

KEEP
ME
IN
MIND

JAIME REED

Point

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reed, Jaime, author.

Keep me in mind / Jaime Reed.—First edition.

pages cm

Summary: Sixteen-year-old Ellia Dawson wakes up in the hospital with retrograde amnesia, unable to remember Liam McPherson, the boyfriend who insists that they are in love—Liam is devastated, and, desperate to reawaken her memories, begins to write the story of their relationship, convinced that it will somehow recreate their relationship.

ISBN 978-0-545-88381-8 (jacketed hardcover) 1. Amnesia—Juvenile fiction. 2. Memory—Juvenile fiction. 3. Falls (Accidents)—Juvenile fiction. 4. Interpersonal relations—Juvenile fiction. [1. Amnesia—Fiction. 2. Memory—Fiction. 3. Love—Fiction. 4. Interpersonalrelations—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.R252314Ke 2016

813.6—dc23

[Fic]

2015031159

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, May 2016

Book design by Abby Denning

*To my family and friends and to He who knows me
better than I could ever attempt.*

Thank You.

CHAPTER
ONE

LIAM

UNTITLED | Page . . .

At that hour, the beach was deserted save the fishermen manning their posts on each of the twin piers. The sun hid just behind the mountains in the east, and a purple sky hovered over the Spanish rooftops beyond the dunes. To the west lay darkness, rolling waves and a half moon, but no view could compare to the one jogging by my side. She was a living, breathing celestial event and the closest star I would ever reach.

The she in question was none other than the Ellia Renée Dawson, a girl so gorgeous, so gloriously epic that it bordered on the absurd. Some celebrities went by one name, like Oprah or Madonna or Bono—they were just that iconic. But Ellia had achieved a level of awesome where she could be identified by a simple pronoun. To this day, legends of her reign echoed the halls of León High School and

inspired a number of copycats, but Ellia was a force with no equal. One seriously had to wonder what she saw in a lanky bookworm like me.

That question had crossed my mind hundreds of times and it surfaced as I looked over my shoulder to see her struggling to keep up with me. Her rich brown skin shimmered with sweat and a thick puff of black curls bobbed at the top of her head. She wore running tights and a cut-off sweatshirt that hung off one shoulder. The words I'M NOT LAZY, I'M A STAY-AT-HOME CHILD were printed across the front and summed up her workout ethic perfectly.

Though she exploited the many miracles of spandex, the poor girl couldn't run to save her life. Horrible posture, flailing arms, and her refusal to control her breathing made our fitness routine a work of comedic genius. It also showed she wasn't the flawless deity her reputation had led everyone to believe. At the end of the day, she was just a girl. My girl. And she loved me enough to sneak out of the house to keep me company.

Her participation dragged my regimen out an extra hour and did zilch to improve my sprint time for track season, but who cared? It was a small price to pay for a few more minutes alone with her before the sunrise forced us to part ways.

"I won't make it! Go on, save yourself!" Ellia gasped and clutched her chest, then collapsed on the sand and pretended to be dying.

"I'm not leaving without you!" I called back in my best action-star voice. "We're in this together!"

“Don’t be a hero, you fool! You’ve got too much to live for! It’s too late for me, but you still have a chance!” She fell back down and began twitching.

Laughing, I trotted to her side and towered over her sprawled form as she began to make snow angels in the sand. “Your acting skills are terrible, babe. Don’t quit your day job.”

She stopped and glanced up at the stars, which were still visible this early in the morning. “Liam, I don’t know how you can do this in and outside of school and not demand combat pay. All this running has to be bad for your joints. I can hear my bones crying. And that runner’s high you keep talking about is a straight-up myth.”

“It’s not a myth; you just have to keep at it. Running’s good for you. It gives you stamina and gets the blood flowing.”

“That might be how things go on your home planet, but us earthbound folk need a legit reason for strenuous work. Either you’re running from something or running to something. Whatever the case is, it better be worth all the huffing and puffing.”

“Quick, someone put that on a T-shirt,” I quipped. “It’ll fit well with the rest of the Ellia Dawson Smart-Mouth Fall Collection.”

“Ooh! That’s actually a good name for a clothing line.” She patted the spot next to her. “Come sit and take a break with me.”

“A break?” I dug in my pocket and checked the running app on my phone. “We just started five minutes ago.”

“Yeah, I need to stretch some more. I think I pulled something.” She pouted.

Oh, she was pulling something all right, but then she looked up

at me with her big, round eyes that always reminded me of a Pixar character. Saying no to her was close to impossible.

I sat down on my bent knees and captured one of her legs in my hands. "Aw, my poor wittle baby. Where does it hurt?" I gave her slim ankle a light squeeze. "Here?"

"Nope." She smiled and bit her bottom lip.

