

*Return
to
Me*

MAE ARCHER

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

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Chapter 1

If Lana Walters had ever thought about dying, she'd have assumed it would hurt more. Instead, when the bus hit her, the lights simply went out. One moment of inattention and then, nothing. Next she knew, she was weightless, flying above Boston.

Lana saw her body lying on the street. Her best friend, Vanessa, was on the sidewalk, her screams shattering the silence that had descended on Newbury Street. She wanted to tell Vanessa not to cry, that it couldn't be good for the baby, but she was being dragged higher and higher. The street disappeared from view and she was lost in a blanket of clouds.

Time didn't exist in the great blue sky. As Lana frolicked among the clouds she remembered Frank and wondered if she would see him, but she was caught up playing with the cloud wisps that curled around her in tendrils, and this thought passed by quickly.

She was just getting used to flying, tumbling about in the wind, when the clouds parted and the strings holding her in the sky were cut. She hurtled down, her eyes stinging as the world flashed past her. Prickles of fear made her feet tingle as the ground rushed up toward her.

Her fall slowed abruptly and she found herself floating above a street. There was a crowd gathered, watching as firefighters and paramedics swarmed around a crumpled car, its front folded into an accordion against a tree. Shards of glass glittered on the street.

She landed gently among the crowd. The firefighters shouted at each other, then there was the grinding sound of the saw. Lana winced and covered her ears, squinting as sparks flew around her. A firefighter shifted and she glimpsed the woman in the driver's seat, her blood-streaked hair covering her face. As a paramedic smoothed the blond hair behind her ear, the woman's eyes fluttered open.

She looked at Lana.



Lana woke, gasping, her heart galloping in her chest as she looked around wildly. She was alone in the hospital bed. She took a shuddering breath and counted to ten, her hands clutching the sheet.

'It's just a dream,' she murmured, the sound of her voice soothing her. Forcing her hands to unclench, she sat up slowly, her ribs aching faintly with each movement. She pushed her hair away from her face. She'd had the dream every night since she'd been in hospital and each time it lasted longer; last night she'd woken while floating above the street.

The door opened and Bess, her nurse, walked in. 'Are you ready, Mrs Walker?'

Lana nodded hesitantly. Even after a week of being told she was Alannah Walker, she was shocked each time she was called by that name.

'Why don't you change in the bathroom?' Bess handed her a lemon and white plaid wool suit.

Lana closed the bathroom door behind her and leant on the basin. Looking down, she touched her bare ring finger. A light

flashed across her eyes and her vision swam then cleared to reveal a rose-shaped ring on her finger. She blinked, and her hand was bare again.

Goose pimples broke out on her skin. Her hands tightened on the basin as her legs shook. Breathing shallowly, she waited for her strength to return. She turned on the tap and washed her face. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw a stranger with the same pale blond hair and blue eyes, but where her own face was round and rosy-cheeked, making her look younger than her twenty-five years, this face was angular and had a sickly pallor. She ran her palms over the sharp planes of her cheeks. Her skin felt papery and blue veins could clearly be seen the surface. What had happened to her?

She pushed away from the basin and stripped. As she pulled on the skirt, she became aware of the tenderness of her bruises. The suit was closely fitted and the waistband cut into her, pulling on her skin and making her ribs hurt. Thankfully the piercing pain she'd felt upon first waking in the emergency room had settled into a dull ache over the past few weeks. She looked down as she slipped her feet into white shoes and saw her smooth, bare calves. It all felt so ... wrong.

She smoothed her damp palms on the skirt, a nervous flutter beginning in her stomach, before she turned the doorknob.

Bess greeted her with a smile. 'Your husband just left.'

Lana exhaled at the reprieve. She knew she was being a child because she'd have to see him eventually, but not yet. She needed more time.

'I'll go tell Dr Chaine you're ready.'

Lana nodded and sat down, her body protesting with each motion. Shifting in the seat, she tried to find a comfortable position. Her toes were squashed in the pointy shoes and she couldn't wiggle them. She hated pointy shoes. Closing her eyes, she tried to force a concrete memory of her own shoes, but it danced away. She lifted her hands to her face and rubbed at her temple. Why couldn't she remember?

Hearing footsteps, she turned as Dr Jeremy Chaine arrived by her bed.

