

A MODERN FAIRY TALE
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TWO YOUNG ENGINEERS ARE SITTING IN FRONT OF A BATTERY OF SCREENS. IT IS THE END OF THEIR WORKING DAY AND THEY ARE BEGINNING TO FIDGET. THE FIRST ENGINEER IS SPINNING ON HIS OFFICE CHAIR WHILE THE SECOND IS SLOWLY SHREDDING HIS PAPER COFFEE CUP.

'Right, any plans for the hols?'

'Not really... the missus quite fancies going skiing somewhere, but I keep telling her it's too early; there won't be any snow. She's got her heart set on the Italian Alps.'

'Oh, so Italy, is it? Well let's have a look. Where are you going to fly into?'

'I was looking at flights to Bergamo; dead cheap they are at this time of the year.'

'Well, let's see if there's any snow, so you can take your lovely lady skiing.'

THE TWO ENGINEERS MOVE IN CLOSER TO ONE OF THE SCREENS, AND START FIDDLING AROUND WITH THE CONTROLS.

'There you go! There is snow, but heaven knows how you get up to it. I reckon you're right: still too early. How about finding a nice cosy retreat somewhere? Just for the pair of you, to get away from it all...'

'Stop there! Now, zoom in... well, that little place looks just about perfect. What's the name? Monte Lento... Which means?'

'Must admit, it's the type of place I wouldn't mind going to myself; do a bit of serious hiking. The position's a dream: 800 metres high, pretty little centre, and nice wide valley with some very impressive mountains all around. And, look... perfect! There's a track, lane, whatever... you with me?'

'Yep... winding up the side of the mountain and... wow! They've got their own personal lake tucked away up there. Now that, my friend, is to be seen! Can you imagine the views from up there? Unbelievable.'

'Well, it would be perfect, but I have a sneaky feeling that once you're there, you're stuck. Can't see any hotels or whatnots. Can you? Just seems to be the odd crumbling hovel'

'Shame! I'd taken quite a fancy to it... Yes, very beautiful: indeed stunning. But I reckon it'll be Sharm el-Sheikh like last year. What was the name of the town again?'

'Monte Lento.'

POPPY

POPPY IS IN THE FRONT OF A TAXI THAT IS CLIMBING THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO MONTE LENTO. THE TAXI DRIVER IS LOOKING GRIM, BECAUSE, ALTHOUGH NOT PARTICULARLY STEEP, THE NARROW ROAD SEEMS TO GO ON FOR EVER. MONTE LENTO REALLY DOES LIVE UP TO ITS NAME: SLOW CLIMB.

Now, Poppy Summers. Right side of the road! Remember! Because you're going to be driving around here: very, very soon.

How exciting!

Isn't it beautiful? The more we climb, the better it gets. I'd forgotten how wonderful it all is.

Monte lento, have you missed me? I sure have ...

Uhh, perhaps I should be making more of an effort to talk to him.

POPPY TAKES A QUICK GLANCE AT THE MAN DRIVING BESIDE HER.

He does look terribly stern though...

Oh! Aren't they amazing? Like confetti fluttering to the ground. I think, Autumn is definitely my favourite season here. No doubt about it. I mean the colours. Oh my God, the colours!

Couldn't have arrived at a better time, could I?

THE TAXI DRIVER GIVES A DISAPPROVING GRUNT AS THE ROAD GETS STEEPER.

And the woods! I would love to go for a walk in them right now.

Tomorrow, I'll start one side and then cross over onto the other. It really is all so terribly pretty.

THE DRIVER NOW EMITS AN EXTREMELY COLOURFUL SWEAR WORD REFERING TO TESTICALS AS A CAR COMES HURLING TOWARDS THEM FROM THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION.

Now, how can they? Race down the road at that speed? Hairy!

Locals, I bet. Well, of course... there's only locals up here.

Less trees now. Last bend. Nearly there Nonna!

I'm home. Oh wow! That's a strange thought, but it really does feel like home.

New job!

New life!

Oh! Here we are! The first stone wall. The first house. The first lane leading who-knows-where... up into the mountains. Can't wait to explore... everywhere.

How can anyone tear themselves away from all of this?

And I'm here!

Just me!

It's all about just me for once.

'You've got to turn here. Devi girare qui'

POPPY GRINS, SHE CAN'T HELP HERSELF.

He's going to hate Nonna's bumpy lane...

MATILDA

MATILDA HAS OPENED THE KITCHEN WINDOW WIDE. SHE DOESN'T WANT TO BE SEEN ON THE FRONT PORCH FRETTING AND WAITING, BUT CAN HEAR THE APPROACHING TAXI NICELY. SHE LIVES IN A VERY PRETTY STONE HOUSE WHICH HAS SOME VERY "AUDACIOUS" – OR THAT'S WHAT THE LOCALS THINK - LAVANDER SHUTTERS.

THE TAXI DRAWS UP AT THE GARDEN GATE AND MATILDA MOVES BACK INTO THE SHADOWS TO TAKE A GOOD LOOK.

Ahhh! Here she comes... up the garden path, trailing that absurdly big suitcase on wheels behind her.

Let me take a good look at her before going to open the front door. Now, isn't she adorable? She might be the smallest, but my God, has she got some "peppe" in her. She's tried to tie her hair up, wild and dark brown like mine, or was, that is. It'll all fall down! There you go, up with the dark glasses to see the uneven paving stones better. And yes, my eyes as well, dark chocolate Reginald used to say. Well, hers are sparkling and alive, mine have squinted up over the years... only to be expected.

Now stop ruminating, you silly old woman, and go and open the front door for her.

'Ciao, Nonna.'

'Darling! Poppy!'

Why her mother had to give them all flowers as names, heaven knows! Although stick a red hat on her and the name could possibly suit... unlike her sisters'

'Come in – leave your suitcase at the bottom of the stairs. My goodness it's enormous! And more to come, is there?'

The house already feels smaller, oh lawdy!

'Come into the kitchen, I've made some tiramisu.'

'Oh, Nonna... how lovely!'

'Now sit down – give me your coat and your scarf. Would you like tea or coffee? Sweetie... do you want to let your parents know you're here safely?'

Stop fussing, you stupid woman! If there's one thing I'm not, it's a fusser. She must be exhausted after the flight and then the drive up...

POPPY DOESN'T LOOK TIRED, AND SHE IS HAPPILY LOOKING AROUND HER.

'This is so strange, Nonna! I mean, actually coming to live here! Now I promise Nonna, I'm going to get out of your hair as quickly as I possibly can.'

'Sweetie, you don't have to...'

'Of course I do, Nonna, otherwise we'll be at each other's throats in the space of no time... the tiramisu is amazing!'

MATILDA NODS SMUGLY.

'None of your bought rubbish here. And you, my girl, could do with a bit of fattening up. Far too thin for my liking, although that's what everyone seems to want these days...'

I just hope, she's not going to get infinitely bored with it all, and then chuck it in and head back home ...

'Now, Nonna...'

Look at her staring at me, with that steady, unflinching gaze which is both hers and mine. It really is most unnerving; it's like looking in a mirror.

'Are you listening to me?'

'Sorry, Darling... you've got mascarpone on your nose. Here, let me give it a wipe. What were you saying?'

'How did you manage it, Nonna?'

'Ahhh! That! Not difficult. Nobody, but nobody, wants to be stuck up here.'

'And he's left me the car...'

'Well – car in the sense it's got four wheels and moves if you turn the key, but I wouldn't trust it to take you far.'

Nonna, it's a dream. I'm so excited!'

Well, let's hope that lasts.

'Although I didn't realise it would be quite so dark and chilly...'

POLLY PEERS OUT OF THE KITCHEN WINDOW AT THE FASTLY APPROACHING EVENING GLOOM.

'Of course not, you've never been late October. You know, you can always turn round and run, before you get in over your head.'

Let's see how she takes that... I'm still not sure she's really understood what she's in for. But no... those eyes are shining... all of her seems to have taken on a bit of a glow.

'Nonna, don't be silly! I'm not some moony teenager who's just drifted up to your front door. I know precisely what I'm in for and I can't wait.'

MATILDA

Best time of the day. I'll have to wake Poppy up soon, but let's enjoy a bit of quiet time.

Ha, ha! I've had a lot of that recently. Can't complain. I love the kitchen-cum-whatever at this time of the morning. It looks quite cosy; and I can't see the dust, that is, until the sun comes merrily shining in through the window.

If you'd told me twenty odd years ago: 'Matilda this is where you will be living.' I would have said: 'No way! Out in the middle of nowhere...' But surprise, surprise! It's where I've ended up and... don't I just love it!

I can still remember Reginald coming through the front door and saying: 'Matilda, I've found it! Our bolthole, for when you can leave somebody else in charge of the shop.'

He had been so thoroughly delighted by his find. A "bolthole". What in heaven's name was a "bolthole"?

Of course, he'd picked it up for a pittance. It was the 70s, and quaint (well, at the time quaintly dilapidated) cottages in the middle of the mountains were extremely unfashionable. Nobody could understand what we'd find to do "up there", in that, "God forsaken place."

Well, the first thing Reginald did, was to knock down the wall between here and the living room. And now look what a beautiful room it is!

I can still recall a couple of pregnant pauses when we were out with friends for dinner... 'but guys, let's be honest; there's nothing there...'

Reginald would mutter on the way back home... 'nothing there! There's everything there!'

Mountains for him were a continual wonder, but then of course, he'd been born and had grown up in the very flat county of Essex.

And what a trek to get up here!

By the time you unlocked the door, it was time to go back down again... haha!

Anyway enough. Time to wake Poppy up, otherwise she'll still be in bed when Giorgio arrives.

MATILDA STARTS (NIMBLY FOR HER AGE) CLIMBING THE STAIRS AFTER MOVING POPPY'S ABANDONED GYM SHOES TO ONE SIDE.

I love you Poppy, of course I do.

But the cottage is already feeling extremely tight!

Silly, old woman!

Don't fight it! Go with the flow and up we go...

SHE OPENS THE SPARE BEDROOM DOOR WIDER.

'Poppy... are you awake?'

POPPY GRUNTS.

'Time to get up, Treasure, otherwise Giorgio will be here and you're still in bed... coffee's on and you can finish the tiramisu.'

POPPY MAKES A LONG GROANING SOUND.

THE FRONT DOORBELL RINGS.

Oh cripes! Front door already. I'd forgotten how horribly early Giorgio can be – incredible! With work piling up; but he's always managed it...

'Coming, Giorgio!'

Don't fall down the stairs, silly woman. Just take it slowly. Giorgio can wait.

MATILDA GLANCES BRIEFLY INTO THE HALL MIRROR AND TRIES IN VAIN, TO SMOOTH DOWN HER SHORT, WHITE HAIR.

SHE OPENS THE DOOR WHERE AN ELDERLY AND DISTINGUISHED-LOOKING GENTLEMAN IS STANDING ON THE STONE PATIO. MATILDA HAS ALWAYS THOUGHT GIORGIO HAS SOMETHING OF THE FAMOUS ITALIAN ACTOR, VITTORIO GASSMAN.

'Morning Giorgio, nice and early...'

'Matilda.'

'Coffee's on, and Poppy will be down in a tick.'

Hopefully.

Goodness! Giorgio really is beginning to show his age, and can I detect the remains of a flaky brioche on his woolly? Poor man. He can't carry on, but on the other hand, I hope he's got lots up his sleeve to keep him busy.

'Now, don't just stand there! Come into the kitchen.'

GIORGIO HAS TO BEND DOWN TO GET THROUGH THE LOW FRONT DOOR.

MATILDA SMILES. IT WAS SOMETHING REGINALD ALWAYS HAD TO DO.

GIORGIO SITS DOWN AT THE OLD ROUND TABLE PLACED IN FRONT OF THE WINDOW.

'Here's your coffee. And can I interest you in some tiramisu?'

'Certainly Matilda, that would be wonderful.'

Always had a horribly, sweet tooth...

'Ahhh! And here she is! Poppy, Treasure. Coffee and cake coming up. Did you sleep well?'

Incredible how youngsters can drag themselves out of bed, and look presentable by the time they've come downstairs...

GIORGIO GALLANTLY STANDS, UPSETTING HIS COFFEE AS HE MOVES ROUND THE TABLE.

'Giorgio: Poppy. Poppy: Giorgio.'

I just hope it's going to be OK. Poppy can get so carried away by things. Still, it's what she, "desperately wanted." That's what she said on the phone: 'Nonna, it's what I've always dreamed about; moving over to Italy – I desperately want this job! I really do!'

And you've got it! Wasn't difficult. Nobody else wanted it. I mean; she thinks I had to pull a lot of strings and then sprinkle some magic on top. But the truth was; Giorgio just looked so relieved when I said Poppy was up for it.

Hang on... Giorgio is about to speak... a lot of clearing of throat. As if his vocal cords need warming up...

'Uhh Poppy, my dear... you do look awfully young.'

Sign of age, Giorgio.

'Of course, I'll be with you for the first few weeks, so that you get the hang of things – and the car, you know you'll be driving on the other side of the road?'

'Giorgio, of course I do! I've been driving Nonna's Panda since I passed my test.'

POPPY PEERS MORE INTENTLY AT GIORGIO.

'Do you know, Giorgio? You remind me of that famous Italian Actor... you know, Nonna, you must have seen that film of his, a million times.'

POPPY TAPS HER CHIN WHILE SHE'S THINKING.

'That's it: The Scent of a Woman... what's his name, Nonna?'

'You're thinking of Vittorio Gassman.'

Oh, goodness! Giorgio's actually blushing... how sweet. Oh, he's clearing his throat again...

'Well... I don't know about that, my dear.'

I think Poppy's going to do Giorgio the world of good: good start...

I am just so excited, and thank you so much, Giorgio, for helping me to find my feet. But I assure you, it can't be any more difficult than the six months I did in Emergency at Whipps Cross.'

Just you meet some of my friends... and then we'll see.

POPPY

POPPY IS IN A VERY ECHOEY OPEN LIVING SPACE. IT LOOKS LIKE A RENOVATION THAT WAS STARTED WITH A LOT OF GOOD AND EXCITING PLANS, BUT THEN SADLY ABANDONED. WHICH IS PRECISELY WHAT HAD HAPPENED...

SHE IS SITTING ON THE FLOOR AND TALKING INTO A TELEPHONE THAT IS PLUGGED INTO THE WALL.

'Found it, Mum! Nonna is making a lot of pathetic whining noises, but I know she's pleased and relieved I've gone. She was so funny, telling me not to touch anything, otherwise she'd never find it again. Am I really that untidy, Mum?'

'She can't understand why this precise one, though. I mean, half the village is empty, surprisingly enough, so I had plenty to choose from.'

'It's up that lane after the tourist office and behind the church, the one leading to the woods. Very bumpy, but the Jeep manages fine. And it's lovely here!'

'Yes. Can you believe it? The Jeep comes with the job!'

'So did I, but there's this barn right at the top. I think, I vaguely remember them renovating it... well half renovating it, but it's definitely livable in; just needs some finishing touches. And furniture, of course. Heaven knows why they've let it.'

'The eldest son Ludovico Asmundo, he's been so charming and very helpful. Do you remember the posh family in the crumbling "palazzo" on the way up to the ski slopes? Count something or other, although Nonna says it doesn't mean much as you can buy anything in Italy - can you imagine?'

Buying blue blood? They're originally from Sicily and they renovated the barn when the youngest went a bit wild, or that's what Ludovico told me, anyway, he's back on track now and working in a bank in Milan. And that's why the barn is empty... I'm so excited, Mum! A space all for me!'

'Not at all! The centre is just down the bottom of the lane... Nonna's worried I haven't got any lights, but I can see the ones in the village from here. I've already got electricity inside, of course. Terrible to say, Mum, but I do seem to have a lot of clout here. Extraordinary. Everybody wants to help me, that is, after I've managed to convince them I'm a fully-trained doctor and not just out of school uniform.'

POLLY LIES STOMACH DOWN AND STARTS ALTERNATELY LIFTING HER LEGS FROM THE KNEE.

'Well! Really well! The surgery is awful though! It has flaky aquamarine walls and a grey vaulted corridor as a waiting room. It doesn't even have a window, so I have to keep the lights on all the

time... it's like being underwater. And then! I nearly fainted when I saw the computer, it looks as if it came out of the Ark, still, Giorgio knows how to work it...'

'He's the old doctor. A friend of Nonna's. I'm surprised we'd never met him before. He's lovely.'

'No, don't think so... you know Nonna. But they're really good friends.'

'Anyway, the terrible surgery.... It doesn't really matter as most of my patients are eighty and over and so I prefer to pay them a home visit. I'm quite happy to go, as I can't say I'm rushed off my feet. They all think it's wonderful as poor old Giorgio wasn't bothering to get out and about much recently.'

'Yes, I think he'd had enough. Anyway, he was so sweet. Yesterday he solemnly handed over the surgery keys saying: 'They're all yours, my dear.'

Everybody has been so sweet! And there is no need for me to ask them a million and one questions, because they literally tell me about every ache and pain they've had since year zero. No detective work needed here, Mum. Although it's easy to get misled, when they give you a total body check from the hair (if they've still got any) on their head down to their ingrowing toe nail.'

'Can you hear me, Mum? You've gone all fuzzy.'

'Love you too... what?'

'Yeah... I really do think I'm over it.'

POPPY PLACES THE PHONE BACK ON ITS STAND AND SITS WITH HER BACK AGAINST THE WALL.

SHE STARTS ABSENT-MINDEDLY CHEWING A FINGER NAIL.

Fingers crossed. Oh God! I am never, ever going to be swayed by my future in laws, or whoever, again!

Never, ever again!

The white dress, the country house, the guests, the wedding presents! That was the worst; having to give them back... not that I wanted all that china, cutlery and cut glass.

Whoa! I'm coming over all clammy...

Still.

It would have been a total, shambolic disaster from day one!

'You were made for each other, Pops.'

If you say so, but don't say so... it's not true!

I think I was more in love with the whole package. His mum looked so terribly hurt when we told her we had decided we weren't suitably matched after all.

So, did I run away!

Did I back out?

Like a true coward?

Couldn't face the music?

It really was for the best!

It really was!

And, look at me now! Medico Condotta of six hundred souls in Monte Lento and its outlying hamlets.

So, James, get that floppy hair out of your eyes, and take a good look!

POPPY'S MOBILE RINGS, SHE GETS UP FROM THE FLOOR AND PICKS IT UP FROM THE BEAUTIFUL WOODEN TABLE WHICH IS THE SOLE PIECE OF FURNITURE IN THE ROOM.

Oh! Signora Umberta. Poor woman! That hip of hers is really giving her hell...

'Buongiorno Umberta. Posso venire domani mattina, e vediamo se riusciamo a prenotare una visita in ospedale... there's no need to drag yourself to the surgery. I'll be with you at 9 tomorrow morning.'

And then we'll get Giorgio to sort you out a hospital visit. He'll know someone, he always does.

Incredible how many doors he can open... I think he's become my personal assistant!

MATILDA

MATILDA IS OUTSIDE IN THE FRONT GARDEN, SWEEPING UP LEAVES.

Oh well, she's gone. And I've got everything back to how I like it.

Silly woman!

It was lovely when she arrived and even lovelier when she left.

Terrible woman!

I am so proud when I see her bumping around in that cranky old Jeep... she has a cushion so she can see better through the windscreen.

Vera went to see her the other morning about her swollen ankles. Very impressed she was, once she'd got over the jeans and jumper.

My God! Where do all these leaves come from?

MATILDA SITS DOWN ON ONE OF THE TWO BRIGHT RED CHAIRS THAT ARE ON HER PATIO. SHE NEEDS A BREAK AND RECALLS VERA'S CONVERSATION.

'E brava, Matilda!'

As if I didn't know.

'Although she wasn't wearing a white coat; I thought all doctors did. It gives them a little more authority, I would say. Wouldn't you?'

TINKLING LAUGH.

Vera has the most infectious laugh I know, it just sort of escapes all of a sudden.

ANOTHER VERY INECTIOUS, DELIGHTFUL PEAL OF LAUGHTER.

'Anyway, she actually told me to take off my tights and shoes – can you imagine? She wanted to inspect my ankles'

Quite right too! It's what doctors tend to do.

I think Giorgio didn't bother so much because he knew precisely what he was going to see: he'd seen it all before.

Poor man, what with losing Julia so suddenly, he just became terribly jaded.

Although Poppy says he's a Godsend, getting hospital visits organized in a jiffy.

Perhaps he just needed a bit of orientation, if you get what I mean. He's even got the old minivan out and serviced, and organized a group of volunteers to ferry the oldies down to the hospital.

I really do think Poppy's enthusiasm has rubbed off a little...

VERA'S BABBLING VOICE COMES BACK INTO MATILDA'S HEAD LIKE A RADIO STATION TUNING IN.

Oh! She does whitter on!

'Vanda, vuoi un'altra tazza di te? O devi proprio andare? You must have tons to do at home...no?

Oh well, another cup then...'

And then I'll physically shove you out of the front door.

'Biscotto, Vanda?'

'Si, grazie Matilda.'

Lucky woman, with all that nervous energy she can eat whatever she likes; she just burns it all up.

What was I thinking about?

Oh, yes! Why did Poppy really want to come? It still puzzles me terribly...

'Da vero, Vera?'

Just let her go with the flow...

Anyway, nice she's met about the only other young woman around these parts. Poppy said they're going down to town for drinks Friday evening, so that'll make a nice change for her.

'Vera, mi dispiace. I'm really sorry, but I've got to...'

What have I got to do? Think!

'I've got to make dinner; I've got Poppy and her new friend coming over.'

Liar!

'And if I don't start now...'

VERA JUMPS UP FROM HER CHAIR, AUTOMATICALLY SMOOTHS DOWN HER PERFECT BOB AND PUTS ON HER PADDED JACKET.

'Certo, Matilda! Of course! And do say hello to Doctor Poppy and tell her my ankles are so much better...'

POPPY

IT'S HALF PAST NINE IN THE MORNING AND POPPY IS WALKING DOWN "HER" LANE THAT LEADS TO THE ONLY REASONABLY SIZED ROAD RUNNING THROUGH THE VALLEY. SHE HAS JUST LOOSENED HER OLD UNI SCARF AND UNZIPPED HER PLUM RED JACKET.

Now, aren't I the lucky one? Can walk to the surgery in ten minutes; and it may be mid-November but what a beautiful, really beautiful morning!

I love it! I really do!

It feels all mine...

Although Giorgio says – what a sweetie he's turned out to be – that I wouldn't, or more to the point: won't... believe the trail of people that pass through at different times of the year.

Apparently, it was mushrooms last month, and then it'll be driving through to go skiing this winter, and then getting away from the appalling heat "down there" in the city summertime. But Giorgio explained, they come and then go, because nobody wants to actually live here!

Well, I most definitely do!

And, wait for it... this evening... da da daa... I'm going out!

Lisa's lovely!

We both giggled uncontrollably when she came into the surgery. It was like: Someone my age! I'm saved!

Well, she in fact said exactly that: 'sono salva!' and so of course, we're going down to Bergamo tonight for drinks.

POPPY HAS REACHED THE TARMACKED ROAD AT THE BOTTOM; THERE IS A MAN HOLDING A PICK AXE AND STARING AT THE STONE IN FRONT OF HIM. HE IS METICULOUSLY MENDING THE DRY STONE WALL THAT FLANKS THE RIGHT-HAND SIDE OF THE LANE.

'Buongiorno!'

How wonderful! A real rustic, doing a job that's possibly been passed down from one generation to another for literally centuries... wow!

THE MAN LIFTS HIS GAZE AND TAKES HIS PEAK CAP OFF TO POPPY.

'Buongiorno a lei...'

Oh! Now he looks familiar! He's probably been in the surgery...

'Che bel lavoro, che ha! Una vera arte...'

What a fantastic job! What a great skill!

THE MAN GRUNTS, AND PLACES HIS CAP BACK ONTO HIS HEAD BEFORE BREAKING THE STONE INTO TWO WITH HIS PICK AXE.

Now where was I? Goodness! What am I going to wear? I haven't thought about having to get "tarted-up"

POPPY GRINS

... yes, tarted- up for, I don't know... ages. It'll be nice...

POPPY IS NOW APPROACHING THE ONE AND ONLY BAR IN MONTE LENTO. SHE MEETS AN ELDERLY PATIENT WHO IS HER FIRST APPOINTMENT OF THE MORNING.

'Buongiorno.'

'Buongiorno, Dottoressa .'

POPPY GRINS EVEN MORE.

I even get a slight bow... I have definitely gone up a notch or two in society.

'Faccio in un attimo, Signora. I'm just going to have a quick coffee. The surgery is open, so take a seat and I'll be along in a tick...'

Oh, God ... the surgery! I wonder if anyone would mind if I put some soft furnishings in that awful corridor. And that beast of a computer! It'll be sitting on the desk... waiting for me! Thank God Giorgio knows how to control it!

POPPY GIGGLES, AND IT SOUNDS RATHER LIKE A VERA-TYPE-GIGGLE.

HER PATIENT, WHO IS STILL HOVERING IN FRONT OF THE BAR, LOOKS A LITTLE STARTLED.

POPPY TRIES TO APPEAR MORE SERIOUS AND PATS THE OLD LADY REASSURINGLY ON HER SHOULDER.

'So you can sit down, and take the weight off your feet...'

And into the bar I go! So handy! Three steps away from the surgery.

AFTER THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE, THE BAR FEELS EXTREMELY GLOOMY. THERE HAS BEEN NO ATTEMPT TO RENOVATE IT SINCE THE OPENING A GOOD TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO. THE OWNERS THEMSELVES LOOK AS IF THEY'VE JUST RETURNED FROM WOODSTOCK; STEFANO IS WEARING JEANS AND A T SHIRT WHILE CATERINA, THE INEVITABLE INDIAN MAXI SKIRT.

'Buongiorno, Caterina. Come stai?'

'Buongiorno, Dottoressa! Bellissima giornata. Cafe?'

'Yes please, Caterina, otherwise I just won't be able to "connect" ... get myself together.

Oh, I love this place! All higgledy-piggledy. Caterina really shouldn't be smoking as many cigarettes as she does – selling them can't help- and she proudly told me her and Stefano were open all through Lockdown and neither of them got Covid.

Humm... perhaps it's the fags... toughens them up...

I'll just sit down for a min, I really can't drink a coffee standing up; seems to be an Italian skill. Now, flowers on the counter from Signora Foppolo's garden... they must be the last, surely! The smell of joss sticks sitting on the window ledge behind me. Never seen anyone buy them. They just sit quietly, letting off a slight scent all on their unlit own...

THERE IS A RATHER UNORTHODOX SYSTEM WHERE PATIENTS PLACE A NOTE IN A SHOE BOX, AND POPPY THEN LEAVES A PRESCRIPTION FOR THEM.

POPPY HAS FINISHED HER COFFEE; SHE GETS UP AND LOOKS AROUND FOR THE BOX.

'Caterina, did anyone leave a message for me in the box?'

'A couple, I think.'

CATARINA BENDS DOWN, SWEEPING HER LONG GREYING HAIR AWAY FROM HER FACE, TO PICK UP THE BOX SITTING ON A PILE OF EXTREMELY DUSTY PAPERBACKS. POPPY IS AMUSED TO SEE SOME ASH SITTING ON TOP OF HER MESSAGES.

'Grazie, Catarina.'

Reckon she's been using it as her ashtray...

THE DOOR OPENS AND AN ELDERLY MAN WALKS IN...

'Buongiorno, Dottoressa.'

'Buongiorno!'

Grin wildly, because I haven't a clue who he is!

Anyway, it's time to start surgery.

Just press past the groaning shelves of magazines and dailies.

This place is better than a social centre!

And how does Catarina manage it? She's wonderfully polite and patient with literally everyone.

'Grazie per il café. Ciao Stefano, ciao Caterina. A presto.'

