

Chapter 7: The Worst Timing

Earlier that morning, after leaving Norma and Dylan, Agent Spooler speed-dialed her partner back as soon as she left the Bates house, heading down the hillside at a quick clip.

“Rivera” he answered.

“Please tell some good news.”

“Is that how you say ‘hello’ now?”

“Cut the crap.”

“I have both good and bad news, actually.”

“Tell me the good first.”

“Turns out our new friend the sheriff dug up a potential accomplice of Summers who could tell us a lot about what went on at that motel. Name’s Maggie Summers, the recently deceased’s sister. Romero said she did the bookkeeping on that place, and he got a hold of the ledgers. From what he said, it’s nice and neat, but very interesting too.”

“That sounds like excellent news! We might actually get somewhere with this. So did you bring in this Maggie Summers, or does Romero have her?”

“That’s the bad news. Romero said she promised him she was going to turn herself in this morning, told me she’s pretty damn terrified of the others who were running that operation. She’d be willing to cooperate in exchange for leniency, possibly

immunity. But apparently she skipped town, hasn't shown up to work or been home or been seen by anyone in over 24 hours."

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?! Why the hell didn't he bring her in right away?!? Jesus fucking Christ, Sheriff Dumbass had one simple job!! No wonder this is town is Ganja Central! Could he be any more useless when it comes to enforcing the law around here?!"

"Are you done?" Rivera had braced himself for such a tirade.

"Yes. Meet me at the sheriff's office, ASAP."

"See you there."

Agent Spolee jumped in her black Ford, gunned the engine, and had to remember not to peel out of the motel's gravel parking lot. It would've spun the tires and kicked up rocks that could damage the motel building. Not that it could look much worse, but all the same it still belong to sister. Her sister: the idea still seemed foreign.

She drove at the speed limit to the sheriff's office. Rivera was already waiting for her outside, since their command office was within walking distance. She flew into the front reception area with him barely keeping up, went straight to the glassed-front secretary's office, and rapped on the glass sharply. It startled the receptionist girl up from texting on her phone.

"We need to see Sheriff Romero, right now! Open that door, please!"

Spolee and Rivera held up their badges faster than the girl could respond. Her eyes opened wide as she hit the button that unlocked the office door, without a word of protest.

Romero figured it was a matter of time before Agent Spoole and her partner barged into his office. He'd wanted to give Maggie the benefit of the doubt. She'd given him her word that she just needed a day to get things in order before she handed over the ledgers--and what she knew--to the FBI. But her word was obviously worthless.

Spoole and Rivera dropped themselves into the two chairs across from his desk. As usual, they dispensed with any small talk.

"What's the story on this Maggie Summers? If there's some compelling reason you gave her a window to skip town, I'd be intrigued to hear it."

"Agent Spoole, I've known the Summers family since we were all kids. I wanted to think that meant something, that she'd come through on a promise she was adamant about. So I was wrong. I've called her five times already; her cell goes straight to voicemail. I left messages, told her she's making things a whole lot worse for herself. But so far nothing."

Rivera added, "We tried to track her phone, but it's one of those prepaid things--no GPS. Best we can do is ping it off cell towers, and so far nothing with that all morning. either"

"So that means she probably tossed it."

"I just got off the phone with the state police, had them put out a BOLO on her. We're not exactly dealing with a criminal mastermind here. That should help; we'll find her."

"Do you have her DMV info?" Agent Spoole wanted to know.

Romero did, pulling it up on his computer and turning the monitor around to show it to them. Rivera had already pulled his laptop out of his shoulder bag and had fired it up. He might have had the same idea Agent Spoole did as she turned to him.

“Freeze any bank accounts and credit cards she has. That should roust her out of hiding even faster.” He nodded and started typing away quickly.