'So how are you this morning?'

Lana forced a smile to her lips. 'Fine.'

He wrote a notation on the chart and looked at her. 'Have you remembered anything further?'

She shook her head.

He must have seen the apprehension in her eyes, because he continued. 'Don't worry, everything will be fine. I have every confidence that your memory will return once you're in familiar surroundings.'

At this point, the Jeremy she'd known would have reached out and touched her gently on the arm, giving her the comfort of a physical touch. But this Jeremy turned to speak to Bess as if Lana wasn't in the room.

Lana kept her gaze on the doctor's bare left hand. She was finally starting to believe that he really didn't know her.

Her memory was like Swiss cheese, tangible certainty filled with bubbles of blankness. When she'd seen Jeremy for the first time, she'd instantly had a flashback of her friend Vanessa. Seeing his left hand unadorned, and Bess's possessive looks when Lana had tried to convince Jeremy he was married to her best friend, she'd thought she was in the midst of a nightmare. It was only when she'd felt the sharp pinprick of a needle in her arm, and that Jeremy clearly didn't recognize her that she'd realized something was terribly wrong.

'Any questions?'

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bess tensing. After a week of testing him by describing his and Vanessa's wedding ceremony and reception, and tossing out the stray bits of information she'd known about him, Lana was ready to give up the quest.

She shook her head. She was beginning to believe that either she was crazy, or the car accident they told her she was in had damaged her memory. How else could she explain the flashes

of recall that were totally at odds to what they told her was her life.

'I'll show Tristan in.' Jeremy looked at her, waiting for her reaction.

Lana returned his gaze impassively. He turned away and ushered in the man they said was her husband. She held her breath as the black wavy hair came into view and she had a faint sense of recognition but when she saw the stranger's thick eyebrows and taut face the sensation faded. As he approached her, she clenched her hands in her lap and held her panic at bay. His sharp eyes were intent on her face and she knew he was watching for signs that she would lash out at him again.

He bent to kiss her. She kept still, aware of Bess's and Jeremy's suspicious eyes on her. The man must have sensed her reluctance because he hesitated, his lips hovering just above her cheek. She put her hand on his arm and pulled him toward her. His kiss was perfunctory, and when it was over he placed his arm around her shoulders and turned to face Jeremy.

'Bess and I will give you some time alone.' Jeremy held the door for the nurse.

As soon as the door closed, Tristan removed his arm and moved away. 'Are you ready?' He lifted her suitcase.

She nodded, looking at the floor. He started walking to the door, but she tugged at his arm, stopping him. She felt his muscles tense under her fingers and quickly removed her hand.

'I wanted to apologize,' she said to his back.

He turned to look at her.

'For the way I reacted.' Her throat dried and she swallowed rapidly. 'I was confused after waking —'

'No explanation is necessary, Alannah.' He placed a hand under her elbow and helped her up effortlessly. His strength made her shrink within herself. But she didn't resist as he pulled her to him and led her out the door.

She realized that Tristan was matching his long strides to her short, tottering steps— she was walking as if she'd never worn heels. His arm tightened around her shoulders and she

felt his patience, smoothing her awkwardness until her steps lengthened and she walked with assurance.

The smell of sweat and wood rose from his skin. His skin was tanned, as though he worked in the sun. The first time she'd seen him, she'd been struck by a sense of *déjà vu*. She'd seen the shimmer of another face with paler skin and gentler features. She winced to herself as she remembered her hysterical shouts of denial when he'd told her he was her husband.

Tristan walked to a red Ford truck in the hospital's car park and placed her bag in the back before opening the passenger door.

'Sorry, I just came from work and didn't get a chance to go through the carwash this morning.'

She frowned. Why would she care if the car was dirty? She'd started shivering when they walked outside, her stockinged legs exposed to the crispness of spring. He looked at her as she rubbed at her arms and reached into the front seat to retrieve a coat then bundled her into it.

She glanced at the step to the cab, and he bent and placed his hands behind her knees, lifting her in his arms. Panic seized her and she tensed.

He carefully placed her on the passenger seat. 'I won't hurt you, ever.'

She saw his frustration in his eyes and lifted her hand, wanting to place it against his cheek and comfort him.

He stilled, waiting for her touch, the look in his eyes softening.

