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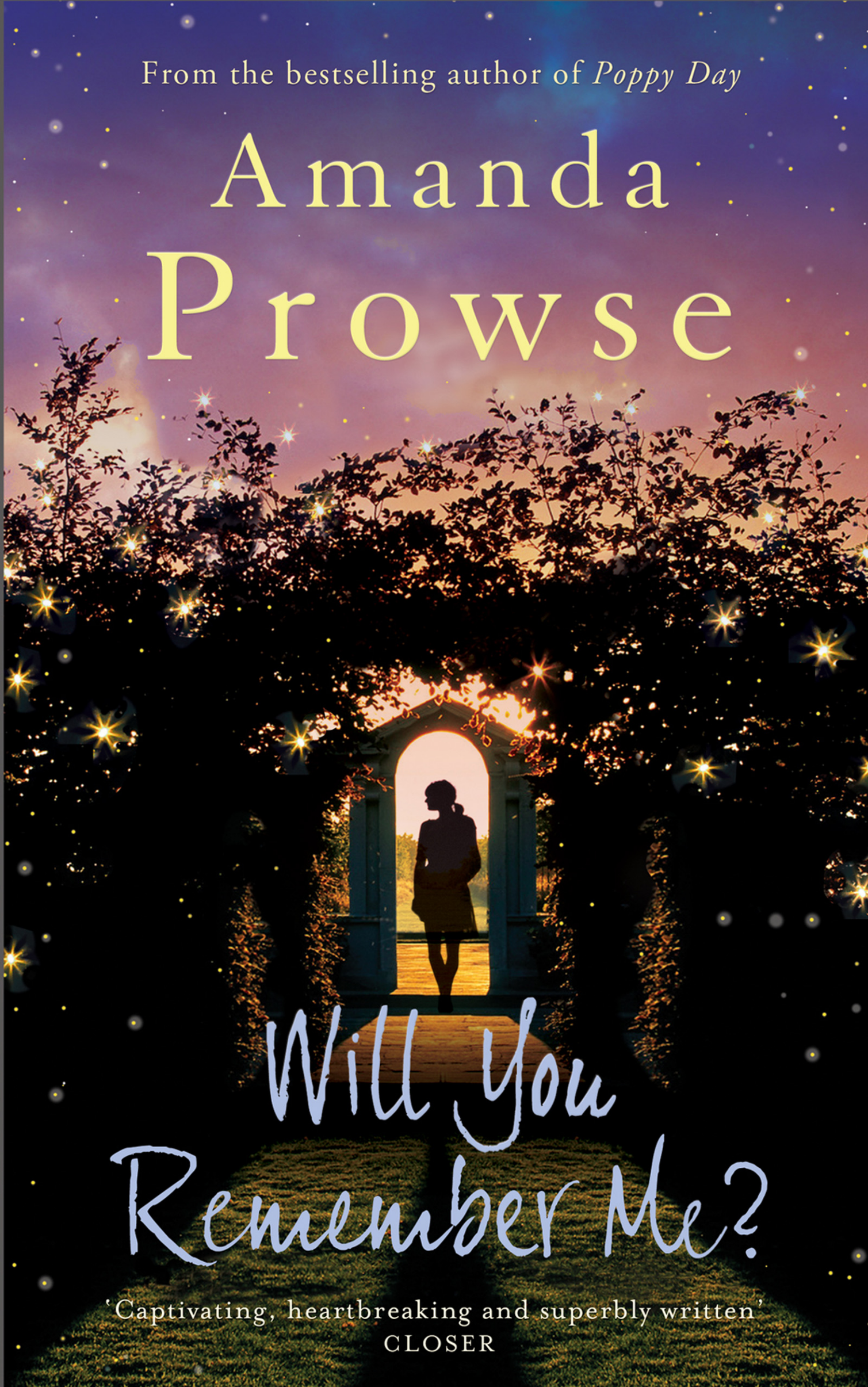
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From the bestselling author of *Poppy Day*

Amanda Prowse



Will You Remember Me?

'Captivating, heartbreaking and superbly written'
CLOSER

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Prologue

I often think about the day we got married, re-playing the best bits in my head. I picture us laughing as we walked to the pub afterwards and the way he held my hand, tightly, possessively, stepping slightly ahead as if leading me and I was happy to follow. It felt safe and comforting. The bloke that owned the local café drove past in his van and shouted out of the window, 'Oi Oi! It's Mr and Mrs!' It was the first time we'd been called it and we exploded with giggles. I thought I looked very average, dreadful really, it wasn't like I had the posh frock and all the trimmings, but when I look at the pictures now of the younger me, I can see that I looked far from dreadful. I was glowing as if my joy shone from me; no fancy dress could match that.

Later that night, with my husband by my side, I climbed into the rickety bed. The gas heater hissed, doing its best to take the chill from the damp room. My face ached from all that laughing and the permanent grin I'd worn. We were both tired. I was about to drop off. My eyelids were drooping and I was really really comfy, when suddenly, he flicked on the lamp and sat up. I opened my eyes wondering what was wrong, thinking that maybe those seven pints of Guinness and the kebab on the way home had finally caught up with him.

He lay back down and turned over, until he was lying on his side with this head propped up on his elbow and he said, 'I love you so much. I want to give you the moon with a bloody big bow tied around it. My wife! I've got a wife and not just any wife but the best bloody wife in the whole wide world!'

