

3. The Salamander Stone

The word 'crystal' derives from the Greek for 'ice', and refers to the early belief that this stone was simply water which had frozen so solid that it was beyond thawing. As late as the 18th Century some scientists maintained that clear rock crystal was simply fossilised ice.

K&J Taylor 'Crystals' (1999)

Amber undressed by her bed in the medical wing, half aware of the echoey voices of children drifting through the open window from a playground three floors below. Suddenly their voices fell silent. She moved to the window and glanced down at the sunlit playground. The children were backing away from a figure which could only be Mrs Fedorowicz. There was no mistaking that bloated body which, from directly overhead, looked like a fat black spider jerking across its web. Mrs Fedorowicz only ever wore black – it matched her short-cropped hair and swarthy complexion; though she always wore as well a pair of white gloves – to protect her from germs - and a slash of red lipstick to match those stupid red high heels she tottered about on. Amber leaned further out of the window; she could just see the white gloves, and those red shoes peeping intermittently from beneath Mrs Fedorowicz's swollen body.

As Amber watched, the silent children closed behind Mrs Fedorowicz like a reforming tide, their voices starting up in her wake as if someone had pressed a switch.

Amber turned away: that woman was ridiculous. But the twitch of a smile froze instantly. You couldn't laugh at Mrs Fedorowicz; there was something about her, something terrifying.

Mrs Fedorowicz entered her office and sat at the desk, her fingers thumping angrily on her keyboard. As Head of Security this break-in at the labs was her problem, and first she must

find the guard responsible for allowing Amber to get so far. He would not be seen or heard of again. “Ah,” cried Mrs Fedorowicz as a duty rota came up on screen. She pressed the intercom. “Send Staples to see me... *now*.”

As she waited, she punched new coordinates into her keyboard and the on-screen image switched to a recording of the Headmaster’s recent interview with Amber Brigantia. *He’s a fool*, thought Mrs Fedorowicz, her eyes narrowing. *He doesn’t even know what that girl did to him*. The monitor was playing and replaying, on a loop, the moment when Amber had changed time.

Mrs Fedorowicz switched off the monitor, then leaned back in her chair, thoughtful now. *That girl is a challenge*.

She knew she could break Amber – anyone will break given sufficient pressure. But Mrs Fedorowicz also knew that breaking Amber was not an option. The girl had to be kept whole. *She will be no good to me in pieces*.

There was a nervous knock on the door. “Come in,” chimed Mrs. Fedorowicz brightly as she stood up.

That girl is a challenge, she thought again, adjusting her white gloves and flexing her fingers as the door opened. *But I like a challenge*.

The scrambled egg had congealed on Amber’s plate as she sat on her bed in the medical wing, stirring it idly. She wasn’t hungry, nor was she tired, though she’d hardly slept for some time. What she really needed was to find James. He’d given her the codes and told her to break into The Playpen. He must know what was going on.

She pushed the plate away and got out of bed looking for her dressing-gown. The doctor’s office door clicked open the moment her feet touched the floor.

“Get into bed, young lady. I have my instructions.”

“But I’m fine. I need to go back to class.”

The doctor advanced menacingly, and one look told Amber it was no use arguing. *That’s the trouble with this place, she thought bitterly, they watch all the time. They watch everything.*

As she settled back into bed, she caught the red blink of a tiny light opposite - the blink of a camera eye concealed, though not concealed. For one absurd moment she thought of waving, or standing on the bed miming an erotic dance. The old Amber, the Amber of yesterday, would have done that; but that girl had gone. What she had glimpsed in that laboratory had changed her forever.

