

Nicky Pellegrino

Under Italian Skies

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Beginning with an ending

It was the old order books that were Stella's undoing. Shelves of them, neatly stacked, right at the back of the storeroom. She had known they were there of course but it was years since she had bothered to take a look, never mind open one. She did so now and saw her own handwriting, rounder and better formed than it was nowadays, less rushed.

There were orders for pleated fabrics from Maison Lognon in Paris, for fine cashmeres and printed Liberty silks, for jacquard jersey knits in deep blues and heather-toned purples, for soft leathers and supple suedes. Stella flicked through the pages and started to cry.

The tears took her entirely by surprise. Until then she had held firm and stayed dry eyed. All through Milly's short but brutal illness she'd managed to keep going. Even when she'd had to announce the designer's death to the other staff and break the news that the business was to close. Every day since then, coming into the office to empty it out, closing accounts, packing up boxes, sending the last archive pieces of clothing to fashion museums – it was dispiriting work but it hadn't made Stella cry. Not once.

Now though, all alone in a half-bare storeroom, she sat down on the floor, leaned back against the shelves, dropped her head into her hands and fell apart. Big, wrenching sobs shook her whole body. The more she cried, the more she felt as if she might never stop.

Those order books held the history of Stella's life. And that life was over.

Soon her cheeks were drenched, her mascara running. Grateful no one else was in the office to witness the state she was in, she struggled to pull herself together. She wasn't going to deal with this today. The order books would have to be thrown away but better to leave it until she felt less emotional. Right now she would make herself a cup of tea instead.

Stella wondered if her hormones were playing up. Perhaps this was the beginning of an early menopause. There seemed no other reason why a bunch of order books, some a quarter of a century old, should have such a calamitous effect on her.

As she boiled the kettle and rinsed her cup, Stella thought about how young she had been when she had written so carefully in their pages. Life was still shiny and new then, and a little scary too. Coming here to work as Milly Munro's assistant, part of the fashion world at long last, she had been desperate to impress, so keen to do well.

What a lovely boss Milly had turned out to be, appreciative and generous, always interested to hear Stella's opinion of a new design for a suit or a little black dress. Milly used to perch on her desk, her grey hair cut into a sharp bob, her mouth a slash of darkest red lipstick, wearing one of her own creations, something plain, slimline and perfectly tailored. Stella would pin up the sketches of each new collection on the large corkboard and together she, Milly and the rest of the small team would examine each one, talk about fabric and fit, discuss what sort of women would wear those skirts and jackets, those gorgeously draped dresses, whether they would be able to run for a London bus in them, sit at a desk, pick up a child.

'These are clothes to live, work and love in,' Milly often said. It was her motto, really. One day Stella had printed it out and pinned it on the wall as a constant reminder to everyone. Now it was the only thing left up there.

Sadly there would be no more collections of beautifully cut clothes. They were finished, the corkboard was bare and the walls too; the desks had been cleared out.

Stella kept wondering if her boss had suspected she was ill. All through that last year, although she worked as hard as ever, she seemed a muted version of herself. It was obvious she was losing weight; those outfits that had fitted so perfectly began to hang off her. Now and then she complained of a stomach ache or back pain. Stella urged her to see her GP but Milly had resisted, claiming she was too busy, saying she was fine and everyone should stop fussing.

In the end Stella had been so worried she had made the doctor's appointment herself and insisted Milly keep it. The diagnosis when it came was devastating. Pancreatic cancer. By then things were pretty far gone and although Milly tried to keep working it wasn't long before she was forced to give up coming into the office. For a while

Stella had gone to her home in Kensington every morning to take down lists of instructions and watch Milly jaundice and then fade away.

In her will she had been very definite about the future of the business. It wasn't to continue without her, some other person at the helm. She was Milly Munro, her designs were her style and the label would die with her. Stella thought it had been the right thing to do. That was the only thing she was sure of.

She had been working in this office for so long she knew every line of the building, every windowsill, every crack in the ceiling. It was extraordinary to think that someday soon she would lock the door behind her one last time and never come back. Where would she go? What would she do? Stella had no idea.

She knew what she didn't want – to be someone's dogsbody, making coffee and running errands, not trusted with anything important. And even if she were offered a job working for a designer she respected it wouldn't be the same.

No, Stella believed she had to reinvent herself. Do something completely different.

Eking out the whole sorry business of closing down the office had kept her occupied for a while. But those order books were almost the last of it. Once they had been cleared out and a few more things tidied up, Stella couldn't justify being here any longer.

She was lucky that money wasn't an issue. A couple of the other girls had been in such a panic about finding new jobs. But Stella had done OK out of her divorce and later, when her parents died, as an only child she inherited all they had. So there was no mortgage to worry about and she had some savings. In fact, if she was frugal she might be able to retire early; but the idea seemed ridiculous.

Forty-nine wasn't old anymore, was it? That was what she kept reading in women's magazines. And besides, she didn't feel old. Yes, the chestnut colour of her hair was courtesy of L'Oréal these days and the smearing on of night creams and serums had become quite a process. But Stella still looked in decent shape. One of the few benefits of not having children was that she hadn't gone flabby around the middle, nor been subjected to sleepless nights to leave her puffy eyed. She had been careful with her pale skin in the sun, had eaten well and exercised. Looking after herself had paid off; she hoped so anyway.

