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From: Stephanie Zia

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Re: Re: NF 15 Swallows and Robins, Susie Kelly, Blackbird Digital Books

To: The People's Book Prize

Extract from *Swallows & Robins: The Laughs & Tears of a Holiday Home Owner* by Susie Kelly

With new-found confidence in my cleaning skills, and armed with the gardening apron, bucket and mop, I go to prepare the cottage for the next arrivals. I skid across the tiled kitchen floor and bang my elbow on the work surface as I go down. The walls, units and sink are smothered in grease, and the floor is like a skating-rink. There are two live caterpillars underneath the microwave, and the sink is blocked with something grey and lumpy. All the crockery and cutlery is pushed out of sight, unwashed. There are sodden towels lying on the filthy beds. I can hardly bear to clean the loo. In every room there are heaps of sweet papers, fluff and dirty tissues pushed into the corners.

In less than four hours the next guests will arrive, and it is 36°C (97°F) in the shade. By the time I have made the place habitable – I use lots of bleach – I am dizzy, exhausted and angry. I am never going to deal with such a horrible mess again.

I put up some cards in the local supermarkets, and spread the word to friends that I need a cleaning person. It's very difficult to find anybody; we live several miles from the nearest town; most of the local population are either retired farmers advanced in years whose wives have earned their rest, or English immigrants with sufficient money not to need to work. After a fortnight I have almost given up hope when somebody tells me of an Englishwoman who may be available.

"She needs the money because her husband did a moonlight flit. Can't blame him, poor man, the way she treated him. But she may be more trouble than she's worth. She's very strange."

As long as she can wield a mop, drive a vacuum-cleaner, clean bathrooms and kitchens and make beds, she can be as strange as she likes. I'm not planning to establish any kind of relationship with her other than employer/employee. I phone her number and have a rambling and surreal conversation which includes the difficulties she is having with her French neighbours, who hate her, and something about a problem with the handle of her cooker, but I think she has agreed to come and discuss the cleaning role. I have asked her to come next Saturday morning at 10.30am, when the guests will have left the cottages. I'm not totally convinced she has understood.

On Wednesday afternoon a tall thin woman of a certain age is standing at the gate looking rather confused, dressed in a flowery blue-patterned frock with a frilly peplum, staggeringly high heels and a blue turban with a feather on the front held in place by a large brooch. Her face is thickly coated in pancake make-up. She looks as if she is on her way to a fancy dress party.

"Anybody there?" she calls.

"Hello, are you lost?" I ask.

"Not if you're the *grande dame* looking for a domestic engineer," she replies. "I'm Ivy Pinson. You asked me to come today."

"Oh. The cleaning lady. You're meant to come on Saturday morning, don't you remember? I can't show you round the cottages now, there are people staying in them."

She says that she must have misunderstood me, but her tone implies that the fault is mine. As she's standing expectantly at the gate, and has taken such care with her appearance to come to talk about a cleaning job, I invite her in for a cup of tea.

"I'd prefer a cold drink, if you wouldn't mind terribly," she says, fanning her face with a magazine she has picked up from the table.

"It's dreadfully hot. Do you have any wine?"

While I'm digging a bottle of rosé out of the fridge, she's opened a cabinet and taken out one of our best and largest crystal goblets.

"Hm, Waterford. I love nice things, don't you?"

She pings it with her forefinger, filling the air with the hiss of fading bells. I bring her a glass of wine in a plain glass and deftly remove the Waterford back to the cabinet. It's the last of a set of six.

Taking off her turban gingerly, she shakes her head and ruffles her thick blonde hair. As she swigs the wine in large gulps, she chirrup away about a great many people I have never heard of. They all have one thing in common: horrible things have happened to them. She nudges her glass towards me with a raised eyebrow. I refill it half-way: she has to drive home. While she talks, her eyes are constantly flicking around the room as if she is taking an inventory. The bright afternoon light picks up a network of deep lines beneath the thick make-up, and the artfully knotted scarf around her neck does not completely hide folds of loose skin. I estimate that she is in her mid-seventies, and am intrigued as to why she is looking for a cleaning job.

