**Chapter Two**

**H**ave you ever been hit in the head with a sledgehammer? Not *literally*, of course. Let me put it in another way. Have you ever had a serious case of migraine that made you collapse onto the ground, writhing and convulsing as if you were wrestling with an unseen enemy?

As crazy as this might sound, this was exactly what I was feeling right now. However, what really freaked the wits out of me was that as I seemed conscious enough, my surroundings were completely spotless. The whiteness was pristine and sterile, like the walls in a hospital. Even the *air* tasted metallic.

What the hell happened just now? No, my memory wasn’t impaired; I could clearly remember the bright flash of light, the freak roller coaster ride down the ravine, and then...nothing. Am I dead? No, no, NO! It can’t be. There ain’t no Gates of Heaven. Even St Peter wasn’t around. I glanced around, half-bracing as I expected the guardian of the Gates of Heaven to suddenly appear out of nowhere and say, “Welcome to Heaven, son! Your papers please.” No luck.

Contemplating whether I was dead or alive made me feel nauseous and silly, so I decided to stand up. My legs were wobbly at first, but after a few stumbles I retrieved my bearings. My head still hurt like hell. If asked to rate the pain from one to ten, I’d surely choose ten. I ain’t no Hazel Grace.

Trying very hard to ignore the persistent pain, I scrutinized my surroundings once more. Suddenly, there was a vicious flash of green at my nine o’clock. My heart skipped a beat. Green Lantern? Neh. I’d bet my weekly wages that Hal Jordan wouldn’t be interested in this boring Limbo of mine.

Unfortunately, the green flash seemed to be moving in my direction, *fast.* And yeah, as much as I would like to meet the legendary Green Lantern himself, the flash just didn’t seem like him. I took an involuntary step backward. Wrong move. The green flash shot at me, even faster than before, as if sensing my fear.

I ran. My legs, elongated versions of Jell-O, could barely cover a few steps when the flash caught up with me. It enveloped me instantly, flooding the surroundings and bathing me in an uncanny green hue. Startled, I stumbled.

Almost simultaneously, my eyes were attacked by a bright flash of light that reminded me of the headlights of the tractor-trailer. I averted my eyes and shivered uncontrollably. Only then did I realize the cold. It was raw and it stung my skin from the *inside.*

Another Optimus-Prime-sized truck romping for my life? No—that didn’t explain the cold. Already I could feel the goosebumps rising on my skin. Even through the freezing cold that was threatening to swallow my mind, I was vaguely certain that I would willingly trade my kidney for a goose feather parka right now.

I was partly delusional when the splitting headache came. It was a gazillion times more excruciating than a sledgehammer blow to the side of a head. This felt like my entire head was being crushed by a meat grinder.

The last thought I had before I blacked out was, *I would definitely rate this a hundred out of ten.*

**“I** hate these blurred lines~” the radio was blaring enthusiastically, along with a figure in the front seat who had her arms bobbing up and down to the rhythm. I frowned. Then I realized with a start that I was in my mom’s rented car, finally going home after my one week stay in the hospital.

My head still ached occasionally. The vision I had just now had been haunting me for days, since the first time I woke up in the hospital bed, donned in the green overalls patients wear after surgery. I remembered that, at first, I was completely disoriented, and was ready to shout frantically for help when a doctor entered.

He was middle-aged, with a bald scalp and thick glasses. He introduced himself as Dr. Gordon, and placated me with a soothing but affirmative voice that felt faintly pretentious to me. “Now, I would like you to do something for me, if you don’t mind.”

I sensed that freaking out wasn’t gonna help me to obtain any information, so I forced myself to calm down. “Do what?”

“Say ‘hello’.”

I gave him a sideways glance. “Hello?”

For some reason, Dr. Gordon was visibly relieved by the fact that I had managed to utter a casual word of greeting. I decided to take that as a cue to ask the questions that had been on my mind. “May I ask what the hell am I doing in a hospital ward? And what day is it now, huh?”

The doctor smiled. “I will surely answer your questions, young man, but first we’ll have to carry out a quick neurological examination, if that’s okay with you.”

I was starting to get irritated by the way he spoke to me like he was giving me options to choose from when in actual fact there were none. “Sure,” I replied curtly.

