

A Lifetime Last Night  
David Homick

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## Chapter 1

A young nurse hurried to the phone in the Intensive Care Unit. "Doctor Howard, your coma patient is awake."

She returned to the patient's bedside, checked the heart monitor, then adjusted the amounts of fluids and drugs that flowed through the two IVs. She smiled as she wrote on his chart while keeping an eye on his vitals.

Richard Dunham looked at the ceiling, unable to move. Blinding light forced his eyes closed. His brain spun up like an old hard drive as his physical systems slowly came online. He tested his arms. The sheets barely rustled. His legs did not respond at all. *Where the hell am I?*

A dull pain nagged from somewhere deep inside his head. He opened his eyes for a moment, but the light was too intense. Unable to focus quickly enough to identify his surroundings, he struggled to get his bearings. His arms and legs felt heavy, impossible to move.

Aware of someone else in the room, Richard opened his mouth to speak. Only a scratching sound emerged, accompanied by a burning pain in his throat. He blinked again.

Doctor Howard pulled back the privacy curtain and stepped inside. Though nearly six feet tall, his boyish features gave the impression that he was too young to be a doctor. He glanced at the patient, then looked at the nurse.

"I understand we have some good news?"

The nurse's excited smile greeted him. "Yes, Doctor. He's been stirring for the past ten minutes." She handed him the chart. "His vitals are improving, and brain activity has increased significantly."

The doctor sat on a stool and rolled over to the side of the bed. He looked at the chart in his hand and then to his patient.

“Welcome back. I was beginning to think you had left us for good.” He held Richard’s right eye open and waved a small penlight.

The pain that gnawed at the base of Richard’s skull spiked, and he recoiled.

“Your eyes are going to be sensitive for a while,” the doctor said.

Richard blinked several times, able to keep them open a little longer each time. He moved his lips, but again was unable to speak. The nurse offered him a few ice chips from a plastic cup, and he held them in his mouth until they melted, savoring the cold sensation on his throat.

The doctor waited for him to swallow. “I’m going to ask you a few simple questions, and I’d like you to blink once for yes and twice for no. Can you do that?”

Richard blinked once.

“Good. Now, do you know where you are?”

Richard blinked. A hospital. He could see a doctor and a nurse. The sound of the heart monitor added further validation.

“Okay. Do you know why you’re here?”

He frowned and searched for an answer, but saw only flashes of images, like pieces to a puzzle he couldn’t fit together. He blinked twice.

“I see.” Dr. Howard wrote something before looking back to his patient. “You were brought to Springfield Memorial Hospital after a serious auto accident. You’ve been in a coma for three weeks. We’ll unhook some of these tubes and wires after we’re certain you’re stable.”

Richard closed his eyes.

“I should warn you that in cases such as yours,” the doctor continued, “it’s not uncommon to experience a temporary loss of memory and/or motor skills. We’ll monitor

you here in the hospital for a while. We want to make sure you're back to your old self before you leave."

Richard opened his eyes, which were growing more accustomed to the light, and stared in disbelief at the doctor. Memory? Motor skills? At the moment, he felt numb. *Am I paralyzed? Tell me the truth, Doc. Will I walk again?*

Doctor Howard studied the chart. "Okay. One more question." He looked up. "Do you know who you are?"

Richard blinked once. *Of course, I know WHO I am. What I need to know is HOW I am!*

"All right, Mr. Riordan, that will be all for now," the doctor said as he stood. "You're doing fine. Just relax and take it slow." He smiled. "I'll come by and check on you again in a few hours."

Richard watched him walk away and stop for a moment to speak with the nurse before he left. *Mr. Riordan? Who the hell is Mr. Riordan? He's asking me if I know who I am, and he doesn't know himself. Is he even old enough to be a doctor?* He'd heard of hospitals switching babies, but never full-grown men.

Richard swallowed hard. Somehow, he had to let them know, but he could barely move and had difficulty speaking.

I must be hearing things, he thought. Maybe the nurse's name was Riordan. He took a deep breath, but it wasn't enough to stop the weight that pushed against his chest. He needed to clear up this misunderstanding as quickly as possible.

He summoned his strength and attempted to raise his left arm, watching in frustration as it moved only an inch or two before falling back onto the sheet. His fingers responded more readily, so he walked his hand across the sheet like a crab, dragging his lifeless arm behind it. He walked it up his side, crossed his stomach, and stopped in the middle of his chest.

Richard lowered his chin as far as he could. He needed to see his name printed on the plastic bracelet encircling his wrist. You couldn't go to the bathroom without the hospital staff checking that bracelet to verify your identity. Someone would be looking at it soon enough.

He turned his arm and read:

RIORDAN, MICHAEL J.

Richard squeezed his eyes. His head began to throb as he opened them for another look. *What the—*

The pain spiked and commanded his full attention. He closed his eyes until he could think again. Nothing made sense. He half expected Rod Serling to appear from behind the curtain and welcome him to *The Twilight Zone*.

Richard surveyed the room, looking for a mirror or anything shiny. A chrome band covered the edge of the tray table next to his bed, reflecting a portion of the ceiling on the shiny surface. He needed a better angle.

His eyes followed the thick gray wire that looped around the bed rail and ended at a control switch. He walked his hand into position and pressed the large button in the center of the device. Nothing happened. He moved his finger to the top edge of the button and pressed again. An electric motor whirred and the top of the bed rose. He held the button and waited for the rest of the room to come into view.

Richard lifted his head until he could see directly into the reflective surface. A stranger's face looked back at him! The alarm on the bedside monitor squealed, and his head fell back to the pillow.

Moments later, someone entered the room. Richard no longer had the strength to open his eyes. The alarm stopped. He sighed, grateful for the silence.

A hand touched his shoulder, and a voice whispered, "We need to talk."