

Chapter 35: Time To Go Back

Her skin felt hot, yet clammy at the same time as beads of sweat popped out along her hairline. Emma stared at her own horrified expression in the bathroom mirror. "This is not happening." She said under her breath. It couldn't happen; she was on the pill, had been for years.

It could be Dylan's...or Norman's..

Emma's fragile control of her dark nature loosened, and she slammed her right fist into the mirror, making a spiderweb crack that nicked the side of her hand. She didn't even feel it, swiped the blood away on the hem of her navy blue T-shirt. It wouldn't show. Now there was the very real possibility of a consequences. A serious one.

There was only one thing that would dispel the violence within her. She knew what she had to do. Somewhere between consciousness and a black-out, she strode fast back to the line of her fellow competitors, taking her place as they moved into the arena. As they all stood and faced the combat-shooting set-up with its blocks to hide behind, she gave a hiss at the lights in her dilated eyes. The male agents standing closest to her turned and looked at her, and their expressions turned from resentment to fear as they took a couple of steps away from her. The announcer's voice boomed over the loudspeakers, welcoming everyone to the blah, blah FBI Combat Shooting Finals, then announcing every agent competing as they were each supposed to take a step forward and raise their right hand in acknowledgement. Just like announcing a sports team.

As last year's winner, Emma was announced last. Some part of her mind registered the rest of the Bates family yelling enthusiastically for her, but it came and went. It took every bit of remaining self-control as she had to wait until it was her turn to grab a digital-sensor-fitted Glock. There weren't real bullets used in these competitions anymore; it was all simulated. This time, she was almost sorry for that. Everything else fell away when she stepped into that arena and ducked behind the closest block. She

caught sight of the first holographic shooter aiming at her, aimed and fired. Direct hit. She ran to the next one, nearly getting hit by a digital shot but it missed. Nothing but the shooting course was in her field of vision. The rest was surrounded by blackness.

Watching this contest was exciting at the beginning, although to both Norman and Norma it started to get repetitive after a while, seeing one agent after another do basically the same thing. Dylan was on the edge of his seat, his eyes never leaving Emma even when she was standing on the sidelines. "Something's not right with her." He said about halfway through. "She's too..I dunno..intense. Looks almost like she might be blacked out."

"Oh, she's not!" Norma dismissed that thought even as it nagged at the back of her mind. "She can't be, wouldn't be able to shoot like this if she were!" It was her most fervent wish in the moment that it was true. Things had been so blissful. In every possible way. The last thing she wanted was reality to come crashing back in, the reality of that dark side of her sister's nature. Norman might be getting better, but that darkness was still there in Emma, just waiting for something to set it off.

The three of them quickly caught on that each time an agent got hit with a digital bullet, a red circular light appeared next to their name on the scoreboard. Get hit three times, miss too many times, and they were knocked out of the running. The competition wore on, and the name Spooler, Emma C. got no red marks next to it. The "0" stayed next to her name, indicating how many targets she missed. People in the audience around the Bates started to murmur. This was nearly unheard of. No one won this thing with a flawless score. Most considered it impossible.

It was her final turn on the floor, and Emma saw one of those red beams of light zing past her as ran for cover, ducking and rolling behind a wooden crate that hardly gave any protection. She'd rolled so many times that both her shoulders were going to be bruised, but she felt none of it. She sprung up and shot at the target, disintegrating him in a pop of light as always happens. Her head snapped around looking for the next one,

and her eyes fell to her left, on her long-ago ex: Agent Carlisle. Or rather, a vision of him. The real Duncan wasn't even in D.C. at the time.

The hallucination smirked coldly, "Agent High and Mighty." He taunted her, "You're coming down to my level soon."

"Fuck off, you're not real!" She hissed. This distraction lasted only seconds, but they were seconds she couldn't afford. Em caught a brief glance at another hologram target diagonally to her right, but before she could take aim at it, the timer ran out and a loud buzzer sounded, signaling the end of this year's Combat Precision Shooting Championships. The bright overhead lights came back on, and hallucinated-Duncan had vanished.

