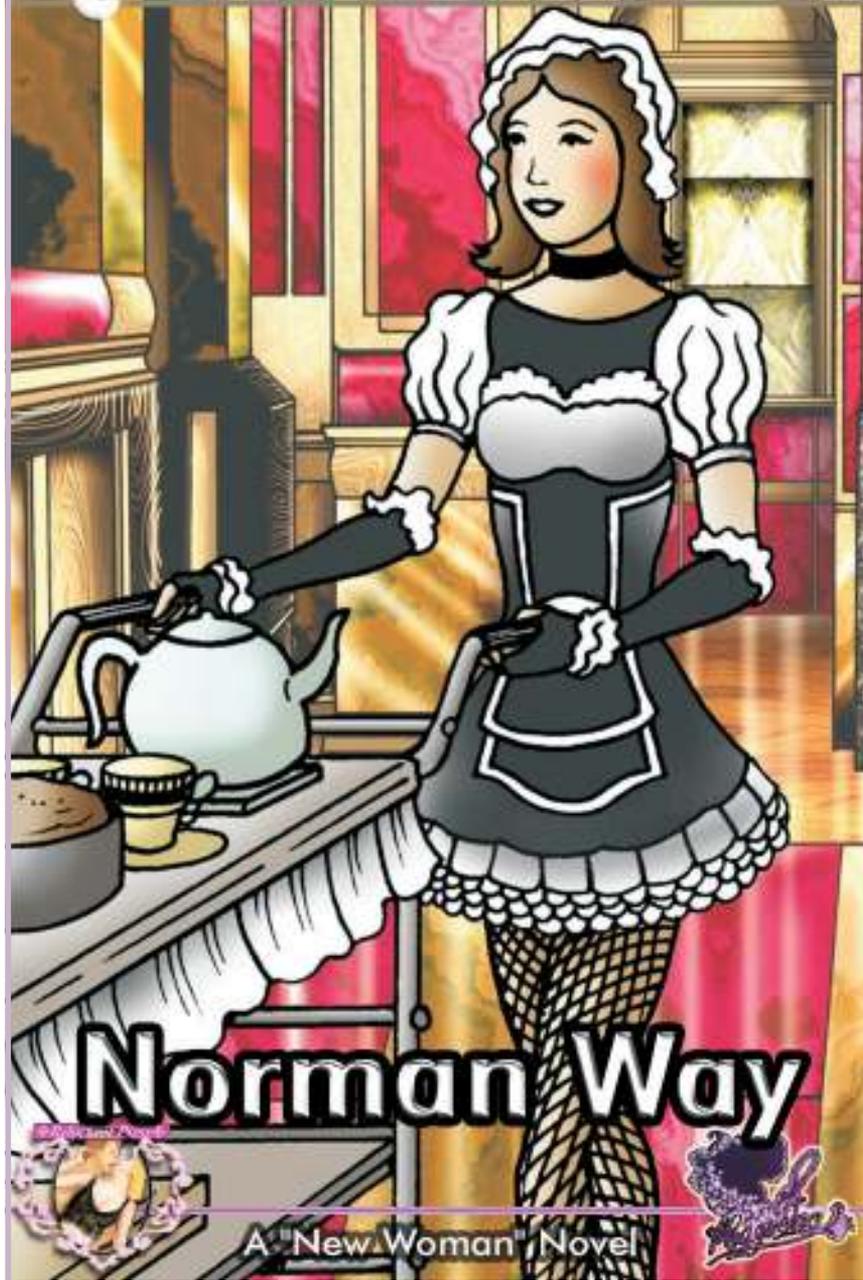


QUARANTINED



Norman Way

A "New Woman" Novel

Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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QUARANTINED

By Norman Way

PRELUDE:

Detective Edward Nyland stood in the doorway and looked at retiring Detective Brian Olson who was sitting at the desk to his left.

He knocked politely on the open door. The man behind the desk looked up from the papers in front of him.

“Come on in and have a seat, Ed.”

“Congratulations on your retirement,” said Detective Nyland as he extended his hand.

“Thanks.” Detective Olson smiled as he took the handshake. “My wife is already in Florida. I am catching a flight after I finish briefing you. I can’t wait to get down to where the sun shines most of the time and there is no snow to shovel.”

“I understand completely. Now what exactly do I have here to begin my journey into cold case investigations?”

