

Chapter 5: Underneath It All

Norma and Emma S. spent the next couple of hours hanging out in the living room, talking. Norma at first thought her sister had led a charmed life. Two loving and supportive parents, never abused in any way, few problems growing up, did well in school, went to college, moved on to a successful career. She tried not to feel resentful and envious, but it was difficult not to. This made her all the more shocked at what she soon learned about her older sister.

Em did say yes to that offered cup of coffee. When she handed it to her, Norma noticed for the first time her sister's hands were bare of any rings.

"So, I didn't notice a wedding ring. I take it you're not married, right? Were you ever? Do you have any children?" were some of the first things she thought to ask.

"No, I've never been married, and no kids. Never had any serious plans to. I've been married to my career for sixteen years. It's been the one constant in my life, the one thing that's always made sense, the one thing that means anything to me. I'm currently single. Looking, but it's not a big priority. I've had plenty of relationships, but the longest one lasted about four years. They're always great in the beginning, but then the guy realizes I'm not going to put my career on the back burner so I can bear and raise his 2.5 kids in the suburbs. Then he doesn't stick around much longer. Besides, dating in D.C. sucks, for the most part. 90% of the men are married, gay, work for the government, or some combination of those. And a good number of the straight married ones have no problems screwing around."

Emma S. thought of adding "Been there, done that." but didn't. She wasn't sure yet how Norma would react to that little piece of her personal history.

"Well, don't YOU work for the government?"

“Yeah, but it doesn’t work too well, from my experience. Each usually thinks their career should be the most important out of the two.”

She paused and took a sip of her coffee, then: “Got nothing at all against marriage and kids, of course. It just wasn’t the path for me. You’ve done a wonderful job with Norman. He’s such a sweet kid, so polite and considerate. It’s rare to see that nowadays; so many teenagers are snot-nosed brats. He totally adores you; anyone can see that from a mile away. I’d say you don’t have to worry at all about being taken care of when you’re older, ‘cause he’ll see to that.”

Norma smiled at the nice things her sister saying about Norman, but alarm bells started going off in her head.

Oh yes, he adores me and I adore him. More than you could ever imagine. We’re way beyond just being mother and son, and you can’t ever know exactly how. No one can. No matter what.

“Thank you, Emma. It makes me really happy to hear that about Norman! He’s been my one constant in my life; I guess like your career’s been yours. He’s the one good thing that’s come out of a bunch of bad situations, and he means everything to me.”

Norma wanted to get away from the subject of her son who was also her lover, but she knew she needed to be subtle about it. Emma S. would pick up on that otherwise. So she launched into the second of the major lies and secrets she’d be bringing into this relationship with her sister:

“I have an older son too. His name’s Dylan, and he’s 21. It’s not like it is with Norman though. We don’t get along, never did. I had a lot of problems raising him; he was always such a rebel just like his dad. I tried, but nothing ever worked out or got better with him. Finally, he packed up and moved out as soon as he was 18. We were still living in Arizona then. Norman and I have only seen him a few times since.

His dad was my high school boyfriend. I know, it makes me sound like a statistic--but I got pregnant when I was 17, barely finished school, and John and I got married. But I was so clueless and naive; I had no idea what I was doing.”

If Norma was going to open up to her sister, she wanted to do it as much as she could, even with the buried secrets she never could tell her.

“I met Sam Bates, Norman’s father, when Dylan was two. We fell in love, and you know, same tired old story that happens all the time. John found out about it, we got divorced, he took off, haven’t seen him in years. Sam and I got married and had Norman, but after a while I learned what Sam was really like. Six months ago, he got drunk like he often did, climbed up on the garage shelves, said he was looking for a screwdriver on the top, and the whole thing fell on him. It was really heavy with paint cans and other stuff, so he died from a bad head wound before the paramedics could get there.”

Emma S. had been looking intensely at her, ever since Norma mentioned “what Sam was really like.” She was quiet for a few beats, then:

“How long had he been abusing you, Norma?”

Norma was only surprised for a second. Of course Emma S. could read into that; she was not one of the top interrogators (male or female) in the FBI’s Violent Crimes Section for nothing.

“Since Norman was about four, give or take. It started out as drunken yelling, but then it got worse pretty fast.”

“It always does.”

“It would get better for a while; he’d say he was so sorry and swear he’d stop drinking and hitting me. But then the whole thing would start again.”

Emma S. nodded slowly and stared into her coffee mug. She knew her sister wouldn’t want pity; she was a fighter. A fighter determined to start over. Some of that must run in the family.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that, Norma. It sounds like Sam did himself in with his own bad behavior, maybe a little twist of karma besides. You and Norman deserve any happiness you can get. Now you have your own business with this motel. It’s unfortunate the place has some...certain history, allegedly anyways. I promise you we’re going to do everything we can to wrap up this part of the investigation and get out of your way so you can get it up and running.”

