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**L.M. Aria**

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***HELP ME REMEMBER***

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## Present

I just woke up in the hospital. My mind can't tell how I got here, why or for how long I have been laying in this bed. My head feels heavy and my body hurts. It's a bearable yet persistent pressure. I'm wearing a hospital gown, slightly bleached, and tinged here and there. I'm checking out the surroundings, completely mystified.

The room is unspectacular, having a mirror hung on the wall, a metal bed, a small table, and a closet.

I'm using my hands to stand up and, as I place my feet on the floor, I feel my organs protesting this move. I choose to ignore the pain and take two steps toward the window. The light is too bright for my eyes, yet I get used to it pretty fast.

The window frame displays some names, threats and hieroglyphs scratched on it. For a second, I'm thinking about scribbling something there myself, however, I immediately give up on this ridiculous thought.

From the other side of the window, the sight comforts me somehow, a strange feeling that has nothing to do with the place I'm in.

The wind amuses the tall trees. The grass of such a lively green, sprinkled with orange and reddish leaves, creates a beautiful landscape.

The park is full of life, but the people walking around with a nurse seem tired and sad. With their shrivelled faces as if screaming for help, crouched, they continue to put one foot in front of the other, allowing the nurses to lead them, just like trained



A keen pain in my left hand causes my train of thoughts to be cut off. As I roll up my sleeve, my eyes fall on a three-inch thick bruise all around my arm.

The next moment brings a light knock at the door and, before I could blink, a man shows up in the doorway. Wearing a white coat and black suit trousers, blond hair and a smile that seemed stamped on his face, he fills the room with a strong scent.

“May I come in?”

Looking at the name tag on his chest, which said Doctor Max, I nod in approval.

“Do you know who I am?”

As I look up, I meet the shy smile of his serene big eyes greeting me. Within a few seconds, I realize I have no clear memory.

“Where am I?” I’m asking, slightly tensed.

“At the hospital. You had an accident and I brought you here.”

“What happened?”

My breath turns heavy, as if I’m running out of oxygen, and my body starts to shake visibly. I’m feeling as if trapped in a cage lost in time and space across the Atlantic Ocean....

The doctor’s eyes send me a strange sort of emotion, somewhere between pity and compassion. I sense he has distressing news and that raises my alert level further.

“Let’s take it one step at a time. Tell me what’s the last thing you remember.”

“Not much. These bruises on my hands terrify

me” I say, rolling the sleeve of my shirt up.

“Let’s have a seat!”

Our eyes meet and, once again, I choose to ignore the discomfort caused by pain. So, I sit down, grinding my teeth.

“As a consequence of the accident you had you lost your memory, but there’s nothing you should worry about. It’s only temporary. You will remember everything, over time, just like a child who’s creating memories with each day.

His voice is confident and, strangely, it reassures me, yet it’s not enough.

“Carry on.”

Suddenly, I get the feeling that he wished I took my words back, as he doesn’t seem to have an answer. A knock at the door cuts in and a young, graceful lady dressed up like the nurses in the park steps in. She ignores me completely and says:

“Excuse me, doctor. Your presence is needed in the relaxation room.”

“I’ll be right there” he replies, in an edgy voice. “Becca, I’ll be right back with you as soon as I’m done there.”

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I slept for more than twelve hours. I feel better on a physical level. Although the pain is still there, it is bearable. I untie my hair, I run my fingers through it, then I tie it back into a ponytail. For some reason, my mind takes me to the image of a child and her mom who tresses her hair into two braids. I get a feeling that I experienced this, for real. The child is

me. I pull my knees against my chest, and I lose my sight onto the floor. I feel abandoned in the middle of nowhere, a place where no one cares about me. That makes me wonder if there's anyone out there, in this world, for me.

I startle at the sound of the door opening. It's the doctor again.

"How do you feel? I brought you some food" he goes.

"A typical English breakfast. I never enjoyed it much" I hear myself say.

"At least, you know what you don't like. It's a start."

With a subtle smile, I grab the plate and place it next to me.

"Tell me, please, what's going on? Why is it that I don't remember anything?"

I'm strong enough to hear what he has to say, good or bad.

He sighs, then he sits on the not too steady chair next to me and says:

"I live next door to you. I arrived pretty late at home that evening and I was too tired to fall asleep. I went into my office, with the intention of reading a few pages to force my eyes to sleep, when I heard you. In the beginning, I thought it was an animal, yet, when I looked outside, I saw you in front of your house, laying on the grass. I could hear your cry as clearly as if you were there with me. My mind built the worst case scenario. When I got near you, I asked what had happened, but you kept on crying, with red swollen eyes. The only thing I identified on your face was terror. I took you into my arms

and I felt your heart pumping so hard that, for a moment, I thought it would pierce your chest. You looked at me, willing to speak, yet I didn't succeed in making sense of any of your words. I was unable to understand what should have been the most appropriate action to take; all I knew was that I could not leave you. For a while, I stood there, freezing alongside you. But then I realised that my arms holding you were numb. As soon as you calmed down, I managed to persuade you of accompanying me here, at the hospital. Ever since that day, you slept unceasingly. You would wake up for a few seconds to fall back asleep. This went on for three days, until yesterday. You know the rest."

