



Stone Blind (The Technicians #12)

Author: *Olivia Gaines*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Step into the world of Stone Blind, the thrilling second book in the Technicians of the Great Lakes. Follow Helen McDaniel as she begins a gripping journey to join the elite ranks of the Forbidden Fruits Technicians Crew. Starting from scratch, Helen learns the gritty, complex skills required to handle the Great Lakes toughest clean-up challenges. Along the way, she discovers more about herself, loyalty, and friendship—and about the mysterious figure known as the Archangel.

In four immersive episodes, Helen builds her skillset and finds partners among the seasoned crew, including familiar faces, new allies, and a scar faced man who offers tips on how to do the job well. Stone Blind delivers a vivid look at setting up the life of a technician as Helen earns her stripes, takes on her new handle, and uncovers the forbidden dynamics within the crew.

For fans of strong female leads and action-packed series set in unique, rugged environments, Stone Blind is the start of a journey that pulls you deep into the heart of the Great Lakes and the world of the Technician Crew. Join Helen as she begins her path alongside The Bad Apple—an adventure unlike any other

Total Pages (Source): 15

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

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 pleasant 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 stay-at-home parent 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.

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 Azrael, 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 . 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.

"Azrael, 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 expecting this and responded, as she reached for two 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 up righted 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 Azrael. “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?”

Azrael 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. Azrael 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,” Azrael 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. Azrael 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 Azrael, 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 insolence 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 Azrael 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,” Azrael said.

“So let it be done,” Jesús completed the sentence. “I add a cranberry to the bowl.”

“I accept the cranberry,” Azrael said.

“I accept the cranberry,” Bad Apple said.

“Whatever,” Sour Grapes commented.

Passion Fruit added, “I accept the cranberry.”

Cherry, in her last 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,” Azrael 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,” Azrael 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.”

Azrael 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, Azrael. 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?”

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 train 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 needed 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 McDaniel, 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 the dish.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

The heat of the morning made Helen McDaniel more restless than she already was, considering her circumstances. As much as she wanted to take the path less traveled, honestly, she needed some form of a path to follow because currently; she had no idea where this was leading. She had two days to pack and get to Wisconsin to live with a man she didn't know for three months, give or take, to learn how to be an assassin. Correction. She needed to get to Wisconsin to live with a man for a three-month period of training to learn to become a Technician.

Her cousin Cherry had been a technician assigned to the state of Indiana and had married a Technician assigned to the state of Kentucky. Cherry had a handler, Azrael, who looked like a bad version of an Angel gone rouge and was Helen's new boss. In some ways, Helen preferred Azrael over the handler for Cherry's husband, Mr. Slow, who was managed by his cousin, an Archangel named Gabriel. The man was no angel in any sense of the word and reminded Helen of sin on a walking stick, too handsome for his own good with eyes that took in everything, but he had an aura of darkness around him others pretended not to see.

Helen saw it. She saw a great number of things which she never mentioned or spoke about with her cousin or anyone else. Life had trained her to sit silently, observing, understanding, and looking for opportunities to be free and to survive. In this new life, she would begin removing all the previous lessons on surviving as prey. She would be trained to be the predator, always watching. Mentally, she was training herself to be consistently vigilant and acutely aware of all that she saw and heard. As she listened to the sounds outside her modest home, in her heart, she decided there was no need to be a predator of opportunity. She wanted to be an alpha predator, unafraid to take down her prey head on versus waiting in ambush.

Outside her door, the morning brain scramble of conversation inside of her head received an interruption of noise, which sounded like a whinny. A faint smile came to the corner of her lips as she made her way to the front door. Her little niece Naomi had been gifted a pony by a stallion of a man called Mustang, who also happened to be Naomi's uncle on her father's side. The smile remained as Helen unfastened the bolts on the door to greet the little angel who'd progressed rather nicely on the care and maintenance of Ms. Sprinkles, the pony with personality.

With her coffee in hand and a smile on her face, Helen opened the main door. Standing on the other side of it was not her niece sitting astride Ms. Sprinkles, but the big stallion himself. For good measure, he whinnied again, followed by a panty-removing smile. At least, those were her first thoughts when she spotted him standing there, to remove her panties and have a short conversation with the man on morning calisthenics. He spoke first, breaking the spell, he knew he'd cast upon her senses.

"Morning, Ms. Helen. I came to see if I could interest you in an early morning ride," Mustang said, biting his bottom lip.

"You are a wicked man," she said, looking out the door to see if anyone had spotted him at her front entrance. Helen moved to the left to allow him inside of the double wide manufactured home. "I wasn't expecting you to be in town again so soon."

"Mama Ruth's birthday is next month," he said with a wicked smile.

"Next month, so you arrived early?" she asked, feeling a little full of herself.

It had been made clear to her that Jarius Neary, known in the Conclave of Technicians as Mustang, only returned to Kentucky twice a year, one was for Thanksgiving or Christmas and the other for his adoptive mother Ruth Neary's birthday. Having Mustang in town a month early raised red flags and a boatload of questions for her, but this morning she wasn't in a questioning mood. The modest

breakfast she'd prepared of biscuits that were entirely too dense, but edible, she wouldn't offer to man out of fear of clogging his bunghole.

"Yeah, there's that, and then there's you," he said. "I needed to see you before you left for the first leg of your training. I don't know. I felt you needed a bit more perspective than you'd get from either Slow or Cherry. I'm all about that perspective."

"I can see," she said, looking him up and down. The longer she stared at him, the more his body responded, and after only a minute and thirty seconds, Helen saw the man was on the ready. She pointed to the front door, which he quickly locked.

Mustang stood in the room, looking fresher than sliced watermelon drizzled in lemon juice and sprinkled with coarse sugar granules on a hot day in the summer sun in the South. The jeans he wore hid little and the shirt stretched across his bulging muscles. His eyes showed a hunger that matched the intensity inside her stomach that eased its way down lower.

"Helen, is that a yes?"

"You didn't hear me say no, Mustang," she replied, providing a light attempt at her own whinny and a stomping of her foot like a mare preparing to mate.

"My goodness woman, I don't know what it is about you, but I like it," he said, wanting to reach for her. However, his brief time with Helen McDaniel had taught him many things about the woman on a journey to a newer version of herself. He'd learned that he was the only man she'd initiated intimacy with in her life. The other times, based on what she didn't tell him, were either intercourse by force, coercion, or necessity. Therefore, he wouldn't start connections with her, she would have to make the move to him – for now.

Helen stepped forward. The soft cotton skirt she wore fell just below her knees. Bare feet padded softly over the linoleum floor. The pink cotton blouse she wore hadn't been buttoned all the way, leaving the swell of the tops of her breast exposed. He didn't know why, but it turned him all the way on; as soon as she touched him, Mustang responded.

His mouth found her lips, starting a passionate kiss which fueled the fire raging between them as he carried her to where he assumed her bedroom would be. In a tangle of arms and legs, they fell on the bed. Mustang's hands roamed over the svelte body, taking his time to remove the skirt Helen wore and to open her blouse. The scars across her breasts, courtesy of a blade from The Collector, he took the time to kiss each keloid of puckered flesh, arriving at the nipple and taking one into his mouth. Helen moaned as she moved against him, wanting more, needing more. Mustang didn't disappoint, shifting his weight to not smother her frame as he positioned himself, then connected their bodies.

Helen didn't waste time building up a head of steam. She reached the pinnacle and exploded but continued moving with him. Her nails razed his back. A mouth, hot and full of coffee aromatics, dripping with saliva from panting, pressed fevered kisses on his neck. Her lips reached his ear, nibbling gently, and she felt bold. In his ear, she whispered a command for him that was dirty and raunchy and jettisoned the man into stud mode.

"Damn!" she cried out, holding on tightly, and the stallion bucked hard to bring her to another moment of tension. The hardness of him stroking back and forth in the soft walls made her shudder and then she bit down on his shoulder, wrapping her legs tightly around his hips, commanding him to finish her and release her from the sweet torture. Mustang didn't let her down, providing exactly what she needed. "Your turn, my lover, your turn is next."

She pushed him to his back, climbing on top, and took the stallion for a workout over

hills, dales and the perfect little spot in the valley. In his boots, he felt his toes curl as he gripped her hips, giving her everything in himself. Eyes tightly shut, he let go, emptying into her the fears and insecurities he would never share with the lady, but this time for them was important. Sweaty and breathing hard, he clasped Helen to his chest. A large hand rubbed gently at her back.

“That was an amazing way to start a Saturday morning,” she chuckled, snuggling closer to him. “You never said why you are here, Mustang.”

“I came to see you, spend a day or so, answer questions, ease your fears, encourage you on these next steps,” he told her.

“Oh, like my man would do before I went in for a job interview or something,” she said, trying not to sound snarky, but hearing what he was saying, as well as not saying.

“Yes,” he said, rolling her over. He lay next to her looking down at the lady, wondering how such a woman had penetrated his defense systems, wear him down, and make him return to Kentucky to ensure she was prepared for what came next. The training Helen would receive was unprecedented. He’d never heard of a training program for a Technician like she was receiving. Initially, Jesús set her training for a month with each member of the Forbidden Fruits, but Azrael disagreed. Instead, Helen would spend three months with each of the Technicians in the Fruit Bowl extending her training from four months to a year. Most who worked for The Company were already trained assassins or sociopaths whose rage and fixations were put to good use by the employment of compensatory training to target the angst. Helen was neither an assassin nor a sociopath, but she could easily become one.

Mustang spoke softly as he looked down at her, “I have worked with Bad Apple. He’s a tough son of a bitch, and you’re about to live in his world for three months.”

Helen gathered her blouse to cover her breasts. Suddenly, she felt vulnerable to the elements, which created a sense of uncertainty in her thought process. There was no way in hell she would live with a man who would spend more time breaking down her defenses than building her up.

“Is he a predator?”

“Not to you or against you,” Mustang said.

“Am I going to need extra locks on my bedroom door to stay safe?”

“No, you’re not his type as far as I know,” Mustang said. “He does have kids at his place. I don’t know how many at any given time, but he runs this residence, I don’t know if it’s a group home, a boy’s home, or if he is the housemother for the House of Applelicious or some shit.”

Mustang said it in a way that made Helen realize Apple played for the other team.

“And the boys, are they all family as well?”

“Yes, he takes them off the streets of Milwaukee, at least the ones wanting something better,” Mustang said. “He trains them on life skills, financial management, and how to blend into the world as men, unless they are entering fields where they can be their authentic selves.”

“Like hairdressers and stylists?”

“You got it,” Mustang said.

“Well, that should be interesting,” she said, running her hand across his abdomen.

“Anything else I need to know about him?”

“He doesn’t play around. The man has no sense of humor, and he’s deadly every fucking day of the week,” Mustang said. “There aren’t many people who make me pause, but he’s one of them. Keep your nose clean, do as he asks, and learn everything he can teach you, and he knows so much, from tracking, long range shooting, hand to hand, and more. He was a Navy Seal and trained with Mr. Exit. Now that dude, is also scary.”

“Okay, I’m officially nervous,” she confessed.

Mustang pulled her into his arms. He said nothing as he held her, wanting to take the lady away from it all, but he wasn’t ready for those steps in his life. She wasn’t ready to be the person he needed in his world because she had yet to learn to be the person she needed to be on her own.

“Don’t be nervous and don’t be scared; be aware,” he told her.

“Thank you,” she said. “You came here to give me what I didn’t even know I needed. The dick down was welcomed as well, but the pep talk also helped. Have you had breakfast?”

“No, I took a red-eye from Portland.”

“How long are you staying?”

“When do you leave?” he asked.

“Monday, first thing,” she told him, staring up into his eyes. “I was supposed to report on Wednesday, but it got pushed back, giving me time to chicken out, I guess. When will you leave?”

“Then I shall leave Monday as well, at first light,” he told her. “In the meantime, do

you want me here with you, across the way with my brother, or further away with the folks to reduce you being tempted to use my body?"

She reached for him. Her arms encircled his neck, pulling him down to her face for a kiss. In the world where she'd existed, too many people saw and wanted to use her body. Helen could never see doing that to another person, not even if he made love like a Greek God about to wage war on the non-believers in the temple.

"I would be pleased if you'd stay with me," she told him. "I do have a guest room if you'd like your own space. Being here does not require the use of your body, but I would value your company, as well as conversation, and sharing meals without feeling like an interloper in someone else's life."

Mustang pulled away from the embrace. His face held a scowl. "You mean to tell me, Ms. Helen, I can stay here with you and not have to put out? You're telling me that we will talk and have thoughtful conversations over meals about life and personal dreams?"

"Sure, if you'd like," she said, watching his face.

"To hell with that," he said, bounding from the bed. "I'm putting my dick away and going to stay with my folks. At least there, I will be appreciated! The nerve!"

She couldn't help it; she burst into laughter. "Okay, fine, I will use that dick frequently while you're here. Does that make you happy, Sir?"

"Hell yeah, that's more like it," he said, laughing and pulling her from the bed. "Should I put it away now or go wash it so you can play with it some more?"

"You get on my nerves; do you know that?"

“I have a nerve you can get on, Ms. Helen,” he said, pulling her close. She felt right in his arms. Helen McDaniel felt right to his spirit.

In the spirit of the game, she was simply a chess piece on a board. Azrael would get to move her about as needed, and Helen would need to comply. This weekend needed to be about grounding. Helen needed to be grounded, not only to her cousin Cherry, but to someone else who mattered to her.

As a Technician, Helen’s life would be tough. She would to see the darkest parts of human nature and still needed to sleep throughout the night. Monday would begin a year-long training program beginning in Wisconsin with the Bad Apple, an assassin with deep-seated anger issues. If she survived all that Bad Apple instilled in her, the next move would be to Ohio in the Archangel’s backyard for a three-month stint with Lemon, a nefarious chemist who specialized in everyday vegetation mixed with venom to kill a person painfully.

He didn’t see Helen thriving in the environment with Lemon. However, Passion Fruit, the accidents’ specialist, was a lover of animals. She had a place in Illinois which served as her cover for rescues and an animal shelter of some form, which Mustang explained to Helen over the worst biscuit he’d ever tasted in his life. Yet, there would be no sour grapes about a meal the lady had only prepared for her own broken taste buds.

The real challenge would be Sour Grapes herself, who didn’t like people. She didn’t like children or animals, but mainly, she detested humans in general. An anthropologist, ironically by profession, provided cyber support by hacking people’s computers. The role of tracker for Sour Grapes altered when she was best able to locate an individual digitally versus on the ground. Sour Grapes morphed from being a tracker to a hacker, causing havoc and chaos across the digital world. Mustang confessed he believed Sour Grapes enjoyed her work.

“Why are you telling me all of this?” Helen asked.

“I’ve never known a Technician to receive the yearlong training you’re about to undergo. You are beautiful, Helen, inside and out,” he told her. The next words which came out of his mouth shocked even him. “At any time, any time you want out, and away from it all, just call me, and I’ll come for you.”

“What if, in between or any breaks I get, we find each other over the course of the year, would you be willing to be my solace?” she asked, needing to know.

“Gladly, because for some damned reason, you’ve become mine,” he said, pushing the biscuit aside. “Follow the path laid out before you; listen, learn, and stay safe.”

“Maybe you should have said stay sane,” she added. “How does one learn these things and not turn into a psychopath?”

“I think, Ms. Helen, you’re being put through the paces to ensure that you don’t,” Mustang added.

For now, it was enough. The planned weekend activities included a cookout later in the day on the back deck by Mr. Slow and Sunday dinner with Mark and Ruth Neary. Monday, she would drive to Wisconsin to begin her training as an elite member of an unknown society. Helen was ready to learn.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Monday, Janesville, Wisconsin

The sun had barely broken over the tree line when Helen loaded the forest green Subaru 4 x 4 hatchback and eased from the gravel driveway. She'd never driven long distances alone before, but she wasn't afraid. In fact, she felt almost free. Sunday morning, a cryptic text arrived on the Technician phone given to her, changing the meeting location from Brown Deer, Wisconsin to Janesville, Wisconsin. Initially, her fear of being set up for a takedown would have overtaken all of her thought processes, but the text was followed up from a brief call from Azrael, her handler.

Brief wasn't quite the correct term to use. The woman growled in the phone that her training had been moved to Janesville, then she hung up. Louisville, Kentucky to Brown Deer Wisconsin would be a nearly seven-hour drive. As she checked the GPS system, Janesville wasn't much different. Helen put on her favorite CD of Mary J. Blige, getting it crunk in the dancery and she was off to begin her new life as a Technician.

With one stop to fuel up and recharge the snack supply, at fifteen minutes after one in the afternoon, she arrived at the address on the GPS. She crept slowly up the driveway, thinking, praying, and hoping that the address was incorrect. The lopsided mailbox displayed the number of the home, which matched the numbers on the two-story farmhouse.

"This can't be right," she said, slowly rolling up the drive path.

The two-car garage in the rear of the home was missing an entire door, which rested against the building. A barn, if one could call it such, sat in the rear of the property

with no front to it whatsoever. Half of the roof for the barn was missing, while the other half was falling in. She could almost say the same for the house. Just as she began to believe she had arrived at the wrong address, on the back porch, if one could call where Bad Apple was standing to be a porch, was the man himself.

Honestly, he was scary, a tall black man, solid in form and coated in a soft umber skin tone. His hair, cut low, showed signs of receding on both sides of the widow's peak, and his beard was scruffy with a neatly trimmed mustache. He pointed to where his pick-up truck was parked, indicating she should park next to the vehicle. Sighing deeply, she mentally checked her arsenal, not that she had much of one. In her purse was a .360, and she had a 9mm in her overnight bag and three knives in her skirt pocket.

"Relax. You're here to learn," she said, cutting the engine.

Helen exited the vehicle, bringing her purse along with her. She didn't offer the man a smile since she didn't want him to get any ideas on how friendly this training session would be. "Bad Apple," Helen said.

"Apple is fine Cranberry," he said to her, using the Technician handle she'd chosen.

"Good enough," she said, walking up the small stairs to the home. "What do we have here?"

"It's an investment project," he told her. "The foundation is solid overall, and the project has good bones, but it will need a heckaton of nurturing and care to make it shine and be a worthwhile asset."

The metaphor wasn't wasted on Helen's sharp mind. She wouldn't insult the man by asking if the reference made was about her or the home, so she didn't. The yard, from where she stood, needed a great deal of work as well. A lone apple tree leaned in the

distance, the branches cracked and weighed from years of no one pruning or picking the fruit which had become dead weight.

“Shall we take a look inside?” Helen asked, waiting for him to lead the way. Apple’s response was simply to arch an eyebrow. He pushed away from the railing to enter the home.

It wasn’t as bad as she’d mentally envisioned. The kitchen was dated with honey oak cabinetry covered in years of fried dinner grease. A lone gas stove rested against the wall with no cover, simply showing off the iron exposed burners. She was grateful no fridge existed in the home, imagining the dead bugs who would have called it home. Beige tile with grungy grout left little to the imagination to envision on the yuck which more than likely existed under the cracked tiles.

“Bathrooms?” she asked.

“Only one,” he said.

“You adding another?”

“Yes,” Apple said.

“Bedrooms?”

“Five total,” he said as the sound of vehicles arriving drew his eye away. Helen walked to the window to see what new hells-cape would arrive to make the three months of training either miserable or downright unbearable.

In the drive, a heavy-duty pickup arrived, towing a 38-foot Silverlake camper. Behind the wheel was a white male with an affixed scowl on his face. Helen balled up her fist, trying to tamp down the anxiety.

Apple noticed, offering gently, “My contractor, Ricky Collins. He stays in the camper and works on the house. Good guy, former Army Ranger, Special Forces, knows your cousin. He can’t cook worth a shit and usually burns everything he tries to grill, but he can sand down these cabinets in a day and add new fixtures by dinnertime.”

“How good is he at plumbing? We will need at least a water closet,” she said.

“Ahead of you. I have some blueprints in my truck, but what this place is, or what it will become, should remain simple,” Apple said.

“My training, will it remain simple as well?” she asked, looking him directly in the eye. Helen held his gaze, waiting for him to flinch or adjust, and he didn’t.

“Nothing in life is ever simple, Cranberry. We like to believe it is, but it’s not,” Apple told her. “At the end of the day, you end up with either the person you want to become or a sad representation of an outdated model, refitted for purpose to serve the greater good.”

“And which are you?”

“I am the proverbial Bad Apple,” he said, watching Ricky Collins climb from the truck.

Before she could say any more, another vehicle arrived, a white passenger van driven by the stereotype of a social worker. A frown covered her face before she even stepped out of the van to approach the house. Her eyes squinted as she looked at Ricky, then squinted as she looked at the house. Helen stared quietly as the car doors opened and out poured three boys—the youngest of the three she recognized.

Apple spoke, “Yeah, he was sent to me. Having you here will help him get settled in.”

“Settled into what? What is this, a group home for boys?” Helen asked.

“It will be,” Apple said. “Come outside and meet the family.”

Helen followed behind him observing the two older boys. One was Asian and effeminate. The other, she put him at about 16 or 17, who seemed pissed off with the world. She knew the third one since she’d rescued him from a closet, chained up by The Collector. He spotted Helen and a smile came to his small face. A small hand waved at her, and she waved back.

“His name is Oscar; he’s 12, tiny for his age, and in need of more than I can start to say,” Apple said as they reached the small group. “Stephen is 16, and Jeffrey is 17. Guys, this will be it. Today, we will all do a walkthrough together and have you pick out your rooms. I will order pizza, and we will make a plan, start cleaning, and around six, our beds will arrive. The rest of the furniture, we have to buy or build.”

Stephen, the Asian boy, twirled in the dirt, “Mr. Milton, who is she?”

“This is Helen,” Apple said. “She is your den mother for the next three months. Her job is to get you settled; Ms. Helen will add in that support element you need as you start your new school. Helen will also be responsible for keeping us all sane as we turn this place into a home.”

He looked at Helen, who was staring at him with a no the fuck I’m not look, which nearly made Apple burst into laughter. She found nothing funny about it at all. Neither did the social worker, who began unloading raggedy suitcases onto the dirt drive. A nod from her head and in a flash, the woman was gone.

“What is happening here?” Helen asked Apple.

He turned, pointing to the house for the boys, who each picked up their suitcases as if

this were a thing which happened every week of their lives. They marched silently with Oscar struggling to carry his case. A silent Ricky materialized next to the kid, holding up the back end of the case as they filed inside of the home.

“They were on the streets of Milwaukee, doing whatever it took to survive,” Apple said. “No one wants them in Foster Care and they will age out soon, anyway. I am given three or four teens per year to get through school and teach a trade and how to be men to make their way in this world. From here, they can go to trade school or the military, but my job is to give them a new option and perspective on life.”

“And what is my role in this happy household where I am supposed to be training as an operative?” Helen asked.

“You look like a suburban housewife,” Apple said. “Taking a life is easy. Living life is as real as the world can get. For three months, you’re going to live the life. People underestimate stay-at-home parents and the skills they possess. Quite honestly, no one knows first aid better than a mom.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Do I look like a man with a sense of humor?”

Ricky, who’d been silent until now, spoke with a voice so deep, she thought Barry White had snuck into the house to add his two cents. “He has no sense of humor at all. I once saw him smile in 2003 when he ate the last donut in the box, but that was it.”

Oscar, who’d said nothing until now, asked “We have donuts?”

Stephen with his hand on his hip added, “That man looks like he wouldn’t even put sugar in the Kool-Aid. He is not going to let us have sugar in the house. What is this

house and how soon will I be able to run away from it?”

“Young man, here you will be safe and learn how to live and make your way in the world by using your brain. Out there, nothing waits for you but death at the hands of a trick who sees no reason for you to remain on this Earth or by disease, given to you by a reckless adult on their way out of this life, but wanting to take one more with him,” Apple said. “Your choice. Stay, be safe, and learn. Leave and take your chances. I’m not forcing you either way, but this is the mark. Stay. Learn. Blaze your own trail or head back to the life you know that offered you little.”

