

Chapter 20: What Doesn't Kill Us..

Agent Spooler found the courthouse easy enough, parked, and located the right courtroom. Romero had apparently gotten there just ahead of her, and he waited for her outside the courtroom doors. It was odd to see him in a dark blue suit instead of the Sheriff's uniform. He wasn't a bad-looking guy at all, though he didn't compare to the one she loved, the one she had waiting for her in a rented vacation cabin on the outskirts of White Pine Bay.

"Morning, Alex." She said brightly. "Looks like my turn to see you out of uniform." Keeping up their now-familiar banter. Pretending everything's the same.

He smirked, "Morning, Emma. I prefer the uniform, honestly. Suits look better on you. Glad to see that shiner Shelby gave you is gone."

The bruise around her eye had faded to a faint ghost of itself, and the last trace was covered with concealer.

"I've always healed pretty fast." But she noticed Romero looking just below and to the side of her chin, at one of those hickeys on her neck. Obviously, it was started to show through the make-up.

Shit. Oh shit.

He looked like he was about to make some comment about it, but she cut him off before he got the chance, "Well, let's go find us a seat, shall we?" She shoved ahead of him and headed into the courtroom, parked herself in the front row of the gallery, Romero taking a seat beside her.

She somehow managed to sound natural as they talked over the latest case happenings. Both agreed that while Maggie Summers was now a cooperating

witness, she was still a flight risk to an extent--due to the threats to her life from Fieretti's gang. Spoole and Romero had already agreed to testify as much. There was also the issue of the serious charges Summers was still facing as an accomplice; there were too many of them stacked up over a decade. No chance of any DA in his or her right mind dropping all of them. Romero reported to her that Keith Summers had since been buried as indigent by the county. Which meant in a plain wood box dropped into the oft-rain-soaked earth. She thought, *Scumbag could've used some better final poetic justice, but I'll take it.*

The judge was nearly 15 minutes late before "All riise.." droned out from the bailiff. As the session dragged on after the charges (over 250 counts of aiding and abetting human trafficking, rape, and kidnapping) were read. Summers' defense attorney was a brunette 30ish woman with an annoying voice and a serious problem getting to the point. Which only fueled Em's restlessness and agitation. Without looking at him, she was positive Romero was staring again at her neck. She shifted her shoulders to try to raise her collar higher over the marks.

Stop it! You're just being paranoid! she scolded herself. *He doesn't know; he has no idea. Not that it's any of his damn business anyway!*



Norma had a few errands to run in town, the main one being picking up all the bed linens for the motel rooms. She and Norman managed to jam all the bundles into the Mercedes trunk and back seat, with little room left over. Even so, she was pleased with the preparations for their little business. Norman was right there for her, helping with anything that needed to be done. They didn't need Dylan's or even Emma-Christine's help; they'd get it up and running just fine without them.

"I need to pick up the dry-cleaning, then we're done. The library's down the street, so why don't I drop you off, you get the book, then I'll swing back and pick you up?" She suggested to Norman.

“Sure, Mother. That’ll work.” Norman wanted to pick up a book he’d reserved. He went into the White Pine Bay Public Library, found the holds shelf and the book with his name on a piece of paper taped to it. Several people were in line ahead of him at the self-check-out, and he hoped they’d move fast so his mother wouldn’t be kept waiting.

Some low voices from one of the nearby tables distracted him: a group of his classmates from school, and they were definitely whispering about him. He caught the words “motel” and “weirdo” and “his mom.” Norman’s face reddened, and he snapped his head around, glaring at the cadre of gossips. They immediately shut up and snapped their own heads down, suddenly very busy with their studying. He took deep breaths, struggling to calm the anger in him. That now-familiar feeling of unreality was coming over him. For the first time, he heard the soft, sweet, soothing voice of his mother in his right ear.

“Ignore them, baby. They don’t matter. Not at all. It’s okay.”

But that was impossible! She was waiting for him outside in the car, not behind him in line. He couldn’t see her, yet he heard her voice as clearly as if she were right there. Then another, similar-yet-still-different voice joined, resounding in his left ear.

“That’s right, Norman. They can go fuck themselves sideways. Who cares? Don’t let it bother you, honey.”

The unmistakable, impassioned, sometimes-strident voice of Aunt Emma. Invisible, but heard just as clearly. Heard only by Norman, evidently.

Holy shit! What’s wrong with me?!

The world became bright and clear again; the darkness disappeared from the corners of his vision. He wasn’t going to black out after all. Norman realized it was

his turn and he'd been holding up the line. He went quickly to the check-out station, scanned his new library card and the book: *Forensic Analysis and DNA in Criminal Investigations*, by R.J. Parker. Norman wanted to learn much more about it, and to eventually try writing some crime fiction.

As he headed for the car with Norma waiting for him, he tried to shake off the scare of nearly blacking out before hearing those voices. The first one was from the other half of his soul, and the second one from the other half of the darkness within them both.

