knock on the door. “Yes?”

“Uhm, I...,” she started.

“All you have to do is ask, Helen. Tell me what you need.”

“Comfort? Not sex, just some comfort if you’d be willing?”

She heard the covers in the dark along with the sound of a hand patting the bed. The lamp on the nightstand flashed on, and there he was in the bed, all full of manliness. His chest had just enough hair to compliment the ripples of muscles that seemed to bump up from under his skin. Suddenly, her need for comfort was replaced by a bit of fear.

“Behave yourself,” he warned as she climbed in and scooted closer to him. Strong arms wrapped around her body sending her back to the feeling of protection in his arms when he had lifted her from the ground and rescued her from the nightmare after her captivity. She imagined this was how Cherry must feel at night lying down beside Slow.

“You smell amazing,” she said, allowing her finger to run over the bumps and lumps of muscles.

“Well, I did just shower.”

“No, you smell like a night of pillow biting and a good time,” she said, thinking she’d made a mistake getting into bed with him, yet her hands roamed over his midsection.

“Hey, have you ever seen that video of the little kid with his babysitter?” he asked, “The little boy is trying to make a point, and he is saying listen, Helen...Helen, listen, listen, Helen. I feel like that little boy. Listen, Helen! You stop touching me like that or you are going to activate my mighty muscle, and I have no plans to use it today, not with you.”

She leaned back, looking at him. “Okay, hurt my feelings.”

“No, Helen, the circumstance is terrible,” he said. “To act on what you’re feeling or experiencing for whatever reason is a bad one. In a year, after you’ve had some time to heal, and you still want to take a ride on this powerful stallion, I’ll send you a ticket to come to me. Or better yet, I’ll send you a ticket and we can meet wherever you choose, a small island, a winery, or a chalet nestled in the mountains, but you have a mutherfucker to handle. You don’t need to be dick sore before going to do it.”

“Dick sore?”

“Yeah, I have a big one, and your little tight body will be sore as hell when I’m done, so leave the stallion alone. Rest in my arms, get some sleep, and get your mind out of the gutter,” he told her.

She found herself giggling. “Dick sore. I’m going to remember that.”

“Hmhm,” he said, closing his eyes, then reaching for the lamp. “You’d remember my stallion too. Sleep. It’s hard to see in dark places, Helen, so you need to stay sharp.”

“Are you saying I’m night-blind, Mustang?”

“I’m saying that the lighting is poor, and the journey is long,” he told her.

Helen said no more. The comfort he offered, she accepted, holding onto him as if he were a life raft. In the middle of the night, he turned to his back, pulling her across his chest. She rested there, listening to the steady beat of his heart, thankful he was here with her. She was thankful for many things, and while he slept, she provided five additional small kisses on his cheek.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Mustang considered himself to be a patient person with a level head. He'd found it difficult to find a woman he could tolerate, and he used the word loosely, that he could stomach for more than two days. By the second day, he wanted them, the underwear they were stashing all over his home, and the constant scrolling on their phones for conversation bits to be annoying. Helen was none of those things. She was calm in the face of adversity.

There was a sense of control about her, even though the current situation could go left at any moment and ruin everyone's lives. She sat in the room, quiet but present. To his amazement, in her hands was a novel she'd picked up in the hotel lobby to read, not her phone. He knew she had a phone, as a matter of fact, she had two, her own, plus the Technician phone belonging to Cherry. She had used that phone to send confirmation of the completed task to Azreal and placed it on a charger.

It would be much later in the evening before they made their move on The Collector; however, she'd said little. It was the little that gave him cause to pause. A vibe rested between them which was pleasant and not pushy. Before it was all over, he had the distinct impression she would find a way to share his bed and currently was using this time to determine the right approach to ask. His answer would still be no, but he was interested to see her approach.

In his line of work, he'd seen too many damaged women trying to make love out of a night of hot sex. He had the war wounds to show for his efforts to start relationships from traumatic events; been there, and did that type of woman. Yet Helen spoke to him. She tugged on him in a way that unnerved him yet made him long to be her hero. He'd also played that role one time too many as well. The gate to that part of his heart had closed years ago. If he were to be a hero to anyone, it would be to himself.

Hell, he felt as if he were the one who needed saving at this point. Plus, she smelled pretty, like lavender. He liked lavender. Shit, he was starting to like Helen too.

“Hey, Helen,” he said, taking a beat, “you haven’t mentioned the plan of action when we get to The Collector’s nest tonight.”

She looked up from the book. He expected her to dogear the page but instead, she took a napkin from the leftover takeout, folded it in half, and used it as a bookmark. Thoughtful . Her eyes, always surveying everything around her, were now studying his face. His handsome face, to match a strong, beautiful, muscle-ridden body that he took great pride in maintaining, had her attention.

“I’m going to walk up to the front door and ring the bell, and when he answers, I’m going to shoot him. As he lies on the floor writhing in pain, I shall shoot him again, remove the key to the cells and collar restraints from his neck, then free the women,” she said. “As he watches the captives he’s held onto as his wives walk to freedom, I’m going to shoot him in his dick and wait for him to die.”

Mustang’s eyes grew wider with every word she spoke. He’d been holding his breath after she said the first “shoot him” and by the time she ended with a bullet to the man’s junk, his mouth was also opened wide.

“Okay,” he said, swallowing hard, “and why do you think he’s simply going to open the door for you?”

“Arrogance.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, arrogance,” she said. “In that messed up head of his, he is going to actually think I am coming home to him for more of his sexual prowess.”

“Now I’m lost, and honestly, I think I would like to stay in the woods, allowing my mind to wander aimlessly, but you have me hooked, so now I have to know,” Mustang responded.

Helen held the book in her lap. Her hand rested on the cover. Neatly trimmed, unpolished nails ran along the spine of the book, and she also took a beat.

“I was chained and collared when he took me by force on the floor in front of the women,” she said. “His knowledge of a woman’s body forced mine to respond to him, making the muscles contract. Before he released me, and after he cut up my feet and breasts, his mouth was used to provide me with a going away gift from him. He is going to believe I’m coming back to him for more.”

Mustang leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “I’m so sorry that happened to you, Helen.”

“I’m looking at it from a feigned attempt at being mentally healthy,” she said. “Hell, it had been so long since a man touched me, ole Cinderella down there started acting up, thinking somebody was finally paying her some attention, and she was going to the Ball at the palace. Only the Prince turned out to be a creep, and she was just happy to be out of the cage. I can’t be mad at her, though; the poor baby had been dick deprived for so long, she was simply happy to be spit on.”

Mustang fell back on the couch, his eyes wide in disbelief. “For the people in the cheap seats, who in this scenario is Cinderella?”

“My vagina,” she said, looking at him with a straight face.

“Sis, I don’t know whether to laugh or to hug you,” he said solemnly. He opened his mouth to follow up the statement, but a chime rang out in the background followed by the sound of a cash register ringing a sale.

“What is that?” she asked, looking around. Cherry’s Technician phone was charging on the table. Helen raised it slowly in her hand. The green bubbles indicated two messages from an unknown texter. “Should I open it?”

“Yes,” he said, waiting to see how she would react to the new bit of information she would learn about what they did for a living. The reaction on her face registered no response as she read the first message. It was the second message which made her look up at him.

“It appears that the second asshole I aerated was a high-value target The Company has been trying to nail down. It would seem as if there is a bonus given on top of the normal payout for the assignment,” she said, looking at the figures. She’d never seen that dollar amount, not even on a W2 at the end of her work year.

In one night, the one assignment made enough to cover her living for an entire year and then some. Helen knew of families of four to six deep who survived on a third of what the assignment had made in an evening for ridding the world of two creeps. Tonight, she planned to rid the world of one more.

Mustang was taking notice. “Your quietness can be unnerving.”

“Evidently, not unnerving enough,” she whispered. “Let’s get some kip before we roll into The Collector’s camp. I need to get my head right.”

She picked up the book she’d been reading and flipped open the pages to continue Chapter 11 of the novel. Currently, they were staying at an inn an hour and fifteen minutes away from The Collector’s doll house. The plan was to arrive at 11:30.

Mustang’s plan was to have the police arrive at 11:42.

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Helen didn't dress in all black. On the contrary, she wore a low-cut white dress, high heels, and a push-up bra which showed off the deep cuts in the flesh of her breasts given courtesy of The Collector, one Stanton Rogers. The full lips, painted a garish red, were shined up, appearing lacquered in the finish. In her left dress pocket, she stored Cherry's favorite micro-Smith and Wesson 9mm, and in her right, a bottle of wine.

She walked up to the front door of the home with burglar bars, a wrought iron locking glass screened door, and lots of locks on the front door. The same pungent smell of sour meat and cabbage crept through the crevices of the doors as she rang the doorbell. She heard locks tumbling open as he opened the door wide and stared at Helen in disbelief.

"Hello, Stanton; missed me?" she asked, leaning forward a little to show off the breasts where the scars showed from his cuts.

"My Chocolate Queen?" he asked, his mouth wide, the bulge in his pants growing.

"Are you going to let me in so I can take care of that for you?" she asked, looking at the bulge and licking her lips. "I must admit, there were nights I thought about you, realizing sadly, a sister didn't cum like that for nobody else before or after you."

She grabbed the handle of the door, yanking at it hard and jolting him from his trance. She pulled it, almost salivating as she looked at the erection in his pants. She pressed her breasts to the wrought iron. The coolness of the contact with the frosty glass made the nipples erect.

"Stanton, baby, are you telling me after all those visits to my house, leaving me presents on my pillow and wanting to be inside of me, now that I'm here, you're not going to let me in?" she asked, pulling hard at the door. "Come on, Stanton. You know you want a mouthful of this chocolate muffin. Can't you almost taste me?"

He swallowed hard. His eyes were wide. "Is this a trap?"

"Do you see anybody with me? Okay, fine," she said, turning to leave. "I thought you missed this tight little body and making me cum so hard for you. I even took a bath in bleach water to wash away the ickies before coming back to you. Damn it, Stanton, I'm wet as hell too. I just knew. I just knew you were going to welcome me home."

Helen took three steps toward leaving the porch when she heard the lock on the glass door turn. "My Chocolate Queen," he said, hoarse, his throat dry. "I looked for you. I couldn't find you. I thought you didn't love me anymore."

"Listen, when a man makes a woman cum like that with little to no effort, a lady has to come back for more," she told him. "I can't wait. What you did with your mouth and fingers, good grief, it keeps me up at night."

"My Queen," he repeated, pushing the door wide. His arms splayed open for her to come to him, his hand moving low to rub the eagerness throbbing in his pants. "I want you to start with this. Get in here. Get in here now!"

Helen stepped inside the door, walking into his embrace with her left hand kept low, hidden in the folds of the dress. From the pocket, she slipped her hand inside, her finger on the trigger. He barely had time to react as she pulled the trigger, placing a bullet in his leg. Shocked, he reached for his leg with one hand while the other grappled for her, only to receive a bullet in the opposite leg. He went down on the floor, writhing in pain.

Quick hands locked the front screen door, knowing Mustang had placed the order for backup. She didn't have much time. The butt of the weapon came down hard on his temple, knocking The Collector unconscious. Her hand slid down his shirt, freeing the keys he kept around his neck. She wouldn't take any chances with the slippery bastard, dragging him across the floor to the dining room where she knew from being

his captive that creeps were creatures of habit. A trail of crimson left a blood-soaked path to the dining room where the table had been set for dinner for six. Her eyebrows arched at the number of place settings. Yet the rest was the same as the other location near the lake where he'd held her captive.

The dining room table had chains bolted to the floor with open shackles to hold his victims in place. The open cuff went around his ankle, and she secured the lock. A dog collar went around his neck, which she also locked into place. Now, to free the women. The table was set for six, which meant he'd added another doll to his collection to match the other four. Well, today was her lucky day.

This house had a similar layout to one near the lake where he'd held her and the other women. She prayed silently as she walked down the hall, flipping on lights and heard the sounds of chains moving as voices called out, "Hello? Hello? Who's out there?"

A door on the left, reinforced with metal plating, had a deadbolt lock on the outside. The key on the ring opened it, and she cracked the door, praying to find one of the women who had helped her escape. She opened the door to find China, who gasped at seeing Helen standing in the doorway.

"Hey Girl," she told China, "Are you ready to get the fuck out of here?"

China wept with joy as Helen went to the next room, freeing Irish, then Mexicali, and finally Italy, who screamed when she saw her. "You came back! You came back for us! Where is he? Where is that bastard?"

Helen placed her hand over her mouth, miming for Italy to be quiet, but she wouldn't be as if she were letting The Collector know they were being freed.

"Bitch, are you trying to get everyone caught?" Helen asked, looking at her.

“No, I’m not,” Italy said, staring at her with a bit of anger in her eyes.

“Listen, if you want to stay here, you can, and we all will leave,” she told her as Mexicali pulled on her arm, gaining her attention while pointing at another door. Mexicali could not speak. The Collector had cut out her tongue, cauterizing the edges to prevent massive bleeding. She made noises that sounded like a seal when she tried to speak, and Helen held up her hand to stop Mexicali from trying.

“He found a replacement for me?”

China said softly, “No, he found a trainee or a helper. However, the helper doesn’t want to be here either.”

Hesitantly, Helen went to the door. She glanced at her watch, still holding the Smith and Wesson low, and tapped on the door. “Hey, I’m going to free you, but don’t come charging at me. I have a gun.”

The hinges creaked, and the room was dark, devoid of light as if the room was once a closet. Behind the door was a boy no more than ten. Thin arms and legs, sunken eyes, and a sheer will to fight off any demon that would come his way covered him as he stood at the door, ready to swing. Helen held up her hands and the weapon. She tossed him the key to free himself from the chains, which more than likely weighed more than he did.

“Let’s move,” she told them, coming down the hall. Stanton Rogers had come around, his eyes were open, and he sat chained, bleeding on the floor. Italy ran to him, trying to stop the blood. In the distance, sirens could be heard rapidly approaching the home. China and Irish were disgusted by Italy’s response to seeing their captor bleeding. Italy ripped off portions of her shirt to apply pressure to the wounds to slow down the steady trickle of life juices eking from his disgusting body.

Mexicali went for Italy, yanking at her hair and causing a tussle between the women. The real surprise came from the boy who walked over to Stanton, socking him in the face with a tiny fist. Helen didn't have time for any of it.

"China, Irish, out the door," she commanded. "Mexicali, take the boy. Italy, if you don't want this bullet, you need to move out of the way."

"No," Italy wailed, "he's, my husband."

"And I'm Pope Benedict; now get the hell out of the way!"

"He's my legal husband," she cried, leaning over him, "I'm Marjorie Rogers, his wife."

Helen stood for a second looking at the woman who had taken part in her husband's sick sexual fantasy gone awry. The women, now free, opened the front glass door Helen had previously locked, exiting the home and running towards the approaching sirens. The disgust she felt grew seeing Italy leaning over the man, frantically trying to save his miserable life.

She raised her weapon to end them both only to hear a voice call to her, "No, don't do it. If you do, it changes everything and it will change you."