Helen knew he was also talking to her. This is not what she had signed up for, but honestly, she didn’t know what the fuck she had signed up for. Oscar had moved closer to her, nearly leaning against her. Instinct made her raise her arm to place it around the child’s shoulder. He wanted reassurance, and this was all she had to give.

Apple spoke, “We need to pick bedrooms. Windows will need to be washed and floors mopped tonight, and tomorrow, hopefully Ms. Helen can head into town for some curtains, rugs, and dishes.”

As they walked the space, Helen realized the home was actually two separate living quarters, and the property had been used for a rental income. She also discovered the second bathroom which could easily be made into an en suite. This room she wanted for herself, but a new idea formed.

“Mr. Milton,” she said, using the name the boys had used for Apple. “How would you feel about making this space a common room? The boys could watch movies, do homework, play video games, and hang out here. The bedrooms can be a safe space for them to get away from the noise of the household.”

“I like that idea,” Apple replied.

“The living room isn’t too large,” Helen said, “and the dining room, if... I’m sorry, was it Mr. Collins? Ricky? Sounds solid, but could you possibly make a project board so the young men can chart their progress on the board for assignments around the home.”

“Good, keep going,” Apple said.

“I can take time over breakfast to sit with each young man, figure out what how they want their rooms to look, and possibly, take each one shopping individually to pick out curtains and bedding for their rooms,” Helen said.

She saw Oscar’s face light up. Jeffrey even engaged when she said it, and her eyes went to Apple. “Mr. Milton, you will be last on the list to shop with me to get the items for your room. I hope you don’t mind being last,” she said.

If Bad Apple could look amused, his expression didn’t show it. He looked more or less as if he had a ball of gas built up under this left lung. When he exhaled, his lip twisted, but he gave her a head nod. “I’ll go get pizza. In the meantime, guys come unload my truck. Get the cleaning supplies and start going over the rooms. Mop, sweep, dust, and wash down those dirty windowpanes. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Ricky walked outside with the kids, helping them to unload. Helen remained in the kitchen looking about the nasty space, wondering what in the world she was going to do here for three months with this ragtag crew of people. Suddenly, a charge filled her core. Oscar ran into the house, holding a broom with a wide smile on his face.

“Ms. Helen! Ms. Helen, I’m going to sweep my room. Let me show you which one I picked,” he said, grabbing her by the hand and pulling her along.

His room was directly across the hall from the room she had. The joy on his face touched her as he walked about the space. Suddenly, he looked at her with tears in his

eyes.

“I was so scared,” Oscar said. “I was so scared of that man...I fought him, Ms. Helen, but he wouldn’t let me eat. If I wanted to eat, I had to do things. You’re here. They won’t hurt me or make me do things for food, will they?”

Helen rushed to the child’s side. “No one is going to hurt you, Oscar. You will have food and a safe place to sleep and go to school and learn.”

“Good, I like school,” he said. “Ms. Helen, this will be my very own room? I don’t have to share it?”

“As far as I know, this is your room and you don’t have to share it,” she replied.

“Do you think I can be happy here and grow up to be a good man who will have his own family one day, with a good job and a pickup truck?”

“Oscar, I pray all good things for you and your life,” she told him, suddenly feeling protective of the boy.

“Awesome,” he said. “Okay, I have to get to work. I have the broom first, then I get the mop. After that, I have to clean my windows. Not a lot of time. Not a lot of time. Get it done, Oscar. Get it done.”

She stood in the doorway as Jeffrey walked by. He side-eyed her as if he were assessing her fit to grace the same hallway as him. She looked at his hair, which was a mess, and he smelled like a bit of an angry teen stuck in an unwashed body. Stephen, on the other hand, pranced his way down the hall, holding the mop bucket and a dry dust mop.

“Ms. Lady, I want my room in chartreuse,” he announced, “with hot pink accents.

And hats. A bitch loves himself some hats.”

Helen wanted to correct him on the self-denigration, but that’s not why she was here. An acknowledgement of his words was all she did. Helen went to her own car to remove a few items, and one was a small, brimmed chapeau she liked to wear when she was feeling like a bad ass. This item she brought into the house and gave to Stephen.

You would have thought she’d given the child a crisp hundred the way he reacted. She pulled out a large bottle of lotion and passed it to Jeffrey, whom she noticed had really dry skin around his elbows and forearms. And last but not least, a small stuffed pony given to her by her niece Naomi, she passed to Oscar.

“I’m going to work on the kitchen and bathroom, so it will be ready for us to at least use the basics,” she told them, walking away.

It was a start. Bad Apple had made his point. He had made her care. She cared about the boys and didn’t want anyone to ever hurt Oscar again. Stephen and Jeffrey’s stories she didn’t know, and truthfully, had only entered the last chapter of Oscar’s, therefore she didn’t know his either. Helen surmised a history between Ricky and the Bad Apple, but it wasn’t her story to write, and she sure as hens pecking in the dirt wasn’t going to ask those men questions about their relationship.

“Chickens,” she said. “If he had some chickens, there would be fresh eggs every day. Oooh, a garden,” she said, looking out the window for the perfect spot for fresh tomatoes. It was the one thing Slow didn’t have at his place that could prove useful.

In the meantime, she would follow the advice given to her by The Mustang, who she sent a quick text to let him know she’d arrived safely. She did the same for her cousin Cherry. A day at a time was what she planned to do. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Dinner turned out better than she'd expected. Bad Apple traveled with a few items, which was not totally great but would make the evening tolerable. One was a folding table, like the 6 footers often used at conventions. Two, he had six metal chairs which reminded her of Sunday school in the church basement. Paper plates and plastic utensils were used for the salad in the container which he rinsed under the water faucet she was sure was pumping out unwanted impurities, bacteria or worse. The kids ate, who said little, as well as the adults.

No conversation was needed as the sound of a delivery truck arrived with the beds for the rooms. Helen sat at the table watching it pull up, wondering if it was indeed only beds or if he had purchased anything else. Apple sat observing her. Then, from his wallet, he removed a credit card and passed it to Helen.

"There is about five grand on it to get all the things we need to get set up here," he told her. "You will need to set a budget, provide me with receipts, and cover a lot of ground with those funds."

She didn't balk at the request, only asking, "So now I am your secret shopper?"

"No, I need to understand your thought processes," he told her. "I need to know how you think so I can better target what kind of person I am training. The way you spend that money will tell me a lot about who you are and what you prioritize as important, not only for yourself, but for the people in this home."

She placed the card in her pocket, taking a good look at the kids. They didn't have suitcases per se but overnight bags. Oscar's meager belongings were in a garbage bag. Those items were the only possessions they had in this world.

“I would like to prioritize the bathrooms if we could,” she stated, her eyes going to Ricky. “I tried to clean those toilets, but seriously, if you could make new toilets and vanities top of the list for tomorrow, that would be phenomenal.”

Ricky nodded and said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Mr. Milton,” she said, looking at Bad Apple, “I assume the appliances and furniture will not come out of the funds on this card?”

“The appliances, no,” he said.

“Hmm,” she replied, squinting her eyes at him. “Food and pantry stores, linens, dishes, and sundries on the card?”

“Yep,” he said, leaning back in the chair.

She picked up a napkin and grabbed a pen. She asked them all, “Anybody with food allergies, any allergies to soaps, powders, or particular color preferences?”

“I like green,” Oscar said. “Green means go. I like the idea of green. I like green foods too.”

“Okay, Stephen? Jeffrey?”

Jeffrey had little to say, “I’ve never eaten shrimp. I’d like to try some. Don’t care about colors, just no pink.”

Stephen pushed aside the slice of pizza, “I want dinnerware. I’d like to set the table for dinner with candles and stuff and place mats with real cloth napkins. No allergies that I know about, but I want some real good shampoo and conditioner for my hair, none of that stuff from the \$1 store either.”

Helen looked to Bad Apple, “Mr. Milton?”

“Me?” he asked surprised.

“Yes, Sir. I’m shopping once and getting it all, so let me know what your color preferences are, food allergies, and the rest,” she said softly.

“I like blues, no food allergies, prefer rice over potatoes, lots of leafy greens, and proteins,” he told her.

When she looked up, her eyes were on Ricky. “And you, Sir?”

“I don’t think I count in this equation,” he added with a voice so deep she felt it vibrate in her chest.

“You’re working here, taking meals here, and sitting at the table. You’re as important as everyone else in this room,” she told him, watching his chest puff up.

“I’m easy,” he told her. “I don’t like kale but will eat it. I’m partial to red, but love the energy of an orange, which is my favorite fruit.”

Oscar perked up, “I love fruit too. Not the kind in the can, though.”

“Noted,” Helen said, putting down her pen when the knock came at the door. She didn’t move as Apple rose to let in the delivery men with the beds.

Helen maintained her private thoughts, keeping them to herself when she realized they were, in fact only beds and frames. The better news is all the beds were the same size. There were no headboards, simply a metal frame with a box spring and a mattress. Apple didn’t have or provide any bed linens; he passed out paper thin blankets for them all. Mentally, Helen was checked out. She wanted a moment alone

with the thoughts that had invisibly climbed out of her brain, sauntered across the room and currently were strangling Apple. She excused herself for the evening, retreating to the stark bedroom.

In her room, what she hadn't noticed, or at least it wasn't there earlier, was a lock on the inside of her door. For measure, she checked Oscar's room, then Jeffrey's and finally Stephen's. They all had the same thing.

"Good night, everyone," she said, going to her room and locking herself in for the night. "This is going to be rough."

Apple sat at the table with Ricky, thinking of everything he'd noticed about the new Technician named Cranberry. She made a point to get everyone's feedback and opinions, including Ricky's, making him feel as a part of the team. Helen, in his opinion, was a survivor and a manipulator. He wasn't certain if she knew how to use it for good or if training her would make her a dark weapon to profit from the unrefined skill set.

"She's a thinker," Ricky said. "I think I like her. I want to see what she comes back with when she goes shopping tomorrow."

"You and me both; 5k is not a lot, considering we are operating with a blank slate here," Apple said. "I've never known The Company to take on a Tech that wasn't already trained, physically and mentally or just pissed off at the injustices of the world. This one, you can't really read her. The best thing I've learned about her thus far, is what is on her mind, she shares, in moderation."

Ricky nodded. "She read the room and the table. Those boys felt included. Hell, so did I."

"Yeah, I saw you puff up your chest," Apple said almost as a caution. "She doesn't

look hungry about the eyes. She's got a man who recently loved on her real good."

"Noticed it too," Ricky said, sounding almost disappointed. "I put locks on all the bedroom doors, including yours."

"Thanks, I need them all to feel as if they have control over their safety. In time, they will go to bed with the doors open or even unlocked."

"This house needs a lot of work: roof, bathrooms, floors," Ricky added. "Living here and working here simultaneously is going to be tough."

"Yep," he said. "Helen will need to employ serious problem-solving skills to make it less chaotic for herself and the kids. School starts next month, and there's a lot to get done."

THE BED WASN'T HALF bad, but it was also not half good. A tiredness eked into her spirit, facing a colossal task, as well as preparing the kids to start school next month. He'd only given her five grand to get a lot done and she would. It was a test to see if she would blow the money on bullshit or if she actually had a working brain in her head.

"I like that fucker," Helen said, rising to start her day. There was no bed to make since there were no sheets. She couldn't put away her clothing since there were no hangers or rods in the closets to put away said articles, for a body to wear. No dresser, not even a rug was available to greet her feet as she stepped out of bed. "Mister. I'm smarter than you think. Five grand in my world is like a million dollars. I'm going to show you some shit."

By the time she made her way to the bathroom to brush her teeth, a new energy filled her. The watch on her arm said 7:30 a.m. Coffee. Breakfast. Make a plan. With her planner in hand, she made her way downstairs to discover coffee already made and

what could be considered a bagel with cream cheese, soggy from being stored in a cooler overnight. The same cooler also held creamer. On the table was a small sugar container and a Styrofoam cup.

“It will do,” she said, sitting down, gnawing on the chewy bagel, and going through her phone. Happily, the community had a wholesale club for which she was already a member and a consignment shop, as well as a few big box stores to pick up items. The big stores didn’t open until ten.

“Morning,” Apple said, entering the room and filling it with Alpha male energy.

“Thanks for making the coffee,” she said, continuing to make notes. “Are there washer and dryer connections in the kitchen?”

“Yes; the appliances should be arriving this morning,” he said. “The washer and dryer connections are in the mudroom.”

“Odd question, but do you have any cash? I can make better deals at consignment shops with cash on hand versus using the card,” she told him.

“Yep, I have about a grand in cash,” he said.

“Can I use five hundred of it?”

“The cash will come off the budget, leaving only 4500 to use on the card,” he said.

“Roger that,” she told him, sipping at the coffee.

“What’s the plan?”

She looked up, giving him a wry smile. “I’m going to go spend your money.”

He smiled. The man actually smiled, and it creeped Helen the hell out. When he spotted her reaction, the smile quickly faded. “Helen, how do you plan to spend it?”

“Wisely,” she replied, smiling at him.

“Listen here, Cranberry, I will fight a woman,” he said and chuckled. “I will open-handed give it to you and make you see stars.”

“That’s if you get close enough before I cut off your balls,” she replied, chuckling as well. Helen took a pause. “Listen, I get it. You want to see how my mind works. If I tell you up front what I’m thinking or planning, it defeats the purpose. You are charging me with creating an environment for the souls in this home to live and thrive, including myself. I understand the first assignment.”

“This isn’t the first assignment; the first one you’ve passed,” he told her.

She sat back in the chair, squaring her shoulders and asked, “And what was that?”

He poured himself a reheated coffee. Intentionally, he entered the pauses in the conversation to make her wait for his words. She didn’t jump in to fill the air with unnecessary confrontations, which he greatly appreciated in the woman. This was the conversation he had meant to have yesterday, but it would happen today.

“We are the gatekeepers,” he said. “Each state has a gatekeeper. Our job is basically to safeguard the women and children. Societies fail and collapse when children and women no longer have hope. Yesterday, you gave us all hope. This house is a shit box. You gave me hope that you would turn it into a home for those kids. It doesn’t matter that you’re not staying. They have hope that when you come back today from wherever you’re going to spend my money wisely, there will be fresh fruit and Jeffrey will get to try shrimp for dinner.”

He paused again before saying, “Hopefully, if not tonight then maybe tomorrow, Stephen will set the table for dinner with cloth napkins. It’s not much, but they have hope.”

“And what about me in this scenario? What are you hoping that I understand?”

Apple was a handsome man. He was tall, dark, and mysterious and exuded manliness. However, in his eyes, a darkness lurked, which made her wary but not afraid. This man too, was a protector.

“Cranberry, taking lives really only requires you to aim and shoot. Creating a life means you understand those you’re sharing space with, and everything you do from now on is to be a part of their world, and you’re doing everything you can to make their world a better place to live,” he said, sighing heavily before changing the topic.

“Do you want to take my truck today?”

“No, my seats let down,” she told him.

“Cranberry, you care. When you come back from shopping, those boys will learn how much their lives mean to not only you, but to me,” he said.

“Sir, permission to speak freely?”

“In private between you and me, always,” he replied.

“Your training program sucks,” she told him. “Do you even know how many windows are in this house? Fifteen. Fifteen windows and all of them need curtains!”

“That’s your concern?”

“And rods. I guess you’re also going to make me hang them at the windows as well?”

“You do need to know how to use tools,” he said, finding himself laughing.

It was the same moment Ricky came through the back door. He froze where he stood, seeing yet not believing. He was hearing the Bad Apple himself laugh. For that alone, Helen, whatever her name was, had his full support in whatever she needed.

HELEN LEFT THE HOUSE at 9:30. She knew the wholesale club opened at 10 a.m., but a home goods store was open now. The shopping spree from hell would start there. She collected items for the kitchen and bathrooms and some bed linens. She put a primary set in the basket, then thought better with boys being in the house. Instead, she selected darker towels and one washcloth and towel in each of the boys’ preferred colors so they would know whose towel belonged to whom. She grabbed two bath rugs and soap dispensers with matching lotion containers. A bar of goat’s milk soap with oatmeal would work well for Jeffrey’s dry skin. She reached the register having only spent \$120.

“I can do this,” she said, loading the items into the back of the vehicle.

The next stop was named Property Pickers. Outside were chairs lined up on the sidewalk. Her purse, a slung crossbody bag, became a safety device with a concealed carry in the slotted pocket as she walked inside with an enormous smile on her face. This stop required finesse.

“Whew, I have found my mecca!” she said to the woman behind the counter.

A lady with hair that seemed uncertain how to behave in the daylight asked, “Morning, can I help you?”

“Sure hope you can,” Helen said. “Me and my brood lost everything in a fire, and I have a hand full of beans to make Jack and his brothers believe the beanstalk is real. Honey, we need everything down to curtains and curtain rods. Please help a sister

out.”

As simple as that and five hundred dollars in cash, and Helen negotiated a dining room set with six chairs, an office desk, a sideboard, a set of dishes with cups to serve eight, and five full sized headboards for the beds. Two of the headboards needed a fine sanding and some paint, but she'd done it before and was no stranger to painting old furniture to give it new life. Somehow, and she wasn't even sure how, she also wrangled out five dressers, with the additional two hundred in cash she herself had in pocket, along with two pink wingback chairs and a side table to go in between for the living room. Just as a bit of a cheek, Helen purchased a chest of drawers for an additional \$100 for Apple's room. She smiled at the implication, wondering if the man himself would wonder why he was the only one to receive two units in his room to hold clothing.

Happy with her purchases, she informed the lady that her husband and his friend would be by later to pick up the items. Feeling a sense of accomplishment, she made a note in her planner of what she'd spent on the card and in cash. The two hundred she'd reserved anyway for the space she would occupy to make it feel at home for herself during the stay. The two pink chairs would be her downstairs reading space. It was a solid investment.

However, for the common room she wanted to take a different approach. Instead of getting a sectional for the same price, she purchased a chair for each of the family members. Each chair was a different color and style. In her mind, she easily envisioned who would select which chair, including Ricky. Her style choice set the budget back by \$1,700, but it was worth it. For an extra \$160, she added on a colorful rug.

“Whew, Chile,” she said, providing the delivery address for the home. “I still need a shit ton of curtains and rods.”

The next stop was Carousel Consignments, a place where it looked as if a hoarder and an antique collector had gotten together and made a store baby. Inside, she located nightstands and bed lamps for the bedrooms. The amiable lady even threw in the light bulbs.

“I need curtains and rods,” Helen said to the lady. “We have about fifteen windows and I’m not about to go broke covering the eyes of the house from the nosiest of neighbors. Plus, we have teens.”

She omitted the part about the teens being boys, but an hour later, she had a decent pair of living room drapes and curtains for all the rooms, including the kitchen. They smelled of being closed up or from once hanging in an old home, but a quick wash and bit of fabric refresher would give them new life. Feeling proud of herself, she made her way to the wholesale club.

“Rice, lots of fresh fruits, shrimp for dinner with chicken, and maybe a salad,” she said, loading up the basket with milk, eggs, bread, peanut butter, and items for the home. She purchased an 11-piece ceramic cookware set and an enamel cast iron cook set in the same color. In the bedding aisle, she located a 3-piece printed quilt set for all five beds at \$25.00 each. A multi-colored rug caught her eye, and the size of 3x5, which was perfect to go by the side of the beds, at \$30 each worked well. The beds also needed pillows, which she grabbed, praying, all of it would actually fit in the vehicle, but the extra hundred for a resting place for their heads at night was worth the hundred and twenty dollars. The total came to \$775.

“Damn marvelous if I may say so myself,” she said, shoving those items into the already overloaded vehicle and heading for the house. If she needed the men to track her travel, she’d left a clear path through the town. “Oh, we are going to need a few blankets for the beds as well. I am not going to shiver my buns off in that house when the temp drops.”

Helen made a mental note to take care of those items when she took them on their individual shopping trips. She arrived the same time the chairs purchased at the furniture store did. Helen parked, exiting the vehicle to the ever-watchful eye of Apple and calling to him, “The car is full. Please have the boys come out to unload.”

He nodded, calling for the kids who barreled out of the door like roaches with the light coming on.

“Please put everything for right now in the living room,” she told them. To Apple, she added, “The other furniture will need to be picked up from the consignment shops. You will need Ricky’s truck as well to go get the items and the boys to help with the dressers when you get back from town.”

She guided the delivery people through the house as they brought in the chairs. The kids watched the furniture coming in noting the placement facing the wall. Jeffrey asked, “Is there a TV?”

“Mr. Milton will have to go get one because I had no more room in the vehicle,” she said, feeling proud.

To her surprise, the appliances were in place: a shiny new fridge, a stove, and a dishwasher. The grungy counter top was no more, and a nice solid butcher block workspace sat in the kitchen. She called to the boys, who had gotten extremely quiet. Helen walked through the house to locate the crew to find they each had claimed a chair for themselves. She smiled at the sight, realizing that the chairs she’d mentally picked for each kid, they also selected the same chair. For a moment, Apple had taken a seat in the chair she’d chosen for him as well as Ricky. Only one empty chair remained.

It was the seat the guys had saved for her. She clapped her hands together. “I have some dishes, Stephen, but I need Mr. Ricky and Mr. Milton to go pick up the dining

room table so we can use it to eat supper. We're having shrimp and rice with chicken, broccoli and a side salad."

She tossed a banana to Oscar. "Let's get it moving, guys." Helen provided the receipts for the consignment shops and the address to Bad Apple and Ricky, who went into town to collect the items. Per Helen's instruction, they needed both trucks.

"Shit, we need a moving van," Ricky said. "How much did you give her to spend?"

A woman in the store grinned at them both. "Hey, you must be the husband. Your wife came through here like the Tasmanian Devil and dropped eight hundred like it was nothing. She made some quality choices, too."

"Yes, my Helen is something," Apple said, looking at all the furniture she'd picked out for only eight hundred dollars. The haul filled the bed of each truck after both stops to get it all loaded and back to the house. He arrived at the sad little grey house to happy faces waiting for him on the porch that leaned to one side. Eager, they rushed out to carry in the items, listening carefully to where everything would be placed.

The boys fussed and fawned over everything, almost sensing which items she'd picked for each of them, and even Apple himself became impressed at what she'd gotten for him. When he reached his bedroom, fresh blue sheets were on his bed, with a color coordinated comforter set, with a bar of soap in a container and towels at the foot. The curtains she'd chosen for the room rested under the window for hanging. He also had a rug on the floor by his bed. More importantly, he had pillows. It would make for a more restful night.

When he looked in the boy's rooms, he saw the same. The kids were optimistic, and Stephen, happier than he needed to be, prepared dinner in matching cookware. He and Helen set the table with real dishes on coordinating placemats and cloth napkins.

In the consignment's corner shop, Helen located a tablecloth which she draped over the dining room table, giving it an air of holiday vibes. She had even picked up a set of napkin rings, which made the young man cry as he set the table for supper.

Helen looked at Bad Apple. He scowled at her. Hesitantly, he asked, “did you go over, and how much?”

She scowled back at him, “I came in under. There is a balance of about a thousand on the card, minus the \$300 cash you owe me for the headboard, dresser and chest of drawers for your bedroom. I only spent roughly around four hundred to stock the pantry and freezer. So that leaves about seven.”

Helen walked off to grab a few melted down candles she’d purchased from a bin at the second-hand store, lighting them to set the ambiance for dinner. She instructed the boys to wash up for supper and come to the table. To drive home her ability as a thrifty woman, she handed him the list along with her final receipts for the day.

Ricky, standing behind Apple and looking at the table, whispered, “I think I might love her. Whoever he is, I may throw my hat in the ring for that lady.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

The week ended on a note of tiredness Helen had never known in her life. Every muscle in her body ached, her joints throbbed, and even her thumbs felt as if they pulled a twelve-hour shift sending out text messages. In her spirit, she was happy to know she'd passed the first test of mental fitness to begin her training as a Technician. Based on the reaction of everyone in the house after the initial purchases, especially the individual chairs, she was doing pretty good. How any of that would help her be an assassin was beyond the scope of her limited reasoning, but as she'd been taught, every action elicits a reaction. Thus far, the reactions were right on point.

