



Sebastian

Author: *Mary Kennedy*

Category: Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: Sebastian Vernon has been in love with Emelia Stanton since they were just kids. Now they have a chance at a life together as she contemplates her last case with the FBI. It was hard to see her go back to D.C., but he knew they would be together soon. Until she called to read the ransom note. There's no holding any of them back. Someone is going to pay for this. Except what do you do when you understand the criminal's motives?

Emelia just wants to solve the bank robberies that have been plaguing the east coast for the last two years. She knows she's close and wants this last case solved before she goes home for good this time. Waking up drugged and handcuffed in a shed isn't exactly how she pictured this ending. Calling Sebastian with the ransom notice was the right thing to do. Unfortunately, doing the right thing in solving the case will take a lot of soul searching and help. Fortunately, she's not short on any of it.

Total Pages (Source): 50

CHAPTER ONE

Sebastian Tadzee Vernon watched his mother and father dancing at the annual Mardi Gras ball at Belle Fleur. It was something Mama Irene was passionate about. In fact, Mardi Gras was nearly as big a deal as Christmas or New Year when it came to celebrations by their family.

There were parades, floats on boats, beads, king cake, and so many delicious foods it made your mouth water just thinking about it. Sebastian's mouth didn't just water, he got hungry thinking about it. Really hungry.

His best friends were running around the tent with the Stanton quadruplets. They all had crushes on the girls. Even him.

Leif, the son of Magnus and Addie, was madly in love with Ellie. As high school juniors, they already had their lives planned out. College for her, military for him, marriage, kids, the whole thing.

Walker, the son of Bodhi and Vivienne, was head over heels for Magnolia, or Mags as they called her. He'd been in love with her since their freshman year of high school, and she felt the same way.

Maddie and Emelia were a bit more free-spirited. Everyone knew that Maddie had a crush on Forrest, and Sebastian suspected that the feeling was mutual. Never were there two more stubborn people.

For Sebastian, the only woman that existed was Emelia. Em was everything he ever

wanted. Beautiful, smart, loving, a great sister and daughter. If he could only work up the nerve to ask her on a date, his life would be much better.

“Staring at her from across the room won’t make her come to you,” smiled Rachel, Emelia’s mother. She was a beautiful, brilliant woman. She’d saved Belle Fleur by discovering something that was eating away at the soil. With her solutions, Matthew was able to expand his land, not lose it.

“I don’t think she likes me,” he said quietly.

“Girls are strange creatures, Sebastian. I should know. I had four of them. Sometimes, they just come right out and tell you they like you, and sometimes, they like to hide it in their pocket, like a little nugget of gold. Emelia is my daughter who doesn’t want the world to know how she’s feeling.”

“You mean she doesn’t want others to know she likes me?” he frowned.

“That’s not what I said,” smiled Rachel. “She’s a private girl. This isn’t a private place. Everyone knows everyone else’s business. She struggles to keep things secret from her sisters. But I know she likes you, Sebastian.”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“Because the inside of her notebook has SV+ES in little hearts everywhere. That’s how I know,” she smiled.

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m mixed?”

“Mixed? Sebastian, honey, we’re all mixed. I don’t know one person on this property who is one hundred percent of anything. You’re a beautiful mix of your father’s heritage and your mother’s beautiful Athabaskan heritage. You’re stunning,

Sebastian.”

“I didn’t think it would bother you, but you never know. Some people at school have made comments.”

“Well, then they’re ignorant. Truly. You know we don’t see anything like that here. Color, background, religion, none of it matters to us.”

His eyes followed Emelia as she left the massive tent, pulling off her Mardi Gras masque as she did.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” Rachel nodded, watching as he walked toward the maze. Behind her, Chief wrapped his arms around her shoulders and kissed her cheek.

“He loves her, doesn’t he?”

“As much as a seventeen-year-old boy can love a girl. Yes. But something tells me this one is forever. He’s a good young man, Chief. We’d be lucky if he ended up as part of our immediate family.”

“Well, we’ll let her make that choice. So far, it seems three of our four have made up their minds already. They’re young, but we’ll give it a chance.” He turned his wife to face him and smiled down at her. “I’m just happy you chose me. Now, what do you say we dance?”

“I’d say I’m the lucky one, and yes. I’ll always dance with you.”

Sebastian followed the cascade of beautiful brown hair as the wind blew through the trees of Belle Fleur. Mardi Gras could be seventy degrees or seven. This year, it was a brisk thirty-eight. He noticed that Emelia wasn’t wearing a jacket and picked up his pace.

“Em! Em, wait up,” he called. She turned, giving him a smile as she wrapped her arms around herself. He took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. “You shouldn’t be out here without a coat.”

“I needed to be away from all the chaos,” she smiled.

“Oh. I can leave you,” he said shyly.

“No, Sebastian,” she smiled. “You’re not the chaos. All of that is. I love our families, but sometimes it’s a lot.” He laughed, nodding at her.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“It’s a lot all of the time. Believe me, I understand.” They walked slowly through the maze, and Sebastian felt the wind pick up. “Maybe we should get somewhere warm.”

She nodded toward the enclosed gazebo, and they jogged toward it just as the rain started to come down. Inside, Sebastian closed the door and started the fire in the small gas fire pit. He then lit the lantern that was always available, and they snuggled together to get warm.

“If I didn’t tell you tonight, you look beautiful, Em. Really beautiful.”

“You didn’t tell me but thank you. You look handsome as well.” They could hear the faint sounds of music floating across the property, seemingly directly at them.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked, standing and holding out his hand. She nodded at him, sliding her arms into his jacket to keep warm. Sebastian didn’t care. His body was on fire. He could hear Bull’s deep voice singing a soft country love song, and he closed his eyes, holding Em tighter.

For Sebastian, it was the most perfect moment of his life. When the song ended, she stared up at him, just looking into his eyes. He was so much taller than she was. He felt the need to protect her.

“Sebastian?”

“Yes.”

“Will you kiss me?” she asked.

“Are you sure, Em? You know what it means to me if we do.”

“I know,” she nodded. “Me too. I love that you feel that way about something as simple as a kiss. We’re going to be going our own way soon, and I don’t want us to forget this. Please kiss me.”

He lowered his head to hers, finding her lips in the dim light. He didn’t pressure her with a tongue or try anything strange. He just molded his lips to hers and enjoyed every breathless moment of it.

When Em pulled back, her chest heaving up and down, they just stared at one another.

“Promise we’ll come back together?” she asked.

“You have my word.”

Giving a promise at seventeen is very different than giving one as a grown man. He and Em did ‘date,’ although that was an exaggeration. They never went to the movies alone together. The others were always with them, tagging along. Dances, sporting events, it was always the group of kids from Belle Fleur.

It seemed enough for now, but when they left after high school to pursue their individual dreams, Sebastian knew that it would be difficult to see one another.

Learning that Em had taken a job with the FBI was like a gut punch. On the occasions they would speak to one another, she never spoke about work. Not her real work.

“It’s just a boring government job,” she would laugh. “Nothing exciting ever happens for me like it does for all of you.”

He never once thought she would lie to him. But when Mags was taken by the rebels in Egypt, and they learned that all of the sisters were in agency jobs, Sebastian was gutted.

“You should have told me,” he said quietly as the others were laughing and joking around.

“I wanted to, Sebastian. So many times. I was just worried that my parents would find out, and I wasn’t ready for that yet.”

“You could have come to see me,” he said, staring at her. She could see the pain in his eyes and shook her head.

“Sebastian, it’s not what you think. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to keep this a secret from you. I’ve never been able to keep a secret from you. I didn’t want it to be this way but look at how this turned out. Once you knew about Ellie, then you all knew about Mags, Maddie, and me. Everything we knew would happen is happening.”

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“Mom and Dad want us to quit and work here.”

“Would that be so bad?” he asked, kicking his boot toe into the dirt. “I mean, you’d be back here. I’m back here.”

Em took his hand and tugged, walking toward the maze. It wasn’t cold like their first night in the maze. It was a perfectly lovely summer evening. When she stopped, still holding his hand, she looked up at him. That impossibly tall, wide figure making her feel like a doll.

“Maybe you should sit, and I’ll stand,” she smiled. He smirked, taking his seat on the stone bench. He opened his knees, and Em stood between them.

“You’re not coming home, are you?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Yes, I am. I just have this one case we’re working, and then I’ll come home. I want to finish this. It’s a series of bank robberies, and I want to catch these guys and end my career on a high note.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said, exhaling.

Em twisted her body to the side, taking a seat on one of his thighs. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him sweetly. When she pulled back, the sweet, innocent seventeen-year-old was gone. In his place was a hard, wide man. His face had a scruffy growth of hair, his eyes intense with longing and burning.

“Come to my cottage,” she whispered. He stared at her, holding her tightly to his own aching body.

“Em, you need to be sure, babe. If we go back to your cottage, we’re declaring to everyone that we mean something to one another. They all know our business.” She looked at him, grateful that he understood her need for privacy.

“You’re right. They will know.”

Hand in hand, they walked out of the maze and toward her cottage. They could feel the eyes of everyone on them, but neither turned back to acknowledge it. Inside her cottage, the nerves were eating her alive.

Now, all she had to do was tell him.

CHAPTER TWO

Emelia Stanton looked across the big Mardi Gras tent, staring at Sebastian Vernon. He was beautiful. She knew that you weren't supposed to say that men were beautiful, but he was beautiful.

"Just go talk to him, Em. You know that he likes you too," said Hex. He adored the Stanton girls, but it was this one, shy little Emelia that had his son's attention. They were identical, so he wasn't quite sure why this one stood out for Sebastian. But she did.

"Oh, hi, Mr. Hex," she said quietly. Hex laughed, shaking his head.

"It's just Hex, Em. I've known you since the day you were born. Just Hex." She smiled at him, a soft pink blush covering her cheeks.

"I don't know if he really likes me or not. He doesn't say much."

"Neither do you," he said, grinning at her. "That could present a problem for the two of you. Someone has to be brave enough to speak first."

"We're so different. I mean, look at me. I'm so small and he's so big. He might not like that."

Hex tried not to laugh out loud. The Stanton girls were all brilliant. They did exceptionally well in school, but he noticed that they were somewhat naïve about other things in life, and boys were definitely one of those things.

"Honey, if he likes you, he won't care that you're smaller than him. I have a little secret for you. Most men like a woman who is a bit smaller. It makes us feel protective of them. We want to be known as the person in their life that will save them. It's silly, really. Very neanderthal ways of thinking, but it's inside of us. We can't help it."

“What should I do?”

“Maybe just take a walk,” he said, grinning at her. “He’ll follow. I guarantee it.”

Emelia stood and started to walk away, then turned back to Hex. She bent down and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you, Hex.” He just chuckled, nodding at the young girl. He felt the womanly hands of his wife on his shoulders and turned to smile up at her.

“You’re a big softie at heart, Hex Vernon. It’s one of the many reasons I love you.”

“I know the biggest reason you love me,” he growled, standing to pull her into his arms. “Why don’t we dance, and I’ll remind you of that.”

“Let’s dance.”

Emelia told herself not to turn around. She didn’t want him to think she was doing this on purpose, even if she was. She headed toward the maze, hoping that if he followed, they could have alone time.

She loved her sisters dearly. But they were like having three identical little mothers always hovering, telling her what to do. They all seemed to be in one another’s business, and she wanted this to be between her and Sebastian. Just the two of them.

“Em! Em, wait up!”

Emilia took in a deep breath and turned, smiling at him as she wrapped her arms around herself. The wind was starting to pick up, and she could see flashes of lightning in the distance. It was cold, and they were about to get wet. Not very romantic.

As Sebastian approached, he took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. His fingers squeezed her flesh, and a sizzling heat went through her body.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“You shouldn’t be out here without a coat.”

“I needed to be away from all the chaos,” she smiled. She hoped he wouldn’t leave her. Not now.

“Oh. I can leave you,” he said shyly.

“No, Sebastian,” she smiled. “You’re not the chaos. All of that is. I love our families, but sometimes it’s a lot.” She hoped that he would understand what she was saying. She loved her parents and sisters. She loved his parents, but everyone all at once was a lot. More than a lot.

“It’s a lot all of the time. Believe me, I understand.” They walked slowly through the maze, and Sebastian felt the wind pick up. “Maybe we should get somewhere warm.”

She nodded toward the enclosed gazebo, and they jogged toward it just as the rain started to come down. Inside, Sebastian closed the door and started the fire in the small gas firepit. He then lit the lantern that was always available, and they snuggled together to get warm, staying out of the impending rain and storm.

“If I didn’t tell you tonight, you look beautiful, Em. Really beautiful.” He’d noticed, she thought to herself. She’d spent hours on her hair and makeup, wanting it to be perfect for him. She intentionally made it look different than her sisters’.

“You didn’t tell me but thank you. You look handsome as well.” Emelia heard the music coming from the Mardi Gras tent. Bull and Amanda were singing a duet while Mia played the violin. She could hear the faint sounds of everything floating across

the property, seemingly directed at them.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked, standing and holding out his hand.

She nodded at him, sliding her arms into his jacket to keep warm. Emelia hoped that he wouldn't see her shaking beneath the coat. It wasn't from the cold. It was from nerves.

Emelia knew this would be the perfect chance for her to ask him. Maybe her only chance with them alone. When the song ended, she stared up at him, just looking into his eyes. He was so much taller than she was. She rocked up on her toes to be taller.

“Sebastian?”

“Yes.”

“Will you kiss me?” she asked.

“Are you sure, Em? You know what it means to me if we do.”

“I know,” she nodded. “Me too. We're going to be going our own way soon, and I don't want us to forget this. Please kiss me.”

He lowered his head to hers, finding her lips in the dim light. He didn't pressure her with a tongue or try anything strange. He just molded his lips to hers and enjoyed every breathless moment of it. It was her first kiss, and Emelia knew it would also be the last. No other man would ever touch her again. Sebastian or celibacy.

When Em pulled back, her chest heaving up and down, they just stared at one another.

“Promise we’ll come back together?” she asked.

“You have my word.”

Emelia knew that any number of things could change between now and when they left for college and the military. She also knew that the majority of those on the property always returned.

They’d both hoped that they could date until they had to leave, but dating was difficult when there were a bunch of other people around you all the time!

For Emelia, it was enough for the time being. Finished with her master’s program, she took a job with the FBI and never told anyone except her sisters. She wanted to tell Sebastian, but she knew that if she told him, the others would all find out, and that would make their parents find out.

None of them were ready for that.

Their hand was forced when Mags was kidnapped in Egypt, and Ellie and Leif reconnected. Now, the whole world knew that they each worked for one of the agencies.

“You should have told me,” he said quietly as the others were laughing and joking around. Finally safe and happily back home, Mags and Ellie were married to the loves of their lives. She was thrilled for them, and she hoped that Maddie would stop being so stubborn and realize that Forrest was the man for her.

“I wanted to, Sebastian. So many times. I was just worried that my parents would find out, and I wasn’t ready for that yet.”

“You could have come to see me,” he said, staring at her. She could see the pain in

his eyes and shook her head.

“Sebastian, it’s not what you think. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to keep this a secret from you. I’ve never been able to keep a secret from you. I didn’t want for it to be this way but look at how this turned out. Once you knew about Ellie, then you all knew about Mags, Maddie, and me. Everything we knew would happen is happening.”

“What’s happening?” he asked.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Mom and Dad want us to quit and work here.”

“Would that be so bad?” he asked, kicking his boot toe into the dirt. “I mean, you’d be back here. I’m back here.”

Em took his hand and tugged, walking toward the maze. It wasn’t cold like their first night in the maze. It was a perfectly lovely summer evening. When she stopped, still holding his hand, she looked up at him. That impossibly tall, wide figure making her feel like a doll.

“Maybe you should sit, and I’ll stand,” she smiled. He smirked, taking his seat on the stone bench. He opened his knees, and Em stood between them.

“You’re not coming home, are you?”

“Yes, I am. I just have this one case we’re working, and then I’ll come home. I want to finish this. It’s a series of bank robberies, and I want to catch these guys and end my career on a high note.” She couldn’t tell him all the details. She couldn’t tell him that she’d received death threats for her investigation of the robberies or that she was close to finding who was responsible.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said, exhaling.

Em twisted her body to the side, taking a seat on one of his thighs. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him sweetly. When she pulled back, the sweet, innocent seventeen-year-old was gone. In his place was a hard, wide man. His face had a scruffy growth of hair, his eyes intense with longing and burning.

“Come to my cottage,” she whispered. He stared at her, holding her tightly to his own aching body.

“Em, you need to be sure, babe. If we go back to your cottage, we’re declaring to everyone that we mean something to one another. They’ll all know our business.” She looked at him, grateful that he understood her need for privacy.

“You’re right. They will know.”

Emelia could feel the eyes of everyone on them as they walked hand in hand toward her cottage. She knew that they all understood now what their relationship was. Hand in hand, they walked out of the maze and toward her cottage. They could feel the eyes of everyone on them, but neither turned back to acknowledge it. Inside her cottage, the nerves were eating her alive.

Now, all she had to do was tell him.

CHAPTER THREE

“I won’t be mad if you want to back out, Em,” he said quietly, taking a seat on her sofa. She shook her head, smiling at him.

“I am nervous, but not because of what you probably think. Sebastian? How many women have you been with?”

Sebastian stared at her, bells and whistles going off in his brain. His conscience was screaming conflicting thoughts at him. Don’t tell her the truth. Tell the truth. Don’t tell her the truth.

In the end, he did what he needed to do.

“Probably thirteen. Maybe fourteen. I only saw one woman more than once. We never really dated. We just liked one another’s company. I’m ashamed to say it, Em, but most were one-time only. I always used protection, and I was honest with them.”

“You don’t have to explain,” she blushed. “That wasn’t why I was asking.”

“Then why?” he asked, scooting closer to her.

“I’ve never been with anyone, Sebastian.” He stared at her, blinking several times and swallowing. “If that matters to you, I don’t know what to say. I can’t change it. I just couldn’t give myself to someone knowing that you were the man I was meant to be with.”

“Em,” he choked out. “You’re fucking beautiful, baby. Are you telling me the men in D.C. didn’t approach you?”

“Oh, they approached me,” she laughed. “Usually when I was with my sisters. I think they thought we were a novelty and might be able to get all four of us together. Sometimes, Maddie, Mags, and Ellie would try to fix me up with someone, but I just couldn’t do it. I started lying to them about seeing someone.”

“Em, baby, why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you come and see me so we could make this official?”

“I didn’t want to pressure you, Sebastian. I know that men need more time than women, and I wanted you to be sure of this. Of us.”

Sebastian stood, shoving his hands through his hair. He turned back, staring at the woman he knew would be his wife. Never touched. Never made love to. She waited for him. Him.

“I’m going to make love to you, Emelia Stanton. When we’re done, we’ll go to dinner with the family and let them all know that when you finish this last case, we’re going to be married. You and me. There will never be another man that touches you. Never.”

She smiled up at him, nodding.

“I know what to do,” she said shyly. “I’m a grown woman. I know what’s supposed to happen, what I need to do. I just don’t have any practice with it.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Well, you’re going to get all the practice you want and need with me. Only me, Em. Hear me?”

“I hear you,” she said, standing to take his hand. “Now, show me what you want.”

Sebastian pulled her into the bedroom and then stripped off his own clothing. Turning, he allowed her to see his entire body, touching him, feeling his skin as he struggled to remain in control.

“Now you, Em. All of it. Take it all off.” She laughed at him, shaking her head.

“You do it. Rip it off of me, Sebastian. Hurry.” She was getting very hot, and Sebastian could smell her sex from where he was standing. He took her at her word, ripping the soft cotton dress from her body. Beneath it, she wore a pure white lace bra and panty set. The soft mound of curls was glistening with her desire.

“Fuck, baby. I hope I can slow down for you,” he growled.

“Sebastian, I’ve been waiting fifteen years for this. Don’t take your time.”

He swiftly lifted her and settled her on the plush covers of her bed. He grabbed a condom and wrapped it over his painful cock. The rich purple head intrigued Emelia as she reached out, stroking it with her soft fingers.

“Babe,” he moaned.

“Feel good?” she smirked.

“You little vixen, you know it fucking feels good. Damn, Em. You’re so fucking beautiful,” he moaned, leaning over her and devouring her mouth.

“So are you,” she said breathlessly. Unwilling to wait, she gripped his cock and guided him to her opening. Wet and begging for his body, he gradually inched his way inside her.

“Mmm,” she moaned.

“I’m sorry, babe. It’s going to sting like a bitch, but then it will be over.” She nodded, gripping his buttocks. Sebastian powered through, burying himself inside her. The salty tears streamed down her cheeks, and he kissed and licked them away. When she started to move her own body, he knew he was going to control this one.

“Legs wider, Em,” he said, staring down at her. “Wider, babe.” His own body was almost too wide and thick for her body to accommodate comfortably. She had to really spread her legs. Instead, she lifted them, wrapping one around his shoulders, the other around his waist.

“Fuck yeah, baby girl,” he moaned.

“Sebastian,” she moaned. “Sebastian, I’m cumming!”

“Fuck yes!”

Both exhausted and breathless, Sebastian slowly pulled out, tying off the bloodied condom and disposing of it. He brought a warm cloth, wiping away the blood on Em’s body.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“You know that it hurt, but it was a beautiful hurt,” she smiled, kissing him and pulling him close to her naked, sweaty body. “It was everything I hoped it would be, Sebastian. I love you.”

Sebastian smiled down at her sweet, innocent face, kissing her again.

“I’ve loved you almost my whole life, Em. Marry me. When you’re done with these damn bank robbers. Marry me, and let’s start popping out the next generation of Vernons.”

Emelia laughed, nodding her head at him.

“For now, we should get dressed and back out there before someone knocks on the door,” said Sebastian.

“They’ll all know,” smirked Emelia.

“That’s the point, honey. I want every last one of them to know.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“When will they come out?” asked Mags.

“When they’re ready,” laughed Walker. “Why don’t we leave them alone? They’ll come and see everyone when they’re done.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“I know,” said Ellie, “but it’s so exciting. We’ve been waiting for them!”

“Hey! Everyone! Come quick! Moose and Erica’s baby is coming!” yelled Conor.

Em and Sebastian forgotten, they took off toward the clinic and waited with dozens of others as tiny little Erica gave birth to the man-child belonging to Moose. It seemed to be taking hours longer than it should have, but they were assured that everything was normal.

U-Jin paced the floors, waiting for news on his sister. They’d just found one another, so he hoped that this massive child didn’t take her from him.

“This is where everyone is,” grinned Sebastian. “What’s going on?”

“Moose and Erica are in labor,” said Conor. “I mean, Erica is in labor, but you know what we mean. How are you guys?”

The entire room gave a knowing smirk, and Sebastian just laughed, hugging Emelia to his side.

“We’re perfect, and we will be getting married once Em has completed her last case with the bureau.” There was applause, then blank stares from Moose standing in the doorway.

“What are you cheering? You don’t even know anything yet.”

“Just tell us everything is okay,” begged U-Jin. He smiled at his brother-in-law and

nodded.

“A boy. Eleven pounds one ounce, twenty-two inches long.”

“Ouch,” said every female in the room.

Moose could only laugh, shaking his head. Erica was a very tiny Asian woman, and he knew she would struggle to give birth to a baby of his. In the end, the team decided to do a c-section to help the poor woman.

“She was so brave, so perfect. He’s perfect. Sergeant Jordan Sculler.” He stared at his friends, the Jordan brothers. They’d brought him here. They’d selected him from their team to come home with them. He would forever be grateful to them.