Forty-nine was young enough to start a new career, to see the world, or fall in love again; it meant she had a past but there were still enough good years ahead, or so everyone kept telling her. Lately Stella's future seemed to have been discussed endlessly over cups of tea and glasses of chardonnay. All her friends pitched in with ideas but most of them seemed impractical. Start your own business, suggested one, or launch your own fashion label. Open a boutique said another, become a personal shopper, a stylist. Retrain as a florist or a make-up artist. Teach English as a foreign language. There was no shortage of ideas. Stella was lukewarm about every one. In fact, she almost resented them.

It had been Lisa, the junior assistant at Milly Munro Fashion, who had said the only thing she had been intrigued by.

'Why not have a gap year?'

'A gap year? Isn't it a bit late for that?'

'I don't see why. My gap year was the best time ever. I travelled, got into my photography and tried all sorts of new things. I'd love the chance to take another. Wouldn't you?'

'I never took one in the first place,' Stella had admitted.

'Well then, now is your chance.'

A gap year? What was it young people did on them? Went back-packing, she supposed, worked on a kibbutz or volunteered on a charity project in a developing country. Stella wished she felt bold enough.

This office had been the place she belonged, this room with the heavy sash windows covered in blistering paint, filled with messy piles of fabric swatches and the chatter of other women. Stella knew it was unusual to stay in a job for such a long time but she had never wanted to leave; she still didn't.

Of course, the person she really longed to talk things through with was Milly. In the old days if something was bothering her they would have lunch at the Italian place round the corner, the one that was always their favourite. Usually Stella ordered the spaghetti with clams, Milly the chicken salad and if it was a Friday perhaps a couple of glasses of wine. And Milly listened ... she was good at listening.

Stella wanted to tell her how sad she was every morning when she opened the office door and didn't find Milly there, already at

her desk, tip-tapping on her laptop. She needed her to know she was angry that she hadn't seen a doctor sooner, when perhaps the cancer might have been caught before it spread so far. To hear about the sympathy notes from long-time clients and the distressed emails, how tough it had been to read them all and draft the right sort of replies. Most of all she wanted to hear Milly's husky voice telling her what she needed her to do, just like she had every single Monday to Friday, and occasionally weekends, for the past busy, happy twenty-five years.

In the kitchenette Stella poured boiling water on the teabag, added milk, then changed her mind and tipped the whole lot down the sink. It was lunchtime after all. She would go to their favourite Italian place and enjoy a bowl of pasta and a glass of wine. She would do it on her own. Surely she was bold enough for that.

The maître d' there was an ancient Italian guy called Frederico who had always made a fuss of them. Stella had never been without Milly and was dreading explaining her absence. Putting on her jacket, she checked her face in her compact. Her eyes still seemed puffy from the storm of tears but once she had fixed her make-up they looked much better.

The restaurant was just round the corner and, walking there, Stella found herself cheered by the thought of sitting at one of the familiar tables and looking through a menu she had read at least a hundred times. However the instant she walked through the door she saw that the place was different now. The décor had been changed, the starched white tablecloths had gone and the far wall had been covered in blackboard paint that was scrawled over brightly in chalk.

Thankfully it was still the same old guy who greeted her at the door.

'What's happened?' asked Stella. 'Has it changed hands?'

'No, no, it is still in the family,' he reassured her, his accent resoundingly Italian although she was sure he had lived in London for years and years.

'But nothing seems the same,' she said.

He threw up his hands. 'The young people are never happy to stand still. Always they are wanting to move with the times, even here in Little Italy. And so you see no proper menu any more, just this blackboard.'

Stella squinted at it. 'Do you still have the spaghetti with clams?'

'For you, Signora, yes. I will tell the kitchen and they will make it for you.'

'But is it not on the menu anymore?'

'We are all very casual here now, very relaxed. We serve you small plates filled with meatballs, seafood or crostini, Venetian food, snacks to share.' The old man's mouth turned down. 'I heard about your friend, Signora. Such a sad loss and I am very sorry. For you there will always be spaghetti with clams. And today a glass of something special to toast her memory.'

He brought a glass of a chilled sparkling red wine that she sipped carefully and thought delicious. Still Stella couldn't get over feeling slightly rattled by the way the place had altered. In her opinion nothing was wrong with how it used to be.

Not that it mattered, really. Once the office was closed she was unlikely to come back here. It was just another part of her old life that was disappearing.

She enjoyed her spaghetti as much as always. The briny juices of the clams, the hit of chilli flakes, the tang of olive oil and white wine – at least the flavours were exactly as she remembered. Comfort food, she supposed it was. And right now Stella needed comfort.

Where would she be a month from now? Stella had never had a Plan B. It had seemed enough, her life; it had seemed perfectly good.

A gap year. Stella pondered the idea as she finished her food. Why should they only be for students, anyway? Perhaps taking one was exactly what she needed to recharge. Then she remembered all those order books, relics of the past that for some reason she had chosen to keep. Really they ought to have been thrown out years ago when they had made the switch to computers. Stella put down her fork, dabbed her mouth with the paper serviette that had replaced the usual starched napkin and waved at Frederico to bring the bill. It was time to make a start.

Time running wild

Everything changes, doesn't it? That is what Stella kept reminding herself when she woke in the morning bright and early as always, even though she no longer bothered to set her alarm clock. Nothing stays the same. People die or move on, relationships break up, businesses close or are modernised, jobs are lost and there is nothing you can do so you might as well accept it. Stella told herself this, sitting up in bed with her first coffee of the morning, as she wondered how to occupy the day.

It was three weeks since she had walked out the door of Milly Munro Fashion for the final time clutching a few mementos – an offcut of a fabric she loved, one of the old order books, Milly's own tape measure – so worn it was illegible in parts – a few of her sketches and a magazine cover featuring one of her most iconic designs.

