

the  
man  
who  
didn't  
call  
Rosie Walsh

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*This book is dedicated to anyone who has found  
themselves floored by the absence of a telephone call.*

*Especially those who didn't imagine they'd care.*



‘We can perhaps only ever fall in  
love without knowing quite who  
we have fallen in love with’

ALAIN DE BOTTON,

*Essays in Love*



# PART I





## Chapter One

*Dear You,*

*It's exactly nineteen years since that luminous morning when we smiled and said goodbye. That we would see each other again was never in doubt, was it? It was a question of when, not if. In fact, it wasn't even a question. The future might have seemed as insubstantial as the curled edge of a dream, but it unequivocally contained us both. Together.*

*And yet it didn't. Even after all these years I find myself stunned by that.*

*Nineteen years since that day. Nineteen whole years! And I'm still looking for you. I will never stop looking for you.*

*Often you appear when I expect it least. Earlier today I was trapped in some pointless dark thought or other, my body clenched like a metal fist. Then suddenly you were there: a bright autumn leaf cartwheeling over a dull pewter lawn. I uncurled and smelled life, felt dew on my feet, saw shades of green. I tried to grab hold of you, that vivid leaf, cavorting and wriggling and giggling. I tried to take your hand, look straight at you, but like an optical black spot you slid silently sideways, just out of reach.*

*I will never stop looking for you.*

## Chapter Two

### DAY SEVEN: *When We Both Knew*

The grass had become damp. Damp and dark and full of industry. Stretching away towards the blackened ridge of the woods, it quivered with battalions of ants and ponderous snails and tiny, gossamer-spinning spiders. Underneath us, the earth drew to itself a last residue of warmth.

Eddie, lying next to me, was humming the *Star Wars* theme tune. His thumb stroked mine. Slowly, gently, like the clouds moving across the fine clip of moon above us. ‘Let’s search for aliens,’ he’d said earlier, as the violet sky had thickened to purple. We were still there.

I heard the distant sigh of the last train disappearing into the tunnel further up the hill and I smiled, remembering when Hannah and I used to camp out here as children. In a small field in this same small valley, hidden from what still felt like a small world.

At the first sign of summer Hannah would beg our parents to put up the tent.

‘Sure,’ they said. ‘As long as you camp in the garden.’

The garden was flat. It was at the front of our house, overlooked by almost every window. But it was never enough for Hannah, whose spirit of adventure – even though she was five years my junior – had always exceeded mine.

She wanted the field. The field straggled up the steep hill behind our house, flattening just enough at the top to fit a tent. It was overlooked by nothing other than the sky. It was speckled with hard frisbees of cowpat and was so high up you could almost look down our chimney.

Our parents were not so keen on the field.

‘But I’ll be perfectly safe,’ Hannah would insist, in that bossy little voice. (How I missed that voice.)

‘I’ll have Alex with me.’ Hannah’s best friend spent most of her time at our house. ‘*And* Sarah. She can protect us if any murderers come.’

As if I were a well-built man with a reliable right hook.

‘And you won’t have to make our dinner if we go camping. *Or* our breakfast . . .’

Hannah was like a tiny bulldozer – she never ran out of counter-arguments – and our parents inevitably gave in. At first they camped in the field with us, but eventually, as I fought on through the knotted jungle of adolescence, they allowed Hannah and Alex to sleep up there alone, with me as bodyguard.

We would lie in Dad’s old festival tent – a lumbering thing made of orange canvas, like a small bungalow – and listen to the symphony of sounds in the grass outside. Often, I’d stay awake long after my little sister and her friend had slackened into sleep, wondering what kind of protection I’d actually be able to offer were someone to burst in. The necessity of protecting Hannah – not just as she slept in this tent, but always – felt like molten rock in my stomach, a volcano barely contained. And yet what would I actually do? Karate-chop them with my teenage wrist? Stab them with a marshmallow-toasting stick?

*Often hesitant, not entirely certain of herself*, was how my form tutor had described me on a report.

‘Well, that’s really bloody useful,’ Mum had said, in the voice she normally reserved for telling off our father. ‘Ignore her, Sarah. Be as uncertain as you like! That’s what your teenage years are for!’

Exhausted, eventually, by the competing forces of protectiveness and powerlessness, I’d fall asleep, waking early to assemble whatever disgusting combination of things Hannah and Alex had packed for their infamous ‘breakfast sandwich’.