The neurological examination was a series of logical thinking questions that I had to answer in a certain time limit. I was also asked to state my name, birth date and some other basic information about myself. I hate to boast, but it wasn’t as hard as I expected. Even the math question was a first-grade question; I’d flinched visibly when Dr. Gordon announced that he would be asking me a math question next, but the doctor chuckled heartily. “No worries, young man. It’s not algebra.”

It happened to be two plus two.

A short while later, Dr. Gordon told me that I’d passed the examination with flying colors. I realized that this was the first time that happened. Sigh.

Misinterpreting my sigh for depression, Dr. Gordon was quick to add, “That signifies the success of the surgery and the minimal amount of damage to your brain cells. You may find it difficult to remember things on and off, but it won’t be permanent. Exercise your brain with mathematical puzzles like Sudoku and you’ll soon be back to normal.”

I nodded. “So, how did I end up...here?” I waved around.

“Well, you were in a ravine, barely conscious when the paramedics found you. They quickly performed CPR—”

“Wait a minute, you mean they found me? Like they happened to be passing by the accident site at what, twelve o’clock in the midnight?” I did remember crashing into the ravine, but not any signs of paramedics nearby.

“No, no, no.” Dr. Gordon shook his head. “We received a call. An ambulance was immediately dispatched to the exact location the call was coming from. However, when the ambulance arrived, the caller was nowhere to be found. But we found you, and thanks to the caller, we found you *in time*. If we’d got there any later you would have died from excessive blood loss.”

I wondered who the mysterious caller who saved my life was. “Do you still have the guy’s number? I think I might wanna call him to thank him personally.”

The doctor seemed uneasy. “Well, we’ve been trying to call him back for the past two days but—”

“Past two days?!” I exclaimed, sitting up abruptly. Instantly, vertigo shot up to my head and I grimaced. “Ugh.”

Dr. Gordon gently lowered me back into my inclined position. “That’s pretty normal for a patient who’s just suffered head injuries. Try to avoid any abrupt movement in the near future,” he advised. “By the way, no, we haven’t managed to track the caller. It appears that he called from a discarded phone.”

I totally ignored him. My mind was still lagging two days behind. “What’s the date today?” I asked weakly.

“Today’s the twenty-fourth.”

“Twenty-fourth of March? Twenty-fourteen?” I wanted to confirm that I hadn’t missed an entire century in Limbo.

“Yeah.” He confirmed.

*Layla’s party was on the twenty-second. I’ve been asleep for two whole days. What a record.* I mused.

“So, when can I be out of this boring ward?”

“You’ll be transferred from the ICU to a general ward tomorrow if your brain shows positive signs of recovery. If all is well, you can be discharged at the end of the week.” Dr. Gordon announced.

“I’m in an ICU?” I demanded, half-incredulous. I mean, I’ve heard a lot about the horrors of the ICU, but this was the first time I’d actually been in one. Fortunately, it didn’t seem any more intimidating than a general ward, just with a relative abundance of beeping machines, wires, and IV drips.

Dr. Gordon stared at me as if I’d just asked him whether he was a doctor or not. “You’ve just undergone a brain surgery. Of course you’re in an ICU.”

I whistled. “Sounds pretty serious to me.”

“Most certainly.” The doctor’s tone gave me the impression that my situation was *way* more complicated than just ‘serious’.

Hesitating briefly, I asked Dr. Gordon what had been troubling me since I woke up. “Does my mom...know about this?”

He nodded. “We called her right after the surgery. Normally we would have waited until she’d signed the Letter of Consent, but there was simply no time.”

“Where’s she now?”

“Your mom has been insisting on staying by your side since we called her. She just went out to grab something to eat, after being unable to do so for a whole day.” Dr. Gordon’s face was full of pity when he spoke.

My eyes blurred. Suddenly, I was back to when I parted with my mom before the party. Her hurt expression appeared in my mind, and I felt another surge of warm tears that threatened to overflow at any moment now.

Dr. Gordon was an understanding man. He patted me gently on the shoulder. “I’ll go get her now while you try to grab some rest, okay?”

I nodded, sniffling.