END OF EXTRACT

SWALLOWS & ROBINS

Chapters 1 and 2

DEDICATION

To everybody who hates housework

INTRODUCTION

OUR Uncle Charlie was a dapper little man who lived with his cat, Tibbles, in a decaying but very large house in a less desirable area of London. Bought for £350 (\$540) during the 1960s, despite its current condition and location the property had increased manifold in value and was worth a handsome sum of which we had been allocated a generous portion "when the time came".

Uncle Charlie had not always been little, but he had always been dapper. He was proud of his wartime service as a rear gunner on Lancaster bombers. Several photographs showed a sturdy, fresh-faced fellow in his RAF uniform and later in his demob suit. They bore no discernible similarity to the shrunken body and shiny head sitting in the armchair he had bought in 1956. Tibbles was the beneficiary of all the devotion and admiration that Uncle Charlie had once given to his wife, who had died twenty years previously and whom everybody who knew her agreed had been a spiteful cow. He was passionately supportive of Tottenham Hotspur football club, and anxious that when he passed through his own heavenly goalposts his wealth should be well and wisely spent.

Each time we visited Uncle Charlie his clothes looked another size too large, but his shirt was still crisp and white, his tie perfectly knotted, and his blazer buttons polished.

"Promise me," he said, reaching out with a clawed little hand, "promise you won't go frittering it away when I'm gone. Use it for something sensible."

We promised.

Eventually Uncle Charlie became so small that he simply vanished, leaving behind a small rectangular hump of earth, two tiny bunches of flowers, and the pot of money which we were honour bound to spend sensibly.

Up there on his celestial cloud, would Uncle Charlie regard a six-month world cruise as a sensible investment? It would broaden our horizons, allow us to visit new places, meet new people, learn new cultures, eat good food and not have to do anything demanding or energetic. It was almost certain that we would never again have such an opportunity.

On the other hand two ancient buildings on our property, originally houses, latterly used as a garage and stable, currently occupied by various wildlife, were falling down. Decades of frost, wind and rainfall had toppled the chimneys. The roofs had caved in, the walls were cracking apart, and the rain was flushing away the mud and animal muck that precariously held the remaining stones in place. Soon they would be reduced to piles of rubble to be removed at vast expense.

So the cruise was off. Instead of travelling around the world meeting new people, they would be coming to us, bringing with them their hopes, habits, hang-ups and idiosyncrasies. Many became friends for life. Some came and went almost unnoticed. Others left lasting impressions. Terry, my husband, has always said that I am like a magnet for crackpots, and certainly a number of them managed to make their way here. Meet the swallows and robins – our summer and winter visitors. At the time there were some whom I could have happily battered to bits with a shovel, but now, after many years have passed I can look back on them all, perhaps ruefully, but certainly with affection.

CHAPTER 1

Year One – First Find Your Builder

THE work required to convert the buildings is enormous, and our inheritance will have to be managed with atomic precision. Artisan builders are beyond our means. We must put our trust and money into a one-man, jack-of-all-trades outfit. The saying about peanuts and monkeys rings in my ears.

Living here on my own for much of the time, while Terry works in England, the responsibility for organising and feeding the monkey rests on me, and I admit that I am daunted. I've heard terrible stories about builders. I don't like fights, shouting, threats, aggravation of any kind and will go to considerable lengths to avoid it. I will willingly drive back and forth to builders' merchants for sacks of cement, timber and any other materials; within the limits of my physical strength I will hold, lug and lift things. I will supply tea and/or coffee willingly, and in copious amounts, and I will pay, promptly, the agreed number of peanuts. In return I will not expect miracles, but an honest day's work, each and every day, resulting in two habitable buildings.

