

LOVE IN ANOTHER TIME

A Sardinian saga

Lexa Dudley



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For Kit

Without whose patience and kindness, I would never have become a writer.

To the elusive and magical Spirit of Sardinia

In other times and in other places, people have lived and loved.
Where lives are touched, leaving a profound effect the one upon the other.
Where memories linger forever, and love is never forgotten.

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Dear Reader
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CASTEDDU

Ageless stronghold with medieval walls,
beneath which Villanova idly sprawls.
Here where past and present merge as one
under a radiant halo of golden sun,
nut-brown children spend carefree hours
in narrow streets, mid ancient Pisan towers.

Cool dark streets, illuminated by shafts of light
open on warm chequered squares of black and white.
From windows, cast in shade, peering eyes are met
as half-glimpsed figures form their silhouette.
Here through darkling doorways, almost concealed,
flower-filled courtyards are fleetingly revealed.

The noiseless step of time passes by unheard
leaving only a breath of wind, gently stirred
amidst washing, billowing like painted sails.
whilst overall an enchanted peace prevails.
Out on azure water, a dancing light gleams,
luring fishermen to gentle noonday dreams.

This city's magic catches the eager wandering eye,
from lofty cathedral, outlined against cloudless sky,
on over the reeling drop of San Remy, to Marina below,
past silent *stagni*, reflecting the sun's fiery glow,
to the devil's saddle towering over Golfo degli Angeli
faithfully watched by the Sette Fratelli.

Spread before me from Buoncammino can be seen
the Campidano patchwork fields of gold and green.
Nearby Tuvixeddu, veiled in her hushed mystery,
shares the splendour of this ancient history.
This city is no fading dream or passing shadow,
but alive with a vibrant race I'm proud to know.

(Poems from my Island)

INTRODUCTION

As a passing note, I set the first part of this story in 1961. Times were very different then; the age of adulthood, and parental control, was 21 and not lowered to 18 until 1970. It was not until 1968 that media censorship was abolished, and bedroom scenes did not have to be played with one foot on the floor! Being gay was only partially legalised that year, and divorcees could enter the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. Discipline and respect were paramount.

When Ellie goes to boarding school, she has a tuck box. In 1947 the country was still on rationing, which wasn't finally lifted until 1954. The tuck box was probably your most treasured possession. It was where you kept your sweets, only four allowed in the evening, under the strict eye of Matron; although it was possible to put some in the pocket of your long grey knickers if you were quick. Biscuits, homemade cake, Marmite, Bovril, jam or honey, were only allowed with your bread at teatime. Tuck parcels from home were always eagerly awaited to keep the supplies topped up.

No mobile phones in fact, in the early 60s, homes that had a phone, often had to share a party line. If you wanted to make a call and the other party was on the line, you had to hang up and wait until they had finished. Calls abroad were difficult. It was necessary to book a call to the country and then wait hours or days for it to go through, unlike today, with the wonderful way you can talk to someone in Australia on your iPhone instantly.

Sardinia is not Italy. It is an island that has changed little over the centuries, from the invading Phoenicians to the coming of the Piedmontese under the Duchy of Savoy in 1720, when Italian became the dominant language, until the present day. The fiercely independent islanders have retained their languages, yes languages, not dialects, through all the millennia together with their folk traditions and local costumes. Although UNESCO has now classed them as 'endangered languages'.

I have been told that there is a lot of reference to food. All I can say is that's the way it is in Sardinia. Food for friends, food for strangers, any excuse to sit at a table and share stories. Their hospitality is second to none.

The Sardes have a profound pride in their country, which is both refreshing and endearing.

With my books, I try to impart a little of the beauty of Sardinia, hoping others will come to love her too.

Finally, if you have read my previous books, *The Whispering Wind* or *Children of the Mists,* you will know that I am a passionate lover of Sardinia and it is a character in its own right, in my books.

Lexa Dudley 2021

ACKNOWLEGDEMENTS

I want to thank everyone who has helped me with this book.

My numerous friends in Sardinia who patiently answer all my questions about their island, and include us in their family celebrations.

And those who sent me pictures of Cagliari in the 60s with stories about that era.

To Ignazio Carboni for his original photo of the Antico Caffe.

To Alberto Piso for his help with the photo for the back cover.

With many thanks to Giovanni D'Angelo for his inspired design for the cover.

My great doctor NR who kindly gives me his time to tell me about symptoms etc.

Finally, my wonderful husband who takes me down to the island every year to renew friendships and do research.

PROLOGUE

England, January 1947

Ellie stood in the doorway of the large late-Victorian mansion watching her mother's chauffeur climb the broad steps to her new school. He puffed as he dropped her shiny new trunk on the marble floor. After pausing for a moment to catch his breath, he returned to the car and collected her tuck box, which he put beside her bright-red trunk. Ellie had chosen the trunk with her father, in preference to the brown or black ones. Her tuck box was of new white wood with black metal bands, and her name, ELEANOR di MONTFORD, stamped on both in big black letters. Her mother, Isabel, always insisted on the 'di', but Ellie left it out, thinking it pretentious.

Ellie turned to see her mother standing on the step below her.

'I can't stay, we have a dinner party tonight. You make sure you behave yourself. I don't want any trouble from you. Do you understand, Eleanor?'

'Yes, Mother.'

Her mother, dressed in a long black mink coat and black crocodile shoes with a matching handbag; her hair pulled up in a French twist, gave her a hard appearance. Ellie noticed her mother was in a hurry to leave and appeared ill at ease, she looked overdressed in her expensive clothes, as most of the women were farmers' wives or country people in their tweed suits and sheepskin coats.

