

CHAPTER 14

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Whether it is, chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, or humility didn't matter—Birch loathed all the virtues. Feeding and then shoveling horse shit took patience and in weird way humility; meaningless work forced on him by his mother. Now his patience and diligence were being tested with unpacking solar panels, peeling off stickers, putting on new sticker and repacking the panels. Like shoveling shit, these type jobs were best suited for unskilled migrant workers. If it were not for a genetic fluke that left his skin without pigments and ocular albinism in both eyes Birch would have sought out a journeyman job in the trades. Prudence and living virtuously was not in his DNA. Sequoia continually professed how cruel life was and that if she'd known early on she would have controlled fate.

Marie, Carlos and Cecelia followed Zack through the warehouse. Birch shut off the heat gun and bit by bit noticed that Cecelia was different. She was short in stature; had flat facial features and her ears seemed small. Bit by bit Cecelia noticed Birch and thought she was seeing a ghost. She'd seen tall skinny adults before but never pure white skin with matching white hair. The pale light blue eyes seemed to say that Birch was a troubled spirit—that he was different.

"Birch, you've met Carlos before. This is the rest of his family, Maria his wife and Cecelia his daughter."

"Hello," Birch said and gave a slight nod toward a full figured brown woman shielding her daughter behind her.

"Carlos is going to be working with us for a couple of weeks. My neighbor is going to run a few tests on him. She heads up the Oncology department at Dallas Memorial Hospital."

"Yeah okay. He could re-label the panels before they get shipped to Dubai."

"I thought Carlos would work in the lab and pull reliability data on

33 the quad panels. You'll have to keep up the shipping department."

34 In a silent rage the blood rushed to Birch's face. "I thought you
35 said I'd have a shot at doing lab work."

36 "You will..." Zach sensed the distain. "But, Carlos has a PhD in
37 Geology, plus an engineering degree. It would be good to get a
38 different set of eyes on the reliability and return on investment for
39 quad panels."

40 The 'eyes' statement added to the hurt. "I get it, another Mexican
41 taking an American's job!" Birch was surprised by his own words.
42 Being albino was one thing, being homeschooled with limited science
43 and zero shop classes was another but calling out the macular retina
44 Albino's are born with was not called for. Birch switched back on the
45 heat gun and pointed it toward a Son Source label.

46 Carlos, Maria and Cecelia followed Zach across the open warehouse
47 area toward the cleanroom. Cecelia held her mom's hand but kept
48 looking back at Birch—he was different like she was. Carlos didn't need
49 any more than the password for the lab computer and what folder the
50 parts list was in. Within the hour he'd built a reliability spreadsheet
51 and was compiling data. Maria and Cecelia sat at one of the stainless
52 steel lab tables and did schoolwork.

53 This same routine went on for the next three days. Birch was at his
54 tipping point. Zach felt the tension between the lab and warehouse but
55 the number one priority was to get at least five hundred full sized solar
56 panels shipped to the Grand Burj Hotel in Dubai. A larger order was
57 pending dependant on the fulfillment of the first.

58 Birch shut off the heat gun when Zach tapped him on the shoulder.
59 Carlos positioned himself behind Zach so to prevent eye to eye
60 contact. For the last three days there had been many stern hard looks
61 from the observation window. Carlos knew the look and the
62 resentment that over half of Americans' have toward Mexicans.

63 "I'm driving Carlos over to Dallas Memorial to see a doctor friend of
64 mine. Marie and Cecelia will be in the clean room doing home
65 schooling."

66 "Yeah whatever!" Birch stepped to the side and flashed a stern look
67 back at Carlos. "Y'all get free medical care too?" The snide under the

68 breath remark was common in Texas.

69 Zach ignored the callous words. "Do you think you can have the
70 five hundreds panels ready to ship by Monday?"

71 "I'm working and double checking everything. I know how
72 important that not even one Jesus sticker is left on a panel." Birch
73 needed to lay some distain on Zach. It felt good to play the Christian
74 hypocrisy card, especially since he was a nonbeliever.

75 "Could you work Saturday if need be?" Zach felt the tension; the
76 shipment was do or die for Son Source.

77 "Probably not! Sequoia has a lot of stuff that I need to do on the
78 ranch." Birch felt good shoving it into Zach's face.

79 "Yo podria trabajar." Carlos offered. Which meant, 'I could work' in
80 Spanish. It felt good shoving it back at Birch.