Some friends have recommended a retired French stonemason who can also turn his hand to roofing. He arrives by moped, with a ragged cigarette clenched between his lips. He is very tiny like a marmoset, with round, rheumy eyes and tufts of hair burgeoning from his ears and nose. He is surprisingly strong for his size, and agile for his age. He heaves stones and timbers, and shovels rubble into wheelbarrows; his friend comes and takes away the rubble in a trailer. At exactly 12 noon each day, the marmoset lays down his tools and takes out from his overall an Opinel knife, and from a box on his moped an evil-smelling garlic sausage, a baguette and a bottle of red wine. He sits down on a bench in the garden, munches methodically, drinks the bottle of wine, accepts a small cup of black coffee, comments on the weather, disappears to the end of the field behind a hedge, and at precisely 1.30 pm is back at work. By the end of the first week reusable stones and timbers are neatly stacked, and most of the rubble has gone. Maurice the marmoset is polite, respectful, knows what he's doing and gets on and does it. What more could we want?

He doesn't arrive on Monday morning of the second week, and his telephone is unanswered. Late in the afternoon his friend comes to say that Maurice has fallen off his moped and broken two fingers. He will not be able to continue working. This is a real blow. The friend cannot recommend anybody else to take his place.

I search for a new monkey. One wants too many peanuts, and one cannot start for at least two months. That only leaves a stubbly-jawed, stocky fellow with muscles and an insolent attitude. He starts his working day with a picnic in the back of his old van, drinking half of a bottle of red wine and eating a tin of sardines. At noon, he finishes the bottle and chops chunks of cheese onto a baguette. By early afternoon his breath can kill at fifty paces. Like Maurice he's a good worker, but he has several times referred to my "*belles fesses*", and when I look it up in the dictionary I find it means nice bum. It is only a matter of time – three days to be precise – before he lunges at me, pins me to a wall and nearly suffocates me with his toxic breath. I shout to the dogs – we have five and he is nervous of them – and when I have re-established my composure I pay him off.

Next is an English jack-of-all trades who promises much. After two days, even as a novice myself I can see that he is out of his depth and doesn't know where to start or what to do. He sits in the garden

and makes lists and orders materials and sketches plans and drinks litres of coffee, but after two weeks nothing much has changed. There are piles of materials all over the place and two windows put into the upstairs of the larger cottage. Something about them doesn't look right, but I can't put my finger on exactly what. He had promised the properties would both be ready by mid-July – that's in four months' time. Now he is talking of "trying to get one ready this year, and finishing the other next year."

I am a failure as a project manager/monkey handler. Paying Jack-of-all-trades his weekly peanut ration hurts, because he is not earning it. My neighbour tells me that if I go out, Jack sits in the garden sunbathing. When I find him loading some of our timber into the back of his van before he leaves one evening, I am not convinced by his explanation that he is putting it there to keep it dry. We have words. He unloads it with bad grace, and chucks it in a puddle. We part on terms of mutual dislike.

With bookings already filling up most of the summer, I've started spending the deposit money to boost the building fund which is running low. I'm frantic.

An acquaintance introduces a big, broad-shouldered man with a disconcerting mannerism of looking over his own right shoulder when he talks, so that I speak to the side of his head. Wandering around the buildings, he pushes at the walls with his hands as if he expects them to fall down, scrapes with his foot at the floors, tutting and shaking his head.

"When were you wanting these places ready?"

"Our first bookings are for the second week of July."

He opens his eyes wide, then makes a puffing noise through pouted lips.

"Well, we'd better get on with it. What you need here is hands, and plenty of them."

I feel a glimmer of hope.

Next day he starts work, bringing with him his girlfriend, her brother and cousin, and two small dogs. One of them is adept at climbing ladders and scrambling about on beams, while the other, which is not, sits howling and whimpering in frustration.

No 4, as I mentally call him, is terrifyingly gung-ho. He prowls around with a screeching chainsaw searching for something to chop or lop. This morning he's up an oak sawing through the 12" trunk of ivy that is throttling the tree. He is balanced precariously on a branch, thrashing around with the machine like something from a horror film. Then he attacks some discarded beams, and chops them into slices for firewood. When he has run out of anything more to chop, he starts rectifying the mess created and left behind by monkey No. 3.

Addressing the two windows that have been perplexing me, he points out that they have no lintels, and are supporting the entire roof. They will have to come out, he says, and be replaced properly. But if he takes them out, won't the roof collapse, I ask. He taps the side of his nose, and tells me not to worry.