The words came from Mustang. He stood in the doorway waiting for her to come to him. He held out his hand, beckoning her forward, but pain kept her rooted to this spot. Hatred for the man named Stanton Rogers who fancied himself a collector of human dolls to live in his house of horrors, outweighed any rational thought. God only knew what his plans were for the boy, or what he'd already done to the child, and for that, he needed the bullet in the weapon she'd kissed with the hot red lipstick she wore on her mouth. That bullet was meant to be his kiss of death.

“He deserves this bullet,” she told Mustang.

“He deserves to spend the rest of his life in a cell,” Mustang said.

“And when they take him to the hospital, and he manages to escape to get free and torture other people, whose conscience will that be on? Not mine. He dies now,” she said, pointing the weapon.

“If he dies, so will the humanity inside of you,” he told her, “Your call. I’ll be in the truck.”

He walked away, leaving the weight of a decision she’d been waiting to execute for five long months. Each time she closed her eyes at night, the torture and pain he had inflicted on her life resurfaced. Mustang wanted to take this moment away from her. He wanted her to be the better person and not kill for the pleasure of watching the light leave Stanton Roger’s eyes. As far as she was concerned, Italy needed a bullet as well.

“Listen to your man, Bitch,” The Collector said. “I know there was some truth in what you said to me. You loved how I made you cum, you whore. No matter where you go or who you’re with, the fact that I made that tight little snatch respond to me says who you really are.”

She used the butt of the weapon to hit him in the mouth. Heavy footfalls of men coming through the door, yelling “Police! Freeze!” stopped her from doing what needed to get done. The minute of hesitation was enough. The police officers arrived, coming to her, but the weapon in her hand was now safely tucked in the pocket of her dress. She silently prayed that the safety was on as she moved away from the ass wipe bleeding man laying on the floor. Emergency services entered the home, surrounding Stanton as Helen slipped out the door.

She used the side exit of the porch to meet Mustang at the edge of the sidewalk. Social services were on the scene for the women and boy, and Helen nodded to the women as she moved to the Ford F-150. China waved to her, placing her hands in a prayer position, and giving a kowtow. Helen provided a mock salute as Irish prattled on to the lady in the overcoat about the horrors they'd all endured. The boy, under the protective arm of Mexicali, waved at her as well. She gave a small smile, wondering, but allowing the idea to wane. It was time to go home. The drive home was six and a half hours. The time was nearing two a.m., and emotionally, she was spent.

“No need to try and drive it tonight; we have a hotel room for another night in case the officers need additional statements or information from us,” he told her, plugging the information into the GPS. “Let’s bring it down a bit before you return home.”

She cut her eyes at him. Helen reached into her pocket, freeing the weapon in the layers of fabric. The look she gave him was filled with daggers. Acid-filled words were held as she drove to the hotel, hoping it had more than a mini bar in the fridge. Tonight, she needed a fucking drink.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Helen wasn't hungry although he had ordered a light meal that had been delivered at the same time they arrived at the inn. She'd found, over the years, her appetite waxed and waned depending on her levels of stress. Honestly, she hadn't eaten an entire meal in days. Here and there she nibbled on enough to sustain energy levels, but a true appetite had not returned to her for some time. Today, only made her life more stressful lessening her desire to eat.

In the bathroom, she stared at herself in the mirror, going over the night. The plan was solid: get in the door, shoot him twice, free the women, allow The Collector to watch the freed women leave, then kill him. However, she'd hesitated. She shouldn't have hesitated.

All of her life, she'd hesitated. She'd hesitated to tell her mother about the things Smiley Roberston would whisper to her when no one was around. The man had bad intentions, which could possibly have been prevented, only if she hadn't hesitated. The two boyfriends in her past had hung around past their expiration dates because the first serious man in her life came after Cherry was away in boot camp. He was an asshole who coerced her into intimacy simply because she needed to keep the lights on and eat food regularly.

The second man, a wolf who dressed as a wolf, had more disposable income to spare. From him, she managed to get shoes, clothing, and actual meat in her freezer. He was a lousy lover but generous with funding. The conversations with him were equally as mediocre as his bedroom skills, but to live, she did what needed to be done.

None of them were by choice. Each of the times she'd had sex wasn't really by her choice or her desire. She sighed, thinking of where her life would go from here. She

was being trained to be a Technician, and yesterday she'd taken two lives. Tonight, she'd been prepared to take another.

"Jeez, Helen," she said, coming from the bathroom wrapped in a fluffy robe. Mustang sat at the table, reading through notes in a folder he'd taken from his briefcase. "Are those notes on a case?"

"Yeah, I'm wrapping up the liaison assignment with the Michigan State Troopers and preparing to head home tomorrow," he said.

She sat, looking at the folder, then asked, "What will happen with the boy?"

"I reached out to Azreal; there is a safe place for him with Bad Apple," he said.

"Bad Apple?"

"Azreal is an Archangel like Gabriel. She oversees the Fruits of the Great Lakes," he said. "Michigan is Bad Apple's territory. Cherry oversaw Indiana."

"And you, Mustang, what is your territory?"

"I'm not an assassin. I am a tracker," he said. "My territory is anything in the Western Region, but my home base is Oregon."

"And the handle Mustang?"

"The Western Region are the Horses, The Midwest Region are the Storms, the Southeast are the Directions, and Northeast are the Trees," he confessed.

She crinkled her brow, showing her lack of understanding. Softly, she inquired, "The Directions?"

“Yeah, my brother is Mr. Slow, there is Mr. Yield, Stop, One Way, yada yada,” he said, stopping to smile. “Some of the names are appropriate handles for each Technician. We have a big son of a bit...I mean a really big dude named Clydesdale and a little short runt of a guy named Shetland. He’s so cute, I am often tempted to pick him up and walk him over to the school bus stop to see if the driver will let him on board.”

He looked up to see her smiling. Her entire face changed when she smiled, and he had to catch himself. His smile faded. This was not the time, nor was this the place.

“Too late. I saw it in your eyes,” she told him, leaning back in the seat. “A funny thing about me, Mustang, is that on a good day, with a bit of makeup and some blusher, I can be cute. I’m not pretty. I don’t have an amazing figure or luxurious hair. I’m average, but for some reason, I attract the worst people to me.”

“You are far from average, and what they are attracted to is the light in you,” he told her. “Even I am pulled towards that light.”

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the tabletop, the look of defeat on her face, “Then why does it always feel so flipping dark around me?”

Her gaze went to her hands. She needed to have a conversation with him to move herself forward. The hesitation was back and fear covered her as she breathed slowly, mustering her courage. Mustang was tired of her second-guessing her natural instincts.

“For goodness’ sake, Helen! In the last two days, you took out a child trafficker, and on instinct, took out the second man, who was worse than the first. The second man was elusive to trained government agents, and on instinct alone, you took him down, then the next day freed four women from captivity and a young boy, and God only knows what that weirdo had planned for that child,” Mustang said. “You’re here.

You're a badass. Ask for what you need."

"I need a night as your lover," she told him, looking up at his surprised face.

"Yeah, I wasn't expecting you to ask for that," he said, leaning back in the seat, in his heart, already knowing she was going to ask. He would say no, again, but he still wanted to hear her pitch to change his mind, "We discussed this, and I think when the time comes for us, and it will, because I also want it, but not now; not like this, Helen."

In her head, it all made sense, and she would carefully, explain it to him. At the end of what she had to say, it would either work out or she would take the couch. Her days of hesitating were over.

"I have never initiated sex," she told him. "Any time I have experienced coitus has been by force or by coercion. I've never had a sexual encounter I initiated. I'm initiating an evening with you."

His face held no expression as he listened to her carefully laid out plan. In the past 72 hours, his first-hand knowledge of her thinking had intrigued him and held him in a holding pattern, not wanting to be far from her. Uncertainty filled his gut, fueling him with doubts about his own desire to be her hero or the simple fact that she was far more beautiful than she realized on the inside as well as the outer woman. What made her stunning was the unawareness of the power she wielded.

"Also, the last sexual release I experienced was by his hand. I don't want to live with that. I don't want to close my eyes and relive that trauma. Leave me with a night of passion between us," she told me.

"Helen, I can't erase what happened to you."

“No, but you can replace the feel of his hands on my body with the feel of yours,” she told him. “His mouth on me can be replaced with the sweetness of the memory of you tasting me with your tongue, my hands in that thick black hair, and the power of the freedom of giving myself to you with no hesitation, not holding back, giving you everything I’ve never shared with anyone else. I am asking you to allow me to be free, sexually with you, holding nothing back, sharing everything in my broken spirit that wishes to soar. I want to ride the stallion, with my hair whipping free, me holding the pommel and clamping on tight with my thighs to stay seated as you buck without restraint.”

“Well damn,” he said, sitting upright in the chair. “My entire soul reacted to every word you spoke.”

“Good,” she told him, standing. The robe opened to reveal her bare form underneath. “He scarred me. He scarred me so I would never desire for another man to see my body. I’m showing you my physical scars. I’m telling you my mental scars. One night, hell a couple of hours, a few rounds...I don’t care. I am asking you for what I need. I need you to make me feel beautiful and wanted as a woman, Mustang. I can even rationalize it in my head that I am spending the night in your arms as your woman.”

He was frozen in place. The light he spoke of shone around her form. His body was eager to give her everything she needed and more. “Helen, I’m not prepared for a night of intimacy. I have nothing with me.”

“I’m barren. Nothing we do tonight come to fruition, other than giving me seeds to bury my insecurities,” she said, holding his gaze.

“And this is seriously what you want from me on this night, well, the wee hours of the morning?”

“Mustang, this is what I need from you, along with that truck,” she said, smiling. “Hell, the way I’m feeling about this, about you, just might get a sister a brand car, a diamond necklace and a weekly phone call as well when I’m done riding the stallion into a lathered sweat.”

She winked at him, allowing the robe to drop around her feet. He stood up, all six feet, two and a half inches of him. His muscles were evident through the cotton tee he wore, and the most amazing erection she’d ever seen in her life greeted her and she gasped.

“You don’t have to ask me twice, my dear,” he said, walking to her. He lifted Helen in his arms, cradling her head to his chest and carrying her to the bedroom.

Mustang sat on the side of the bed, a nude Helen in his arms. He lowered his head to kiss each scar on her breast. Hands, rough with callouses from years of manual labor, ran across her thigh. The scent of her ambrosia filled his nostrils. He would make this good for her even if it killed him to not rut like a bull in heat. The draw to her was powerful. He wanted her and asking her to wait was simply him trying to prevent the inevitable. He’d give her everything she wanted because it was what she deserved.

“You are wrong, Helen,” he said, his lips finding hers, providing a gentle kiss. “You are more beautiful than you know, and I’m honored you asked me to be the gear to shift your life forward, to be here in this moment, and to share this intimacy with you. I will make it good for you. I will make this good for us.”

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Louisville, Kentucky

Cherry paced the floor with one crutch and a cast on her foot. Helen should have been back by now. On the news feed, she saw where the women had been freed in

Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Although Helen had her Technician's phone, Cherry had the laptop. When she checked the account, the banking stated the assignment had been completed with a bonus payment for an additional high-end target. Those funds weren't hers to divvy up, and Helen had earned the money. Cherry split the money into three accounts, one a high-yield money market, the second a working account, and the third an IRA. Helen was no longer broke or needed to be dependent upon Cherry or Slow for money. She had over a hundred thousand new opportunities to live her life however suited her needs.

At a quarter past three in the afternoon, she heard the crunch of tires on gravel as the black F-150 pulled into the drive path, heading around back to the garages. Cherry hobbled to the kitchen and looked out the window above the sink as her cousin pulled in the shop. She watched the garage door come down, and then the side door opened as Helen walked out carrying the go bag over her shoulder.

Cherry spotted the change in Helen immediately. The steps were more confident. She wasn't looking down when she walked, but her head was held high. The sway of her hips wasn't downplayed as she moved. Before, Helen had intentionally hidden any femininity about herself. This Helen wasn't hiding from anything or anyone.

Fear coursed through her, as she blinked several times, "What in the hell happened to her?"

A light knock came at the back door as Cherry hobbled over and opened it wide. Helen entered, and before she could stop herself, Cherry flung her body into Helen, holding her close. Tears she didn't realize she'd been holding poured from her eyes, dampening the side of Helen's face. She even planted a kiss on her temple, then her cheeks, squeezing her cousin tight.

"You're safe. You're home," Cherry said. "I was so worried. I was so worried."

“Hey, girl!” Helen said, pulling away. “I’m fine, Abi. I do however need to get Melody cleaned, as well as the mini.”

“Oh, okay,” Cherry said, stunned by the assuredness in Helen’s tone. “Do you want some tea?”

“Tea sounds good and maybe some cake if there is any left. I’m feeling kind of peckish,” Helen told her, coming inside the home and laying the weapons on the table.

Cherry was at a loss for words. Her cousin had a full four days of working as a Technician, and she was just as calm as if she’d been over to the museum to see the latest art exhibit. Slow was teaching Cherry to not rush things, and this was one of his teaching moments. She put on the kettle, pulling down a new pot she’d recently found at a thrift shop with matching cups and saucers. Last week at the local farmer’s market, a pineapple mango tea had caught her eye and was what she was making today.

“Let me lend you a hand with that,” Helen said, retrieving the gun cleaning kit from the go bag. “Ooh, there is enough cake left for me to get a slice. How is Naomi?”

“She’s fine. She asked about you,” Cherry said, taking a seat.

“I can’t wait to see her and give her hugs,” Helen replied, smiling at Cherry. “That girl is growing so fast, and call me sad if you want, but I am looking forward to hearing about her day. She does the recap so well about her macaroni art.”

Helen was smiling.

Helen didn’t smile.

On a good day, she watched people with mild contempt, but she didn't smile. Something had happened, and Cherry needed to know what it was. Her husband may like to move Slow, but she didn't. She blurted out, "You slept with Mustang, didn't you?"

"The first night, yes, I slept next to him," Helen said. "That come down is rough after an assignment. Seeing the red splotches when you close your eyes, I wasn't prepared for that bit, and it rocked me."

Cherry's lips were tight, "And the second night?"

"Was it three nights?"

"Helen, stop playing with me and dish the deets. He didn't coerce you or force you, did he?" Cherry said, watching her cousin pour tea as if the Duchess was coming over for crumpets.

"No, he didn't, and I actually initiated intimacy with him. I'm late getting back because round three took a little longer," she said, bugging out her eyes.

"Round three! You had three rounds of sex with that man? How are you even sitting down right now?"

"Well, he made me a tub of water to soak in when we were done with the first session of me reconnecting with my faith in the Lord because I called out for Him often. I think toward the end of that first round, I was bordering on blasphemy," she said. "Girl, it was so good, he couldn't wait for me to get out of the tub for the second one. There was water every damned where, and the third one, well, my footprints are all over that shower wall. My God, what a man! That is prime manhood right there, so powerful, yet thoughtful and gentle at the same time."

She sat down at the table, and in several rapid hand motions, broke down both weapons to clean. Cherry had taught her how, and watching her work was almost poetic. It was then that a thought hit.