81 "On second thought, I'll come in to bail y'all out." Birch was boiling
82 inside.

83 "That would be great. This order for the Grand Burj Hotel in Dubai
84 has a lot riding on it."

85 "If need be I'll come in early on Sunday also. I'll make a
86 spreadsheet for all panels that get tagged and repacked."

87 "A spreadsheet isn't necessary. Just keep listing them on the
88 notepad like you have been."

89 "I know how to make a spreadsheet," Birch replied with an
90 informative tone.

91 "That's okay, just keep listing the panels on paper like you have
92 been. I'll build a spreadsheet after they get shipped."

93 "I can add a column to the reliability spreadsheet that I built on the
94 lab computer and call it **terminado**." Carlos offered.

95 The suggestion infuriated Birch! Putting the Spanish word for **done**
96 in the spreadsheet was not going to happen—no matter what. "I'll
97 come in Sunday if needed. All y'all Christians aren't supposed to work
98 on the weekends anyhow. The panels will be ready for shipment
99 Monday morning, hell or high water."

100 "We'll be back by closing. Just get as many panels ready as you
101 can and we'll figure out a weekend schedule later."

102 "Honor the Sabbath," Carlos said under his breath.

103 Birch switched on the heat gun. The loud blowing noise put an end
104 to the three way pissing match. Out of the corner of his eye he
105 watched Carlos give a long hug to Cecelia. Than Cecelia turned up her
106 MP3 player and twirled in a circle like she was a mystical fairy. She
107 danced around Carlos and then fluttered into the pressurized
108 cleanroom.

109 Two hours of repetitious work and sore fingernails only fueled his
110 wrath toward migrants taking over Texas. Cecelia opened the door
111 about every ten minutes and each time took a few steps further into
112 the warehouse area. Maria would call out, "Volver volver," and each
113 time she stared at Birch for a longer time.

114 Finally it happened! Cecelia slowly reached out and gently touched
115 Birch's forearm. The pure white, hairless skin was ghost like; she had
116 never seen a Caucasian so pale.

117 Birch returned the gesture by lightly touching the tip of Cecelia's
118 small flat nose. She let out a short little laugh. In some odd way it was
119 like a kiss of wonderment. Marcia rushed out into the open area and
120 pulled Cecelia back and then said, "Agua."

121 Birch knew a few words of Spanish. "Sigueme, he said and then
122 motioned for them to follow and they headed down a hall toward the
123 breakroom. Out of nowhere Cecelia reached up and grabbed Birch's
124 hand. This type of child contact was something he'd never
125 experienced—it felt innocent and pure at the same time.

126 Maria had never seen Cecelia bond with someone so quickly.
127 Additionally, she'd never experienced such brilliant white skin
128 contrasted with luminous blue eyes. Latino's are stereotyped brown
129 skin, dark hair with dark brown eyes, Birch didn't have any of those
130 traits. Birch looked like an aberration and for sure wasn't an apparition
131 like Mother Mary. In some nonjudgmental way, Maria would have to
132 explain the difference to Cecelia.

133 Birch won even more points when he got a chocolate milk and
134 plastic wrapped blueberry muffin from the vending machines and
135 handed them to Cecelia. His last purchase was a bottle of water that
136 he handed to Maria and said, "Agua."

137 Maria looked up. "Gracias, Señor."

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This brief encounter felt warm and wrong at the same time. The almost black hair and wide open brown eyes were part of it. The smooth brown skin was another piece, along with full shaped figure. From the six foot plus height his eyes wandered down and stared at the exposed and pushed up breasts.

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Cecelia broke the awkward sensual downward look when she grabbed the bottle of water from Marie and put the chocolate milk on the counter. She looked directly at Birch, "Sin lácteos."

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Birch's immediately raised his eyes and his face started to turn red. He'd been caught in a sin by a young girl. Marie giggled. She wondered how much Spanish Birch knew. Culturally, Hispanic women are proud to display their motherly parts especially after a Quinceañera.

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"El baño back there." Birch pointed toward two doors at the far end of the break room and dashed off.

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Fifteen minutes later Birch felt a tap on his shoulder. "Te ayudo," Maria said and at the same time took the heat gun from Birch. She immediately started to warm up a label and burnt her fingers when she tried to peel it off.

