

Chapter 2: The Way Back

"I'm afraid I must strongly advise against that, Mr. Bates." Dr. Miller responded. "Your mother has a long road of recovery ahead of her, and she's going to need help with almost everything for a while. It's a huge responsibility for anyone to take on. She's also going to need a lot of physical therapy, at least four times a week, for the next few months at least."

"That doesn't matter!" Norman shot back at him, "I don't mind, not in the slightest. She's MY mother, and I'M the only one to take care of her!"

The doctor took off his glasses and cleaned them on the hem of his lab coat, then he replaced them and added, "We also don't know completely how her brain and long-term mental function have been affected. I want to run some more tests on that. She appears able to recall new things, but we can't rule out short-term memory problems or similar in the future."

Norman swallowed the lump growing in his throat. "What're the chances of her getting all her memories back, or at least some of them?" It was tearing at his heart that his mother had lost every good time, every loving moment they'd ever shared from the time he was born. All of the horrible things that had happened? That was a blessing, the more he considered it. She didn't need to remember any of that.

Dr. Miller couldn't come up with a definite answer, "She may eventually regain them, with a lot of time and patience. Again, that's where you come in, Norman. Tell her about your lives before this. Show her photos, home movies, things like that. Those can do wonders for this level of amnesia."

"That makes sense. I will." Norman agreed, already thinking of the cherished framed pictures of the two of them, still on their table at home. They'd be one of the first things he'd show her. "So could we go home now?" He was losing patience with

either of them being in this hospital. But no matter how much insisting, the doctor refused to allow it for the next three days. Norman grudgingly agreed, and turned to go back into her room, where he saw she was dozing peacefully, sitting up in bed. She got tired so easily, which for some reason made his love for her rise even stronger in his chest.

"One more thing, Norman." Dr. Miller called after him.

"What?"

"There's the issue of insurance. The policy your under your mother and stepfather's names has been automatically billed for her care. Now that she's out of the coma, I advise you to notify your stepfather as soon as possible. There'll be some paperwork to sign for coverage of her physical therapy and check-ups."

Norman already knew about the insurance; he'd made sure it would always go through. Feigning innocence as only he could do, he said, "Well, I'll try. But the thing is: my stepfather disappeared right after my mother went in the coma. Just gone, no note or phone call or anything. He never answered any of my calls or texts, and I haven't seen him or heard a word from him all these years."

Great performance. Norman silently congratulated himself, *No actor could've done it better.*

The doc looked troubled at this news. "Did you file a missing-person report?"

He lied through his teeth, masterfully: "I tried, but the cops he worked with said it looked like he left by choice and didn't want to be contacted. So they never did anything." Norman shrugged, "He abandoned her. I stayed by her, and I always will. I'm staying here too, until you let her come home on Saturday."

"All right. She'll have to go over the coverage herself, and something can be worked out if he can't be reached."

"Fine. We'll figure it out." Norman's voice betrayed nothing but confidence. No one would reach Romero, ever again. It would be another two years before they could have his fake "stepfather" declared legally dead, but Norman decided they'd deal with that when the time came. He was only going to focus on the here and now. On her: the other half of his soul.

Her eyes fluttered open as he returned to her bedside. "Norman," she murmured. Absently, she reached her hand out for his. In all this frightening confusion of her wiped-blank mind, his presence was so calming. Comforting. Even though she'd just met him, all over again.

He pulled a chair close and laced his fingers through her thin ones. Her skin felt dry. He'd buy her some of that hand lotion she'd liked before; he needed to remember to do that. "Hi, Mother." he said with a soft smile, "The doctor said you can come home on Saturday, only three days away."

"Good. I only wish it were sooner. I hate being in this hospital." Her pale lips drew into the same smile. A few seconds went by as she studied his sweet, earnest face. Her thoughts again became jumbled, and her expression darkened a bit as that blank space in her mind came up, "Um...where is home, exactly, sweetie?" Lord, she hated the amnesia, even worse than being incapacitated in this hospital bed. She could see how much it pained him, and in turn it made her heart ache.

"We live here, just outside of town. We have a big old-fashioned house on a hill, and we own a motel next to it. After my father died in a car accident, you bought them with the insurance pay-out. We'd been running the place for a couple years. It was pretty run-down, but we fixed it up a lot." His smile grew even warmer as Norman's

own memory drifted back to those earliest days when they'd first arrived, so full of hope. It would be just like that again, the two of them. He'd see to that.