My fingers encircled the soft calf. "How about here?"

"Close, but not quite."

I moved in for the kill and tickled the sensitive spot on the back of her knees.

Squealing, she wiggled and tried to scoot away, but didn't get far. "Ah! Stop! Stop! I'm sorry!"

"Had enough?"

"Yes!" she cried out, giggling. "Stop!"

"Good." I let go and then lay long-ways in the sand beside her.

She was still laughing and I kissed her through her smile. Her lips were full, soft, and carried the faint taste of toothpaste and cherry lip gloss. She raked her fingers through my hair and returned the kiss in earnest. All at once, everything became this great emergency where we couldn't get close enough, but we were willing to die in the attempt.

Then it occurred to me that I should probably breathe soon, so I pulled my mouth from hers. Forehead on forehead, we rested against each other for balance; we were too dizzy.

"We should get going on that run. The sun will be rising soon and people will be getting up," I warned.

“Nuh-uh. Don’t wanna.” She shook her head, making our noses rub together. “I could be home, sound asleep in my warm bed where I’m supposed to be, but nooo. I’m out here before the butt crack of dawn, messing up my hair and getting tortured by you.” Her lips dabbed around my cheek and jaw. “The things I do for you, sir.”

I lowered my head and planted a kiss on her bare shoulder. “I thank you for your sacrifice, ma’am.”

“As you should.” She shifted her body so she lay on her side to look at me fully. “My dad would kill me if he found out I snuck out here.”

“You mean he would kill me,” I corrected her.

“Whoever he could get his hands on first.” She shrugged, but her frown and the loud click of her tongue told me that something was bothering her. “It’s not fair having to sneak around like this, like we’re outlaws. It was cute at first—it was giving me all kinds of Romeo and Juliet, Bonnie and Clyde, On the Run realness. But now I’m just over it. I love you, you love me, and this shouldn’t be a part-time gig. We need to upgrade.”

I could understand her frustration. Her dad was a mean battle-ax and all of my visits to her house were heavily supervised and often cut short if I so much as kissed her cheek. Any real quality time was spent over the phone or online. Even in school, our meetings were brief, what with classes, teachers, and learning and all. Privacy was a rare and expensive piece of merchandise that we’d been forced to steal to keep from starving.

“Why does your dad hate me so much?” I asked after a long bout of silence. “You sure it’s not because I’m white?”

“Yeah, sure, play the race card.” She snickered. “You’re a boy—and a cute one—and I’m his only daughter. That’s enough for him. It’s nothing personal.”

“Well, it’s personally affecting me,” I replied. “I can’t wait until we graduate. We can finally do what we want.”

She watched me carefully then reached out to stroke the side of my face. “Hey, hey, cut that out. Stop brooding.”

I leaned into her warm palm. “I’m not brooding.”

“Yes, you are. You’re doing that bottom-lip thing and you got a line between your eyebrows. That’s definitely brooding. I sense another poem in the works.” She draped an arm over her eyes in a show of dramatized angst. “Life is so bleak and not my own / For my parents hound and gripe and moan / That only sports will pay off college student loans / Thus my dream to write is but a seed unsown / I am now and shall remain forever . . . alone.”

I glared at her. For the record, my writing was better than that, but my prose did lean on the dark and moody side. Only Ellia knew about that; she was the only one I ever allowed to read my work. Unlike my parents, Ellia could see my true calling and, by her own edict, her opinion was the only one that mattered.

“Ha-ha. Real funny. You’re in the same boat as I am, Miss Project Runway,” I replied, effectively wiping the smirk off her face. “Have you broken the news to dear old dad that you vetoed the whole engineer idea? I’m sure he was devastated to hear that his only child won’t be taking over the family business.”

Trash talk had always been our shtick, but my comment must've struck a nerve because she rose to her knees in a burst of movement.

"All right, that's it!" she yelled and brushed the sand off her tights. "We are staging a coup! I refuse to spend the rest of our junior year hiding in shadows. We have a year and a half to convince our folks that we want different things. We are not puppets or avatars to live through vicariously."

I lifted a power fist in the air. "Word."

She cut her eyes at me. "Please don't do that. You make it weird." Then she continued, "Let's form a pact, a promise right here, right now that from this point forward we live our own lives and pursue our own dreams, and, no matter what, we will never be as uptight with our own kids. Promise?" She reached out her hand for me to shake, but I threaded her fingers between mine instead.

"I promise," I said.

Her slender fingers closed over my hand and squeezed. "We won't stop until your novel hits the New York Times bestseller list and a hot supermodel is wearing my gown on the cover of Vogue. If one of us gets lost and veers off the pathway, the other has to pull them back. Deal?"