Her head was starting to swim, as she fought to appear completely together. Emma registered her name announced as the winner, to the dismay (and murmured resentment) of her colleagues, the enthusiasm of the rest of the family. She would be better able to appreciate the latter soon enough. The nausea mixed with fear was still clouding most of her thought process. Em managed a forced smile as the military-style medallion with the year and the champion title on it was pinned to her shirt. She'd also get a wall plaque with her name on it in a few days. She gave all the obligatory handshakes, then she bolted for the hallway as soon as it was safe to do so without raising eyebrows.

Dylan was the first to reach her, and he stopped cold at the sight of her pale face and shaken demeanor. Congrats could wait. Em half-collapsed with her arms around his shoulders, even as she fought to steady herself. "What happened? What's wrong?!" He sounded on the edge of panic. The Norms were only a few steps behind him.

"I got sick right before, and I.." Emma dropped her voice low, scared anyone else walking around in the hallway would overhear. "I blacked out, sort of. Guys, I need to go to the doctor. As soon as possible."

Emma managed to make it to the women's locker room where she'd stowed her handbag. A worried Norma followed her, noticing the dried blood and cuts on her sister's hand as Em slammed the locker door shut.

"Emma! Did that happen in the arena? Let me see it!" Norma took ahold of the injured hand. Emma smiled, even as tears stung her eyes. The first night they'd met, it was Norma with the bad cut on her hand. It seemed to have happened a lifetime ago. Now: quite a role reversal.

She shook her head. "I, um..I lost it in the bathroom right before. I got sick, and-" Emma inhaled a very shaky breath. "Norma, I might be pregnant." She blurted out. Norma let out a gasp of horror, her expression nearly identical to Emma's, right before she'd splintered that mirror with her fist. "NO! But you're on the pill just like me! We've been so careful about that. Oh god Emma!" Norma raked her hands into her hair at the sides of her head. "You didn't start this morning too? I know for a fact we're on the same cycle now."

Her eyes drifted down to Em's midsection. Still flat as ever. But some women didn't show at all at first. SHIT!! What if it's Dylan's?! While Norma hated the idea of it being Norman's (if he was going to impregnate anyone, it should be her, goddamn it!!), it would be worse if it was Dylan's. That was a big risk, possibly too dangerous.

Em could no longer contain the sob that escaped her, "I'm sorry, Norma! I'm so sorry. I honestly don't know what I'm gonna do if I am! I'm so scared. On top of everything else, scared you'll hate me if I am and it turned out to be Norman's!"

Not caring if any other women were in the locker room, Norma seized her by the sides of the face and silenced her, kissed her lips fiercely, "Stop it!" She exclaimed, "I love you, you idiot! Don't EVER say anything like that again! Whatever happens, we'll get through it! We take care of our own, remember?" Emma wiped her eyes, "I remember."

The two of them got it together, the best they could, then met a worried-looking Norman and Dylan in the hallway. "Aunt Emma, you don't look so good." Norman could tell right away that it was a black-out, one that had nearly taken over her. Dylan put his arm around her waist once they hit the parking lot, and she leaned into him, grateful for the support. Any other time, she would've been more cautious about showing that much closeness with him while her colleagues were still hanging around in and out of the building, but now she didn't care. She'd just mopped the floor with all of them in the shooting arena, so for now she was nearly untouchable.

For this one time, Norma got the chance she'd been wanting: to drive the Mustang. Dylan looked sulky it wasn't him, but he brightened when Emma snuggled against him in the back seat, leaving the Norms up front. Norma white-knuckled it through the crowded freeway all the way back to Bethesda, but they arrived unscathed. Em spent most of the ride back on the phone with her doctor, not letting up until he'd agree to make space to see her. She couldn't get in until six that evening, but it was better than the unbearable idea of waiting longer on the unknown.

It took another hour and a half of waiting for the results, after the needed medical tests were run. Em sat stiffly in a leather chair in her doctor's office. Before Dylan could drop into the one next to her, she grabbed his jacket collar.

