

Written by Nemi Celestia

ATTRACTED BY AIRWAVES



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Preface

Thank you for joining me on this journey—through Northern England, through mysteries and governmental betrayal, and through first love.

I wrote this story in a mere three days, unable to put down the pen (well, the keyboard, if we're honest), needing the story to unfold. I did plenty of research and was meticulous with the language—something I had to be, since English isn't my native tongue and I've never been to England. Yet while writing, it felt as if I was right there with Eden and Tam through their first touches and first kiss. Any mistakes or errors are my own.

This book was written with love.

Because sometimes, love is the clearest signal of all.

Dedicated to every single young person out there,
struggling with feelings for their own gender. Eden
didn't face much struggle, but I know many do.

My heart weeps for you.

Chapter One

Rain-slicked cobbles gleamed in the fading light as Eden stepped off the No. 25 bus and pulled her blazer tighter around her. Her foot was still hurting from P.E. Those girls were definitely playing far too rough, and she wasn't sure they were being so on purpose because she was new in town.

The afternoon downpour had left the air heavy with the scent of summer rain. Her school satchel still damp at the edges, thudded against her hip as she turned down the narrow lane towards home.

Through the misty drizzle she saw mum standing on the doorstep with a hopeful smile on her face.

"Fancy popping out for some groceries before it turns miserable again?" she called, already headed for the car. Eden hesitated only for a heartbeat and then tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear as she followed.

As they drove through the narrow streets, mum looked over at her, and with a furled brow she asked about the limp. Eden brushed it off.

"That's nothing. Just a rough game of hockey. I'm fine." She didn't want mum to worry about her more than she already did. The move, mum's new job, Eden starting in a new school, and painting the flat. There had just been a lot lately.

Mum nodded slowly and they drove in silence for a bit. The songs playing were her mum's stuff, but Eden didn't mind that, it was mostly hits from the 90's and 00's, and she knew a lot of them by heart.

They pulled into the car park at Tesco and her mum gathered all her stuff, then looked over at Eden.

"You want to stay or come with?" She considered it, then shrugged.

"I'll guard the carriage!" She exclaimed, hoping to sound more happy than she felt. Her mum shot her another look, eyebrows furled. Her signature expression these days, then she smiled.

"I shall gather foodstuff then, youngling!", and left the car with her bag over her shoulder. Eden took her phone

up, noticed it had 8% left on the battery and put it back down into her satchel. She closed her eyes while listening to the music.

She had no clue what the title of the song was or who sang it, but she knew the lyrics by heart. Suddenly the song stopped and she opened her eyes and looked at the screen on the car. "Bluetooth disconnected!". Well that was disappointing. But she guessed her mum had gone far enough away to disconnect.

Eden looked over the buttons and found the one that said SOURCE, then hit it until the display read FM and changed through the stations. Nothing of interest and as she started hearing the same stations for the second time she hit the SOURCE button again, but instead of changing to AUX it changed to AM.

She had no idea what that was, but there was a faint radio station playing. Someone was talking, and there was a lot of static. She scanned up the band—nothing. Back again—a flicker of sound, then gone. She manually went back up the scale until she heard it, it was still kinda faint and with a lot of static.

She turned the volume up and could hear the voice reading out some seemingly random numbers. Then,

silence. Only the soft hiss of interference. And then... music. The song didn't start at the beginning but rather in the middle of the chorus, which made Eden blink. "...take, every move you make, I'll be watching you" and then nothing. Just static.

Chapter Two

The rain had started again, but she didn't mind it at all now. Snug in bed, and hearing it hitting the slanted roof and window, 'the skylight' her mum had called it. She lay on her bed, wearing pyjama bottoms and one of mum's T-shirts, her feet toasty in some wool socks.

She looked out of the window for a moment, but of course she couldn't see a thing in the dark out there and looked back at her phone's bright screen and a Google search of radio stations near Bedale. She had been at it for a while now, and nothing came up with that frequency on the AM band.

She had told mum about the weird radio station as they drove home. How it had played a bit of a song and just stopped. Her mum had shrugged it off, suggesting it was probably just a fluke, or the signal had gone. But for Eden it felt like it had been purposeful, the weird

numbers, she couldn't remember a single one of them now, the song starting in the middle.

She had asked if they had a radio somewhere, but she was just a couple of weeks too late. Mum had tossed the one they had in the kitchen when she packed before the move.

Eden stretched out on her bed, the T-shirt long enough to ensure her tummy skin wasn't exposed to the cool evening air. She dropped the phone on the bed and shuffled out of her room, across the hallway and into the bathroom. Her mum was already there, brushing her teeth. With foam around her mouth she asked about the ankle.

Eden pulled down her bottoms and sat on the loo in one smooth motion,

"It's okay. much better after it got some rest", she wiggled her foot, and smirked, "See? Still firmly attached!",

Mum shook her head and wiped around her mouth with the towel. She went over to Eden and kissed her goodnight before she disappeared into her own bedroom.

Eden couldn't sleep. The radio thing kept rolling around in her brain. She tried to tell herself that it was just a weird radio station, probably just how they did things up north, but wasn't able to convince her brain of it. She decided to go back into the car tomorrow morning before her mum left for work, and listen again. The numbers and the little snippet of a The Police song kept bouncing in her brain as she finally fell asleep.

Chapter Three

"Eden, for heaven's sake! You are going to be late." She fluttered her eyes and rolled to her back. Her arm stretched until she felt her phone in the window sill and then yanked it so the power cord fell out. She looked at the clock. Yup, she was late. But she could make it. She had showered yesterday after P.E. so she only needed to get dressed and brush teeth. Her mum came into her room, she looked rushed as she wrapped an arm around Eden and kissed her.

"I am going to be home late tonight. There's leftovers from last night in the fridge. Send me a text if you're staying out." Eden pulled a blouse over her head and frantically waved her arms around, trying to find the arm holes. Not like she had any friends here or anything to do other than being home. Before she could form a sentence, she remembered that she needed the stereo.

She turned towards the door and passed her mum who was also leaving the room, racing her to the car.

"I need to test something before you go", her mum's sigh was loud enough for her to hear, despite the distance between them already.

Eden jumped into the car, pushing the start button without anything happening. Her mum shook her head as she got into the car and put a foot on the brake. As Eden pushed the button again, the car lit up and the centre display read Bluetooth. She hit the SOURCE button twice, skipping over FM until it said AM. It was still on the same frequency as last night. She turned the volume up, but nothing. Just static.

Eden didn't know what to think. As she stood in front of the house, her mum reversed around the corner and waved as she drove off. She hurried back inside and grabbed her jacket and satchel and ran for the bus.

Chapter Four

She stretched and closed her English book. Break time. And she needed it. Her brain kept circling back to the radio thing. She got up and followed some of the others outside. She was careful to keep her distance from the girl that had kicked her during hockey yesterday, and ended up walking with a group she hadn't talked much to yet. Three boys and another girl, and then her. She just tagged along with them, and one of the boys looked at her and asked her if English had been equally boring at her old school, which she could confirm.

Outside they formed a half circle, looking over the yard. Eden stood an extra step away from the group, not sure if she were invited to go closer or should walk away so they could talk about the things they would usually talk about. But she didn't feel excluded at all. One of the boys was talking about some sport thing she knew nothing about, so she just nodded and smiled.

The girl looked over at Eden and smiled.

"You look totally lost in thought?", Eden gathered her thoughts, considered it for a moment, and then hoped for the best,

"Yeah, I was thinking about a radio station I heard last night, something really weird. A guy reading some numbers and a titbit of a song... you've heard about that?", the girl shrugged. Not uninterested or dismissive, but as if she didn't know. The sports guy chimed in,

"Oh, I think I know what you mean! I haven't heard it myself since ... uh.. radio?!" he grinned, and continued, "but I recall someone from school talking about it a long time ago. I think it was Deavon's sister... whatsherface....", the sports guy stood silently smiling, and she wasn't sure if he was trying to recall whatsherface or if he had abandoned the topic to think more about soccer.

The girl took over again, realising that the sports guy wasn't going to provide.

"Tam. Her name is Tam, doofus", she looked at sports guy in the eyes but he just smirked and shrugged. "I think her real name is Tamsin. She still goes to this school by the way..." her voice trailed off as she looked around the school yard. Probably half the kids were outside and the other half spread out inside. It seemed that the girl couldn't see her, and she continued

"She is in final year. Brown hair, usually wearing metal band shirts and AirPods", Eden nodded. Looking around as well, trying to find someone who matched the description, but quickly realised she probably wouldn't have a better chance at that, than the girl had.

They small-talked for a bit, and Eden kept her eyes peeled on the door, scanning everyone who came out through the doors to see if they matched the description.

They walked down the hallway towards the science lab. Eden was one of the last of the group, since she still wasn't entirely sure where everything was. She was focused on following the guy in front of her and kept her eyes on the front of their group, which of course was the sports guy. She really would have to ask for these peoples names at some point, but right now she just had to get to the lab safely.

They passed some younger kids that were taking up a lot of space, and suddenly the girl pulled on Eden's sleeve,

"That's Tam!" she whispered, nodding towards a group of girls coming from the other direction. Eden looked from ear to ear, until she found the one with the AirPods. She almost stopped walking because she wanted as much time as possible to remember her looks so she could find her again later.

She wanted to just stop her right then and there and ask her about the radio station, but they were already running late and the girl behind her wasn't interested in slowing down and kept her hand on her sleeve, gently tugging Eden with her.

Eden and the girl ended up sharing a table in science. While they were following the teacher's instructions there was plenty of time to small-talk, because two guys a couple of tables over had spilled something and were in general causing a fuss just by being there. The other girl had introduced herself as Lily. She was a pretty blonde, standing almost a head taller than Eden. She was what her mother would call a classic beauty, but even though Eden had realised she looked at girls more

often than boys after she hit puberty, this girl didn't attract her in any way other than as a potential friend.

The teacher was finally done helping the boys clean up, and started lecturing again, as the bell rang.

Chapter Five

The noise was infernal as Lily and Eden entered the dining hall. A lot of people were already queued, and Lily excused herself to go stand in line. Eden didn't have to as she had a sandwich with her from home. It was rare that she had bought food at school, and she preferred to avoid the line as well as having to choose whatever was served.

She grabbed her sandwich and found a table, a task that was easier when she didn't have to wait for food. She threw her satchel on the chair beside her own and saved a seat for Lily. She looked over at the queue and saw that Lily had paid attention to where she sat and formed a heart with her fingers at Eden, as she saw that she had saved a seat for her. Eden gestured a heart the other way and then turned half on her chair while unwrapping the sandwich, looking at everyone who entered the dining hall.

The sandwich wasn't even fully unwrapped before a group of girls entered, talking loudly and self confident as only Year 13 students can. Eden scanned the groups, from one ear to the next, until she saw the AirPods. Tam. There she was, walking as if she was in her own world. She wasn't conversing with the others, probably due to the music in her ears.

Eden put down the sandwich on the table and walked over to the group. She was both determined to talk to Tam and hesitant to approach the older girls. The others didn't pay any attention to her, all their focus on whatever conversation they were having. But Tam looked at her. Probably more alert to her other senses since she couldn't hear what was happening.

Eden forced herself to meet Tam's eyes instead of looking at her own feet, which she instinctively wanted to do. As she stopped in front of her, the others from Tam's group (or was it entourage?) had continued into the room, unaware that one of their own had been halted by a kid.

Tam just looked at her, and Eden didn't know if she should signal to her to take the AirPods out, or if she

should just talk really loud. She definitely didn't want to do the latter in this crowd that already was so loud. Before she could decide, Tam's voice, soft, balanced and yet clearly heard, gave her the answer.

"They are not playing anything". Eden knew she looked confused. She could feel it. Like a drooling idiot savant or someone who just didn't fully grasp the world around her. Tam smiled, her teeth showing between her lips. Not a perfect line of teeth, a bit crooked, a bit uneven but very white. Eden couldn't help smiling back at her. For some reason her cheeks flushed a little and she still wasn't sure what was going on, as Tam continued.

"They are not playing music... there's silence" she explained, as she tapped a finger to one of her ear pods.

"Oh... oh. I see", she blurted out, mentally kicking herself for not being able to say something smart. Like a whole sentence at once. The absurdity of what she was about to ask hit her, and she got tongue tied and couldn't help it, when her eyes went down and looked at their shoes instead. She sensed that Tam nodded. As if to encourage her and then continued,

"Can I help you?". The voice was soft, almost airy, inviting, and friendly. Eden nodded and looked back up

at Tam's face. For a short moment she considered asking why there wasn't music in the ear pods, but then got her senses back.

"Do you know about the radio station?". The words came out fast, almost like "Doyouknowabouttheradiostation". Tam crooked her head and looked at Eden. Almost scanning her face as if she wanted to make sure that Eden wasn't trying to make fun of her. Whatever she saw on Eden's face, it wasn't someone smug, and Tam nodded slowly.

"the weird sentences? the numbers? a bit from the song?" she asked. Eden nodded, and finally managed to use her faculties to form a sentence.

"I haven't heard the backwards sentences. but I heard the numbers and a snippet of an old song" she explained. Tam kept nodding, as if to encourage Eden to continue, which she did.

"but it was really weird. I don't know what the numbers were, but the song was like a couple of seconds only, and not starting at the beginning", Tam leaned in closer as Eden spoke. She could smell the chewing gum in her breath as she began to speak.

"7, 10, 84" she recited and without pausing she started singing very quietly but so beautiful,

"every breath you take, every move you make, I'll be watching you. The Police. 1983". Eden felt how her mouth was open, and she focused to close it, while nodding eagerly.

"YES", she exclaimed way too loud, making a few kids around them turn their heads, "what does it mean?"

Tam, realising her lunch break was going to dissipate into nothing, put her hands on Eden's shoulders. It didn't feel bad in any way, more like a caring gesture.

"Let's talk after school. School bus end of the car park at 3.30!" Her white teeth lit up the entire room for a fraction of a second before she let go of Eden's shoulders and walked briskly over to her friends. Some other kids that had queued up behind the group stepped aside to let her join the others without even uttering a word.

Eden turned around slowly and followed Tam with her eyes until she was hidden in the queue. She turned to walk back to her table and saw Lily look at her with a surprised look on her face.

"What the hell, Eden?", she looked at her with disbelief, "You just walked up to a Final Year... we

don't do that here, ya know". The tone in her voice sounded a bit like her mother when she had done something a good girl shouldn't do. Eden shrugged,

"I need to know about that radio station. You never heard it? It was freaking weird". They talked about other things while eating their lunch and got to know each other a little better.

Chapter Six

Eden felt grateful that the rain of yesterday had passed, as she stood outside the school. Her bus had left a couple of minutes ago, which meant she had been there for at least ten minutes with no sign of Tamsin. She pulled up her phone and aimlessly opened and closed apps, so she looked like she was a busy bee, feeling awkward just standing here. As she opened and closed Instagram for the eleventh time she saw a shadow on the ground and looked up.

Those white teeth. Was that even natural? The slightly crooked teeth next to the front teeth made it seem authentic and genuine, not like a commercial but still very attractive. Perhaps more attractive than if it had been perfectly lined soldiers, standing shoulder to shoulder.

"So so sorry! I hope you haven't been waiting for me for too long?" Tamsin's hand touched her upper arm briefly, enough to give her butterflies in the tummy.

"Oh, me? No, I have only been here a few minutes" she lied blatantly, not wanting Tamsin to think she was a loser who didn't have any friends or anyone keeping her in class for a few extra minutes.

Although the truth was that she didn't have anyone like that. Lily was the only one she knew just a little bit, and she had gone with the sports guy (who she learned was named Noah) as soon as the bell rang.

Tamsin took her hand and at the same time her tummy did a somersault while it also felt like the most natural thing in the world. She started walking her over to another bus stop and as if she had willed it, the bus arrived less than ten seconds after they did. They sat down next to each other with their bags on their laps, and Eden was very aware that their thighs were touching. Tamsin began to talk.

"At least for the last five years. But probably longer. Way longer" she started. "They only happen once a week, always at the same time, always Wednesday 4.34 in the afternoon, always ending at 4.46". Eden's head

was about to explode. Finally she was getting some information about this weird phenomena, and at the same time half her brain were focusing on Tamsin's shoulder rubbing against her own, while she was talking, gesticulating with her arm, their legs touching, Tamsin's far warmer than her own.

"I'm going to tell you what I know, but first I want to know how you came across it. And also, I am Tamsin, but everybody calls me Tam." she reached her hand in front of herself to shake Eden's.

Eden awkwardly grabbed the hand, shaking someone's hand while sitting beside them for the first time in her life.

"E-Eden, I'm Eden," she stuttered. Then she explained how she had heard the radio station the night before and how it had stuck in her brain since. Tam nodded slowly at the right times, smiled vaguely too as if to agree it was stuck in her head as well.

"It does that, Eden", her brain skipping a beat, hearing her own name coming out of the other's mouth. "I don't know a lot about it, but I found a radio in our attic like five years ago and was playing around with it. It happened during the broadcast, and I was so confused. And like you, I was unable to stop thinking about it. So I listened now and then for a few days, then had the

radio on, left on the same station whenever I was home. I must've missed it the first Wednesday after for some reason, but I can't recall anymore, but the week after I was sitting in my room and almost pissed my pants when it started!" The look on Tam's face was vulnerable, genuine and heartwarming. Eden felt like she wanted to rub her arm or something, but of course she didn't. She just nodded as Tam continued.

"In the beginning I thought it was just random things. But the numbers change every week, so do the songs, they usually play two, and there is also a segment with some weird talking." Tam turned halfway in the seat and continued.

"I have some recordings if you can't wait a week for next episode of the podcast from the mental asylum", her teeth showing as she smiled again. Eden nodded eagerly, not sure what she wanted the most. To go home with Tam or listen to the recordings.

The bus had driven them through town, but now as it made a turn onto the main road she realised they were on their way to Bedale and looked at Tam with a puzzled look on her face. Tam seemed to be one of those people who always had a smile waiting to break out on their face, and here it was again.

"You were standing at bus 25, that one goes to Northallerton through Bedale. This one goes there too, but it's a bit slower going through the city. But since I hardly ever can make it for 25, I take this one. So which one is it? Bedale?" she turned her head looking at Eden and she just nodded.