I laughed as flames of happiness flickered inside me.

'Tell me,' he said, 'tell me what you want and one way or another I'll get it for you.' He reached out and knotted his free hand with mine. I remember looking at the bumps of our knuckles side by side with our little wedding bands sitting next to each other, shiny and new, 'I don't want anything, only you…' I whispered, which was the truth.

He shook his head. 'Nah, that's not the answer, girl. If you could have anything and everything was possible, what would you want?' His expression was bright, hopeful and child-like.

I lay back and closed my eyes, trying to picture a world for us where I could have anything and everything was possible. 'Well,' I swallowed, 'I'd like two kids, a boy and a girl, who are happy and secure. I want them to be like us, but smarter and cuter,'

'Well that wouldn't be too difficult!' he laughed.

I didn't open my eyes; I stayed in that world that he'd created for me. 'And I'd like a swimming pool shaped like a kidney,'

'Why like a kidney?' he interrupted again.

'Because apparently, rectangle pools are the cheapest design, but a kidney takes some doing with all them curves, costs more. So everyone would know how much dosh we've got, just by it's shape.'

'Gotcha. What else?' he moved closer towards me. I could feel his minty breath against my face.

'I'd like a diamond ring, not just any old diamond mind, but one the size of an ice cube and I'd show it to everyone at school and on the estate who has ever laughed at me or made me feel like I was nothing.' I felt his lips graze my neck followed by a shiver of joy that travelled down my spine. 'And I want to lay on a tropical beach and feel the soft powdery sand slip through my fingers and the hot sun on my face.' This was the wish of a girl who had rarely left the postcode of her childhood.

'So not Southend?' he kissed me again.

I opened my eyes and turned to face him, 'no, not Southend.'

'Are you done?' he asked as his hand travelled up under my nightdress and rested on the flat of my stomach.

'Nearly.' I placed my hand on top of his. 'I want to dance with you in the rain, wearing a lovely dress and I want it to be a proper dance, like a waltz, old fashioned and romantic…'

He rolled over then until he was lying on top of me, resting on his forearms. He smoothed the hair from my forehead and kissed me gently on the mouth. 'Then a dance in the rain, you shall have.' He covered my chest and neck with tiny kisses, making my heart beat faster.

'And what about you?' I managed, 'what would you want if you could have anything and everything was possible, what would you want?'

His expression was suddenly solemn, he looked into my eyes and spoke in a soft voice, 'I want us to live in the countryside, just like we've always wanted and I reckon if we lived somewhere nice, everything else would fall into place.'

I nodded agreement against his shoulder the countryside was our dream. He wasn't finished, 'and I want to give you everything that you've asked for. That'd be enough for me, to make you happy that's a world I'd like to live in.'

'Well congratulations,' I beamed; 'you do make me happy so maybe we've arrived there already!' I laughed and wiggled down the bed with my arms wrapped around him.

'There is one more thing…' I mouthed into his ear.

He paused from his kissing and gave a small sigh, 'you're sure it's the last?'

I nodded, 'I'd like to know who my dad is.' I had felt the absence of this special man on this my wedding day. Unexpectedly, a tear found its way to the surface and trickled down my cheek, which he kissed away.

'Don't be sad.' He whispered, 'Not tonight.'

I sniffed and smiled. He pulled the duvet over our heads and it felt like we were in our own little bubble, sheltered from the world, like no one could get to us and we were safe. And I remember thinking, if I

get to feel like this, every night of my life, lying in bed with the man I love, knowing that nothing can touch us, then we have arrived at that place, we really have. And I was right.

One

'Bye Granny Claudia!' Peg waved her hand over her head, ensuring her farewell would be drawn out until the last possible moment, watching as Granny Claudia got smaller and smaller in the rear window. 'I've had the best Christmas, ever!'

These were the words they wanted to hear from their daughter every year. Peg settled back on her booster seat with her baby brother, Max dozing in his chair by her side.

Poppy smiled at her husband who drove them from the Oxford village where they had spent the festive holiday in the dear company of their friend Miles' mother, a substitute grandma for the children and a welcome voice of guidance for Poppy. A demure, educated widow who had lost her only son, Claudia was only too happy to take on the role. Poppy closed her eyes and pictured the Christmas Day just passed, a golden turkey with all the trimmings, a brisk walk with the kids in the snow as dusk bit on the day and dark port in crystal glasses that sent her into a glorious slumber in her husband's arms as they sat in front of a roaring log fire. Peg was right; it had been the best ever.

'What's the best Christmas you ever had, Mum?' Peg whispered.

'Ooh, I think this one will take some beating.' She squeezed her husband's thigh across the central console of their Golf, the joy of his surprise return, early from tour, still lingered.

'What's the best present you ever had?'

'Ooh definitely Daddy coming home.' Poppy beamed.

'What about when you were little?' Peg was curious; she shook her head to rid her eyes of her toffee-brown coloured fringe that needed a trim.

Poppy looked out of the window at the snow spattered hedges and wheelie bins crammed full of Christmas packaging, awaiting collection. She only ever gave her daughter diluted versions of the deprivation in which she had grown up, not wanting to upset her with the image of her mum, wanting.

