

Chapter 3: Our World

Judging from the fading sun through her hospital room's small window, it was nearing twilight. Norma's eyes opened slowly, grogginess keeping her brain from focusing on much at first. She couldn't remember for a few seconds whose strong arms had her enveloped, then she recalled Norman. Her son. Her eyes fell on her arm that was resting on his warm chest, and on that reviled needle attached to a tube running out of the back of her right hand. Norman stirred and looked at her, so peaceful with her head nestled against his shoulder. She was still so beautiful, even with the havoc the coma had wrought on her body. Once it registered on her face that she recognized him, he smiled.

"Sleep well, Mother?" The deep yet sweet tone of his voice vibrated in his chest as her cheek rested against it.

"Mmm...yes." Norma tried to stifle a yawn, "It's funny how much I want to sleep, when I was out cold for five years." That yawn won out. "...still so hard to believe. I know that wasn't true sleep, least not what the doctor said."

"I want you to sleep all you need. I'm going to take care of everything." He assured her. "Do you feel like seeing if there's a movie to watch? We always loved watching old movies, ever since I was a little boy."

Norma tilted her chin up to look into his warm, loving eyes. They were such a beautiful shade of blue, the same as the sky on a summer day. She couldn't remember the last cloudless summer day she'd seen, but the idea of it had survived somewhere, in what was left of her memory. She'd soon find that was true about a lot of things in general. "Really? How old of movies?"

"Old black and white ones, from the fifties mostly." He told her. "Some from even before. People always seem better in those older movies. Happier, and treat each

other better." Norman's own memory drifted back to the sleep-overs they had in her bed, watching those when he was small, cuddled up against her. It had been their own little cocooned world. Just like it was now, once again. He reached over and grabbed the TV remote off the bedside table, trying his best not to disturb her position too much.

"It sounds so lovely." She sighed, "Any one we find, I'll be seeing it for the first time, all over again." As he turned it on and surfed through the channels, it hit her for the first time how much the world had moved on. No shows or movies were familiar at all. "Wait, honey! Let's see this." She put her hand on his arm as he passed a news broadcast announcing President Warren was about to give a speech before Congress. "We have a woman president now?!"

Norman grinned at her surprised reaction, "I even voted for her. First time I ever voted. I knew it would've made you proud. She'd doing a great job, from what little I pay attention to the news."

They watched a few minutes of President Elizabeth Warren's remarks, before Norman grew bored and switched to the classic movie channel. "The Lady Eve" was starting, and he hadn't seen it in years, hadn't brought himself to watch many of their favorites in that big empty house by himself. It had been too painful. Now the movie had never seemed funnier or more enjoyable.

During one early romantic scene at the railing of an ocean liner, Norma leaned over and kissed him softly on the cheek, without thinking. Her lips lingered close to the corner of his mouth. The look of happy adoration on his face when she drew back made her own hollow cheeks blush, again. "I hope you don't mind, Norman. You're never too old for kisses from your mother, right?"

His arms tightened around her in an affectionate squeeze, and Norman dropped an equally soft kiss to her forehead. "You can kiss me whenever, however much you want, Mother."

She nuzzled her head back against his neck, their fingertips touching and hands lazily playing. "I feel so good with you." Norma murmured, "I'm so happy you're here with me, Norman." She wondered if they had any other family nearby, and if so why he hadn't mentioned them. Then she figured he didn't want to overwhelm her, which was also sweet of him. So much of this world she'd woken up to was overwhelming enough.

It went on like this, for the next three days. Norman slept only some on the uncomfortable cot on the floor; invariably, he'd end up in her hospital bed, holding her as they both slept soundly. The nurses expressed their disapproval, since Norma had a weakened immune system, and more than once Norman was warned he'd be sent home if he showed any signs of having a cold. Those warnings fell on mostly deaf ears, and she showed no signs of coming down with anything. The only times he went home for long were to check on the motel and to get more Christmas roses to replace the old ones in her vase. A couple of times, he saw Mother watching him in the rose garden from her bedroom window, then she turned and walked away.

