The One and Only

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Extract

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Missing Eve

Nothing hurt like missing Eve.

My girlfriend had been gone two months and I still thought about her every day.

Eve's dad had shut her up in some convent school in Spain. He worked out there, running a hotel where we'd spent part of the summer holidays. He'd said she'd have to stay in the school for a term – no boys, no phones, no way of contacting the outside world. He did it because of me.

Because of us.

I wasn't supposed to know it was a convent school – with bars on the windows like a prison and a starchy brown uniform – but Eve's mum had told me.

It had taken me two weeks of going round every day to get any information out of her. Even then, she wouldn't tell me the things I really wanted to know.

Like, where *exactly* was Eve's school?

Had Eve said anything about me?

When was she coming home?

I think Eve's mum was scared I'd get on a plane and go out to Spain and rescue her. Believe me, I fantasised about doing just that all the time. But I had no idea where she was. And no money to get there, even if I did.

Of course what Eve's mum was most afraid of was what Eve's dad would do if he found out she'd told me anything.

Eve's dad. Jonno. A total bastard. The person I hated most in the whole world.

It was Bonfire Night. The fifth of November. I was going out later with my best mate, Ryan, and some other friends. There was just time for a quick visit to Eve's mum's house to see if there was any news.

I trudged resentfully up the path. I didn't expect things to be any different than they had been on my last visit, about ten days ago.

But they were.

Eve's mum had obviously been crying. Her eyes were all red and puffy when she opened the door. 'Hello, Luke.'

I shuffled awkwardly on the doorstep. I liked Eve's mum. For a start, she looked a lot like Eve. The same long blonde hair and heart-shaped face. And she was always nice to me. But I wished she wouldn't get so emotional about everything.

'Er . . . you all right, Mrs Ripley?'

'No. Not really.'

My chest tightened. 'Is it Eve? What's happened? What's the matter?'

'Her dad's saying she's got to stay out there for a *year*.' Her voice trembled. 'A whole year.'

'He can't!' I stared at her. 'It's only supposed to be until Christmas. That's what you agreed. You can't let him *do* this.'

Eve's mum twisted her hands together. 'How can I stop him? He's got all the money. And he is her father.'

For God's sake.

Privately, I thought Eve's mum was more than a bit pathetic when it came to Jonno. OK, so he was big and loud and aggressive – and he owned her house and everything in it. But still – she could have moved out. Got a job. Supported herself and Eve. Even if it meant being a bit poorer.

'He's probably just trying to frighten you,' I said. 'Have you talked to Eve about it?'

I knew Eve and her mum spoke once a week. Eve's mum was too scared of Jonno to risk letting me talk to Eve myself. And she didn't say much about their conversations, but at least I knew Eve was still alive . . . still thinking about me.

'Eve thinks staying for the year's a good idea.'

'What?' A cold line of fear snaked its way down my spine.

'She said that now she's settled in it makes sense to finish out the year. That if she stays she'll be able focus properly on her art studies.'

I frowned. I couldn't believe Eve really thought this. Jonno had probably been visiting that day . . . listening to her conversation. Still.

'Did she say anything about . . . about . . . ?'

Eve's mum smiled sadly at me. 'About you?' She hesitated. 'Actually she did.'

'Well?' I dug my hands deep into my pockets, hands clenched into fists.

Eve's mum sighed. 'She said the two of you should forget about each other.'

What? 'I don't believe you.'

'I'm not saying she meant it, Luke,' Eve's mum sniffed. 'She might have been saying it because she knew it was what her dad'd want to hear. But it's what she said. That it was stupid you both waiting about for a whole year. That you should move on.'

I nodded, thinking it through. I was sure Eve was just trying to convince her dad she was over me. Well, I was *almost* sure. My stomach twisted. Maybe what she'd said

was what she really thought. *God.* It was unbearable not being able to talk to her myself.

I refused Eve's mum's offer of a drink and wandered off to the park, where I was meeting Ryan and the others. This nagging feeling that Eve had never made that much effort to stand up for herself against her dad had been worming through me for weeks. Now it forced its way to the front of my mind.

How can you be happy to stay in Spain for a whole year, Eve? If it was me, nothing would stop me getting back here to you. Nothing. Don't you want me any more? You didn't even call me on my sixteenth birthday. That was September, Eve. Now it's November. Where are *you?*

I walked through the trees at the entrance to the park. The wind was ice cold. Fierce. People all around me were tugging at their jackets to keep themselves warm.

Surely there's some way you could get in touch with me, Eve? Even if the school doesn't allow mobiles, it certainly has phones. And there must be a networked computer somewhere. Anyway, how hard could it be to borrow a stamp and get one of the other girls at the school to take a letter to a postbox for you?

I could see the top of the massive bonfire at the other end of the park. It glowed orange above the silhouettes of all the people standing, staring at the flames.

Have you met someone in Spain?

No. That couldn't be it. Jonno would hardly separate her from me and let her mix with other guys. I walked past the small pond where Eve and I had met up all through February half-term, when she was still going out with Ben.

So what then? Is it that you just don't feel the same any more?