I laid a hand on my chest; dimmed the lights on the memory. It wasn’t an evening for sadness; it was an evening for now. For Eddie and me, and the great, still-growing thing between us.

I concentrated on the sounds of a woodland clearing at night. Invertebrate rustle, mammalian shuffle. The green whisper of moving leaves, the untroubled rise and fall of Eddie’s breath. I listened to his heart, beating evenly through his jumper, and marvelled at his steadiness. ‘More will be revealed,’ my father always liked to say about people. ‘You have to watch and wait, Sarah.’ But I’d been watching this man for a week and I hadn’t sensed any disquiet. In many ways he reminded me of the me I’d trained myself to be at work: solid, rational, untroubled by the shifting tides of the non-profit sector – but I was someone who’d spent years practising, whereas Eddie seemed, simply, to be that way.

I wondered if he could hear the excitement careening around in my chest. A matter of days ago I’d been separated, approaching divorce, approaching forty. Then this. Him.

‘Oh! A badger!’ I said, as a low shape shuffled across the darkened edge of my vision. ‘I wonder if it’s Cedric.’

‘Cedric?’

‘Yes. Although I suppose it probably isn’t him. How long do badgers live?’

‘I think about ten years.’ Eddie was smiling; I could hear it.

‘Well, then it’s definitely not Cedric. But it could be his son. Or maybe grandson.’ I paused. ‘We loved Cedric.’

A vibration of laughter traced through his body, into mine. ‘Who’s we?’

‘Me and my little sister. We used to camp quite near here.’

He rolled over onto his side, his face close to mine, and I could see it in his eyes.

‘Cedric the badger. I . . . you,’ he said quietly. He traced a finger along my hairline. ‘I like you. I like you and me. In fact, I like you and me very much.’

I smiled. Right into those kind, sincere eyes. At those laughter lines, at the heavy angle of his chin. I took his hand and kissed his fingertips, rough and mottled with splinters after two decades of woodworking. Already it felt like I’d known him for years. For a lifetime. It felt like someone had matched us, maybe at birth, and nudged and aligned and planned and schemed until we finally met, six days ago.

‘I just had some very mushy thoughts,’ I said, after a long pause.

‘Me too.’ He sighed. ‘It feels like the last week’s been set to a score of sweeping violins.’

I laughed, and he kissed my nose, and I wondered how it was that you could spend weeks, months – *years*, even – just chugging on, nothing really changing, and then, in the space of a few hours, the script of your life could be completely rewritten. Had I gone out later that day, I would have got straight on the bus and never met him, and this new feeling of certainty would be no more than an unheard whisper of missed opportunities and bad timing.

‘Tell me even more about you,’ he said. ‘I still don’t know enough. I want to know everything. The complete and

unabridged life story of Sarah Evelyn Mackey, including the bad bits.'

I held my breath.

It wasn't that I hadn't known this would happen at some stage, more that I still hadn't decided what I'd do when it did. *The complete and unabridged life story of Sarah Evelyn Mackey, including the bad bits*. He could take it, probably. There was an armour on this man, a quiet strength that made me think of an old seawall, an oak tree, maybe.

He was running a hand along the curve between my hip and ribcage. 'I love this curve,' he said.

A man so comfortable in his own skin you could probably sink any secret, any truth into him, and he'd be able to hold it without sustaining structural damage.

Of course I could tell him.

'I have an idea,' I said. 'Let's camp out here tonight. Pretend we're still young. We can make a fire, cook sausages, tell stories. Assuming you have a tent, that is? You seem like a man who'd have a tent.'

'I am a man who has a tent,' he confirmed.

'Good! Well then, let's do it, and I'll tell you everything. I . . .' I rolled over, looking out into the night. The last fat candles of blossom glowed dully on the horse chestnut at the edge of the woods. A buttercup swayed in the darkness near our faces. For reasons she'd never deigned to share, Hannah had always hated buttercups.

I felt something rise in my chest. 'It's just so lovely, being out here. Brings back so many memories.'

'OK,' Eddie smiled. 'We'll camp. But first, come here, please.'

He kissed me on the mouth and for a while the rest of the world was muted, as if someone had simply pressed a button or turned a dial.

'I don't want tomorrow to be our last day,' he said, when the kissing came to an end. He bandaged his arms more tightly around me and I felt the cheerful warmth of his chest and belly, the soft tickle of his cropped hair under my hands.

