

Chapter 5: While She Slept

His breath was vapor in the cold, as Norman tightened some of the winterizing wraps around the rose bushes since they'd come loose in the wind. As he worked, his mind drifted back to a certain memory only he held, about what had happened on Christmas Eve five years before:

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Romero had been gone for four days, then out of nowhere: he called Norman that morning. "Don't get too cozy in that big house all by yourself," were his only menacing words before he hung up.

Norman stared at his phone for several seconds, his throat constricting in rage. He would not allow any fear into the mix. The sheriff had come right out and threatened him, but he had to stay calm. Even as the rational part of his mind struggled to keep control, Norman sped up the stairs to his mother's empty room. He ripped open all the dresser drawers and dug through them, in search of the pistol Dylan had given her. Nothing. He lifted up the mattress and felt all over the box spring. Still no gun. "Where is it?!" He hissed, "I need it. Where the hell is it?!"

He rushed to the closet and swept everything off the top shelf. His mother's purses, folded scarves, and shoes in their boxes scattered to the floor. Norman reached up and started feeling around for the revolver. His foot accidentally kicked against something hard on the floor of the closet. It was a black duffel bag, stuffed full of...what? Norman knelt down, yanked it out, and unzipped it. It was jammed with stacks of \$100 bills; his mind was racing too fast to count it all. It was from that fucking dirty cop his mother had made the idiotic choice agree to a fake marriage with. He just knew it to be true. Norman cursed and threw the bag roughly aside; he'd deal with it later.

Storming out of Norma's room, he jumped at the sight of Mother standing in front of him in the hallway. She was in a delectable black, low-cut dress that hugged every curve. In her hands were a shovel and the axe Norman had used to smash apart the shed that fateful evening.

"He's going to kill you, honey." She told him. "He's going to come here, and he's going to shoot you, or stab you, to death." She pushed the axe to him, "You know what you have to do."

Norman started to protest, but she went on, "The ground's soft around the corner of the house. It'll be easy to dig deep enough. Plant something over it, after it's done."

That Christmas Eve was the longest and worst of his whole life. The house seemed silent, cold, and dark even with the fire he lit in the fireplace and no matter how many lamps he turned on. No Christmas tree or presents, no heavenly cooking that his mother would have done, had she not been comatose. Norman roamed the empty motel grounds, the axe gripped in his right hand. Shortly before midnight, he circled the house for what had to be the twentieth time.

He turned the corner to the front of the house and came face-to-face with Romero, who was holding the missing gun on him. No chance to say a word, and the last thing he saw before a black-out took him over: the axe blade connecting with the larger man's thick forearm. Mother didn't hold back, and the force of the blow tore Romero's gun-holding arm almost off, right below the elbow. Only a few shreds of destroyed muscle kept the limb attached. They resembled wet shiny ribbons in the porch light for a mere second.

Ignoring his screams of agony, she swung the axe deep into his shoulder, crushing his collarbone and severing the upper spinal cord beyond that. It made a sound much like the *crack* when Norman broke up bunches of kindling for the fireplace. The body slumped to the white, newly-fallen snow. His blood spread quickly, staining

it. It looked dark, nearly black in the dim light. Romero coughed out a thick stream of blood that trailed from the corner of his mouth. "...fucking psycho...you won't get away wit-..." He couldn't finish. The bleed-out didn't take long. The next thing Norman himself was aware of was the mangled corpse at his feet and Mother, bundled in a her heavy coat now and standing opposite from it, facing him.

"I no longer have to protect you from him," she said with a resigned sigh that sounded a bit...what? Forlorn, almost. Mother turned around and walked away, down the hillside stairs. Her shadow blended into those thrown by the colorful lights decorating the motel. She evaporated. Norman shouted after her, but to no avail. He snatched up the shovel and stormed to the right side of the house, plunging it into the snow and the soaked earth underneath. Just like her to save him from being killed but then leave Norman with a bloody mess to clean up. Fury drove him to dig until the large hole was well past six feet deep and the sky was starting to lighten with dawn of that terrible Christmas Day.

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Back in the present, Norman jumped slightly as his phone buzzed and chimed in his pocket. When he saw Norma's message from upstairs, his heart was suddenly much lighter. No more replaying that long-ago waking nightmare. What was the point in it? He gave the rose garden one last glance before heading quickly up to her room, looking up to see her perfect lovely smile as she stood at the window, her hands braced on the wall on either side if it.

