

*It's All in My Head*

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Kristen James



## Chapter One

Of course I didn't know it just then, but this little event would make me question my sanity and everything about my life. I came to, alert enough to know I'd passed out, but I couldn't remember why. The ground started swelling like waves rolling under me. Maybe I was moving? It felt nice, happy even, until pain splintered my head. I heard voices around me and a humming noise like an engine. I didn't feel so hot.

"Avery, honey, can you hear us? Can you blink or squeeze my hand?"

Who was that? And what was with the squeezing? I felt around in my body, trying to move, and actually came out with some kind of monster moan.

And, oh my gosh, that made my head hurt. Several people spoke all at once, expecting me to answer, but I couldn't manage any more. The humming came from a loud engine, I realized, and I was lying flat on my back. I made out a voice saying, *We're taking you to the hospital.*

It hit all at once. The snowboarding trip Kristina talked me into, the giant hill that Kristina, Dawn and Jasmine said I could do no problem, catching air when I didn't mean to—flying—flying—and then crashing.

Well, I'm assuming the crashing part. I only remember things turning upside down and the white glare of the snow coming at my face in s-l-o-w motion, then fast, then s-l-o-w ...

I should have stayed home and worked on my screenplay with a big cup of cocoa, a plate of brie, apple slices and Wheat Thins ... and strawberries, if I still had some.

Nash had asked me what I was doing for the weekend. Just think, if I had stayed home we might have talked. I sighed, thinking for a second that we were on the way home, but then someone shined a bright light into my eye.

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“Good morning ... uh, Miss Waldorf.”

Morning? I squinted, feeling my head shatter in fifty different directions as the light hit my eyes. I shielded them with my hand for a second to figure out who had spoken to me. The distracted voice belonged to a fifty-or-so doctor in a white coat, salt-and-pepper hair and an oversized nose. He sat next to my bed, glancing between me and a chart in his hands with papers he kept flipping back and forth.

“Hi ...” My voice came out like everything was okay. Maybe it was.

“You took quite the tumble yesterday.” He gave me a kind but quick smile as he spoke. “So I’m very happy to see you’re awake and alert. I’m Dr. Hartley. Can you tell me your name?”

***Marcus.***

“What?” I glanced around but didn’t see anyone else.

Dr. Hartley shifted his head to the side, just slightly, and one eyebrow moved. But I knew my name. “Avery Waldorf.”

***Marcus. My name is Marcus.***

I jumped, but Dr. Hartley had his head down, writing.

“Good, Avery. Do you know what day it is?”

“Saturday ... er, it was Saturday when I crashed down the mountain.” I glanced toward the curtains and the way the sun was slanting through. “Is it Sunday?”

“Ah, yes. Sunday morning.” He put on his glasses to make notes on his clipboard. “Do you know the date?”

“The fif—no, the sixteenth.” I’d lost a day. The doctor wrote on his paper again.

***Where am I?***

What? I glanced around and back at the doctor, who wasn’t responding to that voice. I didn’t answer him, either. It had to be a side effect. It wasn’t like a weird echo in my head or the way things sound when your ears are plugged. The

voice sounded like it came from right next to me, *but no one was there.*

Why, oh why did I go snowboarding with them? I could have stayed home and got some work done while the house was quiet. Reaching up, I softly skimmed my hand over my hair and felt the bulge on top of my head.

***Hello? Yo, doc! Yoohoo!***

I wasn't sure it'd work, but I thought at the voice, *He can't hear you, now be quiet!*

"All right, then." Dr. Hartley checked my eyes and reflexes while explaining I was in the Rogue Valley Medical Center in Medford. I didn't remember much of the ambulance ride. The voice kept breaking in, and the dual conversation made my head spin. It was like the time I babysat five-year-old twins. Never doing that again.

"You're doing great, Avery. Everything looked good in your scan."

I didn't remember that either. I tried to smile, and even that sent a whiplash of pain through my head. He stood and checked the bag up on the pole. After making a note on the chart, he smiled at me again. "I'll send a nurse for your morphine. The pain should clear up shortly. We'll probably keep you for today, just as a precaution. You're alert. It's just a good idea to keep you here."

“Thanks.” I managed to keep a straight face until he walked out the door. Then I made like a squirrel doing a crazy dance across the road, flipping around to check behind the bed. The room was empty. The movement made my head throb, but at least I knew none of my friends were standing behind the hospital bed, suppressing a laugh at their joke.

