







# Operation: Valiant Angel

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**Category:** Romance, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** Valiant: Possessing or showing courage or determination.

Love was not a word that Shepherd Security Operator Jimmy 'Taco' Wilson was acquainted with. What he was very well acquainted with was being one of the best snipers Delta Force had ever seen. He served with honor and distinction and had more confirmed kills than most. He was proud of his record. And that included his record since he was personally recruited by Colonel Sam Shepherd, a man he respected and trusted.

A humble man, he saw none of his acts as anything other than just doing his job. It had been many years since he'd had a long-term romantic relationship, which he thought just couldn't coexist with his Special Forces career. He'd accepted that long ago and was fine with it. As a matter of fact, he loved his life just as it was.

Rae Ella Easton had been reborn into a new life not quite a year earlier when she'd helped the DEA in an operation that left her a woman the cartel would love to find and make an example of. Hence the rebirth as Reina Ellis, a clean and sober, upstanding citizen. Her entire life had been a struggle. She'd been on her own since she was fifteen when she ran away from her fifth foster home. She was a survivor who accepted all she'd been through and overcome as just what life was. Even helping the DEA when she did, she didn't see it as a brave act. It's what anyone else would have done had they been in a similar situation.

She had one friend who knew her past and was not a danger knowing her now because he'd helped to get her out when things got scary. He was a man who was as kind as he was attractive, a sympathetic ear who offered her solid advice. She could talk with him about anything. That man was Jimmy Wilson.

But when pushed to identify the relationship, Wilson had a hard time calling it a friendship. One of the problems was, he hadn't told any of his teammates that he'd stayed in touch with Rae. It was his secret. The other big problem was that Jimmy Wilson did not have friendships with women.

When Reina suspects someone in her new life is in trouble, getting involved also puts her in danger. Jimmy Wilson is the only person

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Alpha

Armed with the M110 Semi-Automatic Sniper System (SASS), loaded with 7.62 X 51 millimeter NATO rounds, Delta Force team member Jimmy 'Taco' Wilson lay prone atop the hard and hot stone roof. He'd been in position for over four hours, lying in wait for the high-value target. His gaze was fixed through his scope on the outdoor café area 2,600 feet away. Henry 'Rowdy' Wright, his spotter, was beside him. It was twelve hundred hours, and their target was an hour late for his meeting, which would be his last.

The air was still. The temperature was a stifling ninety-seven degrees, and the sun beat down on the pair relentlessly. It was just another fabulous day in the Sandbox, where Wilson had spent the majority of his adult life. But he was doing a job he was born to do. James Tressman Wilson knew from a young age that the U.S. Army was his destination after high school. His carefree summers on the Jersey shore throughout his childhood and teen years were a distant memory, a life before training, deployments, and covert operations were normal.

"Silver Mercedes," Rowdy said. "Our target just got out of the back seat."

Wilson moved the scope a fraction of a hair, which swung the view to the parking area beside the café. "Got him."

Through his comms he heard the voice of his mission lead. "Take the shot when it's available."

"Roger," he mumbled, focusing in and following the target, waiting until the best

possible shot presented itself. Wilson exhaled a breath and relaxed, his mind in the zone, his finger on the trigger. The shot was clear. He gently squeezed the trigger. Direct hit, center mass. His target went down.

“Direct hit,” Rowdy confirmed. “Now let’s get the hell out of Dodge.”

Their escape route was, as always, clearly planned, with multiple alternate routes available. They were off the roof, boots pounding down the interior stairs, seconds later. Behind the building was the truck, with team member, John ‘Swisher’ Sweets, at the wheel. They were out of the village before the location of the shot was even identified. It was later, after nightfall, that the four-man team was picked up by a chopper and returned to their base of operation.

After a shower and a hot meal, Wilson was relaxing in his bunk when he was summoned to the CO’s office. He entered to find the familiar faces of Colonel Sam ‘Bigbear’ Shepherd and Sergeant Major John ‘Coop’ Cooper, who he had briefly served with when he first checked into the unit. They were both legends in the SpecOps community. Wilson came to attention.

“At ease,” Shepherd said. He pointed to the chair across from him.

Wilson sat, but not at ease.

“Things are nearly wrapped up here,” Shepherd began. “The target you took down today is one of the last on our scorecard. Are you ready for something different, something equally important as the work you’ve been doing here?”

“Yes, sir,” Wilson answered.

Cooper handed him a sheet of paper. It was a nondisclosure agreement. He scanned through it and signed it. Everything he did was classified top secret, so its contents

were not of interest to him. He handed it back.

“I’m recruiting the best for a new unit I’ve formed. I have a place for you,” Shepherd said.

Wilson listened to Shepherd lay out the guidelines of his new team. He knew right away it was a black ops unit. He liked the idea of operating domestically to protect the U.S. directly. It sounded like their jobs would be varied. They’d interface with the alphabet agencies and the U.S. military, as well as operate on foreign soil. All sounded appealing. And the fact that it was Shepherd and Cooper who would be running this unit made it more appealing. They had his trust. He signed on the spot.

Less than a week later, he was in the suburbs of Chicago, wearing civvies, and checking into the headquarters of his new unit. Shepherd made him the team leader of the newly formed Charlie Team, which consisted of him, two Marine Raiders, and an Army combat medic. They were one of four teams Shepherd had recruited from mostly SpecOps units from all branches.

### Seven Years Later

Wilson was on a special assignment, riding shotgun beside teammate Anthony ‘Razor’ Garcia, who was not only the number three in charge of the agency but was also the lead for the Digital Team. They were three hours into a six-hour drive to Waterloo, Iowa.

Several months earlier, Wilson had been with a team assigned to investigate Cameron Woods, whose info was picked up during a CIA surveillance operation. Shepherd Security had a contract with the CIA to run down domestic leads from info the CIA had obtained where the potential crime was unknown, or it didn’t fit neatly into any of the other alphabet agencies’ scope of operations.

Wilson's thoughts wandered to a mission nearly a year earlier that he had also been assigned to a special mission with Garcia. They pushed through the doors and into the Dark Spot Bar, in Norfolk, Virginia, where they were to meet with an asset Garcia was familiar with, Rae Ella Easton. She had information on the murder of a deep cover DEA agent and a drug smuggling ring that was operating to bring illegal drugs onto the naval base and onto ships that were preparing to sail. They made contact and Miss Easton agreed to be extracted with her info, but it had to be at that moment. Wilson got the car and pulled it into the alleyway behind the bar, where Garcia and Easton would meet him.

As he drove behind the row of buildings, the scene he came up on was sketchy, unsecured, with multiple people loitering around. He could see in Garcia's face as he approached that he felt something was off just as strongly as Wilson did. The entire area was filthy. There were three homeless people spilling out of trash bag tents with their belongings stuffed in shopping carts. A fourth man laid on his side, curled up next to a dumpster. Used needles littered the ground, co-mingled with broken beer bottles and other miscellaneous trash.

Through the windshield, he watched Rae Ella light up a cigarette. She blew the smoke straight up into the air.

"I'm not liking that dude snoozing near the dumpster," Cooper said through comms. He, Shepherd, and team member Madison 'Xena' Miller were on from HQ.

"Unless he passed out as he walked by it, that isn't anywhere anyone would choose to sleep," Shepherd's voice agreed.

Wilson watched as Garcia walked towards the dumpster. He kicked the unconscious man with the toe of his boot. Wilson saw that Garcia held his .40 caliber Glock pointed at the man. The guy didn't move. He didn't moan. Didn't even flinch. He appeared to be out cold, or he was dead, which was a distinct possibility.

Wilson, in the car, pulled up beside Easton. Suddenly, the back door to the bar swung open with a loud thud as it hit the wall beside it. The barrel-chested man who'd been inside the bar, who she'd called Tubbs, stepped out, gun in hand. Gunfire erupted. Bullets hit the wall behind Rae Ella, who dropped into a squat and covered her head with her arms. Wilson returned fire, as did Garcia, as he rushed back to her and shielded her body with his own. Tubbs was struck center mass. Garcia pulled Rae Ella to her feet.

More gunshots echoed through the alley. Rae Ella screamed out. Her hand clutched her right shoulder. The area was already saturated with blood. Wilson saw the shooter a split second before the shots were fired. He jumped from the car to have the shot. It was a man in one of the garbage bag tents. Wilson's aim was, as always, deadly accurate. The now lifeless man slumped over. A revolver lay discarded beside him.

Garcia grabbed Rae Ella and pulled her to the car. He pushed her into the back seat and crawled in over her as Wilson jumped back behind the wheel and sped the rest of the way down the alley.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Rae’s hit,” Garcia yelled over her steady stream of curses. “Right upper shoulder.”

“Nearest hospital is two miles north of your location,” Madison’s voice came across the speaker in Shepherd’s office and through the comms in both Garcia and Wilson’s ears. “Take a left at the end of the alleyway and then a right at the next stoplight.”

“Roger that, Xena,” Wilson replied.

“Get her patched up and on the Lear as fast as you can,” Cooper ordered.

“Hang in there, Rae, we’re getting you to a hospital. But you gotta tell me what you know right now. Who had him killed? And who was responsible for that attack on us just now?”

She spilled all she knew as Wilson drove way over the posted speed limits to get her to the hospital.

“I’ve got you, Rae,” Garcia assured her, trying to calm her.

Wilson’s eyes flickered to the rearview mirror. Garcia was keeping pressure on the wound.

Wilson’s thoughts next went to the plane ride back, when the Op was finished. Rae Ella Easton flew back with them and was turned over to the U.S. Marshals to be given a new identity with thanks for the intel she provided that brought down that drug ring. During the ride home, Wilson had sat next to her, and they’d chatted. Getting to know her a bit, he discovered that she was a nice woman, who had been

dealt a shitty hand in life. She'd done the best she could. He hoped her next chapter would be better, safer.

He'd stayed in contact with her since then, something no one else on the team knew. Her new identity had her living just south of Waterloo. They were close enough to consider checking in on her. Maybe he and Garcia could make a slight detour after their assignment was finished.

"I have reservations about him," Garcia's gravelly voice said, pulling Wilson's thoughts back to the present.

"That's why we're driving out, isn't it?" Wilson asked. "I sat beside him the entire time you had access to his computer. I'm telling you; this guy wasn't nervous about what you'd find. He was compliant. I got the sense he's a good guy deep inside, regardless of what he and his sister were up to. Do you have any specific issues with him?"

It turned out that Cameron's sister, Briana Woods, a former Army MP, had dragged him into helping her with a domestic violence victim rescue operation she was running. What they'd been doing was border-line illegal, but it was also recognized that they probably saved countless women and children over the years. Shepherd had offered Briana Woods a job and brought her operation under the Shepherd Security umbrella just the day before. She would receive full Operator training. Now, Wilson and Garcia were driving to visit her brother with a potential job offer as well.

"We got into his system far too easily. That's my first problem with him," Garcia said.

"And your second?" Wilson asked.

Garcia laughed. "His video game playing. I don't trust any man that plays first-person

shooter video games.”

Wilson also laughed. “Well, I guess I can see your point on that, given what we do. But the job on the Digital Team is just him digging into information online. It’s not like we’d ever asked the guy to staff Ops or pick up a rifle and storm a building.”

Garcia raised an eyebrow behind his sunglasses. “That’s just the thing; we don’t know what may be asked of any person at any time. But if we’re in an absolute pinch and there’s no one else, we just may have to tap on their shoulder. Would I ever want to staff Brielle in Ops? Probably not. But if the shit’s hit the fan, we just might have to,” Garcia said.

Wilson thought about that for a moment. Brielle was one of the Digital Team members, and also the civilian wife of one of the Operators on Delta Team. She was damn good at what she did on the Digital Team but did not have the training or experience to staff Ops. “So, the members of Bravo Team are nearly through their reorientation. I know none of them are too keen on travelling right away. Isn’t Shepherd looking to use them in both Ops and on the Digital Team?”

“I know Shepherd has given a lot of thought to their role. I think that bringing Briana Woods’ rescue missions under the Shepherd Security umbrella will give an opportunity to Bravo Team for part-time in the office and part-time travel just by staffing those cases,” Garcia said.

Wilson was even more confused by the possible inclusion of Cam Woods on the team. Would his skills really be needed with Bravo Team back from staffing the personal security cases? And even though he thought he was a good guy, Wilson believed Cam Woods to be an unlikely candidate for employment with Shepherd Security. “So why is Shepherd even considering him?”

Garcia glanced at Wilson. He was privy to information directly from Shepherd and it

looked to Wilson that he wasn't sure how much to divulge. Wilson did know that Shepherd was going to let Garcia make the final decision on Cameron Woods.

"You mean besides the fact that he's good with a keyboard, he knows about us, and he is Briana's brother and will most likely guess what she's doing now that she's not working with him?"

Wilson wasn't sure if those three things were it. "Is there more?"

"Do you remember a few months back we went after that professor at the University of Mary Washington related to Saxton?"

"Of course," Wilson answered. Laura Lee 'Lah-lee' Saxton was a member of Echo Team. His team, designated Charlie Team, had worked closely with Echo. It was because of her personal experiences that a case was sanctioned by Shepherd to go after that professor. Wilson was assigned to that case. Garcia had been as well.

"The possibility of becoming a referral point for lost classmates came up. It would be a low effort and low-cost service, but with the anticipated volume, it could prove to be very profitable," Garcia said.

"Shepherd's looking to get into the missing person's business?" Wilson asked.

"Shepherd's looking to diversify into whatever profitable endeavors he can that will utilize his personnel and their skills who want to travel less," Garcia replied.

"So, he's considering Cam Woods for that team?"

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“That work would be assigned to the Digital Team,” Garcia said.

Wilson stopped asking questions and just gazed out of the window as the monotonous scenery of snow-covered fields passed by. The more Garcia said, the less he understood. What he did understand was that Shepherd had to make adjustments in the type of cases the agency took on to keep the skilled assets who worked for the agency. Many wanted the necessary travel to do the job cut in half, so they were away from home less. More than half the men on the teams were married, including Garcia. And many had children or were planning to very soon. It was still unfathomable to Wilson that Garcia was married and had a son.

Garcia let the silence in the car hang for a few minutes. “What cases do you want to be assigned to?”

“Whatever Shepherd needs me to do,” Wilson answered.

The truth was, Wilson really didn’t care one way or the other what type of work he was assigned to. He had often said that it all pays the same, but in reality, he had gotten to the point where quiet was better. He’d been assigned over the past few years, mostly to the Power Grid Protection Project. It was a lucrative contract the agency had with the Department of Homeland Security, installing proprietary hardware and software on power producing installations to stop and trace hacking attempts.

He was pulled regularly to work a DEA Partner Mission; another contract Shepherd had signed with the DEA to help identify and apprehend drug distributors and major dealers. He was good at it, and he kept his hair long, which helped him blend in well

with the people who lived in the sketchier neighborhoods of target cities. And of course, all members of the team were tapped on when the DoD hired Shepherd for foreign missions they couldn't touch with the U.S.'s official military assets.

Wilson noticed that Garcia was waiting for more from him. "Look, some of the guys crave the excitement of the traditional cases, or the DEA Missions. I'm still good with them, but I also get why the PGP Project is necessary. It's not glamorous, but it's as important as any other mission, and I know it helps pay the agency's bills."

"And no one's shooting at you while you're turning a screwdriver," Garcia added with a chuckle.

"Let's just say it's a nice break from the steady diet of the DEA Missions I was assigned to for a while. But even those cases are necessary, and we can accomplish a lot that the DEA can't."

"Yes," Garcia agreed. "This is just an awkward time of growing pains and realignments in the agency, and I know a lot of the team members are wondering what Bravo Team's return means for them."

"Well, I'm not one of them. I'm not sure if any of Charlie Team's members are. The four of us have the PGP installs down to a science."

"It had to feel like your team was out in the cold," Garcia said.

"I'm the one that told Shepherd that we needed to remain on it for continuity. It wasn't the type of thing that would get done quickly with rotating different teams on and off of it," Wilson said. "It's an important project. But I'm just not sure if Shepherd Security is the team that should be doing it versus another government team of engineers."

“It’s proprietary software and hardware,” Garcia said. “And Shepherd Security is making a boatload of money from it.”

Wilson raised his hands into the air in a surrendering gesture. “I know. Shepherd has to worry about his balance sheet. The aircraft, the weapons, the ammo. Everything cost money. Hello, I have no complaints about my salary or other benefits. And if staffing the PGP project helps pay for all that, I have no problem with it. It’s just that I think it should be assigned to engineers.”

“Which was the purpose of recruiting Echo Team,” Garcia said.

“And they finally have a rhythm going. Charlie Team can step away now if Shepherd needs us to.” Wilson fixed his gaze again out the side window. The scenery hadn’t changed. It was snowy corn field after cornfield with an occasional stand of trees.

As the car, traveling at seventy miles per hour, approached an off ramp, the highway was on an overpass over a little dirt country road. Through his window, Wilson saw a woman with neon orange shoes on that dirt road running from a man, who caught her and punched her. He turned in his seat in time to see the woman hit the ground. “Get off at this exit!” Wilson said. “There’s a woman being assaulted back there.”

Garcia took the exit. “Find me a way to get to that road.”

Wilson already had the maps program open on his phone, doing just that. He gave Garcia directions to navigate to it as Garcia called their detour into their Operations Center. Six minutes later, Garcia pulled up to the exact spot where Wilson had seen the woman be assaulted. Both men quickly got out of the vehicle and stood in the middle of the vacant road. Wilson ran over to the exact spot where he’d seen it go down. There were what he guessed to be blood droplets moistening the dirt. The air was unseasonably warm for January in Iowa, thirty-five degrees.

“I’ve got blood over here,” Garcia called. He stood near the frame of the underpass.

Wilson rushed over. There was a smear of blood on the rusted metal beam pointing towards the trees that lined the side of the road beside the underpass. “If a car was under here, I wouldn’t have seen it from the highway.” He knew if a car had been there, the woman was long gone.

Hoping that wasn’t the case, his gaze followed the blood smear. Just within the tree line, tangled in the snowy underbrush, something bright orange caught his eye. He sprinted over and retrieved it from the ground. It was a woman’s gym shoe. He held it up to Garcia in his left hand and drew his weapon with his right.

Wilson entered the tree line. Garcia jogged to catch up with him. Roughly twenty yards in, the ground sloped downward. At the bottom of what was maybe a ten-foot gorge, they saw what they’d come to stop. The woman Wilson had seen from the interstate, wearing one bright orange shoe, lay motionless on the ground. She was straddled by a man whose hands gripped her neck.

“Hey!” Wilson yelled, getting the man’s attention. His arm was outstretched, pointing his weapon at the man.

“Hands in the air!” Garcia immediately added; his weapon also aimed at the man.

“We won’t miss you at this range!” Wilson called. “Let go of her now or I shoot!”

Though the man didn’t raise his hands, it appeared he was no longer gripping her neck as firmly. He had a moment of what looked like indecision to Wilson and Garcia and then he bolted upright and took off running.

“Fuck!” both men cursed, charging forward from their location. Wilson took off running after him, as he knew he was faster than Garcia was. Garcia hurried to the



woman, hoping they weren't too late.

The hillside was slick. Wilson slid as much as he ran down it. Even so, he was still able to catch up with the fleeing man as he reached the top of the rise on the other side of the little gorge. Once he was within arm's reach, Wilson grabbed him by his hoodie and pulled him back and off his feet. He crashed to the ground and rolled a few feet back down the hill.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Wilson sprang on him, securing him faced down by straddling him, much the same as he had been straddling the woman. Wilson pressed the barrel of his pistol to the man's cheek. "Give me a reason," Wilson growled, barely winded.

The man, on the other hand, was huffing and puffing. He immediately surrendered.

Wilson secured his hands behind his back in zip ties, which all members of Shepherd Security carried at all times with their federal law enforcement credentials. Both Wilson and Garcia carried DEA badges. Garcia had actually been a DEA Agent after he'd left the Army. Wilson aced the course content DEA Agents took, and he earned his badge and creds. It was conditional, though, only valid while he worked for Shepherd Security. Which was fine by him.

By the time he wrestled the assailant to his feet and led him back to where the young woman lay, now conscious and gently rubbing her neck over the bruising left from the attack, Garcia had called it in. Local police and an ambulance were en route.

She gazed at the man Wilson held. "I hope you burn in hell, Jerry," she croaked. "This time there're witnesses, and you will go to jail." She tried to sit.

"You're better off remaining down until the paramedics can check you over," Garcia told her. "You were unconscious when I reached you. If we'd been a few minutes later, he probably would have killed you."

After the local authorities arrived and Wilson and Garcia gave their statements, turning the scene over to them, they wished the woman, Josie Lewis, well, and they departed. Wilson called in to Ops and made the report when they were back on their

route to Waterloo, merging onto the interstate.

“Another domestic violence case,” Wilson said, shaking his head. “These cases of Briana Woods that we’re bringing in-house are important. I wouldn’t mind being a part of some of those.” They’d learned that Josie Lewis had filed six police reports about the threatening and abusive behavior of her soon-to-be ex-husband, Jerry. He’d violated the restraining order multiple times.

“I’m sure we all will,” Garcia remarked. “As I said, it’s an awkward time of realignment at the agency. Those cases will most likely be ongoing and have at least two field agents assigned to them at any given time.”

Wilson found that a curious statement. They usually operated in teams of four. But perhaps Shepherd was planning to only allocate two field operatives to those cases, which made sense as the DEA cases and the newer CIA referral cases each had six Operators assigned. That was the equivalent of three teams. The PGP Installs took a fourth team, and that left 2 team members for these new domestic violence cases and two team members to be assigned to staff HQ and be home with their families. That was a good allocation of resources to rotate throughout the month. And that would fully allocate all five teams to cases.

The two men let the conversation rest until they pulled off the interstate and were within five minutes of Cam Woods’ townhouse. They were on the same page regarding their approach. Wilson again voiced his thoughts on Cam Woods not being Shepherd Security material. “But I may just be too slanted to prior military service being a prerequisite,” Wilson admitted.

“I’m right there with you,” Garcia said. “And I’ll go a step further and say I think SpecOps, or at least combat experience, should be necessary, but we could be wrong. Brielle worked out, and she had neither.”

“But she did have boots on the ground experience with her investigative reporter background and because of the action in Louisiana before we brought her on board that Cam Woods does not have,” Wilson said.

Bravo

The expression on Cameron Woods’ face was priceless when he opened the door to his townhouse. Wilson couldn’t help but smile.

“You?” For Woods, finding Wilson standing there with the other man, who he’d never seen before, was not only shocking, but it was his worst nightmare coming true. Then dread settled over him. “Wait, is Briana okay?” It had been a full day since he’d heard from his sister, and he knew that she was with Sebastian and another of his team members when he’d last heard from her.

“Relax, she’s fine,” Wilson replied. “Can we come in?”

“Look, we’ve been behaving ourselves. Briana wasn’t committing a crime in Maine. She legitimately needed help. That’s the only reason she called Sebastian.” His eyes darted nervously between the two men.

“No one said you’ve still been committing crimes. Are you gonna let us in?” asked Wilson again.

“Aw, fuck man!” Cam Woods stepped back from the door and threw it wide, inviting them inside. A disgusted look was now on his face. “Are you sure my sister’s okay?” That was the only reason he could think of that this man was back at his front door.

“She’s fine. This is Garcia, one of my colleagues,” Wilson introduced.

Garcia presented his hand. Cam Woods reluctantly shook it, as though he expected a

handcuff to be slapped around his wrist as he did. “I was the one who you gave computer access to last November.”

That statement caused a knot to form in Cam Woods’ stomach and this man’s gravelly voice did sound familiar, which further put Woods on edge. He thought back, considering what he’d done on that computer in the past few months. Had he done anything that was even borderline illegal? He didn’t think so. But who knows what they’d seen or what they’d found on the computer if spyware had been left during the time he’d allowed them free access to his computer? Not that he’d had much of a choice back then. When six armed men are standing in your living room and your hands are zip tied behind your back, you pretty much agree to anything.

“So, what’s this about?” Woods asked.

“Your sister has accepted a position with our agency,” Wilson said.

“She what?” Woods asked, surprised as hell. Of all the things that were going through his mind about why these guys were here, that hadn’t been one of them. “I mean, cool, if that’s what she wants.”

Wilson’s lips tipped into a grin. “She does. I promise you; she wasn’t coerced.”

“Okay, so, whatever. That doesn’t answer why you’re here,” Woods said, feigning disinterest.

“Two reasons,” Wilson said. “First, you know about us, and you worked with her. She won’t be working with you any longer and without you signing a nondisclosure agreement, she can’t tell you why. Not that you wouldn’t have figured that part out. But she can’t tell you who we are and why she wanted to work with us.”

Garcia produced the standard NDA and handed it to Woods.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Whoa, I’m not sure I want to know who you guys are,” he said, not taking the slip of paper.

“Yes, you do,” Garcia said.

“And Briana wants you to know,” Wilson added.

Cameron Woods looked undecided for a few seconds. Then he took the form from Garcia and gave it merely a glance before signing it. “I know I’m going to regret this,” he murmured as he handed it back.

“I want to point out one section on this form that you didn’t bother to read,” Garcia said, his deep voice sounding foreboding. “This document is binding for your entire life and if you divulge any information whatsoever, you will face federal felony charges with a bench trial, which means no jury, just a judge.”

“Whatever,” Woods said. “I already regret this.”

Wilson watched the grin spread over Garcia’s face. Woods was entertaining.

“Your sister was in some real danger on this latest mission of hers,” Garcia said. “But our boss recognizes that what she’s doing is important. There’s no doubt she’s saved many women from being killed by an abusive partner. He also recognizes that she needs a team and resources to back her up.”

“And we have those resources and team members to assign to this project. Plus, we’ll give her protection by operating under our agency’s umbrella,” Wilson added.

“So, your boss offered her a job?” Cam asked skeptically. He knew his sister well. She wasn’t going to turn her operation over to someone else and then follow their rules to do what she felt was a calling.

“In a few words, yes,” Wilson said.

Cam Woods then listened to the two men lay out exactly who they and their organization were. When they concluded recounting the events of his sister retaking her military oath the previous day, he fully understood Briana’s motivation for joining forces with them. And the fact that she’d be working with Sebastian was the cherry on top for her, he was sure. He knew that Bree had it bad for Sebastian.

“I’m glad for her,” Cam said. “Even though I know my sister is tough and can handle herself, I’ve been worried about her out there alone. And since you were here in November, I’ve been telling her we need to dial it back, so we didn’t get caught again. I love Bree, but I don’t want to go to jail for her and this mission of hers.” He grinned a guilty smile.

“Our organization will be taking over this website and contact link you set up to source jobs for her,” Garcia said.

“Sure,” Woods agreed immediately.

“You’re good with a keyboard and at doing some investigative work,” Garcia said to him, watching him closely for a reaction.

“And let us be honest with you. We can’t find a viable income stream for you. Not a legit one, anyway,” Wilson added.

Woods groaned inside. “Oh shit, you are looking to bust me for something, aren’t you?”

“Relax,” Garcia said. “But your future hinges on the next thirty seconds.” He paused and smiled. “No pressure.”

“Ah, fuck,” Woods cursed.

“We’re not the IRS. We don’t care what you may be doing under the table. We just need to be sure it’s not illegal.”

“It’s not. I swear. Even what Bree and I were doing wasn’t really illegal. Well, quasi maybe with those IDs she was pulling,” he admitted. “Everything I do is for cash under the table.”

“There were no encrypted or protected files on your computer that contained financial data,” Garcia stated as fact. He’d looked over every file on his hard drive and in his cloud storage in November. “Do you keep records?”

“In a paper ledger,” Woods insisted. “Do you think I’m stupid? I wouldn’t put it on a computer. Every system can be hacked.”

The corners of Garcia’s lips tipped up again. “Do you have any hacks we should know about?”

“If you don’t know, I’m sure as hell not going to incriminate myself,” Woods replied.

“The question is, would you give up what you’re doing solo for a good paycheck and to help the good guys if you were still allowed to challenge the firewalls and dig into shit you’re not supposed to?” Garcia asked.

“What? Work for you guys?” Woods asked.

Both men nodded. The expressions on both their faces were serious.



“I’m not a military guy. Surely you recognize that,” he said.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“We’re quasi military,” Wilson said. “But we are one hundred percent loyal Americans and so are the few civilians who work with us. As we said, the majority of our group came directly from the special forces’ community. This team is just the next phase of our service. The missions we take on protect American lives.”

Woods looked undecided.

“There’s some serious shit going down out in the world. Shit, we stop. Few get the invitation to join us. We’ve got a top-notch Digital Team. You’d be surrounded by the best,” Garcia said.

Woods laughed nervously. “You’re like, serious, aren’t you?” He couldn’t believe they really wanted to hire him.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Garcia asked.

“Man, you don’t look like you ever joke,” Woods replied.

Wilson had to stifle a laugh. And he hadn’t even seen a truly intense Garcia. He’d almost forgotten that Briana wanted to talk to her brother as soon as he’d signed the NDA. He pulled out his phone and text messaged Madison to see if now was a good time for that call. He knew Madison was working with Briana today, her second day as an employee of the agency.

Almost immediately after, his phone rang an incoming call from Briana Woods. “Hey, how’s it going there?” he greeted.

“Good, thanks. How’d he take it?” Briana asked.

“You can ask him yourself,” Wilson said. He handed the phone to Cameron Woods.

“Your sister.”

“Bree, are you okay?” Cam Woods asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you they were on their way to see you, the nondisclosure form and all.”

“I get it. I had only a mild heart attack when I opened my front door to them.” And he wasn’t joking. His heart definitely seized in his chest when he saw them.

Even though Woods held the phone to his ear, Wilson was close enough to him to make out most of Briana’s words on the other end.

“So, I’m sure they told you I’m working with them now,” she said.

“Yeah, and they just offered me a job too,” Cam said. His tone of voice still clearly conveyed his surprise.

“Yes, I knew they planned to. Take it, Cam. We can still work together to do a lot of good.”

“Aw, Jesus, Bree,” Woods said, turning his back to the two men and pacing a few steps deeper into his house. “You have them now. You don’t need my help any longer.”

“We’re a team, Cam,” she said. “And you’re going to love the tools they have. And the access. We only dreamed about being able to check out our potential clients and their situation like this! This is the big leagues, Cam. And we’ve been invited in.”

Cameron Woods turned back around, and his gaze swept over the two men, still standing in his entry. “I’ll listen to what they have to say, and I’ll consider it. That’s all I can promise, Bree.”

“Good enough,” she said. “Call me after they leave.”

“I will,” he promised. “Bye.” Then he handed the phone back to Wilson. “She wants me to listen to your offer.”

“Your sister’s a smart woman,” Wilson said.

Wilson watched Cam Woods closely as they laid out the employment offer. Woods’ facial expressions as they spoke broadcast his thoughts. He was thrilled by the salary and benefits package. Wilson doubted Woods ever made that much in his life. The list of what he’d buy ticked through his thoughts, no doubt. He didn’t seem intimidated by the workload or hours.

“It’s a team environment,” Wilson said. “You seem to be more of a one man show. Will that be a problem for you?”

“I’m cool with working in a team if everyone’s pulling their weight, and it sounds like they do,” Woods said.

“They do,” Garcia assured him.

“So, I really have to move near Chicago to work for you?” Woods asked. “Haven’t you heard of remote workers or a work from home employee?”

“You will work from home on occasion, usually when we need you to log in and resolve something that is time-sensitive, and we can’t wait until you drive in. Lives often depend on what the Digital Team digs up. But yes, you have to relocate near

our office,” Garcia said.

“And Briana will be operating out of the office. You’ll get to see her more than a few times a year,” Wilson added. “Probably weekly.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Camron Woods cracked a smile. “I’m not sure my liver can survive seeing her that often.”

Wilson and Garcia laughed. They waited a few beats. “So, do you have an answer?” Garcia finally asked when Woods said no more.

“What’s the guy like that heads up the team? I haven’t had a boss in a long time. I have to know he’s not a dick,” Woods said.

Wilson laughed aloud. They had not told him that Garcia led the Digital Team. “He can be a dick,” Wilson said, his smiling gaze beaming at Garcia.

“Fuck you,” Garcia replied. Then his focus shifted from Wilson to Woods. “I lead the Digital Team.”

“You’re shitting me,” Woods remarked.

“That’s why I’m here. I’d never hire a team member I didn’t personally meet. I’m not a dick, but I expect people to do their work by the due dates assigned. I don’t micromanage, can’t in the environment we operate in, but me and every other member of the team are there to help get the job done. We back each other up. And you’ll have a wide latitude in how you carry out your assignments. As I’ve said, what we do is important and often someone’s life is on the line, so what we do has to be right.”

“You keep saying someone’s life is on the line. There’s got to be more you’re not telling me,” Woods said, suddenly serious.

“We told you we run missions for the DoD, the alphabet agencies, and private clients. A pre-mission packet is put together by the Digital Team before every Op. Included in it are clinics, hospitals, and trauma centers in the vicinity of the Op just in case things go south. All must be verified. So, let’s say you’re assigned the pre-mission packet for one of our DEA Partner Missions, where we go undercover to help bust major suppliers. If during it a team member gets hit and is bleeding out, we need to know where the closest medical facility is and be one hundred percent sure we’re rushing him to an open hospital that can treat his wounds. His life depends on it,” Garcia said.

“That happens?” Woods asked.

“Yeah, it happens,” Wilson replied. “We work DEA cases on a regular basis and those fuckers aren’t afraid to pull the trigger.”

By the expression on his face, it was as though Woods finally understood the gravity of what their team did. He nodded solemnly. Wilson also thought he saw increased respect for them in his return gaze.

“Yeah, I accept the job offer,” Woods said. He presented his hand to Garcia.

Garcia shook it. “You’re due in Schaumburg, Illinois, to report for work in two weeks. Wrap up anything you’re working on and get yourself packed. Our office manager will line up your moving company and Shepherd Security will buy your townhouse, so you have a down payment for a new place. We have a furnished apartment where you can stay until you find a place and can move in. And the moving company will store your stuff if you want.”

“Got it,” Woods said. Then he turned to Wilson and shook his hand.

“You won’t regret this,” Wilson said.

Woods blew out his breath and shook his head. He already did. “Will there be a drug test when I report for work?”

“Stop using whatever it is today,” Garcia said, his deep gravelly voice sounding harsh. “I don’t care if it’s legal or not. Stop using it.”

“Okay,” Woods agreed.

Garcia pulled the agency phone he’d set up for Woods from his backpack, which he’d set on the floor when they’d entered. He explained its security, usage, and then asked for Woods’ personal phone so he could set up the dual phone feature.

Wilson noted how unsure of surrendering his phone Cam Woods was. “It makes life much easier to have only one phone. And your monthly cell phone bill goes away too. Another perk of the job.”

“Sure, why not?” Woods remarked and then handed his phone over.

After completing the transfer, Garcia showed Woods how to toggle between the two phone lines. Then he showed him the agency phone book. He only had six numbers programmed in: the Shepherd Security Operations Center, his number, Wilson’s, Woods’ sister’s, Sebastian Roth’s, and the agency office manager, Angel. After Woods reported to work, Garcia would open up the remainder of the staff’s names and phone numbers.

“See you in two weeks. I’m your contact for any questions but contact Angel to arrange your move. She’s expecting your call,” Garcia said.

Wilson presented his hand again. “Welcome to the team. Give your sister a call and let her know you’ve accepted the job offer. The phone is secure. You can discuss anything on it, but be mindful where you are that there are not people around who



shouldn't hear your conversations.”

“Yeah, I will,” Woods said.

Charlie

Reina Ellis glanced at the time on the screen of her phone for the third time in less than five minutes. The usually loud, busy room was quiet. The lone child sat at the desk and colored quietly. Reina's heart broke for the little girl, whose mother was late again to pick her up. The last of the other children were all picked up twenty minutes before. Reina knew what it was like to be the last child picked up, as she was often forgotten by a mother who was too drunk or too high to remember that her child waited. Reina suspected little Lilly's mom fell into the same category, even though she was a nurse. She was just better at hiding it than Reina's mom had been.

Kay Meadows re-entered the room. Kay was the four-year-old full-day preschool teacher who Reina assisted. “I got a hold of her mom. She's on her way. Said she was tied up with an emergency at work again,” Kay whispered. Then she raised her voice and called over to the child. “Lilly, your mom will be here in a few minutes. She was late leaving work. Your mommy works so hard, and her job is important. Let's help her out. How about you put the crayons and coloring book away and we'll get your coat on and meet her in the parking lot?”

Lilly did as she was asked. She was always an obedient child. This was another trait Reina recognized from her youngchildhood years. It was later, in junior high and high school, that she became what many would term a delinquent or a troublemaker. She never considered herself a troublemaker, but trouble did always seem to find her in her teen years, and she never ran from it. Of course, by then she was in her fifth shitty foster home and knew better than to get too comfortable, as it was always temporary.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“You can go home,” Kay said, breaking in on Reina’s thoughts. “No sense, both of us waiting.”

“Okay, thanks,” Reina replied. Then she went over to Lilly and helped her put the last crayons in the bin. “See you tomorrow, sweetie. Have a good night.” She gave Lilly a hug.

Reina was quick to don her heavy winter coat and gloves. She noticed how still the air was as she exited the building. The sun had dipped below the horizon and there was no moonlight, as the sky was cloudy. The parking lot was vacant and darkened. Out of habit, her senses all became alert and focused. The temperatures had been above average during the day. It had been sunny and felt warm for January when they’d brought the children out for both outdoor play times. But now, with night settling in, there was a chill that instantly invaded her, or perhaps that was just dread.

“Stop it,” she said aloud to herself. She knew that she was safe here. Her past was just that, her past. But it hadn’t been even a full year since she left that past life and became Reina Ellis. She was a respectable and upstanding citizen, preschool class helper, clean and sober. She always chuckled to herself when she thought of herself that way.

Just as she relaxed, a black car raced into the parking lot. Tires screeching, it braked hard and stopped, taking up two parking spaces in front of Reina. Reina had taken a few steps backtowards the door into the building the second it had appeared. In her pocket, her hand tightened around the taser she kept there. Her heart pounded hard against her chest.

The door of the car flew open, and Lilly's mom sprung out. "I am so sorry I'm late again," she said as she rushed around her car, heading for Reina and the door.

"Kay is getting her coat on and will bring her out. You don't need to rush now that you're here," Reina said. She carefully looked over Ashley Carona, Lilly's mom, to judge if she seemed impaired. She seemed harried, which would be a normal response when you are nearly a half-hour late getting your child.

"Again, I am so sorry," she repeated, slowing her pace as she reached Reina near the door. "I can't leave until my relief nurse arrives and I perform a turnover of the patients to her and she's having a hard time being on time."

"I get it. We can't leave work either until all the kids are picked up," Reina said, trying to not sound too harsh.

"Look, I'm doing my best," Ashley Carona said defensively.

Just then, the door opened, and Kay Meadows walked out with Lilly. Both of them were bundled up in their winter coats, wearing gloves and winter hats.

Reina forced a smile and nodded to Ashley Carona. "Have a good night." She walked past her, inhaling deeply. She didn't detect the smell of booze or smoke, which proved nothing.

Reina's car was parked at the far end of the parking lot beside Kay's and the facility's director, Kimberly Cargill, who was still in her office. Reina saw her through the office window. She watched the interaction between Kay and Ashley as she buckled in and turned the car over. She wondered if Kay was telling Ashley a late pickup fee had been assessed.

She also wondered if Kay ever suspected Ashley was impaired. And if she did, what

would she do about it? Yes, they were mandated reporters of abuse and neglect and were supposed to notify the authorities if they suspected a child was in danger. And getting picked up and driven around by an impaired parent would put a child in danger. But Reina knew first-hand that wasn't always the worst situation a child could be in.

Reina shook off her concern and shifted the car to drive. She tried to put Lilly Carona out of her thoughts as she drove home. Home was a tiny, nine hundred square foot, two-bedroom house she had been provided to live in as part of her relocation agreement with the U.S. Marshals. The house was in the Wellington Heights neighborhood on the northeast side of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

It wasn't much, but she was safe there. And it was hers, free and clear. All she had to do was pay the property taxes and the utilities. The first was pretty cheap, fifteen hundred a year. The utilities were a different story. Because the house had old windows and was poorly insulated, the heating and cooling costs were ridiculous. Similar homes were listed for around seventy thousand dollars but were selling slowly. She knew the government had picked it up cheap, as a foreclosure nearly a decade earlier.

It was a short drive home. Reina's headlights swept across the front of her white house as she turned into her driveway. The one-car garage sat back from the house, taking up much of the small backyard. She hit the button on the garage door opener, which was clipped to the visor. It rolled open. She parked and closed the door by tapping the close button mounted near the door on the side wall and then exited the garage there, turning the lock and pulling the door closed. It was only a few steps to her back door from there.

Reina's key stuck in the lock, which happened when the air was cold and damp. She jiggled it to unlock it, glancing around the quiet and vacant back yard, another habit from her past life that wouldn't leave. It didn't take long to get the key to work. She

relocked the door immediately as she stepped into the kitchen after she'd flipped the light on.

She hadn't even removed her coat when there was a tap on the back door, startling her. She peeked out through the peep hole, not surprised to see her persistent and annoying neighbor, Bruce. Where had he come from? Just moments earlier, not a soul was to be seen at the back of the house.

"Damn," she cursed aloud. She wasn't in the mood for him. She unlocked and swung open the door. "Were you hiding behind my garage or in the bushes?" she greeted him curtly, staring straight into his brown eyes.

He laughed it off. "I just wanted to be sure you got in okay. There were a couple of random dudes at your front door a few hours ago."

"What guys? Describe them," she prompted without stepping back to invite him inside.

"Just two guys, a Hispanic guy in a leather jacket with short hair and a dude wearing one of those North Face fleece zip ups with long blonde hair. They caught my eye as they were hanging out at your front door. They didn't go together, if you know what I mean."

Whenever Reina heard leather jacket or long hair when someone described a guy, her suspicion spiked. "I'll have to check my front door to see if they left a card or a note," she said, trying to sound unconcerned about it.

"They didn't. I already checked for you," Bruce said, eyeing the inside of her house. He readjusted his tan Carhartt hat, which matched the jacket he wore. His face was clean shaven today, a rarity. He'd made an effort to look good for Reina. If she'd only give him a chance, she'd see he could be good for her.

“Thank you for watching out for my place,” she forced herself to say. “I have to go.” She nodded and then closed the door, relocking it immediately.

The fact that two men had visited while she was away unnerved her. The fact that Bruce skulked around her yard, and she hadn’t seen him when she arrived home, bothered her more. Bruce was harmless, just annoying. And since he watched over her place, that did make him helpful. She made a mental note to be a little nicer to him.

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Wilson flipped his palm up to view his watch, the face worn on the inside of his wrist. He and Garcia were just finishing dinner at the steakhouse and tavern just outside of Cedar Rapids. “It’s past nineteen thirty. She should be home by now.”

Garcia took the last drink of his red wine and then forked the last bite of his steak into his mouth. “How come today is the first I’m hearing you’ve stayed in touch with her?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Wilson grinned. “Because I wanted no flak over it, from you or anyone else.”

Garcia pinned him with a pained expression on his face. “I won’t point out you broke protocol.”

“I think her new name and location are safe with me. She’s needed a confidant she can talk to. You, of all people, have to know how lonely it is assuming a new identity, separating yourself from everyone and everything you ever knew, and starting over.”

“A preschool teacher, huh?” Garcia said doubtfully. “I can’t see it.”

Wilson chuckled. “They gave her a makeover, and she says she’s clean and sober for the first time since she was in her teens.”

“I hope she makes it,” Garcia said, signaling their server for the check. “She’s one of the few women from that time that I didn’t sleep with.”

Wilson was taken aback by Garcia’s declaration and the unasked question in it. “And I haven’t either.”

Garcia raised an eyebrow and shrugged. When they had finished talking with Cameron Woods and Wilson requested the side trip to Cedar Rapids, Garcia was surprised. Rae Ella Easton was someone he hadn’t thought about since they’d left her with the U.S. Marshals when they returned from the Op in Norfolk the year before that she helped them with. Admittedly, finding her in that bar, tangled in the case, had shocked the shit out of him. He’d truly thought she’d gotten out years before. He truly hoped she was completely and permanently out now.

“And thanks for agreeing to this little side trip. I know we’d nearly be home if we hadn’t detoured.”

“It’s fine,” Garcia said. “I’ll be home before Sienna and Little T wake in the morning. And I’m home for the next week.”

Wilson nodded. He’d be deploying the following morning on the next PGP install. It was supposed to be an easy one and his team should be able to complete it in two or three days if they busted ass. Then he’d have a few days off before the next PGP Install. He had his entire schedule through the end of February. He’d have little time off until March.

“Your wife is a saint,” Wilson said.

“She is,” Garcia agreed. “And a hell of a mom. Sometimes I just sit back and watch her with Little T and am blown away by how good she is with him. And I do remember how lonely it is when you take on a new identity. I’m glad you’ve been there for Rae. She’s a good person and has seen too much of the bad shit in life. It’s harder for girls thrown into the system.”

“Yeah,” Wilson agreed. He knew that Garcia meant the Foster Care system, which Garcia too was a victim of. “We’ve talked about that some. She was shuffled to five different homes before she ran away as a teen. She’s in a good place now. I think she’s happy not relying on a guy. She’s told me about how she’s decorated her house. She’s really proud she has her own place.”

“She was never a club whore like a lot of the women who hung around, but she was always shackled up with one of the guys for protection,” Garcia said. “Keep your relationship with her as friends. She needs to know people can be there for her without the expectation that she takes her clothes off and spreads her legs.”



Wilson wasn't sure how to respond to that. He merely nodded when Garcia again made eye contact with him. As they drove back to the neighborhood they'd visited around eighteen hundred, Wilson's anticipation of seeing Rae increased. Though he knew he had to start thinking of her as Reina Ellis now. Addressing her as Rae Ella would never happen, and Rae or Rei was no problem and wouldn't give her away if anyone heard.

Reina sat reclined on the couch in her small TV room, mindlessly watching something streaming on the television. Her hand stroked the soft tabby that was cuddled up with her. She'd never had a pet before and she'd waited nearly six months after settling in before she took in the stray that hung around her house since the day she'd moved in. She wanted to be sure she was settled, and she could offer the affectionate kitty a true home before she brought him inside.

The glow of headlights swept over the front window in a way it only did when someone turned into her driveway. Immediately, she hopped up and stepped over to the window. She peered out, scrutinizing the black SUV that was now parked not even fifteen feet away. This couldn't be good.

A smile pulled at her lips when she saw the passenger emerge from the car. In a black North Face fleece, with blonde hair loosely falling on its shoulders, was Jimmy Wilson, a man who had become her friend and a confidant. She unlatched the locks and threw the door wide as the second man exited the vehicle. Razor, or rather Garcia, who she now knew was a federal agent who'd been on an assignment, under cover as a gang member when she'd met him. He wore a very expensive leather jacket, not a biker jacket, as she'd assumed Bruce meant when he described her visitors.

"Holy crap!" she exclaimed with a smile as she stepped out onto the stoop. "What are you doing here?" She doubted their presence signaled that she was in danger. If there was a threat, it would be the Marshals who came to collect her.

“Hi Rae,” Wilson greeted with a smile and outstretched arms. He pulled her in for a long embrace when he reached her. “We were in the area for work. I couldn’t be this close by and not stop in to say hi.”

“Hi to you!” she replied, holding him tightly, her emotions surging with the contact. “This is such a nice surprise.”

When Wilson broke the embrace and stepped back, Garcia filled the void and engulfed her in a hug as well. “It’s nice to see you,” he whispered in her ear. His squeeze lasted half the amount of time as Wilson’s.

“You too,” she said with a smile. She stepped back through her door. “Come in, please.”

Both men came inside, instantly making her living room feel small.

“Nice place,” Wilson said, glancing around.

“It’s small, but it’s mine,” she said.

“It looks like you,” Wilson said. He pointed to a series of three posters of carousels that hung on the wall above the television. The roof and the horses were all painted in calming pastel colors. “Your artwork especially.”

She was impressed that he’d remembered that she loved carousels. “Thanks.”

“You look good, Rae,” Garcia said. Her hair was a light brown color with golden highlights, not the usual dark mane with random bold hues haphazardly colored in. And she had wispy bangs framing her face, which added to the softness her new look gave her. Her eyes were bright, clear, and focused. And even her complexion looked healthy.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Thanks, Razor, er, Garcia.” She paused and grinned. “I still can’t wrap my mind around the fact that you turned out to be a fed.”

Garcia frowned. “Yeah, we’ll keep that secret between us.”

“Of course. Well, for the record, you look good too, all cleaned up.”

“How’s the shoulder?” Garcia asked, nodding to where she’d been shot during their last meeting.

“It’s fine.”

Wilson thought her answer was a bit dismissive. He vividly remembered driving her to the hospital while Garcia hovered over her, trying to stop the bleeding. And he remembered sitting beside her on the Lear on the flight back, her shoulder bandaged and sore. She’d been dismissive about the injury at that time too, insisting it was fine. He remembered being impressed by her and thinking she was one badass chick.

“Where’s my manners? Please sit.” She motioned to her couch and the easy chair that crowded the room. “And can I get you anything to drink?”

Both men sat, Garcia on the chair, Wilson on one end of the couch. They both declined a drink. She sat herself where she’d been. Teddy, her cat, was no longer in the room.

“We stopped by earlier,” Wilson said. “It was close to six.”

“Yes, one of my neighbors told me two men had been here.” She paused and smiled; her gaze mostly fixed on Wilson. “I would never have guessed it was you, though. I got stuck at work. We can’t leave until all the kids are picked up and one little girl’s mom was a half-hour late again. She’s a nurse and said she can’t leave until her relief nurse is there.”

“You sound like you don’t believe her,” Wilson said.

Reina shrugged. “I don’t like thinking so badly of her, but I wonder if she’s using, not that I’d report her. From what it looks like, the little girl is loved and well cared for.”

“You’d know if someone was using,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, a user can always recognize another person doing the same thing,” Reina said.

“You’re still clean, aren’t you?” Wilson asked.

“Yep, sure am,” Reina replied, her pride evident.

“I’m proud of you,” Wilson said.

Reina’s smile grew bigger. “Thanks, Jimmy. I’m proud of me too.”

“I’m glad you’re doing so well,” Garcia said. He wouldn’t mention that her once heavy Texas accent was gone.

A loud thud came from the short hallway that led to two bedrooms and the bathroom. Both men immediately stood and drew their weapons. Reina recoiled, pressing her back harder to the couch, seeing their weapons suddenly on display.

“Shit,” she cursed.

“Who’s back there?” Wilson whispered, his adrenalin spiking, ready to take on the threat.

“No one, my cat,” she replied in a normal speaking volume.

She watched in disbelief as the two men, with weapons grasped in their hands, proceeded down the hall. She saw them duck into each of the three rooms. In her past life, she hung out with men who were always armed, and for good reason. Afterall, they had to carry weapons as they were carrying drugs and cash. But it had been a lifetime ago since that was the norm she lived with. Now she found it disturbing.

When they re-entered the living room, Jimmy cradled Teddy in his arms and stroked his fur. His handgun was no longer in his grip. “You didn’t tell me you had a cat,” he said.

Reina shrugged again. She didn’t tell him everything, even though she would like to. Confiding in him was easy. He was a good listener, and he gave good advice. “His name is Teddy, and he adopted me.”

“He has good taste,” Wilson said with a grin. He re-took his seat beside her on the couch, still holding and petting the cat.

The remainder of their visit was comfortable and uneventful. About an hour later, Garcia gave Wilson the nod, indicating it was time to go. It was still a four-hour drive home, which would get them in after midnight. Wilson gave the cat a final pat and then set him on the couch.

“You have to go now, don’t you?” Reina asked.

“Yeah, unfortunately, we have to drive back to our HQ yet this evening,” Wilson said, coming to his feet.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Yes, of course,” Reina said as she too stood. She was disappointed they had to go already. She’d enjoyed the visit. “It was great to see you,” she said, staring into Jimmy’s bright blue eyes. She awkwardly shifted her gaze to Garcia after a few seconds. “Both of you.”

“You too, Rae, Reina,” Garcia said.

“Rae is fine. It’s an acceptable nickname for Reina. I wanted a cool new name like Willow, Brook, or Sage, but the Marshals insisted it be close to my real name so I wouldn’t screw up and accidentally divulge my old name.”

Both men chuckled. “I like Reina. It fits,” Wilson said. “And I can still call you Rae.”

“You’ll always be Rae to me,” Garcia added. “We’ll never forget the help you gave us in Norfolk. If you ever need anything, you know how to reach us.”

She nodded.

“I’ll stay in touch,” Wilson added. “It really is good to see you’re doing so well.” He took a step closer to her and embraced her while brushing a kiss across her cheek.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” she murmured. She motioned to the door.

With another quick hug and a, “Bye,” Wilson exited into the dark, cool evening air.

“Take care of yourself, Reina,” Garcia said, also pressing a kiss to her cheek while briefly squeezing her before he followed Wilson out.

She watched them get into their SUV and back out of her driveway before she closed and locked the door. She leaned against the inside of the door and thought about the visit and the two men for a few minutes. She was surprised, as for some reason, she felt emotional watching them leave.

Delta

“She looked good,” Wilson remarked from nowhere after Garcia had pulled onto the highway, pointed towards Chicago.

“She did,” Garcia agreed.

“She’s put a little weight on, too. It looks good on her.”

“I won’t tell her you said that,” Garcia remarked. “Of course, I’m not the one in contact with her.”

Wilson chuckled. “Yeah, I’m sure most women wouldn’t want to hear that anyone noticed they gained weight.” He ignored Garcia’s last comment.

Garcia nodded. “Even if it comes with a compliment that some body part looks fabulous because of the added weight, it’s not welcome.”

Wilson laughed again. “Sounds like the voice of experience. You stepped in it with Sienna, didn’t you?”

The corner of Garcia’s lip tipped up. “That I did.”

Wilson laughed harder. “I have to admit, before Sienna, I never saw you as relationship material.”

“I’m honored you considered me,” Garcia said dryly.

Wilson laughed again. He touched his own temple with his middle finger. “Right here.”

Garcia glanced over. The interior of the vehicle and Wilson were illuminated just enough to make out the gesture. He chuckled. “I never thought I’d be in a relationship. Wouldn’t be if Sienna wasn’t a saint. She puts up with a lot.”

“It seems to me all the wives do,” Wilson said.

“Yes, it’s the job. And I’m sure we all bring our own unique challenges to our relationships, too.”

It was widely known on the team that Garcia was a workaholic, spent more hours at the office and working from home when he wasn’t deployed than anyone, except maybe Shepherd. Sienna truly was a saint, as far as Wilson was concerned. “I don’t think I’ll ever have to worry about that. I like my life the way it is, thank you.”

“I know a few other guys on the team that have said that. Now they’re called husbands and fathers.”

