

The Girl Who
Woke Up in
the Morgue

By Stephen Rocco

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*To my beloved late father,
Horace "Sonny" Rocco.*

Prequel

THE PEOPLE WHOSE JOB IT IS TO SAVE the lives of others navigated the tight staircase to the third floor, the clang of their bulky life-saving equipment drowning out their own labored breaths. One EMT said to his partner, "I hope it's not another overdose." This instinct seemed accurate as they hustled to save the young lady splayed on the couch.

To her rescuers who worked feverishly to revive her, they confronted a human juxtaposition. Her gray skin, the color of dark ice, felt clammy to their touch. Her long limbs were motionless but in a marathon pose, as if running away from the poison entering her body.

"It's no use," said the first EMT who had predicted the event as he watched his partner wordlessly continue his resuscitation attempts. Sweat poured from his brow onto

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the prone victim. Or were they tears?
Gradually his movements slowed as the silent
EMT offered his first words: "She's gone." Or
was she?

Chapter 1: The Awakening

SONNY FIORENTINO HEARD THE FAMILIAR SOUND of his cell phone going off at 3:00 a.m. As a funeral director, he knew it was common for folks to pass in the middle of the night. Sonny had a theory about the time of death. The overstressed body during daylight hours leads to an over relaxed body during the night. The tired heart simply stops in the quiet of the dark, especially for the elderly.

Sonny had a theory about a lot of things, which contributed to people viewing him as a bit peculiar. He often studied people's faces and asked them how they felt. These seemingly healthy folks would be astounded when Sonny suggested that they get a medical checkup. Frequently, these unsettled folks, given health information by a funeral director,

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would return to thank him for the detection of previously undiagnosed diabetes or a heart murmur. Folks often questioned how Sonny, at fifty years old, could live alone above his huge 19th century funeral home. Established by his great-grandparents in 1890, the business was located in a magnificent building, a historical pillared mansion with French stained glass windows that glowed at twilight, sitting atop the highest point in the town of Springdale.

Sonny's great-grandparents had done what he liked to do from his palatial nine-room apartment above the funeral home: look with pride at the "Springdocians" whom his family had served for generations. As it was now 2010, the family had served this community for 120 years.

At the other end of the cell phone call was a police officer, requesting Sonny's assistance. The officer, Skip LeBlanc, had been a classmate of Sonny's in high school. Skip sighed into the telephone that the deceased was a young woman who'd died of a drug overdose. Sonny replied incredulously, "Another overdose?" Sonny had buried several people in the last seven months under similar circumstances. Officer LeBlanc said that the EMTs had worked on the young woman for over an hour but could not detect a heartbeat. The coroner's

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office decided not to examine her further, and she was ready for Sonny to pick up. "I am on my way, Skip," said Sonny.

After he prepared his stretcher, sheets and protective gear, Sonny climbed into his hearse. He then placed a call to his new funeral apprentice, Owen, to assist him. Sonny smiled as he recalled hiring Owen. Following the burial of his grandmother three months earlier, the young man had appeared at Sonny's funeral home. A recent graduate of Springdale High School, Owen said that something was triggered within him at the funeral. He was so impressed by Sonny and his staff's compassion, he thought he might like to go into the funeral business. An impressed Sonny hired him as a funeral apprentice but cautioned Owen that the business was not for everyone. This will be a good test for him, thought Sonny. He knew that not everyone could handle the death of someone, especially someone their own age.

Since it did not look like he would get married, Sonny had to consider that no children existed to take over the business when he was gone. Maybe it was hitting fifty, but lately Sonny had spent considerable time thinking about what would happen to the hundred and twenty year old business. "My nephew or niece might want it someday,"

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Sonny thought, “but up to now they have not shown interest.” This did not surprise Sonny, since most people averted this sad work. More than once, a bereaved family had said to him, “I don’t know how you sit in this big house alone, Sonny, and do this work.” He often agreed with them.

Arriving at an apartment building known to house many transient people, Sonny and Owen entered the decedent’s living area. It was a small, one-room efficiency apartment with a combined tiny kitchen and living area. The decedent lay prone on the worn pullout couch. She lay on her face with one arm and one leg dangling off the couch, as if she was attempting to run and save herself. Her long, dark hair covered her face. Sonny gently pulled back her hair to examine her. The young woman had the angelic, unlined face of a twenty-something with a prominent nose ring on one nostril. Next to her outstretched hand was a glass of water and a bottle of pills.

Skip acknowledged to Sonny that he was saddened to keep meeting him under these circumstances. “We had two other deaths like this last week,” sighed Skip, adding, “They are so young.” Sonny nodded in silence, reflecting that he didn’t realize the extent of these apparent drug-induced deaths. “I should have,” thought Sonny, but he rationalized that

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he didn't bury all of the people. He made a mental note to call the three other funeral directors in town and check on their recent experience with these types of tragic deaths.