Cherry asked, “You’re going to replace me, aren’t you?”

She looked up, the bottle of gun oil in her fingers, “Replace you?”

“Yeah, my broken foot means I can’t work, and if I conceive, I can’t work,” she said. “Would you be willing to replace me?”

Helen leaned across the table and took her hand. “No one can replace the Cherry On Top. I will do what is needed for our family, Abi. You’ve taken care of me for so many years, and if this is what is needed to take care of you, then I will do what is needed; nothing more, nothing less.”

“You seem...different,” Cherry said, still dumbfounded by the arrival of Helen McDaniel. The careful Shenita was truly no more and Helen had taken charge of her cousin. Cherry didn’t know if she liked Helen.

“Bitch, I killed two people, shot the man who held me captive? twice, then freed his other captives along with a ten-year-old white boy child and made wild, reckless love to a man named after a fast horse, who is also hung like one,” Helen said. “How can I not be different after three days of that insanity? Plus, Italy, one of the women I called myself freeing, is the legal wife of The Collector. She helped her husband collect his dolls to satisfy his weird sexual appetites, and, might I add again for the people in the cheap seats, he had the ten-year-old boy in a closet with no light. So yeah, I’m different.”

Cherry burst into laughter. “I don’t know what to react to first in all of what you said; that is a lot to unpack.”

“Well, Mustang wouldn’t let me kill that bastard, and Italy was trying to stop him from bleeding out while still wearing a fucking dog collar with a little flag of Italy like some sort of Sicilian sheepdog!”

Her cousin was still. Helen picked up on the change in the energy. Cherry knew something she was not saying.

“Spill it, Abi,” Helen said.

“The Collector, he’s dead,” Cherry said. “He tried to escape at the hospital and fell down several flights of stairs, breaking his neck.”

“See, the universe is listening,” Helen said and burst into laughter. She started to clap. She looked at the teacup, pushed it aside, and went to the pantry for a bottle of wine. “This calls for hearty red with some white cheese.”

Tears were forming in Cherry’s eyes again. “It is so good to see you laugh, Helen.”

“Honey, after that first forty-five-minute ride on the Mustang, I felt like Harley Quinn, thinking, ‘hmm, I love that Joker!’” She laughed harder. “I didn’t know that is what sex was supposed to feel like. Whew! I might have to dip out once a month and fly to Oregon for a bottle of Pinot and ride on dick-o.”

“Good grief,” Cherry said. “Let’s get these weapons cleaned and prepare dinner for when Michael and Noami get home.”

She looked at her cousin and smiled. They had come so far, been through so much, and were still together. Moreover, the love between them sustained a friendship and understanding neither spoke about but clearly understood.

“Oh, I wanted you to know the bonus you received and payment for the second job

was distributed among three accounts to lessen the tax liability,” Cherry said to Helen.

“Okay, in your accounts?”

“No Helen, the money is all yours. you did the job, so it’s yours,” Cherry said.

“What, all of that money is mine?”

“You earned it, it’s yours.”

“Well, look at that,” Helen said, staring into the glass of freshly poured red. “This day just keeps getting better and better. Does he have any pork chops in there? We need some pork chops, fried, with mashed potatoes, and some green beans. Ooh, I can cook some of Ruth’s biscuits. You know she taught me how?”

In silence, they worked to clean the weapons. An hour later, they started a simple dinner of spaghetti with turkey meatballs and a side salad. The pork chops would come the day after, once they went to the market. Helen was in the mood for a pie, and in the pantry was a jar of spiced apples she’d use to make an easy dessert. While kneading the dough for the crust, her mind wandered to Mustang.

“If you can feel me, Mustang, thank you. Lord, what a man,” she said, smiling to herself.

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Corvallis, Oregon

Mustang sat at his kitchen table taking inventory of his life. He’d never been one for a great number of friends or a man who needed constant companionship. Four days

with Helen McDaniel was making him rethink a great number of things.

He was drawn to her quiet power and brilliant light which she often tried to dim but couldn't. As much as he was drawn to her, it was not his intention to take her to his bed, but when she had asked, explaining why it needed to happen now rather than later, a man only had so much resolve, especially after she laid it out so eloquently. Seeing the scars on her breast left by that monster, he wished he hadn't stopped her from killing the bastard. Fate had intervened and handled the matter for them both. The Collector was no more.

"I made the lady a promise which I need to keep," he said, picking up his Technician phone. He pressed 2 and waited for a connection. A voice answered after the second ring.

"State your need," a voice said.

"Archangel, saddle up for the Mustang ," he said.

"How may I be of assistance?"

"I need to place a few orders, and you're the most likely to make this happen," Mustang said.

"Listening."

"One, a Chevy Colorado, used, low miles, good condition, four doors if possible, in dark green. Two, a new mid-sized SUV, both vehicles for Helen McDaniel," he said to the Archangel.

"Really?"

“She asked me for what she needed, and I’m delivering,” he replied.

There was a pause in the line, “Did you fornicate with that woman?”

Mustang responded, “Do you ever mind your business?”

“Fair enough. What are the other two items?”

“These two, you’re going to love,” Mustang said, trying to hold his laughter. After the request, he said, “Transferring funds to you now along with your fee. Please let me know when the items have been delivered.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, love you, hope to see you at Christmas. Mustang out,” he added, without the custom whinny he had perfected as a teen. He leaned back in his recliner, holding a beer which had grown warm, and thought of Helen.

There was one more item he needed to send to her. This item would be off the books. Maybe two items. His heart felt full when he thought of the wee hours of the morning. She’d given herself to him so freely as if the sensations she experienced were all so new to her. The facial expressions of the pleasure she experienced with each of his movements brought him back to her soft mouth, the tender kisses, and even her asking him if what she was doing felt good and pleased him.

“Shit, now I understand why The Collector was obsessed with that woman,” Mustang said. He looked at his crotch, “And you shut up too.”

It was going to be a long night.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Today was going to be a shit day. His bones ached with the announcement of cosmic vibrations heralding the echoes from the universe that his day was going to go at full pace down a poop hole. Everything in his life had changed, and now he had nowhere to hide from the chaotic world filled with women, but at work. At this rate, he wanted the fax machine to go off so he could have a moment of peace and quiet driving in his shop. On the one hand, where he held tight to the complaints and gripes, on the other, was a bowl filled with happiness. The issue was, he couldn't find the balance in the emotional wheelhouse.

"It all just feels weird," Michael Isaac Neary said to no one in particular.

In the past week, his wife had broken her foot on assignment. His sister-in-law, who was actually a cousin-in-law, had to fill in for his wife and left home to kill a fucker with Michael's brother riding shotgun. She returned nearly a hundred and fifty thousand ideas richer, but luckily, standing next to the man she was sent to target was another fella who had made her asshole itch, as she explained to him, and not knowing the man was a high-value target, she had earned her one hundred thousand blessings from The Company.

"She killed him because the man made her asshole itch," he said, looking up to see his boss making a beeline for his office. "Speaking of itchy assholes."

"Neary," Jerry Stanfield said as he tapped on the door, peering inside the space with his round red face. "Did you see the report from Texas? Now there is a problem in Arizona. We can't keep up with the sheer numbers."

"I've seen the reports," Michael replied.

“Then what are we gonna do about it?”

“Sir, that is a y our pay grade type of decision, not mine,” he told his boss. “My pay grade affords me decisions on who to place on the plane to render assistance, what local resources should be activated, and how much per diem each agent should receive for the market in which we are called in to assist.”

“Yes, yes. But what are we going to do?”

“Sir, in all honesty, I don’t have an answer,” he said, surprised at the truthfulness of the statement. “My wife broke her foot over the weekend, and the past five days have been rough.”

Jerry entered the office all the way, closing the glass door and taking a seat. He provided Slow the same look the old coon dog his dad used to take hunting would give him each time he started to eat a sandwich. It wasn’t his way to confide in anyone, especially not his boss.

“Is Abigail okay?”

“She’s fine, but her sister Helen, I think, had something happen with my brother over the same weekend, and for the past three days, she’s smiling and humming all over the damned place,” he said.

“Wait, you have a brother?”

“Yes, we have a brother; Jarius, that’s his name, came home over the weekend, and he and Helen must have hit it off,” he said. “The thing is...my brother isn’t a bad guy, but he’s not marriage material.”

“Ah, and you can’t say anything because you don’t want the old ball and chain to

think you're jealous since you're not the focus of attention anymore as the sole cock of the walk," Jerry said.

Slow stared at him mutherfuckingly for a good minute and a half. "Is that where your mind went?"

"Well, yeah. I know when my sister-in-law visits and brings those double D cups into our home, they take all the energy in the room. I'm tired when she leaves from straining myself not to watch those juggulugs bouncing all over the place," he confessed. "The one time I mentioned to my wife about Julie getting a better bra, she of course scolded me, asking me why in the hell was I looking? They are double D's, man. Who in their right mind wouldn't look? I've seen women in Trader Joe's looking at those back breakers."

Slow still stared at him mutherfuckingly before saying, "I don't even know why I try to talk to you. There are maybe three or four loose neurovascular connectors in your occipital lobe, which makes you have a borderline personality disorder."

Jerry was confused, asking, "What?"

"I firmly believe that if you didn't pretend like you actually worked in law enforcement, you would have a compound in the mountains where you grew your own food, milked goats, and had five wives all named Mary," Slow told him.

"How did you know I was planning that for my retirement? I don't know about five wives though, but Julie and them knockers would be welcome for a Friday night distraction," Jerry said, wagging his eyebrows.

Slow didn't have time to respond before his phone buzzed, announcing his wife was on her way up to see him. His forehead furrowed in concern that Abigail was coming up to his office. He knew she had a doctor's appointment today to check the cast on

her foot and take new X-rays and such, but he wasn't expecting an in-person visit.

Jerry sat waiting for her to arrive. The elevator doors opened, and Slow stepped out of his office. His wife had been on the crutches for most of the day. He figured she was more than likely tired from hobbling; therefore, he took it upon himself to meet her at the elevator, lifting her in his arms and carrying Abigail like a child, while she held onto crutches, to his office. Several sighs could be heard from the women in the office as he walked by.

Jerry, all smiles greeted her with gusto. "Well hello, Abigail. I'm sorry to hear about your foot. How is our little Naomi? Is she still socking men in the mouth?"

"I don't know, Jerry. I think she only socks men she doesn't like; I guess little Naomi is still transforming the patriarchy," Cherry told him. "Good seeing you."

As obtuse as Jerry Steinfeld could be, he knew a dismissal when he heard one. "Yes, yes, of course. Love to Naomi."

Cherry didn't look at Jerry as he left. He was, among many other reasons, why she never took an office job. Men like that made her want to shoot them all and watch the blood slowly drain from their bodies. However, there was a purpose for her visit. She looked up to see her sexy, very confident husband sitting on the edge of his desk, patiently waiting for an explanation for her coming upstairs to the office.

"How bad is the break?"

"Not too rough, but he couldn't get a good X-ray, which means he has no way to tell me how long it will take to heal," she told her husband.

"Was it hard to get the foot at a good angle to get a scan?"

She smiled at him. He was so handsome and obtuse at the same damned time. From her pocket, she pulled out a picture frame, passing it to him face down.

“I’m not understanding.”

“Turn the frame over,” he told her.

Michael Isaac Neary lived his life with a slow hand. He took his time to process situations to determine the best outcome for all involved. A man blessed with keen insight and a quick wit, he was very slow on the uptake upon looking at the black-and-white image.

“Is this a sonogram?”

“Yes, that is the first picture of Luke,” she told him. “If you turn it this way, let me show you, right there, that is his little worm. We are having a boy.”

Slow sat staring at the image. He could clearly see the head, legs, and arms. When he held the picture as she said, he could see what she meant; there it was, his little Neary maker. He was going to be a father again, and this time it was a boy. He would have a son.

“Holy shit,” he said softly. “Are you okay? Are you feeling okay? Do you need a snack, some juice, a pickle, or a piece of fruit? When? I mean when will Luke be arriving?”

“I’m about 17 weeks,” she said. “We are halfway there.”

“Where? You aren’t even that round about the middle yet. I saw some extra junk in the trunk, but I thought that was just from eating regular meals. Wait, that came out wrong. Holy shit. I’m going to have a son to go with my adorable daughter,” he said,

looking at her. “Do I say thank you? I’m at a loss for words here. Holy shit. A son. Thank you.”

He leaned over, kissing her lightly. He still stared at her, then at the belly covered up in the oversized coat. Michael Isaac Neary held up a finger, exiting his office and standing in the middle of the walkway of the cubicles and offices. He opened his mouth and said very loudly, “It’s a boy! I made me a son! We’re pregnant again!”

For no logical reason, he began to do the MC Hammer dance up and down the walkway in front of his office as people clapped and cheered. For good measure, he even added the music from his mouth with a booming, “dun-dun-dun-a-dun!” Cherry sat in the chair, watching him with pride and she teared up a bit. This is what he had wanted and missed being able to share with his co-workers about Naomi.

People passed by him, giving him a high five as he grinned from ear to ear. She heard a few people mention they didn’t know he was married. One woman said she didn’t know he could dance. Someone commented they had never seen him smile and somewhere an Angel was dying in fear from him showing off his teeth. Finally, when he’d calmed down, he announced, once more very loudly, that he was taking the rest of the day off to celebrate.

He returned to the office, red-faced, slightly embarrassed at his own reaction to the news, and grateful. Michael Isaac Neary was grateful for the new change in his life. This was news his father would love to hear.

“Whew, I need to call Daddy,” he said, holding up a finger for her to wait on second, dialing his father, grinning from ear to ear. “Daddy, we did it. Luke Jacob Neary is in the hopper. He’ll be arriving in about four and a half months. I know right, yeah, please, let Mom know. Sure. Sure. No, she’s wonderful. Just as beautiful as ever. She’s glowing, Daddy. My baby is glowing as she’s carrying the life of our son. Sure will.”

He ended the call, looking at his wife with a blush on her cheeks, “Dad sends his love and says hi. I’m sending you some love too. This is awesome. I need cigars. Ooh, wait. I need to call Jay. Wait. I don’t know if I want to talk to him. I think he and Helen bumped uglies. She keeps smiling.”

“They did,” Cherry said.

“Eww. She also said Cinderella had fun at the ball, I don’t know what that means,” Slow replied. “How long will her post-coitus happy joy thing go on? I mean, do the aftereffects last a long time? Wait. Is Cinderella, I don’t want to know. I can’t know. It would fuck up my day to know what that means.”

“Based on what she said, there were rounds,” Cherry told her husband’s upturned face. “Are you jealous?”

“No, not at all,” he said, “Jay is just not the settling down type. I don’t want Helen to expect much from him going forward, but I could be wrong.”

“I think you might be on this one. Whatever happened between them changed her. The weekend changed her, and she’s happier than I’ve ever seen, so I’m going to leave it alone,” Cherry said, “I’m craving red meat. Like liver and onions red meat.”

“And double eww,” he replied. “However, my blushing bride and mom-to-be, your chariot awaits.”

“Lead on my noble knight,” she answered, getting to her feet. “I want to ask, and I will wait until we are in the car, about what you mean with her expecting too much from him.”

