Exile

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Also by Eve Ainsworth

Somebody I Used to Love
Pieces of Us
Exile

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To Ali

Thank for the laughter, love and support

I'm sorry this book does not have pictures

Eve xx

3 Years Before

This was it.

This was the day I had dreamt of for so long.

It was everything I wanted. Everything I wanted and more.

The best day of my life.

The church foyer was bathed in a soft, shimmering light, and I stood clutching my small posy of pink roses, trying hard to stop my body from shaking.

This was what I had longed for with every essence of my body since I was a child and used to play dress-up as a bride. I loved Harry, with his dark hair and kind brown eyes. He made me feel safe, cherished and happy.

So why then did I suddenly feel so sick?

Ed, my best friend since primary school, stood beside me as solid as ever. I shivered, unable to force my body still, and he rubbed my arm gently.

'It's just the nerves, babe. You'll be fine. It's Harry, remember.' He paused. 'Your Harry.'

My Harry. Mine.

I was still hidden, peering around the gap of the arch. He looked so cute, standing there in his navy suit, a single pink rose placed perfectly in the first buttonhole. His soft brown eyes were warm as he gazed towards the door, his lips curled into a reassuring smile. He was ready to greet me, to sweep me up in the love and romance of this day. I

hadn't been the only one dreaming of our wedding, Harry had too, in many ways even more than I had.

'Take a few extra minutes. He can wait, right? That's to be expected,' Ed said casually. 'I mean, he'd probably worry if you were on time. Like, when has that ever happened?'

I rolled my eyes at him, but he had a point: being on time wasn't exactly my thing. Mum always joked that I had a wonky internal clock installed inside of me.

'Brides are always late,' Ed continued. 'That's just the done thing. There was a girl on TikTok boasting that she'd kept her groom waiting for an hour.' He shrugged. 'I mean, that's a bit excessive, but still.'

I smiled. Of course this was expected. Nerves. The very thought of walking down that long aisle – being stared at by everyone. I just needed a bit more time to gather myself, that was it.

After all, there was so much expectation.

It wasn't only Harry and I who had been dreaming of this day; it had been the whole village.

They had named it their own 'proper little Cinderella story' since we got engaged two years ago and, in many ways, it really was the stuff of fairy tales. The handsome and dashing young man from the lauded estate, marrying his penniless cleaner. The locals were in awe, believing that true love did exist and could break beyond the barriers of class and privilege. The wedding itself was billed as the biggest local event since the last royal wedding, and the Logan family were making a show of it. Everyone from the residents of Enderdale village to gentry and well-connected people across the country were invited, topped off with the local newspapers intent on getting their

scoop. This was a Logan event, of course. An opportunity to show off their money and success couldn't be wasted.

As Harry kept reminding me – it was going to be a day to remember.

And that in itself was a whole heap of pressure pushing down upon me.

I inhaled a shaky breath and peeked through the arch. The church seating was laid out and ready, guests packing out both sides of the aisles with a small crowd standing at the back. The room was lit up by light chatter and laughter. In the background, organ music played gently – a sweeping, romantic number to remind the congregation why they were there.

It really was the perfect wedding scene.

Harry was nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot. His best man, Liam, leant towards him and whispered something in his ear. It made Harry laugh. Liam always knew how to keep Harry on track. I quickly pulled myself away before he spotted me. I hated to think of him anxiously waiting for me like this. It wasn't fair.

I needed to pull myself together.

This was a special day, *our* day, and when I thought of that I was immediately comforted. This would be OK, it really would. I pictured my dad sat at the front, in his smart navy suit that he was still paying off from the catalogue. I knew how proud he was. Dad should have been here, by my side, but some recent leg pain had meant Ed had had to step in. Dad played it down of course, told me he was fine, but I wouldn't let him convince me – though I hated that he wasn't beside me right now. On the other side of the aisle, I spotted Harry's parents – Jenny in her hideously oversized designer hat and Pete sitting upright and still, his eyes fixed on his son. Pete was always calm

in these situations. Harry had only told me the other day about how much Pete calmed him down when he was stressed. He just had that way about him.

I closed my eyes. My legs were like jelly; my tummy felt like it was free-falling. My breathing was a little rapid. I touched my beaded bag – my 'something old' as it was one of the few things I had of Mum's – and felt the immediate relief of knowing my inhaler was inside. I couldn't have an attack now.