Where were they? They left me at the hospital?

***What the hell is this?***

The voice was definitely *in* my head. My fall must have caused some damage, so why didn't something show up in my scan? I felt around for some kind of button to call a nurse.

***Hello? I hit my head? What are you talking about?***

“No, *I* hit *my* head trying to freaking snowboard.” I looked around again, even knowing I wouldn't see anyone there. How could a concussion make me hear voices? When I yanked in a breath, it sounded like I was about to cry. I gripped the blanket—I was *not* breaking down.

***HEY! Who are you, and why am I hearing you?***

“Okay, whoever you are,” I whisper-hissed, “calm the hell down.”

I just needed to backtrack, think this through, figure it out. The day before was clear in my head, from driving up to the ski resort, playing around on the flats for a while, and then letting Kristina talk me into going up the hill with her. There wasn't anything that unusual about it, not anything that should

cause something like this. I closed my eyes, trying to relax my body, and breathed in and out. Just in and out. In and out.

***Still here, babe. And still not sure why I can hear you.***

Oh no. The doctor hadn't flinched when I said my name was Avery, but Avery was actually a male name until about thirty years ago. What if ...?

I stumbled out of the bed, dragging the IV stand, and fell into the bathroom, hitting the light switch. It flickered on and I stood staring at my reflection, sagging in relief. My breath left in one big huff.

Crazy. I'd actually thought maybe I would see a guy's face.

***What is this?***

He went ballistic, screaming in my head. I covered my ears without any effect. The noise was going to kill me.

“Stop!” The one word ricocheted around my head, making the pain worse. Sudden nausea hit me and I bent over the toilet. Then things went black and I had to feel my way to the floor. The voice grew quiet after a minute—maybe he felt this pain and sickening ache all over too. It kept me from moving for a long time. Any movement or noise sliced through my brain and entire body.

Finally, shaking still, I splashed cold water on my face, over and over. As he calmed down, I slid down on the floor again, my hospital gown wet in front, my head pounding, ears

ringing, and stomach trying to climb up out of my mouth. Was he still there?

“You said your name was Mark?”

**No, Marcus.**

“Marcus what?”

I waited for a minute but he didn't answer. “I can hear you but can't see you, and you don't know what's going on? Can you see ... me?”

***I can see what you're looking at. I see your hands all bunched up on your lap.***

“Can you feel this?” I asked as I tapped one hand on my other arm. He didn't answer right away so I did it several more times.

***I think so. It's a bit fuzzy.***

A noise came from out in the room. Great, what if they'd heard me talking to myself?

“Hello?” a female voice called just before she knocked on the bathroom door. I hadn't gotten it shut.

I pulled myself up and peeked around the door to see a young nurse with shoulder length, very straight hair and a no-nonsense expression. I had a vague notion that my hair had frizzed all over the place like an evil cartoon villain, but it was hard to care when I felt like road kill.

The nurse helped me back over to the bed and fiddled with my IV drip. “I heard you have a headache. That's

perfectly normal after smacking your head the way you did. I'm going to up this just a bit, okay?"

***What is that?***

"Okay," I said, not even looking up at the bag.

She smiled, patting my arm in a grandmotherly way, even though she looked about twenty-five. An instant swoosh of happy, sleepy medicine rolled through my limbs. I was more than happy to follow that feeling down into oblivion. THANK YOU GOD.

"Okay, Avery, I'll be by later to check on you." She grew fuzzy as she walked toward the door.

***Oh no you don't. I need answers. Avery? That's your name? Why am I stuck here? How are you doing this to me?***

"Stuck? There's the door, asshole."

***Why are you doing this?***

I closed my eyes again and gave in to the numbing sleep, just wanting to get away from the weirdness.

***Avery! Damn it!***

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"Avery?" a small voice asked. In a wonderful twist of normal fate, I recognized Kristina's airy voice. I'd slept it off, whatever that thing had been. There wasn't any other voice. I wasn't in horrible pain. It just felt like a normal headache. I

started to open my eyes to look at her but my eyelids stuck. Even my throat felt dried out and wilted shut, so I simply lifted a hand in response.

“Avery! Oh, my gosh, I am so sorry about yesterday. Are you awake?”