Closeness like this had become a distant memory, I thought, inhaling the clean, sandy smell of his skin. By the time Reuben and I had called it a day, we were sleeping like bookends on either side of our bed, the stretch of untouched sheets between us an homage to our failure.

'Till mattress us do part,' I'd said, one night, but Reuben hadn't laughed.

Eddie pulled away so I could see his face. 'I did . . . Look, I did wonder if we should cancel our respective plans. My holiday and your London trip. So we can roll around in the fields for another week.'

I propped myself up on an elbow. *I want that more than you will ever know*, I thought. *I was married for seventeen years and in all that time I never felt the way I do with you.*

'Another week of this would be perfect,' I told him. 'But you mustn't cancel your holiday. I'll still be here when you get back.'

'But you won't be here. You'll be in London.'

'Are you sulking?'

'Yes.' He kissed my collarbone.

'Well, stop it. I'll be back down here in Gloucestershire soon after you get back.'

He seemed unappeased.

'If you stop sulking, I might even come and meet you at the airport,' I added. 'I could be one of those people with a name on a board and a car in the short-stay.'

He seemed to consider this for a moment. 'That would be very nice,' he said. 'Very nice indeed.'

'Done.'

‘And . . .’ he paused, looked suddenly uncertain, ‘and I know it’s maybe a bit soon, but after you’ve told me your life story and I’ve cooked sausages that may or may not be edible, I want us to have a serious conversation about the fact that you live in California and I live in England. This visit of yours is too short.’

‘I know.’

He tugged at the dark grass. ‘When I get back from holiday, we’ll have – what, a week together? Before you have to go back to the States?’

I nodded. The only dark cloud over our week together had been this, the inevitability of parting.

‘Well then, I think we have to . . . I don’t know. Do something. Decide something. I can’t just let this go. I can’t know you’re somewhere in the world and not be with you. I think we should try to make this work.’

‘Yes,’ I said quietly. ‘Yes, me too.’ I slid a hand inside his sleeve. ‘I’ve been thinking the same, but I lost my nerve every time I tried to bring it up.’

‘Really?’ Laughter and relief spilled into his voice, and I realized it must have taken some courage for him to start the conversation. ‘Sarah, you’re one of the most confident women I’ve ever met.’

‘Mmmm.’

‘You are. It’s one of the things I like about you. One of the many things I like very much about you.’

It had been a great many years since I’d had to start nailing confidence to myself like a sign on a shop. But even though it came naturally now – even though I spoke at medical conferences around the world, gave interviews to news crews, managed a team – I felt unsettled when people remarked on it. Unsettled or perhaps exposed, like a person on a hill in a thunderstorm.



Then Eddie kissed me again and I felt it all dissolve. The sadness of the past, the uncertainty of the future. This was what was meant to happen next. *This*.

## Chapter Three

FIFTEEN DAYS LATER

‘Something terrible has happened to him.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like death. Maybe not death. Although, why not? My grandmother dropped dead at the age of forty-four.’

Jo turned round from the passenger seat. ‘Sarah.’

I didn’t meet her eye.

She looked instead at Tommy, who was driving us west along the M4. ‘Did you hear that?’ she asked.

He didn’t respond. His jaw was clenched shut, the pale skin by his temple pulsing as if someone were in there, trying to break out.

*Jo and I shouldn’t have come*, I thought again. We’d been convinced Tommy would want the support of his two oldest friends – after all, it wasn’t often that you had to stand shoulder to shoulder with your school bully while the press took photos – but as each dreary, rain-spattered mile passed, it had become evident that we were doing little more than augmenting his anxiety.

What he needed today was the freedom to peddle synthetic confidence without being watched by those who knew him best. To pretend it was all water under the bridge. *Look how I became a successful sports consultant, delivering a*

*programme to my old school! Look how happy I am to be working alongside the head of PE, the very man who punched me in the stomach and laughed when I turned my face into the grass and cried!*

To make matters worse, Jo's seven-year-old, Rudi, was next to me on the back seat. His father had been offered a job interview and Jo hadn't had time to find childcare. He had been listening with great interest to our conversation about Eddie's disappearance.

'So, Sarah thinks her boyfriend's dead and Mum's getting cross,' Rudi surmised. He was going through a phase of distilling awkward adult conversations into neat one-liners, and he was very good at it.

'He's not her boyfriend,' Jo said. 'They spent seven days together.'

The car fell silent again. 'Sarah. Think seven-day boyfriend dead,' Rudi said, in his Russian voice. Rudi had a new friend at school, Aleksandr, who had recently come to London from somewhere near the Ukrainian border. 'Killed by secret service. Mum disagree. Mum cross with Sarah.'