Her hand hovered, but in the end she couldn't. She made a fist and lowered her arm, flinching when he closed the passenger door with a slam.

The wind billowed his Celtics T-shirt against his broad chest as he circled the car to the driver's door. There were smudges of dirt on his jeans. He wasn't the kind of man she was usually attracted to – she liked men who were less visibly masculine; a man who didn't make her aware of her vulnerability with every breath. Someone who was tender, someone more like Fra—

Pain cut through her temple. She cut a quick look at Tristan. He was looking out for oncoming traffic. By the time he'd turned into the street and was staring through the windshield, she was sitting with her hands on her lap, gritting her teeth until the pain eased slightly.

As they wound through the streets to what was supposed to be her home, her already tense muscles clenched tighter. Unclenching her hands and stamping her feet did little to ease the tension. As Tristan turned the truck into the driveway of an apartment block, dread settled in her stomach.

Tristan parked the truck in the building's basement and lifted her out, his touch impersonal. He set her on her feet and went to get her bag from the back. She swayed, her hand hitting the side of the truck with a bang as she tried to stop herself from falling.

'Alannah, are you all right?' He put his arms around her.

'I'm just feeling a little faint,' she murmured into his chest. She tilted her head to look at him, overwhelmed by how tall he was. Even though she was wearing three-inch heels, he still had ten inches on her, much taller than – She clutched her head, a gasp of pain escaping her lips. Only when she heard the ping did she realize they were in an elevator, and that she was being cradled against Tristan's chest.

'Put me down, I'm too heavy.' She weakly pushed at his shoulder.

'You wouldn't weigh one hundred pounds if you were wet.' He shifted her and pressed the button.

She laughed faintly, her head falling back as she looked at him. 'I haven't weighed a hundred pounds since I was fifteen years old.'

Tristan slid through the open door. 'You haven't weighed over a hundred pounds since you were fifteen.' He spat out the words, his hazel gaze full of simmering resentment.

Her smile faded and she tucked her head under his chin. She felt a sting of betrayal, as if the family pet had taken a bite out of her.

Tristan stepped out of the elevator and stopped at an apartment door. He set her gently on her feet, his hand caressing her back, as if in apology for his sharp tone.

As he unlocked the door, she felt her breath speed up and her palms bead with sweat. He pushed the door open and swung her again into his arms, the apartment flashing by in a blur of movement. She saw glaring whiteness before she had to shut her eyes.

He set her on the sofa, kneeling before her as he placed a cushion behind her back. 'Okay?'

His hands were on each side of her, but instead of feeling caged, she felt sheltered. She avoided looking around. She nodded.

'I'll get some water.' He stood and disappeared through the entryway.

Her hand hung limply in the air, too slow to catch him. She kept her eyes on the white carpet, fearing the memories that might leap out to knock her over. Clenching her hands on the cool leather of the sofa, she realized she was leaving a smudge of sweat. 'Damn.' She tried rubbing at it, but made the mark worse.

She looked for tissues, and stared in amazement. She was floating in a white cloud: white furniture, white drapes, white carpet, white walls. It was like being in a sterile cell. She was fascinated by the decorating, and didn't realize immediately that the room evoked no sense of recognition.

Tristan returned with a glass of water.

She sipped, her eyes on the white leather sofa on the opposite wall. She placed the glass on the white maple coffee table and quirked her lips. 'Someone really likes white.'

He looked around him with a raised eyebrow. 'You decorated it.'

She stilled, shaking her head in instinctive denial.

'Oh, of course.' He bent and lifted the glass off the coffee table. 'You don't remember.'

He walked out, leaving her staring after him. She couldn't decide what scared her more: that she was supposed to be a

person whose idea of decorating was space age meets insane asylum, or that he thought she was lying about her memories.

When Lana realized he hadn't returned, she stood on her trembling legs and followed. Reaching the kitchen door, she saw he was bent over the sink. She walked through slowly, taking in the white laminate cupboards with chrome door handles. Wobbling slightly, she reached out to the dining table, her fingertips leaving a smudge on the spotless glass.

He turned to lean against the sink, his arms folded over his chest. She wanted to retreat, her mouth drying of saliva under his gaze. Remembering she had nowhere to go, she decided to tough it out.