Ed squeezed my arm. 'Stevie. It's time.'

Everything was going to be OK. It had to be. This was my day.

This was it.

I nodded and stepped forward, letting the 'Wedding March' sweep us up into a giddy haze. My nervous thoughts quietened, and my feet took over, Ed's strong grip keeping me upright and stopping me from wobbling. I fixed my gaze on Harry. I felt like a fairy on top of a Christmas tree. My arms and legs were like plastic, my dress stiff and constrictive. I felt unsteady. Oh God, I couldn't even breathe properly. Was this it? Was I going to collapse on the floor in front of everyone, fighting for breath, flapping around like a dying fish while the entire congregation gaped and stared? Was I really going to have an asthma attack right now?

I sucked in air. It tasted stale on my breath. I forced myself to stare ahead, to keep my plasticky legs moving. Harry was there – only a few metres away – his handsome, kind face shining in my direction, willing me towards him.

My lovely, sweet Harry.

My…

As I walked, I stole a downwards glance at my beautiful, ice-white dress that continued to cling tightly to

my body as if it were as afraid as I was. My nails were perfectly manicured too, my hair styled and twisted into an uncomfortably tight arrangement on my head, my face heavy with make-up.

When I had looked in the mirror earlier, I'd barely recognised the wide-eyed girl staring back. I was wearing a mask. This wasn't even me.

And yet Harry was still waiting.

I sucked in another breath. Everything felt like it was in slow motion. Something in my mind began to stir. I blinked and looked again across the congregation, and it was as if I could see clearly for the first time in days. The mist had somehow cleared, and the view was utterly terrifying. Something inside of me snapped.

'Ed,' I whispered. 'I can't do this.'

Ed flinched beside me. We were already halfway down the aisle. 'You don't mean that, babe. It's just the nerves talking.'

'It's not.' My voice was louder now, strangled. 'I need to go.'

My feet stopped. I heard a sharp gasp from somewhere. The organist continued playing, unaware. Harry was staring at me, his beautiful brown eyes wide and scared.

He started to step forward.

'No,' I whispered. And when he continued his stride, louder: 'No. I'm sorry. I can't… I can't do this!'

The music stopped, and in the rush of panic I unhooked my arm from Ed's and bolted towards the church doors. All I could hear as I ran were the shocked mutterings from the guests and Harry shouting something to me, something I couldn't quite make out.

Because I just ran. And I kept running.

It was meant to be the best day of my life.
But it ended up being my nightmare.

Chapter One

Stevie

Now

The taxi pulls up outside the Red Lion pub and for the briefest moment I am ready to run again. The words are waiting on my lips, a loaded bullet that I long to deliver to this rather grumpy and unfamiliar driver.

'*No, I can't do this. Take me back to the station. Now.*'

But I don't run. I am bolder now – braver. I have to keep reminding myself of this.

So instead, I tap my phone on his card reader to pay and smile sweetly as he helps me to unload my cases from the boot.

'Here for a break, are you?' he says casually, wiping the sweat from his face. 'You've certainly picked good weather for it.'

It is almost unbearably warm. The bushes that surround the pub hum with bees and I can smell the beer from the garden. Enderdale has always been a bit special like this. It's one of those villages that is either bathed in sunshine and flowers or swept up in an icy, snowy glory. It's the type of place that often features in Sunday supplements or cosy TV dramatisations – visitors usually filter through, drawn in by the old pubs and highly regarded restaurants, but it's often too small and dull to warrant a longer stay.

I have to keep reminding myself that I am like these tourists, because I, too, am simply passing through. It makes me feel a little better.

I take my case and smile again. My teeth are pressed against my lips, and they stretch into a grimace. 'No. No – I'm visiting. I have family here.' I pause. 'I grew up here.'

I don't know why I bother telling him this. I doubt he's a villager. The cab firm were based at the station in Havley, a town five miles from here. If he were a villager he'd know me, of that I'm sure – unless he'd just moved here, that is. But nothing ever changes here, not the people or the place. Or at least they never used to.

He nods. 'Nice. Nice place to live. You must be glad to be back.'

He stomps back to his driver's side, and I simply stare after him. He is definitely not a villager.

And he is very, very wrong.

Being back here is the last place I want to be.

