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TODO IN TUSCANY

THE DOG AT THE VILLA

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PREFACE

‘We’re not in South London anymore’

Lawrence heard it before me. First a series of low staccato barks then a loud, mournful howl. I was still mostly asleep. Groaning, I pulled the duvet over my head.

‘What the heck is that?’ he exclaimed.

I tried my best to ignore him until his getting out of bed made me sit up. ‘It’s two-thirty in the morning,’ I protested, but by now he was opening the wooden shutters of the bedroom window.

For the twenty years of our married life in London, the view that would have greeted us at such a moment was that of the row of terraced houses on the opposite side of the street, illuminated by bright orange streetlights. Now I could see Lawrence struggling to adjust to the moonlit darkness. That picture-book Tuscan landscape, which had seemed so welcoming during the day, had merged into an ominous black with just a few dots of lights from the distant hills and villages.

'We're not in South London anymore'

'It's Todo,' Lawrence half-whispered before calling down to the baying beast beneath our window. 'What's wrong, boy? Be quiet!'

The noise continued, the only sound in an otherwise still night. We definitely weren't in South London any more.

It seemed clear that Todo wasn't going to stop howling without some encouragement; Lawrence looked at me wearily. 'No, don't worry, I'll go; Lawrence'll fix it . . .'

As I listened to him trudge downstairs, I switched on the bedside light – in fact, the only light in our bedroom. Bare wires protruded from the centre of the ceiling where once would have hung an elegant chandelier. It looked remarkably like all the other rooms of our new Italian dream house, named Poggiolino. Three full days of work had made little impression on the chaos which lay everywhere: unopened packing cases, ripped-up carpet, piles of the previous owner's clutter. This was miles away from moving house in London; to be precise, a thousand miles away. The excitement of achieving something we'd been talking about for eight years had kept us going through the stresses of buying the house, selling ours and the move across the Continent, but now reality was intruding into the fantasy.

The low rumble of Lawrence's voice made its way upstairs, and I heard him trying to calm and reassure the dog. Todo – the other gift from Poggiolino's previous incumbent. *Who buys a house with a dog?* I asked myself, lying there in an only half-made-up bed. Then another thought entered my head, one of those middle-of-the-night thoughts that seem to stop the heart and chill the bone: *Just what have we taken on here?*

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After three days spent moving all our worldly goods, three cats and a business across Europe, we'd fallen into bed, exhausted. This was it: our life-changing decision, our bold, brave, crazy new start. But lying awake listening to Todo's howls, it just felt lonely and overwhelming.

Here we were in a strange and quirky house that had most certainly seen better days, perched halfway up a Tuscan hillside, our entire possessions stacked downstairs in cardboard boxes, our family and friends all hundreds of miles away and our bridges well and truly burned.

Aside from bricks and mortar, the only thing that had come with the house was Todo. The estate agent had been very specific: 'If you buy the house, you have to have the dog.'

Could this be some kind of quaint Italian custom? Did dogs get passed on with houses? No, he said, this was an unusual case. Todo's owner had died two years earlier, the place had

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stood empty since then, and despite attempts to move him, Todo had refused to leave.

When the estate agent brought us to view the property, an excited mass of ragged brown and black fur pressed its long nose through the gaps in the gate. Knee-high, with a shaggy coat and large, floppy ears, it was his face that caught our attention. Bright chestnut eyes stood out above a long snout, framed by much paler fur.

‘He’s grinning,’ laughed Lawrence. And it seemed true – a lighter line of fur curving around his muzzle, almost up to his ears, gave him a huge, enchanting smile.

As we stooped to say hello and stroke him, I could see that his fur was matted and tangled and his feather-brush tail knotted with grass seeds. In that single moment my heart was captured.

Apart from Signora Teresa, housekeeper to Todo’s former owner who came in twice a day to feed him, he had been on his own for all that time, and yet it appeared that this lonely vigil hadn’t crushed or cowed him. He was thrilled to see us.

Todo wasn’t the only reason we decided to buy Poggiolino but, if we were both honest, certainly the chief one. When we came back to see the house again, a couple of days after our first visit, he gave us an even more enthusiastic greeting. It felt as though he had been waiting for us. How could we not love him?

Our affection for the house took a little longer to develop. It was in our price range – just – which was encouraging, since we’d feared our budget wouldn’t run to more than a tumble-down barn, given that this had become one of the most popular destinations in Europe. Yes, the setting was idyllic, tucked into a hillside above a pretty valley, but the abandoned property appeared to offer very little else. Dilapidated and dirty, the entire ground floor tiled in a lurid shade of avocado with faded

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brown shutters at the windows, it looked like a rather unfortunate cross between a Swiss chalet and a Californian bungalow.

Unlike our London home, it hadn't grabbed us immediately. Yet, as we talked about it over dinner that night, we both felt there was something special there – a hidden beauty waiting to be revealed, secrets to unfold, faded glamour that might be restored.

