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Journey Into Amnesia

JOURNEY INTO *Amnesia*

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A WORD FROM JOHN

Born in Dublin, Ireland, the land of the storytellers, John immigrated to Australia I loved reading from an early age. Comic books. Advertisements. Signs. Numbers on buses and destinations. My teenage years was filled with Agatha Christie novels.

My twenties found me soaking up true-life stories: marine and air disasters. My favourite, and to me, the most heart-rending of human stories, was that of Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins. The emotional cascades stirred up by loss and pain we experience in life is often difficult to deal with.

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In a dispute over child custody, Judge Pankhurst offers Joni Cartwright the unenviable choice, the horrible decision—that of choosing which parent she must live with.—the child is so distressed by the ordeal and the seemingly insurmountable odds stacked against a once happy family, Joni takes her problems to bed…where she dreams of solutions.

CHAPTER 1

Joni Cartwright sat sullenly in the passenger seat. Her eyes were set firmly on the windscreen, not observing the oncoming traffic or anything else that passed by. Neither did she care should she reach her destination safely. In fact, were the car to break down or run out of petrol, or that someone should rear-end them would be preferable to going to court. And having to listen to her Mum and Dad present reasons to the Judge why they each should have custody of their twelve-year-old daughter was embarrassing, and distressing besides. It was bad enough having to hear her parents argue at home. Now they had argued openly, in front of strangers, even if those strangers were respected members of the legal profession: a judge, a child services representative, and lawyers. And the stranger who takes notes on that machine! Why can't my parents just say we'll stop fighting, and then stop! Just stop and go back to loving each other. Why can't they! Why won't they!

'Joni, please put your seatbelt on. You know the rules.' Her mother spoke softly. The child put her hands to her forehead and made a face; it appeared she had a headache. Her mother asked what's wrong, Joni? Headache? No, she replied, just a bit dizzy. It's nothing! Abruptly she pressed her arms even tighter to her chest and kept her stare straight ahead, determined not to make eye contact with her mother.

'If the police pull me over, sweetheart, we'll be late for Court. That might be used against me…us.'

'Well, that wouldn't do, Mother, now would it? Why can't you and Dad just patch up and…and let us live together. We are supposed to be a family, aren't we?' Joni argued sarcastically.

'Joni, things aren't that easy. They are more…complicated. Oh, I've tried to do the right thing, Joni. Your father and I don't…don't see eye to eye on…well, on some things.' She ended with a sharp burst of frustration. 'Now please do your seatbelt up!' Joni glared at her. 'I hope the car breaks down and we never reach the court. Never!'

Amanda Cartwright swung the vehicle into the kerb and applied the brakes hard. She began to reach for the belt. Joni slapped her hand away. 'I don't want to go! Can't you see how hard it is for me? How can I choose between you and Dad? Really, Mum? How can I?' She covered her face and cried. Her mother went to touch her shoulder but Joni moved away cuttingly and turned her body to the side window. She fingered the door handle as if to get out. Amanda gripped her arm. 'Joni, I know this is crazy. It shouldn't be I…I know it is wrong…but the judge says you must decide. If you don't he will. Do you see that?' Joni responded angrily. 'You and Dad put me in this position. I never wanted us to

break up our family.' She paused to rub her tears away. 'If the judge asks me who I want to live with I'll say, my parents. That's the only answer I'll give.' With that, she pulled the seatbelt around her body and secured it with a strong-willed metal-snap. Amanda resigned to her child's decision. She hit the blinker to move into the traffic.

'You know I'd love you to choose me…but that's because I love you and want you with me. Your Dad wants you, too. I understand that. It's natural. He loves you just as much as I do. The powers that be make these rules. I'm not supposed to influence you. That's why I have been a little distant lately—'

'A little? You mean a lot, Mum, don't you? This past week has left me as though I had no parents at all. Dad can't be nice in case it "influences" me to pick him. And you act as though you don't know me. Is that what the judge meant, that you treat me like an orphan? I'm sick of it. Sick of you. Sick of Dad. And sick of that cruel judge who's making me decide. I hate judges! All of them! I'd like to know how he'd feel if he had to choose which parent he wanted to live with.' She stopped herself short to think about that. 'Maybe…I'll ask him. Yeah, see what answer he has! Yes, I'll do it. Go faster, Mum! Now I can't wait to see the judge.'

