

A NEW FOUND LOVE

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ACCIDENT. Head trauma. Concussion. Possible Fracture. Unresponsive to stimulus.

Fragmented words seemed to be ricocheting off bright lights and dark, intense pain. She heard loud sirens and ripping metal and felt hands touching her, hurting her. Words made no sense, and it was too hard to think.

“Open your eyes,” a deep masculine voice demanded.

It hurt too much. Every flicker of an eyelash caused explosions of pain and blinding flashes of light inside her head.

“Do we have a name on this patient?” the voice demanded.

“Not yet. There’s no identification,” a woman’s voice answered.

“Come on, young lady, open your eyes,” the deep voice demanded.

She wanted to obey and wondered why she couldn’t.

“Come on, mystery girl,” the man’s voice demanded with authority.

She opened her eyes. Bare slits and the searing pain took her breath away.

A man... a doctor in a white lab coat, came into view only inches from her face. He held her chin in place, causing an intense amount of pain. He flashed a light in her eyes and held up two fingers.

“How many?” he demanded.

“Two,” she croaked.

“What is your name?” the doctor asked.

What was her name? Everyone had a name. Why was it so hard to remember? She barely nodded, and explosions went off inside her head.

“What is your name?” the question was repeated.

“Don’t know,” she whispered. “I can’t remember, but it’s not Rebecca...”

“Rebecca, who?” the doctor asked, but her eyes closed, and she slipped into a dark void where there was no pain.

Dr. Jackson Hawkins turned to the nurse, checking off a long list on his clipboard. “Get her upstairs for an MRI, stat. Get the labs started and x-rays. If there are any broken bones, we’ll tend to them after seeing how much damage she’s done inside her skull.”



JACKSON LOOKED up from the patient he’d been hovering over since she’d returned to the emergency room. A police officer entered the emergency cubicle, and Jackson straightened, stretching his aching back. It had been a long double shift.

Sergeant Mick Richards of the Lander Police Department looked at the young woman lying in the hospital bed. He shook his head silently. Teenagers and cars didn’t mix well. This one looked about sixteen. “Is she going to make it?”

The doctor handed the medical chart to the nurse and

washed his hands at a nearby sink. As he dried his hands on paper towels, he took a long look at the girl in the emergency room bed. She was young, but there didn't seem to be any physical injuries except a deep gash on her head and glass embedded in her hand and arm. She had long black hair a nurse had tied back in a ponytail. She looked frail, lying against the white hospital sheets. He knew from the examination that the hair color had come from a box. Her natural color at the roots was blonde. Her eyes were green.

"She'll make it," Jackson said bluntly. "She's going to have one hell of a headache when she wakes up."

"She's lucky," the sergeant said. "It took the fire department almost two hours to cut her out of that old van. The vehicle plates were reported stolen several months ago in Buckston, Iowa. There's no way that van would have passed a state inspection."

"Was anyone else brought in with her?" Dr. Hawkins asked.

"She was the only person in the van. The truck driver who hit her was flown to the Trauma Center in Casper. I've already called, and it doesn't look good for him. The accident was clearly the fault of the truck driver. Witnesses said the truck ran the red light and broadsided her. Drugs were found in the truck, enough that we think he might have been selling. He was probably high on something. He was busted up pretty bad, and he's on the operating table already. They'll do the drug testing at the hospital," Sergeant Richards said with a sigh. "Has she said anything yet?"

"She said her name is not Rebecca, but she's confused. She recognized two fingers when I was holding up two fingers," Dr. Hawkins said. "All the labs aren't back yet, but there was no alcohol or drugs in her system. She has a concussion, so it might be a while before she wakes up and is coherent again."

It was a busy night in the ER, although most of the

injuries were minor and didn't require hospitalization. Dr. Hawkins kept an eye on the young woman as she was periodically rolled out of the cubicle and taken to the various departments for scans and x-rays.

He'd spent nearly an hour removing glass from her hand and arm where she had thrown her arm up to protect her face. The van she'd been driving was so old it didn't have airbags. She'd be moved to the second-floor Intensive Care Unit soon and out of his care, but he'd keep his eye on her. He always kept track of his patients, even after they were assigned to another physician.

Jackson stood over her bed, looking at the apparatuses and automatically checking the readouts.

Suddenly the girl jerked awake, wild-eyed, unfocused, and terrified. She pulled herself into a sitting position, and she gagged.

Jackson was quick to respond, and he held a basin to her mouth and let her empty the contents of her stomach. Vomiting was not an unusual response to trauma.

His young patient was in tears from distress.

"Calm down," Dr. Hawkins said, wiping her mouth with a cold cloth and gently pushing her back against the pillow. "Are you remembering? Can you tell me what happened?"

She was still wild-eyed with fright. "Someone ran into me," she gasped.