We learned from the agent that the former owner had been an American, Carol MacAndrew, who built the house thirty years earlier and lived there until her death at the age of ninety-six. Elegant, charming and by all accounts formidable, she had left an indelible mark on the house and on the lives of those who knew her. Despite falling into a sad state of despair, her home still bore the traces of a life that belonged to a more glamorous age. As I lay in bed that night I could feel it: the house had a past.

And of course there was Todo, who had been her dog. Nothing we had learned about him so far – admittedly not very much – explained this anguished □ a.m. wake-up call. On our subsequent visits during the house-buying process, he'd always seemed just as calm and well behaved as on our first encounter. So what, I wondered as I waited for Lawrence to come back to bed, had transformed him from friendly mutt into this howling apparition?

By the time Lawrence reappeared, almost an hour had passed.

'I think he's calmed down,' he said, climbing back into bed. 'God knows what that was all about, but I suppose it must be the first night anyone's slept here since Carol died. It'll be a one-off thing.'

'I hope so. What if he does this every night?'

It didn't bear thinking about. I turned off the light but sleep didn't come easily to either of us. Earlier in the day we'd said

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goodbye to our good friends Bruce and Hugh, who had made the journey with us from England with a van-load of plants and cats. For three days we'd stayed with them in a hotel in Lucca, just ten minutes away, and during that time they'd been invaluable. I cried when they left, partly because I was sad to see them go but also because, as I watched the trail of dust behind their van, it dawned on me that this was now for real. An Italian home had been our dream for many years but our new house wasn't yet functional, was set deep in the countryside – we'd both lived all of our lives in big cities – and far from everything we knew. There was no one to help us, we weren't fluent in the language and a call to the concierge wouldn't fix things. We'd taken on a huge challenge – were we going to be up to it?

Eventually I drifted off to sleep, and when we woke the sun was streaming through the cracks in the shutters. I got up and made my way downstairs to let Todo in. Lawrence's soothing had worked; the rest of the night had been quiet and the dog's beaming face greeted me as I opened the back door.

I spent some time stroking and patting him, assuring him that all was fine and that of course we didn't mind that he'd disturbed our first night's sleep in Poggiolino.

Lawrence ignored him.

And so to the first breakfast in our new house. Only problem, we didn't actually have a kitchen. We'd hated the plastic and Formica monstrosity that had been in place when we first saw the house, but its absence was still a blow. We arrived to find that it had been removed at the behest of a local priest to be given to the poor, but right now it was difficult to shake the view that charity ought to begin at home – our home. All that remained was a tap from which only cold water ran, but not into a sink – that had gone too, and in its place sat our red washing-up bowl.

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Scavenging what food we could, we headed outside. The garden was, in fact, an olive grove with ancient, gnarled trees dotted across five steps of land – called *poggios*, hence the house's name – falling steeply away. From the bottom of the garden the land continued to slope down towards a stream, and then rose on the other side in a mixture of warm, earthy colours. After more silvery green olive groves, manicured vineyards and tall cypresses, one's eye met the little church of San Martino di Compito at the top of the hill opposite. A faded cream building with traditional red roof-tiles and a stone tower, it blended perfectly with the backdrop of wooded hills and painted houses. Inside the tower perched a set of heavy bells which chimed out on the quarter-hour.

'This is why we came,' said Lawrence, stretching out his legs and throwing back his head, eyes shut, to soak up the sun. Todo basked at his feet.

'It's gorgeous,' I agreed. 'But we've got an awful lot to do. Five more minutes and then we'd better make a start.' I hated to sound like a nag but I couldn't completely shake the fretful feeling that had gripped me in the middle of the night, and I knew that the best cure would be to make some progress.

But where to begin? How on earth would we sort out the mass of furniture, boxes, rugs, bags and assorted paraphernalia? As I stood surveying the mountain of chaos, I had a glorious thought. 'I know what we should do first – let's give Todo a bath.'

'Great idea.'

Lawrence's enthusiasm might have owed more to the deferral of the unpacking than to a desire to wash a couple of years' worth of dirt from our new best friend, but it hardly mattered.

The sink in the utility room was too small, so we opted for the downstairs bathroom. This was attached to the bedroom

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which had once been Carol's. A generous-sized room at the back of the house, when we first saw it we were astonished to find that it had been papered entirely in chintzy dark blue and silver wallpaper. And when I say entirely, I mean *entirely*; the backs of the shutters, the doors, even the light sockets were covered in it, in the bathroom as well as the bedroom. No doubt it had seemed luxurious back in the seventies, but now it created an effect which might have been more suited to a backstreet bordello.

Apart from anything else, it made the room appear so dark. Even on this spring day with the shutters flung wide to let in the clear, bright sunshine, we had to turn on the lights.