Wednesday morning brought a one-on-one day with Jeffrey, a 17 year old, with hair that stood on end like Don King the boxing promoter. It wasn't her place to suggest a haircut, but if she could discern what type of clothing he liked to wear, maybe...perhaps, there would be a middle ground, versus having the young man look like he worked in a lab making terrible drugs that made people see dancing monkeys. The idea of being alone with him made her nervous, and then she looked into his eyes at breakfast. He was enthusiastic about getting out of the house for whatever they were going to do.

"We should be back after lunch," she said aloud, but her eyes were on Oscar. He was the youngest.

Helen's logic, whether accurate or sideways, was to get Jeffrey set up first, then he could aid Oscar with situating his room. So far, she had seen no real connection between the boys. If, and it was a big if, she could have Jeffrey step up as a protector for the two others, then, in this life, or when they moved forward to whatever came next, a sort of family could be formed.

“Let’s roll, Jeffrey,” she told him.

The first stop was to the super-center in Janesville, where she could score a quart of paint, chinos, and jeans. The super center store was also a great place to purchase a fresh pack of undies, pjs, and some form of house slipper. Jeffrey’s head was down when they walked, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. The tattered clothing he wore, broken down from wear and tear, looked no different than what the other teens in the store were worn by choice.

“Let’s get you a pair of jeans, a button down, a matching tee, and pair of chinos,” she told him. “We can look elsewhere for a pair of kicks, but a white nondescript pair from here can work to rock your gear.”

Jeffrey almost, nearly gave her a smile. “I want a pair of Nikes if you have any of the money left.”

“Sweetheart, if you want Nikes, we will figure out how to make it happen,” she told him, offering a faint smile.

The plan, she decided, was to only purchase one pack each of underwear, tees and socks. Jeffrey mentioned the second-hand store. Then she had an idea.

“I have \$40 bucks cash here,” she said, passing it to him. “I’m going to let you decide what you want in the store and what you feel is most important to you.”

Jeffrey, shocked at her approach and giving him money, decided foremost, he needed a wallet to put it in. Luckily, it was red tag week in the thrift store, which offered even deeper discounts. She watched him handpick clothing, only spending twenty of the dollars.

“I want a haircut,” he said. “Been a long time since I had one.”

“Haircut is next,” she told him, searching her phone for a hip and cool barbershop. Locating a men’s grooming station close by, she secured the items in the vehicle's rear, careful to cover the bags with a blanket she kept for just in case, before they walked in the barbers. She clutched her purse tightly, appearing afraid of everything and everyone in the shop. A man who she assumed was the owner stepped forward.

A hearty, boisterous voice greeted them, “Whassup, can I help you?”

“Yes, my son needs a cut, maybe a shave,” she said, lowering her eyes to not make too much eye contact. “All he has is a \$20; can he get it done here?”

The way she said it made all the men in the shop react. She was told to take a seat while Jeffrey sat in the chair. Helen couldn’t hear the shop owner or what Jeffrey was saying to him, but the boy looked up and made eye contact with her. He did it in a way that asked her to back up the story he’d given to the barber. She nodded her head, praying she hadn’t agreed to a lie that couldn’t be substantiated.

Twenty minutes later, Jeffrey looked like a new person. He walked with his head held high and confidence in his posture. His shoulders were back as he went into the wallet to pull out the twenty. The barber only took ten.

“My name is Cole,” he told Helen. “Your son told me he has a little brother who needs a cut as well. Bring him by in the next day or so, and I’ll square him up.”

“Thank you so much. I really appreciate this,” she said. “Jeffrey, you look so handsome.”

“Aww, Ma,” Jeffrey said, shying away from her. “Not in front of the dudes! Not cool!”

“Sorry,” she said, blushing furiously. “Thank you again.”

Instinct told her to link her arm into Jeffrey's as she'd seen Moms do with teenage boys escorting them to a restaurant for lunch or dinner. She also thought it was a logical plan to take him to lunch while they were out, and after, she scored him a pair of Nikes.

At half-past two, they returned home. Oscar's relief was evident when she pulled up and his eyes grew large, seeing the transformation in Jeffrey. Apple saw it too as the boy walked up the stairs and looked him in the eye for the first time.

"Nice haircut," Apple said.

"Got a shave too," Jeffrey said, almost smiling.

"Looks good. Well done," he told Jeffrey. "You too, Ms. Helen."

She smiled but was tired. Stephen, twirling about the living room, began yammering about his day tomorrow, and Oscar nearly sat in her lap when he talked about what they would do on his day, his haircut and more. As best she could, she listened, but mentally, she was already in bed.

A pleasant surprise awaited her when she excused herself to go to the bathroom. Not only had Ricky put in the new toilet, but he'd also installed a new casing over the old tub and laid fresh linoleum on the floor, and there was a vanity, a lovely vanity which now held the pretty soap and lotion dispensers she'd purchased yesterday.

Oscar waited for her outside the door. "I helped make it nice like that, Ms. Helen."

"And a fine job you did helping Mr. Ricky. I think it looks amazing," she replied, reaching for the bag of clothing she'd purchased from the second-hand store, only to be stopped by Jeffrey.

“Stephen can show me how to do a load of laundry,” Jeffrey said. “Ms. Helen, you want a glass of water and to rest for a minute?”

“That would be lovely,” she replied to the young man.

Jeffrey called out, “Stephen, bring Ms. Helen some of that tea we saw her drinking.”

“On it, doggone it,” Stephen called back, sashaying into the kitchen.

Jeffrey parked her in one of the two pink chairs she had bought yesterday that sat in front of the living room window. The curtains were open and the sun shone through the sheers. It had taken her three tries with the leveler and drill to get in the screws, even after Ricky had shown her twice, but she’d done it. She’d hung drapes with fancy rods. Before the night was over, the curtains that she’d washed and dried were hung at all the bedroom windows. The rest of the house could wait until the weekend.

ON THURSDAY, SHE REPEATED the outing with Stephen, minus the haircut. He, unlike Jeffrey, didn’t want name brand shoes, but purchased secondhand shoes in good condition from the discount store. He wanted nothing, including the paint from the super-center, and used the bulk of his money at the red tag sale, coming away with a basket load of clothes. Happier than any man should be with those many clothes, he wanted to spend a few dollars on high end shampoo, conditioner, and a blow dryer.

She didn’t argue, since he seemed thrilled with himself and the items purchased.

Friday was Oscar’s day and they started with the haircut. He said nothing to the barber, but handed him a crinkled twenty from his pocket, happy to have change. Thin for his age, in the super-center, Helen purchased the bulk of the items for him before heading to the discount store where he wanted nothing. Oscar never moved past the front entrance.

“It smells funny,” he said, shying behind her, not wanting to go any further. She didn’t push. He had little to say as they stopped for chicken nuggets and waffle fries, mentioning once his hope for a television.

Helen didn’t ask or need him to talk. Oscar seemed content to simply be with her in a place where he could watch people. She didn’t mind it too much herself. Before, she never dined out and fast food wasn’t on her list of nutritional balance, but these kids needed a new kind of purpose. She didn’t know or understand the plan Apple had for them. However, tomorrow was his day in the passenger seat and she would find out. Today, however, there was Oscar.

“He hurt me,” Oscar told her.

Helen didn’t need to ask to whom the child was referring. She knew. A million thoughts zinged through her head about how to respond or what to say. Instead of trying to offering comfort by over-explaining and providing platitudes, she lowered the neckline of her blouse. Not too far to expose her cleavage but to show the boy the scars.

“He hurt me too, but we are here, Oscar. We survived, we shall heal, and we will move forward and live in the light,” she told him.

The boy nodded and said no more. After completing the sparse meal, they returned to the home where Oscar met Stephen in the laundry room to wash the new clothing. To her surprise, in the common room was a television, a big one hanging on the wall. Since it was Friday, Apple stated they would all watch a movie after dinner with popcorn.

Helen liked the idea, excusing herself for a moment to call her cousin for a check-in. She really wanted to check in with the Mustang, but didn’t want to appear too needy. Everything, thus far, was not terrible, and she was in no danger. The idea of spending

the day with Apple would really give her a sense of who the man was, what he stood for, and the plans for the kids. Until then, she returned to the common room, nibbling on the popcorn as the kids sat in awe watching a King Kong movie. She appreciated Apple purchasing the entire series on streaming, so each week, the ‘family’ could enjoy the next installment.

She would mention culturally enriching films and shows to Apple to broaden the kid’s knowledge base when they spent time together tomorrow.

THE MORNING ARRIVED with Apple ready to go. He almost seemed rather keen his day with Helen but began by establishing a few ground rules. The first one made her smile and even blush.

“One, you’re not buying me any underwear,” Apple said. “I could use more socks, but no, on the underwear.”

“I really had no intention of doing so, but duly noted,” she said, smiling. “Anything else?”

“No fast food for lunch,” he said. “This body is a chiseled machine.”

“A chiseled machine that eats pizza?”

“The pizza was for the kids,” he said, trying to hide the cold slice in his hand from last night’s dinner behind his back. “Do you want me to drive since you’ve been driving every day?”

“No, today you get to take a breather on being in charge,” she told him, looking into the kitchen at Oscar, and speaking to the boy. “We should be back around two at the latest. Do you have questions?”

“No, Jeffrey is okay. He will watch out for me,” Oscar said.

“Good,” she said, looking up at Jeffrey. “He can have snacks mid-morning and mid-afternoon, I would prefer it to be fruit, but there are chips if he wants some. It’s Saturday, so after whatever chores you have, some afternoon TV is okay.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Jeffrey said, looking at Oscar. “Come on and get you some breakfast. I think Stephen is making waffles.”

To make sure no one escaped having a word with Ms. Helen, she looked at Stephen. “You don’t need to cook anything for lunch today. Chips and dogs are fine for a midday meal. Take it easy today and work on your bedroom, getting things laid out. Are you good?”

Stephen blinked twice, looking at her. “Yes, thanks for asking.”

“Be back soon,” she told them all, looking at Ricky. “Sir, don’t let them bowl over you to get their way with extra snacks and TV time before they have finished the chores.”

Ricky saluted, sheepishly asking. “Ms. Helen, is tomorrow my day with you?”

“Sure thing,” she told him, looking back at the ragtag family. “Be back soon. No strangers in the house, and no forks in the electrical sockets. I don’t know the insurance situation, and we don’t need any medical bills.”

They all smiled at her, including Ricky. Apple only scowled. Helen also scowled as the man took up all the oxygen in the vehicle and much of the space. He didn’t seem that tall or that big, or that muscly, but in the front seat of her Subaru, the space didn’t appear to accommodate his mass.

“You’re good with the kids. You learn all that stuff in foster care?” he asked her, as she pulled out of the drive.

“I didn’t grow up in foster care, thank you very much,” she told him.

“Sorry, I assumed you and The Cherry on Top found each other in foster care and connected,” he said.

“Not true in the least,” she said.

He shifted his tactic, “Are your parents dead, leaving you and Cherry had to make your way in the world?”

“No, my mother is very much alive and living in Chicago with a man named Waldo, with uneven front teeth. He’s covered with an equally uneven gold-plated grill,” she said, “and he greets everyone with aiiii!”

Apple chuckled. “And your father?”

“He lives in New York, and before you ask, he sent an Easter, birthday, and Christmas card to me with appropriate amounts of legal tender until I was 18. He even attended my high school graduation. I moved out from Mom’s and got my own place, but he still calls on birthdays and Christmas, checking to see if I made him a grandad,” she answered. “Don’t have the heart to tell him that will never happen.”

“You can’t or don’t want to?”

“Can’t and don’t want to,” she replied.

“Interesting, so I figured you all wrong,” he said.

“Why figure when you can simply ask?” she asked. “Am I free to inquire about you?”

“I guess,” he said. “I assume you’re going to get personal. To clear up matters, no, to me and Ricky. No to me and young boys. I am a protector, not a predator.”

“Never assumed you to be,” she said. “Are you an only child? I am for both my parents. My father never had any more, or at least if he did, he never told me.”

Apple sat for a moment, mentally cataloguing what he wanted to tell her and facts which seemed pertinent to their current situation. She had intentionally avoided the conversation section about her and Cherry. He wanted her to understand the why of his current lifestyle and the reason for being employed by The Company. It wasn’t his long-term goal to stay in the business of ending lives, but if a child creeper needed to die, he was okay to handle the matter.

“I am a middle son,” he told her. “I have two older brothers and two younger sisters. My eldest brother is a minister in our local church. My other siblings are educators. Walter is the minister, Richard is a science teacher, Beatrice teaches math, and Ida, music. She is also the choir director of the church in Charleston.”

“A Southern gent,” she said. “Did you all go to the same college so on game-day weekends you sported the colors of your Alma Mater with tailgate parties near the campus?”

“Funny,” he replied. “Yes, my family all graduated from South Carolina State, and they do take part in homecoming. My parents met there and married after graduate school.”

“So, are you a science minded person as well? What did you major in at South Carolina State?”

He turned to look at her. “No, I am the Bad Apple. I went to the Naval Academy at Annapolis and I am a trained and certified electrical engineer.”

“Shut up, Big Sexy!” she said, gripping the steering wheel. “Bad ass and smart. Okay, keep surprising me.”

“When I left the Navy, I did so as a Seal Team Commander,” he told her trying not to blush.

It was the pause which made her change her approach to the conversation. A sadness simmered in the atmosphere of things he wanted to share with her but was uncertain if the space was safe to do so. Helen paused as well, processing the information he’d given her to connect the dots. Her mind went to the conversation with Gabriel the Archangel, who had fed her pieces. Slow also did the same thing. Apple was waiting to see her deductive skills.

“I bet your minister of a father took exception to that line of work,” she said as she watched his eyes. His stare drilled into her as they sat at the traffic light. Apple pointed at a coffee shop and Helen hit the turn signal, pulling in. She parked the vehicle, waiting for him to say what was next.

“You’re brighter than you look,” he said.

“I’m deadlier than I look too, so what’s your fucking point?”

“Why are you here, Helen? This is confusing the hell out of me. You have no military training. What are you planning to do with these untrained natural skills of yours,” he said, almost looking angry.

“Skills?”

“Yes, you know how to read people like members of the CIA. You have a natural affinity to knowing what to say and what to do in every situation,” he said. “Honestly, you scare the shit out of me.”

Helen didn't miss a beat. “If I have all of that and none of it has been trained to help me do anything but survive in this life, imagine how useful I could be if there was a home for my anger.”

She used the terms Gabriel had taught her on their first official meeting. “Tell me Apple, why do you do this? Why are you making your living doing what you do? Of course, I am also wondering, what do you see in me to train?”

He turned his body in the seat. “Not all Technicians are assassins, Helen. There are people who clean up after the work we do, women who solicit information, trackers, researchers, and chemists. Your strength may not require you to pull a trigger or cause the death of another. My job is to assess where you are and hone what is already there. You have a knack for people.”

“And your knack for boys, what is that about?”

This is information she knew he didn't want to share. This is the information that would tell her exactly who this man was in his mind and in real life. What he shared next would explain more.

“My brother Walter caught me behind the barn at fifteen kissing Willie Baines,” he told her. “I'd hoped he wouldn't tell our father, but he did, which made life at home hell for me, hence joining the Naval Academy.”

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“Don't be. As a young black male, I learned about men and how they saw me as a

human. The main ones, I found out, who publicly ostracized my predilection, were also the ones wanting to exploit it,” he said. “No matter where you go, there are men who will exploit the fear and uncertainty.”

“You make a safe space for the boys,” she said.

“I make a home for them to learn to be men, walk through this world as men. Choices you make behind closed doors are your private choices. I teach them basic life skills, tool usage, and how to live in the world as men. More importantly, I want them to know not all men in the world want to hurt them.”

“Admirable,” she said.

Her words were halted by the ringing of his phone. It was his Technician phone, and she knew because it looked exactly like hers. He answered, “The Bad Apple.”

His face changed incrementally as he listened to the caller. At the end of the minute and thirty seconds, and she knew because she timed it, anger entered the cab of the vehicle. He was mad, and Helen felt at odds with this version of the man.

“We have to go back, now,” he said.

She didn’t question, but got them back to the house as fast as possible. They arrived at the same white van which brought the boys. The same woman was there, but she looked frantic. Helen’s guts felt as if they were boiling. Whatever was in the van wasn’t just bad. It was going to be terrible.

The vehicle barely came to a stop before Apple unfolded himself to climb out. He went to the van, hesitating to look at the frazzled woman, who was shaking her head no. Apple opened the van door, and Helen read his body language. Whatever was in that van was about to change the dynamic of the house and potentially all of their

lives.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Helen wasn't sure what she was looking at when it came to the vehicle or the woman who seemed to show up with children to be placed into Bad Apple's care. At this particular juncture in her journey as a Technician, she didn't know what to expect, but she read his body language. From the driver's seat of the vehicle, she watched his back. Straight, rigid, and full of military bearing as he approached the white van. He provided an almost imperceptible nod to the woman as he slid open the van door.

The rigid back jackknifed, making Helen open the door of her vehicle to step out. Whatever was on the back seat of that van had to be bad. If it was bad enough to elicit a non-verbal response like that from Bad Apple, she needed to know what it was before taking the said problem into the house with the other boys. Thinking you're a bad apple is one thing, but tossing one into the apple hopper is another. There would be no way in the world all the other apples wouldn't be grossly affected.

Her steps were slow as she approached the van. Helen's eyes went from Apple's back to the woman's face. The dour expression also showed she too, felt the weight of the issue in the van on the back seat. One thing Helen could sniff out in any form was trouble. Whatever on the back seat of the van would bring worry in a burlap gunny sack.

"Cranberry, this is Ms. Pear," Apple said.

"Pair, as in p-a-i-r, or p-a-r-e?" Helen asked.

"P-e-a-r, as in fruit," Apple corrected. "Ms. Pear is a sweeper."

"I don't know what that is," Helen said, looking at the woman.

She spoke up. “There are cleaners who go in after the melee and clean up the no longer living bodies and remove the waste. I am a sweeper. After the melee, I come through and clean up the bodies still breathing to get them the resources needed to heal, grow and try to exist without the many nightmares of their experiences.”

“A social worker for the Technicians,” Helen added, “and the package being delivered.”

As she said the words, Apple lifted from the back seat a child, no more than six years of age, wrapped in blanket. A thin arm dangled from the covers, revealing a mark on the arm. It caught Helen’s attention, and she reached to touch it.

“Is that a brand?” she inquired, in disbelief. “Someone branded this child?”

“He was the property of the man whose brand he is wearing,” Apple said, trying to re-cover the arm.

“I’m sorry, but what is that, a bug of some sort?”

“A chrysalis,” Pear said. “It is the stage of a butterfly in between being a pupa and an adult, growing in a hardened shell.”

Helen’s hand went to her chest. The implications for the definition nearly made her vomit. However, Pear’s face emphasized there was more to be said. She pushed Pear a little. “Okay. What did this child take which is going to screw up everything we hold dear and who is coming to reclaim their property or stop the child from talking?”

Both Apple and Pear turned to look at her head on. She hadn’t seen the child’s face, and in her heart, she wasn’t ready. All she could think about was her niece Naomi, and the idea of being branded by some asshole who wanted to harden the child inside to withstand more punishment from adults made her feel ill. Based on their

expression, Helen hit the nail on the head.

Pear softly added, “Kendrick, that is the boy. He took his Master’s wallet. We have his ID and more. However, the Master has moved. The storehouse got cleared when Kendrick got away.”

Helen was ready to see the child’s face. “So, little man, you got away and brought proof to the police. Good for you.”

The covers moved and a small face materialized from under the blanket. The brown skin was taut and thin, showing the child was either dehydrated for long periods and not very well fed. The lips were dry and cracked.

“No police,” Kendrick said. “Police come to the parties. They are the worst. They hurt us. No police.”

“You’re safe now,” Helen said, reaching for the child. She didn’t wait for Apple to say anything else. The boy needed a bit of TLC and she planned to dole it out.

“Cranberry, get on the mic with the contractor and have him bring up the camp bed for Kendrick to rest on for now, since we don’t have a couch,” he said, squinting at her.

“You don’t need a couch for that very reason,” she replied, walking away with the child. “Kendrick, I am Ms. Helen. I’m going to get you some clothes, a bite to eat, and something to drink. There are other kids in the house, and you will need a minute to adjust, but they are nice boys and will help you get better.”

Kendrick coughed, spitting up blood onto the blanket. The red hit Helen low in the solar plexus, knowing the child had internal injuries. She closed her eyes as she inhaled the medicinal scent of the child, who had been cleansed with antimicrobial

and antibacterial washes. The smell reminded her of a hospital or a nursing home being cleaned after a resident had the shits.

“I hurt,” Kendrick said, nuzzling into her chest.

She understood. Helen entered the home, carrying the child. Jeffrey met her at the door, concern on his face and immediately spotted the brand on Kendrick’s arm. Stephen gasped when he saw it and began to back up. Luckily, Oscar didn’t know what it was, but the expression on Stephen’s normally jovial face was one of abject horror.

“Take him back wherever he came from! Whoever owns him will come looking. They won’t stop looking for him until they find his corpse or create one,” Stephen said. “They are sick people. Sick people. Who brought him here! He can’t stay. We are all in danger. We are all in danger if he stays!”

Apple walked through the door, going right for Stephen. He wrapped his arms around the boy, offering simultaneously strength and comfort. The strain of his muscles while holding the teen was clear in the cording of the muscles in his arms.

“You’re here. No one, I mean no one, is coming into this home to fuck with anybody. You hear me? We don’t run,” Apple said. “We dig in, and if they bring the fight to us, they will know and understand how it feels to get their asses whipped. You hear me? Do you hear me?”

“Yes Sir,” the boys replied.

Ricky entered the door, carrying the camping cot, placing it near the fireplace, and laying out a sleeping bag. Helen, seated in her chair in the common room, was not ready, not prepared to let the boy go. She wanted to hold him, comfort the child, as well as pray over him. Never had she been one who was overtly religious, but today

she wanted to pray for this child.

Jeffrey looked at Ricky, then at Apple. “How do we dig in?”

Apple answered every question each of them had in their heads. The initial thought of buying the property was to teach the Cranberry how to set up a homestead and prepare a living space for a Technician. A plan had been put in place to start on her second month at the house, but they had to start now. Everything had to start now, but he would not wait for the men to come find him. Once the homestead was secured, The Cranberry would get her first lessons in tracking. Apple would take the hunt to the hunting lodge and blow that fucker into a million pieces.

“Ms. Helen, first things first,” Apple said. “We need to do inventory of weapons, and build the weapons cache in the house.”

She nodded, remembering the opening in the floor at Slow’s cabin where he stored his weapons. At the home she and Cherry had formerly shared in Indiana, each room had a hiding spot on the ceiling tiles for a locked and loaded weapon. There were no dropped ceilings in this house, but there was a basement, which could work to make a basin under the floorboards to house weapons, but there were too many windows.

“There are so many windows. Are you planning on bulletproof blinds of some sort?” she asked.

“Something like that, but first, we need to create lines of sight with interlocking fields of fire for each window. You will have to work with the boys to get the marking lines right for each window,” he said, watching her eyes to see if she understood what he meant.

“Roger that,” Helen replied, “How many weapons for each window? Does that include crossbows or any automatics?”

“I have four automatics, which will go for each corner of the home,” Apple said, turning to Ricky. “We need basic fencing in the yard, electrified, a few land mines, and booby traps, nothing over the top to start. Reinforce the doors and add more locks on the windows as well.”

Oscar began to shiver. He was scared for himself and also scared for the child in the blanket. The boy didn’t look good. He’d seen that look before in the children who crossed the border with him from Tegucigalpa. The child would not live for long. He would not live and everyone would be sad, but he could be sent away to live in another place where people shouted and hit him.

Stephen wasn’t satisfied with the plan. “Sir, those men are like animals. They are like a roaming pack of wild dogs, always hunting down fresh meat. We saw kids on the street who were taken in by those people and branded, and they came back to recruit more kids. They were like zombies. There were horror stories about the men who owned them and even a few were owned by women who wanted girls. How do you dig in against something like that?”

