

BEYOND THE BROADCAST



Written by Nemi Celestia

Beyond The Broadcast

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Preface

Thank you for joining me in this continuation of *Attracted by Airwaves*, whether you're a returning reader or just discovering the story now.

If you haven't already read *Attracted by Airwaves*, you might find yourself a bit confused — there's quite a lot of history behind these characters. I strongly recommend starting there, and then coming back to pick up this one after.

I've done my best to research thoroughly and avoid moving too many things around in good old England. That said, I've taken some artistic liberties and invented a few places and scenarios. After all, finding Cold War test facilities still in operation might prove a little difficult.

Any mistakes or inaccuracies are entirely my own.

For the ones who've been hurt.

This story is a reminder —

we're never too far gone for hope.

Dedicated

To anyone living with anxiety, depression,
or the quiet ache of PTSD —
you are not alone.
Your story matters.

To those carrying invisible wounds —
may you find safe places,
kind voices,
and the courage to keep going.

To anyone who has ever been afraid,
overwhelmed,
or broken open by the weight of it all.

To everyone who's fought silent battles
and kept going anyway —
you are stronger than you know.

And to the ones who wake up every day
and keep trying,
even when it's hard —

You are seen.
You are loved.

Chapter One

Eden woke up gasping, her breath catching in her throat, heart thudding like a train locomotive. Her eyes darted across the room, searching for the empty, pale green walls, the bolted door. For a moment, she was certain she was still there—still trapped—still waiting for the morning buzzer to scream her into another day.

But no.

She blinked, once, twice. The room was dim and still. Familiar. Hers.

Not the cell. Not the facility. Home.

Her head sank back into the pillow as her chest rose and fell, trying to catch up to the realisation. A soft, early light crept in at the edges of her curtains, and the house was silent around her, holding its breath. She reached out and grabbed her phone from the window sill. 6:20. Nearly half an hour until her alarm.

She took stock. The mattress beneath her was soft, not rubberised. Her duvet, floral and slightly crooked, was halfway off the bed.

She exhaled, pushed the duvet the rest of the way off, and swung her legs onto the carpet. The quiet pressed in again. She padded softly to the loo, the floorboards faintly creaking under her weight — comforting, somehow. Real.

She went downstairs, still trying not to wake the others. Liam could sleep through a war, but Mum usually slept lightly.

She made herself a cup of tea and looked out into the front garden. The weather had been unusually mild over the past few days, and she hoped it would hold for the Easter holidays, which were just around the corner.

Footsteps sounded from upstairs, followed by a door clicking shut. She wasn't really in the mood to sit alone with her thoughts, so she didn't mind that Mum would be coming down in a moment.

Eden watched her from behind as she stepped into the kitchen, limping slightly on her unbandaged ankle. Mum wore one of her usual oversized T-shirts, just like Eden did, and made a beeline for the coffee. Their

mornings had taken on a familiar rhythm again—quiet, unhurried, a gentle return to something like normal. Liam was part of that now, too, drifting in and out with his odd sleeping hours, and Eden wouldn't have had it any other way. The house felt fuller, in the best sense.

Still, there were moments—like this one—when it was just her and Mum in the soft hush of morning, moving around each other with easy understanding. There'd been a time when silence meant fear. Now, it just meant peace.

Eden had accepted the offer of therapy without hesitation, and she'd spent hours talking things through with Gladys. It helped. It really did. But even now, the memories trailed behind her like a second shadow—always close, never quite gone.

Mum had gently suggested she keep seeing Gladys, but Eden had said she was fine. The government had paid for the sessions after everything that happened—but that funding had run out, and if she continued now, it would come out of Mum's pocket. Eden couldn't ask for that. Besides, she truly believed time would take care of it. She just needed a little more of it—enough distance to let things settle, to breathe without flinching.

Mum waddled over to the table and sat down. She gave Eden a gentle smile as she stirred her coffee. They

talked a bit about Mum's ankle. She sprained it on a jog and hadn't been great at sparing it much since.

Eden grabbed her leg and rested it on her lap, wrapping the supporting bandage around the ankle as they sat quietly for a little while.

Mum was the first to break the silence. "Couldn't sleep either?"

Eden shook her head and leaned against the counter. "Woke up thinking I was back there. It faded, but..."

Mum reached out and brushed a hand over Eden's arm. "I know. Happens to me too sometimes. I still go to check your room some nights."

Eden gave a faint, lopsided smile. "Well, I'm here. And I made tea."

"That's very grown-up of you," Mum said softly, nudging her shoulder. "Might even trust you with toast next."

For a quiet moment, they just sat there, sipping their drinks in the early morning hush. It wasn't perfect. But it was safe. And that, for now, was enough.

Chapter Two

Eden slung her satchel over one shoulder, grateful it felt lighter today. Most of her books had gone home yesterday—no one really expected proper lessons on the last day before Easter. The promise of two weeks off hung in the air like the scent of spring.

She carried her blazer over her arm; the sun was already warm on her skin, and the dreadful feeling from the night had faded into the background. The brightness and the birdsong somehow made it easier to breathe. She found herself humming softly as she walked to the bus stop, almost surprised by it.

At school, Lily looked up and smiled as Eden made her way through the classroom. Eden flopped down into her seat with a small sigh and a tired grin. There were still a few minutes before the bell, and the two chatted quietly

about their Easter plans. Lily was going north to see family, and Eden told her she was heading in the opposite direction—down to Liverpool for a few days in a cottage tucked away in the countryside. Their conversation was cut short when the class began.

Eden had tuned everything out, only returning to the present when the bell rang. She scooped up her few belongings, tucking them into her satchel as she headed out into the corridor. Lily watched her go with a lingering smile. It was rare to get Eden to herself; most of the time, Eden and Tam spent every spare second together.

Outside, the temperature had crept up into the mid-twenties, and neither Eden nor Tam had bothered with their blazers. The sun seemed to soften everything, turning brick and tarmac golden and making the shadows blur at the edges. They walked hand in hand across the courtyard. A few younger kids glanced over, but most people had grown used to seeing them like that. It didn't turn many heads anymore. At least, not the hand-holding and occasional kissing. That was old news.

The real gossip had always been about what had happened in the autumn.

Rumours still circled like moths around a flame. Eden and Tam never answered questions, but everyone seemed to think they knew something. Whispers travelled faster than truth, and what had actually happened in the facility had long since been replaced with far more exciting versions. Experiments. Torture. Secret agents.

Eden once overheard a couple of Year Tens on the bus talking about it, not realising she was right behind them. According to them, the police had shut down a hidden site in the south—something out of a Cold War film—where kids had been held against their will. A rogue private contractor, still billing the government for a project long since abandoned, while quietly continuing the work.

And while this was true, the kids had continued the fables. Discussing the torture and experiments, the dead kids in the corridors. Which wasn't at all what happened. But she had no idea how people at school knew so much—more than had ever been printed in the newspapers, it seemed.

There had been another article just a couple of weeks ago, naming the company behind it all. She had screen printed the article from The Guardian's website but she remembered it by heart now. The facility had been called Redhall Institute. Which was a bit confusing

really, since there wasn't a single red hall there. The paper had quoted a statement from the Defence Secretary, distancing the government from responsibility.

Eden had read it with a strange kind of detachment, as if it had happened to someone else.

But she had lived it.

And now, six months later, she was just trying to be normal. Just a girl walking through school grounds with her girlfriend, trying to enjoy the sun and not think too much about everything they had been through.

Still, some shadows took longer to fade.

Tam gave her hand a slight squeeze, as if she had sensed Eden's mind beginning to drift. Eden forced her thoughts back to the present. The Easter holidays were just a couple of hours away now. She wouldn't be seeing Tam this evening—Friday nights were always busy at The Willow Café. Tam had been working there for months. Eden knew she hated it, but she had to earn her keep—and pay Mum back for the driving lessons.

Her thoughts drifted to Liam and Tam. She never felt jealous of either of them—not even Liam, whom Mum

had more or less adopted, even if the paperwork was still crawling through the system. Mum's affection had always stretched wide enough to include them all.

Mum had even given up her home office to make room for him. Tam, however, wasn't around as much as Eden would have liked. Driving lessons were finally over, which was a relief, but Tam still had her own school timetable, work shifts at The Willow, and her own home to juggle—one Eden had still never even seen.

Another gentle squeeze on her hand pulled Eden back to the present. She turned her head to look at Tam, noticing the worry etched on her face. Eden shook her head, as if to banish the troublesome thoughts, and smiled softly at her.

She turned and wrapped her arms around her girlfriend, pressing her lips softly to Tam's before smiling again. She asked when Tam expected to finish work and grunted softly at the answer—closing the café at ten tonight wasn't ideal. But Tam promised to come over tomorrow, and they could spend the whole day together. The thought made Eden's face brighten just as the bell rang, signalling the start of the last lesson.

Chapter Three

Eden pushed open the front door and slipped her shoes off with a sigh. The house smelled faintly of something toasted and vaguely edible—Liam had clearly made lunch again. Possibly beans. Possibly an experiment.

She found him sprawled across the sofa in the lounge, Mum's retired laptop perched on his knees, eyebrows scrunched in concentration.

"Please tell me you're not trying to hack into NASA again," she said, dropping her satchel by the stairs.

Liam didn't even look up. "Nah. I'm behaving. Just an assignment."

Eden padded over and flopped down beside him, stealing the blanket he'd abandoned on the back of the sofa and throwing it over her legs.

"You realise you've become part of the furniture, right? I might have to start charging you rent."

He finally turned his head and grinned. "Only if I get your room."

She smirked. "In your dreams. I have plans to use your room as a walk-in closet."

"Harsh."

Eden leaned sideways to peer at the screen. Lines of code scrolled by.

"So this is that online course you're doing?"

"Yep. Networking and cybersecurity," Liam said proudly. "Today's module is about penetration testing."

Eden raised an eyebrow. "You can't say that in this house."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Grow up."

She grinned and nudged his shoulder with hers. "Seriously though, you're doing well with it, aren't you?"

"I think so. It's the first time something's felt... not useless. Like it might lead to something real."

Eden went quiet for a moment, then offered a small nod. "That's good. You deserve something real." She hesitated, then added, "Hey, how come Redhall couldn't just track us using our phones? Why did they have to use GPS tags?"

Liam's eyes shifted from the scrolling code on his screen to her face. He lifted an eyebrow, just slightly—no real alarm, but there was a flicker of concern there. He knew she still struggled the most with leaving it all behind.

"That's because they weren't really official, not in the way you'd think. Being a private company, they had to stay under the radar, keep things off the books to keep the funding coming. If they'd gone through the Ministry of Defence, there'd have been all sorts of questions. Paper trails. Oversight."

They sat in silence again for a while, the kind that didn't need filling. She didn't say it out loud, but she was proud of him. Even if his hoodie still smelled vaguely of overdone beans and toast.

"By the way," she added casually, "Mum says if you blow the Wi-Fi again trying to brute-force your way into a mock server, you're walking to Leeds for your next exam."

Liam laughed. "Noted. I'll keep the cyber-attacks local."

The front door clicked open, followed by the soft clatter of keys in the bowl.

"Oi, this place better not smell like burnt cheese toast again," Mum called from the hallway, Struggling a bit with getting her shoes off without bending her ankle.

Liam didn't even look up. "I'll have you know I'm experimenting with artisan crisp butties now. It's very high concept."

Mum appeared in the doorway, one brow raised and a shopping bag in her hand. "High concept" she said dryly, but there was laughter in her voice. That hoodie still reeks of student union."

Eden snorted as Mum leaned down and kissed the top of her head, then did the same to Liam without skipping a beat. It was so casual and warm that Eden barely noticed how natural it had become—how he'd slipped into their lives like a missing piece no one realised was missing.

“I grabbed those biscuits you like,” Mum said, holding up the bag as she headed to the kitchen. “And before you ask, yes, I also bought fruit. You’re welcome.”

Eden got up and stretched, giving Liam a soft nudge. “Try not to set anything on fire while I’m upstairs.”

“No promises,” he grinned, already returning to his code.

She wandered up to her room, the laughter from downstairs fading into quiet. The late afternoon sun came through the open window, casting a warm haze across her duvet. She dropped onto the bed, sighing as she sank into the familiar comfort of it—home, safe, real.

But the moment her eyes drifted closed, the image of the pale green walls returned. The echo of metal doors. The cold of the floor beneath her bare feet. She remembered the sound of the buzzer in the mornings, the sterile smell of the corridor, the way voices had bounced off concrete.

Her breath caught. Just for a second.

She opened her eyes again, blinking at the ceiling. She was home. It was over.

As Eden entered the occupied bathroom she sighed. The house was a little small with three occupants but what could she do? Liam focused on watching his progress in the mirror while brushing his teeth as Eden sat down on the loo, waiting until the very last second to pull her trousers down.

Soon after she was fast asleep.

Chapter Four

Eden blinked awake, the remnants of a nightmare clinging stubbornly to her mind. Shadows and whispered voices flickered at the edge of her thoughts, but as her eyes adjusted to the soft morning light spilling through the curtains, the fear began to slip away.

She lay still for a moment, taking slow, steady breaths, willing the dark images to fade. Her room was quiet—empty except for the gentle hum of the house waking up around her.

A small smile touched her lips as she thought of Tam. She'd be here soon, coming over for the day, and just the thought of that brought a warm flutter of hope.

Today was a chance to forget the nightmares, even if only for a little while. Eden sat up slowly, feeling the first real ease of the morning settle inside her.

Eden was sitting at the table in the kitchen. Her hands wrapped around a mug of tea and Mum was shuffling back and forth by the counter-top. “You sure you don’t want some breakfast before you guys go to Nosterfield?”

She confirmed she was good, as she eyed the mountain of sandwiches, crisps and lemonade Mum was hauling into the basket. “You know, we are only gone for the day, not migrating south.”

“Oh, can never have too much provisions when going into the wilderness, love,” she said as the door went up and Tam came in, sunglasses in her hair, a pretty white blouse and that crooked smile across her face.

Eden wandered over to Tam and kissed her, soft and familiar, like she’d done it a hundred times before. Mum didn’t comment—why would she? It was just Eden and Tam.

“Liam’s got this covered,” Eden said, nodding toward the living room. “We’re off to be proper teenagers for a day.”

Mum gave her the picnic basket. Eden went wide-eyed at the weight, but didn’t say anything. She turned to Tam next and gave her the car keys, “Drive carefully,

love,” she said and kissed them both on the cheek before they headed out of the door.

As they turned off their street, the Willow Café came into view—its little chalkboard out front already boasting *fresh scones & elderflower lemonade*. Tam glanced at the familiar windows and the soft blur of movement inside. She didn’t hate working there, not exactly, but lately it had begun to feel more like a pause than a place. Something temporary. She didn’t say it out loud, not yet.

Tam rolled both windows down as they pulled onto the main road, their hair whipping in the warm breeze. Eden watched her from the passenger seat. Seeing Tam behind the wheel still felt a little surreal — such an adult thing to do. “This sense of being free. This is what I want for myself,” Tam said softly. She reached out and turned the volume up, allowing Lady Gaga to drown out the wind.

They drove toward the nature park beneath a clear blue sky. Tam was grateful to have the whole day before her shift tonight. Eden scraped her foot lightly along the floor mat and looked out the window. It had been a while since Tam had stayed over. She wondered if she

might head home after work tonight. The thought left a dull ache in her chest.

She didn't want to sound needy, so she said nothing.

But Tam shifted into fifth gear and reached for Eden's hand.

"Hey, babe?" Eden looked up, met her gaze.

"I can't wait for my shift to be over. Second to last one before the holidays." She smiled. "And I'm definitely sleeping on the inside tonight. You nearly pushed me out of bed last time."

Eden smiled back — grateful, comforted — and not the least surprised that Tam had read her mind. The road ahead stretched golden in the afternoon light.

Chapter Five

Eden stirred before she opened her eyes. A dull heaviness clung to her limbs, as though her dreams had dragged her under and left her there. Her legs were tangled in the duvet, damp and twisted. Something wasn't right.

Then she felt it — the unmistakable cold patch beneath her. Her heart jumped before her mind could catch up. She froze.

Tam shifted beside her, half-asleep, mumbling something soft and unintelligible. When she reached out instinctively, her hand brushed the edge of the wetness. She stilled.

Eden wanted to vanish.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice hoarse, breath catching. "I didn't—I didn't mean to."

Tam blinked her eyes open slowly, the sleep still heavy on her face. Then, realising what had happened, she sat up just a little. Her response was immediate, kind.

“Oh, love,” she said gently, brushing Eden’s hair away from her face. “It’s okay. It’s alright.”

Eden shook her head, mortified. “I didn’t feel it. I didn’t even dream it this time.”

Tam’s hand found hers under the covers and held it.

“It’s just a bit of bedding, Eden. That’s all. It doesn’t mean anything’s wrong with you.”

Eden closed her eyes. “I hate this. I hate that it keeps happening.”

Tam leaned in and kissed her forehead. “You’ve been through hell. Your body’s just trying to keep up. It’s not your fault, babe. None of this is.”

A pause, then a tiny, breathless laugh escaped Eden. “Bet you didn’t plan on starting your Sunday like this.”

Tam smiled gently and gave a little shrug. “Well, it wasn’t quite the wake-up I imagined—but I’m alright. You’re here.”

Eden let out a small snort of laughter, grateful for the softness, the way Tam could hold space without making it a big thing.

“Come on,” Tam said, pushing the duvet back. “Let’s shower together and we’ll get this cleaned up, fresh sheets on, and then you can snuggle me like nothing happened. Deal?”

Eden nodded. And for the first time in days, she really believed it would be okay.

The sun had climbed to its highest point and the girls were sprawled on a blanket in the garden. Mum was relaxing on a garden chair nearby, half asleep behind the sunglasses getting a really weird tan on her bare legs due to the bandage around her ankle, and even Liam had dared exposing himself to natural sunlight, finally dragged away from the laptop by Mum who insisted they all should enjoy time together.

Mum jolted to life with a little snore. Liam didn’t even look up from his book. “That’s the mating call of the suburban mum,” which earned him the chore of helping her in the kitchen preparing some lunch.

Tam rolled over to her tummy and held her head in her hands. “So, you know...” her voice trailed off as if she

was searching for the right words. “I don’t want to tell you what to do. But I am worried.”

Eden didn’t answer straight away. She plucked a blade of grass and twisted it between her fingers.

Tam waited, then continued, soft but steady. “Last night... it wasn’t the first time, was it?”

Eden shrugged. “It’s not all the time.”

“I know. But it doesn’t have to be like this either.”

She reached out and brushed Eden’s hand, grounding her gently.

“I’m not saying you’re broken or anything dramatic. I just think... maybe talking to Gladys again wouldn’t be the worst idea? You liked her. And you don’t have to go forever, just...” She paused. “Let someone help carry a bit of it, yeah?”

Eden glanced sideways, her expression unreadable for a moment.

Eden let out a breath, quiet and shaky. “Why is it so much harder for me?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “You went through all of this too, but you’re... coping. And I just feel like I’m still drowning.”

Tam's brow furrowed slightly, not in frustration but in thought. "You and I didn't have the same path, love. Different wards, different timing. I was older. You were still trying to figure out who you even were while all of it was happening." She reached over, gently brushing her fingers against Eden's wrist. "It's not about being stronger or weaker—it's just... where we were, when it hit us. That's all."

They let the quiet settle around them again, birdsong and the distant hum of the village weaving through the silence.

"I'll think about it," Eden said eventually.

Tam smiled, and nodded. "That's all I'm asking."

They had lunch and then Tam had left for her shift at the Willow Café, hugging Eden tightly at the door and promising to come straight back after close. Eden watched her mountain bike disappear down the road, then closed the door slowly, the house feeling a little quieter without her.

She found Mum in the kitchen, tidying up from lunch with the radio on low and the window cracked open. The late afternoon light spilled across the tiles, golden and soft.

“Mum?”

Her mother glanced over her shoulder. “Hmm?”

Eden hesitated, then sat down at the table, running a finger along the edge of her glass.

“Tam said something earlier,” she began, voice cautious. “About maybe... going back to see Gladys.”

Mum turned the radio down and faced her fully. “Oh?” Her voice was more hopeful than worried.

“Yeah. Just for a bit. I’m not saying I want to dive into it all again. But she’s right—I’ve not really been sleeping. Not properly.”

Mum didn’t speak at first, just crossed the room and sat opposite her. “Sweetheart, you don’t have to convince me. If you feel like you want to go, then we’ll make it happen.”

“I know it’s not cheap though, and—”

Mum waved that away gently. “Eden. I’d sell the car before I’d let you go without help you need. And besides, it’s not forever, is it? Just a little support while your head catches up with everything.”

Eden looked down, blinking quickly.

“I don’t want to make a big fuss.”

Mum reached across the table and took her hand. “Then we won’t. No fuss. Just a call to Gladys tomorrow, and we’ll see when she can fit you in.”

Eden nodded slowly, trying to hide the relief that flooded her chest. “Thanks.”

“You don’t have to be fine all the time,” Mum added gently. “That’s not a rule.”

“I just want it to stop feeling like it’s still happening,” Eden said quietly.

“I know. And you will get there, love. You really will.”

Chapter Six

Eden shifted in her seat, fingers curled around a mug of peppermint tea that was already starting to cool. The office smelled faintly of whatever candle Gladys had lit earlier—something herbal, grounding. There were no clocks in sight, but Eden could sense the passage of time in the way Gladys had begun leaning just slightly forward, not pressing, just... listening.

"You've been having more nightmares lately," Gladys said, her voice soft and even. "Do you think they're triggered by anything in particular, or more a general sense of... intrusion?"

Eden gave a small shrug. "Dunno. It's not always the same dream. Sometimes it's just... noise. Or the lights. Or hearing the buzzer again and not being able to move."

Gladys nodded, jotting something down. “That kind of sensory flashback is common. The brain holds on to fragments when it doesn’t know what to do with the whole picture.”

