

Amber

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For Alistair, Antonia, Will and Tim

ONE

Sunlight shone through the window. It warmed my face and imprinted small red circles behind my eyes. It had to be time to get up, but waking was such an effort. To drag my body into consciousness felt physically harder than swimming underwater. It was tempting not to bother, but I had a nagging sense of things to do. With an effort, I forced myself awake.

What was I wearing? Still dizzy with sleep I stared in disbelief at the hideous garment that I was dressed in. The effort was too much. I shut my eyes and let my head weigh heavy on the pillow, until my brain caught up with the rest of me. For an unnerving moment I couldn't place where I was. The room smelled unfamiliar; its hard, antiseptic odour stuck in my throat and made my head swim with the memory of something frustratingly just out of reach. I prised my eyes open and stared around. I'd expected to see... suddenly I wasn't sure what I'd expected, but it wasn't this plain white room, with minimal furniture and no personal stuff.

So where was I exactly? And more to the point how did I get here? I sat up and winced as a pain seared through

my head. What had I done to deserve that? It must have been something pretty spectacular judging from the state I was in. My body ached; it felt like I'd been hit by a bus. I gingerly pushed back the thin grey blanket and stiff white sheet beneath it.

'Hi there, how are you feeling?'

A middle-aged woman, large and homely, dressed in some kind of uniform, stood at the end of the bed. She was making notes on a piece of card. She smiled warmly, as if she was genuinely pleased to see me awake.

My face burned. How long had she been standing there? I brushed the back of my hand across my mouth, wiping away the drool seeping from the corner.

'Okay, I think.' It was a lie, of course, but what else could I say? 'Thirsty,' I added croakily.

The woman came forward and poured me a glass of water from a jug on a locker next to my bed. 'Here, sip this. Not too much at first.'

As she passed me the glass our two hands met. Her rich skin, the colour of polished wood, made mine seem pale and ghost-like. The water tasted wonderful. I sipped slowly, fighting the urge to gulp it down in one go.

'Better? Good. I'm Kirsty, your nurse. What's your name?'

I opened my mouth, then stopped. Good question.

What was my name? I closed my eyes while I hunted in the depths of my mind for an answer. My name? Come on, it wasn't a hard question. But my head was empty. It felt like an enormous void.

'Um,' I flushed, feeling stupid. 'I can't remember.'

There was concern on Nurse Kirsty's face. She quickly hid it with a bright smile. 'Never mind! You'll remember in a minute. Do you know where you are?'

'Hospital?' It didn't take a genius to work that one out.

'That's right. This is the Rowan Bank hospital near Kirkgreen, in Scotland. Your accent's not local. Are you on holiday?'

So many simple questions and not one answer! I gripped the sheet as I fought to control the panicky feeling swelling inside me.

'I don't know,' I whispered. I bit my lip. I was not going to cry. I'd embarrassed myself enough already without adding tears to the experience.

'Don't worry, love,' Kirsty gave me another of her reassuring smiles as she squeezed my hand. She reached for a small rectangular box attached to the belt on her uniform and pressed a button. 'Doctor Poole asked to see you as soon as you woke. He'll be here in a minute.'

Kirsty held on to my hand until the doctor arrived. It felt weird, because I didn't know her, but I didn't want her

to let go. She chatted away in a light, undemanding tone. She didn't seem to expect a response and she didn't ask me any questions. I was grateful. Kirsty's voice was soft and her accent on the vowels seemed different to mine. I let her conversation roll over me like waves breaking on a beach. Was I on holiday? If only I could remember something about myself. Anything! It didn't have to be my name. Right now I'd settle for my dress size, or favourite type of food or anything to help fill this big empty space in my head.

Doctor Poole was short and bearded but what he lacked in height he made up for in presence. Kirsty bowed her head as he marched into the room. In a matter of seconds he'd felt my forehead, shone a torch into my eyes, listened to my breathing and checked both my pulse and blood pressure. He was clearly a man who didn't waste time. I had a vague recollection of having had a similar sort of check-up not so long ago, but I couldn't remember where or why. Finally, the doctor handed me a mirror saying, 'Don't worry about the black eye. It won't take long to heal. It looks a lot worse than it is.'

My heart raced as I lifted the mirror. I couldn't wait to see myself. Then the memories would return. They had to because it wasn't possible to forget your own face. Or was it? I stared eagerly at my reflection. The bruise ringing my

left eye was something to be proud of. It would definitely get noticed at...

As I let my gaze flick to the bigger picture my throat constricted. A girl with long chestnut hair, a straight fringe dusting the dark eyelashes of hazel eyes, stared back at me. She had high cheekbones and clear skin that was tanned and healthy looking. She was about sixteen years old. Terror engulfed me. The girl was a stranger.

Doctor Poole broke the silence. 'What's your name?' he asked casually.

I couldn't manage speech so I shook my head.

'Do you remember anything about yourself? How about your age? An address? Or maybe the number of people in your family?'

The questions were easy, nursery school stuff. So why, instead of answers, was there a blankness, thicker than fog, smothering my consciousness?

Doctor Poole turned to Kirsty and said quietly, 'Nurse, did the patient have any personal effects on her?'

'Yes!' Kirsty went to the locker. She pulled open the top drawer and brought out a necklace and a slim, black, rectangular object. She held them out to Doctor Poole, who nodded for her to pass them to me.