Apple would not be deterred from the mission at hand. “I don’t run. You will not run nor will you live in fear. We work, we prepare, and most of all, in September, you’re going to school. Your focus is on school. Help us where you can by doing your part in this house, and the rest, you leave to me, Ricky, and Ms. Helen.”

Stephen didn’t want to hear the platitudes shouting at Apple, “And what is she going to do, take the big tough men shopping?”

Helen stood, placing the small child on the cot, her crossbody bag still hung across her chest as she faced Apple. She gave a slight bow, and he read her intention to spar with him in front of the boys. For the sake of the demonstration, whatever her plan would be, he would go easy on her.

Apple made his move at Helen. He didn't know what happened, or how he found himself on all fours like a confused dog about to be washed, with her knee in his back and two knives at his throat. Her eyes were on Stephen.

"Boy, you'd better recognize that anything that is unfriendly coming through that door for any of you, any of you, I will slice to pieces and make a snack of their livers. Do you understand me?" she asked with wide eyes. "I said! Do you understand me?"

"Yes!" They all shouted, including Apple and Ricky.

She released Apple. "We have work to do, family," she told them. "Jeffrey, you're with me. Oscar, you're on sitting duty; keep an eye on Kendrick- that's the boy's name. Stephen, get him broth and liquids, no sugars. He has internal injuries, so go carefully."

"Yes, Ma'am," they replied.

Ricky offered Apple a hand up from the floor. He watched Helen walk away to look at the windows, searching the home for places to make a weapons cache. He didn't know what to make of the woman.

"I think I love her," Ricky said.

"You?" Apple said. "For a minute there I wanted to be hetero so I could snuggle with her after making sweet love."

They both chuckled at the absurdity of it all, but work needed to be done. A home fitted for a Technician was required to prepare to live in a shadow world of covertness. That just didn't happen by itself.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Tampa, Florida

Clive Edell James got called on the carpet. It was days like this which made his job and life more difficult than necessary, but he'd fucked up. He knew he fucked up. His boss knew and now, everyone in The Chrysalis knew it as well. A child, bearing his mark, had escaped the workhouse in Milwaukee. Much to his dismay, the child had escaped with his wallet.

In his tiny little fist, he'd taken Clive's wallet with all of his information and credit cards. This also meant the powers that be would locate his home and take everything he owned. All of it, years of working hard, building his fortress, and climbing the rungs with gusto of the organization, only to be taken down by a tiny asshole. It was why he hated kids.

"Kids are jerks," Clive muttered under his breath while he awaited sentencing for his failure.

The painful truth of his fiasco radiated in his eyes, knowing the justice meted against him would be harsh for such an infraction that no one could have prepared for, even on their best day. A shiver ran down his spine as he heard his name bellowed by the Sargent at Arms, a no-necked man with prison ink covering most his body. They called him 'the shank' in all lowercase letters because he could make a prison shank out of anything, then fatally stab you with it, in nocuous places, as he watched you bleed. The Chrysalis was loaded with folks like him and worse. Again, Clive heard his name being bellowed.

Heavy feet in leather boots stepped through the double doors. Clive faced the podium

where three heads of state waited to find out what had happened with the kid, and how, what, and why Clive still was alive. Sweat trickled on his forehead as a bright light shone in his face.

“Shit Stain,” a heavy voice spoke out.

Clive couldn't see their faces because of the bright light shining in his. If, and it was a big if, he survived the sentencing, and if, and it was a big if, he survived the punishment, seeing their faces was not on his list of need-to-know items. However, no matter the trouble he faced, he wasn't a bitch and didn't plan to act like one; therefore, he saw no need for the Cocoon Heads to treat him like one. A bad thing had happened, and he would be punished.

“Clive Edell James,” he replied, trying to maintain a bit of dignity in the face of such adversity.

“Oh, we want to be formal, when you know, this could be your death,” the voice said.

“If my death were imminent, you would have done it before now,” Clive challenged.

“The warehouse was a safely guarded location and very few knew existed, especially since it had only been up and running for about six months.”

“The child?”

“Kendrick Emmes,” he whispered, feeling the weight of the burden upon him. “He was my aide-de-camp and not a toy. A client decided when I left the room to make the child a personal rag doll. Kendrick fought him, cut the man's face, then got his phone and dialed 9-1-1. The sound of the child's voice, the things he was describing, brought every available police unit in the area.”

The heavy voice spoke, “Aren't you leaving out something?”

“Yes, the client hurt the boy. He hurt him badly,” Clive said.

“Again, Shit Stain, you’re leaving out an important detail,” the voice snapped.

Clive knew what he wanted to hear. “In my efforts to save the inventory of toys and dolls collected in the Field of Flowers, the child was left alone. He was in a bad state, and I wasn’t sure he would survive, so I walked away, but he called to me, begging. I went over and he cut me as well, snatched my wallet when I went down, and made a break for the door. As the cops were coming in, he was bolting out with my wallet in his hand. The police now know where I live.”

“And Shit Stain, you are here in Tampa with that kind of heat on you,” the voice said.

“But I saved the inventory, or at least a chunk of it,” Clive said, staring into the light. “I have fifteen years of service to The Chrysalis and never has such a thing happened under my watch. I am requesting leniency to rectify the wrong.”

A second voice, laced with sexual appeal, spoke. “There is no rectification. The child is with a Technician. A Technician who is more than likely going to hunt you down. You have brought undue attention to us all. My vote is to terminate his contract.”

The third voice spoke, “I second the termination.”

Clive tried to speak. The whizzing of a bullet was the last thing he heard as the first one struck him in the chest, center mass. He didn’t have time to react to dying since his heart stopped, and his body dropped hard to the floor.

The heavy voice spoke. “I didn’t want him dead!”

“Two votes to your one Imperial,” the woman said. “You know how this works. Your Underwing, in fifteen years really has not progressed as he should have. The one

lousy warehouse he ran in Milwaukee under-produced while the rest of the state is booming even in the Winter months. Underwing was a failure.”

Imperial had never cared for Swallow Tail. She was the kind of woman a leader looked forward to backhanding across the mouth each time she spoke. She was a nasty woman who reeked of too much perfume to hide the stench of her overused snatch. His expression emulated the disdain he felt for her as Underwing, while his very own aide-de-camp Clive, lay face down, all the life juices seeping from the gaping hole in his chest oozing onto the floor, ending a piss poor life. The body would be moved to a brightly lit place to be discovered in the early morning by a jogging enthusiast on the Davis Island Trail.

Hopefully, the police would stop looking for Clive; however, by the time Milwaukee caught up with the news, and the identification of the body, everything would have cooled down, or at least he hoped. Yet, a sour feeling hit his stomach. The client would also need to be dealt with for the violation. Branded kids were not toys. Touching a branded kid who belonged to another was a foul move and the man would be castigated. He almost wanted to go and do it in person since the client’s error caused Imperial the loss of Underwing.

Hornworm, the second voice, spoke to him, “Imperial, I know he was one of your favorites. Even as useless as he was, Underwing still pleased you. However, your affection for him made you blind to his shortcomings. We at The Chrysalis do not take kindly to errors of this magnitude. Don’t let his mistake be your undoing.”

“Noted, along with a high-handed fuck you, Hornworm,” Imperial replied. “I hate all of you nasty fuckers. Kids are not my thing. I don’t like what these folks do with kids.”

“Yet, here you sit, mourning Underwing, who was a kid when you took him under, dare I say, your wing,” Swallowtail said.

“Yeah, but I never fucked him; there is a difference,” Imperial stated.

“Bottom or top, all of it hits the same roster in Hell,” Swallowtail said, gathering her items and heading for the door. “Let’s not do this again anytime soon.”

The clicking of her heels on the concrete floor rang out like a death sentence. The time for all of them was coming to a close. It had been a satisfying run with lots of easy money and tons of throw away people made useful for the deviant populous. He was sick of it.

“Too much fucking death,” Imperial stated, also rising and giving one last look at Clive as his heart sank a bit. Imperial, in his own right, was a parent with four biological kids to be exact, one outside of the marriage who hated the blood surging through the tired body which housed a weary soul and three at home who saw the Imperial as an ATM. Clive was his baby, the bad apple of a son who could do unseemly things that Imperial could talk about in the dark work which filled the warehouses called the Field of Flowers. “Dang kid, you had to mess it all up.”

A finger pointed to the body as a large carry bag arrived, creating a new pupa for Clive. He would soak in the pod in his own juices until some unsuspecting traveler spotted him undergoing his transformation into primordial soup. The sadness stayed with Imperial as he exited the building, leaving behind a phase of this life while imagining a retirement, somewhere sunny with no extradition. This life was getting static.

“Rest kid; you’ve earned it,” Imperial said, making a sign of the cross, then leaving.

JANESVILLE, WISCONSIN

Helen had questions and she wanted, no, she needed answers. She felt at least she’d earned that much from Apple, therefore her mouth opened and out poured the

question. The boy Kendrick, thin, bandaged, and wearing a diaper, brought the anger out of her soul. Helen understood little about what she was seeing and what she was seeing. She didn't want to understand but needed to know.

“What does the brand on his arm mean?” she asked Apple.

“The brand means he belongs to a caterpillar in The Chrysalis,” he said. “A loathsome group of collectors who specialize in exotic toys. Branding means he's not to be touched by anyone other than his owner. His owner didn't do this to him; someone else did.”

“His owner?”

“Yes, in The Chrysalis, there are actual butterflies who survive the transformation from being owned, like Kendrick, to being owners themselves. The warehouses are where the toys are housed. Kendrick was used by a deviant because branded toys are not for the customers. The dolls, as desired by borderlines, who haven't matured to collecting are used to recruit other toys,” Apple explained. “The person who owned him more than likely was grooming him as a companion, a loyal servant to share thoughts, keep an eye on the inventory, and in a pinch, serve as a recruiter.”

Helen sighed heavily and asked, “You mean this child was sent out to recruit more children to be brought into the tall grass of caterpillar habitats?”

“Yes, ugly, but true. Kendrick was an aide-de-camp to a senior officer in The Chrysalis, assigned to work in the Milwaukee area to bring back toys and dolls to the Field of Flowers, as the warehouses are named,” Apple said. “A child living on the street and tired of scraping by, will trust another child who says they know a safe place to eat, and the man or woman who has him, ain't so bad. It can seem like a fair trade off to only have to deal with one terrible person, versus being on the streets having to take your chances.”

“Forgive me for being slow on the uptake, but where do these kids come from where they...never mind,” Helen said. “Is this Chrysalis nationwide?”

“No, it is a Great Lakes thing,” Apple said. “I have been trying for a while to find the low-hanging branches where the pupa and chrysalises meet and I can’t. Each time one is shut down, the Sweeper goes in to collect the residue, but no real trace evidence is found. Not even our best trackers can get to them fast enough.”

“Are you planning to train me to track them?”

“Helen, I plan to train you to do a lot of shit,” Apple said. “Taking me down was impressive. I know you can shoot. What else can you do?”

She sighed. “I learned to use a leveler to hang curtains the other day. I also learned to use a power drill to hang those curtains.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “You can’t cook worth a shit either.”

“Apple, what do you see me being able to do for the company? I mean, Cherry was a sniper, and that’s what she did, one long-range shot, and she called it a night. I know how to do that,” she said.

“No, Cherry did mostly sniper work, but she also could break down a body in less than fifteen minutes like you would a deer carcass,” he said. “She is an excellent tracker, she knows how to be a femme fatale and basic chemical manipulation with a solid understanding of knowing, if push comes to shove, how to stage an accident.”

“I’m going to learn to do all of that?”

“Not from me,” he said. “My job is to toughen you up, assess what comes naturally to you, and build upon that skill set.”

“What comes natural to me is caring,” she said. “As shitty as life can be, and trust and believe I’ve had my fair share, I still care. You can toughen me up, but inside, I am still me. It has taken me a long time to like the person I am, so changing me to be something else entirely is not going to work.”

“You can’t be an assassin and care too much,” Apple said.

“Says the man with four broken winged birds in a sideways nest,” she replied. “We all care about something. You’re trying to tell me to not let my heart overrule what has to be done in a timely and expeditious fashion.”

“Well, there’s a five-dollar word.”

“I was starting college classes for accounting when I got sent here, so that will be put on hold for a minute,” she said.

“Nope, reach out and do the classes online so you can still move your needle forward,” he suggested. “In the meantime, I have to go and examine that child and I sure as hell don’t want to see the damage some creep did to him. However, I need the anger. It fuels me, keeps me focused.”

“Whatever gets you there, and shakes the apples from your tree,” she added, wanting to know, wanting to see, but not needing the imagery in her head. “Good night.”

She climbed the stairs to her room. In her hand, she held her phone and stared at it. Helen wanted to call Mustang, but it was too soon. None of this was his problem, and if she called, he’d assume she wanted out and couldn’t handle it. Another week, and she’d call. In the interim, she had a weapons cache to create.

“Shit, I need to really learn how to create one for my own home,” she said, thinking of all the land and woods around Slow’s property. She could be the rear defense for

his home. A yawn sneaked up on her, making her feel more tired than she had in years. “Sleep Helen; tomorrow’s a new challenge.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

The morning didn't start well. Downstairs, as Helen arrived for a hot cup of shut the fuck up until I drink this, seated at the table was a man, one who easily identified as a scary bastard with a scar on his face that hindered vision in his left eye. He scowled when she entered the room, which turned into an outright frown as Stephen sashayed into the kitchen in a bright green blouse, black and white leopard spandex, and green painted boots. Helen instinctively stood between the man's line of sight and Stephen.

"Who is Him?" Stephen asked, looking over the rim of a pair of rose-colored glasses.

"Don't know yet, but he's in the house, so he can't be a foe, just not sure yet what kind of friend he is to the Boss, so let's move cautiously," Helen told Stephen. "Please start breakfast."

"Yes'm," Stephen said, looking at the man. "You need more coffee, Mister?"

"Naw, I'm good," the man replied, looking at Helen. "Yield."

"Yield to what? If you're coming in this house to start some shit, you walked into the wrong place, and I will yield to nothing, good Sir," Helen said, moving to the counter to grab a knife.

"My handle, you scary little woman," the man said. "I am Mr. Yield. A Technician. I am a Direction."

"Oh," Helen said. "Cranberry. I'm a Fruit."

"Fruity, you mean," Yield replied with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. "Where's

Apple? He had me come all this way. What the fuck does he want?"

"I guess it depends on what the fuck it is you do, which would be your first indicator," Helen replied. "More than likely, he called you do so some of that. Have you had breakfast?"

"Quick. Observant. And yeah, I could eat something," he said, his eyes returning to the colorful man-child humming at the counter as he checked the coffee levels in the carafe. She spoke to the boy, still intentionally limiting Yield's field of vision for the kid.

"Stephen, please make a batch of waffles, no meat this morning, with a side of cheesy eggs for extra protein," she added, all the while keeping her eyes on Yield.

More footsteps were heard coming down the stairs. Apple stopped at the entry to the kitchen, noting Yield at the table, Helen at the sink with a knife, and Stephen doing whatever in the hell Stephen called himself doing. The boots were too much, even though the shirt left questions in the minds of sober men as well. Apple started there.

"Stephen, when you start school, think about pulling back a bit on the bright colors. Bright colors make you a target," Apple said. "I'm not asking you to be less than your authentic self, but there is no need to invite more trouble than you can handle."

"Oh, I can handle it just fine," Stephen replied, smacking his lips and placing his hand on a narrow hip.

In three moves, Apple had the boy around the neck, Yield had him by his feet and Helen had knives at both men's gonads. She applied pressure, ensuring they placed the frightened child on his feet. She shook her head no to both men, as they lowered him to the ground, giving Helen a moment to push Stephen behind her.

“We teach by example, not by fear or intimidation,” she stated, calling over her shoulder to the boy. “Stephen, are you okay?”

“No, I pissed my pants,” he whimpered.

“Go change. I got this,” she told him as the boy skulked away. To both men, she turned her wrath. “That was fucked up even by your Technician standards. This home is supposed to be a safe place for him to express himself. No, he will not go out in public looking like the Grand Marshall for the Pride Day Parade, but damn it, you have just told him that this is not a safe place for him to be himself either. Shame on you both.”

Yield watched her closely. Apple did as well. Ricky had silently entered the space from the dining room to see Helen go into action, and he smiled.

Apple spoke to Yield, “See what I mean?”

“Yes, the reflexes are fast and the instinct to protect is fierce, but can she do anything else?”

“She learned to use a drill and a leveler, and she can shoot,” Apple said. “I got a kid in yesterday that came from a Field of Flowers over in Milwaukee. He’s branded, but some creeper got a hold of him, and the boy is in rough shape. I need to find a cocoon in Milwaukee and shut it down.”

Yield asked, “How’d you get the boy?”

“Pear picked him up on a sweep,” Apple explained, nodding his head in Helen’s direction. “She’s sharp, but I’m needed here to get the boy over the hump. Take her, sweep the area, and find me a trail a follow.”

The man with the scarred face frowned, a scary frown which lessened the appeal of being in his company for any amount of time. “Me? What did I ever do to you?”

“You saw it. She’s got natural instincts, but I’m distracted. This house. The kids. Her training couldn’t have come at a worse time, so I’m calling in my favor,” Apple said.

Helen didn’t appreciate being discussed as if she wasn’t in the room. She sure as heck didn’t appreciate being pawned off on some man she didn’t even know, let alone taking off with him to wherever to find a cocoon of pedos or worse. Fear set in, but she maintained her cool.

“And if I say no?” Helen asked calmly. “I was sent here to be trained by you, not fobbed off on the Dred Pirate Roberts over here, no offense.”

Yield scowled. “Offense taken, lady. Hey, Apple, I owe you a solid, and a solid doesn’t mean some wet behind the ears tart little berry to get on my damned nerves. Plus, I don’t know her.”

“Her initial training started with Slow,” Apple said, and Helen watched the body language of the man with the scar.

In her head, she recounted the conversation Slow had shared with her and Cherry. She recalled him speaking about the initial group of Technicians brought in by Gabriel to start his ragtag crew of weird do-gooders. She didn’t take her eyes off Apple as he spoke slowly. Helen took the time to phrase the words correctly.

“No matter where we go in life, it always comes full circle,” Helen said, taking a pause. “Whether we work at Summer camps for the church or alongside lifelong friends, at the end of the day, it becomes about the kids. I’m here to learn to make this world a better place for the kids even though I shall bear none of my own. That right was taken from me. Faith has brought me this far, and faith will lead me on, at least

that's what I was taught that brief summer in Vacation Bible School when my mother couldn't afford childcare. We all learn from each other in some form. I am here to learn. I want to learn, Mr. Yield. Teach me your technical skill."

Yield's entire body language changed. She knew who he was. Slow had shared information with her, and she had repeated it back to him in a way that let him know the little berry knew more than she let on. Ricky didn't get it.

Ricky asked, "Cranberry, you worked at a summer camp with kids at a church?"

Yield turned in the seat, using his better eye to spot Ricky, "No, I did. My father ran one where me and a few of my friends worked each summer until we went off to college, and even after that, we came back to the camp."

Helen offered a soft smile at the corner of her lips and said, "You guys must have been some hellified camp counselors; all things considered."

Ricky was at a loss. "What things? What things considered?"

Apple held up his hand to his friend, "The Southeast Crew of the Directions. All of them worked at the camp for kids in the summers."

"Holy shit," Ricky gulped.

"Teach me," Helen said.

"No, not my thing," Yield replied.

"Must you make me pull rank?" Helen asked.

Yield offered half a smile and asked, "And what rank do you have to pull, Ms. Tart

Berry that no one likes unless they have a urinary tract infection?”

She arched an eyebrow and took out her phone. She pressed a button, and a voice on the other end answered. Softly, she spoke. “This is the Cranberry. We have a situation and Yield has been called in to take over the task. The Bad Apple is attaching me to a traffic sign, but the wind is strong and the sign won’t bend. It is telling me it will not yield to complete this portion of my training. Can the request be escalated?”

Helen listened and nodded her head. She ended the call, poured herself a cup of coffee and took a seat at the table. The moment she took a seat, Yield’s phone rang. She maintained direct eye contact with his good eye as he took the call.

“Yield,” he said into the line. “Yep. Yep. Oh, really. Hmph. Fine, but I won’t like it. Whatever.”

Then he ended the call. His good eye squinted at her while the bad eye tried to focus on what he assumed was a smug look on Helen’s cute little face, but she didn’t have one.

“What’s your game, Cranberry?” Yield asked, feeling distrustful of her making the call to his handler. He also wasn’t certain how she knew The Archangel.

“No game,” she said. “I know things, but I don’t understand what to do with what I know. I was sent here to learn so I can become the best form of whatever shape I’m to take in this evolution of my journey. I am, in academic speak, a tabula rasa, for you to shape, mold, and teach the ideal habits of whatever it is that you do so well. I gather, since I have learned to assume nothing with you people, that for this man to call you in, to take me away from his protection, to be alone with you, that you are the biggest, baddest, and fiercest wolf in the forest, so he chose the best. You’ve earned that respect from him. Do the job. Bring me back. We part as colleagues.”

The tabula rasa was a very academic term, and she had somehow garnered he had been, and still was, in his heart, an academician. He didn't like the icky feeling she gave off, knowing so much about him when he knew nothing about her.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure how I will feel being on the road with a woman I don't know," Yield said, scowling even more at how she carefully and prettily pulled together the right words to soothe his ruffled feathers.

Ricky stepped forward. "She's got a man. Whoever he is, she's not interested in whatever you have to say or offer."

Yield looked at her and asked, "Is this man of yours going to be an issue?"

"Only if you make him whinny," she replied, cocking her head.

Yield sat up tall in the seat. He looked at Helen with a fresh eye. She was interesting. Now, he wanted to know more.

"Pack light for three nights, which is the max I do on a trail. The leads are more than likely cold, but we will find what we find," he said. "Hurry up and don't make me wait."

Helen was on her feet and moving. Ricky came to sit at the table. He had all kinds of questions. "What did she mean by 'the whinny'? Who is that?"

"You don't want to know. Hell, I don't want to know, but now I do," he said. "Shit, how did you end up with this one?"

"She's the replacement for The Cherry on Top," Apple said.

"No shit!" Yield replied. "Well, this is just fucking dandy. Apple, when I find what

you need and bring her back, don't call me anymore. Ever."

Helen returned with a backpack, three knives, and a 9mm, in which she seated a round in the chamber. She did it all without breaking eye contact with Yield. A second later, she grabbed two bottles of water and a couple of pieces of fruit, tossing one to him. "Let's do it!"

Yield shook his head, accepting the water and fruit and heading out the door. "Three days tops, and I'm bringing her scary ass back."

"Three days, and you may not want to," Apple said, already feeling the loss of her company and she hadn't even left. He looked at Ricky and said, "Your thoughts."

"I think I'm in love with her," Ricky said. "I can't believe you're just letting her leave with Mr. One Eye and not put a tracker on her."

"Hell, he is the tracker I need and the luckiest son of a cracker I know," Apple said. "She will either learn or burn out. He will teach her how to stalk, among other things. We shall see. Three days."

"Three days and no Ms. Helen," Ricky said. "Why do I feel like she and I just broke up and she left me and the kids to fend for ourselves? I don't like this. I'm going to my camper and sulk silently in protest."

"Would you stop pouting and get to work?" Apple asked. "I have to go eat crow with Stephen."

Ricky leaned against the kitchen sink, half watching Helen and Yield leave the house, feeling every emotion he could imagine. "I feel like I'm watching my teen daughter go off to prom with a dude I know is going to try to fuck her. I don't like this at all. And what was with the thing you and Mr. One Eyed Willie did to Stephen?"

Apple too had come to the window to watch Helen climb into the front seat of the black Ford-F150. He didn't like it either, but Kendrick didn't look good. The last thing he needed was for the woman to be here if things took a turn for the worse, which he expected over the next three days. It would be best if she weren't attached to the boy if shit came out sideways and ripped up a pucker hole. He thought of Stephen.