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Zach put his hand over hers and demonstrated how to move the heat gun back and forth so not to overheat it. A scent of perfume sent his thoughts to a lustful place. To lust, even in thought is a sin—but Birch wasn't a believer. He should have pushed Maria back into the cleanroom but he really could use the help.

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Within an hour they had a routine down. Birch would unpack a panel, Maria would heat up the old label and peel it off, Cecelia would put on the new label and then help Birch place it in new remarked box and put it on a pallet. As Birch unpacked the next panel Cecelia would turn up her small radio and dance and spin around on the concrete floor as though she was a ballerina. The music and magical dance movements helped to pass the repetitive task of replacing Son Source with Sun Source labels.

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The music overrode the pounding on the customer entrance door. Sequoia wasn't a patient person, especially toward Birch, a son that

173 never grew into a man. She pounded on the entrance door three more
174 times before she went around to the side employee entrance. Over the
175 years Birch asked her to never come in to get him. He didn't like the
176 other workers teasing him about being picked up by his mommy. The
177 gawking and stares from albinism were mostly silent but being vocally
178 called out a Momma's boy was even more embarrassing.

179 Sequoia barged through the back door as though she owned the
180 place. Being the only child of UC Berkeley college professors' civil
181 disobedience ran in her blood. She looked toward the music and
182 spotted the trio multitasking way across the warehouse. "Birch we
183 need to go! I have a load of hay that needs to be put up!" No one
184 heard her

185 While Cecelia was dancing and twirling she caught a glimpse of the
186 tall gray haired cowboy booted woman stomping across the concrete.
187 Cecelia stopped and took up her safe space behind her mom. Maria
188 noticed the stern faced woman that had on men's coveralls and
189 reached for the small radio and turned it off.

190 "Birch we need to go! You have two ton of hay that needs to be
191 put away before dark."

192 "Oh crap? Is it already quitting time?"

193 "Way past." Sequoia snapped. Then she looked over at Marie and
194 stepped to the side to get a better look at Cecelia. "What's your boss
195 doing? Hiring kid's and illegal's after he laid everyone else off?"

196 "I don't know what he's up to. This is the wife and daughter of a
197 Mexican Engineer that Zach knows."

198 "It figures, another Christian white male abusing and using
199 anybody they can profit off of."

200 Cecelia peeked around Maria and in a barely audio tone said. "I'm
201 a Christian." It was strange; although her voice was weak her
202 commitment of faith was strong.

203 Sequoia frowned, if she had more time she would set Cecelia
204 straight about white Aryan indoctrination and why she would be
205 excluded from a perfect race. The same message she had preached to
206 Birch when he was a child. "Go get your lunch box. You got two ton of
207 hay to put up before it gets dark."

208 "Could you tell Maria that she and her daughter were a big help.
209 They don't speak English." Zach darted off toward the cafeteria. The
210 half pint of chocolate milk still sat unopened on the counter

211 When he returned with his lunch box in hand Maria and Sequoia
212 were in a heavy conversation, Birch could only make out a few words.
213 He did interpret that chocolatada meant chocolate and lácteos must
214 have meant milk." Maria pointed at her boobs and said, "Estas
215 chocolatada lácteos." It didn't matter what language they were
216 speaking, Birch knew they were laughing at him.

217 Cecelia saw Birch's white face turn red for the third time that day.
218 She came from around the backside of Marie and took his hand.
219 "Gracias for the muffin señor."

220 The humiliation made it hard to vocalize anything. Finally, Birch got
221 some words out. "Tell Maria that they should go back and wait in the
222 cleanroom until Zach gets back. And tell her I wasn't looking at her in
223 that way."

224 Sequoia was fluent in Spanish. The conversation was now more
225 serious and they were talking about Cecelia. Maria got the last words
226 in and then turned toward and reached out for Birch's hand. She
227 squeezed it and said, "Que la paz esté contigo."

228 Her hand, wide open brown eyes and smile had a tranquil feel.
229 Then she took Cecelia by the hand and they walked toward the lab to
230 wait.

231 "Marie said to tell you the reason that Cecelia didn't drink the
232 chocolate milk you bought for her is because Down syndrome children
233 are lactose intolerant to cow's milk."

234 "Oh? Is that what her daughter has?"

235 "Yes, she's a Down's child."

236 "Did she get Down's from being vaccinated?"

