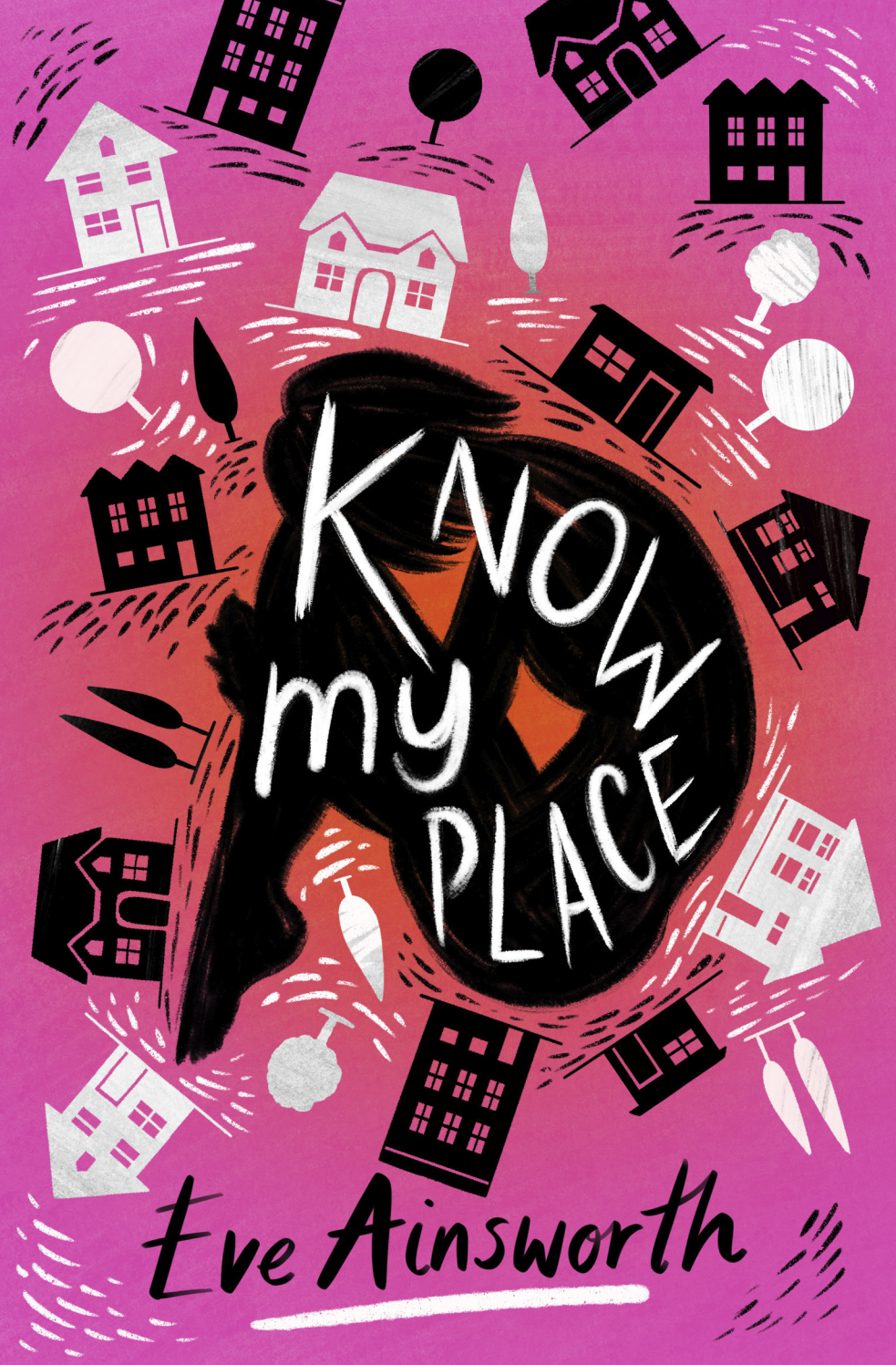

KNOW
my
PLACE
Eve Ainsworth


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Also by Eve Ainsworth:

Because of You

Just Another Little Lie



Eve Ainsworth

Barrington Stoke

First published in 2021 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-980-7

Printed by Hussar Books, Poland

To Kate
You are so special. Never forget it.
Thank you for being my life support.

ONE

BEFORE

I was ten years old when I met my last foster family, the Gibsons – Mary and her daughter, Stephanie.

I was scared and shy as I stood in Mary's living room. I had a sore, twisty stomach and a head full of worries. Mary took my small hand in hers and gripped it. She was tall, with bright red hair heaped on top of her head in a messy bun. Her eyes were sparkly, and her wide red lips seemed to stretch right across her face when she smiled.