"I figured. Considering the people who have heard the radio always come from the Bedale area. I live just south of town in Exelby. But the bus doesn't go there, so we will have to get off in Bedale. I could play the recordings at your place though?"

Eden obviously had a weird look on her face, because Tam continued,

"I recorded them on my phone, what did you expect! A tape recorder?" Eden almost nodded, then realised that it was a rhetorical question and the answer was no, but it was exactly how she had imagined it. Probably because a radio station was such an ancient thing, she figured it had to be recorded with equally ancient methods.

"So what do you say?" Eden realised she had been quiet for far too long, and had to rewind their conversation in her head.

"Oh, sure! Of course! No problem. We can go to my place", the words coming out of her mouth too fast. She was frantically trying to remember if she had cleaned her room before she left, but given that she was running late this morning, chances were that there would be all kinds of embarrassing stuff scattered around.

Chapter Seven

They got off the bus in a different place in Bedale than Eden knew. Tam disappeared into the shrubs as soon as they were out of the bus. Eden just stood there wondering for a moment, until she re-emerged from the bushes, dragging an old and beat up mountain bike with her.

"I always park here" she grinned, and dragged the bike along as they walked the rather long distance to Eden's home.

As they walked up the stairs to Eden's room, she tried taking faster steps, to get a bit ahead of Tam. She slammed her door open and saw her clothes on the floor from this morning. Of course her knickers were on top

of the pyjama bottoms. She leaped into the room and crouched down grabbing it all then tossed it under her duvet and tried to make the bed as Tam came into the room.

"Oh my god, it's perfect!" she gasped, looking around the room. Eden followed her gaze with a doubtful expression on her face, she really tried to see the perfection.

"My room is totally cluttered and all my clothes - and I mean all of it - are always on the floor!" she revealed, as she flopped down on the bed.

"Just feel at home!" Eden couldn't help grinning, and Tam grinned with her as she rolled on her back and put her legs up the wall, forming an L.

"Thank you! I am quite comfortable. Now join me and we can listen to my recordings", she patted the bed next to her and Eden sat down and looked around as if to decide which way to turn, then decided to lay the other way around, but on the bed fully, so they were cheek to cheek, but in each their own direction.

The sun had moved quite a bit while they were listening to the broadcasts. Eden was squinting because she got the sun in her face now, but she really enjoyed its

warmth and the proximity to Tam. She on the other hand looked as comfy as ever, her legs now bent outwards, spreading almost obscenely. Every now and then she turned her head while they were talking, almost grazing the tip of her nose against Edens cheek, and Eden couldn't help thinking that if she turned her head at the same time they would be face to face with less than half an inch apart, albeit their mouths wouldn't be close to each other, since they were still laying in opposite directions.

A sudden shout from downstairs pulled her out of her almost dreamy state.

"Hi love, I'm home. Did you steal a bike today?", both girls laughed loudly as they remembered that Tam had parked hers right outside.

"No, I have a friend over but soz, I forgot to tell you."

Her mum replied instantly,

"It's getting pretty late so I'm going to start cooking. Is your friend going to stay for dinner?", Eden turned her head and looked at Tam who shook her head,

"I really should be going. I totally lost track of time and my folks aren't as humorous as yours I guess". Eden just nodded, feeling sad for some reason, and shouted the reply to her mum. The girls got up from the bed and

walked out. When they arrived at the front door and Eden had opened it, her arm was extended to the door knob and Tam leaned in and gave her a hug.

"We need to talk about your thoughts on the recordings. I guess we totally forgot why we were listening. I will send you the latest recording when I get home", she gave Eden a kiss on the cheek and let her go, before she ran out to her bike and sped off down the road, seemingly in quite a hurry.

Chapter Eight

Friday had been a boring day at school. She had been looking for Tam everytime she wasn't in a classroom, but to no avail. She even scouted for her at the bus, first missing her own bus then missing the other one that Tam usually took.

She knew the next one would be the last of the day and she took it and felt oddly alone on the ride home. Oddly, because she had been alone on all the rides home until yesterday.

Eden spent the evening in her room. She was thinking about all the recordings they had listened to, no sense at all in them, it seemed, but still she felt like there were patterns.

She was listening to the one Tam had sent her again and again. She had written down everything. The recording was about a year old. It started with a song she didn't know, but it didn't sound much newer than the other one she had heard. She shuffled through some papers. She had transcribed everything that had been said, at least the part she understood. The opening song started in the middle of the chorus and then continued one line into a verse. She had googled the lyrics and found out it was a song by Judas Priest. She read through the line a couple of times;

“Feel my stare. Always there. There's nothing you can do about it”.

Definitely a theme with the song from Wednesday. Both songs had been old but there were some other ones that felt far more modern.

After a few seconds of the song there was static for a long time, several minutes of nothingness, before the gibberish started. She had tried to write down what she thought sounded like words, but it was far fetched. It sounded foreign, like it wasn't an earthly language, but aliens or something. Then there was more static buzzing silence. Another bout of several minutes before the numbers started. Everytime they were said in the same voice, in the same monotone style.

This time it was 30, 12, 83. They had tried counting, dividing, adding and everything else with the numbers, comparing from the recordings that were a week apart to see if they were increasing or decreasing. There seemed to be a pattern, but they just couldn't make it make sense. After the numbers there was only a very brief pause before the last music was played. Almost like an outro. Another song, this one also old and of course with a snippet of lyrics about monitoring someone.

Chapter Nine

While they were cooking dinner her mum asked about Tam in just the innocent interrogative way that a parent can do. Eden told her everything that had happened, and while her mum still was dismissive of the radio station and felt it was nothing to worry about, she could tell that it was something that occupied Eden's mind, so she listened while Eden told everything. Of course she didn't tell her *everything*. She left out the part about how she had butterflies in her tummy laying on the bed with Tam, how close their faces had been.

Eden knew that mum was supportive of lesbians, since Eden's aunt was in a relationship with a woman and mum had always treated them as if it played no role, but she didn't really know if she, herself, was into girls or not. Perhaps it was just a phase or something.

She did lean over and concentrated far more about cutting the cucumbers while talking about Tam, to avoid eye contact, but either her mum didn't notice or didn't want to embarrass her.

"So are you guys going to hang out this weekend?" her mum asked suddenly, and Eden realised that the thought of asking Tam to hang out hadn't occurred to her at all, but now it made her throat feel tight and the butterflies in her tummy turned into a flock of birds, swarming around in there.

She avoided the question, not sure what the answer was. She definitely wanted to spend more time with Tam and she wanted to figure out this whole radio station situation, but she also was achingly aware that Tam was a Final Year student and she was not. She was aware that Tam obviously was popular in school, and she probably already had plenty of plans for the weekend.

It was Eden's chore to clean the kitchen after dinner. Her mind was everywhere else. She had managed to make her entire front side wet with splashes of water, as her hands worked on autopilot, doing the dishes. She had just finished wiping the tabletop, when her phone buzzed in her pocket.

She expected it to be a text from Danielle, her childhood friend. They had been messaging daily since Eden had moved to Bedale, but sadly it had soon become more of a once-a-day thing, instead of their endless chats.

She hung the tea towel over the oven handle so it could dry, looked down at herself and realised how wet she was and then walked upstairs to change.

As she pulled her trousers down she felt the weight of the phone in her pocket and remembered the text. She pulled the phone out, standing there with her jeans around her ankles and without a top on, as she read the snippet on the screen.

The text wasn't from Dani but from Tam. She blinked. The message was short enough so she could read it in the little notification box where it said "Free tomorrow?" She nodded eagerly, as if that made any difference whatsoever.

She unlocked the phone and quickly typed in "Sure! I'll bike down to yours if you like". Then she added a smile emoji. Then deleted it again. That was too corny. Too boomer. She added a shrugging girl one and sent it off.

She flipped through the tabs in her mobile browser, trying to keep track of everything. She was looking into mentions of the radio station in local online newspapers. A few readers' letters, complaining about it, though they were all very old. She suspected that a lot of people didn't listen to the radio anymore and that played a role in why there wasn't more mention of it. She had just come across an article from 2003 about it. She bookmarked it, then opened a new tab, a new local newspaper website to start searching.

She typed in different search terms on The Darlington & Stockton Times webpage and there it was. A bunch of online comments to various articles. The curious thing was that the articles weren't about the radio station, but the comments were.

They were all signed by "Valefm". She jotted down the letters of the pen name on a piece of paper. Tried to rearrange them. First she wrote them alphabetically, A, E, F, L, M, V and then started rearranging them. Her best bet was "V Flame" but a Google search returned nothing. She put the paper on top of the stack of her other notes and started reading the comments.

They were all rants about the radio station. *Her* radio station. They didn't really provide much information, just demands that the Darlington & Stockton Times

look into this, that there was something going on with it.

While she was reading, her phone buzzed again and she looked at the top of the display. “I will be at yours tomorrow morning. Can’t wait to hear what you’ve found out!”

Chapter Ten

Eden stretched out in the bed and felt wistful that her room didn't face the east. It was nearly impossible to tell what time it was without looking at her phone. She knew it was Saturday and that Tam was coming over this morning. She jerked upright and grabbed her phone, almost dropping it as the charging lead stretched taut and popped out of the port.

She remembered vividly how she'd had to frantically hide her laundry yesterday when Tam was there and there was no way she wanted to be in bed when Tam arrived. Just the thought of her mum letting Tam in and her having to hide under the duvet made her cheeks flush.

Six twenty-seven. She blinked. It was even half past six, and yet she was wide awake. She made sure to be

quiet as a mouse on her way to the loo. She dangled her legs, wondering why the toilet here was mounted so high on the wall as she peed. She quickly tidied her room, making sure that no underwear were in sight anywhere and made the bed before she shuffled downstairs to have some breakfast.

It felt like time was stretching out. She ran over her notes in her head, trying to focus on the Radio Station Situation instead of Tam, but her mind kept wandering. She thought about why Tam had brushed off going to her place twice, why Tam hadn't been to school yesterday, why Tam had such a perfect smile. Why she wore in-ears without music playing.

It was a beautiful morning, it was set to be warm and sunny all day, her mum informed her as she joined her at the table. They talked a little about nothing in particular. Eden reminded her that Tam would be over later in the day. Mum asked a lot of questions. What were their plans? Would they stay? Should she prepare a nice lunch outside? Would Tam be staying all day? Eden got a bit frustrated with her own lack of planning and, with a slightly grumpy tone, admitted she really didn't know.

Eden hovered near the kitchen window for a long time, not really doing anything, glancing at her phone now and then, then looked out the window again. It was still so early in the day and she feared that she might have to wait for hours before Tam would arrive.

As she adjusted the tea towel for the sixth time she caught a glimpse of movement outside and looked up, barely believing what she saw.

The mountain bike was the same. The face was the same. But Eden was definitely surprised to see Tam arrive in a frock. She wasn't sure why she was surprised. It was frock weather for sure. She looked down at herself. Loose shorts and a simple blouse without sleeves. She felt like she had dressed awful childish all of a sudden. Not that Tam's outfit was especially grown-up. She looked exactly what she was - a teen on a summer day.

Tam saw her through the window and waved with a big smile on her face. Eden waved back and opened the door to go outside. She didn't need Mum in the background while they said hi. She closed the door behind her, leaving it a bit ajar and Tam jumped off the bike, gracefully managing not to show her knickers and let the knackered old mountain bike fall to the ground as she took two steps and put her arms around Eden giving her a hug.

Eden returned the hug, breathing in the scents that belonged to Tam. Shampoo—she couldn't tell if it was apple blossom, but she thought it might be, no perfume, just a hint of sweat from the bike ride, which she found was a little bit attractive. Tam pulled back a little and looked up and down Eden.

"Wow, that's a nice 'fit!" she exclaimed ...her teeth visible once again. Eden almost felt dizzy, looking at the frock, receiving the compliment, noticing the teeth, Tam's scent still in her nose... and only managed a quiet thank you, without returning the compliment - not that Tam seemed to mind.

They were sprawled on the blanket in the front yard. The temperature had climbed above 25 and they were both sweating already as Eden presented what she had found. They went over it all, Tam looking through the pages while Eden explained.

"So these readers' letters have ceased in recent years, but whoever wrote it seems to have been very active once", Eden explained while Tam flipped through the notes and found the right ones.

"They must really have a thing agai..." Eden got interrupted mid-sentence by Tam who were waving the page with the letters , VALEFM on them,

"I know who this is!" she shouted. "It's not an anagram! It's the name". Eden looked confused at her.

"The name?" she asked,

"It's stylised weird, but Vale FM was a radio station. I remember looking up all the radio stations here when I first heard the broadcast" she explained. They both grabbed their phones and started looking it up.

Eden was the first to find something. She read the passage aloud to Tam.

"Between 1983 and 1987, Vale.FM aired nightly across parts of North Yorkshire, run entirely by amateur enthusiast Barry Simmonds from his garden shed between Morton-On-Swale and Masham. The station was known for its eclectic music choices, local shout-outs, and Barry's famously awkward but endearing banter."

Tam tapped her front tooth thoughtfully. Something Eden found incredibly attractive, and she stayed silent while Tam considered. She wanted to Google Barry Simmonds but she couldn't bring herself to look away.

"I don't think I ever heard that name before, but if we can find him, he can tell us what he knows about the static radio," she said, thinking aloud and stopped tapping. Eden snapped out of the dreamy state and nodded.

Chapter Eleven

Eden slowed her road bike, as she heard Tam struggling to keep up, while they cycled across town. It hadn't taken them long to find out who Barry was and where he lived, and even less time to decide to go and talk to him.

They looked at each other, uncertain, while taking in the overgrown garden and peeling paint of the house in front of them. Eden was kind of hoping that nobody would be home, but also hoping they could get answers, while Tam showed no hesitation. She marched up the garden path at a determined pace.

Eden walked briskly to catch up with her and they reached the front door at the same time. Tam pushed the

doorbell, but no sound came. They both wondered whether it was working or not, but while Eden was prepared to wait and see, Tam simply started knocking. A shadow appeared behind the frosted glass and the door was unlocked and opened in one fluid motion.

A middle-aged man looked at them with suspicion and before they could say anything, he muttered

"Whatever you kids are selling, I don't need it." They looked at each other; Eden felt like they should just give up and walk – no, run – out of the garden and never come back. Tam obviously felt differently and didn't budge an inch.

"We're not here to sell anything. We are writing a piece for our school paper on how radio stations have evolved in the past and become extinct in recent years, and we were wondering if we could interview you about Vale.FM, if that's alright?" Eden was amazed with how fluently that lie fell from Tam's lips and didn't say a word, too afraid to ruin anything.

The man lit up like a lighthouse, the suspicion dissipated from his face and was replaced with a wide smile, revealing his poorly kept teeth.

"Oh, yes, oh... certainly! I can definitely make time for that someday", the words tumbled out, and Eden had a strong feeling that he didn't have much planned for the day, which was confirmed only moments later. Tam craned her neck back and looked at the gaunt man, then smiled her famous smile and asked whether now might be a good time.

Dust danced in the shaft of sunlight pouring through the window. The room had a smell—not unpleasant, but it hinted that it hadn't been aired out in quite some time. Eden took in the cluttered desk and floor, both scattered with an eclectic mix of electronic equipment. In the corner, something that looked like an amateur radio was emitting soft static—but no coded messages, no old pop choruses. Tam, who had put her phone on the table, recording what was said, was leading the 'interview', and Eden chimed in now and then with a follow-up question or to ask for clarification.

Mr. Simmonds was obviously excited to talk about his biggest passion in life. He educated them on how there had been several radio stations in the area in the past. Some licensed, most not, being pirate radios playing on the AM band. Vale.FM had been a licensed

station—something they could see he took pride in—but had been on the AM band still, due to cheaper equipment needed. Eden and Tam looked at each other, wondering why he had called it FM then, but didn't want to interrupt the flow.

Tam was asking about various radio stations, obviously probing for him to bring up the mysterious radio station, when Eden had an idea, and—quite rudely—interrupted him, mid-sentence.

"Is there any way you could locate where a radio station is broadcasting from?" she blurted out. He stopped in his tracks and looked at her a bit puzzled.

"Is that also for the school paper, miss?" he asked, not unkindly. Before she could reply, Tam stepped in,

"I am sure Eden just got to think about it, because of all the pirate radios you mentioned. They must have been a pest for the established stations?" Eden just nodded and let Tam take over again. Tam didn't disappoint, and quickly added "established radio stations like yours", which got him talking again.

He spent way too much time explaining about how the pirate radios were parasites, how they mocked the established ones and how he hated them with all of his heart. But then he got to the gist of it.

"We couldn't find them. Back then we had limited access to equipment. But today it would be very easy", he got a sly expression on his face as he got up and shuffled over to the equipment that sprawled along the wall. He dived into a big stack of things and pulled out something that looked like an antenna,

"I should've had one of these back then!" he came back to the chair and flopped down, before he carefully put the device on his coffee table. Both Tam and Eden leaned, almost in perfect synchronisation and looked at it.

On the table sat a battered grey box with a long, jointed antenna jutting from the top like a skeletal limb. Wires spilled out the back and curled across the floor, leading to a tangle of power supplies and dials. One screen displayed a shifting green waveform, while a pair of oversized headphones rested on a dusty notepad scrawled with dates and frequencies. A metal loop antenna hung in the window frame like some kind of strange halo.

"That's a direction finder. It can trace the signals" he explained. The girls stood up and walked around it, looking at the different pieces to it. Tam clearly had understood what Eden's plan was, and without missing a beat she looked at the old man and flashed her pearly whites again. It was clear that she knew she had a great

smile and that she usually got her way when she showed it.

"This is perfect!" Her voice was a little higher than before. "That looks very expensive, though!" Simmonds shook his head.

"Nah, that's an ancient one. It's got a loose connection, and it'd be a bloody mess to actually use it for anything." Eden kept her mouth shut, but Tam didn't.

"Do you think we could borrow it for, like, a couple of days? We didn't bring our photo equipment, and our school is in Leyburn. but that piece would look great on the front page of our paper." Simmonds rubbed his chin, thoughtful for a moment.

"I suppose that wouldn't do any harm... for a couple of days. But I don't have the sleeve for it anymore." He looked doubtfully at the rather large device.

Tam steered the conversation back to old radio stations, but he didn't mention them at all. Both girls figured that, since they'd be able to find the radio station the following Wednesday, it was safest not to pry too much. Soon after, they ended the interview and carefully balanced the direction finder between them as they walked back to Eden's place, pulling their bikes alongside.