237 "No, she was born that way. Just like your Albinism. Its a genetic
238 disorder that happens to the fetus."

239 "Oh? Do you think kids bully her?"

240 "No, Marie home schools like I did you. That way kids don't pick on
241 her."

242 "I'd rather had been bullied. Maybe, at least one schoolmate would

243 have been a friend.”

244 “Let go! We need to put up hay.” Sequoia hated it when other’s
245 challenged her about home schooling and its lack of socializing. Now
246 her own flesh and blood was doing it. *I wished there would have been*
247 *genetic testing when I was pregnant*, Sequoia thought as they hurried
248 out the door.

249 Sequoia wheeled the one ton Dodge pickup and loaded flat bed
250 trailer around an old green camper van. A white Prius shot into the
251 parking lot and headed directly toward them. The trailer brakes
252 screeched and the hay rocked forward. “Fucking idiot,” Sequoia yelled
253 out the drivers’ window.

254 Zach circled the Prius so to pull up on the passenger side of the
255 overloaded Dodge pickup.

256 Birch rolled down the window and leaned out. “I’ll have five
257 hundred solar panels ready to ship by noon tomorrow.”

258 “That would be great to get them headed overseas early.”

259 “Yeah, I busted my ass so that no one will have to come in this
260 weekend.”

261 “Yeah I can see you got a ton of hay to unload.”

262 “Two-ton to be exact!” Sequoia yelled across the cab. She
263 distained self-righteous people; especially the ones the incorporated
264 Christianity into a business name.

265 From way up in the one ton truck Birch couldn’t see across to the
266 passenger seat where Carlos was reclined. He felt weak from all the
267 gadolinium contrast the hospital had pumped into him.

268 “Sounds good.” Zach wheeled around the green camper van and
269 parked next to the steps to the employee entrance. As he helped
270 Carlos to the couch in his office he tapped on the cleanroom window.

271 Zach had made last minute plans to meet up with someone at
272 dinner. If the evening traffic was heavy over to Forth Worth he’d miss
273 the window of opportunity for a surprise. From his desk he called St.
274 Andrews’ church but Deacon David’s phone went to voice mail.

275 Zach told Carlos to rest on the couch as long as he needed and to
276 lock the employee door when they left. He quickly tapped on the
277 observation window into the cleanroom, waved and then ran across

278 the concrete warehouse floor.

279 The converted catholic school cafeteria was packed with migrant
280 workers, drug addicts, Veterans and a few families. Zach spotted
281 Deacon David by his clergy collar and worked himself to the serving
282 side of food line. Within five minutes he had a hairnet and latex gloves
283 on and was dishing out spaghetti. After twenty five minutes from the
284 serving post he spotted an old classmate in line; someone that was
285 more foe than friend. When the once popular jock and state all star
286 football player spotted Zach he pulled the brim of the blue and silver
287 Dallas Cowboys sports cap down to hide his face.

288 "Frank, I'd like to talk with you," Zach said as he ladled spaghetti
289 on to the metal tray. Frank didn't lift his head or acknowledge Zach.

290 Deacon David observed the cold interaction and took up the
291 serving spaghetti post. Zach watched Frank meander to a vacant table
292 at the far end of the cafeteria and sit with his back to everyone. Zach
293 took up a chair next to someone he reviled on more than one
294 occasion. Finally, there was a handshake.

295 A blunt invitation was followed with advice to keep a low key
296 distant. Something Frank never did all through high school. The
297 gluttony of food and drink are one thing—the gluttony of drugs almost
298 always is a dead end. Alone and broken Frank wandered out into the
299 night. He untied his three legged service dog from the bike rack. Cody
300 was not only his best friend—he was Frank's only friend.

301 After the last tray was washed and the twenty gallon pots were
302 scrubbed Deacon Dave approached Zach pushing a broom. "Do you
303 want to talk?"

304 "Sure, I appreciate your help locating the father of my stepson. His
305 son Ben is going into the armed forces. It's just something I felt called
306 to do."

307 They talked for over an hour. Deacon David shared how he had a
308 decorated war buddy that became a priest after the Vietnam War.
309 Their conversation turned technical when David shared his past
310 working on mountain tops on transmission equipment. At that time the
311 AP wire service wasn't using encryption protocols, only the United
312 States Department of Statistics was (DOS). He invited Zach to come

313 back anytime and he'd show him an old decoder box that housed the
314 first generation decoder know as the Clipper Chip. Deacon David
315 sounded more like a conspiracy theorist than a man of the cloth when
316 he went off about how politicians win elections with skewed polling
317 data.

