

Rosie's
Travelling
Tea Shop



REBECCA RAISIN

Rebecca Raisin

Rosie's Travelling Tea Shop

Аннотация

The trip of a lifetime! Rosie Lewis has her life together. A swanky job as a Michelin-Starred Sous Chef, a loving husband and future children scheduled for exactly January 2021. That's until she comes home one day to find her husband's pre-packed bag and a confession that he's had an affair. Heartbroken and devastated, Rosie drowns her sorrows in a glass (or three) of wine, only to discover the following morning that she has spontaneously invested in a bright pink campervan to facilitate her grand plans to travel the country. Now, Rosie is about to embark on the trip of a lifetime, and the chance to change her life! With Poppy, her new-found travelling tea shop in tow, nothing could go wrong, could it...? A laugh-out-loud novel of love, friendship and adventure! Perfect for fans of Debbie Johnson and Holly Martin. Readers LOVE Rosie's Travelling Tea Shop! 'Oh YES, YES, YES!!! I bloody loved this. I absolutely adored this book.' Goodreads reviewer, 5 stars 'Awesome!!!... Absolutely brilliant... I loved this book a huge amount... I sat and read it in an afternoon.' Vonibee, 5 stars 'Had me hooked from the very first page... Absolutely joyous.' Goodreads reviewer, 5 stars 'I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of this novel and read it through in one day... It brightened up my day so much that I couldn't take the sappy grin off my face as I finished reading the final page.' Goodreads reviewer, 5

stars‘A fast-paced, funny, romantic, heart-warming and realistic book that will have you not only laughing out loud but glued to the page.’ Chicks, Rogues and Scandals, 5 stars‘Such a pleasure to read, I lost myself within the pages... An incredibly enjoyable book.’ Rachel’s Random Reads, 5 stars ‘There is just so much to love about this story... This wonderful, cosy read just resonated with me so much!’ Goodreads reviewer, 5 stars

Содержание

About the Author	6
Readers love Rebecca Raisin	7
Also by Rebecca Raisin	8
Rosie's Travelling Tea Shop	9
Chapter 1	13
Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3	28
Chapter 4	38
Chapter 5	51
Chapter 6	56
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	79

About the Author

REBECCA RAISIN is a true bibliophile. This love of books morphed into the desire to write them. Rebecca aims to write characters you can see yourself being friends with. People with big hearts who care about relationships, and most importantly, believe in true, once-in-a-lifetime love.

Readers love Rebecca Raisin

‘Absolutely fantastic book, had me hooked from the first page’

‘I absolutely loved everything to do with this book’

‘Rebecca Raisin has a way of writing that is so evocative, it brings each and every scene to life’

‘Romantic, emotional, hilarious in places but most of all beautiful’

‘Full of anticipation, a real page turner. Loved it!’

‘A good holiday read’

‘Be whisked away on a beautiful adventure and pick up a copy today!’

Also by Rebecca Raisin

Christmas at the Gingerbread Café

Chocolate Dreams at the Gingerbread Café

The Bookshop on the Corner

Christmas Wedding at the Gingerbread Café

Secrets at Maple Syrup Farm

The Little Bookshop on the Seine

The Little Antique Shop Under the Eiffel Tower

The Little Perfume shop off the Champs-Élysées

Celebrations and Confetti at Cedarwood Lodge

Brides and Bouquets at Cedarwood Lodge

Midnight and Mistletoe at Cedarwood Lodge

Christmas at Cedarwood Lodge

Aria's Travelling Book Shop

Rosie's Travelling Tea Shop

REBECCA RAISIN



HQ

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[Table of Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise for Rebecca Raisin](#)

[Also by Rebecca Raisin](#)

[Title page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Extract](#)

[Dear Reader ...](#)

[Keep Reading ...](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

For the hero in my very own love story.

This one is for you Ashley.

Chapter 1

'You're just not spontaneous enough, Rosie ...'

I've misheard, surely. Fatigue sends my brain to mush at the best of times but after twenty hours on my feet, words sound fuzzy, and I struggle to untangle what he's getting at.

It's just gone 2 a.m. on Saturday 2nd February and that means I'm officially 32 years old. By my schedule I should be in the land of nod, but I'd stayed late at work to spontaneously bake a salted caramel tart to share with Callum, hoping he'd actually remember my birthday this year.

He's never been a details man – we're opposites in that respect – so I try not to take it to heart, but part of me hopes this is all a prelude to a fabulous birthday surprise and not the brewing of a row.

'Sorry, Callum, what did you say?' I try to keep my voice light and swig a little too heartily on the cheap red wine I found in the back of the cupboard after Callum told me we needed to have a chat. Surreptitiously, I glance to the table beside me hoping to see a prettily wrapped box but find it bare, bar a stack of cookbooks. Really, I don't need gifts, do I? Love can be shown in other ways, perhaps he'll make me a delicious breakfast when we wake up ...

My eyes slip closed. With midnight long gone, my feet ache, and I'm weary right down to my bones. Bed is calling to me in the most seductive way; *come hither and sleep, Rosie*, it says. Even

the thought of a slice of luscious ooey-gooey birthday tart can't keep me awake and *compos mentis*. But I know I must focus, he's trying to tell me something ...

'Are you asleep?' The whine in his voice startles me awake. 'Rosie, please, don't make this any harder than it has to be,' he says, as if I'm being deliberately obtuse.

Make what harder – what have I missed? I shake my head, hoping the fog will clear. 'How am I not spontaneous? What do you even *mean* by that?' Perhaps he's nervous because he's about to brandish two airline tickets to the Bahamas. *Happy Birthday, Rosie, time to pack your bags!*

He lets out a long, weary sigh like I'm dense and it strikes me as strange that he's speaking in riddles at this time of the morning when I have to be at the fishmonger in precisely five hours.

'Look ...' He runs a hand through his thinning red hair. 'I think we both know it's over, don't we?'

'Over?' My mouth falls open. Just exactly how long did my power nap last for? 'What ... *us*?' My incredulity thickens the air. This does not sound *anything* like a birthday celebration, not even close.

'Yes, us,' he confirms, averting his eyes.

'Over because I'm not—', I make air quotes with my fingers, '—*spontaneous* enough?' Has he polished off the cooking sherry? My husband still won't look at me.

'You're too staid. You plan your days with military precision from when you wake to when you sleep, and everything in

between has a time limit attached to it. There's no room for fun or frivolity, or god forbid having sex on a day you haven't scheduled it.'

So I'm a planner? It's essential in my line of work as a sous-chef in esteemed Michelin-starred London restaurant *Époque*, and he should know that, having the exact same position in another restaurant (one with no Michelin stars, sadly). If I didn't schedule our time together we'd never see each other! And I wouldn't get the multitude of things done that need doing every single hour of every day. High pressure is an understatement.

'I ... I ...' I don't know how to respond.

'See?' He stares me down as if I'm a recalcitrant child. 'You don't even care! I'd get more affection from a pot plant! You *can* be a bit of a cold fish, Rosie.'

His accusation makes me reel, as if I've been slapped. 'That's harsh, Callum, honestly, what a thing to say!' Truth be told I'm not one for big shows of affection. If you want my love, you'll get it when I serve you a plate of something I've laboured over. That's how I express myself, when I cook.

It dawns on me, thick and fast. 'There's someone else.'

He has the grace to blush.

A feeling of utter despair descends while my stomach churns. How *could* he?

'Well?' I urge him again. Since he's dropping truth bombs left, right and centre, he can at least admit his part in this ... this break-up. Hurt crushes my heart. I hope I'm asleep and having

a nightmare.

‘Well, yes, there is, but it’s not exactly a surprise, surely? We’re like ships that pass in the night. If only you were more—’

‘Don’t you dare say spontaneous.’

‘—if only you were *less* staid.’ He manages a grin. A *grin*. Do I even know this man who thinks stomping over my heart is perfectly acceptable?

He continues reluctantly, his face reddening as if he’s embarrassed. ‘It’s just ... you’re so predictable, Rosie. I can see into your future, *our* future because it’s planned to the last microsecond! You’ll *always* be a sous-chef, and you’ll *always* schedule your days from sun up to sun down. You’ll keep everyone at arm’s length. Even when I leave, you’ll continue on the exact same trajectory.’ He shakes his head as though he’s disappointed in me but his voice softens. ‘I’m sorry, Rosie, I really am, but I can see it playing out – you’ll stay resolutely single and grow the most cost-effective herb garden this side of the Thames. I hope you don’t, though. I truly hope you find someone who sets your world on fire. But it’s not me, Rosie.’

What in the world? Not only is he dumping me, he’s planning my spinsterhood too? Jinxing me to a lonely life where my only companion is my tarragon plant? Well, not on my watch! I might be sleep-deprived but I’m nobody’s fool. The love I have for him pulses, but I remember the other woman and it firms my resolve.

He sighs and gives me a pitying smile. ‘I hate to say it, Rosie. But you’re turning into your dad. Not wanting to leave the ...’

‘Get out,’ I say. He is a monster.

‘What?’

Cold fish, eh? ‘OUT!’ I muster the loudest voice I can.

‘But I thought we’d sort who gets what first?’

‘Out and I mean it, Callum.’ I will not give him the satisfaction of walking all over me just because he thinks he can.

‘Fine, but I’m keeping this apartment. You can—’

‘NOW!’ The roar startles even me. *You want to see me warm up?* ‘LEAVE!’

He jumps from the couch and dashes to the hallway, where I see a small bag he’s left in readiness, knowing the outcome of our ‘quick chat’ long before I did. With one last guilty look over his shoulder, he leaves with a bang of the door. He’s gone just like that.

As though I’m someone so easy to walk away from.

Laying down on the sofa, I clutch a cushion to my chest and wait for the pain to subside. How has it all gone so wrong? There’s someone else in his life? When did he find time to romance anyone?

Sure, I don’t go out much, other than for work purposes, but that’s because there’s no bloody time *to* go out! I’m not like my dad, am I? No, Callum is using that as ammunition, knowing how sensitive I am to such a comparison.

The sting of his words burns and doubt creeps in. Am I not spontaneous enough? Am I far too predictable?

