



## Praise for *Ellie Pillai Is Brown:*



‘A **hilarious and heart-warming** story.

I can’t wait to see what Christine writes next.’

Aisha Bushby, author of *A Pocketful of Stars*



‘**Warm, funny and hopeful** . . .

I didn’t really want the book to end!’

A. M. Dassu, author of *Boy, Everywhere*



‘A **fresh, funny, feel-good** story and a powerful exploration of identity, friendship and family.’

Rashmi Sirdeshpande



‘Frank, funny, warm-hearted and wise. **I adored this**

celebration of making your own kind of music,

and dancing to your own beat.’

Simon James Green, author of *Gay Club!*



‘**A feel good coming-of-age gem.**’

*Observer*, Books of the Year

‘**I loved the fresh and original voice** of this coming of age debut, approaching big themes with a light touch.’

*Bookseller*, Highlights of the Season

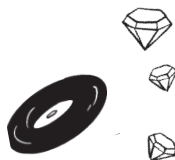




## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christine Pillainayagam is a writer and retail strategist, who lives in Kent with her young family and a collection of records, CDs and minidisks. A mild obsession with the Beatles and the desire to write a story that reflected her own experiences growing up as a first-generation immigrant led her to put that love of music and words into a book. *Ellie Pillai is (Almost) in Love* is her second novel.

A singer-songwriter, Christine also writes a blog: [thelittlebrownbook.co.uk](http://thelittlebrownbook.co.uk)





# ELLIE PILLAI

## IS (ALMOST) IN LOVE



# CHRISTINE PILLAINAYAGAM

Illustrated by Trisha Srivastava



faber



First published in the UK in 2023  
by Faber & Faber Limited, Bloomsbury House,  
74-77 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DA  
faber.co.uk

Typeset in Mr Eaves by MRules  
Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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



ISBN 978-0-571-36702-3



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You can listen to the *Ellie Pillai is (Almost) in Love* album by scanning in the link below – hear Ellie’s songs come to life!

There are song chapters throughout the story that reference specific songs on the album.

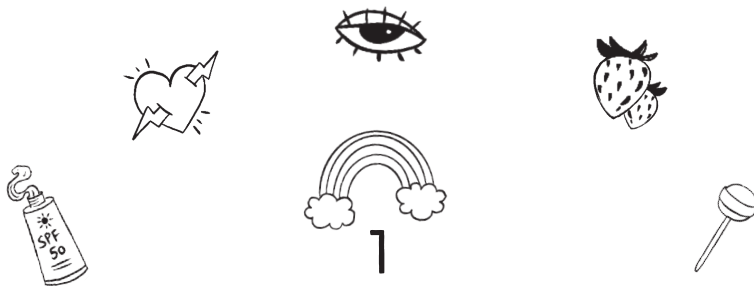




For anyone who doesn't believe  
they're extraordinary – you are.







# A Girl Called Ellie

My name is Ellie. Ellie Pillai. And I'm in love with the boy in the yellow rain mac.

Or at least, I think I'm in love. Because I'm only fifteen, and I'm not sure you can love someone enough, or that much, when you're only fifteen. But I think I could be. As in, I *could* be in love with the boy in the yellow rain mac.

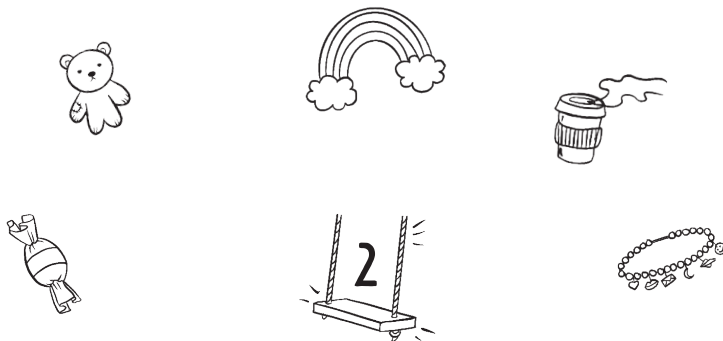
They describe love as the sensation of falling. Careering out of control, or drifting gracefully. It could be either. And this is the first time I've been *almost* in love, so, it could go either way.

My name is Ellie. Ellie Pillai. And I'm almost in love with the boy in the yellow rain mac. Or maybe I'm just falling.