Wilson emitted a sarcastic grunt and decided to change the subject. “So, if this next install goes as quickly as it’s supposed to, Tessman and I plan to head to Saint Thomas to go diving over the weekend.”

“Is that so?” Garcia remarked, noting Wilson hadn’t commented on his last statement.



“Yeah,” Wilson said.

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The next morning as Reina left for work, she was met at her garage by the neighborhood busybody, Lorraine Newhouse, who'd been walking her dog but made a beeline directly to Reina when she was in view. For an old woman, Lorraine moved quickly. Lorraine was in her early eighties and didn't even try to hide that she kept watch over the neighborhood. She openly sat at her windows with binoculars.

“Hello, Missus Newhouse,” Reina greeted.

“Reina, dear, please tell me those men didn't stay all night. I fell asleep, and I didn't see them leave last night. I wanted to be sure you were okay. You know, a young lady can't be too careful. And eight p.m. is late to begin entertaining several gentlemen.”

Reina cringed. She hated anyone in her business. “Nothing to be concerned about, Missus Newhouse,” she assured the woman. “That was my cousin Jimmy and his coworker. They were in the area on work and just swung in for a quick visit.” She would have preferred to tell the old bitty to mind her own, but she knew this would be a faster conversation and she just bit the bullet.

“Your cousin?” she repeated.

“Yep, my cousin, Jimmy.”

“What kind of work does he do?” she pressed.

Reina considered what her answer should be for a moment. “Law enforcement. He and his colleague are DEA agents.”

“Oh, my, really?” she gasped.

“Yes, so as you can see, your concern was unwarranted. I’m late for work. I have to scoot. I’ll talk to you later. Have a great day, Missus Newhouse.”

And with that, she stepped to the door to the one-car garage, unlocked it, and disappeared behind it. Missus Newhouse was still standing near her garage when Reina backed out of it. She waved with a forced, sweet smile on her face after she’d closed the door, and then she backed out of her driveway. Kill them with kindness was a motto she followed.

She knew she shouldn’t have told the neighborhood gossip that Jimmy and Garcia were DEA agents, even though they were. Reina was sure Bruce was dealing, and she had enough experience around men who did to know. She was out of that life and was determined to stay clean. Maybe news that a relative was a DEA agent would deter the over-friendly creep.

As Reina drove to work, she again thought about the unexpected visit the previous night. Her lips drew into a smile when she recalled how Jimmy Wilson sat on the couch beside her. She was astonished at how kind he was to her when they first met, and she’d been shot. And the fact that he’d stayed in touch with her, as he’d promised, still amazed her. She’d never met anyone like him who seemed to want nothing from her. But if he had any intentions beyond the platonic interactions they had, he hadn’t shown it. She wasn’t sure she could call it a friendship, and she’d been at a loss to classify what they were. All she knew was that she liked that he was in her life.

She was even more surprised when she received a text message from Jimmy later that

morning. “Hi, it was great to see you last night. You look good, Rae. You seem happy too. I don’t often get to see positive outcomes in my line of work. I’m glad you are one of the success stories. I’ll be in touch.”

Is that what she was? A success story? She didn’t really think of herself that way. She tapped out a quick reply to his text. “Thanks. It was great to see you last night, too. I’m glad you guys stopped by.”

Wilson smiled, reading her return text. He thought again about how good she looked. It had been a small transformation, but enough to soften her appearance. From how she looked now, no one would guess she was actually a bad ass. He respected her courage, volunteering to help the DEA like she had. And she’d taken a bullet for it.

Then he tucked his phone away as his team for the next PGP Install gathered around the two SUVs that were parked in the private area of the Shepherd Security garage. Their next job site was at the Ameren Venice Power Generating Station on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River, just across the river from St. Louis, Missouri. They would drive there, as it was only about five hours away.

Assigned to this install with him were fellow Charlie Team member Carter ‘Moe’ Tessman, and Echo Team members Laura Lee ‘Lah-lee’ Saxton, Sebastian ‘Crash’ Roth, and Michael ‘Bubbles’ Cooper. It should be a relatively straightforward job. He hoped so. He could already feel the warm tropical St. Thomas air that would greet him and Tessman when they stepped from the plane.

As team lead, Wilson had just met with Shepherd. He relayed the discussion with him to the team. “Shepherd is fine with us busting ass to complete this job in a few days and taking the extra days as leave time,” Wilson said. “The plant runs twenty-four-by-seven, so we can put in as many hours as we’d like to get the install done. I’m assuming you’re all on the same page that you’d like to have a few days off.”

The others heartily agreed. All of them, except for Tessman, had significant others they wanted to get back to and enjoy a few days off work with. Tessman was also looking forward to some good scuba diving in St. Thomas.

They divided into the two SUVs and set out on the drive south. They arrived at the plant at fifteen hundred and set up, putting in a seven-hour day. It was after twenty-two hundred when they checked into the motel that lay just a few miles away, on the other side of the McKinley Bridge, on the St. Louis side of the river.

For the next three days, they worked for twelve hours each day and quickly completed the installation of the hardware. All diagnostics checked out, and the system was up and functioning when they pulled out of the lot at zero eight hundred on the fourth day. They'd be back at HQ by thirteen hundred if they kept ahead of the forecasted snowstorm that was blowing in from Iowa and Minnesota.

Wilson and Tessman found a flight leaving from O'Hare International Airport early the next morning with only one short layover and plane change in Atlanta, which would get them into St. Thomas by thirteen hundred the next day. They booked it and then let Angel, the office manager, know of their plans. She'd notify everyone needed at the agency.

By the time they reached Bloomington, Illinois, nearly the half-way point of the trip, the snow came in wet and heavy with gusty winds, instantly bringing with it near white-out conditions. They slowed to a crawl. Radar showed northern Illinois and HQ had been receiving the same for over an hour.

"This weather is not going to interfere with our trip," Wilson told Tessman, who sat beside him in the lead SUV.

"St. Thomas in January was too good to be true," Tessman said. "We'll make it back to HQ, but looking at the forecast for the next twenty-four hours, it doesn't look like

our plane will be taking off. The airlines are already starting to cancel flights.” He held his phone up.

“Not our flight,” Wilson vowed.

No sooner had the words left his mouth when his phone rang an incoming call from Shepherd. He brought the phone to his ear as he answered. “Wilson.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“The weather is shit, so I won’t keep you. I need to divert your team to Peoria,” Shepherd said.

“What’s in Peoria?” he asked, to which Tessman raised an eyebrow.

“A new case we just accepted from the Marshals because we had assets closest,” Shepherd replied. “A high-value protectee missed a check-in. He’s set to testify on Monday.”

“If he’s that important, why the fuck didn’t he have a Marshals detail with him?”

“They’d transitioned him as the court case had continuance after continuance. In a surprise action, the defense motioned to begin trial on Monday, as it was originally scheduled.”

“Oh, shit,” Wilson remarked. “Sounds like they knew he’d be an easy target to eliminate before the trial started.”

“Yes, that’s what the Marshals are thinking too.”

Wilson mentally went through the backgrounds and abilities of his team. Tessman and Roth were both combat veterans. They could handle themselves. Michael Cooper had been on several missions, mostly as overwatch or in a limited combat role. Reports from other team leads were favorable. He could be slotted for a more active role this time around. Saxton had just completed her Operator Training and had participated in one mission with risk. He’d also been assigned to that mission and found her performance satisfactory. Hopefully, he could keep her assigned as

overwatch, but if she had to take on a more active role, he'd pair her with Tessman.

"Diverting now," Wilson replied, turning off I-55.

"It would normally be under forty minutes from your location, but with the weather, Ops anticipates it'll take you nearly double the time. Ops is pushing the file through to your phones. I'll expect a call from you when you arrive in the area."

"Roger that, Shep," Wilson replied. Shepherd disconnected. Wilson immediately dialed Roth, who rode shotgun in the second SUV that Michael Cooper drove. Saxton was in the backseat. "Put me on speaker. We have a new mission that Shepherd is diverting us to." He filled them in on the mission and was wrapping up just as the text message with the mission details arrived in a text message that pinged their phones. "We'll continue this conversation in thirty minutes after we've had the chance to review the info Ops just pushed through."

Tessman read Wilson the contents as Wilson drove the vehicle through the raging winter storm. "The protectee is a thirty-seven-year-old former stock broker named Neil Jackowski from New York City. He lost the wrong person's money in a Ponzi scheme. In exchange for protection from both his client, whose money he'd lost, and the organization running said Ponzi scheme, he was about to give testimony in open court. His client was an alleged drug cartel moneyman. I don't know if he's brave or stupid."

"I think it's more like stupid and scared," Wilson said. "He crossed the wrong people. Guess he didn't get the memo that if you mess with the drug cartel's money, they make you disappear."

It was quiet while Tessman scanned the information in the file. "His location is on a rural farm just west of Peoria, like the nearest neighbor is over a mile away, rural. And it's flat terrain. Good thing it's snowing like a bitch, otherwise we'd be seen

coming up on the house.”

“Yeah, the snow gives us an advantage. Did the Digital Team send schematics of the house and all entrances?”

“Affirmative, and you’re not going to like it any more than I do. Got four doors. Front faces west, back slider to the east, one on the north side leading into the attached garage, and one on the south side into the basement.”

“You’re right, I don’t like it,” Wilson agreed. “Saxton isn’t ready to go in alone. I’m going to partner her with you at the front door when we make entry.”

“Front door?” Tessman asked.

“This guy just missed a check-in. He very well may be just fine. For all we know, he could be home and answer the door.”

“Yeah, and we just might fly out tomorrow to St. Thomas, too,” Tessman said. “Unlikely.”

“Yea of little faith,” Wilson joked.

It was slow going, and it did take nearly double the amount of time it should have taken to drive just west of Peoria as Ops predicted. The snow was accumulating quickly, and the roads were slick. Visibility was down to about four feet. The two SUVs stopped at the turnoff to the unplowed country road that led to the target farm. They donned their body armor. Wilson conducted the briefing with Shepherd. Madison Miller and Yvette ‘Control’ Donaldson listened in from Ops.

Wilson’s plan was straightforward. He and Roth would park and hike in, taking up positions beside the back door and basement doors, respectively. Tessman would wait



for the transmission from Wilson, indicating they were in position. Once received, he would drive right up the snow-covered driveway with Saxton seated beside him. Roth would be crouched down in the backseat, his M-4 held at the ready. The SUV would be parked blocking the garage, so no vehicle could easily emerge, and Roth would jump out and cover the door that led into the garage, breaching it when appropriate.

Once out in the empty field, hiking towards the farmhouse, a chill from the driving wind instantly invaded Wilson. The wind pummeled the two men with frozen snow pellets, stinging the exposed skin on their faces. They pushed forward. They were nearly on top of the house when it came into view. Crouching low, they circled to the south. Wilson left Roth as he descended the stairs that led down to the basement, though upon review, calling it a basement was generous. It was more like a root cellar.

It didn't take long for Wilson to reach the back sliding glass door. The drapes were closed. He couldn't make out anything inside. His gaze swept the door, looking for light, movement, or anything that would indicate someone was home. Nothing. And the door was locked. He took up position with his back pressed against the worn wood siding beside the sliding glass door.

"In position," Wilson broadcast. "All blinds and drapes are closed. We saw nothing on approach."

"Roger that, Taco. We're turning into the driveway now. At least I think this is where the driveway is. At least there's no tracks, so we know no one drove through here in the last hour or so," Tessman transmitted. He gave a running narrative as they slid to a stop in front of the two-car garage door, effectively blocking any easy egress from it.

The three of them exited the vehicle. Tessman had his Glock 19 held along his leg. Saxton had her new favorite pistol, an MK29 version of the Sig Sauer P226, .9 mm,

in her right hand and tucked inside her jacket. Michael Cooper carried the same pistol. It was holstered as he gripped his M-4 in his hands as he ran to the house, pressing his back to the stone facade beside the door into the garage.

“At the front door,” Tessman advised. He motioned to Saxton to take up a position beside the door, out of the direct line of fire. She did and then pulled her weapon into view. He pressed the doorbell. He didn’t hear anything from within. “No answer from the bell.” He raised his left hand to knock.

At the back door, Wilson pressed an ear to the frigid glass door and strained to hear anything from within. Nothing. “Crash, make entry,” he ordered before he pulled the short pry bar from the back of his jeans. Dropping to a knee in front of the door, he inserted the pry bar beneath the track of the slider closest to the handle and lock. While pulling up on the pry bar, he pulled the door, sliding it open and off the track. The noise of the maneuver was minimal and should be mostly hidden under the constant pelting of the sleet against the house. “I’m in,” he whispered into his comms.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Roth made entry to the dirt-floored basement at around the same time. His flashlight beam swept the interior, locating the crude wooden stairs that rose to the ceiling. He heard creaking floorboards above. “Got movement on the first floor heading in the direction of the front door,” he spoke softly.

Wilson had just entered the house, stepping into the kitchen. He knew Roth hadn’t detected him. Someone else was in the house. With his Glock 19 leading the way and his M-4 slung over his back, Wilson soundlessly crept through the kitchen, his snowy boots leaving puddles on the brown linoleum floor. He heard nothing. He smelled nothing.

Until he reached the hallway which led to the staircase that rose up to the second floor, the front door just beyond the staircase. To the right of the front door was the living room. He froze where he was. The stale smell of cigarette smoke, the kind that lingers on a person’s clothing, was present. And then he heard movement.

“Still no answer at the door,” Tessman broadcast. “I’ve knocked twice and rang the bell once.”

“I’m in position at the basement door,” whispered Roth.

Wilson knew they were all waiting for him to give the go-order. He’d been waiting on Roth. As he stepped into the hallway, he transmitted, “Go, go, go!”

The man in the hallway turned to face him, shock and fear on his face. It was the target they’d come to check on, Neil Jackowski. He screamed out and turned to run towards the front door, just as Roth appeared in front of him, stepping into the

hallway from the basement door. Jackowski's feet slid on the floor when he tried to reverse direction, just like you see cartoon characters do. He hung in the air for a few seconds before crashing to the floor. Immediately, he tried to crawl away.

"Neil, easy, we're here to help you. We're not here to hurt you," Wilson called to him as Roth mounted him, easily pinning him to the floor. "Crash and I have him. Hold position," he transmitted. He kneeled in front of the protectee. "Neil, we're here on behalf of the Marshals. Stop struggling. You're safe."

The thirty-seven-year-old man gazed up at Wilson. His brown eyes held suspicion. His black hair was grown out and hung against his sweaty face. "I hope like hell you're telling me the truth."

"I am. Crash, release him and let the others in the front door," Wilson said. "You missed your check-in call and the Marshals haven't been able to reach you, so they sent us."

"Phone, TV, and internet went out yesterday," Neil Jackowski said.

"Didn't they supply you with a back-up cell phone?" Wilson asked as Roth unlocked and opened the front door, letting Tessman, Saxton, and Michael Cooper in.

"Yeah, there's never been a good signal on it. Getting a call in or out is a crap shoot," Jackowski said. "The trial's been continued another month; I didn't think it mattered if I missed the call-in."

"The defense requested it go ahead on Monday. They retracted the continuance," Wilson said.

"Oh, shit, that can't be good," Jackowski said. "They want me brought to open court so they can silence me. They threatened to kill me."

“That’s not going to happen,” Wilson said, trying to calm him down.

“You don’t understand. Without my testimony, there’s no case against them,” Neil insisted. “They’d only agree to go to trial if they knew I wouldn’t be testifying.”

“We do understand. They’re not going to get to you,” Wilson said, projecting unwavering confidence. The truth was, he had no idea if the Marshals would be able to keep this guy protected. He hoped they could. Protecting witnesses was their mission. “Get a bag packed. We’re going to bring you in. The Marshals have a detail assigned that we’ll rendezvous with to turn you over.”

“Now, just wait a minute,” he stammered nervously. “Aren’t I safest right here? I don’t want to go back to New York until the last minute.”

“That’s exactly what the bad guys will be expecting,” Wilson said. “This snow storm will either help you or it could be throwing a monkey wrench into everyone’s plans. Our orders are to bring you to Chicago to the Marshals’ detail today. Get a bag packed. We’re out of here in five minutes.” He nodded to Tessman. “Go with him.”

“He’s afraid,” Laura Lee said after the protectee and Tessman mounted the stairs.

“He should be,” agreed Roth.

“He’s right that the cartel will try to kill him,” Wilson agreed. “That’s what happens when you mess with cartel money.”

“Do you think they know where he is?” Laura Lee asked.

“Anything’s possible,” Wilson said. “My guess is they won’t strike until he’s back in New York City.”

“I’m glad we’re not escorting him there. I’m counting on a few days off,” Michael Cooper said. “Dahlia’s excited about the snow. I told her we’d go sledding.”

“That sounds like fun,” Laura Lee said.

“You and Dupont should come with us,” Michael said. Laura Lee was living with Brad Dupont, one of the Ops analysts.

Wilson chuckled. “Moe and I have a flight to St. Thomas tomorrow. We’re going diving.”

“That sounds better than sledding,” Roth chimed in. “Briana’s scheduled for twelve-hour days of training at the office for the next few days, but I’ll get to see her in bed at least.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

The relaxed coworker-chatter instantly stopped and all four of them drew their weapons when the unmistakable sound of breaking glass came from upstairs. Wilson switched his comms to transmit to all, which would loop in Ops.

“Glass breaking upstairs. Sitrep, Moe?” Wilson broadcast as he took steps towards the staircase, his weapon leading the way.

“Unsure, Taco. Came from the second bedroom up here.”

“We’ll check it out. Protect the target at all costs.”

“Roger that,” Moe replied.

“Bubbles, Crash, you’re with me. Lah-lee, follow us up. Keep your eyes on our six. Halfway up is your position.” Wilson didn’t wait for replies. He led the way up the staircase, moving quickly and soundlessly. As he neared the landing at the top of the stairs, bone-chilling cold air greeted him along with a whistling sound coming from a room to the left. Straight ahead, the door was closed and the door on the right was open. From the floor plan of the farmhouse they’d seen, he knew the room to the left was a bedroom, the door straight ahead was the master bedroom, and the door to the right was a bathroom.

Wilson stayed low, his eyes sweeping what he could see of the interior of the room to the left. He felt a tap to his shoulder, which he knew meant the man behind him was moving to sweep the room on the right, the bathroom. Wilson inched forward until he was at the door into the room. With a sudden movement, he thrust himself into the room and dropped to one knee, his weapon at the ready held in front of him.

No one was inside. But one of the windows was broken and the outside air blew large, wet flakes mixed with frozen pellets into the room in a steady stream. Movement beside him got his attention. Michael Cooper had entered and stood near the door. Wilson pointed to the door to the closet on the side wall that was open ajar. Then he stood and crept towards it, Cooper on his heels.

He stood back, his aim on the closet space as Cooper threw the door open wide. No one was there. They checked under the bed. Clear. Their gazes scrutinized the floor in front of the window. No object that could have broken the window was present. Snow and ice were all that was on the floor. Then Wilson gazed out of the windows. He saw no one.

“Room clear,” Wilson broadcast.

“Bathroom clear,” Roth reported.

“Coming out of the master,” Tessman broadcast.

They all met in the hallway. Saxton still crouched on the stairs in the position Wilson had assigned her. “All quiet downstairs,” she reported.

“Bubbles, find something to secure over that window,” Wilson ordered. “Is he ready to move?” he then asked Tessman.

“He will be in a minute. He’s just packing the last of his things.”

“As soon as he’s ready, and the window is secure, we move,” Wilson said. “Ops, I’ll leave you looped in until we are clear.”

“Roger that, Taco,” Yvette replied.



Ten minutes later, the five members of the team were huddled around the protectee and were hustling to the SUV. It was crowded with the six of them in it. Wilson was still on high alert. It was odd that the window had broken when it had. Something felt very off to him.

As they neared the bottom of the driveway, a volley of what had to be bullets impacted the vehicle's left side as they passed a dilapidated structure that looked like it had once been a shed for the farmhouse children to wait on the school bus. Tessman was driving. He floored the accelerator. The rear end of the SUV fish-tailed until the wheels grabbed hold of the ground. The vehicle was armor plated and had bullet proof glass, but that didn't stop Wilson and Roth, who sat in the backseat beside the protectee, from getting him down on the floor and covering his body with their own.

"Ops be advised we are taking fire," Wilson transmitted. "Repeat, we are taking fire."

"That's not bullets hitting the vehicle. It's large chunks of ice," said Saxton, who sat in the middle of the front seats.

"Ice?" Wilson repeated, sitting up straight in his seat. "Stop the car, Moe!"

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" demanded Jackowski.

"Moe, you're with me. Saxton, slide over into the driver's seat and everyone hold position. No one fire," Wilson ordered. Then he exited the car.

Wilson stalked to the backside of the structure. Tessman exited the vehicle and followed. At the partially closed door on the shack, Wilson kicked it. It exploded in, revealing what looked to be two pre-teen boys with a stack of ice balls and a weapon of some sort. They were in the process of firing another volley at their vehicle.

Both boys screamed and shrunk back after the door burst open and at the sight of the two men who pointed real rifles at them. “Man, don’t shoot,” one of them pled.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Wilson demanded.

“Nothing, just testing out my new snowball chucker,” the freckle faced future felon stammered.

“Your snowball chucker. Dude, you’re firing ice. You’ve dented up our vehicle. It sounded like bullets striking. You’re lucky we didn’t return fire and turn this shack into Swiss cheese!” Tessman scolded.

With this revelation, both boys started to cry. “We didn’t mean no harm,” the freckle faced one said.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Honest, we didn’t mean to damage anything, didn’t know that window on the house would break,” the other one said.

“But you fired on us again, anyway?” Wilson yelled. “You knew that thing of yours was powerful enough to break a window. What the hell did you think it was going to do to a car?”

Both boys shrugged. “Dunno,” Freckles said. “But that guy who’s staying here is a dick. We were riding our dirt bikes, and the jerk threw rocks at us after he yelled at us for riding in the field. He don’t own it. We can ride there!”

Wilson grabbed their modified snowball throwing contraption and pulled it out of the shack. “I’ll take this weapon. You get home and stop being assholes. I don’t care what that guy said or did. You don’t fire weapons at people, houses, or vehicles. You got that?”

“That’s mine,” Freckles said.

“I’m confiscating it,” Wilson said. “We can do this one of two ways. The first is we all go to your house and talk with your parents about this weapon and the damage you caused and arrange payment for it. Or we take it, and you go home and stop being juvenile delinquents. Do something good.”

Both boys’ eyes went wide. They exchanged guilty looks. “Fine, take it,” Freckles said.

“How’d you get here?”

“Our snowmobiles are over there.” He pointed to a stand of pine trees.

“Get on them and go home,” Wilson said. He walked away from the two boys, still huddled in the shack. After placing the weapon in the back of the SUV, he climbed back in beside Jackowski and Roth as Tessman slid behind the wheel. “Stupid kids.”

“That was kids?” Jackowski asked.

“Yeah, two pre-teens you yelled at and threw rocks at on dirt bikes?” Wilson asked.

“That was those two little fuckers? Had I not been hiding out here, I would have called the police on them multiple times,” Jackowski said. “You need to arrest them and teach them a lesson.”

“Do you want more attention drawn to yourself?” Roth asked.

“No,” Jackowski admitted.

Wilson nodded an ‘I told you so’ at him.

When they arrived at the vehicle Wilson and Roth had abandoned when they’d hiked in, Wilson had Saxton and Cooper transfer to it. The rest remained with the protectee. The remainder of the drive to Schaumburg was slow due to the continuing bad weather conditions, but it was uneventful. They met the U.S. Marshals in the garage of a police station for the transfer.

“Good luck to you,” Wilson told Jackowski before they separated.

“Yeah, we’ll see if these guys can keep me alive to testify,” Jackowski said.

“That’s the plan,” one of the Marshals said.

As the Shepherd Security Team drove out of the garage, heading for their own parking garage nearby, Wilson received a text from Rae. “Hi Jimmy. I hope all is good. I’d like to talk when you have time, nothing important.”

He smiled as he read her message. He tapped out a reply. “I’ll have time in about an hour. Can I call then?”

As expected, they had a short debrief with Shepherd when they arrived at the office. Madison also sat in. “You showed professionalism and control when your vehicle was attacked,” Shepherd said. “Had you returned fire without investigating the source, the outcome would have been much different, though justified, and we’d be having a much different conversation right now. This was a perfect example of remembering the environment which we are operating in before we react.”

“Yeah, something just didn’t feel right about it,” Wilson said. “And that was before Saxton identified the projectiles as ice.”

“I don’t think those dumb-shit kids will be doing anymore firing ice at vehicles. You should have seen their faces,” Tessman said. “I think the one little shit pissed himself when we kicked the door in.”

“Freckles recovered quickly though. That little fucker actually argued with me when I confiscated the ice chucker,” Wilson added.

“I would like to get a look at this weapon they made,” Madison said.

The corner of Shepherd’s lips tipped up. “Those two could make good future Operators. I’m sure none of you were choir boys in your youth, either. Again, I appreciate your restraint in the situation. You handled it well. And as always, the Marshals were appreciative of our assist. Our flexibility and ability to change direction quickly is valuable to the agencies we interface with.”

“That’s one benefit of Operating with less red tape,” Madison said. “From an Ops point of view, having a weather-resistant drone in the air could have helped identify the threat. Michaela and Miraldi have been working on fortifying our drones to make them able to withstand the elements and capable of having guidance transferred to Ops to free up a team member on the ground of manning the controls. I believe we need to use available technology to a greater extent than we currently do. This mission could have ended very badly with two dead kids.”

They all agreed with her that was true.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Shepherd said. “Wilson stay, everyone else you’re dismissed until zero seven hundred on Monday morning. Enjoy your long weekend.”

Wilson watched the others file out of the room.

“Two things,” Shepherd said once they were alone in his office. “I’m pulling you from the next PGP install. You’ll join the team assigned to the next CIA referral mission. Sloan requested to be removed from it as he and his wife just received some news regarding her pregnancy that has necessitated a doctor’s appointment with a specialist. That appointment is Wednesday.”

“Oh, no. I hope everything’s okay.” Wilson knew the couple had been trying to get pregnant for a long time.

“It should be. They just found out they’re having twins and that her pregnancy is now deemed high risk,” Shepherd said. “They need to find out what if any restrictions she’ll have and then make arrangements and Sloan wanted to be there with her for it.”

A smile spread over Wilson’s face. “Twins, huh,” he laughed. “Sloan is so screwed.”

Shepherd chuckled as well. “Anyway, I wanted you to hear about the reassignment from me rather than in an email. You’re going to be spending less time on the ground this year assigned to the PGP installs, all of Charlie Team will.”

“That’s good to hear,” Wilson said.

He then waited a moment. Shepherd had said he was remaining behind for two

things. What Wilson hadn't expected was an order to report to Dr. Lassiter when the meeting was finished. But that was what item number two was. Usually, a meeting with Lassiter, the team shrink, immediately after a mission only occurred if something went sideways. He considered this last one a success.

"Hi, Joe," Wilson greeted Lassiter after he'd entered Joe's office to find Joe straightening his waiting room.

"Hi. Come on back," he said pointing to the door to his inner office.

Wilson followed him to his kitchenette where the majority of the meetings took place. Lassiter grabbed a bottle of water from his refrigerator and held it up to Wilson.

"Yes, thank you," Wilson said.

Lassiter sat across from him. "Shepherd looped me in on the last mission, not because the shit hit the fan but because it could have. Had it been a real threat inside that shed, you would have been cut down the second you kicked the door open," Lassiter said.

"Instinct and situational awareness told me it wasn't a real threat," Wilson said.

"You've been doing this a long time, both with Delta and with Shepherd," Lassiter said.

"Charlie Team's had a nice little vacation working mostly on the PGP Project over the last few years. I've always said it all pays the same and we've been rotated onto active cases often enough that our skills are staying sharp, but I'll admit these kinds of cases are appealing."

"You led a team with several members you'd never been in risky situations with," Lassiter pointed out.



“Yes. As soon as the order came to contact the protectee and transport him, I evaluated my team. I knew, of course, that Tessman and Roth could handle whatever came our way. Michael Cooper had some experience, but I knew Saxton was green. She handled herself well.”

“You led her well,” Lassiter corrected him.

“Because of the PGP Project she already sees me as an authority figure plus she respects experience in the field as opposed to rank.”

“With the new team structures and types of missions Shepherd Security will be engaging in this year, you’re going to be leading actual case teams again, many times with different team members assigned than just Charlie Team. That’s one of the reasons we’re touching bases.”

Wilson took a drink of the water, stalling for time. This was one of those open-ended statements from Lassiter that was a fishing expedition. “I’m up for it.” He beamed a smile at Joe. “It all pays the same.”

Lassiter laughed. “No one shoots at you and your team on the PGP Project.”

“Not usually,” Wilson agreed. “This case started out as an install. That just goes to prove any job can lead to a traditional case or a federal agency assist. I’m glad Saxton got her full Operator training.”

“If what could have happened had you given the order to return fire at the shed weighs on you, I expect to hear from you,” Lassiter said.

“I’ll reach out if that happens,” Wilson assured him.

“Okay,” Joe said. He nodded towards the door. “For the record, I hope your flight

isn't canceled tomorrow. Have a Bushwacker for me while you're there."

Wilson chuckled as he stood. "I wasn't aware you knew your drink history so well."

"Saint Thomas, the Bushwacker, San Juan, the Pina Colada, and from Havana, the Mojito. Yes, I am a man full of useless information," Lassiter said with a smile.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Thanks, Joe,” Wilson said before he left.

Wilson went to his office, where he’d dropped his backpack and coat upon returning to HQ. He had to complete his mission report. He thought about what he and Joe Lassiter had talked about. For some reason, he didn’t see it as a big deal that he’d be leading other team members on active cases again. Was it? Was he missing something?

His text message chimed. He checked the screen. It was Rae. He had forgotten about the call he’d said he would make to her. “Sorry, I had an unexpected meeting. Can you give me another half hour?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Nothing important, just wanted to bounce something off you.”

He got busy on the mission report. The sooner he finished it, the sooner he’d be able to go back to his place and pack for his trip the following day, which he was looking forward to. The other team members had sections on the report to fill out as well. Once theirs were all in, as team leader, it was his job to review all sections and then submit the completed mission report to Shepherd.

He easily completed it in less than a half hour. Then he dialed Rae.

“Hi Jimmy,” she answered on the first ring.

“Hi Rae, sorry for the delay. How are you?”

“Good, good. Are you getting this bad winter storm where you are too?” She knew

his headquarters was in the Chicago area, but she knew not to ask any specifics regarding the location.

“Yes, I spent all day driving up from southern Illinois in the worst of it.”

“That had to be pretty slow going,” she said. “It took me double the amount of time just to get home from work this evening.”

Wilson checked the time on his watch. He always enjoyed messaging and talking with her, but tonight he just wanted to be on his way to his place to pack. “Yes. I’ve just finished work and am still at the office. It’s still coming down and I have to drive home yet.” He tried not to sound grumpy or like he was rushing the conversation.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know that. I said this wasn’t important. It could have waited, Jimmy.”

“No worries. I know the roads are bad, otherwise I would have called you on my way home.”

“So here’s what I wanted to bounce off you, get your opinion on. I’m thinking of going to school to be a teacher, but I never finished high school, even though this identity the Marshals gave me says I did. Will that be a problem? And do you think I can handle the classes? I’ll only take a class or two at a time, so I won’t overload myself. But I really love working with the kids.”

“Rae, I think that’s great that you want to do more. Yes, I absolutely think you can handle it. And most schools have tutoring centers you can go to if you need extra help.”

“Yeah, I read about the tutoring center on the college’s website. I’m sorry to always be bugging you with stuff but I have no one else who knows who I really am that I

can talk to.”

“It has to be lonely,” Wilson said.

“I feel like I’m living a lie most the time because I can’t tell the people in my life anything about me,” she said. “And I couldn’t talk to the teacher I work with about this either.”

“Well, in a way you are living a lie, but with very good reason. Rae, you have to remember all the good you did by helping us. What you did took a lot of courage, courage none of the people in your life in Iowa could even fathom. We’ve talked about a lot, your childhood, how you ended up where you did. You survived a lot of things most people wouldn’t have the guts to survive. And look where you are now, contemplating going to college. I’m proud of you and I hope you are too. Instead of asking yourself and me if you can handle college classes, you should be telling yourself that you will handle the classes, no doubt about it.”

She chuckled into the phone. “Thanks, Jimmy. You always give me a different way to think about things. Thank you for your friendship.”

Rae kept talking, but his thoughts diverted his attention away from her.

The word friendship gnawed at him. Is that what they were, friends? Until he and Garcia were so near to where she lived and had time, he hadn’t considered visiting her. Nor had he told anyone on the team that he was in communication with her. It wasn’t that he was embarrassed or wanted to hide their communication. And even now when he thought about it in those terms, he couldn’t quite get himself to use the word relationship but that’s what it was. Any ongoing interaction between two people is some sort of relationship.

But that still made him ask himself, were they friends? And if not, what were they?

He always enjoyed chatting with her, be it texting or phone calls. He reached out to her as often as she reached out to him. But now, he had to question his motives on why he did. Obviously, he was getting something out of this relationship, or he wouldn't continue it.

"Jimmy, are you there?" she asked when he said nothing.

"I'm sorry, yes, I was distracted for a moment, work stuff."

"I should let you go. Thanks again. It looks like the preschool and daycare will be closed due to the weather tomorrow. Since I should be home tomorrow, I plan to fill out the application to start the next term at the local community college."

"That's great Rae. Just stick to the ID the Marshals set up for any of the questions and you'll be fine. Have a good night."

"You too. Drive safe on your way home. Bye." She said and then disconnected the call.

She stared at her phone for a few moments after ending the call. He had been very distracted. She wondered what his job was like and what kinds of things were discussed at the unexpected meeting he'd just had. She knew he did a dangerous job. Anyone who took on the cartels and high-level drug dealers risked their lives.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Reina was thankful to have a friend like Jimmy to call, as she'd told him. She had no one to talk to about anything regarding her real self. Even though she never expected their relationship to lead to anything romantic, she couldn't help but feel attracted to him. He was good looking, blonde hair and blue eyes. His body was lean and muscular, built just how she liked her men. He was smart, funny, and gave good advice. And he was kind. She had not run into that many men who were good people at their core, but Jimmy Wilson was.

Echo

The conversation he'd had with Rae, who he knew he needed to start thinking of as Reina, remained on Wilson's mind long after the call ended. By some stroke of luck, his and Tessman's flight to St. Thomas was not canceled. It was one of only a handful of flights to make it out of O'Hare International Airport the following morning.

After takeoff, as the two men settled in for their flight, Wilson opened an email on his phone from Shepherd with some articles Shepherd suggested the team read. He was behind on his reading and saw this as a good opportunity to catch up.

"A Shepherd article?" Tessman asked.

"Yeah," Wilson answered, but then clicked out of it. The flight attendant was nearly to them, and he planned to get a drink. "I can't wait to be below the waves."

"Something's eating you," Tessman remarked. "You've been off all morning."

"Nah, not off, and nothing's eating me."

“Really?” Tessman pressed.

Yes, Tessman knew him well. He’d been thinking about Rae and his conversation with her all morning. “Do you think I have a white knight complex?”

Tessman laughed out loud. “You, Mister let the chips fall where they may? Mister, it all pays the same? No. What fool accused you of that?”

“I came to it on my own, trying to figure out my motives.”

“I’m not following you,” Tessman said just as the flight attendant stopped her cart at their row and gazed between the two of them appreciatively.

“What would you like?” she asked with a smile.

Tessman grinned at the pretty young woman. “Darling, you’d slap me if I told you what I wanted,” he said. “I’ll be happy with a rum and diet, though.” He chuckled.

She giggled along with him. She’d been quite friendly to them both when they first boarded early and identified themselves as armed law enforcement. Flight crews always loved to have armed law enforcement on their flights.

“Make it two,” Wilson said with a chuckle. Tessman looked at least fifteen years younger than he was. This woman was young, looked to be in her early twenties, too young for either of them.

“Are you staying long in St. Thomas?” she asked.

“Just a long weekend,” Tessman said. “Do you fly back out this afternoon?”

“No, I’m actually meeting a girlfriend there and we’re staying until we work again, a



late afternoon flight on Sunday. Maybe we'll see you around the island. Where are you staying?" she asked as she handed them their drinks. She slipped them both an extra little bottle of rum with a wink.

Wilson just popped open his can of soda pop as Tessman and the flight attendant traded hotel info. He took a long drink. He was normally up for a good time meeting women while on a short vacation, but this time, he just wasn't interested. It must have been her age, he told himself.

"So, white knight?" Tessman asked.

"Never mind," Wilson said.

"No, you brought it up. What motives?"

And Wilson thought he hadn't been listening. "Someone said something yesterday that got me thinking?"

"Lassiter?" Tessman asked.

"No. He doesn't know about this. Would probably have a field day with me if he did."

"Okay, Taco, man, just out with it already?" Tessman said. "I'll tell you if you need to talk to a shrink about it or if you need to just get over yourself. Then we can focus on diving. What is it?" He took a big swig of his drink.

"There's a woman from one of our missions I've stayed in touch with." He dropped his voice to a whisper and leaned into Tessman's ear. "Do you remember Rae Ella Easton from a mission nearly a year ago?"

“Norfolk, dead undercover DEA agent, Marshals relocatee after,” he rattled off.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Yes. Her new name is Reina. We text and talk occasionally. Yesterday she referred to us as friends and that word won’t leave me. I can’t define our relationship.”

“You sleeping with her?” Tessman asked.

“No,” he answered, outraged that Tessman would ask that. “She’s had enough men use her.”

“Okay, so a skanky whore you won’t touch,” Tessman summed up.

“No, and don’t talk about her that way. She’s really cleaned up, is living sober and respectable. I’m really proud of her.”

“Ah, princess on a pedestal syndrome,” Tessman said.

“No, not even close.”

“White knight, so you think you see her as a project, someone you have to save?” Tessman then posed.

Wilson took another long drink. He refilled the little plastic cup from the can of diet and dumped in the liquid from the second little rum bottle. “I don’t know. She’s got a good heart, which is surprising because she’s had a hard life. She’s a survivor. I respect that. She bounces stuff off me because she’s got no one else she can talk to who knows her story. I never considered how lonely it has to be when the Marshals give someone a new identity.”

“Do you want to sleep with her?” Tessman asked.

“What kind of question is that?”

Tessman laughed. “So you do.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t say you didn’t, which means you do. You don’t like the word friend because you’d prefer it be friends with benefits, lover, fuck buddy, or whatever word you want to use for sleeping with her. Is it just sexual? Tell me you can at least define if it’s a physical thing or if your mind is all screwed up.”

Wilson regretted bringing this up. “Until the word friend was thrown out, I didn’t think about it one way or the other.”

“Are you pissed because she thinks of you as just a friend? Would you prefer she thinks about you sexually?”

“How do you know she doesn’t?” Wilson challenged.

“Because if you had even the slightest hint that she did, you would have slept with her by now.”

“Thanks for that commentary on my character. She’s been through a lot. She doesn’t need another predator in her life.”

“She needs a friend,” Tessman said. “So, you’ve filled that role.” His tone of voice was mocking.

“Just forget it,” Wilson said.

“Name women who are not our coworkers or wives of our coworkers, who you’d say is a friend,” Tessman prompted.

Wilson shook his head. There were none. There were ex-girlfriends, fuck buddies, hookups, but no female friends.

“And your point is?”

“You didn’t even name Reina,” Tessman said. “If you considered her a friend, her name would have flown out of your mouth to prove me wrong, if nothing else. So, the question is, if you don’t want to sleep with her and you don’t consider her a friend, why have you continued the relationship with her? Because, even if you can’t put a name on what it is, it is some sort of relationship that you have with her. And I don’t think you have a white knight complex.”

Wilson inwardly groaned. Oh fuck, Tessman was right.

“She considers you a friend and tells you things going on in her life. I doubt you reciprocate,” Tessman said.

“You know damn well we can’t talk about what we do,” Wilson countered.

“Did you tell her about this trip? That wouldn’t be violating operation protocol. It is something one would tell a friend about, you know, sharing your life.”

He wanted to tell Tessman to go fuck himself. He did tell her about his life, probably more than he should and certainly more than he had shared with any other woman. “I would have if the word friend hadn’t fucked with me. I’ve told her about other trips, and I’m sure I’ll tell her about it next time I talk to her.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“So, maybe you’re thinking about this all wrong. Maybe you should be asking yourself why considering her a friend is so bad,” Tessman posed.

“Maybe that’s it. I don’t do friends with women. I do coworkers and coworkers’ wives, a few of whom I’d say I’d consider friends because of a work relationship. But if those work relationships went away, so would the contact with that woman.”

“Unless it was sexual or became sexual,” Tessman said.

“Yeah. Does that make me shallow?” Wilson asked.

“Fuck if I know. I’m not a shrink,” Tessman said.

Wilson finished his drink in one swallow. “I won’t be asking Lassiter about that. Okay, I consider this resolved. Now we focus on diving. We get in early enough that we should be able to get a dive in this afternoon at the shallow reef at Coki Beach.”

Tessman motioned to the flight attendant for two more drinks. Since they’d be diving later, it would be their last until after. She included her phone number on a napkin with the soda pop cans and mini rum bottles she dropped on his tray table. He flashed her an appreciative smile as he picked the napkin up, making a point of folding it up and putting it into a pocket while she watched. Yes, he’d be getting in touch with her while on the island.

They didn’t exchange too much more conversation until they deplaned. Both men traveled with only a backpack, so they exited the airport and hailed a taxi quickly. They checked into their rooms and changed into clothes appropriate to wear for

diving.

As he plunged beneath the waves, enveloped in the seventy-eight-degree water, calm washed over Wilson. Through his mask, his gaze took in the immense beauty of the world under the water. The water all around sparkled as the sun penetrated it, displaying a multitude of blue and aqua shades. The reef was just under him, teeming with life in an array of brilliant colors. And the current gently caressed him, which he always found relaxing. When he was diving, he felt at peace.

Due to the time of day, it was just a short dive, and they were topside before either man would have liked. After they returned to the hotel and showered, Wilson met Tessman at the hotel bar. When he arrived, Tessman sat at the bar chatting with two women who appeared to be in their late twenties or early thirties. Wilson took a seat beside Tessman.

The bartender, a tanned and tattooed blonde older woman, flashed him a smile. “What’ll it be?” She had a New York accent.

“Bacardi and Diet,” he ordered. “Lime, if you have it.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, motioning to the lime slices in front of her in her prep area. “You just get in today?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, mimicking her formality. “Got in early enough to get a dive in.”

“Here’s my friend,” Tessman said. “Wilson, this is Tanya and Jackie. They’re from Atlanta.” He motioned first to the dark-haired woman, and then the blonde.

“Hello, ladies,” Wilson said with a nod and a smile. They were both attractive, tanned, and it looked like the drinks in their hands were not their first of the day.

They had that look of vacation day drinking, spilling over to night drinking. The bartender slid his drink in front of him. “Thank you,” he said, beaming her a more natural smile than the forced one he’d put on when greeting the two women.

“So, what do you do when you’re not on vacation?” Tanya, the dark-haired woman, asked, her gaze sweeping over both men. She had a southern accent one would expect.

“Talk about when we can take our next vacation, but while on vacation, we don’t talk about work,” Tessman replied with a wink and a smile. “We’re here to enjoy diving and our drinks and have a good time with any lovely ladies we may meet while doing either.”

“Diving, snorkeling or scuba?” Jackie asked.

“Scuba,” Tessman answered.

“We’ve been out snorkeling several times since we’ve got here, but neither of us are dive certified. Is that even the correct way to say it? Anyway, I bet that would be incredible to see what’s down twenty or thirty feet,” Jackie said.

“It is,” Tessman said. “You two should definitely do it. Get certified.”

They had a second round of drinks and then Tessman invited the ladies to join them for dinner at the patio grill. It was obvious that Tessman and Jackie were attracted to each other, and the two instantly became engaged in conversation. Wilson noted that Tanya was friendly, funny, and showed glimpses of being extremely intelligent in some of her statements, but she was not nearly as friendly as Jackie was.

“So, what do you do for a living?” Wilson asked Tanya. It was something he normally wouldn’t ask, but they seemed to exhaust the vacation talk, and it was



beginning to feel awkward.

“You’re not going to believe me,” Tanya said.

“Try me,” Wilson said. He was enjoying the evening far more than he thought he would. And while Tanya was friendly and pleasant, she wasn’t flirtatious, like Jackie was with Tessman, which was good. He wasn’t in the mood for that.

“I’m a student in the final year of my PhD program in astrophysics,” she answered plainly.

Wilson smiled and nodded. “I believe you.”

“This is where you say pretty and smart too, because you don’t know what else to say about it.”

He couldn’t read her tone of voice. “I would never say anything that demeaning,” he said. “That’s quite an accomplishment. What’s the topic of your dissertation?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Her face took on an impressed expression. “Reading and interpreting gamma-ray radiation and other high energy phenomena. We need to look at different spectrums of measure, as I believe we’re missing signals that we should be studying.”

“That’s quite interesting, but I won’t pretend I understand any of it. If you can dumb any of it down, I’d love to hear more.”

“You would?”

“Yes, I would. I take it most of the men you meet generally don’t show an interest?”

“I don’t think most believe me and if they do, I think they’re intimidated by it.”

“Well, my mom always said if you want to meet a nice Christian woman, go to church, not a bar. So, I suppose the same holds true for finding an intelligent, interested man. You’re probably not going to find him in a bar, either.”

“Present company excluded,” she said. “You seem quite intelligent. Your friend glossed over my question regarding your jobs.”

Wilson signaled their server. She came right over. He ordered another round of drinks for everyone. Tessman and Jackie halted their intensely intimate conversation just long enough to place their dinner orders.

“So, your job?” Tanya asked after the server moved away.

Wilson thought about his answer for a moment. Usually, it was military or

unspecified law enforcement. He tended to keep it simple and vague. “You’re not going to believe me,” he answered, borrowing her original answer.

“Try me,” she replied with a smile.

He flashed her a coy grin. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter. “Federal law enforcement.”

“You carry a badge and a gun?” she asked with her eyebrows raised, the volume of her voice matching his.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She shook her head. “You don’t look the part.”

A smirk formed on Jimmy’s face. “That’s the point.”

“You do undercover work,” she stated in an even quieter voice.

Wilson gave her a small shrug and then took a drink. He noticed that Tessman and the blonde were in their own little world and weren’t paying any attention to them. That was a shame. Jackie looked as though she could be one of those women who got turned on by the assumed danger of their job. Of course, as cozy as they looked, Tessman wouldn’t need any added incentive to score with her tonight.

Tanya, on the other hand, was one who would never become involved with a man who did a dangerous job, wouldn’t want the worry that came with it. She was level-headed and analytical. He wasn’t sure how his teammates’ wives handled it as well as they did. And he was even more baffled why he was considering any of this. He had no real interest in Tanya beyond the physical attraction, not that a vacation fling would develop into anything. Plus, it was the last night on the island for the ladies.

Their vacation would be over the next afternoon when they caught their flight home to Atlanta.

His thoughts and his discussion with Tanya drifted to many other topics after their meals arrived. By the time they'd all finished their dinners, Tessman and Jackie had become a bit more engaged with their table mates, but soon thereafter announced they were going for a walk on the beach. Both Wilson and Tanya knew was code for going back to his room to fuck.

"I wouldn't mind a walk on the beach," Tanya said after Tessman and Jackie disappeared from view. "But I have to tell you, I'm not a hook-up kind of girl. A walk. That's it before I go back to my room to read and have an early bedtime. We were drinking in the sun most of the day and I'm really tired."

Wilson grinned. "I have some reading I need to get to as well." He signed the bill, charging it to his room. Tessman would pick up other costs. That was never an issue. "But I'd enjoy a walk on the beach." Not that he'd mind some meaningless sheet time with Tanya. He may not be interested in her or any woman for a relationship, but he was human and male, and he rarely turned down sex with a woman he was attracted to.

"Thank you for dinner," she said, nodding to the bill.

"You're welcome." He finished his drink, noticing that she'd finished hers and also deposited her napkin on her plate.

He stood. "That walk?"

She rose and took his offered hand. The sun had set nearly an hour earlier. The moon shone brightly over the water, illuminating their way. The beach was crowded near the resort, but the farther they walked, the fewer people they encountered. Knowing

how the evening would end made the time together comfortable with no pressure or guessing, would they or wouldn't they end up in his bed.

He noticed how she stared at the night sky with a peaceful look gracing her beautiful face and, for the first time that evening, really considered what holding her and kissing her would feel like. "When you look up there, you see things the rest of us don't," he said.

"I'm sure I do. Or at least I think about things not many other people do." She pulled on his hand, stopping them both. She spun to face him. "You seem like a good person, Jimmy. And you've been a gentleman in every way. I appreciate that. I'm not going to bed with you tonight, but I wanted to do this." She rose up on her toes and leaned into him, pressing a kiss to his lips.

Wilson was momentarily surprised by her kiss, but that didn't stop him from returning it and deepening it, his tongue dueling with hers and exploring her mouth for several wonderful minutes. Of course, his body reacted, but she pulled away too soon.

She retook his hand and stepped back the way they'd come. "Let's head back."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

He walked beside her in silence until they could see the beachfront of the resort ahead. “It’s been a nice evening talking with you.”

“I believe you mean that. I’m sorry it didn’t turn out as you probably expected, a night in bed.”

“Expected, no. Desired, yes. Disappointed, a little. But you were straight from the beginning of what tonight would and wouldn’t be.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” she said.

“And yours. I appreciate someone who states their intentions and boundaries.”

“I’m often called a bitch, or worse, because of it.”

“I’m sure you are. Most men don’t really want that kind of honesty from a woman they’ve met and are hoping to take to bed. They want the possibility that if they play it just right, the no will turn into a maybe, which will become a yes before the night’s over,” he said.

She laughed. “I don’t know why people play games like that. It’s no wonder so many people are single and can’t find lasting love, if that’s really a thing.”

“You don’t believe in true love?” he asked.

“I didn’t say true love. I said lasting love. I think people do truly fall in love, or think they do. The problem is it doesn’t last. Or maybe it’s that once the initial rush of

hormones people newly in love experience wear off, they discover the other person isn't who they thought they were or wished they would be. The divorce rate wouldn't be what it is if that wasn't the case."

"I never thought of it that way," he said.

"You're single. Have you ever been head-over-heels in love?" she asked.

Wilson laughed uncomfortably. "A very long time ago."

"Not recently?" she pressed.

"I've been too busy and not in situations that would allow me to have personal relationships," he answered honestly.

She nodded her understanding. "You're married to your career. I am too. It's been a long road for me to be as close as I am to earning my doctorate. There's been a lot of sacrifices, putting my education first. But it's worth it. Can you say the same thing?"

With no hesitation, Wilson answered, "Yes, it has. The mission is important. There aren't many who can do the job we do."

"You make the world a better place," she said.

"I'd like to think so," he said. He knew the people they helped would agree with that statement.

"Do you ever feel something is missing in your life?"

"No," he replied automatically. He was completely content with his life.

“You are a rarity, Jimmy,” she said. She once again raised up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I wish I’d met you a few years from now, when I may have time in my life for a relationship. You’re just the type of man I would want to share my life with, someone who is satisfied with their own life and not needing another to make them complete.”

“I’d say the same of you, Tanya.”

“Goodbye, Jimmy. Enjoy your time on the island and have a safe trip home.” She kissed his lips once more and then stepped away.

“Safe travels home, Tanya,” he said.

He watched her walk back to the resort until she was out of sight.

Foxtrot

The next day they took a boat they chartered over to St. Johns where there were multiple shipwreck sites to explore and Eagle Shoals, where they investigated underwater arches, tunnels and caves. It was a full day of diving. Seated on the front of the boat as it made its way back to the dock on St. Thomas, Wilson scanned the horizon, where the sun was dropping towards the coastline in front of them. His conversation the previous evening with Tanya was still in his thoughts.

Tessman made his way forward with two cans of beer in his hand. He took a seat beside Wilson and handed him one. “This beats the hell out of winter in Chicago.”

Wilson popped the can open and took a hearty swig. “It sure does,” he said after he’d swallowed. “Shepherd told me I’m being pulled from the next PGP Install and reassigned to the next CIA mission.” He was sure they were far enough away from the boat crew that he wouldn’t be heard. “I’m replacing the Undertaker. His wife is



pregnant with twins, and they have a doctor's appointment he wants to attend.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Tessman laughed. “Twins, Sloan is so screwed.”

Wilson laughed with him. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I can’t even imagine having one baby dependent on me, let alone two at once.”

“That’s why I always slip on the raincoat. I don’t want any unwelcome surprises,” Tessman said.

Wilson laughed. “It’s too bad the ladies we met last night flew home today.”

“Yeah, Jackie was fun. I wouldn’t have minded another day or two of her company.” He took a long pull from his can of beer. “I have Jackie’s contact info. If I’m ever in Atlanta, I’ll reach out to her. She said her friend, Tanya, doesn’t hook up. Is that true? Did you go back to your room alone last night?”

Wilson gazed out over the water again. “It would have been nice to be with her last night, but I’m not disappointed with how it went. It was cool just talking with her. She’s smart, getting her doctorate in astrophysics. She’s like on this completely different intellectual plane than the rest of us, analytical instead of emotional.”

“Yeah, right,” Tessman agreed in a way that communicated he didn’t believe a word Wilson said. “So, have you collected another friend?”

Wilson laughed and then pinned Tessman with a stare. “Don’t start with that again. I haven’t even thought about my other friend the whole time we’ve been here,” he lied.

The truth was, after he’d returned to his room the previous evening, Rae or Reina, as

he was trying to make himself think of her as, had been in his thoughts. He had evaluated his relationship with her against what Tanya had said about him being the kind of person she'd want in her life, someone who is satisfied with their own life and not needing another to make them complete.

That was how he felt, too. If he was ever to have a relationship, it would be with someone who was independent and didn't need him, just wanted him. Was that his issue with Rae? He didn't feel that she was at that point in her life. Of course, thinking about her in those terms meant he had a romantic personal interest. He would never hold that lens up to decide if someone was friends-worthy. And in the back of his mind was what Garcia said. She had always been with men out of need. Maybe he did see her as a project, someone who needed his help.

"So I was thinking of reaching out to that flight attendant after we get back to the resort and see what she and her friend are planning for the evening. Maybe tonight will go differently for you," Tessman said.

Wilson groaned inside. "Sure, whatever," he said casually. "I plan to be on the dive boat as early as possible tomorrow. I want to make the most of the day before our late flight back."

"That makes two of us," Tessman said. "You turning into an old man on me? Can't party late and still be up to dive early?" he teased.

Wilson scratched his forehead with his middle finger, flipping Tessman off while flashing him a smirk. Tessman grinned. When they reached the resort, they each went to their rooms with the intention of getting cleaned up. They'd meet at the poolside bar and grill again.

