

Chapter 40: The Last Family Standing

They agreed to meet with Delaney three days later, at a hotel in downtown Portland. Emma and Norma. Norman would stay behind to man the motel office. He no longer worried about them going off somewhere by themselves. This time, he probably should have. Both he and Norma could see the uncharacteristic fear etching his aunt's features, as much as she tried to conceal it. Emma turned her gaze away from theirs, remembering the dark flowered carpet on the stairs where Caleb had met his end. Blood was drying on those steps.

"We're gonna have to pull up the whole carpet. Off the stairs. Right now." She got up and headed for the basement where the tools were stored. "Come on, Norman. I need you to start the furnace, we're gonna have to cut it up and burn it. I'll find us cutters."

Norma wanted to know, "What can I do? And how much more crap are we gonna have to burn before this is all over?"

That earned her a withering, chilly look from her sister; Norma ever so slightly felt herself shrinking back. Of course they needed to burn it. Throwing it in the dumpster would be extremely stupid, asking to get caught. It took hours of cutting and pulling at the damn thing, but they finally got it all and got it cut into small enough pieces to shove into the lit furnace. The bare wood on several steps was stained with nearly-dried blood. Norma got a bucket of soapy water and a scrub brush from the kitchen, tried to get it all out. It didn't completely work. Norman laid a hand reassuringly on her forearm. "Mother. You can't get blood out of wood. It's soaked into the fibers." Still, she kept on scrubbing at it. Beyond the stains, Emma's fatal bullet had punched through the front of one step, splintering the wood and lodging deep somewhere inside the downstairs wall below. Finding it would be a major task, though not impossible.

Norman came back up from the basement, having thrown the last pieces of carpet into the flames. "Mother, stop." He turned his attention to her, gently taking her arm and pulling her trembling body against his. "I can fix that, patch it up. I just need to go to the hardware store, get some plaster." Norma dropped the sponge and her kitchen gloves on the stripped stairs, wrapped her arms around his waist. So grateful for the solid strength of the man her boy had become. He gave her strength too, and she was going to need it.

"I need some fresh air. Come on honey, let's go outside. We'll be right back, Ems."

"Of course. I'm gonna go lay down for a while." Emma put down the utility knife and trudged up the stairs, careful to avoid the damaged step. Instead of going to the master bedroom she'd been sharing with them, she went into Dylan's old room and stretched out on the unused bed. The masculine scent of him still lingered on the bed spread, making her insides ache. Her laptop was plugged in and sitting on the nightstand, open to the security video feed like always. She considered Skyping him, but couldn't bring herself to. He'd know something bad had happened, from her face and how exhausted she was. She drifted off instead, needing time first.

Unsure how long she'd slept, the ring of Skype on the open laptop woke her. Her eyes fluttered open to see Dylan's picture on the screen. East Coast time: it was the usual time he'd be getting home from work. She didn't know what other choice she had. Emma answered.

"Hey." his handsome face on the screen made her lips pull into a smile, even as tears burned into her eyes. Dylan still looked wonderful even in that ugly grey janitor's uniform. Why couldn't the uber-elite Sidwell Friends School devote a little of their copious money to at least polo shirts with jeans for their janitorial staff? Anyway, that was only a fleeting thought. Dylan noticed her red, puffy eyes right away.

"What's wrong?! What happened?" his voice was getting more panicked by the second. "Did Norman do anything?!"

She shook her head slowly, hot tears spilling down her cheeks. The gravity of what she'd done was hitting her. Nothing at Quantico could have ever prepared her for this. "Dylan...your uncle showed up here..and made a big scene, and we told him to get out, that we wanted nothing to do with him. I'm sorry, I know you never got to know him, but it...uh..it was so terrible for your mother. How he abused her while they were growing up."

His wide eyes told her it all: he'd never had any idea. At one time, Dylan would've doubted Norma was telling the truth. No more. He was in too deep. The family was first, always. Any outside threat needed to be dealt with. "My god..no wonder she's been the way she is.." he swallowed hard before going on, "Did any of you do anything to him?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

The pain in her was every bit as real as a knife through her chest. Emma fought through it and did something she never in their lifetimes wanted to do: she lied to him. "No. We told him to get out. And he did. Left town." She couldn't say anymore as the soft sobs started constricting her throat.

"Hey, hey," Dylan leaned even closer to the webcam. "I know, it's rough. He's your brother too. You never got to know him either; I know that's a lot of dashed hope for you, but does he really matter, even close, compared to all of us? He sounds like a fucking prick, to be honest. Neither of us missed anything with him gone, so just think about that."

The irony of it. She'd killed her own brother, her own nephew/lover's uncle, and Dylan would never know it. He'd also never know who his real father was. Norma would take that to her grave. None of them mentioned Caleb again. There were even more pressing matters at hand.

Emma dried her eyes and managed a weak smile. "I miss you, so much. i wish you were here in this bed with me. It feels empty and wrong without you."

"I wish you were back here with me," he countered, "I hate sleeping alone,"

"I know, baby."

"I guess you probably don't sleep alone, right?" He couldn't stop the bitterness from coming out.

"Honey, stop. You know the answer to that. And you know you and I belong to each other, no matter what the Norms and I might do."

As if on cue, Norma pushed the door all the way open. She crawled onto the bed behind Emma and spooned with her, sliding one arm around her waist and resting her chin on Em's shoulder from behind. "Norman's doing some writing, it calms him down. It's tough, Dylan. But she's not lonely. Rest assured," Norma couldn't resist taunting him, it took her mind away from the fact her brother--his father--was now in a watery grave. Her hand moved up to cup her breast, softly rubbing through her sweater.

Dylan looked about to make a nasty retort, but his mother fondling her like that stopped him, brought back lovely memories of the last time he was on the other end of a video chat with Norma and Emma. The tightening in his pants told him immediately he'd love a repeat performance. It wasn't to be, this time anyway.

After dropping a brief kiss to her sister's neck, Norma's voice turned serious. "We've got a plan. We're going to fix this town for good. Make sure our family will always be safe. Right, Em?"

