

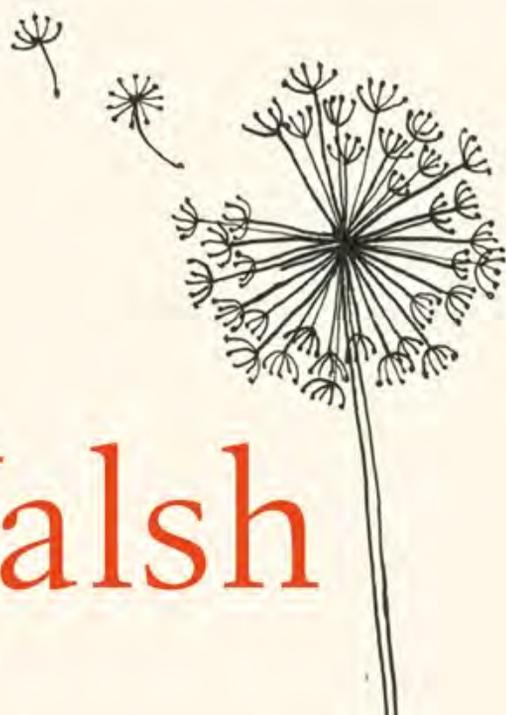
Seven perfect days.  
Then he disappeared . . .

the man

'I absolutely  
loved this book'  
Liane Moriarty

who  
didn't  
call

Rosie Walsh



## 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*.