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try
not to
breathe

HOLLY SEDDON



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For Boo and the babies

CHAPTER ONE

Amy

18 July 1995

Music thudded through Amy's body and seized her heart. Music so loud that her eardrums pounded in frenzy and her baby bird ribs rattled. Music was everything. Well, almost everything.

Later, the newspapers would call fifteen-year-old Amy Stevenson a 'ray of sunshine,' with 'everything to live for.' Her headphones buzzed with Britpop as she trudged the long way home, rucksack sagging.

Amy had a boyfriend, Jake. He loved her and she loved him. They had been together for nearly eight months, walking the romance route around the 'top field' at school during break time, hot hand in hot hand, fast hearts synchronized.

Amy had two best friends: Jenny and Becky. The trio danced in a perpetual whirlpool of backstories, competition and gossip. Dizzying trails of 'she-said-he-said-she-said' preceded remorseful, sobbing hugs at the end of every drunken Saturday night.

Nights out meant lemon Hooch in the Memorial park or Archers and lemonade at The Sleeper pub, where a five-year-old wouldn't have been ID'd. School nights meant 6 p.m. phone calls once it hit the cheap rate. She would talk until her step-dad, Bob, came into the dining room and gave her *that* look: it's dinner time, get off

my phone. Thursday nights were *Top of the Pops* and *Eastenders*; Friday nights were *Friends* and *The Word*.

Amy's Kickers bag grew heavier with every step. She shifted it awkwardly to the other shoulder, tangling her wires so that one earbud pinged out of her ear, the sounds of the real world rushing in.

She had taken the long way home. The previous day she'd got back early and startled Bob in the kitchen as he stirred Coffee Mate into his favourite mug. At first he'd smiled, opening his arms for a hug before realizing that she'd made it back in record time and must have gone across the field.

She'd had to sit through half an hour of Bob's ranting and raving about walking the safe route home, along the roads: 'I'm saying this because I love you, Ames, we both love you and we just want you to be safe.'

Amy had listened, shuffled in her seat and stifled yawns. When he'd finally stopped, she'd stomped upstairs, flopped onto her bed and smacked CD cases around as she made an angry mix tape. Rage Against the Machine, Hole and Faith No More.

As she'd surprised Bob the day before, Amy knew he was likely to be home already. Waiting to catch her and have another go at her. It wasn't worth the hassle even though the longer walk was especially unwelcome on Tuesdays. Her bag was always really heavy as she had French and History and both had stupid, massive textbooks.

Amy hated learning French with a passion; the teacher was a dick and who needs to give a window a gender? But she liked the idea of knowing the language. French was a sexy language. She imagined she could seduce someone a bit more sophisticated than Jake by whispering something French in his ear. She could seduce someone older. Someone a lot older.

She loved Jake, of course, she meant it when she said it. She had his name carefully stencilled onto her bag with Tippex, and when

she imagined the future, he was in it. But over the last few weeks she had begun to see the differences between them more and more.

Jake, with his wide smile and deep-brown puppy-dog eyes, was so easy to spend time with, so gentle. But in the time they'd been going out, he'd barely plucked up the courage to put his hand inside her school shirt. They spent whole lunch hours kissing in the top field, and one time he'd climbed on top of her but she'd got a dead leg and had to move and he was so flustered he barely spoke for the rest of the day.

It had been months and months and she was still a virgin. It was getting embarrassing. She hated the idea of being last, hated losing at anything.

Frustrations aside, Amy hoped Jake had skipped judo club so he could come and meet her. Jake and his younger brother, Tom, were driven home from school every day because his snooty mum worked as the school secretary. His family lived in the double-fronted houses of Royal Avenue. He was always back before Amy reached the two-bedroom terrace house in Warlingham Road where she lived with Bob and her mum, Jo.

Jake's mum, Sue, didn't like Amy. It was like she saw her as someone who would corrupt her precious baby. Amy liked the idea that she was some kind of scarlet woman. She liked the idea of being any kind of woman.

Amy Stevenson had a secret. A secret that made her stomach lurch and her heart thump. None of Amy's friends knew about her secret, and Jake certainly didn't know. Jake could never know. Even Jake's mum, with her disapproving looks, would never have guessed.