"Yes, you were in a vehicle accident," Jackson answered. "You are at the Western Wyoming Medical Center. Sergeant Richards, the police officer in charge of the case, said the other vehicle ran a red light and broadsided you."

"Are they okay?"

"There was a single occupant in the other vehicle. He was sent to another hospital."

"Where am I?" she asked, looking around the cubicle in a panic.

"You're in the emergency room of Western Wyoming Medical Center," he repeated.

"Where is that?" she demanded.

"Lander, Wyoming."

She began shaking her head violently, pushing the bed covers off her. "That's not far enough! I need to get further away. He might find me here!"

"Calm down," Dr. Hawkins said. "You are not going anywhere for a couple of days."

The young woman sat up, trying to swing her legs off the bed. She was grabbing and trying to disconnect the intravenous feeding tubes. "No! You don't understand! I have to get away!"

"Rebecca, you need to calm down," Jackson said firmly.

"I'm not Rebecca!" she snarled angrily, gripping her fingernails into his arm. "I will never be Rebecca again! Never! Ever!" She looked confused and panicked. At the same time, there was a look of determination on her face. She slumped over in the bed and sobbed. "I am Kathryn Shannon Patterson. I have always been Kathryn. They can't change who I am! I do remember, and it's not a dream. It can't be a dream!"

Dr. Hawkins called for a nurse. By the time she entered the room, his patient had closed her eyes and had slipped into unconsciousness again. Jackson ordered a room monitor to be added to the equipment attached to her. He warned the nurses that the patient might try to leave the hospital. If she needed to be sedated, he would authorize it for her protection.

Jackson repeated the name she'd given him several times under his breath. Then he returned to his duty station in the emergency room and immediately attended to another patient. When he was finished, he pulled a card from his pocket and called the police officer he had spoken to earlier.

As a doctor, Jackson dealt with scared people every day. The young girl in his care was beyond scared. She was terrified of something or someone. There was very little information he could give the police officer, only a name and the young woman's reaction to being in Lander.

Three hours later, Sergeant Richards reentered the emergency room. "I need to speak to you in private, sir," the police officer said urgently.

"Millie, I'm going to the cafeteria," Jackson said to the nurse, checking the clock on the wall. "I can use a cup of coffee."

"Me, too," the officer agreed.

Jackson grinned. "You might change your mind after you try to drink it."

Both men grimaced and shuddered after their first sips of the vending machine brew, but they took their cups and went to sit at a table on the far side of the deserted cafeteria.

"You've found something," Jackson guessed.

Sergeant Richards handed over a computer printout. "Kathryn Shannon Patterson went missing twelve years ago in a shopping mall in Idaho Falls. She was six years old. The child was last seen running toward a pet store with kittens in the window. Her mother was following her. Someone ran into her mother, knocked her purse to the floor, and scattered the contents of her shopping bags. She bent to gather her stuff, and when she looked up, her daughter was gone. The kid vanished. There was no trace of her when the police were called, and the security tapes showed a heavy-set woman leaving the mall with a little girl. The resolution of the film was terrible. It could have been anyone.

"Kathryn Patterson has been listed on every missing children's network in the U.S. and abroad. She hasn't been seen or heard of since. There are fingerprints and DNA samples on file. I need the same from your patient for verification."

Dr. Jackson Hawkins looked at the missing child poster and the photograph of the young child. "She's blonde in these photographs, and the eyes are the same. She was a beautiful little girl and still is, although her hair has been dyed a dark brown. The roots show that she is a natural blonde. If she went missing at six years old, in 2010, that means she turned eighteen two weeks ago, and she's a legal adult."

"I'm going to need to talk to her, Doc," Sergeant Richards said. "If she is Kathryn Patterson, we need to find out where she's been for the last twelve years. She's got folks out that have searched for her since she went missing."

"That will have to wait. My patient is suffering from major head trauma. My priority is to keep her calm and to let her recover. She is currently mildly sedated. She is terrified of something or someone."

"I need those prints," the police officer insisted.

"I can't let you take prints without her permission, and you can't prove who she is without proof. It's a catch-22 situation. I suggest you go to wherever the vehicle was towed and try to find a purse or some form of identification. The vehicle should have DNA samples and fingerprints."

"Good idea, Doc," the sergeant said.

Dr. Hawkins nodded, and the two men took the stairs together but went in different directions. Jackson entered the emergency room and walked to the cubicle where his patient looked like she was sleeping. "Who are you, mystery girl? Where have you been, and what terrifies you?" He gently picked up the young woman's hand and stroked her fingers.

The sergeant left the hospital and was on his phone in minutes, dispatching a team to gather samples of blood and DNA.