When Wilson stepped from the shower, an image hit his brain that made him stop in his tracks. Flashing through his mind was the scene inside the little shack after he'd

kicked the door in when the two dumb-shit kids had launched ice at their SUV a few days earlier. One second, he saw his accurate memory of the boys within, cowering when the door exploded inward. The next second, he saw their bloodied bodies.

He stumbled over to the bed and sat on the edge, trying to purge the horrendous thought and calm his racing heart. He hadn't given an order to return fire. The boys hadn't been shot. Where the fuck had that image come from? And why did his brain present him with this thought now?

After several deep breaths, his heart rate returned to normal, and he ran his fingers through his wet hair, pushing it from his face. In all his years doing this job, he'd never experienced a flash of what could have gone differently, tragically, in an operation. When ordered to take a shot, or when giving that order, he never hesitated. If he was in a leadership role, he evaluated the situation and went with the best possible option. Often, there was no time for a lengthy analysis. He relied on his gut instinct from years of experience.

Then he reminded himself that was what he'd done in that situation. He knew immediately that something didn't seem right. Somehow, he knew that the threat they faced wasn't what it appeared to be. Blind deadly force was not called for. He'd made the right call. His team and the dumb-shit boys in the shed were all alive because he had. But that still didn't explain why that possible outcome had just flashed through his thoughts.

Just then, his phone pinged with a text message. He retrieved it from the bathroom counter, feeling irritated that it was probably Tessman, asking him what was taking him so long. His room was stocked with a mini bar. He helped himself to a rum and diet and sat on the bed before checking the message. It wasn't Tessman. The text was from Rae.

"Hi, I just wanted to share this," her message read. It was followed by a screenshot of

the student portal showing her as an enrolled student at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. “I did it! I enrolled in my first college class. It starts next week.”

Wilson found himself smiling, happy for her. He wanted to tell her he was proud of her and that she’d do great, but his prior thoughts, wondering if he saw her as a project, someone he needed to help build, stopped him. He thought about his reply and sipped his drink before tapping it out. “Thank you for sharing. English 101, huh?”

“Can I call? It would be easier to talk than text,” she messaged.

Wilson hit dial, placing the call to her.

“Hello,” she answered. “I’m glad you could talk. I didn’t want to text it all.”

“Yes, I have a few minutes,” he said.

“So, I met with an admissions counselor on a Zoom call yesterday. Even though it was a snow day for us, they were all working remotely, so it worked out. She helped me with the application, and we talked about the path to my degree. She suggested I do my gen-eds first, and we even talked about me transferring to UIU, Upper Iowa University, to complete my bachelor’s degree and get my teaching certificate down the road. It’s a flexible university with accelerated programs. There’s a campus in Cedar Rapids and a lot of online or remote classes.”

He could hear the excitement in her voice. It made him smile. “That’s great, Rae. I’m amazed you jumped on it yesterday.”

“I told you I was going to.”

He chuckled. “You did. I guess I just learned that when you say you’re going to do something, you’re not just blowing smoke.”

She also laughed. “No, I rarely blow smoke. Seriously though, Jimmy, thank you for the encouragement.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“You didn’t need it, but I’m glad I was here to share in the excitement of a new career.”

“Well, I’m a long way from that, but it’s nice to have this goal and take a first step towards making it happen,” she said honestly. “Even though it can be lonely sometimes, I think right now I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. I’m proud of myself for what I’ve accomplished on my own. You know, I’ve basically been on my own since I was fifteen, but I was never really on my own. I always had a guy I relied on. I’m not that same person anymore. I don’t need anyone to take care of me. Yes, the Marshals gave me this house and this new identity, but I’m the one who stayed clean and got up for work every day. I take care of myself and I’m really proud of that.”

Wilson again found himself smiling into the phone. “You should be. You’re right. You had an opportunity from the Marshals, that’s all it was, an opportunity. You’re the one who’s made your life what it is.”

“Thanks, Jimmy. I hope you don’t mind me contacting you as often as I do.”

“I don’t mind at all, Rae, but you know, you can tell your coworkers about enrolling in college and your goal of becoming a teacher. I’m sure they’ll support you, too.”

“Yeah, I know. I can tell them about it without going into my past at all. I plan to, but I wanted to tell you first.”

“I like that you did,” he said. “But unfortunately, I do have to go. One of my teammates is waiting for me.” He wasn’t sure why he didn’t just say someone was

waiting. Well, yes, he did. He didn't want her thinking it was a woman. For some reason, he thought that might bother her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be working today," she said.

Jimmy forced himself to laugh. "It seems like I'm always working, no matter what day of the week it is. But you're off until Monday, lucky you. I'm actually due to report to the office on Sunday."

"That stinks," she said.

He decided against telling her he was in St. Thomas on a dive weekend. "I get other days off here and there that more than make up for it. Anyway, I'll talk to you later. Thank you for sharing your news with me."

"Thank you for your support and encouragement. Stay warm. I'll talk to you later. Bye."

"Bye Rae," he said and then disconnected the call.

He downed the rest of his drink and thought how that call had completely purged him of the feelings that had come with that horrible flash of what could have been during the last Op. He realized he was getting something out of this relationship with Rae. This wasn't the first time talking with her had rid his thoughts of work stuff he wanted out of his brain, if even for just a few minutes.

Fifteen minutes later, Wilson strolled up to the poolside bar where Tessman was snuggled up with both the young flight attendant and another young woman, presumably the friend and fellow flight attendant she'd mentioned. He really wasn't in the mood for this. They were lovely, but they were young, early twenties, barely.



The same older blonde woman was behind the bar. “Rum and diet?” she called as he reached the bar.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered with a smile. He greeted the ladies, impressed with himself for remembering the flight attendant’s name.

The friend, Courtney, took a step closer to him when she introduced herself. He couldn’t help but notice her cleavage in the plunging, loose neckline of her sundress, which had no bra holding those perky breasts in place. He had to admit, the view was pretty spectacular.

“We were just discussing how the ladies go sans underclothing when they’re on the island,” Tessman said, leaning over to say it a bit quieter than the volume of his voice would have been from his own barstool. He made a point of obviously glancing down the front of each of their tops, followed by an appreciative smile.

“Yes, it’s just so freeing,” Courtney said, pressing herself to Wilson. “Nothing says vacation mode like a tropical breeze caressing you where air normally doesn’t touch. We love to go to the nude beach on the French side of St. Martin. Have you gone?” she asked, her gaze fixed on Wilson.

“Yeah, been there, done that,” he said. “Honestly, I love any beach, the sun, the smell of the ocean,” he added to soften his response. He knew he probably sounded like a dick with the matter-of-fact way he’d said, been there, done that. “And of course, diving beneath the surface of the water is the ultimate rush.”

The conversation over the next hour and several drinks became less awkward, but Wilson was just not into it. The girls were just so young. Courtney had just turned twenty-two. And the image that had flashed into his mind of the two boys shot to hell was still in his thoughts, nagging at him. He knew the job they did was serious with serious ramifications. He still couldn’t figure out why his brain had conjured that

image. He knew a call to Lassiter was in order, but he would put that off for as long as he could.

When the conversation with Tessman and the two girls turned to discussing an orgy, Wilson knew he wasn't up for that. Again, he'd been there, done that. He politely declined, citing a headache. Yeah, lame, he knew, but effective. Moments later, Tessman and the two girls finished their drinks and left, arm in arm in arm, to go to Tessman's room for the night. Wilson knew he'd catch shit for it from Tessman in the morning.

"I didn't take you for one to pass up opportunities," the bartender said to Wilson, in her New York accent, after he'd watched Tessman and the girls disappear into the hotel.

"Not interested in that particular opportunity," he told her, motioning to his drink for another. "And you have exceptional hearing."

As the bartender slid the glass in front of him, her gaze shifted to where Tessman and the two women retreated. "Most men wouldn't pass on that for another of my crappy drinks," she said.

Wilson held the drink up to her. "Well, first off, your drinks aren't crappy. And secondly, not missing anything. Been there, done that, not interested in it tonight."

She raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Don't get me wrong, there was a time I'd be all over that," he said. "I guess I've settled down. Besides, both those girls are young, very young."

"Again, most men wouldn't pass on that. The younger the better," she said.

“I don’t know when it happened,” he said.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I guess I’m officially old and settled down,” he said with a laugh. “I’m just not interested in random sex with different women. Not even on vacation. That woman I met last night was interesting, completing her doctorate in astrophysics. I enjoyed getting to know her. The conversation was mentally stimulating. Sex would have been nice; I was attracted to her.” He wasn’t sure why he was having this conversation with this woman.

“Uh-huh,” the bartender said. “Mentally stimulating. And physically?” Then she noticed the group of four that stepped up to the other side of the bar. “Hold that thought.” She moved away to serve them.

Wilson smiled as she retreated. Yeah, he knew it sounded lame. But of course, he couldn’t go into anything regarding the image of the dead boys that had put his mood below adventurous.

When the bartender returned to him, after all the other guests had been served, she leaned in towards him. “Seriously though, if you’re being honest with yourself and me, I think we all get there at some point in time. I know I used to love to party. Bring it on, the more variety the better. But then we all grow up and realize there’s more to relationships than inserting A into B, or maybe even C.” She chuckled.

He laughed with her and nodded.

“So, what’s her name?” she asked.

“Whose name?” Wilson asked.

“The lady you’d rather be with tonight?” She raised both eyebrows.

Wilson smiled. “There’s no one.”

“Uh-huh, well then, there’s the idea you’d rather be with someone special. My friend, you’re not being honest with yourself.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

She laughed again. “You want someone special in your life. Maybe you’ve already met her, and she isn’t attainable. Maybe you have this image of the perfect woman for you. Either way, you didn’t want to partake in tonight’s festivities with your friend because you’d rather be with a specific woman or the image of that woman.”

“No, I just wasn’t in the mood tonight. I have some work stuff on my mind and, as I said, those girls are way too young.”

“Work stuff?” she asked. “You’re thinking about work stuff here? Then I’d say you really do need to get laid, my friend,” she said with a laugh, placing her hand on his.

Wilson laughed again. “Maybe.”

Other guests came up to the bar, and she had to move away again to serve them, leaving Wilson alone with his drink and his thoughts. He immediately dismissed some of her mistaken observations. He was not looking for a relationship and he didn’t have an image of his perfect woman. He had no time in his life for that, never had while doing this job.

He did realize, though, that over the course of the past few years he had settled down, which maybe was something that came with age and maturity. His mindset used to be work hard, with a serious and deliberate focus, and play even harder. YOLO baby.

He still brought that deliberate focus to work, but play had taken on a new definition. Like this trip. The entire reason for it in his mind was for the warmth of the ocean and the thrill of the dive. It wasn't about how much adventure he could pack in, and that included adventure of all kinds, including sexual encounters, which yes, once would have been something he actively pursued.

Instead, his thoughts focused on the fact that he had a few days off. Why would he stay in the bitter cold of Chicago and sit around his tiny condo doing nothing when he could be in St. Thomas? Wasn't that the beauty of his life and doing this job? He put in long hours and risked his ass, making a good buck doing it. He had been a top sniper in Delta, eliminated any target he was directed to. He knew better than anyone that tomorrow was not guaranteed. He'd learned that pretty quick when he joined Delta. And that fact had fueled many drunk nights indulging in anything that interested him.

"I see you're deep in thought," the bartender said as she re-joined him.

"Yeah, still work stuff," he said.

"What do you do?" she asked.

He thought about it for a second and opted to go with, "Federal law enforcement."

She seemed to be surprised. "Hum, I wouldn't have pegged you for that either. I guess I've been wrong about you all the way around."

Wilson chuckled. "Don't judge a book by its cover."

“I rarely do that. So, without giving away vital information,” she joked, “what’s weighing on your mind while you’re on vacation?”

Wilson was not normally the spill your guts to a bartender type, but for some reason, he found talking with her easy. She reminded him of Rae in that way. “I was involved in a case that went okay, but it could have gone horribly wrong and that outcome that didn’t happen is weighing on me. I’ve never experienced this. My mindset has always been you do the best you can at the time with the information and resources available, and then move on.”

“What was different this time?” she asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“That’s just it. Nothing. Not that any case is routine. None are. This case threw us a few curveballs, but all assigned assets performed optimally. It’s wrapped up, but for some reason, it’s still on my mind.”

“Would you have done anything differently if you could do it over again?” she asked.

“No. All was executed as it had to be with the unknown variables at the time.”

She chuckled. “Now you do sound like law enforcement, or military.” She smiled and nodded. “Yeah, military. Which branch and unit were you in?”

Wilson grinned and took a drink of his rum and diet. “What do you think?”

“I don’t think you’d tell me if I guessed it. And I think if I were to press you on what you do now, you’d have to kill me if you told me.”

Wilson laughed. “Nothing that sinister,” he lied. He finished his drink off. “I’m going to call it a night,” he said. He didn’t know what the tab was, but he set some bills on the bar in front of him. It would more than cover his drinks. Tessman had paid before he and the girls left. “Thank you for the conversation.”

“You too,” she said.

Golf

As expected, Tessman gave Wilson shit about bowing out the previous evening with the girls. It was short-lived though as their dive boat reached the reef quickly and the

diving was exceptional that morning. They were supposed to have an early evening flight back to Chicago, which as it turned out, turned into a late evening flight due to delays.

Wilson came back tanned and refreshed. He hadn't had a second flash of the scene that had disturbed him the previous evening. He hadn't reached out to Lassiter, and at this point, didn't plan to. The episode would remain his little secret. As he had an early report time at the office the next morning for the next CIA Referral Case he was assigned to, he showered in the locker room facilities in the gym at HQ and then planned to sleep in his office on the couch. He slept there more often than not on the rare occasions he was in town. It was comfortable, and he slept well on it.

It was just past one hundred hours as he settled in to go to sleep. That was when a priority alert hit his phone. He bolted upright and turned a light on. He hurried to Ops to see what was going on. Brad 'Circles' Dupont and Garcia were on duty. "Hey," he greeted them as he came through the door. "Can I help pull ammo or get anything ready for the alert?"

"No, Requisition Ryan is on it. Shepherd's already in the conference room. I'm headed there now too," Garcia answered. He stood and stepped towards the door.

"Good luck," Dupont called after the two of them as they left the Ops Center.

"I'm not going on this one, but will run it from Ops," Garcia said. He shook his head. "Coop will run lead on site."

"What kind of mission is it?" Wilson asked as they pushed through the door into the stairwell.

"A hostage-rescue situation. Shepherd hand-picked the team."



Wilson knew he was picked because he was a sniper. As expected, he and Garcia were the first to report to Shepherd in the conference room. Wilson sat and studied the info on the monitor. It looked like Miami was their destination. It didn't take long for the others who'd been scrambled to arrive. First Cooper and Madison entered with Jackson. Roth entered a few minutes later. Then Lambchop, Sherman, and Sloan arrived. Shepherd motioned for Lambchop to close the door.

"Thank you for reporting so quickly." He clicked a few keys on the keyboard in front of him and the picture of a twenty-something young woman displayed. She was of Middle Eastern descent but dressed in western clothing. "We've been contacted to run an off-the-books hostage rescue for SecDef. The last proof of life was obtained twelve hours ago, and the general vicinity of the ransom and release exchange location has just been received. We were only just brought in on this case half an hour ago. This is Puja Kumar. She is the daughter of Mitesh Kumar, one of the principals of CCS Enterprises, a prominent and profitable private Indian company that supplies IT contractors worldwide to organizations in all industries. Puja was kidnapped in Washington D.C. while visiting her father five days ago. The ransom demand was received immediately after she was taken. It was for information from specific organizations where CCS contractors are working, including the DoD."

Several of the men at the table cursed.

"Son of a bitch! Why does the U.S. government continue to put themselves in this situation by using contractors? Edward Snowden anyone?" Madison demanded.

"Shep, has the demanded info been given to the kidnappers yet?" Lambchop asked.

"Some, yes. We're told no sensitive US intelligence has been turned over yet. Luckily, as soon as she was taken, Kumar reported it to his contact at the State Department even though the kidnapper stipulated no police. Kumar had hoped the Feds would be assigned. With guidance from FBI hostage negotiators, Kumar has

dragged out providing any DoD data until the exchange for his daughter takes place. SecDef doubts she'll be turned over."

"Yeah, why give up a goldmine in future intelligence?" Cooper said.

"Do we know who orchestrated the kidnapping? Or where she's being held?" Madison asked.

Shepherd clicked a few more keys. "Yes. This is J.R. Percy. He's been identified as an information agent who deals in corporate secrets and brokers various nefarious acts of espionage between contractors and buyers." He was a normal-looking, middle-aged Caucasian male with a great tan. "But he won't be at the exchange. He doesn't get his hands dirty."

"Please tell us we'll be authorized to take him down as part of this mission," Lambchop pled.

Shepherd nodded. "And it's believed that she is being held in the Miami area. Percy's current location is his luxury condo in the Continuum, a high-rise condo building in South Beach. The exchange location will be someplace in the Miami or South Beach area, most likely someplace he can see from his cushy and safe condo. The exact location will be transmitted to Mr. Kumar one hour before the exchange is to take place. Per the kidnapper's instructions, Kumar is flying to Miami from D.C. It's anticipated that the exchange will take place sometime tonight or tomorrow." He paused and glanced at Sloan. "You may be back in time for the medical appointment on Wednesday."

"Thanks, Shep, but if it goes over, it goes over. This is important. Kaylee will understand," Sloan said.

Shepherd nodded again. "With the short notice we'll have on this, we need to be

flexible and agile to position and reposition as needed. The exchange will take place in public is all we know, which runs the risk of collateral damage if things go south.” He paused and clicked the keys on his keyboard. The monitor changed to the schematics and a map of the high-rise complex their target lived in. “What we can anticipate is that Percy will be in his condo, as he rarely leaves the grounds. From there, he has a good view of two directions. There are several good possible exchange locations in his view. One being the marina. The second the city streets below, and lastly this park.” He zoomed in on all three locations.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“He can also see the beach from his condo, but we think that location is unlikely due to the long walk to parking,” Garcia chimed in. “They’re going to want to show her to her father, get the delivery of the efile, and then duck back out of sight and get away with the girl still in their custody.”

“Another scenario we think is plausible is that they will position Kumar on a street corner and pull up in a car. Show him his daughter, get the file, and then drive away with the girl,” Shepherd said. “We’re going to have an hour’s notice. That’s all. So, we plan for the most likely scenarios.”

Within the hour, the team was already en route to O’Hare International Airport where an unmarked government Cessna Citation X waited to transport them to the government hangar in Miami. After transferring their gear quickly to the aircraft, Wilson settled into his seat. Sloan sat beside him.

The team was heavy on snipers: Sloan, Jackson, Cooper, himself. Lambchop and Roth weren’t bad either. Shepherd had not indicated if taking out the bad guys was the plan, but Wilson highly suspected it was. He was to be situated in another high-rise with line of sight to Percy’s condo.

“So, what do you think the odds are we can get this girl without eliminating all the bad guys?” Sloan asked Wilson.

“Slim to none,” Wilson replied. Obviously, Sloan was thinking the same thing he was.

Sherman poked his head around Sloan. “Percy’s marked the second he receives that

file with DoD data. There's no other reason Shepherd would have put you on him. The paid help on the ground with the girl, they won't have access to the file. They're not a threat. They may come out of this alive." He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Wilson settled back in his seat. Yeah, that was what he'd thought too. It was nice having confirmation that someone else had deduced the same thing. He'd never second-guess Shepherd, but he longed for the old days when he was told up front that he was on a kill mission. He popped in his earbuds and turned on his classic rock playlist, and then he too leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Just three hours later, they were on final approach to Miami International Airport. It was nearly dawn. All members of the team had slept during the flight. They'd be ready to hit the ground running. The landing was smooth, the taxi to the hangar short, the air humid and hot when they deplaned, and the drive to the location in South Beach that would be their onsite headquarters for the duration of the Op, gnarled in heavy traffic.

All of them except for Lambchop were transported in a white panel van, driven by a man who identified himself as merely Dip. Wilson knew that Dip was a Fed. Lambchop was handed keys to a sedan. During the briefing, it was disclosed that Lambchop would remain at the airport and be Kumar's driver and bodyguard, sticking by his side, for the duration of this Op.

The panel van pulled into a single unmarked garage door entry in the back of the Portofino Tower, which was another high-rise luxury condo building that faced their target's building, the south tower of the Continuum complex. The door rolled closed before someone on the outside opened the van door. The team grabbed their gear and followed the man in maintenance coveralls down the narrow hallway.

"This will be your group's rooms," the man said with a heavy southern accent. "We

have privacy film on the windows and outer door. Try not to use the street level door if you can help it.” He pointed back in the direction they came. “There’s a street access back door by the garage door, which is more hidden from view.” He handed them all keycards.

“These give you full access to all doors in the complex.”

“Thank you,” Cooper said. “Are you our point of contact?”

“No, go through your normal command structure. I’ll be vacating the premises now.”

“Are there vehicles onsite for us?” Cooper asked.

“Yes, the two sedans in the garage have been designated for your use. Keys are in them. But traffic is normally so fucked up you’re not going anywhere faster by car than walking.” Without another word, he turned and left them.

Wilson glanced around the room they were standing in, set up as a makeshift office. There were two six-foot tables with metal folding chairs. On the wall above one of the tables was a detailed map of the South Beach area. On the east wall were the blacked-out windows and one glass door. A door on the far side of the room was open, revealing a bathroom. The door along the west wall was closed. Wilson opened it. Inside were barracks style beds lining the wall, four of them.

“They only provided us four bunks,” Wilson said to the others.

“Hopefully the exchange will be today, and we won’t even need them,” Madison said. “If Percy is as paranoid as I think he is, he’s not going to let too much time elapse before he calls Kumar. He won’t want there to be much time to get counter-assets in place.”

Cooper's phone chirped. He checked his text messages. "Okay, game on. Kumar landed and Lambchop has him. He's driving him to the hotel. Hopefully our intel is dead on, and he doesn't get contacted by the kidnappers and diverted from this area. In this traffic, we'll never make it to another location in time."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Kumar gets notified of the location for the switch before he reaches the hotel," Madison said.

"Then you better change into your tank top and Daisy Duke shorts right now, Blondie," Cooper said, giving his wife a wink.

Madison's role was slotted to be a bystander on the street wherever the exchange would take place. Wilson had operated with the husband-and-wife team before and was always surprised by how much Cooper had relaxed since Madison joined the team. Cooper used to be a by the book, rule-following pain in the ass. Now he was human, and Ops were so much more relaxed, which fit Wilson's style better.

"Yeah, I'll do that," Madison said. "I'm that confident of my assessment." She shot Cooper a cocky look with a grin, and then sealed herself in the bathroom.

"Okay," Cooper said, dropping his backpack onto one of the tables. It had been laid out with a diagram of the target building as requested. "There's easy access to the immediate area via foot. Not so much with rifles."

"Where's the info on the unit I can set up in? I'd like to check out my sight lines," Wilson said. His location would be the thirty-third floor, even with Percy's unit.

"Me too," said Sloan. Sloan and Sherman would be deployed to a corner unit on the tenth floor. His aim would be on the possible exchange locations.

"The units are vacant. You might as well get set up now," Cooper said.

“Roth and I are going to take a walk around the area to be familiar with it,” Jackson said. Both of them had been assigned to be in the vicinity on ground level. They both needed to identify locations they could observe from undetected, as well as fire from if needed, with clean sightlines. Roth would also be onsite to render emergency medical care if needed.



“Go on comms,” Cooper ordered before the two men left.

Cooper sorted through several folders that were on the table to find the correct packets of information regarding the units they would use that were prepped by the onsite lead team SecDef had arranged. And then he, Sloan, Sherman, and Wilson checked out the building schematics. The service elevator was close to the unit Wilson would set up in to surveil Percy. Sloan and Sherman had a bit longer of a walk to get to theirs.

“I’m going to go up to my unit,” Wilson announced once he’d studied the map and got his bearings. He brought his backpack and rifle case with him and left the room. Sloan and Sherman exited behind him, carrying their gear as well.

They found the service elevator and used the cardkey to call it. They rode it to the tenth floor where Sloan and Sherman got off. Up on the thirty-third floor, Wilson made it from the elevator to the door to the unit he’d occupy without anyone seeing him.

The cardkey allowed him access to the unit. He stepped into a marbled entry with a ten-foot ceiling. He walked through the cavernous entry, the sound of his footfalls echoing in the silent space. Stepping onto the polished hard-wood floor of the living room, he gazed at the far wall. The entire wall in front of him was windows that overlooked the two buildings that made up the Continuum complex, the north and south towers. Percy’s condo was in the south building.

He went over near the window and set down his rifle and pack. From his backpack, he retrieved his rangefinder. He consulted the schematic in the folder to determine

which set of windows on the building he was looking at were Percy's. It didn't have four clean sides. The building had a different number of floors on different levels, resulting in a staggered edge of the building, allowing for multiple corner units on most of the levels.

He pinpointed the windows that were Percy's, and he gazed through the rangefinder, determining the distance. Then he broke out his Barrett M82A1 sniper rifle, a .50 caliber long-range weapon, and set it up at the window. He focused through his Nightforce MIL-SPEC ATACR 5-25×56 F1 scope, bringing the windows and inside Percy's unit into view.

Sweeping across the windows, his gaze settled on the man standing at the window beside a tripod with what looked like binoculars, or a scope mounted to it. His phone was pressed to his ear. J.R. Percy. Percy's gaze was towards the south. Consulting his map, Wilson saw that the park was south, though to see it, Percy would have to look down, which he wasn't. Straight due south was the channel, the exit from the port of Miami, with Fisher Island forming the southern end of the land mass before the channel spilled into the Atlantic Ocean.

Wilson refocused through his scope at the man and the realization hit him that if Percy had Kumar go to Fisher Island for the exchange, he'd have a front row view of any and all boats going to the island. His team would be seen boating over, which was the only way to access the island.

"Be advised the target has been acquired," Wilson broadcast through comms. "I've identified another possible location for the exchange based on the target's current view out his window. He's staring right at Fisher Island."

"That island is a fortress, accessible by invitation only by someone who lives there," Garcia chimed in. "The Digital Team already discounted that location due to the security on the island. And we could not find any known associates of Percy's who

have ties to the island.”

“He’s probably dreaming of living over there, jealous as hell of the rich and famous who are paying through the ass to live on that little hunk of rock,” Sherman broadcast.

Wilson chuckled.

“Just in case, Undertaker, do you have a line of sight to the island?” Cooper asked. “Specifically, the dock area.”

“Negative, Coop,” Sloan replied. “Razor, I sure hope your team’s assessment is correct. If the exchange goes down over there, we’re blind from up here and I don’t see us getting over there in time, if at all.”

“Well, the target also has binocs on a tripod that is currently pointing down,” Wilson said.

“Keep him in your sights, Taco,” Cooper ordered.

“Affirm,” Taco replied, just as a woman entered the room Percy was in. “Who’s this? The target has female company, blonde, beautiful.”

“That would probably be the target’s personal assistant. She’s privy to all his business dealings. She’s not an innocent,” Garcia reported. “Sorry she wasn’t in the briefing packet. We only just learned of her. We didn’t get much lead time on this mission.”

“Understood, Razor,” Cooper said. “All units, be advised that Xena has gone out to survey the area as well.”

“I’m on comms,” Madison reported. “I’m going to go over and check out that park.

Then I'm going to wander around the streets that are in the target's line of sight."

"Roger that, Xena," Cooper acknowledged.

Wilson remained at his post; his gaze trained on the target building across the way. The blonde stood near the target with an iPad or other digital device poised in her grip. It appeared she recorded whatever the two of them discussed. How Wilson wished they could get a bug in Percy's condo! It had been deemed not possible by whoever SecDef had running point on this.

The morning dragged by. Wilson kept his vigil surveilling Percy. By eleven hundred, he was digging in his pack for a protein bar. Kumar was in his hotel room, a mile away, pacing according to Lambchop. This was the boring part of the job, the watching, and the waiting.

Refocusing his view at Percy's windows, Wilson watched the blonde leave. Percy had been on and off his phone all morning. He currently was back on it. Finally, at eleven twenty-five hours, he went to the window and gazed through his binoculars, down towards the street level.

"Target is at the window, checking out the street level view on his binocs," Wilson broadcast.

Five minutes later, Lambchop made the transmission they'd been waiting for. "Game on, instructions have just been received. The meet is to take place at the southwest corner of the parking at Inlet Boulevard. I do believe that is in our target's line of sight."

"It sure is, Lambchop," Coop answered. He was still in the control room consulting the maps.

“What timeframe was given to the father?” Wilson asked.

“Within the hour. He’s to call back when he arrives at the designated location.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Xena, Crash, and Jax, make your way over there and figure out how you can blend in,” Coop ordered. “And Jax, find me a concealed location as well. I’ll head over at the last minute with one of the vehicles in case we need to pursue.”

In preparation, Wilson cut a circle in the glass window. Then he coated the hole and surrounding glass with clear tape. His silencer was already attached to his weapon. He positioned his tripod so that the barrel just barely penetrated the hole he’d made. If he had to shoot, the round should cut neatly through the window in front of Percy as it penetrated it without shattering the entire window. The prepping of his window would prevent it from shattering as well.

The minutes ticked by while they all waited for Lambchop and Kumar to arrive. Kumar, told to come alone, drove. He dropped Lambchop off a few blocks before he would enter Percy’s line of sight. Then he proceeded to the parking lot, parked, and positioned himself on the corner as instructed. He made the phone call to tell the kidnapper he was in position, and then he stood and waited. Again, the minutes clicked by.

Kumar had comms in his ear. Lambchop kept a running dialogue of reassuring and calming thoughts flowing, not his normal pre-mission prayer, but needed messages of having faith, and that it wouldn’t be much longer as he made his way towards Kumar’s location. “You’re doing great, Mr. Kumar,” he said, even though Kumar desperately studied each car that passed him. He looked like a mad man.

Finally, a silver sedan with tinted windows pulled up and stopped right next to Kumar. Madison had a clear line of sight to see what Kumar did. The back window rolled down and Kumar’s daughter sat beside it. She appeared unharmed. Madison

studied the man in the backseat who sat beside Puja Kumar. He held her and Madison could see a gun pressed into the girl's side. Madison broadcast her observations.

"I'll transfer the file as soon as you let my daughter out of the car," Mitesh Kumar said bravely.

"Transfer it first, and then we let her out as soon as we get confirmation it is what was requested," the thug in the backseat said. The driver was turned in his seat, a phone pressed to his ear.

"It is, I promise," Kumar stammered. "Okay, transmitting the file." His shaking fingers stabbed at the keyboard of his phone. He waited, his eyes locked on his daughter's.

"Target should have his eyes on his phone or a tablet," Shepherd broadcast. "The file has been opened."

"Roger, his finger is busy on the surface of his iPad," Wilson confirmed.

"Neutralize the target, Taco," Shepherd ordered.

Wilson released his breath and gently squeezed the trigger, taking the shot as ordered. The round left his weapon traveling at 2800 feet per second. Direct hit, center mass. Percy dropped to the floor. "Target neutralized," Wilson reported.

At that moment, the car pulled away from the curb. "Puja!" Kumar yelled.

"Target vehicle on the move," Lambchop reported. "Undertaker, blow the tires."

A split second later, Sloan took the shot and blew out one of their front tires and then one of the back. The car careened into a park car just as Cooper pulled out of his

parking spot and moved to block the intersection to prevent the kidnapper's car from exiting the parking area. He stopped with the nose of the car pressing against the driver's side door of the silver sedan, pinning it in place.

"Get the girl by any means necessary," Shepherd broadcast a beat later.

Wilson listened through comms as the team moved in to rescue the girl. He operated with the team for so long that just from the bursts of dialogue through comms, he could clearly envision the takedown. Jax moved in on the driver's side of the car and broke the car window with the barrel of his Sig. He then pressed it into the man's chest through the broken window.

At the same time, Lambchop moved in on the passenger side of the car and leaned in through the open window where the girl sat, pointing the barrel of his weapon, with silencer attached, at the man in the backseat who sat beside her. He no longer held her in place thanks to the impact of the crash. "Give it up," he told the man, who looked undecided about his next move. "Your boss is dead. Get your hands up."

The man still looked undecided.

"I'll shoot you right here, right now. You've got three seconds, two, one," he counted down.

The man raised his hands into the air, still gripping the pistol in his right hand. Lambchop reached past the frightened girl and ripped the pistol from his hands. Madison moved in as well, and she removed Puja Kumar from the car. She walked her back to her father, who was just catching up with the runaway car. Kumar and his daughter shared a lengthy hug, exchanging words of love, and Kumar professing how sorry he was she'd been taken because of his job. Madison would stay with the pair until the Feds moved in.



“Big Bear, be advised hostage is free, two ready to be turned over to law enforcement,” Lambchop broadcast.

“Roger that team,” Shepherd transmitted.

With the mission concluded, Wilson stood at the window and allowed himself a moment to admire how the light played on the tide. It danced across the ripples created by the current flowing from the channel into the Atlantic Ocean. Glancing further out from the beach, a few clouds cast shadows on the water, creating varied colors of dark blue. The sun reflecting further out made the water shimmer. It was beautiful and peaceful.

“Okay, team, reconvene at the garage. We’re out of here in ten minutes,” Cooper broadcast, ripping Wilson’s thoughts from the ocean to the post-mission withdrawal.

They’d debrief later.

First, they had to get the hell out of there now that the Feds had moved in to secure the scene. The Feds would deal with the aftermath, the arrests, a medical eval for Puja Kumar, the retrieval of the file from Percy’s phone. A team of Feds was already breaching his unit. Wilson was sure Percy’s pretty blond assistant would be in custody within the hour, too.

They boarded the jet after they’d fought midday traffic to get back to the airport. Cooper brought Shepherd up in the video meeting room on his tablet with the rest of the team huddled around.

“Good job team,” Shepherd said. “SecDef sends his thanks.”

“Was there any sensitive info in that file transmission?” Lambchop asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Wilson doubted it. There was no way SecDef and the federal authorities would let Kumar pass any classified info to Percy. That was why Percy's elimination didn't seem to be imperative based solely on the need to protect data.

"No sensitive info was transmitted," Shepherd confirmed. "Percy's elimination was based on other criteria."

Wilson nodded. It was as though Shepherd had read his thoughts. At the end of the day, it had just been another job. He didn't particularly care why the decision had been made to take Percy out rather than arrest him. He had confidence in the chain of command that had made the decision. The day he stopped having that faith would be the day he'd walk away from the job.

The remainder of the debrief was textbook. The video chat was shut down and each person on the team would complete their mission report on the flight back to O'Hare. Not a bad outcome. On the ground for less than ten hours and the case was wrapped up.

They arrived back at HQ just after sunset. After they stowed their gear, the other members of the team left to go home. The CIA Case had been pushed back. They would deploy on it the following afternoon. Wilson opted to again sleep on his office couch. First, he went to the fifth-floor kitchen to raid the leftovers in the fridge. Angel always kept food on hand at the office. He found several cartons of Chinese food and a tray with sandwiches from a local deli. He heaped a serving of the Chinese onto a paper plate and placed it in the microwave.

Joe Lassiter entered the kitchen. "Hi, how'd it go?" he asked casually as he entered.

Wilson knew Lassiter never asked anything without a motive. “Good. You read the mission report, I assume.”

Lassiter pulled the tray of deli sandwiches from the refrigerator and pulled two of the servings onto a paper plate. “You know I did. I’m not up here on an official capacity regarding your mission. I’m waiting for several members of Echo Team to get back. They’re running one of the Briana Woods’ rescue missions with her. Shepherd needs to come up with a label for those cases other than a Briana Woods’ mission.”

“I thought she was to be in the office for a few weeks for training,” Wilson said.

“This one came into the contact form of hers and was hot, immediate threat of death. Shepherd green-lighted it. It was local, the Chicago area. It was a good first case to have under the Shepherd Security umbrella.”

“Who was staffed on it?” Wilson asked.

“Woods, Saxton, BT, and Bubbles,” Lassiter replied.

“Was it successful?” Wilson asked.

“It was,” Lassiter said, without explaining what successful meant.

Wilson didn’t press him. His microwave dinged its completion of reheating his meal. He pulled it out and planned to bring it up to his office to eat.

“Sit, keep me company,” Joe said.

“Sure,” Wilson agreed, already regretting that he hadn’t just grabbed a sandwich and left the room before Lassiter arrived.

Lassiter sat across from him. “You’ve had an active few weeks. I’m glad you got in the St. Thomas trip in between these last two missions.” He chuckled. “It had to feel like the old days, two unplanned missions back-to-back.”

Wilson chuckled with him. It was forced, and he was sure Lassiter knew it. “It’s comfortable territory. It was easy to fall into the routine of the PGP Installs, but this feels like home.”

Lassiter took a big bite of his sandwich. “That’s good to hear,” he said after he’d chewed and swallowed. “You’re flexible. Shepherd appreciates that. He’s operating in new territory too, you know, making allowances for the men with families and staffing cases based on it.”

Wilson hadn’t considered that. Yeah, when had he ever known Shepherd to make assignments based on a team member wanting to attend a medical appointment with their wife like he had with Sloan? “Luckily, he has multiple team members with similar skill-sets. Though this last mission proved that the job overrules personnel requests when needed.”

“And it always will,” Lassiter agreed. “I know it’s been said before, but right now is such a time of flux within the organization. You have no conflicts with the modifications made for the men with families, do you?”

Ah, so that was what this was about, Wilson realized. “You’ve asked me before, and my answer is still the same. No issues whatsoever. They’re still putting in their time, be it in Ops or running other missions. It’s not in my job description to keep track of everyone’s assignments and evaluate the fairness of them. It all pays the same and I trust Shepherd. Besides, missions like the last two are what I signed up for.”

“Good enough,” Lassiter said. “If that ever changes, I expect you to initiate a conversation with me about it.”

“You know I will,” Wilson agreed.

When Wilson settled in to try to get some sleep, his thoughts drifted to Rae and his last conversation with her. Not tired enough to sleep yet, he tapped out a text message to her. “Hi, how’s it going?”

Her reply was immediate. “Good. I should be sleeping, but I’m wide awake.”

“Me too,” he said. “I just got back from a job, and I leave tomorrow morning on another one.”

“Do you like all the traveling?” she asked.

“I don’t mind it,” he answered. “You have to go where the job is.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“So, you’re not just like assigned to the Chicago area?” She knew that wasn’t the case as she’d met him in Norfolk and when she flew back with them, she learned their home base was some place in the Chicago area. She knew they weren’t a regular unit of federal agents. She knew several of them were DEA and others were FBI. She didn’t buy that they were just a federal task force of multiple agencies, as she’d been told. But she was smart enough to not ask more.

“No, it may be our home base, but we do get deployed to various areas when the job is there,” he said, phrasing it carefully to not give her any info she shouldn’t have.

“It’s amazing to me to hear how all this goes, given which side I was kind of on for so long, LOL.”

Wilson laughed aloud. “Yeah, I bet. It’s a whole different world that most people don’t know about. Just like I’m sure the world you were a part of was the same. Most people aren’t privy to the world you lived in.”

“Yeah, I’m sure my coworkers at the school would be shocked to learn what my life was like before, not that I’d ever tell them.”

“Yeah, that would be a really bad idea, LOL,” he wrote.

“LOL, I know. I can never tell anyone who I really am. That’s why I do like talking to you. You know and know how much my life has changed. Our conversations can be real, with no explanations of anything needed.”

“I like that we talk, Rae. I wish, though, that I could be as open with you, but the

classified nature of my job makes that impossible.”

“I know and I understand,” she wrote. “I guess that puts us both in the same position when it comes to any possible relationship. Neither of us will ever be able to be completely honest with a potential partner. Kind of dooms any relationship, don’t you think?”

Wilson didn’t know how to respond to that. He’d really never thought about it before, because he’d never thought about a person as a potential partner, never wanted that type of relationship. Even as his teammates married and had children, proving it was possible in their job, he still didn’t see himself in a committed relationship, didn’t see himself wanting one.

“I don’t know. Many of my teammates have successful relationships. But they can tell their significant other some about the job after she’s passed a background check when their relationship becomes serious, so it’s not quite the same as your situation.”

“Oh, really? I guess I just assumed you could never tell anyone what you do,” she said.

“Not everything, but more than you’d think,” he replied. “And there are some things I wouldn’t share, wouldn’t want to either burden someone with how horrible something was or how scary a situation was. I know my team mates never share the close calls. They don’t want their wife or girlfriend to worry about them every time they’re out working more than they probably already do.”

“That makes sense,” she agreed. “If Garcia had a wife, I’m sure he wouldn’t want her to know how close he was to me when I got shot and have her worry it could have been him.”

Wilson wouldn’t correct her assumption that Garcia wasn’t married. He was sure Rae

would be shocked to hear that he was married and had a son. “Yes, none of the team members share that kind of thing.”

There was a lapse in their texting that lasted nearly a minute. “I should probably try to get to sleep now. My alarm is going to go off way too early.”

“Before you go,” he tapped out, “I wanted to say that I think you should not assume you can not have a successful relationship because you can’t share anything about your past with someone. If he’s the right person, the good person you are will be enough for him. He won’t need to know everything about who you used to be.”

She thought about that for a minute and suddenly felt emotional. She wanted to debate him, insisting that if someone didn’t know her past, they wouldn’t truly know her. She’d feel like she was not being honest. And the fact that he was urging her to be open to a relationship with someone proved he didn’t think about her in romantic terms at all. That made her sad. She knew she shouldn’t think of him in those terms, but she couldn’t keep herself from having feelings for him beyond appreciation and friendship.

As if she thought he could read her mind, she then felt embarrassed for the thoughts she had. He’d never indicated he thought of her that way or had any intentions beyond friendship. It almost made her feel guilty that she was attracted to him and wondered what it would be like to be with him.

“Okay, thanks, Jimmy,” she tapped out, realizing she’d waited too long to reply. “I better try to get to sleep now.”

“Okay, sleep well. I’ll talk to you later,” he tapped out.

Hotel



Wilson reported to Shepherd's office at zero nine hundred for the pre-mission briefing on the next CIA Referral Case. He was assigned in Sloan's place. On the team that would be deploying were Cooper and Madison, Garcia, Doc, Michael Cooper, and himself. Six team members had become the normal staffing level for most of these cases. It was what seemed to work best.

He learned that Delta Team members Lambchop, Mother, and Sherman plus Echo Team members Roth and BT, and Bravo Team lead Flores, had left earlier that morning on a low threat DEA Partner Mission. The CIA mission would not deploy until the afternoon when the company jet returned from delivering them to Kansas City. With five complete teams, the juggling of staff and assignments had become difficult for Wilson to keep up with. The rest of his team, Charlie Team, were still on the next PGP Install.

"You'll fly out on our Lear at thirteen hundred," Shepherd began. "Baltimore, Maryland is your destination. We have not been given access to the CIA's recordings of what exactly was picked up leading to our mission regarding our target, one Bradford Bianchi, as I was told their investigation is ongoing, however, what we do know is that Bradford Bianchi is not a principal in their case."

"Did they even tell you what we're supposed to be investigating on him?" Doc asked.

"The only direction we were given was that his communications with a Saudi businessman aren't benign," Shepherd replied.

"The Digital Team has dug into him and didn't find any red flags. Known email and phone numbers show nothing concerning, so I have no idea what the CIA means by not benign," Garcia said. "He works overnights, Tuesday through Friday at MRG Enterprises. It's a large freight transfer facility at the Port of Baltimore, mostly dry bulk goods coming in on international shipping containers. Their audits have all been clean. In his job function, emailing and talking with international customers is in his

job description.”

“Baltimore is known for its organized crime syndicate. Is this guy connected?” Cooper asked.

“There are no signs of it,” Garcia answered. “Bianchi’s forty-two years old with no record, doesn’t seem to have relationships with people who are known or suspected of criminal activity.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“That’s hard to believe,” Cooper countered. “Italian families are all connected in some way, through business affiliations, if not socially.”

“This guy seems to be an outlier,” Garcia said. “Which could be suspicious in itself.”

“Keep the Digital Team looking into him,” Shepherd ordered.

“Shep, can you press the CIA for a direction? Are we talking weapons, bitcoin or other untraceable currency, links with known terrorist groups, or another angle as simple as drugs or money laundering? Going into it without any direction is asinine,” Doc complained.

“My discussions with Mason are ongoing,” Shepherd said.

Beauregard Mason was the deputy director at the CIA and Shepherd’s contact. He was also a cagey sonofabitch who habitually didn’t share info that would make their job easier.

“I’ll push Bianchi’s bio and what the Digital Team found on him out to each of you to study. Try to get to it before the flight to Baltimore,” Garcia said. “Michael and Wilson, you’ll want to catch a nap at some point. The three of us are going in as new employees from the contractor service the transfer facility uses to acquire staff. We’re on from nineteen hundred tonight until seven hundred tomorrow. They pull twelve-hour shifts.”

“Madison and I will staff our onsite HQ, run down leads if needed, and find a few hours in there for us each to sleep,” Cooper said.

“Your onsite HQ will be a Residence Inn a few blocks outside of the Port of Baltimore. Angel could only book you a one-bedroom unit. You’ll be hot-bunking it,” Shepherd said.

That didn’t matter to Wilson, and he was sure no one else would have a problem with it, either. “Are there metal detectors the employees have to pass through to gain access to the job?” Wilson asked. If he could carry his weapon was more of a concern to him.

“Negative,” Garcia answered. “Unfortunately, that means anyone else could be carrying as well. If anyone suspicious pops up in our onsite interactions, you can run them through the Digital Team as well. But try not to overwhelm them. Down on the docks, we won’t run into many choirboys.”

The team chuckled.

“Okay, questions?” Shepherd asked. He was wrapping up the briefing.

All replied in the negative.

“Okay, keep me apprised of your progress, Coop. We’re only going to give this three days onsite and if nothing obvious pops up, we’ll pull the plug on it. The Digital Team has already put in a total of sixty hours on this and found nothing concerning about this guy. If Mason doesn’t give us more, we’re not wasting too much more of our time on it.” He stood.

The team followed suit, and all came to their feet as well. Wilson followed the others out of Shepherd’s office. Cooper was the last out. He closed the door. “Okay, we meet in the garage at thirteen hundred.”

Wilson took advantage of the free time to go downstairs to sub-basement level two,

to the gym. He needed a good workout. He put himself through an intense routine of cardio and weighted machines in solitude, earbuds in, his classic rock playlist blasting. Physical exertion always helped him focus. After a shower, he settled in at his desk in his office to do an initial read-through of the file on their target that the Digital Team had put together.

Garcia wasn't kidding. There was zilch on this guy that could be thought of as concerning. He appeared to be a model citizen. He even paid the rent and living expenses for his elderly mother in an assisted living facility and his elderly father moved in with him the year before when his mother had a stroke and required round-the-clock care. At work, his evals were always above expectation in the ranking by his superiors. He rarely called in sick, used his vacation time, and appeared to be your average Joe in every way.

What could have shown up on a CIA surveillance job concerning this guy, or about an associate of this guy? Saudi business dealing was what Garcia had said. It could have been a legitimate business communication that the CIA mistook for something more nefarious. It wouldn't be the first time they got it wrong.

Next, he Googled what crime was most prevalent in Saudi Arabia, even though he was pretty sure it was corruption and fraud. Uncle Google confirmed his memory was correct. Corruption in the form of nepotism and using middlemen to secure business dealings was common.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Bianchi was a middleman who helped facilitate business, which would be considered a crime in the U.S. and a sketchy gray area that passed muster in Saudi Arabia. And of course, if it involved product shipping either way, the legality of the product could be questioned.

Wilson met the remainder of the team in the garage at the appointed time and they quickly loaded the two vehicles they'd take to Chicago Executive Airport, where the

Lear would meet them. Once on the plane, they buckled in to accommodate the fast turnaround time the pilots had planned. It wasn't until they were airborne that the team discussed the case.

"Since this case is linked to Saudi Arabia, we can discount it's drug related," Garcia said.

"The population as a whole has little involvement with drugs," Doc argued.

"But that doesn't mean a particular business man isn't helping another trafficker from a different country move their product to the United States," Cooper spoke up.

"I'm more inclined to think our unlucky target is a middleman, taking bribes to help this Saudi businesses product clear customs," Wilson said.

"What product?" Madison asked.

"It doesn't matter. Accepting bribes to help shipping containers clear customs is a crime," Wilson answered.

"Even if the product in them is legal, it's a crime to accept a bribe," agreed Madison.

"What product does Saudi Arabia export besides petroleum and petroleum products? Very little else," Cooper said. "And petroleum isn't coming through the Port of Baltimore within Bianchi's job function. It's something else."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“So, this Saudi Businessman is the middleman?” Wilson threw out. “I wish we could get his ID. That would help give a possible direction.”

Cooper doubted Shepherd could get the name out of Mason, but he sent Shepherd a text anyway. He requested Shepherd try and he provided their reasons behind wanting it.

Their discussion ended soon after, and Wilson laid his head back to catch a nap. He woke as the aircraft descended.

Later, Garcia, Michael Cooper, and Wilson reported to the facility where Bianchi worked. Garcia’s job assignment was in the computer center, where he could investigate Bianchi’s online activities at work. Wilson was positioned as a laborer so he could poke around to see if anything illegal was coming through the port, and Michael was in the same division as Bianchi. He’d have eyes on him all day.

It was nearly the end of the shift. Wilson’s foreman, Aiello, was a guy who’d worked at the port for nearly twenty years. He claimed to know the ins and outs of everything port related. Wilson was given easy, short assignments that he completed quickly. It wasn’t brain surgery. The one thing he did notice was that Aiello disappeared a lot.

Wilson came around the corner of the metal shipping container. There were four men about ten feet in front of him, huddled to the side of the container. They all stuffed something into their pockets as soon as they saw him. It looked like cash to Wilson, large handfuls of cash. Three of them moved away. Aiello moved towards him.

“Look, you didn’t just see anything,” Aiello said.

“I honestly didn’t,” Wilson said with a shrug.

“Smart man,” Aiello said.

“No, I really didn’t, and I don’t care what that was about,” Wilson said.

“What are you doing on this side of the floor?” Aiello asked.

“That skinny dude with the square glasses sent me over to find you to assign me my next job,” Wilson said.

“Okay, yeah, I can use you over here,” Aiello said. He directed Wilson to help a group of other workers stack containers at the far end of the facility.

Even though all three men wore their comms, Wilson didn’t report the incident. He’d wait until after work to discuss it with the team. The rest of the shift was uneventful.

After the end of the shift, Wilson hung back, watching the rest of the crew clock out to see who did what and to try to get an ID on the three men he saw with Aiello and the cash. After he’d clocked out, Wilson began walking towards the nearest public transportation stop, which was the designated place he’d be picked up by Garcia, who drove the car. From there, they’d circle and pick up Michael, who walked in the opposite direction upon clocking out, hopefully unseen by Bianchi or any of the workers.

Garcia pulled up to the curb beside him. As Wilson opened the door, he glanced around. Behind the wheel of a car severalback from Garcia, Wilson saw Aiello behind the wheel. He was watching them. Wilson knew Aiello had left the building ahead of him as he’d watched him clock out. Aiello should have been long gone by that point. Had Aiello waited and followed him?



“I think my foreman may be following me,” he told Garcia when he got into the car. “Blue Toyota a few cars back.”

“Let’s see if he is,” Garcia said. He pulled into another parking lot and pulled a U-turn, heading back towards the main employee parking lot.

As they passed Aiello’s car, Wilson kept his face straight ahead, but through a side glance watched Aiello’s head follow them as they passed him. “He just gave himself whiplash,” Wilson said. Wilson told Garcia about what he’d witnessed regarding the money.

“You got IDs on those three other guys?” Garcia asked.

Wilson shot him an outraged look. “Please,” he said. “Of course, I do. Got pics of their timecards for you to rundown.”

“What do you think the cash was about?”

“No clue. But they scattered as soon as they saw me.”

Wilson kept a look out for Aiello’s car as they circled back to the pickup location for Michael. There was no sign of him all the way back to the hotel, which was a ten-minute drive. There, the team had a short meeting to go over the events overnight.

“How much cash are we talking?” Doc asked.

“I didn’t see the face on the bills, but each man had a big wad wrapped in a rubber band. And they didn’t like that I’d seen them, either,” Wilson said.

“Do you really think your foreman was following you?” Madison asked.

“It sure looked like it. He had a clear lane to merge into when Garcia picked me up, but he didn’t. He stayed where he was, watching whose car I was getting into.”

“The money could have been for anything,” Cooper said. “It may or may not be related to Bianchi. Make a point of staying out of that guy’s way for now and let’s focus on Bianchi. We can always revisit the cash angle and become a thorn in this guy’s side later.”

“Keep your head on the swivel on the shop floor, Wilson,” Garcia said. “Ports and dockworkers are traditionally mafia strongholds. And you saw something you shouldn’t have.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Thanks,” Wilson replied sarcastically.

“Just saying, that could be enough to get you killed.” Garcia paused just long enough to laugh. “But don’t worry, we’ve got your back.”

“Make sure you stay on comms and broadcast a nine-one-one if you have even a feeling something isn’t right,” Madison added. “You too, Garcia. If this guy is into something, just remember he saw you with Wilson.”

Now Wilson chuckled while slapping Garcia on the back. “That’s right, they may want to fit you for a pair of cement shoes right along with me.”

“I think the expression is cement overshoes,” Madison posed. “And I don’t want either one of you wearing a pair.”

“Michael, you sat several desks away from Bianchi. What did you pick up regarding him?” Cooper asked his brother.

“Not much. He only got up from his desk three times the entire shift, once for lunch break and twice more to hit the head. And before you ask, yes, I kept him in sight the entire time. I used the stall next to him when he took a shit after lunch and stood several urinals down when he took a piss in the morning. I washed my hands at the sink during his afternoon piss. From what I could see of his work area, his cell phone never came out, and he appeared to be diligently working the entire shift.”

“That jives with his computer activity. Bianchi was active in the company portal all day, closing out work forms left and right. And looking back over his history, he’s

always been a top performer,” Garcia said. “The guy just pushes a massive amount of work through the system.”

“Did he send any overseas emails?” Cooper asked.

“Only about five an hour,” Garcia said with a laugh. “They were form letters he filled in info into specific fields. It all looked legit. Even the incoming emails he handled didn’t appear suspicious. And all phone calls are recorded for audit purposes. I listened to a few and heard nothing that sent up red flags.”

“Okay, so maybe it was something he did from a personal account out of work that flagged with the CIA,” Cooper said. “Maybe we need to have Madison make contact with him out of work.”

“From what the Digital Team dug up; he goes to that bar near his home every night he isn’t working,” Garcia reminded them.

“I’ll go starting tonight. Talk up the bartender, become a person they’re comfortable with over the next few nights,” Madison said. “Hopefully, the bartender will do the introductions when he comes in.”

“Sounds good,” Cooper agreed. “We’re going to need another car. Aiello saw the two of you together. I want Michael to steer clear of you both at work and when you’re traveling to and from the job.”

“Does that mean I get my own car?” Michael asked.