Poppy and Martin had as children, both gone to bed on Christmas Eve in damp flats with tummies full of butterflies and expectancy. Neither knew whether the next day all their dreams were going to come true or whether it would be a rubbish day like any other. It was nearly always a rubbish day like any other, but that didn't stop them being excited. There was always the smallest possibility that the rumours were true, that if they had been good, they would get lots of great stuff. Poppy was always a smart child, quickly learning that the whole Santa thing was a rotten lie, but for an hour or two before bedtime, the anticipation would be almost painful. She liked the possibility that there might be some magic, somewhere.

The disappointment of waking every Christmas morning to find it was just another shitty day, albeit with a bit of cooled turkey, a couple of roasted spuds and a string or two of balding tinsel thrown in for good measure, didn't wane. That was until married and with kids of her own, she could give Peg and Max the holidays she could only have dreamed of, erasing the miserable yuletides of her past in the process.

Poppy turned to face her daughter, 'Well, I don't remember too much about my presents, but I do think about one year, my Nan and Grandad were asleep in their chairs,'

'Nanny Dot and Grandad Wally?' Peggy interrupted to show she knew who was who.

'Yep,' Poppy smiled, 'anyway, my mum had gone out somewhere,' an image flashed into her head of Cheryl arriving home, giggling as she slid down the wall with a defunct paper blower between her lips and the smell of booze hanging over her in a pungent cloud, 'I curled up on the sofa and watched the movie 'Miracle on 34th street' I remember

it made me feel very Christmassy and thinking how lovely it would be to have your wishes come true, that was quite a special day for me…'

'I think wishes do come true. I wished my dad back and he came!' Peg clapped.

'That's true.' Martin confirmed over his shoulder.

Poppy tucked the shoulder length layers of her hair behind her ears, 'well that film was very special for me.'

'I like that movie too, Mum.' Peg beamed.

'I saw the black and white version though Peg, the original.'

Peg considered this; 'black and white films make me really sad.' She spoke to her hands, folded in her lap.

'Why's that, Pickle?' Martin asked in the rear view mirror.

'Cos everyone in them is dead.' This she delivered with her palms upturned and her voice doleful as if she was standing on a West End stage.

For some reason this struck Poppy as funny, she snorted her laughter into her palm and Martin followed suit.

Peg folded her arms across her chest, 'You two drive me crazy!' This was fuel for their already giddy state, the two laughed until their tears spilled and they wheezed for breath.

'I really missed you.' Poppy gazed at her husband, the one person who could exacerbate her giggles with nothing more than a well-placed glance.

'I missed you too.' He grinned at his wife who reclined in the passenger seat.

'It's New Years Eve.' Peg stated.

'Yes love, it is and tomorrow is a whole new year! It's exciting isn't it?'

'Are we going to have a party?' Peg sat forward, eyes wide.

'No, I don't think so, we are far too boring.' Poppy pictured a night alone with her man, the kids tucked up, a glass or two of wine and hours and hours in which to make up for their long, lonely months of separation, she felt a stab of excitement at the prospect. Her soldier was home.

'Jade McKeever says her mum and dad always have a party and they drink champagne and beer and cocktails. Last year, her dad's friend got drunk and wee'd in the downstairs cupboard because he got mixed up and thought it was the loo.'

'Well that certainly sounds like fun.' Poppy grinned at her husband.

'We don't have to have a party Peg, I could just wee in the downstairs cupboard anyway.' Martin winked at her.

'Oh Dad that's gross!' Peg stuck out her tongue.

'You started it.' Martin laughed, 'Is Jade McKeever Ross' girl?' Martin had worked with Ross, a fellow mechanic, in the past.

'Yep, and Jade is Peg's new life coach, apparently.' Poppy rolled her eyes.

'We never have parties. I'd like you to have one so I can sit on the stairs and watch everyone getting drunk!' Peg was on a roll.

'You don't have to get drunk at a party, Peg. Sometimes it's nice to go and have a dance and chat to your friends…'

'Wee in the cupboards.' Martin interjected.

'Yes, that too,' Poppy slapped his arm, 'we didn't even have a proper wedding reception did we, Mart?'

'Nope. Didn't need all that fuss, I was just glad to get my girl.'

Poppy pictured Jenna and a couple of Martin's mates from the garage singing 'ta da da da...' repeatedly to the tune of 'Here comes the bride' as they arrived in the back bar of their local.

'Who caught your bouquet then, Mum and tied ribbons and tin cans to your lovely, white car?'

Poppy smiled, Peg had definitely seen too many wedding themed movies, 'I didn't have a bouquet or a fancy car. It was just daddy and me and a few of our mates in the pub near where we lived. I had a lovely day, even without the fuss.'

'Would you have liked all that, tin cans and a fancy bouquet?' Martin asked, his face now serious.

Poppy considered this, 'sometimes, I think it would have been nice, but if I picture a reception or big party, then I see the kids there, so I

guess I didn't miss it, but maybe a party one day would be nice. We could do it for our silver wedding or something?'

Martin nodded, that sounded like a plan and was sufficiently far off not to send him into a panic over finances and planning, 'am I really your best present?' he asked.

She nodded, 'Yep. Although when I'm rich and famous I and have my kidney shaped swimming pool, a diamond on my finger the size of an ice cube and have danced in my evening dress in the rain, that might change…'

'You'll still need me to pick you up and carry your bags though, right?' he leant towards her.

'Always, that's your job, to pick me up when I fall and carry my bags.'

'And kill baddies!' Peg piped up from the back. They'd quite forgotten she was listening. It set them off giggling again.