Eden didn’t reply. She just stared down into her tea, the pale reflection of the overhead lights swimming in it.

“There’s something called exposure therapy,” Gladys continued, almost idly, as if they were chatting about something on the telly. “Where you gradually revisit places or ideas linked to trauma—but only when you’re ready. It’s not something I’d suggest lightly, especially not early on.”

Eden looked up, eyes narrowing slightly. “So you want me to go back?”

“No,” Gladys said, shaking her head gently. “I want you to know that you have options. This isn’t about rushing into anything. But sometimes even talking about what those places meant—what they *still* mean—can help. We don’t need to go anywhere. We can stay right here.”

There was a pause. Eden pulled one foot up under her, curling tighter in the chair.

“I think about it,” she said finally. “Not going back exactly. But... I don’t know. Getting it out of my head

by putting myself in it. Like taking the nightmare and making it real on my terms.”

“That’s a very brave thought,” Gladys said, and meant it. “And a complicated one. Probably for a bit later .”

Eden nodded, still quiet. But some of the weight in her chest eased just a little.

Gladys let the silence settle again, giving Eden the room to choose the next step. Eventually, Eden took a slow breath and looked up.

“I’ve been thinking about... what you said. About revisiting things.”

Gladys offered a small nod of encouragement.

“I don’t know if I could go back. Not really. But it makes me think about how I was when I was there. The way I shut everything out. Like...” She hesitated, lips tightening. “Like I forgot about Mum.”

Gladys tilted her head slightly, her voice still as soft as ever. “What makes you feel that way?”

“I didn’t think about her much when I was inside. Not really. I mean, I thought about her, but not about how she was feeling. And I wasn’t sitting there imagining her crying or wondering if she was looking for me. I

just... focused on surviving. And now, when I think about it, it makes me feel like I'm—" Eden's voice cracked. "Like I'm a terrible daughter."

Gladys gave a slight shake of her head, the kind that didn't dismiss the pain but gently peeled it away from its false edges.

"You did what your brain had to do to survive, Eden. That's not a moral failing. It's instinct. When people are in survival mode, they often shut down everything that isn't directly in front of them. It's not cold. It's protective."

Eden stared down at her mug again. "She must've been going mad."

"I'm sure she was terrified," Gladys said. "But she's never blamed you for that, has she?"

Eden shook her head. "No. She's been amazing. Always asking what I need. Always giving me space. I just—sometimes I wonder what kind of daughter forgets their own mum."

"The kind who was being held against her will and forced into a terrifying situation," Gladys said, matter-of-fact, but kind. "Eden, your love for your mum wasn't switched off. It was buried, for a while. And I'd bet she knows that."

Eden's eyes brimmed slightly, but she didn't let the tears fall. "I think... I just want her to know how much I love her. I don't say it enough."

"You're saying it now," Gladys said gently. "And I imagine you say it in a hundred little ways she notices. A full kettle. An empty dishwasher. Letting her hug you even when you're not in the mood."

That made Eden smile—just barely. "She always tries to kiss my forehead. Drives me mad."

"That sounds like love to me," Gladys said.

Eden stepped out of the building and squinted against the bright afternoon light. She spotted Tam straight away—her elbow propped on the open car window, sunglasses slightly crooked, head tilted back like she'd been dozing in the sun.

Eden opened the door and slipped in. "Thanks for waiting."

Tam smiled, pushing the glasses up her nose. "Always. Did you cry?"

Eden rolled her eyes, buckling her seatbelt. “A little. But in a very dignified, emotionally well-regulated way.”

Tam grinned as she pulled away from the kerb and they drove a few streets in comfortable silence before Tam gestured toward a little café on the corner. “Want a coffee before we head back?”

“God, yes.”

A few minutes later, they were back in the car, paper cups in hand. Eden took a cautious sip of her latte, then sighed. “Okay. That helps.”

Tam raised an eyebrow. “The coffee or the therapy?”

“Both. I don’t know... I do feel a bit lighter,” Eden admitted, watching the buildings blur past. “Like... I’m not fixed, or anything. But it’s not pressing quite as hard today.”

Tam smiled as she took the next turn, clearly not heading straight home.

Eden glanced over. “Scenic route?”

“Stretching our time. Thought you might want to talk a bit more before Liam tries to make you watch that documentary on quantum computing again.”

Eden let out a low laugh. “He’s already warned me. Said it’s *life changing*.”

Tam shook her head fondly. “He’s lucky he’s cute.”

They lapsed into another easy silence, broken only by the sound of the wind through the half-cracked windows and the gentle hum of the road. Eventually, Eden spoke again.

“Gladys mentioned exposure therapy. Not like, as a prescription. Just... brought it up.”

Tam’s fingers tightened just slightly on the steering wheel. “What’s that again? Where you, like, go back to the place?”

“Sort of. Gradual exposure to the stuff that triggers the trauma, in safe and controlled ways. To teach your brain it’s not in danger anymore.”

Tam nodded slowly. “Do you want to do that?”

Eden took another sip. “I don’t know. Maybe. Part of me wants to bury it all and never go back. But then I think... what if I’m always afraid because I never *do* go back?”

Tam didn't rush in with an answer. She just reached over and rested her hand on Eden's leg, thumb tracing small circles through the fabric of her jeans.

"Perhaps it's not a bad idea," she said, softly. "You don't have to prove anything to anyone. But it's Easter and we won't go to Liverpool until Saturday. Might as well do a school excursion. The three of us."

Eden looked out the window again, the fields opening up around them. She wasn't sure what she was ready for—but for the first time, she didn't feel like she was facing it alone.

Chapter Seven

They were all sprawled across the living room like cats in a patch of sun—Eden curled into the corner of the sofa with her feet tucked beneath her, Tam stretched out with her head in Eden’s lap, and Liam cross-legged on the floor, tapping away on his laptop until Tam tossed a cushion at him.

“Oi,” he said without looking up, “you break it, you buy it.”

“I’ll give you two buttons and a lint-covered mint,” she replied, closing her eyes again. “How’s that for currency?”

“Sold,” Liam said with a grin, finally shutting the lid and leaning back on his hands.

Eden absentmindedly combed her fingers through Tam’s hair. The soft rhythm grounded her, but her mind

had been circling ever since they'd returned from their drive to Gladys.

She looked at them both—Tam's calm, Liam's easy humour—and took a breath.

“So... what if we go tomorrow?” she said quietly. “To Redhall. Just for a few hours.”

Liam blinked and looked at Eden. “Are we talking field trip, or full-on ghost hunt?”

“Neither,” Tam was the one answering, lifting her head a bit to glance at Eden, who nodded as to encourage her to continue, then at Liam. “Just... seeing it. Being there. That's all.”

Liam's expression softened. “Yeah. Alright. If we're doing it, I want to be there with you.”

Eden gave a small nod. “I think I need it. Just to see that it's gone. That we're not trapped anymore.”

Tam sat up properly, brushing her hair back from her face. “Okay then. Tomorrow. We'll borrow the car, pack some snacks, stay a couple of hours tops. I'll let your mum know we're going so she doesn't worry.”

“She won't freak out?” Liam asked.

“No,” Eden said, a little smile tugging at her lips. “Not if Tam tells her. She trusts Tam more than any of us.”

“With good reason,” Tam said smugly.

Eden reached for a cushion and promptly hit her with it.

“You’re not even driving with both hands,” Eden teased.

“I am when Mum’s in the car,” Tam replied with a wink.

They all laughed, the kind of laugh that lingers just a bit too long, more about the relief of feeling okay for a moment than the joke itself. And in the warm hush that followed, it felt like tomorrow might not be quite so heavy after all.

Eden stirred first, blinking into the soft morning light coming through the window. For a moment, she forgot what day it was—then it returned in a wave. Redhall. She turned slightly, careful not to wake Tam, who was curled toward her, one hand loosely draped over Eden’s naked hip.

It took a moment to register that her body felt... fine. The sheets were dry. Her heart didn't feel like it was trying to claw out of her chest. She lay still for another moment, letting that sink in.

Tam's eyes fluttered open. "Morning," she said, her voice husky with sleep. "You okay?"

Eden gave a tiny nod. "I think I actually slept."

A smile crept onto Tam's face. "That's brilliant." She snuggled closer and tucked a strand of hair behind Eden's ear. "No dreams?"

"I had one. But it didn't... stay." Eden shifted slightly. "You?"

Tam stretched with a groan. "Only dreamt that Liam downloaded forty-seven viruses trying to mod a farming simulator."

Eden snorted. "Wouldn't put it past him."

They lay in silence for a moment, tangled in a sleepy kind of comfort. Then Eden asked, "What did Mum say, when you told her we were going down there?"

Tam sat up a bit. "She was quiet at first. Asked me if it was your idea or mine."

“What did you say?”

“I told her it was *your* idea. But I also told her we weren’t pushing anything. Just... visiting. She looked a bit sad, but then she just nodded. Said she trusted us.”

Eden sighed and let her head fall back on the pillow. “I hate that we have to put her through this again.”

“She doesn’t see it like that,” Tam said gently. “She’s proud of you. And besides, we are not putting anyone through things. We are mending them. Different thing, entirely.”

There was a knock on the door, followed by Liam’s voice: “Oi, if you two are done with your sleepy little lesbo lie-in, can we *go* already?”

Tam burst out laughing, pulling the duvet over her bare breasts. Eden groaned into her pillow. “How is he this excited before ten in the morning?”

“He probably packed snacks. And a backup phone charger. And a torch.”

“A torch?” Eden called. “It’s daytime, you maniac!”

“Preparedness is timeless,” Liam shouted back.

Eden rolled her eyes and sat up, tossing the duvet back.
“Right. Let’s get this over with before he breaks into a motivational speech.”

Chapter Eight

The road to Redhall was oddly beautiful in the spring. Patches of daffodils lined the verges, and the hedgerows were coming alive with fresh green. Tam drove with the windows down, letting the air in—cool and crisp but far from cold. Liam had claimed the back seat, legs splayed like he owned the place, his curly hair whipping wildly in the wind, while Eden sat up front, one leg tucked beneath her, arm out the open window.

“I forgot how long this drive is,” she muttered.

“That's because last time, we weren't exactly doing the scenic route,” Tam said.

“And I was unconscious,” Liam added brightly from the back.

Tam threw him a look in the mirror. “And coming from the other side.”

Eden shook her head with a faint smile, letting the breeze lift her hair. She looked over her shoulder at Liam. “Do you remember that morning at breakfast—when Charlie snorted milk through his nose?”

Liam barked a laugh. “That was entirely your fault.”

“My fault?” Eden turned, scandalised.

“You were the one who dared me to ask Hannah if she thought pigeons had feelings. But I didn’t just ask—I flapped my arms like wings and cooed at her like a maniac.” He launched into a dramatic impression that made Tam swerve slightly from laughing too hard.

“I kind of feel left out, living on the other ward,” Tam wheezed.

“I still think Charlie was in love with her,” Eden said. “Poor guy. Milk up the nose *and* unrequited affection. Rough morning.”

“He probably never forgave me,” Liam said, faux-mournfully.

Eden twisted back around in her seat and grinned at him. “He didn’t forgive you because you did the wing flapping every time he was trying to impress her with something or another.”

“That,” Liam said, placing a solemn hand over his heart, “was my finest hour.”

Tam was chuckling as she took a gentle bend in the road. “I guess we did have good moments there. Even with everything.”

The mood dipped just slightly, not with weight but with a kind of silence that meant they were all remembering more than they were saying.

Eden rested her head back against the seat. “Yeah. We did.”

They drove a while longer without speaking. Not because there was nothing to say—but because, for once, it felt safe not to fill the space.

They turned off the main road onto a narrower lane, the kind flanked by trees that reached overhead like fingers threading into a canopy. The tyres crunched over the gravel drive, patches of moss spreading into the cracks like nature had started reclaiming what once belonged to concrete.

A faded sign stood crooked near the entrance gate—**Redhall Institute**—its lettering sun-bleached and flaking. A plastic roadblock had been dragged

halfway across the drive, but it wasn't locked or monitored. Just a quiet, empty gesture of *do not enter* that none of them gave much thought to obeying.

Tam pulled over and parked on the grass verge. "Guess we walk from here."

Eden stepped out, blinking against the sudden stillness. There were no sounds of industry, no car engines in the distance, no hum of electricity. Just birdsong and wind. That was the most unsettling part—how normal it felt now.

The three of them climbed over the low barrier and began walking toward the main building. The gravel path was cracked, the weeds having done their diligent work. The gates where they arrived by bus that night were open. So were one of the double doors of the main entrance that lead to the counter where Mr. Henderson had been checking their names on a clipboard.

"No police tape," Liam said quietly. "Not even a padlock."

"They must have done what they needed already," Tam said. "Shut it down. Moved on."

"But it's all still here," Eden murmured.

They pushed the double doors fully open, old leaves and dirt that had gathered was scraping over the floor.

Inside, it smelled faintly of dust and something older—metal, perhaps, or old water pipes gone still. The fluorescent lights weren't on, and the place seemed darker than it should've been even with the sunlight streaming through the tall windows in the arrival hall. The corridors were pitch black due to the lack of windows.

"I should've brought a torch after all," Liam said quietly, as if he was afraid to wake something up.

A bright flash of light hit his face for a second before lighting up the hallway. Tam had turned on her phone torch. Both Eden and Liam pulled their phones out and did the same. Liam grateful that the girls couldn't see him blush a little.

The paint on the walls had started to peel in a few places. Paper notices still clung to the bulletin board in the hall, but the corners were curled and the ink had all but faded—sun-bleached, streaked by damp. Whatever they'd once said was long lost to time and weather.

The corridor entrances at both ends of the rectangular room was ajar. They entered the first corridor—the one that led to both the storage room as well as the two

wards. The smell of industrial cleanser long faded. Liam pushed the door to the storage room open, peered in and gave a little shudder. “Looks like the shelves are still full. If you care to restock your wardrobe or something.”

Eden managed a weak smile, but she could feel her stomach tighten. The room smelled faintly of dust and fabric softener, like nothing had moved in months. Shelves lined the walls, still stacked with folded clothes, toiletries, and labelled boxes—just waiting, like they always had. At the very back, half in shadow, a tall metal gate stood bolted shut. Eden glanced at it, then turned back to the others. “Should we keep going? See if the lounge room’s still standing?”

They moved down the corridor toward the east wing—where Eden and Liam’s ward had been. The hallway was emptier than she remembered. Her feet slowed with each step. Her palms felt clammy.

As they passed the last door on the left, the one leading to Tam’s ward, she was able to shine light into the corridor adjacent to this one. The door was open. Just hanging ajar.

Liam stopped for a second. “This is it,” and pushed the door fully open, leading the group into the lounge.

Eden didn't answer. She had stopped and was staring at the abandoned lounge. Remembering. Reliving. The only place where she got to see Tam. Once a day.

Tam reached for her hand.

No one said anything. They just stood there a moment, letting the weight of it settle in.

Chapter Nine

Tam still had a firm grip on Eden's hand as they walked into her old room. The door was still fully open—just the way it had always been when she lived there. When she was held captive there.

Eden suddenly shuddered, as if she were cold. The light from her phone torch trembled with her hands. Tam let go of her hand and instead wrapped her arm around Eden's shoulders. Liam sensed it too and stepped to her other side.

They stood like that for a moment. Breathing. Grounding. Until Eden took a slow step forward and let her light drift across the room.

She squeezed Tam's hand tighter. Tam turned her head—unable to see it in the dark, but Eden still sensed the movement.

“Perhaps we should go out into the lounge where we all have memories?” Tam asked softly.

Eden nodded. Her voice cracked as she answered, realising Tam wouldn’t be able to see her any better than she could see Tam.

Back in the lounge, they wandered slowly. Tam and Eden stayed together while Liam explored on his own. He disappeared into the classroom. A moment later, the sound of something shifting echoed from within, and the girls moved towards the doorway to look in.

They glanced around but couldn’t see Liam. Several panels on the wall opposite the one they had faced during ‘classes’ had been removed, revealing a hidden room. Another loud bang came from inside, and Tam crossed the floor in a few brisk steps, shining her torch into the gap.

“This must’ve been where they stored the class equipment,” Liam said, his voice echoing slightly. “While we were in the dining hall, I guess.”

Eden’s curiosity sparked. She moved to stand beside Tam, drawn both by the need to see and by the comfort of being close in the dark. Liam was crouched over one of the old laptops they used to watch cartoons, ancient films, and outdated news clips.

The screen flickered to life. The machine booted briefly, the faded logo of the operating system glowing in the gloom.

“This interface is prehistoric,” Liam muttered. “I might cry.”

Eden shuffled her feet and, in a weak attempt to lift the mood, said, “Can you cry faster so we can get out of here?”

He closed the laptop again and they walked back into the lounge—the only room with windows. The harsh sunlight outside was a stark contrast to the darkness inside.

Tam took both of Eden’s hands in hers, her expression serious. “I really want to see the third ward. For my own peace of mind. But it’s perfectly fine if you want to wait outside. And it’s also okay if you just want us to get the hell out of here.”

Eden’s breathing had slowed. Feeling Tam’s touch, standing in the patch of sunlight filtering into the lounge, she thought for a moment before shaking her head. “I want to see the third ward too,” she said, frustrated that the others might see her as weak or fragile. “It’s fine. Besides, I don’t have any memories from there!”

Eden took a steadying breath, still holding Tam's hands. "Let's get it over with," she said softly.

Tam gave her a small, encouraging smile. "Together, then."

They left the lounge behind and made their way back toward the entrance hall, dependent on their torches in the dark. The heavy silence was shared between them.

From the entrance, they turned down the corridor opposite the one leading to their old wards. The floor creaked underfoot, and the stale air seemed thicker here. This was the path they'd never taken before — the third ward, a place filled with unknown memories and shadows.

Liam walked just behind them, curiosity shining in his eyes, even as the building whispered its secrets around them.

Chapter Ten

The corridor curved in the same familiar way — but instead of the pale green walls, these were drab grey. The same humming lights flickered overhead, but something about this side felt colder. Less lived-in.

They moved quietly, glancing into the rooms as they passed. Each door stood open like a waiting mouth, silent and expectant. The layout was identical to their own ward — bedrooms leading off to the sides, a larger space at the far end where the lounge would be. But where their ward had once held signs of life — posters, scuffed furniture, soft touches meant to mimic comfort — this place felt more like a film set trying to imitate it.

When they reached the lounge, Eden stopped in the doorway.

“Where are the games?” she asked aloud, her voice echoing slightly. “The books? The couches?”

The room was stark. Chairs were bolted to the floor in perfect rows, all facing a blank wall. No posters. No shelves of tatty paperbacks or board games missing half the pieces.

Tam stepped further in, turning slowly on the spot. “This... this doesn’t feel like a lounge. It feels like an observation room.”

Liam wandered into the classroom behind it. Another bout of banging echoed out, followed by the scrape of something heavy shifting.

“Oh my god. He’s making a habit of this,” Tam sighed—but she didn’t get to finish.

“Hey—get in here, you two!” Liam’s voice rang out, unsteady. It was shaking.

They almost ran, unsure of what to expect. Liam was pulling at a panel in the back wall. “Looks like nobody has been in here,” he said in a low, wondering tone.

Tam and Eden hurried over and wedged their fingers behind the panel. They pulled — and then it gave way. The panel fell with a loud clatter, and the three of them tumbled backwards in surprise.

Liam was up immediately, peering into the space they’d uncovered.

“What the fuck...” he muttered.

Tam and Eden scrambled to their feet and looked in.

No PCs. No MP3 players. No books. Just a narrow cupboard in one corner, slightly ajar. Inside were clipboards, neat stacks of paper, and a dusty laptop that looked like it hadn't been touched in a very long time.

“They were taking notes in here,” Liam said quietly. “Logs. Timetables. Some of this is coded but...” He frowned, flipping through one page. “Repetitive task intervals. Response tracking. Control versus variable...”

Tam looked at him. “Like experiments?”

“Behavioural,” he confirmed, voice low. “Conditioning. Maybe even stimulus-response stuff. The kind they do in labs. Except this wasn't rats in cages.”

Eden turned slowly, noticing another cupboard on the opposite wall — this one closed tight. She stepped over and tugged it open.

Her breath caught.

She stared at what was inside for a long moment, then looked over her shoulder.

“Guys?”

Chapter Eleven

Eden stepped aside, letting the others look.

Several plastic storage boxes were stacked neatly inside the cupboard — the kind used in school archives or office basements. Each had a label stuck to the lid in faded marker: *Personnel, Transfers, Correspondence*.

Tam crouched down and opened the top one. The faint scent of dust and paper rose as she lifted the lid.

Inside were folders. Dozens of them.

Liam pulled one out and flipped it open. “This isn’t like the other stuff,” he murmured. “This is... bigger picture. Look—” He held out a page for Tam to see. “Transfer records. Kids being moved to somewhere called *Alderley Edge*.”

Eden looked up the name on her phone. “That’s south of Manchester? Hundreds of miles away...”

Tam’s fingers tightened around another folder. She opened it and scanned a page, her brow furrowing. “These aren’t just about the kids. Look — personnel files. Full names. Positions. Even internal memos.” She held one up, and Eden caught the bold heading at the top: *Redhall Behavioural Pilot — Phase 3 Staff Rotation*.

“What the hell is this?” Eden whispered. “Why is this still here?”

Liam’s eyes were flicking rapidly across another sheet. “They weren’t just experimenting. They were moving people around. Staff, kids, whole departments. Like a... like a test run.”

Tam looked up. “And it didn’t end here.”

They sat back on their heels, the weight of it all beginning to settle in.

Eden felt suddenly cold again. She thought about Charlie’s sister Willow who had been transferred the day Eden arrived. And all the others that had disappeared while they were there.

“Do you think... some of the others were sent to this place? This Alderley Edge?”

