When We Need One Another The Most

by Whispersmummy

Summary

I've been playing with this idea for a while.

Elly Chandler has repressed her PTSD symptoms for 12 years. The kidnapping left her unstable and anxious.

Eve Granger is forced to take some time off from the Police due to her ordeal with Witlow.

Both end up on the same psychiatric ward...

PLEASE SEE THE ADDITIONAL TAG. If this kinda thing freaks you out totally, please steer clear. I can only reassure you that it doesn’t actually happen in the story. I won’t let anyone get hurt and I won’t describe anyone hurting themselves or other people. That’s not what the story is about.

Later chapters will be off the ward!
Chapter 1

“She’s not coping. The kids aren’t sleeping, she’s not sleeping. She needs professional help.”

Eve felt her heart dropping into her feet. It wasn’t fair. She’d tried, really she had.

The kids’ wide eyes stared at her, but her mother’s eyes were narrowed, accusing. Her mother ushered the kids out, murmuring something about biscuits. They shuffled out, heads turning back to look at their mother.

Turning her body away from them on the sofa, Eve gripped the cushion with white knuckles. Her hair was lank around her jaw, her scalp felt itchy where she hadn’t washed it for days.

“I think you’re right,” the man who called himself ‘Frank’—she wasn’t sure of his last name—said. “A period of assessment. Some treatment for the PTSD.”

Eve stopped listening. Her fingers ached and shook. Her knee bounced up and down, foot tapping rhythmically on the carpet. Closing her eyes, she tried to take a deep breath, but flashes of that sterile room seared across her mind’s eye, and she had to open them again. I need sleep.

“Eve.” Frank’s voice cut through her slow mind.

Eve blinked, tried to clear her head of the groaning of Brian Witlow as he bled out in front of her. In my head. “What?” Her voice was without strength.

“Are you going to agree to come into hospital today? So we can get you the help you need?”

“Be away from my kids?” Eve asked, her mind feeling foggy. “No.”

“You need some help, love,” her mother said, pulling an arm around her. “You can’t go on like this. Look at yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

“We’re going to have to detain you on a Section Two of the Mental Health Act,” Frank continued. His colleagues nodded in agreement. Someone took her arm, and Eve could vaguely hear one of them asking her mother to pack a bag, and follow on behind them. One of the men was on the phone.

Eve tried to sink further into the cushions of the sofa.

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The receptionist of Kubler-Ross Ward was middle aged and buzzed them into the airlock with a cheery smile.

The man that held Eve’s arm was weedy—Eve idly considered overpowering him but she felt so tired.

Her police training and regular gym visits meant she was physically fit, usually. Running around after two children after a long day at work meant she could keep up with the best of them. At the moment, however, she felt weak and pathetic. The journey had been a long one, and she could still
smell the cherry scent of the car on her clothes.

The second door opened with a ‘beep’ and they stepped onto the ward. The noise of people chatting and laughing hit her like a slap. How could people be happy here? This place of incarceration and embarrassment.

A member of staff approached, male, with dark hair and blue eyes. “Hi,” he said, proffering a hand to her. “I’m Toby, your key nurse.”

Eve blinked at him, kept her mouth closed.

Toby dropped his hand and nodded once, his smile still in place. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you settled in and then you’ll feel a lot better.”

Eve’s mother had a small suitcase beside her leg, her hand patting the handle as she looked around.

Toby took the bag from her and then held out his hand for Eve’s handbag, clasped tightly to her shoulder. “Sorry, Eve. I need to look through that as well.”

Hesitating, Eve stared at him, then at her mother, feeling incredulous. “What on earth for?”

“We need to make a list of your possessions,” Toby explained. Another member of staff came up behind him and he handed the suitcase to her. “Thanks Dani.”

Eve stared between Toby and Dani, and then back at her mother, who nodded, reassuringly. Eve sighed and handed over the handbag, her gaze dropping to the floor.

Dani took both bags through a door that read ‘Nursing Office’ and closed the door behind her.

Eve stood awkwardly, her foot shifting from side to side on the polished floor.

He mother put a tense arm around her shoulders and squeezed her. “I’ll phone the ward tonight,” she said, pulling back and tucking a piece of Eve’s blonde hair behind her ear. “See how you’re getting on.” She left, her back hunched and her hand to her mouth.

Toby held out a hand, indicating they should move down the corridor, the white walls covered in posters and drawings.

A few people walked past them as they walked and gave her curious looks.

Eve kept her head lowered and dragged her feet, the soles of her shoes making scraping noises on the floor. They passed an open area with chairs and Eve caught sight of a few people sitting and drinking tea. She turned quickly back to face the front as they looked up at her. *I wish they wouldn’t stare.*

They passed a room with a door and a pool table. A woman with dark hair and big dark eyes was inside, with another woman and a younger man, playing pool. The first woman smacked the back of the man’s head and they all laughed.

Eve realised she had stopped walking when she looked back towards Toby and discovered he was holding large double doors open for her. He waited, his eyes kind, until she moved through and into a quieter area of the ward.

This corridor was surrounded by bedrooms, eight in all. The doors had small square windows at eye-height, with a key-hole below each.
Toby tapped the door to the left and pointed to the window. “We can open this little window, if we need to check on you and you’re sleeping,” he explained.

Eve nodded. The skin of her face felt saggy on the bones, like they held no muscles to smile. She shivered, even though she wasn’t cold.

Opening the door, Toby stepped slowly into the bedroom.

Eve followed him. The bedroom had two single beds in it, one sink. A bedside table by each, a mirror, and two wardrobes stood without doors.

Toby showed her which bed was heard and explained he would leave her for a few minutes to get settled in.

Eve jumped as the door closed behind him. A leaflet explaining the rules and regulations of the ward sat on her bedside table. Eve glanced at it briefly as she sat on the thin mattress and gripped her hands together, her fingers red and sore. She rubbed at her knuckles, relishing in the sting. At least I’m feeling something. This numbness is terrible.

Eve sat for a few minutes, just taking in her surroundings. She could smell a lightly fragranced floor cleaner, and talcum powder, a scattering of which she could see over by the other bed. So she was sharing—that was strange. She was sure the majority of the other rooms were singles, although she hadn’t paid that much attention. Her heart thudded. What if her roommate was really crazy? Heard voices throughout the night and screamed out? Maybe that’s why they were in together, because the other patient was risky. Not able to stop the shudder from passing over her shoulders, she reached and pulled the leaflet towards herself.

A flash of a white room, a scalpel sticking out of a large belly. Horror but relief on the face of the man who had consumed her life for two years. Pleasure in the fact that he had finally won, this game of cat and mouse.

She smacked her palm onto the mattress and screwed her eyes shut. No.

The door opened and she nearly fell off the bed. The woman in the room with the pool table had stepped in, but was now hovering at the door. “Oh, God, I’m sorry. I didn’t realised you’d arrived.”

Eve blinked, her breathing fast, whole body shaking.

“Are you alright?” the woman asked. “Want me to get a nurse?”

Eve shook her head, her mouth feeling dry. She balled her fists and stared out of the window behind her. The trees waved in the autumn breeze and a bird or two sat within the branches and sung. She forced herself to calm her breathing.

The woman stood still and waited, then, seemingly satisfied that Eve wasn’t in too much distress, crossed the room to the sink. She stared into the mirror above the sink, wiped her fingertips under her eyes, then ran the tap.

The noise of the running water was soothing and Eve felt her body relaxing again and her breathing becoming steady. “Sorry,” she said quietly.

Her hands in the sink, the woman turned her head to smile at her. “It’s fine. I know what it’s like when you’re first admitted.” The woman rubbed wet hands against her face, then grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser. She dried her face, threw the towel into the small bin. Turning around, the woman leant backwards against the sink. “I’m Elly, by the way.” She grinned. “Should have said
that first.”

“Eve,” Eve said, her voice starting to sound normal again.

“Short for anything?” Elly asked, her eyes glinting in amusement.

Eve narrowed her eyes, unsure. She looked at the floor for a moment, tapped her foot against the lino. Then she looked back up. “Evelyn.”

“Eliza.” Elly chuckled. “At least you’re not named after a character from a musical.”

“True.” Eve allowed herself a small smile.

Elly glanced towards the door. “Totally thrashed my friend’s son at pool. Get a lot of practise in here.” She pushed away from the sink and strode over to her bed, which was neatly made, her pyjamas folded on her pillow. “Let me know if you ever want a game.” Elly opened and rummaged through a drawer in her bedside table, pulled out a hairbrush. She pulled it through her shoulder-length brown hair. Plucking a stray hair from the shoulder of her cable knit jumper, she sat on her bed. One knee lifted under her chin, she regarded Eve with interest. “D’you play pool?”

“On occasion,” Eve replied, wondering when the last time she played actually was. Probably during her initial training. She looked around the room, saw a few postcards on the noticeboard by Elly’s bed. “Those your kids?” she asked, pointing to a photograph.

Elly looked towards the photo, confused. Then she smiled. “Oh, no. Kate’s children. Old pictures, actually. They’re both at university now.”

“No kids of your own?”

Elly shook her head. “You?”

“Two. One of each.”

“Well, I never managed to get quite that far.” Elly’s eyes shifted away, and she played with the loose thread at the edge of a large fluffy blanket. She chewed on her lip. “My ex decided to cheat on me after only a few years.”

“Sorry,” Eve said.

Elly shrugged. “After that I never found anyone else worthy enough. Until I met Kate.” She looked up and laughed. “Oh, no. One hundred percent platonic. We don’t live together, but we are partners in our firm. Been working together for twelve years now.”

“What do you do?”

“We’re private investigators. Domestic stuff. Very domestic, these days.” A shadow passed over Elly’s gaze as she looked away again.

Eve studied her. The beige knit jumper was far too big on her thin frame, the black leggings made her legs look long. Fluffy slippers adorned her feet. She wore sparkly earrings and a little makeup. Her hair was neat, her fringe curled gently just above her eyelashes. She obviously took care of herself.

Not like Eve, who hadn’t had a shower in a week, or eaten so much as a snack in two.

“What do you do?”
Eve’s eyes snapped up to Elly’s. She swallowed and felt her shoulders tensing. “I don’t…” She twisted her lips and rubbed the back of her neck.

“Sorry, my curious side gets the better of me, sometimes.” Elly held up both hands. “You don’t have to answer.”

“I’m police,” Eve said, not wanting to offend Elly. Not when they had to share a room.

“Do I detect a faint northern accent?” Elly asked, adding one to her own words.

“That’s right.”

“What are you doing down here?” Elly dropped the accent.

Eve fingered the leaflet that still lay in her hands. “Closest hospital that didn’t have any of my arrests languishing inside.” She bit her lip and felt her cheeks redden. “Oh, I mean…”

“I understand,” Elly said kindly, standing and moving towards her. “Must be difficult, a lot of psychiatric patients have a forensic history.”

Eve nodded. She considered their bedroom, looked between the two beds. “Why am I sharing a room?”

Elly sucked her bottom lip thoughtfully, then shrugged. “Not sure. I know why I am.” She dropped her voice, grinning a bit. “I get lonely.”

“That’s a mental health condition now, is it?” Eve asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Elly laughed. “No. I have issues with being left alone. Especially at night. Makes me highly anxious.” She swept her gaze across the room. “There must be a reason they’ve put you in with me, not just the lack of NHS beds.”

“I have no idea,” Eve said.

Elly indicated the door. “I’ve got meds. And it’s lunchtime, they’ll be around in a moment to call us. You want to come, or shall I let them know you’re taking a moment?”

“Just…” Eve sighed and held up the leaflet.

Elly nodded. “No problem.” She left with a slight bounce in her step.

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Lunch was dinner, a hot meal, which was fine with Eve, although she did wish they weren’t all together in the dining room, two nurses watching over them with folded arms. One flitted in and out with a clipboard.

After lunch Toby sat down with her in a private room and went through the required paperwork. He explained her rights under the Mental Health Act and she signed a form to state she understood. He explained she would see the doctor during the afternoon and have a physical health check.

“A female doctor?” Eve asked, then blushed.

“She is, yes,” Toby replied. “Is that okay?”

Eve nodded.
“Would you prefer a female key nurse?” he asked her.

Eve shrugged.

She signed various disclaimer forms, the NHS covering its back, she realised, until everything was done. Toby suggested she introduce herself to a few people, then left.

The lady who had taken her belongings brought them to her and together they carried them into her bedroom.

Eve sat still on her bed, hands between her knees, her foot resuming it’s tapping on the floor. The room was quiet. People passed periodically across the window in the door, but didn’t look in. After a few minutes, she took a deep breath and stood, passing a hand through her greasy hair.

She went into the area with the chairs, where she had seen people drinking tea before. Four people sat chatting, two men and two women. She gave them a motionless raised hand gesture as a greeting. Sitting in a chair in the corner, she tried to appear polite without drawing too much attention to herself.

The young woman closest to her was slumped in her chair and her black hair seemed greasier than Eve’s. The man next to her was patting his knees in a rhythm, like he was playing the bongos. He shifted from side to side in his chair as he drummed, his face creased in excitement. An older man was darting his eyes to one side on occasion, murmuring something to someone no one else could see. He appeared to be able to carry on a normal conversation with the woman next to him, who had brown hair and sat very primly in her chair, her hands folded in her lap, her ankles crossed.

The woman with brown hair introduced herself as Trisha. “Lunch was appalling, as usual,” she said, her voice low and bitter. “Why they insist on serving pig swill I’ll never know.”

“I didn’t mind it,” Eve replied, remembering how the shepherd’s pie had caused her mouth to water for the first time in weeks.

“Can’t expect much from the NHS,” the older man said, murmured something to his invisible friend, then turned back to them, his smile bright.

Elly appeared from towards the other side of the corridor with a tray. “They do their best, Bill,” she told the old man, and placed a plate of biscuits on the table. “They at least provide us with tasty snacks.

Everyone reached for a biscuit apart from the younger girl with the black greasy hair, which huffed and turned away.

Elly tilted her head to one side and eyed the young girl. “Jess, come on. You know you want one.” She held out a steaming mug towards Jess.

Jess rolled her eyes, took the drink. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Elly replied, handing out the rest of the drinks. She smiled at Eve. “Sorry, I didn’t know what you wanted.”

Eve shook her head, like it didn’t matter.

“Let me give you the grand tour? Toby asked if I would. I can show you where the tea and coffee-making facilities are then.”
Eve pushed up out of her chair and followed her down the corridor. The nursing office was to their right, a door with a member of staff inside and lots of shelves, to their left.

“That’s the clinic, where you get your medications. If you have them.” Elly pointed the other way. “That’s where the nurses and HCAs hang out. Health care assistants. They’re a nice bunch, I promise. Unless you feel like crap and they’re trying to get you up. In which case, they’re evil.”

Eve had to smile slightly at that.

They walked further along, and through a door, and a large door opened into a garden to the left. There were groups of people outside, smoking and hanging around. To their right was the dining room, where they had had lunch.

“They clean the dining room early morning, but breakfast is served at about eight. Depends on when they finish.” Elly pointed further on, through a door with a code on it. “Through there is the art room, the OTs tend to run groups in the week, but sometimes you can get a HCA to let you use it, if they have a minute or two at the weekend. It’s nice and quiet.” Elly stopped walking and eyed her. “You really are the quiet sort, aren’t you?”

Eve shrugged.

Elly showed her how to make a drink if she wanted one, where the biscuits were and what time meals were served. They peered into another room with a piano and other instruments, and Elly laughed at Eve’s grimace. “Not a fan on Kum Ba Yar?”

Once the tour had ended, a smartly dressed lady pushing an ECG trolley arrived and introduced herself as Dr Ellington. She took Eve into the clinic, encouraged her to lie down on the couch and stuck ECG stickers across her ribs.

Eve lay as still as she could and pressed her fingernails into her palms until the machine stopped whirring. Then Dr Ellington took her blood pressure, listened to her heart and lungs, and made a list of all the things she was allergic to.

After the physical side, they moved onto the mental health side. Eve sat, head lowered, as Dr Ellington asked her about her lifestyle, how she took care of herself, what medication she was taking, and whether she wanted to end her life. Eyes harsh, she stared at the doctor at the last question.

“I have children. They need me.” Eve ground her teeth and felt her fingernails biting into her hands. “Why on earth would I do something so selfish?”

“It’s a question we ask everyone who’s admitted,” Dr Ellington explained as she scribbled on her notebook. She seemed used to having to explain this. “It’s just routine.” She considered Eve for a while, a smile in her eyes but not turning up her mouth. “Can I take it, from your response, that you don’t feel suicidal?”

Eve shook her head.

“Good, that’s good. How are you finding the paroxetine? Helpful?”

“I don’t know,” Eve replied, honestly.

Dr Ellington nodded. “We’ll give it a few more weeks.”

And so the assessment went on. Various questions about various angles of her life, from how safe
she was caring for her children, to what she enjoyed doing in her spare time. She tried to answer everything honestly, as far as she knew how.

When Dr Ellington asked about her romantic relationships, she stared at her and kept her mouth firmly closed. *Yes, sure. I was briefly in a relationship with a man convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. And then manslaughter as well. Not going to divulge that little piece of information.*

“You’ve been feeling anxious, am I right?”

Eve sighed. “Anxious isn’t the right word. I wake up,” she said, pulling her sleeves over her hands and straightening her arms. “I wake in the middle of the night.”

“Do you have nightmares?”

“S—sometimes.”

Dr Ellington nodded. “Right. I’ll write you up for some PRN zopiclone.”

“What’s PRN?”

“As and when. You don’t have to have it, but it might be suggested you do if you have trouble sleeping.” Dr Ellington wrote something on a chart that folded out. “And I’ll prescribe you something to help if you do feel anxious. Again, as and when.”

Eve was left feeling empty and irritable, like someone had scoured her with sandpaper. Her watch told her it was four o’clock. Perhaps she’d make a drink and retire to her bedroom. She headed up the corridor, past the garden door and into the dining room. It was empty. Making herself a coffee—decaf she noticed, fair enough—she carried the hot mug back into the female corridor and located her shared bedroom.

Elly was lying on her bed, propped up by her pillows, a small computer game in her hands. Her thumbs worked vigorously until she stopped and sighed, dejectedly. “Damn. Died again.”

“Don’t let Dr Ellington hear you say that,” Eve murmured. “She’ll think you’re suicidal.”

“That old chestnut,” Elly said, her eyes sad despite her joke. She bit her lip, rested the computer on her belly and looked at her raised knees.

Eve took her coffee over to her bedside table, making sure she didn’t spill it with shaky hands. She mirrored Elly’s position on her own bed, lay back and trailed her palm over the soft cotton sheets.

Elly’s bed was at a right angle to her own and they could look at one another from where they both lay. Elly stared at the ceiling, slipped her hands under her head against her pillow. She let out a huge sigh.

“Is it rude to ask what you’re in here for?” Eve asked, unsure about the etiquette of the situation. Her brain felt rather full of information. Her head felt heavy and her fingers twitched on her stomach. She smelt of days-old sweat and uncleanness. She looked towards the sink and wondered if she could manage a strip-wash before she went to bed. She wondered if there was a bath she could use.

A knock at the door and an older lady with a green folder entered, smiled at the both of them. “You’re on ten minutes checks today, Eve,” she said, and she sounded friendly.

Eve nodded and they both watched the woman leave.
“That’s Maggie. She’s a real star.” Elly turned back to look at the ceiling. “And, no it’s not rude to ask. At least I don’t think so. But don’t be surprised if no one else wants to tell you. Some people are very private.” She turned on her side and looked across at Eve. “Will you tell me, if I told you?”

Eve nodded.

“Okay. Well. I have general anxiety disorder. On-going for the last…” She counted on her fingers. “Twelve years. As a result of a trauma, I became frightened to be left alone, small spaces, I really don’t like those. Worried about everything. And in May last year…” She bit her lip. “I did something rather awful to myself and ended up in ITU.”

Eve sat up to drink her coffee, relished in the warmth of the cup against her hands. She started to regret asking, wondered how she would find the words to talk about her ordeal when she wasn’t entirely sure if the story would terrify Elly. She seemed sweet and quite innocent, although her account of her admission made Eve think otherwise.

“You?” Elly asked, leaning an elbow on the bed, pushing her fingers into her hair.

“PTSD,” Eve replied. She looked into her coffee cup, as if it would give her the words she needed. “Don’t suppose you heard about the Brian Witlow thing?” Eve looked up.

“I did, actually. Read it in the paper.” Elly narrowed her eyes. “You’re not Eve Granger, are you?”

Eve nodded.

“They didn’t recount much, or on the news on television. And I know the media isn’t always reliable for truth-telling or factual accounts…but it did sound awful.” Elly smiled over at her. “I’ll probably keep an open mind. Unless you want to tell me.”

“Not particularly.” Eve sipped her coffee, scratched her head a bit. She thought about finding a comb.

The trees swayed outside the window and Eve watched them, looking for the birds she’d heard before. It felt very quiet, maybe a little too quiet. Witlow’s voice rang in her ears, the look in his eyes fleeted across her vision. She gulped her hot coffee, hoping to burn her tongue and snap the flashbacks away, but the coffee was lukewarm.

Elly had rolled from her bed and was by her side suddenly. She was holding out a small bottle of something. “Try this. It’s lavender.”

Eve eyed her suspiciously and cocked an eyebrow.

“Honestly, I find it really helpful if I’m feeling worried or…” Elly used a hand gesture to end the sentence.

Eve watched the bottle as Elly rolled it between thumb and forefinger.

“Would you like some on a tissue or…maybe on your pillow?” She glanced out towards the rest of the ward. “They don’t mind if you have a little nap before tea.”

Nodding, Eve shifted to one side so that Elly could tip a few drops of the lavender oil onto her pillow. She noticed that Elly stepped around her personal space, giving her more room than someone usually would. She wondered whether that was just part of being a patient, or if Elly herself didn’t like to be close to people.
The herby scent reached her nose and reminded her of her grandmother, who grew lavender plants in her garden. Images of playing in the garden, butterflies fluttering around them, her grandmother lifting her up high, seeped into Eve’s brain. She closed her eyes and felt her shoulders slump. Leaving her half-finished coffee on the side, she lay into the pillows and exhaled.

She heard Elly move away and sit back on her bed. The quiet noise of her handheld computer filled the room, and Eve found it more soothing than annoying.

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They had tea and Elly stayed close to Eve during the evening. They sat with a few other women in a female-only television room, watched mind-numbing soap operas. The news came on at ten and Eve shot up from the sofa, stalked out of the room. She could hear Elly following her out.

“Alright?” Elly asked as they stopped outside their bedroom.

“No, I can imagine you wouldn’t be.” Elly smiled at her. “Probably time for my meds anyway. Fancy keeping me company?”

Eve leant against the wall with Elly outside the clinic and waited for a man called James to finish dishing out tablets to young Jess. Eve could hear them talking event through the privacy of the closed door. She could hear them discussing Jess having a shower, and Jess point blank refusing to do so. They argued a little longer, then the door opened and Jess left, her face dark as the night.

Elly went into the clinic and Eve was left by herself. She looked up and down the corridor, took in the board to her right with various activities pinned to it. Tomorrow, Tuesday, they would be taking part in a pottery group. Scenes form the film ‘Ghost’ sprang to her mind and she had to muffle an unexpected laugh with her fingers. She shook her head.

When the door opened once more, James beckoned Eve towards him.

Eve hesitated.

Elly nodded, encouragingly.

“Just want to check you’re not on anything this evening, Eve,” James said.

She went in, feeling the warmth of Elly’s gaze on her back. She leant against the counter, shifting her foot back and forth.

James checked the chart Eve had seen the doctor writing on before, and smiled up at her. “Would you like a sleeping tablet tonight?”

“I’m not sure,” Eve replied, looking about the room.

“What are you not sure about?” His voice was soft.

“I just…” She stared at the floor by her feet, noticed the small red and white tiles, like an American diner. How odd. “I sleep fine.”

“That’s not what you said to the doctor.”

Eve’s head snapped up, her jaw tense.
James kept his gaze firmly on her, but she could see care in his eyes.

It made her feel worse. “I don’t like taking tablets.”

“Sometimes,” James said, relaxing his stance and putting a hand to his chin, “it takes a while to get used to being in hospital. And people need a bit of help to get off to sleep.” He paused, and allowed her to take that in. “Sometimes, once you’ve had a good night, you start to feel better. I know you haven’t been doing much at home in the day.”

“I’ve been watching intellectual shows about social interaction.”

He chuckled. “Jeremy Kyle?”

“Maybe.”

He chuckled again. “That’s okay. I expect you’ve felt low and worried.”

She nodded, a little surprised.

“Perhaps try the zopiclone tonight,” he suggested, tilting his head the other way. “And get back to us about it tomorrow? Let us know whether it’s effective?”

She nodded.

“Alright.” He popped a tablet into a small paper cup and held it out to her. When she took it, he pointed towards the sink, where a tube of cups also sat.

Eve took a cup, filled it with water, and swallowed the tablet.

“You should go to bed within the next half an hour,” James explained, penning his initials onto the back of her chart. “Allow the medications to work.”

“Okay,” Eve said, putting the cups in the bin.

“You have your paroxetine at eight tomorrow morning.”

Eve left the clinic and was pleased to see Elly had waited for her. They walked together back to the bedroom and Elly pulled the curtains around her bed. Eve could hear her getting changed behind it.

She sat on her bed and tapped her foot on the floor.

The door opened and Maggie stuck her head around it. “Can I interest you in a bath, Eve?”

Eve’s eyes were wide. “I just had a zopi…something. Sleeping tablet.”

“You might be okay if you have a quick one.” Maggie looked very hopeful.

Eve felt bad and looked away. “Okay.”

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Elly lay in bed and listened to the sound of the plug being pulled two rooms away. She felt her body beginning to sink into the plastic mattress and reached down to pull her blanket, one her grandmother
had made her years ago, up over her shoulder. Turning over onto her side, she faced the door and Eve’s bed.

The two nights she’d spent alone had been hell. She hated not going to sleep with the knowledge that someone was close by and she hated for the door to be closed. She poked her hands out of the covers, made sure she could see her own wrists. Made sure she could see there was nothing around them. Thin white lines surrounded her left wrist, like a set of matching bracelets. She closed her eyes and refused to look at them.

The door opened and the faint waft of steamy lemons drifted through. Eve stepped inside, wrapped in a bathrobe, her hair towel-dried. She sent Elly a tight smile and pulled the curtain around her bed.

Elly felt satisfied. That lovely blonde hair had looked so greasy and unwashed. There had been an odour about her as well, when Elly had leant close to her she’d wrinkled her nose. Whatever she’d been through had mean she hadn’t wanted to shower in quite some time. *Maybe she’ll tell me about it at some point.*

“I think I know why I’m in with you,” a voice came from behind the curtain.

Elly smiled. “Do you?”

“Yes.” There was a pause. “I have nightmares.” Eve pulled the curtains back, sporting a blue pair of pyjamas with buttons down the shirt and a drawstring at the waist. “Just to warn you.” Her eyes were drooping.

“You’re not supposed to sleep with wet hair,” Elly said gently.

Eve chuckled, looked more relaxed than Elly had seen her the entire afternoon. “I don’t have the energy to dry it.”

“At least brush it?” Elly regarded the nest of fluffy hair that she suspected Eve had shampooed at least three times.

Eve sat on the side of her bed, bare feet scrunching. Her shoulders were flopped forward.

Elly got out of bed and padded over in her socks to Eve’s side of the bedroom. She spied the detangling comb on Eve’s bedside table and grasped the plastic handle. She looked at Eve carefully, twisting her mouth a bit. “Want me to do it?”

“A bit childish, isn’t it?” Eve snarled, causing Elly to step away from her. Eve’s face softened. “Sorry. Actually, I think that’d be nice.”

“Turn around a bit then.” Elly’s heart thumped in her chest and her fingers shook and she lifted the brush to Eve’s head. She tried to be gentle, pulled out all the knots, and ignored the racing of her heart, the tension in her body. The tension that screamed at her to run away. *I hate this, I hate touching people.* She eyed the door, calculated the number of steps to it, knew which hand she would reach out to pull the door open if she needed to.

When she was finished, Eve reached out and touched her arm. Elly jumped backwards and blew out a breath between pursed lips. “Sorry,” she breathed, a hand to her sternum. “I don’t…”

“I’m sorry,” Eve replied quickly, her hand still lifted. She dropped it. “Shouldn’t have.”
“I’m jumpy. About people touching me.” Elly shot her an embarrassed grin. “Still things to work on.”

“No one’s perfect.”

Elly smiled shyly at her, then realised she was still holding the comb and held it out. She bravely stepped forward and touched her fingertips lightly to Eve’s shoulder. The cotton of her pyjamas was soft and brushed. She pulled her hand back.

Maggie poked her head around the door and smiled at them both. “Ready for bed?”

“Yes,” Elly said, scampering over to her bed and climbing in. She buried her fingers in the comforting warmth of her grandmother’s blanket.

“Good. Teeth brushed?”

Elly rolled her eyes and folded her arms, regarding Maggie with mocked distain. “I’m forty-fucking-two, Mags.”

“And I’m old enough to be your mother. Now have you brushed your teeth?”

Elly grinned. “Yes.”

Maggie turned to Eve, shot her a questioning look.

Eve hung her head.

Maggie snuggled her head towards the sink.

Eve slid off her bed and shuffled tiredly towards the sink. She brushed her teeth as Maggie, satisfied, left the room. “Do they check us overnight?” she asked around her toothbrush.

“Yes. They’ll check you every ten minutes, but I’m on hourly.”

“In that case…” Eve spat into the sink and ran the tap, rinsing her brush. “…I apologise in advance for the disturbance to your sleep.”

“I’ll live. They’re pretty quiet when they check you.” Elly snuggled back under her blankets. “Leave your curtain open. They have to check you’re breathing anyway.”

Eve walked towards the light switch and checked with Elly before turning the main light off. She shuffled to her bed, lay down, pulled the covers wearily over herself. She let out a contented groan.

Elly smiled a little more and closed her eyes.

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Waking with a jolt, Elly realised the groaning she had heard coming from the other side of the bedroom had not been in her dreams. She pushed the covers off herself and rested her feet on the floor, turning her head to listen. She checked her wrists and her ankles. She was fine.

Eve was groaning, and the rustling of her covers were constant, as if she was writhing around in bed.
Elly thought briefly about calling for the night staff, and bit her lip for a moment, before standing and moving swiftly to Eve’s side. She knelt on the floor, winced at the cold hard floor beneath her kneecaps, but rested a hand on the mattress beside Eve’s hip. “Hey, Eve.” Her voice sounded too soft over Eve’s groans.

Eve was lying on her back, her legs tangled up in the sheets, her arms out in front of her, fingers grasping something invisible. There was a gleam of sweat on her face, and lines between her eyes.

Lifting her hand from the bed, it hovered over Eve for a moment, before Elly forced herself to grasp her shoulder. “Eve,” she said more firmly, gripping the bone of Eve’s shoulder hard. She shook her. “Wake up.”

Eve’s eyes flew open and she pushed Elly forcefully away from her.

Elly stumbled backwards and barely caught herself before her head hit the floor. “Ouch.” She put a hand up to the back of her head and groaned.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Eve said, scrambling from her bed and dropping down to the floor next to Elly. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ouch.” Elly grimaced and rubbed the rapidly forming bump on the back of her head. The floor was cold against her skin where her t-shirt had rode up her back.

Eve leant over her and held out a hand.

Elly looked at the hand suspiciously and swallowed. She wrapped her fingers around Eve’s hand, felt a nasty shiver go through her as she did so, but pushed the feeling away.

Helping Elly to her feet, Eve pulled at the collar of her shirt. The top button had come done.

Elly tried not to look, but the smooth shadow of Eve’s breast peeked into her vision anyway. She pushed her shoulders up and rubbed at her head again, feeling it was a strange time for a tingle of arousal to rear its ugly head.

Eve perched back on her bed. Her face was flushed and her breathing was laboured, her fingers still played with her pyjama shirt.

“You were having a nightmare,” Elly whispered, her eyes flicking towards the door. Any minute now, a member of staff would interrupt them. “I should go get a nurse.”

“No, please don’t,” Eve breathed, fiddling with her fingers.

“Okay.” Elly sat on the bed next to her, looked sideways at her. “You should tell a member of staff though. They’ll want to record it.”

“I’ll tell them in the morning.”

“Make sure you do.” Elly bit her lip. “I don’t keep secrets for people.”

Eve shook her head. “I would never ask you to.” She wiped at her face.

Elly realised she had tears on her cheeks. She wanted to reach up and brush them away but realised that wouldn’t only be too much for her, it probably would for Eve as well. *Complete strangers don’t do that. That’s far too intimate.* “Reckon you could get back to sleep?”

Fear shone brightly from Eve’s dark eyes.
Elly nodded. “I think you should try. They’ll be round to check you in a minute.”

As Elly stood from Eve’s bed, Eve slid under the covers. She pulled the sheets up to her chin and lay ram-rod straight on her back.

A torchlight shone through the little window in the door, landing on the floor by Eve’s bed. Elly thought she saw Eve hold her breath until the light went away.

“My mother used to sing to me,” Elly whispered into the darkness. “Before I went to sleep. Always made me feel so safe.”

“My mother’s at home with my children. I expect they’re all out for the count. It’s three in the morning.” Eve shifted around in bed, her eyes glinting in the darkness. The silence was calm. The leaves fluttered outside the window, peeking between the gap in the curtains.

Elly took in a deep breath and closed her eyes, her hands out of the covers.

“Jake Osbourne.”

Elly startled a little at Eve’s voice, then sunk back into the mattress. “I’ve heard the name.”

“He was in love with me. Possibly still is.” Eve pushed her hair back from her face. “He thought Witlow had slit my throat. That’s why he stabbed him. Witlow smeared blood all over my neck. And Jake just went…” Eve swallowed audibly.

“Is that what you were dreaming about?” Elly asked, softly.

“It’s what I always dream about,” Eve answered. “Every single night.”

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Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Eve continues her admission.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for everyone's continuing support. I know this is a bit of a strange story, and I really hope it doesn't confuse those unlucky enough not to have seen both C&C and CB.

It's nice to write something with a mental health angle though.

As usual, I'm practising my newly learnt editing skills.

Good as her word, Eve rose at eight and told the early shift staff about her nightmare. She didn’t go into great detail, hung her head and played with her fingers, but did use Wicklow’s name, and explained that it was about her traumatic encounter.

The young health care assistant, Charlotte, smiled and nodded. “If you want to go into a private room and talk properly about it, just let me know, okay?”

Eve nodded, but didn’t accept the offer. Her brain was still fuzzy from sleep and she didn’t feel like sitting in a private room just yet.

Charlotte hopped off to tell the nurse in charge of the shift.

As Eve returned to the bedroom she passed Elly on her way out of the bathroom.

Elly’s hair clung to her face, her skin free from makeup. Her face lit up when she saw Eve and she pushed her wet hair from her eyes. “Hi.”

“I hope she doesn’t think badly of me.”

Elly clutched her toiletry bag in both hands, her bathrobe snugly tied around her, as she followed Eve into the bedroom. “That’s really good, well done.” Her bag thumped down next to the sink and she peered at herself in the mirror. “It’s just easier to be honest with them, the nurses. Start as you mean to go on.”

Eve nodded and sat on the edge of her bed. The messy covers made her wince. She sat for a moment, blinking, her brain trying to wake up a bit. The fog cleared slowly. Then she stood and set about making her bed, pulling the sheets taught and plumping the pillow so that it rested squarely. She felt Elly’s eyes on her and when she turned around, saw Elly smiling at her.

“How did you sleep?” Elly asked kindly, rubbing at her hair with a small towel.
“After my unfortunate awakening at three a.m.?” Eve shrugged and pulled her curtain back from her window. “Not too bad, actually.”

“Those sleeping tablets are good,” Elly said, combing her hair in front of the mirror. She caught Eve’s eye in the mirror. “Any funny taste in your mouth this morning?”

Eve rolled her tongue around her mouth and grimaced. “Metallic,” she admitted.

“Nice bit of zopiclone.” Elly wrinkled her nose. “It’s worth it though, if your really can’t sleep.” She went to her bed and pulled the curtain around to get dressed.

Eve did the same. *Might as well follow Elly’s example.* She made sure she had fresh underwear and a clean button-up jumper. Black, however, along with black jeans, the pair she’d worn the day before. She couldn’t be bothered to search in her suitcase for a fresh pair that would match. Not that matching really concerned her.

As she ran her fingers through her hair, she realised it felt soft and clean. Foreign. Her curtain sounded loud when she pulled it back, to reveal a fully dressed Elly, who was pulling on her fluffy slippers.

Elly lifted an eyebrow and indicated the comb on Eve’s bedside table. “Come on, see if you can do it yourself this morning.” There was a playful glint in her eye.

A *challenge,* perhaps? Eve’s fingers brushed the handle of her comb idly for a moment, before she lifted it and, with purpose, dragged it through her hair.

Elly kept her triumphant grin mostly hidden by turning away and applying some make up. “I’ll dry my hair after meds and breakfast,” Elly said conversationally.

“Mine’s gone all curly,” Eve muttered, pulling strands of her hair straight so hard her scalp burned.

“I have straighteners,” Elly said, tucking her hair behind her ear and pointing to her bedside table.

Eve eyed them and saw the little sticker on the plug. She recognised it from her own work—each electrical item needed to be tested before being used. They’d been given a fresh set of lamps for the main office at work a few months ago, and it had seemed like forever before the guy came round and tested them all, before they could use them. *Health and bloody safety.* She figured it was more sensible on a mental health unit, with patients that could hurt themselves with electric appliances.

*Am I one of those people? Would I intentionally hurt myself if given the opportunity?* She’d read about people that did so—in her line of work, of course she had. People who felt so much pain or distress inside that the only way to control it, or let it out, was to cut themselves. She looked at the straighteners with interest. *Hot, but perhaps not hot enough to leave a mark.*

A shiver ran through her. *No.* She’d felt enough physical pain in her life; had been beaten up, kicked about by bad people. *That wouldn’t help me.*

Elly was watching her worriedly as Eve studied the straighteners. “Are they going to be a problem?” Elly asked, seriousness making her voice sound harsh.

Blinking, Eve stood, placed her comb back where it belonged and moved towards Elly. “Oh, no. Sorry.”

“Are you sure?” Elly asked, still blatantly unconvinced. “I don’t want to…provide a means of…”
“I don’t. I wouldn’t.” Eve looked right into Elly’s eyes, tried to convey how honest she was trying to be. “I promise.”

Elly’s gaze softened and she nodded a little, and looked satisfied. “We should go see what’s on offer in the dining room. And morning medication.” She spoke as if she were at a gala, one finger raised in jest.

They walked down the corridor into the main area. Most of the other patients weren’t dressed yet and Eve felt a little better. *There are always people worse off than yourself,* she could hear her mother saying to her a thousand times. *Not everyone has been through the things I’ve been through.* She shuddered and shook the thoughts from her brain.

The clinic door was open and a tall lady with a long blonde ponytail was behind it, jangling a large bunch of keys in her hand. A black oval-shaped device hung from her belt loop and Eve recognised it as a personal alarm. It shocked her to think that the staff needed these, when they worked at a hospital—a place where they were trying to help people. She supposed if people got very unwell, they might lash out.

“Hi Elly,” the nurse said, her expression pleased.

Elly rolled her eyes and colour tinged her cheeks. “Hello, Rachael.”

“Very nice to see you,” Rachael said, and there was something in her expression that made Eve wonder if there was some kind of joke between them. Rachael smiled at Eve too. “And you must be Eve?” she asked.

Eve nodded.

“That’s great. I’m Rachael.” Opening up the medication trolley, which looked like it was on its last legs, Rachael delved inside and grabbed a chart on the bench beside her. “The usual, Ms Chandler?”

“Yes please.” Elly seemed to be shy around Rachael. Her cheeks remained pink and her eyes were lowered. *She’s like a submissive puppy.*

Eve looked between them and Rachael just smiled at her as she handed Elly a small pot with a single tablet in. “Enjoy,” Rachael said.

Elly swallowed the tablet with water. She eventually looked up and blushed further at Eve’s confused look. “Rachael’s my key nurse, you know, like Toby is yours?”

Eve nodded, still perplexed.

“It’s the fourteenth of February, isn’t it?” Elly asked Rachael.

Rachael nodded, grinning as she took Eve’s medication chart from the bench, flicked through it, located the correct box in the trolley.

“I assured Rachael when I was first admitted, that there was no way I would be off my section by Valentine’s Day,” Elly said, folding her arms and pouting. “Rachael assured me that I would be.”

“You’re not...on a s-section?” Eve asked.

Elly shook her head. “Informal as the day is long.” She and Rachael smiled affectionately at one another. “Thank you for believing in me,” she said quietly.
“Things do get better, you see, Eve,” Rachael said, handing Eve her tablet. “Even if it doesn’t seem like they will.”

Eve took her tablet, and they left Rachael to the rest of her medication round, a queue of people now outside the clinic awaiting their own pills.

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Annie, Eve’s mother, arrived at eleven with both children in tow, and a bag-for-life full of more clothes. Eve had straightened her hair with Elly’s tongs, content with how her hair sat now, neatly resting against her shoulders. The children hugged Eve with solemn faces and Eve tried desperately to put on a smile, a brave face, and convince them that their mother was perfectly fine.

“How long are you going to be here for?” Claire, the youngest, asked her mother when Annie insisted they stop hugging her and sit down in the family room.

Eve felt an ache begin in her stomach and held her children’s hands, one in each of hers. “I don’t know.”

“But why do you have to be in hospital?” Robin, her ten year old, asked, his voice a whisper. Obviously Annie had instilled a fear of the word in their small minds. Great.

“Mummy’s poorly,” Eve said, tears forming in her eyes despite her planned resolve. “So the nurses and doctors are looking after Mummy for a while.”

“But how long?” Robin insisted, his face creasing as he tried to hold back his own tears.

Annie pulled him to her and stroked his head. “Grandma is looking after you both whilst Mummy is here.” Eve noted that she neglected to say the word ‘hospital’. “Why don’t you show Mummy what you brought her?” Annie insisted.

The children looked at one another for a moment, before Robin reached into the bag-for-life and lifted out a brown teddy bear. “We thought you’d like to look after Henry, whilst we can’t give you cuddles.”

To Eve’s horror, a gathered tear slid down her face. She pressed a hand to her mouth and reached with the other toward the bear, holding it close to her face.

Both children sat either side of her and she hugged them to her, the bear between her cheek and Claire’s.

Annie sat across from them, her hands clasped, like a stern school teacher. After a few quiet words between mother and children, Eve smiled and wiped her face. “I’m sorry lovelies,” she said, rubbing her daughter’s back.

“It’s okay to cry,” Robin said and Eve marvelled at how grown up he sounded. She nearly burst into tears again when she wondered whether he’d had to grow up quickly, because of the way she’d behaved during the last few weeks.

“I know it is,” Eve replied.

“But Mummy will be doing no more crying at home,” Annie insisted.

Eve looked across at her. “I’ll be coming home really soon,” she murmured, not entirely sure if her words were true, but wanting to reassure her children.
“Not quite,” Annie replied, her words clipped and sharp.

Eve stared at her.

“Why don’t you two find a book each to read?” Annie suggested, standing and indicating Eve and she leave the room. “We’ll be back in a just a minute.”

The kids watched them go and Eve frowned as Annie steered her into the corridor, which was, thankfully, deserted.

“Mum.” Still clutching Henry the bear in one hand, Eve stood in front of her as the door closed, the children safely out of earshot.

“I think it would be best for you to leave the children to me, until you are one hundred percent well again,” Annie said, taking her time over each word.

“I’ll be returning home when I’m discharged,” Eve stated. “And I don’t expect that to be months away.”

“Well,” Annie started, then closed her mouth. She looked unsure, worried. As if there was something she wasn’t saying.

“What?”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now, I’ll come to your meeting with the doctor on Wednesday.”

Eve just looked at her. “What are you not telling me?”

“Just…” Annie looked embarrassedly about and reached to put a hand on Eve’s shoulder.

Eve shrugged her off. “Tell me,” she insisted.

“When you…” Annie swallowed and pulled her gaze to Eve’s. “When you had your…your episode at work…”

“You mean when I told everyone to go to hell and leave me alone?”

“Your episode,” Annie insisted. “You said a lot of things, so I’m told by your superiors, that I would not be happy for my grandchildren to hear.”

“My children,” Eve said, frowning and folding her arms. “They’re my children, Mum.”

“Yes, dear, I know they are.”

“What on earth did I say?” Eve asked. What had she said? Did she even remember?

Eve’s recollections of the day were scattered, like she’d been watching herself from high above, and through a warped glass mirror. She knew she had shouted at the team, knew she’d seen Wicklow’s face in a reflection in the glass of one of the doors and had smashed it in fear. Her hand had been bandaged for a couple of weeks.

She knew Ajay had put his arms around her from behind and had brought them both to the floor, but she’d never asked herself why. Had she been swearing? Shouting abuse at her fellow colleagues? Threatening people? Talking about things that weren’t there?

Four weeks felt so long ago, like her memories had faded over years and now just sparkled black and
white in her mind, glimpses of what had happened.

“We won’t go into that,” Annie said after a long pause.

Eve’s heart pounded in her chest as flashes of possible combinations of awful things she could have done flashed across her vision. She put a hand to her head and felt her insides crumpling.

Annie’s hand on her arm felt neither comforting, nor grounding. Eve just wanted to leave, wanted them all to leave. She knew when she looked into her mother’s eyes that her boss had told Annie exactly what had happened in the office, four weeks ago, and that Annie was appalled and afraid. Of me.

She turned away and folded her arms protectively across her chest. She plucked at the top button on her jumper, wishing she could rip it off, watch it ping across the corridor and hit the opposite wall. But she clenched her fingers in the material of her jumper and refrained. Well at least I can hold off from destroying my own clothes. Progress.

Annie sighed and squeezed Eve’s shoulder. “We’ll talk about it more on Wednesday,” she promised and Eve found herself believing her.

Eve nodded.

“We should be going,” Annie said, her voice suddenly brusque and cheerful. “Got to get these two back to school.”

“Don’t let them miss any more,” Eve said, following Annie back into the room. She smiled shakily at her children, who were sitting with a book each. “Don’t want you missing out on anything, do we?”

They all hugged goodbye and Eve promised her kids that she’d keep Henry safe. She took him into her bedroom, along with the large bag of clothes, and placed him gently atop her pillow, stroking his soft ear as she sat on the edge of her bed. A hand flew to her mouth and pressed against the sobs that wracked her body.

A noise made Eve sit up straight and wipe at her face, trying to get herself under control. She looked toward the door.

Elly’s dark eyes peered around the wood, her hand resting on the frame. She stood in the doorway, hesitantly, eyes searching Eve’s for some kind of reassurance.

Eve flapped her hand. “Don’t m-mind me,” she managed, pinching the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger.

She felt the thin mattress dip as Elly sat on the other end of the bed, not close, but still beside her. She just sat for a while, until Eve had collected herself and slowed her breathing a bit. Elly felt in her pocket and produced a tissue, holding it out to Eve with a small smile. “It’s clean.”

Eve took it gratefully. “Thank you.” She dabbed at her eyes and gave Elly a sideways, embarrassed look. “Sorry.”

“Don’t ever apologise for crying,” Elly’s voice was soft and slow, her eyes large and very brown. “Would you like to talk to Charlotte? I can go get her?”

Eve shook her head. “I don’t want to cry in front of the staff.”

“They’re quite used to it,” Elly said, a small chuckle in her voice.
Eve allowed her lips to be tugged upwards, looked through her drying tears at the woman sitting beside her; giving her space whilst simultaneously being nearby. She felt warmth flow through her whole body as she looked at Elly, who was wearing another comforting-looking knitted jumper, the sleeves bunched up to her elbows.

They sat for another half an hour, silently, Eve looking at the scrunched up tissue in her hands, Elly watching Eve gently.

“Would you like to hear something?” Elly whispered, shifting a little closer on Eve’s bed.

Eve looked up from her hands and sniffed hugely, screwed up her face to work the muscles after they had become stiff from staring into space. She wiped her nose, and nodded.

“They dragged me onto the ward kicking and screaming. Quite literally.” Elly looked out of the half-open door, checking there was no one close by. “I’d tried very hard to end it all, and when it didn’t work, I tried again here. Someone had left a razor in the bathroom.” She rubbed at her left wrist, where bracelet-like marks shone white against her skin. “And when they took everything away from me, took me to a room with a mattress and not much else, I cried. I cried for four days, without stopping.”

Eve looked at her, trying to imagine the moderately cheerful, very pretty woman in front of her in such a distressed state. She couldn’t.

“And after crying for so long, after all the hurt and…desperation…I just stopped. I was exhausted and I slept. And then I got up and I walked to the door and looked out to where the nurse was observing me, and I just said ‘Okay, I’m ready to talk’.”

Taking a deep breath and blowing it through pursed lips, Elly laughed to herself.

“And I talked for another few days. One-to-one time with my named nurse, whoever that happened to be. And I went to see Sam—he’s the psychologist and I really do recommend you see him—and I talked through everything. I’d never talked about it before.

“Sometimes,” Elly said carefully, “what you just need is a good cry. And then you can deal with the words later.”

“I’ve always been okay with words,” Eve said, her voice harsh in frustration.

“Oh of course, when it’s work, or sarcasm. Or standing up for yourself in front of a client. Easy-peasy.”

Eve nodded, throwing the tissue across the room and feeling a little victory when it bounced against the rim of the bin and then disappeared into it.

“But when it comes to real true feelings.” Elly placed her fist against her own chest. “When it’s right in here, deep things that you don’t even, half the time, know the words to describe…even the world’s best poets would have trouble, I think.”

Charlotte’s face appeared by the door and she smiled at them both, a clipboard in her hands. “Just doing checks. Everyone okay?”

“Yes, I think so,” Eve replied to Elly’s questioning look. The sobs had disappeared from her throat and she no longer felt like she couldn’t breathe. As Charlotte left, Eve stood and went to the sink to wash her face. The cool water felt refreshing against her skin, and she washed the grime from her eyes and under her nose with slow fingers. Drying her face on a paper towel, she turned back
towards Elly. “You know a lot for someone who tried to kill themselves.”

“I’m not saying it was a good thing to do, because I regret it completely.” A shadow passed over Elly’s face. “But I think sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before you can start to climb your way back up.”

Sliding back onto the mattress, closer to Elly this time, Eve held out a hand towards her, palm facing the ceiling.

Elly hesitated, shivering slightly, looking at Eve’s hand as if it were about to bite her.

Eve was patient, kept her hand steady and didn’t move it away.

Very slowly, Elly reached out, pulled back a couple of times, but eventually lay her fingers against Eve’s, palm downwards. Another shiver went through her. She pushed her hand forward, curled her fingers around Eve’s, and brushed her thumb against Eve’s knuckles.

Their joined hands fell between them to rest on the bed. Elly’s chest was rising and falling, but she seemed determined to continue the contact for as long as she could.

Eve stared at her in curiosity, amazed as well at the effect that simple touch had on her. She really doesn’t like physical contact. Allowing her hand to go loose, she let Elly decide when to let go, and smiled warmly at her when she didn’t.

Elly’s eyes flicked up and locked with her own. Elly’s face broke into a smile. “I know it seems so silly a thing, to hold someone’s hand. But I haven’t done this properly, I mean without having an anxiety attack, in twelve years.”

Eve smiled, wiggled her fingers to lace them with Elly’s, and closed her eyes when Elly accepted the further contact. She felt warm and comfortable. She felt like she could drift for a bit, and forget about her worries. Her heart beat steadily but slowly for the first time in weeks, and she actually felt like her skin was settled, not crawling across her bones.

They both seemed to have drifted off somewhere nice, because the noise of Charlotte knocking on the door to do her checks made them both jump and pull away. Elly stood and went to her own bed. Eve understood she needed space, so stayed on her own side of the bedroom. When Charlotte left, they smiled at one another, and Eve curled up on her bed and snuggled into Henry’s fluffy tummy. She thought of her children and made a firm promise to herself that she would do whatever it took to convince her own mother that she should go home.

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Elly wasn’t surprised in the slightest when Eve woke in the early hours of the morning, moaning into her pillow. She padded over and stood by her bed, reached out to hold Eve’s shoulder. She kept her stance loose but ready, in case Eve decided to lash out in fear again, but she was pleased to see that she didn’t end up on her back this time.

Eve’s eyes opened and she shuddered, her hands reaching for Elly’s in the darkness.

Elly immediately allowed her to hold her hands, pushed herself past her automatic and extra sensitive flight response and stayed. “Shhh, it’s alright.” Focus on what Eve needs.

Holding Elly’s hand against her cheek for a moment, then seemingly realising and letting her go, Eve exhaled deeply. “I really don’t want this to become a habit, waking you up at silly-o’clock,” Eve
whispered.

Elly hummed, rubbed her thumbs against the backs of Eve’s hands and then pulled away, the contact already as much as she could manage. “Don’t worry. D’you want to talk about it?” Now that there was next to no risk of her being pushed over, Elly knelt on the floor, and leant her forearms against the mattress by Eve’s hip.

“I don’t want to burden you with it.”


Eve narrowed her eyes and studied Elly in the darkness. “Reckon it would help?”

“I’ve done it before and it’s helped me,” Elly replied. At Eve’s nod, Elly clambered to her feet and went to her bedside drawers, rifled through them and found some paper, and a pen. She clicked it a few times, before bringing everything over to Eve. “Have them,” she said, before moving away to give Eve some privacy.

Elly rolled over on her bed to face away from Eve and pulled the curtain of her window back a small amount to stare outside at the night. The sky was dark and flecked with stars. The garden light shone brightly against the black branches of the tree, which swayed a bit in the wind. She took in a deep breath and sighed, allowing the curtain to drop back.

The scratchy sound of the pen on the paper she had given to Eve was the only noise after the curtain swished back into place. Elly listened to that for a while, recognised when Eve had finished writing as the noise petered out to silence. She shifted in bed, turned back over to face the room and Eve. The darkness made her blink. “Done?”

Eve was using the light from her own pulled back curtain to read what she had written. “Should I give it to someone?” Her voice was like a feather, almost weightless.

“Not if you don’t want to,” Elly matched her tone, sticking her hands out of the covers. She looked at her own hands, remembered how Eve’s skin had felt against her own. She has soft hands. She supposed Eve’s line of work didn’t call for much hand washing, unless she needed to take part in an autopsy, of something. She wrinkled her nose at the thought. I miss my job.

She hadn’t felt that for a while. Since last May, in fact. Part of her had always clung on to the hope that she would never get discharged, be anyone else’s problem. That she would die before being released into the world. But for the first time, she wondered how it would be to go home, to work with Kate again, be a team. Investigate something simple and intriguing. Dress up perhaps, put on an accent. I’ve always been good at accents.

She looked over at Eve, who was studying her piece of paper. Eve folded the paper in half, then quarters. Looking up at Elly, she placed the paper in her top drawer by her bed. “I’m going to leave it there for a bit.” Eve’s eyes were wide for a moment. “Please don’t look.”

“Of course not,” Elly said, hoping with an ache in her chest that Eve would learn to trust her. “Sleep well.”

“Hope I don’t disturb you again.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Elly watched Eve lie down again, pull the brown bear that had suddenly appeared into her arms, rest her chin atop its head. She rubbed absentmindedly at her own wrist, then closed her eyes and settled down to sleep.
Tuesday was pottery day, as depicted by the list of activities on the neatly written board outside the clinic. Elly smirked at Eve’s grimace as they walked down towards the art room together, heading for the group. The Occupational Therapist, Maria, who had red hair and corduroy dungarees, held the door open for them with a wide smile.

They were joined by Harry, who was fidgeting on his stool, and Bill, who had brought his invisible friend with him and was consulting with him about what he should make. As usual, no one was bothered. It made Elly smile, how accepting and tolerant they were of each other, even when they had their own problems. Perhaps it was because of their own problems, she wasn’t sure.

Eve sat next to her, but Elly noticed she pushed her stool so that there was a foot of a gap between them.