This chap is no monkey. He knows what he's doing, and he's getting on with it. He's quickly made himself at home, bounding into the kitchen every morning promptly at 8.00 am, whistling tunelessly and making himself and me a cup of Earl Grey and two slices of buttered toast, plus various refreshments for his team. They are hearty eaters and as they are all working for No. 4 and not being paid by me, I'm happy to keep them well fed.

With eleven weeks of bookings for the season, and work progressing as it is, we are well on schedule.

The peanut supply is diminishing rapidly, and we still have to furnish the cottages. I've bought new beds, cookers and fridges, and some easy chairs, but we need much more. I find a card in a local supermarket advertising "Quality furniture at sensible prices", and call the number.

A deep public school voice instructs: "If you wish to speak to Beverly, then please say so. If you wish to speak to Tristram, do so now."

I explain that I'm looking for decent inexpensive furniture for our holiday guests, and Tristram assures me that he has a warehouse of furniture that will be exactly what I am looking for. We arrange to meet twelve miles away at a place I have never heard of. He will wait for me at the crossroads, because, he assures me cheerfully, I'll never find his house by myself.

After driving through an endless network of narrow roads, past collections of houses where no sign of life stirs, numerous fields and scraggy copses, I am relieved to see an estate car parked at the agreed rendezvous with a man leaning against it. But not a man like any other. In bloodstock terms, he is 'by Viking out of Greek Goddess'.

He's tall and slender. His skin is the same golden copper as his cropped hair and trimmed beard. His blue eyes are fringed with thick black lashes. His nose is straight and narrow, and his broad smile shows startling white teeth. As I climb out of the car my leg bones threaten to melt. I offer a hot, sticky little paw to the outstretched golden hand with its slender fingers, and stand there foolishly and speechlessly.

"Do you like dogs?" he asks, opening the door of his car and releasing a torrent of smooth-haired dachshunds, sleek as otters.

"Meet the children. Children, say hello to our new friend."

The dogs prod my ankles with wet noses, tails wagging.

"Good. The children approve. Let's go."

He invites the children back into his car, and I follow him along a bumpy path through thick woods sinister in their dark stillness, quelling a momentary feeling of panic. What if he's a murderer or rapist? Nobody knows I'm here. They'll never find my body. Who will feed my animals? Even if I manage to escape, I'll never find my way back.

We break out of the woods into a field, and the path leads to a gravelled area in front of a house typical of the area, long and low, with two front doors and a pantiled roof. The walls are a light shade of apricot, the shutters a soft eau-de-nil.

Uncannily, as he opens my car door, Tristram says: "I expect you were getting worried about where you were going to end up!"

He ushers me into the living room. "Come."

After living on a building site for so long, I've almost forgotten what a normal home looks like. There are a few oriental rugs scattered on the flags, a couple of sofas flanking the fireplace, a pile of books on a low table. It's simple, comfortable, and tasteful.

"Be at home," says Tristram, waving a beautiful hand around vaguely.

"I expect you would love a glass of mint tea. Beverly! Come and meet our guest."

Through the patio doors comes a slightly older man – as blonde as Tristram, but shorter, stockier, clean-shaven, with smiling eyes.

"My partner," says Tristram. "Beverly, show Susie your garden. I shall join you shortly with something heavenly."

Beverly leads me through sliding glass doors onto a patio surrounded by flowerbeds, pergolas, climbing roses, a small pond, herbaceous borders and a bright green, velvety lawn. The smell of roses and honeysuckle fills the air. It's a perfect English country garden, in the middle of rural France – something that takes great skill and patience to achieve. Colours and shapes blend in harmony. We sit under a gazebo on a paved area.

"Are you a professional garden designer?" I ask. "It's heavenly."

"I was an accountant by profession, but a gardener at heart. It's taken me four years to create this. I've had to adapt many of my ideas – the climate here is too extreme for certain plants, but yes, I'm rather proud and pleased with the result."

It's an idyllic location, secluded and with unhindered views of fields and open countryside.

"It suits us, my dear. It's private."