-

I walk into the pub, trying to ignore the bubbles of anxiety in my stomach. I'm pretty sure everyone is looking at me, but I can hear Lola's soft words in my ear, comforting me. Her transatlantic drawl always has that soothing effect.

'*Breathe. Just breathe. Focus on your own steps, on your own movement. You don't need to worry about anyone else…*'

The imagined words work; I manage to block out the other customers, almost making myself believe that they are drinking in a New York bar, not in the small, picturesque pub in the village where I spent most of my life.

'Stevie!'

I look up and immediately it's like the flood of sunshine from outside has filled my body.

He is at the bar, looking as handsome as ever. His reddish-brown hair glistens in the light and those gorgeous amber eyes are shining with love.

Ed. All of my fears melt away as I rush towards him. He wraps me tight in his arms.

'Stevie. I've bloody missed you,' he whispers into my ear.

'Me too,' I sob back.

Three years was too long and yet, being here now, it's like I've never been away.

'We've got so much to catch up on.' He lightly kisses my cheek. 'So much – shall I grab us both a drink and we can make a start?'

I falter for a second. 'I can't stay for long. My dad—'

Ed's eyes soften. Of course he knows; why wouldn't he? In this town, there are no secrets. He knows why I'm really here. Why I've momentarily left my safe new life across the Atlantic and rushed back to be here. He squeezes my shoulder.

'I'm so sorry, babe,' he says gently. 'When I heard, I was so shocked…'

'It's OK – we'll be OK…' I shake him off and shoot him my brightest smile. I don't want sympathy now. I might crumple completely. I have to stay strong.

'Is he OK? At least for now?'

'He's still in hospital.' I fight to keep my voice stable. 'I just wish I was here when it all happened. The surgery was a success, though. He should recover just fine. I saw him yesterday when I arrived, and I'll go again tomorrow.'

I still remember the call. It was early morning in New York and I had barely woken up, so when the nurse was

talking to me it had taken her multiple attempts to make me understand.

'*He's had a fall. It's OK – we are looking after him. Are you able to get here? We need to run a few more tests and you're his next of kin.*'

There was no hesitation, not a bit. I packed up my bags immediately and called Jo at the office. She understood straight away.

'Take all the time you need,' she soothed. 'Family is the most important thing.'

I knew this all too well. It had been hard enough leaving Dad in the first place, when he was the only family I had left in the world. But now there was no reason not to be with him. We'd been apart for too long.

I only wish it didn't mean coming back here to face my past.

'It's been a long couple of days,' I say at last. 'I need to go back to Dad's soon, catch up on some sleep. I'll be staying there for a bit. Until he's stronger at least.'

'Let me at least get you one drink,' Ed insists. 'You're here after all. I can't let you rush off straight away.'

I concede and pull myself up on the nearby bar stool, watching as Ed moves behind the bar, helping himself to two vodkas. His parents used to manage this place since Ed was a baby, but Pete has always owned it. They recently moved on and Ed stayed on to run the pub and although he moans about it, I know his heart is here. I take an opportunity to discreetly look around me. It's pretty quiet inside, as most people are enjoying the sunlight-filled gardens. I recognise old Ernie, sitting in the corner, nursing a pint. Two women are further down the bar, but they look like visitors; the guidebook splayed next to their pub menu gives them away. I'm suddenly aware of my

presence here and it feels so wrong. I don't belong here anymore. If anyone was to notice me…

On the other side of the pub, I can see two younger men. They have their backs to me as they stare up at the horse race on TV. My heartbeat stops in my chest for the briefest moment. Is that—?

Ed places my glass of vodka in front of me. 'Yeah, that's Liam,' he says, catching my line of sight. 'He's in here most afternoons with that other idiot from school, Aaron, you remember him.'

I nod. Of course I do. But I'm surprised Liam is with him.

'What about—?' I hesitate, unable to say his name. Ed smiles sadly.

'Harry? He doesn't come here often anymore, not in the daytime anyway, but yeah, he's still a big deal in this place.' He pauses and then points at my drink. 'Get that down you, Stevie; I've got to fill you in on the latest news. It's better you hear it from me than anyone else.'

I do as he says, even though I feel like my throat is closing up. It's not as if I didn't know Harry would be here. I can sense him everywhere. He and his family *are* Enderdale; they are the backbone of the whole bloody place.

And the trouble with a backbone is you can't be without it, even if you try and kid yourself for three years that you can.