Chapter Twelve

It was Tuesday afternoon and Eden was packing her stuff into her satchel. The Geography period they had just endured had felt like it had been just as long as the ice ages they had just been taught about. She made her way out of the classroom and walked slowly down the corridor.

Yesterday and all day today she had spent her time with Lily and the others in the breaks, but at the end of the day Lily and Noah would leave together and immediately.

Eden had seen Tam a few times in school the last two days, but other than a smile when they passed or eyed each other, there hadn't been any interaction between them.

She was walking lost in thought when someone grabbed her shoulder from behind and she almost let out a

surprised cry. She turned and saw Tam by her side, grinning wide.

"Want to share a bus seat?" she smiled, and Eden nodded, feeling unexpectedly grateful. They walked through the chaotic gauntlet that is any school corridor at the end of a school day. Eden noticed that Tam's shoulder was almost touching hers as they walked pretty close to get past all the kids going the other way.

Eden's cheeks were flushing as they walked out of the doors and down to the far end of the car park, where the bus stop was located. She thought about last night. How she had been taking a bath and had thought about Tam while she had touched herself.

She had imagined how it would be if Tam had been in the tub with her. If she had sat behind her there, Eden would have felt Tam's body, her breasts against her back, Tam's legs around her bottom. And she hadn't been able to help closing her eyes and descending her hand into the water and finding her folds while imagining it being Tam's hand.

A voice came from afar, and Eden blinked a few times and turned her head towards the sound.

"...to your place and then be ready with the DF?" she looked at Eden, obviously waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry, I was lost in thought for a moment," she admitted, her cheeks burning red. Tam smiled and repeated herself. She had suggested they should ride home together from school tomorrow and go to Eden's place and then go outside with the direction finder and be ready to follow the signal at four thirty-four.

Eden agreed that was a good plan and realised they were already standing at the bus stop, having no recollection how they got there.

Inside the bus they sat on the same seat as last time. They were talking about what they could possibly find out tomorrow. Tam spoke faster, excited about getting closer to this mystery she had had in her life for so long. She grabbed Eden's hand with hers and held it.

"I can't wait!" she exclaimed with a smile. "It could be out in the industrial park or perhaps even one of the taller buildings along the main road". Eden just nodded. She didn't trust her voice at all, her hand closed itself into a grip and she felt how she got really sweaty palms. She had the urge to pull her hand out of Tam's and wipe it on her skirt, but at the same time she never wanted to let go of her hand ever again.

They held hands all the way to Bedale, only letting go when they stood to get off at Tam's stop. Eden's palm

was damp, and she wiped it discreetly as she followed Tam off the bus.

Tam ducked into the bushes and reappeared with the old bike. She propped it against her hip and wrapped her arms around Eden in a hug that Eden returned instinctively. It was a short hug, but as Tam pulled back, she pressed a quick kiss to the corner of Eden's mouth.

"See you tomorrow!" she said, swinging her leg over the bike—this time giving Eden a fleeting glimpse of pale blue knickers as her skirt hitched up. Eden wasn't sure if it had been intentional—and didn't care. She already knew what she'd be thinking about in the bathtub that night.

Chapter Thirteen

She couldn't be sure, of course, but it had felt like Wednesday had been the longest school day of her entire life. She had checked the time far too often, which only made it feel like it was crawling by even more slowly.

Eden started packing up her bag before the bell had even started ringing, earning her a stern look from Mrs Taylor—one she probably deserved. She kept getting ready, trying to slip her blazer on without drawing any more attention to herself.

As soon as the bell rang, she jumped up, grabbed her already packed satchel, and waved to Lily on the way out. She made it into the hallway well before anyone else and was outside in record time. She walked down to where Tam's bus would arrive and sat down on the bench. A few seconds later, she stood up again, unable to sit still.

She had thought a lot about this moment—when she would spend time with Tam again. She had imagined reaching for Tam’s hand while they were on the bus, or maybe Eden would be the one to hug her first. But she knew she never would. She was far too shy for anything like that. Instead, she had practised in her room how she would return Tam’s hug as soon as she leaned in. How she would grab her hand more confidently, if Tam reached out to hers.

Finally, Tam arrived. She was alone as always, in-ear headphones where they should be and a big smile on her lips as she saw Eden. She walked purposefully over, and as soon as she started to spread her arms, Eden opened hers too and embraced her. It felt almost too eager, and Eden couldn’t help feeling a bit insecure—but Tam just wrapped her arms around Eden’s shoulders and said,

"Oh my, you’ve missed me!"

A soft chuckle followed, but Eden didn’t feel ridiculed. She felt acknowledged. Tam kissed her cheek and pulled back a little, smiling.

"I’ve missed you too, love! But you’d better let go of me before we start rumours."

Eden realised she was still holding on, and that it had been far too long for a casual hug between friends. She let go, but Tam only smiled again.

They were pretty quiet on the bus ride. Tam had grabbed Eden's hand as soon as they sat down, and her fingers were gently caressing the back of it.

Eden really tried to focus on the task at hand—something she had been looking forward to for a week now: finally finding the secret radio station. But her mind kept drifting back to the little kiss Tam had given her—at school, no less!

She felt oddly proud of it. Of course, she hoped nobody had seen the tiny display of affection, but at the same time, she wanted the whole world to know she was in love with Tam. Her thoughts had every chance to run wild, because Tam was being quiet. Eden glanced over at her and couldn't tell whether she was feeling introverted, thoughtful, or aloof. But since they were holding hands, and Tam was still gently stroking hers, Eden figured she probably wasn't aloof.

Walking to Eden's from the bus stop they didn't touch at all. It was almost as if Tam were more afraid to be

caught holding a girl's hand in Bedale than at school, which Eden found a bit weird. She didn't push it though, and they just walked side by side, still mostly quiet, but every once in a while talking about what they would find at the radio station.

Their theories had been all over the place. Ranging from an old computer with a virus that just kept going on and on every week with its corrupt broadcasts, to aliens trying to communicate with humans, which would explain the middle part of the broadcast with the oddly sounding speech.

For the hundredth time they went over what the numbers could mean. Eden had a theory it was dates. It would fit for every broadcast they had listened to recordings of, but then it would be random dates in the 80's and they had spent quite a bit of time trying to find events happening in Bedale on those days but to no avail.

They arrived at Eden's house and got the equipment ready. It was originally designed for one person, with parts strapped to the user's torso, but the girls figured

out a way to use it together—Tam would hold the antenna while Eden operated the little controller box.

They sat at the kitchen table with everything ready, since it was the closest to the door. Their eyes were fixed on the clock above the fake Magritte painting, portraying a man with an apple in front of his face, as the minutes ticked away.

With just under ten minutes to go, they got up, strapped the antenna to Tam, grabbed their phones, and headed outside, walking up to the street at the end of the garden path.

They turned the unit on and Eden began adjusting the knobs. She looked at the dials and felt a pang of panic.

"Oh no! It doesn't have an AM band!" Her voice cracked with frustration, terrified they wouldn't get it working before the broadcast began.

Tam could easily have pointed out that Eden had had four whole days to check that, but she didn't.

Instead, she just stood there calm and content—like a giant Teletubby with an antenna—and her voice was gentler than ever.

"Just go through the other options, love. You can do it."

Eden felt reassured and nodded quickly as she twisted a stubby dial. Suddenly, Tam shouted,

"Fuck yes! There's a pulse!"

Eden immediately froze, hands off the controls, watching Tam as she slowly rotated with the antenna, wearing some clunky old headphones.

They had been scanning and walking for a few minutes before it dawned on Eden. She stopped in her tracks and smacked her forehead.

"Oh. My. God." Every syllable was its own sentence. She sighed.

Tam had stopped a few steps ahead, unable to hear her over the loud pulsing sound in her ear and only aware something was wrong as the lead stretched to its max and pulled on her. She wiggled the headphones off with one hand and looked back at Eden, sensing something was wrong.

"We've got a pretty good signal in this direction. Why are we stopping?"

Eden took a deep breath and looked at her.

"The broadcast hasn't even started yet, Tam!"

Tam immediately looked at her watch and shook her head.

"But we're on the right band, yeah?"

Eden checked and shrugged.

"I don't think so. We're on MW, whatever that means."

Tam nodded towards Eden's pocket, where her phone was.

"Well, look it up, sweetie."

No blame, no guilt. Just a suggestion. Eden took it and searched. After a moment, she muttered,

"I don't get it..."

Tam waited patiently while Eden fiddled with the knobs again, then returned to the screen. Suddenly, she looked up at Tam, eyes wide.

"MW is Medium Wave. And it *is* the AM band. We're listening to the right thing. But it's not broadcasting."

Tam tapped her tooth thoughtfully. Eden, frustrated with this twist so close to broadcast time, stayed quiet.

Finally, Tam broke the silence.

"Okay, so I guess we'll just keep going. Obviously there *was* a signal—we're on the right band. How many AM radio stations do you reckon are around here?"

She gestured broadly, making Eden nod in agreement. Bedale was pretty much in the middle of nowhere. Remote enough that they wouldn't be picking up any big stations, and they already knew there weren't any local ones left on AM. Pirate radio? That was supposed to be a thing of the past.

They locked onto a direction and set off, fully aware they had only twelve minutes until the broadcast would end. Eden glanced anxiously at her watch. Minutes ticked by, and she could hear the loud pulses faintly from Tam's headset when she walked near her.

She watched Tam closely, trying to read her expression—Tam was the only one hearing those strange, rhythmic beeps clearly. With every step, Tam adjusted her course, weaving slightly in a zig-zag as she followed the signal.

Eden kept close behind, careful the lead didn't grow taut, eyes fixed ahead, trying to predict where this unexpected path might lead. Her surprise grew as they moved not towards the now familiar bustle of the town centre, but away from it, heading south into the quieter, almost deserted outskirts. A knot tightened in her stomach—why this direction? She checked her watch again. Only four minutes remained.

The clock was ticking, and with each second, the mystery deepened.

It occurred to Eden that they only knew the sound would get louder as they approached the source, but they actually had no idea whether they were a hundred metres or ten miles from their target. She looked at her phone: zero minutes left. Perhaps just the last few seconds. She studied Tam's back, but she was carrying on, seemingly unaffected. Eden kept the control unit in one hand and pulled out her phone again. Four forty-seven. The broadcast was definitely over.

She wondered if perhaps her phone's clock was off, or if she'd misunderstood Tam about the times. Both seemed equally unlikely—the phone was synced to the network, and she and Tam had gone over the details of the broadcasts so many times that a misunderstanding felt almost impossible.

Suddenly Tam stopped, and Eden walked straight into her back before she could react. Tam slipped the headphones off and turned to face her, a puzzled look on her face.

"There's no way it's still broadcasting!" she said.

Eden shook her head and checked the time again.

"No, it's been four minutes since it ended. We're probably chasing the wrong signal after all—wrong frequency, wrong band, or maybe just a broken DF. Anyway, we're chasing ghosts."

Tam shrugged and tilted her head. No tooth-tapping this time, but she was clearly still thinking.

"We've come this far," she said, glancing back towards the town, now perhaps half a mile behind them. "And anyway, we've nothing else to do—there's still a signal. So let's at least carry on a bit longer?"

Eden nodded. She couldn't argue with that, and they kept walking, the fields growing wider and quieter around them. Eventually, they reached a small farm—a striking place, surprisingly modern, with clean lines and a fresh coat of paint. A tractor stood idle in the courtyard, but there wasn't a soul in sight.

They exchanged a glance. Tam slipped the headphones off again; the beeping was loud enough now that Eden could hear it clearly too.

"Well, what do we do now?" Eden asked, her voice hushed.

Tam looked around, then back at her.

"Would be pretty daft to turn back now, wouldn't it?" she said. "Alright... if someone stops us, we say we're doing a school project. Research on historical radio signals. Technically not a lie."

Eden smiled at that. It was just believable enough to work. And even if it didn't, they had already come too far to stop now.

They continued into the courtyard, and Tam did her slow, deliberate turns until she'd decided which way the signal was strongest.

Nobody stopped them, and when they passed a barn, the main farm was behind them. Ahead was a dirt track—not a long one, maybe a couple of hundred metres—and at the end stood a small building. It might've been a house, or just a very large shed. But right next to it, clear as day, was a radio antenna.

They were about to head closer when Eden spotted something. She put a hand on Tam's arm and pointed. A tall fence surrounded the perimeter of the shed, with official-looking signs fastened at regular intervals. At the top, strands of barbed wire gleamed faintly in the evening light.

They exchanged a look.

"What the hell are they hiding in there?" Tam muttered.

Eden squinted at one of the signs, trying to read it, but they were too far away.

"Whatever it is," she said, "I don't think we're exactly invited." The yellow and red colouring wasn't shouting 'welcome'. If anything, it looked more like a warning.

"I guess this is how far the rabbit hole goes, Eden," Tam murmured, unstrapping the antenna rig with a tired sigh. The weight of the day seemed to slip from her shoulders as she handed it over. "Your turn! You get to wear this clunky thing all the way home." Her grin was wide but her eyes were soft, and Eden couldn't help but smile back, even as she took the awkward tangle of wires and metal in exchange for the control box.

Chapter Fourteen

The walk home was quiet. Not solemn, exactly—just heavy with thoughts neither of them seemed ready to say out loud. Even without the pulse to follow, they didn't pick up the pace. Time stretched between them, each step echoing questions they hadn't answered. Why the fence? Why the signs? Who had something to hide, in a place so far from anywhere?

They passed back through the fields and down the quiet lanes, the silhouette of the town beginning to rise against the pale, evening sky—familiar rooftops and chimneys etched in soft greys and golds. Tam's shoulder brushed Eden's once or twice as they navigated the narrow path, and neither of them moved away.

By the time they reached Eden's house, the light had faded to a gentle denim blue mixed with grey, the evening settling in around them like a quiet hush. Tam

followed her up the front steps, the bulky equipment swaying between them, and they were both still giggling about the ridiculousness of the day when Mum's voice called from the stairs.

She appeared in the hallway with an expression caught between concern and amusement. "Oh my, you look battered, girls!" Her gaze swept across their red cheeks, wind-blown hair, and finally settled on the strange, cobbled-together kit being deposited on the hall floor.

Eden had already tried to explain the DF unit to her earlier in the week, but Mum's face still crinkled in mild distaste at the sight of it. "Honestly, it looks like something you'd use to scramble a satellite, not find a radio station," she said, but there was laughter in her voice. "You both look like you could do with something warm. Dinner's been done for a while—we usually eat at half past five in this house, young lady." Her tone turned mock-stern as she looked at Eden, but the glint in her eye betrayed her fondness.

They slipped off their shoes and made their way into the kitchen, where the familiar smell of something tomatoey and cheesy greeted them like a hug. Tam visibly relaxed. The DF unit was moved gently to the

corner, and the girls set about laying the table while Mum reheated their plates.

Over dinner, Eden and Tam told her about their expedition. How they'd found a signal, and how it had led them far outside town, to a strange little shed with a fenced perimeter and warning signs. They kept it light, glossing over the barbed wire and the strange feeling they'd both had when they'd seen that antenna.

"It was probably just some old facility," Eden said, twirling her fork idly.

Tam nodded. "Or someone's idea of a joke. But it was fenced off, like... really fenced off."

Mum raised an eyebrow but didn't press further. "Well, you're home safe, that's what matters. And next time, maybe bring a flask of tea with you."

Eden met Tam's eyes across the table. The mystery wasn't over—not by a long shot. But for now, they were warm, fed, and together. And that was enough.

Chapter Fifteen

Mum popped her head into the bathroom while Eden was doing her business, “Are you going to be home before dinner tonight or should I plan on eating alone?”

Eden flushed pink—not from being caught mid-business, but from the guilt that prickled behind her ribs. She hadn’t told Mum they’d be late yesterday, and she could hear the worry wrapped in that simple question.

“I expect to be home right after school.”

Mum gave a nod and disappeared down the stairs. A few moments later, her voice called up, —“Bye, love!”

The front door clicked shut behind her.

Eden realised, with a sudden jolt, that she was probably running late. She rushed through the rest of her morning

routine, grabbed her blazer and satchel, and stepped out into the morning air.

At the end of the garden path, she paused to check for traffic. It was habit—this street was hardly busy, especially this early—but after so many years in the city, the reflex stuck. She glanced both ways, then noticed something odd.

A car was parked a little way down the road, facing her. That in itself wasn't unusual—it was a one-way street—but there was typically only one car parked there in the mornings. The neighbours across the way had two vehicles and not quite enough driveway space, so one of theirs was always outside. But this wasn't theirs.

This was something newer. A dark grey saloon. Clean, inconspicuous. The sort of car that could blend in anywhere. Eden squinted, trying to make out the driver, but the glare on the windscreen made it impossible to see. Someone was definitely sitting there. Still. Watching, maybe. Or maybe just checking their phone.

She hesitated for a second longer, then gave a small shrug and turned the other way, her pace brisk now. She didn't want to miss the bus. But even as she walked,

she couldn't help glancing back once—just once—to see if the car was still there.

It was.

Chapter Sixteen

Lily looked at her, brows drawn in slight confusion.

Eden turned her head, raising her own in reply.

"Earth to Major Eden," Lily grinned, misquoting an old song and giving a silly little wave as if they were spotting each other from across a busy street or out at sea.

—"You there, Major Eden?"

Eden gave a faint smile and nodded.

—"Sorry. Just lost in thought."

"You've been like that a lot the last few days."

Eden nodded again, this time slower. What had been taking up all the space in her head lately? The radio station? Tam?

She knew the answer. The radio thing was weird—unlike anything she'd ever experienced. But

Tam managed to invade her thoughts again and again, slipping into her mind in quiet, unexpected ways. Sometimes it was an image: Tam tapping her front tooth when she was thinking. Sometimes it was just a feeling—how it felt when Tam had held her hand, or those soft, almost accidental kisses at the corner of her mouth.

Her stomach did a little flip just remembering.

"And she's gone again," Lily said, nodding dramatically.

Eden blinked and gave her head a small shake.

—"No, sorry. I really was just... thinking."

Lily gave her a knowing look, amused but gentle.

—"No shit," she laughed. "We're on break, by the way. Want to come outside?"

The five of them stood in a loose circle out in the school yard, the cold breeze tugging at the edges of their uniforms. The others chatted, the sound buzzing like distant static to Eden. She kept glancing over her shoulder, trying not to make it obvious.