Stella carried these things back to her small mews flat and found places for them, then there was nothing else to do, nothing at all.

She tried to fill her time. The first week she painted the living-room walls in a pale duck-egg blue, hated it and repainted them plain white again. The second week she threw a cocktail party and made ridiculously elaborate drinks that involved much researching of recipes and scouring for ingredients. The third week she decided she really had to start job-hunting, only she didn't and instead took long rambling walks round London, discovering hidden-away places she hadn't known existed, stopping for sweet treats and cups of tea, and trying not to notice how everyone else seemed to have somewhere to go, someone to meet.

Now it was the Monday of week four and Stella had stopped pretending to herself that she wasn't despondent. She stayed beneath the duvet in the curtained half-light of her bedroom, sipping milky coffee. She didn't even have a cat – that is how empty her life was. Funny, but she had never thought so before.

To Stella time felt like some wild thing she needed to corral and tame. It raced ahead of her, writhing and bucking, and she stayed motionless in bed, half afraid of it.

Simply getting up and taking a shower felt like a triumph. It was late morning by the time she was dressed and had put on a little make-up. That was one of the things she had promised herself she wouldn't do: lie around all day in a bathrobe, with messy hair and a shiny face, giving herself a fright every time she happened to catch her reflection in the mirror. So she slipped on one of Milly's designs, a sample dress she had been given. It was plain black, with off-centre buttons and a shirt collar, and Stella felt a little more businesslike whenever she wore it. This was a dress that demanded some sort of activity. If only there was an errand to run or an appointment she had to keep.

Her friends were all at work and Stella was wary of bothering them. Hadn't she always been impatient at being interrupted by someone just for a chat when she was in the middle of a busy day? There was only one person she thought might welcome the distraction. Her very best friend Nicky Bird, otherwise known as Birdie, was working as a sales rep for a magazine publisher and liked to escape the place and complain how tough it was whenever she had the chance.

Stella texted her, Free for lunch?

The reply pinged straight back, Not really but let's do it anyway!

They met in a little place on Beak Street. It was part of a chain but did good sandwiches on crusty sourdough and decent coffee. Birdie was already there when she arrived and had saved her a stool by the window.

'I'm so envious of you being able to flit about catching up with friends instead of imprisoned in an office all day like me,' Birdie said the minute she joined her.

Stella didn't tell her that freedom wasn't all it was cracked up to be, because she knew it wasn't what her friend wanted to hear.

'So tell me, what have you been up to? How's the job-hunting going?' Birdie asked once she had spent the requisite ten minutes complaining about how impossible work was, how difficult her clients and unreasonable her sales targets.

'I haven't even got started yet,' Stella confessed. 'I've just been mooching round.'

‘Oh well, you can afford to take a little time off can’t you? May as well enjoy it.’

‘Mmm,’ Stella agreed.

Birdie looked at her, eyes narrowing. ‘What do you mean by “mmm”?’

Stella shrugged. ‘The thing is, I’m not enjoying it.’

‘Really?’ Birdie sounded incredulous.

‘It’s not like being on holiday and relishing the time you have off because you know it’s limited. I have no plans, none at all.’

‘Well make some,’ Birdie said. ‘Book a trip. Go somewhere amazing that you’ve always wanted to see. Angkor Wat? Petra? Have an adventure.’

‘I’d love to but not on my own. It wouldn’t be the same.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ Birdie conceded. ‘You know I’d love to come but my credit cards couldn’t take the strain right now.’

Stella considered offering to pay for the flights and accommodation but didn’t want to seem like she was flashing money around. And actually she had never told Birdie how much she had stowed away in stocks and shares. She was private about that kind of thing, just like her parents had been.

‘Someone suggested I should take a gap year,’ she said, just as Birdie bit into her sandwich. ‘Like a student, you know, but an adult one. Apparently it’s a thing now. I Googled it.’

‘An adult gap year?’ Birdie said, swallowing her mouthful. ‘Really? What are you supposed to do on it?’

‘All sorts of things – voluntary work, learn new skills. There are loads of programmes and expeditions to choose from. I came across one in Ghana helping in an orphanage and another where you work on a building project in some poverty-stricken village without any electricity or running water.’

Birdie looked dubious. ‘Would you do that on your own? It sounds a bit awful.’

‘You’re supported by the organisation that sets it all up so it might be OK.’

‘But have you ever built anything in your life? And an orphanage ... you’d fall in love with half the children ... it would break your heart.’

‘Probably,’ Stella agreed. ‘That’s not a reason not to try it though.’

Surely it's better than staying here with no idea what to do with myself.'

Birdie stared out at the lunchtime crowds pushing their way down Beak Street's narrow pavements and she frowned. 'If I had the time and money to escape from all this then what I'd do is go and live in another country for a while and really immerse myself in the culture. I'd choose somewhere beautiful like Paris or Rome, or maybe a smaller town because it might be easier to meet people. And I'd sign up to a language school – yes, I would. That would be me.'

'So would you stay in the same place the whole time?' Stella was intrigued by the idea.

'Yes, I'd rent an apartment, or if I had a nice flat like yours maybe I'd do a house swap. That way I'd really be living like a local.'

'I don't know if my flat's really all that nice,' said Stella. 'It's tiny.'

'What do you mean? It's in such a cute little mews and it's so central. Visitors would love it.'

From the outside Stella's place didn't look like much, just a plain brick building in a narrow cobbled lane in Camden. But at the back it had French windows that opened onto a tiny courtyard and she had stripped the floors back to palest pine and kept things bright and airy so the pokiness of the rooms wasn't too obvious.

