

Aria's
Travelling
Book Shop



REBECCA RAISIN

Rebecca Raisin

Aria's Travelling Book Shop

«HarperCollins»

Raisin R.

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From the bestselling author of Rosie's Travelling Tea Shop comes another uplifting romance. This summer will change everything! Aria Summers knows what she wants. A life on the road with best friend Rosie and her beloved camper-van-cum-book-shop, and definitely, definitely, no romance. But when Aria finds herself falling – after one too many glasses of wine, from a karaoke stage – into the arms of Jonathan, a part of her comes back to life for the first time in years. Since her beloved husband died Aria has sworn off love, unless it's the kind you can find in the pages of a book. One love of her life is quite enough. And so Aria tries to forget Jonathan and sets off for a summer to remember in France. But could this trip change Aria's life forever...? A heartwarming, uplifting and hilarious novel of friendship, love and adventure! Perfect for fans of Debbie Johnson and Holly Martin. Readers LOVE Rebecca Raisin! '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

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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.

PRAISE FOR 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
Rosie's Travelling Tea Shop

Aria's Travelling Book Shop

REBECCA RAISIN



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This one is for you, Jax. You are my sunshine.

Prologue

The globe is spinning in front of us, countries blurring before our eyes. All Rosie has to do is stop it with her fingertip, but I know she won't. She won't make such a big decision based on something as flimsy as fate.

'Come on, Rosie, what are you waiting for?' I can't help but tease.

She averts her china-blue eyes. 'It's just ... this feels too risky. What if I stop it on Antarctica or something?'

I grin. 'Surely Antarctica needs a pop-up book shop as much as the next place? And wouldn't they adore your house-made tea blends, enough to warm the very cockles of their hearts!' I say, laughing. The whole joy of living in our campervans is we have the freedom to go anywhere. But Antarctica might just be a little too far ...

Before I can say anything else, Rosie dashes to the back of the van. 'Wait!' she says with a backwards grin, and I know she's had this next stage planned out all along. I'll bet my last pound she's got a notebook with a full schedule about where we go next in our little campervan-cum-shops. In truth, I trust Rosie to lead us down the right path. She's the sensible one, while I am far too whimsical to make proper life decisions. I'd have trusted the globe for sure, and probably after too much wine.

'Ta-da!' she exclaims, jumping from behind the pink curtain that separates bedroom from living room.

I shake my head and laugh. Atop Rosie's immaculate white-blonde hair is a fluffy blue beret. I'm sure she'll also have a matching scarf and a phrasebook hidden away. 'We're going to France?'

'Oui, oui!' she takes a second beret from behind her back and throws it to me. 'Call me crazy, but I have a feeling good things will happen there. It's such a *romantic* country. I can imagine love *blossoming* there.'

I roll my eyes. '*That's* your reason for choosing France? You think I'm going to fall for some broody Frenchman?'

She shrugs. 'I've done a bit of research—'

'This should be good.' When Rosie says she's *done a bit of research* it means I'm not getting out of whatever crazy notion she's got without a fight.

'—and those broody Frenchman you speak of love literature!'

I wait for further explanation, like our businesses will flourish, but none comes.

'That's it? Because some French men like reading, you think it's a great place for us to spend a year as Van Lifers? Your *whole* decision is based on that?' This is out of character, even for Rosie.

Colour rushes up her cheeks. 'When you say it like that it sounds preposterous! But they don't just *like* reading, it's in their blood, same as you! They live and breathe words and they celebrate their creatives. And also there are fromageries, and who doesn't like fromageries?'

I arch a brow. 'I do like fromageries. And patisseries.'

'Especially patisseries. OK, so we're doing this? Leaving the festival circuit and all we know behind and trying our luck in France ...?'

'What have we got to lose?' I say. 'If it doesn't work out, we'll come home ...'

But there's no way I'll be falling in love unless it's with a three-course French meal. *That* I can open my heart to.

Chapter 1

Southwark, London

In the filmy shadows of a cosy pub in London, my tipsy nomadic friends and I squish together, oblivious to the noise, the body heat, anyone besides ourselves. As we form a tight circle our laughter mixes with tears. Max starts singing 'California Dreamin'" and we all follow suit, warbling one of our favourite songs from the past year, one we sang as we huddled around a campfire while someone strummed a guitar and we sat under the soft light of the moon. Now we link arms and sway, undaunted about how cheesy we must appear.

This constellation of wild and wonderful nomads have plans to scatter across the world like so many marbles, and despite our best intentions, the likelihood of meeting up again is slim. From past experience I know a few will grow tired of van life, sell up and go back to the nine-to-five. Others will fall for a person or place and make a home on foreign soil. Some will keep going, to the edges of the earth, seeking that elusive thing they can't quite name. Goodbyes are always hard, but this one has a deeper finality to it. Everything we've held dear travelling the same festival circuit is falling away.

Maybe it feels that way because I'm taking my van, the Little Bookshop of Happy Ever After, to France for an epic adventure, alongside my best friend Rosie with her tea shop van, and Rosie's boyfriend Max with his lean, green café. A few other nomads have expressed an interest in joining us too, but only time will tell.

We're a fickle bunch.

Well, everyone besides Rosie, that is. Rosie's already trying to knuckle down a timetable, lock in dates and places, write a bullet-point list that covers every contingency, but it's just her way, even though she knows it's virtually impossible to schedule van life. Still, it's a habit of hers that's hard to break. I adore Rosie's eccentricities but she's slowly learning the art of letting go of the things that hold her back.

Besides, you can't really plan when you're a nomad. Vans break down, festivals are cancelled due to inclement weather or celebrity no-shows, money runs out, there are so many variables to daily living.

Now our gathering grows maudlin, as we break apart and refill drinks. Promises that won't be kept swirl in the air above like the glittery trail of a sparkler extinguished before the word is written. I smile sadly, wishing things didn't have to end but knowing that they do.

That's the journey.

I find a quiet perch and sip my wine, mentally counting how many I've had (too many) before figuring gloomy goodbyes warrant a tedious hangover as much as anything.

Rosie, with cheeks pinked from drink, glides over to me before plonking herself down with a long sigh. 'I didn't think it would be this difficult,' she says, leaning her head on my shoulder, white-blond hair falling down like ribbons.

I tilt my head to rest atop hers. 'I know.' I blow out a breath. 'I swear it's getting harder each year.' Feeling safe in our little nomadic bubble, our group had shared their pasts and confided in one another. Laughed so hard our bellies ached and bickered about petty things that seemed important at the time. Almost as quick as the click of fingers, it's over and we'll go our separate ways.

Rosie is quiet as she toys with her beaded bracelet, winding it round and round. These goodbyes are harder for her – this is her first year as a nomad. 'I suppose when we're old and grey and looking back we'll have all these incredible memories of people who stepped into our lives, changing them in some indelible way, before stepping out again.'

'I love that.' I picture an elderly Rosie and Max on some weather-beaten porch, fragrant homemade tea in hand, still in love. And then I picture my future silver-haired self. Driving never-

ending roads, alone. But I'd still have my books, wouldn't I? Rollicking romances to fill my days and inspire dreams, fictional friends to see me through ...

But as I gaze around the room at loved-up couples, loved-up *non-fiction* couples, I feel a pang of loneliness despite being surrounded by people who care about me.

Deep in thought, I'm jarred back to the present by an elbow to the ribs from Rosie. 'What?' I ask.

Her eyes are fixed on a man standing by the bar; even from this distance I recognize those broad shoulders of his, and the way he stands, hands deep in pockets. He seems contemplative as he waits patiently, as if he's half elsewhere, lost in thought.

'It's *Jonathan!*' she says far too loudly. I clamp a hand over her mouth, ignoring the fact I'm probably smearing her lipstick. I feel her laugh reverberate through my palm.

'Will you shush! We don't want to get his attention.' My heart pounds as I try to make sense of him being here of all places. Now of all times.

She battles free, her lipstick only slightly smudged. 'Why wouldn't we want to get his attention? Aren't we going to say hello, at least?' Her eyebrows pull together. Rosie only sees black and white, there's no grey area for her.

While I struggle with how to explain, I turn back in his direction and sneak a peek at the guy who has stolen into my thoughts far too often since we met. His dark hair is longer and curls around the nape of his neck. He's lovely even in side profile. There's something sensuous about his mouth, and before I get lost to it, I shake the traitorous thoughts away. Seeing him again after all this time has given me a jolt, that's all. I wiggle sideways trying to hide behind Rosie, who frustratingly wiggles further away.

Jonathan and I met at a music festival last year, and he'd been endlessly fascinated about the way we lived our lives on the road. It'd been effortless chatting away with him, almost as if we were long-lost friends, reunited. He'd *listened* when I talked, as if he weighed every word that fell from my mouth. It'd been the first time since my husband died that I'd felt a teeny tiny little spark in my heart, but I soon pushed it away. And rightfully so. I made a promise and I'm sticking to it.