Because they'd been among the last to leave the classroom, she and Lily had ended up with their backs

to the building. And Eden couldn't see the door properly unless she turned around.

She told herself it wasn't a big deal. That she wasn't looking for anyone in particular.

But she was. She was waiting for Tam. But there was no sight of her before the bell rang and they went into their classroom again.

Eden sat down at her desk again. It was hers because she'd left her bag there during break. Lily's stuff was scattered across the next desk—half a dozen cute erasers, their textbook, a pen, and a Stanley bottle. Eden glanced at her own table: just the book and her satchel.

Something was off.

She pulled the satchel towards her and paused. It was facing the wrong way—as if someone had been standing on the opposite side of her desk, rifling through it. She frowned and unzipped the top, her fingers brushing the familiar lining. The little purse Mum had given her was still there, tucked neatly inside. She opened it. Two ten-pound notes, untouched. Emergency funds, Mum called them.

Her heart beat a little quicker now, though she couldn't say why. She dug around until she found her phone buried deep in the corner. She pulled it out, ignoring the no-phones rule, and swiped the screen. Nothing strange. No missed calls. No new notifications. But still, a prickle of unease ran through her.

She set the bag down at her feet and tried to focus as class began, but the words from the front of the room felt distant and muffled. Her mind drifted—back to the strange car that morning, to the bag, to Tam. Always Tam.

Chapter Seventeen

By the time the bell rang, the wind had picked up again. Eden hugged her arms across her chest and walked briskly towards the bus stop, scanning the crowd for Tam. She didn't have to wait long.

Tam was already there, over by her usual stop. Eden crossed the pavement and joined her. They hugged—no kiss this time, just a quick squeeze—and then Tam held her by the shoulders, peering into her face.

“You alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Eden gave her a shaky smile. “Something weird happened. My bag—someone’s been in it.”

She told her everything, and Tam listened, then shrugged. “Could’ve just been someone thinking it looked dodgy left out like that. Maybe they moved it to

be helpful. Zipped it up, turned it round, that sort of thing.”

Eden nodded slowly. It wasn’t a bad theory, especially since nothing was missing. Still, the prickly feeling lingered.

They stood close, the sharp breeze encouraging it, and Eden welcomed the warmth of Tam’s arm brushing against hers. She was staring down the road, watching for the bus, when her gaze caught on something further down by the car park entrance. A car.

It was too far to be sure, and she couldn’t see if anyone was inside. But something about it made her stomach tighten. It looked like the same one from this morning—dark grey, newer model, just... there.

She opened her mouth to say something, but the bus pulled up and broke the moment.

They took their usual seats—Eden thought of the seats they had been sitting in that way now—and their hands found each other easily. It felt more natural than it had a few days ago. She wasn’t sweating anymore when Tam touched her. Maybe it was the cold weather. Maybe it was just her heart catching up.

Tam was chatty today, more so than usual. As the bus rumbled along, she leaned in closer.

“I didn’t tell you—I biked out there again last night. After tea.”

Eden blinked. “To the shed?”

Tam nodded. “Didn’t plan to get too close, just have a look in the dark. But as I got to the farm, I heard an engine running. I went round the barn, real quiet, and—yeah. There was a car. Parked just about where we stood yesterday.”

Eden stared. “What kind of car? Could you tell?”

Tam nodded again. “Vauxhall Insignia. A few years old.”

Eden’s eyebrows rose. “Is that a saloon car? Was it grey?”

Tam tilted her head, thinking. “Yeah, it’s a saloon. Could’ve been grey. Or blue. Or black. It was dark, sweetie.”

Eden leaned back against the seat, her fingers still curled around Tam’s. The coincidence was too much. The car this morning. The car at the school. The car near the shed. Something wasn’t right. And whatever it was, it was getting closer.

They hugged goodbye rather quickly—Tam seemed to be in a rush. But not too rushed to lean in and kiss Eden, this time square on the lips. Eden's heart stumbled over itself and her cheeks went warm, tingling even after Tam had hopped onto her bike and sped off down the lane.

Eden spent the entire walk home scanning every street and layby for the car. She spotted a few grey ones, but none of them were Vauxhalls. One *was* a Vauxhall, but it was light grey. Still, the way her mind was now wired, it all felt too coincidental to brush off completely.

Chapter Eighteen

She lay sprawled on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. Her homework sat untouched in her bag, but her thoughts were loud, tumbling over each other. Why would anyone guard a run-down shed like that—even if it was hiding a secret radio station? What could be so important inside? None of it made sense.

Her phone buzzed against her stomach and made her jump. She snatched it up—a message from Tam. That in itself was rare. Tam hardly ever texted; she always seemed busy at home.

Eden read the message twice, her heart thudding in her chest:

*Found a tracking device in my blazer!!
Pinned inside the sleeve. Please check
yours and let me know.*

She bolted upright and grabbed her school blazer from where it hung over her chair. Her fingers ran over the sleeves, from shoulder to wrist. Nothing. She turned it inside out and checked again, brushing along every seam. Still nothing.

She was just about to text Tam when her satchel caught her eye.

She lunged for it, tossing it onto the bed. The flap was already open and a few things spilled out as it landed. She knelt beside it, heart racing, and began emptying it properly. It was the first time she'd done so in over a year, and as she tipped it out, it felt like a time capsule giving up its secrets.

Out came her textbooks and a dog-eared exercise book—checked and cleared in seconds. Then the smaller items: her pencil case with half its contents leaking out, a battered lip balm, a tube of concealer, a pack of mints, a phone charger tangled up with her hairbrush, and a single pad folded neatly in its wrapper.

She sifted through the rest—a keyring, a couple of tampons, some bobby pins, and faded receipts—all innocent enough.

She turned the bag inside out to be sure... and there it was.

Nestled in the bottom corner, nearly invisible, was a small device. Not an AirTag—it looked more like the chunky tags you’d find on clothes in high street shops, fixed to the lining with a metal pin. She stared at it for a moment, then dropped the bag like it had burned her fingers and scrambled for her phone.

I’m tagged as well! Wtf is going on?

Her screen lit up with a reply almost instantly:

I don’t know about you but I’ve cut mine out of the blazer and plan on binning it as soon as I can.

Chapter Nineteen

Eden kept rereading the text.
It didn't feel like Tam.

*"I'm in town 🤪 weird stuff going on!
come alone **don't tell anyone**"*

She sat there for a moment with her phone in both hands, her heart fluttering like a moth in her chest. The message had come through ten minutes ago, and she hadn't seen it until now. She was supposed to be helping Lily with homework, but her brain had stopped working the second she saw Tam's name on her screen.

The punctuation was all wrong. Tam always used full stops in texts, and she'd never put in any emoji or even a little kiss. Tam had attached her location to the message, but the text bit was still out of place.

Still.

What if it was real?

Eden didn't say anything to Lily. Just packed her things clumsily into her satchel and mumbled something about her mum needing help with shopping. She didn't wait for a reply. She just left.

It was cold in town. The kind that got into your sleeves and down your collar.

Eden walked quickly, fingers buried in her pockets. The bus had taken forever, and the sun was nowhere to be seen behind the clouds, tinting the world with that strange greyish-pink light. She headed down the pedestrianised bit near the old Woolworths. She passed a weird little shop that sold incense and crystals and tarot cards. She stopped mid pace. The old battered mountain bike was leaning against the wall. But there was no sign of her.

Eden glanced around, confused. She pulled out her phone again and stared at the message. She typed *"Where are you?"* and sent it.

No reply. Then "Your message could not be delivered. Try again?"

She looked up, scanning the area. A few people were passing through the square—a mum pushing a buggy, a group of boys messing about near the bins, and an older couple moving slow and steady, hand in hand.

She shivered.

Then, a car. Just the sound at first—tyres against the damp tarmac. She turned and saw it pull up alongside the kerb a little further down. A plain black SUV. She wouldn't have looked twice if she hadn't noticed the passenger window rolling down.

A voice called out. "Tam said you'd be here."

Eden blinked. It was a man. Maybe in his thirties. He didn't get out of the car, just leaned a little towards the open window.

"She's at the café round the corner. Told me to give you a lift."

Eden didn't move. "Who are you?"

The man smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Friend of the family."

It didn't feel right.

She took a step back. "It's fine. I'll walk."

But he opened the door then—not getting out, just opening it—and that’s when it hit her. Not a smell, not at first. A kind of thickness in the air. Like everything had suddenly gone syrupy and wrong.

And then something sharp at the corner of her vision—a second figure, behind her now, moving too fast, before she blacked out.

Chapter Twenty

Eden stirred. Her eyelids fluttered, her head pounding with a dull, nauseating throb—and she realised she *desperately* needed a wee. She blinked, squinting against the light. The ground was moving beneath her. Vibrating in a way that made her feel sick. It took a few moments before her eyes adjusted properly.

Had she had a seizure on the way home from school? Then it dawned. She abruptly sat up, which made her head feel even worse. She looked around. It seemed she was the only one in the bus.

Her breath caught. No. No, this wasn't right. The seats were familiar, but there was something *wrong* about the space. She turned, slowly at first, then fully around, her hands gripping the edge of the seat.

There was someone behind her. Curled up on the floor. Still. Back turned. Eden crawled across the floor, heart hammering now, and peered round to see the face. Tam.

She was breathing—asleep, it looked like. Or perhaps passed out. Just like Eden had been a moment ago.

Eden looked around again, this time properly. It *looked* like a school bus—the same grey flooring, the same worn seat covers—but it had been altered. A wall had been built across the front, sealing off the driver's area entirely. No view ahead. No window. No way of knowing where they were going. And it was still moving. Eden's stomach twisted.

Eden had no idea how long they'd been driving while she was asleep, but figured she could check the time of her last text to Tam and compare it to now. She looked around for her satchel, but it was nowhere to be seen. She patted down her pockets—also empty. Her bag was gone. Her phone was gone.

The windows on the bus were frosted and tinted on the *inside*, making it nearly impossible to see out. It was definitely a main road; she could make that much out from the occasional curve and the feel of the speed. Mostly fields, sometimes trees—at least that's what it looked like, though the tint was too dark to be sure. Rural. Definitely rural. She tried to read the road signs

they passed. Close enough for her to recognise the shapes, but not a chance of making out the words.

Normally, she might be able to tell the time from the quality of light outside, the angle of the sun—but the overcast sky and those tinted windows stole that from her too.

She turned and sat down next to Tam, suddenly surprised she hadn't done that first. She reached out and tried to wake her.

She didn't want to shake her awake, so instead she knelt down in front of her, her bladder aching as she did, and Eden quickly adjusted to sit fully on the floor. She brushed her thumb gently across Tam's cheek and called her name, softly.

Tam's eyes opened—no fluttering, no drowsy blinking—they just snapped open. She sat up at once, eyes fixed on Eden, her expression dazed and confused.

Eden quickly explained everything she'd worked out so far. She needed this to be Tam's problem too—she felt completely out of her depth. Tam nodded as she listened, then filled in the gaps.

She'd received a similar text. It hadn't seemed suspicious at the time, not the way Eden's had, because Eden always peppered hers with smiley faces.

Tam had done what she thought made sense. She'd caught the earlier school bus—the one meant for the younger years, since they finished earlier—gotten off at her usual stop, grabbed her bike, and pedalled to the meeting point.

She'd parked up outside a cute little shop and looked around for Eden. That's when the black Kia Sportage pulled up beside her. The man inside asked if she was looking for Eden. Tam had nodded. The man explained Eden had just been hit by a car and taken away in an ambulance.

It hadn't seemed that strange at the time. The message hadn't stood out as odd, and the man spoke calmly. He offered to take her to the hospital, which she knew was quite a bit away over in Northallerton. Tam realised it'd take too long to cycle, so she'd leaned the bike against the wall and got into the car.

And not long after that, the same thing had happened to her.

Chapter Twenty-One

It had been at least a couple of hours when suddenly the bus slowed and came to a complete stop. The girls glanced at each other. They had shifted position and seats a few times—Tam was lying on her back across the rear seats, while Eden sat cross-legged, leaning back against the window, turned so they could see each other.

The engine was still ticking over, and faint voices drifted from outside, but it was now too dark to make out even shadows. Then the bus crept forward again, moving at a snail's pace. Outside, a high-pitched scraping sound pierced the air—like metal grinding against metal—followed by a soft bump as the bus rolled over something. Eden was fairly certain she'd just wet herself a little, but fear held her attention too tightly to care.

The engine abruptly cut out, and the sudden silence felt deafening. Both girls stood, uncertain what to do next. They gathered at the rear of the bus and stared towards the door.

The door opened. They looked at each other, then stared at the door again, but nothing else seemed to happen. Then came a voice—metallic, like it was coming through a speaker or maybe a megaphone.

“Come out. One at a time. Walk slowly. When you exit the bus, turn left and stop.” The voice revealed no dialect, no accent. It lacked *character*.

They exchanged another look, then began walking down the aisle. Since Tam had been in the row behind, Eden was the one to step out first. Bright spotlights beamed down like the ones on a football pitch, flooding the tarmac in harsh white. They were in a small enclosed area surrounded by a tall fence. She stepped down onto the ground, turned left and took a step.

“Stop.”

She did, nearly stumbling over her own feet, squinting against the glare—a sharp contrast to the darkness they'd been sitting in. She felt Tam behind her and that brought a flicker of calm.

A gate opened with another harsh, metallic groan. So that's what the earlier sound had been, she thought. Then came a new instruction: "Move forward."

Just behind the fence, a door stood open. They walked towards it and stepped inside. The floor was cracked linoleum, the walls held old bulletin boards with notices on faded yellow paper. She couldn't read them from here, but had a strong feeling they weren't anything good.

A man entered behind them and closed the door—a solid, heavy noise followed by the distinct sound of a lock turning. Another man emerged from behind a nearby counter, and the two greeted each other. The first man disappeared through the same door the other had come from.

Eden took it all in. Her brain wasn't filtering—every detail was being stored.

"My name is Mr Henderson. Please state your names."

She looked at him, surprised to hear a *please*, but gave her full name. Tam did the same. Mr Henderson scanned a paper list in front of him, trailing his finger down until he found what he was looking for. He seemed satisfied.

"Please come with me."

There it was again—another *please*. He stepped out from behind the counter and led them to a door at the far end of the room. He unlocked it, and the girls followed him through. Once inside, he locked it again.

They walked briskly down a long corridor, doors lining only one side. Eden glanced around. The walls were bare, and the doors looked ordinary enough, though they were moving too fast to study them properly.

Near the end of the corridor, he stopped and knocked. A man opened it at once and told Tam to come with him. Tam looked at Eden, then mouthed *It'll be okay!* before disappearing through the door.

Mr Henderson turned and walked to the end of the corridor, where he unlocked and opened the door, and they stepped into a room that looked oddly like a lounge. There were sofas, a few tables and chairs, shelves with books and board games. It reminded her of a school—or how she imagined a boarding school might've looked fifty years ago. The colours were all dull, everything had a worn, tired feel to it.

Still moving at the same brisk pace, he crossed the room and unlocked another door, revealing a new corridor. He stopped at the first door on the left and opened it.

Eden peeked inside. It had a single bed in the corner, a desk, a chair, and a second door that looked like it led to a small bathroom. It was somewhere between a prison cell, a boarding school room, and an old-fashioned hotel.

She turned around to ask him something—she wasn't even sure what. There were hundreds of questions popping in her brain like popcorn. But just as she turned, the door slammed shut behind her and she heard the door lock. Not a turning key but a click. Just a click.

“Oh, fuck you,” she muttered—language that wasn't like her at all—and pushed open the only other door in the room. It was a bathroom. Thank god, it was a bathroom. She almost waddled towards the loo, pulling her knickers down and sitting. The hiss of her wee hitting the bowl seemed deafening in the silence.

She looked around. There wasn't any toilet paper. The room was entirely void of any toiletries at all. She washed her hands, wiped them on the blazer and then stepped out again, realising she hadn't even turned on the bathroom light in her hurry. The main light in the room was already on. She wandered slowly around.

There was a narrow window near the top of the far wall, but no light or sound came through. The bed was made and smelled clean. She opened a drawer in the desk, but it was empty—not that she'd expected anything different. The inspection didn't take long. She lay down on top of the covers, still fully dressed.

It felt like forever, but at some point, she drifted off.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Eden woke up. She had no idea what time it was, and the ceiling light was still on. She was still really tired, but her sleep had been haunted by bad dreams. She went into the bathroom and drank some water from the tap. Then wiped her mouth on her sleeve and walked back to bed. She considered turning off the light, but it was the only source in the room, and while she wasn't proud to admit it, she was too scared to sleep in the dark.

She took her blazer off but kept her clothes on. This time she got under the duvet, turned onto her side with her back against the wall, closed her eyes, and soon nodded off again. The next time she woke up was entirely different.

A loud, blaring noise pierced the air and Eden almost fell out of bed as she sat up straight. What the heck was that? She looked around, then remembered where she

was. She turned so her legs slipped out of bed and realised she was still wearing her shoes. She reached behind her, found the blazer, and pulled it on—cold after being cocooned in the warmth of the duvet.

The door unlocked and Eden stood up, unsure what to expect. When nothing happened, she shrugged slightly and walked over to the door. The door had opened on its own, and she heard voices from the corridor—the quiet murmurs of children. Not loud like at school, but soft and low. She put it down to the time of day; she didn't exactly feel like breaking into song herself.

She pulled the door fully open and popped her head out, looking down to her left. She saw four or five kids coming towards her, so she quickly pulled her head back like a turtle. As the first child reached her door, he stopped. It was a boy, a couple of years younger than Eden.

“You're new,” he said quietly.

She just nodded.

“Come on, or you'll be late for morning assembly.”

She wasn't sure what was going on. Were they about to sing *Cauliflower Fluffy*? She followed the boy anyway, curious to see what would happen. She closed the door behind her, but it just swung open again.

“Yeah, you can’t do that,” he said, his voice quiet and resigned.

As they came into the hallway, she noticed the door here was fully open into the lounge area. He went in there, and she followed.

She had expected the other door across the room to be open too, but it was shut. Instead, he turned and another door behind the lounge opened into a dining area.

They entered the room with tables already set, and she waited as he sat down, unsure if she should sit next to him or not.

“It’s okay, you can sit there. Willow won’t come back, I guess.” The resignation in his voice was stronger now.