“I appreciate that. But I hope it doesn’t mean it’ll be the last we see of you!”

“Of course not, as long as I’m welcome here.” Em said with a smile. “I’d love to come back and visit you two after this is all over. Maybe some time you could come and visit me in D.C.”

“That’d be wonderful! Norman and I have never been there.” Norma started to picture them strolling through museums, visiting monuments, going to all the places in the nation’s capitol she’d only ever seen in photos.

Even with the secrets she’d always have to keep, Norma was feeling more comfortable around Emma S. than she did with anyone, except for Norman. The fact she’d never be able to tell her all the truth was depressing. She didn’t care about keeping it from others, but her sister was different.

A whole lot of baggage I’ll always be dragging around: Caleb and Dylan, how Sam really died, what might be wrong with Norman, Norman and I... We’ll always have to

hide, even from my own sister, and it's terrible because I'm really starting to like her...

Emma S. cut through her thoughts, "As far as how you hooked up with Norman's father: don't think for a second I think any less of you, Norma."

She drew a deep, shaky breath. The story she was about to tell Norma was going to feel like tearing the scab off an old, deep wound. One she'd become convinced would never fully heal.

"I've been down that road myself. It just happens, to a lot of people. You don't need to feel guilty, and if I were you I'd stop letting Dylan make me feel guilty about it.

"Several years ago, I fell in love with my then-FBI partner: Agent Maddoc. We were assigned together for only a short time before neither of us could ignore the feelings we had for each other, or fight them. He was married, with a couple of kids who'd be around Norman's age by now. But that didn't stop us. Seemingly everyone we worked with knew about it eventually. The Bureau can be worse than a sewing circle when it comes to gossip and intrigue.

"As far as I could tell, his wife was either clueless or in massive denial. Then almost four years ago, we were working a case in New York, going after a sex trafficking ring. We were moving in on this dive hotel where the women were being held captive, and the crime bosses opened fire. We were wearing bullet-proof vests, but one of them hit Agent Maddoc in the neck--right in the carotid artery. He bled out...and died in my arms..in less than a minute."

Em's voice was slightly cracking and she was fighting tears. This was never going to get any better, never going to go away... it might as well be branded into her. She struggled through the rest:

“There was nothing anyone could’ve done. It still feels like it happened in slow motion, but I remember chasing after and firing on the son of a bitch who’d killed him. I took a few bullets in the vest, but I didn’t even feel it until later. The other agents later told me I was screaming like they’d never heard anyone scream before...”

Norma’s eyes widened at the horror of it. “Oh my god...Emma, I’m so sorry! I can’t believe you were in the middle of that...You could’ve easily been killed!”

“I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve been in situations where I could’ve been killed. It’s either the suspects or me, and it’ll be the suspects every time as long as I’m armed and they start shooting first. It’s just the nature of what I do.”

Norma got up, moved closer to her sister, and hugged her.

“You still love him, don’t you? I can see it in your eyes.”

Emma S. accepted her sister’s hug gladly, for several minutes before the heartache started to subside.

“I wouldn’t admit it to anyone else. But yeah, in a way I still do. Will I ever let him go? Eventually, I imagine...but who knows when that’ll be? I’ve gone over and over this with the Bureau psychiatrist. I know that even if I catch every sex trafficker in the country, it still won’t bring him back. But it won’t stop me from trying.”

Norma pulled back and faced her. “You’re crazy-brave, you know that? I mean that in the best way. I can’t even fathom doing what you do. What do you do in your free time? Wrestle pythons? Free-fall sky-diving?”

Em laughed, “God no, I hate snakes! No plans to jump out of a plane, either! I mostly play basketball--I played all four years in high school--and do combat-pistol

tournaments. I won the FBI Combat Pistol Championship last year. I'm probably not going to get to defend my title this year 'cause of being away, but next year for sure! I'd love it if you guys could be there."

Norma grinned, "It's a deal!"

Both of them started at the doorbell ringing, followed by loud banging on the outside door.

Agent Spooler reflexively reached for her weapon; her first thought: one of Summers' crime partners was back, wanting to start up business again. It would really help move her investigation out of limbo if that were true...

Norma got up and looked through the patterned translucent glass in the door to see who it was.

"Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me?! Now? Really?! He's got the absolute worst timing in the world! How the hell did he find us?! Shit!"