Tristram arrives with frosted glasses of chilled mint tea, and we sit chatting while the children wrestle playfully around our feet.

"No, Pumpkin," he calls to one of the dogs who is tentatively trying to excavate a clump of campanula from between some edging stones.

"Shall we visit the emporium?" he asks when we've finished our tea.

"What is it you're after exactly?"

"Basic, practical stuff. Dining tables and chairs, side tables, book cases. It must be decent, but not expensive. Our budget's very tight."

"Right. Let's see what we've got." He leads the way to a large barn at right angles to the house, and hauls back a sliding door.

Daylight floods in onto stacks of packing crates and bulky shapes draped in blankets.

"That's the good stuff that keeps the wolf from the door. Over here is the rest."

There are acres of items of furniture, arranged in neat rows. It's a mixed bag: Formica kitchen units with chrome dials, battered pine tables, chairs that need re-caning, baths, stoves, garden furniture, but also some relatively modern items.

“House clearances. Usually there will be at least a couple of good pieces that I sell on to dealers. And the rest, this kind of thing, well, you’d be surprised, but it goes, sooner or later. I’ve a contact who buys for film and TV sets. They’re always looking out for stuff like this. And 60s items are coming into fashion again out here.”

I pick out some basic items that, with a bit of love and effort, will do for the time being. Tristram will deliver them when I’m ready, for “a small consideration. “ I don’t like to ask how small.

As I drive away, he and Beverly wave from the doorway, standing beside each other, with the children at their feet. A scene of contentment and domestic bliss that gives me a warm fuzzy feeling.

CHAPTER 2

Year One – The Gravel Mountain

BY the end of April progress has slackened. Although the roofs, windows and doors are in place, the buildings are still empty shells. No. 4 insists there is no cause to worry. He has reduced his workforce to just himself and his girlfriend, who survives on a strict diet of coffee and Gitanes. She is as thin as a reed but impressively nimble and strong, carrying and lifting hods of tiles and buckets of cement without damaging her immaculate manicure or creasing her face. Sometimes it almost seems as if she is working harder than he is.

By the end of May the electrics and water services are all in place, but I am waking in a panic almost every night. A month doesn’t seem long enough to tile the floors, put up the pine ceilings and paint the whole place, not to mention clearing up the mess outside and getting the garden planted. No. 4’s girlfriend has disappeared, taking the small sad dog with her. Pouring his 20th cup of tea of the day, licking and dabbing his fingers into the biscuit box to mop up the last remaining crumbs, No. 4 promises we have time to spare. I should learn to relax and have faith. I want to, but I can’t. He is constantly up and down and backwards and forwards. The chainsaw is always buzzing and the biscuit tin always empty and the tea always brewing, but I can’t see any noticeable progress in the cottages.

Less than three weeks before the first guests arrive, No 4 leaves a phone message to say he and his girlfriend have taken the dogs on holiday “to the seaside”, as the howling dog is suffering from depression. Both the cottages look like bombsites, with ladders, tools and sacks of plaster all over the place. I am now seriously stressed and can feel the blood pulsing in my ears and pumping around my body faster than it should. I trundle around with a wheelbarrow collecting rocks, broken tiles, lumps of superfluous concrete, bits of timber and lengths of cable and pipe, shovelling them into sacks to take to the tip. No 4’s mobile phone is switched off, and his girlfriend’s parents have no idea when they are likely to return. I consider taking up smoking.

Three days later, unrepentant and infuriatingly patronising, No. 4 returns with his ladder-climbing dog. He ignores my displeasure and actually pats me on the head, suggesting I bake a cake while he gets on with his work. In a fit of extreme pique I hide all biscuits and Earl Grey tea bags. Shortly afterwards he bounces chirpily into the kitchen, singing his monotonous five-note tune, and clicking the kettle on. Then there is much opening and closing of drawers, and finally he comes into the living room to say he can’t find the tea bags. I tell him that until there is some visible progress on the building front, tea and biscuits are off the menu. He shrugs and bounces out again, humming. I don’t see him for the rest of the day. I lay awake most of the night terrified he won’t turn up in the morning.