“Brother, that’s awesome,” laughed Patrick and Christopher. Christopher turned to Sebastian.

“What about you two?”

“Just the usual Belle Fleur magic,” smiled Emelia. “As Sebastian said, I’ll finish this last case with the bureau, come home to work here, and we’ll get married. Maybe a beautiful outdoor fall wedding.” Her parents, along with Hex and Gwen, hugged them both. Rachel and Chief were particularly happy that a third daughter would soon be married.

A few moments later, Doc carried the tiny, large bundle out for everyone to see. His head full of thick black hair and scrunched-up chubby cheeks earned oohs and ahhs from everyone. Christopher and Patrick were the second to be able to hold him, next to U-Jin.

Taking his nephew in his arms, he stared down at the perfect face, kissing his

forehead.

“You will only know happiness and freedom. I will guarantee it.” His wife smiled at him, kissing his cheek. They’d been trying to have their own family with little success thus far. The beauty was in the trying.

“When can we go home?” asked Moose.

“Not for a few days, brother. We watch our c-section patients for a few days. She’ll be fine here. We’ll make up the bed for you, and you can stay with her.”

“I need to get everything ready,” frowned Moose.

“We will take care of that,” said U-Jin. “Do not worry. My sister and nephew will return to the perfect home. My niece will stay with us until you come home.” Moose slapped him on the back, forcing him to take a step forward. U-Jin could only laugh.

“Thanks, brother.”

“Alright, everyone back to the grove,” smiled Claudette. “We’ll have a pre-celebration and wait on the rest of these babies.”

Over the meal, Emelia and her sisters talked about wedding plans and where to have the ceremony. She’d always wanted to have it in the gardens with her family and friends. No seats, just a short, quick ceremony with scents of Belle Fleur around her.

Then she wanted a huge meal in the grove with everyone. She wanted simple. Basic. She even confessed to everyone that she’d bought a simple, white wool dress three years ago while in Chicago.

“You did?” smirked Sebastian. She blushed, nodding.

“I always knew, Sebastian. It’s been in the back of my closet since then. It’s nothing fancy, a tea-length dress. But I knew that it would be warm enough to wear outside and yet be simple.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“What would you like me to wear?” he asked dutifully.

“Your uniform,” she smiled. “I always dreamed of marrying my Ranger. I want you to wear your uniform.”

“Then that’s what I’ll wear,” he smiled, kissing her.

Over the next few days, they took long boat rides around the bayou, exploring islands they didn’t even know belonged to Belle Fleur. Matthew and the team had taken the time to post signs on each island with its individual name, and the very clear declaration that it was private property.

“I wonder what he’s planning for all these islands,” said Emelia, hugging Sebastian.

“My guess is he’s planning for the future. A future that you and I will be a part of for a long, long time. I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember, Em. I can’t wait for you to be my wife.”

“Same,” she smiled. “I dream of it, you know. I dream of being Mrs. Sebastian Vernon. When I was younger, I used to write it in my notebooks. My sisters would make fun of me and tease me. Thankfully, they knew how to keep a secret, or I would have been outed a long time ago.”

“That wouldn’t have been so bad,” smiled Sebastian. “Maybe we could take a vacation in Alaska, see where Mom was born and raised.”

“I’d love that,” she smiled.

“When do you have to leave?” he said with a sober expression.

“Two days. I don’t want to think about it. This case is kicking my ass. I’m good at what I do, Sebastian. When I’m in FBI-mode, I’m confident; I know where to go for my sources and information, but this one is tough.”

“Wanna talk it through? I could gather the guys, and we could chat about it. As much as you’re comfortable with.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you know, that might help me.”

Back in the grove, Leif, Major, Brix, Forrest, Alistair, Garr, and her sisters all sat patiently waiting for her to begin.

“This has to stay here,” she said.

“Em, we know,” smirked Mags.

Walking along the paths toward the offices were Doug, Chipper, Evie, Autumn, and the new pilot, Clark. Everyone smirked as Forrest followed the woman, watching her every move.

“You know that’s creepy, right?” smirked Ellie. “Just talk to her, Forrest.”

“What? No. No, it’s not like that. I mean. Never mind. Just continue.”

“Alright, so in the last four months, there have been seven bank robberies in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. They follow the same pattern, the same MO. They all happen just as the bank is about to close its doors. The robbers come in with sunhats, remove the hats, and they’re wearing masks.”

“What kind of masks?” asked Sebastian.

“Mostly character masks like rabbits, dogs, that sort of thing. They carry handguns but haven’t harmed anyone. They ask for the cash in the drawers but not the cash in the safe. There is always a car waiting outside, but when the police arrive, the car is still sitting there, and no one is inside. It ends up being a car that was parked a few blocks away and moved.”

“Moved? Like someone parked it, drove it a few blocks, parked it in front of the bank, and then left it there?” asked Leif.

“Yep. No one has been harmed, but I feel like it’s only a matter of time.”

“What about the alarms? Why aren’t the alarms bringing the police in on time?” asked Brix.

“They’re disabled,” she said, staring at the people around the table. She knew that saying that would get their attention. To disable a bank alarm system took skill. It had to be done precisely, and the timing had to be impeccable.

“Disabled,” muttered Forrest. “Bank alarms are complex systems. You have to know what the hell you’re doing to get that done. What about former employees?”

“Believe me, I’ve scanned through it all. Former employees, former guards, IT teams with the banks. I can’t find one link.”

“Are the banks all the same company?” asked Leif.

“No. All different banks. Here’s the thing that I can’t convince anyone of. I think these robberies are connected to some robberies that occurred two years ago. There were five robberies two summers ago in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. All were

done with masks, but the masks weren't animals. They were superheroes.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Superheroes? Like Superman, Batman?” asked Garr.

“Exactly. We’ve scanned street and traffic cameras, but it appears they disrupt those just long enough to take off the masks and move on. There have been no big spends with cash. No one is trying to buy luxury vehicles, watches, or jewelry in cash. It’s making me crazy!”

“It’s a tough one, Em, but I know you’ll figure it out,” said Ellie.

“I can tell you that suspects tend to be the last people you might think,” said Major. Emelia looked up at him, tilting her head sideways.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the usual suspects aren’t usual at all. My experience tells me that while everyone might be looking at an inside job or experienced robbers, it could be someone that we would never think of.”

“That’s actually really good,” smiled Emelia. Major laughed, shaking his head.

“Gee, thanks for having confidence in me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that! I just mean, maybe I’ve been looking at all the wrong people. I’ll have to think about that.”

For the next couple of days, Em rolled all the ideas through her mind while spending as much time in Sebastian’s arms as she could. When she left at the end of the week,

she was sad but also hopeful.

“I’ll be home soon,” she said, kissing Sebastian goodbye.

“I know. I’ll miss you, baby. You’ll find me right here, waiting to make you my wife.” He held her for a long moment, something in his gut saying, ‘don’t let go.’ When he waved goodbye, his friends slapped his back, smiling.

“She’ll be back, brother,” laughed Brix. In his most unconvincing voice ever, Sebastian replied.

“Yeah. Yeah. She’ll be back.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Did you enjoy your break, Ms. Stanton?” asked Helen. An older woman with short, beautifully silver hair and sparkling blue eyes, she’d been the administrative assistant for her division at the bureau for almost more years than Emelia had been alive.

“I did, Helen. It was wonderful to be with my family. We even had a new baby join the family.”

“Oh, a baby,” she smiled, clasping her hands. “That’s so wonderful! All my kids and grandkids live so far away now. Tom and his wife live in Ireland near her family. Alison and her husband live in California.”

“That’s not so far,” smiled Em.

“I guess not, but they’re so busy I only get an invite about once a year.” Emelia frowned at that. She would be lost if she could only see her family once a year.

“I’m sorry, Helen. Maybe you should come home with me sometime and visit my family.” The older woman laughed, shaking her head.

“Oh, Emelia, you are a lovely young woman. Your parents should be very proud of you. I’m just fine, sweetie. I have a good group of friends here in Virginia now. We do all our holidays together, even share a house.”

“Now, that sounds wonderful. Is Frank in?”

“Oh, yes. He came growling in around 0600,” she frowned.

“Helen, that means you were here at 0600,” she smirked. “Alright. I’ll get ready for the usual ass-chewing. Wish me luck!”

Helen laughed at the young woman as she walked toward the offices at the back of the floor. She liked Emelia more than any of the other agents. She always stopped to speak with her, always asked about her weekend or holiday. If her instincts were right, Frank was going to lose a great agent, and Helen would say that it served him right.

“Morning, Tara. Morning, Cord.”

“Morning, Emelia. Glad to have you back,” said Cord. “Frank wants to...”

“Get your asses in here!” came the yell from the huddle room.

“Let me guess,” she whispered. “He wants to see us.” The others chuckled, shaking their heads. Emelia didn’t care. She was going to finish this and be on her way. The love of her life had proposed, and she was going home where she belonged.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“About time you all got in,” he snapped.

“Frank, they were here early. It’s only 0700, and I’m here. Yelling doesn’t make us move any faster,” said Emelia. At home, she was relatively quiet. At work, Emelia had learned that if you didn’t stand up for yourself, no one else would.

Frank looked up at the clock, then back down at the files in front of him, nodding.

“Sorry. I just got off the phone and got the ass-chewing of my life. The bureau and others want this bank robbery ring stopped. Immediately.”

“Well, let me get on the phone and tell the robbers we’d like them to stop robbing banks,” Cord said sarcastically. The others rolled their eyes at him, knowing that Frank would make him pay for that later.

“Frank, there has been no pattern to any of this. Not geographically, not by bank name, nothing. It’s as if they’re picking them at random. We’re looking at all the options, but we just need a break. A little tiny break,” said Tara.

“I know, I know,” nodded Frank. He pushed a sheet of paper toward each of them. “This might be it. We’ve had waste management trying to keep an eye out for any discarded masks. These three addresses, miles apart, had similar masks to what was described in the robberies. Each of you take an address and ask questions.

“I don’t expect any issues. These are quiet, middle-class neighborhoods with families, children, some retirees. It could be totally random, but it might lead us somewhere.”

“I’ll take the one in Maryland,” said Emelia.

“I’ll take D.C.,” said Cord.

“I guess that leaves me Virginia,” smiled Tara.

Gathering their gear, they each headed out. Emelia waved at Helen, smiling at the older woman.

“Be back soon, Helen. Headed to the great state of Maryland.”

“Oooh, get a crab cake by the wharf!” Emelia could only laugh as she got in the elevator with her colleagues.

Emelia drove through the small neighborhood near the water, admiring the pretty little cottages and ranch-style homes. It was a beautiful mix of styles with the well-maintained homes and lawns speaking to the pride of the neighborhood.

Checking the address on her sheet, she pulled up out front of the pretty blue house. Standing outside the car, she looked up and down the street, shaking her head.

“This is not my lead,” she muttered under her breath. Knowing she had to follow up on it, she walked up the sidewalk and onto the porch, ringing the doorbell. It was a few moments later that an older man opened the door, his wife behind.

“Can I help you, dear?” he asked.

“I hope so, sir. My name is Agent Emelia Stanton with the FBI. I’d like to ask you a few questions about a mask that was found in your trash.”

“A mask?” exclaimed his wife.

“Yes, ma’am. May I come in?”

“Let her in, Ed,” said the woman. “Can I get you some tea, honey?”

“That would be lovely, thank you,” smiled Emelia. She took a seat on the older floral sofa and casually took in the décor. It was simple but clean, well-cared for, and exactly what she would expect from an older couple. It seemed odd that there wasn’t the usual clutter of an older person’s home, but then again, they could be neat freaks. She knew a few of those herself.

“So, a mask,” said the man.

“Yes, sir. I’m investigating the bank robberies you’ve probably read about lately, and the mask that was found in your trash matches one that was used in a recent robbery.”

“I’ll bet those darn kids at the end of the street threw it in there,” he said, shaking his head.

“Now, Ed,” said the woman, setting the tea in front of Emelia. “It’s not always those kids. He just doesn’t like kids.”

“I understand,” smiled Emelia. She took a sip of the tea and set it back down on the saucer. “Did you...”

“Did we what, dear?” Emelia looked at the woman, her head suddenly swimming, then looked at the man. She started to stand but fell back against the sofa.

“Oh, no,” said Ed. “Looks like she’s drunk too much.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

The last thing Emelia remembered was the old woman taking her shoes off as she lifted her feet onto the sofa.

CHAPTER SIX

Emelia opened her eyes slowly, the pounding headache telling her that she wasn't where she was supposed to be. The dim light in the metal building seemed out of place, considering where she thought she was. Then she started remembering.

"Sorry about that," said the old woman. "You weren't supposed to find us."

Holy shit. These old people were her bank robbers. She stared at the elderly couple, frowning.

"You're going to make a call. Once you do, we'll leave you here for a while to think about your actions." She was being scolded. By bank robbers! Think about her actions? What about their actions?

"My actions?" said Emelia.

"Don't argue. We know who you are. Emelia Stanton, sister to Magnolia, Maddie, and Ellie. Daughter to Chief Stanton and granddaughter to Ghost Stanton. That's quite a legacy, young lady. Myrtle has written down exactly what you're to say. If you veer from it, I will shoot you."

"He's not lying," said the old woman. "Your friends are already dead. It's a shame that all of you were sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong."

Ed handed her the phone and ordered her to dial the number. Her hands were zip-tied to one of the metal supports of the building, but she could dial the number. She prayed that Sebastian would answer and he would know what to do.

“When is Em coming home?” asked Forrest.

“Soon,” said Sebastian, slowing his run as they reached the main trails. “She’s working on that bank robbery case that everyone was talking about. Seven banks in sixteen weeks. Someone is really good at their work.”

“Well, she’ll be home soon, and you two lovebirds can start your life together.”

“What about you and Maddie? Is she leaving the Pentagon any time soon?” asked Sebastian.

“Brother, I wish I knew. She’s acting really strange, and I’m not sure why. I thought we were doing alright, and then when I was supposed to fly up and see her a week ago, she canceled last minute.”

“That’s not weird, Forrest. That’s a woman. She’s probably just swamped with work, that’s all.”

“I guess.”

They walked the remainder of the way to the offices, finishing their morning PT along with the others. As the meeting began, his phone rang, and he recognized Em’s number. At first, he ignored it. She knew that they were in their meetings at this time.

Then he realized she knew they were in their morning meetings at this time. She wouldn’t call unless it was important.

“Hello?”

“Sebastian? Listen carefully, don’t interrupt.” He waved at the room, silencing them as he stood with the phone on speaker. “I am being held captive by the individuals responsible for the bank robberies. They want five million dollars in small bills. I will call back in forty-eight hours to give you the drop.”

“Em. Em, don’t hang up,” he said in a panicked voice.

“I’m sorry, Sebastian. I’ve read the ransom request, and that’s all I can do. I love you.”

The line went dead, and every man in the room stared at Sebastian and then turned to see the fierce expression on Chief’s face.

“Get your weapons. We’re going after my daughter.”

“We’re all going,” said Leif. Major, Brix, Forrest, Garr, and Alistair all nodded at him. Beside Chief were Hex, Jalen, Tiger, Torro, Milo, and Chase. Chief nodded at his friends as they headed toward the weapons room.

“Jet is ready,” said Eric, sticking his head in the door. “Better news is that she has her tracking devices on and comms is active. You’ll have the precise location once you’re in the air. Bring our girl home.”

Boarding the jet, they all took their seats, and Alistair was pleased to see Clark at the controls, along with Autumn. He just smiled at her and then focused on their new task. An hour before landing, the information came through on the exact location.

“She’s in a neighborhood in Maryland near the water. Canton. From the GPS, it appears she’s in the backyard of a home in a small shed. We’re not seeing any

activity at the house right now, but that doesn't mean they're not there."

"I'm going to kill them," said Sebastian.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Brother, you need to calm down, or I’m gonna leave your ass on this jet,” said Chief. “You won’t risk my daughter’s life. I need you to focus. Hear me?”

“Hear you,” nodded Sebastian. “Sorry.” Hex slapped his son’s back, knowing exactly how he was feeling. Hell, they all knew.

Off the plane, they piled into the waiting SUVs and headed toward the location. Chief could feel the pull at his gut. Two daughters in danger in one year was more than he signed up for. Yet here he was.

The neighborhood appeared quiet and typical for a suburban neighborhood. The SUVs nor the men in them were not in the mood for subtle, pulling right up onto the lawn. Sebastian was the first off, weapon ready, as he stormed into the backyard. The metal shed wasn’t even locked. He prayed that was good news, not bad news.

Tearing the door open, Em was huddled against the wall, blinded by the sunlight.

“Em. Em, baby, it’s me,” he said, cutting the zip ties.

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her, carrying her outside. The group of men staring at her made her want to cry, but she tried to hold it together.

“Are they in there?” she asked.

“Who, honey?” asked her father, kissing her forehead.

“Ed and Myrtle. The old couple I came to interview about the masks. They were this

sweet little old couple. She offered me a cup of tea, and I foolishly accepted it. I never once thought that anything would be wrong with it. She drugged me, and they locked me in that damn shed. Are they there?"

"No one is inside," said Hex, walking toward his soon-to-be daughter-in-law. "The place is empty. No clothing, nothing. You must not have gotten further than the front room. There was only living room furniture and a few sparse pieces of furniture and paintings throughout. It's almost as if it were being staged for sale or something."

"It's a front," she whispered. She realized that Sebastian still held her in his arms, not allowing her feet to touch the earth. "You can put me down, Sebastian."

"Like hell I will." He gave her a dark glare, and she could only shake her head, knowing it was futile to argue with him.

"I need to get to the office. They said that they killed my partners. I need to see what happened." Sebastian frowned, staring at the others. Chief nodded, looking at Hex.

"Alright, honey. Let's go. But you don't make a move without us. Clear?"

"Clear," she smiled. "Everyone? Thank you for coming." She was met with a dozen middle fingers.

That's when she cried.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emelia didn't even realize that it had been twenty-four hours since she'd been taken. Walking into the bureau offices, she was surprised that it was already mid-afternoon the following day.

With a herd of mammoths behind her, everyone stopped, standing to watch as she made her way toward Frank's office.

"Emelia," he whispered, standing from his desk. "Shit, we've been looking for you."

"Looking for me? Why didn't you go to the house you sent me to?" she snapped. Chief, Hex, and Sebastian stared at her. That's their girl.

"We did," frowned Frank. "We went to the house I told you to go to."

"No," she said, shaking her head, looking at her friends and family. "What was the address you guys went to? Where did you find me? I wasn't paying attention."

"We went 18233 Cranberry Cove," said Leif.

"That wasn't the address," said Frank. "The house I sent you to was 987 Crabapple."

"Damn. They moved me. How did they move me?" she muttered.

"You're not that big, Em. It wouldn't take much to drag you to a car," said Major. "Did you find anything at the other house?"

"Nothing. There weren't any clothes, nothing to identify the owners. We found Emelia's car out front, but that was all. Em, Tara, and Cord didn't make it. They knocked on the front door, and it appears they were both shot right there on the porches of the homes. Neighbors heard the shots but nothing else."

"Why didn't they shoot me?" she whispered. "Why let me live?"

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“I don’t know,” said Frank, shaking his head. “This just went from armed bank robbery to murder. We’ve got dozens of teams looking for them now.”

“Wait. They knew me. The woman, she said she knew who I was. She named my sisters, my father, and my grandfather. How would she know all that?”

All eyes turned to a very nervous Frank, who was shaking his head.

“I swear that I haven’t said anything to anyone. Even Tara and Cord didn’t know about your family. I have no clue how anyone would know.”

Emelia took a seat, rubbing her temples. She had a vicious headache from whatever the old woman had given her in her tea.

“Baby, what do you need?” asked Sebastian.

“Can someone go ask Helen for some aspirin and a soda? She keeps them in her desk.”

“Helen’s not here today,” said Frank. “She said she had a family emergency and is headed to New York to see her son.”

Emelia froze, slowly looking up at everyone. Sebastian stared at her, knowing that expression. The others just waited.

“She doesn’t have a son in New York. Her son is in Ireland, and her daughter is in California. She never takes off. Never takes off to see them because they don’t invite

her to see them.”

“Maybe he moved or something. I don’t think it means anything,” said Frank.

“Are you fucking with me right now?” growled Hex. “You’ve got a mature woman working your front desk who lies about a family emergency on the same day that Emelia is kidnapped and two other agents are shot. Wake up!”

“Don’t fucking come in here and yell at me! I’m in charge here, not you.”

“I can fix that,” said Chief. Frank stared at him, then back at Emelia. He knew who they were, and he knew that they could make one call and have him removed from his position.

“Fine. I don’t know much about Helen. She’s nice to everyone, says hello, runs errands when we need it. That’s about all I can tell you.”

“She’s worked here for almost thirty years,” said Emelia, staring at him. “That woman has worked here thirty years, and you know nothing about her. There’s no telling how many other agents have died because of something she knew, said, or did. She just said to me that I was the only person who ever asked about her.”

“That’s why she didn’t have you shot,” said Chief. “Your kindness kept you alive, honey.”

“Yes, but their indifference may have killed them. Tara and Cord were good agents, just always head down.”

“We’re all like that,” frowned Frank.

“Not all,” said Sebastian, staring at Emelia. She smiled at him then stood, looking

down at Frank.

“I’m going to find them, and when I do, it will be my last case for the bureau. I won’t break any rules or laws but stay out of my way.” He had nothing more to say as she left the room, each man bigger than the last following her until it was just Chief and Hex.

“Just for clarification,” said Hex, “we didn’t promise to not break any rules or laws.”

At the desk of Helen, Emelia rifled through the drawers, files, and folders looking for something that would give her an explanation.

“I don’t get it,” said Emelia. “She was here every single day. She wore professional attire without it being expensive, and she drove a car that was seven years old. She didn’t take expensive vacations or trips. Nothing.”

“Where does she live?” asked Forrest.

“Near Falls Church, I think,” said Emelia. “I was never at her home, but we talked about things like where she shopped, went to the movies, that sort of thing. It was always in the area of Falls Church.”

“We’ll see if we can find an address,” said Brix.

“Honey?” said Chief, turning to her with an envelope in his hand. In Helen’s handwriting was her name on the front. She took the envelope and opened it, finding the letter inside.

I’m sorry, Emelia. I really like you, and you’ve always been kind to me. That’s why you’re alive and the others are not. As you can imagine, you won’t see me again. Don’t try to find me. I can’t promise I won’t shoot if you do. Our reasons don’t

matter any longer for what we did. Just know that it was necessary.

“Necessary? How is killing two agents necessary?” frowned Emelia.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“I don’t know, babe, but we’ve got a lot of work to do. Let’s find her address and let’s dig in and see if we can make connections to other retirees of the bureau. Helen might have made a few helpful friends over the years.”

Emelia nodded as they walked toward the elevator banks. She pushed the button and then turned to her friends and family.

“Alright, but if that old woman comes near me with a gun, she’s going to realize just how unfriendly I can be.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

While most of the team was in D.C. helping Emelia, Gwen, Rachel, and the others were planning the spectacular fall wedding that Emelia wanted. Seated in the grove, they were enjoying the beautiful fall breeze and a delicious lunch that George had prepared for them. Everyone was discussing the perfect fall wedding ideas, what her hair should look like, even what her ring should look like.

“I think we should let Sebastian handle the ring,” smiled Rachel. Gwen nodded, agreeing with her friend. Across the grove, the senior ladies were watching, just enjoying the excitement.

