

Reason To Live

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CHAPTER ONE

Michael Riordan watched the ICU nurse push buttons on the bedside monitor. He set an empty Jello cup on the tray table and licked the plastic spoon.

“Can I get another one of those?”

She looked up, and he pointed to the empty cup.

“Sure. As soon as I—”

“And a bacon cheeseburger.”

She smiled. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Fine,” he said. “I can live without the bacon... for now.”

She walked around the bed and picked up the empty cup. “You haven’t had any solid food for three weeks. You can’t just jump back in with both feet.”

Doctor Howard entered the room, wearing a white lab coat and a stern look. He glanced up from the chart in his hand and scratched the graying hair at his temple.

“Welcome back,” he said with a smile. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with an index finger.

An uncertain smile flickered on Michael’s face.

“How are we feeling?”

“I can’t speak for you, Doc, but I’ve had better days.” Michael frowned and straightened the plastic band on his wrist as the doctor walked toward the monitors.

“That’s certainly understandable.” He studied the screen, then wrote something in the chart.

Michael continued to play with his wrist band. “Who is Michael... Riordan?”

The doctor stopped and turned to Michael with a confused look. “What do you mean?”

He held up his wrist. “I mean my name isn't Michael.”

Dr. Howard and the nurse exchanged a questioning glance.

“You've been in a coma for three weeks.” He reviewed the chart. “It appears there's been some memory loss from your head trauma.”

Michael stared ahead, his mind blank, his life up to this point an empty page.

“Michael?” The Doctor waited for Michael's attention to return. “What do you remember?”

“Enough to know my name isn't Michael.”

Dr. Howard stared over the rim of his glasses. “So, what should I call you?”

“You can call me by my real name. Richard... Richard Dunham.”

“Your name is Richard, not Michael?”

“Yes. And I'd appreciate it if you could get me a new one of these.” He thrust his wrist toward the doctor.

“I'll see what I can do.” More chart writing. “What can you tell me about Richard?”

“Apparently, he likes green Jello,” Michael replied, his frustration growing.

“And cheeseburgers,” the nurse added.

Doctor Howard glanced at the nurse and forced a smile. “I see.” He turned to Michael, his expression as sterile as the room. “I'll schedule an MRI. In the meantime, we'll see about moving you into your own room.”

Michael shifted his weight uncomfortably. He'd heard of hospitals switching babies, but never full-grown men.

The doctor patted Michael's forearm. "You just relax and take it slow. I'll come by and check on you again in a few hours."

Easy for you to say, Michael thought. He watched Dr. Howard speak with the nurse before leaving, their voices too low for him to hear.

"What was that about," he asked the nurse when they were alone.

She smiled. "You should get some rest."

"Rest? I just woke up from a three-week nap. I've had plenty of rest."

"Do you want me to get you more Jello?"

He shook his head. "I just lost my appetite."

"Something to drink?"

"Can you help me get to the bathroom?"

"I'm sorry. You can't leave the bed. You're still hooked up to everything."

"What if I have to pee?"

"You have a catheter."

Michael peeked under the sheet. "Okay, what if I have to—"

"I'll get you a bed pan."

"That sounds like fun." He closed his eyes. "Never mind."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Riordan, but I—"

"Please don't call me that."

Her expression fell. "Michael, then?"

"Or that." Michael exhaled sharply. "Can you get me a mirror?"

"What for?"

"So I can shave."

Confusion washed over her face. "Are you serious?"

"No. Just get me something that resembles a mirror." He paused. "Please?"

“Let me see what I can do,” she said before leaving the room.

Michael tried to keep his wits about him, but his confusion, which had turned to fear, teetered on the verge of panic. He needed a drink. Whiskey. Strait up. In a vase. Given his present situation, he didn’t think it an unreasonable request. He pushed the tray table away from the bed and sent a glass of ice chips skittering across the floor.

The nurse returned in time to witness his tantrum. “Mr. Riordan!”

“I thought I asked you not to call me that.”

She took a deep breath. “I found a mirror.”

Michael snatched it from her hand and held it in front of his face.

“This is a joke, right?” He stared at an unfamiliar face in the small mirror. The man that looked back appeared similar in age, perhaps a few years older than his forty-four years. He turned his head from side to side. The stranger did the same. “I gotta hand it to you, it’s a good one. How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

He held up the mirror and examined both sides of it. He belched out a nervous laugh. “Seriously. How did you do it?”

She blinked a few times. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come over here.” He pointed to the side of the bed.

The nurse hesitated before taking a step.

Michael held the mirror away from them with one hand and pulled her closer with the other. She resisted.

“I’m not going to bite. I need you to look in the mirror.”

Her muscles relaxed, and she leaned in closer.

Michael held up the mirror. Two faces looked back, neither of them his. He no longer teetered on the verge of panic. He swam in a pool of it.

He turned to her. "You look the same."

"So do you. It's a mirror." She made no attempt to hide her confusion. "I don't understand."

Michael handed her the mirror. "That makes two of us."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rior—" She pulled away. "I'm sorry. I have to get back to the station."

He called after her as she walked out the door. "What the hell's going on here?"

She disappeared without a reply.

Michael closed his eyes and settled back onto the pillow. He tried to reassure himself that this was only a dream. A bad dream. Or perhaps he'd not yet woken up from the coma. Who knew what went on in a comatose mind?

Michael opened his eyes. A short, gray-haired man in hospital scrubs stood in the doorway. After a moment, the man spoke.

"Richard?"

Michael bolted upright and grabbed his head with both hands. He studied the man through squinted eyes. "You know who I am?"

"We need to talk.