"Ricky, at the end of the day, we are men," he said. "Stephen wants to play on both sides of the world and he can't. He's not strong enough yet to truly defend himself against those stronger than himself, which is what Yield and I showed him. He must learn to pick his battles."

He called for the boy, who came down the stairs in a regular pair of jeans and button-down shirt. It was the most normal Apple had ever seen the kid look since his arrival. Apple instructed him to start breakfast.

Stephen asked, "Where's the scary man and Ms. Helen?"

"They have work to do, as do you," Apple said. He noticed the fear in Stephen's eyes, and his reluctance to turn his back to him. "I will never hurt you. However, in this world, we must learn to blend in, or we are targeted and harmed. Call it code switching or playing into the stereotype, whichever one keeps you the safest. You're Asian, so this world expects you to be a smart nerd. Use that to your advantage until you find your tribe. Choose wisely. It matters. And you need to learn to fight. Ricky can teach you."

"I'm not a fighter," Stephen replied.

"You need to be if you plan to dress like you did this morning," Apple said. "You can wear that stuff here, but out there, blending is key. Understand?"

“Understood,” Stephen responded, setting about to make breakfast for the family.

“Sorry for scaring you like that, but I did it to make a point that even if you were expecting an attack from me, people who hate travel in packs,” Apple told him. “You may be prepared to deal with one, but it is always the accomplice you don’t see that takes you out.”

YIELD WAS QUIET AS they drove. He hated Milwaukee and everything about it, but he would start at the Field of Flowers, looking for clues, then back his way out to locate the cocoon where the new field was planted. He had questions for the woman riding shotgun; her silence was fucking with his calm.

He threw out into the quietness of the truck cabin, “So, family huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know the family?”

“To what family are you referring, Good Sir?” Helen asked, eyes focused on the road.

“Don’t play coy with me, Cranberry. You made the call to my handler, who called me and instructed me to do this. You have his number, so you know the family,” Yield said.

Helen didn’t see a need to answer a question he already had the answers to and moved on to another subject. “As I said, I know a lot of things, but don’t understand where and how the pieces fit. Like this, for instance; you’re carrying no weapons and are dressed like an unemployed Indiana Jones, and the boots are new and hurting your feet. You’re not a killer; it isn’t in your eyes, so what do you do, track, hunt, or retrieve?”

He couldn't turn his head to look at her since he needed the right eye to remain on the road. However, he could feel her, and she felt...odd. In some ways, she almost made him feel calm, which unnerved him, making him feel... unsettled. Yet, Cranberry was observant.

"Tracker, the lucky type. He wants me to walk you through this, see what you can deduce on your own, then we find the new Field of Flowers," he said.

"Okay, help me understand this Field, the cocoon, and Chrysalis shit. Are we talking butterfly themed pedos, running a human trafficking ring?" she asked.

"Close," Yield replied. "Each region has a group of creeps who like kids or unwanted people society has tossed aside. They pull them off the street if those people aren't too far gone with drugs or disease. If they can catch them young and pull them into these communities, the butterfly catchers can put them in kind of stasis, training the kids to recruit more kids while protecting, I guess you'd call it, the main one."

"So, we need to start with food banks and small grocers," she said.

"What? How did you get there?"

"To make the butterfly grow while it is in stasis or while it metamorphoses, the pupa requires nutrition," she told him. "As you said, no one wants to screw a sickly person unless that is their thing, which is all kinds of icky. How do they feed a field full of butterflies? Usually, the caterpillar will suspend itself under a leaf out of plain sight, but before the process begins, does the worm eat the leaves for sustenance?"

Yield chuffed a bit. "Aren't you clever? You still didn't answer my question about the family."

Helen turned in her seat to stare at his profile. In some ways, Yield was a handsome

man. He also wore a plastic ring on his left finger. At some point, he'd had a kid in the truck and she spotted the candy wrapper in the tray from a sweet treat she didn't see the man eating nor enjoying. There was also mud in the vehicle on the floor mat of the back seat where she placed her bag. The dried mud was caked in the form of a circle which more than likely came off a cleat. The man had at least two kids, and one played either soccer or football. She would use that to shut him the hell up.

"At the end of the shift, Mr. Yield, we all want to come home to family, and I want to learn, and be of use so that I can go home to mine," she said softly. "You and I have no need to get personal. I gave you enough information to add two and two and arrive at a reasonable conclusion. Can you leave it there?"

"Consider it left," he said. "What if I decide when we get there to leave you?"

"Naw, you wouldn't," she said. "Your kids love you, and to do something like that, you wouldn't be okay with them finding out their Daddy did a horrid thing."

"Well shit," he said. "I'm not sure if I like you, and I don't feel like you're a threat, but you are. You're kind of fucking scary."

"Kind of?" Helen said, flashing him a smile. "How far is this warehouse and do you have any weapons under the seat in the corral just in case shit gets sticky?"

Helen knew about the under-the-seat storage. She knew about Gabriel. She was in a relationship with the Whinny himself, Mustang, which connected her to Slow, which also connected her to Gabriel. There were a lot of connections and he wasn't sure how she was plugged into the Technician universe, but she made him nervous.

Mr. Yield wasn't certain if the nervousness came from fear or excitement. That in itself worried also him. He didn't get excited often, but he was eager to find out how her mind was going to work this tracking bit, nearly, almost, but not quite, making

him smile.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Helen located three medium sized neighborhood stores near the warehouse where the boy Kendrick was found. The inventory in the store didn't match the neighborhood, which, had it not been there, would have made the area a food desert. As she and Yield walked the sidewalk, the people they encountered didn't appear to have the type of skin which screamed nourishment of healthy fruits and veggies.

"These people don't look like the type to consume high end bottled water," Helen noted. "This is the store they used to bring in food and water for the kids and clients."

"You might be right," Yield said, following Helen into the store.

"Baby," she said to Yield, who looked around to see who she was talking to, realized it was him, and he smiled, a soft smile that came from a place of honesty, making Helen laugh. "See, this is what happens when you're together too long and take advantage of the other person just being there all the damned time. So, I say again, Baby, can you grab us a case of this water. I sure as heck didn't expect to find it here."

The woman behind the counter watched Helen closely. Helen leaned forward whispering, "The man has a GPS, and still won't take directions from the voice in the box because it's a woman. Now here we are in the middle of somewhere we don't need to be, and he is shocked that I called him baby instead of dumbass."

"I heard that," Yield said as the woman behind the counter laughed.

She immediately took a liking to Helen, and out of nowhere, began to talk. "Yeah, if you take two cases or more, I will do a buy one-get one kind of sale for you.

Anything else in here you want, I will do the same.”

Helen was quick to say, “Yeah, the neighborhood doesn’t look like it can support what you’re stocking on the shelves.”

“We’re moving to a new location,” the lady volunteered. “I got a new store over on Wabash, down in the old district. The more I can sell means the less I need to pack up and take to the new shop.”

“Seems to me,” Helen said, “that the moving might cost you less in boxes and weight but will cost more in having to buy all over again to fill the new shelves. I know, my Granddad, owned a local little corner store back in Jersey. The cost of items in a jar, versus plastic, he nearly went broke when he had to replace it after a drunk ran into the front of his store. He had insurance too.”

The woman was dressed down in jeans and a bulky jacket, which caught Yield’s eye, in the way it hung from her body. The outer garment wasn’t designed for a concealed carry, and the woman had a gun under the jacket. Helen was still chatting away like a bored housewife who had found someone new to hear about her favorite recipe on clam chowder. She turned to where Yield stood in the store, calling out to him.

“Baby, we’re taking two cases of the water, a jar of those peaches, and ooh, those crunchy dill spears. I like that brand,” she said to Yield.

He held up his hand, waving at her as if he’d heard it all before, going to the counter and pulling off everything she said. She’d asked him to grab the brands for a reason. In the vehicle, she’d tell him why; thus far, she’d been on the money with her assessment. However, he nearly dropped the jar of peaches when the woman behind the counter said something he was surprised to hear.

“Our owner, he has three of these stores in town,” the woman said. “The stuff he has

us stock is mainly just for him and his friends and the parties he throws. You know, private parties his wife knows nothing about. The store is just a front if you ask me.”

“Shut up!” Helen said, laughing. “Honey, I know what you’re talking about. Mr. Man over there has fishing gear and heads out to “fish” every third weekend but is never smart enough to at least buy some fish when he comes back home. He is either the world’s worst fisher man or he’s just trying to get away from me and the kids. The stuff men do to get away from us...I tell you.”

“Girl, some of these parties, we have delivered champagne, and one time, I kid you not, tins of caviar,” she said, laughing. “Whoever he’s cheating with is eating good. You need anything else?”

“Naw, we’re good. Baby, you want some of these granola bars?”

“The ones with the chocolate,” Yield said as Helen pulled out a few bills to pay for the items in cash.

“Thank you so much for your help, Tana,” Helen said, reading the woman’s name tag.

“Actually, my name is not Tana, but Rochelle. The name tag belongs to the young lady who stocks the shelves,” the woman said.

“Rochelle is a cool name. I always wanted a name like Rochelle or a cool, kick ass name like Rasheeda, but my mom named me Shenita as if her aspirations for me reached only a stripper pole,” Helen said, giving the woman a bit of truth followed by a small lie. “Shenita Brown, how’s that for a messed-up start? I got lucky when I married and got a nearly as anonymous last name. The last name makes all the difference. I am Shenita Johnson now.”

Yield arched his eyebrow at her using his given last name, but it worked. The woman laughed again, giving Helen everything she needed.

“Rochelle Henderson, and my Ma wants me to be a nurse. I’m working on my CNA right now, getting in some practice on the weekend, working for the store owner, but, yeah, with some of the shit I see, I may end up becoming a librarian or something, Nursing is not for the weak at heart,” Rochelle said.

“There are times in life when you are given an opportunity to run and get clear; the smart person understands timing, Rochelle. Thanks for chatting with me,” Helen said. “I know he gets tired of hearing my mouth. Baby, you ready to roll?”

“Rolling,” Yield called back, grabbing two cases of water. Helen grabbed the peaches and jar of pickles, giving the woman a slight salute and meeting him at the truck.

He added the water to the floor of the back seat. Helen did the same on the other side with the pickles and peaches. In the front seat, Yield seated himself behind the wheel, and Helen leaned over to him.

“Provide me a peck on the cheek,” she whispered, and he complied, giving her a smile.

Satisfied, Helen gently rubbed his arm, giving off a false laugh, and she tossed her hair back as if he’d said the funniest thing in the world. Rochelle was watching them. From the side mirror of the truck, Yield could see her in the store window as he pulled away from the curb.

“Well, look at you,” he said, not wanting to sound too impressed with the Cranberry, but he was. “Why the peaches and pickles?”

“Both of those jars are over nine bucks,” she said. “In that neighborhood, who do you

see coming in to buy those products? She gave us everything we needed to know. The new Field of Flowers is near Wabash, at least one of them. The owner mainly throws his parties on the weekends, and she is the patch up girl who comes in to doctor on the toys when the boys get too rough and pulls off Barbie's arm."

"Horrible imagery, but I got you," he said. "So, what do you think we should do next?"

"Hit the former warehouse where the raid happened where Kendrick—that's the boy Apple is nursing—escaped from so we can understand the setup," she said. "The setup will determine the space requirements for the new place, windows, lighting, ventilation, kind of thing. Hopefully, it will narrow the types of building we're looking for...you know to save time. Maybe we can close this up in less than three days."

"Tired of my dashing personality and company already?"

"Who said you had a personality, Mr. Yield?" Helen replied, laughing. "Let's get it done quickly and close the file."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said, heading towards the warehouse.

SHE ALMOST REGRETTED walking into the place. A loose board over a back door would become the entry point. Yield, erring on the side of caution, took a weapon to enter the building. He too, regretted going inside, praying the images of the set up wouldn't haunt him for the rest of his nights.

"This is...just," he said, sighing.

The power for the building hadn't been disconnected, which in this instance, proved helpful to illuminate the mind of a person who thought this to be an ideal playground

for the weird and demented. An area, which looked like a romper room, held tons of toys for children. There were monkey bars, swing seats, and a climbing apparatus. To her surprise, there were tiny treadmills and entirely too many stuffed animals.

However, the runway and stage made Helen's stomach turn. She didn't speak on the silent understanding when she saw the recliners seated on the side of the runway. Instead, she took note of the two sides of the warehouse. One side was a sleeping area for the children.

Rows of bunk beds with very basic bedding in bright colors adorned the sleeping space. She admitted her shock to Yield when they entered the next room that was set up as a classroom. Cords hung on empty desks where the kids could have used computers for classwork. A chalkboard in the class's front stood silent with faint traces of chalk scribbles on conjugating verbs.

The next two rooms were bathrooms, one for the boys and the other for girls, both with stalls. A shiver ran down Helen's back as she thought of the other side of the warehouse. Yield was looking at her, and she blinked twice.

"If this is where they lived and learned, the other side of the warehouse is where they went to work," she said, taking a deep breath. "I don't want to see it, but we need to know what kind of mind we're dealing with. Who would conjure some fucked up shit like this?"

"You and I are thinking alike, Cranberry. I don't want to see it, but we need to know," he said, leaving the boys' latrine to head to the other side of the building.

Again, they both wished they hadn't come into the warehouse. The other side of the warehouse was divided into mini bedroom suites. They only looked at two of the rooms; the second one had plastic sheets on the bed and a hose for rinsing down the residuals, and Helen had seen enough.

“Kitchen,” she said, turning away. “We need to see storage, food prep, and what was left behind.”

Yield didn’t argue, but went along to observe how she would take the information gained from Tana to establish their next course of action. He found himself impressed once more with Helen’s thought process, but her next moves would be a lesson in understanding.

“This is pretty much what I expected,” she told him. “Lots of leafy greens and foods rich in iron. Lots of protein but look here. Someone has been back to clear off the shelves. I doubt cops would be in here taking this food, but we are.”

“You’re taking the food?”

“These canned goods can be used by Apple to feed the boys,” she said, grabbing armloads of goods. Helen spotted a box and added other items from the pantry to it, including rice, oats, and jars of peanut butter.

“Cranberry, this is a crime scene. We can’t take from a crime scene.’

“In this neighborhood, they are going to think these items were stolen by the community, and we’re going to leave the door open so the community can come in, but first, I’m taking this big ass bag of pinto beans,” she told him, adding the items to the box. “Let’s move.”

With the items loaded in the rear of the truck, he sat for a minute just staring at her with his good eye.

“What?” she said. “We’re headed to Wabash, wherever the hell that is, but on the way, I saw a bunch of teens on the corner; slow down as we pass them.

“Why?”

“Trust me,” she said, offering a smile.

Yield, for some odd reason, didn't question her but did as he was instructed, coming up on the teens. He slowed for a second, allowing Helen to roll down the window. Goosebumps ran up his arms, waiting in anticipation of what she would say or do. She didn't disappoint.

“Hey!” she said to whom she assumed was the ringleader. “I left the back door open on that warehouse. Inside, there's lots of food and toys. Help those items get to people in your neighborhood who need to stretch funds until the end of the month. Get the toys to kids who might not have any and dolls to girls in the neighborhood.”

“Who the fuck are you?” the young man asked.

“Your Fairy Fucking Godmother, that's who! Make it happen before dark, or all the goodies go away,” she said, “and don't try to sell shit to make money on the side; give it away fairly.”

Helen tapped Yield on the arm, and they drove towards Wabash, which they tracked on the GPS. There were six buildings. All looked like shit on the outside. The one dead center looked the worst as if it were falling in, but it had lights.

“That one,” she said.

“Okay, how do you want to play this?”

“Smart,” she said. “Pull over. What's in your cache under the back seat? You have any smoke bombs or tear gas?”

“Yeah, both,” he said, looking at her with concern. She knew about the cache under the back seat of the F-150. All Technicians had a small arsenal and items for hairy situations.

“The ringleader, more than likely is not here in the daytime hours on a Wednesday. I’m also not coming back here this weekend with Apple,” she said. “He is needed at the house to get those kids settled for school. We can make quick work of this and kill the invasive species of caterpillars without burning down the entire field.”

“I have no idea what the hell any of that has to do with any of this,” Yield said. “Speak clearly for those of us who are slower thinkers.”

She smiled at him. “The last thing you are is slow, Mr. Yield, no pun intended” she told him.

Helen took a pause, looking at the building. There were a few facts she knew. One, the kids from the last Field of Flowers were taken and placed in foster care. If this new Field was stocked with pupas, then they would be fresh inventory.

“Listen, if we tell Apple what we found, he will need to come here and maybe shoot a few people,” she said. “Today, in this moment, we can save a life and some time. We throw in the grenade, run them out of the building, and have a team in place to sweep up the fallout.”

“Okay,” he said, opening his hands for her to show him how she planned to accomplish this task.

Helen took out her phone and dialed one. She waited for Azrael, her handler, to answer. This was her first official call as a Fruit, and she found herself slightly nervous when her boss answered the call with hostility in her voice.

“Giving up already?” Azrael said into the line.

“On the contrary, Boss. I’ve got some intel. Are you ready to receive or do you need two more minutes to be arrogant and attempt to intimidate me?” she asked. Yield turned in the seat, admiring her spunk.

Azrael replied, “State your need.”

“Tracking with a Direction named Yield,” she said, pausing to let Azrael process the information she’d provided. “Apple wanted the Field of Flowers in Milwaukee found. We’re on Wabash and Delhound, based on information provided by a Rochelle Henderson who works supply chain for the Field of Flowers. She works at Wilkins Bodega on Califax.”

“Okay,” Azrael said.

“The old Field on Mullins is still pretty stocked with food if the locals haven’t taken it all, and the new location, will more than likely have more,” Helen said. “Send everything you have, rolling in silently, no lights or noise once I send conformation. We’re tossing in a couple of canisters of tear gas if I’m right.”

“Why this approach, Cranberry?”

“Simple; I don’t feel like killing any one today, but it’s early,” she said, hanging up the phone.

Yield had completely turned in the seat to watch her. “You are fucking scary.”

“Baby, you have no idea,” Helen said, getting out of the truck. She held the jar of peaches and pickles under her arm as she went towards the door of the building she suspected.

Yield wanted her to wait and explain what she was doing, but he was having too much fun watching the crazy woman work. As bright as an orange jacket in the woods, Helen walked up to the door. She knocked, and to his amazement, a woman answered. Helen showed the woman the jars and passed them to her. The lady accepted them with a head nod and Helen pointed down the street away from Yield's truck. Empty-handed, she returned to the truck. She took her phone and sent a text.

"In five, we go back to the door and toss in two and pull the door wide to let the kids run out first," she said.

"We have the right place?"

"We have the right place."

"The peaches and pickles?"

"I told her Rochelle was in the truck ready to make a delivery of the rest of it, but she sent me to make sure we had the right place," Helen said. "She is headed to the rear door to accept the delivery of the invisible truck I told her was coming around back."

"Dear Lord," Yield said.

"Yeah, say another prayer, Preacher's Boy, because things are about to get hot. Let's do this," she said.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

N either Yield nor Helen made a move until they spotted the top of the fire engine coming over the rise of road. In tandem, they exited the F-150, carrying two cans each of smoke and tear gas. As they reached the front door, Yield tested the door with his hand, knocking with the old Shave and a Haircut rap with his knuckles, bringing a Neanderthal with no neck to the door. He caught the man off guard by punching him in the throat and pulling the pin on the tear gas. He stuck the can in the man's hand as he sputtered.

Helen bent low, rolling into the building a can of smoke followed by a can of tear gas. For good measure, she yelled out, "Going high!" which led Yield to duck as she did a three-point type of toss from an invisible mid-court line into the space. Coughing, sputtering, and crying could be heard as kids ran out, followed by half-dressed adult men.

Police officers arrived, going for the adults first. A van driven by Pear pulled up, collecting frightened children who ran out of the building into her wide embrace. The officers who weren't making arrests of people coming out of the building stormed inside the structure, stopping at what they saw. Helen didn't need to see it, she didn't want to, but she did want to see the woman who answered the door the first time.

"Where's that Heffah?" Helen said aloud, walking past the playground towards the kitchen. She spotted movement in the pantry and pulled her weapon. "Come on out, sweetheart, time to play a game."

The woman came forward. Her eyes radiated hatred, and Helen didn't give two shits. Any woman who peddled child flesh deserved a bullet as far as she was concerned.

“What are you, FBI or some shit?” the woman asked.

“No, a hell of a lot worse,” Helen replied. “Help me, help you. I can make your sentence go a lot easier if you tell me where the other two Fields of Flowers are in town so I don’t have to go hunting.”

“And why the fuck would I do that? These people will kill me,” the woman said.

“Sis I will kill you and not lose a night of sleep. I can pull the trigger right now and end your shitty existence and no one, I mean no one, will call me out for doing it or express concerns about you no longer being alive,” Helen said. “So, easy or dead, your call.”

“You don’t have it in you to shoo....fuck!” the woman screamed as a bullet pierced her upper thigh.

“The next one goes into your head. Talk so I can get home in time for dinner,” Helen said as Yield came into the room along with Pear.

The woman, clutching her leg, offered up the other two warehouses. Helen made note of both and called for medics to come care for the woman. She hoped the information was accurate and not a waste of time.

To Pear, she asked, “Hey, can you do two more today?”

“Two more what?” Pear asked, looking at Helen in shock.

“She gave the location of the other two warehouses, and we can shut down the Fields in greater Milwaukee,” she said.

“Maybe, but we need an idea of size, and hell, I’m at a loss here, Cranberry. How did

you find this so fast?”

“I’m working with one of the best trackers in the business, so I can’t take all the credit,” she said, offering Yield a smile.

He once more found himself impressed that she didn’t take all the glory when all he’d done was basically drive her around. Cranberry made the call, she found the clues, she followed her nose, and she located what they sought. She also closed down a Field with minimal loss of life.

He too was curious, “Pear, can we do it?”

“Scout it out, call it in, and let me know,” Pear replied.

Helen needed to do a quick inventory assessment. “Pear, we are down supplies of four canisters, and we need a reload. What do you have in the van we can use?”

“I have snacks and lollipops along with blankets and bandages. I carry no weapons other than the one for my personal safety,” she said.

“What kind of snacks?” Helen asked.

“Chips, cookies, animal crackers, juice boxes,” she said.

“Can you spare a little so Yield and I can have a bit to nosh on while we head to the next site? We also need more supplies. Do you know where we can get a reup?”

“Call it in, and Azrael will handle it for you,” Pear said, adding, “Good work you two.”

She walked away to get the kids settled and returned a moment later with snack packs

for Yield and Cranberry. Pear stated she needed at least an hour to unload before she'd be ready to roll out to the next one.

Inside the F-150, Cranberry opened the bag of chips and passed it to Yield. She didn't know why, but she used the straw on the drink box to punch in the hole on the juice container, insert the straw, and pass that to him as well.

"Mommy, did you want to cut the ends off my sammich too?" Yield asked sarcastically.

"No, I figured it is what your wife does when you're driving so you can keep your good eye on the road," she said. "We will need to move as soon as I make this call."

"Okay, Ms. Scary," Yield said, sipping the juice box like a child who'd been reprimanded for being naughty. He snacked on the chips as she made the call.

"How did you know?" Azrael asked.

"Instinct, plus I'm sitting beside a master tracker," Cranberry said to her boss. "We know where the other two are. If we can hit them now before they have a chance to hide the inventory or find out, it would be wise. I have addresses. Want to make some magic?"

"Give me the details," Azrael replied, jotting down the information.

Helen provided a bit more detail, "Pear said she needs an hour. It has been fifteen minutes. We also need a re-up on smoke grenades, flash bang thingy-ma-bobbers, and tear gas. I think the flash bang thingies would work a lot better in the element of surprise, but the window is tight before somebody starts making phone calls to lawyers and shit, sounding the alarm of the raid. We can go scout it out and report back if you like."

“Send the coordinates for the re-up for Yield. Go ahead and make it happen,” Azrael said, disconnecting the line.

“She loves me; she just doesn’t know it yet,” Helen told Yield, who nearly spit out the juice he was sipping.