"You're home now, Amy," Mary said. "We are going to look after you."

I looked around her large, cluttered living room. The shelves were packed with books and the cabinets stuffed full of interesting ornaments.

"I collect things," Mary explained. "Precious things, pretty things. And now I have another gem to add to my collection."

I didn't feel much like a gem as I stood there in my old jeans and jacket I'd outgrown. Mary didn't seem to notice that and took me on a tour of the house. She pointed out the old paintings hanging on the walls and apologised for the amount of "stuff" she had in each room.

"I've saved the best room until last," Mary said, pushing open the door.

I stood back, almost too afraid to step inside. The room was bigger than any bedroom I'd had before. The bed seemed lost inside it. I ran to the window. The view was stunning, overlooking the fields behind the house.

"Do you like your room?" Mary asked.

"It's perfect," I said.

Because it was.

Stephanie came home after school. She was just over a year older than me but at least 15 cm taller. Stephanie had the same colour hair as her mum, but it was styled neatly into a plait. She looked me up and down carefully and I saw her eyes were different to Mary's – cool and grey.

"We're going to be best friends," Stephanie said finally.

My first mistake was believing her.

NOW

There's a game I play in my head when things are difficult. It's pretty simple. There aren't many rules. No one knows I do it and I would hate for anyone to find out. They might laugh at me or see me for the silly idiot I really am. But the game helps me. I can believe that I'm someone else for a moment, that I'm normal. I pretend that everything is going to turn out fine.

I call the game "happy families", and I'm playing it right now in the car. I'm sitting in the back and if I slump a bit, I can just see the top of the driver's head. I can only make out a tuft of

my new social worker's blonde hair and her black sparkly clip. It makes it easier to play the game. I close my eyes and let my imagination take over.

I can turn my life into someone else's.

I can make my life better.

You're my mum, I tell myself. My real mum. You're driving me home. This clean, sweet-smelling car is all ours. At the weekend we will go food shopping. I will help you pick all our meals. We will giggle at some of the disgusting things in the supermarket – cabbage! Who even eats that?! We'll go clothes shopping despite me already having a wardrobe stuffed full of outfits. I have everything. Even a dad. He's—

"Amy," says my social worker, Clare. "This is it. We're here."

I sit up. My eyes flutter open and the dream is broken. Reality is back, like a nasty twist in my stomach. I taste something bitter in my throat. I have to cough it away.

"Look! Look, Amy," Clare says. "This is your new home."

Clare's voice is sweet, upbeat. She presses her face into the space between the front seats

to look at me. She is very pretty, like the china doll that used to live at the Gibsons', my last foster family. Clare's face is perfectly made up, with blusher highlighting her sharp cheekbones. Her blue eyes are large and clear under long eyelashes. She looks as fragile as the doll at the Gibsons', but is she really? Maybe Clare's tougher than that. Mary Gibson cried when I smashed that stupid china doll after I'd had another argument with Stephanie. Mary told me it was an expensive collectable. She was very upset with me for breaking it.

I don't know much about Clare except that I'm one of her "cases". I've had so many social workers before Clare, it's easy to lose count. They never really get to know me, apart from what they read in my file. I wonder what they think of me. A poor young girl abandoned by her mum and then shoved in the care system at the age of six after living with her poorly nan. My social workers must've been so pleased when they found the Gibsons. After all, that was meant to be my happy ending, my final page in the file.

I wonder if everyone blames me for it all going wrong. I bet they do. But they don't understand what it was like for me.

Clare has a posh voice and really smart high-heeled shoes. I can imagine her life is completely different from mine.

What's your family like, Clare? I want to ask but don't. Do you have a nice mum? Not like me. But you know everything about me already, don't you? That's all I am, after all – a collection of recordings, a file of writing that is meant to tell the reader everything about me. But really it tells them nothing at all.

The social worker I had before Clare was called Fiona. She was always snappy and in a hurry, seeing me as an irritation she could do without. Fiona never looked me in the eye and she always rushed our meetings. I didn't like her much at all.

I was never told what happened to Fiona. I assume she found a better job, perhaps with easier clients.

It wouldn't be the first time that's happened. I think I've had more than nine social workers and none have lasted over a year.

"Amy," Clare says again more firmly. She drums her fingers on the back of the seat. "Aren't you going to look at the house? It's very nice."

I shrug.

Clare sighs softly and moves to open her door. "I know you must be nervous, Amy," she says gently. But she knows nothing about it. Nothing at all. "It's never easy when a placement breaks down, but what happened at the Gibsons'—"

"Placement?" I repeat the word. It's such an odd, formal way to describe the place that had been my home for the past three years. But I guess that's all I am: something to be placed somewhere, like a piece of furniture. I'm unwanted and unloved, but I must be put somewhere so that I don't make any trouble. I wonder what will happen to me eventually. Where do the unwanted things go?