“Claudette? How many babies do we have on the way? How many under the age of, say, oh, twenty do we have?” asked Irene.

“Mama, why are you asking that? You know how many.”

“Humor me.”

“Well, we have Sergeant, of course. Elena and Daphne are due later this year, early next year. Bowen and Beckett are babies. We’ve got a whole slew in elementary and middle school, getting ready to start high school. Wavy, Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa, Quinn, River, Finegan, Ambry, Bailey, Cole, Joey, Wyatt, West, and Ulani. Oh, we also have Tillie, Patrick, Pax, and Brax. A few who are out there in the world — Pierre, Maverick, Macie, Hayes, and Chris. Plus, we have the children who are already done with school but are still babies. Monroe, Victoria, Nigel, Brady, Maralisa, and Spencer.”

“Mmhmmm,” nodded Mama Irene.

“What does that mean, Mama? That’s a lot of kids running around here. Thirty-four children, Mama. Thirty-four.”

“Yeah, but it don’t feel like it’s enough. We need more. More babies to bless our family. Your daddy and me always want more. It’s selfish of us, but it feeds our hearts and souls.”

“Mama, aren’t you messin’ with things you shouldn’t be?”

Irene gave her a strange look, and Claudette could only shrug her shoulders. Her sister Camille was across the grove, but her twin powers could sense something was happening and looked at her. Knowing their mother, whatever it was, it would be big.

By dinner, the two women and everyone else knew what it was. Announcements of babies on the way were flooding the cafeteria.

“Can you believe it,” smiled Gaspar. “Rush and Caroline, JB and Dana, Abe and Lyra, Harlow and Nate, and now East and Brooke. More babies!”

“Yeah,” nodded Claudette, looking at her mother. “More babies. Isn’t that amazing, Mama?”

“Wait. Why did you look at Mama? What is that look for?” asked Gaspar.

“Wasn’t any look,” scoffed Irene. “I don’t have a thing to do with these young folks havin’ babies. They do just fine all on their own with that.”

“Yes, but it does seem strange that five women suddenly started feeling sick this afternoon. All of them rushed for pregnancy tests while you sat here with a smile on your face. Explain that, Mama.”

“Gaspar, you’re lettin’ your imagination run wild. How on earth could I help all them folks get pregnant? I ain’t a doctor! You’re just reachin’ for things that ain’t there. Enjoy this evenin’. All these fine young folks celebratin’. By next summer, we’ll have lots of new babies. Lots of ‘em.”

As Mama Irene started to walk away, they heard someone cheer with excitement, and they all turned. Ramey was speaking with Virginia, Wes, Wilson, and Sara. Irene kept walking with a big smile on her face.

“Triplets! I’m having triplets again! I’m going to kill your son,” she said to Wes. He could only laugh, hugging the young woman.

“Don’t kill him. You’re gonna need him. Six children, Ramey. What a blessing. Didn’t you wish for seven at one time?” She glared at her father-in-law, shaking her head.

“Don’t you even whisper that! This is it. We’re having these three, and then we’re done!”

“From your lips to God’s ears, child,” smirked Irene. “To God’s ears.”

“Hey, we’re gonna have three more kids in the house,” laughed Brooks. “Does that mean we have to build something bigger?”

“Brooks, I don’t know, sweetie,” said Ramey. “I need to call your father.” She stepped away from the group, dialing Christopher’s number. She hoped she wasn’t interrupting, but then again, she hoped she was.

“Hi, babe. Everyone okay? Kids okay?” he said, answering.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Yes. I mean, sort of. I mean, yes, everyone is okay.”

“Ramey, what’s wrong, honey? Are you sick? Are the kids sick? I can come home.”

“Oh, Christopher,” she cried, shaking her head. He stared at her through the screen on his phone, ready to hop the first plane back to Belle Fleur.

“Ramey, babe, you’re freaking me out.”

“D-do you remember when we first went into the pond together? It was after my surgery, and everything was suddenly working.”

“Of course, I remember.” He prayed that nothing had happened to reinjure her.

“Do you remember when we talked about babies?”

“Of course I do.” He laughed, shaking his head. “If I remember, you said you wanted seven.”

“Christopher,” she cried. “I’m pregnant. With triplets. Again!”

He blinked at the screen, just staring at her beautiful face, all puffy from crying. Behind him, his brother Patrick was smiling ear to ear, the others waiting for him to react to her.

“Triplets. Again.” He repeated the statement, which only served to make her cry more. Then he smiled at her. “Babe, I thought you wanted seven.” Ramey stared at

her sweet, beautiful husband and laughed.

“That’s what your father said. No jokes about that. We’re going to have six children, Christopher. Six!”

“Yep, and they’ll all be beautiful like their Mama. Do we know their sex yet?”

“No, I told Gray I wanted to wait until you got back. It’s weird. It seems like everyone is announcing pregnancies today.”

“No, shit?” he smirked.

“Yeah. Caroline, Dana, Lyra, Harlow, and Brook. Six women pregnant all at the same time! That’s insane, isn’t it?”

“I think that’s one word for it,” smiled Christopher. “The other might be ‘Irene.’”

“Irene? How could she have any impact at all... You know what, never mind. So, you’re really okay with this?” she asked.

“Baby, I love you more than anything in the world. Having my babies in your belly only makes me love you more. Are you okay? Do you need me to come home?”

“No. No, stay and help Em. I’m fine. Your mom and dad are close, the kids are excited, I’ve got plenty of help here. I love you, Christopher.”

“I love you, too.” As he hung up the phone, he turned to face his brother and all their friends. His face was pale, his hands shaking.

“That was a stellar acting job, brother,” smirked Patrick. “Scared as shit, aren’t you?”

“Six. I’m going to have six kids.”

CHAPTER NINE

Emelia’s townhome was a beautiful old red-brick two-story structure in Alexandria. It had three bedrooms, so the team was able to spread out and share beds. It wasn’t ideal, but they bought a few blow-up mattresses and made themselves at home. While Sebastian ordered pizza for everyone, she called the one person she needed the most.

“Maddie, please come over,” she begged. “This is important to me, and I need my sister here to help me.”

“I don’t know, Em. I’m crazy busy here.” She was lying. Emelia knew it. She’d been lying for weeks now, and no one knew why.

“Maddie. I’m your sister. I was kidnapped and almost killed. I need you, and I need your brain. What is the matter with you? I thought you and Forrest were doing well.”

“We were. We are. I just...”

“I can’t believe you won’t do this for me. I don’t understand,” she said, feeling the emotions flood her body. Maddie looked at her sister, shaking her head.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

A few minutes later, the pizzas were delivered, and everyone dove into their meal. Emelia loved to cook for family, but living alone didn’t give her a lot of opportunities to do that. She preferred ordering just for herself than to cook with tons of leftovers that usually spoiled.

Unsure of what was happening between Maddie and Forrest, she didn’t want to get his hopes up and tell him she was on her way. Em knew that they’d been seeing one another for the last five months almost every weekend. Then suddenly, three weeks ago, Maddie started avoiding him. In fact, she was avoiding everyone, and that was even more disturbing.

“I’ll get it,” she said as the doorbell rang. Sebastian gripped her hand, standing with her.

“I’ll answer with you.”

“You don’t need to,” she whispered. “It should be Maddie.” He nodded but stayed close as she opened the door. They both stared at the young woman, then behind them.

“Who is it, honey?” asked her father.

“It’s me, Dad.” Maddie stepped inside the room, and it felt as if the air was sucked out of the entire house. Chief stared at his daughter, then back at Forrest.

“You’re pregnant,” said Em. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I haven’t told the father. Yet.” She looked at Forrest, then rubbed her slightly protruding belly. “I should have told you. I know I should have. I’m sorry, Forrest. I know you don’t want kids, but I do, so I just thought that I’d do this by myself. I was going to come home sooner or later and tell everyone.”

“What the fuck would make you think I don’t want kids?” he snapped, standing so quickly he dropped his plate.

“Y-you said so. Our first time,” she stopped, blushing as she looked at the room. They were family, but some things felt wrong to talk about. Unfortunately, they weren’t giving her an inch at this point.

“Our first time we were together. You said kids have a way of fucking up your life.”

“Maddie, baby. I said if you’re not truly in love, truly committed, kids can cause more problems. They don’t fix the problem. We’d just finished that case with the couple who hated each other’s guts but kept having kids that they ignored and abused. I wasn’t talking about us, Maddie.

“You and me, baby, you and me love one another. At least I know I damn sure love you. Any kids we were to have would be showered in love, affection, learning, peace, everything they could ever want. I have always wanted lots of kids, honey. Hell, I’m a Robicheaux. Lots of kids is written in our DNA.”

“You want kids?” she whispered. Everyone chuckled, and Forrest took a few steps closer to her, hoping she didn’t run. Her father gripped his arm, giving a nod of approval.

“Christopher just found out Ramey is pregnant with triplets. There are five others

back home pregnant. Looks like you and I will be the first to bring new babies home since you're further along. When are we due?"

"We." She smiled at him and took another step forward. "We are due December 23rd."

"A Christmas baby," he smiled.

"Babies." Chief gasped, staring at his daughter, then at Forrest. His smile got wider, and he reached for Maddie.

"How many? How many blessings does this undeserving man get?"

"Genetics are strong at Belle Fleur," she grinned. "Four. Spontaneous quadruplets. Again. It's why I'm so damn big. The Pentagon knows that I have to leave soon. The doctor wants me on bed rest right away."

"Then you'll be on bed rest," said Forrest. "In our bed in our cottage at Belle Fleur. I think first, we need to call your mother and my parents and our grandparents. Sebastian? Em? We might ask to have a double wedding if you could stand that."

"I would love nothing more than being married beside my sister," smiled Emelia. She hugged Maddie, kissing her cheeks and then touching her belly. "You should have called me. I wouldn't have said anything."

"I know. I'm sorry." She looked at her father. "Dad? I'm sorry."

"For what?" he laughed. "I'll have all my daughters married and grandbabies on the way. Your grandma and grandpa are going to be happy as shit."

For the next hour, Forrest and Maddie made call after call to let everyone know at

Belle Fleur. It didn't take much convincing for Forrest to get her to agree to leave the Pentagon the next day and return with him. Sebastian and Emelia knew it was best for all of them.

"I did pull some information for you, Em," said Maddie, taking a seat. Forrest pulled her slightly swollen ankles up onto his lap, gently massaging her feet. "Your lady, Helen. She's got an interesting past."

"How so?" frowned Em.

"She didn't always work as an admin at the bureau. She was with the Pentagon for a while. I'm not sure what happened. That isn't in her files, but she requested a transfer to the bureau about twenty years ago."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Interesting. Why would she lie and tell me all her time was with the bureau?”

“I’m not sure, but what I can tell you is this. There was a group of individual contributors, mostly admins, who stuck together. They did lunch, often carpooled together, even took days off together. The Pentagon told them that had to stop because they had six or seven admins out on one day. It put a big stoppage in the work.”

“These are all people who worked for us,” said Em. “Any at the Pentagon?”

“Several transferred shortly after she did. They had access to it all, Em. Our files, our family history, cases that were being worked, all of it. As much as you liked Helen, and I know you did. You talked about her. As much as you liked her, I think she’s a traitor. At the very least, a bank robber.”

“But she was at work when the robberies were taking place,” said Emelia.

“I’m just trusting my gut. All of this is connected to that woman. And the two that drugged you, Myrtle and Ed? They didn’t bother to hide their names. Myrtle was the executive assistant to General Borden at the Pentagon for years. Ed was a file clerk at the bureau.”

For another three hours, they talked about a million possibilities, writing everything on a huge whiteboard in Em’s office. When Maddie started to yawn, Forrest took control.

“I’ll stay with Maddie tonight, and we’ll go home in the morning. If you need me, I’ll

come back,” he said to the others.

“No, brother,” smirked Sebastian. “She needs you. Make sure she knows that you fucking love kids, and you’re going to be an amazing father.”

Forrest nodded, hugging all his friends. When Chief hugged him, he was surprised at the loving and compassionate way he held him.

“You’re a fine man, Forrest. I couldn’t have chosen anyone better for Maddie.”

“Thank you, sir. Maybe later you can tell me how to raise four babies at once. I don’t have a fucking clue what I’m doing.” The men all laughed, but it was Hex who slapped his back as he left.

“Guess what? None of us do.”

CHAPTER TEN

There were far too many people in Emelia’s townhome for her and Sebastian to do what they really wanted to do. Instead, he held her close, whispering love and devotion in her ear. He was just grateful that she was alive and well. Although Em felt certain that Helen wouldn’t have killed her, he wasn’t so sure.

For Em, she kept thinking back to Helen’s betrayal and her friends who had been killed.

“I’m just having a hard time imagining this woman as a killer. She was always so sweet to me. I mean, she’s got to be in her late sixties.”

“Clearly, that doesn’t mean a thing. We know a lot of men and women in their sixties who could easily be killers,” said Sebastian. “We’ll have the team back home check

on her finances and the other two. I have a feeling that maybe their little group is still together. We just need to figure out who everyone is.”

“If she is a part of this, it’s really a betrayal for me. I saw her every day, and she always asked about the cases. We limited what we told her, but she had access to everything. Especially if Frank was allowing her to do certain things for him. Hell, she could have had the keys to the whole kingdom for all I know.”

“I hate to say this, honey, but Frank’s head will probably roll when all this is done. The bureau will most likely ask him to take early retirement.”

“Maybe that won’t be such a bad thing for him. He’s going to feel guilty about Tara and Cord. He’ll have to face their families, and that won’t be easy.”

Em closed her eyes, hoping for at least a few hours of sleep. Instead, she got a full eight hours filled with dreams of weddings and babies. She could hear people moving around downstairs and got up and dressed. Today, it didn’t matter if she wore her bureau-appropriate suit. Today would be a day she dressed for speed and easy movement.

With a comfortable pair of stretchy jeans, her favorite white tee, and running shoes, she pulled her hair into a ponytail and skipped down the steps.

“There she is,” smiled Sebastian, handing her a cup of coffee.

“You’re going to make a great husband. You already know how to make my day,” she said, kissing him. A few moments later, they received word that Maddie and Forrest were on the jet and headed to Belle Fleur. It was a relief for everyone but also a joyous occasion.

“I can’t believe they almost lost out because of a misunderstanding,” said Em.

“Believe me, honey, that’s how these things happen. We’ve all been there. We’ve all said something stupid, heard something we thought we understood and didn’t hear the whole thing correctly and made assumptions about it. We can all be dumbasses when it comes to love,” said Hex.

“Did you do that with Gwen?” she asked, looking at him.

“I wasn’t exactly charming to her when we first met,” he frowned. “I was afraid for her, and I didn’t feel like she was taking her situation seriously. She set me straight.” The others laughed, and Hex just shook his head at their amusement.

“I don’t want us to misunderstand one another,” she said to Sebastian.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Honey, we’re human. We’re going to make mistakes and do stupid shit. Probably me before you. I’ll say or do something that will piss you off or make you cry, and I’ll feel like shit for it. The key to it all is knowing that we have to talk it out, not walk away. That’s the terrible thing that Maddie almost did. Walk away.”

“She might not know it,” said Leif, “but Forrest was thinking about going away for a while to clear his head. He couldn’t figure out what he’d done wrong.”

“No!” she gasped. “She would have been crushed.”

“And it would have been her fault,” said Chief. “Your sister is brilliant, but she often reacts too quickly to things. If Forrest had left Belle Fleur for a while, she would have been sitting in her own tears trying to raise four babies alone.”

“Such a stupid mistake. A stupid, stupid...”

They all stared at Em as she looked around the room.

“Mistake?” finished Leif.

“Yes. I mean, no. When I left yesterday, Helen actually told me to get a crab cake at the wharf. She didn’t know where I was going. She had no clue what the address of the home was. There were three locations, and Frank handed them to us randomly.”

“Maybe it wasn’t randomly,” said Leif.

“No, it was. She knew where I was headed. I told her I was headed to Maryland, but

there wasn't an address or area mentioned. She knew the addresses because she knew that Frank had found the masks.

"When I came in, she said he'd been there since 0600, and she knew that because she was there before then. She was going through his computer, his notes. Something tipped her off to what he was going to do that day."

"We still need to know how they disarm the alarm systems, get the money out of there, go undetected by the cameras, all of it," said Major.

"I think we need to look at the video evidence again. I think we might have missed something."

Seated in the largest meeting room available at the bureau, they ran through all of the camera footage available. It was frustrating because they could see the vehicle pull up, a man stepping out of the car and then the video would cut off.

"Someone spliced this footage," said Brix. "You can tell. This isn't someone who has a passing knowledge of this shit. It's not as clean as it would be if our team did it, but it's pretty damn good. I'm surprised someone didn't notice it before."

"Hiro? Are you seeing what we're seeing?" asked Chief.

"I am but I'm not."

"What the hell does that mean?" asked Sebastian.

"They did splice the videos, but they did it after receiving them at the bureau. I have the original footage."

"Wait. Are you saying someone altered those here?" asked Emelia.

“That’s what I’m saying. The videos were sent in their entirety, but what you have was altered before you guys saw them. Let me show you the difference.” He brought up a separate screen with the video they were currently looking at on one side and another of the same bank on the right.

“This is the first robbery in D.C. The car pulls up, the man gets out on the left and then nothing. On the right, watch what happens. The man pulls up, he gets out of the car, and then three others get out of the car. They all put on masks, pull their hoods up, and go inside. A few moments later, they come out of the bank, pull the masks off, and put them inside a large tote bag. They remove the jackets and hoodies and walk casually, arm in arm, down the street.”

“It’s two men and two women,” said Emelia, staring at the screen.

“It is,” said Hiro. “Here, we see them further down the street, arm in arm, walking casually. No one suspects four old people as bank robbers. They look comfortable and casual. I think they’ve also found a way to alter their attire. When they go into the bank, they’re all wearing pants, but when we see them down the street, the women in are in long skirts.”

“I’ve seen this trick before,” said Major. “There’s a string they pull that brings the pant legs up and drops the skirt down. It’s pretty clever.”

“Clever and makes it almost impossible for anyone to identify them,” said Emelia. “I only met the man and woman at the house. I didn’t see these other two, and the woman isn’t Helen. That means we have at least five people involved.”

“Maybe we should get the Gray Wolf team involved,” smirked Hex. Emelia looked at him, then back at the screen with Hiro.

“No, but we could ask them some questions.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I’m not sure whether to be offended or flattered by this conversation,” smirked Ghost.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Grandpa, I’m serious. Up until a few days ago, these people were just bank robbers. Today, they are officially wanted for murder. What would possess people in their sixties and seventies to do this, other than the obvious of money?”

“Well, I think that is the obvious, honey,” said Ghost. “Not everyone is as fortunate as we are. We had Code pull some information for American seniors. Median income for older adults is around \$29,740, with men earning \$37,430 and women earning \$24,630.”

“Why do women earn less?” asked Emelia.

“Most women in this age group didn’t work outside the home, or if they did, they worked at a much lower wage for a shorter period of time. Men just happen to have more in social security benefits and more in retirement benefits.”

“That’s not fair!” screamed Em.

“Hey, I’m just the messenger,” smirked Ghost. “About five point nine million people over the age of sixty-five live below the poverty level. Most older Americans receive income from a variety of sources, including Social Security, pensions, retirement plans, annuities, and life insurance contracts.”

“Here’s something very interesting,” said Ian. “Eleven point two million people over sixty-five are working or actively looking for work. Most people are earning around sixty-three thousand a year after taxes, but those above the age of seventy-five earn far less. Around forty-seven thousand a year.”

“Considering the cost of living today, the rising costs of owning or renting a home, this doesn’t leave much wiggle room for retirees to enjoy their golden years,” said Grace. “We have an entire generation of people who should be playing golf and tennis, playing with their grandchildren, but are forced to have additional income just to eat and afford their medications.”

“This is so disturbing,” frowned Leif.

“Tell me about it,” growled Nine. “Those age groups are everyone on our team. We are beyond fortunate that we don’t have to beg for jobs and prove to some twenty-something-year-old kid that we’re worthy of a job. But that’s not the case for everyone.”

“If you want my opinion,” said Gaspar, “I’m going to bet that your senior bank robbers were figuring out that their retirement funds weren’t as great as they thought. They weren’t going to be able to afford to live as long as they hoped in the way they wanted to live. I’m not saying it’s right. I’m just saying I understand what they’re feeling.”

“Uncle Gaspar, they killed two agents,” said Em.

“I know, honey. They’ll need to face justice for that. You asked why they would do this. I think that’s why. Once we can find financials on all these people, we’ll have a clearer view of the real reasons.”

“I have the financials on Helen,” said Hiro. “She’s been a widow for ten years. When her husband, Stuart Aikens, died, all he had was a life insurance policy. They’d dipped into their 401k several times to help their children.”

“Are you kidding me? So they risked their retirement to help their kids, but their kids won’t help them?” said Emelia.

“I don’t know the reasons, Em,” said Hiro, “but it looks that way. The life insurance policy covered the funeral expenses, and it looks like she paid off two major credit cards and her house.”

“Well, that’s good. Her home was paid for,” said Em. They all smiled at her, and she knew she’d missed something.

“Em, they’d lived in their home for more than thirty years. Repairs, updates, maintenance on a house that old can be overwhelming.”

“And it looks like it was,” said Hiro. “Four years ago, she had to sell the house for far less than it was worth. It needed a new HVAC system, a new roof, some electrical work, all high-dollar items that she couldn’t afford. She sold the house, and it looks like she moved into an apartment after that. She left the apartment thirteen months ago, but there is no forwarding address.”

“She would have had to have provided that to the bureau,” said Em.

“They still have the apartment as her address,” said Hiro. “I hate to say this, but I’m guessing that she moved in with her friends, just like she told you. She just didn’t tell anyone else. As of three days ago, she had seven hundred in her checking and around twenty-three hundred in her savings.”

“Are you kidding me? She makes a good living here,” said Em.

“Em, she makes a good living if she has no other expenses like medicine, car payments, all the other daily and monthly things. Obviously, they’re putting the money from the robberies somewhere else.”

“I just feel as if there’s more to this than we know. Good people who have worked hard their entire lives don’t just wake up one day and decide to rob a bank. Like you

said, this is out of character for Helen, at least. There has to be some life-changing event for them that provoked this.”

“You bring up a good point,” said Nine. “Maybe one of them is sick and needs care that isn’t provided for in their healthcare plans. Or they could be hoping to get an experimental treatment of some sort.”

“I suppose any of those are possibilities. I’d like to speak with Helen’s children as well to see if they’ve heard from her,” said Em.

“I’ll keep searching facial recognition for the four that were at the bank. Helen’s face was not one of them, so maybe they were using her as their watchdog at the bureau.”

“Sounds like we have a plan,” said Sebastian. “Maybe take teams of two to interview the banks that were recently robbed. We’ll start looking into the other members of Helen’s little gang and see what we can find out.”

“Listen, these are senior citizens, but they’re highly capable people. Everyone needs to watch their backs,” said Ghost.

“We will, Grandpa. I love you,” smiled Em.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“I love you, too. Sebastian? Don’t fuck this up. Bring my granddaughter home and marry her.”

“That’s my plan, sir.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chase, Milo, and Torro took the two banks that had been robbed earlier that they believed were connected to the current robberies. Georgia was close enough for a quick plane ride, and hopefully, they could gather information.

“May I help you, gentlemen?” asked the bank manager.

“We’re helping the FBI to investigate the bank robbery that happened almost two years ago. Were you here then?” asked Torro.