He carried her to the elevator and out to his SUV. Helen had given her a ride to the doctor’s and dropped her off at his office, and he would bring her home after they

went to celebrate. Naomi wasn't at school today because she was on a shopping trip with her grandmother. It gave them time to talk.

Inside the vehicle, Cherry asked the question again about the man called Mustang. "You said Helen shouldn't expect much from him. I'm certain she doesn't, but a bit of clarification is necessary. I mean, I didn't even know you had a brother."

"Because he's also a Technician, the connection between us, well, you know," he explained. "If you found out his real name, you'd know he was a relation, but he is also Black, so people don't add two and two and get him as my brother."

"And why, you know, the expectation part?"

Slow shrugged a bit. "He only comes home twice a year. For Mom's birthday or he chooses Thanksgiving or Christmas, depending on his schedule."

"Do you ever go to him?"

"Yeah, I go out to fish or when he'd bottling his homemade hooch he calls wine," Slow said. "Mom and Dad go every June; you know Father's Day is also right around both Jay and my Dad's birthdays."

"Still not clear on the expectation thing," Cherry pushed.

"Listen, he is a stallion, always has been, always will be, and he's free-spirited. He doesn't want kids and doesn't really like a woman fawning over him, but he will allow Mom to fuss over him every once in a while. There is a little bit of affection between him and Rebecca, and she thinks the world of him, but there is...well."

"Well, what?"

Slow drove down the highway, ready to turn into his favorite Mom are you okay? Do you need a pickle, some ice cream, or a hug? Should I say thank you?"

He smiled back at her. "Yeah, this is a lot. My arms are strong, my shoulders are steady, and if you guys are good and happy, I'm good and happy."

"I'm happy, but I can't work for a while," she said, looking him in the eyes. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Not if you take your ass out in my golf cart and go shoot us some dinner," he said, laughing.

Cherry swatted at him playfully. "No seriously, will we be okay on one income for a while?"

"I have no mortgage or car payments, so yeah, plus I still have my side gig," he said, winking at her. "If you want to be a stay-at-home mom, it's okay. I'm okay with it."

There was another thing on his mind that he wanted to address. Now was the time since they were sitting in a well of honesty. He was also curious and needed an answer. He asked, "May I ask, Mrs. Hump, you had no reaction to her."

"No need," she said.

"She is a stunning woman, even with the short hair. When it was longer, even longer than yours, she entered a room and sucked the life out of it," he said. "You didn't seem fazed by her, and neither did Helen."

She shrugged, "it's the way you look at Rebecca."

"Huh?" He asked, uncertain what she meant, "What do you mean, the way I look at

my sister?”

“When Mrs. Hump saw you enter, her body language didn’t brace as if she were in a space with a former lover and his new wife,” she said. “She was happy to see you as I guess her friend. The boy was happy to see you too as if he had something to catch you up in his little boy life. Hump gave off the same vibe. When she sat down at the table with you, you blessed the food, took a bite, and looked up at her like you look at Rebecca. As if you were waiting for her to say some shit to annoy you. That’s how you look at Rebecca.”

“I do not!”

“Yes, you do,” she told him, “You also, in your speech to Rebecca, talk to her as if she is still your annoying little sister. Naomi picks up on it, which is why she makes a wide berth for Rebecca. Naomi senses Rebecca is someone who annoys you. You treated Mrs. Hump the same way. Does she annoy you?”

“Never thought about it,” he said, “her role is to seduce men. I always wanted her to feel safe around me, so I turned off the sexual side of myself in her presence.”

“Turned off the sexual side of yourself?”

“Men can do that Abigail,” he said, smiling. “Jay does it as well. I saw him turn it on for Helen.”

“Yes, I saw him turn on the charm for Naomi,” she said. “Keep in mind, Naomi reacted to Jay based on your vibes to him. She watches everything you do and if she senses you don’t like someone, like your boss, your daughter responds in kind.”

“You’re interesting. I like you. Yes, I am madly in love with you, but I also like you,” he said grinning. “Again, are you going to be okay being a stay-at-home mom?”

“You’re changing the subject,” Cherry told him.

“I just found out I treat my sister as an annoyance, my daughter mimics who I like and don’t like, and Helen named her lady parts Cinderella who had a ball with Jay,” he said, “but the good news is, I also found out I’m going to be a Daddy again, and I get to cut the cord when Luke arrives. I’m good. I’m so good.”

For the first time in her life, Abigail Barnes was good as well. The idea of staying home with her children, baking cookies, and having a hunk of meat ready when her man came home from work didn’t turn her stomach. Possibly, a year, maybe two at home would do her some good. It would do Helen some good as well. Finally, she could take it down a thousand and relax. Until now, she’d never realized how tight she lived with the fear of providing for the three of them and having to worry about not coming home after an assignment.

“Thank you,” she said softly, surprised by the arrival of tears.

“No, thank you,” he said. “This is going to be a good life. I love you, Abigail.”

“I love you as well, Michael,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I love building this family with you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Helen rose early to get in a bit of target practice before starting the day. While she walked the shooting lanes of the property, several rabbits decided to end their lives by stepping in front of the rifle she carried. In less than an hour, she secured four plump little bunnies that would make a great rabbit stew. Honestly, she'd never cared for the game. Until recently, she'd never cared for sex, but her life was changing on the daily, and if Mustang walked his sexy behind through the front door, the man was going to get got.

She found herself smiling as she approached the back decking of the home where her cousin lived with her husband and daughter. There was no surprise to see the man of the house on the porch as if he were awaiting her arrival. She presented the rabbits first.

"Morning, Michael," she said, ensuring the weapon was pointed away from him.

"Helen," he replied, passing her a steamy hot cup of coffee.

"I've never cared for rabbit stew, but I have to contribute to the food stores," she said, thanking him for the hot cup of deliciousness.

"You have your own money now; did you think this was necessary?"

"This," she said, pointing to the rabbits, "is always necessary, Mr. Neary. The Cherry on Top is on hiatus, bringing us down an income. If you get hurt or injured on assignment, then I must know how to maintain and provide for the family. You don't have to do it all. We can carry our weight."

“I have reserves, Helen,” he explained.

“I have to bring something to the table if I’m going to live here as a member of your family,” she explained, “and we have already set the boundary that my contribution would not come in the form of sharing your bed.”

“Well, it’s not coming in the form of your cooking either,” he said, chuckling at his own honesty. “Again, we have reserves for such emergencies.”

“As do we, but for once, it would be nice if my cousin could use some of those reserves to get nice things for herself,” she explained. “Abi deserves to be able to go to the closet to select from her collection of designer handbags to match with an expensive pair of shoes she bought just because. She deserves a fave pair of diamond earrings to match the tennis bracelet you will purchase for her next birthday. My cousin has sacrificed so much for us to live and eat; she needs a break. I want to make sure she is well rested this pregnancy.”

“Helen, I can take care of my family, you included.”

“I’m not questioning your ability to be head of the house, I’m simply letting you know that, as a family, we all must pull our weight. I’m making you aware that I am pulling mine,” she told him. “The family is growing. I don’t know what is next for me, but right now, I’m going to help where I can.”

“Your home is here with us.”

“For now,” she told him.

The silence between them hovered with unsaid words. He had things he needed and wanted to say to her, but the approach would need to be guided. When he looked up, she was staring at him. She was reading him. She’d learned to do that very well as if

she knew his thoughts. Helen was also teaching his daughter to do the same thing. It was the reason she sat quietly around people she didn't know. Like her aunt and mother, she assessed every person in the room, understanding, on a level he didn't comprehend, how to approach each person. Instinctually, like Helen and even Cherry, Naomi knew how to handle Jay. She knew how to handle his father. Hell, his daughter even knew how to handle him. He looked at Helen with fresh eyes. She'd read the men, assessing the second man next to Karlton, and she'd acted, but he didn't understand how she knew. An eyebrow arched and she offered a weak smile.

"The white belt and shoes," she told him.

"Excuse me?"

"I dropped the second man because he wore a white belt and a pair of those white leather loafers and no socks," she told him.

The expression on his face showed interest and confusion at the same time. He was thinking about the question, but afraid to ask. Mr. Slow wanted to understand what in her mind made her see the second man as a threat, taking it upon herself to take him down without an assigned order. He needed to know how she knew he was a bad man.

"Helen, you can't expect me to believe you knew he was a bad man because he was wearing a white belt with white leather loafers," he told her.

"The only grown men who should be wearing a white belt are starting a martial arts class," she told him. "In my experience, ten times out of ten, men with those white belts, white shoes, and no socks are pervs. Every one of them my mother brought home, always, always, found a way to slither around me sucking on that front tooth like he'd gotten a piece of lettuce wedge in his incisor. Pervs. Plus, he was yanking on the girl child who was terrified of him. Hopefully, she is somewhere safe."

“She is,” he said.

“Okay, what’s next in my training?”

He stood for a minute. The coffee in his mug had grown cold. His concerns for Helen were only warming up. He didn’t want to beat around the bush, therefore he forged ahead, head on.

“Mustang comes home twice a year,” he said, “and hopefully, things won’t be awkward for any of us moving forward.”

Helen cut her eyes at him. “Every tub must rest on its own bottom and in each shot, the aim must be true.”

“I don’t know what that means,” he answered.

“It is what it is, Michael. He and I shared a moment that I asked to have, I initiated, and I wanted,” she told him. “As he said, he always comes through.”

“Hmmp,” he said as Cherry came to the back door holding his Technician phone. In her hand, she also held her own.

Michael took the phone from her hand, looking at the second device resting in Cherry’s palm. This was unusual. Technicians didn’t get phone calls.

He answered using his handle, “Slow’s down.”

There was a quiet in between the deep breaths he took, looking at Helen. Reluctantly, he answered. “The training hasn’t officially begun. Her survival instincts are at a seven. Mustang evaluated her in the field and can attest to her holding her own. I have not worked beside her as of yet to make a formal assessment.”

Slow nodded his head and ended the call. The second he hung up, Cherry's Technician phone rang. She answered using her handle, "The Cherry on Top."

The quiet returned as she listened to the voice on the line. "I can travel but will have to be driven. Yes. Yes. Shawnee Township. Tomorrow at eight."

The call ended, and all eyes went to Helen. She asked, "What?"

Cherry's lips were tight as she told her, "We have a come to Jesús meeting tomorrow."

Slow's eyes grew wide. "I've never met him; have you?"

Cherry shook her head no as she said, "I've never met him either."

Helen's eyes grew wide and she asked, "Is he going to kill me?"

"No," they both said at the same time. "This should be interesting."

The conversation went no further as the sound of vehicles arriving drew all of their attention. Slow lead the way through the home from the back porch deck to the front porch to see the arrival of four separate vehicles.

"What in the truck nuts is happening here," he said, waiting at the edge of the porch for the vehicles to come to a stop.

The driver of the first vehicle was the one to emerge first. On the back of his truck were two additional vehicles, a Chevy Colorado in deep green and a Subaru Forester 4 x4 SUV also in forest green. Helen's hand went to her breast. Green was her favorite color. She didn't remember mentioning that to Mustang, but he'd heard her words.

“Got a delivery here for Helen McDaniel,” the driver said.

“For me?” she asked, coming off the porch.

The second driver of the next vehicle brought with him a metal carport. He too climbed down and walked over to meet Helen. Offering a wide smile and a lascivious grin, he gave her an inappropriate once-over before chiming in, “Hey, I guess what I have on the back of my rig is the carport for those two vehicles. Let me know where you want me to set it up to house your cars.”

“And like wow,” she said, grinning from ear to ear. “Follow me. I know exactly where that should go.”

As she walked around the side of the house, Slow and Cherry were busy looking at the remaining two vehicles. One had a partially put-together small building of some sort. The last vehicle had his cousin Bleu Neary in the driver’s seat with his ward Jacob on the passenger side. Jacob took care of Bleu Neary’s horses over at his farmhouse on the other side of Louisville.

“Bleu, is that a pony?” Slow shouted as his cousin.

“Yes, yes, it is,” Bleu said, climbing out of the truck. “Jacob, unload Ms. Sprinkles.”

“No, no, and no,” Slow said to him.

“Yes, yes, and sorry, but Ms. Sprinkles is bought and paid for by your brother, and I have orders to deliver this pony to one Ms. Naomi Ruth Neary,” Bleu said, trying not to laugh. He looked at Cherry, tipping the bib of his hat. Thinking better of it, he’d never met his cousin’s wife and corrected the error immediately.

“Good morning, Ms. Abigail. I regret not coming to meet you before now, but as I

understand it, the past few months have been insane,” he said, offering his hand.

“What is shameful is you showing up before eight a.m. at my house with a got-damned pony,” Slow mumbled through gritted teeth.

“Well, if I ever received a got-damned invitation, I wouldn’t have to arrive at the order of someone else,” Bleu said. “Ms. Abigail, please let me know when you are free. I’d love to have you over to meet my DeShonda and my boy. I hear you’re going to add one more to the family. I am as well. Our second one is also a boy.”

He said the last part, looking at his cousin with a twinkle in his eye. The young man Jacob was unloading the pony just as Naomi came out of the house. She spotted it and squealed like a stuck pig making everyone jump.

“It’s a pony! Uncle Black Man got me a real-life pony! Oh, Daddy, I love that man so much,” she said, running off the porch.

Before Jay had left, she’d managed to finagle a story time out of her uncle, encouraging him to add in the special voices, which led to Jay’s signature whinny, which led to the talk of ponies, which led to his brother buying to daughter a got-damned pony.

The wispy curls whipped in the wind as she ran from the porch to see her new gift. Her tiny pajama bottoms twisted to one side of her hand full of boodie as she went over to meet her new friend. Cherry was outdone by her daughter, who immediately went to the back end of the horse to lift the tail. She bent looking underneath the carriage of the pony.

“Daddy, my pony has a vagina! It’s a girl. Can I name her Princess Poppy?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Slow mumbled. “The pony has a name, and it’s Ms.

Sprinkles.”

“Ms. Sprinkles, oh my gosh. Wait until Michelle sees this. Daddy, can I call Michelle and tell her I got a pony? I want to tell her I got a pony,” she said. “When can I ride Ms. Sprinkles? Daddy, can you call Uncle Black Man so I can say thank you for the best present ever? I got a pony. I got a pony!”

His head hurt. His brother was a menace. His cousin was an asshole, and his wife seemed amused by it all.

Bleu didn’t miss a beat, laughing, he wanted to know, “She calls Jay, Uncle Black Man?”

Slow stayed right on track with him. “It gets worse. She asked Daddy, whom she calls the Grandpa Man, if my Mom had a black boyfriend so she could make a black baby.”

Bleu Neary burst into laughter. “Why have I never met this child? I think I love her already.”

A twinkle came to Slow’s eyes. “I think you should go over and give her a hug and get a kiss for delivering the pony to her.”

“I think I will do just that since I am her hero today, me and her Uncle Black Man,” Bleu said, walking towards Naomi with pride.