Introductions were made and Maria plonked a lump of clay in front of Eve, on a dusty wooden board. Eve sat staring at it for a while, until Maria chuckled. “You’re literally allowed to do anything you like. Elly, why don’t you show Eve what you’ve been working on?”

Pushing her stool out, Elly stood and moved to the shelves holding various creations, looking for a moment before finding her own. She beamed and turned to Maria. “You fired it.”

“We had enough things to do to fill a kiln at the weekend,” Maria said.

Elly felt her stomach flutter with excitement as she reached up to hold the small pot in both hands, and marvelled at how scratchy it felt now that it had been fired. Last week, once it had dried, it had felt so brittle within her fingers, but now that it had been in the kiln, she didn’t feel like she was going to smash it immediately. She brought it to the table and set it down, taking a seat on her stool again.

“It’s come out alright,” Elly said quietly, laughing a little as she saw Maria nodding at her.

“It’s so delicate, I did think it might collapse,” Maria warned her. “But, hey, it obviously wanted to be finished.”

The pot was tall and thin, with a fluted rim and large star-shaped holes either side. The lid, that fit perfectly when Elly slotted it on, was bowed in the middle, like a bowl. Perfect for holding fragrance oil. Kate will love it.

Eve’s eyes were stationary on Elly’s pot. She reached across to poke a fingertip through one of the star holes.

Elly smiled at her and leant back a bit from her inspection of her own work, allowing Eve the space to make her own.

Eve’s gaze was curious and held wonder. Her fingertip was gentle as she touched the pot, slid it along the rim and then brushed the sloping side. She withdrew her hand and sat with them both between her knees, her head lowered. “Sorry.”

Elly ignored Eve’s bashful apology and flicked an eyebrow at her. “So, come on, what’re you going to make?”

Eve stared at her clay again, the dark grey colour of it matched the grey of outside, the dark clouds threatening rain. She lifted a hand and, grimacing, poked it, leaving a soft dent in the clay. Her hand hovered. “I’ve no idea.”
“You could pop it on the wheel, if you like?” Maria suggested.

Elly’s eyebrow rose and she studied Eve for a reaction.

Her face expressionless, Eve shook her head.

“A thumb pot then?” Elly asked quietly, tilting her head to one side. *She looks shy. Nothing like the strong and assertive police woman I imagined when I read the papers.*

“Alright,” Eve replied, but Elly wasn’t sure if she wasn’t simply agreeing because she didn’t have the energy to argue.

“Would you like to show Eve what to do, Elly?” Maria asked.

Elly felt relieved. Eve still seemed vulnerable and frightened, and she’d started to trust Elly. Maria was somewhat a force of nature, took a while to get used to, and shocked some people, with her colourful clothes and joyous laugh.

So Elly explained carefully how Eve should kneed the clay, to rid it of any air bubbles. “Otherwise, it might explode when you fire it.” Then how she should push her thumbs into the middle of the clay and tease the clay upwards with her fingers, turning the pot rhythmically, until it was as tall as she liked. “You could decorate it then,” Elly said, sitting back and shifting her attention to her own pot. She touched her chin and paused a moment, before reaching out for some purple and green glazes, a brush, and a cup of water.

“Roll your sleeves up, love,” Maria said.

Elly rolled her eyes but felt delighted, still squirming a bit deliciously at how nice her pot looked now it was ready to paint. She obediently pushed her sleeves above her elbows and lifted her pot close to her face.

They worked in silence, Elly dabbing glaze delicately onto the rock-hard clay, and Eve worriedly poking at the wet clay in front of her. Eve kept rubbing her fingers together, as if she was worried about them being dirty.

Elly deliberately left her to it, feeling that she should allow Eve to become accustomed to the clay. *God, I sound like Maria. Be at one with the clay! Be friends with it!* She idly considered introducing them, but then realised that their worlds were very different, she and Kate, at the moment. Elly was in hospital and Kate was single-handedly running their business. Benji held sometimes, but otherwise, Kate was alone and running the company Elly had set up with her sister-in-law thirteen years ago. *I’m hoping that will change soon. I want to go home.*

She looked across at Eve, discovered the blonde with her thumbs firmly inside her growing pot, and smiled, feeling some achievement. The discomfort at having the wet clay on her skin seemed to have gone from Eve’s face and it was all Elly could do not to reach out and rub her arm to display how pleased she was. But she refrained.

Bill chatted to his unseen companion and to Harry on occasion. Harry was telling Maria about all the detailed pieces he was going to make once he had his own studio, and how much money he was going to make. Elly had heard the phrase ‘flight of ideas’, which always conjured up images of tangible ideas floating off into the clouds like birds on the wing. She understood what it meant...
though. Ideas that carried you away with their enormity. No one had ever told her Harry’s diagnosis, and Harry himself never spoke of it, but Elly suspected he experienced manic episodes. Perhaps he was Bi-polar, like that stalker who had set herself on fire, twelve years ago.

Memories of that poor woman still twinkled past her consciousness on occasion. Elly had felt stable at the time, long before her kidnapping, long before things got ugly in that half-way house. It had been a fun challenge, and she had met Kate. Kate was fantastic, never pushed her, but never let her get away with anything. Always spoke her mind, but was kind with it. Twelve years as comrades and friends had taught her that she had asked of Kate rather a lot.

Elly wanted to give back.

Eve was rolling the pot very gently on its side, and the resulting smooth finish was causing her to smile. Elly didn’t think she’d seen her smile since yesterday and she wondered whether Eve’s face felt strange. She remembered how it had felt when she’d begun smiling again, perhaps a week after they had let her out of seclusion.

“That’s terribly neat,” Elly said lightly, not wanting to praise too much, but wanting to express she was impressed with what Eve had done.

Eve glanced up and her hair swung in front of her face. It was starting to look a little greasy again. Elly remembered she hadn’t showered or bathed since the day before yesterday—not that it was her job to encourage good personal hygiene—that ought to be up to the nursing staff really—but they did share a room, and Elly’s sense of smell was reasonable.

“Thank you,” Eve murmured and then cleared her throat. She sat up straighter and looked at Elly properly. “I thought I might make something for my mother.” She grimaced, possibly at how the words sounded, put a hand to her own cheek and left a smudge of clay there.

Elly chuckled and stood, her own hands clean as she’d only been using a dab of paint here and there, and went to the sink to collect a paper towel. She wet it slightly, and held it out to Eve. She tapped her own cheek where the clay had smeared and smiled at the pinking of Eve’s cheekbones.

Eve scrubbed her face and looked up towards Elly for reassurance.

Elly nodded, gave her a little thumbs-up and sat back on her stool. “I know it sounds silly, and I don’t know what your relationship is like at the moment with your mother...” Elly shrugged and sighed, a knot forming in her stomach as she thought about the pain she had put Kate through. “But my pot is for Kate. She looked after me before...before I was admitted.”

“Did she?” Eve asked, surprised, as if the thought of being looked after by another human being outside of the medical profession was unheard of.

“Made me eat, made me shower...” Elly’s tone was conversational, but she blinked back tears she refused to shed. “But now, positive things. I owe her, and therefore, handmade pots are my payback.” She bit her lip around a smile. “It’s a good job she’s a handmade pot kind of girl.”

“Have you really found it therapeutic?” Eve asked, echoing what James the nurse had said whilst trying to convince Eve to attend the pottery group earlier.

Elly chuckled and shrugged. “I don’t know. I think therapeutic is the wrong word. It’s something to do, you make something that’s pretty...” Her gaze moved swiftly over some of the inventions on the shelf, eyes widening and lips quirking as she suppressed a laugh. “...Mostly pretty, anyhow. And you can make gifts for people. It fills your time, rather than spending time thinking about your life, or
how you feel. It’s a good distraction.”

“I suppose,” Eve said, clearly unconvinced. She had come though, Elly noted, and she had stayed to finish her pot.

The pot she’d made was stout and wide, the sides thicker than Elly’s, but sturdy. It had flat and smooth sides from where she’d rolled it along the board, and now she crimped the sides with thumb and finger, making it look like the top of a pie. Eve grabbed some spare clay from the middle of the table and pressed it flat against the board, took one of the blunt butter knives provided and cut a heart-shape out. She lifted the heart and pressed it against the side of the pot.

Elly reached for some slip, a watery substance mixed with excess clay, and dipped her hand into the bowl. She took the small heart from Eve’s fingers, along with the discarded knife, and shaved tiny slits into the back of it. Then she ran her wet thumb across the slits, wetting the surface, dissolving some of the clay. Their fingertips touched, the slippery clay coating their skin. Elly inhaled deeply as goose bumps travelled up her arm.

They looked at each other, until Elly forced a smile onto her face. “If you don’t use slip to connect the two bits, they’ll probably break apart in the kiln.”

“Oh,” Eve said, blinking slowly at her. Their fingertips still touched.

Elly pulled away, wiped her fingers on a cloth on the table. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to interfere.”

“You’ve been doing this longer than I have,” Eve countered, her eyes glinting a bit as she lowered her head shyly. “I bow to your infinite wisdom on the subject.”

“I’m hardly an expert.” Elly looked up towards Maria, who was smiling at them both.

“Done, ladies?”

They nodded.

“Clean up then, shall we? Gents?”

Harry and Bill helped Elly and Eve clear their used utensils and boards into the sink. Eve washed them, and Elly dried, handing each item between them. Elly made sure their fingers didn’t brush again. Don’t want to make her uncomfortable.

Elly wiped down the table whilst Maria took her glazed piece, which looked pale and uncolourful, and placed it on the shelf labelled ‘for firing’. Elly looked up at it with a pleased warmth in her belly.

“Kate’s going to love that,” Maria said.

Elly simply smiled and nodded.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Eve finally talks about her experience. She also comes up with a way to help Elly.

Chapter Notes

So this thing is continuing. Thanks for all the positive feedback people have left. You are all amazing.

Eve was called in to see the consultant and junior doctor on Wednesday morning at ten. She was led into a large meeting room with a big coffee table in the middle and a white screen the width of the room at the far end. The rectangular shape of a computer screen lit up the white screen, depicting something that looked like her records. One long paragraph entitled: ‘PCR Summary’ flickered, the words large and black against the shining white background. They hurt Eve’s eyes.

She couldn’t pick out many individual words, so she looked down at the floor rather than at the dominating screen, as she walked into the room and sat down in a chair.

Her mother was attempting to sit primly in the low chair next to her. She smiled tightly at Eve, and then returned to gazing at her hands.

She’s worried about telling everyone what I did and said at work. Checking out her own hands, she traced the small thin scab on her knuckle, remnant from when she broke the window during her rampage.

She’d had a quiet night, and had barely woken up for a moment before Elly’s hands in her own lulled her back into a peaceful sleep. The nightmares were getting easier. First good sleep I’ve had in weeks. The morning had been boring too, nothing to do but wait for her meeting. A single touch on the shoulder from Elly before she had gone in had made her feel a little less worried about the entire affair.

Toby, Eve’s key nurse, entered the room with a folder, and was closely followed by the junior doctor, whom Eve had no real interest in. She had a feeling he held no power, could make no decisions. He looked weedy and like a child, head lowered and eyes hollow. The consultant was already there—Doctor Ellington, the woman who had taken her details and checked her bodily functions when she had first arrived. The junior doctor sat at a small desk with a computer.

“Morning Eve,” Toby said, his smile warm.

“Good morning,” Eve replied, making an effort.

“We’re here in PCR today, sorry patient care review,” Toby said, grinning. “Used to be ward round. They changed the name, don’t ask me why.” He looked down at his folder briefly. “So,” he said indicating the projected image on the wall, “this is your summary for the week. See it says here that
you’ve kept yourself clean and attended activities on the ward.”

His smile appeared pleased to Eve and she felt a rush of warmth through her stomach. *He’s one of the people I have to convince to discharge me.*

“She never did that at home,” Annie said, her tone suggesting she was trying to hold back from making some kind of rude comment.

“Sometimes, when you find yourself in a safe environment, away from your home, you can concentrate on things, like having a shower, a lot more readily.”

Eve looked between Toby and her mother, feeling the warmth dissipate.

“Are you insinuating her home isn’t safe?” Annie asked.

“Not at all,” Toby continued, smiling. “It’s how Eve may feel.” He turned to Eve. “I’m sorry if I’m putting words into your mouth.”

Eve shook her head.

“Let’s look at the two days Eve has been here,” Dr Ellington said, her elbows on her knees. *Why on earth are we all sitting in these silly low-down chairs?*

“She’s tried really hard and I’ve been very impressed, considering what has been recorded from her mental health act assessment. She’s taking the medication prescribed for her, has accepted the sleeping tablets offered to her, and is integrating well into ward life and…” He turned to Eve and gave her a thumbs up. “You went to pottery yesterday, didn’t you?”

Eve nodded. When everyone turned to her she took a deep breath. Maybe it was time to actually use her voice. “I’ve started making…” She cleared her throat when her voice made it itch. “I’m making a pot…thing.” She glanced briefly at her mother. “For you. Maybe for your birthday or…” She shrugged, the words disappearing from her brain as her mother looked at her as if she’d admitted to taking drugs.

Toby continued to smile at her, however. *That’s something.* “Sounds great, Eve,” he said. “How are you feeling in general?”

Eve looked around, and tried to sit up a bit straighter. “Okay.” She blinked. *Elly said I should be honest, to start the way I mean to go on.* “Not…not completely okay.” She made a conscious effort to focus on Toby, as he seemed to be the least judgemental. He certainly wasn’t sharing holes into her cheek like her mother was. “I’ve had nightmares, the same ones I was having at home. And it’s been a struggle. I know I had a bath and washed my hair, and I’ve eaten okay I suppose. But sometimes I feel like even doing those things takes such effort.”

“How would you describe your mood?” Dr Ellington asked.

“ Weird.” It was the only word Eve could use to describe it. She tried harder. “It’s as if I’m behind a haze. In a fog.”

“You’ve proved to us that you’re not an immediate risk to anyone, or to yourself,” Toby explained. “Therefore, you can go onto hourly observations from now, if that’s okay with you?”

Eve nodded. *Some peace and quiet.* She had to admit, being checked on every ten minutes had started to grate on her.
“And have you spoken about the incident at work yet?”

Eve stared at her consultant with an incredulous pain in her stomach. “Well, I would, only I don’t actually remember it.” Her voice was bitter.

Annie sucked in a disapproving breath.

*So recently, I was the one with the responsible job, and the accolades, and the power. You looked after my children because I needed to work. Now you sit there like you’re the queen of England.*

“I only know what her colleagues have told me,” Annie said, her lips all tight and lined.

Toby nodded slowly for a moment, considering Eve with a kind gaze. Eve decided she liked him and that he could be trusted. “Would you like us to read the account from your superiors, of the incident?” Toby asked Eve directly, but the look in his eyes was cautious, like she was a frightened animal that could bolt at any minute.

Eve sat up even straighter, pulled an assertive mask onto her face, and nodded.

At a glance from Toby, the junior doctor clicked through a few pages on her notes, scrolled down, and found what he was looking for. A scanned letter appeared, her boss’s curly signature adorning the bottom.

Eve turned away and refused to look, but stared at a point on the wall behind Toby’s head instead. She held her breath as Toby took a deep one in.

“‘DI Grainger entered the office and started shouting. She used words that were very unusual for her—including swear words. She accused DI Shepherd of being present at incident in hospital with B. Wicklow and J. Osbourne, and blamed him for killing Wicklow. She also blamed him for killing Osbourne, although which Osbourne, it was difficult to understand. She then accused everyone in the office of plotting against her and making her believe she was mad. Then she looked like she was going to faint, and stared at the window in the door for several moments. Then she lunged forward and punched a hole in the window, caused the glass to break, and several cuts to her hand.’” Toby took a deep breath. Throughout, his voice had been calm, but he started to look uncomfortable now. “‘DI Roychowdry physically restrained her safely whilst help was called. She was placed into a police cell, where she calmed down and was seen by a doctor for her wounds.’”

Eve remembered the doctor. She had been kind and hadn’t asked too many questions.

“Would you like me to go on?” Toby asked.

Eve shook her head, the lump in her throat stopping her from being able to talk. Her eyes burned with guilt and tears threatened to fall from them. She could feel her teeth chattering and her jaw ached from being clenched. Her rubbed her hands together but found them clammy.

*I hate myself.*

“This is why you can’t come home, darling,” Annie said, but her use of the word ‘darling’ didn’t seem sincere. “Not until I’m completely convinced you won’t have another…episode.”

“I’ll be honest,” the consultant said, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, “damage to property is at the top of your risk assessment, along with self-neglect and verbal abuse.”

*Abuse.* Eve blinked. She’d never verbally abused anyone, at least, not anyone that deserved it. And she’d never damaged property.
“Now, the CPS have obviously dropped the charges, considering your mental state, officially naming it diminished responsibility.” Dr Ellington nodded in agreement. “I’m happy with this—your inability to recall what happened at work suggests you were in a state of dissociation. This happens on occasion after trauma occurs. The brain simply won’t process the event and you sort of…” She laughed and Eve blinked. “…have an out of body experience.”

No one else was laughing, but Dr Ellington didn’t appear fazed.

“How did the account seem to you?” Toby asked.

“I’m not sure. It doesn’t sound like me at all,” Eve said, her foot beginning to tap against the floor. “But the things I do remember…” She looked up and caught Toby’s eye, relaxing a bit as he smiled at her. “I saw Wicklow’s face in the door.”

“That must have been very frightening,” Toby said quietly.

“It was.” I feel like he thinks he understands, but I don’t think he does. How can he?

“Why on earth did you punch the door though, Evelyn?” Her mother’s words were jarring, and the use of her childhood name made Eve turn so sharply towards her, her neck cracked.

“You never call me that,” Eve shot at her, tilting her head to one side and giving her a palms-up gesture.

Annie’s eyebrows rose into her hairline. She began to stand, but Eve put a hand out to catch her arm. She tried to keep her touch gentle.

“No, I’m sorry. Don’t leave.”

Annie slowly sat back down.

“Are you usually angry with your mother?” Toby asked and Eve felt, again, his non-judgmental tone.

“No she is not,” Annie replied for her. Eve had a feeling Toby had been asking her mother the question anyway, but hadn’t wanted to seem rude.

“She’s right,” Eve sighed, flopping back against the chair. She folded her arms loosely over her chest and rested her head on her own shoulder. “Sorry.”

“Do you feel angry all the time at the moment?” Toby asked.

“Most of the time,” Eve replied very quietly. Tears sprang to her eyes but she didn’t have the energy now to force them back. What was the use, anyhow? They all knew what she had done.

“Okay. Thank you for being honest about that. Most people have a hard time talking about how they feel.”

“That’s what Elly said,” Eve murmured without thinking.

Toby nodded. “That’s Elly you’re sharing a room with?”

Eve nodded.

“I hope you’re not bothering another patient with your problems,” Annie started, but Eve turned her head and gave her an eye-roll. Eve was surprised to see her mother close her mouth.
“Everyone makes friends and interacts in hospital,” Toby explained, and the junior doctor nodded in agreement. “It’s okay to do that. Remember, though, that Elly is here for her own issues, and you should try to talk to nursing staff if you feel you need to talk.”

Elly ground her teeth and pulled her folded arms inwards. *I can talk to whoever I like, thank you very much. This isn’t school.*

“How are you sleeping?” Dr Ellington asked, moving the conversation along, to Eve’s relief.

Twenty minutes later, Eve left the room, feeling completely worn out. She had an appointment with the psychologist later in the afternoon, but after the long and terrible discussion with her mother and doctors, she just wanted to lie down.

When she tiptoed into the bedroom, she saw Elly lying back on her bed, playing her computer game. Elly looked up and smiled, putting down the console. “Hey, how did it go?”

“It was hell,” Eve replied, flopping into her pillows and grabbing Henry to bury her face into. She stayed like that for a few breaths, all tense and balled up, and then she let everything drop away, including the bear.

Elly was still smiling at her, having waited for her to have her moment. “PCR is not the party is cracked up to be.”

“No,” Eve sighed, rolling onto her side to face Elly. “It really isn’t.”

“That first one is always awful. Don’t worry, soon you’ll be discussing tiny changes in your medications, and looming discharge dates, just like me.”

“Discharge dates?” Eve asked, her belly fluttering uncomfortably.

“Yes. I reckon I’ve got about two weeks left, then I get to start some leave.”

“Leave?”

“Where you get to go home, or wherever, for overnight stays.” Elly scratched the side of her nose absentmindedly. “I’ll be staying with Kate for a bit. Benji’s just moved in with his lady-friend, and the twins are away at Uni. Kate’s all by herself. Doing her a favour really.”

Eve mulled this over—Elly leaving, or at least not being here all the time. Would someone else be admitted into her bed? Would Eve have to be sociable with someone else, perhaps someone more unwell, psychotic even? Eve wasn’t sure she could cope with that.

“Are you scared?” Eve asked without thinking, and then put a hand to her mouth in mild horror. “Oh. Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Elly said chuckling. “And, yes, I am a bit scared. I’ve been in hospital for nine months—it’s a long time. I’ve only had to think about myself, and even then, you get reminded to do everything. Maggie still reminds me to brush my bloody teeth.”

Their chuckles pattered around the quiet room.

“So, is it just ‘okay you’re discharged, off you go’?”

“No,” Elly replied. “Like I said, they usually let you go for overnights. Test the waters, so to speak.” She put her hands together against her knees and rubbed them. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”
Eve wasn’t convinced that Elly really believed it.

***

Elly waited for Eve outside the room used by Sam, the resident psychologist, a cup of tea warming her fingers. The office was near the doors to the garden and a chill was wafting through, exacerbated each time someone went out for a smoke. The steam from the tea rose and brushed her cheeks. She closed her eyes, her back settling against the wall, and breathed in the tangy fragrance. It was soothing and it reminded her of Kate. Kate made a good cup of tea.

When Eve emerged, red-eyed and head lowered, Elly followed her back to their bedroom at a short distance. She lingered in the doorway, but Eve waved her in with a hand.

“‘S your bedroom too,” Eve said as way of explanation, her voice thick with tears.

Elly shrugged. “Doesn’t mean that you don’t need a minute. Psychology can be tough.”

Eve shrugged, but was very obviously still weeping.

Elly felt the overwhelming urge to wrap her arms around the skinny woman, but that was followed by the feeling of being trapped. Her legs thrummed with the urge to run, but she squished them down and away. She tickled circles against her forearm for a moment, soothing herself, and slowing her heart rate.

Where had that come from?

She went to sit on her bed, confident that Eve didn’t mind. She could always pull the curtains around her bed, although everyone knew how soundproof they were.

Eve simply sat with her face in her hands and shook with tears.

Elly chewed on her lip for a moment, before reaching for her GameBoy. Something the twins had grown out of and had donated, much to Kate’s amusement. All she had was Pokémon, but she didn’t mind. It was a welcome distraction from her own thoughts sometimes. She played a couple of games, pretending to ignore Eve and her sobs.

In the end, Eve stood and washed her face, then crept over to Elly, peering at the GameBoy in her hands.

Elly grinned, before moving her gaze up to Eve. “What?” she asked, cheekily.

“What is that?” Eve asked, and they both burst out laughing.

“Pokémon…something,” Elly shrugged. “I don’t know. Kate’s kids gave it to me.”

“You’re, what, forty?”

“Forty-one.” Elly poked her tongue out at Eve.

“And you’re playing video games.”

“Shut up. It’s a good distraction.” Elly was so pleased Eve was smiling. When she looked up properly into Eve’s face, she noticed the dark brown eyes glinting down at her, a wry smile tugging her lips, and a pair of hands that had settled on Eve’s hips in a mock-judgmental stance. Her face was
still red but other than that, she looked better. “Shut up,” Elly repeated, pursing her lips. They quietened, and Eve perched on the edge of Elly’s bed, clasping her hands atop her legs.

“How was it with Sam?” Elly asked.

Eve eyed her. “I shouldn’t tell you. I’m supposed to tell the nurses, not other patients.”

“Oh,” Elly said, trying to hide her disappointment. “Is that what they said to you in PCR?”

Eve nodded.

“I suppose their probably right,” Elly said, and let out a huge sigh.

“I did go through the…” Eve visibly blushed and patted her knees, as if she wanted to get up. “The thing with Wicklow.”

“You talked about it?” Elly asked, her voice a near-whisper.

“Yes. Hence the blubbering.”

“That’s brilliant,” Eve said, feeling better, much better. *She must be so brave. Imagine going through that more than once.*

“Yeah, Sam was pretty pleased. He scribbled the entire time I was in there.”

“His notes are pretty comprehensive,” Elly said, looking down at her own socked feet, which were snuggled into the blankets on the bed. “He does good write-ups.”

“You’ve seen what he writes about you?”

“He gave me a copy of our sessions, once I was able to form a sentence without shaking, anyway.”

“I might ask him for mine,” Eve said, contemplatively.

“He doesn’t mind. Prefers it.” Elly poked her toes into Eve’s thigh, causing Eve to look down. A smile pulled the corners of Eve’s lips upwards.

Eve poked her again. “If he gets anything wrong, he wants you to tell him too. He doesn’t mind.”

“That’s good of him.”

Elly snuck her foot under the warmth of Eve’s thigh, and looked up, catching Eve’s gaze. They smiled at one another.

Eve’s hand drifted from her lap, towards Elly’s ankle. She held Elly’s gaze, before curling her fingers around the elastic of her sock, gently and slowly.

Elly flinched, but Eve’s hand was warm and gentle. Forcing herself to relax, she noticed the affectionate look in Eve’s eyes and tried to match it with one of her own.

“I want to help,” Eve whispered.

Elly frowned, pushing away the renewed urge to squirm under Eve’s touch. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t like to be touched. I want to help.”
Elly lifted her other foot and carefully pushed Eve’s fingers from her. “You don’t have to do that.”

“You help me when I have a nightmare,” Eve said. “It’s only fair you should get something in return.”

“Quid pro quo, Doctor Lecter?” Elly asked, an almost perfect imitation of Jodie Foster.

“Something like that.” Eve was dead serious and there was a vulnerability in her eyes that Elly recognized. *She doesn’t want to be in my debt. How sweet.*

“I have a lot of issues,” Elly said, pulling both her feet towards herself and wrapping her arms around her knees.

“But I suppose the nursing staff aren’t really very touchy feely?”

Elly barked out a laugh. “Ah. No. They’re not.” She twisted her lips in an uncomfortable smile. “They’re not allowed to be. Inappropriate.”

“Nothing to stop us though,” Eve said.

Elly shook her head.

“So, tell me your problems. I know you don’t like to be touched so…why can’t we…ease you into being touched again? It would be a shame if you met…” Eve closed her mouth and looked away for a moment, but looked back sharply in the next heartbeat. “Wait. Twelve years?”

Elly blinked in confusion. “What?”

“Has it been twelve years since anyone touched you?”

“No of course not.” Elly felt embarrassment crushing her chest and she put a hand to her sternum to try to ease it. It didn’t help. She knew her cheeks were red.

“But you said that twelve years ago…”

“People have touched me.” Elly took her hand away from her chest and placed it back around her knee. “It’s just that I hate it.”

“Even men?”

“Especially men,” Elly replied without thinking. She chewed her lip and rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Another few minutes of silence, although Elly swore she could hear cogs turning in Eve’s mind.

“I don’t…” Elly swallowed and took in a deep breath. “I was kidnapped. Held in a hotel room. By a slightly deranged man. My hands were bound, and my feet too.” She turned her gaze up towards Eve’s and found only caring eyes looking back at her. “He held me down. He put duct tape over my mouth and when he took it off he forced me to eat pizza and drink wine.” She shrugged. “So I also have an aversion to wine and pizza. To Kate’s dismay. She does like her cheap plonk.”

Eve simply watched her, her whole body still but relaxed. Her hand continued to hover near Elly’s ankle.

pizza and wine.”

“That’s awful,” Eve finally said.

“A lot of things that I can cope with, briefly. But I’ve got to remove myself from them after only a few seconds.” Elly sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “I’ve got the GAD under control. But those phobias, they’re still pretty present in my life.”

“GAD?” Eve asked.

“General anxiety disorder. PTSD as well, obviously. I suppose we have that in common, don’t we?” Eve nodded. “We have quite a bit in common.”

“Including our professions.”

Eve’s fingertip lifted to touch against Elly’s ankle.

Pulling her lip into her mouth, Elly shuddered, but forced herself not to move away. She allowed the feeling of wanting to flee wash over her, as Eve’s fingers lifted to more directly brush her skin. She swallowed.

“It’s okay,” Eve said, her voice very soft. “It’s just me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The gentle northern accent soothed Elly’s pounding heart and she found her eyes fluttering closed. How have we only known one another for three days? I never trust anyone to touch me after even three months. She blindly reached forward with a hand and felt Eve’s fingers touching between her own. Her fingers tingled at the soft touch, then she slotted them properly together and Elly tugged Eve by her hand so she shifted closer on the bed, her hip touching Elly’s toes again.

“I promise I won’t hurt you.”

Elly opened her eyes and realized that she didn’t want to run. If anything she wanted to move even closer to Eve. That thought made her whole body shake and she pulled her hand away. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Eve said, reaching out again. She was shaking her head, like it didn’t matter how long it took. “What are you thinking about?”

Elly blinked up at Eve and slipped her fingers into Eve’s again. She squeezed them, reminding herself that it was okay. “I don’t know.”

Eve gave her a disbelieving look.

Elly rolled her eyes. “I like you,” she explained. “And that’s a very foreign feeling for me. I don’t like people, in general. I work for them, they pay me, I go home.”

“Doesn’t sound like a brilliant existence.”

“Is it any different from yours?” Elly asked, feeling a little defensive, but hanging onto Eve’s fingers determinably.

“Well, I get to go home to my family.”

“So do I. Kate. And Benji, and Hannah and Danny. And the cat.”

“Point taken,” Eve said. She looked down and Elly shifted forward, put her knees down and held
their hands in her lap. “Actually, my mother made it overwhelmingly clear that…I won’t be returning home. Not right away.”

Elly passed her thumb over Eve’s knuckles and felt sympathy crash through her body. *I haven’t felt sorry for anyone for months. Years, perhaps.* “Why not?”

“Mother dearest is worried about my behaviour.”

Elly shifted back slightly, but forced herself to remain with her hand in Eve’s. *She’s safe, she won’t hurt me.* “What’s wrong with your behaviour?”

“I kicked off at work.”

“Is that why you got sectioned?” Elly sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and inwardly cursed her mouth for speaking before her brain had time to catch up and stop her.

“Basically.”

Elly paused, making sure her next words were careful and sensitive. She traced little circles into the skin of Eve’s hand. “What happened?”

“I saw Brian Wicklow’s face in a window and put my fist through it.”

Laughter bubbled out of Elly’s mouth before she could grab it back. She covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. That’s not funny in any sense.”

“Well, not the hallucinations, maybe,” Eve said, narrowing her eyes. “But, I suppose the whole damaging property thing might be.”

“Especially for a police officer.”

They both sniggered and Elly found delight in Eve’s chuckles, however bizarre the subject of their mirth would probably seem to the nursing staff if they came in.

“It’s not as if I don’t regret it,” Eve said as her laughter subsided. “And I know it was an awful thing for all those involved at the time. I really do. How could I not?”

Elly shook her head and quietened too. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.”

“It’s okay.” Eve’s gaze flicked down to their hands. “We’ve been holding hands for a while now.”

“Is it getting weird?” Elly asked, teasingly.

A shadow of something similar to disappointment flew across Eve’s eyes, but Elly ignored it. *It’s just holding hands. It doesn’t mean anything.*

“Not weird,” Eve said. She patted the back of Elly’s hand with her free one, then let go. “You’ve done really well though, for someone who doesn’t like being touched.” A spark of indignant assertion lit up her brown eyes. “Same time next week to see Doctor Grainger? We will be studying pizza and why it is a tasty treat.”

Elly chuckled but made a fake gagging noise, pleased that Eve felt able to joke about it. Maybe she should start joking about it herself, it might make it easier to combat. “Oh God no, can we focus on skin-to-skin contact for a while and tackle pizza in a few weeks?”

“You might be discharged by then,” Eve replied, and the shadow appeared in her eyes again.
“I’ll have to come in specially.”

***

After another night interrupted by a brief nightmare, and one that involved some also-brief handholding, Eve followed Elly down to the dining room for breakfast. As was their now-established routine, they had both showered and dressed before collecting their tablets and then greeting the nurses on the early shift. They sat next to one another with tea and toast, and Eve watched Elly carefully cut up her toast into fingers, like one would for dipping into a boiled egg. *That’s strange. Have I been so caught up in my own stuff that I’ve not noticed it before?*

Elly apparently caught her watching and leaned close so only she could hear. “I have issues with food. I can eat fine if everything is cut up into small pieces.”

“A small compromise,” Eve remarked. “I can imagine why.” Flashes of being force-fed food and wine arose in her mind and made her swallow down bile. *Poor Elly. I’m amazed she hasn’t got an eating disorder.* She watched the way Elly ate, carefully and slowly, checking each piece of toast before placing it into her mouth. Perhaps this was a mild form of an eating disorder. She decided not to ask her about it.

Once they had drunk their tea, chatted about this and that, and helped the domestic staff clear away their table, they strolled towards the garden doors. “Want to have a look outside?” Elly asked.

Eve nodded, peering curiously out of the doors and wrapping her knee-length cardigan around her body. She followed Elly outside and into the frosty garden, one or two smokers already hanging around with white clouds surrounding their heads. The garden was large, with a few trees the other side of a high green fence at the bottom.

After moving towards a large bush with tiny flower buds, not yet open, on stems, Elly reached out with a hand and touched the leaves. The look on her face was tranquil and Eve wondered if she had a garden at home. Or at Kate’s place, perhaps.

“I helped Maria plant this buddleia last July. It’s my favourite plant so when she asked for ideas to make a wildlife-friendly garden, I knew it would be perfect.” Her shining eyes turned back towards Eve. “The flowers are purple.”

“It’s a butterfly plant, isn’t it?” Eve asked, stepping up to stand beside her.

“Mmmhmm.” The trees rustled from behind the fence and Eve watched as Elly’s eyes closed and she listened, sunk into it almost. Elly let out a great sigh, pushing her shoulders up and smiling broadly. “Mindfulness,” she exhaled. “Better than anti-depressants.”

Eve hadn’t heard of mindfulness, but she kept quiet, not wanting to jolt Elly out of her blissful reverie.

Unfortunately, Bill came over, his smoker’s fog following him.

Elly coughed and wafted a hand in front of her face. “Do you mind?” Her voice was irritated but friendly.

“Sorry, Elly,” Bill replied, backing off, wafting his own hand in a similar fashion, trying to dispel the fog.
Elly rolled her eyes. “Smokers,” she hissed as if to herself.

Eve felt her cheeks reddening. “I used to smoke.”

Elly’s eyebrow arched.

“Used to,” Eve emphasized.

They found a bench to sit on for a while, neither of them willing to leave the garden until the last minute. Eve watched the trees and wondered why there was a fence between them and the ward. It looked as if it had been placed there recently. She could see a shorter fence further away, behind the trees. *Maybe someone hanged themselves from one of them.* A shiver went through her and she pushed the thought away.

Unfortunately, the image of a body hanging limply from a tree, a cord around its neck scorched through her brain. The face was blank, but slowly turned into the face of Wicklow, his slight smile penetrating her bones and making her shake. The garden melted away. Panic set in as the body changed to that of Wicklow too, and the scalpel sticking out of his chest gleamed in the clinical room that surrounded the both of them.

*It’s your fault he’s dead. It’s your fault Jake is in prison. It’s your fault.*

Her whole body shook. She could feel her fingers screaming as they gripped the material of her trousers. She could hear a whimpering and it took her a little while to realize it was her own voice.

A moment later a hand was between her shoulder-blades, and a voice was shouting beside her. Very slowly, the garden came back into view, and she began to see colours again. She realized the name being shouted was ‘James’.

“It’s okay, Eve, don’t worry. James!”

James came over just as Eve realized where she was and reached a hand out to Elly, wanting her touch, not really thinking about it, but wanting it.

Elly gripped her hand in her own, her palm warm in stark contrast to Eve’s frozen fingers.

“It’s alright Eve. Take some breaths.” James’s voice was calm, unlike Elly’s which held a note of panic. “Slow and deep. What happened Elly?”

“She just sort of went vacant and her eyes glazed over.”

“She just sort of went vacant and her eyes glazed over.”

“When can you hear me?”

“My...” Eve managed, her heart racing in her ears, but James and Elly’s voices filtering through.

When her surroundings came properly into focus, Elly was squatting down in front of her and James had taken her seat on the bench.

“It’s alright now,” James said.

Elly’s hand was still in Eve’s. She seemed to realize and a stab of pain went through Eve’s stomach as Elly let her go. But Elly’s eyes were so kind and she nodded a little when Eve finally caught her gaze.

Out of the corner of her eye, James stood and held out a hand. “Want some PRN?”
Eve kept her gaze on Elly, and shot her a questioning look.

“It’s up to you,” Elly said, but her tone of voice suggested she was in agreement with James.

“Okay,” Eve said and allowed herself to be guided to her feet by James.

Twenty minutes and two milligrams of diazepam later, Eve was lying back on her bed staring at the ceiling. She could feel Elly’s gaze on her from across the room. They had resumed their quiet sharing of the bedroom, and Elly had started a new Pokémon game.

“Diazepam makes everything very beautiful, doesn’t it?” Eve said, wonder filling her like a rainbow.

Elly chuckled. “You’ve never had a benzo before, have you?”

“Nope. This is wonderful.”

“They’re incredibly addictive,” Elly commented, a smile in her voice.

“No surprise from me,” Eve replied, rolling her head lazily to one side. She was aware of her mouth feeling like it was full of glue, the words taking their time to form and come out. “How long have I got before everything goes ugly again?”

“About four hours, give or take,” Elly replied, clearly amused.

Eve sighed deeply and relaxed back.

“Where did you go?” Elly’s voice was so tentative.

“Somewhere very dark,” Eve decided to say, but then closed her lips tightly.

Elly seemed to understand. “I’m sorry about what happened to you.”

“Ditto,” Eve replied, closing her eyes and allowing tears to slide down into the pillow. She stayed like that for a while, feeling terribly sad but relaxing into her relief from the memories for a while.

When she opened her eyes again, the ceiling was still staring back at her, white swirls shimmering down like ice caps. She let out a contented hum.

“So the ceiling is beautiful, is it?” Elly asked, still amused.

“Yes, very,” Eve replied.

“Anything else?” Elly asked.

Eve looked around the room. The blue striped curtains seemed spectacularly aqua-shaded, with tiny pretty dots along each stripe. The colours seemed to shine. Elly’s little collection of beauty products by the sink were vibrant pinks and reds and purples, and reminded her of a gorgeous sunset. Henry stared back at her, his black eyes glinting with humour. She smiled at everything.

When she sat up and looked across to Elly, who had, it seemed, given up waiting for an answer, and had gone back to Pokémon, she saw a beautiful brunette with the biggest most wonderful dark eyes she’d ever seen.

“You’re beautiful,” Eve whispered, emphasizing the last three syllables with relish, her accent strong.

Elly looked up, looked stunned for a few beats, and then rolled her eyes at her roommate. “You
really need to sleep it off.”

Eve flopped happily back on the bed and cuddled the soft bear to her chest, closing her eyes. She thought about her kids and her mother, forgave them all for everything they had ever done, and drifted in a warm sunny place for the next three hours and fifty three minutes.

***
Friday began with them both being woken at eight. Eve was surprised to realise that she hadn’t disturbed Elly in the night with a nightmare. *Diazepam is strong.* It had been her first night in four weeks without waking in a fit of panic, sweat dripping down her back, and remnants of her encounter with Wicklow echoing through her mind.

Maggie was their alarm call, her kind face poking through the door, and an amused glow coming from her eyes. “What time do you call this?”

Swinging her legs out of bed, Elly laughed at her. “Honestly, I’m late for my meds one time and you go all motherly on me.”

“I’m always motherly,” Maggie argued, that amused look not disappearing.

Eve smiled between them both and waited for her limbs to catch up with her now wide awake brain.

Elly stood and went to the sink to brush her hair. The tartan pyjamas hung from her frame and Eve wondered whether her issues with food had caused her to be underweight at some point. She didn’t wear clothes that hugged her curves. Perhaps she had got good at hiding her skinniness.

As the feeling came back into her legs, Eve stretched languidly, feeling very rested. A smile threatened to spread across her face as Elly turned to her and rolled her eyes.

“I slept well too,” Elly said. “But I really don’t like to be late for my meds, so come on, lazybones. Hop to it.”

And hop Eve did. She pulled the curtains around her bed and swiftly got dressed, making sure she found a whole clean set of clothes. She considered her suitcase, still semi-neatly packed, and made the decision to put her clothes in the doorless wardrobe by her bed. Later though—she didn’t want to be late. Elly would be annoyed.

They both used the bathroom quickly before heading down to the clinic. Rachael was there, her hair in a prim ponytail again, and she smiled immediately when she saw who was standing at her door. She gave them both a look that told Eve that Maggie had been down and told Rachael what time they had been up. “Maybe someone needs to set their alarm tomorrow?” she said idly.

Eve allowed Elly to go in first and accepted her tablets immediately after Elly swallowed hers.
“Maybe some of us need a lie in, once in a while,” Elly argued, clearly teasing however.

“Not when you’ve got eight o’clocks,” Rachael teased back.

Elly poked her tongue out. “We were nearly on time.”

Rachael looked between Elly and Eve. “What are you? Joined at the hip?” She smiled at Eve. “Don’t let her lead you astray, Eve.”

Eve felt the smile creasing her face and found her muscles warming at the stretch. It felt so good to smile.

Elly was blushing, her arms around herself, a protective and shy stance.

Wanting to say something to stand up for her new friend, Eve shrugged. “So far, I’ve not seen anything I’d need to be worried about.” She smiled even more brightly when Eve turned to look at her, her head lowered. “I’d say Elly was a model patient.”

“She is these days,” Rachael agreed and then ushered them out of the clinic. “Now scoot. Go eat.”

They shuffled down the corridor together and Eve couldn’t help nudging Elly’s hip with her own. When Elly startled and almost shot against the wall, her hands out behind her to brace herself, Eve’s stomach dropped. “Oh God, I’m really sorry.”

“No it’s…it’s fine.” Elly smiled bravely at her. “You just got a bit close. I’m not used to…” Her voice trailed off as Eve’s hand touched her shoulder. Eve made sure her fingers were light, the touch slow. Elly had room to move away if she wanted to.

Elly set her jaw and stood stock still, allowing Eve to touch her for a moment.

Eve removed her hand, feeling delighted that Elly hadn’t moved away. “Okay?”

Elly blushed again, and breathed out a small laugh. “I think so.” She nodded, like she was trying to convince herself, not just Eve. “Yes. I am.”

“Good.”

They ate at the same table, as was their habit. They stayed in the dining room once everyone had finished, and just sat, drinking tea and listening to the radio that the housekeeper had switched on in the kitchen whilst they cleared away. Elly’s fingertips tapped the table to the beat of the music.

“Are you really serious?” Elly asked after a while, her free hand wrapped snugly around her cup of tea. “About the whole…you want to help me with being touched?”

Eve blinked and leant her elbows on the table. They were sitting at right angles to one another, and Eve touched Elly’s forefinger where it rested on her mug with her own. “If it’s what you want.”

“I actually think it would be helpful,” Elly said quietly, staring into her tea. Her eyes seemed to glimmer where the rising steam reflected in them. “But I do feel it’s a lot to ask. You have your own things to do.”

“When I met with the doctor on Wednesday,” Eve said, “she said that I’m basically here for my own safety, and to get this medication sorted. Get it…what did she say?” Eve wracked her brain for a moment, but came up with nothing.

“It’s paroxetine, isn’t it?” Elly asked.
“That’s right.”

“Takes a few weeks to work.”

“Right. Well, apart from talking therapies, and my meds, and stopping me from doing something silly like punch another window…” They both sort of smirked at that, the memory of their conversation from the day before flickering between them. “I’m not here for anything else. So I might as well make myself useful.”

Elly’s eyes shone for a while before she smiled warmly. She lifted her hand, the one that was tapping the table, and touched the back of Eve’s fingers.

Eve stared down at their hands, and her knuckles tingled where Elly touched them. She frowned at them, and took in the oval shapes of Elly’s nails and her fingers, a little shorter than her own. She’s got girly hands. She looked at her own hands in contrast, her nails squarer, fingers longer.

“So, I suppose we should formulate some kind of plan.” Elly’s voice was bright and broke Eve’s reverie.

“Okay,” Eve said, nodding. Then she looked up and gave Elly a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“Well, we should decide what kind of…touches we’re going to share, I suppose.” Elly blushed yet again and laughed a bit. “That sounds so silly. I like to plan things. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Ball’s in your court.”

“Okay.” Elly continued to tickle the tips of her fingers over Eve’s hand. “This doesn’t feel so bad. I suppose it’s because I’m in control of it.” Someone shouted from outside the dining room which made her look up sharply and pull her hand away.

Eve followed her gaze and an older man charged past, with two members of staff close on his heels.

The chair scraped back loudly as Eve stood, and Elly followed her to the doorway, both their drinks forgotten. Eve peered to the right up the corridor and took in the thickset man, who appeared to be incredibly annoyed at something. She recoiled as he balled his fists and stood tall, his journey impinged by the locked door that led down to the pottery room.

“Get me the fuck out of here!” he shouted and raised his fists at Rachael and another member of staff Eve didn’t know, who was tall and, thankfully, male. She shook her head at herself for the sexist thought, but then took it all back as the new patient lunged at Rachael.

Rachael ducked out of the way quickly and the male member of staff stepped in, easily catching the new patient around his shoulders. “Mr Harris, I strongly urge you to calm down before we have to restrain you and take you to seclusion.”

Mr Harris seemed to think for a minute about his options, his fists still raised in the air. There was a struggle as he lunged again and Rachael stepped in too, grabbing one of his arms.

Eve found her knees shaking a bit from their place just inside the door. She turned left and looked longingly down the long corridor, towards that sanctuary that was their bedroom.

Elly’s hand touched her upper arm. “Don’t worry, Richard will sort him out,” she hissed.

Eve looked incredulously at her, but the next moment, Richard and Rachael had hold of the new
patient, one on each of his arms, and were marching him down the corridor towards the area next to the office where they sat to drink tea each afternoon.

Stepping out in their wake, Eve tiptoed down the corridor and watched as the man was forced gently through a large door and into another area of the ward Eve hadn’t seen anyone enter before.

“You’re shaking.” Elly said when they stopped, her hand returning to Eve’s arm.

Eve stared at the large heavy door, and then back at Elly.

Elly’s lips pursed a bit and she looked too. “Yep. That might be where I had to go when I first got here.”

Backing away a bit towards the wall further away from the door, Eve fiddled with her hands whilst she got her breathing back under control. You’ve dealt with worse situations at work. What is wrong with you? She supposed she’d never been unable to act before—she’d always been in charge or at least one of the people in charge. Her profession dictated she was to keep the peace, protect the innocent, and combat the evil. The people she’d had to restrain in her job had been mostly predictable, but always infuriating. People here weren’t predictable. Like Wicklow.

She hoped, secretly and selfishly, that she’d never have to encounter Mr Harris again. Maybe he’d get moved to a more secure ward. He’d be safer there—maybe he’d be happier too. Less likely to hit anyone.

Moving close to her, Elly held a hand out towards the female end of the ward. “Come on. Don’t worry about Rach and Richard. They’ll be fine.”

“It’s weird,” Eve said as they walked down towards their bedroom. “I would have been right there helping a month ago.”

“Ah,” Elly said, her tone light. “But you wouldn’t have been here to help, would you? You’d be on your way to work, wondering what your day would be.” She pressed her lips together, and gave Eve an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

“No, I suppose I’ve got to start realising I may not be back at work any time soon. You’re right though. We’ve got to keep out of any drama whilst we’re here.”

“That’s exactly right.” Elly went to the sink and brushed her teeth, grinning around her toothbrush when Eve stepped up next to her and did the same.

Eve gently and slowly nudged Elly with her hip again, then stepped back to gauge Elly’s reaction. Blinking and continuing to grin, Elly nodded a little, and then turned back to the mirror to continue brushing.

Once they were both ready for the day, Eve sat beside Elly on her mattress. “So, this plan?”

Elly took some paper from her bedside drawer and a pen. “I think the least scary thing is being touched on the arm. I’m not bothered about that. Or my shoulder. That’s okay.”

“What about your hand?”

“That’s next,” Elly said, scribbling down the body parts. Her writing was curvy and neat. She shuddered a bit as she wrote the number three. “My wrists though. More scary.”
“We could leave wrists for a bit. What about hip-bumping?”

Elly grinned. “That could be number three.”

“What about your face?” Eve asked, looking at Elly’s cheek, wondering how soft the skin was there. She shook that thought away. “Your…your cheek?” She lifted a hand but stopped shy of actually touching Elly’s skin. A blur of memory flickered across her brain as she looked at Elly’s large brown eyes. She’d said something last night. What had she said? Eve chewed on her lip and allowed herself to dwell on it for a moment, before she gave up, and looked down at the list again.

Elly cocked an eyebrow at her. “Touching my face is a bit scary. But not as bad as my wrists.”

“Put that next then, if you like.”

Elly wrote it down. “This is starting to look like some kind of shopping list,” she remarked.

“I know quite a few people who would have a list like that,” Eve commented, her voice dark. “Most of them are in Broadmoor.”

“Delightful,” Elly said, smirking.

“Anyway, next?”

“Ankles,” Elly stated. “Not as scary as wrists. Scarier than my face.”

“Okay.”

And so they continued. When they had run out of basic places, Elly stuck the end of the pen in her mouth and tapped the paper with her finger. “Do we… I mean, I’m not sure how far to take it.” She looked up at Eve and her eyes were wide. She looked a little scared.

Eve shrugged. “Depends what you want. It’s up to you.” She blinked and her lips parted in an ‘O’ as she realised what Elly meant. “You’ve had… um… issues with male friends, I’m going to assume?”

“I have. Of… of course I have.” Elly shifted away from Eve across the bed. She pulled one slippered foot onto the mattress, and rested her chin on it. She wrapped her arms around herself protectively. “I’ve never managed to get comfortable enough with anyone to… do any of that.”

“Third date stuff?” Eve asked, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

It worked—Elly smiled. “Even first date stuff. A hug or a…” She stopped talking. Eve could practically hear her unspoken words whispered through the space between them: a kiss.

“I’m not suggesting I provide that kind of…” Eve frowned and searched for an appropriate word, but didn’t find one. “I’m not sure I’m the person for the job.”

“Maybe I could find a willing participant at a later date to help me with that,” Elly said, her voice teasing.

“Good idea.” Eve shuffled closer on the bed and Elly’s shoulders relaxed.

They both looked at the list, Eve leaning close to Elly’s shoulder. Elly didn’t flinch away but Eve could feel Elly’s eyes on her. A hand slid over her own, her fingers curling round and squeezing.

“Thank you so much for this.”
“You’re very welcome.”

***

All the patients were gathered into the seating area at ten, for a meeting. Elly could see Richard through the glass in the big heavy door, with a clipboard, monitoring the new male patient, Mr Harris, who was still shouting out various expletives occasionally. Richard sat, unmoved by the whole affair. *I do like him, he’s so calm about everything.*

Rachael sat among them all and leant her elbows on her knees. “First, guys, I’d like to explain what happened this morning. We have a new patient who is very unwell, and he became aggressive. He is currently in seclusion. Hopefully he will feel better really soon.”

Eve sat down next to Elly and they shared wide-eyed looks.

Jess was sitting with her hair half over her face and her arms folded. She rolled her eyes and huffed loudly. “Seriously, why can’t people just chill?”

“Sometimes, when we’re very unwell, we can’t control what we do,” Rachael explained.

Jess rolled her eyes again.

Elly sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and forced away her annoyance. Even Jess was allowed her opinion, however childish it may sound. These meetings were about respect and helping each other. No-one liked to attend them, but everyone was encouraged to, and therefore everyone did.

Harry tripped off into a monologue about his pottery aspirations and Elly had to hide a smile behind her hand. She didn’t look at Eve; she knew if she did, she wouldn’t be able to hold in her laugh.

Rachael caught Harry mid-idea and expertly brought the topic back to that of the meeting. “So does anybody have any questions about what happened this morning?”

Everyone shook their head. *I think it was pretty self-explanatory.*

“Great. Now, onto something else a bit unfortunate.” Rachael seemed to collect herself before continuing. “We’ve had a few things go missing over the last few days. Mostly food.” She smiled kindly at everyone. “Someone had some jewellery and some mints stolen last night. If anyone has any information about any of it, just let a member of staff know. It will, of course, be in confidence.”

“What else has been stolen?” Elly asked, her lips pursing as she thought.

“Chocolates,” Rachael replied. “Some fags. Last night was the first time anyone’s lost any jewellery.”

“What kind of jewellery?”

Rachael gave her a stern look and Elly shrugged, apologetically. “A beaded necklace.”

Elly nodded slowly, feeling the unfamiliar intrigue sliding through her body. *This could be interesting.*

At that, the meeting was adjourned. Everyone left with various scrapings of chairs and worried murmurs. Jess remained and sat playing a game on her phone, looking uninterested in the whole situation.

Elly narrowed her eyes and sucked her bottom lip into her mouth. “Hmm.”
Standing, Eve turned to her and shot her a questioning look. “What?”

Elly stood too and crooked a finger as she left the area, going into the room with the pool table and allowing the door to close behind them. “I wonder.”

“Do you?” Eve asked, apparently still none the wiser.

“What if we did some…investigating?” A fluttering had started up in her chest, a feeling she remembered from months ago. That feeling after the first meeting with a client, when the mystery was hanging, unsolved, and ready for her. She actually rubbed her palms together in glee.

“Into the thefts?” Eve asked, her eyes darting from Elly to the door, and back. “Aren’t we supposed to be staying out of the drama?”

“Oh, yes, I know,” Elly said, dismissing that with a wave of her hand. “I don’t mean we set up surveillance cameras, or stake out the area. But we could keep our eyes open. Work together, share information.” She was looking at Eve from under her eyelashes, sucking her lip in barely contained excitement, and had put her best convincing expression onto her face.

Eve considered her for a minute, before a smile tugged at her lips and she rolled her eyes. “You’re awfully persuasive.”

“Sorry.”

“I really can’t,” Eve said and there was regret in her voice.

“I might though. If you don’t mind. Or say anything.”

“Of course I won’t say anything.”

Elly forced her hands to refrain from clapping in elation. She tried not to allow it to overtake her—she knew she’d only crash after being over-exuberant. She made sure to take some long and slow breaths, before nodding. “Right. Okay then.”

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Eve watched Elly as she pulled herself from one person to another, speaking in quiet and nonchalant tones. She had the feeling Elly was interrogating them all, but was effectively making them all believe she didn’t really care. *I’m impressed. She must be good at what she does.* Elly’s approach was relaxed, and Eve was surprised the way she investigated was so different from the way she herself did, in her own job.

At least, the way I used to.

Eve sipped from her fresh cup of tea and considered the situation. She really had wanted to help, but she felt satisfied that she had made a good choice by not getting involved. Her head was still mixed and fuzzy, and it hadn’t been that long ago that she’d had the flashback, out in the garden. *Wasn’t that yesterday? Or was it the day before?* Time seemed to drag on the ward, but she wasn’t taken aback by it. There wasn’t much to do today. No occupational therapists running groups, no extra staff to sort out anything else.

To her left, Maggie knocked on the large door into the seclusion area and Richard came to open it. He handed over the folder to Maggie, who relieved him.

Richard walked past Eve and smiled at her. “How’s it going?” he asked her, stopping and resting a
Eve nodded. “Not too bad.” And she was bemused to find her words were not a lie.

“Good.” He came to sit next to her, opposite a woman Eve didn’t know, who was crunching sweets loudly. The noise grated on Eve, but she tried to push the feeling of annoyance away. The woman was allowed to eat sweets if she wished. “We were talking in handover, and the night staff said you had a good night’s sleep.”