Finally, as Peg dozed and Max snored, Poppy turned to her husband, 'how was it? Out there?' she looked straight ahead.

Martin exhaled through bloated cheeks, as usual he would spare his wife the reality of life on tour, the crushing loneliness, the boredom 'Oh, busy, hard work, a shitty place, the usual. I've had enough really, Poppy.' He ran his hand over his face and rubbed his chin.

She nodded, me too. 'Well, if you can stay here for a bit that'll be okay won't it?' she tried to offer a small flicker of consolation.

'That'll do me, mate. It's all I want, to come home to you and the kids every night. Trouble is I don't know how long it'll be until I'm off again and it's the uncertainty I don't like.'

'I know. I know.' She placed her hand on the back of his and thumbed his tanned skin.

'I hate being away from you and the kids, but it also makes me realise how lucky I am. Imagine all those blokes like me who are away and don't have our heartstrings.'

Poppy smiled and squeezed his hand. It was their thing and always had been, the belief that they had heartstrings that joined them across

time and distance. Linking them as one, no matter what.

Poppy gave a long yawn.

'We keeping you up or are you just bored?' He joked.

'Sorry, I can't help it, I'm permanently knackered.' She sank back into the seat.

'Ha! It's me that travelled across the globe, hopping on and off planes and sitting up half the night and it's you that's yawning!' Martin tutted

'I know, I think I've found it harder work than I realised having you away this time, but you're back now and that changes everything.' She grinned, wrinkling her nose in the way that Peg had inherited.

An hour or so later they were back in the rolling rural landscape of Wiltshire.

'It's bloody beautiful here isn't it?' Martin beamed, leaning forward against the steering wheel to take in the bright sky and snow-covered fields.

Poppy nodded, the novelty for both of trading the concrete of East London for this green open space was still acute.

Poppy placed the key in the lock of their army quarter, one of twelve identical houses that had been built in the 1970's for the MoD. Flat fronted and rather ugly on the outside, but inside, the lounge/diner was quite spacious, the large windows let in lots of natural light and the kitchen was a useable square. There were two good-sized bedrooms and a third that on the block was either used as a study or like Poppy and Martin, was the room allocated to your second or third child. Martin lifted the bags from the boot of the car.

'God it's bloody freezing! Hope you left the heating on.'

Poppy tutted, 'of course I did, can't risk a pipe freeze in this weather. I do manage you know when you're not here. It's a case of bloody having to!'

Martin smacked her bum as she walked past and made her way inside.

Jo, their neighbour ran down her front path in her slippers, blushing

as she patted her hair, which had been hastily shoved into a covered band, 'Mart! Oh God, wasn't expecting to see you. What you doing home? Thought you had another couple of months to go?'

'I did, they cut the tour short.' He smiled. 'I didn't want to say anything to Poppy in case everything changed last minute, you know how it can.'

Jo nodded, 'don't I just.'

'It was all very last minute, but I got to Oxford on Christmas Eve in the early hours.'

'You lucky sod.' Jo wrung the tea towel in her hand; she wanted her husband home too.

'Danny all right?' Martin asked after his drinking buddy and fellow armchair Spurs supporter, who was among one of the last to be deployed to Afghanistan.

'Yeah. Y'know.' Jo shrugged, she didn't need to elaborate on how horrible it was to be separated, especially over Christmas.

'Give him my best.' Martin nodded, sincere.

'Will do, mate. Tell Pop not to worry about tonight, we were going to open a bottle of plonk and watch a bit of telly, but tell her I'll catch up with her in the week.' Jo hovered.

Martin nodded again in her direction; he had no intention of honouring this engagement. Tonight he wanted Poppy all to himself.

Poppy stood in the kitchen and watched as her man lumbered through the door, laden with bags of laundry, presents and the detritus that gathered in the car on any journey.

'You're home…' she whispered.

'The place looks lovely!' Martin grinned, taking in the immaculate leather sofa, shiny laminate floors, cushions plumped just so and dust free surfaces. He smiled at the tiny Christmas tree in the window and the Santa statues on the side table, he was glad they had made this effort for Christmas, even though they were going away. It made the place feel like home. He loved how Poppy cared for their house, feeling a sense of pride every time he opened the door, 'and bloody

huge, I thought it was small, but living inside a tent and washing in a communal block every day makes this feel like a palace!'

'Is that right? Better get me a tent then, I'll kip in that for a couple of weeks and then come in and be as chuffed as chips with this grotty quarter.' Poppy slipped her arms around her husband's neck and kissed him on the mouth, running her fingers over his shorn, fair hair. He knew she loved this house and loved looking after it, finding it far from grotty.

'How soon can we get the kids off?' He whispered, gruffly into her hair.

'Well that depends, if I had a hand with cooking tea and getting them into their pj's it would all happen a lot quicker…'

'Consider it done.' Martin clapped his hands, loudly. 'Right, Peg, Maxy, who wants what for tea?'

The two thundered into the lounge, 'chicken nuggets, chips, peas and chocolate mousse please, Dad!' Peg shouted.

'Yes nuggets!' Max nodded his agreement.

'Coming right up.' Martin bowed, 'is that on the same plate?'

The two giggled, 'I love having my Daddy home!' Peg pogoed up and down, Max joined her.

'Tell you what Babe, why don't you go have a shower, have a moment to yourself.' Martin spoke to his wife as he headed for the kitchen.