"We can't ever have kids together, honey. It's a huge risk, one I'm not willing to take!"

His eyes widened in understanding, "You mean you might be pregnant?" He said in a low, fearful voice.

"Let's hope and pray that's not the case."

When the doctor came in with the results, he glanced at Dylan before turning to her, "Agent Spoole, you might want to have your son wait out in the waiting room with the rest of your family while we go over these."

"He's not my son, and he stays." She snapped.

"Ohh.." The doc's face registered understanding, "Oh, I see." Then he went on with the results.

It was a stomach virus, nothing more. Emma gave what felt like the biggest exhale of relief she ever had. A couple of basic exams confirmed she wasn't pregnant. "Thank fucking God!" She ignored her physician's look of disapproval, grabbed Dylan's hand and snapped up the script for anti-viral medicine the doc wrote, quickly thanking him and promising to rest until better.

Norman and Norman had the same nervous knee bouncing and tense expressions as they sat in side-by-side waiting room chairs. Her thoughts were mostly on what kind of addition this family might see, his mostly on what it meant that Em had a black-out, of sorts. Could it mean he might have one soon, as well? Even with the meds he was on, who was to say it couldn't happen again anyway, if something stressful enough happened? Norman's head was starting to hurt, trying to think of how he was going to explain this to the shrink back at Bayview. He only had a handful of days there left before his 18th birthday, and he'd been so good, so creative, at sticking to stories that masked the family's secrets. There was no way he could slip up now. He leaned his head on Norma's shoulder, breathing in her lovely comforting scent and squeezing her hand gently.

She rested her head gently against his. "You're worried, I know, sweetie. Norman, look at me. Your aunt's having a false alarm, the kind women can get. That's all. I'm sure of it."

His eyes widened even more, "Oh god, Mother.." He said in nearly a whisper, not wanting any other hospital patrons around them to hear.

"We need to make this a lesson for all of us, Norman. We all love each other, but we need to be even more careful."

"I know, Mother. I will. Should I get, um, protection too?" He whispered. His face turned warm at that. Even after all this time, her warm blue gaze at him could still make him blush.

She brushed a stray piece of his hair off his forehead, "Let me think about that, baby. I do think we should go back to just you and me.." She also dropped her voice so only he could hear.

"Yes, Mother, I think so too. I'm ready for that. I wanna go home and start our life together. You and me." His tone was serious yet brimmed full of love for her at the same time. "I know we're gonna miss them, but they deserve their new start too. We'll come back and visit, and they can come visit us."

Nearly another half hour passed. Norman replayed the events of what turned out to be a crazy day, wanting to remember every detail for typing up in the journal pages he'd started on his laptop. Maybe there was a short story he could work out of it, somehow.

He joined his mother, aunt, and brother in the shared relief that Aunt Emma had nothing more than a virus. She indeed looked pale and in need of some good rest. On the way back to the apartment, Norman couldn't help but smile at his mother, who was clearly enjoying driving the Mustang. That wasn't lost on Emma either, as she quipped from the backseat, "Don't get too used to that, baby sister." Before she slumped herself against Dylan's shoulder. After a brief stop to get her medicine. Emma lounged on the sofa bed with him, while Norma and Norman busied themselves in the kitchen making Norma's homemade chicken soup recipe. There was nothing better for curing anything that ails

you, far as Norman was concerned. As he cut up carrots and celery at the kitchen island, he took in the scene of what passed for normalcy in this family. Remarkable, considering everything they'd all done with and for each other.

The peaceful mood didn't last long, as Emma's phone started ringing, startling Dylan as he'd been starting to doze off. Deputy Harrison was evidently tired of waiting for a response to her texts. Em gave a groan of dread as she picked it up, "Yes, Leyla. What is it?" Her voice was laced with both exhaustion and irritation. White Pine Bay was no longer her direct problem. It was Harrison's, and the new deputy needed to woman up already. Shelby, a maimed Fiereti, and Maggie Summers were all in jail, awaiting trials in six or so months, the first two likely never to see the outside of a federal prison again.