**falling:** *adjective*

moving from a higher to a lower level, typically rapidly and without control.

i.e. 'she was injured by a falling tree'



## The Universal

The problem is, he's kissing me. And the kissing has been going on for a long time, and now I'm not sure what Happens Next. His hands are in my hair, which is nice, but he's starting to trail his fingers down the back of my neck, which sort of *tickles*, and I think it's possible he may be reaching for my bra hook, but the thing is, I'm not wearing a bra, I'm wearing a crop top. You know, like an Actual Child. Because Dad managed to shrink the only bras I own by washing them on a 90-degree hot wash – which even Mum is suspicious about, because Dad never does my washing, 90 degrees or otherwise, because he believes I am old enough to do it myself. So, *why then* did Dad choose *today*, of all days, to be *helpful* and put a wash on for me?

A Very. Hot. Wash.

And then I realise, my boyfriend (my more-than-just-a-friend-that-is-a-boy boyfriend) is definitely going for my non-existent bra hook. Because his hand is halfway down my back, and it's fumbling at the back of my cropped Nirvana T-shirt (because: Kurt Cobain's harmonic language, not just: it was on sale at H&M), pinching at the material

where a hook should exist, but which is instead a neon-pink band that reads 'HELLO KITTY' because I Am Literally Wearing a Child's Crop Top. Which I last wore when I was twelve, when I am now almost sixteen, and I want to die.

Because I have a boyfriend now. A bona fide, real life, practically perfect boyfriend. With dark hair and green eyes and an asymmetric smile that makes me smile, even when I'm just thinking about it. The problem is, now I'm here. On his bed. In my flared cord trousers and custom floral Vans. Listening to Blur, 'The Universal', which should be making all of this feel better, but instead feels like the prelude to something more. It really, really, really could happen, Damon Albarn croons.

OH GOD. What? What could happen? Come on, Albarn. Stop being so sexy and beguiling. Now is not the time for *it* to happen. Not when I'm wearing corduroy flares and a Hello Kitty crop top and I can't remember whether I shaved my armpits. OH GOD. Is this what having a boyfriend is? Having to remember whether or not you shaved your armpits every day? Or just having to shave your armpits every day?

I mean, shouldn't I be wearing something sexy (ugh) – or at the very least something where the zip isn't partially stuck and I have to jump up and down in order to get it off.

This is stressful. Like sweaty, unpleasant, band-of-sweat-beneath my-crop-top stressful.

'Ellie?'

'Um, yeah,' I say, as Ash stops kissing me.

'Are you talking to yourself?'

‘Er, no?’ I answer weakly.

‘Because you were kind of gesticulating as if you were talking to yourself.’

‘Was I?’

He grins, his faded blue T-shirt the colour of sky, and puts his head close to mine, our foreheads touching.

‘You are not,’ he says, putting his hands into mine, ‘allowed,’ he says, kissing my forehead, ‘to think about other things,’ he kisses my neck, ‘when we,’ he says, pointing to him and then me, ‘are kissing,’ and one hand is back in my hair. ‘Is that understood?’ he chastises gently.

‘I’m not,’ I lie.

‘Good,’ he replies, cupping my face in his hands, and this time it’s hard to think about anything else except how good it feels to be near him. How I spent months wanting nothing more than for him to be categorically and undeniably mine; and now he is.

But then there are my nipples. My brown nipples. Which a girl once told me, when I was getting changed for swimming, were ‘brown! I didn’t realise your nipples would be brown; but I suppose it makes sense’, and ever since that moment, I have realised that not everyone has brown nipples. I’m not sure why I’ve suddenly remembered that. But I wonder whether I should warn him. Or whether he has brown nipples, because he’s half brown, or whether it doesn’t really matter, because his mother is brown, and so surely he has some visceral, instinctive understanding of brown nipples, or . . .

‘Ellie?’ he says, grabbing my ear and tugging it. ‘Earth to Ellie Pillai. Come in, Ellie Pillai.’

‘Oh God, sorry. Was I doing it again?’