'Perhaps I could try something like that,' she wondered.

'You should look into it at least,' Birdie urged her. 'There are websites, I should think.'

Stella was feeling a little more upbeat as the Northern Line train rattled her towards home. After stopping at the Inverness Street market to pick up some salad for dinner, she hurried back. The afternoon wasn't quite warm enough to open the French doors but she did it anyway and sat on the sofa, laptop on her knee, sunlight dappling the walls and thought her flat might be nice enough after all.

There were so many websites to explore. Stella picked one to start with then made her way through the rest methodically, taking notes as she went. Soon she realised there was quite a lot to it. The home-exchange companies suggested getting your place

professionally photographed, then you had to write about yourself and the neighbourhood, and possibly even make a short video. One site encouraged her to link to her Facebook page so potential swappers could learn even more about her.

Stella didn't have a Facebook page. She had always been slightly scornful about them, maintaining they were for people without enough to do. But now she actually was one of those people and she might as well see what was involved. Facebook sidetracked Stella for ages. It was more fun than she might have imagined making a profile and posting pictures, then finding long-lost friends. The room was darkening and chilly by the time she looked up from her screen.

She stood and stretched, then turned on some lights and went to her small kitchen to put together a quick salad. As she chopped vegetables and whisked together vinaigrette, she thought about a stranger living in her space and what they might think, and what they might do. Would they prefer to shop at the market like she did instead of going to the big Sainsbury's? Would they love the flamenco nights at her old favourite Bar Gansa and drop in to eat Padron peppers and tomato bread? More importantly, would they be tidy or mess up her place? Would they keep the pots in the courtyard watered in a dry spell and double-lock the front door when they went out? It seemed a huge risk to leave some person she had never met in charge of the most valuable thing she owned. Still, Stella thought it worth exploring a little further. There were lots of websites after all, and so many people seemed to be signed up to them; surely it had to be OK?

When she had finished eating she texted Birdie. I think you may be onto something.

Two minutes later a reply came back. Oh my God, are you really going to do it?

The moment she woke Stella checked Facebook to see who had accepted her friend requests. Then she spent half an hour catching up with what everyone had been doing before forcing herself to set the screen aside and make some coffee. She was beginning to see how this might be addictive.

After breakfast she had another trawl through the home-swap

sites. She still wasn't ready to commit but was definitely warming to the prospect. In the meantime there were things to do – drafting a profile and considering how best to describe her neighbourhood, fluffing up the flat so it looked good in pictures and deciding who would shoot them. Stella was busy again; she felt as if she had a purpose.

First she walked through her home trying to look at each room through a critical stranger's eyes. When she bought the place Stella had redone it with lots of white and washed-out pastels. Now she wondered if it looked a little too pared back. New cushions on the sofa would cheer things up, or a bold wall-hanging for the bedroom. Stella had seen some Marimekko ones in a shop at Camden Lock market and might wander down and take a look.

One of the consolations of the divorce had been having her very own space again. Stella had found the mixing and matching of belongings that marriage entailed the least appealing thing about it. The problem was Ray collected things. He was a magpie. Every room in their house in High Barnet had been loaded with his treasures: old train sets and cameras, Tintin figurines, Atomic coffee machines dating back to the 1950s and random stuff made of Bakelite. At any moment his interest might flit away from one thing and alight on another. Stella had drawn a line at the collection of giant pinecones. They attracted dust like nothing else. Besides, by then things hadn't been great between the two of them.

Stella blamed the fertility treatment. It had leached all the life out of her. Even though she feared they had left it too late and the chances of success were so very slim, still Stella had clung on to hope. And when it had been crushed out of her, over and over, she hadn't coped well.

Birdie had told her it was grief she was feeling but to Stella it felt like nothing at all, just a great big blank space inside her where a baby should have been.

For a while life had seemed all disappointments and regret. Stella wasted so much time wishing she had met Ray when she was young and fertile, wishing they had tried to get pregnant straight away like she wanted instead of spending a year or so enjoying each other as he had thought best.

Towards the end they were talking about donor eggs. Even after the split Ray had offered to help her go ahead if she really wanted

to. She thought about it, talked to Birdie and a couple of other good friends, and made the toughest decision of her life. She didn't want to be a single mother in her forties, juggling work with raising a child, sending the kid to stay with Ray on weekends. Yes, she could do it, but it wasn't going to be fair on any of them.

Not long after that Stella bought the mews flat in Camden and set about decorating it with no consideration for the sticky fingers and curious hands of small children, with no thought for anyone but herself.

Work was her consolation. Milly had been the only one who had known exactly what she was going through, but perhaps she had thrown out a few hints because all the girls were so kind to her. Still it had been a bleak time. And now Stella could see it in the layers of beige in her bedroom and the barely-there blue of the rug on the living-room floor. This place needed more than a whisper of colour, most likely more than just a Marimekko wall-hanging, but that was where she would start.

The thing Stella really loved about Camden was the different lives all rubbing up against each other. There were kids in punk regalia, stallholders with sleeves of tattoos, green-smoothie-sipping girls in yoga pants, homeless people lingering round the Tube station. She liked the mishmash of brightly coloured buildings on the high street, the quirky cafés, the smell of spice and incense, the music blasting from shop doorways as she passed and most of all the fact that eccentric still had a place here. It was more raw and rugged than many other parts of London and, although she hardly added anything to the colour, still she liked looking at it.