Lawrence Cartwright was standing next to his lawyer when mother and daughter entered the foyer. Amanda's attorney, Salli-Anne Blackhall, greeted her and immediately suggested they find a niche to talk. A short man in uniform approached and said with politeness: 'the judge has been delayed with another matter. He wishes to convey his regret to you. There'll be a thirty-minute delay.' The women acknowledged the apology with a respectful nod. Joni stayed near but kept glancing over to her father. Casually she moved towards him, her eyes beckoning him to meet her half way. He was reluctant to do that and let her know by facial expressions that he was not allowed to persuade her decision. All she wanted was a hug.

The door swung again. Enter Claire Sunning. She moved with the swaying motion of a model on the catwalk. Her long fingers glittered with diamonds; her ears displayed the sparkling red of rubies, and around her neck hung an exquisite silver pendant, an heirloom from her grandmother, no doubt. She modified her arrogance to a facade of royalty, stopped by Lawrence's side and virtually posed for a greeting kiss. Lawrence leaned forward to whisper something, upon which the woman turned to see Amanda further down the corridor. Joni wasted no time; she imitated the woman with her own version of a strutting model and pushed her way between her father and the woman. Claire had no choice but to step back a pace. She was miffed by the intrusion; her ego was challenged.

'How rude!' Sunning responded, raising her voice. Joni replied even louder.

'Don't I get a hug, Dad? Or will the judge not like that?' Without another word, she threw her arms around his waist. He took hold of her hands and bent to her level.

'Joni, Joni. You know how hard this is for me; you know I can't be seen to…' He looked deep into her face, sorrowfully. 'I really do want you to live with me. Your mother—' Again, Joni purposely raised her voice.

'Dad? Will you go to Mum and take her hand and tell her you want to come home? All of us together. Please?'

The clash of personalities Sunning and Joni exposed, caused others to look around. Amanda's attorney took stock of the kerfuffle and said something to Amanda. Lawrence's lawyer spoke to him. Amanda instantly strode towards the group, believing there was too much conspiring going on.

'And Dad. Tell that woman to go away', Joni begged. Lawrence Cartwright shook his head and with regret, he said, 'we'll talk after the judge makes his final decision. I'm sorry, darling.' Amanda stepped up and said firmly, 'Joni! Come please.' The child came away dejected. She knew her Dad was following 'procedure', or as someone had said 'protocol'. She turned to face the rich woman, to tell her to go away and break up someone else's family. 'Go' was as far as she got; her mother's grip tightened to speed up the disengagement from the others. She marched her daughter back to her attorney. Joni insisted she wouldn't make a choice. Amanda began to cry, but quickly sought refuge in the hand Salli-Anne offered. The forty-something lawyer couldn't help being amused by the child's idea. A little assistance to win the case wouldn't go amiss, she believed. As it was, the decision could go either way. Salli-Anne asked: 'Joni, did your father…did he ask you to choose him?' Joni shook her head. 'No, my parents are not supposed to do that. And you shouldn't ask me, either. You are not working for me!' Amanda told Joni not to be insolent. Her daughter crossed her arms defiantly. Amanda turned away in tears only to find the eyes of Claire Sunning, who had moved noiselessly across the room.

'If it's any comfort', the woman said, 'I think the child should be with her mother.' Amanda queried Sunning's statement with a steady stare in the other's dark eyes. She was persuaded to believe Sunning displayed a patent detachment from family life; and wondered if the woman had children of her own. If she did, they were to be pitied.

'Joni should be with you, Amanda. For what it's worth, that's what I believe.' Sunning nodded imperially and turned away. Salli-Anne asked, 'what did she say?' Amanda repeated the sentiments.

'It's a ruse, Amanda. You can't trust that woman; she's giving you false hopes, trying to put you off guard. What we have prepared to say to the judge is the defence to stick by. It's your personal devotion to Joni, that's what will impress the judge!'

'I think I believe her', Amanda replied pensively. 'I think she really wants me to have Joni, and not Lawrence. I believe Claire is that selfish. She doesn't want…

Joni…anyone, to come between her and Lawrence. I wonder…does Lawrence know that about her?'

The short man in uniform reappeared earlier than expected. 'The judge is ready now, ladies.'