Admittedly I’d been feeling hemmed in, ennui creeping into

everything, even my menu. Each day bleeding into the next with no discernible change except the *plat de jour*. Sure, my professional life is on track but lately even my enthusiasm for that has waned. I've had enough of tweezing micro herbs to last a lifetime. Of plating minuscule food at macro prices. Of the constant bickering in the kitchen. The noise, the bluster, the backstabbing. Of never seeing blue skies or the sun setting. Of not being able to sit beside my husband on the couch at a reasonable hour and keep my eyes open at the same time.

Is this my fault? Am I a cold fish? I like routine and order so I know where I fit in the world. Everything is controlled and organised. There's no clutter, mess, or fuss, or any chance I'll lose control of any facet of my life. That need to keep life contained is a relic of my childhood. Is my marriage now a casualty of that?

But he'd promised he'd love me for better or worse.

Am I supposed to hope he comes to his senses or to beg him to come back?

Sighing, I place a hand on my heart, trying to ease the ache. I could never trust him again. I'm a stickler for rules, always have been, and cheating, well ... I can't forgive that.

But bloody hell, our lives had been all mapped out. Our first child was scheduled for conception in 2021. The second in 2023. And he's just blithely walking away from his children like that! Didn't he understand I would have given up my career for our future family? The career I'd worked so hard for! And I would have done it gladly, too.

Now this?

The gossip will spread like wildfire around the foodie world. My name embroiled in a scandal not of my choosing. It's taken me fifteen years to get to where I am in my career, and that's meant sacrificing a few things along the way, like a social life, and free time, real friendships. But that was all part of the bigger picture, the tapestry of our lives.

It hurts behind my eyes just thinking about it all.

And I mean to cry and wail and torment myself about the 'other woman', or force myself up off the couch and throw my lovingly baked birthday tart at the wall, or eat it all in one go as tears stream down my face – something dramatic and movie-esque – but I don't. Instead, I fall into a deep sleep, only waking when my alarm shrills at stupid o'clock the next day, and with it comes the overwhelming knowledge that I must leave London. At 32, this could be my rebirth, couldn't it?

Not spontaneous enough? Cold fish? Spinster? Like my dad?
I'll show you.

Chapter 2

At Billingsgate Market the briny smell of seafood hardly registers. I dash to the fishmonger, rattle off my order, too distracted to make the usual small talk. John, the guy with the freshest seafood this side of Cornwall, notices my jittery state.

‘What’s up, Rosie? There’s something different about you today.’ He gives me a once-over as if trying to pinpoint the change.

‘Oh,’ I say, mind scuttling. ‘I haven’t had any tea.’ My other great love. Making hand-blended teas for various moods. Wake-me-ups. Wind-me-downs. And everything in between. If I ever leave my job, I have a backup plan at least ... tea merchant!

John cocks his head. ‘You don’t look like you need it though, Rosie. You look alive.’ He shrugs. ‘And utterly different from this fella.’ He points to a dead flounder whose glassy eye stares up at me as John lets out his trademark haw, while I flinch slightly at being compared to deceased marine life. He bags my order, promising to courier it on ice to Époque immediately.

Do I look alive?

As I make my way to the butcher to confirm my weekly order, it occurs to me. Shouldn’t I be puffy-faced, red-eyed, fuzzy-headed from tossing and turning all night? Instead, I feel this sort of frenetic energy because I realise that I’m about to do something very out of character, bold and brave, and completely

unexpected – what that entails, I’m still not quite sure, but the desire is there and I’m about to implement a huge change. *Shriek.*

I’m steadfast Rosie, I don’t *do* change.

I’m going to prove to the world that I’m not staid. Not stuck in a rut. I’m going to surprise even Callum, by doing the opposite of what he expects because I know if I don’t move on fast, I never will.

Being predictable has its disadvantages, and it’s time I shook things up a bit. Jumped, as it were, into a new reality.

What that is though exactly, remains to be seen ...

When I think of my once heart-melting, lovely, red-headed husband my lungs constrict, so I push him from my mind as quickly as possible. As I walk, I repeat the mantra *do not fall apart, hold yourself together*, and promise myself I can wail in privacy later.

I visit the butcher at Borough Market, then the French boulangerie, and finally our fresh produce supplier before all my jobs are done and I’m ready to prepare for lunch service.

When I arrive at Époque, I find the restaurant manager crunching numbers, a steaming espresso in front of her untouched. I’ve always liked Sally; she’s a sassy, funny Glaswegian, who chain smokes and is fantastic at her job.

‘Coffee?’ she says absently, fiddling with paperwork.

‘And a chat,’ I say, dumping my bag on the bench and joining her at the table.

‘That sounds ominous.’ Her eyes dart to me before she bustles

to the coffee machine, which spits and hisses under her hand.

A headache looms. Am I about to make a huge mistake? I've been yearning for change for such a long time, but it's hard to tell if it's a lie I'm selling myself. Callum might have pushed me to act, but I'm not being impetuous, am I?

As worry gnaws away at me, outwardly I remain calm and busy, unwinding my scarf and taking in the restaurant. It's not often that I'm front of house. When I first started at *Époque* the décor was art nouveau, then it went on to have various makeovers, and right now it's industrial chic. Any successful London establishment must move with the times, so the *in* crowd doesn't become the *out* crowd.

And the kitchen is no different. I'm always looking for the next foodie sensation, the dish that will blow patrons' minds, get us write-ups and reservations booked solid for the next six months.

You name it, I've tried it. Molecular gastronomy, sensory gastronomy, *multi*-sensory gastronomy. While it's all very theatrical, and a feast for mind, body and spirit, there's times I just want to cook up a big, hearty bowl of comfort food without any flourishes – real, honest meals that will fill your belly and warm your heart. Alas, that's never going to happen in a Michelin-starred establishment like *Époque*.

Sally returns and places my tiny cup down. 'So, talk,' she says, staring me down. It's her no-nonsense attitude I love. She doesn't mince words, and you always know where you stand with her. Do her right, and you'll have a friend for life. Cross her and forget

working in London again. Sally's been around forever and knows everyone there is to know in the industry. We get on well because she accepts me for who I am, a cookery nerd. That, and she's partial to my twice-cooked fromage soufflé.

'I'm officially handing in my notice,' I say, surprised by the confidence in my tone. With that sort of voice, I could almost fool myself into believing I know what I'm doing! What the hell *am* I doing?

Handing in my notice?

I hope my brain will catch up with my mouth, sooner rather than later.

Sally purses her lips and nods. 'And you don't think this is a knee-jerk reaction to what that despicable excuse for a husband has done to you?'

'You've heard *already*?' That's got to be a record, even for the likes of the London cookery establishment.

With an airy shrug, she tries to downplay it. 'You know what it's like. There were whispers about him a while back, but I didn't think they had any substance, hence why I never said anything.'

Just how long has the affair been going on? Were they having mad, passionate, *unscheduled* sex, while I worked? My heart bongoes painfully inside my chest as though it's preparing for an attack. I will myself not to give into it. He doesn't deserve that. The rat. The pig. The cheating no-good husband. But oh, how it hurts.

'So who is she?' I hate asking but I need to know who he's

replaced me with.

Sally takes a cigarette from her purse and lights up, despite the restaurant being a strictly non-smoking venue and the fact there's enough smoke alarms installed to have half of the London Fire Brigade here within minutes if they're set off.

When she doesn't answer I urge her on. 'It's OK, Sally, honestly.'

With a tut, she says, 'I want to wring his scrawny neck! The things that guy has put you through.'

I'm not a fan of wandering down memory lane. What point does looking back serve? Sally's never been keen on Callum; she's of the opinion he rides on my coat-tails. And I suppose for a while he did. And once, early on before we were married, he did sort of try to steal my job from under me and Sally hasn't forgotten that. I had until this very moment. Clearly I've used poor judgement in the whole choosing my husband department. Back then I had love hearts for eyes, and the world was a wondrous place.

'Who is she?' I prod.

'Khloe,' she says, with a reluctant sigh.

I shake my head. 'Why is it *always* the chef de partie? What a cliché. And Khloe with a K, for god's sake.' I'd met the exotic-eyed vixen at an industry party, and she actually introduced herself as 'Khloe with a K'. Who does that? Kardashians and husband-stealers, that's who.

That means Khloe worked *under* him, literally and

figuratively. The thought leaves a bad taste in my mouth so I sip the bitter coffee to wash it away.

Sally leans closer, surveying me, as if waiting for me to cry, for one solitary tear to fall, or my bottom lip to wobble, something – anything – that shows her I'm not a robot, but I use all my willpower to remain calm and keep telling myself he does not warrant such histrionics. I'm a professional, dammit, and I won't be a sobbing mess at work. I suppose this control is what makes people think I'm aloof, steely, strange, when in fact it's the opposite, it's purely a protective instinct.

Inside my heart twists and shrinks, this pain probably doing me lifelong damage. Will my heart shrivel up altogether, leaving me as predicted – a lonely old spinster? Is rebound sex the answer? No, I will fall in love, not lust.

Hearing about Khloe firms my resolve. London is too toxic for me right now. I need to put some space between me and the city I've loved for so long.

Sally rubs my arm affectionately. 'The whispers will die down, you just need to keep focused, keep working and ride out the storm. Don't give up your career because of that snake in the grass. Please. You've worked harder than anyone I know. Don't let that go to waste.'

I take a moment to decipher my feelings. Eventually I say, 'It's not just him, Sally. It's everything. I've had this nagging feeling life is passing me by for a while now. I've been slogging it out here since I was seventeen. I'm in the prime of my life, and if I

don't look up, I'll miss it. What Callum did might have been the catalyst, but it's not the entire reason. I promise I'm not making this decision lightly or *just* because of him.' As the words roll off my tongue, I feel the truth in them. I've been unhappy for such a long time but put it down to overwork, life fatigue, the daily grind.

'Listen, you're giving me four weeks' notice, right?'

I nod.

'Take that time to think it over. I mean, *really* consider it. Instead of interviewing for a replacement straight away, Jacques can hold the fort alone for a month while you decide.'