Amy's secret was older. Absolutely, categorically a man. His shoulders were broader than Jake's, his voice lower, and when he made rude remarks, they came from a mouth that had earned the right to make them. He was tall and walked with confidence, never in a rush.

Her secret wore aftershave, not Lynx, and he drove a car, not a bike. Unlike Jake's sandy curtains, he had thick, dark hair. A man's cut. She had seen through his shirts that there was dark hair in the shallow dip at the centre of his chest. Her secret had a tall, dark shadow.

When Amy thought about him, her nerves exploded and her head filled with a bright-white sound that shut out any sense.

Her secret touched her waist like a man touches a woman. He opened doors for her, unlike the boys in her class who bowled into corridors like silver balls in a pinball machine.

Her mum would call him 'tall, dark and handsome'. He didn't need to show off, didn't need to boast. Not even the prettiest girls at school would have thought they stood a chance. None of them knew that Amy stood more than a chance. Way more.

Amy knew that he would have to stay a secret, and a short-lived one at that. A comma in her story, nothing more. She knew that she should keep it all locked in a box; perfect, complete, private, totally separate from the rest of her soundtrack. It was already a memory, really. Months from now she would still be snogging Jake at lunchtime; bickering with her friends; coming up with excuses for late homework; listening to Mark and Lard every night on Radio One. She knew that. She told herself she was cool with that.

The feeling Amy got when he touched her hip or brushed her hair out of her face was like an electric shock. Just the tips of his fingers made her flesh sing in a way that blocked out everything else in the world. She was both thrilled and terrified by thoughts of what he could do to her, what he would want her to do to him. Would they ever get the chance? Would she know what to do if they did?

That kiss in the kitchen, with the sounds of the others right outside. His hands on her face, a tickle of stubble that she'd never felt before. That one tiny kiss that kept her awake at night.

Amy turned into Warlingham Road and the ritual began. She

put her bag down on the crumbly concrete wall. She unrolled the waistband of her skirt so it was no longer hitched up. She decanted her things, finding her Impulse 'Chic' body spray and cherry lip balm.

Amy shook the spray and let a short burst of sweet vapour fill the air. Then, after looking around self-consciously, she stepped into the perfumed cloud, like she'd seen her mum do before a night at the social club.

She ran the lip balm along her bottom lip, then the top, kissing them together and then dabbing them matt with her jumper. On the off-chance that Jake was waiting, she wanted to be ready, but not make it obvious that she'd tried.

Amy's Walkman continued to flood her ears. 'Do You Remember the First Time?' by Pulp kicked in and Amy smiled. Jarvis Cocker smirked and winked in her ears as she set everything back in the bag, shifted it to the other shoulder and continued down the road.

She saw Bob's van in the road. Amy was twelve doors away from home. As she squinted, she could make out a figure walking towards her.

She could tell from the way the figure walked – confident, upright, deliberate – that it wasn't Jake. Jake scuttled around like a startled crab, half-running, half-walking. Amy could tell from the figure's slim waist that it wasn't Bob, who was shaped like a little potato.

When Amy realized who it was she felt a rush of nausea.

Had anyone seen him?

Had Bob seen him?

How could he risk coming to the house?

Above everything, Amy felt a burst of exhilaration and adrenaline thrusting her towards him like iron filings to a magnet.

Jarvis Cocker was still talking dirty in her ears; she wanted to make him stop but didn't want to clumsily yank at her Walkman.

She held her secret's gaze, biting her lip as she clicked every button until she crunched the right one down and the music stopped.

They were toe to toe. He smiled and slowly reached forward. He took one earphone, then the other from the side of her head. His fingers brushed her ears. Amy swallowed hard, unsure of the rules.

‘Hello, Amy,’ he said, still smiling. His green eyes twinkled, the lashes so dark they looked wet. He reminded her of an old photo of John Travolta washing his face between takes on *Saturday Night Fever*. It had been printed in one of her music magazines, and while she thought John Travolta was a bit of a knobhead, it was a very cool picture. She’d stuck it in her hardback Art and Design sketchbook.

‘Hello...’ she replied, in a voice a shade above a whisper.

‘I have a surprise for you... get in.’ He gestured to his car – a Ford Escort the colour of a fox – and opened the door grandly like a chauffeur.

Amy looked around, ‘I don’t know if I should, my step-dad’s probably watching.’