Emma couldn't say much further, as her medicine-fogged brain tried to keep up with the hysterical tirade Harrison was unleashing on her. "I can't handle this on my own, Emma! You think I haven't tried?! There are some shady, dangerous people in this town! And they've done something terrible. They're after your family. I really question if any of you should come back from D.C.!"

"What have they done? Send me a picture, Leyla. Don't give me excuses, just fucking do it!"

A few tense seconds passed as Deputy Harrison sent a couple of pictures to Emma's phone. What she saw made her sit up in shock and rage, "What the hell?! No!!" She gasped, "Fuck. Those shitheads!!" She cried. The Bates Motel had all 12 room windows smashed, plus the office window. Someone had spray-painted "Romero's Killers" and "Fucking Cop Killers" and "Murderers" and "Get the fuck out" in black and red all over the light yellow paint they'd worked so hard to finish on the whole building. If that wasn't bad enough, the culprits had also splattered thick red paint all over the rest; they must have scooped handfuls of the stuff out of a can and thrown it so it splashed over the wooden slats, like a crazed vandal's idea of a Pollock painting.

Her phone was flung into the mattress as if it had burned her, and the sight of the drying crimson drips made her stomach heave again. The sight of that name pulled her back to that night in the warehouse, when it wasn't paint that had splattered onto her and soaked through her clothes. Dylan started to put one arm around her to comfort her, as he reached for the phone to see for himself, but Emma jumped up and fled to the bathroom. Sounds of more retching followed.

"Holy shit!" Dylan's tone was equally as furious, though he didn't get the chance to say more as Norman was next to him in an instant and grabbed the phone.

"Mother!" He rushed to her side, hating having to show her the visuals of the destruction, but he had no choice. Rage was clouding his ability to think straight or form a coherent sentence. That motel had meant so much to her. A replay of how happy and hopeful she'd been started in Norman's field of vision. The greyed, slightly blurry images of her smile, her excited movements, her pulling him from room to room. All of it blotted out the here-and-now of their temporary home with Aunt Emma.

"It's not crazy. It's not. We're gonna run this place."

Norma's turn to snatch her sister's iPhone and swipe through the terrible images. The soup ladle in her other hand clattered to the floor, but no one noticed. "No.." Color drained from Norma's face. Her blue eyes were suddenly as deadly-looking as her youngest's, dilated until they were nearly all black. The faint sound of Deputy Harrison's voice was still on the other end. Norman watched as she slowly brought the phone to her ear, her voice icier than he'd ever heard it.

"This is Norma Bates." Her tone was flat, but there was no missing the dangerous fury underneath. She was quiet until Harrison finished her still-rather-panicked speech,

"Mrs. Bates, I'm sorry this happened to your property, and believe me we're going to do everything we can to find those responsible. For your family's safety, I really think it's

best if you stay in Washington for the time being, until we can find and arrest them. We don't know what else these people are capable of, and your family may well be at risk if you return to White Pine Bay now."

For once, Norma didn't interrupt. Finally she responded, her voice nearly a growl that was unsettlingly similar to Norman's, and to Emma's. When they were close to a black-out. "That's not going to happen." Her eyes locked with Norman's, then with Dylan's as he'd joined them in the kitchen. "This family does NOT run. Or hide. We're coming back. If YOU can't find the fuckers who did this: We will, and they will pay for it." She ended the call before Harrison could say more.

"Was that the smartest idea, Norma?" Dylan wanted to know. Dumb move on his part, because his mother's hand shot out and seized the front of his button-down shirt.

"Don't you even start that with me!" she snarled at him. "You have a woman who needs you, so go take care of her!"

Emma had spread herself flat on her back on her bed, unresponsive until Norman took hold of her hands. Knowing what had likely afflicted her, he shoved past Dylan and reached her first. When his hands grasped hers, she shot upright fast, nearly knocking heads with him. That rather painful electrical-nerve sensation shot through both their lower arms.

"Aunt Emma. It's time to go back."

