

Chapter 4: Shell of her Former Self

Norma settled onto the old-fashioned sofa, a light blue fleece throw tucked around her, enjoying the warmth of a fire Norman had lit in the fireplace. She had the TV remote and idly flipped through the channels, but she was paying more attention to the details of the room illuminated by the firelight. The heavy drapes, deep-colored rugs, and piano in the corner felt *right*, more on a *deja vu* level than anything else. She also noted the large framed photo of her former self that Norman had hung on the wall above the piano, a beautiful focal point for the whole room.

As she snuggled her head deeper into the feather pillow he'd brought downstairs for her, Norma tugged at the end of a strand of her hair, dejected. She wanted those golden shiny curls back, grazing her shoulders. For now, she relaxed and enjoyed the aroma of lemon-and-garlic chicken baking in the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Norman stuck one of Norma's best chicken dishes in the preheated oven, set the timer on his phone, and hoped he'd done it right. He'd done his best to teach himself her recipes she made the most often, though he thought he usually fell short. As he started tearing up spinach leaves, cutting radishes, and julienning carrots for a salad, he sensed he was not alone. Sure enough, Mother was leaning against the counter, glaring at him with her arms folded.

"You think because she woke up, that I'm just going to disappear?!" she snarled at him, "I've got news for you, honey: I'm not going anywhere! She never should have! She should have left this world, and left you with me. She was so sweet, too good for this horrible existence."

Norman jabbed his knife in her direction, "Shut up!" he mouthed silently at her, "Go away! You are NOT real!" He hissed in a fierce whisper. There was no way he was going to let Norma overhear him talking to someone who was not there.

"I AM real!!!" she shouted back at him, stomping to the kitchen table and making a move to sweep the dishes onto the floor. Norman moved fast enough to grab her by the forearm, pulling her close so their faces were inches apart, his expression cold and dangerous. "I made you up. I know that now. You are NOT going to ruin this! Now get out of here, Mother. Out the back door, right now!" With that, he flung her roughly away from his body.

Mother gave him a look just as icy, then stalked towards the back door. "This isn't over, Norman." She rounded the doorway into the small foyer of the back door and was gone.

Before he could finish dinner, Norman gripped the edge of the counter for several minutes, shaking. Mother was an entity no longer in his control. Now what? How would it sound if he tried to explain this to his real mother? It was the last thing she needed, in her weakened state. She needed to get strong again, not hear any crazy talk of a fantasy-version of herself that her son could see, but who wasn't real. It sounded beyond insane when Norman thought of it in those terms. The timer for the chicken went off, and he got it out of the oven, quickly finished getting the rest of dinner together.

Norma sensed right away something was troubling him, when he came into the living room to help her into the chair so she could be wheeled to the kitchen table. "Honey? Is everything okay?"

He sat on the edge of the sofa next to her, smiling softly as his fingers brushed her jawline. "Everything's fine. It's just, uh...still overwhelming. I'm so happy you're home, I can't even really put it into words or think too deeply about it." His eyes started to burn with tears once again. *How am I going to deal with this?* But his worry left him when her thin arms slid weakly around his neck and pulled him lower into a hug. He allowed himself to be cradled against her bony frame, being careful not to put too much of his weight on her.

Her turn to give him a lingering kiss on the forehead. "I know, baby." She murmured, "You are so sweet, Norman. I don't know what I did to deserve such a sweet, loving boy, but it must have been something right."

The stress of the incident in the kitchen melted away in him. Everything was perfect as long as they were holding each other. "You're the most wonderful mother in the world. You always have been."

"I hope so, Norman. Shall we? We can't have dinner getting cold after you spent that time making it." She allowed Norman to lift her up and help her into the wheelchair, frowning at it but not commenting. Her hands grasped the wheels, as best she could. "Here, let me try. If I have to be in this thing, I might as well start working up to wheeling it myself."

Norman grinned at her stubborn independence. Yes, this was the mother he knew and loved with all his heart. She could argue with him about the chair and he didn't mind anymore. "Of course, Mother."

Gripping the metal part of the wheels, Norma managed to twist them forward, the motion causing her scant arm muscles to burn. She ignored that and pushed them again, managed to get the hated chair moving a few feet along the floor of the hallway. "One step at a time, right, honey?" Still, she was pleased she'd done even that much.

"You're going to be up and dancing with me again, before we both know it!" Norman assured her, "I have no doubt at all." He draped her arm around his shoulders and lifted her onto her feet, guided her to her feet and helped her into her rightful place, seated at the left end of the table. The feel of his solid frame and the mental image of them dancing together caused more pleasant warmth to spread through her body.