Poppy smiled, she liked having their daddy home too.

Kicking her pants on top of the jeans and t-shirt that nestled in the corner of the bathroom, Poppy let the water splat against the shower tray, she usually jumped into the slightly chilly deluge and started scrubbing as it warmed, but not tonight. Instead, she carefully laid out her silky nightie, dressing gown and only matching set of bra and pants, before positioning her perfume bottle, ready for a quick spritz before she went downstairs. He was home! She grinned into the mirror and practiced her smouldering pose, hair over the shoulder, cheeks sucked in slightly, eyes fixed. She laughed; she was rubbish at that stuff and after eighteen years together, knew that Martin would

only find it comical not alluring. She felt sexy enough without trying to do sultry as well.

Steam engulfed the space as she let the hot water wash over her. She squeezed a blob of her new expensive shower gel into her palm, a gift from Claudia that she had been determined to save for special occasions, well, this was certainly a special occasion, it was New Years Eve. Again she smiled at the thought that her man was on the floor below her instead of miles and miles away across a sea or two…

Poppy inhaled the shiny amber coloured liquid; it smelt of vanilla and honey, lovely. She rubbed her hands together to form lather and ran her palm over her arms, neck and chest. Like most, she had a familiar ritual to her washing routine, doing it in the same way and covering her body parts in the same order, to deviate from this felt odd. She considered this and smiled, wondering how long it had taken for this sequence to become habit. Did other people for example start at their feet and work upwards? Poppy grimaced, this would be entirely wrong.

She began to sing, loudly, 'let your love flow…'

'Mum, Mum!' Peg banged on the bathroom door before trying the handle and realising to her delight that it wasn't locked. She strolled in and gathered up Poppy's silky nightie with its lacy edge and side split, 'what is this? Mum, is this a dress? It looks fancy! Are you going to a party after all?'

Poppy turned her face to the shower nozzle and let the water cover her blush, 'Oh no, that' s just a very comfy nightie – it's nice and cool when it gets hot.'

Peg ran her fingers over the silky material, 'but it's a bit snowy outside, daddy's freezing!'

Poppy turned off the shower, knowing that her allocated 'me-time', was over. 'Yes I know, but it can sometimes get a little toasty if we leave the heating on.'

'Why don't you just turn the heating off?' Peg stared at her with her head cocked to one side and her nose wrinkled.

'Good point, love. I shall do just that.'

As Poppy wrapped herself in the large towel and ran her fingers through her hair, Peg popped the nightie over her head and tucked the bottom of it into her jeans, 'Dad says we can go on the trampoline!' she clapped her hands.

It was what they did. If anything good happened or they were celebrating an anniversary, they all took to the trampoline, deciding beforehand how many bounces were appropriate, ten being the most. This was the exact number that had welcomed the impending arrival of Max two years ago and the amount awarded to Peg's first baby tooth that fell out, the occasions weren't always the most traditional.

'Really, tonight?' Poppy tried to hide her slight irritation; this wasn't how she saw their evening of passion beginning.

'Yes! It's New Years Eve! And we've got a lot to look forward to.'

Poppy kissed her little girl's forehead, 'Yes we have, my darling.'

'I mean I'm going to nine next year and I'm getting a new pet, aren't I?'

Poppy nodded, as she reached for her toothbrush, still hoping that the idea of acquiring a guinea pig might have lost its appeal, despite Martin having agreed readily to the idea.

'And I'm going to try and be Register Monitor next term. I'm going to be really good, mum and not talk too much when Mrs Newman is talking and use my ruler for drawing lines and not hitting people and this time next year, I might be on the X Factor!'

'Why is Mrs Newman on the panel?' Poppy mumbled as she spat her toothpaste foam into the sink.

'No!' Peg tutted, 'But Jade McKeever and me are doing a dance routine and we've learnt a song and we're going to audition.'

'But you'll only be nine!'

Peg rolled her eyes, 'we are going to lie on our application form.'

'Ah, of course, they won't be expecting that!' Poppy tapped the side of her nose, 'Well good luck with your bid for stardom Peg, what song are you going to sing?'

'It's Miley Cyrus, but I haven't learnt the words yet. Jade's going to teach them to me.' Peg coughed and placed her hands on her hips, as if it just by knowing the name of an artiste she was elevated to that auspicious rank of teenager.

Poppy sprayed her perfume onto her neck and wrists. Peg breathed in deeply, 'I love your perfume, Mum, you smell all chocolatey.'

'Chocolatey? Oh good.' Poppy laughed.

Martin did a double take as Peg trotted down the stairs with his wife's finery flung over her hoodie and Poppy following in her comfy tartan pj's and bed socks.

'What the…?' he began.

'Peg came to chat to me while I was getting ready and she found my nightie.' Poppy gave a wide false, grin.

'Mum only wears this when it gets hot.' Peg stated matter of factly as she sat at the table and poked a large chip into her mouth.

'Err, last time I checked we use cutlery at the table, love.' Martin tried to look stern.

'Oh Dad, you are so funny!' Peg chuckled as she picked up a chicken nugget with her fingers and dunked it into the little puddle of ketchup on the side of the plate.

'I believe we are trampolining after tea?' Poppy quizzed.

'Well, it is New Years Eve and we are getting a new pet.' He winked.

'Mart, she has got you wrapped around her little finger.'

'Can you get me a drink please, Mummy?' Peg mumbled between mouthfuls.