As soon as her words were in the air, Amy heard a nearby front door, and ducked down behind the Escort.

A little way up the pavement, Bob set his tool bag down with a grunt. He exhaled heavily as he fumbled for his keys and opened his van. Unaware he was being watched, Bob lumped the tool bag into the passenger seat and slammed the door with his heavy, hairy hands. He waddled around to the driver’s seat, heaved himself up and drove away with a crunch of gears, the back of his van shaking like a wagging tail.

As excited as Amy was, as ready as she was, a huge part of her wanted to sprint off up the road and jump into the van, safe and young again, asking Bob if she could do the gears.

‘Was that your step-father?’

As she stood up and dusted herself down, Amy nodded, wordless.

‘Problem solved, then. Get in.’ He smiled an alligator smile. And that was that. Amy had no more excuses, and she climbed into the car.

CHAPTER TWO

Alex

7 September 2010

The hospital ward was trapped in a stillborn pause. Nine wordless, noiseless bodies sat rigidly under neat pastel blankets.

Alex Dale had written about premature babies, their seconds-long lives as fragile as a pile of gold dust.

She had written about degenerative diseases and machine-dependents whose futures lay in the idle flick of a button. She had even detailed every knife-twist of her own mother's demise, but these patients in front of her were experiencing a very different living death.

The slack faces in the Neuro-disability ward at the Tunbridge Wells Royal Infirmary had known a life before. They were unlike the premature babies, who had known nothing but the womb, the intrusion of tubes and the warmth of their parents' anxious, desperate hands.

The patients weren't like the dementia sufferers whose childlike stases were punctuated by the terror of memories.

These rigid people on Bramble Ward were different. They had lived their lives with no slow decline, just an emergency stop. And they were still in there, somewhere.

Some blinked slowly, turning their heads slightly to the light

and changing expression fluidly. Others were freeze-framed; mid-celebration, at rest or in the eye of a trauma. All of them were now trapped in a silent scream.

‘For years patients like this were all written off,’ said the auburn-haired ward manager with the deepest crow’s feet Alex had ever seen. ‘They used to be called vegetables.’ She paused and sighed. ‘A lot of people still call them that.’

Alex nodded, using scrappy shorthand to record the conversation in her Moleskine pad.

The ward manager continued. ‘But the thing is, they’re not all the same and they shouldn’t be written off. They’re individuals. Some of them are completely lacking awareness, but others are actually minimally conscious, and that’s a world apart from being brain dead.’

‘How long do they tend to stay here before they recover?’ Alex asked, poising her pen above the paper.

‘Well, very few of them recover. This summer we had one lad go home for round-the-clock care from his parents and sister, but that was the first one in years.’

Alex raised her eyebrows.

‘Most of them have been here for a long time,’ the manager added. ‘And most of them will die here too.’

‘Do they get many visitors?’

‘Oh yes. Some of them have families that put themselves through it every single week for years and years.’ She stopped and surveyed the beds.

‘I’m not sure I could do that. Can you imagine showing up week in, week out and getting nothing back?’

Alex tried to shake images of her own knotty-haired mother, staring blankly into her only daughter’s face and asking for a bedtime story.

The ward manager had lowered her voice; there were visitors sitting at several beds.

‘It’s only recently that we’ve realized there are some signs of life below the surface. Some patients like these ones,’ she gestured to the beds behind Alex, ‘and I’m talking a handful across the world, have even started to communicate.’

She stopped walking. Both women were standing in the centre of the ward, curtains and beds surrounding them. Alex raised her eyebrows, encouraging her to continue.

‘That’s not quite right, actually. Those patients had been communicating all along, the doctors just didn’t know how to hear them before. I don’t know how much you’ve read, but after a year, the courts can end life support if they’re being kept alive by machines. And now with the cuts...’ the manager trailed off.

‘How terrible to have no voice,’ said Alex, as she took scribbled notes and swayed, nauseated, amongst the electric hum of the hospital ward.

Alex was writing a profile piece for a weekend supplement on the work of Dr Haynes, the elusive scientist researching brain scans that picked up signs of communication in patients like these. She hadn’t met the doctor yet and was skidding towards her deadline. A far cry from her best work.

There was one empty bed in the ward, the other nine quietly filled. All ten had identical baby-blue blankets within their lilac-curtained cubicles.