Seeing Jonathan here though, spotlight shining on him as if a direction to act, has quite knocked my legs from under me. Thank god I'm sitting down.

'Well?' Rosie prods.

'Well what? We're not going to say a single word, Rosie! We're going to hide in this corner and hope he leaves.' I sip my drink and pretend to be completely disinterested.

'Why?' Confusion muddies the icy blue of her eyes. 'Admit he made your pulse race, that he caused your bodice to rip, made your bosoms—'

Who even uses the word bosoms these days?! I shake my head at her teasing my love of romance novels and the clichéd way non-believers describe them. 'Made my bosoms ... what?'

'Erm ... bounce?' she says, searching for the right word and coming up short.

'Can you hear yourself? He made my bosoms *bounce*? Where do you get this stuff, Rosie, honestly?' I laugh, in spite of it all.

She breaks into a fit of giggles and then her face lights up as if clarity dawns. 'He makes your bosoms *heave!* That's the phrase, isn't it?'

'If my bosoms *were* heaving, Rosie, I'd be off to get medical help, for goodness' sake!' I hide behind my hands, sure she's attracted the attention of the entire bar, and not just lusty-looking Jonathan. Our Rosie doesn't quite have the same filter the rest of us have, so I should be used to it by now. But, by golly. I peek between my fingers and sure enough all of London is staring at us yet somehow Jonathan is still facing the other way. Small mercies and all that.

'You're lucky he didn't hear you, Rosie!'

She elbows me. 'Oh, for crying out loud, Aria. You *can* say hello to the man at least! I'm not proposing you marry the guy.'

I shake my head, no. I can't trust myself. There's something wildly appealing about Jonathan and I haven't felt that spark with anyone other than TJ which is such an alien feeling and one I know that I should run from.

Suddenly he turns and our eyes meet; for a moment time stops. I hold his gaze for too long – what am I doing! 'I've got to go ... to the loo!' I say to Rosie as I jump up and flee. She follows close behind.

'Wait, he's coming over,' she says breathlessly behind me. 'You're going to be the death of me!' Rosie is not a runner.

Of course there's an impossibly long queue, so we tag on to the end of it when all I really want to do is to race into a cubicle and hide behind the door for all eternity.

'You did say before that you liked the guy, so why not say hello?' She stares at me as if I've lost my damned mind.

'I said no such thing!'

'You did so!'

'Did not!'

'Did.'

'Not.'

She harrumphs. 'You don't even need the loo, do you?'

I shake my head, contrite.

'Come on,' she sighs. 'Let's at least use our manners and say hello to him *if* he walks over, OK? He might not have even recognized us.'

I make a show of huffing and puffing. 'Keep your voice down to a dull roar this time, Rosie, OK?'

She stops me. 'I've never seen you so scattered like this.'

'Scattered?'

'I swear I can hear your heart pounding from here.'

Am I nervous? And if so, why? It's true Jonathan and I spent the better part of twenty-four hours together and time raced by – we could have continued talking for weeks and not run out of conversation. But when I think back, it was all about books and being a nomad, nothing personal. So it's not as though I really know the guy, is it? And haven't I had millions of connections with people as a Van Lifer? It's just part of everyday life – so why am I acting this way?

Time to gather my senses. 'Right. Let's just pretend we didn't see him and act surprised if he wanders over, OK?'

She laughs. 'Good plan.'

We head back to the corner and I can't help but sneak a glance at the bar. He's not there. Despite my reservations, my heart sinks. I scan the rest of the pub but he's nowhere to be found. I've scared him off by running away.

'He's vanished, just like that,' Rosie says, her voice tinged with sadness.

Have I lost my only chance ...?

Chapter 2

Southwark, London

Rosie does a quick reconnaissance but comes back, her mouth a tight line. 'Maybe we imagined him.' She flops beside me and deflates.

'We *have* had a lot of wine,' I say, trying to fool myself I don't care. Around us Van Lifers are quietly huddled together, the earlier *joie de vivre* gone after so many lengthy goodbyes.

Tori – the owner of a pop-up Pimm's van – zigzags her way to us, and I groan under my breath. When Tori approaches, it's a sign she's up to something and it's usually no good. Right now I don't have the energy for her.

I can't find it in me to like Tori. She circulates rumours about people and then denies doing it. According to her, I'm a fraudster on the run (which she believes is why I won't talk about my past) and Rosie and Max have an open polygamous relationship (hence Tori encourages women to approach Max!) when they have nothing of the sort. Why she does it is beyond me but if she can stir the pot, she will, by god. It's all so unnecessary and immature. We're a mixed bunch of apples so there's always bound to be a few rotten ones, but Tori is poisonous right down to the core.

I narrow my eyes, steeling myself for whatever ploy is afoot. With one hand on her hip, diva-style, Tori blurts, 'This party is turning into a sob-fest; time to lighten the mood! We don't want our last hurrah to end like this.' As she talks she stabs the air with a cordless microphone to make her point. 'So, who's going to sing karaoke, inspire the masses?'

Beside me, Rosie stiffens. The limelight is not her thing – despite the amount of liquid courage she's consumed.

'Why don't *you* get up there?' I ask, knowing it's futile. Tori's concocted some crazy plan and we won't hear the end of it unless she gets her way. I've managed to avoid her most of the route but I guess tonight my luck has run out.

'I totally would,' she exclaims again in her characteristic screech which is like nails down a chalkboard, 'but ... I've got a touch of a cold.' Her eyes dart all over the place. 'I'm too *nasally* with it or I would be the first one up there.'

Rosie scoffs. 'Yeah, right.'

I cast my gaze around one last time and still can't see Jonathan so I say, 'Fine, give me the microphone,' and shake my head ruefully. In truth I'd rather remember our last night together as a happy occasion, and not everyone crying into their wine glasses. And I'm used to hiding behind laughter and pretending life is grand. It's what I do best. 'What should I sing?' I ask Rosie.

Tori shoos me away. 'I'll choose something appropriate, don't you worry, but make sure it's a real performance – dance, sing and really *rally the troops*.'

Could it be as innocent as all that? 'Fine.' It might be the wine, but I feel completely at ease. It's just singing and swaying to a little music, right? Something we've done almost every night around the campfire anyway. I hop up on stage, and wait for the music to start, grateful I chose to wear skinny jeans rather than the short skirt and black tights I'd been toying with, so those below don't get a flash of anything they shouldn't.

Tori gives me a thumbs-up and bellows, 'Make it count!'

As soon as the familiar tune starts I want to wring her scrawny little neck. I should've known she had some ulterior motive that involved making me look ridiculous. I can't exact my revenge from up here so I settle with shooting a poisonous look her way.

She smirks. 'We had to get their attention, somehow!'

Jittery, I sway to the opening bars of 'Pony' by Ginuwine while desperately wondering how I can dance to it without looking like I've come straight from the strip club. A chair appears and I burst out laughing. 'Is that my prop?' I ask and the stranger nods, grinning.

What the hell, I figure I'll look sillier holding myself tight, so I let go and channel my best inner Channing Tatum and use that chair in the most lascivious of ways. The nomads go wild, they wolf-whistle and clap, their screams drawing a bigger crowd. My heart pounds, and the music thumps. I'm not sure if it's the way I'm dancing or the eyes on me, but my body feels electrified and I find I'm actually enjoying it.

Some of the girls jump on stage with me, and before long I'm totally lost to it, enjoying every single syllable I belt out. I smile even more when I see Tori's thunderous expression because her plan backfired.

More people spring up to join in; it seems 'Pony' speaks to them on some wild primal level and I'm shoved forward. I stumble and the chair tips over, before I right myself just at the edge of the stage. The show must go on, but the gyrating behind me reaches fever pitch and there's no stage left and suddenly ...

I'm flying, arms out ready to soar ...

Until reality hits and holy mother of cliff hangers, I'm not flying, I'm *falling*! As the ground comes screaming into view, I let out a yelp and brace for a hard landing. I scrunch my eyes closed and hear the softest of *oomphs* as I land, not on the parquet, but into the pillowy bed of someone's outstretched arms. I peel an eye open – the man holding me is none other than Jonathan!

'Is this heaven?' Maybe I hit my head on the way down and this is a prelude to the pearly gates?

He laughs, exposing his shiny white teeth, like he's the hero in my very own romance novel. *Of course*. 'It's so lovely to see you again, Aria.' His voice is like velvet.

I can feel the strength in his arms as he cradles me. Exhilaration sends a shock down my spine, a sensation I haven't felt in such a long time, it stuns me quiet. He stares so deeply into my eyes the noisy room falls silent and all I can see is him. My very own hero sent to save me from an untimely fall, just like in the books.