Norma tried to picture this, but none of it registered. It sounded nice though. She could see herself running a motel, why not? "Your father's dead, Norman?" Only curiosity was in her voice; this deceased husband was another blank space. She wouldn't have known any man she'd supposedly been married to, even if he was right in front of her.

"Yeah," Norman hesitated, "He drank too much, was driving home drunk one night. It was bad, but he did that a lot. It was bound to happen."

I'm only protecting her. She tried so hard to protect me, for so long. Now it's my turn.

The single feeling she had was a passing one of pity. "I'm sorry, honey. I know it must have been terrible for you to lose your dad like that." Her gaze held his, growing deeper by the second.

"He wasn't a good guy, Mother. He treated you horribly. Your husband after him wasn't any better. You married him a couple of weeks before the gas leak happened in the house. When you didn't come out of the coma, he couldn't handle it. He left town and never came back. I've never been able to reach him since." Norman moved even closer to her from where he was seated on the edge of her bed. "I stayed, always would have. I never gave up hope."

The news and the strength behind his words caused tears to sting her eyes. "My god..." her voice cracked and she struggled with the hard lump growing in her throat.

Norman took the plastic cup of ice chips off the bed's tray and handed her one, which she gratefully took. The damn doctor and nurses wouldn't let her drink water until the evening; she could only suck ice chips in the meantime. It did feel soothing.

"Sounds like I've had really terrible luck with men," Norma mused. "Well..." she gave him a brighter, more hopeful smile. "I'm through with all that. All I'm going to focus on is getting better, on making things good for you and me, Norman."

His warm, elated expression made her heartbeat increase a notch. "That's all I want in the world." Then they were abruptly brought back to reality as an orderly brought in a cot for Norman to sleep on, setting it up next to her bed. For long moments, Norma and Norman had forgotten anyone else was in the building, didn't notice the hospital staff and other patients going back and forth outside the door.

"Oh, yeah: I'm staying here with you, Mother. Until we can go home."

"Honey! Could you do that and leave the motel for that long? What if we have guests?" Norma almost said she didn't want him to trouble himself that much, but who was she kidding? She could think of nothing more wonderful than his being here with her all the time.

"We have only a few at the moment, and they can drop their keys through the mail slot in the office when they check out. If there's an emergency, they can call me. Or the sheriff if they need to. They'll be fine." Norman assured her. "I need to go back to the house and pack some clothes. It shouldn't take too long."

"Of course, sweetie." Her eyes still never left his as Norman reluctantly got up and started to leave. "Norman, will you tell me more about us, about our life here, when you get back?"

"I can't wait to do just that," He leaned down and kissed her sunken cheek. "I'll be back soon." As he headed out of the hospital and across the parking lot, Norman could barely feel his feet touching the ground. Everything was going to be beyond good. It was going to be perfect. He practically skipped up the hillside stairs and inside, packed a suitcase with everything he'd need. If Mother was still around in the

house, she didn't make her presence known. Almost ready, Norman left his bag on the porch as he took his gardening clippers and went over to the impressive rectangular rose garden on the right side of the house. Over the years, he'd added many different colors of them, each with its own special meaning. Norman had spent many late night hours on his laptop, sitting up in bed and researching them. Unlike his beloved taxidermy, Mother had little to complain about when it came to this new hobby. The first glorious roses he succeeded in growing, she couldn't help her words of praise. What woman could resist such beautiful flowers?

Every day when he visited Norma, he made sure fresh blooms were always in a vase by her bedside. Now on this freezing day, his shoes crunched through the early January snow as he surveyed the rows of treasured rose bushes, checking that each one was still properly winterized. They began blooming in early April each year and continued until late September. Except one winter-flowering plant he'd added a few years ago: a red hellebore bush, also known as the Lenten or Christmas rose. It meant "to purge the veins of melancholy and to cheer the heart." Norman clipped four of these deep crimson flowers and wrapped the stems carefully in a piece of newsprint paper. He grabbed his suitcase off the porch and drove off, counting the minutes until he returned to her.



Meanwhile, Norma jabbed her thumb down impatiently on the call button for the second time. This long, greasy mass of dingy blonde hair was driving her crazy, and she would've scratched hard at her itching scalp if she'd had enough strength in her forearms and hands. She was dying for a proper shower and vigorous shampoo of that mess, though of course she needed a nurse to do that for her. When the first nurse stuck her head in the door, Norma told her as much. The nonchalant response: someone would be around to help her as soon as possible; they were short-staffed and had more critical patients. Norma yelled after her, "I've been in a

coma and haven't showered in five years, for god's sake!" No answer, which increased her aggravation as another half hour dragged by.