“Well, essentially it is a whole lot of nothing for right now. I have spent a month on it and, to be honest, just about everything is a dead end. I hope a fresh set of eyes will be able to see what I am not seeing or maybe find a lead I didn't. As a result I have delved into several other cases but I am drawn back to this one.”

“I see. Just what am I looking at that has intrigued you?”

Detective Olson picked up a file and placed it on top of the others sitting in a box on the left side of his desk.

“This all started with an inquiry into a disappearance of one individual and has since morphed into the disappearance of ten more to date, and that is over about a twenty-year period, I think.”

“That's sounds like quite a bit. It also is quite a lengthy time period. Apparently they are all connected, right?”

“Well, I am not sure about that either but there are two common threads in all of them, or at least it appears that way.

“You may find others as you dig through them but there has been very little for me to find after about a month of trying and I am kind of stymied.”

“I see, go on please.”

“All of these missing individuals are young men 18 or 19 years old. They are all between 5'4" and 5'6"

tall, weight between 140 to 150 pounds, with a slim build. They all have a high school education, no family, close friends or relatives, no formal education, and their last employment was the Mortenson Estate northwest of the Twin Cities.”

“What is the Mortenson Estate?”

“Reginald Mortenson made a fortune in manufacturing and investments. He died many years ago about two years after his first wife. His second wife, Virginia, subsequently sold the businesses that he owned and has made some very wise investments.

“Those investments have provided her and their daughter Crystal with a very comfortable living. Both mother and daughter live at their mansion. They are both active in philanthropy. They have numerous parties and money raising ventures throughout the year for a variety of charities.”

“If that was the last place all of these young men worked, what did they do there?”

“They worked maintaining the grounds and buildings. All of them quit after about two years. They left no forwarding address after picking up their last check and closing out their bank account.”

“So all of them just fell off the earth?”

“That’s as good an expression as any, I guess.”

“No one has ever inquired about the whereabouts of any of these missing young men?”

“Just one about eight years ago but that started the ball rolling. Mortenson Estate seems to be a key. Maybe there is something else going on there but I’ll

be damned if I could find out if there was anything sinister or unusual.”

“Well, I will give it a go. Have a safe flight, Brian.”

The two detectives got up and shook hands.

Outside the building, retired Detective Brian Olson turned up his collar as a gust of wind spun around the leaves in the parking lot. Florida would have no leaves to rake or snow to shovel.

Those chilly Minnesota winters were not going to be missed, he thought to himself as he got into his rental car. That warm Florida sunshine was his future. He put the car in gear and headed for the airport.

Back inside the office, Detective Nyland took the first file off the top of the stack in the box. He flipped it open and placed a yellow notepad and pen next to it. As he began to read the file, he wondered what his predecessor had been missing.

I was a military brat. My parents divorced when I was twelve. Mom tired of military life. Packing up and moving every one or two years finally got to her. The divorce was amicable but I wanted to stay with my dad.

Dad finished thirty years of service just after I graduated high school and turned 18. He gave me a check for ten thousand dollars and said he was headed to Florida for his retirement.

I sold my old compact car and most of what little stuff I had accumulated.

When you are in a military family you don't tend to accumulate a lot of "stuff" or "things," as you have to pack up and move every year or two.

My worldly possessions consisted of my clothes that filled one large suitcase and a garment bag.

I stuck around for a few days until the day I had to leave our quarters. I had booked a flight to the Twin Cities and was looking forward to relocating there.

Arriving back in the Twin Cities where we had lived a decade earlier, I rented a car and paid for a month in advance at a local motel.

I figured thirty days would give me enough time to find some employment and establish myself.

Hot weather states, like Arizona and Texas and humid ones like Florida or South Carolina didn't appeal to me. Minnesota had a change of seasons.

I especially liked the cool springs, warm summers and cool fall. Winter was not the best for me but they usually weren't that long or arduous. I liked it when the temperatures were between about ten and thirty degrees with an occasional light snowfall

I didn't do much for the first week. I just got myself acclimated more or less. I bought a city map and a newspaper on Sunday, as well as checked the internet for employment opportunities.

School didn't appeal to me. I was hoping to get by doing some light labor jobs until I could hook on with a large company and a permanent position.

Temporary agencies were plentiful but the term "temp to perm" was mostly a lie, I knew. If they could get you part time for eight bucks an hour, why would

they hire you for twelve or fifteen so you could actually put a roof over your head?

At least for the time being I had a small financial cushion that would last me for about a year before things got tight and I wouldn't be able to be choosy. I was confident that I would be able to find something in a short period of time.