Almost like...they're a pair of angels over my shoulders, one light, one dark...is that really a bad thing? Maybe not..

~~~~~

"The State calls FBI Special Agent Emma Spolee."

Finally. Emma S. took the stand right after they were done questioning Romero. She gave a brief statement of her role in the case, then as predicted, she got the line of questioning she'd been expecting. Yes, she recognized Maggie Summers' ties to the community. No, under different circumstances she wouldn't consider Summers a flight risk, but due to a lot of mitigating circumstances and the volatility of the ongoing investigation, blah, blah, blah..No, she did not recommend bail and would recommend Summers be remanded to custody until trial.

Summers' defense attorney, evidently feeling she was being sand-bagged by law enforcement, jumped up and shrilly objected.

"Counselors, in chambers." the judge ordered. "Let's take a 30-minute recess, then I'll render my decision. Court reconvenes at 12:30pm." Down came the gavel. The escape to the courthouse lobby was all too welcome. Agent Spolee got a Sprite from the vending machine and pulled out her work phone, tapped out a brief

message to A.D. Stabler. She confirmed her first fit-for-duty therapy appointment for later that afternoon, another half-hour drive away in Portland. All the therapist had to do was sign off on it, and she'd be conditionally reinstated. Two more of those sessions, and she'd be home free. What she wanted to get out of those sessions: some answers she could use, about her and about Norman.

"Sounds like they're still working on a plea deal. Here's hoping that doesn't drag out too long." Romero commented.

"My feelings exactly." she replied, though she was quickly distracted by the buzzing of her other phone. She bit her lip to keep from smiling at the text:

Dylan: I'm at work, bored af and I miss you.

Emma S: Same. I miss you too <3

The screen cycled with a longer incoming text, then a lovely photo of Dylan came up, of him shirtless, leaning with one hand against a tree and reaching up with the other to snap the picture with his phone.

Emma S. nearly choked on her soda. Her heart kicked up several notches, and a sudden needy warmth started between her thighs.

"Excuse me Alex I need to use the ladies' room before we go back in!" she said in a rush before dashing for it, locking herself in a stall and texting furiously:

Emma S: FFS don't sext me right now!!! I'm in a crowded courthouse!!

Dylan: Sorry, I couldn't help it ;)

Emma S: What if someone saw you?!

Dylan: Ethan's takin a nap, no one else around.

Emma S: Mister, you are going to pay for that tonight!!

Dylan: :-D :-D You promise?

Emma S: I am NOT kidding!! You won't be able to sit down when I'm done!!

Dylan: Now I'm hard. Can't wait.

Emma S: Suffer. Until tonight ;) Gotta go, love you.

Dylan: I love you too.

Emma S. dug out a new nicotine patch from her purse, undid the top of her blouse, and slapped it onto her upper back. Hoping it would calm her down enough before she exited. Even so, she couldn't help the excited rush of looking at that photo of him. Very, very nice. She was sure as hell keeping it. She straightened up and managed to compose herself before meeting back up with Romero in the hallway.

Seeing her flustered flight into the restroom didn't leave any lingering doubt in Romero's mind: She'd met someone. It looked to be hot and heavy too, from the appearance of her neck. It had been a torment to focus on the court proceedings as his thoughts raged:

*It's none of my business, and it's inappropriate anyway with a fellow law officer. But..god..who the hell could it be?! The curiosity's going to drive me crazy, if I let it. But still, not my concern...but what does that guy have that I don't?!*

As much as he tried to tell himself to stop it, Romero felt the definite, sharp, painful edge of heartache mixed with envy. The kind that couldn't be ignored or pushed away. He did his best to look normal and nonchalant as she came back out of the restroom. She appeared calm, though her face was still a bit flushed.

"Sorry about that!" she said. "I just remembered I needed to put on another nicotine patch. Five days without a smoke at all, going on six!" she smiled a little too wide.

"Congratulations." his tone was less enthused. "Want to grab some lunch after this is over?" They could still be colleagues, and at least friends...right?

“Sure, that would be nice. As long as we go Dutch on it.” Emma S. said brightly. “I need to go meet with that therapist over in Portland at three, and that’ll save me the drive all the way back to White Pine Bay, then almost all the way back here.”

Romero would take that much, no choice in the matter anyway.

~~~~~

When Norman got in the car outside the library, Norma saw his troubled expression right away.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Some kids from school were in there. I heard them talking some crap about me, about our family.”

Norma flicked her wrist in dismissal, “Oh sweetie, just ignore them! What’s that saying about people with small minds? They talk about people, not ideas.” Then she looked worried,

“You didn’t..nothing happened to you, did it?”

“No, Mother. I thought I might black out, but I didn’t.”

Norma exhaled in relief. “Great. That’s good, baby. Let’s go home and get these linens put away, then we can relax for a little while before dinner and before your aunt comes over.”

“Okay, Mother.” Norman smiled, took her hand in his as they drove back to their new home.

