

## Chapter 1: Alone

*"To sleep, perchance to dream - ay there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come..."*

- William Shakespeare, Hamlet.

In the beginning, there was darkness and cold. She would've shivered uncontrollably if she had a body that could shiver. She tried to look down, but there was nothing to see. The same if she looked up. Norma tried to scream, but she had no vocal chords, no mouth, no breath to draw to make any sound. Somewhere behind her, she heard a soft, masculine, dulcet voice singing something about pearls and seashells. The snippet of lovely music was there for a few seconds, then it faded back to silence. Her field of vision slowly shifted from black to light grey to dark grey to white, and back to black again. Like a mix of color-devoid tie-dye that was constantly changing. Achingly slowly, it grew brighter. How much time had passed, she had no way of knowing. The next thing she was conscious of, her ice blue eyes snapped open to a view of ugly speckled hospital ceiling tiles. A horrible fast beeping sound was drilling into her already-pained skull. She tried to call out, tried to speak. Something was jammed down her throat, preventing it.

A nurse rushed into the room, then called out some code Norma couldn't understand. Then the kind-faced black woman leaned over her, put her hand on her forehead.

"It's okay, Mrs. Romero. Try to be calm. You have a breathing tube. Don't try to fight it. We're going to take care of it for you."

Norma tried to sit up, but she might as well have been pinned under a sack of wet cement, for as much as her body would obey her. The tube down her throat was making her start to gag. The doctor rushed in, looking flat-out astonished. He quickly got to work, disconnecting the horrible tube down her throat and carefully pulling it

free. As soon as the ghastly flexible thing was pulled from her, Norma started to retch uncontrollably. The nurse put a plastic basin under her chin, but it was unnecessary; Norma had nothing to spit up but thin strands of saliva. Nothing solid had been in her stomach for years.

Finally, the nausea and gagging passed. She looked around, able to move only her eyes. It was a monumental effort to even turn her head. Why was she so weak? Why wouldn't her body obey what her mind wanted it to do? She also became aware of a heavy weight on her head, which turned out to be her hair. Her blonde hair had been left to grow down to her waist, never trimmed once. It was greasy as well as heavy. The nurse had run powdered shampoo through it once a week, but that had only done so much.

Dr. Miller had been the physician assigned to her, though he hadn't had much to do other than monitor her basic vitals and make sure she had the daily required glucose drip that had kept her alive. Until now. He approached her bedside almost casually, looking through her chart, seemingly struggling for what to say. "You're awake, Mrs. Romero." He finally said. "This is unexpected, but it's very good news. Are you-

"Why are you calling me that?" She managed to croak out. "That's not my name."

He paused, then asked "What is your name, then?"

"Norma Bates."

"I see. All right, Norma. It's okay if I call you 'Norma'?"

With great effort, she nodded.

"Good. I want to ask you a few questions, Norma. Okay? Just do the best you can. Now, do you know what the date is today?"

She wracked her tired brain. "It's...um..Christmas? No,wait...uh, almost Christmas, 2015." Once she said it, she became more assured of it. "Yes, that's it."

His expression was grave. "Mrs..I mean, Norma, It's the sixth of January.."

She started to crack a relieved smile. But, wait...that couldn't be right. There was no way her hair could've grown this much, and she'd become this emaciated, in just a few weeks.

"Norma, try to stay calm. This is going to be a lot to take in. It's 2021. You've been in a coma, for quite a long time."

"What? No...This can't be true. It can't!"

Another one of the nurses came over and gave her an injection in her stick-thin forearm. Norma tried to pull it away, without any success, giving a wince at the pain. She immediately sank into the mattress, the sedative pulling her into unconsciousness. "This'll help you relax, get some sleep you definitely need." Dr. Miller's voice was the last thing she heard before her eyes fell shut against her will. She didn't hear the doctor tell the nurse, "Call her son. Get him here as soon as possible."



Norman woke up to Juno jumping on his bed (once his mother's bed), and licking his face. "Good Morning, Juno." He ruffled her shaggy fur. "I smell breakfast cooking, don't you?" Once washed up and dressed, he went downstairs and admired her from the kitchen doorway for a moment. The mother who'd grown out of his troubled mind was a vision of perfection, right down to the green bow tying her apron in place. She turned around with a warm smile, holding plate stacked with hotcakes.