Jacques is the celebrity chef de cuisine and won't like having to wait in limbo for my decision. He's an ogre to work under. In actual fact, I do his job so he can sashay about front of house before returning to the line and barking orders and cursing. As his star rose, I worked my way up behind him, and we have a sort of grudging respect for one another. While he has an ego the size of the Titanic, he lets me control the menu and I have complete freedom in the kitchen, even if he does take the credit.

'Thanks, Sally. I appreciate that. But I'm quite sure, so you can start interviewing.' No point pretending. They'll need a sous-chef so things run smoothly, and while I'm not super friendly with Jacques, I do like the other staff and would hate for them to have to carry the extra weight of my absence.

After one of Sally's breath-stealing hugs, I leave her and go to the kitchen to shuffle the fresh produce around and prepare the

day's menus, hoping the kitchen staff won't pry, even though I bet they've woken up to gossipy text messages about me and Callum.

That's the culinary scene for you.

Chapter 3

After a strangely quiet Sunday shift, I'm home earlier than usual, giving me time to mull over whether I've taken leave of my senses. Who quits their job on a whim like that?

My phone beeps constantly with messages like:

Darling, that swine didn't, did he? Text me back. Kimmy x

I wrack my mind wondering who Kimmy might be and come up blank. There's another from Leroy who I vaguely recall works with Callum.

So are ya leaving then? If y'are can you put in a good word with Jacques for me?

The rest are of a similar ilk; people wanting the inside scoop. No one actually offers to help me drown my sorrows or bring cake over so I can eat my feelings. And seeing as they're all chefs, it hurts.

They want the gossip or my job. The vultures.

I don't dwell on it much – just every hour, on the hour, or so. Still, if there's one thing I'm good at it, it's making a plan. New life scenarios. What *not* to do, kind of thing. I write down various possibilities – stopping just before *what if the sky falls down* – and realise for once in my life I have absolutely no idea what to do, or where to go when my notice is up.

It's a scary thought. Yet somehow liberating.

No one gives up a sous-chef position at *Époque* unless they've

married royalty or won the lottery, and that's exactly why I'm relishing the thought. No one, absolutely no one, including my husband (do I call him ex at this juncture?), thinks I'll react.

The whispers in the kitchen were that I'd work even longer hours and virtually chain myself to the line with some kind of mad zeal, avenging myself by doing the job of three until one day when I'm a lonely old crone someone has to drag me kicking and screaming out of the kitchen. So nothing new there then.

The wine helps clear my mind and I drink steadily, delighting in the rich Shiraz, a gift from Sally, thrust into my hands at the end of my shift with the words: *enjoy your day off tomorrow, but think things through ...*

Inexplicably the bottle empties, so I open one of my cheap quaffers as I skim through various blogs online, hoping to find an idea, or something to give me perspective. Those uplifting, let-the-breeze-blow-you-here, change-your-life type of blogs.

As I sip, I read so many wonderful stories of transformation, of risking it all. Families who've wrenched their kids from school to live life on the road. Single women (just like me now!) who've thrown their spatulas down and taken the reins and live by their own rules. People with pop-up food vans. Campervan pottery shops. Musicians who play from tiny homes. Artisans who make jewellery by the sea, sell their wares and follow the sun. I shake my head. There's a whole community of people out there *living their best life ...*

Could I be that person? Probably not.

So it can't hurt to look at campervan prices, can it? I'm only *looking*, I'm not buying. Even if I were to go out on a limb and envisage a totally new way of life, I'd have to commit to months of research to see if it's viable. Then there's the flat to consider. My possessions. Money. I'm stuck, really, aren't I? It strikes me that we humans build these lives for ourselves that have the tendency to trap us. I guzzle more wine and wonder how I can fix the mess I've found myself in ...

* * *

The next day, I wake up with a screaming headache. The pounding in my head is in staccato with the buzzing of the doorbell. My one and only day off from the restaurant, and my most relished lie-in has been ruined. By me, and the copious amounts of wine I'd put away, and by whoever deems it acceptable to visit at – I scan the clock – barely eight o'clock. It should be a criminal offence. I silently berate myself for drinking so much red on an empty stomach. But cooking for one, well, I'm not used to it.

The buzzing continues and it dawns on me. It's Callum come to his senses and seen the error of his ways. He'll wear that apologetic gap-toothed smile of his, his too-long red hair hanging over one eye, so he can hide behind his mistake. And I shall relish telling him to spin on his heel and go back the way he came!

I dash out of bed, as the world spins on its axis. Bloody hell, just how much *did* I drink last night? Don't tell me I'm going to be one those tragics who drink their life away and use the

empty wine bottle as a microphone for an impromptu concert? A memory forms; did I karaoke the night away strutting my stuff for my own reflection in the window? As alarming as the thought is, the doorbell buzzing makes my hangover worse so I hurry along to answer it.

Hand on wall, I steady myself and wish I'd brushed my teeth and had some painkillers on hand. Urgh. Quickly, I pat down my bed hair and open the door with a grimace.

It's not Callum.

And suddenly it occurs to me I'm braless in a teeny tiny singlet wearing a pair of Callum's old tracksuit bottoms, so big they gape at the front. So not appropriate. With a wild grin that I hope masks my discomfort, I grasp desperately at the coat rail to my right, while pondering who this stranger is, as my fingers finally make contact with my jacket and I fling it on.

'Sorry,' I say. 'I wasn't expecting anyone.'

Confusion dashes across the elderly man's face. He's dressed in a worn duffel, denim jeans and has a kind smile. He doesn't look like a Londoner, somehow – his features are too soft, too amiable, his face too open, like a doting grandparent. 'Erm,' he says scratching the back of his neck. 'You said you'd pay extra if I got here early.'

Oh bloody hell. Pay extra? Is he some kind of gigolo? He looks a bit too old for that caper. Not that I've had any experience with such a thing, but still. Was I so inebriated last night I thought *that* was the answer? I'm losing my damned mind!

‘Excuse me, sorry, it’s been such a long day ...’ Oh, hell, it’s only 8 a.m. ‘I mean, a long night—’, I cough loudly, ‘—the night before, I mean. As in last night.’ *Stop talking!*

He nods, but worry flashes in his eyes. ‘Well, do you want to come and have a look at her?’

Relief washes over me. *Her?* I’ve bought a puppy? Or even better a 10-year-old rescue hound who needs some love after too long in the shelter! Forget my 2021 child, I’ve adopted a fur baby who’ll cuddle me better than Callum ever did. It makes sense. There are so many animals out there that need adopting and I mentally give myself a pat on the back for being so forward-thinking.

‘Ah, sure,’ I say and tighten the coat around me, holding the voluminous pants with my other hand. Note to self: wear own pyjamas in this time of drastic change.

I stumble down the steps after him, thinking just how perfect an animal companion will be. Snoopy can snuggle with me at night, be my best friend, my most faithful ...

‘Here she is.’ He points but nothing jumps out at me. There’s a great big fuchsia pink van parked on the side of the road blocking my view. I scan parked cars up the length of the street, expecting to see a furry face peeking out, a wet nose fogging up the glass but don’t see a single animal.

Just when I’m about to question him he hands over a set of keys. ‘The credit card payment has been approved so she’s all yours. Let me show you around.’

The credit card.

The what?

What the hell have I done!

The con artist and stealer of my money opens the pink campervan door to reveal a very tidy tiny home complete with small kitchen, doll-sized sink, an electric hotplate and oven. A wave of claustrophobia runs down the length of me. It's so compact, how anyone could live in such a space is beyond me. However, there's a faint aroma of cinnamon sugar in the air that makes me smile, as if whoever cooked here last, made comfort food.

'This here's the dining room,' he says, pride in his voice as he motions to a fold-down plank of wood with two padded bench seats on each side, which he lifts to reveal deep storage cavities. Everything seems to have a double function.

Next to the dining area is a one-person sofa with pink storage nooks above. I spy a bedroom off at the back and take a peek in. The bed is made up with fine linen and one rose cushion sits lovingly in the centre of the bed. It makes my heart tug for some reason I can't pinpoint.

A gauzy floral chiffon curtain separates the living and sleeping quarters. There's a bathroom, which is so narrow I have to crab walk in sideways, but it's neat and sparkling clean. Of course, the tiles are pink, and they slowly grow on me as I understand the need for décor to match. There's no excess, everything here serves a purpose. It's not chintzy, it's homely, as if someone put

a lot of care into making things pretty and comfortable for long, slow journeys.

But I don't do things on a whim. I most certainly don't buy campervans for ... the full weight of winter runs right through me from my head down to my toes.

'Excuse me, how much was erm ... the approval?'

He frowns. 'Five thousand pounds like we agreed and an extra five hundred to get her here by 8 a.m. I drove through the night.'

Flip. Fluck. Fugger.

What the hell am I supposed to do with such a thing? Live in it? Is it even roadworthy? Can I drive such a big, long, hulking thing? And pray tell, where the bloody buggery am I meant to be going in ... *her*. Urgh. How do I know I even spoke to this guy? He could be one of those internet stalker, hacker types. Really, this is very out of character for me.

A scream echoes through my brain.

'I'm sorry about Callum,' he says. 'But you're doing the right thing. Leaving the big city toxicity behind and heading out on the open road. You'll find yourself there, Rosie.'

Oh god. I did buy this fuchsia pink monstrosity. I'm never drinking again.

'Yes, well, I'm lost quite a lot of the time,' I say, swallowing back panic. 'So finding myself will be a real bonus.'

He waxes lyrical about hidden storage, and petrol mileage, permits, parking and a bunch of other stuff, I stop listening, as I find it hard to catch my breath. Five thousand five hundred

pounds! That's almost the entirety of my savings. I'll have to repay my credit card. I'll have to sell this on. I'll have to ...

'The trailer hitches on very simply, and inside that are all your tables and chairs, and even a little fire grate for those cold days, customers just love milling about that, warm cocoa in hand.'

'Customers?'

He gives me that same look as if he's worried I'm unhinged which I clearly am. 'Yes, your pop-up tea shop customers, remember?'

'Erm ...'

'You want to go back to making comfort food, big portions made with love, not a micro herb in sight. Served up with steaming pots of gourmet hand-blended tea. Cream tea Sundays. You *are* Rosie, aren't you?' Uneasiness lines his face.