***Yes, isn't that nice. You're awake. Maybe we could work on this little problem, if you're not too busy.***

Oh, god. I groaned and felt Kristina's hand on mine. If I weren't so out of it, I'd have grabbed her hand back tight.

***Hey, think I like sitting around in the dark, waiting on you?***

“Ave?” Kristina asked. It actually took using my finger to pull back my eyelids. I blinked several times and tried to clear my throat but nothing happened. Kristina gave me a worried smile. Jasmine, Dawn and the guys must have left, or maybe Kristina went home and came back?

A large Styrofoam cup sat on the stand with a plastic lid. I pointed at it.

“Are you thirsty? It's ice water.” She handed me the cup, then saw that it wouldn't work while I was lying back. I wasn't exactly flat, but almost. She set the cup on the bed and pushed the button to raise it.

I finally got the straw in my mouth and sucked down the entire cup of ice water. My throat felt somewhat better. “Thanks.”

Apparently, you don't get good sleep in a hospital, and I imagined that was working with my head injury to make me feel like crap. But my friend was here. We shared a look and I almost cried.

Kristina sat on the bed, a small smile on her lips even while her brows did a concerned lift in the middle. She's one of those lucky people that always looked good, her hair in tight spiral curls, her skin glowing and clear, and her hazel-almost-green eyes always looking like she's sweet and caring. She's so sweet in fact that she never complains about her curly hair, knowing we all love it. I like to wrap it around my finger.

"I feel so horrible," she said, her brows pinched. "I should have never talked you into going down that hill."

"It's okay. I'm good." How could I be upset with her? She's been there for me since we met on our first day on campus. College wouldn't have been half as fun without her. "Well, there's ..."

***Don't!***

I tried to talk but couldn't push my voice out.

*You—Marcus—are you doing that?*

***You can't tell her I'm here.***

"I'm okay, really," I said, unsure if it was me or him talking. Was that possible? Could he do that?

Kristina sagged with relief but her eyes got shiny. She was probably up all night, worried that I'd be mad at her. She

always worried about what I thought, which is a nice change from the rest of the world. When she figured out Kyle liked her, she was sick to her stomach for two days because I had gone out with him first. She wouldn't even talk to him without my blessing, so then of course I gave it to her. How could I hold back from a friend like her?

***Um, 'cause it was your man?***

She gingerly smoothed my hair back, looking at the bruise.

“Is it bad?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” she answered, laughing, “but it’s mostly hidden by your hair. Thank god you didn’t land on your face.” She sucked in air, almost like she’d make something bad happen with those words. “You scared me.”

“Scared myself. At least, if I’d been thinking when I was lying there. I was pretty out of it.”

I had a bunch of questions, like what had happened after my accident the day before, but I didn’t want to push it with my throat. Maybe it was sore from being out in the cold? I hoped I wasn’t getting sick on top of almost cracking my head open.

***Great. A worry freak. I’ve got questions too.***

*Shut up!*

I jerked and the giant cup fell over. Kristina grabbed it and set it on the stand. “So, Dawn and Brandon had to get

back, and Jasmine went with them. Kyle was going to stay, but I told him to get back so he could go to work. I mean, after I found out you were all right. We were all here until after the scan. We were all freaking out. I mean really freaking out.”

The young nurse came back in to check on me. While she was there, an orderly brought a tray with soup, crackers and steamed veggies. The soup smelled okay—something so bland I wasn’t sure what it was. If only I had my crispy rice crackers from home and some freshly ground pepper.

Kristina talked—and so did the crazy voice—while I sipped the soup.

***I just don’t get it. Why the hell am I stuck in some crazy chick’s head?***

*Then leave!*

“Ave?” Kristina’s voice went up an octave.

“Yeah?” I couldn’t help shaking my head—ouch—thinking it would clear it. It was like sitting between two friends at a loud football game with both people talking at the same time.

“Are you tired? It doesn’t seem like you’re listening.”

“Sorry. My mind’s a bit fuzzy. They have me on morphine, and I did knock my head yesterday.” I tried for a weak smile.

“Well, I can let you get some rest. I’ll go make some calls. Kyle said he’d come get us.” She lowered the bed again.

“Okay, good. Thanks.” I smiled as she walked out, throwing one last look at me.