Isabel dropped a perfunctory kiss on her daughter's cheek and went down the steps to get into the waiting car. The chauffeur closed the door and climbed into the driver's seat.

Ellie waved to her mother, but Isabel did not return the gesture. She did not look back, and Ellie knew her mother was already thinking about the dinner party that evening – whom she could impress, or who would be in a high enough position to help her husband's career.

Ellie watched as the large black Rolls Royce made its way down the long drive.

Her father had said his goodbye to her at breakfast and had pressed a ten bob note into her hand, whispered. 'Don't tell your mother,' and given her a quick peck on the cheek, then checked to make sure no one was watching.

Ellie turned to look at the large, red-brick building. It had all the hallmarks of an institution: bare wooden floors, curtainless windows, and the distinctive smell of carbolic soap reaching out into the morning air.

She walked inside and watched the other girls being enfolded in their mothers' arms or hugged by their fathers and wondered what it was like to be loved by such adoring parents.

A clattering noise caught Ellie's attention, house shoes banging on the wooden stairs, and then someone called her name.

'Ellie, oh, Ellie.'

A young girl came rushing toward her with outstretched arms and a broad grin across her face.

‘Polly,’ cried Ellie, as the two girls embraced, both wearing the school uniform of grey gym tunic, white shirt, and a house tie, grey lisle socks and black house shoes.

‘Gosh, Polly,’ said Ellie, pulling away and looking at her friend. ‘It’s been over a year and you have grown so tall.’

‘And you are still as skinny as a beanpole. What have you been doing? What was London like? You look so pale. Come on, we are sharing a dorm. I have so much to ask you and so much to tell you. I’ve missed you so much, we all have.’

‘I’ve missed you, too. Is everyone okay?’

‘Yes, come on, follow me.’

‘What about our trunks?’ asked Ellie.

‘Manning will bring them up. Come on. Tuck boxes go in the dining room. You must remember, the front stairs are out of bounds during term time, back stairs only,’ said Polly, without pausing for breath.

Ellie smiled and followed her friend up the impressive oak staircase and down a long corridor to a compact room at the end. Two beds occupied most of the room, with two chests of drawers, a washbasin, and a rather motheaten-looking mat beside each bed.

Polly went to her chest, opened a drawer, and rummaged around until finding what she was searching for. With a great flurry, Polly handed a bag to Ellie.

‘Heavens, sweets!’ said Ellie peering into the bag ‘Where did you get them? We couldn’t get any in London, even with our ration books.’

‘Simon knows a boy at school whose father makes them, so we always have the ones that are misshapen or wonky.’

‘But they still taste great. What a treat – thanks,’ said Ellie, relishing the sugary flavour.

‘Now, tell me what has happened to you,’ said Polly. ‘I’m dying to know.’

‘First, tell me, how are your parents and Simon and Laurence?’ asked Ellie.

‘Parents are well, and my brothers are back at boarding school. Simon still hates it, and Laurence loves it. Funny how two brothers can be so different. Papa says one takes after him and the other after Mother, but I can’t remember which one is which. Enough about my brothers, tell me what happened to you. Your father rang mine to see if he could arrange for you to come here. Are they going abroad again? Can’t you go with them? It was all such short notice.’

Ellie sat on her bed and looked at her dear friend with her green eyes and auburn hair, which she wore in two thick plaits but when loose became a halo of curls.

They had spent the first five of their seven years in each other’s company playing together and at the local Playgroup. Polly’s father, Adam Smythe, was a farmer and had been exempt from military service during the war to produce food. He lived on the farm next to Ellie’s grandparents’ home, and they were lifelong friends; the women had always kept in touch with each other.

When Ellie and Polly and the boys were babies, they were all put out in prams together, then playpens, and finally they could play in the fields, always accompanied by the two Labradors from the farm. It was during the war, and they all played in the one remaining unploughed

meadow, built camps, and fished and swam in the river; idyllic days without a care in the world, returning at teatime dirty, hungry and tired. Only the occasional dog fight between the Luftwaffe and the RAF disturbed their carefree childhood.

'Come on, tell me,' said Polly.

'I don't know,' began Ellie, 'but I know I angered my mother, which is never a brilliant move.'

'That's true,' laughed Polly.

Ellie pushed the sweet into her cheek. 'Well, as you know, my mother was desperate to move back to London as soon as the war was over, although Father wanted to stay here. I can't tell you how much I hated it. No friends, only a nanny for company. I hardly saw my parents, as they were always out attending dinners, luncheons, or some puffed-up function or other.

'Anyway, about two weeks ago, Father was at an Embassy lunch, Mother was at home and told the nanny, she was expecting an important visitor and did not wish to be disturbed under any circumstances. Nanny decided we should play hide-and-seek in the garden. It was cold, and Nanny wanted to get some hot chocolate. So, I went to hide in the summerhouse. When I got there, I could hear strange moans coming from inside, so I looked in through the window.'

'What did you see?' asked Polly, her eyes wide with expectation.

'My mother was lying on a couch, her skirts up around her waist, her blouse open, and her naked legs wound round a dark shadow, which was moving slowly over her. At that moment Nanny returned and pulled me away. When I asked her what my mother was doing, Nanny put her finger to her lips and whispered, 'Your mother is securing a job for your father.'

Polly stared at her friend. 'Did your mother find out you had seen her?'

'Well, they had a formal dinner party that night for all the usual top people. I had to perform my party piece, which I hate. Anyway, one woman asked me.

'And what have you been doing today?' pulling me towards her.

'I went to play hide-and-seek with my Nanny.'

'How lovely. And how old are you? And where did you hide?'

'I am nearly seven, and I wanted to hide in the summerhouse, but I couldn't because my mother was in there securing my father his new job.'