Eve nodded again, feeling a bit like one of those dogs that sat on the back shelf of a car. “I didn’t have a nightmare,” she said quietly, her gaze flicking to the woman. Eve set her jaw, however. I shouldn’t hide my problems, just because there’s someone nearby. “And I slept through.”

“That’s brilliant,” Richard said, the top of his balding head shining in the lights from the ceiling. “Let’s see if we can continue that. Was there anything you did that helped?”

“I had a bath before bed,” Eve said. “And diazepam.”

Nodding, Richard clasped his hands together, his bony fingers folded neatly. “Maybe have some diazepam with your teatime meds. See how you feel later?”

“Alright.”

Satisfied, Richard stood and made his way out of the seating area and to the office. He looked weary already, and it was only ten-thirty.

Eve sipped from her tea and her gaze drifted back to the female patient across from her, who was still crunching away happily. The sweet smell of her candies wafted into Eve’s breathing space. Mint.

Eve blinked and casually looked the woman over. She appeared to be in her own little world, unfazed by anything that went on around her. Her brown hair was messier than Eve’s had been the day she had been admitted, and looked twice as greasy. The three cardigans she wore were full of holes and it looked like she’d never taken them off. One of the cardigans had a large pocket either side. One pocket was bulging with the sweets she was popping into her mouth at regular intervals. The other pocket was also full of something.

“Hello,” Eve said kindly, wondering whether the woman could hear her. “My name is Eve.”

“I know,” the woman said, and carried on eating her sweets. Then she smiled and scratched at her hair. “I’m Phillis.”

“Nice to meet you, Phillis.” Eve squinted affectionately at her. She sat and waited, even after she had finished her cup of tea.

Elly was still off somewhere, collecting data from whoever she was interviewing. Eve felt a little alone, without the brunette next to her. I suppose I can’t always rely on her, though. She’s not my guardian.

Eventually, the woman clambered to her feet and shuffled in her leggings down the female corridor, her cardigans gathered around her.

Standing up as quietly as she could, Eve followed her at a distance, trying to make it look like she just happened to stand up and walk the same way at exactly the same time. She kept her head lowered, bringing her gaze up only when she hoped Phyllis wasn’t looking.
Phyllis scuffled into her bedroom—a single, Eve noted, she wasn’t sharing—and sat down on her bed.

Eve moved to the other side of the corridor and hid just out of sight, but maintaining a clear view of Phyllis where she was sat. Her heart fluttered in her chest and anticipation wracked her limbs and made them shudder.

Rummaging around in her pocket, Phyllis took out the packet of mints and pushed them carefully under her pillow, an almost loving gesture, like the sweets were her children, things to be taken care of. Then she reached into the other pocket. She pulled out a long necklace, the beads pulling slightly at the holes in the pocket of her cardigan. She held it between both her hands and tilted her head to one side as she gazed at it.

Eve stepped back, properly out of sight. Her hand touched her chin as she stood and considered her options. Should she go straight to the nursing staff and tell them? Should she wait, and see if anything else went missing? Should she simply keep out of it—it really wasn’t her responsibility to snitch on someone on the ward.

But what if Phyllis stole something of hers? Or something of Elly’s—her treasured GameBoy? She would feel bad for not being involved sooner.

Just as she was about to head for their bedroom, Elly strode past her, looking glum. Her arms were folded in front of her and her eyebrows were furrowed. The corridor was reasonably dark, the lights off from overhead. When Eve reached out to catch Elly’s arm, Elly cried out in shock and jumped backwards, her hands coming up to protect herself. Dark eyes focussed on Eve.

“Shit,” Eve hissed. “I’m so sorry.”

Unexpected and slightly hysterical laughter pealed forth from Elly’s throat and Eve relaxed a bit, smiling despite herself. She pointed into their room and they both moved inside, Eve closing the door behind them.

Deciding to find out what information Elly had first, Eve indicated outside their bedroom with a forefinger. “Did you do some digging?”

Still chuckling, and with her hand against her lips, Elly glared good-naturedly at her. “I thought you were staying out of it?”

Eve shrugged and leant against the sink as Elly went to get a large jumper from her wardrobe. “What did you find out?”

Elly pulled the jumper over her head, shaking out her hair, and Eve thought she looked so comfortable in it, oversized and warm-looking. “I spoke with a few people who’ve had things taken. Bill is particularly annoyed that his mints are gone. He likes his little treats. And Kirsty is really upset about her necklace. Her boyfriend gave it to her for their anniversary.”

“Did she describe the necklace?”

Elly narrowed her eyes and folded her arms, her hands covered by the jumper’s sleeves that were too long for her. “Why?”

“Did she?” Eve found an assertive tone slipping into her voice, something resembling her former self, the strong and no-nonsense detective she could barely remember being.

“She did,” Elly said, her eyebrows lifting and curiosity slipping across her features. “She said it was
purple and blue and beaded. It had a large heart at the bottom.”

Eve brought the image of Phyllis in her bedroom into her mind’s eye, the colours and the large heart-shaped bead at the bottom that matched Elly’s description to a tee. The way Phyllis held the necklace so carefully, cradling it in her hands. Biting her lip, she let out a long sigh and spun to sit atop her neatly made bed. She put her fingers against her forehead and closed her eyes.

The bed moved as Elly sat beside her. “What’s wrong?” her quiet voice asked.

Shaking her head, Eve sighed again. “I know who has it.”

“How?”

“I had an inkling when the noise of crunching mints annoyed me so much I wanted to throttle someone.”

A low chuckle rumbled from Elly’s chest. “Oh, yes, I suppose that would give the game away.”

“Our thief is none other than the lovely Phyllis. Who appears to own more cardigans than the sea has fish.”

“Oh dear. She’s a sweetheart.” When Eve opened her eyes, Elly actually looked sad about it. “I was almost hoping we’d catch a villain. Someone doing it to spite someone, or perhaps for attention.”

“Cynic,” Eve teased, wanting to poke Elly in the ribs, but going for her arm instead, as per their plan. Elly grinned and rolled her eyes. “You can talk. I’m sure years of police work have made you a real glass-half-empty kind of gal.” She used an American accent and tilted of her head as she said the last few words.

Eve just shrugged, her smile matching Elly’s.

“So,” Elly said, pouting a little and leaning back against her hand, which she placed behind her on the mattress. “What do we do?”

“We need to tell the staff, don’t we?” Eve sighed, feeling as unhappy about the situation as Elly looked.

“We do.” Elly stretched her neck backwards and Eve watched her throat as she swallowed, took in the pale skin the motion presented her with. She wondered for a moment how Elly’s skin felt. But she held back, necks were not on the list.

“Come on then. Let’s get it over with before lunch.”

They made their way down the corridor again, and Elly knocked on the nursing office door. An administrator opened it, her glasses perched on the end of her nose and her face flustered, her hair all wispy around her face. “What?”

Elly blinked and stepped back a bit, and her eyes were suddenly round and worried.

Eve stepped forward and smiled in what she hoped was a friendly way. “We have some information about the things that have gone missing.”

The woman’s eyebrows furrowed and she frowned at first Eve, then Elly. “I really don’t have time for this.”
“We’ve been doing some research,” Elly said, apparently finding her voice. “I’ve interviewed a few people, and Eve saw something…” She trailed off as the staff member rolled her eyes and put a hand on her hip.

“Do you really think I have time for this?”

“Can we talk to a nurse, or something?” Eve asked, the hairs on the back of her neck rising.

“They don’t have time either. Not for some childish snooping, or whatever you’ve been doing.” And the door closed firmly in their faces.

When Eve turned, Elly was blinking rapidly and her eyes looked wet.

Eve put a hand to her shoulder and rubbed the soft, warm wool of her jumper. She didn’t say anything, wasn’t sure what words would make Elly feel better. Her touch seemed to, however, and after a few seconds, Elly’s hand covered her own and she smiled.

“I’m such a baby,” Elly murmured, wiping her eyes. “I hate it when people are like that.”

“She was out of order,” Eve replied, shaking her head to disregard Elly’s words. “Let’s find someone else.”

As they walked down to the dining room, Elly walked close to her, and whispered in her ear. “I wonder whether Sonya’s in on it. Maybe she takes a cut from all the stolen things, like Fagin. That would explain her bitchiness.”

Eve chuckled, and relaxed somewhat from her distrustful stance as her eyes fell on Rachael, who was sitting with Jess and chatting with her. As they approached, Rachael looked up.

“Alright?”

“We’d like to talk to you, if that’s okay?” Elly asked, warmth seeping from her. She really likes Rachael.

“Course,” Rachael said, and she rose and followed them out into the corridor again.

“We think we know who the thief is,” Eve said, stopping near the garden doors, where no one was about.

Rachael’s eyebrows rose. “Oh that’s fab. I mean it’s not but, hey, mystery solved.” She paused and gave them both an expectant look.

“It’s Phyllis,” Elly said, apology ringing through her voice.

“Phyllis?” Rachael sighed and Eve was reminded of Elly’s reaction only moments ago, when she’d found out the same information. “Oh dear. How do you know?”

“I saw her with the necklace,” Eve said. “And she’s been eating mints all morning.”

“Right,” Rachael said, and nodded. “Okay. Thanks guys.” She left them, with a formidable sigh.

Elly looked both satisfied and regretful. “Rachael will be really nice about it, at least.”

“She seems nice,” Eve commented as she went back into the dining room and to the kettle to make them both a drink. Whilst it boiled, she looked over at Jess, who was sitting with her head in her hands, dark lanky hair sliding between her fingers. “Jess? Brew?”
Jess looked up slowly and nodded, her eyes red. Eve decided not to comment—making a cup of tea for the young woman would be comfort enough, she hoped.

Eve and Elly walked back to the small seating area. They sat side by side and drank their teas, just sitting together and relaxing. Something made a loud banging noise from somewhere, probably not anything to worry about, but Elly tensed anyway, her sharp intake of breath indicative of her anxiety.

As Eve watched, Elly took slow and deep breaths, the round of her midriff rising and falling underneath a carefully placed hand. A few breaths later, her shoulders fell as she relaxed. When she opened her eyes, her cheeks pinked. “Oh,” she whispered, her eyes sliding away.

“Breathing exercises?” Eve asked, genuinely interested, but keeping her voice a whisper too as to not make Elly feel any shyer.

“Abdominal breathing. Good for anxious moments.” Elly caught Eve’s gaze again. “Rach teaches it sometimes, if she has time. She’s really good.”

“She has a very calming voice,” Eve agreed.

“So long as people aren’t throwing punches at her.”

They both sniggered, and then were quiet again. Eve reached over to touch the back of Elly’s hand, hoping it was okay to do that in public, hoping that nobody asked about it.

Elly flinched just a tiny bit, then relaxed and smiled as Eve’s fingertips skimmed over her skin. She sunk down in her seat, leaning a little into Eve, just enough so that their shoulders pressed against one another. She sipped at her tea and allowed Eve to touch her hand in small circles.

Phyllis stomped out from the female corridor, looking very guilty. Rachael followed her, the beaded necklace clutched like a prize in her hands. As she passed them, her gaze drifted to their hands, resting on the wooden arms of the chairs between them. She stopped for a moment, but then carried on, a thoughtful look on her face.

Eve shot Elly a concerned look, but Elly just shifted her backside down even lower in the seat, closed her eyes, and drank her tea. “Don’t we make a good team?” Elly asked.

“We do,” Eve replied, looking down at their hands. “Your friend Kate will be jealous.”

Elly let out a long happy sigh, and rested her cheek against Eve’s shoulder.

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Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Elly and Eve continue their journey. Revelations are had.

Chapter Five

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Apart from psychology, which both of them attended once a week, separately, and their meetings with the doctors, also separately, Eve and Elly stuck together whenever they could. The next week was busy, with Eve starting cognitive behavioural therapy, and Elly being encouraged to go out for walks around the hospital grounds on her own, and therefore these moments together seemed few and far between. The extra activities made them both tired, and Elly noticed that Eve was settling down to bed most evenings before supper was served.

The following Tuesday, Kate came to visit, with Benji in tow, and his girlfriend, Laura. Benji had told Laura about Elly, and from Laura’s reaction and warm greeting, Elly figured he’d been kind about his description of her. *Perhaps he hasn’t told her about my suicide attempt.* Her hands still trembled when she shook Laura’s hand, but she reminded herself how far she had come, and how much more comfortable she felt with Eve.

So far, they had stuck with simple touches to her arm and shoulder, and holding hands. Elly had even gone so far as to tickle the back of Eve’s fingers once or twice, as she had that first week. Eve had bumped her hip a few times, always catching her eye beforehand, and always making sure she was okay afterwards. *She’s so sweet. I wonder if we’ll stay friends after I’m discharged. I hope so.*

As Kate and Benji and Laura were leaving, having played various games of pool with her, and teased her about her enthusiastic recollection of a Pokémon level she had completed, Eve rounded the corner from the dining room, a cup of tea in her hands. She smiled shyly at the little group, and Elly felt an overwhelming urge to introduce them all, which she did.

“My roommate, Eve.” Elly held out a hand. “This is Kate, my sort-of better half.”

“In business, any road,” Kate said pleasantly, holding out a hand to shake. “Heard a lot about you.”

Eve shook Kate’s hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you too.”

Elly inwardly grimaced and hoped Eve didn’t let on that she knew about Kate’s involvement in her crisis, and in the attempt to end her life. Eve simply smiled though, shook hands with Benji and Laura, and moved on, offering Elly a small smile and a flick of her eyes towards the female wing.

Elly nodded at her request, but focussed back on her little family as they all wished their farewells to her. She hugged Kate hard and Kate patted her cheek. “Be good.”

“I will,” Elly promised. She watched their retreating backs as the airlock doors closed one after another behind them, and then slunk into the dining room, to make her own cup of tea.

Carrying it down and into their bedroom, she found Eve staring at her mobile phone, a small smile
tugging her mouth. “What?” she asked, curiously.

“I had a text from Ajay.”

“Who’s he?” Elly sat on her own bed and blew across the top of her drink to cool it.

“A colleague. I suppose, a friend.” Eve put her phone on the sheets and reached to stroke her teddy bear’s head idly. “He held me back when I kicked off at work.”

“Ah. Your hero, then?” Elly teased, smirking a bit across the room.

Eve chuckled. “I suppose.” She looked up and narrowed her eyes at Elly. “Not my type though. I tend to go for bad boys.”

“Do you?”

“Jake was, I suppose, the worst anyone could be. Murdered his wife and her lover. Then murdered a terminally ill prisoner.”

“An evil one,” Elly argued, a wash of affection flooding her. “And he was provoked, wasn’t he? Didn’t I read that?”

“Maybe I’m doomed to date evil people,” Eve murmured.

Elly put her drink down and stood, tripping over to Eve’s bed, sinking down by her feet and placing her hand over one sock-covered ankle. “Don’t say that. You never know who you’re going to meet.”

“My husband was a knob-head, left me for someone pretty and not obsessed with work.” Eve’s gaze slid out of the window and Elly gave her time to talk. “Some…shop assistant in Debenhams.”

“She sounds delightful,” Elly replied.

Eve looked back at her and smiled slightly. “Oh yeah, she’s everything I’m not.” At Elly’s pinched expression, Eve laughed. “I hope you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” Elly said, patting Eve’s foot gently and then moving her hand back to her own lap.

They sat in silence for a while, each with their own thoughts.

“Oh, what did…Ajay?” At Eve’s nod, Elly continued. “What did he want?”

“He’s going to come in and visit, with my Chief Con, on Friday.” Eve rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose.

“Let’s hope they’ll have a return date for you.”

“Let’s.” Eve rested back against the wall and her pillows, her hands clasped over her tummy. “How was Kate?”

“She’s okay. Still keeping the business afloat. I am so looking forward to being back at it. That little job you and I did together really sparked something in me. A need to get back into the swing of things.”

“Shall I arrange for another crime to occur?” Eve asked, her twisted mouth giving away her joke. “To keep you occupied until the time comes?”
Elly giggled. “Not necessary. I doubt she’ll let me return to work immediately when I get out of here. She’ll ply me with tea and force me to watch daytime television whilst she waits on me hand and foot.”

Eve looked disgusted. “Can’t think of anything worse.”

“No, me neither. I think I’ll be forcing her onto the sofa, vacuuming around her whilst she languishes with a glass of cheap wine and some smooth jazz.” Elly sucked her lip into her mouth and picked at a loose thread on her jeans. “She deserves a break. After the mess I left for her.”

Eve’s fingers touched her own and Elly didn’t flinch. Eve seemed to notice this difference and smiled warmly at her. “Sounds like a good way to pay her back. Clean her house from top to bottom.”

“It’ll keep me out of trouble.” Elly’s voice was close to a whisper, and she cleared her throat, but couldn’t think of anything more to say, so didn’t.

“You’re doing really well with this,” Eve said, having dropped her voice to match Elly’s volume. She indicated their hands where they touched, atop the bed sheets.

Elly nodded. “It’s starting to feel better, I mean, not like I’m going to run away every time you touch me.” Her gaze caught Eve’s and Elly had the distinct feeling that Eve felt proud of her. Her cheeks felt hot, but she pushed away the shy feeling and smiled properly. “Thank you.”

Their fingers scissored almost of their own accord, and Elly squeezed Eve’s hand in her own. A shivered shot through Elly, but she found it wasn’t terrifying, or so uncomfortable.

“What was the next thing on your list?” Eve asked, her thumb rubbing against the side of Elly’s.

Elly swallowed and watched their hands for a moment, before saying: “My face. My cheek.”

“And how does that feel, the thought of me touching your cheek?”

Elly eyed her. “Scary.”

“Alright.” Eve relinquished her hand from Elly’s and sat back against her pillows again. “What if you made the…first move? As it were?”

Elly laughed, shooting Eve a confused but amused look. “Whatever do you mean?”

Eve grinned too and beckoned Elly towards her. “You come over here. I’ll hold my hand out.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Come on.” There was a sparkling humour between them, like the dust was glinting in the air of their bedroom. Eve held her hand out at cheek-height, then shot Elly an expectant look. She crooked her forefinger, another gesture of beckoning.

Elly rolled her eyes and shifted sideways on the bed, until her hip was level with Eve’s. She reached over Eve’s body and placed her hand by Eve’s other shoulder, leaning over her a little. Tilting her head in a challenge, she waited.

Eve’s hand floated six inches away from Elly’s cheek. Their eyes locked and an unexpectedly tender look passed between them. Elly’s gaze flicked to Eve’s hand, then back to her face, and she recognised the soft look in her eyes as affection.
Shifting closer, Elly moved into Eve’s hand just as Eve slid her fingers gently over Elly’s cheek. Elly’s eyes slipped closed at the warmth of Eve’s fingers, the careful way they touched her, and the way that Eve’s thumb stroked her skin ever-so slightly. She lifted her own hand and cupped Eve’s elbow, finding she needed to touch Eve too, to ground herself. Her brain had become fuzzy and her mouth had gone dry. Her stomach felt like it was full of fizzy drink, rolling around and around and fluttering. She squeezed Eve’s arm, gripped onto her firmly, and took in a long, slow breath.

Eve didn’t move. When Elly opened her eyes, Eve’s gaze was still on her, but the touch of a smile had entered her features. Dark brown eyes were steady on her, and the crinkles by the side of each were kind.

Elly reached up her other hand and placed her palm against the back of Eve’s, feeling laughter bubbling up and tumbling out of her mouth before she could hold it in. It was a laugh full of the surprise and elation she felt.

Eve removed her hand gently, but not before thumbing Elly’s cheekbone again. “How was that?”

“How was that?” Elly coughed and rubbed the back of her neck, sitting upright again. “I…I mean. It was okay.”

Eve sat up too and looked so pleased Elly thought she would cry. *Such a simple thing. Something anyone would be able to do without a thought.* “Other side?” Eve asked, and then shrugged. “Just to make sure it’s okay?”

Elly rolled her eyes again indignantly, but leaned forward in agreement, allowing Eve to cup her cheek the other side. This time Elly felt Eve’s fingers run along her jawline, then up by her ear. Shivering, this time in physical response to Eve’s touch rather than psychological fear, Elly pushed her shoulders up and grinned.

Eve smiled back, placed her palm snug against Elly’s cheek, and left it there.

Feeling strangely content, Elly reached out a hand to Eve, who sat up to move close to her. Elly lifted her fingers to Eve’s cheek as well, trailed a little circle around the small mole on her cheekbone, before copying Eve and laying her palm flat against her skin.

“Alright?” Eve asked in a whisper.

Elly nodded, her smile widening when Eve brushed her cheek with her thumb again. “You’re making me tingle.”

“Is that okay?”

“It’s nice. I mean it’s…” Elly bit her lip but didn’t move away. Eve’s hand was still warm, and her cheek even warmer under her own hand. She felt safe. “It’s a strange feeling. Unfamiliar, I suppose.”

Their gazes caught again and this time they held. “Do you want me to stop?”

Elly’s throat felt like sandpaper as she swallowed. “No.”

“Then I won’t.”

Something else was seeping into Elly’s stomach, something tense and hot. Like lava down an ice flow—something that shouldn’t be there. It was scalding and dangerous, but thrilling. Her heart thumped in her ears and her palms felt sweaty. *She’s so pretty. Those dark eyes.* Elly could smell the shampoo Eve used, and she could see the little flecks of gold in her irises. They were very close,
closer than Elly was used to being with anyone. Eve’s breath puffed on her cheek as she moved even closer.

The door banged open and against the wall and they flew away from one another. Elly put a hand over her mouth and whirled around to the door, to see that Trisha, her eyes wide, had interrupted them.

Eve stood shakily from her bed and ran a hand through her hair. Trisha and Eve had met and spoken a few times before. “Hiya, Trisha. How are you?”

Trisha looked from one to the other and back, and then took a few steps backwards. “Fine. Thanks.” She stared into the room, then at the number on the bedroom door. “Oh. Wrong room.”

Elly tried to laugh to break the tension. “Oh, I do that all the time, Trisha.”

“Yeah, me too,” Eve said, her hands starting to rub in and out of each other.

Trisha looked shocked, but at what, Elly wasn’t sure. Was she embarrassed to have walked into the wrong bedroom so forcefully? Or by what she had found? Elly realised how they must have looked to someone who didn’t know their plan.

Trisha swung her brown hair over her shoulder, and backed out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her with a bang.

Elly stood on shaky legs, the noise of the door opening and then closing having jarred her previously settled nerves. The smallest noise and I’m a nervous wreck. I hate this. She wrapped her arms around herself protectively and lowered her head, her eyes closing tight.

Gentle hands touched her shoulders and Elly felt small caresses against where her shoulders met her neck. She opened her eyes to find Eve standing in front of her, a concerned look in her eye.

“Sorry,” Elly breathed, shaking her head.

“It’s okay. It was something new, and then bloody Trisha…” Eve was grinning lopsidedly.

“I felt…” Elly looked away, over to where Eve’s bear sat, his black eyes staring at her. She swung her gaze away, feeling scrutinised by the toy. She took a deep breath, and then looked back up at Eve. “You said…a few days ago. When you were drugged up on diazepam.”

Eve frowned in confusion.

“You said,” Elly continued, “that I was beautiful.”

Eve blushed and her gaze shifted to somewhere over Elly’s shoulder. “Did I?”

Elly nodded.

“Oh.” Eve was pouting in thought, her eyebrows pushed down, obviously still not understanding what Elly was talking about.

“And when you touched me…” Elly’s cheeks were hot, and she put a palm against one of them. “I looked at you and…” She blinked, and stepped away, hastily wrapping her arms back around herself. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.” Eve was in front of her again in one step, and Elly shied away from her, going to sit on her own bed. “I felt it too.”
Elly blinked and looked up sharply. “You did?”

Eve nodded.

“So…” Elly dropped her arms and rested her hands into her lap. Eve sat on the bed too, but seemed to make sure there was space between them. For this, Elly was grateful. “Does it…does it mean something or…”

“I’m not sure.” Eve shrugged. “Maybe it just means, despite having only known one another…” A thoughtful look as she counted, then a small smile. “…fifteen days. Despite it only having been a short time, we have a connection. We’re friends, I suppose?”

“Friends,” Elly agreed, smiling softly. “And, for what it’s worth, I think you’re beautiful too.”

“That’s…good to know.”

“But…friends,” Elly reiterated.

“Friends are allowed to touch,” Eve commented, but then looked unsure.

Elly narrowed her eyes. “It felt like more than friendship,” she whispered, but stuck her hands under her legs and looked at her socks as a new feeling of dread and fear surged over her. “At least, it did to…to me.”

Eve shifted closer, lifting a hand to touch Elly’s shoulder until she looked back up. “It did to me. But.”

Elly let out an exasperated huff and allowed herself to smile briefly. “But?”

“I don’t think this is the time or the place to…investigate any further.”

A hum rumbled from within Elly’s chest and she paused, before nodding. “You’re right.”

“I think we both have our demons and…there isn’t room for anything else at the moment.”

Elly turned properly to her and felt that overwhelming urge to hug her again. Maybe I could work towards that. “You’re awfully sensible, you know that?”

“Sorry,” Eve said, but she looked anything but. They sniggered, their eyes shining with shy mirth.

“Maybe we could…perhaps…revisit it? Once we’re out of this place and…a bit less troubled?”

“I’d like that.”

“But for now: friends?” Elly held out a hand and Eve grasped it.

“Friends is good.”

Elly pulled her hand away and rubbed at her knee. “I suppose I can ask Kate…or someone else to help me with…” She shrugged and smiled at Eve. “Don’t feel you have to continue with the touching thing, not if you’re not comfortable.”

“I didn’t say that,” Eve said seriously.

A prickle of hope and excitement started in Elly’s stomach. “Really?”
“No need for me to stop helping you, just because of…” She gestured with a hand, indicating the air between them. “…whatever this is.” Eve frowned. “Unless you’re not comfortable.”

“I am.” Elly chuckled. “Well, you know, I will be. You’ve helped me so much these past two weeks. It would be a shame to give it all up.”

“Alright then.”

“Alright.”

***

That evening, during dinner, a new and comfortable mist had settled over them. Elly kept looking up at Eve and smiling, a knowing look passing between them as they ate. Eve watched Elly cut her roast potatoes up into small pieces, found it endearing rather than worrying. It was a thing that Elly did to cope with how she felt. Maybe when they were both home, they could go out to a café together and practise eating larger pieces of food.

Eve blinked at her presumption: that they would meet up when they weren’t being forced to share a room. Not that I’m complaining. She smirked to herself, ate her main course hungrily, and scraped her plate with her fork to catch any escaped drips of gravy. She’d seen a few patients come and go. The man who had frightened them all so much a week ago had been transferred, the man that talked to himself had been given a placement, somewhere with support so he could keep himself well, and others had been discharged back to wherever they had come from. She could have been given any number of roommates instead of Elly.

She waited for Elly to finish her roast dinner, sitting with her hands clasped in her lap. She thought back to her last patient care review, how the consultant had been so pleased with her progress. She could see it herself: she was smiling more and her face didn’t find it so difficult to do so. She was showering every day without fail and without being reminded. She’d even started wearing a bit of makeup again, especially when her children were visiting.

Soon, they were going to plan her discharge. It scared her, made her wonder what they would say, where she was going to go if not to her own home, but Toby had insisted that it wouldn’t be for several weeks yet. They just needed a plan in place, and a date to aim for. Eve hoped it wouldn’t be too long. She’d heard of people being institutionalised, assumed it was similar to prison—one would de-skill if left incarcerated for too long.

She’d also watched Elly go off the ward for her solitary walks, her dark bob blowing in the breeze, and felt a little envious. I don’t want to be on my section anymore.

The sounds of Elly scraping her own plate met Eve’s ears and broke her out of her musings. Elly sucked her fork into her mouth and then laid it down, before scraping her chair back and picking the plate up. “Pudding?”

“Definitely.” Eve replied. She’d been told, on Sunday, the day that everyone got weighed, that she needed to gain two kilos to be considered a healthy weight. Another goal to achieve, to prove that she was following advice and being sensible. So: pudding was a must.

As they finished their desserts, Rachael entered the dining room and went over to Trisha’s table. Eve heard low murmurings, mostly small-talk, and then watched as Trisha lowered her voice, and her eyes flickered to the two of them. Trisha’s expression seemed full of distaste, and a shadow of concern passed over Rachael’s face.
Eve looked away hurriedly, her gaze back in her empty bowl. A blush crept over her cheeks as she worried about what Trisha was saying. She checked Elly, but was pleased to find her back to Trisha, and therefore her face the picture of oblivion.

Elly finished her pudding and pushed her bowl away. “I love jam sponge. Childish I know but…” Her voice trailed off as she took in Eve’s expression. “What is it?”

Eve forced a smile onto her face. “Sorry. Just thinking.” She indicated her clean bowl. “You’re right. It was a good pudding.”

Elly seemed to accept this change in mood, and Eve followed her over to the kitchen with her own bowl. Just before they reached the doorway into the corridor, Rachael caught up with them. “Guys, can I have a word?”

A pang of nervousness curled inside Eve’s stomach as Elly nodded, and they followed Rachael into the clinic. Rachael jangled her big bunch of keys and indicated the trolley with a wave of her hand. “Meds? Whilst we’re here?”

“Good idea,” Elly said brightly.

Eve leant against the cupboards and fiddled with her fingers.

“So,” Rachael said, with an obvious attempt at nonchalance, “I was talking with Trisha just now, and she has some concerns.”

“Oh?” Elly’s tone was cautious, but her face was still creased in a smile. To her, Rachael can say nothing wrong.

“She says…and I hold no judgement, honestly, I don’t…that she caught you two kissing.”

Eve stared at Rachael. “That’s ridiculous.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Elly’s gaze swung round to her and the look in her eye was incredulous.

“Not that I…” Eve wanted to explain, but without giving Rachael the wrong idea, without giving the game away, without stating her attraction out loud, she would just have to hold her tongue for the moment.

“We weren’t kissing,” Elly explained, her voice a lot calmer than Eve felt, taking her tablets from Rachael in the little paper cup and swallowing them with water. “I promise.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” Rachael continued, the nonchalance blatantly duelling with the worry behind her eyes. “We’re an accepting bunch on this ward. But.”

“Yes, yes. We’re patients and it’d be inappropriate.” Elly didn’t look guilty, and Eve was thankful.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Rachael handed Eve her medication too, then locked the trolley. “So, if you weren’t kissing, how in the world did Trisha get the wrong impression?”

Now Elly looked guilty. She chewed her lip and tapped the side of the counter where she leaned, next to Eve. “Well…” Elly looked helplessly at Eve, her eyebrows furrowed.

“Elly has an issue with being touched,” Eve explained slowly, her gaze resting on Elly, making sure what she was saying was okay.
“Yes, I’m well aware,” Rachael said, her eyes narrowed, but perhaps in curiosity, rather than worry now.

“So, we came up with a plan. We’ve become friends. And I wanted to help.”

“Eve had her hand on my cheek, when Trisha walked in,” Elly continued. She scuffed the floor with her slipper. “Please don’t be angry about it,” Elly whispered. “It’s really helping me.”

They both looked at Rachael, who was standing by the trolley, her arms folded, with the bunch of keys dangling from one finger. She looked first at Eve, then at Elly. She pursed her lips, took in a large breath, and then let it out.

“It’s helping?” she asked, still obviously not convinced.

“Yes,” Elly replied, confidently. She reached out and placed her hand over Eve’s on the countertop. Eve smiled sideways at her and turned her hand over to link their fingers.

Rachael’s gaze shifted down to their joined hands, and then back up at Elly. “I’ll admit, you’d never have been able to do that two weeks ago.”

“I know. Like I said, it’s really helping.” Elly let go of Eve’s hand and her palm smacked her side as it dropped.

“It would be awful, though, if someone else were to see, and misconstrue…”

“I agree,” Elly said quickly. “We’ll try to be more discrete.”

“Thank you.”

“Will you share what we’ve talked about with the rest of the staff?” Eve asked.

“I’ll have to write a progress note, one in both of your records.” Rachael touched her chin and swirled the keys around her other forefinger. “However, I’ll be vague. Put something about you supporting one another. I don’t think anyone could complain about that.”

“Sounds fair,” Elly said, and the bright smile that seemed to be only reserved for Rachael, returned.

Friday rolled around quickly and Eve felt her stomach clenching more and more with each passing day. They had been to pottery again, discovered that their pieces had been fired—Elly’s oil burner for the last time, and Eve’s pot for the first—and that nothing had exploded in the kiln. It was Elly’s turn to make a new piece with wet clay and she took great delight in smearing slick grey mess all over Eve’s arm when she wasn’t expecting it. Eve laughed with her, pleased she felt comfortable now to touch her in this way.

Lunch was a hurried affair and Eve shot out of the dining room without Elly to clean her teeth and apply as much makeup as she felt comfortable with. She had chosen her outfit; something smart but comfortable in which to meet her colleague and her top superior, the Chief Constable of her area.

She was looking forward to seeing Ajay—the young officer hadn’t visited or contacted her apart from the text message, not since her episode at work. Things were coming back in dribs and drabs, and she could now remember Ajay’s strong arms around her shoulders, pulling her backwards, away from the smashed glass. She supposed she owed him at least an apology, perhaps something
handmade in pottery as a gesture of her remorse.

When they arrived, they were shown into the meeting room, the one with the low chairs and large coffee table in the middle. Her boss, whom she knew well enough to call David, sat across from her, his large hands resting on his knees, which stuck up comically because of the inappropriately low chairs. He shuffled his shiny shoes under the large coffee table to lessen the effect.

Ajay stepped up to her and patted her shoulder, a friendly but professional gesture. Had they been alone, Eve thought maybe he would have hugged her. She wished he had, she could do with some tactile comfort. From Ajay’s posture, she assumed their meeting was all business and limited pleasure, not that she would expect a social visit from her Chief Con when she was in a mental health hospital.

“Good afternoon, Eve,” David said, his low baritone slow and kind. “So nice to see you’re feeling better.”

“I’m getting there,” Eve replied, used now to being honest about her emotions.

“You look really well,” Ajay agreed, then closed his mouth.

“We’ve come to talk with you about the incident in January,” David said. *At least he’s leaving out the small talk. No need to draw out the inevitable.*

“Okay,” Eve said, sitting up as straight as she could.

“We feel, due to the nature and severity of the incident, your behaviour, your mental state at the time, and how it affected your work colleagues…”

Ajay looked down at his feet, his knuckles white as his hands clasped one another.

“We feel,” David continued, “That your time in the police force ought to come to an end.”

Eve stared at them both. Ajay looked like a little puppy that’d been kicked for something that wasn’t his fault. Her boss’s face was stoic, all business, apart from a flicker behind his eyes, something that resembled regret.

“Right,” she said, her stomach lurching, and then falling into her feet.

“We’ve spoken about it with the team, and everyone agrees that you should be offered early retirement, due to ill health, with a very handsome pension to make the transition as smooth as possible.”

“Right,” Eve repeated.

“What are your thoughts?”

Eve looked around the dark room, searched the white walls for inspiration. A poster caught her eye, something about handwashing. She scrutinised it, as if it held the answers. The black and white picture of two hands depicted a heart shape, like the hands were expressing their love for soap. The ward was quiet, the thick walls of the meeting room muffling any chatter from outside. Then she let out a breath she didn’t even know she’d been holding, and turned back to the two men. “I think that’s fair.”

“Good.” David patted his knees and made to get up, but Eve held out a hand.
“Wait. I said it was fair. I didn’t say I was happy.” She pressed her palms together. “I’ve given twenty years to the force, made my way up the ranks, developed a good reputation.” She shrugged and smiled despite herself. “The last couple of months aside. I’m a good interviewer, a good investigator, and I work hard.”

“I’m not saying you don’t,” David said.

“I just think…it’s a huge waste of a good detective.” Eve shrugged again, her palms open to the world.

“It is,” David said, forlornly. “However, it has been discussed. You are currently on extended sick leave, and when that comes to an end, you will be retiring. Your psychiatrist is in agreement.”

“You’ve spoken with my doctor?” Eve said, anger bubbling inside her.

“I have.” David seemed neither ashamed nor abashed. “She agrees that once you are discharged, a change of lifestyle and job will be the best thing for you.”

Eve set her jaw and glared at David.

“Wicklow changed you,” Ajay said softly, reaching over to pat her hand. “You had a spark before, and now…” It appeared as though he didn’t know what to say to explain himself, but at least his tone was kind. “You could spend time with your kids, help them with their homework, be there to pick them up from school.”

Despite her expectation of not being allowed home so soon, Eve felt a smile tugging the corners of her lips as she looked at Ajay. She nodded. “Right, okay. I suppose I’ll have to accept it.”

David didn’t linger and Ajay appeared to be his driver for the day, so he got ready to leave too. He pulled Eve into a hug, however, disregarding professionalism, and Eve hugged him back with vigour.

“You take care of yourself,” Eve impressed, squeezing his arm as he stepped back from her.

“I will. You too.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Ajay.” She gave them a small wave as they left, and then watched through the huge glass windows in the airlock doors as the unmarked police car sped away from the ward.

Elly was in the tea-drinking area, playing on her GameBoy. Eve dropped into the seat next to her and sighed, tears threatening to fall down her cheeks. Elly turned and placed her hand over Eve’s a questioning look in her eyes. Eve shrugged and sighed again, a whoosh of air that fluttered her fringe.

“Talk about it later,” Eve murmured. She didn’t want to cry.

Seeming to know that she needed time and space, but also to have someone just there, Elly kept her hand over Eve’s until someone joined them in the seating area. With a tiny smile, she removed her hand and went back to her game.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Eve and Elly get closer...

Eve’s CBT began full-force the next week. First, Sam went over several grounding techniques, including placing a cold compress on the face, and studying the environment around you. They practised them several times together, and Sam explained the techniques were to be used when she felt anxious, or the memory of her ordeal became too much.

“Like when I have a flashback?” Eve asked, her voice careful and uncertain.

“That’s exactly right,” Sam replied.

His office was small but comfortable. The chairs in it were big and Eve could pull her feet up under her backside when she sat in one of them. She studied the fabric of her trousers and scraped at a piece of something on her knee. The room was less noise-proof than the big meeting room, and the window was open a crack. The sounds of birds twittering filtered through, something she found calming and stabilising.

“I’m going to try and sit outside later,” Eve said quietly, then looked up when she heard him shift in his chair.

His expression was pleased. “I think that’s a really good idea. That’s where you had your flashback isn’t it, the first week you were here?”

She nodded, slowly.

“Take a member of staff with you if you like, just to sit with you.”

“I’ll take Elly.”

“Ah yes, I heard you guys were friends.”

Eve studied him, but he didn’t seem upset about the fact. “We’re sharing a room.” *I’m sure most people who share a bedroom here either become friends, or enemies.*

“Good job you don’t hate each other then.” Sam chuckled and Eve smiled too. “Anyway, I hope the session has been helpful?”

Eve nodded, her brain mulling over the things she had learnt.

“Great. Next week?”

“Yes. See you then.” She stood and he followed her down the corridor to let her into the main area of the ward.

Eve found Elly leaning against the wall and chatting with Rachael. Her usual bright smile was
evident and as Eve watched, Elly giggled at something Rachael said.

Clearing her throat noisily, Eve made her presence known and was pleased when Elly’s smile became soft, but still as bright.

“Hi.”

“Hello,” Eve replied.

Rachael smiled at Eve too. “Hey. How did it go?”

“Okay. I’ve got some relaxation techniques under my belt. They’ll be really good for when I have a flashback, or a nightmare.” At the last few words, Eve looked at Elly, squinting her eyes a little in knowing.

Elly nodded gently and squinted her eyes too.

_That’ll take some of the responsibility of her shoulders, if I can deal with my nightmares myself. She won’t have to get up in the middle of the night to calm me down anymore._

Eve was beginning to like being tended too, if she looked deep down inside herself. She hated to admit it, but the feeling of Elly’s fingers on her face, or clasping her own, was the most comforting thing she had ever felt. _It’s helping her too, she’s getting used to touching someone._ Sometimes she lay in bed and wondered whether Elly would ever touch her like that if she stopped having nightmares.

Rachael smiled at them both and caught sight of someone she wanted to talk to. “Great talking to you, Elly.” She touched Elly’s arm as she left.

Elly watched her go, not having flinched even the slightest at the touch of the nurse.

Eve turned to watch Rachael leave, a sudden and strange feeling seeping into her stomach. “You get on well with Rachael.”

They walked down the corridor to their shared room. “She’s lovely,” Elly said, her voice a bit breathless.

Eve eyed her. “Is she?”

“She’s a great nurse,” Elly continued. “I told you, didn’t I? Right from the start she believed in me. Even when I was smacking the walls and trying to hurt myself, she always told me I’d be okay.” Her gaze was soft on Eve’s. “Sometimes it just takes time.”

Eve studied her, and saw the slight blush in her cheeks, the way her eyes were lowered as she spoke about the attractive nurse. She looked down at the floor, scuffed her slipper against the tiled floor and bit her lip. “Do you like her?”

“Of course I do.” When Elly looked back up at her, Eve saw the realisation in her eyes. “Oh, you mean, do I _like_ her?” A hand to her mouth, Elly muffled a chuckle. “I suppose she’s pretty, don’t you think?”

Eve shrugged.

Elly came to sit next to her on the bed. “You’ve got green eyes.”

“My eyes are brown.”
“That’s not what I mean.”

“Am I that transparent?” Eve asked, sighing and throwing her a sideways smile.

Elly placed her hand over Eve’s. “Listen.” Eve looked up at her. “We’ve not even gone there yet. Me and you. Have we?”

Eve shrugged again, clasping her hands on her own lap.

“And Rachael’s a staff nurse, I can hardly begin something with her, can I?” Elly grabbed Eve’s shoulder and pulled her round to face her, forcing Eve to look at her. “Hey, that’s enough. You’re not allowed to go all moody just because I’m nice to Rachael and Rachael’s nice to me. And Rachael’s pretty.”

Eve sighed, tilted her head to one side, and licked her lip. “I’m being a twat, aren’t I?”

“Yep.” Elly’s fingers smoothed gently against Eve’s shoulder.

Eve stretched her head backwards and let out a groan. “I’m sorry.”

“I suppose it’s nice to know you care,” Elly said, the playful tone back in her voice. She let Eve go, apparently content that Eve wouldn’t run away. “Believe me, I’m not going to do anything like that whilst I’m in hospital, with anyone.”

“Neither am I.”

“Good,” Elly laughed, folding her arms. She pulled at the elbow of the big jumper she wore, the beige one with the cable-knit patterns down the front. It looked like it was decades old and Eve was sure she could see several small holes in the tatty thing. She thought it was adorable.

“Sorry,” Eve said again, her stomach hurting a bit with guilt. “I’ve got to stop reacting to everything so strongly. It’s not good for me, or for anyone.”

“Let’s forget it.”

Eve nodded. “So, what’s on the agenda for today, Doctor Granger?”

Eve snorted and patted her own thighs, before standing up from the bed. “I was going to try and spend some time in the garden before lunch.” She bit her lip. “Um, would you come with me?”

“Of course,” Elly said.

The morning was bright and a bit frosty. February was turning out to be a cold month, and the grass was crisp underfoot. Eve had pulled a scarf on, and had watched in amusement as Elly lugged a thick leather jacket over her shoulders. Elly’s expression told her she’d noticed Eve’s amusement, but she didn’t comment.

There was a bench on the far side of the garden, almost under the trees, if not for the tall green fence separating the little woodland area from the lawn. They sat, shoulders hunched and close together, trying to keep the icy breeze from rushing between them. Eve settled her hand behind Elly on the back of the bench, just shy of actually putting her arm around her. She didn’t touch her, just the cold wood and metal brackets of the bench. She pulled the sleeve of her coat over her hand to keep out the chill.

“We have bird feeders,” Elly said quietly, pointing over to the right, behind yet another green fence.

Eve followed Elly’s finger and smiled as she saw the feeding station, which had all sorts of food in
hanging feeders attached. As they sat as still as they could, two sparrows arrived and pecked form the peanut holder. Elly inhaled sharply, in happiness perhaps at seeing a little bit of nature.

“Wow, look, what’s that?” Eve asked as another bird, a black and white thing with a long tail, swooped onto the feeder as well.

“Long tailed tit,” Elly whispered, then turned to Eve and breathed out a laugh. “Don’t even.” She gestured with a raised finger.

Eve was the epitome of innocence. “I didn’t say anything.”

They quietened, and Eve found herself relaxing as Elly leaned sideways against her, the leather of her jacket sending up a cloud of vintage scent. Leaning her head back against Eve’s arm, Elly turned her head to the side to continue watching the birds as they flicked between each hanging feeder, and poked their little beaks into the various types of food. Squabbles emerged, the tits vying for control over the sparrows, until a large and speckled starling flew into the foray and the smaller birds scattered.

Elly sighed deeply, her breath spiralling up into the chilly air. “I do wish they would get on. There’s enough food for all of them.”

“I expect they’re starting to nest,” Eve replied, furrowing her eyebrows. It felt like only yesterday that it was Christmas. *Time flies when you're mentally unwell.*

“Anyway.” Elly sat up again and turned to Eve, her expression affectionate. “How’re you feeling?”

Nodding, Eve turned her gaze around the garden, at the trees behind and to the right of them, the grass with various footprints in it, and the collection of chairs on the concrete by the doorway. “Not bad.”

“What techniques did Sam give you?”

Eve let out a long breath.

“You don’t have to talk about them if—”

“No that’s okay.” Eve leant forward and put her elbows on her knees. She studied the grass at her feet. “Mindfulness. Looking at things around you, listening to things, in the moment.” She turned her head to look at Elly. “That leather coat seems to be keeping me grounded.”

“Because it’s the ugliest thing you’ve ever seen?”

“Not at all.” Eve squinted through a smile. “It looks nice on you.” Heat crept over her cheeks and they both had to look away for a beat. “Actually, it’s the smell.”

“It smells?” Elly sounded horrified.

“Like old leather.”

“Oh God,” Elly hissed, pulling at the collar of the jacket. “I’m going to set light to it the first chance I get.”

“Don’t.” Eve placed her hand over Elly’s on her sternum. “I like the smell.” She pursed her lips and let out a small laugh. “It smells comforting.”

They both hummed in amusement and thoughtfulness. Then Elly clasped Eve’s fingers in her own,
squeezed, and let her go. “I’ve had it years.”

“It looks well-loved.”

“So, recognising smells, that’s a good way of grounding yourself,” Elly said, the smile lingering in her eyes.

Eve felt smug at that, that she’d made Elly smile. *She’s so pretty when she smiles.*

“What about the other senses?” Elly rubbed her fingertips, seemingly idly, over her own forearm under the sleeve of the jacket.

Eve watched her hand for a while, until she felt Elly’s own gaze on hers. “Maybe…strong mints or something?”

“That’s a good idea. I’ve never thought of that.”

A sudden rustling of the trees behind them. A squeak of a door as it opened. A flash of metal gurney. Eve’s whole body tensed and she screwed up her eyes as the uncalled-for memory suddenly took her over, unprecedented and unyielding. Wicklow, his smile evil and dangerous. Jake, his eyes black and full of fire. Aggression as he rammed the…

“I suppose we’d better move onto backs,” Eve heard Elly say through the haze of memory, and then she felt a warm hand against her spine, rubbing up and down. “I’m giving you a minute, then I’m getting staff.”

Eve blinked hard. Her eyes were open, but they didn’t seem to be connected with her brain. Wicklow was still swimming on front of her eyes. *Look at five things.* Okay so that wasn’t going to work. *Listen, feel.* She took a deep breath of cold air and allowed it to burn in her chest. “Talk,” she managed, reaching out blindly for Elly’s hand.

Warm fingers left her back and wrapped around her own. “Okay. What would you like me to talk about?”

Eve shook her head, the haze fading a little, then growing strong again. She gritted her teeth and groaned softly.

“Alright, don’t get your knickers in a twist.” There was worry in Elly’s voice, but there was also kindness, and some humour. *Normality. That’s what I need.* “They do a gardening group here, when it gets warm,” Elly said. “Maria leads it and last year we grew the biggest pumpkins I’ve ever seen. After they were as big as tin baths, we cut them off and carved them up. Nothing too scary, of course, and we had to put LED lights in them rather than real tea-lights, but they made Hallowe’en ever-so special.”

The mist dissipated a bit, and then stayed away. Eve could see her knees, and the grass past them. She could hear her own breathing, and noticed when it slowed. She could feel Elly’s thumb rubbing the back of her hand in little circles. She could smell the old leather of her coat.

“That’s it,” Elly whispered to her, moving her lips close to her cheek. “You’re doing really well.” She breathed out a small laugh through her nose. “Think about the nice warm cup of tea we’re going to have once we’ve frozen our bums off out here.”

Eve couldn’t help the snort that escaped her, and the mist cleared completely. She was left with just Elly’s smiling face breaking into a grin, right in front of her own.
“And she’s back in the room,” Elly breathed.

Eve pressed a hand to her chest and closed her eyes.

“I wonder what it is about being outside.” Elly squeezed her hand then let it go.

Eve opened her eyes again and looked around the garden, trying to notice things, and to remember things. Real things. Not things that were in that autopsy room. Not Wicklow’s evil eyes.

“I…I don’t know,” Eve replied, shivers beginning over her body. Elly’s hand against her spine again was a welcome comfort. She eyed Elly with affection. “So, you touch backs now?”

“We’ve skipped ahead somewhat.” Elly shot her an apologetic look. “Needs must, however.”

“Thank you.”

“Just so long as you’re alright.”

Eve nodded.

Glancing across the garden to the door, Elly raised her eyebrows. “How about that nice cup of tea?”

***

Jess, with her greasy hair, and Trisha, were sitting in the lounge when they had finished their evening meal that night. Eve looked exhausted after her morning psychology session, the flashback, and the cooking group they’d both attended in the afternoon. Spoils from the group were sitting on a plate in the dining room, having been mostly consumed during the evening. Cupcakes always went down very well on Kubler-Ross Ward.

Elly sat a little way away from Eve on the three seater sofa, which wasn’t as comfortable as Kate’s, but more comfortable than the hard wooden chairs in the tea-drinking area. She took a cushion from the corner and held it over her lap, bringing one slippered foot to the sofa, her knee raised.

Soap operas, something that Elly had never been interested in, were coming to a close. The news would be starting soon, and Elly looked forward to not only the drone of the newscaster talking about whatever was going on in the world, but the exit of their television companions, their usual evening programs finished.

As if on cue, Trisha, and then Jess, left the lounge in search of cocoa and their evening medications. Having already both had theirs, Eve and Elly stayed to watch the news. Elly glanced over as the credits began and noticed Eve staring into space. “You okay?” she asked as quietly as she could, not wanting to startle her.

Eve appeared to shake herself out of whatever thought she had been lost in, and turned to give Elly a very tiny smile. “Just…really tired.”

“We’ll go to bed in a bit.” They shared a shy look. Elly laughed. “You can go whenever you like, don’t wait for me.”

“It’s okay. Think I need to just wind down a bit first.”

“Those cakes were good.” Elly rubbed a hand over her belly.
“True. You bake well.”

“Maria did the majority of the work.”

“You did some great stirring.”

Elly reached over and poked Eve in the side, getting a wider smile in return. Patting the sofa next to her, she looked pointedly at the empty lounge. “I think we could risk sitting a little closer together, don’t you think?”

“So brazen,” Eve replied with a smirk, but complied, shifting so her thigh was pressed against Elly’s. They both watched the news as it began, and were quiet, the only parts of them touching were their legs.

As there was a break for the weather report, Eve turned back to Elly. “What was next on the list?”

“We did faces,” Elly replied, thinking hard. “Ignoring out little foray into back-touching, I think the next thing was ankles.”

“Ankles?” At Elly’s nod, Eve looked down, at Elly’s slippered foot which rested still on the sofa. “Okay.”

“Just be…” Elly trailed off.

“Did he…tie your ankles together?”

Elly nodded.

Eve hesitated for just a moment, but the fact that Elly didn’t drop her foot seemed to give her the confidence to reach out. She ran a fingertip along the small strip of skin above her sock, but below her trouser leg.

Elly’s toes curled in her slipper, but she forced herself to stay focused and relaxed. It’s okay, she’s not going to hurt you. She’s not going to tie you up, and she’s not going to force you to do anything you don’t want to. Taking a big breath in, she wiggled her shoulders to release them of tension.

“Okay?” Eve asked quietly.

“Mmmhm.” Elly’s lips parted as Eve’s finger and thumb circled her ankle, the pad of her thumb rubbing back and forth. She swallowed, the skin under Eve’s touch starting to tingle, and flexed her foot back and forth to loosen the muscles there.

When she lifted her eyes to Eve’s, she was very close to her. Eve’s eyes were dark in the dim light of the lounge. Those careful fingers trailed up a little, then down, rounding the bone of her ankle. Elly sucked her lip, and focused on breathing in and out, slowly.

Eve removed her hand with a soft tickle, and Elly felt the cool air rush back to her skin. She dropped her foot to the floor and smiled.

“How was that?”

“Okay.”

Eve’s gaze on her was so gentle and kind. “We’ll do wrists a different day. I can tell that was hard for you.”
Elly nodded, her heart quivering a bit. It felt safe in the dark lounge, and they were alone. *I could just kiss her and no-one would know.* Eve’s lips were pale pink and thin, but so inviting. *No. Stop it.* Elly pushed the thought from her mind. *She’s only been in hospital for a few weeks. It’s not fair on Eve.*

They turned back to the news, catching the last stories. They listened in silence, then by silent mutual agreement, stood and went back to their bedroom to get ready for bed.

***

Elly lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. Eve’s soft and even breaths drifted over from the other bed. The night staff had just completed their twelve o’clock checks, and Elly still wasn’t asleep. *Should have had a sleeping tablet. Damn. Too late now.*

Elly couldn’t stop thinking about Eve’s lips, and how perfect they had looked. How much she had wanted to kiss them. How much she had wanted to break their voiced agreement, smash through everything they had built within their friendship. Break the trust of the fragile woman sharing her bedroom. Just for one kiss.

*I didn’t though. I stopped myself.* She let out a breath. *Truth is, I’ve not felt desire for another person for so long, it scared me.* Stretching back against the mattress, Elly rolled onto her side to face the wall. Elly knew logically, that being attracted to Eve was okay, and that she should allow herself the feelings. There was nothing sordid or dirty about feeling desire for someone, especially when the feelings were returned.

She closed her eyes and her mind slid to Eve, to those dark eyes and lovely lips. Elly imagined pressing her lips against Eve’s, cupping her cheek, and closing her eyes against her soft cheek. *I know how her skin feels. I’ve put my hand on her almost every day since last week.* She had to admit that it had got a lot easier being touched there by Eve, and touching Eve in return. It felt good, and not just in a relieved way because she was finally getting over her phobia. *I like to touch her.*

A coil of warmth flooded her belly as she imagined being pressed against Eve, and she wished she’d pulled the curtains around her bed. The space between her legs, a space she hadn’t felt for years, seemed to awaken in a delicious ache. Elly pushed the heel of her hand against her pubic bone in an attempt to push the feelings away. *Great, now I’m horny and have no way of doing anything about it.*

She closed her eyes and her mind slid to Eve, to those dark eyes and lovely lips. Elly imagined pressing her lips against Eve’s, cupping her cheek, and closing her eyes against her soft cheek. *I know how her skin feels. I’ve put my hand on her almost every day since last week.* She had to admit that it had got a lot easier being touched there by Eve, and touching Eve in return. It felt good, and not just in a relieved way because she was finally getting over her phobia. *I like to touch her.*

A moment later, cries from the other bed had her out of her covers and onto her feet in half a second. It was familiar now, getting up and going to Eve when she had a nightmare, and Elly didn’t think twice before kneeling down beside her and taking her hands.

Instead of opening her eyes and calming, like usual, Eve gripped her hands tighter and pulled, in a seemingly automatic response. Elly was used to being pushed away, but not pulled towards her roommate, and therefore wasn’t prepared. She fell forwards, nearly cracking her forehead against Eve’s.
Her squeak must have woken Eve properly, or perhaps it was the body landing half on top of her. Eve’s hands were immediately against Elly’s shoulders. Elly scrabbled on the bed to push up on her elbows and looked down at Eve, her whole torso pressed against Eve’s with the blankets between them.