Norma was amused when he told her what the deep red blooms were called. "Christmas roses in January. Somehow that's so fitting."

Norman smiled and brushed a strand of her long hair back from her forehead, "The best Christmas gift I've ever gotten: that phone call that you were awake."

She smoothed her hand over his wrist. "Maybe we'll start a new tradition. All our own." Then the moment was broken as her lunch was brought in, much to Norma's dislike. First she had a difficult time keeping anything down, then there was the quality of the hospital food, or lack thereof. After a few failed tries, the only thing she

was able to stomach was vanilla pudding, and not much of it at a time. Norman brought her a pint of Neopolitan ice cream, saying it had always been her favorite, and she fared better with that. Both of them dug in with plastic spoons, sitting on her bed and watching "Casablanca." It was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted. "Besides, it's not like I have to worry about my weight right now," she half-joked.

It wasn't always easy. When Norman brought in some photos of them for her to look at, she broke into tears. "I used to look like that?" she wiped at her reddened eyes. "I was so pretty...now look at me." She held up her wasted-away arms. "I look awful! How can you even stand to look at me, Norman?"

"Mother! Stop." He took her hands in his, tenderly. "You are beautiful. You always have been and always will be. I've known that since I was little." His earnest words only made her cry harder.

"That's another thing: I can't remember you when you were a little boy. I'm so sorry, Norman." Her fingers traced over a picture of the two of them, taken when he was about six. She was holding him, his small legs wrapped around her waist, and they were both smiling. Norman vaguely recalled his father scolding her for still carrying him, that he was too big for that. But Sam Bates was long gone.

He drew her into a hug, rubbed her back until her sobs quieted. "We were playing hide and seek in the park that day." Norman leaned back against the raised half of the bed, and she rested her head on his shoulder. "You hid behind a tree, and I got scared when I couldn't find you. Then you came out and picked me up, told me it was only a game, that you'd never leave me."

She looked in his eyes, "I never will. Never again, sweetie." Before she realized what was happening, Norma was leaning into him, her eyes half-closed and her gaze falling on his lips. Then she righted herself and blinked. "Um, will you tell me some more? About our house and motel, maybe?"

"Nothing I'd like better." Norman pulled out his phone and swiped through the pictures he'd taken of every room in the house, with all its vintage charm. While she'd taken one of her many naps over the past couple of days, he'd managed to clean everything up. "You're the best cook in the world, Mother. So you'd always spend plenty of time in the kitchen. I've tried to teach myself how, but I'll never come close to what you can do."

Norma lingered over the warm-looking kitchen with its dark wood cabinets. "I'm going to have to relearn so much." she said absently as she swiped over to the shot of their living room, "Did I play the piano? Or do you?"

Norman chuckled, "You do, and you tried to teach me when I was a kid, but I was pretty hopeless. Couldn't get past 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.' Plus I never wanted to sit still long enough to practice." Both of them silently wondered if she'd also completely forgotten how to fill the house with the beautiful music like she used to.

He'd even taken pictures of the basement and of his prized taxidermy owl mounted on the wall in the motel's back office. "I used to do a lot of taxidermy, stuffing and mounting animals I'd found dead in the forest or on the road. It felt like giving them a second chance, in a way. Honoring them by making them look alive again. You never liked it much, but I did anyway." Norman moved to the pictures he'd taken of the rose garden back when it was in full bloom, "But I don't have a lot of time for new taxidermy projects anymore, not since I planted this. It takes time and work to keep it up."

"Honey, those are so beautiful!" Norma exclaimed, "You've done a wonderful job..wow."

"Buying you roses almost every day added up, so I grew our own. It was worth every minute. I can't wait for you to see them when they bloom in the spring. You have an herb garden, on the other side of the house. I kept that up too."

Her heart was filling even more with love for him, and with that pull she felt towards him, one she wasn't completely consciously aware of. Yet. "We have such a nice home together, Norman. I can't wait to get back to it. Tomorrow can't get here soon enough."