Dr. Jackson Hawkins was a fourth-year resident at the Wyoming Medical Center. The community hospital served the needs of the surrounding town of Lander and shared the

responsibility of Wind River Reservation with the nearest town of Riverton. Both were western towns and pulled in the tourists wanting a wild-west experience. Most emergencies were minor car accidents and broken bones from less cautious activities. The tourist showoffs, who tried to ride the 'wild west bucking bronco' machines, were constant clients. The more severe accidents were the cliff climbers, as Lander was known for some of the best rock climbs in the west, surrounded by the mountain ranges of Yellowstone and canyons with names like Sinks Canyon and Wolf Point.

Revisionary history aside, with his Shoshone ancestors, Jackson had been raised with a different view of cowboy and Indian legends. Still, he considered the region around Lander his home, and he'd inherited a small ranch from his parents. His ranch was thirty-five miles from town, but he didn't live there. Trying to make the commute had proven problematic, as a young intern constantly on call. Several missed emergency calls because of the spotty phone reception, distance, and the time it took him to report to work had caused problems.

After being chewed out several times, he'd decided that living at his ranch wasn't worth aggravating his senior advisors. He'd rented a small one-bedroom apartment several blocks from the hospital and would live there until he finished his residency.

Jackson was one of two resident doctors pulling a night shift. The patient caseload was light, so they could take turns and catch several hours of uninterrupted sleep. He awoke instantly when the duty nurse pushed the door of an empty examining room open.

"What?"

"The policeman is back and wants to speak to you," the nurse said.

Jackson rolled to his feet and followed the nurse.

Sergeant Richards was standing at the nurse's station. He was accompanied by a man and a woman wearing business suits.

"We've got a match. The girl is Kathryn Shannon Patterson," the sergeant said. "This is Agent Harry Walden and Agent Lauren Harris of the FBI."

"Let's take this into a more private area," Dr. Hawkins requested, and he led them down the hall to a small conference room.

"We need to speak to Miss Patterson as soon as possible," Agent Walden said. "If she can tell us exactly where she has been, it will save us a lot of time and trouble. Were there any signs of physical or sexual abuse?"

"My patient has a concussion. She has multiple bruises and minor cuts resulting from the auto accident," Jackson said. "I didn't see any evidence of old bruises or have any reason to suspect anything else."

"We need..."

Jackson interrupted the FBI agent. "Ms. Patterson needs rest," he said firmly. "My priority is her physical and mental care and to see that she receives the medical assistance she needs."

"Every hour of a missing child's life is of consequence," Agent Lauren Harris said.

"Hold on," Jackson said. "My patient hasn't admitted that she is Kathryn Patterson yet, and even if she is, according to the documents the Sergeant showed me, she is legally an adult. Whatever her situation, she has a right to say how this is handled."

The FBI agents exchanged looks.

"If your patient is a kidnapping victim, we need to find out what happened to her. There are no statutes of limitations on kidnapping. Our investigation..." Agent Walden said.

"Is secondary to her medical care," Jackson interrupted

firmly. "I will not allow you to distress my patient. As her physician, I will decide when she is well enough to speak to you. If she is willing."

Dr. Hawkins paid close attention to the Jane Doe patient, as she was still listed in the hospital register. He had her moved into the Intensive Care Unit. The ward was open, and the patients were visible through glass walls for medical observation twenty-four hours a day. The young woman wouldn't escape without being noticed.

The staff at Western Wyoming Medical was small enough that everyone was aware of the situation within hours. She was referred to as *Jackson's Jane Doe*, and her privacy would be guarded by the hospital personnel.

The police were hard to ignore, along with the FBI agents stationed outside the ward in the hallway. When she awakened again, Dr. Hawkins was notified immediately.

Kathryn knew she was in a hospital. It was obvious enough, as she could see the nurses stationed in the center of an area of curtained cubicles. She had awakened before but couldn't remember anything beyond the pain. Her head wasn't hurting as much this time, and her first instinct was to run. What stopped her was the needles attaching her to scary-looking machines.

A tall man of dark coloring with a long black ponytail hanging down his back entered the cubicle. He pulled the curtains for privacy. He was wearing a white lab coat, and she read his nametag. She had a vague sense of seeing him before.

"Can you unhook these things?" she asked.

"Not today, maybe tomorrow," Jackson said gently. "I'm Dr. Jackson Hawkins, and we need to keep you here for a few more days. Can you tell me who you are?"

The young woman looked terrified. "I don't think you can keep me here against my will."

“No, we can’t,” Jackson answered truthfully. “But, you need to be here for a little longer. I would like to help if I can. Are you Kathryn Shannon Patterson?”

The young woman began to tremble, and her eyes filled with tears. She hadn’t heard her name in years. Nodding her head, she began to sob.

Jackson made his way to the bed. He touched her bandaged head, and she leaned into his chest, sobbing. He didn’t back away and put his arm around her shoulders. “It’s going to be okay, Kathryn. It’s going to be all right,” he assured her.