Slow said nothing as his cousin bent low, speaking to his daughter. He watched Bleu Neary lean in, going for a kiss. On cue, he watched Naomi ball up her fist and sock him in the mouth. He looked at his wife and winked.

“Children. I am going to spend my life surrounded by children,” Cherry said,

appreciating her husband's bold move.

Bleu looked back at him. "You knew that was going to happen, didn't you?"

"Yep, pretty much," he said. "What is that building for on the other truck?"

"It's the barn for Ms. Sprinkles," Bleu said, asking where it should be erected. "It seems Jay thought of everything."

"Did he send any feed for the pony?"

"Actually, he did," Bleu said, watching Jacob lift Naomi onto the pony. "He also paid for Jacob to come by three times a week for three months to teach her how to ride, brush the pony down, and take care of her."

"Yeah, good old Jay," he said, wanting to call Mustang, but that could wait for later.

Cherry offered Bleu and Jacob a cup of coffee and breakfast, which both gladly accepted. In the kitchen, she pulled her husband aside and asked, "Is your brother really rich or something?"

"Yeah, Jay bought a small defunct vineyard in Oregon, turned it around, and some wine company bought him out," he said. "He still lives on the vineyard, but the wine is taken care of by the company who bought him out. The money from the vineyard, he invested in some app a weird dude wanted him to go in on, and that made him like a billionaire or some shit. I don't ask."

"Oh, okay then," she said, watching her cousin run her fingers over her vehicles. The Subaru was new; the pick-up truck was not.

Never in her life had Helen had a new car. There were very few things in her life that

had been new or not purchased at a discount or from a wholesale rack. However, she now had a new car. From the back window, Cherry observed Helen as the man passed her an envelope.

Whatever was in the envelope brought Helen to her knees. She took a seat on the front steps of her home, cradling the package to her chest. The back of her hand wiped away tears. Whatever Mustang sent to Helen must have touched her heart.

“Family,” Cherry said, turning to chat with her husband's cousin. “Okay, who is the oldest, Zeke or Gabriel?”

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Helen couldn't believe her eyes. The carport went up without hassle as the quick-drying cement was poured into holes for the braces of the carport. The man said to allow it to dry after placing weights on the edges to hold it in place. The two vehicles sat in front of her home, both belonging to her. The second vehicle, the Subaru, was brand new with 25 miles on the odometer.

“Brand damned new,” she said, as the man passed her the keys and paperwork. He told her the insurance was paid for the year on both vehicles. The registration for both, in her name, was paid as well. “Thank you,” she told him.

He passed her an envelope with the documents. She looked inside because the package was uneven. She removed the thin black velvet box, opening it to find a necklace with a small angel with a brilliant diamond in the center of her chest. She looked at the certificate, a Ray of Light diamond. A second envelope inside the package had her name in bold block letters.

Helen slowly opened the envelope to find an open-ended plane ticket to Salem, Oregon. Also, inside was a business card, black, with the raised image of a Mustang

and a phone number with a 541 area code. She reached into her pocket to grab her personal phone. Her hands shook as she dialed the number.

He answered on the third ring, “Jay Neary.”

“Mr. Neary, this is Helen McDaniel,” she said, trying to sound professional.

“Oh today, it’s Mr. Neary. Last week, it was faster, you rock-hard son of a bitch,” he said laughing.

She burst into a combination of laughter and tears. “This is too wonderful, all of it. I want to say I don’t deserve this, but I do. Thank you for seeing me. Thank you for these gifts.”

“And what about the plane ticket?”

“Anytime, anywhere, anything you need, Mr. Neary, I’ve got you,” she said.

“I always come through Helen; just say when you’re coming to me and I’ll do the rest,” he told her. “Cheers my lovely.”

“Cheers,” she said as he disconnected the call. She looked up to see Naomi on a pony with the man who arrived in one of the other vehicles. Slow and Cherry must have known who he was, so she didn’t want to make it her business, but she did head over to the house to join them for breakfast.

Naomi and the young man had also come inside the home.

“I tethered Ms. Sprinkles to the back deck while the barn is getting set up for her,” Jacob added.

Helen looked at Naomi and said, “Hey girl. I see you got yourself a pony.”

“Uncle Black Man sent it to me,” Naomi said, smiling.

“Uncle Jay,” Slow corrected. “Helen, this is my knot-headed cousin, Bleu Neary. That is his ward Jacob who will be coming three times a week to give Bunny her riding lessons on the pony Jay sent to her.”

“Well, he does always come through,” Helen said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Oh, dear God,” Slow said, feeling the bile rising in his throat.

“Ooh, there’s a story here. What happened between you and Jay? Ooh, you and Jay,” Bleu said, leaning forward. “Tell me more. I wasn’t aware he’d come home for something other than Thanksgiving and Aunt Ruthie’s birthday. He stopped in for dinner and a slice of pie?”

Slow was becoming more annoyed by the minute. “Don’t you have a set of toothless construction workers to oversee or something?”

“No, this is so much better! So very Ophelia and Laertes!” Bleu added, smiling. “Helen, are you and Ms. Abigail here related?”

“She’s my cousin,” Helen said, “and you are Zeke and Gabriel’s brother?”

“I am,” he said, looking at her closely. Helen was looking back at him with the same intensity and then Slow saw it. He saw the unflappable Bleu Neary flap. She could see him.

Helen could see the real Bleu Neary, and he was intrigued about what she would say to him next to reel the man into her web. He’d misread her on so many levels. What

he'd thought was an innocent victim of circumstance had become a weapon of destruction, only she didn't know yet. She didn't know how to wield her power, but she was learning. Helen offered a soft smile, before speaking.

"It must be tough on you, Bleu, being the smartest one of the three brothers," she said to the man. He sat and watched Bleu's entire demeanor change. The man, who had a Doctorate in psychology and specialized in mind fucking suspects, had just, in fact, gotten into a game of wits with a woman far cleverer than she let on. She'd picked up on the Hamlet reference Bleu had used. "Tell me, it must have been a Shakespearian childhood growing up in the house with Zeke and Gabriel?"

"Well, now that you ask," Bleu said, leaning back and expanding his chest.

Slow also leaned back in his chair. She was going to be just fine. They were all going to be just fine. Tomorrow would be the real test; if she could survive an interview with Jesús, she would make a great Technician. Everything about her read suburban housewife who would be seen driving about in her little Subaru or picking up flowers and plants in her pick-up truck, not knowing she was as deadly as they came.

He loved it.

He was loving every moment of his life. Helen had found a means to harness the anger. The thin tree in the yard which never seemed to get enough sun and often shed its leaves before the others was becoming healthier by the minute. A lone life he'd once led as a Technician, had been replaced with a family man who enjoyed spending time with the ones he loved.

For his wife, her time as a Technician was coming to a close. For Helen, her life as a Technician would now commence. It was his job to train her, to prepare her, to guide Helen on the rules of engagement for taking out the trash. It was his assignment. It was his job.

He was a great captain. He was Michael Isaac Neary, a Technician in the Southeast Directions, and known as Mr. Slow. A husband, a father, a brother, a brother-in-law, a son, and a friend. More than ever, he was a bringer of justice.

“I’m good with it,” he said, rising to make more waffles for breakfast for his family.

Cherry sat watching in amazement at the transformation in her family. The scared rabbit Helen always seemed to be the confident woman preparing for something new in her life. Everything she said she never wanted appeared to be exactly everything she needed to be happy. For the first time in her life, she was just that, happy.

“I’m good with it,” she said, watching her husband smiling as he went to the kitchen. She would have a great life. Well, after her come to Jesús meeting. However, that was tomorrow.

- Fin -

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Shawnee Township, Indiana

The ride to Shawnee Township wasn't a very pleasant drive. Cherry sat on the back seat of the Ford F-150, uncertain if it would have to be returned if she were deactivated, or if Helen were given her role in The Company if the lease of the vehicle would be transferred to her cousin. Either way, her foot hurt and she was nervous. She hated being nervous because then she got that funky sweat in her armpits that smelled like she'd been eating garlic knots all day followed by a jar of kimchi. Helen also sensed something was bothering her cousin.

"That Bleu Neary is something, isn't he?" Helen said. "Did I hear him say he would bring his crew back to do a room extension and build a nursery for Luke?"

"Yeah, ain't that some shit? He is coming to build a living space for a person who is still developing into a little minion to fill diapers up with shit," Cherry said, looking down at her foot.

"You don't want the pregnancy, Abi?"

"Hell yeah, I want this child, but not really relishing the idea of being pregnant again," she told her. "There should be pods, you know, like with peas. I drop in an egg, he comes behind me, and squirts in the pod, and nine months later, we have another Neary. I shouldn't have to earn stretch marks and saggy tits for the job."

Helen didn't like it when her cousin was like this. They had come so far, had been blessed with so much, and as always, the pretty girl was whining about her hunk of a man giving her everything she'd ever wanted in life. In the meantime, Helen lived in

the backyard like the hired help. She wasn't envious by any means, but her cousin could be an ungrateful bitch.

"Well, at least this time you don't have to work while you're pregnant," Helen said. "Remember the one job you took when you were seven months along because the deep freezer was nearly empty? Those days are behind you."

"There is that," Cherry said, shifting. "I don't mean to be bitchy, but this meeting is unprecedented."

"I think, having a nursery for a child born in our family is unprecedented," Helen said, changing the subject. "This time, you will have a rocking chair, a changing table, a mini library, and stacks of disposable diapers. You don't have to wash cloth diapers anymore. You also get to be a stay-at-home mother."

"Yeah, also there's that," Cherry said. "I mean, what am I going to do being at home all day with a small child?"

"Take some online cooking classes," Helen said. "Also, maybe it's time to think about getting that real estate license you said you once wanted, or learn to paint, sketch, skeet ball shoot, whatever you want. This is a new life for you, for us. Are you afraid to be happy?"

"I am happy, but I'm scared. I'm scared of this meeting. I'm scared of waking up one day and he's changed his mind and wants four more kids," Cherry confessed.

"Was that your reluctance in telling him about Naomi?"

Cherry shifted in the back seat. She leaned forward an inch as she spoke, "No, there are a lot of rules to being a Technician, Helen. One, you don't have kids, and two, you don't make kids with other Technicians. We broke the rules and we could have

lost our lives in doing so, therefore, take caution with Mustang. Yeah, he's family, but he's a Technician."

"I can't make kids with him."

"Yes, but you can distract him and become his liability. If he has something to lose, then his effectiveness is hindered," she explained.

"Noted. And your fear about this meeting?"

"I've never been to one before. I don't know the other Fruits, only by handles; this is new to all of us. Be on your toes and ready for anything," Cherry said. "Do you have your knives?"

"Yes," she said. "Ironically, the one night I didn't have them on me was the night The Collector grabbed me. If I'd had my knives, the story would have been different."

"Not by much; a man like that sets his cap, a man like that makes it fit," Cherry said.

The silence returned as they approached the exit in Shawnee. Helen, having learned to read her cousin better than she ever could any man, shifted the energy in the vehicle. She'd always been a calming balm for Cherry, who seldom relaxed and was often on edge. Being married to Michael smoothed her out around the edges. Helen took the time to soothe the beast.

Helen said, "I think a soft sage green would be a nice color for the nursery. Where is it going to go again?"

"Bleu is going to knock out the closets between our bedroom and the guestroom to make a walkway. The nursery, or at least half of the space, will be the nursery, and the other part will serve as a playroom. Once Luke grows into a toddler, the nursery

becomes his bedroom. I think Bleu mentioned adding a Jack and Jill bathroom,” Cherry said, fidgeting in the back seat.

“Listen at you sounding all suburban housewife and shit,” Helen said, laughing, as they arrived at the set location. “Ooh, I hope they have snacks. I am kind of hungry.”

“Is that what’s on your mind? You’re about to meet Jesús. I don’t know many people who have ever met the man,” Cherry said, feeling the sweat pooling in her pits.

“Relax, cousin, at the end of the night, he is simply a man. He is going to look at me, think I am weak, and react based on his eyes,” Helen said.

“And what are you going to do when he does?”

“Teach the man a valuable lesson that I’m not one to mess with,” Helen said, flashing a toothy smile.

She was a lovely woman with the look of a middle-income woman who belonged to a man who watched the Saturday college ball of his favorite team from a university he never attended. Helen looked as if she had the perfect casserole recipe for any occasion and made wonderful sweet and sour meatballs. The look was perfect for an undercover agent, but her job, if she were approved, would be determined by the man himself.

It was time to have a little talk with Jesús.

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The room held a conference table capable of seating twelve. Food lined the center of the table as if it were the last supper. At the head of the table, sat a man with dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark spirit. Cherry shuddered just looking at him. Helen had no

reaction. Her eyes were on the food.

Around the table, sat four others along with Azreal, who commented that they were late. A black man with a look of boredom on his face was introduced as Bad Apple. Cherry had mentioned him once. He was an assassin assigned to Wisconsin.

A woman, with ebony skin, hazel eyes, and a natural ponytail sat across from Bad Apple. In front of her, rested two vials of a liquid, viscous in appearance and cloudy. These were packaged and passed over to Bad Apple. She was Lemon, the poisons specialist covering Ohio.

Passion Fruit, an accident specialist, resided in Illinois. She sat with her fingers in her mouth as she nibbled on her nail beds. Helen passed her a carrot stick from the crudité tray as she would have for Naomi, she tapped at the woman's hands, like a mother, shaking her finger at the nasty habit. Passion Fruit scowled at Helen, looking her up and down as if the woman asked to make out later in the bathroom. Helen took a seat in between Passion Fruit and a woman with a plateful of grapes in front of her.

"I'm Sour Grapes," the woman said. "I am a tracker."

"I'm just here for the food," Helen said, looking down at the table at Jesús, she nodded. "Sir."

Jesús got to his feet, quickly, and everyone at the table jumped, including Helen. His voice was deep and rumbled in his chest when he spoke. His words were aimed at the newcomer.

"Azreal, you expect me to believe this wisp of a woman with no confidence is to join your team, as what, the mellow mushroom?" Jesús bellowed.

Helen was anticipating this and responded, as she reached for a couple of the grapes,

“A mushroom is a fungus, not a fruit.”

“You dare correct me; you shit stain on my time!” he bellowed coming at Helen with fury in his eyes.

Helen pushed back from the table, trying to get away. Cherry didn’t make a move to protect her cousin; although their entire lives had been built as symbiotic beings, this one time she couldn’t help. She sat still as her cousin recoiled into a ball. Jesús barreled down on her, hovering over Helen in the chair. His eyes were filled with rage. His breathing was ragged. His fists were balled into knots.

Then he froze.

He leaned over her, but his entire posture changed as he uprighted himself. There was the glint of the knife against his throat. Bad Apple, Lemon, and Passion Fruit moved to aid him as three small knives flew through the air, landing at the feet of each courtesy of Helen’s side pocket cache.

“One nick and you will bleed out, if, and this is a big if, the venom from the copperhead I found and laced this with don’t get you first,” she said, pressing the blade to his throat.

“You would cut me?”

“Bitch, I will end you,” Helen said to Jesús. “The problem with men is that you think every woman you see is going to be intimidated by you, bend to your whims, and then service you like an out-of-work hooker on her last hump. Should I show you how wrong you are?”