'Yes, yes, I'm Rosie. And yes, my very own pop-up tea shop, of course I remember. I haven't had any tea yet myself you see, that's all.' My calming blend would go down a treat right about now, there's not much that marshmallow leaves, camomile, and mint can't fix. Well, except making big life decisions while under the influence of Shiraz. I haven't blended a tea to fix that just yet.

I glance once more at the van and a murky idea takes shape. A pop-up tea van could work. Hadn't I wanted to go back to my roots, cooking big batches of cookies, apple crumbles, and layer cakes laced with rum? Scones with lashings of home-made jam and thick luscious cream. Rib-stickers, nourishing food that warmed you from the inside out like big bowls of hearty stew, and

rich rustic soups. Or cinnamon rice porridge, dishes that filled your belly and kept you warm on those cold wintry nights.

Coupled with my hand-blended exotic teas, maybe inebriated me had a plan and I just had to remember it. *Rosie's travelling tea shop* ...

‘So ...’ The man takes some paperwork from his bag. ‘We just need to fill these out and Poppy is all yours.’

‘The van’s name is Poppy?’ I think of the pink cushion, proudly sitting on the bed, like it should mean something to me, but what? Why?

He laughs and his cheeks pink. ‘My wife chose it. We ran Poppy round for some time before she was taken ill.’

‘I hope she’s feeling better.’ As soon as I say the words I understand, but it’s too late to snatch them back.

He thrusts his hands in his pockets and his eyes cloud. ‘Sadly she passed, but you know, Rosie, she was an eccentric like you ...’

An eccentric? I’d been called worse.

‘... and I think she’d be very happy that Poppy is going to be in such ...’ He blushes and mumbles something incoherent before recovering and saying, ‘in such good hands.’

I forgive him for stumbling on the words. I’d be a little dubious handing over Poppy to me too, with all those memories attached from the trips they must have undertaken together.

The poor man, you can see the loss in the lines of his face once you know. ‘I’m incredibly sorry to hear about your wife. I

promise I'll take good care of Poppy.' Curiously, I feel a bond with this elderly fellow. With Poppy. As if his wife left me clues to say: follow your heart!

'We're going to have a lot of adventures.' As I drive straight into a town called Losing-My-Damn-Mind – Population: One.

His face softens, and he swipes at his glassy eyes. 'Rosie, take it from me – life is so fleeting. Being on the road is full of challenges but nothing comes close to the simple joy you'll find in some remote corner of the globe. Keep safe, and keep your mind open to possibilities ...'

My spine tingles with recognition and a slow smile settles across my face. Who says I'm not spontaneous? Poppy and I are going to embark on an epic journey, one long overdue ... But how to afford it? And where to go?

Chapter 4

A couple of weeks later, after a dizzyingly long shift at Époque I realise leaving really is the best course of action, no matter how much it scares me. Work has been a nightmare with the rumours, gossip and constant whispering behind hands and I want out.

But first I need to formulate a plan. I have Poppy and now I just need figure out what to do with her. Back in the flat, after a healthy and nutritious meal of a packet of salt and vinegar crisps, I fire up the laptop and do a bit of investigating.

OK, I go straight to Khloe Parker's Facebook page, and see she's updated the masses already: *Khloe Parker is in a relationship*. She's tagged Callum in the post and collectively, they've had seventy-two comments. I can't help myself and I click them open, hoping they're not all congratulations.

Does anyone remember he is in fact married? Even though it's like a stab to the heart, I read each comment, from the inane 'wow' to the more heartbreaking, *'Congrats guys, glad it's finally out in the open!'*

In the gloomy evening, in the quiet of night, I realise I was the last to know, and the thought pains me so much I can barely swallow my tears. Our mutual acquaintances had known and no one bothered to tell me. Instead they've sent the happy couple their best wishes ... What kind of life have I been living here?

I click over to Callum's page, and find photos of the pair,

selfies taken up close, their bright eyes and wide smiles taking up the frame. I quickly close Facebook down, and resolve never to check their pages again. Not my best idea, was it? It makes me feel lower than low, as if I don't matter to anyone.

Is it just because I'm leaving and will have no relevance anymore, because I won't be Rosie Lewis, Michelin-starred sous-chef ...? Or more truthfully is it because I was always on the periphery anyway, never quite fitting in and not knowing how to do anything well, except cook. With my legs well and truly kicked from under me, I forge ahead, trying to push it from my mind.

Mindlessly I scroll the internet, looking for something to distract me. Funny cat videos work until I picture my future with a furry companion and a very healthy herb garden, and quickly move on. Hours later I stumble on a website that catches my eye.

Van Lifers: Living the dream on the open road

As I click through the site, marvelling at the exotic pictures of these strangers' travels, I find a forum, and request to join. I plan to lurk and read their live conversations, but as soon as I'm approved, a message pops up from another member, so I don't have the chance.

Hello there Rosie! I'm Charlotte, one of the moderators. If you have any questions, do let me know.

Golly, I thought I'd sneak in and read their posts before actually having to chat to anyone!

Thanks, Charlotte. I'm just going to have a peruse.

She sends me a thumbs-up emoji and I shut the chat window

down and spend the next little while trying to make sense of all the different threads, and the plethora of advice from nomads.

Dare I try to live such an unstructured life?

Just the thought of it almost makes me break out in hives. Every day would be different, and I'd have to learn to let go of my obsession with planning every minute, and factoring in variables. Could I do such an audacious thing?

I shut the computer with a bang. Doubtful. But their profile pictures stick in my mind, some with islands and cerulean water in the background, others with rugged mountains, forests, or verdant fields, but they all shared one trait: huge smiles that threatened to swallow them whole. Not the fake selfie smile, the forced rigor mortis of social media pictures, but real joy emanating from these strangers as if they've found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

That's what I want. To feel joyful. But are some people predisposed to joy and others to worry? It would be an experiment then, right? To shed my old self, and see who hides beneath. Despite my self-enforced alcohol ban, I pour a glass of white wine, and think about where I'd go, and what I'd sell to be able to afford the lifestyle, and mostly how I'd manage to reinvent myself if only I took the first leap.

Logging back on, I click the chat button and find Charlotte's name and type:

Charlotte, do pop-up food vans make enough money to fund travel, or do most people have a safety net of savings?

I send it before I can overthink it, cringing at how desperate I must sound. How do I, planner extraordinaire, not have enough savings? After buying Poppy I wiped out most of what I had; coupled with the cost of living in London, there's not much left to save even if I wanted to.

Ellipses appear as she writes a reply, and finally:

Everyone is different and it depends on what sort of lifestyle you want to maintain, but generally speaking, pop-up food vans do exceptionally well – everyone needs to eat, right? Not only do they sell to the public at various festivals, and fairs, they also sell to the other nomads, so if that's your speciality, what are you waiting for!

Hmm, she has a point, everyone does need to eat, and who doesn't like a freshly brewed pot of exotic tea alongside scones with jam and cream. I could keep my menu simple to start with, and see how things go. Poppy can't sit on the side of the road forever.

Thanks, Charlotte. What am I waiting for indeed! I'll mull it over 😊

* * *

A few days later, a rough idea takes shape, and even though it's daunting, it somehow feels right. But I need more information so I head back to the forum to find Charlotte. Her name isn't on the chat window but before I can ask anyone another person pops up.

Hey Rosie! I'm Oliver. Welcome to VL. What's your location?

Blimey, why does he need to know? I can't just give out my

location willy-nilly, can I? There's a lot to be said for remaining anonymous. Why did I use my real name? An amateur move!

Is this part of my problem though, being so reserved with people? Always holding back, keeping everything bottled up. Slowly but surely becoming an outcast in my own life? Still, he could be anyone! I can't just trust strangers, *especially* names on a screen. I compromise, and reply, albeit guardedly. Really he can't be any worse than my real-life acquaintances, who've all kept quiet despite my heartbreak.

Hi, Oliver. I haven't started my journey yet. Just getting the lay of the land, so to speak. I'm looking for Charlotte, if she's around?

I scroll to the top of the current thread and read. It's an online forum for anyone who needs advice or help when it comes to travelling in a caravan or campervan. Born2Travel asks about the best travel insurance, while WanderlustWendall shares an anecdote about an altercation she had with a national park inspector near the Welsh border. They seem so vibrant, so happy; even when WanderlustWendall shares that she copped a fifty-pound fine, she says she learned her lesson and is generous enough to share the tip so others don't make the same mistake. TravelBug1978 discusses the money saving merits of a 5:2 fasting diet, while NomadbyNight scoffs at the idea.

Charlotte won't be back for a few weeks, she's guiding a cycle tour in the Peak District and will be out of range.

Are they all so adventurous? I couldn't imagine being on a bike for a day, let alone for weeks at a time. Wouldn't that provoke

some sort of injury, all that sitting on a teeny tiny seat?

Thanks, anyway.

I blow out a breath, having psyched myself up to speak openly to Charlotte I feel somewhat deflated.

No worries, so when do you plan to leave?

I want to chat away, and share all my hopes and dreams, but I'm not that person. And for some reason, I felt more comfortable talking to Charlotte, perhaps it's a female thing. It gave me hope that if there were a bunch of other women travelling the globe alone, then I could do it too.

Soon.

What else can I say? Even if I don't meander from place to place, I'll be driving Poppy somewhere, even if it's only a caravan park where I spend the remainder of my life hiding ... No, no I will make the effort, I will adapt, dammit. So Charlotte is currently burning her thigh muscles cycling up and down hills, that doesn't mean I can't ask Oliver the same questions.

As I dillydally with how to begin, he asks:

Do you blog?

While I love reading blogs, I'd never write one. My creativity is in the kitchen, and I don't pretend otherwise.

No, sorry, I don't.

Another person joins the site, so I'm betting he'll welcome them and I'll be able to read through the amazing threads with eye opening titles like: How I quit my corporate job and now live on fifteen pounds a day and couldn't be happier. Or: Life after Loss,

on the open road. And: My pop-up Pimms van, and how I make money to fund travel. So many stories, so many different versions of life, ones I'd never ever considered. Goose bumps prickle my skin, as if my body knows this is the next course of action for me too. Taking Poppy on an adventure like I promised, and making money along the way, enough to keep me going, until I work out exactly what I'm searching for ...