He lifts a brow ever so slightly and somehow I sense it's an invitation to kiss him, so I don't overthink it – I just follow my heart. I press my lips against his and let every delicious sensation wash over me. It's electrifying, as if I've been zapped back to life after a long slumber. We kiss as if we're the last two people on earth. It's everything I imagined it would be and I'm only disappointed by how woozy I am. Is it him, the fall, or the wine making me feel such a way? Really, I should be more ... The thought floats away as our kiss deepens. He's stealing the breath from my lungs in the most enchanting way but worry pushes at the edge of my subconscious which I duly ignore, instead revelling in the touch of his lips against mine. When our lips finally part, the room spins and I'm quite lost for words. I double blink, as the noise slowly returns and the spell is broken by people jostling past.

Woozy, I see Tori glaring at me, revenge written all over her face. I still haven't forgotten she chose 'Pony' of all songs for me to 'rally the troops' with, thus practically making me catapult off the stage and into the arms of this delectable hottie – evil thing she is!

'Jog on,' I say to her. 'Before I blurt out that secret you shared not so long ago.' I arch a brow and try to look fierce.

Her eyes widen and she says, 'You wouldn't!'

'I would!'

As far as secrets go it's not very juicy; she's in love with musician Axel but won't do a damn thing about it – strange since she's so keen to meddle in everyone else's life.

With one last withering glare at me, she taps Jonathan's shoulder and says, 'Don't listen to a word she says, Aria suffers from *liarbetes* ...' With a cat-who-got-the-cream smile, she saunters away and if I wasn't bound by Jonathan's strong arms, I probably would have given her a word walloping. What *is* her problem with me?

'Did she say ...?'

'Sorry,' I say as all reason falls away and I picture myself the heroine and Jonathan the gorgeous hero. He did just save me from all manner of broken bones and bruises. I realize he's still cradling me in his arms – he must have the strength of ten thousand men!

'Why are you sorry?' He probably thinks I'm regretting the kiss.

I can't remember why. 'You can put me down if you want?'

'Do you want me to?'

Yes. No. I don't know.

His deep blue unfathomable eyes mesmerize me. I could get lost in them but that niggly is still trying to break through the haze. Rosie's been onto me about opening my heart – as if it's as simple as putting a key to a lock. And staring into Jonathan's twinkling eyes, I wonder why I haven't even tried? There's a good reason, but it's ephemeral, whisper-thin and just out of my grasp – I must be punch drunk, or love drunk or maybe just *drunk drunk*?

Rosie wanders over, her skirt swishing. When she sees us she lets out a gasp, a sharp odd sound. She gives me a look I can't decipher, but I gather I'm acting strangely, still being held aloft in his arms like he's just rescued me from a burning building or something, so I wiggle my way out, still feeling wobbly. This whole scenario has *bad choices* written all over it.

'I fell,' I say, my voice too loud. 'Off the stage. Jonathan caught me or else ... I'd have been seriously injured. Possibly dead, in a very bloody gory way.' I picture CSI chalking the outline of my body and know a gruesome picture will distract Rosie. She's always picturing her imminent death.

'I'm glad you're alive,' she says. 'I'm ah ... going to find Max. Back soon.' She flounces off but not before acting out a bunch of dramatic charades meant to imply *what the hell is happening, I leave you for two minutes!* or thereabouts.

Jonathan and I stand close and silence descends. I can't form words; I can't even *think* of any. My mind scrambles with the inane, but I don't want to look completely socially inept. Well, more than I already do, that is. 'It's cold outside.' *Way to go, Aria!* 'What I mean to say is, we're having a cold snap.' *Brilliant!* 'But it's warm in here.'

He grins and it lights up his lovely face. 'Spring in the UK, eh?' He's teasing me. Of course it's spring, and of course it's cold. We're bloody well in England.

'Quite.'

He saves another painful silence by saying, 'Are you staying in London for a while?'

I shake my head. 'No, not for long. France is next for us.' Surprise lights up his eyes, but it's not like France is the edge of the earth, is it? 'This is our goodbye party. What about you? Do you live in London?'

What do I really know about the man? Could I have been so selfish I didn't ask him a single question back then? As I recall we got very animated about books, and I know I can lose days when that happens, literally *days*, but we didn't delve much past that.

'No, I live in St Albans. I came to London for a meeting.'

'A meeting for what?'

He doesn't get to respond as the room darkens and that can only mean one thing. Max. He's big enough to block out the light. 'Jon, my man!' He takes his hand and does that macho, fist pump thing, and I internally cringe thinking he's going to break every bone in poor Jonathan's hand. 'What brings you to the Squeaky Pig?'

'I had a meeting near London Bridge. Got the shock of my life when Aria literally fell into my arms. What timing, eh?'

'You *fell* into his arms?' Max doesn't hide his surprise.

'I was *pushed*.'

Max shrugs. 'Let me get you a beer,' he says to Jonathan and then does the big, manly backslapping thing.

Can he not just use his words to communicate? As much as I like Max, we bicker like warring siblings half the time. He's an enigma and I'm still figuring him out but one thing I adore about him is his love for Rosie and the way he treats her like she's a goddess come to life.

'So, your meeting was for—'

Rosie interrupts as she walks back over. 'It's so lovely to see you again, Jonathan!'

I roll my eyes. 'So I was just asking Jonathan—'

'Here, my main man.' Max hands Jonathan a beer. 'Get that down you. Looks like you've had a long day.' I'm never going to get an answer and suddenly I find the whole situation hilarious.

I give up and listen to my friends instead. They met Jonathan that same evening way back when, and it was a raging success. That night raced by and before we knew it, it was over. As the best things always are.

And here we are now. I do love the fact that Max acts as though it's totally natural to run into Jonathan again whereas for me it feels like I've been struck by lightning.

Though, I suppose Max hasn't been thinking about him off and on like I have. Jonathan and I made a connection back then and I haven't forgotten him no matter how hard I've tried to.

Max pulls Jonathan away to introduce to him to someone and Rosie takes that as her cue to grill me.

'Did I see you *kissing* him?'

I let out an awkward laugh. 'He stared into my eyes like we were long-lost soul mates and I just reacted. Wow, that boy sure knows how to kiss. This is going to sound ridiculous but it gave me the strangest feeling, as if I've been in a daydream for years and suddenly with his lips against mine ... I'm awake again.' I touch a finger to my lips, remembering the sensation.

'Wow, that's great, Aria. That's really great. Great.'

'Why are you saying it like that?'

She blinks. 'Like what?'

'Great. Great, great, great.'

She hugs herself and says, 'It's just that you were so adamant you'd never fall in love again. I think this shows real courage.' Her eyes go glassy. Poor Rosie has been secretly worried about me and my spinster status more than her jokes have let on.

'Are you crying?' I ask. Rosie doesn't do tears. Especially not in front of people if she can help it.

'A little. You guys just look so perfect together. Like a couple on the cover of one of your romances. Except he has his shirt on.'

'That's very sweet, but I'm *not* falling in love.' I remember my husband TJ's sweet face, his big laugh. I remember my promise and I curse white wine and its bad-choice-making qualities from here to kingdom come. That was the god damn niggles!

I forgot about my own bloody husband!

My gut roils with my betrayal but I try to remain cool. 'It's nice to know that my heart isn't frozen over, but nothing can happen with Jonathan.'

Time to run. Time to change the subject swift as anything.

'And stupid Tori said I had *liarbetes* while insinuating that I liked him, and as you know I most certainly do *not* have liarbetes ...'

A frown appears. 'She said you had liarbetes?'

'Because her plan backfired. And then I got distracted and now I'm confused and I need to leave.'

Rosie tuts. 'Come on, Aria. You're the one always looking for signs and here's a big, fat, flashing neon one. It's Jonathan, in the flesh! *Jonathan!* A man who you admitted made your heart flutter and then he was gone and you didn't swap numbers or contact details, and he just so happens to visit this bar and save you from untimely death falling from a stage ... I mean you've got to admit this is even better than any of your romance novels because it's real!'

She's so animated my heart tugs, even if she is being far too loud. 'So?' I'd have never confided all that to her if I thought I'd see him again. And if anything, the chemistry we had before has ramped up a notch. If I didn't have any baggage, I'd still be in his arms now.

'So ...?' Her eyebrows pull together. 'So what now? What happens in chapter two?'

I shake my head. 'Now I depart back to the Little Bookshop of Happy Ever After, make a steaming pot of tea that will hopefully ease tomorrow's enormous hangover and then I sleep like a log.'

Her mouth falls open. 'You won't even exchange numbers with a guy who previously spent almost twenty-four hours in your company listening to you talk about *romcoms* like they were the most fascinating thing on *earth*'?

'You can stop with all the *emphasis* because *romcoms are* the most fascinating thing on earth.'

She tuts. 'You know what I mean.'

I consider Jonathan as he stands off in the distance with Max. 'Last year he really did seem enthralled about the many nuances of romance tropes and the paths to happy ever after.' It's not often you find a guy like that, is it?

We sip our wine thoughtfully as we study him and once again confusion bubbles up to meet me.

'He's lovely in a very bookish sort of way,' Rosie says.

'What does that mean?'