Polly sniggered.

'There was a terrible hush in the room. My mother turned as white as a sheet and demanded that Nanny take me to my room. She was laughing in a most curious way, and said, 'Children have too much imagination when left on their own'.'

Polly took Ellie's hand and laughed. 'No wonder your mother sent you away. I bet she was furious.'

'I knew I was in trouble as soon as my mother looked at me. She insisted on sending me to school in London, but Father put his foot down and said he would only agree to send me away if I came here to be with you in the country. The row between them could be heard down the street.'

Ellie sucked her sweet. 'So, they bought my school clothes and Nanny sewed on name tags, and when they were all done, Mother gave her notice.'

Polly rose and put her arm around her friend. ‘You will be happy here, I can assure you, and we are like sisters.’

‘Will you teach me to do my plaits? I still can’t do them on my own,’ said Ellie.

‘Of course, it just takes practice.’

The term started well until the weather took a sudden turn for the worst. The girls took to sleeping in the same narrow bed, with all the blankets over them for extra warmth. Later in the month, snow started falling and the forecast was bleak. After two weeks of snow, ice, and arctic winds, the old boiler finally gave up the ghost and the school had to close. They contacted the parents and the girls started packing their trunks.

Polly rushed into their dorm flinging the door against the bed.

‘You’re coming home with me. The head has just told me your parents are abroad and your grandparents are not well and have gone to their London apartment. Papa is coming today. Do say you’re pleased.’

Ellie looked at Polly and burst into tears.

‘Oh. It won’t be that bad. Simon and Laurence will be there too.’

‘No. I’m so happy.’

Polly’s father arrived in the early afternoon to collect the girls. He hugged them both and then loaded their trunks and tuck boxes into the back of the ex-army Austin ‘Tilly’, which was covered by a tarpaulin. The girls clambered into the remaining space in the back, where they snuggled down on the blankets laid over straw for warmth. There was a large flask of hot chocolate and some slices of fruitcake in a tin. Ellie sat back and thanked her lucky stars for such caring friends.

A slight break in the weather came in the afternoon, but the clouds were heavy, and the sky promised more snow.

When they arrived at the farm, Simon and Laurence greeted them; both boys had returned the day before. They helped their father unload the ‘Tilly’, while Mrs Smythe hugged and kissed both Polly and Ellie.

‘Put the girls’ trunks up on the landing by their room, please, boys. Nanny will want to sort everything out,’ called Mrs Smythe. ‘And then come down, wash your hands and get ready for tea.’

They finally sat together at the kitchen table, waiting for Mr Smythe to say grace. He thanked the Lord for the food, and they all tucked in.

Mrs Smythe turned to Ellie. ‘I have put you with Polly in her room. I thought you two might like to be together. If you are not happy with that, we can move you into a room on your own.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Smythe, I would love to share with Polly, but doesn’t she want her own room?’

‘Of course, she won’t mind,’ Laurence cut in. ‘She can chatter to you all night long.’

Polly kicked her brother under the table, and he feigned being hurt. The friendly rivalry was something that Ellie always enjoyed; she loved this family life, which was lacking in her own

home.

Slices of ham were piled on a large oval dish. A huge pile of toast rose from a basket. There was homemade butter, and pots of jam, together with a chocolate sponge and a fruit cake. Ellie felt her stomach rumble; she was suddenly ravenous.

'Tuck in, Ellie, there's a good girl. You know you don't have to wait to be asked in this house, otherwise, you will find it has all gone before you can get your hands on it,' said Mrs Smythe, slapping Laurence's hand as he reached for three pieces of toast in one go. 'And, Ellie, I think you are old enough to stop calling us Mr and Mrs Smythe. My name is Beatrice, so you can call me Bea, and you can call my husband A-J as all his friends do. Agreed?' she said, a warm smile spreading across her face; then turning to Nanny said, 'Nanny would you be kind enough to pour the tea for us all.

'Agreed,' said Ellie, 'and thank you.'

Wonderful, carefree days flew by. The boys were up early to bring in the coal and the wood for the fires in the house and the Aga in the kitchen. The girls helped make bread every day and baked cakes on alternate days. It was their job to collect the eggs, wash them, and grade them, so A-J could take them down to the shop to help with supplies for the village.

They took turns milking the house cow, and Ellie had Polly in stitches as she tried to learn to get the milk in the pail. They took the milk and poured it into large enamel pans in the dairy. The following day they would skim off the cream; some they kept for the house, while the rest was hand-churned into butter by Bea. They put the whey to one side to be fed to the pigs.

At eleven o'clock they all went into the dining room, where the fire had been lit, and their Nanny would make sure they carried out the work they had been sent home with from school, and where Simon always made sure he sat next to Ellie. At night they snuggled down into their beds with feather filled mattresses and pillowcases topped with linen sheets, woollen blankets and large feather eiderdowns, making it difficult to rise on the cold mornings.

Some days it was so cold with a bitter wind from the north that they hurried through their jobs, eager to get back into the warmth of the farmhouse. On those days, it was necessary to break the ice on the animals' water troughs, which they did every morning and late evening, making the house even more inviting. Simon rubbed the chilblains on Ellie's hands and feet every night with witch hazel or calamine lotion to stop the itching and rubbed lanolin into them in the morning. He became her constant companion, and they did most things together.

On the farm, their water came from a well, and they would come down every morning to the kitchen to collect their pail of water from a hand pump over the sink, add some boiling water to it and wash in the bathroom next to the kitchen. The tin bath was dragged out twice a week, and they took it in turns to have a bath in front of the Aga with hot water straight from the tap on the range.