Don't apologise! A lot of VLs blog about their journey, almost like an online diary to keep track, that's all. It's a great way to follow along with those you connect with.

I contemplate his theory. It would be nice to keep a record, keep track of where I go. But I know myself, and I'm more of a reader. Maybe I can keep my own online diary for myself.

Do you blog, Oliver?

His blog might shed light on exactly how this Van Lifers movement works and who he is.

Yes, my blog is oliverstravels.co.uk I mainly post pictures because I'm a photographer. Check it out if you have a mo.

I click the link. Wow. His pictures are truly breathtaking. Stunning snowscapes. And lush green fields. Black and white wedding portraits. I find his 'About' page and read his bio. I stop short when I see his profile picture. Oliver is jaw-droppingly handsome. One of those boy-next-door types who grows into his looks and suddenly becomes a heart-stopper. He has brown wavy locks, a trustworthy clear-eyed gaze, and his lips curve into a perfect sweet smile that conjures the idea of romance. Seeing the

man behind the words, I feel less suspect about him, and more willing to talk, before I realise how shallow I'm being. While he doesn't look like a serial killer, that doesn't mean he isn't!

Your photography is stunning.

My hands hover over the keyboard. Should I say more? Less? I am clueless with these sorts of interactions and I don't want him to get the wrong idea.

Thank you. It keeps me on the road so I'm grateful for that.

I scroll further through his blog, trying to get a handle on where he is, how long he's been doing this for. There's not a lot of writing, like he said, it's mainly photos. I can't see any other information, no travel route, no other clues as to where he might be. So he must work as he goes, taking photographs for people before moving to the next place. While the idea of no fixed abode terrifies me, I can also see the romanticism in it. The absolute freedom.

Where are you now?

I'm only asking out of politeness. Not because Oliver is a bit of alright.

Ireland ...

I've always wanted to visit Ireland. In this new strange life of mine, maybe I can go. Really, what's stopping me from ditching the material possessions and living a simpler life, like all these Van Lifers are doing?

Oliver and I chat for a while longer about this and that before he tells me all about various camp sites where I can stay for

next to nothing, stock up on cheap supplies and meet likeminded nomads. I make notes about the locations to research later.

He makes it all sound so *easy*, as if it's as simple as readying the van and filling up with fuel.

When I finally sign off we agree to chat again soon and I give myself an imaginary pat on the back for being so social and open when it feels so alien.

After doing a few hours of research myself, Bristol seems like the most logical place to travel to first. It's just far enough to blow the cobwebs out of Poppy, and not too far to turn back if I chicken out.

When my notice is up at Époque, I'll pack and get the hell out of here and see where the breeze blows me.

Look at me, making friends and being *spontaneous*. I blithely ignore the shake in my hands by circling them around a nice steaming cup of passionflower tea, a blend of florals made specifically to calm nerves, promote calm, and induce sleep. Just the ticket for my spinning mind ...

* * *

Before long my notice is up and it's time to leave my job. My career. My safety net. I say my goodbyes at Époque, getting teary when I hug Sally. It's impossible to imagine not waking with the birds and rushing around London in the morning, just like I've done for the last fifteen years. Or coming home after dinner service with heavy legs, and a dull throb in my head. Who will I be, if I'm not a sous-chef at Époque?

Suddenly I feel anchorless. Like those solid walls I built around me are caving in.

Back home, I begin to pack, knowing I've only got a few more weeks' grace, as per our divorce stipulations. The divorce itself won't settle for aeons, but we'd set out the terms and conditions, and as much as it hurts I will stand by what I promised. I'll be out of London by April. Callum wanted me to move sooner, offering me a payout at settlement, but I held firm. Their little love nest will have to wait. I need these next few weeks to plan, to come to terms with whatever it is I'm going to do.

I brew a pot of comforting raspberry and thyme tea, hoping it will perk me up. While it steeps, I fire up the laptop and decide to email Oliver for advice.

Hi Oliver,

If one was to set out on a journey, where would I likely go? Are there certain routes for novices, or is it more of an organic thing? I've been toying up seriously with the idea of a pop-up tea van ...

Thanks for your time.

Rosie

With that done, I sip my tea, and spend an age staring out the window at the relentless March rain. I should be enjoying this time, strolling through Covent Garden, wandering through Hyde Park, eating out at all those new restaurants that have cropped up over the years that I haven't had a chance to try, but I don't leave my flat, except to go to the local Marks and Spencer's and stock up on ready-made meals that I eat half-heartedly.

I don't have the inclination to cook for myself – it hardly seems worth it – and I realise this is probably the first time in my life that my appetite has waned. Food tastes bland, and I only hope this is a phase. Instead, I sit in front of the TV like a zombie, too disheartened to leave the flat for anything other than wine. I hear the echo of Callum's recriminations: *You're just like your dad.* I'm not. I'm just taking some *me* time.

I check my email and am surprised to find a response from Oliver already.

Hi Rosie,

It depends on where you want to go, and what your timeline is. The Hay Festival begins in May, and is one of the best, in terms of crowds and length of time. Ten days long, it tends to be a good money spinner for those starting their journey over the summer. If that suits you, you can stock up in Bristol and camp there beforehand, it's close to the Welsh border.

It seems like a sign that he's suggested the very same place I'd had my eye on.

That's where a lot of the festival nomads meet and find travel partners, someone to journey along with on the open road. Worth thinking about. Then you can choose a route (check the attachment for ideas). Along the way you'll find fairs, and markets and all sorts that tie into the festivals so there's plenty of work to be had – or not, depending on what your motivations are.

If you have any other questions, shoot them over. But in the meantime, check out the attachment.

Oliver

I click on the attachment and find more information about Wales, and various travel routes depending on what you sell or what kind of journey you're undertaking. There's ones for those with a literary bent, itineraries for sporty types who love climbing mountains (nope) and one that grabs my attention: the foodie/festival route. I lose the next few hours imagining a brave new life, and wondering if I have the courage to live it.

When I stumble on a picture of a suspension bridge high above a tea-coloured Avon Gorge, I make a mental note to avoid it all costs ... These nomads sure like to live on the edge. I'm risk averse, and picture myself instead picking wild flowers, and baking up a storm on flat, solid ground.

I take my tea and walk to the window. Rain lashes down and grey skies hover over me like a heavy sigh. I take it as a sign. There's nothing for me here now, and the only bright spot in my life is Poppy, with her *interminable* pinkness. The thought makes me smile. It's time to pack up my things, sell what I can, and donate the rest. I can't take much with me, and that's a freedom in itself. Luckily, I live a very uncluttered life, so it doesn't take long to sort my belongings into piles of keep, sell, donate, or leave for Callum as per our agreement.

I'll have to wash Poppy thoroughly once more, and make sure she's all kitted out.

Hi Oliver,

Thank you for your advice. Bristol looks just the ticket. I

checked out that link you sent, and I do really like the idea of following that set route like so many others do. At least I'll know tentatively where I'm going and that's enough for me.

Thanks so much,

Rosie

Chapter 5

Am I off to an unlucky start choosing April Fool's day as the beginning of my journey? Fools rush in, right? With my forehead pressed against the living room window I watch as rain lashes down on poor Poppy. Her windscreen is frosty and opaque, the wipers half-mast like eyes closed for sleep. So much for a sunny-skied spring – although the weather does match my mood.

Drenched Poppy, copping bucket loads of rain, seems solemn somehow. I know it's the first sign of madness having affection for an inanimate thing, but I feel an affinity with her, perhaps because she is finally going to ferry me away from here, hopefully onto better, brighter things.

In the time since this whirlwind happened, Callum hasn't called or visited once. All our discussions have been handled through lawyers. *Lawyers*. Grave and dull men with no spark in their eyes. They handle our case, the two opposing sides, as succinctly as possible. There's a sterility to it all, and I can't help marvel that life can change so devastatingly fast.

He's agreed to buy out my share of the apartment, which comes to almost nothing since we're still paying the interest on the debt and not much else, and I gave myself until today to embark on my new adventure.

As I gaze around our once happy home, the same old feelings claw at me. How could he discard me so quickly, so easily, as

if I were rubbish? I don't want to be alone, to be unsocial, to push people away, but I struggle making friends because there was never the time or the inclination.

This loneliness is deafening.

Getting away will broaden my horizons, give me some much-needed life experience, and I'll find my place in the world. I'm aware of my downfalls. That need to retreat usually trumps everything else, and I can't let it.

Hefting the last box from the tiny little south London flat Callum and I have shared for the last seven years, my heart shrinks once more.

With a lump in my throat, I shut the door and try my best not to think of my replacement – Khloe, a younger, perkier version of myself – moving in as soon as I move out.

As I walk to Poppy I feel boneless, like I'm going to fall, and no one will be there to catch me.

For the first time in fifteen years I won't have to be at Époque this coming Friday ready for the three busiest days in the restaurant. This feels so alien, so foreign to me that of course I'm bound to feel a little jelly-legged.

'Ready, Poppy?' My voice breaks. I tap the side of the van before stowing a box inside and hopping up into the front seat. I freeze. What the hell am I doing, leaving London, leaving all I know?

I sit there catatonic for so long that one of my neighbours, old Mrs Jones, raps on the window, her face pinched, and asks if I'm

waiting for the RAC.

A flush of embarrassment flares. I shake my head, and say, 'Oh no, nothing like that. I'm just ...' *Summoning courage, wondering if you can die from a shattered heart, the usual.* 'Waiting for the right time to leave.'

Old Mrs Jones shakes her head in that supercilious way of hers. She's never liked me – doesn't like the hours I keep, the way I stack the recycling, the fact I lock my letterbox, trivial things that leave me bamboozled. But over the years I've learned she's like that with everyone, a little judgemental, a lot dramatic.

'Well, off you go!' she harries. 'My daughter is on her way, and she could use this parking space. She has a *baby*, you know.'

I hold in a sigh. Everyone has a baby these days. Probably Khloe will have a baby that she and old Mrs Jones can bond over, cooing and speaking baby language. Best not to think of it.