'I'm not cross,' Jo said crossly. 'I'm just worried.'

Rudi considered this, and then said, 'I think you tell lie.'

Jo couldn't deny it, so remained silent. I didn't wish to antagonize Jo, so I remained silent as well. And Tommy hadn't said anything for two hours, so he remained silent, too. Rudi lost interest and returned to his iPad game. Adults were rife with baffling and pointless problems.

I watched Rudi obliterate what looked like a cabbage and was blasted suddenly by a great longing: for his innocence, his seven-year-old's worldview. I imagined Rudi Land, in which mobile phones were gaming stations rather than instruments of psychological torture, and the certainty of his mother's love was as solid as a heartbeat.

If there was any point to becoming an adult, it eluded me today. Who wouldn't prefer to be killing cabbages and talking in a Russian accent? Who wouldn't prefer to have had their breakfast made and their outfit chosen, when the alternative was malignant despair over a man who'd felt like everything and somehow become nothing? And not the man I'd been married to seventeen years; a man I'd known precisely seven days. No wonder everyone in this car thought I was mad.

'Look, I know it sounds like a teenage saga,' I said eventually. 'And I don't doubt that you're pissed off with me. But something has happened to him, I'm certain of it.'

Jo opened Tommy's glove compartment to extract a large bar of chocolate, from which she snapped off a chunk with some force.

'Mum?' Rudi said. 'What's that?'

He knew perfectly well what it was. Jo handed her son a square without saying anything. Rudi smiled at her, his biggest, toothiest smile, and – in spite of her growing impatience – Jo smiled back. 'Don't ask for more,' she warned. 'You'll only end up being sick.'

Rudi said nothing, confident she'd give in.

Jo turned back to me. 'Look, Sarah. I don't want to be cruel, but I think you need to accept that Eddie is not dead. Nor is he injured, or suffering a broken phone, or battling a life-threatening illness.'

'Really? You've called the hospitals to check? Had a chat with the local coroner?'

'Oh God,' she said, staring at me. 'Tell me you haven't done any of those things, Sarah! Jesus Christ!'

'Jesus Christ,' Rudi whispered.

'Stop that,' Jo told him.

'You started it.'

Jo gave Rudi more chocolate and he went back to his iPad. It had been my present to him from America, and he told me earlier on that he loved it more than anything else in the world. Which had made me laugh and then, to Rudi's bafflement, cry a little, because I knew he'd have learned that phrase from Jo. She had turned out to be a remarkable mother, Joanna Monk, in spite of her own upbringing.

'Well?'

'Of course I haven't been calling hospitals,' I sighed. 'Come on, Jo.' I watched a row of crows scattering from a telephone wire.

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. My point was just that you don't know any more than I do what's happened to Eddie.'

'But men do this all the time!' she exploded. 'You know they do!'

'I don't know anything about dating. I've been married the last seventeen years.'

'Well, you can take it from me: nothing's changed,' Jo said bitterly. 'They still don't call.'

She turned to Tommy but found him unresponsive. Any residual confidence he'd feigned about today's big launch had evaporated like the morning mist and he'd barely said a word since we'd set off. There had been a brief display of bravado at Chieveley Services when he'd had a message telling him that three local newspapers had confirmed attendance, but a few minutes later he'd called me 'Sarah' in the queue at WHSmith, and Tommy only called me Sarah when he was extremely anxious. (I had been 'Harrington' since we turned thirteen and he'd started doing press-ups and wearing aftershave.)

The silence thickened, and I lost the battle I'd been fighting since we left London.

*I'm on my way back to Gloucestershire,* I texted Eddie,

quick as a wink. *Supporting my friend Tommy; he's launching a big sports project at our old school. If you wanted to meet up, I could stay at my parents'. Would be good to talk.*  
Sarah x

No pride, no shame. I'd somehow moved beyond that. I tapped the screen of my phone every few seconds, waiting for a delivery report.

*Delivered*, it announced perkily.

I watched the screen, checking for a text bubble. A text bubble would mean he was writing back.

No text bubble.

I looked again. No text bubble.

I looked again. Still no text bubble. I slid my phone into my handbag, out of sight. This was what girls did when they were still in the tender agonies of adolescence, I thought. Girls, still learning to love themselves, waiting in mild hysteria to hear from a boy they'd kissed in a sweaty corner last Friday. This was not the behaviour of a woman of thirty-seven. A woman who'd travelled the world, survived tragedy, run a charity.