So, let's see what list of ailments Signora Vassali is going to hit me with today...

IT'S SEVEN P.M. AND POPPY IS UPSTAIRS IN HER WOOD-BEAMED BEDROOM WHICH WAS ORIGINALLY PART OF THE HAY LOFT.

SHE IS STANDING IN FRONT OF HER BEDROOM MIRROR THAT IS LEANING AGAINST THE WALL.

How do I look?

I've almost forgotten how to do this...

The black jeans are fine, boots too, and I can always take my jumper off if it's too hot; bit prickly though.

POPPY STEPS CLOSER TO THE MIRROR TO ADMIRE HER LONG, DANGLY EARRINGS.

Perhaps I should have given the earrings back, but hell... why? I love them.

SHE FLICKS ONE LIGHTLY AND IT GLITTERS BEAUTIFULLY.

And James gave them to me as a birthday present, didn't he?

You don't have to give back birthday presents, do you?

Poppy Summers, they're yours. So, flaunt them, my girl!

And stop scratching your neck! It'll go all red and nasty.

POPPY HAS NOW COME DOWNSTAIRS AND PICKED HER BAG UP FROM THE TABLE.

Keys, money, phone... hop, skip and jump down the stone steps.

And into the Jeep.

Da da da daa... and Lisa, here I come!

LISA

LISA IS SITTING AT HER DESK IN THE TOURIST OFFICE. THERE IS A BIG PICTURE WINDOW ALL ALONG THE FRONT; AND AS THE LIGHTS ARE ON, SHE IS VERY MUCH "ON SHOW" TO ANYONE WHO MIGHT POSSIBLY BE PASSING BY.

Hang on – let's see if I can turn the computer off with my elbow, otherwise I'm going to smudge my nails.

And here she is! Our dottoressa in her dilapidated Jeep.

Oh! She's looking a little somber- well - sophisticated, I suppose. All in black and she'll be way too hot in that jumper!

'Ciao, Poppy! Quanto stai bene! I love your earrings! Now, isn't this exciting? You couldn't do me a favour, and turn off the computer? I've just painted my nails...'

'Er... love the skirt, Lisa! But, don't you think you'll be a bit cold? And those heels... wow!'

Feast your eyes Poppy... feast your eyes...

'Naah...'

LISA SPLAYS HER HANDS IN FRONT OF POPPY.

'What do you think? The same shiny pink as the skirt. Looks good, doesn't it? And the heels... at least I can pull them out and actually wear them for once! There's no point in me wearing them in the office with the "oldies" just wanting a map with all the walks on, and possibly me to show them the way. They're definitely not after my body, are they? Poor loves! What a busy day, Poppy! Federico popped in.'

POPPY ACTUALLY PUTS HER HAND TO HER HEART AT THE MENTION OF FEDERICO.

'Federico Rossi?'

'That's the one... do you know him?'

'I met him one Christmas when we went skiing... must have been 16 or so... he was a dream!!'

'Still is... the heart-throb of Monte Lento. He helps me out with the trekking in summer and teaches skiing in winter.'

'Don't you absolutely adore him?'

'Naah, like a second brother to me.'

'Me and my sisters were crazy about him!'

'Bit too energetic for my liking... much prefer them slow and smouldering.'

POPPY SUDDENLY REMEMBERS TO TAKE HER HAND AWAY FROM HER HEART AND LOOKS CURIOUSLY AT LISA.

'Rightio... lights off, and we're ready. Ready Poppy, to hit the road! Well, ready to drive down some very dark and twisting roads. And then, my dear friend, we will strike them dead!'

LISA HAS LINKED ARMS WITH POPPY, AND HAS TO STOOP SLIGHTLY WITH HER RIDICULOUSLY HIGH HEELS AS THEY ARE WALKING TOWARDS POPPY'S CAR. THEY ARE ALMOST OPPOSITES IN BOTH COLOURING AND ATTIRE. POPPY BEING PETITE AND DARK: WHILE LISA IS BLOND AND CURVY.

'My goodness! I feel about 19!'

'Poppy Summers! You needed this; it's not all about counselling and consoling all day long. There's more to life. And, wow am I pleased you've come here! You've saved me from literally dying of boredom!'

Have to sort out the clothes though. A bit of colour and a bit of leg! She's got good ones: so, show them off girl!

POPPY

IT'S VERY NEARLY CHRISTMAS AND POPPY IS IN THE SURGERY. SHE HAS A LOT OF BAGS NEXT TO HER DESK WHICH CONTAIN CHRISTMAS PRESENTS FROM HER PATIENTS; THERE ARE SEVERAL POINSETTIAS POKING OUT OF THE TOP OF THE BAGS.

ALMA IS HER LAST PATIENT; SHE'S MADE A CONCESSION FOR THE DOTTORESSA AND HAS REPLACED HER WORK DUNGEREES AND WELLINGTON BOOTS FOR A TWEED SKIRT AND PAIR OF EXTREMELY OLD BLACK LACE-UPS. POPPY HAS LEFT THE SURGERY DOOR OPEN SO THAT SHE CAN ADMIRE THE IKEA CUSHIONS THAT SHE'S PUT ON THE CHAIRS ALONG THE CORRIDOR.

Better!

'Allora, Signora Alma. Cos'è il problema?'

'Ahhh, Dottoressa, buona domanda...'

Groan... this is going to take time...

Now, keep it light...

'You're looking fine. Tell me what's bothering you...'

Please...

'It's the bowels, Doctor. I used to be as regular as clockwork, and now I can go days without anything budging.'

'Well, I think we can sort that out nicely, Alma. Perhaps you've changed something in your diet. I really wouldn't over worry about it, and I'll give you something to help everything get on the move.'

POPPY LEANS OVER THE COMPUTER WHICH IS SITTING TO ONE SIDE, TO GET HER PRESCRIPTION PAD.

ALMA'S HAND SHOOTS UP, AS IF SHE WERE SITTING IN THE FIRST ROW – WHERE SHE IN FACT ALWAYS WAS – OF PRIMARY SCHOOL.

'That's not everything, Doctor. Wish it were, if only, as I was telling my husband the other day; it's a miracle I can get out of bed in the morning with everything that's going on. You see, doctor, it's the spots for a start. Black spots which keep dancing around in front of me. At the beginning, I thought they were midges or what have you. Even tried to swat a couple, but Doctor, believe it or not, it's got something to do with my sight. I'm telling you, it's really quite annoying to have those black spots floating around all day long. Now, I did ask myself. Could there be a connection with the bowels? You do wonder, don't you? I mean, it's all connected: one part to another.'

'OK, Alma, unfortunately it's a sign of age...'

'Well, I guessed that.'

ALMA SNEEZES AND TAKES A PERFECTLY CLEAN AND IRONED HANDKERCHIEF OUT OF HER BAG.

'Dust.'

'Could well be, Alma.'

'Do you know Federico, Doctor Poppy?'

'Yes, I do Alma.'

'Small world... he's my youngest nephew. Such a nice boy, don't you think?'

'Oh yes, Alma. I had quite a crush on him when I was younger.'

ALMA LOOKS SUITABLY PLEASED.

'Oh, really Doctor?'

'Anyway, back to you, Alma...'

Otherwise, I will never get home!!

'Black floating spots, Alma.'

'Flying all over the place, Doctor.'

'As I said Alma, unfortunately it's a sign of age, and the best thing is just to ignore them, that is, not unless they become even more bothersome. Now Alma, how about me taking your blood pressure?'

ALMA GIVES POPPY A STEELY WARNING STARE.

'Later; haven't finished yet. You know there's no girlfriend at the moment?'

'Sorry, Alma?'

'Federico hasn't got a girlfriend. Now, can you believe it? A handsome boy like him. And he's not getting any younger... time he settled down.'

ALMA ARTFULLY RAISES HER RIGHT EYEBROW.

'Errr yes. Anyway, Alma. What else was bothering you?'

'I've got a twitch, Doctor. And it just comes out of nowhere. I'll be dusting or out doing a bit of shopping... and there's this twitch. I've told Alberto, but he really doesn't seem to listen. I say:

"Alberto, I've got that twitch again. What do you think it is?" He's useless... no help at all.'

'Where is the twitch exactly, Alma?'

'My back, Doctor. I would hate it to get worse. I can go days without and then: "Alberto, there it is again!"'

'Alma, can you show me precisely where it is?'

'Difficult, Doctor, because it moves around...'

Surprise, surprise!

'Sometimes it's at the top, sometimes more towards the bottom.'

'Perhaps a cream, Alma. Although it's strange it's not one precise spot.'

'That's exactly what I said to my husband: strange it's not in one point. He's got a very respectable job, you know?'

POPPY LOOKS SLIGHTLY DAZED

'Your husband, Alma?'

'Nooo: Federico. A very good catch, I would say.'

'Ahhh! OK... Federico, your nephew. Now Alma, back to your twitch. Slip your jacket and cardigan off and I'll just take a look.'

ALMA WAGS HER RIGHT INDEX FINGER AT POPPY.

'Not so fast, Doctor. You can take my blood pressure and have a look in a second. Haven't finished yet...'

God! Have mercy...

HALF AN HOUR LATER – IT FEELS LONGER - POPPY IS LEAVING THE SURGERY WITH A LOT OF CHRISTMAS DECORATED CARRIER BAGS.

I'm almost missing my tight-lipped patients back in Whipps Cross who wouldn't tell you a thing.

Alma was hard work! And another poinsettia! That's ten! Where am I going to put them all? Hmm, they'd look great in Lisa's office window, I'll get her to adopt them... I'll take them round tomorrow.

POPPY STOPS IN HER TRACKS AND LIFTS HER FACE UP TOWARDS THE NIGHT SKY.

A SNOWFLAKE LANDS ON HER NOSE.

Perfect for Christmas!

POPPY SMILES WRILY TO HERSELF.

And there was no need for Alma to sell me Federico, I'd take him any day!

MATILDA

IT'S CHRISTMAS MORNING AND POPPY'S PARENTS (SAM AND CLAIRE) WITH POPPY'S YOUNGER SISTER, DAISY, HAVE JUST PARKED THEIR CAR OUTSIDE MATILDA'S FRONT GATE. LUCKILY, THERE IS JUST A LIGHT SPRINGLING OF SNOW. THEY COULD HAVE STAYED WITH MATILDA – 'GOD FORBID!', WAS CLAIRE'S REACTION – AND ARE THEREFORE STAYING IN A VERY-NICE-HOTEL-THANK - YOU IN BERGAMO.

'Come in, come in! Don't just stand there all of you... Samuele, you know where the spare key is. You could have used it instead of having to wait while I was fiddling around in the dining room. It's so wonderful to see you all!'

And I just hope I've got enough wine glasses to go round. My goodness! I'd forgotten how big you all are! Or perhaps that's me shrinking...

'Now come through and we'll have a drink while we're waiting for Poppy.'

'Oh, she's not here yet! I need to give her a big hug; I miss her desperately you know, Matilda.'

'Well, of course you do, Claire.'

SAM'S MOBILE PINGS, HE SCROLLS DOWN FROWNING.'

'Sorry, Mum. I just need to answer this... Internet is awfully sketchy up here'

SAM OPENS THE FRENCH WINDOWS THAT LEAD INTO THE BACK GARDEN AND SLIPS OUT.

'Isn't the stock exchange closed, Claire?'

'Of course, but it doesn't seem to make any difference...'

'Mum, throw over the keys, and I'll get the pressies out of the car. Nonna, it's lovely to be here! I'd forgotten how cute and cosy it all is.'

And I, Darling Daisy, had forgotten how majestically tall and stunning you are. Claire and Samuele definitely made you with a Barbie doll in mind. I'm surprised they didn't hire you for the film. And those heels! I mean, I used to wear them myself, but not that high! And can I spy an engagement ring?

DAISY'S GIGGLING.

'Nonna, you're staring!'

'Of course, I am, you are truly magnificent! Claire, you must be so proud of her.'

'I am, Nonna, I am. I'm so terribly proud of all three of them. Shame Rose couldn't come, but Richard is so awfully busy with lots of cases. And it would have been too much for Rose to come all on her own with Lucy who has just had the most terrible bug.'

'Well, hopefully they'll manage to come over soon.'

And I'm not unhappy they've left the bug at home! I mean, however lovely they are as a family, and they really are, I could definitely do without...

MATILDA'S THOUGHTS ARE INTERRUPTED BY SOME VERY LOUD SHRIEKING AS POPPY AND DAISY CAN BE SEEN JUMPING EXCITEDLY UP AND DOWN IN FRONT OF THE SUMMER'S SILVER FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE MERCEDES. DAISY HAS JUST SHOWN HER SISTER THE EXTREMELY BIG AND SHOWY DIAMOND RING SHE IS WEARING.

'Oh, she's arrived! Now tell me, Nonna Matilda. How's she getting on? Poor Darling – she could have literally specialised in anything.'

CLAIRE TURNS TO SAM WHO HAS JUST COME BACK INSIDE, BUT IS STILL LOOKING WORRIED.

'Couldn't she Sam? With her marks and then tons of training. But no — she has to come up the top of a mountain and fester away in the middle of nowhere. Not that it isn't beautiful here, Matilda. It is, it truly is. I really do wonder if it was just wanting to escape from James, the family and the wedding.'

Silly woman... in the middle of nowhere. Come on, Claire!

'She seems fine, Claire. I would say more than fine. She's made friends and everyone adores her. And, so what? She wanted a change of air, understandable, after all the hoo-ha of the cancelled wedding. She really does seem very much at home here, Claire.'

MATILDA HAS MOVED OVER TO THE SINK TO GET A CLOTH, AND SPIES GIORGIO THROUGH THE WINDOW COMING DOWN THE LANE.

'Ah! Here's Giorgio. I hope you didn't mind me inviting him. But he's always terribly at a loose end over the holidays. Samuele, put that phone away! There can't be anything that urgent on Christmas day – everything is closed.'

SAM MUTTERING.

'If only, if only Mum.'

SAM PUTS HIS PHONE AWAY, HIS FACE CLEARS. HE STRIDES OVER TO MATILDA, GIVING HER AN ENORMOUS BEAR HUG, WHICH POSITIVELY WINDS HER.

'Now, what wonderful feast have you prepared for us today? I was just telling Claire on the way up, about the most amazing Christmas lunches we always used to have. It's tortellini in brodo, isn't it? Because if it isn't, I'm walking out right now!'

MATILDA TURNS A SCHOOLGIRL SHADE OF PINK AND PUSHES HER SON PLAYFULLY AWAY.

'Of course, I have, Samuele. Oh, how silly you can be! And I've laid the dining room table. I thought it would make a nice change. Shame your sister isn't coming, but you know her...'

THE FRONT DOOR OPENS, AND GIORGIO COMES IN WITH DAISY WHO HAS AFFECTIONATELY LINKED ARMS WITH HIM. HE IS LOOKING JUST AS ROSY-CHEEKED AS MATILDA.

'Look Nonna who I found in the garden... your boyfriend!'

MATILDA CHOKES ON THE OLIVE SHE HAS JUST POPPED INTO HER MOUTH, AND SITS DOWN PROMPTLY ON THE ARMCHAIR BEHIND HER SMILING BROADLY.

What a crazy lot!

POPPY FOLLOWS GIORGIO AND DAISY THROUGH THE DOOR WITH TWO LARGE CARRIER BAGS. SHE'S LAUGHING HAPPILY.

'It's all right for some! I just get the bags!'

CLAIRE STRIDES OVER TO POPPY AND HOLDS HER TIGHTLY.

'Poppy, Darling! I have missed you so much!'

'Me too, Mum... me too.'

Now, let's get them all round the table and feed them, before it gets so terribly late.'

'Grub up everybody.'

THE FAMILY GO INTO THE DINING ROOM WHICH HAS A WONDERFUL DARK WOOD TABLE THAT HAS BEEN DECORATED BY POPPY FOR CHRISTMAS.

DAISY HAPPILY TAKES HER PLACE AT THE TABLE.

'It's beautiful, Nonna!'

'All Poppy's work.'

'You are not doing a single thing after lunch, we'll do everything, and tomorrow I'll help you in the kitchen.'

'That's sweet of you, Daisy. Now come and sit down everyone. Oh, Samuele... yes, pour out that wonderful Franciacorta you brought with you, and we can toast Christmas.'

POPPY

IT'S LATE AFTERNOON ON CHRISTMAS DAY. THE WHOLE FAMILY ARE SPRAWLED OUT ON ARMCHAIRS AND THE SOFA WITH EXTREMELY DAZED LOOKS ON THEIR FACES. MATILDA HAS JUST TURNED ON TWO SIDE LAMPS AND DAISY'S RIGHT; THE BACK LIVING AREA REALLY IS COSY – YES, AGREES CLAIRE, BUT A BIT TOO CHINTZY FOR HER LIKING. ALTHOUGH SHE'D NEVER SAY SO TO MATILDA, LOGICALLY. GIORGIO HAS SLOPED OFF HOME.

Wow! That was one gigantic lunch! It's no good Nonna saying she'd made less than normal. It was huge! So, let's have a sneaky look at everyone.

Mum looks fantastic and she hasn't pried at all, thank goodness. Dad! Shut your mouth! Is he dribbling? Look at those frown lines, he worries too much about work. And Daisy! Well, Daisy is looking well and truly amazing, always does. She's in love and positively glowing. Love the nails! No chance of me getting them done up here, thank God!

Poor Dad! Of course, he's gone to sleep. No Internet: no bucks!

So much easier living without! Nonna definitely agrees with me.

'Darling.'

Spoke too soon... here she goes. I can see that steely glint she gets in her eyes.

'What, Mum?'

'Promise me, you'll tell me if you've made the most whopping, huge, horrendous mistake coming here; and you're simply mouldering away, Darling.'

MATILDA COMES OVER WITH A TRAY OF COFFEE AND FROWNS AT CLAIRE.

'Don't you agree, Nonna? '

My God! She's worse than a Chinese torture!

'Well, Claire. Poppy seems really happy to me.'

'I know, Nonna, but I was saying to James just the other day...'

'James? Where did you see James, Mum?'

'Oh, he came for supper. We're on a couple of committees together. He seems at such a loose end these days, doesn't he Sam? And let's face it. He really was, almost family. Given half the chance...he still would be. You see Poppy, he's pining.'

POPPY STARTS CHEWING HARD ON ONE OF THE MINCE PIES THAT MATILDA BROUGHT WITH THE COFFEE.

'No, he isn't, Mum! It was extremely mutual, us splitting up. Can you imagine going through with it all? And then deciding we'd made the worst mistake in our lives? You're such a snob, Mum! James was just perfect, because he came from the "right type" of family. If you're not careful...

POPPY HAS GOT HER FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD CHEEKY LOOK.

'... if you're not careful, I'll shack up with a multi-pierced and tattoo covered heroin addict.'

CLARE LAUGHS GAILY AND A LITTLE UNEASILY.

'Oh, Poppy! You do make me laugh!'

'You know, seriously, Poppy might well find her soul mate here, Claire. Some rustic who lives with his sheep, halfway up a mountain...'

CLAIRE LITERALLY SHUDDERS.

'Now, stop it! The pair of you!'

MATILDA AND POPPY GRIN AT EACH OTHER.

'My God! You and Mum have got the same smile!'

'I know, Samuele. At Least one of your children looks a bit like their Nonna Matilda. Now Daisy, come here and show me that ring of yours properly. It's stunning! And tell me all about your fiancé.'

'Oh, Nonna! I'm so happy! He was staying at the hotel... and one should never mingle with the guests, but...'

'Well, Darling, you're not exactly staff; you are the manager.'

'I know, Mummy. But all the same, it's not really professional... We just couldn't help ourselves though. He was in London for work, and there was such a connection. Anyway, no problem now. When he's in town, he's staying with me.'

'Is there a date, Darling?'

'No, Nonna. But there will be soon, and then it'll be frantic as I want everything perfect. We'll be getting married in the family chapel, of course...'

Oh my God! Mum will be positively swooning.

POPPY

IT'S THE FIRST OF JANUARY AND POPPY IS WOKEN UP BY SOMEONE RINGING ON HER FRONT DOOR BELL.

SHE COMES GRUMPILY DOWNSTAIRS, AND FINDS LISA STANDING ON THE STEP LOOKING READY FOR (ANOTHER) PARTY, WITH HER BLOND WAVY HAIR SHINING BEAUTIFULLY IN THE SUNLIGHT.

'Lisa, what are you doing here? Dressed as well... and what time is it?'

'Lunch time, my dear Poppy. And you're coming to ours! Don't you remember? We decided last night – well this morning – that you'd come to ours. It's a family tradition.'

Is she totally and utterly out of her mind? After last night? How much did we drink, for Christ's sake?

POPPY NOTICES THE EXTRODINARY SHOES LISA IS WEARING.

'Why are you wearing your walking boots, Lisa?'

'Went for a walk, didn't I? To get rid of the alcohol-soaked parts in my brain and what-have-you... Did the trick wonderfully.'

LISA HAS FOLLOWED THE HUNCHED AND PYJAMA-CLAD BACK OF HER FRIEND INTO THE KITCHEN AREA.

LISA PEERS CLOSELY AT POPPY'S FACE AS SHE GINGERLY SITS DOWN ON THE STOOL AT THE COUNTER.

'Yuk, Poppy! You didn't go to bed with your make up on? And those look like squashed panettone bits in your hair...'

POPPY VAGUELY FEELS AROUND IN HER HAIR WITH HER FINGERS.

'I think, I took some panettone to bed with me...'

'Oh, Poppy! You are funny!'

That girl, is far too bright and cheerful for this time of the morning!

Did I really say I would go to theirs for lunch? Cripes!

Still, it was tremendous fun – the square was positively buzzing, and where did they find all those young people? And a disco done by Roberto! Who would have thought... Didn't Lisa say it was a tradition? People coming miles for the New Year's Disco. Only another year to wait for the next one!

POPPY GIGGLES AS SHE'S UNSCREWING THE COFFEE POT.

'Welcome, Poppy Summers, to the year 2024. What are you laughing about?'

'Oh... a bit about everything. It was just such a transformation! Federico was looking good. If anything, better than what I remembered. Shame I'll have to wait another year...'

'To have another party, or see Federico again? Not quite for the party. There's La Cena Sotto Le Stelle in August which is quite something.'

'Goody, goody...'

POPPY SIPS AT HER COFFEE AND IS BEGINNING TO FEEL BETTER.

'Yes, Dinner Under the Stars. It's magic! They put one long table along the High Street and dinner is cooked by the local bar, trattorias and whoever. It's a bit commercial really and just about every village around has cashed in on the idea. But it's lovely, you'll see. Still, that's not now, Poppy Summers! Now is about putting on a pair of jeans and jumper and being led tenderly over to mine for a celebratory New Year's lunch.'

POPPY CLIMBS THE STAIRS AND SHUFFLES INTO HER BEDROOM. SHE STARES AT HER REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR AND GROANS.

I could definitely do without lunch!

POPPY AND LISA HAVE WALKED DOWN THE LANE, CROSSED THE ROAD, AND WALKED DOWN ANOTHER LANE A LITTLE FURTHER ON FROM POPPY'S.

And here we are! Happy families. Strange that I've never met Lisa's parents.

LISA'S MUM HAS BEEN WAITING FOR THEM AND IS AT THE DOOR AS THEY ARE APPROACHING. SHE IS CURIOUS TO MEET HER DAUGHTER'S NEW FRIEND.

'Buongiorno.'

SERENA BLOWS HER FRINGE AND FLICKS A PERFECT CURL OUT OF HER BRIGHT BLUE EYES. SHE'S BEEN COOKING ALL MORNING AND IS HAPPY TO BE OUTSIDE IN THE COLD, CRISP AIR. INSTEAD OF HOLDING OUT HER HAND, SHE HUGS POPPY AND GIVES HER A BIG KISS ON EACH CHEEK.

Well, Lisa's mum is a bigger and brighter version of her daughter. And her dad?

WHO IS BEHIND HIS WIFE.

Looks nice and quiet; hardly surprising with these two in the family.

'Buongiorno, Poppy! Io sono Serena e mio marito: Pietro. Grazie per la stella di natale, Poppy. You shouldn't have bothered.'

Stop grinning, Lisa. And it's a good job I still had a couple of poinsettias at home. Well, Dear Plant, I think you've got a better chance of a longer, healthier life with these fair people. It's already looking a little perkier. Heaven knows what I'm doing wrong with them...

'Nonna!'

'Yes, we thought it would be nice to have Matilda over and of course... Giorgio.'

GIORGIO GETS UP FROM AN ARMCHAIR, LOOKING AROUND FOR SOMEWHERE TO PUT HIS GLASS.
HE IS LOOKING IMMACULATE, AS ALWAYS.

How lovely! Nonna's looking great. She definitely didn't see the New year in. Only she can wear black at her age, and not look as if she's going to a funeral.

'Buon Anno, Nonna... Giorgio.'

'Buon Anno, Darling. Isn't it sweet of Serena and Pietro to invite us over?'

Poor Giorgio, he always seems to be tagging along.

'Buon Anno, Poppy.'

'Buon Anno, Giorgio.'

BIG HUGS ALL ROUND.

'Now, everybody. Time for lunch. I haven't made too much. Poppy, are you hungry?'

'A little.'

'Because everybody always says, I do: cook far too much food, that is.'

I am not going to be able to eat one single thing! I hope they've got a dog...

LUNCH IS WELL ON ITS WAY.

What a beautiful room! Serena must be an artist or something, because it all looks very arty-crafty.

Love everything in the room: learn Poppy! Fabulous wooden table in the middle, dusky pink sofa with some wonderfully bright scattered cushions, under the window. Oh yes, I definitely approve!

Cream linen curtains... she'd be perfect to give my abysmal waiting room a total makeover.

'Really, Serena! I am well and truly stuffed. Now if that was a "modest" lunch, I don't want to think about what you...'

A DOOR SLAMS AND A DOG STARTS BARKING.

So, there is a dog!

'... normally dish up. And well, OK, I'll take some pasta home, but the roast beef no. I really don't eat that much.'

'You young people.'

SERENA CUTS A BIG SLICE OF PANETTONE.

'You must Poppy, absolutely must, try this panettone. It's the best! And I've made a nice zabaglione cream to go with it.

Heaven knows how Lisa stays so slim with this onslaught of food; perhaps she's just trying to impress. It's all delicious, but I really cannot...

SERENA PLACES AN OBSCENE AMOUNT OF PANETTONE AND CREAM IN FRONT OF POPPY.

'There you go, Poppy! Now, what do you think? The sauce just finishes it off perfectly.'

Oh, God! It'll finish me off!

'Oh, Serena e buonissimo! I'm afraid I'll leave some though...'

Well, if I eat it really slowly and wash it down with some more dessert wine, and Nonna: stop grinning at me!

'E tutto perfetto, Serena. I want your recipe for the red cabbage. It's one of those things I always buy when I see it, and then never know what to do with it.'

MATILDA TURNS TO POPPY, GRINNING EVEN MORE.

'There you go, Poppy! You've finished it. Would you like another slice?'

You, are one very wicked Nonna.

'No, Nonna, da vero! That really was an excellent lunch. Let me take these dishes out... no, no Serena; I really could do with stretching my legs.'

And escaping!

Oh! Who are you?

THERE IS A TALL MAN STOOPING OVER THE COOKER AND EATING THE COLD TAGLIATELLE DIRECTLY FROM THE PAN WITH A WOODEN SPOON. THE FAMILY'S SHEEP DOG IS LOOKING HOPEFULLY UP AT ITS YOUNG MASTER.

'Who are you?'

Well, that was extremely polite, Poppy Summers.

THE MAN JERKS UP, TURNS ROUND AND STARES AT POPPY. HE'S GOT DARK BROWN CURLY HAIR, A BEARD, AND EYES THE COLOUR OF AN EXPRESSO.

'Scusa, devo andare.'