'Right,' I say and start the engine, wondering if old Mrs Jones *will* make friends with Khloe. They can gossip together, just like she's tried and failed with me, because I don't care if the single guy in apartment four *plays those fecking video games with all the guns and the shooting at midnight!*' And I especially don't care if the twenty-something in six wears *those trashy boots that go all the way up to her derrière as if she's a lady of the night!*' Their lives have nothing to do with me. Perhaps she, Khloe and Callum can dine together at her infamous Monday night supper clubs, and whisper gleefully that they're grateful I'm gone. Tears sting the back of my eyes and it feels like I might implode – I have

to get out of here.

But my imagination runs wild and I visualise Mrs Jones sniping, *'She's an odd one that Rosie; always darting away from people like she's got something to hide.'*

I won't miss old Mrs Jones.

With a deep breath, I pull out and tackle the traffic, ignoring a blast of horn and the wide-eyed look of a pedestrian who edged a little too close for comfort. How many hours of this do I have ahead?

I drive, well, *sputter* along in Poppy, clamping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles turn white. London is difficult to navigate on foot at the best of times, but in Poppy it's downright terrifying. My first rendezvous point is the camp in Bristol so I set my mind to achieving the goal of arriving there, not dead.

With grim determination, I manage to concentrate and also to ignore the sound of my pulse thrumming my ears by turning the music up. Like people, Poppy has her quirks: she backfires when she's disgruntled as if she's telling me off, and pulls sharply to the left if senses me veering this way and that.

It's a learning curve, and we simply must get to know each other better. When I have a moment of panic, just the usual, *WHAT THE BLOODY HELL WAS I THINKING*, she drives straight and true as if she knows she must take control while I briefly lose my mind. Before long, I find my groove, and Poppy belches and squeaks as if urging me on.

Goodbye, London, hello ... brand new, exciting life! I crank

the music and a slow smile settles over my face. I've done it, I've really done it and a sort of pride creeps over me.

Chapter 6

Five hours later, well over schedule, I reach the camp in Bristol, accidentally accelerating when I mean to brake, and careen out of control towards a beautiful red-headed girl who wears a look of abject horror because I'm about to run her down!

I stamp hard on the brakes, Poppy fishtails wildly as airborne pebbles shoot into the poor unsuspecting girl like bullets, the sound *pow, pow, pow* ricocheting off her tiny frame but before long she's shrouded in a mist of dust. I come to a screaming halt, the smell of burnt rubber permeating the air. Have I hit her? Stiff as a toy soldier I manage to fall out of Poppy and land directly into a pile of mud with squelch as I miscue my exit from such a high perch. I turn onto my back, my bones creaking with effort. While my body may have the appearance of someone in the first stages of rigor mortis, I feel strangely euphoric.

I survived!

Poppy survived! London is long gone and I can finally breathe fresh air, and ... and then I remember *the girl!* As the dust settles, I see she's frozen on the spot, her mouth opening and closing but no words fall out. I'm hoping it's on account of the dust she's swallowed and not because a pebble punctured her lung or something. Just as I'm about to call for help, she chokes out, 'That was some entrance!'

Still supine, relief washes through me as I stare up into her

face, her coppery hair falling over her cheeks. She seems calm enough considering I almost killed her. Well, to be fair, *Poppy* almost killed her. Bloody hell, we're going to have to practise when it comes to parking and dismount.

When I don't respond she says, 'Are you OK?' Concern ekes from her voice. She's one of those effortlessly pretty girls whose natural good looks don't need adornment. Her bright hazel eyes are framed by lustrous black lashes sans mascara. Her hair is the colour of fire, and flashes in the soft sunlight and I feel drab in comparison.

I've taken too long to respond, and her eyes dart about looking for help. I get that look a lot.

'I'm ... great,' I say with what I hope is a convincing smile that belies my inner turmoil. Just the *where am I, why did I buy a van under the influence of Shiraz, how am I meant to wash this mud off me*, kind of thing.

But there's no need to panic, it's all going on the to-do list, things I can improve on, a list of people *not* to run over, that kind of thing.

A frown appears between her thick, perfectly symmetrical eyebrows. How are girls achieving eyebrows so thick they need their own postcode? Tentatively I touch mine, wondering how you can add body to such a thing. There's a whole world out there that I haven't had a moment to consider while I've been cooped up in a commercial kitchen.

'You don't look great, to be honest.' She's noticed my

eyebrows, and their rather spartan lustre, dammit. ‘You look like you’ve just escaped the jungle, or something.’ She grins.

I laugh for the first time in aeons but by the look on her face the sound is more maniacal than I intend. *The jungle*, that’s one way to describe it. ‘I have. I’ve just come from London. The urban jungle.’

The unreality of my situation hits me and I just feel so ... disconnected from my old life, my old self, and while it’s strange, it also produces a feeling of wild jubilation. From this very moment on, I can be whoever I choose to be!

She holds out a hand to help me up. I pray my legs carry me after being ramrod in Poppy for so long. ‘Let’s get you cleaned up.’

I follow the girl to a bathroom and jump in fright when I see my reflection in the mirror. There’s no way she could have been judging my eyebrows or any of my face for that matter, because she can’t have seen it under all the caked-on grime from the muddy puddle and who knows what else. Bloody hell! I look like I’ve just participated in a mud wrestling competition, and even my hair sticks out at odd angles, probably because I spent the better part of the drive pulling at it.

‘Did you sleep rough?’ she asks, concern on her face.

‘No, gosh no. The mud is the culprit. It’s amazing that I can find the only puddle from here to the never-never, but there you go.’ After I’ve cleaned up as best I can, we head back outside. Poppy makes the strangest hissing sound and I give her a quick

once-over to determine where the noise is coming from.

‘The tyre!’ Air slowly leaks from the front tyre and Poppy droops to the right, as if she’s exhausted. ‘It’s OK,’ I say more to myself than anyone. ‘I’m sure I can ...’ I realise I’ve never changed a tyre in my life, and wouldn’t have the foggiest how to go about it.

Bloody hell, who goes travelling around the countryside without knowing how to change a tyre? It defies belief that I could have overlooked such a thing. Me, methodical to a fault, queen of contingency plans.

‘Don’t panic,’ the girl says. ‘I can help you change it. Do you have a spare?’

Oh golly. ‘I’m sure I must do. I guess van maintenance slipped my mind.’

‘I can also give you some pointers on the mechanical side of things. I’m a gun at oil changes and whatnot now, anything to save money, right? I’m Aria, by the way,’ she says, holding out a hand, which I find endearing since my own hands are stained black after my ordeal.

‘Great. I’m Rosie.’ We shake and she gives me a wide smile as if my presence has brightened her day.

‘How’d you find us here?’

‘I stumbled across the Van Lifers online forum and got chatting to a guy called Oliver who told me this was a good starting point, close enough to Wales to stock up and get my bearings.’

You mad, mad thing.

My body aches in strange places, and I'd found the drive as hard as being in command of a busy kitchen. A different sort of hard.

'I'm glad you're here,' she says, flashing bright white teeth.

'Me too,' I say, and find myself meaning it.

'The Van Lifers forum is great. Lots of tips on there, maps, market and festival info, that kind of thing. Plenty of people offering support.'

I nod, overwhelmed by the environment. It's like I've fallen through a trapdoor and arrived in a parallel universe. Checked shirts are obviously a prerequisite. A group of bearded hipsters sit around a campfire, as a gorgeous brunette strums a guitar and sings a haunting song. A few play cards on fold-out tables, some hang washing under their awnings, while others bustle about packing their vans in readiness to leave. A handful give me a wave as I walk past, and I smile tentatively back.

I'm not like them. I sense it already. They exude this sort of worldly air, a certain grace as if they're comfortable in their own skin, with their open faces and wise eyes that sparkle with all they've seen. But I'm determined to sink into this lifestyle and find the ease they all wear in their ready, lazy smiles.

Aria pulls me from my reverie. 'I'll make you a brew and we can chat.'

She opens the door to her little van and I gasp as the inside comes to life under flickering candlelight. It's a utopia for

biophiles. Rickety bookshelves line the sides of the van, filled to the brim with chaotically stacked books. On the floor, cane baskets cradle bundles of vintage Mills and Boon books, bound together with string. Every nook and cranny is bursting with novels, candles, cushions or rugs and the scent of recently brewed coffee lingers in the air.

While I understand how this would appear like a nirvana for most, for me it produces a sense of unease. This kind of clutter all begins innocently enough. A few things here, then there. Then everywhere.

‘You have a travelling bookshop?’ I say and then mentally slap my forehead.

‘The Little Bookshop of Happy Ever After. I sell romance novels. Word nerd at your service.’ She salutes and I can’t help but laugh.

‘Word nerd has a nice ring to it.’

The dim space is perfumed by posies of fresh wild flowers, and scented candles. Coupled with the aroma of old books, there’s a musty dustiness that hints of times gone by. An old, wrinkled, leather high-back chair sits squished against the side of the van and I bet it’s where Aria spends most of her days.

There’s a bunch of ruched velvet ruby cushions stacked in a pile, textured woolly throw rugs drape from hooks. I imagine whiling away time in the Little Bookshop of Happy Ever After would appeal to bookworms everywhere, but another thing concerns me, and I grapple with whether I should speak up or not.

It's usually these little truth bombs that tend to detonate in my face, but it's actually a matter of life or death – so I decide to be honest and figure out a subtle way to broach the subject.

I clear my throat. ‘*Should* you leave burning candles unattended?’ I ask in the nicest possible way, when really I mean, ‘you most certainly should *not* leave burning candles unattended, especially with so many books laying haphazardly around’. While Aria rescued me from the depths of a muddy puddle, her entire livelihood could have gone up in flames – it's only fair I should warn her. It's what I imagine a good friend would do.

She laughs, a big haw that startles me coming from such a wisp of a thing. ‘They're all part of the ambiance, they add to the romance! People wander in when I'm not here so I want them to feel at home. Feel comforted. And what better way to do that than with the scent of old books and sweet-smelling candles?’

My eyebrows shoot up. ‘You let people come in here without you being present?’ What if they go through her things? Read her diary. Nap on her bed? Or worse, steal books?