Straightening her shoulders she met his gaze. 'You think I'm pretending to have amnesia?'

'Let's just say that your amnesia ploy is convenient.'

She stared at him uncomprehendingly. He pushed away from the sink in frustration and stalked toward her. She stepped back, losing her balance and almost falling.

He reached out to catch her. She flinched and grabbed hold of the chair, her foot hitting the chrome leg and making her wince in pain.

In the sudden silence, she heard her heartbeat.

'I have never in my life hit a woman and I'm sick of having my own wife treat me like a wife-beater.' His voice was full of frustration. He ran his hands through his hair and took a deep breath before softening his voice. 'Alannah, I know that you think that your amnesia ploy will put a stop to it but —'

The phone rang, halting his words. They stared at each other, and she waited for him to finish his sentence. The phone rang again, its shrill tone demanding attention. With a sigh of frustration, he answered.

She pulled out a chair and sat. She was trembling with relief, feeling she was on the edge of a precipice and he'd been about to throw her down. His voice intruded on her thoughts, and she cocked her head to listen. A stab of jealousy cut through her,

startling her in its intensity. He hadn't spoken so tenderly to her yet, he'd only been strained and abrupt.

He was standing in profile to her, his face transformed as he smiled gently. Recognition hit her. She'd known this man. Fondness filled her and she wanted to go over and lean into him. Instead she looked at her hands on the table. She knew with bone-deep certainty that she'd loved that man with the gentle smile and been loved in return. Her eyes teared up as she felt the pain of loss. What had happened to them?

'No, she's okay.' He looked at her, the smile fading and the hardness transforming him into the remote man she was familiar with. Seeing the tears on her cheek his eyes narrowed.

She looked away in embarrassment, awkwardly wiping her face.

'Here she is.' He handed the phone to her. She took it, looking at him questioningly. He covered the handset. 'It's your mom.'

She tried to thrust it back.

He covered her hand and squeezed gently. 'You will speak to her, and you will apologize.'

She put the phone against her ear, her hand trembling from the effort of not flinging it across the room.

'Hello,' she said into the handset, her voice cold.

'Alannah, honey, I'm so glad to hear you're okay.' Her mother's voice cut out and Lana heard her gasping for breath as she suppressed her tears. 'Tristan tells me you're going to be just fine. That the doctor said you would make a full recovery.'

She felt his hard gaze on her, but refused to look at him. 'That's right.'

Silence filled the line. 'Well, I guess I'll let you go.'

Lana pictured Tammy as she'd been the last time she saw her at the hospital: her glossy hair gleaming with blond highlights, her eyes supposedly full of pain and hurt when Lana had told her to leave and never come back.

'I just wanted to see that you were okay.' She paused, as if searching for courage. 'I love you, baby.'

Lana's hand tightened on the phone, anger coursing through her. 'Thanks for calling.' She stood and hung up the phone gently.

Even with her back to him, Lana felt the anger snapping around Tristan. She turned to face him, a smile of bitterness tilting her lips. 'Let me guess. You're on Mommy's side, right?'

She felt the change in him; the frustration and anger withdrew. 'Don't you think it's time to let go of your childish grudges?' His unconcerned voice raised goose pimples on her skin. 'So she hospitalized you when you were seventeen. Grow up. If that's the biggest betrayal you'll face from a parent, consider yourself lucky.' He walked out of the kitchen, speaking over his shoulder. 'I'm going to have a shower.'

Her hands dropped and she looked at his back in confusion. What was he talking about? She looked at the phone, raising a finger to her lips to bite her nail.

'Oh, God,' she whispered, sitting on the chair. She raised her hands to her face as terror took hold. Could her memory be so damaged that she didn't even know what the truth was?

She looked over her shoulder at the door Tristan had disappeared through. Tammy must have lied to him. She'd always been good at telling stories that suited her.

She stood, the now familiar weakness washing over her and leaving her swaying. She had to find Tristan and tell him the truth. With determined strides, she followed Tristan down the hallway. Brightly colored frames caught her eye.

Her strides slowed, familiarity taking hold as she stared at the sketches. Each house had been lovingly detailed, evoking the feeling of security and comfort. She frowned as she looked closer. They were almost like architectural drawings. The broad pencil strokes looked just like — Pain cut through her temple, cutting off her thought.