CHEWING AT THE PASTA IN HIS BULGING MOUTH, HE EXISTS THROUGH THE BACK DOOR STILL HOLDING THE WOODEN SPOON.

AS THE MAN EXISTS THROUGH THE BACK DOOR, LISA COMES THROUGH WITH A BIG PILE OF DIRTY PLATES.

'Who's that?'

LISA SHRUGS HER SHOULDERS AFTER DEPOSITING HER DISHES ON THE DRAINING BOARD.

‘That? Just my brother.’

BOTH POPPY AND THE FAMILY’S DOG ARE LOOKING STUNNED.

MATILDA

IT'S ONE EXTREMELY COLD DAY IN JANUARY. MATILDA AND POPPY ARE SITTING ON A PEW NEAR THE BACK OF MONTE LENTO CHURCH. POPPY HAD BEEN CURIOUS TO HAVE A GOOD LOOK INSIDE THE SIMPLISTIC STONE STRUCTURE WHEN SHE ARRIVED IN OCTOBER, BUT HAD BEEN DISAPPOINTED BY THE 19th CENTURY ORNATE RENOVATION.

THE CHURCH FEELS COLDER INSIDE THAN OUT.

THEY ARE BOTH RAM-ROD STRAIGHT AND STARING IN FRONT OF THEM.

TWO ELDERLY LADIES NOD AS THEY PASS BY, WITH MATILDA AND POPPY AUTOMATICALLY NODDING BACK.

Well, it was to be expected. She had been looking peaky for months and months. Still, it's Poppy's first, so can't be easy. Grisly business, Giorgio always said. Having to go and certify if the poor thing is actually dead.

Not many people though. I would have expected more. What a morbid thought, Matilda Summers! Typical of village life: 'you know who's died... and there wasn't a great turn out at the church.' I mean, who really cares?

QUICK PEEP AT POPPY.

She'll be fine, and it wasn't as if she was young or anything. It'll be harder when – let's hope it doesn't happen for a very long time – it's someone young and seemingly in good health.

VERA COMES IN, NODS AT MATILDA AND POPPY, AND SITS IN THE PEW IN FRONT OF THEM.

I remember poor Chiara Bertelli, struck down almost overnight, and Giorgio kicking himself he hadn't done more tests and what have you. But who would have thought at 30 something. My God! Poppy's age possibly.

BOTH CHURCH DOORS ARE OPENED FOR THE SOLEMN OCCASION, AND A SIMPLE WOODEN COFFIN IS SLOWLY CARRIED DOWN THE CENTRAL AISLE BY SIX PALLBEARERS DRESSED IN BLACK.

Here she comes, the old girl. This is definitely not for me! Everybody having to say goodbye in this chilly, gloomy church. No! I'll have to write down that I want to be whisked through some sumptuous velvet curtains and burnt. Then everybody can have a party... now. What music would be fitting? Something loud and raunchy, I fancy.

POPPY LEANS CLOSER TO MATILDA AND WHISPERS.

'Nonna, stai bene?'

'Yes, Poppy, I'm fine. I've just decided that I definitely do not want to have my funeral here, in this extremely depressing place. Take me somewhere, build a bonfire, and then throw me down the loo... or wherever you want, if I don't fit.'

POPPY SNORTS; TRYING NOT TO LAUGH, AND A FEW HEADS TURN INCLUDING VERA'S.

She's fine, knew she would be. Tough as old boots, just like her nonna.

POPPY

IT'S LATE JANUARY AND POPPY HAS JUST FINISHED HER EARLY MORNING SURGERY. SHE'S CLOSED AND LOCKED HER DOOR; SHE TURNS ROUND AND NODS TO HERSELF AS SHE LOOKS DOWN THE CORRIDOR. IT IS MUCH IMPROVED. THE WALLS ARE NOW A CREAM COLOUR; SHE'S REPLACED THE SPLINTERED WOODEN CHAIRS FOR PLASTIC ONES IN BRIGHT PINK AND TURQUOISE, AND PUT SOME OLD BLACK AND WHITE PRINTS OF MONTE LENTO ON THE WALLS. THERE ARE TWO SMALL TABLES AT INTERVALS WITH MAGAZINES ON THEM. LISA OPENS THE OUTER DOOR AND WALKS TOWARDS POPPY.

'Hasn't it improved? Your mum was totally right about the colour.'

'She always is.'

'And shouldn't you be in the office?'

'And a very good morning to you, Poppy! Now who is going to be around on a freezing cold January morning? No mushrooms to pick, no trekking to be had. They're all further up the mountain skiing, aren't they? The only thing with a bit of life in the office at the moment, is your seven poinsettias that you so hastily burdened me with. I've stuck a notice on the door saying, back soon. Any gruesome stories to tell me this morning?'

'Lisa, you are terrible! And there is an unwritten law which explicitly says that I cannot discuss my patients with anyone. Not even you. Now let me see... the only real excitement was Signor Anzalotti losing his hearing aid down the loo and being bullied into the surgery by his wife, who is well miffed she can't tell him off without it. And of course, Roberto, who is always worrying about something.'

'No gushing blood' And hanging, lacerated limbs? Sounds really boring to me.'

'No, Lisa, it's never that. If you want to see that type of thing, you've got to go to Emergency. Now, why are you here? You're looking extremely pleased with yourself about something.'

'Of course, I am. Come and have a look. They're in the car. You can say no, of course, and I will understand. Or I might. But I really do think you need them. Very, very much so.'

THEY ARE NOW OUTSIDE THE SURGERY. POPPY LOCKS THE OUTER DOOR AND TURNS TO LISA AS SHE PULLS ON HER OVER-SIZED RED BOBBLE HAT KNITTED BY MATILDA. SHE IS HAVING PROBLEMS SEEING.

'What do I need, Lisa?'

PUSHING HER HAT UP A LITTLE.

'These two... come and see. It's not normal you living all on your own. You need something alive and pulsing, if you get what I mean, and you don't seem to be doing an awful lot about finding it yourself... that's why they're boys...'

Oh my God! Please! Make them not be puppies! I will have to say no and that will be terribly embarrassing. No way can I keep dogs! They need walks and all that. It's like having children, but worse.

'It's not normal you, Lisa, still living at home with Mater and Pater at 33!'

LISA IS OPENING THE BOOT OF HER CANARY YELLOW FIAT PANDA WHICH EMITS SOME VERY LOUD AND HUNGRY MIAOWING.

Oh, thank goodness for that! Kittens! But again! Do I really want them?

POPPY PEERS INTO THE BOOT AND SEES TWO VERY FLUFFY HONEY-COLOURED KITTENS.

'And I've got you some litter and a tray because they're far too small to go out yet. Filippo has already given them their first vaccination, so you don't have to worry about that. All you have to do is give them lots of cuddles, oh, and some food of course. Got a bag of that as well.'

'Filippo?'

'My brother, the vet.'

POPPY TURNS A PRETTY SHADE OF ROSY PINK. SHE TRIES TO HIDE HER FACE BY STICKING HER HEAD BACK IN THE BOOT AND UNZIPPING THE CAT TRANSPORTER. SHE SCOOPS UP THE LOUDER KITTEN.

'Poor mite! He's hungry! Are you sure it's a boy?'

'Filippo reckons they both are. They were found in the woods with no mum in sight. And every animal in distress gets taken to my brother. I thought of you immediately. So, what do you say? They might get thrown back into the woods, if you don't adopt them.'

'That is blackmail, my friend! There's no need for that. I'll have them! And when they are old enough to go out, you will find someone to put in a cat flap. There's no way I'll be traipsing to the door every time they want to go out or come back in again... they really are very sweet.'

'Knew it! A pushover! What are you going to call them?'

'Bread and Butter. Just look at the colour of them! And if one of them turns out to be a girl, the name suits all the same.'

'Bread and Butter! You are daft, you know. Thank goodness they're kittens and not children. Come on, I'll drive you home.'

GIORGIO

IT'S A SURPRISINGLY WARM DAY IN EARLY FEBRUARY. GIORGIO AND MATILDA ARE WALKING UP THE LANE THAT LEADS TO THE CONVERTED BARN. GIORGIO HAS JUST CHIVALROUSLY LINKED ARMS WITH MATILDA AS THE WAY IS BUMPY. MATILDA IS LOOKING IRRITATED AND GLANCES UP AT THE "SILLY MAN". SHE CAN MANAGE VERY WELL ON HER OWN, THANK YOU, BUT DOESN'T REMOVE HER ARM.

THEY HAVE BEEN INVITED FOR TEA IN ORDER TO SEE THE NEW FLUFFY, FELINE TENANTS.

'This weather is all wrong. Too dry and way too warm!'

'That's climate change for you, Giorgio. The poor kids being born now will really have to deal with it.'

'Tosh! Matilda! It's cyclic, it's all about cycles. It'll get colder and wetter soon, you see. Ah! Here we are! Afternoon, Poppy.'

POPPY QUICKLY INVITES THEM IN AND CLOSES THE FRONT DOOR FIRMLY.

SHE'S TERRIFIED OF BREAD AND BUTTER ESCAPING.

MATILDA GIVES HER GRANDDAUGHTER A HUG AND LAUGHS AS SHE LOOKS DOWN AT THE FRANTIC TOSSING AND TURNING OF FUR.

'Just look at those two little treasures. Almost makes me want to get one myself. Almost! But not quite though... I'll enjoy yours.'

Two peas! Two peas in a pod! They really are so very alike. Not like the rest of the giants in the family, but then Reginald was extremely tall. Poppy's looking a bit tired, hope everything's OK. It would be terrible if she called it a day.

'Thanks, Poppy. No sugar. I'm trying to stop as I know it is so terribly bad for me.'

BREAD IS NOW BRAVELY CLIMBING UP GIORGIO'S TROUSER LEG WHICH HE HAS DECIDED IS INFINITELY BETTER THAN A PAIR OF SLIPPERY JEANS. GIORGIO GENTLY UNHOOKS THE CLAWS AND CUPS THE KITTEN IN HIS HAND.

'I'd forgotten how cheeky they are when they're this small.'

GIORGIO STROKES BREAD WITH HIS FREE HAND.

'I hope they're not too much bother, Poppy. Lisa really should have asked before springing them on you.'

BREAD STARTS PURRING LOUDLY.

POPPY LAUGHS HAPPILY.

'Oh no, Giorgio! Not at all! It's Lisa getting her own back for the Stelle di Natale I landed her with. Although it's not really the same thing...'

POPPY TURNS TO MATILDA WHO NOW HAS BUTTER ON HER LAP.

'But have you seen, Nonna, how well they're doing in her office window? Incredible. My two have gone all floppy and keep dropping their leaves.'

MATILDA HELPS HERSELF TO ONE OF THE HOMEMADE BISCUITS SHE BROUGHT WITH HER, AND LOOKS MORE CLOSELY AT POPPY.

'You're looking peaky, Poppy. Everything OK? Your mother will never forgive me, if you go and get ill.'

'Stop fretting the pair of you, and it's hardly your fault Nonna, if I pick a bug up or whatever. Not that I have. No, I'm fine... a bit tired. The paper work is catching up on me. More and more people keep registering. I didn't think quite so many people lived hereabouts. I seem to waste an awful lot of time booking appointments and then writing up about the patents after their visits.'

GIORGIO GENTLY PUTS BREAD DOWN AS HE HAS BEEN PAINFULLY DIGGING HIS CLAWS INTO THE POOR MAN'S GROIN.

'Well, that's not a problem, Poppy. I'll be your secretary. I can book the appointments for you and help out with some of the paper work.'

POPPY GRINS.

'Giorgio, would you?'

'Of course, Poppy. I really am too much at a loose end. It'll be something to keep the old cogs turning. And I can file everything away in the computer for you.'

'Giorgio!'

POPPY LEAPS UP AND PLANTS A VERY MOIST KISS ON GIORGIO'S CHEEK.

'Marry me!'

GIORGIO LAUGHS SILLILY AND BLUSHES.

Well, that's a relief! She's not going to chuck it all in, and I'll enjoy giving her a hand.

'What a nice man, you are Giorgio!'

'Flattery will get you everywhere, young lady!'

'Now come on, you two. Stop batting your eyelashes at each other and have one of my biscuits.'

Well, that'll keep me nice and busy and keep the dear girl here. She's doing a grand job.

POPPY

IT'S MID FEBRUARY ON A SURPRISINGLY COLD MORNING. PERHAPS GIORGIO IS RIGHT ABOUT CYCLES. POPPY IS JUST SLIPPING ON HER SOCKS AS SHE GETS OUT OF BED. THERE IS A BIG BASKET ON THE FLOOR FOR BREAD AND BUTTER. IT'S EMPTY AND THE TWO KITTENS ARE CURLED UP TIGHTLY ON POPPY'S BED. THEY MIGHT LOOK ASLEEP, BUT THEY'LL BE DOWNSTAIRS BEFORE POPPY AND BOTHERING HER FOR FOOD.

Oh my! Feels really cold! I need coffee and quick, because I've got a busy day ahead. Perhaps I shouldn't be quite so willing to go and see people, but it would be so mean to get the oldies traipsing miles to get to the surgery...

POPPY SCREWS UP HER EYES.

... it does seem so terribly bright up here this morning...

POPPY COMES DOWNSTAIRS AND INTO THE KITCHEN AREA, WITH BREAD AND BUTTER ALREADY NEXT TO THEIR FOOD BOWLS. SHE DRAWS THE CURTAINS.

'Oh, my God!'

Look at that! And there's lots. They didn't forecast that! And, oh goodness! How in the hell...

POPPY IS TURNING AWAY FROM THE WINDOW, LOOKING FOR HER PHONE, WHEN SHE TURNS BACK AND DOES A DOUBLE TAKE.

Well, I never! A perfectly dug out pathway leading directly to my car and the lane has been cleared as well! How efficient can you get?

POPPY'S MOBILE RINGS FROM INSIDE HER BAG SITTING ON THE COUNTER. IT'S LISA.

'Pretty, isn't it?'

'It's stunning, Lisa! I can't believe how much snow there is, and it was a clear sky with a moon shining through the skylight when I went to bed last night.'

'It happens... it happens. Happy you've been dug out?'

'How efficient the council has been! And so early! I'll be able to get to the car and drive down to the surgery, no problem. And then hopefully, I'll be able to do my rounds later on.'

'That, my dear friend, is not the council freeing you from the frozen wastes surrounding you. They probably haven't even noticed it's snowed yet. No, you have a Prince Charming at your service.'

'Giorgio! He's the only real gentleman I know, and I really don't think he could have shoveled so much snow out of the way without having a major heart attack.'

'Of course, it's not Giorgio, silly. It's Filippo. You seem to have made quite an impression on him.'

Why do I always blush, just thinking about him?

POPPY LAUGHS NERVOUSLY.

'I only met him for like 30 seconds in your kitchen, and then he bolted.'

'Don't know about that, well, I do actually, because I brought some dishes through. Anyway. He came in, plonked himself on my bed and asked me if I'd seen the snow. Snow? It was 6 in the morning, pitch black outside, and I barely had my eyes open. Declaring that he definitely needed to dig you out, and that he'd even got Fabrizio to give him a hand with his tractor. It was totally bizarre! And then off he marched. Have you bewitched him or something? I swear, Poppy, if he could, he would have been wearing a coat of armour – he was being so damn chivalrous. Wasn't my brother at all. You can't normally get two words out of him. And he's always tending to sick animals, definitely not damsels in distress. Not his scene at all.'

'Oh, gosh!'

'Oh, gosh indeed! I wondered if he'd been drinking or trying out some strange new drug before giving it to a horse or something; he was so fired-up!'

ROSE

IT'S MID MARCH AND ONE BEAUTIFULLY SUNNY DAY. THE "BIG SNOW" IN FEBRUARY SEEMS A VERY DISTANT MEMORY. DAISY HAS COME TO STAY WITH NONNA MATILDA TO CHOOSE HER WEDDING DRESS. SHE IS ACCOMPANIED BY ROSE, THE ELDEST OF THE THREE SISTERS. THEY ARE SEATED AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE AND WAITING FOR POPPY TO DROP IN BEFORE MORNING SURGERY.

'Oh, Nonna! This is so lovely! Having some time out. I've missed you terribly and next time I'll bring Lucy with me, and you can thoroughly spoil her as well.'

MATILDA GRINS BROADLY AT HER VERY TALL AND BEAUTIFUL GRANDDAUGHTER. SHE CANNOT HELP BUT COMPARE THE TWO STUNNING GIRLS SITTING IN FRONT OF HER. DAISY SOMEHOW, COMES ACROSS AS SHOWIER, AND IS DEFINITELY MORE AWARE OF HER STUNNING LOOKS. ROSE ON THE OTHER HAND, IS MELLOWER, AND MATILDA THINKS CLASSIER THAN HER YOUNGER SISTER.

'How's Richard, Darling?'

'Oh, he's fine. Terribly busy of course. Good job he's making buckets of money and I can art and fart around, and run after Lucy, of course. I really can't complain, can I Nonna?'

'No, you can't. Although the "arting and farting" I've seen looks amazing. Didn't you get something shown in a magazine?'

'Oh yes, you're right Nonna, I did. Sheer fluke. Still, it's feels more like a hobby than a real job.'

'Now, Daisy. You can't go wedding dress shopping with just a cup of coffee inside of you...'

'Nonna, of course I can. I must! I've got to lose at least a stone before the wedding. Of course, being tall, you can't really see it. But, it's there. They will be able to alter the dress nearer the date if need be, won't they Nonna?'

'Of course, they will. Now stop fretting. Ah! Here comes Poppy.'

POPPY ARRIVES LOOKING RATHER FLUSTERED.

'Sorry, I'm a bit late, but I've been jogging and so had to have a shower. Nonna, you are sure you've never seen a bear around here, aren't you?'

'Oh, Treasure! How silly you are. There are definitely no bears out there...'

Now, Pops is looking positively radiant! This rustic life - haha - really does seem to suit her. What a relief, after all that messing around with James and idiotic plans to get married. Right twat, if you

ask me. Even if he did have all the right connections. And that floppy fringe and chinos... no, thanks!

'Pops! You're looking wonderful! Is it love?'

POPPY IS RUMMAGING AROUND IN HER BAG AND BLUSHES.

'Now, Rose Summers. Who am I going to fall madly in love with, here, in the middle of nowhere?'

'Well, something's happened. Because you're positively glowing.'

POPPY TURNS TO DAISY WHO IS STILL GLOOMILY STARING INTO HER COFFEE CUP.

'Hi, Daisy. Ready for a big shopping day? Sorry I can't come, but there's surgery and all that...'

Bet she's not. Wish I could get out of it. Because we all know what Daisy's like when she's out shopping. Groan!

'... The most important thing is that you've got Nonna with you, and her very critical eye.'

DAISY SHAKES HERSELF OUT OF HER STUPOR. SHE IS NOT A MORNING PERSON AT THE BEST OF TIMES.

'I'm really nervous, I'm not going to find exactly what I want...'

We all are.

'It's so important. I really can't let the side down, because Timothy's family are going to so much trouble. Now. I know, you won't want to, Poppy, but hats are an absolute must.'

POPPY'S EXPRESSION IS ONE OF EMBARRASSED CONFUSION.

'Uhhh hat, Daisy? But I thought... well, I know you never asked me, but Rose is going to be one.

And so...'

What! She never actually told her.

'Darling Pops, of course, I would have loved you to be the third bridesmaid. But it's a height thing. You'd look all wrong...'

Poor Pops. Here it comes...

'So, I've asked Sammy. She's the right height and the right colouring. You are so terribly dark, Pops! Timothy's family want everything to look perfect...'

Bitch!

POPPY LAUGHS AND ABSENTLY PLAYS WITH THE EDGE OF THE TABLE CLOTH.

'Well, that's a relief! I'm much happier with a hat than some drippy bridesmaid's dress.'

Toucé Poppy!

DAISY SMILES BROADLY AND A LITTLE ARTIFICIALLY.

'Good! Well, that's settled. Oh! And I'm terribly sorry, but we really must invite James. He's practically one of the family...'

Oh, my God!

'You don't mind, do you?'

MATILDA COMES BUSTLING IN AND BREAKS UP THE SISTERS' TETE - A - TETE.

'Come on, girls, time to go. And Poppy has much more important things to do than chat about dresses and stuff.'

Game, set and match to Nonna Matilda!

SPACE PARK AT THE NATIONAL CENTRE OF EARTH OBSERVATION, BRISTOL UNIVERSITY.

IT'S THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE EASTER HOLIDAYS THAT THE TWO ENGINEERS ARE WORKING TOGETHER.

'Wotcha Mate... good Easter?'

'Not bad, although it's quite nice to be away from family.'

'Yeah, know what you mean...'

'Oh! Remember our little mountain retreat?'

'What was the name?'

'Monte Lento.'

'Right, Monte Lento... well, there seemed to be a fair bit of stuff going on up at the lake over the hols. Like: flashing lights and big patches of people.'

'Wonder what they were up to...'

'Looked like fun...'

LISA

IT'S WEDNESDAY MORNING AFTER THE LONG EASTER WEEKEND AND POPPY IS TAKING TWO COFFEES INTO THE TOURIST OFFICE.

LISA IS SITTING AT HER DESK AND FLICKING THROUGH ONE OF THE VOGUE MAGAZINES THAT ARE PLACED BETWEEN THE TWO VISITORS' CHAIRS. APPARENTLY, SHE SAYS, THE OLDIES LOVE THEM. HER SEVEN POINSETTIAS ARE STILL LOOKING LIKE CHRISTMAS IN THE BIG FRONT PICTURE WINDOW.

'Here you go: coffee.'

'Now, where did you get that? Have we got a Starbuck's just opened, or what?'

'Oh, no...'

POPPY TAKES OUT A TISSUE FROM HER SHOULDER BAG, AND STARTS WIPING AT THE COFFEE SHE HAS MANAGED TO SPILL ON THE DESK.

'... Catarina and Stefano have finally got some takeaway cups at the bar. God, Lisa! You have no idea what Easter Monday was like.'

LISA OPENS THREE SACHETS OF SUGAR AND POURS THEM INTO HER COFFEE.

'I don't understand how it happened. Didn't anybody know about it? Have you ever seen the film about Woodstock? Same thing.'

'I don't think there were that many people, Poppy.'

'It was frightening! And I'm all for free expression, but why at the top of our mountain? And why didn't we see them all arriving?'

'They came under the face of darkness, my friend...'

LISA HELPS HERSELF TO ANOTHER BRIOCHE FROM THE PAPER BAG THAT CAME WITH THE COFFEE.

'... it was only supposed to be a couple of bands and a loud speaker. There was me taking my oldies out for their trek, and all we could hear was this loud thumping music from across the valley.'

'How on earth, did they get everything up there?'

'Haven't a clue. But where there's a will, there's always a way. What time did you get a call?'

'Late afternoon, I suppose, just before the police arrived. Poor mountain, Lisa! It was a total violation. Rubbish everywhere. I had to see to a few minor injuries and stop people from jumping in the lake. And one girl was taken to Emergency as she couldn't stop throwing up. Anyway, the real problem was Roberto! When I arrived, he was just spinning round with a great big grin all over

his face. Heaven knows what he'd been given. Because he's a total innocent, not into drugs at all, with his computers and all that. I took him home and let him sleep it off on my sofa. You would not believe, Poppy, how spaced out he was! When he woke up the next morning, and after umpteenth cups of coffee, he told me he'd only gone for the music. He swears he didn't take anything. He thought he'd be drinking Coke and eating hard-boiled eggs and crisps! He's like thirteen, in some ways... no younger... He was mortified when he was unstoned.'

LISA IS CURIOUS TO SEE HER BROTHER COMING UP THE STEPS THAT LEAD TO THE TOURIST OFFICE. HE NEVER COMES TO THE OFFICE. HAS HE NOTICED POPPY'S VERY DIRTY JEEP SITTING OUTSIDE? IT'S DIFFICULT NO TO.

Ok, let's see how Poppy reacts to this. I am sure those two fancy each other rotten. Poppy goes red just at the mention of his name.

'Poppy, you're crumbling that brioche all over my maps. Morning Filippo.'

There she goes! As red as a very ripe tomato.

'Uhhh, morning Lisa... Poppy.'

FILIPPO IS LOOKING DOWN AT HIS VERY DIRTY BOOTS WITH HIS BLACK CURLY HAIR HIDING HIS FACE. THERE'S A CHAIR NEXT TO POPPY'S, BUT HE DOESN'T SEEM TO WANT TO SIT DOWN. HE HAS HIS HANDS FIRMLY STUCK IN THE POCKETS OF HIS BARBOUR JACKET.

'I was passing and I thought...'

'What did you think, Dear Brother?'

'Uhhh, that it'd be nice, if I popped in, like... all OK?'

'Fine. Do you want one of Poppy's briosh?'

'Uhhh...'

Now, this is hysterical. God, man! Pull yourself together.'

'... umm must be going.'

FILIPPO ALMOST RUNS TO THE DOOR. HE JERKILY TURNS ROUND BEFORE EXITING.

'Poppy!'

'Yes, Filippo!'

'Bring Bread and Butter in. They need their booster.'

'OK, Filippo.'

FILIPPO TURNS TO GO SO QUICKLY, HE ALMOST BASHES HIS FACE AGAINST THE GLASS DOOR.

LISA RAISES HER EYES TOWARDS THE CEILING.

My God! Can't get more romantic than that!

LOWERING HER EYES AND CUPPING HER FACE IN HER HANDS, LISA STARES AT POPPY.

'Poppy Summers! You have gone as red as the poinsettias that I am patiently looking after for you until next Christmas.'

POPPY LAUGHS A LITTLE HYSTERICALLY.

'Well, it is terribly hot in here. Must go! Things to do.'

I bet! Like, let your blood pressure and heart rate get back to normal. I should just lock them in a room for 24 hours, and let them get on with it.

LISA'S FACE GOES ALL DREAMY.

Just think about what cute babies, they'd make...

LISA GRUNTS.

Now, stop it! Stop running away with your imagination and get a life! God! Send me a man here, 800 hundred metres up a mountain. And now!

POPPY

IT IS FINALLY THE DAY OF DAISY SUMMERS AND TIMOTHY SMYTHE – BLAKE’S WEDDING. IT IS, OF COURSE, A PERFECTLY WARM AND SUNNY MAY MORNING.

POPPY IS SITTING ON A WHITE WROUGHT IRON CURLY-WURLY CHAIR, AT A MATCHING TABLE WHICH HAS BEEN COVERED WITH A SPOTLESS LINEN TABLECLOTH. SHE HAS A PLATE OF HORS D’OEURVES AND A GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE IN FRONT OF HER. SHE HAS OPTED FOR A TABLE WELL TO ONE SIDE OF THE MARQUEE WHERE SHE CAN HAVE A GOOD STARE AT EVERYONE AWKWARDLY MILLING AROUND WITH THEIR GLASSES AND PLATES OF FINGER FOODS.

POPPY IS WEARING A BEAUTIFUL AUDREY HEPBURN DRESS IN KINGFISHER BLUE SATIN, WITH A FITTED BODICE AND A FULL JUST- BELOW-THE-KNEE SKIRT.

SHE HAS MISLAID HER WIDE-BRIMMED FANCY HAT SOMEWHERE, AND HAS NO INTENTION OF GOING IN SEARCH OF IT.

Well, that’s over and done with. Daisy is looking stunning! And Timothy seems to think so too; can’t keep his hands off her cream satin dress. Much better than white and frothy: thank you Nonna Matilda for finding it.

Bridesmaids looked good too. Didn’t want to be one anyway. Perfect height both of them ha ha... Won’t the group photos look just wonderful? All symmetrical... Now, Poppy Summers, don’t be such a bitch!

Anyway, congrats Daisy! You’ve gone up a notch or two. And if that’s what you want, I’m really happy for you.

POPPY TAKES IN THE SWEEPING GROUNDS ALL AROUND HER.