I paid another month's rent for June. Between the internet and the Sunday paper, I kept trying to sort the wheat from the chaff but I wasn't having much luck. I didn't want to jump at anything just to have a job but then again maybe I would have to.

I spotted an ad on Craigslist for building and grounds maintenance worker at Mortenson Estates. I thought it would be as good a place as any to start.

There was no phone number listed, just "apply in person" to Diamond Temporary Services.

The next morning I put on my sport coat, slacks, white shirt and black tie. The drive to Diamond Temporary didn't take long as it was in a mall complex a short distance away.

I walked in and stopped at the front desk. A young woman looked up from her desk and smiled at me.

"Can I help you?" she inquired.

"Yes. I am David King and I am here to apply for the position at Mortenson Estates," I replied.

She handed me a clipboard and a pen.

"Have a seat and fill this out please."

I took the clipboard and pen from her and sat in one of the chairs across from her.

Other than doing a few odd jobs for my neighbors wherever we had been stationed, I had no other work experience largely due to the fact that I had just turned eighteen.

As a result I had no references either except for a few neighbors I had done odd jobs for. I hoped this wasn't going to be much of a hindrance in my job search.

When I finished, I handed the clipboard and pen back to the receptionist.

"We will call you for an interview by the end of the week," she said.

"Thank you," I replied and left the office.

Without a job record and no work experience other than working for myself, I wasn't sure if I would be called.

To my surprise I got a call at nine am the next morning from the temp agency. I had just returned from a fast food place adjacent to the motel.

"Please be here at ten am for your interview," said the voice on the phone.

"I'll be there," I replied and hung up.

I watched TV for a while and then changed back into my slacks, jacket and tie.

It was 9:45 when I walked into the office of the Diamond Temporary agency.

“Hi I am David King. I have a ten o’clock interview for the position at Mortenson Estates.”

“Have a seat, David. Crystal Mortenson will be with you shortly.”

“Thank you,” I replied and took my seat.

The receptionist picked up the phone.

“Your ten o’clock is here Ms. Mortenson,” she said.

A few minutes later a tall, attractive woman came out of the back office and stood over me, extending her hand.

“Good morning, David. I am Crystal Mortenson.”

I took her hand and stood up as she gave my hand a firm squeeze.

She wore no makeup and was wearing a black pantsuit, black flat shoes and a plain white blouse. She was an imposing and authoritative figure.

“Please come with me,” she said in a firm voice.

I followed her into the back office.

My nervousness must have showed as she closed the door behind us.

“Relax, David, and have a seat. This will be brief.”

As I sat down across from her, I felt my pulse accelerate.

“I see you have just come back here from California and are looking for work in this area?”

“Yes, Ma’am. My dad retired from the Air Force and went to Florida. I came back here because we had once been stationed near here. I liked the area and the change of season.”

“I see. You have noted on here that except for doing odd jobs for friends and neighbors you have never worked for any one else, correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Have you given any thought to school or training of some kind?”

“Not really. I am not sure what I want to do. I felt I need to get out and work for awhile before deciding on a career path. Education isn’t cheap and I want to be sure about the career path I choose.”

“Smart choice, it is good to work for awhile and consider your options.

“The position we have available is for building and grounds maintenance. Your supervisor will be training you in all aspects of the job. This position does require you to work some week ends with days off during the week and some week days with week ends off.

“You will have about ninety days to complete your probation period before you are eligible for benefits which are medical, dental and eye care.

“In addition you will have a free apartment above the maintenance shop with utilities paid.

“Your car out front is a rental, is that correct?”

“Yes it is. I didn’t want to buy one until I started working full time.”

“Actually we have a company car that if you are hired you may use. Just sign up for it several days in advance.

“You will be provided with three meals a day in the main house kitchen and there are laundry facilities in the basement.”

“Your training salary will be eight dollars an hour and after probation you will get a raise to nine. That’s not much compared to wages in the city but if you look at the fact that you have many benefits, not the least of which is a free furnished apartment and free utilities, it is a very good deal for you.”

“You are right and I couldn’t agree with you more.”

“In addition you will be required to take a physical exam. If hired, you must, without exception, follow a strict health regimen.

“There are exercise machines in the basement that are available to you after eight pm. You must maintain your weight to height proportion, that is BMI, in order to keep your job.

“Do you have any questions, David?”

“No. I believe you have covered everything.”