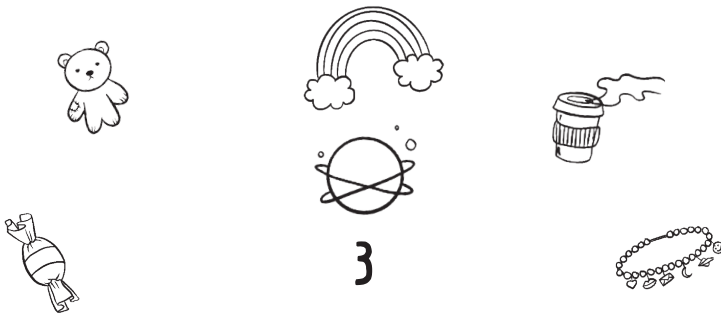
‘Yes,’ he says, looking slightly concerned, his hand coming down to rest on his washed-out black jeans. ‘Are you OK? Is *this* OK? Because we can stop if you want to.’

And honestly, I never want to stop kissing Ash Anderson, it’s just that I’m *me*, and sometimes that makes things slightly problematic.

I lace my arms around the back of his head, pulling him closer.

‘You,’ I say, kissing his cheek, ‘don’t need to worry,’ I kiss his other cheek, ‘about me,’ I say, feeling the softness of his mouth beneath mine.

And this time, I let Damon Albarn do all the talking; because someone else has to, and my mouth is otherwise engaged.



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# I'm Not Discussing This Over WhatsApp

**Jessica:**

what happened?

**Hayley:**

deets. all the deets.

**Jessica:**

✓ THAT.

**Ellie:**

what r u 2 blathering on abt?

**Hayley:**

WHAT HAPPENED?

**Jessica:**

what is blathering?

6



**Ellie:**

not discussing this over WhatsApp

**Hayley:**

facetime?

**Ellie:**

no

**Jessica:**

zoom?

**Ellie:**

NO

**Hayley:**

do u want 2 kno what happened when  
i went 2 James's house?

**Ellie:**

YES

**Hayley:**

\*i'm not discussing it over WhatsApp\*

I genuinely hope nothing *actually* happened when Hayley went to James's house, because as she told me last term, she's a feminist vlogger and he's a footballer, which really shouldn't make any sense – it's just, *they do*. But it isn't going to take much for this delicate balance of the universe to tip completely off its axis.



**Ellie:**

FINE. 2m?

**Jessica:**

👁️?

**Ellie:**

tea

**Jessica:**

the spoke – 11?

**Hayley:**

FINE

**Ellie:**

FINE

**Jessica:**

drama queens

**Hayley:**

ty.

**Jess:**

😊

**Ellie:**

♥️ this new group chat





## The One

On the way home from Ash's house, The Beatles, 'Drive My Car' is playing on repeat in my head – or possibly in real life – because it's hard to tell the difference between daydreams and reality when you are dating a green-eyed Timothée Chalamet lookalike.

In the back seat, I furtively reply to the messages from Jess and Hayley, while Ash drives, with his mum up front directing him. He's weeks away from turning eighteen and taking his driving test the same day. A week after that, I turn sixteen – and yeah, that feels kind of *big*. Like maybe it's *time*.

And even though it didn't happen today (thanks, Hello Kitty crop top), it feels like when I'm sixteen, maybe it *should*. Because he's kind, and sweet, and maybe even The One. Even though we've been going out for approximately two days since I serenaded him and he met my parents over dinner, today I met his mum too – as in My Boyfriend's Mum, as opposed to just My Favourite Teacher. It's strange how quickly things happen when they Actually Start Happening. How calling him my boyfriend feels completely normal now. Because I, Ellie Pillai, have a boyfriend, and he's kind, and sweet, and maybe even The One.

I smile to myself while trying not to think about Dad demanding we kept my bedroom door open last night, then appearing at random intervals like some kind of sergeant major planning an indiscriminate inspection.

As my phone buzzes again, I roll my eyes. What do those two clowns want now? Although I love the fact that for once I'm the one with *news*, and that finally my two clowns are getting on.

**Mum:**

ARE YOU OK? WILL YOU BE HOME SOON?

**Ellie:**

omw now. ash & his mum driving me.

And this is Mum panicking that she hasn't seen me in the last eight hours, because in Mum's head, any number of bad things can happen when she isn't there to prevent them. Which I get, because bad things do happen – like my brother Amis dying of leukaemia. Words I'm only just starting to be able to say in my head without wanting to cry. I just keep trying to explain to her that there's nothing she could have done to prevent that. Because we tried. We tried so hard, for so long.

**Mum:**

GREAT! SEE YOU SOON.

I clear my throat, trying to let the feeling pass.

Note to self: teach Mum to turn the caps lock off on her phone.

'I can't wait till I get my driving licence.' Ash cringes as he walks me to my door when we arrive. 'So I can drop you home on my own. I can't even kiss you,' he says, squeezing my hand meaningfully.