Inside those pastel walls, nurses and orderlies could hump and huff the patients into a seated position, wipe their wet mouths and dress them in the clothes brought in from home and donated by arms-length well-wishers.

A radio fizzed from behind the reception area, as chatter and ‘golden oldies’ alternated with each other. The barely audible music jostled with the sighing breaths of patients and the beeps and whooshes of machinery.

In the furthest corner of the ward, a poster caught Alex’s eye. It

was Jarvis Cocker from Pulp, limp-wristed and swathed in tweed. She strained to see the name of the magazine from which it had been carefully removed.

Select magazine. Long-dead, long-forgotten, it had been the magazine of choice throughout Alex's teens. She'd deluged the editor with unanswered letters begging for work experience, back when music seemed to be the only love anyone could possibly want to read or write about.

The dark-blue uniformed manager who'd been showing Alex around had been snagged. Alex spotted her talking quietly and seriously with the watery-eyed male visitor of a patient in a stiff pink house-coat.

Alex soft-shoe shuffled closer to the corner cubicle. Her shins seared with pain from her morning run, and she winced as she quickened her steps. The thin soles of her ballet pumps ground into her blisters like grit.

Most of the patients were at least middle-aged, but the cubicle in the corner had a queasy sense of youth.

The curtains had been half-pulled across haphazardly, and Alex stepped silently through the large gap. Even in the dark of the cubicle, Alex could see that Jarvis Cocker was not alone. Next to him, a young Damon Albarn from Blur mugged uncomfortably at the camera. Both had been carefully removed from *Select* some years ago, dust tickling their thumbtacks.

The scene was motionless. The bed's blanket covering a peak of knees. Two skinny arms lay skew-whiff on top of the starched bedclothes, tinged purple, goose-pimpled, framed by a worn-in blue T-shirt.

Alex had avoided looking directly at any of the patients so far. It seemed too rude to just stare into the frozen faces like a Victorian at a freak show. Even now, Alex hovered slightly to the side of the Britpop bed like a nervous child. She gazed at the bright-white

equipment that loomed over the bed and scribbled needlessly in her notepad for a bit, stalling until she could finally let her eyes fall on the top of the young woman's head.

Her hair was a deep, dark chestnut, but it had been cut roughly around the fringe and left long and tangled everywhere else. Her striking blue eyes were half-open and marble-bright. With Alex's long, pony-tailed dark hair and seaside eyes, the two women almost mirrored one another.

As soon as Alex let her eyes fall on the full flesh of the woman's face, she recoiled.

Alex knew this woman.

She was sure of a connection, but it was a flicker of recollection with nothing concrete to call upon.

As her temples boomed with a panicked pulse, Alex built up the courage to look again, mentally peeping through her fingers. Yes, she knew this face, she knew this woman.

It wasn't that long ago that Alex's powers of recall would have been razor sharp, a name would have sparkled to light in a blink. A mental Rolodex gone to rust.

Alex heard thick flat soles and heavy legs coming towards her apace. The penny dropped.

'So sorry about that,' the ward manager was saying as she puffed over. 'Where were we?'

Alex span to look at her guide. 'Is this..?'

'Yes it is. I wondered if you'd recognize her. You must have been very young.'

'I was the same age. I mean, I am the same age.'

Alex's heart was thumping; she knew the woman in the bed couldn't touch her, but she felt haunted all the same.

'How long has she been in?'

The manager looked at the woman in the bed and sat down lightly on the sheets near the crook of an elbow.

‘Almost since,’ she said quietly.

‘God, poor thing. Anyway,’ Alex shook her head a little. ‘Yes, sorry, I have a couple more questions for you, if that’s okay?’

‘Of course,’ the nurse smiled.

Alex took a deep breath, gathered herself. ‘This might sound like a silly question, but is sleepwalking ever a problem?’

‘No, it’s not a problem. They’re not capable of moving around.’

‘Oh, of course,’ said Alex, pushing strands of hair away from her eyes with the dry end of her pen. ‘I guess I was surprised by the security on the ward – is that standard?’

‘We don’t sit guard on the door like that all the time, just when it’s busy. Other than that, we tend to stay in the office as we have a lot of paperwork. We do take security very seriously though.’

‘Is that why I had to sign in?’