Liam’s face was unreadable. “Maybe.” *Or worse. Maybe that’s where it’s still happening*, he thought, but didn’t say it out loud. They hadn’t heard a word about Alderley Edge in the news.

The car hummed quietly as they drove back, tyres humming against the A-road. Late afternoon light slanted across the dashboard, warm and golden, but Eden barely noticed.

She sat in the passenger seat, her gaze fixed out the window, watching the hedgerows blur past. Her hands were folded tightly in her lap, as if anchoring herself there.

Behind them, Liam was nose-deep in a folder, the rustle of paper the only sound besides the car’s engine.

Eden could still see the room. Her room. The way the door had stood open, just as it had every day until they got locked up for the night.

“You okay?” Tam asked quietly, one hand resting lightly on the gearstick, her other steady on the wheel.

Eden blinked, then gave a faint nod. “Just... tired.”

They both knew it wasn’t just that.

Tam didn’t push. She simply pulled over at the next layby, parked for a moment, and gave Eden’s hand a gentle squeeze. “We don’t ever have to go back there.”

Eden turned to look at her, then shook her head. “No, this place is behind me now. Behind us.” They stepped out of the car and stretched their legs. Liam looked up from the papers, realising they were parked and climbed out from the backseat and went in between some trees by himself.

Tam and Eden hugged each other. Holding each other in a long embrace. Just the way they had done it every afternoon for playtime. Soon after Liam returned and they got in the car. Tam started the car again. “We’ll figure it out,” she said. “One piece at a time.”

In the back seat, Liam made a quiet noise of discovery, tapping a pen against the edge of a file. “No way!” His voice almost not recognisable.

Tam craned her neck back to eye him in the rearview mirror. But he wasn’t looking up. Just sitting there pale as a ghost. She had no witty remark and just flat out said “What? What is it, Liam?”

He didn't answer right away. Just stared at the sheet in his hands, knuckles pale around the paper.

"Liam?" Eden twisted in her seat to look at him. "What is it?"

His voice was barely a whisper. "It's my mum."

Tam's gaze flicked to the rearview mirror, her fingers still on the steering wheel. "What do you mean?"

"She's listed," he said, his eyes wide, stunned. "Third ward. Staff. Behavioural oversight. Her full name, national insurance number. Everything."

Eden's breath caught. "But... I thought—"

"She disappeared when I was five," Liam said. "Just vanished. She was a doctor and she was working with behaviour in children. Everyone thought she'd walked out. Couldn't cope. But I always wondered if it was more than that."

Tam's brow furrowed. "What does it say?"

He turned the file so they could see, voice hollow. "'Dismissed'. That's it. No reason. No date. Just that word. Not transferred. Not retired. Just... gone."

No one said anything for a long moment.

Eden reached back, placing a hand on his knee. “Maybe this is the start of finding out what really happened to her.”

Liam nodded, but his eyes were distant. “If she was part of this... if she knew... or if they did something to her...” His mind obviously a chaotic mess.

Tam reached a hand behind her, laying her hand on his leg as well, her voice firm but gentle. “Then we’ll get answers. All of them. Together.”

Chapter Twelve

The following days passed in a strange rhythm — part Easter holiday, part packing for the cottage trip, part crime documentary. Mornings were slow, draped in sunshine and the scent of toast. Liam padded around in his socks, packing chargers and cables for the trip. Tam helped Eden sort clothes into piles, mostly by colour and vague intention.

Then, sometime after lunch, the files came out again.

They sat around the kitchen table with mugs of tea slowly going cold. The paperwork had become a quiet gravity pulling them all in — faded letterheads, clipped documents, old HR records typed in the sterile, bureaucratic language of control.

“Every single medical staff member,” Liam said one afternoon, tapping his pen against the edge of the table,

“either got promoted or dismissed. Nothing in between.”

Eden frowned, tucking her knees under her on the chair. “What kind of place has no one who just... left?”

Tam leaned over the file, reading upside-down. “Promoted to where?”

“Alderley Edge,” Liam answered. “Same place, over and over. I suppose it also was owned by Neurologic Behavioural Institutes — sounds fake, doesn’t it?”

Eden muttered, “Sounds expensive.”

They all chuckled quietly, but the mood remained uneasy.

Liam picked up another sheet. “Look at this—same promotion form, different name. No role listed. Just ‘approved for relocation’.”

Tam folded her arms. “And the ones who got ‘dismissed’? There’s nothing else?”

“No end-of-employment dates, no reference letters, no follow-up,” Liam said. “Just a black hole.”

Eden swallowed. “You don’t think—”

“Let’s not go there yet,” Tam interrupted gently. “Let’s just say it’s weird. And maybe dangerous. But we don’t know what it means. Not yet.”

There was a pause.

Then Eden stood, stretching. “I’m gonna throw together some sandwiches. Who wants cheese and who wants mysterious corporate conspiracy?”

Liam grinned, lifting a file. “Do I get both?”

The late afternoon sun filtered through the living room windows, turning the floating dust motes gold. Tam lay stretched across the carpet, head resting on a rolled-up hoodie. Eden was curled into her corner of the sofa, half-buried in cushions, and Liam sat cross-legged on the floor surrounded by a scatter of documents like puzzle pieces waiting to click together.

“This one’s odd,” Liam muttered, shifting another sheet out of the way. “No promotion label, no dismissal—just an internal memo with a postcode.”

Tam perked up. “What kind of memo?”

Liam squinted at it, brow furrowing. “Says ‘Transferred to Alderley Edge facility – site 2’. No names. Just a reference number and the address.”

Eden leaned over the arm of the sofa. “Wait, an actual address?”

Liam nodded, flipping the page so they could see. “Here.”

Tam rolled onto her stomach and grabbed her phone, fingers flying. “If this place shut down with Redhall... it’s probably abandoned too, right?”

No one answered. Eden’s stomach gave a quiet twist.

“Wait,” Tam said slowly. Her voice had that slightly-too-calm note that meant something unexpected had happened. “This address... Alderley Edge is practically next door to the cottage we’re going to stay at. Like, forty minutes from Delamere.”

Eden blinked. “You’re joking.”

Tam turned the screen to show them — a red pin on the map. Their rented cottage in Delamere Forest sat just to the west.

“It’s not walking distance,” she said, “but it’s close.”

Liam leaned back, the curiosity written all over his face. “We should plan another excursion.”

Eden hugged a cushion tightly to her chest. “I want to see the other facility too. See it shut down. Abandoned, like Redhall.”

Tam had left to go home and pack, her voice still lingering in Eden’s ears from the goodbye kiss at the door — “*You two better not forget bathing costumes and towels!*”

Back inside, the house settled into that gentle rhythm of preparing for something. Mum was humming to herself in the utility room, sorting laundry into haphazard piles.

“Liam, trousers off!” she called. “I’m washing everything today, including the stubborn ones!”

Liam sighed dramatically, already halfway down the stairs. “It’s not *stubborn*, it’s called *character*.”

Eden snorted and opened the fridge. “Right, Chef Extraordinaire,” she said, tossing Liam a pepper. “Dinner’s on us tonight.”

“To be clear, I’m sous-chef,” he replied, catching it with surprising grace. “You’re the one who knows where we hide the garlic.”

By the time Tam returned — a large duffel bag slung over her shoulders, her cheeks flushed from the bike ride— the kitchen smelled like something between actual food and mild chaos.

“Something burning?” she teased, leaning over to kiss Eden’s cheek.

“Nope,” Liam said, popping a carrot into his mouth.

“Just emotional trauma in the form of overdone pasta.”

Tam laughed and slumped into a chair at the table. “Perfect. Just like school dinners, then. And why aren’t you wearing trousers?” The last part aimed at Liam.

They ate together, the four of them gathered around the kitchen table. Conversation soon turned to plans for the next day—what time to leave, and who would be in charge of the music. Tam would be driving, since Mum’s ankle was still sore, and both Liam and Eden agreed that meant she had no say in the playlist.

The discussion shifted to more practical matters: whether the cottage had Wi-Fi—Liam’s primary concern—and if Mum would be okay on her own while they went to Alderley Edge.

“I’ll be just fine,” she said firmly, pointing at them with a fork. “You three go out and breathe some real air for once. And don’t forget to actually *rest*. That’s an order.”

Later, as the sun dipped low, the bags stood ready by the door and the plates were drying on the rack, Eden leaned her head against Tam’s shoulder. For a few precious moments, it really did feel like things were shifting — not erased, not forgotten. But changing.

Chapter Thirteen

The car was packed and humming at the kerb just after nine, boot filled to the brim with duffel bags, food boxes, and a half-deflated football Liam had insisted on bringing. Tam sat proudly behind the wheel, sunglasses on and elbow resting on the windowsill like she'd been doing this for years.

“Right,” she said, grinning. “Two and a half hours of B-roads and questionable playlists. Let’s go.”

Eden slid into the passenger seat, folding her legs beneath her and tucking a blanket around them. “If you drive like you did yesterday, we’ll be there in two.”

“Oi,” Tam said, mock offended. “I was extremely responsible yesterday. I used my indicators and everything.”

In the back, Liam had already opened a bag of crisps, despite Mum's long-suffering patience. He grinned out the window, eager and restless, like he couldn't wait to be on the road..

"This is wild," he said. "I've literally never been anywhere that didn't have delivery apps and decent Wi-Fi."

"You'll live," Eden teased.

"Will I?" he said, solemnly. "Without kebab on demand?"

Mum just chuckled as she made herself comfortable beside him, hair tied up and thermos in hand. "You'll survive. And you might even enjoy it."

Tam pulled away from the house, the early morning light slanting across the road ahead. Eden leaned her head back, letting the hum of the car and the smell of pine air freshener mixed with the scent from Liam's crisps lull her into something close to peace.

Tam kept her eyes on the road, the corners of her mouth twitching into a small smile. "Still kind of can't believe I'm here," she said, voice light but distant. "My lot don't usually let me out of their sight for this long."

Eden glanced sideways at her. She didn't push — she knew Tam didn't talk much about home — but the way her knuckles tightened slightly on the steering wheel said enough.

"I'm just... really glad they said yes," Tam added after a pause, softer now. "That's all."

Eden smiled. "You deserve a break. We all do."

"Couldn't agree more," Mum said, reaching across to squeeze Eden's shoulder. "A proper getaway. No laundry. No alarms. Just us. All of us."

The trees thickened as they moved further from town, the road narrowing and curving gently through the countryside. Every few miles, Liam would point something out — sheep on a hill, a crooked tree, a bizarre pub sign — as if trying to memorise the whole journey.

Eden caught Tam's eyes and smiled. "He's like a toddler at a safari park."

Tam laughed. "It's cute though, innit?"

They drove on through the quiet roads, nearing the cottage, the city of Liverpool now behind them and something softer ahead — a place to rest, to regroup, to be teenagers again, if only for a little while.

The gravel crunched under the tyres as they pulled into the narrow drive, the cottage nestled among tall trees and already thick summer-green undergrowth despite it being spring. It had the look of an old hunting lodge — solid stone walls, small windows, and a low roof, with ivy creeping up one side as though trying to swallow it whole.

They tumbled out of the car stretching and yawning, limbs stiff from the long drive.

Tam whistled low. “Alright, this is proper.”

Mum was already peering up at the roof. “No bats. Yet. I’m calling that a win.”

Inside, the air smelled faintly of woodsmoke and something herbal — old, but not unpleasant. The place was cosy, with creaky floorboards, mismatched rugs and thick curtains. A pair of binoculars sat proudly on the windowsill, next to a dusty bird guide and an empty mug with “PROPERTY OF GRANDAD” in faded lettering.

“Nice of Grandad to lend us the place,” Liam muttered, picking up the binoculars. “Weird little vibe, but it’s got character.” He put them to his eyes and turned around, looking at Mum through them.

She chuckled as she lowered herself carefully into one of the mismatched armchairs by the hearth, rubbing at her ankle. “No Grandads involved, I’m afraid. One of my coworkers has family who own it — usually use it for birdwatching trips and the odd writing retreat. They were happy to lend it out for a week. Said it’d do us good.”

Eden noticed the way Mum winced slightly as she shifted her leg. “Do you want us to bring the rest of the bags in?”

Mum gave a warm but tired smile. “Yes please, love. I’m just going to sit here and pretend I’m not being spoiled rotten.”

Tam was already halfway to the car again. “Consider it your lucky day, honorary guest of Grandad’s hunting lodge.”

Eden laughed and followed her, the late morning sun slanting through the tall trees as they carried the rest of their things inside. It felt, for now at least, like the world was giving them a breath.

They spread out to explore. The bedrooms were basic — wooden beds, heavy blankets, furniture that had been old twenty years ago. Liam and Mum quickly claimed the two small singles at the back.

“Right,” Mum called down the hallway. “That leaves the master bedroom to the two of you lovebirds. Hope you don’t need a safe word.”

“Mum!” Eden yelped from halfway up the stairs.

“Make it ‘badger’,” Liam added helpfully, walking by with a stack of towels.

Tam’s ears went pink but she was grinning, nudging Eden up the stairs with her shoulder. “Your mum’s brutal.”

The master bedroom was bigger than the others, with a double bed and a window that looked out across the clearing and into the trees beyond. Tam dropped her bag on the floor and stretched her arms overhead.

“This’ll do,” she said.

Eden flopped onto the bed, the mattress bouncing beneath her. “It really will.”

Chapter Fourteen

The air was still and golden when Eden stepped out onto the back patio only in her bikini bottoms, towel slung over one shoulder and the sun already warm on her skin. It was the kind of quiet that didn't hum with tension — just birdsong, the distant rustle of branches, and the occasional creak of the old cottage settling in the heat.

Mum was already out there, feet up on a faded deck chair, her top folded neatly beside her. She sipped tea and tilted her head toward the sun, like someone finally letting herself soften. Eden spread her towel on the ground and settled down beside her, letting the warmth seep into her skin.

“I don't remember the last time I just... stopped,” Mum murmured, eyes closed behind her sunglasses. “Not properly.”

Tam joined them a few minutes later in a bright bikini, holding a jug of water with slices of cucumber floating lazily inside. “Liam’s gone to explore. Said something about finding a bear cave. I didn’t have the heart to tell him.”

Eden smiled, watching Tam spread out a towel next to hers and stretch out with a sigh. The forest loomed just beyond the garden — tall and quiet and full of secrets — but probably not bears. Sunlight danced on the old stone patio, the air thick with the scent of pine and something sweet from the woods.

“We’ll go to Alderley tomorrow, yeah?” Tam said lightly, resting her head back on her arms. “But today’s ours.”

“Mm,” Eden murmured. She wasn’t thinking about Redhall or Alderley Edge. Or coded reports. Or the third ward and the cupboard she’d opened. or anything tied to Neurologic Behavioral Institutes really. Just the breeze, the warmth, and the soft rhythm of Mum’s breathing beside her.

For now, that was enough.

After dinner, Mum poked around the low cupboard beneath the television and came up triumphant, holding a battered cardboard box above her head like a trophy.

“Who’s up for *Cluedo*?” she announced, wiggling the box.

Tam raised an eyebrow. “I warn you all, I’m dangerously competitive.”

“You’re *dangerously* bad at it,” Eden murmured, smirking. Tam’s mock gasp was followed by a flick of a cushion in Eden’s direction.

They cleared the coffee table and spread the game out while Mum settled into the armchair, ankle up on a stool and a glass of wine cradled in her hand. Liam dug through the cupboard again, producing a second game — *UNO* — and stacked it nearby for round two.

They played for over an hour, laughter and harmless accusations echoing around the cosy lounge. Tam’s deductive method turned out to involve a lot of guesswork and very little logic, and Eden kept narrowing her eyes at her cards like they might whisper answers.

At some point, Eden shifted a little closer on the sofa, letting her bare knee rest against Tam’s. Tam didn’t say anything — just gave the gentlest of smiles and tapped

her pinkie finger against Eden's under the table. It felt like a secret handshake, like safety tucked into something quiet.

Outside, the woods were growing darker, shadows lengthening between the trees, but inside the cottage was golden and warm, the lights low, the windows fogged from laughter and the heat of the day.

"I think Miss Scarlet needs a solicitor," Mum declared as she lost for the third time.

"Too late," Tam replied. "She's already planning her escape through the conservatory."

They moved on to *UNO*, which brought out a more ruthless side of Liam, who grinned every time he slammed down a "Draw Four" with dramatic flair. But even when he won — twice — Eden didn't mind. Her hand was in Tam's now, fingers loosely interlaced, and the warmth between them felt like it had been there forever.

They didn't talk about the next day. Didn't need to. Tonight was for quiet hearts, for games and banter and touch-light comfort. There would be time for everything else.

Just not yet.

The soft hum of the cottage settling into night wrapped around them like a warm blanket. After clearing away the board games and brushing away the last traces of laughter, the four of them began their bedtime ritual — slower here, freer, more peaceful.

Mum winced slightly as she shifted weight onto her good ankle. “I don’t think I’d manage without this second bathroom,” she said, nodding toward the pair of doors just down the hall. Liam grinned, already heading for one with her in tow.

Tam reached for Eden’s hand, their fingers sliding together easily, like they’d done a thousand times before. They moved down the corridor toward their bathroom, the one with the faded floral wallpaper and a small frosted window that caught the moonlight.

“I love that we get our own bathroom! Your turn brushing teeth first?” Tam whispered, her voice soft in the quiet.

Eden smiled shyly. “Yeah, thanks.”

She stepped up to the sink, tilting her head as she worked the toothbrush over her teeth. Tam sat on the toilet, a faint hiss was heard as she relaxed herself. From her spot, she watched Eden’s reflection in the

mirror — the way the light caught the curve of her cheek, the way her eyes softened with calm.

When Tam was done, Eden stepped aside, and Tam joined her by the basin. Silence filled the room except the sound of Liam's voice from the other loo.

When they finally stepped out, hands still entwined, the warmth between them lingered as they undressed and slipped into bed, the gentle rhythm of their breathing mingling with the peaceful night around them.

Chapter Fifteen

Sunlight filtered softly through the trees, casting dappled shadows across the deck where the family gathered for breakfast. The air was fresh and cool, carrying the scent of pine and earth, a soothing contrast to the heavy thoughts that hovered beneath the surface.

Mum moved quietly around the small outdoor table, setting down plates of toast, fresh fruit, and steaming mugs of tea and coffee. The simple ritual of breakfast grounded them all, a warm moment of calm before the day's plans.

Tam and Eden settled side by side, their hands occasionally brushing as they reached for the butter. Liam fidgeted with his toast, excitement barely contained beneath his calm exterior.

"We'll head out to Alderley Edge after this," Tam said softly, glancing at Eden. "No rush. We've got all day."

Eden smiled faintly, grateful for the slow pace. “It’s nice... just being here for a bit.”

Mum joined them, her presence steady and reassuring despite the limp in her step. “We’ve got time. Let’s enjoy the morning. No need to dive into things straight away.”

Outside, the birds sang, and the forest around them felt like a quiet bubble — safe, familiar, waiting.

There wasn’t much banter this morning. The usual teasing and laughter felt hushed, tucked beneath layers of nervous energy and quiet anticipation. Each of them was wrapped up in their own thoughts, waiting for the day ahead.

Tam leaned closer to Liam across the table, speaking in low tones. “Maybe we’ll find more paperwork there. Something that can explain all of this.”

Liam nodded, eyes bright with curiosity. “Yeah. There has to be more. If we can piece it together, maybe we can finally understand what really happened.”

Eden watched them, tracing the rim of her cup with a finger. She felt a flicker of hope amidst the knot of anxiety tightening in her chest. *Maybe seeing the place — abandoned, silent like Redhall — will help me leave*

it behind for good. Not just the memories, but the fear too.

She took a slow breath, letting the cool morning air fill her lungs. The forest around them seemed peaceful, but the path ahead still felt daunting.

Mum gave Eden a small, steady smile. “You’ll be alright. Just take it one step at a time.” Her eyes flicked to Tam and Liam. “And you three — make sure you keep each other safe.”

None of them smiled, but they nodded in quiet agreement.

Shortly after they were getting ready to leave. Liam’s eyes landed on the binoculars resting on the windowsill. With a small smile, he picked them up and gently handed them to Tam. “Here, you take these. You’re good at looking out for us.”

Tam returned the smile, slipping the binoculars carefully into her rucksack. “Alright, I’ll carry them. Someone has to keep watch.”

Eden stood quietly nearby, mostly lost in her own thoughts, the weight of what lay ahead pressing gently on her mind. She didn’t say much, her gaze drifting

between the trees outside and the familiar faces around her.

After a few moments, Tam slung her rucksack over one shoulder and opened the door. “Alright, team. Time to get going.”

They stepped out into the crisp morning air, the soft rustle of leaves underfoot as they made their way to the car.

Chapter Sixteen

They parked the car at the edge of Alderley Edge, the quaint town stretching out before them with its tidy shops and quiet streets. Tam pulled out the crumpled sheet with the address, scanning the details again.

“Should be just past the town,” she murmured.

Eden gazed out the window, watching as the trees grew denser, the houses thinning out until they were driving beneath a canopy of leaves. The road curved gently, winding through the forest like a secret path.

They passed a small man-made hilltop crowned with a faded wooden sign. The paint was peeling, but the words were still legible: *Alderley Edge Observatory – Coming Soon.*

Tam slowed the car. “Looks like this was a plan that never took off,” she said quietly, glancing at the

untouched hill. No construction equipment, no workers in sight—just the quiet woods at the foot of the hill guarding their secrets.

They turned off the main road onto a narrower lane, lined with thick trees pressing in on either side. The street name on the sign matched the address from the papers, but it felt almost too quiet, too remote for something so official.

As they drove a little further, a faded sign came into view. Not as neglected as the one at the Observatory, but the paint had started to peel, although the words were still clear: *Northbridge Resource Centre*. It stood adjacent to a wooden shed where a side road met the one they were on.

Tam slowed as they passed, eyes flicking toward the shed and the side road. She then turned to the quiet road ahead. The place felt out of place — but she couldn't put a finger on what it was.