"I would love that so much," she exhaled, clinging tighter to him before she had to let go. "Don't ever give up on me, Norman."

She watched as he served up dinner, "This looks wonderful, sweetie." When he started to sit at the opposite end, Norma looked disappointed, "But come sit over here by me." Norman picked up his plate and obeyed her, settling at her side. It was an unexpected and such a welcome change. He'd be at her left side at every meal from then on. Being so close to her, all of his worries evaporated. His efforts at cooking had come out perfect, and Norman soaked up her praise even as she couldn't finish everything. Once he'd cleared away and washed the dishes, they resumed their favorite positions on the sofa, after Norman put another log in the fireplace.

Norma tucked her feet under her backside, shifting until she could find a comfortable position. It wasn't easy because so many of her bones stuck out. Then she nestled her head into that perfect spot between his neck and shoulder. Their arms wrapped around each other, and Norman played with one of her long strands. Despite her dislike of all that hair, it felt so nice. "Will you tell me another story about our life, Norman? Something that might help me start to remember?"

After considering for a moment, he decided to tell her about the time she caught a group of pot-growers smoking weed on the motel porch and chewed them out. Norma laughed so hard, her full stomach started to hurt. "I really said that?!" She gasped. "It's so funny, how different things were back then." They'd watched a few more news broadcasts, and Norman had filled her in a few things. Namely that marijuana was now legal and taxed nationwide. White Pine Bay now had dispensaries as the main economy.

"It's true, hard to believe it was such a big deal then." He chuckled and squeezed her closer. After another hour of skimming TV channels, Norma was nodding off against him.

"Come on, Mother. Let's get you to bed." Norman stood up and picked her up, loving how she clung to him as tight as she could. He loved carrying her. Norman could tell she loved it as much, her thin body pressing against his. As her boy helped her get washed up and ready for bed, Norma surveyed the old-fashioned throw rug, the heavy drapes, and her bed that he'd fitted with brand-new sheets. She didn't have a lot of choices for sleepwear that fit, but Norman found her a pair of long-sleeved champagne-colored satin pjs where she could still wear the top. Her periwinkle-blue panties would have to do instead of the pajama bottoms that were too big, for now.

Norma stretched out, relaxing fully into her own bed. Finally, after so many years. It was the scene of the accident, but now it felt nearly heavenly. Almost. What did feel divine was Norman pulling the heavy quilt over her, leaning close and pressing his lips to her forehead, then her cheek, lingering. Before he could pull away, Norma turned her head and captured his lips with hers, for the second time that night. This time, it lasted. Her mouth caressed his, exploring. Ever so slightly, her lips began to part, causing Norman to jolt a little. Reluctantly, she broke the kiss. Even in the soft gold lamplight, she could see the deep blush coloring his face. And that perfect, loving smile of his.

"I'm sorry, Norman, I...I don't know what came over me. It just, um...I feel so close to you."

"Don't be. That was wonderful, Mother. We are close, closer than any other two people could ever be" He gave her a quick peck on the lips, "Sleep well. I'll leave the door to my room open, if you need anything. I'll see you in the morning."

Norman hated to leave her, even just to his adjoining room. His heart was racing, and the heady mix of love and arousal was impossible to ignore. He'd loved her for so long, in every way. The reality of his attraction to her had first brought shame, then fear, then confused relief when his mother had held him in her arms, laying on their sides on his bed. Her words that he'd never forget, that it was completely

normal. Norman replayed that memory over and over, as he slowly got ready for bed. Sleep wasn't going to happen for him any time soon. He'd been afraid of having to confess his true feelings to her again, but those fears had vanished. She was very obviously feeling it too. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror before turning off the light. His cheeks were still flushed, and he couldn't stop that wide grin on his face.

Risking having Mother appear to berate him, Norman dropped onto his bed, loosened the drawstring on his cotton pajama pants and wrapped his hand around his throbbing cock, desperate for relief. His eyes dropped closed as he thought of that kiss. Unexpected, and so sweet, and all the more beautiful since Norma had been the one to initiate it. If she'd kept going, had only parted her lips a bit more, they would've tasted each other. His body went taut and a deep satisfied moan escaped his throat as he came.

