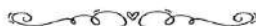


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INTRODUCTION

She runs through the middle of the street like a lunatic. Her vision is blurry. She can't even appreciate distances anymore. All the lights are brighter than they should be, large and hazy. Her heart is racing. She's lost awareness of what she's doing. She rushes through the hospital's doors and past security without a word. She's panting. Her lungs feel like they're about to take a medical leave, for good. But her eyes are so desperately wide open, even that emotionless brick of a security guard agrees to take her back to the lobby so she may be told where *he* is. A nurse who has witnessed the entire event takes a deep breath of relief seeing that the fugitive has been caught. She's not so happy to hear that the girl is not getting kicked out of the hospital, but rather being led farther inside of it. And when she does, eventually, see *him*, it's like her whole world has been torn to shreds, and she has to stop for a second and wonder if she's even alive anymore, and what kind of nightmarish hallucinations she might be having.

The girl falls to her knees next to his bed. She takes his hand and can't help but shed all of the tears that she's been holding back since she first saw him tonight. Her heart of glass is smashed to pieces, her very soul is broken.

"Forgive me! I never told you..."

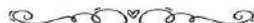


Chapter 1

AMBER

Amber has always believed in magic. When she was but a little girl, her mother would tell her fascinating stories about fairies and spirits of the forest and Amber was so captivated, so entranced, her big, orange eyes would sparkle with joy and she would sit there open-mouthed, waiting in amazement for the stories' end. To any ordinary adult, such stories would seem dumb and obviously unreal, they would be nothing but fiction created to help the little ones sleep at night. In Amber's case, however, their beautiful narration and all the carefully placed little details made those fairy tales seem real and the girl believed that with all her heart. She is and always has been a happy-go-lucky type of person. She's optimistic and cheerful and things always go her way. This means that if Amber was to say right this second "I wish it would rain!", most of the time it actually would start raining, if not the next second, then tonight or tomorrow, in any case it *would* rain. Such coincidences reinforced Amber's belief and, while her parents knew that, as she became older, she would have to start seeing reality as it is, they simply didn't want to ruin her happiness and her imaginative nature.

As time passed, Amber grew and grew, but she never ceased to believe in magic. This phenomenon continued as, upon starting school at the age of seven, she met a child who shared the same passion for magic. That child was her classmate and soon became Amber's best and only friend. They spoke all day long about fairies and spirits and gnomes and, while all the pupils just kept laughing and making fun of Amber's beliefs, her



best friend, despite eventually growing out of this passion for the supernatural, has never had a single mean thought about Amber and has always been there whenever she needed some company or guidance.

“Will!”

Clutching a hefty book, tiny bag hanging on her side, strapped diagonally from her left shoulder, a girl raises her hand with her eyes wide open and a smile on her face. A teenager her age approaches excitedly. He also carries a mountain of books, inside a school bag that he’s quickly zipped up and thrown onto his shoulder.

“Hey, Amber! Sorry for making you wait!” says the boy, panting.

“Come on, we’re gonna be late!” exclaims Amber with a slight laugh, gently punching William’s arm in annoyance.

On the not-so-busy streets at the outskirts of London, Amber and her best friend rush towards their destination. Time is quickly ticking away. Their faces on fire, small drops of water flowing through their hair, feet moving fast, as if chased by a monster... A few well-placed steps have William on the bus right on time, taking Amber’s hand and pulling her onto the vehicle about to leave. They’re both panting heavily and William is even bent over, with his hands onto his flexed knees, but they’ve made it onto the bus that’s going to take them to school. They are both sixteen years old, Amber being about five months older than William. Every morning one of them waits in front of the other’s house and they leave together. Even now that they’re in high school, they haven’t at all drifted apart. Studying at the same school, despite not in the same class, may have helped.

“Watch this, Will!”

Amber closes her eyes, then carefully says:

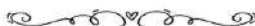
“The bus will stop...”

A couple seconds pass.

“I’m waiting...” chuckles William.

“Hmm... Now!” she says in an undertone.

The driver suddenly presses the break. They’ve reached the bus stop and must walk from here. Amber gasps, looking



enthusiastically at William, with her bare fist clenched and the book even more tightly squeezed against her belly.

"Did you see that?! It worked!" laughs Amber, with a large smile and gesturing excitedly with her free arm.

"I know you are magical, Amber," smiles William, with a slight sigh. "Don't be too over the moon, though. It could have been a mere coincidence."

"Oh, come on, you used to believe in magic... What happened to you...?"

"Nothing happened, Amber. I just... grew out of it."

They get off the bus, walk calmly until they reach the high school's large, open gates and pass through the crowded entrance. Amber gazes at William, then redirects her eyes towards the cold, solid, concrete ground upon which they are walking. Lost in deep thought and doubt, unsure of her own beliefs, Amber stays this way until they reach her classroom.

"We're here." — a few seconds pass — "Amber...? Hey, Amber!" utters William, with the face of a confused puppy awaiting his next command.

He gently rests his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Yeah!" Amber jumps and looks at William. "I'm... sorry, heh, what were you saying?" she laughs and smiles awkwardly, quickly glancing at the ground, then staring at William, while keeping her head low.

Gazing at her understandingly, the way a parent looks at his child while remembering his own childhood, the boy says:

"We've reached your classroom. School is about to start."

"Oh, yeah. Good luck with today's classes, Will!"

"Good luck to you, too! See you after school!"

Amber puts her free hand onto the book that she's tightly pressing against her belly, then subtly waves with the hand that had been holding the book that whole time. William replies with a slight, yet genuine smile and a quick wave and leaves for his class.

All throughout the day, Amber keeps thinking of what the boy said. "Could everything be a mere coincidence? It's not like some stuff doesn't genuinely feel too otherworldly not to



actually be that way! Forget that... Why did William grow out of his belief in magic in the first place? Are the two of us slowly drifting apart? Does he, too, think I'm weird and crazy, just like everyone else? No, no, that can't be... He's my only friend, he would never think —"

"Miss Daydream!"

"Huh?" Amber whispers, suddenly awoken from her sleep-like contemplation. "Yes sir!" she says loud and clear, only partially realizing what is going on.

Everyone laughs, except for Amber and the teacher.

"You are one of my best pupils, Amber. What has happened that made you so inattentive in class?"

"Nothing, mister. I'm fine."

"Well, then solve this math problem, will you?"

"Yes, of course!"

It's a difficult geometry problem that requires knowing a theorem Amber has learned in class. She solves it immediately, without much of a struggle, which shows the teacher that she has studied. The question is, what could she have been thinking about that distracted her from his math class, a class that Amber loves and eagerly awaits? Break time arrives and the math teacher takes Amber aside for a talk.

"Amber, I can see that something is going on with you. What is it?"

"I'm not quite sure, mister. Things have started to change and I don't know what to think of that."

"Well, Amber, things always change. It is normal. Whether they change for the better or not, we can only find out by living and experiencing the future."

"You're right, mister. Thank you!"

"Good luck with today's classes!" the teacher says, preparing to leave. "Oh, and... well done with that math problem. It wasn't easy!"

"Thank you, mister! Have a good day!"

The teacher smiles and nods, gradually disappearing down the hallway. Amber goes back into her classroom, haunted by the scenes of embarrassment that are constantly replayed