'Do these mean anything to you?'

I took the things eagerly and placed the black object

on the blanket while I transferred the necklace to the flattened palm of my right hand. I stared at it for ages. I sensed that it was special and wished that I could connect with it. The golden chain was as delicate as a spider's web. From it hung an irregularly shaped amber stone, with a zigzag of gold through the middle. The colour of the amber made me think of the setting sun. It was achingly beautiful. I longed to try it on but hesitated. I felt like a thief. Did the necklace really belong to me?

Kirsty must have guessed what I was thinking. She leaned in and, sweeping back my hair, deftly fastened the chain around my neck. 'There you go.' As she stepped back she added, 'That's so pretty.'

The moment the necklace touched my skin my fingers were drawn to the amber stone. They traced around the outline then moved on to the surface. It was cold and smooth to my touch. I loved the feel of the raised lightning-shaped bolt of gold that almost split the gemstone in two. Someone had taste. Had that someone been me, or was the necklace a present? I let it go reluctantly as I reached for the rectangular object. It was almost the length and width of my hand, with rounded corners and a slightly curved back. The surface was lighter and looked like it might be a screen of some sort. It had a round button at one end and there was a thin switch on the top edge.

The device felt solid but it wasn't heavy. I turned it in my hand, knowing that it was significant.

Doctor Poole thought so too. 'It's a mobile phone. It should list your contacts. Switch it on and we'll take a look.'

A mobile phone! Well, at least I knew what that was. I pressed the round button, then jabbed at it impatiently when nothing happened. I tried the switch at the top. The phone remained lifeless.

'It's run out of charge. Nurse, do you have a phone like that? Can you lend...?' Doctor Poole paused. 'Can you lend the patient a charger?'

'Sorry doctor, my phone's so cheap it practically came free with my cereal,' Kirsty answered.

The patient! How long would it be before I remembered my name?

Kirsty was ahead of me. 'Would you like to choose a name, love, just until you remember your old one? I'm sure it won't be for long.'

Doctor Poole nodded his approval. 'Good idea,' he agreed.

I didn't want a new name but I didn't want people to call me 'the patient', either. So what should I call myself? My hand strayed to the necklace. It was all I had, that and the mobile phone. Two small things that linked me to a life

I couldn't remember. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

'Amber,' I said.

'Good choice,' Kirsty beamed at me. She wrote it on the white card, quickly, as if she couldn't bear for me to be 'the patient' either.

'What happened? Why am I here?' With a jolt I realised that no one had said. The doctor and Kirsty exchanged a look. I could tell there was worse to come. My heart plummeted as Doctor Poole lowered his voice in the annoying way adults did when they were delivering bad news. 'There was an accident. The car you were travelling in was hit by an articulated lorry.'

'Oh!' That explained a few things. I had a sudden, uncontrollable and totally inappropriate desire to laugh. I breathed deeply. As I inhaled, a sharp pain wiped the smile clean from my face. My hand flew to my chest and I slowly let the breath out again.

'That's bruising,' said Doctor Poole, in a matter-of-fact voice. 'We X-rayed, and you haven't broken anything.'

They took X-rays. I wrapped my arms around my chest. It made me feel even more vulnerable knowing that Doctor Poole and his medical team had examined me when I was unconscious.

'The accident, was I driving?' Could I drive? I didn't remember.

Doctor Poole and Kirsty exchanged another look. Before I had time to process what it could mean Kirsty held my hand again.

‘You were a passenger,’ said Doctor Poole, his voice strangely soft. ‘You’re lucky to be alive, very lucky. Another motorist, and his son, pulled you free from your car just seconds before it exploded.’

‘My car exploded?’ I didn’t do things by halves then. But I was only the passenger.

‘What about the driver?’ I asked.

‘She was a woman; unfortunately she... she perished in the accident.’ Doctor Poole paused.

I stared at him. I had a question, but the words stuck in my throat.

A sympathetic look flashed across Doctor Poole’s face. ‘We don’t know who the lady was. She might be related to you. Then again, she might not. The accident only happened last night. Your travelling companion was burned so badly there was little to go on. We’ve established that she was probably in her early thirties. My own daughter’s sixteen. You look a similar age. It’s possible that the driver was your mother, if she was very young when she had you. I’m sorry but, for now, that’s all I can tell you.’

The shock was like a punch in the stomach. I clutched at Kirsty’s hand as I fought to breathe. Surely this couldn’t

be happening?

‘I really am very sorry.’ The words were a cliché, but Doctor Poole spoke them kindly enough.

Anger burned me. I didn’t want sympathy. It wouldn’t bring my... who though? Was the driver my mother, a sister, or a friend? I wished she was here and could tell me. A sadness that was colder than winter crept over me and snuffed out my anger. Questions crowded in my head. Did I live round here, or was I passing through? Where had I been going? I reached inside myself, searching for answers, but it was no good. No matter how hard I struggled to recall them, the details of my life weren’t available.

‘What’s wrong with me? Why don’t I remember anything?’ I hadn’t meant to sound aggressive, but fear made it come out that way.

Doctor Poole shifted on his feet. For a moment he looked uncomfortable. ‘What do you know about retrograde amnesia?’



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