‘Sure I do! They leave a note if they borrow a book, or money in the kitty over there if they buy something.’ Aria points to an unassuming pastel green *unlocked* cash box. I know it's unlocked because the padlock sits next to it, rusted open as if it's spent the better part of its life in the sea. Surely strangers would take advantage?

‘But ...’ Words fails me.

‘Sit down,’ she says. ‘I'll make a pot of tea.’

I move to the wrinkly leather chair and it sighs as I sink into its weathered embrace. I fight the urge to tidy, to right fallen books, to fold the rugs. *Be cool, Rosie.*

‘So,’ I say, squaring my shoulders. ‘Is everyone this erm ... lax with their vans?’ I could always go back to London, it’s not too late. Get my old job back. Live in some bedsit I’ll jokingly refer to as the crack den. Start over. Adopt a rescue dog. Buy one of those lint brushes to remove pet fur from my clothing. Invest in some quality sneakers for all the *walkies* I’ll take Rover on. I picture myself, getting dragged along by a slobbery French mastiff, my life literally going around in circles. But where’s the fun in that? No, I must stay resolute and wait for my shiny, sparkly brand new life to take off. I desperately want to live outside of ordinary.

No change comes easy, right? I’m sure everyone feels like this when they upend their life, their hopes and dreams scattered about like so many escaped marbles!

She laughs again, that same boom that reverberates around the van. ‘Not everyone is so lax. Why, Rosie, does it bother you?’

‘A little,’ I admit, scrunching my nose.

‘It’s fine, really,’ she says. ‘I’ve never run into any trouble doing things this way. Most people are honest and if I lose a book or two that’s nothing in the scheme of things for the freedom I have, right? If I loan a book out I never get back, who cares? I can come and go as I please, and at the end of the day, there’s a little money in the kitty for the next adventure.’

I doubt I can ever be like Aria. I'd have a nervous breakdown. But in reality we have two very different businesses and I'll have to be at my post – after all, the tea won't brew itself. I don't have to be *exactly* like her to fit in, do I? My tables and chairs will be outside, so no one has to traipse through my van unless I invite them to.

'What made you pack up and leave?' she asks, switching the subject while she fills a glass teapot.

'Oh,' I say, dropping my gaze. 'Nothing really, I just felt like a change was in order.' Who wants to be thought of as the dumped desperado, fleeing in disgrace? Not me.

She doesn't probe further, but I can tell from the question in her eyes, she wants to. I detect Aria has a story too, from the way she looks knowingly at me – a likeminded soul, perhaps? But she lets the moment pass, balances a pot of tea on a stack of books between us and hunts in a cupboard for cups, finally producing two mismatched mugs, one that reads: *Bookworms do it better*. The tea is a fragrant blend of vanilla and jasmine and I go to ask her where she procured it from, when she interjects.

'Do you have a rough plan, or will you take each day as it comes?' she asks, her voice muffled as she reaches in to an overhead cupboard before brandishing a dusty biscuit tin.

Once the tea has steeped, I pour and the scent of jasmine fills the air. I'm eager to get started on blending a new range of teas for my pop-up shop, imagining the heady fragrance of fresh floral bouquets, or spicy nutty blends. Back in the present, I say,

‘I haven’t got an exact itinerary in place, but I thought I’d follow one of the festival circuits, so I have more opportunities for the tea shop.’

Her eyes twinkle. ‘You’re opening a tea shop?’

‘Rosie’s Travelling Tea Shop! I want to go back to my roots making old-fashioned comfort food served with big pots of house-made tea blends. I can’t wait to get started. I just hope Poppy’s tiny kitchen can handle it.’ Even though I’m muddled with this new version of me, of what I’m supposed to be and feel, I know being in my happy place, the kitchen, will help centre me and ease those doubts, when I’m doing what I love.

‘Whatever cake and tea can’t fix, the open road can.’ A shutter comes down over her face. It’s so slight, I don’t think anyone else would notice it, but it’s as though what she’s saying doesn’t actually ring true for her. I see it, because I know that feeling well. Suddenly, she’s staring into her tea, her shoulders stiffening slightly. I have an inkling that asking her might cross that fine line between being nosy and potentially ruining a burgeoning friendship. I mustn’t say the first thing that pops into my mind, I’ve learned that the hard way.

‘Yes,’ I say, realising she is waiting for a response. ‘The open road ... the possibilities are endless.’

‘It can be daunting doing that first big trek if you’re alone,’ she says, staring over the edge of her mug at me.

Poppy could break down at night, the very moment a guy with a hair fetish escapes from a prison up the road and lops off my

white blonde locks. I could bake scones and buy fresh cream from a local farm and have not one customer. I could get robbed. My petrol siphoned. Get eaten by bedbugs. Go weeks without speaking to a real person.

I glance at my watch, wondering if there's enough daylight left to announce I've left the oven on in London, and I'll be back ... never! Note to self: stop reading true crime books for the foreseeable future.

'This might be presumptuous,' Aria says, blowing her hair from her eyes. 'But why don't we stick together? Not to live in each other's pockets or anything, but books and tea are a match made in heaven, and I think we could do well side by side.'

Oliver told me Bristol was the meet-up place, and safety in numbers and all that. A ripple of happiness runs through me. Despite turning up looking like I slept on the streets – dirty, grimy, muddy, and a little lost – Aria has managed to ignore all of that and has taken a shine to me.

Have I made a friend, so easily? I begin to doubt her motivations. She's known me for all of five minutes. There must be something wrong with her. But what? Is she on the run from police? She doesn't look like a criminal. Maybe she's someone famous in hiding. Or is she lonely amid all these people? That, I can understand well. Does she sense I'm lost? She's a little lost too, despite her apparent popularity, despite being surrounded by people of the same ilk to her. I see it in her eyes, the way they cloud over.

‘Stick together?’ I say.

‘Think about it,’ she says, gazing past me as if she is picturing us in the future. ‘We follow the festival route. Set up next to each other. Join our tables and chairs out the front for our customers, but best of all we have someone close by to hang out with in those lulls. To drive with on the long hauls.’

It couldn’t hurt. And as independent as I like to think I am, I’m terrified of driving Poppy through the lonely hours of night-time.

‘It could work,’ I say, trying to play it cool. ‘So you don’t have a set route?’ I ask. ‘Or follow any schedule?’ I like knowing where I’m going and where I’ll be. The festival route is a nice, orderly clear-cut circuit, with set dates and schedules.

She laughs. ‘I’m more a *fly by the seat of my pants* type of gal. I move whenever I get the urge to, and that’s how I’ve always been, but there’s plenty to see on route as we follow the festival circuit, and I’m happy to stick to that for business, and we’ll only run off course for adventures.’

Adventures? ‘OK ...’ Does it really matter if we go off course every once in a while? Planning my old life down to the minute didn’t work out so well, after all.

‘Let’s do it,’ I say before I can change my mind.

We are opposites, that much is certain, but don’t they say opposites attract? Aria’s effusive, bubbly, and definitely popular, going by the number of waves and *hey yous* thrown at her as we’d walked past clusters of nomads outside. That’s what I aspire to be like, to have that ability to blend in easily, to not be the person on

the sidelines all the damn time. I want adventure, a new purpose, to really grab life by the shoulders and shake it up!

‘Brilliant,’ she says, smiling. ‘And I get how you’re feeling, Rosie. At first it’s a little intimidating. Getting off the beaten track, following roads to nowhere, sleeping under different patches of sky every week, but you will learn to love it. And eventually you’ll look for the hidden places, ones empty of footprints and hope that real life never comes calling again.’

‘OK, I guess I have a lot to learn.’ A place with no footprints sounds a little too deserted for my liking, but Aria will be there (safety in numbers). Even so, it’s not like we’re going to be attached at the hip. We’re basically just travelling at the same time and setting up next to each other, in order to promote our pop-up vans.

‘You can learn as you go. All we need to do is make enough money for our adventures.’

‘Our adventures are what exactly?’ I picture myself skydiving, or parachuting, and my belly somersaults with panic. I’m more of a feet-firmly-on-the-earth type.

‘This and that.’

‘I’m not really fond of—’

She holds up a hand. ‘Outdoor adventures, Rosie – running, climbing, swimming in the most beautiful places you’ll ever see. Eating at fancy places, or holes in walls. Paying exorbitant prices at tourist traps, or eating fruit from a tree in the middle of nowhere, it’s all part of the fun! But first you have to give yourself

some time to get acclimatised.’

I guess I hadn’t thought of exploring as much as I had about escaping. What would I see? Life changing sunsets, a galaxy of stars, water that runs backwards. I pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming.

‘Let’s head off to Wales on Monday?’ I say, deciding that will give me enough time to consult my maps, speak to Oliver from the online forum for advice and double check I’ve done everything I can in terms of van maintenance.

‘Perfect. The Hay Festival is next month and in the interim there’s other local fairs we could set up shop at.’

My strength is my love of fragrant tea and hearty food and the absolute joy I find in making it. How can anyone resist my baking when I pour my heart and soul into what I do? Or taking a big sip of a spicy nutty tea blend that invokes a place yet travelled? This has the potential to be life changing for me.

And now I have a travelling companion. A feat in itself.

‘Wales it is.’ A place I’ve never seen.

What is this new world? The lost part of me shimmies with anticipation.

Later that day, I sit on my bed and email Oliver to double check I haven’t missed anything. I’m mindful not to bother Aria with every single thought that pops into my head, so I figure friendly Oliver can field some of my questions. His reply beeps back almost instantly.

Hi Rosie,

You've ticked all the boxes as far as I can see. Just make sure you double check with the council before 'popping up' anywhere. Some councils require certain approvals and health checks since you're selling food. Let me know if you run into trouble and I should be able to point you in the right direction at least. Safe travels.

Oliver

The paperwork side of things is a lot more time consuming than I'd imagined, but that's what spreadsheets are made for, right? I make a list of possible fairs and places to 'pop up' around Wales and enter all the relevant info into an excel spreadsheet so I'll have it on hand when we need it. I send Oliver a thank you email and fall into bed wondering what Callum is doing right now. Does he miss me? I fall asleep with him on my mind.