The rain was clearing. Through the crack of open window I could smell the tang of wet tarmac and damp, smoky earth. *I am in agony.* I stared vacantly at a field of round hay bales, squeezed tightly into shining black plastic like pudgy legs into tights. I would tip over the edge soon. I would tip over the edge and go into free fall if I didn't find out what had happened.

I checked my phone. It had been twenty-four hours since I'd taken out my SIM card and rebooted. Time to try again.

Half an hour later we were on the dual carriageway coming into Cirencester and Rudi was asking his mother why the clouds were all moving in different directions.

We were a matter of mere miles from where I'd met him. I closed my eyes, trying to remember my walk that hot morning. Those uncomplicated few hours Before Eddie. The sour-milk sweetness of elderflower blossom. Yes, and scorched grass. The drift of butterflies, stunned by the heat. There had been a barley field, a feathered, husk-green carpet panting and bulging with hot air. The occasional explosion of a startled rabbit. And the strange sense of expectation that had hovered over the village that day, the boiling stillness, the littered secrets.

Unbidden, my memory fast-forwarded a few more minutes to the moment I actually met Eddie – a straightforward, friendly man with warm eyes and an open face, holding court with an escaped sheep – and misery and confusion tangled like weeds over everything else.

'You can tell me I'm in denial,' I said to the silent car. 'But it wasn't a fling. It was . . . it was everything. We both knew. That's why I'm sure something's happened to him.'

The idea made my breath stick to the inside of my throat.

'Say something,' Jo said to Tommy. 'Say something to her.'

'I work in sports consultancy,' he muttered. Embarrassment bloomed on his neck. 'I do bodies, not heads.'

'Who does heads?' Rudi asked. He was still keeping close tabs on our conversation.

'Therapists do heads,' Jo said wearily. 'Therapists and me.'

*Ferapists.* She pronounced it *ferapists*. Jo was born and bred in Bow, was a proper, salt-of-the-earth cockney. And I loved her; I loved her bluntness and mercurial temper, I loved her fearlessness (lack of boundaries, others might say), and most of all I loved the tremendous fury with which she adored her son. I loved everything about Jo, but I would still have preferred not to be in a car with her today.

Rudi asked me if we were nearly there yet. I told him yes.

‘Is that your school?’ he asked, pointing at an industrial estate.

‘No, although there are some architectural similarities.’

‘Is *that* your school?’

‘No. That’s Waitrose.’

‘How long till we get there?’

‘Not long.’

‘How many minutes?’

‘About twenty?’

Rudi slumped back into his seat in self-conscious despair. ‘That’s *ages*,’ he muttered. ‘Mum, I need some new games. Can I have some new games?’

Jo said he could not, and Rudi set about buying some anyway. I watched in awe as he matter-of-factly typed in Jo’s Apple ID and password.

‘Er, excuse me,’ I whispered. He looked up at me, his little blond Afro an unlikely halo, his almond-shaped eyes cart-wheeling with mischief. He mimed a zip being shut across his mouth and then pointed a warning finger at me. And because I loved this child far more than I wanted to, I did what I was told.

His mother turned her attention to the other child on the back seat. ‘Now look,’ she said, putting a plump hand on my leg. Her nails had been painted in a colour called Rubble for today. ‘I think you have to face facts. You met a bloke; you spent a week with him; then he went on holiday and never called you again.’

The facts were too painful at the moment; I preferred theories.

‘Fifteen days he’s had to get in touch, Sarah. You’ve been sending him messages, calling him, all sorts of other things that quite frankly I’d never expect of someone like you . . . and yet – no response. I’ve been there, love, and it hurts. But



it doesn't stop hurting until you accept the truth and move on.'

'I'd move on if I actually knew that he simply wasn't interested. But I don't.'

Jo sighed. 'Tommy. Please help me out here.'

There was a long pause. Was there any humiliation greater than this? I wondered. A conversation like this, at the age of nearly bloody *forty*? This time three weeks ago I'd been a functional adult. I'd chaired a board meeting. I'd written a report for a children's hospital with which my charity was soon to start working. I'd fed and groomed myself that day, made jokes, fielded calls, responded to emails. And now here I was with less command of my emotions than the seven-year-old sitting next to me.