Romero figured she'd ramp up the pressure like that. He'd done some of his own research on Special Agent Emma Christine Spoole. The woman had a reputation as a ball-breaking interrogator who should make any halfway-wise criminals shake in their boots. She was practically a surgeon when it came to firing a weapon, and she was also an E-1 level black-belt in Krav Maga: the hand-to-hand combat originated by the Israeli Army. Meaning she was technically a human lethal weapon, capable of permanently crippling and even killing someone with her bare hands if she had to. Keith hadn't stood a chance in hell against her, even if he'd been sober and armed with more than a box cutter. Romero realized he'd underestimated her. He was now positive she'd be fine against even the worst of the drug lords in White Pine Bay, if any of them ever chanced across her.

“Maggie Summers also gave me a name. I saw it a couple of times in your case files; it's Joe Fieretti. She said--”

“Excuse me, Sheriff. I want to get this on the record.” Agent Spoole pulled out her smartphone and indicated the voice recording app. Romero hesitated. It was her turn to look questioningly at him. “The faster we can do our jobs...” she reminded him.

“All right, go ahead.”

She tapped “Record” and Romero started again:

“Maggie Summers told me her brother had a partner named Joe Fieretti, and Fieretti has several aliases. One she knew of is “Jake Abernathey.” She said Fieretti is running three other branches of an operation that trafficks in women from Asia. Or he was, only one’s left in another port along the coast, not counting the one that used to be at the Seafairer.”

“Did she say exactly where?”

“No. But she did say they had a third partner here in town. She wouldn’t tell me his name. I tried to get it out of her, but she clammed up. She said Fieretti would kill her if he found out she was talking to anyone. Finally she said she’d be willing to turn over any evidence if you’d try to get the DA to show her leniency. Obviously she’s considered an accomplice, since she knew about it for years and did nothing.”

“Anything else?”

Romero swallowed hard, stalling for time. Loyalty-wise, he was going to cross a line by telling Spoole and Rivera what he said next:

“About a month before Keith knew for sure he was going to lose his property to foreclosure, he gave me couple of zipped-and-locked duffel bags. He asked to hide them for him and not to tell anyone. I was doing it as a friend. I assumed he’d gotten mixed up with some local, um...businessmen, and it would eventually pass when he was able to pay his debts. After the trouble at the old house Monday night, I cut one of those bags open and found the ledgers. I looked through them, then took them to Maggie Summers. She confirmed my suspicions. I didn’t open the second bag yet.”

Agent Spoole noted the date, time, case number, and those present. Then she tapped “Stop” and saved the recording.

Rivera had finished his freezing of Maggie Summers' financial assets by that point.
"Done. Now we watch the scanners for the BOLO and wait."

"Would you be willing to hand over those ledgers and that second bag? Without making us go to the trouble of getting a warrant?" Agent Spoole wanted to know.

"Yes. I have them at home in my garage. Your vehicle or mine?"

"Yours. As long as you don't mind dropping me back at the command post afterwards." Agent Spoole handed Agent Rivera the keys to the fleet car. "Have the others not on surveillance or foot detail listen to the scanners as well. We'll be listening over the sheriff's radio too."

"Copy that."

A few minutes later, Romero was driving the sheriff's SUV towards his house, with Agent Spoole riding shotgun.

She was silent for the first mile or so, then:

"I think I owe you an apology, Sheriff Romero. I underestimated you."

"Why's that?"

"I figured your buddies from way back when were more important than enforcing the law around here, but what you've told us about the Summers family, Fieretti, and that third partner has caused me to rethink that. It gives me a lot more confidence you want to do the right thing, "

“Things aren’t always as black and white as what’s on the books, especially in this town.”

“Oh really? I have to disagree. I believe kidnapping and trafficking women is cut-and-dried as far as the animals who participate in it. They need to be punished to the furthest extent of the law. You know what the minimum sentence is? 15 years per count.”

“I totally agree with you. Though accomplishing that in this town might not be as cut-and-dried as you might think. Not that I’m saying it isn’t completely despicable and I won’t stand for it here in White Pine Bay!”

He drew a deep breath. What he was going to reveal next was actually making him nervous.