Stella felt invisible as she walked towards the market, just another middle-aged woman in clothes that draped her upper arms and covered her knees. She didn't especially miss men's heads turning and definitely not the barrage of wolf-whistles she used to have to brace herself for when walking past building sites. She was way past caring about being noticed. When friends like Birdie nagged her about getting out more or signing up for online dating, she tended to laugh and change the subject. Ray had been a bonus. He came along when she had given up on the idea of finding someone. Stella thought if it hadn't been for the whole miserable trying-for-a-baby thing they might still be together. But they weren't. And

Stella didn't have the stomach for more disappointments.

She found the Marimekko store and bought some cushions as well as the wall-hanging. Pleased with her purchases she turned for home, determined that by the end of the afternoon she would at least have decided which of the home-exchange companies to go with.

When Birdie called several hours later she was still staring at the screen. She had been distracted several times, posting a shot of her new wall-hanging on Facebook, reading an interesting newspaper article someone had linked to, looking at a video on YouTube.

'Oh no, you're in a Google coma,' Birdie told her. 'You've got to watch out for that, being home alone every day.'

'I'm not in a Google coma.'

'Yes you are,' she insisted. 'Here's what you have to do. Put down the phone, pick up your credit card and sign up to the company you most like the look of. It's not that expensive, right? And it's not like you're committing yourself to anything at this point.'

'I suppose that's true,' Stella agreed.

'Do I need to come round and make you do it?'

'I think I can manage.'

'Good, because I've got a date.'

'Someone new?' Stella asked.

'Yep, I met her on Pink Cupid.'

Birdie too was post-divorce but dealing with it rather differently from Stella. She had declared herself over men, had lost ten kilos, cropped her wheat-blond hair and started dating her personal trainer – a woman. As far as Stella knew they still hooked up every now and then, but whatever arrangement they had can't have been exclusive because dating website Pink Cupid, and the women she found on it, often featured in Birdie's conversation.

'I'm enjoying my freedom ... you should start enjoying yours too,' Birdie said now.

'So you keep saying, but I'm not as brave as you.'

'You're not as wussy as you think, either.'

Stella laughed. 'I might be.'

She was happy for Birdie. To Stella it seemed as if she had finally

turned into the person she was meant to be.

‘I’d say you’re one of the most courageous people I know,’ Birdie told her. ‘You just don’t see yourself that way.’

It was a lovely thing to hear but she didn’t believe it. Stella had never been especially daring. What she wanted from life was all the commonplace stuff – a husband, a family, a nice home, a good job. Well, she had given it her best shot, hadn’t she?

‘You’re going to put the phone down now and find that credit card, aren’t you?’ said Birdie.

‘I am.’

‘OK, go for it, and see you soon.’

Stella followed her friend’s advice. She chose the company that seemed the most professional and signed up. Immediately a whole world opened up to her. There weren’t only ordinary houses and flats available but castles and houseboats, even a couple of yachts. There were French country cottages and villas on paradise islands, a canal house in Amsterdam, an apartment with a view of the Sydney Opera House. Stella found herself amazed. She’d had no idea so many possibilities were out there on the internet, waiting to be discovered.

A lot of doing

If there was one thing Stella was really good at it was making things happen. Once she had set her mind to a task she got it done. So it didn't take her long to set up her profile for the house-exchange website. She was careful to describe her apartment as most suited to a single person and made a lot of how quiet the little mews was but how vibrant the area. She remembered Lisa, the junior assistant from work, telling her she was into photography so had her come and take some interior shots and paid her with a few bottles of wine.

'So you're really going to have a gap year – how cool,' Lisa said, as Stella darted about plumping cushions and arranging lilies in a vase.

'Probably not a whole year; perhaps just a few months to give me time to think about what to do next.'

'Where will you go?'

'I'm not sure. It depends who wants a house swap at the same time and is looking to come to London. And I suppose it doesn't matter where in the world I end up, not really.'

Lisa turned on a few lamps to cast a warmer light, then started snapping pictures of the living room from different angles. She chatted as she worked. 'Is there any place you've always wanted to visit?' she wondered.

Stella thought about it. Compared to most people her age she hadn't done a lot of travelling. She and Ray had honeymooned in Thailand and holidayed in France. Before that there had been beach holidays on islands like Ibiza with girlfriends or work trips with Milly when she had been showing new collections in Paris and New York. But Stella had never spent a decent amount of time in any destination.

'Lots of places,' Stella told her. 'I guess it would be nice to swap with someone not too far away so friends could visit if they wanted.'

And I'd like a bit of history, and people speaking another language so it really does feel properly foreign, but also a place that's safe, since I'll be there on my own.'

Lisa had finished in the living area so they moved on to the bedroom, Stella smoothing the duvet, arranging more flowers, piling up some colourful cushions she had bought and stacking paperbacks on the nightstand to make it all look welcoming.

'I think it's great that someone your age is so open to new experiences,' Lisa told her. 'I can't imagine my mum doing it. She'd never have the nerve.'

Stella gave her a sidelong look. She always forgot that to girls like this she probably seemed ancient, part of their parents' generation. Perhaps it was not having children but she didn't really feel so different from how she had felt at Lisa's age. More confident in some ways, more cynical certainly, but essentially she was still the same person.

'It's not like I'm backpacking through India or something,' pointed out Stella. 'I'm sure I'll end up some place very civilised having an extended holiday.'

'Well I hope at your time of life I've got your adventurous spirit,' Lisa said, artlessly.

It was funny how other people saw you. Birdie had described her as courageous and now this young girl seemed to think she was intrepid. Stella was fairly sure she was neither of those things.