Gesturing around the room she says, 'Well, he's so different to all the other guys here, isn't he?'

Jonathan stands out among my nomadic friends, dressed in what looks to be high-end clothes, not as shabby as the rest of us who live in tiny spaces and don't own a lot of anything because there isn't room. But it's more than that – he gives off an air of being slightly aloof and lost in thought that makes him instantly fascinating.

'He looks like an accountant,' I say. 'That's what you mean, isn't it?' Hide behind humour, isn't that the way?

We fall about laughing because he most certainly *doesn't* look like an accountant. 'I bet he's a creative of some sort,' I muse, agreeing with Rosie's earlier description. 'It's the way he listens, as if committing things to memory. And those eyes, those deep reflective pools, hold a sort of sadness, an angst. He gives off the vibe that he's a little lost among so many people, don't you think?' I recognize that trait because I am the same except I can put on an act that will fool even the most discerning.

'Wow, Aria, is that all?'

I blush. 'Well, I guess I prefer the types who fly under the radar rather than ones who spectacularly announce themselves.'

'Yeah, yeah I can see that. But what *does* he do?' she asks.

I think back.

'I don't think he mentioned it.'

'He's got a Kit Harington vibe, right?' she says, surveying him.

'So now we've got Jason and Kit? How lucky are we!' I laugh. When we first met Max I was convinced he was Jason Momoa, the big hulking star from *Game of Thrones*. I put the question to Rosie but she'd never heard of such a beast. I soon fixed that by making her binge watch *GOT* and even she admitted the resemblance was uncanny. Now I look to Jonathan and see if she's right about the Kit thing. She is – it's the broody eyes and the sensual pout.

I double blink myself back to reality. *Leave, Aria, before you regret it.*

With a deep sigh I say, 'He's too lovely for the likes of me. I'll just end up hurting the poor guy when I decide this is all a mistake. Which it is.' I kiss Rosie's cheek. 'I'm going to head off. I'm too wobbly to make any sense of anything.'

Her forehead furrows. 'But ...'

'No buts. I'm done.'

As a romance novel aficionado, I know it's always safer falling for the boy in the book.

'I'll walk you to the tube at least. Or I could ask Jonathan to?'

I give her a nudge with my hip. 'Kajri wanted to leave half an hour ago, so I'll catch the tube with her.' In truth I want to be alone – my ears are ringing, my head pounding and I have this overwhelming feeling I've made a mistake.

Before Rosie can talk me out of it, I turn on my heel and get swallowed by the crowd. I need to be by myself. And I vow in future to swap every second glass of wine with water ...

Chapter 3

Greenwich, London

The next morning, I awake slowly, delicately, mouth dry as a mathematics textbook or something equally lacklustre. As I stretch, my taut muscles ache and I briefly wonder why, until the previous night comes crashing back, like a movie reel playing at agonizingly slow speed.

Oh good lord of the rings, please tell me I did not gyrate to a chair on a stage! I squint as if that will make the memory easier to deal with, but it doesn't help. I can see myself in all my 'Pony' glory, singing and dancing (and gyrating!) as if I were being paid for it. Well, Tori can't say I didn't give it my all – but then another heart-stopping memory forms.

No, no, no, *nooo!* I talk myself down. There's no chance I could have kissed anyone.

But the memory is stubborn and plays out aching slowly. Me literally falling into Jonathan's arms. Kissing him passionately, over and again. The feel of his soft lips against mine. The heady sensation of desire, something I haven't felt in such a long time. *For very good reason*, I berate myself. Mercifully the memory ends with me snaking my way out of the pub with Kajri's arm linked through mine.

There's a knock at the door and Rosie's face appears, a question in her eyes.

'You're awake!' she says, looking bright as a button despite the late night, and enters the van bearing a plate with two slices of delicious-looking lemon-scented cake.

'I might be awake but I'm in the midst of "the remembering" and it's not good, not good at all. And I'm hoping when I confide in you, you're going to tell me it was all a dream ...' I put a hand to my banging head and claw back panic.

'Let me make a pot of tea,' says Rosie, avoiding my eye. She places the plate on the coffee table, which is not so much a real piece of furniture but a small square of clear Perspex perched atop a stack of hardbacks.

I edge from the bed and throw on a robe as dust motes dance. There's not much room in my little van, and it's not neat as a pin like Rosie's. But I love the comfort it brings me; every nook and cranny is stuffed with books, candles, keepsakes. Even my bed is full of books, leaving me only a small sliver to sleep on, which Rosie assures me is a death trap and swears she'll wander in one day to find I'll have suffocated.

Aria Summers tragically killed by her girl squad, Nora Ephron and Kristan Higgins ...

Despite my full body throb, I manage to settle on a chair with tea in hand. 'Tell me I didn't kiss Jonathan?'

She blows steam from the top of her tea. 'So what if you did, Aria?'

I groan. 'And you just let me?'

'Why wouldn't I?'

I cock my head. 'You know why, Rosie.'

She gives me a hard stare which I return. Eventually she sighs and says, 'There's times where you've just got to listen to your heart, Aria, and this is one of them.'

'It clearly wasn't my heart doing the decision-making, it was the copious amounts of white wine. Urgh. I bloody well *forgot* I was married!'

'Widowed.'

'Same thing.' It's getting harder to spin that line though as the idea of love blossoms inside me more because I'm surrounded by loved-up couples at every turn. *I had that* – I want to scream – *and I miss it*.

Her scoff rings out. 'You can keep lying to yourself, but I won't go along with it.'

I frown. 'I'm doing no such thing.'

'No?'

'No, Oprah. I'm not.'

'So what did you kiss him for then? I've seen you tipsy before and you've never shown the slightest interest in any other man, despite several trying to make a play for you.'

Cue the dramatic eye roll which hurts my brain. 'What? As if. You make it sound like I've got men falling at my feet.'

'You do! But you never see it, Aria, because you don't *want* to see it. Men circle you, their tongues practically hanging out like lost puppies, tails wagging, hoping to get a moment of your attention.'

My laugh escapes at the preposterousness of such a thing.

'Don't laugh like that, it's true. And things are different with Jonathan. Out of a *sea* of men, he is the only one who stands out for you.'

'A sea of men!' I snigger at her exaggerations. Sure there's plenty of men about but they're Van Lifers, more like protective big brothers than anything. 'It's not that anyway, Rosie. He could be bloody Prince Charming and it wouldn't matter an iota. I've had the greatest love affair of all time, that's enough for me. It's not very fair to TJ for me to be acting like a floozy, is it?'

Her brows knit. 'A floozy is pushing it. Would TJ want you to act like a martyr? I think not. It's hard for me to see you so down, Aria, writing *The End* after TJ left.'

I sigh and sip my tea while my head pounds with self-recriminations. 'It's not *The End*, is it, Rosie? I'm still alive, I'm still here. I'm getting on with my life as best I can. And I enjoy it just the way it is. I really do.' These protestations come naturally, I've been saying them so long, but part of me wonders if I still believe it myself.

'You left without saying goodbye to Jonathan.'

I slide my gaze away. 'So?'

'You're not fooling me.'

'I'm not trying to.'

She lets out a frustrated groan. 'You're going to let a great guy slip through your fingers, Aria and you might be able to lie to everyone else including yourself, but you can't lie to me. I can see the loneliness in your eyes when you think no one is looking. Last night I saw your face drop when you scanned all the couples in the room and then *light up* when you were with Jonathan.' She pats my arm and says gingerly, 'It's OK to want to be loved. TJ would want that for you.'

What would TJ think if he could see me now? Waking up hair a bird's nest, eyes red from lack of sleep, having kissed a guy I barely know? It smacks of a life lived teetering on the edge and once again I doubt my place in the world. Just what am I doing?

'Whatever it was last night was just a momentary slip. There are millions of women out there with fulfilling, happy *single* lives. Why am I any different? I don't need a guy to complete me like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I'm fine just as I am.' *Lies, lies, lies.*

There is something endlessly fascinating about Jonathan but my guilt-plagued heart can't give in to such temptations.

'I'm not saying you *need* Jonathan, I'm saying you *want* Jonathan, there's a big difference. And it doesn't even have to be romance, it can simply start with friendship.'

'I'll take your comments under consideration,' I say making a moue. This badgering about boys was a lot more fun when it was me pestering Rosie and not the other way around.

She puts her hands on her hips and does a sigh so theatrical it's worthy of an award. 'When you go into job-interview mode, I know I've lost you.'

I stand and fold the throw rug.

'And pretending to tidy. The conversation really is closed,' she says and laughs.

I laugh too, knowing she's picked up on it. I never clean the Little Bookshop aside from vacuuming. Even the dust bunnies are my friends. That's the appeal of the tiny space. It's full to

bursting with romance novels, the air perfumed with the lemony scent of preloved books and rose candles. Ruby and teal velvet cushions give it a Gatsby feel and plush throw rugs litter the space for customers who find a tome and settle in for the day.