“I was an assistant manager at the time,” said the man. “The manager has since retired.”

“Were you here when the bank was robbed?” asked Chase.

“I was. The manager was off that day. We’re all trained on how to handle bank robberies. We don’t fight. We don’t argue. We give them what they want, and the bank handles the rest.”

“Is that what happened?” asked Milo.

“Definitely. They had these strange Superhero masks on and rubber gloves. You couldn’t see any of their skin. They simply slid a note to the teller asking for all the money in the drawers. They didn’t seem to care about the safe at all.”

“Is that odd?” asked Chase.

“Not odd, just different, I guess. The safe has way more money in it, but obviously, that’s harder to carry. These people were different. They weren’t waving guns around, although they did have weapons. They just held them at their sides. There was a pregnant customer who was crying, and they allowed her to get off the floor and sit in a chair.”

“Compassionate bank robbers,” frowned Torro.

“We closed the bank for a week during the investigation, and then everyone had to go to counseling. Honestly, it sounds crazy, but if I were ever robbed again, I’d hope it was the same people. They were just so nice.”

Chase stared at his friends, nodding. Nice. They didn’t want to hurt anyone. They didn’t take the money from the safe, most likely because they couldn’t carry it. And they didn’t frighten anyone.

“Did you notice anything at all about their physical features, their bearing?” asked Milo.

“I’m afraid not. The FBI agents asked me the same thing. They were smaller, and I could tell that at least one of them was a woman. But as I said, they never spoke to anyone. I know this is going to sound crazy, but they were almost comforting or maybe comfortable to be around. I’m not sure.”

“You’ve been very helpful, thank you,” said Chase as they turned and left the bank.

The three men seemed confused.

“All they wanted was the money,” said Torro. “They didn’t have any intentions of hurting someone, which makes me wonder what would have happened had someone put up a fight.”

“I’m glad we won’t know the answer to that,” said Chase. “Come on, let’s follow their route after they left the bank.”

Chief and Hex took the bank in Florida, planning to fly back up to Georgia to pick up Chase, Milo, and Torro. The bank was in a quiet area of northern Florida in a small neighborhood. This wasn’t the big city bank that would have millions in deposits. This was small.

“Hey,” said Hex, nodding his head across the street. “A retirement community.”

“Imagine that,” frowned Chief. He pulled on the big glass door, the brass handles somewhat tarnished. Except the big door was locked. He tapped on the glass, and a guard opened the door for them.

“Are you customers?” asked the guard.

“No. We’re here to speak to the manager about the robbery you had. We’re working with the FBI.”

“Yes, sir. Come in. Sorry about that, but since the robbery, we screen all of our customers before just opening the door. It really spooked the manager.”

“Were you here then?” asked Chief.

“No, sir. I was living right across the street when it happened. I’d been looking for a

job and walked over the next week and asked if they needed a security guard. I'm a retired police officer. Not in a big city, but my little community in Nebraska was safe."

"I'm glad you found something you enjoy," said Hex.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Let me get the manager for you.” He scurried toward the back of the building, leaving Hex and Chief seated in a comfortable waiting area.

“Doesn’t that sound convenient that he found a job the week after the bank robbery?” asked Hex. Chief nodded at him, then looked around at the tellers and other bank personnel. Most were older, not young college kids at their first job.

“Awful mature workforce, isn’t it?” frowned Chief.

“Yep.” He tapped his comms and spoke to the others. “Take note of the age of the employees in the banks you’re checking.”

“Roger that.” The chorus of voices replied as they watched the manager walking toward them. She was an older woman, probably in her late fifties or early sixties.

“Gentleman, how can I help you?”

“We’d just like to ask a few questions about the robbery you had. Did you notice any identifying marks on the robbers?” asked Chief.

“No, nothing. I told the FBI agents that same thing. They were polite, even wrote a polite note,” she laughed. “They just wanted the money in the drawers and left.”

“Did you press the alarm button?” asked Hex.

“Of course,” she nodded. “But nothing happened. They discovered later that the cameras and alarms had been disabled. Only temporarily, but it was enough time for

them to get what they wanted and leave. Two minutes after they were gone, everything came back online again. We were told these systems were foolproof, but obviously, they weren't."

"Was anyone harmed?"

"No," she laughed. "I know it seems foolish of me, but I don't think these people wanted to harm anyone. They were quick, kind, and never once yelled at anyone or waved their weapons in our faces. This was not the bank robbery I'd seen in television and movies."

"That's good," said Chief. "Did these people have any limps, maybe one of them using a cane? What about a hearing aid?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I told the agents the same thing. There was nothing visible that anyone saw. They were calm, methodical, walked in casually, walked out casually. That's it."

"The senior community across the street looks nice. I've been looking for a place for my father. Do you know anything about it?" asked Chief.

"Many of our team members live there," she smiled. "This is a primarily retired community, so we hire those that need extra income. We've got a lot of experience in this room, and they have far more patience with our seniors."

"I think that's great," said Hex.

"It is, but it isn't. Many of my employees are working because they have to. They don't make enough money to support themselves or their spouses in retirement. I've got at least three who have their children back at home living with them. It's strange times we're living in."

“Yes, ma’am. It sure is.”

Each of the visits to the banks yielded the same information. No visible markings that would tell them who the robbers were. Polite, quiet, and efficient. But nothing else.

“We went to the apartment complex where Helen was living, at least according to her personnel records,” said Sebastian. “Landlord says that she was a good tenant, never caused any issues, paid her rent on time. He knew she was struggling with her utilities and was trying to help her out, but he said that more than a few times, she let her electricity lag.”

“Damn. I hate this,” said Brix. “I hate that we’re chasing down senior citizens that, in all likelihood, are doing this simply to survive. It’s like an aging group of Robin Hoods.” Emelia’s phone rang, and they all turned to look at her.

“Helen’s son,” she whispered, answering the call on speaker. “Mr. Aikens?”

“It’s just Tom, ma’am. You called about my mother. Is she ill?” he asked.

“No. I don’t believe so,” said Emelia. “Tom, my name is Emelia Stanton, and I’m an agent here with the FBI. We have reason to believe that your mother may be involved with a group of individuals, senior citizens, who are robbing banks.” There was a disturbing silence on the other end of the line, and then he spoke.

“I’m not sure what to say, Ms. Stanton. My mother and father were never millionaires, but they had a good retirement.”

“We’ve looked into their finances, Tom. Your mom didn’t have a lot left after burying your father. It seems they lent a great deal of their retirement to you and your sister.”

“Bullshit,” he snapped.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I mean, that’s bullshit. My parents never gave us a dime. My father believed that we needed to pull our britches up and make it on our own. My sister and I had student debt that nearly killed us, but we made it through. My wife and I moved to Ireland about six years ago, and I’m proud of what we’ve accomplished here.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“My sister and her husband live in California and run a winery that belonged to his family. They’re doing very well. If my mother needed money, all she had to do was call us.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Aikens. Tom. I didn’t mean to upset you. We’re just trying to figure all of this out. Your mother moved out of her apartment and into a house with several other people.”

“I knew that,” he said. “She told us she enjoyed their company and pooling their resources was helpful for all of them. I think they had someone in their inner circle that died about a year ago, and it hit them all hard.”

“I see. Well, that can be tough for anyone. She left the bureau the other day and hasn’t returned. If she contacts you, please let us know, or please ask her to call me.”

“Is my mother wanted for these bank robberies?” he asked.

“At this point, she’s wanted for suspicion of armed robbery and an accessory to murder, as well as divulging classified information.”

Again, she was met with complete silence on the other end of the call.

“Mr. Aikens?”

“I’m here. Listen, my sister and I didn’t have the best relationship with our mother after our father died. She never told us that he was dying, which resulted in us not being able to say goodbye to him. We’re a little bitter about that, as you can

imagine.”

“I can understand that. I would be devastated if that were to happen to me,” she said, staring at her own father. He smiled at her, giving her hand a squeeze.

“I think that’s all I can tell you, Ms. Stanton. My sister and her family are in Italy on holiday right now, so she probably won’t respond to any calls. I’ll try to let her know what’s happening.”

“Thank you, Tom.”

“Ms. Stanton? If you speak to my mother, tell her, well, tell her we’re very disappointed in her.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Maddie, honey, we’re so glad that you’re home,” said Rachel, hugging her daughter.

“Oh, Mom, me too,” she said, hugging her mother. “I’m so sorry I didn’t say something sooner. I was scared, and I made a mistake. I misunderstood something that Forrest told me, and I just let my head take over.”

“None of that matters now,” she smiled. “You’re home, and he’s with you. You’re healthy, and these babies are going to be a blessing to us all.”

“Oh, now, let me see,” said Mama Irene, walking toward them. “Look at you. Beautiful, just beautiful! Well done, Forrest. Now, that’s how you keep the Robicheaux name alive.” Forrest could only laugh, shaking his head.

“That wasn’t really on my mind, Mama Irene, but I’m glad I can do my part.” His parents were walking toward them, and he smiled, seeing the huge grin on his father’s

face. His parents were both twins, so he expected a multiple birth. Just not a foursome.

“Congratulations!” said Carrie, hugging them both. “We’re so happy for the two of you.”

“Thank you,” smiled Maddie. “I’m scared to death, but at least I have Mom, who can tell me how to handle four at once.”

“Let’s get you to the clinic. Gray wants to do some tests on you, just so she has everything she needs.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “Will you come with me?” Forrest just laughed, shaking his head.

“Try to keep me away,” he said, kissing her and hugging her protectively. A large group followed them to the clinic as she was whisked to the back by Doc, Kelsey, and Gray.

“What’s happening in D.C.?” asked Robbie.

“Old people robbing banks, that’s what,” frowned Forrest.

“What do you mean?”

“We think the robbers and those that kidnapped Emelia are all senior citizens. We’re not sure what they’re doing or how they’re doing it, but they’ve robbed a half dozen banks that we know of. One of them was the admin at Emelia’s division of the bureau. She’s missing now, of course.”

“Damn. That’s not good,” frowned Robbie. “Let the team in D.C. handle that. What

do you need from us?”

“I’m going to need help preparing a nursery for four babies.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

As Maddie was led to the back with Forrest, the others began discussing everything from upcoming weddings and holidays to new babies and the infamous senior gang on the East Coast. A short time later, Forrest and Maddie appeared.

“Four boys,” smiled Maddie, walking out of the treatment room. “She just confirmed it. We’re having four sons. Forrest, if they’re as big as you, you are never touching me again.”

Forrest could only laugh, hugging Maddie and shaking hands with the others. Mama Irene was so happy; there were tears in her eyes.

“Four more boys to protect the world,” she smiled. Maddie stared at her, a look of fear and trepidation on her face.

“Protect the world,” she whispered.

“Honey, they can protect the world with their minds, their hearts, not just their bodies. These will be special boys. Special, special boys. You and Forrest will guide them along with all of us. They’ll be just fine,” smiled the old woman.

“Come on,” said Rachel, taking her daughter’s hand while Carrie took the other, “we’re going to help you figure out how to make a nursery in that bachelor pad of Forrest’s.” As they walked ahead, Forrest pulled back on his father’s arm.

“Dad? I’m scared to fucking death. Four sons, Dad. Four.”

“Yep, that’s what I heard as well,” he smirked.

Forrest's expression didn't change as he looked at his father for the advice he needed. Others circled around him. Just as the women supported one another in everything, so did the men. His Uncle Remy smiled at him, Matthew, Cam, Luke, and several others.

"Forrest, you're not alone," said Remy. "We'll all be here to support you and guide you. You won't do a damn thing wrong that can't be fixed."

"That means I'll do shit wrong!" he said in a panicked voice.

"Of course you will," said Matthew. "Listen to me, son. Raising children is the greatest privilege of your life next to marrying your wife and serving your country. We should probably throw serving God in there, too, but that's not for everyone. Either way, this will be the greatest achievement of your life. The greatest. You're going to watch them four boys grow into crawling, battery-operated, non-stop messes." The entire group laughed.

"Then one day, you'll turn around, and they'll be toddling little curiosity buttons. Everything needing to be explored, touched, and tasted."

"I remember you licking a bullfrog once," smirked Remy, looking at Luke.

"One of my finer toddler moments," said Luke.

"Then suddenly, they're in school, and they can 'do it themselves.' Little by little, they need you less and less. You and Maddie will discover a new relationship between the two of you, and you'll be building something even stronger, better.

"And one day, you'll be standing in that grove watching as they take their wives, or husbands," smirked Matthew. "They'll be fine, strong men with auburn hair and whiskey eyes. Everyone will know, the minute they introduce themselves, that they

are Robicheauxs, and they are not to be messed with.”

Forrest had tears in his eyes, staring at his great-uncle. He hugged the older man, shocked once again at how solid he was. It didn’t feel as though he’d lost any muscle or bulk. He was nearly as big as the day Forrest first met him. How was that possible? He prayed it was good genetics.

“Thank you, Uncle Matthew. I’m so grateful I’ll have all of you to support me.”

“We’re family, Forrest,” said Cam. “All of us. Whether you have one child or twenty, we’re here to support and help.”

“Speaking of,” said Jake, standing behind Matthew, “your senior citizens who are robbing banks. Might want to check if any of them have medical issues. Maybe they’re trying to save someone or get medicine from another country. Medicare ain’t so kind sometimes.”

“I thought it provided medical care for the elderly,” said Forrest.

“Son, it provides the bare minimum, and I’m being kind. Even if you’re on a fixed income, it could cost you as much as sixteen hundred dollars a month. If you go into the hospital and are there longer than sixty days, they charge over four hundred dollars a day. Do you know any seniors, others than those here, who could afford that?”

“I had no idea,” frowned Luke.

“I don’t think any of us did,” said Cam. “That seems criminal. I mean, other countries take care of their elderly. There are innovative programs in Sweden, Denmark, Japan, and many others. Why aren’t we doing the same?”

“When you find the answer to that, you’ll really solve the true mystery,” said Jake. “Worst thing is prescriptions. Sometimes, it covers the medication. Sometimes, it doesn’t. And it damn sure don’t cover experimental drugs, which may be the only thing available to save someone.”

“This is so disturbing,” said O’Hara. “Some of us are creeping up on sixty-five. Can you imagine if we didn’t work here? If we didn’t have the support of you, Matthew, and Irene, we’d be relying on our military retirement benefits and Medicare.”

“I think we need to look into this further,” said Forrest. “Maybe one of these individuals is sick, or someone they knew was sick. It doesn’t justify what they’ve done, but it might give us a place to start.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Well, I think it seems obvious that all of these robberies are connected, which means they’ve been robbing banks for at least a couple of years. Hiro texted to say that he has some information for us when we’re free,” said Sebastian.

“Let’s give him a call,” nodded Chief.

“Morning, everyone,” said Hiro. “I’ve got at least some good news for us, or at least a place to start. We have the names of our robbers. We were able to get facial recognition from the street cameras and match it to recent camera footage at a local hospital.”

“Damn. It’s what we thought then. Someone is sick,” said Hex.

“Someone was sick. The hospital was the VA,” said Hiro. The silence in the room was deafening as they all stared at one another. “I know it sucks, but the patient they were seeing was at the VA hospital in Pennsylvania.”

“Tell us everything, Hiro,” said Em.

“We already know about Helen Aikens. She’s been a civil servant for her entire career. She’s been active in her community, she is an avid bridge player, and along with a group of friends, they won four national tournaments. They take this shit seriously. She’s in a book club, and she plays golf once a week. Sounds like she lives a pretty good life. Except that she shares her home with four other people.

“Ed Morgan, Myrtle Cunningham, Jeffrey Banks, and Mac Steiner.”

“None of them are married?” asked Emelia. “I mean, I guess it doesn’t matter. I just thought there would be couples involved.”

“There was at one time. Mac Steiner was married to Estelle Steiner. She was a veteran. The veteran at the hospital. An Army nurse with more than thirty years of service. She developed metastatic breast cancer five years ago. They did a bilateral mastectomy, three rounds of chemotherapy, two rounds of radiation, and it still spread to her brain.

“There was a new drug and treatment regimen available in Germany, but the VA nor Medicare would pay for it. That was in May two and a half years ago. The first bank robbery was August of that year. She was flown to Germany two weeks later and died in the hospital there. It was too late.”

“Damn. Damn,” muttered Sebastian. “They not only tried to save their friend, but they were also too late and, most likely, blame Medicare and the VA.”

“It looks that way. She and Mac were married for more than fifty years. They were part of the friend group with the others. When she died, Mac lost the house, and his driving privileges were revoked at the request of his nephew, who was handling his estate. It looks like he took almost all of Mac’s money and disappeared.”

“Little shit. I’d like to get my hands on him,” said Chief.

“Same,” nodded Hiro. “It was after that when Mac moved into the house that was being shared by Ed, Myrtle, and Jeffrey. Ed Morgan is a retired employee of the Treasury. He was an analyst for almost forty years. He never married. He has no children. Myrtle Cunningham was married to one of Ed’s best friends. Nick Cunningham was also an employee of the Department of the Treasury. He died suddenly of heart failure three years ago.

“Jeffrey Banks is the most interesting of all of these to me. He was a cop in Baltimore for twenty-five years, then had a second career in security, specifically in electronic security systems.”

“So, he’s the guy disrupting the alarms and cameras,” said Sebastian.

“He’s my bet,” said Hiro. “Once I had this information, Jean and Ella were able to dig in and find the financials we needed. At face value, their bank accounts are average. A few hundred in checking, a few thousand in savings. Nothing out of the ordinary for retirees. In fact, it’s probably generous for many retirees.”

“So where is the money?” asked Emelia.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out. Every month, they donate to a non-profit organization called The Silver Fund. The Silver Fund is designed to help seniors in financial distress. Now, their donations up until now have been no more than fifty bucks a month. But that’s just what we can see.

“When Jean dug into The Silver Fund and their donors, he noticed that between eight and twelve days after a bank was robbed, The Silver Fund received donations of almost the exact amount stolen from the bank.”

“Who heads The Silver Fund?” asked Sebastian.

“We’re trying to find that information now. It’s very secretive, almost like a club. But here’s the interesting thing, the thing that might make us all pause for just a moment. They’ve helped thousands of senior citizens who were at risk of losing their homes, food deprived, or needing medical treatment not covered by their retirement. Thousands.”

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit,” muttered Chief. “I do not want to do this. I do not want to stop

something good, but they've been robbing banks, and they killed two agents!"

"We have to find them," said Emelia. "I don't want to stop the good either. Maybe if we can find out who heads the organization, we can advise them not to take donations from this source any longer. I mean, technically, the government could ask for those donations to be returned if it could be proven where they came from."

"There has to be a better way," said Hex. "Hiro? Do we have an address for this house that they all share?"

"Yes, but it won't do you any good. At 0231 this morning, a fire was reported at the home. There were no bodies inside and no furniture. It was completely empty and appeared to have been started by an accelerant. They burned the house to the ground and left. They're on the road, and we have to find them."

"Get busy, brother. Check all the cameras, check local banks that they could hit, find out everything we can. I want to know if Ed, Helen, Myrtle, Jeffrey, or Mac have any medical issues or medications that we could use to find them or if they have another residence they could use. They were using the house that Em went to. Who owned that one?" said Sebastian.

"It was a house up for rent. I think they broke into it and used it while they could," said Hiro.

"Alright, brother. Dig as deep as you can," said Sebastian.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Will do. Take care, everyone.”

“Hiro? Nice work, brother,” said Chase. Smiling, Hiro ended the call, and the others frowned at the blank screen.

“I think Garr and I will head to the address of the fire,” said Alistair. “Maybe the fire department found something that will help us.” Sebastian nodded at his friends as they left Emelia’s townhome.

“Hex, Chase, Torro, and I will go to the VA hospital where Estelle was treated. It’s not a place I want to visit, but I don’t think we have an option. With any luck, we’ll be able to speak to someone, and we won’t be tied up there all day and night. Hopefully, we can find out something there as well,” said Chief.

“I’ll take Milo and Tiger and head to the Treasury. Two people that we’re aware of are connected to the Treasury, and being a part of this seems strange to me. I can’t imagine what they were doing that would have any part in this, but it’s just too easy to ignore. Then we’ll see what we can find on Banks’ old investigation company. I’d like to know why he closed his doors. Businesses like that, run by ex-cops, usually do well.”

“That leaves you and me, babe,” said Sebastian. “What do you say we go see if we can join a bridge game?”

“It’s what I’ve dreamed of. Playing bridge with my man and a bunch of seniors.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I’m sorry we had to burn the house down, Ed,” said Myrtle, gripping his forearm. They were standing by the river in a remote park, hoping to be able to figure out their next move.

“Don’t be. It was just a house. What we’re doing is far more important. We just have to find another place to live for a while.”

“Maybe we should think about moving on,” said Helen, nervously wringing her hands together. “That young woman you took is from a very influential and powerful family. They won’t let this die. I say we go to Canada or Mexico.”

“We’d still have to have valid passports,” said Mac. “Getting through border security would be difficult. If this girl and her family are as good as you say, they probably already know who we are.”

“Listen, I know it’s difficult, but we can’t quit now,” said Jeffrey. “We’re close. So close to being able to help others and living the way we always intended. We can’t give up now.”

“I agree with Jeffrey,” said Mac. “We’re too close to throw in the towel now. We’ve done so much good, and I think if we just push ourselves a little more, we’ll achieve our goal.”

They all stared from one person to another. They’d come a long way, and they’d done a lot of good. They didn’t start out to rob banks, but they were only able to contribute small amounts stealing from others. They never stole from anyone who didn’t deserve it. They targeted their victims with intent.

Sometimes, it would be stealing a watch or jewelry and selling it. Sometimes, it was taking evidence at the Treasury or from Jeffrey’s job. They weren’t proud of themselves, but it had to be done. They might be elderly, but they weren’t useless.

“We made a mistake in killing those agents,” said Mac. “We’re wanted for murder now, not just bank robbery.”

“We’re all aware of that, Mac. We just have to stay cool and out of sight. No one has been suspicious of a group of senior citizens. I think we’ve played that well.”

“But now they know, Jeffrey,” said Helen. “They know, and they’ll be looking for us. I know how the agency works and how this young woman works. She won’t give up.”

“I think we’re worrying about things we can’t control. Let’s find a place to rent for a few weeks, and then we’ll finish what we started. After that, we can head to Miami and follow through on our plan.”

“Then what?” asked Myrtle. “It’s not like we’re all healthy as a horse. We’re going to need medications, doctors, maybe one day, something more serious. At this point, we can’t use our medical plans, or we’ll be identified in the pharmacy or doctor’s office. Did you think of that?”

She was starting to become panicked and wasn’t sure they understood just how desperate they were about to become. Without a permanent place to live, they were now homeless. They were wanted by the FBI and the friends of the young woman they drugged. Things were not looking good.

“I know you’re feeling overwhelmed, Myrtle, but I’m not giving up,” said Mac. “Estelle didn’t die in vain, and I won’t let her death be the end of this. We’re going to prove that there’s a better way to manage this whole process of getting old and dying.”

His friends stared at him, unsure of what to say. They looked down at their feet and then back up at him. It was cold in D.C. today, and the winds whipping off the

Potomac were picking up. Jeffrey looked up at the sky, then back at his friends.

“There’s a storm coming. We need to find somewhere to stay for a few weeks.”

“This needs to be done in a few days, Jeffrey. Not a few weeks,” said Helen. “We won’t have that much time.”

“Alright, then. A few days. But we still need a place to stay. Let’s find something.”

The troop piled into the minivan, all their belongings in the back, with additional tubs of personal belongings in the small trailer they were pulling behind them. If anyone asked, they were on their way to Arizona and their new retirement community.