The ground was littered with twigs and leaves from the trees above my head. I crunched across them, trying to reassure myself.

I'm not going to jump to conclusions. OK? It was like your mum said. You were saying what Jonno wanted to hear. Weren't you, Eve?

I had jumped to conclusions in the summer – over this Spanish guy. Eve had been in his room one night. She'd said nothing had happened but I hadn't believed her. Then it turned out he was gay and miserable about not being 'out' with his family and they had just been talking after all. Eve dumped me for not trusting her. The next few days until I got her back were hell.

I wasn't going to make that mistake again. And yet . . . it was hard to feel OK without any reassurance.

I could hear, as well as see, the big bonfire now. Hissing and spitting and crackling. Little kids were running about with sparklers, writing their names in the air. There was a

square fence made of metal barriers set several metres away from the fire, surrounding it. People were pressed up against the metal bars, staring at the flames in the centre.

I stared too, admiring the way the fire licked and leaped, always moving, eating at the logs beneath it, twisting up into the sky.

I couldn't see Ryan or any of our friends, so I pushed my way through the crowd to get closer to the barrier. The heat from the fire was strong on my face, even at this distance. And then I felt a different heat. The sensation that someone was staring at me. I looked round. A girl I hadn't noticed before was standing next to me. As I met her eyes, she smiled.

She was pretty – with a small, round face and a dimple in her chin. And she had amazing hair – great waves of red curls that tumbled right the way down her jacket. The flames from the bonfire were lighting the curls, creating a golden halo effect around her head as if the hair itself was on fire.

'Hi,' she said.

I frowned. Did I know her? She *looked* familiar. Yes, I was sure I'd seen her before. But not at school. Somewhere else. With someone else I knew well.

'Haven't I met you before?' I said.

The girl's smile deepened, revealing two more dimples in her cheeks. 'That has to be the cheesiest line ever,' she said.

'It's not a line,' I said, feeling myself blushing. 'I wasn't . . . I didn't . . . I mean, I really thought I'd seen you somewhere.'

I turned awkwardly back to the fire.

God, Eve. See how crap I am without you?

'Oh.' I sensed the girl was still looking at me.

I stared at the fire, wanting to walk away, but feeling it would look rude.

'I'm sorry,' the girl said. She leaned forwards on the barrier, next to me.

I glanced down at her. She grinned.

'Luke! Hey, Luke, man.' Ryan raced over. 'Where've you been? Come on, this is rubbish. We're going down the Burger Bar.'

He punched me on the shoulder. Then he turned towards the girl. 'So who've you been chat— OH MY GOD. HAYLEY.'

'Ryan.' The girl's eyes were wide. The hiss of the fire and the low murmur of people chatting filled the silence.

Then Ryan stepped forward. With characteristic swagger he wrapped his arms around the girl and hugged her.

'Hey, where've you been, Hayley?' he said, twisting round to wink at me over the girl's shoulder. 'You just dropped off the face of the earth.'

The girl pulled away from him, making an obvious

effort not to smile. 'Actually *you're* the one who dropped off the face of the earth. After that party in February.'

'Oh, right.' Ryan looked sheepish. 'Sorry.' He gave her what I knew was his most charming grin. 'I must have been mad,' he said.

Hayley rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, right. I heard you started going out with some girl – Chloe somebody?'

It all fell into place.

'You were at our party,' I said. '*That's* where I remember seeing you.'

Leaving with Ryan and him snogging your face off at the end of our road.

Ryan and Hayley both turned to me.

'D'you remember Luke from then?' Ryan said. 'Chloe's his sister.'

Hayley stared at me.

'Hey, d'you wanna come with us down the Burger Bar?' Ryan said.

I watched Hayley. I really didn't care whether she came or not.

You see, Eve? I only care about you.

Hayley's face fell. 'I can't. I'm with my parents and my sister. We're going out for dinner at this really expensive restaurant. It's a great place, but . . .' She tailed off.

Ryan shrugged. 'No problem.'

Hayley hesitated. 'Maybe another time though.' She glanced at me, then back to Ryan. 'You know? Let me know if there's a good party on or whatever, yeah? Um . . . have you still got my number?'

Ryan grinned at her. 'Here.' He handed her his mobile. 'Put it in my phone. Next time I hear of a "good party" I'll call you.'

Hayley blushed as she punched in her number. She said goodbye quickly and scampered away.

As we wandered over to where our friends were standing, Ryan started writing a text. I peered over his shoulder. He was calling up Hayley's number.

'What are you doing?' I said. 'You can't call her straight away. In fact, you can't call her at all. What about Chloe?'

Ryan grinned at me. 'I'm just forwarding her number to you, you idiot. That's why she gave it to me.'

I stared at him. '*What?*'

'Lu- uke, man.' Ryan rolled his eyes. 'Didn't you see the way she looked at you? You should ask her out. One date's not going to hurt anyone.'

As he strolled away from me, my mobile beeped. I checked the text. There was Hayley's number next to a message from Ryan.

TLKS A LOT BUT FIT BDY. CALL HER.