Jesús said, “No need.”

He backed away, taking a wet cloth handed to him by Azreal. “You’re an angry little thing, aren’t you?”

“I have no home for my anger. Are you offering a position to house it?”

“Maybe,” Jesús said, looking down the table. “You aiming to be the next Cherry on Top?”

“No, she earned that name. I have no rights to it,” Helen said, pointing at the chicken fingers. “Mind if we get a bite of this food?”

Azreal said she could help herself. She sat watching the woman make a plate of food for a linebacker and one for her cousin. The cousin was the real reason they were here. Azreal focused her attention on Cherry as Jesús returned to his seat at the head of the table. He looked back at Helen several times. His gaze fixed. His interest piqued.

“The Cherry on Top, we are here for you,” Azreal said. “Your foot is broken and you are unable to work for two months.”

“I’m also pregnant again, three months along,” Cherry said. “By the time the cast is off, my belly is going to be too large for me to shimmy up and down rooftops.”

Everyone at the table looked at her, everyone but Helen, who had moved on to the watermelon slices. Azreal kept half an eye on Helen while being angry at Cherry, although she was expecting the outcome.

Jesús asked, “Are you asking to be retired?”

“I am,” Cherry said. “I lost my taste for this years ago. I don’t know what’s next, but it's not this, not anymore.”

Jesús' eyes were on Helen, who now nibbled on squares of cheddar. She finished the cheddar and moved on to a chicken finger, plunging it into a small container of barbeque sauce. Helen nibbled on it, grabbed a dinner roll, shoving a shaving of ham into it with a bit of cheese. She bit that as well.

Jesús shouted at her, "Damn, have you eaten this week at all, woman?"

"I couldn't hold anything this morning because Cherry was nervous, and I was worried that you were going to lay hands on me, and we would have to fight," she said. "Now that I see that's not the case, and you don't plan to kill my cousin, or me, then we're good. Ooh, is that brie?"

He looked at Azreal, uncertain what was happening. "This is the woman who took down Karlton and Ramon Santos? And why did you shoot Ramon Santos with no order or assignment to do so?"

Helen put down the cheese. "He wore a white belt with black pants and a pair of those white leather loafers with no socks. The girl child was terrified of him as he pulled on her skinny little malnourished arms, and the two little boys were in shock. The shoes...mainly the shoes and white belt."

Bad Apple actually smiled. He leaned forward, picking up a carrot. He nodded his head, "I would have shot that fucker too."

Helen pointed at Bad Apple with a knowing head nod. Jesús felt like he was in an alternate universe of an assassin therapy session. He asked for an explanation, looking down the table at Helen.

"Perverts. Always the perverts who wear those kinds of clothes," Bad Apple said. "I've never run across one that didn't have a young'un they were preying upon with sexual deviancy. She did right."

“Thank you, plus the little girl was terrified of him, meaning he’d already done a bad thing,” Helen said. “Is she safe? Hey, what about the boy The Collector had taken, is he safe as well?”

“He is. He’s with me,” Bad Apple commented. “You did a good thing for that one. It was about to go bad for that kid. He didn’t come out unscathed, but time will heal all wounds.”

“No, time simply allows a scab to cover the festering boils under the skin,” Helen said, moving on to the green grapes. “You gonna eat all of those, Ms. Sour Grape Lady?”

Jesús slammed his fist on the table. “Can we focus here, please?”

“Can’t focus if we don’t know why we’re here,” Helen said, turning her gaze to him. The timid woman who had walked through the door was replaced by one with acid in her eyes. She stared at him mutherfuckingly and for a second, Jesús was shocked at the reaction of his body to her motions. The man inside of him reacted to the wisp of a woman, and he was uncertain if he wanted to smack her across the face for being insolent or make sweet love to her all night. If he hadn’t been looking at her, he would have missed the subtle shift in the demeanor.

Helen McDaniel was a sociopath.

A soon-to-be card-carrying, licensed, lethal weapon of the government.

He looked at Azreal who nodded yes. Bad Apple nodded yes. Sour Grapes and Passion Fruit also provided a nod, and last was Cherry, who spoke.

“I present a new piece of fruit for the bowl as the cherry in the dish has been removed,” Cherry stated.

“The fruit looks sweet, but that shit is bitter,” Jesús said.

“Cranberry,” Helen said. “The stuff you get in the plastic bottles is mixed with grape juice for it to be sweet. Actual cranberry juice is really bitter.”

“So let it be written,” Azreal said.

“So let it be done,” Jesús completed the sentence. “I add a cranberry to the bowl.”

“I accept the cranberry,” Azreal said.

“I accept the cranberry,” Bad Apple said.

“Whatever,” Sour Grapes commented.

Passion Fruit added, “I accept the cranberry.”

Cherry, in her final act as a Technician, spoke, “I have taught the cranberry to shoot, and her aim is true. She has been assigned a mentor and has begun her coursework. The cranberry is skilled in knives, knows poisons, and can read men. I present the cranberry for the bowl as the replacement for the Cherry on Top.”

Jesús took out his phone. His Technician phone also was pre-programmed with a person on the end when he pressed one. The one on his phone went directly to the Technician God at the Company.

“State the reason for your call,” the mechanical voice said.

“I, Jesús, am calling in the retirement of the Cherry on Top. Her shop is here along with credentials and weaponry issued by The Company,” he said in the line.

“Is there a replacement?”

“The replacement is in training, but has completed two assignments, both of which you are aware of,” Jesús said.

“And this fruit?”

“The Cranberry has been activated,” Jesús added.

“So it is written,” the mechanical voice said.

“So it is done,” Jesús replied ending the call.

Helen, who had moved on to a pomegranate, was oblivious to it all. Jesús made one more call to the switchboard. A voice answered, “How may I direct your call?”

“Calling in a nomenclature change. Deactivate the Cherry on Top. Activate the credentials of the Cranberry, code HM4589,” Jesús said.

“Hold for confirmation,” the voice said. A few clicks were heard in the line, and then the voice said, “Credentials created for The Cranberry, assassin trainee, female, territory Indiana. Anything else?”

“That is all,” Jesús said, looking at Helen. “One. Follow the rules. Two, if you ever have to see me in person again, please know I will be coming to end your life. Three, do a good job, keep your nose clean and only, and only work on your assignment. Don’t shoot any other mutherfuckers because they are wearing clothes you don’t like.”

Helen furrowed her forehead. “What are you saying? Are you saying I am officially a Technician?”

“Sadly, yes. Don’t make me regret this, Cranberry,” Jesús added, rising and looking everyone over. “Good work team.”

Helen looked at her cousin. So much had changed in their lives in such a small expanse of time. Helen was officially a Technician, a badass assassin assigned to take out the trash in the world, well at least in Indiana. She could handle that.

Hell, she was even looking forward to it. “Wait, is that why the entire fruit bowl is present, for me?”

“No,” Jesús said. “Over the next four months, you will be in rotation, You will spend a month with each of your team members to learn how they work, understand their strengths, and how to move as a Technician.”

“But I have a trainer and a mentor, who is my handler,” Helen said.

“Not anymore,” Azreal corrected. “You belong to me. My team, my rules, my training. Welcome to the Fruits of the Great Lakes. I cover Michigan. Your first month you will spend with Bad Apple, followed by Passion Fruit, then Sour Grapes, and finally me. If an assignment comes through, you will work it with one of your teammates.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re excused,” Azreal added. “Take Cherry home, pack your things, and Bad Apple will expect you no later than Wednesday.”

Helen asked, “You want me to pack up everything and move in with a man I don’t know for a month to learn how to do bad things to people?”

Bad Apple leaned forward. “You already know how to do bad things, Cranberry. I’m

going to teach you how to do the job even better and not leave any trace of evidence.”

Helen’s appetite waned, then faded. The food in her stomach felt as if it were forming into a ball of shit destined to clog her butt hole. Her gaze went to Lemon. “What about her? Do I get to spend time with the Lemon?”

Lemon spoke, “I don’t want to be bothered with you, and won’t if I don’t have to. Anything you need to know about what I do, you can learn from that Bad Apple.”

Azreal interjected, “She will get a rotation with you as well Lemon. We need her sharp and ready to work. We have five months to hone every muscle and sense in that body of hers and pack on ten pounds of muscle.”

Helen did not know what to say. She didn’t know what to make of any of it. The timeline would work. Hopefully, if she did well, she’d make it back on time for the arrival of her nephew Luke. If she didn’t, then...well, life would go on.

She was ready for the break.

She was ready to start her own journey.

Helen was no longer afraid to live or be challenged, or to be alone. She was ready for what the world would bring. And if any man got in her way, well, she would simply cut off his dick. She looked up and everyone was staring at her.

“What? Too dark?” She asked.

Jesús smiled at her.

Bad Apple smirked.

Sour Grapes leaned forward, “I like her.”

Passion Fruit nibbled on another carrot stick, “She’s going to be a problem.”

It wasn’t the normal path to becoming a Technician, or how a Technician was made, but this is simply the start of the Cranberry’s journey. Four months were in front of her with training with Bad Apple, Passion Fruit, Sour Grapes, Lemon, and her handler, Azreal. Thus far, she didn’t like any of those fuckers, but she wasn’t here to like anyone. She was here to learn to kill and not leave a trace.

“Yes, the fuck I am,” Helen said, winking at Lemon. “Hey, are you going to eat that roll?”

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Mr. Slow waited patiently for the return of his wife and Helen. The heart that normally beat steadily raced at a pace in his chest, giving him a headache from the sudden influx of oxygenated blood to his brain. A come-to Jesús meeting was unprecedented with Technicians. Normally, he only spoke with Archangels, and even that was a rare occurrence.

The crunch of the wheels in the gravel meant they had returned. The vehicle stopped at the front door. Helen placed the vehicle in park to help her cousin out of the backseat. Slow walked from the porch meeting his wife, hoisting her in his arms. He liked the feeling of having her close to his chest, his heart rate slowing, the calmness returning to him.

“Goodnight Helen,” he said, giving a nod of his head.

“Rest well Micheal,” she said, humming. She climbed into the vehicle driving it around the house to the garage for parking. Tomorrow she would begin her

preparation to leave for Wisconsin to begin training with Bad Apple. In the back of her mind, she wanted to send Mustang a note to let him know what was happening, but she would do that later. Currently, her mind was filled with all of the things that need to happen in less than 24 hours. Her mind went to her cousin. Again, she smiled and hummed to herself as she put away the vehicle.

Inside the home of Michael Isaac Neary, he'd traded the red wine his wife liked to drink for a fluted glass of chilled huckleberry tea, with no caffeine. It didn't provide the same kick, but it lessened the possibility of Luke arriving into the world climbing off the walls or needing a bit of a petite Syrah on his pacifier to get through the night. He took a seat beside his wife. Michael would allow her to take the lead.

Cherry sighed, then spoke. "The Cherry on Top has been deactivated. She is no more. Only Abigail Neary remains."

She looked him in the eyes as she spoke the words attempting to gauge his response. Abigail waited for a flicker, a reaction, or a bit of relief to show in his expression and none came. His face held no expression.

"Okay," he said. "And Helen?"

"Cranberry," she told him.

"Cranberry?"

"Yep, she is no longer your responsibility as I'm sure you've been told. She begins her training in a few days with Bad Apple. She will spend a month with each Fruit in the bowl to hone her skills," she told him, "But you knew that already, didn't you?"

He took her hand in his. Strong fingers toyed with the single band on her hand. The week had been nuts and the bling he'd purchased hadn't been placed on her finger.

From his pocket, he removed the box. The half-carat ring he showed her, then placed on her finger. He kissed her knuckles, then leaned in to kiss her.

“I know a lot of things Abigail,” he confessed. “Some I can speak on, others I can’t. However, what I can speak on is this... is us. I love you. I love this life we are building, but moreover, I want you to be happy in your choice.”

“Happy in my choice?”

“In your choice of me as your man, your husband, having another child,” he said. “I want you to be happy in your choice of walking away. Are you happy with your choice Abigail?”

The hormones were doing a number on her. Her eyes teared and she couldn’t hold it anymore. She began to cry. The tears overtook her, and her body began to shudder as he pulled her onto his lap. He cradled the shaking form against his body and held Cherry as she cried. No words were spoken as they sat in the moment. Finally, his wife spoke.

“When she went missing, I had to find her. I had to find her because I didn’t know how to live without her,” Cherry said. “Helen has always given me purpose. Focus. A reason to keep going. My entire life has been spent taking care of her and she doesn’t need me anymore, Micheal. She is going to leave me so I can be free and be happy, and I am. I just didn’t know how much I needed it. I am free to be happy.”

“Abigail, are you happy with our life, with me?”

“Michael, a woman couldn’t ask for anything better, I am very happy with you, this life, and my new parents by marriage,” she said. “Your parents are amazing and they love us. It feels good to be loved in the right way.”

“I love you the right way,” he told her.

“Yes, and it feels good. We are good,” she said, leaning into him.

He rose from the couch, his wife in his arms, headed for bed. The week had taken its toll on them all, and he needed a break. They hadn’t taken a honeymoon or had time for anything, and this weekend would be perfect to get away for a few days. He’d call his mother to watch Bunny for the weekend as he and Cherry took some time away to connect and plan for their future.

It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

Everyone started somewhere.

Cherry’s story as a Technician had come to a close. For Helen MacDaniel, The Cranberry, her journey was simply beginning. She was a decorative fruit, but a fruit that added balance to any serving, hot or cold. It simply depended on what you placed the cranberry in which determines the taste of dish.

-The End-

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Trust, or lack thereof, could make a break a spirit. At the window, a lone goldfinch tapped aggressively at the kitchen pane. Seeing its reflection, assuming another male had entered its territory, it sought to defend what he felt rightfully belonged to him. Ironically, as Kylie West watched the anxious winged lover defend his territory, she knew, based on the habits of the bird breed, that as soon as those eggs hatched, this dude would flee the nest. Her bottom lip quivered as she held the documents in her hand which nearly mirrored her relationship with the bird.

The West Family Farm, a heritage farm, that has existed in the West family for nearly 150 years, would come to an end under her watch. She was the last West in the family and her father's only living relative. Grandpa West, a man of many talents in farming, had no skills in financial management, making a mess of the books. Today she would meet with his accountant and pray there would be some hope or semblance of opportunity to at least save a few acres.

Kylie, having returned from Oregon with her new man, prepared to take over the farm and start anew. Sheldon Biggs said he was ready to take it all on. He was ready to be a husband, a father, and a farmer. Filled with hope and blind faith, she and Sheldon packed her belongings relocating her to St Ansgar, Iowa to the West Family Farm. The first clue something was amiss showed up in the moving truck. The only items in the truck belonged to Kylie.

The second red flag appeared when Sheldon saw the size of the farm, thinking 120 acres was a great deal to manage, although only 24 of the acres were actually for farming. Kylie watched him balk at the state of the barns and outbuildings as he mentally calculated in his head the cost of repairs to such a property in disrepair.