Eve’s eyes were wet as she looked up at her in the darkness. She reached up slowly and touched Elly’s face, her gaze full of terror. Then she pressed against Elly’s back, causing Elly to lie against her shoulder.

Elly shifted to one side, her hip now against the bed rather than being pressed wonderfully against Eve’s, and allowed Eve to hold her. She felt the tension in her own body easing as the warmth from Eve’s bedclothes and body seeped through to her. Elly tried not to inhale too deeply, tried not to allow Eve’s smell permeate her senses, but they were just too close. Eve smelt of sleep and herbs and cake and Elly couldn’t help herself.

Her body took over as she pressed her face into Eve’s neck, nuzzling her and relishing the soft skin she found.

Eve didn’t seem to mind—the heart thudding underneath Elly was still fast. She’d obviously been knocked for six by the nightmare. Eve’s hands grasped her pyjamas at the shoulder and back, her head turning a little so that she could press her cheek against Elly’s forehead.

Bile rose up in Elly’s throat as the realisation of what they were doing surged through her. She sat up quickly and wrapped her arms around herself, swallowing to force the feelings away.

Eve sat up slowly too, her eyebrows furrowed and her face forlorn. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say that,” Elly whispered, her voice cracking with tears.

“I’m sorry you feel scared,” Eve corrected herself, reaching out a hand.

“Holding you was not part of the plan. Not for at least another week.” Elly was shaking and rubbed her own arms with numb hands.

“I shouldn’t have done that, not without checking it was okay.”

“You had a nightmare.”

“I did it without thinking.”

Elly looked over from where she was kneeling, her backside next to Eve’s knees. “Was it worse than usual?” Her arms dropped from around her middle as she looked at Eve in the dark.

A shiver went through Eve’s body and Elly wondered if she had felt just as scared. Eve blinked rapidly, as if trying to shoo away the feelings left by her nightmare. “It was worse, yes.”

“Tell me.”

There was a pause and Eve shrunk back a little, away from Elly.

Tucking her hair behind her ear, Elly shifted up the bed and sat by Eve’s waist. She placed a palm against her shoulder and smiled at the softness of the cotton T-shirt Eve wore. She removed her hand, but only to lay it against Eve’s cheek. “It’s alright.” Her words were like a puff of a breeze into the silent room.
“You were there.”

Elly stroked Eve’s cheekbone with her thumb.

“Wicklow had you.”

“Oh God, how awful.” Elly took Eve’s hand with her free one and squeezed her fingers.

A huge shudder went through Eve, and Elly sighed out a large breath, before stretching out against Eve’s side again and wrapping an arm about her waist. Eve tucked her underneath her chin and cuddled her close. “But it’s not next in your list,” she grumbled quietly.

“This is for you, not for me.” Elly squeezed Eve through the blankets. “For once, let me do something that makes you feel better.”

“You do that just fine every night I wake up.”

Elly snuggled her nose against Eve’s neck. “I know. But the level of comfort I provide is directly proportionate to the scariness of the dream.”

“Is that so?” Some of the spark was returning to Eve’s voice, and Elly was glad.

“That’s right,” Elly murmured, squeezing Eve again and pressing her face into the cotton neck of her T-shirt.

“I think I’m okay now. No more comfort needed.”

They didn’t move, but Elly shivered. Eve pushed her away and held the covers open for her. Elly climbed underneath them, pushing her socked feet down towards the bottom of the bed. She stared at Eve for a moment, before settling down on the pillow beside her. Their noses brushed and Elly shivered again, but not with cold. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes before one a.m. checks.”

“I expect there’d be a big fuss. Two female patients canoodling.”

Elly snorted a laugh. “Canoodling? It’s hardly that.”

“You’re in my bed,” Eve hissed.

“I know that,” Elly replied in the same teasing tone. They quietened.

Eve rolled onto her side to face her. “Just a few more minutes then.”

Elly nodded and turned her head to the ceiling as Eve moved close to her, wrapping her up in her arms.

She smells so good. And she feels so warm. Years of sleeping alone in a cold empty house, and then months of sleeping alone in a single, slightly-uncomfortable hospital bed, made sharing one seem so strange, but at the same time, so wonderful. It was cozy and safe and surreally childlike, as if they were six year sold and out camping together, and there were scary noises and they just needed each other.

Elly’s earlier arousal threatened to taint the peaceful moment, but she pushed the feelings away and concentrated on Eve’s arms around her, and the soft hair that brushed her own cheek. She focused on Eve’s slow even breaths, the steady and calm heartbeat against her own ribs. She focused on her warm body.
When Eve’s hand began a careful caress by her shoulder, Elly pushed up and away with a soft chuckle. She slid out of Eve’s bed but made sure to catch her eye and smile warmly at her. “It’s nearly time they were round.”

“Okay.” Eve stretched in bed and gathered the blankets about herself, snuggling against her pillow.

Elly chuckled again and shuffled back to her own bed. She crawled in and wrapped herself in the blankets too, grinning over at Eve. “Is it wrong to admit that I liked that?” she whispered as keys turning in windows could be heard from down the corridor.

“I liked it too. You’re a good cuddler.”

Elly refrained from making a joke about being good at other things, and blinked her eyes contentedly. Who’d have thought I’d enjoy climbing into bed with someone. But Eve felt so safe and warm, even with the hurdles they were clearing together, and however fast those hurdles were being jumped over.

They smiled at one another in the darkness and Elly watched as Eve’s eyelids lowered, and she drifted off to sleep. She closed her own eyes then, and settled in the restful memory of being in Eve’s arms.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Decisions are made and Elly moves out.

A few nights later, Elly was getting the hang of having Eve touch her ankles. They were both sitting on Elly’s bed, Eve with a magazine—something dreadfully popular but with a few good articles in it—and Elly was playing on her Gameboy. Elly sat against the head of the bed, and Eve sat sideways, her feet at the edge of the mattress, her right hand idly caressing Elly’s skin at the top of her sock.

When she hit a particularly ticklish spot Elly snorted and curled her toes. The look Eve shot her was mischievous, but when her fingers returned, she stayed clear of the area that had made Elly squirm.

It was relaxing, just sitting together and focussing on their things, but also being touched so affectionately. Elly tried to concentrate on her game, on killing the rogue Pokémon with her weasel-like Quilava, but Eve’s fingers were starting to distract her more than her brain could quite manage. She reached down and gave a nervous chuckle, before taking Eve’s hand in her own.

“Let me touch you for a while?” she whispered, feeling her cheeks heat up at the implication of her words. It’s not like she’s not aware you’re attracted to her.

“Oh, okay.” Eve smiled at her and turned a little against the pillow she’d taken from her own bed to plump behind her back. She stuck her foot out and revealed a pale blue fluffy sock and the edge of a pair of leggings. Wiggling her toes comically, she placed her foot by Elly’s hip. “No tickling, though.”

“Of course not,” Elly said. “I’ll be tickling just as much as you tickled me.”

Eve’s eyebrow disappeared under her fringe.

Elly went back to her game and played with one hand, whilst brushing the backs of the fingers of the other against Eve’s skin. Her leg was soft and warm, and Elly lost all notion of what was going on in the game, deciding instead to draw patterns on Eve’s skin with her fingertips. First, she spelled Eve’s name, then her own, and felt a little like she was branding Eve as her own. Which is ridiculous. We don’t belong to one another. So she caressed the words from her skin, and then drew little hearts and circles and flowers around her ankle.

A small hum of approval rumbled from Eve’s chest and when she caught her eye, Eve pushed her shoulders up in contentment. “That’s nice.”

Chuckling, Elly rolled her eyes. “When did a thing that was supposed to help me become something that you enjoyed?”

“No,” Eve replied softly, but didn’t move away, and Elly continued her light caresses, without any presumption that it was about being therapeutic anymore. She likes it, I like doing it, where’s the harm?

A sharp scream and a shout from outside their bedroom made them both tense and Elly’s hand fell away. They sat up straight and peered out of the window in their door. The window was too small,
however, and they were both too low down on the bed to see anything.

Elly stood and crept to the door with Eve close behind her. It was dark on the ward; the nursing staff often turned as many lights off as they could around eleven o’clock to make sure everyone got a good night sleep. Pulling the door open a crack, they both peered outside. Elly could feel Eve against her back, and then felt a hand at her hip.

The young woman with dark greasy hair, Jess, was cowering against the corridor wall, and a young health care assistant, Daniella, had a hand out but wasn’t touching her. “It’s okay, you’re safe,” Daniella kept saying, and eventually Jess calmed down enough to speak normally.

“He was there. He had me. I couldn’t get away.”

“Your dad?” Daniella was making very sure her voice was low, but, hidden by the darkness of the corridor, Eve and Elly could both hear but couldn’t be seen by either.

“Yeah.” Jess put her hands to her face, her shoulders shaking.

A small noise of affection and sympathy escaped Eve, but too quiet for Jess or Daniella to hear. Elly pressed backwards and Eve’s hand on her hip squeezed her over her pyjamas.

“He wouldn’t let me go.”

“It’s okay now.”

“When will they stop? These…nightmares?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.” Daniella seemed a little lost, but then straightened and held out a hand towards the clinic. “What about we go find James? Would you like some PRN?”

“Yeah,” Jess replied from between her fingers. “Okay.”

“And then we’ll have a quick chat, okay?”

Elly watched Jess and Daniella walk away and through the double doors that led out from the female wing onto the main ward.

“Oh poor darling,” Elly said, the bedroom door closing at a soft push. Eve remained against her back, even when Elly turned around. She was a step away from the door and found she didn’t feel contained or trapped. She smiled up at Eve and waited for her to move away, which she did. The loss of her felt cold, but Elly pushed the feeling away. “She was abused by her dad.” A shiver passed through her, at the implications of such a thing, of how the girl must feel because of it. **How could someone hurt their daughter?**

“Terrible,” Eve said, shaking her head slowly.

*I suppose she’s seen more than me in that department. I’m only used to jilted husbands and bored housewives.* “And she hasn’t had a nightmare in weeks. Since way before you got admitted.”

“Poor Jess. Even if she is a pain in the bum I do feel a bit sorry for her.”

“She’s so young. She shouldn’t be in hospital.” They both mulled over their thoughts for a while, before Elly inhaled deeply and went to her bed to pick up her Gameboy. “I’m not sure I want to play anymore.” When she looked up, there was something disappointed in the depths of Eve’s eyes, and Elly immediately stood and moved towards her. “I meant the Pokémon.”
“I suppose we ought to settle down,” Eve said, walking past Elly to grab her discarded magazine before climbing into her own bed.

“We should. Big day tomorrow.”

“I hate patient care review.”

“At least you don’t have a CPA. Your meeting will be about meds and your progress. Mine will be about discharge and getting better and going home.”

“This is true.” Eve lay down on her side and pulled her bear to hold it close to her nose. “Would you like the teddy to help you sleep?”

“I’m okay, thank you.”

They exchanged sleepy smiles and Elly went to her own bed, before switching off the main light and climbing in. She stuck her hands out of the covers, pulled her knees comfortably up so she was curled up into a ball, and closed her eyes.

“Good night, Eve.”

“Good night, Elly.”

***

Eve waited anxiously outside the nursing office after knocking as politely as she could without being ignored. Elly had been in her CPA, a meeting held every so often to determine the next steps in a patient’s treatment and recovery, for nearly an hour and Eve was feeling anxious.

What if they send her home without being able to say goodbye? What if I’m eating lunch and she leaves and I never see her again?

She stopped her brain from delving into dangerous territory. Elly was not Eve’s mother, or her minder, or her responsible adult. Eve could live very well without Elly, and had done for over forty years. They did not need one another, and, Eve realised, to need someone like that would be detrimental.

I love to touch her though, and I do like being around her. She’s very helpful when I have a nightmare.

Rachael opened the door to the nursing office and Eve was almost surprised, realising she’d been lost in her thoughts for several seconds. “Oh, sorry,” Eve said, and then cleared her through. “I’m sorry. I’ve spilt coffee on my pillow case and wondered whether I could have a new one?” She held up the pillow case, which had a pale brown stain on it, and was wet with water too where she’d tried to rinse it off in the bedroom sink. “Sorry,” Eve said again, but snapped her mouth closed.

“That’s okay. I drop things all the time.”

Rachael came out of the office and led Eve to the laundry cupboard, which was locked with a key on the bunch she carried. She unlocked the cupboard and rummaged around a bit in the mess that was the interior, before handing Eve a new, pressed pillowcase. “Here.” They swapped them over and chuckled at the exchange. “Anything else?”

“I was wondering, actually, whether Elly was finished in her CPA yet?”
“The official meeting actually finished a few minutes ago,” Rachael explained gently. “She’s in the meeting room with her doctor and her friend Kate, just finalising things.”

Eve heartbeat quickened and her hands started to shake just as much as they had when she’d dropped the coffee. “Oh.”

“Don’t worry,” Rachael said, locking the cupboard back up and carrying the sodden pillowcase towards the sluice, a room that held rubbish and things to be cleaned. “She’ll be out in a bit, and then she can tell you all about it, if she wants to.”

Eve just nodded. She walked down to the dining room, as it was lunchtime and semi-delicious food smells were wafting down and making her stomach rumble. It felt like Elly had been gone for hours. They always ate together, and it was strange to sit at a table where other people were sitting who weren’t the smiling brunette.

Even so, Eve sat, and she ate shepherd’s pie and even engaged in some general conversation. The food was good, and the plentiful gravy made it all the tastier. Eve added extra pepper and relished in the spice on her tongue.

Once her plate was scraped, and Bill had finished telling her about the gnomes that used to visit him in his garden every day, she stood to collect some pudding. Her entire body lit up when Elly walked through the dining room door, but her heart dropped when she saw the redness of Elly’s eyes, and the puffiness of her face. Dropping her plate off with the kitchen staff, she moved to Elly’s side as she stepped up to order her own food.

“You alright?”

“Let me eat first,” Elly said quietly, and there was a note of annoyance in her tone.

Eve stepped away from her, took a bowl of bread-and-butter pudding from the server and ladled custard onto it, before waiting for Elly to have her own plate filled, and indicating the table she’d been sitting at with Bill.

Bill stood, his chair scraping noisily back. Elly noticeably winced, but sent Bill a smile as she sat down and did not move away when Eve sat close to her.

Eve wasn’t sure what to say, but recognised Elly’s wish to be left alone when it came to details about her meeting. Elly’s fingers trembled as she lifted her fork, and she took the smallest amount of food onto the prongs of it before daintily putting the fork into her mouth.

Recognising, also, Elly’s anxiety, and wishing to alleviate it however she could, Eve ate slowly too, and tried to shrug off her own nervousness. “Bill was telling me all about his gnomes.”

Elly looked over at Eve and her smile made its way to her watery eyes. “He has been here nearly as long as me, you know. I think that’s my favourite story.”

“I’d love to have gnomes in my garden,” Eve said, and watched as Elly started to make larger mouthfuls to pop into her mouth. “They sound fabulous, very funny, great company.”

“I especially like the way they move things because of…what is it?”

“Umm…auras.”

“Auras, that’s right.” Elly hummed out a laugh and glanced down at her plate. She noticed herself at the mouthfuls she was managing. Her eyes flicked up to Eve’s half-apologetic, half-appreciative.
“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

They ate in silence and Elly seemed much more relaxed, which Eve was very grateful for. *That’s good. It can’t be terrible news then.*

Once they were finished, and had left the dining room, they made their way down to the female wing. Before they got to the door, Elly stopped and just looked at it for a while, blinking slowly. Then she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and strode purposefully in through the door that she swung open.

She sat on her bed. Eve sat next to her, but intentionally made sure there was a couple of feet between them. She wanted to give Elly some space and respect that she felt worried at the moment.

“So, my discharge date is set.”

“That’s…good?”

“I suppose it is,” Elly replied with a large sigh. “I just…” Tears gathered in her eyes and Eve recognised fear rather than misery.

She shifted an inch closer and her hands itched to reach out, but she refrained from doing so. “Are you scared?” Eve asked.

Elly nodded, sniffling a bit. Her big brown eyes were glistening. “I’ve been here for months. I’m not sure…how…”

“How you’ll cope?”

Elly nodded.

“You seem…and correct me if I’m wrong…like you’re strong, and a fighter. And like you’ve always been someone who can take care of themselves.”

Grabbing a tissue from her bedside table, Elly wiped her eyes and then her nose. “I feel like a child, sometimes. I’ve been looked after for ages now, and I’m…I’m not sure I can do it.”

“What’s the plan?”

“My discharge date is March the first. I’m going home for a couple of nights prior to that, to see how I fair. Which will be fine, because I’ll be with Kate. But I’ll be in a bedroom by myself.” She swallowed and her face crumpled.

Eve couldn’t help it—she reached towards Elly and after coaxing a nod of affirmation form her, she slide her arm around her shoulders. Elly sagged against her and Eve’s stomach ached in relief. She pressed her nose into Elly’s thick dark hair and squeezed her.

“That’ll be scary for you?”

“Mnhmm. But they want me to move out of here…” She looked towards the door with wide eyes, and then pressed her own face into Eve’s shoulder. “And I…like being in here with you. I know it’s really silly to think that but…”

“It’s not silly. Not silly at all.” Eve rounded her fingers around Elly’s shoulder, rubbing in a back-and-forth motion. “I get why they’re doing it, but it does seem a bit unfair.”
“Unfair,” Elly echoed, her tears beginning to dry now that she apparently felt supported by someone who felt the same.

“I mean, who else will want to share with little old me?” Eve asked, her free hand slipping into Elly’s.

Elly chuckled through her tears and pressed her lips to Eve’s neck. Eve noticed that she didn’t kiss her, just pressed those two areas of skin against one another. Elly inhaled a bit and then hummed, her breath tickling Eve’s neck.

Finally, Elly pulled back and smiled at Eve, the tissue coming up again to wipe at her face. Eve kept her arm around Elly’s shoulders and continued to smooth her thumb back and forth. The wool of her jumper was scratchy but warm. The jumper was big enough, Eve reckoned, for them both to fit inside.

The image of Elly and her pressed together and warm inside a big woollen sleeping bag stirred feelings inside Eve that she almost did recognise.

“You’re a great roommate,” Elly said, coughing slightly at the tears still gurgling within her throat.

“Where will you go?” Eve asked, deciding that a logical approach might be sensible, perhaps would take the emotion from the situation and help Elly to think more calmly.

“Well, there isn’t a free bed at the moment, so they’re going to swap me with Jess.”

“Jess?”

Elly nodded. “She needs someone close by, a bit like you did when you first got here.” She snuggled her body into Eve’s side but kept her head up so they could look properly at one another. “She’s having some problems. More so than usual.”

“Fair enough,” Eve whispered and was pleased when Elly nodded.

“There’s more. Actually.”

“Okay.” Eve squeezed Elly again and Elly smiled.

“This was more my decision, than the team’s. I think it’s best.” Elly took a deep breath and then nodded, as if to herself. “I need to stop relying on you for things.”

Eve frowned. “You don’t rely on me.”

“Oh, I do.” Elly blushed and smiled. “The touching thing, it’s been working really well, but…look as us now.” She chuckled. “You’re comforting me like it’s second nature. Without even asking.”

“I’m sorry,” Eve said and tried to pull away, but Elly held onto her.

“No, I mean, I like it. And I think that’s probably the problem.” Elly looked into space for a while and Eve gave her time to think. “I like you. I really like you. We haven’t…kissed or anything, but I feel like we rely on one another for emotional support, which is…it’s brilliant and I feel so cared for.” She looked back at Eve and smiled again. She lifted a hand and caressed Eve’s cheek with the back of her fingers. “You make me feel, dare I say it, loved, and what I should really be doing is working hard on loving myself.”

They grinned at one another and Elly tapped Eve on the arm, a mini-smack.
“You know exactly what I mean Doctor Granger, so don’t give me that look.”

“Okay, okay.” Serenity fell between them and Eve squeezed Elly once before letting her go. This time, Elly allowed her to.

“So, I discussed it with Rach and Kate and…they all agree. I need to stop relying on you. And, actually, you could do with stopping relying on me as well.”

“That’s true,” Eve replied, but a churning began in her gut anyway, like tumble drier full of clothes. “I’m sorry if I’ve—”

“No,” Elly cut in. “You haven’t been a pain, I promise.” Their eyes locked again and Eve thought she could see something tender in Elly’s eyes, something intense. It drew her in and she didn’t want to look away. “It’s been very nice having someone else to think about other than myself.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Eve whispered, but set her jaw and straightened her back. “But it’s fine. We’ll see each other in the day.” She bit her lip, a shiver going through her. “I suppose I need to start getting used to my nightmares by myself.”

“Or with the nursing staff. You can ask them for help. I’m sure they’re way more qualified than I am. Much better at handling…” Elly shrugged.

“I feel loved too,” Eve said quietly and Elly’s face shone as she smiled. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course. I would hope that I…make you feel like that.”

It wasn’t an admission, not really, but Eve’s insides quietened and her thoughts simmered down. She felt safe in the knowledge that she made Elly feel like that. She felt worthy of her time, and worthy of her attention. It’ll be okay. We shall live. And it’ll be better for both of us if we take a step back from one another for a while.

“So, the touching plan?” Eve considered Elly carefully.

“I’d love to continue with it, but I feel like we’re at a juncture. Like if we went much further…we might go too far.”

“Yeah,” Eve replied, nodding.

“Okay then. Maybe we’ll see how things go and perhaps if you’re discharged soon, we can meet up for a coffee or whatever and…” She trailed off and looked down at the floor.

“Do you think I’m going let you get away once you’re discharged?” Eve cocked an eyebrow at her. “It’s not going to happen.”

“You’ve got another week to get sick of me.” There was a glint of worry in Elly’s eyes, despite her mask of bravado.

Eve rubbed Elly’s shoulder. “No chance.”

They smiled at each other, and Elly tucked her socked foot behind Eve’s, her instep smoothing up and down her ankle.

“It’ll be okay,” Eve said, and her voice displayed her confidence.

Elly nodded and laid her head against Eve’s shoulder.
Elly moved out that afternoon, and the bed-space was cleaned by nursing staff, who wore gloves and plastic aprons. Jess moved in shortly afterwards, once the bed was remade and the surfaces were dry from the wipes they had used. Her head hung low, her hair in front of her face, and she couldn’t meet Eve’s eye. *That’s okay. She’ll get used to me.*

Eve went to see Elly in her new bedroom. The room was like a smaller version of their shared room, with a sink, wardrobe, bedside table and bed. Elly was sitting on her bed, looking out of her new window, with a wrinkled nose. “I’m not sure I like this view very much.”

Eve sat near her and looked outside. “It’s not that great,” she agreed, taking in the green fence and the people walking past on their way to the main hospital.

“I miss the birds already.” Elly smiled at her. “I miss you more.”

“Less of that, now.” Eve patted Elly’s hand and Elly grasped her fingers. Eve moved away and pulled her fingers free, but made sure she kept her gaze soft. “Come on, now.”

“Sorry,” Elly whispered, but then shook herself and looked drastically less upset. “Okay. Self-soothing. Let’s get a coffee.”

That afternoon, Eve’s mother and children visit. Eve brought out her finished pot and presented it, with red cheeks, to her mother, who took it with an unsure expression. The kids seemed much more enamoured by the pot and wished to have it for themselves, as their mother had made it, but Eve insisted. “It’s for Grandma, isn’t it?”

Both children sat politely on the low down seats, until Eve suggested they all go into the pool room and have a game. The kids raced into the other room and Robin set up the balls like he’d done it a hundred times. Eve wondered whether he had. They both attended an after school club in a youth centre, and there was a pool table there. Sometimes their father took them out for dinner to the local pub and there was a pool table there as well.

“You seem much better,” Annie said, as they watched the children play pool.

“I feel a bit better,” Eve admitted, her face pulling into a smile as Robin potted a ball and Claire applauded him. “I think the medication is having some effect now.”

“That’s good. Good.”

“This thing about not going home when I’m discharged…” Eve left the sentence unfinished so that her mother could answer the unspoken question.

“I think we need to discuss it with your doctor.”

Eve let out a breath and felt the tension in her stomach ease. *That’s good, that she’s admitted perhaps she might be wrong.* Eve watched her children and couldn’t imagine ever being a risk to them. “Okay,” she said. “That sounds like a plan.”

When Annie and Eve’s children left the ward, Eve was pleased to see Annie put the pot carefully into her handbag.

***

They began a countdown to Elly’s discharge. Nine days marked the morning after their first night
apart, and they met for coffee whilst the breakfast things were being laid out, in the dining room. Elly placed a hand on Eve’s arm and squeezed. “Alright?”

“Yeah. It was okay.”

Elly looked around before feeling satisfied that no other patients were close by. “How was Jess.”

“Okay. She woke once and shifted around a bit, but she didn’t seem frightened.” Eve sat at one of the tables after making them both a coffee and wrapped one hand around her own cup. She rested the other hand on the table.

Her gaze trained on Eve’s hand, Elly hesitated, before laying her own hand over Eve’s, just for a moment, before she withdrew. Their shared smile made warmth blossom through her body. They sipped at their coffee, and Elly just enjoyed being near Eve after so many hours apart.

“And, were you alright?” Elly asked after a few moments, realising she hadn’t even asked.

“I was fine. It was weird having someone else there, and with the knowledge that that person wasn’t…” Eve grinned and lowered her head towards Elly. “You know. Pretty. Sweet. Really good at chasing nightmares away.”

“Oh shush. I’m sure given the opportunity Jess would be a great nightmare chaser.”

Eve shook her head solemnly. “Not as good as you.”

“Did you have a nightmare?” Elly’s voice was affectionate as she calmed from their teasing.

“Yes,” Eve stated simply, but she was smiling and it was all Elly could do not to hug her. She seems like she’s not so scared of them anymore.

“Was it okay?”

“I woke up with a start, but I distracted myself with my mobile for a bit, and it seemed to work.” Eve smiled, proudly as she drank another mouthful of coffee. “I even used the five senses thing Sam taught me.”

“That’s brilliant. I’m pleased for you.”

The catering staff started to bring in freshly made toast and boiled eggs, so Eve and Elly stood and went to see what else was on offer.

***

Eve’s next psychology session was focussed on what had happened to her. She was asked to recall each event, describe how she had felt, and what she’d done. She cried, the memory of Jake stabbing Wicklow in that sterile room, with Wicklow’s blood dripping all over her neck, the main traumatic experience, as well as the way she and Jake had been manipulated by both Wicklow and his sister. Sam handed her some tissues and nodded slowly as she dabbed at her eyes. She felt exposed and vulnerable, and he gave her time to come back to herself.

“The purpose of telling me is to explore your memories of the event,” he explained, his legs crossed and his usual pad of paper on his knee. “You’ve done really well today, but I’d like for you to try drawing a picture that represents what happened, or writing it down. How do you feel about that?”

“I’ve never been much good at drawing. But I could try.”
“It doesn’t have to be Monet or anything,” he said, smiling. “It just has to represent your experience.” He patted his own thighs and gripped his pad of paper. “Right. Next week?”

She nodded and stood, following Sam down the corridor and smiling as he let her back onto the ward.

Elly was waiting for her. They deliberately did not touch as they walked together past the nursing office and to the tea-drinking area. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” Eve said, thickly. She pulled her fingers through her hair to comb it and discovered it was knotted from her hands nervously pulling at it.

Elly seemed to notice. “Come on,” she said, taking Eve’s arm and steering her towards the female wing, and into her single bedroom. She indicated Eve should sit on her bed and went to her sink to grab a hairbrush.

Facing back around to the front, Eve closed her eyes and forced her breathing to remain deep as Elly pulled the brush through her hair, her free hand tenderly stroking back each section that she brushed. When her hand drifted over Eve’s ear, Eve turned her cheek into the warm hand.

Elly’s hand lingered.

Eve kept her eyes closed and leaned further into Elly’s hand, relishing the warmth from her skin, and how her touch made her own skin tingle. A moment later, Eve pulled away and nodded, standing from her slumped position on the bed.

They grinned at each other.

“You having your own room doesn’t seem to stop us from having little moments, does it?” Eve asked, her hair swinging in front of her face. She pushed it back and found it smooth and all the knots having disappeared.

“True.”

A knock sounded from the door and it opened after a beat. Toby poked his head around and eyed Eve suspiciously. “You’re not supposed to be in each other’s rooms, guys.” His words were kind but firm.

Eve threw up her hands and gave Elly a smile. “Sorry. I’ll go.”

Elly skipped after her as she left the bedroom and they made their way down to the dining room for a coffee.

***

Seven days before Elly’s discharge, she planned on an overnight stay at Kate’s. “I suppose I’ll have to call it ‘home’ now,” Elly said, a sparkle of excitement in her belly.

“Kate’s going to be there, though?” Eve asked, anxiety evident in her expression.

Elly smiled tenderly at her. “Yes. The whole time I’m…home. And she’ll look after me.”

Eve shot her an unsure look and laughter bubbled up form Elly’s throat.

“It’s okay. Benji’s coming over for a curry too. And his girlfriend. So I won’t be alone.”
“Is it weird?” Eve asked, fingering the handle of her mug as they drank coffee in the female lounge. “Is it weird that I want to come with you?”

“Once you’re discharged, maybe you could come round for a curry too?” Elly suggested, a blush sweeping across her face. She looked down at her cup and her heart fluttered.

When she looked back up, Eve was smiling at her. “I’d like that.”

“Would you? I feel like I’m being awfully forward.”

“Pfft.” Eve’s hand swept through the air. “I think we’re both old and wise enough to make statements like that. Even if it’s just as friends.”

“Okay,” Elly agreed. “I’d like it too.”

Later, once Elly was packed and ready to go, and Kate was waiting for her in the carpark, she swung her bag over one shoulder and turned towards Rachael and Eve, both of whom had decided to see her off.

She shared a smile with Rachael, who beamed back at her, handed her a plastic packet containing her medications, and told her to be good.

Eve looked worried and kept glancing out of the big glass doors and into the car park.

“Will you stop being silly,” Elly insisted.

Eve shifted her feet around and rubbed the back of her neck.

“It’s alright.” Elly stepped up to her to give her a one-armed hug. She felt Eve melt into her and felt her own body moulding into Eve’s like they were supposed to be against one another like this. She pressed her nose into Eve’s hair by her ear and nuzzled her a tiny bit. “It’s okay. Text me, yeah?”

“Of course I will.” Eve’s arms came around her hesitantly, and squeezed her close. “And you do the same, yeah?”

“I will.”

She felt Eve’s cheek pressing against her own, and then Eve pulled back and stepped away. Her arms hung limply by her sides, and her eyes were down-cast.

As a last farewell, Elly reached and squeezed Eve’s arm. Eve looked up and nodded, then smiled.

“Be good, missus,” Rachael said, and Elly nodded, before Rachael lifted her fob to the door sensor, which caused it to unlock.

Elly pushed the door opened, and strode purposefully outside into the sunshine and the car that was waiting for her.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Eve deals with Elly being on leave, and Elly deals with not being on the ward for a night.

Please note the new tags...

Chapter eight

The ward had taken on a new meaning for Eve once Elly had walked out through those front doors. She felt exposed and alone, her heart pattering beneath her ribs uncomfortably. She considered her options, and sat with a coffee in the dining room to do so. Her hands gripped the mug tightly, her fingers burning a bit at the too-hot ceramic.

People entered and left the room: patients and nurses and HCAs and domestic staff. She watched them, her scarf bunched up around her chin, a comforting presence for her to sink her mouth and nose into.

*I don’t like being alone anymore. It scares me.* She lifted her head and gathered her strength. Okay then, if she wasn’t going to be by herself, she would have to locate someone to sit with until she felt better. Scanning the room, she noticed Jess hunched over a black notebook, a pen in her thin fingers, scribbling. She didn’t seem to want to be interrupted. *I’ll say hi to her later.*

Maggie, the HCA that both she and Elly felt was a mother figure, and not in a negative way, strode into the room. She took in the occupants and smiled at Eve.

Eve flicked her eyebrows up once, then twice, nodding towards the vacant seat next to her.

Moving to the chair, Maggie pulled it back and slid to sit on it. Her eyes crinkled as her smile deepened. “Hey Eve.”

“Hiya Maggie.”

“Done your teeth this morning?”

Eve snorted and rolled her eyes.

Maggie seemed pleased about that reaction and rubbed her hands together. “How are things today?”

Eve bit her lip, suddenly shy and unsure about divulging her feelings about Elly not being around to the older lady sitting at her table. Maggie had curly grey hair and a kind face, a glint in her eye, as if she knew things without having to ask. *Honesty. Best policy.*

“I’m missing Elly,” she said, staring into her coffee. She didn’t look up for a while, not until Maggie nudged her elbow with her own.

“I know you are.” The brown eyes were regarding her with quiet respect and Eve felt something uncoil in her stomach.
“I’m pleased for her. She’s come so far, from what I can gather. But we’ve been a bit…joined at the hip. And it’s odd not having her to chat to.”

“I expect she feels the same.”

Eve laughed and shook her head. “Oh no. I’m sure she’s having a great time. They’ve got Kate’s son round and they’re having a curry and a film, I think.”

“You’d be surprised. She really does seem to care about you too.”

Eve noticed there was no question put to her about her own feelings. Am I that transparent? She took a moment to sip from her coffee, allowing the bitter taste and warmth to calm her racing heart.

“Have you spoken about your feelings?”

Eve nodded, and smiled up at Maggie.

Maggie returned the smile, seemingly understanding that the outcome of that conversation had been good. “Good.”

“We’re not…” Eve glanced around, noting that there was no one too close to them. “We’re waiting until we’re both discharged. So it could be a while, but we both agree it’s the best thing to do.”

Nodding, Maggie leaned back comfortably in her chair. “Very sensible. I’ve seen relationships start in here, and it’s always difficult.”

“I can imagine.” Eve’s gaze flickered over to Jess for a beat, before she turned back to Maggie. “It’s a strange environment. Sort of like prison, but obviously not in a bad way. It’s contained, almost like its own little world by itself. I must admit,” she said thoughtfully, “I do sometimes forget there’s a world out there.”

“I get to go home after eight hours,” Maggie said, “and even I forget about the outside world sometimes.”

Eve sucked her bottom lip and jiggled her leg under the table. “I got some leave on Wednesday.”

“I know. Unescorted, one hour in the hospital grounds.”

Eve nodded. “I think I might take the liberty of using it, once I’ve finished my coffee.” She looked up at Maggie, her leg continuing to bounce. “Do you think that would be okay?”

“I don’t see why not. You’d better catch one of the staff nurses before you go. That’s the way it works. They have to do an assessment, make sure you’re okay to go.”

“Okay.”

Maggie stood and beamed at her. “I’m pleased you’re keeping yourself busy. She’ll be back before you know it.”

Once Eve had finished her drink, she made her way to the nursing office and spoke with the nurse in charge of the shift, Dawn, before grabbing a pair of shoes and her coat, and being let out of the ward.

It was a cold day. The wind scorched her face, causing her to pull her scarf up around her ears. She looked around the car park and noticed a path that led to the perimeter of the hospital.

Kubler-Ross Ward was set next to two older adults wards for mental health, but within the grounds
of the main general hospital. The large buildings splayed across the otherwise green and grassy area, having been built up to include various other departments over the years. Eve didn’t know the hospital well. She was an out of area patient, due to her circumstances, and had never been to the main hospital.

She started to walk, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her coat as she made her way along the path and beside a row of trees. She walked for a while, enjoying the new environment, and appreciating the small amount of freedom she had been given.

She came across a gate which led out of the grounds and into a small village. She stopped walking, staring through the gate and wondering what lay beyond. Maybe the village had a small shop. She had her purse with her and could buy something, anything, to bring back to the ward. Maybe some chocolate she couldn’t get from the little trolley the paper man brought round each weekday.

Then she remembered the piece of paper that set out the conditions of her section 17 leave. Her consultant had stated that her leave was to be taken inside the hospital grounds only. But no one would know. I have an entire hour to go wherever I like.

She took a step towards the gate, but stopped again. She thought of Elly, but then pushed her out of her mind. She was in hospital to get better, and would do so by following the rules. And she needed to get better for herself. Not for Elly. Not for her mother, or her children. If she broke the conditions of her leave, the only person she would be lying to, would be herself.

So she stepped back, and continued along the path, which led around to the front of the hospital. She could see the main road from here, the cars whizzing past and beeping occasionally. It was a little overwhelming, and Eve felt her palms becoming clammy. So she turned back the way she had come, and accepted that at least today, she would be going no further. It’s a good start though. Baby steps, it would have to be.

The noise of the traffic battered around her skull as she walked, making her hands shake. So she concentrated hard on the green of the grass she walked next to, the soft swish of the wind as it pulled at her hair, the feeling of the cold on her cheeks. She sniffed the air and took in the subtle petrol smell, and then the smell of nature as she approached her ward again, the fields stretching out behind it. She reached into her coat pocket and found a packet of strong mints, pulled one out and popped it into her mouth. The taste hit her like a smack, but she was grateful for it—it seemed to reboot her brain, reminding her of how safe she was.

She looked at the clock as she entered the ward again, the warmth seeping in through her winter coat and calming her further. She’d been out for thirty minutes. That’s something I could tell Elly. She’d be proud of me.

Smiling at the various nursing staff who regarded her with interest as she pulled off her coat, Eve moved down to her shared bedroom. Jess was lying curled up on her bed, and looked dead to the world. Eve watched her for a second and was pleased to see her ribs rising and falling steadily.

She sat quietly on her bed and pulled her teddy bear into her lap. She took out her phone and typed out a text.

Just took some leave by myself – are you impressed? X

She usually signed her texts to others with an ‘E’, but figured as she and Elly had the same initial, this would be purposeless. She settled on a single kiss and pressed ‘send’.

Not too much later, her phone buzzed gently and she smiled at the reply.
Good for you! I’m helping Kate do some housework. We’re talking about the company. She’s telling me about some of the jobs she’s done recently. X

Eve smiled at the returned kiss, pressed her phone to her chest for a moment, before texting Elly back.

I’m jealous. Jess is asleep, so not the best conversationalist right this second. X

Stretching out on her bed, Eve leaned back into her pillow and yawned. Her limbs were heavy and achy, and her brain seemed to be wanting to power down. Glancing over again at the sleeping young woman, the dark greasy hair that was spread over her own pillow, Eve rolled onto her side to get comfortable, before settling her phone next to her pillow, ready for a nap.

Unless she starts talking in her sleep, I think you’ll have to look elsewhere for intellectual stimulation. I’ll give you a ring tonight, after evening meds. That okay? X

Eve smiled sleepily and sighed.

That would be lovely. It’s not the same without having you to talk to. X

Not an outright admission of the way she felt, but Eve hoped it would be good enough. She didn’t want to put too much into texts, and especially when Elly was at home, enjoying herself so much. I’m so glad she’s coping, thriving, even.

The reply came.

I miss you too. Speak later. X

Warm tingles flooded Eve’s stomach and she couldn’t help grinning into her pillow. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, cuddling Henry the bear with both arms, and enjoying the feeling of his soft fur against her face. He still smelled a little like her son, all clean and soapy and familiar.

Allowing herself a nap, she drifted away and dreamed briefly about lying on a beach, the bear tucked beside her, and Elly with sunglasses and a big sunhat on, not far away. When Elly turned around and smiled at her, Eve jolted awake.

That’s the first dream I’ve had in weeks that didn’t involve violence or Wicklow.

She blinked rapidly and smiled. Things were beginning to look up. Hope sparkled in her chest, and she looked ahead, at whenever her discharge date would be. Wherever she went, whether it was home, or somewhere else, she would be okay.

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The curry was good, the naan bread fluffy, and the ice cream to finish was sweet and better than anything the NHS could have provided. Elly sunk into the wonderfully comfortable sofa in Kate’s living room—mine too, I suppose—and smiled over at the woman across from her in the armchair.

Benji and his girlfriend had stayed until just after ten, at which point they had hailed their goodbyes and had left them in a lamp-lit living room with the end of the news playing on the television. Elly hadn’t listened to the articles. She figured there would be time to do that once she was comfortable being in the house again.

Her rings and bracelets glinting gold in the low light, Elly sipped from her cup of tea and smiled over at her. “You seem okay. Am I wrong?”
“No, you’re right. Thank you.” Elly smiled back. *I hope Kate knows how appreciative I am of her support.* “But I am getting tired.”

“The nurses gave you a sleeper, didn’t they?”

Elly nodded, twisting the sleeve of her jumper between her fingers.

“Are you going to have one, or try without?”

“I think I’ll go up in a minute, if that’s okay.”

“Of course.”

“And try without at first. If I struggle, I’ll have a zopiclone. But I do hate them, and I refuse to come home…” They shared an affectionate smile. “I refuse to come home with them once I’m discharged.”

“Alright.” Kate pointed a slipper-clad toe towards the door. “Don’t wait for me, will you? Go up when you’re ready.”

“Okay.” Elly stood and went to her, laying a hand over Kate’s on the arm of her chair. “Today’s been lovely. You’ve made it lovely. You and Benji. Thank you.”

“The twins will be back for Easter. Then I’ll have a houseful.”

“I hope it’s not too much work for you.”

“We shall share it, oh dearest Elly.”

Grinning and nodding her acquiescence, Elly patted Kate’s hand before shuffling out of the living room and going upstairs.

Benji’s old room smelled of incense and air freshener. Elly knew it had formerly smelled of old socks and teenager in the years Benji had occupied the room, and she also knew Kate had cleaned it from top to bottom before she had arrived for her leave. It would be her bedroom, for the foreseeable future, at least until Elly found her feet.

Elly couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. Kate was like a sister to her, and she could never see herself living with a romantic partner. She couldn’t see herself with a romantic partner, period, except perhaps Eve. Eve, who took her as she was, hadn’t known her before, hadn’t known her at her worst, but knew her worst had happened. And she still wanted to stick around.

She glanced down at her phone and saw she had a text from Eve. Filling a glass full of water in the main bathroom, she sat on her bed (a double, what luxury) and took her nighttime medications, wrinkling her nose at the box containing a single zopiclone tablet. *I don’t need that, not just yet.* She was in a comfortable house, with the occasional creak or groan, but she was safe. Kate had locked the door, and the front door was solid wood and strong. *No one will be coming through that tonight.* She nodded once, before tucking the zopiclone into her handbag.

Eve had texted, saying she was ready for their phone call, if Elly still wanted to chat. *In what world does she think I don’t want to talk to her?* Elly called her the minute she was in her pyjamas, planning on brushing her teeth afterwards, and then settling into bed.

Eve picked up after a second or two. “Hiya.”
“Hey stranger,” Elly said, relief and happiness tingling through her at Eve’s voice.

“How has it been?”

“Okay. Very nice actually. The film was a hoot. And the curry: divine.”

“Glad to hear. How is Kate?”

“I think she’s pleased I’m here, if only for one night.”

“I bet she gets lonely in that big house, especially with her kids at university and all grown up.” A sigh. “I can’t imagine my two leaving.” A pause and Elly got the feeling Eve felt sad.

“Oh, hey. It’s what happens. Kids grow up. And you’ll be there to see it happen.”

“I have a feeling you’re right. My mother seemed a lot more into the idea last time we spoke.”

“You said. It’s wonderful news. She can’t expect you to be poorly forever, can she?”

“No.”

Elly pulled her knees up and stroked the cotton of her pyjamas bottoms where they pulled tight over her knee. “Anyway, how has the ward been?”

“Fine. Like I said, I went on leave. Only thirty minutes, but it felt really good to have a walk, on my own, with no one to tell me when to be back.”

“It’s all part of getting you ready to go home. I expect you’ll be off your section soon too.”

“Do you reckon?”

Elly grinned. “Course. You’re so much happier since you first got admitted.”

“I am,” Eve agreed.

Elly wanted to hug her. “And then we’ll go out for that coffee we keep talking about.”

Another silence. “I miss you,” she whispered, almost too quietly for Elly to hear.

“I miss you too,” Elly replied, equally as quietly. “But it’s okay. We can cope. We should get used to it. I can’t always rely on you. It’s not healthy.”

“I know. I actually felt really good without you here today. Apart from the missing-you part. It felt a bit sort of…sort of scary but good. Am I making myself clear?”

Elly hummed out a chuckle and pressed the phone to her ear, her eyes closing. “Yes, I know what you mean.”

“I’ve been chatting with people. Maggie came to sit with me for a bit and she said that she’s seen people have relationships on the ward before, and it doesn’t usually end well.”

“Yet another reason to wait until we’re both out of that place. It’s lovely, and it’s been so helpful for me, obviously, but I am anxious to get back to real life.”

Eve chuckled. “Me too.”

“What do you think you’ll do?” Elly asked. “When you’re home? Now that the police have decided
you’re no longer D.S. material?” She spoke with malice and with sarcasm. *I hate that they’ve just dropped her like that. Thrown her away like dishwater. She’s so good and so sweet and she doesn’t deserve it.* Anger rolled inside her, but she pushed it away, tried to focus on the practicalities of it all.

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I should work for a while. I expect I’ll be claiming benefits.”

“My care coordinator already has my application in for benefits. It seems very odd to be getting free money. I want to work, but I also don’t want to do too much at once. I’ve been in hospital for ages.”

“I understand. And I agree. I’ve been in the police my whole life. It will be strange not working. But necessary, I suppose.”

“I’ll start working with Kate when I feel ready. It’s a good business, and it still works well. It always worked before my admission. We kept each other going if we had a frustrating case, or if a client was being a pain.”

“Sounds perfect. Maybe I could work for you once I’m out.”

The silence stretched between them like a rubber band, and Elly felt like it was about to snap as she reached for her glass of water and took a long gulp.

“Oh. I mean. I was just joking.” Eve sounded panicky, and Elly’s heart lurched.

“That’s okay. Let’s just see how things go, hmm? See how everything pans out.”

A huge sigh of relief rumbled through Elly’s phone. “Okay. Well, you know, keep me in mind. I have the experience.”

“I’ll keep your CV right at the top of the pile.” The atmosphere broken, Elly smiled and relaxed back into her pillows. “So, how is everyone? Am I missing anything?”

“Jess isn’t great,” Eve said quietly, and Elly wondered if Jess was actually in the bedroom. “She’s sleeping a lot. Rachael’s just managed to get her in the bath. She’s standing outside the door and chatting with her to stop her doing anything silly.”

“Oh poor love,” Elly sighed. “I hope she feels better in the morning.”

“I’m keeping an eye.” Eve cleared her throat. “She’s back. Jess, it’s Elly. She says hi.”

The young women didn’t appear to respond.

“She says hi back. Well, I think she would if she didn’t have a towel over her head.”

Elly chuckled softly and sighed. “Well, I suppose it’s time to go to bed.”

“I’m already here.”

“Me too.” The image of Eve settled down in her single bed made Elly smile, and the urge to go collect her and bring her back to Kate’s house so she could curl around her in her new and improved double bed made her breath hitch.

“Good. Hope you sleep well, Elly.”

“Good night darling.”

“Night.”
Elly didn’t want to hang up, not really. She felt like staying on the phone all night and just having Eve close if only in an audible way. But she didn’t. She pressed the infuriating red button on her phone and stood up to go clean her teeth.

After lying in the big bed and fidgeting for half an hour, she decided to sit up and play on her Gameboy for a while. Kate’s house was homely and lovely but it sounded so different to the ward. It was quiet and loud at the same time. And the bedroom had things in it, cluttering up the space and the surfaces. Pretty things, ornaments and candles and things that smelt lovely, but still things. All over the place. Her bedroom on the ward was sparse. She simply wasn’t used to it.

So she fought Pokémon for a while, but quickly began tiring of it, her eyes drooping so that she found it difficult to play. Hoping she could finally fall into a sleep, she put the console away and lay curled up, her hands sticking out of the duvet as usual. She stared at the crack in the curtains for a while, before getting up to pull them fully closed. Climbing back into bed, she inhaled deeply, feeling her body sink comfortably into the mattress with the exhale.

_Come on, old girl, time to go to sleep._

But sleep didn’t seem to want to come. She squirmed in bed, getting the duvet tangled in her legs for a moment and feeling her heart rate pick up momentarily whilst she sorted out the problem, before forcing her body to relax again.

_Perhaps some self-soothing._

Elly lay on her side, knees drawn up, and held out a bare arm to the cool air of the bedroom. She trailed her fingertips against the skin of her forearm, closing her eyes with the familiar and comforting feelings that caused. She continued to tickle her skin for a while, and her brain seemed to settle a bit more, floating in a place somewhere close to sleep but not sinking right beneath it.

Her mind wandered. She thought of Eve, those dark eyes and the way she squinted when she was thinking seriously about something. The thin mouth and those lips Elly had thought once or twice about kissing. Her body tingled as she remembered falling on top of Eve the week before, the way Eve had pulled her close and how her lips had felt against her forehead.

Elly squirmed but for a completely different reason. She pushed the heel of her hand against her pubic bone to push away the feelings but then remembered where she was.

_I’m at home. I’m in my own bedroom. Kate won’t check on me unless I ask her to. There are no hourly checks, no nursing staff walking the corridors. I won’t be disturbed._

Still, she felt uncomfortable about it. Kate wasn’t too far away; she’d heard her ascending the stairs a few minutes ago and going to bed. And it didn’t feel like her bedroom, not just yet. She didn’t really live here yet.

She’d read an article recently, on her phone, about how beneficial masturbation was for sleep. And for various other things too, including one’s mental health. Elly pulled her bottom lip into her mouth and eyed the bedroom door. Could she? Should she?

_I’m a grown woman, for goodness sake. It’d be better than taking a sleeping tablet, wouldn’t it?_ 

Not having done it for a good nine months, Elly wasn’t sure. If memory served, she’d partaken in a little self-pleasure every now and then, before her admission, and had enjoyed it very much. Even when she’d been battling with her memories, during the aftermath of her kidnapping, it had been a time for distraction and release.
The nine months she’d been in hospital had been difficult for her, because of her inability to do anything about her libido. Not that she’d really wanted to, or even had a libido, not at the beginning. Her mind was too taken up with distress and flashbacks, and being pumped full of medication that didn’t work yet. But recently, and especially since Eve had come into her life, something had fired up inside her, turning a key, and roaring into life.

She settled on her back and rubbed at her neck, wondering whether her body worked the same as it had nine months ago. Do I like the same things? So she explored, trialing her fingertips all over, on top of her pyjamas: her shoulders, tummy and sides. She pushed up against her hand when she brushed over her breast, feeling her nipple pucker through the cotton of her shirt.

Her gaze flicked towards the door again.

A throbbing ache had started right between her legs. She slipped a hand down her trousers and pushed passed her pubic hair, swallowing a gasp as her fingers touched wetness and warmth. After so many months of not touching this wonderful place—and it was certainly a place Elly had always thought of as wonderful—one touch of her fingertips to her own pulsing flesh was enough to make her shudder and grip the duvet with her free hand.

She pushed herself underneath the covers, for once pulling the duvet up to her chin. Her legs parted and she made slow circles, stretching her head back into the pillows as the familiar arousal washed over her. Oh God, I have missed this. Screwing her eyes shut, she brought herself closer and closer, her orgasm a tidal wave thundering towards her.

The moment before she came, Eve’s beautiful face broke into her consciousness and the thought that perhaps one day she would be able to lie next to Eve and touch her like she was touching herself brought Elly right over the edge of the wave and into the crashing swirling suds of her orgasm.

She shook all over and smothered a groan with her pillow. Panting, she rolled back onto her side and curled up, her sex still twitching and contracting, her wet fingers sinking into the duvet. She waited for her breathing to slow, and then stretched out, hearing the pops and cracks of her limbs, before curling right back up again, a sense of peace settling over the entire bed.

I can’t wait to come home properly. I’ll be able to do that as often as I like.

She smiled into the pillow and tried not to giggle at the absurdity of the situation. Then she stuck her hands out of the duvet and considered her fingers, the fingers that had brought her such sparkling pleasure. She marveled at her own hand, and wondered, just before falling asleep, whether those fingers would ever cause the same tumbling wonderfulness in Eve.
Eve and Jess have a worrying conversation.

A nightmare had woken her at around two am, but Eve had managed, had sat up and shivered for a moment, before wiping her eyes and settling down again. Elly had not been present in her dream, and Jess hadn’t stirred when Eve had woken. She was pleased about both things, and forced herself to breathe calmly, after her tears had dried by themselves.

After sleeping for a few more hours, Eve got up and showered, then went to request her morning medication. She ate breakfast slowly, her brain feeling sluggish despite the hours she’d slept. The cereal tasted cardboard-like in her mouth, but she swallowed it down, a small voice in the back of her head that sounded unsurprisingly like Maggie reminding her that breakfast was the most important meal of the day.

Drying her hair carefully, she pulled the brush out at an angle so that her hair dried reasonably straight. She didn’t have Elly’s straighteners to borrow, and wanted to look okay for her return. *Need to show her that I was okay by myself, that I coped.* She watched her own eyes in the mirror as they narrowed in evaluation, at the creases by her eyes and mouth. *Were they there before I was introduced to Wicklow or has he aged me?*

Shaking her head to expel the thoughts from her fuzzy brain, she brushed her hair once more, just to be sure, before setting everything back down and going back to sit on her bed. She had chosen to wear a comfortable pair of jeans, a button-up shirt, and a green jumper. The wool of the jumper felt silky under her palm as she passed her hand over her arm. She breathed slowly into the comfortable sensation of stroking her own skin through the material. She’d seen Elly do it a few times—she called it ‘self-soothing’. Eve filed that away for later use.

The notebook by her bed caught her attention. The psychologist, Sam, had suggested she write down her experiences, which may help her to process what she had been through. The book seemed welcoming, for once, and when she opened it with shaky fingers, the pages looked crisp and white. Chewing her lip, she pressed open the cover and held the book open on her knee for a while.

She reached across blindly and took a pen, pulled it across to her lap. The pen felt harsh, but she held it purposefully and clicked it so that the nib protruded, ready. The lines on the first page seemed to wobble a bit, but then came more into focus. She put the nib on the page and, very steadily and slowly, wrote Wicklow’s full name.

*Brian Wicklow.*

Her curly handwriting made the name seem boring, not something she should be scared of. When the sound of the name echoed in her mind, however, she blinked rapidly and swallowed.

*Are the memories too difficult? What do I think of you?*

She wrote the words, speaking directly to Wicklow. Despite being very much dead, she felt it was he whom she wished to explain her experience to. He needed to hear what she had to say, and how she
felt about the whole thing. He hadn’t understood; had been locked inside a world only he knew, his scorched and warped brain only allowing him to see the world in his own scorched and warped way.

_You relished in my pain. You fed off the look in Jake’s eyes when he thought you’d killed me. How could you do that? And you saw him as he lunged at you, and stabbed you in your cold heart._

She tore out the page and scrunched it with her knuckles white. Placing it carefully on her bedside table, she started again.

_It all happened in a silver room, with a gurney and a scalpel._

No it hadn’t. It had begun months before, Wicklow getting inside her head. But she didn’t care. She was focusing on the event in question, the day when everything had gone wrong.

So she wrote it all down. The facts, the figures, and then how she felt. She cried as she wrote, her tears blocking her vision of the words she scribbled, but she kept going, her hand flying across each page. The paper became scuffed and threadbare, and she lost track of time.

When she stopped, the smell of sausages and potatoes was drifting through the open door to her shared bedroom. Other patients were milling around in the corridor and heading down to the dining room for lunch. Daniella, the HCA, walked passed and smiled at Eve, flicking her eyes towards where the other patients were headed.

Taking a deep breath, Eve looked back down at what she had written. It wasn’t neat and she was sure the grammar and spelling was all wrong, but she supposed it didn’t matter. It was true, she assumed. She felt like she hadn’t been fully awake when she’d written it, could barely remember her own hand moving across the paper to write.

It was like someone else had written it.

But she felt like it had poured out of her. Her body was empty now, and she felt hungry. She closed the notebook and placed it atop her bedside table. Then she changed her mind and slid it under her pillow. No reason to leave it out in the open. She wasn’t worried about someone reading it, just that that the words would escape the pages and hurt someone.