Lost, I'm watching him tell a foreign story to me. His words seem to drop from another planet, as nothing he says is familiar or looks like an experience I've had. I am simply afraid of the unknown. Did this really happen to me?

My eyes get flooded with tears and I'm shaking. I'm afraid of the dream I'm trapped in. I fear for my life.

My thoughts are cut off by images invading my mind. I get no clear picture, yet they give me terrible shivers. *I'm smelling blood and I feel the strong hand squeezing my cervix, as if twisting the neck of a still doll, eventually leaving me breathless. My eyelids feel heavy and I'm doing my best to scream. I'm struggling, kicking with my fists and feet, yet he won't move a muscle. His arm is holding me even tighter and the pain leaves me paralysed, causing me to become its prey.*

"I recall a man."



“Who is he? Can you describe him?”

“Unfortunately, no, I can not.”

I’m lost in my own thoughts and memories. I’m juggling two parallel worlds: one I am unable to recognise and another hiding the path I want to uncover. The latter is an unknown twisted road swollen by darkness.

“All right. We’ll take it one step at a time. Now, get some rest. Let’s talk some more, afterwards. OK? As soon as we figure out what happened, we can make the most appropriate decision.”

As he leaves, I’m heading toward the window. I’m looking at nothing as my brain is stuck. All I want is answers, as I need to know what’s going on with me.

Then, I’m going back to bed hoping for sleep to embrace me.

*I’m in a room I don’t know, with darkness preventing me from seeing anything around me. For a few moments, I sit still, allowing my eyes to get used to the darkness; then, I take a step forward and go downstairs. My name is being called, like an echo, making me realise I’m not alone. I seem to recognize the voice. Some dim wavering light pull me to it, calling me to take a closer look. A silhouette shows up, only a few steps away. It’s not walking, it seems to be floating. For moments in a row, I’m struck by terror. The silhouette taps my shoulder, then it calls my name. It’s my mother! Her face is distorted, with the left cheek being merely a dangling piece of flesh. I can see her bones and veins. I close my eyes for a second, praying that it’s just a nightmare I can wake up from. When I open*

*them, the same figure is now standing still in the doorway. When I call, she doesn’t hear me, yet she suddenly turns at me. I’m afraid of her now, so I’m going as far from her as possible. I want to vanish, to wake up! Instead, my footsteps take me to the lit up room. Oddly enough, as I reach the doorstep I see myself laying on the floor in a pool of blood. Incapable of having any sort of reaction, I cover my mouth with my hand, looking at myself as if into a reality distorting mirror. The laying image of me is staring at me sitting in the doorway, as if telling me something. My own words strike me heavily, in an excruciating scream: “Run!”*

My own terrifying scream wakes me up. My body straggles from the wet sheet. It’s already morning time. I gather myself and realize I’m still on the hospital bed, barely waking up from a dream of death.

An agonising pain in my chest prevents me from breathing. The entire room is spinning around, making the pressure in my head unbearable. I crawl to the door, hitting it with my fists, hoping for someone to hear me out. A few moments later, which seems like forever, the door opens.

“Oh, God!” the doctor says.

His concern is obvious. From the floor, he takes me to the bed. He checks my temperature and heart rate.

“What happened? Do you feel any pain?”

“Why do memories hurt?”

The blond nurse enters the room. Both the doctor and I ignore her presence.

“You need to take it easy.”

He takes my hand into his and caresses me in a comforting way.

"I believe I know what happened the night you found me. It all began when I was just a child."

### Past

I had just turned sixteen. There were only a few days left for the long awaited summer holiday to start. I wasn't a very sociable person, by nature - I would rather choose to read something than engage in useless chats. I used to immerse myself in books of any kind, mostly non-romance, even though I considered myself an incurable dreamer.

Fashion has never been my cup of tea; to me, clothes are nothing but essentials used to cover our bodies. That's why my father would always make it a subject for debate, in a subtle manner suggesting that I should be more feminine, to stand out and make friends. I never found a reason for such conversations, yet he was so absent that I got used to not having him around.

The time he spent with us was becoming shorter and shorter. Hours on-call, midnight calls and long shifts have become so hard to handle for my mom that she grew into despising his job. I remember my father telling me: "A doctor always puts his patients above everything else". Until one day, when my father said he had a surprise. None of us paid any attention to this affirmation; from my part, it was mainly because I had just woken up and I had no drive to start a new school day. He got up, to catch our attention, and said:

"Starting today, you will see me more often."

These words shook us both. He carried on while we looked at him, perplexed:

"Last night, I resigned. I will no longer be just a guest here. I want to get involved with my family. I found a huge house in the countryside with an even greater courtyard. As a bonus, we get peace and quiet, as well as the fresh air we all need. Therefore, I bought it. Not to mention that the price was highly convenient."

"What?" my mother yelled. "Don't you think we should have talked about this, first?"