Everyone was silent, a duvet of anticipation in the car, and Tam just shrugged and continued down the road.

Then, further along, a small house came into view, its number visible on the doorframe. Tam frowned. "We've gone too far. Looks like we missed it."

She glanced at the others in the car. “We’ll have to turn around and check out Northbridge.”

They turned the car around and headed back toward the shed and the faded *Northbridge Resource Centre* sign. Tam eased the vehicle onto the narrow side road. Unlike the road they had just been driving on, the tarmac here was smooth and well-kept—no sign of neglect.

As they passed the shed, their eyes caught a car parked just beyond it, front facing the little road. It seemed out of place, parked so far from anything.

Liam frowned. “Who’d park out here?”

Tam glanced over, then shrugged. “Hunting season started recently. So probably just a hunter.”

Eden nodded quietly, still watching the car as they continued down the road.

They continued along the smooth tarmac as it gradually narrowed, winding deeper into the forest. The trees closed in on either side, branches casting long shadows across the car. The air felt heavier here, quieter—only

the occasional rustle of leaves or distant bird call breaking the stillness.

After about a mile, the dirt road curved sharply. Tam slowed the car, her breath catching as the treetops parted to reveal a large, imposing complex nestled in a clearing.

The facility loomed ahead, its tall fences topped with razor wire glinting faintly in the fading light. A towering building rose behind the barriers, another building behind it, their windows aglow with artificial light. It was nothing like the abandoned husk of Redhall — this place was alive, humming with activity.

They stopped the car and climbed out silently. Tam pulled the binoculars from her backpack, raising them to her eyes. She scanned the perimeter, moving figures in uniform, and vehicles parked in neat rows.

“It’s operational,” she whispered, voice barely carrying in the stillness.

Liam squinted, “I suppose it’s just a factory then.”

Eden’s heart pounded, her fingers tightening around Tam’s arm. All the fences, the remoteness, it didn’t feel at all like a factory to her. They were no longer walking

into ghosts—they were facing something very much alive.

Tam and Liam stood near the car, their voices low and cautious as they eyed the sprawling complex ahead. Eden held the binoculars tight, her fingers trembling slightly as she raised them to her eyes.

“Do you think it’s really a factory?” Liam asked, squinting at the buildings through the late afternoon haze. “Or something else?”

Eden scanned the area, her breath catching when she spotted a fenced enclosure not far from the main buildings. Through the binoculars, she saw the figures inside—children, moving in a line from one building to another. Their movements were stiff and robotic, as if they were being guided by invisible strings.

“Tam... Liam...” her voice wavered. “There are kids. In a pen.”

Tam frowned, stepping closer to peer over Eden’s shoulder. “Why would they let them be visible from the road?” she muttered, unsettled.

Liam shook his head slowly, voice grim. “Perhaps nobody ever comes down here uninvited.”

Eden's chest tightened, panic rising fast. Her fingers clenched around the binoculars until her knuckles turned white. She took a shaky breath, then handed the binoculars over to Liam.

"Too much," she whispered.

Liam lifted the glasses back up just in time to see a car pull away from the facility, engine low and steady. It slid onto the road, disappearing down the path towards them, as if dispatched on some urgent mission.

Chapter Seventeen

The weight of what they'd just seen settled heavily in the air. Tam slid back into the driver's seat, her hands tightening around the wheel. Liam shut the door beside her, Eden already in the backseat, silent, still pale and trembling.

"Let's get out of here," Tam said, her voice low but urgent. The engine roared as she swung the car around.

She kept a sharp eye on the soft shoulder of the road. Liam was the first to spot the approaching headlights from the other side—fast, coming straight towards them.

His eyes widened. "That's the car that was parked by the shed!"

Tam's heart pounded. Without hesitation, she swerved sharply onto the soft earth beside the road. The tyres

kicked up leaves and loose soil as she steered between the trees, as the car bounced over uneven ground.

“We’re not going back there,” she said firmly, eyes darting ahead for a way out. The trees closed in on both sides, branches scraping the sides of the car as they sped deeper into the forest.

Behind them, the headlights hesitated at the edge of the tarmac, then started to follow—slow but relentless.

Eden gripped the back of Liam’s seat, breath hitching, while Liam stared wide-eyed at the rearview mirror, watching their pursuer struggle through the undergrowth.

Tam’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. “Hold on,” she warned, eyes flicking to the narrowing space between the trees. Without hesitation, she swerved sharply off the path, the tires crunching over branches. Scraping sounds ran along the car’s sides as she pressed the accelerator harder.

Liam let out a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding. “You’re nuts!” he shouted over the engine’s roar.

“We don’t have time!” Tam snapped back, teeth clenched. The headlights of the pursuing car were

gaining fast, reflecting in the rearview mirror like twin predators closing in.

Eden's heart hammered, but she forced herself to breathe deeply, letting the panic fade into sharp focus. She gripped the binoculars tightly in her lap, eyes locked on the road ahead.

A sharp branch screeched along the passenger side of the car, metal groaning as it scraped the paint. Eden jolted in her seat, eyes wide.

"I thought you had driving lessons!" she shouted, clutching the seat in front of her harder.

Tam's hands tightened on the wheel as she swerved to avoid another low branch. "Yeah, but *on the road*, Eden!"

The trees blurred past, close and fast, the car jolting across rough terrain. The sound of twigs and brambles clawing at the undercarriage filled the cabin — making them wonder if they would make it out of the forest at all.

Branches snapped under the wheels as Tam guided the car through a narrow gap in the trees. The forest

seemed to resist their escape — branches clawing, roots jolting the tyres, every turn risking a collision.

Then, suddenly, the undergrowth thinned.

“We’re through!” Liam exclaimed from the back, hope lighting his voice for the first time.

The car burst out of the trees, tyres thudding onto an old gravel road that wound its way around the eastern edge of the compound’s grounds. Tam slowed just slightly, her knuckles white on the wheel, scanning left and right.

“I think we lost them,” she said. Her voice was low, cautious. Eden turned in her seat, chest heaving, watching the line of trees retreat behind them.

Nothing.

No headlights. No engine.

Only the crunch of gravel beneath their tyres.

A collective breath filled the car. Liam slumped back in his seat, letting out a nervous laugh. “Bloody hell,” he muttered. “I thought we were done for.”

Tam didn’t smile, but the tightness in her jaw eased a little. “We’re not out yet.”

They followed the gravel road as it curved gently eastward, weaving between hedgerows and empty fields. The forest was behind them now. The world felt open again — sky overhead, the occasional bird call. Even Eden felt her shoulders start to lower, her fingers finally relaxing around the binoculars in her lap.

And then she saw it.

A glint in the mirror.

Her stomach dropped.

“Tam,” she said quietly. “Behind us.”

Tam checked the mirror. Just for a moment — a flicker of black among the trees where the road curved back west.

“I see it,” she said.

The relief vanished. The chase was back on.

Chapter Eighteen

Tyres squealed as Tam took a sharp bend, the car tilting ever so slightly before thudding back level with the road. Houses began to appear — spaced-out at first, the kind with long driveways and expensive gates — then closer together, neater, cleaner. The edges of Alderley Edge proper.

“Still nothing,” Liam muttered, eyes fixed on the wing mirror.

Eden clutched the handle above the window, trying to steady her breathing. Her thoughts hadn’t caught up yet — the sound of branches clawing the car still echoed in her ears, adrenaline still sharp in her limbs. She wasn’t sure if she was cold or just shaken.

Tam kept her gaze locked ahead. “We need to disappear into traffic.”

“There isn’t any,” Eden said. The streets were eerily quiet. Too early for school runs. Too late for morning joggers.

“Then we fake normal,” Tam replied. She eased off the accelerator slightly, the car settling back into something less frantic. They passed a little newsagent, a bakery with its lights just coming on. A dog walker raised a hand at them. Tam nodded in return.

It helped. A little.

They looped round the far side of town, deliberately skirting the centre, taking roundabouts the long way, then smaller residential roads, before finally veering west. Heading home. Heading away.

Eden checked behind them again. Still nothing. But she didn’t stop watching.

“I don’t think they’re there anymore,” Liam said after a while. He sounded less sure than he probably wanted to.

“They could still be tracking us,” Tam replied, her voice a whisper now. “Number plate, car type... We’ve got to be careful.”

Eden finally looked away from the mirror and stared out at the rows of houses. People were living ordinary lives just streets away. It felt like a different universe.

“No, they never were able to track our phones back in Bedale but had to use GPS trackers, remember?” Liam said after a moment. “They weren’t the government. There’s no way they can look up a number plate.”

Eden didn’t argue. Tam didn’t either.

They just drove. Quietly. Watchfully. Not stopping until the village behind them was nothing but a cluster of roofs in the mirror — and even then, they didn’t let themselves feel safe.

Not yet.

Chapter Nineteen

The sun was already lower when they pulled into the little gravel driveway at the cottage. The forest still cradled them in green and gold, but it no longer felt like a fairytale — more like a fragile bubble, and they had come close to bursting it.

The engine stuttered to silence. None of them moved.

Then the front door swung open.

Mum stepped out onto the deck, squinting against the light — and froze when she saw the car. Her gaze swept across the long scrape down the passenger side, the twigs still clinging to the undercarriage, the smear of mud up one wheel arch. Her expression shifted in an instant — not to relief, but to alarm.

“What the hell happened?”

She limped down the steps without waiting for an answer, eyes wide, taking in each of their faces as if counting them wasn't enough — as if she needed proof that none of them were bleeding or broken.

“Inside,” she said sharply, her voice tight and clipped. “Now.”

They obeyed without a word.

Once the door was shut, Mum didn't press them right away. She turned instead, phone already in hand, and stepped back out onto the deck.

They heard the low murmur of her voice through the window.

“Hi—yes, sorry, I just... I need a favour. Please don't tell anyone we're using the cottage. I know, I know, but—please, just trust me. I can't explain right now. Yes. We're safe. Just—keep it between us.”

When she came back in, she sat down slowly, her face pale and drawn, her eyes shadowed with questions she wasn't ready to ask — or afraid to know the answers to.

“You're all back,” she said softly, her gaze lingering on Eden. “But that's not the car you left in.”

Eden sat beside her. Her throat was tight, full of unsaid things — fear, guilt, confusion. She just leaned into her mum's side.

Mum didn't flinch. She put an arm around Eden and held her close.

They told her everything.

Not in a neat, ordered retelling — but in bursts, fragments, all out of order, over cups of tea that went cold in their hands. Tam did most of the talking at first, with Liam jumping in to explain details from the paperwork they'd found, the binoculars, the children walking like ghosts behind the fence.

Eden was quiet. Her voice only joined theirs when she described what she'd seen through the lens, and when she did, her hands shook.

Mum didn't interrupt. She listened. That was the most surprising part — not disbelief, not panic — just this quiet, burning attention. Like she already knew the world was darker than most people would dare to guess, and this... this was just one more door kicked open. Perhaps it wasn't surprising, given that she knew everything that happened in the Autumn.

When they finally ran out of words, the silence felt different.

Heavier. Hungrier.

“So,” Mum said, setting her mug down. “What now?”

Tam leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “We think Northbridge is a front. For Alderley Edge. The road we took? The building's position? It all fits.”

“They’ve got the whole thing camouflaged under a pretend name,” Liam added. “There’s nothing about it online. But it’s active. You don’t keep a front that visible if you’re hiding something small.”

“Calling the police won’t work,” Eden said quietly. “We have nothing. Just what we saw.”

Mum nodded slowly. “And with all the prank calls from kids claiming they’ve been in similar places. The false alarms from grown-ups who think something shady is going on in every back alley.”

“They looked like experiments,” Liam said, his voice sharp with anger. “Those weren’t normal kids.”

Tam nodded grimly. “Even if we went to the police... if Neurologic are still connected to anyone in government, we’d be dismissed too. Or worse.”

“Like the staff,” Eden murmured. “Promoted or dismissed. No in between.”

A pause.

“We could leak it,” Liam suggested. “Media. Online. Or anonymous tip to a journalist. That worked last time, remember?”

Mum winced. “You wouldn’t be the first. Do you know how many prank tips the major papers got this winter? Kids pretending they were Redhall survivors. ‘Secret school for mind control’, that sort of thing.”

Tam groaned. “So they’re desensitised.”

“They won’t take another teen with a wild story seriously,” Mum said. “Not without evidence. Real evidence. Something they can’t ignore or write off.”

Eden looked down into her lap, her fingers curling around the sleeve of her hoodie. “So... we get evidence.”

They all turned to her.

Tam nodded, slow and deliberate. “That’s what it’ll take. Something they can’t ignore.”

Mum held up a hand. “Alright, enough. I know you’re fired up, and I know you’re right to be. But don’t go deciding anything right now.”

Tam opened her mouth, but Mum cut her off gently. “Please. Just give it a day or two. Think it through. I’m not saying *never*. Just not... like this. Not while your hands are still shaking.”

There was a pause. Then Liam gave a small nod, rubbing his thumb along the rim of his mug.

Eden didn’t speak, but Tam glanced at her and finally sighed.

“Alright,” she said, voice quiet. “We wait. For now.”

Mum reached out and rested a hand over Tam’s.. “You don’t have to rush into the fire just because you know where it is.”

No one said anything more. But the fire, once lit, didn’t go out.

Chapter Twenty

Eden blinked awake to the creak of the door opening. A soft footstep. She turned her head groggily.

Liam stood there in the half-light, still in his pyjamas, holding something in his hand.

“She’s gone,” he whispered.

Eden pushed herself upright, not bothering to pull the duvet to cover her chest. The sweat clinging to her skin was cold now, making her shiver. The sheets beneath her were dry, but her whole body ached from tossing and turning. Her hair stuck to her neck, damp from the heat she’d slept through. Or tried to.

“Gone?” she croaked, voice hoarse.

Liam nodded and walked over, handing her a folded slip of paper. “She left a note. It was on the kitchen table.”

Eden’s eyes scanned the scrawl — Tam’s handwriting, hurried but steady:

*Couldn't sleep. I'm so sorry. I had to go back. I'll be careful. I just need to see it again, properly. I won't do anything stupid, I promise.
I'm sorry, Mum.*

Below that a heart and a *T*. Eden stared at the note. The words blurred, but not from tears.

“She called her mum,” she murmured.

Liam sat on the edge of the bed, his expression drawn and pale.

“What do we do?” he asked.

But Eden was already swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

Downstairs, the faint sizzle of frying filled the kitchen. Liam moved carefully, cracking eggs into the pan, brow furrowed in concentration, keeping himself busy. Eden sat at the small table, arms wrapped around herself, staring out the window without really seeing. She didn't comment on Liam's breakfast efforts—didn't want to break the silence.

The door creaked as Mum shuffled down the stairs, her ankle still tender but her presence steady. She stopped in the doorway, an amused smile twitching at her lips.

“Well, well. Liam, who knew you had it in you?” she teased lightly, but her eyes quickly softened as they flicked from Liam to Eden.

Eden met her gaze, voice low and tight. “Tam's gone.”

Mum's smile faltered. Liam handed her the note. Mum's fingers trembled slightly as she read, then she discreetly wiped a small tear from her cheek. The simple word—*Mum*—caught her off guard, softening the weight in the room.

She folded the note carefully and looked up. “For now... let's stay put.” Her voice was steady, reassuring both them and herself. “Tam's sensible. She's smart. She'll be careful.”

The silence stretched between them, filled with quiet hope and unspoken worry.

The smell of eggs and toast filled the kitchen as the three of them settled around the small table. Mum poured tea quietly while Liam carefully balanced a plate in front of Eden.

Eden took a bite but didn't say much at first. Liam, still trying to keep things normal, broke the silence. "So... if Tam doesn't come back... if we can't take the car, how do you think we'd get back to Alderley Edge?"

Eden thought for a moment, chewing slowly. "Well, we'd have to call a cab, I guess. Then maybe catch the train from the nearest station?"

Liam nodded, warming to the plan. "Yeah, probably the railway station near the town centre, but we'd have to be careful about timing."

Eden glanced up, the weight of it settling in. "It's not going to be easy... but we can figure it out. We have to."

Mum sighed, a flicker of frustration crossing her face. "I wish I could come with you," she said quietly, rubbing her ankle. "But I can't — not like this. I wouldn't be of any help." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "Stay put here for a few more hours. If Tam

hasn't come back by then, we'll start looking into train timetables and figure out the next steps."

Her voice was steady but firm, the weight of worry held back just enough to keep them grounded. Neither Liam or Eden challenged the decision.

Chapter Twenty-One

The sun was warm on their skin, but the air between them was heavier than it should've been. Eden lay on the lounger, arms folded behind her head, the sun catching the edges of her collarbones. Beside her, Mum adjusted her sunglasses, stretching out with a low sigh.

Liam sat on the decking with his back to the house, poking half-heartedly at a sketchpad. "Try calling her again," he said, and Eden pulled her phone out from its hiding in the shadow under the lounger. "Still nothing," she sighed.

Mum shielded her eyes to glance at the horizon. "We might as well enjoy the sun while it's here. Storm's rolling in later," she said, voice light but not quite breezy.

Eden blinked slowly, watching a bird wheel in the sky. "Feels wrong, trying to relax."

Mum didn't look at her, just reached out and gave Eden's foot a gentle squeeze. "You don't have to pretend it's all fine. But worrying every second won't help her either."

Liam gave a quiet grunt of agreement without looking up.

The sunlight stayed with them for a while longer, warm on their skin, even as their thoughts wandered down winding forest roads.

The screen lit up as the call ended unanswered, and Eden let it dim again with a frustrated breath.

"She's probably got it on silent," Mum said gently, though her eyes hadn't left the road leading to the cottage for more than a moment. "Or she's deep in the woods again."

They all knew it was a reach, but no one challenged it.

By the time the first rumbles of thunder rolled in from the hills, the sun had disappeared behind low, heavy clouds. Liam was the one to finally say what none of them wanted to.

"She should've been back by now."

No one replied straight away. Eden sat up and grabbed her hoodie, suddenly cold despite the lingering warmth in the air. Mum rose a little slower, wincing slightly as she shifted her ankle.

“Let’s at least figure out how we’d get there if we had to,” she said. “Just... to be prepared.”

Inside, Eden opened her laptop and pulled up train schedules, while Mum sat nearby, watching quietly—letting Eden take the lead. Liam moved around the kitchen, gathering a few things into a small rucksack — water bottle, snacks, a torch from the drawer.

“You’re packing?” Eden asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Just being ready,” he muttered, heading to the window and peering out at the gathering clouds. “If we go, we’ll want to move quick.”

“Look at you—promoted to carrier of all things,” she murmured, mouth twitching into something almost like a smile.

He rolled his eyes but didn’t argue. As he rifled through the pile of things they’d left by the door, his brow furrowed.

“Where are the binoculars?”

They all paused.

Mum glanced up. “Didn’t you bring them back yesterday?”

“Eden did and I put them back in place,” Liam said. “They’re not there.”

Eden’s stomach sank. “Tam must’ve taken them.”

No one said anything for a moment. The first drops of rain began to fall, soft and infrequent, dotting the decking outside.

Mum rose slowly, her face drawn but resolved. “That’s enough waiting,” she said quietly. “It’s time to go.”

She stepped over to Eden first, cupping her cheek before leaning in to press a kiss to her forehead, then her lips. A silent, steadying gesture.

Then she turned to Liam. He straightened slightly as she kissed him too — not on the cheek, but the same way she had done with Eden.

“Take care of her,” she murmured.

Liam nodded, his throat tight. “I will.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

By the time they arrived in Alderley Edge, the rain had passed, but the sky remained heavy with brooding clouds. The light was dim despite the hour, the sort of dull, grey afternoon that made everything feel quieter than it should be.

Eden tugged her hoodie tighter around herself as they walked along the narrow road out of town, the damp air clinging to their skin. Neither of them had spoken much since stepping off the train, the weight of uncertainty thick between them.

Then Liam slowed, lifting a hand to point. “There.”

Eden followed his gaze — her stomach gave a small, unexpected lurch. Mum’s car was parked just ahead, tucked into a narrow pull-off spot near the old sign for the observatory. The words still half legible, faded but stubbornly present.

“She’s here,” Liam murmured.

They stood in silence for a moment, looking toward the tree line beyond the car. A low stone wall ran along the edge of the road, half-covered in moss and ivy. Just a few paces ahead, it dipped — a break in the wall where years of erosion or use had made a natural crossing.

Eden stepped toward it first. “Come on,” she said, barely louder than the wind.

They slipped through the gap and into the woods, the trees crowding in close overhead, branches dripping from the earlier rain. The forest seemed to hold its breath around them.

The climb up the hill was slippery with damp leaves and mud, the path barely marked and long forgotten. Whatever plans there had once been to build the observatory, nature had reclaimed them years ago.

At the top, they paused, catching their breath. Trees clustered densely around the summit, their branches thick and unruly, making it difficult to see much of anything beyond them.

Liam turned slowly, scanning the treeline. “Which way do you reckon she went?”

Eden looked too, though it felt pointless. The woods all looked the same — dark, wet, tangled.

“She could be anywhere...” she murmured.

He pulled out his phone and hit redial. The ringing was loud in the quiet, then cut off as it went to voicemail again.

“No signal,” he muttered, checking the bars with a frown. “Or she’s not answering.”

Eden walked in a slow circle near the old signpost — its paint blistered, the metal warped slightly from time and rain. Then something caught her attention. A small ridge of earth, like a mound left behind when the sign had been dug in. She stepped onto it carefully and rose onto the balls of her feet.

“Wait...”

From that slightly raised position, she could just make out the edge of a roofline, low and grey, tucked behind the trees to the southeast.

“I can see it,” she said. “The facility. Just barely.”

Liam came to her side, trying to follow her line of sight. “You think she’s already there?”

Eden didn't answer at first. The sight of it — even just the corner of it — made her heart quicken. She felt a trickle of unease down her spine.