Her hand went to her neck and she felt the loss of her necklace, her precious, precious necklace. They had taken it, along with all her possessions, when she’d been forced to come to this school. It was supposed to be part of her therapy, a fresh start after the death of her father. Well, she would have the necklace back. She would insist. They couldn’t keep her stuff. *That’s stealing.* There was a moment of child-like rage. *How dare they!* And then the new Amber, the Amber who had emerged from those laboratories, whispered in her ear: *What’s stealing to them? What’s murder, and worse, far worse?*

The door to the ward opened with a bang and a head peeped round, grinning. It was the school psychologist. Though elderly, he was always busy, his body bent into a curl of energy suggestive of too much to do and too little time to do it. Amber had always liked him – but now she trusted no one. As he spoke, she found herself looking for the plot behind the platitudes. *I’m getting like Mum, she thought, seeing evil everywhere.* Then the pang – *but she was right about this place..... my mother was right!*

“Amber, my dear,” the psychologist gushed, placing a large box on her bed. “Since you have not fully integrated with your life here, we’re going to try a new tack. I was hoping you could achieve closure after your family tragedy, that you would come to see this school as

your new family. But alas, it hasn't worked. So what I want you to do now is the exact opposite. You must actively explore your childhood, everything that happened when growing up. Don't be afraid of your feelings." He gestured at the box. "This contains all your possessions that you brought here from your previous life. Go through them carefully."

Amber gasped; they had brought back her things as she'd wanted. Could they read her mind? Did they know what she was thinking?

The psychologist looked at her with weary sympathy. "Now now, dear. Don't worry. We will work through this together."

He patted her arm then bustled away, leaving her with the box containing sixteen years of memories. Amber glanced suspiciously at the red camera eyes, before running her fingers over the lid. *How small it is. How insignificant is a life when it can be squeezed into such a small space.*

But her heart beat madly at the thought of what was inside.

As soon as she opened the box she caught the smell of home, a nostalgic mix of rich woody tones, dust, and her mother's favourite perfume. On top lay an unframed picture of Moffy her cat, curled at the corners but Moffy's eyes still bright, a half-meow forming in his mind. Beneath the picture was a heavy bound photograph album. Amber knew by heart what was in it, but couldn't face it yet. She laid it carefully on the bed.

She was looking for her necklace, digging in corners. She pulled out a bundle of dried yarrow stalks and a pack of tarot cards wrapped in black silk, a Christmas present from her weird Nan, Ophelia, who hated being called 'Nan'. Where was Ophelia now? Why hadn't she phoned for so long? Amber placed the things next to the photo album.

The bed became littered with bits and pieces of no importance to anyone, apart from Amber who could assign each a rich history. But the one thing she wanted lay at the bottom, carefully wrapped in tissue paper. This was important, Amber knew that, and as her hand

closed over it she wondered why on earth they'd let her have it back.

She cleared a space on the bed and sat cross-legged, pulling her dressing-gown over her knees to form a lap, and tucking her hair behind her ears. Glancing at the red eye opposite, she angled her body to obscure its view and bent forward, unwrapping the tissue paper.

There in the centre lay the necklace, *her* necklace. The chain was of red gold with an ornate fitting of delicate filigree attached to a heavy, crimson crystal which Khiza called The Stone. It was no ordinary crystal, but cigar-shaped with a hard sculpted surface depicting a perfectly-formed little lizard. The lizard winked at her as it twisted between her fingers, and its scales glittered with a thousand red and gold beams, arcing into the eye like frozen fire. She held it in the hollow of her hand feeling its heat and weight, and it sat in her palm as if it grew there, as if she and it were of one substance.

It was her Salamander Stone and it was very precious, not least because it seemed to be the way she called Khiza, and was a tangible token of his existence. It was the very day after she'd been given the Stone that Khiza had first appeared when she was playing in the back alley.

Her parents had said Khiza was just an imaginary friend; lots of children have them, even her own father when he was little. Amber gave a little knowing smile. Khiza was not imaginary. He was real alright. At first he rarely came, and when he did they played like two sleepwalkers blindly bumping into each other. As she grew older he grew too, both becoming more sure of the strange state they shared. They spent hours together, sometimes in England, sometimes in his country, in Africa. She grew up with Khiza, she *knew* him – not in the clumsy way you know a person in the flesh, but as one soul reaches to another soul, a lost other half of your own self.