Once she had chosen the shots that showed her home to its best advantage there was nothing to stop her going ahead and posting her profile. After that Stella sat nursing a cup of peppermint tea and searched for possible matches, ideally people who wanted to travel soon, who were interested in London and had homes that seemed appealing but not too flashy. Stella didn't want her place to be a disappointment. She would like whoever stayed there to appreciate it even if it wasn't all that special.

By early evening she had come up with a shortlist – there was a stylish flat in Madrid, a farmhouse in the south of France, a chalet in the Swiss mountains and a small pink villa with terraced gardens stretching down to a rocky coastline in southern Italy. That last place was the one Stella was least sure about. Its owner was

a man, and there was a shot of him, silver-haired and quite good looking, but he didn't have a Facebook profile so she couldn't find out much about him. Plus he said in his blurb that he was looking to swap with a gardener who would be happy to spend time maintaining his grounds. While Stella enjoyed messing about with the pots of herbs and succulents out on her patio she wasn't sure it constituted gardening. What if she killed this man's prized plants or ended up having to spend the entire time digging and weeding? Still, it did look lovely in the photographs. There was a pergola with bougainvillea climbing over it and views to the sea. There were pomegranate trees and a lemon grove, and a courtyard with an outdoor fireplace.

Stella could imagine herself there picking the lemons or reading beneath the shade of the pergola on a hot sunny day. She thought about sending him a message but held back. If she had been the brave, adventurous spirit everyone thought her to be she wouldn't have hesitated, of course. The real Stella was more cautious.

Her phone rang and she checked the number on her screen. It was Birdie so she answered.

'Not Pink Cupiding then?'

'No, I'm having a night off.'

'How did the date go the other evening?'

'It was fine. Not sure if I'll see her again though. There's someone else I've spotted that I may be having coffee with at the weekend.'

'I wish I could find a house swap as easily as you find dates,' Stella told her.

'Did you actually sign up then?' Birdie sounded pleased.

'Yes, you should check out my profile. It looks pretty good.'

'I'll do it right now. Hang on, just let me get my laptop. Here we go ...'

Stella gave the link and heard the keys of Birdie's laptop click as her fingers flew over them.

'Oh yes, there you are,' she said. 'Nice pic of you.'

'It's a few years old,' Stella confessed. 'But I couldn't find anything else decent.'

'Your place looks great too. Yeah, I like it. So what's the problem?'

'Well, actually it is a bit like dating,' Stella explained. 'You trawl

through lots of profiles searching for houses and owners you like the look of. You can check their reviews and click through to their Facebook pages. I've found a few possibilities but I'm not sure if I trust my own judgement.'

'OK, let's go through them together then. Tell me where to look.'

Sitting on their sofas, in front of separate laptops, in flats at opposite ends of London, Stella and Birdie spent an evening together. They took breaks to top up wine glasses or smear cheese onto crackers, and giggled over silly things as they ranged through Stella's shortlist and beyond.

Birdie was rude about people's taste in wallpaper and suspicious that several of them might be psychopaths.

'That woman on the olive farm in the south of France looks like a real bitch,' she declared. 'The Spanish couple seem OK but do you really want to go to Madrid? I think the best bet is the guy with the pink house in Italy, the silver fox, I'd go with him.'

'I'm not going to be meeting these people, you know,' Stella told her. 'They'll be over here while I'm there. They just have to be trustworthy.'

'The silver fox looks trustworthy.'

'I think so too for some reason, although I suppose you shouldn't judge by appearances. Perhaps I'll send him a message.'

'What will you say?' Birdie asked.

'Just that I'm interested in swapping my place for his.'

'You want to make sure you create the right impression. Don't try to be funny because it never works in emails. Just be chatty but not too keen ... you need to intrigue him.'

This is a house-exchange site you know, Birdie, not Pink Cupid.'

'Hey, you were the one who compared it to online dating.'

By the time they got off the phone Stella was feeling sleepy and procrastinating was easier. Better to send a quick message in the morning when she felt fresher. She wasn't going to spend hours crafting it though, no matter what Birdie said. If the pink house or its owner turned out not to be right there were other places to choose from.

Writing to a total stranger was trickier than Stella had expected. With a work email she wouldn't have struggled, but brisk and

businesslike didn't seem like the right tone for this. She needed to be warm but not over-friendly, to give him a sense of who she was without going on too much.

Hoping for inspiration, Stella looked back at his profile. In the picture he was sitting outdoors, leaning back against a wall of brightly painted terracotta tiles and smiling. He looked a few years older than her. His face was deeply bronzed, his silvery hair a little messy, his build slim with wide shoulders. She reread the words beneath his photograph.

Hello, I'm Leo. I'm a landscape gardener who specialises in creating community spaces and my work takes me to all sorts of interesting locations. I love nature and the outdoors but also enjoy city life. Villa Rosa is my summer house and it lies on a spectacular stretch of coastline near a historic village called Triento. I have beautiful gardens here and would appreciate house-swappers who are willing to do a little to help tend them, but otherwise this is the perfect place to come and relax and reflect, to swim in the sea and take walks, to eat wonderful food and share time with friends. There is a small car that I'm happy for guests to use to visit the surrounding area. I speak fluent English, am single and a non-smoker. Villa Rosa is a simple house but it is kept scrupulously clean and tidy and I would treat any home I stayed in the same way.

He sounded very into his house and Stella wondered if he was gay. Or perhaps like her he was a divorcee. She tried to imagine what his work creating community spaces involved. And just because someone claimed to be scrupulously tidy it didn't mean they actually were. If anything the fact that he had felt the need to mention it made her suspicious. Still, perhaps he would find red flags in the message she was drafting.