Norma made herself focus on making her upper body move, willing herself to sit up from the raised half of the bed. Her breath grew ragged with the effort, and beads of sweat popped out along her hairline. Finally, she managed very slowly to lift her back away from the mattress and brace herself with her hands on either side of her rail-thin thighs. "I can do this," she muttered. Lifting her right hand, she pulled at the blankets that might as well have been made of lead, seeing her own legs for the first time. Norma bit her lip, biting back the sorrowful frustration at how painfully wasted-away they looked.

Struggling to stay upright, she pulled with both hands at one of her inert upper thighs, willing what was left of her leg muscles to wake up and work, damnit! One foot slipped off the side of the mattress, dangling towards the floor. "Okay..." she panted, "...progress."

"Mother! What are you doing?!" Norman's voice cut through the quiet room, startling her so much that Norma lost her balance and fell sideways, slumping against the raised mattress and the side of her head narrowly missed hitting the metal bed railing. He dropped his suitcase and flowers, rushing over and taking her leg, lifting it safely back in bed. She was wearing only a hospital gown that had ridden up quite a bit, but he had no chance to dwell on that.

Norma clasped his solid biceps as he gently took her by the waist and shifted her back upright and safe in bed, replacing the blankets over her. "I want out of this damn bed." she defended herself. "I need a shower, badly, and the nurses are taking their sweet-ass time helping me! I thought if I could stand up, that'd get their attention!" She was starting to sound like a petulant child, but she didn't care.

Norman's expression was grave, as he placed his warm hand on her cheek. "Don't ever do something like that again! Promise me, Mother? Not until you've got your strength back. You could've fallen and broken a leg, or worse!" His forehead touched hers, and Norma forgot her frustration. "I couldn't stand anything else bad happening to you."

God, he feels so good... flashed through her mind.

"I promise." Her voice was softer, as she caressed his jawline; it was now a bit easier to lift her forearms and use her hands. As they parted and Norman moved to get his bag and the flowers, an idea occurred to her. "Why don't YOU help me shower, honey? I'm your mother, right? So it's not like it's weird or anything." Nevertheless, her face was growing warm at the idea. "You're going to have to do it at home, at least for a while. Might as well start now."

"Uhh...sure...yes, of course! You're right, Mother. Let me just, um...get things ready." he stammered. Norma noticed the blood rushing to his cheeks as well, turning them a lovely deep pink that made a smile play across her lips. "Oh, I brought you these!" Norman added, taking the wilted roses out of their vase on her bedside table and replacing them with the hellebores.

"They're beautiful, sweetie. Thank you. Now, shall we? I'll feel so much better once I get this layer washed off me, and wash this hair!"

"Yes, Mother." Norman opened his suitcase and changed into an old T-shirt he didn't mind getting wet, turning his back so she'd hopefully see less of his embarrassed excitement. After a quick check of her adjoining bathroom, he saw the shower had a chair and detachable shower nozzle, plus plenty of room for him to stand and get her cleaned up. Okay. He could do this. A few towels and washcloths were on a wall shelf by the shower entrance, but the only shampoo and soap was what he'd brought, so it would have to do. She'd smell like him, but was that a bad thing?

Norman didn't see how it was. Returning to her, he asked "You think you can hold onto the chair handles?"

"Yes! I will, I just want this done, baby! Please."

"Okay, Mother. Here we go." Norman pulled back her blankets and scooped her up bridal-style into his arms. She was so light and frail, weighed practically nothing to him. Norma gave a sharp little inhale at the feel of his arms cradling her, holding her tightly against his body. It felt so safe. Wonderful. She didn't want to let go, as her arms circled around his shoulders, clinging to him with the little strength she had, not that she truly needed to. She figured it must not be difficult for him to feel her quickening heartbeat. Norma was disappointed when he gently lowered her into the padded medical chair in the spacious shower.

He moved behind her and untied the laces holding her hospital gown closed at the back. "Are you okay, Mother?" he asked with concern, as he pushed it off her shoulders and down over her chest.