This place is amazing! My God! The parents - in - law have even got a lake at the bottom of the garden. There’s Mum and Dad mingling, or more to the point: Mum. Dad looks as if he’d like to be somewhere else. If he notices me, I’ll wave and he can come and sit with me.

Very brave, the kimono dress, Mum. Looks really good, and no doubt cost a fortune. And can I see some very clever touching up of her perfect chestnut brown – ‘oh, it’s my natural colour’ – bob? She must have the odd white hair by now! My goodness, she’s lapping it all up! Shame there’s not a title into the bargain, because then... then... It would have been the ultimate cherry on top of that extraordinary wedding cake I spied when searching for the loo.

And here he is! James – the ex of Poppy Summers’ who scuttled off to Italy to become a family doctor and wipe away the continual tears from her dark – and let’s be honest – rather foreign looking eyes.

POPPY GIGGLES TO HERSELF AND LEAPS UP TO GRAB ANOTHER GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE FROM A PASSING WAITER.

I am feeling an incy - wincy bit tipsy.

Looking very dapper, of course, in his Morning Suit. Found it hard to be even civilized, didn’t he? He could have been a little warmer. We were together for four years for goodness sake, and almost ready to get married!

His new girlfriend, who looks like a saucier version of Princess Diana in her kinder garden frocks, is way more suited. Seriously though; I hope they’re extremely happy together.

POPPY TAKES A BIG SWIG OF HER CHAMPAGNE.

I wish everybody extreme happiness!

And she’s the right height. I mean, have you noticed Poppy? All the girls are the right height here. What were they given to eat as kids? And why wasn’t I eating it?

POPPY STARTS WAVING FRANTICALLY AT HER FATHER WHO HAS COME AWAY FROM THE MAIN CROWD OF PEOPLE. HE TURNS THE OTHER WAY AS A WAITER STARTS BASHING A BIG SHINY GONG AT THE STOP OF THE STEPS.

LUNCH IS SERVED.

POPPY GETS UP A LITTLE UNSTEADILY AND FINDS THAT HER HEELS ARE NOW SINKING INTO THE GRASS.

I shudder to think who I’ve been put between. Shame Nonna Matilda chickened out. Dodgy knee, my arse!

POPPY FREES HER HEELS FROM THE LAWN AND FOLLOWS THE QUEUE OF PEOPLE SLOWLY UP THE STEPS THAT LEAD INTO A VERY IMPRESSIVE HALL.

Cor blimey! Talk about Upstairs and Downstairs. And you, Dear Daisy, are definitely upstairs. The In-Laws seem really sweet, though. Especially the mum who looks as if she’s been dropped down from a Martian space ship and hasn’t the foggiest where she is.

POPPY GIGGLES HAPPILY TO HERSELF, WHICH GETS A COUPLE OF PUZZLED LOOKS FROM PEOPLE NEAR HER.

Impressive room! Apparently, the ball room no less. And those French windows leading out onto the terrace! Very nice. Oh yes, Daisy will be down as much as she possibly can.

OK. Seating plan... God! I'm on the odds and sods table, with Zia Susannah and Zio Francesco. They are so intense! Nonna told me they have both recently published papers on something or other. I have a nasty feeling; they are going to tell me all about them...

A RATHER SERIOUS LOOKING LADY WITH GLASSES AND DRESSED IN A POKA DOT NAVY BLUE DRESS HAS SPOTTED POPPY.

'Poppy, Dear! We're sitting together! I have so much to tell you...'

Groan! Bring on the wine!

ALMA

IT'S AN EXTREMELY QUIET TUESDAY MORNING TWO WEEKS AFTER DAISY'S WEDDING. POPPY IS BACK AT MONTE LENTO AND ABOUT TO DROP INTO CATERINA AND STEFANO'S FOR A QUICK COFFEE BEFORE SURGERY. ALMA IS OUTSIDE THE BAR HAVING A SNEAKY FAG. SHE CAN SEE POPPY WALKING – ALMOST RUNNING, OTHERWISE SHE'LL BE LATE AND WON'T HAVE TIME FOR COFFEE – ALONG THE VALLEY ROAD WITH THE MOUNTAINS FLANKING IT ON BOTH SIDES. ALMA STUBS OUT HER CIGARETTE AND DISAPPEARS INSIDE THE BAR, REAPPEARING JUST AS POPPY ARRIVES.

'Buongiorno, Dottoressa.'

'Buongiorno, Alma! Come stai oggi?'

'Bene, Dottoressa. As well as can be expected with all my problems. Every day I get up and say: "Alberto, it'll be a miracle if I last until evening..." Now, Dottoressa Poppy, I've paid for your coffee and a SuperEnalotto ticket. My bowels are so much better you see, and that's all thanks to you.'

'Why, thank you, Alma. How nice of you! There was no need; especially the SuperEnalotto ticket.'

'Oh yes, there is. Do you know how much you can win this week?'

'I haven't a clue, Alma. How much?'

'More than 350 million! You just have to have a ticket!'

'And what happens, if I win, Alma?'

'If you win, you give me half...'

No chance of that! It's liking finding the smallest needle in the biggest haystack.

'... but, no Dottoressa! What would I do with all that money? Keep it all!'

You are never going to win it. But it's the thought that counts, isn't it?

FEDERICO

FEDERICO HAS A NEW MOUNTAIN BIKE WHICH HE HAS BEEN DYING TO TRY OUT. AND FINALLY, TODAY – A SATURDAY, BUT QUIET – IT SEEMS THE PERFECT DAY: CLEAR SKIES AND DRY TRACKS. FEDERICO HAS TAKEN THE PATH THAT LEADS TO THE LAKE AND IS FEELING EXTREMELY PLEASED WITH THE BIKE AND HIMSELF.

Wish I'd changed it before, because this is just crazy! Nice few rocks coming up... as smooth as olive oil! The suspension is something else! Thought I wouldn't need all the gears, but wow! I reckon I could climb a sheer rock face with this baby! A little bit of muddy track coming up... and yes! The grip on these wheels, is just awesome!

FEDERICO IS SO BUSY TRYING OUT HIS NEW TOY THAT HE HAS FAILED TO NOTICE A LONE FIGURE SITTING ON A ROCK BESIDE THE LAKE. IT'S POPPY.

Now, let's try the brakes... woo-hoo! Now who's that I? Am I mistaken, or is it the delectable Dottoressa Poppy? Goody, goody. I've been meaning to catch up with her for quite some time. And what a terribly romantic place to meet.

FEDERICO SPEEDS UP AND BRAKES DRAMATICALLY BEHIND POPPY.

'Poppy!'

SPRAYING HER, AS SHE TURNS ROUND, WITH THE ONLY EXISTING MUDDY PUDDLE IN THE WHOLE OF MONTE LENTO THAT DRY, SUNNY MORNING.

'Federico!'

'May I join you on your rock?'

'Of course, you may.'

FEDERICO CAREFULLY LEANS THE BIKE AGAINST A PINE TREE, HANGS HIS HELMET ON AN ACCOMODATING BRANCH, AND JUMPS UP ONTO THE ROCK NEXT TO POPPY. THEY MAKE AN INTERESTING PAIR: POPPY BEING PETITE AND DARK; WHEREAS FEDERICO IS ALL LEGS AND BROAD SHOULDERS WITH LONGISH LIGHT BROWN CURLY HAIR THAT DEFINITELY HASN'T BEEN NEAR A BRUSH RECENTLY.

'I never see you, Poppy...'

POPPY HAD FORGOTTEN HOW WONDERFUL FEDERICO'S SKY-BLUE EYES ARE.

'... you never came skiing this winter.'

'Don't you remember, Federico? I was absolutely useless and got all grumpy when I was wet.'

'Yes, you did, didn't you? And I've been meaning to come to the surgery, but I've never got anything wrong with me.'

POPPY GRINS AT FEDERICO.

'Thank goodness! One strong, healthy patient. Because I'm telling you, Aunty Alma is a nightmare!'

FEDERICO BURSTS OUT LAUGHING AND NEARLY FALLS OFF THE ROCK.

'Zia Alma! I think she's got us hitched and with at least three kids...'

FEDERICO SHUFFLES CLOSER TO POPPY.

'I could think of worse.'

POPPY ELBOWS FEDERICO PLAYFULLY IN THE RIBS.

'Down, boy!'

'Well, anyway Poppy. Are you happy here? You look it.'

'Very! Wish I'd come sooner.'

'Me too. We must make the effort and go out some time. I can bring Marco and you can bring Lisa... Do you want to try my bike? It's awesome, I'm telling you.'

'No thanks, Federico. I think I've got enough mud on me for one day. Off you go! I can tell, you are just dying to give it a really good test ride... or whatever you call it.'

IT WAS LOVELY MEETING POPPY, BUT SHE'S RIGHT, FEDERICO IS ITCHING TO GET BACK ON HIS BIKE AND SEE HOW IT PERFORMS GOING DOWNHILL.

'OK, I can take a hint: you "want to be alone" like... Marilyn Munroe...'

'Marlene Dietrich, you idiot!'

FEDERICO JUMPS ONTO HIS BIKE AND IS PUTTING ON HIS HELMET.

'So, we have a date, Poppy?'

'We most definitely do, Freddy.'

ONCE FEDERICO HAS DISAPPEARED DOWN THE TRACK, POPPY GETS UP AND STARTS WALKING DOWN ANOTHER GENTLER PATH WHICH LEADS TOWARDS "HER" WOODS AND HOME. SHE IS LOOKING EXTREMELY HAPPY.

WELL, THAT WAS NICE!

MATILDA

IT'S A WONDERFUL EVENING IN JUNE AND BOTH MATILDA AND GIORGIO HAVE PUT A JACKET ROUND THEIR SHOULDERS, SO THEY CAN SIT OUTSIDE AND ENJOY THE VIEW ACROSS THE VALLEY WHILE HAVING THEIR AFTER-DINNER COFFEE.

GIORGIO HAS JUST PICKED UP HIS COFFEE CUP.

Now do I suspect a tremor there? Poor Giorgio! He'd hate that.

'Thank you, Matilda. That was splendid! I must definitely take you out one evening for dinner.'

MATILDA ARCHES HER RIGHT EYEBROW.

'Well, that'll get the village talking. And where exactly were you thinking of taking me? Not much around here. And anyway, I like to be tucked up in bed by nine. No Giorgio, dinner was a great big thank you for all you're doing for Poppy.'

GIORGIO'S RATHER STERN EXPRESSION SOFTENS.

'You're welcome, Matilda. What a good idea you had! She's doing splendidly! Such a nice girl.'

MATILDA ABSENTLY STARTS DEAD HEADING THE RAMBLING ROSE ON THE WALL BESIDE HER.

'My idea? She didn't need much convincing. Mentioned it, and she was up here like a shot. She's told me some very gruesome stories about Casualty in London. Do you know the percentage of Heroin addicts and underage prostitutes in the city? I was shocked, Giorgio. Truly shocked. I know it's not all roses here. Ha ha!'

MATILDA THROWS THE DEAD ROSES ONTO A NEARBY BORDER.

'But there's no dirty needles in the kiddies' playground, and prostitutes would have a hard job finding any work at all... Of course, the rest of the family, or some of them, disapprove and think Poppy could do better. What a load of rubbish! So pleased I didn't go to the wedding...'

MATILDA TURNS HER BEEDY EYES ONTO GIORGIO.

'Have you ever paid for sex, Giorgio?'

GIORGIO GOES AN UNHEALTHY SHADE OF DARK RED AND STARTS COUGHING.

'Matilda! What a question!'

Humm, but you haven't answered me, have you Giorgio?

'Anyway, we've got off the point. I thought Poppy would get so terribly bored here, but she seems to have fallen in love with the place.'

'It's worked out splendidly, Matilda.'

GIORGIO FINISHES HIS COFFEE AND SMACKS HIS RIGHT HAND ON HIS THIGH.

'Splendidly.'

POPPY

IT'S THE MORNING AFTER MATILDA AND GIORGIO'S DINNER. POPPY HAS SURGERY AND - SURPRISE, SURPRISE – SHE'S RUNNING A TRIFLE LATE. AS POPPY GETS CLOSER TO CATARINA AND STEFANO'S BAR, SHE SPIES A LOT OF BUNTING THAT HAS BEEN DRAPED OUTSIDE FROM ONE LAMP POST TO ANOTHER, AND BALLOONS! THERE IS ALSO AN INORDINATE NUMBER OF PEOPLE HANGING AROUND FOR 9.30 ON A WEEKDAY MORNING.

Oh, lovely! Must be a birthday. Perhaps Catarina's or Stefano's.

POPPY SIGHS HAPPILY.

This is why, I love this place. There's a real feeling of community.

I think, Poppy Summer, June might well be my favourite month so far. They're probably already sweltering down on the plains, but it's perfect here. Clear blue sky, and everything finally out, in leaf and in flower. Now I must try and leave home ten minutes earlier, so that I can walk the back way through the woods, or just take it more slowly along the road. It is truly all magnificent!

AS POPPY IS APPROACHING THE BAR, SHE SPOTS NUMEROUS PATIENTS.

'Buongiorno, Signora Maria. How is your arthritis?'

'Buongiorno, Dottoressa. Much better. You are a wonder! We all say so, and look what you've gone and done now!'

SIGNORA MARIA PROUDLY POINTS AT THE BALLOONS AND BUNTING.

POPPY IS LOOKING RATHER PERPLEXED.

What have I done? How very strange. Perhaps it's a tradition. Perhaps they have a Saint's Day for doctors. Yes, that'll be it! There's a saint for everything. How sweet, they are. Giorgio should be here, because it's his saint as well.

'Ah! Signor Rampazzo! How is your shoulder? It's definitely looking a lot better. I hope you're taking it easy.'

'Molto meglio, Dottoressa. If you need any carpentry doing, just give me a whistle.'

Whistle I will, definitely better than the phones up here.

'Comunque, Dottoressa. Congratulazioni.'

'Thank you Signor Rampazzo. The town really shouldn't have gone to all this bother.'

'Oh yes, they most definitely should! Nobody in Italy has ever won 373,000,000 euro before.'

POPPY

POPPY HAS TRAVELLED SOME WAY TO DO HER SHOPPING.

SHE'S WEARING BIG DARK GLASSES AND A BASE BALL CAP WELL PULLED DOWN, WITH A VERY UNATTRACTIVE AND BAGGY TRACKSUIT OF AN UNDEFINABLE – LOOKS AS IF IT WAS PUT IN A DARK WASH BY MISTAKE - COLOUR.

SHE'S WORRIED SHE WILL BE RECOGNISED WHICH IS SOMEWHAT MANIACAL OF HER AS, YES, HER WIN HAD BEEN IN ALL THE NATIONAL PAPERS. BUT THERE HAD BEEN NO NAME GIVEN AND DEFINITELY NO PICTURE SHOWN: YET.

POPPY IS STANDING IN FRONT OF A VAST ARRAY OF BISCUITS.

Oh, my goodness! What an enormous choice! I definitely need lots of biscuits to go with the lots of tea I'm drinking.

POPPY PICKS UP A PACKET.

Classic Italian biscuits...

SHE PUTS THEM BACK AND PICKS UP A PACK WRAPPED IN DULL BROWN PAPER.

Not too much sugar, wholewheat flour blahdy – blah: they look OK...

Oh, hang on!

There's a big packet over there, that's buy two and get one free!

Can't be bad...

POPPY MOVES TO THE BASKET CONTAINING THE BIG BARGAIN PACKS.

Nah, chocolate though. Not crazy about chocolate biscuits, cookies yes, but not chocolate through and through.

POPPY MOVES FURTHER DOWN THE AISLE.

Now, there's a nice packet! And they look really healthy! Let me just...

POPPY PICKS UP A PACK.

My God! Bit pricey!

POPPY FREEZES WITH THE PACKET OF OATMEAL AND DATE COOKIES IN HER HAND.

Poppy Summers! What's the problem?

You can buy every single packet of biscuits on the shelf: you can buy the whole damn supermarket!

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

Once upon a time there was the sweetest of girls called Poppy. She lived at the top of a tower in the midst of an enchanted and wolf-infested forest, where she had been imprisoned by her two extremely wicked sisters, The only person who visited the tower was her granny Matilda, bringing her biscuits and a jug of milk every single day.

Sorry, I had forgotten for a moment.

This is a modern fairy tale and so: Poppy, yes; tower, most definitely not; Poppy's sisters, yes, but they are not wicked at all. And Matilda doesn't have to bring food every day, because Poppy can undoubtedly fend for herself.

So, let me begin again.

Once upon a time there was an extremely kind and pretty girl called Poppy.

Although Poppy had been born and brought up in Essex, she decided to go and settle in the small mountain town where her Grandparents had retired to after having sold Matilda's dress shop.

It was a splendid and enchanting place - so no enchanted forest, but we do have an enchanting village.

It was the magical village she had always come to for her holidays when she was a child.

Monte Lento.

Luckily for Poppy (what a fortunate girl, she appears to be) there had been an extremely decent job just sitting there for her at Monte Lento

So, she had a good job and had also started making friends.

Lucky, lucky Poppy.

But one glorious day – the sun always seemed to shine in Monte Lento – Poppy had perhaps a little too much good luck.

She won the biggest amount of money ever on the National Lottery. Poppy won over 300 million euro. Such money had never been won before, and nobody else would ever win such a sum again. It was almost as if the people who ran the lottery managed somehow, to block the win at a much lower amount. It was even discussed on various chat shows around the country; how detrimental it was, winning such an extraordinary amount of money. Damaging to both mind and body.

Or were people just jealous?

The local festivities that had started outside Catarina and Stefano's bar, carried on all day, with people insisting she had a drink with them or, once she had escaped back home, arriving on her doorstep with cake or whatever they considered their specialty. Everybody in Monte Lento was so happy for their local doctor.

'You must eat, Dottoressa Poppy, you must eat.'

Food seemed to be the solution to everything in Italy, and Poppy's fridge and cupboards were very soon groaning with cakes, biscuits, salames, local cheese, jam, chutney and much more. Perhaps the strangest was a jar of cauliflower that looked horribly like the pickled brains that had been in the lab at uni. Well, she wouldn't be tasting that! To be honest, she didn't fancy anything at the moment.

But it would all die down, wouldn't it? And then she could get back to normal.

Poppy started by insisting that Alma - who had bought the ticket for her- should definitely take half. It may well have been the chat shows, or just that Alma was feeling so much better since Poppy had dealt with her bowels and the floating spots in front of her eyes – the twitch was still there, but you can't expect miracles – that she point-blank refused.

She went on to explain: you don't give a present and then want it back again, do you?

Well, that was true, thought Poppy. But then the present wasn't normally 373,000,000 euro.

Perhaps Alma hadn't grasped how much the win was. But then neither had Poppy really. Anyway, she would just get on with her life until the reality sank in and then; she could start to think about how to spend such an absurd amount of money.

Well, it wasn't possible.

In theory, the names of SuperEnalotto winners were never revealed, but then, it wasn't common for the whole town where the winning ticket was bought, to know about it.

Monte Lento did.

And when the press latched onto the story: young, pretty doctor from the UK comes to work in the Italian Mountains and then goes and wins the most amazing amount of money; there was no letting go. Poppy's name and picture were splashed across every local, national and even a few international front pages.

So, her idea of obviously burying her head in the sand, was just never going to work. It was most unsettling. There was surgery of course, there were her patients. But she couldn't concentrate with so many contradictory thoughts flying around inside her head. And her motto very quickly became: take it one step at a time.

Her first step was the barn.

She had no intention of budging because she loved it there, job and all. Just as long as people let her get on with it.

The barn was now hers.

Although her mother and sisters, or to be more precise Daisy, said she really was letting the side down: living in a barn, when she could be living in a castle, for goodness' sake!

What a load of rot! Everyone she knew, and apparently many that she didn't, had very specific ideas about how she should now be spending her money.

Poppy dug her heels well into her job and her freshly renovated home. And wasn't she happy that communication was so sketchy up there, otherwise she might have literally exploded with everything being thrown at her by family, friends and whoever. The only people who seemed totally unfazed by her very weighty windfall, were Nonna Matilda, Lisa, and of course Dad back in the UK.

Dad had said straight away that once she'd got her plans sorted, he'd deal with everything. Which was such a relief. She'd never thought in her wildest dreams, that she'd be needing a personal banker.

Giorgio sweet as he was, started treating her as if she was made of glass. Whenever in her presence, he would gingerly hover nearby – but not too much so – with his arms slightly open; as if she was about to crack and needed to be caught before smashing into a thousand pieces. It was most bizarre.

Lisa said, she was joking of course, that Poppy must find herself a man very quickly and have umpteenth children, so that she had someone to leave all her "dosh" to.

'You can't leave it all to Bread and Butter.'

'Or, I know what...' cried Lisa, as she was fiddling with her blond curls in front of the office window, '... you can buy a football team! They cost a fortune, apparently'

Very funny, thought Poppy, who loathed football.

But it was nice and normal; it was just Lisa being her silly self.

And then the strangest thing happened.

CHAPTER TWO

All the men from her past life and even a few girls, strangely enough, came marching out of the woodwork.

And so, who was the first?

James.

James, long-term boyfriend turned fiancé and who had then practically ignored her at Daisy's wedding: that James. James with that awful floppy forelock. Why hadn't she noticed it before? Anyway, he turned up on her doorstep, saying he was just passing.

Ha! thought Poppy.

You don't pass Monte Lento, it's just not possible; you have to make a very special effort to get there. Poppy was exhausted. Surgery had been long and then she'd been out home visiting all afternoon. She peered at the growing gloom behind James. She almost felt as if she was hallucinating. What was he doing here?

'Where's Amanda?'

'Oh, her' replied James vehemently '... she's history!'

Now that, sounds like a line from some film.

James moved a little closer and stared -after having flicked his hair away- deeply and sincerely into his ex-girlfriend's eyes.

'Poppy, I have missed you terribly.'

'Didn't look like it at the wedding.'

'I couldn't bear it, Poppy, to come and talk to you, to be near you... it was too much. The truth is, I just can't stop thinking about you.'

Poppy was definitely not in the mood for such utter rubbish, and just wanted to get rid of James as quickly as possible. He must have come in a car, and so he could go away in it. It wasn't as if he was stuck. Poppy wondered how she could have been his devoted girlfriend, because, she honestly couldn't find anything appealing about him at the moment; she was horrified to notice that his upper lip was almost invisible: and his chin! ... She must have been totally blind for all those years.

Poppy frantically tried to make out a vehicle of some kind parked in the lane.

'Where's your car? You have got one, haven't you?'

'I came up in a taxi, the driver was a rather grumpy old type.'

'Yes, I think I know him.' Poppy was beginning to feel even more tired and hopeless.

James now turned his insurmountable charm on and asked coyly: 'you don't have an extra pillow, by any chance? I mean, Poppy, it is getting on terribly and I can't walk back down to the city.'

'You're not staying here!' barked Poppy, surprising both James and herself with her fierceness.

'I'll give you directions to Nonna Matilda's and you can sleep in her spare room. I'll give her a ring straightaway.'

It wasn't difficult to explain how to get to her Nonna's house and then she basically slammed the door in James' surprised face.

'Oh, and James...' Poppy added just before the final push.

'Yes, Poppy?' asked James hopefully through the extremely small space left, between door and frame.

'... get a haircut.'

It all happened so quickly, that he hadn't had time to initiate Plan B... which was to tell Poppy, he had discovered he had an extremely rare and incurable type of cancer. Good job he didn't, because Poppy would have undoubtedly laughed in his face.

As James trudged back down the lane, he wondered if Poppy was going a bit loopy. Cut your hair? What was that all about? Nonna wasn't overly happy to have James staying the night; she'd always found him a bit of a drip. But she came to the conclusion that she'd prefer him with her, than dripping all over her favourite and filthy-rich granddaughter. She'd phone Gastone up very early the next morning, and get him to take James back down the mountain.

Wasn't it strange, thought Poppy, how you can totally go off someone. She didn't feel guilty at all about her frosty reception. She was extremely happy he had gone, and so were Bread and Butter, who would now get their dinner.

When Poppy told Lisa the next day, her friend came out with a loud and derogatory snort.

'Wasn't very subtle, was he? "Just happened to be passing by my exe's," who has now become a multi-millionaire...'

Poppy was looking extremely grumpy for once, *there's nothing to be merry about. How would she like it, if she became a multi-millionaire overnight?*

'And...' added Lisa merrily, '...I really wouldn't be surprised, if you have a whole string of suitors queuing up outside your front door.'

Lisa swatted at Poppy playfully.

'Shoo shoo! I have a lot of work to get on with here.'

Poppy looked quickly at the computer screen where there was a game of Solitaire.

'Hah! Nice work, if you can find it!'

Lisa always made her feel better.

She decided to go to Nonna Matilda's, to check James had left.

He had, thank God!

The next to crawl out were neither boy nor girl friend.

It was Aunty Susannah and Uncle Francesco.

They came for tea at Nonna's, and would definitely not stay the night as they were awfully stretched for time. They'd be off before dusk because poor Francesco really was beginning to have problems driving in the dark. Too much small print, apparently; not in the sense of business contracts, but research footnotes that had to be scrupulously read at the bottom of each page. So, they were stretched for time, but definitely not for words.

Matilda was logically thrilled to see her daughter and son-in-law, although she was always in awe of these two super brains: who did Susannah get them from? Poppy was already sitting at the kitchen table when they arrived and was amused to see through the window: Aunty's brown slacks - did they really still exist? - and shiny orange nylon shirt. Uncle Francesco's attire was just so bland that Poppy had totally forgotten what he was wearing by the time they'd climbed back into their red Yaris Hybrid and started the arduous climb back down to civilization.

Aunty Susannah said they had been dying to come and tell Poppy about the latest "find" for quite some time.

'You did seem so terribly excited about it all at the wedding.'

Poppy could remember getting excited about a second slice of Wedding cake: it had been yummy.

Matilda tutted a little about the nylon shirt Susannah was wearing as she put the tea tray down on the table. And was there a definite whiff of perspiration in the air?

'Darling, at least buy cotton.'

'Mama, do you know how much water it takes to make a cotton shirt? This a perfectly usable shirt that I bought when at uni.'

Oh lawd! thought Matilda, *sweat stains and all...*

Aunty Susanna, once she was fed and watered; enthralled them all with a bullet-like speech about the latest dusty manuscript that had been unearthed, entitled: The Third Madrigal for our Lady Lost. To be accompanied by the harpsichord, of course.

'It's so terribly difficult to interpret, you see, 17th century music often is, and the library was flooded at some point which of course hasn't helped. Still, we're wading - ha ha, it's dry now, of course - through it all, and it is so terribly exciting, isn't it Francesco?'

Susannah's glasses kept slipping down her shiny sharp nose - that's nylon for you: makes you perspire! - until she wedged them impatiently against her tight bun of grey hair. Matilda was amused to see Poppy in a state of: enchantment? More likely; extreme boredom. It was wonderful what they were doing, earth shattering apparently. But neither of them could play the harpsichord. So why all the fuss?

Susannah droned on.

'Now, Poppy. I know you'll be fascinated to learn there's a crowd-funding thing going on. It would be so appreciated if you could give a little.'

"A little" which meant "a lot".

'You too, Mama, of course.'

By the time they left, both Matilda and Poppy were feeling quite dazed.

'What are you going to do, Treasure?'

'Well, give them "a little", of course.'

'How sweet of you! My goodness! They really do live in another world.'

'I envy them, Nonna. They'd know precisely what to do with my money; they'd buy that crumbling old palace in Venice and turn it into a harpsichord museum.'

Both Nonna and granddaughter laughed happily.

CHAPTER THREE.

With all the excitement of becoming very rich overnight, Poppy had rather neglected the fact that Bread and Butter needed “the chop”.

She had mentioned it to Matilda and Giorgio when they came for tea. Giorgio had inadvertently crossed his legs, and turned a little pale. And Matilda said: ‘if you must...’