“I’ve learned more about you than you also might think, Agent Spooler. You’ve been in the FBI’s violent crimes section for the past 16 years. Graduated second in your class from Quantico. One ‘Duncan Carlisle’ was first. A former instructor is quoted as calling you two ‘among the most promising young agents to come out of the Academy in the previous decade.’ Before that, you did a double undergrad in psychology and criminal justice at Ohio State University. Your senior thesis was “Psychopathy: Aberration? Or Condition to be Channeled and Possibly Cured? An Expansion on the Theories of Dr. Evelyn Vogel.”

She was taken aback, but she let her face betray nothing. “Did you bother to read it?” she asked coolly.

“I did. I liked it. It was interesting. Kind of wordy in some places, but overall pretty thought-provoking ideas.”

“I was 22 when I wrote that. When it comes to this kind of criminal activity, I’ve since found those who run these operations can be called ‘human’ only on the most basic level. ‘Psychotic’ is a kindness as far as what these individuals do. I have a feeling you’ll see more of that when we all get up close and personal with them.”

Romero was quiet at first, thinking that over. Then:

“Since we’re on that subject, I think I underestimated you in some ways as well.”

“How so?”

“I’m confident you can handle yourself just fine against even the worst of the worst in this town.”

“Thank you for the better vote of confidence.”

They’d pulled into Romero’s driveway by that point.

“If we don’t catch Maggie Summers by tonight, would you be interested in joining me for a drink? I go off duty at 10 tonight, unless of course she turns up.”

Agent Spoole smiled. If she chose to partake, it would be even easier than she thought. “Maybe; I’ll let you know closer to then. I already have dinner plans. I’m taking my Code 7 at six. If not, rain check?”

“Sure.” Romero opened his garage door and the two of them headed in. He retrieved and handed her the cut-open duffel bag containing the ledgers. She snapped on a pair of latex gloves, flipped them open, and spent some time looking carefully through the pages.

“I see what you mean. Every other month, the whole block of rooms: booked at once like clockwork. Place was mostly dead the rest of the time. All paid in cash too. One of my team’s a forensic accountant; I’m going to have her go through these. This should be enough to get us a warrant to search the place, if the judge is at all reasonable. Want to hand me that other bag?”

He did so, along with the hunting knife he’d used on the first one. She put it on his work table and stabbed the knife hard into the heavy material, pulling and ripping a few times before tearing a big-enough hole in the bag.

“HOLY FUCKING SHIT!!! Yeah, I’m sure all this cash came from motel rooms--your friend was keeping this well off the books, more evidence for us and not a second too soon!”

Romero couldn’t help but frown in disapproval. She was not only very intelligent; she was so beautiful, and she’d be even more attractive if she didn’t curse so much. But he thought better of mentioning it.

Now we’re really in this together--both our departments, that is. If we’re going to clear this criminal element out of White Pine Bay, we’ve got to get them all, every last one. Any loose ends will mean repercussions. Serious ones.

His cell phone rang, and he stepped out of the garage to take the call. Agent Spooler only heard him say, “I understand,” “Yes,” and “We’ll see what we can do. I’ll let you know as soon as I know anything.”

“That was the M.E.’s office.” he told her after hanging up. “They’re releasing Keith Summer’s body, and his sister’s the only one around to claim it. Or was.”

He dialed Maggie's number and left her yet another voicemail, telling her she needed to do the right thing, needed to come back and at least give her brother a proper burial.

"Come on. I can tell you're dying to get this entered into evidence and to get that judge on the phone."

"You HAVE caught on somewhat about me, Sheriff Romero."

He thought briefly of telling her to call him Alex, but then remembered it wouldn't be appropriate while they were still on duty and working together. Later, maybe, if she'd say "Yes" to that drink. Romero normally didn't mix work and pleasure, especially with a fellow law officer he'd only met five days ago. But it was pointless to deny it: He was becoming irresistibly drawn to Agent Emma Spolee.

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By that evening, it had been a long day of analyzing the motel ledgers, trying to trace the cash (which turned out to total \$150,000), and working on getting a search warrant. The county judge gave Agent Spolee the run-around on that last one, which pissed her off, but she maintained her cool. Finally he agreed to issue a warrant for searching only the motel office, and then only for any more financial records. It was a start. As for the money, some of the bills were unmarked and others weren't--making tracing them a long, tedious process. Still no sign anywhere of Maggie Summers. Agent Spolee was only too happy for the dinner break as she drove back to Norma and Norman's just before six.