_STOP being stupid._

Her thoughts drifted to Elly. She didn’t want Elly to see the words she’d written. She didn’t want to taint the lovely woman with the potentially damaging evidence of her own life. I already did that to Jake. It’s my fault he’s in prison.

Patting the pillow her notebook hid beneath, she stood and made her way out of the room and towards the sausages and mash.

During lunch, she looked around for Jess, but didn’t see her. She hadn’t been in their bedroom either, not since breakfast at least. _I suppose she must be in with the psychologist, or taking part in a group._ Daniella, with her clipboard tucked under one arm, didn’t seem bothered that someone was missing, so Eve’s chest untightened and she was able to eat her lunch in relative comfort.

After lunch, Eve made herself a large plastic cup of squash and put a little hot water into it, before going to sit in the tea-drinking area. Bill and Harry joined her and she sat quietly and listened to their conversation about their previous jobs. Bill had captained a ship in the navy and, despite his clearly delusional mind-set, Eve could believe it. He had a look about him that commanded authority, and seaworthiness. She found her lips tugging upwards into a smile as she listened, and her brain started forming images of Bill in a smart uniform, standing proudly on the deck of a ship, shouting orders...
Head down, hair lank, and strides swift, Jess shuffled past them, and towards the bedroom. Eve narrowed her eyes at her retreating back for a moment, before pushing herself up to standing, and following the young woman.

Jess had already flopped on her bed when Eve entered, face in the pillows, and ribs slowly expanding in and out. Eve tilted her head to the side and took a chance by going over to her.

“Hiya.”

Lifting her head, Jess allowed her black greasy hair to fall over her face. The skin Eve could see was red and puffy, and Eve perched on the edge of the wooden chair next to Jess’s bed.

“You okay?”

Jess just looked at her, and then pushed her hair out of her face, rolling her eyes. “What d’you care?”

“I do care. I care about most people.” Eve sighed and looked at the floor by her slippers. “Maybe that’s my downfall, hmm?”

“Sure thing.” Jess swung her legs around and sat up. She curled her toes in her thick slipper socks and a visible shiver ran through her.

“Anything I can do?”

Shrugging, Jess wiped her face and wouldn’t meet Eve’s eye.

“You feel manky?”

“What’s that?”

“Really?” Eve asked, smiling a bit. “You don’t know what manky means?”

“Some northern thing. I suppose.” Jess’s eyes stuck decisively at the door.

“Yeah, guess so. Just means… Means you feel shite.”

“Yeah,” Jess agreed, heaving a huge sigh, and then gripping the edge of the mattress. “Something inside me just… It doesn’t want to play ball today.”

“Just today?”

“No. Every day.” Scratching at a pimple on her forearm, Jess’s dark eyes lifted to Eve’s. “Not that you’d get that.”

“I do get that. I can understand depression. Feeling shitty.”

“This isn’t just that. Whatever.”

“No,” Eve pressed, clasping her hands in front of her, elbows on her knees. “Not whatever. If you want to tell me, tell me.”

Jess looked away and shook her head.

“Are you scared of something?”
Jess looked back at her in surprise, but then her face fell. “Nothing that’s actually here.”

“Not even yourself?” Eve could understand that. Her whole body felt scribbled on, tatty, dirty. And she felt like everyone she got close to would end up in pain or trouble, or something. Still, she wanted to help Jess. The young woman seemed desolate.

“Myself? Like, I’d do something idiotic?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“D’you feel like that sometimes?” Jess asked, and sat up a little straighter now that the focus wasn’t on her own problems.

Eve noticed, however, and cocked an eyebrow. “Sometimes. Do you?”

Jess just nodded.

“Do you think you’ll do something today?”

Jess stared at the floor.

“Do you want to hurt yourself, Jess?” Eve asked, steadily, but her heart thumped at her ribcage so hard that it hurt.

Jess glanced at Eve, then stood and walked swiftly from the bedroom.

Eve was left alone, her head turned towards the door Jess had exited from, fear and guilt slopping around her brain.

Did I cause that? Does she feel like hurting herself because I got near her?

Shaking her head sharply, Eve stood and raced out of the room and down the corridor. She hammered on the nursing office door and stepped back, her fingers tapping at her own hip. She stuffed her hands into her jeans’ pocket, but it didn’t stop her palms from going clammy.

It felt like it took an age for anyone to answer. Eve’s heart soured when the dark-haired Toby answered, Eve’s keyworker. She’d spoken with him several times since her admission, and she trusted him not to laugh at her, or roll his eyes. He immediately dropped the smile from his face as he took in her features, which, Eve reckoned, must have been screaming panic.

“What’s the matter?”

“I need to talk to you about Jess.” Eve hopped from one foot to the other, then realised what she was doing and stopped.

Toby came out of the office and closed the door behind him. He beckoned for her to follow him to the pool room, which was empty, and closed that door once she had stepped through. “Okay.”

“I think she’s going to…hurt herself. We just had a conversation and when I asked her if…if she felt like it, she…she ran off.”

Toby smiled tightly at her, but the look in his eyes was sincere. “Thank you. I’ll go check on her now. Thank you for telling me.”

Eve nodded and he left. She slumped against the wall and put a hand to her head. She let out a massive breath, all worry and responsibility leaving her. She’s in good hands now. You don’t have to
The door opened again and Eve almost expected Toby to come back in and tell her she was worrying about nothing.

But it was Elly, her backpack over one shoulder, and her eyes bright. “Hi. I wondered where you’d got to.” Her face fell the minute she properly took in Eve’s demeanour. “What happened?”

“Jess. It’s okay, the staff are dealing with it.”

“What did she do?”

“Nothing, I hope.” Eve took Elly’s arm and led her to a couple of comfy chairs. They sat and, after relinquishing her bag to the floor, Elly rubbed Eve’s shoulder, before she blushed and removed it.

Eve swallowed. “She basically suggested she might do something. But I just told Toby, and I’m hoping he’s going to sort it.”

“That must have been rough for you.” Elly’s fingers twitched in her lap, as if she was hankering to touch Eve. “To hear that.”

“Not as rough as I’m sure it was for Jess. She just seems so…desperate.”

“Oh darling.” Elly’s voice was softer than a whisper, but the tenderness in it made Eve look up. Their gazes locked and Eve reached to thumb Elly’s shoulder. “Welcome back.” She shook her head and chuckled thickly. “How did it go?”

Nodding, Elly blushed and smiled. “It was okay. Scary but…” Her face coloured more deeply, and she put her hand to her mouth for a beat, before scratching the back of her neck. “It was fine. I coped.”

“Must have been weird. Being in a house again.”

“It was. But Kate was great and… I was fine.” She looked deeply into Eve’s eyes and sucked her bottom lip into her mouth. “I’m going to be fine, I think. When I go.”

Eve leaned in and rested her cheek against Elly’s shoulder next to her hand. Elly’s arm slid around her back and she inhaled deeply, the scent of Elly filling her lungs; that leathery musty smell of her jacket, the fragrance of her shampoo, and everything else that told her Elly was near her.

She felt Elly pressing her nose into her hair and closed her eyes. Elly squeezed her, and hummed out a noise of affection.

“I’m glad you had a good time.”

“No jealousy?” Elly chuckled against her and Eve wrapped an arm around her belly.

“Sorry. I know we decided not to do this.”

“Oh sod it,” Elly said. “I missed you.”

“You too.”
They pulled away, grinning like idiots, and just in time.

Bill came flying through the door, luckily in a completely oblivious fashion, but with horror in his eyes. “The girl. She…there’s blood everywhere.”

All three of them ran into the corridor, but Jess was already being led from the clinic with secure bandages around one wrist. She looked up and scowled at Eve as she walked past, Toby’s firm hand at her back.

Tears gathered in Eve’s eyes and she felt her insides churning. Elly’s hand returned to her shoulder, rubbing up and down as Bill left them, his imaginary friend apparently more interesting than the drama that had unfurled on the ward.

Elly was making hushing noises close to Eve’s ear, but Eve could barely hear them. The guilt took her belly and twisted it, causing bile to fill her throat. She dashed towards the toilet and retched over the bowl, dropping to her knees as a drip of coffee came up but not much else. A soothing hand against her spine calmed her racing heart, rubbing in small circles, and she was vaguely aware that it was Elly crouched behind her.

Then the warmth left her and Maggie was at her hip with a glass of water and some paper towel. “Come on, lovely. Up you get.”

Eve nodded mutely and accepted the hand that Maggie offered.

“Let’s go sit somewhere quiet, hmm?”

Again, Eve nodded. She allowed herself to be led towards the activity room, where pencils and felt tips occupied plastic pots, and a piano stood in one corner. Maggie pulled a chair out and they both sat, Maggie kind eyes resting on Eve, waiting for her to speak.

“You’ve done all the right things, today. Telling us about Jess. She knows other service users can’t keep secrets, it’s not fair on you.”

Eve nodded. “I know.” She lifted her head and looked around. “Where’s Elly?”

“She’s gone to sit quietly and have a drink. She needed to sort out her things.” Maggie gave her a pointed look. “And she is keeping away from all this emotion.”

Tears dribbled down Eve’s cheeks. “I didn’t want to…I didn’t want her to…”

“I know you didn’t. And it’s okay.”

“Is she okay? She’s not…” Flashes of Elly doing something similar to what Jess had done, of bandages adorning her beautiful wrists, where Eve knew scars already lay, made Eve feel sick again.

“She’s perfectly able to handle it. Let her sort herself out. But, really, you should be sorting yourself out first.”

“Would you check on her?” An overwhelming feeling of fear gripped her chest and for a moment, Eve couldn’t breathe.

Maggie shook her head. “She’s fine.” She squinted at her from behind her thick glasses. “What d’you think might have happened to Elly?”

“I don’t know.” The breath rushed out of Eve and she slumped. “I just…I feel like everyone I
touch…or everyone I’m around…” She shrugged and placed her forehead in her hand. “Stupid, I know.”

“Not stupid. Understandable.”

“I wrote down some stuff today. Sam suggested I did and I… It occurred to me that…I feel guilty about Jake and…”

“And that guilt keeps pushing into the rest of your life? The people you love?”

“What if by being near me…” Eve swallowed and shook her head, a lump forming in her throat as her chest tightened again. “What if she feels the rottenness inside me? What if that makes her… hurt?”

“These are just your thoughts.” Maggie’s gaze on her was strict but caring.

Eve groaned and sat up again, her head back and her eyes closed. “I feel like… I feel like I’m teetering on the edge of insanity and…” She huffed again, her gaze moving out the window, to the smokers with drifts of vapour spiralling upwards, the birds a little further away on the feeder, and even father away, the trees swaying in the breeze. “It’s like there’s something inside me that I can pass on. Something evil.”

“That’s not true, though. You know that.”

Eve nodded. “I know I’m not a bad person. But what if what I’ve been through has tainted me in some way?”

“I don’t think it happens like that.”

They sat for a while, just in silence. Eve fiddled with the sleeve of her jumper. Maggie slid a piece of paper towards herself and began to colour, lifting an eyebrow at Eve’s surprised expression.

“You should try it. I find it very calming.”

Eve looked at the various black-lined pictures meant for colouring in. Her hand hovered over one, a swirly abstract thing with small areas to colour. She grabbed it and peered more closely at it, before choosing some crayons and beginning to fill in the spaces.

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Elly hummed to herself, something familiar, and unpacked her bag, trying not to think about the heightened emotion she’d been exposed to, as well as the paleness of Eve’s face as she’d thrown up.

_I want to comfort her so much. I want to make her feel better. But it’s not my job. At least not yet._

She shuddered and shook off the feelings. All was okay. Jess would be fine; she was being tended to, probably in de-escalation, that room she herself had spent so much time last May. And Eve was fine as well; Maggie had arrived just as Elly had started to feel overwhelmed, and had given her a look that suggested Elly should remove herself from it all.

Which she had.

She tried not to feel guilty and useless. Once Eve felt better they would reconnect, sit together with a coffee maybe, and chat about their time apart.

Bag unpacked, Elly tiptoed down the corridor towards the dining room, and peered into the activity
room. She saw the backs of Eve and Maggie, both of them appearing enthralled with whatever artwork they had chosen to do. She smiled and nodded at the scene, content that Eve was okay, and went into the dining room to make a drink.

Eve joined her twenty minutes later, looking tired but calm. She sat close to her and placed her hand on the table, their pinkie fingers a millimetre away from one another.

Elly made the first move—she stroked her finger against Eve’s knuckle. They shared a soft smile and Elly felt her stomach warming at the acknowledgement in Eve’s eyes.

They didn’t chat, in the end. Elly felt the dust settling around them and was content to simply sit, and drink coffee, and then tea. And then the domestic staff brought out dinner and they sat together to eat as well, smiles exchanged, but words unneeded.

Evening television was watched. Jess sat a way away from them, on the floor, knees pulled up to her chin, but she did at least occupy the same space. Elly noticed she and Eve exchanged a look, and that the look that Jess gave Eve was of acceptance. Eve seemed to sink into the sofa as Jess left, and rested her cheek on Elly’s shoulder.

The room was dark and they were alone again. They sat, arms and thighs touching, close together. Eve let out a huge sigh as the news came on, and lifted her head. Her dark eyes caught Elly’s and she blinked slowly. She seemed to be searching.

A tension thudded around them, with the intro music from the news programme. Elly’s heartrate increased in speed and power, her jaw dropped and her lips parted. Eve was very close and as her own eyes flicked down towards Eve’s lips, she felt the tension amplify. *I could just kiss her. Right now.*

She sat back and folded her hands in her lap, looking down at her fingers. Her knee bounced.

Eve sat back too, and looked away. “Sorry.”

“No. It’s okay. It’s been a trying day, hasn’t it?” Elly forced herself to look at Eve, to sit up straight and set her jaw.

“No excuse. We agreed.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t want to kiss you,” Elly admitted, and then chuckled breathily. “Sorry.”

Eve smirked and looked up at her. Then the joviality fell from her and she shuddered.

Elly frowned, her own worry creeping in like a mist. It cooled her insides and made everything flutter uncomfortably. “What’s wrong?”

“I feel like…” Eve closed her eyes for a moment, and then shook her head. “Like if I get too close to you I’ll…”

“What?”

Eve swallowed. “Mark you. Hurt you, somehow.”

Elly wanted to hold her close, to press away the fear that was clearly evident with her embrace and her lips. But she refrained and nodded. “I don’t think you’ll do that.”

“You don’t know I won’t hurt you.”
Elly wasn’t sure what to say. So she just looked at Eve, tried to express everything she felt for her through her gaze. She looked at Eve’s blonde hair, neat and tidy and straight. She took in her pretty face, and those dark eyes that seemed to hold the weight of the world sometimes. They certainly did now.

“Why do you think you’ll hurt me?”

Eve looked deep into her eyes. “Because I’ve hurt everyone. My kids are struggling at school because their mum’s a lunatic.”

“Don’t say that word,” Elly pleaded.

“My mother’s upset and worried. She shouldn’t be. She should just forget about me.”

“Oh darling.”

“And Jake. Jake.” She huffed and Elly saw tears in her eyes again. Reaching forward, she carefully took one of Eve’s hands between her own. “Don’t touch me.”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do,” Elly said, keeping her voice light but sincere.

Eve stared at their hands like they were on fire. Or covered in some kind of harmful chemical. “But I might…” She looked away, but left her hand within Elly’s.

Elly smoothed one hand over Eve’s, smiling at the soft skin under her palm. “You might what?”

“I feel like my entire body is full of…something bad. I don’t want you to…to catch it.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“That’s basically what Maggie said. She said it’s just my thoughts. Just negative thoughts encroaching on a potentially positive outlook on life.”

Elly saw the brightness in Eve’s eyes and allowed a small smile to spread across her face. “It’s normal to have negative thoughts when you’re still recovering from a trauma.”

“Is it?”

Elly nodded. “I thought everyone was out to get me after what happened to me.”

Wrinkling her nose, Eve squeezed Elly’s fingers with her own. “That’s not nice.”

“It wasn’t.”

“I’m glad I’m here.” Eve chuckled and shook her head. “Not with you, that’s not what I mean. However lovely it is being with you.”

“I understand.”

“Being in hospital. I just thought it was because I kept having flashbacks, and nightmares. But I do have things I need to work on.”

“And once you have, you’ll be a better person, a new improved Eve Granger.”

Eve nodded, her other hand shifting to cup around the back of Elly’s. She leant down and brought their hands up, pressing her lips gently against the backs of Elly’s fingers.
Tingling warmth flooded Elly’s whole body and she couldn’t help smiling broadly. She leant towards Eve and pressed her lips against her cheek. She kept her face close. “Not that you’re not simply lovely now.”

“An Eve that didn’t include flashbacks, or negative thoughts, or being on a section though…”

“Quite a catch.”

It was very dark suddenly, the television showing deep-coloured pictures of the introduction to a new programme. Elly realised it was later than usual, but felt she didn’t want to move, not just yet. She turned to the television and narrowed her eyes in thought.

“I think we could stay up just a bit longer, what do you think?”

“I think that’d be okay.” Eve settled around again, close against Elly’s side and with their hands still joined. No-one came in, so they held hands all through the gentle comedy panel show, laughing together at the contestants and their quick wit. Elly had to close her eyes as Eve’s thumb traced circles around her palm, but soon settled into the caress, found she enjoyed it. It reminded her of when they’d first become friends, when Eve had decided to help Elly with her fear of being touched. She felt so good when Eve touched her now.

They sat so close together and watched the programme, the knowledge that they were simply in the same room causing Elly’s heartrate to sink, and for her to feel as if their hearts were synchronising. Like they’d come to a plateaux, something comfortable and safe. Elly hadn’t felt safe with anyone for such a long time. Eve’s hands in hers were warm and comfortable, and it was in that comfortable state that Elly fell to sleep on Eve’s shoulder.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Getting closer to Elly's discharge, and they both get some positive news.

Chapter Notes

I'm well aware that Eve's section 2 should have lapsed or been renewed at 28 days. I've taken creative license in this instance.

Thanks to everyone for their continued support and appreciation for this.

The realisation of something hit Elly on the sixth day before her discharge. She was packing up her backpack with her overnight essentials, when she remembered a conversation she and Eve had had the week before, about how long it took Eve’s mother to drive from their home in Yorkshire to the ward. Eve lives up North. She’s only down here because of the high likeliness of bumping into one of her previous arrests.

So, being friends after Eve’s discharge would be pretty difficult. Elly decided she’d try and meet up with Eve, even if it meant taking the train all the way up the country. They’d talked about meeting for coffee. They’d joked about working together. I suppose her working for me will be impossible, if she’s all the way up north. That’s a shame.

Pulling her bag onto her shoulder, she sat in the tea-drinking area and waited for Eve to come out from speaking with the doctor. They were both being seen in patient care review, but Elly knew her own review would be brief as she’d been seen for over an hour last week. She swung one foot back and forth along the carpet, tapped the wooden arm of the chair, and waited.

When Eve did emerge, she had the brightest but most confused smile on her face Elly had ever seen. Eve’s mother followed her out of the room, so Elly left them to it, simply sending Eve a smile as they made their way across the ward and out through the main doors. Elly assumed they were going for a walk or perhaps a coffee at the café in the main hospital.

She was pleased for Eve; knew she and her mother didn’t have the best of relationships at the moment. She hoped Eve would divulge her news once they returned.

Elly was called into PCR and clutched her backpack in her lap. The consultant reviewed her summary as it was displayed on the screen. She sat as politely as she could and tried not to fidget. Kate was waiting for her in the car park, ready to take her back home on overnight leave. Doctor Ellington seemed to take forever to gather all the information she needed.

“I’m pleased with your progress this week, Elly,” she said, eventually.

Elly sat up straighter and smiled in what she hoped was a friendly way. Come on, I want to go on leave, get on with it.
“I’m going to allow you to begin driving again, too, if you feel safe to.”

Elly’s heart leapt and she felt her face stretching into a grin. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You’re meds aren’t going to affect your ability to do so, so I think it’s safe to say you can.”

Elly nodded.

“Have you used zopiclone this week?”

“No. Not at all. I’ve not needed it.”

“I think we’ll take that off your chart then, if you’re agreeable?”

“That’s fine.” Elly patted her hands together in contained excitement.

“Great. Well. Discharge next week. I’ll send your summary to your GP, and you’ll get two weeks of medications from us, before you’ll have to get it from your GP.”

“Fab.”

Elly and Rachael, who happened to be running PCR that week, exchanged a pleased look, and Elly stood, her backpack clasped in both hands.

“See you next week for a final farewell,” Doctor Ellington said, making some notes on the papers in front of her.

Elly looked around for Eve as she left the room, searching the corridor and then peeking into the shared bedroom she no longer occupied, but to no avail. Eve was still out with her mother, it appeared. Her excited insides dropped half-way, but she figured she could phone Eve later and tell her the good news. She could go visit her in her car now, once they were both settled at home. No need for trains. The thought of being on a train made her stomach clench anyway. All those people jostling me. Having to sit close by someone I don’t know.

After collecting her medications from Dawn, she left the ward and met Kate in the car park.

“What’s that look on your face for?” Kate asked her as she climbed into the reasonably new VW Beetle. She squeezed Elly’s shoulder in a warm greeting.

“I’m allowed to drive again.”

“Ah. So we should alert the authorities.” Kate turned the ignition and drove out of the small car park, her eyes twinkling. “Elly Chandler, road hog extraordinaire.”

Elly giggled and cuddled her backpack in her lap. “Make it much easier to do surveillance.”

“Once you’re ready, yes it will.”

“I’m going to have to relinquish Benji of my wheels.”

Kate pushed her bottom lip out in jest and made a sympathetic noise in her throat. “He has enjoyed keeping your darling motor running, you know? Keeps going on about how he loves driving Laura around, taking her to posh restaurants.”

“Like where, McDonalds?”
“Something like that.” Kate laughed and turned out of the hospital grounds, the little car revving noisily as she sped it up along the main road. “He’ll be fine, my son and heir. He’s got that bike.”

“I can’t believe that thing is still running. It must be twenty years old now.”

“Close to. He loves that thing more than your car, though. He’ll probably be pleased to get back on it.”

They were quiet for the remainder of the journey. Elly took out her phone and sent a text to Benji, informing him of the situation and her need for her car back. The reply came quickly, and Benji told her he’d bring the car over when he visited them that evening.

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Eve stirred her hot chocolate slowly, her mind still spinning with the news. The café was reasonably quiet, just a few patients with broken legs hanging around, drinking lattes. “Are you sure, mum? I mean…it’s a massive thing. To move all three of you such a long way.”

“I think it’s best. You heard the nurse—the waiting list for psychology at home is months long. You’d have to be discharged with no real support and wait around for that. I don’t want you taking a step backwards.”

“I suppose it does make sense.” Eve frowned into her mug, watching the melting marshmallows floating on the surface of her drink. One by one, they faded into the liquid until all that was left was a frothy mess in her cup. She expected it to taste sugary, but when she took a sip, it was more creamy and inviting. She hummed and closed her eyes, before focusing back on her mother. “What about the house? I’ve not paid the mortgage off and it will take ages to sell.”

“I thought we’d rent it out and then rent something down here. Claire and Robin are both starting new schools and it’ll be good for Robin to get away from those terrible lads in his year anyway. You know they’ve been bullying him.”

“Have they?” Eve’s head snapped up. How have I missed that? I’m such an awful mother.

“Yes. Don’t worry. I’ve been dealing with it whilst you’ve been sorting yourself out.”

“What about you? Leaving your friends and the town you’ve lived in for so long?”

“A change might do me good too. We can always move back if it doesn’t work out. Rachael said you can continue with your therapy straight away when you’re discharged if we stay here, so you’ll have no time to…go under.”

“Strange turn of phrase, but okay.” They smiled at one another and Eve’s stomach warmed at the look of acceptance in Annie’s eyes. She’s starting to trust me again. Thank goodness. “I would have forgone therapy to be with my children. You know that?”

Annie nodded, her fingertip running along the edge of her teacup. “I know, love. But this way, you won’t have to.”

It hit Eve and she blinked. I can see Elly if I live down here. I never considered the long distance between here and Yorkshire. Why didn’t I think of that?

***

Elly’s phone rang at around seven, just after Elly had helped Kate clear the table and load the
dishwasher after a delicious spaghetti bolognaise. She picked up with a smile already tugging her lips at the name that had flashed up. “Hello.”

“How’s your afternoon been?” she asked Eve, a little worried that her leaving without saying goodbye might have confused or upset her.

“Great. PCR was difficult as we got told my psychology won’t start for a few months once I’m discharged. There’s a massive waiting list up north.”

“Yuck. Yes, the NHS is a bit stretched, so I’ve heard.”

“But my mother had a solution.” There was a pause and Elly heard Eve pulling in a big breath, as if she had something just as big to report. “After hearing that if I lived in the area, my psychology would continue basically from my discharge date, she suggested we move.”

“To London?” Elly’s mouth hung open as she moved into her bedroom, sliding onto the soft duvet cover and pulling her feet up onto the bed.

“Yep. So, I suppose, although it never occurred to me before today, we’ll be a lot closer. So that coffee? Definitely on the cards.”

“That’s fantastic. I mean…” Elly bit her lip and pulled her knees up to hug them. “Won’t it be an awful pain for your children? Won’t they have to moves schools and the like? And your mother?”

“Robin’s starting secondary school in September and Claire’s going into juniors. So, actually, they’ll be moving schools anyway soon, and meeting new people. And I’ve just been reliably informed by my mother than Robin doesn’t get on with his classmates so…” She trailed off.

“Oh. Not something you knew before today?”

“Apparently I’ve not been paying them much attention.” Eve’s words were clipped and charged with sadness.

“You’ve been through something horrific.” Elly scratched the leg of her jeans with a fingernail, snuggling her toes into the cushiony duvet. “Probably best that you didn’t involve them for a while.”

Eve made a noise like she didn’t believe Elly one iota, but seemed to refrain from commenting.

“Anyway,” Elly said, “this is all good news. Perhaps it will be a fresh start for all of you. You most of all.”

“I must admit, for purely selfish reasons, it would be nice to be closer to you.”

Elly smiled. “I realised this morning that you were a bloody northerner and that you’d have to go back to your homeland at some point.”

Eve chuckled. “You sound like I’m from some far off country.”

“It would feel like you were if you went back to Yorkshire.”

A moment of silence whilst Elly thought. She felt her stomach settling down, the humming of anxiety quietening too. This solves a lot of problems for Eve but I’m still surprised her mother is willing to do it. She hoped beyond her usual energy to hope, that Eve would be okay, with a move to London. She knew she came from the countryside, that she lived and worked around cattle, and
farms, and rolling hills. She supposed a change of scenery might be good for her, but she hoped the change wouldn’t be too much.

“I want to be near my kids,” Eve said eventually. “And I would go anywhere for them.”

“I understand.”

“It’s just a happy coincidence that I’ll be near you too.”

“For that coffee.”

“Otherwise it would be a bit of a drive, wouldn’t it?”

Elly chuckled and nodded, even though Eve couldn’t see her. “It would. And on that note, I got some good news today as well.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m allowed to drive again.”

“You weren’t before?” Eve asked.

“No. Too risky. They were worried I’d drive into a bridge or something, I think.”

“Ah.” It appeared as though Eve didn’t know what to say to that. “That seems sensible. Maybe I should check Doctor Ellington is okay with me driving too.”

“I was on many medications to keep me from…well. And to help me sleep. Oh.” Elly grinned. “She took zopiclone off my chart. So I won’t have it anymore.”

“That okay with you?”

“Yeah. I haven’t used it in at least a week. I seem to be sleeping okay.”

“Probably something to do with your roommate not having nightmares.”

Elly sighed, but felt affection beating strongly within her chest. “I never minded that.”

“I did.”

They both sighed and Elly looked towards the bedroom door, aware that Kate might think she was hiding from her. “I should go, Kate wants to watch some kind of documentary about Nineteen-forties Paris. She’s fluent in French and loves the history too.”

“Okay. Have a lovely evening.”

“You too.” There was a pause, but Elly could think of nothing else to say, at least nothing she was ready to say just yet. “‘Night.”

“‘Night.”

She hung up and slipped from the bed, shuffling quickly back downstairs. Kate was pouring them cups of tea in the kitchen as Elly entered, and looked up with a smile. “Eve?” she asked, a knowing glint in her eye.

“Yes.”
“You rather like her, I think.”

Eyeing her friend, Elly perched on the edge of the large kitchen table and scuffed the toe of her sock on the tiled floor. “Can I admit something?”

“If it’s that you’ve got feelings for the attractive police woman, then, of course.”

Elly rolled her eyes but grinned. “How did you know?”

“I’ve known you nearly thirteen years. You don’t think I notice these things?” Kate held a cup towards her, an eyebrow raised in question, her expression vying for more information.

Taking the cup from Kate, Elly nodded. “You’re not wrong. I do feel for her…a lot. But don’t worry, I’m not going to get into anything whilst either of us is in hospital.”

“Good,” Kate stated in the straight-forward way Elly was familiar with.

“And we’ve not done anything, not really.” Elly’s cheeks burned for a moment, as she remembered the things she’d imagined, especially last time she’d stayed overnight at Kate’s. “She’s been helping me get over my fear of being touched.”

Kate’s eyebrow rose further.

“Oh. Nothing like that,” Elly reassured her.

Kate narrowed her eyes in jest, but Elly kept her gaze steady.

“Honestly. I’d tell you.”

***

Eve smiled down at her phone, as she received a final goodnight text from Elly. She imagined Elly at Kate’s big house, in that double bed, smiling at her own phone as she sent the text. I hope she sleeps well. She seemed to last time she went on leave.

Jess slunk into the bedroom, her hair hiding her face, and the bandage round her wrist clean and well applied. She sat on her bed with a huge sigh, and pushed her hair back so Eve could see her face. She looked depressed, but more awake than a few days ago, and Eve was glad.

“Hi,” Eve said, tentatively sending the young girl a smile.

Jess lifted her gaze to Eve’s. “Hey.”

“How are you?”

Jess shrugged, but then shook her head and swallowed. “Yeah I’m okay. Sorry about the other day.”

Leaning back against her headboard, Eve smiled across at her. “No worries.”

“I should have just gone to nursing staff.” Jess rubbed at her face. “But sometimes the words aren’t there. It’s like something’s stopping them.”

“I understand. It can be hard sometimes.”

Jess actually smiled at her, just a bit. “Bill said you were sick in the toilet.”
Eve nodded, dropping her gaze momentarily.

“Sorry if I did that. I didn’t mean to.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I just got a bit overwhelmed I think. Been through a lot, you know?”

“Have you? Me too.” Jess pulled her fingers through her hair and wrinkled her nose. “Yuck.”

“Why don’t you have a bath?” Eve asked, feeling something close to maternal emotion bubbling up within her, similar to how she felt when Claire or Robin were ill. “Might make you feel better?”

Jess shrugged, but then looked up and nodded.

“Go ask Maggie if she’ll wait outside for you. I’m sure she won’t mind a chin-wag through the door.”

Jess snorted humorously, and rubbed her hands on her black jeans. “Yeah. Might be a good idea.”

Eve routed around in her bedside drawer and found the small bottle of oil Elly had given her during her first night on the ward. “Hey, put some of this in it.” She proffered it to Jess. “It’s lavender. Smells lovely.”

Jess cocked an eyebrow in disbelief, but took the bottle as she moved towards the door. “Okay. Thanks.”

Eve watched her leave with a feeling of satisfaction.

If I can just help in some small way, maybe she’ll feel better.

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Eve’s next session with Sam was the morning afterwards. She took in her written account of her experience and sat with her knees drawn up and her fingertips tapping atop them, whilst he read it.

Once he had, he placed it carefully on his lap and smiled up at her. “This is great work. Very succinct and articulate. You write well.” He nodded. “You also use a lot of emotive language, which is great. I feel like you’re more comfortable writing things down than you are saying them out loud?”

Eve nodded.

“That’s okay. Either medium works, and if you find that one works better than another, then use it. I’d still like to continue the CBT, if that’s okay, and that will involve some more talking. How do you feel about that?”

“Okay,” Eve replied with a nod.

“Today, I want to work with your feelings about the event, and your beliefs.” He paused, studying her, but she found a respectful expression enveloping his features. “I get the feeling that you feel very guilty about what happened, not only to Wicklow, but also to Jake.”

Eve stared down at her hands in her lap and nodded.

“On a scale of one to ten, ten being completely and one being barely at all, how strong is the guilt you feel?”

Eve thought hard. She allowed the feelings she kept usually hidden in the back of her brain to immerse to the front, and they caused a lump in her throat to form. It’s surely all my fault. If I hadn’t
been there, Wicklow wouldn’t be dead, and Jake wouldn’t be in prison yet again for murder.

“Nine.” Her voice broke and she cleared her throat. Then she nodded and looked up at Sam’s kind face. “Without me, they’d both be living fairly simple lives. Jake would be doing what he enjoys—woodwork. Restoring old cabinets and rocking horses. Wicklow would be having a whale of a time manipulating guards and other prisoners…perhaps he’d be languishing at her majesty’s pleasure in hospital, on a whole lot of morphine by now.”

“Would they?”

“Probably.”

“You don’t seem sure.”

“Hence why I said nine, not ten.”

Sam nodded. “Right. So you reckon you’re solely responsible?”

Eve nodded, and then shrugged.

“Jake is a man, with free will, just like anyone else.”

Eve blinked, but felt no better.

“And Wicklow was a man too, with free will. It sounds like he played you both, manipulated Jake into doing exactly what he wanted.”

“Jake killed Wicklow because he thought Wicklow had slit my throat,” Eve said, the volume of her voice rising. She bit back a more detailed description.

“But Jake chose to stab Wicklow. He chose to murder him. That was proven in court, wasn’t it?”

“I feel like…” Eve almost didn’t want to admit how she felt, but pushed forwards anyway. “I feel like I have something inside me that’s…bad. Something that’s tainted, like I can pass it on to other people.”

“Okay, let’s explore that.” He held out a hand for her to continue.

“It’s as if…I’m scared that I’ll hurt people with this thing. I don’t want to get too…close to people. What if I…pass it on to my kids. Like I did with Jake?”

“You believe you have some kind of bad effect on people? And you passed it to Jake?”

Eve nodded. It sounded ludicrous when he said it.

“Okay. And how does it make you feel? Other than scared?”

“Angry.” Her voice rose another notch and she felt it rumbling inside her chest, like a growling animal scratching to get free from her. “Why did it have to happen to me? Why me? I must be bad.”

“Bad things happen to people, Eve, you know that. You don’t have to be a bad person to have bad things happen.”

Eve just nodded.

“The bad things that happened to you were the result of a serial murderer playing a game. You just
happened to be his target.”

She looked up. “Me? Not Jake?”

“I think Jake was probably part of it too. But it sounds like it was you Wicklow targeted.”

Eve looked down again. “Everything just seems so…bleak though. Like bad things will always happen to me now.”

Elly’s face popped into her mind and for a moment the bleakness faded a little. Warmth spread across her body and her hands uncurled from where they gripped the material of her trousers.

“Where have you gone?” When Eve looked back up, Sam was smiling, and an understanding glow shone from his eyes.

“Nowhere.”

“Something made your life seem a little less bleak just then.”

Eve bit her lip. “I have a friend.”

“Elly?”

Eve nodded.

“It’s nice that you have someone who makes you feel better.”

_I should be honest. It’s what it’s all about._ “I think I love her.”

Sam blinked and shrank back a bit, but regained his composure quickly. “Oh. Right. And how does that sit with you?”

Eve laughed, half-bitterly. “Well, I don’t particularly want to get close to her. What if I make her life hell because of the…my bad luck?”

“Bad luck? Are you someone that believes in luck, Eve?”

“Not usually.” She scratched the back of her neck. “Actually never.”

“Okay, so what changed?”

“I guess…” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “My experience with Wicklow.”

“So, your beliefs have been changed by your trauma.”

_My trauma? He makes it sound like it belongs to me. Maybe it does._

“I suppose so.”

Sam folded his hands over the notebook on his knee and smiled steadily at her. “How did you feel at the time?”

“When Wicklow was…dying?”

Sam nodded.

“Out of control. I suppose as a police detective, you’re used to being in authority. I was used to
bossing people about. I was helpless and defenceless. Not from Wicklow, from Jake. I wanted to stop him.”

“Would it be fair to say you had no control over what Jake did? That most people would consider you very brave, and not at all responsible for another person’s actions?”

“I suppose it would.” She wasn’t sure, though, and apparently it was clear that she felt like this by her expression.

“I would like you to go away and consider this. We need to make sure we’re being fair to ourselves. You need to think about how you are now, what you have achieved, especially after such a traumatic experience.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“How are you doing with the grounding techniques we went through?”

She smiled. “Actually, okay. They seem pretty helpful.”

“That’s great. Keep up the good work.”

“Oh,” Eve said, as she stood and he held out her written work for her. “Um. My mother is going to be moving down here with my kids.”

He narrowed his eyes empathetically. “How’s that feel?”

She nodded. “Okay. I’d go wherever they are. But it does mean I can continue with psychology when I’m discharged straight away.”

He nodded. “Brilliant. Okay then, until next time.”

As she left the locked part of the corridor, Rachael beckoned to her over. Eve stepped into the clinic and shot her a questioning look. “Sorry to grab you straight out of psychology, Eve, but I thought you should know. In fact, you sort of have to know. You’re off your section.”

“What?” Eve asked, her face tugging into a smile.

“The consultant forgot to fill in the paperwork at PCR yesterday. Doctors!”

Eve laughed and Rachael smiled more widely.

“So, you don’t need written leave anymore. But if you’re going out, we’ll still need a brief chat about how you feel before you do. That okay?”

“Do I have a choice?” Eve asked, playfulness rising up within her. It was a nice feeling.

“I wish you did, but it’s policy. Anyway. Good news, hmm?”

“What’s good news?” Elly’s voice drifted through the half-open door.

Eve pulled it open and grinned at Elly, who had just come in from outside, her hair all over her face from the wind. “I’m a free woman.”

“Informal?”

Eve nodded, unable to refrain from stepping into Elly’s open arms.
“That’s fantastic. I’m so pleased for you.” Elly pulled her close.

Eve rested her head against Elly’s shoulder. She watched as Rachael averted her gaze, and then turned her back, respectfully giving them some space. She squeezed Elly around the waist and when they pulled back, Elly kissed her cheek.

That’s becoming a regular occurrence. That’s the second time she’s done that. Butterflies fluttered inside Eve’s stomach as she looked deeply into Elly’s bright eyes. Her cheek tingled where Elly’s lips had touched her.

“I brought my bloody car back with me. Benji assured me he didn’t need it.”

Eve turned to Rachael, hopefully smiling at her. “Would it be okay if…if we went out?”

Elly laughed. “I’ve just got back. Can you wait an hour or so?”

“Just to a café or something. Is there one close by?”

“Let me get unpacked first.” Elly turned to Rachael. “Is that okay?”

“That’s fine. So long as you’re back by dinnertime. I think it’s stew and dumplings.”

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Elly drove them a little anxiously into the nearby village and parked by the little corner shop. Eve wondered whether she was nervous about her driving ability. It’s not like I’ve driven that recently. She doesn’t need to worry. They found a table in the local pub and Eve bought them both a fruit juice each. “Reckon we’d get told off if we turned up back on the ward pissed?” Eve asked as she set them down on the table.

Elly chuckled and nodded. “I think we probably would. We’re both informal now, so we’d probably get chucked out and told to sober up before returning.”

Sitting across from her, Eve pressed her palms either side of the glass, feeling the icy condensation against her skin. It was a nice feeling, being away from the hospital and just together and alone for a while somewhere normal. The pub was quiet, and they sat by the front windows so they could watch people that walked past.

Elly sighed. “This was a good idea. Thank you for suggesting it.”

“That’s okay. I fancied a break anyway.”

“Did you have psychology this morning?” Elly asked, reaching across the table to touch Eve’s wrist.

Eve nodded.

“How did it go?”

“Okay. We’re onto the part where I have to explore how I’ve changed since the incident.” Eve took her hand off her drink and slotted the very tips of her fingers in between Elly’s.

Elly smiled and allowed the touch. “And have you?”

“Well, I used to be a lot more positive. And I used to think I was a good person.”

“You still are,” Elly breathed, squeezing her fingertips inside Eve’s.
Eve smiled softly at her. “I’m just coming to realise that. It doesn’t feel like I am. It feels like I bring bad luck wherever I go.”

“I don’t believe in bad luck.”

“Neither did I, before Wicklow.”

The name seemed to ring around them and Eve shuddered. She didn’t like saying his name, but it had slipped out. She eyed Elly anxiously, as if her words would sully the air between them and spoil the atmosphere.

“Sorry.”

“No,” Elly replied, shaking her head and gripping Eve’s hand in her own. “Never be sorry about what happened to you. It’s not your job to be sorry.”

Deep down, Eve knew Elly was right. And it was difficult to argue with those large brown eyes anyway, especially when they were looking at her with such affection.

Elly took her hand away and sipped from her drink. They sat back and Eve felt Elly’s gaze following her own when she looked through the misty windows of the pub.

“It’s nice here,” Eve said, hoping to ease the fizzy atmosphere.

“I’ve been here a couple of times with Benji and Kate. And the twins when they were home for Christmas.” She laughed. “Hannah kicked Danny’s arse at darts. I’ve never seen a kid throw anything at a dart board with such aggression.”

Eve turned to peruse the pub properly. There was a semi-circular bar in the middle, with a pool table in the far corner, and a dart board close by. The furniture was all dark wood and shiny, with glass-topped tables, and leather-adorned chairs. It was comfortable and warm, and homely. She could smell chips cooking in the kitchen and a couple a few metres from them were enjoying a pie each.

They sat together until one in the afternoon, chatting comfortably. Elly scraped her chair back first. “We ought to go, Rachael will wonder where we are.”

“Next time, we’ll have dinner here.” Eve smiled and caught Elly’s hand as she stood. “I’ll buy you dinner.”

Elly winked at her and Eve flushed with pleasure. “Will you?” Elly teased, and swept out of the pub before Eve could reply.

The journey back was filled with beaming smiles and exchanged looks of affection. Eve felt happy and for a few moments, forgot she was a patient on a mental health ward, relishing in the way Elly’s hand had felt in her own. She felt more human, and more positive about life.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Elly is discharged. They have their first 'date'.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for your continual support with this. A bit of an emotional chapter, but hopefully in a good way! :)

Elly was discharged the following week. Her room felt empty as she sat in it, waiting for her medications to arrive from the pharmacy, all her belongings packed away. She tapped the tips of her fingers against her knee and half-considered taking out her Game Boy to fill the time.

When she looked towards the door, she caught sight of Eve, her lips pursed around a smile, leaning her temple against the door frame. “Hiya,” Eve breathed.

Smiling broadly, Elly took in the dark deep eyes and the way Eve’s hair curled carefully around her ear. “Hey stranger.” She hadn’t seen Eve all day due to her frenzied attempt at packing eighteen months’ worth of items into two holdalls.

Eve’s gaze slid along the floor in front of her. She seemed unsure and a little anxious.

Elly beckoned her inside with a quick gesture, and then rose from the bed to cross the room to the door.

Eve’s eyes were wide as the door thudded closed at Elly’s push. They stood in front of one another, their gazes locked.

An overwhelming urge to touch Eve rose within Elly, so she stepped back just a bit. Then, after a heartbeat or two, she gave in to the feeling, resting her hand against Eve’s shoulder.

Eve tilted her head and rubbed her cheek against the back of Elly’s hand. Elly’s skin tingled, but she forced her hand to remain where it was.

“Are you nearly done?” Eve’s voice was quiet and her eyes were half-lidded, as if she were falling asleep.

Elly understood the feeling. *I feel lethargic when she touches me, or I touch her. As if my body is sinking into warm water and I could just drift away.* She found the feeling scary, but freeing, as if she were approaching a new chapter, a new sense of identity. *One where I can be touched, and touch other people too. Or at least Eve.*

“I’m all done,” Elly replied, turning her hand over to tickle Eve’s cheek.

Eve grinned and closed her eyes properly, laying her own hand against Elly’s. It was cute, like a
kitten accepting a stroke from its owner. *Stop comparing her to a pet. She’s not your play thing, and no one owns her.*

Sliding her hand out, Elly steadied her gaze on Eve’s, trying to push reassurance towards her. She hoped Eve understood that it still felt terribly new, to touch someone so intimately. Not that it was unpleasant; it was just unfamiliar and made her heart thump a bit.

“When do you leave?” Fear had crept into Eve’s voice, but Elly had an inkling she was attempting to hide it from her. Eve folded her arms across her chest, and looked out of the bedroom window.

“Just as soon as my medications arrive. Maggie said they wouldn’t be long.”

Eve moved her gaze to the other side of the room and Elly allowed her to avoid looking at her for the moment. “Would you like me to…leave you alone?” Eve shrugged. “Just so you can….sort yourself out or…” Her shoulders lifted again, and then dropped as if in defeat.

“No.” Elly smiled and finally reached to take Eve’s chin and lift it.

Eve blinked at her, her gaze catching with Elly’s. “Okay.”

“Keep me company?” Elly sat back on the bed and patted it.

Eve glanced towards the door. “But…that’s against the rules.”

“Sod the rules. I’m practically not a patient here anymore.”

Something bitter flitted across Eve’s eyes.

Elly pulled her swiftly towards her and tugged so that she sat on the bed close to her. “Hey. This is a very good thing.”

“I know it is.” Eve looked like she was trying to convince herself as well as Elly.

“And whilst you’re here, and I’m not, I’ll come take you out for leave.” She nudged Eve with her elbow. “That dinner you promised me?”

Eve smiled. She carefully and slowly spread her fingers and slotted them underneath Elly’s. She squeezed. Eve’s fingers were clammy and Elly’s chest jolted in sympathy. “I owe you dinner,” Eve managed.

“You do.”

Drawing in a deep and shaky breath, Eve looked down at their hands, all knotted together. “I’m scared.”

Elly’s stomach burned with simultaneous empathy and pride at Eve admitting how she felt out loud. *It can’t be easy for her. “What of?”* She tried to keep her voice soft.

“I suppose…the unknown.” Eve lifted her head. “What if…once you’re at Kate’s and all happy, and away from this place… What if you forget me and we don’t see one another again?”

Almost of its own accord, Elly’s hand lifted to Eve’s cheek and stroked her skin. Tears pricked at her eyes, but she blinked hard so that they wouldn’t fall. “It’s not going to happen.”

“You don’t know that.”
“I do,” Elly said. “We have something…special. I haven’t felt like this for a very long time and, yes, it’s terrifying for me for more than one reason. But it’s also amazing and wonderful and…” She swallowed and traced her thumb over Eve’s cheekbone. “Let’s make some plans, hmm?”

Eve blinked. “I don’t want to impinge on your happy times at home with Kate.”

“Oh shush.” Elly grinned at her modesty. “We both need to know that things will continue between us, don’t we?”

Eve nodded.

“So, let’s fix some dates.”

“I don’t exactly have a full schedule.”

“Apart from psychology, and whenever your family visit?”

Eve smiled, leaning into Elly’s fingers briefly before they left her skin and rested back in Elly’s lap. They decided to meet up on a Saturday each week, for as long as they needed to. Eve insisted she take Elly out for dinner, which Elly agreed to after pretending to protest.

Once plans had been made, they sat in silence, staring out of the window, their hands still connected between them. Elly turned first towards Eve, smiling at the way her fringe fell across her eyes a little. Eve’s cheeks were pink and her gaze dropped back to their hands.

“It feels so strange to think you won’t be coming back tomorrow.” A visible shudder slid across Eve’s shoulders.

Elly rubbed her thumb over the back of Eve’s hand. “It’s alright.” She leant against her upper arm, then took a chance and rested her chin on Eve’s shoulder.

Taking the hint, Eve pulled her hand away but only to slide it around Elly’s back.

Elly closed her eyes and inhaled close to Eve’s neck. She smelled of lavender and Elly wondered for a moment whether Eve had applied the oil she’d given her, perhaps to calm herself down. Elly hoped Eve didn’t feel too anxious. *She might have another nightmare and I won’t be here.* Elly pushed the thought away. *She’s not my responsibility. I’m not her mother. She has the staff here, and she shares with Jess.*

Eve’s fingers started to trail little patterns against her hip.

Elly’s entire body tensed, but she stayed close, and allowed the touch. *It’s okay, it feels nice. It’s not scary.* She swallowed and forced her breathing to remain slow.

“That okay?” Eve whispered, and she could mean nothing but the way she was touching her.

“Very close to okay,” Elly admitted, but then clarified. “Closer than anyone has ever been to okay.” She lifted her head and they smiled at one another.

“Makes me really glad, that.”

A knock sounded on Elly’s door.

Elly rolled her eyes and shifted sideways on the bed, so that there was a good two feet of empty space between them.
Maggie pushed the door open. Her eyebrow rose as she took in Eve’s presence, but she barely hid a smile and apparently chose not to comment. “Your meds await you.” She thrust her head towards the corridor.

Butterflies swarmed inside Elly’s stomach and her vision went blurry for a moment. *Oh goodness, here goes. Home time. Forever.* A warm hand at the small of her back, however, grounded her. When her vision cleared, Eve’s gaze was locked with her own and warmth seeped back into her body.

Elly stood on slightly shaky legs and the warmth at her back disappeared. *It’s okay. I can do this.* She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Surprising herself by smiling excitedly, she bent to grab her bags.

Eve hauled a spare shopping bag with a few things in it into both arms, and they left Elly’s final hospital bedroom behind.

***

Jess had smiled at Eve at least three times during the evening, and it made Eve feel all settled in her stomach. She got the feeling that Jess was over the worst of her depression, or whatever diagnosis or issues she had—she had never actually needed to ask—and that made her very satisfied. *Maybe I don’t taint people with my bad luck, after all. Jess seems to be feeling so much better. And we spend every night in the same room.*

When her phone buzzed with a call, at ten o’clock, Eve closed the bedroom door and was thankful that Jess was in the communal areas of the ward for the moment. “Hiya.” She pressed her mobile to her cheek as she flopped back onto her bed.

“How is it?”

“它’s okay,” Elly replied. “Kate made us a lovely roast dinner. Benji and his lovely lady came round for a drink or two. And now, as usual, I’m in my pyjamas and snuggled in my huge bed.”

Chuckling, Eve ran her fingertips along her teddy bear’s soft head. “Sounds perfect.” The desire to express how much she wanted to be right there with Elly was strong, but Eve held back from voicing her thoughts.

“We’re taking it slowly. And we have a plan.

“How d’you feel?” Elly asked.

Eve rolled her eyes amusedly, but sighed down the phone. “I’m a bit anxious. I don’t have my best friend here.”

“Is Jess out then?” Unease surfaced from beneath the teasing tone of Elly’s voice.

Eve wanted to put her right. “It’s you. I think you’re my best friend.” She faltered and her breath caught. “Oh. Is…is that okay?”

A low hum through the phone put her at ease. “As childish as it is to have best friends, I’d hasten to agree.”

Eve tapped her teeth with her fingernail and smiled. “Good.”
“Are best friends… allowed to think that their best friend is pretty?”

Eve barked out a laugh. “Yes. I think that’s acceptable.”

“Good. I do.”

“I do too.”

“Good.”

Eve shook her head in amused disbelief. *Sometimes, we really are complete plonkers.* “Anyway.”

“Anyway.”

“I should let you go.” They’d agreed to keep their phone conversations short, if only to allow Elly to sink back into normal life outside hospital.

“Probably best. Could do with an early night. And I’d never get to sleep if I talked to you all night, would I?”

Again, that teasing tone. Eve grinned, and felt her cheeks burning. “There could be many interpretations of that statement. But I’ll choose the most chaste.”

“Oh, you are a darling.”

“You’re very welcome. Now, off to sleep with you.” Eve tried to match the tease in Elly’s voice with her own.

“Good night, darling.”

For the first time in months, heat flooded down Eve’s belly and further. She stared at her own socked feet bemusedly, the gentle arousal unfamiliar and strange. She swallowed it down, allowed it to happen, and tried not to think about Elly in her pyjamas, cuddled up in bed. “Good night.” She hoped her voice wasn’t hoarse.

***

Their first official Saturday meet-up after Elly’s discharge took place at the pub they had visited the week before. Elly had left her car in the hospital car park and they had walked over together, their fingers brushing occasionally. Elly had wanted to take Eve’s hand in her own, but there were people about and a knot formed in her stomach when she imagined being seen like that. *I feel vulnerable and exposed. I’ve only just been discharged, what would people say?*

The pub, on the contrary, was quiet for a Saturday lunchtime. They sat opposite one another near the window again, and perused the menu’s they had collected from the bar. Elly rested her chin in her hand as she scanned the meals, her gaze settling on a chicken curry dish she’d had before and enjoyed. When she looked up, she noticed Eve was smiling at her. Giggling, she reached forward and took Eve’s fingers with her own. She felt a lot safer for some reason in the confines of the pub. “Hi.”

“I have a question,” Eve said. “But tell me to shut up if it’s not okay to ask.”

“Try me.” Elly bounced her eyebrows up twice, before sitting back expectantly.

“I was wondering…I mean…” Eve’s gaze slid to one side, her thumb rubbing back and forth across the menu’s laminated edge. “This…being attracted to…”

“Anyway.”

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“I was wondering…I mean…” Eve’s gaze slid to one side, her thumb rubbing back and forth across the menu’s laminated edge. “This…being attracted to…”
Elly let her fumble for a while, wondering whether Eve would eventually ask what she suspected she wanted to ask. In the end, she took pity on her. “Are you asking whether I was gay before I met you?”

Eve closed her mouth tightly and nodded.

“Well, I’m not gay. At least, I don’t think I am. I’m not sure what I am.” It felt very natural to skim her thumb over the back of Eve’s hand as she spoke. “I’ve always been attracted to men. And… around thirteen years ago… I realised I might be attracted to women too.”

The look in Eve’s eyes was comfortable and mellow. They both took a sip of their diet cokes with their free hands.

“There was this police woman…” Elly’s cheeks felt hot and she laughed. “Okay, seeing a pattern suddenly.”

Eve chuckled too.

“Anyway. I was investigating this police officer, as requested by her husband, for infidelity. There was something about her, something infuriating and terribly feminist about her. Like she hadn’t a care in the world. Which in the nineties was an uncommon, but very well-respected, thing.”

“I can remember.” Eve squeezed Elly’s fingers. “I remember being a detective back in those days. Old boys’ club, and all that.”

“Exactly. She was pretty, I suppose. Confident and… she exuded this sort of power over people. I don’t know.”

“What did you do?” Eve asked, the corners of her mouth turning upwards.

“I asked her out.”

“You did not.”

“I certainly did. Not in the most dignified of ways, I must admit, but I did it.”

“What did she say?” Eve’s eyes were deep and gentle.

“Oh, she said no. Had far too much work to do, you know.”

Eve nodded.

“I’m not sure I was quite her type, anyway. She was married to a man, and sleeping with a male colleague on the side, so…”

“Probably not the best start to a relationship anyway, hmm?” Eve smiled properly. “Having investigated her for her husband?”

“Indeed.” Elly tapped the menu. “I’m ready to order, if you are.”

“Sure, what would you like?”

Elly watched Eve as she stood at the bar, one knee bent and her elbows on the stained wood. The bartender came over straight away and took her order, then her payment, so Elly didn’t have long to watch her. She took the short time to glance over her body: the lean legs and long back, the angular shoulders and how Eve’s grey jumper hugged her waist.
She blinked and looked sharply away when Eve turned and came back, not wanting to be caught staring in any way.

The glint in Eve’s eyes meant she knew just what Elly had been occupying her time with.

Trailing a fingertip up and down the damp side of her glass, Elly sucked her bottom lip into her mouth for a moment. When she chanced a look at Eve, she sent her an apologetic look.

Eve simply looked shyly pleased. “Fifteen minutes.”

“Okay.”

Eve caught her hand again and relief flushed over Elly’s body. She felt a little braver. “What about you?”

“Me? I’m having the shepherd’s pie.”

“No.” Elly grinned and shook her head. “I meant…you know. Your sexual preference.”

“Oh. That.” Eve apparently tried to keep up the humorous façade for a second or two, then she nodded more soberly and smoothed the fingertips of her free hand against Elly’s wrist.