They had fresh eggs, butter, and cream. Over the next month, Ellie gained a little weight and a rosy complexion, rather than the pallid look when she arrived; but more than that, Ellie felt alive among these wonderful, loving people.

At last, the snow stopped, and the temperature rose, after one of the worst winters on record.

England had come to a standstill and the economy had been hit. But with the thaw came flooding; acres of farmland lay underwater, and the crops they had planted in the autumn had either frozen in the ground or drowned by the floodwater. It wasn't until April that everything on the farm got back to any semblance of normality.

During this time, Ellie got to know the family and family life. Polly played chess with her father, or Laurence, and swore he always cheated. Ellie and Simon always sat reading books together and looked up the secrets of natural history.

'Will you come back here every hols now?' asked Simon, peering at her over the top of his book.

'I don't know. I shouldn't think so. I may have to go to my grandparents' if they come back to the country; or see my parents wherever they are. But it wouldn't be fair for your parents to look after me all the time.'

Simon lowered his book, looked at her, and smiled. 'You know what, Ellie? You will become a permanent member of this family because one day I will marry you.'

Ellie looked at him and laughed. 'Don't be so soppy, Simon.'

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Sardinia, Late May 1961

Ellie watched from the deck as the old ferry pulled into the port of Cagliari. Great cranes stood like sentinels by the dock, swinging from side to side, as they loaded or unloaded the various cargoes, while swarthy men pulled and heaved at ropes and chains. Young, olive-skinned boys stood chattering beside the quay, waiting to run errands or carry luggage.

The main road in front of the port ran on either side of an extensive garden in which were planted young palms. Further down the road, there were large trees, by which stood the trams waiting for an assortment of passengers. All along the buildings on the far side was a grand arcade, where people walked or sat at tables, drinking coffee, smoking, or just watching the world go by.

The early morning sunlight shone on the golden city that rose from the harbour to the Castello at the top. It had all the promise of a beautiful day, with a clear blue sky. A gentle breeze rippled across the sea and stirred Ellie's long blonde hair as she watched the men below secure the ferry with ropes.

Ellie thought of the book she had bought by D. H. Lawrence: *'And suddenly there is Cagliari: a naked town rising steep, steep, golden looking, piled naked to the sky from the plain at the head of a formless hollow bay.'* But it was not naked: there were trees planted in the streets, there was colour, and the bay was wide and welcoming. Cagliari had moved on.

The crossing from Livorno had been long and she had slept briefly in her cabin, waking to the rocking of the ship. It had been almost twenty-four hours and Ellie was glad to see the port.

She looked over the rail at the milling crowds below and watched as a large car was making its way through the throng of people. It stopped at the bottom of the iron stairway, which had been manoeuvred across the harbour, and now rested against the ship, waiting for the passengers to disembark. Ellie smiled to herself, knowing she would enjoy this magical-looking city.

Ellie watched as her mother stepped from the car and spoke to her chauffeur. Isabel was impeccably dressed, as always. Not a hair out of place, not a crease in her dress. Her mother dismissed the chauffeur with a quick gesture of impatience. He gave a slight bow and walked over to speak to a man dressed in a neat white uniform and handed him something, which Ellie guessed was a tip. The man looked around furtively as he took the money and waved the chauffeur up the stairs. Ellie moved inside and stood beside her luggage near the doorway at the top of the iron stairway. She knew someone would collect her, as her mother always arranged everything.

It did not matter where they were in the world, Isabel di Montford organised people with a charm that was reserved for others, rather than her family, and people always fell over themselves to help her. It was said it was her steely nerves and charm that got her husband all the

best jobs in the Foreign Office, but Ellie knew that her mother used more than her feminine charm to get what she wanted. At home, Isabel ruled the household with a rod of iron, and Ian, Ellie's father, always gave in to her – anything for a quiet life. The only time he had stood up to her and won, was when he demanded Ellie went to join Polly at her school, rather than a school in London, but he had paid for it with Isabel's demands to move abroad again.

Ellie looked up to see the chauffeur collecting her luggage and stepped forward to introduce herself.

'Good morning. I am Ellie Montford.'

'*Signorina*.'

A brief handshake and he was off down the huge metal stairway, a suitcase in each hand.

Ellie followed him down the stairs, carrying her vanity case. At the bottom, there was a young boy, no older than twelve, with large brown eyes and a mischievous smile. He was wearing a cotton shirt and shorts but was barefoot with a small green ribbon tied around his big toe.

'Can I take that for you, *signorina*?' he said, gesturing to her vanity case.

'Thank you,' she said, handing over her case and following him to the car where he handed it to the chauffeur.

'Go away, go away, little vagabond,' said Isabel, shooing the boy away.

Ellie felt in her pocket, found a five-lira note, and handed it to the boy. His face lit up as he smiled at Ellie. His smile was wide, his face angelic, but there was a wicked twinkle in his eye.

'Grazie, signorina.'

'Ellie,' cried her mother, 'I would be grateful if you did not encourage the little ragamuffins. They are a real nuisance.'

Ellie smiled at the boy and gave him a broad wink behind her mother's back.

Isabel turned to greet her daughter with the usual peck on the cheek and her obligatory criticism.

'Your hair is too long, you've gained weight, and you have been eating too much pasta. You must take yourself in hand while you are down here.'

Ellie sighed, wondering how she would cope with her mother over the coming months.

They settled themselves in the car and Isabel continued.

'I have a letter for you from Simon. I wish you wouldn't encourage him to write to you.'

Ellie sat in silence as her mother moaned on. She turned to look out of the rear window of the car and watched the young boy as he went to find someone else to help.