Emma took Norma's hand, pulled her even closer around her. "There's someone I know from years back. A powerful guy in D.C. who can put law and order back in this town. The kind that will look the other way, when it comes to us. And the kind that'll deal with anyone who tries to screw with us."

"How do you know people like that, Ems? I'm almost afraid to ask.." Dylan felt the trepidation building in him. It sounded shady, dangerous. Still so many things he didn't know about the woman he loved. What had really gone on in her past, before she'd found her way to them?

"Remember when I mentioned my ex, from the Academy?" She had, once or twice in passing. "Duncan eventually married Burton Delaney's daughter. They've since split, but that's not the issue. Burton's the one who can help us."

"For a price." Norma was the one to add that.

"What kind of price?!" Now Dylan was definitely not liking the sound of this, "What does the guy want, money? It's not like we have a lot of it, and how're we gonna--"

"He doesn't want money. He has more than enough of it. Oh, no. Delaney exchanges favors for favors. That's how Washington really works. Hell, it's how the whole fucking country's run. Every time you hear some politician on the news spout off about 'morality' and 'family values'? That's pure unadulterated bullshit." Emma was getting worked up into a rant. "I've witnessed plenty behind the scenes, and it's one big game of mutual back-scratching. The kind that often flouts the same laws they promise to uphold."

She stopped, in need of a breath. At least the four of them weren't hypocrites, in their love for one another. It made her feel more justified in doing this. To an extent. She went on, still sitting up against Norma and holding her hand,

"I've stayed away from those kinds of dirty quid pro quo dealings until now, and I've done my damndest to protect you from knowing about it. Now I've cashed my chips in. Whatever Delaney wants me to do in return, it won't be pretty. Or legal. Or safe. But it's too late; the plan's already in motion. I have no choice. I'm doing this for all of us."

Norman had come into the doorway in time to hear the last part of Aunt Emma's speech. All it took was the tone of her voice to let all three of them know the gravity of this situation.



Three days after, Norma almost made them leave late because she took so long deciding what to wear, throwing a good number of of her dresses onto the bed after vetoing them, getting more agitated and nearly hitting Norman with a couple of them as he sat on the mattress, hold up his hands to shield himself.

"I need to look businesslike, and not like someone who's easily pushed around!" she said, "At the same time your aunt and I don't need to look like twins either," she gave a laugh at that, "We already do, enough as it is!" she held up a white sleeveless dress adorned with flowers in a couple different shades of blue. It was one of his favorites. Norman got up and circled his arms around her waist, held her to him and dropped a kiss to her neck. She relaxed against him, somewhat, giving a soft sigh.

"It's okay, Mother. Calm down. You look beautiful in everything, and anyone who's not an idiot would know not to push you or Aunt Emma around. It's not the clothes that do that." He reached into the wardrobe and took out a deep blue blazer Norma had recently gotten to wear in the motel office. "Here, wear this with that dress. It'll be perfect." His fingers trailed up the soft skin of her back as he zipped it for her, giving her that unspoken promise of what would follow that night, after he'd pull it back down for her. She turned in his arms and pressed a lingering kiss to his lips,

returning that loving promise without words. They didn't need any. He fastened her single strand of pearls around her neck after she finished dressing, then linked his arm through hers, leaning against each other as they descended the stairs.

Aunt Emma was pacing by the front door, looking even more agitated than Norma. She was dressed in the same pretty off-white suit with the black blouse and scarf she'd worn to the court hearing, months ago when she'd become his legal guardian. It seemed very appropriate. Once again, she was doing something that would safeguard the family in the long run, if things worked out. Norman tried to push away any fears they wouldn't. He gave her a long hug and kissed her close to one corner of her mouth. "You can do this. You can do anything." he murmured in her ear.

After he walked them down to the car and saw them off, Norman opened the motel office. He put on his dark blue jacket with the gold "Manager" pin on the breast pocket. It was such a big source of pride for him, that Mother had given him that level of responsibility for their little business. He flipped open the laptop on the front desk, checked for new reservations, then pulled up the always-on security camera feed. All was quiet. They would be okay.



Their high heels clicked loudly on the tile floor of the hotel lobby. They'd be meeting Delaney in the lobby of the Hyatt in downtown Portland. It was only a few blocks from the Marriott, where Em and Dylan had spent such an incredible day and night for his birthday. It seemed a lifetime instead of only a few months ago, and it only made the heaviness in her chest grow worse. Would they have those happier times again, after this was all over?

Norma took her by the forearm, aware of the fear her sister was trying so desperately to hide. "I haven't seen anyone intimidate you until now, Emma. Not

even the worst criminal scum when you were face to face with them. You're starting to scare me."

Emma stopped and spun to face her, eyes blazing. "Because it would be stupid for anyone NOT to tread lightly around Delaney!" she hissed. "He's got people working as his eyes and ears everywhere, we're talking up into the national government levels. They think of everything, and you DON'T EVER want to cross them! They make sure any witnesses or loose ends disappear. WHATEVER you do, DON'T antagonize him! Or else we could end up with more than we bargained for."

"I understand," Norma was uncharacteristically subdued.

He was waiting for them in an armchair in one of the lobby's many meeting areas, flipping idly through a newspaper, though Em knew damn well he was aware of their presence before they even reached him. He slowly folded it and put it aside before standing. His hair and mustache were grayer now, but he looked much the same.

"Agent Spoole." he intoned, "It's been a long time."

"Hello, Burton. Yes, it has." Her tone was cool.

He turned to Norma, "You're Norma Bates." It wasn't a question. "The resemblance is uncanny. Now, let's get to it. What can I do for you, Emma?"

They all took seats, then Em told him a very edited version of the family's story, starting with the Fieretti case that brought her to her birth family, then of course skipping over much of that, to the point where the crime boss killed Sheriff Romero. Some prominent people in White Pine bay were blaming and targeting the Bates family, and the whole place had descended into crime-ridden chaos. Norma added a general detail here and there, but she mostly kept quiet, not wanting to accidentally give away too much.