318 Zach's brain was spinning at full speed while driving back from
319 Forth Worth. *Hopefully, Ben's graduation speech goes off without a*
320 *hitch. Sally's not speaking to me since I sold her BMW. If she finds out*
321 *about what I just did our marriage will be over. Dr. Coreen is always*
322 *so professional. She was so gracious to do an MRI for no charge and*
323 *list it as research. Carlos health speculations are in line to Deacon*
324 *David's conviction that RF energy is harmful. At least Birch got ahead*
325 *of schedule removing Son Source labels...*

326 The repeating worrisome thoughts halted when Zach drove into the
327 employee parking lot and the headlights showed that the old green
328 camper van hadn't moved. *That's odd they're still here.* The lights
329 were off in the warehouse. The dim light shinning out from the
330 cleanroom window was enough to navigate across the warehouse.
331 Zach peeked through the glass and did not expect to see three people
332 in sleeping bags huddled together on a foam rubber camping mattress.

333 Somewhat mortified he left the Prius in electric mode which was
334 silent and would not disturb anyone. *God now what? Are you putting*
335 *more to deal with because I changed the Son Source stickers? I had*
336 *to! I don't want to lose everything. I've read the biblical book of Job*
337 *and I don't have that kind of strength. 'Our daily bread' is all I'm*
338 *asking from you.* Zack's argumentative discerning ended when he
339 slowly pushed open the kitchen door.

340 The kitchen light came on. "Your girlfriend, Dr. Kurtz called three
341 times this evening and needs to meet with you... Again..." The ambush
342 was only part of it! In a huff she slammed the door going out to the
343 garage. It was her turn to take a long drive to think. Pastor Tom was
344 her spiritual coach and was always willing to meet her no matter what
345 time it was.

346 Zach crept down the hall. Kendra was fast asleep. He knocked on
347 Ben's door. "It's open."

348 "How's thing going?" Zack ask through the half opened door.

349 "I'm still working on my commencement speech." Ben looked up

350 from the note pad. Sprawled out on his stomach and with his knees

351 bent upward his toes still touched the wall above the headboard. He'd

352 really outgrown his bed his senior year.

353 "I can help you with the speech if you want?"

354 "No thanks." I'm just making sure there's no reference to God or

355 Jesus per the school guidelines."

356 "What?" Zach stepped inside the room and pushed some dirty

357 clothes with his foot so to make a path.

358 "Yeah, remember how I told you about my favorite teacher Mr.

359 Docherty. How he got fired over the word 'God' in the Pledge of

360 Allegiance."

361 "Wasn't he trying to spread his religious beliefs in the classroom?

362 At least that's what the new media reported."

363 "Not really. Mr. Docherty was telling us that the word God was

364 added to the pledge by congress in 1954. He told us that it was an

365 effort to fight the influence of communism at that time in history. He

366 wanted our class to debate rather to omit the words 'under God' in the

367 Pledge of Allegiance like it was originally written."

368 "I didn't know that. It sounds like Mr. Docherty was a good

369 teacher."

370 "He was." Zach flipped the note pad over. "You know he came to

371 all my soccer games even after he got fired. He loved soccer although

372 he couldn't kick a ball after the Korean War."

373 "Why's that?" Zach asked.

374 "Cause he lost half his leg when he stepped on a land mine."

375 "Oh..." Zach steadied himself on the bedpost. It took a minute to

376 compile whether any war was good. "Ben, why do you want to join up?

377 Especially after having firsthand knowledge like that?

378 "Mr. Docherty often asked our history class, 'What would the world

379 look like if it were not for the United States Armed Forces?"

380 Zach drew a deep breath; he had never served. He justified his

381 service to the United States as being an environmental fighter a

382 steward for cheap and clean energy.

383 Ben didn't need to draw a breath to rationalize an answer. "Mr.
384 Docherty is one of the reasons I want to serve."

385 "Ben, just remember that there will be people with different
386 viewpoints at your graduation. So be careful with what you do and
387 what you say. Respect for different beliefs is important."

388 "I know..." Ben flipped the notepad back over. "I've always
389 respected how you and mom use the business name **Son Source**.

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