"Good Morning, honey. Come and eat." As it had been their routine for years, he took his place at the opposite end of the table from her. He told her about the new shower curtains he'd ordered for the motel rooms, thinking it would distract her from his usual late afternoon plans. Every day at four o'clock, he'd close the motel office and drive to the hospital where he spent at least a few hours holding his mother's hand, seated at her bedside. His real mother, who was a wasted-away shell of her former self. Yet her heart had kept right on beating. Mother-he'd-made-up didn't like it, but Norman had made it clear he wasn't going to stop his daily hospital visits.

The years that had worn on had also given him imagined paradise with Mother, but he knew it was an illusion. Norman couldn't face the horrendous guilt of putting his real mother in a coma, via carbon monoxide. He'd meant for both of them to move on, to be happy together in whatever hereafter might be waiting. It had all gone so wrong. He came through, but Norma never woke up. The doctors, nurses, and his stupid jerk-off of a stepfather were all positive she would die. Norman knew better, knew she'd never leave him. She didn't. Her body refused to let go of her life, though she needed a machine to breathe for her. Norman would never forget the day Dr. Miller showed him the monitor of her brain activity. It was so much that she might as well have been up and around, yet she remained in some place between life and death.

"Could she ever wake up? What're the chances of that?" Norman had to know.

"We don't know," the doctor admitted, "Every case like this is different. She could wake up tomorrow, or she could be in the coma for the rest of her natural life. The important thing is," The older man gave Norman's arm a reassuring pat, "Not to give up hope. Spend time with her, as much as you can. Talk to her. It's uncertain how much she can hear you, but that's worked wonders with many coma patients.

As Norman reluctantly left to go home and get some rest, Romero grabbed him roughly in the hallway and slammed him against the wall.

"I know you did it, you piece of shit!"

"What are you gonna do, kill me here in the hallway?" Norman taunted him.

"No. I'm gonna prove it." He shoved Norman away.

"Good luck with that," Norman's smirk only grew, "She's not yours anymore!" he called after Romero as he walked away, "Not that she ever was!" A measure of satisfaction briefly filled him at getting in that parting shot, giving him a little break from the knife-sharp guilt. Sheriff Fake Step-Daddy had long overstayed his welcome, not that he ever had been welcome to begin with. Norman smiled to himself as he drove the Mercedes back to their now-empty house. He knew what he had to do. It would simply be a matter of opportunity.

That opportunity had indeed shown up, and the memory of it brought that soft smile back to Norman's face as he finished up his breakfast. He'd gotten lost in remembering, not hearing the last thing Mother said to him.

"Norman! What're you daydreaming about all of a sudden?" she snapped.

"Oh...uh...I'm not, Mother. Just thinking about what I need to get done today." he assured her. Before she could respond, the phone on the kitchen wall rang. Grateful for the interruption that had likely thwarted an argument, Norman got up to answer it.

"Norman Bates?"

"Yes?"

"This is Dr. Miller. You might want to sit down for this. Your mother's out of the coma. She woke up less than 20 minutes ago."

Norman nearly dropped the receiver, and his knees did feel weak for a moment. "How is she?! Is she okay? I've gotta see her! I'll be right there!" For once, he didn't care if he was blathering in the excitement. He'd been waiting so long, never stopped holding onto that small shred of hope he would have her back.

"Norman, there's something else you should know first," The doctor could hardly get the words in edgewise, and Norman wasn't listening. He breathlessly thanked him, repeating he'd be there as quick as he could, then hung up.

When he turned around, the illusion of the warm, bright kitchen was gone. In its place were stacks of dirty dishes on every surface, piles of clutter on the counters, and one of his almost-finished taxidermy projects. Yet another small, black-and-yellow bird. Mother had evaporated as well. "What am I doing?" Norman said, pacing around the mess, "I can't bring her home to this, gotta get it cleaned up!" He was ashamed of himself for letting it get like this. It was also difficult to slow his thoughts down enough to focus. "I can't wait. I have to go to her now!" He grabbed his jacket and car keys, flew down the hallway and out the front door, barely remembering to lock it.