Cooper nodded. “Doc and I will go with Madison to the bar and run surveillance and back up for all of you from the car parked outside it.”

“Or we could just get me a car,” Madison said.

Yeah, Wilson knew that wasn't going to happen. Cooper would not send her into an unknown situation without him being nearby for backup.

"Blondie, you know no one goes in without backup," Cooper said.

Wilson knew the moment any of them assumed a case had no risk associated with it was when the danger would rear its ugly head. Even if it turned out that Bianchi was clean, there was still that business with the large handfuls of cash, which he had to believe was probably mafia related.

Indigo

That evening, Madison went into the Little Falcon, the neighborhood bar Bianchi frequented when he wasn't working, while the three men working overnight with him reported to work. As planned, Cooper and Doc were set up in the car in the parking lot. It turned out Bianchi's little home away from home was a cute little hole-in-the-wall gastropub and brewery, not a dive-bar as everyone had envisioned. The bartenders were quite engaging when Madison said she'd just moved to the neighborhood. They introduced her to all the regulars in the place.

The night at work for Wilson, Garcia, and Michael was uneventful. It was a long twelve hours of nothing suspicious. Aiello gave Wilson a wide berth after assigning him to work on a long project with his number two in charge. Wilson did not see Aiello or the three other men who had the cash during the previous shift until they all stood in line to clock out.

Through comms, Wilson heard Garcia gripe that there was nothing suspicious regarding Bianchi, and he'd looked through all the work the man touched. Michael, too, complained this was a non-case. Bianchi repeated the previous shift of only leaving his desk three times. He wasn't overly friendly with any of his coworkers. He just focused and plowed through his work.

The third and final night Bianchi was scheduled to work before his three nights off went much the same until an hour before it was time to clock out. Wilson had been left on his own to complete the final job of the shift in one corner of the yard. Shipping containers were stacked high around him. He was scanning the labels and entering them into the system as pending customs inspection.

His senses tingled, alerting him that he was being watched. He caught sight of a reflection off of something shiny to his right. But when he glanced in that direction, he saw nothing. He kept at the task, but remained alert. Several moments later, he was rushed by four men, Aiello and the three others who had the cash that first shift.

“Whoa, Aiello, put the pig sticker away, dude,” he said, knowing it transmitted. “Hold fast there and tell me what the hell this is about.” The hold fast was for the team, so they’d give him time before busting this assault up.

Aiello held the switchblade knife to his throat. “How about you tell us who you really are? And your Hispanic carpool buddy from computer systems. You two are cops.”

Wilson decided instantly how to play this. “Try Feds, but we’re not here investigating you. You have nothing to do with our case. What you’re in to, I don’t know, and I don’t care. Put that knife away and step back. And by the way, I’m wearing a wire. If anything happens to me, my partner and boss know it was Aiello, Keeler, Darrow, and Kent who did it.”

The men all looked shocked as he recited their names.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Look, you’re not even a footnote on my report,” he said when Aiello didn’t step back or speak. “But if you don’t back off right now, you’ll be prominent in it.”

“How do you know your case doesn’t involve us?” Aiello asked.

“Trust me. I know. I don’t care about that cash you’re so worried I saw you with. As far as I’m concerned, it was friendly wagers between friends. I’m here to fry much bigger fish that you probably don’t even know is operating at this port and this facility.” He pushed back against Aiello, who finally took the knife away from his throat and he stepped back. “That’s better. Thank you,” Wilson said. And it was a far better outcome for the man. Had he not removed the knife, Wilson would have broken his wrist removing it himself.

The three other men exchanged nervous glances. “Now what?” the man named Victor Kent asked.

“You all go back to work and don’t mention anything about me or my partner to anyone else. If anyone figures out who we are, I’ll know it came from one of you and then I will go out of my way to jam you up. We’re nearly done here and will be out of your hair in a few days, and we’ll make the world a hell of a lot safer.”

“Huh?” Aiello asked. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“Good choice,” Wilson said. He watched the four men retreat back the way they’d come until they disappeared around the corner of one of the containers. Even though he’d played it cool, his fight-or-flight hormones flowed through his veins. He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart, and he kept his gaze in that direction, just in case

this wasn't really over.

"Everything okay, Taco?" Garcia's voice came through comms.

"Yeah, they're gone."

"Nice play," Garcia said. "I'm heading back to my section. Bubbles, do you still have eyes on the target?"

"Affirmative," Michael replied. "This guy is as boring as they come."

The following day, Bianchi and the team were off shift. Because of the assault on Wilson by Aiello and his little band of budding felons, Garcia had the Digital Team dig deeper into the four of them while they waited for the Little Falcon to open. Cooper and Madison were in the car across the street from the gastropub, watching for Bianchi to arrive. They knew he went there daily when not on shift, and from the examination of the receipts by the Digital Team, they knew he went at all hours of the day and evening.

Wilson woke just past thirteen hundred. Not bad. He'd gotten five hours of sleep. Michael and Doc still slept, but he found Garcia in the living room area clicking through screens within the MRG Enterprises intranet work system on his computer tablet. He wasn't surprised Garcia was already up and working, but he was surprised he was in the intranet system that was supposed to only be accessible when inside the building.

"You looking for anything in particular?" he asked Garcia. "And are you having any luck?"

Garcia shot him a grin. "I built a backdoor in for myself and the Digital Team. It was easy enough. Their intranet links with their external internet presence. I'm just going



over the last few work orders Bianchi closed out and I'm verifying dates that he actually worked the days the orders were closed. So far, all is lining up."

"Can I help?" Wilson asked.

"Thanks, but no. I'm nearly done. By the way, the Digital Team sent a complete file on the four guys with the cash who assaulted you. They all went to school together, played on the same high school football team. Aiello was the team quarterback."

"My guess is he's still the ringleader, as he's the foreman and the rest are just labor."

With a few clicks on the keyboard, Garcia looked back at him. "I just sent you the file. See if anything jumps out that may explain what they're into. I have a feeling we'll be wrapping this case up soon and I'd love to make a referral to the proper authorities regarding them. You're lucky they wanted info and didn't move in to kill you right away."

"I knew they were there before they struck, wanted to see what they had in store. Aiello didn't realize it, but I had hold of his hand and there was no way he could have cut my throat, but it's nice you care."

"A heads up you knew you were about to be assaulted would have been nice," Garcia's deep voice said.

"Next time, I promise," Wilson joked. He grabbed a cup of coffee and his tablet and opened the file on Aiello and the others. As usual, the Digital Team had done a thorough job. After he'd finished reading the file, he spoke again. "Bianchi has no known criminal ties, but Kent and Darrow do. I'm not sure how Darrow has stayed out of jail with his arrest record. Either he's protected or is one lucky sonofabitch that the charges keep getting dropped."

“I’m going with protected,” Garcia said.

“The question is, by who and is it related to the money I saw and what they’re up to?” Wilson thought aloud.

“All four men had money in their hands?” Garcia asked.

“Yes, identical rolls of cash,” Wilson answered. “So, it didn’t look like one guy was paying the three others.” He thought about it for a moment. “More like one guy was passing it out and showing the others his was an equal cut.”

“That would make more sense,” Garcia agreed.

“These four are all in their late thirties and have a history going back at least twenty years. None of these guys are rich or if they are, they’re hiding it well,” Wilson continued. “My original thought that whatever they’re into is small potatoes looks accurate based on this report.”

“Yeah, I have to agree with that. If they were making serious money, no matter what agreement they had, at least one out of the four would be living above his means,” Garcia said.

“And that just isn’t the case,” Wilson agreed.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Just then, Garcia received a text message from Cooper. Bianchi hadn't shown at the Little Falcon yet. He wanted Garcia to give him a call if he was up. Wilson had to chuckle at that. Of course, Garcia would have been up and working by then. Coop knew that.

"Yeah, I've been up a while," Garcia said into his phone. "Taco and I looked over the report from the Digital Team on Aiello and his three goons. Nothing there. And I looked over the rest of Bianchi's work in the company system. There's nothing there either, Coop."

"With today being Saturday, Bianchi's Senior will go visit his wife in the home. If Junior goes to his neighborhood tap at the same time, we can get in there and search the place," Cooper said. The digital team had discovered that Bianchi's father visited his wife every Saturday. He signed in at her care home at four in the afternoon every Saturday, had dinner with his wife, and then signed out at six-thirty sharp. "Why don't you and Taco head over there and watch the residence? If they both vacate, enter, search, and plant some tech on Bianchi's home computer."

Wilson checked his watch. The timing could be perfect.

Wilson and Garcia watched Bianchi and his father leave the house. They got into his car, which was parked out front. They both presumed that Bianchi was driving his dad to his mother's care home. They reported the movement to Cooper.

"Five will get you ten that Bianchi drops his dad at his mom's home and then goes to the Little Falcon for dinner," Wilson transmitted.

“Let’s calculate twenty minutes for Bianchi to deliver his dad, and then another fifteen to drive to the Falcon. I’ll go in, say, in about twenty minutes. I want to already be inside when he arrives,” Madison said.

“Taco and I are entering the house now,” Garcia advised. Then he nodded to Wilson and opened the car door.

Wilson walked with him to the front door. It was sheltered from the view of the neighbors on both sides in an alcove. Garcia rang the bell. Wilson knocked just to be sure no one else was in the house. They surveyed the area. There was no doorbell camera, no other security cameras in view.

After two minutes with no sounds coming from within, Wilson pulled the lock-picking tools from the breast pocket of his jacket. Picking locks was a new skill he’d just acquired. Just as he was about to insert the tools into the lock, the click of the deadbolt being opened came from the door. Wilson stepped back and hid the tools behind his back as the door swung open.

“Can I help you?” an older, Italian woman with the slightest of accents asked.

“You are not Bradford Bianchi,” Wilson said with a smile.

“You just missed him,” she said. She grabbed a tote full of cleaning supplies from the floor. They watched her turn the knob lock on the inside of the door knob. Then she stepped out and pulled the door closed. They stood in her way. “If you’d excuse me, please. And no one is home. You should go.”

They both stepped back and watched her walk between them to the car parked on the street in front of the house. They followed her away from the front door and got back in their own car. They pulled away from the curb before she did, but circled the block and returned after she’d left.

“Now that we know only the door knob lock is locked, that makes it easier,” Wilson said.

“And we know no one else is home,” Garcia added.

The two men returned to the front door and Wilson easily picked the cheap lock. They were inside quickly. They separated and began to search the house. Garcia found a laptop on the kitchen table and got to work on it, hoping it was their target’s computer and not his father’s.

Wilson easily discerned which of the two bedrooms was their target. The one without the support stockings, Bengay, and bookshelves filled with old Popular Mechanics magazines dated from 1990 through 2014. He searched the dresser, followed by the nightstand. Bianchi’s clothes were all crisply folded and arranged just so. He was careful to maintain the order in each drawer.

“Our boy is a neat freak,” Wilson broadcast. “His underwear is even folded in perfect, tight three by three-inch squares.” He lifted one of the little bundles of fabric and held it up, examining it. He wondered how Bianchi folded it so tightly, so compactly. And here he thought his method of rolling his clothes was best. He could learn a few folding techniques from Bianchi.

“He’s also a security freak when it comes to his laptop,” Garcia chimed in. “I find it odd that he has no security system on his house at all, but his laptop is Fort Knox.”

“Makes you wonder what’s on his laptop,” Cooper said.

“I’ll know in about three minutes,” Garcia said.

Wilson smiled to himself, hearing the glee in Garcia’s voice.

“If our target proceeds here after dropping Senior off at the home, he should be here any second,” Cooper transmitted.

“If not, if he comes home for some reason, that only gives us another five minutes or so before we’ll be rudely interrupted,” Wilson said, calculating Bianchi’s potential movements and the time associated with it. He’d moved on and was now searching the closet, which was equally organized as his dresser drawers.

Three more minutes clicked by.

“I’m in,” Garcia announced.

“It’s about time,” Wilson teased him through comms.

“Target should have been here by now,” Cooper said.

“Unless he goes in to see his mom, too,” Madison whispered. She was already inside the Little Falcon and had ordered a beer.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Facility records say negative. Not his normal pattern,” Garcia replied.

“If the target is circling home, you’ve got maybe one minute,” Cooper warned.

Wilson left the bedroom and returned to the living room. He peeked out the front window just in time to see the target in his blue Toyota pull into the driveway. “Fuck, target acquired,” he said. “We have maybe thirty seconds.” He rushed towards the kitchen where Garcia had already closed the lid to the laptop and opened the sliding glass back door.

The two men exited, drawing the heavy drape closed and stilling it as much as they could. Wilson slid the door closed just as he heard the front door open. They both ran around the side of the house and pressed their bodies against the white siding near the front of the house.

They did not see, but in the house, Bradford Bianchi went into his bathroom and retrieved his wallet from the counter, where he realized he’d left it. Then he retraced his steps through the house, glancing at the cleaning job Mrs. Romero had done with approval. He closed and locked the front door and returned to his car.

Wilson and Garcia heard the front door close. Then they heard the car turn over. From their vantage point, they saw the tail of the car in the street before Bianchi shifted to drive and pulled away. “He’s gone,” Wilson reported.

“Probably heading here now,” Cooper said. “I wonder why he went home.”

“Must have forgotten something,” Wilson posed. He and Garcia walked to the back

of the house. The door was still unlocked. They re-entered and they both returned to their searches.

Several minutes later, Cooper reported that Bianchi had just pulled into the parking lot of the Little Falcon.

Madison sat on a barstool in the middle of the bar. She had a menu open in front of her. When Bianchi entered, he went to the right side of the bar, fourth stool, and settled in. The bartender greeted him by name and then went to the tap and drew him a beer without Bianchi ordering. Then the bartender handed Bianchi the clipboard with the specials.

“Maddie, here’s one of our other regulars. Brad, meet Maddie, she’s new to the neighborhood,” the bartender introduced.

“Hi Brad,” she said with her best flirty smile.

“Hey,” he acknowledged.

At his house, Wilson went into Bianchi’s bathroom next. He found baby oil and an anal dildo inside the towel folded on the toilet lid. Below it was a gay porn magazine. “Oh hello,” he transmitted. “You need to change up your plan and send Coop in,” he paused for a moment as he flipped through the hardcore male on male magazine. “Our target plays for the other team, won’t have any interest in Xena.”

“Oh fuck. How’d the Digital Team miss this important detail?” Cooper groaned. “Coming in now. Create me a cover, Xena.”

“Nothing in this guy’s history suggested he’s gay,” Garcia replied to Cooper’s question. Then he hit pay dirt on Bianchi’s computer. “Oh, but the gay porn on his computer confirms what Taco found. Holy shit, does this guy have the movies eating



up his hard drive space.”

Inside the bar, Madison shifted gears immediately. She picked her phone up from the bar top and pretended to read a message. “Kevin,” she called to the bartender. “Draw me another beer. My brother just got here and is coming in. I’m so glad he decided to come. He’s been down since he and his boyfriend broke up.”

Bianchi’s attention became focused on her. And when Cooper came into the bar, greeting her with a hug and a kiss, Bianchi’s lips pulled into a grin.

“Kevin, my brother John,” Madison introduced.

The two men shook hands over the bar. Then the bartender handed him the beer. He settled onto the stool beside Madison, his eyes sweeping the bar as he did. When his gaze met Bianchi’s, he smiled at Bianchi, who still grinned at him. When he did, Bianchi averted his gaze quickly.

“Our boy is shy,” Cooper said quietly his face to Madison and broadcasting to the team. “He smiled at me until I made eye contact.”

“He must not be out of the closet yet,” Wilson said. “Makes sense now why he keeps to himself at work. Being gay wouldn’t go over well with the dockworkers.”

“Probably not with his Italian father either,” Garcia added.

“New plan, Xena and I will make him our new best friend,” Cooper said. “This way, it won’t be threatening to him.”

“We’ll be finished here in about a half an hour,” Garcia said. “I’m going through all his files and have already installed spyware on his laptop. So far, no red flags of what could have triggered the referral to us.”

“Besides his bathroom magazine preference, nothing out of the ordinary from my search so far either,” Wilson added.

Then he moved on to what he surmised was Senior’s bedroom. In the rolltop desk he found stacks of betting vouchers. Looking through the receipts, it was obvious that Senior played the ponies as well as frequented casinos. From the stack of receipts from the Horseshoe Casino in Baltimore, he was a regular there. And he lost big every time he was there. He transmitted this tidbit. “Why didn’t we get this info from the Digital Team? I’d like to know where the money is coming from to support dad’s gambling. No wonder our target is paying his mom’s medical bills.”

“So now I have to wonder if it’s Junior or Senior we’re supposed to be looking into. Is there a computer in Senior’s room, Taco?” Garcia asked through comms.

“Negative, not that I’ve seen yet,” he answered. “But I haven’t completed my search.”

Wilson worked for the next twenty minutes searching every drawer and every pile of papers in Senior’s room. In the closet, he found a locked footlocker. He picked the lock and opened it. “Holy shit,” he said aloud. “Senior has six handguns, an AR-15, and multiple magazines of ammo for each weapon. Who the hell is this guy?” He began snapping pictures with his phone of the weapons to document what he found.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Razor, have the Digital Team dig deeper into Senior,” Cooper ordered. “When you finish there, wake Bubbles and Doc and have the two of them head over to the home to follow Senior.”

“Roger that Coop,” Garcia acknowledged. “You nearly done in there, Taco?”

“Yeah, and no computer,” Wilson answered.

They left shortly thereafter. Once in the car, Wilson dialed Michael. Michael’s groggy voice answered on the third ring. “Yeah?”

“Good morning, sunshine. Wake Doc. We need you two to get to work.” Michael woke Doc and put the phone on speaker. Wilson filled them in on the events of the day so far.

“That’d be just like Mason, have us investigating the wrong damn target because he won’t give us enough info to conduct a thorough investigation,” Doc grumbled, the first words from his mouth.

Juliette

Sunday arrived with the team having more questions than answers. As enlightening as Saturday had been, the reason for their investigation was still not clear. Although Madison and Cooper tried to befriend Bianchi, he remained standoffish. Cooper even followed him into the men’s room at one point but discovered the man used a stall rather than positioning himself at the row of urinals to pee. Cooper even remained at the urinal, giving Bianchi a glance as he opened the stall door. Bianchi kept his gaze

averted throughout his handwashing and retreat from the otherwise vacant men's room.

The Digital Team came up with very little on Bianchi Senior. As far as his weapons, he had never completed a firearm application with the state of Maryland or anywhere else. He also had never been arrested, charged, or convicted of any crime. The man had never even had a traffic ticket. He looked as squeaky clean as his son.

"We're missing something," Doc said as they recapped what they knew and all they didn't know. "If I didn't do this job, I would have guns and wouldn't have any of them registered with the state either, so that isn't an issue for me that Bianchi Senior has weapons in his footlocker. At least they were unloaded and locked up. I find his gambling more of an issue."

"Yeah, he spent hours at the tables last night and it looked like he was losing," Michael said. They'd followed him to the casino when he left his wife's care home.

"Especially if he lost big to the wrong people," Wilson agreed.

"Bianchi Junior is ripe for being blackmailed if he's trying to keep the gay porn shit under wraps," Cooper said.

"I almost feel sorry for him, so repressed. No real friends at work and it appears none in his personal life. The bartender confirmed he never talks to anyone in the bar besides waitstaff," Madison said. "Has to be lonely. And if his dad doesn't know he's gay, how much do they really interact in the house?"

"Well, they're on different schedules with Junior working overnights," Wilson said. "So maybe not much."

"We'll find out soon enough," Garcia said. He had his tablet open in front of him.

The split screen displayed Bianchi's kitchen on one quarter of the screen, his bedroom where he still slept below it, the camera that aimed at the front door that was hidden in the cold air return across the room was in the upper right section, and the image from the camera in Senior's room focused on his still form in the bed in the lower. "It's nearly fourteen hundred. One or both of them should be getting up soon."

"As soon as they're up, we deploy to cover their movements, same assignments as yesterday. If we don't find something today, Shepherd's pulling the plug on the investigation," Cooper said.

Wilson couldn't say he was surprised. But he also had a gut feeling this was something. They just hadn't figured out what it was yet. He voiced his thoughts and was thoughtful for a moment. "If it's going to be shut down, maybe a direct approach is what it's going to take," he said. "I mean, if we make Bianchi believe we know what the case is we're investigating that involves him and a Saudi businessman, maybe he'll spill it."

"Hell, it's worth a try," Cooper said. "Okay, we proceed as planned. If nothing shakes loose, we confront Bianchi Junior at his home after he leaves the Little Falcon today."

"And Senior?" Doc asked.

"If he's there, we confront him too," Cooper said.

"Without outing Junior to Senior," Madison spoke up. "If his dad doesn't know he's gay, it's not our place to out him."

The rest of the team agreed.

Garcia and Wilson tailed Bianchi all over town. It was his errand day. He hit the grocery store, pharmacy, and the public library to return several books, and he ran his

car through the carwash. Then he ended up at the Little Falcon, where Cooper and Madison were already two beers in.

After another day of tailing Senior to the casino, Doc and Michael were happy to hear that Bianchi Junior finally ended up at his favorite watering hole. They hoped he'd return home after his meal and two beers. Senior was still sitting at a table and losing.

Madison and Cooper again tried to engage Bianchi in conversation. Again, they failed. He ate his meal, drank a few beers, and then left. Wilson and Garcia followed. When it was clear he was heading home, Cooper and Madison left the bar, heading there as well.

Upon arrival in front of Bianchi's house, Madison and Cooper slid into the back seat of the car Wilson and Garcia were in. They discussed the tactic they'd use. Then the four of them approached the house. It was deemed no risk that Bianchi would flee, so no one was needed at the back door. Madison stood in front of the others. She rang the doorbell.

When Bianchi opened the door, his surprise was unmistakable. When Madison produced her FBI badge, that surprise turned to confusion and fear. "I, I don't understand," he stammered.

"May we come in?" Madison asked.

Bianchi stepped back, shaking his head in utter bewilderment. The team followed him in. Wilson was the last to enter. He closed the front door behind himself. Bianchi stood in the living room awkwardly.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“I recognize you,” Bianchi said to Garcia. “You’re from the computer room at work.”

“We’ve been investigating you,” Madison began. “We received a tip regarding your conversations with a certain Saudi businessman.”

Bianchi looked like he was about to throw up. “Khalad Bashar?”

Madison nodded. “Yes. What can you tell us about him?”

“That I wish I’d never heard his name,” Bianchi said, looking more unstable on his feet.

“Why don’t we sit down?” Cooper said, motioning to Bianchi’s living room couch.

Bianchi dropped himself onto the far left of the couch. Cooper sat in the middle right section. Madison sat across from him in the rocking chair, leaving Garcia and Wilson to stand on either side of Madison, as there were no more seats in the room.

“Let’s drag a few kitchen chairs in,” Wilson said to Garcia after evaluating how intimidating it had to feel to Bianchi that they stood as they did. In any other situation, intimidation would have been the intention, but not in this one. Bianchi was clearly already intimidated enough.

“Khalad Bashar?” Madison repeated gently. Wilson was impressed as she adjusted her approach.

“Yes, he tried to blackmail me into clearing his organization’s shipments without a

proper inspection. I didn't though and I'm waiting for him to make good on his threats."

"What threats, exactly?" Madison asked.

"You don't know?"

Wilson watched him slump in his seat. The man was embarrassed and defeated. If it was what he suspected, Bianchi would never say it out loud. "We need to hear it in your words, but let's start with this. Tell us how it unfolded. How did the communications begin?" Wilson asked.

"I think the term is catfished," Bianchi began. "Looking back now, I should have suspected." He shrugged. Or was it a shudder? Wilson couldn't tell.

"A lot of really intelligent people are catfished every year. Those doing it are skilled. And let's face it, most people aren't suspicious of everyone and everything," Madison said. "They take things at face value."

Bianchi nodded. "Well, you can believe I'll be more suspicious of everything and everyone."

"How'd it start?" Madison pressed gently.

"It was on an app, swipe right, swipe left," he said, mocking himself. "I never really thought twice about using the same picture on my work email and using it in my personal life. It was a good picture. We're required to have a picture on our email for work. Makes it more of a personal customer service experience for our customers is what the company brass has said. BradfordBianchi at MRG Enterprises dot com. And my personal email, Bradford Bianchi at gmail dot com. Didn't occur to me anyone would look for me, want to set me up and I'd made it super easy for them." He shook



his head in disgust.

“We live in a sick world,” Cooper agreed. “How’d he do it?”

“I don’t know how he found my account on that site. It’s supposed to be anonymous, your email address and real name. My site name is BB ten-twenty, my birthday, October twentieth.”

“The site sends you email regarding your account?” Garcia asked.

Bianchi nodded.

“He probably hacked your email account first and then saw the emails from the dating app site. From there it was easy enough for him to find your account on the dating site, set up a fake profile of his own, and initiate communication,” Garcia said.

“My own email account led him there?” Bianchi asked.

“Yeah, more than likely. Had it been a hetero dating profile, he’d have set up a fake female profile to use.”

“Remember, these people are skilled at what they do,” Cooper reminded him.

“So he initiated communication with you in the dating app?” Madison asked.

“Yes. He sent me a message, said all the right things, looking for friendship and perhaps more, but definitely friendship and someone to talk to first. Must have read my profile and created his to mirror mine. We talked for weeks about work, family, life, unfulfilled dreams. And before you ask, yes, things got very personal, and a bit risqué. I’d never done anything like that before. It was fun, and I thought I’d found someone like me, wanting to take the next step, but unable to due to current life

circumstances.”

“Why are you unable to? What life circumstance?” Madison asked.

“Hello, my father. I can’t tell him I’m gay,” Bianchi said.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“You’re forty-two years old, for God’s sake!” Wilson said. “Isn’t it time you grow a pair and tell your father who you really are?”

“It’s about respect. It would kill my father if he knew I was gay. He’s old-school Italian. In his world, a man just isn’t attracted to another man,” Bianchi said. “And he sure as hell doesn’t act on his feelings or urges. No, in my father’s world you marry some poor woman who hasn’t a clue that you’re thinking of sticking it into some guy’s ass when you’re having sex with her, make a few babies, and live unhappily ever after.”

“That sounds pitiful and extremely dishonest. And what about you? Don’t you deserve to be with who you want to be with?” Wilson asked.

“I will when my dad is gone.”

“You could have a boyfriend or even just a lover and keep him under wraps from your dad, you know,” Wilson suggested.

“Tried that. And look what happened to me. I thought I found a guy who was like me. But he wasn’t. He turned out to be a married guy from Saudi Arabia looking to get his company’s goods pass U.S. Customs inspections quickly. He couldn’t romance me into doing it for him, so he tried blackmail instead.”

Wilson felt bad for Bianchi. Bianchi thought he’d found a kindred spirit, a potential partner. What he’d really found, though, was a corrupt Saudi businessman looking to get his company’s imports into the country more quickly. And it had been picked up on by the CIA, and here they were, following up on it and making this guy feel even

worse.

“Worst-case scenario, he follows through on his blackmail threat. What happens?” Madison asked.

“What do you mean, what happens?” Bianchi demanded. “My life is over.”

“It’s not over,” Cooper argued. “Being gay isn’t a crime. And most people don’t give a damn who you love.”

“You know, I was jealous of you when you walked into the Falcon, a gay man living his life, his sister openly talking about his boyfriend. You don’t know how lucky you are,” he told Cooper. “And now to know that you’re a Federal Agent, and openly gay. You’re an inspiration. I can’t be like you.”

Wilson was surprised Bianchi hadn’t put it together that Cooper was faking being gay to try to have an in with him. This guy really was naïve. He hadn’t learned a thing from being catfished.

Cooper wouldn’t ruin it for him. “I get that you respect your dad and don’t want to cause the kind of friction you would if he knew. You’re a good son. You help pay for your mom’s care. You let your dad move in. With his gambling debts, he obviously isn’t in a financial position to pay for your mom’s care or probably even keep a roof over his head.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Bianchi said.

“There’s more?” Cooper asked.

“Well, yeah,” Bianchi said in a dramatic fashion.

“So, Dad, what?” Cooper pressed.

“He crossed some very dangerous people,” Bianchi said. “He came across some money that wasn’t his. He should have left it where it was, but he didn’t. And the owners came up with the way for him to return it to them all cleaned and legit looking.”

“Mob money,” Wilson filled in. “He’s returning it to the casino in the form of losing it back to them.”

“But it worked too well, and it’s now taken on a life of its own. He paid the initial back years ago. Now, he’s being forced to help them launder other money by losing it at the tables,” he said, making air quotes as he said the word losing.

“What’s the source of the other money?” Madison asked.

Bianchi shrugged. “Who knows? Drugs, racketeering, illegal betting, prostitution? Does it matter?”

“And does Bashar know about this?” Wilson asked.

“No, I never told him, and he never brought it up. My dad’s problem is separate from mine.”

“Walk us through how your dad came across money he shouldn’t have taken?” Cooper prompted.

“It was years ago. He was still coaching. One of his former students’ sons was on the team. You know about the families, right? They run everything around here. Vinny Aiello Senior was at the school watching Junior play. Vinny Senior isn’t involved in the family business, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t opportunistic, either.”

“Aiello, who is the foreman at MRG?” Wilson interrupted.

“Yeah, he’s Vinny Senior, knows my dad from when he went to that school and played ball,” Bianchi explained. “So, he’s in my dad’s office after the game, blah blah blahing about old times with his uncle, his mom’s brother with the last name Palumbo, yeah, those Palumbos. The Feds, I mean federal agents, had been following Uncle Palumbo and picked that moment to try to arrest him, but Uncle Palumbo had seen them coming and hid the brief case of money before they moved in. Later, my father found it, thought he could keep it and the Palumbos would be none the wiser.”

“But they weren’t none the wiser,” Cooper deduced.

“You and your father both have got to be two of the unluckiest people I’ve ever met,” Wilson said.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Yeah, like seriously,” Bianchi agreed. “So, Vinny Aiello Senior plays errand boy for the family, retrieves the brief case from my dad with a threat, and just like that, my dad’s working for the Palumbos. And get this, Aiello gets a monthly kickback from the family that he shares with the three dumbasses he recruited to be his muscle when he went to the school to confront my dad. He could have kept all of it. My dad didn’t need four guys to intimidate him. He would have handed it over to Aiello had he been alone.”

“Darrow, Keeler, and Kent,” Wilson said.

“Yeah, how’d you know?” Bianchi asked.

“His three buddies from high school,” Wilson replied. So, that’s what the money exchange had been for.

“Does your dad make anything from his involvement?” Madison asked.

“No, but he gets to gamble all the time, which he likes. And he’s doing it with someone else’s money, which is a bonus. They let him win early in the game if his cards shake out to win, but he knows the money has to go to the house at the end of the night.”

“Does he want out?” Garcia asked.

“Nah, he has nothing else to do with his time.”

Wilson’s gaze locked with Cooper’s. Cooper looked as astonished by Bianchi’s

lackadaisical attitude as he was. He waited a beat for Cooper to say something. “Coop?”

“Yeah, there’s a crime here, but nothing for us to follow up on.” He stood. “Brad, today’s your lucky day. We’ll make sure Bashar doesn’t follow through on releasing any info on you. If your dad ever wants out, contact me.” He pulled a card with his name and phone number only on it and handed it to Bianchi. “Good luck to you.” He presented his hand, which Bianchi shook.

“Good luck, Brad,” Madison said as she too stood.

“You’re an over performer at work,” Garcia said. “They should be paying you more. Mention that on your next review.”

“Yeah, sure,” Bianchi agreed.

“Don’t discount your right to be happy or push it off to later. Be careful but get back out there,” Wilson told him, not sure where the sentiment had come from. He wasn’t one who should be giving anyone relationship advice.

Then the four members of Shepherd Security filed out the door.

Kilo

Reina got to work on Monday morning to find that Lilly Carona was no longer enrolled at the preschool. The center’s director, Kimberly Cargill, entered the classroom and asked Reina and the classroom teacher if anything had happened with Lilly on Friday. Neither woman could think of anything. And Lilly’s mom had actually been on time to pick her up the entire last week.

“Well, Lilly’s mom gave no notice. She just left a voicemail over the weekend saying



that Lilly would not be returning to our school. And she paid for the entire week in advance last Friday, as usual. The unused days aren't refundable, not that she even asked about a refund in the message, which I find very odd."

"Has the check cleared yet?" Kay asked. "Maybe she knows she'll be bouncing a check."

"Maybe," Kimberly agreed.

Reina found this beyond odd. Ashley Carona was a single mom, as far as Reina knew. Wasting that amount of money was not something she would do. "Were you going to call her and ask if something happened you need to be aware of?"

"Why would I open that can of worms?" Kimberly asked.

"It's better to let it lie," Kay agreed. "I, for one, am glad we won't have to stay late waiting for Lilly to be picked up any longer."

While both Kay and Kimberly agreed there was no reason to question the sudden withdrawal from the school, Reina was suspicious of Ashley Carona's motives and concerned for Lilly. But maybe she was just transferring her own traumatic childhood onto Lilly.

Later that morning, Reina slipped into Kimberly's empty office. She knew the filing cabinets where the student files were kept were not locked. She wanted to get a look at Lilly's. Maybe she'd drive by her house, just to take a look to see all was okay. Maybe she'd call Lilly's mom and ask if everything was alright. She wasn't sure yet.

She located and pulled Lilly Carona's file. She heard Kimberly's voice in the hallway. She was approaching. Reina quickly tucked the file into the back of her pants under her sweater.

“Reina, what are you doing in here?” Kimberly asked, startled to see Reina standing in her office.

Reina clutched her forehead. “I just needed a quiet moment. I just took some Tylenol and am trying to dull a headache.”

“I hope you’re not coming down with the flu, too,” Kimberly said.

Reina knew it was making its way through the school, both students and teachers were coming down with it daily. “I hope so, too,” Reina said. “Can I take a few more minutes in here where it’s quiet and give the Tylenol time to work?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Kimberly patted her shoulder. She pointed to the couch. “Of course. Take a seat and relax for five or ten minutes. I’d rather go cover for you for a few minutes than risk your headache getting so bad you have to go home and then have to cover for you for the rest of the day.” Kimberly gave her a supportive small smile and then she left the room, closing the door behind herself.

Reina took the opportunity to take pictures with her phone of the forms in Lilly Carona’s file. Then she refiled the folder, knowing that within the next few days, Kimberly was sure to pull it to transfer it to the no longer enrolled drawer and if it was missing, Kimberly would surely suspect her of taking it.

Ten minutes later, she returned to the classroom. She assured Kimberly the headache was dull, and that she was fine to carry on. Throughout the rest of the day, she considered what to do with the information in the pictures on her phone. She had Lilly’s address and her mother’s phone number as well as the mother’s employment information. There were also two emergency contacts listed. She could drive by the home address. But what if Ashley Carona was outside and saw her? Would she have to have an excuse for being there?

Glancing at the wall of drying paintings the children made last Friday, Lilly’s sledding scene picture hung with the others. She could take it and deliver it to their home. Yes, that’s what she’d do. Now she just had to sneak the picture out. Later, near the end of the day, Kay was in the bathroom, and she was alone with the kids. She took down the picture and rolled it, stuffing it into the arm of her coat to hide it. Now that she had a plan, she felt more relaxed.

It was dark outside when Reina left work, carrying her winter coat. At her car, she

removed Lilly's picture and placed it on the passenger seat before donning her coat. She pulled the picture up from Lilly's file that had her home address and then plugged it into her maps app.

Reina was nervous as she drove to Lilly's address. She wasn't completely familiar with all of Cedar Rapids, but she knew this part of town was a nice area. The homes were newer than the one she lived in, a little bigger, and on larger lots.

She wished she was pulling up on it in daylight because not all the homes had clear street numbers on them. When the maps program told her she'd arrived at her destination, she pulled over to the side of the road and looked at the nearest homes. The address was twelve-forty-two, which would put it on the right-hand side of the street. The problem was that house was circled with a high, chain-link fence. She got out of her car and walked up to the fence, which was secured with a lock. Within the fence, the skeletal structure of a charred, half collapsed home greeted her. It looked like it had recently burned. Even though the air was still, she could smell the remnants of the flames.

Tears welled up in her eyes and a lump formed in her throat. Is this why Lilly had been removed from school? Was she okay? Or had she been injured or killed in the fire?

"Hey, what are you doing over there?" a male voice called to her from the man who'd just stepped out onto the porch of the house across the street.

"Nothing," she called back. She took a few steps away from the fence and turned to face the man who still stood on the porch. "What happened to this house?"

"What do you mean, what happened? It burned down last week," he answered, descending the stairs.

She walked across the street. “How terrible. I’m not sure if this is the house I was looking for or not. Did Ashley and Lilly Carona live there? Was that house twelve-forty-two?”

“No, twelve-forty-two is that house,” he said, pointing to the small ranch home to the left of the burned house.

“Oh, odd. My maps app told me this was twelve-forty-two. I sure hope no one was hurt in the fire.”

“Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case,” the man said without elaborating.

“Sorry to hear that,” she said, taking a step away from him.

“But the woman and child in twelve-forty-two aren’t there any longer. They moved out on Saturday. A moving van was there,” he volunteered.

“They did?” she asked, surprised. Why would Ashley Carona pay for the next week’s tuition on Friday if she was moving out on Saturday, unless the move was local?

“Yeah,” he confirmed. Then he turned and returned to the porch.

“Do you know them? Do you know where they moved?” she asked.

“No, can’t say I do.”

“Thank you for the help.” Reina watched him disappear behind his closed front door. Then she approached the dark house he had identified as where Ashley and Lilly Carona lived.

It was a small brick ranch with an attached two-car garage. The curtains were drawn

in the front and there didn't appear to be any lights on inside. She tried the front door. It was locked. Not sure what she was looking for, or even why she was doing it, she circled around the garage, heading towards the back yard. Behind the garage was a service door in to it. She found the door unlocked.

Stepping into the garage, she activated the flashlight on her phone and swept the inside with the beam of light. The garage was empty. Whatever may have been on the shelves that lined two walls was now gone. Reina had a moment of indecision when she found the door that led into the house unlocked. Should she go in?

Deciding she'd come this far; she took a deep breath and pushed the door open. "Hello," she called. Only silence greeted her.

Reina made her way through the laundry and utility room, past the washer and dryer, furnace, and hot water heater. The shelves above the washer and dryer were empty. She walked through every room, opened cabinet doors and drawers in the kitchen and two bathrooms. She opened closet doors in each of the three bedrooms. All were empty. The carpets showed the impressions of where the furniture had been. She clearly made out where beds, tables, and dressers had been arranged in the rooms.

She wasn't sure what she'd been looking for. But Reina found nothing. Retracing her steps, she ended up back in the laundry room. The flashlight on her phone, still leading the way, illuminated the glass dryer door. Inside were clothes and the unmistakable brown fur that could only be a stuffed animal. She opened the door to find the outfit Lilly had worn to school on Friday and her special brown bear that she'd named Lovie, and brought as her special item to school. It was her comfort bear that she snuggled with at naptime and presumably night time as well.

Reina sifted through the remainder of the clothing in the dryer. Several of Lilly's outfits were in there as well as clothes that obviously belonged to her mom, even though Reina rarely saw Ashley out of scrubs. How did Ashley forget a load of

clothes when she moved? A load including Lilly's Lovie? And certainly, it would have been missed. Why hadn't they come back to retrieve it? Maybe Ashley hadn't had time to yet and would? Reina wrestled with what she should do. Should she take the bear and try to find them? Or leave it in the dryer in case Ashley came back. Maybe she really hadn't fully moved out yet, even though it looked like it.

After several moments of indecision, Reina placed the items back into the dryer. It could have been that Ashley had been working shifts at the hospital since she moved and would come back. Once back in her car, Reina brought up Ashley's phone number. She'd call her. She wouldn't admit to being at Ashley's house, but she would ask about dropping off the picture and pretend she didn't know they'd moved. Glancing at the painting on the seat, Reina noticed Lilly had what she believed to be Lovie clutched in the sledder's arms. She'd bring that up with Ashley too, in hopes Ashley would volunteer information, such as Lovie being lost or left behind.

Once she had it all thought out, she dialed the number. The call went right to voicemail. Not even one ring. Reina wasn't sure, but she thought that meant a phone was off. She didn't leave a message. She did have Ashley's work phone number. She could try that.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

A knock on her window startled her out of her thoughts and made her jump in her seat. A policeman in uniform stood beside her car. She rolled her window down at his prompting.

“Is everything okay, ma’am?” he asked.

“Yes, why?” she replied, fighting to catch her breath from the surprise by his window knock that got her heart pumping hard in her chest.

“You’re parked in front of the crime scene. Did you know the deceased?”

Her gaze darted back to the burned-out building surrounded by fencing. She didn’t see any crime scene tape. “Crime scene? No, I didn’t know it was. I was here to visit someone I knew in the house next door, but evidently, she moved.” She pointed to the dark house she’d recently exited the same way she’d gone in. She wondered if that neighbor across the street had called the police on her. “I was just calling her to see where she moved to.” She held her phone up to the officer.

“May I see your license, proof of insurance, and the vehicle’s registration, please?” he asked.

“Sure, but why?” she asked, reaching for her purse on the passenger seat beside Lilly’s painting. She didn’t see how he tightened his grip on his gun as she did. She pulled the requested documents from her purse and then the glove box. Her adrenaline spiked. She knew the Marshals had provided her with all valid documentation that was supposed to hold up to any scrutiny, but a part of her was fearful something would be off that would make the officer suspicious.



“Please remain in your vehicle while I run these,” he said.

In her rearview mirror, she watched him return to his own car, which she only now realized was parked behind hers.

A few minutes later, he returned to the spot beside her car. He handed her license and the documents to her through the window. “I’ll let you be on your way,” he said. “Have a good evening.” He nodded and then returned to his squad car.

Without delay, she turned the engine over and then signaled before she pulled back onto the quiet residential street. She shook all the way home from the encounter. Thankfully, neither of her nosy neighbors greeted her as she arrived home. Both Lorraine Newhouse and Bruce had left her alone since she’d told Lorraine her cousin Jimmy was a DEA Agent. The past few days had been wonderful.

She made herself a can of soup for dinner and considered what she should do next, if anything. Was it just a coincidence that Ashley and Lilly’s next-door neighbor was killed in a fire that was being investigated as a crime right before they moved? Did Ashley own the house, or were they just renting it? Maybe it hadn’t been Ashley’s choice to move. They could have been evicted.

After she drove herself crazy with considering it for over an hour, Reina picked her phone up and dialed the one person who could probably look into Ashley and Lilly Carona and their disappearance.

“Hi Rae. Is everything okay?” Jimmy Wilson asked when he answered her unexpected call. They did talk on the phone sporadically, but the timing of the call was always discussed via text prior to the call. He’d never received a call out of the blue from her before.

“Yes, is this a bad time?” she asked.

“It’s fine. I have a few minutes,” he assured her. He was in his office at HQ getting ready to deploy on the next DEA Partner Mission with Delta Team plus Jackson. He and Alpha Team had returned to HQ earlier that morning, having flown out of Baltimore on the agency Lear after solving the CIA referral case involving Bianchi. “It’s nice to hear from you.”

“It’s nice to hear your voice,” she said, regretting that she’d said it as soon as the words slipped out. “Jimmy, I need a favor. I’m sure it’s nothing and I’m just overreacting, but I think someone’s in trouble. There’s definitely something odd going on.”

“What do you mean, Rae? Tell me what happened.”

She recounted the events of the day. “Had Lilly’s Lovie not been in the dryer I don’t think I’d be this worried. I don’t know if you know anyone with kids, but their nap and nighttime Lovie isn’t something any mom would just leave behind when you move,” she said. “And the whole fire and crime scene stuff, that just really freaked me out, not to mention the cop running my ID.”

“Well first, I’m sure you’re okay with the cop having taken your ID and documents. Any identity set up by the Marshals passes muster. So, don’t worry about that. And I have to agree with you regarding the fire and their move. It’s one hell of a coincidence, unless their house was damaged and they had to move, but then, it would be temporary, and they probably wouldn’t have cleared everything out.”

“Jimmy, she’s a single mom. There is no way in hell she would have paid for an entire week’s childcare and then not used it or even ask for it back.”

“Okay, let me turn this over to our Digital Team, and they can look into this woman and her child.” After he said it, he knew he should not have told her the team name or any function at the agency.

“Thank you. I’d appreciate it. I just want to make sure they’re okay.”

“Send me what you have, and we’ll look into them. It might take a few days, but I promise I’ll get back in touch with you when I know something,” he guaranteed.

She sent him the pictures of the forms she had taken on her phone. “Okay, just sent it.”

“Got it, thanks. So, besides this, all is good?” he asked.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said.

“What’s up? Talk to me,” he urged her.

“It’s nothing, really. This thing with Lilly and her mom, you know, I doubt anyone missed me when I flew out of Norfolk with you last year. I could have been dead, and no one would have known or cared.”

“Rae, don’t say that. You matter. You were instrumental in helping to bring down that drug ring. We wouldn’t have cracked it without you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“If I’d been with Smitty when they picked him up, I’m not sure the DEA would have noticed if I’d been killed with him,” she said.

“We’ve never talked about your relationship with him. I’m sorry I never asked how you were doing with the loss.”

A lump formed in Reina’s throat. “Yeah, he was a good guy, an undercover DEA Agent, that takes guts. I was his in, to help make him look legit to the cartel. We pretended to be a couple for his cover.”

Wilson waited for her to say more. She didn’t. He’d always assumed there was something personal between them.

“Jimmy, I’ve really liked this shot at a normal life. I like my job, the kids are great, and my coworkers are nice, have made me feel a part of the team. I never had a job outside of a bar before and have never really been on my own. And now just starting college. It’s nice, but it’s kind of scary too.”

“In what way?”

Reina wiped the tears that were now spilling onto her cheek. “I’m waiting for someone to call me out because I don’t belong here and even if they don’t, I’m sure something is going to happen to fuck it up.”

“Oh, Rae, don’t think that way. You do belong there. And why are you so sure something’s going to fuck it up? Is it just that feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop?”

“Yes, something like that,” she admitted.

“I think how you’re feeling is perfectly normal.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” he said. “And I’m proud of you, Rae.”

She smiled into the phone. “Thank you, Jimmy, And I’m sorry I even brought it up.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m glad you confided in me. I like that we talk.”

She still felt embarrassed that she’d told him. It had not been her intention, but as usual, whenever they talked, she ended up telling him her private, guarded thoughts and many of her innermost secrets. “I do too. Thank you for always listening.”

“Of course,” he said as a text message from Lambchop, Delta Teams’ lead, displayed asking if everyone was ready to head out. “I hate to do this, but I do have to go. The team is kind of waiting for me.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt your evening. Goodbye, Jimmy.”

“Bye Reina,” he said, purposefully using her new name.

Lima

They were two days into the next DEA Partner Mission in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The target was a suspected drug house in the heart of the notorious ‘War Zone’ near Pennsylvania Street and Copper Avenue. They were set up with a high-powered camera lens a block away in a vacant 780 square foot adobe ranch that had a direct sightline to the target house’s back door, where the majority of the foot traffic

came and went from. And so far, the foot traffic had been substantial.

The Shepherd Security Team was contracted to do the surveillance for three reasons. First, because the DEA did not have enough staff to assign to the massive scope of the operation. As soon as this drug house was identified, Espinoza, the agent in charge of the DEA team, knew they'd finally found a major distribution hub and he wanted to take down everyone associated with this stash house at the same time.

Secondly, the local police had leaks. In the past, whenever Espinoza's team was about to make a bust with the backup of the local police, the bad guys had been clued in, and their operation was moved. Espinoza and his crew busted locations with no drugs in them. So, the decision had been made to completely cut the local police from the operation, hence the need for the additional resources the Shepherd Security Team brought.

The final reason the Shepherd Security Team had been brought on was because they could operate without the constraints of needing warrants before they acted. They could get the proof first and then the DEA Team could get the warrants. Less red tape, quicker results. And that was what Espinoza needed. Fast results to shut the stash house down and get those higher up on the food chain.

Espinoza provided the team with pictures of the known dealers. Those street dealers were not the primary targets. It was the source of the drugs that the team needed to track. The drugs had to be delivered to the house for distribution to the street dealers. But so far, two days in, there were no deliveries identified.

Wilson sat viewing the feed from the high-powered camera that was trained on the target building. Jackson slept on the cot in the bedroom, as he had pulled the overnight shift to watch the video feed. Lambchop and Mother were in cars a few blocks away, watching those who approached and departed from the target house. They were ready to roll on any suspected delivery person that may be identified, and

Sloan and Sherman were at the hotel. They had the overnight shift to trail any potential delivery men. Espinoza's team was running surveillance of the street dealers, keeping tabs on all the players.

Wilson's phone buzzed with an incoming call from Garcia. He hoped Garcia found info on Rae's missing student and her mother. He wanted Rae to be assured that the little girl was okay. He was still surprised Rae had reacted as she had, especially that she had actually gone into the vacant house and searched for any signs of them. The more he got to know her, the more surprised he was by her.

"Hey, hope you have something for me," Wilson said, answering the call.

"Not much," Garcia said. "This Carona woman is a ghost. Shepherd is going to reach out to St. Vincent with the Marshals to see if she was one of their identities. Her trail is solid on paper, but when you reach out to verify with actual people, no one remembers her, like at her last place of employment, a hospital in Minneapolis. And no one from the nursing school she attended remembers her. Dates verify, but not a single instructor can describe her."

"Yeah, that sounds like a cover identity." He chuckled. "Have you checked with Briana Woods? Maybe this woman was one of her clients."

Garcia laughed too. "Yeah, I actually did run it by her. This woman isn't one of hers."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Let me know what you find out. I promised Rae that I’d let her know what we found. She’s really attached to this little girl.”

“I guess it’s not out of the realm of possibilities that the Marshals stashed another protectee in the same town they put Rae in, but if they did, Rae can’t know that.”

“I know,” Wilson said. “I’d just tell her we looked into it, and all is well.”

“You might want to just tell her that now. She doesn’t need to be worried about this kid and her mom.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Wilson agreed. He didn’t want to lie to her, though. Rae had a valid concern, and he didn’t want to brush it off. He respected her too much to do that.

“I’ll be in touch when I know something,” Garcia said.

“Thanks,” Wilson said.

His vigil continued for the remainder of the afternoon. Mother dropped off dinner to them just after Jackson had woken and joined Wilson. Shift change would be in about an hour. Mother was getting as frustrated with their unproductive surveillance as much as Wilson was.

“What if the street dealers are delivering product to be packaged as well as taking away the drugs ready to be sold? It’s been two days and no big deliveries. I don’t believe the place was that loaded with product that they wouldn’t have needed to restock by now,” Wilson said.



“That’s what Lambchop was thinking too,” Mother said. “Let me get him on the phone.” He dialed Lambchop and put him on speaker. “We were just discussing a change in approach,” Mother told Lambchop. “Wilson agrees with you that it could be the street dealers delivering the raw product to the house, as well as taking away the packaged units.”

“What change in approach are you thinking?” Lambchop asked. “Do you want to take one down before he reaches the house?”

“I think we need to track one from the moment he leaves the house until he returns,” Wilson said. “We intercept him before he arrives at the house, and all kinds of red flags may go up with the bad guys.”

“Agreed,” Lambchop said. “Let me get Espinoza on the line with us. Hold on.” There was a pause. A minute later, Lambchop was back on the line. “Espinoza, you still there?”

“Yes,” he answered.

Lambchop filled him in on what they suspected and made the pitch for stepping up surveillance.

“These guys are so fucking paranoid that shadowing one of them for twenty-four hours isn’t going to be easy,” Espinoza said.

“We’ll use trackers and long-range surveillance. We’re not going to be following them down the street. They won’t see the same three cars on their tails,” Lambchop said.

“Who would you like to start with?” Espinoza asked.

“You identified that Angelo douchebag as being pretty high up on the food chain. He’ll be our first target,” Lambchop said.

“We’ll have Sloan and Sherman acquire him tonight. He normally hands off to street dealers throughout the War Zone before midnight and then flops at one of his baby momma’s apartments,” Mother said.

Later that night, as he lay in the bed Jackson slept in earlier, Wilson messaged Rae. “Hey, we’re still looking into your missing mom and child. Right now, we’ll say no news is good news.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we haven’t found anything worrisome. Look, sorry, I have to go, work stuff. I’ll be in touch soon,” he said, to end the messaging and her questions.

“You’re working late,” she messaged. “Thanks for the update.”

He let that last message hang and didn’t respond to it. His thoughts at that moment again went to Rae and that she’d entered that house alone. That could have gone horribly wrong for her. What had she been thinking? He had to talk with her about being more careful at a later time.

The next morning, Wilson was again monitoring the video feed. Sherman and Sloan had acquired Angelo the night before. They tracked him over the course of five hours, delivering product to a half-dozen street dealers and collecting the proceeds from previously sold stock before he turned in at midnight at the apartment of one of his known baby mommas, one of five in the War Zone. Angelo was a busy boy.

Mother and Lambchop had taken over surveillance at zero seven hundred. It was eleven hundred and Angelo was just leaving the apartment. Wilson’s phone chimed in

a text message. It was from Shepherd with a request for a video chat.

“Things are getting hot here, Shepherd. Can this wait an hour or two?” he replied back.

“You let me know when is better,” Shepherd replied. “We’ll do it then.”

“Affirmative,” Wilson replied, and then turned his attention back to the communications between Lambchop and Mother.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

He also kept them apprised of the comings and goings from the target drug house. He identified three more higher-level dealers arriving with what could have been backpacks full of product, which in that neighborhood would be methamphetamines and fentanyl.

The surveillance scored them what they hoped was the location of the next house up in the food chain, another home just a few blocks away. It was another small adobe ranch also built in the early fifties. The Digital Team at HQ ran the house and discovered that it had been sold at auction, a foreclosure, less than a year earlier. Just like the house they'd been surveilling. The names of the buyers didn't matter. They'd all be fake.

"We need to rotate you into the surveillance, Taco," Lambchop broadcast. "Our boy is looking paranoid, not sure if he made Mother or I."

"Affirmative," Wilson replied. "Big Bear wanted a video chat with me."

"Wake Jax and have him take over the surveillance. Do your call with Big Bear and then advise me of your availability," Lambchop ordered.

"Roger that," Wilson acknowledged.

Wilson messaged Shepherd and then woke Jackson. Shepherd set the time for the call in ten minutes. Wilson brought his phone into the bedroom and connected it to Shepherd's video room at the ten-minute mark. The feed displayed showing Shepherd and Garcia sitting at the conference table in Shepherd's office.

“St. Vincent confirmed the woman going by Ashley Carona is one of theirs,” Shepherd said.

“That is, of course, not to be shared with Rae,” Garcia added.

“Of course,” Jimmy acknowledged, a little annoyed that Garcia felt he had to tell him.

“St. Vincent asked if we could give him an assist. He can’t interview Rae, but we can ask the questions and report back to him.”