I checked Tommy's eyebrows in the rear-view mirror to see if he was likely to throw anything in. His eyebrows, which had taken on a life of their own when he'd lost his hair in his early twenties, were nowadays more reliable barometers of his thoughts than his mouth.

They were creased together. 'The thing is,' he said. He paused again, and I sensed the effort it was taking to extract himself from his own problems. 'The thing is, Jo, you've assumed I agree with you about Sarah. But I'm not sure I do.' His voice was soft and careful, like a cat skirting danger.

'What?'

'I predict a riot,' Rudi whispered.

Tommy's eyebrows worked up his next sentence. 'I'm sure the reason most men don't call is that they're just not interested, but it sounds to me like there might be more to this. I mean, they ended up spending a week together. All that time, can you imagine? If Eddie was just after you-know-what, he'd have disappeared after one night.'

Jo snorted. 'Why leave after one night if you can pack in seven days' you-know-what?'

'Jo, come on! That's what twenty-year-old boys do, not men of nearly forty!'

'Are you talking about sex?' Rudi asked.

'Er, no?' Jo was thrown. 'What do you know about sex?'

Rudi, terrified, returned to his fraudulent iPad activity.

Jo watched him for a while, but he was bent studiously over the screen, muttering in his Russian voice.

I took a long breath. 'The one thing I keep thinking about is that he offered to cancel his holiday. Why would he—'

'I need to wee,' Rudi announced suddenly. 'I think I've got less than a minute,' he added, before Jo had time to ask.

We pulled up outside the agricultural college, right across the road from the comprehensive Eddie had gone to. A grey mist of pain hovered as I stared at its sign, trying to imagine a twelve-year-old Eddie bouncing through the gates. A round little face; the smile that would crease his skin into laughter lines as the years passed.

*Just passing your school*, I texted him, before I had time to stop myself. *I wish I knew what happened to you.*

Jo was suspiciously upbeat when she and Rudi got back in the car. She said it was turning into a lovely day and that she was very happy to be out in the countryside with us all.

'I told her she was being mean to you,' Rudi whispered to me. 'Do you want a piece of cheese?' He patted a Tupperware of rejected cheese slices from the sandwiches Jo had given him earlier.

I ruffled his hair. 'No,' I whispered back. 'But I love you. Thank you.'

Jo pretended not to have heard the exchange. 'You were saying that Eddie offered to cancel his holiday,' she said brightly.

And I felt the fissures of my heart open wider, because, of course, I knew why she was finding it so hard to be patient. I knew that of the many men to whom Jo had given her heart and soul (and, often, her body) in the years before Rudi, almost none had called her. And the ones who had called always turned out to have a collection of other women on the go. And each and every time she had let them string her along, because she could never quite give up the hope of being loved. Then Shawn O’Keefe had arrived on the scene, and Jo had got pregnant, and Shawn had moved in, knowing Jo would feed and house him. He hadn’t had one single job in all that time. He’d disappear for whole nights without telling her where he was. His ‘job interview’ today was pure fiction.

But Jo had been allowing this for seven years, because she somehow convinced herself that love would blossom if she and Shawn worked just a little harder, if she waited just a little longer for him to grow up. She’d convinced herself they could become the family she’d never had.

Yes, Jo knew all about denial.

But my own situation seemed to be too much for her. She’d tried to humour me since Eddie had disappeared off the face of the earth, forced herself to listen to my theories, told me he might just call tomorrow. But she hadn’t believed a word of it, and now she’d cracked. *Don’t allow yourself to be used the way I have*, she was saying. *Walk away now, Sarah, while you still can.*

The problem was, I couldn’t.

I had tried out the idea of Eddie simply not being interested. Each and every one of the fifteen days my phone had remained silent. I’d combed through every glowing, lambent moment of my time with him, searching for cracks, tiny

warning signs that he might not have been as certain as I was, and I'd found nothing.

I barely used Facebook these days, but suddenly I was on it, all of the time, scouring his profile for signs of life. Or, worse – someone else.

Nothing.

I phoned and messaged him; I even sent him a pathetic little tweet. I downloaded Messenger and WhatsApp and checked throughout the day to see if he'd surfaced. But they told me the same thing every time: Eddie David had last been seen online just over two weeks ago, the day I left his house so he could pack for Spain.

Flattened by both shame and desperation, I'd even downloaded a bunch of dating apps to find out if he was registered.

He wasn't.