Delaney listened with tented index fingers and a largely unreadable expression. Emma finished off with, "I'll level with you, Burton: We've had to take some extreme measures to protect this family, do some things we never thought we'd have to do. Things that can't ever be found out. We need that protection from your people. I know what they're capable of. I'll uphold my end of the deal. You have my word on it."

That got a slight eyebrow raise from him, a first. He looked back and forth between the sisters for a moment. "You're very intensely connected to this family, Emma. That's obvious. As I'm sure you know, I recruit and contract certain special projects for the National Security Council, among my other responsibilities. It so happens I have one I was going to assign to Austin; I'm sure you remember him?"

"All too well." Austin Carlisle was Duncan's younger brother, and Emma had never much cared for the guy. He'd had all of Duncan's ambition but little of the charm or level-headedness. After nearly getting himself kicked out for infractions she couldn't remember, he'd completed police academy training a couple of years after she and Duncan were out of Quantico. While Em couldn't recall all the specifics, she did remember it stirring up a load of drama in the Carlisle family. What she could recall was something she'd overheard at Casey's Bar, the last time she'd heard her ex's brother mentioned by name. "Last thing I heard, he got fired from the State Department. I take it he works for you now." Her turn to make that a statement, not a question. It covered up the block of ice forming in her stomach. The NSC was a smaller, splinter agency that had broken off from the National Security Administration. It quietly carried out one of the country's dirtiest secrets: permanently eliminating individuals determined to be threats to the government.

Delaney reached over to his attache' case at the side of his chair and pulled out a manilla envelope. "I'm willing to set up Austin in the sheriff's seat in that town. No need for the inconvenience of an election. That'll be dealt with. In turn he'll deal with the disorder and make sure your family's safe from anything. Including any legal

repercussions if any of you find the need to take more 'extreme measures,' as you put it." He took in the distrustful look on Norma's face and the mix of dread and hope on Emma's. "Austin's calmed down and matured over the past years, especially since he got engaged. His fiancée will be coming there with him, and I'll take care of getting them set up."

Emma didn't want to know her end of the deal, but she could no longer avoid it. "What do you want from me, Burton?"

He handed her the envelope, and she took it delicately, as if fearful it would explode in her hands. Norma watched every move with wide eyes, the fear of the unknown almost too much to bear. Em opened it and pulled out a thin stack of typed pages. The first detailed the location of two untraceable assault weapons, one a long-range sniper rifle with high-powered scope technology. The other an unmarked semiautomatic pistol with an illegal silencer. Both were in a locked hardshell suitcase stowed in a locker on the ground floor of Dulles Airport in D.C. Locker keys were at the bottom of the envelope, and the instructions included how to dispose of the weapons when the job was done. For one crazy instant, Em almost found that a shame, being such an aficionado of such hardware. The rifle itself was deadly enough to be outlawed on U.S. soil, available only in the Middle East and a few Eastern European countries. Then sanity, or what passed for it, returned to her.

The next pages were a three-day detailed calendar of two names: their plans and locations around Washington at all times of the day and night. At seeing the names, it took everything Emma had not to black out. On the bottom of the stack were two printed photos, one of a man she didn't recognize dressed in a very decorated military uniform. Looked like Marines, from what she knew on that subject. The second froze her breath in her chest. That attractive raven-haired woman in the photo was Vanessa Moore, sister of Mary Kincaid. Mrs. Kincaid was better known as the First Lady of the United States.

"Burton...no..." she raised her gaze up to meet his cold hard eyes. His voice was deceptively calm and dulcet.

"You'll get the next out flight to Dulles. Then you'll locate those weapons, and secure them. Follow that itinerary to the letter, until you find the right window to target them. Then you'll kill Colonel Thomas Blair and Vanessa Moore, and dispose of the weapons as instructed. I'll know when the job's completed. Then Austin and Morgan will be headed to White Pine Bay. Your family will never have to worry about anything there again."

"I can't do that!" Emma cried out, "I'm no fan of the Kincaids, but I can't kill someone else's sister! Why?! What the hell did she do?!"

Norma cut in, "You can't be serious?!"

He simply held up one finger to silence their protests, "Emma, both of them were heavily involved in the failed plot to assassinate President Kincaid over a year ago. They're becoming more of a threat, more noise that needs to be silenced. You called me. You don't have the luxury of choice anymore."

After a few breathless pauses, Delaney turned his attention to Norma, his cold expression never changing, "I've done some interesting research into a recent cold murder case in your new chosen hometown, Mrs. Bates. From what I've concluded, you're fairly skilled with an edge weapon. Perhaps--"

"LEAVE HER OUT OF THIS!!" Emma cried out, forgetting they were in earshot of other hotel patrons, "I'll do it! OKAY?! I want something in return, Burton!" She didn't wait for him to respond, "I want OUT OF D.C.!! I want a transfer to the Portland FBI field office; I don't CARE what it takes! Make it fucking happen!! This isn't what I signed on for in Washington! It's nothing but an evil fucking cesspool! I'm DONE after this!!"

He had his index fingers tented in front of his face, once more. "Consider it done, Agent Spooler. You have 72 hours to do the job. If you don't complete it, or if you're apprehended, my associates I've placed here in Oregon will have no choice but to cut our losses. You understand that?"

"Yes!" she managed, jumping to her feet and seizing Norma by the arm, "I won't fail, Burton! I know you'll hold up your end. Nice seeing you again...or not. You'll know when to set the next phase in motion. Good-bye." With that, she sprung up and took off, nearly dragging her little sister with her.

As a parting shot, Norma glared back at Delaney: "Let's not meet again!" She would've said more, but Emma pulled harder on her arm. She would've usually objected to being woman-handled like that, but her mind was still trying to wrap itself fully around what had just happened.

"Emma, you're scaring me!" Norma exclaimed. Em had jumped into the Mercedes driver's seat herself, sped them to the nearest Walgreens. She strode in and grabbed two prepaid burner cell phones and slammed them onto the counter, along with two bottles of wine for when they got home. "I'll tell you in the car," she hissed.