No one would suspect a thing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

The still-smoldering remains of the two-story home greeted Garr, Alistair, Brix, and Major as they pulled up to the scene. One fire truck was leaving the scene, while another stayed, spraying the smoking remains of the home.

Crowds had cleared away, the only remaining vehicles those of the fire department. The truck for fire investigators was still there, along with two patrol cars.

“Morning, folks. No onlookers, please,” said the firefighter.

“We’re not onlookers,” said Major. “We’re investigating the individuals who owned the home. We are with Voodoo Guardians.” The eyebrows of the firefighters and police officers rose in admiration. One of the cops moved closer, looking at the four men, glancing up and down.

“You’re way fucking bigger than everyone says you are, and that’s saying a lot,” he smirked. Brix laughed, shaking his head.

“We’re peewees compared to some of the others. Can you tell us anything about how this started?”

“Plain old gasoline,” said the investigator. “Two cans from what we could tell. They wanted to make sure that nothing was left to see.”

“Did you say that you were investigating the people who owned the home?” asked the officer. Alistair looked at his name tag and nodded.

“Corbin, right?” The officer nodded. “Yes, we need to find them.”

“We’re a bit confused,” said Corbin. “The owner of this home died two months ago. Willie Carter. There were no surviving relatives, so it’s been tied up with the bank.”

“Shit,” muttered Garr. “We’re looking for at least five senior citizens whom we believe are responsible for robbing banks recently. We also believe they killed two FBI agents.”

“No, shit?” muttered Corbin. “We knew of the robberies, obviously, but that’s a fed case all the way. Seniors?”

“I wonder if they knew the deceased,” said Brix. “Maybe they had some sort of an agreement with him.”

“Like we said, the deceased’s name was Carter, Willie Carter. Died of heart failure two months ago at the age of eighty-two.”

“Where did he work before he retired?” asked Brix.

“Well, technically, I suppose he wasn’t retired. He worked a four-hour shift three days a week at the convenience store on the corner. Seems shitty that at eighty-two, he had to do that, but the bank was threatening to take the property for back taxes owed. Before that, he was a retiree of the Treasury Department. Records, I think.”

“That’s three,” said Major. “We’ve got three of them tied to the Treasury.”

“Well, that’s not suspicious at all, is it?” said Corbin. “I don’t know the details about what he did, but it had something to do with tax records, not personnel.”

“Did you find anything, anything at all?” asked Major.

“Naw, man. Everything was scorched. Not even a piece of paper left behind. Lady

across the street said they'd been staying there a few weeks. She thought they were renting it from the bank but never saw them move furniture in. She thinks they were using the staging furniture."

"Did she see them move out?" asked Alistair.

"Afraid not. We think they moved out in the middle of the night. She did say that the previous owner was an avid bridge player."

"Bridge? Like the card game?" asked Alistair. Corbin nodded. "Text Sebastian and Em. Let them know that Willie Carter may have been part of this as well. This could get much bigger than we imagined."

Chief, Hex, Torro, and Chase entered the VA hospital in Pennsylvania and walked toward the reception desk. Every seat in the waiting area was filled, with some patients just standing against the walls. Some of them looked desperate. Others resigned themselves to the fact that they would wait for hours with no resolution to their problem. They were playing the game.

The horrible hospital green walls gave them all chills. Not a painting or photo anywhere, just ridiculous posters about not smoking, avoiding addiction to opioids, and healthy pregnancies. Chief stared at his friends, shaking his head.

"There, but for the grace of God, and Mama Irene, go us," he frowned.

The reception desk was managing calls and people all at the same time. The two women looked stressed beyond belief, and the lone security guard didn't seem to care.

The line was five to six deep, and some of the waiting patients weren't patient at all. When they finally had their opening, the woman looked up at them anxiously.

“We’re not here for an appointment,” said Chase, hoping to settle her nerves. “We’re here to speak to someone about a patient that died not too long ago.”

“Baby, lots of patients die here. If you’re not family, move it along. I can’t, and I won’t give you those records. It’s not legal, and you should know that.” Hex frowned at the woman and leaned on the counter.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Listen closely. You’re going to get us someone to speak with, or I’m going to make a call to the president of the United States. He’s then going to call your supervisor, you’re going to lose your job, and so will your boss. Then I’m going to go through those doors back there and rip this fucking shithole apart.

“I’ll ask one more time. Nicely. Get me someone to speak with or you are going to regret seeing these faces today.”

“I already do,” she frowned.

“Maybe if you started giving a shit about them, you wouldn’t regret it,” said Chief, pointing to the waiting hordes of people. The woman looked as though he’d slapped her in the face, and Chief immediately regretted his words.

“Now, you listen to me,” said the woman, slowly standing. She was what they would call ‘sturdy,’ and she was about to unleash on the group of men. Her hair was braided tight against her head, the salt and pepper of experience evident to all. “I care for every man and woman that walks in these doors. My daddy served, my granddaddy served, my son served. I care for them all. I even care for the ones addicted to drugs who just want more. I even care for the ones that are just lookin’ for a way out. I even care for the ones that are lyin’ about everything they went through.

“They’re all sick, but I care for them all. What I don’t care for are people comin’ here treatin’ me like shit when it’s clear I got more than enough bodies out there to worry about. You four don’t appear to be missin’ any meals, losin’ any limbs, or needin’ anything urgent. So do me a favor, sit down and be patient or I’ll make that call for you to the president.”

Torro smiled at the woman, nodding his head.

“I like you,” he grinned. “Doesn’t mean I don’t need to speak to someone right now. But I respect what you’re doing, and we do understand. We’re all former military. We’re trying to get to the bottom of why a group of seniors would rob a bank after one of their spouses needed treatment and couldn’t get it.” She let out a loud huff and laughed at them.

“Why? Baby, they robbin’ banks because that’s the only way to get what they need. Did you not listen to me? Look around you. These people all have appointments. The hundred people walking around outside are waiting, hoping to be seen today. If someone needed a treatment not on the list of approved treatments, they were just out of luck. I know it ain’t right. But it is what it is.”

“We’ll take a seat,” said Torro, nodding at the woman.

“Hold on. Come on back,” she said, waving them around the desk. “I don’t need y’all in the waitin’ room scaring everyone.”

The men smirked at her. She was warming up to them, or at least playing along like she was. Pointing to several chairs in a hallway, they took a seat and waited as she walked to an office and returned a few minutes later.

“Someone will be with you shortly. Dr. Esoffa, our director, will talk to you.”

“Thank you,” said Torro. She started to walk away, and he grabbed her hand giving it a squeeze. “Seriously. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she nodded.

“This place has made improvements over the years, but it’s still a messed-up piece of

bureaucracy,” said Chase.

“Yeah, but it’s all they have right now. Until someone truly cleans it all up and gets rid of all the red tape, this is what they have,” said Hex.

“Gentlemen, I understand you’d like to speak to me about the death of a patient,” said a small black man walking toward them. He wore a white coat, purple dress shirt with a bow tie, and Bermuda shorts with running shoes. They all smirked.

“Nice outfit,” smiled Chase.

“It’s why I wear it. You’re smiling. That’s a good start. Now, what can I help you with?”

“We think about two years ago, a former Army nurse, Estelle Steiner, was here for treatment of advanced breast cancer. We know that she had multiple rounds of chemo and radiation as well as a bilateral mastectomy. There was a new treatment offered in Germany, but you didn’t approve the treatment.”

“Ah, I see,” he said, nodding. “Mr...”

“I’m Hex. This is Chase, Torro, and Chief. We’re retired military but run a security and investigation firm now.”

“I see, and according to my very angry front desk person, you know the president.” They all nodded, and Hex pulled out an ID card that said everything the doctor needed to know.

“Alright, Hex. I don’t recall this patient, but it may have been before I took over the hospital. VA benefits or Medicare rarely covers experimental treatments. Especially if those treatments were in another country. We have no way of knowing what

they're testing, what the studies or clinical trials look like, and because it's experimental, they aren't required to give full disclosure."

"So, the patient has no option other than to drain their savings or die?" asked Torro. Chase gripped his friend's arm, trying to tell him to hold back.

"I know it feels wrong, and in many ways it is. We try to offer every option possible for our patients, but sometimes, it's not within our grasp. This patient, Estelle Steiner, was she related to one of you?" he asked with a sly gaze.

"Uh, well," said Chase.

"You said she was your aunt, isn't that right?" asked the doctor again.

"Yes. My aunt," said Chase. The doctor smiled at Chase and waved them toward his office. Seated behind his desk, he entered the information and read the screen for a few moments.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Her breast cancer was advanced, stage four. She hadn’t done a mammogram in more than ten years. I hate to say this, but if she had done her yearly check-ups, she very well could have survived this. Even with the chemo and radiation, she really didn’t have a chance.”

“And the experimental treatment?” asked Chief.

“I see it mentioned in here, but it wasn’t even cleared for her type of breast cancer. I don’t believe she would have survived no matter what they did.”

“We know that she did end up going for the treatment in Germany, but she died shortly thereafter.” The doctor nodded, frowning.

“It’s not surprising. The treatment was for advanced-stage breast cancer of a different type, but by that point, the breast cancer was no longer the issue. It had spread to her brain. That’s what they should have attempted to slow. I’m not sure that this treatment would have helped with that at all.”

“Sir, I know that you deal primarily with veteran care, but can you give me a sense of what the care, in general, for our elderly is like in this country?” asked Chase.

“Now, that is a loaded question, young man,” he frowned, standing. “Walk with me. I only have a few more minutes to give you, but this is important. The care of our aging citizens should be something always on our minds, yet it is not. We worry about our children, as we should. We worry about our workers, as we should. But in America, it often feels as if when you reach a certain age, the age where you can no longer do everything for yourself, that you are no longer of value.

“Children forget that their parents and grandparents have wiped their noses, changed their diapers, stayed up all night with infections and fevers, cried over their boo-boos. It is expected that a parent should care for a child. But who cares for the parent? In other countries, they are revered for their wisdom and experience, their value to their culture. In America, they are tossed aside to drown in loneliness, poverty, and disease.”

“Jesus,” muttered Chase.

“You asked me to give you a sense of the care provided in this country for the elderly. It isn’t a question about old or young, good care or bad care. It’s about wealthy or poor. If you have money, you will always get the treatment you need, even if you’re alone. If you do not, you struggle to pay for your medications, your options for care facilities are limited to nursing homes that care nothing of your former life or value. Not all, but many. Your life will end before it should. I know that’s a somber note, gentlemen, but that’s the best I can do.”

“You’ve been very helpful, sir. Thank you,” said Chief. “Oh, and by the way, the receptionist needs a raise.”

Jalen and Tiger entered the Treasury building directly across from the White House. They placed their weapons in the bins and walked through the scanners, showing their IDs. They didn’t need to show their weapons. They could have simply walked through with the stealth netting, but they were trying to do everything by the book.

“Can we help you, gentlemen?” asked the officer.

“We’re looking for the personnel office,” said Jalen.

“Fourth floor, second door on the left,” he said, pointing to the elevators. With a dozen other people, they piled into the elevators and made their way upstairs.

Opening the office door, they were surprised to only see one person sitting in the space. A young man.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“We’d like to speak to someone about a couple of former employees that we believe may be responsible for some recent bank robberies.”

“I’m the only one here,” he said, standing to greet them. “My name is Jay Walsh. I’m an assistant human resources director. Are you with an agency?”

“No. We’re private investigators helping the FBI.” He looked at their IDs and then typed something into the computer and nodded.

“Who is it you’re interested in?”

“The first person is Willie Carter.”

“Old Willie,” smiled the younger man. “He was great. That guy knew everyone, knew where to find everything, and was probably responsible for training half the people in this building. He was a records administrator but had a crazy, wicked memory. He remembered every detail about everyone.”

“When he retired, was it voluntarily?” asked Jalen.

“Retired? Willie didn’t retire. I mean, not really. He said it was time to move on, and he was going to do something else for a while. He left, and last I heard, he was working part-time at some convenience store. He didn’t need the money. Not that I know of, anyway. He was at the top of his pay grade and single. He was very frugal. I used to joke with him about driving a twenty-year-old car.”

“But he had access to all the tax records, is that right?” asked Tiger.

“Yes. Everything. Who else?”

“Ed Morgan and Nick Cunningham.”

“Oh, that’s interesting you’re asking that. Ed, Willie, and Nick were all good friends. They weren’t all the same age, but about the same era. They’d been here forever. Poor Nick died suddenly, had a stroke at his desk or something. It wasn’t long after that Ed and Willie decided to do something else. They were all really nice people. It was a shame what the system did to them.”

Jalen and Tiger stared at one another, then slowly looked up at the younger man.

“What did the system do to them?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Well, they were never able to prove it, but Ed and Nick allegedly identified that a few of those in charge had been siphoning money from the retirement funds into their own accounts. They all figured out a way, allegedly, to siphon it back to those who needed it most. Like I said, no one could actually prove it, but they caused such raucous they couldn’t stay any longer.”

“And was it proven that the people in charge were taking money from the retirement funds?” asked Tiger.

“Definitely. Eight people lost their jobs over it, which is probably why they weren’t charged. You could hear them all screaming at the directors that they would make sure every news agency in the country knew about their inept leaders if they touched them.”

“Interesting,” frowned Jalen. “You’ve been a great deal of help.”

“Hey, if you really want to know about them, go to the Virginia-D.C. Bridge Masters Meeting. They all played bridge together and apparently were crazy good.”

“Bridge,” frowned Jalen. “Now, isn’t that something?”

Sebastian and Emelia stepped inside the small white building that was the home of the Virginia-D.C. Bridge Masters Club. They’d already received word from the others that there was a tie to this club, but it would need to be proven.

“Hello, may I help you?” asked the elderly woman seated at the desk.

“We’d like to speak to someone about some friends of ours that are in the club,” said Emelia.

“Friends of yours? Young lady, I don’t have time for liars or scammers. Those that belong to this club are retired.”

“I meant no disrespect, ma’am,” she said calmly. “I’m trying to solve two murders and a number of bank robberies that we believe members of this club participated in.”

“That’s impossible. As you can see, we’re all elderly.” She made the statement so casually Emelia turned to Sebastian and frowned.

“No offense, ma’am,” said Sebastian, “but I know a lot of highly qualified and capable seniors. You’re capable of anything you set your mind to.”

“That is true, and I appreciate the insight,” said the woman, “but no one here would do such a thing.”

“Let me just give you the names,” said Emelia. “Ed Morgan, Helen Aikens, Myrtle Cunningham, Jeffrey Banks, Estelle Steiner, Mac Steiner, and Willie Carter.”

“Sorry. Those names aren’t familiar to me at all.”

“Again, ma’am, no disrespect intended, but their photos are on the wall behind you, accepting a rather large trophy,” said Sebastian.

“I don’t believe they’re members any longer,” she said casually. “If you’ll excuse me, we have a meeting about to start.” Sebastian reached across the desk and gripped her wrist.

“Ma’am, I have attempted to be patient and kind to you, but you are not cooperating

in a federal investigation of two murdered FBI agents and a number of bank robberies. You are clearly lying to us, and I want to know why.”

She pulled her arm free and leaned over the desk, a look of fury on her face.

“Young man, there are a number of things I would like to know and yet I do not have the answers. You will not find your answers here. Get out, or I will call the police.”

Sebastian stared at the older woman and knew that she was more than aware of the people he spoke of and, more than likely, what they were doing. This little bridge club was not what it seemed.

“Alright. We’ll leave you alone for now. Just know that I’ll be watching you and your little club,” said Sebastian. “If any of those individuals show up, I’d appreciate a courtesy phone call. I just want to speak with them.” He handed the woman a business card, and she stared at him, tearing it to pieces and letting it fall to the desk.

“It looks like I’ll need to have the FBI come in and check this place out for illegal gambling,” said Sebastian.

“You do that,” laughed the woman. “You do that.” Emelia gripped his arm and pulled him toward the door. As they walked outside, she stared at him, then back at the door.

“Em, they know something!” he exclaimed.

“Yep. And now, so do we. The other photo on the wall that you didn’t see had someone else we know in it. Frank.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Why didn’t you tell us, Frank?” asked Emelia.

He carefully placed his personal items in a box, rifling through his desk to see if he'd missed anything. When Emelia demanded a meeting with him and the director, he knew what it was about.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Frank, we just need to get to the bottom of all of this,” said Chief. “Why didn’t you tell us that you were in the bridge club with them?”

“Because I knew that I would become a suspect,” he said resolutely.

“Frank, you are a suspect! You withheld information from me intentionally. Those people killed two of your agents!”

“They didn’t mean to,” he said, staring at the room full of people. “I know them all. They didn’t mean to. They never meant to hurt anyone.”

“Frank, you need to start talking,” said the director.

“Everyone in that club has worked for the government at some point in time. Local, county, city, state, or federal. It was how we all met at a national conference for civil servants. Ed and Willie were the oldest, but they acted like kids half the time. Jeffrey was the baby of the group.

“Estelle was already sick when we met her and Mac. She’d already lost her hair and about half her body weight. Poor thing was just withering away. They kept talking about this experimental treatment they were going to try, but Medicare and the VA wouldn’t pay for it. Nothing was working for her.”

“Frank, she didn’t go for a mammogram for ten years,” said Torro. “We have no way of knowing if that would have made a difference, but the doctors thought that it might. The treatment she sought out wasn’t even for her type of breast cancer. By the time she got there, it was the brain cancer killing her.”

“God,” he muttered, shaking his head. He folded his hands in front of him and just sat quietly for a moment.

“Frank,” whispered Emelia.

“We just wanted to make a difference for other retirees. People who gave their lives in service to their country in one way or another. If we could buy their medications, we did. If we could provide for the surgery, we did. Maybe they needed help with utilities that month, rent, or groceries. We helped out. You have no idea what a few hundred bucks will do to help older people.

“They’re all frugal. They were born in the era of the great depression or WWII. They’re used to the rations of WWII, the modesty of the 1950s. They are called the Greatest Generation for a reason, and yet no one seems to want to help them. We took food and medicine to an Army vet in Sandybottom not too long ago. His roof had cardboard covering holes, the wind and rain coming through any time there was a storm. He’d asked for help, as much as it pained him, but no one wanted to do a damn thing.

“So we did. We gave him the medicine, gave him the food, and hired a contractor to fix his place up. It took only a week to fix the major issues. A week of a man’s time. The sick part of it all? His daughter lived only five miles from him and had no clue how bad it was.”

“Frank, I understand,” said Hex. “We all understand, but robbing banks and killing people isn’t the answer.”

“What is, Hex? What is the answer? We’re all smart people, and we tried like hell to get someone to listen to us. They just kept saying, ‘there’s an agency for that,’ ‘there are groups that can help.’ Fools. All of them were fools.

“Willie got the notice that he was behind in his taxes on his house and went to speak to the bank about a loan. The house was worth fifty times what the taxes were, and yet they wouldn’t give him just a year to figure it out. He was too old, they said. He didn’t have enough income. That man died because of what they told him!”

“Frank, we need your help in stopping them,” said Sebastian. “We are sympathetic to this. We really are, but if they keep going, someone is going to get killed, and it won’t be us. They can’t keep up this pace, keep running forever. How is the bridge club involved?”

Again, Frank sat quietly for a long moment, not saying anything. He reached inside the drawer of his desk and pulled out his service pistol, laying it on the desktop. His hand never left the weapon.

“Frank, don’t do this,” whispered Em.

“They’re good players, all of them. They’ve won multiple tournaments. When they rob the banks, they give the cash to the club, who then deposits it into the Silver Fund, and they disperse it in the form of payments for winning tournaments. That’s how the people get what they need. It’s never placed in an account in our names.”

Milo and Jalen took a slow step to the side of the room, and Frank cocked the hammer of the pistol.

“Don’t, son. I don’t want to hurt any of you, but I won’t go to jail.”

“Don’t do this, Frank. We can help you,” said Chief.

“No one can help me.” He spun the pistol flat on the desk, pointing it at his chest, and fired. Barely alive, Emelia gripped his hand as the others took the weapon and called for an ambulance.

“Frank! Frank, please don’t die,” she said, kneeling beside him.

“You’re a good agent, Emelia. A good kid. Let this one go.”

“I can’t do that, Frank. I can’t. They killed Cord and Tara. I can’t let that go,” she said, shaking her head.

“See,” he wheezed, “you’re a good agent.”

Dead before he ever arrived at the hospital, word spread through the agency of what had happened. Emelia notified the director that she would resign when this case was solved, and he was happy to give her the case for her last one.

“We need to put a hold on the funds of the bridge club,” said Emelia. “I don’t want to. Lord knows I don’t want to. But we have to. If they know that they can no longer use them for distribution of funds, they’ll have to do something else.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Hex and I will go out there right now, honey,” said Chief. “You guys try to figure out where they went after leaving Willie’s.”

“Thanks, Dad,” said Emelia, hugging her father.

“Take care of her,” said Chief, gripping Sebastian’s hand.

“You know I will, sir.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Frank killed himself,” said Ed, walking in the door of the camper.

They’d found a campground in rural Virginia that rented cabins and trailers by the week. The cabins were all full of temporary workers, but the trailers were larger and had room for everyone in one. It was still tight, but they were together.

“He what?” gasped Myrtle.

“He killed himself. They found out the connection between us and the bridge club. They must have seen his photo on the wall along with ours. When they confronted him, the news said he shot himself.”

“Did he say anything to them?” asked Mac.

“Mac! He killed himself,” said Ed.

“I know that, but if he told them everything about us, we’re cooked. We’ve got nowhere to go, and we need to get the hell out of here now!”

“No,” said Jeffrey. “No. I’m not done yet, and neither are you guys. I just know it. We have more in us. We have to do one more job.”

“Jeffrey, they know who we are, and they’re coming for us. It’s only a matter of time,” said Helen. “Now, you might be willing to die in a bank heist, but I’m not.”

“That’s why we’re not doing a bank heist,” said Jeffrey.

“What are you talking about? We’re not professionals. We knew about banks because we had inside information for them all.”

“That’s right. You did,” said Jeffrey. “Thanks to me. I was the one that hacked into your records to get the schematics on every bank on the East Coast.”

“You got in because Willie knew how to let you in,” said Ed. “We can’t be foolish here, Jeffrey.”

“Listen to me. I know what I’m doing. We’re going to rob from the robbers.”

They all stared at him, unsure of what in the world he was talking about. Maybe he’d started to lose his mind. If they left now, they could be in Mexico in two days or Canada by tomorrow night.

“We should just head to one of the borders now,” said Helen.

“Listen to me!” yelled Jeffrey. “A week ago, Baltimore and D.C. police did a joint raid of The Silencers, the motorcycle gang. They confiscated more than fifty-five million in drugs, two million in weapons, and thirty million in cash.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Mac.

“That’s right. Holy shit. They took it all and have it housed in a central evidence locker located between D.C. and Baltimore. It’s one I know intimately.”

“And you think they’re going to just let you walk in there and take all of that?” asked Myrtle.

“No, I think The Silencers are going to pay me to let them inside to get what they want.”

“Jesus, do you hear yourself?” said Ed. “You’re going to put drugs and guns back in the hands of one of the most vicious gangs in the country. I don’t know if I can do that, Jeffrey.”

“I’ll do it. For us. For Estelle, Willie, and Frank. I’ll do it. Me. I’ll split the cut that they give me, and we can all go our separate ways. They want their shit back, and they will be willing to pay for it.”

“How can you be sure?” asked Ed.