Tom cats always went astray, and didn’t she know it. Because Matilda and Reginald had always refused to castrate their male cats. Saying there was plenty of space up in the mountains for the “wee wild beasties”, which was definitely an expression they’d picked up from Nanny. And then after leaving a very pungent trail of masculinity all around the house, and a lot of the neighbouring female kitties pregnant; they all sodded off!

‘So,’ said Poppy bending down to give her pair a stroke, ‘you really will be much happier, and you won’t smell.’

Poppy had also quite possibly put off the op, because she always felt so terribly shy around Filippo. She couldn’t work out why, because she definitely didn’t fancy him, did she? Anyway, it was time, and the cat carriers were got out. And how was it that cats always knew something was up, even before seeing them? Once she had both Bread and Butter safely in their transporters, looking out at her as if it was the end of the world, she walked round to Serena and Pietro’s.

Filippo was still living at home like his sister. Didn’t they have any pride, those two? Over 30 and still with Mum and Dad, although admittedly, their parents did seem the most easy-going and pleasant people Poppy had ever met. It was as if it had never crossed anyone’s mind in the Signori family that at a certain stage in life, there should be a parting of the ways. But no, all four of them seemed thoroughly content with the set- up.

‘Incredible,’ muttered Poppy, as she started feeling as if her arms were about to drop off.

‘You two are heavier than I thought.’

Their son had his surgery in a rather flimsy looking lean-to that had hastily been added to the house when Filippo, after finishing his intern, rather surprisingly stated he was going to set up his own surgery at home.

‘What is it with our children?’ Pietro had asked Serena.

‘We’ve given them both wings, and they keep flapping back home.’

Both husband and wife had then chuckled happily, so perhaps that was the attraction. There really was zero pressure in the Signori Household. And Filippo secretly wished for an into-the-wild

experience. Because there were wolves, and also the odd illusive bear in the surrounding area.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have to care for one of them?

So that was where Poppy was heading for; the lean-to. She would have loved to go into the Signori's cheery and chaotic - if there was one thing that niggled Serena, it was how messy her two children still were - kitchen for a cup of coffee. But Bread and Butter now weighed at least a ton each and had started meowing pitifully.

There was no putting it off any longer, and my God! She should have brought the car.

Poppy put Bread - or was it Butter? - down and pushed the door of the surgery open. She'd never been there before, because the cats had done all their jobs at home when Poppy was at work.

Filippo would tell Lisa and then Lisa would tell Poppy: 'it's time for those two kitties to have their jobs - leave the door unlocked (quite normal in Monte Lento) and Filippo will come round and sort them out. He seemed to have changed his mind about the original plan of her coming to the surgery to do them; there did seem to be an awful lot of sidestepping being done by the two of them. Were Filippo and Poppy avoiding each other on purpose? Seemed to be.

But not this morning.

Poppy was pleasantly surprised at how neat - messy at home, but extremely orderly in the surgery - and clean Filippo's surgery was. The skylight in the roof was propped open and so there wasn't even that wild, tangy smell you usually found at a vet's. There was a metal table in the middle of the room where animals could be placed and inspected, or so Poppy imagined, and that's where she placed the two cat carriers.

While she was busy telling Bread and Butter that they wouldn't feel a thing, Filippo was backing out of his "theatre", he loved to call it that - 'scalpel nurse'- as he imagined himself in the middle of a tricky operation on a wolf.

Anyway, Filippo was backing out of the theatre door with a big cage, that unfortunately had no wolf inside, but Precious, Caterina and Stefano's daughter's snappy Jack Russel.

Turning round; he came face to face with Poppy.

'Morning, Poppy.'

'Morning, Filippo.'

Shame Lisa wasn't there to see the deep red blush that had crept over both of their faces.

'Here they are, ready for the chop.'

Filippo winced painfully at Poppy's inappropriate terminology. It just sounded so brutal... and her being a doctor and all.

'Uhhh OK, Poppy'

Filippo wished his surgery was a whole lot bigger, he was feeling extremely hot and flustered.

My, God! What wonderful hair she has!

Poppy was also feeling caged in, just like Precious the Jack Russel, and she couldn't back away as she had the three chairs right behind her, placed against the adjoining wall.

Now, if I could just tuck that curl behind his ear, which keeps getting in front of his eye...

Filippo cleared his voice authoritatively.

'OK, Poppy. Just leave them here, and I'll get started. You can pick them up this afternoon.'

Oh! Look at her two front teeth, they cross over slightly. How sweet is that?

OK, Filippo.'

Poppy peered through Bread and Butter's netted windows. They had both gone quiet and were glaring back at her accusingly.

'So, see you later...'

Look at those biceps up there! My goodness, he's tall! Sign of honest, hard work there...

'Bye, Poppy.'

Poppy turned round to leave.

Groooan... can't she wear looser jeans? Look at that arse!

The surgery door clicked shut, and she was gone. Both of them literally shook themselves out of their stupor.

Biceps! Don't be silly, Poppy Summers!

Eyes like pools of liquid chocolate! Wake up, man!

Poppy decided she would invite Filippo out for a drink some time; they were almost colleagues, weren't they? And get rid of this silly infatuation or whatever it was.

Still, he hadn't treated her any different than normal. So that was refreshing. Another person who didn't see her as a walking gold mine.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next people to crawl out of the woodwork were Mum and Daisy.

They would be staying in the second bedroom of the newly converted barn, which now had a very generous en suite. And so, they were basically sleeping in the hay loft that they had been so scathing about. Strange, thought Poppy wryly, they always said they were both far too busy to drag themselves away from London and climb a mountain. Well, they now magically had the time. Rose would have come as well, but there was school, and Richard who was rushed off his feet, as always; definitely couldn't cope with everything on his own.

She's got more sense than the other two, thought Poppy.

Matilda was almost bristling when her daughter in law and stunning granddaughter – marriage definitely suited her – arrived. She had become so possessive of Poppy, and she knew the two elegant and sophisticated visitors - huh! what ridiculous shoes for the mountains - were here to scheme.

And so, they were.

The pair of them had got it into their sweet little heads, that Poppy was wasting away; up here in the mountains, and that she should come straight back to London. Come back to London and do the season, or whatever it was called these days.

Matilda was horrified, Poppy too.

There was a lot of whining and cajoling; and they hadn't even unpacked their suitcases yet.

'Darling, you can't positively stay here and ignore what's happened.'

Why did Mum always make her feel she was doing it all so totally wrong?

'Just think about all the good and positive things you can do with the money.'

'Exactly!' was Daisy's intervention, she was basically there to back Mum up.

'I'm not suggesting you do something all showy and selfish, Darling. That's not you. You can do so much good. But not here, Poppet, where the phone and Internet goes dead every five minutes.

You will fester here, Poppy!'

And then Mum had drawn her trump card.

'Daddy's looking so strained these days, I just hope there's nothing wrong; your coming back would cheer him up no end.'

Poppy had a real soft spot for her dad, and the feeling was most definitely reciprocated. It was the first she had heard about Dad not feeling well. Was Mum just playing on it? Or were there really

some health issues? Poppy suddenly felt her heart plummet: Dear Daddy! He had been so excited about her coming to Monte Lento. Nonna was nearby to keep an eye on her and it seemed, somehow, things were coming round full circle.

Matilda told Poppy that there was nothing wrong with her dad, apart from working too hard... *... and having to put up with his supercilious wife*, she added silently to herself.

Mum and Daisy hadn't actually told Poppy how long they were staying with her, which was a bit worrying. She couldn't bluntly ask them when they were leaving. They'd just arrived! Nonna claimed she most definitely could, and thumped her mug of tea down on the newly varnished table. She could hear Claire's heels on the wooden floor above as she was approaching the stairs. 'I'm off home. Let me know, Treasure, when you need reinforcements.'

'Darling, it all looks wonderful!' exclaimed Claire as she placed her very elegant right-hand shoe onto the new cotto flooring.

'The chandelier is divine!'

'Isn't it? I just thought that the table needed something nice and bright above it. It's Murano. But then of course, I can now buy as many biscuits as I fancy ...'

'Darling, I wouldn't call that chandelier biscuits.'

'Well, you know what I mean.'

Well, Claire didn't, and she wondered if her middle daughter was getting even flakier.

'Anyway, Poppet. It's turned into a nice little mountain retreat, that is, when you want to get away from it all.'

Mum was like a Chinese torture. Once she'd got something into her head, she couldn't let go; and she'd just keep on and on...

'Mum! I'm not coming back to the U.K. I'm doing the locals a valuable service here. Once people start forgetting about my windfall, and they almost have, it'll be back to work as normal.'

'Yes, Darling. I know you're a giver and not a taker, but just think about all the fun you could have back home. And, you could still be giving. There's lots of charities that would welcome you with open arms as an ambassador.'

Poppy couldn't think of anything worse. Having to go to events and networking all over the place. Becoming an Influencer! Good God! She knew exactly what was passing through Mum's mind, because London was the perfect place to find a suitable young man.

And sure enough: 'and just think of all the yummy men you'd meet.'

She makes them sound like a meal on a plate for goodness sake.

'You haven't got a boyfriend here, have you? And you're never going to find one, with the average male here being 80 or over....'

Poppy giggled: she suddenly had a very clear image of herself sitting on a shelf next to the biscuits.

'... and let's be honest, Poppet, you need a little looking after at the moment. You do seem to be a trifle on the hysterical side.'

Daisy had now come downstairs and joined the two of them at the table. She looked ready to pop out for drinks. Well, they could always go to Catarina and Stefano's...

Poppy giggled again.

Daisy and Mum glanced at each other; it was like a silent message: you carry on Daisy.

'Timothy's got heaps of friends who are just dying to meet you.'

Oh, my God! Would they never stop?

Luckily, Mum and sister Daisy didn't hang around long, and at a certain point they seemed to run out of steam and stopped badgering Poppy. But she wasn't fooled, they'd just changed tactics.

Poppy shivered, literally shivered on that bright and sunny morning, after they'd got into their rented four-wheel drive and driven back down the mountain.

What were they scheming now?

CHAPTER FIVE

It wasn't long after her mum and Daisy's visit that Poppy had a rather scary episode with her Jeep. She had obviously, she would have been extremely stupid not to, replaced the very old and capricious Jeep that had come with the job.

She had been sad to let it go. It seemed to belong to easier and more carefree times. There was no garage in Monte Lento to get things checked, and so she had got used to its little ways: the windscreen wipers, which she had always meant to change but never got round to, that didn't wipe but scraped; the reverse that could be so obstinate and then just sweetly slipped into place when she was totally exasperated by it; the dodgy tyres – Giorgio kept assuring her they were fine and still had a lot of life in them yet – OK, so why did she definitely find herself skidding when the road was wet or even worse when there was snow? And shouldn't a four-wheel drive happily climb any gradient like a mountain goat? There were times when Poppy had automatically leaned forward and bumped up and down on her seat to give the old thing some added momentum. No... there was no excuse. She had to buy herself a new vehicle as she was basically riding around in her potential coffin.

She went down to the car showroom with Dear Giorgio who said she needed a male companion with her when buying a car. Dear Sweet Giorgio, male he definitely was, but Poppy had a sneaky feeling he knew sod-all about cars. It would have been better to take Roberto who definitely knew his stuff. But it wasn't going to be hard. Poppy was going to be well and truly faithful, and replace the old one, with a spanking new one.

And oh, what a joy, it was!

There was no battle now with her Jeep, which obediently did every single thing it was summoned to do.

That was; until one late evening when she was driving back from her first birth. There hadn't been many of them recently and this was the first Poppy had actually assisted.

And what a nice couple, they were.

They'd moved into one of the top paddocks and were having a good go at dairy farming. They were also making their own cheese - sold at a local produce market two hamlets away – which Poppy had declared, after eating a big piece, was truly amazing. She was all for some new blood and enthusiasm in the neighbourhood; and it lowered the average age of her patients from 80 to 79 and a half!

It had taken the couple a little bit by surprise when Stella had fallen pregnant, because she was knocking on forty. A little bit by surprise, but not unpleasantly so. Stella had been adamant she wanted to have the baby at home, which had been bothering Poppy a trifle. What if something went wrong? Admittedly the pregnancy had been textbook perfect, but there was no popping along to the theatre for a cesarian when you lived up the top of the mountain.

Stella and Stefan said she would do just fine. Was that Stella or Poppy they were talking about? So, it was just Poppy and the midwife, who'd arrived just in time as she'd had to drive across a couple of mountains, present at the birth.

It did go really smoothly, and Poppy was mentally patting herself on the back while she drove back down the mountain. Perhaps she'd promote a bit of home deliveries... because everybody had seemed extremely happy and relaxed about the whole thing. But then, perhaps not. You needed a certain type of attitude, and possibly more...

Poppy had never acquired the habit of haring down the mountain side like all the local males - some females too - who seemed to think they were competing in a cross-country rally.

Because anything could be crossing the quiet country road, couldn't it? A Bambi like deer, a fox, a sweet little squirrel. Poppy hated to see a road kill.

She had nearly reached the village, when she was horrified to find her brakes weren't working. She'd just got to another bend, she'd basically had her foot on the brake the whole way down, when she started speeding up.

And horribly so.

Fuck! I've just had my most intense and tricky home visit, and I'm going to tumble down the side of the mountain and crash!

Was Poppy's immediate thought.

Alanis Morissette's song sprang to mind: *Isn't it ironic!*

No brakes in the mountains was just asking for trouble.

Poppy was now literally racing towards the last but one bend before the final descent, when an image flashed before her eyes.

The lane!

It was on the bend and it was a walking path that zig zagged back up the mountain.

Poppy took it, with stones flying from each side of the jeep and the engine screeching horribly. But it did the trick, the car was now slowing down and Poppy wrenched on the hand brake.

The car grumpily came to a halt.

Poppy was shaking from head to foot, she climbed out of the Jeep and sat down against a tree. It took her a good ten minutes to stop shaking and during that time she changed her mind about whom to phone. Giorgio would flap and Roberto definitely, more than happy to come and rescue his doctor and friend, would have a better idea about what had gone wrong. Poppy's chosen saviour arrived very promptly in his mum's Fiat Panda, informing her immediately, that the brake fluid must have sprung a leak. It was the only possible reason, and...

'Yes! Just Look!' he pronounced, as he peered inside the engine.

'No brake fluid... looks like a Friday afternoon job.'

'Which means?' asked poppy.

'Don't do anything properly, do they? In a rush to get home and start the weekend. Bet this was finished and certified on a Friday afternoon.'

Poppy wasn't so sure, and neither was Lisa when Poppy dropped in to tell her. She even put aside her thick, glossy magazine.

'Your car was tampered with; no doubt about it.'

Lisa loved a bit of drama, as she didn't get an awful lot of it at Monte Lento's Tourist Office. She peered intently into Poppy's face.

'Now, don't forget. You're now a very rich lady. So, who would benefit from your demise?'

Poppy was stunned by the very thought of it.

'Oh my God! My family. Nobody else.'

'Makes you think, doesn't it?'

Well, it made Poppy feel icily cold all over.

'And there was me thinking of going to the police. I don't think I will...'

'Told you!' said Lisa assertively, 'you've got to find a chivalrous man to marry, and share the loot with.'

"Loot!" Where did Lisa pick these expressions up from?

'Otherwise, you're never going to get rid of your slobbering family.'

"Slobbering!" Poppy wouldn't exactly say her family was slobbering. Her family was lovely, at least she thought so...

Lisa was warming up nicely to a faint idea she'd had. A crazy idea. But, wouldn't it be fun? And it would definitely take Poppy's mind away from the heavy stuff. Wouldn't she herself love to worry about spending a fortune? But all that money didn't seem to suit Poppy. She hadn't bought a single thing yet! Apart from the car. And look what had happened to that!

'You need a quest!'

'A what?' Poppy wasn't even sure she knew what a "quest" was. Perhaps something to do with King Arthur, round tables, and all that.

'Well, your suitors will be going on a quest. They must...'

Lisa drummed her perfect nails on the desk and stared into the space above Poppy's head.

'... slay the monster! That's it! And bring back its head to show you.'

Lisa chuckled happily at her absurd idea.

'And the winner grabs you!'

Poppy didn't think there were many monsters at Monte Lento, and had Lisa been eating the dried magic mushrooms that were supposedly found in the woods in autumn? And if her friend had..., could she have some too, please?

'And anyway, I haven't got any suitors, Lisa.'

'You will, you will. Just look at James. He was up here like a shot. There'll be more. Just wait and see.'

'And how can they slay the monster, when they don't know anything about your crazy quest?'

'Just you wait and see Poppy Summers. This is going to fun.'

CHAPTER SIX

Poppy had won the Italian Lottery in June. July had very quickly replaced June, and it had now slipped into August.

A time when the whole of the world seemed to go on holiday.

The two engineers at the National Centre of Earth Observation at Bristol University were no exception. Although, of course they had to take it in turns, otherwise nobody would be observing. It was the morning when they were swapping over.

The second engineer came into the lab looking extremely brown and relaxed.

'Well, I hope, I have as good a time as you so obviously have had,' said the first.

'It was great! You know, me and the misses were farting about and hadn't booked anything; too much choice, I always say. Well, we went to Monte Lento!'

'You never!'

'A bit of adventure and surprise is never a bad thing. So, I booked the flight, managed to get a taxi to take us there, would you believe? Went into the local tourist office. You would have fancied her, I'm telling you...'

'Who?'

'The bird in the tourist office, who spoke English better than you and me, and she booked us into about the only B and B for miles around. I'm telling you, it's a dream up there.'

'Well, we knew it was. So; long walks, healthy food and early nights wink wink, was it?'

'Well, actually no! The whole of the village was transformed into an outdoors dining room on Saturday evening. They'd put tables all along the high street and that's where we all had dinner.'

'So, you had an invite?'

'Not really. Melissa and I had gone out for a stroll, hoping to find a take away in the centre, and just came across it! Dinner Under the Stars. It was quite magical. We were immediately found a seat, and wow! The food and wine were amazing! It just went on and on... with candles all along the middle of the tables, so you could admire the perfectly starry sky - think I spotted you up there, ha ha. It was well and truly something, I'm telling you.'

'Bet it cost you...'

'No, it was ridiculously cheap. We were even introduced to an English girl who lives there. Heaven knows what she's doing up there!'

'Well, next time I'm coming too.'

‘Melissa and I definitely want to go again, if that’s what they do every Saturday evening. They must just stick all their dining tables outside and start cooking. Easy! I’m telling you; I’ve never seen anything like it...’

Poppy seemed to have got over her “brush with death”, as Lisa liked to call it, and still adamantly thought it was a duff from Friday afternoon. Roberto’s explanation did seem to make perfect sense.

Roberto had been quite adamant about getting in touch with the showroom where she’d bought the car, but it was now working splendidly after its visit to the mechanic’s. And perhaps in the back of her mind, she didn’t want to know the absolute truth.

No, the car was a last-minute rushed job. Somebody had inadvertently poked a screwdriver into the brake fluid container. Could happen, couldn’t it?

It was now a Friday afternoon in Mid-August and Poppy was extremely excited about tomorrow evening when there would be the much acclaimed and anticipated: Cena Sotto Le Stelle. She had to keep telling herself to concentrate as she was doing an afternoon surgery; and she definitely didn’t want to give the same shoddy service that she’d got with the car.

Preparations for the evening had been going on for quite some time. There would be a series of tables snaking all along the street, and the whole village would be there with family and friends. The menu had been pinned up on Stefano and Caterina’s notice board for weeks in advance, with various dishes being crossed out, changed, or added; as the whole village expressed their opinion. The dinner would start at 9.30 so it was going to be nice and dark.

Poppy gasped as she walked round the last bend in the street.

All the trestle tables had been covered with white linen table cloths, and there were flickering candles all along them. The village had even managed to provide real cutlery, glasses and china – heaven knew how it would all get back to its rightful owner after the dinner. The smell of cooking that was being done in Don Matteo’s roomy communal kitchen was divine. Poppy laughed as she spotted Lisa dressed as a rather formal waitress, and thought she might well see her best mate working harder than she’d ever done before.

This is what she loved about Monte Lento; this sense of community. And she admired tremendously the slow trickle of young people who were coming back to settle in this quiet,

sleepy village. And wasn't she doing her bit? Being here to assist both new and older members of the community... Poppy hadn't felt so content for quite some time.

She had just spotted Nonna and Giorgio, when she was stopped in her tracks by a very dapper Ludovico; the young count who had rented and then sold the barn to her.

"Dapper", Poppy giggled to herself, it did so totally suit Ludovico, with his perfectly pressed trousers, pristine white shirt and blazer. He really was a very fine specimen, and Poppy grinned: as if he'd come out of a laboratory.

'Now, Doctor Poppy. Not any old seat for you. Come with me, as you have the place of honour this evening.'

And there was Ludovico, pulling out the chair for Poppy, giving it a quick wipe with his cotton handkerchief – you didn't see many of those these days – and gently pushing her down.

'You, Poppy, are doing absolutely nothing this evening. Apart from eating and being merry.'

Well, if you insist... Poppy thought happily.

The evening flew by. The food was great and Poppy washed it all down with some extremely nice wine. Everything was sourced locally: the salame had been made by Stefano's dad; the pickles by Catarina; the tortellini by Serena and a team of mates; the meat was being grilled on a nearby barbecue by the men; and the cakes! Well, the cakes had been made by about every female in the village. Poppy didn't think there was a prize for the best one, but there was a lot of tension as the plates with an assortment of various tarts, biscuits and sponges were being passed round. It was all about light fingers and firm beating, apparently.

Poppy was always amazed at how self-sufficient the little village was.

There was even music being piped very discreetly through speakers, that had logically been set up by Roberto. He had diligently compiled a play list that included both Italian and English songs to suit the locals and Dottorissa Poppy.

How sweet he was?

How sweet everyone was?

Poppy ate and drank far too much, and was positively glowing by the end of the evening.

There had been a rather weird moment when she'd had a chat with a really nice couple from Bristol, who just happened to be there on holiday. She couldn't really understand why they'd come precisely here, and they definitely didn't understand what Poppy was doing there. She just left it, it just felt like too much hard work to go into details on such a wonderful and magical

evening. Every time Lisa passed, she winked dramatically at Poppy and nodded to Ludovico who was sitting snugly by her side.

Was it the wine, or just everything about the evening?

But Poppy was finding herself more and more attracted to Ludovico.

He really was so very charming, and Poppy discovered that he was also good at listening.

Something that not everyone was great at. She found herself telling him an awful lot about her and her family, about the move to Monte Lento; about winning the Lottery. Ludovico hung on every single word of Poppy's

He'd politely looked surprised about her win, as if he hadn't known anything about it – impossible – and told her quite sternly that she must think very carefully about what to do with the money.

But then, maybe he really could understand about money, coming from a rich family and all that.

Perhaps invest in something that involved the local community? Give it some much needed vitality? His advice did seem to make very good sense.

Poppy stared at him as he was explaining about injecting funds into a local community and stuff.

He was quite light for a Sicilian. There was even a little red in his wavy hair, and he had the most incredible deep blue eyes. It all became clear when yes; the Asmundo family was originally from Sicily, but Granny had been Scottish. Poppy stared on: what an interesting combination! She had never understood the expression "chiseled" before, but was beginning to now. Because gazing at him in the flickering candle light; he would look so impressive in stone, a true Michelangelo!

It was logical that after cake and coffee that the count-to-be, when it was his rightful turn that is, should escort Poppy home. And of course, he would come in to see the building work that had been done on his original barn.

Instead of having coffee, they opened another bottle of wine, and sat very close together on Poppy's new bottle-green sofa. Poppy was now feeling very light-headed and giddy. She was also beginning to lust terribly after "Ludy". She had been living in a very arid and deserted place for quite some time now, and this seemed just perfect to get herself a much-needed shag.

Shag! Poppy started giggling like a teenager.

Ludovico was staring very seriously at Poppy.

'Doctor, I have this terrible pain...' Ludovico began to unbutton his shirt buttons slowly.

My God! His chest! Poppy couldn't take her eyes off his amazing pectorals major... he just had to work out with a chest like that!

'Where exactly?' she asked, arching her right eyebrow.

'Here, Doctor. Right here.'

Ludovico gently took Poppy's hand and placed it on his torso.

'But it moves, Doctor... like this...'

Ludovico slowly slid Poppy's hand down towards the top of his trousers.

Oh, God! Just take those trousers off! Please! Now!

Poppy was aware, somewhere, in her extremely randy state, of a groaning noise.

Was it Ludy, who was turning into a rabid beast? *Yes, please!*

'Perhaps it's easier Doctor, if I just slip off my trousers. What do you think?'

'Oh yes! Most definitely'... was Poppy's enthusiastic reply... 'please do!'

The groaning was now become a deep rumbling... hot-blooded Sicilians, no doubt.

'But let me kiss you first, Doctor. I really need to kiss you right now....'

Well, if you really must... and then we'll get back to the trousers...

Ludovico took Poppy in his arms and gave her a very long and deep kiss.

It was just as they were coming up for air that the rumbling turned into one very loud crash.

The flaming passion died instantaneously.

What was that?

Poppy's Murano, glass chandelier was shattered into a thousand multi - coloured pieces on the table and all over the living room cotto tiles.

Poppy's first thought was, right now? When I was just about to get a good bonk! But then looking at all the glass around her, she was really sorry for the chandelier. It had been beautiful and had cost her a very pretty penny. And look at it now! In a million bits all over the floor. Thank goodness Bread and Butter, undoubtedly, were upstairs on her bed.

And if they'd been sitting at the table, drinking their wine?

It would have landed right on top of their heads.

Ouch!

Ludovico hastily did up his shirt and started making an attempt at checking what had actually happened. Not easy, with all that glass around the place. The big brass hook that had been screwed firmly into the beam above the table was on the floor, with its three chains still obstinately attached. Ludovico picked up the hook and chains, crunched back over to the sofa, and somberly presented it to Poppy.

'Well, must say: nasty bit of workmanship there!'

He was beginning to look quite uncomfortable with the situation, and there was no way they could pick things up – ha ha – from where they'd left off.

Poppy was quite happy to escort him to the front door, and was already dying to clear up the mess before eight little, delicate paws came padding down the stairs.

Ludovico cupped Poppy's face tenderly in his hands when they were well out of Splinter Land, and gave her a last lingering kiss.

'We have some unfinished business, Poppy, and if I may take the liberty, I'll bring round the plans for the flat conversions of the Palazzo. It could be a good investment for you.'

Ludovico stared intently into Poppy's eyes, 'you will be seeing me very, very soon, My Sweet.'
And off he went.

Poppy had the hook and chains in her handbag when she went round to tell Lisa everything the next day. Nearly everything, because she wasn't going to tell Lisa about their silly Doctor and Patient exchange.

'It rather put an end to our very-near sexual bonding. Poor Ludovico went away looking somewhat startled, I thought.'

Poppy pulled the hook and chains out of her bag.

'Do you think, we can consider this the head of our monster? In a way Ludovico did save me, because I wasn't sitting at the table as I normally do. That chandelier would have landed right on top of my head!'

'... well could be,' although Lisa wasn't really convinced. 'Anyway, Ludovico always looks a bit startled since he's had some surgery on his face'

'Plastic surgery!'

It was like pouring icy water all over Poppy's ardour.

'It's not as if he saved me, really...'

Poppy had gone right off Count Ludovico and his advances. She sadly put the hook and chains back in her bag.

'... and a hook and chains can never replace a head...'

'I've heard,' informed Lisa, 'that our Little Count has got some very expensive and unsavoury habits, and that the family is rocking more than rolling in money. There was talk about them turning the old palazzo into holiday flats, which has a rather desperate ring about it.'

'Well,' concluded Poppy. 'I think we can cross him of the list of suitable suitors...'

Lisa giggled. Wasn't this fun? Although loose screws, heavy swinging glass chandeliers and failing brakes were perhaps worrying.

Had somebody got it in for Poppy?