Once they were in the Mercedes, Em ripped open both phones, activated them, programmed their numbers in them, and slapped one into Norma's hand. She gripped her beloved little sister by the chin, looked into her eyes. "Hold onto this. IF I call it, it'll ring once. It means I've been caught. Then don't worry about me. They'll have got me, and I'm already dead. Then take Norman and Dylan, and RUN! Go north to Canada, Vancouver. Get the next flight overseas, to the UK, Australia, South America, wherever you can! If you can't get off the continent in 24 hours, they'll catch up with you, and they'll kill us all."

Em pulled her shaking little sister tight against her. "It's horrible, it makes me sick, but I'll do it! I'll do anything for you, Norma! Anything for all of us!"

She didn't bother calling or texting Dylan about it. Let him have his last few days of contentment in D.C., however much without her. Once they got back to the Bates house, they only told Norman that Em had to go back to Washington for a few days. "She's got business to take care of. It's going to fix this town, for good. Just trust us, baby." Norma slid her arms around his waist and pulled him to her. They were in the kitchen, having opened the wine while figuring out dinner. Trying to pretend things were normal, without success.

Suspicion and worry darkened Norman's features. "What kind of business, Mother? It's not anything dangerous is it?" He had a terrible sinking feeling it was.

Emma was meanwhile upstairs, throwing everything she needed into a suitcase after reserving the next flight out, in four hours. She downed two glasses of merlot while packing, resisting the urge for more. Catching his question as she hauled it downstairs, she cut in with "It's something very ugly, and yeah: dangerous, that I have to do." She joined them, trying and failing to conceal how much her body was shaking. "It'll be worth it. I promise. We can be together, all of us, after this. No one will ever bother us again. Not the cops, not the asshats in this town. No one. We're getting a new sheriff after I take care of this. He'll be on our side."

"Will you tell me more, Aunt Emma? I'll drive you to the airport. I insist. Mother, you stay here and relax, finish dinner."

The time to leave came too fast. Norman put her suitcase in the trunk while Em hugged Norma fiercely to her. "It'll be fine. All of it, I swear! Take care of each other. Keep an eye on the news for the next three days, and remember what I said about that phone. Keep it on you."

Tears spilled out of Norma's eyes. How much danger they were all in was hitting her. Two lives traded for the four of theirs. "You come back to us! You fucking hear me?! Better them than us!"

Emma managed a weak smile at her sister dropping a now-more-frequent F-bomb. Hard to imagine where she picked up that habit. Before she got the chance to respond, Norma planted a lingering kiss on her lips. Right there in the motel parking lot. Em was surprised for a second, then kissed her back. Hell, once soon-to-be-Sheriff Carlisle was in town, any of them could lock lips with each other in the middle of a crowded street and he'd ignore it. There wouldn't be a damn thing anyone else could do about it either. The thought of that end prize cut through the fear and made her giddy, at least for a moment.

"I love you, Emma." her voice was soft, sweet even with the tears.

"I love you too. More than I can ever say."

Taking it as permission, Norman gave his mother a quick kiss before he and Aunt Emma got in the car. "Be back soon, Mother. Try not to worry." He backed out and pulled onto the highway, Emma placing a hand against the car window and watching her, their eyes locked until the last second.

Norma pulled her blue wool wrap closer around her, suddenly freezing on this late spring evening. Her head lowered, and terrible sobs tore from her throat. "If you die, part of me will die with you." she choked out, before forcing her legs to take her back up the stairs to the empty house. It was too cold and seemed unfamiliar without the family there. She needed them back. Norma hadn't prayed for anything since she was a little girl, but now she curled up on her side on the sofa, sending out silent wordless prayers that Emma would kill those two people and get home safe. That Marine guy and First Lady Kincaid's sister had to be bad people who deserved it. No

one mattered more than the Bates family. Whatever it took, they had to stay together.

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Norman didn't want to leave her at the airport before he had answers. "Why are you both so upset?" He demanded, "Don't think you have to protect me; I need the truth before you go! What's this guy Delaney making you do?" He almost pulled the car over onto the shoulder of the road, but thought better of it. "Aunt Emma, look at me!" he snapped. "Tell me!" His voice was getting more uncontrolled as he watched her shaking her head and rubbing her own forearms with her hands.

Her abrupt reaction wasn't what he expected. "Norman, I have to kill two people!" she snapped loudly, near hysterics. Both of their eyes were taking on that hardened, deadly look. He reached for her hand, but this time she snatched it away. "Not any two people. One's a high-ranking Marine Colonel who works at the Pentagon. The other one...fuck..this is tearing me apart..It's the First Lady's sister." Now she grabbed Norman's hand, lacing their fingers together. The pain was incidental by comparison.

Norman didn't know how he didn't lose control of the car. "What?! He's forcing you to do this?!"

"I don't have any choice. I know what it makes me, all too well: a rogue FBI Agent. A hired gun. A corrupt cop at the federal level. Getting involved in this secret dirty illegal shit was something I swore I'd never do. It's been going on for decades, honey. But I never had a reason to before." She let go of Norman's hand and lifted his chin between her fingers. "You, your mother, and Dylan. You're my good reason for doing this bad thing. Just like with your uncle. These people are far from innocent. Once the job's done, we'll be untouchable. Above the law."

"That's what you meant by the town being 'fixed.'" Norman could scarcely believe he was hearing this. If he didn't know better, he'd have sworn it was some alternate reality they'd fallen into. It wasn't.

He parked at the airline entrance, got her suitcase out for her, and pulled her tightly into his arms. "Like Mother said, come back to us." His face brushed hers as he pulled back, and Norman's mind flashed *to hell with it*. He brought his lips to hers in a slow, smoldering kiss. In front of any- and everyone passing by on their travels. Both he and Mother needed to send her off like this; to him, it was sealing that promise that everything would come through. "You know what you have to do." he murmured, his forehead pressing to hers, before letting her go.