Before leaving, Dr. Gordon took a last glance at me. I wasn’t sure what I saw in his eyes, but I felt like he was staring at me as if my survival was an incredible miracle.

**“Y**ou’re awake.” My mom’s voice dragged me out from my reverie. I must have made some noise; a groan, a moan, a snicker or a sniff when I was in recall mode.

“Yeah.” I smiled weakly.

Surprisingly, my mom didn’t criticize me for turning her Honda into a wrecked Diet Coke can. The car was found in the worst state possible; with the windscreen shattered and the entire front part mashed, bursting all four tires. It was a miracle that I survived the crash—the paramedics had commented—not to mention escaping with no broken bones. Well, except for two long gashes to both sides of my head, whiplash, and a severe concussion. Some said that I got lucky. Me? I couldn’t care less. I was thankful to be alive.

“You hungry?” She was looking at me through the rear-view mirror. I smiled reassuringly at her.

“Not really. But I wouldn’t mind a burrito.” I admitted, spotting the familiar red and white ‘Del Taco’ sign coming up ahead.

We pulled up beside a red Ford EcoSport. Mom wanted me to stay in the car, but I insisted on following her out. I wasn’t going to let her treat me like a four-year-old. Just because I took a knock to the head a week ago didn’t mean I couldn’t buy a burrito on my own.

My mom was careful enough not to let her feelings show when she first spoke to me in the ICU. But she couldn’t hide her joy. She was smiling all the time, with tears in her eyes. I never imagined my mom to be such an emotional woman behind her steel-like façade.

My stay in the hospital wasn’t a vacation. Afflicted by unrelenting headaches, I was constantly swallowing Tylenol. I wasn’t allowed too much though, as Dr. Gordon said he wanted to see me ‘bright and alert’. The drug numbed the pain, but gave me hallucinations. Mom had told me that I kept mumbling something about Dad in my delirious state. Once, I even mistook a nurse for my mom.

To my dismay, the accident aggravated my insomnia. Or maybe it was the Tylenol. Never mind. I barely slept on my first—and last (I was moved into a general ward the next day)—night in the ICU, twisting and fidgeting restlessly on my bed. I ended up reading *The Fault in Our Stars*. Mom had given it to me, hoping to provide me with some company when she returned home for the night. It helped. I half-laughed, half-cried myself to sleep.

When I complained to Dr. Gordon about my sleeplessness the next morning, he prescribed some Ambien for me—sleeping pills to help me relax and fall asleep. I took two of them that night. They helped, but God knows their side effects.

“Good morning, sir. How may I help you?” The pretty blond cashier was smiling at me. Finally.

“I would like a...” I caught sight of the monstrous burritos on the menu board behind the cashier. I decided to go random.

“Epic Chicken Chipotle Ranch.” Pause. “Bold.” I winked at Blondie.

She beamed widely. “That would be...five dollars and thirty-eight cents.”

I carried my tray to where my mom sat. She wasn’t eating, as she just had lunch before picking me up from the hospital. At least that’s what *she* said. I didn’t believe her, of course, so I pushed my packet of fries at her. “Eat up. I’m not gonna let you starve yourself.”

My mom harrumphed at my jibe. “Now who’s playing daddy, huh.” She chided me as she delicately selected a fry, dipped in some ketchup and sent it into her mouth. My mom was always a polite eater.

I attempted a witty riposte. “You—”

Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to finish with my retort for at that moment, a terrified shriek rang out from the counter. I registered gasps and curses, and from the likes of it, it didn’t sound like someone had won the Powerball. I swiveled my head around.

A hooded guy was at the counter, an arm around the blond cashier’s neck. For a fleeting moment, I wondered if she was his girlfriend and that he was kissing her, right across the counter. Then I saw the knife.

*Holy shit.* The guy had a knife pointed at the girl’s jugular. The girl was struggling, all right, but the man had a strong grip on her, with the shiny knife threatening to slice her neck open. My eyes did not miss the thin stream of blood that slid down her throat, as the tip of the knife pierced her skin.

The man was talking in a low voice, so I pricked up my ears to hear what he was saying. “...now, slowly, hand me the cash from the register—do not attempt anything foolish, for you wouldn’t want your neck slit open, or do you?”