I craved control over this uncontrollable situation. I couldn't sleep; the thought of food made my insides convulse. I couldn't concentrate on anything and I jumped on my phone with the frenzy of a starving animal when it buzzed. Exhaustion pressed at me throughout the day – great fibrous wads of it; a suffocation, at times – and yet I spent most of the night wide awake, staring into the pitchy darkness of Tommy's spare room in West London.

The strange thing was, I *knew* this wasn't me. I knew it wasn't sane behaviour, and I knew it was getting worse, not better, but I had neither the will nor the energy to stage an intervention on myself.

*Why didn't he call?* I typed into Google one day. The response was like an online hurricane. For the sake of any remaining sanity, I had shut down the page.

Instead, I'd googled Eddie, again, had gone through his carpentry website, looking for . . . By that point I didn't even

know what I was looking for. And of course I hadn't found a thing.

'Do you think he told you everything about himself?' Tommy asked. 'Are you certain he isn't with another woman, for example?'

The road dipped down into a little bowl of parkland, in which stately oaks had gathered like gentlemen in a smoking lounge.

'He's not with another woman,' I said.

'How do you know?'

'I know because . . . I know. He was single; he was available. Not just literally, emotionally.'

The flash of a deer vanishing into a beech wood.

'OK. But what about all the other warning signs?' Tommy persisted. 'Were there any inconsistencies? Did you sense he was holding anything back?'

'No.' I paused. 'Although, I suppose . . .'

Jo turned round. 'What?'

I sighed. 'The day we met, he cancelled a few incoming calls. But that was the only time it happened,' I added quickly. 'From then on he answered every time his phone rang. And he didn't have anyone strange calling him, either; it was all friends, his mum, business queries . . .' *And Derek*, I thought suddenly. I had never quite got to the bottom of who Derek was.

Tommy's eyebrows were engaged in some complicated triangulation.

'What?' I asked him. 'What are you thinking? It was just the first day, Tommy. After that he picked up when anyone rang.'

'I believe you. It's more that . . .' He trailed off.

Jo was noisily silent, but I ignored her.

'It's more that I've just always thought Internet dating to

be risky,' Tommy said eventually. 'I know you didn't meet him online, but it's a similar situation – you have no friends in common and no shared history. He could have recast himself as almost anyone.'

I frowned. 'But he made friends with me on Facebook. Why would he do that if he had anything to hide? He's on Twitter and Instagram for his work, and he's got a business website. Which includes a photo of him. And I stayed at his house for a week, remember? His post was addressed to Eddie David. If he wasn't Eddie David, cabinetmaker, I'd know.'

We were now deep in the old woods that spread across Cirencester Park. Pennies of light flashed across Jo's bare thighs as she gazed out of the window, apparently at a loss. Before long we'd emerge from the woods, and soon after that we'd reach the bend in the road where the accident had happened.

At that thought, I felt my breathing change, as if someone had thinned out the car's oxygen.

A few minutes later we emerged into the post-rain brightness of country fields. I closed my eyes, still unable, after all these years, to look at the grass verge where they said the ambulance crew had laid her out, tried to stop the inevitable.

Jo's hand found its way to my knee.

'Why are you doing that?' Rudi's antenna was up. 'Mum? Why is your hand on Sarah's leg? Why are there flowers tied to that tree? Why is everyone being—'

'Rudi,' Jo said. 'Rudi, what about I spy? I spy with my little eye something beginning with "W"!'

There was a pause. 'I'm too old for that,' Rudi said humpily. He didn't like being kept out.

My eyes were still pressed shut, even though I knew we'd passed the spot.

‘A whale,’ Rudi began reluctantly. ‘A watering can. A wobile phone.’

‘OK, Harrington?’ Tommy asked, after a respectful pause.

‘Yes.’ I opened my eyes. Wheat fields, tottering dry-stone walls, footpaths like lightning forks across horse-cropped grass. ‘Fine.’

It never got any easier. Nineteen years had sanded down its edges, planed over the worst of the knots, but it was still there.

‘How’s about we discuss Eddie some more?’ Jo suggested. I tried to say yes, but my voice trailed off. ‘In your own time,’ she said, patting my leg.

‘Well, I do keep wondering if he’s had an accident,’ I said, when speech felt possible. ‘He was off to southern Spain to windsurf.’

Tommy’s eyebrows considered this. ‘I suppose that’s a reasonable theory.’

Jo pointed out that I was friends with Eddie on Facebook. ‘She’d have seen something on his page if he’d got hurt.’