“Very well then, I will be interviewing several other candidates. I will let you know by the end of the week. Thank you for coming.”

She stood up and extended her hand.

I shook it and left her office.

Back in my motel room, I couldn’t believe my good fortune. It would mean very little money but essen-

tially free room and board. In addition there would be no car payments, insurance or car maintenance either. That was quite a bit of savings right there.

If I was hired, I could bank most of my earnings for school or anything else that I would want or need.

Friday morning at nine am, Diamond Temporary Services called me.

“Crystal Mortenson said you have the job. Please report to the Wendell Clinic at 400 Olson Drive, Suite 108 at 1 pm today for your pre-employment physical.”

“Thank you. I will be there,” I said and hung up.

To be honest, I felt like I had just won the lottery.

I unfolded my map of the Twin Cities and found the location of the clinic. It was several miles away, off the southern expressway.

To kill some time I watched a couple of movies on cable. I showered and shaved for my physical.

I arrived fifteen minutes early at the clinic. It was located in a white office building. There were several other office buildings in the same block.

Inside I walked down the hall to Suite 108.

At the front counter, I was greeted by a woman in white who handed me a clipboard.

“Fill this out, please.”

I took it from her and filled out the medical questionnaire, then signed it at the bottom.

She took it from me, looked it over and smiled.

“Have a seat. They will call you shortly.”

I sat down and picked up a magazine.

Shortly another woman in white came out of a side entrance.

“Come with me please,” she said.

I followed her into the back room.

“Strip to your underwear.”

I did so.

Standing before her, I was a little nervous as she took my pulse and blood pressure. After drawing a blood sample, she handed me a cup.

“Pee in here. I will be right back.”

She went into a back room and closed the door.

When I finished, I knocked on the door and she came out.

Next she took a series of measurements from the circumference of my head and neck to my chest, waist, hips, wrists and ankles. My sleeve length and the length of my feet were last.

After she finished jotting everything down, she picked up a large needle and swabbed my arm with the other hand. She smiled at me.

“This is part of your new health regimen,” she said as she jabbed the huge needle in my arm.

After putting down the needle, she picked up a bottle of large pink pills and handed them to me.

“As are these. Take one of these a day. We are done here. You can get dressed.”

“What are all the measurements for?” I asked.

“You will be supplied with a work uniform and shoes,” she replied with a smile.

I nodded and got dressed as she left the room.

That night I felt good about my future. I couldn't think of anything about this job that would be too difficult for me to master.

So many things being supplied with the job meant I wouldn't have the expenses most people would have, like a car or clothes except for underwear and socks of course. It seemed almost too good to be true.

That term “too good to be true” gave me an anxious moment. My mother once said if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is but at this juncture I tossed it off.

I wasn't in a position to be fussy. I didn't think I had anything to worry about. If things didn't turn out well I could always quit.

I was also certain my blood and urine test would be okay as I never got into the drug scene and having just turned eighteen, I still had no experience with alcohol.

The phone rang Sunday morning. A woman who identified herself as Jeri Boyd said I was hired and asked me which car rental agency I was using. I told

her and she said she would meet me there in an hour.

I was elated that now I had a job, little or no living expenses and as far as I could see, a bright future ahead. I packed up my stuff and put it in the trunk of the rental car.

After I checked out of my motel, I gassed up the car and drove to the car rental agency.

Shortly a blue 4x4 pickup truck pulled in. There was a Mortenson Estates logo on the door. A stocky woman with short blonde hair got out and came inside the agency.

I got up and walked up to greet her.

“Hi, I’m David King,” I said as I extended my hand.

She took my hand in hers and gave me a firm manly handshake.

“Let’s go,” she said and walked away.

I picked up my bags followed her outside. I put my bags in the back and got into the cab of the pickup truck.

Jeri was a rather mannish looking woman. She made no conversation as she drove and I didn’t offer any.

It took us about forty-five minutes after exiting the freeway before we turned off a state highway and on to a county road. Another fifteen minutes passed before we stopped at an iron gate.

Jeri rolled the window down and entered several numbers on the keypad. The gate swung open and she drove in.

The entry road was about a mile long with large trees on both sides. Up ahead I saw a large mansion. Jeri turned right on a service road and we stopped in front of the maintenance shop.

She put the truck in park and turned off the ignition. Turning to me, she smiled.

“You’re home, David. Get your gear and I will take you upstairs.”