“Because I know these people. I hunted them and maybe worked with them on occasion.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Holy shit, were you a dirty cop?” asked Mac. Jeffrey laughed, shaking his head.

“You’re asking me this now? We’re fucking bank robbers and murderers, Mac. You fucking killed two federal agents. Don’t judge me. I know them. That’s all you need to know. They’re going to meet me at Diascund Reservoir tonight at ten. You can come with me, or I can go alone.”

“I’ll go with him,” said Helen. “I trust him, but this way, I’ll come back with information that will make all of you feel better.”

“Please, Helen,” smirked Myrtle. “We all know that you and Jeffrey have been climbing all over one another for the last year. Don’t give us that bullshit.”

“Really, you want to go there, Myrtle? Do you think we don’t know that you were screwing around with Willie. While your husband was alive.” The older woman stared at her friend, her lip quivering.

“Stop! None of that matters now,” said Ed. “So what if Myrtle and Willie were seeing one another? Nick was an asshole to her sometimes. We all saw it. Willie was a sweet, kind man. They deserved some happiness together. I don’t give a shit about you and Jeffrey, Helen. We’ve known about this for a while now. All of it.”

The trailer quieted once again as they peered out the small windows, watching the wind blow the falling leaves across the park. With their affair public, Helen sat next to Jeffrey, who put his arm around her.

“I think we have to give it a shot,” said Mac. “If we can make enough money off of

this to help the last few people, we can move on and maybe find another way.”

“How much will we make, Jeffrey?” asked Myrtle.

“I’ve asked them for half the cash. That’s fifteen million dollars. More than enough to do what we want to do. I get them access to the building, and they’ll give me the cash before they leave.”

“Can you really trust them?” asked Ed.

“With my life.”

“How can you be so sure? These are criminals. I know what you’re going to say. So are we, but they are violent men. You can’t be sure!”

“I can.”

“How?” pressed Mac.

“Because the leader is my brother.”

“Your brother? Your blood brother?” asked Mac.

“Yes. Different fathers but same mother. We’ve always been close, even when he went to the gang and I went to the academy. I helped him. He helped me. He won’t double-cross me.”

“What do you all say?” asked Ed.

“I say yes,” said Helen.

“Yes,” said Myrtle. Ed nodded.

“Alright. Let’s find a new way to help.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Chief and Hex walked into the bridge club only to be greeted by the same woman who had greeted Sebastian and Emelia. She must have known they would come back. That or she was the only one guarding the gate. Cocky when they left her, she just didn’t have any idea of how bad it was going to be.

“If you’re here about those bank robbers, we don’t know a thing,” she said, smiling at Hex and Chief.

“Wrong answer,” said Hex, shoving the desk aside and pushing the woman in her wheeled office chair toward the wall. She screeched, and two older men came out, staring at them. Then, they saw that they were not alone. A group of federal agents walked into the building. The yellow logo of the FBI on the back of their jackets. They were armed with crates to remove evidence and weapons that they were not about to test out.

“You lied. You lied about knowing all of them,” said Hex, pointing to the wall. “You lied about knowing Frank. He’s dead now, by the way.” The two men and the woman gasped, looking at one another.

“The funds of this club are now frozen and in federal custody. This club will be shut down, and you will not have access to your banking, this building, or anything else belonging to the club.”

“You can’t do this! Joey, call someone to help!” she yelled at the man.

“Frank was the one that could help, Anne. We’re done. Just shut up.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“It would go a lot easier on you if you’d just tell us everything you know. Anything that could be helpful.”

The woman folded her arms over her chest, stubbornly refusing any assistance. For an old bird, she definitely wasn’t easily intimidated.

“What’s with you, lady? You’re caught. You don’t get a free pass out of jail because you’re old. They’re going to try and convict you.”

“I don’t care,” she said, jutting her chin out.

“Maybe you should,” frowned Hex.

“She doesn’t care because they helped her,” said the man called Joey.

“Shut up!”

“You shut up, Anne! They helped her when she was about to lose her house. She’d put everything she had into helping her loser son and didn’t have a dime to her name. The bank was going to take her house, and he sure didn’t give a fuck.

“Willie was able to find the tax records and wiped them clean, making it look as though the tax payments were paid for the next ten years. Helen made sure that she had enough to live on, while Jeffrey made sure the loser son gave her back some of the money.”

“He’s not a loser,” she scowled.

“He is. He’s your son, but he’s still a loser, Anne.”

“How did Jeffrey make that happen?” asked Chief. The man looked at Anne, who was pleading with her eyes, begging him not to say another word.

“Jeffrey and Ryan are half-brothers. The loser son and the cop. What a combination, right?”

“Your son is Jeffrey Banks?” growled Hex. She looked away, not wanting to give anything away, although it was already done.

“What kind of shit is her son into?” asked Chief.

“He’s the boss of a gang. The Silencers.”

“The Silencers? Your son is the fucking boss of The Silencers? Do you have any idea what kind of people they are? Jesus, lady, you’re something else. So your cop son, Jeffrey, helps his deranged criminal brother, Ryan, all the while robbing banks to help you and other senior citizens.”

“You guys need to come see this,” said one of the agents, walking back out front from the main meeting space.

“Watch these three. Especially her,” said Hex. “If she moves, put a bullet in her head.” The agent stared at him, then back at the old woman.

“Yes, sir.”

“What do you have?” asked Chief.

The agent pointed to a pair of double doors leading to what should have been a

storage room. Instead, inside were dozens of maps pinned to the walls, marked with routes and check-in points. They even had little cars glued to the maps.

“Well, I guess with only one of them being the tech expert, they had to have something old school, didn’t they? Get pictures of all of this so we can double-check and be sure that these were already hit. If there’s something new on there, we need to know where it is.”

“Yes, sir. Our tech guy got into the computer system as well. They’re definitely not very stealth. There is a folder titled Help, and it’s not help for the computer system. It looks like it’s filled with requests for assistance from the elderly. Dozens of scanned e-mails, letters, cards, everything you can imagine, begging for assistance of some kind. There must be some sort of secret network they all know about, and we don’t.”

“Great. Just fucking great,” muttered Hex. “Send that file to us, and we’ll start sifting through to see if there’s anything we can do.”

“Yes, sir. What do we do about the three out front?” Hex looked at Chief, and they both knew what they had to do.

“Arrest them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Emelia’s condo was buzzing with activity as everyone was sifting through the evidence they’d collected. So far, they’d found nothing on traffic cameras, but Hiro and the others believed it was because Jeffrey was able to freeze the cameras from inside their vehicle. As he approached, one after another would be frozen until they were a safe distance away. They knew it was possible because it was an older technology that they’d used once upon a time.

“The Silencers. Brother, this puts a spin on things we didn’t want,” said Chief, staring at his friends. “Old people and a fucking gang, that’s quite possibly one of the worst in the entire country.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“We’ve got the team trying to find anything we can on where they’re located and what they’re doing. Local law enforcement and DEA said they raided one of their houses a week ago and walked away with a helluva haul. I’m going to guess they’re seriously pissed off,” said Torro.

“Silencers,” said Hex, shaking his head. “Guns, drugs, women, prostitution, trafficking, and murder for hire. One-stop shopping. Jesus. I sure as shit hope all our blue-haired gang didn’t know what kind of bed partners they were mating with.”

When the doorbell rang, they all quieted, pulling their weapons. Sebastian wasn’t stupid enough to pull Emelia behind him. She only would have run in the opposite direction. He did grip her hand, indicating for her to go slowly and let the others do their thing.

“My house. My door,” she said, turning to them. She had her own weapon behind her back. Looking through the peephole, she turned to them with a strange look on her face. As she opened the door, the others quieted even more.

“Mama Irene? Claudette?” said Chief. Behind them, Jake, Matthew, Baptiste, and Rose walked in.

“This is getting very crowded,” smirked Alistair. “Why are y’all here?”

“Give me the list,” said Irene with her hand out, wiggling her fingers.

“What? No. Mama Irene, this is evidence. I can’t just hand this over to you. What are you going to do with it?” asked Emelia.

“Honey, you can call it evidence. I call it human beings in need. These are people. People who reached out in good faith, believing someone on the other end could help them. They’re sitting out there waiting to see if anyone will respond. Can you imagine how that must feel for them? Now, you give me that list, or I’ll find another way to get it.”

“I-I,” she stammered, looking around the room.

“Might as well,” said Hex. “She won’t leave without it.”

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Major.

“What do you think I’m gonna do? I’m gonna help these folks. We got plenty, and if they need a little, we’ll give ‘em a little. We’re gonna split this up and contact these folks. We’ll see what we can do for ‘em. Doesn’t mean it ain’t evidence for y’all, but there are still people out there waiting for someone to answer their prayers. I won’t let ‘em die thinkin’ there’s no one.”

“Mama Irene, I love that y’all want to do this,” said Alistair, “but there are about six hundred people on this list, and they’re all over the East Coast. How will you help them?”

“Are you questionin’ me, Alistair Thomas Fitch?” He smirked, hearing his full name as the others chuckled.

“No, ma’am, I would never question you. I’m just curious.”

“It’s alright to be curious. We’ll find a way to get them what they need even if we have to hand deliver it all.”

Chief looked at Baptiste, who had that smile on his face that said, ‘easier to go with it

than fight it.'

"You were in agreement with this?" he asked Baptiste.

"I wouldn't say agreement," he grinned, rubbing the back of his head. "I would say I was purposefully selected to escort them here."

"Just by looking at these, Mama, about a third just need their prescriptions paid for," said Claudette.

"That's easy enough," said Jake. "We can find their pharmacy and pay for their medications for a year. Longer if they need them."

"Keep a list," said Matthew. "If they need help beyond a year, we'll stay in touch and see what we can do."

"I love you all, but we can't all fit here. My townhouse just isn't big enough, and we're bursting at the seams as it is," said Emelia.

"Of course, we can't all stay here," laughed Irene. "Matthew rented the top floor of that fancy hotel downtown. Everyone has their own room, and we can spread out but still be together. Gather your bags, Emelia." Chief raised an eyebrow, wondering how his daughter would react to being told what to do in her own home.

"But Mama Irene, this is my townhome. Sebastian and I can stay here." She stared at the young woman, not saying a word. Emelia felt the others in the room squirming and cleared her throat. "Yes, ma'am. I'll go get my bags."

"Thank you. The rest of y'all do the same. Let's go. We got work to do, and I brought food."

“You brought food!” screeched a half dozen men.

“Of course I did. Did you think I’d let y’all eat hotel food? I swear, sometimes these children forget where they came from. Maybe we should come out in the field more often, Matthew. Did I bring food? What kind of mama and grandmama would I be without food? Brought coconut cake and lemon bars too. They’ll have to suffer through breakfast, but I bet I can talk to the chef at the hotel and get back there in the mornin’.”

“I know, darlin’, I know. Let’s go. They’ll be right behind us, won’t y’all,” he said, looking at the men in the room.

“Yes, sir,” they all chimed in.

“She brought food,” said Chief.

“She brought coconut cake,” smirked Alistair.

“Forget all that,” laughed Torro, “she’s going to talk to the chef about making us breakfast!”

“I got dibs on the first plate,” said Major.

“How do you get the first?” frowned Jalen.

“Because I just called dibs. Don’t you know how these things work?” Hex and Chief watched as they streamed out of the townhome. They both shook their heads.

“Maybe they are just overgrown children.”

“Maybe?” laughed Chief.

Sebastian waited at the foot of the steps for Emelia. She came down with a large bag and just smiled at him. They all looked somewhat surprised that she’d actually followed instructions.

“I’m a smart woman. I know not to argue with Mama Irene.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I see, I see,” said Claudette. “Yes, ma’am. That’s awful. Alright. Can you give me the name of your pharmacy? We’re going to call and pay for the prescriptions and see how long you’ll be needing them. I’ll tell them to call you when they’re ready.”

The woman was crying on the other end of the line, giving her the name and number of her local pharmacy. When Claudette said goodbye, she lowered her head against her forearms on the table. Jake’s big hands massaged her shoulders, kissing her head.

Baptiste looked at his big sister and frowned.

“You okay, sis?” he asked.

“It’s a lot, Baptiste. That woman is on necessary medications for a heart condition and high blood pressure, but she hit something called a gap. How do we, as a nation, let this happen?”

“I think we don’t,” said her brother. “We’ll get this done, and then maybe we can start working this from a different angle. One where we can make long-term changes with government policies.”

“We’re so lucky, Baptiste. I know that we all know it, but this just proves it even more. We never have to worry about where our next meal is coming from or whether or not we can afford medical treatment or housing. We’ve been so, so fortunate.”

“We have,” said Rose. “Because of your parents. We’ve all been incredibly lucky and blessed. I say a prayer every day for them. For all of you, for saving me.”

“You saved me, baby,” said Baptiste, kissing his wife.

“Claudette, did you take care of that woman?” asked her mother from across the hall. They had all their suite doors open so they could speak to one another and

communicate freely. The elevator key to their floor was for their team only.

“I did, Mama. It was medication that she needed. Jake is taking care of calling the pharmacy now.”

“Good, that’s good,” said Irene. “Baptiste, what about the man who needed the new prosthetic arm?”

“I put him in touch with Ryan and the team at G.R.I.P., Mama. They’re going to fly out to see him and get him fitted for a new one. One of the best we make.”

“That’s what I like to hear! We’re makin’ a difference now.” She had a big smile on her face, the twinkle in her mischievous eyes lighting up the room. Matthew loved it when she was like this. She was a force.

They heard the elevator ding, and heads looked down the hallway, ready for whatever might come. Instead of bad guys, the security guard escorted a man and woman down the hallway, both wearing suits and looking very official.

“Sorry, Mr. Robicheaux, Mrs. Robicheaux, but this lady says she has to speak with you about what y’all are doing.”

“No problem, Hank. I appreciate you bringing her up here,” said Matthew. “How can we help you?”

“My name is Stacy Follett, and I’m the Administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid. This is my assistant director, Paul Trivini.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“Nice to meet you,” said Matthew. The man and woman looked around them, watching as men started coming out of the rooms.

“They’re all my children and grandchildren,” said Irene. “They’re helping us.”

“Yes, that’s what we’re here about,” said the woman. “Mrs. Robicheaux, there are procedures for people on Medicare that they have to follow to get their medications. We can’t just give medicine to whoever wants it without justifying the need.”

“Is that so? Well, what procedure is in place when you don’t give them their medications? Tell me that. What procedure prevents them from dying of high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes? How is it you justify seven hundred dollars for a vial of insulin, that without it, the patient will die!”

“Well, we carefully review...”

“Pfft! You don’t carefully review nothin’. Tell me, what are the names of the people on this list that you’ve refused treatments or medications? Tell me that.”

“My love, let her speak,” said Matthew, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Fine. Speak.”

“I, we, review their files and the necessity of the medications.”

“And you’re a doctor?” asked Claudette.

“No. But we have many doctors working for us. We also employ pharmacists, nurses, physical therapists, every medical specialty.”

“And these experts denied the woman I just got off the phone with her blood pressure and heart medications,” said Claudette.

“I would need to review her file,” said the woman, swallowing. Rose stepped forward, and Baptiste smiled, knowing that his little spitfire had a temper and knew how to use it.

“I’ve worked in the corporate world and understand the need for processes and procedures,” said Rose calmly. The woman and man smiled at her. “I also know the absolute futility of many of the rules put in place. The absurdity of their nature and need. You act as if you’re just looking at ledgers with numbers, which you are. You see a social security number, check it with age, weight, height, and the estimation of how long they will live.”

“Now wait a minute!” said the man, taking a step forward. As he did, Baptiste planted a hand in the middle of his chest that told him he would be wise to back up.

“That made you angry, Mr. Trivini, because it was the truth, and you don’t want everyone to know the truth. The things these people are requesting, needing to live life, full, productive lives are basic. It’s not like they want hair transplants and breast augmentation!

“They’re not asking for anything they haven’t worked for. These are people who have worked their entire lives contributing to a system that is supposed to provide for them, and your people are denying them that right. It’s heinous, and it borders on genocide only with generations.”

“How dare you!” said Follett.

“How dare I? How dare you! You were put into this position to help, not hinder,” said Rose. “You are supposed to protect them, not harm them and lead them to early death. Yes, I know the system is taxed, and it’s not going to last forever. You know why? Because it’s not a good system! It could be better, and you know how to make it better. You just won’t!”

Both of them were silent, just staring at Rose then looking around the room. Mama Irene stood next to her daughter-in-law, gripping her hand and giving it a squeeze. She was proud of her. Proud of what she’d said.

“Maybe you’d like to call the next one on our list,” said Jake. He handed the woman the paper, and she gasped. “Eleanor Follett. I believe she’s your mother. It appears she needs to have an MRI in order for the doctor to approve her hip surgery. Your people have refused, saying it’s unnecessary. Her doctor refuses to do the surgery without it. I imagine she’s in a lot of pain right now.”

“Sh-she called me a few days ago, but I’ve been so busy,” she said, staring at the paper. She looked up at them, nodding. “I’ll do better. I promise you, I’ll try to do better. Thank you for helping these people.”

“Stacy?” said her partner.

“No. They’re right. We need to fix this, and we’re going to find a way. Ms. Robicheaux?” she said, looking at Rose. “Would you be willing to participate in the review panel?”

“I would be thrilled to do so,” said Rose.

“I’ll be in touch,” she said, nodding at them. “Thank you. Thank you all.”

They watched as she and her assistant left the floor. When they were gone, Irene

hugged Rose, kissing her cheeks.

“And this is why I’m not worried about leavin’ y’all one day. When my time comes, everything will be in good hands. Now, let’s get back to work.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was well past midnight by the time the team stopped working and headed to their own rooms for much-needed sleep. Emelia and Sebastian showered, crawling into bed together, happy to have some alone time.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:18 am

“How did this get so big?” she whispered.

“It always does,” he smirked. “I’ve watched the older men, my father, and others, for years. They think something will be simple, and it never turns out that way.”

“I keep thinking about how desperate they must have been to start doing what they’re doing. I know that Myrtle and Mac both lost spouses. Helen lost her husband. I know they probably heard from others in the bridge club who had experienced the same. But to turn to bank robbery is pretty damn desperate.”

“Which only solidifies how big this problem really is,” said Sebastian. “Have you spoken to Maddie? How is she feeling?” Emelia rolled on her side, staring down at his face with a big smile.

“She’s doing great. Four healthy boys. They’ve already put her on bed rest, but she’s working from her bed, of course,” she laughed. “I can’t wait for us to have kids.”

“Me too,” he said, kissing her. “What do you say we practice that now?”

“I say yes,” she purred against his lips.

Sebastian was good at many things, but the way he used his mouth on her body made Em sing. He had the lightest bit of scruff on his face that always tickled her in the right way, teasing her body, her insides always quivering, begging for more.

She never slighted him, either. She enjoyed oral sex with Sebastian. He’d been the first man she ever attempted oral with, and he would definitely be the last. His thick

cock, with its perfect purple head, just seemed to scream at her.

Working together these last few days had been difficult. Just as she was focused on work, he'd walk by with his snug jeans, and all she would see was the outline of him.

Sebastian gripped her breasts, massaging as his thumbs and forefingers twisted and tweaked her nipples. For Emelia, it was the thing that always sent her over the edge. Some days, she really believed she might have an orgasm just with breast play.

But they weren't done. She'd had her orgasm, and he was always determined to give her another while he worked toward his own. Emelia climbed on his body, straddling his hips and lowering herself down, down, down until her breath caught in her throat.

"Why do you have to be so damn big?" she gasped.

"Why are you so perfectly fucking tight?" he growled. "Fuck, baby. That's so flawless, so right. Keep it up, keep rocking, Em." He gripped her hips, slamming her harder against him as his body fired upward, driving into her. Flipping her to her back, he pushed her knees toward her own shoulders, opening her wider for him.

"Sebastian!" she gasped. He couldn't even respond. So breathless and lost in the feelings, his voice wouldn't come. But his body did.

Slowly, he lowered her legs, letting them adjust to their natural position once again. Laying his forehead to hers, his breathing evened out, and he began kissing her, tasting her sweetness. She smiled up at him as her fingers trailed through his hair.

"I think we need another shower," she smiled.

"No fucking way. We get in that shower, and I'm going to fuck you all night long. I want to wake up and smell me on you. We'll shower in the morning."

“Won’t we want to fuck again in the morning?” she asked with a coy grin.

“Damn right, we will.”

Although they both slept like babies, waking up to news from the home team wasn’t exactly what they wanted. Showered, dressed, and enjoying breakfast, Chief and Hex walked toward the team, frowning.

“What the fuck now?” asked Baptiste.

“We need to find these people now,” said Hex.

“We know that,” said Emelia. “We’re trying. Is there something we don’t know about?”

“A lot,” said Hex. “Hiro and the team found some additional information that we didn’t know before. Helen, Ed, Myrtle, and Mac all have terminal illnesses. Mac is dying of COPD, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. It’s advanced, and he can’t get all the meds he needs. Ed has stage three liver cancer. Inoperable. Myrtle has Alzheimer’s.”

“And Helen?” asked Emelia, somewhat concerned.

“She has kidney failure, honey. She’s had it for years, but the dialysis is no longer working. She needs a kidney transplant, but older patients are lower on the list,” said Chief.

“What about the ex-cop? What about Jeffrey?” asked Sebastian.

“Nothing that we can find yet. That feels odd all by itself.” Hex stared at the group. “I think we’ve got to follow more of the trail and see if we can find them. Are you all

staying here to make more calls?”

“Nowhere else to be,” smiled Matthew. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“Where will you be, Dad?” asked Emelia.

“I think Hex and I are going to go have a conversation with our three bridge players in the federal jail. No surprise that none of them have made bail. Maybe they’d be willing to give us a clue as to what’s happening.”

Jeffrey had left earlier in the morning, saying he was going to run some errands, get some groceries for everyone, and make sure that their meeting with his brother was still set. While he was gone, the others just sat around staring at one another.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” said Mac, shaking his head. His coughing fits were happening more and more frequently, his inability to breathe actually creating more issues for the team.

“Just a little longer, Mac,” said Helen. He smiled at his friend, shaking his head.

“It’s okay, Helen. I just want to see the warm waters one more time. I just want to stick my toes in the sand of the beach and listen to the waves.” Helen looked out the window and saw the taxi pull up. “That’s for me.”

“Mac, where are you going? You can’t leave,” said Ed.

“I have to. You know I do. I’m slowing everyone down, and it’s only getting worse. I can’t get my meds any longer. We screwed up. We might have helped others, but we didn’t bother to stop and help ourselves when we needed it.”

“We’ll do that with this money that Jeffrey is getting us. You’ll have your meds by

the end of the week,” said Myrtle. Mac hugged Helen, then Ed. Standing in front of Myrtle, he kissed her forehead and smiled.

“I love that you all believe he’s still going to split this money with us, but he won’t. That’s not in his DNA. He’s going to get that money and leave, and I can’t afford to wait around and be disappointed. These last few years have been some of the best of my life. I love you all.”

He grabbed the small duffel bag with all of his belongings in it. Two t-shirts, four pairs of boxers, four pairs of socks, two pairs of trousers, and three shirts. There was one tie and one sport coat, just in case. Wrapped inside the sport coat was a wedding photo of him and Estelle.

As he got into the taxi, he turned and waved at his friends.

“Dulles, please,” he said to the driver. He wasn’t sure if could get through security or not, but he was going to try. Jeffrey had given all of them fake passports and driver’s licenses, but he had no idea if they were any good.