'There will be no need for you to write to him, Eleanor, do you hear me? I do not want you to encourage him. It is not as if he has anything to offer. He comes from farming stock, and the family is hardly out of the top drawer. Besides, Laurence will inherit the farm. Simon will have a minor job in the Foreign Office,' said her mother.

Her last words brought Ellie back from her thoughts. 'Like Father,' said Ellie, looking at her mother. Then added, 'Yes, I mean no, Mother.'

'You know, Eleanor, your father has worked hard for his position; you should respect that. And know that Simon is not a suitable match for you, even if it is time you thought of settling

down. Your father should get his knighthood for his work in the Foreign Office. I want nothing to jeopardise that, do you understand?'

Ellie sighed again. 'All you are interested in is being Lady di Montfort. I like Simon; I have known him since childhood. With you and Father always away, we grew up together – shared our secrets, climbed trees together, grazed our knees together. He is kind and caring, and he is almost family.'

'Not very ladylike, and you always defend that family against me, and Simon is always standing up for you.'

'That is because I spent more time with them than I did with you and Father.'

Her mother turned away and sighed with the all too familiar look when she wasn't getting her way.

Ellie was fond of Simon but had always said she would not consider marrying until she reached twenty-four, and that was three years away. They had always said they would marry each other if they had found no one by that time. There was little doubt that it had come around quickly.

The car halted outside a large, imposing building. The chauffeur jumped out and rushed round to open the doors for the two women. A manservant came forward to take the cases, as Ellie followed her mother into the grand cool hall.

Black-and-white marble tiles were on the floor, covered with expensive-looking Persian rugs. Fresh flowers filled the hallway with their fragrant scent. The ceilings were high, leaving room for numerous pictures and portraits on the walls, giving the entire place an air of grandeur.

Whatever Ellie thought of her mother, Isabel knew how to organise things, even if they were over the top at times.

'Your father is in a meeting with the Consular from Rome this morning, but he should be back for lunch.'

The young woman who came forward to greet them was short and slender with raven-black hair clipped up in a French twist and dark, almond-shaped eyes that watched everything. She smiled, making her face light up.

'Ah, Giovanna, this is Signorina Eleanor. Take her upstairs to her room and help her to unpack, then show her around,' said Isabel in a dismissive tone.

Ellie raised her eyebrows in surprise at her mother's manner and followed Giovanna up the wide marble staircase.

'Did you have a pleasant journey from Livorno, signorina?' asked Giovanna. 'It can sometimes be choppy.'

'Yes, it was calm, fortunately,' replied Ellie. 'Thank you.'

They reached the first floor and walked down a wide corridor. Giovanna pointed to the doors as they passed.

'Those doors lead into the private sitting room and dining room. We hold all the big functions downstairs in the grand room,' said the girl.

They reached the door at the end of the passage, and Giovanna opened it to reveal a spacious,

airy room with windows on two sides and a large pair of French windows on the far side that overlooked the port.

Ellie walked over to one window and looked out. There was a wonderful view of the port. Below was a colourful array of terracotta-tiled roofs as the buildings stepped down toward the port. She went over to the French doors, opened them, and stepped onto the balcony. Warm, salty air came to meet her, followed by the sounds of the city which came on a gentle breeze. Ellie smiled as she surveyed the scene.

She turned back to look at the room. It was painted a pale blue and had a blue carpet. The curtains were the palest of blue with a floral design of pastel shades. Her bed, facing the French doors, was large and its cover was the same material as the curtains. A cool room. A dressing table was on one side of the room, and a big double wardrobe on the other.

'Signorina, can I help you?' asked Giovanna, who was standing by the luggage, which had magically arrived in the room.

'Thank you, Giovanna.'

They unpacked Ellie's cases and found places for everything, all the time chatting together.

'Tell me, Giovanna, what is Cagliari like? Do you live here in the city? Do you get any time off?' asked Ellie in her broken Italian.

Giovanna laughed. 'So many questions, signorina.'

'Sorry, but I like to know everything.'

'Yes, I live here; Cagliari is my city. I love it. I live up in Casteddu, which is the old part of the city. And yes, I get time off when we are not too busy here.'

'Would you take me around Cagliari, show me the places that only the locals know, plus all the sights everyone should see? And would you introduce me to your friends, please?'

Giovanna looked round to make sure no one was listening.

'It's most irregular.'

'So am I,' Ellie replied.

They looked at each other and laughed.

'What is Milan like? I have never been there,' said Giovanna, putting Ellie's shoes in the wardrobe.

'It was wonderful; 'Polly, my lifelong friend, begged me to go to Italy with her to help organise everything for her wedding. It turned out to be an amazing experience. We did a lot of shopping in the big shops and small boutiques; they have beautiful clothes and shoes. I had always dressed plainly, not wanting to draw attention to myself, as my mother insisted, I should not be showy, but Polly changed all that when she made me buy the suit you are holding and coloured scarves to brighten up my plain dresses. I always feel more confident in that suit. They had beautiful things.' Said Ellie, laughing.

'So, I see,' said Giovanna, holding up the pink Chanel-style suit trimmed in navy. 'You also speak good Italian for an English person, and it will improve down here. Please, go on with your story.'

'Polly and I went to university together. That is where she met Mario. He was in London

improving his English, while Polly was at college learning Italian. They met at an Italian evening arranged for the students at the university. From then on, they were inseparable. Eventually, she took him home to meet her parents and told them they wanted to get married. Mario explained to her father they wanted to get married in Italy but would like his permission.'

'How lovely,' said Giovanna, hanging another dress in the wardrobe.

'Anyway, Mario – whom the family, and Polly, thought was a young, impoverished student – turned out to be the second son of the owner of a large wine estate near Rome.