“Where is she?” she asked, looking around as the kids sat down. She counted the seats and realised there was room for sixteen, but not all were needed. As the other kids started grabbing food, she realised how starving she was and began to fill her plate while listening to the boy next to her.

He told her his name was Charlie, a wiry boy with dark hair and a decisive expression on his face. Willow was his sister, who they had ‘picked up’ yesterday. Charlie continued with his mouth full of oatmeal that him and Willow had been the only ones who knew each other

before and also got to be on the same ward, but he didn't know why that was. He said it with some pride, she didn't understand.

She had so many questions, but as she ate and Charlie spoke as fast as he could, she just shut her mouth and nodded along.

He told her about the days here. After morning assembly—which was basically just breakfast and a head count—they'd have classes until lunch. After lunch, there was what they called 'play time,' though he said it in a way that made her raise an eyebrow.

"Well, that's what they call it. But it's just some time in the lounge," he said with a small shrug. "But we do get to see the kids from the other ward!" His voice brightened a little at that.

The place—he wasn't even sure what it was—had three wards: the bigger ones where they were now, and a smaller one on the opposite side of the courtyard. Eden pressed him on what kind of place it was. It felt exactly like how she'd imagined a jail. Charlie just shrugged.

"Whatever. A jail with classes and play time, I suppose."

She could hear the silly edge in his words, but it didn't change how she felt about it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She stayed by Charlie's side as they left assembly and walked back down their corridor. She noticed that all the doors were more or less open. Not that she had anything anyone could steal anyway.

She stopped outside her door and put a gentle hand on Charlie's arm to halt him from heading to his own room. She glanced down the corridor at the other kids, searching for the right words.

"Uh..." she hesitated, unsure how to ask. "Where do I get a toothbrush? Fresh clothes?" She'd noticed the other kids wore everyday clothes, all looking fresh and clean enough. She felt grimy in her crinkled school uniform, still smelling faintly of herself.

Charlie explained that she'd probably be pulled out during class to receive those things. Eden nodded, releasing his arm. He started to walk again, then

glanced back with a little encouraging smile that warmed her more than she expected.

The buzzer went off again and she sighed. She hoped she'd see Tam in class. She was scared, alone, and—though she hated to admit it—actually starting to freak out a little. She took a deep breath, composed herself, and stepped into the corridor.

She hadn't done anything since they were sent back to their rooms. There was nothing *to* do. She'd just paced in circles, listening to the muffled sounds from the hallway. Now she leaned against her door frame and watched as the other kids began to shuffle past.

She studied them. Most seemed to be around her age or older, a few younger. Charlie looked like the youngest. He'd said he was twelve, and it seemed like most of the others were older than both of them.

Charlie emerged from his room—she noticed they weren't exactly neighbours, but close enough. Third door down. He looked up at her as he passed, his expression asking without words: *You coming or what?* She gave a small nod, as though he'd actually spoken, and fell in step behind him.

She still hadn't seen any doors marked *classroom* or anything like that, so she assumed some adult would come fetch them. But Charlie walked into the lounge and turned right, back into the room where they'd had breakfast.

All signs of food or eating were gone. The long table had been broken into smaller desks, arranged in rows like a classroom. She realised the long table had always been several desks pushed together.

Now they stood separated in a grid, all facing the back wall.

Charlie made his way to a desk near the wall, where windows normally would have been, and sat down. She noticed each desk was differently equipped: some had books, others a small PC or an MP3 player with headphones. Charlie's had a PC.

There was only one empty seat beside him as he was at the end of his row, and she moved towards it. It had a PC too. But as she reached it, Charlie looked up and gave a small shake of his head.

"You need to sit in your own seat."

She stared at him, incredulous. *How was she even supposed to know which one's hers?*

A tall girl swept past her and dropped into the seat beside Charlie without hesitation, already clicking at the PC. Eden backed out of the row and scanned the room, a confused look on her face. The rest of the kids came in quietly, one after another, and sat without a word.

The last one was a blond boy—overweight, with the palest hair she'd ever seen. Once he sat, there was only one desk left with anything on it. An MP3 player.

She made her way to it and sat down, slipping on the headphones. She didn't press play right away. Instead, she looked around again, studying the others.

Most kids had PCs, and they were watching video clips. Not all the same, not just out of sync—it was like each screen was doing something completely different. Cartoons. The news. An old brown-tinted film.

She glanced down at the MP3 player. She could smell her own sweat and hated it. Grimacing, she pressed play and tucked her arms tight to her sides, as if that could contain the smell.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Static.

That was all she heard at first. Just static.

She shifted in her seat, unease prickling under her skin. Then came the talking—or what *sounded* like talking. Not words exactly. At least not a language she had ever heard. Perhaps an alien, talking to himself. Garbled, too distorted to make sense.

Was this some kind of joke?

Her fingers hovered near the player's buttons. For a second, she thought about stopping it. But something in her gut warned her not to. She didn't know how things worked here. Maybe they were being watched. Monitored. Tested.

She glanced around the room, trying not to look too obvious. Her eyes swept the walls, the corners of the ceiling. No blinking lights. No tiny cameras that she could spot. Still, the room felt *observed*.

She turned slightly in her chair, pretending to stretch, trying to catch a glimpse behind her. Nothing. Just two rows of kids, absorbed in their screens. Quiet. Compliant.

A lump rose in her throat.

She had really thought—*hoped*—she'd see Tam in class. Her stomach clenched with the familiar ache of disappointment. Charlie had said they'd see the kids from the other ward during playtime. After lunch. After whatever *this* was.

She just had to make it that far.

The static buzzed on, now layered with soft, eerie nonsense. Eden let it wash over her, meaningless and strange. She wasn't really listening. Not anymore.

She felt the tears slip down her cheeks, hot and silent.

She didn't wipe them away.

She didn't even notice the droning voice in her ears anymore—except when it cut out for a minute, leaving just static, before resuming again. By then, the sounds were like wallpaper. Background nonsense.

Something about the room had been bothering her, and she'd spent however long it had been trying to work it out. Then it hit her.

There were no windows.

She frowned, surprised it had taken her so long to realise. It wasn't like she hadn't seen walls without windows before—but *whole rooms* with *no sign* of the outside? That was different. Still, before she could untangle her thoughts, the door opened and a man walked in.

She recognised him immediately. Mr. Henderson.

Except—it wasn't.

As she stood up, she realised he was older. At least ten, maybe twenty years older. But he was dressed exactly the same: plain slacks, pale shirt, navy pullover. It was the uniform that had tricked her. They were trying to make them indistinguishable, she realised.

He didn't speak, just waved her over.

She followed him without question, out through the lounge and into the corridor on the opposite side. As they passed the first door, she hesitated for a heartbeat. She recognised it from the night before. *Tam*. That had to be her corridor.

She nearly stopped.

The man noticed. He had turned around, watching her—not stern, just... curious. As though he were wondering what she would do next.

She caught up quickly, pretending nothing had happened.

They walked a little further, then he knocked on a door. It opened instantly, even though there was no one visible behind it. She guessed it must be the same locking system as her own room—controlled remotely.

Inside was a narrow space that opened into a much larger one lined with shelves. He walked ahead, turning into one of the aisles, and for a moment she just stood there, unsure. When he cleared his throat, she jumped and hurried to follow him.

The shelves were filled with clothes—neatly folded, labelled by size. He spoke suddenly, startling her again.

“Sizes go up. XXS on the bottom. XXXXL at the top.”

Then he glanced at a clipboard and began reciting a list. She was to take a certain number of each item. When he got to underwear, she flushed. There were only two options: plain white boy-briefs or girl knickers. No bras.

That surprised her, but she didn't say anything and she wasn't really bothered by the choices. Most of her underwear at home was plain cotton too.

Once her arms were full of clothing, she realised with a sigh that the most personal items were now stacked awkwardly on top. She hated that. But there wasn't much she could do.

They returned to the front, where he pulled out a basket and set it on the counter. She flipped the pile quickly, tucking the knickers underneath her blouses. There had been a decent selection—nothing stylish, but enough to pick things she might've worn at home.

Then he led her down another aisle and selected items from a different set of shelves. This time it was hygiene products—soap, a hairbrush, toothbrush, toothpaste, female hygiene products. She was relieved she didn't have to ask.

She followed him back to her ward and felt quietly relieved when he didn't turn towards the classroom. Instead, he walked straight across the lounge until they reached the door to her corridor.

Eden had spent the entire walk watching his back, still half-expecting him to turn into Mr. Henderson. But now, standing beside him, she took a proper look.

It was odd—how easily she'd mistaken him at first. The outfit was identical, sure, and they were roughly the same height and build. But their faces were nothing alike. This man had deep lines around his eyes, the kind that came from years of sun. His moustache made him look like an old-fashioned copper from a telly drama.

She gathered her courage.

"Is Tam okay?" she asked softly, biting her lip the moment the words were out.

He stared at her. Said nothing. Seconds passed, dragging like hours. Her arms were beginning to ache from the weight of the box. She wondered if she'd crossed some invisible line, broken a rule she didn't know existed.

Then—at last—he looked up, only briefly, and then straight at her again. He gave a small nod.

That was all. But it was enough.

Something in his expression told her she shouldn't push her luck. Still, she was grateful. He hadn't ignored her. He *had* answered—just not with words.

He straightened his back and said, in a tone that reminded her suddenly of assembly at school, “You will remain in your quarters until lunch. I cannot answer any questions.”

Then he turned and left. She heard the corridor door click shut and lock behind him.

She pushed into her room and tried to close the door behind her, but it wouldn't stay shut. It kept sliding open again. With a sigh, she nudged the box onto the floor and used it to wedge the door almost closed.

Grabbing some clothes and toiletries, she went into the bathroom. At least *this* door worked. It clicked into place, and though there was no lock, she still felt a little safer.

Warm water flowed down over her, and she exhaled as the tension began to lift from her shoulders. It wasn't quite hot enough—but it wasn't cold either. And after everything, it felt *good* to be clean.

She pulled on one of the cotton blouses and glanced at herself in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. The fabric was thin. She worried for a moment that her nipples might show through—but shrugged it off. There wasn't much she could do.

She folded her dirty clothes carefully, tucking her underwear between her skirt and top, and stepped back into the main room.

And then she paced.

Back and forth. Again and again.

Wondering what time it was.

And when the others would come back.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eden felt her brain slipping into that fuzzy, restless state where even fear began to lose its grip. She was bored out of her mind. Despite everything—despite the strangeness, the dread, the unanswered questions—her thoughts couldn't stay focused for more than a few seconds. Maybe that was just as well. It's not like she was going to figure it all out on her own.

I need to talk to Charlie, she thought. I need to see Tam! Oh god, I really need to see Tam.

Her eyes stung. A single tear traced a path down her cheek. She wiped it away with a sharp, annoyed movement. She had to do something before she went completely mad. She missed Tam. She missed feeling safe.

She pulled the box away from the door and set it down on her desk. When she turned around, the door had slid

fully open again. So much for privacy. Still, at least it locked at night. That thought brought a strange sense of comfort—yes, she was locked in, but everyone else was locked out.

She stepped into the corridor, wandering slowly. The first door was almost fully open and the room was clearly empty. No bedding, no box with things. The same layout as her room, same pale walls, same scuffed furniture. It smelled faintly of disinfectant—sharp and sterile, like a hospital corridor after visiting hours. She wrinkled her nose and moved on.

The next door. Charlie's.

She paused.

His room looked lived in. A poster of Arctic Monkeys was taped above his bed—no surprise there, except... How did he get a poster? Had he brought it with him? Her eyes darted around, taking in more details. A few items sat on his desk—some small figurines that looked like Paw Patrol characters, a notepad with something scribbled or sketched on it. Normal things. It wasn't a typical boy's room, but it also wasn't an empty sterile place like her own.

She was about to step further down the corridor when the door behind her clicked.

She froze.

Should she run back to her room? Walk casually? Stand still? For a moment she just stood there, heart thudding in her chest, before turning calmly and heading back the way she came.

She got all the way inside her room before the first of the others returned. She stood just inside the door, looking towards the corridor as she heard the first steps approaching. A girl—older than Eden, maybe even older than Tam—walked past without a word, barely glancing her way. Her blonde hair was tied back messily, and her shoulders were hunched in a way that made her seem far older than she was. Almost like an old woman in a teenager's body.

More kids followed. Then Charlie, the last to arrive. Although he had been if not the first, then one of the first to leave their corridor this morning, she thought. Both for breakfast and class.

He gave her a look—brief but unmistakable—his eyes flicking down over her body before meeting hers again. She had to resist the urge to cross her arms over her chest.

“Lunch in ten minutes,” he said, already moving past.

She nodded mutely, her mind suddenly spiralling. He would have told her if lunch wasn't in the same place as breakfast, wouldn't he? If there was a rule she had to follow? Or maybe he'd been here so long he'd forgotten what it was like to be new. Maybe a wall would slide away and a swarm of adults in their stiff uniforms would pour into the room—

She shook her head and tried to breathe.

Still feeling exposed, she crossed her arms over her chest and tucked her hands under her armpits. The contact made her nipples feel even more pronounced through the cotton blouse, but she couldn't help it. She needed the comfort. Even that small gesture of holding herself was better than doing nothing at all.

When they entered the eating area, there was no trace of it having been a classroom just minutes ago. Food was already on the table. Eden saw that the chair she'd used for breakfast was free. She didn't know if it had been Willow's seat for lunch too, but she figured it had.

She wondered if they had fixed seats or if it was free seating — but everyone just sat down in their usual spot. *Perhaps it was a way to keep control*, she thought,

in a world where they didn't control anything at all. She sat down on her own chair. On Willow's chair.

Charlie was already in his seat, spooning food onto his plate. Eden glanced over, bracing herself — but it actually looked... fine. Smelled good too, surprisingly. Bangers and mash. That was okay. She wasn't the biggest fan of sausages, but she gave herself a generous pile of mash and a squirt of ketchup.

She looked around. The blonde girl — the one who looked much older than she probably was — was sitting at the far end of the table. To Eden's other side was the pale-haired boy. He was big, but Eden realised he wasn't really overweight. Just a big boy, solidly built. She had to lean slightly towards Charlie when he started cutting his sausages.

She dragged her fork slowly through the last of the mash, smearing lines of ketchup into it and drawing little shapes without thinking. There wasn't much talking, but two kids were discussing a TV show she didn't recognise. She could only see one of them — a boy about her age, maybe a little older. He was handsome, with soft curls that bounced when he moved his head. She could tell he was talking to a girl, but Eden couldn't see her through the couple of kids sitting between them.

Her head was already turned towards Charlie when he put down his cutlery. He turned slightly, and their eyes met.

“When’s playtime?” she asked — not really meaning to sound desperate, but it came out a little too eager. As soon as her hunger had settled, the deep ache to see Tam had crept back in and taken over everything again.

“I’m not entirely sure,” Charlie said, glancing at his bare wrist as if checking the time. “But probably in half an hour or so. We go back to the ward first,” he explained.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eden was standing in the middle of her room, her hands clenching and relaxing without her even realising it. She lifted an arm and sniffed. She smelled fine. They hadn't given her any deodorant or perfume, but since she'd only showered recently, it was okay.

She was just about to cup her hands over her mouth to check her breath when a knock on the open door made her turn.

A boy was leaning against the doorframe with a small smile tugging at his lips. It was the curly-haired boy who had discussed tv-series at lunch.

“Welcome to The Bunker,” he said, his grin widening as he stepped inside without asking.

She smiled back — the first time since... yesterday? It felt strange, like her face had forgotten how. She

nodded her thanks and kept her arms crossed in front of her, unsure what he wanted.

“I got you a little welcome gift,” he said, that smirk still playing around the corner of his mouth. He held out his closed hand.

She hesitated, then held hers out underneath, palm up.

He opened his fist, and a single piece of chewing gum dropped into her hand.

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m so not eating that,” she said, eyeing the gum suspiciously. It had been in his sweaty palm, after all and it was all weird on one side, as if he had gnawed at it.

He grinned and shook his head. “You really shouldn’t.”

He leaned in a little, glancing over his shoulder like someone might be listening. When he spoke again, it was barely a whisper — almost just mouthing the words.

“There’s something inside.”

Her eyes narrowed.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper, the kind torn from a notepad — probably Charlie's. She unfolded it carefully.

There's a keycard in the gum.

Only use it at night.

*You need to be silent when you enter the
corridor —*

they've got voice recorders.

Only works inside the ward.

She looked up at him, stunned.

“Oh, I forgot — I'm Liam,” he said, suddenly casual again. He extended his hand.

She shook it, her own still half-closed around the gum.

“I'm Eden,” she said quietly, and offered him a real smile this time.

He gave a tiny nod, then turned and headed for the hallway. Over his shoulder, he added, “See you later, I guess.”

And just like that, he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The door to their ward clicked and slid open, and this time Eden was the first one out.

The lounge looked completely different in daylight. The first thing she noticed was the windows. Actual windows. The room was still empty, and she wandered over to them for a better look.

Outside, she saw overgrown grass, weeds, and a mess of shrubbery—but what really dominated the view was the wall. It stood a little way off, but it was impossible to ignore. Maybe ten foot tall. The surface was worn and flaky, patches of paint peeling away, and the top edge was jagged and uneven, as if parts had crumbled or been chipped off over time.

She found herself wondering what this place looked like from the outside. But the thought was cut off by a voice calling her name.

“Eden!”

Tam.

She spun around just in time to catch her, arms flung wide. They crashed into each other with a tight, breathless hug, and neither was willing to let go.

Tears streamed down Eden’s cheeks, her chest rising and falling with sobs. For the first few minutes, they didn’t speak. They just clung to each other.

It was Tam who finally broke the silence, her voice hoarse and shaking.

“I don’t fancy this place very much.”

Eden nodded against her cheek, still unwilling to let go.

“I missed you so bad,” she whispered, her voice raw and honest. No awkwardness. No embarrassment. Just the truth.

Tam only nodded. Then Eden realised—this was perfect. The way they stood, cheek to cheek, they could whisper quieter than Liam had and still be heard. She brought her lips to Tam’s ear, brushing it as she whispered.

“Check for cameras. I don’t think there are any, but better be sure.”

As she scanned the walls and ceiling, Tam did the same. A breath later, Tam whispered so softly it tickled her skin.

“Nothing. I think we can speak freely.”