“I told you,” Elly reminded her gently.

“True. Okay.” Eve fixed Elly with a serious but affectionate gaze. “You’re the first woman I’ve ever…” She inhaled deeply and then let it out slowly.

Unable to keep the surprise from her face, Elly’s mouth opened, but no words came out.

“I know. Imagine.” Eve’s cheeks pinked and she looked away.

“No. I don’t…I don’t think…” Elly shrugged. “Anything, really. It’s your story, and it’s your journey.” She pushed her eyebrows down and leant closer. “I can’t imagine, actually. That must have been a…a shock. What with everything else you’ve had to go through recently.”

“Actually, it wasn’t.” Eve frowned and appeared deep in thought for a moment. Then she seemed to shake herself out of it, and focused back on Elly. “It crept up on me, when I met you. I just, sort of, knew. That I liked you.”

“How did you know?” Elly hoped her voice sounded curious, and not as if she was judging Eve.

“My stomach kept fluttering when you looked at me.” Eve shrugged, like it was nothing at all. “That hadn’t happened since I met my ex-husband.”

“I hope you fancied the socks off him, then,” Elly joked.

“I did. At the time. Before I discovered what a…” Eve huffed and shook her head, her shoulders dropping. “Anyway. Enough about him.” She traced circles against the table with a finger. “Do you mind?”

“That you’re attracted to me? Goodness no.”

“No, I mean… That you’re the first woman I’ve ever looked at and gone…” Eve lifted her eyes to Elly’s and the dilation of her pupils spoke volumes.

Elly blushed and smiled shyly. “Of course I don’t.” She giggled. “It’s flattering.”
Their food arrived, breaking the coy moment between them. Elly was glad of it. *I don’t think I could have continued with that much tension. Especially with an empty stomach.* They tucked in greedily and Elly made a special effort to scoop whole mouthfuls of curry onto her fork rather than the tiny morsels she often reverted to eating when she felt nervous.

She knew Eve noticed, and felt proud of the fact. *I want her to see that I’m okay. That I’m coping well, not just coping.* She enjoyed the food and murmured the fact around her fork.

Once their plates were empty, they left the pub hand-in-hand, the spring sunshine glinting off the small river they walked along on the way back to the ward. Elly held Eve’s hand firmly, not wanting to lose contact for a second. Now that she was used to touching someone’s hand with her own, she wanted to make the most of it. *Mark never gave me the chance. Not like Eve has.*

She must have looked like she was deep in thought, because, as they reached a field with a lone donkey in it, munching on some grass, Eve tugged her hand so that she stopped. They leant against the fence facing one another. Eve’s hand travelled up Elly’s forearm to her elbow and her fingers tickled her lightly through her jacket. “You okay?”

Elly decided on honesty. “I have something I want to tell you.”

Eve looked frightened for a moment, but obviously tried to cover it up with a smile.

“It’s okay. I’m not breaking up with you before we’ve even begun, I promise.”

“What then?” Eve looked at her through lowered lashes against the sunshine.

The trees rustled above them and the grass waved a bit in the breeze. Everything looked peaceful and golden, including Eve’s hair. Cars drove past a few streets away, but here was calm.

“My ex. Mark. I was with him at the time of my…ordeal.”

Eve nodded, but kept quiet.

“We….we had a sexual relationship before it all happened, and although things weren’t perfect, they were okay. I think I was happy, sometimes.”

Again, Eve let her continue.

“But afterwards. I didn’t want to be touched. Mark gave me time, probably far too much time, actually, but I never got to a place where I was comfortable doing…anything. We tried. A few times, as I recall. I panicked each time and we had to…had to stop.” Heat rose in her cheeks and she looked across the field towards the donkey, who seemed oblivious to the turmoil swirling inside her. “In the end, he gave up. Said it wasn’t worth it.”

A tear slid down Elly’s cheek before she could stop it. And before she could catch it, Eve’s fingertip had swiped it away, and she’d stepped forward and offered her open arms. Elly stepped up too, her eyes closing against Eve’s neck as she allowed Eve to hold her.

“You wanted me to know that?” Eve murmured into Elly’s hair.

Elly nodded, her lips brushing the skin of Eve’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I know it’s probably changed everything…”

“Not at all.” Eve rubbed her back up and down, but Elly noticed she kept her touch gentle and her arms slack, so that Elly could move out of them if things got too much. She didn’t feel overwhelmed,
didn’t feel the too-familiar rising panic as Eve’s body heat warmed her own. She sagged a little against Eve, a breath of relief releasing from her aching lungs.

“Really?” Elly sniffed and turned her head to one side. She slid her hands around Eve’s waist and held her too.

“Nothing has changed. We have plenty of time. I still have some soul searching to do, and an admission to finish. You have stuff to do… get back to work… all that. No need to get ahead of ourselves.”

“But… but what if I can never…” Gulping, Elly pressed close into Eve’s arms.

“Then we don’t.” Eve’s shoulders lifted and then dropped.

Pulling back and dropping her head to one side, Elly frowned at her. “But… wouldn’t you need…”

“I haven’t needed that from someone for years. I mean…” She grinned and swept the backs of her knuckles down Elly’s cheek. “You know. If it does come to that and we… do get that far… I’d like to. Don’t get me wrong, I’d really like to.” She shrugged again. “But it’s not a requirement for us being in each other’s lives.”

Elly stared at her, another tear threatening to tumble down her face. She blinked rapidly and grasped Eve’s wrist, moving her hand away from her face. *A little too intimate. I hope she understands.* The look in Eve’s eyes suggested she did.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Eve replied to Elly’s unspoken question.

Elly nodded, a little uncertain, but willing to hope. “Let’s see what happens.”

“At least I know now that it’s a problem for you. That’s important.” Eve looked away, towards the donkey. She scuffed at the dusty ground with the toe of her boot. “I’d prefer not to… force you to… do anything you weren’t comfortable with.”

“Thank you.” Elly didn’t know what else to say so she closed her mouth.

They turned as one back towards the hospital grounds, their hands firmly linked together.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

More dates, and Eve gets discharged.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few Saturdays went much the same way. They went for dinner at the village pub close by, walked along the stream and stopped at the donkey field.

Three weeks later, Elly leant against Eve’s shoulder as they both rested their elbows on the fence, the trees with pink blossom swaying heavily above them. She held out her bare forearm, turned her wrist upwards and studied it. The scars were still there, and she knew they probably wouldn’t disappear altogether, but they were pale and thin. Elly remembered how they were for weeks after she’d made them: angry and red and puffy.

Eve nudged her gently. “You alright?”

Elly held out her wrist.

Eve peered closely at it. “Is that where you…” She swallowed and pushed her eyebrows down.

Elly nodded but didn’t want to talk about it. “The…touching exposure work we were doing. All those weeks ago?”

“What about it?”

“I just…wondered…whether you’d consider…” Elly gave up on verbalising exactly what she wanted and held out her wrist again. “I think we got to wrists, didn’t we?”

“Did we? I forget.” Eve looked very serious. Elly didn’t want to bring the mood down; they had been having such a nice, relaxed time together.

“If you don’t want to…I mean we don’t have to. Maybe it’s not the kind of thing…”

Eve’s fingers tickled against the skin of her wrist and Elly’s words trailed away. She looked down at her wrist and felt a flutter in her chest. Warmth flowed over her skin and up her arm. The fine hairs rose there and she settled her cheek back against Eve’s shoulder.

“Okay?” Eve’s voice was less than a whisper.

“Yes.”

Eve traced patterns along her wrist, down to the fleshy part of her thumb and back up. She zigzagged over the white scar as if she was decorating it, then trailed her fingertip up Elly’s arm.

“Would you hold my wrist?” Elly shivered despite the warm late-spring air.

“Would you be okay with that?” Eve’s breath ruffled Elly’s fringe.
“I want to try it.” Elly lifted her head and looked directly into Eve’s eyes. “I want for it to be okay.”

“Just tell me to back off if it’s scary.”

Elly nodded. She held both arms out and felt a lump forming in her throat, but lifted her chin defiantly. *I will not let my fear control me. It’s not that psychopath. It’s Eve.*

Her gaze on Elly’s, Eve took both of Elly’s wrists and circled her fingers and thumbs around them. Elly tensed and winced. Eve pulled away, but Elly shook her head.

“No. Please. It’s okay.”

“It’s just me,” Eve whispered. She held Elly’s forearms and bent down to press her lips to one of Elly’s scars.

A rush of air escaped from between Elly’s lips. When Eve straightened, their gazes locked again. Elly bit her lip, and then forced herself to relax.

“Let’s try some distraction,” Eve said, her mouth turning up at one corner. “Tell me where we’re going to go for coffee once I’m discharged.”

Elly exhaled on a laugh. “Oh. Somewhere terribly fancy. The smell of coffee beans freshly ground.”

Eve smiled fully and smoothed her thumbs against Elly’s skin.

“Homemade cake, lots of lovely music playing on the stereo. Maybe some board games littered about the place.”

“I’m going to absolutely thrash you at Scrabble.”

Another laugh. “Yes, I expect you are.”

They quietened and Elly glanced down. Eve was holding her wrists firmly but gently. Elly’s heart rate had slowed to a steady thumping and the blood wasn’t rushing in her ears any more.

“How’s that?” Eve tilted her head to the side.

“Good.” Elly lifted her own arm and kissed Eve’s finger. They both grinned and Eve let her go.

“To get used to being touched?” Eve nodded. “Of course I will.”

“Only if it’s…only if it’s okay. I don’t want you to…”

“Don’t be silly.” Eve leant sideways against the fence and dipped her head so that her fringe covered her eyes. “Anything that makes you smile like that is absolutely worth it.”

Elly’s cheeks felt hot as she leant over the fence to pluck some grass from the edge. She held it out and a nearby donkey looked up at her. She waved it and he came over.

The donkey munched the grass and Elly took a chance, skimming the back of her hand over his soft nose. “Well, you’re gorgeous, aren’t you?”

“I bet you say that to all the donkeys,” Eve murmured and when Elly turned back to her, she found her beaming.
“Just the ones I like.”

***

Back at home, Elly sat at the dining room table with a magazine whilst Kate pored over a beige-coloured file. Elly tried to see what was written but Kate smacked her away. “Do you mind? This is confidential.”

“Oh come on, let me look? Just a little peek?”

“No.” She narrowed her eyes at Elly. “You’ve been home a month. It’s too soon, Elly.”

“At least let me advise. I haven’t lost all my skills since I went into hospital, you know.”

“Fine. Woman caught her husband cheating two years ago. Suspects he’s out doing it again. Honestly, I don’t know why these people get a second chance. They wouldn’t get one from me.”

“It is not for us to judge, just to catch the bastard in the act.” Elly leant her chin on her hand and pulled a thoughtful expression onto her face. “So, surveillance? Catch him at it again? Check out his work, what time he leaves? Talk to his friends?”

“Box-standard really, isn’t it?” Kate sipped her tea. “Not really enough to tax the brain.”

“Let me have it then?”

“No. I’ve already met the client.” She studied Elly carefully, then sat back. “You can have the next one.”

“When did you become the boss of this company?” Elly teased.

“When I found you in a pool of your own blood last year.”

Elly looked away. As usual, Kate’s straightforward way of expressing herself had caught her a little off-guard. It wasn’t a joke, not exactly. Just a statement of fact and something Kate obviously wanted to make sure Elly remembered, if only to save her from the past repeating itself.

“Point taken.” Elly took a deep breath and turned back to Kate.

Kate was smiling, an affectionate spark in her eye. “The next one. So long as it’s simple, not too traumatic, and only involves a bit of light investigative work.” She pointed at Elly with her pen in a half-motherly, half-teasing way.

Elly smiled. “Deal.”

***

On an evening where the sun shone brightly through her bedroom window and the birds were out twittering and feeding their newly-fledged children, Eve’s phone rang. Jess sloped politely out of the bedroom as Eve picked it up. “Mum, hiya.”

“Eve, how are you today?”

“I’m good. I slept really well last night and psychology went well this morning so… yeah, I’m good.”

“Are you supposed to be ‘good’ after your sessions with the psychologist?”
She tried not to groan out loud. “Well,” Eve said, leaning against her headboard and stroking her teddy bear’s head idly, “I’m not saying it was all sunshine and rainbows. But we’ve got to the part where I look at my life and decide how it can be made better.” She bit her lip. “How I can make it better myself. Taking control, you know?”

“Well that sounds very…it sounds lovely.”

Eve didn’t think her mother was wholly convinced, but she let it slide. Annie wasn’t sure about many of the things Eve did on the ward, including her psychology. *Typical northern mother, suspicious of any airy-fairy talking therapy. I expect she thinks it’s all pretending to be a tree in the wind, or something.*

“Anyway, the reason I was phoning.” Annie’s voice was all business. “We went to see a house today and I’m happy to say we signed the contract.”

“Oh, that one in Highgate?”

“Yes, that’s right. Very nice, lovely high ceilings and the kids each get their own room. I’ll have the smallest bedroom and you can have the master. It’s an en suite.”

“I don’t mind having the little room if you’d prefer.”

“No, Eve, that’s okay. You’re young enough to find someone that you might like to share it with so…I’m well past that now.”

“No you’re not. I know lots of women that have found romance later on in life.” The image of Elly’s smiling face flashed across Eve’s mind’s eye, making Eve smile.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll have enough problems telling a man that you live with your mother. Not that he deserves you if he doesn’t understand your situation in my opinion…”

Eve bit her lip and paused. *Should I tell her?* “On that subject, I actually have something to tell you.”

“What’s that?”

Eve’s heart hammered. “Well, I don’t know if this is a bit too big to tell you over the phone. Lord knows I perhaps should have told you sooner or…anyway. I suppose I’ve started now, so I’d better continue.”

“Just spit it out, girl.” Annie sounded frustrated at Eve’s stumbling.

“Um…okay. Well, you remember Elly? The woman I briefly shared a room with here?”

“Ah yes, that pretty girl with all the hair. Yes I remember her.”

“Well she…we…sort of…” Eve growled and smacked her palm down into the hospital mattress. “We’re kind of…close.”

“Oh, I did think you’d made a friend. I’m not sure how happy I am with you being friends with someone in a mental health facility; however, I suppose one must socialise in these places.”

Eve bit back a retort, took another long breath in and set her jaw. “Okay, well, whatever you think, we’re quite close and…well…we’re waiting until I’m discharged and she’s been discharged already so…”

“You seem all a-fluster, Eve. Has this woman been nasty to you?”
“No, mum. Quite the opposite. We’re very close. And once I’m out of hospital, we’re going to meet up for coffee.”

“Hmm, well, I suppose you won’t have any friends when you’re discharged, a new place and everything. I suppose I can allow it.”

What am I a child? Eve sighed. She lost her nerve. “Okay, thanks. She’s lovely, you’ll see. Very up together. She lives with a friend and they run a business together.” Somehow, Eve didn’t think her mother would approve of Elly being a private detective, so she left that information out.

“She can’t be that mentally unwell then. Good. Okay.”

***

Annie and the children moved down south the week after, into a four-bedroomed house near Highgate Cemetery. Annie picked Eve up from hospital on the way, the small van carrying all the essentials they needed arriving before they did. Their things were unloaded before they even got there. Annie waved the removal company off and led Eve and her children into the house.

It was in a pretty area with lots of greenery and the rent was just about affordable. Eve wished she could afford something a little bigger, but it would have to do for now. They had a garden, and a driveway, and the kids seemed happy, so Eve was happy. The junior and secondary schools were not far away.

Eve unpacked her belongings in her bedroom, which was light and airy, feeling a little strange knowing she wouldn’t be sleeping in the bed just yet. The big window displayed the garden, and the trees lining the street. Laughter from the kids’ bedrooms filtered from across the hallway.

Claire and Robin raced into the room and bounced on her freshly made bed. Eve chuckled and lay on her back. Claire cuddled up to her side. “My room is so the biggest.”

“It’s really not,” Robin argued, pouting and folding his arms.

Claire giggled. “It is a bit bigger than yours. And it’s green and that’s my favourite.”

“Mine’s red. It’s awesome.”

Claire fidgeted and plucked at Eve’s necklace. “You’re coming home soon, Mum?”

Eve stretched an arm under Claire’s head and filtered her hand through her long ponytail. “Course. Just a couple of weeks now.”

“We’ve missed you,” Robin said, sitting against the foot of the bed with his legs crossed. He fingered the throw on the end of her bed.

“I’ve missed you too, so much.”

“You’re well now, yeah?” Robin didn’t look at her.

“I’m very close to being well.” Eve studied her son with his serious face and floppy hair. “And I’ll continue to get well once I’m home.”

“Why did you get poorly?” Claire’s small fingers pulled Eve’s pendant one way and then the other, along the chain.

Pulling her lip into her mouth, Eve felt fluttery bees in her stomach. Her gaze drifted towards the
bedroom door, out into the hallway. Annie was downstairs, sorting out the kitchen things.

“Yeah, how come you got poorly?” Robin shifted a bit closer to her and poked her leg with his toe.

“Well it’s…” Eve took a large breath in. “Something very scary happened to mummy at work. And because of that, I’ve been having nightmares.”

“Oh,” Claire said in dismay and stroked Eve’s cheek.

Eve placed her hand over Claire’s, holding it snug to her. “Sometimes, I have the nightmares in the daytime, when I’m not even asleep. They’re different—they’re called ‘flashbacks’, and they happened sometimes to people if something really frightening happens, and they don’t quite process it properly.”

“Nanny says you broke a window at work.”

“She told you that?” Eve stared at her son.

He fidgeted. “No. I overheard her telling someone on the phone.”

A rock settled in Eve’s stomach at the thought that her own mother had been gossiping about her breakdown. Or whatever they’re calling it. “I did do that.”

“Why?” Claire looked curious and concerned in equal measures.

“Because I had a flashback. I thought I saw a bad person in the window. I was frightened.”

“So…you had a day nightmare?” Claire leant up on one elbow.

“That’s right.”

“Mum, that must have been really scary.” Robin’s expression was very serious.

Eve reached for his hand and he willingly took her fingers in his.

“I’m really sorry that happened, Mum.” He squeezed her hand.

“It’s not your fault, darling.”

“What can we do to make you better?” His eyebrows were pushed down and his eyes searched the duvet as if for answers.

Claire rolled against Eve’s side again and buried her face in Eve’s neck. “You just need lots of cuddles. That’s what Nanny said. Lots of cuddles and kisses.”

“Oh well, she’s right.” Eve squeezed Claire around the shoulders. “It’s on prescription.”

“What’s ‘prescription’?” Claire asked.

Robin looked up. “It means the doctor wrote a thingy for it. Like mum’s tablets.”

“Oh.” Claire thought for a moment, and then grinned. “Okay. I’ll give you cuddles and kisses.”

Eve rolled them over and hugged her daughter close. “That’s all I’ll need, love.”

***
Two days before Eve’s discharge date, Elly arrived for a visit. Their eyes glinted at one another, but they remained at a distance until they were in Elly’s car.

“How are you doing?” Elly squeezed Eve’s fingers before letting her go and turning on the engine.

“Terrified. My mother is coming to pick me up after she’s collected the kids from school.”

“Your first overnight leave,” Elly sang, such pleasure lighting up her face that it made Eve’s insides tingle. “What is it that terrifies you? The new house?”

“Actually, no.” Eve felt her face twisting in discomfort.

“Not your lovely mother, surely?” Elly teased, swinging them neatly out of the carpark and up the main road.

“Maybe.” Eve eyed her. “Is that awful of me?”

“No.” Elly glanced quickly at her before focusing back on the road. “I’m still a bit scared of Kate, if I’m honest. She’s a force to be reckoned with.”

Eve laughed. “I like her more and more each time you talk about her.”

“I told her about you…well. She guessed.”

Regret flooded Eve’s stomach. “Um…I actually tried to tell mum about…well, about us.”

“Was she upset?” Elly’s voice was soft.

“No. She accepts that I need to make friends in the area.”

“Friends?” Elly’s gaze was pointedly on the road, and her knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

“I may have failed to get my exact point across.” Eve chewed her lip. “I’m sorry. I think she’s just coming round to the notion that I’m not going to punch out any more windows. I think being attracted to a woman, let alone one I was in a mental health hospital with, would be a little too much.”

Silence stretched like elastic, but didn’t ping back. Elly sighed and her grip loosened on the steering wheel. “I suppose it’s a lot to expect. Being out and proud, or whatever the term is.”

“And we are keeping it slow, aren’t we?” Eve tried to catch Elly’s eye, but of course she was driving.

“Yes. We are.” Blinking a few times, Elly straightened and wiggled her shoulders, perhaps to relax them as well as her hands. “Sorry. I suppose my insecurities are showing through.” She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. “Not wholly attractive.”

“I think you’re allowed to feel insecure, the things you’ve been through.”

Elly nodded. “Thank you.” She pulled the car into a small carpark and turned off the engine. The sides of her mouth pulled upwards.

“Where have you brought us?” Eve looked around. “I’m really not familiar with anything ‘round here.”
“I thought it’d be nice to show you some of the lovely parks.” Elly pulled the handbrake, grabbed her keys and swung the door open.

Eve followed suit, squinting at the bright morning sun. She spotted a sign. “Parliament Hill.”

“That’s right. You can see all across the city if we get to the top. It’s pretty.” Elly smiled at Eve over the top of the car.

Eve closed her door and laid her forearms atop the roof. “Sounds lovely.”

“There’s a pool down that way.” Elly pointed to the side. “But I think it’s a bit chilly still for a dip.”

“In my clothes? No thank you.” Eve pushed away from the car and joined Elly as she walked away and locked the car with the remote over her shoulder.

“Hmmm. No maybe not.” A playful sparkly shone from Elly’s dark eyes and Eve couldn’t help but smile back at her.

They walked along the path, side by side, for a while, just enjoying the fresh air and being in one another’s company.

“I googled your address,” Elly said and stopped walking. She pointed along the horizon. “It’s just over there.”

Eve squinted into the sun and nodded. “Looks familiar. I’ve only been once so…” She shrugged.

“And over there…” Elly pointed to the left. “You can just about see The Shard.”

Stepping up to her side and leaning into her body space, Eve put her hand up to shade her eyes. Elly visibly shivered and took a step away.

“Oh, sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Elly looked around her, as if suddenly aware of how exposed they were on top of the hill.

“Hold my hand,” Eve said, her palm up and fingers splayed. “If you want to.”

Elly stared at Eve’s hand for a while, her gaze flicking back up to the expanse of space all around them every so often. Then she shivered again, but stepped close and snugly fit her fingers between Eve’s.

When their gazes met, Elly smiled at her. “It’s just…I just…” Elly huffed, perhaps at her own lack of articulation, and smoothed down her jacket with her free hand. “I usually have issues with small spaces, not wide, open ones.”

“Let’s sit down.” Eve tugged on her hand and they found a bench to sit. A few people walked past but they didn’t pay them too much notice.

Elly gazed down at their joined hands and her mouth tugged upwards at the corners.

“Would you like to hear about something I managed to do?”

Big brown eyes lifted to her own and Elly nodded.
“I told my kids that I’m a loony.”

Elly nudged her with her shoulder. “Shut up, you didn’t.”

“Okay, maybe I didn’t use that exact term but…basically I told them why their mummy isn’t very well.”

Blinking, Elly’s smile brightened. “How did they take it?”

Eve sighed and nodded. “Not badly. They asked questions. Robin understood more than he let on, I think. And I’m not sure if that makes me proud or upset.” Eve looked down at her shoes. She scuffed the toe of one on the grass peeking out from below the concrete. “I don’t want him knowing too much about it, the details. He’s only eleven.”

“I don’t know a lot about kids, I’ll admit.” Elly tilted her head to the side and the sun gleamed gold against her dark hair. “But I think, because we hope they’ll be innocent forever, we underestimate them sometimes.” Shifting closer to Eve, Elly kept her gaze steady.

“I needed them to know, just in case I have a flashback at home. They’d be so scared, seeing that. But I explained that it was like a nightmare when you’re awake. And they got it, I think.”

“That’s great. It must have been a difficult thing to tell your children.”

Eve stared out at the view of the city. Sun reflected off the glass of several skyscrapers. She inhaled sharply as the image of a scalpel hit her like a cold wall of water.

Her vision went fuzzy. The clanking of metal against metal echoed through her ears. She gripped something below her, the seat she was on. Every muscle in her body screamed.

When she came to, she was bent forward and all she could feel was a warm hand at her back. Then, the fingers between her own squeezed and lifted. Soft breath covered her fingers before lips pressed against her knuckles. “It’s okay. You’re safe.”

Pulling one foot onto the bench—and she now remembered it was, in fact, a bench she was sitting on—Eve gripped her knee instead with the hand not in Elly’s. The warm hand—Elly’s other hand—smoothed up and down her back. The touch was soothing, like warm waves lapping at one’s skin on a sunny beach. That was an image that worked, so Eve stuck with it. She imagined Elly was there too, in the large sunhat she’d never seen her wear, at least not in real life.

Her breathing, which had become ragged and sharp, eased off. Her heart steadied. Her grip on her own knee and on Elly’s hand loosened.

“It’s alright.”

The air rushed out of Eve’s chest. She sunk against Elly’s side.

The hand in her own pulled away, but only to wrap around her back and pull her closer. Soft lips brushed her forehead.

“That’s it. You’re okay.”

“I’m okay.” Eve’s voice was croaky and thin. She cleared her throat and blinked rapidly for a while. Her vision cleared as well, and the hill and the surrounding buildings snapped back into focus.

Shivering, Eve leant away.
Elly’s arm remained around her shoulders, her fingers stroking her neck. “We can cuddle for a moment more, if you like.”

“I’m okay.” *I need to do this without Elly. And that’s okay.*

Elly tickled Eve’s neck once more before dropping her hand back to her own lap. “Okay.”

Eve turned and swallowed, before smiling weakly at her. “Sorry.” She stared out at the building that her caused her flashback and scowled at it. “Bloody skyscrapers. Tricking me into thinking they’re…” She trailed off as someone walked passed them.

“We should get back.” Elly sounded disappointed. “Maybe it was too much to bring you up here.”

“No. It’s beautiful. It’s just my brain, being triggered by mundane stuff. I expect it’ll happen everywhere.”

“I don’t like you being scared.”

“I don’t like *being* scared.” Eve slid her fingers between Elly’s again. “But I do like being around you.”

Elly eventually looked up, her gaze hesitant. She seemed to notice Eve’s sincerity and a smile drifted back onto her face. “Alright then.”

“The more I’m exposed to the world, the easier I’ll find the world.”

“You’re ever-so wise, d’you know that?”

Eve laughed. “We’ll I was top of my class, you know. At Police School.”

“Police School? They don’t call it that.”

The banter was back and Eve felt the butterflies starting up again in her stomach. “That’s what Claire calls it when she plays with her friends at school.”

“Sweet.”

“Takes after her mother, obviously.”

Elly giggled, then stood and pulled Eve up with her. “Come on. Back to the ward before your mother arrives and wonders where you are.”

“Yes Miss.”

***

Eve’s overnight leave at home had gone well. She had helped her mother prepare dinner. They’d all sat round the dining table and chatted. It had been wonderful hearing about Claire and Robin’s days at school. Robin seemed a lot happier. *Maybe the kids at his new school aren’t giving him a rough time. This move has been good for all of us.* Annie had treated her like a part of the family again as well, rather than someone to be feared. Eve was overwhelmingly glad.

Her consultant had decided that her one night’s leave was enough. She was being discharged. Eve wondered whether it was a good thing, to know on the day and not have time to get anxious about it. She sat on her bed and considered this, her fingers tapping on the firm hospital mattress, the bed linen gone for the wash.
A thin face poked around the door. Jess smiled shyly at her. “Hi.”

“Hiya.” Eve shifted to the edge of the bed and beckoned Jess inside. “Look. Room to yourself again.”

“Yeah, until they admit someone else into your bed.” Jess shrugged. “Won’t be long.”

“Never mind. Maybe the next person won’t be as absolutely awful as me.”

Jess’s smile broadened. “You’ve not been so bad.”

“Oh, so you are going to miss me?”

“You and your interfering self.” Jess pulled at the bandage that still encircled her wrist. Her gaze found Eve’s again. “Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome.” Eve stood as Jess came towards her and held her arms wide.

Stepping into them, Jess ducked her head and sighed against Eve’s ribs. “I’m gonna have to find another mother figure.”

“Try Maggie, she’s pretty old.”

Jess pulled away, blatantly horrified. “I didn’t mean…”

“Oh shush,” Eve laughed pulling her back in. “I was joking.”

When Annie arrived to collect her, Eve was waiting in the tea drinking area.

“Very prompt,” Annie said, nodding her approval.

“Well, we said ten, didn’t we?”

“True. Still, usually you leave things until the last minute. We won’t be doing that with the kids’ morning routines, just so you are aware.”

Eve tried not to smile, but nodded solemnly. “Yes, mum.”

“Good.”

They carried Eve’s bags out to the car and Rachael came with them, a plastic zip-lock bag in her hand. She shoved it in Eve’s lap when she got into the car. “No forgetting your meds, now.” Rachael seemed to have wet eyes.

“Thank you, Rachael.”

“That’s okay. Blimey, look at me going all soft. Don’t tell anyone, please.”

Eve chuckled. “Of course not. Elly told me you were the nicest staff nurse, so there’s a secret you can have in exchange.”

“My two love birds, finally flying the nest.” Rachael sighed exaggeratedly and patted Eve’s shoulder. “You’ve both done so well. I’m so pleased.”

“Maybe we’ll come visit, at some point. When we’ve both managed to get some normality back.”

“That would be lovely,” Rachael replied, stepping back as Annie started the car. “But I don’t want to
see you back as an inpatient, okay? No more of that. Go live your lives.”

“Alright.”

Rachael disappeared behind them as Annie pulled away.

Eve sighed, closed her eyes and sunk back against the headrest. After several minutes of driving, Eve started to fidget. She could feel the heat of Annie’s gaze occasionally on her, between looking at the road.

“What did she mean?” Annie’s words were clipped.

“When?” Eve asked, her eyes still closed.

“She said ‘love birds’. What did she mean?”

Eve opened her eyes and begun to play with the plastic bag containing her medications. “I’m not sure we should have this conversation whilst you’re driving.” She tried to sound calm, like it wasn’t a huge deal, but her mother, unfortunately, knew her far too well.

Annie indicated, pulled the car to the side of the road and pulled the handbrake on. “There. Now talk.”

Her lip between her teeth, Eve felt bile rising in her throat. She’d hoped to sidestep the issue, at least for the first few weeks of being at home. But, she supposed, she had to face the music at some point. “Elly and I. I told you, we’re close.”

“But you’re not love birds.” A statement, not a question.

“Not…officially. But we’ve admitted we do like one another. Like that. You know.”

“I know?” Annie smacked her palms against the steering wheel.

Eve jumped and shrunk backwards. “Yes. We’re attracted to one another. I think perhaps I might love her. I’m not really sure yet.”

“Attracted? Like…like les…” Annie stared at her own hands. Then she looked all around them, at the cars rushing passed them on one side, and a mother with a buggy on the pavement on the other.

“Yes,” Eve said, mustering up her courage, despite the look of obvious disgust in Annie’s eyes. “Like lesbians. I’m not sure the word really describes me exactly. Elly’s the only woman I’ve…”

Annie leaned right across Eve’s lap and pushed the passenger door open. “Out.”

“W…what?” Eve stared at her.

“Get out. I’m not having you in this car.”

Eve’s jaw dropped.

Annie’s emphatic arm gesture was enough to convince Eve that Annie was serious. She got out of the car, clutching her medication to her. Annie reached into the back and threw her backpack out towards her. It hit Eve on the shin.

Annie drove off with a squeal of tires.
Eve looked after her in horror, the dust swirling around her feet. She blinked, trying to comprehend what had just happened. *Did she just drive off without me? I've just been discharged from hospital and she’s just left me in the middle of London?*

*Shit.*

Eve stared up and down the street for a few minutes, unsure what she should do. Should she phone the ward and get them to come help? Should she try to ring her mother and see what on earth was going on?

Eve had exactly no idea where she was. A church stood looming on the other side of the road, the gravestones stark against the lush green grass in front of it. A path bisected the graveyard.

Eve stuffed her medication into her backpack, then hauled the backpack onto her shoulder and carefully crossed the road. *Would be just my luck to get hit by a car, the minute I'm off the ward.* She thought briefly that it would serve her mother right if Eve got knocked over, but she quickly pushed that thought away. *I'm supposed to be getting my life back. And deliberately hurting myself like that just to get back at my mother would not be the way to do it.*

She sat on a stone wall by the church and took out her phone. Staring at the stars and hearts pattern that Claire had chosen as her background for a moment, she took a deep breath.

She called the only person she knew in London who would want to come get her, and wouldn’t think she needed to be back on the ward.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry. That ending came right out of the blue.
Elly rubbed her palms together and then placed them on the beige file. The basement was just as she had left it, if a little tidier. Over the years, Kate and she had adorned the space with various decorative items; a flower here, a string of beads there. And a big beautiful canvas depicting a moonlit forest with a deer lonesome under a tree hanging from the wall.

The previous, and downright aggressive, landlord had left for greener pastures and the new lady had treated them well. The rent had not been increased during the last five years and they barely saw her. Apparently, she trusted them to keep the place clean and intact.

They now had a large shelving unit for the files, which were arranged in alphabetical order along the wall. A filing cabinet stood on one corner for their contacts, and was locked when they weren’t in the building. The only traces of Larry that remained were the outdated devices they still used on occasion—bugs and the like—grouped together in boxes against the far wall. It felt lived-in and like a second home.

The corner of her mouth turned upwards as she took in the space and stuck her nose into her steaming cup of tea. “Back at the grindstone,” she murmured, more to herself than to Kate, who leant against the filing cabinet as she watered the spider plant that sat atop it.

“Complain, and I’ll send you home.”

Elly beamed at Kate’s raised eyebrow. “My lips are firmly sealed. So, when did this one come in?”

“When you were in the loo. Sounded reasonable, so I took the details and told Mr Jones you would see him tomorrow.” Kate gestured with the spout of the watering can. “He was on his way to work and busy this evening.”

“Can’t be that urgent.” Elly opened the file and flicked through it. “I’ll take my time.”

“You do that. Don’t they call it ‘pacing’? Isn’t that what your keyworker said?”

“That’s it. I’m supposed to take things steady, have breaks in between tasks.” Sighing deeply and in frustration, she fingered the corner of one page. “I know it’s for the best but…”

“You want to dive in. I understand.” Kate slipped passed her and squeezed her shoulder. “But, you might as well take all the advice you’re given.”

“They’re the professionals, I suppose.”

Burying her nose in the file, she almost didn’t notice her mobile going off. It buzzed across the table and she picked it up. Bright sparks exploded in her stomach as she saw who it was. “Eve, hey.”

Silence on the other end of the phone, then heavy breathing.
“Eve?”

“Elly.” Eve’s voice was broken. Is she crying?

“What’s the matter?”

“I…” Definite sobs.

“Eve?”

Kate threw her a concerned look and Elly pulled the phone away from her ear. “I’m putting you on speaker. Kate’s here.”

“Eve?” Kate asked, her voice unwavering. “Tell us what’s happened.”

A muffled gulp, then a sob. Elly reached towards the phone and stroked the side of it, as if the soothing gesture would transfer through the device and to the distressed woman on the other end.

“Eve?”

“I’m…God. I came out to my mother and…she just chucked me out.”

“Chucked you out?” Kate asked, incredulously. “What’d you mean?”

“She pulled over onto the side of the road…I’ve no idea where I am. Some church somewhere.”

“Are you somewhere safe?” Elly asked.

“Just sitting…sitting in a grave yard.”

“What do you need?” Kate put her hand on Elly’s arm, as if to stop her from offering help before Eve asked for it. Elly sucked her lip and nodded to Kate in understanding.

“I…I don’t have any cash…otherwise I’d get a taxi. Are you busy…or..?” Her voice remained thick with tears.

Elly stood. “Of course I’m not busy. I’ll come get you.” She strode to collect her car keys from the hook on the wall and came back to her phone. “Where are you?”

“St Andrew’s Church. Um…there’s a road sign just…wait a second.” Rustling as Eve apparently walked for a moment. “Oh. Harrington Street.”

“I know where you are.”

“Okay. I really don’t.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Elly?”

“Yes, darling?” Elly made sure her voice was gentle.

“I’m…I’m scared.”

“I’m coming. I’ll be ten minutes, okay?”

“Okay.”
“Just sit tight.”

Eve hung up.

Catching Kate’s eye as she rounded the table for her coat, Elly felt uncertainty flutter in her stomach. “I’m doing the right thing, aren’t I?”

“I’m not going to tell you what to do.” Kate’s gaze was steady. Elly gulped. “Okay.”

“Seems like she’s in a bit of a pickle.”

“Did she say she came out to her mum?” Elly pulled her coat on and smoothed down the collar.

“That’s what I heard.”

“What on earth…” Elly looked at her watch. “My goodness, they must have been on their way home from hospital. It’s barely lunchtime.”

“Keep in touch,” Kate insisted and Elly nodded as she started up the stairs and onto the balcony. When she reached the top, she hung over the railings.

“I will. Thank you, Kate.”

After breaking the speed limit for much of the way to the church, Elly caught sight of a bedraggled-looking figure hunched against a wall. She pulled in close to the pavement, turned off the engine and hopped out.

Eve took a large step towards her as she approached and lifted a visibly shaking hand.

Clasping the hand between both of her own, Elly searched Eve’s eyes for some kind of explanation. “What happened?”

Tears streaked Eve’s cheeks and her breathing was ragged. Her eyes darted side to side and shuddering washed over her from her head to her toes.

Elly cupped her elbow and led her through the wrought iron gate of the churchyard. She located a wooden bench and they sat. Eve leant forward, dropped her backpack onto the floor and gripped Elly’s fingers hard.

“I’m here now. We’ll deal with whatever has happened, okay?”

Eve nodded.

“Start from the beginning?”

Eve let out a shaky breath. “I ended up telling my mother I was…in love with you. That we were… thinking about becoming…you know.” Eve swallowed noisily. “She didn’t take it as well as I’d have hoped.”

“She chucked you out of the car?”

“And just drove off.” Eve stared down at her mobile. “She’s ignoring my calls and texts.” Her hand flew to her mouth as her entire body juddered with sobs.
Elly hesitated. *I feel vulnerable out here.* She looked around. They were hidden from the road by a large tree and various shrubs winding around the small churchyard. Tracing her fingers along Eve’s shoulder, she shifted closer to her on the bench.

Slumping sideways, Eve accepted an embrace, burying her face in Elly’s neck.

A steel fist tightened around Elly’s neck, but she pushed the fears away. Eve needed her, and she was going to give her whatever made her feel better. She pushed her nose into Eve’s hair and tucked a strand of it behind Eve’s ear. “It’s alright.” She made small shushing noises as Eve cried and continued to stroke her hair until Eve’s sobs turned into the occasional hiccup.

With a deep guttural sigh, Eve sat up again. She wiped at her face and her cheeks reddened. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’d much prefer you cry your eyes out than do something silly.” She rubbed at her own wrist.

Eve watched her hand and nodded. “Okay.”

Deciding upon giving Eve the control, Elly rubbed her shoulder and pulled a soft smile onto her face. “So, what’s the plan?”

Eve chewed her lip and gazed out into the churchyard for a few seconds. Then her shoulders flopped resignedly. “I suppose I ought to go to the house.” She shrugged. “I’ve nowhere else to go.”

Elly bit back an argument. She wasn’t sure how Kate would react to Eve coming home with her. “Good plan.” She took Eve’s hand and squeezed it before standing. “Come on then. I have a whole lot of tissues in my car.”

Eve followed Elly out of the gate again, her backpack gripping in both hands. “I suppose that’s a good thing to have when you’re working surveillance.”

Exactly right,” Elly said, pleased that Eve could look passed her predicament and make a joke. “Especially during hay fever season.”

Eve’s eyes glinted with both tears and amusement.

After Eve gave Elly her address, they travelled in relative silence. Eve dabbed at her nose and eyes with a tissue from the little box in the glove compartment. Elly wasn’t sure what she should do once they got to the house: leave Eve to deal with things alone, or hang around until she was sure Eve wasn’t going to be abandoned again. *She’s a grown woman, I should leave her to it, shouldn’t I?* Her head told her this was a sensible plan, but her chest hurt when she imagined leaving Eve with whatever Annie had to throw at her.

Eve made the decision for her. “Would you come with me? Inside, I mean?”

Elly glanced away from the road to find wide brown eyes trained on her. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

After parking at the side of the road, Elly followed Eve up the little path to the front door. The house was pretty, with a draping silver birch out the front, and a neatly cut lawn.

Eve knocked then blushed. “I don’t…I don’t have a key yet.”

“To your own home?” Elly forced herself to keep her thoughts about that to herself. She breathed
steadily to calm her mixed anxiety and anger. Annie doesn’t trust her yet. How can she not trust her? She’s done so well.

The door swished open. Annie’s startled face greeted them. “Eve.”

Elly lowered her gaze and stepped back.

“Mum. What the hell is going on?”

Annie looked around, her gaze flicking between the street and the two of them standing on the doorstep. “Not out here. Goodness, Eve, have you no qualms?” She stepped back and Eve moved inside. She looked towards Elly, who lingered uncomfortably on the path before joining her.

The door clicked as it closed. Annie walked purposefully into the kitchen and busied herself unloading the dishwasher, her back very much turned away from Eve.

“Mum. We need to talk about this.”

“I don’t know why you’re here.” Annie lifted a stack of plates and shoved them into a cupboard with a bang that made Elly jump. “I made my feelings about…things…perfectly clear.”

“You…left me on the side of the road like a bag of rubbish you couldn’t be bothered to take to the tip.” Strength shone through Eve’s tears and Elly’s heart surged. “I have just come out of hospital.”

Annie turned to them and placed her palms together. “What you told me…” Her gaze flicked to Elly. “Your feelings for this woman…” Her nostrils flared.

Elly shrank away, wished she could make herself as small as possible. Perhaps disappear altogether.

“You’ve obviously been influenced by whatever…hippie-type things they’ve been drumming into you on the ward.” She huffed and pulled her hand through her hair. “I knew it was bad for you, but you just wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Are you talking about the psychology?” Eve looked aghast.

“That namby-pamby nonsense. It’s confused you, made you believe things that aren’t true. And this…these feelings you have for…”

“Her name is Elly,” Eve stated, her arms folded over the straps of her backpack.

“Whatever her name is, you’ve been corrupted by…whatever.” Annie threw up her hands. “I’m going to call that bloody hospital and give them a piece of my mind.”

“Do what you like. Call them.” Eve pushed her mobile phone across the kitchen table. “I have the number in my contacts.” She stared hard at her mother. “Are you truly saying you don’t approve of how I feel? That being gay…or whatever this is…being attracted to another woman is disgusting?”

“I’m not homophobic,” Annie said, reaching for the phone but not picking it up. “I’ve always been respectful of people in the minorities, you know that.” She pulled out a chair and sat. “But I can’t accept that you went into hospital, had all this treatment and then came out with all these…inappropriate feelings.”

“I met someone I like. I didn’t mean for it to happen, Mum. But it did.” Eve slid into a chair at the table, opposite Annie. “It was a complete coincidence that it was in hospital. Had we have met somewhere else, it would have happened there too. At work, in the park, in the supermarket…”
Eve’s gaze drifted to Elly and her face softened. “I think Elly’s beautiful. What luck I got to meet her.”

“Luck.” Annie sounded tired, like she was running out of energy. “What about the kids? What are we to tell them?”

“We tell them the truth.” Eve shrugged.

“I’m not explaining to them how you…” Annie gestured wildly at Elly and then leant her head in her hand.

“Why not? Because they’ll get corrupted too?”

“Exactly!”

“No, Mum. It’s not 1901, it’s not abnormal anymore, and it’s not something I should be ashamed of. I’m allowed to love who I want and be attracted to whoever I’m attracted to.”

Annie started to wring her hands on the table in front of her. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not doing anything to you.” Elly was surprised and impressed with the solid tone of Eve’s voice. “This isn’t about you. It’s about me and it’s about Elly.”

Taking in a shaky breath, Annie looked first at Elly, then back at her daughter. She placed her hands onto the table and swallowed. “I need some time to think this through.”

“That’s fine. I’ll give you space. It’s a reasonably sized house. We don’t have to be in each other’s pockets.”

“No. I can’t have you here.”

Eve blinked. “This is my home.”

“I know. I know.” Annie growled and shook her head. “But I can’t have you here.”

“You’re chucking me out again?” Eve stood with a loud scrape of her chair.

Elly moved to her side and felt red hot lava rising up inside her. “You can’t possibly ask Eve to leave.”

“I can, and I will, young lady.”

Elly shrank back again.

“I will call you tomorrow. We’ll work something out.” Annie fiddled with Eve’s phone and pushed it back towards her. “I need to talk to the ward, speak with your consultant. Figure out what to do about this. I’m sure there are treatments you can have…”

Fists balled at her sides, Eve’s gaze on her mother hardened. “You’re not serious,” she whispered.

“Please leave. I’ll phone you tomorrow.”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

Elly studied Eve tentatively. “Um…we have a sofa you could stay on.”
“We?” Annie barked.

“Kate and I.”

“Elly lives with her friend and colleague.” Eve turned to Elly and flashed her a hopeful look.

“Not ideal.” Annie sat back. “But, if you’re being supervised, I’ll allow it.”

“She’s not my mother,” Elly whispered, the desire to run beginning to build inside her. She was having a hard time taking the derisive flame in Annie’s gaze. “She doesn’t run my life.”

“Maybe she should. You seem to have influences over people that maybe you shouldn’t have.”

“Mum, seriously, listen to yourself.” Eve snatched up her phone and turned to Elly. “Are you sure? You don’t think Kate would have a head fit?”

Elly chuckled despite her increasing flight response. “I’ll phone her before we leave. If you’re happy to come stay, that is?”

“As it looks like I’m not welcome here.” All the fight seemed to leave Eve in a whoosh. Her whole body sagged. She turned her gaze to her mother and a single tear trickled down her cheek. “What about Robin and Claire? What are you going to tell them?”

“I’ll say you’re still unwell and you had to stay in hospital for a night.”

“No.” Eve moved towards the front door. “Tell them the truth. Perhaps they’ll knock some sense into you.” She caught Elly’s hand and led her out of the house and back down the path. Elly tripped along behind her, trying to collect all the pieces of what had happened into her head and make some kind of sense of them all. I honestly didn’t know people still felt like this. Hasn’t the world moved on from this kind of hatred?

They sat in the car together and Elly could see Annie lingering by the kitchen window, perhaps making sure they left in a timely fashion.

After tapping the office number on her phone, Elly activated the speaker function. Kate picked up on the second ring.

“Elly. Are you okay?”

“Do we have caller ID?”

“Yes. Now, tell all.”

Elly reached to hold Eve’s hand, slipping her fingers in between Eve’s. “Well, it turns out Eve’s mother is having a hard time believing I haven’t corrupted her daughter. She thinks the therapy Eve has had has addled her brain and made her gay.”

“Lord. What a kerfuffle.”

“I’d say.” Elly took a deep breath. “She’s said she doesn’t want Eve in the house tonight. Would it be okay if she stayed with us?”

“On the sofa, of course,” Eve interjected. When Elly smiled at her, Eve pressed her lips together.

There was a pause. “Hmm. I must admit, I’m reluctant to the idea.”
Elly sagged in her seat. “Please. She’s got nowhere to go.”

Another pause, then a sigh. “Just because you asked so very nicely. And I’d like to be seen as the good guy here.”

“It’ll just be for one night.” Eve rubbed her thumb with a sense of relief over the back of Elly’s hand.

“Fine. Come on over. I’ll get the extra bedding out.”

***

Eve sat with her hands clasped against the cotton pyjamas covering her knees. The sofa was just about long enough for her, and the sheets Kate had allocated smelled fresh. *This is not how I imagined my first night out of hospital to be.* Sighing deeply, she looked around the stylish but slightly cluttered living room, taking in the various ornaments and glass lampshades that littered it.

Her phone rang just as Elly brought in two steaming mugs of tea. Eve picked up with one hand, the other taking the cup from Elly. She sunk her nose into the steam before saying: “Hi Mum.”

“Eve.”

Elly perched a foot away from her, offering unspoken support but not invading her space. She sipped delicately from her mug.

Eve tried to focus on Elly, on the glossy brown hair that curled against her shoulders. “Did you phone the ward?”

“I did.” Annie’s words were clipped, as if she didn’t actually feel like talking. *She’s phoned me, at least. She’s kept to that promise.* “I’m very sorry to say that I appear to have been mistaken.”

Eve allowed her to talk, sipped her tea and leant back against the soft cushions of the sofa. She relished the heat from the drink as it scorched her tongue just a bit.

Elly leaned back with her, her head turned to watch her, her knees pulled up underneath her backside.

“Apparently an attraction to someone of the same gender can happen later on in life. It’s nothing to do with your mental illness, and, apparently, nothing to be concerned about.”

Eve tried not to express her relief audibly. She’d been worried all afternoon that Annie would have spoken with a member of staff that had an issue with homosexuality. That perhaps her unfounded beliefs around the subject would be validated by some bigot that shouldn’t be anywhere near vulnerable people.

Brown eyes watched her with concern. Eve smiled and nodded encouragingly to Elly. Elly returned the smile.

“I’m glad you got to hear that from a professional,” Eve said. “At least now, you can rest at ease with the knowledge that I’m not a freak.”

“I never used that term,” Annie argued. “I was simply concerned.” A pause. “I’m still concerned.”

“Whatever your feelings, I still can’t believe you just left me in the middle of London.”

“It was a knee jerk reaction. You’ve no idea how hard it has been these last few months, Eve. Having to be mum and nanny to your children. Trying to keep everything together whilst you’ve
been languishing in hospital.”

“It’s not been a walk in the park for me either.” Eve flushed and put her tea down on the coffee table. She shifted closer to Elly and reached for her now free hand. “It’s been really difficult not only dealing with what I’ve been through, but also finding out I’m attracted to a woman. Although…” Eve smiled at Elly. “Not as difficult as it could have been. Elly’s been amazing.”

“I’ll admit, you do seem comfortable with this Elly.”

“I am.” The flame of the candle Elly had lit for her on the mantelpiece flickered and Eve tried to focus on the warmth that seemed to come from its glow. “So, what now?”

“The kids are in bed. And I don’t want to disturb them now.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That you’re staying with a friend for a night. But that you’ll be back tomorrow.”

“So, I’m still required to keep away, for tonight.”

“I told you, I’m not disturbing them now.”

Eve pressed the phone hard to her ear and sighed. Her stomach ached. “They’re my kids, Mum.”

“I know.” Annie sighed. “You’ll see them tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Eve found she had no energy left to argue.

“I will come collect you from this…Kate’s house…after I’ve dropped them off at school.”

“It’s Elly’s house too. But okay. I’ll be ready.”

“And we have a lot of talking to do.”

Blinking back tears, Eve held on to Elly’s fingers tightly. “Yeah. We really do.”

“Good bye, love.”

“Bye, Mum.”

The line went dead. Sobs bubbled up into Eve’s throat and she tried to push them away. But they refused to be ignored. Eve’s phone thunked onto the floor by her feet as she bent forward and lowered her face into her hands.

That wonderfully familiar and soothing hand rubbed up and down her spine, as it had so many times. Eve cried, her hands becoming slick with tears and her dripping nose. Something warm and fluffy wrapped around her shoulders. Once she’d quietened enough to look around, she realised Elly had pulled a woollen throw from the back of the sofa and snuggled it around her.

Elly held out a box of tissues. Eve took one gratefully and cleaned her face as much as she could.

“What did she say?” Elly asked in a small voice.

Eve laughed bitterly through her tears. “That she’s been corrected by the ward, but that she’s not willing to accept me home tonight.”
“That’s insane.” The emotion in Elly’s tone was evident. “How can she demand that of you?”

Eve just shrugged.

Elly rubbed her shoulder through the wool of the throw. “Well, you’re welcome here for as long as Kate says it’s okay.”

“I thought you said she wasn’t your keeper?”

Elly’s cheeks reddened. “I owe her a lot.” Sorrow flashed across her eyes.

“You do?”

Elly nodded, then seemed to shake herself. “Anyway, I need to make a good impression still. She gave me my first case yesterday.”

A weight suddenly lifting from her, Eve grabbed the distraction from her own misery with both hands. She threw the used tissue into the bin by the side of the sofa and leant sideways against the back. “That’s fantastic. I’m so pleased for you.”

Elly turned to face her. “Thank you.” Beaming, she tucked her hair behind her ear with a shy hand. “I suppose she thinks I’m ready.”

“Do you feel ready?”

“I think so.”

Their gazes locked and, for a moment, Eve’s troubles drifted to a distance where they couldn’t touch her. I’m here with Elly, in her house. Apart from being at home with my children, I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.

“I suppose I should leave you to get some kip.” Elly ran the backs of her fingers down Eve’s upper arm in a nonchalant gesture. Eve’s arm tingled and her smile grew.

“I suppose.” She muffled a sudden yawn behind her hand and chuckled. “It’s been a horrible day. But thank you for being there for me.”

“I’ve got your back, you know that, right?”

“I’ve got yours too.” Eve glanced out of the door, to where clanking noises were coming through from the kitchen. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “I’ll admit, I’m pretty terrified of your best mate, though. Don’t expect me to take your side in an argument between the two of you.”

Elly laughed. “I won’t. We don’t argue all that much. Not since I came home.” Dropping her hand away from Eve’s shoulder, she rubbed the back of her neck. “Okay. Totally leaving you alone now. Sleep is therapeutic.”

Rising from the sofa, Elly stepped towards the door, but seemed to change her mind, pausing before she got to it. Then she moved back to stand in front of Eve. She cupped Eve’s cheek and leaned in to press her lips to Eve’s temple. A shuddery breath filled her lungs as she pulled back and straightened. Eve’s cheek felt cold as Elly removed her hand.

“Sleep well.”

Eve nodded. “You too.”
A contented sigh made Elly close her eyes in a smile. “Knowing you’re near, I’m sure I will.”

Eve’s stomach tingled as Elly gave her a little wave and left the room, pulling the door closed behind her. Eve was left in the dark room with a single candle flickering against the wall.

***

With a jolt, Elly was awake. The usual fear gripped her, the darkness almost complete and closing in on her from all sides. But the feeling drifted away within seconds as she, firstly, remembered where she was, and then realised why she had woken.

Soft groans from below the floorboards.

Swinging her legs out of bed, Elly pulled her slippers on and shuffled as quietly as she could out of her bedroom and down the stairs. Without turning the light on, she managed to navigate her way into the living room without walking into anything. The candle still cast a dull light on the wall above the fireplace, and the moon shone onto the trees outside, which in turn reflected onto the twisted body under a heap of blankets on the sofa.

Having not dealt with Eve’s nightmares for a few months, Elly was unsure what she should do. She knelt down next to the sofa, her hand hovering above Eve’s shoulder.

“No! No, don’t. Leave her alone!”

Overwhelming concern flooded Elly’s chest and she shook Eve’s shoulder, hard.

Eve sat up and gripped Elly’s wrist like a vice. Elly braced herself against being pushed away, or pulled close, but Eve did neither. Eve’s gaze slipped about wildly, and then she focussed on Elly’s face.

“Oh,” Eve breathed, loosening her grip on Elly’s wrist.

Elly sat back on her heels. “You were dreaming again.”

“Oh.” Eve’s eyes gleamed in the white moonlight. “Right.”

“I heard you from upstairs.”

Looking away, Eve plucked at the covers that had wound around her legs. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.” A strange burning sensation started in Elly’s wrist—her old fear of being touched. It’s okay, it’s just Eve. But the feeling wouldn’t go away, so she pulled Eve’s hand away and laced their fingers together. That feels safer. “Are you okay?”

Eve inhaled deeply, and then let out the breath through pursed lips. She nodded and pulled her gaze back to Elly’s. “I think so.” Stark fear shone plainly from Eve’s eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Eve hung her head and then shook it.