'Simon, Polly's brother, arrived to be with us for the wedding. Laurence, Polly's elder brother, sent his love but could not get back from Africa, as his mother-in-law was ill with malaria.

'Polly and Mario had the civil ceremony in England in a registry office before returning home. Then her parents came down to Italy for the marriage ceremony, which was held in a private chapel on the estate. Everyone was so welcoming. The meal afterwards was long and noisy, like all Italian weddings. It was a perfect day.

'When Mario's father stood to give his speech, he thanked Polly's parents for allowing him to have the wedding in Italy. He wished the young couple all the best and then, with a slight tear in his eye, he announced that they would spend their honeymoon in Australia! And that they would stay down there for a few months; I was so surprised by the announcement, as it had been a secret.

'The following day we all said our goodbyes and the newlyweds left for Australia. Polly told me they were going to visit various vineyards down there to get ideas for more modern wines.'

'Australia,' said Giovanna, closing the suitcases, 'I should like to go there one day.'

'Thank you for all your help, Giovanna.'

'Signorina, if you need them, your parents have the big suite upstairs. Your bathroom is the first door on the left as you leave your room.'

Left on her own, Ellie thought back to the wedding day. She had gone to find Polly to say her goodbyes. Her dear friend had brought out the best in her, giving her confidence by always being there to help her.

'I will miss you so much, Polly. I hope you have a wonderful time in Australia. Don't come back with too much of a twang.'

Polly pulled Ellie down to sit next to her on a nearby bench. 'I will miss you too. But, Ellie, there is something I have wanted to say to you for a long time, my last piece of advice. You need to find yourself a lover. You need someone to show you how lovely you are, not the plain Jane your mother insists on calling you. But not my brother – Simon is great, but you need a stranger.'

'Don't be silly,' laughed Ellie, somewhat taken aback.

Polly took Ellie's hand and held it tight. 'I'm serious, Ellie. Love frees a woman, gives her wings. I know what it has done for me.'

'But you are beautiful; everyone falls in love with you, Polly.'

'Ellie, listen to me, please. You are beautiful, with your golden hair and green eyes, and you have a wonderful nature. You may not realise it, but you are an extremely attractive woman.'

'Polly, you always make me feel so good.'

‘Don’t forget that then,’ said Polly, kissing Ellie on the cheek. ‘I must change. And you look amazing in that pink suit, I am so glad I made you buy it. Love you.’

And with that Polly had gone, leaving Ellie to think over what her friend had said. Then, laughing at the thought, went in search of Simon.

‘Ellie, dearest Ellie, what am I going to do without Polly? Laurence has gone, and now you are going away too. I will miss you all so much,’ said Simon, putting his arm around her.

‘I promise to write, as long as you write to me too,’ she said, kissing him on his cheek.

‘I will, I promise. There should be a letter waiting for you. I will be interested to know the reaction it receives.’

Ellie laughed.

Simon said a fond farewell to Ellie before they took him to the airport.

Later, Mario’s father drove Ellie to Livorno, to catch the ferry down to Cagliari.

It had all happened so quickly – Ellie smiled at the thought of Polly and Mario – it had been a wonderful experience.

*

Ian returned from his meeting with the consulate in time for lunch. It was the usual formal affair, Isabel in charge, and Ian eager to tell them everything that had happened that morning together with any fresh gossip.

He had welcomed Ellie with a perfunctory kiss on each cheek.

‘I’m glad you’ve come. I have arranged for you to go to the university to have Italian lessons with Professor Serra. He is about to retire from the university, but he still does the odd bit of tuition. It will be good for you to do something with your time when you are not helping your mother with the entertaining. You will start after the weekend, so you have two days to sort yourself out.’

Ellie sighed. Nothing changed. The Foreign Office moved her parents every three years in the service, and wherever they went, if Ellie joined them on her holidays, her father would send her to school, college, or whatever educational place was on offer to learn the local language and to mix with the local people. As a result, she could speak French, Portuguese, Swahili, and a little Urdu. Her father, a brilliant linguist, expected his daughter to follow him. Ellie was lucky to have inherited her father’s love of learning a language, which pleased him. The thought of learning Italian was pleasing as it was such a pretty language.

After lunch, while her parents took their usual nap, Ellie walked through Cagliari to get her bearings. Turning right outside the house and walking down the narrow, steep street towards the port below, where a gentle breeze greeted her with its salty smell of the sea.

At the port, the boats were so close together that it was possible to walk from one to the next all along the port. Fishermen with dark, weathered skin were resting on their boats, some lulled into their afternoon sleep after the night’s fishing, others mending their green and ochre-coloured nets spread out on the Quayside to dry. A few waved idly to her or called a soft greeting.

Ellie sighed, feeling at peace here.

She turned to walk across to the Via Roma, where little cafes had seating under the grand arcade, away from the now intense Sun and sat at a table to watch the world go by. It was the quiet time when the Sards took to their beds after a good meal before the evening rush started.

She ordered a lemonade and sat sipping it… There was something about Sardinia that was so very different from Italy.

The following morning, Ellie took her place at the breakfast table. Her father was reading an out-of-date copy of *The Times*, while her mother was busy going through her mail.

'Coffee, signorina?'

'Yes, please, Giovanna,' said Ellie, helping herself to a brioche and some jam.

'Simon has said that he hasn't heard from you.'

'You said that yesterday, Mother. Besides, I saw him in Milan.'

Isabel passed the letter to Ellie. It had already been opened and read by her mother, who deemed it her duty to read all her daughter's mail before handing it over to her.

Ellie took the letter, read it, and smiled. It was a few weeks old, written before they had seen each other at Polly's wedding. Simon had said he would be interested to know what her mother's reaction would be, as he had written a vivid account of the birth of some piglets; how he had to assist and had become covered in the sow's blood.