Books line shelves and lie in disorderly alphabetical piles from the floor up making it a warm cosy little haven, lit by fairy lights and the odd candle when Rosie doesn't blow them out with wild protestations about fire hazards and cinder boxes.

'What's the plan then?' I cannily reroute, breezy as anything.

'If you're insisting on your own spinsterhood, then I guess we pack up and get ready to head off for France tomorrow? We've got that fete and a few festivals lined up already.'

I raise a brow. 'Let me see your bullet-point plan, Rosie and don't pretend you haven't scheduled our every move.'

A blush creeps up her cheeks and she takes a notebook from her bag. 'OK, OK, I have made a very simple plan, we don't have to follow it precisely' – she lifts a shoulder – 'but it's rock solid and I think we should.' The book falls open and I see pages and pages of notes.

'Bloody hell, Rosie. France is not another planet, you know that, right?'

There's no accounting for some. Rosie's a planner and always will be.

'I know, but we only speak basic French and I wanted to make sure every possible contingency was catered for.' She flicks the pages with a worried sigh. 'I think I've covered it all.'

I take the notebook from her hands; it's heavy with ink and angst.

'Rosie ...' I struggle with what to say. 'This must have taken you weeks.'

She tries to laugh it off. 'Yeah about six all up. I guess I'm a little more nervous about leaving the UK than I once thought.'

Anxious Rosie's researched every possible thing that could go wrong and then found potential solutions. I skim through the notes before landing on one that makes me smile. 'Haunted places to avoid in France ...?'

Surveying her nails as if they're fascinating, she says offhandedly, 'Better to be prepared for everything. It's an old city and I think it's best if we go in with eyes wide open.'

I struggle to contain my mirth because I know she's serious but it's almost impossible as I feel my lips quiver with it all. Rosie's such a hoot and has no idea how funny she is, probably because she truly believes in such things.

Composed, I say, 'You think we're going to be killed by ghosts?' Rosie's got this weird obsession with envisaging her demise, often in a gruesome way. Escaped convicts with white-blond hair fetishes (coincidentally the colour of her hair), spontaneous combustion, vampires, Ebola, packs of wild animals ... you name it, she's imagined it.

'It's possible.' Her face is a picture of solemnity and I can't tell whether she's winding me up or not. Rosie's foibles are many and varied which is what makes her so great, but it also makes her hard to gauge at times.

'Right, well, I'm glad you've made note of so many places to avoid. Who wants to see glamorous old chateaux anyway?'

'You're being sarcastic?'

'I am.'

'You're evil.'

'I am.'

'OK, now that's cleared up, are you ready to make a move, tomorrow morning about ten?'

'There's nothing keeping me here, if that's what you're asking.' *Best to run away like you always do, Aria ...*

'Mm-hm.'

'Well, I guess all I can say is toodle-loo England, and *bonjour* France.'

'*Oui, oui.*' She gives me a peck on the cheek. 'Get cracking and we'll meet for a late lunch, yeah? One last meal of proper fish and chips before we leave the motherland?'

'Is there anything better to soak up the effects of the night before?'

Her eyes sparkle. 'Well, only if you're Max. He's already insisted I have kombu kelp juice, whatever the hell that is.'

'Tell him seaweed is a living breathing thing too.'

'Will do.' She grins. 'I'm going to wash Poppy and check all my kitchen accoutrements are packed away ahead of the long drive. Meet you out front at two-thirty and we'll walk down to the pub?'

I nod. 'Perfect.'

I wave her goodbye and flop back into my chair to contemplate it all. France, Jonathan, TJ. The epic journey ahead. I've managed to live over a thousand days without my husband. *One thousand days*. It seems like forever and yet just like yesterday too. With him in mind, a new man turning my head seems so foreign.

The spark with Jonathan has been ignited no matter how much I deny it, but a drunken kiss isn't exactly a relationship, is it? I can still protect my heart and forget all about it.

Whenever I'm conflicted, I picture myself the heroine in a love story to make sense of it all. That's the problem with being obsessed with romance novels, you see everything play out as one, including your very own life.

Hopeless romantic Aria vowed never to love again after losing her husband, TJ, but fate seems to have other ideas and keeps throwing mysterious Jonathan in her path. Is this a test of her commitment to her husband, or is it a sign she should open her heart and her mind to the possibility of falling in love once more? Nomadic by nature, Aria can't see the point when home is always at the end of a new patch of road ...

Chapter 4

London to Calais

After a much better night's sleep *sans* alcohol I'm packed and ready to go. I take my pot of tea and sit on the tiny deck outside the Little Bookshop, marvelling at sunshiny clear skies while I wait for Rosie to appear. The swollen fat grey clouds of the previous day are long gone, and instead all I see is an expanse of bright blue above. Birds chirp and butterflies frolic as if trying to woo me to stay.

Spring has been as dull as dishwater up until now. London, the wily beast, puts on a great show when we're about to leave these familiar shores.

Before long Rosie joins me for our usual morning ritual – I hand over a cup of tea which she swaps for a chocolate chip muffin. She chats away nineteen to the dozen while I come slowly awake, mainlining tea in order to be able to communicate. Our Rosie is one of those annoying *early bird catches the worm* types.

'What's with all this glorious sunshine?'

'It should be criminal,' I agree, taking a bite of gooey chocolatey goodness waiting for the sugar to jumpstart my body into another day.

Pretty flowers add pops of colour to the expanse of garden. 'It's a false spring. It'll go back to grey as soon as we hit the border, you know.'

I laugh. 'I know. The homeland trying to lull us into a false sense of security.'

'Bloody outrageous.' She takes a bite of her muffin.

'I'm not fooled for a minute! Where's Max?'

'Securing the perimeter,' she says, her voice deadpan.

I grin at her explanation. 'Jogging?'

'Yeah, I guess. I'll never understand his need to exert so much energy first thing in the morning.' She looks guiltily at the rich calorie-laden sweet treat in her hand and then shrugs and continues munching away at it.

'Gotta keep up that physique somehow.' Max is buffed and bronzed, a real mountain of a man. It's a mystery to us how he maintains said physique subsisting on a sugar-free, processed-carb-free, vegan diet. Rosie of course is the exact opposite; she bakes old-fashioned comfort food (carbs loaded with sugar and spice and all things nice) and doesn't run unless some mythical terror is chasing her.

Rosie and Max are my favourite 'opposites attract' romance trope come to life. While Max is a carefree, save-the-planet pacifist, Rosie is a highly efficient over-planner who doesn't read social cues too well. They're the perfect balance for one another and proof romance novels are truly a guide to life and not just a fun way to pass the time.

'While we're talking about healthy choices and diet and exercise, could I tempt you with some scones and lashings of jam and cream?'

'My arm could be twisted.' I swipe the crumbs from the chocolate muffin I've just demolished out of sight. Rosie says I've got hollow legs and she'd hate me for it if she didn't love me so much. She's curvaceous and I'm straight up and down – I know which I'd rather be, but Rosie doesn't believe me.

'Stay right there.'

Within minutes she's back with a plate bearing freshly baked scones, still warm to the touch. 'Golly what time were you up?'

'Four,' she says sheepishly. 'Couldn't sleep. Big day.'

Poor Rosie. Any change does not come easily to her and I know she struggles with it more than she lets on. Pre-dawn, she'd have been scrubbing the inside of her van, Poppy, and then baking up a storm until it was light enough to wash the outside of Poppy. When she's in turmoil, she cleans.

She cleans and cleans and then cleans again. And then bakes. And the whole cycle of cleaning starts again while the rest of us sleep like the dead.

'All set though?' A small part of me worries that Rosie will pull the plug and decide leaving is too great a risk for her. She's changed so much over the last year, but part of her will always carry that fear that the unknown is not safe.

She rubs the back of her neck. 'It's going to be an adventure and while I'm nervous I know I'll have you and Max, so what's there to be worried about?' Her words wobble but I smile encouragingly at Rosie trying so hard to be brave. 'Once we're finished here,' she says, 'I'll check Poppy over once more and then we're good to go.'

I lean into her. 'That's the spirit.'

As we chat a couple of remaining nomads come to say one last goodbye. 'Stay for morning tea?' Rosie says to them before dashing back to her van for more plates.

Leo, who runs Rollerskating on the Road, gives me a big hug. He's off to run his retro skating tours in Cornwall to catch the hordes of tourists who flock there over spring and summer.

'I'm going to miss you,' I say, giving his hair a tousle. He's one of my favourite people on the festival circuit for his ever-present megawatt smile. A twenty-something with the world at his feet and his whole life ahead of him. What's not to be happy about when you've got wheels strapped on and the day is but young?

'Keep in touch, yeah?' he says, squishing the breath from my lungs as he hugs me tight. 'And I mean it, I want to hear all about France and the wild exploits you lot get up to.'

'Sure will. You be safe, please? Don't go careening down hilly streets and around blind corners. I want to see your big smile with *all* of your teeth in place when I get back.'