"'Placement' is just the term we use," Clare says, looking back at me. Her smile stretches across her face. It looks tiring. Her face muscles must hurt by the end of the day.

"We are hoping this will be a permanent home for you, Amy," Clare goes on. "The Dawsons really are a lovely family and they are so excited to have you. Kenny, their son, is only a year older than you and he's ever so nice."

I don't reply. I met my new foster parents, Gemma and Graham Dawson, briefly in the flurry of meetings to arrange this whole thing, but I haven't yet met Kenny. Everyone has told me how lovely and kind he is, but I'm not buying it. I was told the same things about Stephanie three years ago and look what happened there.

"Amy," Clare says. "Won't you just look? See for yourself. It's such a perfect house."

I sigh loudly, reach for the car door and open it. My body is stiff as I move out into the open. We are parked on a small drive. To the right is a shiny red BMW that looks freshly cleaned.

I look up. The house is detached and made of red brick with a large white garage attached. I glance at the plant pots dotted neatly under the front window, and at the gravel path winding towards a modern black front door with glass panels. Two small potted trees stand at each side of the door, twisted into shape like upright snakes.

"Nice," I mutter.

Posh, I think to myself.

"Isn't it?" Clare says. "I told you you'd like it."

"Yeah …" I scuff at the ground. My trainers are old and shabby. They look out of place on this neat drive.

Clare moves behind me, to the car boot. She begins to search for my belongings. "We're a bit early," she says. "I didn't expect the journey to be so fast, but I'm sure it won't be a problem."

"I hope not," I reply. My gaze is fixed on the front door as I watch it open. A figure steps out into the sun, her hand held up in greeting.

Gemma Dawson.

My new mum.

I choke back a laugh.

Here we go again.

Another new home for Amy.

Inside, the house is white, clean and minimal. Gemma leads us into the living room first. The sofas are huge and covered in cushions that look expensive. I hang back by the door, studying the wooden statues and massive TV. A lot of stuff in here looks like it could break easily.

"We are so glad you're finally here," Gemma says softly.

I stare back at her. She is smaller than I remember, probably only a couple of centimetres taller than me. Her hair is dark, short and pushed away from her face. Her eyes are brown and remind me of conkers. She's staring at me so hard I feel like she can see right into me. My hands grip the bag I'm holding.

"Where's Graham?" Clare asks. "I'm guessing Kenny is still at school."

Gemma nods. "Kenny's at computer club until four thirty and Graham is planning to come home early from work." Gemma looks at me again. "You remember we told you that he's a teacher? He works at a private school across town. He's looking forward to seeing you again. We thought perhaps we could get a takeaway tonight?"

Clare almost squeals with excitement. "Oh, that sounds lovely, don't you think, Amy?"

I shrug. I guess so.

"I'm not that hungry," I say.

Gemma smiles. "It's OK," she says. "You don't have to eat much. Is there anything you fancy? Kenny loves pizza."

"I don't mind," I say, and hold her gaze. I want Gemma to see that I'm not some six year old that can be won over with treats. I know how it all works. I'm tired of playing games. "I'll eat whatever really."

"Good." Gemma's voice is still bright. Her eyes break away from me and sweep over my bags. I can almost hear what she's thinking – not much stuff. I suppose I don't have much. Some clothes. A few books that I've kept over the years. I didn't really get many new things when I lived with the Gibsons, especially near the end. There wasn't much point when I hardly left my room.

"Perhaps I should show you around," Gemma says. "We really want you to feel at home here, Amy."

Clare nudges me and says, "That sounds like a great idea. Go on, Amy, have a good look about. Get familiar with the place." She pauses, then adds, "I'm going to go now, Amy. But I'll be back soon. To check everything is OK. And you have my number. You can call me if you need to."

Clare stares at me for a moment or two and then a soft smile flutters across her face.

"Go on, Amy. It'll be all right," Clare says. "You'll get settled in no time. You'll see."

Settled? I glare back at Clare. Is she being serious?

Clare doesn't notice my mood, or if she does, she chooses to ignore it. She just nods gently.

Gemma goes to show Clare back out. I have no option but to stay where I am for the moment. My arms are stiff at my sides and my stomach is twisted, dreading what's to come.

Clare turns back to me briefly. "It'll be OK," she says again. Her smile is gone. She is serious. "Trust me."

I almost laugh.

I was right about Clare. She's just like the other social workers. She really doesn't understand.