At the ticket counter, he purchased a one-way ticket to Miami. He handed the TSA agent his fake license and the ticket. The man barely looked at it, waving him on through. I guess age does have its advantages. When he boarded the plane, he tucked the duffel above his seat and leaned his head back, closing his eyes.

Twice, he woke with coughing fits that had everyone around him concerned, but all in all, it was a good flight.

Two thousand miles away, a young man staring at a computer screen with hundreds of photos passing by his gaze stopped the scroll.

“Hiro! I’ve got something.”

Miami airport was more than Mac could handle. His coughing had worsened in the humidity of South Florida, and the gate agent called for a wheelchair for him. The young man led him outside to the taxi line, where he asked the driver to take him as far south as he possibly could.

“I just need a beach, young man.”

The driver nodded, taking Highway 1 all the way to Key Largo. Pulling into the small park, it was nearing sunset. Mac handed him two crisp one-hundred-dollar bills and thanked him.

“I can wait, sir.”

“No need,” he said.

He kicked off his shoes and coughed so hard he thought he might fall over. Nearly gasping for every breath now, he knew he’d made the right choice. Mac struggled to make his way through the sand, finally able to take a seat at the water’s edge and stick his toes in.

The sun was at the point in the sky where it appeared to be dunking itself into the cool waters of the Atlantic. Mac just stared at it, remembering all the times that he and Estelle used to go to the beach.

He felt someone sit beside him and didn’t even bother to turn.

“Just let me see the sunset,” he said.

“I’m in no hurry, sir,” said Luke. “It’s a beauty tonight.”

“FBI?”

“No, sir. Just someone who’s trying to help.”

“We never meant to hurt anyone. I’m sure all killers say that. I’m usually the most gentle, calm spirit ever.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“What changed?” asked Luke, still looking straight ahead.

“I lost the only thing that ever mattered to me. A woman who cared for others her entire life while under fire, while in the middle of conflict. She never asked for a damn thing except a treatment no one wanted to give her.”

“Mr. Steiner, this won’t matter at all to you, but the treatment in Germany wouldn’t have helped your wife. The cancer had spread to her brain, and that treatment wasn’t designed for her condition.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t matter to me at all,” he said. He started coughing, and Luke noticed the trickle of blood at his lips. He handed him an old-fashioned handkerchief. It was silly that he carried it, but Grandma always said a gentleman always has one in case a lady needs it. The man smiled, taking it and wiping his mouth.

“Why don’t we get you some help, sir.” Mac turned to see another man on the other side of him. Eric just smiled at him.

“Do me a favor and bury me next to Estelle in my coat and tie. Make sure our wedding photo is with me.” He looked at the young men beside him and nodded. “You’re big boys. That’s good. Our country needs big men to fight for what’s right. My question for you two is, will you fight for what’s right?”

“Sir, right now my grandparents and aunt and uncle are back in D.C. making calls to everyone that was on your list at the bridge club. So far, they’ve bought prescriptions for more than a hundred and fifty people, scheduled more than sixty uncovered tests, and are still making calls. When they’re done, my aunt will be headed to speak with

Congress about changing the policies of Medicare and Medicaid.

“I’m not sure we’ll make a huge difference, sir. But for now, we’re making a difference for the people who reached out to you.”

Mac didn’t say anything, his eyes closed, just sitting with his hands over his knees. Eric looked at Luke, then reached over, feeling his wrist for a pulse. He shook his head.

“I guess we call for the coroner,” he said to Luke.

“Not yet,” said Luke, looking up at the setting sun. “He wanted one last sunset. Whether he sees it or not, he deserves this one.”

The two lifelong friends made sure Mac was upright the entire time. When the light of the sun had finally faded, they called the coroner and texted the others.

“We found Mac. He’s gone.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The federal prison wasn’t exactly where Chief and Hex wanted to spend their day. They’d rather be home with their wives and their team, but this was important. Not just because Emelia was involved but because, ultimately, it affected all of them.

Showing their IDs to the guard, he nodded, opening the door as they walked inside. Another guard led them to an interrogation room.

“Guards will bring them down together like you asked. Not like they’re running anywhere. Gotta give them old folks credit, though. They tried to stick it to Uncle Sam, didn’t they?” Hex and Chief just stared at the guard, not finding humor in his

comments. He cleared his throat, leaving the men inside.

A few minutes later, they could hear the sound of chains clinking against the concrete floor. Chains. Three senior citizens, not in great shape, were chained. They knew that there were two sides to the prison, one for males, one for females. When the guard opened the door, he led the three to their chairs and then chained them to the table.

“Is that really necessary?” asked Chief.

“Policy, sir. We make no exceptions. Just knock on the door when you’re done.” Chief and Hex nodded at the man. The two men seemed to scoot further away from the woman.

“I hope you feel good about yourselves,” said Anne. “Imprisoning three senior citizens.”

“Lady, don’t fuck with me or attempt to make me feel bad,” said Hex. “You’re the one that broke the law and raised two law-breaking sons. You have a chance to redeem yourselves. Any information you provide to us will be seen as support and will reflect positively at your trial.”

“I’m not telling you shit,” said the old woman. The others just shook their heads.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know,” said Joey. “So will Shel.”

“Shel. That’s your name?” asked Hex.

“Shelly. My dad had a great sense of humor,” frowned the man. Chief and Hex said nothing, just nodding.

“We need to find the others. We think they’re in danger and are going to do

something really stupid this time. Jeffrey is crazy if he thinks that just because Ryan is his brother, The Silencers won't kill him on the spot."

"They won't!" snapped Anne. "They wouldn't dare. Ryan would never let them hurt his brother. Never!"

"Lady, you're delusional. The Silencers kill. They don't care who, they don't care when, they don't care how. It's the only damn thing they're good at. They will kill Jeffrey once they have their shit back," said Hex.

Anne was smart enough to not say anything. She knew about The Silencers and how they operated, and she knew that Ryan could be ruthless. But she also knew that Jeffrey was able to control his brother's temper. Usually.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“Look, they’ve left the area, and we want to know where they would have gone,” said Chief. “Are there any more safe houses, any other properties of your deceased friends?”

Joey looked at the men, shaking his head. They knew it all. They’d been fools to think that they could get away with this.

“No. No more safe houses,” he said. “They probably tried to find someplace they could pay cash for, although they don’t have much cash.”

“What the hell? They’ve been robbing banks. How do they not have cash?” asked Hex.

“Because they never kept much for themselves,” said Shel. “Don’t you guys get it? They were truly giving it all to the rest of us to help us. They’d keep a few thousand for food, utilities, anything else, but they didn’t get rich from it. Hell, they were driving a ten-year-old mini-van for a while.”

“So, places they would need to pay cash for,” repeated Hex. Shel nodded. “Motels, not hotels. Campgrounds. Mobile home park rentals.”

“I guess,” said Joey. “I know you have to do this. I know they killed those two agents, but I also know they didn’t mean to. Before you say it, I know that doesn’t matter. But you boys have to understand how much good they’ve done. Dozens, hell, hundreds of people who have their medications, surgeries, treatments because of them. I know it was wrong. We all know it was wrong, but in a lot of ways, it was right.”

“Joey, we do understand what you’re saying, but we can’t condone bank robbery and murder. We just can’t. The system is broke, no fucking joke about that,” said Hex. “We’ve got some friends working on making changes right now. I wish to Christ that we would have known about this sooner, and we would have figured out a way to help.

“Their intentions were good, but their methods failed. Now, the people who really need help may not get it because of them. They’ll either be seen as crazy old people gone off the rails, or Robin Hood and his merry men. We just want to find them so that no one else dies.”

“Do you have a phone number or e-mail address for them?” asked Chief.

“We don’t use e-mail much,” said Shel. “We know that you kids can track that stuff nowadays.” The two men smirked at being called kids. They weren’t much younger than the people seated before them.

“They didn’t like using cell phones much. Jeffrey told them not to because they could be traced as well. He bought them throw-away phones. You know, the ones that you can use once and toss in the garbage. Had a whole bag of them. We never knew what their numbers were.”

“That’s more helpful than you think,” said Hex.

“Help?” scoffed Anne. “You can’t trace an untraceable phone.”

“News flash, Anne. Nothing is totally untraceable.” She gave a deathly glare to Hex, and he returned the favor.

“Look, you can think what you want,” said Joey, “but we would do it all again. We’re sorry about what happened with those agents, but everything else? Well, everything

else we did intentionally.”

“I wouldn’t tell the judge that,” frowned Chief. The two men stood, knocking on the door for the guard. When he opened it, they turned to the others and just stared at them.

“You know what makes me really sad about this?” said Hex. “You all were supposed to be part of the greatest generation, the baby boomers, with work ethics and intelligence that only experience and wisdom could bring. I still believe that. I’m just sad that all of you didn’t exemplify it.”

Hex and Chief dragged their feet as they left the interrogation room. They’d freed women and children from traffickers. They’d brought down drug lords. They’d killed terrorists. But somehow, in some strange way, this felt like the worst case of their lives.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Ryan? Ryan, it’s me,” whispered Jeffrey into the darkness of the building. He watched as his brother walked out between two rows of pallets piled high with electronics, guns, and, most likely, drugs.

“Are you okay?” asked Ryan. “Did you see Mom?”

“I’m good, and no, I didn’t see Mom. I can’t get inside a prison right now, Ryan. We can figure out how to get her out later. Are you guys ready for tonight?”

“We’re ready,” said Ryan. “Are you going to be able to get inside that evidence warehouse?”

“Don’t worry about that. I have everything I need. Once we get in, I’ll take care of

the guard, and you guys get your shit and whatever else you want. Just follow through on what you promised, Ryan. I want my money.”

“You’ll get your money,” said his brother.

They couldn’t have been more different in appearance. Ryan favored his father, who had also been in a gang. He was covered with tattoos, even on his face. He had piercings everywhere, and his clothes always looked dirty even after they were freshly washed. Their mother thought he hung the moon. Probably because he was always giving her money.

Jeffrey was different. Tall and slender, he only had one tattoo, and that was of a nude woman. It was face down on his abdomen. Her head turned to the side with her mouth wide open right at the appropriate location of his hardened cock. He got a kick out of it. Women did not.

Growing up with Ryan was hard. Older by three years, he was always more adventurous, rougher, harder. Their mother didn’t seem to mind at all. It reminded her of her one true love, Ryan’s shithead father, who left her pregnant and alone, sending a few hundred bucks via a courier every few weeks. That was all she got for raising his bastard child.

Jeffrey’s father was the owner of a local hardware store. He was respected, kind, hardworking, and the target of The Silencers. Not willing to pay their protection money, Ryan and his buddies killed him late one night, making it look like a robbery. It didn’t matter. Jeffrey knew. But he couldn’t be angry with his brother. His father should have given them what they wanted.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

The number of times he'd kept him out of jail was mind-boggling. Moving evidence, having 'conversations' with witnesses, all to make sure big brother stayed out of prison. This time would be the last. He tried to see the faces of the men and women behind his brother, but they were careful to stay in the shadows.

"Where are the old geezers?" he grinned.

"They're your age, Ryan," frowned Jeffrey.

"I don't give a fuck. Where are they?"

"I left them in a trailer we're renting. We'll be at the warehouse for you to get your shit. Don't worry."

"And what happens after that? Where are you going?" asked Ryan.

"Mexico. Maybe South America. I don't know yet. South is about all I can tell you right now. I'd sure love it if you came with me, Ry."

"Fuck that!" his brother scoffed. "This is my life, you know that. You could stay and join the club."

"I can't. My face will be everywhere. I'd only put all of you in more danger. I'll give each of the others some money, and we can all do our own thing."

"What the fuck does it matter? They're all dying, aren't they?" laughed his brother. Jeffrey once again felt the stab of his brother's absolute coldness. He looked down at

his feet, wondering if he was really doing the right thing. Of course, no one ever really taught him what the right thing was. That was the excuse he was running with, even as a grown man.

“Yeah, they’re dying. We all are, Ry. I’ll be at the warehouse by eleven.”

“Be there, bro. I wouldn’t want to have to come after you,” smirked Ryan.

The pit in Jeffrey’s stomach only grew as he drove back toward the trailer park. He watched his mirrors, checking for police cars. He kept his speed low enough to not be noticed but not high enough for a ticket.

Stopping for food, he filled the grocery basket and felt the pit grow wider. What did it matter? He’d be gone by tomorrow, and they’d be on their own. None of them would make it. Not one. He loaded the groceries and filled his gas tank before the last leg back.

When he opened the door, their faces were somber.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Mac left. Said he was holding us back,” said Ed. Jeffrey stared at them, nodding. He wasn’t wrong. His coughing was an identifiable feature that someone would be able to pin to them.

“He’s a grown man. He can make his own decisions,” said Jeffrey. They all stared at one another, then back at him.

“He was our friend,” said Ed. “He was the man who helped us the most.”

“The most? I think you’re confused, Ed. I’m the one that’s been helping the most.

You guys wouldn't have been able to figure out any of the technical aspects of these jobs. I bypassed the traffic lights, the alarms, all of it. Because of me, we got in and out, and no one suspected a damn thing."

"Maybe not, but it's not all about manpower, Jeffrey. It's about being a human being. A good man. I'm just now remembering that we forgot to be good humans during all of this. We set out to help people, not hurt them."

"In case you missed it, none of us is good any longer. None of us! We're bank robbers, murderers. That's what we are. You two got all nervous with those agents and killed them. Not me. I told you to let me teach you how to use the guns, but you got cocky about it." He shoved his hair back, tired of arguing. "We can't worry about it now. Let's fix ourselves something to eat and rest. We need to be at the warehouse by eleven."

"Then what?" asked Helen. He stared at the woman, her skin sallow. Her kidneys were going fast, and she'd be lucky to make it the week.

"We split the money, and you go your way, I'll go mine."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Mac is dead," said Major, staring at the group. "Luke and Eric found him on a beach in Key Largo. He just wanted to see one last sunset, so they let him."

"Damn," muttered Brix. "You know what, I'm almost glad it ended that way for him. No jail time. No hospitals. No handcuffs."

"He asked to be buried next to his wife. Eric said he had a sport coat, tie, and photo of their wedding in his small bag. Bastard didn't have more than four or five hundred dollars," frowned Major.

The air in the room seemed gone all of a sudden. What was remaining was heavy and dark. Mama Irene walked toward Major, hugging his big body.

“He’s in a better place, baby.” Major nodded, looking around the old woman. He saw Baptiste, Rose, Claudette, and Jake but not Matthew.

“Where’s Matthew?”

“Oh, he had things to do,” she said casually. Major looked at Baptiste, who only shrugged.

“We got word from an anonymous member of the bridge club that Jeffrey might be joining his brother tonight in getting his shit back from the DEA tonight. We think it’s happening tonight, and the rest of the gray squad might be joining him. We know it’s a warehouse,” said Sebastian.

“Do we know where it is?” asked Brix.

“We have three possible locations,” said Emelia. “The DEA and police don’t seem too concerned with our warnings and aren’t willing to share their information. Cam called the POTUS to see if he could get them to share nicely, but we’ve had no response so far.”

“Then we’ll have to go to all three,” said Sebastian. “We’ll split up and watch all three. Major, Brix, Garr, and Alistair will be team one. Chief, Hex, Jalen, and Tiger team two. Torro, Milo, Chase, Em, and me, team three. We’ll head to the locations at 2300 and see what we see.”

“You can’t do that on an empty stomach. We got the chef to let me use the kitchens this afternoon. They’re bringin’ up dinner. Home cooked,” said Mama Irene.

“That’s why I love you!” laughed Torro.

“I love you, too, baby.”

While they ate the delicious meal, Irene, Rose, Claudette, Jake, and Baptiste updated them on their list. Almost two-thirds of the way through, they’d made an impact with almost everyone. A few on the list had already passed, a few had been helped by family members.

It still didn’t fix the problem, but they were making the difference they’d intended. Baptiste had already contacted Jean to set up a fund for just such a thing in the future. They’d decided to call it The Silver Savior Fund. A good name.

When Luke and Eric walked in, their faces told everyone the story before they even opened their mouths to give details. A few moments later, Matthew entered. His shoes were covered in sand.

“Matthew, why do you have sand on your shoes?” asked Emelia.

“Oh, well, I was out walking, and they were putting sand down around the mall. I must have stepped in some.” He smiled at Emelia, kissing her cheek. “Hello, my love.”

“Hello, darlin’,” smiled Irene. “Are you good?”

“I’m just fine,” he said, nodding to his wife. “Did you save some catfish?”

“Of course,” she laughed, filling his plate.

Baptiste smiled at his father, knowing that somehow he’d been there when Mac passed. He may have even helped Luke and Eric come to grips with it all. Either way, the man was at peace now, and he felt sure that his father had a hand in that.

“Mama Irene, when we get back to Belle Fleur, I’d like to start planning our double wedding with Maddie and Forrest. Nothing big, just something simple.” The entire room laughed at her. “What? What’s so funny?”

“Babe, there are four hundred people on our property. Who are you excluding from this wedding?” smirked Sebastian.

“Geez, I forget how big we’ve gotten,” she frowned. She looked at Irene and Matthew, their angelic faces giving her a sense of peace. “Can we keep going, Matthew? I mean, is there enough room for us to continue to grow and stay together as one family? I’d hate it if we have to split up.”

“There’s more than enough room, honey,” he smiled. “We don’t want anyone split up either. We want all of us to be together for as long as we’re able.”

“That’s good,” said Emelia with a sense of relief. “I know it seems silly for a woman my age, but I don’t want to be separated from my sisters or my parents. Hell, I don’t want to be separated from any of them.” She pointed to all the men in the room.

“It’s true,” smiled Alistair. “We’ve all grown up together, and it feels as though we’re brothers and sisters.”

“Ew,” frowned Sebastian. “Don’t do that to me.”

“Sorry,” he laughed. “For the rest of us, it feels that way. But you know what I meant. We’re all so close I’d be sad if I ever had to leave any of you.” Major stared at his friend, tilting his head sideways, then opened his mouth wide.

“Ho-lee hell. That’s why you broke it off with Brittany. She wanted you to move to Colorado to be closer to her family.” Alistair said nothing, looking down at his plate of food. “Brother, we would have come and seen you. If you loved her...”

“I didn’t.” Major quieted, waiting for Alistair to continue. “I didn’t love her, and I realized that almost too late. Almost. There was always something nagging at me about her. She was beautiful and smart. She worked hard at her job, but she wasn’t passionate about it. Her apartment was always messy, and she hated cooking or eating at home. She always wanted to eat out. She asked me to go to Colorado with her to visit her family.”

“What happened?” asked Emelia.

“Nothing.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“What do you mean, nothing?” asked Brix.

“I mean, they greeted her with a hug. Said hello to me but didn’t shake my hand or hug me, which is fine. Kind of. They said they’d be ordering pizza and for everyone just to relax outside. No firepit. No chairs. Just relax outside.

“Every damn meal was ordered in. No one cooked. No one cleaned. There was nothing productive happening at their home. Nothing. I offered to do some basic repairs on the house, and her father looked as though he might tear my head off. I left it alone after that. Told her that I needed to leave early because of work, but I think she knew. There was no way I could be a part of that family. She thought everything was perfectly normal.

“When she got back, we met for dinner. She kept saying, ‘isn’t my family great,’ ‘isn’t Colorado wonderful.’ I just nodded. Then she said she was quitting her job and moving back home. I wished her luck but said that it wasn’t for me. I needed to be closer to home.”

“I’m sorry, brother,” said Garr. “I knew something was wrong, but you never told us.”

“Wasn’t a reason to,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve always known that I would return to Belle Fleur and make it my permanent home. Either someone wanted that with me, or I’d be doing it alone. Either way, I was coming home.”

“She’s out there for you, baby,” said Mama Irene, squeezing his hand. “You just have to be patient.”

“You’re always sure, Mama Irene,” he said with a sad smile. “I wonder if maybe some of us weren’t meant to be alone. I mean, we can’t all find our mates and live happily ever after.”

“Now, you listen here, Alistair Thomas Fitch. Your great-granny is one of my dearest friends in the whole world. We know things, the two of us. We know you’re gonna be happy with a beautiful, smart woman who will make you the best version of yourself. You just be patient and don’t worry so much.” She took his empty plate and filled it with more food, handing it back to him. “Try wearin’ a different cologne. Sometimes that makes a difference.”

With sage advice from Mama Irene, Alistair was surprised that he was already feeling better. Bellies full, hearts warm, and souls replenished, they relaxed for a few hours before heading out to the three possible locations.

Geared up, comms on, and everyone knowing exactly what they should do, they waved at the seniors.

Tonight was going to be a long one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The first warehouse was not in a prime industrial space. It was located on the outskirts of Baltimore in one of the roughest neighborhoods in the area. It felt as if it could be the place, but then again, why would an evidence warehouse be in this location?

“We picked the short fucking straw,” frowned Brix.

“There’s a cop car outside the place and lights on inside. It looks like an evidence warehouse, but damn. Baltimore needs to fund their shit a bit better,” said Garr. “Or

the DEA.”

“I can’t imagine that this is it, but let’s watch and be sure,” said Alistair.

“Hey, Alistair, we meant what we said back there. We wish we would have known about you and Brittany,” said Brix.

“I know, brother. I was embarrassed, to be honest with you,” he said in a low voice so as not to be heard. “I admit that I was enjoying the sex and companionship. It bugged me that she never wanted to cook or stay in, but I just thought it was her wanting to be out when I was home. I should have picked up on the signs. Her place was always a mess. She wasn’t. She damn sure spent the time and money on herself, but not her place.”

“Lessons learned, man,” said Major. “But what about Clark? She’s fucking hot. Don’t tell Elena I said that.”

The others all chuckled, nodding at Alistair and Major. He had a strange look on his face and then turned to them.

“I think you’ll know what I’m saying but hear me out. I’ve never had trouble getting a woman’s attention before. I mean, I try to give all the signals to Clark, but nothing is happening.”

“What kind of signals?” asked Major.

“I don’t know. The signals. You know, like giving a head nod when she walks in the door of the cafeteria or a smile in the morning meeting.”

“Brother, those aren’t signals. Those are just gestures. Try being more direct with her,” smirked Brix. “She’s obviously fucking smart as shit, or she wouldn’t be flying

for us. I mean, I watched her, and she's every bit as good as Savannah, Evie, Doug, or Chipper."

"I know that," he nodded. "I can't explain it. I'm not explaining it very well anyway. There's something about her that I really like."

"Try to explain," asked Major.

"She's put together. Always. Her clothes are neat, clean, pressed, fashionable without being ridiculous for an operative. I don't know where she buys those fucking t-shirts, but damn, they hug every curve of her body in all the right ways. And her pants? It's like they're stretch pants, like tights or some shit, but they have these cute pockets strategically placed everywhere.

"And her hair? Her fucking hair is perfect. It's like this perfect shade of blonde with these natural waves, but it never looks messy. It's always pulled together just right. She has the greenest eyes. They remind me of the moss hanging from the cypress trees back home. Like a soft green, not deep.

"Her ass? Brother, don't get me started on that damn ass," he said, shaking his head.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“Okay, okay, we get it. She’s perfect. So why the fuck won’t you ask her to dinner?” said Garr.

“We work together.” The others tried to control their laughter, but it was difficult.

“We all fucking work together,” laughed Brix. “All of us. That never stopped anyone, damn sure not any of us. It won’t matter if she’s the one, brother.”

“I guess. I just don’t want to fuck it up. I’ve never felt like that before. You know what I mean? I don’t want this to be a fuck around and leave her situation. I don’t want it to be a one-night stand. I don’t know anything about her other than what I just told you because I get so fucking tongue-tied I can’t speak to her.”