Poppy jumped up.

'Oh hello kettle!' Martin called after her.

Poppy ran the tap and smiled, this was a good feeling, back to normal, family life, everyone where they should be, snug and safe under their little roof in Larkhill.

She opened the fridge and saw a bottle of champagne and two glasses cooling on the top shelf - perfect.

With the tea things washed and put away and the kids in their pad-

ded snowsuits, the four laughed and squealed as they made their way out to the little square back garden. Martin was the first to climb onto the trampoline in his jeans, sweatshirt and socks with his wellington boots placed neatly side-by-side on the floor. Poppy handed him Max who was wrapped to resemble a little Michelin man, he giggled, finding the whole exercise hilarious. Peg made her own way up, and stood resplendent in her snowsuit with a green neon tutu skirt over the top and her face almost entirely covered by her hood and scarf. Poppy clambered aboard in her pyjamas, dressing gown and thick socks with a fleecy top zipped up under her chin and her striped bobble hat securely over her ears.

Martin held Max as they all stood in a wobbly circle and held hands.

'Okay Cricket family,' Martin spoke in a whisper as his breath blew smoke into the chilly December air, 'how many bounces? I vote four.' He smiled at his wife.

'Four?' Peg screamed, 'no way, ten! And Maxy wants ten I can tell.'

Max clapped and shouted 'Duck!' his word of the moment.

'Okay,' Martin looked at each member of his family, 'so that's a four from me, a ten from Peg and a Duck from Maxy. Mummy, you have the deciding vote.'

Poppy gasped and placed her hand on her chest, 'Oh gosh that's a huge responsibility. Well, let's have a think…'

'Ten, ten ten!' Peg chanted, causing waves as she jiggled that threatened to topple them all.

'I vote… ten!' Poppy shouted.

Peg screamed and commenced her bouncing, which caught Poppy off guard and sent her sprawling, she squealed as Martin lay down next to her and held Max's mitten covered hands as he bounced in the small space not filled by his parents. Peg finished her bounces and jumped on top of her mum, landing with a thump. Max copied his sister and pretty soon all four were in a heap on the trampoline, laughing, fighting for breath and staring at the clear, winter sky.

Their breathing slowed and the noise hushed. Martin slid his palm

across the thick woven base and gripped his wife's hand.

'There is no where on earth that I would rather be than right here, right now.'

Poppy raised his hand to her mouth and kissed his fingers, 'me too.'

'It's going to be the best year, Poppy. I just know it.'

She smiled into the darkness, 'Yes it is, my love, the best.'

Two

Martin turned his attention to his wife from the pan on the stove at which he laboured, 'Well here she is my beautiful hot bird.'

Poppy held the folded newspaper up to her face, Joan May Williams, aged 84. Wife, Mother, Grandma and Great-Grandma died peacefully after a brief illness. Donations to any Alzheimer's charity in lieu of flowers…

She looked up from the newspaper and over her shoulder at her husband who was wearing her 'I kiss better than I cook' apron as he flipped fried eggs that popped and sizzled in the pan. She pointed at her chest,

'Do you mean me? Or have Tesco delivered one of them rotisserie chickens you like?'

'Yes, I mean you.' Martin held the spatula aloft and grabbed around her waist with his free hand, pulling her towards him. After any time away, he was drawn anew to his wife's pale skin, with it's smattering of freckles across her nose, her clear green eyes and her shiny, shoulder length hair, now layered, hanging in reddy-brown loops around her face.

'You make me sound like some leggy model, I think we might need to get your goggles upgraded.'

'I don't need no leggy model, I just want you.'

'Well that's lucky, cos that's what you've got mate and you are well and truly stuck with me.'

'What's that you're reading?' Martin watched as she turned her

attention back to the newspaper holding it close to her face, devouring the contents.

'Nothing.' Poppy haphazardly collapsed the paper into an awkward parcel and shoved it next to the bread bin.

'Are you looking at the obituaries again?' he waited for her reply, wanted to see if the lie passed her lips.

She nodded. Trying not to laugh.

'I hate you reading them.' He whispered.

'But I've always read them.'

'I know and it creeps me out!' He shivered.

'Why? I think it's lovely to see what people have said about their loved ones.'

'I tell you what it is, is an excuse for people to wallow in their sadness and for the newspaper to make a few quid! What's the point? Grief should be a private thing. The person they are writing about is brown bread, it's bloody pointless.'

'It's not pointless, Mart. At least I don't think it is, its like wishing them a fond farewell.'

'A fond farewell? I just don't think it's very jolly.' He replied.

Poppy threw her head back and laughed loudly, 'not very jolly? Have you been mixing with them officers again, Mart? Jolly? Not very jolly?' she taunted him, while he kicked his leg out, trying to catch her with his foot as she wiggled out of reach.

They both smiled as Poppy stood behind him and ran her fingers over the tan line at his neck. Feeling the slight bulge of flesh against the pad of her finger. Martin had always been solid, stocky and she could now see the extra pounds that would pad him into his middle age.

'I love having you home.' She kissed his neck.

'Well that's lucky too, cos I'm not going anywhere either.'

'Although I must admit, I find it easier to keep my kitchen clean and tidy when you aren't home.' Poppy picked up the empty egg carton and flung it in the recycling bag she kept by the back door, before

reaching for her cloth and spraying it with Cif.