“It might help.”
Eve looked up and the need in her eyes made Elly’s insides clench. “What if my mother treats me awfully when I go back tomorrow? What if she makes my life hell?” She put a hand to her lips. “What if she turns my children against me?”

“Hey, of course she won’t.” Elly pulled Eve’s hand to her mouth and kissed her knuckles. “I’ll come round and… give her a good talking to.”

From Eve’s raised eyebrow, Elly reckoned she probably hadn’t been that convincing.

“Okay, maybe I won’t. But she won’t turn your kids against you. They love you. And whatever your mother thinks, they’re going to be ecstatic when you go back tomorrow.”

A car went passed, its headlights lighting up the room for a moment. Eve managed to pull the blankets from around her legs, and then draped them around her shoulders. She pressed her cheek into the wool and gazed down at Elly with sad eyes.

“What d’you need?” Elly whispered.

“I need…” Eve swallowed and looked away. A tear made its way down her cheek.

“What?”

“I don’t…. want to be alone.”

Elly shivered. She forced her hand to remain in Eve’s but felt the urge to run coursing through her. Could I deal with that: someone in bed with me? She drew in a deep, healing breath, and considered the woman on the sofa in front of her. Her heart fluttered.

“Come upstairs. Sleep with me.”

Eve caught her eye. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Elly stood and tugged on her hand. “Come on.”

Following her obediently, Eve’s feet made little noise on the stairs as they ascended. Elly stopped at the top to listen. Satisfied that Kate was still fast asleep, or was at least pretending to be, she pushed open her own bedroom door and led Eve around to one side.

“Climb under the covers.”

“Thank you.” Eve let go of her hand and sat on the edge of the bed, before pushing her legs under the duvet and turning onto her side to face the middle.

Rounding the bed, Elly climbed in beside her. She faced Eve, who was just about visible in her dark bedroom. “That’s okay.”

Eve put her arms out, her intentions clear. A sharp intake of breath from Elly later, and Eve withdrew. “Oh. Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Elly reached for Eve and rubbed her thumbs over the backs of both her hands. “As much as I’d love to cuddle you, I don’t think I can.”

“Too much?”

“Just a bit.” Elly laughed out on a breath, relief swamping through her. “Thank you for understanding.”
“No problem.” A moment of quiet whilst Eve shifted to get comfortable. Their knees brushed, which made them both giggle. “What will Kate say when she realises I didn’t sleep on the sofa?”

“Nothing, I hope. I’m an adult; I’m allowed to invite people into my bed if I wish.”

“Hmm.” Eve shifted a little closer so that her nose was close to their joined hands. Her warm breath tickled Elly’s fingers. “Somehow, I think she’ll probably have a lot to say on the subject.”

“This is a massive step for me.”

“I know.”

“So, I would hope she would at least wait until you’ve gone home to comment.”

They smiled at one another in the darkness. “I love that I’m special enough for you to invite into your bed.”

“Oh, you definitely are.” Elly sighed and gazed over at Eve, whose eyes were drooping. “Go to sleep.”

Eve’s lips curled upwards briefly and she pulled the duvet up over her shoulder. “Okay.” She closed her eyes and continued to caress Elly’s fingers with her thumbs.

Elly watched over Eve as her thumbs slowed, then ceased their movements. Her own heartbeat calmed as Eve drifted off, and she felt a sense of peace deep inside her bones. She relinquished one hand and pushed some of Eve’s hair back where it had fallen over her cheek. “Sweet dreams,” she breathed, so quietly she barely heard it herself.

A soft smile settled onto Eve’s features. All her lines smoothed and she looked so young. Elly’s chest burned with emotion and she found herself watching Eve for a little longer, before sleep inevitably pulled her down into its warm and comfortable depths.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Eve returns home.

Chapter Notes

I’m using a new app to write and it’s decided that copying italics is far too difficult. So, despite having written thoughts in italics, it’s just inserted them within asterixes. Which is annoying, but I’m sure I’ll live (just about).

Elly’s bed smelled different. That was the first thing she noticed as she slipped into wakefulness. The second thing that occurred to her was how warm she was. And the soft movements of the pillow beneath her head: up and down.

The pillow was harder than usual. *Did Kate buy me a new pillow?* Snuggling her face into whatever surface her cheek rested on, Elly clutched her fingers around the material underneath them.

*It’s not a pillow*. She struggled out of the dozy state she had settled into and pushed up on one arm. Sleep clouded her vision until she had blinked a few times.

The morning sun was making the curtains glow blue, and it lit the room softly. Eve lay on her back, her far arm up over her head and her near arm under where Elly’s neck had been. Elly’s gaze flicked from Eve’s face down her body, to where the duvet was bunched around her hips. *How did we get like this?*

Bile rose up and threatened to cause Elly’s lungs to give out, but she forced herself to breathe slowly and steadily. She pulled her bottom lip into her mouth contemplatively, and continued to gaze down at the woman in her bed, within whose arms she had apparently been nestled.

Calmness was on the horizon. Elly beckoned to it with her mind and it fluttered towards her, washing over her with an ease she’d thought she’d never experience again. One huge sigh later, she very carefully settled back down, her cheek resting against Eve’s collarbone. It occurred to her that her original placement had been a little lower, but that thought gripped her stomach hard so she pushed it away. That was too much.
She breathed. Her focus slid over each part of her that touched Eve. Her knee rested against Eve’s thigh, and that was warm and comfortable. Her hand loosened its grip on Eve’s pyjamas shirt, which was cotton and soft. Her cheek, which she allowed to rub very gently against Eve’s shoulder, thumped steadily with Eve’s heartbeat. Inhaling deeply, Elly discovered that Eve smelled wonderful.

*I’m lying with someone, in their arms and in a bed. Neither of us has had a nightmare—this is not for comfort. It’s because we feel for one another.*

Eve continued to breathe steadily, her body otherwise still and warm.

With her eyes open and taking in the soft light from the window, Elly sunk into the feeling of being held. For the first time in twelve years she felt safe and comfortable. For the first time in twelve years it occurred to her that all was not lost, and perhaps a romantic future was not out of her grasp.

That thought made her smile. She could feel the skin by her eyes crinkling and the muscles in her face pulling. Giggles bubbles upwards and she ended up snorting into Eve’s shoulder in an attempt to stay quiet.

With a soft moan, Eve stretched. Suddenly, her whole body tensed, the muscles of her abdomen hardening underneath Elly’s elbow. Then Eve started and went completely still.

Realising how she must feel, Elly pulled with her arm, keeping Eve from moving away. “I’m okay. So long as you’re okay?”

Eve remained tense. “I’m alright. Just don’t want you to...” She audibly swallowed. “This isn’t too much?”

“I’m as shocked as you are.” They were whispering and Elly was reminded of being a girl and sneaking into the fridge at night to steal a snack. “I really did think it would make me...freak out...but actually...” She wasn’t sure how to express herself, so she trailed off.

Still as rock hard as a plank of wood, Eve took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I don’t want to do anything that will scare you.”
“I’d like...” Elly lifted her head just a bit so that she could look at Eve’s face.

Her blonde hair fanned out on the pillow, Eve’s eyes were wide and she looked unsure.

“I’d really like...” Elly shivered but set her jaw and pulled a wide smile onto her face. “I’d like you to hold me. If you’re comfortable.”

Hope and something like passion flew through Eve’s eyes before she smiled and nodded. She touched Elly’s shoulder, so that her arm lay snugly against her back. Then she lifted her other arm and trailed her fingertips along the back of Elly’s hand. “Alright?”

“Yes.” Elly swallowed down the nerves that attacked her and concentrated solely on the tickling caress against her hand.

“Tell me if you want me to stop.” Eve’s fingers trailed up to Elly’s wrist.

Elly shivered but not with disgust. A puff of air slipped past her lips and she relaxed fully against Eve’s embrace. “That’s wonderful.”

“Good.” The caress moved further up Elly’s arm and her skin goose bumped in response.

“It *feels* wonderful,” Elly clarified. “But also...i-it’s wonderful b-because I feel okay. I don’t feel like I need to run away.”

“No pressure.”

Elly grinned and snuggled into Eve’s shoulder. “Thank you. Um...” She rubbed her thumb against Eve’s top. “Would it be okay to...to touch you?”

A chuckle rumbled through Eve’s chest. “Not to brag, but I am completely fine with *you* touching *me*.”

Elly’s cheeks flared. “Just figured it would be polite to ask.”
“Of course you can.” Eve’s arm squeezed around Elly’s back. “Of course you can touch me.”

Her lungs filling with a shaky breath, Elly slipped her hand upwards, feeling the bumps of Eve’s bottom ribs. Then she travelled down again, stopping on the flatter flesh of Eve’s waist. She drew circles into the cotton and felt Eve’s lungs expand and then drop again in a sigh.

“I feel like I’m learning again,” Elly whispered. Wonder filled her belly as her fingers made little patterns against Eve’s side. “It’s been... I mean, I’ve tried to...touch other people but...”

One long arm grasped her back for a second and then loosened. “I know. It’s alright.”

“It’s been a very long time.” Elly’s fingers stopped at the hem of Eve’s shirt. She hesitated, before sneaking them underneath and discovering warm skin that was smooth.

A small gasp made Eve’s lungs draw up. Elly pulled her hand away sharply.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Before she could properly finish her apology, Eve had taken her hand. “It’s fine. You just...”

Narrowing her eyes up at Eve, it dawned on Elly why she had reacted the way she had. “Oh.”

“Hmm.” Eve’s cheeks were rosy.

“I make you...” Giggles tickled up Elly’s throat. “Do I?”

“Hmm.”

“I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be. Just...” Eve’s blush deepened. “Please don’t be offended. Or frightened. I won’t ever get carried away. I’ll stay still and let you set the pace.”

Leaning up on one arm again, Elly sent her a look. ‘That’s not very fair is it?’

“I’m not the one who is...just starting to get used to being touched.”

Elly huffed. “I know.” Her jaw hurt from being clenched. “But I don’t want you to just...” She gestured into the air. “Just be an inactive participant.”

Eve chuckled and rolled onto her side. She took Elly’s hand, like she had when they had fallen asleep the night before, and rubbed her thumb over her knuckles. “I don’t intend on being inactive.”

“Good.”

“But, for now, you need to set the pace. You need to be in control.” Eve dropped her gaze from Elly’s. “I get the feeling you’re so scared because you don’t want to lose control. Like you were forced to by that maniac.”

Tears gathered in Elly’s eyes but she blinked them back. *She knows me so well.* She lifted a single finger and traced Eve’s jawline. “You’re absolutely amazing, do you know that?”

“So are you.” Eve pursed her lips around a smile. “I haven’t slept so well in ages.”

“Me neither. I think we should sleep together every night.”

“As tempting as the offer sounds, I don’t think it would be very good for either of us.”

Elly didn’t feel rejected. The shy smile that was making Eve’s eyes sparkle was enough to convince her that Eve *wanted* to sleep with her. “Co-dependency never was my thing anyway,” Elly replied, her gaze flicking down to Eve’s lips.

She blinked and dragged her gaze back to Eve’s eyes. The tiny flinch of Eve’s lips meant she had
noticed. Elly’s cheeks burned, but she smiled through her blush.

They lay still and silent for a few minutes. Eve played with Elly’s fingers, tracing her knuckles and the spaces between them. The skin of Elly’s hands tingled and Elly allowed a little noise of pleasure to escape her.

Footsteps on the stairs made them both twitch, but Elly brushed a palm against Eve’s shoulder. “We should get up. Your mother will be waiting for you soon.”

Visibly deflating, Eve’s face dropped. Her gaze lowered and her hands went loose inside Elly’s.

“It’s okay,” Elly breathed, and squeezed Eve’s fingers, slotting her own between them. “We’re going for that coffee soon, aren’t we?”

“Distracting me with the thought of a date unfortunately doesn’t mean I forget that my small-minded mother is sitting at home awaiting my return.”

A soft knock on the bedroom door.

Eve sighed and sat up. She turned to give Elly a questioning look.

“You can come in,” Elly called.

Kate pushed the door open and peeped around it. “Ah. Yes. I thought this might be the state of affairs.” There was an amused glint in her eye.

Elly’s cheeks flamed and she tried not to look away. “Yes. Well, I think we can all say it was inevitable.”

Kate held up her hands. “You’re both adults. I’m not here to judge.” She did, however, sweep her gaze over them, taking in their state of being fully-clothed and the neatness of the bed. *I hope she realises it was all very chaste last night.*
“Good morning, Kate.” Eve’s eyes were lowered and she was blushing, but she was smiling too.

“Good morning, Eve. How does coffee sound?”

Eve nodded and huffed out a laugh. “I think I’m going to need one.”

“As strong as you can make it.” Elly smiled and Kate pulled a hand through her cropped hair.

“Le café est ma spécialité.” She left with a flourish of her patterned dressing gown.

Giggling, Elly shook her head. “I love her but she’s entirely bonkers, sometimes.”

“She’s fantastic. You’re both fantastic.” Eve trailed her gaze across the duvet. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

“It was a pleasure.” They exchanged a shy but happy look.

“Right. Well, I suppose I’d better get ready for battle.” Eve swallowed and shuddered. “Not sure I want to.” She took Elly’s hand again. “I quite like being here with you.”

“Me too. But, needs must and coffee calls.”

***

Elly pulled her car up to the front of Eve’s house for the second time in twenty-four hours. She raised the handbrake and tapped the fingers of her other hand against the steering wheel. “Right then.” She turned to Eve.

Blonde hair hung in front of Eve’s face, but she took a deep breath and sat up straight. Elly got the impression she was gathering herself as Eve stared out of the window at the house.
After giving her a moment to think and prepare, Elly tilted her head to the side. “What would you like me to do?”

The raised eyebrow Eve threw her made her chuckle and her cheeks burn.

“You know what I mean.”

A sigh escaped Eve’s lips. “Sorry. Yes. Well, I’m going to go in by myself, I think.”

“I agree. Whatever needs to be said needs to be between you and your mother.” Elly’s heart dropped all the same. *I can’t be her saviour all the time. She needs to fight her own wars.*

Eve nodded. “True.” She caught Elly’s eye. “Would you mind waiting...just five minutes?” Dark eyes were a little wary.

“I’ll sit right here until...” Elly checked the car clock. “Nine-fifteen. How’s that?”

“Perfect.” Eve’s gaze returned to the house and her hand trembled as she reached for the door handle.

Following her gaze, Elly saw the curtains move. “Looks like she knows we’ve arrived.”

Eve remained still.

Elly wasn’t sure what to say, so she used her newfound tactile skills to caress the space between Eve’s shoulder blades. Eve leant back against her in response and her shoulders relaxed.

“Right. In I go then.”

“Good luck.”
The smile that Eve gave her was warm and affectionate. She reached to touch Elly’s jaw. “Thank you. You’re wonderful.”

“And you’re absolutely worth it.” Elly made a shooing gesture. “Go on. I have a client to see.”

“In that case, good luck back.”

They smiled at each other and Eve swung the door open, before climbing out. Her backpack bounced against her shoulders as she trudged up the path.

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It was a pain having to knock at her own front door yet again, but Annie was not someone who left the front door open, even when she was in the house. Eve scuffed her trainer against the dusty front step as she waited. She didn’t have to wait long.

The smell of coffee and baking seeped through the door just after it opened, which calmed Eve somewhat. *She only bakes when she is happy. That’s a good sign.*

“Eve, love.” Annie allowed her daughter into the house with a tight, and perhaps tentative, smile.

“Mum.” Eve drew in a deep breath before she huffed it out. Her nerves were back, but she refused to allow them to contaminate her expression. She tried to match her mother’s smile.

“Good to have you home.”

They entered the kitchen and Eve sent Annie a suspicious narrowing of her eyes. “Um... Does that mean I can stay?”

Annie seemed to flop a bit, and she turned her head and nodded. Her body looked heavy as it sank into a wooden chair at the kitchen table. She patted the table across from her and Eve obliged, dropping her bag to the floor.
“I’m really sorry, love.”

Eve swallowed and pushed her hair behind her ear.

“I was absolutely terrible to you yesterday.”

“Yes. You were.” Eve kept her gaze steady on Annie’s face, and her body settled at the sincerity she saw there. “I’d just been discharged from hospital. I needed your support, not your judgement.”

“I know, I know.” Annie hung her head and shrugged. “I’m old fashioned, I suppose. It shocked me. I wasn’t ready to hear any of it.”

“And now?” Eve asked. She clasped her hands together on the table. “Am I to expect another outburst the next time I tell you something you don’t approve of? Should I have a back-up plan in case you throw me out again?”

“I’ve been reading. Researching. Homo...homosexuality.”

Eve blinked a few times. “Have you?”

“On that internet you’re all so fond of.” She made a flapping gesture and chuckled. “It’s very informative.”

“Oh god, what did you put into the search engine?” Eve stared at her.

“Um... Yes a few of the initial pages I found weren’t really what I was looking for.”

“I really hope this wasn’t on the kids’ laptop, mum.” Eve felt like laughing but Annie was already struggling with her own embarrassment, so she kept it contained.

“No. My own, luckily. Not that I ever intended—“
“I can imagine.” Eve smiled and reached across the table to pat her mother’s hand. “Anyway. Go on.”

“I read all about the history of gay people. And it really was atrocious what they went through way back when. Did you know it used to be illegal?”

“Yes mum. I’ve worked in law enforcement for quite a while. The old boy’s club was pretty vocal about how it should have remained against the law.”

“Terrible, really. Like I said, I’m in no means homophobic. I just... I wasn’t sure how to feel.”

“I know. I guess I do understand.”

“My generation, we never encountered any gay people. They didn’t exist.”

Eve looked long and hard at Annie. “They did. They just weren’t out.”

“Out. Hmm.” Annie rubbed her chin. “I suppose people had to keep it secret.” She looked at Eve with worried eyes. “Is that what you’re going to do now: come out?” She leant her jaw in her hand. “Are you going to go to gay pride and get your hair cut short and buy some big lumberjack boots?” Annie’s accent twisted the phrase comically.

“No.” Eve took Annie’s hands in her own and was very pleased when she didn’t move away. “I haven’t changed.”

“You seem different to me.” Annie’s expression was respectful, but concerned.

“Maybe I’m happy.” Eve sighed and dropped her gaze to their joined hands. “I wasn’t so happy before.”

“You weren’t happy with Jake.” It wasn’t a question and it sent a shiver right through Eve’s body.

“No. It was like I was waiting for something to happen with him; either something fantastic, or
something diabolical. I wasn’t so sure which. It turned out to be the latter.”

“It did.”

Eve looked up and caught Annie’s gaze. They both smiled and Eve blinked back tears. “I wish he’d just stayed in prison.”

“So do I. I think he probably does too.”

“D’you think so?”

Annie nodded. “He did love you. I could see it. Every time he looked at you, there was this painful look in his eye.”

Eve stared hard at the wood of the table and pulled back her hands. “I got him put in prison again.”

“No.”

Eve looked up. Annie’s expression implored her to believe. *She doesn’t think I’m to blame either.* “I feel responsible,” Eve managed. She swallowed the lump down after it got caught in her throat.

“I know. But you’re not.” Annie’s gaze on her was steady when Eve looked back up, and she drew strength from it. “You’re not. He had something in him that meant he wasn’t like other people. That thing... That thing that stops normal people from being violent. It was missing in Jake.”

“I feel like...” Eve bit her lip and grimaced at the shudder than ran through her. “Sometimes I feel like I’m bad news.” She rubbed at her upper arm, trying to stimulate some kind of heat into herself. “Like I’m going to t-taint everyone that touches me.”

Her guts roiled as the words stuttered from her lips. She wanted to tell her mother how she felt. Her psychologist had explained that her loved ones should know how she was feeling, and that she should practise expressing herself to those she trusted.
So, that was that. She had done it. The one thing she felt the most strongly about was out in the open, in this new kitchen that had all her nick knacks and her favourite mug sat waiting to be filled.

A sudden urge to get up and do something overcame Eve, so she stood and moved towards the kettle. “That’s how I feel, anyway,” she said, her voice thin.

She busied herself making them both a coffee. A small tower of cupcakes stood next to the kettle, but Eve didn’t much feel like eating one. The silence hung in the air like mist, but somehow she knew that Annie needed time to process it all.

Once the drinks were made, and milk had been added, the clunk of them both hitting the table seemed to shock Annie out of her thoughts.

“Is that how you feel?” Her voice was wobbly and it seemed like she needed a few deep breaths to continue. “All this time, you’ve felt like you’re...”


“Oh love.” Annie nodded slowly for a moment, then took Eve’s hand.

Eve held on, remembering being upset as a child, slipping into that memory for a moment, before remembering that she was in her forties and not reliant on her mother for consolation.

“You’re not.” Annie’s words were stark and sure. Eve held onto those as well, a lifeline into hope.

“I was... I was having flashbacks.”

“Your consultant said.” A gentleness lay in Annie’s voice. “That must have been frightening.”

“That’s what happened when... I was at work.”

Annie squeezed her fingers.
“And I’ve had a few since. Whilst in hospital.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

Eve nodded. “I know. I was…” Her cheeks burned briefly, but she plowed on, wanting to be truthful. “Embarrassed. I suppose.” She let out a slow breath. “I’d be just sitting in the garden there and the trees would be so beautiful, and I’d be chatting with Elly…” The memory of a warm hand on her back and a soft caring voice in her ear made Eve smile. “And I would just see it again. That autopsy room. All metal and science and… And it would squeeze me here.”

Her crunched up fist patted her sternum. Her mother squeezed her remaining hand again.

“If you... if you have one when you’re at home?”

“I’ve got a lot better at dealing with them by myself.”

“What would help?” Annie’s smile drifted over to her like a pleasant smell, which mingled with the delicious coffee aroma.

Eve took her coffee and sipped. “I do this thing: mindfulness. Grounding. I have to think of things I can see, hear, smell, touch and taste.”

“So, perhaps, brewing you a good coffee would work?” There was humour tinting Annie’s gaze and it made Eve smile.

“Yes, that would work. Elly rubs my back; that works. She... she’s helped a lot.”

“Has she?” Annie appeared surprised. “Another patient?”

“She’s not just another patient. And, really, she isn’t anymore. Like I’m not a patient either. I’m just Eve, retired copper and mother of two.”
The teasing made Eve feel light and safe, her earlier nerves had all but disappeared with the fear that her mother hated her. *It’s okay. She’s coming round to the fact that I love a woman, and that I’m not completely barmy.* She drank her coffee and found her stomach grumbling.

The cupcake her mother brought her on a small plate was sweet and perfect.

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Once the kids were in bed, and Eve had taken her medications, she enveloped her mother in a warm hug. “Thanks for today,” she whispered outside her bedroom. She toed the carpet. “Um... I’m going to phone Elly. Just so you know.” She gestured towards her bedroom.

Annie smiled and nodded. “You really care about her.”

“Well, give her my love. What she must think of me.” A darkness had crept into Annie’s eyes.

“It’s alright, you and I have made up.” Eve touched Annie’s shoulder, before leaving her mother in the hallway and going into her bedroom.

It was just as she had left it when they moved in. Light, airy, with a white metal bed and crisp sheets. She checked the clock and smiled when she realised she had time to get ready for bed.

Her en suite had been recently cleaned. Eve inhaled the fresh scent of lemons and thought of Annie making it nice for her. *Let’s hope it stays amicable. I don’t much fancy having to move out from living with my kids.*

Cleaning her teeth, she studied herself in the mirror. The face that stared back at her seemed young - perhaps younger than before she’d met Wicklow. Before Jake had been released. Before all the shit had begun.

*I’m okay now.* She pushed her brain to remember the fact. She knew she wasn’t completely fixed, things still needed gluing back together. She needed some sort of routine; a job perhaps. Maybe
she’d offer to help on whatever job Elly had begun today. They’d sort of half-joked about working together. Eve wasn’t entirely sure how serious either of them had been.

A conversation for post-teeth-brushing perhaps.

Her pyjamas felt soft and cozy. She settled into her bed—*her* bed, finally—and picked up her phone. Elly answered almost immediately.

“Hi.”

“Hiya,” Eve replied, the sound of Elly’s voice apparently the last piece of the puzzle. She almost heard the click of it settling into place.

“So, you’re definitely going first,” Elly insisted. “From the lack of an S.O.S. I’m going to assume it went reasonably well.”

“Yes.” Eve answered on a long sigh. “It’s all good, at least I hope it is. After a somewhat surprising google search, resulting in unintentional lesbian porn, she now has a little more understanding about the whole...” She pulled her lip between her teeth. “You know. The whole gay thing.”


Eve laughed. “Hmm. Don’t think she realised what googling ‘lesbians’ usually gets you.”

“Oh goodness, I hope she wasn’t too traumatised!”

“I think she closed her eyes quick sharp before she turned to stone.”

“Good.”

Pushing her feet under the covers, Eve rested back against her pillows and sighed. “She was reading up on gay history. Researching how gay people have been terribly marginalised and discriminated against.”
“Well, I suppose it shows she’s interested. And accepting, maybe?”

“Yes. It’s a good start. And I…” Eve swallowed. “I told her a bit about my flashbacks and… and what helps me if I have one.”

“I’m so proud of you.” Elly’s voice was quiet and slow, like she wanted to savour every word she spoke.

Eve smiled and clutched her phone to her ear. She hummed. “Thanks. I also picked my kids up from school for the first time in… three months.”

“I’m just going to have to lather on the praise, aren’t I?”

Eve chuckled and warmth spread through her belly. “So, tell me about your day.”

“No family revelations for me, I’m afraid. At least not my own family. All very boring. However, we do have an awfully rich businessman that believes his wife is straying.”

“Sounds intriguing. Details?”

A low chuckle that made Eve’s mouth water. She pushed the feeling to one side but not away. It wasn’t new, but she wasn’t ready to feel it with Elly only a phone line away.

“Two kids, both gone to uni. Bit of empty nest syndrome, he thinks. She leaves every other evening and says she’s going with friends for drinks, or whatever. Returns completely sober, with vague recollections of their activities.”

“Hmm.” Eve’s brain sparked with interest and theories, something that hadn’t happened for a few months. It was a delightful feeling and made her heart beat that little bit more quickly. “So, perhaps a new lover? Or she’s visiting clubs to pick up men. Or women.”

“Ooo interesting concept. I suppose I shouldn’t rule out a change of preference. They’ve been
married a while, perhaps she exploring new avenues.”

“You’ve opened my eyes.” Eve snorted. “Now everyone I see has the potential to be interested in their own gender. What has become of me?”

“I expect it’s like getting a new car,” Elly hummed. “You see the same model everywhere.”

“True.” Eve’s hand came up to cover a yawn, but Elly apparently heard it anyway.

“Sleepy?”

“Yes,” Eve admitted, her eyes suddenly drooping. “It’s been a long day.”

“I’ll be busy with interviewing this wife’s friends and acquaintances tomorrow,” Elly said gently. “But I’d really like to have that coffee. Saturday?”

“Two days? Not sure I can manage that long.”

“Oh shush.” Eve could practically hear Elly’s blush. “Anyway, you’ve got to get back into family life. However wonderful it is when we’re together.”

“Fine. So, you’re just going to go round to these friends’ houses and ask them?”

“More or less. I’ll have to be stealthy though. Keep my cover. She’s Scottish, so I’ll be posing as a friend she knew at uni. Long lost type of situation.” Elly cleared her throat. “What d’ye think te me accent?”

Eve had to clear her throat as well. “Um...good. Yes it’s good.” She chuckled. “Could have fooled me.”

“I do east end as well. That’s pretty much my limit.”
“Feel free to practise your northern accent with me, if you like.” Eve strengthened her accent as she spoke, which made Elly giggle.

“Tha’ I shall, daaaa’ling.”

Eve laughed too. Then she yawned again. “Under cover. Different accents. Not how we used to do things on the job.”

“Ah yes. Well my ‘on the job’ is a little less on that side of the law than yours was.” A slight pause, with tension. “Um...is that going to be a problem?”

“No,” Eve replied quickly. “I’m not a copper anymore. So long as we’re not talking...serious crime.”

“Oh. No. Nothing detectable. Usually.” An audible swallow echoed down the line. “Gosh, actually I hadn’t considered me breaking the law *slightly* might be against your...”

“It’s honestly fine.”

“Okay.”

A silence where Eve could practically hear Elly relaxing.

“Right. Anyway. Sleep.”

“Yes.” Eve sighed and smiled, snuggling her shoulders into the pillows behind her back. “Hope you sleep well.”

“First night back in reality. Hope you sleep well too.”

“I’ll put on some soft music or something if I don’t drop off straight away.”
“Text me,” Elly said. “If I’m awake I’ll text you back.”

“Thank you.” Eve turned her bedside lamp off and the room relaxed into darkness. Her phone cast a small glow across the duvet. “Good night.”

“Night darling.”

For a while, Eve smiled at her phone screen. Then she placed her phone on her bedside table, slipped down in the bed, and pressed her cheek into her pillow. It wasn’t quite as warm or as safe-feeling as sleeping with Elly, but she tried to grab and keep with her the memory of Elly’s voice, and the way she called her ‘darling’, until she sunk into sleep.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Elly and Eve work together for the first time.

Chapter Notes

Finally, I have updated.

Original writing has been my main focus the last few months, guys, but I’m still intending on finishing this one. Hope you guys like the update.

In other news, Hooked On You, the romance lesfic novel, published by Ylva and available to actually buy, will be released on 6th February next year. Get your bums down to my website - www.jennmatthews.com - and sign up to my newsletter. You will get exclusive content and be entered into a competition to win a Merlot Bunny and a signed copy of my book.

Exciting.

* * *

Elly rolled onto her back and shaded her eyes from the sunlight shining through her blue curtains. She stretched. Today is a new day. Eve is okay, I hope, and I’m working. Actually working. Shivers made a small noise of delight rumble through her.

Summer was approaching steadily, each day brightening and allowing her to lose a layer of clothing. Gone was the leather jacket she was so fond of. It made her a little sad as she knew how much Eve liked it, but needs must, she supposed. She chose a long-sleeved white top and a thin green cardigan, rounding off the outfit with jeans and boots. She only had a small mirror in her bedroom. She brushed her hair as she regarded her reflection, and was reminded of the first time she had touched Eve—when she had brushed her hair for her, right in the beginning of Eve’s admission.

We’ve both done well. Hope fluttered within her. With her work and Eve’s renewed status in her family, there was light on the ever-beckoning horizon.

Coffee scent tickled her nose as she entered the kitchen. Kate smiled up from her porridge. “Morning.”

“Good morning.” Elly busied herself with coffee and cereal and sat with Kate to eat. “Nice day, I hope.”

“Looks like.” Kate’s gaze settled out the window. Her smile flickered and widened. “What’s on your schedule?”

“Off to chat with some of Mrs Jones’s friends. Old uni lot, you know.”
“Reckon they’ll be able to shed some light on her evening’s activities?”

Elly shrugged. “That’s the hope. I’m sure to get a wider picture of the situation than her darling husband has given us.” She cast her mind back to the buff folder, containing all the information she had perused during the previous two days. In her opinion, Mr Jones didn’t know his wife all that well. “Perhaps she’s found someone more attentive to her needs.”

“Something we all strive for.”

Elly nodded around a mouthful of cereal.

After consuming a hearty breakfast, caffeine and getting ready for the day, Elly grabbed her keys and bag and headed out to the office. The drive was quiet, the radio playing smooth and satisfying music that she hummed along to. As she unlocked the door, a thrill fizzed through her. It was the first time she had unlocked the office door herself since last May. *How has it been a year since I did this? I’ve been in name on the rent since Larry left.*

Ten years of silence and then a letter, confirming Larry was alive and kicking in Gibraltar. Elly giggled as she descended the stairs into the office space, the ludicrous way the letter had been worded causing her to roll her eyes. She’d been well and truly over him at that point. She’d had other issues to deal with. The answer machine held a steady red light—no messages.

After a quick phone call to Mr Jones to get the work addresses of some of his wife’s acquaintances, Elly collected the information she needed from the file and headed back out.

Her first stop was a bakery, with intricately decorated cupcakes in the windows. The brightly coloured swarm of treats invaded her visual senses, as well as the sweet smell of sugar and caramel. Elly’s mouth watered and she couldn’t help the smile that tugged her lips.

The woman behind the counter looked relaxed but busy. She smiled to Elly when her turn came and rubbed her hands together. “What can I get you?”

“Umm.” Elly looked across the display and then set the Scottish accent amid her own voice. “What would you recommend?”

“Depends what you’re looking for.” Something about the woman’s attitude make Elly blink. As she caught her eye, the woman’s gaze twinkled in a pleasing way. She was surprised when the woman looked her up and down with an appreciative smile.

“Umm.” Elly chastised herself for her nerves and chewed her bottom lip. “Something sweet.”

The twinkle intensified. “You’re not sweet enough, darlin’?” The Scottish accent, deliberately, as far as Elly could tell, strengthened in a clear attempt at flirting, snapped open the realisation that she was working.

Elly pulled on her best flirting smile. *I might as well use what I’m given.* “Not today. I really fancy something…” She leant over supposedly to check out the gingerbread men in the basket on the counter, but actually to give the woman a peek down her top. “…delicious.”

“I’d say the rainbow cupcakes are your cup of tea then,” the woman replied, her hand spread wide to indicate which cakes she meant. “They’re full of buttercream and white chocolate drops. Perfect for a pretty lady.”

Heat spread across Elly’s cheeks and she risked a coy look downwards. “In that case, I’ll take two.”
“Eating in?”

“Due for a break?” Elly threw her a wink.

“I am actually.” The woman indicated a small round table at the back of the shop.

Elly paid for her cupcakes and carried them to the table, waiting casually for the woman to join her.

After handing over to a colleague, the woman came over. “I’m Kelly.”

“Laura.” Kelly’s hand in her own was warm and firm. An unfamiliar tingle shot through Elly’s middle. “Nice to meet you.”

“You’re not from around here.” Kelly cocked an eyebrow at her as she settled in the chair across from Elly.

“No. Glasgow.”

“Been down here long?”

“Just a week.” Elly poked her cupcake with her fork. “Been looking for an old uni friend.”

“Maybe I know them.”

Elly was taken aback. The forthright, confident way Kelly spoke to her made a small lump form in her throat. She couldn’t work out whether it was fear or embarrassment.

“I went to uni in Glasgow too.”

Elly tried to look surprised and pushed the lump away. “You never did.”

“Yeah. Economics.”

“English Lit.” This was at least true—Elly had studied the subject at A-level and read a great deal. If she was asked something in depth about an author, she would be able to wing it without detection.

“So, who were you looking for?”

“Marie Fredrickson. Well, I think her name is Jones now. She married.”

“Yeah, I know Marie.”

From the way lines appeared between Kelly’s eyebrows, and the way her gaze shifted sideways, it appeared as though mention of Marie’s name made Kelly sad. I wonder why. Did something happen between them? The affair her husband thinks she had could have been with a woman after all.

“Do you? How fortuitous.” Elly leant her chin on her hand and took a mouthful of cake. “This is amazing, by the way.” She gestured towards Kelly with her fork, hoping to bring back the gentle flirting.

Kelly looked up and seemed to shake herself. “Sorry. Bit of history.”

“Really?”

Kelly nodded. “We…well. I kissed her once. Just after we graduated. Long time since but…she went all uncomfortable afterwards. Then she met Bill and got married. I still see her sometimes, but
we’re not close.”

“That’s a shame.” Elly sighed deeply and poked her bottom lip out just a touch. It had the desired effect, and Kelly smiled once again. “I’ve not seen her since uni. What’s she like now?”

“Quiet. Always looks a bit flustered. Like she’s got no time.”

“Does she work?”

“Not since she had the kids. And little William is, what, twenty now?” Kelly huffed in disbelief. “How did we get so old, hmm?”

“No idea.” Elly threw her a disbelieving look. “So, she comes in regularly?”

“About once a week.” Kelly nodded. “Yeah. I always say hi. She always buys a cake for her husband.”

“That’s nice.”

“Not really. She never seems happy to do it. Like it’s a chore.”

“She doesn’t buy anything for herself?”

Kelly shook her head. Her hand started inching towards Elly’s on the table.

Elly pursed her lips and ate some more of her cake, effectively stopping the pursuit towards a handhold. The old nervousness surged within her, the fear of being touched. The feeling of wanting to run away. She swallowed and forced a smile onto her face to counteract her retraction.

“I guess she’s on a diet or whatever.”

“Does she need to be?”

“Not from what I can see.”

“Strange. She never used to be concerned about her weight.” Elly took a stab in the dark.

Luckily, Kelly nodded. “I know, right?”

“Husband have anything to do with that?”

Kelly pushed back and relaxed more in her chair. She remained friendly, but had folded her arms, as if trying to be casual. I wonder if she thinks she was too full on. Elly internally breathed a sigh of relief at the space between them.

“No idea,” Kelly replied. “She did say something to me once that I found strange.”

Elly finished her cake and placed the fork neatly on the plate. “Mmm-hmm?”

“Vicki, the girl I work with…” Kelly indicated the till. “…she was complaining that her boyfriend had been two-timing her.” She shrugged. “Gossip seems to interest Marie. Always has, right?”

Elly nodded.

Kelly continued. “She seemed so shocked though. Swore she’d never cheat. Good on her, I say.”

“What’s so strange about that?”
“It was the way she worded it. She said ‘we have almost no secrets, me and Bill. And I’d never cheat on him’. Like she had things she wouldn’t tell him, you know?”

“Reckon she’s got a secret life then?”

Kelly laughed. “I doubt it. I’ve never seen her even look at another man. I’ve watched her being flirted with, by some good-looking guys, you know? But she barely even notices. Bill is her one and only.”

Whilst trying to keep her features stoic, Elly wracked the detective part of her brain for anything else she needed to know. “She’s never told you what she’s keeping from him?”

“No. Like I said, we’re not close anymore.”

Slumping a little, Elly nodded. “I suppose if she’s not even telling her husband…”

“She’s not going to tell me.” Kelly’s hand slid across the table again, some kind of renewed motivation glistening in her eyes. “Have you got any secrets?”

*I used to be a mental health patient.* Elly nearly snorted at the thought. She re-schooled her expression and tampered down her emotions. “I haven’t actually. Quite forthright and simple, really.”

“Sounds great.” Kelly’s voice had dropped to a murmur. Her fingers brushed the back of Elly’s hand.

Elly stared at their hands. She pulled hers back and placed it in her lap. “Boring.”

“Not at all.”

The breath Elly took felt tight. She swallowed. “I should be going.” Elly made sure her words sounded apologetic.

Kelly bought it and looked disappointed but understanding. “Someone to get home to?”

“No. But I’m late for a job interview.”

Kelly’s smile broadened. “Good luck.”

After gathering her bag and jacket, Elly stood and beamed at the pretty woman. She considered Kelly with appreciative eyes and realised that she actually did find her attractive. *I don’t know why I’m surprised. It’s not as if I’ve never found another woman attractive.* Kelly’s dark hair and eyes were pleasing to look at. The way her hips flared out from her small waist was sexy. Her top hugged her curves and the neck of it was cut fairly low.

“Thank you.” Elly braced herself against her own fight or flight response and squeezed Kelly’s shoulder, hoping it would be enough. The smile Kelly gave her suggested it was.

“If Marie comes in again, I’ll tell her Laura was looking for her.”

She was about to ask Kelly who Laura was, then remembered. “Great. Thanks.”

The sun touched her face and made her feel like she glowed as she strode out into the street. She mulled over the information she had gained whilst she walked back to her car.

* * *

“You’re sure you’ll be okay, love?”
“Course,” Eve replied, drying her hands, which were wrinkled from washing up their lunch things.

Annie blew out a slow breath between pursed lips and shot Eve a worried look.

Trying not to roll her eyes, Eve hung the towel up and leant against the counter, facing her mother. “I’ll be absolutely fine. Go meet up with Sandra. Have a nice time.”

A few more tense heartbeats, during which she scrutinised Eve, and Annie sighed. “All right. But you know where I am if you need me.”

“I do.” Eve went over to her and slid her arms around her. “Thank you for being concerned, but there’s really no need.”

Annie pulled back and gave Eve one last lingering look. “You know I love you, don’t you?”

Eve nodded. “And I love you.” She watched Annie move away to collect her bag and coat. “Say hi to Sandra from me.”

Bitterness pinched Annie’s face for a moment, before the lines smoothed. Then she nodded and smiled. “I will.” She lifted her shoulders, something similar to pride shining from her. “I’ll tell her all about how well you’re doing.”

Eve’s stomach warmed and she presses a hand just under her ribs. “That’s lovely.”

“Bye, love.”

“Bye Mum.”

The sound of the front door closing behind Annie was final, and the quiet that stretched afterwards felt cavernous. Eve stood still for several minutes, deciding to use her ears to notice the small sounds she’d otherwise miss when someone was home with her. Traffic rumbled passed, trees rustled and the occasional radio from a car filtered in and out of the silence. Taking a deep breath, she looked around her, taking in her surroundings. She walked through the house then, running her hand over small additions she hadn’t noticed so far, picking up one or two toys that hadn’t quite made it into the kids’ rooms.

The mobile phone in her back pocket buzzed. She pulled it out and grinned at the name. “Hi Elly.”

“Hello stranger.”


“I’m good. Intrigued by this Mrs Jones.”

Eve walked through to her bedroom and shuffled back against the headboard. “Your client’s wife?”

“Mmmhmm. The plot thickens. I don’t think this is a simple case of adultery.”

“Do tell.” Not one for gossip usually, Eve was surprised by the thrill that caught her breath.

“Well, I went to see one of her friends from uni. Her husband said they knew her best. Anyway, turns out this particular friend has lost touch somewhat. After a rather ill-advised attempt at a kiss.”

“A kiss?” Eve pulled her knees up and pressed her phone to her ear.

“Between Marie Jones and her friend Kelly.”
“So she is having an affair with a woman.”

“Not exactly,” Elly said with a chuckle. “The kiss was quite some time ago and is the reason for their distance. Apparently, Marie didn’t take kindly to being kissed by the lovely Kelly.”

“Lovely?” Something burned in Eve’s chest.

“Well…” Elly paused.

Gripping the duvet next to her hip, Eve waited.

“I may have…utilised my overwhelmingly effective flirting skills to get Kelly to talk to me.”

“Did you use the Scottish accent?”

“I did.”

For some reason, Eve’s chest loosened and she felt better. “Bet you were irresistible.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.” Elly sounded breathless.

Eve grinned. “If you turned on the charm full throttle with me, I’d be helpless to resist.”

A crackled laugh. “Anyway,” Elly continued, “looks like there’s more to it. Kelly seemed set on the idea that Mrs Jones would not cheat on her husband. However tiresome she finds his cupcake obsession.”

“What’s your next move?”

Elly made a noise like a pleased hum, as if she were thinking. “I might employ some tailing skills. Follow her around for a bit. See where she goes on these secret excursions.”

Her fingers now idly smoothing the soft cotton of her duvet, Eve allowed her knees to drop and crossed her legs at the ankle. “Proper detective work now?”

“Surveillance, yes. Time for dark glasses and flasks of coffee. She’s due out tonight.”

“Want some company?”

A sharp intake of breath was followed by a long silence.

Eve wondered whether the line had gone dead. “Elly?”

“Y-yes. Sorry.”

“Thought I’d lost you for a moment.” Eve laughed in relief. “Sorry. Shouldn’t be so presumptuous.”

“No it’s…that’s okay.”

“It’s your job. I shouldn’t expect to tag along when you’re working.”

“No it’s…actually…maybe I’d like the company.”

It was Eve’s turn to stop. “Oh,” she managed.

“We did talk about working together.”
“That was just a pipedream, though, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not sure,” Elly replied. “The idea is appealing, especially when you have all this experience with investigations and detective work. Seems a shame to let it go to waste.”

“But…” Eve chewed her lip. “I mean…you don’t need me cramping your style.”

“You wouldn’t be.”

Elly’s sure words settled Eve’s nerves a little. She continued to finger the duvet. “Maybe it would be nice.”

“She’s goes out in the evening, around eight.”

Eve twisted her face, feeling as if she was being pulled between two things. Should she stay out all night to help Elly and spend time with her? Should she stay at home and be the good, dutiful, sensible daughter and mother, so that Annie would think well of her?

Her head was growling that she needed to stay—to look after herself, prove her worth and make sure no one became upset with her. Her heart drifted in the image of her and Elly sitting alone and in a dark car, side by side, sharing smiles and biscuits and chatting. Eve would feel warm and safe in her company. She could properly be herself for an entire evening.

“The kids would have gone to bed by eight,” she murmured, half to herself.

“Oh good. I wouldn’t expect you to miss their bedtime.” Anxiety had filtered into Elly’s voice, making Eve want to reach out to her.

“No.” Eve sighed. “I’d have to convince my mother it was a good idea.”

“No pressure.”

“Okay. Thank you.” She sighed, a sense of calm settling over her. “If I manage it, I’ll bring the biscuits.”

Elly giggled. “Chocolate?”

“What else?”

“So, tell me about your day.”

They chatted a little more. The subjects of their conversation were less important, Eve felt, than the fact that they were talking at all. A closeness pulled at Eve, making her feel tingly and comforted at the same time. She wrapped her arms around herself and smiled, the sunshine that hit one of her socked feet adding to the bright sensations flooding through her.

* * *

Elly pulled the car to a gentle stop in front of Eve’s house. She tapped one finger on the steering wheel and waited, not wanting to alert Eve’s children to her presence. The text she had received an hour ago, the one stating they were ‘on’ for the surveillance, had made her grin more widely than she could remember ever doing. It also made her stomach flip a bit and not in a comfortable way.

_Stuck in a small box with another person for an indefinite amount of time._

She’d had to gulp a few lungfuls of air before she’d stopped shaking. It was a test, she decided. And
of all the people to sit in a car with for hours, she knew Eve would understand if she had a panic attack. It wasn’t like Eve didn’t know her issues. There wasn’t much point in avoiding it forever, either. She wanted it to be okay. She wanted to be normal again.

The tapping of her finger sped up as Eve stepped out of her front door, before closing it behind her. Elly gripped the wheel and threw Eve a smile she hoped didn’t look pained.

The smile that Eve gave her in return was warm as she slid into the passenger seat. “I’ve been bad.”

Elly laughed and eyed her suspiciously. “What on earth do you mean?” She chose humour to diffuse her taught nervousness. “Am I going to have to place you over my knee?”

“Oh shush.” Eve lifted her hand and moved it as if to pat Elly, but seemed to stop herself. She simply touched the back of Elly’s hand where it lay on the wheel. “I just may have…slightly skirted the truth when explaining to my mother where we will be tonight.”

With an aghast expression, Elly placed a hand to her throat. “How terrible of you!”

After indicating the road in front of them, Eve clipped her seatbelt into place. “Drive, will you?”

Elly turned the car on and pulled away. “Come on, Eve. What did you tell your mother?”

A glance to her left told Elly that Eve felt quite guilty. “Umm. I said we were going to look through files at your office.”

Elly’s finger tapping started up again and she had to physically stop herself from doing it. “Right.”

“I just…I don’t think she needs to know. It’s…it’s my life.” Eve held a hand up in a half-shrug. “I don’t want to…to lie to her. But I feel like a child with her at the moment. And if I can’t do the things I want to do…I think I’m going to be miserable.”

Elly took one shaky hand from the wheel to place over Eve’s knee. “I understand.” When Elly glanced away from the road, Eve was smiling at her.

The remainder of the drive was silent. Elly jumped at one point, when another car, its headlines blaring, turn into her path on the road. Eve’s hand took up residence on Elly’s knee this time, just for a few breaths, and then it was gone. The sweetness of the gesture made Elly’s leg tingle.

They arrived at the Jones’s property, and Elly shut off the engine. She squinted out of her window for a moment, before checking her watch. “Apparently she usually leaves at around eight-ten. So we have a few minutes.”

They looked at one another. Eve was clutching a bag to her lap and when Elly eyed it quizzically, she opened it. “Biscuits.”

“Oh well that’s us set then,” Elly said. She pointed to the flask in her cup holder. “Only room for one flask though, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t mind sharing.”

Another lengthy silence was broken by someone exiting the Jones’s house. Elly sat up straight and peered out. It was a woman and, from her memory of the photo Mr Jones had shown her, it was definitely her mark. Mrs Jones got into a car and the red light streaked the road when she turned it on.
Elly started her own car again and they followed at a distance. She remained focussed on Mrs Jones’s car, carefully tracking each indication and each turn in case they lost her. She drove through the town centre and came to a stop at a row of Victorian houses, each with a pristine garden and shiny doorknocker. Elly parked across the road and shut off the engine, grabbing her binoculars from the glove compartment.

“What’s she doing?” Eve’s voice was almost a whisper.

“I’m not sure. Perhaps this is where her affair lives.”

Eve hummed in interest as Elly held the binoculars to her face and trained them on the door. She could make out Mrs Jones lifting the knocker and letting it fall. She was too far away to hear the noise it made, but the door was answered promptly by a middle-aged woman in a suit, many sparkling rings on her well-manicured fingers.

She turned sharply back to Eve. “It’s a woman.”

“I knew it,” Eve hissed and held out her hand for the binoculars.

Elly handed them to her and watched her as she peered through them. The look on Eve’s face when she lowered them to grin at Elly was delightful. Giggling, Elly rolled her eyes. “Look at you all excited about a bit of lesbian infidelity.”

“Well, it’s the most drama I’ve seen for weeks. Much better than someone shouting and screaming and being forced medication on the ward.”

“True.” Keeping the binoculars in one hand, she turned her other palm-up and offered it to Eve.

The blush that crept up Eve’s cheeks was visible even in the streetlamps. She slid her fingers between Elly’s and squeezed. “Thank you for letting me tag along.”

“Well it would have been terribly boring without you,” Elly replied, returning her gaze back to the door. She watched Mrs Jones entering the house and the door closing behind her. She checked the clock on her phone and, resting the binoculars in her lap, wrote the time on a small pad of paper. “I’d only have been sitting here in the dark thinking of funny things to say to you about it when I next saw you.”

Another squeeze. Eve brushed her thumb over the bulge of Elly’s thumb.

It tickled slightly and Elly squirmed just a touch, before relaxing back in her seat. “Okay, well I suppose we’re here for a while. Until she leaves.”

“Should we place bets on how long they’ll be?”

Elly smirked. “How long does it take for…?” Her face went hot. “Um… I mean…”

Eve’s gaze was trained on her knees. “I’ve never thought about it. I suppose everyone’s different.”

“Is it odd that I’ve always assumed, you know, with a woman, it would be a more…lengthy activity?”

Eve chuckled. “Not odd.” She shrugged, lifting Elly’s fingers to her lips. “Who knows though?”

“Lesbians presumably.”

Silence settled around them for a while. Elly’s attention remained on the house Mrs Jones had gone
in. A couple of cars drove past and Elly turned to hide her face each time headlights flared in their
direction. Thoughts began swirling around and she sucked her bottom lip as she allowed them to
slide over her.

Sex. Sex with Eve. Women having sex. She’d thought about it before, obviously. Over the last few
weeks, she’d lain in her comfortable bed, seeking release and letting her imagination and her fingers
go where they wanted. Images of Eve lying with her, touching her, had filled her and brought her
pleasure, even if they had been full of mist and the unknown. She wondered what it would really be
like. Would Eve know what to do? Would Elly?

She turned back and found Eve smiling at her. The tug on her hand made her flinch, Eve’s intention
clear. Elly wasn’t quite ready to move closer though. “Just…” A violent shiver slid through her.

Eve’s eyebrows furrowed. “It’s alright.”

Her chest feeling like it was being squeezed by the jaws of death, Elly held on to Eve’s hand tightly.
“I’m sorry.”

Eve’s eyes flicked towards the door. “Do you want me to get out for a bit?”

“No it’s…I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

Elly dropped her head and pushed out a breath. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s up?”

With her free hand pressing her sternum, Elly took a moment. “I think I’m just a bit overwhelmed.”

A second tug on her hand made Elly look up. The understanding in Eve’s gaze made her chest hurt
in a different way. “Listen, I’m not here to make a move. We don’t even have to hold hands, if that’s
too much for you.”

“I do want to,” Elly argued, her voice small.

“But you’re scared?”

Elly nodded.

“I told you before, we can take our time. I have nowhere else to be, and no one else to be with.”

A few calming breaths made Elly’s chest relax, and the burning pain faded away. She scratched at a
thread on her trousers. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And you’re worth it.”

“I do…” Elly looked up. “I do want to…you know. I want to kiss you.”

A smile blossomed across Eve’s features. “That’s nice to hear.”

The smile was infectious. Pleasure and shy affection made Elly’s skin tingle. “Well I’m…I’m glad
you think it’s nice.”

Eve moved her face close to Elly’s ear. Her warm breath tickled Elly’s neck, before she murmured,
“I want to kiss you too.”
The space between Elly’s legs twitched and ached for a moment, before further warmth enclosed her whole body. “Good.”

After withdrawing, but keeping their hands linked, Eve rested her head back against the headrest. She yawned widely.

Elly giggled. “Oh dear.”

“I’m fine.” Dark eyes blinked open and Eve rolled her head on the headrest to direct her gaze at Elly. “Do you really think they’ll be a long time?”

“No idea.” Elly smothered a laugh behind her hand. “Perhaps they’re just having a quickie.”

Eve snorted and shook her head in disbelief. “Let’s hope they take a little longer. I’m quite enjoying just sitting here with you.”

* * *

They ended up playing silly games, including twenty questions and eye-spy. It all finished with Elly claiming she could see some sort of obscure bird on a rooftop. Eve honked with laughter at the absurdity and Elly joined in, still insistent about the bird.

“Anyway,” Elly said, wiping her eyes, “I think we’ve pretty much got all we can from eye-spy.”

“Do you reckon?” Eve’s face felt warm and she put her free hand to her cheek.

Elly hummed and nodded. “Another game?”

Another yawn pulled Eve’s jaw to its limit. She wriggled in her seat, relinquishing her hand from Elly’s to stretch them both above her head. A soft moan escaped her. When she settled back down, Elly’s eyes looked suddenly dark and huge in the dim light. “No more games,” Eve replied gently.

Elly nodded.

“You okay?”

“I keep thinking about…my life I suppose.” Elly seemed to hesitate a moment before placing her hand back into Eve’s. Her skin was warm and Eve wondered whether she’d ever felt anything so soft. “All the shit that’s gone on. All the things I’ve been through.”

Eve sighed and caressed the back of Elly’s hand. “I guess most people have hardship. But I think you’ve had the lion’s share.”

Eve sighed and caressed the back of Elly’s hand. “I guess most people have hardship. But I think you’ve had the lion’s share.”

“So have you, though.” A small smile tugged Elly’s lips. “We both have.”

As if of its own accord, Eve’s hand lifted to touch Elly’s cheek.

Lines appeared at the corners of Elly’s eyes, but she didn’t move away.

If Eve thought the skin of Elly’s fingers was soft, she had been sorely mistaken. Elly’s cheek was like velvet, and her eyes fluttered closed as Eve cupped her jaw. She forced herself to keep her distance, to stay where she was in the reasonably uncomfortable seat, not wanting Elly to bolt. The hitch in Elly’s breathing seemed like anxiety rather than full-blown fear.

“All right?” Eve whispered.
A breath shot out of Elly’s parted lips, and although her eyes remained closed, she nodded.

“I don’t want to scare you.” Eve couldn’t bring herself to speak more loudly. It seemed as though the moment would break. “But you’re so…so beautiful. I just want to touch you.”

“It’s fine,” Elly breathed. She wrapped her fingers gently round Eve’s wrist and held her steady. Her fingers shook but Eve got the impression she was pushing herself, trying to be brave.

“Just…tell me to stop if you…you know?”

“I will.”

Eve trailed her fingertips over Elly’s cheek, trying to put as much love and tenderness into that one touch as she could. She smiled when Elly turned her face into the caress and nuzzled the tips of her fingers.

“Shouldn’t we be focussing on the job?” Elly was smiling properly now.

“Must we?”

Elly opened her eyes and cocked an eyebrow. “That feels…” She swallowed audibly.

“Scary?”

“Good. It…it feels good.”