“I think... that's where she's going.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Liam shifted his weight from foot to foot, squinting through the trees. “Would be bloody brilliant if we had the binoculars right now,” he muttered. “Can barely see anything through this wall of leaves.”

Eden didn’t respond. She was still standing on the little rise, trying to catch another glimpse of the grey rooftop. But the angle was too shallow, the branches too dense.

He sighed. “Of course she took them. Of course she didn’t think to leave a note saying *where* she was actually going.”

Eden finally looked over at him. “You’re not angry,” she said quietly.

“No, I’m...” He paused, scrubbing a hand through his damp hair. “I’m scared, Eden.”

She stepped down from the mound and brushed the dirt off her hands. “Me too.”

There was a silence between them — heavy, but not awkward. Just full of things unsaid.

“Alright,” Liam said after a moment. “Let’s check the woods. If she’s here, she’s got to be close.”

Eden nodded. “Though if she’s not answering her phone...” she considered the possibilities, and in a lower voice, “...she probably doesn’t want to be found,” ignoring the alternatives.

Liam gave a grim sort of laugh. “Yeah. But we’re not leaving her out here on her own.”

They turned from the summit and began to make their way back down but on the other side, pushing into the trees, looking for Tam or at least traces after her.

The forest swallowed them in shadow as they stepped off the summit and followed a narrow, barely-there path winding between the trees. Wet leaves clung to their shoes, and the thick undergrowth muffled their movements—but not their breathing. Eden’s heart pounded in her chest, the echo of every step sounding far too loud in the quiet woods.

Liam glanced behind them. “Feels like we’re being watched,” he whispered.

“Don’t say that,” Eden murmured, eyes scanning the darkened tree trunks ahead.

Then, from somewhere deeper in the forest, came the distinct sound of footsteps. Slow. Crunching. Purposeful.

Liam grabbed Eden’s arm and pulled her towards a fallen tree, its broad trunk slick with moss. They ducked behind it just as the sound drew closer.

A figure emerged through the trees—a man in a dark green jacket and matching cap, some kind of security uniform. He carried a radio clipped to his chest and moved without urgency, his shoulders slouched like someone at the end of a long shift.

He didn’t seem particularly alert. He wasn’t scanning the trees. If anything, he looked bored. He paused just a few metres away from them, shifting his weight and glancing around lazily. Eden held her breath.

The man’s head tilted slightly. He frowned.

Had he heard something?

Eden squeezed Liam’s hand.

The guard reached for his radio and spoke in a low voice, just audible over the rustle of leaves.

“Yeah, nothing out here. I’ll head to the hotspot next, give it a once over.”

The radio crackled something unintelligible in return. The man gave a noncommittal grunt and moved on, disappearing back into the undergrowth, making no effort to be silent.

They waited. Counted slowly in silence.

Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty.

Only once the forest had fallen still again did Eden exhale.

“That was close,” Liam whispered.

Eden nodded. “But he wasn’t paying attention.”

They crouched in silence until the sounds of the guard’s footsteps had faded completely. Only then did Eden lift her head over the trunk, scanning the shadows.

Liam moved to stand. “We should follow him,” he said quietly. “See what this hotspot is. Could be nothing. But if Tam’s caught...” His voice faltered.

Eden didn't reply, just nodded grimly and rose to her feet. Her heart thudded in her ears, a steady rhythm of worry.

They were just stepping onto the path again when Liam suddenly stopped, eyes wide. "Wait—your phone."

"What?"

"You and Tam... didn't you have 'Find My' switched on?"

Eden blinked. Then her hand flew into her jacket pocket, yanking out her phone. *Of course. Why hadn't she thought of that? Stupid.*

Her fingers moved quickly over the screen, breath held tight as she waited for the map to load. For a moment, all she could see was their own location, a small blinking dot in the trees.

Then—

"She's here," Eden whispered, voice trembling. "She's still here."

Liam leaned in. "Where?"

Eden pointed at the glowing screen. "Just ahead. Maybe a couple hundred metres that way." She tilted the phone

slightly in the direction the guard had walked. “Near the hotspot.”

They looked at each other.

No words were needed.

They started walking. Quietly. Careful not to step on branches and twigs. Every footfall pressing into damp forest floor, hearts heavy with hope and dread.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The forest deepened around them as they moved further from the road. The air was damp, heavy with the scent of moss and old rain, every branch and root seeming to reach out as if to trip them or slow them down. Eden led, her eyes flicking constantly between the glowing screen and the shadowed woods around them.

They were close.

Then, as they rounded a slight bend in the path, she stopped short.

“This is it,” she whispered, glancing down at the pulsing dot on her phone. “It says she’s right here.”

The trees around them stood in still, watchful silence. Nothing moved. No voices, no footsteps. Just wind brushing through damp leaves high above.

Liam looked around, scanning the forest floor. “Do you see anything? Clothes, a shoe, I don’t know—her phone?”

Eden crouched near a patch of trampled leaves, her breath caught. The earth was kicked up, leaves scattered like something—or someone—had fallen here. She leaned closer, brushing at the wet debris.

“Try calling her,” she said, her voice quiet but firm.

Liam fumbled with his phone, pressing Tam’s contact. They both stilled, holding their breath.

Then—

Bzzzzzz. Bzzzzzz.

Eden jerked upright, spinning to find the sound. It was close. Too close. She turned back, staring at the patch of disturbed ground beneath her.

Bzzzzzz.

And then she saw it. Just the corner of a case, black against the brown mulch, poking out from under a thin layer of leaves and pine needles. Eden’s hands moved quickly, brushing the storm-swept mess aside.

Tam’s phone.

She lifted it carefully, staring at it as if it might answer her questions. The screen lit up briefly, showing Liam's call still ringing.

"She dropped it," Eden said, her voice barely more than a breath. "Or... someone made her."

Liam's expression darkened. "She wouldn't leave it behind on purpose. Or would she? Like a bread crumb?"

No one said what they were both thinking: that this was the last point Tam had been, and she was now somewhere else.

Somewhere they couldn't see.

Eden looked at the crushed leaves, the broken twigs. Her fingers clenched tighter around the cold plastic of Tam's phone.

"We're close," she said. "I can feel it."

And now, she wasn't going to stop.

Eden swiped up, the screen damp beneath her thumb. Tam's passcode was easy — her birthday, reversed — and the phone unlocked with a soft click. The

background was a selfie of the three of them, all squinting into the sun on a windswept moor. Her chest ached just looking at it.

She opened the Messages app first. Nothing since yesterday. No unread notifications, no signs of an outgoing text that might give them a clue. She tried Instagram next — it barely loaded with the spotty reception, but again, no new activity. No stories, no cryptic captions.

Liam hovered behind her, peering over her shoulder. “Try the camera roll.”

Eden glanced up at him, then nodded. Her thumb moved to the Photos icon. The gallery opened. The most recent row was of shots from the day before — the cottage, Mum topless in a deckchair, Liam pulling a stupid face at breakfast.

And then—

A new thumbnail. A four-second video, timestamped earlier today.

She tapped it. The screen flickered, then filled with Tam’s face. It was dim, rain drizzling, shadows flickering across her cheeks, and she was whispering urgently, clearly in motion.

“...If you find this, I didn’t mean to go this far—” Her voice cut off sharply at the sound of a *thud*. The picture jolted sideways and then went black.

Eden’s breath caught in her throat. She watched it again, then again, frozen in place. Liam didn’t say anything at first. When the silence stretched too long, he asked quietly, “Was she being chased?”

Eden shook her head. “I don’t know. But someone found her.”

The phone felt heavier in her hand now. Water had seeped in around the edges, making the screen glitch at one corner.

She locked it and slid it into the pocket of her hoodie. Then she craned her neck back, noticing how dark the sky was already. “We need to decide what we’re doing. Because we’re out of time.”

Liam was already looking around. “If she was hiding when she filmed that, she couldn’t have gone far after. Maybe she’s still close. Or...”

He didn’t finish. Neither of them wanted to say the word *taken*.

Night had crept in like a tide, slow and unnoticed until it was suddenly everywhere.

The forest, once dim, was now black beneath the canopy. Only the faintest silver glow filtered down through the leaves from a cloud-covered moon, and even that offered no comfort. Every shape looked unfamiliar. Every sound made them pause.

Eden's arms were wrapped tightly around herself, her hoodie damp and clinging. Cold had soaked into her skin, the kind that didn't go away no matter how much she moved. She couldn't tell if she was shivering from the temperature or from everything else.

Liam walked beside her, quiet for once. His trainers squelched occasionally on the soft forest floor, but he didn't complain. Neither of them had the energy.

They hadn't spoken in a while.

They'd looped back through the hotspot, retraced the guard's steps twice, even climbed halfway up a muddy incline to try and get another glimpse of the facility. Nothing. No movement. No Tam.

At one point, Liam had muttered, "What now?" and Eden hadn't answered. Because she didn't know.

Her stomach clenched, not from hunger, but from the growing weight of dread that pressed against her ribs like a stone. Tam was smart. She wouldn't get caught. She would have found a way to contact them if she could. Unless...

She blinked hard. No. Not that. Not yet.

"We can't just keep wandering," Liam said eventually, voice low and tired. "We're walking in circles. If she's out here... she's not close anymore."

Eden stopped, arms still folded, eyes fixed on nothing. The trees stretched around them like a cage. It smelled like wet bark and dead leaves.

For the first time, the thought surfaced in her mind fully formed.

What if we're already too late?

She didn't say it. Couldn't. But Liam must have seen something on her face, because he stepped closer and touched her arm, gently.

"We'll think of something tomorrow," he said. "Maybe... maybe we camp out somewhere. Wait until morning."

She nodded faintly, though she wasn't sure what that meant either. Her fingers curled tighter around the fabric of her sleeves.

They had come looking for Tam.

And now they were lost, too.

Chapter Twenty-Five

They found shelter where the forest thinned near a slope, where the roots of an old tree had curled out from the earth like fingers, leaving a shallow, hollowed space beneath. It wasn't much, but it was far from the facility and it broke the wind, and that was something.

Eden sat with her back against the gnarled trunk, knees drawn up, arms wrapped tightly around them. Liam crouched nearby, rummaging in his backpack with care. The phone's torch cast a thin cone of light, making everything feel more still somehow—like the world outside its glow didn't exist.

"I've got some cereal bars," he said, unwrapping one and offering it to her.

She took it without a word, then pulled out her phone. The screen lit her face in a pale wash, and for a moment she hesitated, thumb hovering over the call button.

“You’re going to tell Mum?” Liam asked softly.

“She deserves to know.” Eden didn’t sound entirely convinced. “I just... I don’t want her to panic.”

Liam shifted a little closer. “Ask her for money, yeah? For binoculars. We’ll need them.”

Eden gave a tiny nod and tapped the button. The phone rang, twice.

“Eden?” Mum’s voice came through, tight and sharp. “Is she—have you—?”

“We found her phone,” Eden said gently. “Not her. It was on the ground in the forest nearby. We think she might’ve been caught, or—maybe she dropped it while hiding. There’s a short video. It cuts off really suddenly.”

There was a heavy silence on the other end. Eden could almost hear Mum's thoughts racing.

“I’m calling the police,” she said.

“Mum, wait,” Eden said quickly. “Please. If they really have her, and the police start poking around... what if they move her? Hide her deeper? Dismiss her?”

Mum let out a sound that was half-sigh, half-stifled sob. “So what do you expect me to do?”

“Just hold off a little while. Let us try to find something—proof. We’re not just sitting here. We’re planning.”

Another pause. “Where are you even staying?”

“Somewhere dry. We’ll manage,” Eden said carefully. “And Mum... we need some money. For supplies. Binoculars, maybe a charger if I can find one.”

“Of course,” Mum said immediately. “I’ll send what I can. But Eden... you can’t fix this on your own.”

“I’m not on my own. I’ve got Liam.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Mum’s voice, softer now: “Just be safe, love. Please. Both of you.”

Eden blinked hard against the sting in her eyes. “We will.”

The call ended without fanfare. She let the phone drop to her lap, screen still glowing faintly.

“She’s transferring some,” Eden said, voice small. “We can check shops first thing.”

“Good,” Liam murmured. He handed her a second cereal bar without asking, and she took it with a half-hearted smile.

They shared what little they had—some trail mix, a packet of dried fruit, a couple more bars—eating in silence except for the occasional rustle of wrappers. When they were finished, they huddled together in the hollow, their backs to the wind.

It wasn’t comfortable. It wasn’t warm. But it was better than nothing. Liam climbed down behind her and they almost spooned to share their warmth.

Eden tucked her head against Liam’s shoulder, listening to the forest settle around them. No birds. No wind now. Just the weight of the night pressing in.

“We’ll find her,” Liam said quietly.

Eden didn’t reply. But she didn’t pull away either.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The sun was still very low in the sky when Tam pulled out from the gravel drive, but the clouds had gathered on the horizon, dark and expectant. The headlights cut through the faint daylight as she guided the car down the quiet country road.

She hadn't left a proper note until the very last minute, scrawling it with a shaking hand on a scrap of paper from the kitchen drawer. *Sorry, Mum. I promise I'll be careful.* She meant it. She *was* being careful — or at least, as careful as she could be.

But careful didn't mean doing nothing.

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel as the trees thinned out and the hedgerows blurred into motion. The tyres hummed softly beneath her, and for a moment, she let the rhythm of the road settle the noise in her head.

She hadn't been able to sleep. Not properly. It was a mix of Eden tossing and turning and her own inner eye showing her the fenced-in pen. The children inside it.

Tam swallowed hard and blinked at the road. She wasn't stupid — she knew how reckless it was to go alone. She could practically hear Eden's voice in her head: *You promised you wouldn't.*

But that was just it. She hadn't promised *not* to go. Only not to go alone. And if she told them she wanted to, if she even hinted at it... Eden would have come. Liam, too. And that wasn't fair. Not after everything they'd already been through.

So she had lied by omission. Again. But it wasn't in her nature to sit still, to wait.

"I'm not trying to be a hero," she muttered aloud, as if saying it made it more true. "Just trying to do something. Anything."

They didn't have proof. And without it, no one would believe them. Not the police. Not the papers. No one. But if she could get closer — really close — maybe she could film the kids in the pen with her phone. Or at least the guards or something else. Something solid. Something that would make it real to the world.

Her thoughts kept circling back to Eden. The way she'd looked yesterday, quiet and lost in her own mind. That small, brave nod when Tam had said *we go back*. Eden wasn't made for this kind of fear. She carried it, yes — carried it all the time — but it wasn't meant to be hers. Not alone. Tam wanted to take some of the weight, if she could.

The drizzle turned into a proper rainfall as she passed the sign for Alderley Edge. Gentle at first, a misty sheet against the windscreen. She flicked the wipers on and leaned forward slightly, watching for the dip in the stone wall, the faint pull-off near the unbuilt observatory.

“This is stupid,” she whispered. “And I’m doing it anyway.”

Because someone had to.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The dawn came grey and sluggish, leaking light through a blanket of clouds. Eden stirred beneath the crinkled foil of the emergency blanket, sending Liam a grateful thought that he had put it in the backpack. She was stiff and aching from the night on the forest floor. Her back protested as she sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with the heel of one hand.

Liam was already awake, crouched by the base of a tree, trying to warm his hands with the last of the heat from the tea flask. He looked tired but alert, eyes scanning the woods beyond, as if expecting someone to step through the mist at any moment.

“She didn’t come back,” he said softly.

Eden didn’t reply straight away. She hadn’t really dared hoping for a miracle like that. So she just nodded, then

reached for her phone. Still no messages. No signal, either. She let it drop back into her lap.

“She was probably caught where we found her phone,” Liam continued, finally breaking the silence. “If they’ve got guards doing patrols in the woods... she wouldn’t have had many places to hide.”

Eden hugged her knees to her chest, the foil blanket slipping off one shoulder. “But we need to get over there. Get closer.”

They both fell quiet again, the truth of it settling heavy between them.

After a moment, Eden stood up and brushed herself off. “We need a safer way to watch the place. Somewhere they can’t patrol easily.”

Liam followed her gaze to the other side of the facilities. Perhaps a mile or more away. Up through the trees, towards the hilltop where the faded sign for the observatory still leaned, even though they couldn’t see it from here. She remembered the way she’d had to stand on her toes just to catch a glimpse of the facility through a break in the trees.

“If we go up there,” she murmured, “we might see enough. Not everything. But... something. And they can’t see us.”

Liam nodded. "It's high ground. Easy to spot movement. And if we're careful, we can blend in. Just some hikers or something."

Eden gave a wry smile. "Hikers who happen to be camping in a field with binoculars pointed at a secret compound."

"Well, we'll need to act natural," he said, shouldering his backpack. "Get the lay of the land first. Then... we figure out what to do."

She stood too, shaking off the stiffness, and pulled her phone out. "But first we need to find some camping gear."

Liam wiggled to get the backpack over the other shoulder as well. "Right. Let's get what we need first — binoculars, sleeping bags, maybe a tent."

Eden slipped her phone back into her pocket and glanced toward the town's edge through the thinning trees. "There's a 'Go Nature' shop near the centre. They should have everything."

They moved carefully back through the woods, mindful of their footsteps, and doing a big circle around the compound. The forest still heavy with early morning mist. The quiet weight of what lay ahead settled on

them again, but now edged with a small thread of resolve and hope.

Back on the hill, they unpacked their gear under the dull grey sky. The small two-person tent was a tight fit, but it would keep the worst of the wind off them. Liam carefully unfolded the camping stool and set it near the edge of the clearing.

“It’s not much, but it gets us up enough to see past those trees,” he said, nodding toward the fenced pen between the buildings far below. Eden settled onto the stool, binoculars raised, eyes sharp.

They took turns keeping watch, their voices low when they spoke, sharing silent glances in the fading light. Shadows lengthened, and the forest seemed to hold its breath around them.

From their vantage point, they watched as a few cars pulled into the compound—clean, unmarked vehicles with no signs of identification, probably the employees’ own cars. Staff emerged, moving briskly but without urgency. Other cars started to move out. The staff that had ended their shift perhaps.

A small delivery truck arrived at a side entrance, unloading crates quickly before slipping away. Still, no

sign of the children they had seen before, no movement in the fenced pen.

Each arrival and departure sent a ripple of tension through them, as if the facility itself was a living thing, watching back.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Tam rolled quietly to a stop at the pull-off beside the faded observatory sign. The sky was heavy and low, the thick clouds swallowing any hint of sunlight. She cut the engine and sat still for a moment, the weight of what she was about to do pressing down on her chest.

With a steadying breath, she grabbed her backpack, slung it over one shoulder, and stepped out. The air was cool and smelled faintly of damp earth. She looked toward the hill where the observatory should have been—a gentle rise dotted with trees that blocked a clear view of the facility below.

She moved cautiously toward the stone wall lining the roadside, spotting the small dip where the earth had been disturbed long ago. Ducking through, she slipped into the woods, her footsteps muffled by layers of moss and fallen leaves.

The forest felt alive—each crack of a twig and whisper of wind made her pulse quicken. She kept low, eyes scanning the shadows between the trunks. No signs of guards yet, but she knew better than to let her guard down. Every sound felt magnified in the stillness, every breath a secret she didn't want the woods to share.

Tam pressed onward, deeper into the trees, seeking any sign of the compound—and hoping against hope that she could find a way in without being seen.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Eden sat cross-legged on the little mound on the hill, her notebook resting carefully on her knees. She scribbled down the latest details. Liam stood beside her on the camping stool, scanning the treeline with the binoculars, his jaw tight with tension. Eden flicked through the pages, and recapped.

“The last car was about an hour ago,” Eden said quietly. “A white van with a logo for some laundering company. They dropped off what looked like bags of laundry, maybe uniforms. Then there was a delivery truck with fresh produce — fruits and vegetables, I think. And an IT company van from Manchester showed up earlier, but no one else since.”

Liam nodded slowly. “No new arrivals means they’re probably planning for all of that to arrive at certain

hours of the day, to not have someone come while the kids are in the pen.”

Eden bit her lip, closing her notebook. “It feels like we’re in a waiting game now. You’re prolly right. No kids have been in the pen today — at least none we can see.”

The two exchanged a look — equal parts worry and determination.

“We keep watching,” Liam said firmly, as he sat down on the stool, resting the binoculars on his knees. “Find the rhythm of the place.”

Eden’s fingers drummed lightly on the cover of her notebook. “I’m going to keep the log updated every hour. We have to be ready for whatever comes next.”

The woods around them stood silent, heavy with shadows as the sun began to dip lower, the sky turning a steely gray. The quiet stretched long and thin — every rustle of leaves, every distant birdcall amplified in the stillness — a constant reminder of the unknown waiting just beyond their sight.

After another long hour of tense silence, Eden’s gaze snapped to a sudden movement near the edge of the compound. A cluster of figures appeared, shuffling

through a gate and into the fenced pen between the buildings.

She waved Liam over, and while he wouldn't be able to see any details he stood next to her and stretched trying to look over the treetops.

The children moved slowly, aimlessly, as if caught in a fog. Their steps were uneven, their heads turning without purpose. The air around them felt heavy, charged with something wrong.

Eden's breath hitched as she focused on one girl who suddenly crumpled to her knees, collapsing without warning. Another girl came over, her movements smoother, less mechanical — but still distant, detached.

Eden squinted through the binoculars. "Wait... that brown shoulder-length hair..." Her voice cracked with disbelief. "That's Tam."

Eden's heart twisted. Tam wasn't quite like the others — her movements less robotic, a bit more fluid, lifelike, still clinging on. But the way they all moved, so vacant and confused, sent a chill straight through her.

"Tam," Eden whispered, voice barely audible over the rising wind. "She's here." She looked through the binoculars again. Tam's clothes were muddy and dirty but still in a much better condition than the other kids.

It looked like none of them had had a shower in a very long time.

Neither of them spoke after that, the weight of what they'd seen pressing down hard. The kids paced within the pen, trapped in a silent limbo — and everything about it screamed that this was far from over.