The girl whimpered in terror. The guy, apparently taking it for a ‘no’, nodded approvingly. “Good girl. Do as I say and you’ll be safe, I promise.”

Have you ever been betrayed by your legs? Like those moments in your dream when they simply don’t obey you. That’s exactly what was happening to me right now. One moment, I was gaping at the crime that was unfolding before my eyes, and the next, I was storming brazenly towards the thug.

*Stop, you idiots!* I screamed at my legs. Even my mom was horrified at my suicidal march. “Jarod! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she hissed under her voice.

To my horror, my legs marched themselves right towards the hooded guy with large, confident strides. Well, I wasn’t. There was no way I was going to get myself killed playing hero.

The guy heard me coming. He spun around, but did not let go of his hostage. I was struck by how awfully young he was under the hood. “What...what are you doing?” he spluttered. He obviously didn’t expect a customer to stand up against him. Neither did I, actually.

I surprised myself once again by retorting, “What do *you* think I’m doing?”

“Get back!” he gave a warning flick of his knife.

My mouth was going rogue. “Listen to me, you’re gonna put down the knife, and let the girl go.” Now that sounded pretty stupid to me. Which robber would be so dumb to listen to such sweet-talk?

Uncertainty flitted across the man’s face. For a moment I thought he was *actually* going to give in, but I was disappointed. The look of fear in his eyes was replaced by resolution, and his hand with the knife left the girl’s throat...only to come straight at me.

Now, I’ve totally no idea how it happened, but as the knife screamed towards my stomach, my body shifted backwards slightly and my right hand shot out, parrying the guy’s knife-hand with a blow to his wrist. It felt really weird—like I was *watching* my body perform the moves.

The robber’s knife clattered noisily onto the counter and down to the floor behind it. I hope it didn’t nail any of the girl’s foot.

*Okay, he’s weaponless. You can back off now.* But, no, my body wasn’t finished with him. Grabbing at the man’s wrist, I gave it a sharp twist. He winced instinctively, and his other hand came to the rescue, thus releasing the girl. I followed with a side kick from my front leg at his nearest knee, buckling it. He collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

A stunned silence ensued. I was aware of the number of eyes on me. The robber, defeated, grabbed the chance and tried to escape, but it wasn’t long before the stupefied crowd recovered. Several guys dashed off after him in pursuit. I was told later that the guy was subdued a couple of blocks down.

The crowd started cheering. The other workers rushed out from behind where they were hiding to comfort the traumatized blond girl. When our eyes met, she smiled gratefully and mouthed the words, “Thank you.”

*Sure.* I thought. *Though I wouldn’t mind a thank-you kiss on the cheek.*

Suddenly, I was overcome by a wave of dizziness. I clutched at my swimming head. Instantly, my mom was at my side, supporting me as she hustled me out of the restaurant.

“Wait—” I protested, but mom pushed on. Before I knew what was happening, I was back in the car.

“Jesus Christ!” Mom exploded as she drove off. “What the hell was that?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“What do you mean ‘You don’t know’?” She demanded, incredulous. “You just single-handedly took down a knife-wielding robber, and you’re telling me you don’t know?”

I was beginning to get pissed off. “I’m telling you I don’t *freaking* know! Why don’t you ask my arms and legs instead? They were the ones who started all this. And why are you in such a hurry?” As if on cue, a car honked as my mom swerved dangerously into the main road.

Unfortunately, my mom thought I was being a wise-ass. “Now, Jarod, you’re going to tell me truthfully—no lies—from whom are you taking martial arts lessons?”

I almost guffawed. “Nobody, mom. I know you won’t believe me, but I promise, I didn’t know anything about kicking ass until just now. For God’s sake, I almost wet myself when my legs started walking towards the guy!”

My mom pulled over abruptly by the roadside. She twisted around her seat to face me, and to my surprise (I’m getting a lot of them lately), there were tears in her eyes.

“Do you know how worried I was when he shoved the knife at you?” she choked.

So that was why she was so freaked out. I mean, yeah, what kind of mom wouldn’t freak her wits out when her son challenges a knife-wielding lunatic.

I gave her my most reassuring look as I promised her. “Don’t worry, mom. It wouldn’t happen again.”