He entered her room to find Norma had summoned the leg strength to get herself the handful of steps to her vanity table, no doubt leaning against the wall and grabbing the sides of the table for support. The physical therapist had given her a walking cane to gradually replace the wheelchair, but at home she told Norman "You can take that thing right out to the dumpster." She could now take ten or so steps at a time, holding onto either the furniture or to him. She much preferred him.

Norma had gathered the thick heavy mane of her hair into a loose ponytail, the end of which she could nearly sit on. Before he could move to stop her, she picked up the sharp sewing scissors she'd found in the second bedroom. She snipped through it just above the elastic band until it came free. The remaining roughly-cut hair stopped an inch below her shoulders.

"Mother!" He exclaimed, "Was that really necessary?"

Norma smiled in triumph, holding the severed hair up before dropping it onto the center of the rug, "Yes, and we can burn that, as far as I care. I want my old hair back, like in the photos. Will you take me somewhere in the village to get it cut like that?" She gave him a beautiful smile that made his insides melt, his surprise and annoyance instantly forgotten.

"Okay, Mother." The corners of his lips drew upward as well, "Anything you wish." He went to her and leaned down, encircled her waist with his arms and kissed her cheek. "I agree. I always loved your hair like that."

Norman had no idea where in White Pine Bay she'd gotten her hair done all those years ago. He searched on his phone and found a salon that had opened up only a couple of months ago; it had been a used bookstore previously. He figured maybe no one working there would know her, but of course this was a small town, and the story of her coma had been in the White Pine Bay Current newspaper. Not to mention the locals had been unable to gossip about anything else for weeks.

The stylist who could take her was a young dark-haired woman named Samantha, who'd only moved to town six months ago from Northern California but had heard their story all the same. It was evidently tough for her to contain herself, when it came to questions: How was Norma holding up, how was the motel doing, how did she feel about the major changes in the town's economy, and on and on. Norma smiled politely and answered things were going well, that it was a slow process but

she was on the mend. When questioned about the past, she could only admit, "I can't remember; I'm sorry. I wish I could." Despite how many times she looked at their family photos and how much Norman told her, the amnesia hadn't let up at all. Still one big dark nothingness when she tried to pull up any old memories. It sometimes brought her to tears of frustration, but then again: she had the newer memories she'd formed, those of her and Norman and their quiet little life together now. *Maybe...that's all I need*, she thought on some days. *Maybe it doesn't really matter...*

Norma thought back to three days before, when she'd been in her usual spot on the couch while Norman was down in the motel office. On her open laptop was a history of anything on one "Alex Romero, White Pine Bay Sheriff," The most recent news was from four years ago, reporting that the search for him had been called off. Volunteers had combed the surrounding forest, the bay had been dredged, and nothing. It was as if he'd vanished into thin air, dropping out of society and not wanting to be found. Norma had then clicked on an older article, showing that strange man and the former version of herself as newlyweds.

"Bastard," she seethed. Even though she may as well have been looking at a photo of two strangers, "Rotten fucking rat bastard. How could you?! You left, took off like a coward while I was almost dead to the world!" She slammed the laptop shut and threw it aside onto the couch cushions. "You're dead to me now." Sobs shook her as she folded up onto her side, until she calmed down and considered the man in her life who was there, right by her side through everything. He was the one who mattered now. The only one.

After Samantha had trimmed and layered Norma's hair, she talked her into adding a few lighter blonde highlights. While she was waiting for the dye to finish, Norman came over and knelt by her chair. "I'm going to go pick up a few things. I'll be back by the time you're done."

When he returned with a few shopping bags, his mouth dropped at how stunning she looked. The young stylist had transformed Norma's hair into soft gold high-lighted curls that brushed his mother's shoulders. At no extra charge, Samantha had also helped her apply make-up that set off her ice-blue eyes since Norma couldn't remember much of that on her own.

At his speechlessness, her face grew warm. "Do you like it, honey?" she asked, giving him a shy smile.

"Like it? I love it!" Norman rushed to her salon chair and took her hands in his, helped her stand up. "You're gorgeous. You always were, but..god, you're so beautiful!" His memory rushed back to their car trip into White Pine Bay, when they'd first moved to town. Her perching on the hood of their car, looking like a goddess, one hand on her hip. Norma looked so much like that again, her hair now nearly the same, the only difference being time and the effects of the coma. He'd had to guess her size, since she was still rail-thin. All the same, she was a butterfly slowly and painfully emerging from its chrysalis.