The weather was turning colder and windier as she parked by the hillside stairs and got out, pulling her black wool coat tighter around her and brushing away her hair that was whipping into her face. Dark thunderheads were rolling in, looking ominous

behind the old house. It was going to storm tonight. Emma S. felt her heart starting to thump in her chest, and she suddenly had a weird sense of dread. She lifted her head to look towards the top of the stairs and very nearly screamed.

Keith Summers was standing there. Or what was left of him. The left third of his head was blown open, like a watermelon smashed with a hammer. Blood was flowing in thick rivets down his face, along with clots of pulverized brain matter.

“Bitch. Look what you did to me.” His voice was that of a demon from the worst circle of hell. He was glaring hatefully at her with his one remaining eye.

Emma S. felt herself starting to detach from her body. Things were growing very dark and far away--like she was looking at the world from the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. This had happened to her before, a few times over her life. The last time she'd blacked out was the night David Maddoc was killed in front of her.

*You're not real, you're not real, you're not real!!*

The words screamed over and over as a silent mantra in her head. She managed to snap her eyes shut before her field of vision went totally dark on its own.

“Are you okay?” A worried voice cut through the beginnings of her black-out, giving her a thin lifeline back to the real world. Emma S. opened her eyes. Her sight and awareness returned to normal. Summers was gone. In his place was her younger nephew, Norman. That sweet kid who was looking at her with concern. She was sweating despite the cold weather, and her heart was threatening to tear itself out of her chest. What she wouldn't have given for a cigarette at that moment, a real one, just one to calm her down..

“Huh? Yeah, um, I’m okay. I just..uh, I’m fine.” She struggled to gather her jumbled thoughts.

*His voice...it made it stop..pulled me out of it..that’s never happened before..*

“I guess I’m a little nervous. I take it your mom told you.”

*What else could I say to him, without sounding totally insane?*

Norman smiled at her, “She did. So you’re my Aunt Emma. I’m happy to meet you. Well, meet you again as my aunt, I guess.” He held out his hand to her. She’d walked the rest of the way up the stairs by then, and she shook it.

“Great to meet you too, Norman. Again. As my nephew.” She smiled back. Then she retrieved her e-cig from her purse. “Do you mind? Just for a minute before we go in.”

“Not at all.” They sat side by side on the top step as she took a deep drag. Both were quiet at first, grappling for what to say next.

“This feels weird. I mean, we’re family, but at the same time we don’t know each other at all. Nothing against you of course, but still: it’s a peculiar situation.” Norman admitted.

That did a lot as far as breaking the ice, just voicing that truth. “I feel exactly the same way. It’s really weird for me too. So I think we all shouldn’t feel weird about feeling weird. That’s to be expected, and I feel where you’re coming from, Norman. It’s like I thought I knew every side to my own life, and now that’s been up-ended. To an extent.”

*You know what else is peculiar?* she thought, *A 17-year-old boy using the word 'peculiar.'*

Norman considered this, "I think it'll start feeling less weird as we all get to know each other. How long are you going to be here in town?"

"I think you're right. As long as it takes, until we catch the rest of the people who were running a forced-prostitution ring out of this motel."

"Well, even though what they did was really bad--I still hope it takes you a while, in that case."

Emma S. laughed at that. "You're sweet, Norman. Why don't we we continue this conversation inside? It's getting freezing out here."

They both stood up and started to turn towards the house. Norman suddenly threw his arms around her and hugged her hard, startling her so much that she just stood there rigidly at first.

"I know I already said it, but thank you, thank you so much for saving my mother's life! She's everything--everything to me; I'd be lost without her!"

She saw his eyes were welling up as he let go of her. She rubbed his left shoulder briefly with her right hand, still feeling awkward from the unexpected hug.

"I'd do it all over again, as many times over as I had to. For you both."