Norma glanced at his borrowed book's title. At first, she thought his interest in the subject was a bit morbid. But then she thought of what her sister did, who she worked for. That kind of science was used to help victims, to catch and punish people who did very bad things to others. So she reasoned there were plenty of worse things he could be interested in.



Later that afternoon, Emma S. got to the therapist's office a bit early. As she sat in the waiting room, she googled the name of the woman she'd be meeting with: Dr. Michelle Ross, M.D., psychiatrist. Apparently a recent transplant here to rainy Portland after years of having a practice all the way down in sunny Florida. That was the only thing of note on the doctor's website.

Dr. Ross was a semi-attractive woman in her early forties, with black-framed glasses that she tended to pull down when she was listening extra closely.

"Agent Emma Spooler." she greeted her with that calm yet substantive tone unique to the profession.

"Dr. Ross. Nice to meet you. I take it you got all my records and the reinstatement form to be signed?"

"Yes. I reviewed all of that this morning. So, I'm going to go through the standard form questions. Then we'll take it from there. I know you're eager to get back on duty, especially with this case you've committed so much to. But you know as well as I do, with your background, it's also important not to rush this."

"That's fine with me." Emma S. took a seat on the sofa across from the therapist.

"You recently sustained a mild concussion, any lingering effects from that? Trouble concentrating, sleeping more than normal, dizziness?"

“No to all that. It wasn’t a bad one, thankfully.”

“You recently stopped a home invasion, and soon after, you were assaulted by a member of local law enforcement. How have you been feeling about that?”

“Totally fine. I’d do the same things all over again. Both turned out to be the very alleged criminals we were hunting.”

Dr. Ross flipped through and reread several pages from Em’s files. Then she looked up at her, pulling down those eyeglasses.

“You were recently reunited with your birth family. Would you tell me about that?”

Em told her the whole story, and about Norma, Norman, and Dylan. Their basic biographies. Not the secrets. One of those would come out. But not today.

~~~~~

“I don’t want to get up. You get the remote.” Norma protested. She and Norman were snuggled up on the sofa, looking for something decent to watch on TV. Dinner was in the oven and should be ready by the time Emma S. got there. She’d called as she’d left Portland, letting them know it’d be only her joining them, sans Dylan. That news only heightened Norma and Norman’s good moods. Even the incident in the library was pushed out of Norman’s mind as he helped his mother haul the linens inside, forgetting to lock the front door.

Things seemed so lovely as he managed to stretch his arm and get the TV remote off the coffee table. Norma evidently wanted control of it, and he wasn’t going to give it up that easily. He playfully held it over his head, switching it from one hand to the next as she tried to grab it without moving from her position curled against his side.

“Norman! Give it to me! Come on, honey, stop playing around. I don’t want to keep watching this dumb movie.” But she had a mischievous look on her face too.

He gave a wicked grin, still playing keep-away with the remote. “What will you do for it, Mother? Hm?”

“Norman! Careful what you wish for, baby.” She lunged even closer against him, managing to grab his wrist holding the remote. With that, Norman dropped it on the other side of the couch and pressed his lips to hers, threading his fingers into her hair.

Norma kissed him back long and hard, wrapping her arms around him and rolling so she was fully on top of him. “Mmm..is this a good start?” she murmured against his lips before bringing them to hers again.

How long they kept kissing and enjoying each other, they couldn’t have guessed. Until they heard an astonished gasp from behind them. Followed by the smashing of the wine bottle as it slipped from Emma-Christine’s hand, shattering on the foyer floor.

“Norma!” she gasped out. Her eyes were saucer-wide and her face was drained of color. “Norma...WHAT THE *FUCK*?!?!!!!! WHAT THE...OH GOD!!”

Both Norma and Norman were on their feet as Em whipped around, away from them.

“Emma!! Stop!! Please!! EMMA-CHRISTINE!! DON’T DO THIS!!! We love each other, PLEASE!!” Norma screamed out, chasing after her. “It’s not what you think!!! Please, I’m begging you!!! You can’t---”

“I CAN’T WHAT, NORMA?!?!” Em screamed back, her eyes flooding with tears and her breathing at a fever-pitch. “Tell anyone?! Arrest you?!?! JESUS FUCKING

CHRIST!!” More words failed her as she collapsed onto the stairs, sobbing hysterically.

That wasn’t precisely the reaction Norman and Norma were expecting. “Aunt Emma, don’t arrest her!!! Please, it’s true!! WE’RE IN LOVE!! I love her more than my own life; I’d die without her!! You can’t keep us apart!! I won’t allow it!!” Norman was sobbing himself as he advanced closer to her.

Em’s head snapped up to face him, her eyes feral. “I’m not arresting anyone, Norman!! How could I?!?! FOR THE SAME THING I’VE BEEN DOING MYSELF?!?!”

Both their turns to draw sharp breaths. “Emma...what are you saying?” Norma struggled to make her voice steady again.

Em shook her head, still in shock and disbelief, tears still streaming down her face. “I’m saying what I’ve been trying not to tell you!! *I’M IN LOVE WITH YOUR OTHER SON!!!*”