“You do seem to have an effect on people. Is that how you reeled in the Mustang?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but that stallion is wild and free to roam whatever pastures he chooses,” she said. “As am I, but I’m not hungry and ain’t looking to be fed.”

“Yeah, I hear you, but that man is a master tracker. His instincts come naturally, like yours. He figures out what people want and need and based on that intel, he moves accordingly. Did he teach you the same?”

“What that man has taught me is between me, him, and Jesus,” Helen said, offering a smile. “The question is, what will you leave me knowing, Mr. Yield, about the art of tracking and making assumptions?”

“Right now, I feel like I know nothing, so there’s that,” he said. “You seem to have had plenty of training before I got here.”

“My training is based on survival,” she told him. “I have a certain look. People want to talk to me, and outside of sometimes looking like an angry black woman ready to snap her fingers and roll her neck for coming at her wrong, I’m can also be very approachable. I vibrate at a different frequency which puts people at ease with me.”

“Yeah, noticed.”

Helen pulled a knife from the inner pocket of the jacket. She pushed the corner of

juice box to a point, then cleanly sliced off the end. He watched her turn up the container to drink, avoiding the fight with the straw going into the hole. Until now, in his entire life and existence with juice boxes, it had never dawned on him to do such a thing or think such a thing was possible. The Cranberry thought differently.

Technicians were trained by the government in some form or another to color within the lines. The Cranberry, as far as he could tell, lived on the periphery of a line drawn for her by people who wanted to control her existence. Instinctually, she'd learn to observe and move accordingly. She was operating on instinct alone and thus far, everything was as she saw it, and he couldn't argue with the logic.

"Thirty minutes have passed; let's get this done so you can get a good night's rest," she said. "We close them both out tonight, I'll drive us back to Apple's, and you can sleep there, if that's okay."

"It's okay," he said, turning to take a look at the woman. He incorrectly made assumptions about her when they initially met this morning in Apple's kitchen, and now he would have to eat crow, washed down with a juice box. "Yeah, it's okay."

AT FIFTEEN TILL MIDNIGHT , Helen pulled the F-150 into the yard at Apple's rundown home. She was glad to see it and ready for a hot shower. The ick of the assignment was a bit too much for her brain to process. The last few months had been trying on a bitch's soul, but she felt good.

On the porch, the headlights from the truck outlined Apple's silhouette. Ricky's form appeared next to him. At the upstairs window, she spotted curtains moving at the windows of Oscar, Stephen and Jeffrey's rooms. A smile came to the corner of her lips.

"It appears I have been missed," Helen said as Yield came awake.

“I can see it,” he said, sitting up. “We made decent time.”

“Time is something I truly hate to waste,” she told him, cutting the headlights. Helen stepped out of the truck, waving her newfound small family forward. “We need to unload, guys.”

Apple arrived at the truck first, doing a visual survey of the woman. Then he asked, “Unload what?”

“The spoils of your private war,” she told him. Yield lowered the tailgate to boxes of food that Helen had removed from each of the warehouses.

Rocky asked, “Where did you get all of this stuff?”

“We found three of the Milwaukee Fields of Flowers, shut them all down, and commandeered these food stores for the house here, and I only shot one smart mouth chick who tried to be flip with me,” Helen said. “Amazing how a bullet can loosen lips.”

“You shot someone?” Jeffrey asked.

“Yes, in the leg. She is not dead but will be limping for the rest of her life as a reminder of being an evil person,” Helen explained. “She was allowing adults to hurt children in those warehouses and being paid money for it. We put a stop to it.”

Stephen, his arms loaded with a box of canned goods said, “I knew of a few kids who went into those warehouses but never came out, and if they did, we found them on the street barely alive or worse. You guys shut them down?”

“We shut down the ones in Milwaukee,” Yield said, looking at Apple. “It seems somebody didn’t want you going out and leaving your kids to handle the situation.

She took care of it.”

Helen was no longer with the truck. She’d left them all to go into the home, get a hot shower, have a cup of chamomile tea, and go to bed. It was enough for one day.

Ricky noticed she’d left the group to go inside. When the kids were gone with Oscar being the last to unload the boxes of dry goods, he turned to Yield with questions. “Well, how did she do?”

“She did it all,” Yield said. “All I did was drive her around.”

“What?” Apple asked. “Explain this to me as if I were an idiot.”

Yield didn’t know where to start to explain the phenomenon that was The Cranberry, so he began with what he knew. “Whatever has happened in her life has turned her into what can be a force for good if it is harnessed in the right way. There is an inherent trait in her to care for others. You have some spoils of what was in those warehouses, but she reached out to kids on the corners to go in when the police left to empty the shelves to feed the neighborhood.”

“Huh?” Apple said.

“Yeah, we found the first one by her looking for the food suppliers to feed the kids in the warehouse,” Yield said. “A bodega that had high end foods and a woman named Rochelle told her everything we needed to know. A walk through the warehouse where the kid escaped from gave her the idea of size and set up, and we went hunting. We found it, and she checked it out by walking to the door with a jar of pickles and a jar of peaches.”

Ricky rubbed his chin, saying “You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not,” Yield said. “She told the woman at the door that Rochelle was arriving with the rest of the supplies at the back door, which allowed her to see into the front, and she spotted the playground equipment inside to confirm we had the right place. She called Azrael, who rolled in support, quiet and deep. We threw in a couple of tear gas cans and smoke bombs and the roaches scattered.”

Apple inquired, “She shot someone?”

“The woman who came to the door. She asked for the location of the other two facilities, and the woman said no and challenged Cranberry, saying if she told the locations they would kill her. Cranberry politely informed her that the gun in her hand indicated she would kill her as well, and the one didn’t think Cranberry had it in her to shoot. Cranberry proved her wrong.”

“Good grief,” Apple said.

“That’ it! I’m in love,” Ricky said.

“If I wasn’t married, I would want a night or a lifetime in her arms myself,” Yield said. “For a second, I found myself envying the man with the whinny, but honestly, she’s scary.”

“How so?” Apple wanted to know.

"She's got knowledge, but can't put it all together. When she finally figures it out, I hope she uses it for good," he said. “I need a couple of hours of sleep then I’m heading home. She said you had a place here I can crash.”

“Sure, sure,” Apple said, “this way.”

Apple had a thumb drive's worth of information to consider as the man with the

scarred face closed the bedroom door of the downstairs room Ricky had barely finished. The room had a bed and a dresser, nothing more. It would serve its purpose for the evening.

As the door closed, Apple's phone rang. It was Azrael. The conversation would be short. He didn't have much to say or add. In his opinion, the assessment was over.

"Bad Apple," he said into the line.

"Can we talk?" Azrael said.

"Not much to say."

"The report from Yield?"

"Your report from Pear?" he asked.

"Odd, but effective. Three warehouses closed and you didn't have to leave home. What are we dealing with here?" Azrael asked.

"The hell if I know," Apple said, "but we would be stone blind to assume that placing a weapon in her hand would make her the ideal asset. She has a quality about her that puts people at ease, and she knows how to work it. Her way with words gets past the defenses, and she gets the information needed. She's a unifier, a doer, and has limited fears. If she does, we never see it."

"What kind of technician would best suit her skills, based on what you have seen?"

"She hasn't had a chance to do anything yet but track, do minor set up, and intake children," Apple said. "Making her a sweeper would be a waste. A cleaner would be distasteful, and tracking may be her thing, but seriously, we need to see what she does

with Lemon and chemicals or with Passion Fruit and Accidents.”

“Which one should be next?”

“Move her to chemicals and see how she fares with a tough cookie like Lemon,” Apple said. “I would love to be a fly on the wall for that one.”

“How much longer do you want or need?”

“I’m done; she doesn’t need me. Give her a couple of weeks off then on the next training,” Apple said.

“Good enough,” Azrael said, ending the call.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Helen waited patiently at the kitchen table for the Mr. Yield's arrival. There were questions she had for the master tracker before he departed for home. She hoped he would be willing to share the information, and to be sure he was in a sharing mood, she had a little something prepared for him. He arrived just at the moment she expected him to, right at the seven a.m. on the dot mark.

"Morning. I prepared you a go bag," she told him.

"Morning back, and what is in this said go bag you've prepared for me?" Yield asked, waiting to find out what the woman wanted.

"I have pancake sticks for breakfast, coffee, hot, black, a tad bit of sugar, but more on the bitter side to keep you awake. There are two sandwiches, one for lunch, the other for a second lunch, along with juice boxes, a pear, an apple, you know for commemorative purposes, and of course, your granola bars," she said with a smile.

"No cranberries in this go box?"

"I have a bottle of cranberry juice, you know, for nostalgia," she said, sticking out her tongue at him.

"You're fucking scary, but thanks. What do you want?"

"Okay, right at it," she said, lifting her mug of coffee, allowing the air to settle between them. "How do I track a person, just out right? How would I know where to start?"

Yield opened the lunch bag, seeing all the goodies she'd packed for him. He wanted to take a photo of it to show his wife Millicent how it should be done because the bag was beautiful. The Cranberry had done this before.

"Hmm, if you have their phone number, you can start there," he said.

"Okay, but what app?"

"Do you have your Technician's laptop?" he asked, picking up one of the pancake sticks. "What is this?"

"It is a pancake, cooked over a strip of bacon, and laced with maple syrup," she said. "I'm trying to figure out how to make them into burritos so I can include the scrambled eggs, but not yet. And yes, I have my laptop."

"Weird, but okay," he said, biting into the strip of pancake, nodding his approval at the taste. "When you open your computer, look for an app called Bad Habits. Enter the phone number and you can track the person."

"At one location, or will it provide me the person's nasty habits, since that is what the app is named?"

"Yes, if you want to track their movement for the day, or if you want to track their movements over the course of a week, it will give you patterns, as long as the phone is on," he said, watching her face. "Use it wisely, Cranberry."

"Me, take advantage of software that allows me to track the movement of people and know what time they leave home, the route they take to go to work, and where they are sitting having coffee? Never!" she said waving her hand as she sipped the coffee with her eyes wide. It made Yield chuckle a little.

“Tell him I said hi when you find him,” he said. “It has been truly a strange experience meeting you.”

“I found confidence in my instincts in spending time in your light,” she told Yield. “May we depart as friends and meet again as family?”

“Family, eh? And you would be the weird cousin with the cats who all have names from Shakespearian characters,” Yield said, stopping himself.

“No, that would be I think, Rest Stop?” she said, grinning at him.

“Damn, I like you ? you scary little woman,” he said, taking note of the reference to Bleu Neary’s love of Shakespeare. She did know the family. “You know I’m going to make the call to find out about you.”

“You can, but it is doubtful he will tell you much,” she said. “Be safe and get home in one piece.”

Apple entered the kitchen at the same time Yield picked up the carafe of coffee. He pointed at it, looking at Helen. Apple frowned at her, wanting to know why she was giving away his coffee carrier.

“You can get another one; he has a long drive to get home. Plus, he did you several favors in coming, locating the warehouses, and shutting them down. He can have the carafe,” she said. “I will go and get you another.”

“Whatever,” he grumbled, looking at Yield. “Thanks.”

Yield replied, “Fuck you and we’re even.” He pointed at Ricky, who also entered the kitchen, Yield’s good eye on Helen.

She arched her eyebrows, looked at Apple, and smiled. Yield crinkled his forehead, looked at Ricky, then at Apple, and arched his eyebrows. Helen nodded, Yield cocked his head. Helen smiled. Yield shrugged, and Ricky clapped his hands.

“I don’t appreciate you two talking in Technician code about me in front of my face while I’m standing here, not understanding what you’re saying about me,” Ricky claimed. “Apple, what did she say?”

“You don’t want to know,” he said, offering Yield a handshake of thank you.

Helen watched him walk to the door, and he looked back at her with his good eye, gave a mock salute and took off. She couldn’t tell if he was a good man or a man who did good things for the right reason when the wrong reasons would get him caught. She knew he had a family, and the way he looked at the go bag, his wife hadn’t mastered the art of preparing his food stores for long riding assignments.

“Hmmp,” she said, looking at Apple. “What’s next, oh great trainer?”

“Two weeks off,” he told her.

“Who has two weeks off?”

“You do. I am done with you Cranberry,” Apple said.

“Have I failed? Did I do something wrong? I will get you another coffee carafe,” she said, feeling out of sorts.

“No, you haven’t failed. My job was to assess you to see where your strengths lie and suggest the course of action for you as a Technician,” he said. “You are great with kids and doing intake for children, making them feel comfortable in a new environment. You can set up a safe house and know how to budget for long term

planning. The job of setting up the window defenses with interlocking fields of fire worked well. You were able to achieve a critical understanding of tracking, shut down three warehouses, and still managed to make a go bag for a traveling Technician. We are done here. Enjoy the time off and report to Lemon in two weeks.”

“Well, that is rather abrupt,” she said. “Just like that, I am free to go for two weeks?”

“Use the down time well. Lemon is all about chemistry and poisons, so you need to be fresh and rested,” he explained.

“Okay, let me go pack and say goodbye to the kids,” she said, rising slowly.

Apple and Ricky watched her leave. Ricky spoke first when she was out of earshot. “What did she say to Mr. One Eyed Willie about me?”

“She said you and I were together,” Apple said.

“How does she know about us? I mean, I was ogling her too,” he said, feeling some kind of way for being outed by Helen when he was certain Apple and he was hiding it well.

“Yeah, but you spend more time ogling me,” Apple said.

“You are rather fine,” Ricky said.

“Whatever, Army Ranger, don’t you have something to hammer or nail? Never mind, ignore that,” Apple said, laughing. “I’m going to miss her.”

“Me too,” Ricky said. “How do you think the kids are going to handle her leaving?”

“They aren’t going to like it, especially Oscar,” Apple said, thinking about the last

twelve hours.

The boy Kendrick was no longer in the home. His injuries were more than Apple could care for. She pulled Apple to the side to inquire about his well-being. Initially, he didn't think the kid was going to make it at all, which is why he had sent Helen away. The last thing he wanted was for her to experience such a thing on her first training assignment.

"Helen, he needed more care than I could provide," Apple said, staring her down, which meant she didn't need to ask anything else, therefore she wouldn't.

She called the boys downstairs to a full on, Southern breakfast to include the recipe Ms. Ruth Neary used to make her two step biscuits. She'd learned a number of recipes from the woman, which would come in handy later. Along with the handmade biscuits, were Ruth's sweet potatoes hash with onions, crispy bacon and an egg bake with extra mushrooms.

"Wow, this is amazing," Stephen said, "maybe you should be cooking instead of me."

"The reason you were doing the cooking is that I have to head out," she said, making them all look up at her. Oscar's bottom lip began to tremble. "I got you set up to be comfortable here in your home. Take good care of each other."

Jeffrey wanted to know if they would see her again. Stephen wanted to know if she would keep in touch. Oscar asked if he could come live with her which didn't surprise or shock Apple in the least.

Her goodbyes to the boys were short. However, she handled it like a pro. In her notebook, she'd jotted down each of their birthdays. "I will send you postcards from wherever I am over the next year to keep in touch. When I get home, I will send you guys stamps to mail me back with photos so we can keep in touch. Make sure you

address them to Aunt Helen.”

“Aunt Helen,” Jeffrey interjected, “will you come home for Thanksgiving?”

“If the Lord is willing and the Creek don’t rise,” she said, hugging each child and giving Oscar an affectionate kiss.

She provided a handshake to Apple and one to Ricky as she walked out the door. Helen didn’t look back because she was too excited looking forward. Inside the vehicle, she received a text from Azrael with the coordinates for Lemon’s location in Ohio. She would need to drive past an airport to get there two weeks from now, which meant, technically she could fly out of the airport, leave her car and come back into two weeks to claim it.

Logic would dictate she head home to connect with Cherry, but she was free to live as she wished. She drove for ten minutes into town and pulled over. An idea hit here that made her smile. She found herself almost giddy as she made plans for at least a couple of days if not the entire two weeks. A click here, a click there, and she was ready.

“This is going to be good,” she laughed, putting the car into gear. “This is going to be soo good.”

SALEM, OREGON

Trooper Neary sat on a lonely stretch of road, keeping an eye out for speeders trying to take a shortcut into Portland. His mind drifted as he thought of Helen marching off like a toddler on her first day at killer daycare. Several times he took out his phone to text her, but he wanted to wait. This evening he’d call, maybe check in with her to make sure she was okay. Thoughts of her over the past day had become so strong, he was tempted to take a few days off to make sure she had fared well with her decision

or at least was safe. He'd just sat the phone down, picking it up again when a car sped by, setting off his radar.

"Good grief!" he said as the squad car rocked from the force of the wind of the speeder zooming past. He hit the lights on the cruiser and took off after the motorist who didn't drive far but slowed down and pulled over. These sorts of stops made him nervous.

He stopped, grabbing his pad, preparing to write the ticket. On his radio, he called in the license plate, stating where he was on the road in case something went afoul. The car came back as a rental.

Exiting the cruiser slowly, he noticed the car windows had not been rolled down by the speeder. He tapped on the back rear light, making the driver look up, but he couldn't see the face. Approaching the window, he gently tapped, asking the driver to roll the window down. He looked inside at the driver and stood frozen. He stared, not believing his eyes.

"Helen?"

"Hey there, Stallion," she said. "I learned how to track people, and I used it to track you. Surprise!"

"Yes, I am," Mustang said, removing his Smoky the Bear shades. "You tracked me? Why...I mean, is everything okay? Did something go wrong with Apple, with your training, wait, you're in Oregon."

"Calm down, Trooper. I did good and learned how to do some tracking with Mr. Yield, who says hi by the way, and I got two weeks off for shutting down three warehouses in Milwaukee that did yucky things to kids," she told him. "I thought, maybe, of those fourteen days, you could benefit from my company and a few of

them, I mean if you want them.”

“I want them, of course,” he said, smiling at her. “I can’t believe you’re here. You tracked me.”

She pointed at his phone. “I’m a technician trainee, but my instincts are sharp but not sharp enough. You’re getting off your shift in a little while. Want me to pick up some dinner from that little place you like by your house so you can come home and get off a lot with me?”

“Huh?”

“The Asian Fusion place by your house; you’ve been there twice in the last week. I mean, unless your girlfriend works there and I’m stepping on toes here,” she said.

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I am seeing this woman, though, not sure what we’re calling it, but for now, I guess it’s working for us both,” he said, finding himself blushing. “Hold on, you learned basic tracking and used it on me. Are you using your newfound skillsets for personal gain, Cranberry?”

“Yes, plus I thought you were missing this vagina. If you don’t want it, I can turn this vehicle around, take it back to Kentucky, and put it away,” she said, looking at him.

“Oh no you don’t,” he said. “I’m heading into the shop to clock out. I need about 45 minutes before I get home.”

“So, what do you want me to do, pick up something for dinner and wait on the front porch, or are you passing me the keys so I can be ready to welcome you through the door when you get there?” she asked, biting her bottom lip.

“My keys are in my locker at the station,” Mustang said, “There is a keypad on the

garage. The code is 0624, which is my birthday. Once inside the garage, enter through the door and the alarm for the house is 0612, which is Pops' birthday. You can pick up dinner, and I'll meet you there. Again, I can't believe you're here."

"I have two weeks before I have to be in Ohio. Take as much of that time as you want, but it won't bother me if you have other plans," she said.

"No, this is perfect," he said, offering a wry smile. "Absolutely perfect. See you at the house in about an hour."

Helen sat watching him walk to his squad car. She was surprised at her body's reaction seeing him in his Trooper gear, the gun on his hip walking all bad ass up to her vehicle. Seeing the back side of him as he headed to his vehicle brought back nasty memories of Mustang being nude and sweaty, making Helen clench her thighs together in the front seat of the rental.

"That man is finer than kitten fur," she said, grinning as she pulled away from the shoulder of the highway. The restaurant, already added to the GPS, was where she headed after pressing the button, and she was on her way to get dinner.

He didn't say what to order but based on what she'd seen him eat the few times they shared a meal, she placed the food request. Fifteen minutes later, she had food for two days, just in case they needed more nourishment after round one. Happy with the food, she punched the button saved on the GPS to his home.

Nervousness filled her when she arrived at the mountain chalet style house. As instructed, she punched in the code on the keypad and the garage door went up. Inside the garage was a black Mustang Cobra, a motorcycle, a canoe, and entirely too much fishing gear. The food in hand, she opened the door to the home to hear the alarm, and she punched in the code for the house like he'd told her, disarming the system.

She wanted to be nosey and ramble through the place. Her first instinct was to go to his bathroom and check under the sink for feminine supplies to see if a chick was attempting to nest, but she stopped herself. Instead, she went to the kitchen to set the table for supper. In a drawer, Helen located a candle with a holder. In the cupboards, she found wine glasses and water goblets. Mustang liked his water with ice, and she preferred hers without, so she prepared them and set both on the table. Another drawer held placemats, and then she found forks and knives. When she was done, the table was set, and then she heard a vehicle pull into the garage.

“Daddy’s home,” she said, checking her breath. She kicked herself for not freshening up first in case Daddy wanted some dessert before dinner, but it was too late now.

“Helen?” he called out as he came through the door from the garage.

“In the kitchen,” she called back as she plated rice, followed by meat and veggies. “I hope this is okay. I know you have wine but wasn’t sure what you wanted to go with the food, so I didn’t open anything. You like?”

“I like,” he said, frozen in place, reeling from the realization of Helen being in his actual home. He wanted to embrace her. He wanted to kiss her. He needed to feel her body next to his. Sighing, he said, “I can’t reach for you and won’t make the first move, but I’m here, you’re here, and if you don’t kiss me right now, I’m going to lose my shit.”

“Hmm,” she said, standing behind the chair. “What happens when you lose your shit, Mustang?”

“I’m going to eat your sexy ass alive, Helen. I’m trying to be respectful based on what you’ve shared with me and not push my will or needs off on you, but I need you. Don’t make me lose my shit, Helen.”

She raised her blouse and pulled it over her head. She came out of the pants next and stood in front of him in just her underwear. To drive home the idea of him losing his mind, she unsnapped her bra and tossed it at him. Helen took her time bending slowly to take off her underwear. She tossed those at him as well.

“I’m not even going to take off my gun,” he said, moving at a clip and reaching for her.

Helen let out a small squeak as the pythons gathered her against his chest. His lips touched her, igniting the fire between them. She wrapped her legs high above his waist, bumping against the gun. In his ear, she cautioned him to remove the hardware. Holding her with one hand, he unfastened the belt with the other and dropped it to the floor.

“Baby, we’re not gonna make it to the bed,” he said, turning toward the dining room table.

“No, nope, no naked asses on the table,” she mumbled through the fevered kisses. “I’m feeling very happy to see you. We’re going to need the bed.”

“Say no more,” Mustang said, carrying her to the bedroom. He had questions, concerns, and more, but right now, he simply desired to be with Helen and show her some appreciation for traveling to the West Coast to spend her time off with him. It would be a lovely two weeks, but the idea of coming home to her every day made him begin to rethink how he was living his life.

Lutsen, Minnesota

Imperial, the head of the Chrysalis Organization, received word on Milwaukee. Although it had not been very lucrative and poorly managed, the plan, had they made it to the end of the month, was to install a new team, move the Fields, and scrap the current customer base. The clientele in Milwaukee were animals. The last thing she wanted was a playground full of ruffians.

“This is bad,” Imperial said, picking up her phone. She dialed a number and waited for the voice on the other end. “This is Imperial. You’re aware of what occurred in Milwaukee?”

“Unfortunate, but you’re to blame,” the voice said. “Shitty management of a product that is too delicate for the customer base you have is a recipe for disaster. All of it is distasteful.”

“You never mention taste when I’m wiring your percentage of the profits,” Imperial said. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“A Technician,” the voice said.

“What? That makes no sense; no one was killed,” Imperial said. “The three warehouses were shutdown with only one bullet fired. I’m not comprehending.”

“She’s new,” the voice said. “She shut down The Collector as well. I think this Technician may be a problem. She’s a hound.”