Relief and happiness swept through Eve. “Oh well that’s…” She simply nodded; thumbing Elly’s cheekbone and relishing the way it made Elly’s smile broaden.

The hand on Eve’s wrist dropped, but then rose to hold Eve’s face. Elly shifted in her seat so that she was facing Eve properly, one knee dangerously close to the handbrake. “You have absolutely no idea how beautiful you are, do you?”

“It’s not something I’ve really thought about. At least, not in the last few months.”

“Well you are.” Elly leant forward and gently pressed her lips next to her hand, right at the corner of Eve’s mouth.

Surging forwards, Elly captured Eve’s lips between her own, knocking a groan out of her; half-surprised, half-relieved. Their first kiss was passionate and hard, teeth banging slightly and lips crushing. It was hurried and infused with determination and want.

They parted, breathing heavily. Eve gripped the back of Elly’s neck. “Don’t feel you have to—” But she didn’t manage anything else.

Elly leaned in once more, and this time the kiss they shared was timid and tender, as if they hadn’t kissed yet, as if they were young, unsure about what to do, and what a kiss really meant.

But it meant heaps to Eve. Just the simple joining of their lips caused emotions to swirl and spiral
inside her. I don’t want her to be scared. I want to kiss her. I want to take it slowly. She feels so good. I don’t want her to freak out. She pulled back with difficulty, but held Elly at arm’s length, trying to catch her breath.

The look in Elly’s eyes was nothing short of terrified.

Eve let her go and tears burned behind her eyes. She put a hand to her mouth. “Shit. I’m so sorry.”

“No. Don’t say that.”

“I didn’t mean to…”

Elly touched her lips too, but with something akin to wonder.

Eve stuffed her hands under her thighs. “Are you okay?”

Shuddering, Elly nodded. “I think so.”

Shame grabbed Eve’s heart and squeezed it. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

Eve yanked her hands out from under her legs and pulled at the sleeves of her jacket fitfully. “You’re not ready. I knew that and I…”

Firm hands gripped her upper arms. “Would you shut up for one second?”

Eve’s gaze caught Elly’s.

A few slow blinks later and Elly’s lips quirked upwards. “I kissed you.”

Did she? “Oh.”

With one hand back on Eve’s cheek, Elly nodded. Her fingers trailed small patterns against Eve’s skin. “And it’s okay.”

“You were scared, though.”

Apparently, Elly wanted to be honest. “I know. I was scared. But not because it was you.” She sighed. “Actually, I think, if it hadn’t been you, I would have been very scared. Instead of simply a little scared.”

Hope shone like a single tea-light in a cathedral and Eve beckoned it closer. “Really?”

“It was always going to be scary,” Elly reassured her. “It’s been rather a long time for me. Years, in fact. I haven’t…even kissed anyone for…” She trailed off and closed her eyes, apparently trying to remember. Then she shrugged and sighed again. “I can’t even recall.”

“Oh.”

“A woman of many words, aren’t you?”

Courage fizzled in Eve’s bones. “Would you rather I was a chatterbox?”

“Not at all.” Elly tilted her head to one side. “I like you as you are. Words are overrated, anyway.” She moved closer.
Dipping her head, Eve brushed her lips against Elly’s, confident that it was what Elly wanted. That, even though it frightened her, she wanted to try. Perhaps if they tried often enough, it wouldn’t be so scary after a while. *Well, I always said I would help her with her fears.* Eve smiled against Elly’s mouth and felt her smile back.

* * *

They almost didn’t notice Mrs Jones leaving the property. She was stuffing something into her handbag and Elly wasn’t convinced her neat hair suggested a night of raw passion. “What do you think she was doing with that woman?” she asked as they followed Mrs Jones’s car back towards her home address.

“I can’t decide. I mean, why would one go out at night to a location you’d keep secret from your husband, unless you had something to hide?”

“It is the most obvious explanation,” Elly mused. “An affair.”

“But the most obvious explanation isn’t always the one that’s right.”

Elly waggled her index finger in Eve’s direction. “You’re very correct, Detective Granger.” The long and happy-sounding sigh from the other side of the car made Elly smile.

“So, am I employed then?”

“As what? My third in command?”

“If you like.”

Elly glanced across and caught the smirk on Eve’s face. “It wouldn’t be up to me. Kate’s in charge.”

“I thought it was a partnership?”

“Not since I’ve been ill.”

“Ahh.”

They turned into Mrs Jones’s road and pulled up at the end, as far away from Mrs Jones as Elly could manage whilst still giving them a good view of the house.

Eve’s fingers fidgeted in her lap.

Elly reached over to still them. “Don’t fret. We can talk about it another day.”

After chewing her lip and fidgeting for a moment longer, Eve nodded. “Okay.”

They both jumped at a loud knock on the passenger’s side window. Mrs Jones was standing with her arms folded and a stern expression on her face. Elly groaned deep in her throat, then wound down the window. “Can I help you?” She tried to keep the tightness from her voice.

“You’re the ones who have been following me,” Mrs Jones replied. “Surely I should be asking you that?” She seemed strangely calm.

Eve shot Elly a wide-eyed look.

Elly deflated even more and groaned again. She removed her hand from Eve’s and pushed the door open, clambering out and leaning on the roof of the car. “I’m really sorry.” She fumbled for an
explanation. “I recognised your car and thought it was the one my husband had had stolen a few weeks ago. I made a mistake. Sorry.”

Mrs Jones frowned. “Likely story. I know my husband employed you. I overheard a conversation he had with you on the phone. I’m not a moron.” She stepped back as Eve got out of the car and stood, shuffling her feet.

Elly bit her lip. “Okay. You got me.”

“So, what? You follow me around and find out where I’m going? Then tell my husband?”

Still toeing the pavement with her boot, Eve nodded. “Something like that.”

Mrs Jones sighed deeply, miserably. Then she rung her hands, her eyebrows furrowed. “I implore you: please do not tell him where I’ve been.”

“Where have you been, Mrs Jones?” Elly kept her voice low and walked around the car to join them.

Eve’s hand on her arm was a comforting weight.

“Where do you think I’ve been?”

Elly looked at Eve helplessly, but got only a confused look back.

“I’ve been working.”

“Working?” Something new struck Elly. “So you’re…you’re selling your body?”

A loud laugh bubbled out of Mrs Jones. She practically double up with mirth. “God no! Who’d have this, hmm?” She spread her arms as if indicating the whole package. “Apart from Bill, of course.”

“Of course.” Elly was still at a loss. “So, if not prostitution, what on earth are you working as?”

“A bloody cleaner.”

Eve took a step back. “A cleaner?”

“Yes. Oh, don’t look at me like that: all judgemental. I’m qualified for nothing, my dear. Straight into marriage after university, which I didn’t quite complete. My mistake. Been paying for it ever since.”

Elly blinked. “But…but why?”

“Because, as sad as it is to admit, my darling husband will not allow me to have money. He thinks he’s doing me a favour, stopping me from having credit cards and an allowance to spend as I would like. I had some issues with overspending and getting into debt when we were first married. Student loan didn’t quite cover the meals out I had. But that’s a long time ago, and he still won’t let me splash out every now and then.” She growled and balled her fists. “I’m unhappy. Deeply. He’s a loving man, very caring. His heart is in the right place. But I’m stifled. I need my freedom.” She swept the air with one hand. “And this little job gives me the means of having that.”

“So…” Eve’s eyes were flicking from side to side, as if she was organising all the new information. “So, you’re not having an affair?”

“Who on earth did you think I was having an affair with?”

A lost and terrified look crossed Eve’s expression, but she lifted her jaw in strength and took a deep
breath. “Well the…the woman who’s house you went to.”

“Mrs Fredrickson? Oh gosh no, dear, she’s not my type.”

Eve gaped at her. Elly wanted to laugh.

Mrs Jones apparently found this rather amusing too. “You don’t think I haven’t dabbled with women? Back in the day, my dear, it was all the rage. But these days, I’m happy with my Bill. Can’t beat a loving, if slightly annoying and patronising, partner in crime.”

“You don’t think he’d understand?” Eve asked.

“I don’t think so. I’m not sure.”

Elly could feel Eve’s gaze on her, but she tried to direct her own towards Mrs Jones. “Um…so where do we go from here?”

“Well, you obviously need to be paid. I suppose you can always say you followed me to the pub where I met my friends. That’s up to you.” She sighed and looked towards the house. “I suppose I ought to come clean about my job, really. I’ve been cleaning for Mrs Fredrickson for a good six months. I’m surprised he didn’t have someone follow me sooner. I’m not surprised he thought, perhaps, that I was cheating. I haven’t been the nicest to him lately.”

“I’m new to this, I’m afraid.” Eve gestured towards Elly. “You’re the boss.” There was something fiery and affectionate in her eyes. It warmed Elly’s stomach.

“We do need to be paid. But, yes, I’m willing to report that we found no evidence of you being unfaithful. Just as long as you tell your husband the truth at some point.” She softened and smiled. “I don’t particularly like dishonesty.”

“Fair dos.” Mrs Jones patted Elly’s shoulder.

Elly tensed and tried not to shrink back.

A warmth immediately touched her side. Eve had moved to her, effectively cutting off any more of Mrs Jones’s tactile behaviour. She’s protecting me.

Mrs Jones walked away, with a flick of hair. At her gate, she threw them a smile and a wave. Elly waved back, a little dumbstruck.

“Well, that didn’t turn out as I thought it would.” Eve was chuckling.

Nodding slowly, Elly fitted her fingers into the crook of Eve’s arm. “No. It didn’t.”

Glistening eyes caught her own and Eve shifted in front of her, her smile gentle. She brushed a lock of Elly’s hair behind her ear. “Time to go home, I suppose.”

Elly nodded. Her heart felt sore, as if taking Eve home and leaving her there would break it. Therefore, she reached up and cupped the back of Eve’s hand, before turning her head and pressing a kiss to her palm.

The gentle smile widened and Elly saw a flash of teeth. “I’ve certainly had my eyes opened to the world of private detective work.”

“I hope you had fun.”
“I really did. But I expect that was the person I was learning from, rather than the actual activity.”

Tilting her chin upwards, Elly pulled Eve down to her. Their lips touched very gently. Tingles shot down her body, but she tried to embrace them and not think of them as frightening. *This is how she makes me feel. It’s lovely, not scary.* She stepped closer and pressed her body against Eve’s, realising a moment later that the car was behind Eve’s back.

Eve’s hands were stationary against her back, over her coat. A small noise, like a rumble of thunder hundreds of miles away, broke forth from Eve.

Elly answered it with a hum of her own.

The kiss lasted a minute or so, then petered out, dropping to simple nudges of lips against lips. Elly smiled, stroked the backs of her fingers down Eve’s neck, and then wound one finger into a piece of her hair. “We should go.”

“We should.”

They lingered. Elly wasn’t sure who pulled away first—maybe they did so at the same moment—but by the time they were both in the car again, it didn’t really matter. Eve’s hand slid into Elly’s once she’d turned the car out of Mrs Jones’s road, and it remained there the entire way back to Eve’s.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

How has it been 3 months since I updated? What happened?

Oh, that's right! My book was published! :oO

Madness.

Anyway. NSFW, etc. Surely, you'd assume that about anything I wrote these days?

Eve lay in bed, thirty minutes after Elly had dropped her off, her lips still tingling. She ran a fingertip over her bottom lip, wondered whether the swirling feeling in her stomach was because Elly was a woman, or just because she was Elly.

When Elly had pushed her against the side of the car, a startled but aggressive monster had risen within Eve. Suddenly Elly’s body was very much something to be thought about. The curve of her waist and the swell of each breast. Eve had seen her in pyjamas—they had shared a bedroom for over a month whilst on the ward, of course she had seen her. And then when they had shared Elly’s bed, when she’d first been discharged. In fact, Elly had snuggled against her shoulder, had rested her arm around Eve’s waist. They’d touched all along their bodies, from hip to shoulder, and all the bits in between.

Tightness pulled at Eve’s tummy. Elly probably wasn’t ready to carry out any of the things Eve was considering. She suspected Elly wasn’t having the same thoughts yet either. Keep it in your pants. Don’t get carried away. You’ll only frighten her and then you’ll ruin it. The monster that had previously been growling turned angry. Her surroundings darkened to muted greys and blacks. She wanted to throttle the man that had tied Elly up. Sweet, sweet Elly, who had the prettiest eyes and the most delightful laugh. Both of Eve’s hands balled into fists. She held steady for a while, taking slow breaths, trying to calm herself.

This isn’t going to help anyone.

Getting angry would only make the situation more complicated. A long breath out and she felt a lot better. Her muscles relaxed and small pinpoints of colour returned to her world. Cars drove past her bedroom window, headlamps making her curtains orange in the darkness. The kids were asleep, her mum too probably. All was still.

Surely, it was natural to feel turned on when the person you were attracted to was close, their body against yours? Even if it was just a memory at the late hour. And Elly’s lips had felt so good against her own, both hot and shivery at once. Their first kiss had been fuelled by passion and need. Those dramatic emotions were soon and thankfully replaced with tenderness and affection. A quiet connection had brought them back together. It had felt good.

Eve hadn’t kissed anyone since Jake. Rather than push the memories of him away, she forced herself to accept them and allowed them to drift around her for a while. Her psychologist had encouraged this, suggested to her that the more a person shoves their feelings and thoughts away, the more persistent they would become. And thoughts were just thoughts, insubstantial unless you allowed
them to linger. They were safe, unless they dictated your actions.


Love? Maybe.

*I know I love her. I fancy her too. She’s completely beautiful.*

These thoughts were much more comfortable. She let them float about, touch and delight her. The parts of her body that had awakened just minutes ago reignited. She shifted her hips around, wanting to relax and sleep, but found the fullness between her legs wouldn’t shift. She chuckled voicelessly, the silliness of the situation tickling her.

*I’m forty-two. I’m absolutely allowed to be horny.*

Submitting to the realisation that it was, in fact, okay to feel the things she was feeling, and to feel them when she thought about Elly, Eve closed her eyes and indulged. Elly’s soft features appeared in her mind’s eye. Her smile, the way one of the eyebrows lifted when she was interested or amused. The way she spoke; the hum that caught in her throat when she enjoyed something. The sparkle that appeared in her eyes when she was working, and when she gathered enough evidence to create a theory.

Eve thought about the curve of Elly’s lips, how soft they were when they were pressed against her own. Fingertips that skimmed Eve’s back over her coat. Being pushed against the car with insistence.

A wave of arousal shot through her and she gasped quietly. The heaviness between her legs began to throb. She pressed her thighs together to ease the discomfort.

Her eyes popped open and she glanced around her bedroom. The tree outside her window cast strange blustery shadows just above her curtains. She swallowed hard. The hallucinated glint of metal made her tense. She slid her own hand across her middle and clutched at her opposite hip, wanting to continue the fantasy, feel some comfort from the memory of Elly holding her. She turned her head towards her dream-companion and closed her eyes again.

A safe feeling enclosed her and she relaxed once more. Everything settled around her and her fingers loosened a little at her hip. She remembered how Elly had snuggled close, her chin against Eve’s collarbone. A knee just brushing her thigh. Fingers caressing the skin just above her waistband.

Eve fingers trailed little patterns against her naked belly, under her pyjama shirt. The touch made her wiggle in bed, a smile flickering onto her face. She sighed and her body sunk further into the mattress. She stretched backwards, then softened, her fingers widening their exploration.

The soft hairs around her navel were fun to stroke. Pleasure fluttered across her skin, half-sexual, half-sensual. She could practically hear Elly humming her approval, an element of affectionate humour in her tone. Her nose would brush Eve’s ear and it would make Eve giggle.

Eve’s legs parted under the duvet. She scrunched her toes into the sheet and shifted until she was half on her side. One thigh rested against the memory foam, the other dropped outwards, her foot sliding as she bent her knee. She tried an experimental roll of her hips and shivered in delight.

The hand that could have been Elly’s, in Eve’s dream-world, snuck up her shirt and trailed lazily across her breast. Her nipple hardened at the proximity and Eve screwed up her face in delight. She brushed the nub gently and immediately felt it trickle down between her legs. She did it again, more firmly, and the corresponding effect increased in intensity.
The skin around her nipple was soft and puckered, as if cold. She concentrated on the area for a while, drawing it out, allowing herself a chance to stop if she wasn’t comfortable. She wanted it to be nice. She wanted to enjoy it. When she rubbed her nipple again, she had to bite her lip to stop herself from moaning.

Her other breast got the same attention. The heavy feeling between her legs blossomed, as if she was opening out, ready and longing. She longed for Elly, for those supple lips against her own, and perhaps other places. She hadn’t thought of that, of Elly kissing her anywhere other than her lips and forehead, and perhaps her knuckles. The sudden image of Elly’s face lowering between her legs made her arch her back and push her breast into her own hand. She pulled and rubbed at her nipple, the pleasure pooling now, a coiled spring that begged for release.

The minute her fingertips slid between her legs, she jolted, her own wetness coating her hand and surprising her. She lay still for a few heartbeats, her hand unmoving and pressed against her labia. Rather than end up having to dispose of her trousers into the washing basket, she shoved them down and off, leaving her skin cool to the air of the bedroom. Her shirt remained in place, keeping her from freezing completely.

A few cleansing breaths helped. She settled back into the tender and comfortable place in her mind, the place she shared with a calm and sleepy Elly. They were together, sometime in the future. A future that had Elly confident and unafraid of being touched. Elly’s hand was sure and skilled—she had touched Eve before.

Eve’s fingers moved, just twitched gently. Her whole sex contracted in a gentle swirl and pleasure made her quiver just slightly. She began a slow fluttering, her clit achingly distended and accepting of her touch. Pleasure made her breath hitch.

She found it difficult to keep her caresses both light and slow, so gave in to what her body was telling her. *God, that’s so good.* Her clit burning now, she slid downwards and dipped two fingers inside herself. The wonderful full feeling made her gasp. She gripped the duvet in her free hand.

Her hips had begun to rock, the tempo that of an adoring dance between lovers. Her breathing had deepened, her chest heaving in time with her hips. She slid in deeper, curled her fingers in a way she found familiar. It wasn’t like she wasn’t practised, an artisan at her own pleasure. It had just been a little while since she had indulged.

Parting her legs more, Eve began a thrusting, sliding, delicious movement, curling and curling against that sensitive area, the one that made her back warm and new wetness flow. She lay the back of her free hand over her mouth, hoping to catch any sounds she might make. It wouldn’t be long now.

She’d whispered Elly’s name softly into the darkness of her bedroom before she could stop herself, but inwardly shrugged. She was thinking about Elly. And that was okay.

She imagined Elly up against her side, lips brushing back and forth along her jaw and neck, and shoulder. Elly’s fingers inside her, touching her with the experience of a competent lover, someone who had spent many nights learning her body. She wondered whether Elly would talk dirty to her: probably not. Maybe she would coo at her and reassure her. Elly was sweet. That wasn’t difficult to imagine.

Eve brought her thumb forward, her unattended clit screaming with want, and pressed. Her hips bucked and her back arched as pleasure washed over her. She rocked her hand against the movements of her pelvis and tried not to groan. Just a few thrusts and she was panting, her sex so wet, her whole body aching for completion, perched on the edge.
She came in a languid, wonderful few moments. Tiny stars burst across her vision and her clit pulsed, her fingers being pulled repeatedly by the ripples of her orgasm. Everything was amazing, so amazing, and then things slowed, gentled. It was a few breaths before she realised she’d shaken so much that the duvet had slid down to her hips. Evaporating sweat made her shiver. She moved her hand away and let out a long breath through smiling lips. Her whole body felt light and sated. She felt a little messy, but safe none the less.

*If only Elly was here to hold me.*

She smiled at that thought, rolling her eyes at her longing to be with Elly, even after her expedition into the world of self-pleasure. It was okay, though. She briefly wondered whether Elly had ever done the same—she’d been discharged a few weeks ago. She’d had more opportunity.

Eve realised she didn’t mind either way, so long as Elly was happy. If Elly felt comfortable doing that and thinking about Eve whilst she did so, it didn’t bother Eve. And if she didn’t, well, maybe Elly would get to a place at some point where it *was* okay for her to do that. Eve hoped she did. She reckoned it would be therapeutic for Elly to try it by herself before they tried it together.

Curling onto her side and making a mental note to retrieve her pyjama bottoms before she fell asleep, Eve cuddled into her pillow and sighed. She imagined the pillow was Elly, a soft part of her, perhaps her breast. She smoothed her palm across the cotton, pretending she could feel the heat of Elly’s skin through her pyjamas. She wondered if Elly’s nipple would pucker if she snuggled her so intimately. She almost giggled at the thought.

Sleep nearly pulled her down before she managed to redress. It felt like an eternal effort for Eve to locate her clothes and pull them back on. Once she was sorted, however, her mind relaxed to mirror her body. She felt like a feather on the wind.

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Elly ran her tongue over her newly brushed teeth and grinned. She felt overwhelmingly proud of herself. She’d kissed Eve, actually *kissed* her. She hadn’t panicked and she hadn’t run away. Progress, indeed.

Butterflies still trembled in her belly. Her fingertip tapped along the side of the mattress as nerves kept her energy levels high. She snorted and shook her head. *What a state. One kiss and you revert back to an excited teenager with a crush.*

She lifted her mobile and scrolled through her contacts until she reached Eve’s number. Sleep seemed to be evading her. Might as well see whether Eve was up too. She’d dropped her off an hour ago.

Eve answered on the third ring, and sounded as if she was mid-yawn when she managed a warm greeting.

“Hey. Sorry.” Elly chewed her lip. “I expect you were off to sleep.”

“Nearly.” Eve’s voice sounded lazy. Perhaps she had just had a bath. Or had lavender oil on her pillow.

“Sorry. I’ll go, shall I?”

“No,” Eve said quickly.

Elly smiled and settled down in bed, her phone pressed to her ear.
“A few minutes more awake won’t hurt.” Eve sighed and a low hum echoed in Elly’s ear. “Did you miss me?”

“After an hour? Of course not.” Elly forced nonchalance into her voice but she had the feeling it wasn’t that convincing.

“Likely story,” Eve replied.

Elly chuckled. “Anyway. Kate’s light was on when I got home, but she didn’t come out of her room. I expect I’ll get the third degree in the morning.”

“Does she…does she know?”

“Know what?” Elly asked gently.

“That we…kissed?”

The butterflies redoubled their efforts inside Elly, but she tried not to let them take her words away. “I haven’t told her yet.”

“But you will.” It wasn’t a question.

“She’s my best friend. My closest confidant. I tell her almost everything.”

A pause. Elly stomach clenched.

“I’m glad.”

“You are?” Elly brightened.

“I like to think of you with someone to rely on. Not…not because you can’t take care of yourself, of course, but…” Eve trailed off and Elly could hear the anxiety in her voice.

“I know what you mean.” Elly clutched at the duvet, warmth blossoming over her. “I think I’d feel the same if you lived with a friend.” Another pause. “I have yet to form an opinion about your mother.”

“She’s behaving herself. Keeping her cool, especially when it comes to you. I’m glad of that.”

“Me too,” Elly sighed.

“Anyway,” Eve said, another yawn hollowing the sound, “I’m now going to be a right party-pooper and say goodnight.”

“Tired are we?”

A noise similar to a cough. “Um…yes. Long night, you know?”

“I do know.” Affection rose up in Elly’s chest. “Eve…”

“Hmm?”

“We’ll…” Elly gulped. “I mean, we will talk about…about us. When we meet for coffee tomorrow.”

“Sounds wise.” Uncertainty rang clear through the connection. “I um…I look forward to it.”

“I like kissing you,” Elly said softly, and without thinking.
Eve chuckled kindly. “Oh, I love kissing you too.”

“And it…it’s still scary but…it’s also…fantastic.”

“Fantastic, huh?” Eve sighed. “I’m flattered.”

“Good. You should be.” Elly felt as if she was on the edge of a cliff, looking down and praying she wouldn’t fall. “Um…I’d like to do it again.”

“Yes, me too.”

They both broke out into snorting and muffled giggles. Elly pressed her palm to her mouth. “We are such morons.”

“I kind of like this whole…putting things simply. It makes it clear. Shows me where you stand.”

“I fancy you,” Elly teased.

“Oh well…um…”

“I think it’s time for sleep.” Elly yawned herself, stretched her free arm above her head. “I’m meeting someone for coffee tomorrow morning.”

“Who’s ‘at?” Eve sounded genuinely befuddled.

“Talk about moron.” Elly grinned. “You.”

“Oh.”

“So, you know, get lots of sleep. I’ll see you at ten.” Elly grimaced as she took in the time. One AM. Yuck.

“I’ll try.” Eve’s voice was already petering off, as if carried away on the wind.

“Bye, darling.”

“Bye.”

Elly nearly said I love you aloud, but caught the words at the last moment. Too soon. And too much. She inhaled deeply and nodded to herself, before placing her phone on the bedside table and curling up to sleep.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

HOW has it been 6 months?

This chapter is angst-filled. In case you couldn't possibly have guessed!

Eve forced her breakfast down, mostly for the benefit of her children and mother. She waved Robin and Claire off at the school gates before driving back home to get ready for her coffee date.

Nerves had been swirling her insides since she’d woken up. She’d touched herself, brought herself to orgasm and then spoken to Elly straight afterwards. Of course she had needs but it felt wrong, somehow.

She nearly tripped over the threshold when she arrived back home, her bootlace catching her handbag as she placed it down and then attempted to step away. Everything felt tight: her collar, her waistband, even her own ribs.

She placed a hand against her sternum and breathed. Her back was flush against the wall. The hallway was dark, the only natural light came in through the mottled glass front door. Slowly, thankfully, her breathing and heart rate slowed.

It was okay. It was fine. Just because she had masturbated—might as well use the word—and had thought about Elly, and then had spoken to Elly on the phone, didn’t make her disgusting. Just thinking about the word made her shiver. She was entitled to her own sexual desires. She was entitled to her fantasies.

For some reason, things were too close to the surface today. Little niggles were bobbing up and breaking through, causing her shoulders to tense, her jaw to ache.

She pressed a hand to her forehead. She continued to breathe. It’s fine. She said she fancied you. Maybe she’s done the same.

Eve couldn’t contemplate that concept without becoming anxious again, so she pushed away from the wall and went into the kitchen. She shoved a breezy expression onto her face.

Annie was drying up the breakfast pots.

Rounding their oak table, Eve joined her mother, taking a pan from her to put away in a high shelf.

“They went in with no problems?”

Eve nodded. “Robin even took the Mickey out of my laugh.”

“He hasn’t done that in a long time.”

“No since before I was in hospital.” Eve chewed her lip. “Do you think he’s being stopping himself? He used to do it at least once a day.”
“Maybe.”

Sunshine blossomed within Eve. She rested her hips back against the counter and watched Annie dry up the last serving spoon. “I’m really glad he feels okay to make fun of me again.”

“All little boys should feel comfortable doing that.”

Eve narrowed her eyes briefly, but relaxed when she caught sight of Annie’s smile. “They should.”

“Coffee?”

“I’ll pass. I’m leaving in forty minutes.” She needed a long slow breath in and then out to calm her newly racing heart.

“Oh that’s right. You’re meeting your friend.”

“It’s a date, Mum.”

Annie eyed her, then turned to put the kettle on.

Unsure whether she wanted another argument, Eve kept her mouth tightly closed whilst Annie made herself a coffee. Then strength built inside her. She took the chair opposite her mother. “You know…I wanted to talk to you about Elly.”

A sigh, perhaps of weariness. Annie looked deeply into her coffee for a beat, then lifted her gaze to Eve’s.

“I understand you’re uncomfortable with it. But it’s something that’s very important in my life.” Eve traced a knot in the wood of the table. “I want to talk to Robin and Claire about Elly.”

“Surely that’s unnecessary.” It wasn’t a question.

Eve ploughed on. A confidence she associated with being a D.I. held her steady. It was invigorating to know she still had it in her. “At some point I’m going to want to bring Elly here. She should meet them and they should know who she is. I’m also an adult who deserves a fulfilling relationship. I want Elly to spend the night.”

A deep flush coated Annie’s face. “Must you?”

“Yes.” Eve wanted to reach out, but kept her hands on her own side of the table. Annie looked far too on edge for any kind of physical contact. “I’m not saying it will be today, or tomorrow. I’ve told you about Elly’s issues with touch and, I’m assuming you’ve realised that this means we need to take things more slowly than one would expect…” Eve swallowed and then cleared her throat. “I’ve got to deal with this. It’s something I should be able to talk to my mother about. “So I’m not saying that anything is going to happen any time soon.”

Annie’s gaze had returned to her coffee. A tendon was tight under her jaw.

“Mum.” Eve sighed. “We kissed last night.”

Head snapping up, Annie determinedly looked around the kitchen. “I’m not sure why we need to discuss this.”

“Because it’s a massive part of what is going on with me. My mental health isn’t just about…how anxious I am, or how many flashbacks I have. It’s about how I feel in here.” She smacked her chest with her fist. “And how I feel in here is really complicated at the moment. I can tell my psychologist
all I want but what I really need is for my mum to listen.”

It was a long time coming, but Annie finally locked her gaze with Eve’s. “Eve.”

“Yes, mum.”

“I just…” She let out a huff. “I feel so…”

Insight. She’s actually going to talk to me about how she is feeling. Not just battle with me about what I should be feeling.

“I feel very out of my depth with all this.”

Surprise made Eve sit back. Relief made her smile. “You do?”

“I’d come to terms with the PTSD stuff. Your trauma. The flashbacks.”

“I’m very glad about that,” Eve said, with affection.

“But this…this gay thing. This thing with Elly. I don’t feel equipped.”

Eve did reach out then. There was a distress in Annie’s eyes she hadn’t seen for a long time. “What is it about dating Elly that you think is different from me dating a man?”

Annie simply held her hands out in a shrug. Then she reached for one of Eve’s.

Eve nearly cried. “Is there a difference?”

“Yes.” Annie looked about her. “No. I’m not sure.”

“Let me put it this way.” Eve spoke slowly and with care. I want to understand. “I was married, was I not?”

A nod.

“To a man that I thought loved me, gave me two amazing kids, then left me?”

Another nod.

“I’ve dated men since then. I nearly dated…” She forced the name from her own lips. “Jake.”

Something flashed across Annie’s expression. “Yes.”

“That was…intense. And stupid. I was under some sort of spell with him. Should have remembered all the parts of him.” A trickle of a memory—Jake sitting beside her on the swings when they were children. Then the black and white photographs of his murdered ex-wife and her lover…

She pushed it away. She was stronger than that.

“I should have remembered what he had done. He helped us with Wicklow.” She barely stuttered at all. Her confidence grew. “But ultimately, there was a part of him that was broken, isn’t that what you told me?”

Annie bobbed her head, then took a sip of her coffee with her free hand.

“Everything considered, would you rather I’d have continued dating Jake? Or my ex-husband?”
Despite the hard look in Annie’s eye, she did not release Eve’s fingers. “Of course not.”

Eve waited. She wanted her mother to find her own way with this one.

“With Elly, it’s unknown territory. Not only...physically.” Annie coughed. “But she’s a woman. A relationship with a woman will be different for you. Might make you unwell.”

“Why?”

“Because...the stigma.” Confusion and frustration marred Annie’s features. Lines appeared between her eyebrows. “Eve. What if this is a phase for you? Or for her? What if she decides she’s into men again and you get heartbroken? Don’t you see what will happen? You’ll be back in hospital before you can say ‘psychiatry’ and I’ll be left alone again with the children all over again.”

“Mum.” She squeezed Annie’s fingers, then prised her other hand from her cup to hold that too. “I can’t go through life not taking chances just because it might make me unwell if things go wrong. And the stigma isn’t what it used to be. It’s 2007, not 1907.” She gave Annie a teasing smile. “It’s not illegal, civil partnership is around.”

Annie sighed. “I just...I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“It’s not something you can protect me from. Unless you wrap me up in cotton wool and never let me out of the house. What kind of life would that be?”

“Probably not a great one,” Annie agreed. She smoothed her thumb over Eve’s knuckles.

“It’s not like before, when Dad was around and you were both working. You’re here for me; we can be here for each other.” Eve’s smile grew. “And I’d truly like you to meet Elly under more friendly circumstances.”

“I think I could do that. Give you my approval.”

Hope rose in Eve. She gave her mother’s hands one last squeeze, before relinquishing them so she could continue with her drink. “That would be lovely.”

“And...and Robin and Claire? You want Elly to meet them as well?”

“I need to talk to them first. Explain everything.”

An enhanced blush spread over Annie’s cheeks.

“I’m not going to go into detail about it. But it’s something that’s important for them to know. I need them to know that, if Elly comes round to stay, why she’s doing that. That it’s because I care deeply for her. Not just as a friend. But as a romantic relationship.”

“Well, why can’t you just say you girls are friends?” Annie gestured with her cup. “Wouldn’t that be easier for them to understand?”

“My kids are intelligent. They handled the concept of their mother being in a psychiatric facility with grace and respect. I want to show them the same respect.” Eve chuckled. “They’re not stupid, Mum. They’ll work it out. Robin’s in secondary school and Claire isn’t far behind him. They’ll already be hearing the word ‘gay’ in their friendship groups so...” She shrugged. “I want to be honest with them. I want to show them that it’s not something I want to hide. Not something I should be hiding.”

So articulate suddenly, Eve. Where has it come from? Eve couldn’t help the smile that pulled her
Annie nodded before draining her cup. “Do you want my moral support?”

“Maybe afterwards. But I’d like to tell them everything by myself, if that’s okay.” Eve tapped her fingertip on the table, her stomach fluttering. “You’re at bingo tonight, aren’t you?”

“You still want me to go?”

“You should. Go have a break from all this.” Eve swept the kitchen with a lifted hand.

“All this’ is not something I need a break from.” And finally affection seeped from Annie’s gaze. It was tinged with worry. “I know I wasn’t supportive at first. It was a shock to the system. But now…” Her throat worked as she swallowed. “We need to be a united front, don’t we?”

“Something like that.” Eve touched Annie’s hand. “I suppose you can come back tonight to an open and honest family. If that suits you?”

“Right. Okay, well, you had better get going then.” Annie stood and indicated the clock on the wall. “You’ll be keeping your Elly waiting.”

My Elly. Warmth bloomed through Eve’s whole body.

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The coffee shop they had chosen was warm and quiet. Jazz played on the stereo, steam rose from the coffee machine and shiny pastries sat on glass stands on the counter. Elly arrived first. She perused the sweet delicacies, wondering whether she should get Eve something. I’d like to treat her, but would it be presumptuous? What if she doesn’t feel like sugar today?

She chose one for herself and figured if Eve wanted to share it would do both of them some good. That, and the thought of feeding one another with the same fork was quite appealing.

A pot of tea for two, loose leaf, of course. A chocolate brownie in the centre of the table. Deep red cherries poked out from the chocolate in a way that nearly caused Elly to start picking at it without her companion.

The door swung open and Eve entered, a slanted smile crinkling her eyes. “Hi.”

“Hello,” Elly replied, patting the chair across from her own. As if the possibility that Eve would want to sit anywhere else existed.

“Have you been here for long?”

“No.” Elly watched Eve shrug off her jacket and hang her bag on the back of the chair. “I was a little early, but I utilised the time to get us something to drink.”

Eve eyed the plate in the middle of the table. She folded her hands and crossed her legs. “You’re indulging?”

“We are indulging.” Elly smiled and pushed the plate a millimetre closer to Eve. “Thought we could share.”
Shyness seemed to overcome Eve and she dipped her head. Her hair fell forwards, hiding her eyes.

Elly gave her the time she needed, but lengthened her arm to touch the back of Eve’s hand.

Without lifting her head, Eve turned her hand over and threaded their fingers together. “That’s very sweet of you.”

“Chocolate for the soul? How could I resist?”

Eve took a huge breath in as she finally sat up straight. “I’m hoping my soul can take it.”

“Of course it can. You have a kind soul. It deserves chocolate.”

Affection shone from Eve’s eyes. She caressed Elly’s knuckles with a soft fingertip. “Thank you.”

“You can buy the next round.”

“No, I mean…” Eve’s gaze flickered to the brownie. “For the thought. Not just the food.”

Needing a topic that took them away from the tenderness that tugged Elly’s chest, Elly sucked her bottom lip, before glancing outside. “Windy today, isn’t it?”

A small chuckle vibrated through Eve, before she followed Elly’s gaze. “A bit. The rain last night watered my new garden for me.”

“Saves you a job.”

“It does.” Eve’s eyebrows furrowed, but her smile remained. “Do you have a garden?”

“Kate has a sort of courtyard. With pots. She grows a wide variety of…well mostly grass, but some herbs. She likes to keep up her mysterious hippie reputation.”

“Grass?” One of Eve’s eyebrows lowered.

“Yes, you know. Green. Grows in most back gardens. Leafy thing.” Elly pouted in confusion, then realisation dawned. “Oh.” She gave Eve a mischievous stare. “Not that kind of grass.”

“I was going to say.”

“Police instincts failing you there. The one time Kate encountered a cannabis plant was when Benji accidentally got given one by a mate at college. Poor lad insisted he didn’t know what it was.”

“A likely story.” Eve shuttered her eyes in fondness.

Reluctantly pulling her hands away from Eve’s, Elly turned her attention to the teapot. “Fancy a cup?”

Eve swallowed, but recovered from whatever nerves she had felt and nodded.

The tea fogged the air above them as it was poured. The china cups were so decadent. Elly felt as if she should be wearing a cocktail dress. She gestured towards the brownie. “So, did you want half, or shall I take it home with me?”

“Definitely want half.” Eager fingers reached for the singular fork, which Elly handed to her. Before Eve could use it to take a bite, however, she stopped short. “I just realised something.”
“What?”

“Stand up.”

Elly looked around her in puzzlement, but complied.

Stepping slowly towards her, Eve cupped Elly’s chin. A short glance towards the server, and the other customers that littered the cafe. Eve trailed her knuckles an inch down Elly’s neck, resting her fingertips on the patch of skin where her shirt collar brushed her sternum.

Elly wondered whether she would pass out from that simple touch.

Eve’s gaze was on Elly’s lips. Then she was dipping closer.

Her breath catching in her throat, Elly’s body was suddenly in fight or flight mode. Every muscle tensed. She wanted to run.

Eve stepped away, but not too far. Her hand was still close to Elly but not touching her. Eyes: understanding and a little wet.

Elly gathered herself. I want to kiss her so much. But something was stopping her. Maybe it was the idle gazes on them. The other people, each with an opinion. The fear of being judged. Elly felt exposed, on show, like an animal in a zoo with a thousand on-lookers. She swallowed.

Eve still didn’t move away. She did shift her hand slowly down Elly’s arm until she found her hand. “It’s all right.”

“I hate that I feel like this,” Elly whispered. Her heart clattered against her ribs.

“Just take your time. If you don’t feel ready…”

“But I…” Elly forced herself to step into Eve’s space once more, trusting that she wouldn’t make a move. “I was ready last night.”

“Doesn’t mean you feel exactly the same today.” Eve shrugged. “We’re not alone or in the dark, for one thing.”

“That’s two things.”

Eve relaxed a touch. “All right, pedantic.”

Elly sighed. She made the decision to reach up and tuck a lock of Eve’s hair behind her ear. Her fingers lingered against Eve’s skin.

Eve’s face twitched. A moment of desire, perhaps. Deep affection. Then Eve was blinking slowly and smiling down at her. “I’m able to wait.”

The fear dropped from Elly. Relief flooded her senses. She leaned in and pressed her lips to the very edge of Eve’s.

Eve stayed where she was. She didn’t reach out, she didn’t crush Elly into her arms. She didn’t move forward or move away. She barely responded, apart from giving a tiny murmur. She closed her eyes.

Once Elly had settled back in her chair, everything seemed to shine more brightly. Even the one person that looked their way didn’t bother her. Sod them. If they haven’t seen two women kissing before, that’s not my problem. Elly grabbed the fork and took a piece of brownie, slipping it into her
mouth in what she hoped was a smug fashion.

Eve lowered herself into her chair, then cocked an eyebrow at Elly.

Elly replied with smirk. “You’re missing out.”

A pause. Then a wide smile and a shake of her head. “I don’t think so.”

*Does she mean that kiss was sweeter than any snack could be? Am I imagining things?* Elly didn’t care. The twinkle in Eve’s dark eyes made up for Elly’s previous embarrassing reaction.

Small talk took up the next half an hour, as well as tea drinking. Elly relished the easy way they interacted. Each time Eve touched her fingers she tingled all over. *Gosh, what will I be like when we finally sleep together?* That thought made her cheeks burn. Thank goodness Eve couldn’t read her mind.

“What have you got planned for the rest of the day?” Elly asked.

“Picking up the kids from school.” Something passed over Eve’s expression. “Something I wanted your view about, actually.” Eve sat back and twisted her lips. Then she rubbed the back of her neck. “I want to tell them about us.”

“Y-you do?”


Elly sat with her mouth open for a breath or two, considering the issue. Then she took a tiny amount of brownie onto the fork and held it out to Eve.

Eve lifted a hand and made to take the fork from her.

Elly shook her head and tilted her own chin upwards.

A squinted smile. A nod of acceptance. Eve parted her lips and the tip of her tongue was visible as Elly slid the fork into her mouth.

A muffled laugh. Eve shot Elly a look, half amused, half coy.

Elly returned the look. “I think… You know your kids. You can make that decision.”

“But I do value your opinion.” Eve swallowed her mouthful and passed her tongue over her bottom lip. She closed her eyes briefly and hummed in pleasure. “You have excellent taste in cake, by the way.”

“Thank you.” Elly held her warm cup between both hands. “What exactly do you intend on telling them?”

“That I care about you. That, maybe, at some point, you might…stay over.” Eve stared out of the window. “That…that it might not happen for a while but that…that I’d like it to happen. Because I’d like for you and I to be…” She huffed out a laugh. “Is the word ‘girlfriends’ too immature?”

Elly giggled. “Well, you can’t describe me as your ‘partner’. Kate would be awfully offended.”

“True.” She fingered the coaster under her cup. “Would you mind if I used ‘girlfriend’ to explain how I feel about you to my children?”
“No.” Emotions fizzled in Elly’s blood vessels, making her mind a little jittery. It was a good kind of jittery, though, one that didn’t cause her fear. “I suppose, once Kate’s twins are back from university… They’re older, of course. But they will have questions too.”

“No point in beating around the bush?” Eve ran a hand through her hair. “My intentions are reasonably obvious.” She gave Elly a lopsided smile. “It’s just that the time frame will probably be a lot more drawn out than you might expect.”

“Good way of putting that we’re taking it slowly.”

A warm look passed between them.

“I was going to ask, actually.” Elly sighed, wriggling her shoulders to loosen them. “How do you feel about an evening of movies and cuddles?”

“With you?”

“Of course with me.” Elly wafted the very idea that it could be with anyone else out of the air by Eve’s face.

“I’d like that very much.”

“And…and if you were to bring nightclothes and…” Elly looked around them, conscious once more of their less than private location. “Last time we were in the same bed was…sort of a necessity.”

“Doesn’t mean neither of us had a choice in the matter.”

“No, that is true.” Elly bobbed her head once. “But it was more about being safe and secure than… doing it simply for enjoyment.”

Eve flushed and nodded.

“A movie and…maybe a drink or two.” Elly held up a hand. “Something planned. Another date.”

“Robin and Claire go to their father’s next weekend.”

Elly gripped her cup until her knuckles went white.

“I don’t want to rush you.” Eve made a movement towards her, like she wanted to take back her words.

“I brought it up.” Elly consciously relaxed her body. She took a few breaths. “Let’s make a provisional date for next Saturday. Where…and what time…we can discuss it closer to the time.”

“I don’t want you to be scared.”

Elly shook her head. She took Eve’s hand again, making sure to keep her touch gentle. “I’m afraid it’s pretty unavoidable. But you helped me so much on the ward. When I got used to being touched.” She’d dropped her voice, not wanting anyone to eavesdrop. “If you’d have asked me back then whether I’d be okay being touched like this…without freaking out, I’d have laughed in your face and then run a mile.”

They gazed down at their joined hands.

“Just let me know how you feel. The minute you’re not comfortable with…with any of it.” Eve’s eyebrows pressed together. Longing filled her expression.
“I’ll tell you.” Elly pursed her lips around a shy smile, her gaze flitting away. “I…” She cleared her throat and tried again. “I’ve been trying to imagine…to prepare myself for when we do…”

Eve cocked an eyebrow at her. “Have you?”

Humour bubbled up in Elly’s throat. “I read something somewhere that said the imagination is a great resource for tackling phobias. Like, say, a fear of spiders. You picture a spider there, close to you, and prepare for the moment when you have to deal with one in real life.”

Eve winced.

“I’m not comparing you to a spider, I promise.”

Eve’s expression softened. “I understand what you mean.”

“Good.” Elly let out a breath. “I…I wanted to tell you that. I am thinking about it.”

“You are?”

“I’ll be honest, it’s a bit foreign.” Elly stuttered and put a hand to her mouth. She rolled her eyes. “Not that I haven’t thought about it in general…obviously…I mean I was single for years.”

Eve took the hand Elly had to her face and pressed a kiss into her fingers. “I’ve thought about it too.”

Unsure eyes flickered up to catch Eve’s. “You…you have?”

“Are you surprised?”

“Well, a bit. Perhaps.” Elly frowned. “But you’re not scared of being touched…or being…intimate. Why would you need to—”

“I am scared though.” Eve tilted her head. “It’s not something I’ve ever done, not with a woman. And when we do…finally…if we do…get round to…” She rolled her eyes, which made Elly giggle. “I want to have some idea of what to do.”

“Good point. Might as well be prepared.”

“If only there were books on the subject.”

“Lesbian sex for dummies?”

They both snorted.

Eve trailed a pattern across Elly’s knuckles. “I don’t know if you remember your first time with a lad…”

“In great detail.” Elly ground her teeth, but grinned. “And it is not something I ever wish to repeat.”

Nodding, Eve grinned back. “There you go then. Preparation sparks confidence.”

Once more, they let go of one another’s hands to finish their teas. They sipped in silence.

Elly took in all that Eve had said. So she’s thought about being with me. She’s imagined it, just as I have. What does that mean? Did she lie in bed and feel the things that I felt? Did she do anything about those feelings? Or was it simply an intellectual stream of thoughts? A planning session for when we finally achieve that together?
A few dark brown crumbs remained on the plate. Elly pressed one so that it stuck to her finger and lifted it, without much thought, to Eve.

Obediently, Eve opened her mouth but moved no further. She gave Elly the control.

Affection swam through Elly at that small thing. *She is so respectful of me. She wants to ease me in so gently to everything we experience together. She understands when I struggle to cope.* Tears stung her eyes but she pushed them away. She needn’t be sad. It was such a happy thing, being close to Eve.

Elly took a deep breath before touching Eve’s lips with her finger.

Eve’s tongue came out and, oh so gently, swiped the speck of chocolate from her skin. The touch was so brief, Elly almost didn’t feel it.

But the tingle that fluttered down her arm was all pleasure. No fear accompanied it. It made her smile.

In turn, Eve smiled back.

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A stroll was in order following such a delicious piece of cake. Eve pulled her scarf securely round her neck as they left the little cafe, striding out onto the street. It wasn’t long before Elly was at her side, her hand firmly in Eve’s, eyes dancing as she smiled up at her.

“I’m so used to holding your hand whilst we walk,” Elly mused, her expression thoughtful.

“It’s one of my favourite things to do.” Eve hadn’t meant to say it out loud. Her cheeks became hot, but the smile that ignited in Elly made her slip up worthwhile.

They had no clear destination, just wandered along a few streets, with nowhere to be until lunchtime. Eve relished in the way Elly felt against her arm, the way she squeezed her hand occasionally. Elly’s hair had curled somewhat since she had been home. It framed her face softly. Eve had to battle against the temptation to stroke it back from her cheek.

They came upon a children’s play area, empty of course, due to it being the middle of the school day. They sat on a swing each, hands joined between them. Back and forth they rocked.

“Can I tell you something?” Elly squinted against the sunshine.

“Go ahead.”

“I feel terribly young when I’m with you.”

Eve shot her an unsure look.

“I don’t mean like a child.” Elly let out a chuckle into the morning air. “I just mean…carefree. Happy. Like I’m discovering the world again.” Chocolate-coloured eyes crinkled in a smile. “It’s new, but so…so…lovely?”

They both laughed. Eve put a hand to her mouth, self-conscious about the noise that often took her
over when she allowed it.

Elly grinned toothily at her, her expression full of wonder. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh like that. Not properly.”

“Robin says I sound like a goose,” Eve managed, blinking against her unease.

“I think it’s a marvellous sound. A proper laugh. Like I said: carefree.”

“Maybe you could teach him that.”

“I will.” A promise. Elly’s gaze fell to Eve’s lips. “I’m going to be honest with you.”

“You are?”

Elly’s tone had become gravelly but light. “I’m getting a terrible urge to kiss you again.”

Eve turned her swing so that she half-faced Elly. She clasped both her hands. “Only if you—”

The next moment, Elly’s lips were on her own. Elly’s fingers were cupping the back of her head and it was all Eve could do not to moan. It was so, so soft. Elly tasted like chocolate: spicy, sweet. Every cell of Eve’s body pinged.

Elly broke the kiss for the length of time it took her to take a shuddery breath, then they were joined once more. Elly tongue sought entry, so Eve parted her lips. The kiss deepened. The swing wobbled under Eve’s backside.

Rather than ending up on the play area’s rubbery floor, Eve pulled away. She was surprised to see that they were both panting.

“Oh…Lord.” Elly shook herself. “I didn’t mean to throw myself at you.”

“If the mood takes you, don’t hold back on my account.”

Elly sniggered and shook her head. “Not the most chaste thing to do in a children’s park.”

“No.” Eve looked about them. “No one to see us though. All alone.”

“I love being alone with you.” Elly’s voice was almost a whine.

“We can see how things go,” Eve began, “but if things go well with my kids and…and my mother…next Saturday evening. Would you like to…do the movie thing at mine?”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

They quietened. Elly still held Eve’s face, her fingertips trailing along her jaw and neck. It made Eve tingle but she figured she could resist launching herself at Elly in a way that would frighten her. Therefore, she sat on the swing, feeling a little ridiculous, but enjoying Elly’s touch.

“Oh,” Elly whispered. She brought her forefinger to Eve’s cheekbone. “You have an eyelash.”

Tears filled Eve’s eyes so quickly that she had to pull away. It wasn’t far enough so she scrambled to her feet and crossed the park to the fence. Footsteps followed her but seemed to stop a distance away.

“Eve?”
Eve folded her arms around herself and leant forwards against the gate. Images of her childhood, Jake, the swings, the wish she had made. Metal. The morgue. The look in his eyes when he had stabbed Wicklow. Wicklow’s expression as his plan had been fulfilled. The blood seeped into the corners of her vision, clouding her eyes, her judgement. Consuming her with fear.

Her ribs burned as she struggled for breath. In the end, she let it take her over. But rather than going into herself, falling madly into the memory, she threw her head back and screamed.

Elly’s arms were about her immediately. Her hands sought her wet cheeks, clutched in her hair, grabbed at her back. The warm from those touches brought Eve back down from her overwhelmed state.

It was so quick. A moment of release. Then calm. Elly’s big dark eyes searching her face, once Eve could open her own. Her hands smoothing, cooling and warming at the same time. Tears in Elly’s eyes too.

Eve sniffed, moved back, put her hands over her face.

Elly enveloped her back into an embrace.

Eve let her. She pressed her nose into Elly’s neck, held onto her with a death grip. Or maybe it was a life grip. Eve couldn’t think properly.

Minutes passed. Thankfully, no one came to see if they were okay. All Eve could hear were the gulls circling the houses close by and the breeze brushing them both.

Then the soft sound of hushed singing caught her ears.

“Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward the sailor’s cry,
Carry the lad who’s born to be king,
Over the sea to Skye.”

She shuddered from head to toe. Was that Elly singing to her? The arms that held her squeezed, then gentled. The voice was barely a whisper, part of the wind, perhaps. Eve snuggled further into Elly’s neck, idly hoping her nose wasn’t dripping all over Elly in the process. When she inhaled, she smelt Elly’s perfume.

“Shh, darling. I’m here.” Elly rocked her. Then the song started up again and Eve found it soothed her, as a lullaby would a baby. She was lulled into a warm, safe place, where only she and Elly existed.

Once her mind had cleared, and she was able to open her eyes, Eve lifted her head to look at Elly.

“It was only an eyelash,” Elly whispered. One tear had escaped down her cheek.

“Jake…”

Elly thumbed Eve’s soggy cheeks. “Don’t. It’s okay.”

Eve nodded, gazing deeply into Elly’s eyes, craving the affection she got from that connection. “Sorry.”
“It’s okay,” Elly repeated. “Take your time.”

Isn’t that my line? Eve considered voicing her thoughts, but her mouth didn’t seem to want to work. But it was okay. Elly was holding her, caressing her slowly and gently. Eve didn’t want to be anywhere else.

Her breathing back under control, Eve managed to step back. She caught Elly’s hands as they fell from her face. “Flashback.” Her voice was thin.

Elly nodded. “How are you doing?”

“Yeah.” Eve wiped her nose on her sleeve, then grimaced. “Oh fuck, sorry.”

Elly chuckled tenderly and found a tissue in her own pocket. “Here.”

“Ta.” Eve cleaned her face with the hand not in Elly’s. She didn’t quite want to let her go yet.

“That the first one you’ve had since being discharged?”

Eve nodded.

“Correct me if I’m wrong but…” Elly narrowed her eyes with interest. “You seemed to deal with it differently.”

“I did.” Eve blinked. She took in a shaky breath. “I guess, rather than keeping it all inside I just…” Her hand flew out.

“Let it out?”

A nod. A pang of guilt. “I…I hope I didn’t scare you.”

“Shh. Don’t worry. I’m made of strong stuff.”

Eve touched Elly’s cheek. “You’re…just…so…” There wasn’t a word to describe how Eve felt about Elly right then. So she leant in, hoping Elly wouldn’t run.

Elly brought Eve’s lips to her own in a crushing kiss. Eve tasted her own tears and Elly’s, and the sweet dessert they had shared. Briefly, she wanted to clamber inside Elly, get right in there and stay. It was so warm and wonderful and pleasure-filled.

However, she didn’t want to hide. She wanted to be care-free, just as Elly had said. Therefore, after their lips had joined a few times, their sloppy kisses giving way to gentle sweeps of lips, Eve broke away. “I love you.”

Another tear trickled down Elly cheek, but she was beaming. “Oh God. Eve, I love you too.”

“We haven’t said that yet, have we?”

“I don’t know. Have we?” Elly let out a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh. “I’ve been thinking it and feeling it for such a long time I forget what we’ve said to one another.”

“So have I.”

Elly stroked her thumbs under Eve’s eyes, wiping away any stray tears. “It is so nice to hear it.”

“So nice.” Eve felt stupid, limp, as if her brain was twice as slow as usual. All she could think was
she said she loved me. She really did that.

“Are…are you all right?” Elly seemed so unsure.


“That doesn’t shock me.” Elly brushed Eve’s hair back behind her ears. “I know we’re grown women and all that but, perhaps a nap would be good?”

Another yawn took Eve over. “With you?”

Elly looked away, but seemed to consciously bring her gaze back to Eve’s. “Not today.” Stark and sure. Strength.

Understanding twisted Eve’s insides. She nodded. “Sorry.”

“There’s always that imagination of yours, hmm?”

Eve smiled. “There’s always that.”

“Whatever helps.” Elly’s gaze flicked downwards and her lips parted.

Eve’s mouth watered. Their next kiss was so soft, Eve involuntarily gasped.

They turned as one towards the cafe, starting to head back to their respective cars. Elly’s hand was firmly in Eve’s, their fingers interlocked. A feeling of safety and stability flowed around them, Eve thought. Screaming into the play park hadn’t been on the agenda that day, but it certainly appeared to have aided her reaction to her flashback. Recovery was nowhere close by, but at least Elly was near, and that was all that Eve cared about.

Works inspired by this one:  
Cover Art: When We Need One Another The Most by Kayryn

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