***Cute. She's more sweet than hot. Nice ass, though.***

“Oh, no, you don't go there. You are not checking out my friends, got it? And you're wrong. Kristina is beautiful, hence every guy we know giving her double takes all day long.” I was talking out loud, wasn't I? I glanced at the door, half expecting to see Kristina standing there with wide, shocked eyes. That voice sounded *so* real—just like Kristina and the nurse. I huffed out a breath, trying to get comfortable, and contemplated telling someone about this. Maybe they could run another scan and figure it out. Fix it.

***No!***

“Why not?”

***Look, I don't know what's going on, but I ...***

*What?* I wanted to press him, but he sounded scared.

***No, I am not scared. I just don't know ... where I am.***

I waited, confused, and a little scared about that. Why was he here in my head if he didn't know why? If he was haunting me, wouldn't he know about some unfinished business?

***What the hell! I am perfectly fine, okay? I don't have any unfinished business, and I am NOT dead.***

“Then why are you in my head like this? Listen, maybe we should try to figure this out.” I looked around like I'd find someone to look at while speaking. Finally I looked up toward

the ceiling. “Were you really sick or something? Or do you remember being in a car?”

***I wasn't in an accident.***

“Okay, fine. What were you doing before you woke up in my head?”

Silence. I waited through a long minute and then Kristina walked in with a paper bag.

“Snacks! They had muffins in the cafeteria. I grabbed yogurts too.” She held up different items. At the bag of pretzels, I made a face. “Those are for me, and I promise to eat them away from your breathing space.”

***What's with her?***

Like the good friend that she was, Kris knew I hated pretzels, even the smell. It amazes me that people can eat them when they taste like camel piss. Not that I actually know what camel piss tastes like, but I'm pretty sure it's pretzel flavored.

“Muffin?” she asked. “There's cranberry and apple crumb.”

“Umm.” My stomach felt off, but I was still hungry after the soup. “Maybe yogurt instead.”

She handed me a Mountain Blueberry yogurt and sat on the bed. We ate and chatted, and then she held my hand when my stomach didn't like having food after all. I kept it down, though, and then fell asleep at some point. I woke up later, finding the room empty, and my bladder making me get up

whether I wanted to or not. I was washing my hands before I realized Marcus hadn't said a word in a while. The morphine. Doh. I laughed out loud, even though it vibrated my head in a painful way.

When I opened the door, Kyle was there, sitting in a chair so close to Kristina that their knees touched as he leaned in toward her, making their own little private space. It was only the tiniest of memories that I dated Kyle for six months before he and Kristina were an item. That was ancient history, though. Especially to them.

I moved enough for them to notice me. Kyle glanced at me for a millisecond before dropping his gaze to the floor.

"What're you laughing about?" Kris asked me while swatting his hand away from her knee.

I walked carefully to the bed with the drip pole, just in case I wasn't a hundred percent yet, before answering. "I thought I heard some weird noises, but it's better now, and I realized it was the morphine. I was high for a while or something."

***On morphine? I'm not so sure about that, babe.***

*Oh, what do you know?* I brushed him off until I realized I'd heard him again. Kyle might have given Kristina a look. I caught the expression on her face as she tried to convey something to him without me seeing.

“Funny, huh?” I asked, settling back and pulling the blanket up to cover the hospital gown.

Kris stood up, playing with the zipper on her gray jacket. “I’m going to the nurse’s station to ask when you’re being discharged. This is getting crazy. They keep telling me one thing but nothing happens.”

I gave a weak okay as Kyle hopped up and followed her out. He wore loose jeans and an oversized black hoodie today. Sometimes I wonder what I ever saw in him. He’s not super tall for a guy, maybe 5’7”, with light brown hair and blue eyes. He’s good looking, but when I think about it, he’s kinda plain too.

It sounded like the voice huffed an irritated sigh, like I was bothering him by thinking. Hello, it was my brain.

***I prefer Marcus to “the voice.”***

Marcus. That’s all I knew about him, his name. It had to be from the concussion, which meant it’d go away. The doctor said I was fine ... except they hadn’t released me yet.

I’d be in the car with just Kris and Kyle for the drive home. They’ve been together a year now, and I was pretty sure he’d propose sometime soon. Or maybe I was wrong, and he’d wait until after graduation. But by all accounts, they were on the road to getting engaged, graduating, getting married and starting a life together. Buying a house. Having kids. But