Emma never would've imagined she could sleep on the plane ride, but so many of them for years had conditioned her body to it. She put the neck pillow on and dropped into a feverish sleep about a half hour after take-off. Even weirder, she woke up clearer-headed and refreshed, that vital manilla envelope clutched in one hand. She took the elevator down to the airport's bottom floor and located the locker in the instructions. Unlocking it, she pulled out one large hardshell case and one smaller one. Hauling both up to the baggage claim, she piled them on a luggage cart along with her own suitcase after locating it. One flash of her badge and airport security waved her on through without checking the tags or lack thereof on the weapon cases.

Her position had opened doors for her, given her those privileges that civilians didn't get. What would become of her future as an agent? Portland would not be the same three-ring circus as D.C. Part of her was relieved and part was depressed to leave it behind. As she rode in a cab to the hotel she'd be holed up in, Emma watched the famous monuments and buildings passing by, her heart growing heavier. So many beautiful memories she'd built here with Norma, Norman, and Dylan. The city had never seemed more vibrant and alive than when they'd been here with her. Now it



seemed stark, cold, and showing some of the evil she knew was slithering just under the surface of how things were run.

She checked in and declined the bellhop's offer to help her get the bags upstairs. Locking the door and pulling the drapes shut, she hefted the bigger case onto the bed and popped the latches. Inside were the pieces of a 50mm Barrett M84 long-range sniper rifle, complete with ammo, laser scope, and stand. The model had been banned in the U.S. for years, due to its deadly-accurate firepower and maximum damage even from long distances. Emma let out a low whistle of awe, noting the serial numbers on the hardware had been scraped away, indeed making it untraceable. This baby would sell for six figures on the black market or the dark web, easily. How Burton Delaney had procured it, she didn't even want to know.

The smaller case housed a Ruger SR-22 semi-automatic pistol with a silencer. Also illegal and untraceable since the serial numbers on both were gone. Her cold, rational mind was taking over, shutting down any emotions that would make her hesitate or mess up this operation. She'd deal with those later when this was all over. Emma sat cross-legged on the bed and leafed through the calendars of her targets. Colonel Blair went jogging in Lafayette Park at 7am every morning, and it was only two blocks from her hotel. Emma turned on her laptop and pulled up Google Maps of the area. Several buildings would give her a clear shot from the rooftop. Delaney knew what he was doing with this assignment, no question.

The rooftop of the building that gave her the clearest shot was a closed parking garage that was shut down for construction of more floors. It was also next door to the offices of the Secret Service. More fitting irony. The only way Emma was able to get any sleep was by forcing her mind to paint lovely pictures of the future she wanted with Dylan. They'd get an apartment in Portland, spend the weekends taking motorcycle rides along the coast, having picnics on the beach once it was warm enough, going on camping trips, maybe rent another cabin sometimes, and of course go to dinner at the Norms' often. They'd be happy, and safe from any

persecution. It was all she wanted in the world, all that was saving the last of her battered sanity at this point.

She rolled out of bed at 4:30 am and fortified herself with coffee from the room's small machine. Emma got dressed in black jeans and a heavy black sweater one of her favorite blue tops. D.C. was warm in the spring but still pretty cold before the sun rose. The streets were mostly quiet as she walked the dozen blocks to the garage and easily found her way to the outside stairway leading up to the roof. The power was off, so no elevator and little light other than from the street lamps outside. Somehow she managed to find her way, struggling not to let in the blood-soaked memories of the last time she was in a dark abandoned building.

"Won't think about it...I can't.." she kept muttering under her breath with each step, lugging the M84 case. "Can't think about any of it...not now...can't black out...can't do it." Her voice sounded dead. She couldn't have said which terrified her worse, that chance of a black-out, or what she was about to do. Emma waited on the concrete floor, at the edge of a cut-out section of the garage that faced the park's jogging path. It was a straight drop to the street below. As the sky was beginning to lighten, it afforded her an unobstructed line of fire to the jogging path across the street. She waited with her right eye on the scope and right index finger on the trigger housing, once she'd assembled the M84. Laying on her stomach on the freezing concrete and forcing her mind to go blank except for the mental image of Colonel Blair.

At 7:23am, he appeared, running at a brisk pace right towards the garage. Emma centered the crosshairs on his chest, moved her finger and squeezed off a shot. The weapon made only a soft "pew" noise due to the silencer. A bloom of red exploded out of him, staining his white T-shirt, a direct hit to the heart. The Marine stumbled, clenched the fatal wound with both hands as he fell to the ground. He'd expire before the first paramedics arrived.

She pulled back from the weapon and stood up, a cold calmness settling in her own chest. "That's all?" Em breathed. It had been quick, easy, impersonal, and over in a matter of seconds. She was too far away to hear the screams of other joggers near him when he was hit. Then she snapped out of it, ripped apart the pieces of the weapon as fast as she could, stashing them back in the case and tearing out of there, down the stairs and onto the street, walking with purpose but not so fast that she attracted attention. Emma pulled up the address of where she was ordered to dispose of the M84 in its case. It was in an apartment building dumpster in a neighborhood quite a walk from Lafayette Park. That didn't bother her, as she breathed in the cool morning air and allowed herself to hear nothing but the traffic rushing by and the sound of her footsteps on the concrete. She located the address, found the dumpster, lifted the lid and dropped the case in. Done with. Delaney's people would retrieve it whenever they may. Emma hailed a cab back to her hotel, dropped her clothes after locking her room door, and spent a long time standing under a hot shower before drying off and collapsing into bed for the rest of the day. The second part of this job would be much worse.

Vanessa Moore's calendar reported she'd be meeting friends for drinks at a hole-in-the-wall nightclub in a trendy neighborhood of Chevy Chase, Maryland. There were also notes from Delaney that Vanessa rarely if ever let her phone go unanswered, and she had a habit of stepping outside to as private an area as afforded. When she finally got up that evening, Em pulled up photos of the club's exterior and saw the most private place was a back alley around the corner from a side exit. Of course it was. The area was poorly lit. Plenty of places to hide in the deep shadows. She also saw it was an older building whose owners hadn't gotten around to installing security cameras overlooking that alley. The thought of security cameras made her ache for home, noting that she now thought of Oregon and a certain house on a hill as home, not this corrupt city any longer. It was a struggle not to call any of the family. She stashed her phone in the nightstand drawer instead.