Emma S. had noticed Norma didn't curse much; the elder Calhoun sister was the one with the cop's mouth. So hearing Norma drop an F-bomb had to mean something pretty bad.

"Who is it, Norma?"

Norma turned and leaned her back against the inside door, lightly knocking her head against it once.

"Speaking of the devil. You're about to meet your other nephew. Whether any of us are ready or not."

Norma opened the front door on Dylan. He looked taller than she remembered, more imposing than the slouching kid he'd once been. But he still had that same lousy, contemptuous attitude he'd always had; she could see it written all over him.

"Hi, Mom."

"What do you want, Dylan?"

"Nice way to say 'hello', really. I lost my job, I'm broke, and I need a place to stay 'til I can figure something else out."

"Dylan, this is really a bad time right--"

"When is it ever a good time for you, Norma?" he snapped. "Huh? My guess would be never!"

Norma steeled herself and fought the urge to yell at him. Getting into a screaming match with Dylan in front of Emma S. was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Did you try going to your dad? Don't you have friends who could help you out?"

"They all have even less. Besides, I figured you must have gotten quite the windfall after Sam died."

To his surprise, Norma stepped aside and motioned him to come in. "That's beside the point. I--we--have to tell you something more important."

Dylan stepped into the foyer and saw the very attractive brunette woman standing behind and to the side of Norma. She stepped forward, held out her hand, and smiled warmly.

“Hi Dylan, I’m Emma Spolee.”

“Um, hi..” Dylan shook her hand, at a loss for more words. He got a good long look into her face. She had Norma’s face, the same eyes, same lips, same bone structure, same...almost everything. Those blue eyes--those same cerulean blue eyes. All three of them had them.

Dylan shot his gaze from her face to Norma’s, back to hers, back to Norma’s again. No doubt about it; his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. They looked unbelievably alike. Way too much alike to ignore or dismiss as a coincidence..

“Okaaaayyyy, this is just weird...You two look alike..like, a lot alike...what’s going on here?”

His mother and her almost-twin exchanged a glance and laughed softly.

“I guess we’re going to have to get used to people’s reactions like this. No point keeping him in suspense: Dylan, I’m your aunt. We just found out for sure a couple of hours ago. Your mother’s my biological younger sister.”

His eyes flew open wide. “Are you serious? For real? Why the hell did you never say anything about her, Norma? Do we have any more lost relatives that might randomly show up one day?”

“It’s NOT like that! I had no idea she even existed until a few days ago! Neither of us had a clue we were related until this morning!”

Emma S. added, “It’s true, Dylan. Norma was not keeping anything a secret from you. She really had no idea.”

“Your grandparents had another daughter before I was born, and they gave her up for adoption. They never said a word about her, not even once. I was totally in the dark about it! Long, drawn-out story--but we found each other.”

Dumbfounded didn't even begin to describe it. Dylan temporarily forgot why he was mad at Norma, forgot all the reasons why he resented her so much, forgot all the slights and other insults he'd put up with from this family.

“How do I know you are who you say you are?”

The two (supposed) sisters looked at each other again, and Norma jerked her head in the direction of the kitchen.

“Follow us. We'll prove it to you.”

Norma and Emma S. sat across from him in silence as Dylan read through the adoption records and PCR results that were still spread over the kitchen table. Even though the science never lies, it still felt unreal every time he glanced up at the two women who resembled each other so much. One was a manifestation of the totally crappy hand he'd been dealt his whole life. The other was a stranger, still unknown as far as ally or foe. From what he could tell, she and Norma had already become pretty tight in a short time.

“All right. Can't argue with any of this. Why would your parents do that, Norma? Why her and not you?”

“Damned if either of us know. It's not like your grandfather's still around to explain it. Who knows what your grandmother would have to say as far as an excuse for it.”

Dylan was silent for several beats, then he couldn't help but be curious.

“So where do you live, Emma? Here in White Pine Bay? You don’t mind if I call you ‘Emma’, do you? The whole ‘aunt’ thing I’m gonna have to get used to.”

“Of course not, that’s fine. And no, I live in Bethesda, Maryland and I work in Washington, D.C. I was sent here on a case for my job.”

She was wearing a suit, but it looked much too stylish on her for her to be some stereotypical government bureaucrat. Actually, the fleeting thought crossed Dylan’s mind: *She looks much too pretty for that too..*

“What do you do?” he was almost afraid to ask. He’d also almost forgotten Norma was still in the room. His mother took the hint and went to get the pot roast out of the freezer to start defrosting it for dinner that evening, giving him and his aunt some space to get acquainted.