I got out of the truck and removed my gear from the back. I followed her up the side stairs. She unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Inside I set my bags down and she handed me a key.

“You have the rest of the day off. Your work and the meal schedule are on the table. See you in the morning.”

With that, she turned around and left me.

The apartment was small. To my left was a two-person couch and coffee table in front of a 40” TV. To my right was a small bed and next to that a small dresser. The bathroom was equally small as was the closet next to it. There was no stove or refrigerator.

After putting my stuff away, I sat on the couch and opened the brown envelope

The first sheets listed the rules and regulations that I was to follow while working there. The next was my work schedule for the month.

Everything was laid out for me. The times for all three meals, work and break times as well as my times off were listed.

I put the list down and tried to think of anything they had left out but couldn't.

At 6 pm I walked to the back of the mansion and entered the kitchen. One of the staff handed me a plate of chicken and rice along with a cup of milk.

The food was excellent. I left and went back to my small apartment.

It was eight pm when I saw Jeri's pickup truck stop out front. She honked the horn once.

I went outside as she dropped the tailgate on the pickup truck.

"Your work uniforms, rain, and winter gear are in the box. Here are your work boots."

I hefted the box and she placed the shoes on top of it.

"Wear a clean coverall each day. On Friday, turn in your dirty coveralls when you come in for breakfast."

I nodded and picked up the box.

Back inside my apartment, I hung up the seven coveralls and the two coats. I put the work boots on the floor beneath them.

I tried on each of the dark blue coveralls and they fit perfectly.

I thought it was a bit odd that the coveralls didn't have any pockets but they did have "Mortenson Estates" in white across the back.

My work boots and both coats fit perfectly as well. I guess you could say that now I was ready to begin my duties in the morning.

It took awhile for me to get to sleep that night. I watched TV until late but I still was a little restless.

The alarm clock shocked me into wakefulness. I shaved and dressed quickly, then went to the kitchen for breakfast.

Jeri was already there. I sat down at the table and one of the kitchen staff placed a glass of juice, a glass of milk, silverware, and a plate with scrambled eggs and a single strip of bacon in front of me

The breakfast was very good. When I finished, Jeri got up and waved to me.

"Let's go, David, time to start work." I got up and followed her out to the truck that was parked in front of the mansion.

We spent most of my first day away from the main house. We trimmed small bushes and edged the sidewalks and entry road. The time flew by.

At breaks there was decaf tea or decaf soft drinks available. Dinner and supper were once again the best food I have ever eaten though, like breakfast, the portions were small.

I figured I was never going to get fat or rich here but everything was going well on my first day and the little contact I had with the other staff members was very pleasant.

So it began. I was busy all day, eating great and sleeping well.

Most of the work was outdoors but we did some plumbing repairs and painting inside the mansion too.

I did not see Crystal or her mother while we worked inside. The other staff members I saw were either several of the maids or the kitchen help.

Our conversations were just to say hello as they and, of course, Jeri and I were too busy to engage in conversations.

I was also surprised that so far I hadn't seen any male employees anywhere inside or out. It seemed odd that apparently I was the only one.

It was not something I thought much about so I just shrugged it off.

At the end of the month, I was told to report to the basement after supper. When I went down there, I was given another shot and a refill of those large pink pills from a woman in white. She said nothing to me and I didn't offer any conversation.

Signing up for the use of the car to get a haircut and open a bank account to deposit my first check and the one from my dad, I was admonished to remember to keep my hair short.



I did so in accordance with the rules I had been given initially. I wanted to be sure to obey all those rules and regulations.

After my haircut, I opened my checking account, deposited my paycheck and the one dad had given me, then I took in a movie. I went back to the mansion, feeling that I had fallen into something really good.

Two more months passed and Jeri informed me that I passed my probationary period. I was happy about that and the raise though money wasn't my immediate concern.

I noticed a funny thing when I showered that evening. My skin seemed to feel a little softer and there was some tenderness around my nipples. I wasn't sure what to think but I decided not to say anything.

My work continued as the weather turned cooler. Keeping the mansion clear of the falling leaves was quite a job. Jeri also started up two snowblowers and hooked up the plow to the pickup truck.

By the end of October, I became more concerned about the tenderness around my nipples and the increasingly soft feel of my skin.

In the mirror, my face appeared to have a softer look and my beard seemed to be lighter. I made a mental note to ask about these subtle changes when I got my next shot.

At the end of the next month, the woman who gave me my shot and a re-supply of pills just smiled at my question.