"Deal. No matter what." I nodded, knowing she meant every word and that alone gave me a valid reason to try. To hope.

If I had an answer to the question of what she saw in me, it would be the recognition of a person lost. We may have been from different backgrounds, but we spoke the same language and we each

bore the weight of family expectations. Ellia hid it well with humor and sass, but those sad brown eyes pleaded for someone to set her free. I understood that feeling, and whether she knew it or not she held the keys to my freedom, too.

“Okay. Now that that’s settled, I’ve got a second wind, so on with the cardio! I’ll race you to the pier. Ready? One, two, three—go!” She dashed across the beach before I could even get to my feet. With her typical clumsy strides, she headed to the winding bike trail leading up the hill. The path had a high peak that overlooked the beach below and served as the quickest route toward the docks.

She threw her head back with a wicked laugh of certain victory and then spun around and gestured for me to follow. Dusting the sand from my shorts, I took my time catching up with her. I could outrun her by miles and it seemed only fair to give her a decent head start.

Little did I know that these would be the last few minutes we’d have together. If I had known, I would’ve stopped her or told her to wait for me. That one small error in judgment would cost me dearly. The penalty came by way of a piercing scream ringing in the air.

“Ellia?” The name ripped from me in a startled breath and served as both a question and answer. It had to be her. My adrenaline spiked, and unleashed the darker parts of my imagination.

I poured all my energy into running at the sound, my heart pounding in my chest, my leg muscles burning from the rising incline. Ellia couldn’t have been too far ahead, but it was enough for me to lose sight of her. As I neared a bend in the path, it then became

apparent that she hadn't cried out again. There was no sound from her at all; the only footsteps I could hear were my own.

"Ellia!" I called out into the darkness again, but only crashing waves and my pounding heartbeat replied.

Panic quickly set in as my ears strained to pick up any sign of life: a whimper, a curse, another bloodcurdling scream; anything other than the eerie quiet that made the hair rise on my arms. I begged for just one footprint, one small flash of movement to help me find her. I'd never begged for anything so hard in my life . . .

I lifted the pen from the page and ripped my reading glasses off my face. My eyes began to prickle and burn and I pressed down on the sockets with my knuckles. The tears came anyway, and kept coming as I tried to pick up the pen again. Even with blurry vision, it was obvious that what I'd written down was absolute gibberish. The letters dipped past the blue lines of the paper in squiggly waves and then trailed off at the margins. Not one single word was legible.

Every night this week had produced the same results. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get past this exact point in the narrative. These thoughts couldn't stay locked in my brain, and for the sake of my physical health, I had to find rest at some point. For the past month, sleep came to me in three-, sometimes four-hour spells before I was up at my computer or scribbling in my notebook for the rest of the night. Now my old standby was working against me.

I closed my notebook and dropped it on the floor by my bed, resigning myself to the fact that I wasn't going to get any coherent writing done this morning. My thoughts were skipping around again and had completely jammed once I decided to commit that painful memory to paper.

My head fell back against the headboard and my stare bounced to various points around the room until it settled on my desk clock. I had an hour before I needed to get ready for school and a hard run would help to clear my mind.

I threw on some running shorts and a T-shirt, then laced up my sneakers. Charging my phone, grabbing my keys, and ruffling my hair was the extent of my pre-workout ritual. I tiptoed downstairs so as not to wake up Dad and, after chugging down a bottle of water, I headed out through the back kitchen door.

Thin purple streaks in the sky let me know dawn was approaching. The air was a bit cold for February in this part of California. Hopefully, the rapid blood flow would keep me warm. I headed west and ran like my life depended on it. The air sawed in and out of my lungs and I enjoyed the burn, craved it. My arms swung back and forth, propelling my movements like blades slicing through air. Once I attained a comfortable rhythm, my brain could finally shut down and my body operated off-line. It was good not having to think for a while. I was aware that hard pavement lay under me, but my feet barely absorbed the impact and all I could see ahead was my destination.

The bad part about mental autopilot was that the body was left to follow its original flight plan. Repetition had programmed popular commands and navigation points into its system. The only way to override it was to make a conscious effort to change course, but that involved thinking, which would defeat the purpose.

This was the excuse I made for stopping at the curb across the street from Ellia's house once again. It was simply a reflex. It couldn't be helped.

My eyes drifted up to the second window to the left and, in a true act of self-torture, I waited in hope for my girl to appear through the curtains. I knew she wouldn't, but I liked to think that at any minute she'd turn on her lamp and signal that she was on her way down to join me. I could picture her scurrying around the side of her house, crouched low under her parents' window, then racing across the grass to meet me at the corner. Wishful thinking can create a mirage of the highest caliber and the amount of power the mind wielded never ceased to amaze me. If pushed hard enough, it could make you believe almost anything.