'Anyway,' concluded Lisa, 'we'll keep it. I know you've gone off him, but Ludovico's hook counts as the first "trophy" ... and... we can put it here, well out of the way.'

Lisa placed it proudly in the centre of the empty desk that had been pushed against the back wall. Poppy had always vaguely wondered why there was another desk in the office, and Lisa now explained.

'It was my colleagues' desk, when there were two of us. You wouldn't believe how busy we were, Poppy. The place used to be positively buzzing, with people popping in all day long... not that it's not still buzzing. But I must admit.'

Lisa got her nail file out of her desk drawer and peered suspiciously at her immaculate nails.

'But the local council had to let Vera go.'

'Vera worked here! Well, I never!'

'And she was very good!' stated Lisa, 'and now I have to tackle everything by myself; rushed off my feet, I am!'

Poppy excused herself and while she was walking to Caterina's and Stefano's, she tried to picture the Tourist Office "buzzing", and people "popping" in and out. She was shocked to realize that she'd never seen a single soul inside the office.

Still, she loved the idea of putting all the "severed heads" on Vera's old desk and then getting down to decide... It was really silly, but such good fun; and Lisa always made her smile.

But the hook was definitely no contender.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It wasn't long before there was something else sitting on the trophy table, next to that very sturdy hook that should never, ever have unscrewed itself from the beam above Poppy's table.

But what was it, exactly?

It looked like a chunky brush that you might use on a dog that had extremely tough hair.

Lisa was watering her numerous poinsettias that were still flourishing nicely, she had explained to Poppy it was because they had a good amount of light, but not directly, and Poppy was now explaining about the strange object on Vera's old desk.

'It comes from that "monster" of a computer that is standing on my desk in the surgery.'

'There you go,' Lisa tweaked off a couple of slightly inferior looking leaves, and buried them in the pot, 'you should have changed it when you got your dosh.'

"Dosh", Poppy smiled to herself. Where did Lisa pick these expressions up from?

'I know, Lisa. But Giorgio is still in charge there. He keeps all the patients' info and updates their files. I caught him whistling while he was tapping away the other day, it really does seem to have given him a new lease of life. Anyway, I went into the surgery Monday morning and it was smoking! Literally smoking, Lisa, and there was this this terrible smell.'

Poppy took a sip off her coffee, 'Lisa, why are you breaking off those perfectly healthy leaves?'

Lisa turned round and stared accusingly at Poppy, 'makes room for new ones, doesn't it? Miss Perfect Green Fingers... And then?'

'Well, luckily; who walked in promptly at 9 o, clock?'

'I have no idea, Poppy. But I am itching to find out. A technician from IBM? Although I don't think they make them anymore. You really were asking for trouble, Poppy Summers; not changing it.'

And Lisa patted her sleek Mac, that was sitting open on the desk and having a nap.

'Roberto! Roberto walked in. Good job my first appointment was late, as knowing Roberto; seeing my door closed, he would have gone back home and forgotten what was wrong with him.'

'And?' Lisa had finished her pruning and was now seated in front of Poppy with one of the briosh that Poppy had brought in with the coffee.

'And, he smelt it! Straight away. "What's that smell, Poppy?" and he had the back off the computer in a jiffy. He seems to take a screwdriver everywhere with him. He is now my hero, Lisa.'

Poppy squints her eyes and stares above Lisa's head.

'Don't you think, he looks a bit like an older Harry Potter?'

'Don't tell me he had a spare part for an IBM computer from the 80s in his bag, as well?'

'Don't be silly!' Poppy opened the bag of brioche, peered inside, but then quickly screwed it up again.

'He had a tinker about in the afternoon when I was out of the studio, and the next day, he came up to the house and proudly presented me with' Poppy pointed at Vera's desk, 'that; whatever it is, which he has now replaced. Isn't he a sweetie? Giorgio was so relieved, because we would have lost everything. He also brought a couple of floppy discs that he's saved everything on.'

Poppy unscrewed the bag of brioche once again, took out the remaining one, and broke it into two.

'So, you see, Roberto has saved my bacon. You know, he really is quite cute in a nerdy sort of way...'

Lisa snorted, upsetting a few flakes of brioche that were lying on her desk, 'if you say so, Poppy.'

The two friends had turned once more, to contemplate the two trophies, when the glass door of the Monte Lento Tourist Office opened; and very good-looking lady with short white hair stepped inside.

Lisa was immediately excited: a visitor! And one that looked as if she would just love to go on a walking tour. Poppy had just picked up the second half of the last remaining brioche, when she realized who the lady was.

'Nanny!'

This confused Lisa no end. Wasn't Matilda, Poppy's nanny? And not this lady who was now hugging Poppy very tightly.

Once Poppy had introduced Margaret to Lisa, and explained that she had been the family's nanny when Poppy and her sisters were children, she was extremely curious to know what her wonderful nanny was doing there.

'Granny's worried about you, Pet.'

Poppy reveled in Margaret's rich and warm Scottish brogue. She was trying to work out how old Nanny was. She must be at least 80: she was looking truly amazing!

Nanny Marge had of course heard all about the lottery win, and had been ecstatic for Poppy, but then on second thoughts: it really was a sinful amount.

And Marge loved all of them, she really did, but Claire and the girls, or more to the point, Claire and Daisy, could be such terrible snobs. She hadn't been able to come down to the wedding, but she'd seen the photos, and Daisy had most definitely done very well for herself.

Matilda had told her that there seemed to be some subtle, but serious scheming going on - to try and convince Poppy that the best place for her was London, where she could marry into the right type of family, and possibly spoil everyone.

It would be so very difficult to be generous to family you hardly ever saw, because you were stuck half way up a mountain.

The troops had retreated temporarily, but Matilda had no doubts; they were planning another attack. Marge was sure her friend's fears were spot on. She peered critically at Poppy. She looked better than expected, but had lost weight; and there was a nervous energy about her which Marge didn't like. She was also biting her nails again, Poor Pet.

'Are you staying, Nanny?' asked Poppy, hopefully.

'For a while, yes, but don't worry, I'll sleep at Granny's.'

'Oh no you won't!' said Poppy firmly, 'you're coming to me. It'll be wonderful, and I'll feel about six all over again.'

Nanny Marge was probably about the tidiest person in the universe, and she absently picked up the two objects on the spare desk and started looking around for a bin.

She visibly jumped when Poppy and Lisa shouted in perfect unison: 'no!'

It all sounded a bit silly; she knew it did, but Poppy tried to explain what the hook and whatever-its name-was, were doing on the desk.

Marge was entranced. She hadn't had a lot of romance in her own life, too busy looking after other people's children, and so to live a modern-day fairy tale was wonderful.

'I want to meet the two young men straightaway!' she proclaimed.

Lisa punched her right fist in the air, 'yes, we now have a Fairy God Mother!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

And so, she did.

Marge met both contenders very soon.

It was lovely to be staying with her old charge, but she quickly discovered that Poppy was more out than in. She might have won an atrocious amount of money, but she was still the local doctor, and it took up a lot of her time. Nanny Marge was extremely proud of her; she always had been a very generous girl, and evidently, still was.

Working so hard also took Poppy's mind off the problem of what to do with all her money. Dad had been wonderful, saying, 'take your time,' but that time seemed to be up. He had now started gently reminding her that she couldn't just let it sit there forever. It went against his professional etiquette as a banker, and it's what basically Ludovico had said as well. But every time she promised herself, she would sit down and have a good think, she got an instant pounding in her ears.

So, for now, she was just working like mad and being pampered by Nanny.

Nanny's cooking had always been legendary, and so she was also often preparing dinner for Lisa, or Matilda and Giorgio, sometimes all three: the more the merrier had always been her motto. And Poppy's barn took on a much more jovial and bustling feel, not that she had been moping around in it, but it was very big and echoey for one person and two cats.

Marge had washed, wiped and scrubbed about everything she possibly could, but there came a time when she had literally exhausted all her dusting, sorting (she was extremely careful not to overstep any of Poppy's boundaries) and tidying chores.

And it was only 10 in the morning!

So, she took to walking.

She had always enjoyed walking in her beloved Highlands or wherever work had taken her; and she was delighted to find a series of well sign-posted paths in the slopes around Monte Lento.

It was her second walking expedition when she discovered the Count's Palazzo.

It was set slightly higher than the village itself – appropriate, thought Marge – and was really quite striking, or let's say: had been.

Marge looked critically at it. It would have suited an urban setting much more, as there was nothing alpine about the solid art-deco residence. It could have been described as quite "noble", if it wasn't for the rusty scaffolding covering the whole building. It would definitely look splendid

once the renovation had been completed, no doubt about it, and Marge could imagine some wonderful original features; she would just love a little peep inside.

Nanny Marge had been born curious.

Villa Promessa was early 20th century, with its tangled vegetation having been an extremely pretty Alpine – so at least something had respected its surroundings – Garden, designed, of course, by a leading landscape gardener of the time. Money had been spent lavishly on the building as the industrial family from Bergamo had had a great deal of it. Yes, funds they most definitely had, but unfortunately not the class; so, they were more than thrilled with their only daughter's betrothal to Ludovico's Great Grandfather as a title was in the offing.

As there were no boundaries, Marge really didn't think she was trespassing, and anyway, she couldn't believe anyone was actually living in the building now.

She was startled to find the French windows wide open round the back, and Ludovico sitting outside on a plum - coloured velvet sofa, having a smoke.

Now that, eyeing up the wonderful sofa that Ludovico had sprung up from, is most definitely period!

After having been taken somewhat by surprise, the charming Ludovico kicked in. And when he realized that she must have something to do with their pretty – and now extremely rich – local doctor; he was positively gushing.

Marge reported back to Poppy and Lisa that very same evening at dinner.

'He was absolutely charming, and such a good-looking young man, although I think I startled him somewhat...'

Lisa and Poppy both chipped in, 'he always looks like that.'

Marge stopped serving and stared into the distance with her spoon mid-air.

'Definitely could have done with a good beating!'

Lisa and Poppy shrieked with laughter, 'what needed a good beating, Nanny? Ludovico?'

'No, Pet, the sofa he insisted I sat down on. Anyway, there was just something about him. He was just too smooth for my liking, and it didn't look as if the family were swimming in particularly clear waters. No, Poppy, I'm afraid he's off the list. If I'd had my magic wand with me, I'd have turned him into stone.'

'Now that, Nanny,' proclaimed Poppy grinning, 'is really appropriate.'

It was lovely to see Poppy so happy. Marge fully approved of her new friend, Lisa, who seemed to make light of everything.

'Don't worry, Marge,' said the lady in question, helping herself to more pie, 'the hook will be binned tomorrow.'

Weren't they having fun?

CHAPTER NINE

Marge didn't meet Roberto next, but the encounter she did have, was an extremely pleasant one. She couldn't get over how beautiful Monte Lento was, it was like her beloved Scotland with constant sunshine.

When she'd been over with the girls as children, Matilda had still had her wonderful dress shop in the centre of Bergamo Alto, and so that's where they'd always stayed. Shame she didn't have it anymore, but there was now a whole variety of chains that had literally "raped" the fashion industry. All of this had come out one morning when Marge had dropped in for a coffee. Matilda had told her, that the limit had been – she had screwed up her eyes and actually gnashed her teeth – the limit had been: Zara! So, no more wonderful dress shop and amazing bargains for Marge. She admired her very long-standing friend across the table; she was looking amazing and could have gone on forever!

But then, what a wonderful place Matilda and Reginald had moved to!

A wonderful place that Marge was now exploring.

The only thing that slightly niggled Marge, was the wild life. Because she wasn't in the very tame U.K. anymore. But she had been assured numerous times by numerous people, that she wouldn't come across anything bigger than a squirrel.

There were definitely no wolves, and definitely, most definitely: no bears.

Oh goodness! Did they actually have bears in Italy?

And the wild boar only attacked, if you did.

'Just stay on the footpath, Marge,' assured Lisa, 'we've had zero casualties here as regards the wild life.'

It was now early September and the air had changed, the locals shook their heads and said: winter won't be long. It was so invigorating... Marge could most definitely smell mushrooms, and the deciduous trees all around her were slightly changing colour. Probably from drought, poor things, as August had been exceptionally hot and dry apparently.

Marge was standing at a cross paths - is that what you called it? – and having a pause. She deserved it most definitely at her age; when she heard some very loud crashing, crunching and snapping coming through the woods.

Oh, my God! What's that?

It wasn't a what, but a who.

It was Federico out for his vigorous daily run.

As soon as he spotted Marge, he put on the brakes.

A lost Lady! Should have come with me on a guided walking tour.

Marge had an excellent sense of direction and knew precisely where she was, and where she had to go, but it was always nice to come across a bit of chivalry these days.

Marge was intrigued to be faced with an extremely good-looking young man, no doubt about that, dressed in a very erratic and scruffy way.

It was somehow endearing, as most young people were perfectly kitted out for their chosen sport these days – this boy was wearing an extremely old pair of shiny red shorts with green and yellow stripes down the sides and a mucky brown, holey T-shirt, which Marge's critical eye deduced had got into the coloured wash by mistake.

'My name is Federico,' he pronounced very loudly and clearly, as if the elderly lady was deaf.

'I would be extremely happy to lead you the way.'

Wonder where he's left his horse and armour, thought Marge.

Marge went back to ruminating about young people nowadays. All this thrown – on – just - as – if - he'd - got- out - of - bed attire failed to hide the boy's fantastic physique. Wasn't it nice to meet a boy these days who couldn't care less about his appearance? Marge now noted two very shapely legs with odd socks, and some very old gym shoes.

And boys now, seemed to be just as vain as girls.

Marge was even ready to forgive the young man for his rather evident tattoos. There was so much preening and pouting, and all those selfies! Hadn't there been a recent accident with a girl falling off a cliff while taking one, because she couldn't take her eyes off her screen?

What were they called? Influencers... what the hell's bells were they?

Federico stood there with a patient smile on his face as Marge continued to stare dreamily into space.

Oh dear! She did find her mind wandering terribly recently.

'Where are you staying? I can walk back with you.'

And so, that's what they did; walked back together. Freddy was enthralled when he discovered who Marge was, and confessed that he'd always had a real soft spot for Poppy.

All the better, thought Marge.

And strolling back down the track together, Marge warmed to Federico even more.

He'd travelled extensively, patting his shorts proudly that he'd bought in Bolivia, and still had loads of future projects. Marge liked young people that got up and did things. She could see he had endless energy, and seemed super- positive about life in general. So, he was ticking all the boxes.

And!

He was drop – dead gorgeous.

Freddy escorted Nanny right to Poppy's front door, just in case she turned round and started wandering off in the wrong direction.

'Please, say hello to the Lovely Lady Herself.'

And he was sprinting back down the track.

Marge switched on the kettle, feeling very pleased with herself.

No need to look any further, was there?

And wouldn't they have wonderful babies?

It was while she was sipping her tea that it crossed her mind. Drats! He hadn't been on a quest, and slain any monsters: so, no head. Marge chuckled to herself. She was the Fairy Godmother though, all she had to do, was a bit of magic and get everything sorted. She happily waved her teaspoon three times in the air. She was beginning to feel a bit like Mary Poppins.

Now, what a great film, that had been!

Wasn't she enjoying herself?

And then she decided – fair's fair – to get Poppy to invite Roberto round for dinner, so she could have a good look at him, too.

Lovely boy! No doubt about it, but a bit too nerdy.

No, no... Federico was the one.

All Marge had to do, was find a monster.

CHAPTER TEN

Poppy still hadn't had a holiday, and it was about time she did; apparently. Everyone said she should. But with whom and where was beginning to give her another headache.

Why did everyone want to get rid of her?

The problem was totally taken out of her hands when Claire phoned, saying she'd bought her a ticket for a flight in two weeks' time, so that Poppy could come and celebrate their 35th wedding anniversary with them. Therefore, holiday was solved, and Poppy began to look forward to going back to London for a week.

Marge would look after everything at home and Giorgio would take care of the surgery, although, Poppy was a little worried about him these days. He had started trembling a lot, and didn't seem nearly as happy as he had been at the beginning of her stay. Poppy crossed her fingers that there wouldn't be any major emergency while she was away, but then, she thought happily – there never had been, so he'd be fine.

At the last minute Matilda booked on the same flight, muttering that it was just so uncivilized not being able to get two seats together. It ruffled her feathers even more, when it suddenly occurred to her, that her granddaughter could buy the plane and possibly the whole fleet. Poppy was delighted she was coming, and suspected it was to make sure that her granddaughter got back to Monte Lento safe and sound. She really shouldn't have worried; because Poppy was very much in love with her new home - shame she couldn't say the same about a man!

So, how did Poppy's little break go?

Extremely well.

Sam came to pick her and Nonna up at Stansted, and took them out for a pub lunch on the way back home. It was lovely to have some time with Dad, as Mum always took over the show terribly. Matilda would be staying with Sam and Claire in Muswell Hill and Rose had absolutely insisted Poppy stay with them in their newly renovated house in Highgate. Poppy hadn't seen Rose since the wedding; of course, they'd chatted, but with the very sketchy phone connection at Monte Lento – there was nothing more frustrating than being cut off mid- sentence – it felt for both of them, as if they'd been a little out of touch recently.

Poppy was curious to see how Rose would act around her, now that she was a multi-millionaire: *stop thinking about it*, immediately sprang into her mind, *take a break*.

Dad had been his wonderful old self, giving enormous bear hugs to both his mamma and daughter as soon as he'd spotted them in the arrivals hall.

And Poppy was happy to find the same Rose. Tall, but not as tall as Daisy, beautiful, but not so showily stunning as their younger sister; Rose, the eldest, was her same very sophisticated, practical and slightly acerbic self.

Poppy loved the house. Multi-floored and narrow – with a basement kitchen that led out onto a surprisingly generous-sized garden; Rose had really gone to town on it. There was no client to please this time, and it's what she'd toiled and tensely lived for at university. Just stepping into the hall, took Poppy's breath away. It was a dark crimson, a colour that Poppy would never have had the courage to use, with a rich, caramel carpet running along the whole length. And then there were a crazy amount of very striking mirrors of different shapes and sizes in gold gilt frames.

Poppy peered into one which reflected back her rather foggy and spotted self.

'Aren't they great?' said Rose proudly straightening one: 'picked them out of a skip.'

'I love it!' declared Poppy.

On opening the door at the end of the corridor, there was a lot of very bright natural light coming in from the open French windows, and a vibrant green garden as a back drop.

'You clever, clever girl!' gasped Poppy.

'Well, if anyone knows how to do it ...' replied Rose smugly, 'it's me.'

And there was Lucy, her niece, at the kitchen table doing her homework.

Homework!

Yes, because Lucy – she grandly informed her aunty – had started school, hadn't she?

Gosh! Of course, she had.

Poppy was highly amused by the tutu and thick, chunky pullover Lucy was wearing; all topped off very nicely by a crooked unicorn hairband. Rose firmly believed in her daughter choosing her own clothes when not in uniform: 'they have to express themselves. I can't stand kids being dressed by their socially climbing mums.'

Lucy was proud to be doing her homework, but easily distracted by juice and biscuits, while now sitting cross-legged on the table and curiously studying Aunty Poppy.

Rose made tea for her and her sister at the other end of the table.

Lucy started telling Poppy all about her first day at school at machine-gun speed; until that is, she was persuaded to go upstairs and watch telly: 'while Mummy and Aunty have a chat.'

She jumped down from the table and pirouetted towards the kitchen door, or sort of, as Rose was resisting her daughter's constant besiegement to start Ballet Lessons. She reckoned it was far too disciplined for a savage like Lucy; she'll go all prissy, movement yes, but not so controlled...

Lucy turned at the kitchen door, and declared that Aunty Poppy looked nothing like Mummy and Aunty Daisy.

'If I'd been Granny, I would have called Aunty Daisy: Sunflower, because she's all long and yellow,' and Lucy did a grand leap out of the kitchen.

Poppy reckoned her sister was probably right about the ballet; if her niece won, she'd last a month and then want to do something like football. As they could hear Lucy stomping up the stairs – how did she manage that in bare feet? – Rose commented on how similar Lucy was to Poppy. She'd never thought about it before, but yes; her niece was petite, rake thin, and with rich brown hair and matching eyes.

'Lucy can see it too, that's why she keeps staring at you.'

'Now,' stated Rose, 'you know why you're here.'

'For Mum and Dad's anniversary party.'

Rose snorted, 'rubbish! It's to find you a suitable husband. Dad would have been happy doing absolutely nothing, but Mum has taken it as the perfect excuse to have a whopping great big party and invite every eligible man in London.'

'Oh, God!', groaned Poppy, I hope she's not going to invite James.'

'Nah,' assured Rosy, 'she's pulled out the big guns. Titles and all that, Poppy. Aristocracy is famous for being strapped for cash, all those big draughty mansions to maintain, and so they'll all be gagging to meet you: stinking rich and ready to become a Lady or whatever.'

'Oh, God!' Poppy was beginning to wish she could jump into her private jet and swan off to a Caribbean Island. She suddenly realized what money was for: escaping.

Then she positively shuddered when she thought of her close encounter with Ludovico.

'I've had enough of blue blood. There's one in Monte Lento.'

'Have you brought something pretty for the party?' asked Rose sweetly.

'I think, I'll wear a sack!'

Poppy didn't wear a sack to the party, but a very pretty silk smock dress in deep red that cost her a very pretty penny. She'd brought over the kingfisher blue dress from the wedding, but Mum insisted they go shopping and that it was going to be her treat. Well, Poppy thought, that was really silly and treated all three – Daisy came as well – and bought them tea at Langham's afterwards.

It was great fun. Poppy couldn't remember the last time she'd been shopping. They went to a boutique off Regent's Street that normally she would have avoided like the Plague; and it was like stepping inside a treasure trove. Daisy went for long and floaty; she had the height: Mum, classic and extremely elegant.

Poppy kept pushing one beautiful dress along the rail after another, but not seeing anything that really grabbed her. She really wished Nonna Matilda was there to help, but she'd picked up a cold from the flight and had opted out. It was the nice – not too clingy, but present – shop assistant that tentatively pointed out the red dress. The colour was absolutely perfect for Poppy's dark looks.

'You look so cute!' was Daisy's comment, and with the high heels that the shop miraculously had to go with the dress, it was transformed into sexy cute.

Poppy would never have picked it out and tried it on by herself, but she loved it.

And she loved saying: 'I'll take them all', without even glancing at the price tags.

So, this was what they meant by shopping therapy.

Claire also wanted them all to go to the hairdresser's and get their nails done together. Poppy point blankly refused, *I mean, there is a limit...* And anyway, with her curls, all she had to do was wash her hair, and give her nails a good clip. She was quite obsessed about keeping her nails nice and short, otherwise she'd be stabbing her poor patients when she checked them over. Patients? She really did feel she was in another world; and she really was enjoying her break.

That was: until the party.

Claire had been fretting and fussing all week about the weather, as she really quite liked the idea of the party spilling out into the garden. She'd gone crazy with the fairy lights, or more to the point the gardeners had. And all her fussing and fretting paid off, because London was having some surprisingly warm weather for early October. There was no stuffy sit-down dinner, but a lovely buffet and champagne that seemed to be literally on tap.

It must have cost Mum and Dad a fortune.

The unobtrusive chill-out music that had started off the evening, turned into loud dance music as everybody got suitably tanked-up.

Matilda came and put her arm protectively around Poppy's shoulders.

'How are you feeling, Lamb?'

'Lamb, Nonna?'

'Well, you are about to be placed on the alter – I can count at least six eligible titled men in the room, and I bet they all want a dance with you.'

Poppy grabbed another flute of champagne from a passing waiter as Elton John and Dua Lipa started belting out Cold Heart.

'Come on Nonna, let's dance.'

Matilda gracefully backed out, personally thinking they should turn the music down a tad. She found herself a chair in the corner from where she could observe. Claire had written casual wear on the invites, but there wasn't one T shirt in sight; it was all chinos and impeccably ironed shirts open at the neck. Rose and Daisy's girl friends were all in their pretty party frocks, of course, but as Matilda gazed around the room; there did seem to be an inordinate number of males.

I wonder why?

Poppy was soon dancing with several young men hopping awkwardly around her.

She was introduced to every male under the age of forty, and it was like verbally sinking into quicksand with every single one of them. What was wrong with all those young men? Some of them were extremely good-looking, and they all had impeccable manners.

Well, accents to start with. Poppy found a posh, really posh accent, somewhat grating:

'Poppy, I have so been wanting to meet you. Isn't it strange we've never met before?'

Not really, as you most definitely went to Eton and then onto Oxford, while I most definitely didn't.

Poppy had abandoned her high heels and was now getting neck ache from looking up at all those extremely tall men.

'But now we have... and I must say you are looking stunning this evening... blah blah blah.'

The problem was that Poppy didn't go hunting, most definitely couldn't shoot a gun, and had never even sat on a horse: big brutes! And Polo - yes ok - it was a mint, wasn't it?

And then going to the wrong school – Southgate High –, there were zero friends in common.

And university: she'd gone to a dead common one, and then sodded off to Italy to become a family doctor.

There was really very little to talk about.

Had she been away this summer?

France, possibly?

Montecarlo?

Oh, she was living in Italy.

So, perhaps Porto Fino?

Had she been on anyone's yacht?

No.

And on it went...

Claire was beginning to look desperate, and Poppy was feeling utterly exhausted.

The next morning, Poppy woke up with Lucy reading a book at the end of her bed.

'Lucy, you can't read. You're only five.'

'Nearly six, Aunty Poppy, and Mummy says I'm brainy like you.'

Lucy put her book down carefully so she wouldn't lose her place, and shuffled up the bed on her bottom.

'So, did you meet Prince Charming last night?'

Poppy lifted up the duvet and Lucy snuggled up to her favourite aunt. If anyone were to walk in and see them side by side, they would have presumed they were mum and daughter.

Poppy gave a jaw – locking yawn.

'No, they were all such crashing bores.'

Lucy patted her aunt's thigh consolingly through the duvet.

'Boys, always are, Aunty Poppy.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dear Poppy,

I wish I didn't have to write this letter, but desperate circumstances have compelled me to do so. You are a lovely girl, and I really did think there was quite a spark between us, but it seems to have sadly extinguished itself. But then of course, hearts cannot be ruled. Otherwise, I might have been able to avoid writing to you with such an audacious proposal. Audacious, but I hope, not unpleasant.

You might well have heard that my family has struck on hard times. It is the malady of many noble families these days, and we are forced to turn our splendid mountain retreat into a complex of luxury holiday flats.

The building work was initiated with gusto, but, as you have probably noticed, work has ground temporarily to a halt as funds are running low.

And you, Sweet Lady, could be our saviour.

I would therefore like to propose you become a partner in our exciting and, without a doubt, lucrative enterprise.

After considerable thought, my father - who has returned to our Sicilian residence for health reasons - and I, have come to the conclusion that we can offer you 20% of the business, after having deposited 1 million euro in our business account.

I know it sounds an excessive amount, but we have taken into account your recent "windfall", and I remember very clearly, our stimulating conversation about injecting money back into the local economy.

I do feel it is so important to help the community, and of course, close family.

Please do send my fond regards to Nonna Matilda, as I have become somewhat of a recluse these days and feel an inexplicable need to stay near my beloved palazzo.

Please do take very special care of her.

Wouldn't it be terrible if she were to meet with an unfortunate accident?

It is so easy here, on these steep and winding roads. Or perhaps when out walking on an uneven and rocky footpath.

One must be so terribly careful.

Please take your family into consideration and especially your beloved Nonna.

I await with pleasure your consent to my proposal, please feel free to write me an email at the above address, and I will then give you the appropriate bank details for the money transfer.

My fondest and best regards, Ludovico Asmundo

*P.S. Please do say hello to your delightful Nanny who I had the pleasure of meeting.
What a sweet and frail old lady!*

CHAPTER TWELVE

Poppy had read the letter from Ludovico which had been discreetly delivered by hand to her post box at the bottom of the lane, and then umpteenth times again.

