

How to Find Love in a Bookshop

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"Absolutely delightful." -People

The enchanting story of a bookshop, its grieving owner, a supportive literary community, and the extraordinary power of books to heal the heart

Nightingale Books, nestled on the main street in an idyllic little village, is a dream come true for book lovers—a cozy haven and welcoming getaway for the literary-minded locals. But owner Emilia Nightingale is struggling to keep the shop open after her beloved father's death, and the temptation to sell is getting stronger. The property developers are circling, yet Emilia's loyal customers have become like family, and she can't imagine breaking the promise she made to her father to keep the store alive.

There's Sarah, owner of the stately Peasebrook Manor, who has used the bookshop as an escape in the past few years, but it now seems there's a very specific reason for all those frequent visits. Next is roguish Jackson, who, after making a complete mess of his marriage, now looks to Emilia for advice on books for the son he misses so much. And the forever shy Thomasina, who runs a pop-up restaurant for two in her tiny cottage—she has a crush on a man she met in the cookbook section, but can hardly dream of working up the courage to admit her true feelings.

Enter the world of Nightingale Books for a serving of romance, long-held secrets, and unexpected hopes for the future—and not just within the pages on the shelves. *How to Find Love in a Bookshop* is the delightful story of Emilia, the unforgettable cast of customers whose lives she has touched, and the books they all cherish.

Veronica Henry worked as a scriptwriter before turning to fiction. A winner of the Romantic Novelists' Association's Romantic Novel of the Year Award, Henry lives with her family in a village in North Devon, England.

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Prologue

February 1983

He would never have believed it if you'd told him a year ago. That he'd be standing in an empty shop with a baby in a pram, seriously considering putting in an offer.

The pram had been a stroke of luck. He'd seen an advert for a garden sale in a posh part of North Oxford, and the bargain hunter in him couldn't stay away. The couple had two very young children but were moving to Paris. The pram was pristine, of the kind the queen might have pushed—or, rather, her nanny. The woman had wanted only five pounds for it. Julius was sure it was worth far more, and that she was only being kind. But if recent events

had taught him one thing, it was to accept kindness. With alacrity, before people changed their minds. So he bought it and scrubbed it out carefully even though it had seemed very clean already, and bought a fresh mattress and blankets, and there he had it: the perfect nest for his precious cargo, until she could walk.

When did babies start to walk? There was no point in asking Debra-his vague, away-with-the-fairies mother, ensconced in her patchouli-soaked basement flat in Westbourne Grove, whose memory of his own childhood was blurry.

According to Debra, Julius was reading by the age of two, a legend he didn't quite believe. Although maybe it was true, because he couldn't remember a time he couldn't read. It was like breathing to him. Nevertheless, he couldn't and didn't rely on his mother for child-rearing advice. He often thought it was a miracle he had made it through childhood unscathed. She used to leave him alone, in his cot, while she went to the wine bar on the corner in the evenings. "What could go wrong?" she asked him. "I only left you for an hour." Perhaps that explained his protectiveness toward his own daughter. He found it hard to turn his back on her for even a moment.

He looked around the bare walls again. The smell of damp was inescapable, and damp would be a disaster. The staircase rising to the mezzanine was rotten, so rotten he wasn't allowed up it. The two bay windows on either side of the front door flooded the shop with a pearlescent light, highlighting the golden oak of the floorboards and the ornate plasterwork on the ceiling. The dust made it feel otherworldly: a ghost shop, waiting, waiting for something to happen, a transformation, a renovation, a renaissance.

"It was a pharmacy, originally," said the agent. "And then an antiques shop. Well, I say antique-you've never seen so much rubbish in your life."

He should get some professional advice, really. A structural survey, a quote from someone for any work needed-yet Julius felt light-headed and his heart was pounding. It was right. He knew it was. The two floors above were ideal for him and the baby to live in. Over the shop.

The bookshop.

His search had begun three weeks earlier, when he had decided that he needed to take positive action if he and his daughter were going to have any semblance of a normal life together. He had looked at his experience, his potential, his assets, and the practicalities of being a single father, and decided there was really only one option open to him.

He'd gone to the library, put a copy of the Yellow Pages on the table, and next to it a detailed map of the county. He drew a circle around Oxford with a fifteen-mile radius, wondering what it would be like to live in Christmas Common, or Ducklington, or Goosey: they sounded straight out of Beatrix Potter. Then he worked through all the bookshops listed and put a cross through the towns they were in.

He looked at the remaining towns, the ones without a bookshop at all. There were half a dozen. He made a list, and then over the next few days visited each one, traveling by a complicated timetable of buses. The first three had been soulless and dreary, and he was so discouraged he'd almost given up on his idea, but something about the name Peasebrook pleased him, so he decided to try one more town before relinquishing his fantasy.