Ellie looked up to see her mother looking at her with disdain. Simon knew that Isabel read all of Ellie's letters, so he always put some lurid details in to upset her. He would have been well pleased with today's result.

'We have a drinks party this evening for some local charities. I expect you to attend, Ellie, and I expect you to smarten yourself up,' said Isabel.

After breakfast, Ellie went to find Giovanna, who was sitting in the kitchen enjoying a quick coffee.

'Signorina, can I help you?' said Giovanna, jumping up from her chair.

'Please, Giovanna, sit down and enjoy your coffee. Then perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me where I can go to get my hair done. I would like to have it put up for this evening.'

Giovanna put her hand in her apron pocket and pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote a name and address and handed it to Ellie.

'Tell them I sent you and ask for Giorgio; he is a wizard with long hair.'

'Thank you,' said Ellie, taking the piece of paper.

'Excuse me, signorina, but does your mother always read your mail?'

'Yes, but all my friends know that she does, so they think up some wonderful stories. Today my friend, Simon, gave a rather vivid description of the birth of some piglets, much to my mother's disdain.'

The two young women looked at each other and giggled.

Ellie found the hairdressers in a street off the Piazza Yennes and was introduced to Giorgio. An hour later, Ellie left with her hair put up in a beautiful French twist with flowers for

decoration.

Back at the house, everyone was busy getting ready for the evening's drinks party. Ellie had a quick bath, then slipped into a little black dress she had bought with Polly in Milan. She put on her pearl earrings with a matching pearl necklace and stood in front of the long mirror. Giovanna knocked and entered.

'Signorina, you look very elegant.'

'Thank you, Giovanna – your hairdresser is wonderful. Don't you think you could call me Ellie, rather than 'Signorina' all the time?'

'I don't think your mother would approve,' said Giovanna with a smile.

'Please, Giovanna, call me Ellie.'

'I will, but only when we are alone together, agreed?' Ellie smiled and nodded in agreement.

Downstairs, the guests were arriving for their free drinks and canapes. A babble of gossip and greetings filled the room. When Ellie entered, it was already filled with smoke, as men puffed on their cigars and women on Gauloises or Sobranie cocktail cigarettes. She took a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter and stood to sip it.

Ellie watched the surrounding people. Most of them were from the Diplomatic Corps, while others represented various charities. There were dignitaries, councillors, and foreign diplomats. She wandered among them, listening to snippets of conversation in a variety of languages.

Giovanna came past with a tray of Vol-au-vents. Ellie took one and popped it in her mouth, then took another.

'If you are hungry, go downstairs. They are preparing all the goodies there; you can help yourself.'

Ellie smiled and followed Giovanna down to the kitchen. She selected several delicacies and sat at the end of the table to eat them while sipping her champagne watching the activity in the kitchen.

When she had finished, Ellie picked up a tray of goodies from the table and returned upstairs to hand it around to the guests, giving her a chance to chat with them as she passed from guest to guest.

'Eleanor, what do you think you are doing?' asked her mother, looking shocked at her daughter taking the role of a servant.

'Mingling, Mother, mingling,' Ellie said, moving on to a couple who looked lost.

'Would you like some of these?' she asked the girl who blushed and looked awkward. She was short and lean-looking with dark eyes. Her hair was straight and as black as a raven's wing.

Ellie pushed the tray forward. 'They are delicious, please have some. Don't be shy, help yourselves.'

She was rewarded with a winning smile.

'Are you from a charity?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'I am Antonia, and this is my brother Franco. We run a small shack to help the young boys who live in the port and try to find work for them in the docks or around the town of Cagliari.'

Ellie turned to the youthful man; he too was short and lean-looking. It was easy to see that they were related, with their similar features and colouring.

'Yes, I saw some at the port when I arrived. Tell me about it,' said Ellie.

'There's not a lot to tell,' continued Antonia, 'we rent an old fishing shack on the beach near Giorgino. We sleep about twenty boys at a push and feed them as best we can. That is why we came today, to see if we could get someone to sponsor us or help us, but nobody is interested.'

'How do you feed them?' asked Ellie.

'The people in the markets are extremely kind, and they always give us what they can't sell. At night, we collect whatever they have left behind. Plus, the bread shops and the pasta shops always give us what they would have thrown away.'

'Why do you do this for the boys?'

'Because there is no one else to help them, and we were orphans ourselves, so we know the problems the young boys have.'

'What about the young girls?'

'They are luckier, as they get taken into domestic service.'

'May I come to see you one afternoon?'

'Yes, please, that would be wonderful, thank you,' said Franco. He pulled a rough piece of paper out of his pocket with instructions on how to reach the shack.

'Leave it with me; I will see what I can do. Perhaps I could come and see you next week. Would Monday be all right?'

Another winning smile from both of them and Ellie tucked the address into her pocket.

It was around nine-thirty when the last guest left. Ellie went into the sitting room to join her parents and plonked herself down on the sofa.

Giovanna came in to ask if they wanted anything to eat.

'Scrambled eggs and toast with a little salad,' said Ian, dismissing Giovanna, he turned to Ellie. 'Who were the young couple you were talking to?'

'They look after the waifs and strays, the young boys who work at the docks doing odd jobs –'

'I would be grateful if you didn't get involved, Eleanor,' Isabel cut in. 'They are not waifs and strays, but vagabonds, ragamuffins, thieves or ne'er-do-wells. You give them money and they just become a pest. I do not know how they got an invitation to come here. People are not interested in that kind of charity. I know I didn't invite them.'