Skip told Sonny that young woman's name was Kelsey Jordan. The police were still tracking down any family members. As Sonny glanced down at the pill bottle, he noticed something. Skip seemed to read his mind as he commented, "I know. The label on the bottle shows that the pills were prescribed to a Julie Plummer. We are in the process of checking that out."

Sonny went about preparing who he now knew as Kelsey for the journey to his funeral home. He instructed Owen to clean the phlegm around her mouth and close an eye that was open. Next, they carefully wrapped her in a clean sheet and zippered her in a heavy canvas body bag. Then they delicately placed her on the stretcher and wheeled her into the hearse.

As Sonny prepared to drive to his funeral home, he looked down at the name of Kelsey's physician, Dr. Jerome Singer. Sonny had known this doctor's retired father, Dr. Stanley Singer, who'd had a thriving medical practice in Springdale. Sonny did not know his son Jerome, but was well aware of what he was doing in the community. In the short time

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since his father's retirement, Jerome had expanded their small family medical practice to include a comprehensive diagnostic and rehabilitation clinic. Sonny would have to talk to the younger Dr. Singer in the morning in order to obtain a signed death certificate.

Since Sonny had not been able to reach anyone from Kelsey's family, he told Owen that they would not embalm her that night. Sonny then instructed Owen to carefully unwrap the sheet, and they both gingerly placed the young lady on the large white ceramic embalming table. As they did, Sonny observed that Owen's face had changed. It was reddened and perspiring, and Owen gagged as if he were holding in a bad sneeze. "It's okay, Owen. You did a fine job. You can go home now. Make sure you wash up," Sonny spoke quietly to Owen. The new assistant said, "Thank you." As he headed to the washroom, he turned around, his face more relaxed. "I'm not sure this profession is for me, Mr. Fiorentino. I hope you understand." Sonny looked at the young man. "Of course, Owen. Don't be hard on yourself."

Sonny's interaction with Owen only reinforced his uneasiness entering the fiftieth year of his life. A poignant time, especially as his own dad had died at the age of fifty. "Maybe God has something bigger in store for

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me one day besides burying the dead." Chastising himself for not seeing the benefits of serving the bereaved, Sonny's mind turned back to business. "I won't put her in the freezer tonight. Hopefully the family will contact me in the morning, and I can embalm her then."

Sonny glanced once more at the sight of the young woman who had no business being there. Her unlined face should have promised many more years of life. He shook his head sadly as he closed the lights in the morgue. He was just about to shut the door when he thought he heard a slight sound - almost like a sparrow ruffling its feathers. Probably nothing, he thought as he closed the door regardless, glad to go upstairs and finally get some rest after a busy night.

That sound remained in his ears, however. Almost halfway up the stairs of his home above the funeral chapels, Sonny turned around. He entered the morgue and walked over to Kelsey. He reexamined her, looking at her chest and nostrils, even putting a mirror over her nostrils. "I'm going crazy," thought Sonny as he chastised himself. Again he turned to leave the morgue. Just then a slight gurgle emanated from Kelsey. He ran over and saw her nose twitch, as if trying to remove something. She was alive!

Chapter 2: The Hospital

SONNY FUMBLER WITH HIS CELL PHONE as he nervously started CPR on the young girl. He dialed 911 in between breaks, and yelled into the phone, "Come to the Fiorentino Funeral Home morgue. I have a girl alive here." The dispatcher tried to clarify, "Is it someone attending a wake?" "No!" he shouted as he compressed her chest. "No, she is supposed to be dead. Hurry." This crazy dialogue continued for several exchanges until Sonny screamed, "Get the hell here as soon as possible!" hanging up the phone to concentrate on CPR. He focused on Kelsey. "Come on, Kelsey, stay with me," he said as he saw her chest compress and expand a bit stronger. She then made a gurgling sound

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followed by a slight cough, as if she needed her lungs cleared.

Just then, the EMTs who had declared her dead an hour ago burst into the morgue. "I can't believe she's alive!" exclaimed one of them, his words expressing as much shock as nervousness. The EMTs then immediately used the defibrillator on her heart. Her breathing got stronger as they placed oxygen on her face and raced wordlessly to the hospital with Kelsey. Sonny was left alone in the morgue.