Emma S. got this smirk on her face that was rather...cute, to Dylan. She reached inside her suit jacket and got her badge. At seeing the gold shield and the large blue “FBI” on her ID card, he couldn’t help but be impressed, if not a little intimidated.

“Really? That’s...that’s..really cool...” A note of respect in his voice. But why was he stammering all over himself like a dumb high school kid? How had he not previously noticed what looked like a 9mm Glock holstered on her right hip? *Great; hopefully she doesn’t think I’m a total idiot!*

Then another thought occurred to him:

“Norma! You aren’t in any kind of trouble, are you?”

“No, we’re not. It’s some other people in this town they’re investigating. Sorry to disappoint you, Dylan.” Norma’s last phrase was dripping with sarcasm.

The sarcastic tone wasn't lost on Emma S. either. She wanted to know why there was so much bad blood between her sister and her nephew. Norma didn't do a great job of concealing her dislike for him, which seemed extreme for any mother to feel about her own son. Dylan didn't seem like an ex-con or anything; she'd have picked up on that when he found out what she did for a living. He seemed like a nice enough guy, so far anyway.

Emma S. was shocked she was silently admitting this:

He's very easy on the eyes. I've got a weakness for 20-30-something, in-shape guys in leather jackets and nice-fitting jeans. Always have. I've picked up a few in bars and had sweet nights with them. Dylan looks exactly like that...Wait, WHAT THE HELL am I thinking?!?! He's my nephew!!

To kill those less-than-familial thoughts, she told Dylan about how the Bureau had the property under surveillance because of the late Keith Summers, how the probable-would've-been rapist had broke in and attacked Norma, and what she'd done to stop it.

"You shot him in the head?! Damn. Funny how that kind of excitement seems to follow this family anywhere, even when some of them move out of state, don't tell their son, and don't leave a forwarding address." Dylan said the last bit pointedly at Norma.

"I had my reasons, Dylan! I'm trying to build a new life here for me and Norman. The last thing I wanted was you coming in and screwing it all up!"

"Seems like your long-lost sister's come in and shaken things up, and that's totally fine with you!" Dylan immediately regretted saying that; it had flown out of his mouth before he could think.

“I’m sorry, Emma. I didn’t mean that! No offense, It’s just--”

She reached over and put a hand on top of his. “None taken. It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean anything personally towards me by it.”

Emma S. twisted around in her chair to face Norma, her hand pulling away from Dylan’s. “You moved and didn’t say anything at all to Dylan about it? I’m not taking sides or anything; I’m just trying to understand why.”

“It’s complicated, Emma. Like I told you before, we don’t get along. It’s better for everyone if we have as little to do with each other as possible!”

“Uh-huh. Don’t you think it’d be better for everyone if you tried to work things out so you two DON’T have this much drama? As tough as I’m sure that sounds...”

Dylan could’ve kissed her for that. No one had ever been this nice, this comforting and reassuring towards him before. He felt for a few seconds like he wasn’t totally alone in the world, either. Maybe Emma S. was starting to see some of Norma’s true colors, and it would be interesting to see how she handled that. She was (so far) a voice of reason and rationality meeting the emotional storm that was Hurricane Norma.

When she briefly squeezed his hand, Dylan suddenly had to focus on remembering to breathe..

Norma regarded them both silently, her expression a mixture of resentment and resignation. “Fine. Dylan, you can stay in the spare room at the top of the stairs. We’ll give it a try and see how it goes. But if you’re going to stay here, you’re going to pitch in.”

She turned more towards her sister and brightened up. “Emma, can you come over for dinner tonight? We still need to tell Norman, and I think it’d be nice to have all four of us here. Say around six?”

“I’d love to. I should get back to work until then; Agent Rivera’s left me about 15 texts and voice-mails so far. ” She’d already called Rivera around eight that morning and told him to take care of the morning roll-call and briefing. But about an hour later he started blowing up her phone about something. Whatever it was, she’d go take care of it and hand off any work past six to him.

Emma S. got up and hugged Norma, and Norma threw her arms around her, returning it for several seconds. This was another first; Dylan couldn’t remember his mother ever hugging anyone like that. Anyone other than Norman, that is. His aunt also murmured something Dylan couldn’t quite hear, but it was:

“It’s all gonna be good, Norma.”

They parted, and Emma S. gave Dylan a winning smile and a little wave as she passed the kitchen table. “I’m glad I got to meet you so soon, Dylan. I’ll see you this evening.” With that, she saw herself out.

Tense silence hung in the kitchen for a minute. Then Norma was the one to talk first:

“I’m not saying I’m happy about you showing up. But I’m willing to give it a try. The first sign of trouble you cause: you’re out. Understand?”

“Perfectly.”