Peasebrook was in the middle of the Cotswolds, on the outer perimeter of the circle he had drawn, as far out as he wanted to go. He got off the bus and looked up the high street. It was wide and tree lined, its pavements flanked with higgledy-piggledy golden buildings. There were antiques shops, a traditional butcher with rabbit and pheasant hanging outside and fat sausages in the window, a sprawling inn and a couple of nice caf s and a cheese shop. The Women's Institute was having a sale outside the town hall: there were trestle tables bearing big cakes oozing jam, and baskets of mud-covered vegetables and pots of herbaceous flowers drooping dark purple and yellow blooms.

Peasebrook was buzzing, in a quiet way but with purpose, like bees on a summer afternoon. People stopped in the street and talked to each other. The caf s looked pleasingly full. The tills seemed to jangle: people were shopping with gusto and enthusiasm. There was a very smart restaurant with a bay tree outside the door and an impressive menu in a glass case boasting nouvelle cuisine. There was even a tiny theater showing *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Somehow that boded well. Julius loved Oscar Wilde. He'd done one of his dissertations on him: "The Influence of Oscar Wilde on W. B. Yeats."

He took the play as a good omen, but he carried on scouring the streets, in case his research hadn't been thorough. He feared turning a corner and finding what he hoped wasn't there. Now that he was here, in Peasebrook, he wanted it to be his home-their home. It was a mystery, though, why there was no bookshop in such an appealing place.

After all, a town without a bookshop was a town without a heart.

Julius imagined each person he passed as a potential customer. He could picture them all, crowding in, asking his advice, him sliding their purchases into a bag, getting to know their likes and dislikes, putting a book aside for a particular customer, knowing it would be just up their alley. Watching them browse, watching the joy of them discovering a new author, a new world.

"Would the vendor take a cheeky offer?" he asked the estate agent, who shrugged.

"You can ask."

"It needs a lot of work."

"That has been taken into consideration." Julius named his price.

"It's my best and only offer. I can't afford any more."

When Julius signed the contract four weeks later, he couldn't help but be amazed. Here he was, alone in the world (well, there was his mother, but she was as much use as a chocolate teapot) but for a baby and a bookshop. And as that very baby reached out her starfish hand, he gave her his finger to hold and thought: what an extraordinary position to be in. Fate was peculiar indeed.

What if he hadn't looked up at that very moment, nearly two years ago now? What if he had kept his back to the door and carried on rearranging the travel section, leaving his colleague to serve the girl with the Rossetti hair . . .

And six months later, after weeks of dust and grime and sawing and sweeping and painting, and several eye-watering bills, and a few moments of sheer panic, and any number of deliveries, the sign outside the shop was rehung, painted in navy and gold, proclaiming Nightingale Books. There had been no room to write purveyors of reading matter to the discerning, but that was what he was. A bookseller.

A bookseller of the very best kind.

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Thirty-two years later . . .

What do you do, while you're waiting for someone to die? Literally, sitting next to them in a plastic armchair that isn't the right shape for anyone's bottom, waiting for them to draw their last breath because there is no more hope.

Nothing seemed appropriate. There was a room down the corridor for watching TV, but that seemed callous, and anyway, Emilia wasn't really a TV person.

She didn't knit, or do needlepoint. Or sudoku.

She didn't want to listen to music, for fear of disturbing him. Even the best earphones leak a certain timpani. Irritating on a train, probably even more so on your deathbed. She didn't want to surf the Internet on her phone. That seemed the ultimate in twenty-first-century rudeness.

And there wasn't a single book on the planet that could hold her attention right now.

So she sat next to his bed and dozed. And every now and then she started awake with a bolt of fear, in case she might have missed the moment. Then she would hold his hand for a few minutes. It was dry and cool and lay motionless in her clasp. Eventually it grew heavy and made her sad, so she laid it back on the top of the sheet.

Then she would doze off again.

From time to time the nurses brought her hot chocolate, although that was a misnomer. It was not hot, but tepid, and Emilia was fairly certain that no cocoa beans had been harmed in the making of it. It was pale beige, faintly sweet water.

The nighttime lights in the cottage hospital were dim, with a sickly yellowish tinge. The heating was on too high and the little room felt airless. She looked at the thin bedcover, with its pattern of orange and yellow flowers, and the outline of her father underneath, so still and small. She could see the few strands of hair curling over his scalp, leached of color. His thick hair had been one of his distinguishing features. He would rake his fingers through it while he was considering a recommendation, or when he was standing in front of one of the display tables trying to decide what to put on it, or when he was on the phone to a customer. It was as much a part of him as the pale blue cashmere scarf he insisted on wearing, wrapped twice round his neck, even though it bore evidence of moths. Emilia had dealt with them swiftly at the first sign. She suspected they had been brought in via the thick brown velvet coat she had bought at the charity shop last winter—she could never resist a vintage bargain— and she felt guilty they'd set upon the one sartorial item her father seemed attached to.

He'd been complaining then, of discomfort. Well, not complaining, because he wasn't one to moan. Emilia had expressed concern, and he had dismissed her concern with his trademark stoicism, and she had thought nothing more of it, just got on the plane to Hong Kong. Until the phone call, last week, calling her back.