Amber glanced up at the red eye blinking on the opposite wall of the medical room. She turned away, then quickly put the necklace over her head, the heavy crystal falling

between her breasts and settling near her heart. She felt the atoms of the stone thrill to her heartbeat and set up a reverberation, like distant drums calling. This was how she had always called him. And since he had almost made it through last night without the necklace, surely he would come now. “Khiza,” she whispered, “Khiza.”

Amber waited, but he did not come. She held the crystal tightly, an agony of expectation and longing, but still he did not come.

She sighed and let go of the stone. Turning back to the box, she searched its contents, taking out a volume of poetry, a birthday present from her mum. She opened it, though not to read; instead she bent down breathing in the fusty flavour of the pages. It was the scent of home again and her eyes glazed as she sat there remembering.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly what had led to her mother’s first breakdown. She’d become increasingly paranoid, increasingly convinced that the family was being watched, that Amber, her only child, was being targeted. Amber remembered one terrible day in the supermarket when her mother had screamed at a stranger: *Why are you following us? What do you people want? You’re not having my child.* The screaming alerted the whole store and there was a scene. Her mother had to be forcibly restrained: the police, the doctors, and behind it all, eventually, the strong soothing presence of her father. It was only after this breakdown and her mother’s first committal that Amber began to really appreciate her father.

Amber swallowed; her mouth had gone dry, her throat felt constricted. Her father was dead. She put the poetry book carefully on the bed, closing it and forcing herself to also close that memory. Her father was dead, murdered, but she couldn’t afford to feel it, not yet, not with so much at stake.

She was rummaging in the box again when the back of her neck prickled and she knew someone was watching her. She glanced at the red electronic eyes blinking all around, but dismissed them, and her gaze fell on a real person loitering in the open doorway at the far end

of the ward. Her heart sank. It was Meshak. He was slouching against the doorpost, and even at this distance she caught the sharp glitter of his eyes.

“Hello, Meshak,” she called, tucking the Salamander Stone out of sight. “You’ve heard, then?” Amber was on her guard. She trusted no one now, especially not this solemn young man, the son of the Security Controller, Mrs Fedorowicz.

Meshak came over to the bed, cleared a space and perched, uncomfortably, among her memories. He was large and powerful and moved slowly; everything he did was slow and calculating. The bed sank under his weight and her precious photo album slid to the floor, falling open. Meshak glanced at the pictures, but made no move to pick it up. Instead he looked at Amber, his appraising eyes roving lazily over her face and lingering on one bare shoulder where her dressing gown had slipped. She pulled the dressing gown tightly together.

“I’ve heard.” His voice was deep, slow, but non-judgmental. If he had an opinion he was hiding it. “The Head said to take you back to classes.”

He never wasted words, and normally Amber was grateful not to have to talk; but this time she wanted to find out how much he knew. As the son of the Security Controller he might know everything. She looked at him quizzically, wondering if she dare risk a question; but one glance at that dark heavy face, so much older than its seventeen years, warned her to keep quiet. His eyes had a subtle wrongness - perhaps a squint, but more than that. One eye, the left, was iron-grey like his mother’s; the other a filmy brown with a surface blankness like looking into a void. It was never aimed at you, but slightly to one side, which was unnerving. His presence was always unnerving – like his mother’s.

Amber got off the bed, picked up the album, and began scooping her things back into their box. “I must get dressed. Wait outside. I won’t be long.”

Meshak stood up and slouched to the door again, leaning against it and facing away from her, into the corridor.

Amber drew the curtains around her bed and looked in the cabinet for her clothes; they were there, neatly folded. She twitched the curtain to check on Meshak and could see his broad back hunched over in the doorway. Taking off her dressing-gown she reached for her clothes.

Meshak's fingers moved easily over the buttons on his phone, which made little beeping noises as he entered the numbers. An image appeared on the screen. He peered at it closely and could see Amber at an angle as if looking from above. He saw her clearly as she removed her dressing gown and nightie leaving her briefly naked – apart from the necklace which pulsed with light.

Meshak flicked his wet tongue around cracked lips, and slid it back again between his teeth.