'Your kitchen? Blimey, there are women burning bras all over the world so the kitchen won't be considered 'theirs'.' Martin laughed.

'Not me,' Poppy smiled as she swiped at the sink drainer, 'I like looking after my house, plus I've only got a couple of bra's; I'd be in all sorts of unsupported trouble if I started burning them.'

'I sometimes think you'd rather we didn't eat and then you could keep your kitchen immaculate at all times.'

Poppy carried on cleaning, not willing to confess that sometimes that was exactly what she thought. 'Well if you don't like it, you can always move into the shed in the back garden, where I think the dirt and mess might be more to your liking!'

'I'm only teasing you Babe, I love being in our shiny house. I'm not going anywhere.'

'Well, not yet.' Poppy crinkled her nose, hardly able to think that this happiness might be subject to a countdown. The supposed two year gap between deployments seemed to be ignored as numbers dwindled and campaigns continued. She knew it wouldn't be long before he came home, looking sullen, eye twitching and muscles tense as he delivered the phrase she always dreaded, I've been posted…

'Maybe not ever.' he quipped.

'Ooh now your talking.' She kissed him again before freeing herself from his grip and plunging her hands deep into the sink, wanting to get a head start on the washing up as she felt for the cups and cutlery that lurked under the suds.

'Seriously Poppy, I've been having a good old think. I reckon when this year is up, I should think about signing off. Then we can stay around here, the kids don't have to be uprooted from school and I don't have to go away again.' He turned to look at his wife over his shoulder.

'God that sounds perfect, I'd love it, but it's a lot to consider love, we'd lose the house obviously and you'd need to find a job.'

Martin nodded, he had thought of this, 'I'm sure I can get some-

thing, looking after a fleet in some company or a garage. I get causal offers from people that I meet all the time apparently my military training and willingness to put up with the most shite conditions makes me an attractive prospect!'

'Well who knew?' Poppy mocked.

'Not me.' He grinned, 'Or of course I could always set up my own business, open my own garage or whatever…' He let the idea dangle.

Poppy watched him glance at her before he returned his stare to the pan, trying to gauge her reaction.

Poppy abandoned the washing up and turned to face him, 'That'd be great wouldn't it? I could go back to hairdressing if need be, just while we get set up. Ooh Mart! I'd love to see you with your own business. You could have Cricket and sons over the door!'

'Or and daughters.' He corrected.

'Only if you are planning on setting up a flight school for our little pilot, she's quite determined.'

Martin laughed. 'She'll have to be. I think I'll see what surprises this year has in store, but I might do the sums, see what it would take and how far we could get with my gratuity. It wouldn't be huge, but if we were careful and had another income coming in, it might just be do-able.'

'Are we having another baby?' Peg shouted as she pulled a chair from the table and sat with her legs tucked up underneath her, neither had heard her approach in her green and blue striped socks.

'Another baby?' Poppy laughed.

'Yes, I heard Dad say something about surprises this year and the last time you said you had a big surprise for me, we got Maxy! I don't mind if we are, but I'd like a girl this time, called Katniss.'

'No darling, we're not having a baby and I can almost guarantee that if we did have one, we wouldn't be calling it Katnap or whatever.'

Peg rolled her eyes before burying her head in her colouring book, concentrating on keeping the pink pen within the lines.

Martin chuckled, 'I've got one kid that wants a new baby and one

doing his level best to make sure I can't get within four feet of my wife!' He whispered from the corner of his mouth.

Poppy smiled and thought about the previous night. Max had woken several times, only settling when ensconced in their bed. It was not quite the evening of passion they had planned.

'Oh I don't know, you seemed to do okay in the Max free interludes.'

'That was just me getting started.' Martin grinned at his wife.

'Well, better get them tucked up early tonight then, Romeo.' She flicked the water and suds from her fingers in his direction.

The front door bell rang.

'I'll get it!' Peg jumped off her chair and ran towards the front door, skidding in her socks until she banged into the door.

'It's Aunty Jo!' Peg announced as their neighbour entered with two boxes wrapped in Christmas paper balanced on her arms.

'Are they for Maxy and Me?' Peg pranced from foot to foot.

'Peg – don't be rude!' Poppy yelled as she released herself from her husband's grip.

She smiled at Peg, knowing the joy at receiving a gift when you thought there were no more in the offing was heightened.

Jo shook her head, sending her cascade of dark, glossy curls shivering down her back. She winked at Poppy, 'Actually no Peg, these are for Mummy and Daddy.'

'Oh.' Peg kept her smile in place, 'Can I open them for them?'

The two women laughed at the little girl who refused to let her excitement flag.

'Course they're for you, darlin" Jo handed the box on top to Peg who screamed up the stairs, 'Max, wake up! We've got a present!'

Max immediately started to wail. Smoke rose from the eggs in the pan and Peg screamed in excitement as she peeled back the red foil paper, to reveal a pair of roller boots. The fire alarm began pipping its herald.

'It's a bloody mad house!' Martin yelled from the kitchen as he opened the window and Poppy whizzed a tea towel in a helicopter

motion below the smoke alarm.

Jo opened the front door and worked it back and forth to try and dilute the smoke. She laughed, happy to be a small part of this chaotic, noisy family.

With Peg content to roll up and down the hallway, oblivious to the irritating rattle of her wheels and Max diligently counting all his new dinosaurs back into the box from which they had spilled, the three adults sat and sipped at strong tea. The remnants of fried egg sandwiches and sloshes of ketchup littered the plates on the coffee table in front of them.