Chapter Thirty

Tam's eyes scanned the facility through the dense trees, heart pounding with a mix of fear and determination. The quiet hum of activity in the distance only sharpened her focus. She moved cautiously, every sound amplified in the heavy forest air.

Suddenly, a faint rustle behind her—a soft footstep, barely noticeable. Her heart lurched. She bolted forward, yanking out her phone and fumbling to start recording. She got only a couple of seconds of shaky footage before strong arms clamped over her mouth and throat, dragging her back with brutal force.

A sharp, chemical scent filled her nose—familiar and deadly. Her mind screamed a warning as the unmistakable smell of ether washed over her.

“No...” she tried to struggle, but her limbs betrayed her. Darkness crept in at the edges of her vision, swallowing everything whole.

The last thing she registered was the cold grip tightening, the fading warmth of the forest slipping away as unconsciousness claimed her once again.

Chapter Thirty-One

The kids had only been outside for ten—fifteen minutes when a sharp shout split the quiet, jerking Eden’s head up. She moved the binoculars slightly, just in time to catch a sudden shift in the stillness—then came the flurry of hurried footsteps.

“Can you see?” Liam whispered, tension tightening his jaw as he scanned the scene. “Is it Tam?”

A cluster of staff emerged from the main building, their voices raised—sharp and urgent, though the words didn’t carry. The kids in the pen, who’d been drifting in slow, aimless patterns, were suddenly herded with quiet efficiency. They moved faster now, but not naturally—like puppets responding to an invisible string, staggering across the dirt with vacant eyes. Something was happening, but from this distance, it was impossible to tell what.

Eden's breath hitched as she watched the children being funneled toward the smaller building at the back of the compound — the one they'd barely noticed before.

"They're being taken inside," she said quietly, heart pounding. "But why the sudden rush?"

Liam didn't answer, eyes fixed on the group. The air between them thickened with unspoken fears as the reality of the facility's cold control settled heavier around them.

Eden pulled her notebook closer, the weight of the moment sharpening her focus. "We need to get closer," she said, tapping the page. "Maybe even inside that smaller building where they're taking the kids."

Liam raised an eyebrow. "Right. And how exactly do you plan to do that? Sneak inside the laundry company's van tomorrow?" His voice sarcastic. "Think no one's going to notice if two kids just waltz out of their delivery truck?"

Eden met his gaze, unfazed. "Okay, wise guy. Then what's your brilliant idea?"

He shrugged, a slow grin tugging at his lips. “I’m just saying, we need a plan that doesn’t get us caught in a van full of dirty laundry.”

She smiled back, a spark of determination in her eyes.

“How about a van full of IT equipment, Wi-Fi whisperer?” her smile became wider as Liam turned her head and rewarded her with a completely confused look. A plan was forming in her head.

Liam blinked, clearly caught off guard by the nickname. “Wi-Fi whisperer? Really?” He smirked but didn’t deny it. “Alright, I’m listening. What’s the plan?”

Eden leaned in, lowering her voice as she tapped at her phone. “I’m looking up that IT company now—the one from my notes. They’re based just south of Manchester. If we can get a cab there and sneak into their car park, grab one of their vans... we might be able to drive straight into the facility tonight.”

She paused, eyes gleaming. “Remember earlier? The IT guy was parked right outside the big building’s gate. The gate was left open while he was there. That’s our way in.”

Liam nodded slowly, the pieces falling into place.
“Okay... I like this. Nighttime, less alert staff, and a car with legit access. Let’s do it.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Tam's eyes fluttered open, the dull, sterile scent of disinfectant filling her nostrils. Her head throbbed and her vision swam slightly as she tried to make sense of the dim, unfamiliar room around her. The cold, hard surface beneath her felt unforgiving — a metal table or narrow cot — and the faint hum of fluorescent lights buzzed overhead.

She lay still, listening.

Voices murmured nearby, clipped and clinical. A man's tone was sharp, tinged with frustration.

"She's not responding as expected," the voice said. "We need to probe deeper — find her behavioural triggers. That is, if she was ever admitted to Redhall."

Tam's heart hammered. The words "admitted" and "third ward" floated faintly through the conversation.

“She might have been transferred there,” the first voice muttered, voice thick with irritation.

The arrogant doctor scoffed. “She isn’t reacting. But we will let Doctor Bainright examine her when he returns. She isn’t on the regular medication schedule of course, so I’ve given her just enough to keep her sedated until morning — without killing her.”

He added, almost with a smirk, “It’s Easter holidays; regular staff are off duty. The head doctor returns the day after next. He’ll set up her meds properly then.”

Tam clenched her fists beneath the thin blanket covering her, a swirl of fear and determination flooding through her despite the haze clouding her mind. She wasn’t out of this yet — not by a long shot.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eden spread her notes across the ground around her, the written details of the IT company's location, staff schedules, and her rudimentary drawings of the compound staring back at them in black and white.

"We need to be surgical about this," she said, voice low but steady. "When we get inside, your first job is to locate Tam in their system — find out exactly where she's being held."

Liam nodded, already running through the mental checklist of hacking into unfamiliar networks. "And the doors," he added. "If I can override their access controls, we can move around without tripping alarms or getting stopped by guards."

Eden smiled, the spark of determination shining in her eyes. “Exactly. You’re the key to getting us in and out without getting caught.”

Liam raised an eyebrow. “No pressure.”

She gave him a playful shove. “None at all.”

They both knew this was just the beginning, but for the first time in days, they had a real plan — and a real chance.

Eden folded her notes and looked at Liam with a sly grin. “Alright, Wi-Fi Whisperer — assuming you can get us inside, what about the car? Think you can handle driving it?”

Liam smirked, leaning back against the chair. “You don’t know much about me, do you? I can drive just fine. Let’s just say I’ve had some experience that would surprise you.”

She raised an eyebrow, amused. “Well, good. Because I’m not about to drive us into a high-security compound after the last stunt Tam pulled.”

He chuckled. “Fair enough. I’ll get us in and out without a scratch.”

Their eyes met, the weight of the plan settling between them — nerve-wracking, but necessary.

The sky deepened to a bruised purple as twilight settled over Alderley Edge. Liam stood by Mum's scratched-up car, phone pressed to his ear, calling for a cab. The distant rumble of tyres on wet pavement from the larger road behind them was a small comfort in the heavy quiet.

Eden leaned against the car, her breath steady now, no longer tangled in the fog of anxiety that had clouded her earlier. The tight knot in her chest had loosened. With every detail they worked through, every step of the plan she helped shape, she felt herself growing stronger — no longer just swept along by fear or someone else's decisions.

"This is our move," she whispered to herself, eyes scanning the darkening road. "We're not waiting anymore."

Liam glanced over and caught her eye. There was something fierce and steady in her gaze that hadn't been there before. "Cab's coming," he said softly.

Together, they stood in the fading light — two pieces of a plan, finally feeling in control of their own story.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Tam's head felt heavy, each thought slowing like a weight pressing down on her mind. The edges of the room wavered, the dull light seeming to pulse faintly. She was led through sterile corridors, her footsteps unsteady but still deliberate. They pushed open the door to a small, bare room —much smaller than her cell in Redhall, just a bed against one wall, the faint hum of silence filling the space.

The haze thickened. She lay back on the bed, eyes half-closed, the ceiling melting into a blur. She fought to hold on, but the drug pulled her under, soft and relentless.

She had no recollection of falling asleep—or waking up again.

Tam's legs felt heavy as she was herded along a narrow path lined by cold metal fences. The dull grey sky pressed down on them, making the world feel smaller, tighter. Around her, other kids shuffled like shadows, their eyes vacant, movements slow and mechanical.

Suddenly, one girl stumbled and fell to her knees on the dirt close to her. Tam didn't hesitate — but it all happened in slow motion. She knelt beside her, offering a hand. "Come on, you're okay," she whispered, her voice barely breaking the silence.

She walked around aimlessly in the pen, following after the girl. Ready to help her up again if needed. Suddenly a sharp cry cut through the stillness. Another girl, eyes wild and desperate, snapped out a shout, breaking the fragile quiet. Guards appeared quickly, their heavy boots thudding against the ground as they closed in. One grabbed the shouting girl roughly, silencing her with a harsh grip before dragging her away toward the darker buildings.

The remaining children, including Tam, were guided back toward the smaller building at the back, their movements subdued once more. Tam's heart pounded, but her face remained calm as they were ushered inside, the heavy door closing behind them with a final, echoing thud.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The cab dropped them a short distance away, leaving them on a quiet stretch of pavement in the heart of the industrial area.. The small office building ahead was unassuming—glass windows reflecting the dull afternoon light, a modest sign declaring the company name. A handful of cars and vans sat parked in neat rows, all emblazoned with the same blue and white logo.

Liam and Eden stood side by side, scanning the empty lot. No movement. No sign of anyone coming or going. The silence felt heavy, like the calm before a storm.

“What now?” Liam whispered, eyes darting to the door and back to the street.

Eden bit her lip, weighing their options. “We need to get inside and find some car keys unless you can jump start it?”

She glanced at Liam, determination burning in her gaze. He shook his head. “I could, but these cars are newer. They have immobilizers.” He didn’t explain and Eden didn’t ask.

They stayed frozen for a moment, the weight of what lay ahead settling around them like a chill.

Liam crouched behind a delivery van at the edge of the carpark, fingers flying over his phone screen. The glow from the device lit up his focused face as he messaged members of his study group, IT security courses had a tendency of attracting people who wanted to be hackers. He didn’t mention their situation but pleaded for any advice on bypassing the immobilizer.

The hum of distant traffic filled the evening. Liam’s heart thumped, every minute stretching with the weight of their plan.

Suddenly, Eden’s soft humming cut through the stillness. Liam’s head snapped up.

She appeared around the corner, a confident smile playing on her lips. She casually dangled a set of car keys from her finger, swinging them like a prize.

“Got it,” she said, voice low but triumphant.

Liam blinked, disbelief and relief mixing in his expression. “How?”

She shrugged, stepping closer. “The office window was left open. I just slipped in, grabbed the keys, and snuck out. Easy.” She clicked the button on the key fob, and a car’s indicators flashed.

Liam let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “You’re something else.”

The engine hummed softly as they sat parked on the side of a dimly lit road just outside Manchester. Liam was a bit comfier with the clutch now and the car moved smoother for him.

The rain had stopped, but thick clouds still loomed overhead, casting long shadows caused by the moonshine, over the car’s interior. Liam gripped the steering wheel, his fingers tapping nervously as he pulled out his phone.

“Alright,” he muttered, glancing at Eden. “Time to make the call.”

He dialed the number for the Northbridge Resource Centre, holding the phone steady against his ear. After a few rings, a gruff voice answered.

“Northbridge Resource Centre.” Nothing more, not inviting for conversation.

Liam swallowed hard, forcing his voice to sound casual – and more grown-up. “This is Dale, calling from the IT company. We had a bit of a mix-up earlier today with some equipment at your factory. Looks like the problem wasn’t truly fixed.”

There was a pause, the line crackling faintly.

“We’re sending someone to fix the issue, he should be there shortly.”

A short silence, a crackle on the line. “Fine,” the man grunted. “I’ll notice the front desk.”

Liam hung up, his heart pounding. Eden gave him a small nod.

“Step one,” she said quietly. “Now, let’s go rescue Tam.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

The little hatchback rolled steadily down the narrow access road, the dull hum of the engine swallowed by the darkness. Eden shifted out of the passenger seat and curled up, cramped, in the cargo area, hiding under a jacket that smelled faintly of sweat, her heart hammering in her chest as Liam drove with deliberate calm, passing the main guard house.

There was no movement from the guard house. But he did see a car parked in the same fashion as last time. Nobody followed them, but they should be expected to arrive, so perhaps it was the phone call doing its magic.

Liam kept his eyes sharp, steering toward the side entrance they'd scouted—the one the IT van had used that morning.

As they neared the gate, Liam had to stop the car for a few seconds, eyeing the mechanism with a flicker of doubt. Then, almost imperceptibly, the gate began to slide open—slow, quiet, and welcoming. Liam eased the car forward and drove past the threshold, heading straight for the same spot where the IT van had parked earlier that day.

Just then, a guard appeared in the doorway beside the large loading bay door, stepping out with a tired expression. Liam lowered his window and forced a disgruntled sigh. “Great, working evenings again,” he muttered, voice low but loud enough for the guard to hear. “Company apprentice perks, huh?”

The guard gave a brief nod, clearly used to hearing complaints and not in the mood to entertain. “Just park by the loading bay door,” he said, his tone flat. Without another word, he disappeared back inside.

The oversized door began its slow, grinding slide upwards. For a second Liam considered driving inside, but since the car had been parked outside earlier that day, he didn’t dare improvise or stray from the script. He glanced back at Eden, who was still tucked away in the cargo hold, her eyes sharp and alert.

The game was on.

Liam grabbed a battered toolbox from the back of the car—almost identical to the one the technician had used earlier. He took a deep breath, then stepped out, toolbox in hand.

“First time here,” he muttered casually to the guard, trying to sound nonchalant but feeling his heart hammer in his chest.

The guard gave a half-smile, clearly used to rookies stumbling through. “Right this way,” he said, leading Liam inside through the cargo bay door where they disappeared in the dark.

Meanwhile, Eden slipped silently from the cargo area and melted into the shadows. With careful steps, she followed behind, she dug into the other side of the building noticing it was a big storage room filled with shelves.

Rows of metal shelves stretched out, stacked with clothes, toiletries, and other supplies. A faint smell of washing powder and dust hung in the air.

She paused, taking a careful look around. The room felt familiar—almost like the supply room at Redhall, but wrong. She realised it was because she had entered it the wrong way around—from the backside.

She pressed herself against a shelf, peering through the half-open door to see the guard usher Liam into a small PC room down the hall.

Liam stepped into the cramped room, the door creaking softly behind him. Against one wall, several outdated PC consoles hummed quietly, their screens flickering with lines of code and system prompts. A large whiteboard dominated another wall, covered with neatly handwritten directives, schedules, and staff instructions. The handwriting was precise but bore the marks of countless revisions and crossed-out notes.

In one corner, a towering stack of moving boxes threatened to topple over. Peeking out from the worn cardboard were piles of printed journals, patient files, and stacks of printer paper. On top of the boxes, smaller items cluttered the surface—an old stapler, empty plastic chartequers, a box of paper clips, and a few scattered pens.

Liam ran a hand through his hair and set down the toolbox. He had work to do. The guard turned around without a word and left, leaving Liam alone in the poorly lit room.

He slid onto a creaky chair in front of the nearest console and powered it on. The system hummed to life, its interface surprisingly modern compared to the cluttered room. He quickly bypassed the login prompt, fingers moving confidently across the keyboard. All his experience from classes — and his connections with the hacker group — made navigating these systems rather easy for him.

Within moments, a digital map of the facility appeared on the screen, detailed and clear. Various rooms and corridors were labelled — wards, offices, security stations, and more. Liam's eyes scanned for any mention of Tam's name or a room assignment.

There it was. A list of room numbers and names filled the screen. His eyes moved quickly down—name after name—until one stood out. Not a name. Just: *Patient*. He clicked. The map loaded. A section lit up in pale blue: **Patient Quarters. Ward B — Room 8.**

Liam heard the door creak behind him and turned, half expecting to be caught—only to see Eden.

“That's where she is,” he muttered, pushing his chair aside so she could see the screen.

Eden's breath caught. For the first time in hours, her expression shifted—something fragile and hopeful breaking through the focus and worry.

Liam's fingers flew over the keyboard, pulling up the door control interface. He found the electronic lock panel for Ward B's entrance, but no matter what commands he tried, the system stubbornly refused to budge.

"Locked down tight," he muttered, frustration creeping into his voice. "Looks like they've fortified this place better than I thought."

Just then, footsteps out in the storage room.

"Shit," Liam hissed under his breath and quickly closed the map on the screen.

Eden had been moving quietly around the small room while Liam worked, and now stood near a cluttered corner. At the sound, she instinctively ducked behind a towering stack of boxes and dusty gear, her heart pounding as the guard's footsteps echoed closer.

The guard stepped in, scanning the room briefly. His gaze hovered near the cluttered corner—but after a moment, he turned and moved over to Liam.

Liam held his breath, eyes locked on the screen, pretending to be absorbed in his work.

Just as the guard was about to leave, he paused by the door and glanced back at Liam with a half-smile, half-impatient look.

“You planning to spend the entire night in here fixing things, or what?” he asked, his tone teasing but edged with genuine impatience.

Liam swallowed his frustration and shrugged, leaning into the role.

“Apprentice’s curse,” he said with a tired grin. “I’m struggling a bit, but I’ve got it under control.”

The guard’s expression softened. He gave a small, sympathetic chuckle. “Poor kid sent out in the evening shift, huh? If you’re bored, maybe you can sort these boxes while you’re at it.”

With a casual kick, the guard nudged one of the stacked boxes. A pile of loose papers and small items toppled over the edge, spilling onto the floor—some of it landing right in Eden’s lap. He just shrugged, standing there a moment, debating whether it was worth tidying up.

Eden, unaware of his brief deliberation, blinked down at the unexpected bounty: among the scattered items lay a handful of keycards, glinting faintly in the dim light.

The guard finally stepped out, closing the door behind him. Eden's heart hammered in her chest as she quickly emerged from behind the boxes. In her hand was a keycard.

Eden's voice was steady, dripping with just enough mock professionalism to catch Liam's surprised glance.

"Do you think you could activate this one for me, dear?" she asked, holding up the keycard with a smile.

"Unbelievable," Liam said with a laugh, shaking his head. "You dive into a mess and pop back out with a keycard. Of course..."

She smirked at his response and pulled out the notepad from the front pocket of her hoodie. She bent over and quickly sketched the map from the monitor—careful to capture all the corridors and key points. She closed the notepad and looked at him.

Meanwhile, Liam dived deeper into the software, fingers flying over the keyboard. Moments later, he looked up with a satisfied grin.

“Got it. Made you a Warden-level card—access to every floor and door.”

Eden’s eyes sparkled with determination. “Perfect.” She slipped the new card into her pocket, gave Liam a quick nod, and slipped out of the room, the notepad clutched tightly in one hand.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Eden crept through the maze of aisles, the faint hum of the building's ventilation echoing softly around her. Each step brought her closer to the narrow door at the far end—the threshold to the corridor beyond.

Her breath hitched as she reached out for the keycard reader. A cold shiver traced down her spine, and her fingers trembled just slightly. Beyond that door lay halls not unlike the ones where she'd once been trapped, the sterile, unyielding walls that had felt like a prison to her. The weight of memories pressed in—the cold fluorescent lights, the faint antiseptic scent, the overwhelming sense of helplessness.

A flicker of panic threatened to rise, but she forced herself to swallow it down. This time, she wasn't alone. This time, she had a plan.

The door creaked open, letting a thin shaft of dim light spill into the storage room as Eden stepped into the corridor. Her heart thundered in her chest—part fear, part memory.

Her fingers tightened around the keycard as she approached the door ahead. The scanner remained silent, then with a soft click, the lock released. Eden exhaled a shaky breath and pushed the door open.

The corridor beyond stretched into shadow, darker than the one she just came from, the overhead lights dimmed or perhaps broken. The darkness swallowed the end of the hall like a mouth waiting to close. Every echo of her footsteps stirred ghosts she wasn't ready to face, but still, she moved forward.

She checked the map quickly, making sure she was at the right door. Swiping the keycard, the lock clicked open, and a sharp gust of cold air hit her face. Heart pounding, she sprinted low and fast across the narrow gap between buildings, every shadow a possible threat, until she reached the door to the patient ward.

Inside it felt even darker after being outside in the moonlight. Eden stepped forward and broke into a run, the sound of her footsteps echoing sharply against the

cold walls. Every heartbeat thundered in her ears as the shadows seemed to close in around her, but she didn't look back.

She was here to fight back.

Meanwhile in the PC room, Liam's fingers flew across the keyboard, finally breaking through the digital barriers to the personnel files. His eyes scanned the screen quickly, searching for one name above all others—his mother's.

There it was. The records showed she had been dismissed in late 2015. Liam's heart tightened as he scrolled to the end of her file. There, in stark black and white, was a note that made him freeze: "Found dead in Whitechapel, 2016/01/24." A cold weight settled deep in his chest, the reality sinking in—someone whose life had been quietly erased, forgotten by the world.

The screen blurred as a heavy silence settled over the room, the weight of that cold fact pressing down on him. He plunged into the mess on the floor, pushing keycards and staplers aside as he searched frantically. Then he remembered the toolbox from the IT car. Rummaging through it, he quickly found what he

needed — a USB key. Without hesitation, he plugged it in and started copying files.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Tam sat on the edge of the narrow bed, her mind clearing slowly from the haze that had dulled her senses. She hugged her knees, trying to shrink away from the world.

The room was small and bare, much more sterile than the one at Redhall, and here it felt colder—making Redhall seem like a boarding school in comparison. It was as if she was just being held here to be caged and alive. The faint hum of distant footsteps and muffled voices outside only deepened the oppressive stillness. Despite the bleakness, a small part of her clung to the hope that she was still alive, still fighting.

Tam's heart jumped as the footsteps halted just outside her door. The silence stretched, heavy and sharp, each

second feeling like an eternity. Then, the soft but unmistakable *click* of the door unlocking echoed through the quiet. She swallowed hard, tension tightening every muscle, waiting for what—or who—would come through.

Eden moved cautiously down the dim corridor, the faint hum of fluorescent lights flickering above her. The walls were bare, and the silence pressed in around her like a weight. There were no numbers on the doors, no clear signs to guide her—just endless stretches of identical, dull grey metal.

She pulled out her hastily drawn map and glanced at it again, tracing the route with a finger. Every door looked the same: cold, unmarked, and uninviting. Her heart pounded as she tried to steady her breathing, reminding herself to stay focused. Getting lost here wasn't an option—not when Tam's freedom depended on her finding the right room.