Somehow the hours slipped by, and somehow she was able to get some dinner without feeling sick. That cold, detached calmness only grew as Emma changed into black jeans and a black sweater, then went downstairs to get a cab, the Ruger SR-22 stashed in her emptied-out handbag. She had the driver drop her off down the street, then had a seat at an open-air bar across the street from the club. And she didn't have long to wait. Her vantage point gave her a clear look at Vanessa getting out of the back of a black towncar and heading inside. Emma shut her eyes for several seconds, trying to blank out the thoughts of: *It's someone else's sister...not just anyone's either...who helped in trying to have her brother-in-law killed...according to Burton anyway...why should I trust any of that shit he told us?*

"I have no choice." she said under her breath, as she paid for the Diet Coke she'd gotten and left, still talking softly in that disturbing flat monotone as she walked across the street and into the alley. "She's gotta be a bad person. Gotta have done something bad. She's got blood on her hands from somewhere." It was the only way Emma could go through with this. After nearly an hour of waiting in the deep shadows under the fire escape, Vanessa Moore came outside through a back exit, pulling out her phone to answer a call.

The attractive raven-haired woman in a figure-hugging burgundy dress never got a chance. She was seized in a hard choke-hold from behind, cutting off her air supply and ability to scream for help. The gun silencer pressed to her temple, and the trigger was squeezed. It gave an even softer spitting noise. A single round tore through her brain and lodged just shy of ripping out the other side of her skull. Vanessa slumped out of Em's grip, dead before she hit the ground. Her phone tumbled from her hand, its screen cracking. She never got a glance at her killer. It was all over in about 10 seconds. Though as Emma hurried away, out of the alley and down a side street, time had slowed so much in her mind.

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White Pine Bay

Norman woke the next morning to the familiar, lovely aroma of breakfast cooking. As tired as she was from staying up so late watching the news nonstop, his mother still got up before he did, to make them bacon and eggs. He rolled out of their bed and went to the bathroom to wash up, hearing the faint voices of CNN news anchors from downstairs. Norma had refused to turn it off ever since Aunt Emma left, watching and waiting for any word of two certain deaths out of the nation's capitol.

Norman finished getting dressed and went downstairs, glancing at the TV in time for the regular talking heads to be interrupted by a breaking story. "Mother!!" he called out, bringing her running to his side.

"What is it? Is there-" She didn't have to finish, as the voice-over of a reporter gave the rapid-fire details of what they knew so far. Footage was being shown of a sheet-covered body being removed from behind a building, just outside D.C. They both hung onto every word:

"Sanitation workers made a grisly discovery early this morning. The body of Vanessa Moore, sister-in-law of President Kincaid, was found behind a popular nightspot in Chevy Chase, Maryland. According to a statement from the medical examiner, she died of a single gunshot wound to the head. So far there are no witnesses and no leads. This happening less than a day after Marine Colonel Thomas Blair was slain in an apparent sniper shooting. The Washington metro area is on high alert, many fearing these are acts of domestic terrorism. Early reports from the White House and the D.C. Metro Police indicate both cases are being treated as assassinations. The President and the First Lady are scheduled to address the nation today at noon Eastern Standard Time. We will be bringing you updates on this story as it develops."

Norma's hand clamped over his bicep, squeezing it. "My god...she did it. She really did it, Norman!" Her arms wrapped around his shoulders and he pulled her into a tight hug, lifting her off her feet for a moment.

"Did you ever have any doubts, Mother?" He put her down and cupped the sides of her face, "We're gonna be okay. All of us."

As she hurried to serve them up breakfast before it could burn, Norma felt lighter on her feet than she could recently remember. The burner cell phone was in the pocket of her apron. It stayed silent. Some nagging conflict was in the back of her mind, despite the joy. She'd never had any interest in politics, she hadn't even voted in the last election, and she always couldn't care less what President Kincaid said or did. But part of her acknowledged they were still people who'd suffered a terrible loss. Because of the Bates family. A pretty damn hefty price to pay, when you thought about it. Collateral damage, like they'd always said.

Norma gathered and started washing up the finished breakfast dishes, as Norman put on his manager's jacket, kissed her lips briefly before going down to open the motel office. It was nearly 9am, almost time for the presidential address. She went into the living room and almost turned off the TV, but she couldn't bring herself to. She sat on the sofa and watched while the President and First Lady made their way to the podium on the White House lawn. He looked like he'd hardly slept, and Mary Kincaid looked like she'd aged a decade overnight. Her eyes were red too; no amount of make-up could hide that. Norma bit her lower lip, only taking mental note of the parts of their speeches that stood out:

"This was a terrible act of cowardice, and we will see that justice will be served." - President Kincaid.

"I lost a beloved member of my family yesterday. Despite our many differences, she was still my sister. I have the deepest gratitude for the outpouring of support, from both sides of the aisle and from so many across the nation." - Mary Kincaid.

Norma's throat constricted as she reached for the remote and turned off any more. "Better them than us." she repeated as she went about the rest of her day.

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## **Washington, D.C.**

Later that same day, Dylan had just gotten home to a depressingly empty apartment when his phone went off with a text. Emma-Christine. He smiled briefly until he saw what she'd written:

Emma: I'm back in town. Meet me at the Vietnam Memorial. Right now.

Dylan: What?! When were you gonna tell me you're back? What's going on?

Emma: Not for long. We're getting out of here, back to Oregon. We have to. Just meet me there. I'll tell you everything.

He didn't waste time changing into regular clothes, just threw his jacket back on over his janitor threads and headed down to the Metro station. Dylan had never reached the National Mall faster, unaware this would be their last time there. He spotted her on a bench facing the black mirrored wall etched with thousands of names of the fallen. Her arms were wrapped around herself and Emma appeared to be staring off into space until she saw him. He rushed to her and pulled her tight into his arms, his irritation at her not withstanding.

"When were you going to tell me, huh? How long have you been back?" He had to know.

"Only since the day before yesterday. And we're getting the hell out, as soon as possible." She didn't want to let go of him. It was the first time in days she started feeling somewhat human again. "Dylan," she pulled back, held the sides of his face. "Have you seen the news at all today?"