He's wearing a soft black jumper over his T-shirt now, his jeans loose and cuffed at the ankle – one side tucked unknowingly into a white sock, the laces of his paint-spattered Converse looped round and round their tops.

'But I can kiss you,' I smile, standing on my tiptoes and planting a gentle kiss on his lips – and Mavis from next door's lilac curtains are twitching at the mere hint of this scandal.

'Ellie. What time do you call this?' Dad barks, as he opens the door.

'Er, 6.15 p.m.?' I say, irritated.

'Hi, Mr Pillai,' Ash says, extending his hand.

'Ellie has a curfew,' he says sharply. 'It's 11 p.m. on weekends.'

'YES,' I say through gritted teeth. 'And its 6.15 p.m., Dad. So, looks like we made it . . .'

He opens his mouth to respond as Mum rushes forward.

'Ash!' she cries, enveloping him. 'Where's your mum?' she says, her hand caressing Phantom Baby.

'In the car,' he grins. Because there is nothing to do but grin and squeeze each other's hands while the awkwardness of this nightmare passes.

Mum peers out on to the driveway, waving like an overenthusiastic clown as she approaches the car and hustles Mrs Aachara inside.

Dear gods (any of them), please, just NO.

But my parents being distracted means Ash and I can finally go up to my bedroom without being watched, so I grab his hand and lead him upstairs, leaving Mrs Aachara to the mercy of Mum's hallway interrogation.

I nudge the door closed with my foot, and turn towards him as he nudges it back open.

'What are you doing?' I hiss.

'Your dad wants us to keep it open, Ellie,' he says, twirling a lock of my hair around his finger. 'And as he doesn't exactly love me, I'm not planning to make it any worse.'

'He just doesn't know you yet. When he finds out you're a Bowie fan, he'll love you more than I do.'

'So, you love me, do you?' he smirks.

'Er, no,' I splutter. 'I mean . . .'

Oh God.

What?

What Did I Mean?

'I'm joking,' he teases. 'It's been two days.'

And I know I don't *love* him, love him – but I feel like I *could* love him. Like maybe that's possible. Like maybe that's not so funny.

'Actually,' he says, watching me carefully, 'it's been about three months. Because I haven't thought about much else since the first day I met you,' and now David Bowie, 'Moonage Daydream' is playing – probably just in my head, but who can tell any more – as the boy with green eyes looks at me and the world stands still. Which would be much more romantic if Bowie wasn't singing about an alligator.

‘Ash,’ comes a low voice from the doorway. ‘Nimi wants to know if you’d like anything.’

Dad.

We spring apart.

‘Er, no. Thank you,’ Ash says, pushing me away from him.

I nod vigorously at him, trying to convey with my eyes: You Must Accept Dad’s Hospitality.

‘I mean . . . yes?’ he says, staring at me, confused.

‘What?’ Dad says, his eyes trained to Ash’s face like some kind of ninja.

‘A drink?’ he asks, looking at me again. I nod encouragingly. ‘And something to . . . eat . . . ?’ He trails off.

‘Hmnnnn,’ Dad says, narrowing his eyes at him before he makes for the stairs.

‘Are you regretting this?’ I say, suddenly panicked. I bet that Hannah girl who seems to comment on every Instagram he has ever posted doesn’t have parents who are either killing you with kindness or food, or just trying to plain kill you. I bet anyone would be less work to go out with than me.

‘What do you think?’ he smiles, tucking a stray hair behind my ear.

Minutes later, Mum appears at the top of the stairs with a cup of chai and some biscuits.

‘Here you go,’ she says, placing them next to Ash – and I swear she even winks a little as she closes the door gently behind her.

Dear gods, thank you for making my mum normal.

Even if it’s only sometimes.

# ♡ Song 1 ♡

## Verse, Chorus, Middle Eight - Perfect Things

There's a beauty in imperfection. In the incomplete. A story half told and a chance to write its ending.

Perfection is transitory. Momentary. A million moments of perfection, in a life imperfect.

And the sound of being almost in love is the low sweet thrum of an A below middle C; a trouser leg tucked egregiously into a white sock; it's him and me, me and him, a face close to mine in a moon-laced dream.

Somehow it makes sense, even if it doesn't.

*They're just stories  
You know that you should not believe in  
They're not real  
There's no such thing as perfect things.*