Hi Leo, I'm Stella. I'm interested in a possible house swap.

Stella stopped writing and started deleting. She had to come up with something better than that.

Hi, I'm Stella. I think Villa Rosa looks lovely and I may be interested in a house swap with you. I'm planning on taking an adult gap year after many years in the same job and so I'm flexible about dates but am keen to travel as soon as possible. I'm single

too but would hope to have a friend or two come to visit over the course of my stay. There isn't a car here for me to offer but really you don't need one because the Underground is a manageable walk away and there are lots of buses ...

This was getting boring and really only repeating things she had covered in her profile. Stella paused, hands hovering above the keyboard.

I'm not an especially knowledgeable gardener but I'm happy to do some basic weeding. I'm very clean and tidy ...

Stella felt she had to mention it since he had.

My place is small and there is no view but it's in a quiet street and close to quirky shops, lively bars and restaurants ...

How to finish? Stella frowned. She needed something brisk and upbeat.

Please let me know if you'd like to hear more ...

She deleted that.

Looking forward to hearing from you and learning more about Villa Rosa. Yours, Stella Forrester

She read it through once and pressed send. Instantly she felt several things at once. Panic because what had she done? Excitement because where would it lead? Relief because now it was up to him whether to take it further.

The website gave no clue how long she should expect to wait for a reply. Stella found herself checking several times as the day went on, and being disappointed. The more she thought about a little pink house by the sea, simple and clean, the greater her longing to be there. London was a constant reminder of how out-of-kilter everything was and Stella missed the old routines and familiar faces of her job. At Villa Rosa everything would be different. In a way she would be living someone else's life. The idea was quite tempting.

Perhaps Leo wouldn't be interested in her modest little flat at all. Quite likely his inbox was full of requests from people wanting to stay at Villa Rosa, people who had fancier places in smarter parts of London. If so, he would be mad not to go with one of those. Stella wished she had put more effort into selling herself and making a good impression. It was too late now.

By bedtime she still hadn't had any response. She was starting to feel alarmed at how the days were slipping by and how little she seemed to get done. Working for Milly had meant making the most of every moment, packing it full. In comparison to then, Stella felt as if she was living in a daze. The less she did, the less she felt capable of doing.

In the morning she would pull herself together, she vowed. If there was still no word from Leo she would send messages to some of the others – the couple in Madrid, the woman in the south of France – whatever Birdie thought of her. She was going to take her life and make something happen in it.

Hello, Stella. Fantastic to hear from you. I'm keen to get over to the UK as soon as I can as I'm working on a community garden project in north London. I think your place may be just what I'm looking for. My only concern is that Villa Rosa is really designed only for summer living. The kitchen is separate from the rest of the house and, this time of year, when we're still having rain, you may find yourself getting wet on your way to cook dinner. The sea will be very cold too. But there's space for you to have friends to stay, and as I'm keen to be in London for a while to get the garden established, you can have Villa Rosa for as long as you want within reason. It's a special place. I haven't owned it for very long but already I feel a strong link with it. I always feel better for being there. Oh and you will love the gardens. Ciao, Leo Asti

Dear Leo. So good to hear from you and that's great news that you're interested in swapping.

I guess in the hotter months a separate kitchen is ideal. Don't worry, I'm not concerned about getting a bit wet. I'm not certain how long I want to be in Italy for, though. Could we leave it open-ended? Would that work for you?

I haven't done a house exchange before so I'm not entirely sure how things are meant to work. Do we need to draw up some sort of agreement about bills and things?

I'm attaching a photo of my 'garden'. Yes it's only a few pots out on my patio! My place is tiny, you know. I think we might have made the rooms look a little bigger in the pictures and I'd hate for you to get here and be disappointed, especially if you have other, grander options. Stella.

Dear Stella, I'm not interested in grand; I prefer simplicity. The inside of Villa Rosa is quite spartan because in the hot summer weather I live my life outside. It's comfortable enough but by no means luxurious.

This is my first house swap also so I'm not sure what the proper procedure is. I think we just agree on a date and mail each other a set of keys – easy! I'm fine with us keeping things open-ended so long as you give me some warning before you want your flat back; what about a fortnight's notice? My main home is an apartment in Naples so if I need to come back to Italy for work in the meantime I can stay there. At this point I have no plans to use Villa Rosa until late July, when my family will be gathering there for our summer holidays.

We can each cover the bills for the place we are living in so no need to draw up a formal agreement unless you feel the need to. Villa Rosa has some quirks though – it's an old house after all – and I'll have to give you a list of them.

Now some questions: do you have a pet I need to care for? Will you be happy for me to use all your personal things: bed linen, towels etc., or should I bring some items over? And you say you don't have a car so are you confident driving? The roads here are narrow and winding, perhaps even a little dramatic in places, but Villa Rosa is some distance from Triento, certainly too far to walk. I don't want you to be feeling stranded. Ciao, Leo.

PS – Your patio looks charming.

Dear Leo, I used to drive a car regularly when I was living in the suburbs so no need to worry. It's just the last few years, being so central, that I haven't needed one. No pets here, not even a goldfish. I assume since Villa Rosa is a holiday home you don't have any there that I'll need to worry about? Of course you must use my linen, towels etc. You don't want to be taking up space in your luggage with that kind of thing.

Let me have a think about the start date. I'll come back to you on that.

In the meantime I'm intrigued about your community garden

project. What is it exactly? What is involved? Stella.