“So, from that, I gather the Carona woman went dark on the Marshals,” Wilson said.

“She’s off the grid entirely. And she wasn’t an innocent witness in protection. Her remaining out of jail is incumbent on her cooperation. Moving in the middle of the night with no forwarding address to the agency is not cooperating,” Shepherd said.

“What about the little girl?” Jimmy asked.

“The child is hers,” Shepherd confirmed. “I’ll send the list of questions for Rae Ella Easton over to you, Wilson. I need the interview completed within the next few hours.”

“She’s at work until eighteen hundred,” Wilson said. “She won’t answer her phone while she’s at work.”

“St. Vincent needs these answers ASAP. Do whatever you can to get her to answer your call. This interview is a priority.”

“Will do, Shep,” Wilson answered, not sure how he’d accomplish it.

He took out his phone and tapped out a text to Rae, asking her to call him immediately. Then he waited. Fifteen minutes later, he received the reply from her he expected.

“I’m at work. Can’t talk until after 6:00,” she tapped out.

“Rae, this is really important,” he pressed. “Can you go to the bathroom or out to your car for five minutes?”

“Jimmy, I can for about three or four minutes after the classroom teacher gets back. I’m alone in here with the kids right now and can’t be on my phone.”

“Okay, I can stand by and wait. Call as soon as you can,” he messaged back. It was a full twenty minutes before his phone rang. “Hi Rae, thanks.”

“I’m in my car for a few minutes. What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry to have made you leave work to talk to me,” Wilson said. “I have some questions regarding Ashley Carona and her daughter that I need to ask you.”

“I thought you said everything with her was okay.”

“Rae, I can’t tell you what’s going on. I have to ask you to trust me.”

“Is Lilly Carona okay?” she pressed. “It’s a simple question. Yes or no, is she okay?” She had a really bad feeling.

“I don’t know, Rae. I don’t know,” he admitted. “That’s why I need to ask you these questions, to determine if she is.”

The tone of his voice was alarming to her. “Okay, shoot.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Did anyone other than her mother ever pick her up from school?”

“No, but she did have two emergency contacts for pickup as that’s required for all our students,” Reina pointed out.

“Yeah, we looked into them. They’re bogus.”

“So, had Lilly’s mom not shown up one day we never would have reached someone?”

“Yes, that’s the gist of it,” Wilson confirmed.

“How irresponsible of Ashley!” Reina exploded. “To put her daughter in that position.”

Wilson was impressed that Rae was such an advocate for the little girl, but given her childhood, it didn’t surprise him. “Did Ashley Carona always pick her daughter up driving the same vehicle?”

“Yes, of course she did. Jimmy, she was a single mom with only one vehicle.”

“Did the little girl ever talk about anyone else, her father, an aunt or uncle, a friend of her mom’s, anyone?”

“No, she never did. I got the impression it was just her and her mom.”

“Did she always come from work dressed in scrubs?” Wilson asked.

“Yes, no wait, there was one day the week before they suddenly disappeared that she was dressed in street clothes at pick up, jeans and a black sweater with a different coat on, a nice leather jacket. When she came from work, she wore her scrubs and a parka.”

“Which day was that? Can you remember?” Wilson pressed.

“I don’t know,” Reina said. “But it was definitely that last week.”

“Is there anything else you can think of that either the little girl or Ashley Carona said that at the time you didn’t find odd but now do?” he asked.

Reina thought about that for a minute. “I honestly can’t. Ashley Carona was not one of the parents that are chatty and friendly when picking their kid up. Other moms talk with us. They talk amongst themselves, planning playdates for their kids outside of school. But not Ashley Carona. She pretty much came at the last moment, or late, and she didn’t talk with anyone.”

“Was there any kid that the little girl was especially close to, played with most days, maybe told secrets to?”

“There are a couple of kids in the class that Lilly was closer to, played with more often than the others.”

“Rae, this is important. Is there any way you could quietly ask them if Lilly told them any secrets or if Lilly mentioned anyone besides her mom, anyplace she goes, or that she was going to move?”

“Oh, Jimmy, I hate to do that. These kids are only four years old. I’m not sure if anything they say is reliable, plus to use them,” she began, a list of other objections primed in her thoughts.



“Rae, your answers will be helpful, but one of those kids might know something, something that will help us find her.”

“Jimmy, what’s going on?” Reina asked. She had such a bad feeling. She’d been worried about Lilly, but this new feeling that had settled in the pit of her stomach was something different. The worry had turned to fear. It made her feel nauseous.

“I’m sorry. I can’t tell you. Please trust that your concerns have been taken seriously and we’re looking for the little girl and her mom.”

“Okay, I’ll ask a few of the kids Lilly played with regularly.”

“Call me after work and let me know if you find out anything,” Wilson said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye,” she said. She took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves, and then she returned to the classroom.

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Reina took advantage of every opportunity that Kay, the classroom teacher, was out of earshot to talk with the three children Lilly played with most often. Her friends missed her. That was all Reina learned. None remembered Lilly ever mentioning another person besides her mom. As Reina expected, their four-year-old attention spans and their limited conversation skills didn’t provide any help.

As soon as she turned her car over after work, she dialed Jimmy. He answered on the second ring. “Hi Jimmy, is this a good time?”

“Yes, I have a few minutes,” he replied, his gaze still on suspected stash house number two across the street. He was parked in the parking lot of a bar from which

the house Lambchop and Mother had identified earlier could be seen. “But I may have to go suddenly. If so, I’ll call you back when I can.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

She was pretty sure she knew what that meant. He was working. It was only then that she realized he was doing the same dangerous job Smitty had been doing when he was killed. That thought made her heart ache not only for Smitty, but also for Jimmy. “Okay, sure, well, I talked to the kids. No one knew anything helpful. They’re only four years old,” she reiterated.

“I know,” he said. “I was hoping for something, even something small, a confirmation of a guy in Ashley Carona’s life or a friend. There had to be another adult in this little girl’s life.”

“What about at her job? Did Ashley have friends at work that might know what happened to her?”

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but no. Ashley Carona kept to herself at work, too. No friends. She’s officially on an unpaid leave of absence pending FMLA paperwork,” Wilson said. “She told her employer that her mom was just diagnosed with inoperable stage four cancer. She told her supervisor she was temporarily moving back home to be with and care for her mother, who doctors have given a matter of weeks.”

“Could that be true?” Reina asked.

“It’s not,” Wilson said.

Reina was surprised by the matter-of-fact way he’d said it. He knew for sure it was not true. “You know things about Ashley Carona.”

“I’m sorry, Rae, I’m not at liberty to share any details.”

“And I guess if it was a temporary move, she wouldn’t have cleared everything from her house,” Reina thought out loud.

“No,” Wilson agreed. “Thank you for trying to get info from the kids. If anything comes to light, let me know.”

“You mean if one of them suddenly remembers something?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said. “Look, try not to worry about this kid too much.”

“You’ll let me know if you find anything out?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ll let you know what I can.”

She was left feeling disappointed. Let her know what he can? That wasn’t good enough. She needed to know that Lilly was okay, that Lilly was safe and with people who would take good care of her. Reina did not think Ashley Carona fit into that category.

“Rae? Are you there?” he asked when she didn’t respond.

“Yeah, I’m here.” She knew her voice sounded pissy.

“Rae, I promise I’ll tell you what I can, probably more than I should. Please understand, Ashley Carona has a right to her privacy, just as you do.”

“That’s different,” she complained.

He couldn’t tell her it really wasn’t that much different, except for that Rae was an

innocent who was relocated, and Ashley Carona wasn't. And the fact that she'd gone dark on the Marshals meant that she was either in trouble or up to old tricks. He wasn't sure which scenario was worse for the little girl.

Just then, he saw one of the other higher-ranking dealers who'd he'd documented visiting the first house earlier that morning approach the front door of this new location they'd named stash house number two. "Hey, I'm sorry, I have to go," he said. He ended the call and then immediately rang Lambchop. "Got Gustavo approaching the target location." He zoomed in with the camera on his phone and took a few pictures.

"I'm moving towards your location," Lambchop said. "When he leaves, we let him get a few blocks away from the house and then we take him down. Espinoza thinks it's worth the risk and Gustavo just drew the short straw."

"Roger that," Wilson replied. Finally, some action, something concrete to move the case forward. If Espinoza was ready for one of the players to be taken down, that had to mean they were close to moving on the entire network.

Fifteen minutes after Gustavo went in, he exited the house. Lambchop was near the alleyway that ran behind the bar, pawn shop, and little corner store on the block. Gustavo had arrived by cutting through the alley before crossing the street. He'd been observed cutting through backyards and favoring alleys when they were available, rather than walking on sidewalks or streets.

"Target just left the house," Wilson broadcast. "Crossing the street. Ducked into the alley."

"Roger that. Got him behind the pawn shop," Lambchop reported. "He just went in the back door into the pawn shop. This is new. Taco get back here. Leave the car. We'll grab him up when he leaves."

Wilson exited the vehicle. He rushed around the back of the building. Lambchop already stood with his back to the brick building beside the door to the pawn shop. Wilson took up the same position on the other side of the door. They waited.

“We don’t identify ourselves,” Lambchop said. “We just scoop him up.”

Wilson nodded. It was a familiar tactic.

“Espinoza will set the tone. We follow suit,” Lambchop added.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Five minutes later, the door opened. “Yeah, no fuck,” Gustavo called back into the store, his back and the black backpack sticking out the door. He laughed with whoever was within the building. Wilson and Lambchop both heard two sets of male voices laughing. Still facing inward, he took another half step out the door. “Just don’t sell it before I get back.” He was still laughing as he stepped all the way out of the building as he pulled the door shut. It was at that moment that he saw Wilson as his head was turned in that direction. “What are you fucking doing there?”

“I’m not the one you need to worry about,” Wilson said. “It’s him.” He pointed to the other side of the door, where Lambchop was now reaching for him. It only took two seconds for the two men to have Gustavo pinned to the ground. Wilson secured his hands in zip ties behind his back as Lambchop put tape over his mouth before the man had a chance to scream out or struggle.

They lifted him to his feet and dragged him over to the car Lambchop drove, a silver twenty fifteen Subaru Forester that had seen better days but blended into this neighborhood well. They laid him on the floor of the backseat, his feet in the air kicking, his body wriggling.

“That looks uncomfortable, my friend,” Wilson said to him. “But you chose that position.” He closed the back door and positioned himself in the front passenger seat.

Lambchop drove to a slightly better part of town where the DEA had a house set up as their base of operations. With a phone call to Espinoza, they pulled up to the residence and the garage door rolled open. They drove in. After the door was closed, they pulled Gustavo from the back seat. He wasn’t any more cooperative than he’d been. They sat him on a bench facing Espinoza, holding him in place. Espinoza went

behind him and unzipped the backpack. He pulled out the football size lump of pills that could be anything in shrink wrap.

Wearing plastic gloves, Espinoza slit the wrap with a knife and pulled out one pill. He dropped it into a test solution and shook it. It tested positive for fentanyl. “This is a lot of money right here,” Espinoza said to him, holding up the package of pills. “Your boss isn’t going to be happy you lost it.”

Gustavo mumbled something behind the tape that was still over his mouth.

Espinoza nodded to Wilson. Wilson pulled the tape off.

“You don’t know who you’re fucking with, motherfucker. You’re dead, all of you are fucking dead!”

“No, you will be when your organization hears how you cooperated with the DEA,” Espinoza said. He pulled the chain from inside his shirt that his badge dangled from and let it fall on the outside of his shirt.

Gustavo’s eyes went wide. Evidently, he hadn’t figured out these guys were the cops, must have thought they were some other crew moving in on their territory. It must have been the fact that they hadn’t identified themselves as cops or read him his rights.

“You have a choice,” Lambchop said. “Cooperate and get a deal or be tossed back out onto the streets with thanks in a very public way.”

“Yeah, we’ll all be wearing our badges and be thanking you and wishing you well,” Wilson added. “We may even throw out the locations and people we know about.”

“You can’t do that. And this arrest won’t stick. You didn’t say you were cops, didn’t



read me my rights,” Gustavo said.

“Oh, you’re not being arrested,” Espinoza said. “My friends just gave a friend a lift here and we’re just having a conversation.”

Wilson patted his shoulder, which he still held, holding Gustavo in place. “That’s right. It was so nice of you to offer up your drugs to us. You shouldn’t have. It’s bound to get you into a lot of trouble with your homies.”

Gustavo let out a long string of curses. He was fucked, and he knew he was.

“So, we know about the stash house off Copper and Pennsylvania, of course the one across from the pawn shop, and we’re pretty sure that place is being supplied from a warehouse over on the north side, just off Second and Slate,” Espinoza said.

Wilson was surprised by this new location. Espinoza and his team had been busy.

“But we’re greedy. We also want to get the part of your crew supplying that warehouse, need the date and time the next shipment will be coming in there,” Espinoza said.

“Fuck you, man! You’re not getting shit from me!”

“That’s unfortunate,” Espinoza said. “Isn’t it, gentlemen?” he asked, his gaze sweeping over Lambchop and Wilson.

“Yes, very unfortunate,” Lambchop agreed. “I had hopes for you.”

“We thought you were the smartest of the guys, Gustavo. We could have made this offer to Angelo, but thought you were smarter than he is,” Wilson said.

“I ain’t no fucking snitch,” Gustavo said.

“Won’t matter to your boss if you snitched or not. You’ll still be executed,” Lambchop said.

“We’ve seen it a hundred times. Those motherfuckers assume you’re guilty if you’ve talked to cops,” Espinoza said.

“Very unfortunate,” Wilson said. “No matter what, this isn’t going to end well for you.”

Gustavo’s gaze darted between the three men. It was almost as though Wilson could see the steam rising from his head like in a cartoon as his brain worked overtime, trying to figure a way out of this. “What deal?”

Lambchop patted his shoulder. “Now that’s being smart.”

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Wilson remembered that he had to report back to Shepherd that he'd talked to Rae right before the Gustavo takedown. He'd not had the opportunity until he and Lambchop left the house the DEA was using as their onsite HQ. "I have to call Shepherd back," Wilson said. "I almost forgot." He pulled his phone from his pocket. Even though he doubted Lambchop knew anything about it, he had no problem making the call in front of him.

They'd left Gustavo with Espinoza.

The Shepherd Security Team was on standby. Espinoza expected they'd conduct the major takedown within the next few hours. Gustavo swore up and down he did not know the delivery schedule to the warehouse, had no clue if any product was even there. At least he didn't deny knowledge of it. Lambchop volunteered the team to do recon at that location before warrants were obtained. Busting an empty warehouse was not on anyone's to do list.

After talking with Shepherd and giving him the report, which was basically that Rae talking with the children yielded no useful information, he put his phone on speaker and he and Lambchop filled Shepherd in on the current status of the DEA Partner Mission.

"Can we get the Digital Team to pull schematics on that warehouse?" Lambchop asked.

"Consider it done. Okay, keep me informed, Lambchop," Shepherd said. "If the team

does recon on that warehouse, have Ops online with you.”

“Will do, Shep,” Lambchop said.

After they disconnected the call, Lambchop fixed Wilson with a questioning stare. “Rae Ella Easton?”

Wilson laughed. “Yeah, that’s basically the look Garcia gave me, too. It hasn’t been easy for her, relocating and taking the new identity from the Marshals. I never considered how lonely it would be for a person. I’ve been a friend. That’s it. She’s had a rough life and is a good person despite it.”

A smile spread over Lambchop’s face. “You’re quite insistent that you’re just a friend.”

“You know, I never thought about what the relationship was until she threw out the word friends. It really fucked with my head until I decided I didn’t have to categorize what the relationship is. I like talking with her and being there for her,” he said honestly. “I like that she knows she can confide in me things she can’t tell anyone else in her new life. I care about her and am her biggest cheerleader to make her new life a success. I’m not having sex with her and would never take advantage of her or the trust she has in me. If I’m not a friend, I’m not sure what that makes me.”

“A good person,” Lambchop said. “And yes, anytime someone leaves their old life behind and takes a new identity, it’s hard, lonely, scary, brings a wide range of emotions.”

“She said she has this feeling of waiting for the other shoe to fall, for someone to call her out that she doesn’t belong in the life she’s living now. It has to be like walking around on eggshells, not a feeling I can even imagine,” Wilson said. “But at the same time, I see this incredible strength and determination in her that I respect. And this

thing with the little girl and worrying about her as she is.” He paused and chuckled. “I could see her stepping in front of a gunman and taking a bullet to protect this kid.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Lambchop said. “You need to caution her to leave finding this kid to the Marshals. What do they think happened to the mom and kid?”

“Shepherd hasn’t said. But I figure it’s one of two things. Either the mom is back to her old ways or they’re in trouble, or they were found by whoever the Marshals had her in hiding away from. Either way, it doesn’t look good for either one of them. If the mom is back up to old tricks, they’ll find her eventually and she’ll go to jail, leaving the little girl with no mom. She’ll most likely be thrown into the system.”

“That’s rough,” Lambchop agreed. “As Michaela and I prepare for the arrival of our own little girl, I can’t imagine ever putting my kid into any situation that could potentially hurt her. I don’t know how any parent can. She isn’t even born yet, but every fiber of who I am is programmed to protect her from everything, every minute of every day.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s how all good parents are wired,” Wilson said. “Hell, Hahna isn’t even biologically theirs and that’s how Cooper and Madison feel. The problem is I can’t tell Rae this woman was a Marshals’ protectee like her. Well, not exactly like her. And I don’t want to lie to Rae and tell her all is okay with this kid when I don’t know it is, like Garcia thinks I should. So, I’m not sure how I can tell her to leave finding this kid to the experts.”

“From what you’ve said, she won’t. If she happens to see the kid, or someone she thinks is the kid, she’s going to check it out,” Lambchop said. “You need to tell her enough of the potential danger that just maybe she’ll call you or, in the very least, she’ll be careful poking around.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. She’s not going to stop asking questions and I can totally see her following someone she thinks is the kid or her mom.”

“Give her the bare minimum to convey the possible danger and leave it at that,” Lambchop instructed. “Give her a call now, if you need to. I need you focused on this mission when Espinoza contacts us with the go order.”

Wilson chuckled. “You think I’m not focused? I’m wounded.”

“You’ve never not been focused. Then again, I’ve never known you to have an ongoing relationship with a woman. It can take time to figure out how to keep it all compartmentalized.”

“Compartmentalized?” Wilson asked.

“There’s a reason most can’t do this job and have a family. You can’t do it if you can’t compartmentalize. No matter how much I love Michaela and my life with her, I have to be able to completely tuck away every thought regarding her while I’m working.”

“To be focused,” Wilson commented.

“Yes,” Lambchop confirmed. “There’s no room for any distraction.”

Wilson knew that. “Rae’s not a distraction. My thoughts won’t be on her when we get the go order.”

Lambchop nodded. “I text messaged Mother while we were with Espinoza. He should have the rest of the team up to date and in the holding pattern with us,” Lambchop said, changing topics. “I’m sure Espinoza will want us to recon that warehouse. His team can’t legally go in without a warrant and he’s not going to want to go in and let

the bad guys know we know about that location if it isn't full of product."

"If it's empty, do you think Espinoza will want to wait until there's a delivery to move on the network?"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“I hope not,” Lambchop said. “With Gustavo going MIA, they’re going to get real paranoid and are bound to change things up.”

“Yeah, and we’re ready to move on them as they are now,” Wilson agreed. “I’ve already executed the takedown of stash house number one in my mind from several different angles.”

“I’m sorry I suggested you were distracted,” Lambchop said with a chuckle.

Wilson chuckled with him.

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Just before sundown, Espinoza got in touch with the Shepherd Security Team with the formal request to recon the warehouse. The Digital Team had gotten back to them over an hour earlier with the schematics of the warehouse. All six team members were at the hotel, awake, had studied the schematics and planned their approach to breaching the warehouse to search for product. One of Espinoza’s men had relieved Jackson from surveilling stash house number one an hour earlier. That was when they knew the request for them to enter that warehouse would be coming.

As Shepherd had requested, Lambchop contacted Ops to be on with them when they moved on the warehouse. Garcia and Caleb ‘Hound dog’ Smith were on in Ops, with Garcia running primary for their mission. The team arrived on site after the darkness of night settled on the city. One of the two vehicles they drove approached from the north, the other the south. The warehouse sat on a corner lit by a single streetlight. It had a small parking lot that lay to the east. Sharing the same driveway but veering



west towards the back, the drive led to the three loading docks.

The dirty concrete warehouse had seen better days. Wilson was sure at least one of the windows was broken, but with the lack of light on most of the structure, it was hard to tell. One thing that was easily identifiable was that the place had no vehicles on its grounds and there were no discernible lights coming from the interior. It appeared dark and lifeless.

As previously planned, both vehicles drove past the warehouse, crossing paths with each other.

“Before we enter, a quick prayer,” Lambchop broadcast through comms. “Father God, keep this team safe this evening. Let this structure be as vacant as it appears. Let no innocent bystanders wander into our operation. And if it is your will, God, have a large cache of illegal drugs be waiting for us to find. Amen.”

Wilson and the two others in the car with him chuckled at Lambchop’s last sentence before joining in an, “Amen.”

“Go, go, go,” Lambchop then said to proclaim the Op underway.

The vehicle heading north was driven by Jackson. Wilson and Mother rode with him. Jackson pulled up alongside the road just past the building from which the loading docks could be seen. Wilson and Mother slipped out of the car and ran at a crouch towards the warehouse. On the other side of the building, Sloan, driving the other car, did the same. Lambchop and Sherman got out of that car and approached the front door to the warehouse.

Both drivers then drove around the block and parked their vehicles. Jackson parked in the full parking lot of a factory that was running a second shift. Thankfully there were few lights in the parking lot, and he was able to park up against a dark line of bushes.

Sloan parked on the street alongside a twelve-foot-high chain-link fence. Then they both made their way towards the target warehouse.

Wilson and Mother made it to the back of the warehouse and the first raised loading dock. The garage door was rolled down but there were gaps between it and the wall which allowed the men to easily slip inside. “We’re in,” Wilson broadcast. “Door number one.” He glanced around the interior which was very dimly lit with emergency lighting. He could see well enough that he didn’t need to don his night vision goggles. Glancing to his right, towards dock doors number two and three, he was surprised to see a solid cement wall. That hadn’t been on the architectural drawings for this warehouse.

At the front of the building, Lambchop and Sherman had a harder time gaining entry. The door was sturdy and locked. The window beside it though was not. Lambchop forced the window open. Sherman climbed in and then unlocked and opened the door for Lambchop. The front room was an office, equally filthy as the outside of the building with no working lights, just the low voltage emergency lighting on the ceiling above the door that should lead into the warehouse per the diagrams.

“We’re in, too,” Lambchop answered. “Going to make access into the warehouse now.”

“Be advised, Lambchop, the building has been altered. There’s now a solid wall between bays one and two,” Mother broadcast.

“Let’s see what else has been altered,” Lambchop said. “Going to enter the warehouse now.”

“Hold up,” Wilson transmitted. “Let us scope out the interior first. There are windows on the doors in this bay looking into the warehouse.”

“Roger that, Taco,” Lambchop replied.

Wilson and Mother crept soundlessly against the wall. In the far-right corner was a large double door with windows. Wilson carefully peeked through the window to ensure the space in front of it was vacant. It was clear from his vantage point, but he didn’t have a full view of the entire interior of the warehouse space.

Wilson pushed the door open, Mother covering him. Wilson stepped into the open space, his back against the swinging door. Mother, in a low crouched position, came out into the warehouse, his aim behind Wilson. Clear. The two men circled, back-to-back, until they had scrutinized every shadow in the large open area.

“Clear,” Mother broadcast. The two men closed the door and pressed themselves to the wall that led towards docking bays two and three.

Lambchop opened the door that should lead to the warehouse floor. It squeaked and moaned loudly as it moved, echoing through the entire warehouse. Seconds later, the door to loading dock bay number three swung open, spilling light into the warehouse and infusing the area with low Latin music. Instinctively, Wilson and Mother flattened their backs against the wall. Both men also tapped the mic on their comms with a finger. They were close enough to the Tango they didn’t dare speak, but the tap would transmit a sound that would warn Lambchop and the Birdman to hold position.

A man stepped into the open warehouse. A shaft of light from behind him like a spotlight, illuminated him. Held by his side a metal barrel that pointed downward reflected the light. A question immediately came to both Wilson and Mother. Was he alone? They’d find out quickly. Wilson motioned to Mother. He’d take the man; Mother was to cover the room the man had come from. Mother nodded.

The man’s gaze was directed towards the front office as though he knew the sound

had come from that door. His feet carried him a few more steps further into the warehouse. Wilson and Mother moved on him. They rushed towards the open door soundlessly, remaining in the shadows near the wall until the last second.

Then suddenly, as Mother dropped to a knee and circled himself around, so his gaze and his weapon was trained on the lit-up room, Wilson advanced on the man, overtaking him without being seen. In one motion, Wilson pushed the man from his feet and out of the light that spilled from the room, knocked his loosely held weapon from him, and jammed the barrel of his Sig P226 up against the back of the man's neck.

“You move, you're a dead man,” Wilson whispered to the man. “Don't make a sound, don't even breathe.”

The man's rigid form didn't move.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Clear, Lambchop,” Wilson broadcast in a barely audible voice, just in case someone Mother hadn’t identified yet was inside that room. He glanced over his shoulder at Mother, who held his position, his gaze still into the room.

“Heading your way now,” Lambchop replied. Then he and the Birdman carefully made their way towards Wilson and Mother’s location.

Wilson watched the two men approach through the darkness.

“The Undertaker and I have just entered through the front,” Jackson’s voice came through comms.

“Hold position,” Lambchop ordered in a quiet voice, quiet enough that he wouldn’t be heard by anyone within the room the Tango on the floor came from.

Mother had not proclaimed if the room was vacant. That made Wilson assume it was not. And Mother still hadn’t moved. When Lambchop and Sherman reached Wilson, Lambchop immediately zip tied the Tango’s hands behind his back as Sherman pressed tape to his lips. Lambchop then secured his ankles in zip ties as well before Wilson dragged the man several feet further into the darkness of the warehouse.

The three men crept up on the open doorway by circling far into the warehouse, into the dark shadows to not be seen by whoever may be inside. As soon as they were beside Mother, with their backs to the wall, he pivoted so he no longer gazed into the room, but he remained on a knee. He motioned to the others that he saw three men within the room, and he pointed out the general vicinity of each.

“One Tango neutralized, three more in the room,” Lambchop broadcast, his voice a whisper. He was confident the low playing music in the room would keep the three men inside from hearing him. “Undertaker and Jax, proceed to the back of loading dock three.”

“Roger, Lambchop,” Sloan replied. “We’ll let you know when we’re in position.”

All four of the men knew that those in the room would soon miss their buddy who was secured, face down on the warehouse floor. The seconds ticked by as they waited for Sloan and Jackson to get to the back of the building. Finally, Jackson broadcast that the two men were in position. The garage door, however, was secure, with no gaps that would allow entry as loading dock number one.

Lambchop motioned to the men beside him. They lined up on Mother, who still kneeled beside the door. “Three, two, one, go!” Lambchop counted down in a barely audible volume.

On the go order, Mother pivoted again, so he swung in front of the open doorway, the barrel of his M4 penetrating the room. Lambchop rushed past him, going straight into the room. Wilson, behind Lambchop, entered and rotated to the right. Behind him, Sherman made entry and veered to the left.

The view in front of Wilson when he’d gone right was an expansive room stretching out into the bay of loading dock two. So, there was no wall between bays two and three. Rows of tables were set up. Sitting atop the tables were stacks of boxes, rolls of plastic wrap, and containers with the unmistakable blocks of raw drugs. On one table a box full of a white substance, that would later test positive as cocaine, was in the process of being processed into baggie sized containers by a lone man standing with his back to Wilson. The row of tables behind him had an open trash bag full of dried cannabis buds.

Wilson approached the subject quickly and quietly, his P226 in his grasp. He knew it was only a matter of seconds before their presence would be seen by one of the three men, and the alarm raised. Wilson was nearly to the man when on the far left of the room shouts and curses caused the man Wilson approached to swing his head in that direction. He must have seen Lambchop or Sherman as he reached for his handgun, which lay on the table within his reach.

Wilson moved to intercept the man before he got to his handgun. With his left hand, Wilson reached out and struck the man's hand, pushing it away from the gun just as his hand made contact with it. This sent the weapon flying. It clattered to the floor. Wilson then used his body, slamming his right side into the Tango. This knocked him off balance, and he crashed into the table. Wilson heard the unmistakable sounds of his teammates engaging the other Tangos, but he kept his focus on the man in front of him, his Tango.

His Tango, after pulling himself off the table, turned his fists to Wilson. But Wilson had already stepped back far enough to be out of reach, his weapon trained on the man. "Uh-huh, get 'em up," Wilson ordered.

The Tango didn't believe he'd shoot. He swung and took a step towards Wilson. Wilson bobbed right, out of the trajectory of the punch. Wilson immediately buried his fisted left hand in the man's groin. He wasn't going to fuck around with this guy. The man squealed and instantly went down. Wilson dropped on the man, one knee down hard in the middle of the man's back. Only then did he scan the room to see that both Sherman and Lambchop had or were in the process of getting their men subdued.

"Jax, Undertaker, come in and clear the remainder of the warehouse," Lambchop transmitted. "Ops, please notify DEA command that we can confirm drugs at the target location."

“Roger that, Lambchop,” Sloan’s voice came through comms.

“Making that report now,” Garcia’s voice came through a second later.

Wilson pulled a zip tie from his vest and then grabbed his Tango’s wrists, securing them behind his back. The man had slightly recovered from the crotch blow and was now vocally throwing out curses and threats in what Wilson was sure was an octave or two higher than his normal voice. Wilson ignored him. He then secured the man’s ankles.

Wilson glanced over the product on the many tables in the room. There was a shit-ton of illegal drugs in all stages of preparation for sale, cocaine, methamphetamine, fentanyl, and even marijuana. Then he walked towards the center of the room where Lambchop had another man already secured. Beyond him, Mother and Sherman had just completed restraining the mountain of a man who wasn’t giving up too easily.

Leaving the Tangos where they were, Lambchop and Mother went back out into the warehouse and they dragged the previously restrained man inside, laying him beside his amigos. Sherman and Wilson began photographing the tables to document the scene. As expected, just a few minutes later, Lambchop was contacted by phone by Espinoza. Lambchop relayed to him the contents of the warehouse. He also sent photos to Espinoza.

“Okay, Mirandize them and let them know they’re under arrest by the DEA,” Espinoza said. He of course already knew that both Jackson and Wilson carried DEA badges. “I’ll get the warrant for that location now. Don’t question them until I notify you I have it, should only take a few minutes.”

“Affirmative,” Lambchop replied. Then he nodded to Wilson. “Mirandize them.”

“Gladly,” Wilson said. He went in front of the four of them. “Do you all speak



English?” No one answered. “No matter.” He pulled his DEA badge and chain from inside his bulletproof vest and stuck it in each of their faces. “DEA, assholes. You’re under arrest for possession of narcotics with the intent to distribute and sell.” He then read them their Miranda rights.

When he finished, he motioned to Mother. Mother, a fluent Spanish speaker, then repeated the entire statement in Spanish. Shortly after, Jackson and Sloan entered the room. The rest of the warehouse was empty. Lambchop stationed them at the front door. Espinoza and his crew were running operations at stash house number one and two and a third location they’d identified. After they’d successfully secured all three locations, Espinoza then had the local police pick up a dozen street dealers. At the end of the day, three dozen people were in custody, including the four men the Shepherd Security Team had in custody at the warehouse.

The team wasn’t relieved until after twenty-two hundred. By the time they gave statements and left the scene, it was nearly midnight. They were hungry and tired. The agency Learjet wouldn’t get them until midmorning. They found an all-night diner even though a good steakhouse would have been preferred.

Seated at a table for eight in the middle of the barely occupied diner, the team ordered breakfast, which was available twenty-four hours a day. After, they returned to the hotel and sacked out. Wilson awoke to an empty room. Jackson’s bed was empty. He found him in the lobby when he went to get coffee. Jackson was seated in the lobby, on the phone with Angel, sipping coffee. A half-eaten bagel was in front of him. It was zero seven hundred. The free breakfast would be open a few more hours.

After getting a cup of coffee and a muffin, Wilson wandered over by Jackson, who was just wrapping his call up. “Anyone else up?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“Yeah, Mother and Lambchop went for a run about forty-five minutes ago. Haven’t seen Sloan or Sherman.”

Had he gotten up earlier, Wilson would have joined them on the run. “The Lear is confirmed for ten hundred,” he remarked. “I have time to catch a workout. The gym looked decent.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” Jackson asked with a chuckle.

Wilson smiled. “Yeah, anyway, is all good at home?”

“Yes. Angel has some time to make up at work. She’s going in for a half-day today.”

Wilson had forgotten it was Saturday. He often relied on his watch to tell him what day it was as there was no such thing as a normal work week. “Looks like we’ll be off tomorrow. I’m on the next CIA Referral case tentatively scheduled to deploy on Monday. You?”

“I’m scheduled to be in the office for the next week,” Jackson said. Wilson knew that he was pretty much on an every other week mission deployment schedule to give him time at home. “I’m off tomorrow to have time with the fam.”

Wilson nodded. “That’s good. It has to be hard.”

Jackson shrugged. “It is what it is. I appreciate Shepherd has adjusted things, but hadn’t he been able to, or when he can’t, I’m still home more than I would be in a regular active-duty deployable unit.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it. Yeah, there’s no six months or longer deployments in this unit.”

Lambchop and Mother came in through the front door. Both men looked like they’d had a good run. They grabbed beverages and then joined Wilson and Jackson. “I spoke with Shepherd this morning,” Lambchop said. “As long as everyone files their mission reports by the time we get back to HQ, everyone is off until Monday morning.”

“Sweet, we should be in and unloaded by thirteen hundred, thirteen-thirty tops. That leaves a lot of the day left and all day tomorrow off,” Wilson said.

Lambchop chuckled. “Why, what are you planning?”

“Yeah, not enough time to get away on another dive weekend,” Mother added.

“Sadly, no,” Wilson agreed. “My plan? To do absolutely nothing. And that’s the point. I’ll stop on my way home and get somebeer or a bottle of rum and diet. I’ll order Chinese or a pizza and do nothing until Monday morning, when I plan to arrive at HQ several hours before the time to deploy so I can hit the gym.”

The three other men laughed. “You can tell he’s single,” Lambchop said.

“But right now, I’m going to go catch a workout in the hotel gym,” Wilson said. “We’re leaving for the airport at what, about zero nine hundred?”

“Yeah, we’ll meet by the cars then,” Lambchop confirmed.

At zero nine hundred, Wilson and Jackson exited the hotel through the back door, near where their vehicles were parked. Within minutes, all six men had exited the hotel and had the vehicles packed for the short drive to the airfield.

November

Reina Ellis rushed out her back door. Her neighbors were still leaving her alone for the most part, since she'd told nosy Mrs. Newhouse that her cousin was a DEA agent. She wished she'd thought of it sooner. She wanted to hit the ATM and get some cash to keep in the house on her way to the community college bookstore, as she'd be going right by the bank. She had decided to get another book for the English class she was taking as an online class this semester. It was listed as optional, so she hadn't purchased it originally, but after just the first week of taking the class, decided it might be helpful.

It was Saturday morning and besides a little housework and laundry; she planned to devote most of the weekend to her schoolwork with hopes of getting ahead in the reading, after this trip to the bookstore. The sun was shining, and the temperatures were in the upper twenties, not terrible.

Her mood was still somber as she continued to worry about Lilly. She couldn't help but wonder what Jimmy knew that he couldn't tell her. And it was also his tone of voice when he'd said he just didn't know if Lilly was okay or not. He was being honest. He didn't know which scared her more. Certainly, if Lilly was okay, that could have been figured out quickly.

She withdrew two hundred dollars from the ATM that was at the far end of the drive-up banking lanes. After stuffing it into her wallet, she pulled forward to the stop sign that emptied into the parking lot of the bank. Just then, a man and a woman exited the bank. Her eyes fixed on the woman, Ashley Carona. Her hair was worn long, falling onto the lapels of a black leather jacket. Her face was full of makeup, but it was her, Reina was sure!

She momentarily froze, watching the pair cross the lot. The man was good looking, a fit body, a clean-shaven face, a black full head of hair slicked back. As they reached

the front of a black SUV, he removed the sunglasses he'd just slipped on when they exited the bank, and he pointed them at Ashley Carona as his other hand grabbed her by the upper arm. He had a terse expression on his face.

They climbed into the front seats of that black SUV; the man driving. The backseat windows and rear window were tinted black. Reina regained her senses and rolled forward. The man pulled forward through his spot and crossed the lot, heading to the far exit. Reina stayed back a few feet, but followed. She was easily able to fall in a couple of cars back when the SUV pulled out onto the street.

The SUV took a turn onto the interstate highway. She followed, fumbling to get her phone from her purse. She dialed Jimmy.

"Hello?" he answered on the second ring.

"Jimmy, I saw Ashley Carona. I'm following her right now," Reina said as soon as he answered.

"You're doing what? Where are you, Rae?" He pointed at Lambchop and snapped his fingers to get his attention. They were at the hangar, loading their gear onto the Lear. The others were on the plane.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“I think she’s heading to the airport,” Reina said.

“Is the little girl with her?” he asked as Lambchop stepped over near him.

“I don’t know. I saw her come out of the bank and get into the passenger seat of a black SUV. The windows are tinted. I couldn’t see who else was in the car.”

“Was she alone when she came out of the bank?” he asked, already feeling concerned. He swiveled the phone, so the speaker was still pressed to his ear, but the mic was away from his mouth. “It’s Rae, she’s following the Carona woman. Notify Ops for me,” he whispered to Lambchop.

“No, some man was with her.”

He swiveled the phone back into place. “Rae, the man was probably a Marshal. I did get some info on Ashley Carona. She’s in the witness protection program, just like you.”

“He didn’t look like the Marshals I had contact with. Jimmy, this guy threw off a real dangerous vibe. I’m worried about her.”

“Rae, you need to be careful,” he said, knowing his words were falling on deaf ears. He couldn’t tell her what he knew about the woman she knew as Ashley Carona and the character of the type of people she previously associated with. “I can’t tell you why, but just take my word for it that if that isn’t a Marshal, and he’s the type of person I think he is, he’s dangerous and would hurt you without any remorse.”

“I’m back several cars. I’m sure they didn’t even see me,” Reina insisted.

“Stay back several car lengths and stay on the line with me,” he said. He knew he sounded like he was issuing her orders and that wouldn’t go over well. “Give me a running report on where you are and what’s going on.”

“I’m fine, Jimmy. Don’t you want me to try to get you a license plate number or something?”

“Rae, if you see it great, yes, read it to me. But don’t go any closer to them. I don’t want them making you. That could put you in danger.”

Reina continued to follow the black SUV and gave Jimmy the running narrative about where they were, and what the car was doing. She stayed in the same lane on the interstate even though the black SUV changed lanes continually. Traffic slowed and eventually came to a stop. There was nothing she could do when her car pulled up beside the black SUV.

She tried to keep her back pressed hard against the seat and keep her eyes straight ahead. The last thing she wanted to do was make eye contact with the man behind the wheel of the SUV, as the front windows weren’t tinted. She was successful until the traffic inched forward, and she gazed left, then right out of habit. She was slightly in front of the SUV and not only did she make eye contact with the man but also with Ashley Carona.

“Shit!” She knew her facial expression was shock. So, she forced a smile and waved at Ashley while mouthing, “Hi.”

“Shit what, Rae?” Wilson asked.

Ashley Carona didn’t smile, didn’t wave. There was an intense-looking conversation

between her and the man before Reina's vehicle inched far enough ahead of them that she could no longer see in the vehicle.

"Traffic stopped, and I ended up next to them. Ashley saw me," she explained.

"Get out of there, Rae, get the fuck out of there now. Just get over and take the next exit."

"I want to at least get you the plate number," she said. "We're stopping again and I think I can get it as they come up. I'll stay back far enough that I'll be somewhat behind them." And that was what she did. She hung back, leaving a gap between her and the car in front of her. The SUV pulled up to the bumper of the car in front of it. She got a good look at the plate and read it off to Jimmy.

"Okay, you got it. Now get the hell out of there," Wilson said. He repeated the plate number to Lambchop, who typed it into his phone.

When Reina looked up, she saw that Ashley was turned in her seat, gazing directly at her, and the expression on her face was not friendly. "Yeah, I'll do that," she assured Jimmy.

As the traffic started to move, she inched over to the far-right lane so she could get off at the next exit. She lost track of the black SUV. She took the off ramp, not entirely familiar with where the road she was getting off on would take her. "Okay, I'm off the interstate," she reported once she'd cleared the exit ramp. She gave Jimmy her location.

"Are you okay, Rae?"

Had she not been so startled by the look on Ashley Carona's face, she would have realized how worried he sounded. That would come later. "Jimmy. I'm fine. You



should have seen how Ashley looked at me.”

She didn’t sound fine to him. She sounded rattled. “She’s on the run. She’s probably freaked out that someone who can identify her, saw her,” he said.

“On the run from what?” she asked.

If Jimmy answered that question, she didn’t know. The second the question left her mouth; her car was violently rear-ended, and she dropped her phone as the seatbelt tightened and the airbag in the steering wheel deployed. She didn’t exactly scream, but she was aware of the startled grunt, half-shriek that came out of her mouth.

When she regained her wits and realized what had happened, she struggled to get her seatbelt off. The airbag in front of her was deflating. She looked out the side window and saw she was along the side of the road, with a berm several feet away but beside her. She opened her car door and stumbled out, winded, dazed, and disoriented. It barely registered when a pair of hands grabbed her from behind and spun her around. She found herself staring into the face of that man who’d exited the bank with Ashley Carona.

“Rae? Are you okay?” Wilson yelled into the phone. He’d heard her shriek and the impact of metal on metal. “Rae, what happened?” He waited a beat for a reply. None came. He turned his attention to Lambchop. “That sound was unmistakable, metal on metal. I’m sure she was just in a car accident.” He paused and shook his head. “And now nothing but silence.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Lambchop had already dialed Ops. Brad 'Circles' Dupont was on. He relayed the information. "Shepherd needs to get a hold of St. Vincent and get her license plate number and, in the meantime, get a hold of the Iowa State Highway Patrol and give them the exit she took. Not far off, it is the scene of her car accident. And Wilson is still on the line with her phone. Run a trace to locate her phone. Also, have them put an APB out on the black SUVs plates."

"Roger that, Lambchop. Will take care of it immediately."

"Get back to both me and Wilson when you have anything to report."

Wilson kept the phone to his ear, straining to hear whatever he could through the phone. The line was still open. The call had not terminated. He'd listened to Lambchop on the phone with Ops. "Who's on?"

"Circles took the call."

Wilson felt good about that. Dupont was an experienced Ops Analyst.

"Is her phone line still active?" Lambchop asked.

"Yeah, I can't hear anything, though. I hope she's okay."

"You mean you hope Ashley Carona and her companion didn't cause the accident to do her harm," Lambchop said, as though he could read Wilson's thoughts.

"Yeah, that," Wilson confirmed. His thoughts were overwhelmed as unfamiliar

emotions assaulted him. He realized the depth of his feelings for Rae. He'd taken for granted her friendship, but the thought of her no longer being there to bring a focus outside of the job left an emptiness he couldn't reconcile.

The others stepped off the plane. Their gear was secure. Wilson and Lambchop filled them in on what had happened and why Wilson still clutched the phone to his ear.

"I'll tell the pilots we're going to hold off departing until after law enforcement is on scene and can give us a report," Lambchop volunteered.

"Thanks, I appreciate that," Wilson said.

The minutes passed slowly. Wilson kept the phone to his ear, waiting. Finally, fifteen minutes later, he heard the faint sound of sirens through Rae's phone. They grew louder until he was sure the siren was beside Rae's phone and then it cut out. He waited, his heart pounding. Even though he didn't want Rae to be hurt, he hoped a cop would get on and say Rae was there, unconscious from the accident, but okay. Somehow, he knew that wouldn't be the case.

"Hello?" he yelled into the phone.

A few minutes later, a voice came through her phone, a male voice. "Hello, this is Iowa State Trooper Dorant."

"My name is Wilson," he said. "Special Agent, DEA. I was talking with the owner of that car when I heard a car accident occur. Is she there? Is she okay?"

"No one's here, Agent Wilson," the trooper said.

"The car should be registered to a Reina Ellis," Wilson said. "Can you confirm the plates are registered to her?"

“In a moment,” Dorant said. “First, I do need to confirm your credentials. Give me a call back number and I’ll contact you on my mobile. This phone is nearly dead.”

“She’s not there,” Wilson told Lambchop after the trooper had disconnected the call.

Seven minutes later, Wilson’s phone rang an incoming call routed through the Iowa State Highway Patrol per the caller ID. “Wilson,” he answered.

“Thank you, Agent Wilson. This is Dorant. Thank you for allowing me to follow my procedure. I can now release information to you. I can confirm the plates on the car are registered to Reina Ellis of Cedar Rapids.”

“That’s who I was on the phone with when I heard the crash. That’s her phone.”

“There’s no sign of her or anyone else,” the trooper said. “The airbag deployed in the crash. Besides her phone being on the floor of the vehicle, when I got here, the driver’s side door was open, and her purse is sitting on the passenger seat.”

“I have a license plate number that one of my colleagues has requested an APB on. That vehicle, a black SUV, may have had something to do with the accident. The driver of that vehicle may have forcibly taken Miss Ellis after.” He read the license plate number to the trooper.

“And you suspect that why?” the trooper asked.

“I’m sorry. I’m not at liberty to say. But be advised that if you find the occupants of the SUV, they should be considered dangerous.”

“We’ll be in touch if we have anything to report.” The trooper had been looking through her purse as they’d talked. “Also, Miss Ellis had just made an ATM withdrawal of two hundred dollars less than an hour ago. The money and receipt are

in her purse.”

“Unless she’s injured and wandered away from her car, she didn’t leave it willingly,” Wilson said, becoming more concerned about Rae.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“We’ll conduct a search of the immediate area for her as well,” the trooper guaranteed.

With that, the call was disconnected. Wilson relayed everything to the five other members of the team who stood nearby.

“Let’s get airborne. Shepherd has approved us diverting to Cedar Rapids,” Lambchop said.

“Thanks,” Wilson said, truly touched that Lambchop had reached out to Shepherd to ask.

Oscar

Reina sat stock-still with fear. Truthfully, she was stiff and sore too from the collision. She’d never experienced airbags deploying. How did she not know that between the airbag hitting her in the face and the seatbelt snapping tight across her shoulder and chest that she’d feel like she’d been hit by a truck? Well, in actuality, she had been, or rather an SUV plowing into her at full speed.

She kept her gaze forward on the rearview mirror where every few seconds the eyes belonging to Ashley Carona, or as she now knew her first name was really Stella, would flicker to make eye contact with her before she re-affixed them on the road. She tried to gauge the expression on Ashley’s face or look to see if her eyes conveyed pity, fear, or malice.

After she’d stumbled from the car, Reina had been utterly shocked when the man

grabbed her, spun her to face him, and then he roughly pulled her to the back of the SUV even though she struggled against him. He said nothing, but the glare on his face was frightening. He pushed her in and slid in beside her, still holding her arm in a vise grip. She was sure he'd bruised her arm terribly, but was also sure a bruise was the least of her worries. He fastened the seatbelt over her, pinning her hands beneath it. No matter how she turned her hand and wrestled against the belt, she couldn't pull an arm loose, nor could she reach the button to unlock it.

He'd yelled at Ashley Carona, calling her Stella, and ordered her to drive. She didn't argue. She said nothing. Just slid behind the wheel and shifted to drive immediately. Only after the car was moving did she adjust her seat and the mirrors. She pulled back onto the expressway, resuming their drive south.

"Why did you hit me? Why have you forced me into this car?" Reina asked again. She'd asked the man these questions several times already. This time, with her eyes boring into Ashley Carona, she was asking her.

"Be quiet," the man next to her said. He hit her in the chest, pressing her back. "And stop moving around. You're going nowhere."

Reina glanced at him. He may be cleaned up and dressed nicely, but he was as dangerous as many of the men she knew in her past motorcycle gang life who looked as dangerous as they were. Of course, she included Razor in that group, and he turned out to be a Fed. Could this man really be a U.S. Marshal?

"Ashley, or is it, Stella? Are you with this guy, or are you in trouble?"

"I said shut up!" the man yelled.

"Why were you following us?" Ashley, Stella asked.

“I wasn’t,” Reina lied. “Why would I be?”

“Shut the fuck up,” the man growled.

“I guess it doesn’t matter now,” Ashley, Stella said.

“Where’s Lilly? Is she okay?” Reina asked.

The man pulled a gun from his jacket. He jammed the barrel under Reina’s chin. “One more word and I fucking pull the trigger. Now shut the pie hole.” His voice was low and menacing.

Reina nodded. Ashley’s eyes again flickered to the rearview mirror. Reina saw fear in them.

“Don’t say anything. Lilly’s fine.”

With this statement, Reina knew that Ashley believed the man would shoot her. The blood in her veins ran cold, and she began to shiver. She closed her eyes and Jimmy’s face materialized in the darkness. They’d been on the phone. Had he heard the accident? Had her phone survived it? Would he look for her? She realized that he was her only hope.

Reina focused on soothing, calming thoughts. She reopened her eyes to watch the street signs, so she’d know where they were taking her after she felt the gun no longer pressing beneath her chin. She dared a glance at the man beside her. His gaze was trained out the window.

Without being able to see the time, Reina had no clue how long they drove. Her best guess was just over a half hour, maybe forty-five minutes. Ashley, Stella pulled off the interstate and took several turns off on rural roads with little to no traffic. It



seemed to Reina that she knew where she was going.

Finally, after driving down a long, winding dirt and gravel drive, the car pulled up in front of an old white farmhouse. After she'd put the car in park and turned the engine off, Ashley, Stella, turned in her seat. "A word, Blake?" Then she got out of the car, slamming the door.

"Stay here," the man, who Reina had just learned was named Blake, said. He got out of the car, closing the door as well.

Reina strained to hear their conversation. Through the tinted window, Reina saw Ashley, Stella's animated gestures and could make out a few of the words she said. "Unnecessary...crazy...can't," she said. "Warning you Blake!"

Blake grabbed her flailing arms. "Too deep...little girl...Fuck! Stella!"

Ashley, Stella pulled her arms away. She pointed her index finger at him. The expression on her face was pure hate. She said something through gritted teeth and then Reina heard her say, "Kill you!"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

The car door opened and the man, Blake, leaned in and unfastened the seat belt. He again grabbed her by the upper arm. "Get out."

Reina leaned against him, opposing his efforts to remove her from the car.

"Jesus fucking Christ, get out of the damn car!" He tugged harder on her arm, sliding her across the seat and out of the car.

"Reina, just fucking stop resisting," Ashley, Stella pled. "He'll kill you. He'll fucking kill you."

"So, it's Stella, huh?" Reina asked once she stood in front of her.

"Yeah, though I really wanted to be Ashley. Unfortunately, the past always catches up with you," she lamented. "Not that you'd know anything about that."

Reina wanted to laugh. Yeah, she knew all about that. She wondered for a second if disclosing her past would grant her any goodwill with these two. If they knew she had a past, would they not worry about her being a threat to them? The honor amongst thieves' theory? She'd think about it more. "I think a person can leave their past behind if they truly stop making the choices they made in that life."

Stella's gaze went to Blake, who still held Reina's arm in a vise grip. "Yeah, sometimes people won't let you do that."

"Inside, both of you," Blake snapped.

They entered the house. In the front room, a man sat. He was of the same ilk as Blake, dressed nicely, clean shaven, same age range, fit, wearing a pistol in a shoulder holster, throwing off a dangerous vibe, and wearing a scowl on his face when he saw Reina. “Who’s this?”

“The kid’s new babysitter. You’re welcome,” Blake said.

“Has Lilly called for me?” Stella asked.

“No, haven’t heard a peep from her,” the man said.

“If you’ve hurt her in any way,” Stella warned, “I’ll kill you.”

The man raised his hands shoulder level in surrender. “Kiddy fiddlin’ isn’t my thing.” He nodded to Reina. “But I’d tap her in a heartbeat.”

Reina’s body stiffened. This was all too familiar territory. There was a reason she always had an old man in her past life. Protection. Protection from predators like this guy. She was considering if she’d speak out with a threat and project a false bravado.

Stella spoke before she had the chance to. “Don’t even think about it. She’s off limits too. And if you try to touch me again, I’ll cut your fucking dick off and feed it to you and don’t think I won’t.”

“Down, girl,” Blake said, almost amused. He nodded to the staircase.

Stella mounted it as Blake pulled Reina over. “Take care of Lilly,” Stella said to her. “I hate that she’s afraid, but keeping her in the room upstairs is the safest place for her right now. She’ll be thrilled to see you.”

At the top of the stairs, Stella slid a lock open on a door. She opened it and went in.

Blake pulled Reina in behind her. Reina watched Stella go over to the large queen-sized bed. She saw Lilly's face on the pillow, her small body covered by blankets. Stella sat on the edge and stroked the hair back from Lilly's face, who appeared to be asleep.

"Hey angel," Stella said when Lilly opened her eyes.

"Mommy." Lilly sat up and hugged her.

Reina watched a hesitant, sad smile play across Stella's face. "I missed you."

"Can we go home now?" Lilly pleaded. "I don't like it here."

Reina saw tears fill Stella's eyes. "I'm sorry baby, not yet. Mommy still has some work she has to do, and this is the safest place for you while I do that. But I brought you company. Miss Reina from school is going to be here with you, so you're not alone."

Upon seeing Reina, Lilly's face lit up. Reina pulled her arm from Blake, and she rushed over to Lilly. She gave her a hug. "Hi sweetie. I missed you at school." She noticed Lilly's Lovie was clutched in her arms. It was either a duplicate or Stella had gone back to her house for it.

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While on the Lear en route to Cedar Rapids, the team was notified that Shepherd had reached out to St. Vincent and notified him of the events that had just occurred. He pressed hard and got the information the team needed. A voice call was enabled on Lambchop's tablet and the team huddled around it, listening.

"St. Vincent released info on Ashley Carona. Her real name is Stella Adams. Five

years ago, she was swept up by the FBI for being a part of a sophisticated identity theft and money laundering scheme being perpetrated by an extensive network. She provided info, even wore a wire and helped them get evidence on other members of the network. She also agreed to testify. She gave the FBI intel that led them to just about everyone in the network. Only a couple gave them the slip. The FBI always suspected she'd squirreled some of the cash away someplace, but they couldn't find it. They appreciate any assistance we can give in finding Stella Adams now that she's gone dark on the Marshals."

"What about the little girl?" Wilson asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“She was pregnant while helping the FBI. She’d told the Marshals assigned to her after she was taken into protective custody that the baby’s father didn’t believe her that it was his. She never gave them his name.”