‘We shouldn’t underestimate his phone having died, though,’ I said. My voice wilted as each avenue of hope shut down. ‘It was a mess. He—’

‘Babe,’ Jo cut in gently. ‘Babe, his phone isn’t dead. It *rings* when you call him.’

I nodded miserably.

Rudi, eating crisps, kicked the back of Jo’s seat. ‘Borrrrrrrred.’

‘Stop it,’ she said. ‘And remember what we agreed about speaking with your mouth full.’

Rudi, unseen to Jo, turned towards me and offered me a view of his half-masticated crisps. Unfortunately, and for reasons unclear, he had decided that this was an in-joke between us.

I slid my hand into the side pocket of my bag, closing my fingers around the last piece of hope I had. ‘But Mouse,’ I said pathetically. Tears were hot and close. ‘He gave me Mouse.’

I cupped her in the palm of my hand; smooth, worn, smaller than a walnut. Eddie had carved her from a piece of wood when he was just nine years old. *She’s been with me through a lot*, he’d said. *She’s my taliswoman*.

She reminded me of the brass penguin Dad had given me as a desk-mate during my GCSE exams. It was a stern-looking thing that had scowled ferociously at me from the moment I’d opened each paper. Even now, I loved that penguin. I couldn’t imagine trusting anyone with it.

Mouse meant the same to Eddie; I knew it – and yet he had given her to me. *Keep her safe until I get back*, he’d said. *She means a lot to me*.

Jo glanced back and sighed. She already knew about Mouse. ‘People change their minds,’ she said quietly. ‘It might just have been easier for him to lose the key ring than to get in touch.’

‘She’s not just a key ring. She . . .’ I gave up.

When Jo resumed, her voice was gentler. ‘Look, Sarah. If you’re certain something bad has happened to him, how’s about you scrap all these private communications and write something on his Facebook wall? Where everyone can see it? Say that you’re worried. Ask if anyone’s heard from him.’

I swallowed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean exactly what I just said. Appeal to his friends for information. What’s stopping you?’

I turned to look out of the window, unable to reply.

Jo pressed on. ‘I think the only thing that *would* stop you is shame. And if you really, truly, honestly believed



something terrible had happened to him, you wouldn't give a rat's about shame.'

We were passing the old MOD airfield. A faded orange wind sock frilled over the empty runway and I suddenly remembered Hannah's great hoots of laughter when Dad once observed that it was like a big orange willy. 'Willy sock!' she'd yelled, and Mum had been torn between helpless laughter and reproach.

Rudi opened Jo's music library on the iPad and selected a playlist called 'East Coast rap'.

If I was as worried as I said, why *hadn't* I written something on Eddie's wall? Was Jo actually right?

The Cotswold-stone cottages of Chalford were sliding into view, clinging determinedly to their hillside as if awaiting rescue. Chalford would give way to Brimscombe, which would turn into Thrupp and then Stroud. And in Stroud a large committee of teachers, pupils and press were waiting for Tommy at our old school. I had to pull myself together.

'Hang on,' Tommy said suddenly. He turned down Rudi's rap and looked at me in the rear-view mirror. 'Harrington, did you tell Eddie you were married?'

'No.'

His eyebrows had become quite wild. 'I thought you said you told him everything!'

'I did! But we didn't go through our roster of exes. That would have been . . . well, tacky. I mean, we're both nearly forty . . .' I trailed off. Should we have done? 'We were meant to tell each other our life stories, but we never got round to it. Although we did establish that we were both single.'

Tommy was watching me through the rear-view mirror. 'But have you and Reuben updated your website?'

I frowned, wondering what he could be getting at.

Then: ‘Oh *no*,’ I whispered. Freezing fingers brushed my abdomen.

‘What?’ Rudi shouted. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Sarah’s charity’s website,’ Jo told him. ‘There’s a whole page about Sarah and Reuben, about how they started the Clowndoctor charity in the nineties when they got married. And how they still run it together today.’

‘Oh!’ said Rudi. He put the iPad down, delighted at last to have been able to solve the mystery. ‘Sarah’s boyfriend read it and his heart got broken! That’s why he’s dead, because you can’t be alive if your heart doesn’t work.’

But: ‘I’m sorry – I don’t buy it,’ Jo said quietly. ‘If he spent a week with you, Sarah, if he was as serious about you as you are about him, that wouldn’t be enough to put him off. He’d confront you. He wouldn’t just slink off like a dying cat.’

But I was already on that confounded Messenger app, writing to him.