

Book Prologue

All I could see through the thin slit in the gauze bandages wrapping my head were shadows, outlines of people moving around me. Coming out of an anesthesia fog is disorienting; a feeling underscored by nausea, headache, and dizziness. I surmised it must be nighttime. There was a sense of calm among the hospital staff. Their movements lacked urgency.

That's in contrast to the typical hospital environment where organized chaos rules—patients, guests, doctors, nurses, technicians, and cleaning staff shuttling equipment, patients, and treatments from here to there at a frenetic pace. It wasn't until a day later that I realized I was in a special ward: NICU, or Neuro Intensive Care Unit. A nurse was sitting dutifully by my bedside, occupying the middle slot of three, 8-hour shifts. One bed, one nurse. How many other beds were in this unit? I had no idea.

I heard a steady beeping that was, in a way, calming. My arm movements alerted the nurse that I was awake, trying to orient my surroundings. I could feel myself coming out of the fog in moment-by-moment increments. As I tried to move, I was assured by a voice that I was okay. I was instructed to not move so much.

My head felt like a sack of rocks. I had no idea that there were 10 pounds of ice packed into the gauze mass encapsulating my head—cold dead weight. Where was I? What was I doing in this place? That anesthesia and its concomitant fog was doing its job, even if it was releasing its grip.

Then suddenly, I realized I couldn't breathe. I tried gulping in air. No dice. I clawed at my mummified head, attempting to remove whatever was obstructing my breathing path. I could get no air flow through my nose or throat.

"What is it? Why are you struggling?" asked someone off to my left.

An alarm sounded. More shadowy figures, more voices, and intensified movement followed. Someone urgently began peeling the gauze from my face.

"What is it? Why are you shaking so much?" a man asked, looking intently into my now exposed eyes.

I moved my arm near my throat and mouth. "Are you having trouble breathing? Is that it?" the man asked.

I nodded as best I could. What I didn't realize was that, even though I was strapped down, the entire bed was shaking violently. After this surgery I still measured 6'4" and 295 pounds, down from 6'6" and 320 pounds at the time of my admission. The removal of a brain tumor from my pituitary didn't diminish my stature much. Or my ability to quake hospital furnishings.

No one could get me to stop shaking or clear my breathing passages. I could see a doctor grasping a pair of surgical scissors above me, but still nothing made sense. All I knew is that I couldn't breathe. My panic escalated.

"I cannot help you until you stop shaking!" the doctor screamed.

Somehow, through all my disorientation and fear, I could finally comprehend what he was saying. I summoned help from the only place I knew I could go.

"Mom, if you're out there somewhere, I need your help," I called out through my breathlessness and gauze. It was more like a whisper.

Still not breathing, still moving uncontrollably, my entire body suddenly went still as those words left my lips. The doctor immediately opened my mouth and inserted the scissors to cut and remove a dangling wad of gauze from my throat. Did this procedure take a minute? Ten seconds? I had no idea. But a sense of calm returned after he pulled the mucous encased mass from my mouth.

I could breathe again. I hungrily engorged my lungs. The movements of those around me subsided. My mom, long ago taken from me in a freak auto accident, once again proved that she would always be there for me.