Eden shook her head—too forcefully, perhaps, given how closely they were pressed together.

“No. They’ve got voice recorders. If we speak up, they’ll hear. But like this, I think it’s safe.”

Tam pressed in even closer, her body warm against Eden’s.

“I don’t mind that. Like... at all.”

And for a moment, they simply stood like that, in the quiet comfort of one another’s arms.

It was Eden who spoke again, shifting slightly, their bodies brushing—but there wasn’t a flicker of awkwardness in it now. No embarrassment. Just closeness.

She told Tam about Charlie and Liam. About breakfast and the strange, echoing stillness of the place. How it had already started to get under her skin. Tam listened, then told her she’d been to the supplies room, too—but just after classes had started, before Eden.

Eden explained what Liam had called the place—**The Bunker**—and what she'd learned. The surveillance. The odd routines. That some kids had been allowed to decorate their rooms, which meant they must've been there a while. Tam hadn't noticed any of it. She'd kept to herself, barely leaving her room. She hadn't even spoken to anyone, not even at meals.

That surprised Eden. Tam was usually the bold one, the talkative one. But here, it seemed the walls had pressed in on her too.

Tam did have news though. But not from the other kids. From Mr. Cox. Eden had to ask and it turned out that Cox was Hendersons older colleague. Tam explained that the place had three wards. The ones they knew and a third one, which Cox was unwilling to say anything about.

Tam continued. If kids came in together they would always be split up into each their own ward. Eden interrupted, sharing the seemingly irrelevant information that there had been a sister and a brother both living on her ward until recently.

Tam continued. She knew that the girl who had been there the longest was a 19 year old from Eden's ward. She even knew that there had been no jailbreaks ever in the history of the place.

Eden pulled her head back long enough to look at Tam's expression, as if to make sure she was serious. Tam put a kiss on Eden's lips and pulled her in again, before she continued whispering in her ear.

Tam had tried to talk to Mr. Cox when she was fetched to go get clothes and toiletries. The guard had ignored her all the way. In the storage room he had closed the door behind her and told her that the walls had ears. But not in the storage room itself, since the kids would never be alone there.

She decided to start flirting with him. He had been unwilling at first, but as they got to the clothes she had simply grabbed a jumper and pulled her top off, showing her breasts to him while changing into the jumper, which had been too much for poor Mr. Cox.

After that he answered her questions, but she really didn't know what to ask, so she didn't get as much information as she wanted, except what she had just shared with Eden.

Eden couldn't help grinning. That was exactly a thing that Tam would do, but that Eden would never have been able to. Charlie caught her eyes and he looked at her with an expression on his face she couldn't interpret. Then she realised she was grinning wide, facial expression so out of place, and stopped it.

After they'd shared everything they knew, they slowly pulled away from each other. Eden looked at Tam properly for the first time.

Light grey cotton joggers and a matching jumper. Nothing fancy. But somehow, Tam looked stunning in it. Effortless. Like the kind of girl who could make prison-issue clothes look like a fashion shoot.

Eden glanced down at herself, suddenly self-conscious. She was in joggers too, but they didn't fit as neatly—baggier at the waist, and her blouse didn't match at all. She tugged at the hem, wondering what Tam saw when she looked at her.

Tam kept fidgeting with her ears, and Eden realised—of course. No AirPods. It was strange seeing her without them. Like something essential had been robbed from her. Which basically was what happened.

They looked around the lounge. The couches were all taken—pairs and small groups already sprawled across them, some laughing quietly, others just watching.

They moved over to one of the side tables instead. Eden took a chair, and Tam pulled the other one closer,

scraping its legs across the floor until it was right next to Eden's. Then she sat and reached for Eden's hand, lacing their fingers together.

Eden's heart swelled a little. Not loud or dramatic. Just full.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The ward door clicked shut behind her, the sound sharper than usual. It felt like being sealed off — not just from Tam, but from something warmer, something closer to home.

Eden stood in the hallway for a moment, staring at the white walls that somehow felt colder now. The muted hum of the lights above her was the only sound. Everyone else had disappeared into their rooms. She hadn't even realised how much she'd relied on Tam's presence to anchor her. Now, she just felt untethered.

Her room was exactly how she left it. The bed was made, a little too neatly, and the corners of the blanket tucked in like hospital staff had done it. It didn't feel like *hers* — not really. There were no posters, no clutter. No scent of home. No half-read paperbacks splayed open like butterflies. No crumpled hoodie in

the corner of the floor that still smelled of Mum's fabric softener.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at the empty wall across from her. Ten minutes passed like fog — she didn't move, didn't think. Just sat.

Then the tears came.

Not loud ones. Not sobs. Just that silent kind of crying where your face stays still but the tears won't stop. They slid down her cheeks and dripped off her chin. She wiped at them once with her sleeve, then gave up.

She didn't even know *exactly* what she was crying for.

Her mum perhaps. The smell of toast in the morning. The crumpled, warm duvet on Saturday mornings. The way Tam had said her name like it meant something.

Everything and nothing.

Time felt broken inside the ward. She kept glancing at the wall where a clock should've been, but there wasn't one. She thought of asking Charlie what time it was, but she guessed he wouldn't have any clue either. Besides; she didn't want to talk. She didn't want to be *seen*.

By dinner, she still hadn't spoken to anyone.

The meal passed in a blur. She chewed, she swallowed. She couldn't have said what the food was. Everything tasted like paste.

Back in her room she lay on the bed and pulled the blanket up to her chin, staring at the ceiling. The silence was heavier at night. Not quiet — heavy. Like something sitting on her chest.

She imagined her mum coming through the door. She pictured her voice:

“Eden, sweetheart, it's okay. I'm here. Let's go home.”

And then Tam — bold and brave, knocking on her door with that defiant little smile.

“Snuck out. Couldn't sleep without you.”

She almost laughed. But it caught in her throat.

She turned onto her side and curled up.

No one had taken her toothbrush. Or her shoes. Or her sense of who she was. But she felt stolen anyway.

She whispered it out loud, into the pillow:

“I miss you.”

To both of them.

To the parts of herself she hoped weren't lost completely.

Then, quietly, she closed her eyes.

And waited for morning.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

She woke up with her back to the room but she sensed someone was in there. She spun around and saw curly hair. Liam. He was kneeled down by her bed, his head on level with hers. Before she could scold him he put a finger on his lips, signalling that she would have to stay quiet. He pointed towards the door or the hallway. The door was of course wide open.

She sat up in bed, happy that she had kept the blouse on when she went under the duvet, but very aware that she wasn't wearing trousers. She pointed towards the box on the desk and Liam got what she was saying right away. He stood up and grabbed it, then gently pushed the door closed and put the box in front of it. Without the clothes she was wearing and the joggers on the floor it wasn't heavy enough and it slid ajar.

He looked back at her and she picked up the trousers and threw them to him. He caught it mid air and

dropped them in the box but it wasn't quite enough. He poked his head into her bathroom and then disappeared for a few seconds before coming back out with the clothes she had arrived in. He dropped them into the box as well from standing height and she worried how they would be spread out down there.

But he didn't look into the box again, just used his foot to push on it and the door until the door was closed. This time it stayed closed and he came over to her bed again. For a second she feared he would sit *on* the bed, but he didn't. He sat back down on the floor next to it, where he had been when she woke up.

"Wow, you got a bad door," he exclaimed. "Mine stays pretty much closed. So who's the girl you talked to in the lounge? She didn't look like a sister." She pulled the duvet tighter around her, didn't want him to see her like this.

"No, she's..." she paused for a moment. Friend felt inaccurate. Not covering. Girlfriend? That could mean a friend who is also a girl, but it could mean so much more. It would probably also start an avalanche of questions she wasn't ready to answer.

She realised something. Her brain kicked into gears, and instead of answering his question she asked him one instead.

“Couldn’t you just have locked the door with your keycard thingie?” He blushed dangerously red, then nodded slowly. He obviously hadn’t thought of that. They both looked over to the door, then at each other and shared a silent grin. Hers also covering the smug feeling that she had avoided the question so elegantly.

Liam rested his head against the side of her bed, arms looped around his knees like he wasn’t planning to leave anytime soon. Eden had the duvet wrapped high under her arms now, knees tucked close beneath it. She was still acutely aware of how little she was wearing, but also... strangely not in danger. Liam had this way about him — like a golden retriever with too much hair and not quite enough filter.

“So,” he whispered, still smiling. “Mysterious girl in grey. She your... what? Cousin? Secret agent? Fellow escape artist?”

Eden rolled her eyes, but there was no venom in it. “She’s just someone who matters.”

That seemed to satisfy him — or maybe it didn’t, but he had the grace to pretend it did.

A few moments passed in quiet, and she was grateful for it. The silence didn’t feel awkward, just suspended

— like the air between them had been wrapped in a blanket too.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he murmured finally, eyes flicking to the little window under the ceiling, though there wasn’t much to see beyond it. “Kept thinking about everything. The staff, the hallways, this place. And you, actually.”

Eden tilted her head, curious now. “Me?”

“Yeah. You’re like...” He fumbled, scratching behind his ear. “You don’t act like the rest of us. You ask the wrong questions. You *notice* stuff. I mean, you noticed my gum trick was a bit dodgy.”

Eden gave him a soft smile, not quite proud, but quietly pleased.

“Plus,” he added, eyes twinkling, “you’ve got this whole secret spy thing going on now. Passing notes. Whispering behind couches. Mysterious reunions in the lounge. You’re basically our James Bond.”

“Bond would have placed the box in front of the door, so he would hear any intruders,” she shot back dryly.

He laughed into his sleeve, muffling it for the sake of whatever might be listening beyond the hallway. Then his face sobered, just a little.

“Hey,” he said more softly. “You miss home?”

The question hit her unexpectedly hard. Her throat tightened, and for a second she couldn’t speak. She nodded instead, eyes fixed on the small patch of the wall behind his head.

“My mum,” she whispered eventually. “I don’t even know if she knows where I am. I don’t know if she’s okay. Or if she thinks *I’m* okay. She used to always come in after I fell asleep just to check if I was breathing. It used to annoy me. Now I... I’d give anything to feel her hand on my back.”

Liam reached up and gently touched the edge of her blanket — not pulling it down, not trying to see her face, just anchoring her there with a bit of contact.

“My mum left when I was five,” he said quietly. “I still check the windows sometimes. Dumb, huh?”

Eden shook her head. “Not dumb.”

More silence.

Eventually, Liam sighed and leaned his head back against the bed frame again. “Okay. I’m gonna go in a minute. Just... didn’t want to be alone. Didn’t want *you* to be alone either.”

Eden felt the ache in her chest shift. Not ease, exactly — but move. Like the pain had stretched a little and made room for something else. Not happiness. But maybe... comfort.

“Thanks,” she said softly. “For sneaking in. And for not looking.”

He chuckled. “I’m a gentleman. Besides, I get the feeling you’d knee me in the face if I wasn’t.”

“Probably.”

They shared one more grin — soft, fleeting — and then he got up, lifting the box up and sat it back down on the desk. And just like that, he slipped out the door and back into the shadows of the corridor.

She didn’t sleep right away. But this time, she didn’t cry either.

Chapter Thirty

Time didn't move in here. Not properly.

It stretched and sagged like wet fabric, dripping minutes so slowly Eden sometimes forgot how long she'd been standing, or breathing, or blinking. There were no clocks. Not on the walls, not on their wrists. Time was a murky thing here—stretched thin like chewing gum, pulled taut across endless repetition. The days chopped into the slots between breakfast, class, lunch, playtime and dinner. The alarm going on in the morning, the buzzers going every time a new part of the day started.

She knew that lunch was exactly at noon, the only marker of the day, the closest thing they had to knowing. Everything else blurred together: the morning assembly, the classes, the supervised playroom sessions. There were no windows in the ward, no natural light to guide them. Just the constant artificial

glow that made everything feel slightly unreal, like they were trapped in a loop that no one had the power to break.

She would often visit Liam in the nights, or he would visit her. They would sit and talk for hours. He had explained that he got the keycards from Mr. Cox. He had two. Or more accurately, he had one and Eden had the other. Both times he had managed to get the card from Mr. Cox without Cox knowing it, but he didn't want to give any details on how he knew to do that.

Eden had asked him how the cards would only work on the room doors then, and he shrugged, explaining they probably didn't. But if she left the corridor, the risk of getting caught was too big. They knew so little about the place and how things worked behind the curtains.

The next day she had talked to Tam about the keycards and how they possibly would work outside the ward. But Tam had agreed with Liam — too risky.

They woke at the same hour every morning — The alarm blaring, then the soft hiss of the door unlocking and the corridor lights flaring to life. She'd begun to wake before the sound now, her body trained to anticipate it like a cruel reflex.

Some mornings she tried to resist — to lie back down, to pretend she hadn't heard. But the silence that

followed was louder than any siren. Because the morning assembly would begin soon. She had no idea what would happen if you weren't there, but nobody was ever missing so she didn't dare be the first one.

So she dressed. Always. And followed.

Breakfast was the same every morning. No egg, no sausages or beans. Always cereal and milk. In the beginning she had a hope that they would get something different on the weekends, so she could keep track of how long she had been there, but it was the same always.

After that came *Classes*. Some days she would come in and see the mp3 player, other days a book or a pc. She hated the mp3 player, the meaningless talking drove her insane. The books were weird too. But less so. The pages were cut out from other books, sometimes comic books or newspapers. Nobody ever instructed her, and she had tried both reading every single word and flicking through the pages and just looked out of the window.

She liked the pc the most. It was always videos playing and she couldn't pause or stop it. She could start it and that was it. The video would still run after she got up and left after class. No sound, no headphones. Just the images changing. She liked the cartoons best. There

were also news clips but they were very old. Probably from when Mum was a kid. They were subtitled, and since there weren't any sound, she didn't know if they were captioned English or translated from something else.

It happened once in a while that they got waved out during class. Sometimes to go get something from the supply room. It seemed random but it happened that Mr. Cox would come and wave one of them out the door. Most times it was so they could pick something from the shelves in the supply room, toys, posters, pen and paper.

Other times, and that was quite scary, they would come pick up one of the kids only to tell them something in privacy. They would then be missing the next morning. Other times new kids would come in. It never happened during the day. Somehow they were just there one morning. Eden guessed they would have arrived exactly the same way Tam and she did.

Then came *Lunch*. It was always okay. Not good and not bad. Just ok. The same menu every three days. Some were talking. Liam often spoke to the girl across from his seat. Eden had learned that her name was Hannah, but most of the others stared at nothing and kept silent.

Playtime was next. She was always anxious to get there, to see Tam. They never played any of the board games, they never looked at the old TV screen in the corner. They would either be hugging and whispering in each other's ears or they would sit and hold hands. Somehow they had started kissing every time they saw each other and every time they had to go to their wards again. It wasn't something they had agreed or talked about. It just started happening.. Liam had started calling Tam for Eden's girlfriend, but not in a mocking way. Eden hadn't corrected him. Perhaps he *was* correct already.

Evenings brought the loudest silence. Eden had gotten a notepad and pen. One day during class Mr. Cox had come to the door and waved her out. The first time Eden got something she had chosen pen and paper. It was a great way to organise her thoughts but also to slip notes to Tam or Liam. She was stunned that the grown-ups hadn't figured out how they were using it.

Eden would spend the evenings writing letters to Tam. They exchanged them every day at playtime, but they wouldn't read them before the evening and then write replies, giving the evening some content other than staring at a wall.

Doors locked again. Lights dimmed. And Eden lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, trying not to miss Tam so

hard it ached. Trying not to imagine her mum's voice. Trying not to feel the hours pulling her apart.

Sometimes, she thought of the outside world. But not like it was real — more like a dream she half-remembered. Her room. The soft creak of the bannister. Rain on her window. Her mum humming in the kitchen. They lived in her memory now like scenes from a storybook.

Chapter Thirty-One

One day it happened. Mr. Cox came to class and waved Eden out. She closed the book and got up, careful not to make any noise, and went outside the room with him. In the lounge, he stopped — which confused her. She was used to being taken to the supply room, either for a small gift or to restock her toiletries. But this time, he stopped right outside the door and waited until it clicked behind her.

“I have to inform you that your behaviour recently means you will have to eat in solitary tonight. You will stay in your room when the others are leaving. When they return, you can go to the dining area and have your dinner.” Eden went pale. She was sure this meant she would be taken away in the morning.

Lunch took forever today. Her legs felt restless, shifting constantly—crossing them, then uncrossing. Her

fingers fiddled with something all the time, usually the string from her hoodie, which she would knot tightly only to undo it moments later.

She had no appetite. It was chicken curry with rice, a meal she usually liked, but today she just pushed the same piece of meat around in the sauce without eating. Finally, they heard the door unlock and moved back to their rooms.

Playtime would be soon. She stood by her door, trying to count the seconds in her head, though she had no idea how many there would be, even if she guessed the timing right. A red mark itched at her neck. She felt like she needed the loo but didn't want to go now and risk being late for playtime, so she shifted her weight as her stomach rumbled quietly.

Then came the click. The door to the lounge swung open. She pushed her own door fully wide and stepped outside to the corridor then inside to the lounge in a few steps. She stood there, helpless in the middle of the room, arms hanging loosely by her sides. It would be a minute or two before the other ward arrived; they had a bit of a walk to get here, according to Tam.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Eden looked out the window, her arms crossed around herself, not because she was cold, it was always a medium temperature, but giving herself a hug. She saw frost on the ground, but no snow yet. It felt like summer had been a very long time ago. Mum. Bedale. School. It was all so long ago.

Tam put her soft lips on Eden's like she always did, then leaned in close.

“Okay, what happened? You look like you've seen a ghost,” she whispered. This time, the gentle brushing of her lips against Eden's ear didn't calm her. Eden shook her head so slightly that anyone watching probably wouldn't have noticed, but Tam felt it against her cheek.

“I was told not to come to dinner tonight.”

At first, Tam said nothing but her arms around Eden’s shoulders squeezed harder. They just held each other tightly. Eden focused on her breathing, aware that her inhales were shallow and fearing she might start to hyperventilate. Tam felt it immediately.

“It’s okay, love. It’s okay. We’ll figure this out. Breathe with me,” she said softly, and Eden concentrated on matching Tam’s slow, deep breaths. It helped. Her thoughts began to clear, though her arms still clung tightly to Tam’s shoulders, and she felt her stomach urging her to the loo. She nodded slowly against Tam’s cheek to show she was alright, and Tam continued.