“A woman,” Imperial stated. “Interesting. What do we know about her, her specialty, what is her thing?”

“We know nothing, which is what makes her a problem,” he said. “Before she took down The Collector, she put a bullet in Karlton the last thing you need is for her to get you in the crosshairs. If she finds you, she finds us all,” the voice said, “so be smart and lay low.”

The call ended with Imperial in her feelings. Three warehouses in one night meant she was out of millions. Millions in tax free dollars taken from her by some woman she didn’t even know. She no longer lived in Wisconsin, but it was her territory.

“We’ve built something special here, and that woman Technician is not going to destroy it,” Imperial said, staring out the window. Too many sacrifices had been made. Too many challenges had been overcome. Too much money to be made to give it all up now. The female Technician was a slight problem. Besides, they’d gotten rid of one before; this one would be no different.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Helen could feel him watching her while they sat at the kitchen table eating a meal that had grown cold while it waited for the lovers to sate their appetites for each other before satiating their desires for food. Her attention now focused on the design of the dining table in a rich wood intricately meshed with a deep blue resin.

“This table is amazing,” she commented, not looking up at him.

“Thank you,” he offered.

“You made this? Oh wow, such remarkable craftsmanship. The resin is a nice touch. It is almost trooper blue,” she added. “What kind of wood is it?”

“Sequoia Redwood,” Mustang replied, watching her facial expression at the usage of the coveted, protected wood. “No, don’t even. The tree had fallen and they were cutting it up to be hauled off. I happened to be in the area and got several chunks of the trunk. One I made into this table, and another piece was used to craft my coffee and end tables.”

She rose, wearing the tee he’d discarded in haste to have her that he’d worn under his Trooper shirt. He said nothing as she bounced to the living room to admire the pieces he’d mentioned. Try as he might to reconcile the reality of her being in his home, he had questions and unless they were answered with a bit of clarity, the possible response would keep him up at night.

“Helen,” he said softly, moving to the living room where she camped out on the couch, her legs folded into a lotus position as she stared at the table. “I’m having difficulty wrapping my mind around you being in Oregon, in my home.”

“I had some free time, and I wanted to test out my tracking skills, so I thought I’d surprise you by using some of those free days with you, and here I am. I don’t know when I may have this much free time in the future so...this table is really cool. You have a shop nearby where you make furniture?”

“The shop is under the house, kind of like a basement,” he said, taking a seat on the floor to not appear as if he were lording himself and his alpha male power over the lady. “You mentioned tracking lessons with Mr. Yield... I mean, things were going badly with Apple?”

Helen ran her hand across the smooth wood, appreciating the care it took to shape and smooth the texture. The blue resin filled the cracks like foam, filling crevices in a broken structure. The natural raw edge of the tree had not been removed, which gave the piece character.

“Nine hours isn’t that far in relation to what was needed. It was par for the course,” she told him. “Apple’s role was only to assess me to determine my strengths.”

It was all rather fuzzy to Mustang. He needed more explanation, causing him to ask, “Why did he call in Yield?”

“A kid broke free from a Field of Flowers, and Pear brought the boy to Apple,” she told him. “Of course, Apple wanted to root out every Field and shoot up the place, but the kid needed care. Honestly, I didn’t think the boy would make it through the night, which is why I think he sent me with Yield to track down the warehouse, you know in case things went downhill with the boy, but I found all three warehouses in Milwaukee and shut them down.”

Mustang leaned forward. He heard everything she said, but he still could make the two ends meet in the middle. “You found the warehouse, not Yield?”

She smiled at him. “Men think and hunt like predators,” she said. “I think like a woman. Healthy kids need nutrition. The kids have to be healthy to be profitable. Therefore, I started from the perspective of a woman and how and where does the food come from to feed the kids? I went from there.”

She made eye contact with him as she spoke. “We found a bodega near the raided warehouse which stocked food the locals couldn’t or wouldn’t spend money on. High end fruits and veggies in glass jars with fancy labels that went through the pasteurization process. I went in the store, chatted up the girl behind the counter, and extracted the easy info from her wanting to brag. Her chatty nature gave us leads, and Yield and I found the warehouse.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. “The two of you took down a pedo ring?”

“No, I called in backup. Azrael rolled in cops and ambos with no lights. Yield and I popped smoke, threw in some tear gas, and watched the roaches scatter,” she said.

“Okay, that was one warehouse,” he stated, fully engaged in what she was saying.

“Well, the lady who answered the door at the first warehouse, I kind of shot her to get the addresses of the other two,” Helen said, still fixated on the coffee table. “She gave it up, then we reset twice and did it all over again, shutting down the Milwaukee Fields of Flowers.”

“And finding me?”

“I wanted to show off to impress you,” she confessed, finding herself blushing at the admission.

“I’m impressed,” he said softly. “So, can we go back to the assessment completed by The Bad Apple and what he determined?”

“Oh, that man doesn’t know what to make of me.”

“He’s not alone,” Mustang said.

Helen shrugged nonchalantly. “Hey, you guys are programmed to hunt, but I think like a woman...wait a minute,” she said, popping to her feet. “Those warehouses...had playgrounds in them next to catwalk runways...”

“Disturbing visual,” he commented under his breath.

“Yeah, the actual visual was even worse. The rooms were set up for wankers to watch the kids play while they sat in chairs diddling themselves, but there was also a classroom, and the pantry was stocked with nutritious, balanced meals for the kids.”

Mustang was enjoying watching Helen’s mind work. He did not know where she was going with any of it, but he was appreciating the ride. Patiently, he sat, awaiting her deduction. “What are you thinking, Helen?”

“I’m thinking men are wasteful,” she said. “Sorry, but men will use up a rag dog, fuck the stuffing out of it, and set it on fire to cover their late evening dates with an inanimate object.”

“Harsh, but okay,” he said, “meaning what exactly?”

“Jay, there was a classroom set up, along with boys’ and girls’ bathrooms, colorful bedding, and child friendly graphics on the wall.”

“Designer focused pedophiles?”

“No, a man would not take the time or effort to make a home for the children like that,” she said. “A man would scoop up, use up, and then discard as many as possible

versus training and mentoring. Those children worked on one side of the building but lived and learned on the other.”

Mustang’s mouth dropped open as Helen raced to the other room to find her phone. He watched her as she made the call to Azrael, who picked up after the third ring.

The husky voice answered, “State your need.”

“I think the Chrysalis are women,” Helen blurted into the line.

Azrael’s tone held no amusement, “How did you conclude that?”

“A man throws away his broken toys and gets new ones. A man wouldn’t concern himself with making sure the kids had exercise equipment in the form of a playground, a classroom, or nutritious food,” Helen stated. “A woman would, especially if she were grooming the kids to recruit other kids.”

“Okay, then what would be your next steps in locating these women leaders?” Azrael asked, intrigued by the deduction of the woman Apple had assessed as a sociopath.

“Madams have doctors and nurses on call to treat their toys when the tricks get too rough and pull-out Barbie’s hair. That Rochelle chick said she was in CNA school and worked on the broken toys. If she does it, then maybe other students do as well. We start by tracking that heifer’s movements over the past month. Also, not sure if this is the right train of thought, but maybe three to five women with new wealth in maybe the last ten years with assets that don’t match the bank statements. I don’t know how to find that kind of stuff.”

“Let me look into it. Are you close by?”

“Hell no- you gave me two weeks and I am far from the maddening crowds,” Helen

said.

“Keep your phone close.”

“I’m taking my two weeks,” Helen said. “Hey, is this paid vacation time, and do I get medical?”

Azrael disconnected the call. Helen put the phone on the table. She had a twinkle in her eyes when she looked at Mustang. It was the same twinkle that had him sitting in his living room in his underwear, wondering how in the hell he’d come to this moment. She offered him a smile, which also made him smile.

“I’m growing on her, but Lord please forgive me, that is one unattractive woman. She looks like she’s laughing and crying concurrently while taking a sneeze that turned into a fart.”

Mustang burst into laughter. He really enjoyed being in her company. She was a breath of fresh air compared to the women who tried to be a part of his life.

“Helen, are we going to discuss you using company resources for personal gain?”

“Nope. Are you going to report yourself for benefitting from my ill usage of technician technology?”

“I don’t know,” he said solemnly. “In some ways, I’m flattered you want to spend the time with me, but on the other hand, I’m concerned about your reasons.”

Helen returned to the couch, folding her legs under her body. She considered what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it.

“I didn’t want to go home and be alone,” she said softly. “I mean, technically, I

wouldn't have been alone. What I would have been was a fifth wheel on the pregnancy train, sitting on the sidelines with my cousin and your brother working entirely too hard to include me in their family events. I didn't want that, so I guessed, or hoped, we could be lonely together."

He smirked a little at her assumption. "You assume I'm lonely."

"Jay, when I was at my lowest, scarred inside and out, I asked for help in guiding me back to the light," she said. "I wasn't healed, still aren't for that matter, and I was hurting and hating myself as this ugly, cut up, useless thing another man used and tossed aside. My self-esteem had been shattered into a million pieces. I asked you to make love to me to and make feel wanted and you did."

He said nothing as he listened to her speak an unspoken truth about her life, but she wasn't mentioning why it related to him. He'd been down this road one time too many with women who had planned a life with him, but didn't plan for him to have a life outside of fathering the kids they wanted and putting a roof over their heads. That, he wouldn't do for any woman, even for a spark like Helen. He still listened to what she was saying.

"Slow said you come home to Kentucky twice a year, and once a year they come to you; however, outside of those three instances, you're walking this path alone. I'm here to let you know you have a friend in me, and I want to see this life you've built and how you live. I came so you can show me your world, Jay."

He was on his feet and held out his arms. Helen rose from the couch, walking into the embrace.

"That is quite possibly the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me to get my dick," he said laughing.

“Well, a chick did fly to the other side of the country to get it. I mean, I have to lay it on thick so you can continue to put out. You know, like you’re doing me a favor for coming so far,” she said, leaning back to look directly him in the eyes. The twinkle was back in the way she looked at him, making his body react.

“You are kind of unsettling; has anyone ever told you that? Your mind works like a mad machine in one of those weirdo science labs, and I am here for it.”

“And I’m here for you,” she said. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure...”

“When you saw me at the traffic stop, I saw your mind toying with the idea of me being here for two weeks. May I ask what immediately came to mind for you to teach or show me first from the world of The Mustang?”

“Canoeing,” he said, without hesitating. “Then I want us to make you some simple nightstands for your bedroom where I can put my phones and charge up my watch and place my cup of ice water at night.”

“So, you’re planning to come home to Kentucky and stay with me? I hear you and I like the idea of those projects we can do together,” she said. “Just so you know, I can now use a power drill and a leveler, so I can help make those items.”

“Good to know,” he said, yawning. “Tomorrow, I have an early shift, but I finish at two.”

“Good, I want to sleep in tomorrow, maybe do some laundry, read a book, paint my toenails, and then find those bitches who are making sex romper rooms for perverts,” she said, squeezing him about the waist.

“You are very disquieting, but I dig it. The man in me responds and comes alive to everything about you,” he said. “Let’s call it a night.”

“Nice to know because the woman in me was given two weeks of freedom, and the only place I could think to spend it was with you,” she said. “I’m tired as well. Dishes, then bed?”

“Yeah,” he said, yawning as if it were a pattern they did every night. She was wearing on him, and he liked the tread. He liked it a hell of a lot.

MUSTANG ROSE FROM THE bed, peeling Helen from around him. She slept coiled under him like a little puppy not wanting to lose its Mommy’s warmth. Normally, he didn’t go for such things, but she had a calming effect on him, which he did go for. Lately, he’d been feeling unsettled himself, to the point of almost being uncomfortable with the job, as if he could feel this ominous thing coming to upchuck his existence. His instincts kept him on high alert, and the stop he had made on the side of the road with Helen behind the wheel had the hairs standing up on the back of his neck.

He might bring it up and run a few ideas by her to see what she thought, but right now, he needed to get to work. Mustang showered and removed the last clean uniform from the closet that held his work items. He took his boots, socks, and underpants into the other room to dress, frowning at having to alter his morning routine. Altering the routine would mean forgetting something, and he couldn’t afford to do that, not at this point.

In the kitchen, he arrived with clothes in hand to find Helen. She must have gotten up when he went into the bathroom. He didn’t even notice the bed was empty when he came out of the shower since the room was dark, and he’d assumed she was still sleeping. On the table, she had Canadian bacon, eggs, and well toasted English muffins.

“Good morning,” he said, “and what is all of this?”

“Breakfast to start your day the right way,” she said, grabbing the first mug in the dish drainer, which she assumed he used each morning. Helen poured him a cup of coffee, but not one for herself.

He watched her reach for the lunch pail he’d brought in the door with him yesterday coming in from work. Last night, when they washed dishes, Helen had paid attention to the remnants inside of it. She poured the freshly brewed coffee into the thermos, sealed it, and placed it in the curved lid of the lunch pail. What little coffee remained ? she poured into her own mug.

Mustang ate the breakfast she had prepared as Helen made two sandwiches, both with mayonnaise, and a bit of the spicy mustard from the nearly empty jar she spotted in the fridge, and wrapped each sandwich individually. She grabbed an apple, quartered it, and covered it as a whole apple in plastic wrap. From the pantry, she grabbed a bag of nuts and a bottle of water, adding both to the lunch pail.

“I don’t know what time you have lunch even though it is an early day,” she said, closing the pail. She pushed the lunch box toward him, leaned down, and provided a slight kiss to his lips. Helen leaned against the kitchen counter, finishing the sip of coffee. “Have an amazing day, and I will see you back here after two.”

“Just like that, you’re going back to bed?”

“I’m in your space, disturbing your morning routine,” she said. “I can either be a help or a hindrance by yapping at you and making you forget something important. You have a dangerous job. I don’t need to distract you. See you when you get home.”

She blew a kiss and toddled off to the bedroom.

“Shit, I think I might be falling in love with her crazy ass,” Mustang said, looking toward the bedroom where he wanted to take at least fifteen more minutes to really start his day right.

Helen called from the other room, “I heard that!”

He simply smiled and prepared himself for work, easing out the door to the garage. Mustang made it to the office, a smile still on his face, as his boss called a meeting on a case coming up for court in the next few weeks. He’d been going over his notes in the file at his house, and the file he needed was still at his house on his desk.

“Damn it,” he said, realizing he didn’t have time to go back and get it. “Aw man...bear balls.”

Reluctantly, he took out his phone. He dialed Helen, not wanting to ask, but he needed her help. She answered the phone, not sounding sleepy, but awake.

“Missing me already?”

“Always, but I need an assist,” he said. “In my office on the corner of my desk is a file labeled Murtaugh. I forgot it this morning and need it in about twenty minutes.”

“Say less; be there in ten,” she replied, ending the call.

Helen was already dressed. She hadn’t gone back to bed since her body was still on it’s normal time zone. After locating the file folder and disarming the system, she pulled up the GPS and pressed the pre-programmed address for his station house.

“See, being prepared pays off,” she said, pulling out of the drive and heading to the Trooper station.

Helen entered the front door carrying the folder. A woman with too much attitude sat behind the desk giving Helen a curious stare. She spotted the folder, and her entire body language changed.

She asked, "Can I help you?"

"I have an item for Trooper Neary," Helen said.

"You can leave it with me," the woman told her.

"Or you can call back to the bullpen, let him know Helen has arrived, and he can come and retrieve it himself," she told the lady.

"Or you can leave it with me, like I said," the woman repeated with more attitude than necessary.

Helen wasn't in the mood to get into a discourse with the woman. She pulled out her phone and called Mustang. In the line, she simply said, "Lobby."

A couple of minutes passed before he came around the corner, the smile on his face wide as she passed the folder to him. Helen was dressed as he had hoped. She wore an adorable pair of cropped jeans and cute sandals which showed off her newly painted toenails, and she carried a mini designer bag to match the shoes. Her hair sat high on her head in a messy bun and her earrings matched the yellow blouse over a white tank. She looked absolutely perfect to him. There was no garish red lipstick, stupid fake eyelashes, or fillers in her face. The smile, warm and natural with no veneers or blue tinges from over treatment with whitening techniques, nearly made his stomach flutter when she spoke.

Helen said as she passed the folder to him, "I didn't know if it had sensitive information, so I didn't want to leave it on the counter."

“Thanks love,” he said, leaning down, his lips puckered. Helen kissed him, not wrapping her arms around his neck to make a show about it.

“See you at home,” she said, noticing the crowd gathered behind the reception area to take a peek at who’d come to the office for Neary.

A loud chorus of “ohs” and “ahhs,” followed, making Helen turn around to see the Troopers all watching. She provided a playful wave to them all, leaving as silently as she’d arrived. Mustang shook his head, knowing he wouldn’t hear the end for the rest of the day. His chest stuck out a bit with pride as his co-workers watched her leave.

The woman behind the counter made a snide remark, “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.”

“I don’t. She’s a woman,” Mustang said, joining the Troopers to get the meeting started.

He sat distracted during the meeting and most of the day. He didn’t pull anyone over when he went on patrol but simply patrolled his stretch of highway and realized he was sick and tired of sitting in the car. The nervous feeling returned and he leaned into it, returning earlier than expected to the station house. He’d used the last two hours to catch up on paperwork, then he’d head home to her. Maybe he was lonelier than he believed, and having someone to go home to for a change was a pleasant experience.

The closer it got to two o’clock the more his spirits improved. At 1:45, he sat grinning like an idiot, thinking of her being at the house waiting for him. A warm, gushy feeling hit his gut, and he knew then, he was in trouble.

“Damn, she must be amazing,” Littlefield, a Trooper he’d trained, said to him. “Jacobs wants to see you before you go.”

“Roger that,” Mustang replied, closing out his computer for the weekend. He cleared his desk, then made way to his boss’ office. Tapping on the frame, he said, “You wanted to see me?”

“Yeah Neary, come on inside,” Jacobs said. “Close the door and take a seat.”

The icky feeling was back. Mustang didn’t like it, but he held his tongue, waiting to see what the man had to say. At the end of the conversation, Mustang was left speechless. The conversation was a game changer.

“Go home, talk it over with the little woman that no one knew you had, and get back to me on Monday,” he told Mustang.

“Okay,” Mustang said, feeling out of sorts. The feeling continued as he drove, making it to the house and entered his home, carrying the empty lunch pail, not knowing what to expect.

The afternoon had grown cool, and the air was crisp with a hint of cold in it. Someone who lived in the South would find the weather bone chilling. It also explained the gas fireplace being on when he walked into the house. The house felt like a sauna. However, a smell of red sauce cooking and the bottle of red on the table meant Italian for supper, and for the damndest reason, all of it felt right. Helen coming around the corner in fuzzy pink slippers, her hair in a messy bun, and smeared pasta sauce on her blouse also felt...right.

“Hey, how was your day?” she asked.

“Weird,” he said.

“I hope the guys didn’t give you too much flack about me,” she said, greeting him with a spoonful of pasta sauce for him to taste, then a kiss to welcome the man home.

“No, but we need to talk, and the sauce needs salt, basil and oregano,” he said, the weight of his words hitting her in the face. Her entire body language shifted, and she offered a weak smile. “No, not like that, Helen. I don’t want you to leave. I’m happy you’re here. No, you didn’t embarrass me, and I don’t want you to go. My boss called me in with a job offer.”

“A what?” she asked, looking down at the sauce on her top. “Oh poo. I am an absolute mess. What do you mean by a job offer? You have a job. As a matter of record, you have two.”

“A teaching position has become available, and a request was put in for me to take it,” he said.

“Are you thinking about it?”

“Hell yeah, but before I can answer, I wanted to talk to you about it,” he said. “I know, weird, but all of this has been peculiar. The odd feelings that have been circling me as of late are coming more frequently, almost like an omen. I can’t even start to tell you how hard I was thinking about you and then you popped up on the side of the road in fucking Oregon, and now this.”

“Okay, Stallion, let me tug on the reins. Please explain to me what the “this” is?”

He exhaled slowly, “I have been offered a teaching position at the Trooper Academy in Plainfield, Indiana,” he said.

Her eyes grew wide, her lips formed an O, and she yelled at him, “Shut up! How?”

“The work I did finding you, helping Cherry, and then staying on to help track that madman put eyes on me,” he said. “They want me to come teach tracking at the Academy in Indiana. It will also mean a promotion to Master Trooper.”

“Do you want it? I mean, you’d have to leave all of this,” she said. “All of this is pretty nice.”

“I dunno. I had been considering coming back, being closer to home, to family,” he paused, “I can’t believe I’m saying this...to you.”

“Indiana is my state,” she said with the twinkle in her eye again.

“Helen, you know what I’m asking,” he said. “You’re sharp enough to add it together.”

“I hear it all, but I can’t give you kids,” she told him. “I never thought about getting married or a long-term relationship with a fella. I don’t know. What are you asking, for us to be permanent? Already? So soon.”

“I guess it is too soon,” he said, “but we feel...right. I like us together, and it is too soon, but fate is telling us it is time for us both to stop being alone.”

She sat for a minute. Her eyes raked his body. Then the twinkle was back in her eyes. “I get to have that dick all the time?”

“Yes, and I get to smear my mustache with that vagina all the time,” he said.

“Leave it to you, Jay,” she said. “Your family would be happy, but then I would have to move to Plainfield.”

“Yep, but when we come for a visit to Kentucky, we will have a place to stay,” he said.

“Jay, I still have a shit ton of training ahead of me,” she told him. “My training is supposed to be for a year. I don’t know if I will get breaks like this. I have poisons

with Lemon, accidents with Passion Fruit, and Cyber tracking with Sour Grapes. You sure?"

"I have to sell this house, move all my stuff, find another house, buy it and close," he said. "There is a lot to do if we want this and if we want us. Do you want to try?"

"Yes, but I don't want to try. I've had enough trying in my life. I want to do," she said. "I want us to do this."

"Good, we have two weeks to figure it out," he said. "You're here for a reason, Helen. You came to me for a reason, and now we know. This is going to work out for us."

"I know it will because we want it to work," she said, feeling better about the decision to come to Oregon and see her guy. "Okay, basil, salt, oregano...just a pinch of sugar. Shut up. I like it like that."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Saturday morning eased in with little said between Mustang and Helen as he grappled with the upcoming decision that would alter the course of both of their lives. He didn't know what it was about her, but he wanted her as his own for as long as she'd have him.

"I'm ready to see your shop and make the table we spoke about," she said.

"Right this way, Milady," he said with a flourish of his hand.

Helen performed a mock curtesy and headed down the stairs. Lights flickered on with every step she took, illuminating the neat workspace loaded with power tools, table saws, and equipment that could easily dismantle a body.

"I saw that!" he said laughing.

"What, I didn't say anything," she laughed, taking note of the space requirement, he would need in a new home.

She watched him remove a sizeable chunk of Sequoia redwood, and then he passed Helen a pair of goggles and a hand sander. He explained while she listened and complied. Two hours later, she mixed the resin, added color, and drizzled the concoction into the crevices of the table to create their very first couple's project.

"Okay, we let it set, then smooth it out and apply the final finish," he told her.

"Odd that we would make a table for a house I'm not going to be living in," she commented, appreciating the beauty of what they had created together.

“We made this to put beside the reading chair to hold your latest novel and cup of tea in our new home,” he said, watching her face.

Helen blushed a bit at the implication. She had a few ideas she wanted to share. He needed to be made aware of what she’d learned on how to set up a Technician’s living space, as well as what she’d learned living on the land with Mr. Slow. The home she and Cherry shared was minimal in case she got burned, a term used when an agent’s identity was discovered, and they had to move fast. She’d never personalized a place and was beginning to plan some ideas for the home she had on Slow’s land when life changed for her once again. This time, Helen wanted to be in control of the change.

“Bad Apple bought this shit of a two-story colonial farmhouse that needed new bathrooms to say the least,” she told him. “He gave me a budget to set up the house. I guess that will come in handy for what comes next for us.”

Mustang’s back was to her as he worked, turning slowly to inquire, “Your thoughts?”