As Lawrence went to and fro with the kettle and I sorted out an old towel, Todo watched with evident fascination. He followed first me and then Lawrence, uncertain whether to be pleased or not, but giving his tail a kind of half-wag now and then because, whatever was happening, he was with us and that was good.

'Do you think he's ever had a bath before?' I said. 'Let's take it very slowly, just in case he hates it.'

'Bath time, Todo,' Lawrence said, stroking the back of his head as Todo looked up with enquiring eyes. Gently he lifted him – encountering no resistance – and put him into the tub.

The moment Todo's feet entered the water his smile broadened and his tail wagged with conviction. This was clearly not a new experience for him. As we were beginning to learn, he loved attention and affection and even the application of some smelly human shampoo didn't diminish his pleasure at being fussed over.

As I lathered him from head to tail and his fur clung to him, he seemed so much smaller and his eyes grew enormous. His tail, which never ceased to wag, sprayed me with water

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continuously, but it was impossible to mind. The water turned brown with the years of accumulated dirt from his coat and Lawrence peered at the murky suds. 'Judging by the colour of that, he'll turn out to be white when it's all over.'

Two rinses later it was time to release him, at which point mayhem erupted. He ignored my attempt to towel-dry him and bounded out of the bathroom, heading to the terrace, where he stopped and shook himself vigorously, sending water arcing into the air in a perfect spiral. It was like turning on a sprinkler, and most of it landed on us as we arrived behind him.

'Thanks Todo.' I wiped water from my face as he threw himself to the ground and began to roll on the grass.

I had bought a brush for him before we left London, and when he'd finished his post-bath ritual he came and sat happily beside me as I knelt to brush his fur. Cautious at first, I tried to untangle some of the many knots and pick through the matted hair before snipping off clumps that wouldn't budge. Todo was clearly enjoying it and was happy to stay put, which made it so much easier. His grunts of pleasure, especially when I tackled those floppy ears, made us laugh, and it was a joy to see his coat gleaming in the sun.

All three of us knew that this was something more than just a bath; it was a cleansing of all the sorrow he'd had to endure over the past two years. We weren't just getting rid of the dirt and grime but of the neglect and loneliness and sadness which had followed the loss of his beloved Carol.

The process of buying Poggiolino hadn't always been easy but the thought of rescuing Todo from his hopeful wait had kept us going, and the look on his face now as he nuzzled my hand told me it had all been worthwhile. So what if we only had a microwave to cook with, if our bed was propped up at

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one corner by books and we had no telephone connection? We had Todo.

For half an hour we all sat on the terrace as, now sweet-smelling and clean, he rested his head on my lap, as if to show his appreciation. The bathing had put us all in a great mood and a delicious feeling of excitement had replaced my worry about the scale of the task at hand. Lawrence and I looked at each other and smiled, hardly daring to believe that we were here, that we had done it. But lovely as it was sitting outside, we had work to do.

Lawrence decided to go and start putting our office together in Carol's bedroom. Once he was on his hands and knees with an assortment of screwdrivers, Allen keys and half-assembled shelving, I decided to leave him to it and start organising the furniture in the sitting-room. Judging by the swearing coming from his direction shortly afterwards, things weren't going well.

As I moved the sofa, chairs, tables and rugs around, Todo decided to help by sitting in exactly the place where I was about to put each item, stopping me in my tracks.

'Come on Todo, budge,' I said for the fourth or fifth time, trying to keep the exasperation out of my voice. He stood up, wagged his tail, and then sat straight down again. Eventually he took the hint and wandered over to the corner, where he lay, watching closely as I arranged everything.

The sitting-room was the nicest room in the house – large and square with a high ceiling and two sets of graceful French windows which opened onto the terrace, allowing the light to flood in. Between them was a simple fireplace with a mantelpiece made from a large piece of hand-carved olive wood and in the corner an archway led to a dining-room.

When we first saw the house, the room held an assortment of battered chairs, there were torn and faded curtains at the

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windows, and the mantelpiece was crowded with jars, old ornaments, photos and postcards, and a bunch of luggage keys with leather tags. Curious I had picked them up and read the inscriptions: 'Carol's large Pullman', 'Carol's plaid case', 'Carol's large valise' . . . they conjured up images of a time of elegant, luxurious travel and attentive porters – a world away from the budget flights we used to jet back and forth between Italy and London. Now we had finally removed the dilapidated furniture and minutiae of another life, I looked at this well-proportioned room and could picture Carol hosting parties for the great and good of Lucca.

I glanced over at Todo, so curious and attentive to my every move. Was he remembering how it had been during her time? Was the armchair always in the other corner? Did the sofa use to face the windows? Or did it all feel a world away from what he had known?

An hour later Lawrence appeared, announcing with a self-congratulatory flourish, '*È finito*, it's finished,' in his best *Godfather* accent.