And she didn't know what to do about it.

She'd come back to Monte Lento all ready to get back to work and her normal daily routine. She'd had a good, long talk to Dad in London, and finally there were some very clear ideas forming in her head. The break, apart from the ridiculous party, had really done her some good.

She was able to happily tell Nanny Marge that she was fine: absolutely fine.

And she looked it.

Nanny said she'd be off then. She was going to visit her sister in Scotland. She didn't like to complain, but Marge had found at the stately old age of 82, that she was homeless. It was the plight of many an old nanny who had dedicated their lives to numerous families. And then what? Marge had the money; she could happily settle wherever she wished to, but she felt quite rootless and unsure where she actually wanted to be. She never, ever wanted to outstay her welcome, and so now seemed the perfect time to go and visit Mary.

Poppy said that was fine. But she'd be coming back to wave her magic wand, wouldn't she?

Of course, she would.

If Nanny'd had an umbrella and carpet bag, she'd have just levitated herself into the air. But sadly no; Matilda drove her down to Bergamo Airport.

And then the letter arrived.

Poppy couldn't get down to anything without different sentences repeating themselves:

an audacious proposal;

our exciting and lucrative enterprise;

1 million euro;

please take your family into consideration;

my fondest regards to Nonna Matilda;

a sweet and frail old lady.

It must have been the second weekend after Poppy had returned. Lisa just knew something was wrong, and she hadn't the foggiest idea what. Her best friend had made her scream with laughter about the silly party in London when she'd arrived back; but then she had gone horribly quiet.

Quiet and distant.

Lisa had suggested they went for a jog Saturday morning as there was nothing like a bit of fresh air to clear out the brain cells, but then she'd gone and twisted her ankle on the second of the offices three steps. How ridiculous! Not on one of her mushroom picking tours up the mountain, no, on a bloody step! Poppy assured her it was nothing to worry about, but she definitely wasn't going running for the next couple of weeks.

Poppy woke up early, she'd been thinking about just hanging around the barn as Lisa couldn't come running with her. But when she looked out of the bathroom window at the gently swaying trees with a crystal-clear blue sky beyond; it was just too good a morning to miss. She put on her jogging gear with her most comfortable gym shoes.

She wouldn't go far; she was feeling really quite out of sorts.

But just stepping out of her front door, made her feel better.

Bread and Butter came a short way with her, but they seemed to have their own invisible boundary line, and once they'd reached it, they sat down, pricked up their ears and started making a series of high-pitched squeaking noises. They were also worried about Poppy.

She knew the track well by now; it was right behind the converted barn and wound itself leisurely - of course: Monte Lento - up the mountain. After running for about ten minutes, Poppy slowed down to a brisk walk. She was so happy to be out. Ludovico's letter didn't seem quite so bad now. Perhaps his English had made him write some rather peculiar sentences, and he wasn't threatening her at all. Could be, couldn't it? He'd always come across as such a chivalrous boy... man? Poppy suspected he was probably older than she had originally thought.

She giggled - it was nice to hear her giggle was back: plastic surgery... oh my God!

Poppy decided to take the track through the woods that climbed up towards the abandoned ski slope amidst the fir trees. It was in fact; the same way Marge had taken on the morning she'd met Federico pounding down the mountain on his morning run. She gazed around her at the wonderful array of autumnal colours and at the occasional leaf lazily twirling to the ground. They reminded her of those leaves she'd seen falling onto the road when she'd first come up in the taxi.

Hadn't time flown?

Poppy raised her eyes and took in the vast canopy of trees above her with the sun's rays breaking through.

Yes, that was it! Ludovico had miss-worded his letter and the best thing Poppy could do, was go and have a good chat with him. There really was no need to beat about the bush...

What was that?

Poppy had become finely attuned to all the noises around her when she went out for her run; it sort of reassured her to figure them all out.

But this noise had been different.

Poppy could see something blocking the way further along the track - she'd never let on, but she was a little short-sighted and had been meaning to get her eyes checked - and whatever it was, it was moving!

She was now relieved to see that the bulky form had moved off the track to one side: a wild boar?

Well, she wasn't going to risk it, and she turned to go back.

She stopped dead, there was something rustling in the bush just behind her.

She turned round again.

Oh!

And out popped a bear cub – although adorable on its own, it was now being swiftly joined by a mature bear padding down the track in front of Poppy. Her throat went extremely dry and she swallowed hard.

And they all said, there weren't any!

She felt extremely angry and cheated by everybody; every living soul in that stupid village, who had assured her there were no bears around. Because if she'd known, she'd have stayed indoors with her door and windows firmly shut.

She knew, everybody did, that the totally wrong thing to do, was to turn your back on a bear and run. Mum and its cub were so close now that Poppy could smell their wild, pungent scent. It was horrible. She decided to walk slowly backwards and try and get as much distance between her and the two bears as possible. As soon as she started moving, the mother bear lifted itself onto its hind legs and froze.

It could have worked, most definitely, if Poppy hadn't caught a root with the back of her gym shoe and toppled over.

As she fell backwards, there was a kaleidoscope of colours, trees and sky all rushing towards her; which all settled as she found herself lying flat out on her back – looking up at that gently swaying

canopy above her. She had a horrible feeling that the mother bear had now lowered its two front legs and was approaching her, snorting with every stride.

Poppy felt extremely numb and calm.

If she'd been able to watch Missus Bear – the cub had disappeared and was helping itself to some berries from a nearby bush – she would have been amazed at how graceful the animal was as she padded towards Poppy.

Bear was going to give the flat, inert form a good sniff and then decide what to do, although it now looked a lot less threatening lying down.

In the back of Poppy's mind, there was now another approaching noise. A loud crashing and snapping of twigs. It was the same series of noises that Marge had heard while out on her walk.

It was Federico.

'Don't move, Poppy!'

As if I could.

Federico was now close enough to step around Poppy and face the wild animal who had majestically lifted itself once more onto its hind legs. He opened his mouth wide and screamed at the bear; she slightly dropped her head to one side, observing, and then roared back at him in self-defense. Freddy didn't give in, and continued screaming wildly into the bear's face.

Mum Bear stopped, shook herself, landed back onto all fours, and nonchalantly walked into the bushes, with her cub trotting happily behind her.

Federico gently helped Poppy to her feet.

'You all said there weren't any – honestly! Oh, my God!'

Poppy started to shake uncontrollably, gritting her teeth, as Federico explained.

'It's only Hilda – she wouldn't hurt a fly, although you have to be careful when they've got little ones. Wasn't it cute?'

'I think, I'm going to faint.'

Which is precisely what Poppy did.

Federico deftly caught her and carried her down to the tourist office.

Well! What a morning, it had turned out to be. And who said nothing ever happened up here?

Thought Federico happily, as he strode down the path; Poppy was as light as a feather. Lisa was speechless, which didn't happen often, when Federico pushed open the office door with his bum and lovingly sat Poppy -now conscious – down on an office chair.

Lisa had been explaining to an elderly couple all about their autumn walking tours.

They looked very surprised by the appearance of this fine young man, striding into the office with a beautiful girl in his arms: all very dramatic. Before they had time to enquire what had happened, Federico explained, she'd slipped and twisted her ankle. The elderly couple peered at both the girls' ankles, Lisa's bandaged, and apparently the dark girl's soon to be so.

Were the walking trails around here so very treacherous?

Federico slapped a metal tag onto the trophy table, very appropriate, explaining that Hilda had lost it: again!

'Hilda?' the elderly man asked curiously.

Lisa and Federico replied in perfect unison: 'a dog!'

Federico added, 'a large and very naughty dog. Harmless though, totally harmless.'

Poppy gazed on in total oblivion.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The immediate relief Poppy had after her close encounter with the bears soon wore off, and was replaced with that ever-present feeling of foreboding she had these days.

Poppy had always believed in threes. Two bad things and then another is right around the corner. Winning the lottery was good, wasn't it? Surely? But Ludovico's letter had been horrible, and then the bear! How terrifying had that been? And it was no good everybody telling her Hilda was practically a pet in these parts. No good at all. And "Hilda" for crying out loud. Who had given her that ridiculous name?

Apparently, Filippo, because she reminded him of his granny. Well, at least it showed that he had a sense of humour; something Poppy had never seen herself. Hilda had been the most frightening thing that had ever happened to Poppy. When she closed her eyes, the bear was there, huge and menacing, and she could still smell her. Poppy was even toying with the idea of prescribing herself some sleeping pills; she felt in such a mess.

It cheered her up marginally when Lisa got all excited about the two trophies now sitting on the spare desk.

'Two suitors, Poppy! One even better than the other! Shame Nanny's not here to wave her magic wand and declare the winner... or perhaps there are more. Stop biting your nails, Poppy! Are you sure there's nothing wrong?'

'No... everything's sorted.'

And it was.

She hadn't told a soul about Ludovico's letter, and had decided to give him the damn money and be done with it. She'd driven down to Bergamo and instructed the bank manager where she had a couple of million deposited - it had been her original bank account when she arrived in Italy, and thank goodness it had nothing to do with Dad - to transfer the money. It was a business venture, and for her it really was nothing.

For goodness' sake; she had a fortune!

And then she could stop worrying about Nonna's every move; and she didn't think that even the Asmundo's feelers could get so far as Nanny in Scotland. Although she did go all cold and clammy when she remembered Ludovico saying his granny had been Scottish. But anyway, it was now all nicely sorted. She would go and see Ludovico in that pathetic crumbling villa of his and be very firm. She'd want a decent percentage of the business which they must go and finalise

immediately. And he was right, it would bring a nice lot of business into the village and attract some younger people, because they'd be needing - eventually - a whole team of staff to run the place. Yes, it was all for the best, and Poppy decided that sleeping pills were definitely not needed anymore.

The leaves in the woods were now falling plentifully and both Vera and Alma declared: they'd be losing more than a few dry leaves.

Giorgio died in an accident.

He was out for a walk and had been literally struck down.

It was unfortunately Matilda that found him as he was coming her way; and he'd very nearly arrived with his walking stick and sensible shoes. She'd been expecting him for coffee and started fretting, because Giorgio was never, ever late. She'd opened her garden gate and seen his body lying at the top of the lane. She immediately called Poppy who certified the death, and also discovered a very neat hole that had pierced Giorgio's skull. Apart from being extremely distraught: poor Giorgio, he was Poppy's rock; she was extremely puzzled.

It had been horrible waiting in the lane.

Matilda had gone and got a blanket to cover Giorgio with, and once the ambulance had finally left - the body was taken to Bergamo Hospital for an autopsy - grandmother and granddaughter walked slowly back to Matilda's for a shot of brandy each. After a second, they started reminiscing about how important Giorgio had been to both of them. He was one of those unintrusive people that was a solid and constant presence, but had never interfered. A true gentleman.

'He asked me to marry him.'

'He didn't!' exclaimed Poppy.

It must have been just before Poppy arrived. She had been truly flattered, but he was a mate — a really good one at that. No. Matilda didn't want to share her house and most definitely not her bed, with anybody these days. She was very much enjoying her independence after getting over the terrible shock of losing Reginald. And it felt creepily like cheating on Julia.

'He was terribly lonely: poor man. He was so much happier when he could help you, Poppy.'

Both of them had a little more brandy and tears welled up as Poppy thought about everything, he had done for her.

There would be no funeral in the church. He had specifically told Matilda that he wanted to be cremated with the least fuss possible.

It was a real shock when the results of the autopsy came back. Space Debris? Possibly from a satellite? Poppy had never heard anything like it before. Apparently even the smallest thing that wriggles its way through the atmosphere, turns into a lethal object. It was like Giorgio being shot through the head by a bullet. He wouldn't have known a thing, thank God.

The National Centre of Earth Observation said they were terribly sorry.

'Can I ring them?' enquired Poppy.

'If you want to, but I don't know what good it will do...' replied the coroner from Bergamo Hospital.

Poppy then had an extremely bizarre conversation with one of the engineers, as she was worried it could possibly happen again.

Engineer no 1 laughed: 'you must be joking! That guy really was extremely unlucky.'

Poppy felt as if this conversation was coming out of a science fiction film.

'By the way, what a wonderful place you live at.'

'Have you been here?' asked Poppy with surprise.

'No, not personally. But I can see you.'

Oh my God, that really was very spooky!

Nanny Marge promptly came back to Monte Lento – she'd been planning to anyway, as she felt there was still unfinished work to do there. She decided to stop with Matilda who was looking somewhat dazed, and kept staring up suspiciously at the sky. Marge was sure Matilda hadn't been in love with Giorgio, but he had been a very good friend; and losing one at their age could be so very disorientating.

It was the second morning of Marge's stay and they were having their mid-morning coffee on the sunny patio.

Matilda suddenly commented, 'Marge. You really do seem to make things tons better! I'm so happy you're here.'

'Why thank you, Matilda.' her friend replied happily.

'Now...' continued Matilda, 'onto more important things than us two oldies: Poppy. How do you think she's looking? I know her, she's hiding something.'

'Totally agree, Matilda,' said Marge leaning over to take another biscuit from the jar, 'although apart from this tragic thing with Giorgio...'

Both friends raised their eyes towards the great blue beyond.

'... how is it possible that something fell out of space? I didn't think there was anything up there.

Anyway: Poppy, she does seem to have perked up just a little.'

'Isn't it great that we can be anxious together? Because I don't want to start hovering around her — poor treasure. That party in London was so totally out of order! What was Claire thinking of? And this silly thing about finding her a suitor that Lisa's started —although Poppy does find that funny. Why did she go and win all that money, Marge? It's ruined everything.'

'If I were her...' said Marge, crunching her way through another ginger biscuit, '- you really must give me the recipe, Matilda - I'd drop everything and go travelling. I'd travel until I'd found the most idyllic place and then I'd buy it, all of it, and live there happily ever after.'

'But she's found it! I assure you, Marge. Before everything went tits up — excuse my French — she really had found where she wanted to be. And everybody loves her here. I really don't think she'd be happy, continually on the move. If I had all that money...' Matilda tutted impatiently, 'it's giving me a headache just thinking about it.'

'Exactly Matilda, talk about a tricky one.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A very tricky one indeed.

Dear Poppy,

Thank you so much for transferring the requested money into my bank account. I can't tell you how excited I now am about what we are embarking on.

Work on the palace will shortly be beginning and I will, of course, keep you up to date on the building progress. As you can see, I have attached the plans so you can get a clear idea of what will be done. I am especially enchanted by the alpine garden project, and sure that you are as well.

You are no doubt, curious to see that there are also plans for a spa in the basement and a heated swimming pool located in the old winter garden.

My architect has told me that the potentiality of my lovely, but sadly neglected, family home is enormous. He is convinced that we will be able to sell or rent the luxury five-star flats at a very handsome price.

There is so much to look forward to, but I am mortified to inform you that the funds we have will not sustain such a hefty transformation.

And so, Dear Poppy, I am extremely pleased to be able to offer you a further portion in our Asmundo Luxury Alpine Flats venture.

I have no doubts that your generosity can be stretched to another mere million euro.

Please do send my condolences to Madam Matilda for the untimely death of her good friend Giorgio Gritti. I hope your grandmother is fairing well, it is sad times like the present, when you must be extra careful of loved-ones. She is undoubtedly in a fragile state of mind and body and could – God forbid – meet with an unfortunate accident while out and about.

It is most definitely a time to take special care of her.

I also send my sincerest regards to your frail and aging nanny Margaret.

What a sweet lady.

I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

My bank details are the same as previously.

We are destined to do great things together, Dear Poppy.

Totally at your disposal, Ludovico.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was all too much.

Poppy's world was toppling around her.

She had to admit that Ludovico was blackmailing her, and she also had to admit to herself that she had been extremely stupid giving him the first million. Where did she think she was living? In some idyllic, magical kingdom created by Lisa?

She felt terribly stuck.

She should have gone straight to the police: still could. She had been a total idiot, but then, the letter didn't actually threaten her in any way. The police would probably pat her on the head and tell her to trot off home.

What a snake Ludovico had turned out to be.

It was Sunday morning and Poppy decided to walk up to the lake one last time before the paths turned icy. Lisa would have come, no doubt about it, but Poppy wanted some time to herself. She always felt so much better when she was outdoors. And sod Hilda! She could get eaten by her for all she cared.

Poppy left Bread and Butter at their invisible boundary line and walked through the woods, before starting the slow, gentle climb that took her up to the lake. She did feel better, she knew she would, although it did suddenly cross her mind that the Asmundo family might have had something to do with Giorgio's death.

But no. How could that possibly be? She was now getting phobic about literally everything. She climbed the last ridge, topped it, and stood in front of the lake. It was beautiful: it always was. The water looked like glass and reflected the surrounding mountains, pine trees and blue sky perfectly. Why didn't she bring a tent up here and disappear for a month or two?

Because you'd freeze, silly!

Poppy went to sit on "her" rock and sighed.

Had Federico been sitting quietly on his saddle somewhere? Ready to appear perfectly on cue?

He'd changed his bike again, and just like the last time, he came to sit with Poppy.

He was probably the most perfect person to have around. It crossed Poppy's mind how uncomplicated he was ... *wish my life was*; he shuffled up very close and looped his arm affectionately around Poppy's shoulders.

'When are you going to marry me, Poppy, and give me half your fortune.'

He was uncannily close to all that rubbish about quests, suitors and trophies. Well, he had been extremely brave, hadn't he?

It was as if he'd been reading her mind: 'seen any bears around, Poppy?'

She jabbed him hard in the ribs, not even a great big grisly could faze her at the moment.

'Poppy, is something bothering you?'

Yes, Federico was the person to tell.

'You look terribly down in the dumps; I would be high fiving the entire world, and spending all my lovely lolly. Poppy, what's up?'

He pulled her even closer and gave her a gentle squeeze.

'I got this letter, you see, or more to the point, I got the second one. I think, I know I did, do the wrong thing with the first, but it wasn't going to change anything really, giving it to him...'

Federico should have been hanging on every word: every syllable, nodding sympathetically and gently urging her to carry on. Instead, he was staring up at a very big bird that was gracefully circling over their heads.

'Look! A golden eagle!'

Yes, Poppy could see that it was a bird of prey, and big at that; but how in the hell did you identify one from another?

She was now also gazing up at that majestic bird, circling lazily way above them.

'Are you sure, Federico? It's beautiful.'

'Of course, I'm sure. Now that, Poppy Summers, is a real treat for you. Isn't he just wonderful?'

'And you know it's a boy!' Poppy found the whole scene in front her, totally enchanting.

'Of course I don't, silly!'

Both boy and girl watched the magnificent eagle picking up the air currents above them.

The eagle was in no hurry, she - Freddy was wrong - had already eaten, and was looking out for a small and furry seconds. She definitely wasn't interested in the two bodies sitting on the rock that were too big and not furry at all.

Once she had finally circled away, Federico looked sideways at Poppy.

'You were saying?'

'Oh, nothing...' the moment had passed, 'now off you go. You're just dying to get back on your new bike.'

'Why don't you sit on the handlebars, and I'll give you a ride back? It'll be like the Sunshine Kid with Robert Newman and Kathreen something...'

Poppy smiled. It was one of her most favourite scenes ever, 'it's Sundance Kid with Paul Newman and Kathreen Ross, you nitwit! And anyway, no thank you. Off you go! I'll take a gentle stroll back down avoiding the woods.'

'Ha! Hilda's gone, she never hangs around long'

And Federico was gone too, streaking down the mountain.

Poppy was sorry she hadn't told him about the letters, but she did feel marginally better, Federico always cheered her up tremendously.

And she had decided. She definitely wasn't going to fork out another million. Because where would it all end? And she really needed to go and talk to Ludovico. Even if he was the last person she wanted to see at the moment. She would also call in at Nonna's this afternoon, and tell her how icy the paths were and to stay safely indoors.

The golden eagle had caught her seconds and was happily circling home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dear Matilda,

You will be reading this after my death. I don't think I could have told you face to face what I did; and what I am now totally ashamed of.

You, my Dear Matilda, have been my best friend for the last ten years or so, and we have known each other for considerably longer.

I know I overstepped a boundary when I asked you to marry me. I can still see your startled face; and if I'd had Reginald's incredible sense of humour; I might have been able to bluff my way out of what I'd said: 'scerzo, I'm only joking!'

And then Poppy arrived.

What a lovely girl! I was a little sceptic at first, of such a small scrap of a girl. But turns out she's like your feisty self.

Yes, she was wonderful right from the first day, and, I was helping her. I felt happier and more alive than I had done for quite some time.

I can't really pinpoint the moment when everything went sour. It was neither yours nor Poppy's fault; but I felt I was being pushed away: left out.

I still remember very clearly the morning I was having breakfast at Catarina and Stefano's. The prostrate called, and it was while I was washing my hands that I heard Alma and Vera whispering on – nothing new there. They were saying how wonderful Dottaressa Poppy was, and how useless I had been. I reappeared from the bathroom with Caterina wildly flapping her arms, which she dropped on seeing me reappear, and everyone looked sheepish.

I pretended I hadn't heard, quite possible at my age, and everyone saw the same old Giorgio who was getting on, beginning to tremble; and was, apparently, useless!

They say that jealousy is a green-eyed monster, well, I can vouch for that; and there is no way you can control it.

I was jealous of Poppy. She had my job, and everyone said she was better than me. She had you, Dear Matilda. And even if I was always included, I was just the spare part.

Being pitied is another devastating feeling.

And then Poppy went and won the SuperEnolotto, and I became jealous of what she had, and I didn't. You see, the beautiful flat that Julia and I had created in the centre of Monte Lento now had a leaking roof, dodgy plumbing, and even dodgier electrics. And I didn't have the money to sort it.

Poppy could have sorted it out in a jiffy.

And then she went and bought her shiny new Jeep. And instead of everyone sneering and saying she was getting above herself; she was doing exactly the right thing! Because, "poor old Giorgio" had left her a death trap, to go hurtling around the mountains in.

I was now blind with jealousy.

So, late one night I took my screwdriver - walked up Poppy's lane - and stabbed it into the brake fluid tank. I wanted to teach her a lesson. I wanted her to go away, and leave you and Monte Lento to me. I wanted everyone to adore Good Old Dottor Gritti again.

Of course, I was shocked when I heard what had happened to the car. Shocked and really ashamed. I couldn't confess. You would have hated me, and quite rightly so.

What I did, has plagued me ever since. How is it possible to work oneself up into such a state of mind?

Please forgive me, Matilda.

And tell Poppy how sorry I am.

I wish you both all the happiness that you quite rightly deserve.

You are two extremely precious people to me.

My sincerest regards, Giorgio Gritti.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Matilda sat at her kitchen table staring vacantly into space, Giorgio's letter was sitting in front of her. A cry might have done her good. For poor Giorgio, and what he'd gone and done. For her silly self who had always taken him so much for granted. For Poppy who had done absolutely nothing wrong, but had become the victim.

What a terrible, terrible mess.

And then he'd gone and got hit by a screw!

Poppy was due round for tea and Matilda had asked if Marge could stay upstairs for half an hour or so, while she showed Poppy the letter. Her granddaughter always looked so solemn these days and Matilda was really sorry she had to do this, but she could never hide things. It wasn't right for her and most definitely not for Poppy. So, once she'd placed a big mug of tea and a slice of Marge's cake in front of her, Matilda handed over the letter.

'Treasure, I could have just torn it up and not let you see it; but I think you need to.'

Poppy was shocked and scared to see another letter. Had Ludovico decided to write to Nonna?

And saying what, precisely?

'It's from Giorgio...'

Well, that was a relief, thought Poppy.

'... and it was left for me at his solicitor's until he died. I'm afraid, it's not pleasant. But like I said, you need to see it.'

Poppy started reading the letter. It was awful. Once she'd finished, she got up and told Nonna she was going home.

'I can't stay Nonna. But don't worry about me. I just need to be alone.'

Alone to think that it was all her fault; she needed to think very seriously about what she was going to do next. Marge was shocked to see that Poppy had already left when she came downstairs.

'Poor, Pet... there's more going on than she's telling us. I know she's hiding something. We must keep a close eye on her, Matilda, she can't take much more of all this.'

Matilda was beginning to rue the day that Poppy had come to live in Monte Lento. What had she gone and done?

She was just an interfering old fool.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was 10 p.m. and Poppy's bedtime. She was dropping – although she knew that she would inevitably go to bed exhausted, wake up at 1 a.m.; and spend the whole night tossing and turning. It had become the norm since reading Giorgio's letter.

Bread was curled up tight on her bed, but Butter wasn't happy. He couldn't settle and kept meowing pitifully, and then; he was violently sick. He really was looking a very sad kitty. Poppy phoned Lisa, who answered immediately as she was just as concerned about Poppy as Matilda and Marge, and told her to come straight over with Butter.

Of course, Filippo was there; where else would he be?

She was so worried about Butter that she didn't start her usual fretting about seeing Filippo, who guessed straight away - after feeling Butter's extended stomach - what the problem was. Urethral Obstruction. It comes on quite suddenly and can be lethal. Well, that was good to know. Perhaps Nonna Matilda had been right about letting her boy cats be boys, because castrated males were more prone; apparently. It was all Poppy's fault: everything always was...

It also crossed Poppy's mind that she'd been giving them a cheap dried food that had made her heave just opening the packet; all because she was wallowing in her own self - pity and couldn't be bothered to drive down to the pet food shop.

So, double fault.

'Can you stay and hold him for me? It's easier in two.'

Of course, she could, it was the least she could do, after being such an awful cat owner.

'Is he going to be, ok?'

Filippo looked up briefly from the stainless-steel operating table, 'of course he'll be fine – we just need to get all that pee out, and make sure it keeps coming.'

'I think it could be the crap food I've been giving them.'

'Could be... now let's send you off to sleep, Butter, and get the catheter inserted... but not necessarily, Poppy.'

Why's he being so nice to me? thought Poppy. *I suppose that's supposed to make me feel better, but not really; I am turning into a really horrible human being.*

It was good working together.

Butter was being unblocked; and Filippo really did have the most amazing hands! Wasn't she lucky to have him so close by? Butter could have died. And wasn't he wonderfully gentle? He continued

talking to Butter, as if he was able to hear him, and it struck Poppy that Filippo was so much happier with animals than with people. Perhaps she should have chosen Veterinary Science as well; she definitely wasn't great around people at the moment. He looked so wonderful with the strong surgical spot light shining over his bent head. Almost biblical, like that wonderful portrait of Jesus done by... Salvador Dali? Or not? Did Salvador Dali do religious? And he'd got the most amazing Adam's apple — she'd never noticed it before. He was so totally different from his sister — takes after his dad. It didn't take long to sort Butter out; it was a question of catching it in time. And he'd keep Butter there for a couple of days to keep an eye on him.

Filippo raised his eyes and stared at Poppy across the table. It was probably the first time; they had actually looked each other in the eye.

'Are you OK. Poppy? I know Butter's been a shock for you, and it just comes out of nowhere...'

Poppy burst into tears; Filippo let go of Butter's limp leg — he wasn't going anywhere, and was round the table like a shot. He drew her gently towards him and held Poppy tight. She could smell the strong antiseptic that Filippo had used before operating on Butter, she could feel the strength of his arms around her, his warm breath on top of her hair. She would have been perfectly happy to stay like that forever: and it was precisely what Filippo was feeling too.

It would have been appropriate, for the fairy tale at least, if they'd been turned into marble and just been left there. But Butter would have woken up and started whinging ... so probably better not.

Poppy told Filippo about the letters from both Ludovico and Giorgio. Once she'd finished, and got an extreme amount of gunge and snot on Filippo's surgical jacket, he gently lifted up her chin and wiped her nose with a very dubious tissue he'd found in his jean's pocket.

'You don't have to worry anymore, Poppy.'

If he'd got it, he would have been putting on his chain mail there and then.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Filippo was furious, and it surprised him, because he normally got furious about: trapping songbirds in nets and then sticking them on a spit; abandoning a pet after being desperate to get it; following a fashion for dogs and then buying it a pushchair; hunting down wild boar that had a lot more right to the woods than people did.