Overwhelmed by what had just happened, Sonny leaned against his preparation table, rubbing his head. He needed to feel something tangible to convince himself that what he had experienced was real. He guessed that he'd spent fifteen minutes performing CPR, but those minutes seemed like hours. Sweat coalesced on his neck, and he had the rubbery legs of an inebriated sailor. He went into the closest bathroom in his funeral home, the ladies' room, and applied lavender facecloths dipped in cold water on his face. He looked into the mirror, and dilated eyes as big as chestnuts stared back. He kept repeating, "I hope she is alright."

Unsure of what to do next, as it was now 4:00 a.m., Sonny made the journey from the basement of the funeral home where the

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morgue was located through the first floor, that contained three chapels, to his apartment on the third floor. He flopped on his bed fully clothed and tried to close his eyes. The scent of the young woman was still with him. Convinced he could never sleep tonight, he decided to go to the hospital.

When Sonny arrived at Mercy Hospital in Springdale, one would have thought it was midday. The chief of police and several officers were there, as well as several EMTs and an attorney for the ambulance company. A representative from the Medical Examiner's Office was also there. Sonny immediately thought they were there for reasons other than Kelsey's prognosis.

Sonny sidled over to Chief Frank Powell, Springdale's long-time police chief. "Any word on her prognosis, chief?" asked Sonny. "Nothing," said Chief Powell, "They are still working on her." Just then, one of the doctors came down the corridor. "Is anyone here from the girl's family?" asked Dr. Quigley. Chief Powell responded, "We have been unable to locate them. How is she doing?" Dr. Quigley said, "I think she is going to make it. We are trying to dilute the drugs in her body slowly, so I'm unsure if she has any permanent damage." Chief Powell gave a mournful

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chuckle and said, "I guess she wasn't ready to be buried." No one laughed.

Sonny asked Chief Powell if he had noticed a trend with the young people having a problem with prescription drugs. "Not really," he said. "We are mostly concerned about street drugs. We see a lot of cocaine and some heroin on the streets, but it's confined to a small group."

The chief then turned his attention to the circumstances which took place at the morgue. "Sonny, we should probably have you give a statement tomorrow at the station. We don't know where this is going legally." For the first time, Sonny considered that he may be at risk of liability, or at a minimum, bad publicity. Bad publicity was an alarming theme that his grandfather and father had drummed into him since his youth. He remembered their words: "In our business, you are taking care of a family's emotions as much as you are the body of their loved one. A family must have trust and confidence that their loved one is in good hands." Sonny realized that three generations of good will might be at risk here.

Sonny mentally retraced the events of the night since being notified of the death. He did think it was unusual that the medical examiner did not want to examine Kelsey before releasing her to the funeral home. In most

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cases, the medical examiner would do a post-mortem exam – at a minimum a toxicology report to see what drugs were in the deceased's systems. At most, a full autopsy to investigate any other suspicious symptoms in the body would have been performed.

Sonny knew that this was not his call to make. The medical examiner was responsible for Kelsey's body. Their office has tremendous authority to examine or not examine a decedent. Sonny laughed to himself, as he often compared the ME's powers to that of the IRS's decision to conduct an audit. In fact, he had some deaths where the family literally begged the medical examiner's office to do an autopsy, but they refused. For example, one family had alleged that the hospital caring for their elderly father was negligent and contributed to his death. After weighing all the circumstances, such as age, health, and the hospital report, the ME's office denied the family's request. Sonny had to tell this family that they could pursue a private autopsy at a teaching hospital, but that could cost from \$5,000 to \$10,000. Sonny had to consider that the ME's were getting so many of these drug deaths, they might be too relaxed in their inquiries.

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Sonny's thoughts were interrupted by his friend, Officer Skip LeBlanc. "Amazing. I bet this is one for the books for you, Sonny."

"First time for everything, Skip, but I'm glad she's alive. She is such a beautiful girl."

Sonny asked Skip the same question he asked Chief Powell. Skip's response was different. "Yes," he answered, "I am seeing an upsurge in the amount of these drug cases. I hear kids say they can get twenty oxy for \$20." Skip said he'd quickly learned that this stood for a twenty-milligram oxycodone for \$20. "Some of these kids are getting these drugs from their grandparents' medicine cabinets."

Sonny told Skip that he had seen a sizeable increase in youthful deaths in the past year, but the death certificates did not list opiates. He noted that his two recent deaths were from heroin overdoses. Skip commented, "I'm not sure, but I think that kids are starting with opiates and graduating to stronger drugs."

For some reason, this conversation triggered something in Sonny's mind. He started to feel he was on the sad frontline of an epidemic that was destroying his community. He wondered if what was happening to

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Springdale was happening in other communities, too.

As he returned alone to his silent funeral home, he was deep in thought about this issue. Climbing the three levels to his apartment, Sonny promised himself he would call his funeral colleagues in the morning. Maybe they had some answers for him.