All that was left was for me to offer him the obligatory, 'Oh wonderful, darling, haven't you done well?'

Later in the afternoon we had a lovely excuse to down tools, as Teresa had invited us for coffee. Brushing ourselves down, we called Todo, who happily followed us up the steps beside the house to the back gate.

We didn't have far to go. Teresa lived opposite Poggiolino, just a little further up the road. We had met her on our first visit to the house, when she arrived with the keys, and a handful of times since, and each time I had grown to like her more.

When we showed off the newly bathed Todo she nodded and smiled approvingly before ushering us into her front

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room, where we sat on a large sofa covered in knitted throws, waiting for her to appear from the kitchen with coffee and a plate of homemade almond cakes.

I asked her about Todo's howling but she could offer no explanation. 'I don't remember him doing it with La Signora,' she replied. Teresa always called Carol 'La Signora' and we were touched by this mark of respect, long after their working relationship had come to an end. Carol's husband, on the other hand, was generally 'Jim', though occasionally 'Signor Jim' and once or twice, with affection, '*il bevuto*' – the drinker.

It was clear from the snippets both the estate agent and Teresa had told us that the story of our predecessor had much more to unfold. Besides Todo, one of the things that had appealed to us about the house was that it had its own history – one that echoed ours, as Carol and Jim had also come to Italy in their forties, and had been music lovers, just like us.

I glanced outside. Todo, sitting on the patio, was becoming restless. And though Teresa was politeness personified, I didn't want to appear pushy. I was very aware that my Italian wasn't really up to subtle enquiries. There were a great many questions I wanted to ask but they, and Teresa's stories, would have to wait for another day.

As we stood to leave, she wrapped some of her cakes in a napkin before handing them to me, and I saw Lawrence's face light up at the thought of real food. As our resident chef, the absence of a working kitchen was worrying him.

Back in the house we began unpacking our office files and computers. We had no idea how long it might take to get the Internet installed, but – with what was to prove a ridiculous degree of optimism – we aimed to be up and running within a few days. We needed to be. This wasn't a holiday; we had a business to run. As agents to a small catalogue of classical

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singers, musicians and entertainers, we were totally dependent on a phone line and a good Internet connection.

We worked for the next few hours while Todo stuck his nose helpfully into every box as we opened it. He'd barely left our sides all day. Clearly a dog who loved company, he continued to wag his tail enthusiastically, getting under our feet every five minutes. I could hardly bear to think of him wandering around outside the locked house, alone for two long years. Every now and then one of us would stop work to stroke him. We still had no idea what had upset him in the night but we were keen to avoid a repeat performance and hoped that lots of reassurance might settle him.

Eventually, with the light outside fading, we called it a day.

'I can't face a microwave meal tonight; let's try that place around the corner,' Lawrence suggested.

'Good idea. But what do we do with Todo?'

'Well, we can't take him with us. He'll be OK for an hour, won't he?'

'We've seen dogs in restaurants before.' Somehow, even though I knew Lawrence was right, it pained me to leave Todo on only our second night.

'Let's ask when we get there. I don't think we should assume it's the done thing.'

Promising Todo we'd be back soon, we set off down the hill to the nearby village. Before long we were tucking into excellent pizza and cold beer, though I was aware that Lawrence was eating very quickly, even for someone who enjoys his food. Was he thinking the same as me – that Todo might assume we were just visitors passing through and that he'd been left alone again?

We were home within the hour and he greeted us as though we'd been gone for a month, dashing out of the front door as

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soon as it was unlocked then rushing between us, dispensing contented grunts in both our directions.

As I had done the night before, I took Todo through the utility room to the outside boiler-room, before patting his bed where he lay down obligingly. I was pleased that he seemed more settled than he had the previous evening. Perhaps tonight we'd all get some much-needed rest.

'I don't believe it.' Lawrence's tone was even more agitated than the previous night as he got out of bed and opened the shutters.

'Todo, this is ridiculous,' he shouted. 'Go back to bed!'

Had he done this every night? Surely it couldn't have been tolerated. But then again, perhaps it had been, and no one really noticed. Maybe he was a yard dog and he thought it his duty to make a racket to scare off predators and burglars?

Poor Lawrence made another weary exit downstairs. In my exhausted state, reason – and the positivity of the daylight hours – went out of the window. I was right back in the grip of the same worries as the previous night. All I could think was: *Have we done the wrong thing?* There was so much that we needed to learn, so many difficult tasks to manage in order to live successfully in our new house and new country. Telephones, Internet, heating, hot water, building work, a new kitchen, making friends, travelling back and forth to London, not to mention a new language, for goodness sake! All this and we couldn't even get the dog to sleep properly. I was still in a fever of anxiety an hour later as the same thought kept going round and round in my head.

Will we get this right or are we kidding ourselves that we can cope?