'I'll try.' He grins flashing those pearly whites. 'But I can't promise anything.'

'Daredevil.'

'Bookworm.'

I laugh. 'And proud of it!'

'I'm going to miss you two so much,' he says and moves to give Rosie a hug. I can tell she's trying not to be as stiff as a toy soldier but our Rosie's not one for displays of affection.

'You remember to wear that helmet I got for you. It has the highest rating safety specifications out there. I tested it myself,' Rosie says.

'I sure will, Rosie, and I won't listen to anyone in future who calls me a namby-pamby for wearing such a thing.' I struggle to hold myself in check. The helmet Rosie bought for Leo resembles something worn on the Apollo 11 mission and I wonder how on earth he can see out of the damn thing, but you know Rosie, safety first, always.

'A namby-pamby? But it's for safety, I don't understand?' Rosie asks, bamboozled by others not being as safety conscious.

He shrugs. 'Jealousy is a curse. Be kind to the herbivore, won't you?' he says to Rosie about Max, the resident plant-eater. Rosie is trying her best to keep up with the conversation, confusion shining in her blue doe eyes because she's probably picturing Leo and what other safety gear she should have bought him.

I move to her and swing an arm over her shoulder. We exchange a glance and I give her an almost imperceptible nod to spill that we know his secret. She whispers, 'Look after Lulu too!' We cover our mouths to stop giggles from pouring out – how child-like we are at times!

He raises a brow. 'It's out then, is it?'

'Imagine keeping that from us,' I jokingly admonish him. But we all know love on the road is delicate when it's new. Eyes on your every move doesn't help and the gossip spreads like wildfire, so it's best to play it coy until those feelings are certain, and that much I do know ... from watching on the sidelines, all the damn time.

Lulu joins us smelling as always like the purple flower she loves so much. She owns Lavender at Lulu's, a pop-up shop that sells homemade natural bath products, from soaps to shampoos and everything in between. She wears her heart on her sleeve and is the true peace-loving hippy of the past, reincarnated.

I take a step back to drink in the lovebirds one last time, my heart doing a little happy dance for them. They're both salt of the earth, big-hearted wanderers who tread gently on this planet.

We take time over our scones laden with jam and cream coupled with freshly brewed tea. It's a wonder I'm not the size of a house since Rosie walked into my life, but I suppose I've stopped eating from a packet these days, whatever charred mess I'd previously managed to consume in order to stay alive. Cooking is not my forte and I had little interest in food until Rosie came screaming into my life.

Everything she makes is from scratch and even if it is laced with butter and sugar, there's a homeliness about it, conjuring Sunday visits to Gran's house where you'd leave with a warm heart and a full belly.

Maybe I can grow a food baby, that will give me something to love ...

After sharing their travel plans, Lulu and Leo thank us and offer another round of hugs. We watch them walk off together, hand in hand. 'No more goodbyes, my heart can't stand it,' I say, resting my head on Rosie's shoulder.

Rosie gives my arm an affectionate rub. 'We'll see them again, surely.' It's a strange game this wandering lark. You'd think it would be easy to keep in touch, but it never works out that way. Patchy Wi-Fi, days spent driving from one place to the next, busy festivals and fairs and those people who once owned a corner of your heart slowly get pushed out for the people you meet on the next part of the ride. These special people may dart out of our lives but I will always remember them for the easy open friendship they offered.

'I'm hoping there'll be a wedding invitation in the inbox soon!' I nudge Rosie and motion to Leo and Lulu who kiss in the distance under the shade of an oak tree.

'Won't she make the most beautiful bride?'

I sigh, picturing it. 'Stunning! I can see her with long blonde plaits, wearing a gauzy cheesecloth dress.' I'll never tire of seeing love bloom. Never, ever, ever. 'Barefoot, a beach wedding ...'

'A bouquet of bluebells and forget-me-nots.' Rosie's face shines, as we lose ourselves dreaming. 'Daisy chains for the flower girls.'

'Cream linen for the ring bearer, a lavender filled cushion a bed for the quartz wedding ring.'

I smooth down my shirt. 'If we mentioned all this to her do you think she'd freak out?'

Rosie laughs. 'It might be a little presumptuous since they've only been dating for a week.'

'But when you know, *you know*.' They catch us staring and we both yelp and wave enthusiastically as if we're proud parents. 'OK, Cupid. Let's just stalk their Facebook pages and if we get any hint marriage is on the cards then we can bombard her with our suggestions.'

'Bombard?' Rosie queries.

'Gently make myriad helpful suggestions ... Perhaps I'd better stick to fictional weddings.' Wedding season, you'll find me attending all sorts of *fictional* weddings; from historical to modern-day romances, there's not a single one that doesn't make me shed happy tears.

'For the time being stick to the books,' Rosie says. 'You can blubber until your heart is content and you don't have to worry about wearing waterproof mascara.'

'True, another reason reading beats real life. Waterproof mascara is impossible to remove.'

I turn to her, suddenly enamoured with the thought of weddings, babies, good, solid strong futures. 'What about you, Rosie? Have you and Max discussed the next stage much?'

A blush creeps up her neck.

'You have!'

'Don't be ridiculous!' Her voice rises with each syllable.

I fold my arms. 'What's ridiculous about it? I've never seen a couple so besotted before.'

Playfully she swats at me, a sure-fire sign she's embarrassed discussing it. 'So why do I need marriage to cement it?'

Hands on hip, I say as if it's obvious, 'So I can plan the wedding!'

She dissolves into a fit of laughter. 'That's it?'

'Well, I want to be an aunty too. Can you imagine your little brood of curly-haired beauties who roam wild and free, climbing trees and speaking four different languages?'

'It screams pathetic, but yes I *have* pictured them, a little boy and a little girl two years after ... and I'm already in love with them, even though the boy is a bit reckless and the girl always hangs off Max and insists on speaking in an American accent like her daddy. Isn't that a little cuckoo?'

I waggle my brow. 'What are their names?'

She gives me a hip bump.

'I know you have it all planned, Rosie!'

Our peals of laughter punctuate the day. It feels so good to celebrate these little wins my friends are having. To think of the way love can blossom into real-life miniature humans blows my mind and I'd love to be part of their family, as the eccentric word nerd adopted aunty who lives next door and teaches them to read.

'Fine, their *tentative* names are Alchemy and Huckleberry.'

My laughter dies and dries into a hard lump in my throat which I semi-choke on. 'Wow ... Rosie, they are, erm, certainly unique names. Won't forget those in a hurry.'

'I thought you'd especially like the literary nod to Huckleberry.'

I swallow my shock. 'Ah, wonderful! I'll order in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* just as soon as I get a free moment.'

She gives me a hard stare. 'Do you really think I'd name my children Alchemy and Huckleberry?'

'You're not?'

'No, I'm not.'

'Oh thank god! I wasn't sure what to say! You know as well as I do that nomads have a tendency to name their offspring all sorts of wacky and wonderful things, I thought you'd been bitten by the same bug. Don't get me wrong, I love Sage's son Quest, and Ziggy's daughter Freedom—'

'You hate their names.'

'I do *not*! Their names are as adventurous as their little spirits. What if Quest grows up to be an explorer? Quest going on a quest! And Freedom might become a human rights lawyer and how handy will her name come in then?' OK, I don't love their names, but I'll never tell.

'You're a hopeless liar, Aria. My chosen names if you must know are Indigo for the little boy who is destined to arrive first, and exactly two years and six months later little Aria Rose will be born into this world. You've ruined the surprise.'

'Aria Rose?'

'It's got a nice ring to it, you have to admit.'

'It's beautiful. And I'm honoured. So when do these little cherubs plan on gracing the planet?'

She huffs and takes out her ever-present notebook with a long sigh as if I've pushed her patience to the limit, knowing (as I do) that everything is planned no matter whether babies can be or not.

With supreme confidence, she says, 'Indigo should arrive around June 2023, and baby Aria in January 2026 or there about. It's not too soon, is it?' A frown appears.

'Not at all.' Knowing Rosie, she'll figure out a way to make babies happen exactly as her schedule decrees. 'What does Max say?'

She scoffs. 'He says let nature take its course, and if it's sooner then that's all the better.' She pinches the bridge of her nose as if Max's carefree nature pains her. 'But I'm not ready, not yet. I'm still adjusting to life on the road.'

'Me too,' I say and feel the truth in my words. 'It's an ongoing learning curve.'

'What about you, Aria, would you ever consider babies?'

I baulk. 'By immaculate conception?'

She purses her lips.

Noting the time so I can distract her, I say, 'Wow, we'd better push off if we want to stick to your schedule.'

There's a tap on the van door. A courier stands there with a package in hand. 'Aria Summers?'

'That's me,' I say. Had I placed a special book order I'd forgotten about? Or a blindfold so I won't see myself walking into any more bad choices? Maybe a chastity belt for those times when I forget I'm resolutely single ...