When they got home, Norma (as always) insisted he carry her up the hillside stairs and then up the stairs to her room. "Mother," he laughed, "You can walk now, better than you let on." He gently chided her.

"Yes, but what's the fun in that?" she teased him. More than teasing...it sounded flirtatious now. He sat her gently onto the bed they now shared. She couldn't sleep peacefully without him holding her. Even then, the bad dreams and the creepy feeling of being observed still weren't kept entirely at bay.

Norman pulled the dress he'd bought for her out of the shopping bag he'd brought upstairs. The full-skirted sleeveless dress was bright blue, with pink floral patterns all over it. To keep her warm, he'd added a royal blue cashmere cardigan sweater. "I had to guess, but I hope this'll fit."

Her eyes teared up, "Thank you, honey." she breathed, "You're so good to me, Norman," she struggled not to sob.

"Hey. Mother, stop." Norman cupped her chin and lifted her eyes to meet his. "You deserve to be happy. You deserve everything."

He helped her into her new dress and zipped it up for her. Norma held to his shoulders as she turned this way and that, looking at herself. Then she buttoned her sweater against the cold overcast day. "It's perfect." she said softly, turning against him so he had no choice but to take her in his arms. Almost involuntarily, her hand reached up and caressed the back of his neck, gently pulling his mouth down to hers. Norman's gentle yet firm hands circled her waist, steadying her before wrapping his arms around her. Hers wrapped around his neck, her heart beginning to jack-hammer. Norma felt her body responding, warming and throbbing with a need that grew more insistent by the second. Her lips teased his slowly apart, and her tongue swiped over his bottom lip, bringing soft moans from them both. They finally broke that heated passionate kiss, their breath rapid.

"Honey," she murmured, their foreheads pressed together, "What are we doing? I'm your mother. I gave birth to you." Yet Norma didn't let go of him, feeling their bodies trembling against one another. She didn't trust her knees not to give out if he hadn't been holding her. "But you feel so good...so right," Her gaze went sideways and fell on the bed. It would be so easy, wouldn't take another coherent thought, for him to lift her up, her legs wrapping around his hips. Images flashed through her mind, of Norman placing her on her back upon the mattress as reverently as he would a work of art. Of him hovering over her and kissing her as his long fingers smoothed her skirt up and glided over her sensitive inner thighs.

Her fevered imagination let her feel him slipping two fingers inside her sky-blue panties that had already darkened with her wet arousal. If he really touched her

slick, sensitive flesh...she'd go to pieces. Norma knew it. Her rational mind knew she'd naturally experienced physical intimacy on the other side of that darkness that was her blotted-out past, and her body on some primal level responded. All the same, this was might as well have been the first time for her, in terms of conscious memory.

Norman's thumb traced over the center of her bottom lip. "I've loved you for as long as I can remember," he said softly, "For my whole life. I was so scared when I realized it was as more than your son, and it caused me a whole lot of turmoil, you could call it."

She grasped his wrist gently, looking into his blue eyes that mirrored her own. "Did I always love you too, like that, Norman?" The question was more to herself than to him. "Don't answer that," she added. "It's something only my own heart can answer. Not my mind. Or my memory, what little's left of it anyway." Norma gave him a briefer kiss, then: "I do know this, honey: Eventually I'm going to get tired of waiting."

"I will too," he breathed softly, hardly able to get those three words out. This was more than he ever dared hope for, even as the suffocating guilt refused to release its hold on him. He would love her, make her happy, do anything at all for her. Wouldn't that count for something, make up for the horrible thing he'd done that night, nearly killing them both? Did she ever need to know the truth about Romero?

A sudden crash made them both start in fright, Norma clinging tighter to him. Both turned to see the fading spectre of Mother, who'd picked up Norma's silver vintage hairbrush and smashed the vanity table mirror with it. Her eyes radiated pure hate at them both, as she dissolved from sight like a projector image being turned off.

"What the hell?!" Norman tried to contain the terror in his voice.

"My god," Norma's eyes had grown saucer-wide. "I knew it. Don't ask me how, but I knew we had some goddamn evil spirit in this house! I wasn't dreaming it, and please, honey! Please don't think I'm going crazy, but-"

"Mother! You can see her too?!"

She grew even more fearful, with that newfound knowledge. "Apparently, my little vacation to the hereafter brought that on. Now what in god's name are we going to do about it?"