“They think it was someone associated with the network?” Wilson asked.

“They did, maybe one of the people who got away,” Shepherd said.

“As far as the money goes, are there any indications she was living above her means?” Lambchop asked.

“I have the Digital Team poring over her finances. It doesn’t appear she is, but they’ll let you know,” Shepherd replied.

“According to Rae, she appeared to be a single mom with tight finances,” Wilson offered.

“We’ll find out soon,” Shepherd said. “The black SUV was a rental from Des Moines airport. The Digital Team is also getting info on whoever rented it. I’ll push through what I have on StellaAdams and her case from the Marshals and the Digital Team will get you their reports as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, Shepherd. How long are we authorized to look into this?” Wilson asked.

“Angel has arranged a couple of rental vehicles for you, as well as hotel accommodations. Proceed to the accident site when you arrive and then touch bases with the Iowa State Patrol. We’ll talk again after that to set the approved scope of this

operation,” Shepherd said. “I want to talk with the FBI before I commit us to anything past recovering Reina Ellis.”

“Roger that, Shep,” Lambchop replied.

Papa

The farmhouse was cold. Reina wasn't sure if the heat was set any higher than forty or fifty degrees, wasn't really sure if it was on at all. She and Lilly had their coats on, yet still spent the time under the blankets on the bed to keep warm. They played games, colored, and Reina told her stories. There were pads of paper, crayons, and a few other things to keep the little girl occupied. They slept a lot. It was hard for Reina to keep track of the time passing.

Thankfully, there was a bathroom in the room they could use. Reina found it disturbing that Lilly wore a dress with no underwear below. Lilly hadn't mastered pulling her pants up and down by herself, even though she was fully potty trained. Her mom, knowing this, left her to fend for herself in the bathroom. As Reina helped Lilly in the bathroom, realizing Lilly hadn't wiped herself well while she'd been in there and helped to clean her up, her anger at Lilly's mother grew.

Reina checked the closet. Nothing inside. She'd been hoping to find something she could use as a weapon. There were two windows in the room. She looked out of both. No other homes in sight, just the barren leaf-stripped trees and overgrown scrub brush for as far as her eyes could see. She wondered if the view from a different side of the house would show any other homes nearby.

There was a twelve pack of water that someone had taken the time to loosen all the caps and a stock of various food items on one of the tables, many of them already open. Unsure how long they'd be there, Reina rationed the food, but did try to make sure that she and Lilly had a variety of food, alternating protein bars and fruit pouches

with an occasional bag of chips and sweet treat whenever they ate.

Reina was sure at least two days had passed since Blake and Stella had left them there. No one had returned. Reina was dozing when the door opened. Blake came into the room.

“Reina, come with me,” he said, his voice icy.

Reina had a really bad feeling about this, but she didn’t want to scare Lilly. “Okay,” she told him. Lilly slept beside her. She shook her a bit to wake her. “Lilly, sweetie, I have to go for a short bit. Go back to sleep. Stay under the covers to stay warm, sweetie.” She kissed her on her forehead.

When they were in the hallway with the door closed, Blake, who held her arm, relocked the door. “Why’d you bother waking her?”

“I wanted her to know I was leaving. I didn’t want her to wake up alone and be afraid. You really don’t know anything about kids, do you?”

He shrugged off her remark. He pointed down the staircase. “You fight me, and I’ll throw you down the stairs,” he warned.

“I won’t,” she said. Then she walked willingly down the stairs beside him.

That other man was not in the front room. Stella was not there either. The rest of the house was quiet. He led her to the frontdoor and opened it. That was when that bad feeling she had turned into fear. It was gray and frigid outside. The cold air invaded her the second he pulled her out of the house. A beige sedan was parked in front of the door. The SUV was nowhere in sight.

He popped the trunk open with the push of a button on the key fob he held in his hand



that was not holding her. They were just a few steps away from it. “Get in,” he said, pointing to the trunk of the car.

She pulled against him, leaning away from the car, and defiantly shook her head. “No.”

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way where you get hurt.”

They appeared to be alone. Could she overpower him, get Lilly, and drive them out of there? She remembered the turns they’d taken once off the interstate. She knew she could navigate them back to civilization. But what if she didn’t succeed? Would he take it out on Lilly?

“Last chance,” he said.

She nodded and stepped towards the car. She grabbed hold of the edge of the trunk as though she was going to climb in and then at the last second used the car to push against, to give herself leverage as she kicked backwards, kicking him in the crotch with all her strength. She followed up, coming to her feet and grabbing him by the hair on his head and pulling his head down as she thrust her knee up.

In the corner of her eye she saw, too late, the other man who’d been in the house, rush up beside her, a gun in his hand that was swinging towards her head and the painful impact. That was all she remembered until she opened her eyes to darkness. She had the sensation of movement and felt nauseous. Her head hurt, too.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

By the time the movement stopped, she had come out of the fog and remembered all that had happened. She felt around her immediate area. She knew she was in the trunk of the car. The dark gave way to light when the trunk opened. She found herself staring at Blake's face.

Without a word, he reached in and pulled her to a sitting position. "Get out," he said while pulling on her to help lift her from the trunk. She wobbled on her feet, holding onto the car to combat the dizziness she felt. With no words spoken, he pulled her away from the car. They were on a gravel road in a small clearing in the trees. The sky was a dark gray, either it was about to snow, or night was creeping in. She wasn't sure which.

He pulled her up a little rise, her feet stumbling on the uneven ground. She barely saw the hole in front of her when she felt him push her and she fell forward, down into the deep hole. She landed hard on her right side. She lay there, stunned for a few seconds. She heard the unmistakable sound of a car door closing, a car's engine turning over, and tires crunching on gravel, growing softer and softer. Then silence.

Shock was what she felt, mostly. Had that just happened? Had Blake just pushed her into a hole in the ground? She stared straight up at the dark gray sky and mentally gauged how different parts of her body felt. She wiggled her toes and then moved her legs. Her right shoulder, which she lay on, was sore. But she wiggled her fingers and then moved her arms. There was no intense pain as she did. She didn't think she'd hit her head when she landed. She was quite sure her right shoulder and hip absorbed the brunt of the landing. And the ground beneath her appeared to be dirt and the remnants of snow covering grass.

She slowly sat up, paying attention to how her body felt as she did. She was sore and stiff, but she felt no intense pain anywhere. From the seated position, she took in her surroundings. Though the ground beneath her was dirt and grass, the walls of the hole of the perfectly circular eight-foot-wide hole were made of or lined with metal. It was like a metal tube was standing on its end in the hole.

She pulled herself to her feet again, focused on how her body felt as she did. In the back of her mind, she knew she could have been badly injured and could make it worse by moving around too much. She looked up. The hole had to be ten feet deep. What in the hell was this place? How long had she been unconscious? She rubbed her throbbing head. Her hand slid to the back to feel over where it hurt the worst. She wasn't surprised to feel wetness and stickiness on the back of her head. When she viewed her finger tips, she saw blood. Only then did she let the tears fill her eyes, as they'd been threatening to since she woke in the trunk.

Blake had pushed her into this hole and left her. Was he leaving her there to die? Or would he be back? Leaving Lilly alone in that bedroom was horrible. Pushing her into this hole and leaving her was heartless, truly evil. If he didn't come back, would someone find her? If not, how would she die? Would it be the cold that got her? Or would it be from starvation or dehydration? She heard the howl of a coyote in the distance. Or would a wild animal fall or jump into the hole and kill her? Eat her alive? That had to be the worst scenario she could think of; the worst way to die, being eaten alive.

She pushed those thoughts from her mind. No! She was not going to die here. It was cold, but she had on a coat. If she kept moving, she should keep herself warm. It wasn't supposed to be too cold the next few days if she remembered the forecast correctly, lows in the upper twenties. So, she shouldn't freeze to death.

Dehydration was a risk, though. Could she collect her urine and drink it to stay hydrated? Gross. But if it kept her alive until she could be found, she'd have to do it.

She glanced around the ground. There wasn't even anything to collect it in. That was out. There was a little bit of snow on the ground. It would melt in her mouth, but there wasn't very much of it. Okay, so dehydration was a real risk if she was here too long.

She paced, trying to get her blood pumping to stay warm. "Help! Someone help me!" she yelled as loud as she could about a dozen times. Then she listened hard for any sound. Nothing.

It was getting dark out. It would be pitch black in less than an hour. Reina wrapped her arms around herself, cold, afraid, alone.

Quebec

"I think we have something," Garcia's voice came through the speaker on Wilson's phone.

The Digital Team had been working around the clock. The license plate number Reina had read to them turned out to be a rental out of the Des Moines International Airport. It was rented by a man whose ID said his name was Garret Jeffries. The ID was fake, but they got his picture from the ID and the lobby camera. St. Vincent ran it by the FBI Agents who'd worked Stella Adams case. The man was a coconspirator, named Blake Henning. He had been in the wind for the five years Stella Adams had been in the program.

Next, the Digital Team pulled the camera footage available from all cameras in a five-mile circumference of the accident site where Reina's car had been found. They looked at all the black SUVs. If they couldn't see the plate, they tracked the car as far as they could until either the plate was seen, the vehicle was lost, or its' occupants were clearly seen to be ruled out as being Henning, Adams, or Reina Ellis.

It took longer, but even as they reviewed camera footage, Caleb Smith and Cameron Woods also spent time trying to remotely hack into the onboard SatNav System on Henning's rental car. It took time, but they finally succeeded.

The team had been on the ground for three and a half days.

Garcia had something, alright. The current location of the rental car and every place it had been since it was rented. It was currently in a very remote location at the end of a dead-end gravel road in rural Iowa, miles from any Podunk little town. It was the perfect place to hide if you needed to lie low from law enforcement and the perfect place to keep a hostage. The thought crept into Wilson's mind that it could also be the perfect place to bury a body in a shallow grave. He pushed that thought from his mind.

The team geared up and drove towards that location, chasing the setting sun, in the two vehicles Angel had arranged for them. Night had fallen before they reached the long gravel driveway off the remote gravel road. When they were less than a mile out, they launched a drone. The drone provided night vision graphics as it flew over the trees devoid of leaves and the clear path of the winding driveway. Finally, a clearing with a small two-story house that was butted up to the trees came into view. And parked right in front of the house was the black SUV. The drone also transmitted thermal imaging, showing only one heat source in the house, one occupant. Lights were on in one room on the first floor and in one room on the second. The sole adult-sized occupant was in the room on the first floor.

The team donned their night vision goggles and made their way through the trees. Once near the house, Lambchop and Mother circled to the north side of the house, where windows were on the room with the lights on. Sloan and Sherman went with them, but continued to the back of the house, where a back door was. Wilson and Jackson approached the front of the house. First, they looked inside the SUV through the front, un-tinted window. They saw no one inside. The doors were locked, and the

hood was cold. They slinked up alongside the front door.

Once everyone communicated in the affirmative that they were in position, Lambchop gave the shortest of prayers. “Dear Father, let us find Reina safe, Amen. Hit it in three, two, one,” he counted down. “Go, go, go!”

At the front door, Jackson kicked the door in. As soon as it burst open, Wilson rushed in, his Sig leading the way. At the same time, Mother used a tool to crash through one of the windows in the room their Tango was in. Lambchop breached the room an instant later, his M4 in his grasp. At the back door, Sherman used a pry bar to crack open the back door. Sloan went in first, immediately followed by Sherman.

The man who’d been sitting in front of a laptop jumped up at the sounds of the assault on the house. His gaze darted to the two men coming through the window first, followed by snapping his head to view the two men entering from the front of the house. His pistol in its shoulder holster lay on the table across the room. He knew he couldn’t reach it, and all these men were packing some serious heat. If they were cops, they wouldn’t shoot an unarmed man. He ran towards the kitchen only to see two more men coming towards him from that direction.

Wilson pounced on the man attempting to flee. He tackled him to the ground. It wasn’t Henning. The man struggled. “Where do you think you’re going?” Wilson demanded. He had the man subdued, his knee pressing down hard in the middle of his back. “Six to one odds are not great.”

“One Tango subdued,” Lambchop transmitted to Ops who listened in. He then pointed at Mother, Sloan, and Sherman. “Clear the rest of the house.”

The three men mounted the stairs as Jackson moved in to secure this unknown man’s hands behind his back in zip ties. They helped him up and seated him in one of the living room chairs before securing his feet in zip ties as well.

“Where are they?” Wilson demanded.

“Who?” the man asked.

Through comms, Wilson, Jackson, and Lambchop could hear the voices of the three men upstairs declare, “Clear, clear, clear,” as they checked out each room.

“Wrong answer,” Wilson said in a calm voice accompanied by a death stare that was even scarier than had he yelled.

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

The three men descended the stairs. “Got coloring books and crayons,” Sherman said. He held up a pad of paper. A beautiful carousel was drawn and colored in pastel colors.

Wilson knew Reina had drawn it the second he laid eyes on it. It matched one of the posters hung in her living room. He knew Reina had been here. But where was she now? “Blake Henning, Stella Adams, four-year-old Lilly, Reina Ellis. Where are they?” Wilson repeated in the same serious and controlled tone of voice.

“I don’t know,” the man began to say.

Wilson grabbed the paper from Sherman and put it in the Tangos face. “Reina Ellis drew this. She was here. Now where the fuck is she?” His tone was no longer calm, and the volume of his voice also rose.

The man’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head. Wilson pulled out his Cold Steel SRK5 fixed blade knife, a gift from Lambchop. He suddenly thrust all six inches of the black blade into the arm of the chair. The man jumped and let out a yelp.

Wilson pulled the blade from the chair and held it up in front of the man’s face. “It goes in your thigh next. Now where the fuck is Reina Ellis?”

“Not here. Blake took her,” he stammered. He certainly wasn’t going to divulge his part in helping Henning get her into the trunk of the car.

“Took her where?” Wilson pressed.



“Out in the woods yesterday,” his voice cracked as he talked. “She may be alive still. I don’t think Henning killed her.”

“You better pray he didn’t,” Wilson growled.

“Can you lead us to where he took her?” Lambchop asked.

“I can show you the area on a map,” the man said.

“And Lilly? Where is she?” Lambchop asked.

“Stella came back and took her; she and Henning took her. Stella was pissed Henning took that Reina woman, but Henning has the upper hand, and Stella can’t fucking tell him no. Henning’s running things and Stella knows it.”

“Your name?” Lambchop pressed. “And don’t lie. Your prints will prove out who you are.”

“You lie and I’ll fucking bury you in the woods in a shallow grave,” Wilson snarled.

“Eddie Van Slood.”

“If you’ve lied about anything, I’ll fucking bury you,” Wilson threatened. “And don’t think for a second I won’t.”

Jackson brought a map of the area up on the tablet that controlled the drone. He had it ready to send back out to search for Reina. He held it in front of Eddie Van Slood’s face. “Where did Henning take her?”

“About five miles due west, there’s this gravel road that leads into a water conservation or overflow area along the Iowa River. There are these holes in the

ground for water overflow. They're deep, like ten feet deep and like six feet wide. The walls are steel. There isn't any way for anyone to climb out of one of them. That's where he took her, was going to throw her into one."

"Yesterday?" Wilson demanded.

Van Slood nodded.

Wilson did a mental calculation of the temperature over the last twenty-four to thirty-six hours and the expected drop in a person's core temperature. It was currently twenty-eight degrees, the coldest it had been in the last three days. Knowing that a drop in core temperature of up to approximately one degree per hour was possible if she was not actively trying to generate body heat, she most certainly had suffered hypothermia by now. All special forces team members were well educated in the stages of hypothermia, including at what point death was imminent.

Wilson's gaze met Lambchop's. He could see the SEAL was also calculating the odds she'd still be alive. It was theoretically possible that her body temperature had dropped low enough to cause death. Every member of the Shepherd Security Team knew it.

Wilson nodded to Jackson. "Let's get that drone in the air near those holes and find her."

"Mother, you're with me. The rest of you go find her," Lambchop ordered.

The four men immediately left.

Mother leaned into Eddie Van Slood's personal space. "If you lied about anything, that man will kill you and we'll let him."

“I, I didn’t,” Van Slood stammered.

“Now you’re going to tell us how to find Blake Henning, Stella Adams, and that little four-year-old girl,” Lambchop said.

Romeo

Wilson drove at what he considered to be unsafe speeds on the gravel road down the little incline towards the Iowa River area where the river overflow drainage pits were located. They were there, alright. Six of them spread over a half mile. They got to the foot path that led to the first one. Jackson launched the drone.

“I hope she has enough body heat left to register on it,” Sherman said as the four men hiked towards the first pit, following the drone that zoomed ahead of them. Wilson had a rappelling line looped over his shoulder.

“I hope she has a light-colored coat to make her easily seen,” Jackson said. This would aid in rescuing her or recovering her body.

Wilson wished he knew what color coat she had. He didn't.

The drone reached the first pit and broadcast an image of an empty pit. No heat signatures, nothing discernible as a human. They'd just reached the turn off in the trail to pit number two. “I'll send it over pit number two,” Jackson said. “I think someone should still take the time to check out pit number one, just to be sure there's nothing up against the walls that would be undetectable and to be sure no ground has been disturbed.”

“I've got it,” Sherman said. He immediately veered off towards pit one.

Wilson watched his flashlight beam flicker ahead of him on the trees for a second before he veered towards pit number two. If she'd been buried in the floor of the pit,

would the Birdman be able to see it from the rim of the hole? He pushed that thought from his brain and pushed on.

The drone reached pit number two. The images it sent were the same. No heat signatures in or near the hole, nothing that looked like a human being in the hole. The men stopped where they were and sent the drone over pit number three, several hundred feet further up the trail than pit number two. Pits number four through six were accessible further up the gravel road where it dead ended.

“Nothing in pit number one,” Sherman reported through comms. “I’m heading back your way. If anyone was in the pit, it would be seen on the drone. Honestly, I can’t tell from the height of the rim if the bottom ground has been disturbed. If we don’t find her in the six pits, I think that would be a secondary search of the pits from inside of them or in daylight,” he said.

“Roger that,” Wilson said.

When the drone arrived and hovered over pit number three, Wilson’s eyes were glued to the tablet, along with Jackson’s. Nothing.

“Let’s get back to the car and drive to the next set of pits,” Jackson said, already turning around to hike back.

“Yeah,” Wilson agreed. He transmitted to Sherman to meet them back at the car.

They drove up the winding gravel road until it dead ended. Pit number four was in front of them. No need to launch the drone on it. Wilson and Sherman walked up the uneven ground to it as Jackson launched the drone towards pit number five. Wilson noticed how the ground seemed disturbed as they neared the edge. He was filled with hope this was the place.

He shined his flashlight down into the pit. “Reina! You there?” he called as he circled the light. About three quarters of the way around the circle, the beam found a still figure seated with its side against the wall all hunched up and huddled into itself, hood up on the black jacket that was pulled over its knees. “Reina!” he called again.

He handed the bulk of the rope to Sherman as he donned his MoG Gloves so he could fast-rope down. “She’s here!” he yelled to Jackson and Sloan, who stood near the car.

“Someone’s here,” Sherman corrected him as he wound the rope around himself to provide counterweight, making himself the anchor for Wilson to pull against as he fast-rope down. “Can’t see who it is.”

Both men ran towards Wilson and Sherman. They each grabbed the rope to help provide enough anchor weight. With a tight rope between him and his team, Wilson turned to face the steel lining of the hole. Swinging out far enough for his body to stay off the wall would be a challenge. Ten feet wasn’t far, didn’t give him long to remain off the wall before he had to slow down. He tossed the line out about three feet and immediately leaped off the wall, jumping out as far as he could.

He dropped as fast as the rope he’d thrown and swung towards the wall as he descended. He gripped hard, slowing his descent, and put his legs out so his feet would impact the wall. Then he put his feet beneath him and on the ground. Success. He’d gotten down there without face-planting into the side of the steel wall.

“I’m down,” he yelled up towards the team, forgetting that his comms would transmit it if he switched it to transmit. They all peered over the edge with the beams from their flashlights lighting the hole. He approached the still figure. As he approached, he saw it wasn’t still. It shivered. Thank God. “Rae?” He dropped to a knee beside the black-coated figure and raised the hood. Wilson wrapped his arms around her. Relief surged through him. “It’s her!” he yelled up to the team. “Rae, talk to me,” he prompted, his voice softer. He noticed how cold she felt. “Are you okay, Rae?” he

asked, becoming very concerned. Then he reluctantly released her, just long enough to open his backpack and get out his emergency blanket. She was freezing cold. He had to start the warming process even before they got her out of the hole.

Reina was sure Jimmy beside her had to be an illusion, as a bright unearthly light from above surrounded him. Had she finally slipped into unconsciousness and was dreaming? Or worse, had the cold killed her, and this was what happened when you crossed to the other side? She'd heard stories of people going into the light after they'd died.

She'd kept herself awake for the most part of the last two days since Blake had pushed her into this hole. She paced, did jumping jacks, anything to keep moving to stave off the hypothermia she knew was imminent. She'd foolishly tried to climb out of the hole several times, which brought new sore spots on her body when she fell from the bad hold the metal wall offered.

She'd cried, allowing self-pity to overwhelm her and then talked herself out of the mindset that she was going to die. An adamant refusal to accept this was how she'd go out. She'd survived so much already in her life. This was not how it would end. Then the despair of being cold, alone, thirsty, hungry, and afraid would creep back in and she'd go through the range of emotions again, an endless cycle of thoughts.

She knew she had allowed herself to doze. She'd been exhausted. She'd crouched down and pulled the coat over her knees; thankful she had a large jacket. Balling herself up had helped her retain some warmth. If she wasn't dead, maybe she was asleep.

"Rae?" Wilson asked when she didn't speak. He now had her wrapped in the blanket, and he held her to his chest once again.

She felt his hand caress her cheek. He'd removed his glove. His hand was so warm.

She pressed herself more firmly against him. Her arms were inside of her jacket, folded up tightly against her chest. She nodded. Her throat was parched from all the yelling for help she'd done. She wasn't sure if she could speak.

He angled her chin so he could look her in the eye. "You're safe."

She nodded again, wide eyed and frightened. "Water," her hoarse voice croaked out.

Wilson grabbed his bottle of water from his backpack and brought it to her lips. She gulped it down. He looked around and saw no bottle of water, no food. She'd been without food or water for at least twenty-four hours. He wondered how long it had been since she ate or drank anything?



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“How is she?” Sloan’s voice came through his comms.

“Cold, shivering, but conscious,” he said after he’d switched his comms to transmit.

“Let’s get her up so I can take a look at her,” Sloan said.

“Can you move the car close enough to tie off to? I’m going to have to walk her up the wall and would like an assist.”

“You gonna fashion a harness with the end of the rope?” Sloan asked.

“Yeah, will tie us both in,” Wilson replied.

“Negative, can’t get the car close enough, but you’ve got the three of us as anchors. We’ll step back to assist as much as we safely can,” Jackson offered.

“Affirmative,” Wilson acknowledged. He knew it wouldn’t be easy. Going up without proper rappelling gear was a hundred times harder than going down. It required brute strength and some technique. It was hard on the body. “Rae, are you injured anyplace I should know about?”

“My right shoulder and hip hurt, and I have a lump from where I was hit on the back of my head,” she said.

“God, I’m sorry we couldn’t find you any faster than we did,” he said and then kissed her forehead.

New tears filled Reina's eyes. "You found me. I don't know how you did, but you did."

"Shh, shh, please don't cry," he whispered while kissing her again, her forehead, her cheeks, and then he pressed his lips to hers. "Thank God we found you." He held her close again for a moment. "Do you think you can walk? I'm going to get you out of here, over there by the wall. It's the best spot up top to do it."

With his help, she pulled her knees from inside the coat. She was stiff.

"Where're your arms?" He hadn't noticed the sleeves were empty when he found her or wrapped the blanket around her. Then he realized where they were. "Inside your coat, that's brilliant. But here, let's poke them back into the sleeves. I need you to hold on to me if you can when we ascend."

He helped her to her feet and then helped her walk to where the rope dangled. She was wobbly on her feet and very stiff. He wrapped the blanket around her and sat her beside him as he wrapped and looped the end of the rope, creating a harness. He wrapped it around himself just so, around one leg, looped over the opposite shoulder, back around his waist, through his legs again and up over the other shoulder. He tied it off. "Weight check on me alone," he transmitted. His gaze flickered to the top of the hole. There were no longer any flashlight beams pointed downward. There was only one lying beside the rope. Then he sat back on the harness with his full weight.

"Successful test," Jackson's voice replied. "Good to go with her weight."

Wilson then helped her to her feet and maneuvered her, so she faced him and then he fed her legs over his and over the top of the ropes so she straddled him and laid on him, her head on his shoulder, her arms around his neck. "I need you to try to hold on, Rae," he said. The blanket around her shouldn't interfere with her holding on.

“I will,” she said, her voice still sounding hoarse.

“Added weight test successful. Start your climb, nice and slow,” Jackson’s voice said.

“Roger that,” Wilson advised. He reported each step he took and gave them verbal direction on the speed with which they took up the rope every step of the way, be it just right, too slow, or too fast.

When he neared the top of the hole, he felt relief. His muscles were screaming in fatigue. Where the rope was wrapped around him, even through his coat and clothing, his skin felt seared from the friction of the rope digging into his body.

“I see your head, Taco, nice and slow as you transfer your foot hold from vertical to horizontal,” Sherman, who was man number one on the rope, counseled.

“Okay, ready to transfer direction. Give me one good pull on three,” Wilson said. Then he counted. “One, two, three, now!”

He’d been teetering on the edge, one foot vertical, one on the horizontal ground, his weight leaning over the hole. The extra little pull propelled him the rest of the way up. He transferred his weight and Rae’s forward and then stumbled a step or two before he got both feet beneath him on the solid ground. Successful and a few steps forward of the hole, he dropped to his knees. By the time he lowered her to the ground in front of him, the team had rushed forward.

“Get her into the car where it’s warm,” Wilson said with a ragged, breathless voice. “Undertaker, she’s probably going to need fluids. There was nothing down there, no bottles or food wrappers.”

Jackson scooped her up, and he rushed her to the backseat of the car. He laid her on the seat and then Sloan crowded in. Jackson went to the front seat and started the car,

turning the heat to hot and the fan on high. Meanwhile, Sherman helped free Wilson from the mock harness he'd crafted.

By the time Wilson got to the car, entering on the opposite side of Sloan, the inside felt toasty. Sloan had a second blanket around her. Wilson slid her upright slightly, resting her head and shoulders across his thighs. "Rae, I'm not sure if you remember Sloan. He was on the plane back from Norfolk. He's a team medic." Then he turned his attention to Sloan. "She's freezing and her voice was hoarse. I gave her some water."

Reina stared at the man, vaguely remembering him. He'd checked her shoulder on the plane and gave her a couple pain pills to swallow.

"Hi Rae," Sloan said. "How do you feel?"

"Not sure," her voice squeaked. "Better now that I'm up here."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“You have to feel pretty weak,” Sloan said.

She nodded that was the case. Wilson offered her more water. She finished the bottle before she spoke again. “Lilly’s at a farmhouse. I might be able to get you there from the interstate.”

“The white farmhouse in the middle of nowhere where you were kept and drew the picture of the carousel?” Wilson asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Been there. They moved her,” Wilson said.

“I’m sure you’re dehydrated and hypothermic,” Sloan said. “We need to get you to the hospital.”

“No hospital,” Reina argued. “We have to find Lilly.”

“We’ll find her,” Wilson assured her. “Sloan, can’t you give her fluids? I know you carry them.”

“She needs the fluids heated. Her body temp is already too low, and the fluids will make her colder,” Sloan said. “And they can wrap her in heated blankets at the hospital. Her heart needs to be monitored, and bloodwork needs to be done to assess her organs like her kidneys, liver, and pancreas.”

“No hospital,” Reina repeated more forcefully.

“Rae, you’ve been exposed to the cold for at least two days and are severely dehydrated. You need to be observed for the next twelve to twenty-four hours,” Sloan said.

“No hospital,” she repeated for a third time.

“Can’t you observe her while you give her fluids and warm her, Sloan?” Wilson pressed. “I can take a shift watching her too.”

Sloan shook his head. “Yeah, maybe. Rae, do you have any heart history, any known issues with any of your organs?”

She shook her head.

“Okay, we’ll give it a try but if at any point I really think you need to go to the hospital I won’t take no for an answer,” Sloan said. He’d run a few checks of her vitals. Her blood pressure was low, which was expected. Other than that, her heart sounded strong, and he didn’t detect any breathing issues.

“Thank you,” Wilson said, a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m serious, if there are any indicators she isn’t bouncing back fast enough or if she’s tanking, she goes to the hospital,” he said firmly.

Sherman and Jackson entered the car with their gear. “I notified Lambchop and Ops that we found her,” Jackson said. He sat behind the wheel. “Where to?”

“Where’s Lambchop and Mother at with Van Sloot?” Wilson asked.

“About to hand him over to authorities. Lambchop says he’s been quite talkative,” Jackson said. “Even gave them the deets on a second car Blake Henning and Stella

Adams left in with Lilly. He claims they're headed to the Chicago area for a few days and then are supposed to be back out at that farmhouse. There's already an APB on it from here to Chicago. The Digital Team is already working the traffic cameras along the route."

Reina listened to the man in the front seat, struggling to stay awake. "Blake pushed me into that hole," she said. "There was another man there. He hit me in the head with something, a gun I think."

"Where was Stella during this? That's Ashley Carona's real name, Stella Adams," Wilson said.

"Yeah, she's not a nice person, a criminal from the sounds of it," Rae said. "She wasn't there. She left Lilly alone locked in a room with that second man guarding her, scum bag."

"Stella or that man?" Sloan asked.

"Both," Reina said. "Lilly is going to be scarred from this experience. I don't know how that woman could do this to any child."

She felt Jimmy's caress over her face again. His touch was comforting. The car was warm, and she already felt warmer than she had in a couple of days. But she was exhausted. All she wanted to do was go to sleep. At some point as they drove, she let go and allowed herself to drift into a deep slumber.

Sierra

Reina came awake with a start at the sensation of being lifted and cold air stinging her cheek.

“Easy, we’re at the hotel,” Wilson said when he felt her flinch in his arms.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

“I can walk,” she said, really not sure if she could.

“I’ve got you,” Wilson said.

Jackson unlocked the door to the two-bedroom suite, holding it open for Wilson to bring her in. Sloan went ahead of them, into the king bedroom, and he pulled the bedcovers back. Wilson followed him in and laid her on the bed, blankets, coat, and all. Then he covered her with the bedcovers.

Reina instantly felt comfortable with her head on the stack of pillows and the mattress below her.

Sloan opened his medical backpack and pulled supplies out. He’d used a wrist cuff to check her blood pressure in the car. He’d use a standard arm cuff now. “I hate to do this, but I need to pull one of your arms out to check your vitals. It’ll be for just a few minutes.”

He reached under the covers and brought out her arm that was closest to him, her left arm. He reran all vitals. Her blood pressure was still low, but not dangerously low. Her oxygen sats were still low as well. But her heart rate and pulse had come up and were closer to the normal range. And of course, her core body temperature had risen and would continue to increase as they warmed her.

“Rae, I want you to take a few really deep breaths. Try to completely fill your lungs,” Sloan said. He watched her do as he’d said. “Yes, like that. I want you to take at least two really deep breaths like that every minute. Your O-two sats are low, but we can get them up pretty quick with deep breathing.”

“You need anything?” Jackson asked Sloan. He and Sherman stood in the doorway.

“Yeah, there’s that Chinese takeout up the road. We all need to eat, but she’ll need warm fluids. Get her a large wonton soup and make sure there’s white and fried rice and some noodles with mildly flavored chicken in the order. That’ll be good for her stomach as well,” Sloan said. Then his gaze shifted to Wilson. “Get a cup of hot water for her to start with.”

Jackson and Sherman left to get the Chinese. Wilson went to the kitchen to get the cup of hot water for her to sip on. Sloan got out the supplies to start an IV to get her fluids. He had a hard time finding a good vein as expected due to the fact that she was both dehydrated and she’d been in the cold for so long. The last thing he wanted to do was put her through multiple needle sticks to find a vein. After cracking a heat pack to activate it, he laid it on her arm where several good veins should be. They showed themselves to him after several minutes and the heat doing its thing on her arm. He easily inserted the canula to deliver the fluids.

Wilson returned to the room as Sloan was taping the tubing in place. “That was fast,” he said, setting the mug onto the nightstand beside Rae.

“I know you want to go back to sleep, but you need to drink that cup of water before you do and when the food gets here, I’ll wake you to eat,” Sloan told her. “And I’ll be checking your vitals every thirty minutes or so until they’re all in the normal range.”

Wilson laid his hand on Sloan’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Let me take a look at your head and which side did you say your shoulder and hip hurt?” Sloan asked.

“Right,” she said. “Though neither hurt that bad now.”

Sloan rolled her so he could examine the wound on her head. It was borderline if stitches were needed or not. Since so much time had passed since the injury occurred, he opted to clean it and apply antibiotic ointment to it. He'd evaluate it again in a few hours to see if stitches were really necessary. He didn't want to put her through it if he didn't have to. Then he checked the right shoulder, palpating it and then moving the arm around. She experienced only mild discomfort, as he did. The same for the hip.

"I think you sustained only minor injuries to the shoulder and hip when you landed on them, like deep bruising. Let me know if the pain increases at all at any point."

"I will," she promised.

Sloan nodded and then walked towards the door. "I need to call Kaylee. I'll be back in a few."

Wilson sat on the edge of the bed, filling the spot vacated by Sloan. He lifted the mug to her lips. "It shouldn't be too hot to drink."

Reina had never drunk just plain hot water, but it felt amazing going down her throat. "How did you find me?" she asked after she emptied the cup.

"It took a few days to track that black SUV and for our team to hack into its SatNav system. We located its exact location at that farmhouse earlier this evening. Blake Henning and Stella Adams weren't there, had taken Lilly. But another man was there, Eddie Van Sloot, and with a little intimidation, he told us where Henning had taken you."

"Intimidation?" she asked with a small smile.

Wilson smiled. "Okay, maybe the threat of grievous bodily harm."

Reina laughed softly. “If you hurt him, I’m okay with that. Did he tell you where they took Lilly? She’s still in a lot of danger. In my past life, I’d been around some pretty bad people who you knew were bad. But Blake is different. He’s pure evil, dressed up to look normal.”

Wilson would take her word for it. “He said he didn’t know exactly where, but he gave us the info on the vehicle they’re driving.”

“The beige Volvo?” she asked. That was the car that she had been put into its trunk.

“Yes,” he said. “He said they were heading to the Chicago area for a few days before they’ll return to that farmhouse. We have an APB out on the car, and our Digital Team will be looking for it on cameras on every possible route to Chicago and back again. There will also be a couple of Marshals waiting at the farmhouse for them in case they do return. We’re doing everything we can to find them. But all you need to focus on now is rest and recovery. You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’ll be fine,” she insisted.

“Yeah, I know you will be,” he said. “You’re a survivor, Rae.” At his prompting, she drank the rest of the hot water before Sloan re-entered the room to check on her. He rechecked her vital signs and was happy to see the numbers trending better.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:16 am*

Reina fought to keep her eyes open as she listened to the two men talk. She was exhausted. At some point, she fell back asleep and was woken by Jimmy gently shaking her and talking to her sometime later. She woke disoriented but warm. It didn't take long for her to remember where she was and why. And she smelled the incredible and unmistakable aroma of Chinese food.

"That smells good," she said to Jimmy. He sat beside her. Had he stayed with her the entire time she was asleep? The thought he had brought a smile to her face.

"It just got here. Sloan wants you to start with some soup. He's getting it for you now," Wilson said. "Let me help you sit up more." He positioned the pillows behind her to prop her up.

"I'm actually hot now." She looked down at her chest to see her coat was still on, as well as the silver emergency blanket. "Can you help me get my coat off?"

"That's good. Yes, let's get it off you." Wilson pulled the bedcovers back. He gently pulled the mylar emergency blanket off of her and from under her. He unbuttoned her coat. He helped her slide it off the arm without the IV and he helped to pull it from under and behind her. He slid the coat up the tubing and hung it on the hook Sloan had inserted behind the headboard to hold the bag of fluids. "Can I help take your shoes off so you're more comfortable?"

Potential embarrassment hit Reina. "No, they're fine. And I'm sure my feet stink. My shoes haven't been off the whole time since. What day is it?"

"It's Wednesday night, Rae," Wilson said. He watched tears fill her eyes. He sat

beside her again and covered her hand with his. “It’s okay. Losing track of time in situations like the one you were in is common.”

She turned her hand over, grasping his hand, and stared at their joined hands as she tried to collect her dismayed thoughts and breathed deeply to calm herself.

Sloan entered the room, carrying a steaming mug. He saw the tears in her eyes and their joined hands. “Okay, I’ve got some good and hot wonton soup for you.” He came up beside them. “You already look better,” he said to her. “After you have the soup, I’ll recheck your vitals. It’s good to see you doing your deep breathing. That’s going to bring your O-two sats up.” He handed the mug with the soup in it to Wilson. “What do you want? I’ll bring you a plate so you can eat in here with her.”

“I’ll wait till she moves on to the rice or noodle course and get it then,” he said. “I smell something spicy. Just make sure some is saved for me.”

Sloan glanced back at Rae, who was blinking rapidly to clear the tears. “If you want to talk to someone about what you just went through, let Wilson know. We have a team shrink and he can request a video call with him for you. He’s really good to talk with after traumatic situations. He has a lot of great coping techniques.”

Reina stared at him shocked he was suggesting it. Then she recovered her game face and said, “Thanks, I’ll let him know.”

Sloan pointed at her soup. “Eat up.” Then he left the room.

Wilson couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought about Lassiter and suggesting a call for her with him. Sloan was right. Lassiter could help her. He handed her the mug. “His name is Joe Lassiter and Sloan’s right. He’s very helpful. Let me know if you want to talk to him.”

She nodded and took a sip of the hot soup. It tasted amazing. She drained the cup and ate the wonton.

Wilson took the mug. He stood. "I'll get your next course. Be right back."

The food cartons were lined up on the little countertop in the kitchen area of the room. The five other team members sat at the table and on the couches and chairs in the main room. "What's her next course, Sloan?"

"Get her some white rice and some of the chicken in lo mein noodles. That'll be easy on her stomach."

Sherman made her a plate and then grabbed an empty plate for himself. The Mongolian Beef was empty. "Motherfuckers!" He lifted the empty container into the air. "You didn't save me any?"

The others laughed at him. "Check the microwave," Lambchop called across the room to him.

Wilson opened the microwave to find a plate piled high with some of every dish that was on the counter, including a generous serving of the Mongolian Beef.

"Sloan was the perfect little wifey, making you a plate," Lambchop said with a laugh.

Wilson laughed. "Thank God he did, you ass holes wouldn't have left me any."

Sloan got out of his seat and went into the kitchen. "How's she doing, mentally? Has she talked to you?"

Wilson shook his head.

“Don’t let her stay in her own head for too long,” Sloan said. “And encourage that call with Lassiter. You know as well as I do that she’s going to have PTSD after what she went through.”

Wilson hadn’t considered it yet. First, he wanted to be sure that medically she was okay. “Yeah,” he agreed. He carried the two plates back to the bedroom.

They both devoured all the food on their plates.

She glanced up at the bag that still had a lot of fluid left in it. “How much longer do you think this has?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe a half hour. Why?”



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“I have to use the bathroom,” she said. “I’m feeling better, and I drank a lot. Can’t we take it out?”

“Let me get Sloan.”

Wilson went to the door and summoned Sloan. Sloan checked her vitals, happy they all looked better. “Can you hold it for like fifteen minutes?” he asked. After she nodded that she could, he opened the valve, allowing a faster drip. “There. It’ll be done in about fifteen minutes. Then I can take it out. I want you to get the full bag.”

Sloan returned in fifteen minutes. The bag had emptied into her vein. She watched him gently remove the canula from her arm. He wrapped compression tape over a piece of gauze around her arm. Then he pulled the bedcovers back. “Let me make sure you don’t get dizzy or anything as you get up.”

Wilson stood back, watching and appreciating Sloan’s care of her. Since Kaylee had come into his life, Sloan had become a different person that showed even when he was caring for a patient, in this case, a female patient. “You’re going to make a good dad,” Wilson said to Sloan as they stood waiting for her outside the bathroom door that was within the king room. There was a second bathroom off the double queen room as well.

Sloan laughed. “Words I never thought I’d hear,” he said. “Sherman’s a hell of a dad. Now that’s something I still don’t believe. He does this horse whisperer thing with Bastian, get’s the little guy to settle down and stop crying, just by hearing Sherman’s voice. Or who knows, maybe it’s how he holds him.”

Wilson hadn't really talked with Sloan about his wife's pregnancy or the fact they were having twins. "Twins, now that would scare the shit out of me."

Sloan laughed again. "Just knowing I was going to be a dad scared the shit out of me. I'd rather do a lot of the dangerous shit we do than know a tiny, little, completely dependent human is reliant on me. But the fact is, moms do the majority of the work. And my job will be to do whatever I have to do to help Kaylee and make her job easier. As Sherman put it, I have to do everything I can do to help, including getting up every time that baby wakes up in the middle of the night, changing his diaper, and bringing him to momma to be fed. It would be easy to lie in bed, knowing she has to feed him if she's nursing and she's off work for a few months, anyway. Why should I get up? Because it helps her and that's my job. It's going to be harder on her with twins, so I'll have to work harder to help her."

Wilson was impressed with Sloan. And given that Sloan was giving Sherman the credit for the approach, he was also impressed with Sherman.

Inside the bathroom, Reina heard the majority of the men's conversation. But she was distracted by the feeling of cold that was creeping back into her. She turned the water faucet to hot to wash her hands, also wanting to splash water on her face. It took a long time to heat up, but once it did, it felt wonderful on her hands and on her face. A hot shower would feel amazing. Later.

She opened the door to find both men still on the other side of it. "I'm fine," she assured them. She refused help and shuffled backover to the bed. She was practically shivering again as she pulled the bedcovers over herself.

"Rae, are you okay?" Wilson asked.

"Just cold again," she said, rubbing her hands together.

“Yeah, that can happen,” Sloan said. “Your core temp hasn’t reached normal yet, I’m sure, and you left the warmth of the blankets. I’ll get you some more hot liquid to drink. That’ll help.” He left the room as Wilson tucked the covers in around her.

“I really do feel much better,” she insisted. “The soup and food, and I’m sure the IV really helped.”

Wilson leaned in and kissed her forehead. “I’m glad. I’m going to leave you to go back to sleep now. That’ll help you too. I’ll just be out in the main room with the others and I’m sure Sloan will come in to check on you.”

Tango

Reina came awake feeling nearly normal. She was warm, felt rested, and alert. The dim light was on across the room beside a chair where she saw Jimmy sat. His eyes were on the screen of his phone. She couldn’t help herself but take a moment to study his face and his solid form. She’d always thought he was attractive, and right now, he was even more attractive to her than ever.

“You’re awake. I’m sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“No,” she answered. She noticed how quiet it was. “What time is it? Is everyone else asleep?”

He rose from the chair and crossed over to the bed, retaking his seat on the edge of the bed beside her. “It’s early, nearly three. About an hour ago, our digital team found the beige Volvo. The team went to intercept.”

Excitement at the news skittered through her. “Really?”

“And don’t worry. They know Lilly is probably with them. They’ll do everything

they can to protect her from seeing anything she shouldn't. And they'll take care so that she doesn't get hurt."

Reina nodded, nervous energy flowing through her. "So, this could really be over very soon."

"I hope so," Wilson said.

Reina sat up. She adjusted the pillows against the headboard so they would bolster her to sit comfortably. "How long did I sleep? I feel well rested."

"That's good to hear. You look much better, too."

"Do you know if my phone was recovered? I'd like it back."

"Yeah, we have it. The car accident scene was our first stop when we got into town. The state trooper who was the first on the scene had it."

This was great news. "Well, can I have it?"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Reina, you shouldn’t call or text anyone yet,” he said.

“If you have my phone, then you know that you’re pretty much the only person I regularly call or text. I was told to lie low by the Marshals and that’s what I’ve done.”

“Then why do you need your phone?”

“It would be nice just to be able to see the time or scroll news groups, play some games, or listen to music,” she said, feeling annoyed she had to justify why she wanted her phone.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Of course, it would and to just feel normal again. Yeah, I’ll get it for you. Are you hungry? There’s left over Chinese in the fridge. I could get you a plate.”

“No, but I’d really love to take a shower and maybe change my clothes if anyone has anything that would fit me.”

“I’m sure that’d be fine, though you should probably not get your head wet where you were hit.”

She nodded. “And I’d love to brush my teeth.”

“You can use my toothbrush if you’d like. I doubt anyone has an extra,” he offered.

He got himself a plate of fried rice while she was in the bathroom. He insisted she leave the door cracked open. Every few minutes he’d yell in, asking if she was okay

even though she guaranteed him she didn't feel dizzy at all. He was worried she'd suddenly feel lightheaded and fall. He also got her a pair of his flannel sweatpants with a drawstring closure, his favorite long sleeved black compression base layer shirt, and a pair of thermal socks. That'd keep her warm.

She came out of the bathroom dressed in his clothing; a towel wrapped around her hair. She was rubbing her hands together. "Damn, am I ever going to stop feeling so cold?" she asked as she padded back over to the bed. She flattened the pillows and crawled back into bed, lying on her side and pulling her legs up tightly to her abdomen.

"Here, let me help to warm you," Wilson said, immediately crowding in beside her and pulling the bedcovers over them both. He took her into his arms and held her close. She straightened her legs and pulled her body flush up against his. Satisfaction rolled through him, knowing that his body heat would help warm her. "Body heat," he added with a smile.

She laid her head on the pillow, her eyes gazing into his, which hovered over her. She instantly felt his body heat. She watched him shuffle a bit, readjusting his position so that his head was on the pillow beside hers and she found herself gazing into his beautiful blue eyes.

"I could get used to this," she said with a small smile.

When she rested her hand on his chest, the sensation of her touch shot straight to his cock. He kissed her forehead and then the tip of her nose, wanting to kiss so much more of her, but knowing this wasn't the time for it, not after what she'd just been through. And he didn't want her to think she owed him anything. What Garcia had previously said came back to him. Rae needed to know that he didn't expect her to spread her legs for him as payment for anything he did, including rescuing her.

Her whole body buzzed with the sensation of his body against hers, of his arms around her, holding her close, of his lips on her skin. She yearned to feel those lips on hers.

Wilson allowed his hand, holding her back, to stroke over it softly. He took in the incredible sensation of holding her in his arms, the length of his body pressed to hers. He liked how she melted into him, accepting his comfort. He gazed into her eyes, lit with life and adoration for him in her return stare.

His hand drifted up her arm, over her shoulder, and up her neck. He caressed softly over her cheek, his fingers lingering on her neck. He enjoyed the softness of her skin, craved the closeness to her, wanted more, a lot more.

The sensation of his touch was electric. “I like it when you do that,” she said. His thumb brushed over her lower lip, and she trembled. She exhaled hard, wanting it to be his lips. She ran her hand over his hard chest and up to his shoulder, unaware that instinctively she pulled her body closer to his.

“I was so worried about you the entire time,” he said in a whisper. He pressed a soft kiss to her lips and then pulled less than half an inch away. “I would have moved heaven and earth to find you.” He pressed a second kiss to her lips, which lasted longer. When he spoke again, his lips were still against hers. “I promised myself I’d tell you how I feel about you when we found you.”

Reina not only heard his words, but she felt them, his lips on hers as he spoke. She was frozen in the incredible moment.

His next kiss was a slightly opened mouth kiss. As she opened her mouth to him, he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, earning him an erotic moan from her and her hand on his shoulder gripped it harder. He rolled atop her, both hands grasping the sides of her face, and he kissed her more deeply than he’d ever kissed anyone. He

was completely in the moment. No other thoughts but enjoying this perfect kiss entered his mind.

Reina, at that moment, was just Rae again. The constant reminding herself what her new identity was evaporated. All that mattered was the kiss, the all-consuming kiss. An inferno raged inside her, a desire, a need for this man, something she'd never felt. She'd been with a lot of men, a lot, but no kiss had ever felt like this before. The weight of his body on hers was exciting. She wanted him to make love to her because she knew it would be an emotional coupling as well as a physical one. He would make love to her. He wouldn't have sex with her. He wouldn't fuck her.

She was confused when, after several wonderful minutes, he pulled away and hovered his head over hers. She could feel his breath blow over her lips. His lips were still close. Her eyes fluttered open when his lips hadn't returned to hers after a few seconds.

"That felt just like I thought it would," he said quietly. "Rae, I've known for some time that I've had feelings for you beyond friendship. You're important to me. I can't imagine my life without you in it. That became clear when you were taken. I was worried about you and would have moved heaven and earth to find you because if you'd never been found or if, God forbid, you'd been killed, I'd be a mess without you. And I didn't realize it until you'd been taken."

She reached her lips back to him and initiated an open mouth kiss that communicated her feelings in return. Her kisses were given freely with fervor, her entire focus on tasting him, her mouth becoming one with his in preparation for her body to be completely open to him.

After several more really active minutes of kissing and caressing each other, he pulled away again. "Not here, not now, but soon."



“Why?” she gasped.

“The team will be back soon.” He kissed her forehead. “Besides, I want to do this right with you, Rae.”

“What does that mean?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“I’ve been with women just to be with them. I haven’t had an actual relationship in more years than I can remember. Work gets in the way of relationships. And that’s what I want with you Rae, a relationship, not just incredible nights in bed, which there is no doubt in my mind they will be incredible nights.”

She returned his erotic grin. She also had no doubt they’d be incredible.

“There are things about me and my job you need to know if you’re going to be in my life and it wouldn’t be fair to you for you not to know what you’re getting into. That’s a discussion for another time. And you’ve been through a lot the last few days. You need to heal from that first.”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he offered.

“No, I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to think about it. I want to forget every second of it, but I know I won’t ever be able to.” She couldn’t and didn’t want to vocalize the despair she’d felt, truly believing she was going to die in that hole. And even though Jimmy had found her, and she was safe now, she was still so worried about Lilly. Was she okay? And how afraid was she? Did she know that man had left her out there to die? Little girls shouldn’t have to have that knowledge ever.

“Maybe in a few days you’ll be ready to talk about it,” he said. “And when you are, if you don’t want to talk to me, I’ll get you an appointment with our team shrink. He’s a trauma counselor and a damn good one.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” she said.

He kissed her forehead again and then laid his head back on the pillow. “Have you warmed up?”

She flashed him a coy grin. “If I say yes, are you going to get up?”

Wilson chuckled. “No, I’m staying right here with you until you get up.”

“In that case, I might not ever,” she said.

He laughed and then turned more serious. “Really, have you warmed up?”

“Yes, thank you for sharing your body, I mean, um, your body heat.”

The towel had loosened on her head and several wet strands of hair had escaped. He brushed them back from her face. “Sloan isn’t going to be very happy you got your head wet.”

“The hot water pouring over my head felt so good,” she said. “Hopefully, I didn’t fuck up the wound too badly.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. He’ll want to get more antibiotic ointment on it.”

She shrugged. “That’s fine. I really do feel better and am tired of being anyone’s patient.”

“I vaguely remember that same attitude after the gunshot to your shoulder,” he said. “I remember thinking this is one tough chick.”

“And you were there with me on the plane after that, too. I think we need to change

the dynamics of our relationship. I can't keep getting injured around you and your team," she said with a laugh. "No matter how much I like being with you."

"Are you saying you don't want to see me or have a relationship?" he asked, not understanding her statement. She hadn't said anything about how she felt about him in return after he'd told her.

"Oh, God, no, that's not what I meant. I meant that I have to stop getting injured when I'm around you, that's all. And around you is where I want to be." She paused for a moment and gazed into his eyes. "Jimmy, I'm not good at relationships and I'm even worse at saying how I feel. That's what you need to know about me. I'll try. That's all I can promise."

He pressed another soft kiss on her lips. "I'll hold you to it, trying, that is."

## Uniform

Lambchop got Ops on the line as the team, minus Wilson, neared the location of the beige Volvo that the Digital Team had tracked to a neighborhood in an older section of Des Moines. Then he said his short pre-mission prayer. The two cars circled through the dark, residential streets and easily found the target car. It was parked in front of a small one-bedroom ranch home. It was zero two-thirty, and it had just begun to snow. All the other homes on the street were dark. The target house had lights on in the front room that flooded out into the night through the gaps in the curtains.

The team separated into two groups. Lambchop and Mother approached the front with a gooseneck surveillance camera. They'd use it to look through the gaps to see who if anyone was in the front room. Jackson circled around the house to the left, Sloan and Sherman to the right. They had two more of the small camera-head surveillance cameras. They'd try to get a look into any windows and locate the people

in the house.

“If we can get eyes on the child sleeping alone in a bedroom, we get her out before we take down Adams and Henning,” Lambchop said as he laid his hand on the hood of the Volvo. It was cold.

“Roger that,” Jackson replied. “Preferably, we can move her without her waking.” As he was the father of two, he was quite adept at doing this.

“Yeah, she’s been kept locked in a room alone for a few days. She’s going to be traumatized enough. We don’t need to add to it,” Sherman agreed.

At the front window, the tip of the camera was lifted to just over the window frame at the gap in the middle of the curtains. Lambchop slowly rotated it, sweeping the view from right to left. Nearby, Mother manned the small monitor that showed him the interior of the house.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Back a hair,” Mother whispered to Lambchop. “Yes there. Stop.” He scrutinized the display. Standing in an archway that led to what looked to be a hallway was Stella Adams. He was sure it was her. “Got target Adams in the room. Now continue to the right.”

There were no windows along the left side of the house but the window on the back at the left corner of the house had blinds that were closed, all but one on the bottom right corner that was broken and hanging just enough that the camera showed the interior of the room. Jackson switched it to night vision and then raised the camera head in front of the opening created from the broken blind. He swiveled it slowly, his eyes focused on the screen of the small monitor.

He made out the unmistakable outline of a small dark-haired body in a bed. His or her face was covered with a blanket. There was no way to be sure it was Lilly. He swung the camera to take a good look at the room. Rae had said Lilly had a purple jacket. There was a child sized jacket, and a small backpack tossed across the foot of the bed. With the night vision mode on, he couldn't make out colors. He'd have to make the determination if it was her coat when he was in the room.

“I've got a dark-haired child sleeping in the back left bedroom. Door is closed. I'm going to enter and try to confirm its Lilly before I extract her,” he whispered into his comms.

“Just extract, repeat, just take the child. We have target Adams in the front room. Notify when you're clear,” Lambchop broadcast.

“Roger,” Jackson acknowledged. He examined the window and pushed up on the

bottom section of it. It was locked. But it was an old-style lock, one swivel mechanism in the center of the window. He attached a suction cup circular cutting tool near the lock. It was a quick and quiet device to cut a hole in the window so he could slip his hand in and unlock the window. From there, he could lift the bottom pane.