PS – You're very kind about my patio. It's really not that charming but it's nice enough to sit outside with your coffee on a sunny morning.

Stella was slightly alarmed about how quickly things were progressing. That was why she had told Leo she would get back to him about a date. Their messages had flown back and forth over the course of a morning. Leo must have been sitting at his computer working and she was on her sofa in what Birdie had so rudely called a Google coma. Then abruptly the communications stopped. He went silent after she had asked him to tell her more about his work. Of course it might have been that he had left his desk to go and do something else but Stella couldn't help being suspicious. He was a complete stranger, after all. Since he had never had a house swap there were no reviews from other people up on his profile. What if he wasn't who he claimed to be? She had no way of knowing.

Google didn't help much. She found a couple of entries for 'Leo Asti, landscape gardener, Naples' but they were all in Italian. There were no more pictures of him; nothing on Facebook, twitter or Instagram – he was practically a nonperson on the internet.

Stella had read all sorts of scare stories – identity theft, internet scams, con artists. What if this Leo was dodgy? Some sort of Mafia character? Perhaps there were sinister reasons he needed to get out of the country. Yes it was unlikely, but not beyond the bounds of possibility.

It was a relief when a reply finally came from him late that evening. He sounded so sane.

Hi, Stella. Now you have asked me about my great passion! Sorry to take so long to get back to you but I wanted to wait till I had more time. I could talk about this for ever so feel free to stop reading if you get bored ...

My real job is as a professional landscape architect. It is something I have been doing for many years and, while I still enjoy it, I had reached a stage in my life when I wanted to make a bigger difference to people – not just those who can afford to pay me but poorer ones, those who live without beauty and green spaces.

My concern is how isolated we are all becoming. I remember when I was young how people in Italy lived on the streets. We

met our neighbours, said buongiorno, stopped for a chat, touched lives ... But now even here that is changing. We stay shut inside our homes, on our computers and phones, staring at screens, watching the world instead of being a part of it.

Are you still with me? I haven't lost you?

I began to create gardens to draw people outside and together. To begin with I did it without any permission. I planted things in the night on disused ground. I was a little crazy, yes?

Now my community gardens are organised and official. Often they are in run-down, urban areas. We grow vegetables and fruit trees and flowers in these places. The vision is mine but neighbours come together for the planting and I leave them to maintain what we've created. Often it works, not always. But when I make a gardener out of someone who has never put their hands in the soil ... or I see an old person sharing the knowledge of a lifetime with a young child, then I feel I am doing good work, a thing that counts.

This is enough about me, surely? You said something in an earlier message that I am curious about. You are on an adult gap year? What is that? Tell me more. Leo.

Hi, Leo. First of all, that sounds amazing. I really hope I get to see some of your gardens if I come to Italy. Could you send me a couple of pictures?

Adult gap years are a newish thing I think. The idea is that you take time out from your everyday life for experiences and adventures. Mine was forced on me after my employer died and I found myself out of a job. I'm sure I won't take a whole year but I do like the idea of a gap and this seems a good time for one. I've always lived in or around London and I'd like to be part of somewhere different for a while, get to know new people (hopefully they won't all be inside on their computers!) and their way of life. It all sounds a bit self-indulgent compared to what you're doing. I had thought about volunteering on some project in a developing nation. Perhaps I still ought to. But Villa Rosa seemed so tempting. I looked at all your photos and could imagine myself there. And I've always longed to visit Italy but never managed it ... Stella.

Stella, if you have a feeling that Villa Rosa is where you should be then you must come. It is a house that needs people, I think, and you will be filling it with your voice and your personality, and

your friends (and helping keep the weeds down in my garden). You will be doing a good thing.

It must have been a shock to have your employer die and to find yourself without a job so suddenly. You deserve this gap.

I will confide in you now. Since agreeing to work on this project in London I have been feeling a little anxious. I have done only one other in England and I found it difficult. That time I stayed in a motel room and it wasn't a good place to go back to at the end of a tough day. That's why I decided to try this house swap – in the hope I might find a home from home. I would like to be in London soon, however. How long do you think it will take you to decide on a date? I do have a couple of other house-swap options but I'd like

to think of you in Villa Rosa ... and I think Villa Rosa would like it too. Leo.

PS – Some pictures of my gardens attached as requested.

He talked about the house as if it was a person and that seemed odd to Stella, who thought him rather intense but supposed that might be the way with Italian men. She clicked on the pictures he had sent and was pleased to find he appeared in one of them. He was with another man, arms slung round each other's shoulders, faces creased into smiles, both holding spades. Behind them was a vegetable bed filled with structures made with willow branches, plants climbing up them. Leo looked more natural, less posed than he had in the first shot. He was older than his companion but striking with his sun-burnished skin and silvery hair.

She wasn't so worried now about him being a conman. Who in the world would create such an elaborate lie? Surely with Leo her little mews apartment would be in safe hands. What was she waiting for?

Hi Leo, I'm free to swap whenever you are. Let's do it soon! Stella.

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The pictures of Villa Rosa hadn't done it justice, not even nearly. The villa stood with its back to the mountains and glowed pale pink in the setting sun. Its dark-green shutters looked freshly painted, its wooden door gleamed with varnish, the terracotta tiles of its roof were weighed down with stones. Everywhere Stella looked there were plants, growing in pots, climbing up walls or sprouting from beds carved into the lawns. In front of the house was a courtyard with a flowering pomegranate tree at its centre. And over by the kitchen there was an outdoor fire and a table she could eat at when the weather was fine. She turned to face the sea and took in the view she was going to see every day for weeks to come...



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