Promptly at 8.00 am he arrives, singing ‘zippetty doo da,’ waving a box of tea bags and a bag of *pains au chocolat*. Today, he announces, he will be tiling the floors while I make the tea. At the end of the day he can barely walk, but to his credit the entire ground floor of both buildings has been perfectly tiled. And he has had a brainwave, an inspiration, for a time-saving, labour-saving way of grouting them. Instead of the conventional laborious mixing of grout and spreading into the joints with a scraper, he will pour a very wet cement mix over the entire floor, allowing it to flow into the cracks. Once it has set and dried, he will wipe over the tiles with a cloth to remove the excess. He estimates this could save two days work. I’m apprehensive at the thought of the floors smothered in wet cement, but we desperately need to save time.

Next morning he is sloshing buckets of runny cement all over the newly tiled floors. The liquid doesn’t flow, but lays in a sullen grey puddle. We have to wade about in it and push it around with lengths of wood, and it makes a simply dreadful mess. By next day it has formed a thick gritty coating

covering the entire ground floor of both buildings. After rubbing vigorously with a dry cloth, No 4 admits gloomily that it hasn't worked out quite as he hoped. He won't have time to rectify it as well as fitting the kitchens and ceiling panelling and painting all the walls. He passes the floor problem to me.

It takes three days, with buckets of soapy water, cloths, scrubbing brushes and abrasive pads. While the tiles are wet it looks as if all traces of cement have gone, but as soon as they dry a new grey veil emerges. I have to continually wet the cement and rub it very hard to make any impression, whilst avoiding rubbing the cracks because the grouting is still soft and smears itself over the tiles into a new mess. And hour after hour the humming continues as No 4 makes endless tea, as I am permanently bent double and there are still acres of floor to clean. Scrubbing and rubbing, I start hating No 4 with a fearsome passion.

By the end of the week the kitchen units are installed, the ceilings are in place, and the floors are as clean and free of cement as they are ever going to be. No 4 has done well, and when he comes for his weekly wages he asks whether he may have an advance against his next and final week, as he has a problem with his car and is short of cash. I make an exception to my primal rule of never paying a builder before the work is completed. In spite of everything, he has accomplished almost all that I have asked, so I pay him for the following week.

Next week he will be back to paint all the walls, and fill the courtyards with the twelve cubic yards of crushed limestone he has ordered for the purpose.

When he hasn't shown by midday on Monday, and his mobile phone is switched off, I know I've been taken for a ride and have only myself to blame. I begin painting, and I paint from early morning to the small hours of the following morning, until I can barely see, but I get the first coat on the ceilings and walls in both cottages. After a few hours sleep I pick flakes of paint out of my hair and off my face and hands, and start all over again.

The gravel didn't arrive this morning as promised. I call the quarry, who say the delivery is on its way.

Late in the afternoon a truck arrives and begins spewing a mountain of large sharp grey granite pieces. Shouting, waving my arms and making violent throat-slashing signs, I manage to stop the cascade. Half of it is already spreading over the drive. The surly driver insists I ordered granite, not limestone. I call the quarry and they ask me to pass him the phone. After some furious conversation he shovels the stuff back onto his truck and drives away spitting curses and muttering "*quelle pute anglaise.*" The quarry phone back to say they will be here at 9.00 am tomorrow with the limestone.

The following morning they phone again, saying the truck has broken down, and then in the afternoon they are short of a driver, but they'll be here tomorrow morning without fail.

I'm woken next day by a crashing and whooshing noise. It sounds as if the buildings are collapsing. Leaping to the window I see a vast truck expelling a torrent of crushed limestone just inside the gate. And as I watch another truck drives up and spews out a second heap, forming a mountain range which cuts off my car, house and the cottages from the rest of the world. There is enough gravel to give the entire hamlet a generous coating.