“This is my family’s legacy,” she told Sheldon. “I am going to add to the legacy by bringing life to this place with children.”

She touched her belly. It was the first indication to him that she was expecting his child. The second time she told him she was expecting his child happened two days later. The final time she told him of the pregnancy, it was said to the back of his head. Sheldon walked away. He walked away and said he was returning to Washington state to pack his things. When he came back to Iowa, they could start working on all the ideas and visions she had for the property.

In her head, the barn would be turned into a rental space for parties, bridal or wedding showers, and large family gatherings. It would serve as a revenue generator to pay down the ridiculous mortgage from the loan her grandfather took out on the place to buy new farm equipment. Several of the acres could be sold, she explained, to lessen the tax costs which were also coming due.

“Yeah, this is a lot,” Sheldon replied looking at her stomach. “I need a minute. Let me head home and get my things, and when I return at the end of the month, we will figure it all out.”

She didn’t expect him to come back. Honestly, she didn’t want him to come back, everything she owned was here on the farm. The farm was all she had left and now, she was pregnant, alone, and scared out of her mind. That was weeks ago, and thus far, she hadn’t heard from him.

In the distance, her phone rang. Maybe it was Sheldon having a change of heart, but she doubted it. More than likely, it was another predator wanting to swoop in and pick off the remnants of her carcass as she sat, forlornly too tired to cry, and barely able to put up a fight. Reluctantly, she answered the call.

“Kylie West,” she said into the line.

“Ms. West, this is Kimbrae Phillips Brown, from K. Phillips and Associates in St. Joseph, Missouri,” the voice said, “do you have a moment to speak with me?”

“I have nothing but time,” Kylie replied.

“Very good,” Kimbrae said, “I am, or rather, was your grandfather’s accountant.”

“Why, he was terrible with money and has left me a farm and a boatload of debt. What did he need with an accountant?”

The hostility in her voice said enough for Kimbrae. She understood this moment more than most, and after many conversations with Ollie West, plans had been put into place to protect his only grandchild. Kimbrae saw to his wishes.

“Ms. West, I need to meet with you as soon as possible. Your Grandfather left a few provisions for you, in case you needed them,” she told the young woman.

“He did?”

“Yes, but let’s not discuss it over the phone,” she told her. “I am in St. Joseph, Missouri, which is about a five-hour drive. Ollie West would make the drive, spend the night in St. Joe, and have a good meal as we went over the books.”

“The books? He has so much debt,” Kylie said. “The buildings on the property are falling in, vultures are at the door, and if a little check you have for me is enough to cover all of this, I will be there tonight. If not, I am simply...I can’t right now.”

Kimbrae did the dance with family heirs one time too many to want to deal with this lady’s pity party. Life was unfair, harsh, and a bitter pill to swallow, but the medicine had to go down, with or without sugar. She didn’t mince her words.

“Ms. West, I understand how you feel, however, you can sit there and sulk, or come see what your grandfather left as a provision for your future,” Kimbrae said. “I am texting you the address, how soon can you be here.”

“I guess tomorrow afternoon,” Kylie replied, feeling even lower than she had earlier.

“Good, I shall see you then,” Kimbrae said, ending the call.

The call came in yesterday. Today she was making the drive to St. Joseph to meet with the Phillips woman. Five hours was a great deal of time to recount the misfortunes of life, and thus far, the last generation of the West family was seeing its fair share.

Ollie and Ruby West, gave birth to two sons, one of which was Kylie’s father. He, hating farm life, joined the military and married a flighty woman named Marian, giving birth to only Kylie. Jacob West stressed the importance of having a son to carry the West name and family line, as well as bring Marian to visit the farm. She turned up her nose and refused to visit again. Jacob’s life in the military came to a close when he received a job offer while in Seattle to move to Portland, Oregon where Kylie grew up.

Summer and Spring break were spent on the farm with Grandpa Ollie and GMa Ruby. Ollie made special nests and feeders for the goldfinches who mated in July. Outside of her bedroom window were the birdhouses with plexiglass backings so she could see inside when the eggs would hatch and the birdies would grow. Those feeders were now filled with mold from old clumped seeds where Grandpa Ollie stopped making gutters to keep the feed dry. Wet seeds meant mold and goldfinches were clean birds, who refused to return to the feeders, although they always returned to Iowa each year.

Jacob, like the goldfinches, did as well. His brother, Bryan, never left the farm and

worked side by side with his father to keep the land. Younger than Jacob, and often given to flights of fancy, suffered a tragic accident on his thirty-third birthday, dying, and leaving no children. Jacob, then returned to the farm as Kylie went off to college. Her mother, finding herself suddenly free, filed for divorce, leaving Jacob to move to Paris and study art.

It was no loss to Kylie. She and her mother had a relationship, but it was never as close as either woman would have preferred. The unsaid words between them, over time, became a distancing tool that grew into a silence, neither knew how to break. Kylie gravitated to her grandmother, who loved to cook and was free with affection. She loved her GMa Ruby and Grandpa Ollie.

Ruby West, during Kylie's sophomore year of college, suffered a massive stroke in which she didn't recover. The heartbreak over the loss of his Ruby, sent Ollie into a funk, in which he also never improved. The sadness gripped her family in a way, where Kylie felt she wouldn't bounce back from any of it either.

Her father, a stern man with no sense of humor, often talked to himself. She never understood how he and her mother connected, let alone made her since the silence between her parents also grew. The only conversations Jacob would have in his later years were with himself. Loud conversations where he seemed to argue with no one in particular, making him appear strange. Ollie's depression deepened even more when Jacob, after having one too many, decided to argue loudly with himself on the side of a dark backroad on the Eastern border of the West land, an area, where very few people with melanin traveled. A truckload of 'patriots' decided to teach him a lesson for yelling at his betters, leaving a broken, battered Jacob on the side of the road to perish from internal injuries.

Another blow to Ollie who simply, had no will to continue.

"Hey there Grandpa," Kylie said as she came to the funeral of her father. It appeared

that every time she came to the farm of late, it was to attend a homegoing service.

“Hey Punka Puss,” as he loved to call her. “I was gonna work on those birdhouses for you, but my back, and this arthritis, a man just can’t get around like he used to.”

“I understand Grandpa,” she lied, “maybe later, we can pick one or two to fix.”

“Ain’t no fixing what’s wrong with this place,” he grumbled. “I’m leaving it to you. I trust you’re going to do right by this land and carry the West name on into the future. Find yourself a nice fella, that can see the vision for this place you talked about creating. Get you a man who can see more than just the right now. To make this place go, Kylie, you need a man who can also see you. A good man is waiting on you gal. He’s gonna take good care of you.”

“I will do what I can Grandpa,” she promised, and it was all there was to say on the matter. The promise seemed moot with the weight hanging about her neck like an albatross. She didn’t cry and she wouldn’t. First, she needed to see what the accountant had to say, then, she would make her next moves.

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The offices of K. Phillips and Associates were housed in an older building with modern amenities. She entered the offices skeptical of anything the efficient-sounding woman on the phone had to say and furthermore, she didn’t trust anyone who claimed to have managed her grandfather’s finances considering the sizeable mess he left her to handle. Optimism left her after the first hour into the drive, now she was simply bordering on arriving with a pissy attitude.

“Good morning, welcome to K. Phillips, how may I help you?” The man behind the counter said. A black man, large in size, with numerous muscles greeting her like an old lover, raised her hackles. Her immediate thoughts went to shady dealings in the

company if that dude was the receptionist.

“I’m Kylie West, I have an appointment with Ms. Phillips,” she said, looking suspiciously at the man.

“Ah, yes. It will be a few moments,” he said. “Did you come here straight from the drive from Iowa?”

“I did,” Kylie said.

She watched the man rise, leaving her standing at the desk. He returned a moment later with a bottle of water, an apple, and a bag of veggie crisps. Kylie’s eyebrows arched in surprise.

“Thank you for this,” she said, taking the snacks, not even realizing she was in fact, hungry. A phone buzzed and the man was smiling at her.

“Mrs. Brown will see you now,” he told her, leading her to an office in the rear of the building which took up the back half of the establishment.

A mid-sized conference table sat to the right. A black woman, in heels and a power suit rose as she entered the room. She offered a smile as she pointed to the conference table asking Kylie to join her.

“Good, Dax gave you something to eat,” she said. “Mr. Ollie always wanted a piece of fruit, a bottle of water, and something to crunch on when he came for his quarterly visits. I’m Kimbrae, nice to finally meet you in person.”

“In person?”

“Yes, Mr. Ollie bragged about you so much, I was starting to think you were

imaginary,” Kimbrae said, taking a seat.

In front of her was a thick folder, loaded with papers nearly bursting from the seams. Kylie looked at the folder as well, opening the water to take a sip. The skepticism returned as she stared at the woman.

“I guess as imaginary as his financial ability to manage money,” Kylie replied. “Everything is a mess and unless you’re about to tell me he left me a million dollars, which is what I’m going to need to save that farm, then we can cut this short.”

Kimbrae tilted her head. There was more going on with the young woman than just the farm. In her eyes existed a deep-seated pain she needed to expel and obviously she had no one to share the letdowns in her life. Instead of jumping into the matters at hand, Kimbrae called Dax for tea service.

“Excuse me? I didn’t come here for tea,” Kylie interjected.

“No, you came seeking help and hope,” Kimbrae said. “Besides, where else do you have to be, at the farm, alone? I am sensing, other matters are weighing you down, so if you want to talk, now is the time. I have resources and may be able to help.”

“Like you helped my Grandfather?”

“Actually, yes,” she said, opening the folder as Dax arrived with a tray. Two delicate tea cups with a matching teapot arrived with finger sandwiches and tea biscuits. “Thank you, Dax.”

Kylie’s eyes went to the man. “Is he like, your man or something?”

“No, Dax is my Guy Friday, as he likes to call himself,” she said. “He’s been with me going on eleven years. The man is great at his job and runs this office smoothly and

efficiently.”

“I’ve never seen the likes.”

“There are things in the world Ms. West, you have no idea exists. One is good people who are willing to help you for nothing more than the sake of being there when you need a friend,” Kimbrae said.

“Is that what you’re doing, being my friend?”

“It appears as if you need one,” she replied, “but closing yourself off to shield the pain is not going to win you any champions.”

“Well, that’s what I need right now. I need a champion, a hero, a husband, a handyman, a rich man, a man who is willing to take on the burden of my life...,” she said, dropping her head. “Let me rephrase that. I need a life partner to aid me in restoring a legacy and building a new one.”

“And what are you willing to offer in return?”

Kylie’s head popped up, “what do you mean by that?”

Kimbrae replied, chuckling as she spoke. “You want a hero and a champion to take on your cause. In return, what are you willing to provide, companionship, love, three hot meals a day, and loving arms when he comes in the door at night?”

“Funny, laugh at my predicament.”

“What you need, someone is willing to provide, Ms. West, you simply have to place the request into the universe and see what answers,” Kimbrae added.

“Yeah, that’s my fear, what is going to answer,” she said softly.

“What, is it exactly that you need Ms. West?”

Kylie didn’t expect to have this sort of conversation with her grandfather’s accountant, but the woman was holding information close to her vest. The buttons were tight and she was waiting on Kylie to be honest. Honesty was all she had left.

“I’m pregnant,” Kylie said. “The father of the child dropped me off, lied, and said he was returning to Washington state to collect his things, and that was two weeks ago. I have heard nothing from him. My bank account is low. The farm is falling apart. I am using gallon jugs of water to keep clean. Grandpa left nothing but debt and I am lonely, sad, and scared. I need a hero and a million dollars.”

“Okay,” Kimbrae said, passing her a check.

“What is this?”

“Mr. Ollie was terrible with money,” Kimbrae said. “Each time he paid me a visit or paid my fee, I added it to a special interest-bearing account in your name.”

“What?”

“Roughly, when I closed it out yesterday, it came to three hundred and fifty thousand,” Kimbrae said passing her the check. “Granted, Mr. Ollie also gave me twenty-five thousand to invest and save for you, which is also a part of this total, minus a small management fee I kept for myself.”

“He did what?”

“Ms. West, this is not enough to take care of everything with the farm,” she said. “We

can make a plan to help you hold on to the majority of the acres, but some will have to be sold off to keep it in the family you're about to start."

Kylie's hand shook as she looked at the check. She'd never seen that many zeros in her life and had no idea how to handle that much money. Her eyes misted as she looked at Kimbrae and passed the check back to her.

"I don't know how to handle this kind of money," she said, "I will need help. Can I give this back and you give me a monthly allowance or something."

"Of course, if that is your wish," Kimbrae said. "How else may I help you?"

"Can you get me a husband to help raise this child, fix that farm, help me sell off the acres we can't use, start a business to make money, so I can stay on my family's land," Kylie wanted to know?

"I can't, but I know someone who can," she said, picking up her cell phone. She searched her contacts, locating the number for one Coraline Newair in New York City at the Perfect Match Agency. The phone rang several times before a voice came over the line. "Coraline, Kimbrae Phillips Brown, I have a client for you."

Kylie watched the woman chat into the line as if this were a thing she did every day. She provided the person on the other line with information about Kylie as if they had known each other all their lives. All the while she spoke, Kimbrae's eyes remained on Kylie.

"Yes, she is expecting," Kimbrae said, "I would say about two months along. Yes. College Graduate, Reed College, liberal arts, she is a photographer. Yes, her grandfather left her a farm in Iowa that is about 120 acres of run-down buildings, and in debt. Oh, okay. You can. How soon? I will get her on a plane and to you tomorrow. Thanks so much."

Kimbrae ended the call, smiling at Kylie whose eyes were wide in fear. “What the hell just happened?”

“A company in New York specializes in matchmaking,” Kimbrae said. “You head to New York tomorrow to meet with her, take a few tests, and a database will spit you out a perfect match that wants a ready-made family, a farm, and has the funds to get done what has to happen. More than anything, he will be willing to take it all on.”

Kylie was shaking her head no. “What kind of man wants to marry a woman carrying another man’s child?”

“Maybe a man who can’t have any of his own,” Kimbrae said. “At some point Kylie, you’re going to have to learn faith and trust are synonymous. Go through the process, be open, and be willing to see what life can bring you next. Thus far, you are alone and have nothing.”

“And what if this perfect match is a weirdo who wants to beat me and my child, and on the same farm I’m trying to save, it becomes my prison?”

It was Kimbrae’s turn to bug out her eyes, “Good grief Sis! Relax.”

She called Dax to her office. He entered, bringing a fresh pot of tea, and stood at the side of the table awaiting instructions. His eyes were on his boss and not the woman.

“Dax, can you please book Ms. West a hotel close to the airport,” she told him. “She needs to be on a flight to New York to meet with Ms. Newair tomorrow. Book her an overnight stay in midtown and a return flight here to St. Joseph, the following day.”

Dax turned to Kylie, “Ms. West, do you have an airline preference or a frequent flyer program?”

“Not really,” she said, looking at Kimbrae. “You are serious, aren’t you?”

“I’m as serious as this life situation you have,” she told Kylie. “Let’s work on getting you some happily ever after.”