“I have a plan.” Eden pulled back just a little, looking at Tam. If she had a plan, why hadn’t they used it weeks ago? Months ago? She wasn’t even sure how long they’d been here now. It was definitely autumn, they could tell from the lounge windows—no snow yet, but it could come any day.

Before Eden could ask, Tam answered the question she hadn’t spoken aloud.

“It’s risky. Really, really risky. Slim chance of success. But if they’re taking you tonight, we have no choice.”

Eden felt cold sweat break out as Tam explained the plan.

They waved Liam over and opened the hug so he could be part of it. They moved their heads around until both Eden's and Liam's ears were close to Tam's mouth. She explained to Liam that they would have to try to escape today. He was welcome to come with them or stay behind, but they would need his keycard if he didn't want to go.

Liam looked at her with a decided expression. There was no hesitation as he turned his head until his mouth was at Tam's ear. Eden couldn't hear what he said, but she knew. She knew he was in.

Tam and Liam whispered back and forth a few times, then Liam let go of the girls and moved back to the corner of the couch where he'd been sitting before. This time, he hugged one knee to his chest while watching the girls.

Tam explained the plan to Eden. When she told her that she knew about the service entrances, Eden tried to turn her head, but Tam kept her cheek close and went on.

“As I said, the plan is super risky. I didn't want to give you false hope. But I know how they make the beds, set

the tables, and all that — even though we never see them do it. There are service entrances to both wards.”

Eden blinked. She had never seen any doors like that. Not that she’d looked for them exactly, but still — she would have noticed if there were other doors in the corridor or the classroom slash dining room.

Tam continued. The plan was mostly risky because everything she knew had only been told to her — she had never seen the labyrinth of service corridors herself, and certainly not the outside.

Eden turned her head slightly and pressed her lips to Tam’s ear.

“How do you know this? Why would Mr. Cox tell you any of it?”

Tam was quiet for a few seconds. Her voice was a bit unsure, hesitant, as she began speaking again.

“I have...” She paused. Took a deep breath, then started again. “Shown him myself. I’m not proud of it. But I knew this day would come — that one of us would be picked. I’d hoped it would be me, and that it wouldn’t be for a long time yet. That I’d have time to come up with something better. Something safer.”

Eden didn't want to ask. Didn't want to know. She just nodded slightly against Tam's cheek to let her know she understood.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eden was sitting at her desk. Her pen and notepad lay in front of her. She was sweating from wearing three different layers on top and two pairs of trousers. But it would be freezingly cold when—if they made it outside.

She looked down and read through the plan again. It would begin the second the doors opened for dinner. Eden would use her keycard to open her own door and meet Liam after the others had left.

Then they would make their way to the service entrance and slip into the hidden corridors. From there, they'd follow the route and meet up with Tam.

Tam had drawn a map based on what Mr. Cox had told her, and she would lead them to the staff exit behind the arrivals desk. If all went well, they'd use the keycard

again and slip out through that entrance — already beyond the fence and free to run.

Eden read through the steps one more time. Liam and Tam would probably be missed at dinner almost immediately, she guessed. And even if they weren't, just entering the service corridors carried a huge risk — they might run into staff at any moment. Worse still, the employee exit was directly behind the manned front counter.

She shook her head. It didn't matter. It was their only chance.

The door out in the hallway clicked.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Dinner time.

Eden's heart jolted against her ribs. The familiar sound of locks disengaging — normally a comfort — now made her breath catch in her throat. She didn't move yet. Waited. One second. Two. Let the footsteps pass her door, one by one. Shuffling. Whispering. The usual dinner time murmurs.

She counted to ten, stood up, and pulled the keycard gum from her pocket. It was dirty. Covered in lint and had a few cracks in the surface and a gaping hole where the chip had been inserted on the side.

Her hands shook as she tapped it against the scanner. She waited for a full second. No longer than usual, but it felt like an eternity. Then the door clicked.

She opened it just wide enough to slide through.

The corridor was empty. The others were gone. Except Liam who stood next to her door. Waiting. He didn't speak. Just nodded. They moved quickly, but were limited in movement by wearing several layers of clothing.

They crept forward, hugging the walls until they reached the little supply closet, near the entrance to the class area. She could hear the others talk quietly on the other side of the locked door. They both looked at the back wall, trying to find the scanner. Liam pointed to the upper left corner and Eden leaned in and swiped the keycard over a worn spot in the corner. A click. Then the door opened to reveal the entrance Tam had described.

The corridor was dark, but there was a faint bulb in the ceiling casting a lazy yellow light. The corridor was significantly colder than the quarters they just came from. The air smelled different here — dusty and unused. The walls were bare concrete. No colour, no warmth.

They stepped inside.

The door shut quietly behind them, closing out the familiar world and sealing them inside the unknown.

They didn't talk. Only the sound of breathing. Shoes brushing the floor. Distant humming — electrical — maybe from lights or machines deeper in the building.

A thud.

They froze.

Another thud. Closer. Heavy footfalls.

Eden grabbed Liam's hand. She pulled him into a shallow recess in the wall, pressing their backs into the shadows. A voice followed. Male. Not Mr. Cox. Someone else.

"...told them the rota's changed. Don't know if he passed it on..."

Their footsteps echoed as they passed — too close. So close. Liam had his eyes shut, lips moving silently.

The sound faded.

They waited.

Eden exhaled so slowly it hurt. Then they moved again, following the map in Eden's hand — a folded, sadly rudimentary version of what Tam had explained to Eden, based on what Cox had explained to Tam. It

looked childlike. Scribbled arrows. “Don’t go here!!” scrawled beside a thick line marked *boiler access*.

Another turn.

This corridor was tighter. Much narrower, with cobwebs dangling, like it hadn’t been used in years. Dust clung to their socks. They were both holding their shoes in hand to move as silently as possible. The overhead lights buzzed faintly, flickering every few seconds.

They passed a vent. Voices carried through it — dining hall chatter, metal trays clattering. Normal sounds. Life still going on slightly above them.

Then — footsteps again. Sharp. High heels maybe. A woman this time.

They ducked into a side hallway. The woman didn’t turn. Just passed by, walking quickly, muttering into what sounded like a radio.

“We’re out of wipes in the East Ward. Check again before lights-out.”

Eden clenched her jaw. They were so close.

Tam was supposed to be waiting at the junction up ahead.

When they reached it, she wasn't there.

Panic clawed at Eden's stomach. What if something had happened? What if Tam had been caught? What if—

Then.

A soft tap. Then a click and a panel opened. They looked into a room like their own lounge, but without the furniture and they saw it through a closet. Tam's head popped into view. She had bundled some belongings into a hoodie and tied the sleeves around her neck as a little interim rucksack, but worn on the front.

No words. She entered the corridor and quickly looked from side to side. If she was surprised of how it looked, she didn't show it. How cold it was. How it smelled. She never gave it away. She found the right direction, at least she hoped it was the right one and they tippy toed down the empty corridor.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Tam was red-faced, sweating. She showed Eden the map in her hand and pointed — *next stop: staff corridor behind arrivals desk.*

They moved quickly now. No more turns. Just a single hallway that sloped down gently, the walls narrowing, the ceiling pressing low.

Then they reached it.

The final corner.

Just behind it — the back of the front counter.

They could hear a man's voice. Low and gravelly. He was talking to someone else.

“Did you check the East door logs? I think we had a blip earlier.”

Eden covered her mouth with her hand. Her breath was loud. Too loud. She turned to Tam and Liam.

She didn't feel brave. Just empty. And ready.

The corridor split just past the reception counter. One path led to the staff break room and locker area. The other — darker, narrower — led towards administration. From the break room came a faint chatter of a radio.

Tam hesitated at the junction, her breathing shallow. She checked the scrap of paper in her palm, then pointed the opposite way of the radio playing, her hand trembling. “It’s this way,” she whispered. “Just past the janitor’s closet. The records room should be behind the door marked ‘Personnel Only’.”

Eden felt the cold sweat beading at the back of her neck. Every footstep sounded like thunder against the linoleum. Liam stayed behind them, crouched low, watching their backs.

They moved in bursts — pausing at corners, ducking into alcoves, hearts pounding. The overhead lights were dim in this wing, flickering slightly, as if even the building held its breath.

As they passed a cracked door, they heard voices. Male, gruff — one laughing, the other answering in a low murmur. Staff.

Tam signalled them to freeze. They backed up against the wall, silent, holding their breath. The voices drifted closer. A shadow crossed the crack of light under the door.

Then — retreating footsteps. The creak and a rattle of a kettle cupboard. A door swung shut.

Tam counted to ten in her head. Then ten more. Only then did she move again.

The “Personnel Only” door was locked. Tam turned and looked at the others. It was Liam who was fastest this time. He mouthed “*keycard*” and Tam nodded as she held it to the sensor. The door clicked, it sounded like a ricocheting thunder in the empty hallway.

Inside, the air smelled like dust and antiseptic. Shelves lined the walls, filled with labelled boxes, folders, personnel rosters. A desktop monitor glowed faintly in sleep mode.

Tam turned her head and opened her makeshift rucksack. She looked at Eden and Liam, and in a hissing voice, told them to make one as well. They both pulled their outermost jumpers off, and tied it the same

way that Tam had with hers. She began grabbing what she could: ID rosters, staff schedules, a binder labelled *Incident Reports*. Eden spotted a filing drawer marked *Discharge*. She pulled it open, fingers flying. Photocopies of letters, signed forms, stamped approvals — all doctored. One stood out. Willow Turner. Charlie's sister.

She took it.

Footsteps. Approaching. Fast.

"Someone's coming," Liam warned, urgency in his whisper.

They stuffed the papers into Liam's backpack. Tam nearly dropped the map but Eden snatched it up, tucking it into her hoodie.

The door clicked.

Tam grabbed the knob and yanked it open from the inside — hard. A staff member on the other side jumped back with a surprised grunt, the mug in his hand tipping sharply. Hot tea sloshed over his fingers and splattered onto the floor.

"Shit!" he hissed, fumbling the mug and turning instinctively away, shaking his hand.

Tam, Eden and Liam froze — breathless, hearts thundering — just inches from him.

But the man didn't look up. He swore under his breath again, stepping backwards, already heading towards the nearby break room.

“Bloody brilliant,” he muttered. “No paper towels in this place.”

As soon as his back turned, Tam nodded sharply. “Go.”

They slipped out like shadows, feet barely touching the ground. Down the corridor. Left at the junction. Past the reception. And down to the staff entrance.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tam looked at the others. Sweat had made the collar of her jumper wet. Her cheeks were flushing red. She didn't need to tell them to be quiet. They looked at her, waiting for her to decide, she was clearly in charge now. She grabbed her keycard and held it in front of the door without scanning it and held up three fingers. Two. One.

A door just outside the corridor beeped before she put the keycard to the entrance door.

It wasn't loud, but it felt like an explosion in Eden's chest. She pressed herself flatter against the cold wall, heart rattling in her throat.

The man behind the counter shifted. His chair creaked.

"Did you hear that?" he muttered.

Footsteps.

Coming closer.

Tam moved like smoke — silent, swift — peering through the crack in the wall where the corridor ended and the staff area began. The man was only a few metres away. Another footstep and he'd be looking straight at them.

He was holding a clipboard. Reading. Not looking up.

Tam reached out — pressed the keycard against the exit panel.

Nothing.

She tried again. This time the door clicked to signal it was unlocked.

The man looked up.

Tam grabbed Eden's wrist, yanked hard and pushed the door open with her shoulder.

They bolted.

Behind them, a shout. A clatter. The man had dropped the clipboard.

“Hey! HEY!”

The night air hit Eden's face like a slap. Cold. Real.

They were through.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Tam didn't let go. Liam caught up beside them, sprinting like he'd been waiting his whole life for this. The gravel underfoot crunched and scattered. A floodlight behind them flicked on — harsh white cutting through the night.

Another voice joined the shouting.

Eden didn't look back.

A siren began to wail — not deafening, but insistent. Not an alarm meant for the whole building. Just something to alert a few.

They ran faster.

Eden's legs burned. Her lungs screamed. But the lights behind them grew smaller.

Then — trees.

Real trees. But several hundred metres away.

The air was cold, surprisingly cold. None of them had been out since last summer. Liam even longer, but they weren't freezing as they ran as fast as they could, clutching their loot to their chests.

It felt like forever before they reached the trees. The spotlights hadn't hit them once, but obviously the whole building knew they were gone. She wondered what the other kids were thinking right now inside. They wouldn't know who was missing from the other ward, but they would see who was missing at their own table.

They ran through the first trees, branches whipping their arms, brambles grabbing at their socks. The world behind them was still shouting, still lit. But here — under the canopy — it was quieter.

Not safe.

Not yet.

But quieter.

Only when they reached the outskirts of the forest, where the undergrowth began to thicken and the light from the building no longer reached, did Tam finally

stop. She turned, face glistening with sweat, breathing hard.

No one had followed.

Not yet.

They stood there, panting, the forest like a shadowed wall in front of them.

Behind them, the past.

Ahead — whatever came next.

Eden didn't speak.

She just reached for Tam's hand.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

They didn't speak much at first. The forest swallowed their footsteps as they pushed deeper through the trees, still half-expecting sirens to start wailing behind them. But nothing came. No barking dogs. No shouting. No searchlights.

Just the rustle of leaves and their breath fogging in the cold.

Tam led the way. Her shoulders were tense, and Eden could tell she was thinking three steps ahead, like always. They stuck close, half-walking, half-jogging, until they reached a narrow country road and followed it in silence, gravel crunching under their feet.

It was Liam who raised his arm first when headlights approached — a single pair of yellow beams cutting through the dusk. He didn't even look at the girls for

approval. He just did it. Like he was tired of waiting for someone else to be brave.

The car slowed.

It was an old Volvo, the paint a bit dull, the passenger door held together with duct tape. The man behind the wheel looked like someone's dad — beard a bit patchy, tired eyes, a takeaway coffee cup in the holder.

“You kids alright?” he asked, window cracked open, engine still running.

Tam stepped forward. “Sort of,” she said. “We missed our bus. We were doing school stuff at my uncle's cottage and didn't realise how late it had gotten. Could you maybe take us anywhere north?”

The man looked them over. Three teens in jumpers and hoodies, faces flushed, The “backpacks” lumpy with what looked like books. Eden had stuffed the documents so far down hers they bent in the middle.

He gave a soft sigh. “Hop in. I'm heading towards Leeds. Should help you a bit of the way at least.”

They didn't wait to be asked twice.

The car was warm, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Eden's fingers stopped trembling. She sat in the back with Liam, while Tam took the passenger seat. She'd pulled her hood down and was smiling, that bright, easy kind of smile that made people want to trust her. Eden watched her reflection in the window. She was good at this.

The man — Eden wasn't sure, but perhaps his name was Peter — asked what school they went to. Tam answered with something that sounded legit. Said they were in sixth form. Said they were studying history. Said the paperwork was for a group project on local institutions.

He bought it.

"I've got a kid about your age," he said at one point. "Never leaves the house without her earbuds in."

Tam laughed politely. Eden could tell she was watching the road signs. Clocking how far they were getting. She was counting minutes.

After an hour and a bit, Peter pulled off at a roundabout and into a petrol station car park. The sky was dark now. The air outside the car had that damp, wintry chill that makes your nose sting.

“This is where I turn off,” he said. “You sure you’ll be alright?”

“We’ll be fine,” Tam said. “Thank you. Really.”

He nodded and gave a small wave as they shut the doors behind them.

They stood in silence, watching the car disappear down the road until the taillights faded. Then it was just them. The petrol station was closed, the lights off, and the road stretched in both directions without end.

Tam pulled her hood back up. Her smile was gone now, replaced by something sharper.

“We’re almost there,” she whispered.

And for the first time, Eden actually believed it.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

They walked north for a bit, Tam looking from side to side, clearly scouting. They weren't in the middle of nowhere, there was a gas station after all, but they definitely weren't in a bigger town either. Suddenly she crossed over the street, Liam and Eden followed her. She stopped on the side of the road, there was no pavement out here and looked into a car park area. The tarmac broken, weeds growing through. She pointed towards an abandoned workshop and started walking again.

The door creaked open with a groan, revealing a dusty old ride-on mower, two crates of road salt, some burlap bags and a table-bench set in a corner.

They didn't talk much at first. Tam pulled the door shut. It was as cold in here as outside due to a broken window pane, but the place wasn't entirely dark in the moonlight. The night air settled around them, damp and

quiet, broken only by the occasional sound of tyres hissing along the distant road.

Eden sat with her back against the corrugated wall, her legs pulled to her chest. The adrenaline had worn off, leaving her body sore, her thoughts brittle. Tam had stacked all the evidence on top of the crates and covered them with the clothes so they hopefully wouldn't get damp through the night. She sat down next to Eden and held her hand, unashamed, not caring if Liam saw or not.

Liam had used the burlap bags as a bean bag and was curled up near the mower, his hoodie pulled tight over his head, chin resting on his knees. He wasn't asleep, but his eyes were closed. Maybe pretending. Maybe trying.

Tam shifted closer to Eden and rested her head on her shoulder. "Still cold?" she whispered.

"Just tired," Eden whispered back.

They stayed like that for a while, pressed together, listening to the wind's faint howling through the cracked frame. Eden didn't care anymore if Liam saw. There was something oddly freeing about it — about not having to hide the way Tam's thumb brushed slow circles against the back of her hand, or the way their

foreheads eventually touched, breath warm and shared in the hush of night.

Liam cracked one eye open and grinned sleepily. “You two are gorgeous.”

Tam laughed under her breath. “Jealous?”

“Not even a little,” Liam said. “But it’s kind of nice. Seeing people who actually give a damn about each other.”

That silenced them for a moment. Eden blinked. Her heart ached, but not in the way it used to. It was softer now. Real.

“I do,” Tam said, just loud enough for Liam to hear. “I really do.”

Eden didn’t say anything. She just leaned in and kissed her.

It was slow. Unhurried. Tam’s fingers threaded through her hair, and the shed seemed to disappear for a moment. The road nearby, the escape, even the aching cold — all of it fell away.

When they pulled back, Liam had buried his face in his arms again. “I’m not here,” he mumbled.

Tam chuckled and rested her cheek against Eden's once more. "We should try to sleep," she whispered.

"I don't think I can," Eden murmured.