“Alistair, relax, brother. She already likes you. We see the way she smiles back at you and waves when she walks by. She’s sending you signals as well. You’re just missing them,” smirked Major.

“What? When the fuck did that happen?”

“Shhh,” said Brix, nodding toward the door.

Another police car pulled up, and two officers got out, opening their trunks. They were laughing and grabbed two large plastic bins and then closed the trunk, knocking on the door.

“If I were a criminal, now would be when I jump their asses,” said Alistair.

The door opened, and the cop inside smiled, waving them inside. They waited patiently, watching for any signs of activity. Twenty minutes later, the two cops came out, got in their vehicle, and drove off.

“I don’t think this is our location,” said Brix.

“I don’t either, but we need to give it a little longer,” said Major. “The best we can hope for is that the others see something, and we can get there in time to help.”

“And what do we do with the seniors when we find them?” asked Garr. “I’m so conflicted by all of this. I’m struggling with what we’re going to do with them.”

“They have to be arrested, brother,” said Major. “The law is the law. We all agree that they were trying to do the right thing. It’s all so fucking shitty, and I can’t believe we haven’t changed the system. But it is the system, and until we can make it change, this is what we have. I’ll do my fucking job, as awful as that will make me feel, and we’ll try to help them in another way.”

“What about The Silencers?” asked Garr.

“They’re fair game. Those bastards have been doing all the wrong shit for decades now. Killing, trafficking, dealing in drugs, weapons, anything that would make them money. If they fire, do not hesitate to fire back.” Garr nodded.

“Roger that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Chief, Hex, Jalen, and Tiger sat at the top of a landfill hill, staring down at the warehouse below. It was a clever location, probably keeping out a lot more people than they originally thought. The entire property was surrounded by razor wire.

“Is this D.C.’s or Baltimore’s?” asked Tiger.

“Neither. This one belongs to the DEA. One of many. Major said there was only one cop at the Baltimore warehouse. I guess they don’t think a lot of their stored evidence,” frowned Hex.

“You’d think these guys would learn to have better systems. This one is good, but it’s not impenetrable. Obviously, since we’re sitting our big asses on this hill,” frowned Chief.

“Yeah. Our big assess on a hill of trash, and God knows what else,” said Tiger, crouching on his heels. “I refuse to sit on this shit.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” said Hex, doing the same. They heard his knees pop and crack and smirked at the man. “Fuck y’all. You’ll start popping and cracking soon, too.”

“Do you see any guards?” asked Chief.

“Three. Two are on the inside, according to thermal, and there’s one on the outside. If this were holding the shit from The Silencers, I would bet there’d be more than three. I’m not sure this is our place.”

“Maybe not, but it’s the place we have to be right now,” said Tiger.

“You two must be happy as shit,” smirked Chief. “Brix and Major seem happy as fuck.”

“They are,” nodded Tiger. “I worried about Brix with Daphne and her parents accepting him. Turns out I didn’t need to worry about who we thought were her parents at all. Her biological parents are amazing. They’re planning to come for the

holidays for like six weeks. They even offered their chalet for anyone who wants to use it as a vacation spot.”

“That’s awesome, brother. Major and Elena are happy as shit to be expecting. We worried at first but discovering that the doctor in England fucked up was good news.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“What about her mom?” asked Chief.

“That’s a different story,” said Jalen, shaking his head. “She lied to Elena about her father, and I’m not sure she can forgive that. There’s a lot that has to be weeded through before she’ll call her. Sad shit is that her mother doesn’t seem to give a fuck. She hasn’t called her at all. Breaks my heart. She’s amazing.”

“Is she gonna work with May and Thomas?” asked Hex.

“That’s the plan, although I think my son has plans to keep her pregnant and home.”

“I think that’s been everyone’s plan,” said Chief. “All I can tell you is that it doesn’t work worth a damn. I thought having four kids, all the same age, at home would keep Rachel busy. I was fucking stupid for believing that. She was big as a house, supposed to be on bed rest, and I found her out on one of the islands digging up dirt samples.

“She’s still doing it! Finley has really brought out an entirely new level of excitement for her. With her engineering prowess and Rachel’s excitement for the soil, I don’t think my wife will ever just stay at home. I’ve become okay with that,” he nodded to the others.

“Liar,” smirked Hex. The others chuckled. “I guess I’m the lucky one that Gwen’s world doesn’t often overlap with ours. Designing clothes and creating her own label has been amazing for her. I’m so fucking proud of her I could burst. But I’m thankful as fuck every damn day that it keeps her in a building on the property.”

“What about the fashion shows?” asked Tiger.

“Oh, I hate those fucking things. Hundreds of people running around like mice in this tiny space backstage, pushing and shoving, changing clothes in front of everyone. Drives me nuts!”

“But you go?” frowned Jalen.

“Yeah, I fucking go. Because I would support that woman to the ends of the earth. Her indigenous designs are helping to rebuild villages in Alaska. She gives almost everything back to her tribe. I’m in awe of that woman every day, and I would do anything for her. Anything.”

They all smiled, nodding. They felt the same way.

“Being married to Hazel is different,” smirked Tiger. “That woman could kick my ass any day of the week. And I’d let her.”

They laughed, admiring his honesty. The truth was Hazel could probably go toe to toe with almost anyone on the property.

“I can’t believe I didn’t notice her sooner. I could have lost her, and I’m not sure what would have become of me had that happened.”

“I don’t have to worry about that with Stormy,” smiled Jalen. “She’s more in the bucket of Rachel with a non-violent job in meteorology.”

“Brother, in case you haven’t noticed, weather in Louisiana is violent as fuck. It’s not a no-risk job,” smirked Hex. Jalen frowned at him, then nodded.

“All this does is make me wonder how Mama Irene and Matthew did this with fifteen

kids. I worry like fuck with one,” frowned Tiger. “Hell, Chief, you’ve got four. Girls!”

“Don’t fucking remind me. The weight is lifted knowing that they fell in love with four of our own boys. I know they’ll be close, well cared for, and loved. That’s all the father of four daughters can hope for.”

“Hey, looks like a shift change,” said Hex.

Two unmarked cars pulled up, and three men got out, their DEA jackets emblazoned with their logo.

“Subtle,” smirked Tiger.

“These guys don’t know subtle,” frowned Chief. The two guys inside walked out, the one on the perimeter giving them a wave as he drove away. A few minutes later, the new crew was in place, and the other crew was gone.

“I don’t think we’ve got the location,” said Jalen.

“Major’s crew says the same thing. Do you think we should head to Sebastian’s location?” asked Tiger. Chief nodded.

“I think it’s a safe bet that it’s the one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Torro, Milo, Chase, Sebastian, and Emelia were lying on a rooftop, two warehouses from the one they were watching. There’d been no movement other than a shift change, which brought in four new DEA agents.

“Is four normal?” asked Chase.

“I don’t know about normal, but it seems reasonable. This would be a shitty job if you’re an agent. You’d want to be out with the action, not babysitting a warehouse. That only tells me there’s something worth watching in there,” said Emelia.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“How’s Christian doing?” Sebastian asked Milo.

“Good. At least, we think so. He doesn’t call home as much as he used to. I think when he first left for Corps, he was lonely as shit and scared. We all know what that feels like. Now, according to the tech team, he’s on a special team, and he’s doing well. He just doesn’t tell us about it.”

“I wouldn’t read too much into it, brother,” said Torro. “We all kept shit from our families when we were in. Even families like the one we belong to now. It was stupid.”

“I know that better than anyone,” said Chase. “I mean, fuck, my old man was one of the baddest fucking Marines on record and a badass with Steel Patriots and REAPER-Patriots. Yet I felt like I needed to shield him from something. It was so fucking stupid.

“Meeting Maeve the way I did made me realize that secrets only get people killed. She made me more open with Mom and Dad. My whole fucking world changed when that woman saved my life. She skied with my big ass for miles,” he said, shaking his head.

“That’s hard to believe,” smirked Torro. “I’ve had to carry your big ass.”

“Shut up, asshole,” he laughed. “She’s my whole world, brother.”

“You guys don’t regret not adopting?” asked Milo.

“No. Not at all. It might sound selfish, but we like our alone time, and when we want the kids around, we can just pick ten or twenty from any number of houses a stone’s throw away. There’s always a kid to borrow so that you look normal at the carnival or fair or some stupid-ass Disney movie.”

“You go to Disney movies?” smirked Emelia.

“Hell, yeah. That shit is amazing.” The others just chuckled, shaking their heads at their friend.

“Lia’s old man was a piece of work. An FBI agent that was the worst of them all,” said Milo, shaking his head. “I wasn’t sure she’d ever want to have kids after all that. Then we had Christian. Our entire world changed.”

“After you had to deal with her father,” said Sebastian.

“Yeah, brother. That was some shit.” He looked at the faces around him and smiled. “Do you ever think about all the shit we’ve been through? All the shit we’ve put our parents, grandparents, Mama Irene, and Matthew through? It can’t have been easy for them.

“I mean, think about what you went through with Maeve,” he said, looking at Chase. “Imagine how your parents were feeling after what they experienced before they got married. The two of you, your parents. Hex and Gwen, Chief and Rachel. I mean, damn, that was some shit they had to come through to make it where we are today.”

“Yep, but they did it,” smiled Emilia. “They did it because they believed. They believed in love, themselves, their country, all of it. We saw it. We experienced it. All of us. I won’t ever lose that feeling. Not ever. I will always trust Sebastian to save my life, and I hope he knows I’ll do the same for him.”

“Always, babe,” smiled Sebastian.

“Good because we’re about to have some issues.” She nodded toward the warehouse below and watched as Jeffrey Banks stepped out of a small rental car. He looked casually behind him, and they followed his gaze.

“Between the other warehouses,” whispered Sebastian. “Team Charlie to Alpha and Bravo. We’ve got ‘em. Get here fast.”

Jeffrey ran his fingers over the keypad, pretending to press in the numbers. He knew that the DEA agent would be walking around the side of the building any second now. Sure enough, he appeared right on time.

“Stop right there. Hands up,” said the agent.

“Brother, I’m Baltimore PD, picking up evidence for a trial tomorrow,” smiled Jeffrey. “I’ve got my badge in my pocket.”

“Slowly,” said the agent.

He carefully pulled out the badge and ID, hoping to keep his finger over the name so that the agent wouldn’t make a connection. As he held up the badge, a man from behind cracked his skull open with a massive wrench.

“Move it the fuck along,” growled one of his brother’s men.

“You didn’t have to hit him,” said Helen. “He was cooperating.”

“Bitch, shut the fuck up, or I’ll do you next,” said the young man. Helen just stared at him, unfazed by his actions. She’d been around crime a long time, only just recently as a participant.

“Open the fucking door, Jeffrey,” said his brother.

“I have to do this carefully,” he said. “You need to step back, or the cameras will see you.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” snapped his brother, waving at the camera. The others just snickered at their boss’s brazenness.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“Ryan, let me handle this,” said Jeffrey.

“Get them to open the fucking door so we can get our shit,” growled Ryan. Jeffrey stared at him, then back at his three remaining friends. Suddenly, Myrtle stepped forward, gripping his hand.

“Jeffrey. Don’t. Don’t do it. We should leave now before this gets out of hand. We’ll do another bank. Not this,” she pleaded.

Without a thought. Without hesitation, Ryan put his gun to her temple and fired. Helen and Ed both screamed. Jeffrey jumped, cursing under his breath.

“You fucking idiot! Honestly, do you believe they’ll open that door now? They see us. They see all of us.”

“Eyes on the target,” whispered Sebastian.

“Fire when you have a clear shot,” said Emelia calmly.

He had Ryan in his crosshairs, and without a second thought, he fired, hitting him in the back of the neck. He dropped, and gang members started firing wildly in the air. Jeffrey grabbed his brother’s shirt collar and pulled him to the side of the building.

Two men turned to Ed and Helen and fired a bullet into their chests, then ran along the side of the building.

“On your left,” said Chase from the building beside them. “We’re jumping to the next

building and getting closer. Stay where you are.”

Jeffrey stared down into the face of his brother. The bullet missed his skull but hit the top of his spine. He knew that he was paralyzed, but his fucking mouth sure wasn’t.

“I’ll kill you when I get out,” he seethed.

“God, you’re such a fucking dick, Ryan! You did this, not me! Do you see this fucking mess? You did this! All for your damn drugs and guns.”

“Don’t forget my money,” he smiled with a bloody grin. “Get me out of here.”

“I’m not leaving without the others.”

“The others are dead,” he slurred. “I told them to kill everyone if something happened to me. My men follow orders.”

“Your men? They’re not your men, Ryan. They’re a bunch of drug-addicted derelicts who are in it for the powder and the cash. That’s all. That’s why they stay, not out of loyalty to you.”

“Fuck you,” he gasped. It would be the last words his brother ever heard from him. As two of his men walked toward him, he knew it was over. He was glad.

“Boss said to blow your brains out,” smirked one of the men. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

Jeffrey didn’t close his eyes or look away. The bloody head of his brother was still in his lap, soaking through his trousers. He heard two shots fired but felt nothing. Looking up, he was shocked to see the FBI agent.

“You?”

“Yeah. Me,” said Emelia. “You’re under arrest, Jeffrey Banks.”

“I’ll be dead by morning,” he said, shaking his head. “Do you know how many of his men are already in jail or prison? By now, they all know to kill me if I show up.”

“They’ll put you in solitary,” said Sebastian. Jeffrey just laughed, shaking his head.

“You really don’t get it, do you? Between him and Mom, they have an entire platoon of people waiting to take me or anyone else out. Anyone who ever did them wrong in their eyes.”

“I wish I could feel sorry for you, but I can’t,” said Emelia. “You broke your oath. You took advantage of these people.”

“I helped them. I helped them to get the money they wanted and needed, and in turn, we helped dozens, if not hundreds, of people get the care they needed.”

“Keep telling yourself that story,” said Chase, walking up to them.

“I need to tell you something,” said Jeffrey, staring at Emelia. She kneeled beside him and his dead brother as the man whispered to her. She jerked back, not believing what he was telling her. Shaking her head, she didn’t believe it. She couldn’t believe it.

They heard the door to the warehouse creak, and two DEA agents stepped out. A third was behind them, and Milo saw the weapon.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

“Gun!” He fired twice, killing Jeffrey, but the six bullets fired by Milo killed him. He was the connection that Jeffrey was using for the warehouse. Of course, he didn’t realize that his own brother had paid the man as well. To kill him.

“What a mess,” said Emelia, looking at the dead bodies. Not one of the gang members was left alive, and all of the elderly had died. Ambulances, coroners, sheriffs, police, FBI, DEA, and every other letter in the alphabet soup was on scene.

It would be noon the following day before they returned to the hotel, showered, and slept for more than twenty-four hours. They couldn’t leave yet.

There were still things to work through.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“Emelia, we’d like to offer you the position of Assistant Director,” said the man seated before her.

“Assistant Director?” she frowned. “I don’t have nearly enough experience for that. There are dozens of other agents more qualified for that role. I respectfully decline. Please accept my resignation.”

“Emelia, you’re a wonderful agent. Surely, we can entice you to stay,” he smiled. Sebastian was seated beside her, her father, Hex, Baptiste, and Matthew in the room as well. “I’m certain your family sees the wisdom in this.”

“What my family sees is a man who is attempting to cover up one of the most

heinous acts I've ever seen," said Emelia calmly. The director stared at her, swallowing as she continued. "Did you think we wouldn't find it? Thousands of files were hidden in that warehouse. Thousands."

"Files? Emelia, it was drugs, guns, cash, a few electronics. That's all."

"That's not all. Thousands of paper and electronic files hidden from the public. Hidden so that you and all the other fucking agencies could so graciously cooperate with one another. Government employees robbed of their true benefits. Millions of elderly patients were not given the care they needed and deserved."

"And you hid it all. Carefully removed from file cabinets when it was all paper, then electronically transferred to some pit of doom. Millions. You've been doing this for years."

The men in the room stared at him as he stood, believing that he could actually walk out. Instead, he spotted the six military MPs on the other side of the door.

"I'm not in the military. They have no authority over me," he said calmly.

"According to the President of the United States, they do. He sent them. Not me." Emelia was so calm and cool. Sebastian thought it was the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

"You're so naïve, Emelia. Do you honestly believe that the system we have in place will be able to support your grandparents, parents, hell, you? Do you? Because it won't. Tough decisions had to be made, and a group of us who believed decided to make those decisions long ago. We can't support the entire world."

"No one asked you to. But supporting those in our country who have contributed to the very programs you're denying them full access to is not out of the question. I'm

not naïve, director. I'm honest. I'm direct. I'm by the book. But naïve, I am not.

"I think you forget who I am and who my father is. Who my grandfather is. And all my other aunts, uncles, and beloved friends. We are anything but naïve. We have seen the worst the world has to offer. To think that the worst I would see would be in my own backyard, in my own country, is despicable."

"I've given everything to my country!" he said, pounding his fist on the desk.

"Everything?" smirked Baptiste. "You've given barely anything at all. You graduated from Georgetown with a law degree, became an agent, and just climbed the ladder. You own a three-point-nine-million-dollar home in Fredericksburg and drive an eighty-thousand-dollar foreign sedan.

"Your vacations last year included Capri, the Maldives, and others, to name a few. You've given nothing, but it seems you got a great deal. I agree with Emelia. You've forgotten who you're dealing with. We know everything about you. Everything. Including those that worked with you on this little experiment of yours."

"It wasn't an experiment. We formulated a plan that saved the system. Saved millions and millions of dollars, if not billions."

"And killed people," said Sebastian.

"Did people die? Yes. Old people who were so sick no amount of treatment would have saved them. Why would we spend thousands of dollars on medications and treatments for someone who wouldn't survive."

"I wonder if you would have said that had it been someone in your family," said Hex, sneering at the man. He only laughed.

“See, that’s the difference between you and me. I made that decision. I made the decision to deny my wife’s care for lung disease. I denied care for my own father when he had a stroke. I made that decision! I made it because it was the right decision to make.”

Emelia just stared at the man who’d been the director of the FBI for nearly six years now. She’d met him a handful of times and never suspected he was capable of anything so disturbing.

“You nearly make me lose faith in humanity,” said Matthew. “Nearly. Then I see these fine young people standing around here and know that we’re in good hands. Fine hands.”

“Who are you again?” asked the arrogant man.

“No one important,” smiled Matthew. “But I should tell you that your wife and father are ashamed of you. They’re embarrassed by your actions.”

“They’re dead,” he said coldly.

“I know. Your father said to tell you that he intentionally left more to your sister, knowing that somehow you were behind all of this.” He stared at Matthew, trying to reason how he would know such information. “He also said that the coins he collected are still in a secure location that only your sister’s son is aware of. They belong to him now.”

“No. You can’t know that.”

“Your wife. Now, she’s another story. She’d like to ask for your forgiveness.”

“My forgiveness? For what?”

“For cheating on you with your assistant director, Chet Myers. They were happy together for almost twenty years while you ignored her and stole from those most important to you. She also wanted me to tell you that the lump you felt should have been checked on years ago. It’s malignant.”

He gasped, stumbling backwards against his chair.

“Wh-who are you?” he whispered.

“No one important,” repeated Matthew. Hex opened the door, and the MPs came in, carting the director away.

Emelia leaned against the desk, gripping the edge with her hands. She shook her

head, sick at what they'd discovered. This had been happening for years. How many people died because someone else held their fate in their hands?

"I need to go home," said Emelia. "I need to hug my sisters."

"Then let's get my girl home," said Sebastian, kissing her temple.

As they left FBI headquarters, the director was being read his rights and placed in handcuffs into the back of a car. It would be months of testimony and trials ahead, but hopefully, he would live long enough to be found guilty and hear the verdict.

"Matthew? How did you know all that information in there?" asked Hex.

"Baptiste found out from family," said Matthew calmly. "I thought it might be helpful when the time came."

They were too tired to question it any further. Gathering their belongings from the hotel, they waited for their ride home at the small municipal airport. When the jet landed, Alistair was surprised to see Clark piloting.

"Now's your time, brother," smiled Brix. He looked at his friend and nodded. As he started to move forward, Brix and Major held the others back. "Give him a minute."

"Hi there," she smiled, looking up at him. "You guys have had quite an interesting few days."

"Yeah. It's been – strange."

"Strange can be hard," she said quietly. "Are you okay?"

"I am. Thank you for asking. Are you alright? Are you settling in okay?" he asked.

“I think I am. It’s a lot all at once. The place is huge, and I’ve gotten lost a dozen times,” she laughed. “In the air, I’m good. On the ground, I’m a lost goose.”

“Well, lost geese are my specialty,” he smiled. “Would you like to have dinner with me when we get back? It can be at the cafeteria or anywhere. I’d just like to get to know you.”

She swallowed hard, staring up at him, then nodded.

“I think I’d like the cafeteria if that’s okay. The food is so great there.”

“I couldn’t agree more. I just need to drop my gear when we get back and shower. Six-thirty okay?”

“I’ll be waiting on my front porch.” They stood, just smiling at one another for a few moments when Major finally cleared his throat.

“Hey, uh, can we go home now?” Alistair laughed, shaking his head.

“Yeah. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:19 am

Emelia spent two days with just her sisters and her parents. She needed them around her. She needed to touch them, talk to them, know they were there.

Then, she found herself needing to be near the seniors. Mama Irene, Matthew, Ruby, Sven, all of them on Belle Île. It was as if she needed to see for herself that they were healthy and didn't need anything.

When she started to question the health of the ghosts, Sebastian knew that she needed a break.

"Honey, Franklin and Martha are ghosts. They're exactly how they've been for two hundred years," smirked Sebastian.

"I just want to know if they need anything," she said, stomping her foot.

"Honey, we're fine," said Franklin. "We got everything we need and more. You go get yourself married. Your sister needs to marry that boy before she pops out them babies."

Emelia looked at Franklin and reached for his hand. The ability to touch their ghosts was new for all of them, but it was something she treasured. She squeezed the older man's hand, and he smiled, a sparkling light emitting from his face.

"You're right," she said, nodding at him. "Maddie and I need to get married."

It was as if the wind carried her words directly to Mama Irene and Claudette. By noon the next day, they were standing before the altar, proclaiming their love for their

grooms and becoming Mrs. Sebastian Vernon and Mrs. Forrest Robicheaux.

Forrest convinced Maddie to skip most of the reception, pleading with her to get off her feet. After one dance and a healthy dinner, she retreated to their cottage, where they remained for three days.

“Alistair really likes her,” said Emelia, smiling at their friend dancing with Clark.

“He really does, baby. But not as much as I like you. In fact, I love you so much I ache for you day and night.”

Emelia turned in his arms, smiling up at him. She kissed him sweetly as their parents smiled from the side of the dance floor.

“I feel the same way, Sebastian. Thank you for coming for me, for believing in me. There is nowhere else I want to be in the whole world.”

“Same, baby. Same.”

“This one worked out well,” said Matthew, smiling at his wife. “We got Maddie and Emelia where they’re supposed to be, and we gave Rose a purpose that she’s going to run with. I’m so proud of her.”

“I am too, Matthew. That girl has been chewin’ some behind in Washington. She’s gonna make a difference.” Matthew was quiet for a long moment, then nodded.

“We’ve made a difference. It’s arrogant of me to say, but because of all these beautiful children, we’ve made a difference. You and me, my love.”

“Indeed we have, Matthew. And the best part is, we’re not done yet.”