"I think you ought to come home," the nurse had said. "Your father will be furious with me for calling you. He doesn't want to alarm you. But . . ." The but said it all. Emilia was on the first flight out. And when she arrived Julius pretended to be cross, but the way he held her hand, tighter than tight, told her everything she needed to know.

"He's in denial," said the nurse. "He's a fighter, all right. I'm so sorry. We're doing everything we can to keep him comfortable." Emilia nodded, finally understanding. Comfortable. Not alive.

Comfortable.

He didn't seem to be in any pain or discomfort now. He had eaten some lime Jell-O the day before, eager for the quivering spoons of green. Emilia imagined it soothed his parched lips and dry tongue. She felt as if she was feeding a little bird as he stretched his neck to reach the spoon and opened his mouth. Afterward he lay back, exhausted by the effort. It was all he had eaten for days. All he was living on was a complicated cocktail of painkillers and sedatives that were rotated to provide the best palliative care. Emilia had come to hate the word palliative. It was ominous, and at times, she suspected, ineffectual. From time to time her father had shown distress, whether from pain or the knowledge of what was to come she couldn't be sure but she knew at those points the medication wasn't doing its job. Adjustment, although swiftly administered, never worked quickly enough. Which in turn caused her distress.

It was a never-ending cycle.

Yet not never-ending because it would end. The corner had been turned and there was no point in hoping for a recovery. Even the most optimistic believer in miracles would know that now. So there was nothing to do but pray for a swift and merciful release.

The nurse lifted the bedcover and looked at his feet, caressing them with gentle fingers. The look the nurse gave Emilia told her it wouldn't be long now.

His skin was pale gray, the pale gray of a marble statue.

The nurse dropped the sheet back down and rubbed Emilia's shoulder.

Then she left, for there was nothing she could say. It was a waiting game. They had done all they could. No pain, as far as anyone could surmise. A calm, quiet environment, for incipient death was treated with hushed reverence. But who was to say what the dying really wanted? Maybe he would prefer his beloved Elgar at full blast, or the shipping forecast on repeat? Or to hear the nurses gossiping and bantering, about whom they'd been out with the night before and what they were cooking for tea? Maybe a distraction from your imminent demise by utter trivia would be a welcome one? Emilia sat and wondered how she could make him feel her love, as he slipped away. If she could take out her heart and give it to him, she would. This wonderful man who had given her life, and been her life, and was leaving her alone.

She'd whispered to him, memories and reminiscences. She told him stories. Recited his favorite poems.

Talked to him about the shop.

"I'm going to look after it for you," she told him. "I'll make sure it never closes its doors. Not in my lifetime. And I'm never going to sell out to Ian Mendip, no matter what he offers, because the shop is all that matters. All the diamonds in the world are nothing in comparison. Books are more precious than jewels." She truly believed this. What did a diamond bring you? A momentary flash of brilliance. A diamond scintillated for a second; a book could scintillate forever.

She doubted Ian Mendip had ever read a book in his life. It made her so angry, thinking about the stress he'd put her father under at a vulnerable time.

Julius had tried to underplay it, but she could see he was agitated, fearful for the shop and his staff and his customers. The staff had told her how unsettled he had been by it, and yet again she had cursed herself for being so far away. Now she was determined to reassure him, so he could slip away, safe in the knowledge that Nightingale Books was in good hands.

She shifted on the seat to find a more comfortable position. She ended up leaning forward and resting her head in her arms at the foot of the bed. She was unbelievably tired.

It was 2:49 in the morning when the nurse touched her on the shoulder. Her touch said everything that needed to be said. Emilia wasn't sure if she had been asleep or awake. Even now s...

Other Books

The Bookshop on Primrose Hill, 'If you are a lover of books, handwritten letters, literature, quaint bookshops, vintage, and the charm of London, this magical treasure is a must-read' Judy, Goodreads reviewer 'An emotional, vibrant love letter to bookstores, moms/daughters and second acts' Kari-Ann, Goodreads reviewer *** Valentina Baker was only eleven years old when her mother, Eloise, suddenly fled to London, leaving Val and her father on their own in California. Now a librarian in her thirties, Val is fresh out of a failed marriage and utterly disenchanted with life. One day, Val receives word that Eloise has died, leaving Val the deed to both her mother's Primrose Hill apartment and the bookshop she opened twenty years ago. As Val jets across the Atlantic, she wonders - could this be her chance at a new beginning? In London, Val finds herself falling in love with the pastel-coloured flat and the cosy, treasure-filled bookshop. When she stumbles across a series of intriguing notes left in a beloved old novel, it's the start of a scavenger hunt that will take her all over London and back in time... but most of all, bring her closer to the mother she lost twice. Bittersweet and uplifting, The Bookshop on Primrose Hill will steal your heart. Perfect for fans of The Bookish Life of Nina Hill and How to Find Love in a Bookshop. Published in the US as With Love from London.

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