"Some. They had it on the TV in the cafeteria at the school today. Those two got shot; one of 'em's the First Lady's sister. What does this have to do with us?"

The sudden lack of color in Emma's face and the haunted look in her eyes told him everything. He dropped his arms from her and backed away, horrified. "Em...no..."

"I had to! That was Delaney's price, okay?! I had NO CHOICE! Don't walk away from me, baby! Please!"

"Why didn't you call me? The whole time you were out killing those people, you could've at least talked to me! I know you talked plenty with Norma and Norman about it. I don't even have to ask!"

"Because I could've gotten caught! If I had, or if I didn't go through with it, all four of us would be dead! That's how much you don't fuck around with Delaney's people! I did this for us."

She was a murderer. An assassin. Capable of such cold-blooded acts, it was making his head spin. He still loved her. Dylan closed the space between them, grasped her forearms and leaned his head against hers. "You were the only one of us in this godforsaken family that got away at first. Now you never will."



The words brought a soft smile to her face. "I'm all in. Forever." She kissed him, slow and lingering. Nothing else felt more like coming home.

"Come on," Dylan kept hold of her hand as they walked to catch the subway back to the apartment. He pulled out his phone and scrolled for a certain number. "I'm calling the transport company. It'd be nice to get the truck and Mustang moved out there within the next month." Moving plans soon consumed both of them, crowding out the cold unfeeling darkness encroaching on her mind. For now.



### **White Pine Bay.**

#### **Three weeks later.**

Norma was restocking motel business cards and the brochures in the office rack, while Norman was checking the website for any new reservations. There were a couple of them; early summer was bringing families on vacation, and the Bates Motel was almost sold out. Some great news in this otherwise depressing and uncertain time. Their uncertainty only increased when the Sheriff's SUV pulled up, and two unfamiliar figures were visible inside. Strange not to see Deputy Harrison in the black-and-white, and White Pine Bay's deceased sheriff had become a faded memory.

Norman and Norma stood side-by-side in the office doorway as the new sheriff got out, walked around and opened the passenger door for the young woman riding shotgun. She got out, opened the backseat and lifted an adorable baby out of her car seat, secured her in the pink carrier the mother was wearing on her front. Sheriff Carlisle hooked his arm through hers protectively. He looked in his early 30's, with brown hair the kept falling across his forehead. He also had pale blue eyes that looked rather cold; the only time he seemed to warm up was when he was talking to or looking at Morgan.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bates, I take it." he shook both their hands, "I'm Austin Carlisle, your new sheriff, though I know you've been aware of that for a while."

Morgan followed suit, "I'm Morgan Sanders, well, soon to be 'Carlisle', Austin's fiancée" she said with a rather shy smile. Up close, Norma was surprised how young this girl was. She looked barely out of high school, if that. Morgan had wavy, nearly-black hair that almost reached her waist, loosely braided over one shoulder. She was also very slender and pale, with the darkest brown eyes either of the Bates had ever seen.

*Those are haunted eyes, Norma couldn't help thinking. She's had terrible things happen in her life. It's right in those eyes. I ought to know...*

"It's great to meet you both!" She and Norman greeted the Carlises warmly, "And who's this?" Norma indicated the sleepy-looking little girl who appeared about a year old.

Morgan smiled, "This is Sara, our daughter." She lifted her up and turned her a bit more to face them, "She's a little shy at first."

"She's precious!" Norma briefly shook one of those tiny little hands, getting a smile out of Sara. "Come in, please." She beckoned the Carlises into the office. Ever the gracious manager, Norman poured coffee for both couples.

Sheriff Carlisle began, "I going to need you both to come down to the station and fill me in on the details of the vandalism that happened here a few months ago, as well as anyone harassing you since then. Bring any security footage you might have as well, and please try to be as specific as possible. Say, tomorrow at three?"

"Of course, we'll be there." Norman assured him.

Carlisle glanced at the motel laptop that Norman had since opened the security camera feed, "I was prepared to tell you to get video surveillance here, and to be vigilant, but I see you're already two steps ahead." He cleared his throat before adding, "I understand your family has a unique arrangement, and I don't need to know the details. What all you need to know is this: No one's going to 'see' anything or say anything about whatever you four may do, or however you might appear together. I made a commitment to uphold that, and I honor my commitments. Now, we should get going. Thank you for the coffee, and I'll see you three tomorrow."

"We've still got a lot of unpacking to do," Morgan added as Norma walked her out to the car, a few steps behind the sheriff, "This town's lovely, and so's your motel. It's a nice change from Jacksonville, down in Florida. More peaceful. The air's so different, it lets me breathe easier."

"Oh, is that where you're from originally?" Norma was becoming curious to find out first-hand about this sweet, strangely sad young woman who looked like she should be enrolling in the 12th grade instead of already being a mother and setting up house as the sheriff's wife.

"It's...umm...where we were living for a while anyway." Morgan shifted her eyes away and busied herself getting Sara into her carseat. It was obvious she didn't want to say more. She gave Norma a too-bright smile, "Very nice to have met you both, Mrs. Bates. I'm looking forward to getting settled here."

"Call me Norma, please. And you're both very welcome drop by any time." Norma waved as the Carlisles drove off.

Back at the front desk, Norman looked up as she reappeared. "So, what do you think of them, Mother?"

"I think they don't believe in wasting time, that's for sure. Does she even look old enough to vote? And was there a chill in here when he walked in, or was it just me?"

"Mother." he admonished. "They seem like nice enough people, and he looks like he knows what he's doing. We should give them a chance, watch and see if Sheriff Carlisle delivers on everything that Delaney guy told us. Maybe..." Norman looked thoughtful for a moment, then smiled "Maybe in a couple weeks, we could go on a date in town, test that promise out." He came around the front desk and slipped his arms around her waist, gave her lips a teasing kiss.