She winced, blinking. In the blackness behind her closed eyelids she saw herself lying against bright cushions. She was nude, warm patches of sun shining through the window and creating

patterns on her skin. He sat on a chair holding a sketchbook, his face in shadow.

Lana opened her eyes and looked around. She shook her head dazedly, feeling like she'd been jerked back to another time. Tristan – she had to find Tristan. Hearing the shower behind the closed door to her left, she turned the doorknob and stumbled inside.

'Tristan.' Steam rose around her, hiding the floor.

'Alannah.'

She turned to his voice. The water cut out abruptly and he stepped out of the shower, water sluicing down his body. 'What's wrong?'

Her eyes traveled over the drops glinting on his skin. As he lifted a towel off the rack, the light fell on the scar that ran down his chest. She focused on the pale line then looked up at his face. 'What's that?'

'Is that what you interrupted my shower for?' He ignored her as he dried himself.

'You had a heart operation.'

He lifted an eyebrow. 'You don't say.'

All sound disappeared. His lips were moving but she couldn't hear him. Her ears popped, as if she was in a plane that was taking off. Pressure built in her chest until she couldn't breathe. She closed her eyes, images flashing like a DVD switched to fast forward. Snapping her eyes open, she looked at him in disbelief. How could she have forgotten?

'You came back,' she whispered brokenly. He put his arms around her as she fell into him. She smiled tremulously, her hand cupping his cheek. 'You're not dead. I love you, Frank.' She saw his irises widen, then blackness descended.



'If you struggle to read, then
you haven't found the right
book format.'



I'm Amra Pajalić, the owner and publisher of Pishukin Press, an independent press dedicated to the publication of own voices fiction and nonfiction, as well as genre fiction.

There is a quote that states 'If you don't like to read, then you haven't found the right book.' I would like to extend that further and state that 'If you struggle to read then you haven't found the right book format.' As a high school teacher I have taught students with various individual needs and recognise the need to make books accessible for all kinds of readers. To this end I am committed to publishing all Pishukin Press titles in as many formats as possible. This includes:

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A note from the author

Return to Me was inspired by a dream in which I was with my husband, but he was different to how I knew him. I grieved for the man I knew and yet loved him in this different place. When I woke up the dream was so real and present, and even as I write this today I remember this feeling of grief that I felt watching the man who was not my husband walk away from me.

The next day I was tormented by questions of 'What if?' What if a woman was transferred to a parallel universe and was married to the man who was her husband, but he was different? What if she knew he was the man she fell in love with, but she had to fight for him to fall in love with her again?

Growing up my favorite TV show was *Quantum Leap*, starring Scott Bakula as Dr. Sam Beckett, a physicist who involuntarily leaps through spacetime during experiments in time travel, by temporarily taking the place of other people to correct what he consistently discovers were historical mistakes. This show tickled my imagination. I loved how each leap and correction had a ripple effect on everyone Sam met.

And so I wondered, how would Lana's time travel leap affect the people she knew in this parallel universe? Would they feel an echo of her memories, rippling and interrupting their lives?

How would it affect her best friend Vanessa and Jeremy, the man she was fated to be with? Would Holly and Aiden find their way back to each other?

I loved writing this novel because it combined several of my favorite romance tropes: time travel, second chances and star crossed lovers. If you want to read more of the *Leap of Fate* series, let me know whose story you want next.

And don't forget to sign up to my newsletter to find out my latest writing news.

About the author

Mae Archer is the pen name for author Amra Pajalic.

I knew I wanted to be a writer since I was a child. I loved listening to my grandmother's war stories about English maidens falling in love with handsome Yankees while England burnt under the Luftwaffe's blitz.

When I discovered romance novels as a teenager I soon realized that my dream job was to be a romance writer. After many career twists and turns I'm making my dreams come true.

My real life is like one of my grandmother's stories. I met a foreigner who travelled through Australia and it was love at first sight. I married him six months after we met and in the twenty-five years since has been an adventure.

Return to Me and upcoming Hollywood Dreams, were both traditionally published by PanMacmillan's imprint Momentum and I am re-releasing them as an indie author.

I write young adult novels and memoir as Amra Pajalic. I also publish dark/horror fiction using pen name A. P. Pajalic. I live in Australia with my husband and daughter.

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