Norman melted into his mattress, his breath gradually slowing and his limbs completely relaxing. In the faint winter moonlight coming through his curtains, he could make out the shape of Mother standing in the corner, her eyes burning into him. When he turned on his bedside lamp, she vanished. If she wanted to taunt him, fine. Right now, that seemed minor compared to the most cherished woman in his entire world, who was asleep in the next room.

As the night grew later, Norma wasn't sleeping that peacefully. She dreamed she was falling through that tunnel of nothingness, with its cold and constantly-shifting light. Then everything flipped, and she was falling upward, somehow being pulled towards more of that horrid emptiness. She was suddenly running through the darkened house, strong and able once again. A menacing figure followed her, and every door or window slammed shut as she approached it. Norma raced frantically through each room, screaming for Norman to help her. But he was nowhere to be found.

"Normaan!!" She cried out, jolting awake, sweat dripping down her temples. Her breath was so fast that she was nearly hyperventilating. In less than a minute, her son was by her side, seated beside her and wrapping her tight in his arms. "Baby.." She breathed,"I had the most horrible nightmare. I was stuck in this...I don't know...empty place. Then I was trapped, in this house, and someone was trying to hurt me. I couldn't find you." Norma couldn't say any more as sobs choked her.

"I'm right here, Mother. You're safe No one will ever hurt you. I swear it." He held her in a tight hug. Norman had fallen asleep reading a book of his now-favorite French poetry. With plenty of time on his hands, he'd learned the language with the help of online lessons, over the years. He settled into the pillows, holding her against him. "I'll stay here with you, all you want. All night." He held her as she settled against him, then opened the book to one of his favorites that reminded him of them.

"I'm going to read us some poetry, and I think it'll make us both feel better," With that, Norman opened his book and begin reading.

"Mon rêve familial

by Paul Verlaine

**Je fais souvent ce rêve étrange et pénétrant
D'une femme inconnue, et que j'aime, et qui m'aime
Et qui n'est chaque fois, ni tout à fait la même,
Ni tout à fait une autre, et m'aime et me comprend.**

**Car elle me comprend, et mon coeur transparent
Pour elle seule, hélas! cesse d'être un problème;
Pour elle seule, et les moiteurs de mon front blême,
Elle seule les sait rafraichir, en pleurant."**

Norma's insides were aching, at his beautiful voice. The strange words were creating pulses between her thighs. "What does that mean, baby?" she dared to ask. He recited the translation:

My Familiar Dream

**"I've often this strange and impressive dream
Of an unknown girl I love and loves me,
And who each time is neither the same deemed
Nor different who loves and understands me.
For she knows me, and my crystal-clear heart
For her only is not a puzzling part.
For she alone of my pale sweaty brow
To freshen up with tears she does know how."**

"That's so beautiful." Norma snuggled even closer against him, "You sound beautiful, sweetie. I could listen to you read those every night."

"Then that's what we'll have to do, Mother." He loved the feel of her relaxing against him. Norman gave her a soft kiss on the forehead, then put the book aside and turned off the light. This was where they belonged: in each other's arms. He was going to take things slow and easy, let her make the next move, give them both time to adjust and explore these feelings.

Right before she drifted off, Norma had an uneasy feeling they were being watched. She tried to dismiss it as remnants of fear from the nightmare, but all the same: *This house feels haunted*, was her last waking thought. If she dreamed anything else that night, she had no memory of it. The first thing she felt was the bliss of his arms around her, then his hardness pressing against her bony pelvis. Norma gave a slight jolt of surprise, but she didn't pull away.

That morning, then over the next month, they got into a routine. Norman would make them breakfast, then take her to physical therapy three mornings a week. He'd wait around, watching as Norma went through the exercises to build her strength back up. After a couple of weeks, she was able to stand up with the help of support bars and take a few steps. Both were elated, Norman hugging her and spinning her around once. Each time after that, she was able to take a few more.

Therapy left her wiped out, and Norma usually dozed off in the car on the way home. Norman would lay her on the couch, tucking a quilt around her and giving her a kiss before going to tend to the motel. She'd sleep for a couple of hours, then he'd return to make them lunch. In the afternoon, she grudgingly exercised her limbs more, with the stationary peddler and arm bands the therapist had sent home with her. It was further exhausting, but she wanted out of that wheelchair even worse.

On one cold February afternoon, Norma got on the bathroom scale and saw she'd gained 13 pounds. "A hundred and ten. Amazing how much better I feel." She knew Norman was outside checking on their treasured rose garden. Pulling her phone out of her sweat jacket pocket, she dropped back in her chair and texted him the good news. She added: "I want to do something to celebrate. Come upstairs."