She was going to finally be released the following afternoon. When they woke up that morning, first thing was Norma's last shower in the hospital. One thing she hated even worse than the hospital food: the wheelchair the nurses made her sit in as one of them wheeled her into the bathroom. They wouldn't let her even try to walk those few steps, not even with Norman's strong firm arms holding her up. That thing made her look like a crippled old lady, and she wanted nothing to do with it. Dr. Miller was making them take a wheelchair home for her to use, but he had no say in it once they actually got home.

"Norman? Sweetie?" She whispered, gently nudging him awake. "Today's the day."

Norman grumbled wordlessly as he sat up, rubbing his eyes and smoothing his messy hair. Then he remembered what she meant. "It sure is, Mother."

"Will you help me stand up? Please? Just for a minute before I have to sit in that damn chair."

He'd quickly learned it was pointless to argue with her about the wheelchair. She was being stubborn as all hell about it. Norman stood up, pulling the blankets back and lifting her under her arms. "Okay, Mother. Here we go." She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, his solid strength and warmth almost making her forget to plant her feet on the floor. Norman shifted so she could put some of her weight on them, but her leg muscles needed a lot of strengthening before she could stand on her own again.

Once showered, he helped her dress in a pale pink velour sweatsuit he'd picked out. It was the only thing besides hospital gowns that fit her thin body now. Her beautiful dresses and other outfits were at home, still hanging in her closet. He'd refused to get rid of even one. She'd be swimming in them now, but that wouldn't always be. In the meantime, they'd have to do some clothes shopping.

Norman dried and brushed her hair; he'd become pretty skilled at that over the past few days. After packing up everything of theirs, he wrapped her in his heavy lined plaid winter coat and added his dark red wool scarf, ignoring her protests that he was going to freeze. "My jacket's fine until we get home." he told her, "It's going to take more to keep you warm for a while, and it just snowed again last night."

After more waiting around for the doctor, Norma signed the discharge papers and insurance forms, before she grudgingly allowed him to lift her into the hated wheelchair. She realized that this town included people who knew everybody else's business and spread it around. Her name was whispered a couple of times as she was wheeled out. Norman lifted her into the passenger seat of their 70's Mercedes, folded up her wheelchair and packed it in the trunk along with his suitcase. She'd only come into the hospital in the white nightgown she'd been wearing, and it had long since gone missing. When she felt the freezing cold winter day, Norma was grateful he'd made her wear his coat. Norman had been right.

She tried to look at everything they passed as Norman drove them home, hoping just one thing, however small, would jog her broken memory. Nothing did. A smile did play across her lips as he parked in the gravel parking lot at the foot of the hillside stairs. "This is just beautiful, Norman." Faintly in the distance, she could hear ocean waves from the other side of that steep hill where their old Gothic house sat.

He leaned in and kissed her cheek, "Welcome home, Mother."

"I've waited so long for this." she said softly, losing awareness again of much of anything, other than the warm blue of his eyes. Then Norman opened his car door and moved to get out and open the trunk.

"I'm not going up those stairs in that thing!" She told him, folding her arms. "Not happening. No way are you pulling me backwards in that damn thing, one step at a time like I'm some invalid!"

"Mother, you're really being unreasonable about that wheelchair."

"No. That's final."

"Okay, if you insist." With that, Norman went around and opened her door, undid her seatbelt and swept her up into his arms again. She shivered, partly from the cold but mostly from the delight her body felt at him carrying her. Oh yes, he was going to carry her often, whenever she could find a reason. Until her own legs could carry her again. She had to cling tight to him while he unlocked the two front doors, then she was back in his arms, bridal-style. Feeling so safe and protected. Norman placed her carefully on her back on the sofa. "I'll be right back, Mother."

She placed a hand on the side of his face, stroking his jawline. Norma brought him back down closer and kissed him on the lips this time. It was quick and unplanned, and she was tired of waiting. When she drew back, she saw a flicker of memory in his beautiful eyes. As if he were remembering another such kiss from a long time ago. "I'll be right here," she murmured.

During his brief trip back to the car, Norma looked around at the cozy living room and towards the stairway they'd passed. "This is our home. I'm going to make it that way."