"I wanted to surprise you. I know I was way too absent and I wanted to make it up to you."

"Even so, Peter! It's a hasty decision."

"I thought that was what you wanted."

"And I thought that when we make a decision, especially one affecting us all, we should talk about it. Becca needs a school transfer and she's a high-school senior. Did you consider this?"

"It's too late now. Do you want me to cancel everything? Speak your mind, what do you want me to do?"

"Even your resignation was inconsiderate, don't you think?"

"I don't know about you, mom, but I'm happy to get a transfer from this school. A new beginning sounds promising. I can't stay longer; the bus is here."

I got up, hugged them, and left while their argument was still on. I don't know what their resolution was, but when I got back, peace and harmony greeted me.

In less than a week, we were already on our way to the new home. I put on my headphones, grabbed “The Sherlock Holmes Casebook” and let time pass. No remorse took me over for leaving the house I was born in. I said goodbye to no one and nothing could have held me back.

### Present

**B**efore opening my heart to the doctor, a complete stranger, negativity rushed through my bones. Now, although he is still a stranger, by telling him more of my story I feel lighter, somehow. At least, there’s hope left...

### Past

**T**he house was huge - maybe too big for just the three of us. I had always been fascinated with the old Tudor style; at the same time, though, I found it gloomy. The flower garden in front was also impressive and my father seemed very proud of his purchase.

“Do you like it?” he asked as we got out of the car.

“What sort of question is that? I can’t wait to choose my room.”

Giving me a hug and a kiss on the forehead, took the keys of the property out of his pocket.

“Would you like to be the first one to enter our new home?”

I took the keys out of his hand and ran to the door. Upon opening in a hurry, I entered the long,

bright hallway.

At my left, there was a small study, and the living room was at my right. At the end of the hallway, right under the staircase leading to the upper floors, there was a small service toilet. Right in front of me, I found a big fancy kitchen, with glass doors, leading to the backyard.

My house tour continued upstairs. On the left, I found the first bedroom, with a front view offering me the chance to observe the gardens next door; the second bedroom also had a balcony. The next floor had the same chamber arrangement, with rooms as large as the others; the only difference was that the bathroom had a bathtub instead of a shower cabin. I could already picture myself, covered in bath foam, having a read in the silence of night.

As I was inspecting every corner of the house, my parents were bringing in the luggage.

“I decided over my room. Which one will you two choose?”

“We don’t know yet” my mom replied, with a smile. “We didn’t reach as far as you did. Would you rather help us unpack than cause chaos by running around?”

I went to the car and took a lighter box, with my name on it. As I got back, there was something strange about my parents’ look.

“You’ll get a job here, Peter. Don’t worry about it.”

“What if I don’t?”

“We’ll take care of it when the time comes. Still, you should have considered this before making this purchase.”

"Sarah..."

"What's done is done. All I ask is for a little bit of patience. We'll sort it out."

"You're right, I'm sorry! I'm just worried. I'll look for something starting tomorrow. Although..."

"Yes?"

"I think I'd like to reconsider my options."

"What do you mean?"

"As a doctor, no matter where I go, I won't be home much. I thought about looking for a job at the university, as a professor. This way, I would have a fixed schedule and I'd be home for dinner every evening."

The satisfaction on my mother's face must have been perceivable even from Saturn. They hugged in a way I didn't see them in a while, then she said:

"Let's choose our room before Becca takes over the house."

As they were heading towards the other level, the stairs would squeak under their footsteps. Back into my room, I took the few books out of the box and placed them on the bookcase shelf.

Most of the house was furnished and it looked pretty neat and clean, both on the inside and on the outside.

"Hey, where are you?"

"Down a floor."

I climbed down the stairs in a hurry and I entered the first room. There, I found my mother taking stuff out of a box and my father laying on the messy bed, plugged to his laptop as if he and real life had nothing in common. I noticed he was already looking for jobs, although I overheard him say he would only

start the next day.

"Dad, are you OK?"

"Sure. Did you finish unpacking in your room?"

"If one box counts, then yes, I did."

"Come" he said, smiling "let me help you out."

He shut down his laptop and we went down to the ground floor, together.

"You look... I don't know, sad?"

"No, not at all. Don't you worry about it. Everything will be just as we imagined."

I guess even he could understand how insincere his words were. Together, we carried a few boxes up, then he went back into his chamber.

Shortly, in the doorway, I spotted my mother observing how I set my stuff in order, while daydreaming.

"You scared me!"

"I didn't mean to."

"I'm almost done."

"Come here. You can finish tomorrow. It's late already."

I cleared up my bed and I snuggled under the blanket. My mother wished me goodnight and stepped out.

"Do you want me to close the door?"

"No."

I never liked having the door closed while sleeping as I felt like choking, even though I didn't suffer from claustrophobia. All I had was too much of a rich imagination taking me to far not-so-cosy lands. Back then, I used to believe in spirits, ghosts, and monsters. I had a feeling they could have grabbed me entirely, playing with my subconscious mind.