Eden pressed forward into the next corridor, trying to steady the quickening rhythm of her footsteps. She counted the doors as she passed—one, two, three...—matching each one against the rough sketch in her notebook. When she reached what should be the right door, she paused, her breath catching in her throat.

The door loomed silent and unmarked. Her hand hovered just inches from the card reader, hesitation rooting her in place. Was this really the right door? What if it wasn't? What if opening it brought danger instead of answers?

Her heart thudded in her chest, every second stretching out as she weighed her next move.

Eden took a deep breath and finally pushed the door open. Inside, Tam looked up, eyes wide and confused at first. Then, recognition dawned—her face lighting up with a fragile hope.

“Eden?” she whispered.

Without another word, they closed the distance, wrapping each other in a fierce, trembling hug. Their lips met in a brief, urgent kiss, a mix of relief and longing.

Eden pulled back slightly, her eyes scanning Tam's face and dirty clothes. Shock hit her—Tam looked so fragile, so worn down by everything she'd been through. A silent ache settled deep in Eden's chest as she took in the full weight of her girlfriend's ordeal.

Tam's footsteps echoed softly behind Eden as they retraced her steps through the labyrinthine corridors. The faint hum of fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting shadows that danced eerily along the walls. Every creak, every distant murmur, made their hearts race, but Eden's steady pace and unwavering confidence kept them moving forward.

"Honestly," Tam whispered, her voice low and full of awe, "I don't know how you pulled this off. You just... showed up. Like some kind of miracle."

Eden glanced over her shoulder, a small, tense smile tugging at her lips. "I couldn't just sit and do nothing. I wasn't about to let them keep you in there—not when I could do something."

The tension thickened with every turn, every door they passed. They moved cautiously, aware that any moment could bring the unwelcome sight of guards or worse. The weight of uncertainty hung heavy, but Tam found strength in Eden's calm determination — it was a beacon in the oppressive gloom of the facility.

They reached the end of the corridor, the final door to the outside looming ahead. Tam's breathing was quick but quiet beside her.

Eden eased the door open a crack. The chill air bit at her face as she peered through the narrow gap. Two guards stood just outside, their silhouettes lit by the dim yellow glow of a nearby floodlight. One of them was smoking, the other gesturing lazily as they spoke in low, indistinct voices.

Tam tensed behind her. Eden held up a hand for patience, then moved it down until she found Tam's and held it, their hearts thudding as they listened. A moment later, one of the guards flicked the cigarette away and muttered something. Then, slowly, they both turned and started walking, their boots crunching faintly as they disappeared around the far corner.

Eden waited a beat longer, then glanced at Tam. "Now," she whispered.

As they neared the storage room, Eden's grip on the notepad tightened. "Almost there," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. Their breaths mingled in the silence, the anticipation almost unbearable. Every shadow could hide a threat, but together they pressed on — fueled by hope and the urgent need to reclaim freedom.

Their footsteps slowed as a murmur of voices drifted from around the corner ahead. Eden and Tam pressed themselves flat against the wall, hearts pounding, barely daring to breathe.

A couple of guards appeared, their tone low but tense.

“Did you hear? The Warden’s on site,” one said, voice thick with disbelief. “Thought he was supposed to be in Scotland for the holidays.”

Another chuckled darkly. “Yeah, must be sporting some fancy vacation gear under that badge then. But no one’s actually seen him yet. Just his card—moving around the facility like a ghost.”

The first guard sighed. “I’d rather not run into him, to be honest. But I guess they called him back after the intruder incident yesterday.”

The second gave a low grunt of agreement, and they turned, walking briskly down the corridor. Their voices drifted into faint murmurs, footsteps growing softer with each step until the silence crept back in.

Eden waited a heartbeat longer before letting out a slow breath, squeezing Tam’s hand. The danger felt closer now, sharper — but they still had to keep moving.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Meanwhile, back in the PC room, Liam's fingers flew over the keyboard as he copied all the personnel files and the journals on the kids onto a USB key. Every file he saved felt like a small victory—a piece of the puzzle, evidence that might expose the truth. He paused for a moment, breathing deeply, knowing this was more than just data; it was hope. With the USB safely tucked away, he prepared for the next step.

The guard kept returning, his footsteps echoing down the hallway every few minutes. Each time, Liam froze, heart pounding as the door creaked fully open and a shadow fell across the room. The man's casual glances weren't quite casual — they seemed to carry a quiet impatience, a silent reminder that Liam wasn't supposed to be there long.

Liam stole a glance at the clock, then at the door. Where were Eden and Tam? How much time did they have left? The tension thickened around him like the stale office air, every second stretching longer, every breath tighter.

He started slowly gathering the things he had pulled out of the toolbox and cleaning up. He was shutting the computer off as he heard steps outside again. This time they sounded different.

Eden led Tam quietly into the storage room, hearts still racing from the close call. But then, faint footsteps echoed from the other end.

“The guard,” Eden whispered, eyes scanning for a place to hide.

Shadows became their refuge as they pressed against the shelves, holding their breath as the guard’s heavy boots grew louder and then fainter as he left the storage room again.

As soon as the footsteps had faded fully away, Eden grabbed Tam’s hand. “Let’s go—now.”

They dashed through the dim aisles, adrenaline propelling them toward the PC room where Liam waited, the only hope they had for a way out.

Chapter Forty

Inside the PC room, the tension was thick as fog.

“We can’t just walk out the front door,” Tam said quietly, still holding Eden’s hand.

Eden looked between her and Liam, weighing their few, grim options. “We don’t have a better plan. We run for it. Now. Before the guard comes back.”

Liam nodded, jaw tight. “I’ll get the car ready.”

He slipped out of the room, moving fast through the storage room. The building felt like it was holding its breath. Outside, the cold night wrapped around him as he reached the little hatchback, crouched beside it for a moment looking around, then pulled the door open as quietly as he could. He slid inside, started the engine—its quiet hum sounding deafening in the

silence—then left the doors unlocked and slipped back toward the building, heart pounding.

Inside, the girls waited. Every second ticked by like a warning.

The moment Liam reappeared at the door to the PC room, his face was pale and tight with urgency. “It’s now or never,” he hissed.

Eden grabbed Tam’s hand, and the three of them bolted from the PC room, sprinting through the storage room. Footsteps echoed—guards, closer now, voices sharp and alert.

They burst through the loading bay door into the cold night, the facility lights casting harsh rectangles across the tarmac. The little hatchback stood ready, engine humming.

Liam yanked open the driver’s door. “Go, go!”

Tam scrambled into the passenger seat, arms flailing as Eden practically shoved her in. With no time to spare, Eden clambered in right after, half on Tam’s lap, slamming the door just as Liam closed the driver’s side door.

Shouts rang out behind them—guards spilling from the door, one of them raising a radio to his mouth.

“Hold on,” Liam growled. He threw the car into gear with shaking hands, foot jabbing at the clutch. The engine gave a nasty jolt—and stalled.

“No, no, no!” he muttered, twisting the key again. The engine coughed uselessly.

“Liam!” Eden hissed, crouched awkwardly over Tam’s lap as the guards drew closer. One of them had already raised a torch, its beam slicing across the car park. She fumbled for the little knob on the door and clicked it shut with a soft lock.

“I’ve got it—I’ve got it!” he said through gritted teeth, trying again. The engine sputtered once more. The torchlight flashed over the bonnet.

Then, with a roar, the engine caught.

Liam slammed the gearstick into first, tyres skidding on the tarmac as they lurched forward. The car fishtailed for a moment, gravel spitting out behind them, before it caught grip and surged ahead.

Behind them, shouts rang out, sharp and urgent, but already swallowed by the noise of the car as it tore down the access road and away into the night.

Chapter Forty-One

Headlights flared in the rear-view mirror.

“Car behind us!” Eden called, twisting in her seat to look. Through the back window, she saw two guards sprinting across the forecourt and piling into a low black estate. The engine roared to life behind them.

Liam didn’t respond, eyes locked on the narrow lane ahead as he swung the car hard to the left, tyres protesting. “Hold on,” he said, more to himself than to them.

The facility’s forecourt dropped away behind them as they sped through the main gates. No headlights ahead, no movement at the guardhouse—maybe no one had radioed ahead yet, or maybe it was empty. Either way, they were through.

The smooth tarmac gave way to crunching gravel as Liam veered off the road and into the forest, following the same rough path Tam had taken days earlier—out of ideas, but moving fast.

The car jostled and bumped as they hit the uneven surface. Eden braced herself with one hand against the dashboard, the other still holding onto Tam's arm. "Are they following?"

Liam glanced up at the mirror. The trees swallowed the road behind them, shadows thick and flickering in their rear lights. "I don't see anyone. I think... I think we lost them before we left the tarmac."

"Let's not slow down to be sure," Eden muttered, her heart still thudding wildly.

Tam shifted under her, her voice groggy. "Where... where are we?"

"Getting you out," Eden said softly, brushing a damp strand of hair from her forehead. "We're nearly there, I promise."

The road ahead wound through the thick woods, darkness pressing in on either side, but Liam kept his focus steady, knuckles white on the wheel. The chase wasn't over—not yet—but they were ahead. For now.

Branches whipped against the windows, scraping like claws as the car lurched and bucked along the overgrown trail.

Liam winced as the front bumper clipped a low-hanging branch, sending a thud through the chassis. “Sorry—sorry! These trees are everywhere!”

“You’re the one who said you could drive,” Eden muttered, gripping the handle above the window as the car swerved again and bounced over a thick root.

“I *can* drive. I just—didn’t say I was good at it,” Liam shot back, squinting through the windshield as leaves smeared across it like paint. “This track is basically a hedge maze with mud.”

There was a sudden thump, louder than the rest, and the car jerked violently to the side.

“Oh for—” Eden’s head snapped forward as the car jolted to a stop, its front end lodged against the mossy curve of a thin birch tree. The engine gave a protesting whine, and the tyres spun uselessly in the dirt.

Tam whimpered softly, still half out of it, her hands trembling where they clutched the edge of the seat.

Eden pushed the door open. “Wait, I have an idea,” she pulled her hoodie over her head, which made both Liam and Tam stare. “You too, Liam. Jumper off, under the front tyre!”

He scrambled out and did as she commandeered. As soon as both front tyres had the jumpers stretched out behind them they jumped in the car again. Eden didn’t hesitate. “Now, reverse slowly! Slowly! Ease the tyres onto the fabric.”

After a few agonising seconds and the crunch of bark giving way, the tyres found grip again. The car jolted free, spraying mud.

Back in her seat, Eden slammed the door and wiped bare arm across her forehead. “Deja vu,” she muttered, breathless. “Only last time we didn’t ram the forest.”

“Last time *Tam* drove,” Liam pointed out.

“And I didn’t hit a tree,” Tam said.

But even with the bickering, there was tension in the air—a sense of racing the clock. Behind them, the dark felt full of eyes. And ahead, freedom was still just out of reach.

The car tore out from the treeline, tyres skidding sharply as they hit the gravel edge of a narrow dirt

road—the same one Tam had used to guide them out of the forest days before.

Eden leaned forward, squinting through the windscreen. “Wait—wait, slow down!”

Liam didn’t have to ask why. Just ahead, at the junction where the forest track met the main road, two dark vehicles sat idling, their high beams blazing and casting harsh light that made it difficult to make out any clear details—perfectly positioned to block their path.

Eden squinted against the glare; it was hard to make out clearly, but she was fairly certain there were people standing around the cars. Between them, half-hidden in the shadows cast by the trees, the dull gleam of torches caught on black uniforms.

“Bloody hell,” Liam breathed, slamming on the brakes. The tyres shrieked in protest and the car almost went sideways, before grinding to a halt. “That’s why no one came after us. They were already here.”

“They were trying to trap us,” Eden said, her voice low, her heart hammering. “They knew exactly where we’d come out.”

Tam, slumped low in the passenger seat, whimpered faintly. Her eyes were half-lidded but darting, aware enough to know this wasn’t over.

Liam's fingers drummed against the steering wheel. "We can't go forward. They'll box us in. Unless—"

Eden assessed the situation. Her brain amped by the adrenaline. "Go between!"

Liam bit his lip. There was just enough room between the cars but there were people there.

"You sure?" Liam asked.

"No," she snapped. "But unless you want to explain all this to a bunch of armed guards, it's our best shot."

Liam threw the car into gear, this time less aggressive with the accelerator. Perhaps hoping the guards would step out of the way well before they got there. One of the guards ahead shouted, their voice sharp and commanding.

"Go!" Eden shouted, clutching Tam to her as the car jolted forward again, bumping forward and into the narrow space between the cars.

Chapter Forty-Two

Liam gritted his teeth and kept the wheel straight as they sped toward the narrow gap. Eden braced herself, shielding Tam as best she could. One of the guards leapt aside, shouting, just as the little car scraped between the two larger vehicles. Metal shrieked. A side mirror snapped off. For a breathless moment, Eden feared they'd hit someone—then the other guard rolled onto the back of one of the cars to avoid being run over.

Then they were through.

“Keep going!” she shouted, twisting in her seat to look behind them. One of the dark cars was already lurching into motion, pulling out onto the road after them. The other hesitated — maybe damaged, maybe boxed in — but it didn't matter. One was enough.

Liam floored it. The engine whined, pushed harder than it liked, but they gained a few precious metres before the pursuing vehicle surged forward in the rearview.

“Where now?” he barked.

Eden fumbled for her phone, but her hands were shaking too badly. “Just keep heading north! We need distance — any town, any road with traffic!”

Tam stirred faintly in her lap, groaning.

“We can’t outrun them for long,” Liam said through clenched teeth. “This thing’s barely got any guts.”

“They don’t know where we’re going,” Eden said, trying to steady herself. “They’ll expect us to go back to town.” She reconsidered. “Don’t. Take the next left — sharp turn — we’ll cut across country.”

“This really does feel like the worst kind of déjà vu—and you’re the tour guide,” Liam muttered, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

The turn came up fast. Liam yanked the wheel, and the tyres screeched again, skidding gravel before catching. The car jolted down a narrower road flanked by low stone walls and rolling fields, patchy in the moonlight. Eden could no longer see the chasing vehicle, but the pounding of blood in her ears told her it was still there.

“Eden,” Liam said suddenly, his voice lower, different.
“What if we don’t lose them?”

“We will,” she said, though her voice trembled. “We have to.”

She looked down at Tam. Her skin was pale, but her grip on Eden’s hand was a little tighter now.

“For her,” Eden added, quieter. “We’re not going back.”

But they didn’t lose them.

Eden twisted around in her seat, she had absolutely lost count of how many times she had done that on the short ride, watching the black cars closing in behind them. Her voice was sharp with urgency.

“Motorway—just get us onto the motorway!”

Liam glanced at her, pale and rattled. “What, into *traffic*?”

“Yes!” she snapped. “Too many witnesses. They won’t try anything reckless if we’re not alone.”

He didn’t argue. Instead, he swerved sharply towards the junction signposted *M56 — Manchester / Chester*,

the tyres squealing yet again, as they took the slip road. Behind them, the pursuing car hesitated at the turn.

“They’re following,” Eden muttered, eyes locked on the side mirror. “But slower now.”

Liam merged into the stream of cars, tension written in the curve of his shoulders. “So... now what?”

Eden exhaled slowly. “Now we hide in plain sight.”

Chapter Forty-Three

The road ahead stretched out, a grey ribbon of tarmac under a pale, fading sky. The car rattled every time Liam pushed it harder than it wanted to go, tyres humming beneath them. The motorway was busy, not packed, but enough cars that weaving between them added to the tension pressing down on them.

In the wing mirror, Eden could see it—the dark car, unmarked but unmistakable. It had been trailing them for several minutes now. Not speeding. Not dramatic. Just... *there*. Inching closer. Relentless.

“They’re gaining,” Liam said, barely more than a murmur. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

Eden swallowed and pulled out her phone, heart pounding. She dialled.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

“Greater Manchester Police, what is your emergency?”

“We’re—we’re being followed. On the motorway. M56. Heading east. There are people coming after us—we escaped from a facility—please.”

There was a pause. Not the kind that meant someone was thinking. The kind that said: *They don’t believe you.*

“I’m sorry—could you repeat that? You’ve escaped from where?”

“A *government* facility,” Eden hissed, trying to keep her voice down. “In Alderley Edge. They took my friend—drugged her. We’ve just broken out. We have *proof*, and now they’re trying to get us back. They’re in a black car behind us.”

Liam glanced sideways at her. “Tell them about the USB.”

“We have files—copied from their systems,” Eden added quickly. “Names, locations. Children.”

Another pause. The dark car was closer now. Switching lanes when they did. Keeping pace.

“We have no record of a government facility in Alderley Edge, miss.”

“Of course you don’t,” Eden spat, panic threading through her voice. “It’s *secret*. Look—look at the traffic cams. We’re in a dark blue hatchback with logos emblazoned on the sides. There’s a black car following us. No plates.”

The voice on the other end hesitated. “One moment, please. Stay on the line.”

Eden stared at the screen. “Don’t you dare put me on ho—”

But the line had already gone silent, apart from the soft hiss of a hold tone playing in her ear.

“They put you on hold?” Liam’s voice was tight with disbelief.

Eden nodded once, jaw clenched. “They don’t believe me.”

Outside, the black car was two lengths behind. Then one.

And still no sirens.

The hold tone stopped.

A click.

“Miss?” the voice returned, calm and officious. Too calm. “We’re currently experiencing a shortage of available units in your vicinity. I advise you to remain calm and drive to the nearest police station if you feel unsafe.”

Eden stared at her phone like it had betrayed her.

“You *advise*—?” Her voice cracked. “There are *armed men* chasing us down a motorway, and you want us to *stay calm*?!”

“I understand this is distressing,” the operator said, clearly reading from some kind of script. “But unless there is an immediate—”

“The driver is *fifteen*!” Eden shouted. “He’s not even licensed. He’s a *kid*! He’s panicking. We’re all panicking.”

Liam flinched slightly but didn’t argue. He gritted his teeth and changed lanes, pushing the car faster. The engine whined in protest.

“Check the traffic cameras again. M56. Now. You’ll see it. A kid driving. A black car behind us. Probably no plates. And if you *still* think this is a prank, just wait until we end up in a pile-up on the news.”

There was silence again. Not a disconnect—she could hear the faint rustle of movement on the other end.

Then, finally: “Please remain on the line. I’m escalating this to a supervisor.”

Eden laughed, a sound that cracked like glass. “Do that. But you’d better be quick, or there won’t be anything left *to* escalate.”

She ended the call and dropped the phone into her lap, breathing hard.

“Liam,” she said, “drive like you’re trying to *get arrested*.”

He gave a tight nod and swung into the next lane, pulling in front of a lorry with centimetres to spare. Horns blared behind them. The black car stayed with them.

Eden turned, watching it in the mirror, willing it to disappear.

It didn’t.

Chapter Forty-Four

The black car was closer now. Almost kissing their rear bumper.

“They’re going to try and ram us,” Eden said, her voice tight, eyes flicking between the mirror and the road ahead.

As if on cue, the chasing car veered sharply to the left, pulling up alongside. Then—*slam*—it collided sideways into them, grinding their little hatchback against the crash barrier. Metal shrieked. Sparks flew.

Liam swore under his breath, fighting the steering wheel. “They’re going to wreck us—”

Another hit. This time harder. The whole car jolted, tyres skidding as they bounced off the barrier again. A warning light blinked on the dashboard. Smoke curled faintly from the bonnet.

Tam was clutching the dashboard, her face pale. “They’re not trying to stop us—they’re trying to *dismiss us*.”

“Keep going,” Eden urged. “They wouldn’t do this if the police weren’t close. They’re panicking.” She hoped that was true.

But Liam’s grip on the wheel was slick with sweat. The car groaned every time he asked it to do more than it was made for. Another bump, and he nearly lost control completely, swerving across two lanes before pulling it back.

Then—

“*There!*” Eden shouted, pointing up ahead.

From the on-ramp, flashing blue lights appeared, cutting across in the dark night. A police car, sirens howling, merged into the motorway, weaving through the traffic. Another followed just behind it.

The black car fell back slightly. Not retreating—just calculating.

Liam saw them too. “Do we go *to* them or *past* them?”

“We go *through* them,” Eden said. “Make them *see* us.”

She reached out and slammed her fist on the horn, holding it down as they surged forward, the sound blaring into the chaos.

The police car's lights flared. It began to shift lanes, forcing other drivers to move aside. They were being noticed. Finally.

But behind them, the black car surged forward again. One last attempt.

“Hold on!” Liam yelled.

He didn't need to say it twice.

The sirens screamed louder now. The lead police car pulled diagonally across two lanes, forcing Liam to swerve—but this time *into* safety. The guards' car slowed behind them, boxed in by other traffic and flashing lights.

The black vehicle dropped several car lengths behind, then veered into the far lane. It didn't exit. It just... vanished into traffic.

Liam let out a shaky breath. “Did we just win?”

“I don't know,” Eden said, her voice hollow. “But it's not over.”

Blue lights flooded their mirrors. The loudspeaker barked, sharp and officious. “Pull over *immediately*. Hands on the wheel.”

Liam obeyed, easing the battered hatchback into the hard shoulder, engine coughing. The car barely made it before dying completely, a plume of smoke rising from beneath the bonnet.

The moment they stopped, armed officers descended. Doors flew open.

“Out of the car—*now*! Hands where we can see them!”

Tam was trembling as Eden helped her out. The police officers were nearby but didn’t stop her from getting Tam to her feet. Liam stepped out slowly, arms raised, trying to speak, but the officer had already grabbed him and was pulling his arms behind his back.

“You’re being detained on suspicion of dangerous driving and evading police.”

“But we were the ones *being chased!*” Eden shouted, but they weren’t listening. A second officer pulled her aside, cuffing her with far more care—but still too tight.