Norma gave a soft laugh, "We could do that. Remember the last time we went to the movies?" she grinned and winked. It almost took their focus off the short trip they had planned for that afternoon. Both remembering what it entailed. After a couple of more uneventful hours, they locked up the office early and got in the car. Headed for the Pineview Institution about 45 minutes away. When they got there and obtained their visitors' passes, the Norms saw Dylan was already there, on his knees with his head on her lap. She was unresponsive, staring out the window, her mind far away.

Once Em and Dylan had quickly moved to Portland, had everything shipped, things seemed to be going okay. Then she couldn't get out of bed for a few day. Soon after, she stopped talking or responding to anyone speaking to her. Her mind was elsewhere, in happier times.

Dylan had a hard time handling it after she committed herself. He drank too much, smoked too much weed that was now legal, and drove under the influence too many times for comfort.

Norma pushed him aside and leaned against her sister, looking into her vacant eyes. "You have to snap out of this!! Stop it! Dylan's a wreck!" Norma clasped her hands, and Em slowly turned to look at her. "Say something, damnit!"

"I can't forget." Emma droned softly, "Oh god, what have I done?"

Norma pulled her close against her. "We're safe now. We always will be. Hold onto that, and come back to us. Emma, please.."

It took a few more weeks, a lot of intense therapy with Dr. Ross, and a round of antidepressants she had to get used to, but Emma very gradually emerged from the deep depression. It didn't help that her adoptive parents thought she was insane for uprooting her life and moving all the way to Oregon. They'd also never know the true nature of the love she shared with her birth family. Another lie and secret the four of them would always have to keep up. Guilt wracked her because she never wanted them to think she was abandoning them. Promises were made to go back to Ohio that Christmas. Eventually she was cleared to start work in the Portland field office, as a Supervisory Special Agent with her own office. No more sitting in a bullpen, and a lot less going into the field, unless of course she chose to. For the first couple of months, heading the Cyber Crimes Unit was exciting: her field agents tracking down criminals who operated on the worst corners of the dark web. Then it became routine; Emma almost became convinced she could have a dark web "honey-trap" website set up and teach Norman, Norma, or Dylan to monitor it.

The relative monotony was the best thing for all of them, despite how restless it made Emma-Christine at times. She and Dylan found a lovely rental house with a wrap-around porch, overlooking the Willamette River. He got a job in one of downtown Portland's popular head shops, though she expressed how she thought he could do better. Dylan and Emma went to dinner at the Bates house every Sunday night, sometimes other nights as well. More routine that helped put them at ease. Whispers did start circulating about the family throughout town, though they never lasted long.

One day while exiting the grocery store, Norma and Norman caught sight of a missing-persons flyer with photos of that angry red-headed woman who had

screamed at them at Romero's burial. Her name was Christine Helgens, and her husband John's picture was next to hers. Norma drove straight to the sheriff's station and went right into Sheriff Carlisle's office, needing to know if this had anything to do with the family. He looked up from his computer and told them coolly to shut the door. Norman did so, and Carlisle said in an almost-bored tone, "The Helgens had hired some people to trash your motel and threaten you. It was taken care of. Don't worry about it, and don't ask any more questions." His look softened a bit, "While you're here, Mrs. Bates: I wanted to thank you for all the help you've given Morgan with the wedding plans. She's been overwhelmed, and I have no clue about things like that."

Forgetting the disappearances, Norma smiled, "Of course. I'm happy to. Sorry we barged in on you like this. We'll see you at the rehearsal dinner, if not before. All you have to do at the wedding is show up." With that, mother and son went home to make dinner, side by side as always.

Indeed, Morgan and Norma had become fast friends during those trying months. The first time she invited her over and gave her a tour of their home, Norma broached the question: "Morgan, I hope you don't mind my asking, but how old are you?"

Morgan crossed her arms over her chest, looking defensive. "I'll be 20 in three weeks. I know: I look younger. I get that a lot. I don't care what people think of me and Austin. He's 12 years older, but it doesn't matter. We love each other." She gave Norma a pointed look, "Age difference is something you're familiar with too, from what I gather." Then she quickly switched subjects, "Oh I love the carpeting on your stairs! It goes great with the rest. Looks like you just had it redone." Then the two women were off again with talk of the Bates house's interior and what else Norma wanted to do to it. As the summer drew to a close, the family eventually learned something else unsettling about the sheriff's soon-to-be wife: she had no family. None that she spoke to or wanted anything to do with, and she clammed up when

asked further about it. No one on her side would be at the wedding, and until Norma: she had no help in planning it. That soon changed, as Norma threw herself into helping with enthusiasm. She was never going to have a daughter to do this with, so Morgan was her one chance.

The Carlisle wedding turned out to be the social event of that autumn in White Pine Bay. Austin and Morgan were set up in a large house with a sprawling backyard, in one of the town's wealthiest neighborhoods. His sheriff's salary could not have afforded that, though by now others knew it was wise not to look closely or ask questions. The yard was transformed with lanterns and roses for the reception, and it was a beautiful reception.

Norma looked the picture of elegance in a sky-blue, form-fitting dress. Norman couldn't pay attention to anyone else the entire time. With minimal complaints or arguing, she'd also talked Emma into an equally lovely dark red one. The boys looked perfect in their black tuxedos, despite their griping and smartass comments about "monkey suits."

The Bates foursome were some of the first ones on the temporary dance floor that had been set up on the lawn. They politely declined any offers to dance with any other guests. How close their boys held those two beautiful women raised eyebrows, but nothing more. Norman let Em cut in and dance with Norma for a song, his mother and aunt nearly as close with each other. Then he had a turn with his aunt, while Norma slid her arms around Dylan's shoulders for another. Finally, his mother and soulmate was back in his arms. Norman leaned his forehead to hers. "Things all worked out, Mother. Just like you promised."

"Yes, baby. It's all gonna be good. We're safe now. Forever." They turned and watched as Morgan, Austin, and little Sara were posing for wedding portraits in the backyard's gazebo. Em and Dylan moved next to them and did the same, watching their allies with knowing smiles. The wedding party ended shortly before midnight,

the Bates family wishing the Carlises all the best before heading home. Ready for any more adventures their new lives would bring.

The End