'Sign here, love.' I do and he hands over the package. 'Have a good day.'

'Book order?' Rosie asks.

I tap a finger to my chin. 'Must be but I can't remember who for? I'm sure I got them all sorted already.' A big part of my business is ordering in rare books for my customers and then shipping them on for a small profit. I also have an online shop with a romance cult following. Anything to keep the wolf from the door. Van life is a constant state of hustle to be able to continue the journey.

'Open it up.'

I tear it open to find a handwritten note and what looks to be a diary.

When I see the name at the end my heart stops. 'It's from TJ's mum.'

I fold the letter.

'Aren't you going to read it?' Rosie asks, eyes enquiring. 'Oh ... privacy, right? I'll go and give you a few minutes?'

I nod. 'Thanks, Rosie.'

When she's gone I take the letter and sit on the edge of my bed, trying to slow the rapid beating of my pulse. Surely TJ's mum wouldn't write to harangue me? I'd always hoped we could mend bridges but part of me is still angry about the way the family ghosted me after TJ died. His mum, Mary, led the charge, ignoring me at his funeral, not inviting me to family birthdays or Christmases after he'd gone. It was as though I didn't exist to them anymore. I'd gone from favourite daughter-in-law to public enemy number one. It hurt. It still hurts. And despite being treated horrendously by them, I still miss them, especially Mary who was like a mother to me once.

Dear Aria,

I hope this finds you well. Although if you're anything like me, you're just plodding through every day on autopilot. The world isn't the same without TJ. Don't you find that colour has been leached from everything? The sun isn't as bright and even the sound of laughter sounds strange to me these days, but I endure. What else can one do?

He left this diary with instructions to send it to you, but I'd misplaced it. For that I am sorry.

Mary

She had this precious keepsake for almost three years and forgot? It's that same old game-playing and to what end? I expected better from them, but grief is a wily beast so I stretch my limits trying to sympathize to justify her behaviour, find any reason why she'd keep this from me and come up short. She blames me for taking TJ away from her when he got sick, and she won't listen to reason about it.

My hands shake as I tentatively open the diary. I slam it closed when I see the loops and scrawls of TJ's neat writing. I'd never seen him write in a diary, not once. I blink back tears at having a relic so treasurable – his thoughts, his words, trapped inside. There couldn't be anything sweeter for a word nerd like myself. But when did he write in it? What if it's some terrible secret he's chosen to confess?

There's no time to ponder now. We're about to leave and the very last thing I want to do is read it in haste. I kiss the diary and put it in my bedside drawer wishing my husband had been sent back to me but knowing that his words are the next best thing.

Chapter 5

Calais

The diary is on my mind as we say goodbye to old London town and start our journey. It's nice to be alone in the front of the van and let my mind wander. I'm following Max so I don't have to worry about the route. Instead I spend the next couple of hours reminiscing about TJ and some of the amazing adventures we shared. He was the type of guy who was up for anything. Rock-climbing, chick-flick marathons, sailing, and my favourite – walking in the rain hand in hand with me. He loved his life and I hang on to that.

After a long drive we arrive in Calais, park up and stop to stretch our legs as gloriously warm sunlight bathes our stiff bodies. French accents bounce around, and I smile listening to such poetic language. *Ooh la la*, it's theatre come to life as men gesticulate wildly over tiny cups of café crème and women with broody eyes sit smoking cigarettes.

'Not too keen on doing that drive again. Poppy was all over the road,' Rosie says, her face white. Driving a big rig like Poppy is no easy feat, just keeping her on the road requires a certain kind of concentration. Like the Little Bookshop, pink campervan Poppy has a mind of her own at times and will pull this way and that to get your attention. They're grand dames who've had long, illustrious lives before they stepped into ours.

'That's the first leg done, Rosie. You did well. We've got less than three hours to go to get to Rouen.'

She blows hair from her eyes and Max takes her in his arms. He doesn't say anything, he's always just there for her when she needs it. A calming presence who never speaks in platitudes to Rosie, because who likes platitudes? I love *love* and seeing it jump from the pages and come to life with these two gives me the warm and fuzzies.

But I can't let them know that. 'Get a room, you two.'

Rosie's anxious mood is soon replaced by wonder as, wrapped in Max's arms, she takes in her surroundings. The parading of their love is probably half the reason I'm suddenly consumed with Jonathan fantasies – the two of us reading side by side with only the flickering glow of candlelight. OK so it's not exactly a wild, passionate imagining but baby steps, and all that.

Rosie's happiness is infectious so it takes me a minute to take in the view and that's when I spot them. 'Look!' I point. 'You can *just* see the white cliffs of Dover from here.' They are so spectacular, the white of them is luminous even this far away. 'I can't help it; the song is playing in my head.' I start humming Vera Lynn's classic hit 'The White Cliffs of Dover'.

'Wow,' Rosie says. 'I'd love to take the ferry past them one day, see them up close.'

'Me too.' There's so much world to explore, I'm hoping this French trip inspires us to keep going as far as we can in our vans. 'But for now, adventure awaits. And that is *Le Phare*, the lighthouse on the point.'

Rosie groans, not being one for heights. 'How many steps?' Or exercise.

I feign ignorance.

'Don't try that look on me, I can see right through it.'

'Fine. Two hundred and seventy-one teeny tiny little steps.'

She harrumphs. 'I'll never understand why you two like hurting your bodies in such a way. Where's the fun in having your thigh muscles burning?'

I grab her elbow and lead the way. 'The view of course, silly.'

We find the lighthouse and buy tickets, Rosie muttering the whole time, more so when we're halfway up and our legs are wobbling with effort. 'Remind me again why I couldn't see the same sea from the ground level?'

I laugh. 'You've got a point there.'

Max sprints ahead of us, and again I idly wonder if he is some kind of closet superhero. The man never runs out of steam. Poor Rosie is grunting, grumbling and ruining the day she met us.

We climb on, somewhat slower, chests (*dare I say it, bosoms!*) heaving. We're eventually rewarded with the magnificent view from the top of the lighthouse. Max is at the rail and motions us over.

'Say it ...?' Max goads her, his face split with a grin. I note he's not out of breath, not in the slightest.

Hands on hips, Rosie grins back and manages an out-of-breath, 'Wow!'

Waves crash and we're assailed with the briny smell of the sea. It's enough to rejuvenate us after sitting so long in our vans, and fills me with energy for the next stage of the drive. 'In my next life I'm going to be a lighthouse keeper,' I say, imagining myself sitting up here, wrapped in a throw rug, book in hand, with waves lapping at the shore.

'You might have noticed they're not really in use these days,' Rosie says.

'That's even better, I don't want to work, I just want the view.'

Rosie smiles. 'Rapunzel, hey? Hiding away in her own castle.'

'Something like that.' I picture future me: Aria Summers, lighthouse recluse, teens running to the door and knocking before they shriek and leg it away like I'm the modern-day Boo Radley. *Le sigh.*

'Coffee and then we'll begin the second leg?' Rosie asks, taking a quick look at her notebook. 'We're tracking right on time.' Her grin is triumphant.

We find a little French patisserie, where fragrant jasmine climbs the walls and perfumes the breeze. We find some cane chairs that all face the street and sit side by side like soldiers. I find it strange the way the French don't sit around a table but rather facing outwards. I've been admonished before on a previous trip to Paris when I turned my chair to face TJ. That is not the done thing, I soon found out. The memory makes me smile and some devilish part of me is tempted to try it now to see what would happen, but I rein it in.

A few minutes later the waiter takes our order of two *café au lait* and *tartelette fraises* while Max settles with herbal tea and fresh air. How the man is still alive with what he subsists on is beyond me.

We do the usual nomad café etiquette and all take out our phones and connect to the free Wi-Fi to see what we've missed since our last break stop. Nothing my end, it seems. The world has continued to spin with nary any need from me. I try not to take it to heart.

I stretch my arms above my head, relishing being out of the van when Rosie pipes up. 'Tori wants to know where we're staying in Rouen.'

I groan. 'Are you kidding?'

'Nope, she says if the offer still stands, she wouldn't mind joining us.'

I cross my arms. 'What offer?'

Max gives me the ghost of a smile. 'We did give a blanket statement to everyone about joining our French sojourn.'

'Yeah, that might be so, but I didn't mean her!' I sputter out.

He shrugs. Max is one of those people who gets on with everyone, everyone wants to be his friend. If he were any more laid back, he'd be dead. 'She's OK in her own way, isn't she?'

Tori hasn't once set Max up to fail, played practical jokes that backfired or any of the number of things she's tried on me and Rosie. He doesn't know about the polygamy rumours she started about him and Rosie – no one wanted to be the one to tell him. Max is a pacifist but when it comes to Rosie all bets are off.

'She's a bit of a closet viper,' Rosie says.

His face darkens. 'She seems so harmless.'