"Me neither. But tomorrow's coming."

And it was. Whether they were ready or not.

Chapter Forty

The shed was colder than it had been in the early hours. Eden's breath came out in soft white puffs as she snuggled closer to Tam. It wasn't much of a plan, hiding everything there right on the crates — just covered in hoodies and jumpers —but they couldn't carry it all, and they couldn't risk being caught with it either. And after all they needed it to be easy enough to find.

“It's good enough,” Tam said quietly, wiping her nose with her sleeve. “They can find it here.”

Liam gave a solemn nod. “Let's just hope they believe us.”

Tam glanced at Eden. “They will.”

They stepped out into the pale morning light. The wind had picked up, sharper now, cutting through their

hoodies. The road to the petrol station was empty. Not a car in sight, just frost on the verge and the echo of their footsteps.

Inside the shop, it was too warm, too bright. Rows of drinks in glass fridges, overpriced sandwiches in plastic triangles, the faint hum of cheap radio playing a song Eden didn't recognise. The man behind the counter looked up once, then went back to his phone.

Tam looked around, not finding what she wanted and told the other two to stay put. She walked over to the attendant, a sudden spring in her steps. They couldn't hear what she was saying, but the man looked doubtful first, then nodded a few times as Tam explained something to him. He handed her his phone and then pointed down the counter.

Tam walked down to where he had pointed and moved a sign that said *please use the other register*, out of the way and uncovered a phone book. She waved Eden and Liam closer and started flipping through the pages.

"Which paper?" she whispered.

Eden thought for a moment. "The Mirror? Or The Guardian?"

"The Guardian might actually listen," Tam murmured.

She dialled. The phone rang for a long time before someone picked up — a woman with a clipped voice and a tired edge.

“Guardian tip-off desk.”

Tam cleared her throat. “Hi. I... I need to report something. It’s about a private facility. A children’s facility. They’re—” Her voice caught. She steadied herself. “They’re doing illegal things. Experiments. There’s proof. I have documents.”

There was a pause. Then the woman asked, “Are you in danger right now?”

Tam hesitated. “We got out. But they’ll come looking.”

“Where are you?”

“No. Sorry. Not yet. I can give you proof. It’s names, experiments, staff rosters. You’ll see it’s real.”

The woman on the other end was quiet for a moment, then said, “All right. We’ll see. How can we get the evidence?”

Tam turned slightly, glanced at Eden, then lowered her voice. “There’s a bunch of paper, binders, all kinds of things. Hidden in a shed. Just off the A14, about 100 metres north of a petrol station near...” She hesitated

then looked over at the cashier. “Where are we exactly?”. He gave her a puzzled look then answered the question. She relayed it to the lady along with a description of the shed. “Tell someone to check there. Today.”

“Name?”

Tam hesitated. Then, “Tam. That’s all you get for now.”

“Okay, Tam. We’ll look into it. Please be careful.”

The line went dead.

Tam slowly hung up. Her hand was shaking.

Eden stepped closer. “Do you think she believed you?”

“She said someone would check,” Tam said quietly.

“That’s all we needed.”

Just then, the man behind the counter cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry about what happened to you lot. Would you like some coffee or cocoa from the machine? On the house.”

Eden blinked, unsure she'd heard him right. She looked at Tam, wide-eyed. “What exactly did you tell him?” she whispered.

Tam smiled, her crooked teeth showing — and Eden's knees went a little weak. "Just that we were robbed and lost everything. Even our jackets. Now go get something warm to drink, love" She winked, then turned and handed the phone back to the man.

They stood huddled in the corner by the coffee machine. Tam sat on the one stool, and Eden leaned against her, resting her head on her shoulder. Through the window, they could see Liam standing outside, watching the road.

They'd been taking turns keeping an eye on the shed, and next it would be Eden's shift out in the cold. She was already dreading it. More than anything, she wanted to call Mum. To hear her voice. To say she was okay.

Tears stung her eyes just thinking about it. Whether Mum knew where she was and had somehow agreed to it... or didn't know at all and thought she was gone — both were unbearable in different ways.

Chapter Forty-One

Eden stood outside the petrol station, wrapped in Tam's hoodie, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. Morning mist clung to the road and the damp chill pressed against her skin. Her eyes stung from exhaustion, and her legs ached from standing for so long. Every sound made her flinch.

A car approached from the south. She straightened, blinking hard. It was a dark saloon — nothing official-looking, just ordinary enough to be suspicious. It didn't slow down by the station but passed quietly, tyres humming against wet tarmac.

Her breath caught as it turned off just up the road, pulling into the small car park by the shed. The one with their papers.

She crouched behind the bin enclosure, heart in her throat. No sense in alerting the others yet — what if it wasn't them? What if it *was*? Either way, better not to draw attention to herself or the petrol station.

The car door opened. A figure stepped out — older, wearing a black jacket and carrying what looked like a folder under one arm. Eden squinted. They moved with quiet purpose, heading straight to the shed. She couldn't see their face, but they didn't hesitate. They opened the door, bent down, and gathered the thick bundle of papers they had left.

Then, just as quickly, they were back in the car. It pulled out without revving or fuss and disappeared south again.

Eden stayed where she was, chest tight. Her fingers were stiff from gripping the wood of the bin corral. She counted to twenty then waved to Tam and Liam, before she darted across the road.

The other two had caught up with her as she got to the shed and pushed the door open with a loud creak. Inside the shed, there was nothing left. The documents were gone.

“They’re gone,” she said, breathless. Tam and Liam nodded, seeing it themselves. “The papers. Someone took them.”

They walked back to the petrol station. The warmth inside made their noses run and their cheeks redden.

They went back to the corner near the coffee machine and sat down on the floor.

The cashier kept an eye on them. Then shuffled over to them. “What was that all about?” he asked. Not too suspicious, more curious. He looked pretty sleepy still, and like he would rather be in his bed than doing the morning shift.

Tam smiled at him and explained that it was just Eden being silly, making the others think that Tam’s mum was there to pick them up. He nodded slowly, not sure whether to believe them or not. He did a grandiose wave towards the coffee machine and mumbled “feel free to go for seconds” as he went back to his seat behind the counter.

The three of them settled into uneasy silence inside the gas station, the hum of the old fluorescent lights flickering overhead. Eden sat close to Tam on the floor, leaning against a large cooler, her fingers nervously twisting the hem of her jumper. Liam lingered near the window, eyes sharp, watching every car that passed along the empty road. The cold seemed to seep through the cracked windowpane, but none of them dared to complain.

Every minute stretched on, thick with tension. Tam kept glancing at the clock above the counter, her jaw tight, lips pressed into a thin line. Eden was also looking at the clock endlessly, but she wasn't really keeping track of time. Just so grateful to see a clock for the first time in so many months. She wanted to ask what Tam was thinking, but the weight in her chest told her it was better to stay quiet, to let the moments pass. Outside, the occasional distant bark of a dog and lorries growling past on the road.

The cashier bustled about behind the counter, occasionally stealing glances their way, but no one spoke. Eden's mind raced — had the papers reached someone who could actually make a difference? Or were they still out there, vulnerable and unseen? The uncertainty gnawed at her, twisting tighter with each passing second.

Finally, Tam shifted, standing and brushing her hands over her trousers. "I'm going to check now," she said softly, eyes meeting Eden's then Liam's. The room seemed to hold its breath with them. Eden nodded, swallowing past the lump in her throat.

She asked the cashier — again — if she could borrow the phone, claiming her mum was trying to arrange transport. He nodded kindly and handed it over.

Chapter Forty-Two

Tam didn't make a call. Instead, she opened the browser, typing quickly with one thumb. Eden joined her at the counter, peering over her shoulder.

They scrolled to *The Guardian's* website.

Nothing. Not yet.

Tam let out a slow breath. "They've got the story now," she whispered. "It's just a matter of time."

They settled back into their corner, the air thick with anticipation. Outside, the morning sun cast long shadows across the empty forecourt, but inside, time seemed to stand still, although they could see the hands on the clock move. Eden's fingers tapped nervously on

the table while Liam stared out the window, silent and watchful.

Minutes ticked by, slow and heavy, until finally Tam asked the cashier once more if she could borrow the phone. “Really sorry, but we are cold and tired and really just want to go home” she said quietly. The man nodded kindly and handed it over without hesitation.

She opened the website again. Both Eden and Liam were looking over her shoulder, she launched the browser, her thumb flying across the screen as Eden leaned closer, eyes scanning the page with her.

Chapter Forty-Three

She refreshed The Guardian's homepage — and there it was: a bold “BREAKING NEWS” banner stretched across the top. The headline screamed about the case, a sharp summary of the shocking details, with a note that the story was still unfolding. Below, an announcement read: *“Chief Constable to address the case at 10:30 AM.”*

Tam glanced at the clock on the wall. Less than half an hour.

Eden swallowed hard, feeling a mix of hope and dread twist inside her. “It’s happening,” she breathed.

Tam’s fingers tightened around the phone. “We just have to wait.”

The room felt colder now, but the weight of what they'd done — and what was to come — pressed heavier than ever.

Tam handed the phone back with another grateful smile. The cashier smiled too, and Eden had the odd feeling he thought Liam and she were a couple, leaving Tam all single and left out. A tiny sting of jealousy pricked at her, though it didn't run deep. Still, she turned away, not wanting to feed the feeling, and let her eyes wander around the shop instead.

That's when it hit her.

The TV — mounted high on the wall in the opposite corner from the coffee machine.

She spun round and in two quick steps was next to Tam and Barry. She cut Tam off mid-sentence.

"Hey, that telly up there," she said, pointing over her shoulder. "Is it working? Can we get the BBC?"

Tam looked at her, something like admiration shining in her eyes. Eden felt a flicker of pride at finally being able to contribute.

Barry rummaged behind the counter for a remote.

The screen blinked to life, already tuned to a news broadcast. A reporter stood in front of police tape, speaking urgently. Tam snatched the remote and turned the volume up.

“...earlier this morning. Chief Constable Tom Willis is expected to make a statement shortly, but what we know so far is that police activity is centred around a compound just outside Thurgroft, near Sheffield. Several individuals have been led out of the building escorted by police, more than twenty children evacuated. A school bus was seen arriving not long ago, lending weight to earlier reports — first published by *The Guardian* — of a covert facility where children were allegedly being held against their will.”

Tam, Liam and Eden stared at each other. For a long moment, none of them spoke — barely able to believe what they were hearing.

Chapter Forty-Four

Eden stepped out into the car park with Tam close behind. The phone felt heavy in her hand, like she was holding something sacred. She swallowed, then called.

It rang twice. Then—

“Hello?”

Her mum’s voice. Tired. Guarded.

“Mum,” Eden said, her voice already catching.

There was a sharp breath on the other end. A silence. Then her mum crumpled.

“Oh my god... Eden? Eden?!”

Tears came fast, words tangled with sobs. “Is it really you? Is it—are you okay? Where are you? Oh, love, I

thought—” She broke off again, weeping so hard Eden could barely understand her.

“I’m okay,” Eden said softly, crying loudly herself, snot running under her nose. “I’m safe. I’m with Tam—and there’s a boy, Liam. I’ll explain everything. Can you come get us?”

“Yes. Yes! Tell me where. Right now.”

Her voice snapped into motion, alive with desperate relief. Eden gave her the address. Her mum said she was on her way.

It wasn’t even half an hour before her little car skidded into the forecourt.

Eden barely had time to step forward before her mum was out of the car, running. They crashed into each other, arms wrapped tight. Eden could feel her mum trembling.

Tam joined them, and her mum didn’t hesitate — pulling her in too, squeezing her fiercely. “You kept her safe,” she whispered. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

Then Liam stepped forward, a little awkwardly, hands deep in his pockets. He glanced down.

“You must be Liam,” her mum said, still breathless.
“I’ve heard your name already.”

He nodded, clearly unsure.

She didn’t wait — she opened her arms and pulled him into the hug. “Thank you for helping my girl,” she murmured. “You’re coming home with us.”

Eden saw the flicker of emotion in Liam’s eyes. Gratitude, surprise... maybe something softer too, something that looked a little like being seen.

The sun was hidden by clouds as they drove, casting golden light and God’s fingers across the hills. Eden sat up front, Tam and Liam tucked in the back. Her mum kept glancing sideways at her, as if afraid she’d disappear again.

“Are you sure you're alright?” she asked quietly.

“Getting there,” Eden replied, and reached for her hand.

They didn’t talk much after that. There’d be time for stories. For questions. For the mess of it all.

But for now, they were just heading home.

Chapter Forty-Five

The kitchen smelled of toast crumbs and yesterday's coffee. The radio murmured low from the corner, a polite voice reading headlines that Eden already knew by heart. Mum had bought a new one since Eden had disappeared to feel less alone, she supposed.

She sat at the table in her hoodie, sleeves pulled over her hands, watching her mum fuss with the teabags.

"It's mad, isn't it?" her mum said, placing a mug in front of her. "Like something out of a film."

Eden nodded. "It doesn't even feel real."

They sat in silence a moment. The kettle clicked off behind them.

"Did you see the BBC piece this morning?" her mum asked. "The one with the ex-MI5 guy?"

“I did. And the Guardian article last night.” Eden’s voice was quiet, flat. “It’s... a lot.”

Her mum sighed and sank into the chair across from her.

“So it *was* the government, back in the '80s. Some Cold War thing. Started off as a psychological operations project, meant to track suggestibility in children. Then it got passed to private hands. No official record of it ever ending.”

“And no real oversight,” Eden added. “The stations were all over. Not just ours. They came online at different times in different regions.”

Her mum shook her head. “And no one stopped it. Not really.”

Eden stared into her tea. “They used music to draw kids in. Songs that were just catchy enough to keep you listening. Then came the numbers.”

“They’re saying the numbers were random,” her mum said.

“Yeah. But paired with the songs... It was like bait. Designed to spark curiosity. If you were the kind of kid who wanted to figure things out, who questioned things — they noticed.”

“Did you hear what they said about the voice?” her mum asked, almost whispering.

Eden nodded. “It was always English. Just played backwards.”

Her mum looked haunted. “All those years, no one figured it out.”

Eden tapped her nails lightly on her mug. “They didn’t need most people to notice. Just a few. The right few.”

They sat quietly for a bit. Mum reached out and shut the radio off.

“I keep thinking about what would’ve happened if we hadn’t gone out there,” Eden said. “If we hadn’t recorded it..”

Her mum reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “But you did. And you prevailed. You were brave. All three of you. All of you.”

Eden smiled faintly, then watched as her mum stood and turned back to the stove.

She stirred something in the pot, gave it a taste, and said over her shoulder, “Food’s ready!”

Then she raised her voice and called up the stairs:
“Liam! Come down, love. You need to eat!”

Eden smiled again. There was something strange, and comforting, in hearing that — like things were slowly becoming normal again.

Chapter Forty-Six

The day was still and bitterly cold. Frost crackled beneath their boots as Tam and Eden followed the familiar path, now rimmed in silver. Their puffy jackets rustled with every step, and their joined hands were snug between them — fingers threaded, warm even in the chill.

They didn't speak much. Words weren't needed.

Their breaths curled in the air like slow ghosts. Eden could see the pale pink of Tam's cheeks, the glint of frost in her lashes. The silence between them felt full, not empty. Like something waiting.

The trees thinned as they reached the open field. The sky overhead was pale and washed out, not quite blue, not quite grey. A few birds darted across the open air, startled by nothing.

They stopped without saying why. Just halted there, side by side, in the middle of the winter-bleached grass.

Eden turned first, letting go of Tam's hand only so she could touch her cheek, and the moment held.

They leaned in. One kiss. Soft, certain, slow. Eden parted her lips and felt Tam's tongue brushing over them for a moment, then their tongues twirled around the others, exploring.

Then they pulled apart, eyes lingering for a heartbeat, and turned together.

The gate was open.

Ahead of them stood the radio station — squat, silent, wrapped in caution tape and edged with police signs that fluttered slightly in the wind.

The grass beyond the gate was flattened in places, marked by boots and tyre tracks. The hush of the morning made it feel almost like a memorial. Tam gave Eden's hand a squeeze, and they stepped forward together.

The gate creaked faintly as they passed through. Inside, the air was cold and still, thick with dust and silence. They moved over to the old broadcast desk. The equipment was just as they'd left it — the wires, the

knobs, the thick yellowing plastic. It had no right to still work, but it did.

Tam was already checking her phone, her thumb flying across a group chat. She typed a response, then looked up. Eden was already wearing headphones now, seated before the ancient microphone like it was a ritual.

“Everything’s ready,” he said softly.

Tam reached out to the control panel. Her fingers found the switch and flicked it from *Off* to *On*. She took her own headphones on. Static crackled through the air, sharp and familiar.

She held up her hand, watching the seconds on her clock tick past.

When the numbers turned from 4:33 to 4:34, she dropped her hand.

“This is Tam and Eden from Bedale. They tried to silence us — but we’re still here”

—

And at the same time, on the same frequency but many many miles away.

“This is Liam from Calstone. They tried to silence us — but we’re still here”

“This is Charlie from Telford. They tried to silence us — but we’re still here”

“This is Freya from Crawley. They tried to silence us — but we’re still here”

“This is Hannah from Benwick. They tried to silence us — but we’re still here”

27 different places and different names. Everyone sent the same message.

The End.

”

They stood close, the sharp breeze encouraging it, and Eden welcomed the warmth of Tam’s arm brushing against hers. She was staring down the road, watching for the bus, when her gaze caught on something further down by the car park entrance. A car. That didn’t belong.

When Eden moves to a quiet town tucked between hills and silence, she doesn’t expect much to happen. But then she meets Tam — clever, guarded, and utterly magnetic — and everything starts to shift.

Drawn together by a strange radio signal that pulses through the air once a week, the girls find themselves uncovering something that was never meant to be found.

As their connection deepens, so does the mystery and they soon start noticing people following them.

A story of quiet defiance, first love, and the kind of truth that doesn't stay buried forever.

If you are LGBTQ+ and struggling, you are not alone.

There are people who care and who are ready to listen — no matter where you are in the world.

For support, you can reach out to:

 The Trevor Project (available internationally for information and online chat): thetrevorproject.org.

 It Gets Better Project (global stories and resources): itgetsbetter.org.

Or search for LGBTQ+ helplines and youth organisations in your country.

You deserve to be heard, accepted, and safe — exactly as you are.