Ellie was about to argue with her mother but caught her father's look, which said, *not now,* and she smiled at him.

Supper arrived, and after coffee, Ellie said goodnight to her parents and went along the corridor to her bedroom. The young couple's card was in her pocket, and she would see them on Monday.

Sunday was always church in the morning, followed by a large lunch, after which her parents would retire to the sitting room and fall asleep. In her bedroom, Ellie went through her vanity case and taking out her wallet, counted out the lira she had leftover from her holiday in Milan. She smiled as there were about a hundred pounds, enough to help Antonia out for the time being.

When Monday morning arrived, Ellie happily walked up to the university with her note of introduction to the old professor.

He proved to be a man in his late sixties, and ready to retire. He had thin, sallow skin and narrow lips. His eyes were a watery brown with dark circles that made them retreat into their sockets. His head was covered with wiry grey hair which, like his eyebrows, grew in every direction. His grubby suit looked as if he had slept in it for the past week.

The professor stared at her over his half-rimmed glasses and, with no preamble, began his lesson. He was an exacting teacher with little patience. He also had a pronounced lisp, which made him hard to understand. Ellie found the lesson boring and difficult to follow but knew her father would never hear of her quitting.

The afternoon was much more interesting, as she visited Franco and Antonia. Ellie wandered the length of the port toward the shack, following the instructions on the piece of paper Franco had given her. Men sat on the Quayside, smoking, or talking about the night's fishing and what tomorrow might bring.

The brown-boarded shack looked to be in a state of collapse. It desperately needed repair and a coat of paint. Outside, lines of washing hung at odd angles under the weight of the dripping garments. Ellie knocked at the door.

A young boy answered her knock. Ellie recognised him at once as the brown-eyed, mischievous-looking angel who had taken her vanity case the day she arrived at Cagliari, and Isabel had shooed him away.

'Hello, I'm Ellie, and what is your name?'

'I'm Tommaso. I remember you.'

Antonia came to the door. 'Don't leave the signorina standing outside, Tommaso, have you no manners? How many times do I have to tell you it's rude to leave someone on the doorstep?' Turning to Ellie, she added, 'I am so sorry. Please, come in and sit down,' she said, opening the door wide and inviting Ellie in.

One of the other boys stood up from the table where he was sitting and offered Ellie his chair.

'Thank you,' said Ellie. She sat down and was immediately surrounded by a crowd of nut-brown children with black hair and eyes to match. They all looked so young and thin, but not malnourished.

'Now, boys, away, please; allow the signorina to have some breathing space.'

They all moved but still stood staring at Ellie.

Tommaso came forward and touched Ellie's hair.

'Tommaso please,' said Antonia, 'leave the signorina alone.'

'I'm sorry about that,' said Antonia, 'but we all find blonde hair fascinating. Now can I get you a drink – water, coffee?' asked Antonia.

'No, but thank you.'

Ellie turned to Tommaso.

'May I ask why you wear a green ribbon on your foot?'

‘To show I’m not so poor that I can’t have something on my feet.’

Ellie smiled and ruffled the young boy’s hair.

She turned to Antonia.

‘I came to give you this,’ she said, pulling an envelope out of her bag. ‘There is not a lot, but enough to help with the rent or whatever.’

Antonia took the envelope, holding it as if it were about to explode in her hands.

‘Open it. It should help until we can get someone to fund you.’

Antonia dropped the envelope onto the table. ‘Where did it come from?’ she asked, looking nervous.

‘It’s all right, I promise you. It is from my bank account – nothing illegal, promise. It is some money I had leftover from when I was staying in Milan.’

Antonia opened the envelope and looked at the money. Tears came into her eyes.

‘You have no idea what this means. It is the answer to all our prayers. We are about to be evicted, as I can’t find the rent. I’ve been at my wits’ end. Thank you, Ellie, thank you,’ cried Antonia, and put her arms around Ellie and wept. Then pulling away, asked, ‘But what do you want from us?’

‘Nothing, silly. I just wanted to help.’

‘Thank you. But people usually want something from us,’ sighed Antonia.

‘Well, I don’t. Now let me help you with the laundry.’

They chattered together as they did the washing. When they had finished and hung out the clothes to dry Antonia pulled at Ellie’s arm.

‘Come and see inside and I’ll show you where the boys sleep.’

Ellie followed her into a sizeable dormitory room at the back of the shack. Chairs stood beside the beds with odd bits of clothing. The room was dark and dingy but smelled clean and fresh.

‘We top and tail the younger boys, so the older boys can have a bed to themselves.’ Said Antonia.

‘What is the age range?’ asked Ellie.

‘We have one boy who is only five years old, but he has an older brother who helps to look after him. The ages range up to eighteen, by which time we hope they have found permanent work and shelter, but they know they can come back here if they are desperate.’

‘Tell me, why do they come here?’

‘Because they have either lost their parents or their parents can’t afford to feed all their children, so the older ones get turned out. Whatever the reason, they are welcome here.’

‘Can I come back again?’ asked Ellie.

‘Whenever you want; we are always here. Remember, Ellie, if you ever want anything done, you only have to ask. The boys will always be glad to help you.’

The two girls embraced.

‘Thank you, Ellie, thank you.’

It was early evening, and the light was fading as the large red sun sank into the sea.

‘Tommaso, come here, please,’ said Antonia, ‘I want you to see Signorina Ellie back to her

house.'

'Yes, Mama,' said Tommaso. He took Ellie's hand. 'Come with me. I know all the shortcuts.'

He chattered to her all the way back to her house, then stood at the bottom of the steps.

'Good night, Signorina Ellie, and thank you.'

Ellie fumbled in her bag for a note, but when she looked up, he had disappeared into the twilight.