On the right side of the house, Sloan and Sherman checked each of the two rooms, another bedroom that was empty, and a bathroom. A small rectangular window ran across the top of the shower. Their gooseneck camera caught Blake Henning across the room taking a piss in the toilet. They reported his location and activity through comms to the others.

Lambchop wished Jackson already had Lilly out. “Undertaker, cover the back door. No one gets past you. Birdman, report back to me and mother in the front. You’ll go in with us when we breach.”

“Roger that, Lambchop,” Sloan acknowledged. Sherman headed back around the side of the house towards the front.

“Going into the bedroom now,” Jackson transmitted after he’d cut the hole, unlocked the window, and slid the bottom pane of glass up.

He crawled through the window, pushing the blinds gently and quietly into the room as he rounded the window sill. He dropped soundlessly onto the carpeted floor feet first. Then he crept over to the bed. First, with a dim penlight flashlight in his hand, he examined the small purple jacket and fully packed and zipped backpack with the Disney Princesses on it. This had to be Lilly.

He put the coat and jacket on a table beside the window. He noticed a Disney Princess throw blanket covered the little girl in the bed. He wrapped it around her as he scooped her up. A small stuffed animal fell to the floor as he stepped from the bed.

He retrieved it. At the window, he pulled the blinds aside. The movement startled the little girl awake.

“Shh, Lilly, I’m a friend of Miss Reina. We’re here to get you and your mommy away from that bad man. Please stay quiet.”

In the moonlight coming through the window, he saw her eyes go wide, but she nodded and dropped her face back against his shoulder. He grabbed her backpack and coat and climbed back out the window. Only when both feet were back on the ground did he transmit that he had her out and was proceeding to the car with her.

There was a second woman in the living room with Stella Adams. No one else was seen by any of the men but they couldn’t get a look inside the kitchen, where lights were also on but there were no gaps in the window coverings to see in.

The camera they had to view in the room showed Blake Henning re-enter the room and take a seat on the couch. He was repacking a duffel bag. “Okay, we go in fast, standard formation,” Lambchop transmitted once Jackson had transmitted that he was back at the car. “I’ll kick in the door. We announce ourselves as federal law enforcement and each take one.”

“You wearing your body armor?” Tommy ‘Louisa’ Flores, Bravo Team’s lead who was on in Ops, asked.

“Affirm, Louisa,” Lambchop replied. “And carrying sidearms only. Okay, on me,” Lambchop said. He set the camera onto the ground and then crept up to the front door. Mother was right behind him, his hand on Lambchop’s shoulder. Sherman was behind him.

As a matter of habit, Lambchop tried the door, surprised to find it unlocked. He immediately opened it and threw it wide, rushing in, his weapon leading the way.



“Federal Law Enforcement! Hands up and don’t move!”

“Get ‘em up!” Mother echoed entering the room and going straight for Henning who had just hopped up from the couch.

“Freeze! Get your hands up!” Sherman yelled at Stella Adams who bolted into the hallway. She didn’t stop. He took off after her.

Henning ran towards Mother, banking on the fact that he was law enforcement so he wouldn’t shoot. He dove at Mother, intending to tackle him but Mother, a highly trained Marine Raider, deflected his tackle and helped him faceplant into the hard wood floor faster. Then he was on him, his knee pressing down hard on the center of his back.

The second woman was the only one of the three who froze and raised her hands as instructed. Lambchop holstered his weapon and was just beginning to secure her hands in zip ties when the door on the far wall flew open. A man wielding a shotgun stepped into the room.

“Gun! Get down,” Lambchop yelled. He pushed the woman to the floor and covered her with his own body as he drew his weapon and the shotgun was fired.

Sherman caught up with Stella Adams at the door to the bedroom Lilly had been in. He body checked her into the wall. “She’s not there. We got her out,” he told Stella.

Then the loud bang from the shotgun got everyone’s attention. The wall behind where Lambchop stood before dropping to the ground was now peppered with buckshot. When Mother had dropped to his belly, his grip on Henning was loosened. Henning sprung up and grabbed the man with the shotgun, who’d come up from the basement, and used his body as a shield. He pressed the barrel of a pistol into his neck.

“Drop the guns or I shoot,” he threatened.

Both Mother and Lambchop stood, their weapons trained on Henning. “Not happening, Henning. It’s over. Drop it!” Lambchop instructed. The other woman ran from the room and into the hallway.

Sherman and Stella could hear all that transpired in the living room. “Keep Lilly safe,” Stella said.

Then the other woman hit Sherman on the head with a pistol she produced from an ankle holster. Sherman collapsed to the floor. She handed the weapon to Stella. Stella grabbed her backpack from the hallway, slipped it on, and then pressed the gun under the other woman’s chin. They stepped back into the living room together.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“We’re walking out of here,” Henning said.

“Not happening,” Lambchop again said. His gaze darted to the hallway. He knew that something had happened to Sherman. “Undertaker, make entry. The Birdman is down.”

Just then, Henning and Adams, shifted position, threw the two others right at Mother and Lambchop, who gladly propelled themselves to crash right into the two law men. Henning and Adams darted into the stairwell, closing, locking and bolting the door shut.

The two men pushed the willing human shields off of themselves and ran to the door, finding it securely locked. The two human shields bolted out of the front door.

“Lambchop!” Mother alerted seeing them escape.

“Fuck!” Lambchop exclaimed. “This door is massively reinforced.” He knew they couldn’t go after those two, cover the outside escape windows, and cover the door. “Undertaker, did you find the Birdman?”

“Affirm, he was struck on the head. Is out cold.”

“Drag him here into the front room to treat him so you can cover this basement door,” Lambchop ordered.

“I have alerted the local LEOs,” Flores transmitted. “They’re coming without lights and sirens, are aware of activity by ATF.”

“Thank you, Louisa,” Lambchop replied. Even with the backup he was sure at least two of the four would get away. He’d do all he could to be sure it wasn’t four out of four.

As soon as Sloan appeared in the archway, Lambchop and Mother ran out the front door. They split and circled in opposite directions around the house. Neither window well had been disturbed. The basement was locked up tight. They held their vigils by each window well until the local LEOs arrived, six of them. By this time, Sherman was conscious. He had a hell of a bump on his head but swore he felt fine. Lambchop ordered him to wait in the car with Jackson and the little girl.

As soon as the backup arrived, Lambchop, Mother, and Sloan broke through the door in the front room. It had stairs that led down to the basement. Lambchop led the way down the well-lit stairs to the equally well-lit basement. “The house is surrounded! It’s over. We’re coming down and we will fire if we are fired upon,” Lambchop warned.

At the bottom of the stairs, the three men thrust themselves out into the open basement, each training their weapon in a different direction. No one was there. There were several work tables and computers set up with various other pieces of equipment. They ignored the tables for now.

On the north wall was a closed door. They advanced on it. Lambchop yelled his warning at it. A split second later, he kicked it. The door jamb splintered, and the door banged open. The men rushed inside the room to find a hole made in the foundation and a tunnel being eaten up by the darkness.

“Holy shit,” Mother remarked.

“Who the fuck has a tunnel in their basement?” Sloan asked.

“Someone guilty of something they may need to escape from,” Lambchop replied. “Sloan, yell up to the officers and tell them what we found and then follow Mother and me down this tunnel. I’m sure those two are long gone but we need to see where this comes out.”

They followed the tunnel. It ended about eighty yards in, with a ladder leading up. Climbing the ladder, they emerged from the storage shed at the back of the property, the door to the back open. The sides of the shed were shrouded with bushes so the getaway was hidden from the view from the house. They looked around but as expected, saw no one. All they did find was the unmistakable outline of a vehicle that had no snow in it that had been parked behind the shed. Its tire tracks led away down the street that ran behind the target house in the direction they’d driven when fleeing.

They ran back to the house and descended the stairs to the basement. The local LEOs were already inspecting the equipment on the work tables. “Looks like a facility to process stolen IDs and credit cards and to create false identities,” one of the officers said. “We’ve already called it in. A detective is en route.”

The Shepherd Security Team looked over the equipment as well. “Fucking hell. Now we don’t even know what names they’re going by or what they’re driving,” Sloan said.

Lambchop had Sherman return to the house to give his statement. Then he returned to the vehicle that Jackson waited in with Lilly. They didn’t mention Jackson or Lilly to the local police. They drove back to the hotel. The three other members of the team waited for the detective and did a quick turnover of the scene when he arrived.

Victor

Jackson notified Wilson when they arrived at the hotel with Lilly. Jackson carried her in, still wrapped in her Disney Princess blanket. She’d been put to bed wearing her

clothes and shoes. Jackson had talked with her in the car as they'd waited. "You're silly, wearing your shoes to bed," he'd said.

"Mommy said it would be easier. We're going on an airplane very early," she'd said.

Jackson transmitted this info to the Digital Team. They could comb over security video from the airport looking for Stella Adams and Blake Keening and go through the passenger manifests for all flights looking for a party of three, traveling with a small child who was a no show for the flight.

Reina gave her a big hug, so relieved that she was okay and away from Stella and Blake Keening. "I promise you they will keep looking for your mommy."

"Blake hurt mommy. He hit her," Lilly said.

Reina hugged her again. "Well, you know what? Your mommy is tough. She's working hard right now and will be back as soon as she can." Reina felt kind of bad for lying to her, but she didn't need anyone telling her that her mommy was as bad of a person as Blake Henning was. She needed to believe her mommy was working to get back to her.

After a drink of water and a snack, Reina put her back to bed. She sat with Lilly until Lilly fell asleep. Then she left the room and went back out into the living room area where Jimmy and Lambchop sat. She wasn't sure where everyone else was.

"She's finally asleep," Reina said. She sat on the couch beside Jimmy.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Our plane will be here in approximately five hours,” Lambchop said. “You and Lilly will come back to our headquarters in the Chicago area with us and we’ll deliver you to the Marshals. They’ll clear your house in Cedar Rapids out and arrange a new identity for you.”

“My cat?” Reina asked, remembering him. She’d thought about him starving to death while she was in that hole, but hadn’t thought about the cute little tabby since she’d been rescued.

“He’s fine. We stopped by your house when we first got into town. I left out enough food and water for him to last at least a week.”

“Can we stop and get him so I can bring him with me?”

Wilson’s gaze went to Lambchop. If it were up to him, he’d say yes, but Lambchop officially was the team lead.

“Sure,” Lambchop answered.

“What about Lilly? What happens to her now?” Reina asked.

“That’s going to have to be determined,” Lambchop said. “A suitable guardian has to be found.”

“I want to be that guardian. She knows me. I’ve been that little girl whose mom is suddenly gone from her life, and I know how afraid she is right now. She can’t be put with some stranger,” Reina pled.

“We’ll put the request through our boss to submit to the Marshals. They’re going to have to relocate you both anyway,” Lambchop said. “We’ll heavily petition for you to be named as her guardian.”

“Do we really have to leave Cedar Rapids?” Reina moaned. “I’ve only just gotten settled in here and it’s the only place Lilly knows as home.”

“Give us a minute, will you?” Wilson said to Lambchop.

Lambchop nodded. “I’ll call our boss and request you be named as Lilly’s guardian.” He went into the other bedroom and closed the door.

“It’s not safe for you and Lilly to stay in Cedar Rapids. Her mom can’t find you. And Blake Henning absolutely cannot find you,” he said, his tone serious. “And you know that.”

“So, I start over again?” Reina said.

“You and Lilly start over again. Watching you with that little girl, I know you’re the perfect guardian for her.” He beamed her a supportive smile. “Come back to the Chicago area with us, with me,” he said. “I’ll help you get settled in a new life with Lilly there, with me.”

“With you?” Reina asked. “Don’t feel you have to.”

He interrupted her. “I want to. I told you I want you in my life, my life in Chicago, not Cedar Rapids or anywhere else. It’ll be different this time for you, having Lilly with you. I want to help you, Rae.”

“You’ll help me find Lilly and me a place to stay until the Marshals can place us somewhere? I doubt they’ll have a place available near you right away,” she said, not



sure she understood the arrangements he was suggesting. She didn't want to make assumptions, but she saw the raw emotion in his face, in his eyes, and she heard it in his voice. It pulled her heart into a hopeful place. "Last time, it took the Marshals two months to get me settled in Cedar Rapids. That's going to be so disruptive for Lilly. Her life's just been turned upside down."

"My place is a tiny one-bedroom condo, not ideal for a kid for any length of time. We'll have to work that out," he answered. "I'm not in town that often, work, though I'll see what kind of accommodation I can get. The guys with families get more time at home. We all live near our headquarters; many have wives or girlfriends. We're a tight group. You'll have a good support system even when I'm away for work."

He hadn't thought this through yet, wasn't sure exactly what he was offering her. All he knew was that he wanted her close, not only to protect her and Lilly, but for them to spend time together. He hadn't been lying when he told her he wanted a relationship with her. Would it seem too fast, too much pressure if he suggested living together? Was he even considering that as a possible arrangement?

"Could we stay at your place until the Marshals find somewhere for Lilly and me? I mean, if you're not home much," she asked tentatively. He'd voiced opposition to his place based solely on thinking it wasn't good for Lilly.

"It won't work. Lilly needs her own room. Need at least two bedrooms, maybe three," he thought out loud. "And I'd like to find a permanent place near my teammates with kids. Several of the teams live in the same townhouse communities near each other. It works well for them. Their places have small back yards. Lilly needs a back yard."

"Lilly needs stability and to know she's safe. She needs to know she can count on the adults in her life. That's more important than the sleeping arrangements."

“And I have no doubt you will provide her with all of that,” Wilson said. “I have no experience with kids, but I want to try to help Rae.”

Reina’s heart pounded in her chest. Help how? She didn’t want to ask, didn’t want to put him on the spot. He’d said he wanted a relationship with her, but that was before she volunteered to take Lilly on. She couldn’t assume he wanted to be an instant dad. She knew how she felt about him. And that was before that kiss, that incredible kiss. “I want you to help. I, I,” she stammered. “Lilly will be lucky to have you in her life.”

“Just Lilly?” he asked. “This is where I call you out for not telling me how you feel, for not telling me what you want. This is a really big life decision for us both. We just went from knowing we wanted some sort of relationship, where we explore these feelings between us, to planning our lives with the stability a four-year-old needs. If I’m in her life, I’m going to be a father figure. If we’re in a relationship, I’m there helping you be the best mom you can be to her, and to help you pursue all your personal goals, whatever that looks like. My number one job would be to support you and provide for our family. When I’m in town, I’ll want to spend every second with you and Lilly defining and solidifying this relationship. If we’re not ready to live together, maybe we should be roommates living in a three-bedroom place, so we each have our own room, so there’s no pressure. That’s what I was thinking.”

If she hadn’t already thought he was a great guy, she certainly would now. As a matter of fact, she was pretty sure she had just fallen in love with him. He gazed at her expectantly.

“I’ve always gotten into these really fast relationships. In that past life, it was how it went. You hooked up with a guy and he became your old man, your protection, so you lived with him. Sometimes it was a matter of convenience just to have a place to lay your head. But everyone knew it was never going to last long,” she paused and shrugged. “Of course, I didn’t have much in the way of belongings, just what would fit in a backpack and a duffle bag, so it’s not like I was moving a lot of stuff from

place to place. I don't know now if I was really living with them or just staying at their places. But I know with you it's going to be very different, and not just because Lilly will be there."

"Yes, it will be," he said. "I'm suggesting a very long-term relationship, Rae."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“You just talked about your commitment to us, to me, and called us a family.” She smiled, a big grin on her lips as tears filled her eyes. “I didn’t want to assume you wanted me to live with you, especially now that Lilly is part of the package,” she said. “Not many guys would take on a little girl that isn’t theirs. ”

“There’re two of my teammates that are married. We were on a mission in this third-world hellhole. We came across a couple of those containers like they load on the back of semi-truck trailers, the kind that get stacked on boats and shipped all over the world. And inside those containers were hundreds of women and girls, fucking chained like animals in the worst God-awful conditions I’ve ever seen humans held in. We freed them and turned them over to authorities to get them home, to keep them safe. But there was this one little girl, couldn’t have even been four, was a hell of a lot smaller than Lilly. There was no way to find her family. And one member of our team, Madison, she formed an attachment to that little girl. She told her husband she couldn’t leave her, and they were taking her home. He agreed to it because really, what else could he do? She instantly became amom to that kid, and he instantly became the kid’s dad. I never understood it until I saw you with Lilly and you said you wanted custody. Then I got it. You were going to be Lilly’s mom and because I care about you, I’m going to support you any way I can and I’m going to be the best damn father to that kid I can be. It doesn’t matter if she’s biologically mine or not. This isn’t something a person can do half way. It’s all or nothing.”

Her heart swelled and the admiration and affection, and yes, she was sure, the love she felt for him doubled, maybe tripled. “You’re a unicorn. Men like you don’t exist anywhere but women’s fantasies.”

He leaned into her and kissed her lips. “I’m real, baby, and I mean every word I

said.”

“I liked lying in bed with you and won’t want you down the hall in a different bedroom at night. I want us to share a bed. I want to snuggle with you. I want to fall asleep with you holding me and I want to wake up the next morning the same way. I want to go all in on this relationship.”

“Good, me too,” he said. He kissed her again.

“Wait, since when does the DEA have missions in third-world hellholes?” she asked.

“That’s the other conversation we have to have. My job. I carry DEA creds and a badge, and I earned them. But I’m not really a DEA agent, well, not a traditional one, anyway. Some of the guys on my team carry an FBI badge, ATF, CIA, or ICE. Lambchop’s credentials and badge says NSA. The official line is that we’re a special multi-agency task force, but what we really are is a military black ops team operating mostly domestically. Most of us were recruited from the special forces. That’s what you have to know, have to know what getting involved with me means. You’ve already seen the dangerous work we do, but it’s more than that. Our missions are important. There’re not many people who can do what we do, that have the training to do what we do. Often, people’s lives are at stake. We get scrambled at all hours of the day and night if there’s a true emergency. Often plans get interrupted. You have to be okay with it for us to work.”

As Reina listened to his words as he told her what his team really was, what they really did, she shouldn’t have been so surprised. “Razor, Garcia was with the special forces?” Accepting that he was a DEA Agent had been hard enough. Now, knowing he was also a member of the military in the special forces was even harder.

“Yeah, he’d been a highly decorated Army Ranger,” Wilson said.

“Were you a Ranger too?”

“No, I was with Delta,” he said. “I was a sniper.”

This took her by surprise. “A sniper?”

He could see her unasked question all over her face. “Yeah, I took out a lot of really bad terrorists over in the Middle East.” She looked away and he couldn’t read her reaction to his admission. He grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. “I did my job, Rae, and I did it damn well. And now, I do my job in this unit. We help people. We save people’s lives, and I still do my job damn well.”

She was impressed by how strong and unapologetic his voice was. He was proud of the work he did. He wouldn’t shrink back from it, no matter what she may have thought about it. Now she understood so much about him, about his unit. “I have to believe it takes a very understanding and a self-sufficient woman to be with someone who does your job.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“It’s a good thing I’m both. I know first-hand, times two, how dangerous your work can be, but also how important it is. Remind me of that if I’m ever less than understanding that you suddenly have to go to work. And I’ve made my own way since I was fifteen, younger really.”

Wilson swallowed her in an embrace. It was all on the table and she was still there, wanting to go all in. And just like that, he was going to have a relationship and be partly responsible for a little girl. And both Rae and Lilly would need to recover from the traumatic events of the past few days. He’d get an appointment with Lassiter ASAP for Rae and get a referral to a child trauma specialist for Lilly. Lassiter would demand a couple of appointments with him too, he was sure. Well, hell.

## Whiskey

Reina settled back into her seat, now that the jet had leveled off. She adjusted her arm, which held Lilly, who was asleep. Her gaze rose, focusing on Jimmy, who sat across from her, watching her. The last time she'd been on this plane, he sat beside her. She remembered how kind he'd been to her that day. She would never have guessed how important to her he'd become.

"Kids, I envy how they can sleep anywhere, anytime," she said.

"Sleep's the best thing for her right now," Jackson said. He sat beside Wilson. "They're also very resilient. She's going to be fine. You know that, don't you?"

Reina shrugged. "I hope you're right."

"I have two kids. Another of our teammates has a daughter around the same age as Lilly. She'll have kids to play with until your new identities come through and you can get her back into a preschool," Jackson said. "Getting her back into a normal routine will help her a lot."

Reina nodded. "Yeah, that and reassuring her that she's safe and will be cared for. I don't know what I should tell her about her mom."

"I still want you to talk to our team shrink. He'll be able to help with what we should tell Lilly," Wilson said. "He could probably give us a referral to a good child trauma counselor."

"Angel, Madison, Elizabeth, and Sienna will be helpful too," Jackson said, his gaze on Wilson. "It was the four of them who got Hahna settled so well." His gaze shifted to Rae. "She's a normal and very happy five-year-old now. You'd never guess she went through something so horrific."

Wilson saw the uncomfortable expression on Rae's face. "They're the wives of several of our teammates. Well, Angel is Jackson's wife and our office manager at work. And Madison and Cooper are the team members who are married that I told you about. They're the ones who adopted Hahna. You'll meet them all."

"That's good to hear that the little girl is doing well," Reina said. "It's encouraging that Lilly will, too."

"All the wives will give you support," Jackson said. "That's one thing that's a definite. The ladies help each other. We're all an extended family."



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

Reina never had family in her life, let alone an extended family. She never even had too many girlfriends, not real ones anyway.

Wilson could see the discomfort wash over Rae's face as her thoughts obviously occupied her mind. He leaned forward and took her hand in his. "There's this incredible new life ahead for you. You and Lilly are going to be blown away by the family you're about to become a part of."

"Become a part of, just like that?"

"Yes, just like that," Jackson answered. "We've seen it happen every time one of the men meets someone and they become a couple and introduce a new woman into our group. The wives instantly befriend them. Because of the job we do, no one outside of our group can understand what it's like when we're away for work. You know about the danger that comes with the job we do. Our wives know too. It's not easy for them when we head off on a mission. They support each other. They're a family."

Reina's gaze went to Jackson. "I look forward to meeting your wife and the others."

"You will shortly. After we land, we're headed to the office for a debrief and to unpack our gear. And I'm sure Shepherd, our boss, will want a private meeting with Wilson."

"Don't let Jackson fool you. He and Garcia share the number three spot at the agency. He's already had a conversation or two with Shepherd about you and me."

Jackson laughed. "I've let Lambchop have that honor being team lead for this

mission.” His gaze went back to Reina. “Angel makes a great cup of tea, always has time to listen, and is good at keeping people company who are waiting for meetings to be over. She even keeps toys at the office to keep kids occupied.”

“She sounds wonderful,” Reina said.

“She is,” Jackson agreed. “And she has the proper security clearance to hear anything and everything.”

Reina recognized the airfield they had landed at. It was the same one they flew into last year from Norfolk. This time, though, the Marshals wouldn’t be waiting for her at the hangar. From what Lambchop said, they’d approved her request to be Lilly’s guardian, and they would assign identities for her and Lilly to remain there in the Chicago area. Jimmy’s boss, a man she’d just learned was named Shepherd, would arrange it all.

By the time the team had transferred all their gear and the carrier containing her cat, Teddy, to the two waiting SUVs, it had started to flurry out. Lilly had woken up during the bumpiness of the landing. She now sat in the middle of the backseat between her and Jimmy. Jackson drove and Sloan sat beside him. The others were in the second black SUV. Jimmy had told her the cars were owned by the agency, as was the plane. And they were now heading to the team’s headquarters. She had to admit, she was a little intimidated by it all.

Her gaze focused on Jimmy. The three of them were going to stay at his condo tonight. A short-term resolution to their housing problem. She couldn’t help but feel excited at the prospect of being with him tonight. After the kisses they shared, she was sure tonight would be incredible.

She also knew the team was planning to go after Stella Adams and Blake Henning as soon as they found them. The thought of being left alone with Lilly in an unfamiliar

place was a bit unnerving, even if she would suddenly become a member of this big close family, as Jimmy and Jackson had said. She wouldn't vocalize that feeling, though. She didn't want to give Jimmy any doubts that she could handle the job he did and this new life. She wanted this new life to work so badly.

Jimmy told her where they went as they drove. Schaumburg, Illinois, was where their headquarters was located. And soon, they drove into the parking garage beside the ten-story building. They drove deep into two sub-basement levels. Jimmy explained the security behind the gate and the two garage doors that required codes to be entered into keypads to open. Then they pulled up in front of an elevator that didn't look like it belonged in what Reina had completely forgotten was a parking garage.

"I just messaged Angel to come meet you and bring you to the kitchen near her office while we unpack the cars," Jackson said. "It'll be more comfortable for you than waiting around."

"Thanks," Wilson said. "You're going to like Angel."

"I'm sure I will," Reina said. She was surprised that the garage was warm when she got out of the car. She held Lilly's hand, and they waited off to the side of the elevator door and out of the way of the guys as they unloaded the vehicles, carrying their gear through a door near the elevator.

The chime sounded and the elevator door opened. Whatever Reina had imagined Jackson's wife to look like, the beautiful black-haired woman with the infant on her hip wasn't it. She had a warm smile that focused on Jackson. "Welcome home," she said softly after he'd rushed to her and wrapped her in his arms. After he kissed her, he took the baby from her and kissed her too, before holding her close. "Daddy missed you, baby girl," he said.

"We all missed you," Angel said.

“Angel, this is Rae or Reina and Lilly,” Jackson introduced. He handed the baby back to her.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Angel said with a genuine smile. “Let’s go back up to my office. I can take a break and make us some tea.” She crouched down to Lilly’s height. “And I keep some toys by my desk too, for visitors like you. And some snacks if you’re hungry.” She stood back up and hit the elevator button.

“I’ll bring Teddy to my office and set him up with his food and some water out of the carrier. We’ll probably be here for an hour or more,” Wilson told her.

“Thank you,” she said.

The elevator door reopened. They stepped in. “I get to have my kids at the office with me a few days a week, so I’m sure we’ll find something to keep her busy.”

“How old is she?” Reina asked.

“This is Johanna. She’s nearly eight months. And our son Sammy is three. He’s at preschool today.” She glanced at Lilly. “Jackson said she’s four. The place Sammy goes has a great four-year-old program. A good friend’s daughter was in it last year. This year they have her there in the pre-K program. I’ll make sure I get you the name of the preschool.”

“Thank you, that’d be great. I worked as a teacher’s aide at Lilly’s preschool. I liked it.”

Reina watched the lights count the floors as the elevator ascended. It stopped on the fifth floor, and they got off. They were in the hallway of an ordinary-looking place. She followed Angel past a few closed doors and one open one that showed an empty conference room inside. She wondered if that was where Jimmy and the others would

meet with their boss. Angel directed her to the next door on the right. It was a large kitchen with windows that ran the entire wall in front of them and looked over the big Woodfield Mall.

“Can Lilly have a J-U-I-C-E-B-O-X?” Angel asked, spelling the word out.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Are you thirsty, Lilly?” Reina asked her. “Would you like a juice box?”

“Yes,” Lilly answered with a smile.

“And how about a little S-N-A-C-K? Is that okay?” Angel asked Reina. “I was just about to get Jo one.”

“Of course, thank you. Anything is fine. She has no food allergies,” Reina answered, appreciating that Angel was asking her permission first before offering anything to Lilly. This would take some getting used to, being consulted and acknowledged as Lilly’s mom. But that was the role she was taking on.

Angel got the kids set up with their snacks and then popped two mugs filled with water into the microwave. She offered Reina a chocolate chip cookie, what had been given to Lilly as her snack.

“Thank you. This is good, home baked, isn’t it?” Reina asked after taking a bite.

“Yes, with a lot less sugar,” Angel said. “I try to feed healthy food or at least healthier alternatives.”

“We had to take a nutrition class to work at the preschool. If you ate only like the experts recommended, you’d be starving,” Reina said.

Angel laughed. “I like more of a common-sense approach. And I like to eat.”

“Jimmy said we’ll have to stop by the grocery store on the way to his place. We’re

staying there,” she said, not knowing if Angel knew or not.

“Jimmy Wilson’s a good guy,” Angel said. “Jackson told me that the team will be on standby to go after those they need to,” she said to not say too much in front of Lilly. “When they do, if you need anything, let me know.”

“Thanks,” Reina said. “I’ll have to get your phone number.”

“You’ll be issued an agency phone. Shepherd has already approved it. My phone number will already be programmed into it.”

Reina’s eyes flickered to the phone she had set on the table beside her. She recognized it as the same model Jimmy and all the others carried. The microwave dinged and Angel retrieved their steaming mugs. She set a tin with a selection of tea bags in front of Reina before she sat.

Angel’s eyes took in everything about Reina. She, of course, knew who she was and what she’d been through. “Do you prefer Rae or Reina?” Angel asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Reina replied. “It’s the same. Jackson said you knew about me and my past.”

Angel saw the emotions wash over her face as she said it. This woman had a raw edge to her that Angel recognized. “Some, yes, and I understand going through something traumatic. I’ve been there, met Jackson and the team when they R-E-S-C-U-E-D me from something horrific. It gets better. I won’t tell you it completely goes away because it doesn’t, but it fades over time and with the proper trauma counseling. I’m sure they’ve already mentioned our Doctor Joe Lassiter to you. Take them up on that appointment. You won’t be sorry you did.”

Reina sat shocked, just staring at this woman. Then her eyes went to both Angel’s

baby and then to Lilly. A lump formed in her throat, preventing her from speaking.

Angel's heart broke, seeing the desperate expression that formed on Rae's face. She reached over and took hold of her hand. "And you can talk to me anytime you'd like to. But seriously, don't wait too long for that appointment with Joe. He helped me. He's helped a lot of people."

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Inside Shepherd's office, the six team members sat with Shepherd, Cooper, Doc, and Garcia at his conference table. "Good job on the recovery of Reina Ellis and Lilly Carona, team. But we're not done yet."

"The Digital Team is still combing through all the camera footage in a five-mile radius of that house to identify the vehicle Stella Adams and Blake Henning were in after they gave you the slip. The early hour of the morning will help with that. They're also reviewing all the security camera footage from the two closest airports. From there, hopefully we can pick up their trail. We'll find them," Garcia guaranteed.

"Because our perps can identify all of Delta Team, we're pulling you from the next part of the mission and inserting Alpha Team minus Miller," Shepherd said. "Tommy Flores from Bravo will be your sixth. He's currently asleep as he was on in Ops all night. He knows he's slated for this mission and will respond when alerted. You can fill him in after you're scrambled."

Wilson was surprised by the inclusion of Flores. He wasn't surprised Shepherd was rotating Delta Team out. Both Adams and Henning could identify them. From what they'd reported after getting Lilly, neither got a look at Jackson.

"Van Sloot decided to shut his mouth once he was in the custody of the authorities who Mirandized him," Lambchop said with a laugh. "He wasn't sure who the fuck



we were, but was sure Wilson would kill him if he didn't give us the info he did."

"Good for you," Garcia said to Wilson. "Now that he's holding back, I want a piece of this asshole. He's as responsible for Rae being thrown into that hole and left to die as Henning was."

"Save it for Henning and Adams," Shepherd said. "Obviously, Adams was holding back when she made the deal to turn evidence against the network."

"I have to wonder how long they've been in communication," Wilson said.

"You'll find out as soon as we find them," Shepherd said. "Get some answers for the Attorney General of New Jersey before you turn them over to the authorities when you do find them. You can let them think you're whoever you want. Just get them and get that info."

The team all smiled and nodded. They liked operating without their hands tied.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Be ready to deploy as soon as the digital team picks up their trail,” Shepherd said. “Wilson stay. Everyone else, you’re on a thirty-minute alert. The Lear will be on standby at Chicago Executive,” Shepherd said, ending the meeting.

Wilson watched the others file out of the room.

“I’m going to grab Rae and get her phone issued,” Garcia said from the door before he left, closing it after himself.

Shepherd pulled a form from the folder in his pile. He handed it to Wilson. “I’m assuming, which is something I normally do not do, that you’ll want to add Reina and Lilly to your medical insurance.” He pointed to the dollar amount outlined on the form. “That’s what it’ll cost you to cover them each pay period through payroll deductions.”

“Um, yes, that would be the responsible thing to do, to ensure they’re both covered, not knowing when she’ll get a job and what type of coverage, if any, will be offered.” The amount, of course, didn’t matter to him. Adding her and Lilly as dependents made this shit real.

“Did you or did you not inform Lambchop that she and the little girl would be staying with you, that you planned to live with them?”

Wilson felt the scrutiny of Shepherd’s gaze on him just like he was in his first days at bootcamp with his drill instructor standing over him during an inspection. “It’s complicated, Shep, but yes, we’re together.”

“Okay,” Shepherd said gruffly. “Garcia’s issuing her phone, having her sign the NDA, and will tell her about calling Ops. It’s up to you to decide on the tracker for her and the ankle bracelet for the little girl. Notify me if you want them and I’ll approve them. It’s up to you to have that conversation with her.”

“Okay, thank you. I’ll let you know.” Shepherd still stared at him expectantly. He signed the form officially adding them as dependents. He handed it back. “Thank you for everything, the insurance, authorizing the mission to go to Iowa and find her, all of it.”

“It was also a Marshals case, so even if it wasn’t personal for you, we would have looked into it. St. Vincent asked me what last name she and the little girl should be given? In the past, with the other wives, we put it in the names they’d take, anyway. Why is it I have a feeling that in this case that may not be the best idea?”

“As I said it’s complicated,” Wilson replied.

“You have an appointment with Lassiter in five minutes. Talk with him, uncomplicate it, and let me know.”

“Yes, sir,” Wilson said. He came to his feet, knowing he’d just been dismissed.

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Garcia poked his head into the kitchen and saw Rae sitting at the table with Angel. The little girl who must have been Lilly played on the floor with Johanna. “Hey, Angel, Wilson’s still in with Shepherd. Can I borrow Rae? I want to issue her phone. And can you keep Lilly for a few minutes?”

“Sure,” Angel said. Her gaze went to Reina. “She’ll be fine with me.”

Rae's eyes shifted to Garcia. She still had a hard time reconciling who he really was versus the person she knew him as before. "Hi," she greeted him with a small smile as she stood. She followed him into the hallway.

In the hallway he gave her a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. "Glad they found you." He nodded down the hallway. "Come on."

She walked beside him, hurrying to catch up. He walked fast. They went all the way down the hallway the same way she'd come with Angel, and she took a second look at the rooms as they passed them.

He hit the call button on the elevator. "Sloan said you still need to take it easy. Make sure you do over the next few days."

The chime sounded, and the doors opened. They stepped in. He pressed eight. He also had to enter a code on a keypad before the doors would close.

"My office and workroom is on eight," he said. "I'm sure Wilson already told you that you cannot ever tell anyone about us, our office, our missions. Everything we do is classified top secret. I'll be giving you a nondisclosure agreement to sign regarding everything about us. If you ever violate it, it's federal prison."

"Yes, and I'd never tell anyone." She was surprised by the harshness of his voice.

"Rae," Garcia said in a gentler voice. "What we do is really important. But this agency has made a lot of enemies with a lot of really bad people. That has the potential to bring danger to all of us and the people we care about. We have procedures in place to help keep everyone safe, procedures you'll need to follow."

The elevator arrived on the eighth floor and the doors opened. He led her down the hallway to a room loaded with computer equipment and various electronics. She sat

on the edge of her chair facing him over a work table. She was more than a little intimidated.

He handed a piece of paper to her. “Our standard nondisclosure. Read the whole thing word for word if you want but what it says is that for as long as you live, if you ever tell anyone anything related to us, you’ll go before a judge, evidence will be provided how you broke the agreement, and you’ll go right to federal prison.”

His words were unnecessary. Even without the agreement, she’d never have told anyone about them. She knew firsthand the importance of the job they did. She felt numb at this point. “What name do I sign?” she asked him.

His lips tipped into a grin. She wasn’t being a smart ass in how she asked. “There’s room below the line, maybe both? Hell, maybe even Reina Wilson, huh?”

His smile, as he suggested using the name Wilson, held questions. “Let’s not get ahead of things.” She signed both names and handed the form back across the table.

“No hesitation on signing it,” Garcia noted aloud.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Nope. I told you I’d never tell anyone.”

“And I believe you,” he said. He picked up the phone he’d programmed for her. He explained the phone and about adding her current phone line to it. She handed her phone over without question. After he’d created the instance for her private phone on the agency phone, he handed her now dead phone back to her. Then he explained about the phonebook. “There’s one number I want to explain to you, our Operations Center.” He pointed it out.

She noticed that Ops was the first name and number in the phonebook before the rest were listed alphabetically beginning with Angel.

“Ops is manned twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They’re there for all dependents in case of an emergency. A while ago, one of the wives was alone, her husband was deployed, and she had a medical emergency one night. She called Ops and Ops dispatched one of the team medics even though 9-1-1 was called. He tended to her medically until the paramedics arrived and then he stayed with her at the hospital and notified her husband of the situation. If you ever suspect you’re being followed or something feels wrong, you call them. Don’t worry about it being a false alarm.”

“Okay,” she said. “That’s nice to know there’s help available.”

“It’s one of the ways we take care of our team members’ dependents. No one can do the job we do if they’re worried about their family while they’re gone. They have to know someone is looking out for them in their absence. And they have to know their significant other has everything handled.”

“This is the part where you tell me not to be a burden on him, right? Well don’t worry about that. I won’t be.”

“Easy, Rae,” Garcia said. “I didn’t mean it that way. All of the wives will tell you the same thing. It’s what they all live by, taking care of everything at home, relying on Ops or the other wives for any issues, and then telling their unit member about it after the fact, including the successful resolution of the situation.”

She took a deep breath and nodded.

“So, one time while I was on a mission, my son who was three months old at the time, spiked a high fever my wife couldn’t get down. One of the other wives went with her to the hospital so she wasn’t there alone, which I appreciate. It wasn’t until after she was back home and his fever was down, and I called that she told me about it. Now imagine I knew about it and was worried when we were out in that alley in Norfolk. Do you think I wouldn’t have been distracted, knowing my kid had a high fever and was at the hospital? Do you think I wouldn’t have been distracted, knowing my wife was going through that without me there to support her?”

Reina was shocked to hear his story. “You have a wife and a son?” Razor was married and was a dad? Wow, that blew her mind.

Garcia smiled a genuine smile that made his eyes sparkle. “Sienna is a saint to put up with me and this job and Little T is the necessity in my life I didn’t know I needed until he was here.”

Reina smiled, utterly amazed by his proclamation. She saw him in a very different way at that moment. “Wow, that’s really incredible. I’m glad you found happiness.”

He nodded. “It wasn’t then that it happened, but the point I’m making is, with what we do we have to be focused and not worrying about anything but the job and what

could possibly go wrong. That's what we need our families to do to support us. It's that simple."

She nodded as well. "I get it. I'd never want to put Jimmy in a situation where he was worrying about me or what was going on at home if he needed to concentrate on the job he was doing."

"That's exactly it," Garcia said. "So, you and Wilson?"

Reina laughed. "I was wondering when you were going to get around to asking me that. Yeah, Jimmy and me. He's the first guy I've ever been friends with, like real friends. And he's probably the first guy whose ever just wanted friendship and didn't expect something from me, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," Garcia said. "I'm glad for you."

"Any advice?" she asked.

"Yeah, don't fuck it up. Don't bring any crap from your past into this relationship. And don't let what happened over the past week hang over you. Put the demons where they belong, banish them to hell, and don't let them stomp on your happiness. Wilson's a good guy. He deserves you at your best giving this your all."

"Wow, Razor the relationship guru. Who would have guessed?"

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Wilson stopped at the kitchen after he left Shepherd's office. Angel was there with Lilly and Jo. "Does Garcia still have Rae?"

"Yes, but it's no problem. I can keep Lilly until she gets back. I know you have an



appointment with Joe,” Angel said.

“Yeah,” he said shaking his head. “I’m headed there now. If I can get Rae an appointment with him after mine, can you keep her a while longer?”

“Sure, it’s no problem, though Jo will be going down for her nap in about an hour. If Lilly doesn’t nap, maybe you could bring her down to the gym to that corner where I have the kids play area set up.”

“That’s a good idea.” He shrugged. “I doubt she’ll take a nap. She slept on the plane.”

From there he took the stairs down to the fourth floor and Joe Lassiter’s suite.

Wilson settled into a chair at the table within Joe Lassiter’s kitchen. He wasn’t surprised Shepherd had ordered him to talk to Lassiter. What he had been surprised about was how cool Shepherd had been regarding his relationship with Rae.

“You made some major decisions in the last twenty-four hours, I’m told,” Lassiter began.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“You know, it just feels right. If you’d told me a couple of months ago that I’d be jumping into a relationship with her, with anyone, and taking on a four-year-old little girl, I’d have told you that you were high,” Wilson said.

Lassiter chuckled. “So, there’d been an ongoing relationship with her since the Norfolk Op?”

“Kind of, it’s not like that,” Wilson said.

“Now you sound like Burke,” Lassiter said.

Wilson laughed. “Yeah, I guess I do. I can’t explain it, Joe,” he said. His teammate, Rich ‘Handsome’ Burke had a relationship with team member Laura Lee ‘Lah-lee’ Saxton’s sister for months that he classified as, it’s not like that, when he was pressed on the relationship.

“Try,” Lassiter pushed.

“This thing with Rae wasn’t romantic. It never went there. It was friends, and even that, classifying it as friends’ kind of fucked with my head because I was hard-pressed to name what was going on. It was comfortable talking to her. It was a connection to someone outside of work that grounded me. I liked being there to support her, to be an ear because she couldn’t talk to anyone else in her new life about the challenges of starting over.”

“Was she having a hard time settling into the new life or fitting in with the people in it?”

“No, she wasn’t a victim. I found her to be a strong and capable woman that was still vulnerable and finding her way.” He paused and chuckled. “And she has a sense of humor I like. We just clicked.”

“So, you’re going to have someone who is just a friend, no romantic feelings for, live with you and you’re taking on a little girl in the deal too?” Lassiter asked.

“Well, the romantic part changed after she got taken. That’s when I realized I did have those feelings for her. And once we found her, we both either realized or admitted our feelings to each other,” he confessed.

“You just realized?” Lassiter asked. “Just like that? You do understand why I’m skeptical, don’t you?”

“Believe me, I know how it sounds,” Wilson said. “I wrote off even the remotest possibility that I’d have a relationship with a woman a long time ago. It just didn’t seem like it would fit into my life, doing this job. And I was fine with that.”

“But now you want it?” Joe pressed.

“It just feels right, Joe. It’s like it will fit with little thought required.”

“Do you love her?”

Wilson blew out a breath and glanced away. “Now there’s a word I’m not acquainted with. I’m not sure, but I’d sure like to find out if that’s what this is or what this can grow into.”

“That’s a good answer,” Lassiter said. “What happens if you figure out that isn’t what it is?”

“That’s one thing I love about you, Joe, your optimism.”

“Hear me out. There’s a child involved in this. It’s not like it’s just you and Rae, give it a go, and go your separate ways if it doesn’t work out. That little girl is going to get attached to you both. You’re going to present yourselves as a couple who are there to take care of her, a family.”

“I get that. I don’t want us to do anything that could hurt her if it doesn’t work out. But I also know that when I’m not working, I’m going to want to spend as much time with them as possible.”

“Them, not just Rae?” Lassiter asked.

“You know, it’s crazy. Seeing Rae with that little girl and knowing how much she cares about her; it makes me greatly respect her. She didn’t even hesitate when asking for guardianship. She was ready to take it on alone. And I knew I wanted to help her. I know Rae’s history. Her mom was a drug addict. Her father was never in the picture. She got bounced from shitty foster home to shitty foster home before she ran away when she was fifteen. She wants better for Lilly. It makes me want to be there and help.”

“Both Rae and Lilly are recovering from traumatic events.”

“That’s why they both need me there with them,” Wilson argued. “And can I ask you to meet with Rae, today? She won’t talk to me about what happened.”

“I can,” Lassiter answered. “I’d like to meet with you both together at some point too.”

“And a referral to a child trauma specialist would be appreciated too,” Wilson said.

Lassiter nodded. "I can get you that also."

Wilson checked his watch. "What does your schedule look like after this?"

"Let me see if I can push Michaela out an hour. I'm supposed to see her in about ten minutes, but if she can come later, I can see Rae now."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Thanks, Joe, that would be great. I really don’t want to hang around here for another hour. We need to stop at the grocery store on the way to my place. Not knowing when we might reacquire Stella Adams and Blake Henning, I want to make sure I get Rae and Lilly settled as fast as I can.”

“One more question,” Joe said. “Why did you take Shepherd’s offer when he recruited you to this team in the first place? From what I understand you were killing it with Delta.”

Wilson had to laugh at that. Yeah, he had been killing it. He served with honor and distinction during a time when what they did mattered. He’d been a decorated sniper with Delta. He had more confirmed kills than most and he was proud of his record. Target after target was eliminated. “I know we’ve talked about this before.”

“Humor me,” Lassiter pressed.

“We’d defeated ISIS. Things were changing. I wasn’t sure what the mission was going to be. With the little red tape Shepherd’s team would be restrained by, it was appealing. No other team would get done what Shepherd’s team was going to get done, and I wanted to be a part of it. And it’s true, we’ve really accomplished a lot that no other team could have.”

“That’s true,” Lassiter agreed. “So, you had no hesitation when joining this unit?”

“None, it just felt right.”

“Much the same as this relationship with Rae and taking on the child?”

“Yes, exactly like that.”

“If you’re having any problems coping with your new role, I expect to see you,” Lassiter said.

X-Ray

“I’m glad you agreed to talk to him today,” Wilson said. “Just text me when you’re done, and I’ll come back and get you. I’m going to go get Lilly from Angel and bring her down to our gym to play. Angel has all kinds of bikes and ride-on toys down there. There’s a lot of room for them to ride around. She even has a climbing fort for the kids set up.”

Reina wasn’t surprised she did. From what she’d seen already, Angel seemed to be the kind of person that had everything in her life mastered, so of course she’d have an area set up for the kids. “Good, Lilly needs to run around and play. It’ll be good for her.”

Wilson pressed a kiss to the top of her head. They were outside the black door with gold lettering that said J. Lassiter. He opened the door for her and motioned her in. She stepped into an outer office area that looked like any other doctor’s waiting room. Watering one of several plants on a table was a man with severe scars on his face and neck.

“Hi, you must be Rae,” he said with a smile. He set the watering can down. “I’m Joe. It’s nice to meet you.” He extended his right hand to her.

“Hi,” she said, shaking his hand. She tried not to stare at the scars that littered his face and neck.

“I’ll come back when you text me,” Wilson said. He pressed a kiss on her lips and

then nodded at Joe before he left.

Joe opened the door to his inner office area. “Come on back.”

Reina reluctantly walked through the door. He directed her into the kitchen just a few steps inside the suite.

“I don’t have as many good tea choices as Angel, but I can offer you a water or some coffee.”

“A coffee would be nice, thank you.”

He swung a cabinet open above the long counter the sink and the Keurig maker were on. “Pick a mug and have a seat.”

She glanced over what had to be a hundred different mugs lining three shelves. “Wow, you have quite a collection.”

Joe smiled. “Yes, everyone gets me a mug when they go someplace.”

She reached into the cabinet and pulled down one adorned with beautiful flowers. Then she sat, so she faced the window and looked out at the mall parking lot. It was crazy that this place, a military black ops headquarters, was next to a huge shopping mall.

Joe had a water bottle. He set it in front of a chair kitty-corner from her. When her coffee had brewed, he set her cup in front of her along with a selection of creamers and sugars.

“Do you prefer Rae or Reina?” he asked.



“Either is fine,” she said.

“Is one attached to either of the past lives you’ve lived?”

She chuckled. “Yeah, that’s exactly what it was, two past lives. I was just starting to feel like Reina Ellis, but always had to remind myself who she was, the cover the Marshals had built for her.” She wouldn’t tell him that the only time it wasn’t in her thoughts was when Jimmy kissed her.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Did you like who she was?” Joe asked.

“Yes. And I liked the world she lived in. She was someone Rae Ella Easton could never have been. Reina lived in a respectable world that Rae Ella couldn’t have just walked into.”

“And what about now? You have the ability now to be whoever you want to be,” Joe posed.

“I don’t ever want to go back and be Rae Ella again. And having Lilly with me, that world just isn’t a place for her.”

“Because she deserves better?” Joe asked.

“Yes, it’s a world for those who are just getting by. That’s no world for her.”

“What about for you? Don’t you deserve better?” Joe asked.

“I thought we were going to talk about what happened to me last week?”

“We are,” Joe said confidently. “You deserve better than the world Rae Ella Easton lived in, and you deserve better than what happened to you last week.”

An emotion she couldn’t define hit her. She choked up and couldn’t breathe as tears filled her eyes.

“The devil is in the details,” Lassiter said. “And the only way to rid yourself of that

devil is to talk about exactly what happened and how you felt, your fears, your anger, any other emotions that seized you then and since. If you don't identify the emotions and talk about it, PTSD will grip you and make you incapable of being a good mother to Lilly. It will steal your life from you and thrust you into this unnecessary, never-ending cycle of fear. But you can stop it from taking hold of you by confronting your emotions head-on. That's where I come in."

"I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about it," she forced out.

"I get that. It can be overwhelming. Let's start out with what you want for this new life."

"I want to be a good mother for Lilly," she said.

"I don't believe that most people set out to be bad or neglectful parents. I think they're imperfect or broken and all their past demons prevent them from being good parents. Your mom was a drug addict," he said.

She nodded that he was correct.

"I doubt she picked up the meth pipe and seriously considered if she should take care of her child or get high. Where she was at mentally and emotionally prevailed, and she lit up. She had demons she was quieting with each hit."

"I never thought about it like that," Reina acknowledged.

"No, because you were the abandoned child, the victim of her addiction. It's because you went through being abandoned that you're going to be the best possible mom to Lilly that you can be."

"Yes, I am," she vowed.

“And I’m here to make sure there are no demons dragging you down that will prevent you from being the mom you want to be, the mom Lilly deserves,” Joe explained. From the expression on her face, he saw that Reina got it. He knew right then that she’d put in the work with him that she had to, to mentally be the fittest she could be. “Now, let’s talk about what happened from the second that car plowed into yours until the team found you and got you out of that hole.”

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They collected their bags and coats as well as Teddy, the cat, from Wilson’s office and the three of them descended in the elevator. Reina held Lilly’s hand. It was nearly dinner time and Lilly was tired and hungry.

“How about we hit a drive-thru for dinner on our way to the grocery store?” Wilson suggested.

“That’s a great idea. I don’t think she’s going to last too long.” She nodded at Lilly.

The elevator door opened, and they stepped into the underground garage. Reina watched a beautiful woman with long curly hair approach them. She was dressed in jeans and a dark blue sweater, carrying a coat.

“Hey, I heard your team got back,” she said to Wilson. She smiled at Reina and extended her right hand. “I’m Madison. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you too,” Reina said, shaking her hand.

“You must be Lilly,” she said, squatting down, so she was eye level. “My daughter, Hahna, is about your age. We’ll have to get you two together to play.” Then she stood to her full height and her gaze went to Wilson. “Coop said you’re just waiting for the Digital Team to find your perps.”

“Yes. Glad the rest of Alpha Team will be on the mission,” Wilson said. “But right now, we’re out of here. Got to get little miss here, something to eat. You on in Ops tonight?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Just for a few hours to help cover.” She checked her watch. “I better go. Was nice to meet you Reina.” She pushed through the door into the stairwell after entering her code.

They hit a drive-thru and got meals for all three of them. They ate in the truck in the parking lot of the Super Walmart. Hewas thankful he’d gotten the model with the crew cab when he’d bought his Dodge Ram. Next, they visited the bathroom for Lilly in the store and then toured the store with two grocery carts. Lilly sat in the large basket portion of one. In the other, the first item they loaded in was a proper booster seat for Lilly’s size and age. She’d been riding around in cars, just seat belted in. She needed to be properly protected. They also selected a potty seat that went on the regular toilet.

The housewares section had several items they wanted to purchase. They let Lilly pick a plate, cup, and silverware set. She chose a Disney Princess set. The grocery side was the next section they went through, filling the carts with food that neither Wilson nor Rae usually bought. Several hundred dollars later, they checked out and installed the new booster seat in the backseat of Wilson’s pickup truck before unloading the rest of the bags into the truck.

Lilly happily watched cartoons on the big screen television mounted on the wall in the one room living room and kitchen area as Wilson carried the groceries from the car in the parking garage to the apartment. Reina familiarized herself with his kitchen as she put groceries away.

His condo was small. The main room consisted of the living room and a kitchen with a small round kitchen table with four chairs. A short hallway was on the wall to the

left. It had three doors. One a bifold door housed the stacked washer and dryer and a closet. The door to the bathroom was on the same wall and the door to the bedroom was on the other.

“Your place is nice,” Reina told him after he’d given her the short, grand tour.

“It’s small and undecorated,” he said.

There were two pictures in frames on the white walls of the main room of scuba divers in beautiful blue waters. She pointed to them. “Not completely undecorated.”

Teddy, the cat, lay beside Lilly, who stroked him. Reina could see how happy Lilly was to have the cat to pay attention to. And after being alone for several days and shoved in a carrier all day, Teddy looked happy to be the focus of her attention.

“You can sleep in the bedroom with Lilly. I’ll take the couch,” Wilson offered.

“It’s big enough for all three of us,” she said.

“That wouldn’t be right,” he said.

“We’ll see,” she said. She checked the time on her phone. It was nearly six-thirty. She’d probably get Lilly to bed around seven, even though she needed a bath. But she looked tired, so it could wait. And the truth was, Reina was tired. She wanted to get to bed early as well.

True to her plans, Reina had her in bed before seven. One of Lilly’s favorite books was in her backpack. Reina kicked herself for not picking up a few more books at the store. They didn’t have many toys for her either. Reina made a mental note to make a list of what they absolutely needed the next day. But for tonight, the one book would have to do.

Lilly sat nestled between the two of them on the big bed and Reina watched Wilson read the book to her. He'd insisted on doing the reading and he looked like he enjoyed it. After they'd tucked her in and left her in the bedroom with a dim light on, Reina embraced Jimmy after they'd stepped from the room. "You looked like a natural reading that story to her."

Wilson chuckled softly. He drew her by the hand into the living room and pulled her to sit closely beside him on the couch. Reina shifted in her seat so she faced him. He took both of her hands in his. Lilly had insisted the door be left cracked open, so they whispered. "It's been a long time since I read a bedtime story."

"Is it something you'd like to do every night you're home?"

"Yes, I can see the three of us snuggled up in bed like that as a nightly routine. Like I told Doctor Lassiter today, I would never have envisioned wanting this even a month ago, but now, this just feels right." He waited a second to see if she'd share anything about her meeting with Lassiter as she hadn't yet. "What did you think of Joe Lassiter?"

"He's a nice guy. I was a bit startled by the scars on his face. He told me about getting wounded when he was in the military and his own PTSD. And he really made me think about how what I went through, being left in that hole to die, could change me and make me too focused on my own trauma to be a good mother to Lilly if I don't get help for dealing with it."