"I'm fine, honey. You can look. Don't be embarrassed." she breathed. It still took a lot out of her to grip the chair handles and keep herself upright. She refused to sway or collapse. Mind over matter. Her weakened body was not going to win this one. Once stripped of that ugly thing, Norma watched while he took the shower nozzle off the wall and turned it on, adjusting the temperature until it was just right. With more of that steely mental control, she tilted her head back enough so he could wet down her hair and run the warm water over the rest of her body. "Mmmm...oh yes, I've been wanting this so much." she murmured with relief.

Norman stood behind her and massaged shampoo into her scalp; it took some time to get that entire overgrown mane washed clean. He tried to let the chore at hand distract him, without success. He could count every vertebrae in her spine and every one of her ribs. Her once-lovely round backside was nearly gone, the outline of her

hip and pelvic bones more obvious. Tears spilled unbidden out of his eyes. *I did this to her.*

After he'd finally worked conditioner through all that hair and rinsed it, he soaped up a washcloth and rubbed it in gentle circles over her shoulders, then down her back and over her hips, following it with the warm water to rinse her pale skin clean. Then Norman had to move around to her front, washing over her neck and the stuck-out wings of her collarbones. Norma kept making little sighs and moans of contentment, even more as he ran the soap and water over her now-smaller breasts. Her son bathing her wasn't supposed to feel this good, was it? A son she had zero memories of, beyond the past 24 hours. For the first time, she felt alive again. Truly reawakened.

"Norman? Are you crying?" She noticed the wetness on his cheeks as she looked down to watch his hands soap and rinse her legs. Pleasant tingles were moving up and down her skin at his touch. "Honey?" Never minding she was all wet, Norma lifted his chin.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you, Mother. It's so tough for me to see you like this."

"Oh, sweetheart; I'm not going to be like this forever! I promise. I'll get strong again, get back to how I used to be. I swear it! Please don't be sad, Norman. It just makes me sad. We're together again. That's all that matters!"

Her sweet, promising words soothed his grief and guilt, for now. "I know. You're right. It IS all that matters, for always." Norman finished rinsing the last of the soap from her body, turned off the water and replaced the shower nozzle. He grabbed two towels from the shelf, wrapping the first around her as best they both could manage, then using the other to squeeze the water from her hair. Once he'd dried all the droplets of water from her skin, Norman rushed to his suitcase and found one of his flannel pajama shirts: light blue with thin black stripes. It was clean and warm, a big

improvement that flimsy gown that hadn't been changed in days. She smiled as she lifted one arm at a time and he worked them into the long sleeves, then she clung tight to his neck as he lifted her out of the chair long enough to wrap it around her and fasten the buttons. It was easy, sweet, and already felt routine. They could do this, together. It was too big for her, falling nearly to her knees, and Norman had to roll up the sleeves a couple of times. It was full of his scent and felt like he was wrapped all around her.

Norman carried her back and placed her in bed, toweling the last of the water from her feet before pulling the covers over them. "Mother, we should dry your hair. Last thing I want is for you to catch a cold."

"I'm so tired." she protested, "Can't we skip it this one time?" Indeed, Norma only now realized how exhausted she was, her limbs settling into the mattress.

"We can try you laying on your side. I'll do all the work."

Norman managed to help her turn on her left side, then he retrieved a comb and his hair dryer. No sooner had he started untangling the damp strands when one of the nurses finally came in.

"You've already showered, Mrs. Bates?" She asked in surprise, "And you helped her," Her tone towards Norman was accusing.

"Yes, she was tired of waiting." Norman snapped, "I'm gonna be the one to do it at home anyway."

"That was a very irresponsible thing to do without instruction first," She lectured. "One of you could've fallen and gotten hurt."

Norma snapped back in annoyance, "Did we fall? Am I hurt? No. We're fine." Still, she had no choice but to bare her right forearm as the nurse attached a fresh glucose IV to her, announcing they were going to start tapering her off it tomorrow. Then she left.

"That's good." Norma gave a tired chuckle as she struggled back onto her side as best she could. "I'm really looking forward to eating actual food again, though I know that'll be a process too."

Norman was busy combing through the rest of her hair. It was dull and rather brittle, but thankfully it didn't tangle too much. He ran the dryer over it as she dozed, unable to keep her eyes from falling shut. Once finished, he moved around to the other side of the bed and lay down on his back beside her. With that same slow maneuvering from them both, she snuggled into his arms, her head resting in the crook of his neck. "Thank you, sweetie." she murmured before falling into a deep sleep.

He gave her forehead a soft kiss. "I love you, Mother." Soon, he'd drifted off as well.