



Season Two:

Episode Six

As Herman left the hospital, he checked his phone to find seven missed calls and dozens of text messages. He scrolled through the messages, becoming increasingly alarmed. Something was going on at Shady Bluff.

“If Mal goes, I go. Find your own weekend nurse!” one read. “Did you know?” asked another contact. “Call me ASAP. It’s crazy over here.” That last one was from Pippi, the Resident Services Director. Herman was about to hit the “return call” button on his phone, but then he heard the blare of a horn and he started. He’d stepped right in front of a truck exiting the parking lot. He gave a shaky smile and a wave and stepped back out of the way.

As the vehicle passed him, he looked over the rows of cars, identifying his own. Two rows over in a small compact car, someone was sitting, their face turned toward him. The sight stopped him mid-step.

For a second, her face had been illuminated and it looked like... Well, it looked like Maxine. But that wasn’t possible. Maxine was dead!

He didn’t want the woman to see him staring, so he kept walking. Once in his car, he picked up his phone and scrolled through the texts that Pippi had sent him. From what he could tell, someone had taken over Regina’s role and fired the Wellness Director.

But why? No one knew that Regina was in a coma; he’d not reached out to anyone about what had happened, although he supposed most of the community already knew. Gossip traveled fast. Who was this person that just showed up and took command of the community? If anyone was to take over, that promotion was his by rights. After so many years of endless paperwork, surely he deserved recognition for that hard work!

He hit the button to call Pippi back. As it rang, his eyes wandered to the rows ahead and that driver who'd so closely resembled his dead coworker. She was getting out of the car. Her hair, as dark as Maxine's, was also cut in the same style, just above shoulder length, evenly across the bottom.

As he watched the woman walk away, he noticed that her size and shape, even the way she walked, was so similar to the former Culinary Chef's that he couldn't shake the thought that it really was Maxine.

"Hello?" a voice responded from his phone. "Herman?"

"Yes, Pippi. It's me..."

"Where are you? Everyone is freaking out. I mean, it's really crazy, Herman. Everyone in Wellness is upset and..."

"Can I meet you at Shady Bluff in about 20 minutes, Pippi?"

"I wish I could, Herman, but I can't. I have something... important to take care of."

"What could be more important than this?"

"It's something personal. Something... well, I can't tell you yet, but I will soon, okay? I promise."

Herman sighed. Pippi was always much more dramatic than she needed to be.

"Okay, but who is this new administrator?"

"I've not seen him before. His name is Basil Forthright. Some name, huh? He's very intimidating. He completely took over Regina's office and put up all these huge diplomas."

Herman didn't recognize the name. It was very odd for the corporate office to send a complete stranger to run the building. "Okay, I'm on my way now. I'll figure out what's going on."

He was about to start the car when he realized that he had left a bundle of paperwork in Regina's hospital room. He had felt a little bad about bringing his work with him to the hospital, but there was just always so much paperwork to do, he could never stay on top of it.

Sighing, he made his way back inside the hospital. He tamped down his annoyance by telling himself it would only take a minute.

As he rode the elevator to the fifth floor, he tried to imagine what corporate could be thinking, sending in a replacement. Were they planning on cleaning house? *Good luck finding someone willing to take care of all the paperwork I have to wade through*, he thought.

He stepped off the elevator and followed the signs back to Regina's private room. As he approached, he realized that the door was slightly ajar. That was

funny, it had been wide open earlier. Perhaps one of the nurses had closed it after checking in on her.

He pushed the door open slowly, afraid of interrupting. And there was someone in the room with Regina. It took Herman a moment to process what he was seeing. The same woman he'd watched walk into the hospital was standing by Regina's bed. She was leaning forward, her hands holding a pillow.

Was she making the bed? No, he could see the outline of Regina's lower body under the covers. The woman was holding the pillow over Regina's face.

It wasn't until the heart rate monitor on the other side of the bed began a low, prolonged beep that Herman realized what he was seeing. The woman stood up, wiped her forehead. She took the pillow from Regina's face and placed it back under her head. The heart monitor continued its whine. Flatline, that was what it was called. It meant someone's heart had stopped beating.

Herman had never considered himself a coward, but his true nature showed itself for the first time. Later, he would replay this moment in his mind with great shame, imagining what he should have done differently. What he could have done differently.

But no matter how much he wished he'd made the brave decision, the *right* decision, it didn't change what he actually did.

Which was to step back slowly, hoping he wasn't noticed. Because now he was certain that the woman he'd caught suffocating his boss was Maxine Brûlée. Who everyone thought had been murdered. And if Maxine was alive, then it meant something even stranger than a corporate takeover of the community was going on.

As he broke into a run for the stairs, he heard movement around the corner at the nurse's station. Perhaps they would catch the woman who'd just murdered Regina. But he wasn't going to stick around to find out. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he took the steps two at a time and didn't stop running until he was back at his car.

Credits

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