But to get angry because Ludovico had been threatening Poppy, was a totally new emotion. And so, first thing next morning, he went round to see that “prat” in his very sad and pathetic palace that should never have been built – it was so out of context – in the first place. And even if it was extremely chilly, Filippo found Ludovico round the back, sitting on his velvet sofa with a full ashtray beside him.

To be honest; Ludovico hated the palace: it was dark, echoey and damp, and he much preferred sitting outside than in. The whole family had now pissed off to Sicily and just left him there: “to sort it all out.” He was wearing a very tatty sheepskin coat, and staring moodily into his mobile.

Come on! Give me a bit more of a connection!

Perhaps he was checking to see if Poppy had sent him an email saying she was willing to give him another million. Otherwise, it could get a bit nasty: and quite possibly messy. It was what his family did best: putting on the pressure.

And then he’d sod off; because the luxury flats were never going to happen.

Who’d want one in this dead-end hole?

He looked up to see Filippo purposefully striding towards him.

And what’s our local witless vet doing here?

Filippo knew precisely what he was doing there.

He grabbed Ludovico around the throat; only to find himself clutching a very nice, silk cravat. Ludy had a tendency to wear silk as he considered it classy - it also covered the two fine lines that were creeping insidiously around the future Count’s neck - and was a material that could be extremely slippery.

Filippo angrily shoved the ridiculous indument into his pocket and grabbed Ludovico much more firmly by his sheepskin collar.

‘What the fuck are you doing? Just leave her alone: her and her family... otherwise, you’ll find yourself in a whole lot of trouble.’

Filippo wasn't sure what the "trouble" would be – but he'd think of something. Like... he'd surround the palazzo with those awful snares that he'd retrieved over the years from the woods. They could quite happily break an ankle or two, and if you fell on one of them: quite possibly a neck!

Now Ludovico wasn't only a cad, a sneak, a liar, and when need be: a downright crook; he was also one very ginormous coward.

And quite frankly, he'd had enough.

He was pissed off, sitting on his velveteen sofa in his silk cravats, freezing his balls off. There was always Plan B - he'd already got a good million, hadn't he? - and that was to put the place up for sale without trying to squeeze more money out of the Beautiful Doctor Polly: and then scarper. And let's hope the family didn't send him to Scotland next, because that heap of stone didn't even have a roof.

There was a horrible glint in Filippo's eye, that Ludovico was being forced to look straight into, as Filippo still had him firmly around the collar.

The liar kicked in.

'There really is no need to threaten me, my friend,' gasped Ludovico, 'Poppy was just as excited as me about the building work... we're just waiting for the umpteenth permit to come through; and then you wait and see... it's just so hard with such a splendid old building like this one. We want to get everything just right...'

Filippo actually lifted Ludovico off the ground, gave him a couple of shakes for good measure, dropped him, and then marched off.

It was when he was approaching the town that he decided to call in at the Tourist Office for first, and see if Lisa could fill him in on what he'd been totally unaware of.

It was perfect.

There they were: Lisa and Poppy sitting in front of each other at the desk. Lisa had finally come clean about the letters with her best friend.

His sister spotted him first and waved: Poppy turned round and blushed.

Filippo swung open the glass door, and dropped the silk cravat on the table between them.

'You won't be having any more problems, Poppy, must go and check on Butter.'

And he was gone.

Lisa leapt up from her chair and placed the cravat dramatically on the table of trophies.

'There you go!'

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was a Saturday morning and Matilda, Marge, Lisa and Poppy were sitting around The Table of Trophies. Ten days had passed since Filippo had stormed up the mountain and grabbed Ludovico by the collar, and he was quite adamant that there would be no more trouble from that specific, and very unsavoury quarter.

Matilda and Marge had been speechless when they were given the two extortionate letters from Ludovico to read, telling Poppy she should have gone straight to the police. Yes, but anyway... and Poppy hung her head like a very naughty teenager ... what was a miserly million? And it did now look as if the Count-To-Be had slunk away for good. Matilda actually ground her teeth when she thought about what that creep had got away with: 'I can hear you', Marge would say.

Butter was back home, and looked none the worse for his emergency operation. Although Poppy was still terrified it would happen again to one of her pair, and was now spending a "fortune" – haha, she must stop using such expressions – on the ultimate cat food for pee problems.

Whenever urinary tracts and whatever came up in the conversation, Matilda kept her mouth firmly shut, but looked most definitely smug.

Poppy was feeling marginally better, at least the Count's perfidious antics had been quelled, and was throwing herself into work. Luckily, well not really; but for Poppy it was: a very nasty gastro enteritis was doing the rounds. She was also extremely busy persuading the majority of her patients – it took time – to allow her to do their annual flu jabs.

It was definitely appropriate to now sit round the desk and cheer Poppy up with their daft quest. It was Marge, surprisingly, who was all fired-up about it; whereas Lisa seemed to have run out of steam and was staring vacantly out of the office window: Matilda had come for the coffee and cake. Marge actually stood up and cleared her throat, before recounting excitedly, the tales of the three trophies sitting in front of her.

'All fine boys,' she concluded, '— now we've got rid of the snake. So, who's it going to be?'

Heaven knows how they'd found out, Matilda vaguely remembered telling her friend about what "silliness" they were up to that morning; because in walked Vera and Alma.

'Can we join you?' piped Vera who looked around her lovingly, while Alma was busy struggling with her muddy rubber boots – she'd just finished feeding the pigs.

'Ah! It was so lovely working here...' sighed Vera as she and Alma brought over a couple of fold-up chairs which Lisa kept for when it was "buzzing" with visitors '... such a shame they had to cut costs.'

Poppy smiled to herself, she loved both of them dearly: with all their little quirks, and aches and pains. They were here to help Doctor Poppy choose – and it struck her, they really did care.

'Anyway,' stated Marge firmly, 'here we are, gathered,' she pointedly stared at Vera and Alma, willing them to take it seriously, 'around our auspicious table of trophies – ready to declare our Lady Poppy's betrothed.'

Vera squealed with delight and Poppy giggled.

'But, Nanny – OK, I decide, but what if my betrothed doesn't catch on and declare himself?'

Alma put her hand up – back to school again – 'I think, Ladies, in these times and in a modern fairy tale, it's Dottoressa Poppy who does the proposing.'

Lisa tutted and Matilda nearly choked on her cake: everybody was becoming extremely silly.

Lisa came back from wherever she'd been, and picked up the bristly whatnot that had started smoking inside the surgery computer. She looked quizzingly from one lady to another seated around the table.

Dear sweet Roberto, he'd been such a good friend, but: 'I don't think so. It would be like sleeping with Harry Potter.'

That got gales of laughter from all of them.

'Poppy!' barked Matilda, trying to gain a little decorum.

'A grown-up one, Nonna', Poppy corrected herself, '— not like the one in the films.'

Roberto's brush-like-thing was ceremoniously binned.

'Now what about our dashing vet?' enquired Marge, holding up the pretty paisley cravat.

Good question thought Poppy, she had seen neither hide nor hair since he'd brought Butter home, and unfortunately, it had been excruciatingly embarrassing for both of them. Poppy felt quite unhappy thinking about Filippo, but she didn't have long to ruminate as Lisa looked about ready to bin the cravat.

'I know he was amazing, Poppy, but all in all I can assure you my brother is just absolutely useless around women. He's never had a real girlfriend. Can you believe that?' Lisa relented and moved the slippery, silk scarf to one side, 'let's just move it to one side, and discuss our last trophy.'

'Oh, yes!' chirped up Alma, 'Federico! You said yourself, Dottoressa Poppy, you've always had a terrible crush on him. And he was so brave, saving you from that terribly fierce bear.'

Poppy smiled, 'Alma, are you trying to sell him to me? I told you before; there's no need. I love Federico... always have!'

Marge clapped her hands.

'Well, I think we've decided!' And she threw the cravat into the bin.

The four elder ladies looked happily dazed, and were all thinking about the wonderful babies Poppy and Federico would make. So, that was settled. Poppy hung around after the rest had left and asked Lisa if she wanted to come to hers for a drink or something.

'Sorry, Poppy. I'm waiting for an important phone call. I'll catch up with you later.'

Poppy left the office feeling fine, it had been really funny; leaving Lisa staring gloomily at her blank computer screen.

What have I gone and done?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

They'd had their first snow at Monte Bello. Nobody had cleared her drive this time, but it was now the weekend, so Poppy could quite happily walk wherever she wanted to go.

Poppy still hadn't seen Federico, and anyway: would she propose to him?

Of course not.

Then a spell would be cast on her, and she quite fancied the idea of the whole village going to sleep for a century or so. They'd wake up to a knight, a prince or whatever; crashing through the undergrowth to wake everyone up.

She might have decided what to do with her money by then.

It was while she was having breakfast that she decided she'd walk up to the "palace" and just check there was nobody there. It would make a nice gentle walk, and she could stay on the road that had already had its snow cleared. She loved it! It was freezing cold, but there was that incredible feeling of peace and quiet you get with a snow fall. She really ought to go further up and have a go at skiing, but she'd never enjoyed belting down the side of a mountain and just asking for a series of multiple injuries. Although, she herself didn't see any, because they all went straight to Emergency. But she should go up anyway and just say hi to Federico.

'Federico, will you marry me?'

Very funny.

Poppy had now reached The Asmundo Mountain Retreat and had some very pretty namesakes in her cheeks. She was surprised to see a man frantically banging at a For Sale board with a hammer out the front. As she approached, he angrily looked up at her, as if it was Poppy who had frozen the ground – wrong fairy tale – which was obstinately unrelenting and never going to let him plant his board.

'Hello!' Poppy recognized him from somewhere.

'Morning, Dottoressa.'

So, he definitely recognized her. That was it! The taxi driver!

'Gastone, right?'

'That's right. Suppose you're not interested, Dottoressa? Because it would save me a whole lot of bother, if you were.'

And Gastone started hammering the top of the board even more vigorously.

'So, they're selling?'

'Yes, looks like it. I mean, yes, and...' Gastone stood up a little taller, leaving the board wonky, '... I'm the agent.'

'But,' Poppy was confused, 'don't you drive the taxi here?'

'I am a man of many trades,' and Gastone solemnly handed Poppy his business card: Gastone Taxis. Agente Immobiliare. Uomo Tutto Fare.

'But!' and he raised his arm warningly, 'this...' giving Poppy yet another business card, '... is my true profession.'

Poppy was curious to read: Master Craftsman of Dry Stone Walls. Of course, she'd seen Gastone mending the wall. My goodness! Did this man ever sleep?

'Are you interested, Dottoressa?' and he nodded towards the palace.

'Well, Gastone. I really don't think so.'

Although it did strike Poppy, she had practically bought the place already. She looked appraisingly at the building once more. The Asmundo Palace was looking extremely handsome that morning. The scaffolding had all gone and it looked almost glowingly fairy-like in the snow.

'Can I go and look inside?'

'Of course, you can. There's no electricity, so you'll have to open a couple of shutters. I've got a taxi call, so just shut the front door when you've finished. You know where to find me.'

She didn't, but no doubt Nonna did, and anyway; she was just being nosy.

In the meantime, Matilda and Marge were having their morning coffee. They did seem to discuss Poppy an awful lot of the time, but they both agreed that she was looking much better and just needed to decide how to spend that ridiculous amount of money of hers.

Finding her a man, had been a lot of silly nonsense: she could find a suitable partner all by herself.

Matilda was a little worried Monte Lento might not be such the perfect place for her granddaughter after all, and Marge was secretly disappointed the Trophies had come to nothing.

'Do you know what, Matilda?'

'What, Marge?'

'I'm going to sprinkle a bit of my fairy dust and cast a spell on Poppy.'

Marge was having problems remembering the actual wording of a spell, strange; she'd seen umpteenth Disney cartoons over the years with all her little charges.

She dramatically springled the crumbs of a ginger biscuit on the tablecloth, commanding:

'Abra ca dabra, Poppy, see the light!'

Matilda frowned at her very good friend: *stupid woman!*

It was exactly what Poppy was doing. She'd opened the two sets of heavy shutters on the front windows — along with the extremely grimy windows, and was gazing curiously all around her. The hall was very impressive with doors leading off on each side and one at the end which looked as if it went down into the basement. There was the most wonderful sweeping staircase with a beautiful curling wooden banister inviting her upstairs. Poppy was curious to see a lighter square on the back wall halfway up, there had obviously been a picture there; and she liked to think it had been a portrait of the Scottish Granny. It would have looked like Ludovico in a dress, yes, she liked that idea.

The fairy dust landed on top of Poppy's head, or more probably, it was just dust upset by the open windows that was now circling in the beams of light that had been let in.

Poppy gasped, cupped her hands over her mouth, quickly closed the windows and shutters: and ran home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

If somebody had been watching her, they would have called out as she rushed past “her” lane.

‘Poppy, are you blind? You have to turn up there...’

She wasn’t lost, she was going to the track in front of the Tourist Office — an office which was surprisingly dark for a Saturday afternoon; apart from a multitude of bright red poinsettia leaves in the window. She had to see him right now. She had to explain everything and make him see.

Poppy was heading for Serena and Pietro’s house, although not the cosy kitchen, but the surgery.

She was there in front of it now. She yanked the door open and was ready to declare herself:

ready to tell Filippo she’d now decided everything; when out stepped a young, fair-haired man in a white coat with a steaming mug of coffee in one hand.

‘Where’s Filippo?’

No: hello, nice to meet you. I imagine you’re here to help. I’m Poppy Summers, and I’ve come to have a chat with Filippo. No, Poppy was desperate. She had to see him now.

‘Where is he?’

Poppy asked again, with her eyes darting crazily around the room, as if he could be hiding under a chair or the examination table.

‘He’s not here.... and you are?’

Marco was beginning to worry that every pretty young girl in Monte Lento was not quite up to scratch. First he’d met Filippo’s sister, and what a smasher she was, but talk about sullen — she’d frowned menacingly at him and kept muttering about ruining everything. And now there was this very cute girl, from her accent she was most definitely English, who was totally freaked-out.

Let’s hope there were more than two nubile females in the village...

‘Where’s Filippo? I must speak to him!’

This one also seemed to be deaf to boot, because he’d already told her Filippo wasn’t available.

Perhaps she’d got a cow that was about to give birth, she didn’t have to worry; they normally managed perfectly well on their own.

‘Whatever the problem is, I can help you. Filippo’s gone to Canada for six months - lucky bugger - perhaps even longer.’

The crazed girl -she really was very pretty- went chalk white and then a very rosy pink.

‘When did he leave?’

She now looked as if she was about to cry.

'I think his flight's mid-afternoon, his sister's taken him...'

'Where from?'

She really had zero small talk, didn't she?

'Malpensa, I think. That's where most of the international flights leave from. But really, there's no need to panic. I'm just as good as Filippo, and we'll get whatever's bothering you, sorted.'

'I really don't think so', and she had gone.

Malpensa, Poppy had never been there, and everyone groaned when they had to. Who could she get to take her there? Because she didn't think she could drive herself; she had a horrible feeling she'd end up on the motorway going in the opposite direction.

Gastone!

No, he'd had a call, hadn't he?

Matilda would panic more than Poppy, as there were most definitely some horrible junctions involved. Poppy was beginning to feel stuck in a horrible nightmare where she couldn't get anywhere...

Roberto!

Roberto would take her, and thank God she'd remembered her phone!

Roberto was sitting in his bedroom with the heavy curtains drawn. It was so annoying to have the blue sky and sun reflected in his screens. He had almost as many as the Space Park of Earth Observation in Bristol, although he wasn't interested in satellite viewing; he was playing a multitude of video games: all at the same time. One of which was his own making. He'd never told Monte Lento what he did, and they wouldn't understand anyway. He had numerous dishes on his parents' roof which explained why it was normally the only place where the locals could have a reasonable phone call without having to shout frantically into their apparatus. Which is exactly what rang now, ahh! Poppy! He loved Poppy! Not in that type of way because... he didn't really know why, but...

'What's up, Poppy?'

'Roberto! Thank God you're there! Can you drive me to Malpensa? We'll take my car, of course. Filippo's flying to Canada; and he mustn't!'

That was the great thing about Roberto. You could come up with something totally out of the blue, and he wouldn't bat an eyelid.

'I'll be right with you...'

Roberto loved driving — it was like being at a console, but a little less tricky. Where did she want to go? Malpensa. Good! Let's hope they met a bit of action along the way. Although virtual was always better than reality, sadly. But it would make a nice change for the afternoon. All he needed was his glasses as he was terribly short sighted: just like Harry Potter.

Poppy was not the best of company along the way, she was too freaked out, and spent most of the time biting her nails. The Jeep was great to drive; much better than his mum's Panda. Roberto could in fact, have bought himself a really nice car, and found his own little nest... but, who could be bothered? Not him, definitely.

'We're going to make it, aren't we, Roberto?'

'Of course, we are; those long-haul flights are always late.'

Which wasn't comforting at all, and Poppy went back to her nails.

The drive was a trifle boring and they made good time. Roberto left Poppy at the appropriate terminal and said he'd come and find her when he'd parked.

Of course, the flight hadn't left, and of course Poppy managed to catch Filippo before he went through the gate. Otherwise, this would not be a fairy tale.

Filippo had been waiting for this work experience for quite some time: anxiously waiting. It was his dream come true. He was going way up north, and would finally live his very own "into the wild" moment. It was an outpost that boasted a lot more wildlife than people, but as the latter were constantly coming and visiting: there was a definite need to monitor the former; look after it, if sick; and study the relative consequences of a changing climate.

What more could he possibly want?

There was now something else he wanted very badly.

He'd fallen in love with Poppy, instantly, the first time he'd seen her in his parents' kitchen. He'd been so stupid. He should have asked her out for a drink, there and then, instead of running away like one of his poor wounded animals. And now he was sodding off to the North, and not even of Europe, but Canada!

'You know you don't have to go; you can change your mind...' said Lisa who was standing next to him as they made his final call.

'Why wouldn't I not want to go?' Filippo snapped at his sister; he felt like crying.

Lisa's face broke into the most wonderful grin as Poppy came flying towards them.

'That,' declared Lisa happily, pointing to her friend, 'is why you wouldn't want to.'

By the time Roberto reached them, Filippo was trying to get his bags off the flight, although, quite frankly: he couldn't care a toss!

So, what had Poppy said when she almost bowled into brother and sister, after catching her breath, that is.

'Filippo, will you marry me? We've got so much to do.'

Good girl! thought Lisa, so all the trophies and stuff had paid off.

'Of course, Poppy.'

And that was that! Lisa couldn't help thinking how blunt they both were, but was extremely amused to see that the pair then appeared to be stuck to each other with super glue. Even when Filippo was trying to fill in a form for a very irate stewardess, they still managed to have their arms around each other.

Lisa had to admit, it was extremely sweet.

And then up rolled Roberto. Looking as if he'd just happened to be passing.

Lisa took a second look, a longer look, he really was quite cute.

'Well,' she declared, 'you two Love Birds can take the Jeep, and I'm driving back with Harry Potter.'

Lisa dramatically winked at Poppy and dragged a very startled Roberto away.

It was while she was driving back to Monte Lento that it occurred to Lisa: what exactly had Poppy and her brother got to do?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Filippo and Poppy got married three weeks' later; time to do all the required papers, and no more. Both families were worried they were rushing it, but there was no stopping them. They then continued in the same hell-bent way to sort out everything else.

Poppy had dragged Filippo up to the palace as soon as it was light the morning after his aborted flight. They stood in front of the building while Poppy explained excitedly what she'd seen in her mind's eye. Filippo bent down and gently cupped her face in his hands.

'Were you afraid, it was all going to vanish into thin air?'

They walked back down to the village with the For Sale board and got Gastone out of bed. Poppy was adamant they weren't going to pay a fortune for it, and knew she had already paid a hefty deposit. It was very quickly theirs; money really could work miracles... It was going to take some time to get everything just right, so Roberto did a virtual tour of the finished palazzo with a very pretty Lisa as the guide.

'Roby! You've made me look like a doll!' she exclaimed, swatting Roberto on the shoulder.

'No, I haven't!' Roberto always looked at Lisa as if he'd just got his first-ever hot dinner, 'you're tons better...'

How silly, he could be: silly, but sweet.

Anyway, it was amazing what Roberto could do with a computer:

LISA IS STANDING PRETTILY IN THE ALPINE GARDEN WEARING A SUMMER FROCK.

'Welcome everybody to the Gritti Clinic.'

THERE IS A MAN IN THE BACKGROUND BENDING OVER THE ROCKERY AND STRAIGHTENING A COUPLE OF PERFECTLY PLACED STONES. HE STRAIGHTENS UP AND RAISES HIS CAP AT THE CAMERA. IT IS, OF COURSE, GASTONE.

LISA HAS NOW APPROACHED THE TWO HEAVY WOODEN DOORS — LEAVING GASTONE TO HIS WALLS, SHE OPENS THEM, AND WAVES US THROUGH INTO AN ELEGANT ART DECO HALLWAY.

'Isn't it just wonderful?'

LISA IS PROUDLY SMILING AS IF SHE HAS DONE THE PERFECT RENOVATION HERSELF.

'If we go right, we're in Doctor Poppy's domain, where the first thing we find is this very lovely reception area. Morning, Marge.'

MARGE STANDS UP FROM BEHIND HER LOW COUNTER, AND MOVES A PRETTY VASE OF FLOWERS FURTHER TO ONE SIDE. SHE IS LOOKING INVINCIBLE AND AGELESS — SHE IS ALSO SMILING WARMLY.

‘Morning, Lisa, and what a smashing one it is, too. Now let me tell you something about the reception. Well, I’m here to take calls from our patients and also for Doctor Visconti’s furry friends: not that they will be personally ringing us...’

BOTH LISA AND MARGE LAUGH GAILY.

‘Well of course not, Marge. So, there is also a veterinary clinic?’

‘Yes, there most definitely is, Lisa. The right wing is for people, whereas the left side is for animals. We are basically catering for every wee living, breathing creature hereabouts.’

‘So, Marge, there’s just Doctor Summers and Doctor Visconti here?’

‘Oh no, Lisa. The poor Dears would be rushed off their feet, if they literally had to deal with everything; we have a series of specialists that regularly come up to the clinic. And as I’ve got my own flat on the top floor, I really am on call 24/7.’

LISA TURNS TOWARDS THE CAMERA AND SMILES BROADLY.

‘Oh, wow!’

HER MOUTH THEN TURNS SOLEMNLY DOWN.

‘Now I imagine, Marge; these specialist appointments can cost a pretty penny.’

MARGE SMILES HAPPILY AT HER AUDIENCE.

‘Oh no. not at all; there’s the Gritti Foundation that pays for it all. You see, it’s Doctor Poppy and Doctor Filippo’s belief that giving such a service to its inhabitants, will encourage some fresh blood to come up the mountain and settle here. There are already youngsters that are bravely starting up their own businesses, and carrying on the traditions of our Oldies that are ready to put their feet up and enjoy a well-deserved rest. I, of course, am the exception to the rule; this job has given me a new lease of life.’

MARGE IS LOOKING EVEN HAPPIER — IF THAT IS POSSIBLE, AND POINTING AT A PHOTO SITTING ON HER DESK OF POPPY AND FILIPPO ON THEIR WEDDING DAY.

‘Aren’t the bonny pair just grand?’

LISA TURNS TOWARDS THE CAMERA AND ADDS HER DAZZLING SMILE, IT’S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE AN ADVERT FOR TOOTHPASTE.

‘They most definitely are. What about the first floor? Can we have a tour, Marge?’

‘Of course, Lisa.’

THE TWO OF THEM ARE NOW WALKING UP THE BEAUTIFUL SWEEPING CENTRAL STAIRCASE. MARGE IS JUST A LITTLE OUT OF BREATH AS THEY REACH THE TOP LANDING. WE MUSTN'T FORGET HER AGE.

ONCE SHE'S GOT HER BREATH BACK.

'Here again, Lisa, on the right it's for our two-legged patients, whereas on our left, it's for our faithful four-legged friends. Well, four-legged, but not necessarily; because if it's a wee bird that has had a mishap... and let's not forget our creepy crawlies... although I don't know how much you can do for them... and why not a fish? I mean, it's not as if the whole animal world is on four legs, there is such a variety... I was thinking just the other day...'

MARGE STOPS HERSELF, AND FOCUSES ONCE MORE.

'Now where were we... oh yes, here we have, Lisa, on this floor; numerous diagnostic machines. It was another of our doctors' goals: to having everything on site, with no need to go careening down the mountain for an X ray, or just a simple blood test.'

MARGE IS NOW LOOKING AS IF IT'S CHRISTMAS, AND A VERY MAGICAL ONE AT THAT.

'Isn't it all amazing, Lisa? I am so proud of them both.'

'Oh...' LISA FLASHES YET ANOTHER DAZZLING SMILE, 'we all are. But just one question, Marge. What about the bigger and wilder beasts? And I'm not talking about Federico Rossi here...'

BOTH WOMEN CHORTLE HAPPILY.

MARGE COMPOSES HERSELF AND STRAIGHTENS HER SILK SCARF THAT HAS STARTED SLIPPING.

'Well of course not, Lisa. We can't have a horse trotting around in here, or a very pregnant cow. Well, she'd probably stay at home anyway, wouldn't she?'

MARGE CLEARS HER THROAT AND KNOTS HER SCARF FIRMLY.

'We have a well-equipped annex out back for our bulkier patients.'

THE TWO OF THEM ARE NOW WALKING SLOWLY BACK DOWN THE STAIRS.

'Well, Marge. Thank you so much for showing us around.'

'It's my pleasure, Lisa.'

BOTH WOMEN WINK MISCHIEVOUSLY AT THE CAMERA.

Lisa loved what her boyfriend had created.

Yes, they are still a couple, and they've decided to move in together. Turns out that Roberto is quite a successful business man in his own right, because his video game isn't just any old one, but "the" game to play at the moment.

Lisa is having one surprise after another about her nerdy boyfriend, whose very nerdy friends on meeting Lisa, declared Roberto: to be one extremely lucky sod! Lisa met them all virtually of course, in a chat room, because they are scattered in bedrooms all over the world; and was surprisingly shy and even blushing as she was being introduced.

Roberto's mum is extremely relieved her son is finally flying the nest; and excited about turning his room into a studio for her sewing and embroidery.

And will there be a, happy – ever – after here?

Well, that's another story.

SPACE PARK AT THE NATIONAL CENTRE OF EARTH OBSERVATION, BRISTOL UNIVERSITY

IT IS FRIDAY AFTERNOON, AND EVEN IF SOMEONE HAS TO COME IN OVER THE WEEKEND, THERE IS A FESTIVE FEEL IN THE AIR.

THE TWO ENGINEERS ARE FIDDLING AROUND WITH THEIR PHONES AT THEIR DESKS. THE MULTIPLE SCREENS IN FRONT OF THEM ARE BEING TOTALLY IGNORED.

'So, congrats are in order... reckon you're only doing it to get some extra hols.'

'Well, that would be a bit drastic. But yes, it will be nice.'

'Decided where to take her? Back to that little village in the mountains?'

'Well, I was thinking about it, but then I reckon that wonderful dinner and all, was a one off; and then after what happened to that poor old geezer... no, I'm going to give it a miss.'

'Yeah. I think you're right. Dead - end place: there's nothing there.'

'Anyway, she's got her heart set on Venice, so, that's where we're going.'

'Of course, where else would you go on your Honeymoon, my friend?'

THE FIRST ENGINEER TAPS IN "VENICE: THINGS TO DO" ON HIS PHONE.

'Well, let's have a little look, although nudge - nudge wink - wink: I'm sure you'll have plenty to do. Well... you can't get wackier than this: they've just opened a museum of harpsicords. Bet you're interested!'

'Well, why not?'