Kimbrae knew a few things she wasn’t ready to share with Kylie. If the universe was listening, everything would align perfectly. The answers Kylie needed would be handled by the man who understood unasked questions. It would be interesting indeed and she couldn’t wait to see if her hunch was correct.

“This will be very interesting indeed,” Kimbrae said.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:39 pm*

Today was going to be one of those damned days that started off lumbering through the morning and by the end of the day, falls flat on its face in the middle of the floor, praying for a merciful ending. He often felt that way working from home doing a job with little to no reward as a fact checker for a social media company. Initially, the daily postings were a challenge in finding legitimate sources to provide credible, thoughtful and insightful responses to misinformation. Seven years later, the job devolved into cutting and pasting text to dispel the same false narratives picked up by different bots which spread systematically throughout the day across multiple platforms.

The job became so boring, Macalister Fontaine saw no reason not to double his income with a night time position as a data annotator. At night he ran computerized algorithms to categorize large datasets to ensure they were labeled and organized for usage by researchers the next day. It paid better than his day job, and four years of working nights made him a very wealthy man.

It also made him a lonely man. A man who decided to register with a mail order bride service to find himself the perfect match. Ironically, five years later, he still had no match, perfect or otherwise. He'd spoken of the agency to his foster brother Adriano, who went to New York, met a sassy mountain gal named Katherine, and married happily, living a life on the farm in Kansas where they grew up.

He also spoke with his foster brother Mateo Zingales, a jazz saxophonist who luckily married a local girl who also registered with the agency to get his perfect match who lived on a farm in Arkansas. Jeremy Husking, also his foster brother used the agency and married his dream girl, leaving his small farm in Nebraska for life as a United States Senator in our nation's capital. Even his foster sister, who was more like his

real sister, at least she was in his heart, used the agency to marry a nerd who loved Kimbrae with everything in him. Her husband didn't grow up on a farm, but last he heard, they were planning to buy some land in the country. They were all happy and he wanted a bit of happy for himself.

He wanted that kind of love, which is why, thus far, he refused the matches sent over who came in around the low nineties on the compatibility scale. The life he wanted to live required a woman who matched with him at least in the high nineties, around the ninety-eighth percentile. Macalister wanted a house full of children, a large farm to raise his brood and a cute little wife with a wild mane of hair. It would also help if she were a tiger in bed.

He felt that portion always helped the relationship, to get along at night, or in the middle of the day, or even on a hot sticky afternoon felt pretty good to him. Sex wasn't primary in his mind, but it was one of the areas a couple needed to be good at together, so when the fights couldn't be resolved with words, at least sweet love could soothe the ruffled feathers. His feather hadn't truly been ruffled in a while and he needed his pillows fluffed.

So far, the candidates he'd received were the left side of milk toast. Women who wanted nothing more than to be married, have babies and be taken care of by a man. He didn't mind any of those general ideas, but he wanted to build a legacy. The land would be part of the familial wealth. The buildings, in the plan in his head, would be more than housing for farm equipment and animals; the buildings would be multifunctional. At least, that's what he planned in his head. In real life, he was simply, lonely.

Downstairs in the townhome, the coffee started exactly at six in the morning. He exercised from five thirty to half after six, showering, and pouring himself a cup of Joe which strengthened in richness by the completion of his morning routine. When he opened his email at a quarter of eight, the inbox was normally cluttered with requests, nonsense and sales offers from companies where he ordered archery equipment.

However, this morning, five emails down was a message with a star, in bold letters from Perfect Match, the agency out of New York tasked with finding him a wife.

Hope surged through him as he clicked the message, opening the missive to see his latest match. A woman, in trouble, who inherited a farm, right in Iowa, less than two hours away. A woman, expecting a child, with no immediate family and nearly broke. She needed a hero, but what he needed to know were the percentages of compatibility on paper.

He scrolled down the message, looking past the photo of her adorable face, wild mane of hair, deep, intensive eyes, kissable lips to see the large grey block which held a boldfaced number. In the block the magic number appeared. She matched him at 98.8 percent.

“Hey now,” he said, scrolling up again, looking at the photo. “Did I read that right, she’s pregnant?”

Pregnant.

Preggers.

Some other man’s child.

In trouble.

Inherited a farm.

He did the calculations in his head, focusing in the portion of the lady being nearly broke, with less than three hundred grand to her name, and that farm, based on the numbers attached, would put her in the poorhouse in less than a month. An attachment to the email showed the farm. A heritage property and she was the last West to carry on the family line. The child in her belly would be the heir to the

property.

“Does the father of the child know that bit of information?”

His mind went to work factoring in the variables. What if I’m the child’s father? What if I marry her, give the child my name, claim it as my own, fix up the property, make it profitable, and make sweet love to her with those kissable lips? Ninety eight percent match and she had a farm .

“I could be her hero.” He looked over the data once more. He stood. He walked about the room. He pondered, and came back to his desk. “Hey, what if I’m not her only match?”

He didn’t want to waste time or words. The email he composed was written slowly to get the words just right. He read over them, taking a breather.

Dear Ms. West,

I shall keep this simple. First, hello and a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I have the know-how to successfully manage and run a farm. Second, I shall give the child my name and raise him as my own, with nurturing and guidance. Third, each day you shall feel appreciated and in time, love.

I am slow to anger. A man of few words, and I have a tender touch. I am willing and I am able. I am an honest man, with a good heart. Make the call and I can be there by the end of the week, and I shall be all yours.

Sincerely,

Macalister Fontaine.

He read over the text several times, but felt it was impersonal. Yes, it was accurate

and good start, but it missed the connection between them as husband and wife. Macalister looked at it again, and began a quick edit.

Dear Kylie,

I would be honored to have you as my wife. I have the know-how to successfully manage and run a farm. The child will be raised as my own with nurturing and guidance as well as carrying my last name. To honor your family's heritage and legacy, it would be amazing if the kid's middle name can be West. Last, and more important, each day as your husband, your man, and the head of your house, you shall feel appreciated and in time, love.

I am slow to anger. A man of few words, and I have a tender touch. I am willing and I am able to handle the tasks at hand. I am an honest man, with a good heart. Make the call and I can be there by the end of the week, and I shall be all yours.

My number is 515-555-1869. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Macalister Fontaine.

"Damn, that's pretty good," he said aloud, feeling proud of himself. In the message was her email. He clicked the link, copied and pasted the message and in the subject line, he added, A Message from Your Perfect Match. Macalister hit send.

His coffee had grown cold, but his hands were hot. The thudding of his heart became a distraction, so much so, it took his brain a minute to realize his phone was ringing. He turned slowly, looking around for the device as if the aliens had finally decided to make contact. The beating of his heart intensified as he reached his desk, picked up the device, sliding his thumb over the arrow to connect the call.

“Mac Fontaine,” he said into the line. The deep voice reverberated in his ear as he listened. He didn’t think to check the number or the caller. His distraction at the email he sent was the only thing on his mind. Then, in his ear he heard it, making his knees nearly buckle.

“Mac Fontaine, this is Kylie West,” she said softly. “I got your message and yes, I would love to meet with you, to talk, discuss the possibilities of a life together, but more importantly, discuss what is growing inside of me and the farm.”

“I can be there by Friday,” he replied.

“Okay, just like that,” she said.

“I am in Des Moines, which is roughly two hours away,” he told her. “On Friday, when we meet, I would like to get a feel of what you want to see happen with the farm. I would like to walk the land, the home, the outbuildings, talk about options.”

“And the child?”

“If you consent to marry me, it becomes our child, belonging to no one else from the moment you say I do, and put on the ring,” Mac told her. “I assume, in needing a husband the father is not in the picture?”

“The picture is ripped up and, in the trash,” she told him.

“Good enough,” he said. “Friday it shall be then. Oh yeah, honeymoon choices, and ideas for your wedding as well.”

“I get a honeymoon?”

Macalister found himself chuckling. “I think, we will need to start our journey together in a neutral environment, but keep in mind, we will have the farm, repairs,

and so much more to get clear of, so reasonable.”

“Reasonable,” she said. “I look forward to meeting you in person.”

“Friday,” he said, “I should be there around lunch time. I look forward to seeing you, Kylie. Have a great day.”

He ended the call holding the coffee, which again, had grown cold. His hands were hot and his pants felt tight. A frown covered his face as he stared at the wall.

“Holy shit,” he said, realizing it was well after eight and he hadn’t clocked in. He quickly sent a message to his supervisor that he needed to take the day off. Macalister didn’t wait for a response. He never took time off unless it was mandatory, and he needed to get a checkup of the financial sort. In less than fifteen minutes, he was out the door and on the road. He needed to see a lady about some money.

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“Morning Dax,” Macalister said as he walked through the doors of K. Phillips and Associates. “I don’t have an appointment; can you work me in to see my sister?”

“She’s about to have lunch, so your timing is perfect,” he said, “do you need a bite to eat too?”

“I’m okay, thank you,” he replied to the man who had entirely too many muscles to be a secretary, or Guy Friday as he called himself.

Dax offered him a bottle of water, which he accepted and took a seat in the lobby. The longer he sat, the more ideas came to mind when he looked around the office. He, Jeremy, Adriano and LeBeau helped her design the space. The building was a run-down foreclosure which Kimbrae got on the cheap. Using sustainable products in the rebuild, as well as recycled materials, the price of renovating the offices were half

the cost. He smiled thinking of all the glass he'd gotten at a discount from an office building also being remodeled in Des Moines. The company practically gave him the glass to get rid of it, and now, the pieces had a second life here in Kimbrae's office building. He was still smiling when he looked up to see her standing in front of him.

"This is a surprise," she said. "Normally, you call to let me know you're coming."

"My morning has taken a turn, and I needed to speak with you," he said, feeling his cheeks grow warm.

"Okay, come on in," she said. "Let me grab my lunch. Are you hungry, should I order something in?"

"No, I don't want to put you out," Mac replied, "how about I take you to lunch instead?"

"My afternoon is packed, no can do," she said, looking to her assistant. "Dax, call Mr. Cho's and order a bit of lunch for me and Mac. No peanuts please. A lemon-lime soda for Mac."

"You don't have to do that," Mac said, feeling out of sorts, "but thanks. Thank you as well Dax."

He followed her into the office. A minute later Dax arrive with a tray of hot tea in his hand and a file folder under his arm. Both, he placed on the conference table.

"Is that my file?"

"It is, the perfect time to do an annual review, since it is January," Kimbrae said.

"And I'm getting married," he said, trying not to blush.

“Say what?”

“Perfect Match, finally came through,” he said. “I’m meeting her on Friday. She has a farm she inherited up in St. Angsar. I understand it needs some work, but I need to do a financial checkup, look at some options. Plus, she doesn’t have any family and will need a friend.”

Kimbrae showed no expression on her face. Kylie, as well as her foster brother were both clients, therefore she would not divulge any information unrelated to what sat in front of her in the file. She opened the file to check the latest numbers which Dax printed and included inside the folder.

“Are you planning to take her home to meet Aunt Sue?”

“I’m hoping, with the work needed on the farm, her having no family, and all, that maybe a small wedding in Kansas, with a reception,” he said. “I don’t know about any of that stuff. I mean your wedding was wow, but nothing over the top like that.”

Kimbrae hadn’t seen this side of Mac. He usually kept everything close to the vest, including his emotions. The very important detail about his bride to be, he hadn’t mentioned and she would wait to see if he brought it up.

“Okay, let’s take a look,” she said, looking inside the file, passing a copy of his financials. “You are very healthy with a solid portfolio, high interest yielding accounts, and a chunk of cash which can be used. Where does the farm stand financially that she’s inherited.”

“I don’t know yet, what I want and need to know is my pockets, to see where and what I can do without losing my shirt,” he said, “I also want to take her on a honeymoon. I mean, I can’t do a 14-day cruise like your nerdy professor, but I can give her something special to start our life together.”

Mac blushed as he spoke. Again, a side of her brother she'd never seen. She would help where she could.

"When are you planning to meet your new bride?"

"Friday, I am driving up to St. Angsar to walk the property, assess the buildings, test the soil for growing crops," he said. "More than likely, anything we grow will be for our own use and the family, making some local restaurants kind of farm to table stuff, nothing major."

Kimbrae liked seeing him this way. He appeared, almost happy, hopeful, and pleasant. Her brother was a good guy who just looked weird in his coloring, but had an amazing heart.

"Mac, may I ask what she is into, her thing, or profession?"

"A photographer," he said. "She went to a liberal arts college in Oregon, majoring in art, but she's a photographer by profession."

"If I may," she said, "if you want to win her over, as a wedding present, buy her a top-of-the-line digital camera. The honeymoon should be somewhere quirky and photogenic. Give her the camera before you take off so in case, she sees something she wants to shoot, you can stop and let her begin your lives together with a new album of images."

"And a dedicated workspace in the house," he said looking at her. "Ooh, if we can make the barn into a rental space for events, making her the photographer, she can have an additional studio in the barn with back drops and scenes, with hay bales. I like."

Kimbrae watched his face. The next part she would ease into, and offer as an idea. "Mac, if you don't plan to farm the entire land, maybe a portion can be sold to ease

the tax burden, add in some cash to help with the renovations,” she told him.

“Yes, and I’m letting you know now, so you can tell that husband of yours to bring his tools,” he said. “A big part of this I’m going to need help with, so I’m asking ahead of time.”

“Whatever you need little brother,” she said, as the lunch order arrived. Thanking Dax for the food, Mac blessed the meal and looked her in the eyes.

“Can I do this Kimbrae?”

“You can, Mac,” she told him, “However, you will need to budget to the penny, cut costs where you can, but it will work.”

“I need to hear the numbers,” he told her.

“In total, you’re worth about two million, with assets. Your debt is low, you have a good three hundred in cash, four cards with high limits, and a solid portfolio, but we know to live like we are poor if you want to keep it,” she said.

“I may need half a million in liquid cash to do this right,” he said. “Can you make that happen without too many penalties?”

“Let me work my magic,” she told him. “As a wedding present, I can toss in a hundred, which will bring you to four in cash. Maybe the others can toss in some as well, and you won’t need to cash in anything.”

“You’re married now Kimbrae, you can’t take that money from your house to give to me,” he told her, holding up his hands.

“I had money before he showed up, and that’s my money to do with as I please,” she told him, “Besides, it’s an investment in your new business. I am an investor. The

others will or can be as well.”

“I love you Sis,” he said.

“And I you, but you may need to let Aunt Sue know as soon as you can,” she told him.

“Will do,” he said, as they ate, catching up on her life.

From the time he took his first summer job as a teenager, he brought home his check and handed it to her, just as he’d seen his foster brothers do. Kimbrae took the checks to the bank, made a deposit in each person’s account, bringing back their allowances for the week. She handled the finances for all of her foster brothers and for Aunt Sue. She taught them all financial management and he’d never been hungry nor broke.

He planned to keep it that way. Besides, he was going to be a husband and a father to a kid.

A father.

A husband.

A family.

He would finally have a family of his own. That in itself, was enough to keep him smiling. Plus, there would be a baby. A little baby to take care of and raise.

“I hope it’s a boy,” he said, smiling to himself.

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