"He knows how bad PTSD is," Wilson agreed.

"Yes," she said. "And he really made a lot of sense. I've set up a couple more appointments with him."

"When we go to find Stella and Henning, I'll leave you the keys to my truck, so you



have transportation. I think you should call that child trauma specialist Lassiter gave me the referral to tomorrow and get her an appointment as soon as you can. Did Lassiter tell you what you should tell Lilly about her mom?"

"He thinks right now what I'm saying is okay until we talk to that counselor." Reina yawned very deeply. She was exhausted.

"You should go to bed," he said. "I'll just come in and get a spare pillow and blanket."

"That bed is big enough. I could sleep in the middle with you on the opposite side from Lilly. I know you don't think it's right for you to sleep in the same bed as her, but it's not like you'd be sleeping next to her. I know there are a lot of pedophiles out there. I've known a few, but you aren't one of them."

"And it's not like we're going to be having sex in the same room with her," he added, warming up to the idea. "I would like to go to sleep holding you."

"Not that I feel awake enough to do that tonight, but I'd like that soon," she said.

Wilson leaned in and kissed her lips. "Yes, soon," he agreed after he'd pulled back. "Come on, let's get you in bed before you fall asleep right here."

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The next morning, Wilson woke up the same way he'd fallen asleep, with his arms around Rae. She still slept. But on the other side of her, Lilly popped her head up and looked around. He raised his index finger to his lips in the universal shh signal. He pointed to the door. Lilly followed him out of bed. He closed the bedroom door so Rae could sleep.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Let’s let Reina sleep longer. She was really tired last night,” he whispered to Lilly. “Do you want to watch TV this morning and then we can maybe surprise Reina with breakfast? You can help me make it.”

“That would be great!” she exclaimed.

“Shh,” he hushed her.

She climbed onto his brown leather sofa as he turned on the television. “Cold, gotta pee,” she said.

“It’s down the hall, remember?” he asked, pointing to the hallway.

She slid off the couch and ran to the bathroom, stopped in the hallway, and turned to him, waiting.

“Go potty, honey,” he said. She still didn’t move. “You need help putting the potty seat on, don’t you?” he asked. He went into the bathroom and fitted it over the adult seat, and he pulled the little foot stool they’d bought her in front of the toilet. She still didn’t move as he stepped back to the door. Then it occurred to him she needed help. Well, shit. He was not at all comfortable with this. “Can you pull your pajama pants down?”

She shook her head.

He reluctantly went back in. He pulled her pajama pants and underwear down and lifted her onto the potty seat. He knew it was innocent, and he wasn’t some

pedophile, but it just seemed so wrong. He stood in the doorway with his back turned.

“Done,” she said, still seated on the potty.

“Okay,” he said, turning back around. “Did you wipe?”

“Mommy do,” she said.

“You’re a big girl and we’re going to teach you how to,” he said. He dispensed the toilet paper, wadded it and handed it to her, giving her instruction on how to wipe, shocked that he was doing this. After she did, he helped her stand, pulled her pants back up, and then helped her wash her hands. He’d made it through it. Whew. That had been harder than some of the missions he pulled in the Middle East.

The sound of clapping drew his attention to Rae, standing a few feet outside the bathroom door. “Nice job, you two.”

“We were going to let you sleep in today,” Wilson said, a bit embarrassed she felt the need to applaud his efforts.

“I’m awake. Let’s mix up that pancake mix and fry that bacon we bought at the store.”

It was around noon that the alert Wilson had been waiting for finally sounded on his phone. He had thirty minutes to get to the office. His go-bag was ready. He was waiting for Jackson to pick him up. When Jackson messaged that he was two minutes away, Wilson slung his backpack over his shoulder and then wrapped his arms around Rae. “You have the keys to my truck and the key code and alarm code for the door. You can go anywhere you want. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but I’ll call and text when I can. Reach out to Angel or Madison and set up a playdate for Lilly like they invited you to.”

“Yes, I’ll do that,” Reina promised.

“And remember, contact Ops if you need to,” he also reminded her.

“I’m going to be fine, Jimmy. Lilly and I will be just fine. We’re going to play games, color, watch movies, and probably go to bed early again. I plan to do some laundry, and Lilly and I will probably walk down to that corner store to get some fresh air and exercise. I’ll let Lilly pick a treat. We didn’t get much in the way of treats at the store last night, just meal stuff. But maybe tomorrow I’ll reach out to Angel or Madison.”

He kissed her, a slow, passionate kiss. “I’ll miss you. But we’ll get them.”

“I know you will,” she said.

Then he went over to Lilly, who sat at the kitchen table coloring. “I have to go to work, kiddo, but Reina will be here and will take good care of you.”

“Bye, Jimmy,” she said.

Yankee

“Cameron Woods is really killing it on the Digital Team,” Garcia told Wilson. “So far, he’s a good hire.”

Wilson was surprised. “I’m glad to hear that. I’ll admit I was on the fence about him.”

“I know you were. He was like a dog with a bone when we needed to find that SUV. He worked twelve hours straight with no break and he worked all night going through flight manifests to find what flight Adams and Henning took. They flew under the

names Pete and Cynthia Dougherty, their five-year-old daughter, Lilly, not making the flight.”

“I know the Digital Team is still working on where they went after arriving in Newark,” Wilson said. “It’s a big city.”

“Well, first off, Newark airport has hundreds of security cameras. They’re still poring over footage to track their movements when they got off the plane. And Newark has lots of traffic cameras,” Garcia said. “These fuckers aren’t going to get away.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

They reported to their onsite command center, a storefront in a nearly vacant strip mall, set up by the Marshals. Wilson was surprised to find that Agent St. Vincent was on site. “Appreciate your help on this,” St. Vincent said, shaking the team members’ hands as they arrived. “As I told Shepherd, we just don’t have the staff to chase down every potential lead that may come in, especially if Adams and Henning separate. We have assets chasing down the Smiths in Iowa whose house they were staying in that you raided the other night. And yes, Smith is their last name. They’re known associates of Henning and Adams from the case five years ago. And before you ask, there was not enough evidence for them to be arrested back then.”

“That’s not the case now,” Cooper said. “Those fuckers aided and abetted fugitives, assaulted our team with deadly weapons, and were running a stolen identity clearing house from their basement.”

St. Vincent raised his hands in surrender. “Choir, preaching. Arrest warrants have been issued on them both, and we have a team in Iowa searching under every rock for them. By the way, your man that got cold-cocked by Jennifer Smith, is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” Cooper reported.

“Okay, let’s get to work,” St. Vincent said, motioning to the computer banks and maps of the area they had set up on two six-foot work tables.

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Reina enjoyed the low-key day with Lilly. She didn’t put Lilly down for a nap, planning an early bedtime for them both. They did walk to the corner convenience

store as planned, the perfect distance to get fresh air and exercise, but not too far for Lilly's little legs. Jimmy text messaged when they arrived in Newark, New Jersey. The crimes and arrests originally took place in New Jersey, though a lot of it was centered in Atlantic City.

After making an easy dinner of soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Reina brought Lilly into the bathroom to take a bath that she desperately needed. Reina was sure she hadn't had one in days, maybe a week. She helped Lilly undress. She'd been teaching Lilly to pull her own pants on and off when using the bathroom all day. She understood why helping Lilly in the bathroom had been so uncomfortable for Jimmy earlier that morning. That thought still made her smile.

When Lilly pulled her shoes off, the liner of one of the sneakers pulled out, revealing an Apple AirTag beneath it. Reina immediately grabbed it, panic setting in. She checked beneath the liner of the other shoe. There was no AirTag there. She tried to hide her alarm from Lilly by forcing a smile. "Okay, let's get the rest of your clothes off and get you in the tub." The water was almost filled to the depth Reina wanted it to be. The bubble bath powder she'd bought at the store the night before and sprinkled in had created a high foam that smelled of strawberries. Lilly looked excited to get in.

Reina handed her the plastic takeout food containers to play with that she'd found in the kitchen cabinets. "I'm going to leave the door cracked and step into the hallway. I have to make a phone call," she told Lilly. "Stay sitting on your bum-bum in the tub, okay, sweetie?"

Lilly was happily dumping water from one container to the other and didn't answer.

Once in the hallway, Reina dialed Jimmy. The call went right to his voicemail. "Jimmy, I found an AirTag in Lilly's shoe. I'm really freaked out right now." Then she remembered both Garcia and Jimmy had told her if she ever needed anything and

could not reach him to call Ops. “I’m going to call that Ops number, but call me when you can, okay?”

She ended the call and then immediately brought the phonebook back up. She tapped Ops. It rang only once.

“Ops, Reina, is everything okay?” a woman’s voice asked.

“I don’t know,” Reina said. “Is this Madison?”

“Yes, this is Madison. What’s up, Reina?” her calm voice asked.

“I, um, I found an AirTag in Lilly’s shoe. I don’t know if her mom put it there or that man, but it means someone can find her.” Her heart pounded in her chest as she said those words aloud. Lilly was in danger.

“Where are you right now?” Madison asked. She opened up the program that recorded each team member’s location from their tracker to see who was close by. She knew neither Reina nor Lilly had trackers, yet. She’d have to talk to Wilson about out, maybe even before he got back.

“At Jimmy’s condo,” Reina answered.

“Are the doors locked?” Madison asked.

“Yes,” Reina answered. That she did know.

“Okay, good. Are you and Lilly together?”

“She’s in the bathtub and I’m in the hall. I can see her. I was getting her ready for bed.”



“Okay, here’s what I want you to do. Get her out of the tub and dress her in warm pajamas, but put on her socks and shoes. Keep the AirTag in your pocket. Pack a backpack with a few days’ worth of clothes for you both. We’ll relocate you somewhere safe. I’m going to send Delta Team to you, the men that were in Iowa with you. Hand over the AirTag to one of them. They’ll take it from there.”

“Will you stay on the phone with me until they get here?”

“Yes, and I’ll let you know when our people have arrived. I won’t have you open the door if I’m not one hundred percent sure it’s our team on the other side of the door.”

Madison sent an urgent alert to scramble all four members of Delta Team. Their instructions were for two of them to escort Reina and Lilly to HQ and for two of them to take the AirTag to set a trap for whoever may be monitoring it or even closing in on its location.

Madison’s voice was so confident and calm, Reina felt her pulse go back into the normal range. “Okay, I’m going to put you on speaker so I can get Lilly out of the tub and dressed.”

“Okay. Reina, you’re safe. We’ve got you. The odds anyone is closing in on you right now are very slim. Just keep the doors locked and stay on the line with me until the team gets there.”

Reina slid the phone into her bra so her hands would be free. She went back into the bathroom, where Lilly happily played in the bathtub. She hated to cut the bath short. Being the compliant child she was, Lilly, though disappointed she had to get out, didn’t argue.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“I know this is a fun tub,” Reina said. “I promise your next bath can be longer.” Reina dried her off, put her pajamas on her, and then the shoes and socks while sitting on the living room couch.

“Why shoes?” Lilly asked.

Oh boy, Reina hated to lie to her. “We’re going to go on a little adventure before bed.” She wondered if that was what her mom had said to her when she’d turned Lilly’s world upside down.

It was only a ten-minute wait before Madison told her the team had arrived. They stood on the other side of the front door. Reina peeked through the peephole. She felt so relieved to see Sloan’s face through it. She swung the door wide, so appreciative to see the three men crowded around the door.

“AirTag?” Lambchop asked, his cupped hand hanging between them.

“Yes,” she said. She pulled it from her pocket and dropped it into his palm. “Thank you for coming.”

“No worries,” Lambchop said.

“Lilly, do you remember me?” Sloan asked her. She nodded that she did. He lifted her into his arms. “We’re going for a ride.”

“Yes, I told her we’re going to have a little adventure before bed,” Reina said.

“You are,” Lambchop agreed. “I’m not sure, but I think an ice cream sundae may be involved too.”

Lilly’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Lambchop said. His gaze went to Reina. “We’ll escort you out to the SUV in the parking garage that we have parked right in front of the door. Mother’s behind the wheel. He and Sloan will bring you to our HQ.” He noticed Lilly hung on his every word. “Madison will take you to her place for a sleepover tonight.” He smiled at Lilly. “She made a point of telling me you’ll have ice cream sundaes when you get there.”

“That’s very nice of her,” Reina said.

The three men clustered around her as they guided her through the hallway and to the door to the parking garage. Lilly never noticed that the men gripped their weapons beneath their jackets. They knew she didn’t need to see them carrying. Sloan carried her backpack.

“Coming out,” Lambchop broadcast through comms to Mother.

“Roger,” Mother replied. “No movement.” He stood beside the driver’s door, which was open, his eyes sweeping the parking garage, his gaze penetrating every corner and every shadow. His ears listened intently for any sound. Nothing.

As the door opened and Lambchop came out first, Mother slid back behind the wheel of the SUV and shifted to drive, his foot heavy on the brake. Reina, clutching Lilly to herself, was clustered between the three men. They were a wall around them. Before she knew it, the car door was open. She slid in with Lilly, and Sloan crowded in beside her. As he closed the car door, Mother pulled away and drove them away from the others. The windows were all tinted. There was no need to crouch down. She

fastened Lilly's seatbelt and then her own, relieved.

Sherman and Lambchop crossed the garage to Sherman's Hellcat. He'd driven himself, Sloan, and Mother, meeting Lambchop, who drove an SUV, there in the parking garage. It always amused Sherman, watching Lambchop fold himself into his little red sports car.

"Stop laughing," Lambchop said, tucking his six-foot five inch, two hundred sixty-five-pound frame into the car with a roof height of four-foot seven inches.

"Where do we take it?" Sherman asked, shifting to drive.

"I talked with Shep on the way over. He's got an empty unit on the third floor of the building. If someone was watching the tracker all day, it would have shown a stop at the office. Going back there at this time of night shouldn't tip anyone off the tracker was found. We place it in the unit. Shep has Requisition Ryan making the unit look inhabited, and he's placing remote locks on the doors so we can lock and unlock them at will. We can use building cameras to surveil anyone coming into the unit and intercept."

"Perfect," Sherman agreed.

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When the SUV entered the underground parking garage area within the two large doors that made the area private, Madison waited near the elevator. Mother pulled the car up right next to her.

Madison opened the back door. She beamed a smile at Reina and Lilly. "You're coming to my house for a sleep over!" she said in an enthusiastic tone of voice with a big smile on her face. "My daughter, Hahna, is going to be so excited."

“Yay!” Reina said in a mock excited voice with the best smile she could muster.  
“This is going to be so fun.”

“Lilly can sit in Hahna’s booster seat on the drive to my house,” Madison said.

“Is Hahna with Elizabeth?” Sloan asked.

“Yes, she’s going to bring her home and meet us. Ice cream sundaes for everyone,”  
Madison said, giving Lilly a big smile.

After Lilly was buckled in and Reina and Madison had settled in the front seat of her SUV, Reina relaxed. “Thank you,” she said to Madison.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“I was just getting off shift and I have plenty of bedrooms. We wanted to introduce the girls, anyway.”

Reina paid attention to the route she took just in case she'd have to drive it another time. Madison got in the left turn lane at one of the intersections. She pointed at the townhouse community to the right. “The rest of Alpha Team live over in that townhouse subdivision. Just a reminder, my husband John and I are on Alpha Team. If we were to go straight, we'd come upon the preschool we all use and beside it is the elementary school our kids will all go to.” Then she made the turn. “Most of Delta Team, the team that just came to pick you up, they live about a mile north of here in a different townhouse community, except Lambchop. He and his wife live across the street from us.”

“That's convenient,” Reina said.

“We help each other a lot. It helps to live close to each other. Elizabeth, whose husband is also on Alpha Team, watches Hahna for us when we're working. They even have a bedroom at their house for Hahna.”

“That's truly amazing,” Reina said.

The car pulled up in front of a large two-story home. Madison went into an app on her phone and opened the garage door. Another car, a Lexus, was already in one of the three garage bays. “Oh, good, Elizabeth is already here.” She pulled her car into the garage.

They went into the house, passing through the large laundry room on the way to the

kitchen, which opened up into a cozy family room. Standing at the kitchen counter was a young, petite blonde woman who held a little blonde toddler girl on her hip who had to be about a year or so old. Reina deduced the woman had to be Elizabeth.

Sitting on the counter was a dark-skinned little girl with a big smile who squealed and jumped down from the counter when she saw them come through the door. “Mommy!” After she gave Madison a hug, she turned to Lilly. “Hi, I’m Hahna.” She hugged Lilly.

Madison introduced them. Hahna took Lilly’s hand and drew her over to the large toy section in the corner of the family room. The little one on Elizabeth’s hip, her daughter Olivia, protested and wiggled. Elizabeth set her on the floor. She ran over to join the girls playing with the little kitchen set.

“Little girls love big girls,” Elizabeth said. “Hi, I’m Elizabeth. You must be Reina.”

“I am. It’s nice to meet you.” They shook hands.

“Oh, hey, I almost forgot,” Elizabeth said, “the unit next to us is going on the market next week. I asked the owner to hold off signing with a realtor because I know a few people who may be interested in buying it. I ran it by Dahlia to see if she and Michael wanted to look at it, but they’ve really got their hearts set on buying over near Delta Team. Angel told me that you and Jimmy are talking about getting a place. Reina, would you like for me to set up a time with the owner for you to come take a look?”

“Oh, I’m not sure. Yes, we have talked about needing a larger place, but I think I should wait for Jimmy to get back,” Reina insisted.

“I’d hate for someone else to buy it before he gets back. Alexander told me he’s not sure how fast they can wrap this case up,” Elizabeth said.

“It won’t hurt for you to look, Reina,” Madison agreed. “You can tell Wilson about it. Send him some pics if the team doesn’t get back before the owner needs to make a decision.”

“The team is pretty used to being gone when decisions have to be made,” Elizabeth said. “And they know we have to make those decisions without them sometimes.”

Reina just wasn’t comfortable with that, but she didn’t want to lose what could be the perfect place, either. “Yeah, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to look at it.”

“Great!” Elizabeth said. “I’ll text the owner now and set something up for tomorrow morning. I can keep Lilly while you’re over there. It won’t take long. The units aren’t that big,” she said and then laughed.

“They’re very nice, three bedrooms, a two-car garage, basement, they even have their own little back yard,” Madison said.

“It sounds nice,” Reina agreed.

“And best of all, this one is right next to me,” Elizabeth said with a big smile. “I watch a lot of the children of the team members, so there’ll be kids next door for Lilly to play with. Angel and Jackson are down the block, and Anthony and Sienna are across the street from them.”

“And don’t forget that Elizabeth watches Hahna when Coop and I are working, even when we’re gone. It would be great for Hahna to have a girlfriend near her age right next door,” Madison added.

“Though all the kids think of the others as either siblings or cousins,” Elizabeth added.



Reina smiled as well. She really liked both of these women, and it would be good for Lilly to have friends living so close. “That sounds great,” Reina agreed. “I have to talk with Jimmy yet to see how it will work, but I also had just started college, a remote class that I should be able to keep taking. I may need to hire you to watch Lilly just for me to catch up on the assignments I fell behind on this past week.”

Elizabeth took hold of Reina’s hands. “I would love to have Lilly over to play. We’ll talk about money later. Just let me know when you want to work on your assignments.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Reina said.

“You’ll be here for a few days at least,” Madison said. “I’m off tomorrow and Sunday. You should be able to get a lot of it done.”

Madison got out the ice cream and toppings, creating a sundae bar on the counter. Reina helped Lilly top her ice cream, thrilled that she already had made a friend in Hahna. She smiled, watching the two girls talk while they ate their sundaes.

Elizabeth left to take Olivia home shortly afterwards. Reina’s heart was overjoyed watching Lilly give little Olivia goodbyehugs as Hahna did. This wasn’t the normal Lilly she’d known from school. This new affectionate Lilly was obviously due to Hahna being so affectionate and outgoing. Hahna would be a great role model for Lilly.

Madison locked the door to the garage after Elizabeth left. She checked each door and armed the alarm system. And then the four of them headed upstairs. “We have several guest rooms. Do you want to share a room or have separate rooms?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“We’ll share. I think that would be best for Lilly,” Reina answered.

“Yes, I assumed so. It took almost a month before Hahna felt safe enough to make it all night in her own room,” Madison said. She showed them her room, Hahna’s, and then the guest room down the hall.

Madison let each girl pick a book from the large bookcase in Hahna’s bedroom. They all piled on Hahna’s bed and Madison and Reina each read the girls one of the books. The girls hugged each other goodnight. Reina brought Lilly to the room they’d share while Madison tucked Hahna in.

After Lilly was in bed, she stepped into the hall to talk to Madison. “I’m going to go to bed now, too. I’m so tired.”

“I bet you are,” Madison said. “No problem. I’ll probably read in my room for an hour or so, if you need anything.”

“Thank you.” She paused.

Madison could see she had more on her mind. She nodded, encouraging Reina to ask.

“Are you sure we’re safe here?” Reina asked in a whisper. “And I don’t want to bring my trouble to your door and put you and Hahna in danger.”

Madison turned her back and lifted her sweater up slightly, enough to reveal the butt of a pistol tucked into a holster at the small of her back. “I’m one of them, carry an FBI badge and credentials that I earned. I participate in the same missions as the

guys, do the same job. I very easily could have been on the ground in Iowa. My team just wasn't up for the rotation. Yes, I believe you are one hundred percent safe here. If they were tracing that AirTag, there is no way they'll find you here, and if they somehow did, I've got you and Lilly. I never hesitate to take out one of the bad guys."

Reina was impressed. She smiled and nodded. "Thank you for that. And again, thank you for opening your home to us."

"You're welcome. Sleep well."

Lilly was already asleep when Reina re-entered the bedroom. Once in bed, she checked her phone. Jimmy still hadn't messaged back. She sent him another message, telling him that she was going to sleep, but urged him to call when he could. She'd have her ringer on very low with hopes the phone wouldn't wake Lilly, too.

The next morning when she woke up, Reina found a text from Jimmy, sent very late. He said he didn't want to wake them. He promised they'd talk today.

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Wilson had been paired with Jackson the night before. The two of them conducted surveillance of a man named Thomas Costa. He'd been arrested with the others five years earlier, took a plea deal, and was already out on parole. The man had a busy night, hitting several night clubs and bars in the Ironbound neighborhood, walking from establishment to establishment. They photographed everyone he interacted with. None of them were Stella Adams or Blake Henning, even though they were tracked to this very area.

While they watched Costa's every move, Garcia and Doc broke into his apartment and searched it for any signs he was in touch with Henning or Adams. Cooper and

Tommy were at Costa's place of employment, his brother-in-law's garage, where he worked as a tow-truck driver and did light work as a mechanic. He had a desk there and also parked his personal car in the lot there. It was within walking distance from his apartment. They broke in and searched the desk, the tow-truck and his car.

The Marshals were running down other leads that didn't require warrants.

It was after midnight before Wilson and Jackson returned to the hotel, confident Costa was in for the night. Wilson's alarm went off at zero seven hundred the next morning. Overnight, the Digital Team had spotted Adams and Henning in a car on the expressway, heading towards Atlantic City. Other cameras confirmed their arrival in A.C.

Just before the team was ready to head south in the two rental cars they had, Wilson slipped away and called Rae.

"Hi, I'm glad you could finally call," she said.

"I was busy doing surveillance work last night. Sorry. I saw that you'd called Ops and Madison messaged me that she had you and Lilly, so I didn't worry. And then I saw your message that you were with her and okay."

"Yes, everyone was great. Seeing that AirTag really freaked me out."

"I bet it did. You did the right thing, calling Ops. That's what they're there for," Wilson said.

"How's it going there?"

"Nothing substantial yet. But they're still in the area. We got confirmed sightings of them yesterday."

“Do you know why they’re there? There has to be a reason.”

“The Marshals speculate there’s cash or something else they need or want someplace here,” Wilson said. “We just have to find them.”

“Well, don’t worry about Lilly and me. Madison said we can stay here as long as you’re gone. Oh, and Elizabeth, you know her, right?”

“Yes, Doc’s wife. Doc is here with the team.”

“Elizabeth said the person who lives next to her is about to put her townhouse on the market next week, says we can get a look at it before she lists it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Did you go take a look at it?”

“Not yet,” Reina said. “Do you want me to?”

“Yes, and let me know what you think. Homes in that neighborhood don’t come on the market often, I know that.”

“Okay, I will. Elizabeth thinks I can get in this morning. I’ll let you know.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve got to go. The team is waiting. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Sure, I’m glad you got to call,” Reina said.

Later that morning, Madison drove them over to Elizabeth’s house. They’d gotten there twenty minutes before the neighbor was expecting Reina. The kids played, and the ladies chatted. At the time of the appointment, Elizabeth stepped outside with her and knocked on the door.

Reina knew she wanted the house before she even stepped foot inside. It was the same layout as Elizabeth’s place, which Reina found perfect. And the fact that it was next to Elizabeth’s house was even better. She’d already decided that Elizabeth was one of the nicest people she’d ever met. If Reina was to close her eyes and envision what a best friend should be like, all of Elizabeth’s traits that she’d seen so far would be it. Elizabeth even advocated Reina have mercy on Stella Adams, or as she said, give her grace. She was Lilly’s mom.

Elizabeth introduced Reina to the owner and then returned to her own house while

Reina was given a tour of the house by the owner, Lee, a sweet woman in her seventies who was moving in with her daughter. The house was far nicer than any place Reina had ever lived. But when Lee told her what she was asking for the house, Reina's heart deflated. That was a lot of money. She had no idea of Jimmy's finances, but there was no way she would tell him she loved this three hundred-thousand-dollar home.

She thanked Lee and told her she'd discuss it with her boyfriend and get back to her quickly, even though she had no intention of doing either. She was sad when she returned to Elizabeth's house.

"What's wrong? Didn't you like it?" Elizabeth asked when she rejoined them.

"I love it. Elizabeth, she's asking three hundred thousand dollars."

"Wow, that's a great price," Madison chimed in.

"I'm sure she'll list it higher if she has to pay commission to a realtor," Elizabeth agreed.

"Really?" Reina asked, shocked.

"I'm sure Wilson can get at least two-fifty for his place," Madison said.

"For a one-bedroom condo?" Reina asked.

"His place is in a very nice building. The attached parking garage adds so much value," Madison answered.

"Did you take pictures to send Wilson?" Madison asked.

“No, I’m sure he won’t need to see any.”

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The team arrived in Atlantic City with several leads on the two they sought, thanks to the Digital Team and the Marshals. The Marshals were checking out locations the two had been observed at during the original investigation five years ago. The Marshals gave the Shepherd Security Team the names and addresses of several of their prior associates who still lived in the area that had been investigated before the arrests but were not charged due to insufficient evidence.

The team split into three teams to surveil those associates. Wilson was paired with Tommy Flores. Before Bravo Team was assigned to the private security missions, Bravo and Charlie Teams worked closely together. It had been many years, but once again, working with Tommy was still comfortable territory for Wilson.

Their target was a man named Hugo Morales, who neither Wilson nor Tommy could understand why the evidence hadn’t been enough to charge him. The fact that he’d been in the identity theft and money laundering network was clear to them both.

And once they started to surveil him, it was clear he was no boy scout now. He visited several pawn shops and bars, brief stops that lasted only ten to fifteen minutes each. Through the window at several locations, they saw the shopkeepers hand him an envelope, which he looked in before shoving it into a pocket in his jacket. At two of the bars, Wilson and Flores took turns following him in. They each observed the same thing in the bar.

“Protection money?” Wilson asked Flores.

“Or stolen credit cards being passed to him by complicit shopkeepers?” Flores posed.



They sent a text message with what they'd witnessed to the team and St. Vincent with the Marshals.

Cooper called. "Your guy may very well still be operating with the business the network was charged with. That doesn't mean he's in contact with Adams and Henning."

"The Smiths in Iowa were still conducting business and our two were obviously in contact with them," Wilson pointed out. "I have a feeling this guy either has or will be paid a visit by Adams and Henning. I want to stay on him."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Approved,” Cooper said. “Let me know if you need another set of faces to properly surveil him.”

“For now, we’re good, but I can see that being necessary if this drags on too long,” Wilson said.

“Roger that. Be careful with this guy. We already know how dangerous the Smiths were,” Cooper said.

“What I don’t get is Stella Adams playing the single mom nurse and living within her means if she was still active with the network,” Flores said.

“I was thinking about that,” Wilson said. “What if she was using her nurse position to lift IDs from patients?”

“Fuck, that’s pretty low,” Flores said.

“That would be a good place to lift them, especially if the patient was in critical condition and would be hospitalized for a long time. They may not know their ID or credit cards were gone for weeks,” Cooper said. “But from all we’ve looked into, Ashley Carona was not living above her means.”

“Maybe she was promised a payday in the future after she provided X number of IDs or credit cards,” Wilson theorized. “Or maybe her being brought back in wasn’t her idea. From what Lilly and Reina both said, Stella Adams isn’t running anything right now and she very well could be afraid of Henning.”

“I’ll pass this theory along to St. Vincent and see if they have the resources to look into possible missing IDs and credit cards at the hospital she worked at or if he needs our Digital Team to do it,” Cooper said. “Stay in touch.” Then he disconnected the call.

Over the next twenty-four hours, the Shepherd Security Team’s focus shifted completely to Hugo Morales. Garcia and Jackson searched his home while the other team members surveilled him visit more establishments in a different section of town receiving envelope after envelope. Hugo Morales was living way above his means, evidenced by the house he lived in and the many high-end electronics, expensive jewelry, and artwork that was inside.

Their break came on the second evening they were in Atlantic City. Morales visited a two-story condo building that looked more like a slightly renovated old motel a block off of the boardwalk. Wilson and Flores drove by after he’d parked and caught a glimpse of the man opening the door to Morales. It was Henning.

The team surrounded the building and called it in to St. Vincent, as he wanted to make any arrest by the numbers so it would stand up in court. But as they waited, three figures exited the condo. There was at least one more person inside they saw.

“Razor, Taco, and Louisa follow our targets. Stay on them. The rest of us will remain on the target building. St. Vincent’s ETA is five minutes,” Cooper broadcast through comms.

Wilson and Flores exited their vehicle. A cold breeze off the ocean hit them as soon as they stepped from the protection of the building and into the open road, following the three suspects. The end of the road dead-ended at the Boardwalk. That was the direction the three they followed headed.

“If they separate, I’ve got that Henning fucker,” Razor transmitted.

“Adams is mine,” Wilson said.

“That leaves Morales for me,” Flores said.

Once the three they followed stepped foot onto the boardwalk, Morales went left, the other two, right. The area was quiet. It was mostly only the people rushing from vehicles to storefronts and back to their cars that were on the boardwalk due to the cold. This would make it harder to tail them unseen.

“Okay, they’ve separated from Morales,” Wilson broadcast. “Coop, do we have permission from St. Vincent to take them down? They are fugitives.”

“As a last resort, if you’re going to lose them,” Cooper replied. “Do it by the legal numbers.”

They followed for another few blocks. When they turned and took one of the paths that led to the beach, both Garcia and Wilson became suspicious. “Something isn’t right about this,” Wilson said to Garcia, broadcasting it to the team as well. “Our two are heading to the beach. And look how Henning is holding onto Adams’ arm.”

Garcia was right there with him. “We’re moving in,” he said as he took off in a run. They overtook the beach access path the pair had disappeared down quickly. It was lined with a fence and bushes outside of it. That covered their approach from anyone on the beach who’d gone left or right.

They both sprinted and quickly left the path as it emptied onto the beach. It was a cloudy night, which made quickly seeing Henning and Adams difficult. Wilson finally identified movement near the lifeguard station up ahead of them and to the right. He smacked Garcia’s shoulder and pointed. Both men ran full-out, despite the sand. They pulled their weapons. As they neared, they saw Henning had both his hands around Adams’ neck.

“Let her go, Henning!” Wilson yelled.

“Get your hands in the air, both of you!” Garcia added.

Henning’s head snapped in their direction. Stella Adams’s hands were near his waist. She grabbed the pistol he had shoved in his belt and stuck it into his gut and pulled the trigger several times. Henning slid to the ground.

“Drop it, Stella!” both men yelled over each other.

Wilson, who was several feet in front of Garcia, was nearly to her when she turned the gun in their direction. “Federal agents, Stella! Drop it!” He didn’t stop running.

“Don’t make this worse on yourself!” Garcia added. “Don’t make us shoot you!”

Wilson didn’t stop running. When he reached her, he plowed into her, pushing her arms upward as they hit the sand, his body on top of hers. The gun flew out of her hands when she landed, and the wind got knocked out of her. By the time she caught her breath, she was lying facedown in the sand with her hands zip tied behind her back.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“He was going to kill me,” she said after they’d pulled her to her feet and Mirandized her. “I didn’t know who you were running up on us.”

St. Vincent and a local LEO, Detective Arthur arrived. The Marshals also raided the condo the three of them had come out of. It was loaded with stolen credit cards, IDs, and cash. Floreshad assisted the Marshals taking Morales into custody in a bar up the boardwalk. They caught him with an envelope full of what later proved to be stolen credit cards.

It was after zero two hundred when the Shepherd Security Team got back to their hotel. Wilson knew Reina would be asleep, but he sent her a text that simply said, “It’s over. We got them. I’ll call in the morning.”

Zulu

Upon waking, Reina saw the text and tears filled her eyes. It was over. She breathed easier than she had since she’d seen Stella Adams and Blake Henning exit that bank. She glanced back into the bedroom where Lilly still slept, her angelic face on the pillow. One thing she knew was that this time, Stella Adams would not be getting a new identity. She would be going to prison. Both Lambchop and Madison had assured her of that.

She sent Jimmy a text telling him she was awake and to call whenever worked for him. The call came an hour later as the four of them were eating breakfast. She stepped into Madison’s front room to take the call. “Hello.”

“Hi, how are you doing?” Wilson asked.

“Anxious to hear how you got them.”

“I’ll tell you more in person, but we located them late last night. Henning was strangling Stella Adams. She shot and killed him.”

That hadn’t been what Reina expected to hear. “Oh my God,” she said. “He was going to kill her?”

“Yes.”

“So she killed him in self-defense?” she asked.

“That’ll be for a judge and jury to decide,” Wilson said. “And I guess an attorney general too, if they charge her. But we were there, she didn’t need to kill him to stop him.”

“Oh my God,” she said again. “She’s in custody?”

“Oh yeah, she’s in custody. She isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. St. Vincent is sure she’ll get at least twenty years for her multiple crimes.”

“Can I see her and talk to her?” Reina asked. “I want her to know I’ll take good care of Lilly. No matter what she’s done, she is her mother. And I want to be able to tell her how big of a piece of shit she is for putting her daughter in the situations she did.”

Wilson chuckled. “The Yin and the Yang all in one person. Yeah, I can put that request in with my boss.”

“When will you be home?” she asked.

“Our plane get’s here in a few hours. We’ll be back after lunch. It’ll be safe for us to

go back to my place. I can borrow an agency vehicle and come pick you up. See if you can get back in touch with the woman selling that house next to Elizabeth and Doc's house. Maybe we can stop by and see it after I pick you up."

"Okay, I'll do that."

"I'm sorry, I have to go," he said. Cooper had just poked his head into the room and pointed to his watch. "I'll see you later."

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Madison stuck her head into the guest room Reina and Lilly were staying in. The girls were playing in Hahna's room, so Reina took advantage of the time, per Madison's prompting, to work on her assignments for class. "The team will be back in about an hour," she said.

"Yes, Jimmy messaged me before they took off and gave me the approximate time he'd land. Madison, I truly appreciate you letting Lilly and me stay here."

"I'm glad you could. The girls get along great. This has been good for them both," Madison said. "Our boss, Shepherd, would like to meet with you and Wilson after the teams' debrief. I've already talked to Elizabeth, and she can keep the girls. I can drive you in and we'll drop the girls at Elizabeth's on the way. I have a little bit of work I need to do at the office."

"Should I be worried that your boss wants to meet with us?"

"Not at all," Madison assured her.

Reina packed up her and Lilly's few belongings and carried them out to Madison's SUV in the garage when they left to go to the office. They walked the girls into



Elizabeth's house. Reina was again reminded how much she liked Elizabeth. The young woman's welcoming hugs and attention to both of the girls as they entered instantly put both Lilly and her at ease.

That ease was replaced with mild anxiety as they drove to the ten-story office building along the ring road at Woodfield Mall. It was all familiar now, the parking garage, the gate, the double garage door entry to the private parking area, the elevator, floor five, all of it.

But when she and Madison stepped off the elevator, there stood Jimmy, waiting for her. He greeted her with an embrace.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Is Coop in his office?” Madison asked.

“Yeah, he headed that way after our debrief,” Wilson answered.

“I’ll see you later. Let’s get the girls together to play soon,” she told Reina. Then she walked down the hall in the direction Reina knew led to the kitchen and Angel’s desk.

Wilson laced his fingers with Rae’s. He kissed the top of her head. “Shepherd’s waiting for us.” He gave her hand a gentle tug as he stepped towards Shepherd’s open door in the corner.

Reina pulled on his hand, stopping him. “Is there anything I need to know?”

“No, it’s routine.” He gave a smile and then continued walking towards Shepherd’s office. He knocked on the open door.

“Come,” Shepherd said.

They entered the office. Reina saw the man sitting at the big desk in front of floor to ceiling windows. He stood and walked over to the seating area to the right of his desk. They joined him there. He extended his right hand to Reina. “I’m Shepherd. It’s nice to meet you.” He held a manilla folder in his left hand.

She shook his hand. “Hello, it’s nice to meet you too.”

He motioned to the couch. He sat in a chair opposite them. “Stella Adams is going to

face a variety of charges in multiple jurisdictions,” Shepherd said. “She won’t walk free for many years, certainly not while her daughter is still a minor. If you’re still willing, you’ve been given custody of Lilly Carona. The Marshals are waiting for my direction on the creation of new identities for you both.”

“Is one for me really necessary?” Reina asked. “It sounds like everyone associated with Iowa is either in custody or dead.” She was glad Blake Henning was dead.

“For your protection it is best,” Shepherd said. “People in jail can still have visitors and pass info along. And they do get out at some point.”

He handed the folder across to her. She opened it and read the name she was getting. She giggled. She turned to Jimmy. “Did you know?”

He glanced at the sheet of paper in her hand. He smiled. “I was consulted and agreed.”

“Rachel Wilson,” she read aloud.

“Rae is an accepted shortened form of Rachel,” Shepherd said. “The second page is Lilly’s. I need for you to sign yours in that name so the Marshals can create your ID.”

He handed her a pen, and she signed on the line. She remembered the process from last time. They’d create for her a driver’s license, passport, and issue her a credit card, enough for her to establish bank accounts. Last time they gave her eight hundred dollars. She had a lot more than that in her bank accounts now. “What about my bank accounts under Reina Ellis?”

“They’ll clear them out and issue a cashier’s check under your new name so you can take it to the bank of your choice to establish accounts. They should have that all done within ten days,” Shepherd said. His gaze went to Wilson. “I assume the delay

in her getting access to funds won't be an issue."

"Not at all," Wilson said. "I've got you," he added, a wink to Rae.

"Thank you both," she said. She flipped to the second page. Lilly Wilson was the name Lilly would be taking.

"Wilson mentioned you wanted to talk to Stella Adams. I can arrange a visit," Shepherd said.

"Yes, please," Reina said. "No matter what she's done, she is Lilly's mother, and I want her to know that I will take good care of Lilly. And would it be okay to offer to write to her to tell her how Lilly is doing, maybe send her pictures? And maybe when Lilly is older, she can write Lilly, or I can take Lilly to visit?"

"I'd think long and hard about what you're offering her," Shepherd said. "But if you want to do that, yes, I'll provide you with an anonymous PO box address she can have. She can never know your real address, understand?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you. And I promise, I will think about it." And she'd talk with Jimmy about it as she hadn't yet. She also wanted to give Stella a piece of her mind for the situation she'd put Lilly in and the harm she'd done that Reina would now have to make sure Lilly recovered from. She wouldn't mention that to Shepherd though.

"Do you still have your ID under Reina Ellis?" Shepherd asked.

"Yes."

"Your flight will have to be booked under that name as the Marshals won't have your ID issued under Rachel Wilson soon enough."

“Okay, no problem. I have both my driver’s license and passport with me.”

Shepherd’s eyes went to Wilson. “Angel can make your travel arrangements. She’s off today but can take care of it from home. I messaged her. She’s expecting your call. You’re off for the next three days. Report for duty at zero seven hundred Thursday.”

“Yes, sir,” Wilson said, coming to his feet. He knew they’d just been dismissed. He also already knew he was off for three days. He’d met privately with Shepherd and Cooper after the debrief. It had also been disclosed that the Smith’s had been located and arrested.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

Reina also stood. “Thank you again, Mister Shepherd, for everything.” She presented her hand.

“You’re welcome,” he said shaking it.

Once in the hallway, with Shepherd’s office door closed, they embraced.

“We have a lot to accomplish in three days,” he said.

Cooper and Madison approached. “I hear you’re headed to Newark to meet with Stella Adams,” Madison said. “I’m in town for the next few days. I can keep Lilly and Elizabeth can watch her if I have to come into the office, though I think the majority of my work can be done from home. I’m not scheduled to cover Ops.”

“That would be great. She’s comfortable at your house,” Reina said. “Thank you.”

“Are you flying out today?” Madison asked.

“If we can,” Wilson said. “I need to call Angel.”

“If we can fly out today, I still need to tell Lilly about the plans, even though I know she’ll be thrilled that she’ll be staying at your house.”

“I’ll sleep with her in the guest room,” Madison said. “I understand it’s going to take her time to be okay being alone in a room.”

“I’m injured that you don’t want to sleep with me, Blondie,” Cooper joked. “We

haven't been introduced. I'm Cooper, Madison's husband."

"It's nice to meet you," Reina said. "I recognize you from the pictures at your house. I'm Reina." She paused for a second. "Or no, I guess I won't be any longer. My new name's going to be Rachel, Rae for short." She smiled. "Just Rae again."

"It's nice to meet you, Rae," Cooper said.

"It might be a good idea if you only think of yourself as Rae now," Wilson said.

"Yeah, I think you're right. I mentally had to remind myself constantly that I was Reina, not Rae or Rae Ella. This should be easier."

"We're headed to Doc and Elizabeth's to get the girls," Madison said. "You can ride with us."

"That's perfect. Lee said we could come see the house again at any time. We could do that and tell Lilly she'll be staying with you for a day or two without me," Rae said.

Upon arriving at Elizabeth and Doc's house, they told Lilly the plan, who took it well. Rae knew both Madison and Elizabeth would take good care of her, but she still felt a little sad when she buckled Lilly into the car seat in Madison's car. Then she and Jimmy knocked on Lee's door.

After seeing the unit from the second floor to the basement, Wilson was ready to make an offer, but he knew he should talk with Rae about it first. They'd have several hours while flying to New Jersey to do that. "Thank you for letting us see it, Lee. I promise to get back to you by dinnertime tonight."

"Good enough," she said. "I'm only doing this because you're friends of Elizabeth

next door. That girl is a doll.”

“Yes, she is,” Rae agreed.

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Rae thought she’d mentally prepared herself to sit down and talk to Stella Adams. But when the guard escorted the woman wearing Department of Corrections prison apparel into the room, Rae knew she wasn’t properly prepared to sit opposite of this woman who had so spectacularly failed her child.

Stella Adams looked different, and it just wasn’t the clothes. Her hair, worn in its normal ponytail, needed to be washed. Her face, devoid of makeup, looked dry and pale. But it was the sad, utterly defeated expression on her face and the eyes that lacked a spark of life that hit Rae the hardest. A broken woman sat in front of her. The things she’d planned to say to the woman evaporated from her thoughts.

“Are you doing okay?” Rae asked.

She nodded. “Is Lilly okay?”

Rae smiled. “Yes, she is. She misses you, doesn’t understand.” Rae pulled the drawing from the folder. “She drew you this picture.”

Stella teared up. She covered her mouth with her trembling hand. “Lilly is the only good thing I’ve ever done. No matter what you may think of me, I love her so much.” Tears spilled out of her eyes.

“I know you do,” Rae said. “And she loves you too.”

“I would have died if anything had happened to her. It wasn’t easy to let her go, but I



knew it was the best thing for her. We could have killed that agent and took her from that car that night like Blake wanted to. We drove right by them. But that would have been devastating to her to see. Regardless of what they told you about me, I'm not a monster. Blake was the monster. He tried to kill me. That's why I had to kill him."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

“Yes, he would have killed you,” Rae agreed even though she was shocked by what Stella had just said. They would have killed Jackson that night if Stella had wanted to get Lilly. “And as far as letting Lilly go, that was the best thing for her. But you had an AirTag in her shoe. So, it’s not like you couldn’t find her and get her later.”

“Found it, huh? Yeah, I planned to come get her when we were done in Atlantic City, and I was free of Blake.”

Reina could not think of a thing to say in response to that. She was glad when Stella continued.

“I’m so sorry he hurt you. I thought he’d killed you. I can’t tell you how relieved I was to know you were okay. Please believe me that I am so sorry you got involved in it.” She wiped the tears that continued to trickle down her cheeks.

“I had a gut feeling Lilly was in trouble, you were in trouble. I don’t regret trying to help. I’m sorry it ended for you as it did.”

“Well, we all make our own beds, don’t we? I really tried to be Ashley Carona and leave all that behind in New Jersey. But they wouldn’t let me. Once they found me, I was theirs again. It’s ironic, I didn’t want to be a CNA. That was the Marshals doing. They even got me the job at the hospital where Jennifer Smith saw me. That’s how it happened, how they found me. And it put me in a good place to compromise people’s identities. They threatened me and Lilly. There was nothing I could do but go along.”

Reina doubted that. She wondered why Ashley Carona had not reached back out to the Marshals. Surely, they would have helped her. “There’s always something you

can do. You could have called the Marshals.”

“Blake Henning burned my next-door neighbor’s house down when I said no, thinking it was my house. He fucking killed nice old Mister Singer. If I didn’t go along, he would have killed Lilly.”

“I visited your house after Lilly was no longer coming to school. My maps program told me the burned down house next to yours was actually your address.”

“Why did you do that?” Stella asked.

“I told you; I had a feeling you and Lilly were in trouble.”

The room fell silent for a long minute.

“Thank you for agreeing to be Lilly’s guardian.”

“Thank you for your approval of it,” Rae said, not that Stella had to approve of it. But it was better that she did. “I’ll make sure you receive letters and more hand-drawn pictures from her. I’ll send you photographs of her too and drop you notes so you know how she’s doing. And I’ll make sure you have an address so you can write her letters,” Rae offered. “You’re her mom. I’m not going to replace you.” And that was the bottom line of it. Stella was her mother and even though she was in prison, it was better for Lilly to have a relationship with her.

Stella shook her head. “Lilly needs a mom, and I can’t be it from in here. You be her mom and be the best damn mom she could ever have.”

“I want her to know who you are,” Rae said. “I could even see about bringing her to visit when she’s a little older,” Rae offered.

“No, I don’t want my kid visiting me in jail,” Stella said, cutting her off. “Do you understand? Don’t you ever bring her here.”

Rae nodded. “Okay, but if you ever change your mind.”

“I won’t,” she replied sternly. “I had to visit my dad in jail. I would never put my daughter through that.”

“Lilly will need to be told in an age-appropriate way that you’re in jail and why,” Rae said. “What are your thoughts on that?”

“I don’t know. I know the shame I felt, knowing what my dad did. I don’t want Lilly to feel that way. Make sure you get her some help, you know, a child therapist.”

“I already have an appointment scheduled for her next week,” Rae promised.

“There’s no chance I’ll be out before she’s an adult. She needs a mom. She needs you to be her mom,” she repeated.

“But yes, please drop me a note from time to time and let me know how she’s doing.”

“I will,” Rae again promised.

The detective stepped back into the room. “I’m sorry, visiting time is over.” He nodded to Rae. “I’ll see you out.”

A uniformed officer came in and took Stella. At the door, Stella stopped for just a second. “Thank you, Reina. I know you didn’t have to come talk to me. I appreciate that you did.” Then the guard escorted her from the room.

Rae stepped out into the hall where Jimmy waited. He and the detective were in the

room next door that had a monitor, the camera in the corner was hooked up to. They saw and heard everything.

Wilson wrapped his arms around Rae and pulled her into his chest. “You went easy on her.”

“I showed her grace like Elizabeth suggested. Elizabeth was right. Stella Adams will punish herself for the actions that led to her being locked up away from Lilly far more than anyone else ever could. No matter what else I can say about her, she loves her daughter.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:17 am*

Wilson pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “You’re a good person, Rae. Lilly is so lucky to have you as her new mom. Take that role in her life, just like Stella said. She needs a mom. She needs you to be that mom.”

“And you?” she asked.

“I’ll be right there with you, like I promised. While you were in there, I contacted the owner of that townhouse next to Doc and Elizabeth and I bought it.”

“Just like that?” she asked, shaking her head.

“Yes. I agreed to their price, their terms, and no contingency to sell my place. I just bought it. They’ll have their lawyer send the contract to mine with what closing date works for them.”

Rae glanced around the empty hallway. Having this conversation in the hallway outside of the jail’s interview room was all wrong. She didn’t want to plan her future here. “Not here,” she said.

Wilson understood. He chuckled. “Come on. Let’s go. Angel got us a hotel room for the night.” He twined his fingers around hers and led her out. They thanked Detective Arthur for arranging the visit. He walked them out.

Rae watched Jimmy open the door for her on the passenger side of the rental car. She was again impressed with his gentlemanly gesture. “Thank you,” she said feeling emotional.

Wilson pulled Rae into an embrace, concerned by how emotional she appeared. “Are you okay?”

“I will be,” she said. She pulled away just far enough to look into his eyes, into his beautiful blue eyes. “Jimmy, Stella and Blake would have killed Jackson.”

“Correction, they would have tried. There’s a good chance he would have killed them instead.”

The thoughts ran through her mind of the added horror that would have been inflicted on Lilly, no matter which way it would have gone. “I am even more determined now with providing Lilly a safe, normal life where none of those things touch her.”

Wilson waited a beat. “And we will, Rae. Are you doubting we can with the job I do?”

She shook her head. “No, that’s not what I was saying. The world needs more people that do the job you do, because there seemsto be an endless supply of people who do bad things. By the way, Madison said it was over a month before Hahna could sleep in a room alone. Tonight, may be our last chance for that for a while to be alone in bed.” She flashed him a suggestive smile.

He pressed his body into hers and gifted her with a lengthy kiss. When he pulled away, he said, “In that case Mizz Rachel Wilson we better get to that hotel.”

“One more thing, Jimmy. I’m pretty sure I’m in love with you,” she said, a little nervous to be putting it out there.

Wilson’s lips pulled into a grin. “That’s good, because I’m pretty sure I love you too.”

“Can either of us really be sure as we haven’t even slept together?” she asked.

“You read my mind. Let’s get back to the hotel and see.”

Six Weeks Later

Rae descended the stairs to find Jimmy and Lilly in the kitchen, busy making breakfast. Lilly stood on one of the kitchen chairs that was pulled up to the counter beside Jimmy. It was their third morning waking in their new home. It was the second morning that Lilly woke up in her own bedroom after sleeping all night in it alone.

“That bacon smells so good,” Rae said. “Good morning, you two.”

“Good morning, mommy,” Lilly said.

Rae loved the sound of that. “How’d you sleep, Lilly?”

“Good,” she said with a smile.

Rae crossed the living room and greeted them both with kisses. She went to the refrigerator, where a chart was held onto it with magnets. She grabbed the sticker pack. “Pick your sticker.” She held the selection up to Lilly. She picked Belle. Rae peeled it from the others and pressed it onto Lilly’s pajama top. Lilly hopped down from the chair and pressed the star sticker Rae gave her next onto the chart beside the star reward from the prior morning for sleeping all night in her own room.

Lilly’s room was planned and the furniture and decorations bought before they took possession of the townhouse. They set it up on their first day in the new place. Her room was decorated with all her favorite Disney Princesses.

Rae pressed another kiss to Jimmy’s lips. She hadn’t slept in. They’d woke early,



made love, and then she'd gotten in the shower when they saw on the monitor that Lilly was awake. "I love you," she said after the kiss.

"I love you too," he said, his smile hinting at how wonderful their morning tryst had been for him. The simple fact was sex with Rae was better than anything he'd experienced before in his life because he loved her. She and Lilly were his present and his future and it was a future that he looked forward to.

"Can I play with Hahna today?" Lilly asked.

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“I’ll have to message her mommy and her Auntie Elizabeth and see if she’s free,” Rae replied. It was Sunday. Neither girl had school, but Rae wasn’t sure of Madison’s plans, or even if Madison and Cooper had to work or not.

Both Elizabeth and Madison had been life savers, keeping Lilly on many occasions and while they moved into the townhouse and unpacked. Many of Jimmy’s teammates helped them move in. She met so many of them she still couldn’t recall all their names. The Marshals’ movers delivered her stuff from Iowa and all of Ashley Carona’s belongings too. The garage was crowded with boxes they’d have to go through.

“Lilly, did you feed Teddy yet?” Rae asked, staring at the empty food bowl in the kitchen.

“I forgot,” Lilly said. She instantly went to the container with his food and scooped some out, pouring it into his bowl. Then she got another star sticker from Rae and placed it on the chart.

All of Rae’s lady parts warmed when Jimmy pressed kisses to the back of her neck. He had that effect on her. His touch, his kisses ignited something inside of her that held a sexual desire she’d never experienced. And that desire only existed because of her complete trust in him and her consuming love for him. The sex, from that first night at the hotel in New Jersey, was intense and raw with a complete emotional honesty. She opened herself to him unlike she had with any other man ever in her life.

“Do you need to do schoolwork today? Wilson asked her.

“It can wait until tomorrow after you deploy on your next case,” she said.

She had to start her English class over at a new college under her new name. But that was okay. She was still focused on her goal of becoming a teacher. She’d met Garcia’s wife, who was a teacher, and she encouraged her. She liked Sienna a lot.

As of now she wasn’t working. Jimmy had convinced her she could take some time off work to get the house and Lilly settled, and to start her class again. Lilly was in a three day a week, full-day preschool program at the neighborhood school the other children went to. It was walking distance from their home. She couldn’t wait until spring arrived and she could walk Lilly to and from school.

The horrors of the month before entered her thoughts occasionally, but she’d learned coping techniques from Joe Lassiter. And Lilly was doing well enough that she didn’t worry about her nonstop any longer.

Wilson embraced her and kissed her again. “I’m really proud of you,” he said. He pulled a box from his pocket and opened it. A solitaire diamond was set in the ring within. “I know I love you. I know I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Happy tears filled her eyes.

“Marry him, Mommy,” Lilly chimed in.

Wilson laughed. He’d told Lilly he was going to propose and showed her the ring before Rae came down.

Rae wrapped her arms around them both. “Yes, I’ll marry him.”

The End