* * *

By Sunday I'm as ready as I can be. A map is taped to the wall, and coloured thumb tacks mark our route. I've allowed for weather delays, car troubles, and sourced where to get fresh produce and supplies to cook with as we go from place to place. I've watched countless YouTube videos about car maintenance and feel confident I will at least know the basics if I break down. Aria's showed me how to do an oil change in return for some basic cooking classes so she can learn how to switch off the pan one step before charcoal, which is probably more a life-preserving measure than anything. I've never seen anyone burn so much food before!

I feel strong, capable, and enjoy learning more skills, even on the go.

We plan to set off early the next day, and I'm jittery with anticipation.

But I'm prepared this time. I have engine oil, the flat tyre has been fixed and refitted and a wheel alignment done on Poppy. There's an extra car jack, a spare canister of petrol, oil, water and a maintenance kit. All our permits and insurances are sorted thanks to Aria, who it turns out is a dab hand at all that mind-numbingly tedious legal side of things, completed online without much angst by her. Council approval is a headache but Aria knows how to apply quickly and efficiently and which places to avoid that have fussier rules and regulations and are likely to decline us.

As I check my bank balance, which has taken a hit from all the extras for Poppy, my email beeps. I open it to find a message from Oliver.

Briefly, I worry he's going to ask me to sign up or join, and my funds will take another beating. He's been handy when I've had lots of little incidental queries crop up that I didn't want to keep bothering Aria about. So I suppose it's fair if he expects to recoup financially from all my questions.

Hi Rosie,

Just checking in to see how you're enjoying Bristol? I've been busy with work, I had two weddings to shoot over the weekend and now I'm editing the pics which is the most time-consuming

aspect of it all.

I wait for his sales pitch, join today and get the fee fifty percent off! I keep reading.

After that I'm going to hike Llanberis Path, to the summit of Snowdon, which I've always wanted to do. It's meant to be like a little lost Eden. I get cabin fever if I'm cooped up in the van too long, so this should do the trick.

Safe travels,

Oliver

No sales pitch. No join now. No sign up for this or that promotion. Maybe Oliver is just interested in other people's journeys? But what is it about all these nomads who want to climb the summit of rocky outcrops, and see the world from the highest perch? Perhaps I've spent too long in the kitchen on my feet. In my opinion, the best method of relaxation is of the horizontal-on-the-couch-kind. I grab at my muffin-top (a mere side effect of being a chef!) and wonder if I need to partake of a bit of one-foot-in-front-of-the-other action?

I type Llanberis Path, Snowdon into a search engine and my enthusiasm flees. It's a six-hour return hike for a 14.6 kilometre trek to 3300 feet. It's practically Everest in my opinion. And I couldn't imagine myself taking on such an arduous climb.

Hi Oliver,

Haven't seen much of Bristol yet (besides the hardware shop!) but Aria mentioned something about visiting town later for a wander. Getting my head around all of the logistics of travel and

all that entails. Aria has been an enormous help. We leave Monday for Wales. Can't believe I'm doing this but here I am!

Good luck with the hike, sounds like an epic journey.

Rosie

After I've sent the email and tidied the tiny space I use for a desk I head outside to find Aria. Her van door is wide open and she's in her usual repose, feet up, nose in book, half cups of tea circling her as though she's incanting a spell with them. A pot of baked beans bubbles on the stove so I go and give it a stir, not surprised to find them sticking to the bottom already.

'The bookworm in her natural habitat,' I say, envying her ability to immerse herself in reading the way she does. For some reason I always feel this strange guilt if I read for too long, as if I should be doing something more constructive with my time. It eventually gets the better of me and I pack the book away and clean and tidy, sort my things, whereas Aria can lose an entire day between the pages of a book. I make a note to schedule some time expressly for reading, no interruptions, no excuses.

She yawns and stretches herself languorously, before setting her book down.

'This bookworm needs a bit of fresh air. Want to go to Clifton Village?'

'What about your erm ... lunch?' The congealed mess doesn't look very appetising to me but Aria doesn't seem to mind that sort of thing.

'I've burnt it again, haven't I?'

‘Yes.’

She laughs. ‘Let’s go out instead.’

I settle in the passenger seat of the little bookshop and find it comforting that Aria’s van belches and backfires just as much as Poppy does. Maybe these old vans all have their quirks and it’s just a matter of translating their meanings.

As we chug along, I relax into the seat, watching the world flick by, so different to the vista I had in London. A silence falls between us, and I debate whether to fill it with something inane or just let it be. Aria doesn’t seem the type to mind either way, so instead of mumbling and bumbling I keep quiet and enjoy the scenery. As I look up my breath catches, the sky is a riot of colour.

‘Look!’ I say, pointing to the bevy of hot air balloons that float gracefully in the air.

‘Aren’t they beautiful?’ she says. ‘You know there’s an actual hot air balloon fiesta in August? Balloonatics come from all over the world to fly right here in Bristol. Hundreds of them.’

‘Wow, the sky awash with floating barometers.’

She giggles. ‘That’s what they look like from here, right? Gosh, Rosie you have to go on one. Looking straight up from the basket into the belly of the balloon is like starting into a kaleidoscope with the different layers of colour and the lick of flames. A spectacular sight.’

‘I’ll stick with watching them from ground level. Hell will freeze over before I risk life and limb to ride in a hot air balloon.’

She lets out a cackle. ‘Rosie, you’re not super adventurous, are you?’

‘The exact opposite.’

‘That’ll all change, mark my words.’

I shoot her a look that says, *not on my watch*.

When we come to Clifton Village, Aria pulls into a carpark and I’m immediately assailed with the vinegary scent of fresh fish and chips.

‘A girl’s gotta eat, right?’ She arches a brow.

‘You know the way to my heart, obviously.’

We order beer-battered fish and chips and munch away, lightly debating about whether minted mushy peas adds or subtracts to the meal. ‘But how can you *not* have mushy peas?’ I ask, bewildered.

She grins. ‘I’m as British as they come, but you know, I really don’t like them. They remind me of baby food! And I don’t think they pair with fish and chips. They just don’t.’

My mouth falls open. ‘I’ll have to take this under consideration. I’m fairly sure that’s treasonous and I don’t know if we can be friends.’

‘Take your time, think about it. I promise it’s my only foodie qualm.’

‘Pass your peas over then.’

She screws up her face, handing the offending side over.

‘So, after this shall we wander over the bridge? I’ve heard the vaults are pretty spectacular. We can do a tour through them.’

‘Sure.’

Half an hour later when I see the bridge up close I have second thoughts, remembering now the picture Oliver sent of this very same bridge. A *suspension* bridge. ‘Is it just me or is that bridge *swaying*?’ Holy moly, the bridge seems so high, the dark tea river running perilously fast way, way underneath. Of course I’ve crossed many a bridge in my time but not one of such epic proportions as this. And on foot.

Aria’s machine-gun cackle startles me. ‘Yeah, apparently the bridge deck moves and everything! Sometimes they have to close the bridge to traffic when it’s too squally.’

‘You say that like it’s a good thing.’

‘It is! It’s almost like a living being, bending and blowing about like it’s got something to say.’

‘And it’s saying “*Stay the hell away*”, I believe.’

Before I can make excuses, she grabs my hands and propels me forward and just like that I’m on the walkway of the bridge. As cars whoosh past, I feel the ground move under my feet. It’s so damn high, it takes my breath away.

‘You big tough Londoner, you!’ Wind whips at our faces and Aria calls out, ‘Doesn’t it make you feel *alive*?’

‘Well, yes, only because I’m picturing my imminent *death* ...’ but my words are whipped away by the gale. ‘Which does make me appreciate being here, right now, alive and well and on a crazy adventure with the first British person I’ve met who doesn’t like mushy peas!’

‘I’m so glad you’re here, Rosie.’ She lets out a laugh and then pauses before speaking with a nervous lilt. ‘A couple of days ago I had this silly idea that I’d cross this bridge for the last time.’ She averts her gaze. ‘Not Thelma and Louise it off or anything, just say goodbye, pack up and head home back to my parents. Give up on this whole van life. Back to the grind of nine-to-five, you know?’

Shock must register on my face because she shrugs, and gives me the ghost of a smile and continues. ‘Things haven’t been great, and I sort of made this deal with the universe, to send me a sign, give me some sort of reassurance to stay and at that very moment you tore into the parking lot, nearly ran me over, and then opened the door and fell straight into the mud. I knew instantly, that you had come tearing into my life for a reason.’

I’m lost for words, but scramble for some. ‘Were you really going to give up the van life for good?’ I can’t picture Aria doing anything nine-to-five, she’s too ephemeral, too different to live such a mundane, regulated life.

‘Yep, incredible, right?’

‘Why though?’ What would make her consider such a thing? If Aria can’t handle van life, how can I?

She grabs my elbow and carries me along, tucking her chin against my arm. With a long sigh she says, ‘I felt like there was no sunshine anymore, you know? Like I was trudging through interminable darkness. Have you ever considered why you’re here, Rosie? Like right here, right now? This moment.’

I had, only mere moments ago, and it strikes me it's because of Aria that already I've jumped far, far out of my comfort zone and relished it, even though it scares me. 'Meaning of life type of scenario?' I ask.

She nods.

'Oh, Aria I am probably the worst person you can ask. My life imploded in London and I spend almost every second of every day wondering what the hell I'm doing. I shift between abject terror, and horror, with occasional bouts of hysteria. But already, you, with your gutsy attitude and go-getting vibe, have opened my eyes. I wish I could say the right thing to make you realise how wonderful you are, how I aspire to be a girl just like you, but I'm not good with words. I'm not good really at anything except cooking.'

'You undersell yourself, Rosie. You just happened to show up right when I needed you most. And now look, we're walking across this bridge, instead of me packing up and going home to a bleak, boring life, and I wonder how I ever thought that was a good idea.' A stray tear welds its way down her cheek, and I know there's more to her story. Much more, but I don't push her for details. Whatever the reason, for once in my life I feel as though I'm exactly where I'm meant to be, if that means being here for Aria. I look at the water rushing beneath and squeeze her hand tightly. 'So you're staying?'

'I can't argue with the universe when they send me my very own Rosie, now, can I?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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