“Outbuildings,” she said. “You’re going to need outbuildings. This workshop, one, plus the sporting equipment. We will need garages, especially for the two vehicles you purchased for me plus my shop. Your two vehicles and your shop if you still plan to track as a Technician. We need privacy and land. People don’t need to see what we’re bringing onto the property.”

He loved the way her mind worked, which made conversations with the lady so much easier by not needing or having to codify a subject before the discussion. “How much land are you thinking?”

“Don’t know; we have to set a budget and take a look at what’s available,” she told him.

“Okay, lunch, laptop, and we begin searching,” he offered watching her eyes.

The search over soup and sandwiches went well, and they located a property with the requirements, the land, and the buildings. However, the home on the property was a no go as far as they both were concerned.

"That small house would be perfect for a workshop," she said, "but we would need to build a fence around the entire property to keep it private."

“Build,” he said, looking at the screen, using the 3D angles to search the property.

“Or we can stay with a manufactured, but I tell you, I don’t like walking and it feels like my house is moving,” she told him. “A manufactured home, while practical, feels less than permanent. I haven’t had a lot of permanent, and I’d like some for once.”

He still wanted to know more about her background, inquiring, “Before your mother died, did you guys move around frequently?”

She arched her eyebrows at him and she told him, “My parents are both very much alive. My father lives in New York. My mother is shackled up with a loser named Waldo in Chicago who likes to greet everyone by saying “ aiiii .” He’s a creep but her type. She’s happy and away from me.”

“Well, that answers the next question about family holiday gatherings,” he said.

“And your folks in Wisconsin?”

“My grandmother died years ago. My Dad was killed doing Homeboy shit on the streets, and my mother couldn’t cope with life and she sent me to live with my Grams,” he said. “I was getting out of hand in Wisconsin, and Gram’s pastor told her about this summer camp in Ohio. I went, because, hey, I love the outdoors, camping

and canoeing. I met the Neary's. Rebecca almost drowned, I saved her life. The next day, my Gram's had a stroke, which ended her life. Then I got a new family."

Helen didn't reach for him. She didn't ask any follow-up questions about his mother's inability to cope, assuming the worse and letting the mangy dog lie on the front porch. "We have a lot to learn about each other."

"Yes, but at least you want to learn. Most women see me and want to have sex- which I frequently turn down," he said. "I can see it in their eyes what they want for themselves but they never factor in what I want."

This was the Jarius Neary Helen wanted to know. She needed to understand how the man processed information on life and women. Helen also needed a bit of a guidebook on the care and maintenance of the prized stallion. Softly she encouraged him, "Explain...please."

"They want the man, a couple of kids, the yappy dog, and a house with a foreign Mom-mobile. Then I am stuck at cookouts standing next to a grill with other beer bellied Dads, looking sad at having to either return to Disney World for vacation or migrating to the Disney Cruise. I don't want to be an accessory some chick pulls out at functions to show-off that she has a man. Even worse being the reason my kids don't like to be around me because she's made me into the disciplinarian, and I hide at work taking extra shifts since I don't like the people my wife turned our kids into," he said. "You are the first woman who has ever worked with me in my shop or even wanted to know what I'm into."

He was watching her again. He stared her in the eyes when he asked the next question. "Why are you considering this union between us, Helen? I mean, it is so random- that...I dunno."

"Is it random, Jay?" she asked, staring him in his eyes as she responded. "You guided

Cherry to find me. In your arms, I felt safe. I felt safe to initiate intimacy with you—which is something I’ve never done. I mean, I’m not a sexual person. Hell, I never really fully participated in the act or tried to avoid it all together. You have me initiating and enjoying things I’ve never had an interest in doing. Now I’m thinking about a raw edge desk for my home office.”

She stopped, biting her lip. What she wanted to say next would tell him so much. He deserved the words and her honesty. “I experienced a very enjoyable orgasm with you, and for some damned reason, every time we couple, I get to enjoy more. Hell, there was that one time, one had barely ended when another one started, and my feet cramped up in sheer delight. I never cared for sex until you, but it is about us, not so much the act? if that makes sense. It is about caring for the person and I care for you. The freedom you give me to enjoy all the feels is liberating. I want to return the sentiment. Your happiness, for me, is important, you deserve that from the woman in your life. Does that make sense?”

“Oddly, it does,” he said. “We are the lone wolves who found each other.”

“What we do next matters only to us,” she whispered, “and now, neither of us feels alone.”

SUNDAY MORNING, THEY spent nearly an hour in Mustang’s canoe on the pond near his home. Helen did not know what she was doing, but she sat facing him in the small boat, her hands resting on the oars fixed out of the water. Several attempts were made to mimic his movements with the oars, but she gave up, simply holding the paddles. Jay’s quietness meant a matter was on his mind.

“If we are going to figure this out, we have to talk it through,” she told him.

“Yeah, just going over the budget in my head, what is needed, and what everything will cost for me to start this new life with you,” he said.

Helen's back went rigid. She held up her index finger to him, "Aht! Aht! You are considering a teaching position in your field that takes you out of the patrol car on dark back roads. The position brings a promotion along with the change of job title. You also desire to be closer to your family, fish more with your dad, and hang out with your nutty sister who owns a beauty salon and can't do hair or a pedicure. You also want to be around to get Ruth's pound cake. The position you're considering simply happens to be in the state I cover."

His chest puffed up a bit, "Okay, when you put it like that!"

"Jay, I will be the one moving to be with you," she said, "so now you can beat your pecs and feel all alpha male that your woman is moving to be with you."

He was grinning at the words he repeated, "My woman."

"Your woman, Jay,"

"Does my woman want to be my wife?"

"Are you asking?"

"Not yet; too many variables to iron out."

"Okay," she said.

He waited to see if she had more to say, but she didn't. He loved that about her. Helen didn't mince words or hide behind platitudes or coy inferences. She said what she meant and meant what she said.

"Helen, I'm going to marry you," he spoke softly.

“That will be nice,” she said looking out over the water as if the universe spoke to her on a ripple in the pond. “I never gave much thought to it before, aspiring to be a wife, especially, you know, minus giving a man some kids thing. I think it will be nice, me out in the Technician world putting a bullet in an asshole and coming home to Chicken Piccata and snuggling. I can deal.”

“I take it that as a yes, you’re open to the idea,” he said, smiling at her and nodding her head at him before going back to her mental notes. The private conversation she was holding in her mind took up the space in the canoe.

Once more, he sat waiting and she said nothing else. It was enough—they had a starting point. Over the two-week stay, Helen worked daily on tracking down the potential women of the Chrysalis, searching trends and patterns. She was on to something, she could feel it, but the nightly cuddling sessions had her off her game. She needed to get back to work.

Her list was growing.

Order PO Box online; jot it down to remember mailing address.

Send the boys each a card.

Add one in for Ricky and Apple.

Send a card to Naomi with a picture of her in the canoe, but without Jay.

Check in with Cherry.

Fly into Dayton to get her vehicle, then drive to Oxford, Ohio to start training with Lemon.

Grab a book on home remedies.

Winter jacket and possible boots.

Call Azrael to see if there is any 411 on Lemon she'd be willing to share.

Check on the leads of the Chrysalis and share what she'd found, which was nothing.

Just as she did with the boys at Apple's place, Helen made a special going away breakfast for Mustang. There was no need to caress his ego or pump him up for their next meeting, since she didn't know when it would be. In the past, her M.O. would have been an offer to help with the move, or create a folder with the steps needed for a smooth operation. Not this time. The move and getting his life from Oregon to Indiana would be solely upon him, that way, if he reconsidered, it had nothing to do with her.

As easily as she'd arrived, she kissed Jay lovingly and left for the airport. She was headed to Ohio to train with Lemon.

"Ohio," Mustang said, picking up his phone. It was a call he needed to make, but was hesitant. He dialed anyway to get the ball rolling.

"State your need," the voice said.

"The Mustang is moving to greener pastures and is requesting an assist," he said in the line. Gabriel Neary, the Archangel, was the last person he wanted to call but the ideal person to handle what he needed. It also helped that he and his brother Bleu Neary dealt in real estate, and Bleu had a crew of toothless construction workers that got jobs done. He also could get his hands on government surpluses of manufactured homes.

“State your needs,” the voice repeated.

“October 1st, I’ll be starting a permanent teaching position in Plainfield, Indiana at the Trooper Academy,” he said. “I texted you the property I’d like to have for my new home, but it will need a privacy fence all around and a double or triple wide residence with septic, propane, and satellite. I will wire you three plus your fee.”

The Archangel asked, “Indiana?”

“Yeap, can you keep it quiet until everything is in place?”

These kinds of moves made The Archangel nervous. Helen wasn’t a tested filly, and she was still in training. The anger she nurtured like a sick puppy didn’t have a home, and The Mustang was about to move into her backyard to graze. It could mean trouble if the woman felt as if she were being monitored. “Does she know?”

“She picked the property. Mustang out.”

THE HOUSE FELT DEAD without Helen in the space. He’d never considered himself to be a lonely man, but her absence really made him happy he was getting the hell out of Oregon. His new future meant coming home from work to her. In the meantime, there was packing and moving ahead for the next sixteen arduous days.

He went to check the workroom to see what would go and what needed to be packed separately for shipping across the country. He started with the workstation where Helen and he had worked to make the tables. A white envelope rested on the countertop. The bold script stated “ the first night without Helen ...”

“What in the world is this?” He said, holding the envelope. Mustang lifted the flap, seeing the words, “ Maybe have a seat first with a cold drink ?”

“Okay, Helen,” he said with a smile, wondering what she was up to with the package.

He held the envelope in his hand as he climbed the stairs. The white package rested on the end table while he poured himself a cold glass of lemonade, almost calling to him like a Siren on the crags, luring him to a salty finish. Seated in his favorite chair, he crossed his legs and opened the envelope. Mustang began to read the words, nearly holding his breath in anticipation.

Night 1- Ending My Day with Helen

Jay, around the house, I have left 14 more of these envelopes. Each evening, before closing your day, we shall end the evening together as we have the past two weeks. Over the next 16 days as you pack up your life in Oregon, preparing to start anew in Indiana, you will find these notes. In each envelope are the 15 reasons I am looking forward to sharing a life with you.

To keep it interesting and to hone those tracking skills of yours, Baby, each letter contains a clue as to the location of the next night’s envelope.

However, in this letter I have included reason one I’m looking forward to a life with you.

Talk soon. Your friend, lover and woman-Helen

Mustang touched his chest, surprised at how much the idea of reading a letter from Helen each night when he came in from work moved him. It also triggered his hunting instinct to find the letters in the house. He was packing, so she knew he’d find them all, but he was game to play along.

Initially, upon her departure, she’d seemed rather cold and distant, almost distracted, and he’d felt some kind of way. However, this made up for it. Mustang checked

inside the envelope and located another smaller notecard. He pulled it out and opened it to find a photo.

“Oh, dear Jesus!” he said, looking at a photograph of his bare, naked, flaccid penis. He looked closer at the image, and there was a pink post it note cut in the shape of an arrow pointed at his life givers. “When did she take this shit?”

Inside the notecard in Helen’s handwriting, he read the caption and nearly howled with laughter.

“Jay, I kept one of these pics for myself. It’s in my wallet. When anybody asks to see our kids, I’m going to whip out this photo of your pal Colt and tell them here’s a pic of our kids—they are sleeping.” Helen

He leaned back in his chair, taking a long swig of the lemonade. He chuckled. “This woman nicknamed my junk Colt,” he said, needing an extra second to gather himself. A moment was taken to go over the envelope to look for the clue for the location of the next message. He came back to the image of his member.

“Yeah, burning this right now,” he said, rising to make his way to the kitchen. A twinkle came to his own eyes when he realized Helen knew he’d want to burn the photo. The game was afoot.

“She’s batshit crazy, and I’m going to marry that woman first chance I get,” he said laughing. “This is gonna be good.”

OXFORD, OH – THE HOME of Lemon, The Poisons Specialist

Helen arrived in Oxford, Ohio, the hometown of Lemon and Miami University. It was a college town of about twenty-two thousand with lots of coffee shops, young people on cell phones, and in her estimation, the perfect place to be invisible. It was a

little after eight a.m. when she arrived at the cedar covered home and pulled around back to park. In the yard, she didn't know what to make of what she witnessed.

A storm must have come through during the night. Fallen leaves and branches littered the yard, and a chunk of the roof of an outbuilding was missing its head. However, it wasn't the buildings that caught her attention.

There were four people. The one in center was Lemon, looking rather pissed off, holding a large pickle jar with the heads of two vipers. To her left stood two teen girls who bore no resemblance to either Lemon, each other, or the man who stood holding the spade. Based on Lemon's reaction to the blood on the spade, the gentleman must have been the one to remove the heads of the visitors in the jar. He looked up at Helen.

His eyes made her stop walking, but just as quickly as he spotted her, he dropped his head.

"Hmmpf," she said, coming closer. "Lemon."

"Cranberry," she replied. "These are my wards, Bria and Ayanna."

"And the man?" Helen asked.

"I don't know this son of a bitch who came in here and killed my babies," Lemon said, angry enough to have spittle leave the corners of her mouth.

"Listen, lady," he said. "I was trying to get out of the storm. I went into the barn thingy, the roof came in, the cages broke, and those snakes are not indigenous to North America. I reacted and kept them from escaping."

"Who is going to help you escape from me? Do you know how valuable those were?"

“Do you know how deadly those were?” the man asked, adjusting his stance from an alpha to one of contrition.

There was a lot happening here, and Helen didn’t know what the hell was about to happen, but it sure beat being at Slow’s in that house. This place had energy. Lemon was a fiery one and the man would prove interesting. The girls, they were another story, but she had three months.

“Where should I drop my gear, and what can I do to help?” Helen asked, looking at the man again, who once more made eye contact, then dropped his eyes. “Interesting.”

- Fin-

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:01 am

Darkness descended from the clouds creating a murkiness to the middle of the day. Heavy winds howled as the forces gathered, galloping down the open highway in brisk gusts pushing leaves and debris like paper. Brushes with the heavy winds pushed against the truck nearly forcing the vehicle off the road. In the truck's cab, the driver's hands clutched the steering wheel as anxious eyes searched the roadway for an ingress to rest until the storm passed. Seeing no options for safety until the storm passed over, the driver continued along the roadway, careful of his speed.

For a moment, the pack of howling winds abated, allowing the driver to relax. If he could make it to the next town, there was a possibility of a chance. His journey, thus far had been long, arduous and more than anything, he wanted some ground time out of the vehicle. Two weeks. Two weeks he'd been driving, coming up from Guatemala on the Pan American Highway, taking back roads and narrow streets to avoid cameras and detection as he made his way to Elyria, Ohio. The driver needed a new start, a new life, and a new name. The one he currently owned was dirt. Along with the name being dirt, men, whom he served beside for years wanted his body buried deep alongside his name.

"I shouldn't have taken the job," he said, clasping to the steering wheel for dear life.

A co-worker, if you could call him that, came down with a hard case of COVID and couldn't make a high paying black ops assignment in Central America. His first thoughts were to turn it down. Rarely, if ever, did he take work with a fresh crew that he didn't know. Not only did he not know them, he'd never heard of several of the men, but his eyes were on the paycheck. All he needed was one more fat check and he could pay cash for the farm he wanted in Kentucky, get a few horses, and live the simple life. In hindsight, the amount he had would have brought down the points and

made the mortgage easy, but in his world, no one wanted a paper trail of monthly payments.

“Nothing in this life is easy,” he grumbled as the wind picked up again. This time, the howling turned to growling and the friendly chase of the wind, began an aggressive pursuit of the vehicle. The sound of a freight train on steroids came at him, pushing the truck sideways in the road against the force of the wind.

“Shit,” he said, looking for a place to pull off, but the rain began to fall in heavy droplets.

Windshield wipers, swiped back and forth trying to keep pace with the aggression of the downpour, but failed miserably in keeping the windscreen clear. At this rate, he’d be lucky to find anywhere on the open road to ride it out. Just as he thought there might be chance, the howling gust of the wind encircled the truck, lifting it from the road, hurling the vehicle into the air, across an open field, dumping the truck on its side. The driver, strapped in gasping for air, struggled mentally between staying inside the vehicle, or taking his chances outside in the elements. Darkness covered the truck, then the driver as he passed out from the impact of the crash.

He didn’t know how long he’d been unconscious, but when he came to, his pants were wet, crusted blood caked on his forehead, and a headache from hell greeted him like an old lover. In the backseat was his overnight bag with the last pair of clean underwear and a one semi funky pair of jeans. He wore his last pair of socks with a hole in the toe and half the heel eaten away from the wear inside of his second favorite pair of boots. Struggling, he unfastened the seat belt, pushing open the door of the pickup, climbing out slowly.

The field where he’d landed, now littered with debris and what looked like the remains of a dead chicken, meant a farm was nearby. He knew, there was no sign of life from the direction he’d driven, meaning people, he prayed were ahead. Night began falling and he needed to get a move on if he were to find a place to rest for the

evening.

“Damn it,” he said as he tried putting weight on his right leg. Something was hurting, but he didn’t have time to nurse it. It wasn’t broken; therefore, he would not try to fix whatever was happening below his knee. Safety was his priority.

A sign ahead read Butler County and he did not know where that was, but the last his reading on the GPS told him the end destination was 234 miles away from the current location to Elyria, with a busted-up truck, a stack of cash and an injured leg. He began walking along the side of the road, weary from the two weeks of driving. He was weary from the life he led. He was simply too weary to continue on for much longer. The non-quit commitment in his head wouldn't allow him to stop, even though his feet and body craved the rest. Five miles down the road, and a bit over the horizon, he saw lights.

A farm. A small farm with a barn. The barn meant he could rest in tonight, and maybe in the morning seek help from the farmer, to get a tow for his truck. Right now, he simply wanted to rest.

He eased his way onto the land, searching for cameras, and finding none, he made his way to the outbuilding. Darkness descended but he could clearly see half of the roof no longer being there after being pulled off by the same storm which put him on his feet; achy feet which wanted to rest. Inside the barn, an eerie feeling surround him and he stopped.

“Something is not right,” he said, looking about for a weapon. He spotted a spade on the wall and grabbed for it.

Slowly he moved forward as the tail of something slithery, double backed, and came at him. “Holy shit,” he said as the hood of the snake spread wide.

He tossed his bag at the reptile, catching it off guard and bringing the spade down

hard on his head, severing the body from the fangs. Barely having a moment, he turned to spot another venomous snake that had no business being in Ohio, or even in North America for that matter, and he made quick work of ending it as well.

“What in the hell have I walked into,” he asked, holding the spade, and walking the space.

Carefully, he moved, checking each of his steps, looking for more, but finding the two vivarium cages. “Good, there were only two of those fuckers.”

On a shelf, next to an empty workspace sat a jar of what used to be pickles. At least he hoped it was pickles. Unscrewing the cap, the tart scent of vinegar and pickling spices met his nose. In an empty glass, he emptied the pickling water. The jar would be the new home for the venomous head that he scooped up on the spade and dumped in the glass jar, sealing it tight.

Fatigue came at him in a rush. In the corner, he spotted a cot with a pillow. Gratitude overwhelmed him as he leaned back on the cot, inhaling the soft scent of jasmine. The cot belonged to a weird ass woman who owned a pet cobra and a Gaboon viper.

"I bet in the back somewhere are a bunch of Bunsen burners, with skeleton heads," he said softly before succumbing to the need for sleep.

WILL LIGHTENING, THE local weatherman, was a bald-faced liar. Each time that man put his face in front of Channel 8 WHMT- TV to broadcast the forecast, he got it wrong. Even on the days when it poured down raining cats, dogs, and limp lizards, Will Lightening stood in front of the camera with his oversized glossy white veneers, showcasing the randomly streaked highlights in his over permed hair, shouting to the rafters about the sunshine. Today he lied again.

Myrtle Kainker, PhD, a chemistry professor at Miami University, sat in the empty bathtub, holding onto the sides for dear life as angry winds howled in the late

afternoon. It was a tornado. A tornado was bearing down on her, the farm and everything she owned and that limp biscuit Will Lightning said prepare for sunshine and blue skies.

"As soon as I get on my feet, I'm going to bake that meat headed meteorologist some brownies laced with laxatives to run the lying shit out of his tiny brain," she said, slumping into the tub.

Loud winds whipped back and forth, each time the trees she promised to have trimmed next to the farm scraped against the glass she swore under her breath. The rickety weather vane she promised to get repaired, crashed through the back bedroom breaking the glass. The barn, which desperately needed a new roof was being peeled off the building section by section, and her lab, reinforced in the barn's rear would be protected. A horrific thought went through her mind based on the type of research she was working on with live specimens, made her sit up momentarily in the tub. She'd forgotten to place the cages in the barn's rear with in the protected room.

"Oh Lord," she whispered, praying the specimens didn't get loose. The last thing she needed was for those creatures to mix with any of the local population. If they got free, and managed to wreak havoc on the community, she would never forgive herself.

Forty minutes later, and grateful the storm was over, she climbed out of the tub, treading down the stairs to the living room fearful of the amount of damage the farm had sustained. The girls, whom were her wards, would be home soon from Cincinnati. The call came through fifteen minutes ago. The girls were coming down the main road. Last night she'd been alone, but not afraid, simply concerned.

Wearing rubber boots which came to her knees, she exited the front door mentally prepared to see the damage left by the tornado. Instead, what she found was a strange, racially ambiguous man in her yard standing over the carcasses of her lab specimens. He also held in his hands her pickle jar which normally contained the morning

pickled vinegar she enjoyed consuming before a cup of tea. Her eyes were then drawn to the contents of the jar.

"Are those my babies? Did you kill my babies?" She screamed at the man. "Who the hell are you? What are you doing here? And why did you kill my babies?"

The man, solid in form, loaded with muscles and only wearing the remnants of a tattered wife beater tee, loose fitted jeans and worn-out boots, frowned at the African American woman. He was surprised she was the owner of the home. After seeing the serpents, he automatically assumed the property was owned by a man with missing teeth and a rebel flag wearing a red ball cap. He also expected said owner to possess a mutt with a backwoods name like Butchie. Instead, what he had in front of him was something entirely different. His curiosity was piqued.

Adding a bucket load of fuel to the fired-up situation, a car arrived with two teenage girls. Based on their expression, there was a relationship between the woman in the boots who kept deadly snakes she called her babies and the teen girls. Jared found no familial resemblance, yet they were protective of the woman. Immediately, they flanked both sides of the snake whisper. He respected that since he was, in fact the interloper. He sat down the pickle jar with the snake heads. He held up his hands to show he was unarmed and lowered the intonation of his voice.

"The tornado picked up my truck and dumped it, with me inside behind the wheel in a field, five miles down the road," he explained. "I'm Jared Bane. I walked as far as I could with my injured leg and found your barn."

"And you feel that gave you the right to walk into my barn and kill my babies?" Myrtle asked.

"No," he said, "I walked into the barn and was greeted by the big one, standing upright with the full hood expanded and he was free. Then the Gaboon came around the corner at me, so I decapitated them both."

"You had no right!"

"Right? You want to talk about right? You have two of the deadliest snakes known to man in glass cages in a barn in the middle of Ohio," he said. "I'm certain no lab knows you have them and in the middle of a storm, the glass is broken and they are free. What if, instead of me in the barn, one of these young ladies walked in there, would they have known what to do against a giant King Cobra? I think not. It could have been you as well."

"So, I'm supposed to thank you? I think the hell not!" She said, snatching up the pickle jar with the two heads in it.

As she opened her mouth to give him an earful, another vehicle arrived. The crunch of the tires on the gravel was enough to lower the temperature on the conversation. The car came to a stop as a black woman stepped out, observing everything around her. Her eyes, went first to the man standing over the dead snake bodies. Next, she took in the woman with the pickle jar with two snake heads from the bodies on the ground. Then she looked at the teen girls. None of the items went together.

Her response, "hmpf."

The woman holding the jar gritted her teeth. "On top of everything else, I forgot about you coming today."

The girls asked, "who is she? And who is he?"

Helen McDaniel simply smiled, "I am The Cranberry. You can call me Helen."

- End

Coming Spring 2025