As he passed through the living room, Norman glanced at the large framed photo of his mother he'd set up on the coffee table. In it, she was in a lovely pink dress, her long golden hair falling in curls over her shoulders. The picture dominated the rest of the room, and it was surrounded by the rest of the pictures of them, going all the way back to when he was a little boy. He'd also added five vases of roses, different colors and one for each year, switching them for fresh ones every so often. Candles and more of his stuffed birds completed the arrangement. There hadn't been any space on the coffee table for years, as he'd kept adding to this shrine. It was his way of seeing her every day, during the hours he spent at the house and away from her bedside.

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The sedative wore off after about half an hour, enough for Norma to open her eyes. She was even groggier than before; forget about any efforts to sit up. The doctor was reading off of one of the machines she'd been hooked to, making notes on a chart. To her gratitude, the only thing she was still attached to was the IV running out of her right arm. As her vision cleared, she noticed the ugly purple-black bruises surrounding the needle.

"How're you feeling, Norma?" He asked kindly. Dr. Miller took the remote that would raise her hospital bed to a sitting position. "Here, see if you can press this." With great effort, she managed to.

"I feel like hell." Norma griped as the bed rose. Then she caught a glance at herself in the small mirror above her room's sink. "Oh, god! I look horrible! How did this happen?! How did I get in the hospital?" She'd been slender with nice curves before. The coma had taken nearly 40 pounds off her, and she now resembled a woman in advanced stages of anorexia, or a survivor of a third-world famine. Her muscles had also atrophied badly, despite a nurse moving her limbs once a week. Her cheekbones and ribcage stuck out, and her skin had an unhealthy grayish cast. Then there was the uncomfortable mass of her dirty, too-long blonde hair. Tears pricked her eyes. She wasn't dead, but she looked close enough to it.

"You don't remember the night you were brought in, Norma?"

She tried, but there was a fogged-out nothing where her memory should have been. It hurt her head trying to recall anything. "No. I...I...can't remember anything."

"Do you know where you are, what town or state?"

She shook her head. The doctor had barely said "White Pine Bay, Oregon" when Norman burst into the room.

"Mother!!" He cried out, "Oh, Mother!" Too overjoyed for more words, he rushed to her side, started to embrace her, trying not to dwell on her wasted appearance. She was still the most beautiful sight on earth, to him.

"Wait, stop!" Norma was badly startled at this handsome dark-haired young man getting so close to her so fast. "I can't...I don't know who you are." She noted he was even nicer-looking near her, with deep blue eyes and sculpted features. Norma realized from the look she'd had in the mirror: their eyes were the same lovely shade.

Norman straightened up, shocked and hurt. "I'm Norman, Mother!" He cried, "How can you not know me?!" He struggled to calm down, not wanting to frighten her any further. He drew a deep breath and gently clasped one of her hands. "I'm your son. You've GOT to know me! We know each other better than any two people ever have." Norman fought the tears burning his own eyes.

Dr. Miller cleared his throat, "Your mother has almost total--though likely temporary--amnesia. That's what I was beginning to tell you over the phone."

It was splitting Norma's heart even worse, seeing how much this news hurt him. She gave his hand a weak squeeze back. "I'm so sorry I can't remember you! I'm trying, I just can't! I can't remember anyone." Her voice cracked with a sob.

Norman wanted so badly to embrace her, to pull her into his arms and make that pain go away just as she'd done for him so often. Instead he lifted her chin so their eyes met, wiped the tears from her sunken cheeks with his thumb. "It's okay. I love you, Mother. More than anything, more than my own life. That's all you need to remember right now."

Her hand stroked his, brought it to caress the side of her face. Something deep in her inaccessible unconscious mind must have made her do that with this sweet man



who professed she was his mother. So strange. She couldn't recall ever having any children. Wasn't that supposed to stay with a mother forever? And Norma's breath caught at the intense love for her in those eyes. She's never witnessed love this pure and devoted. It was written all over him, over his features, his touch, the sound of his voice.

*He'd do anything for me. Anything at all.*

Echoing her thought, Norman added "I'll take care of you, Mother. Anything you need or want. I'll help you get better, help you remember me, I promise!" He stood up and faced the doctor who'd been watching this whole exchange with disapproval. "I'm taking her home." His tone was final.