Tam, barefoot and in dirty clothes, looked utterly lost. She didn’t resist, just stood quietly as a female officer gently guided her toward one of the police cars.

No one was asking why a 15-year-old had been behind the wheel. No one asked why the passenger looked drugged. No one had *yet* asked about the black car that disappeared.

In the end, they were just three kids in a wrecked car, fleeing something nobody yet understood.

Eden looked across the road as she was led to a police vehicle. The black car was *gone*. Like it had never been there.

Only tyre marks and bruised metal hinted at what they'd survived.

Chapter Forty-Five

The cold fluorescent lights hummed above them, casting a sterile, almost dreamlike haze over everything. The three of them sat on a long bench in the station's holding area—separated by low partitions but close enough to see each other. Tam leaned against Eden's shoulder over the barrier, eyes half-closed. Liam had his head back against the wall, staring at the ceiling, fingers tapping a restless rhythm against his knee.

A clock ticked too loudly.

They'd told their story. Or most of it. Two officers had listened with that polite, slightly incredulous expression adults always wore when kids said something that sounded just a bit too much like a film plot. Chasing down leads. Secret compounds. Sedated teenagers.

Government guards. It all sounded mad when said aloud.

And yet, none of them faltered.

The detective—DI Sullivan, she said—was measured but not unkind. She'd taken notes, asked careful questions, had even looked over the USB stick Liam had handed her. Her brows had furrowed more than once as she clicked through the folders. But she hadn't said much.

"Your parents have been called," another officer had told them. "We'll get you sorted as soon as we can."

But that had been over an hour ago.

Tam's parents weren't answering. The numbers rang out.

"They're probably asleep," Eden said gently, but Tam just looked away, jaw tightening.

As for Liam, the officer had come back after ten minutes looking vaguely embarrassed. "We... couldn't reach your family," he'd said, avoiding eye contact.

Liam didn't seem surprised. He just nodded once and said nothing.

Eden's mum was a different story.

"She's out at a remote cottage, yeah?" the officer confirmed, flipping through a report. "No car. No reception. We're sending someone down there, but it'll be a while."

Eden had just nodded, swallowing hard. "Tell her I'm okay when you reach her," she'd said quietly. "And tell her I'm *doing* something."

So now they waited. No charges yet, no shouting, no accusations. Just that long, heavy pause after everything had blown up and the grown-ups didn't quite know what to *do* with them.

A low murmur came from the far desk—DI Sullivan, speaking in hushed tones with someone over the phone. She had the USB in her hand, and her thumb was tapping it rhythmically against her other palm.

Eden watched her, heart thudding. *This is real*, she thought. *Now they know. Now they have to see it's not just three teenagers playing spy games.*

Tam stirred and whispered, "Do you think they'll believe us?"

Eden glanced down at her, brushing a strand of hair away from Tam's cheek. "They have to. We gave them everything."

Tam nodded, though uncertainty still clouded her face. Eden pressed a gentle kiss to her temple and stayed there, holding her close in the quiet.

Liam sighed, sitting up straighter. "Even if they don't, that USB doesn't lie."

"Yeah," Eden agreed, more to reassure herself than anyone else. "It's all there. What they did. Who was involved."

"And where," Liam added. "Redhall. Alderley Edge. Maybe more."

The overhead light buzzed again.

At the desk, DI Sullivan ended the call. She glanced over at them and then stepped into an inner office, closing the door behind her.

The silence that followed was deep and strange. For a moment, the three of them just sat, not knowing whether to feel safe... or very much *not*.

Chapter Forty-Six

The floodlights snapped on one by one, bathing the courtyard in an unforgiving white glare. Long shadows stretched across the ground as the silence was shattered by the sudden clamour of voices and slamming metal doors. Somewhere high above, a siren gave one long, steady pulse before cutting out.

In the pen, the children stirred.

They moved slowly at first—confused, blinking under the harsh lights like moths caught out of the dark. Then, at the sound of whistles and barked orders, they began to shuffle into lines. Barefoot and dazed, in mismatched sleepwear and light jackets, they formed crooked rows with mechanical obedience. Most were silent. A few murmured to themselves or glanced around as if trying to locate something real in all the confusion.

From one of the squat buildings at the far end of the compound, a set of double garage doors groaned open. Their movement echoed, slow and deliberate, like something ancient was waking.

Out rolled the buses.

There were three of them. Long and low, their pale grey paint catching the courtyard lights with an unnatural gleam. The design was dated—rounded corners, wide windows, no visible logos—but the bodies gleamed as if freshly polished. It was as though they'd been locked away decades ago, waiting for a morning like this.

Waiting for *now*.

One staff member jogged alongside the lead bus, radio clutched in one hand, shouting something unintelligible to someone deeper inside the compound. Behind him, others emerged—men and women in dark uniforms, moving with the tight efficiency of people who had rehearsed this scenario over and over but had never expected to enact it.

Whistles blew again. Children began to be ushered towards the buses, still dazed, still silent.

From one of the side buildings, a woman in a lab coat hurried out, clutching a tablet to her chest. Her face was pale. She spoke to one of the staff by the buses, her

voice tight with urgency. He nodded once, waved an arm in a circling motion, then turned back to the loading process.

Another bus door hissed open.

One child stumbled on the stairs. A staff member caught them roughly by the arm and pushed them forward.

The lines thinned. The pen emptied.

Lights flicked on in windows that had stayed dark for days. The compound was alive with sudden purpose. It moved with a terrifying kind of order—no panic, no shouting beyond what was necessary. Just cold precision. Protocol.

They were leaving.

They were *moving the children*.

Whatever had gone wrong—whatever warning bells had rung in the shadowed corners of this secret place—it had triggered the response they'd been preparing for years.

And they were wasting no time.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The waiting room smelled faintly of stale coffee and disinfectant. A vending machine hummed in the corner, its display flickering dimly, and the harsh overhead lights made everything feel more tired than it already was.

Eden sat slumped on one of the plastic chairs, shoulders brushing Liam's. Tam was next to her, wrapped in a blanket someone had handed her, staring blankly at the far wall. None of them spoke. Not since the officer had told them Eden's mum was on her way. That had been almost half an hour ago.

Then came the sound of hurried footsteps in the corridor beyond the frosted glass. The squeak of rubber soles, a brief exchange of muffled voices.

And then—

The door burst open.

“Eden!”

Mum rushed in, hair wild from the wind, eyes wide and wet. She didn’t hesitate. She didn’t even pause to close the door behind her. She crossed the room in three long strides and pulled Eden into her arms, holding her as though she might disappear if she let go.

Eden melted into her. Buried her face in the familiar scent of her mum’s coat and clung.

“Oh my darling girl,” her mum whispered into her hair. “I was so scared—so scared.”

Tam and Liam looked away, trying to give them a shred of privacy, but her mum reached for them too, pulling all three into a tangle of arms and warmth.

“You’re safe. You’re *all* safe. Thank God.”

Liam let out a shaky breath. Tam didn’t quite know what to do with the hug, stiff for a moment, then relaxing—just a little.

Her mum pulled back to look at them, cupping Eden’s face in her hands, eyes flicking over the bruises and dirt and exhaustion.

Her eyes moved to Tam. “What have they done to you?” she said softly, voice breaking. “What happened to you all?”

Eden shook her head. “It’s a long story. But... we did it. We got Tam out.”

Her mum blinked at her, a flicker of something fierce sparking behind the tears. “Whatever happened, we’re going to sort it. I promise you that.”

For the first time in days, Eden let herself believe it.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The last of the children were being shepherded up the bus steps, one by one, their faces blank and pale in the cold light. Most moved slowly, unsure of their own legs, dazed and stumbling. A few had to be helped—guided by staff with tight grips and tighter expressions.

Engines growled to life as the buses idled in the courtyard, sleek but uncanny—vintage in shape and design. Their pristine bodies glinted under the high floodlights, like relics waiting in silence for the right catastrophe.

Near the back entrance, two men in navy fleece jackets wheeled crates from the storage building to the boots of waiting SUVs. The crates rattled with equipment—racks of cables, routers, boxes marked

with glowing yellow IT hazard stickers. One of them barked to the other to “*Get the backup drives—now.*”

There was urgency now.

And then—

The night cracked with blue.

Flashing lights swept across the treetops from the western ridge. A sharp shout rang out. Somewhere far off, a radio squawked to life, then fizzled with static.

The first Tactical Aid Unit vehicle burst from the trees at the back of the compound—dark, angular, armoured—tyres chewing through undergrowth, splashing through the creekbed like it wasn’t there. Another appeared on the opposite side, emerging with a roar from the path that skirted the observatory hill. Then a third. Then four.

Floodlights blazed from their roofs, sweeping the grounds in a flickering wash of blue and white.

Foot teams came next—officers in full tactical gear fanning out from every wooded edge of the perimeter. Dark figures in combat helmets, rifles raised, infrared goggles glinting under the moonlight. Some moved in pairs along the fence line, others darted toward the buildings.

A woman in black body armour raised her fist and barked orders into her radio. *“Building A clear. Sector Delta, move now. Intercept the convoy—repeat, intercept!”*

Inside the courtyard, staff began to scatter. One man bolted for the trees, only to be taken down in seconds by a pair of officers. Another tried to jump into one of the SUVs and was hauled bodily from the driver’s seat by a gloved hand.

One of the buses revved, tyres screaming—but the gate at the far end was already sealed, a black TAU van angled across it like a barricade.

There was nowhere left to run.

And above it all, the compound—this quiet, hidden place of secrets—shuddered as the world finally bore down upon it.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The morning light spilling through the cottage windows was soft and grey, the sky washed with the kind of clouds that promised drizzle but not yet rain. The smell of damp soil and moss drifted in through the half-open kitchen window. A kettle hissed quietly on the stove.

Tam sat curled in one corner of the big worn sofa, legs drawn up beneath her, a thick blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Her hair was still slightly damp from the shower she'd taken at the hospital, but her skin had lost that waxy pallor. There was colour in her cheeks now. Life returning in slow, tentative steps.

Mum moved about the kitchen quietly, making tea she didn't quite expect anyone to drink. Eden sat beside Tam, flipping absently through a book she wasn't reading, glancing at Tam every few minutes just to make sure she was still really there.

Liam was at the table, fidgeting with a spoon, eyes puffy but alert. He hadn't said much since they got home.

They'd left the hospital just before dawn. The doctors had wanted to keep Tam for observation—trauma, possible exposure to sedatives, shock—but Mum had looked at her, truly looked at her, and Tam had simply shaken her head.

“No. I want to go with them,” she had said, voice quiet but unwavering. “I just want to go home with Mum.”

Mum had hesitated. Just a breath. Then she'd taken Tam's hand and squeezed it. “Alright. Let's go, love.”

And that was it.

Now, in the safe hush of the cottage, Tam's fingers brushed Eden's hand where it rested on the sofa cushion between them. Neither of them spoke, but the touch said enough.

“You hungry?” Mum asked gently, from near the stove.

Tam shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Later then.” Mum didn't press.

Outside, the forest rustled with birdsong. The world, impossibly, was still turning.

Tam and Eden remained on the sofa as the minutes slipped by, wrapped in the same silence that had settled over them since leaving the hospital. But it wasn't the heavy, awkward kind. It was a silence made of shared understanding, of the closeness that came not just from surviving something terrifying, but from choosing each other even in the middle of it.

Eden shifted slightly, her fingers gently brushing Tam's. She looked over, eyes soft and searching. "How are you really?" she whispered, barely more than a breath.

Tam hesitated, then let out a quiet, shaky sigh. "Like I was taken apart and put back together slightly wrong," she said. "But I think... I think I'm still me."

Eden reached out, tucking a lock of hair behind Tam's ear. Her hand lingered a moment on Tam's cheek, a light touch, reverent. "You're more you than ever," she murmured.

Tam leaned into the touch, eyes closing for a moment. "I was so scared I'd never see you again."

"You did," Eden said, her voice steadier now. "I found you. And you held on."

A small smile tugged at Tam's lips. "You stormed a government facility for me."

"Well," Eden shrugged, "Liam helped, and you do make it very hard not to."

They both laughed—quiet and breathless and a little teary—and then leaned forward at the same time. Their foreheads rested together for a moment before Eden kissed her, soft and careful, like something precious. Tam's hand found the fabric of Eden's sleeve and held on.

They pulled apart just as Mum reappeared from the kitchen, a tray in her hands with mismatched mugs of tea.

"Oh," she said, pausing at the edge of the room. She smiled—gentle, knowing. "Scooch up, will you?"

Tam and Eden shifted to make space as Mum sat on the other side of Tam, setting the tray down on the little table. She didn't say anything at first, just wrapped an arm around Tam's shoulders and held her close.

Tam leaned into her immediately, and Eden reached across to take her other hand.

Mum looked at them both on the couch. "I don't know what they put you through," she said gently, "but it's

clear you pulled each other through.” She glanced over at Liam at the table, her expression softening. “All three of you.”

m nodded, her eyes glistening. Liam gave a faint, tired smile before mumbling a quiet goodnight and heading to his room.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Eden said softly.

“No,” Mum agreed. “But we’re not in them anymore either.”

Chapter Fifty

Mum had quietly excused herself a little while ago, offering tired smiles and one last check that they were warm enough. She hadn't pressed them with questions, hadn't tried to make sense of it all just yet. She simply kissed the tops of their heads, as if to anchor herself to the simple fact that they were there—safe—and then disappeared into her room, closing the door with a soft click.

The living room had dimmed to the flicker of the television. The BBC was still looping the story, anchors trying to maintain calm as words like “*unprecedented*,” “*covert operation*,” and “*unauthorised facility raid*” played beneath grainy aerial footage of Alderley Edge. Tactical vehicles moving like beetles across fields. One clip showed figures in white coats being led away in

cuffs. Another showed the busses—lined up and empty now. The voice of a reporter echoed, steady but tense, describing “a decades-long secretive programme under government contract.” A Member of Parliament was on the screen promising a thorough investigation, wanting to unearth the entire operation, no stone unturned.

Tam barely registered the words anymore. Her head rested on Eden’s shoulder, their duvets pulled around them like a cocoon. She’d stopped shaking a few hours ago, but her muscles still held that strange half-memory of running, hiding, cold floors and white lights. Now, though, she breathed in time with Eden. That was enough.

Eden shifted slightly to adjust the pillow behind her, and Tam murmured something unintelligible in protest.

“Sorry,” Eden whispered. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Tam mumbled. “Just pretending.”

“Me too.”

Outside, the wind tapped gently at the windows. Somewhere in the kitchen the radiator clicked. The world was slowly righting itself, creaky and reluctant.

Tam rolled to face her properly, duvet still tight around her. “Do you think they’ll shut it all down?”

Eden looked toward the TV, where a scrolling chyron now read '*Prime Minister expected to make statement tomorrow.*' She hesitated. "Maybe not all. But enough. We've got the files. Liam made sure of that."

Tam gave a small nod. "And what about us?"

Eden gave a slow, steady blink. "We're not going back. Not to Redhall. Not to any of it. We are going to be okay."

Tam's eyes softened, and she reached under the covers to find Eden's hand.

"I know," she said. "Because you found me."

Eden squeezed her fingers. "And I won't lose you again."

The television droned on in the background. But neither of them were really listening anymore.

They stayed like that, two girls wrapped in duvets on an old couch, a quiet morning sheltering them while the world outside began to stir.

Eventually, the low murmur of the news faded into nothing, just shapes and lights flickering across their closed eyes. Eden reached to the side, tugging down the zip of her hoodie with a tired hand, her movements

slow and quiet. Tam followed suit, peeling away the borrowed jumper she wore and the soft cotton top beneath.

There was no awkwardness between them, no fumbling or embarrassment. Just warmth. Familiarity. The kind that came from surviving something terrible and still finding each other at the end of it.

They slipped beneath the duvets again, Eden snuggled behind Tam, closer this time, skin to skin, the last remnants of chill fading between their bodies. Eden's hand settled at Tam's waist, Tam's fingers curling lightly against Eden's hip.

Tam sighed, deeply. "You smell like shampoo and forest."

Eden gave a soft chuckle against her hair. "You smell like hospital and cheap fabric softener."

Tam smiled faintly, eyes already drifting shut. "Sounds about right."

Outside, the wind had calmed. Inside, the quiet settled like a blanket over the cottage.

No more guards. No more pens. Just the couch, the blankets, the soft thrum of hearts finding their rhythm again.

By the time the news anchor's voice announced the top of the hour headlines, both girls had drifted off, tangled together in a sleep that was heavier than exhaustion—something healing, something safe.

Chapter Fifty-One

The cottage was quiet save for the soft clink of cutlery against a plate and the occasional creak of old floorboards. Outside, the afternoon light filtered through thin curtains, casting long stripes across the sitting room.

At the dining table, Liam sat with a bowl of cereal in front of him, half-forgotten. A mug of tea steamed beside it, untouched. Across from him, Eden's mum sipped from her own cup, her face lined with fatigue and quiet concern.

"So," she said gently, "this... hacker group of yours. They're the ones who helped you break in?"

Liam shrugged, fiddling with the corner of his placemat. "Sort of. One of them gave me instructions to

spoof credentials, but the card thing was Eden. Actually most of it was Eden.”

Mum nodded slightly, but she didn’t interrupt.

He glanced towards the sofa, lowering his voice instinctively. “It was all Eden, really. She planned everything. The IT company, the car, even how we’d get inside. I just... filled in the gaps.”

On the couch, tangled in duvets and one another, Tam stirred. Her brow furrowed slightly as the light shifted across her face, and then she blinked, eyelids fluttering open.

There was a moment of disorientation. The soft hum of conversation. A warm shape beside her. Safety. Eden.

Tam exhaled slowly.

She pushed herself up on one elbow, rubbing her eyes. Her body still ached, the fog of yesterday clinging to the edges of her mind, but it was looser now—like mist clearing from glass.

Liam turned as he heard her move. “Morning,” he said softly, with a faint smile. “Or, uh... lunchtime.... Tea time. I dont know,” he shrugged slightly.

Eden mumbled something unintelligible into the pillow before turning over, her arms still loosely looped around Tam's waist.

Tam blinked at them both, then looked over to Mum, who gave her a warm smile and opened her arms. "There's tea, toast and jam if you want it, love."

Tam nodded groggily, her eyes welling slightly at the simple kindness. "Thanks," she croaked.

"You're safe now," Mum said gently, and it wasn't just words. It was a promise. A truth.

The girls didn't move right away. They stayed in their cocoon of duvets and blankets, of warmth for a little longer, skin brushing skin, the smell of toast drifting through the air, and for the first time in days, the moment was entirely theirs.

Chapter Fifty-Two

The scent of roast vegetables and leftover pie still lingered in the air as sunlight spilled through the windows, warming the stone floor of the cottage. Plates were stacked by the sink, crumbs brushed into a waiting bin. The big clock above the fireplace ticked steadily onwards as the little household moved around each other, folding jumpers, collecting toiletries, checking for anything left behind.

Tam stood by the window, carefully folding a borrowed jumper she'd practically lived in since they came back to the cottage. Her cheeks were flushed with colour again, her movements no longer sluggish. The fog that had weighed down her mind had lifted almost entirely, and while her muscles still ached here and there, she felt like herself again. Really herself.

“I swear,” she said, grinning over her shoulder at Eden, “if we forget that stupid phone charger again, I’m blaming Liam.”

“You always blame Liam,” Eden said, tugging her duffel zip shut with a dramatic huff.

“Because it’s usually his fault,” Tam said sweetly, brushing past her and tossing the jumper into a bag. “He’s a walking tech disaster unless he’s glued to a screen.”

“I rescued the entire op, thank you,” Liam replied from the hallway, dragging a small suitcase in one hand and dramatically wiping sweat from his brow with the other. “Some respect for your local hero, please.”

Eden snorted. “Local hero? You stalled the car in front of armed guards.”

“And I drove us onto the motorway and escaped!” he shot back.

“Barely!”

“Exactly! High drama!”

Tam laughed—really laughed. The kind that made her eyes crinkle and her shoulders shake. Eden paused

mid-fold, watching her with a soft expression that lasted just a beat too long.

It felt good. It felt *right*.

“Honestly,” Tam said, catching her breath, “I think the scariest part of all of it was Liam’s driving.”

“Oi!” Liam called from the doorway, juggling bags. “I got us out, didn’t I?”

Eden leaned over and stage-whispered, “That’s debatable. Pretty sure the *police* rescued us.”

“Details.”

Mum appeared with a soft knock on the open doorframe. “Everything packed?”

“Just about,” Eden said, glancing around. “You sure we’ve not left anything?”

“Only a trail of psychological damage and a very suspicious local constable,” Liam said.

Mum gave him a look. “Charming.”

Tam zipped her bag and slung it over her shoulder. “Well, if we’re all going to be arrested again, at least we’re doing it as a team.”

Eden reached over and laced their fingers together.
“Let’s aim *not* to get arrested today, yeah?”

They looked around one last time—the low beams, the ancient hearth, the scatter of mugs and blankets and warmth. It had been a safe place. A bubble. And they were ready to leave it behind.

Ready for whatever came next.

”

They lay low in the heather, binoculars passed between them. Staff came and went. Deliveries. Shouts. Locked gates. No sign of children. Not yet. Then, movement.

A girl stumbled into the pen like her legs didn't belong to her. Another helped her up. Shoulder-length brown hair. Eden's breath caught. "Tam."

Tam and Eden are finally together. Girlfriends. Safe. Or at least, they should be.

But Eden can't shake the feeling that part of her never made it out of the facility.

The quiet is too loud. Closed doors still feel like cages.

Liam has moved in with Eden and Mum, and the three of them are doing their best to stitch life back together. A quiet Easter holiday in the south seems like the perfect escape.

Until they discover another facility.

And then Tam disappears.

No one believes them. No one is coming to help. So Eden and Liam decide to go after her themselves—straight into the heart of the nightmare.

But this time, they're not just fighting for the truth. They're fighting for someone they love.