'Spoken by a man who doesn't understand feminine wiles,' I say, envious that Max can float through every day never once picking up on such a thing. We're almost predisposed to it just being in his bloody limelight. Women flock to Max, and he doesn't seem to notice or care one jot.

'I don't think I want to know, if that's the case,' he says, his leonine eyes ablaze at the thought someone might be underhanded with Rosie.

'Are you going to tell her where we are?' I ask. But I know Rosie, and her moral compass which always points true North. It's not her way to leave anyone out, she knows from personal experience how much it hurts – even if Tori does deserve it.

She lifts a palm.

'It's fine,' I reassure her. 'If Tori starts, I'll put a stop to it, simple as that.' The strawberry tart explodes with flavour and I debate ordering a second serve. How do the French get their fruit to taste so sweet? I make a mental note to hunt out a fresh food market and buy a bucket load of seasonal fruit.

'What's the worst she can do?' Rosie says, scrunching her nose.

'We're all going to be busy once the festivals and fairs start anyway, right?' Max says.

'I hope so,' I reply, munching away and trying to put Tori far from my mind. I've never travelled abroad before *and* tried to pop-up at the same time, so I'm a touch apprehensive that things might not run as smoothly as they did back home. We've got each other though, and if the bottom falls out of our plan, we'll make a new one, right? It's not as if we're in Antarctica.

'Right. Speaking of,' Rosie says, glancing at her watch. 'We'd better head to Rouen. We want to find the campsite before it gets dark.'

I drink the last of my coffee. 'I can't bloody wait!' I've always wanted to travel around France, stopping at as many little provinces as possible, finding gems off the beaten track. I love Paris – who wouldn't, with it being steeped in literary history – but there's something magical about going the long way around the country, choosing places that aren't as big and as bustling as the city of light.

What treasures will we find?

As we leave the café Rosie sidles up to me and whispers, 'Was the letter OK?' She's one of the only people who knows the story behind it all. I don't usually tell anyone about TJ, it's an awkward thing to throw into conversation and it usually freezes up those new interactions before they've started. It's easy to pretend to be a carefree nomad whose great loves are all fictional. Rather than admitting I'm a broken-hearted girl running from her past.

I debate whether to go into it now and decide I'll give Rosie a brief rundown so she doesn't worry. 'His mum, Mary, misplaced a diary of TJ's and it's only just been found. She sent it along with a short letter. All it says really is that life has been hard for her too.' In truth, I haven't been able to think of anything but the diary and what it might contain but I need to read in solitude when I won't be interrupted.

'Oh, Aria, I don't know what to say. Are you going to write back to her?'

I contemplate it. 'It's hard to know whether that will just stir it all up again, you know? Both of us are still bruised from it ...' I *should* write to her. She deserves that at least. But whether it would help or hinder, I'm not sure yet.

Rosie's eyebrows pull together. 'But at one time you loved your mother-in-law.'

I fold my arms against the breeze that blows from the sea. 'And she loved me. But things changed, Rosie. And I don't know if it can go back. There's a lot of resentment there.'

With a nod she says, 'Read the diary first, see if that makes things any clearer.'

I consider it as I look back towards the deep blue of the ocean, just visible from the café. 'Yeah, for sure. You'd think I'd devour it in one sitting, that's what I'd normally do, but I want to make it last. It's like a gift from him and I need to savour it.'

'I totally get that. It really is the most beautiful surprise and she did send it eventually ...'

'Yeah, you're right. I don't think she'd ever be truly malicious. She's not that kind of person. She's heartbroken, and that I understand. I just wish I could call her and explain, but it's not that simple.'

'I'm always here if you need to talk, you know that, right?'

'Thanks, Rosie. Once we've settled in, I'd love to.' I give her a squeeze. Rosie is all about fixing family rifts after learning the hard way there's not always all the time in the world to do so.

Revived from the caffeine and cake, we huddle checking the map before getting back into our respective vans and heading for Rouen. We drive in a convoy of three with Max leading the way, and Rosie following behind me.

A few hours later the spires of Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Rouen pierce the skyline and my mouth falls open in awe. A little while after, we drive through the medieval town and I'm astonished at its beauty. The old buildings look almost Shakespearian, Tudor style with colourful wooden cladding. It's a postcard come to life but there's no time to ogle as I do my best to follow Max, hoping that Rosie is OK behind me. We park up at the campsite and Max gestures that's he's going to the office to check us in. While he's doing that Rosie and I take a moment to stretch our legs and check out the park.

'Right.' Max returns and points to the far end of the park. 'We're back there, right by the river.'

'Nice.' We're only staying in Rouen a couple of weeks but already I know it's a place I'll want to return to and spend time meandering hidden laneways and tiny alleys. 'It's a vibrant energetic town from what I gathered driving through.'

'Yeah, it's a pretty place,' Max says. 'The manager, Antoinette, has given me directions to the fete which is only a hop, skip and a jump from the campsite, so that'll make it easier on the day.'

Our first French fete and it's a big one, well known for hosting exotic vendors from all over the country! We managed to secure an allotment because of Max's connections. His mom, Nola, is Van Lifer royalty, she basically created the movement way back when and knows how to survive on practically every continent. We sorted out a range of places to pop-up and applied for permissions and paid whatever fees so we'd be one step ahead when we arrived.

'We've got a week to explore before the fete,' says Rosie. 'Though I'll have to start preparing as soon as I can. I need to make another batch of jam and also some literary tea blends.'

Once we've moved our vans and are connected to the power, I shower and change into comfier clothes. I check my online shop and am happy to note a big order for Maeve Binchy books. It takes me less than thirty seconds to find them buried behind an ottoman that's seen better days. I wrap them in butcher paper and pen a quote by the icon herself, that we are nothing if we're not loved ... I'll get them in the post tomorrow.

Once I'm sorted I go to Rosie's van to discuss the plan for the next day (OK, and also because she will feed me a dinner big enough to send me right into a food coma).

I knock on Rosie's door and enter to find them sitting side by side at the dining table. Max looks ginormous in the space, as if he's being squashed inside a doll's house. 'So, lovebirds ... tomorrow, what do you want to do?'

'I need some supplies for the fete,' Rosie says. 'But aside from that I was just going to follow you two. I'm absolutely beat today. I'm hoping the fog will clear and when I wake up I'll be energized.'

'A good night's sleep will be just the ticket, Rosie.' We've had a big week, all those goodbyes, all those glasses of wine. 'I thought I'd wander into town after breakfast tomorrow. I'm sure there's a bookshop calling my name and there's a big chance that I might find Narnia and never return.'

She laughs. 'In that case I'd better supervise. I'd love to find some French patisserie cookbooks. What about you, Max, what did you want to do?'

He runs a hand through his leonine locks. 'I'd planned to head off alone to arrange a little surprise ...'

'A surprise?' Rosie's face turns puce, actually puce, and that quickly too. 'Not for me ...?' Max's surprises are usually of the high-octane nature and safety-first Rosie is still coming to terms with life in the fast lane.

Max cuts her off with just a look.

She cradles her head. 'Why am I picturing my imminent death, a fireball, a knife skirmish, being shot out of canon into a deep body of water ... urgh, I need to sit before I fall. Oh, god I *am* sitting. Flip.'

He tries his best to contain his smile but his lips quiver in rebellion. 'Right. You wouldn't *be* Rosie if you didn't think of the gory, terrifying, bloodcurdling way in which you'd leave this mortal coil whenever any new experience crops up.'

She looks aghast. 'That's simply not true.'

'Isn't it?' he probes.

I laugh. It is very true!

'What did you say before you tried abseiling, rally driving, zip lining? And don't forget driving the quad bikes through the forest a few weeks ago,' Max reminds her.

She guffaws. 'It's not unreasonable to imagine the quad bikes could very easily roll over, spill fuel which catches alight ripping through the dense forest in mere seconds causing wildfires and ... I still can't understand why the manager of that death trap of a place took offence?'

'No?' Max grins and raises a brow. 'When you started throwing out statistics about the amount of people injured on quad bikes and his customers halving in thirty seconds flat, you don't think that might have rubbed him up the wrong way?'

'That? You think that's why he got so uppity? I was doing him a favour, he should have been thanking me!'

'Yeah, right. I guess it's just your way to fantasize your own grisly death.'

'OK fine, I do always picture my imminent death, but that's only so I can prepare ahead: what to do in the *likely* event of an emergency. I wouldn't call it a fantasy, god, Max. You make me sound like I'm eagerly awaiting such a thing when in actual fact it's the exact opposite!'

With a laugh he says, 'Well either way, I'm proud of you, Rosie, and you're going to love this surprise. It includes you too, Aria.'

'Great! I wouldn't call myself an adrenalin junkie but I'll give anything a go at least once ...'

'Almost anything,' Rosie says. 'Love is off limits, right?'

'That old chestnut?'

'Slipped out,' she says, her voice sheepish. 'So that's sorted, let's have a dinner feast and an early night ...'

Music to my ears.

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