'When's Danny back then, Jo?' Martin missed his friend and football buddy.

'Ten weeks tomorrow. I can't wait.' Jo beamed.

'It'll be good to see him.' Martin nodded.

'He's had enough, Mart to be honest, I don't think he's had the best tour and what with all these cuts he knows he'll be turned around quite quickly and back out again, somewhere. He's seriously thinking of signing off.'

'Sounds familiar.' Poppy sipped at her mug.

Martin sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. 'It's because it's tough now Poppy, houses falling apart, too few of us stretched, posts gapped and the jobs that need doing don't disappear, it just means that with less people we all work harder, longer and you don't even have time to think. Danny and I won't be the only ones thinking of jacking it in. It's a shame, they are losing good men, trained men, but still spending money on recruiting and trying to think of the next big thing. If only they were more efficient and a bit smarter, there'd be less people leaving and we'd keep the skills we need.'

'I think this is the same conversation being had on every patch in the country. I was talking to some of our old neighbours up in Catterick everyone is saying the same, trouble is there aren't that many jobs once you get out, not now. ' Jo added, 'It's a bloody shame, I don't want to move. I love my house, neighbours are a bit of a handful though.'

She smiled.

'That's funny,' Poppy sat up straight, 'I feel exactly the same!'

The women were quiet for a second.

'God, if you moved I'd really miss you, I'd miss the kids.'

Poppy reached over and patted her mate's leg, 'and they'd miss you.' She felt the familiar guilt that Jo had not fulfilled her wish to become a mum when it was a role that had come so easily to her. 'Mind you, even if we moved, we'd still see you.'

'Yeah, but it wouldn't be the same.' Jo sipped her tea.

'No, I know. But let's not worry about that - you've got Danny back in ten weeks! That's so exciting.'

'Yep, you're right. I wonder how much weight I can lose in ten weeks?'

'Lots if you stop scoffing biscuits and fried egg sandwiches!' Peg offered as she whizzed past the back of the sofa.

Poppy felt her face colour, 'more tea anyone?' she tried not to notice as Martin's shoulders shook.

'I'm getting a new pet, Aunty Jo.' Peg shouted from the hallway.

'Are you, I thought Mummy said no?' Jo looked quizzically at Poppy.

'She did, but daddy said YES!' Peg shouted her joy.

'She'll give me heart failure that child or at the very least send me grey.' Poppy smiled.

'In fairness I was put on the spot a bit.' Martin pulled a face, trying to excuse his culpability.

Jo laughed, 'So what pet are you getting?' she spoke to Peg's form as it whizzed by.

'A guinea pig – called Katniss!'

'Piss Piss!' Max shouted from the rug on which he sat.

Martin felt a new wave of giggles about to erupt. 'Maybe not Katniss, Peg,' he suggested, 'I thought you wanted to call it Toffee?'

'I did, that's the name that me and Jade came up with, but I prefer Katniss now.'

'Piss Piss!' Max shouted again, this time looking at his dad to see if it got the same reaction.

'I think we are going to go with Toffee.' Martin made the decision; he couldn't have Max shouting that out every five minutes.

'Shall we go today, Dad and pick him up?'

'Let's do it tomorrow, Peg.'

'Okay!' She shouted as she thundered past and hit the front door. 'Ouch!'

The three of them held their cups still and waited to hear Peg's recovery.

'I'm okay!' she wheezed and stood up ready for another run.

'How much is a guinea pig and all its gubbins going to cost me?' Martin asked as if only just considering the cost.

'A bloody fortune and it serves you right!' Poppy laughed.

Martin read Peg and Max the Gruffalo, complete with growly Gruffalo voice and squeaky mouse impression. Poppy had tried to do their favourite story justice during his absence, but knew that she didn't come close. Well, as long as they were occupied…

She let the shower run and placed her hand under the warm water. Smiling in the mirror, she felt very lucky. They had been together for over half their lives and still the spark of excitement at the prospect of physical contact hadn't waned.

'You are one lucky girl, Poppy Day. Very, very lucky.'

Love and luck… she heard her Nan's voice saying her favourite expression, picturing the day her Nan had teased her about getting serious with Martin Cricket. They were sat opposite each other at the little table in the kitchen, her Nan with a roll-up perched between her fingers and a cup of stewed tea in it's saucer, 'so do you love him Poppy Day? Does he make your tummy go flippy and your face all smoochy?'

'No Nan, yuk!' she had shouted, although that was exactly how he made her fourteen year old self feel.

'I thought you was best mates, you and Mart? And that's no basis for a boyfriend! You're supposed to argue like cat and dog not be best mates! What kind of a future would that lead to?' Dorothea winked at her granddaughter. 'I'm teasing you darlin'. I wish you both all the love and luck in the world.'

Poppy smiled into the deluge of water, 'It's been a lovely future Nan, but you knew it would be, didn't you?'

The hot water ran over her head and body. They had a big day tomorrow, a new addition to the family. She decided to try and feel pleased about the arrival of Toffee the guinea pig; after all, Peg was beside herself with happiness. Maybe she would take care of it herself; maybe Poppy wouldn't be lumbered with mucking out a bloody guinea pig as well as everything else that fell under her remit in this house. She laughed, fat chance.

'Working nine til five…' Poppy sung loudly as she worked the soap into bubbles between her palms.