‘Yes, we keep a record of all the visitors,’ said the manager. ‘When you think about it, anyone could do anything with this lot, if they were that way inclined.’

Alex drove slowly into orange sunlight, blinking heavily. Amy Stevenson. The woman in the bed. Still fifteen, with her Britpop posters, ragged hair and girlish eyes.

As Alex slowed for a zebra crossing, a canoodling teenage couple in dark-blue uniforms almost stumbled onto the bonnet of her black Volkswagen Polo, intertwined like a three-legged race team.

Alex couldn’t shake the thought of Amy. Amy Stevenson who left school one day and never made it home. Missing Amy. TV-friendly tragic teen in her school uniform; smiling school photo beaming out from every national news programme; Amy’s sobbing mother and anxious father, or was it step-father? Huddles of her

school friends having a 'special assembly' at school, captured for the evening news.

From what Alex could remember, Amy's body was found a few days later. The manhunt had dominated the news for months, or was it weeks? Alex had been the same age as Amy, and remembered the shock of realizing she wasn't invincible.

She'd grown up thirty minutes away from Amy. She could have been plucked from the street at any time, by anyone, in broad daylight.

Amy Stevenson: the biggest news story of 1995, lying in a human archive.

It was 12.01 p.m. The sun was over the yardarm; it was acceptable to begin.

In the quiet cool of her galley kitchen, Alex set down a tall glass beaker and a delicate wine glass. Carefully, she poured mineral water (room temperature) into the tall glass until it kissed the rim. She poured chilled white wine, a good Reisling, to the exact measure line of the wine glass and put the bottle back in the fridge door, where it clinked against five identical bottles.

Water was important. Anything stronger than a weak beer or lager would deplete the body of more moisture than the drink provided, and dehydration was dangerous. Alex started and finished every afternoon with a tall glass of room-temperature water. For the last two years, she had wet the bed several times a week, but she had rarely suffered serious dehydration.

Two bottles, sometimes three. Mostly white, but red on chilly afternoons, at home. It had to be at home.

As Matt had stood in the doorway of their home for the last time, carrying his summer jacket and winter coat with pitch-perfect

finality, he had told Alex that she ‘managed’ her drinking like a diabetic manages their condition.

Alex’s rituals and routines had become all-encompassing. Staying in control and attempting to maintain a career took everything. There was nothing left for managing a marriage, much less enjoying it.

Alex hadn’t expected to be divorced at twenty-eight. To most people that age, marriage itself was only just creeping onto the horizon.

She could see why Matt left her. He’d waited and waited for some inkling that she would get better, that she would choose him and a life together over booze, but it had never really crossed her mind to change. Even when she had ‘every reason’ to stop. It was just who she was and what she did.

They had met during Freshers’ Week at Southampton University, though neither of them could tell the story. Their collective memory kicked in a few weeks into the first term, by which time they were firmly girlfriend and boyfriend and waking up in each other’s hangovers every day.

Drinking had cemented their relationship, but it wasn’t everything, and it became less important to Matt over time. They talked and laughed and did ferociously well throughout their courses, (his Criminology, hers English Literature) partly through frenzied discussion, partly through competitiveness. From the very first month, it was *them*. Not he or she, always them.

It had been nearly two years since the decree absolute, and she still defaulted to ‘we’, her phantom limb.

Every afternoon, before the first glass touched her lips, Alex turned off her phone. She had long closed her Facebook account, cleaned the web of any digital footprints that could allow drunken messages to Matt, his brothers, his friends, her ex-colleagues, anyone.

Alex had a few rules come the afternoon: no phone calls, no emails, no purchases. In the dark space between serious drinker and functioning alcoholic, there had been no rules. Cheerful, wobbly pitches had been sent to bemused editors; sensitive telephone interviews had taken disastrous, offensive paths; Alex had vaporized friendships with capitalized, tell-all emails and blown whole overdrafts on spontaneous spending sprees. And far worse.

Things were better now. She was getting semi-regular work, she owned her own home. She'd even taken up running.

At least once a week she planned her own death, and drafted an indulgent farewell letter to Matt and the child she'd never planned, the child they would now never have.

She sat down at her desk and opened her Moleskine notepad.
'Amy Stevenson.'

Alex had a story, and it was far more interesting than the one she had been sent to write.