It's already hot. The air is still. The only sounds are the droning of the bees and chirping of the crickets. I find No. 4's shovel, and a battered wheelbarrow, and start shovelling and tipping. The gravel is only about twenty yards from where it needs to go, but it might as well be twenty miles. The shovel is heavy and the limestone is heavy and the wheelbarrow is heavy. After two hours, it is impossibly hot. The tarmac is melting. The garden is wilting. I can barely lift the shovel. Every few minutes I step back from the pile to see if there is any noticeable difference. There isn't. I recognise the impossibility of moving it all by tomorrow. Staring at it bleakly, I curse No 4 with an intensity that frightens me. Then I burst into tears of rage and frustration.

What am I going to do? I bawl. The dogs sniff and lick me as I sit on the pile, jabbing my heels angrily into the stones.

A car engine stops on the other side of the gravel mountain. There's a lot of crunching, and over the top appears Tristram who slithers down onto the driveway. I'd forgotten he's delivering the furniture today.

"My dear girl, what on earth has happened? What have you done? You look dreadful!"

I throw myself at him, sobbing, and waving hopelessly at the heap of limestone.

"Why don't we have a lovely glass of mint tea?" he asks, tactfully disentangling my damp dirty hands from his crisp white shirt. "You'll find it really does make everything better."

By the time I have picked some mint, torn it up, put it in the pot, sprinkled it with sugar and left it to steep, Tristram has taken off his shirt and is shovelling heroically, singing snatches from Rigoletto in his deep baritone. I want to fling my arms around him again and kiss him all over, but I'm not sure he'd appreciate it.

"I've given Bev a call. He'll be here soon."

Beverly arrives with the children, who make instant friends with our very sociable dogs and go and lie in the cool of the house with them. We dig out a second wheelbarrow and another shovel, and between the two of them, fuelled with gallons of mint tea and cucumber and tomato sandwiches, by late afternoon the mountain has been moved and the courtyards are carpeted with nearly knee-deep limestone chippings. There is no time to hire a compactor, and anyway it wouldn't be any use. As Tristram points out after we have bashed at the stuff with the back of the shovels and jumped up and down on it to no effect, there is far too much of it.

"Why did you order so much? And it's the wrong grade, far too coarse. It will never compact into a smooth surface."

"It's going to be hell to walk on," Beverly adds helpfully.

As a matter of fact, it's virtually impossible. Like trudging over very deep, very thick sand. As you drag your feet out your shoes fill with little pebbles. We stare gloomily at it, willing it to vanish. Tristram remarks playfully that it will certainly anchor the garden furniture in place.

They are both streaked with dust and sweat.

"You won't mind if we rinse ourselves off?" Tristram points to our garden hosepipe.

"Perhaps you'd like me to do your backs?" I suggest.

"Get thee behind us, Satan!" he laughs. "And make more mint tea."

Once they're refreshed, we unload the furniture and put it in place. It looks better than I had expected.

"Nice. Most pleasant. Your guests will love it here," says Beverly. "It's a lovely location. I can give you some plants, too, so that you can pretty the garden. I've plenty of cuttings and seedlings."

Later we sit by candlelight listening to the nightingales, eating a Greek salad and sipping, as a change from mint tea, a bottle of Sancerre that Beverly thoughtfully brought with him. I reflect on how very lucky and privileged I am to count as friends these two kind and charming men.

"Do the cottages have names?" asks Beverly.

"Yes. The larger one is Lavande, and the little one Pissenlit. I've got a couple of ceramic name plaques on order."

They both look rather startled. "Pissenlit? Do you know what that means?"

"Yes. It's French for dandelion," I say, straight-faced.

"But surely you know how it actually translates," insists Beverly.

"No," I lie. "Tell me."

Beverly coughs. "Well, literally, it means 'piss in the bed'."

"Well I never. I hope nobody does," I reply.

Tristram catches my eye. "Naughty! You knew perfectly well. I think you have a somewhat contorted sense of humour."

Neither he nor Beverly will accept anything for their help today.

"An absolute pleasure. And any time you are in need, you have only to ask."

It's 11.00pm by the time they leave. The last thing I have to do is varnish the staircases in both cottages. It only takes an hour. The brush starts falling to pieces, and a few bristles remain embedded for eternity in the varnish, like insects in amber. But I don't think anybody will notice. We're open for business!

END